

Temptation in the Garden

John 18:1–12

March 7, 2021

Pastor Trent Eastman — New Baptist Church, Huntington, WV

Where We Are in John's Gospel

We come tonight to John 18. So far in this gospel, Jesus has eaten with his disciples, after which he washed their feet. He then tells them plainly that he is going away and they cannot follow him now. This of course troubles the disciples, but Jesus assures them that it is going to be all right. They will not be left alone — God's Spirit will be sent to them, and Jesus himself is going to prepare a place for them and bring them to himself. John chapters 14, 15, and 16 are among the most comforting chapters in all of Scripture.

After Jesus speaks these words of comfort, he prays for his disciples. This is John 17, the great high priestly prayer, and over the last three weeks we have sat with that prayer — a prayer that only Jesus could pray. He prayed that the Father would glorify the Son so that the Son might glorify the Father. He prayed that the Father would keep and guard his people in his name so that they might have his joy made full in them. He prayed that they would be sanctified by truth, and that the word of God is that truth. He prayed that they might be one in the same way that he and the Father are one, so that the world might know just how deeply they are loved. And he prayed that they would be with him — where *I AM* — to behold his glory.

The meal is over. Words of love and comfort have been spoken. He has prayed for those he loves. And now it is time. John 18 is where Jesus picks up the cup of wrath and death.

John 18:1–12

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. 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. Then Jesus, knowing all that would happen to him, came forward and said to them, “Whom do you seek?” They answered him, “Jesus of Nazareth.” Jesus said to them, “I am he.” Judas, who betrayed him, was standing with them. When Jesus said to them, “I am he,” they drew back and fell to the ground. 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.” 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. So Jesus said to Peter, “Put your sword into its sheath; shall I not drink the cup that the Father has given me?” So the band of soldiers and their captain and the officers of the Jews arrested Jesus and bound him.

What John Is Highlighting

John’s gospel is different from Matthew, Mark, and Luke, and the reason is straightforward. John is less concerned with giving you every detail than he is with helping you understand the significance of what Jesus did. His gospel is written to focus the reader’s attention on certain things. It is a little like what happens when you are watching a football game on television and a fantastic play wins the game. The announcer goes back to the beginning of the play, circles the player you need to watch, traces out exactly what he does — a quick block here, releases, goes up field — and then starts the slow motion. Now you see it. That is exactly what John is doing. He is deliberately highlighting something about Jesus that is essential for us to see if we are to understand how our salvation is won. He tells us as much in John 20:31: he has written these things so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

With that in mind, I think the right way to read John is not to treat his gospel like puzzle pieces we press into the other gospels to fill out the picture, but rather to pay careful attention to what is *different* in John — because the differences are the point.

John’s account of the arrest is very different from the other three gospels. Why? What is he highlighting? The answer is this: John wants you to see that Jesus has all authority and power

to do exactly as he wills. Jesus had the complete freedom to choose the cross or not. Which means that Jesus was not *taken* — he gave himself up. And that free, willful choice to drink this cup of death and wrath is essential to our salvation.

Let me walk through the text and show you how John makes that case.

First, notice that John does not give us the name of the garden. He does not use the word *Gethsemane*. That is deliberate. The word Gethsemane means the place of the press — the place of suffering. Matthew, Mark, and Luke linger in Gethsemane. They give us Jesus praying alone, the disciples sleeping, the sweat falling like drops of blood. They describe Jesus being pressed down under the weight of his passion. But not John. John wants you to see Jesus' power and authority, and so he gives you simply: a garden.

They cross the Kidron — a small stream running between the Mount of Olives and the temple mount — and they enter the garden. And then Judas arrives. Verse 3 tells us he brought a *band* of soldiers. That word in Greek is a military term for a unit representing one-tenth of a legion — roughly six hundred soldiers. This was not a handful of temple guards coming with torches. Judas brought hundreds of armed soldiers to arrest one man.

And there Jesus meets them. He does not wait. He comes *forward* and asks, “Whom do you seek?” They answer, “Jesus of Nazareth.” And Jesus says to them — literally — *I AM*. The word “he” is not in the Greek. This is the holy name of God, the name spoken from the burning bush in Exodus 3. And when Jesus declares that name to these hundreds of soldiers, they draw back and fall to the ground.

