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Luke 22:31-38

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# WHO HAS THE SWORD?

*SERIES: THE GOSPEL OF LUKE*

Over the past year the situation in Syria and Iraq has gone from bad to worse with the spread of the self-proclaimed Islamic State, which has shown itself more violent than even al-Qaeda. The world has been appalled by the videotaped beheadings of captives. Now we wait to see what happens to the two Japanese captives. Will ISIS carry out its threat to wield the sword again?

Meanwhile, the world's attention has turned to Saudi Arabia with the death on Friday of King Abdullah. The world's leaders have been making their way to Riyadh to pay their respects to the new king, Salman. The national flag of that country features a sword underneath the text of the Shahada: "There is no god but God, Muhammad is the messenger of God." The national seal is two crossed swords under a palm tree. Two weeks ago the Saudi foreign minister was among the world leaders in Paris participating in the solidarity march after the Charlie Hebdo massacre. Yet his country was in the process of administering a public flogging to a Saudi citizen who had tried to exercise free speech. The conservative clerics had wanted to convict him of apostasy, which carries the death penalty. Death would have been by public beheading with the sword. Saudi Arabia is a Sunni state, committed to the very conservative Wahhabi or Salafi interpretation of Islam and the Quran. It is an ideology which embraces the sword.

What is the role of the sword in Islam? Does the Quran mandate or permit the sword? Is the sword permissible or even required in jihad, in the struggle? This is a troublesome issue for Moslems around the world. And it is troublesome for the rest of the world to be faced by those who insist that Islam wield the sword, that the way to right the world's wrongs is to use the sword.

The sword is not unique to Islam. The church has often wielded the sword, either literally in the Crusades, or metaphorically in doctrines about power. If we are honest we have to admit that the Bible itself is not innocent when it comes to the sword. The sword (*hereb*) is mentioned 413 times in the Old Testament. There are plenty of gory stories.

Simeon and Levi took their swords and massacred Shechem and all the men of his city, avenging his shameful rape of their sister Dinah and restoring family honor (Gen 34:25-26). When Jacob blessed his sons at the end of his life, he rebuked these two: "weapons of violence are their swords" (Gen 49:5). He passed over them in assigning the line of succession.

When Moses came down from Mount Sinai and found the Israelites worshipping the golden calf, he cried out, "Who is on the LORD's side? Come to me." It was all the sons of Levi who rallied to him. Moses ordered them to take their swords and pass through the camp. This gruesome slaughter of 3000 men ordained the Levites for service to the Lord (Exod 32:25-29).

Forty years later, when an Israelite brought a Midianite woman into his tent in the sight of all the people, Phinehas, the grandson

of Aaron the high priest, took his spear and spiked it through both of them, thus halting the plague that the Lord had sent through the camp. The Lord commended him: "he was jealous with my jealousy among them, so that I did not consume the people in my jealousy" (Num 25:11). Phinehas had shown himself a worthy successor to the office of high priest. The word pair "jealous" and "jealousy" can also be translated "zealous" and "zeal." Phinehas would be the inspiration for subsequent zealots, who would justify the use of the sword in fighting for the Lord's honor.

This is just for starters, before Israel had even entered into the land, before the Canaanite genocide! These are troubling texts and we can't just wish them away. But I have another troubling text to deal with today, one in which swords feature prominently.

Jesus has been celebrating Passover with his disciples. An ominous sense of foreboding has been developing. The religious leaders were seeking how to put Jesus to death (Luke 22:2). Satan, who, after the temptation, had departed from Jesus until an opportune time (4:13), has returned and has entered into Judas (v. 3). Judas has negotiated with the leaders to betray Jesus (vv. 4-6). Present at the negotiations were the officers of the temple guard, suggesting that violence is expected. Jesus commenced the meal by saying, "I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer" (v. 16); he anticipates that his Passion is imminent. He has ended the meal by observing that "the hand of him who betrays me is with me on the table" (v. 21), whereupon the disciples interrogated one another to try to find out who it is. What would they have done if they had been able to identify the betrayer? We know that several of the disciples were hotheads. We will learn that there are two swords at the table and that the disciples are prepared to use them to defend Jesus. Would they have drawn them if they had been able to unmask the betrayer?

