The Gethsemane Season

When God Prepares You Through Pain, Prayer and Surrender

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Life Reclaimed Publishing
Perth, Western Australia

The Gethsemane Season: When God Prepares You Through Pain, Prayer and Surrender

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Some scenes in this book are imagined reconstructions or composite examples. They are labelled as such where they appear and do not describe real individuals.

This book is not a substitute for medical, psychological or legal help. If you are in danger or thinking about ending your life, please contact the emergency services or a crisis line in your country straight away. Further guidance is given in Where to Find Help.

Dedication

To everyone who is praying through a season they did not choose.

To the one sitting in the hospital car park, the one waiting for a phone call that will not come, the one carrying a decision that costs more than anyone knows: you are not alone in the garden. Someone has knelt there before you, and He is kneeling with you still.

And to my wife, Prophetess Kumba Kpou, and our six children, Georgina, Christina, Giftens, Bruce, David and Eliana, who have taught me that love is learned most deeply in the hard seasons.

Contents

Preface....1
Introduction: Welcome to the Garden....5

Part One: Into the Garden....18
Chapter 1: The Garden Before the Cross....19
Chapter 2: The Cup Jesus Had to Drink....30
Chapter 3: When Your Soul Is Overwhelmed....41

Part Two: Praying in the Garden....52
Chapter 4: The Struggle Between Your Will and God's Will....53
Chapter 5: The Power of Persistent Prayer....65
Chapter 6: Strength Sent Into the Garden....75

Part Three: Alone, Misunderstood and Betrayed....85
Chapter 7: The Loneliness of the Secret Place....86
Chapter 8: When Those Closest to You Cannot Understand....96
Chapter 9: The Kiss in the Dark....106

Part Four: Discerning and Surrendering....117
Chapter 10: The Difference Between God's Testing and Our Own Choices. .118
Chapter 11: Surrendering What You Cannot Control....130
Chapter 12: The Hidden Gardens of Those Who Lead....140

Part Five: Rising From the Garden....150
Chapter 13: Rise, Let Us Be Going....151
Chapter 14: When You Fail in Your Own Garden....161
Chapter 15: Another Garden, an Empty Tomb....170
Conclusion: Not My Will, but Yours....180
Where to Find Help....185
Appendix A: A 21-Day Prayer Journey Through the Garden....188
Appendix B: Scriptures for Your Gethsemane Season....198
Appendix C: Small Group Discussion Guide....204
Bibliography....211
Acknowledgements....214
About the Author....215
Books by Solomon Kpou....216

Preface

> Then Jesus came with them to a place called Gethsemane, and said to the disciples, "Sit here while I go and pray over there."
>
> Matthew 26:36

There is a moment in the Gospels that I have never been able to read quickly.

It is late at night. The Passover meal is over. Jesus has washed His disciples' feet, broken the bread, shared the cup and sung a hymn with them. Then He leads them out of the city, across the Kidron Valley, to a garden on the slope of the Mount of Olives. And there, in the dark, the Son of God says something that still stops me every time I read it. He tells His closest friends that His soul is overwhelmed with sorrow, even to the point of death. And He asks them to stay awake with Him.

Then He goes a little farther, falls on His face and prays.

I wrote this book because of that moment. And I wrote it because of the people I keep meeting who are living through their own version of it.

Why I Wrote This Book

In my years of pastoral ministry I have sat with many people in their darkest hours. I have prayed with families in hospital rooms. I have prayed with parents who did not know how to tell their children the news. I have listened to men and women who did everything they knew to do and still found themselves facing a closed door. I have walked with believers who were betrayed by people they trusted, believers who were waiting on God for something that did not come, and believers carrying a quiet grief that no one else in the church could see.

Again and again I have heard the same questions. Why is this happening? What did I do wrong? Why is God not answering? How long will this last? And underneath all of them, often unspoken, there is a deeper question: Can I still trust God when He does not take this away?

Many of us have been taught, directly or indirectly, that the goal of the Christian life is to get out of hard places as fast as we can. We pray for the pressure to lift, and when it does not, we assume something has gone wrong. Maybe our faith is too small. Maybe God is displeased. Maybe we have missed something. Those thoughts pile a heavy weight of shame on top of what is already a painful season.

But when I look at Jesus in Gethsemane, I see something different. I see the sinless Son of God under unimaginable pressure. I see Him asking the Father, honestly and openly, whether the cup could pass from Him. And I see Him rise from that prayer, not because the pressure had been removed, but because His will had been laid down. He walked out of the garden and towards the cross, strengthened to obey.

That picture has changed the way I understand hard seasons. So I wanted to put it into a book that ordinary believers could hold in their hands when the night is long.

The Central Message

The message of this book can be said in one sentence:

Some seasons are not about escaping the pressure; they are about learning to trust God and remain obedient in the middle of it.

That does not mean we should never pray for deliverance. Jesus Himself prayed, “O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me” (Matthew 26:39). Asking God to change our circumstances is not a lack of faith. It is honest prayer, and the Bible is full of it. God does heal. God does deliver. God does open doors that looked shut forever.

But Jesus did not stop there. He went on: “nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will.” That word *nevertheless* is the hinge of the whole garden. It is the place where honest prayer becomes surrendered trust.

Some seasons are given to us not so we can find the fastest way out, but so we can learn to say that word and mean it. In those seasons, God is not absent. He is doing something deep. He is teaching us, as the old saying goes, to trust His heart when we cannot trace His hand. He is building in us an obedience that holds when comfort is gone. And He is drawing us into fellowship with the One who prayed in the garden before us.

