

Matthew 26:40-44

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/matt/matt-26/matthew-2640-44/>

As Jesus is praying in the Garden of Gethsemane, He checks on His disciples and finds them sleeping during His hour of grief. Jesus continues to pray and tells His Father that He will obey Him. The disciples fall back asleep again, as Jesus returns to pray more.

The parallel gospel accounts of this interaction are found in Mark 14:37-40 and Luke 22:45-46.

Matthew continues his narrative of Jesus's final night.

Jesus's prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane as His *disciples* slept most likely took place on the night of Nisan 15 (late Thursday by Roman reckoning). See "[The Bible Says Timeline of Jesus's Final Day](#)" to learn more about the timing and sequencing of this event.

When Jesus first arrived at Gethsemane (the olive press), *He* asked His *disciples* to "sit here while I go over there and pray" (Matthew 26:36). *He* also asked *them* to "pray that you may not enter into temptation" (Luke 22:40). Jesus then took *Peter*, James, and John further into the garden and confided how deeply troubled *He* was to *them* and asked *them* to *keep watch* (Matthew 26:37-38). Jesus then went a little further ("about a stone's throw") and prayed to His *Father*, asking Him if it was possible to let this cup *pass* from Him, but Jesus added, "yet not as I will, but as You will" (Matthew 26:39).

After *praying for one hour*, Jesus returned to His *disciples*, whom *He* had previously asked to *keep watch* (Matthew 26:38, Mark 14:34) and to pray (Luke 22:40).

The Gospels do not specify whether Jesus returned to both the larger and smaller groups of *disciples* or if *He* only *came to* the smaller group. The smaller group was the three *disciples* (*Peter*, James, and John) whom *He* took with Him further into the garden (Matthew 26:37; Mark 14:33).

We do know that Jesus *came to them* because *He* spoke to *Peter*. The larger group was the eight *disciples* *He* told "Sit here while I go over there and pray" upon entering Gethsemane (Matthew 26:36, Mark 14:32). Jesus may or may not have also gone to this larger group.

But when Jesus *came to the disciples*, *He found them sleeping* instead of keeping *watch and praying*.

Jesus awoke *Peter*, the leader among *the disciples*. Matthew records three things Jesus *said to* him:

- *So, you men could not keep watch with Me for one hour?*
- *Keep watching and praying that you may not enter into temptation;*

- *the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.*

Mark's gospel adds a fourth expression that Jesus *said* when *He* first *came to Peter*,

- “Simon, are you asleep?” (Mark 14:37)

The first thing Jesus *said to Peter* was: “Simon, are you asleep?” (Mark 14:37). The name, “Simon,” means “Listen” or “Hear.” By using *Peter's* given name of “Simon,” Jesus could have been making a play on words meaning “Listen, wake up.”

The second thing Jesus *said to Peter* was: *So, you men could not keep watch with Me for one hour?*

Jesus's question to Peter after *He* woke him up appears to be one of disappointment. *Peter* and *the other disciples* were supposed to have been alert and *praying* for strength because of the difficult ordeal they were about to endure, but instead they were *sleeping*. They *could not keep watch with Jesus for even one hour*.

The third thought Jesus said to Peter was: *Keep watching and praying that you may not enter into temptation.*

This comment was a reissue of Jesus's original instructions (Matthew 26:38, Mark 14:34, Luke 22:40). It was a reminder as to why they were in Gethsemane. They were there to draw strength from God for the difficult challenges they would soon face.

The primary trial they would soon face would be to not lose heart or faith when Jesus submitted to arrest and allowed Himself to be unjustly condemned and murdered. Jesus knew they would all fall away because of what He would do (submit to arrest) that very night (Matthew 26:31). But when *He* told *them* they would fall way, they all vehemently promised they would never do that because they were ready to die for Jesus (Matthew 26:35).

This hour was their opportunity to find their strength and perspective from God, and not themselves. But they spent it sleeping instead of keeping *watch and praying*. It appears that their confidence was in their own power to resist and follow. Jesus was leading *them* to understand that they could not resist in their own power. But they did not get it.

Jesus was reminding *Peter*, and *the other disciples*, to *keep watching and praying that you may not enter into temptation*. This is because Jesus understood the need. This scene drips with irony, as the Creator of the world seeks God's help to resist temptation, while the weak and needy *disciples* snore away without a care, confident in their own courage (Colossians 1:17).

