

## **“Treachery and Malice”**

**John 18:1-12**

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### **Text Comment**

- v.2 Was Gethsemane owned by some wealthy man who was a supporter of Jesus and had made it available to the Lord as a place to meet with his disciples? In any case, Jesus does not attempt to evade capture by altering his habits. As he said, “No one takes my life from me; I lay it down of my own accord.”
- v.3 The detachment of Roman soldiers came along to deter any violence on the part of Jesus supporters when the arrest was made. What Judas provided, of course, was the opportunity to locate Jesus at the opportune time, when there would be no crowd around. The presence of both Romans and Jews – John is the only gospel writer to mention the Roman soldiers – may be his way of indicating that the entire world was responsible for what was about to happen. The torches, lanterns, and weapons are an eyewitness touch. John, many years later, can still see the scene unfolding before his eyes.
- v.4 Remember, the Lord has just completed his agonizing prayer in the Garden and has been visited by angels from heaven, as Luke tells us.
- v.5 Perhaps this is when Judas kissed the Lord. John omits that detail.
- v.7 Apparently it took them some time to recover their wits and know what to do. So Jesus, the one person who is completely in control of the situation, repeats his question.
- v.9 In the face of his own arrest and all that the Lord knows will come of that, he takes pains to ensure that his disciples will not be harmed.
- v.10 The word means a long knife or a short sword. It was probably what we would call a dagger. In all likelihood, Peter was striking wildly with his sword, he got Malchus’ ear by accident. As one commentator puts it [Carson, 579]: “The blow was as clumsy as Peter’s courage was great; the tactic was as pointless as Peter’s misunderstanding was total.” But, we are at least reminded of a fact of life: a man who is brave one moment, in one situation, can be a complete coward a short time later!
- v.11 Peter’s courageous act is not foolish because it was futile – there were too many soldiers to prevent the arrest by such means – but because it interfered with what had to happen and what the Lord had long said he was going to Jerusalem precisely to make happen: viz. his giving up his life for the sins of the world. Here, of course, “cup” hearkens back to the Lord’s prayer in the Garden which John has not included but which he assumes. It refers to the suffering that lies ahead. Just as John does not mention the Lord’s agony of prayer in Gethsemane and his triumph over his temptation there, so he does not mention that the Lord restored the ear of Malchus by merely touching it.

First, the officials and the soldiers were startled by the Lord's calm and confident identification of himself to the soldiers; his stepping out to meet them. What is more, he used a manner of speaking, much more striking in John's Greek than in the NIV translation – he says, in answer to their question, "I am" – which sounds very much like God himself speaking (compare the same expression in 8:58, for example). The soldiers imagined that they would be chasing down a fleeing peasant [Morris] and instead, find themselves, confronted in the gloomy and numinous atmosphere of that olive grove by a commanding presence. Now, precisely what happened and what caused it to happen is debated and, perhaps, we cannot finally know. Some commentators suggest something quite prosaic. The soldiers were stepping back from the Lord's unexpected advance, stumbled and lurched backward, bumping into the men behind and causing them to fall as well.

It seems clear, however, that John does not expect us to think of an accidental trip. These men found themselves in front of a presence who overpowered them – in whatever way his presence effected them so powerfully – and there was a physical reaction, a recoiling from the Lord. It is certainly clear that John is telling us that the men who came into the Garden to arrest the Lord were overawed in his presence and that they continued on in their errand only with his consent. My goodness, *he* has to bring them back to the matter at hand, by asking his question a second time in v. 7. They were themselves on the ground, speechless and nonplussed.

In other words, we have here, virtually, another of John's "signs." It isn't, of course, one of the great signs, one of the seven public miracles that John narrated in what commentators call the "Book of Signs." The "Book of Signs" remember is that part of the Gospel that stretches from chapter 2 to chapter 11, from the changing water to wine at Cana in chapter 2 to the raising of Lazarus from the dead in chapter 11. It isn't a "sign" in that sense, but it is, nevertheless, a public, outward demonstration of the majesty and the divine royalty of Jesus Christ. These men knew – by whatever means – they knew instinctively and intuitively that they were before the presence of someone far, far greater than themselves.

