

NATIONAL COMMUNITY CHURCH

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The Way of the Garden

Pastor Joel and Nina Schmidgall

Pastor Joel:

Well, what's going on NCC family? Pastor Joel and Nina here and we have been praying for you locked down in your homes. I think every single week we get new guidelines from the DMV. And it started out large gatherings no more than 1000 then it went down to 250 down to 100 down to 50 down to 10. I don't even know where we're at right now. But if the legal limit gets any lower, we're actually gonna have to ship some of our kids out to y'all, so somebody take Ella, somebody take Zeke, somebody take Renzi. But I just said take this moment today to give props and thank God for our teachers. Lord bless you guys, you need a raise. And I'm telling you, you don't know your negotiating power right now you could easily get double salary at this moment. I mean, parents would vote for triple salary, give them whatever they want, they can have anything. And I actually think it's not gonna be a physician or a doctor that comes up with the vaccine to the virus, it's gonna be a parent who's desperate. And they're just like throwing the animal crackers in and the airborne and the vitamins and it's like there's a vaccine. But we care greatly about our extroverts who are away from their friends, but how about the introverts who are stuck in a little box with four people that they can never escape? So this is crazy, isn't it?

And but here's the thing, I try to laugh every day just for a minute. And I also try to take a few moments every single day to lean into the Lord. And so today we hope that we can just be a small encouragement as we lead into 'The Way of the Garden'.

Well, it was growing up that there was about a half mile away there was a little pond with a garden that surrounded it, and I would go there and it became somewhat of a prayer place for me. So I had a rough day at work and over at International House of Pancakes and I'd go over there I'd be playing ball and have a rough day and I go over and seek God for wisdom. I remember being in a rough place and went through a bad breakup, and it kind of it took something out of me. I remember rounding that and making a trail in that ground around the pond praying that the Lord would re-found me and my identity in Christ. After my father passed away, I remember being down on the soil in that garden seeking God, to bring his comfort and his strength, in the midst of my loss. The place of the garden, it's a special place for me. It's a place where I found strength, where I found the source of my strength where I've been able to release things to God and, but also share emotions and struggle and wrestle but eventually find a place of resolve in him. The garden in the scriptures, it's interesting, because it's one of the most intense moments that really the scripture has to offer and its set in the garden. In it Jesus wrestles with his own burden with intense distress and he pours out His heart to God. And out of it, he gives us a path forward. And he shows us how to be honest with the Father, how to wrestle how to lay things down how to wrestle with his own burden and God's will for His life and even share his deep emotions with God Almighty. And it helps us in our own versions of challenges, if you will.

Let me set the context for us today and then we'll read the Scripture. Jesus and the disciples had just finished the last supper in the upper room. This is where Jesus practiced the first moment and shared Holy Communion for the very first time with the disciples; it's what we did last week. Pastor Heather led us so beautifully in our homes, in the moment of communion and then Jesus washed the disciples feet, and he showed them to be a leader, you are a servant and then he foretold the cross that was to come. And they came down out of the upper room, and they

descended down the busy crowded streets, as there are people all over the place who had come on pilgrimage, and they were there for the festival. And they passed the lower pool on the left and then they came out through the fountain gate and they went over the Kidron Valley. As they did, they look down and you can see the river run red with the animal sacrifices that were foretelling what was to come in the near future. They came across there and they came over to the Mount of Olives ended up at a little garden called Gethsemane. And as they approach this place, this is where we find the setting of our story.

Historians believe that there was a press there where olives were crushed and oil would begin to flow. This is metaphorical of what was to come it's a foreshadowing that Nina will talk about in just a moment. But this is a place of deep agony for Christ. It's a place where he leans in, and it's an unparalleled show of human emotions. It's as though Christ's humanity is naked in front of us here in this very moment. And he leans in and we see that the deep emotion come out in the scriptures and it's the Luke version of the story found in Luke chapter 22, verse 39 through 46. I'm going to read it for us today.

³⁹ Jesus went out as usual to the Mount of Olives, and his disciples followed him. ⁴⁰ On reaching the place, he said to them, "Pray that you will not fall into temptation." ⁴¹ He withdrew about a stone's throw beyond them, he knelt down and he prayed, ⁴² "Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done." ⁴³ An angel from heaven appeared to him and strengthened him. ⁴⁴ And being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground."