The fourth and final remark Jesus *said to Peter* before *He* returned to pray was: *the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak*. The two key terms of this departing comment are *the spirit* and *the flesh*.

The Greek word translated as “*spirit*” is “πνεῦμα” (G4151). It is pronounced: “pneu-ma.” It can mean the immaterial person of an angel, demon, or human being, or Person (such as the Holy Spirit). It can also mean “wind” or “breath.”

In this verse, Jesus is apparently referring to Peter’s *spirit* or the disciples’ individual spirits. When the Bible refers to people’s spirits, it does so in one of two ways.

The first way the Bible refers to a human *spirit* is as a general term to describe the immaterial part of a human being. In this general sense, our immaterial *spirit* is the opposite of our physical body or *flesh*. It is the part of us that survives the death of our physical body (Ecclesiastes 12:7).

The second way the Bible talks about a human *spirit*, is a more specific term to distinguish a person’s *spirit* from a person’s “soul” (ψυχή—G5590 pronounced: “psuché”).

The Bible tells us that, “the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul [‘psuché’] and spirit [‘pneuma’]” (Hebrews 4:12). This verse indicates that in at least some Biblical contexts, a person’s *spirit* is distinct from a person’s *soul*.

A person’s *spirit* is what enables his soul to relate to God in a way that is similar to how a person’s body enables his soul to interact with the physical world. Apart from Christ, we are spiritually dead in our trespasses and sin (Ephesians 2:1-5). For a believer in Jesus, a person’s *spirit* is made new and alive upon being born into God’s family (John 3:6). A believer’s *spirit* is what connects us to God (Romans 8:16). A person’s *spirit* is what enables our soul to connect with God.

The Greek word most often translated as “soul” is “ψυχή” (G5590). It is pronounced: “psuché.” It can mean “soul,” “self,” “inner being,” and/or “life.” A person’s “psuché” is who they essentially are. The soul consists of a person’s mind, heart, and will. The mind, heart, and will are the so-called “organs of the soul.”

A person’s mind is the seat of their thoughts and intellect. It includes their consciousness, intellect, and is what/how they process thoughts and ideas. Our mind contemplates what is true from what is false. The mind is the mental screen of a person’s life.

A person’s heart is the seat of their emotions and desires. It includes a person’s feelings, loves, and fears. It is the part of us that is attracted to perceived goodness and beauty, or has an aversion to perceived evil and ugliness.

A person’s *will* is the seat of our freedom and choices. It our choosing mechanism. As divine image bearers of God, we have the ability to make our own decisions (Genesis 1:27). We are neither preprogrammed robots, nor beastly animals who only act on instinct. Though we have a nature, reason, and desires that incline us towards some choices more than others, our *will* is what enables us to override reason and instinct and choose who we will trust, which perspective we will have, and what we will do.

Together these three organs (mind, heart, will) of the soul make up a person's core identity. This is why "psuché" is often translated as "self." And when Paul tells us to be led by the Spirit, or walk in the Spirit and not *the flesh* (Romans 8:4-16, Galatians 5:16-25), he is telling us to have our "psuche" (mind-heart-will) engaging with God's Spirit through our *spirit*, and not according to the desires of our physical *flesh*.

This seems to be what Jesus meant when *He* told sleepy *Peter* in Gethsemane: *the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak*. Jesus was exhorting *Peter* with this departing remark to have his "psuche" (mind-heart-will) relate to God as *Peter's spirit* was *willing*, and possibly even desiring to follow God. Jesus was exhorting *Peter* to not obey the drowsy desires of his *weak flesh*. However, it would seem *the disciples* were quite confident in their *flesh*, and did not see the need.

The second term in Jesus's remark *the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak* is the word *flesh*. In this context Jesus could mean one of two things. *He* could simply be referring to *Peter's* physical body when *He* used the term *flesh*. Or *He* could be referring to the seat of *Peter's* sinful desires when *He* was talking about *the flesh*. Either way *the flesh is weak*. The seat of sinful desires can only seek its own *will*—leading to death (Romans 8:6). It cannot accomplish God's *will* (John 15:5, Romans 8:8). Since we are made in the image of God, we know right and wrong (Romans 2:14). However, our human willpower is limited. But God's Spirit is unlimited.