I need to say something carefully here. What Jesus faced in Gethsemane was unique. He alone was preparing to drink the cup of God's judgement against sin, and He drank it for us. Our suffering does not pay for anything. Our pain does not earn us God's favour. Our seasons echo His garden, but they never repeat it. And because He has already been there, we never have to enter ours alone.

What God Does in the Garden

The title of this book speaks of God preparing us through pain, prayer and surrender. I chose those three words on purpose.

Pain is the part none of us choose. It may come through grief, illness, betrayal, family crisis, long waiting or a decision that costs us dearly. I will not pretend in these pages that pain is good in itself. But I do believe that God is able to work in every season, and that nothing you face is beyond the reach of His redeeming hand.

Prayer is what Jesus did with His pain. He did not hide it, numb it or pretend it was not there. He brought it to His Father, three times, with what Hebrews calls "vehement cries and tears" (Hebrews 5:7). If you are in a hard season, hear me: one of the greatest gifts this book can offer you is permission to pray honestly. And I want to encourage you to keep praying, even when you feel you have nothing left to say.

Surrender is where the garden leads. I do not mean a passive, resigned giving up. I mean an active, trusting yielding of our will into the hands of a good Father. That kind of surrender is not weakness. It is the strongest thing a human heart can do.

A Word Before You Begin

If you are reading this in the middle of your own Gethsemane, I want you to know something. I have not written this book from a distance. I have written it as a fellow traveller, and as a pastor who loves people and believes with all his heart that Jesus meets us in the garden.

You do not have to read quickly. You do not have to have the right words. Some chapters may speak to you straight away, and others may only make sense later. That is all right. Take what you need. Sit with the questions. Pray the prayers in your own words.

And remember this: the garden is not the last word. Jesus walked out of Gethsemane to the cross, and from the cross to a tomb that could not hold Him. There was another garden waiting on the other side, the garden of resurrection morning. Whatever season you are in, the God who raised Jesus from the dead is with you in it. And He has not finished writing your story.

Come with me into the garden.

Introduction: Welcome to the Garden

> Coming out, He went to the Mount of Olives, as He was accustomed, and His disciples also followed Him.
>
> Luke 22:39

The Night Nobody Plans For

It is after midnight, and the house is quiet. Everyone else is asleep, but you are still at the kitchen table with your phone face down beside you. The news you were dreading came today. It may have come from a doctor, a bank, a lawyer or someone you love. However it came, it rearranged your life in a single afternoon.

You have prayed. You prayed in the car on the way home, and you prayed again when you could not sleep. You have asked God to take it away, to change the result, to let you wake up and find it was a mistake. And the night is still the night.

If you have ever sat at that table, you are not as alone as you feel. Jesus has sat there too. It was not at a kitchen table but in a garden on the Mount of Olives, on the darkest night of His life.

Nobody plans to arrive in Gethsemane. We plan for celebrations. We plan weddings, holidays, new jobs, new homes and new ministries. We make lists, set goals and pray about the future we hope to build. But nobody writes a season of sorrow into the calendar. Nobody circles a date and says, “This is the month my heart will break.”

Yet sooner or later almost every believer finds the way there. The path that looked so clear bends into the dark. Prayers that once came easily now feel heavy. The night is long, the pressure is real, and the way forward runs straight through the very thing you hoped to avoid.

A composite story. It draws on situations common in pastoral care and does not describe any one real person.

Think of a woman in her fifties sitting in a church office after a midweek service. Her husband has been unwell for most of the year, the bills are mounting and her eldest son has stopped speaking to the family. She has not come for advice. She has come because she has run out of words. “I keep praying the same prayer,” she says, “and nothing moves.” Her pastor does not rush to fix it. He opens his Bible to Matthew 26 and reads the account of the garden slowly, out loud. When he reaches the words “My soul is exceedingly sorrowful, even to death” (Matthew 26:38), she begins to cry. “He felt like this?” she asks. Nothing in her circumstances has changed by the time she leaves. But she walks out knowing that the One she is praying to has knelt in a garden like hers.

If that is where you are as you open this book, welcome. You are not the first to come to this garden, and you will not be the last. More than that, you are not here alone. Jesus walked this path before you. He knows the way in, and He knows the way through.

The Trees That Grew Again

On the lower slope of the Mount of Olives, beside the Church of All Nations, eight old olive trees stand inside a low fence. Their trunks are thick, split and hollow, twisted like rope that has been wrung out and left in the sun. Pilgrims lean against the railing to look at them, and many have wondered whether these are the very trees under which Jesus prayed.

A team of Italian researchers set out to find out. Working through the National Research Council of Italy with several Italian universities, they spent three years studying the grove and announced their results in 2012. Five of the eight trunks were too hollowed out to date. The other three were radiocarbon dated to 1092, 1166 and 1198. Genetic testing suggested that all of the trees had come from the same parent plant.

So these are not the trees Jesus knelt beneath. At around nine hundred years old they are among the oldest olive trees ever studied, but they are not two thousand. There is a reason for that.

In AD 70, about forty years after the crucifixion, the Roman army laid siege to Jerusalem. The Jewish historian Josephus, who was present during the war, records that the Romans "cut down all the trees that were in the country that adjoined to the city" for about ninety furlongs around, roughly seventeen kilometres, to build their siege works. The pleasant gardens and groves outside the walls, he wrote, had become "a desolate country every way". Whatever was growing in Gethsemane on the night Jesus prayed was very likely felled along with everything else.