Nina:

As Jesus and his disciples came into the garden, he left them, giving them the instructions to pray, so that temptation would not overcome them. The word temptation in the Greek it means a trying, it means a trial, a taxing Jesus' instruction - do not enter into temptation. It gives us a reflection, an idea of where he's at, in this moment stepping into a place of taxing, of trial, of pressure. By giving the disciples this warning he's saying to them, you are about to face the most intense pressure of your life. So be on watch and be praying. The word Gethsemane in the Greek, it means the olive press. It's where the oil is pressed through a process of intense pressure and the garden is certainly Jesus' place of pressure.

You know, this series was planned months ago and the weeks were laid out. And yet here we find ourselves on this week in the garden, and Jesus' place of pressure, his place of deep suffering and grief. So a few weeks ago, and due to this pandemic, there was an abrupt stop to our lives as we knew it, right? There was a swift moment when everything was stopped school and work and church and sports and travel, even the most precious things like graduations and weddings and even funerals. There were a few days that we might have had peace or even a sense of resolve. But then slowly, the pressure began to build, right. First it was just going to be two weeks, so then maybe April or now May, maybe June or longer the pressure has only intensified. And many of us have worried for loved ones that are at risk or they're suffering. And the names have started to come in if people that we know and that we love who are affected. Many in our community have begun to lose jobs or have their pay reduced just as they're seeing the bills mount and we know those who have watched dream opportunities die. The pressure intensifies for those that are quarantined under very difficult circumstances. There are some marriages that were already struggling or kids with behavioral challenges and now they have the pressure of extended time under those circumstances. I have been thinking especially of the parents of kids with special needs, those kids that really depend on routine and their trusted teachers to be able to thrive, or individuals that already deal with anxiety or depression, and that these things that we're facing now are just exacerbating some of the worries of this

season. And Joel and I have been wrecked knowing that there are those that face vulnerabilities that make their home anything but safe. A dear friend shared vulnerably with us this last week and said if this had happened when I was a kid I would have been trapped in a prison, my stepfather was physically abusive to me and sexually abusive to my sister, school and church were my only respite then the pressure is almost unbearable.

And as Jesus stepped away to pray, we watched the passage build, showing us how his anguish grew. Here we see a Jesus that we have not seen before. All of us together have been walking through this daily devotional series, right, studying the ways and the actions of Jesus and at no other time have we seen Jesus troubled in this way. He's faced a raging storm on the Sea of Galilee, totally composed and unruffled. He's faced demonic temptation a belittling by Jerusalem's religious leaders, total composure. And every account of Jesus he's collected he's sure footed in his response, but here in the garden, a decidedly different spirit. The passage that we read from Luke says that Jesus knelt down to pray. And Mark is even a little stronger, saying he threw himself to the ground and began to pray. A typical Jewish prayer posture of that day was actually to stand with eyes open and lifted up to the heavens. But in fact, this is the only place in scripture where we see that Jesus is said to have knelt. In fact, Jesus drops to his knees, perhaps to reflect to the urgency or his humility, or perhaps his anguish. In fact, this event in the life of Christ is commonly called agony in the garden. The word Gethsemane is even used culturally as a synonym for a place or an occasion of great mental or spiritual suffering.

Here is the version from the account in Matthew. So Jesus, he took his three disciples that he was closest with and he went apart. It says,

Matthew 26:37 "He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with him, and he began to be sorrowful and troubled. ³⁸ Then he said to them, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me."

Luke writes that Jesus was in such agony and he prayed fervently, or some translations use the word anguish instead, in his anguish, he prayed more earnestly. Jesus cast himself to the ground because he was agonizing in prayer. Something terrible was going to happen. Jesus knew it. And the disciples were beginning to comprehend it.

We have all been in our moments of agonizing prayer lately, haven't we? A few nights ago we were cleaning up dinner with our family again, so much cleaning and preparing of food and snacking and re-cleaning. And as we were cleaning, I just asked if I could be excused to you know, I was going to go to my room. I said mom is going to have a timeout. And we've been handing out a lot of timeouts perhaps lately in our home. No, but I just I needed a minute. And part of it was because I've been facing what so many of you are facing which is, you know, trying to figure out how to manage their home learning and each of their assignments from teachers and their own grief about being away from people that they love and, and trying to do my job, you know, in virtual meetings and manage all those things. And even the worry every time I had to leave the house to go to the grocery store and but mostly it was because I had been spending any moment that I could in preparing for this message and really, leaning in to the things that our community was experiencing or the things that so many in the world were experiencing.

