The Provocation of Peter
Matthew 26:51-56
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With Jesus seized by those sent from the chief priests and elders, the focus of Matthew's Gospel shifts to His disciples. This will be a pattern, where we see the main focus on the events leading up to Jesus' death and resurrection, but there are moments where Matthew includes details about the disciples. We've seen their participation in the last Passover supper and at Gethsemane prior to the arrest. We will see Peter later outside the courtyard, awaiting the outcome of the trial of Jesus, and then denying Him three times (Matthew 26:58, 69-75). Their failures are a subplot of the crucifixion account.

<u>The attack by Peter (26:51)</u>

The response to the arrest of Jesus was for one of the disciples to attack the slave of the high priest *"one of those who were with Jesus reached and drew out his sword, and struck the slave of the high priest and cut off his ear."* We learn from John's Gospel the identity of the one who struck the slave, *"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"* (John 18:10).

Why Matthew and the other Synoptic Gospels would leave the disciple and the slave unnamed is unclear. The one possible reason for John to include Peter's name is that he wrote his Gospel long after Peter had died and Jerusalem had fallen to the Romans. The time for Jewish reprisal for this act had long closed.

What is remarkable about this account of Peter's attack upon the slave of the high priest is its brashness in light of the crowd of temple guards and the hundreds of Roman soldiers. Did he think he could defeat such a mob with his small sword (MACHAIRA), even if the other disciples joined him?

Peter was possibly emboldened by Jesus' words to bring a sword with him to Gethsemane. *"whoever has no sword is to sell his coat and buy one. For I tell you that this which is written must be fulfilled in Me, 'AND HE WAS NUMBERED WITH TRANSGRESSORS'; for that which refers to Me has its fulfillment. They said, 'Lord, look, here are two swords.' And He said to them, 'It is enough.'"* (Luke 22:36-38). Why else bring a sword if not to use it? And certainly Peter had seen the power of Jesus' miracles and could hope for Him to miraculously overcome them.

Furthermore, Peter had seen the effect that Jesus had upon the crowd by just His words moments earlier, *"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.' 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"* (John 18:4-6). This may have also encouraged Peter to act.

Peter must have been aiming for the slave's head, not his ear. Luke 22:50 clarifies that Peter *"cut off his right ear."* What most likely happened was that Peter was aiming for the head but the helmet worn by the slave protected him. The slave of the high priest was probably a leader of the temple guard. Helmets in the first century were designed to protect the head, but left the ears exposed in order to hear orders.

<u>The admonishment of Peter (26:52)</u>

Jesus rebuked Peter for his abrupt attack, *"Put your sword back into its place; for all those who take up the sword shall perish by the sword."* Luke 22:51 tells us that Jesus healed the slave of the high priest after Peter struck him, *"But Jesus answered and said, 'Stop! No more of this.' And He touched his ear and healed him."* This probably spared Peter from arrest, although the guard was far more concerned with Jesus than any of the disciples. Even when He was arrested, Jesus continued to exercise control over the circumstances.

The command by Jesus to stop his attack was followed by the Lord's reason, *" or all those who take up the sword shall perish by the sword."* Jesus obviously did not view such violence as appropriate and His perspective was that violence only results in greater violence. This was consistent with His teaching at the beginning of His public ministry, *"But I say to you, do not resist an evil person; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also. If anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, let him have your coat also. Whoever forces you to go one mile, go with him two."* (Matthew 5:39-41). Followers of Jesus must de-escalate conflict, rather than provoking conflict.

Jesus Himself would model this approach to opposition and difficulty in the coming hours, *"while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously"* (1 Peter 2:23). The way of Jesus was not to attack back when He was attacked. Instead, He trusted God the Father with the outcome.

The reason why Jesus chose this approach to conflict was spoken by Him to Pilate during His trial, *"My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, then My servants would be fighting so that I would not be handed over to the Jews; but as it is, My kingdom is not of this realm"* (John 18:36). Because the kingdom of God is not of this world, which *"lies in the power of the evil one"* (1 John 5:19), Jesus saw no need for either Himself, or His followers, to employ the tactics of this world to accomplish the will of God.

This is significant because so many people since Peter's attack on the slave of the high priest have adopted similar violent methods throughout the church age. While it is obvious that Jesus taught against violence, the eagerness of sinful man to accomplish his ends has led to violence by individuals and even churches. Any violence in the name of Christ is morally wrong, opposing the teaching of Jesus, who gave Himself as our example. *"For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps"* (1 Peter 2:21).

