

## EXPRESS GRACE UNDER PRESSURE

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Theme: In order to express grace under pressure requires that we believe God is good no matter what and that He has our ultimate welfare firmly in hand.

Text: Matthew 26:36-56

During this season of Lent we are engaged in a very helpful exploration of what it means to be a witness to Christ's life in and through us using the acronym WITNESS.

**W:** Walk with People, especially the outcast

**I:** Invite People to Come and See the Person of Christ

**T:** Testify to God: "I was blind, but now I see"

**N:** Nail Your Sins: Do they get in the way of seeing Jesus in our lives?

**E:** Express Grace Under Pressure

**S:** Serve Needs

**S:** Share the News

Let's begin with some self examination: What is the quality of our faith when the pressure mounts and life turns against us? What message would you say your life is communicating as a witness to those around you when you truly under the gun? Does our faith in Christ make any difference in the way that we handle life's challenges?

This morning we peer into the Garden of Gethsemane and the heart wrenching portrayal of the most difficult moment in our Lord's life. His time had come. He was on the eve of the divine appointment for which He had been sent by His Father. As we read the Scripture this morning, let us do so with more than the usual reverence because we are allowed to eavesdrop on an intimate transaction between the Father, the Lord and creator of all, and His Son, the God-man, who came to bear the punishment for all guilt.

### **Read Matthew 26:36-56**

"I hate this world. Life is so unfair." I heard those words coming out of my mouth when I was watching the television news reports of the execution style slayings of Michael Lefkow, the husband of Federal District Judge, Joan Lefkow, and her mother, Donna Humphrey. The first article I read in the *Chicago Tribune* opened with the question of fairness, "Don't all these good deeds mean anything?" It is the type of question that starts somewhere so deep down inside of us that it comes out as a muffled groan. The ache in our heart is a combination of anger that we want to hurl somewhere (God is the likely target), yet it is mixed with sorrow over the personal loss and the state of our world.

The title of this message, *Express Grace Under Pressure*, almost seems to make mockery of this tragedy and unspeakable evil. How can we possibly *express*

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*grace under pressure?* Grace implies that we sense the presence of God's redeeming love even in the midst of life circumstances that would appear devoid of His presence. One could legitimately ask, "Where was God on that day when the executioner pulled his gun on innocent people? Don't the good deeds of Michael Lefkow's life of service to the poor through his law practice and his church mean anything?"

Many have concluded that given the sufferings of this world, that a good, trustworthy God is a laughable scenario. Shortly after the tsunami that devastated a huge swath of South Asia, the airways and print media were filled with discussion about the goodness of God. An article in the *Chicago Tribune* by Eric Zorn caught my eye. It was entitled, "Tsunami Levels a Challenge to our Beliefs." He wrote, "Did the tsunami reflect the will of God? Or was God powerless to stop it? If it was God's will, what moral lesson can we possibly accept from the entity for whom individual human life is evidently so expendable? Why isn't constant fear the only sensible attitude toward such a being? Either way, what does it mean to trust God and have faith in God when in seconds on a sunny day a crashing wave from the deep can snatch a loved one literally from your grasp and drown?"

We may not have been touched personally by either of these tragedies that are just two recent visitations of the fallen world in which we live. Yet life has taught us that just because we are followers of Christ, there is no hedge of protection against life's reversals. In recent days we may have experienced anything from relatively temporary *disappointments* such as not getting the job we wanted or entrance into our school of choice; to greater *debilitations* such as extended unemployment to the breakup of a relationship; to quality of life altering *devastations* such as the loss of a child, or the betrayal of a friendship.

Each of these setbacks is a fork in the road. With each of life's challenges we are offered the opportunity of becoming *bitter or better*. In order to become better, or to learn to express grace under pressure requires an unshakeable confidence in a foundational truth: ***We must come to profoundly believe and stake our life upon the certainty that there is no catch, no limit to the goodness of God's intentions and his power to carry them out.***

Eric Zorn drew a far more cynical conclusion about God. "I call my outlook indifferent agnosticism: I don't know if God exists and I don't care. God's will and design for this temporal and spatial vastness, if any, is so patently, deliberately impenetrable that I doubt any mortal can grasp it." The Christian psychologist, Larry Crabb, has said and I believe it, "No one would come to the conclusion that God is good by looking at life." The extent and sheer randomness of the human toll makes the conclusion that God is good more than a challenge.

