

## **A Willing Sacrifice (John 18:1-12)**

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One could be forgiven for concluding we live in an anti-authoritarian age. Systems are evil. Structures are suspect. If someone in a position of authority does something we don't like, off with their head. Children resist the authority of parents. Students ignore the authority of teachers. Citizens resist the authority of law enforcement. Question authority didn't die in the 60s. It's very much the spirit of our age.

It's also half the story. If you look a little deeper, it doesn't take long to realize our collective problem isn't so much with authority in a categorical sense but authority in an external sense. The reason we take issue with every form of external authority is because we are ruthlessly committed to our own authority. The strength of our opposition to other people's authority is the measure of our infatuation with our own.

We're not actually against authority at all. We've simply shifted the locus of authority from something that exists outside of us to something found within us. We have individualized authority such that each one of us has become a god unto ourselves. I am accountable to no one other than me.

Here's the ultimate problem with that approach to life. It puts us on a collision course with the One True God, the Creator and Redeemer of heaven and earth. What did we read earlier in Isa 43:10-11? "You are my witnesses," declares the LORD, "and my servant whom I have chosen, that you may know and believe me and understand that I am he. Before me no god was formed, nor shall there be any after me. I, I am the LORD, and besides me there is no savior."

From a human perspective, Jesus' arrest suggests his authority is not supreme. John takes pains during Jesus' final hours to show us that nothing could be further from the truth. He is, at every point, in complete control, both of his own destiny and actions of his enemies. He's not a helpless sacrifice, a powerless victim. He's a willing sacrifice, and therein lies the wonder of the gospel, the good news of our salvation.

Think of Jn 18:1-11 as a sandwich. On both sides, people are resisting Jesus' authority. His first opponent is Judas and his followers. His second opponent is

Peter. But the main point, the meat of the sandwich so to speak, is found in the middle where Jesus demonstrates the supremacy of his divine authority. The question is not whether he has it, but how we will respond to it. And it's the way Jesus exercises his authority that makes our right response to his authority possible. Our response must be informed by several realities.

### **1) ALL SIN IS A REJECTION OF JESUS' AUTHORITY (vv. 1-4)**

As Ch. 18 opens, Jesus has just finished praying for the present and future people of God. All the requests he makes come to a head in Jn 17:26. He wants us to enjoy the gift of his presence and to be conformed into his image. And both of those blessings require something – that Jesus makes known the Father's saving power via the way of the cross. For unless he dies the death we deserve to die on account of our disobedience, there can be no fellowship with the Holy One, only a fearful expectation of judgment.

V. 1, "So [Jesus] went out with his disciple across the Kidron Valley, where there was a garden..." The fact that the way of the cross passes through a garden is loaded with symbolism. A garden was where everything in our world went wrong in the first place, where the first man and woman resisted God's rightful authority. Jesus is returning to where it all began to deal with the separation sin creates between us and a Holy God, to finish his work of making everything right again. The garden isn't a random place. It's a divinely appointed place. And it's a place Judas could readily find Jesus.

For three years, Judas appeared to be one of his disciples. But in Ch. 13, he reveals his true colors and hands Jesus over to the Jewish authorities who wanted him dead. Friend, the testimony of his life is a sober warning. Do not presume upon your spiritual privileges or religious experiences.

Judas had seen it all – supernatural miracles, matchless instruction. He ran with the Christian crowd. He even had a position of leadership in their midst. He lived day in and day out with God himself. Yet his heart was far from him. Friend, nearness to the things of God is a fatal substitute for heart-level devotion to the kingdom of God. Do not content yourself with appearing faithful. Tend well to the condition of your soul.

Judas had every reason to remain loyal to Jesus. He created Judas. He cared for Judas. He even washed his feet. And Judas responded to Jesus' loving authority by turning his back on the Lord. A garden of fellowship, where Jesus often met with his disciples (v. 2), once again became a garden of betrayal. For there Judas met the Lord (v. 3) with "a band of soldiers and some officers from the chief priests and the Pharisees," and a collection of "lanterns and torches and weapons."

Friend, in a critical sense, whenever we sin, we are acting like Judas. Sin is not just breaking God's law, or disobeying God's rules, or doing wrong things. "Oh yeah, I guess I shouldn't have driven 79 in a 65. Sorry about that." No. It's always personal. It's always relational. All sin is an act of spiritual disloyalty to the God who created us for his glory.

