

POWER

“. . . the gospel . . . is the power of God unto salvation . . .” (Romans 1:16)

PUT UP THY SWORD

Paul Meacham, Jr.

Maybe it is due to the combined efforts of John Wayne and John Ford, but in America, we love the cavalry. Those who put themselves in harm's way are our heroes. They swoop in just when things have turned from bad to worse. We have trouble imagining a scene where a representative of the encircled wagon train comes out from his hiding place and explains to the newly arrived young officer that he and his men are not needed, that this is their battle, and they must fight it alone. Yet, the passage under our consideration, John 18:10-11, tells us of a friend and follower who put himself at risk to protect his Lord only to be told that his efforts were misguided, and his assistance was unwelcomed.

The apostle John, an eyewitness and inspired historian of the events (Matt. 26:37; John 18:1, KJV), recorded that when Judas led an armed mob into the garden to arrest Him, Jesus went out to meet them (John 18:4). Jesus clearly identified Himself as the One they were seeking and took steps to ensure that His disciples were not involved in the arrest, thus shielding them from danger (John 18:5-9). Jesus' disciples did not know what they should do, but expressed their willingness to fight by asking Jesus if they should defend Him with the sword (Luke 22:49). It was Peter, however, who stepped forward, drew his sword, at struck out at the high priest's servant, a man named Malchus (John 18:10).

Peter's intentions are not explicitly stated, but we know that his blow landed in such a way as to cut off Malchus' right ear (John 18:10). From that we might conclude that Peter was an extraordinary swordsman and was able to nip off a man's ear without further damaging him at will. Or we must conclude that Peter, a fisherman, not a soldier by trade, was striking at Malchus' head and came away with only an ear. Whatever Peter's intentions, Jesus intervened and miraculously restored Malchus' ear (Luke 22:51).

It was there on a cold night in the garden that we can see by torchlight the scene unfold: Jesus standing between the mob and His disciples; the mob armed and acting under the authority of the High Priest; Peter

standing at the head of the disciples with his bloody sword drawn; everyone ready to kill; when Jesus turned to say unto Peter, "Put up thy sword into the sheath" (John 18:11). I have no doubts as to why Judas did what he did. He was a thief (John 12:6). I have no doubts as to why Peter did what he did. However misguided, he was ready to die for Jesus (Matt. 26:35). I am, however, compelled to ask, "But why, Lord?"

Why did Jesus not want Peter's assistance? Why was stepping forward to defend our Lord the wrong thing to do? I believe the Bible answers these questions.

Put Up Thy Sword: Because You Are Putting At Risk Those I Am Protecting

Matthew's account tells us that Jesus said to Peter, "Put up again thy sword into his place: for all they that take the sword shall perish with the sword" (Matt. 26:52). There is an inherent risk in taking up arms and waging a physical battle. History has shown us that those who engage in physical combat die at an alarming rate compared to those engaged in more peaceful pursuits. In drawing his sword, Peter put himself and the other disciples in grave jeopardy.

Jesus had already taken steps to clearly identify Himself and to tell the mob that His disciples should be allowed to go. Peter's actions created risk and raised tensions at the exact moment when Jesus was seeking to provide safety and calm anxieties. Jesus had just finished praying to His Father that during His time on earth He had protected His disciples (John 17:12). Yes, Peter was trying to help Jesus, but he was actually working against his Lord's purposes.

Peter would later learn that his actions created risks that extended beyond the garden. John tells us that later that night as Peter warmed himself by a fire with the servants and officers of the High Priest he was recognized as being a disciple of Jesus. Who was it that recognized him? It happened to be a relative of Malchus who also worked as a servant to the High Priest. Being put on the spot and being afraid, Peter denied that he even knew our Lord. There is no doubt that

Peter, the man who cut off Malchus' ear, was at greater risk than would have been Peter, just one of the disciples of Jesus. Peter never should have drawn his sword, but, having drawn it, he needed to put it away.

