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John 18:1-27

Fifty-first Message

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THE ARREST OF THE KING

One common element in action movies is when the hero is captured by the dark, sinister enemy, but he seems unfazed by the situation. Rather, he is bold, confident, and even outspoken, promising delight to come when he takes down the enemy, even though he is bound and outnumbered. This is the kind of assertive confidence we see from Jesus in John's gospel as the Lord begins the agonizing steps to the cross.

Chapters 18 and 19 of John tell the story of Jesus' passion. John's account is different from those of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. John includes more material on Pilate and the Roman authorities, because his emphasis is on Jesus confronting the power of Rome. Jesus' death is not due to a charge of blasphemy but that he claimed kingship. The kingship of Jesus is a repeated theme in the passion narrative. John does not tell about Jesus' agony in Gethsemane; his Jesus is more in control. He is not the passive victim but the sovereign initiator and master of all that takes place.

Several passages in John have no parallel in the Synoptics. But John is complementary, not contradictory. He differs but little in the tone set by the Synoptic writers: "resolution and anguish, firm commitment to obey the Father, and personal recoil at the cost – these are not mutually exclusive options even amongst believers suffering today."¹

In our study we notice the contrast between two men, Peter and Jesus, and how they respond as the unpleasant events of the cross unfold. Both men are juxtaposed as Jesus is arrested and dragged before the Jewish authorities.

When Jesus had spoken these words, He went forth with His disciples over the ravine of the Kidron, where there was a garden, in which He entered with His disciples. Now Judas also, who was betraying Him, knew the place, for Jesus had often met there with His disciples. Judas then, having received the Roman cohort and officers from the chief priests and the Pharisees, came there with lanterns and torches and weapons. (John 18:1-3 NASB)

When Jesus finished speaking (likely this is a reference to the whole of the upper room discourse and the prayer in chapter 17), he left either the upper room or the city and went out to a place called the Kidron, about 200 feet below the base of the outer court of the temple. This valley has an stream bed that is dry most of the year but becomes a torrent during the seasonal rains. To the east of the valley, on the opposite side, the land rises to the Mount of Olives.

On the foot or slopes of the eastern side lay an olive grove. Jesus goes in and out of this garden, which implies it was a walled enclosure. Here is where he met with his disciples, probably more often during the Passover week, as attested in Luke. There is no mention of Jesus' prayer and agony in Gethsemane. That has already been mentioned in 12:27.

As Jesus often met with his disciples here, Judas knew the place. The verb tense is emphatic, intensive. It was the ideal location for the arrest to take place – at night, away from the city. Jesus leads his disciples away from the city so that they might go free. But he doesn't try to escape. Rather, he goes to the place where Judas could count on finding him.

Judas leads a "cohort" of Roman soldiers. This could have been up to a thousand men, although in practice perhaps limited to 600. The noun could also refer to a "maniple," which was 200 men. In any case, it was a sizeable force compared to Jesus and the eleven disciples. The soldiers would have come from Caesarea. They were stationed at the Fortress of Antonio, next to the temple, ready to control any riots or uprising during the Passover feast. Accompanying Judas were some assistants from the chief priests and the Pharisees – the temple police, in other words. This combination of Jewish and Roman authorities in the arrest of Jesus indicts the whole world.

There would have been a full moon at Passover, but since the cohort might have to wander around the countryside, the soldiers and officials brought torches, lamps, and weapons, just in case. At the end of chapter 13, Judas went out into the darkness. Ironically, he returns with the agents of the power of darkness, who must bring lanterns because they belong to the world of darkness. This garden scene brings to mind Genesis 3, when the serpent approached Adam and Eve in the garden. Unlike the first Adam, the second Adam does not shrink from the confrontation. (literally, I am").

So Jesus, knowing all the things that were coming upon Him, went forth and said to them, "Whom do you seek?" They answered Him, "Jesus the Nazarene." He said to them, "I am He" (literally, "I am"). And Judas also, who was betraying Him, was standing with them. So when He said to them, "I am He," they drew back and fell to the ground. (18:4-6)

Jesus knew what was going to happen. None of this surprised him. Even though he agonized, he was ready. Initiating the action, he asks the question, "Whom do you seek?" This is the same question he asked of the two disciples in chapter 1. There are two responses to this question: those who want to follow Jesus, and those who want to get rid of him. Judas stood by Jesus. Maybe this is the point at which Judas kissed him. Jesus is in command of the situation. When the wolves come, the good shepherd does not flee. He goes forth to lay down his life so that the sheep are safe.

