

Chapters 18-21

The Gospel of John

In the opening verses of Chapter 18, some Roman soldiers together with temple police sent by the chief priests and certain Pharisees serving in the Sanhedrin (the Jewish governing body in Jerusalem) show up in the Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus is waiting with his disciples. He had just finished telling them what was about to take place, what it meant, and what would happen to them afterwards. The main point of his lengthy discourse, and his concluding prayer to God the Father was to assure them of his continuing presence with them through the Holy Spirit. The Spirit would dwell in their hearts for the purpose of bringing them the gift of salvation. This he would accomplish for them in his death, resurrection, and subsequent ascension back to the Father from whence he came.

So while his time with them as a human person just like them was coming to an end, while it was time for him to submit to the Father's will—the reason he came in the first place—and resign himself to the fact that salvation for others meant dying on a cross, rising again, and returning to the Father, they will nevertheless not be left “orphaned” by this. He will return in the Holy Spirit in order to bring them the salvation he himself accomplished.

Moreover, the change that will take place in them through the power of the Spirit dwelling in them, that is, salvation itself, will result in eternal life and blessedness for them. They will know who he was and what he did for them. They will be different people, reborn as children of God.

This, in turn, will transform them from having been disciples (which means learners) into apostles (which means those who are sent to proclaim a message). Through the ministry they will have been empowered to do, Jesus will establish a new community. This new community or “ecclesia” (Greek for assembly) will become the church of Christ. It will be Christ's body on earth because he will be the spiritual presence that dwells in them and makes them a community whose unity consists of the bond of love created by the Holy Spirit who dwells in their hearts, and who empowers them to proclaim the message of Jesus (the Gospel) to the ends of the earth.

This means that those who come after them—those in whom the Holy Spirit has created the gift of faith in Christ as their Lord and Savior—they will come to believe, not because they encountered Jesus in the flesh but because they encountered him through the proclaimed word of the Gospel. The word together with the outward signs he gave them (the sacraments), will be the means through which the Holy Spirit will bring the presence of Christ into their hearts.

Therefore, the mission of this community will be to invite others, through the Gospel, to join them and to gather around these means of grace so that their new faith may be nourished, strengthened, and grow. Just as the Jewish people gathered in synagogues in

order to hear and reflect on the law of Moses, the church will gather in order to hear and reflect on the good news of Jesus Christ.

This new community would be known as “the eschatological community” because it was established, formed, and sent in anticipation of the final fulfillment of God’s salvation in Christ when the Kingdom of God would come in all its fullness. This community is a sign of God’s promise to redeem all people and his whole creation at the end of time--and therefore--at the end of human history. Jesus referred to this as “the close of the age: in Matthew 28.

Finally, Jesus also promised that “the gates of hell will not prevail against it.” There will be times when the church prospers. There will be times when it declines. There will be times when the world will turn against it. And there will be times when it exists in peace. Why things happen as they do is a matter that pertains to the wisdom of God. We, the members of the church, have no access to this. Everything we can and need to know about God is contained in his revealed word, the canonical books of the Old and New Testaments. Being human and being of this world, we cannot know anything about God aside from the things he reveals to us. And this includes the length of time it takes for God to establish his kingdom once and for all. As Jesus told his disciples, “It is not for you to know the times and the seasons the Father has set according to his wisdom.” (Acts 1: 7) Therefore, the church lives in hope, not in certainty as to when the Kingdom will come.

Finally, this also means that the people of God, known as the body of Christ on earth, are a pilgrim people. Just as the Hebrew slaves, after being set free from the house of bondage by the power of God became pilgrims on their way to the promised land, just so, Christians are pilgrims through this world and on their way to the Kingdom of God. It will be essential for the members of Christ’s body to refrain from investing their hearts into any aspect of this world, a world that is passing away. To do so would constitute idolatry—putting our faith in some part of the created order, an order groaning for redemption. (Paul) As members of Christ’s body, as people in whom the Spirit of God dwells, we no longer belong to this world. We belong to the “City of God.” (Augustine) This is our hope. This is our destiny. This is our “ultimate concern.” (Tillich)

As the eschatological community, we live according to the commands of our God as they were articulated by his Son, Jesus Christ. “Love one another as I have loved you.” By this, and by the fact that we fulfill the mission we were given, the world will know we belong to Christ. This is our reason for being. “And lo, I am with you to the close of the age.” (Jesus, Matthew 28)

Returning to our story. Jesus is waiting for his abductors to arrive, which demonstrates his resolve to do his Father’s will. From this time on through the whole story of his passion, he is in control of the things that happen. He is not a victim. He is “the lamb of God,” meaning that he willingly sacrifices himself. He could change his mind and resist this at any time. His determination to obey his Father is the controlling motivation throughout.