And yet olive trees still grow there.

That is the remarkable thing about the olive. It is one of the hardest trees in the world to kill. Cut it to the ground and, given time, it will often send up new shoots from the old root. Axe, fire and war can take the trunk. They rarely reach the life underneath.

Job knew about trees like that. In the middle of his own long night he said:

> "For there is hope for a tree, If it is cut down, that it will sprout again, And that its tender shoots will not cease. Though its root may grow old in the earth, And its stump may die in the ground, Yet at the scent of water it will bud And bring forth branches like a plant." (Job 14:7–9)

Job was speaking out of grief. He was comparing the hope of a tree with what he feared was the hopelessness of a man, who "dies and is laid away" (Job 14:10). He could not yet see what we have been shown. But the picture he painted runs on through Scripture: a stump that looks finished, a root still alive in the ground, and green shoots at the scent of water. Isaiah used the same picture for the promised King. When the royal family of David looked like a felled tree, God said, "There shall come forth a Rod from the stem of Jesse, And a Branch shall grow out of his roots" (Isaiah 11:1).

I tell you about these trees because this book is written for people who feel cut down.

The trees that stand in Gethsemane today do not prove anything about the Gospels, and I do not want to make more of them than they are. But they make a quiet picture worth carrying into the chapters ahead. They grow in the place of the oil press, on ground that has been pressed, cut down and laid waste. And they are still alive. They are still bearing fruit.

That is not a bad description of what God can do with a person in a Gethsemane season. The pressing is real. The cutting down is real. But it is not the end of the story, because the life of the believer is hidden with Christ in God (Colossians 3:3), and that root cannot be reached by any axe.

What Is a Gethsemane Season?

Gethsemane was a real place. The Gospels place it on the Mount of Olives, across the Kidron Valley from Jerusalem, and John calls it simply "a garden" (John 18:1). Luke tells us that Jesus went there "as He was accustomed" (Luke 22:39). It was familiar ground, a place He went to pray. But on the night He was betrayed, that familiar garden became the scene of the hardest prayer ever prayed. There the Son of God fell on His face and asked whether the cup might pass from Him. And there He gave His will to His Father.

The name Gethsemane is generally understood to mean "oil press". Hold that image from the start. Olives do not give up their oil by being admired. They give it up under weight. In the ancient world they were crushed, packed into baskets and pressed beneath a heavy beam until the oil ran out. The oil lit lamps, healed wounds and anointed kings. None of it came without the press.

When I speak of a Gethsemane season, I mean a time when you are under that kind of pressure, and the pressure does not lift simply because you pray. You are being pressed. The question underneath it all slowly changes. At first it is, "How do I get out of this?" Later, if we let God lead us, it becomes, "Will I trust Him here?"

A Gethsemane season can take many forms.

For one person it is grief: the death of a parent, a spouse or a child, and the long ache that follows the funeral when everyone else has gone home. For another it is illness, their own or that of someone they love, with its waiting rooms and test results and nights without sleep. For some it is waiting: for a child, for a marriage partner, for a prodigal to come home, for a door that will not open. For others it is betrayal by a friend, a colleague, a spouse or a church. It may be a family breakdown, a business that collapses, a prayer that has gone unanswered for years. Or it may be a clear call from God that will cost more than you thought you could pay.

What these seasons share is not their circumstances but their shape. They press us. They bring to the surface what was hidden in our hearts. They expose our fears and the things we have been leaning on instead of God. Sooner or later they bring us face to face with the same choice Jesus faced among the olive trees: my will, or Yours?

It is worth saying early what a Gethsemane season is not. It is not necessarily a sign that you have failed. It is not proof that God is angry with you. It is not evidence that your faith is weak. Jesus was perfectly obedient, perfectly loved by the Father and full of the Holy Spirit, and still He knew the garden. If the sinless Son of God passed through a night of overwhelming sorrow, then sorrow on its own cannot be the measure of our spiritual failure.

I also want to be careful with the word itself. Not every hard day is a Gethsemane. A flat tyre, a bad week at work or a disappointing exam result may be painful, but they are not what this book is about. And our seasons, however heavy, are never the same as His. What Jesus faced in the garden was unique in all of history. He alone was about to bear the judgement of God against the sin of the world, and He bore it in our place. Our suffering pays for nothing. It earns us nothing. Our gardens echo His, but they never repeat it.

That difference is not a cold theological footnote. It is the best news in this book. Because He drank the cup no one else could drink, we never enter our garden alone, and we never enter it under condemnation. “There is therefore now no condemnation to those who

are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1). Whatever is pressing you, it is not the wrath of God. That cup has already been emptied.

So a Gethsemane season, as I use the term, is a season of pressing in which a believer, held by a Saviour who has been there first, learns to pray honestly, to surrender willingly and to keep walking in obedience. It is a hard place. It can also become a holy one.

Not Escape, but Trust

When pressure comes, our first instinct is to look for the exit. That is human, and it is not wrong. Jesus Himself prayed for a way out. Mark records His words with startling directness:

> "Abba, Father, all things are possible for You. Take this cup away from Me; nevertheless, not what I will, but what You will." (Mark 14:36)

He did not pretend He wanted the cup. He did not put on a brave face for the Father or recite a pious formula. He told the truth about what He wanted. So if you are praying for healing, for provision, for a marriage to be restored or for the pressure to end, you are in good company. Keep praying. Asking God to change your circumstances is not a failure of faith. Scripture is full of such prayers, and God answers many of them with a glad yes.