The soldiers and officials answer "Jesus the Nazarene." Jesus answers, "I am." At this the soldiers and officials stagger backwards and fall on the ground. Jesus could have just been saying, "I am he." However, we have seen this phrase "I am" several times in John. As we have noted, these words are a link to Isaiah 40-55, where God himself repeatedly takes them on his lips. This is an expression to be reserved for God alone. Perhaps the soldiers stagger at Jesus' willingness to identify himself. But perhaps too they hear overtones of

God's self-disclosure. It takes them a few seconds to pull themselves together and regroup.

Therefore He again asked them, "Whom do you seek?" And they said, "Jesus the Nazarene." Jesus answered, "I told you that I am He; so if you seek Me, let these go their way," to fulfill the word which He spoke, "Of those whom You have given Me I lost not one." (18:7-9)

Again, Jesus initiates the action, asking the same question. He repeats his identity, but also asks for the disciples to be released so that his word or promise, stated in chapters 6, 10, and 17, might be fulfilled (6:39, 10:28, 17:12). The disciples' safety is guaranteed by Jesus' arrest and death. This is a symbol of our eternal security. Jesus loves us to the end and keeps us in the Father's name. If you have difficulty believing that God is for you and that Jesus loves you, contemplate his promise to not lose one of those whom he has been given by the Father.

All of this is too much for Peter, who reacts consistent with his impetuous character.

Simon Peter then, having a sword, drew it and struck the high priest's slave, and cut off his right ear; and the slave's name was Malchus. So Jesus said to Peter, "Put the sword into the sheath; the cup which the Father has given Me, shall I not drink it?" (18:10-11)

Peter takes bold action, cutting off Malchus's right ear with a sword. Only John names Peter and Malchus, and he assumes the healing of Malchus's ear by Jesus. Jesus rebukes Peter strongly because Peter is trying to lead him away from God's will and the work he came to accomplish. Jesus will not be turned aside. The mention of the cup that he must drink brings to mind his prayer in Gethsemane. It also brings to mind Psa 75:8: "For a cup is in the hand of the LORD, and the wine foams ... surely all the wicked of the earth must drain and drink down its dregs." Jesus knows he has to drink the cup of God's wrath over sin and unrighteousness.

Let us pause here and reflect on the characters in this scene. First, Judas and the authorities represent the world that lives in darkness, the world that is in rebellion against God. Sometimes the darkness stands next to Jesus, who is the light, seeking to work against God's kingdom. Sometimes the darkness appears to have the advantage in strength and numbers. Sometimes their tactics are secretly wicked and unjust. However, as this story will go on to illustrate, they cannot thwart God's rule or his will. In fact, God is using the powers of darkness to work out his sovereign plan. This should give the church great confidence and assurance. No matter what the world throws at us God is not surprised. He is in control.

Then there is Peter. He is willing to fight for God's kingdom, but in so doing he is actually working against God. He is so appalled by the unfolding events, so outraged by the possibility of loss that he lashes out to avert God's will. We do the same. We fight against anything bad or unfortunate, anything that might rob us of our sense of well being or happiness. We don't understand that unpleasant circumstances can be part of God's will or plan. But they are. When we resist, we are indicating that we just might be unwilling to accept God's sovereign will for our lives. Jesus' rebuke is for us. Even though we agonize, we must drink the cup which the Father gives us and trust in God's sovereign will.

Maybe God is asking you to forgive someone but you are resisting. Maybe your bosses at work are giving you direction that you are

resisting. Maybe you are facing physical difficulties that you won't allow God to use for his glory. Maybe a relationship just isn't working out, but you are fighting God's will to let go. Are you fighting against what God has for you?

Finally, there is Jesus. He is confident, bold, steadfast. He is directing the action, trusting in his Father, willing to drink the cup that God has for him.

The contrast between Peter and Jesus is just heating up. The next scene takes us from the garden to the courtyard of Annas, the father-in-law of the high priest.

So the Roman cohort and the commander and the officers of the Jews, arrested Jesus and bound Him, and led Him to Annas first; for he was father-in-law of Caiaphas, who was high priest that year. Now Caiaphas was the one who had advised the Jews that it was expedient for one man to die on behalf of the people. (18:12-14)

This mention of the soldiers and commander might indicate that the Romans stepped forward and took control when Peter cut off Malchus's ear. But since Jesus is taken first to Annas and Caiaphas, it's clear that the Jews were the primary arresting officers.