In this, they are like the soldier who, having witnessed the crucifixion of the Lord and all that transpired during the three hours he hung on the cross – saw the darkness overshadow the land, felt the earthquake – could not help but say at the end of it all, "Surely this man *was* the Son of God!" Or, they are like the soldiers guarding the tomb on Easter morning, who were so afraid of the angel who appeared before them that "they shook and became as dead men". Their fear of the supernatural messenger who appeared before them made them like soldiers so terrified in battle that they find they literally cannot move.

In this, they are even like Peter himself, who, several years before, with his friends, the brothers James and John, had, after a night of fruitless fishing, dropped his nets at the command of the Lord and caught such a great catch of fish that their nets began to break. Peter also fell down, at the Lord's feet, and said, "Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man." In all these cases there was an instinctive, intuitive recognition of the majesty of the man before them, of his nature and character as one far above them.

But, if so, why did these men not fall down and acknowledge the Lord as Peter had done by the Sea of Galilee? They did not, as we might have thought they would, fall at the Lord's feet and

beg his forgiveness that they ever came on such an errand. They did not say, “Depart from us, Lord, for we are sinful men.” No, after the Lord had as much as helped them up and brushed them off, they recovered themselves, continued with the arrest, and dragged this man, before whom they had just been struck down by a power beyond their comprehension, off to his death.

And, remember, if not the Roman soldiers – and probably them too – surely the religious officials knew all about Jesus and what he had done over the past three years. They knew of his mighty works and of his teaching. So when they were struck dumb merely by the force of his presence, surely we might well have expected that they would have connected what happened to them in the olive grove with all the rest that Jesus had done. We might have expected that they, *at least they*, would have caught themselves, said to themselves, “What in the world are we doing here arresting the Son of God?” and begged for his forgiveness. But they did nothing of the kind. They finished their errand without hesitation.

And, remember one thing more. Though John does not make a point of this, he obviously knows that most readers of his Gospel will not fail to remember that, after Peter struck off the ear of Malchus, *Jesus put it back!* Might we not have expected that Malchus, at least, would have stood up and said, “Fellows, you do what you must, but if you think I am going to have anything to do with the arrest of this man, you’ve got another think coming!” But, nothing of the kind happened. Nor did Judas catch himself, seeing all those men on the ground before Jesus of Nazareth, and say to himself, “What have I done? Here I am fighting against God! Lord, forgive me!” Nothing of the kind.

It didn’t happen here in the olive grove, it didn’t happen in the garden Easter morning, it didn’t happen on Golgatha on Friday afternoon, and it didn’t happen – not really – throughout the entire course of the Lord’s ministry as he revealed his divine glory times without number to thousands upon thousands of people, who eventually rejected him without so much as a second thought.

How can this be? It is the question that confronts us and haunts us from the beginning of the Bible to the end. How could the Israelites, having seen the power of God with their own eyes, the ten plagues, the parting of the Sea, the pillar of fire, how could they have doubted God as they did, questioned his ability to bring them safely into the Promised Land, and, at the last, rejected him as their God and Savior?

And how could the people have seen the Lord’s miracles and every other evidence of his divine accreditation and then treat him as a common criminal? How is this possible?

The answer to that question is a large part of the secret of human life. The answer is that men are, from their conception in the womb of their mothers, the enemies of God. Sin is first and in its origin and fundamental principle, a spiritual antipathy toward God, a spirit of rebellion against him. Men and women fear God – they are terrified of his judgments – and they resent God – they chafe under his rule and control; but, before all of that they hate God. “The sinful mind is *hostile* to God,” is how Paul puts it in Romans 8:6. And we have already heard the Lord Jesus say the same thing earlier in this Gospel. In 7:7 we read, “The world hates me...because I testify its works are evil.

Just as God made us to love others and sin makes us selfish and lovers of our selves, so we have been given breath to love God with all our hearts, and sin has made us haters of God instead. Sin is the principle in us, the power in us, the tendency in us which reverses in us what ought to be, makes us the reverse of what we were made to be, and so turns us from lovers of God into haters of God.

One of the great old works on sin, the nature and consequences of sin, was Ralph Venning's, *The Plague of Plagues*, published in 1669. Right at the outset, Venning makes this point, that sin is not first the violation of this law or that, but the fundamental anti-God bias that rules and controls the human heart.

