

“Whom Do You Seek?”

John 18.3–11

¹When 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. ²Now Judas also, who was betraying Him, knew the place, for Jesus had often met there with His disciples. ³Judas then, having received the Roman cohort and officers from the chief priests and the Pharisees, came there with lanterns and torches and weapons. ⁴So Jesus, knowing all the things that were coming upon Him, went forth and said to them, “Whom do you seek?” ⁵They answered Him, “Jesus the Nazarene.” He said to them, “I am He.” And Judas also, who was betraying Him, was standing with them. ⁶So when He said to them, “I am He,” they drew back and fell to the ground. ⁷Therefore He again asked them, “Whom do you seek?” And they said, “Jesus the Nazarene.” ⁸Jesus answered, “I told you that I am He; so if you seek Me, let these go their way,” ⁹to fulfill the word which He spoke, “Of those whom You have given Me I lost not one.” ¹⁰Simon 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. ¹¹So Jesus said to Peter, “Put the sword into the sheath; the cup which the Father has given Me, shall I not drink it?” [NASB]

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I. Introduction

Is it legal to say that one of the most hideous passages in Scripture is one of my favorite? Do we have the liberty to label a verse in Scripture as “cool”? If you answered “no” to either of the above questions, well, I don’t intend to try to persuade you to change your answer. But if you are willing to suspend your judgment on my peculiar colloquialisms for few moments, you might enjoy life—at least the next few moments of it—a little more. This passage is hideous, and it is one of my all time favorites. And there is a verse in this passage that is just plain *cool*. So chill, baby; and be loved.

Let me tell you of three powers. One: The Power of Jesus’ Person Unveiled Preliminarily. Two: The Power of Jesus’ Plan Justified Prophetically. Three: The Power of Jesus’ Passion Explained Patiently.

II. The Power of Jesus’ Person Unveiled Preliminarily

First, the power of Jesus’ person unveiled preliminarily. It is a hideous scene. It reminds me of an ancient mural painting we saw in a mountaintop monastery in Greece. There was a ladder set on earth with its top reaching to heaven, upon which the saints—the faithful descendents of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—were ascending to eternal glory. And we know that ladder to be Christ Himself.^{Gen28.12;Jn1.51} But around the ladder swarmed black demons brandishing long, sharp hooks, attempting to snatch unwary believers from the ladder and into the fire below.

So comes this demonic host of Roman soldiers (maybe a battalion of 600 men), urged on by the ranting lackeys sent by the chief priests and by the Pharisees, cheered on by rabble rotted out on the inside from envy and fear for their place among men. Very well-armed are they, to arrest and subdue one Man. What a show of force! What hatred burned in their hearts, fanned by three years of being silenced by this Man’s unassailable wisdom and love.

What did they fear from one Man, to come in such numbers? Well, He *had*, after all, slipped through their fingers as if invisible more than once. He *had*, after all, given some rather powerful demonstrations of healing and raising the dead. Could He, like Elijah, call down fire on the Captains and their fifties?^{2Ki1} If so, why not their six hundreds?

At their helm was a man who would hail Jesus as Teacher and kiss Him as one would kiss a friend. Judas. But Judas and the army behind him did not find Jesus. *Jesus found them*. Jesus knew all things that were coming upon Him. His human nature had recoiled at the suffering He foreknew. His divine nature recoiled at the sin He would bear for us. His human and His divine natures both gushed over with love for those His Father had given to Him from before the world began... and also for those He had not given Him. There were some of both in this promiscuous assembly. They were all at that point gathered against Jesus... and Jesus *went forth* to meet them. Jesus took the first step, not they. Jesus, as it were, forced their hand.

It seems like a silly question. “Whom do you seek?” Why ask? Jesus knew exactly whom they sought. And they *thought* they knew whom they sought. We know from the other accounts that Judas, His betrayer, had already planted the deadly kiss upon the Savior’s cheek, marking the target. His betrayer, with putrid lips, had already planted the same pollution upon the Savior’s pure skin, that you and I pour upon Him with every wretched sin of our mind, tongue, hand.

“Whom do you seek?” Jesus *makes* them state His strong human name. “Jesus the Nazarene.” And then... Jesus proclaims His omnipotent divine name. “I AM.” Oh, sometimes

those little italicized additions in the Bible are just as lamentable as the inserted headers! If your text reads, “I am *He*,” take a dark black marker and cross out the He. It is as unoriginal and uninspired as the header in this version that reads “Judas Betrays Jesus.” This passage is *not* about Judas betraying Jesus; and the Tetragrammaton does not include “He.” I AM.

And that brings us to the coolest verse in the Bible. (Or certainly, one of them.) ⁶“So when He said to them, “I AM,” they drew back and fell to the ground.” Oh, I just want to rewind that and play it over and over again. “So when He said to them, “I AM,” they drew back and fell to the ground.” “So when He said to them, “I AM,” they drew back and fell to the ground.” “So when He said to them, “I AM,” they drew back and fell to the ground.” That is so *cool*!