There is some confusion regarding Annas and Caiaphas and their authority. Caiaphas was the actual high priest, but Annas had enormous influence. Annas was the high priest from AD 6-15, when he was deposed by Gratus, Pilate's predecessor. Five of Annas's sons and his son-in-law Caiaphas held the office of high priest at one time or another. The high priesthood was a family affair, and Annas was thus the patriarch of the family. The Jews resented Rome's interference. Many considered Annas to be the real high priest, even though Caiaphas held the title. Luke makes the same point as John (Luke 3:2; Acts 4:6).

John reminds the reader of Caiaphas's statement in chapter 11 (49-52) about one man dying for the nation. Caiaphas speaks better than he knows. This ironic truth will turn the tables on Israel.

Now the camera pans across the courtyard to another scene which was taking place simultaneously.

Simon Peter was following Jesus, and so was another disciple. Now that disciple was known to the high priest, and entered with Jesus into the court of the high priest, but Peter was standing at the door outside. So the other disciple, who was known to the high priest, went out and spoke to the doorkeeper, and brought Peter in. Then the slave-girl who kept the door said to Peter, "You are not also one of this man's disciples, are you?" He said, "I am not." Now the slaves and the officers were standing there, having made a charcoal fire, for it was cold and they were warming themselves; and Peter was also with them, standing and warming himself. (18:15-18)

The other disciple is probably the beloved disciple, John. He was known to the high priest; he was not just a casual acquaintance. Some have argued that John could not have been a friend of the aristocracy. But social stations were not so rigid in Israel. John mentions Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea. The wealthy also learned trades. Even Paul knew how to work leather. We know from other places in this gospel that John and Peter were very close. John, who is recognized by the doorkeeper, brings Peter into the courtyard.

The high priest here is probably Annas, and the court is not the temple but an atrium connected to his house. A servant girl would not be on duty as a doorkeeper in the temple area. The house of

Caiaphas probably shared the same courtyard. Therefore the questioning that takes place is relatively private, with a few members of the Sanhedrin present.

The servant girl questions Peter. The question may not have been hostile so much as cynical. Peter cowers and says he is not a disciple. He may have felt that a little lie wouldn't hurt, but one lie leads to another.

The fire was made of charcoal. Only John gives this detail, suggesting eyewitness recollection. If this was a temple fire, then Peter could not have had access. The fire confirms that it is night, because it was cold. Night proceedings were actually illegal. We remember that Nicodemus comes at night and that night or darkness is associated with evil.

Now the camera moves back to Jesus.

The high priest then questioned Jesus about His disciples, and about His teaching. Jesus answered him, "I have spoken openly to the world; I always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where all the Jews come together; and I spoke nothing in secret. Why do you question Me? Question those who have heard what I spoke to them; they know what I said." When He had said this, one of the officers standing nearby struck Jesus, saying, "Is that the way You answer the high priest?" Jesus answered him, "If I have spoken wrongly, testify of the wrong; but if rightly, why do you strike Me?" So Annas sent Him bound to Caiaphas the high priest. (18:19-24)

The high priest here is Annas, who delivers Jesus over to Caiaphas. This is a preliminary interrogation. He questions Jesus about his disciples and his teaching. The first concern was for the size of Jesus' following and the potential of an uprising. The second concern was theological, and specifically pointed to Jesus' claim as to his identity. The concern presented later to Pilate was political.

In a formal Jewish hearing it may have been illegal to interrogate the defendant. A case had to rest on the testimony of witnesses. Annas, as the high priest emeritus, may not have felt bound by these rules in an informal hearing.

Jesus does not say anything about his disciples. As to his teaching, he tells Annas that he has spoken everything in public and nothing in secret. Even though he spoke to the disciples in private, and perhaps gave more details, what he may have said in private was the same as what he said in public. He had one message. In a trial, witnesses for the defense were questioned before witnesses for the prosecution. So Jesus calls on proper procedure, telling them to question those who listened to him. He invokes the law against those who were using legal authority to transgress the law.

One official slaps Jesus – a sharp blow with the palm of the hand. Jesus does not back down but again appeals to proper witness. If he spoke the truth, he questions why he was struck. Jesus is asking for a fair trial. The Jewish authorities cannot win their case by fair means and so must resort to foul.

Annas recognizes that he will get nowhere with this man, and sends him to Caiaphas. Jesus must go before the current high priest and leader of the Sanhedrin if he is to be taken to Pilate. John does not record Jesus' appearance before Caiaphas.

Jesus goes on trial before the Jewish authorities, but as we can see, he puts Israel on trial. The judges themselves are judged. The Jewish authorities aim to execute Jesus as a law-breaker, but if they under-

stood the law, they would become followers of Jesus. The trial of Jesus is actually the trial of old Israel and demonstrates their failure.