When his abductors arrive under the direction of Judas, they hesitate. They are clearly intimidated by him. When he tells them who he is, at first they fall back. So he tells them once again and this time they move to arrest him. Peter draws his sword and cuts the ear off the high priest's slave. Jesus tells Peter to put his sword away for he must do his Father's will.

At this point, the phony trial begins. First, Jesus is brought to the high priest for questioning. Jesus simply tells them that he has nothing to hide, that he has spoken openly throughout. "Ask anyone who heard me. They can tell you what I have said." One of his abductors was offended by this remark, thinking it was disrespectful to the high priest, so he struck him. Jesus' enemies are abusive, and he willingly accepts the abuse. This would later be identified as one of the consequences of the fact that he assumed the role of the person who was a sinner in our place. Having been identified as the sinner we were, he necessarily suffered the consequences.

In the meantime, while this is going on, Peter is fingered as one of his disciples. Fearful, Peter keeps his distance from Jesus and plays the role of a bystander. When accused of being one of his disciples, Peter denies even knowing Jesus, not once, but three times. Clearly, in the face of possible arrest and conviction, Peter loses his courage. The spirit previously had been willing to follow him even if it meant dying with him. But the flesh—the old self—is weak. The cock crows after the third denial, and Peter recognizes his failure to remain faithful to Jesus.

In the synoptic gospels, Peter's guilt and shame are recorded as driving him to weep. John does not mention this. However, the main point is not Peter's shame. It is Jesus' grace. Despite Peter's lack of faith which points to his desperate need for redemption, even though he was Jesus' prized disciple over a three year period, nevertheless, Jesus will return and restore him. By his amazing act of forgiveness and grace, Peter will be healed of his shame and self-reproach. Peter became double-minded as a person who both loved Jesus but nevertheless lacked the courage of faith to identify with Jesus when the situation became threatening to his personal safety.

The story was preserved as a testament to the power and compassion of Jesus for those whom he had chosen to be his disciples. God's love in Christ is miraculous in its power to redeem us. It is more powerful than our sin. It is more powerful than any evil. It is even more powerful than natural death. For this reason, we can rely on God's grace to heal us from our own sin, from the evils that we encounter in the world, and from the power of death to destroy us.

When we, in our spiritual weakness, are overcome by these enemies of life and love, needn't despair and give in. This would be a self-fulfilling prophecy of failure and victimization. Without God's grace, we have no chance of surviving the negative powers of "non-being." They would prevail, and God's will to preserve us whole and in possession eternal life would be stymied. The devil, who is the power of non-being itself, would win.

The story of Peter is a testimony of the fact that this does not need to happen. Faith, which receives divine grace because it receives Jesus himself, enables us to be “delivered from evil” as we pray in the Lord’s Prayer. For Peter, this meant going from the ultimate denier of Jesus to the person who willingly was crucified as a witness to this love for Jesus. “Crucify me upside down, for I am not worthy to die as Jesus did.” This was Peter’s testimony to Nero in 63-64 AD when this tyrannical, evil madman tortured Christians in order to save his own worthless skin.

If St. Augustine is right in saying that hell is populated by people who don’t want to face and live in the presence of God, then Nero is surely there, burning in the same way he torched innocent Christians in order to shed light in the darkness of a garden where the Vatican now is located. Peter’s tomb lies directly below the altar of St. Peter’s Basilica—or so tradition says. It may be true. There is evidence of Christian burial sites there. In any case, this is a fitting place for the chief of the apostles to have been laid to rest. But I digress...

Jesus is then brought to Pilate so that his enemies can succeed in their plot to kill him. But why are they so afraid of Jesus, so fearful that they want to eliminate his influence on the people altogether?

