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Matthew 26:47 - 26:56



Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

In this passage, Steve Gregg examines Matthew 26:47-56, where Jesus is betrayed by Judas in the garden of Gethsemane. Gregg notes that Jesus refers to Judas as "friend," despite his treacherous intent, and points out the differing accounts of Peter's response to the soldiers' arrival among the gospels. He also explains that Jesus' words about twelve legions of angels were likely not a call to violence, but rather an indication that he could have easily avoided arrest if he wished. In Gregg's analysis, he emphasizes the importance of understanding the context and language used in biblical passages.

Transcript

Turning now to Matthew chapter 26, we find Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane, where he has just prayed three times while his disciples slept. And we read now at verse 47, Then immediately he went up to Jesus and said, For all who take the sword will perish by the sword. Or do you think that I cannot now pray to my Father and He will provide me with more than twelve legions of angels? How then could the Scriptures be fulfilled, that it must happen thus? In that hour Jesus said to the multitudes, Have you come out as against a robber with swords and clubs to take me? I sat daily with you, teaching in the temple, and you did not seize me.

But all this was done, that the Scriptures of the prophets might be fulfilled. Then all the disciples forsook him and fled. Here we have one of the most shocking things in the gospel stories, and that is the activity of Judas Iscariot as he betrays Jesus.

Why he did this is never fully explained. There are some who believe that Judas was always a wicked disciple and only pretending to be a sincere disciple. Others have felt that Judas at one time really was sincerely a follower of Jesus and that he became disillusioned with Him.

But it's just shocking to see that one of the twelve, one of the ones that were entrusted with so much, they saw so much, they did so much, they received so much from Jesus, that he would betray Him as he does here. And then that he would betray Him with a kiss. That's an interesting thing.

It says in the book of Proverbs, the kisses of an enemy are deceitful. And here we have the kiss of an enemy deceiving Jesus, showing some sign of affection it would seem. But really, what an awful sign it really was.

It was a sign to those who came to arrest Jesus that this was the one they should take. The fact that it was necessary for Judas to identify Jesus this way makes one wonder whether all the soldiers who had come from the chief priests knew Jesus by sight or not, whether they'd ever seen Him or heard Him. It seems otherwise they would have no difficulty knowing which one was the one.

There were, after all, only thirteen men there that they were coming to meet, and one of them was the one that was the most famous of all, Jesus. It would seem unnecessary for someone to have to make an identification of Him by this technique of giving a kiss. But for some reason, perhaps there was a prearranged understanding that maybe Jesus would be disguised, or maybe the light in the garden would be not good enough, and some of the disciples being bearded men, probably their faces partially concealed, there might be some mistaken identity.

It's hard to say. All we know is that Judas had prearranged that he would reveal to the soldiers which one was the one by coming and kissing Him. Now, a kiss, of course, was a typical greeting for men in the Middle East, as it is still today in some parts of the world.

Well, in the Middle East, among other places, it was more like a handshake or a friendly greeting. Men in our culture, in America at least, do not generally greet one another with a kiss on the cheek, but that is just a cultural difference. It was very common for men to greet one another with a kiss.

But Jesus said to him, Friend, why have you come? That's how Matthew records it. What's interesting is that Jesus said to him, Friend. Now, Jesus knew what he had come to do, and Jesus knew that Judas was behaving as anything but a friend.

He was actually an enemy. And yet, even at this point, Jesus extends his seemingly unconditional goodwill toward Judas. Judas was not a friend to Jesus, but Jesus was continuing to extend the opportunity of friendship to him in calling him Friend.

What are you doing, Friend? Why are you doing this? Actually, Jesus said more than this, but Luke is the one we have to consult to find that out. In Luke 22, verse 48, Jesus said to Judas, Are you betraying the Son of Man with a kiss? Now, of course, Jesus wasn't asking in order to get the information. It was quite obvious what Judas was doing.

He was saying it as if to spell out to Judas the treachery and to maybe appeal to his conscience and say, Do you realize what you're doing? You're betraying not only a friend. You're betraying the Son of Man, the Messiah. And you're doing so with this gesture of friendship, which is a phony one, because you are not being a friend to me at all.

