'When My Love To Christ Grows Weak'

A husband and wife enter a dentist's surgery. The husband says, 'I want a tooth pulled. I don't want gas or Novocaine because I'm in a hurry. Just pull the tooth as quickly as possible.' The dentist says, 'You're a brave man, which tooth is it?' The husband turns to his wife and says, 'Show him your tooth, dear.'

Going to the dentist is a fear that many people have for one reason or another but most of us are quite happy to go along to the dentist as long as it's someone else who needs the treatment. Many people have a fear of going to the hospital because they believe that old saying, 'when you go into a hospital, you never come out.'

I've often said, if you want to know what's going on in a preacher's life, listen to his sermon. And the same is true when it comes to a hymn writer, if you want to know what was going on at a particular time, in the life of any hymn writer, listen to the words of the hymn.

John Wreford was keen on studying God's Word and he eventually became a co-minister at a church in Birmingham. Now remember there were no microphones back then, like we have today and so a preacher really needed to raise and project his voice so that everyone could hear them. Sadly, his preaching career only lasted 5 years because his voice suffered great strain from all the preaching he was doing.

You see, something was happening in the life of John Reynell Wreford that made him feel pain or sadness. We don't know exactly what it was he was experiencing in 1837 when he penned the hymn, 'When my love to Christ grows weak' but as we go through this hymn, you'll soon discover that it reads like a confession. It reads like a man whose been on a personal spiritual journey, a man whose been fighting many personal spiritual wars. A man whose seeking comfort and resolution from those personal wars.

But Wreford did what many faithful Christians do when they're hurting, He looked at the pain and suffering that Christ went through. What was it Wreford learned from Christ's suffering? All five verses of this hymn invite us to observe Christ in His worst moments. In other words, if you want to know how to handle your personal spiritual struggles, look to Christ and learn how He dealt with them.

Please turn your Bibles to Mark 14, where we're going to learn from Jesus, how to deal with our own spiritual battles. Mark 14:32-42 'They went to a place called Gethsemane, and Jesus said to his disciples, "Sit here while I pray." He took Peter, James and John along with him, and he began to be deeply distressed and troubled. "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death," he said to them. "Stay here and keep watch." Going a little farther, he fell to the ground and prayed that if possible the hour might pass from him. "Abba, Father," he said, "everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will." Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. "Simon," he said to Peter, "are you asleep? Couldn't you keep watch for one hour? Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak." Once more he went away and prayed the same thing. When he came back, he again found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy. They did not know what to say to him. Returning the third time, he said to them, "Are you still sleeping and resting? Enough! The hour has come. Look, the Son of Man is delivered into the hands of sinners. Rise! Let us go! Here comes my betrayer!"

The Jewish Passover is getting closer and although the Jews were focusing on that great deliverance from Egypt, Christ is thinking about the greatest deliverance of all. In just two weeks from now, Christ will have to face the greatest trial of His earthly life. He knows He is the head crusher whom God prophesied about in Genesis 3:15. He knows the cross is looming and has always loomed over Him but here in the garden, it's almost like the horror of what's He's going to go through surfaces to the front of His mind.

Because the apostles, like many other Jews, were excepting a physical kingdom, they simply didn't get it. Jesus had been preparing them for this moment for 3 years, but they still didn't understand. They didn't understand that death was part of His story, they didn't understand that in order for mankind to be delivered from sin and death, He had to die.

I can imagine the disciples walking up to Gethsemane thinking it was time for prayer and rest. But I can't imagine what was going through Christ's mind as He walked up with them. He chooses Peter, James and John from the 11 and He calls them to wait with Him while He prays. If only the apostles understood what He was about to do, if only they could hear His prayers. His words are hauntingly tragic but fail to be heard by deaf and sleepy ears.

Mark 14:34 "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death, stay here and keep watch." Jesus leaves the apostles behind and He begins to plead with the Father. Mark 14:36 "Abba, Father," he said, "everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will."