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Then where do we look to come to the conclusion that there is no limit, no catch to the goodness of God's intentions and his ability to carry them out? We cannot express grace under fire unless we believe in the unshakeable goodness of God. Our very witness depends on it. There is only one place to look.

I know all the arguments to explain the sufferings of this world. 1. Suffering is a necessary consequence of the freedom of human choice; 2. God has an arch enemy in Satan—there is battle going on between good and evil; 3. Suffering is the necessary proving ground to develop our character. I am sorry none of those arguments do it for me. There is only one place to turn to convince me that there is no limit to God's good intentions and his power to carry them out.

The suffering Christ. The only thing I can hold onto is that the God-man Jesus Christ came among us, faced all the evil that this world could throw at him even unto the utter forsakenness of death on a cross, and overcame it through the resurrection from the dead. The British novelist Dorothy Sayers put it like this, "For whatever reason God chose to make man as he is—limited and suffering and subject to sorrows and death—He had the honesty and courage to take his own medicine. Whatever game he is playing with his creation, He has kept His own rules and played fair. He can exact nothing from man that He has not exacted from Himself. He has Himself gone through the whole human experience, from the trivial irritations of family life and the cramping restrictions of hard work and lack of money to the worst horrors of pain and humiliation, defeat, despair and death. When he was a man, He played the man. He was born in poverty and died in disgrace and thought it well worthwhile."

In our Scripture text this morning, we peer into the gathering darkness that settles on God's only Son. Even Jesus appears to waver in his trust of the goodness of God as he agonizes in prayer to His Father. The question behind this passage is: Could Jesus Himself believe that there was no limit, no catch to goodness of God's intentions and his ability to carry them out?

Before we look at the conversation that transpires between Jesus and His Father as he faces the cross, it is good to remind ourselves of the relationship that Jesus brings into the Garden of Gethsemane. Throughout his public ministry, Jesus was shaped by the identity that He was the beloved of the Father. It is fascinating to me that Jesus' ministry some three years prior to the Garden prayer was inaugurated in the waters of baptism, empowered by the descent of the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove, and then affirmed with a personal voice from the Heavens.

In Matthew's version, the Father's voice speaks a more general message, "This is my son, whom I love, in whom I am well pleased" (Matt. 3:17). To whom is the Father speaking? The Father is speaking to the crowd gathered around John the

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Baptist. The way I see it, it is as if the Father here is a proud Papa, bursting at the seams with pride over his child. Any of us who are parents have had proud moments, when our child was honored with an award or excelled in athletic competition. We wanted to stand up and shout our approval and make sure everyone knew that this was our kid. When our daughter graduated from medical school I warned her that I was going to make an absolute fool of myself (and her). When her name was read and the diploma was placed in her hands, I lept to my feet. I was a crazed Dad who shouted at the tops of my lungs, *"Way to go, Aimee."* We had paid a lot of money for that moment. It seemed that even the Lord of the universe could not contain Himself, *"You know who this is. This is my beloved Son."*

In Mark and Luke's account of the same incident, the message of the Father is spoken personally and directly to the Son, *"You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased"* (Mark 1:11). I love Eugene Peterson's paraphrase in The Message, *"You are my son, marked and chosen by my love, the pride of my life."*

It has long puzzled me, why these words? Of all the things that the Father could have said to or about the Son at the beginning of His ministry, why these words about his place in the heart of the Father? Frankly, I can think of many other things the Father could have said. A little coaching talk: *"Go get 'em kid. Show them your stuff."* A word of caution for the tough times ahead: *"Don't let those so and so's get you down."* Perseverance could have been his theme: *"Hang in there to the end."* A reminder of his mission: *"Show them how much we love them, Son. I am with you all the way."*

I believe the reason that these defining words of affirmation were present from the very beginning is that there would come this time in Gethsemane when even Jesus would have reason to doubt that He was the beloved of the Father. What even Jesus needed to know above all things was His place in the heart of the Father, especially when the cross could make him doubt that he was the Father's beloved.

