

In Moments of Greatest Stress

Luke 22:23-46

Series: The Climax of the Cross (Luke, Spring 2020)

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Worship: Selfless Love

Key Sentence: As Jesus submits to the cross, he shows us how to react in moments of greatest stress

Outline:

- I. Remember to be the servant (Luke 22:24-27)
- II. Avoid egotism (Luke 22:28-34)
- III. Be ready for what might happen (Luke 22:35-38)
- IV. Pray - and submit to the Father's will (Luke 22:39-44)
- V. Pray - and watch out for temptation (Luke 22:45-46)

Luke 22:24-46 A dispute also arose among them, as to which of them was to be regarded as the greatest. ²⁵And he said to them, "The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and those in authority over them are called benefactors. ²⁶But not so with you. Rather, let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves. ²⁷For who is the greater, one who reclines at table or one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at table? But I am among you as the one who serves. ²⁸"You are those who have stayed with me in my trials, ²⁹and I assign to you, as my Father assigned to me, a kingdom, ³⁰that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom and sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel.

³¹"Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, ³²but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers." ³³Peter said to him, "Lord, I am ready to go with you both to prison and to death." ³⁴Jesus said, "I tell you, Peter, the rooster will not crow this day, until you deny three times that you know me."

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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.

⁴⁵And 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.”

In Moments of Greatest Stress Luke 22:23-46

What is the most stressful situation you've lived through? I know you've had stress. Everyone has. The people around you, in church or in your neighborhood are also experiencing stress, from the response to COVID-19, if nothing else. But you may also have other health concerns for a specific parent or loved one who is aging or ill. You want relief for them, but it seems you just get set-back after set-back and one is a moment of stress and worry. This has been the story with Gail's mom since Gail's dad died, and it has at times been very stressful.

But your stress could be any number of other things. Maybe your normally balanced budget has been unbalanced by unexpected expenses, and every new expense is an elevation of stress. Maybe it's a marriage in which conflict comes frequently, like waves on a shore and every wave reaching higher. Maybe it's just the stress of juggling family, parenting, home, job, spiritual life, and health. Each of these adds a step up to your stress level. Your greatest stress may not have been any of these, but each stressful situation is like all the others in some ways. First, it's marked by uncertainty. You don't know how things are going to come out. It's also marked by conflicting emotions. You don't know exactly what you want in the situation or how you feel about those involved. Third, it's marked by fatigue. Things build up until you are really just tired, worn to the core. Finally, it's often marked by conflict. Things you normally would ignore, get under your skin and make you mad.

In our text for this morning Jesus and the disciples are in a very stressful situation. Jesus has spent days of acclaim and opposition. Even the disciples are aware that something significant is about to happen. But Jesus is fully aware of what's going on, and Jesus himself is under the greatest stress that any human being has ever endured and headed for worse. You can see the signs of stress. So, in Luke 22:23-46, as Jesus submits to the cross, he also shows us how to react in moments of greatest stress. I see in this passage five principles about handling stress, attitudes derived directly from the words and actions of Jesus.

The first attitude, perhaps the hardest, is to remember that you are the servant. This is something Jesus both taught and modeled throughout his ministry. Luke 22, verses 24 to 30: *A dispute also arose among them, as to which of them was to be regarded as the greatest.* ²⁵*And he said to them, "The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and those in authority over them are called benefactors.* ²⁶*But not so with you. Rather, let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves.*

²⁷For who is the greater, one who reclines at table or one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at table? But I am among you as the one who serves. ²⁸“You are those who have stayed with me in my trials, ²⁹and I assign to you, as my Father assigned to me, a kingdom, ³⁰that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom and sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel.

This discussion comes at a climactic moment. Jesus has just given them the bread and the cup to remember him by: his body broken, his blood shed. He’s told them that one at the table would betray him. It’s natural that they discuss among themselves who it might be. But like schoolchildren, the discussion deteriorates into foolishness, as they compare first their loyalty and then their greatness with one another. “You wait and see, Jesus is going to give me the place of honor in his kingdom.” By now the disciples should know better, but the stress of the moment brings out their self-centered self interest.

Jesus responds by teaching them again, patiently, that they are to be servants as he is a servant. “The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and those in authority over them are called benefactors.” It was common among rulers in Greek cultures to call themselves “benefactor.” Jesus says his followers are not to be self-promoting, but humble. “Let the greatest among you become as the youngest.” In that culture, age was revered. Those who were young had less honor and took last place: at the table, in speaking, and in prestige. Jesus says “Let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves. For . . . I am among you as the one who serves.” He was and is king of heaven, Son of God, sovereign over the universe, yet he came among us not as king, not as celebrity, but as one who serves. In the Gospel of Mark he says “For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” In John’s Gospel we find that he showed servanthood by washing their feet. “If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. ¹⁵For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you.”

