

Message #55

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John

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THE PASSION OF CHRIST BEGINS

JOHN 18:1-11

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

One of the great genres of literature is the tragedy. William Shakespeare was the master of dramatic tragedy. Hamlet, Othello and King Lear are classic examples of the literary form. In each play, heroic characters are done in by their own flaws or the flaws of others.

We encounter tragedies of various sorts all around us. We are reminded of them regularly by the news media. Occasionally they cross paths with our own lives. We Christians are not immune to them.

I read a story this week about a missionary family that was the subject of tragedy. David and Svea Flood (PROJECTOR ON--- DAVID AND SVEA FLOOD) were missionaries from Sweden who headed to the Belgian Congo in Africa in 1921. They and their two year old son joined another Swedish family, the Ericksons, in setting out to do pioneer missionary work. They headed into the interior to unexplored areas to find unreached people who would be willing to hear the Gospel.

In village after village they were rejected. Exhausted after weeks of travel, they finally set up camp on a mountainside. The chief of the village nearest to them was hostile. He encouraged his people to stay away from the Westerners. David and Svea struggled to learn Swahili and tried to establish a relationship with the villagers. One little boy from the village was allowed to go up the mountain and sell these missionaries chickens and eggs. Whenever the lad showed up, Svea showered him with love and attention. One afternoon she led him in a prayer of invitation to believe in the Jesus whom they so much wanted to share.

Eventually the Ericksons got discouraged and returned to a mission station some distance away. The Flood family battled malaria and primitive living conditions and unfriendly villagers. Then Svea got

pregnant. She was already weak and sickly. The chief allowed one of the women in the village to serve as a midwife. A little girl was born, but mom died 17 days later. Tragedy. Svea had asked that the baby be named Aina, a classical Swedish name for girls. Dad was bitter. He dug a crude grave for his young wife and headed out to the mission station with his small son and baby daughter. David was finished with ministry. He was ready to go back to Sweden. Getting back to Sweden from a remote part of Congo meant a very arduous journey in the 1920s. The Ericksons had been unable to have children. They gladly jumped at the opportunity that David offered to adopt Aina.

Before Aina reached her first birthday, both of her parents were poisoned by hostile natives. Again, tragedy. Aina was claimed by another missionary couple. These Americans left the Congo two or three years later and settled in Minneapolis. Aina's name was changed to Aggie, and she was raised as an American. (PROJECTOR OFF)

The passage before us this morning has the makings of another tragedy. There is a betrayal. There is the looming death of an innocent man. There is initial bravery from friends, but eventual cowardice. The issue in the tragedies of life is this: Is God sovereign? Is there a good God who offers us hope and meaning in the tragedies of life?

Today is the first Sunday in Lent. I would like to claim credit for good planning in reaching this point in our study of John's Gospel at this season of the year. But the reality is that I just realized this week that the timing of the conclusion of the study of the Upper Room Discourse and the beginning of the story of the arrest, trial and crucifixion of Jesus fits with the beginning of Lent. So any credit will have to go to a higher authority.

After the Apostle John has spent five chapters recording the conversation of Jesus with His disciples in an upper room in Jerusalem at a Passover feast, he now moves more quickly to describe the arrest and crucifixion of Jesus. In this first part of his description, John emphasizes the sovereignty of Jesus over the events that follow.

I.

In vv. 1 & 2 of #18, which is found on p. 904 in the black Bibles under the chairs, we learn about JESUS' SOVEREIGNTY OVER THE PLACE OF HIS ARREST. (PROJECTOR ON--- I. JESUS' SOVEREIGNTY OVER...)

Verses 1 & 2 read, "**When Jesus had spoken these words he went out with his disciples across the**

brook Kidron, where there was a garden, which he and his disciples entered. Now Judas, who betrayed him also knew the place, for Jesus often met there with his disciples.”

The reference to “these words” is probably the whole message in the upper room which John has just recorded. Some Bible students suspect that some of the words of Jesus may have been spoken after the band of disciples left the upper room.

(UPPER ROOM TO GETHSEMANE) However the talking went, the starting point for this walk was inside the city of Jerusalem. The group of Jesus people had to go through part of the city, down into the valley of the Kidron, and then up the slope of the Mount of Olives.