Certainly, part of it is that they feared Jesus’ influence on the people, such that—or so they thought—he might lead a political insurrection. The Jewish authorities were fully aware of the fact that such was the power and policy of the Romans; a bloodbath would be the result. The Romans not only were too powerful for Jewish revolutionaries to prevail in a conflict, their policy was to destroy anyone or any group that committed insurrection so it would not happen again in the same place.

They knew Jerusalem itself would be destroyed. They knew the nation itself could be destroyed, as it was one hundred years later. This is how the Romans kept the peace. “Peace through strength.” Sound familiar?

In any case, if they thought Jesus posed a threat of this nature, they would seek to eliminate him in any way possible. However, it is also important to take note of the fact that, should the Romans turn on the nation of Israel, they too—the high priest and the members of the Sanhedrin—would lose their power and all the privileges that went with it. They had made a pact with the devil and now they were stuck with it. Anyone who makes a pact with the devil will eventually be conformed to the devil’s image. Their willingness to have an innocent man crucified, the most shameful, not to mention painful way to die, is testimony to the fact that they were in bondage to evil because of their desire for wealth, power, and privilege.

This is the consequence of becoming so attached to idols. When we can’t give up on our possession of the idol, when our lives are so invested in the idol that there is nothing we fear more than losing it, then we are also in bondage to sin and possible evil behavior. Surely, by any one’s definition of evil, willingly seeking to kill an innocent man so as to preserve our self-interest—this is evil.

As for those clowns who deny the existence of evil because it doesn't suit their illusions about reality, at the very least, they are trampling underfoot the virtues of justice, goodness, integrity, honesty, and respect for the value of human life. This is what Jesus received from those whom God ordained to uphold his laws! (the high priest and the Sanhedrin) Moreover, lest anyone think the human race has improved by some theory of historical progress, the fact is this sort of thing continues to go on. We elect Presidents who are similarly guilty of these same things when they make attempts to destroy the reputations, careers, and social standing of those who might dare to reveal their misdeeds. I can think of several people who are prominent in politics today who might fit into this category.

In any case, because of the dark and secret motives, Jesus is sent to Pilate. Now Pilate is tasked with upholding Roman justice. While this is not a particularly impressive ideal by the standards of ideal justice, at the very least it means that an innocent man is not convicted of a capital crime and punished using a method reserved only for the very worst criminals.

To his credit, Pilate at first sees this for what it is—an attempt to manipulate him into handing down a sentence of death to someone who didn't deserve it. So he makes a lame attempt to convince them to accept a lower punishment. Keep in mind that Jesus comes from a class of people who were considered to be of little or no value. This being the case, it would not have bothered Pilate to flog Jesus for no good reason. Painful as this flogging was, who would care, considering who the victim was? But this does not work.

Pilate then tries to interrogate Jesus so as to get him to incriminate himself, giving Pilate an excuse to bend to the pressure of the crowd. And by the way, this truly reveals the character of Pilate. He is too weak personally to remain steadfast in his responsibility to resist these calls for an unjust sentence. Strong leaders uphold their responsibility to govern according to the law. Weak ones bend to the pressure of the crowd like reeds in the wind (to use a metaphor Jesus used when describing what John the Baptist was not).

Jesus clearly says that he has no ambitions to impose a worldly kingdom on the populace and thereby take the reins of power. He is a king. But his kingdom is not like the kingdoms of this world, ruled by violence, bloodshed, injustice, and war. We have those in our world today as well, particularly in Syria, with their allies, Russia and Iran. An entire city, along with its inhabitants, are bombed into oblivion for the sake of power, influence, and self-interest.

Rather, Jesus' kingdom is one that is not yet here. But it is coming. It is even now entering into this world in terms of its influence and power. As he said previously, it has "come near." That is, the power of this kingdom has been unleashed to a limited degree. Its power is in the presence and activity of the Spirit of God. There is nothing more powerful than this kingdom, But for now, it has been unleashed for only a chosen few.

The kingdom of God is the rule of God. It is not simply a future event that occurs all at once, as if God ruled only at the end of time. In Jesus Christ, God's rule has broken into this world. People saw it when Jesus healed, when he cast out demons, when he restored sinners, and when he found the lost. They saw it in his ethical positions: love your enemies, do good to those who persecute you, etc. These things make no sense to us, neither do the miracles nor the teachings because they point to the miraculous power of grace, and thus present a challenge to the ways in which we understand how the world works. The fact is, when God's rule breaks into the world, its effects are not consistent with our experience. The presence of God's power changes the way the world works because it is used for the sake of redemption from the world.