After the meal Jesus has been speaking to his disciples, giving what amounts to a farewell speech before he heads out to suffer and die. We pick up from last week midway through this address.

## I. Denial

**"Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers." Peter said to him, "Lord, I am ready to go with you both to prison and to death." Jesus said, "I tell you, Peter, the rooster will not crow this day, until you deny three times that you know me." (Luke 22:31-34 ESV)**

Satan has already entered Judas. Now we learn that he has the rest of the disciples in his sight as well. Though Jesus addresses Simon Peter, his words concern all the disciples: "Satan demanded to have you (plural)." The wheat sieve is one of many agricultural metaphors of judgment used in the Bible. After grain has been harvested, threshed and winnowed, it is sifted to remove any remaining chaff. Passage

through the sieve would not be comfortable! The Lord does not prevent Satan having access to the disciples, just as he allowed Satan to have access to Job to test his faithfulness: was Job faithful to God only because God had given him a charmed life?

Peter and the other disciples will be sifted, but Jesus has prayed specifically for Peter: “I have prayed for you (singular).” Jesus has already prayed that Peter’s faith or faithfulness not leave him. But it will; Peter will prove faithless in the coming crisis, as Jesus knows he will. But Jesus sees beyond the crisis of faith: “when you have turned again.” Peter will come through the crisis; he will turn in sorrow and repentance. And once he does, he will have a new mission: “strengthen your brothers.” It is through the crisis of failure and restoration that Peter will be qualified to strengthen his fellow disciples in their trials. Peter must first fall before he can rise to leadership.

But Peter does not yet understand this. Jesus has commended the disciples, “You are those who have stayed with me in my trials” (v. 28). Peter is confident that he will continue to remain with Jesus in the coming trials. Even if it means going to prison or to death, he will be loyal and faithful. He and his master will not be parted. What means will he be willing to use to stick with Jesus?

But Jesus knows better: within just a few hours Peter will deny three times that he even knows Jesus. In just a few hours Peter will go from zealous resolve to insistent and persistent denial and abandonment. This will be Peter’s humiliation, which is made complete when Jesus turns and looks at him immediately after the rooster crows. Then Peter “went out and wept bitterly” (22:61-62). He is utterly undone.

My favorite site in Israel is probably Tabgha, on the north-west shore of the Sea of Galilee. Here the Church of the Primacy of Peter commemorates his restoration. After the disciples had caught 153 fish, Jesus served them breakfast on the beach. Then, after asking, “Do you love me?” he charged Peter, “Feed my sheep.” He did this three times to match the three-fold denial (John 21:15-18). Today a beautiful statue commemorates this tender scene. Peter’s leadership among the apostles is granted by the Lord himself after his humiliation, after he is stripped of his pride and self-confidence. Only then will Peter be ready to follow Jesus to prison and death. He is imprisoned several times in the Book of Acts, and tradition places his martyrdom in Rome just a few years after the end of the book.

## 2. The Sword

Jesus has one more topic to talk about at the dinner table before they head out into the night.

**And he said to them, “When I sent you out with no moneybag or knapsack or sandals, did you lack anything?” They said, “Nothing.” He said to them, “But now let the one who has a moneybag take it, and likewise a knapsack. And let the one who has no sword sell his cloak and buy one. For I tell you that this Scripture must be fulfilled in me: ‘And he was numbered with the transgressors.’ For what is written about me has its fulfillment.” And they said, “Look, Lord, here are two swords.” And he said to them, “It is enough.” (22:35-38)**

There is an art to giving a good after-dinner speech. If it follows a fund-raising banquet for a non-profit such as RealOptions or IJM, the speech should be inspiring and uplifting so that guests leave even more committed to the cause. If it is for an alumni gathering or a wedding it should be witty and amusing. Either way, the speech should leave one satisfied. But the closing paragraph of Jesus’ after-

dinner speech left the disciples with the wrong idea and has baffled commentators for two thousand years. This “sword speech” is often called the most difficult paragraph in all of Luke’s gospel, even in all four gospels.

How are we to understand this? And how are we to avoid Jesus saying what he seems to be saying? He seems to recommend that everyone buy a sword. But that can’t be right, can it?

