

## The Cup of Fate

Sermon for Maundy Thursday

Sermon Text: Luke 22:39-46



*And He came out and went, as was His custom, to the Mount of Olives, and the disciples followed Him. <sup>40</sup> And when He came to the place, He said to them, “Pray that you may not enter into temptation.” <sup>41</sup> And He withdrew from them about a stone’s throw, and knelt down and prayed, <sup>42</sup> saying, “Father, if You are willing, remove this cup from Me. Nevertheless, not My will but Yours, be done.” <sup>43</sup> And there appeared to Him an angel from heaven, strengthening Him. <sup>44</sup> And being in agony He prayed more earnestly; and His sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground. <sup>45</sup> And when He rose from prayer, He came to the disciples and found them sleeping for sorrow, <sup>46</sup> and He said to them, “Why are you sleeping? Rise and pray that you may not enter into temptation.”*

There are times when so much is piled on top of people that we can no longer withstand the pressure on our mind, body, and soul.

Constant stress at work and stress within the family at the same time can become too much. The individual can't fight on multiple fronts. At some point, he becomes overwhelmed and either gets sick or has to stop working and be checked into a clinic so that he or she can get out of it alive. We all know these borderline situations and how difficult it is to do the right thing in such a situation. It can be too much: work, caring for people in need, stress in the community – these are all situations in which we must endure too much and, in the end, we would prefer to run away.

On Maundy Thursday, Jesus is in just such a situation. Jesus' prayerful struggle in the Garden of Gethsemane is a battle of the soul that takes the Savior of the world to the last reserves of His strength. It's interesting that this struggle of Jesus occurs right between the Last Supper and His terrible torture and death. The struggle in Gethsemane is, so to speak, the gateway to Jesus' path of suffering. Jesus stands here at the threshold. There was still a way back from there. There was a real choice to go back and run away.

On this fateful night, the disciples weren't far away from Jesus and Jesus asked them: “Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation.” (Matt. 26:41) We all know how this story continues. The Bible doesn't tell us how long Jesus stayed away but it was probably a long time, so everyone nodded off one by one. At the same time, they should pray! Had they realized at the Last Supper that this night would be the culmination of Jesus' mission, at the latest when Jesus took the bread: “Take and eat! This is My body” and then the cup: “Take and drink! This is My blood.” The disciples must have realized that everything Jesus did and everything He is would now come to a climax tonight. Why doze off tonight of all nights? And then again, I'm not surprised. If I exemplify the church in our time, I see that things are going on in the church in exactly the same way as they were in the Garden of Gethsemane. The church in our time knows only one direction – downhill. Even in our community, it becomes ever more difficult to talk about faith. Even in our families we know it – it becomes increasingly difficult to instill faith in our children. The church is in a very special time of temptation and it's from all sides, from outside it and from within it... And Jesus also tells us here: “Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation.” And what do we do? We don't do anything different than the first disciples – we sleep through everything. It's as if we didn't even realize that our fate is decided in Jesus.

Let's look at Jesus. What did He do in this difficult hour of testing? And how did He pray? At the beginning of His mission, Jesus' struggle with Satan was also impressively demonstrated by Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. Three times Satan tried to lead Jesus astray. Satan aka the Devil or mess maker, always has only one goal: he wants to keep us away from God. The truth is that we are God's children and that our lives are therefore in His hands. Satan is the mess maker. He wants to break apart what God has done. It's always about power for Satan, he lays claim to power over us. Satan doesn't want us to be God's children but wants to rip us out of God's hands so that we belong to him instead.

Already back then in the desert, Jesus could have gotten power, security, and bread from Satan, but Jesus didn't let Himself lose sight of God. And the same thing in the Garden of Gethsemane. Because Jesus turned His face and trust completely away from Satan and looked only to God and cried out: "Father!" With this word, Father, and with this cry of distress, Jesus comes out of isolation into togetherness. As He let out this cry of distress, Jesus was no longer alone but the Father was by Him and with Him. Both looked at something that was terrible and wonderful at the same time – it was a cup or chalice. In ancient times, a chalice always had a dark side and the chalice was used to suggest a person's deep, mysterious destiny. For Jesus, His destiny was very clear. He knew where it had to end. He knew what lay ahead of Him – it was death! And Jesus didn't want that! Jesus wanted to live! Death is the worst contradiction to everything that Jesus is. And now, Jesus was to experience death firsthand! This won't do! Even Jesus struggled with this question and asked His Father that this cup be taken from Him. But at the same time, Jesus placed Himself completely in God's hand and submitted Himself completely to the will of the Father. Death is terrible and Jesus didn't want to die but if the Father wills it, then the Father's will is also stronger than death. "Your will be done!" prayed Jesus. Jesus' prayer was actually a struggle. Before Him was a choice: He stood at the threshold – before Him was death and behind Him was life. Jesus experienced and endured the place between heaven and hell. And Jesus submitted Himself to the Father.

Let's look back at His disciples. Nothing had changed with them. Nor had anything changed in the external situation on that fateful night either. The soldiers were already on their way to arrest Jesus and to kill Him. None of that had changed at all. Only Jesus had changed. The decision was made. He went through the door with His head held high. He had made up His mind. Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane is not comparable to our prayers. And yet, we can also experience what Jesus experienced. When we are in trouble and would much rather run away, we then pray and often, nothing happens. At least nothing that we can see. The situation remains exactly the same. Yet, we go on our way strengthened. We see something like this happen in the Garden of Gethsemane. Is everything now hopeless? Will everything only end with death? In Luke's Gospel, there is an interesting wordplay with the word "to rise." As Jesus rose from prayer and as He urged the disciples to rise and pray, the same word is used as in the sentence when He said: "the Son of Man must suffer many things...and on the third day be raised." (Luke 9:22) So we find in the middle of the Passion narrative, a little hint of Easter. We see that the One consecrated to crucifixion is already led to the slaughter as the Resurrected One. Because He knew already in Gethsemane that He is in God's hand. In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus not only saw the fateful progression of the cruel cross in the cup, but He also recognized His fate in God – God wanted it this way. Even as, and especially as the Crucified One, He knew Himself to be in God's hand.

Dear congregation, Jesus' struggle in the Garden of Gethsemane was, for hundreds of years, already a comfort to people in great suffering and in situations where they had to endure temptation. The paths that God leads us on can be difficult. These paths can even be unbearable. Jesus' path of suffering was difficult, but His path of suffering is a clear path. His path leads beyond Good Friday to Easter. So we dare to look beyond the dark times to Easter and in doing so, we celebrate a "mini-Christmas" by partaking of Jesus' body and blood, Christ with us, on Maundy Thursday. Amen.