This is the Kingdom of which Jesus is a king. But the full revelation and establishment of this Kingdom is not yet here. And, because it comes from God, it is not "from here" as Jesus says.

Pilate sees an opening here. If Jesus identifies him as a king, then perhaps he could arrest Jesus for sedition—as far as the Romans were concerned, there were no kings except those they put in place, such as Herod the Great. Any claim to being a king would therefore be grounds for an arrest.

So, Pilate asks Jesus if he is a king. As usual, Jesus throws the ball back in his court. "You say that I am a king." And then he goes on to identify himself as the king of the eschatological kingdom—the end-times kingdom. And yet, as the king of this coming kingdom, he was sent into the world to "testify to the truth." Everything he said and did was testimony to the God who was in the process of saving people for this coming kingdom. He was revealing—bringing to light—the power and purpose of God's rule. It was present right now in him, and in due time, it would be present everywhere. This is the truth of the human condition, and the truth of what God is doing about it. Everything in the world that contradicts this truth is therefore a lie. That is, the kingdoms of this world are a lie because they are ruled by false gods, and their rule represents a fallen humanity. Kingdoms that rule through violence, false claims of authority, and where there are more losers than winners—these kingdoms are pretenders. Moreover, being pretenders, being based on lies, and being opposed to God's Kingdom, they are passing away. Only Jesus' rule represents the truth because he revealed the rule of God, and the fact that this rule is the destiny of all people.

Pilate then reveals another aspect of his flawed character. "What is truth?" he asks sarcastically. Sarcasm is a way of dismissing something in a contemptuous way. In other words, it is a way of saying he doesn't believe in it. And so there is no point in trying to convince him that Jesus is, in fact, a king, and that his kingdom reveals itself in the "signs" he performs, and the words he speaks.

Pilate, placing himself outside the influence of this truth is no candidate for doing the right thing. For him, as for those in history who came after him, "truth" is not one thing. The truth is established by those who hold the reigns of power. There is no truth that's true for everyone.

Pilate then addresses the crowd saying there is no case against Jesus which deserves death. However, being a shrewd person who knows how to use whatever options he has to get out of this mess, he mentions the fact that, at every Passover, he can release a prisoner. He hopes they will choose Jesus because the only other guy available was a bandit.

Bandits were people who, for some reason, had lost their means for making a living. The options for these people were limited and insecure. They could become day laborers and hope to be hired during harvest time. (There were three harvests in the mild climate of Palestine.) Or they could become beggars—not a particularly attractive option. So, some of them banded together and preyed on people, particularly in rural areas and along roads where no one else would see their criminal activity. The man helped by the Good Samaritan was the victim of bandits along the long and lonely road from Jericho to Jerusalem.

Predictably, the crowd chose Barabbas. The enemies of Jesus had already stirred up this crowd to call for Jesus' execution. They were mere puppets—people who had no particular reason to be angry with Jesus until the authorities told them that he was a blasphemer. This would have been enough to turn them against Jesus. Consider what we have seen in the news when a religious group feels as if they have been attacked at the core of their beliefs. A riotous crowd is not unusual as a response. This is what I believe happened here. The authorities told the crowd that Jesus claimed to be God. This was blasphemy. They reacted accordingly.

Pilate argues with them one more time, and this time the crowd reveals to what lengths they are willing to go. Jesus claims to be a king. So the crowd appeals to Pilate on the basis of having no king but Caesar. This contradicts their whole religious outlook. For the Jews, only God was their king. And yet, in order to get Jesus crucified, they commit idolatry, for by saying they have no king but Caesar, they are denying their own God.

This demonstrates the degree to which an out of control mob can become entirely irrational. Bare, brute emotion is in possession of these people. They have lost all perspective and don't know what they are doing. Protest movements, political movements, and anger generated by social change on the local level—all of these can create situations like this. Forget about justice. Forget about what's the right thing to do. An emotionally out-of-control mob is very hard to deal with; it's almost impossible. This has happened in our country many times. (1968 Democratic convention)

During this *mêlée*, Pilate had Jesus dressed in a purple robe with a crown of thorns, and he had ordered him to be flogged. He presented Jesus as a weak caricature of a king with no support whatsoever from anyone; Jesus looked totally defeated. Pilate said, "Here is your king." The humiliation coupled with the suffering and being alone (his disciples had scattered), was a standard way of robbing the victim of any vestige of dignity. Here was the Son of God being treated and presented as the most rejected and despised criminal on earth.

