

4.17.25 Holy Thursday The Garden of Betrayal, Again Matthew 26:47-56

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As the songs we've heard tonight have illuminated, The Garden of Gethsemane is a place of deep sorrow, intense spiritual struggle, and, most memorably, betrayal. I called this message, *The Garden of Betrayal, Again*, because this is the second significant time in the Bible that there is a betrayal in a garden. The first as we heard earlier in our series on The Gardens of God, took place in Eden when Adam and Eve failed to trust and obey God and instead pursued their own will rather than God's. Tonight, it's Judas, yet it isn't just him. In Matthew 26:47-56, we witness the moment when Jesus is betrayed by one of his own, arrested by a hostile crowd, and abandoned by his closest friends. This passage is not just a historical account; it's a mirror reflecting the human heart, the cost of discipleship, and the sovereign plan of God unfolding even in the darkest hour.

Listen to **Matthew 26:47-56**, ⁴⁷ While he was still speaking, Judas, one of the twelve, arrived; with him was a large crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests and the elders of the people. ⁴⁸ Now **the betrayer** had given them a sign, saying, "*The one I will kiss is the man; arrest him.*" ⁴⁹ At once he came up to Jesus and said, "*Greetings, Rabbi!*" and kissed him. ⁵⁰ Jesus said to him, "***Friend, do what you are here to do.***" Then they came and laid hands on Jesus and arrested him. ⁵¹ Suddenly, one of those with Jesus put his hand on his sword, drew it, and struck the slave of the high priest, cutting off his ear. ⁵² Then Jesus said to him, "*Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword.*" ⁵³ *Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels?* ⁵⁴ ***But how then would the scriptures be fulfilled, which say it must happen in this way?*** ⁵⁵ At that hour Jesus said to the crowds, "*Have you come out with swords and clubs to arrest me as though I were a bandit? Day after day I sat in the temple teaching, and you did not arrest me.*" ⁵⁶ ***But all this has taken place, so that the scriptures of the prophets may be fulfilled.*** Then all the disciples deserted him and fled.

Gethsemane means "oil press or olive press," a fitting symbol for the crushing weight Jesus experienced. Here, Jesus prayed in agony, His soul *"overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death"* (Matthew 26:38). The garden, a place of intimacy and prayer, becomes the stage for betrayal and violence. Just as olives are pressed to produce oil, Jesus is pressed by the weight of impending suffering and betrayal.

We all have our "Gethsemane" moments of pressure, testing, and decision. Take a moment and think about your own life – when have you felt the weight of pressure, testing, or deciding which path to take? Often, we think the easier path is the preferred one to take, but in the Bible, we learn that sometimes it's the harder path, the seemingly more difficult choice that leads us where God wants us to go.

Judas, one of the twelve, arrives with a crowd armed with swords and clubs. He's arranged a signal: a kiss, a universal sign of affection, tenderness, and care, as a means of betraying Jesus. It's one thing to be hurt by an enemy, but another to be betrayed by a friend. **Psalm 41:9** (NIV) says, *"Even my close friend, someone I trusted, one who shared my bread, has turned against me."* This describes what happened to Jesus. **People have speculated about Judas's motive from the beginning.** Was it greed, disillusionment, or perhaps a misguided attempt to force Jesus' hand—whatever the reason, Judas's act is still hard for us to imagine. We think, "I would never have done that."

Jesus addresses Judas as **"Friend,"** a word heavy with irony and grace. Three times in Matthew's Gospel, the same word is translated as friend. First, in a parable in **Matthew 20:13-16** the Generous Landowner says to the grumblers who are complaining about their pay, *'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you.'*

In **Matthew 22:12-14**, in the parable of the wedding feast, the king says, *'Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?'* Then in the garden of betrayal (Matt. 26:50), Jesus says to Judas, *"Friend, do what you are here to do."* In all three cases,

the person addressed as **friend** is in the wrong. They are selfish, greedy, unprepared, lacking in righteousness, or guilty of betrayal.

Yet Jesus models grace, forgiveness, and composure, even in the face of betrayal. He doesn't resist, nor does He curse Judas. Instead, He submits to the Father's will. Jesus isn't a victim of circumstance; He accepts the path set before Him. In fact, there's a sense in which Jesus absolves or forgives Judas because he says not once but twice that this is the way events had to unfold so the scriptures would be fulfilled.

One of Jesus' followers (identified as Peter in John's Gospel) reacts with violence, cutting off the ear of the high priest's servant. This is a misguided attempt to defend Jesus by worldly means. **Zeal Without Understanding is often not helpful.** Peter's action reveals a failure to grasp Jesus' mission.

Jesus's Rebukes violence as a means of response saying: "*Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword*" (v. 52). Jesus rejects violence as the means to advance God's kingdom, a lesson that the church and Christians have forgotten or ignored time after time ever since.

As I mentioned last Sunday, Jesus reminds His disciples that He could call on "*more than twelve legions of angels*" (v. 53), but He chooses not to. Jesus demonstrates that true power is found not in force or cruelty, but in submission to God's will. Meekness is not weakness; it's strength under control. Jesus' restraint is not passivity, but obedience to the prophetic plan of redemption. The crowd, sent by the religious leaders, comes armed as if to arrest a dangerous criminal. Jesus points out the irony: He taught openly in the temple, yet they come under cover of darkness. Jesus is treated as a physical threat, even though He is the Prince of Peace. The arrest is not about justice, but about preserving power and silencing truth, motivations often used by those in power throughout history up to the present.