There is always a vertical element involved. When I am impatient with my kids, what am I saying to God? You are not working all things together for my good and I could do a better job running the universe right now than you are. When I become bitterly angry over a perceived insult, what am I saying to God? I am not willing to trust you to vindicate me. Vengeance is mine and I will repay. When I look lustfully at another woman, what am I saying to God? I refuse to wait for you to satisfy my soul. I will not honor you with my body. I will please myself.

Instead of submitting to God's will we attempt to impose our own. Instead of submitting to his authority, we assert our own. That's what sin is - a willful rejection of Jesus' authority. It's why Jesus asks the question he does in vv. 4 and 7. "Whom do you seek?" There is a "who" at the heart of every wrong thing we do and every right thing we fail to do. We're shaking our fist at God. As King David says in Ps 51:4, "Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight."

Do you think of sin that way, friend? As an act of spiritual disloyalty? As betraying God? Or do you minimize it by limiting your attention to the human consequences or fallout? Apart from God's saving intervention in our lives, our sin defines us no less than it defined Judas. It's who we are. We are disloyal to the God who created us as those who reject his authority.

Yet knowing all we do about Jesus by this point in the gospel, there is a deep irony in the way Judas thinks "lanterns and torches and weapons" can take down the Son of God. It's a picture of the futility of sin, the futility of human opposition to the authority of God, and a futility Jesus swiftly exposes.

## **2) MEN CANNOT PREVAIL AGAINST JESUS' AUTHORITY (vv. 4-9)**

Imagine the scene. Judas is standing there in the torchlight, surrounded by a gang of armed men, intent on inflicting their will against the Son of God. What's Jesus going to do? Look at v. 4. "Then Jesus, knowing all that would happen to him, came forward..." The contrast is striking. Judas knows the place in v. 2 and forms and gathers a group of armed men to oppose God's authority. Jesus knows all that is about to happen in v. 4 and steps forward in obedience to God's authority.

He's not surprised. His plans are not derailed or delayed. He knows exactly what's happening, why it's happening, and where it will lead. Such is always our Lord's relationship to the actions of sinful men, our own included. He knows he's about to die at their hands. But he doesn't run. He steps forward. He is neither hapless nor reluctant. His sacrifice is voluntary and willing, fueled by holy love. Jn 10:17-18, "For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again..."

Aren't you grateful, brothers and sisters, that in the face of our sin, Jesus steps forward? When the cosmic powers of evil prepare to do their worst, Jesus steps forward. When oppression and injustice assault the authority of God, Jesus steps forward. As King David did before the Philistine army, so too does David's Greater Son. Fearful saint, when you feel the weight of your sin, when trouble without and within is breathing down your neck, remember, Jesus steps forward. He engages in the battle. He takes up our cause. He fulfills his mission. He is the King who prevails.

And the question he asks as he steps forward isn't for his benefit. It's for the benefit of his enemies and his watching disciples. It's a question that exposes the crux of the conflict and the reason his enemies are ultimately doomed to fail. V. 4, "Whom do you seek?" Who is it that you think you are about to arrest? Who is it that you think you can intimidate with swords and bind with ropes? Who is the One you have yearned to destroy for so long and yet against whom you could not lift a finger until today?

When you sin, friend, when you reject submission to any authority but your own, who are you opposing? Who are you resisting? The truthful answer is the same

today as it was back then. You are seeking to impose your will on God. Don't con yourself into thinking your ultimate issue is with that church, or those friends, or those rules, or even your own parents. Your battle is with the Lord of Hosts. That's who you're seeking. That's who you're opposing. That's the authority you are determined to resist and destroy.

Jesus' question forces them, and us, to wrestle with a question that lies at the heart of John's gospel and the heart of the Christian faith – who is Jesus, really – because the validity of his authority depends upon the nature of his identity. V. 5, "They answered him, 'Jesus of Nazareth.'" That's who you are. You have no authority over us because you're nothing more than a man like us.

The Lord's reply in v. 5 forcibly confronts them with the fact that he is Jesus of Nazareth, and yet he is immeasurably more. "Jesus said to them, 'I am he,'" or literally "I am - ἐγώ εἰμι." Ex 3:13-14, "Then Moses said to God, 'If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?' God said to Moses, 'I AM WHO I AM.' And he said, 'Say this to the people of Israel: 'I AM has sent me to you.'"

The man standing before them in the torchlight was Jesus of Nazareth. He was also the Eternal God clothed in human flesh. With two words, Jesus confirmed the reality of his humanity and deity. But it was more than a brilliant answer. It was a devastating answer. V. 6, "When Jesus said to them, 'I am he,' they drew back and fell to the ground."