But notice where the prayer goes next. "Nevertheless, not what I will, but what You will." The request is honest, and the surrender is just as honest. Jesus held both together in the same breath. He did not stop asking in order to surrender, and He did not stop surrendering in order to ask.

The cup did not pass. The arrest came, the trials came, the cross came. Yet Jesus did not walk out of Gethsemane defeated. He walked out steady. When the soldiers arrived with their torches, He did not hide among the trees. He "went forward" to meet them (John 18:4). Something had happened in the garden. The circumstances had not changed, but He had been strengthened to go through them. We will look closely at that strength in Chapter 6.

This is the heart of a Gethsemane season. Sometimes God says yes to our prayer for escape, and we should rejoice when He does. But sometimes His answer is, in effect, "Not out, but through. Not around, but with Me." In those seasons, victory is not that the pressure disappears. Victory is that we keep trusting and keep obeying while the pressure is still there.

The letter to the Hebrews opens a window into this. It says of Jesus:

> "who, in the days of His flesh, when He had offered up prayers and supplications, with vehement cries and tears to Him who was able to save Him from death, and was heard because of His godly fear, though He was a Son, yet He learned obedience by the things which He suffered." (Hebrews 5:7–8)

Two phrases in that passage deserve a slow reading.

The first is "and was heard". Jesus prayed to the One who could save Him from death, and He was heard. Yet He still died. Hebrews is not confused. The Father heard and answered, but the answer came on the far side of death, in resurrection. Being heard by God does not always mean being spared. Sometimes it means being carried through and raised up.

The second is "He learned obedience". Jesus was never disobedient. He did not need to move from rebellion to submission, as we do. But in His human life He came to know, from the inside, what obedience costs when it is lived under the full weight of suffering. He learned it the only way it can be learned: by doing it when it hurt.

If the Son learned obedience that way, we should not be surprised when ours is shaped in hard places too. That is not because God enjoys our pain. It is because some things are only formed under pressure. Patience is not learned in a hurry. Trust is not tested when everything is going well. Obedience means little until it costs something.

So this book will not offer you a technique for getting out of your garden quickly. I wish I could, and I will never discourage you from asking God for exactly that. What I want to offer is something more lasting: the company of Jesus in the garden, the freedom to pray

honestly, and the slow, steady grace to say with Him, "not what I will, but what You will", and mean it.

What This Book Is Not Saying

Hurting people can be wounded further by careless words, even words that sound spiritual. Most of us have heard them. "Everything happens for a reason." "God never gives us more than we can handle." "If you had more faith, you would be healed by now." Each one carries a grain of something true, wrapped in a great deal that is not, and each one has sent people away from church feeling more alone than when they came in. So before we go any further, let me say plainly what I am not saying.

I am not saying that God causes every evil thing that happens to you. Scripture is clear: "God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He Himself tempt anyone" (James 1:13). We live in a fallen world where sickness, injustice, accidents and cruelty are real. We have an enemy who, in Jesus' words, "does not come except to steal, and to kill, and to destroy" (John 10:10). People make choices that hurt others. God is sovereign over all things, and He is able to work even through what He did not cause. But His power to redeem a wound does not make Him its author.

I am not saying that your suffering is a punishment. Some hardship does follow our own choices, and when it does, the way forward includes honest repentance. We will look at that carefully in Chapter 10. But a great deal of suffering has nothing to do with personal sin. When the disciples saw a man born blind and asked whose sin had caused it, Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but that the works of God should be revealed in him" (John 9:3). Job was called blameless by God Himself (Job 1:8), and still he lost everything. Jeremiah was faithful, and still he was beaten and thrown into a cistern. Pain is not a verdict.

I am not saying that if you trust enough, everything will turn out as you hope. God sometimes heals and sometimes does not. Sometimes He rescues us from trouble, and sometimes He gives us grace to endure it. The apostle Paul pleaded with the Lord three times to

remove what he called a thorn in the flesh. The answer was not removal but grace: "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9). Paul was not short of faith. He simply received a different answer from the one he asked for, and he learned to live inside it.

I am not saying that suffering is good in itself. Grief is not a gift to be unwrapped with gratitude. Cancer is not a blessing in disguise. Abuse is not God's tool for building character. When Paul wrote that "all things work together for good to those who love God" (Romans 8:28), he did not say that all things are good. He said that God works in all things, and the next verse tells us the goal: that we would be "conformed to the image of His Son" (Romans 8:29). The good God promises is not always the outcome we wanted. It is always more of Christ in us.

And I am not saying that prayer replaces practical help. If your season includes depression, anxiety, trauma or overwhelming grief, please do not try to walk through it with a book alone. Talk to your doctor. See a qualified counsellor or psychologist. Tell your pastor and trusted friends what you are carrying. If you are ever in danger or thinking about ending your life, contact emergency services or a crisis line straight away. You will find Australian contacts, and a note for readers in other countries, on the Where to Find Help page at the back of this book. Seeking help is not a lack of faith. It is often one of the ways God sends strength into the garden.

So what am I saying?

I am saying that Jesus has been where you are, in the sense that matters most. He knows what it is to be pressed, to be troubled to the point of death, to ask for the cup to pass and to hear no change in the plan. I am saying that honest prayer and full surrender are not opposites. I am saying that God is present and at work in your season, even when you cannot see or feel it. And I am saying that the garden is not the last word, because beyond the garden there is a cross, and beyond the cross an empty tomb.

