

## **Jesus' Time in Gethsemane**

**Dr. Andrew Swafford**

Hi, I'm Dr. Andrew Swafford. I'm a Professor of Theology at Benedictine College in Atchison, Kansas. You know, I wasn't always a professor. I wasn't always thinking that I'd be out on this. So this is my 16th year teaching, but I actually came to Benedictine a long time ago as a student. As a student, I came here only for one reason, and that was to play football. It's the only reason I came.

You know, I grew up kind of Catholic, but in name only, things like the faith didn't matter that much to me. Image, sports, things like that, that's what made me tick. And I met our Lord, Jesus Christ, in a powerful way in college and wanted to kind of give my life to Him and pay it forward for all those who really stepped in for me and proclaimed the Lordship of Jesus Christ in a way that changed my life forever, and that's really why I'm here. That's why we are here together as we discuss and pray through the mystery of the Agony in the Garden, the mystery of Gethsemane. But first, let's begin in prayer.

### **Opening Prayer**

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, of the Holy Spirit, Amen. Lord Jesus, we give You thanks and praise, honor and glory. We give You thanks. We give You thanks for the gift of our lives. We give You thanks for the gift of redemption. We give You thanks for Your incredible, incomprehensible, relentless love. Lord Jesus, we pray that that may be made real to us in our minds and our hearts this very day. We ask this through Christ our Lord, amen. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, of Holy Spirit. Amen.

### **Christ's True Humanity**

So this mystery, the first of the sorrowful mysteries, the Agony in the Garden, this is really where Christ begins to shed the blood of His passion. As we know from the gospel of Luke, that He sweat drops of blood in His agony. Here in this mystery, we see on full display Christ's true humanity. The church fathers had a saying, that what is not assumed is not redeemed, that Christ became fully human. Didn't just look human, didn't put on a human jacket or coat that He could just then take off. But rather, the mystery of the incarnation is the union of these two natures, the human nature and the divine nature in the person of the Eternal Son, the eternal Word who became flesh and dwelt among us. The mystery of redemption is that Jesus Christ is the marriage of humanity and divinity. He is the bridge. He is the one who reconciles heaven and earth. And in this great mystery, we really see the union, the union of Christ's human will with His Father's will.

In Christ's full humanity, His true humanity, He abhors death. He abhors death. Lord, if this cup may pass, take this cup from me. Father, if you may remove this cup, please remove this cup. And so, on the surface, of course, He has an aversion to suffering, an aversion to death. But beneath that, underneath that, He says, "Not my will, but Thy will be done."

And you know, this is true of the great saints and martyrs. This is often true of God's will for our lives that when you scrape away the sin, and that's not true of Christ, of course, but our selfishness, our fears, what we most deeply desire, that really is where you'll find God's will for you and for me, aligned in the very depth of our desires. And so, our Lord Jesus Christ, in the mystery of the garden, in the garden of Gethsemane, not unlike our first father Adam in a garden. Jesus goes to another garden and He succeeds where Adam failed. In this great mystery, He, on the one hand, abhors death, but then unites His will most deeply, "Not my will, but Thy will be done." So we see here this mystery of redemption, that in Christ's human will, He's obedient to the end to the Father. And in doing so, He reconciles heaven and earth.

### **A Parallel with Another Mystery**

And you know, this mystery of the garden of Gethsemane, the Agony in the Garden, it has an interesting parallel with another mystery, parallels and yet differences. And that is the mystery of the transfiguration. So think about it, both mysteries, the Transfiguration and the Agony of the Garden, who's with Jesus? Peter, James, and John. Peter, James, and John are both at the Transfiguration and they're also in the Agony in the Garden. They both also occur on a mountain. Traditionally, the Transfiguration takes place on Mount Tabor, and the Garden Gethsemane takes place at the bottom of the Mount of Olives. So those similarities kind of draw our attention to kind of reflect on these together.