Before we try to unravel the paragraph here are some guidelines. We must assume that Luke has been very careful in what he has written; therefore this perplexing paragraph isn’t the result of his carelessness, ignorance or incompetence. Luke is preparing us for the Passion, Christ’s suffering and death, which commences in the very next scene, so any interpretation of this paragraph must illuminate the Passion and vice versa. Any reading of this paragraph must also be consistent with the whole of Luke’s gospel, with his particular presentation of the life and death of Jesus. This paragraph is unique to Luke; we must assume that it is an integral part of his understanding and portrayal of Jesus.

Jesus begins by reminding his disciples of happier days when he had sent them out to proclaim the good news and heal the sick. He had sent out two groups on this mission: the Twelve (9:1-6) and the Seventy-Two (10:1-12). He had sent both groups out without provision, without purse or bag. They were to rely on the hospitality of the towns and villages they entered. If a town did not receive them, they were to shake off the dust of that town from their feet as a testimony against its residents that they had rejected the kingdom when it had come near. Had the disciples lacked anything when Jesus had sent them out like this? “No, nothing,” replied the disciples.

So far so good. But now! “But now,” says Jesus, and now things get difficult for the disciples, for us readers and for the commentators. But now, times have changed. Instead of being sent out without moneybag, knapsack or sandals, one should take his moneybag, knapsack, and—here we are in for a surprise—not his sandals, but a sword, even if it means selling his cloak and buying one. What does this mean?

A common interpretation is that this means the disciples are going out into a changed world. For example, “When they go out on mission again, they can expect only trouble.”<sup>1</sup> They will no longer be able to rely on the provision of hospitable strangers; they must take their own provision. “So in contrast to the former instructions for mission, full provision is now required... Disciples are to engage the world, but they will have to take care of themselves.”<sup>2</sup> What about the sword? Since the apostles did not actually go out with swords, the sword must be interpreted metaphorically to indicate the hostile world: “Opposition will come. But ‘sword’ is a figure for preparing to fight.”<sup>3</sup>

Recognizing that I am disagreeing with learned commentators whom I respect, this makes no sense to me. Jesus is not sending the disciples out on a mission. In forty days’ time he will send them out on a mission, but with full provision:

**“you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” (Acts 1:8)**

Though the apostles do face rejection, they also receive a hospitable welcome from many: from the Ethiopian eunuch in his chariot, from the Roman centurion Cornelius at his home in Caesarea, from Lydia the dealer in purple in Philippi. From the church which

presumably started in Lydia's house, the believers in Philippi send provisions to Paul wherever he goes. The book of Acts doesn't read like a fulfillment of this verse (Luke 22:36); it reads like a fulfillment of Acts 1:8, of the Spirit-empowered mission that Jesus promised the apostles, moving out from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth, even into Caesar's palace in the heart of Rome.

I have other problems with the standard interpretation. If Jesus were referring to the future mission of the apostles, he could have said, "From now on," a phrase used five times in Luke. Instead he says, "But now," which I read as applying only to the Passion. Far from going out on a mission, the disciples disappear. They accompany Jesus to the Mount of Olives and then they vanish into the crowd, in which it is the women who are prominent. Peter stays around long enough to deny Jesus then he too vanishes into the crowd until after the resurrection. Another problem is that this standard interpretation doesn't make sense of the Scripture quotation that immediately follows and is introduced with an explanatory "for."

Is there another way of understanding the text? The difficulties are multiple, because verses 36-38 contain several enigmatic statements. The syntax of the second clause of verse 36 is problematic: "The one who does not have, let him sell his cloak and buy a sword." Jesus contrasts the one who has and the one who does not have. What do they have or not have? The English versions and most commentators assume that it is a sword that "the one who does not have" lacks. But the syntax does not require this. It could be that he lacks a money-bag, or that he lacks the wherewithal for life. Each of these three options has its problems.

Jesus doesn't address the disciples directly but uses impersonal language: "The one who has...let him...; the one who has not...let him..." This is the language of proverbial sayings. The most familiar such saying in the New Testament is "The one who has an ear, let him hear," used fourteen times. Though I am still puzzled by this verse, my current position is to accept it as a proverbial statement.