The victory this book points to is not guaranteed escape, wealth or health. It is the resurrection life of Jesus at work in ordinary people, and the quiet strength of faithful obedience when the night is long.

Who This Book Is For, and the Road Ahead

I have written this book first for ordinary believers who are walking through a season they did not choose. You may be young or old, new to faith or a follower of Jesus for decades. You may be the person everyone leans on, or you may feel you have nothing left to give anyone. If you are being pressed, this book is for you.

Perhaps you are sitting in a hospital corridor at two in the morning, waiting for a doctor to come through the doors. Perhaps you have just heard the word *redundancy* and do not know how to tell your family. Perhaps an engagement has ended, or a marriage, and you are wondering whether God has forgotten you. Perhaps you have prayed for the same son or daughter for twenty years and still see no change. Perhaps God has made a decision clear to you, and it will cost you friendships, reputation or security. Whoever you are, there is room for you in this garden.

I have also written for those who walk beside people in pain: husbands and wives, parents, friends, small group leaders, chaplains and carers. Part of what Gethsemane teaches us is how easily we fall asleep when someone we love needs us to stay awake. At the end of each chapter you will find a few lines headed *For the One Walking Alongside*. My hope is that they help you watch and pray with others more faithfully.

In one chapter especially, I have written for pastors, youth workers and others who carry people for a living or a calling. Those who care for others often carry their own garden seasons in secret. They preach on Sunday while their own hearts are breaking. They hold everyone else's pain and have nowhere to put their own. Chapter 12 was written with you in mind, though I hope the whole book will minister to you.

And this book is for anyone who is curious about Jesus and wonders whether faith has anything honest to say about suffering. The Jesus of

the Gospels is not a distant figure untouched by human pain. He wept. He was deeply distressed. He asked His friends to stay with Him. If you are exploring faith, I invite you to meet Him here in the garden, where His love is shown so clearly and at such cost.

The road ahead

The book follows the Gospel accounts of that night in order, from the walk across the Kidron to the empty tomb. Rather than giving you a list of topics, it walks you through the garden with Jesus, one step at a time. The fifteen chapters are gathered into five parts.

Part One: Into the Garden looks at where we are and why it hurts. We walk with Jesus across the Kidron to the place of the oil press (Chapter 1), consider the cup He was about to drink (Chapter 2) and stand with Him in the overwhelming sorrow of His soul (Chapter 3).

Part Two: Praying in the Garden looks at what Jesus did with the pressure. We listen to the struggle between His will and the Father's (Chapter 4), learn from His persistence in praying the same words again (Chapter 5) and discover how God sends strength into the garden without removing the cup (Chapter 6).

Part Three: Alone, Misunderstood and Betrayed looks at the wounds that come through people. We consider the loneliness of the place a stone's throw from His friends (Chapter 7), the pain of those who sleep while we struggle (Chapter 8) and the kiss of Judas in the dark (Chapter 9).

Part Four: Discerning and Surrendering looks at how we make sense of our season and let go. We ask whether we are facing testing, consequence or simply a broken world (Chapter 10), learn to surrender what we cannot control (Chapter 11) and look at the hidden gardens of those who lead (Chapter 12).

Part Five: Rising From the Garden looks at how we walk out. We see Jesus rise and go forward in costly obedience (Chapter 13), we follow Peter through failure to restoration (Chapter 14) and we come at last to another garden with an empty tomb (Chapter 15).

The order matters. The early chapters give you permission to be honest about your pain. The middle chapters help you bring that pain to God and to the people around you. The later chapters help you stand up and walk on. If you are in the rawest part of your season, you may find yourself staying in Part One for a while. That is all right. The garden is not a race.

How to Use This Book

You can read this book straight through, but I encourage you not to rush. A Gethsemane season is not a problem to be solved in an afternoon. It is a place where God meets us slowly. Give yourself permission to read a section, put the book down and pray. Some chapters may speak to you straight away. Others may only make sense months from now. Take what you need and leave the rest for later.

Each chapter ends with three short pieces.

Reflection offers a handful of questions. They are not a test. They are an invitation to be honest with yourself and with God. You may like to keep a journal beside you as you read and write down your answers, your prayers and anything you sense the Lord saying to you.

A Prayer gives you words for the days when you have none of your own. Pray it slowly. Change it. Make it yours.

For the One Walking Alongside offers a few lines for those supporting someone else through a garden season: what to say, what not to say and how to stay awake.

At the back of the book you will find more help. *Where to Find Help* lists crisis lines and support services. Appendix A is a 21-day prayer journey through the garden, with a short Scripture reading, reflection and prayer for each day; you can use it alongside the chapters or on its own during an especially hard stretch. Appendix B gathers Scriptures by theme, so that you have the Word of God close at hand when your own words run out. Appendix C is a discussion guide for small groups, with questions and a prayer focus for each chapter.

A word about the stories in these pages. When I tell you about a person from history, I have tried to tell it accurately and to point you to

where the account can be checked. When I describe a scene from the Bible, I keep to what the text says, and where I fill in details for the imagination, such as the moonlight on the night of the Passover or the sound of the Kidron, I will tell you that I am doing so. When I offer an illustration that is imagined rather than real, I will say that too. Your trust matters more to me than a dramatic story.

This book also works well in a small group, a church study, a prayer partnership or a family. Gethsemane is partly a story about our need for companions who will watch and pray with us. So if you can, read it with others. Share honestly. Pray for one another by name. You may find that simply being among people who are willing to stay awake with you is part of how God strengthens you.

