

“THE SEIZURE OF THE SAVIOR”
MATTHEW 26:47-56

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul makes a profound statement about the Lord Jesus that gives us insight into the choices He made and the actions He took while He lived on this earth. Paul says, *⁶ [Jesus], though He was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷ but emptied Himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. ⁸ And being found in human form, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross (2:6-8).*

Though Jesus was equal with God in every way—possessing identical divine attributes and prerogatives—He voluntarily relinquished the independent use of those attributes and prerogatives while He was on earth. Paul says, *“He did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped.”* Literally, He did not count equality with God *“a thing to be used for His own advantage.”* So, for the 33 years Jesus lived on earth, He voluntarily laid aside His divine prerogatives, and completely submitted to the will of His Father.

This morning we are going to explore one of the most extraordinary examples of how Jesus made this choice even though it cost him His life, and how that choice changed human history.

It is late Thursday evening of Holy Week. Earlier in the evening Jesus had observed the Passover meal with his disciples. After supper, they retreated to the Mount of Olives where He told them that all of them would abandon Him that very night. Peter was incredulous, declaring that he would die before denying or abandoning Jesus. After that, they went to the Garden of Gethsemane because Jesus wanted to spend some time in prayer. He asked His disciples to join Him, though they soon fell asleep. Jesus was in great agony and pleaded with His Father, *“if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will.”*

After some time, Jesus woke them and, **verse 47**, *⁴⁷ While He was still speaking, Judas came, one of the twelve, and with him a great crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests and the elders of the people.*

Apparently, Matthew identifies Judas as “one of the Twelve,” to highlight the irony and tragedy of his treachery (Blomberg, NAC). Furthermore, in using the singular verb and adding that a crowd was with *Him*, Matthew emphasizes *Judas’* role and responsibility in Jesus’ arrest rather than the others who accompanied him who actually performed the arrest. These others came from the chief priests and elders of the people, which suggests that they were official representatives of the ruling body of Judaism known as the Sanhedrin. Matthew wants us to know that these were not just rabble rousers, but people who were sent on a mission by the most powerful leaders in Judaism.

The reference to “swords,” which were short daggers or knives that were normally tied to one’s belt, indicates that some Romans soldiers were also present. Indeed, John references this in his account, identifying them as a “detachment of soldiers” (18:12). Those who wielded “clubs” were Jews, for clubs were commonly used by Jews as a weapon.

Why would this crowd come prepared for a skirmish? And why would the Jewish leaders arrange for a detachment of Roman soldiers to accompany them? Did they view Jesus as an insurrectionist? Had they seen Him do anything that would lead them to believe that He might react aggressively? A few days earlier Jesus had caused a scene in the temple courts by angrily overturning tables and driving out merchants with a whip. But other than that, there was nothing about His behavior that even hinted at violence.

But remember, a number of people in Jerusalem at this time wondered if Jesus was the Messiah, and the popular Jewish perception was that Messiah would overthrow the Roman Empire and reign in God's kingdom. They believed Messiah would, indeed, be an insurrectionist, and that He would, of necessity, use violence to establish His rule. Thus, the chief priests and elders may have wondered if there was a more militant element to Jesus' organization than met the eye. Whatever the case, they wanted to be prepared.

Verses 48-49. *48 Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, "The one I will kiss is the man; seize Him." 49 And he came up to Jesus at once and said, "Greetings, Rabbi!" And he kissed Him.*

Men in the ancient Middle East customarily greeted one another with kisses on both cheeks. But Judas' deceitful display of friendship here only serves to heighten his treachery. He pretends to come in peace and uses a term of respect, "Teacher," to identify Jesus. It is not only a signal to the mob, but Judas' final repudiation of His Master. This kiss was a slap in Jesus' face, and Jesus knew it.

Try to imagine what it would feel like to be Jesus in this situation. It is the middle of the night. He is surrounded by a mob carrying swords, clubs, and torches. He has been betrayed by a friend whom Satan has entered and turned into the personification of evil. He is about to be pounced on. The tension is so thick you can cut it with a knife. Everyone is anxiously waiting to see how Jesus will react.

Someone who did not know Jesus might have expected Him to react by saying, "Damn you to hell, Judas! Your name will live in infamy because of this." Instead, **verse 50a.** *50 Jesus said to him, "Friend, do what you came to do."*

Rather than panic, rather than getting flustered, rather than getting defensive or disgusted, Jesus gives Judas His undivided attention and calls him "*Friend.*" Though it is possible to interpret "friend" as sarcastic, I rather think that Jesus was, one last time, showing Judas who He really was. Judas had just shown his true colors; Jesus was showing *His* true colors. He was loving His enemy, just as He admonished His followers to do in the Sermon on the Mount.