(KIDRON VALLEY) This is a view of the Old City of Jerusalem, where the temple was located, from the foot of the Mount of Olives. Those are olive trees in the foreground. (KIDRON VALLEY AERIAL VIEW) This is an aerial view of the valley, which runs from the right below the Old City of Jerusalem, to the left. The Kidron was a wadi, which is like our washes, although I don’t think that there is any water that flows through this part of it any more.

Since this was the spring, there could have been some water in it. The other factor to consider is that this was Passover. It seems clear that Jesus and the disciples had just celebrated the Passover meal. Some weeks ago, I pointed out that Professor Edersheim believes that Galilean Jews celebrated the Passover one day before Judean Jews did. If that was the case, thousands of lambs would have been slaughtered in the temple that afternoon. That blood was poured out on the east side of the temple. As Jesus and the disciples stepped over the Kidron in the light of the full Passover moon, they may have been stepping over the blood of slain Passover lambs.

An additional thought of spiritual significance could have passed through the human mind of Jesus at this moment. His ancestor David passed over the Kidron in his flight from his son Absalom. That detail is noted in 2 Samuel 15:23. The issue, in a sense, was the same. Who is the rightful king of the Jews? Both stories involve a betrayal. In both cases, the traitors will be hanged. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Our text calls the place where Jesus and company entered “a garden.” The original Greek word means “a cultivated tract of land.” It was used by Greeks to refer to everything from a large plantation to a small plot of land. The other three Gospels make no mention of a plot or tract of land. This certainly does not

mean that there was not a cultivated area. But Matthew and Mark both refer to the place of meeting simply as Gethsemane. They do not specifically mention a garden or tract of land.

The word "Gethsemane" could be either Hebrew or Aramaic in origin. The languages are related. The meaning is "press of oils." This Gethsemane is said by the other Gospel writers to be located on the Mount of Olives. So clearly the oil involved is olive oil. Still today, as you could see from the earlier slide, there are olive trees there. So if there were olive trees which were cultivated, there needed to be an olive press.

Is there any evidence of an olive press located in the area? (PROJECTOR ON--- GETHSEMANE CAVE MAP) Yes, it is in a cave that is labeled "The Grotto of Gethsemane" on this map. Archaeologists have found evidence that this cave was used for an olive press. It is the only remains of an olive press that they have found in the area. It is near the grove of olives to which tourists are taken today.

(GETHSEMANE GROVE) The trees in this grove are indeed very old. A few years ago, samples were taken from several of them, and they were estimated to be 900 years old. (GETHSEMANE CHURCH CAVE) The grove is located to the left of this church building, which is the Church of All Nations. The cave is located to the left of the grove.

(GETHSEMANE ENTRANCE) The cave is not as conducive to handling a lot of visitors as is the grove of olive trees. It is controlled by the Franciscans. When I visited Israel, I went with a rather large group. Our guide took us to the grove. I had asked him beforehand if it would be possible to see the cave. He took me aside from the group and showed me how to get there. He told me not to take too long. I arrived here just as a mass was about to start. So I stepped inside for just a couple of minutes and got out just as a priest was closing the door for the service.

(GETHSEMANE INTERIOR) This is what it looks like inside. That this was the actual place where Jesus met with His disciples fits with the evidence that we have. It was an enclosed place. It was the location of an olive press. An olive orchard by itself would not have offered a great place to meet. It was still exposed to the elements. Later this night, we will be told that people were gathered around a fire by the high priest's house because it was cold. A cave would offer warmth and protection from the elements.

There is also an ancient tradition that this was a site that was visited by the earliest religious pilgrims who came to Jerusalem. A nun by the name of Egeria in 382 made a visit to Jerusalem and kept a diary

which has been handed down through the centuries. She makes reference to going “into Gethsemane” on Good Friday. She does not specifically mention a cave, but she speaks of being provided with candles “so all can see.” (PROJECTOR OFF)

There is perhaps also spiritual significance, or at least symbolic significance, in the sovereign choice by Jesus of a place with this name. This Son of David had an ancestor who had encounters involving a place with a similar name. Gath appears several times in the Old Testament. The Hebrew meaning of this word is “winepress.” David had several encounters involving Gath. His most famous fight was with Goliath, who was from Gath. At one point, David fled from King Saul, who was trying to kill him. He fled to Gath, though it was a Philistine city. He later described the intense struggle that he had while there. The struggle is described in Psalms 34 and 56. John does not describe the intense struggle that Jesus had in prayer in Gethsemane. But Matthew, Mark, and Luke do give us this description.