Matthew gives us a vivid description of Jesus' emotional state as he enters the Garden on the eve of his crucifixion. *"Then Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane [most likely the private garden on the slopes of the Mount of Olives owned by a wealthy person who had allowed Jesus and his disciples a place for solitude], and he said to them, "Sit here while I go over there and pray. He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with him, and he began to be sorrowful and troubled"* (Matt. 26:36, 37). The only other time in Matthew that we are told that Jesus had selected out Peter, James and John to accompany him was on the Mount of Transfiguration, when the glory of the Son is revealed. *"His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light"* (Matt. 17:2). On the Mount of Transfiguration they saw the glorious

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divinity of Jesus, and heard the affirming voice of the Father, “This is my son, whom I love...” Now they witness Jesus in his full humanity.

Jesus “began to be sorrowful and troubled”; in the NEB it is translated as “anguished and dismayed.” Dale Brunner says that Jesus is depressed and confused. These words are used of a person who is agitated and anguished by the threat of an approaching event. In v. 38 Jesus himself says, “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death.” In other words, Jesus is saying, “I feel so bad I could die.” The weight of depression is so heavy upon him it is as if the forces of death could crush his life. In many ways it is utter aloneness that he is facing. As we read the text that we see that those who accompanied him for three years could not even keep their eyes open to pray with him. Upon his arrest, our text concludes, “Then all the disciples deserted him and fled.” His enemies were closing in. The kangaroo court would be in session shortly. The Evil One was cackling with glee that he would rid himself of his arch enemy. This would be enough to crush any man.

But that was not the half of it. What could possibly be the cause of this crushing sorrow? We see it in Jesus prayer uttered three times. “Going on 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. Yet not as I will, but as you will’ (Matt. 26:39). What is the cup that Jesus asked to be taken from him? Was it his death on the cross? Was Jesus cowardly shrinking from the physical torture that awaited him? No, the cup that Jesus was to drink was the cup of judgment. His death was *substitutionary*. On the cross the guilt of all humanity would be placed upon Jesus, and His Father would pour out his wrath upon our sin. What Jesus was anticipating in agony was His separation from his Father.

Jesus addresses God as “My father”. In Mark’s account of the same incident, he adds that Jesus said, “Abba, Father.” Abba is a common Aramaic word for Papa. Jesus uses the language of a young child who lovingly trusts his Papa, Abba. Jesus has a relationship with the Father like no other. The Biblical scholar Joachim Jeremias said that there was no precedence in all Jewish literature for anyone addressing God in this fashion. In this moment of utter turmoil, Jesus reverts to the language of his childhood. “Daddy, if there be any other way...let this cup pass from me...” Is Jesus wavering here? Is He having a hard time putting together the cross with the goodness of God? Father, can’t you step in and prevent this horror from happening? He knows that in just a few hours a separation of unspeakable proportions is going to occur. On the cross we hear Jesus groan, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” He takes on the greatest fear that we all have—utter isolation. The fear of death is nothing more than the fear of utter rejection. Jesus bears that for us so we will not have to.

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In v. 42 we see that Jesus is coming to terms with the inevitability of the cross. He moves a step closer to submission to the Father's will. In his first prayer it is as if He says, "if it be possible, no..."; now he says, "If it not be possible, yes..." "My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink, may your will be done."

Max Lucado in his book *And the Angels Were Silent*, says of Jesus' submission to the will of the Father, "The battle is won. You may have thought it was won on Golgotha. It wasn't. You may have thought the sign of victory is the empty tomb. It isn't. The final battle was won in Gethsemane. And the sign of conquest is Jesus at peace in the olive trees. For it was in the garden that He made his decision. He would rather go to hell for you—than go to heaven without you."

Did you note the change in Jesus upon submission to the will of the Father? Once he rested in the belief that there was no catch, no limit to the goodness of God's intentions and his power to carry them out, he was ready to face with courage and resolve what was before him. After praying a third time, we read, "Then he returned to the disciples and said to them, 'Are you still sleeping and resting? Look, the hour is near, and the Son of man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Rise, let us go! Here comes my betrayer!'" (Matt. 26:45, 46). Jesus entered the garden with a tortured and divided heart and walked out with a singular resolve to carry out the Father's will.