Put Up Thy Sword: Because Even Fervent Zeal Can Be Misguided

There is no doubt that Peter was zealous in his attempt to protect Jesus. He drew his sword and struck the first blow even though it was an armed multitude that had come out against Jesus (Matt. 26:47; John 18:3). However, zeal is not the only test of propriety. Paul wrote concerning the Jews. "Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is, that they might be saved. For I bear them record that they have a zeal of God, but not according to knowledge. For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and going about to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God" (Rom. 10:1-3).

For zeal to be a blessing it must be shaped and controlled by knowledge. There are those who blow up buildings killing thousands in the name of religious zeal. There are those who perpetuate hatred and racism in the name of religious zeal. There are those who remain intentionally ignorant of God's Word and justify their choice by boasting of how fervently they believe what they believe. Zeal is important (Tit. 2:14), but separated from a controlling knowledge of God's will it is dangerous.

In Peter's case, all he needed to do was wait for Jesus to tell him what to do. When the disciples realized that the mob had come to arrest Jesus, "they said unto him, Lord, shall we smite with the sword?" (Luke 22:49). That was a good question. It was asked of the right person. If Peter had waited for the answer, he would have known God's will on the matter. Instead, Peter allowed his zeal to drive his actions without the controlling influence of God's Word.

A favorite song of mine tells the story of

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an inept flight crew trying to find the city of Philadelphia in the dark. One line of the song has the captain informing the passengers that "We're not sure where we're heading. The good news is we're making excellent time" (Chordiac Arrest). Such unguided, uncontrolled zeal may bring a chuckle when it appears in a barbershop quartet's routine, but it is no laughing matter when it is found in God's people.

Faithful children of God have long been ridiculed for giving to and requiring of others a "thus saith the Lord." How else can we know that our zeal to please our Creator is actually pleasing to Him? How else can we know that our steps are being taken under the guiding hand (Psa. 119:105; Jer. 10:23)? Let us be satisfied to live the sentiments of Ira Brister's beautiful hymn. "Not a step will I take without Jesus, is the vow that my heart hath made; Though I often am tempted to leave Him, yet unto Him my heart is stayed." Put Up Thy Sword: Because I Do Not Need That Kind Of Defense.

Peter made a mistake. He saw before him a man with two arms, two legs, two eyes, two ears, and one nose and forgot that Jesus was more than just a man. In the stress of the moment, he did not consider that Jesus was divine and did not need to be defended. There were times Jesus allowed His disciples to help care for Him.

There was a company of women who followed after Jesus and the apostles tending to their needs (Matt. 27:55). Jesus was alone at Jacob's Well because He had sent the disciples away to purchase food for them to eat (John 4:8). However, Jesus never put His disciples at risk to care for or protect Him. It would not have fit with His stated purpose in coming to the world: "Even as the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many" (Matt. 20:28).

When Peter struck Malchus, Jesus corrected him. "Thinkest thou that I cannot now pray to my Father, and he shall presently give me more than twelve legions of angels" (Matt. 26:53)? Satan had once tempted Jesus to make His deity known by casting Himself off the pinnacle of the temple. "He shall give his angels charge concerning thee: and in their hands they shall bear thee up, lest at any time thou dash thy foot against a stone" (Matt. 4:6). Jesus is the Son of God, and therefore, the angels of Heaven are at His beck and call. If Jesus had needed a defense, He had a host of beings with power beyond our understanding available to Him (2 Kings

19:35).

Additionally, a careful reading of the account shows that Jesus did not behave as One who needed to be rescued. When the mob came to get Him, He went out to meet them (John 18:4). He asked them who they sought and positively identified Himself as their prey (John 18:5; John 18:8). Upon identifying Himself to them, "they went backward, and fell to the ground" (John 18:6).

What caused them to fall to the ground? Were they simply surprised by His candor? Were they afraid because of the miracles they had heard about? Were they struck down by "the glorious effulgence of the majesty of Christ which overpowered them" (Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown) as some have supposed? I do not know what caused the mob to fall to the earth, but I do know that Jesus was not behaving like someone who wanted, needed, or expected to be rescued.