On some nights during this last week before crucifixion, it appears that Jesus and the disciples went to Bethany beyond the top of the Mount of Olives to the home of Lazarus and Martha and Mary. Ancient Jewish law said that religious pilgrims were not to go beyond the city limits of Jerusalem on Passover night. This place would be a good location to spend the night. Perhaps a friend of Jesus and the disciples owned this olive orchard and reserved the cave with the olive press for Jesus to use when He was in Jerusalem for the feasts.

Already we have seen Judas leave the Passover meal to collude with the religious authorities to arrange Jesus’ arrest. Jesus was aware of all of this. He was omniscient. If He wanted to avoid capture, He would not show up with the disciples to this familiar meeting place. If the Jesus people were not still in the upper room, this was the next obvious place to search. But Jesus had a purpose in all of this. He was not a victim of circumstances beyond His control. The place of His arrest was even a part of His sovereign control.

II.

In vv. 3-6 we are exposed to JESUS’ SOVEREIGNTY OVER HIS CAPTORS. (PROJECTOR ON--- JESUS’ SOVEREIGNTY OVER...) In v. 3 the author writes, **“So Judas, having procured a band of soldiers and some officers from the chief priests and the Pharisees, went there with lanterns and torches and weapons.”** We have seen that Judas had previously colluded with the representatives of the Sanhedrin, the high council of the Jews, to betray Jesus. At the Passover meal, Jesus told Judas privately that He knew what Judas was about to do. Judas left the meal. The other disciples thought that Jesus had sent him to get something more for the meal or to offer alms to the poor.

Mark's Gospel tells us that, as the Passover approached, the religious leaders were planning to nab Jesus. Chapter 14 vv. 1 & 2 give us this additional information: **"...And the chief priests and the scribes were seeking how to arrest him by stealth and kill him, for they said, 'Not during the feast, lest their be an uproar from the people.'"** Judas Iscariot came to them after the general desire to do in Jesus had been established. He could help them to get Jesus, but they were still planning to make an actual arrest only after most of the religious pilgrims had gone home.

Now Judas Iscariot has learned that Jesus is aware of his betrayal. He must assume that his cover has been blown. The other disciples may know. They will probably leave town soon. Judas makes the religious leaders aware of this. The situation is forcing the hand of the Sanhedrin. Any normal rebel leader would be planning to head for the hills. So they must act fast. Who is really in charge? Jesus is working all things out according to a divine plan.

The term "band of soldiers" in our translation of v. 3 is "cohort" in other translations. It is a Greek word used in this time and place to refer to a Roman battalion that theoretically numbered 600 men, though it could be more and was usually less. Verse 12 of this chapter refers to the leader of this "band of soldiers" as the captain. Literally the word is "chiliarch," which was not used of a centurion, the leader of 100 men, but the officer over an entire cohort. It is possible that the whole battalion did not come along, but Matthew #26 v. 47 says that it was a great multitude that was part of this arrest team. Temple police were included with them.

Jewish leaders must have approached the Roman authorities for help. Since it was already well along in the evening, they may not have wanted to bother Pontius Pilate the governor. We don't know. Perhaps they went directly to the Roman chiliarch. Normally this cohort was stationed at Caesarea on the coast, where the Roman governor had his headquarters, but on the Jewish feasts the governor often came down, and always the cohort came down. If there was going to be trouble with the Jews, it was likely to happen at one of these feasts.

(FORTRESS ANTONIA) The Roman cohort was posted at the Fortress Antonia at the northwestern corner of the temple. It was conveniently located there so that the Romans could keep an eye upon festivities in the temple. Now some, or most, of these soldiers joined temple police and Jewish officials in this mission to get Jesus. The Romans would not have allowed any Jewish police unit to have much in terms of weapons, lest at some point they would pose a threat to the Romans. So the Romans would come with the firepower to handle any situation. Above anything else, the Romans valued order in their

provinces. A warning to them about a rebel or troublemaker among them was likely to produce the desired response. (PROJECTOR OFF)

A full moon would not seem to make torches and lanterns so essential. But if the word was that Jesus might be hanging out in a cave, they could become essential. Judas was not really in charge of this expedition, but he was functioning as a guide to lead them to Jesus.

