

# The Garden as a Place of Agony

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**T**he agony in the garden is a remarkable piece of the passion of Christ, poised as it is between Jesus' public ministry and his death as that time and place in which he essentially hands his life over to God and to human beings. Here we have a story that sends a chill down our spines—first because the mental, emotional, and spiritual suffering of Christ naturally moves us, but also because this achingly real account touches upon something very close to home for each one of us. The internal battle of Christ in the garden depicts an epic, familiar struggle—between life and death, between the human will and the will of God, between doubts about the past and anxiety over the future, between the natural human dread of powerlessness and the life-changing tranquility of total surrender.

## The “Garden of Gethsemane”

Parallel accounts of Christ's suffering in what is commonly referred to as “the Garden of Gethsemane” can be found in Matthew 26:30-56, Mark 14:26-52, and Luke 22:39-53. While John's gospel does not narrate the suffering of Christ in the garden, it does place his arrest there (John 18:1-12). Interestingly, none of the four accounts actually identifies the place as the “Garden of Gethsemane.” Matthew and Mark write of Jesus and his disciples going to “the Mount of Olives” (a place mentioned with some frequency in the gospels) after their last meal together, and then coming to “a *place* called Gethsemane,” probably a smaller part of the larger Mount of Olives area (Matt 26:36; Mark 14:32). Luke refers only to “the Mount of Olives” and makes reference to the fact that it was “his [Jesus'] custom” to

*The Agony in the Garden*, 13th century, Byzantine illumination. The J. Paul Getty Museum.

go there (Luke 22:39). Notably, only John refers to the place as “a garden,” which he describes by mentioning its location as “across the Kidron Valley” (John 18:1), a vague geographical note that corresponds with the location of the Mount of Olives. John also mentions that this was a place Jesus often went to with his disciples (John 18:2).

While it is important to note the distinctions among the gospel accounts, it is also fair to conclude that Gethsemane was indeed a garden-like area within the larger land area known as the Mount of Olives. Clearly the indigenous olive tree was the dominant plant of the region (fittingly, “Gethsemane” means “oil press”), and one might imagine a secluded grove of these trees coexisting with other naturally growing vegetation. This place would be peaceful and semi-private, a suitable place for Jesus and his disciples to withdraw from time to time for quiet and refreshment. Although the exact location of the actual garden is unknown, it is reasonable to place it at or near the current site of Gethsemane, which is located on the lower western slope of the Mount of Olives.

### **Gospel Depictions of Jesus in the Garden**

Envisioning the Garden of Gethsemane as a peaceful and secluded place at the base of the Mount of Olives, we can now move forward to more closely consider what happened there according to the gospel accounts. All four gospels agree that after their last meal together Jesus and his disciples walked to the Mount of Olives. The gospels indicate that this was a place frequented by Jesus and his disciples; therefore the latter, who continued to be a bit thick in the head about what was about to happen to Jesus (despite his many efforts to prepare them), would not have found anything unusual about going there. Jesus often went to quiet places to pray; they may have expected another such evening of prayer (see, for example, Luke 21:37, which specifically refers to nights spent on the Mount of Olives). But as we know, this particular evening would play itself out quite differently.

Although Matthew, Mark, and Luke offer parallel accounts of Jesus’ suffering in the garden, a close comparison uncovers interesting variations in emphasis, each shedding light on the evangelists’ unique portrayals of Jesus and what they especially wish to convey about his final hours. While there is basic agreement among them, the ways they differ are especially revealing.

In Mark’s gospel (probably the first gospel written and subsequently used as a source for both Matthew and Luke), the suffering of Jesus is unadulterated. He is described as “distressed and agitated” (14:33). He tells Peter, James, and John that he is “deeply grieved, even to death” (14:34), and in a powerful image characteristic of this raw gospel Mark writes that Jesus “threw himself” to the ground and began to pray (14:35). In these dark moments before his arrest Jesus is portrayed as utterly alone.



*Christ in Gethsemane (Agony in the Garden)*, Lucas van Leyden, 1509.  
National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC.

Raymond Brown describes the Markan scene: “The isolation of Jesus is dramatized in three steps as he moves away from the body of the disciples, from the chosen three, and then falls to the earth alone” (see Raymond Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* [New York: Doubleday, 1997], 145). Indeed, this isolation is consummated when one of Jesus’ own (Judas) betrays him, he is seized and arrested, and “all of them [the disciples] deserted him and fled” (Mark 14:50).

Although Matthew is known to edit and soften Mark’s account at times, in this scene of great suffering that evangelist follows Mark’s account very closely. This in itself is significant. Matthew was clearly not interested in toning down the distress of Jesus, his sense of dread, or his fervent prayer, nor does Matthew make any attempt to minimize the embarrassing failure

of the disciples to perceive Jesus' pain, to assuage his loneliness, or to grasp in any meaningful way the enormity of the suffering to come. As in Mark's account, the disciples had promised at the last supper to be faithful to Jesus even unto death (Mark 14:31; Matt 26:35), but they desert him with astonishing rapidity.

In contrast to Matthew, Luke makes significant modifications to Mark's account. Among the numerous changes is the complete removal of the Markan phrase "distressed and agitated," which could be interpreted as a lack of trust on the part of Jesus. Rather than describing Jesus as *throwing himself* to the ground, Luke prefers a more deliberate and controlled image, indicating instead that Jesus "knelt down" (Luke 22:41). Luke is also the only one of the evangelists to specifically mention Jesus *rising from prayer* (Luke 22:45), a detail that could easily be overlooked but that has the effect of highlighting the newfound strength of Jesus after his period of intense prayer. Overall, Luke's account depicts a Jesus who is more calm and collected than the graphically agitated Jesus portrayed by Mark and Matthew. (Luke, however, finds his own way of expressing Jesus' pain, as we will investigate further below.) In further contrast to Mark and Matthew, Luke takes great pains to mitigate the failure of the disciples, omitting their promise to never deny him, generously attributing their sleepiness to grief (Luke 22:45), decreasing the number of times Jesus finds them sleeping, and graciously making no explicit mention of their final desertion.