He expects us, in times of stress, not to become concerned about greatness, not to retreat into defense of ourselves, but to become even more the servant of those around us. A simple illustration of this is the two cries you might hear on a sinking ship. The old traditional cry is “women and children first.” That’s the cry of a servant, one who is concerned about the lives of others. But too often a ship has gone down with heartless cries of “every man for himself.” That’s the cry of panic, the cry of the fallen nature, of selfishness and self-seeking. How does this work in your stress? What’s your cry when the ship is sinking? Ask yourself: “Do I have a servant’s attitude in this situation?” “Is there someone here I can serve to help them through this stressful time?”

Rebecca Reynolds, one of my favorite writers, published a different kind of COVID-19 checklist this week: “I’ve checked on one local elderly friend to let him/her know I’m willing to make a grocery run now to keep him/her out of crowds.” “I’ve donated to a local organization that stands ready to help the helpless in my community if a crisis escalates locally.” “I’ve reached out to at least one family with an immune-compromised member to let them know I’m praying and see if I can run out to get supplies for them.” And so forth.

Even in times of stress, Jesus is asking us to be like him, like servants, and he makes a promise that God will honor our commitment. “You are those who have stayed with me in my trials, ²⁹and I assign to you, as my Father assigned to me, a kingdom, ³⁰that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom and sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel.” He teaches that there is a future and a hope. This distress, these trials, will not last forever. A day is coming in which you and I will sit at the feast, eat and drink at the table of the Lord, and enjoy his rest. While we may not sit on thrones like the disciples, judging, yet we will be in the crowd around the thrones, worshiping the Lamb.

So the first word this passage speaks to those in times of stress is to remember to be the servant in the situation. The alternative is egotism and independence, and that’s what we see Jesus warning Peter against in verses 31-34 “*Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, ³²but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers.*” ³³*Peter said to him, “Lord, I am ready to go with you both to prison and to death.”* ³⁴*Jesus said, “I tell you, Peter, the rooster will not crow this day, until you deny three times that you know me.”*”

We noticed, when we first saw that Judas was planning a betrayal, that Satan himself was personally intervening in that situation, and had prompted Judas’ actions. Here we see Satan at work again, but notice the sovereignty of God. Satan had to ask, literally ask permission, to sift Peter like wheat. Satan, despite his evil and despite his power, is still subordinate to God. This does not mean that God is responsible for the evil which Satan does, but it does mean that God both allows those actions and fits them into his higher and better purposes.

What Satan asked in this case was to sift Peter like wheat, that is, to greatly test his character. Great stress often leads to great temptation, great opportunity to fall and fail. But, Jesus says, “I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail.” Jesus knows that the Father is sovereign. He doesn’t expect Peter to avoid the temptation or even the failure but he does expect God to keep Peter safe, to turn him around, and to use him in the lives of others. But Peter falls easily into egotism: “Lord, I am ready to go with you both to prison and to death.”

We know that Peter is outspoken. Sometimes it's positive, as when he speaks up to say that Jesus is the Christ. Sometimes it's very negative, as when he tries to prevent Jesus from continuing toward the cross. But mostly Peter's audacity is a lot like ours, saying things that are easy to say but hard to live out: "No problem Lord, I'll be with you to the end, to prison. I'll go to death for you."

It's just this kind of self-confidence, especially in times of stress, that leads into temptation and then into sin. You've all heard of an alcoholic or drug addict, who swore they were fine, that they could handle this, and then they gave in. Scripture says: "Be careful if you think you stand, lest you fall." How many of us have said "I'm going to get up every morning and have a quiet time," only to find ourselves more stuck in bed than normal. How many have said "I know those candies, those chips are there, but I'm not going to touch them." How many have said: "Never again am I going to get that angry with my children, no matter what." How many have failed to keep those promises?

In times of stress, we need to avoid egoistic boasting. Look what Jesus says "I tell you, Peter, the rooster will not crow this day, until you deny three times that you know me." Peter's boasting gets him into great trouble, and causes him great grief. We make stressful situations even worse by indulging our ego. I knew a couple many years ago who had great stress in their marriage. Each had major grievances against the other, which had in theory been confessed, forgiven and set aside. I called these grievances the big guns, and the problem with this couple was that every time they had a small argument, their egos would get involved and they would pull out the big guns, "Well you . . . what you did!" "Well you're no better . . . don't forget that." Ego and pride are what tempt us to hurt others, emotionally, spiritually, even physically.