According to v. 4, **“Then Jesus, knowing all that would happen to him, came forward and said to them, ‘Who do you seek?’”** John omits details that the other Gospels include. We know from these other sources that Jesus wrestled in prayer while the disciples fell asleep. Notice that Jesus takes the lead. He perhaps meets His captors at the entrance of the cave. The author John is stressing the sovereign activity of Jesus, who knows all things. He is the one who is really taking command of the situation.

Verse 5: **“They answered him, ‘Jesus of Nazareth.’ Jesus said to them, ‘I am he.’ Judas, who betrayed him, was standing with them.”** We have seen Jesus use the expression “I am he” earlier. Its meaning is ambiguous. It could be simply a statement of self-identification. But it is also the Greek equivalent of the Old Testament name for God, YHWH. During an argument with the religious leaders in the temple, Jesus had earlier responded by saying, “Before Abraham was born, I am.” The Jewish leaders recognized that He was claiming to be God. Thus they tried to stone Him. So the Jews in this contingent could have recognized that Jesus was again making a veiled claim to deity.

Verse 6: **“When Jesus said to them, ‘I am he,’ they drew back and fell to the ground.”** There are various possibilities and combinations of possibilities to explain this reaction. There may have been some manifestation of the supernatural involved. It could be that the Jewish leaders were stunned and taken aback by the repetition of this claim to be God. It could be that this crowd of captors was tightly packed in as men descended into the entrance of the cave. When the ones at the front stepped back, they knocked over the ones behind them, and a domino effect resulted.

Back in #7 the temple police at the Feast of Booths were sent to arrest Jesus. They came back empty-handed. (JOHN 7:45-46) Verses 45 & 46 explain why: **“‘Why did you not bring him?’ The officers answered, ‘No one ever spoke like this man!’”** Such was the commanding force of the presence of Jesus.

In the face of impending tragedy, Jesus was still in charge. (JOHN 10:17-18) Back in #10 vv. 17 & 18, Jesus said, **“...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.”** Jesus is sovereign over His captors.

III.

In vv. 7-11 we encounter JESUS' SOVEREIGNTY OVER HIS IMMATURE DISCIPLES. (III. JESUS' SOVEREIGNTY OVER...) According to vv. 7-9, **“So he asked them again, ‘Whom do you seek?’ And they said, ‘Jesus of Nazareth.’ Jesus answered, ‘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: ‘Of those whom you gave me I have lost not one.”**

Jesus is seeking to free His disciples from capture. By asking the question a second time, He is clarifying the point that it is the supposed ringleader whom they are seeking, not His followers.

The Apostle John recognizes that this is a fulfillment of the promise made in the prayer of Jesus which the disciples heard just a little earlier in the upper room. If you turn back to #17, look at v. 12. Jesus prayed, **“While I was with them [the disciples], I kept them in your name, which you have given me. I have guarded them, and not one of them has been lost except the son of destruction, that the Scripture might be fulfilled.”** The son of destruction is Judas Iscariot, who is standing with the captors. Jesus is still guarding the rest of the disciples. He is exercising sovereignty over them.

Verse 10: **“Then Simon Peter, having a sword, drew it and struck the high priest’s servant and cut off his right ear. (The servant’s name was Malchus.)”** The Greek word for “sword” refers to a long knife or short sword. Peter is painfully aware of Jesus’ recent words a short time earlier that He would deny Jesus. He is acting now to prove himself. Most likely Peter was aiming for the head of this guy. Malchus ducked, and Peter hit his ear instead.

This attack could have led to an all out fight. With the arresting party having overwhelming numbers and the disciples being backed into a cave, the Jewish leaders and the Romans could have wiped out the whole band of Jesus people. But Jesus is in charge of this situation. (LUKE 22:51) In Luke #22 v. 51 we are told, **“But Jesus said, ‘No more of this!’ And he touched his ear and healed him.”** What do you suppose Malchus took away from this? His ear may have been healed practically before he realized that it was cut off.

Verse 11 back in our text says (PROJECTOR OFF), **“So Jesus said to Peter, ‘Put your sword into its sheath; shall I not drink the cup that the Father has given me?’”** “The cup” is a term used figuratively in the Old Testament as well as by Jesus for suffering and for the judgment of God. Indeed this is the sovereign purpose of Jesus, to become the object of His father’s judgment so that He might pay the penalty for the sins of the world. By trusting in Jesus and what He did for us, we humans have the opportunity to experience eternal forgiveness and eternal life. The immature disciples do not yet get this.