If Jesus was referring to *Peter's* body when *He said, "the flesh is weak," He was saying* that *Peter* lacked sufficient physical stamina or strength to perform God's *will* in his own power. It was late, it had been a long day preparing for the Passover (Luke 22:8), full of disturbing surprises (Matthew 26:21), wonder (Matthew 26:26-29, John 14-16:30), and deep emotions (Luke 22:15, Mark 14:31). All of this, including the multiple cups of wine drunk at the Passover Seder (Luke 22:17, 20), would naturally make the body (*flesh*) tired. *Peter and the disciples' flesh* was especially *weak* at this perilous moment.

But even at his best strength, *Peter's flesh* could not overcome the looming trials and please God. The only way to please God is by overcoming our trials with faith in Him (Hebrews 11:6). Jesus was exhorting *the disciples* to pray with Him to obtain strength beyond their human limitations.

If Jesus was referring to *Peter's* sinful nature when *He said, "the flesh is weak," He was saying* that *Peter's* natural desires were evil and wrong. And that if *Peter and the disciples* followed their *flesh* it would lead *them* away from Jesus, and from doing what was right during the trials to come. Instead, *He* exhorted them to follow their *spirit* which was in tune with God's good *will*.

Again, whichever of these two meanings Jesus meant by *the flesh*, the functional outcome was the same. And it is possible Jesus had both in view.

Neither *Peter* nor *the other disciples* could overcome the trials in their own *weak* strength. They would only be able to overcome their trials the same way Jesus overcame His trial: by spiritually relying upon the Holy Spirit.

Matthew then records that Jesus *went away again a second time* to pray to His *Father*. Mark records that when *He* returned to pray that “Again He went away and prayed, saying the same words” (Mark 14:39) as *He* prayed before.

Matthew records Jesus praying as *My Father, if this cannot pass away unless I drink it, Your will be done*. This was nearly identical to what he recorded Jesus as *saying* before when *He* prayed, “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; yet not as I will, but as You will” (Matthew 26:39).

The pronoun *this* in the phrase *if this cannot pass away* refers to “*this* cup.” The expression “*this* cup” as explained in further detail within [The Bible Says commentary for Matthew 26:39](#) , represented God’s wrath and judgement upon sin and/or the circumstances Jesus was about to endure, including arrest, false condemnation, humiliation, torture, abuse, and a painful execution on a Roman cross.

Jesus was deeply troubled by these circumstances (Matthew 26:37-38). *He* was so troubled that as *He* prayed, “His sweat became like drops of blood” (Luke 22:44). But even as *He* was troubled and dreaded the prospect of having to endure such suffering, Jesus was willing to *drink this* cup.

Jesus trusted His *Father* even unto death (Philippians 2:8) and was *willing to drink this* cup if it meant pleasing His *Father*. In doing this, Jesus trusted that His Father’s will was for His best.

This is what Jesus was *praying to His* Father when *He* said, “*My Father, if this cannot pass away unless I drink it, Your will be done.*”

After *praying* this for some time, Jesus returned to His *disciples a second time*.

Again He came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were heavy. Jesus woke *them* up and repeated something similar to what *He* told *them* the first time *He* came to *them*. Mark reports how when Jesus spoke to *them* the *second time*, *they* were so sleepy that “they did not know what to answer Him” (Mark 14:40).

Matthew then reports, *And He left them again, and went away and prayed a third time, saying the same thing once more*.

Once again, Matthew and the other Gospel writers show how Jesus was dependent upon His *Father* for strength to endure the trials to come. Jesus spent several hours drawing strength from His Father. Even though *He* was without sin and a sin nature, *He* was still tempted. But *He* did not overcome sin in His own strength, great though it was. Jesus overcame His trials in the Spirit.

He relied upon His *Father*’s power. In so doing, Jesus set an example for how we should overcome our trials. By relying upon God by means of *the spirit* and not our *weak flesh*.

The Gospel writers Matthew and *Peter* (through Mark) both contrast their own weakness and failure with Christ's strength, and humbly share it in a way to benefit their audience to follow Jesus's example and not their own.

Biblical Text

⁴⁰ **And He came to the disciples and found them sleeping, and said to Peter, "So, you men could not keep watch with Me for one hour? ⁴¹ Keep watching and praying that you may not enter into temptation; the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak." ⁴² He went away again a second time and prayed, saying, "My Father, if this cannot pass away unless I drink it, Your will be done." ⁴³ Again He came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were heavy. ⁴⁴ And He left them again, and went away and prayed a third time, saying the same thing once more.**