

“I Am He”

The Fifty-Fifth in a Series of Sermons on the Gospel of John

Texts: John 18:1-11; 2 Kings 1:1-16

Jesus has done absolutely nothing wrong. He has spoken only those words which YHWH has given him to speak. He has broken not a single one of God’s commandments in his thinking, in his doing, or in his speech. He has loved God with his whole heart and his neighbor as himself. But the religious leadership of Israel absolutely detests Jesus—this includes the Sanhedrin (the Jewish senate), both main political parties and religious factions (the Sadducees and the Pharisees), the smaller factions (the Herodians and the zealots), as well as many of the chief priests, elders, and biblical scholars (the scribes and teachers of the law). In their minds, Jesus is a blasphemer and a heretic. Although his miracles attest that he is from God, instead, many of the Jewish religious leaders see this as proof that he is in league with the devil. Jesus has spoken of himself as equal with YHWH, he has called himself the true temple as well as the true Israel. He identifies himself as the “Son of Man,” a prophet, and that one foretold throughout the Old Testament. Because people love darkness rather than light (even “religious people”), the Jewish leadership seeks to put an end to Jesus’ messianic mission, even as he seeks to be alone with his disciples to pray. It is hard to imagine, but the sinless Son of God is about to be arrested by an armed mob on the charge of blasphemy, even as one of his own disciples betrays him by revealing where Jesus is to be found. And all the while the citizens of Jerusalem and pilgrims in the city to celebrate the Passover, remain sound asleep only to be rudely awakened as the news of Jesus’s arrest begins to spread.

We continue our series on the Gospel of John, and we enter into the final section of this gospel, the so-called “Passion Narrative.” In the “Passion” section of his gospel, John recounts those events associated with Jesus’ arrest, trial, and crucifixion (chapters 18-19), followed by the account of our Lord’s triumphal resurrection from the dead (John 20-21). The first seventeen chapters of John’s gospel have been pointing to those events found in the closing chapters. Jesus’ long-dreaded hour is at hand. The time has come for Jesus to suffer and die, and in doing so, secure eternal life and faith for all those given him by the Father. In his death and resurrection, Jesus will bring glory to both the Father and to himself—the very thing which Jesus sought in the opening portion of his High Priestly Prayer.

One of the things which makes the gospels unique as a literary genre, and which separate them from ordinary biographies, is the presence of a so-called “Passion narrative.” Each of the gospels includes an account of Jesus’ arrest, trial, and brutal death by crucifixion, followed by the account of Jesus’ resurrection from the dead. Although each of the gospels emphasizes different aspects of Jesus’ passion, when taken together we get a very full eyewitness account of why Jesus was crucified, how his death fulfilled Old Testament prophecy, what this death means (in terms of our salvation), and how his death was not the end of his messianic mission. It is in Jesus’ bodily resurrection from the dead that many of the hard sayings and unexpected turn of events revealed throughout John’s gospel find their resolution—something which the disciples have been led to expect but were struggling to understand.

John, who was an eyewitness and a participant in the events he’s about to recount in chapter 18, includes the kind of unique details which one might expect from an eyewitness. John tells us that Jesus went to Gethsemane by walking through Kidron Valley. John also specifically identifies Peter as the one who uses his sword to cut off the ear of a man named Malchus—a servant of Caiaphas, the high priest. No

other gospel mentions these details. In addition, the Romans figure a bit more prominently in John's account than in the synoptics. In verse 3, for example, John tells us that Roman soldiers were present when Jesus was arrested, and in John's account, Pontius Pilate (the Roman governor) plays a larger role than he does in the synoptics.

There are difference as well in points of emphasis in comparison with the other gospels. John largely skips over Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane, as well as omitting some of the details of Jesus' arrest, likely due to the detail and length of Jesus' Upper Room Discourse (John 13-16), and High Priestly Prayer (John 17).¹ Each of the gospels describe the same historical events in light of their distinctive purposes for writing—Matthew was written to convince Jews that Jesus is the Messiah, Mark was probably written for Gentiles and centers around Peter's perspective, and Luke, who sets out his gospel chronologically. John, you may recall, writes his gospel as spelled out in chapter 20, vv. 30-31. *“Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.”* John wants all who read his gospel to come to faith in Christ.