The power of Jesus’ person unveiled preliminarily. Jesus declares the divine name as only the divine Person can. *And every single one of those soldiers and priestly and pharisaic gofers knows it.* Do you know it? Have you stopped to ponder the fact that Jesus declares “I AM”? The Lion of the Tribe of Judah whispers “I AM” and a whole battalion and its lackeys fall prostrate on the ground. What will happen when the Lion roars? He who is seated on the Judgment throne flattens an army with a simple “I AM” before He is even glorified. Is it any wonder that *every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord*, when He comes like lightning flashing from the east to the west, rending the heavens and rolling them up like an old garment before Him?

The power of Jesus’ person unveiled preliminarily. The crowd represented by Judas was overcome by Jesus. Now tell me... who’s in control here? They came seeking Jesus, wanting to believe that they, not He, were I AM. But they, not He, fell to the ground when they heard “I AM.” What a miniscule show of force was this! Ever heard of “just war” theory? One of the tenets of just war theory is to use only enough force to accomplish your purpose, and minimize collateral damage. Don’t destroy a nation if taking out one city will accomplish the purpose; and don’t hurt the non-combatants.

Jesus could have called down twelve legions of angels, but all He had to do was say “I AM.” That is *all* it took for the world to know that He is “I AM.” And the non-combatants—His disciples—were unharmed and uncaptured. Now you know. But do you believe? Are you glad He is I AM and you are not? Are you His disciple? Has He by grace made you a non-combatant, at peace with God?

Well, we do retain some of our combativeness, don’t we, even though we have peace with God through faith in Christ? He will not stop short of granting us the grace to know He is I AM, by telling us and leveling us. It is the best thing for us. If you will challenge the Law’s Commands—your breach for which He died—He will tell you I AM and level you. If you are His, you will rejoice and thank Him. And you will see the smile that attends His Name. But if you fall flat in bitterness against Him, don’t expect to see that same smile. And don’t count on being able to get up.

The power of Jesus’ person was unveiled preliminarily. Just a little show of force, incomparable to the coming demonstration. How cool is that!

III. The Power of Jesus’ Plan Justified Prophetically

Second, The Power of Jesus’ Plan Justified Prophetically. ⁷“Therefore He again asked them, ‘Whom do you seek?’ And they said, ‘Jesus the Nazarene.’” Jesus went forth because this was all Jesus’ plan. God the Father made the plan from all eternity, and God the Son was in complete accord from all eternity. It was the Father’s will and the Son’s will.

Now, Jesus sternly presses them to carry out His plan. “Whom do you seek?” The word is different. He doesn’t just ask this time; He *demand*s that they answer to *Him*. Well... Jesus releases them from His hold pinning them to the ground... now they *knew* Whom they sought. But they didn’t dare say “You.” They didn’t dare say “YOU ARE the one we seek.” They numbly spit out, “Jesus the Nazarene.” And when they have thus submitted to His control of the entire proceedings, He then issues another command which they are powerless to disregard. ⁸“Jesus answered, ‘I told you that I AM; so if you seek Me, let these go their way,’ ⁹to fulfill the word which He spoke, ‘Of those whom You have given Me I lost not one.’”

Early in the Gospel Jesus asked two disciples, “What do you seek?”^{1.38} He was examining their wants. Ever since then, John has been showing that our “what” must become “Whom.” THE “Whom.” We must have Jesus. We must have I AM or we die. He must die or we must die. Thus Jesus, who came to die, commands this devil-driven horde to let the disciples live. It was God’s plan all along. The powers of death must have the Son; and the people of the Son must have His life.

This command of the Lord was directed not only to the soldiers in that field. This command Jesus has issued to all the forces arrayed against the Church in all ages. Jesus, according to the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, commanded the battalion to take *Him* to death, and in so doing stripped them of all power to take *us* to death. Kill the body they may... hurt the members they might... but condemn the soul they cannot. His command to all forces arrayed against you and me is that they kill Him and let you and me go our way.

Jesus, our great high Prophet had spoken in His prayer to the Father, ^{17.12}“While I was with them, I was keeping them in Your name which You have given Me; and I guarded them and not one of them perished but the son of perdition, so that the Scripture would be fulfilled.” It could not *not* happen. The Scripture *is* Jesus’ Word. He came to save you, and if you believe, then it is impossible for you to perish. You cannot *not* be saved. The power of Jesus’ plan was justified by His own prophetic word.

IV. The Power of Jesus’ Passion Explained Patiently

Third, The Power of Jesus’ Passion Explained Patiently. The devil was not the only one to tempt Jesus. This passage concludes with another hideous—and favorite—part. You see, the battalion and the gofers weren’t the only ones who thought they wanted to be I AM. Poor Peter gets picked again to parade the pride in you and in me. Poor Peter gets picked again to test Jesus’ patience.

