

THE HANDS OF THE PASSION¹

Hands of Misguided Zeal

In the name of Jesus, the Friend of sinners, dearly redeemed:

Who else but Peter? Of the four gospel accounts in the Garden of Gethsemane on Holy Thursday, only John identifies Peter as the disciple with the slashing sword. Our Lord will use Peter's **Hands of Misguided Zeal** for Jesus to give an example of service, evidence of power, and assurance of love.

Simon Peter was one of the Lord's first and closest followers, a solid leader. When Jesus asked the Twelve who they thought He was, Peter confessed, "***You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.***" Peter climbed out of the boat to walk on water with Jesus in a storm. Peter pledged he'd rather die than disown his Savior. But sometimes he spoke too soon. Shortly after Peter's beautiful confession of faith, he took Jesus aside and tried to convince him that going to Jerusalem and dying on a cross should not be a part of the Messiah's mission. Remember how Jesus rebuked Peter? "***Get behind me, Satan!... You are not thinking the things of God, but the things of men.***" (Matthew 16:16; 14:29; 26:35; 16:23 EHV²)

How could Peter ever forget that stinging rebuke? Did he even understand it? Do we forget and make mistakes when Jesus' enemies come to the garden? They still hate Jesus; He promised they would hate us too. Armed with swords and clubs – a small army against an unarmed Rabbi and His followers? Overkill in unrepentant fear. Peter surely felt a far different reason for his actions than the armed mob. Peter loved Jesus. He wanted to lay down his life for his Friend. Wasn't this just righteous zeal?

You and I love Jesus too. How can we not get upset, even angry, when our Savior's name is dragged through the mud? When we see his Word ignored and ridiculed, we want to do something. Protect Jesus. Defend our loving Lord and Savior. Good and godly impulses, but can we go too far? How easy it is to sin against God's Word. To match ours with Peter's **Hands of Misguided Zeal**.

Only John identifies Peter and that the assaulted servant's name was Malchus. Only John reports something else that night, which clears up any confusion about who was really in control. It was not Peter, not the Jewish officials or the small army of soldiers arresting Jesus. I counted seven ways to see.

What's this called in the first sentence? "***Jesus, knowing everything that was going to happen to him, went out and asked them, "Who are you looking for?"*** Knowing everything – *omniscient*?

Instead of hiding in the shadows or heading for the hills, Jesus meets his would-be captors with a question: "***Who is it you are looking for?***" His time has come. He knows everything, but He also wants to declare His Name. The mob answers, "***Jesus the Nazarene.***" Many times in John's Gospel Jesus says, "ἐγώ εἰμι," "I AM." We can't help thinking of Moses at the burning bush with the LORD, the great *I AM*. John is clearly proclaiming Jesus' deity in three times saying, "ἐγώ εἰμι." The *eternal* Three-in-One.

The soldiers could even stand up to Jesus' Word. Overpowered by the Divine Word, ***they backed away and fell to the ground.*** All-powerful, *omnipotent*, who is really in charge?

Who alone can protect His followers without weapons? Jesus is the one giving the orders even while He looks helpless. He had every right to defend himself, but he was more concerned about the good

¹ Adapted from NPH 2021 Lent: *The Hands of the Passion* by Adam Mueller and Steven Pagels.

² EHV ~ *Evangelical Heritage Version* (<http://wartburgproject.org>) © 2019. NPH: 800-662-6022, Amazon-Kindle, LOGOS.

and welfare of his disciples. Mercy told the mob, ***“If you are looking for me, then let these men go.”*** And right there faithfulness fulfilled God’s Word of promise to protect all whom the Father gave Jesus.

Peter, seeing how the mob was forced to bow down to Jesus, how quickly they surrendered to the Lord’s terms, instead of taking advantage of the peaceful release Jesus had negotiated, Peter decided to take matters into his own hands. Without any warning he drew his sword and ***“struck the high priest’s servant, cutting off his right ear.”*** Was he just not thinking? Did his emotions get the best of him surrounded by hostile men wanting to harm him? Instincts taking over for his Friend and Savior, or fellow disciples? Peter promised to defend Jesus to the death. Was Peter convinced this was the time to give up his life? He could see Jesus needed help. In spite of the odds, he was going to the rescue.

Nothing wrong with wanting to help a friend in need, except that Jesus doesn’t need any help—because Jesus is true God. He is all-knowing, all powerful. Peter had seen three years of convincing miracles. But Peter was guilty of assaulting another human being. His best intentions are only a symptom of a much more fundamental problem. By deciding that he needed to do something to help Jesus, Peter demonstrated a lack of understanding, or even worse, a lack of trust in God.

Is force needed to advance the Christian cause? Historians tell us that the Crusades harmed more Eastern Christians on the way to the Holy Land than they harmed Muslims. What about the massacre of Jews and Muslims when the Crusaders conquered Jerusalem? And the Inquisition? The Roman Church tortured men, women and children to prove whether they were Christian or not. A Christian extremist bombing an abortion clinic? Peaceful attempts to march against injustice and corruption...how long before they turn violent in spite of efforts to stay peaceful? Any kind of violence against another person (in the name of God or for any other reason) is a clear violation of the Fifth Commandment. God only gives His representatives in government His authority to use deadly force.

Staying peaceful can we still fall to doubting God’s power? “If we would only elect the right political leaders or pass the right legislation, then we could get back to the good old days when our country was a Christian nation.” “If our church only had more programs for families or talked less about sin or was more like the active churches, then our congregation would grow.” If only *we* did X,Y, or Z, then *we* could make things better.

See the *we* pronouns? Look in the mirror and you don’t need a sword in your hands to identify with Peter. Probably can remember times when your thinking was misguided. Yes, God wants God-fearing leaders...and healthy churches...and Christians filled with a godly zeal. But before we put our faith into practice, God wants us to put our trust in him. He wants us to make God’s Word and will our guide. God wants us to understand how quickly things can go sideways when we don’t.

Jesus reprimanded Peter, ***“Put your sword away! Shall I not drink the cup the Father has given me?”*** Why is Jesus so upset? Why so adamant? Because he knows what’s at stake. He understood all His life that there is only one way for sins to be forgiven, one path that leads to heaven. God the Father’s plan demanded that his Son be arrested that night and executed the next day. That plan would be carried out to perfection when our perfect Substitute died in our place. Jesus willingly took that cup of suffering into his hands of mercy-guided zeal. Jesus drained that cup of suffering to the dregs. He demonstrated how much he loved his misguided disciple—and how much he loves you and me.

John names Malchus, but Luke reports that Jesus reached out his hand and healed the servant’s ear. (22:51) This was Jesus’ final miracle before his crucifixion. So why did he do it? Why did he heal this man’s ear? Why was he so eager to help his enemy? Because that is who Jesus is. Because that is what Jesus does. Jesus came into this world to seek and to save. Jesus has a burning love for lost souls. Jesus is full of compassion and mercy, which explains why, a few hours after he healed Malchus, he reached out his hands one last time. He stretched out his mercy-guided hands on the cross to redeem us from our sins, to fulfill Isaiah’s prophetic words, so that by his wounds we might be healed. (53:5) Amen.