And I laid my grief at his feet, and I leaned into his comfort. And if there is anything that we learned in this passage is that it is okay to bring our deep grief to the Lord. One of our worship leaders, Josh Coad leading today

shared with our team last week, virtually of course, he shared that worship isn't just praise, it is lament also. And that actually by worshiping through lament and also through praise, we can actually let one lend weight to the other. I let him know that that really resonated with me because I've never felt such strong swings between the two than in this season, the lament, and then the praise or the gratitude. I think we all feel a sense of praise for these moments, right. Praise, even gratitude that our family has been pressed into one another for the blessings in our lives, but then lament, deep grief at the difficulty and the uncertainty of what's ahead, and the pain of what others have lost or are feeling. May all of it draw us to the feet of the Father. In our agony, may we never cease to seek our Father for strength, for comfort, for wisdom, and for peace.

And so I went up to my room, and I just knelt before the Lord and I began to lay my grief at his feet. And as I began to pray in the Spirit I finally just blurted out to the Lord, it just kind of came out, "What is happening?" Like, Lord, I believe that you will work all these things towards good but in that moment, I needed to know I needed to understand. And I began to just pray and lean into him and to offer up members of our community at his feet. People like Rebecca Ferguson Andre, who serves on the keys plays the keys on our worship team and who had to this week hurry up to New York to be near her mother who was in the intensive care unit, very critical condition. Though, she just had to hurry to be near because the limitations at the hospital she couldn't even go to be at her mother's bedside. I began to offer up Dr. Matthews, who is a member of our pastoral leadership team, and he lost this week to the COVID virus, his aunt, a spiritual mentor to him who was the first to take him to church as a little boy. And as I just prayed on, I began to pray for the children that live near the Dream Center that they might not have a parent available to them to just help with their home learning. What about them Lord? Or even the neighbors that live just around the corner from us underneath the bridge that live on the street, that they don't have the ability to social distance or to quarantine or even the means to wash their hands.

Pastor Joel:

And I just love the way you bear others burdens, Nina. And isn't that part of our calling to bear each other's burdens in this season? As I look at the Scripture, I wonder, is there any scripture that you relate more deeply with than right here in the garden. As we look at Christ and we see him, exchanging with the Father, Jesus turns to God, him who all things are possible in. And he has the capability to change things but he doesn't. And is this the core of why it's such a dramatic moment for Jesus before God. And in verse 42, he says, God, he says, Father, he says, if you are willing, take this cup from me. And it's the first time in all of the Gospels that Jesus petitions the Father, and the Father does not show up in a powerful deliverance. And here's what theologian Yon Olaf Hendrickson, here's his explanation. He said this, he said, "The experience of God's absence is closely linked to expectations of the good or of goodness, however, when conditions or possibilities for goodness are no longer in view, this underpins the experience of God as absent. Since faith in God considers God to be the very source of goodness." Is this what Jesus was expressing in Mark chapter 15, verse 34, when he says, "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*" Is he saying, God? I don't see goodness right now in front of me. I can't see hope. And can't you relate with this right here?

And maybe you've had an experience, maybe you've prayed a prayer, and you're saying, God, there is no foreseeable hope in front of me. And how am I going to deal with this situation and we cry out, we say, Father, please take this cup from me. And maybe it's in hearing that or watching a loved one suffer through something, maybe it's losing a loved one. Say, Father, take this cup from me. Maybe it's watching the economy just take a nosedive and realizing there's a dream that is dying before your very eyes, Father, take this cup from me. Maybe it's being at a dead end job and that you don't want to be any say Father take this cup from me. Maybe it's hearing

that diagnosis and it's just too much weight to bear on your back and you say, Father, take this cup from me. It's Chris, and Lana, who are going to come in a few moments and share a brief part of their story where they drink the cup of cancer, and the cup of losing a little one. And they talk about how in those moments that they didn't feel God. That they struggled but they had to be honest with God and they had to cry out their emotions. And it's almost as though they're describing this very scripture of Jesus coming into the garden and interfacing and reaching out to God Almighty. We can understand why Jesus in the Scripture, why he comes and we can understand why God says; take this cup of wrath from me. Take this cup of torture from me; take this cup of pain away, please.