Remember, the disciples were packing. Well, Peter was packing, anyhow. He had this sword, and he figured that if Jesus was going down, he’d go along too... fighting. Peter had already assured Jesus that he’d do what he could to save Him... to which Jesus had responded that before the night was through Peter would deny Him three times.^{13.37} Maybe Peter was so quick with the draw to try to prove his loyalty in the face of Jesus’ prophecy. Who likes to lose face after such a statement of faith?

I’m not sure why Peter tangled with the high priest’s slave... perhaps the Roman soldiers were more intimidating. Perhaps Peter thought a slave of a priest would make a more worthy sacrifice than the Lamb of God. I’m also not sure why John troubles to tell us that the slave’s name is Malchus. Who cares? He was just a slave, just a lackey gofer. Who cares?

Well, the very presence of his name in God’s Word indicates God cares. The very presence of Malchus’s name in God’s Word indicates God’s Love for individual souls... whether they are elect or not. Malchus may or may not be written on the Lamb’s Book of Life. But Malchus

reminds you and me that God loves the people whose ears you and I might like to cut off with our self-righteous misuse of the sword of the Spirit—the Word of God.

Peter tempted Jesus. Perhaps not the way he had before. Previously, Peter had tempted Jesus to relish the thought of not having to suffer. That time, Jesus responded, ^{Mt16.23}“Get behind Me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to Me; for you are not setting your mind on God’s interests, but man’s.” Perhaps this time Peter tempted Jesus to panic. How easily could this have turned into mayhem! How Peter jeopardized his own life and the other disciples’, whose release Jesus had just summarily secured! How easily the soldiers could have been suddenly justified in crushing with deadly violence a violent rebellion... started by *Peter!*

How quickly could Jesus’ command and control of the situation crumble in this crucial moment of sacrifice! But Jesus, according to Luke, issues another command. ^{Lk22.51}“Stop! No more of this.” Then Jesus again substantiates His power, His authority, and His compassion by touching Malchus’s ear and healing Him. That is so cool. Even the soldiers and gofers thought so, and withheld their retaliation.

But there is more. There is never a want of the profound in Jesus. ¹¹“Peter, put the sword into the sheath; the cup which the Father has given Me, shall I not drink it?” Peter had pulled his sword in his own wrath. Jesus could have called down the swords of twelve legions of angels. But He *would* not. For *God* was about to pull *His* sword in *His* wrath and pierce *His own Son* on the cross... in place of you and in place of me. And His Son Jesus willed it to be so. A cup is a limited vessel... Jesus would drink God’s wrath for those God had given Him. Yet for them he would drink *every* drop.

So put the sword in its sheath. ^{Zec4.6}“Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit,’ says the LORD of hosts.” ^{2Co10.4}“The weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses.” As Matthew records it, ^{Mt26.52}“Put your sword back into its place; for all those who take up the sword shall perish by the sword.” The sword has a place, and that place is in the hands of the civil magistrate, not the Church. The Church has the sword of the Spirit which is the Word of God. And that Word of God says that Jesus Christ willingly laid Himself under the sword of God’s eternal wrath for *our* sins, in order that Jesus might clothe us with *His* obedient sinlessness.

Therein lies the power of Jesus’ passion. Peter’s passion and yours and mine—by which we would try to save the world or a single soul—will never succeed. Would you have your friends see the power of Jesus’ passion? Then stop trying to make them see the power of Jesus’ passion. You are using worthless swords. The power of Jesus’ passion can come only through the love with which Jesus loved you and me... and Malchus... and your friend who does not know Christ and may never know Him.

So instead of taking up your sword, come along. Simply stand by your friend. Even if she or he is wrong. The power of Jesus’ passion was explained patiently to you. The power of Jesus’ passion must be explained patiently to her or to him... when she or he asks. “The cup which the Father has given Me, shall I not drink it?” Now that is cool. And nothing—*nothing*—can substitute.

V. Conclusion

Whom did the battalion and lackeys seek? Whom did Peter seek? Whom do you seek? Is Jesus’ Person good enough for you? Is Jesus’ plan wise enough for you? Is Jesus’ passion complete enough for you? Are His person, plan, and passion powerful enough for you? Part of what makes this passage hideous is the battalion and the lackeys and the Peter in you and in me. “I AM.”

Jesus with a powerful word lays us flat. How cool is that!

Jesus sets us free by His powerful plan. That’s cool, man!

In Jesus’ passion He drinks our cup’s ration... and explains it in a very cool fashion: I AM.

“I AM.” Jesus with a word raises us up that we might go our way... *His way*.
How heavenly, heavenly, heavenly is that!