So come. Bring your questions, your tears and your tired prayers. Bring the thing you cannot control and the cup you wish would pass. Jesus has gone ahead of you into this garden. He knows the way through, and He is waiting to meet you there.

Welcome to Gethsemane.

Part One: Into the Garden

Chapter 1: The Garden Before the Cross

> When Jesus had spoken these words, He went out with His disciples over the Brook Kidron, where there was a garden, which He and His disciples entered.
>
> John 18:1

It is late on the night of the Passover. The meal is finished. The bread has been broken and the cup passed from hand to hand, and the little company has sung a hymn together (Mark 14:26). Now a door opens somewhere in the city and a group of men steps out into the cool night air.

Let me fill in the scene a little, as the Gospels invite us to imagine it. Passover fell in the middle of the Jewish month, so the moon that night would have been full or close to full, throwing pale light across the stone streets. The pilgrims who had crowded into Jerusalem for the feast would be settling down to sleep. The group walks east, out through the city and down towards the valley.

At the front walks Jesus. He knows exactly where He is going, and He knows exactly what is waiting for Him there.

Before there was a cross, there was a garden. Before the nails and the crown of thorns, before the darkness at noon, there was a hillside among the olive trees where the Son of God knelt and prayed. To understand our own garden seasons, we need to begin where He began: with the walk across the valley, the climb up the hill and the place He chose to pray.

A Night Walk Across the Kidron

John tells us that Jesus "went out with His disciples over the Brook Kidron" (John 18:1). It is a small detail, the kind of thing we read past without a second thought. But in Scripture small details are rarely wasted.

The Kidron is a valley that runs along the eastern side of Jerusalem, between the city and the Mount of Olives. For most of the year it is dry. In the rainy winter months water can run through it, which is why John calls it a brook. To reach the garden, Jesus had to go down into that valley and climb the other side.

The Kidron had a long memory. It was the place where Israel's reforming kings disposed of the city's idols. King Asa burned the obscene image his grandmother had made "by the Brook Kidron" (1 Kings 15:13). In Hezekiah's day the priests brought out all the uncleanness they found in the temple, and the Levites carried it to the Brook Kidron (2 Chronicles 29:16). When King Josiah cleansed the nation, he brought the wooden image out of the house of the Lord, burned it at the Brook Kidron and ground it to ashes (2 Kings 23:6). Over the centuries the valley became the place where what defiled God's house was carried out and destroyed.

Stop and consider that picture. On this night the One who would carry away the sin of the world walked down into the very valley where Israel's idols had been burned.

The Kidron also held a memory of sorrow. A thousand years earlier another king had crossed it in deep personal pain. When David's son Absalom turned the hearts of the people and seized the throne, David fled Jerusalem. Scripture says that "the king himself also crossed over the Brook Kidron" while the whole country wept aloud (2 Samuel 15:23). Then he began to climb the hill on the other side:

> "So David went up by the Ascent of the Mount of Olives, and wept as he went up; and he had his head covered and went barefoot. And all the people who were with him covered their heads and went up, weeping as they went up." (2 Samuel 15:30)

Picture it. The great king of Israel, the giant-killer and sweet psalmist, climbing the Mount of Olives barefoot and in tears. His own son had turned against him. And as he climbed, worse news reached him: Ahithophel, his trusted counsellor, had joined the conspiracy (2 Samuel 15:31). David's response was to pray: "O LORD, I pray, turn the counsel of Ahithophel into foolishness!"

The parallels are hard to miss. A king crossing the Kidron. A king climbing the Mount of Olives in sorrow. A king betrayed by a trusted friend who had shared his table. Earlier that very evening, speaking of Judas, Jesus had quoted David's words about such a friend: "He who eats bread with Me has lifted up his heel against Me" (John 13:18; Psalm 41:9).

The Son of David walked David's road, with the same grief and the same betrayal. But there was one great difference. David crossed the Kidron to escape. Jesus crossed it to surrender.

The Mount of Olives: A Hill of Tears and Promise

The garden lay somewhere on the western slope of the Mount of Olives, the ridge that rises east of Jerusalem and looks straight across the valley at the temple. The Gospels do not give us an exact location. The sites shown to pilgrims today rest on early church tradition, and the tradition is old and reasonable, but it is not the text itself. What Scripture does tell us is that this hill was a place Jesus knew well.

In the last week of His life Jesus spent His days teaching in the temple courts. Luke adds that "at night He went out and stayed on the mountain called Olivet" (Luke 21:37). While the crowded city slept, the Lord withdrew to this hillside. It was His place of rest and His place of prayer.

The Mount of Olives was a hill of tears long before that Thursday night. A few days earlier, as Jesus rode down its slope towards the city, the crowds were shouting their praise. Yet Luke records that "as He drew near, He saw the city and wept over it" (Luke 19:41). On the same hillside where He would soon pray in anguish, He had already wept with love for the people who would reject Him.

It was a hill of teaching too. It was "as He sat on the Mount of Olives" that the disciples came privately to ask Him about the end of the age (Matthew 24:3). And it was a hill of promise. The prophet Zechariah saw a day coming when the Lord's feet would "stand on the Mount of Olives" (Zechariah 14:4). After His resurrection, Jesus led His disciples out to this same ridge and was taken up into heaven from it, and the disciples "returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet" (Acts 1:12).

So this one hill holds a whole story. It holds David's tears and Jesus' tears. It holds teaching about the future and the hope of His coming again. And in the middle of it all, it holds a garden where the Saviour bowed low and said yes to the Father.