“The sinfulness of sin not only appears from, but consists in this, that it is contrary to God. Indeed, it is contrariety and [hatred] itself. Carnal men, or sinners are called by the name of enemies of God...but the carnal mind or sin is called enmity [or hatred] itself. Accordingly, [sin] and its acts are expressed by names of [hatred] and acts of hostility, such as, walking contrary to God...rebellng against God...rising up against him as an enemy...striving and contending with God...and despising God. It makes men haters of God...resisters of God...fighters against God...even blasphemers of God, and in short very atheists, who say there is no God.... It goes about to ungod God, and is by some of the ancients called *Deicidium*, or God-murder or God-killing.” [Throughout that paragraph, Venning has listed many different texts where this view of sin and its consequences is found in the Bible.]

That hatred, as the Bible is careful to show, is usually masked. It can disguise itself as indifference to God and his will, or it can take the form of the zealous devotion to any and every religion except that which is revealed in the Word of God, or it can take the form of a patronizing skepticism toward the claims of Christianity, or a sneering scorn of Christian beliefs. This hatred of God can take a religious form or an atheistic form. It can express itself in strict morality or in open immorality. But, lying beneath all of these spiritual states is this visceral hostility to the living God.

People do not reject Jesus Christ because the evidence is simply not sufficient to persuade them – that evidence was overwhelming in the case of so many during the Lord's ministry and certainly was in the case of these men –; they do not refuse to believe in him because intellectual honesty compels them to embrace some other philosophy of life. They reject Jesus Christ because deep down he offends them, because they dislike him, and because they are rebels against him, and they would rather die than submit to him. The soldiers didn't think this out that night in Gethsemane, but that was what was at work, that anti-God bias is what made them so indifferent to what had happened to them.

Like it or not, that is the Bible's teaching and the account we have before us this morning is but one of very many illustrations of it to be found in the Bible. It is, after all, an obvious question. If Jesus is the Son of God and proved it to mankind when he came into the world, why did so many refuse to believe in him and submit to him? The Bible is fully prepared to answer that question. There is something in people, something deep and powerful, that renders them averse

to God. There is a malice toward God in their hearts, there is an anti-God bias deep within them that controls their thoughts and actions.

Now, to be sure, they don't think that, they wouldn't agree with that account of themselves. They would take offense that I should characterize them as haters of God. Who am I, they would say, to say what is in their hearts, to impugn their motives, to explain why they make the choices that they make?

But, of course, it isn't I, it is the Word of God that is always explaining human life in these terms. And, what is more, we Christians are the first to say, that one of the reasons we know that what the Bible says about human rebellion against God and hatred of God is true is because we have the evidence of it in ourselves. Our own hearts persuade us that this is what sin is, an anti-God principle.

By God's grace we have come to love God and to love Jesus Christ his son. But sin remains in us and will until we are finally in heaven, and we can see very clearly what it is and what it does. Nothing makes a Christian more miserable, nothing surprises him or her more often, nothing is a greater disappointment than just this averseness to God that we *still find within ourselves*, even knowing God and loving him and wanting to serve him as we do. The world accuses us of being hypocrites, of not living up to our words, and we say with complete sincerity that the world doesn't know the half of our hypocrisy! We see these foolish, foolish men in the olive grove recoiling and falling back from the Lord and then proceeding to arrest him and we see ourselves plain as day! We *know*, we know as certainly as we know we are sitting here in church, that Christ is the Lord, that it is wisdom to do his will, that his commandments are not burdensome but rather are the way to life as it ought to be, we know that he has loved us and deserves our love in return, we know that in walking with him we will find the greatest conceivable fulfillment and satisfaction, and still we turn away from him, still we find ourselves drawn powerfully to what we know is wrong and displeasing to him, still we find ourselves time and again preferring the world to this Beautiful Majesty. We find that coming to God in prayer, which ought to be our delight, is like pulling teeth instead. And we hate ourselves for it, sometimes we fear for our souls because of it, but still it is there. As long as we are sinners, as long as we have sin in us, there is always that averseness to God, that anti-God bias doing its ugly work in us.

Oh, no, we have no difficulty believing that men could instinctively and intuitively and powerfully recognize that they were in the presence of the Son of God and *still* proceed to betray him – as Judas did – and to arrest him – as the soldiers did – and to ignore his great kindness and power – as Malchus did. For we are doing the same things every day of our lives! Don't tell *us* that sin is not an anti-God principle and power in every human heart. We who love God and Christ and want nothing so much as to love him with all we are and all we have, find that same hatred of God in ourselves still.

