

Midweek 2

It Is Hidden in the Savior's Sighs

Text: Luke 22:39-46

- I. Love required his whole attention.
 - A. Great love because of the coming cross.
 - B. Great love because of those for whom he would bear it.
- II. Need requires our whole attention.
 - A. When we do not take his cross seriously, we greatly increase the weight of our own crosses.
 - B. His love on the cross not only atones for our failure but inspires us to follow after him.

As we continue to look for the glory of Christ hidden on the cross, let us go with Jesus and his disciples to the Garden of Gethsemane. There we will see how seriously Jesus takes his journey to the cross, as well as the sad consequences when we fail to take seriously that journey and the cross. We read from the gospel according to St. Luke, chapter 22, beginning at verse 39:

Jesus went out as usual to the Mount of Olives, and his disciples followed him. On reaching the place, he said to them, "Pray that you will not fall into temptation." He withdrew about a stone's throw beyond them, knelt down and prayed, "Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done." An angel from heaven appeared to him and strengthened him. And being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground. When he rose from prayer and went back to the disciples, he found them asleep, exhausted from sorrow. "Why are you sleeping?" he asked them. "Get up and pray so that you will not fall into temptation."

I.

In Lent, we are following Jesus to the cross. Lent is special. It is filled with glory. But the glory is hidden on the cross. Those who do not take it seriously will never see it, much less enjoy it or receive it. Tonight that glory is hidden under the sighs of the Savior. And there is nothing trivial about that. The sighs that end on the cross are the beginning and the middle, the heart and the core of what God has to say to us about ourselves and about himself. Let us follow Jesus this evening to the dark Garden of Gethsemane on the Mount of Olives. There we see how seriously Jesus took Lent.

He bids the disciples, and us with them, to watch and pray as he prepares for the great struggle that is about to begin. May we never think that the struggle was easy for him. Just look at him in the garden. He throws himself facedown on the ground. As the writer of the epistle to the Hebrews tells us, he prays with loud cries and groans. He sees all that

is about to take place. Even as he prays, his dear friend Judas is in the process of selling him out for a few pieces of silver. The soldiers are on the way. Jesus sees it all. Soon will come the trial. Soon will come the spitting and beating. Soon there will be the flogging. Soon there will be the crushing weight of the cross. Then will come the nails in his hands and feet. Then a day of hanging on the cross naked, in shame, the object of ridicule and mockery. And then death. But that isn't even the half of it. Abandoned by all, comforted by none, all of the evil, all of the sin, all of the vice of the whole world will be dumped on him. And every bit of God's righteous rage against sin will be thrown into his face and onto his soul.

Oh, yes, Jesus took Lent seriously. What love he had for his Father! Who can begin to grasp or fathom it? For all of this he does out of love for the Father. Seeing all that he is about to endure, he cries out with groans and sighs to the Father he loves with every fiber of his being: If there is another way, Father, dear Father, . . . but your will be done. Three times Jesus cries out. An angel even comes to comfort, or strengthen, his human nature in the face of such agony. But does the angel lessen his pain? Not at all! Rather, the angel somehow gives strength to the human nature of Christ to bear and endure still more. He prays, he cries, he groans all the more at the dread prospect of his Father's anger and the torment ahead for his innocent body and soul covered with the sin of the world. It was certainly painful enough to endure the shame and the abuse of men. It was certainly painful enough to be abandoned by those he had helped and those he loved, to be abandoned by family and friends. But to be punished and then abandoned by his Father—who can even begin to comprehend what agony that entailed? And so he cries to his Father for relief. But only the angel comes. And then the angel leaves. The torment decreed for the sins of the world will not be taken away, nor will it be lessened in the least.

And what love for us! We are there in the garden with the disciples. And what are they doing? Surely they hear Jesus' cries. Surely they must see the blood and sweat that pours off his anguished brow. Surely they wrestle with God in prayer and smite their breasts during this great struggle taking place only an hour before the greatest struggle begins. Surely they take Lent and the cross seriously. After all, Jesus is going through all this out of love not only for his Father but out of love for them, for us.

But no! Look! The disciples are sleeping. They do not watch with Jesus. They do not join him in prayer. They do not struggle even to stay awake. Is that not astonishing? Saint Luke tells us that they sleep because of sorrow. The whole thing is just too much for them. A child cannot sleep on Christmas Eve because of the excitement of the coming Christmas Day. But the disciples, on the night before the suffering that wins salvation, sleep!

Wonder beyond wonder that Jesus does not at that point give up in disgust and say, "If that's all you care about Lent and about what I am going through for you, then forget it! I'll go back to the praises of the angels that I enjoyed before the world began. You disciples are not worth half, no, not the smallest fragment of the effort."

Oh, how such words would sting in our ears. For we know only too well the sleep of the disciples. With them we are experts when it comes to not taking Lent seriously. We know how to say to Jesus, "Well, Lord Jesus, I know that this and that is what you want me to

do, but frankly it's just too much effort for me. Besides, I'm sure you understand. I'm sure you will forgive me. So, Lord Jesus, just excuse me while I go my own way, take a nap, a break from following after you. I certainly wouldn't want to suffer any lack or much inconvenience under the cross. No, not suffering but glory is what I want, glory that I can touch and taste and see. I'd much rather you give me time and treasure, friends and family, work and play, all that my heart desires so that I can do with them as I please, enjoy them for myself and those I love. You know, Lord Jesus, how it is."

