

Opportunities And Failures

Luke 22:39-46

39 And he came out and went, as was his custom, to the Mount of Olives, and the disciples followed him. 40 And when he came to the place, he said to them, "Pray that you may not enter into temptation." 41 And he withdrew from them about a stone's throw, and knelt down and prayed, 42 saying, "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done." 43 And there appeared to him an angel from heaven, strengthening him. 44 And being in an agony he prayed more earnestly; and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground. 45 And when he rose from prayer, he came to the disciples and found them sleeping for sorrow, 46 and he said to them, "Why are you sleeping? Rise and pray that you may not enter into temptation." (Luke 22:39-46 (ESV))

Have you ever been face to face with a real and genuine "opportunity of a lifetime" and without recognizing exactly what you had in front of you, simply went right on past it in favor of another thing that seemed more appealing or more convenient to you at the moment?

We can't usually know when such opportunities have taken place because their real value does not become known to us. But sometimes, in the mysterious grace of God, He enables us to look back on some of those opportunities and to catch a small vision of the thing we missed out on. And on those occasions, our hearts grieve within us for our loss.

Choices and our ability to make those choices are a necessary part of the way that God made us. They are a part of the "free will" allowance He has given to us. So yes, without doubt and most often without advance notice, we will be confronted with opportunities for choice, mostly very ordinary everyday ones. But sometimes those choices turn out to be very serious. And if we are fortunate enough to make a good and right choice, our hearts are gladdened.

But unfortunately, it seems that the clear lines between the rightness and wrongness of many of our choices are not so plain. They are blurred and confusing, and in the rush of daily life, we find ourselves making choices we should not make.

And may I say that some of the worst of our wrong choices take place within the most ordinary of our daily circumstances.

So it was on this night, as the disciples accompanied Jesus to the Garden of Gethsemane. This was something that they were very accustomed to doing. And so, this opportunity for prayer probably seemed to them to be much like all the many other similar opportunities for prayer.

But with that being said, we do have one inference given within these words that tells us that this visit to the Garden of Gethsemane had some difference to it. We are told here that the disciples were sorrowful, even to the point of exhaustion.

And they did have cause to be sorrowful, several reasons. They had just been told that one of them would betray the Lord Jesus. And also, they were no doubt remembering all the many times that Jesus had warned them that He might soon die.

But I also believe that the unseen spiritual kingdom that revolves all around us each day was and still is very real and very active within men's lives. And it was especially active there during those hours leading up to Jesus's death on the cross.

We can see it clearly in the way that the angel came to minister to Jesus as He suffered great sweat drops of blood and cried out to God the Father to let this cup pass from Him.

These words do not say that the disciples were also being ministered too by the spiritual kingdom. But I have to believe that they, through their deep feelings of sorrow, were being made aware of a very serious impending event.

And I believe that the spiritual kingdom ministers those same kinds of feelings to you and me when something very "big" and perhaps "ominous" is about to take place. And for the lack of a better way of explaining our feelings, we call them "premonitions"! And those feelings cause us to respond in different ways.

With these disciples, their sorrow should have provoked them to a time of fervent prayer. But it did not! They were instead, "sleeping for sorrow", or as the NIV words it, were "Exhausted from sorrow".

Sorrow, most often, would seem to be a form of distraction that would keep a person awake, tossing and turning. But here, their grief caused them to do the opposite, to become drowsy and to fall asleep.

And therein might lie evidence of the other participants within the spiritual kingdom, those sinister powers of darkness that tempt us to do things that we should not do, to make choices that we should not make.

Consider for a moment . . . could and should the disciples have fought off their drowsiness and continued with Jesus in prayer. Yes! They most definitely should have and could have!

How do we know that they could have stayed awake . . . because Jesus said so! He actually came back to them and woke them on three occasions, exhorting them to stay awake and to pray. Listen, this from Matthew 26

40 Then He came to the disciples and found them asleep, and said to Peter, "What? Could you not watch with Me one hour? 41 Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak."
(Matthew 26:40-41)

So yes, the disciples could have stayed awake!

Should they have stayed awake? Oh yes! And for a multitude of reasons, one of those reasons was given to them immediately by the Lord Jesus. He said . . .

41 Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." (Matthew 26:40-41)

Our flesh, that part of us that has our "self", our soul, within it is especially susceptible to temptation. There seems to be an open doorway with our "flesh", our "soul" by which the dominions of darkness, those powers and principalities of the demonic world can gain access to our soul and there bring about the temptations that will keep us from doing the things that God intends for us to do.