And, that, you see, is what makes so important and so wonderful the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the church at Pentecost, the great event we are celebrating today.

For it was Pentecost that made possible the overcoming of that hatred of God that, left unchecked, allowed to have its way, would have destroyed us all. It was at Pentecost that the Spirit of God was let loose upon the nations of the world. Jesus had just been talking about that in the Upper Room remember. How, when the Spirit came, he would convict the world of sin, show sinners what they really were and how evil and ugly and deadly was this aversion to God that ruled their hearts. How, when the Spirit came, he would show Jesus Christ to the world and overcome their unbelief and bring them to faith in the Savior. How, when the Spirit came, men and women everywhere would be drawn by a divine power they could not resist, drawn to recognize in Jesus Christ the Son of God that he is, to love him for what he did for us, dying in our place to pay the price of our sins, drawn to cast their hopes of eternal life solely on the Lord Jesus and his death and resurrection, drawn to love him when they had hated him before.

Remember what the Lord had said to Nicodemus several years before. A man must be born again to enter the kingdom of God. He must be given a new start, a new beginning. The principle of sin, the anti-God principle must be broken in his heart and replaced by the principle of faith and love for God. And no man can do this for himself; no woman for herself. Only the Spirit of God can do this work of *recreation* within a person. Only the creator of man can recreate him. And that is what the Holy Spirit has been doing ever since among the nations of the world: drawing men and women to God, overcoming their hatred of him, and turning them into lovers of God and of Jesus Christ.

Look at yourself in those foolish, benighted men in the olive grove who came to arrest Jesus that night: Judas, with his heart filled with treachery and bitterness; the religious authorities with their jealousy of Jesus' popularity eating them up; the soldiers just doing their job, indifferent to everyone; Malchus who was about to pass through an experience he could never have imagined. All of them recoiling before the numinous majesty of the person standing before them. And, then, all of them proceeding as if nothing had happened, nothing to them, nothing to Malchus. What is Malchus going to say when he stands the next time before the Lord Jesus Christ? Unless, as I hope, sometime after Pentecost the Holy Spirit broke through the anti-God prejudice that had poisoned this man's mind and heart and made him realize that in those moments in the olive grove he had seen the true meaning of his life. Perhaps one day he was pulling on his ear, and by the Spirit's work in his heart, he suddenly realized and said to himself, "what have I done?" And then hurried off to find one of the apostles to get all his questions answered. Do we know his name, Malchus, because later the Holy Spirit made him a Christian, a lover of Christ, and so his name was preserved by Christians in the record of the history of our Savior? It is wonderful to think so.

*Without* the Holy Spirit a man or a woman remains a stranger to himself or to herself. They are just like those men who walked out of the olive grove with the Lord Christ in tow having already forced into the deepest recesses of their mind what they had just seen and felt. But, then, *by* the Holy Spirit, suddenly everything becomes clear.

The "cup" that the Lord spoke of. We now know what it means. All the suffering he had to endure to deliver us from our sins, our guilt before a holy God. Of course that is what it was. Of course he had to suffer so. How else could we be delivered from our just deserts? Suddenly it is all clear: the infinite love, the terrible sacrifice, the certainty of eternal life through faith in

Christ. What those men would not see – wouldn't see to save their lives – now suddenly is as plain as the noonday sun! That is the Holy Spirit at work, battering through our averseness to God to show us the truth about ourselves and about Jesus Christ.

Remember how the Apostle Paul put it in Romans 5:10? “For if, *when we were God's enemies*, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son...” He loved us as his enemies and overcame our hatred through the terrible sacrifice he himself paid. Why should I become a Christian? Why should I, if I am a Christian, live as an out and out Christian? Why should I be willing to forsake the world and anything in the world to be truly and entirely devoted to Jesus Christ?

Because to be anything else, anything less, is to be those men in that olive grove that terrible night. It is to do what they did and be what they were. It is to look truth in the face and then continue to live the lie. It is to continue to hate the Prince of Life. And that is, must be, the most supremely foolish and futile thing that a person can do!

See the Lord Jesus walking away with such men, a soldier on each side holding him by the arm. He could have stopped them in a moment as everyone in that olive grove knew full well. And see those soldiers now going back to their barracks and sitting down at their card game, making profane comments as soldiers do. You *do not* want to be like them!