



John 18:1-14
So That You May Believe: John
“When the Path Is Difficult”

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This morning we enter into what is the home stretch of Jesus’ life here on earth as we continue in our series in the Gospel according to John. In the last several chapters Jesus has been doing a lot of final teaching and equipping of the disciples for the task of carrying on after Jesus departs from them. In John 17, the chapter immediately preceding where we are today, he prays for God’s glory, for the initial group of disciples, and then for the disciples that come in the generations to follow such as you and me. We looked at John 17 in three sections, starting two Sundays ago, and then Paul preaching on the second part last Sunday, and Gwen preaching on the third part on Ash Wednesday a few days ago.

And so now we get to John 18, where things take a turn. Today we are in the **first 14 verses** and I invite you to follow along on the screen, in a pew Bible or your own, or on your phone on a Bible app. This is God’s Word to us this morning...

(Sermon Title Slide) So, after Jesus prays, he heads across this valley called the Kidron Valley. Jerusalem is built on a hill, and this valley is at the base of that hill, and then across to where it meets the base of the Mount of Olives. So, this valley is the low space in between Jerusalem and the Mount of Olives. At the base of the Mount of Olives, on the far edge of the Kidron valley from Jerusalem is a garden, as John tells us. We know that this garden is called the Garden of Gethsemane.

Interestingly, the Kidron valley was a popular burial site over the course of several centuries. There are tombs dating to at least 850 or 900 B.C., and they extend up the Mount of Olives, too. To this day there are still hundreds of them in the valley between Jerusalem and the Mount of Olives, and tens of thousands on the Mount of Olives itself, particularly on the slope facing toward Jerusalem. So, Jesus leads them through this valley of death. Kind of reminds me of Psalm 23, “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.” Now, I’m not saying that when David

wrote Psalm 23 that he is referring specifically to this valley. But, this valley certainly fits the bill: There are a lot of graves here.

And so, to this garden, surrounded by the tombs of both kings and peasants, going back nearly 1,000 years before them, 3,000 years before us...this is where Jesus brings his disciples. Now, John notes for us that Jesus frequently went to this garden with the disciples. **Perhaps it was a place to get away from the hustle and bustle of the city, without having to go too far.** But it was also a place they went by on several occasions in visiting the village of Bethany, or perhaps villages beyond Bethany, because it was on the other side of the Mount of Olives. This would be a common route for them to go to get there.

And it is there, in the garden of Gethsemane, that Judas Iscariot comes with the authorities. The people he brings are a mixture of Roman governmental military types, and Jewish religious leaders – officers from the chief priests of the Jewish faith, and of the Pharisees, who are among the Jewish religious leaders of the day.

One commentator said that a “detachment” of soldiers was a technical military term and would be about 600 guys. Add in some religious leaders and you’re looking at, what, 620? More? We don’t know for sure how many officers from the priests or how many Pharisees were there. If the 600 number is right, however, it seems like kind of overkill for the purpose of arresting one guy who by most accounts had “pretty much” been peaceful. 😊 Even if 600 is way high...and it was like in the range of 50-60: that still seems like a lot.

But it’s not just the numbers of them that is astonishing; It’s also that they were carrying torches, lanterns, and weapons. Now, torches and lanterns make sense for visibility, though I would think they could also be used in a physically threatening kind of way if needed. But this is night time, and there weren’t street lights or lighted garden paths, so you have to bring the light with you. **It is ironic, however, that that they’re carrying these sources of light to come and arrest the one who made the statement that he is “the**

light of the world.” Even as these guys carry their light sources, they are spiritually still in the dark.

So, there’s a whole bunch of them. But it’s the presence of weapons that really stands out. I mean, what were they anticipating when they found Jesus – that he’d be waiting with his 12 disciples armed with knives and swords? In Luke’s account of this, Jesus says, **“Am I leading a rebellion, that you have come with swords and clubs?” (Luke 22:52).**

But you know, this is kind of how some people respond to Jesus. For whatever reason, for *some* people Jesus’ presence, his teaching, even just his name brings a reaction of fear, there are assumptions, just all kinds of crazy thoughts going on that lead to irrational reactions toward him and his followers. And we see that here with these folks who’ve come to arrest him. I want to skip ahead past Jesus’ words for a moment, and we’ll come back to them. So, let’s look at Peter, first.

Peter doesn’t really help Jesus’ cause with his own irrational reaction. In the dark, with the light of these torches and lanterns illuminating things, he pulls out his sword and takes a swing at a guy. Just my own personal take on this, but this feels like it flies in the face of Jesus’ prayer literally just a handful of minutes earlier...an hour at the most...Jesus prayed that the disciples would be in the world but not of it. So, the opposition shows up with worldly weapons for a battle of the flesh; But our battle, as Paul writes in Ephesians, is not against flesh and blood but against principalities and powers, against spiritual forces. This is not Peter’s battle to fight. Jesus has got this. But Peter forgets this, and pulls out his own sword.

Now, let’s be honest with ourselves: we probably react in poor ways at times, too. **I’m sure at one time or another, we’ve all been like Peter here – maybe not with a literal sword or knife – but, reacting in a worldly way that doesn’t really help Jesus. The good news is that Jesus extends grace.** He does it with Peter after the resurrection, and he does it with us, too. By the way, Peter probably wasn’t aiming for Malchus’s ear, but Malchus probably ducked out of the way, and that’s what he ends up hitting, and cuts it off. I read that theory in a commentary this week and I was stunned. Honestly, I

have never in my entire life thought about that until this week. I always figured Peter aimed for his ear, and I thought it was so odd! I'm probably the last person on the face of the planet to figure that out, and I doubt it inspires much confidence for you in me as your pastor. But, I wanted to share with you something I learned this week that was particularly eye-opening. Maybe not a life-changing application coming out of it other than "don't get in sword fights" but I appreciated this insight.