Furthermore, because Jesus taught *"My kingdom is not of this world,"* we should expect that the Lord's means of achieving His divine ends are very different from the world's means of achieving its ends. We, as followers of Jesus, must prioritize His values and methods, which are spiritual in nature. Paul instructed us accordingly in 2 Corinthians 10:3-5, *"For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses. We are destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and we are taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ."* Our battle must not be fought by employing worldly methods to secure spiritual ends.

These verses shape what we seek as servants of Christ, along with how we choose to go about it. The Lord has called us to *"make disciples of all nations"* by means of *"baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you"* (Matthew 28:19-20). While clearly the Lord does not desire us to become violent, all forms of belligerence are inconsistent with "*the meekness and gentleness of Christ" (2 Corinthians 10:1).*

We must seek His glory by employing His ways, *"Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart"* (Matthew 11:29). As we follow Him and learn from Him, we will learn gentleness, which is the manifestation of the Holy Spirit at work in our lives (cf. Galatians 5:22-23).

This approach of meekness and gentleness is how we minister the gospel of Christ in making disciples, *"always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence"* (1 Peter 3:15). The good news of Jesus Christ is received by the grace of God alone, through faith alone, not through the works of any man (cf. Ephesians 2:8-9). Not even Paul the apostle's ministry was based upon his eloquence, *"my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power"* (1 Corinthians 2:4). This is even true regarding those who oppose the truth in unrighteousness, *"The Lord's bond-servant must not be quarrelsome, but be kind to all, able to teach, patient when wronged, with gentleness correcting those who are in opposition, if perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, having been held captive by him to do his will"* (2 Timothy 2:24-26).

Not only is our ministry to the unbelieving world through the proclamation of the gospel with gentleness, but we teach the word of God to the believers with gentleness also. Paul said of his ministry to the Corinthians, *"What do you desire? Shall I come to you with a rod, or with love and a spirit of gentleness?"* (1 Corinthians 4:21). We are called to serve our fellow believers *"with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love, being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace"* (Ephesians 4:2-3). We minister to those who struggle with sin with gentleness, "*Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted*" (Galatians 6:1).

There is no place for pressure tactics, intimidation or manipulation in our ministry to either our fellow believers or to the world. Threats and guilt trips are human ways to achieve outcomes, and true spirituality is the work of God, not man. They may appear to bring change, but it is simply earthly adjustments to external forces. To think that we can release the grace of God through the force of human will is the epitome of foolishness.

<u>The authority of Jesus (26:53)</u>

Certainly, Jesus' authority did not cease with His arrest. He continued to have the ability to ask the Father to deliver Him, if it were the will of God. He phrased this truth as a rhetorical question to Peter, within earshot of some of the crowd, *"do you think that I cannot appeal to My Father, and He will at once put at My disposal more than twelve legions of angels?"*

A legion was 6,000 soldiers, which would be ten times the size of the cohort of Roman soldiers sent with the temple guard to arrest Jesus. Twelve legions would then total 72,000 soldiers, and since angels are *"greater in might and power"* than men (2 Peter 2:11), *"more than twelve legions of angels"* would be an overwhelming force against this crowd. Since only one angel of God slayed 185,000 Assyrians in 2 Kings 19:35, these words of Jesus are quite a dramatic statement of power to end this arrest.

The point that Jesus made is that there was no need for Peter to rise up against the mob since Jesus Himself had the ability to ask His Father for a force that was immeasurably beyond what Peter and his one sword could hope to accomplish. Jesus was able to ask the Father, and *"at once"* have this force deployed. The timing of the force was part of the authority of Jesus over this mob that had come to arrest Him.

This explains our need to trust God, who has the power and the righteousness to accomplish what He desires. Attacking those who are opposed to Jesus is unrighteous and completely unnecessary, demonstrating a lack of faith in God being fully able to bring about His desired end. We must not only seek after God's will, but to do His will in His way, not in our way.

The accomplishment of the Scriptures (26:54)

The purpose of the arrest of Jesus was, in part, to fulfill the word of God. Not only must Jesus die for the sin of man, but the way this would come about was also predetermined. Jesus was intent upon the will of God, as revealed by God in the Scriptures, regardless of His own ability to ask for the twelve legions of angels to come to His aid or His personal desire for this cup to pass from Him (Matthew 26:39).