That matters for you and me. The place of your deepest struggle is often closer than you think to the place of your greatest hope. The hill that held Gethsemane also held the ascension. God has a way of writing pain and promise on the same ground.

The Place of the Oil Press

Matthew and Mark give the garden its name: Gethsemane (Matthew 26:36; Mark 14:32). The word is generally taken to come from the Hebrew or Aramaic for "oil press". It fits the setting. The Mount of Olives took its name from its groves, and there may well have been a press somewhere on the property, though the Gospels never mention one.

The ancient process was slow and heavy. The olives were gathered and crushed first, often beneath a great stone wheel turned around a basin. The pulp was then packed into flat woven baskets, stacked one on another and pressed beneath a long wooden beam. One end of the beam was set into a wall; the other was weighted with heavy stones. Little by little the pressure increased, and little by little the oil ran out into a collecting vat. Archaeologists have uncovered the remains of many such presses across the land of Israel, which shows how ordinary and important this work was in Jesus' world.

The oil was precious. It was used for cooking and for light. It soothed and cleaned wounds, as the Good Samaritan knew when he poured oil and wine on the injured traveller (Luke 10:34). It was used to anoint priests and kings. And in the tabernacle God commanded that the lamp be kept burning with the very best of it:

> "And you shall command the children of Israel that they bring you pure oil of pressed olives for the light, to cause the lamp to burn continually." (Exodus 27:20)

Pure oil of pressed olives. Without the press there would be no oil, and without the oil there would be no light in the house of God.

It is hard to imagine a more fitting name for the place where Jesus prayed. That night the full weight of what lay ahead pressed down on Him. His soul was "exceedingly sorrowful, even to death" (Matthew 26:38). He was pressed. And from that pressing came an obedience that would bring light and healing to the world.

Hear me carefully, though. The image of the oil press does not mean that God delights in crushing His children, or that He sent every painful thing in your life to squeeze something out of you. As we saw in the Introduction, God does not tempt anyone with evil (James 1:13). Much of the pressure we feel comes from living in a broken world, from the choices of other people or from the opposition of the enemy.

But this much is true. Whatever the source of the pressure, God is able to bring oil out of it. The press does not have the final word. A season of crushing can become a season of anointing. What feels like the end of you can become the very place where something of Christ is released through you, light for others who are still sitting in the dark.

Not every hard season is a Gethsemane. But many of us know what it is to be pressed by grief, illness, waiting, betrayal or a decision that will cost us dearly. In those seasons we are not alone. Our Lord has been to the oil press before us.

From One Garden to Another

There is another garden behind this one.

The Bible begins in a garden. “The LORD God planted a garden eastward in Eden, and there He put the man whom He had formed” (Genesis 2:8). It was a place of beauty, abundance and fellowship. God placed Adam there “to tend and keep it” (Genesis 2:15). The man and the woman lived in the open presence of God, and later they would hear “the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day” (Genesis 3:8).

Then came the choice. When the woman saw that the tree was good for food, pleasant to the eyes and desirable to make one wise, “she took of its fruit and ate. She also gave to her husband with her, and he ate” (Genesis 3:6). The text does not put it in these words, but in that moment the human heart said something like this: *Not Your will, but mine.* Adam and Eve reached for what God had withheld. They trusted their own desire above His word.

What followed was hiding. “Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden” (Genesis 3:8). The first garden became a place of shame, fear and separation, and at last a place they could not return to.

Now come forward through the long centuries to another garden, also full of trees. Here the one Paul calls “the last Adam” (1 Corinthians 15:45) kneels, and the struggle is just as real. But this time the word that rises from a human heart is different: “not as I will, but as You will” (Matthew 26:39). The first Adam hid among the trees. The last Adam rose from among the trees and went out to meet those who had come for Him.

The Gospel writers do not spell out this comparison, and we should be honest about that. It is a connection drawn by Christian readers, not a statement made in the text of Matthew, Mark, Luke or John. But it rests on solid ground, because Paul himself sets Adam and Christ side by side:

> “For as by one man’s disobedience many were made sinners, so also by one Man’s obedience many will be made righteous.” (Romans 5:19)

One man's disobedience began in a garden. One Man's obedience, which would be completed on the cross, was settled in a garden. Eden was lost through "my will". In Gethsemane "Your will" carried the night.

This is not merely a beautiful piece of theology. It touches every one of us. In some way every Gethsemane season brings us back to that ancient choice. Will I trust God, or trust myself? Will I reach for control, or open my hands? Will I hide from God in my pain, or come to Him with it?

The good news is that we do not face that choice in our own strength. Christ chose rightly where Adam chose wrongly, and through His obedience we are made righteous. When we enter our own garden, we enter it as people who belong to Him. His surrender becomes the ground we stand on.

Why Jesus Went There

So let me ask a simple question. Why did Jesus go to Gethsemane at all?

He did not go by accident. Luke tells us, "Coming out, He went to the Mount of Olives, as He was accustomed" (Luke 22:39). The garden was part of His habit. He had been there many times before.

He did not go to hide. John makes that plain: "And Judas, who betrayed Him, also knew the place; for Jesus often met there with His disciples" (John 18:2). If Jesus had wanted to escape, He could have gone almost anywhere else that night. He could have slipped over the ridge to Bethany or out into the wilderness of Judea. Instead He went to the one place Judas was sure to look.