Jesus is arrested and carted off. Interestingly: **He's taken to the father-in-law of the current high priest. Why the father-in-law?** Annas had been the high priest for almost a decade up until about A.D. 15. He had 5 sons and a son-in-law who served as high priests as well. So, he's a powerful guy at the time. And while he wasn't formally still the high priest and no longer had that positional power, you definitely get the sense in the gospels from other mentions of him, that he still had influential power.

Ok. Let's go back to the middle section where Jesus interacts with the mob. **Judas' arrival with these people is no surprise to Jesus.** He anticipated it. You may recall that just a few hours earlier he had excused Judas from the Passover meal and told him to go do what he needed to do. But even before this we've seen glimpses of a plot, of an effort to trap Jesus, and Jesus was well aware of it all. John 5:16-18 tells us about a plot to kill him; 7:1, 7:19, 8:6 all tell of religious leaders trying to trap him and accuse him. In fact, if you read the gospel of John in one sitting, I think you'll more easily see kind of a cat-and-mouse game between the Jewish religious leaders and Jesus. They're constantly after him and hounding him. So, it's not like this is a big surprise to him because he's had antagonists all along who were plotting against him, and in Judas there was even an insider who helped facilitate Jesus' arrest.

There's a phrase that we have here in America that goes like this: "When the going gets tough, the tough get going." It's a phrase that originated in the 1950's and is mostly a motivational tagline to get people moving when things get tough. And that's not too far off from what Jesus does here. These guys have come to arrest him, but Jesus takes the initiative. He presses into the challenge. The path is about to get difficult and he steps into it. Look at verse

4, **“Jesus, knowing all that was going to happen to him, went out and asked them, “Who is it you want?” (John 18:4).** Notice that Jesus is the one who goes toward them and initiates the conversation. He doesn’t shy away from the difficult path. He leans into it. He initiates it. When the path in life gets difficult, sometimes the temptation is to turn and run the other way; but Jesus does just the opposite.

Then he once again presses into the difficult road ahead in verse 7, when he says for a second time, “Who is it you want?” It’s almost like he wants them to make sure that they really want to get him. It’s like he’s saying, “Are you sure you want a piece of me?” Well, maybe not quite like that...he’s not trying to escalate things or pick a fight. But again, he takes the lead. You see: **Jesus is not going to be controlled by anyone.** He’s not the one who reacts; He takes initiative. He’s the focus of events here, not them. He’s the lead actor. He moves toward them, he initiates the conversation.

And then after they respond that yes, they’re looking for Jesus, he still takes the lead in the conversation, as we see in verse 8, “I told you that I am he.” I often wonder what was going through their minds at this moment. When John tells us that they drew back and fell down when Jesus first answered the question, I’m thinking that some of them didn’t fully know what the mission was they were on. And when they find out they’re coming for Jesus, they’re in shock and awe. Anyway...Jesus continues by saying, “If you’re looking for me then let these men go.” He’s not waiting for them to bring up the disciples, he’s stepping up and telling them what they ought to do: let these other men go.

And then lastly, Jesus’ response to Peter pulling out his sword confirms this “initiative-taking” yet again. **Jesus says to Peter, “Put your sword away. Shall I not drink the cup the Father has given me?” (John 18:11).** Jesus is in charge; he’s the one calling the shots, even if it’s leading down a difficult path, and it’s all part of his Heavenly Father’s plan. Yes, it’s difficult. It’s painful. But it’s all part of what God has laid out.

So, the guys who’ve come for Jesus think they’re doing the world a service by arresting Jesus; and they are. *But it’s not what they think.* They think

they're ridding the world of Jesus but instead, in the long run, Jesus is going viral! It's like a social media post that goes way beyond what you expected: to tens or hundreds of thousands. Have you ever had that happen? (No hands go up.) Yeah, me neither. But these guys sure did! They have no idea that rather than *suppressing* Jesus they're setting him free and helping to put the wheels in motion for something far greater! Their simple arrest of Jesus is leading to the cross, yes; but then it's the empty tomb, and then the unleashing of the Holy Spirit, then the birth of the Church, and then a world-wide movement of God that 2,000 years later is still going in full force.

And it's all because God takes the initiative. These guys think they're taking the initiative, but they're not. They're really just playing right into the plan, unbeknownst to them. And so, Jesus leans into it.

So, when the path of life is difficult or you encounter obstacles...when you're going through dark valleys or the valley of the shadow of death...when life takes twists and turns that you weren't expecting and wouldn't choose to go down if you had a choice, follow Jesus' example. Press into those challenges, and trust God. **Don't let obstacles and difficulties knock you off your feet, but rather step into them and meet them head on, remembering you're not alone, and God's "got this."** God is with you; he's with us in our church family. He'll keep you refreshed and encouraged in the midst of things. He never leaves us or forsakes us, and he leads us to still waters and green pastures and prepares the table before us. Sometimes, that table is in the presence of our enemies as Psalm 23 says, and Jesus experiences here. But even there, God's promise is that he anoints our head with oil and our cup is filled to overflowing (Psalm 23:5).

So, don't fear the challenging paths in life or the obstacles you face. Step into them boldly, trusting that God is with you and leading you along, sustaining you, nourishing you, taking care of you, so that you would live a more Christ-like life, shining the light of Christ in the dark places for the world to see. Let's pray...Amen.