But what are the alternatives? One is a servant attitude. But we also need to counter egotism with dependence on God. How did Jesus handle Peter's temptation? He prayed that Peter's faith would not fail. That's what we need to pray for ourselves and others, that our faith, that our trust in Him would not fail.

But, Jesus would also say to us in verses 35 to 38 that we need to be prepared, prepared for what will happen, and the fulfillment of things to come. *He said to them, "When I sent you out with no moneybag or knapsack or sandals, did you lack anything?" They said, "Nothing."* ³⁶*He said to them, "But now let the one who has a moneybag take it, and likewise a knapsack. And let the one who has no sword sell his cloak and buy one."* ³⁷*For I tell you that this Scripture must be fulfilled in me: 'And he was numbered with the transgressors.'* *For what is written about me has its fulfillment."* ³⁸*And they said, "Look, Lord, here are two swords."* *And he said to them, "It is enough."*

When Christ had previously sent out the disciples without bag or purse or sword, it was to teach them to depend on God alone for their ministry needs. They were not to depend on themselves. You might think he is now saying the opposite, “Ok, from now on don’t depend on God,” but that would contradict himself. What he is saying is that the end is near. Be ready for whatever happens. “Everything written about me is reaching its fulfillment.” Jesus is teaching them to be prepared for the climax, ready mentally and spiritually, not literally, since he’s not actually sending them out at this point. As one commentary says “The contrast indicates, not a reversal of normal rules for the church’s mission, but an exception in a time of crisis. . . Since he told them not to buy more swords, and since two were hardly enough to defend the group, the swords are a vivid symbol of impending crisis, not intended for actual use.” Another commentator said “Jesus’ call in Luke 22:36 to acquire these items is a call to readiness, resourcefulness, and vigilance. Jesus is warning his followers in his characteristically attention-riveting manner that in the coming days they will need to be prepared for a spiritual battle like they have never before experienced.”

The disciples of course, understand him to be saying, “get a sword and be ready to fight.” They look around and count. “One, two. We’ve got two swords, Lord.” But Jesus looks at them and says, ‘Enough.’ Now some would understand him to say “Two swords is enough for what I have in mind.” But the Greek is more easily interpreted as “OK - that’s enough of this conversation.” Furthermore, the larger context of what Jesus has taught, especially about the fact that he will be arrested and crucified, makes his meaning clear. He was not condoning the use of violence, but ending a misguided conversation.

But how do we apply this to our lives in times of stress? One way is to emphasize spiritual preparedness. The issue isn’t if we have a suitcase or even a gun, but if we have the full armor of God for the spiritual stresses we face. Ephesians 6 “Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm. ¹⁴Stand therefore, having fastened on the belt of truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, ¹⁵and, as shoes for your feet, having put on the readiness given by the gospel of peace. ¹⁶In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one; ¹⁷and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, ¹⁸praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication.”

This is exactly what we see Jesus doing as he faces the greatest moment of stress in all human experience. He prays and submits to the will of God. Verses 39-45

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

Jesus is approaching the most hellish thing any man ever faced. I’m not talking about his own death. Many have died nobly, with self-sacrifice. What I’m talking about is his punishment for our sins. Keep in mind the facts. Sin is rebellion against God. Sin separates the sinner from God. Sin deserves God’s wrath. To restore fellowship with God, justice must be done and sin punished. When God wanted to express his love by rescuing sinners, he had to do it in a way that preserved his own justice. That’s where Jesus comes in. God offered himself as a substitute to bear the punishment and receive the wrath we deserved. Jesus himself was sinless, undeserving of punishment or death. But the punishment for all our sins was directed at him. Here are a couple of familiar ways that the Bible expresses it: “He himself bore our sin in his body on the cross.” “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us.” “He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities.”

Can you see, then, why Satan came and tempted Jesus to avoid the cross? It was to prevent this disease of forgiveness, redemption and righteousness from spreading all over the world. Jesus took the sin, guilt and death of many into his own flesh when he died as that sacrifice. And his punishment also meant separation from the Father. For the first time in all eternity the fellowship between the Father and the Son was broken. That’s why on the cross he’ll say “My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me.”

This is the what makes the Garden of Gethsemane so significant. Jesus, fully human and fully divine, had to choose to obey the Father’s will. The distress and the trauma of this decision can hardly be grasped. On one side the fallen angels and their fuhrer, Satan, are hoping against hope that he will turn from the path, and leave the fallen human race to them. On the other side the host of heaven can hardly believe he’ll sacrifice his infinite holiness for finite fallen creatures. Yet, unique though this situation is, Jesus does, in the garden what all of us can do in times of distress: He prays and submits himself to the Father’s will.