Finally, it should be noted that John's gospel does not describe the scene of Jesus' agony in the garden at all. Whether this is because it was not part of his community's tradition or because he deliberately chose not to narrate this event, the fact that it is "missing" is in keeping with John's characteristic depiction of Jesus as all-knowing, fully in control, and generally "above the fray." John presents Jesus, even as he is arrested in the garden across the Kidron Valley, as the one controlling the situation: he is the one asking the questions (John 18:4, 7); he willingly identifies himself to his captors with words that ring of divinity ("I am"; John 18:5); and he calmly tells the ever-fiery Peter that he will drink the cup the Father has given him (John 18:11; note the faint echo of Mark 14:36). Ultimately, Jesus' captors do bind and arrest him, but only after they have literally fallen at his feet (John 18:6).

## Agony

Let us turn back to Luke's account and reflect on a final detail that sheds light on our understanding of Christ's suffering while also revealing something about our own experiences. Although this event in the life of Christ is commonly called the "agony in the garden," only Luke actually uses the word "agony." Luke writes that Jesus "was in such agony and he prayed fervently" (Luke 22:44a NAB). Some translations (such as the NRSV) use



*The Garden of Gethsemane*, Flemish tapestry, ca. 1520.  
The National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC.

the word “anguish” instead: “*In his anguish*, he prayed more earnestly.” The Greek term is *agōnia*, a weighty word that was no doubt carefully chosen by Luke. The original meaning of *agōnia* carried the connotation of an athlete’s struggle. It conjured up images of a determined runner on his last legs, or a competitive wrestler under intense physical and mental pressure. With this meaning in mind, Luke Timothy Johnson offers a literal translation of this verse as “*Entering the struggle*, he continued to pray even

more eagerly” (see Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke*, SP 3 [Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991], 350–52). The second half of the verse continues to play on the imagery of a struggling athlete, whose intense efforts work up a sweat: “[A]nd his sweat became like great drops of blood, falling on the ground” (Luke 22:44b). It should be noted that verses 43–44 are not found in some early manuscripts of this gospel, and it is uncertain whether they were part of Luke’s original text. Regardless, the verses are both ancient and canonical.

Our first impression may be that using the imagery of an athlete or a wrestler, images we associate with sports and recreation, seems inappropriate

as a way to depict the intense suffering of Jesus in the garden. But there is great power behind this image. Clearly, Luke wishes to describe Jesus as maintaining some level of calm and control because of his unshakeable trust in the Father (recall Jesus’ last words on the cross in Luke’s gospel: “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit” [Luke 23:46]). And yet this simple word—*agōnia*—allows Luke to fully

*We can see our own vulnerability and struggles mirrored in Jesus’ agony.*

expose the very real suffering of Christ. Imagining Jesus contending against the approaching darkness, struggling with his pain the way an athlete strenuously prepares for a contest or a wrestler struggles against a worthy opponent, is an image we do not soon forget. It draws us more deeply into the narratives of Christ’s Passion so that we are able to read our own struggles there: our own wrestling matches, our own whispers of the timeless prayer of Christ: “Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done” (Luke 22:42). We are no longer simply readers or spectators. In this vivid *agōnia* we are in the garden, too.

### **Our Gethsemane**

Indeed, the *agōnia* of Christ in the garden offers us a meditation on all kinds of human struggles. Jesus was not only experiencing the very human dread of suffering and death. He also faced the “sleepiness” of friends in the midst of his anxiety, the betrayal of one close to him, and the impending desertion of the rest. Certainly, in expectation of his death Jesus naturally looked back at his life—an exercise that in all of its humanity must have included questions and inner conflict (we know, for example, that he felt conflicted about leaving his followers behind; see John 17:12–15). Finally, Jesus was clearly being annealed in the all-too-familiar crucible of discernment between his own will in that moment (“remove this cup”) and the eternal will of the Father (“yet not my will but yours be done”).

The command of Christ— “Follow me!” —includes walking with him to Gethsemane. It is a place we go before every Golgotha of our lives. It is the place of inner turmoil and *agōnia*. Here we struggle with him, we watch him to see what he does and to imitate him. We see him throw himself to the ground and lie in the dirt of the garden. Isolated by the sleepiness of his friends, he turns all the more earnestly to the Father. He is vulnerable; he surrenders. And the Father—who never deserts his children—does not change the past, nor does he remove the arc of suffering from his Son’s life. But he sends an angel to minister to him (Luke 22:43) and he imparts to him a resolute spirit. We see him rise from prayer ready to face the hour at hand. He awakens his friends with a renewed calm, a steady voice, and a serene acceptance of what will come: “My betrayer is at hand” (Mark 26:46).

Even before the cross, the garden is a place of surrender. Like the iconic garden of Eden it is a place of weighty decisions where human and divine both clash and converge. It is a place of prayer and self-examination, a place to grapple with the inevitable betrayals of human life. There will be times when we really have no choice but to follow the Master to the garden and allow the *agōnia* to play out, and if we follow him closely, we too will fall to the ground in prayer; we will accept the quiet comfort the Father offers; we will rise with strength of spirit and drink deeply from the cups that do not pass.

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