Verse 50b-51. *Then they came up and laid hands on Jesus and seized Him. 51 And behold, 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.*

All four Gospels tell us that there was a brief and ineffective show of resistance from Jesus' disciples. Luke records that His disciples asked Him, "*Lord, should we strike with the sword?*" and that before Jesus had a chance to respond one of the disciples drew his sword and cut off the right ear of the high priest's servant. John tells us that it was Peter who used the sword, and then identifies the man who was attacked as Malchus. Luke, a doctor, tells us that Jesus healed the man's ear (22:51).

It is difficult to say, exactly, what motivated Peter's action. Perhaps he was haunted by Jesus' prediction that he would deny Him three times that night and was trying to prove to Jesus that he was not a coward. Perhaps he was just acting impulsively.

Regardless, **verses 52-54,** *52 Then Jesus said to him, "Put your sword back into its place. For all who take the sword will perish by the sword. 53 Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and He will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels? 54 But how then should the Scriptures be fulfilled, that it must be so?"*

Peter ought to have been arrested for attacking an official with a sword, and it is likely that he would have been had not Jesus promptly intervened. But Jesus instructs Peter to put

his sword back where it belonged, and then proceeds to make three statements. First, He says, *“all those who take the sword will perish by the sword.”*

Peter viewed his weapon as a means of protecting himself and Jesus. But Jesus viewed Peter’s weapon as something that contradicted all that He, the Prince of peace, stood for. Furthermore, Peter was overlooking the principle that violence breeds violence—that people who use deadly force against others risk others using deadly force against them. And that is a most unfitting end for a servant of the Prince of peace.

But there is something even more incongruent about Peter’s use of a sword on this occasion. Jesus says to him, *⁵³ Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and He will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels?*

Peter had been with Jesus for three years now and had seen Him demonstrate His divine power over and over. Did he really think that Jesus could not help Himself if He really wanted to? Indeed, Jesus tells him that He could have asked His Father to send more than twelve legions of angels to rescue Him.

Since a legion consisted of six thousand soldiers, that would be an army of 72,000 angelic beings, who are far stronger than human beings. We also read in Joshua 5 that Jesus is the Commander of the army of the LORD (5:14). Had Jesus wanted to resist or escape, all He had to do was speak a word, and He would have been immediately delivered by invisible and irresistible forces.

But remember, *⁶ [Jesus], though He was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷ but emptied Himself...* Though Jesus was equal with God in every way—possessing identical divine attributes and prerogatives—He voluntarily relinquished the independent use of those attributes and prerogatives while He was on earth. He did not use them for His own advantage. He voluntarily laid them aside, and completely submitted to His Father’s will, even unto death.

And the Father had revealed His will long before Jesus came into this world. Seven hundred and forty years before Jesus was born, the prophet Isaiah wrote:

⁴ Surely, He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed Him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted.

⁵ But He was pierced for our transgressions; He was crushed for our iniquities; upon Him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with His wounds we are healed.

⁶ All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.

⁷ He was oppressed, and He was afflicted, yet He opened not His mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so He opened not His mouth.

It was undoubtedly this passage to which Jesus was referring when He said to Peter, **verse 54**, *⁵⁴ ...how then should the Scriptures be fulfilled, that it must be so?* Then Jesus turned His attention to the whole group that had come to arrest Him. **Verse 55**. *⁵⁵ At that hour Jesus said to the crowds, “Have you come out as against a robber, with swords and clubs to capture me? Day after day I sat in the temple teaching, and you did not seize me.*

Jesus addresses the elephant in the room. They had encountered Jesus in the temple every day that week, and it would have been a whole lot more convenient to apprehend Him there and haul Him over to the house of the high priest, which was just a stone’s throw from the temple. Instead, they had furtively come to a remote place in the middle of the night so that His arrest would attract the least amount of publicity possible. In other words, there was

something sinister and sneaky about what they were doing and how they were going about it. If true justice was their main concern, they could have done this publicly in broad daylight.

But it wasn't. The ones who sent them had a personal vendetta against Jesus and were determined to get rid of Him by whatever means, even if they had to resort to devious methods. They also knew that if they had publicly arrested Him, they would have had opposition, and Luke tells us that they were afraid of the people.

But ultimately, Jesus wants them to know that their cunning behavior was prophesied in their own Scriptures. **Verse 56a.** ***56 But all this has taken place that the Scriptures of the prophets might be fulfilled.*** In treating Jesus as a criminal, the chief priests and elders were fulfilling what the Scripture had foretold long before. Isaiah prophesied that Jesus would be ***"numbered with the transgressors"*** (Isa. 53:12).

Verse 56b, *then all the disciples left Him and fled.* Apparently, the disciples had been unaware of Judas' sinister plot and were shocked to see him leading this posse to arrest their Master. They saw Peter's pathetic attempt to resist and then heard Jesus rebuke him for it. And now Jesus, instead of doing something miraculous, was calmly reasoning with the ones who apprehended Him. It was too much for them to bear, so they panicked and ran for their lives, leaving Jesus all alone.