The mystery of the Transfiguration, though here are the differences, really displays and shows forth Christ, the glory of His divinity. In the Agony, as we've seen, we see His true humanity. And also, in the Transfiguration, the Father speaks. "This is my Beloved Son, listen to Him." But in the Agony in the Garden, the Father is silent. The Father is silent. These are two ways in which Christ lives out His defined sonship. And really, He's carving out a path for you and for me. See, in the mystery of the incarnation all the way through the cross, we need to think of Christ as fully entering our plight, entering our condition in, here's the difference, in solidarity with us, not merely as our substitute. Christ goes to the cross in solidarity with us, not merely as our substitute. Goes as our head, ultimately to empower us to do the same, not merely as a substitute. What do I mean?

## **Christ is with Us**

Well, as we see here with the Transfiguration, in the Agony in the Garden, we too will go through both sides of this. Sometimes, we feel the closeness, the nearness of God. We can taste the joy of the glory that awaits us. And there's other moments when we experience the frailty of our human nature, the abhorrence of death, and God feels distant and far. We need to recognize that wherever we are, Christ was there first. Wherever we are, whether it's glory or suffering, whether it's nearness and consolation, or this sense that God is distant, whether we sense God speaking to us clearly or we sense His silence, Christ was there first and Christ continues to live His life through us.

As the great Fulton Sheen loved to say, "There's no Easter Sunday without Good Friday." And this is all part of the Paschal shape of the Christian life, the Paschal shape of the Christian life from death to resurrection, from lament to praise. If you read the Book of Psalms, there's actually way more lament than praises, but the praises are stacked back in. It ends in this glorious rendition of praise. And there's a movement from lament to praise just as there's one from cross to resurrection. The Transfiguration gives a foretaste of that glory to come, a foretaste of His resurrection, a foretaste of our resurrection, but not without first going through the agony and all the other sorrowful mysteries, going through the cross.

## **God Truly Loves Us**

What John Paul II once said is that "In Christ, God loves us with a human heart." In Christ, God loves us with a human heart. God is not distant. God is not just an idea. And I think, I really think, when we struggle with God, when we say where is God in this or that? And inevitably, that's going to happen at some point. As I share with many students over the years, I think when we have those struggles, sometimes when we only think about God as an abstraction, we only think about God philosophically, we tie ourselves in knots. I'd encourage you, I'd encourage myself, and all those that we come across, bring those questions, even those doubts, before the face of Christ. Before the face of Christ.

When we struggle with believing that God truly loves us, don't simply think of God as an abstraction. Bring those before the face of Christ. It's very hard to think those same things that tie us in knots when we think about presenting those questions to the face of Jesus Christ, in Christ, God has come near to us. He didn't just drop down a philosophy, He didn't just drop down an idea. He didn't just say, here's some Play-Doh, here's some aerosol, just go play with that. No, no, He became one of us so we could see Him, so we could touch Him. And He even bled in the presence here of Peter, James, and John. And all the more so with the scourging, the crying with thorns on the cross. He came near to us. And so, kind of like the catechism, and Catechism 309 says there's not one aspect of the problem of evil. Or rather, I'm sorry, there's not one aspect of the Christian faith.

There's not one aspect of the Christian story that is not itself part of the answer to the problem of evil. That is simple philosophical solutions aren't going to work. This mystery is beyond us. This mystery is beyond us. What begins to give a glimpse of meaning is Jesus Christ from beginning to end and recognizing this life is not the end. I am made for something even more than this, as great as this is, as great as this is. In Christ, God loves us with a human heart.

## **Marking the Agony of the Garden**

You know, there's a church that marks the spot, this garden of Gethsemane, the Agony of the Garden. There's olive trees there that are very, very old, very ancient. Some have claimed that maybe even go back to the time of Jesus, certainly hundreds if not thousands of years. These trees are very ancient, very old. And I love taking pilgrims there. I love being in this place, it's called the Church of All Nations. And there's this Rock of Agony, which is the traditional spot venerated where our Lord suffered this agony.

The Agony in the Garden where He began to shed His redemptive blood. And at the top of this church, on the outside, there's a deer on top and it reminds you of Psalm 42, "As a deer longs for running water, so my soul longs for you, my God." So my soul longs for you, my God. Jesus Christ, as we will see again and again, He is the answer to the question that is every human life. Jesus is the answer to the question that's every human life, that He reveals to us both what it means to be human, what it means to live out total self-giving love. And that's what you see in the Agony.