And these words were no doubt calculated to cause Judas to see the error of his way. Judas did eventually see the error of his way, but only after it was too late. Now, it says that when Judas kissed Jesus, the soldiers and those who had come after him came and laid hands on Jesus and took him.

Now, there was a reaction, and that was from one of the disciples. It says in verse 51, And suddenly 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. Now, it does not say which of the disciples did this.

If you will consider Mark's Gospel and Luke's also, you will find the same report, that one of the disciples took a sword and cut off the ear of the servant of the high priest. But the disciple who did this is not named for us. However, when you get to the Gospel of John, and you read the story there, you will find that Peter is the disciple who did this.

And not only does John give us the name of the disciple who did the cutting, but he actually gives the name of the servant of the high priest. His name was Malchus, which indicates that John knew, you know, John was clearly an eyewitness. He knew who had done it, and he knew who it was done to.

Now, that being so, we might ask, Why is it that Matthew, Mark, and Luke do not mention Peter by name as the one who took the sword and did this deed? And yet John does. Well, traditionally, John wrote his Gospel later than all the other Gospels. In fact, in all likelihood, John wrote his Gospel after Peter had already died.

It is possible that Matthew, Mark, and Luke wrote their Gospels while Peter was still alive. And what is reported here is really a criminal action. Peter forcibly took a sword and resisted arrest.

It's like the soldiers came, and he took up sword and attacked one of them. And that would, of course, be a highly illegal act. And therefore, in telling the story, Matthew, Mark, and Luke may be protecting Peter, who may have been still alive when these Gospels were in circulation.

If they would report that Peter had done this, it might be something that could get him into trouble with the authorities. However, when John wrote his Gospel, probably Peter was dead by this time. And therefore, John took the liberty of naming the disciple that had done this thing.

Now, Jesus' reaction to Peter is different in each of the Gospels. It should not be thought that this is contradictory information, but rather simply that the Gospel writers each record a different part of how Jesus reacted to Peter striking Malchus with the sword. When Peter struck Malchus with his sword, Mark's Gospel does not record any response to this action by Jesus.

It just says that one of them took a sword and cut off the ear of the servant of the high priest, and then the story goes on with Jesus talking to those who had come to arrest him. But Matthew and Luke and John all record something Jesus did on this occasion. In every case, they record that Jesus spoke to Peter, the one who had wielded the sword.

In Matthew, the words are these, Jesus said to him, So, we have Jesus making two responses to Peter, according to Matthew's Gospel, and those responses really bring out two different points. The first response is that those who take the sword shall perish by the sword. Now, what is the meaning of this cryptic remark? It is actually quoted in the book of Revelation, chapter 13, with reference to the beast.

But what did Jesus mean when he applied it to Peter? Those who take the sword will perish by the sword. Well, there are several possibilities here. He could have been saying, as one commentator I read a long time ago said, that he was not making a generic statement about all situations, but only about this situation here, namely, that Jesus and the disciples were outnumbered.

We know from what Luke tells us in Luke, chapter 22, that there were only two swords among the disciples, and Peter had one of them, and that those who had come out against him were much more heavily armed, and that Jesus was simply saying, if we take up the sword to defend ourselves, we'll certainly die by the swords of these people. Not because it was an axiom that this would always be true, but because it would be true in this case. And so some feel that Jesus was not making a statement about swords in general, but simply about the sword in this case.

Peter's sword and that of the disciples should not be brought out because they were greatly outnumbered and would certainly die by the sword, which Jesus did not desire for his disciples to do at this time. That is one way of looking at it. Another is to make it as if Jesus is giving a universal axiom, namely, that everybody who seeks to defend himself with a sword will die by that means.

This is the way that a lot of people quote it. However, it hardly seems likely that that is what it means, since it wouldn't be true. There are many people who wield a sword and who fight using a sword, but who have never died by that means.

