

FEELING THE FLAMES OF HELL

Mark 14:32-41

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A favourite activity for kids on holidays is to have a camp fire, especially to toast marshmallows. Now if it's a church camp Jac will ensure a ChildSafe risk assessment is done. And that instruction is given about fire safety. That's because we know that flames can suddenly flare up. So we can get burned if we are too close. Even if we are not that close, we can still feel the heat of the fire. Now I mention this because, here in Mark 14, I want you to have the sense that Jesus is getting close to his worst suffering and he is feeling the heat. The next day Jesus will be hung on the cross and suffer *"...the anger of God against the sin of the whole human race"*. Now in a sense, on the evening before, as Jesus gets closer to the cross, a flame from the pit flares up and burns him. This night, as one writer put it, 'the fierce wind of hell was allowed to sweep unbroken over the Saviour ...' This idea gives us an understanding as to what is happening to Jesus here in the Garden of Gethsemane.

To set the scene let me show you some photos of the garden. It is interesting, even ironic, that the name of the garden, this grove of olive trees, is 'Gethsemane' which means 'oil press'. In other words, it refers to the place where the olives are crushed for their oil. The oil press would have been a heavy beam that was lowered onto a sack of olives. The weight would be increased until the oil was crushed out of the olives. This is an apt metaphor for what we see here. We see Jesus in a terrible state. He is emotionally crushed. Mark writes in Mark 14:33-34 that Jesus *"...began to be deeply distressed and troubled. 'My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death' he said to his disciples."* The Greek language here is very strong. Jesus is really in a bad way. There is a horror that overcomes Jesus that leaves him appalled and reeling. It hits him so hard that he staggers and is afraid the shock will kill him. Like the weight added to the beam to crush and press the oil out of the olive, the sorrow and dread for what's coming begin to press on Jesus so heavily that the weight of it alone literally threatened to kill him.

Luke, who is a physician, tells us in his gospel that Jesus was so bad he 'sweated blood'. That's a medical condition called 'hematidrosis'. Under great emotional stress tiny blood vessels rupture in the sweat glands producing a mixture of sweat and blood. In

the quiet of the garden of Gethsemane Jesus looks and sees hell with all its terrors and unspeakable horrors open before him. The battle that approaches is a boiling cup mixed with all the sin of the world, the full-bore assault of the demonic hordes of hell, and the fierce wrath of God.

This sudden display of terror by Jesus takes us by surprise. When we read the gospels, we see Jesus knew his mission was about suffering. Already in the Garden of Eden God had said that the offspring of Eve would *"...crush the serpent's head and he would strike his heel"*. So many of the prophecies in the Old Testament had spoken of the 'Suffering servant'. Jesus knew the scriptures. He had come to fulfil them. That's why on Palm Sunday he had deliberately provoked the crowd and the Pharisees by riding into Jerusalem as king. He again provoked his antagonists to action when he got a whip and cleaned out the Temple. Jesus himself had pushed the events that led to his crucifixion. He had resolutely tackled the Pharisees. Jesus had carefully explained to his disciples that he must die. Even at the last Supper Jesus had been calmly and firmly in control. He had instituted his Supper to replace that of the Passover. He knew he would fulfil the symbolism of the Passover Lamb. He said, *"This is my body given for you...my blood poured out for many."* He knew Judas would betray him. In fact, he had sent him on his way. Even walking up the Mount of Olives to the Garden Jesus was in command. He had predicted that the disciples would leave him, and that Peter would deny him. Jesus knew that his *"...hour had come"*. What was about to happen was no surprise. It had been predestined by him and the Father before time. And now that moment was here. This was his purpose for being on earth. Now was the time, 'the hour', to provide the way of forgiveness and grace that would bring hope to all creation.

Yet, now, all of a sudden, Jesus is a quivering, terrorised heap. In fact, he is so terrorised that he prays to God that he might get out of this whole business. Look at Mark 14:35 *"Going a little further, he fell to the ground and prayed that if possible this hour might pass from him."* The usual way for a Jew to pray was to stand up with hands raised to heaven. Here is Jesus with his face in the dirt, groaning, 'God I want out!' This sudden change has baffled people over the years. They find it hard to accept Jesus' 'cowardice', as some have called it. The argument is 'OK, so Jesus knew he was going to die. So perhaps there is something like 'pregame nerves- the moment is here!' But many others, even non-Christians have been in that position and met death with bravery. The story is told of the Greek philosopher Socrates who calmly drank a cup of poison while talking to his disciples about the 'immortality of the soul'. Even the Christians who faced the lions when they were persecuted did so with greater courage than what we see here with Jesus.

These comparisons miss the point of what Jesus is going through here in the Garden. Sure, Jesus knew beforehand that he was about to be betrayed, denied, falsely tried, mocked and crucified. That would be enough to strike fear into any person. The physical suffering caused by being whipped and crucified would be immense. But that is not the horror that appalls Jesus. It is not what other people will do to him. His terror is God and what God will do to him. Look at verse 36. Jesus prays *"Abba, father, everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me."* The 'cup' is an Old Testament reference to God's fury. Isaiah 51:17, for example, speaks of the 'cup of staggering': *"Rise up, O Jerusalem, you who have drunk from the hands of the Lord the cup of wrath, you who have drained to its dregs the goblet that makes men stagger!"* The horror that Jesus faces is the fury of the living God. 'To be a sinner in the hands of an angry God' means no one can intervene on your behalf. Nothing can be a worse punishment because God is the ultimate. Jesus is not just facing death as we know it. He is facing eternal death. He is facing hell. He is facing the total abandonment by God. He will confront the full anger of God. All our earthly suffering is ended by death. But God can crush and terrorise the soul for eternity. Jesus feels the heat of the fury of hell. A flame flares up as he gets closer to his crucifixion. He feels that his Father is already starting to withdraw. The Father is starting his abandonment of his son; just when Jesus needs him the most. *"Abba Father...dad, please"*. In a few hours the world will hear the terrible complaint or demand as Jesus shrieks out from the depths of hell *"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?!"*