Again, keep in mind that he [Jesus] was allowing this to happen. He could have done one of many things to escape this excruciating suffering. But he simply allowed it to happen, like a sheep on the way to slaughter. He truly was “the lamb of God” as he stood before this crowd—a crowd that had lost its collective mind and was manipulated by evil men. Certainly it starts to become clear here that he was bearing the sins of others.

When an innocent man is tortured, humiliated, and executed, not because he is a sinner or a criminal, but because those who are doing this to him are sinners and criminals (which they were), then we can say he is bearing and dying for the sins of others. It was their sinful behavior, not his, that put him on the cross. Therefore, he was bearing their sins and paying the penalty for their evil deeds.

Jesus is then led to the place of crucifixion, a hill next to the crossroads leading into the city of Jerusalem. Pilate affixes a sign on Jesus’ cross that says “King of the Jews”—more to mock Jesus’ enemies than Jesus himself. It works. The Jews ask that it be taken off but Pilate refuses. Ironically, the sign is true.

This site was chosen so that a maximum number of people would see it. For the Romans, this was done as a deterrent so that anyone who might want to try something could see what would also become of them. For Jesus, it was so that those who saw it—this image of him dying on the cross—would come to be the reminder of how their salvation was accomplished. It clearly displayed the cost it incurred for Jesus to have done this. There, on him, they would see their sin putting Jesus to death. Jesus became the rejected and guilty sinner—not because he was, but because he freely chose to become guilty for our sake. God was saying “No” to sin in Jesus’ crucifixion, but it was for the purpose of saying “Yes” to our salvation in his resurrection from the dead.

Only a few women and “the disciple whom Jesus loved” were standing near the cross. It was the day of preparation. This was the day when all the sacrificial lambs were being slaughtered at the temple so that Jewish families could celebrate the Passover. The symbolism is crystal clear.

Jesus speaks three times from the cross. First, he identifies Mary as the beloved disciple’s mother. He then says he is thirsty—the fulfillment of a prophecy. Thirdly, he says, “It is finished.” That is, the atonement for sin had been accomplished. In fact, everything he had been sent to do was finished, for then he died. He had done all that his Father had called him to do. A divine life filled with goodness and light, sent into the world to spread goodness and light, ended up on a criminal’s cross where he died. What does this say about the world’s need for redemption?

Jesus is buried in a nearby tomb in a garden. Nicodemus, who obviously was still attracted to Jesus and his message, brought the burial spices. So, all the burial customs were observed when he was laid in the tomb.

The resurrection of Jesus takes place before anyone comes. Some women, including Mary Magdalene, who had supported him during his ministry, saw that the stone was rolled away and ran to the disciples to tell them. Peter and the beloved disciple ran to the tomb and they saw the same thing—it was empty. After they left, Mary was there by herself, weeping. Jesus appeared but she did not recognize him until he spoke her name. His resurrected body was not the same as his former, mortal body, and so he perhaps appeared somewhat different than she remembered.

In any case, she tries to hold onto him. He tells her she can't do that because he has not yet ascended to the Father. That is, neither she, nor anyone else, can have him as he is. After ascending to his Father, he will descend in the form of the Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit that brings the salvation he accomplished to us. Because he is the One who wiped out sin, defeated death, and reconciled us to God, Jesus' victory will become our victory when we receive him in the Spirit through faith in the word. We will receive divine love and life through faith because when we believe in his word, he comes to us, lives in us, and includes us in the eternal life and love of the triune God.

Everything he has taught is now really available to us. At one point he said, "This is the victory—faith." In and through faith, we become victors because we are reunited with him. Therefore, we no longer belong to this world. We no longer look for our ultimate happiness and fulfillment in the good things of this life. Not that we have to become paupers, but we do have to invest our hearts in him while treating earthly blessings as temporary. We now belong to God. And, as children of God, we are on our way to the promised land. As long as we continue to rely on him, and as long as we seek his grace as our highest good, the Kingdom will be ours.