Oh, yes, he knows. He saw it in the disciples in the garden. He sees it in us. And what does he say in answer? "Father, dear Father, with cries and groans and sweat like blood, I come before you and ask—ask that your will be done. While they sleep in indifference and carelessness, I beg of you, let me redeem them. And if this is the only way, then I obey! Just so long as their debt is paid and their ransom complete and secure." That is glory. That is the glory of the cross hidden in the Savior's sighs, the glory that redeems us for all eternity from death and the grave, from hell and eternal sighs of anguish and despair. Because of his great love for his Father and because of his great love for us, Lent and the cross absorb his entire being, every particle of his strength in his mind and body and soul.

II.

Oh, may we too take Lent and the cross seriously as we follow Jesus there in the garden. And how do we do that? How do we take it seriously? Jesus told the disciples, and he tells us: "Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation," into the devil's snare and trap. Again we have to pay close attention to Jesus' words here. He does not tell the disciples to watch and pray so that they can help him bear the cross for the sins of the world. No, never that! He must bear the cross for our redemption entirely alone. He tells the disciples to watch and pray because of the great danger and the great struggle that lies before them. They too must bear a cross. They too must endure a great battle. And the devil is waiting for them, eager to catch them in his snare and trap. If they do not listen to the words of Jesus, they will have no armor of defense. If they do not watch, that is, fill the eyes of their hearts and souls with him and what he is doing for them, then they will fall into the snare and trap of the devil. Without Jesus and his Word in the eyes of mind and soul, they will not cry out for help and none will come. Yes, without his Word and aid in answer to their prayers, they will suffer far more than they need to suffer in the coming hours and days.

For suffer the disciples must. The day will come when they will be despised because of Jesus. Yes, the day will come when they too will bear a cross and their glory as children of God and heirs of eternal life will be hidden in sighs of pain and groans of sorrow. For all of them will be persecuted because of him. What groans and sighs await them even in the coming hours when they see Jesus arrested. Temptation comes. The devil attacks. And at Jesus' arrest, they all fall and fail. They run away and hide. How loving of them! How loyal! At the first whiff of trouble, they are gone. Peter, the strongest and boldest, denies Jesus with loud oaths and curses. The rest, except for John, just disappear into the woodwork. If they had only listened. If they had only watched with Jesus and prayed as he told them to do. They still would have suffered. But they would have suffered in hope,

strengthened by his Word, supported every step of the way by his answer to their prayers for strength and help through that Word. Because they didn't listen to him, didn't fill the eyes of heart and soul with him, because they didn't cry out for help, they spent those next days with nothing to drink but tears and nothing to eat but despair.

So in whose footprints will you put your feet? Jesus bids you watch and pray as you listen to his Word and follow to the cross in Lent. The disciples take their feet out of the footpath to the cross and turn aside to sleep. If you join with the disciples, then you can be sure that when your time comes to carry a cross, you will carry it with much greater sorrow than is necessary. Worse yet, you may be so filled with sorrow at the cross of God's own sending that you cast it aside and never taste the glory hidden in sighs under the cross. You will fall and fail. You will run away and hide. You will deny him and pursue the sin of the moment rather than suffer with him while you wait for the glory of the resurrection.

Perhaps you already know that from bitter and painful experience. Think of the times in your life when you were tempted and you stumbled and fell. Why was that? It wasn't the will of God that you should fall. It was because you did not listen to him, did not watch with eyes fixed on him and his love for you. You did not pray, or if you did, you prayed for the secondary things as though those prayers were the most important ones. There is a time to pray for secondary things, and those prayers are indeed important. They are prayers for health and a measure of wealth; they are prayers for the warmth of family and friends. But more important is the prayer that Jesus bids us pray together with the disciples in the garden. It is the prayer that we will not fall into temptation. It is the prayer that we watch with him so that he and his grace fill our eyes and hearts and minds. It is the prayer that he would always be first and his Word most important to us. It is the prayer that in the hour of temptation to abandon him in times of persecution or to doubt his love in times of trouble—that in all such times we may cling to him and watch with him.

For we already know what it is like not to watch and pray. We already know what it is like to follow the example of the disciples and to fall asleep and push Jesus and his Word aside. The soul, after all, is like a vacuum. If it is not filled with the sight of Jesus and his grace, then very soon it will be filled with something else. Yes, very soon will come the tempter into the vacuum to engulf and fill the void with doubt, with fear, with lust, with pride, and with that whole host of sins that we know so well. Think of the times in your life when you were afraid that perhaps God had finally left you, had finally gotten sick of your excuses and now was going to let you stew in your own juices for awhile. You got sick. You lost a job. A loved one died. The past had shame in it. The future held fear. But Jesus said: Watch and pray! Listen to my Word and promise. Follow me to the cross; yes, clear your mind of everything else and consider it all as nothing so that you may join me under the cross.

If we do that, we will indeed still suffer. But we will suffer with Jesus. We will suffer in the confidence of the resurrection and the victory that he has won for us by his cross. We will suffer without despair. We will, in summary, experience the glory hidden with Christ in sighs under the cross.

Take Lent seriously. Take his cross seriously. May the incomparable love of Jesus in Lent inspire you to follow him up to the cross. For that is where he wants to find you and meet you and be with you: under the cross. We go to receive from him all the grace and benefit that he so yearned to win for us. We go to drown in the flood of his mercy. We go to live for him as he lived and died for us. Yes, we go to share in his heaven, since he has already endured hell in our place. He took it all so seriously. May we follow in his footsteps now and all the way through the portal of death and into the heaven he won for us in Lent! Amen.