

Chapter 107: Fulfilling the Scriptures

Matthew 26:47–56

In Gethsemane, Jesus poured out his anguished soul before his Father in heaven. In doing so, he relinquished the fears flowing from his human will as his Father supplied the supernatural strength of the Holy Spirit to empower Jesus for the path ahead. Jesus, having strengthened himself through prayer, is now prepared for the betrayal of Judas, his arrest, and the crucifixion that will follow. In this scene where Jesus is betrayed by Judas, arrested by the authorities, and denied by his disciples, we see the magnificent restrained power of Jesus. Out of all that happens to Jesus, nothing is beyond his control, and he refuses nothing that his Father has set out for him. Here, we see that *Jesus laid down his life as one both in authority and under authority*.

Authority and Surrender (Matt. 26:47–50)

The dominant theme throughout this passage emphasizes the absolute control of Jesus over the situation. In the previous section, Jesus woke his three closest disciples to inform them that the hour was at hand for him to be betrayed into the hands of sinners, and pointed them to the arrival of Judas (Matt. 26:45–46). The first verse of this section highlights how closely the arrival of the betrayers connects with Jesus' words: "While he was still speaking..." (v. 47a). As Calvin notes, Matthew is "careful to state that our Lord foresaw what happened; from which it might be inferred, that he was not dragged to death by external violence, except so far as wicked men carried into execution the secret purpose of God."¹

As Matthew had written in the report of Judas's meeting with the chief priests to plan the betrayal, the Evangelist once again highlights the fact that Judas is "one of the twelve" (Matt. 26:14, 47b). This description does not merely identify Judas, but it underscores the treachery of Judas's betrayal. Here, Judas does not come alone, but "with him a great crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests and the elders of the people" (v. 47c). Hagner notes that this show of force may "seem to suggest that they intended to take into custody a serious criminal (cf. v 55). Perhaps they feared that the eleven would defend Jesus at any cost."² While the rest of the narrative will show that those fears were, to some degree, well founded, we will also see that it is Jesus and *not* this armed crowd who puts an end to the disciples' resistance.

Matthew now tells us more of Judas's conspiracy with the chief priests: "Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, 'The one I will kiss is the man; seize him'" (v. 48). Although it may seem somewhat strange that they would need Judas to identify Jesus, we should keep in mind a few factors that would have made this important. First, as Carson notes, it was not only dark, but additionally,

¹ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 3:240.

² Hagner, *Matthew 14 - 28*, 788.

“in a time long before photography, the faces of even great celebrities would not be nearly as widely known as today.”³ Additionally, Blomberg suggests the possibility that the whole area of Jerusalem (possibly including other parts of Gethsemane) “was teeming with Passover pilgrims who were tenting there.”⁴ It was essential, then, to have someone sufficiently familiar with Jesus’ patterns (see John 18:2) and Jesus’ appearance in order to identify Jesus immediately.

Matthew draws out the sinister nature of the act of Judas’s betrayal in several ways. To begin, the word for “Greetings” was a friendly thing to say to someone, “used to indicate all kinds of friendly greeting and always expresses the wish of happiness and well-being.”⁵ Judas then hails Jesus as “Rabbi,” and kisses him. To kiss Jesus was a normal greeting in the culture, as a sign of affection and friendliness. Still, the word for “kiss” in v. 48 (Judas’s proposal of the plan) differs from the word for “kiss in v. 49, where Judas actually kisses Jesus. The latter word is an intensive form of the former word, suggesting that Judas may have kissed Jesus in “an unusually elaborate welcome on this occasion, [which] heightens his treachery.”⁶

Jesus is not deceived by the lavish display of affection; however, the expression that the ESV translates as “Friend, do what you came to do” (v. 50a) is notoriously difficult to translate. To begin, the word “friend” does not quite convey in English the ominous overtones that accompany this term throughout the Gospel of Matthew (see Matt. 20:13; 22:12).⁷ Additionally, Jesus words are, very literally, “for which you have come,” and it is unclear whether this is meant as a command (“*Do that for which you have come*”; so, ESV), a question (“For which *purpose* have you come?”), a statement of some kind (whether, “*I know that for which you have come*”), or an exclamation of “resigned disappointment” (“For this you have come!”).⁸ Indeed, the brevity of the phrase may be intended to be ambiguous enough to accommodate any or all of these meanings. Overall, the point is that Jesus saw through Judas’s greeting to know the real reason for which Judas had come.

At this point, the armed crowd “came up and laid hands on Jesus and seized him” (v. 50b). The fact that they “laid hands” on Jesus fulfills the words that Jesus had spoken only moments before: “the Son of Man is betrayed into the *hands* of sinners” (Matt. 26:45).⁹ This fulfillment does not only demonstrate Jesus’ foreknowledge of the situation, but his control over the situation. It would seem that Judas or his armed escorts would have the upper hand over Jesus and his disciples, but Jesus has prepared for and anticipates everything that is happening. France, observing Jesus’ control, also notes that “The contrast with his emotional prayer in the preceding pericope is striking. The Jesus whom Judas and his posse meet is now resolute, calm, and authoritative.”¹⁰

³ Carson, “Matthew,” 612.

⁴ Blomberg, *Matthew*, 397–98.

⁵ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 1047–48.

⁶ Blomberg, *Matthew*, 398. Hendriksen suggests that Judas’s kissing was “probably fervently or repeatedly,” Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 923–24 (esp. footnote 851). See also Hagner, *Matthew 14 - 28*, 788..

⁷ Blomberg, *Matthew*, 398.

⁸ For the first three options, see Blomberg, *Matthew*, 398. For the final option, see Hagner, *Matthew 14 - 28*, 789.