When Jesus finished celebrating the Passover with his disciples, he sought to leave the upper room and head out for his fateful meeting with Caiaphas in Gethesamne. Recall, that in verse 31 of John 14, Jesus told the disciples, *“but I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father. Rise, let us go from here.”* But the disciples had so many questions to ask that as Jesus stood up to leave, the conversation continued on for some time (the material in John 15-16), before Jesus stopped to pray for his disciples (John 17). Having taught the disciples everything which the Father had revealed to him, and now having prayed for himself (John 17:1-5), for his disciples (John 17:6-19), and for us (John 17:20-26), Jesus can delay no more. His time has come.

As we turn to our text, verse 1 of chapter 18, we read, *“when Jesus had spoken these words [the content of John 14-17], he went out with his disciples across the brook Kidron, where there was a garden, which he and his disciples entered.”* Jesus has been set apart (“sanctified”) for a particular mission—to save all those given him by the Father before the foundation of the world. Jesus must die for the sins of his people, and he must fulfill all righteousness through his own perfect obedience to the Father's commands. These things must happen so that Jesus can complete his messianic mission and grant eternal life and faith to all those given him by the Father. This series of events begin with Jesus' arrest, and by the next morning will take Jesus before Jewish and Roman authorities, then to a place called “Golgotha.”

Although there is a certain sense of inevitability about Jesus' mission taking him to the cross where he will suffer and die, we know from the account of Jesus' time of prayer in Gethsemane—before his arrest as recorded in Matthew 26:38-39—that this evening is exceedingly difficult for Jesus (on a human and emotional level). There is no doubt as to whether or not he will complete his mission—he will—yet his fear and apprehension regarding what is about to happen and the suffering he will undergo are real and palpable. In his gospel, Matthew tells us that Jesus said to his disciples, *“my soul is very sorrowful, even to death; remain here, and watch with me.” And going a little farther he fell on his face and prayed, saying, ‘My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will.’”* We can imagine that little was said as the group left the upper room and walked through the wadi (identified by John) as the Kidron Valley, a dry wash which runs just below the outer courtyard of the

¹ The similarities and differences between John and the synoptic gospels is capably discussed in: Carson, The Gospel According to John, 571-576.

Jerusalem temple. On the other side of the valley is the Mount of Olives, on the slopes of which was a large grove of olive trees, and a small walled-off garden known as Gethsemane.

This was a familiar place to the disciples, as we discover in verse 2. *“Now Judas, who betrayed him, also knew the place, for Jesus often met there with his disciples.”* This very well may have been the location where, on the previous evening, Jesus gave the Olivet Discourse of Matthew 24, Mark 13, and Luke 19 and 21, in which he describes the course of future events and predicted the destruction of the temple and the city of Jerusalem by the Romans. In Luke 21:37, we are told that, *“every day [Jesus] was teaching in the temple, but at night he went out and lodged on the mount called Olivet.”* Since Jesus went there several times during the Passover week after his triumphal entrance into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday (it is now late Thursday evening), Judas, who had left the upper room earlier—after Jesus identified him as a treacherous man and the agent of devil—knew exactly where to find Jesus and his disciples once the Passover celebration had ended.