Many people, like Alexander the Great, used the sword a great deal in conquering lands, but he died not by the sword. He did not die in war. And there are many people like that.

And for that matter, the apostle Paul never did take the sword, but he died by the sword. His head was cut off by the Roman sword. So it is not true as an axiom that everybody who uses a sword will die by that means.

And therefore, it's not likely that Jesus meant that, because we are not the only ones who realize that. Jesus certainly would have realized that not everyone who takes the

sword will die by the sword. But he might have been saying that those who take the sword take the risk of dying by the sword and are inviting that kind of response.

That is, if somebody is attacking you, and you, as Jesus said elsewhere, if you turn the other cheek, it may diffuse their anger. You may perish or you may not. But if you do fight back, you are inviting a violent response from them.

You are simply escalating the violence, and you may very well be the one to be the loser as a result of that. If you take the sword, you are inviting a response of the sword, and you may well die by it. It is possible that Jesus was saying something along those lines.

If so, it would seem as though Jesus was basically discouraging the use of the sword in all situations, because the use of violence will bring a violent response, and that could turn out badly for you. There is also a possibility that Jesus was making a cryptic remark about those that were coming with swords and sticks to take Jesus. Those who were taking the sword would themselves later die by the sword.

This was true of many of them, because within a few years' time, the Romans conquered Jerusalem, and these chief priests and these people who came out to arrest Jesus, many of them died by the sword, the sword of the Romans. And Jesus may have been saying to Peter, listen, you don't need to bring your sword out. God will take care of these people.

These people who are bringing their swords out against us, they will have their day when they too will perish by the sword. All of these are possible meanings of what Jesus said, and it's not entirely clear how he meant it in this case. It makes it difficult to be dogmatic in taking his statement and applying it in one way to the exclusion of the other ways.

Jesus certainly was saying, however, that there was no reason and no appropriateness about Peter taking the sword in this case, and he was discouraging him from doing so. But Jesus went on further and said, or do you not think that I can now pray to my Father and he will provide me with more than 12 legions of angels? Now, a legion, at least among the Romans, a legion was 6,000 soldiers, and 12 legions of angels would presumably be something like 72,000 angels. Now, 72,000 angels could do a great deal of damage to anyone they attacked, including this little band of representatives of the high priests who came to arrest Jesus.

If Jesus wished to call 12 legions of angels to his assistance, there would be no problem in dispatching these people who are causing his problems at this moment. Of course, 12 legions is not an exact number, or at least it's not likely that Jesus was saying, this is the limit of the angels that I could call upon. He's probably saying that to the disciples, there are 12 of you here.

Actually, there were 11 on his side, though Judas was there too. But if all 12 of you disciples would come to my defense, you could not possibly defend me as much as God

could. For each of you, he could send instead a legion of angels, and how much better off would I be under their protection than yours? The idea here is that God is not impotent to save me if he wishes to do so.

He does not need the help of your sword, Peter. There are angels standing by who will gladly come and rescue me if I'd simply ask them to do so, if I will call upon them. But I can't do that because then the scriptures will not be fulfilled.

And we need to remember this many times when we are, well, inclined to make a defense for ourselves. There are Christians, after all, who are inclined to arm themselves heavily and to put the bolts on their doors and the booby traps and the alarm systems and all the things around because of fear of intruders, whether it's burglars or government agents or whatever they're afraid of. There are many Christians who seem to be of a mind to arm themselves and to fight.

And they should remember what Jesus said. You know, if he wants to, he can call twelve legions of angels. He doesn't need our weaponry.

If God's kingdom is at stake and it's under attack, then God can defend it well enough without us having to bring our puny swords to the picture, which, by the way, may result not so much in success on our part. But as he said, if we bear the sword, we may yet die by the sword. Our weapons do not guarantee our safety.

The safest place to be is with the Lord. There's a psalm that says, the horse is prepared against the day of battle, but safety is from the Lord. There are those who prepare their weapons and their horses for battle, but that will not determine their safety.