Verse 41: he withdrew from them about a stone's throw, and knelt down and prayed, ⁴²saying, "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done." Jesus prays that this cup, which he has told the disciples he must drink, this cup, which is the cup of God's wrath and punishment poured out, as talked about several times in the Old Testament, this cup, he says, take it from me, if you are willing. But if this must be, then not my will but yours be done. Not what I want but what you want be done.

In our moments of stress we are both like and unlike Jesus. We are like him when we already know what God wants. We know the right thing to do, the right way to be toward those around us. We know the path of obedience, but we don't want to do it, so we agonize before the Father, maybe agonize for a long time before submitting to his will. The other Gospel writers tell us Jesus went back and prayed three times before he finished in the Garden. But we are also unlike Jesus in that we don't always know the Father's will. We don't know whether we will live or die, succeed or fail, do well or do poorly. We don't know the end of every path, and we can't see the outcome of his plan. So we are called in every circumstance to both pray and submit. "Lord, we ask you to do this, but we submit to your sovereign will."

What we see of Jesus actually tells us that knowing God's hard plan and being able to choose is the hardest thing of all. That's part of the agony Jesus suffered.. This plan, which he had made with the Father and the Spirit, required him to endure the greatest pain anyone would ever know. This decision to do it is agonizing. Look at verses 43 and 44 "And there appeared to him an angel from heaven, strengthening him. ⁴⁴And being in an agony he prayed more earnestly; and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground." Doctors tell us this is possible, that under incredible stress blood vessels can rupture, exuding blood. Yet at the end of that agonizing moment Jesus affirms: "not my will but yours be done." Doesn't Michael Card capture the essence of this moment wonderfully? "Trembling with fear, alone in the garden, the battle before the final war. Blood became tears, there in the garden to fall upon the silent stones. There in the darkness the light and the darkness stood still; Two choices, one tortured will. There once the choice had been made, all the world would be saved by the One in the garden."

You and I will never know that kind of stress, but when things get hard, when things begin to fall apart around us, the essence of obedience is this: not my will but yours be done. God, you know what I want. I want my marriage restored, I want my friend healed, I want mercy for my child, I want to see change in this person or this ministry. But more than I want any of these things, I want your will to be done. Strengthen me, that I might do your will.

Prayer with submission is one of the key disciplines in times of stress. But another kind of prayer is also important, and this is our last observation. Did you notice in verses 40 and 46, that Jesus counseled the disciples to watch and pray so that they would not fall into temptation. This other key discipline in times of stress is prayer for protection from the temptations stress brings. Did you ever wonder what kind of temptation Jesus was talking about? You might look at the text and say: “well, they were tempted to fall asleep.” Not that sleep itself is sinful, but in this place at this time when Jesus was in agony, sleep was the last thing they should have done. But I think it more likely he was warning them against other kinds of temptation. All of them would be tempted to flee. Peter was tempted to deny. Many, maybe all, were tempted to doubt. How could this possibly be part of God’s plan? How could the Messiah die?

In times of stress, one should pray not to fall into temptation. I think we apply that by looking to our areas of weakness. Maybe when things get stressful for you, you become irritable and angry. Maybe when stress builds up you seek escape in lustful thoughts or in porn. Maybe under stress you punt responsibilities and hole up. You shut down. Maybe under stress you panic and run to worldly wisdom to solve a problem. I don’t know what your area of weakness is, but I suspect you do. That will be the area in which temptation comes in times of stress, unless you specifically pray to be strengthened against it.

How do we pull this all together? The most impressive thing in the passage is the incredible willingness of Jesus to bear our punishment and receive the wrath we deserve. As our friend Max Lucado once wrote “he would rather go to hell for you than go to heaven without you.” If you are seeing the great love of Jesus today for the first time, then I need to tell you that he wants a response from you. He wants you to put your faith and trust in him and him alone, so that he can give you the forgiveness and restoration which he has earned for you by his death, and which you have longed for.

But in looking at Jesus in this passage, we have also seen five principles for how we can handle stressful situations in our own lives. Have I (1) examined myself to see if I am taking the role of a servant? (2) examined myself to see if my ego is making me vulnerable? (3) prepared myself for spiritual warfare? (4) submitted myself to the Lord’s will in prayer, and (5) strengthened myself against temptation, again in prayer. If you will sit before the Lord with this checklist, and carry your stresses to him, I think that you will find that, like Jesus, you can submit to His will no matter how difficult.