Judas brought the members of the Sanhedrin who had been involved in plotting Jesus’ death since the days of the Feast of Booths, months earlier. Judas also led a detachment of Roman soldiers to the garden, men who likely would have been stationed in the nearby Antonia Fortress to help keep the peace as the population of Jerusalem swelled to great numbers with many pilgrims coming into the city for the Passover. According to verse 3, *“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.”*

If Jesus and his disciples sought out this walled garden for privacy and prayer, then it would be the ideal place to arrest Jesus. Jesus would not be expecting to be arrested there (the Sanhedrin reasoned), and since the garden was small and surrounded by a stone wall, a large number of soldiers would not be required to surround it, thereby preventing Jesus from escaping. According to John, Judas (the traitor) directed the mob to Jesus’ precise location—for which Judas would get his thirty pieces of silver. Present were a detachment of Roman soldiers, certain “officers” (the temple police who would be the ones to actually arrest Jesus), men who represented the chief priests (who controlled the Sanhedrin) and the Pharisees (the minority party), who disliked Jesus so much they were willing to participate with the more liberal Sadducees (the majority party of the Sanhedrin), whom the Pharisees hated, and with whom, on most occasions, they would have refused to co-operate. But this was not “most” occasions.

When the arrest mob found Jesus right where Judas said he would be, the disciples must have been taken by surprise by the mob’s arrival—they did not know what was about to happen. But Jesus was not surprised by the inevitable events about to unfold. In the synoptic gospels, we learn that as Jesus was praying, the disciples had quickly fallen asleep (the hour was late and they were growing tired), leaving Jesus alone when he needed his disciples the most. John affirms Jesus’ foreknowledge of his arrest in verse 4. *“Then Jesus, knowing all that would happen to him, came forward and said to them, ‘Whom do you seek?’”* Jesus voluntarily came forward and announced himself, which indicates he probably stepped out of the garden toward them when the mob approached.

The critical point is that Jesus is not taken by forces beyond his control. Our Lord could have summoned a legion of angels to wipe this puny little mob from the face of the earth. Or he could have asked the Father for a miraculous demonstration of power—like the ground opening up and swallowing all of them as in the days of Korah and the rebellion in the wilderness. Instead, Jesus knew the mob was coming, and willingly allows himself to be arrested. The scene is packed with irony as the Roman and Jewish civil authorities (who hate each other) now work together to arrest a man who could kill them all with but a word. Yet, Jesus does not resist. He simply asks them, *“whom do you seek?”*

The arrest mob was not expecting things to go smoothly. In response to Jesus' question, we read in verse 5 that "*they answered him, 'Jesus of Nazareth.' Jesus said to them, 'I am he.'*" John only tells us that "*Judas, who betrayed him, was standing with them.*" Matthew's account includes an important additional detail revealing the true depths of Judas' treachery. "*Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, 'The one I will kiss is the man; seize him.'* And [Judas] came up to Jesus at once and said, '*Greetings, Rabbi!*' And he kissed him. Jesus said to him, '*Friend, do what you came to do.*'" Judas kisses Jesus, as Jesus identifies himself as one whom they are seeking.

Upon realizing they had their man, the mob is not sure how to react—but they clearly expect trouble. John tells us that "*when Jesus said to them, 'I am he,' they drew back and fell to the ground.*" Jesus uses the *ego emi* (I Am) formula again, but likely in the general sense of "it is I." Throughout John's gospel, Jesus has repeatedly identified himself as *ego emi* (I Am), most notably in John 8:58, when debating with the scribes and Pharisees, Jesus told them "*truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am.*" Since this expression is one of the characteristic ways in which YHWH reveals himself throughout the Old Testament (i.e., Exodus 3:15 and the burning bush encountered by Moses), we read that in the earlier encounter the scribes and Pharisees "*picked up stones to throw at him, but Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple*"—an indication that Jesus was identifying himself with YHWH by using *ego emi* as a title.

On this occasion, those arresting Jesus may be reacting to Jesus' simple assertion ("it is I") as though Jesus were once again speaking as though he were one with YHWH in the Old Testament.² Since the mob expected trouble from Jesus, they immediately recoil in horror at his words in which he claims a divine identity—whether falling to ground was a sign that they took Jesus to be blaspheming, and this was a show of disgust at how terrible a thing Jesus had done, or (and this is much more likely) the mob was truly afraid that Jesus was about to perform a miracle thwarting their purposes, John does not say. But the fact that the soldiers fell to the ground—along with the chief priests, Pharisees, and temple guards, is a very good indication that everyone was terrified once Jesus spoke and said "it is I" (*ego emi*). Everyone is fearful and jumpy—except Jesus.