They weren't awestruck with amazement at the deity of Christ. John doesn't say the magnitude of what they were trying to do suddenly dawned on them. Or that it was a voluntary act of worship. No. The fact that they give Jesus the same answer to the same question in v. 7 indicates their attitude toward him hasn't changed. So why did they crumple to the ground? Because they experienced in their bodies something of the weight of glory. And they were completely helpless, physically undone, in the face of it.

Friend, God does not need your faith in him or submission to his Word to make himself glorious. He IS glorious. He is supreme in power. Supreme in majesty. Supreme in authority and dominion and honor and beauty. That's the reason when sinners and saints alike experience his self-revelation throughout Scripture, their

involuntary response is to fall to the ground speechless. Such is the weight of his glory. Nothing in heaven or earth compares to him.

Jesus doesn't lift a hand. He doesn't raise his arm. He doesn't pull out a bigger lantern, torch, or weapon. He simply speaks. He reveals the glory of his divine nature through two words and his enemies are crushed, like a cardboard house before a Category 5 hurricane. Friend, Jesus is still in the same business today, the business of revealing the truth and power of his divine identity through words. When you open your Bible and begin to read, you are not reviewing men's thoughts about God. You are coming face to face with the weight of God's glory, the truth of his identity, the perfection of his power.

One of the sweetest lessons of Jn 18 is that in the darkest hour of sin, the Lord reigns. When racism rears its ugly head, he reigns. When sexual abuse devastates a family, he reigns. When you keep running to the very addiction you know will eventually destroy you, he still reigns. The Lord's relationship to evil, in other words, is not like Star Wars where victory totters between "the force" and "the dark side." All power in heaven and on earth is his. And when the cosmic powers of evil begin to do their worst, Jesus remains completely in control.

Did wicked men arrest Jesus? Yes. Are wicked men about to crucify Jesus? Yes. Will wicked men do evil things to you? Yes. But let us never conclude those things are happening because God has vacated the throne of the universe. To the contrary, he accomplishes his greatest work through the darkest of hours. We may never know exactly what he is doing, but we do know this. No matter what happens, Jesus is in control. Cling to that promise, brothers and sisters. Hold fast to that assurance. God will be no less faithful to his promises today than he was to the promises he made his disciples earlier in Jn 17:12.

V. 8, "I told you that I am he. So, if you seek me, let these men go." This was to fulfill the word that he had spoken (Jn 17:12): "Of those whom you gave me I have lost not one." Jesus was arrested, but even during his own suffering, he remained faithful to his word. He protected his followers from harm in fulfillment of his word. He will do the same for us, brothers and sisters. Ezek 12:25, "For I am the LORD; I will speak the word that I will speak and it will be performed."

That's what Judas and his followers refused to acknowledge. They refused to recognize the divine identity of Jesus and the consequent futility of their quest to

overcome his authority. What a picture of the stubborn irrationality of sin! Jesus decks them without raising an arm and they still refuse to confess he is the Christ, the Son of God, even when he gives them a second chance.

Yet the truth remains. And ultimately, men cannot prevail against the authority of Jesus. For now they rage. For now they refuse. But neither they nor you will be permitted to refuse forever. Ps 110:1, "The LORD says to my Lord: 'Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.'" Jesus' enemies falling to the ground was a foretaste of the end of human history where every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord.

Peter should have known that, no less than the rest of Jesus' disciples. So what's the most rational, logical thing to do after seeing Jesus' enemies crumble to the ground in response to the words of his mouth? Trust the saving power of Jesus' words, right? Trust the authority of his Word and wait quietly for Judas and company to let them go exactly as Jesus said they would. Alas, Peter does none of those things. He's just like us.

### **3) WE SUBMIT TO JESUS' AUTHORITY BY TRUSTING HIS WORK, NOT OURS (vv. 10-11)**

V. 10, "Then Simon Peter, having a sword, drew it and struck the high priest's servant and cut off his right ear..." He sizes things up, decides the present course of events isn't good, and tries to fix the situation himself. He's just seen Jesus knock down the entire group by speaking two words, and yet he thinks it would be smart to contribute a little "deliverance" of his own.

Peter's more like the armed men with Judas than he realizes. They oppose Jesus by categorically rejecting his authority. You're not God. You're just a man. Peter opposes Jesus by functionally denying his authority. He reveals just how little he believes Jesus is in control by trying to do God's job for him. We do the exact same thing, friends. Instead of submitting to Jesus' authority by trusting and waiting for him to work, we strike out on our own and try to hurry things along.