That tells us something important. Jesus was not a victim swept along by events He could not control. Months earlier, "when the time had come for Him to be received up," He "steadfastly set His face to go to Jerusalem" (Luke 9:51). He had said of His own life, "No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of Myself" (John 10:18). Going to the garden was an act of deliberate obedience.

And He went there to pray. That is the heart of it. On the most terrible night of His earthly life, facing a trial no one else has ever faced,

Jesus did not reach first for a plan, a weapon or a way out. He reached for His Father.

Days earlier, as the shadow of the cross drew near, He had said:

> "Now My soul is troubled, and what shall I say? 'Father, save Me from this hour'? But for this purpose I came to this hour." (John 12:27)

In Gethsemane we see that same honest wrestling at its deepest. Jesus did not pretend the hour was easy. But He knew that the way through the hour was prayer.

Notice, too, that He went to a place He already knew. He did not suddenly discover prayer in the crisis. The garden was familiar ground because He had met His Father there again and again. When the darkest night came, He went where He had always gone.

There is a quiet lesson here for every believer. The habits we build in ordinary seasons are the ones that carry us in extraordinary seasons. If we wait until the storm hits to look for the way to the place of prayer, we may find the path overgrown. But if we have walked it many times, our feet will know the way even when our hearts are breaking.

A settled habit of prayer does not stop the storm from coming, and it does not make the pain any less real. But people who have learned to meet God in quiet places tend to know where to run when everything falls apart. They have a garden to go to.

A composite story. It draws on situations common in pastoral care and does not describe any one real person.

Picture an older man who has been reading his Bible and praying at the kitchen table before work every morning for forty years. It is an ordinary habit, and few people at church even know about it. Then one Tuesday the phone rings with news that his grandson has been in a serious car accident. In the hours of waiting at the hospital, his family notice that he is the steady one. He is frightened, and he says so. But he knows where to go with his fear, because he has been going there every morning for most of his life. Later he puts it simply: "I didn't have to look for God in the waiting room. I already knew the way."

Your Own Garden Before the Cross

Perhaps you picked up this book because you are standing in a garden of your own.

You may be waiting for a phone call from a specialist. You may be watching a business you spent twenty years building slip through your fingers. You may be carrying a grief you cannot put into words, or a hope you have prayed over for so long that you are almost afraid to mention it again. You may be facing a decision that will cost you friendships, money or reputation, because you know it is what God is asking of you.

In a sense, you are standing at the edge of the Kidron. The night is closing in. The way ahead runs down into the valley, up the hill and into a place of pressing.

If that is you, I want you to know three things.

First, you are not the first to walk this way. Jesus has gone ahead of you. He knows what it is to be pressed, to be troubled, to feel the full weight of what is coming. The writer of Hebrews says, "For in that He Himself has suffered, being tempted, He is able to aid those who are tempted" (Hebrews 2:18). And again: "For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Hebrews 4:15–16). The Lord who knelt among the olive trees is able to meet you among yours.

Second, the garden is a beginning, not an ending. It came before the cross, and the cross came before the empty tomb. Hold on to the order of that story. The garden is a passage, not a destination. However long the night feels, you will not stay in this season forever.

Third, and this is the heart of the whole book, you can learn to trust God and remain obedient in the middle of it.

That may not be what you want to hear. When we are pressed, most of us pray first and loudest for the pressure to stop. That is a natural and honest prayer, and Jesus prayed it too. God often does bring relief, healing and deliverance, and we should never be afraid to ask Him for

them. But sometimes the answer is not removal. Sometimes the answer is strength to stay. Sometimes God does His deepest work not by lifting us out of the press but by meeting us under it.

Jesus did not go to the garden to find a way around the cross. He went to the garden to find strength to go through it. And He came out of that garden steady, settled and ready to obey. The disciples ran. He walked forward.

So stand with me for a moment at the edge of the valley. Look up at the dark hillside and the olive trees moving in the night wind. Watch the Lord walk ahead of His disciples, down into the Kidron and up towards the place of the oil press.

He is not running away. He is going to pray.

And He invites you to follow Him there. Among those trees He is about to speak to His Father about a cup.

Reflection

1. Jesus went to Gethsemane "as He was accustomed" (Luke 22:39). What places or habits of prayer have you built into your life? Are they strong enough to carry you through a hard season?
2. David crossed the Kidron to escape; Jesus crossed it to surrender. In what you are facing now, are you more inclined to run from the pressure or to bring it to God?
3. Where do you feel pressed right now? What might it look like for God to bring oil and light out of that place, without pretending the pressure is good?
4. Think about the contrast between Eden ("my will") and Gethsemane ("Your will"). Where in your life are you being invited to make that same choice?
5. How does it help you to know that the garden came before the cross, and the cross before the empty tomb?

A Prayer

Lord Jesus, thank You for walking down into the Kidron and up the hill to the place of the oil press for me. Thank You that You did not run from the hour but went out to meet it in prayer. When I am pressed, teach me to come to the Father as You did. Where I have said "my will" like Adam, give me grace to say "Your will" with You. Meet me in the garden I am in right now. Strengthen me to trust You and to stay faithful in the middle of the pressure, and bring oil and light out of this season for Your glory. In Your name I pray. Amen.

For the One Walking Alongside

If someone you love has just entered a garden season, resist the urge to explain it. They do not yet need a reason; they need a companion. Ask what the next few days look like for them and offer one specific, practical thing: a meal, a lift, an hour of childcare. Pray with them briefly if they welcome it. Above all, do not disappear after the first week. The Kidron is crossed in a night, but the garden can last a long time.