Today, it is right for Christians to defend the Gospel and its message of hope (1 Pet. 3:15). It is right for us to defend ourselves in the spiritual battle we wage with Satan (Eph. 6:10-19). It is right for us to defend ourselves when we have been accused falsely of wrongdoing (Acts 22:1ff). However, Jesus has never needed us to defend Him, rather "Our soul waiteth for the LORD: he is our help and our shield" (Psa. 33:20).

Put Up Thy Sword: Because My Kingdom Is Not Of This World

Peter's actions were diametrically opposed to his King's desire and indicative of a citizen in an earthly, not spiritual, kingdom. The next day Jesus defended Himself against the charge that He and His followers were a threat to the Roman government.

"My kingdom is not of this world: if my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight, that I should not be delivered to the Jews: but now is my kingdom not from hence" (John 18:36). If Jesus had intended to establish an earthly kingdom, then Peter's actions would have been perfectly right. Earthly kingdoms are advanced and defended at the edge of a sword, but not Jesus' kingdom. The battle cry of the Islamic faith has been "Islam, tribute, or the sword" (Newman 432). Jesus' kingdom, the church (Matt. 16:18-19), is advanced by the Sword of the Spirit (Eph. 6:17), not by the sword of man.

Jesus was fully aware of the dangers of this world and acknowledged a person's

need to defend himself from those dangers.

As He prepared His disciples for the changes they would experience because of His return to Heaven, He advised them, "When I sent you without purse, and scrip, and shoes, lacked ye any thing?" And they said, Nothing. Then said he unto them, "But now, he that hath a purse, let him take it, and likewise his scrip: and he that hath no sword, let him sell his garment, and buy one" (Luke 22:35-36). Jesus would no longer be among them to protect them. They would have to look to their own protection.

But the physical sword has never been a suitable instrument to advance the cause of the Lord's kingdom. One cannot be driven to Jesus at the point of a sword.

"No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him: and I will raise him up at the last day. It is written in the prophets, And they shall be all taught of God. Every man therefore that hath heard, and hath learned of the Father, cometh unto me" (John 6:44-45). Therefore, Peter was being groomed to wield a weapon that was "...quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart" (Heb 4:12). Peter's weapon was to be the Word of God.

Put Up Thy Sword: Because It Is Time For Me To Go

The events that played out in the garden on the night in question were put in motion before the world was created (Rev. 13:8). When the time was right, Jesus was sent into this world (Gal. 4:4). Now the time was right for Jesus to turn Himself over to them and submit Himself to their cruelty. In Luke's record of the events, Jesus questioned the mob and acknowledged that their time had come. "Be ye come out, as against a thief, with swords and staves? When I was daily with you in the temple, ye stretched forth no hands against me: but this is your hour, and the power of darkness" (Luke 22:52-53).

They had wanted to kill Jesus before. When Jesus taught publicly regarding the Jewish leaders' hypocrisy, "they perceived that he spake of them. But when they sought to lay hands on him, they feared the

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multitude, because they took him for a prophet" (Matt. 21:45-46). They wanted Him dead but feared the people. On occasion, they even took steps to kill Him and Jesus, because it was not the right time for Him to die, had to remove Himself from their grasp. When Jesus claimed deity by pointing out that He predated Abraham, "then took they up stones to cast at him: but Jesus hid himself, and went out of the temple, going through the midst of them, and so passed by" (John 8:59). Again, when Jesus taught in the temple grounds that He was divine and that those who rejected Him as the Messiah would be rejected by Jehovah, they "took up stones again to stone him....Therefore they sought again to take him: but he escaped out of their hand" (John 10:31; John 10:39).

In the garden, however, there was no escape. It was not because they had Jesus cornered. It was not because He was overpowered. It was not because He was outnumbered. There was no escape because it was time for Him to go. His Father's plan called for this to be the time when He should go and, as at all other times, Jesus did what pleased His Father (John 8:29). For Peter to stand in the way, no matter what his motives, put him in the way of God's plan. He needed to put up his sword and move aside.