Whatever Jesus meant, he meant it to show that the Scriptures were being fulfilled in himself:

**"For I tell you that this Scripture must be fulfilled in me: 'And he was numbered with the transgressors.' For what is written about me has its fulfillment." (22:37)**

The cited Scripture is from the final verse of the fourth and final Servant Song of Isaiah (52:13-53:12), read in its entirety as our Scripture reading. "He was numbered among the transgressors." Who are the transgressors among whom Jesus sees himself numbered? Several identifications have been offered. They are the two criminals (lit. "wrong-doers"; "malefactors" KJV) between whom Jesus is crucified (23:32, 39). Or they are the Romans who crucified him: the "hands of lawless men" mentioned by Peter in his Pentecost sermon (Acts 2:23). Or they are the temple guard who come out with swords and clubs to arrest Jesus (22:52). Or they are the disciples who leap to his defense with swords (22:49-50). The disciples' response which effectively brackets the Isaiah quote between swords invites us to view sword-wielders as the transgressors, with the disciples as the prime suspects. Perhaps the transgressors are all of the above, all the sword-wielders and convicted criminals who surround Jesus in his Passion.

But maybe we should take an interpretation that doesn't involve the sword. Maybe the transgressors are the sinners and tax collectors with whom Jesus has dined all the way through Luke's gospel.

The statements either side of the Scripture quotation are not the usual formula for fulfillment of prophecy. Both the verb "fulfilled" (*teleō*) and the noun "fulfillment" (*telos*) imply accomplishment, reaching the intended end, goal or purpose. Furthermore the two statements are complementary but not synonymous; the second statement isn't redundant. This Scripture has its realization in Jesus (first statement). And here is the end, the purpose (*telos*) for which Jesus came (second statement). What is Jesus all about? He came to be numbered with the transgressors in both life and death: in his life and ministry, dining with tax collectors and sinners, healing lepers; in his passion and death, surrounded by sword-wielding disciples, temple guard and Roman soldiers, crucified between two criminals in the place of an insurrectionist. It was necessarily so: this Scripture *must* have its accomplishment in Jesus. This identification with sinners in life and death certainly fits Luke's portrayal of him.

But the disciples don't understand this. They hear Jesus calling everyone to equip themselves with the sword; they hear him say that he will be surrounded by transgressors. And so they reply, "Look, Lord, here are two swords." "Look, Lord," as they pull them out from under the table or from under their cushions. It is clear that they understand Jesus to have been talking about real swords, not metaphorical swords. Why did they have swords at the table? Many commentators say it was because of fear. I don't think that is right. The disciples may have been afraid after Jesus was arrested and taken away from them, but at the dinner table they are not afraid. Among those sitting around the table are several hotheads. The Twelve include at least one zealot, Simon the Zealot (6:15; Acts 1:13), also called Simon the Cananaean (Matt 10:4; Mark 3:18; Cananaean is a transliteration of the Hebrew/Aramaic word for zealot). Simon's inspiration would have been Phinehas the first zealot. James and John wanted to call down fire from heaven and wipe out the Samaritan village that did not extend hospitality to Jesus as they started their journey to Jerusalem (9:54). No wonder Jesus called them Boanerges, the Sons of Thunder (Mark 3:17)! Peter wasn't afraid; he was confident that he would follow Jesus through his trials even if it meant to prison or death.

No, the disciples meant, "Look, Lord, here are two swords; we're ready to face the transgressors and defend you." The disciples are brave, courageous and ready. When the authorities arrive to arrest Jesus, the disciples ask him, "Lord, shall we strike with the sword?" (22:49). Without waiting for an answer one of them flies into action, slicing of the ear of the high priest's servant. John's gospel identifies this hothead as Peter (John 18:10). Jesus has praised his disciples for staying with him through his past trials. Except for Judas, the other eleven are committed to stick with him through the upcoming trials. They are thinking "swords," real swords, their own two swords. They are ready.

This is exactly what the Romans were afraid of at Passover, that zealous Jews, pumped up on the retelling of the Passover story, the story of liberation and freedom from the oppressor, would rise up in revolt. This is why the Roman governor came up from Caesarea to Jerusalem each year at Passover to keep an eye on things. This is why Pilate was reluctant to release Barabbas who was in prison for insurrection and murder (23:19, 25).