Jesus is unarrestable. Throughout the gospels, we see people — primarily the religious establishment — attempting to capture and kill him, and they simply cannot do it. Crowds want to stone him and he walks right through them. They try to trap him with words, and they end up looking foolish. They send guards to arrest him and the guards come back speaking his praises. No one can touch him. And even here, on the night when hundreds of soldiers come for him, Jesus speaks his name — the name of God — and they all go down.

The Temptation in the Garden

And then something happens. Peter, emboldened no doubt by this stunning display of power, draws a sword and cuts off the ear of the high priest's servant. He has done exactly what he said he would do — not only earlier that evening when he promised Jesus he would never desert him, but months before, when they were still on the road to Jerusalem. Do you remember that moment? Jesus had told his disciples plainly what was coming:

And he began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again. And he said this plainly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and seeing his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.” (Mark 8:31–33)

Peter’s action in the garden — like his rebuke on the road — is a temptation. It is a temptation for Jesus to not go to the cross. That is precisely why Jesus had said to him then, “Get behind me, Satan.” The temptation is not only Judas and his soldiers. It is also Peter and his sword.

And now Jesus speaks directly to the cup. “Put your sword into its sheath; shall I not drink the cup that the Father has given me?” I believe it is impossible for us to fully comprehend what drinking this cup means. Psalm 75:8 describes it this way:

“For in the hand of the LORD there is a cup with foaming wine, well mixed, and he pours out from it, and all the wicked of the earth shall drain it down to the dregs.”

This is the cup of God’s wrath — his full and undiminished punishment poured out upon all sin. It is a cup of separation, a cup of death, a cup of cursedness. Jesus has the authority, the power, and the freedom to refuse it.

But what does he do? He heals the soldier’s ear. He puts his hands out. He allows himself to be taken. Jesus chooses to hand himself over. He chooses obedience to the will of the Father. He chooses to receive the cup he has been given, and to drink.

Two Gardens

The Bible begins in a garden. In Genesis 2, God places the man and the woman in a garden called Eden. There they enjoyed unbroken fellowship with God. There was no curse, no death, no sin upon them. But something happened in that garden. In Genesis 3, the man and the woman are tempted by a serpent to do the one thing they were forbidden to do — to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. We know what happened. Adam and Eve did not trust the Lord. They believed the serpent’s lie that God was holding something back from them. And so, because of that temptation, they sinned. The primary consequence was this: they were removed from the garden — that place of fellowship with God. They became alienated from him, relationally separated, and that relational separation is the very heart of what we call the curse of sin and death. Through the sin of one man, death spread to all people.

But now, in John 18, there is another garden. And just as in the first garden, there is a temptation. Just as Adam was confronted with the choice to eat or not eat, Jesus is confronted with the choice to drink or not drink. But unlike Adam, Jesus trusts the Father. He is obedient, even to the point of death. He gives himself over.

Earlier this evening we read from Romans 5, a passage that holds these two gardens together:

“For if, because of one man’s trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ.” (Romans 5:17)

If Adam’s unfaithfulness brought upon us the curse of sin and death, how much more does Jesus’ faithfulness give to us life? How much more does the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign through the one man, Jesus Christ?

Our salvation is won by the faithfulness of Jesus. And those who are in Christ are no longer defined by the curse brought by Adam. They live instead under the reign of righteousness and the abundance of grace that has come through Christ.

Which Reign Rules Your Life?

So I want to ask you: what defines your life? What rules your life? Is it the reign of death that has come to us through Adam? Or is it the reign of righteousness and the abundance of grace that have come to us through Christ?

Think about the figures we meet in this text. Judas — the disciple so consumed by greed and the things of this world that he never escaped the reign of death, despite being as close to Jesus as any man alive. And Peter — so wrong in his expectations about Jesus that he became, without intending it, a source of temptation to the very one he loved, doing things in Jesus’ name that were directly contrary to Jesus’ will.

Are you a Judas? Are you a Peter? If so, I have good news for you. Jesus Christ is faithful. And it is because of his faithfulness to the will of the Father — faithfulness even to the point of death — that there is an abundance of grace available to you, greater than all your sins. Receive that grace, and allow the reign of righteousness to rule your life.

Amen.