Loved ones, can't you feel and hear the pain and anguish in His words? If this doesn't show us the humanity of Christ, I don't know what will. It's no wonder Wreford could pen the precious words,

When my love to Christ grows weak
When for deeper faith I seek,
Then in thought I go to thee,
Garden of Gethsemane.

Whatever spiritual struggles Wreford was going through, He was wise enough to go to Jesus and learn from Him. He was wise enough to look at one of the most agonising moments in Christ's life. You see, loved ones, we all go through agonising moments in our lives. But whatever it is we're going through, if we start to think that our love for Christ is growing weak, we must remember that His love for you remains the same. If we want to strengthen our love and faith in Christ, we need to remember the strength of His love for us.

1 Timothy 1:15 "Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners." Yes, His aguish was about going to the cross to die but we must never forget that He was going to the cross to die for us. In other words, if Jesus could face this terrible sacrifice, then surely, we can face whatever causes us to struggle in our moment of weakness. Two lines later we can almost hear Wreford crying out with the Son,

There I walk amid the shades
While the lingering twilight fades
See that suffering, friendless One,
Weeping, praying there alone.

You ask any preacher and they will tell you that being a preacher can be the loneliest job in the world. We're so busy preparing sermons and studies, counselling the bereaved, married couples, and encouraging those who are struggling spiritually. Caring for our wives and kids, and a whole host of other things but I've learned over the years when I'm feeling lonely, I need to get back to the cross and see how Christ dealt with loneliness.

You see loved ones, when struggles come our way and we're tempted to give up, go back to the cross and remind yourself of His love for you. That's what Wreford did in his time of anguish, he goes on to write,

When my love for man grows weak,
When for stronger faith I seek,
Hill of Calvary, I go
To thy scenes of fear and woe.

There behold His agony,
Suffered on the bitter tree;
See His anguish, see His faith,
Love triumphant still in death.

Jesus was in intense spiritual agony in that garden, why? Because He has to make a decision. The same decision that Adam had to make and the same decision that you and I have to make. Will I do what I want? Or will I do what God wants? And like I mentioned a few weeks ago, God asked such a small thing of Adam, He put him in a beautiful paradise, told him to have anything he wanted, but just don't touch that one tree, that's all He asked of Adam. But what did He ask of Jesus? He asked Him to go and hang on a tree.

Aren't you glad He chose to do His Father's will? And aren't you glad that Jesus chose to go the cross? When we take our eyes off the cross, we take our eyes off His love for us. When we take our eyes off the cross, we take our eyes away from the hope we have.

There was a country church which had a huge sign outside of it which read, 'We preach Christ crucified'. As the months went by the flowers and bushes begun to grow over the sign and all you could read was, 'We preach Christ.'

A few more months went by and more of sign got covered by the bushes, until all you could read was, 'We preach'.

For too many years now Christians have preaching the church, instead of preaching Christ crucified. And this isn't a new problem, the church in Corinth for example, were focused on who baptised who, and the wisdom of the world but Paul writes to them and says in 1 Corinthians 1:23 "but we preach Christ crucified."

A few years ago, I was asked to preach at Liverpool's Youth Weekend, and I remember giving three kids a map of the world printed on a piece of paper which I had cut into a jigsaw puzzle. The idea was to see how quickly they could the map of the world together. They all managed to do within a few minutes, but they could have done it a lot quicker, if they had turned the paper over, because on the back of the map was a picture of Christ on a cross.

You see loved ones, when we're trying to make sense of this world and what's going on in our own lives, it's so easy to look to the world for answers. But if we would only turn the pages of our Bibles, we'll see the Christ on that cross and be reminded of His great love for us. When we look at the world, we remember our own ungodliness, we remember how sinful we were, we remember how dead we really were.

But when we look to the cross of Christ we remember something greater. Ephesians 1:4-5 "But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions."