Peter’s behavior actually threatens the mission of Jesus. He does not understand that mission. But Jesus is sovereign over His immature disciples. Jesus is sovereign over a situation of what appears to be an unfolding tragedy.

In the most severe difficulties of life that we encounter, the challenge for us who are Christians is to believe that Jesus is sovereign. Is there purpose and hope in the human tragedies that we encounter?

The adoptive parents of Aina, now called Aggie, raised her on Christian principles in the Twin Cities. (PROJECTOR ON--- AGGIE HURST) Aggie went to a Bible college after high school. There she met and married a young man who was going into ministry. His name was Dewey Hurst. Aggie knew the basic story about the circumstances of her birth. She knew about her Swedish roots. She knew nothing about what happened to her father and older brother.

Dewey Hurst eventually became the president of a Bible College in Seattle. One day a Swedish religious magazine showed up in their mailbox. Aggie glanced through it and found a picture of a small white cross planted in the ground over a burial site. Written on the cross were the words “Svea Flood.” Aggie knew that was the name of her mother.

Aggie did not know Swedish, but there happened to be a professor at the college who was originally from Sweden. She rushed over to that woman’s house. The woman translated the story, which told about how her parents came to this African village. It told about the death of her mother and how she brought this little African boy to Christ. It described how the father left the baby girl in the hands of other missionaries. But then it went on to describe what happened to the African lad.

That boy later went on to start a school in that village. He taught and shared the gospel about Jesus with all of his students. Eventually that formerly hostile chief became a Christian. Now the village had 600

Christians and an active church congregation. Aggie was touched to learn about what happened out of the tragedy of her parents' suffering.

For their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary, the Bible college gave the Hursts a vacation to Sweden. Aggie reconnected with her Swedish family. She discovered that her birth father had remarried and had four more children. Unfortunately, his second wife also died. Now an old man, he was an alcoholic and a professed agnostic. Her half-siblings discouraged her from visiting her father, but she insisted. She found him in a small apartment. Diabetes and a stroke had crippled him. David wept when he saw his daughter. He recounted his bitterness about what happened in Africa. But then his daughter told him the rest of the story. According to Aggie, her explanation of the kindness of God brought him back to repentance and forgiveness and restoration. David Flood died a few weeks after Aggie returned to the US.

Several years later, Aggie and her husband attended an evangelism conference in London. One of the speakers was the superintendent of a national church in Zaire, what was once the Congo. He spoke about the spread of the gospel in his country and the work of God in his own church group of 110,000 people.

After the meeting, Aggie approached him and asked him if he had ever heard of a young missionary couple by the name of David and Svea Flood. Speaking through translators, he said, **"Yes, madam, I used to sell them chickens and eggs. ... It was Svea Flood who led me to Jesus Christ."** **"And who are you?"** **"I am Svea Flood's daughter; I was born on that mountaintop."** They proceeded to weep and embrace each other.

The African church leader invited Aggie to visit his hometown. Months later she did. She visited the missions outpost where she had been raised by the Ericksons before they died. Then she was driven to the village that her parents had desperately tried to reach. This time there were hundreds of villagers waiting and cheering for the daughter of the missionaries. They had built arches covered with flowers for her reception. (AGGIE HURST BIOGRAPHY) Aggie wrote in her biography, **"Eventually, the pastor of the village church led me up the hill, all the people following; at the top of the hill was a flat place beneath a grove of trees. The pastor pointed to it and said, 'This is where your parents' mud house once stood. ...this is where you were born.**

"He then turned and pointed, without a word, to a simple grave, framed in cement and over it stood a tall beautiful palm tree, overlooking the entire valley below. And marking the grave was that small

white cross--- and on it written, Svea Flood (1896-1923). I was standing where my mother had stood--- declaring the gospel to one small boy. And now I knew the harvest of the seed she had sown.” (*Aggie: The Inspiring Story of a Girl Without a Country*, Hurst, 1986)

In the tragedies of life that we do and will encounter, will we trust in the sovereignty of Jesus, the head of the church? Will we believe that our lives have a hope and a purpose?