⁹ Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1111.

¹⁰ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1011.

Authority and Command (Matt. 26:51–54)

One of the disciples (Peter, as John 18:10 informs us) cannot bear to allow Jesus to be arrested: “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” (v. 51). In the context of the evening so far, we should remember that Jesus has told Peter several times that he would deny him. Carson notes that, “After repeated warnings of defection, Peter may have felt that the crucial test of loyalty had arrived. He is magnificent and pathetic—magnificent because he rushes in to defend Jesus with characteristic courage and impetuosity, pathetic because his courage evaporates when Jesus undoes Peter’s damage, forbids violence, and faces the passion without resisting.”¹¹ As Calvin notes, “we are much more courageous and ready for fighting than for bearing the cross.”¹²

Jesus, however, puts a stop to this resistance immediately: “Put your sword back into its place. For all who take the sword will perish by the sword” (v. 52). Once again the emphasis of the passage is on Jesus’ control over the situation: “when one of his disciples tries to defend him, it is Jesus himself, not the arresting party, who puts an end to the attempt.”¹³ Whether Jesus’ warning about perishing by the sword forbids all warfare is inconsistent with the rest of the Bible (both Old and New Testaments), and it misses the unique nature of this moment. Carson wisely limits the significance of this passage to the simple idea “that violence *in defense of Christ* is completely unjustified; certainly v.52 separates Jesus from the Zealots.”¹⁴

One of the main reasons that Jesus does not need *Peter’s* defense is that Jesus has at his disposal an overwhelming angelic army, should he choose to make use of it: “Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels?” (v. 53).¹⁵ As France notes, Jesus here makes “it clear that it is not that he *cannot* resist but that he *will not*. In Gethsemane he has accepted his Father’s will.”¹⁶ The Scriptures must be fulfilled.

Authority and Fear (Matt. 26:55–56)

Jesus then scolds those who have come to arrest him: “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” (v. 55). While teaching in the temple, Jesus had not been surrounded by bodyguards, ready to whisk Jesus away at the first sign of trouble. Even before this night, Jesus had not resisted any kind of arrest. Yet, although they now brought an overwhelming force of people and weapons to capture Jesus, those measures were entirely unnecessary.

For the second time, Jesus cites the fulfillment of the Scriptures as the driving motivation for his submission to this unjust process: “But all this has taken place that the Scriptures of the prophets might be

¹¹ Carson, “Matthew,” 613.

¹² Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 3:243.

¹³ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1011.

¹⁴ Carson, “Matthew,” 613.

¹⁵ “How silly for Peter to flash his little human sword!” (Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 1052.)

¹⁶ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1008.

fulfilled” (v. 56a). Lenski ominously writes, “Here are the real forces at work in what is taking place this night: God is carrying out his prophetic plans, Jesus is thus voluntarily putting himself into his captors’ hands. That and that alone is why this army is scoring such a huge victory against a single humble man! But let these victors think of the part they are playing in God’s plan as recorded in the Scriptures.”¹⁷ These thugs have not overpowered Jesus; Jesus has restrained his power to give himself over to them. Yet, while Jesus will allow himself to be given over this night in order to die as the suffering, Messianic servant, his estate of humiliation will soon come to a close. After that, he will rise victorious in his estate of exaltation, which will include returning one day to bring judgment in righteousness against all of his enemies. These men will be held accountable for whatever power they think they are exercising against Jesus.

The final note of this passage fulfills what Jesus had foretold: “Then all the disciples left him and fled” (v. 56b). This is the culmination of their failure to believe Jesus’ warning (Matt. 26:31–35), to watch and pray as preparation for the coming trial (Matt. 26:40–46), and their misunderstanding of their mission: “Hence we may again infer how much more ready they were to fight rashly than to follow their Master.”¹⁸ At Jesus’ greatest hour of need, his disciples all scatter from him, leaving Jesus to face his trial abandoned and alone.

Discussion Questions

1. How much time did Jesus have to spare between finishing praying and the arrival of Judas (v. 47a)? What had Jesus been “speaking” when Judas arrived (v. 47b; see Matt. 26:45–46)? What does the description, “one of the twelve,” suggest (v. 47c)? What does Matthew tell us of Judas’s treachery (v. 48–49)? What should we make of Jesus’ response to Judas (v. 50)? In all this, did anything catch Jesus off guard? Did anyone overpower Jesus? If not, then what happened here?
2. What kind of authority does Jesus possess for his disciples to jump into action, fighting to defend their Lord (v. 51)? Why does Jesus use his authority to command his disciples to stop fighting in his defense (v. 52)? What does Jesus’ authority to command twelve legions of angels tell us about the nature of this scenario as a whole (v. 53)? What should we understand from Jesus’ statement that he is under the authority of the Scriptures (v. 54)?
3. Jesus observes that the crowd never tried to arrest him when he was in public (v. 55). What prevented the religious leaders from laying hands on Jesus then (Matt. 21:46)? Why does this mob not fear to arrest Jesus now? When the disciples flee, what do they fear (v. 56b)? In the light of the fears of the mob and of the disciples, what should we learn from Jesus’ repeated statement that he is acting under the authority of the Scriptures?
4. How does this passage contrast the authority of Jesus and his being under the authority of the Scriptures? Why did Jesus voluntarily come under submission to his Father’s will, as expressed in the Scriptures? What role did his love for his people play in what he did? How does this story teach us of the power and love of Jesus over our own lives? What strength should we draw in the midst of our own suffering from Jesus’ voluntarily suffering for us?

¹⁷ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 1055.

¹⁸ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 3:250.