Here, it was not as if the demons provoked the disciples to do something that was blatantly sinful. No, they instead used one of the simplest of temptations, "drowsiness". And that one simple temptation was enough to distract them from their appointed duty of prayer.

"Sleep" is such a simple thing, and so good for us when done at the appropriate time and place. But misused, "sleep" can also be used to accomplish the will of the evil one, as it did here in the Garden of Gethsemane, and as it does often with tens of thousands, even millions of people who, each Sunday, choose to "sleep in" rather than get up and go to church and worship the Lord.

What a clever diversion by the evil one! And may I say, as those dear ones “sleep in”, often they are missing out on life-changing opportunities that they may never recover from.

Here, drowsiness and sleep kept the disciples from taking part in something that was so big and so important that even we, looking back and knowing what they missed out on, still can't fathom the magnitude of its importance.

They missed out on joining with and being an intimate part of the provision that the Lord Jesus would make for the salvation of men's souls. Wow! What an opportunity and what a horrible failure for these disciples!

But to say that such things are an “unforgivable lapse” in commitment would not be true. God can and does forgive such things, and many other things that are far worse. But for these disciples, this was a very, very, very big loss of opportunity. And the thing that Jesus was asking of them was so very simple, prayer, staying awake and joining with Him in prayer!

And may we again take the opportunity to address the nature of this very simple, but vastly profound matter of prayer.

As we have seen over and over again, Jesus gives us the full understanding that prayer is not just one of the essential parts of a relationship with God the Father; it is probably the very most important. Why is that so? It is as simple as it appears to be. At its barest level, prayer is nothing more than an intimate conversation between us and God. I have said to you often that my mind thinks in a visual manner. And in this matter of prayer, I see myself walking along each day, with God walking beside me.

Now, consider a similar circumstance of daily life. My wife and I go for a walk through our neighborhood for our daily exercise. It is so natural for us to carry on a conversation while we walk. In that conversation, we talk about many of the things that concern us, both personally and as a family.

And it is in and through those and other conversations like them that we establish and maintain a deep, loving relationship with each other. During those conversations and others, we share very intimate concerns. And the more intimate we choose to become, the more trust and appreciation we gain in and for each other.

And folks, while yes, there are many, many other important things within our daily lives, “loving relationship” rises above them all, “loving relationship” with God and “loving relationship” with each other.

How do we know that relationship is so very important? Because God has said that it is! We are told clearly in the scriptures that all the most important things in life reduce down to just one thing . . . “Love the Lord your God with all of your heart, all of your soul, all of your mind and all of your strength, and then love your neighbor as yourself.” And Jesus would add to that, “Love each other as I have loved you”.

Those words describe “relationship”, deep, intimate and loving “relationship”. And that was what Jesus was asking from His disciples on this very, very difficult night, relationship!

These men, who were just a “stones-throw” away, were not just His disciples; they were His closest of friends. And He needed them to be “one” with Him in His sufferings. And they should have been! But they weren’t. And I can only imagine how many times afterward they looked back on this night and sorely wished they had done better.

So then, what shall we gain from being able to view the opportunities and the failures of these dear men? It is this! It is our usual nature to make excuses for people in these kinds of circumstances, and to cut them some slack, but folks, we must not. Why? Because if we do, we are apt to provide them with an excuse that is not ours to give. And even further, we are apt to provide our own selves with a similar excuse when a similar time comes for us. And that should not be!

These scriptures tell us plainly to “make no provision for the flesh”. And that was what Jesus warned these men about when He said to them,

41 Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." (Matthew 26:41)

Those disciples should have stayed awake and should have prayed fervently. And if you and I were to have been in that same circumstance, we too should have stayed awake and prayed. It is as simple as that.

Am I condemning them or us for failures? No! Not at all! I am simply giving recognition to the most basic of requirements of our souls and that is that we be obedient to the righteous requirements of God, no matter how difficult they seem to be. And also, for us to know that each time we fall short, we truly are hurting someone or perhaps even disrupting one of the greater plans of God.

What then should we do with what we know from these words? It is this! Just as you and I are able to observe here with the Lord Jesus, we need to make firm plans for a daily time of prayer, and a daily time of relationship building, both with our Lord, with our families, and with our friends.

And we must follow through with those plans. We must develop habits and customs that provide for those opportunities and choices to become successful.

And it all reduces down to one thing on our part, and that one thing is “obedience”.

May I close with some familiar words from Deuteronomy 30 . . .

19 This day I call the heavens and the earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live 20 and that you may love the LORD your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him. For the LORD is your life.

(Deuteronomy 30:19-20)