

The Way of Solitude

Matthew 26:36-44

Introduction

Blaise Pascal, the famous scientist, theologian and Christian of the 17th century once wrote:

All the unhappiness of men arises from one single fact, that they cannot stay quietly in their own room. (Blaise Pascal)

The reason for that, he said:

... is the natural poverty of our feeble and mortal condition, so miserable that nothing can comfort us when we think of it too closely. (Blaise Pascal)

So, to not think of things too closely, we turn to what Pascal calls "diversions" to distract us from ourselves:

Hence it comes people so much love noise and stir; hence it comes that the prison is so horrible a punishment; hence it comes that the place of solitude is a thing incomprehensible. (Blaise Pascal)

Silence is golden, the adage says. But all of us know from personal experience that many times silence is intolerable.

The spiritual discipline of solitude is known as "the most radical" of the spiritual disciplines because it attacks us at the very source of our misery and wrongdoing.

To be in solitude is to follow the call of God to a place where we have determined to do nothing. For extensive periods of time.

All productivity is given up. All accomplishments are set aside. It is enough that God is there, that He is God and we are His.

As you know our Lenten theme this year is:

THE WAY

And you know, we are building these sermons around a single verse of Scripture:

Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." (John 14:6)

Today the way of Jesus leads us to THE WAY OF SOLITUDE. In the minutes before He was led away to be crucified, Jesus went to a secluded garden just outside the city limits of Jerusalem.

- It was a place He had visited often – so often, in fact, that Judas knew right where to lead the detachment of soldiers who he would lead there.

For Jesus, this was a place where He could be alone with God. It was a place of solitude.

- Now, remember, this story takes place during Passover – a time when conservative estimates say that more than a million people would have been in the city.
- There were no quiet places in Jerusalem!

All the remaining disciples – now only 11 – went with Him to the outer garden, but three of them (Peter, James and John) were invited to go in deeper with Jesus to the place of solitude.

I want to suggest to you tonight that Jesus invites us all to join Him in the deeper part of the garden. He invites all of us to a place of solitude. It is HIS WAY.

Come with me and let's observe what happens in this place.

#1: JESUS ENTERED IT “OVERWHELMED”

Look at verse 38:

My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. (Matthew 26:38)

The language sounds “poetic,” doesn't it? But break it down.

What Jesus was feeling wasn't a mere surface level emotion! He was feeling this at “soul level.” “My soul” He says. Deep within

These three men – Peter, James and John – were his best friends, and He was being incredibly transparent with them. Not all 11 disciples heard this admission. Only those three!

- You and I both know that there some things you can share with anybody – surface level stuff. Most of our conversations happen at this level.
- But other things – soul level things – can only be shared with a very few people.

These were the same three men that had been with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration. They had seen Him at His highest. Now they were with Him at the lowest point in His life. These were soul level friends.

The Garden of Gethsemane was on the Mount of Olives, so named because there was an orchard of olive trees there. The name “Gethsemane” means “olive press.”

- The very place where Jesus prayed was the place where those olives were squeezed until every last drop of oil had been removed.

When Jesus told His three friends that He was overwhelmed, He used words that sound very similar to the olive press in that place. He was “overwhelmed to the point of death.” That is, He was under such intense pressure that it was killing Him.

- Have you been there?

It is in moments like these, when the situations of life are demanding more from us than we think we can handle, that Jesus invites us to join Him in the place of solitude. God invites you and me into the depths of the garden – to a place of solitude – where we can have soul level conversations with Him.

#2: IT IS A PLACE OF BATTLE

Look at verse 39:

Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, “My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me.” (Matthew 26:39)

We read in one of the other Gospels that this time of prayer was so intense that Jesus sweat drops of blood.

In the place of solitude all our defenses are down, all the distractions are gone, so it becomes a place of spiritual warfare.

My will vs. God’s will.

What I want vs. What God wants.

There is an interesting contrast of pictures here in this section of the text.

- In one corner, we find Jesus, facedown on the ground, praying intently to the point that blood comes out His pores.
- In the other corner, we find His three friends, sound asleep.

For them the solitude of the place made them sleepy. Once the distractions were gone, their exhaustion showed up.

- I get that. You sit down for a moment, and you get tired! As long as you were moving – as long as there was noise – you were in the game. But take all of that away ...
- But that’s part of the battle! In our exhaustion God says, “Look what you are doing to yourself. I didn’t create you to run non-stop. I created you to stop and spend time talking with me.

Be still and know that I am God. (Psalm 46:10)

Satan doesn’t want you to have soul level conversations, so he encourages you to run yourself ragged so that are too tired to talk with God on a deep level.

- Before you have “my will or thy will conversations” with God, you first have to fight the battle of focus!

#3: JESUS EMERGES “VICTORIOUS”

Look at verse 46:

Rise! Let us go! Here comes my betrayer! (Matthew 26:46)

Jesus stayed in the solitude of the garden and prayed until He knew God's will and was committed to doing it. The disciples, on the other hand – those three men who slept through the prayer meeting, were not ready.

Then Simon Peter, who had a sword, drew it and struck the high priest's servant, cutting off his right ear. (John 18:10)

The impact of the solitude on Jesus carries Him all the way through the trial and crucifixion.

You have to fight the battle in order to achieve the victory.

Jesus fought. The disciples slept. Jesus won. Peter lost.

Listen to these words of Scripture:

This is what the Sovereign Lord, the Holy One of Israel, says: “In repentance and rest is your salvation, in quietness and trust is your strength.” (Isaiah 30:15)

Truly my soul finds rest in God; my salvation comes from him. Truly he is my rock and my salvation; he is my fortress, I will never be shaken. (Psalm 62:1-2)

APPLICATION

Ruth Haley Barton, author of a book I have been reading in preparation for my extended time away, writes:

The invitation to solitude is just that. It is an invitation to enter more deeply into the intimacy of relationship with the One who waits just outside the noise and busyness of our lives. It is an invitation to communion with the One who is always present even when our awareness has been dulled by distraction. It is an invitation to the adventure of spiritual transformation in the deepest places of our being, an adventure that will result in greater freedom and authenticity and surrender to God that we have yet experienced. (Ruth Haley Barton, *Invitation to Solitude and Silence*)

Hear the invitation of Jesus to disciples of all centuries:

The apostles gathered around Jesus and reported to him all they had done and taught. Then, because so many people were coming and going that they did

not even have a chance to eat, he said to them, "Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest." So they went away by themselves in a boat to a solitary place. (Mark 6:30-32)

Let's pray ... Amen.