We're told all the disciples deserted him and fled. There can be a Loneliness that comes with Obedience. Jesus is left utterly alone, abandoned by those who had pledged loyalty. Jesus experiences the full weight of human loneliness and rejection. It's

hard to fathom what was going through his mind and heart after all he had done for his disciples and for everyone. In our own lives we may experience that following Jesus may lead us into places of isolation and misunderstanding. Despite betrayal, violence, misrepresentation, and abandonment, Jesus remains faithful to His mission. He walks the path of obedience, trusting the Father's plan.

The Garden of Gethsemane echoes the Garden of Eden. In Eden, Adam and Eve failed the test and brought death; in Gethsemane, Jesus passes the test and brings life. Where Adam and Eve said, "My will, not Yours," Jesus says, "Not my will, but Yours be done." Jesus reverses the curse of the first garden by His faithfulness in the second. Jesus' arrest is not a tragic accident, but the fulfillment of God's redemptive plan. The cross enables the forgiveness of sins and the restoration of humanity. Through suffering and obedience, Jesus secures salvation for all who trust in Him.

In the classic 1960 movie, **Spartacus**, about a slave rebellion in ancient Rome, the lead character portrayed by Kirk Douglas demonstrates bravery, courage, and love, but the slave army is finally beaten by an overwhelming Roman force, The Roman General Crassus demands that the survivors identify Spartacus or his dead body. Just as Kirk Douglas begins to stand up, one of his most loyal men stands up right next to him and says, "*I am Spartacus.*" Immediately man after man stands and says, "*I am Spartacus.*" As a result of their loyalty and faithfulness, they all end up being crucified. This is the exact opposite of what happens in Gethsemane. Rather than the disciples standing and saying, "I am Jesus," they flee.

It's easy for us to be critical of the disciples; of Judas for betraying Jesus, of Peter for denying Jesus, of James and John for seeking positions of glory for themselves, of all of them for fleeing. And yet, we must take a hard look at ourselves. We're all capable of betraying Jesus, denying Jesus, seeking power, position, and glory for ourselves, or fleeing from any hardship that comes with being associated with Christ. We can betray, deny, and flee—through our actions, our silence, our compromises. The story of Judas is a warning and a mirror. There's a sense in which we are all Judas. We have all had moments when we've chosen comfort, security, self-interest, or our will over faithfulness

to Christ. **“I am Judas.”** And so are you. Yet even in our failures, Jesus offers forgiveness and restoration and an example for us to follow.

How do we respond when we feel betrayed or misunderstood? Like Jesus, we can respond with grace, not vengeance and trust God’s justice and timing. Like Jesus, we’re also called to embrace the cross. Suffering and rejection are part of the Christian journey. We’re invited to take up our cross and follow Him. Like Jesus, we can also anchor our lives in God’s Word, interpreting our experiences through the lens of Scripture. Let God’s promises shape your perspective in times of trial. Faithfulness is measured not by immediate results, but by obedience to God’s will.

Things look bad at this moment in the Biblical story, but there is **Hope Beyond Betrayal**. Thankfully, the garden of betrayal is not the end of the story. From the darkness of Gethsemane and the horror of the cross will eventually come the dawn of resurrection. Jesus’s faithfulness in the face of betrayal opens the way for our redemption. In our lives, we can also move from **Betrayal to Blessing**. Healing from betrayal is possible through Christ, who offers peace the world cannot give and promises never to abandon us. While not all relationships will be restored, God can bring wholeness and new beginnings out of brokenness. God can transform our wounds into sources of grace and healing. Betrayal and abandonment, while painful, can deepen our dependence on God and refine our character. These experiences can push us toward greater maturity, empathy, and Christlikeness as we learn to trust God more fully. Even when others fail us, we’re called to remain faithful to God and to our calling, just as Jesus did in the garden and on the cross. Our identity and security are rooted in Christ, not in the approval or loyalty of others. I invite you to trust God in your own garden of testing. Will you follow Jesus, even when the path leads through darkness?

Closing Prayer: "Lord Jesus, in the garden You faced betrayal, violence, and abandonment, yet You remained faithful. Help us to follow Your example—to trust God’s will, to respond to evil with grace, and to anchor our lives in Your Word. When we face our own gardens of testing, may we remember that You have gone before us, and that Your victory is our hope. Amen."

Before Communion : A Contrast between Two Gardens

Eden and Gethsemane present two different pictures of temptation.

Adam and Eve fail to trust God and then try to hide from God in a garden.

Jesus seeks God's presence in a garden in his time of greatest temptation.

They fail to do God's will, even when it's relatively easy.

Jesus does it, even when it couldn't be more difficult, praying,

"Not my will, but thy will be done."

Adam and Eve fail to accept responsibility for their sinful actions.

Jesus forgives the sinful actions of those who crucify him saying,

"Forgive them, Father, they know not what they do."

Let's share in a unison prayer as we ask the Lord's forgiveness: