

Matthew 26:47-56

Introduction

Especially now, we are walking in territory that can only be appreciated and understood by the means of deep reflection and meditation. These are the verses and the chapters in the Bible that actually describe for us the sufferings of Jesus for you and for me. There's no way to fully grasp these things apart from long hours of meditation – even many lifetimes. But we have only a few short minutes, and we struggle with the easily distractible attention spans of our weak flesh. So in light of this, let's pray together.

I. Matthew 26:47–49 — While he was still speaking, Judas came, one of the twelve, and with him a great crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests and the elders of the people. Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, “The one I will kiss is the man; seize him.” And he came up to Jesus at once and said, “Greetings, Rabbi!” And he kissed him.

This is just the very beginning, but already we feel within ourselves how terribly *wrong* this is. On the one hand, it seems ludicrous. What do the chief priest and elders need with a “great crowd” of men brandishing swords and clubs? When has Jesus ever given them even the slightest reason to fear that He would resist them with force? Think back over all that we've seen of Jesus – of His words and of His deeds. It was Jesus who said, “Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also” (5:39). It was Jesus who said, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (5:44). Never once has Jesus ever so much as lifted a finger in even a hint of physical force. Instead, as Peter says, *and as we have seen*, He always “went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil” (Acts 10:38). And yet what is this? An armed troop from the chief priests and the elders of the people – and they have come to *seize* Jesus. How have we come to this? I suppose we *know*. But in the end, there's just no way for us to make any sense of this, whatsoever. Doesn't it *feel* so completely, and totally, and even ludicrously *wrong*?

When we meditate and reflect deeply enough, we also begin to feel sickened by the perverseness and the depravity of what we see. “The betrayer had given them a sign, saying, ‘The one I will kiss is the man; seize him.’ And he came up to Jesus at once and said, ‘Greetings, Rabbi!’ And he kissed him. Depending on how late it was, the full moon of Passover would have been giving significant light in the Garden. So even without the torches and lanterns that John says they were carrying (John 18:3), it would have been an easy thing for Judas, *one of the twelve*, to find Jesus. On the other hand, in a time before photographs and video recording, even a well-known, public speaker may not have been easy for most other people to recognize – especially at night. So Judas is not only there to lead the crowd to Jesus, but also to specifically identify Him and point Him out. And how will he do this? “The one I will kiss is the man; seize him.” A kiss in that culture was a sign of greeting – something like our handshake (Luke 7:45). But Judas has spent three years now with Jesus. By now, a kiss should have been not just a formal greeting, but also a warm expression of affection and love (1 Pet. 5:14). But then again, it was just that very evening that Judas had been with Jesus in the upper room. So what does it mean when Judas goes immediately up to Jesus, gives Him a “warm” handshake and says, “Hello! How are you,

Teacher”? As one who was just sitting around a table with Jesus, as one who now leads a band of armed men to *seize* Jesus, what does it mean when Judas goes up to Jesus “at once” and says to Him, “Greetings, Rabbi,” and kisses Him? Sickening. Revolting. Despicable. Those are the words that come to my mind. But they do more than that. They fill my heart. I *want* to lash out at Judas. I want to *hurt* him. In my flesh, I want to make him pay for this perverse evil.

II. Matthew 26:50a — Jesus said to him, “Friend, do what you came to do.”

Philip Schaff asks: “Why did the Lord call Judas *friend*—a term of civility, though not necessarily of friendship—and not [rather] a *villain*, or a *traitor*, and why did He not turn away, in holy indignation, from this Judas-kiss, the vilest, the most abominable piece of hypocrisy known in history, which the infernal inspirer of treason alone could invent? To give us an example of the utmost meekness *and* gentleness under the greatest provocation.” (cf. Lange) If Jesus called Judas “friend,” then who could I possibly call my enemy? *If* Jesus called Judas “friend,” *then* how can we even know what an enemy is? May the Lord forgive us for all of our feelings of personal injury, for every time we thought we had an understandable excuse for feeling resentful and angry, for every time we have ever been provoked to anger. Who is your enemy? Who is the one who provokes you with the greatest provocation? Will you love this person, as Jesus loved even Judas? Can we sincerely address even our “enemies” with, “my friend”? Jesus not only left us an example to teach us, He left us an example to *strengthen* us in our inner person and to help us have the victory when otherwise we would most certainly feel that it was hopeless.

Almost all translations have Jesus saying: “Friend, *do* what you came to *do*.” But a literal translation would actually sound like this: “Friend, what you have come for.”* I believe that the most accurate way to translate this into English would be as a question whose *tone* indicates *authority* (cf. HCSB; NKJV; YLT). “Friend, what have you come for?” What an *amazing* response. Judas greets and kisses Jesus with insincerity and hypocrisy. And using only four Greek words Jesus responds with patient rebuke, sovereign authority, and obedient surrender. Perhaps we could paraphrase like this: “Friend, why the charade? If you would betray me and hand me over, then go ahead and do it” (cf. Luke 22:48). “Friend, what have you come for?”

Are your eyes fixed on Jesus? Are you listening to Him? Are you watching Him? Even now, in your heart, are you worshipping Him?

III. Matthew 26:50b — Then they came up and laid hands on Jesus and seized him.

* The ESV just supplies the missing verb: “*Do* what you have come for,” or, “What you have come for, *do*.” But I don’t think this is the best translation. I think there’s a reason that Jesus didn’t supply the verb Himself. He was avoiding any hint that He would ever command Judas to *do* what he was about to do. So then, what was Jesus saying? Was He asking a question? “Friend, what have you come for?” (HCSB; NKJV; YLT) It’s certainly true that Jesus knew why Judas was there, and it’s also true that there is no “question mark” (interrogative pronoun) in the Greek. But since we cannot translate literally, and since I don’t believe we ought to supply the verb that Jesus chose not to supply, I believe that the most accurate way to translate would be as a question whose *tone* indicates *authority* and prior knowledge (see above). Of course, since tone cannot always be conveyed with written words, a paraphrase such as the one suggested above would seem to be necessary.

In verse 45 Jesus said to His disciples, “The hour is at hand, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners.” And now those sinners have “laid their hands on Jesus, and seized Him.” The Greek is very vivid (compare Acts 4:3; 5:18; 21:27). They grabbed hold of Jesus and made Him their prisoner. Bruner says it simply, “For the first time in his ministry, Jesus comes under the power—“into the hands”—of [sinful] human beings.”

IV. Matthew 26:51 — And behold, one of those who were with Jesus stretched out his hand and drew his sword and struck the servant of the high priest and cut off his ear.

For just a moment our eyes, and our attention, is distracted from Jesus. John tells us that the one who drew his sword was Peter (John 18:10-11). After all of Jesus’ teaching, and all of His warnings, Peter was still not prepared for this moment. He must have been afraid, but he was determined that he would not abandon His master. He must have been full of “righteous” anger and zeal. This was the Messiah they were laying their hands on. So he decides right then and there that he will *die* if necessary to *defend* the rightful king of Israel – just like so many other heroes of the Old Testament. But our “righteous” zeal, does not necessarily achieve the righteousness of God (cf. James 1:20).

V. Matthew 26:52–54 — Then Jesus said to him, “Put your sword back into its place. For all who take the sword will perish by the sword. Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels? But how then should the Scriptures be fulfilled, that it must be so?”

When God’s people existed as the ethnic and political nation of Israel, it was *right* for them to use the sword at God’s command and for the cause of God’s glory. But now Jesus is creating a new people, a new and refined Israel, a new covenant community. And for this new Israel, for the *Church*, the sword is *never*, ever an option – *ever*. When Jesus says, “For all who take the sword will perish by the sword,” we hear an allusion to Genesis chapter nine:

✓ Genesis 9:6 — Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image.

In other words, if Peter were to kill someone here in the garden even in self-defense, or even in the defense of another, by Jesus’ own word he would have been guilty of *murder*. Do I believe that there are times and circumstances when self-defense, or the defense of others is acceptable – and even required? Yes, I do! But never, *ever*, when it is the *Gospel* that is at stake. Years later, the apostle John would write to the seven churches in Asia:

✓ Revelation 13:10 — If anyone is to be taken captive, *to captivity he goes*; if anyone is to be slain with the sword, *with the sword must he be slain*. Here is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints.

Someone else has said: “[The Christian faith] cannot be forced; and it should be defended, not by killing but by dying” (Lactantius; quoted in Bruner). A man named Glen Penner writes:

“Over 150 years ago, missionaries from Great Britain and Germany traveled to northeast India to preach the gospel. I was once told the story by an Indian church leader, during this time, a man, his wife and two children were converted to Christ. Their spontaneous faith spread throughout the village, angering the leader of the community. He summoned the man before the village and demanded that he renounce his Christian faith or face execution. The man, facing this crucial decision, sang a song that I have heard sung around the world, ‘I have decided to follow Jesus, I have decided to follow Jesus, I have decided to follow Jesus, no turning back, no turning back.’ Enraged, the chief ordered the archers to shoot the two children. As both of the boys lay... on the ground, the chief asked, ‘Now will you renounce your faith? You have lost both of your children. You will lose your wife as well.’ The man replied by singing, ‘Though no one joins me, still will I follow...’ The chief was beside himself with rage and he ordered the wife put to death. Now he asked for the final time, ‘Now I will give you one more opportunity to deny your faith and live. There is no one for you in the world.’ The man then sang, ‘The cross before me, the world behind me... No turning back...’ Eventually the courage of this man and his family would lead to the conversion of this chief and the entire village.” (Glen Penner; <http://www.persecution.net/download/seed.pdf>)

When this man was summoned with his wife and children, he did not offer any armed resistance. Had he done so, he may have saved the temporal lives of his children, and yet compromised their faith and their eternal future. Had he done so, he may have saved his family’s life, only to forfeit the salvation of his entire village.

“All who take the sword will perish by the sword.” “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth” (5:5). “Do not resist the one who is evil... love your enemies” (5:39, 44). Especially as American Christians we argue, and we qualify, and we make all sorts of conditions, and exceptions, and loopholes. But no matter how legitimate *some* of these exceptions may be, surely our attitude and the amount of emphasis we place on these exceptions *convicts* us of sin. Bruner writes: “It is when all that we hold most dear is threatened – Jesus’ person here, Christian causes now (‘free world,’ Christian mission, the right to worship) – that the reality of faith in Jesus and his nonviolent teaching is most severely tested.” These questions cannot be only academic. If Jesus refused the sword in the garden, have we as His disciples any right to take up the sword? If Jesus refused the sword in the garden, have we as His disciples any right to view the sword of the American military as if it existed for the sake of the Church? If Jesus refused the sword in the garden, what should this mean for how we live out our Christian faith in this hateful and hostile world – and especially in this increasingly hateful and hostile culture?

Jesus not only left us an example to teach us, He left us an example to strengthen us in our inner person and to help us have the victory when otherwise we would most certainly feel that it was hopeless. To paraphrase one man, all who ever live under persecution may pick themselves up often by means of this Word and example of Jesus (cf. Johannes Weiss, quoted in Bruner). Are your eyes fixed on Jesus? Are we running with endurance the race that is set before us? Is He truly the author and the perfecter of our faith? As we watch Him in the garden, are we worshipping Him?

Jesus refuses the sword in the garden because in that context the sword could only be an instrument of murder. But there is another reason that Jesus refuses the sword. “Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels? But how then should the Scriptures be fulfilled, that it must be so?” Twelve legions would probably have amounted to about seventy thousand angels. But then Jesus actually said “*more* than twelve legions,” as if seventy thousand were but a tiny fraction of all the vast armies of heaven. When we refuse to take up the sword, when we refuse to resist and defend ourselves, not for one moment should we ever feel defenseless. Should it be God’s will that our persons or our lives be spared, just a *single* angel out of all the myriad legions of heaven would be sufficient for our rescue. When God does not immediately strike our tormentors and persecutor’s dead, it is not for any lack of power or resources on His part. It *must* be because He Himself has *willed* that we should have the victory through suffering and, if necessary, even through death. The Apostle John encouraged the churches in Asia with these words:

- ✓ Revelation 12:11 — And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death.

We have no right to ask God for twelve legions of angels and then expect that He will give us what we ask. But Jesus, on the other hand, says: “Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and *he will* at once send me more than twelve legions of angels?” Jesus refuses to ask His Father for protection *not* because He believes that everything has already been fatalistically determined. Jesus refuses to ask for protection only because He would freely and willingly obey His Father’s will. “But how then should the Scriptures be fulfilled, that *it must* be so?”

Are your eyes fixed on Jesus? In our hearts, are we worshipping Him? If Jesus refused to ask for what He could have rightfully had, may it be enough for us just to know that all the legion armies of heaven are at God’s disposal should He ever *choose* to use them. When God does not immediately strike our tormentors and persecutor’s dead, it is not for any lack of power or resources on His part. It *must* be because He Himself has willed that we should have the victory through suffering, and if necessary, even through death.

VI. Matthew 26:55–56a — At that hour Jesus said to the crowds, “Have you come out as against a [dangerous rebel[†]], with swords and clubs to capture me? Day after day I sat in the temple teaching, and you did not seize me. But all this has taken place that the Scriptures of the prophets might be fulfilled.” Then all the disciples left him and fled.

Three times Jesus has spoken now. First to Judas, who betrayed Him, then to Peter, who took up the sword, and now to the crowds, who have laid their hands on Him and seized Him. And each time Jesus has spoken, He has spoken as the only one among them all who has true *authority*. Are you beholding Him? To Judas He said, “Friend, why the charade? If you would betray me and hand me over, then go ahead and do it.” To Peter He said, “Put your sword back into its place.” And now to the crowds He says, “I am innocent, and by your own actions you also know this to be true.” “But all this has taken place that the Scriptures of the prophets might be fulfilled.” Or as Jesus also said to Peter: “But how then should the Scriptures be fulfilled, that it

[†] Cf. NLT; NIV; LN Greek Lexicon; Blomberg; Bruner.

must be so?” The authority of Jesus was not the authority to do whatever *He* wanted, or the authority to call for protection to defend His innocence. The authority of Jesus was only one thing – it was the authority of *God’s will*. Jesus spoke the word and will of God *with authority* – *even* when that word and will of God was His own suffering and death. If this was *all* the authority of Jesus, then should we desire any more than this for ourselves? Truly, we have *great* authority. But our “authority” does not stem from our rights as American citizens, or even from our inalienable rights as human beings. Our true *authority* comes from our willing surrender to the will of God. So even as we call our enemy, “friend,” and even as we refuse to “take up the sword in self-defense,” we know that the true authority is not with those who persecute us. The true authority is with us – through our willing surrender to the good, and acceptable, and perfect will of God.

But the disciples are not yet able to see this. What hope do they have, if they cannot take up the sword – not even in self-defense?

VII. Matthew 26:56b — Then all the disciples left him and fled.

Whether we take up the sword, or flee, we will also fail at the test if we don’t keep our eyes fixed on Jesus. Are your eyes fixed on Jesus? Are we running with endurance the race that is set before us? Is He who went *willingly* to suffering and death truly the author and the perfecter of our faith? As we watch Jesus being arrested here in the garden, do we *worship* Him – knowing that He was leaving us an example to follow in His steps?