Jesus replied to his sword-wielding disciples, "It is enough." Here is yet another enigmatic statement. What is enough? ESV and other versions leaves it ambiguous. What did the disciples hear Jesus saying? I imagine them hearing Jesus' affirmation that two swords would be enough. With just two swords Simeon and Levi were able



to slay all the men of Shechem, take back their sister Dinah, avenge her rape, and restore family honor. With a single spear Phinehas was able to stop the plague that had killed 25,000 Israelites, and thereby earned the Lord's praise for his zeal. If the cause was just and the Lord was on their side, two swords would certainly be enough to stand by Jesus and defend him. But this can't be what Jesus means, can it?

Other English versions read, "That's enough!" (NIV) or, "Enough of that!" (HCSB). These interpret Jesus' statement as putting a stop to the disciples' talk of real swords. Is he frustrated that they still don't understand? That after all the time he has spent with them, they still think in terms of the sword? A third option, towards which I currently lean, is to read Jesus' statement as closing the after-dinner farewell speech: "Enough talk; let's go."

However we understand verse 36, and my current working hypothesis is to read it as a proverbial saying, this passage is not about changed provision and a metaphorical sword. It is about real swords; the disciples certainly hear it that way. But in the end it is a rejection of the power of the sword. After Peter slices off the high priest's ear before waiting for Jesus' permission, Jesus gives his answer, "No more of this!" (22:51). The disciples still don't understand! Then, surrounded by transgressors with their weapons—the two swords of the disciples, the swords and clubs of the temple guards—he touched the servant's ear and healed him. He undoes the work of the sword. All four gospels describe the ear-slicing, but only Luke mentions the healing. This is consistent with his portrayal of Jesus as the healer. Jesus dispenses healing to the very end. On the cross, surrounded by the swords of the Roman soldiers, he prays, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (23:34). To the criminal beside him he says, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise" (23:43).

It is enough. And so Jesus' last supper with his disciples and his farewell address to them come to an end. His disciples still think of God's kingdom in terms of the sword and greatness. They are confident of their own loyalty and faithfulness, that they will stay with him no matter what. How clueless they are! And yet it is to these ones that Jesus has promised a place at his messianic banquet table, and seats on thrones ruling over Israel, positions for which they are so manifestly unprepared.

The church has often been as uncomprehending as the disciples, thinking in terms of the sword and greatness. The crusaders took their swords and went into battle under the sign of the cross. The medieval papacy used the "two swords" verse to justify its two-realm theory of papal power, decreed by Pope Boniface VIII in 1302. There are two swords: the spiritual sword wielded by the Church and the temporal sword wielded by the king. The king's sword is subject to the Church's sword, so the king must bow the knee to the pope.

But Jesus did not think in these terms. He did not follow the world's patterns of leadership, as elaborated in our offertory hymn.<sup>4</sup> Verse 1: "My Lord, you wore no royal crown; you did not wield the powers of state"; he did not exercise lordship in the manner of Gentile rulers. Verse 2: "You never used a killer's sword"; he did not take up arms as a violent zealot. Verse 3: "You did not live a world away in hermit's cell or desert cave"; he did not retreat from the world but dined with tax collectors and sinners. Verse 4: "You made no mean or cunning move, you chose no unworthy compromise"; he was not like the chief priests who were deeply compromised with the Romans for the sake of power and wealth. Jesus rejected these four models of leadership: the king, the revolutionary, the hermit, and the politician. Instead he came to serve and to give his life. This is the model he has been laying out for his disciples in this his farewell address at the end of the Passover meal before he goes out to suffer and die. The Lord Jesus Christ came not to be served but to serve and to give his life, the One for the many, the One for us. Thanks be to God!

1. David E. Garland, *Luke*, ZECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 870.

2. Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 9:51–24:53*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 1747.

3. NET Bible translation note.

4. Christopher Idle, "My Lord, You Wore No Royal Crown," in *Light upon the River: Hymn Texts of Christopher Idle* (London: St Matthias; Carol Stream, IL: Hope, 1998), 93.