Jesus had tried to prepare the disciples for the moment of His sacrifice. According to McGarvey, Jesus had spent about nine months teaching them "that he must go unto Jerusalem, and suffer many things of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised again the third day" (Matt. 16:21) (414). It was Peter who had opposed the idea at that time, and Jesus had to rebuke him saying "Get thee behind me, Satan: thou art an offence unto me: for thou savourest not the things that be of God, but those that be of men" (Matt 16:23).

Jesus had taught them in great detail why it was necessary that he die.

"The hour is come, that the Son of man should be glorified. Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit. He that loveth his life shall lose it; and he that hateth his life in this world shall keep it unto life eternal. If any man serve me, let him follow me; and where I am, there shall also my servant be: if any man serve me, him will my Father honour. Now is my soul troubled; and what shall

I say? Father, save me from this hour: but for this cause came I unto this hour" (John 12:23-27).

One of the most difficult concepts in Scripture for me to grasp is the fact that "it pleased the LORD to bruise him" (Isa 53:10). That Jehovah saw the travail of His soul and was satisfied (Isa. 53:11). What pleasure could a Father gain from seeing the suffering of His Son? What could be satisfying about seeing His Son pour "out his soul unto death" (Isa. 53:12). The only ways I can answer these questions is that Jesus died making "intercession for the transgressors" (Isa. 53:12). Like a father whose laments are laced with pride and satisfaction over the grave of a son who selflessly gave himself up to save the lives of others, our Heavenly Father could once again say, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (Matt. 3:17).

Put Up Thy Sword: Because You Cannot Accomplish By Killing What I Can Accomplish By Dying

Peter thought Jesus was engaged in a struggle, and He was. The problem, for Peter, was that he did not understand the true nature of the struggle in which Jesus was engaged. Peter's understanding of Jesus' battle was limited to what he could see. He saw an armed mob, he knew Jesus was hated by the Jewish leadership, he knew Jesus would be falsely accused, and he stepped in to defend Jesus. What Peter could not then appreciate was the true identity of the enemy. Later, when Peter better understood the greater war being waged, he wrote, "Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour: Whom resist stedfast in the faith, knowing that the same afflictions are accomplished in your brethren that are in the world" (1 Pet. 5:8-9).

Jesus had been locked in a battle with Satan from the very beginning. In the wake of man's first sins, Jehovah decreed that he would "put enmity between thee [Satan] and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed" (Gen. 3:15). The Bible gives us glimpses of the on-going war between Satan and God. Satan's persecution of Job was more than a personal attack on Job. It was an assault on Jehovah and His authority (Job

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1:9-13). The conflict between Satan and Jesus was played out in clear terms as Satan tempted Jesus to abandon His Father's plan and prove His deity through a Satan-conceived shortcut (Matt. 4:1-11). Even after being rebuffed, Satan continued to tempt Jesus in his hopes of depriving the world of a savior (Luke 4:13).

That night in the garden was the beginning of the final events that would lead to the blows so long ago prophesied. "It shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel" (Gen. 3:15).

This battle had to take place. Jesus would not deliver His crushing blow to Satan's head until Satan had first bruised His heel. The blow Jesus was to receive was slight relative to that which He was going to deliver, but it did not seem slight. Peter was not prepared for what he saw happening to Jesus. It was not that Jesus had not done what he needed to do to prepare him. It was just that it was beyond Peter's and the other apostles' ability to comprehend fully what was going to happen to their Master.

There are times that we, like Peter, fail to recognize the greater battle. We get sidetracked by the small battles that touch us daily and fail to see the bigger picture. When that happens, we need to put up our swords and focus our attention on the bigger issues.

Why do we tell the truth when many would argue that lying to ease another's immediate pain would be kinder? We tell the truth because it is right to do so and wrong to

lie (Col. 3:9; Rev. 21:8). Why do we stand for the truth uncompromisingly even when pressured by family or friends to give in "just this once?" We stand firm on God's Word because it is right to do so and will sustain us in the end (1 Cor. 15:58; 2 Pet. 3:17; Col. 1:23).

Peter, no doubt, had to take a firm stand on many things in his service to God. On that night in the garden, he took a stand in the wrong place. He was standing between Jesus and His purpose. There was only one right course for him to take. He needed to put up his sword and get behind Jesus. What a great example for us!

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