This is what Wreford remembered during his times of pain and suffering. He knew that spending time in the garden and at the cross will only do him good. He knew when he went back there, his faith would be renewed, his strength would be revived and his love for Christ would be rekindled. He understood by going back to the Christ, he would have everything he needed to face his daily life again, listen to his words,

Then to life I turn again,
Learning all the worth of pain,
Learning all the might that lies
In a full self-sacrifice.

Notice how he ends this hymn, he says he needs to get back to living his life and the way to do that is by applying what he has learned. And that's a lesson we all must learn as Christians, there's no point in just reading the Scriptures if we don't apply what we learn to our lives.

Or as James says in James 1:22-25 "Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom and continues in it—not forgetting what they have heard but doing it—they will be blessed in what they do."

Wreford looked at what Christ found at the end of His agony, the story of Christ doesn't end at the cross. The story of Christ teaches us that Christ's suffering was worth it, He pleased the Father and is now at His right-hand side. And loved ones, we too like Christ, must fix our eyes on the end result, not on the here and now.

2 Corinthians 4:17-18 "For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So, we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal."

All that pain and suffering, all those trials and temptations, all those griefs and sorrows we bear, will all be worth it in the final analysis. Let me ask you, where will you turn to, when your Gethsemane comes? You see, Adam and Eve turned to temptation and failed their Gethsemane test. Judas turned to greed and failed his Gethsemane test. Peter turned to fear three times and failed his Gethsemane test.

What about you, where will you turn to when life brings tough situations your way? Where will you turn to when a loved one dies? Where will you turn to when you lose your job? Where will you turn to when your health takes a turn for the worse? Let me give you two quick applications to help you when times of testing come your way.

1. In testing times, 'turn to the Father in prayer'.

You see, as Christians we have the privilege of praying to the Father anytime, anywhere but all too often we often neglect our prayer lives when difficult times come our way. Jesus's goal was to please His Father, and as a man, He became distracted with the reality of going to the cross, so what did He do? He prayed three times to the Father in His hour of testing, He knew His Father would help Him focus on the glory He would receive.

Now I used the word, distracted on purpose, because that's what Satan wants to do with us all, He wants to distract us from doing God's will. It's the word that Peter uses in 1 Peter 5:7 "Cast all your anxiety (distraction) on him because he cares for you." Peter is saying give God all your distractions, give Him all your pain and anguish, give Him everything which stresses you out, why? Because God isn't easily distracted.

In other words, you might go through some things which distract you from God, but God will never let anything distract Him from you in your time of need. If you struggle to know what to pray, try praying what the Psalmist prayed in Psalm 25:16 "Turn to me and be gracious to me, for I am lonely and afflicted."

I understand that certain trials are more testing than others, I understand that they can quickly drain us to the point where all we want to do is sleep. But remember Jesus' words to the disciples in Mark 14:38, "Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak." When times of testing come, we need to pray to God, or we may end up spiritually weak.

2. In times of testing, 'turn to your church family'.

Notice how Jesus turned to the apostles three times, yes, they were asleep and yes, they weren't much of an encouragement to Him in His time of need. But I think Jesus was teaching us that not only do we need a divine touch in our time of anguish, but we also need a human touch in our time of anguish. I've seen too many Christians going through times of testing and the first thing they do is turn their back God' people. Oh, they were on fire when times are going smoothly, Oh, they are always at worship and Bible study. They are involved in every activity the church has going and such an encouragement to those around them.

But! Times of testing come and instead of drawing strength from their church family, they withdraw from them. You might say, well, I just need a divine touch, I just don't want to be around other Christians at the moment. Listen loved ones, don't deceive yourself, if Jesus needed a human touch in His time of need, then what makes you think you can go through your time of need without that human touch.

Romans 12:15 "Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn." The church are God's arms and legs and if you don't spend time with other Christians, your denying the body of Christ from doing what God designed His body to do.

Let me encourage you to pray when life gets tough, let me encourage you to immerse yourself among other Christians, so that they can mourn with you and help you in your time of need. Let me encourage you read those Gethsemane and cross accounts, because when our love for Christ grows weak, we can be reminded of what He went through for each of us.

1 John 3:1 "See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!"