You see His true humanity, you see His obedience, but you see His love. That's what the passion is all about. The passion is not, well, God the Father had to beat somebody. No, no, that makes God into a moral monster, rather the cross and already beginning here, is a revelation of the love of God. It's a revelation of the love of God. It's this self-offering, total self-gift of the Son to the Father on our behalf, and we being offered up in Him, with Him, and through Him as we hear at Mass to the Father.

## **A Solidarity With Us**

So the mystery of Christianity really comes down to this, what happened to the head, what happened to our Lord Jesus Christ, will be reproduced in through each one of us, through the Holy Spirit. This is what it's all about. That's what we say Christ goes as in solidarity with us, not merely as substitute. He didn't suffer so we wouldn't have to. He suffered so that our suffering, our sorrows, our agonies would be redemptive. On the one hand, never be afraid to pray for healing. We go to the doctor when we're sick, we go to hospitals, and we pray for each other and we pray for our Lord to heal us, supernaturally, miraculously, if He so wills it, and He still does that to this day. We should never be ashamed of that. Look at any recent canonization cause and there's plenty more accounts, people giving eyewitness testimony of miraculous things that are happening in our day.

But we also know that that's not always what He does. That sometimes even after we've pursued those things, it's either not the time right now or maybe not even His will to heal us of those things. And when that happens, we have to recognize there is this deep mystery of redemptive suffering. You know, John Paul II in "Evangelium Vitae: The Gospel Of Life," actually described as part of the culture of death, the sense that suffering is meaningless, that suffering has no meaning, has no value. He saw that as part of the culture of death.

Deep within the Catholic tradition, deep within the scriptures is this mystery of redemptive suffering. You see it anticipated in the Old Testament, if you read the accounts, for example of the Maccabean Martyrs, those seven brothers in 2 Maccabees 7 who died before Antiochus, this Greek king, because they would not compromise their faith and they gave their lives. And they even say, if you read their words, that the youngest one by the end says, through our suffering, by faith, we believe this will evoke God to act, that our suffering is not meaningless. That's not without meaning, it's actually redemptive.

And the famous passages in Colossians 1:24 where St. Paul says, "I make up what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ." We're like, what's lacking in the cross? Nothing is lacking in the cross. What's lacking and what remains is for the cross, the Paschal mystery, His death and His resurrection to be reproduced in and through each and every one of us. This is why Mary is first and model disciple. She's united with Christ in His passion. We have the prophecy with Simeon in Luke 2 where Simeon tells her that her soul will be pierced as she watches her son. It's fulfilled in the cross, she watches her son and how hard that would've been to be there consenting to God's will and watching her son on the cross. And she also shares in, participates in His resurrection, and that's what the mystery of her blessed assumption body and soul into heaven is all about.

## **Uniting with the Lord**

What all this means is in our suffering, if we've sought it for healing, whether it's medically or by prayer, and the Lord hasn't willed to do or to do that now, we can unite our suffering to Christ on the cross and we can participate in the redemption of the world. That's what redemptive suffering's all about. By God's grace, by God's condescension down to us, by God's accommodation to us, by God's wanting to bring us into His mission, not because He needs us, but because He wills to dignify His creatures. What graces will be poured out because we unite our sufferings to our Lord. So let's always remember, wherever we are, Christ was there first. And wherever there is suffering now, Christ suffers in us, with us, and through us. Our suffering is never without meaning. It is never meaningless. It always has value to the very, very end.

I'll pray for your journey. Please pray for mine. Thank you for being with us. Our Lord Jesus Christ loves you and loves me more than we could ever imagine, and that's what we

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couldn't come to philosophically. As great as Aristotle and company are, they'll never get this. They'll never get this, which is one of the hardest things to believe, that God loves us, that He cares for us so deeply. And as John Paul II said, rightfully so, that in Christ, God loves you and He loves me with a human heart. God bless you.