When something isn't the way it ought to be at work, why do we assume we need to put in more hours? If something isn't the way it ought to be with our kids, why do we assume we need to have longer conversations or issue stronger consequences? If our spouse isn't changing fast enough, why do we start harassing or repaying

them in kind to “get their attention”? Why do we replay painful conversations in our minds, frantically searching for something we could have said or done to produce a different outcome?

What are we functionally saying in all those situations? Jesus, you do not have authority. You are not in control. I am. And I’m going to fix this situation for the better if it’s the last thing I do! Doing God’s job for him never goes well, brothers and sisters. But Peter’s problem, and ours, runs deeper than doubting God’s authority and power to do the necessary work himself. A lot deeper. The deeper issue is Peter’s blindness (and ours) to the kind of work that is really needed in the first place.

What does Peter assume? Whatever it costs, even if I die trying, I have to stop Jesus from being arrested. That’s what needs to happen here. So let’s start cracking heads! He’s completely blind to the fact that through his arrest and imminent death Jesus is about to work the greatest act of deliverance from sin and death the world has ever seen! What does the Lord immediately say to Peter in v. 11? “Put your sword into its sheath; shall I not drink the cup that the Father has given me?”

Jesus rebukes Peter because in his “effort” to fix the situation himself he’s actually opposing the redemptive purposes and plans of God. He isn’t just messing things up by trying to do God’s job for him. He’s denying God’s wisdom and contending against God’s will. himself. And therein lies the sobering warning of Jn 18.

There are two ways to oppose Jesus’ authority. We can do it as sworn enemies. Or we can do it as professing followers. Everyone around Jesus – enemies and followers included – is resisting his will, opposing his authority. The only difference is that Judas and company know it while Peter doesn’t. Like Peter, we arrogantly think God needs our help, our “contribution” to get the work done. And we arrogantly think we know exactly what kind of work needs to be done in the first place.

In either case, our opposition is futile, brothers and sisters. Why? Because men cannot prevail against the authority of Jesus. So where does that leave us, whether we’re his enemies or followers? It leaves us in desperate need of a Savior. Here’s the good news.

**Jesus rescues us from opposing God’s authority by freely submitting to the same.**



When he says to Peter, “Shall I not drink the cup that the Father has given me?” he’s saying, “Peter, the only path of deliverance, not just in this situation but in every situation, is the path of humble, sacrificial obedience to the will of God. The ultimate reason I came into the world is to drink the cup of wrath that men like Judas and you deserve on account of your opposition to my authority. And I’m going to exercise my divine authority by remaining obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. For unless I do, I cannot deliver you from slavery to your own authority so you too can experience the joy of living in obedient trust to God’s authority.”

“But that requires something, Peter. You have to stop acting like you’re God, opposing my authority, and choose to submit to my authority by trusting my work, my wisdom, my timing, and my power.”

That doesn’t mean being spiritually passive, brothers and sisters. It does mean staying in our lane as creatures by obeying God’s Word, no matter the costs, and locating our confidence in every situation in Jesus’ authority and Jesus’ work, not our own. It means resting in the power of the gospel to change people’s hearts instead of our own words or actions. It means fixing our eyes on the Savior who drank the cup of the Father’s wrath so sin and death would not have the final word and declaring with the prophet Jonah in every situation, “Salvation belongs to the Lord.”

## **CONCLUSION**

All sin is a rejection of Jesus’ authority. Men cannot prevail against Jesus’ authority. And we submit to Jesus’ authority by trusting his work, not ours. And every time we fail, praise God that he is not just our rightful authority. He is our Faithful Savior. Jesus redeems us from futile opposition to the Father’s authority by freely submitting to the same. He lives the obedient life we cannot live. He dies the death for sins we deserve to die. And by his work alone, we are forgiven and freed from devotion to our authority and for the joy of submission to God.

You’ll never win contending with Jesus, friend. But then again, why keep fighting? Why keep resisting? The authority to which he invites you to submit is an authority he exercises by laying down his life for you. There is no better, no safer, no lovelier or more beautiful authority in the entire world. Don’t oppose him. Embrace him. Ps



84:11-12, "For the LORD God is a sun and shield; the LORD bestows favor and honor. No good thing does he withhold from those who walk uprightly. O LORD of hosts, blessed is the one who trusts in you!"