We know throughout the course of redemptive history whenever God reveals himself to people, the human reaction is fear. Here, all Jesus has to do was identify himself and the mob cowers before him. But whether from anger at his words, or from fear that he will perform a miracle, the act of falling to the ground before Jesus has strong messianic implications. There are a number of places in the Psalms where unbelievers are terrified in the presence of YHWH (Psalm 27, 34, 56). In Psalm 27:2, we read, "*when evildoers assail me to eat up my flesh, my adversaries and foes, it is they who stumble and fall.*"

There is also a loud echo in John's account of Elijah's experience in 2 Kings 1:9-14 (our Old Testament lesson), where fire consumes pagan soldiers who oppose God's purposes. And then in Isaiah 11:4, the prophet foretells that the messiah, "*with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; and he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.*" Those police and soldiers who were there to arrest Jesus on trumped-up charges, fall at his feet when he simply tells them, "it is I" whom you seek. Their fear of Jesus fulfills Old Testament messianic expectations.

Therefore, the mob must have been completely surprised by the ease in which Jesus is arrested. They know full-well Jesus' reputation as a miracle worker. They know all about Lazarus being raised from the

² Carson, The Gospel According to John, 578.

dead just days before. They also know that Jesus has bested them every time they have debated with him during the feasts preceding the Passover. The mob knows that Jesus has successfully eluded them every time they have sought to arrest him previously. They expect Jesus to do something similar on this night—hence the inclusion of Roman soldiers in addition to the temple guards—but when they identified Jesus as the one whom they were seeking, surely they were surprised by the fact that Jesus does not resist them. The dialogue between Jesus and those arresting him is repeated in verses 7-8, and you can just picture the awkward moment when Jesus does nothing, and those arresting him get up off the ground not quite knowing what to do or expect. “*So he asked them again, ‘Whom do you seek?’ And they said, ‘Jesus of Nazareth.’ Jesus answered, ‘I told you that I am he.’*”

Jesus is concerned for the welfare of his disciples, and in the face of the armed mob, Jesus seeks their freedom from arrest and protection from bodily harm. Jesus tells the authorities in the last part of verse 8, “*So, if you seek me, let these men go.*” But his plea for harm not to come to the disciples is also a fulfillment of Jesus’ prayer for his disciples uttered a short time before in the upper room. In verse 9, John tell us that “*this was to fulfill the word that he had spoken: ‘Of those whom you gave me I have lost not one.’*” In his high priestly prayer (John 17:12), Jesus prayed, “*while I was with them, 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.*” This petition in Jesus’ prayer, in turn, harkens us back to passages such as John 10:28, where Jesus (speaking as the good shepherd) said, “*I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand.*”

Throughout these events it is clear that Jesus is the good shepherd who is about to willingly lay down his life for his sheep so as to save them and us from the guilt of our sins and turn aside the wrath of God. Of those given him by the Father, including his disciples, Jesus will lose none. When the mob shows up to arrest him Jesus already knows his own fate. But he also seeks his disciples’ deliverance from arrest and protection from a similar fate, because he deeply cares for these men, and because, as the good shepherd, the Scriptures had foretold that he loose none of those given him by the Father. He does not.

As for Judas, the son of destruction, Matthew tells us of his fate (chapter 27:3-10). “*Then when Judas, his betrayer, saw that Jesus was condemned, he changed his mind and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders, saying, ‘I have sinned by betraying innocent blood.’ They said, ‘What is that to us? See to it yourself.’ And throwing down the pieces of silver into the temple, he departed, and he went and hanged himself. But the chief priests, taking the pieces of silver, said, ‘It is not lawful to put them into the treasury, since it is blood money.’ So they took counsel and bought with them the potter’s field as a burial place for strangers. Therefore that field has been called the Field of Blood to this day. Then was fulfilled what had been spoken by the prophet Jeremiah, saying, ‘And they took the thirty pieces of silver, the price of him on whom a price had been set by some of the sons of Israel, and they gave them for the potter’s field, as the Lord directed me.’*” The good shepherd preserves his sheep to fulfill an ancient prophecy, while the son of destruction (Judas) meets an appropriate fate—he hangs himself, also in fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy.