So why can we be assured in the midst of life's evils and injustices that there is no catch, no limit to the goodness of God? How can we be witnesses who express grace under pressure?

We demonstrate grace under pressure by relinquishing ourselves to the will of the Father who is good. As Max Lucado wrote, "the sign of conquest was Jesus at peace in the olive trees." There is a huge difference between relinquishment and resignation. Resignation is to be beaten down by human events and to be crushed by injustice. Catherine Marshall writes, "Resignation is barren of faith in the love of God...Resignation lies down quietly in the dust of a universe from which God seem to have fled, and the door of hope swung shut." Relinquishment, on the other hand, is the indomitable belief that the hidden hand behind it all is the loving hand of the Father. We willingly submit, as Jesus did, knowing that we are deeply loved.

Relinquishment is possible because the cross is in fact the greatest demonstration of God's love. God takes what was intended for evil and turns it into the act of greatest good. From a human perspective alone the cross puts on public display the darkness in the human heart. The cross dramatically, more than anything else, tells us of what humans are capable—the execution of God himself. But from God's perspective it is the act of greatest self sacrifice. Humans

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meant it for evil, but God meant it for good. The apostle Paul wrote, "But God demonstrated his love for us, in while we were yet sinners Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8)

There is a story told that comes out of the Old Soviet Union when they made their periodic attempts to rid the nation of religious beliefs. The Soviet authorities used to send KGB agents to the nation's churches on a Sunday morning. One agent was struck by the deep devotion of an elderly woman kissing the feet of a life-size carving of Christ on the cross. The agent said to her, "Babushka (Grandmother), are you prepared to kiss the feet of the beloved general secretary of our great Communist party?" The woman immediately replied, "Why, of course. But only you have to crucify him first."

The cross tells us that the Lord has entered fully into our human experience and faced any horror that this life can throw at us. No one has sunk so low that Christ has not gone lower. Therefore the writer of Hebrews can say, "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin" (Heb. 4:15) No one can say, our God does not understand for ours is the only God with wounds.

The only place I know to turn in a world that almost daily astounds me with its capacity for horrendous acts of inhumanity is to the cross of Christ. How do I know with certainty that there is no catch, no limit to the goodness of God's intentions and his power to carry them out?

John Stott says it better than I can, "I could never myself believe in God, if it were not for the cross. In the real world of pain, how could one worship a god who is immune to it? I have entered many Buddhist temples in different Asian countries and stood respectfully before the statue of Buddha, his legs crossed, arms folded, eyes closed, the ghost of a smile playing around his mouth, remote look on his face, detached from the agonies of the world. But each time after a while I had to turn away. And in imagination I have turned instead to that lonely, twisted, tortured figure on the cross, nails through his hands and feet, back lacerated, limbs wrenched, brow bleeding from thorn-pricks, mouth dry and intolerably thirsty, plunged into God-forsaken darkness." And I say with Stott, "That is the God for me!" We may never understand the meaning of any particular tragedy that happens to us in this life, but knowing that Jesus entered into our world of flesh and blood, tears and death and holding fast to the truth that He "has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows", makes our struggles more bearable and allows us to find grace to see beyond the immediate.

We can place our eyes on the darkness and become bitter, or place our eyes on the One who absorbed the darkness into Himself and become better. As Larry

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Crabb has written we know we have found God when nothing can shake our confidence in his unchanging goodness:

- Whether it be financial storm clouds that would seem to envelop us
- Whether it is a positive biopsy that shatters our dreams
- Whether it is unexpected unemployment that sends shudders of fear about the future
- Whether it is a rebellious child that provokes unimaginable pain

Jesus won the battle of my heart about the goodness of God, when He walked square into the pitch black of sin and abandonment of the cross and came out on the other side in resurrection to newness of life. This is the only place to look when it comes to believing that there is no catch, no limit to the goodness of God's intentions and his ability to carry them out.