

Hands of Misguided Zeal: Peter

John 18:4-11

⁴ Jesus, knowing all that was going to happen to him, went out and asked them, “Who is it you want?”

⁵ “Jesus of Nazareth,” they replied.

“I am he,” Jesus said. (And Judas the traitor was standing there with them.) ⁶ When Jesus said, “I am he,” they drew back and fell to the ground.

⁷ Again he asked them, “Who is it you want?”

“Jesus of Nazareth,” they said.

⁸ Jesus answered, “I told you that I am he. If you are looking for me, then let these men go.” ⁹ This happened so that the words he had spoken would be fulfilled: “I have not lost one of those you gave me.”

¹⁰ Then Simon Peter, who had a sword, drew it and struck the high priest’s servant, cutting off his right ear. (The servant’s name was Malchus.)

¹¹ Jesus commanded Peter, “Put your sword away! Shall I not drink the cup the Father has given me?”

Why did Peter cut off that man’s ear? It’s not that surprising that he did it. I mean, Peter has a reputation among Bible readers as the act-before-you-think disciple. Peter speaks up on behalf of the disciples. Peter jumps out of a boat to try walking on water. But why did Peter cut off this man’s ear?

I suppose there’s something natural about it. Peter loved Jesus, and Jesus was about to get hurt. So he defended the one he loved. That explanation makes sense because when Jesus told the disciples that he was going to be arrested and tried and crucified, Peter said, **“Never! This will never happen to you.” Jesus turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.” (Matthew 16:22-23).** Maybe it was because of what Peter wanted. Peter wanted Jesus not to suffer.

But maybe Peter wanted to prove himself. This bold disciple, perhaps he wanted to prove his love. That would make sense because earlier that night, **“Jesus told them, ‘This very night you will all fall away on account of me... Peter replied, ‘Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will.’”** And later, **“Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you.”** (Matthew 26:31-35) Maybe Peter wanted to prove that he was one of the good guys.

In researching this Bible passage, I read some folks who said that Peter’s heart was in the right place, a funny expression. It seems to imply that Peter wanted the right thing, but he went about it the wrong way. Maybe he was over-zealous or used the wrong tool, but he was after the right thing. But that’s precisely the opposite of the truth. Peter’s zeal was great! He will need all of that passion and courage when he becomes the leader of Jesus’ church. But his heart was not in the right place. Jesus was going to the cross, and Peter said, “Never!” Jesus said, you’ll fall away, and Peter said, “No!” Peter’s heart was not where Jesus’ heart was.

We know that because Jesus told us what he was doing. He told us that his plan was to be betrayed, arrested, and killed. And he gave Peter precise instructions about what to do when that happened. –They say when you are dealing with someone in a crisis, you should make eye contact and give clear simple instructions. —That’s what Jesus did. In the Garden of Gethsemane, he gave Peter clear, simple instructions. **“Watch and pray.”** (Matthew 26:41). “You watch. I am going to be arrested. I am going to stand trial in your place. I am going to die the death you deserve. And I don’t need you to help. I need you to— and this will require all your zealous passion—I need you to watch this. And I need you to watch yourself. Watch yourself so that you do not fall into temptation. Because when you zealously want to do something that God does not want you to do, it is easy to do something stupid. So, Peter, I will handle the doing. You, watch and pray. Neither of those requires a sword.”

But Peter did not do what Jesus told him. He did what he wanted. When his hand reached for a sword, when he raised above his head, crashing down just to the left of the cerebellum of God’s servant, that was a great big “No!” to God. A “No thank you!” to the Savior. It is hard to obey God when you desperately want something else.

But as Peter was contradicting Jesus' word, Jesus was fulfilling it. **"If you're looking for me,"** he said to the armed mob, **"then let these men go."** (John 18:8) This happened so that Jesus could make good on this promise. Take me instead of them. This is precisely what God wanted. It's what he promised. **"The Son of Man came to give his life as a ransom."** (Matthew 20:28)

It is not that Jesus loved the idea of suffering. He asked his Father to let it not happen. Just minutes before his arrest, Jesus was so sad he could die. He collapsed, nose in the dirt, and yanked on the heart of his Father in Heaven. He used an Old Testament word picture. **"My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me."** (Matthew 26:39) You see, Old Testament poems picture God's justice as a cup. When human beings do the horrible things we so often do, God pours his anger into a rancid and foaming cup. Drinking from the cup makes people crumble. It kills people. It erases them from God's love. And our Father has handed that cup to Jesus.

Jesus prayed, **"Father, take the cup away. Yet not as I will, but as you will."** (Matthew 26:39). Jesus did not want to suffer and die. But he did what his Father wanted. He was filled with zeal for the right thing. So he orchestrated his own arrest.

Everything about this night proves Jesus' zeal for doing what his Father wanted. That mob didn't find Jesus; he went out to them. They didn't overpower Jesus.; he overpowered them. He said, **"Who is it you want?"** They said, **"Jesus of Nazareth."** And when Jesus said, **"I am he."** They all fell over. (John 18:6) And when Peter tries to do the opposite of what God wants, **"Jesus commanded Peter, 'Put your sword away! Shall I not drink the cup the Father has given me?'"** (John 18:11).

Death and the curse were in that Cup,
Oh, Christ 'twas full for thee.
But thou hast drained the last dark dregs,
'Tis empty now for me.¹

¹ "O Christ, What Burdens Bowed Thy Head" by Anne R. Cousin.

While Peter raised a sword in a flagrant “No!” to God, Jesus held out his hands tied up by soldiers and received a cup from his Father, saying “Yes!”

That very same Father has given you a cup to drink.² Your cup does not contain God’s wrath because you are not going to atone for the sins of the world. But if you peer over the edge of your cup, you will see all those things God has asked of you. Has he given you the job of mother or father, and all the struggle that comes with that. Has he given you the role of a student or employee with all the frustration? He has mixed in particular talents, and he’s left out others. He’s given you your health, or perhaps he’s taken that out. He’s given you a loving family or maybe a broken home. He has given you so many things that you did not choose, and some stuff in your cup is bitter. But your cup has this ultimate sweetener—your life ends in eternal glory. Not all lives do. Yours does.

And so your Father sits across the table and slides to you your cup. You could spend a lifetime raising a sword, shaking a fist, and saying “No!” to this life. You could point out that it doesn’t make sense, that it’s not what you want. But this is from your Father, who loves you enough to give you his firstborn. These struggles, these blessings, they are for you. Saying “Yes!” to this cup will require all of your energy and your zeal. But you can learn from Jesus how to drink it.

That’s what Peter did. After his misguided zeal made him raise a sword at God’s plan, he learned. He prayed. He watched. He watched Jesus go to the cross, just like he planned. He saw Jesus rise from the dead, just like he planned. And after Easter, Jesus aligned Peter’s zeal with God’s. He said, “Peter, I’ve got simple, clear instructions for you. **Feed my lambs. Take care of my sheep.**” (John 21:15-16) Peter did. He used all his zeal and all his energy to serve in God’s church. And legend has it, that when it came time for Peter to drink the bitter part of his cup, he did not raise a sword. He did not lead a rebellion. He walked the way of the cross, singing hymns of praise all the way.³ As you and I struggle with what we want and what God has asked of us, let’s bring our zeal in line with our Father’s. Shall we not drink the cup our Father has given us?

Amen.

² For the reference to “drinking your cup,” I am indebted to Professor Mark Paustian.

³ The Acts of Peter, Chapter XXXVII. <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/actspeter.html>