And he prays this prayer but it doesn't end here. Father, if it be in your will take this cup from me. "Yet" the King James Version says, "nevertheless". And it's after that, nevertheless, that shows the true nature of our faith. It's after that, nevertheless, if we really have a deep faith, then we will see if it survives. It's after that nevertheless, that shows us if we have true character in God. What comes next after the nevertheless it's after the nevertheless, is when you go from interest in God's benefit to surrender to God's purpose. It's what separates conditional capitulation from unconditional surrender.

The Mount of Olives, on the eastern side is the boundary of the city of Jerusalem and on the other side, it actually leads into the wilderness. It's that same wilderness that so many have found refuge in over thousands of years. Even David when he was fleeing, Absalom ran into the wilderness through this entrance. And we see Jesus in the garden and here he is in the Mount of Olives, he's less than an hour away from just disappearing into the wilderness. In other words, when he prays this very prayer, he has escape right in his sights. Nevertheless, yet, take this cup from me God but nevertheless, not my will but your will be done, may it come to pass. Many of us we never get out and we never make that transition from take this cup to thy will be done.

There's a great article in the Harvard Business Review. And David Kessler talks about how the five stages of grief how we as a culture are going through these five stages and we go through denial as the virus won't affect me and then we go through anger, what do you mean I got a lockdown in my home and we go through bargaining. Okay, well, if I lock in my home, then I should be safe then right? And we go through sadness and I can't handle I can't take this anymore. And then hopefully we get to acceptance, okay, this is here, this is happening. It's okay. We can do this. There's a new normal. And there are all these different stages but the reality is some of us get stuck in one stage, don't we? And we go on a loop. And we go over and over through anger or through sadness, and we can't get out of it. We're saying, take this cup, take this cup, take this cup, and we won't leave that behind. But emotions have to have motion. It's okay to go through this in different paces but we've got to keep moving. We've got to keep shifting. It's embracing but it's not becoming sedentary in these moments. And it's when we get to acceptance, that the power comes the power to understand that there are some things that we can't control. And there are some things that we can do.

Kessler in the article, he talks about this. He says after acceptance, he contends there's actually a six stage of grief. He writes a whole book on this. And he says after acceptance comes meaning. Those of us who have faith in Christ can understand that in the good he can bring meaning, in the bad he can bring meaning, just as in the same like.

Nina and I are trying to embrace the fact that we have something to learn from God in this season that we have never learned before. That God has something to say in our relationships that we haven't learned in any other

season of life, that we can do something in this season now that we have never done before. There is great opportunity. And it begs then the question of us, and it forces us so that we have a decision to make, embrace it, or miss it. What are we going to do? Use it or lose it, accept it or reject it, lash out or lean in?

I like the way Max Lucado put it. He said, "It was in the garden that Jesus made his decision. He would rather go to hell for you, and then go to heaven without you." And Jesus in the midst of his agony in the Scripture somehow he comes to a point of resolve.

Sometimes prayer absolutely changes the situation and God shows up and God moves, and we find restoration, or we find healing. But sometimes, as in the garden, prayer doesn't change your circumstance. But it changes your will. And it was at the cross, that the battle was fought but it was in the garden that the will found resolve where we move from take this cup to nevertheless.

Martin Luther King Jr. said it well in one of his final sermons. He said this, he said, 'We must learn the rigorous test of moving from "let this cup pass from me" to "nevertheless". Few people learn the lesson. And they end up in all the misery and all the agony and all the frustration of life because they can't quite jump from one to the other. They live life on "let this cup pass from me". They try to, when they see that the cup is still there; they try to get away from it through diverse methods and manners. And they end up more frustrated.'

I don't know about you, but I'm going away determine that wherever He leads me, I will follow. I will follow him to the garden. I will follow Him to the cross if he wants me to go there. I will follow him to the dark valleys of death if he wants me to go there. Not my will, but thy will be done. And when you can cry that when you stand up amid life with exuberant joy, and you know that God walks with you. Even though you walk through the valley of the shadow of death, you know that God is there.

So, Lord, we just take a moment to lean into you right now. God we pray. We pray today that you would comfort the afflicted. Lord, I pray we will find solace in you. And God as we face a season that still is to come of pain, maybe sometimes some hurt Lord, different things coming in. We will stand as it says in the book of Mark, Jesus says, "Now rise, rise up, let's go". And so we face our trials with a new resolve today. And so Father today Nina and I, we bless every watcher, every family, every home every neighborhood, we bless with resolve, we bless with moments of honesty before you God with a wrestling, but we pray that your Spirit today would minister and give us true resolve to lean into your will. Not mine God, let thy will be done. In Jesus name I pray. Amen.