As the flame of that terrible fire flares up and blasts Jesus he gets a foretaste of what is to come. It overwhelms him with horror. 'Father isn't there some other way, please?!' Jesus shows us something of his inner struggle. Theologians sometimes wonder if temptations or struggles were real for Jesus. After all he is God. But here the temptation to quit is so real. That's why earlier Jesus had said so strongly to Peter *"Get behind me Satan"*. Jesus needs strength to cope, strength to go on. As the 'Father' is withdrawing the 'Son' is desperately hanging on to him: *"Abba, Father...dad please!"* The Father has been such a strong support to Jesus in his ministry. So often Jesus went to the Father in prayer and received strength. Jesus has always been faithful and obedient. Now again he prays. He seeks support from his Father. His greatest love is his Father. God is everything to him. Like Psalm 42 Jesus desperately longs and thirsts for God. But the Father is starting to withdraw. And the horror of what is coming appalls Jesus. Jesus is not going to get help or support from his disciples; they just don't get what's going on. So, without God Jesus is so alone. In his humanness, Jesus, for a moment, pleads for salvation to be gained another way.

Now notice he asks for it on the basis of trust. He trusts that his father is almighty: *"...everything is possible for you"*. Such is the trust of the agonised Christ. He always depends on God and trusts him. Yes, everything is possible, even grace for a sinful and rebellious world. And that is precisely Jesus' task, to bring grace, to bring hope for God's people. In fact, he is to bring hope for the whole creation. Jesus is not just an ordinary person. He is the one the whole of history has been leading up to. The wellbeing of the whole creation hinges on what is about to happen. Jesus is the Son of God incarnate, God in human form, through whom all that exists was created. Jesus is the second Adam. The hope of all humanity rests on this person. If any other person struggles and fails we could say that a segment has broken off the rock. But if Jesus fails the very bedrock of all existence shudders and collapses. Jesus is the covenant representative. As the second Adam, by his obedience he is to restore what the first Adam destroyed by his disobedience. Adam was promised eternal life if he obeyed and he failed. Jesus stared eternal damnation in the face if he obeyed -and he was faithful. On Jesus was placed the 'sin of the world', our sin, your sin, my sin, and he staggers under the weight. He stumbles.

Yet he goes on. Look at as he says (verse 36) *"Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will."* Hebrews 5:7 says *"Jesus offered up prayers with cries and tears to the one who could save him and he was heard because of his reverent submission"*. Here we see how deeply Jesus loves us. We see his love for an unloving world. We see the obedience of Jesus for a disobedient people. This is brought out so powerfully as we return our attention to the disciples. See the disciples as Jesus goes through his horrific struggle. What are they doing? Note verse 37 *"Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping"*. He is just a little way from them, groaning on the ground, praying aloud, yet they sleep. Jesus is so alone in his struggle. His Father is withdrawing his support. How good the support of his friends would be! But the disciples for whom he will die, the church for which he will suffer, has no idea that the 'hour' has come. They do not know what Jesus will suffer. They are not aware of the trauma they are about to face. Jesus is battling his own horror, but we see he is concerned for his disciples. Note verse 38 *"Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing but the body is weak"*. You notice Jesus encourages them to pray, not for him, but for themselves. He encourages them to pray for strength *"not to fall into temptation"*. Jesus knows the struggle himself. He was powerfully tempted to walk away from the cross. The disciples had bragged of their support for Jesus. But soon they will fail him, and it will devastate them. The disciples are too self-reliant. They need to pray to see their own weakness and to live by trusting God. It is remarkable what we see here. Jesus is about to suffer the punishment of God for the sin of the world. It is a suffering that is unspeakable. Yet he supports his disciples. He gives them the clue to his own strength-

prayer, clinging to God in trust and complete obedience. Even in hell Jesus still clung to God crying out "*My God, my God...*"

As we see Jesus in this Garden of Gethsemane, in amongst the olive trees, this place called the 'olive press', we find ourselves deeply moved by his commitment and love, don't we? As we see him stagger in the face of the onslaught of hell we realise something of what Jesus suffered. On the cross Jesus bore the just punishment for our sin. It was a horror beyond imagining. And by the grace of God it will not be known by us. Jesus felt the horror in the garden and yet he went on. He had to, he wanted to, for our sake, for the sake of all people and the creation. Never has there been a love as great as this. Never has there been a suffering of horror as great as this. Never has anyone so undeserving suffered so much for others. Yet by it, we who are so unworthy in the presence of God are made worthy. By Christ's suffering we receive grace.

You notice how forgiveness and hope are achieved: by trust and obedience, by faith and prayer. There is a deep humility to serve, driven by a powerful love for others. There in we see our calling as well. Do we want to bring hope to our communities? Then we are to be like Jesus. We focus on making the gospel known. We tell people about why Jesus suffered on the cross. We are committed to humbly serving others, driven by a deep love for them. We are driven by a deep desire to see them experience the grace of God and enjoy the hope of a world restored from all sin and evil.