As I have contemplated the significance of this passage in terms of application to us, I am going to resist the obvious temptation to warn us against being like Judas who betrayed Jesus, or Peter who resorted to violence to try to defend Jesus, or the disciples, all of whom abandoned Jesus. Nor am I going to consider the merits or the lack thereof of using verse 52 as a proof-text to support pacifism. I believe the most profitable thing to consider from this passage is what we can learn from our Lord Jesus, particular in His profound demonstrations of faith and love.

First, *Jesus refused to take matters into His own hands but put His complete trust in His heavenly Father so that His will could be done.* Don't forget, He was equal with God in every way—possessing identical divine attributes and prerogatives. But He voluntarily relinquished the independent use of these attributes and prerogatives while He was on earth in order to do His Father's will. And it was His Father's will that Jesus become the Sin-bearer for mankind—the One who would bear our sin and be punished in our place. It was His Father's will to crush Him by making Him a guilt offering for us.

And though Jesus, in the words of the song, "could have called ten thousand angels to destroy the world and set him free," He, instead, died alone for you and me. He relinquished the independent use of His divine power to destroy His enemies, and allowed His enemies to destroy Him, so that we might not be destroyed in hell, but have eternal life.

Let's just say that Jesus had called ten thousand angels to set Him free and deliver Him from death. You and I would not be here. The world would have self-destructed long ago, and every person that had ever lived would now be in hell. There would have been absolutely no hope and no remedy for the human race. But God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, and that Son put His complete trust in His Father's will, because He knew that His own death was the Father's method of rescuing the human race from their sin and giving them eternal life.

Second, *because Jesus trusted His Father, He could remain calm and composed during an extremely tense and combative situation.* We learned in the previous passage that when Jesus was praying in the garden, He was anything but calm. He was in such deep anguish as He anticipated being the object of His Father's wrath that He sweat great drops of blood. But when He emerged from that prayer, after determining that He *would* submit to

His Father's will, He was no different than He was on any other occasion. He wasn't flustered; He didn't panic; He didn't raise His voice or get agitated in any way.

And I would submit to you that this wasn't because He was trying to be cool or macho—I don't think He was even trying to be brave. He was calm and composed because He trusted His Father. Yes, He knew that His Father was about to crush Him, but He also knew the very next verse in Isaiah's prophecy. "*He will see the suffering of His soul and be satisfied*" (Isa. 53:11). The writer of Hebrews tells us that for the joy set before Him, He endured the cross, despising its shame (12:2). Jesus knew that the reward of His suffering would be worth it in the end.

Third, *Jesus distinguished Himself as the Son of God, by giving individuals His undivided attention in this volatile situation.* He looked Judas squarely in the eyes after his kiss of betrayal and called him "friend." He told Peter to put his sword away, and then gave him a lesson in theology. He calmly picked up Malchus' severed ear and reattached it. He addressed the crowd. In fact, in John's Gospel we are told that after Judas kissed Jesus, Jesus turned to the crowd and said, "Whom do you seek?" And when they said, "Jesus of Nazareth," He said, "I am He." And when He said, "I am He," they involuntarily drew back and fell to the ground. Why? I wouldn't be surprised if it was out of shame. Deep down inside they knew that this was no ordinary man. His poise, His attitudes, His reactions, His behavior distinguished Him as none other than the Son of God. His goodness exposed their sin and magnified it.

And I don't know about you, these things compel me to admire Jesus all the more. They also endear me to Jesus and inspire me to love Him more. They make me want to cry out, "Hallelujah! What a Savior!"

“The Seizure of the Savior”

Matthew 26:47-56

Main Idea: *Jesus’ trust in and submission to His Father’s will enabled Him to remain calm and composed during an extremely tense and potentially volatile situation.*

Judas Betrays Jesus (47-50a)

He leads a delegation of armed men (47)

He administers the prearranged signal (48-49)

Jesus acknowledges Judas (50a)

He calls him friend

He tells him to do what he came to do

Jesus is Apprehended (50b-56a)

A disciple (Peter) makes a feeble stand (51)

He draws his sword

He slices the ear off the High Priest’s servant

Jesus rebukes Peter (52-54)

For taking matters into his own hands (52)

For underestimating Jesus’ power (53)

For not knowing the Scriptures (54)

Jesus addresses the mob (55-56a)

Why treat Him as a dangerous criminal? (55a)

Why not apprehend Him in public? (55b)

They are fulfilling their own Scriptures (56a)

The disciples run away (56b)

Learning from Jesus

- Jesus refused to take matters into His own hands but put his complete trust in his heavenly Father so that his will could be done.
- Because Jesus trusted His Father, He could remain calm and composed during an extremely tense and combative situation.
- Jesus demonstrated His love by giving individuals in that tense, combative situation His undivided attention.