The safety will be from the Lord. If you bring the sword to your own rescue, you may yet perish by the sword, as Jesus said. On the other hand, if God wants to rescue you, he can do so without your sword.

He could send twelve legions of angels if he wished, and therefore that raises serious questions about whether Christians need to be arming themselves for their own defense. I will not really say that Christians can't have arms or that they can't defend themselves. I'm not sure that Jesus' comment goes so far as to say that, but it certainly should change our perception of our own security, that God is the one who has our security and interest, and he has no limit to the angels and to the resources that he could send to rescue us.

And thus reads Matthew's gospel. Now, of course, in Luke's gospel, the response of Jesus to Peter cutting off this ear of Malchus, the high priest's servant, is different. It doesn't record much of a verbal response on Jesus' part.

In Luke 22, 51, it simply says that he said, Permit even this. That is, instead of giving an elaborate record of the rebuke that Jesus gave to Peter, it just has Jesus saying to Peter,

Permit even this. And then Luke tells us that Jesus healed the man's ear, that Jesus touched his ear and healed it.

So here we have Jesus healing a man in the very act of that man coming to arrest him. That is really a picture of the forgiving grace of God. The very man that is there ready to take him off and crucify him sustains an injury, and Jesus heals him.

And to do good to those who hate you is something Jesus himself taught to be done. There's a well-known story among the early Anabaptists. These were the early Mennonite-type people, and they were nonviolent, as modern Mennonites also are.

They didn't believe in resistance, and they didn't believe in fighting, but they were badly persecuted. And there was one of these men who was being chased by an officer of the law who was going to take him and have him killed. Because in Europe in the mid-1500s, it was in many places illegal to be a Mennonite, and you could be put to death for that.

And this one Mennonite gentleman was fleeing from an officer who was wanting to take him and to kill him. And this man fled across a frozen lake and made it safely to the other side, but his pursuer fell through the ice and was doomed to die in the icy waters. And the fleeing Mennonite turned back, and he went and he rescued the man who was pursuing him.

And that man took him back and executed him. Now, this is so much like what Jesus did, and it's so much like the Spirit of Christ, but so different from the spirit of many Christians today. Many Christians today feel that it's their task to defend themselves and defend their rights and escape from harm and all of that, whereas Jesus himself set a different example, as have some Christians at other times done the same.

When Polycarp, the martyr, was arrested, he actually had had a chance to escape, but he had a vision or a dream of him being burned up in his bed, and he decided that God was telling him that he should submit himself to martyrdom and be burned at the stake. And when the soldiers came to arrest him, he asked to pray for them, and he spent a time in prayer before they took him. And, you know, Jesus said to pray for those who persecute you.

Do good to them. Jesus modeled this himself in healing the ear of the man who was injured by Peter's sword on this occasion. In John's Gospel, Jesus' response to Peter on this occasion was this, in John 18.11, Jesus said to Peter, Put your sword into its sheath.

Shall I not drink the cup which my father has given me? In other words, Jesus recognized that this arrest and being taken to the cross was the cup his father was giving to him. Remember he prayed three times that the cup might be taken from him? Well, the cup was not to be taken from him. It was going to be given to him.

And because of his resignation to the will of his father, he said, Well, this is the cup my

father has given me. Do not prevent me from drinking it. It's a bitter cup.

It means my death. It means a painful and excruciating death. But it is from my father.

And shall I not drink that cup that my father gives to me? That is the attitude that Christians also should have when it comes to trials that God brings to us. This is the cup that God has given to us. Now we might say, No, my trials are caused by people, not by God.

Hey, well, this trial of Jesus was caused by people, too. There was Judas. There were the chief priests.

There were all these guys arresting him. They were all bad people, and they were causing his trials right then. But he still saw it as the cup his father had given him because his father did not choose to send 12 legions of angels to save him or to take this cup from him.

Therefore, recognizing it as coming from the hand of God because God chose to allow it to happen, Jesus received it and set an example for all of us in receiving from God's hand whatever trials he may wish to bring to us. This is how we grow. This is how we obey.

This is how we bring glory to God in our lives as Jesus did.