Although Jesus voluntarily surrenders to the mob, the tempestuous Peter seeks to defend his master. This is the same man who swore just hours earlier that he was willing to die for Jesus, only to be told by Jesus that instead, Peter would deny that he even knew Jesus—something Peter will in fact do shortly after the disciples flee into the darkness. Before his courage departs, however, John informs us in verse 10 that “*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.)*” According to Luke (22:51), Jesus healed Malchus on the spot. We may give Peter kudos for his zeal to defend Jesus, but this is yet another sad indication of just how badly the

disciples misunderstood Jesus' messianic purpose in accomplishing our redemption. In verse 11, John reports that "*Jesus said to Peter, 'Put your sword into its sheath.'*" In his gospel, Matthew adds that Jesus told Peter, "*all who take the sword will perish by the sword.*" Violence breeds violence. Jesus will not be taken by force, but will surrender voluntarily.

It is also interesting to notice that when Matthews mentions Jesus' comment about the futility of Peter's action, Matthew goes on to mention what Jesus also said to Peter about the necessity of Jesus' voluntary surrender. In Matthew 26:52-56, we are told that "*Jesus said to [Peter] 'Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels? But how then should the Scriptures be fulfilled, that it must be so?' 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. But all this has taken place that the Scriptures of the prophets might be fulfilled.'* Then all the disciples left him and fled." Jesus can summon all the help he needs, but if he does so, and avoids the cross, then he is, in effect, giving in to the temptation of Satan in the wilderness, who offered Jesus "all the kingdoms of the world" if only Jesus would end his messianic mission before going to the cross (according to Matthew 4:8). This Jesus will not and cannot do. He must fulfill biblical prophecy. He must save all those given him by the Father.

At the sight of Jesus so seemingly helpless before those sent to arrest him, and with a large crowd beginning to form, Peter and the rest of the disciples flee. They fell asleep in the garden while Jesus sweat drops of blood, praying that if there be some other way, then let it be. Now they desert Jesus, fearing for their own safety. They may have deserted their master, but Jesus does not lose even a single one of his sheep. Again, the irony is inescapable. Jesus must endure the shame and humiliation of rejection by his own people (Israel), betrayal by a traitor (Judas), and now abandonment by his own disciples. Yet, it is the disciples' fear of bodily harm and their spontaneous panic which protects them from danger—just as Jesus had prayed.

In Matthew's account, before the mob arrives at Gethsemane, Jesus prayed, "*my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will.*" In John's account (v. 11), when Jesus rebukes Peter and tells him to put his sword away, John adds another statement from Jesus to Peter (not mentioned by Matthew); "*shall I not drink the cup that the Father has given me?*" When entering Gethsemane, Jesus was under tremendous pressure to abandon his mission. He prayed for the cup of God's wrath to be taken away. But now, upon his arrest, Jesus tells Peter (who will flee momentarily and then deny knowing Jesus later this same evening) that Jesus will complete his mission, which is to drink the cup of wrath given him by the Father. Yes, Jesus says, I shall drink the cup.

Despite the temptation to turn back, Jesus will complete his mission. Although all the help he needs to end his ordeal is but a prayer away, Jesus will not seek to be spared from the humiliation of being arrested in the middle of the night by a mob which refuses to accept his claims to be the promised one who is one with YHWH, and who was foretold throughout the Old Testament, as confirmed by the signs and wonders he performed. When the mob approaches Gethsemane and asks for Jesus—instead of slaying them all—Jesus simply says, "I am he." He has just taken his first sip from the cup of wrath. But there is much more of God's wrath in the cup yet to drink. Jesus will drink it all—down to the bitter dregs—so secure for us salvation from sin, and deliverance from the wrath of God.