Last week, the entire sporting world watched the congressional investigation into steroid use in major league baseball. Brian McNamee and Roger Clemens appeared before the committee and faced searing questions. What struck me is that both men tried to boldly assert themselves in the face of the authorities. But neither could pull off what Jesus did in this confrontation.

Once again the camera pans across the courtyard.

Now Simon Peter was standing and warming himself. So they said to him, "You are not also one of His disciples, are you?" He denied it, and said, "I am not." One of the slaves of the high priest, being a relative of the one whose ear Peter cut off, *said, "Did I not see you in the garden with Him?" Peter then denied it again, and immediately a rooster crowed. (18:25-27)

John takes us back to the fire, a common literary device of linkage, where a second questioner is standing by Peter. His question is almost identical to the one asked by the slave-girl in v 17. For a second time, Peter denies that he is a disciple of Jesus.

The third questioner is a relative of Malchus. Only John gives this detail. For a third time, Peter denies association with Jesus. Immediately a rooster crows, and Peter knows that Jesus' prediction has been fulfilled. John does not give much detail, but one can hear the thud in Peter's heart.

All four gospels record Peter's sad lapse. It wasn't just that he denied the Lord, but that he was an intimate disciple. The result left Jesus completely isolated and alone to face what lay ahead.

With his beautiful literary style, John continues to contrast Jesus and Peter. Three times Jesus says, "I am" in the face of the enemy. Three times Peter says "I am not." Once again Jesus remains confident and steadfast. He stands up to his accusers and denies nothing. On the other hand, Peter cowers before his questioners and denies everything. The word "deny" reminds us of what Jesus said, "But whoever denies Me before men, I will also deny him before My Father who is in heaven" (Matt 10:33).

The trial of Jesus is also the trial of new Israel, and again there is failure. Peter cannot follow Jesus in his own strength, even if he has good intentions. He cannot follow until Jesus has died for him and he begins to rely on "I am" instead of "I am not."

In the garden, Peter's reaction was to fight. In the courtyard, his reaction is to flee. He is afraid of what it will cost him to associate with Jesus. He knows that Jesus is the Messiah, but he has not yet surrendered his whole life. He doesn't want to accept suffering. He is unwilling to sever his ties to the world of darkness. As a result the world has the power to evoke fear. He is controlled by his expectations, pride, and selfishness.

This morning the worship team sang John Newton's hymn, set to new music, *I Asked the Lord*: "I asked the Lord that I might grow/In faith and love and every grace." But the Lord answers by taking us on a circuitous journey to show us the depravity of our hearts.

Fleeing is just another way of resisting God's will and surrendering ourselves fully to his plans and purposes. We do the same thing as Peter. We live in fear of suffering, so we deny Jesus in our actions or our words with family, friends, co-workers, and neighbors. I well remember how difficult it was for me to share with my fervently church-going family when I became a Christian back in my early twenties. I also remember how difficult it was for me to share my

new faith with my wife when I first met her, because she was not a Christian.

As we approach Easter Sunday we are forced to take inventory of our lives. Are we willing to accept God's sovereign will? Are we willing to surrender ourselves to a sacrificial life? Some things are really hard to accept. They can push us to the edge. One day we want to lash out and fight, the next day we want to flee and hide. But whether we are fighting or fleeing the result is the same. We live in the darkness and the world has power over us.

John is pointing out that there are two kingdoms: the kingdom of God and the kingdom of the world, the kingdom of light and the kingdom of darkness. There are also two glories: the glory of heaven and the glory of the world. Jesus is living in the kingdom of his Father, seeking the glory that was his before the foundation of the world. As we saw in our last study, he prays that all who follow him will share in his holy character and transcendent glory. There will be times when we will feel like victims of the world, but Jesus tells us and shows us that he has overcome the world, and that God can work good and eternal things in our lives, even in our suffering. When we stop needing the world – its people, plans, and possessions – then, like Jesus, we will begin to live boldly and confidently.

The good news is that Peter's story doesn't end here. Around a charcoal fire, Jesus will restore him to service through his forgiving love and grace. That means that there is hope for all of us. Peter will come to understand what it means to follow Jesus, even into death – and he will do so gladly. This same Peter would write the words we read earlier:

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you; but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing, so that also at the revelation of His glory you may rejoice with exultation. If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. (1 Pet 4:12-14)

Therefore, those also who suffer according to the will of God shall entrust their souls to a faithful Creator in doing what is right. (1 Pet 4:19)

1 D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 572.

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