The Scriptures that Jesus referred to was the betrayal by His close friend (Psalm 41:9), along with the details of His sacrificial death that was foretold in Isaiah 53. Other passages that would be fulfilled include Psalm 22, 69, and Zechariah 13. These books were written many hundreds of years before the events of Christ's death, by different prophets, in different eras, to both Israel and Judah.

Jesus Himself had also told His disciples several times that *"the Son of Man will be delivered to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn Him to death, and will hand Him over to the Gentiles to mock and scourge and crucify Him, and on the third day He will be raised up"* (Matthew 20:18-19; cf. 16:21; 17:22-23). These words that He spoke to His disciples about His future would also one day become part of the Scriptures that were fulfilled.

The admonishment of the crowds (26:55)

After Jesus addressed Peter He turned to the crowds and said*, "Have you come out with swords and clubs to arrest Me as you would against a robber? Every day I used to sit in the temple teaching and you did not seize Me."* Matthew introduced these words with the unusual transitional phrase, *"At this time."* The implication of this phrase is that the original readers would be familiar with these words of Jesus and Matthew is noting the exact point when Jesus spoke them in the narrative.

Jesus knew they plotted to arrest Him in the stealth of the night, and their choice of the strategy of arresting Him demonstrated their fearfulness of Him. They did not want to seize Him during the day, in front of the temple crowds, lest they encounter a riot (Matthew 26:4-5). It was not as though Jesus was a fugitive that they needed to track down to arrest, He was readily available to them. He didn't flee, they were the ones running from the Righteous Judge of all the earth.

Furthermore, their arrest of Him was how they might arrest a common criminal. This reflected the words of Isaiah 53:12, *"And was numbered with the transgressors; Yet He Himself bore the sin of many, and interceded for the transgressors."* By coming after Him *"with swords and clubs to arrest"* Him, they were treating Jesus, Righteous One, as a transgressor.

His words to them were a rebuke of them, yet what they did was because *"all this has taken place to fulfill the Scriptures of the prophets."* In their great transgression against Him, they were fulfilling the very Scriptures of the very prophets that they revered. Yet they were so wicked they were oblivious to the fact that their rebellion against God was actually accomplishing the will of God.

The abandonment by the disciples (26:56)

This episode concludes with a focus upon Jesus' followers, *"Then all the disciples left Him and fled."* This is certainly an abandonment, for they didn't just flee, they *"left Him."* But they undoubtedly did so because Jesus opposed their resistance and they were afraid of being arrested themselves as accomplices. They likely fled while Jesus was being bound by the Romans and temple guard (John 18:12).

Mark 14:51-52 adds, *"A young man was following Him, wearing nothing but a linen sheet over his naked body; and they seized him. But he pulled free of the linen sheet and escaped naked."* This person is anonymous, but since this account is only found in Mark, the most common suggestion is that it was Mark himself.

The significance of the story of this young man is not so much who it might be, but what happened to him. As *"a young man,"* he was not one of the eleven, but yet he was present and *"they seized him."* So while he *"escaped naked,"* the fact that he, like Jesus, was seized, tells us that others besides Jesus were at risk. This further explains why the disciples would flee the mob and abandon Jesus. If this was Mark, he then describes himself as responding just as the eleven disciples did, and *"left Him and fled."*

Conclusion

The arrest of Jesus involved many people joining together, as predetermined by God, prophesied by Jesus and revealed in the Old Testament. It was instigated by the betrayal of Christ by Judas and was arranged by the Jewish chief priests and elders. In order to avoid any disturbances from His followers, the chief priests and elders collaborated with their Roman occupiers to arrest Jesus in the middle of the night of Passover. Unknowingly, they were doing what had to take place to fulfill the Scriptures of the prophets.

Meanwhile, the disciples arrived at the garden of Gethsemane unaware of why Judas had left them (cf. John 13:28-30). During their time in the garden, they were unable to remain awake while Jesus prayed (26:40–45). Now as Jesus was being arrested, Peter resorted to unrighteous violence, and when Jesus rebuked him, all the disciples fled in fear during the arrest. We continue to see the struggles of the disciples during the most climactic day of Christ's public ministry.

Yet the emphasis of this account of Peter's attack upon the slave of the high priest and Jesus' response to him teaches us the means that God desires in service to Him. We must put aside wrath (Colossians 3:8) because peacefulness is the fruit of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:22) with which we serve God's will. This can only be done when we *"put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience"* (Colossians 3:12).

"Remind them to be subject to rulers, to authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good deed, to malign no one, to be peaceable, gentle, showing every consideration for all men" (Titus 3:1-2).