



**John 18:1-11**

# Victim or Victor?

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John 18:1-11

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The church I attended as a child had a large stained-glass window stretched across the front of the sanctuary. I often looked at it when my mind wandered

in worship. This happened a lot since I was bored much of the time. I don't blame the pastor. I did not have my mind on what I was doing. Some you will relate to this story.

I grew up feeling sorry for Jesus. Maybe this stained glass had something to do with it. It seemed like the deck was stacked against him. Jesus seemed a victim of circumstances beyond his control.

John tells a much different story. Jesus is not a victim. He remains a victor. Even in his darkest moments, Jesus will triumph. His mastery over his personal circumstances is striking.

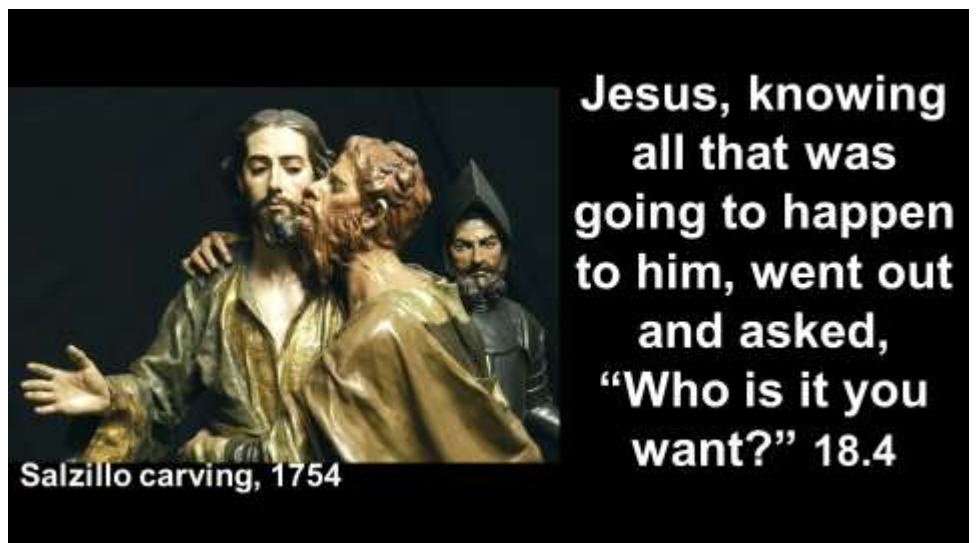
We come now to the last week in Jesus' life. Jesus has gathered with his disciples for one last supper. He issues them his farewell discourse. After closing the evening with prayer, Jesus and his disciples retire to the Garden of Gethsemane.

Judas knows he can find Jesus there. The disciples often retreated with Jesus to this out-of-the-way garden. Judas leaves the temple with a detachment of soldiers carrying torches, lanterns and weapons (18:3). A detachment of soldiers equates to a cohort of anywhere from 200 to 600 Roman soldiers. The religious establishment bungled their

first attempt to arrest Jesus (John 7:44-46). They are not going to make the same mistake twice.

Do not miss the irony of soldiers coming to arrest the Prince of Peace. They choose the cover of darkness to carry out their sinister plot. This, too, is full of irony since the theme of light and darkness is common in John's gospel. They carry torches and lanterns to arrest the Light of the World.

Verse 4 is telling: "Jesus, knowing all that was going to happen to him, went out and asked them, 'Who is it you want?'" Jesus does not wait for them to come to him. He takes the initiative. He asks the question.



They are looking for Jesus of Nazareth. "I am he," Jesus answers. English translations supply the pronoun "he" so the verse reads more smoothly. Literally, Jesus answers, "I am."

His boldness catches the crowd by surprise. The ones in front step back, causing those behind them to stumble and fall. More irony. Unwittingly, Jesus' opponents fall at his feet. It prefigures the day when, "Every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord" (Philippians 2:10-11).

Their surprise reaction may also have something to do with Jesus' "I am" declaration. "I am" serves as a shortened form for God's name in the Old Testament, "I am who I am"

(Exodus 3:14). It also recalls Jesus' seven "I am" pronouncements that appear in John's gospel.

A second time Jesus asks, "Who is it you want?" (18:7). Again, they answer, "Jesus of Nazareth." "I told you that I am he," Jesus says. "If you are looking for me, let these men go" (18:8). You've got to hand it to Jesus—always covering for his disciples.

Peter decides to take matters into his own hands. He brandishes a sword and starts swinging, severing the ear of Malchus, servant of the high priest. Fortunately, for Peter's sake, he has bad aim. Taking out Malchus would have proven fatal for Peter.



Put your sword away.  
Shall I not drink the cup  
the Father has given me?  
18.11

"Put your sword away," Jesus commands him. "Shall I not drink the cup the Father has given me?" (18:11).

In the synoptic gospels, Jesus prays to God the Father in the garden, "Let this cup pass from me" (Luke 22:42). The cup Jesus is about to drink is the cross. Jesus will drink the cup of suffering. He will offer his life in exchange for people's sins. God's justice demands punishment for sin. Therefore, God, through Jesus Christ, pays the penalty. This cup that should have been ours to drink Jesus takes for us.

Let me circle back to a key verse: "Jesus, knowing all that was going to happen to him, went out and asked them, "Who is it you want?" (18:4). Jesus goes to the very garden where Judas expects to find him. He could have gone to another garden to avoid detection. No, he goes to this garden. There

is no attempt to evade his captors. He goes out to greet them. He asks the question. He directs the action.

Jesus is not a helpless victim of circumstances. He voluntarily participates in his arrest and trial.

If we read forward in John's gospel, we learn of Jesus' arrest and subsequent trial before the Roman governor, Pontus Pilate. Pilate's frenetic movements alongside Jesus' calm demeanor fascinates me. Out and In. Back and forth. It makes me wonder "Who, exactly is on trial here?"

Finally, Pilate blurts out, "Don't you realize I have the power either to free you or crucify you?" (John 19:10). Jesus responds, "You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above" (19:11). "You have no power over me" is not a typical victim response.

One other reference to Jesus as master over his circumstances is worth mentioning here. In John 10, Jesus announces "I am the good shepherd of the



**I lay down my life. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord.  
10.17-18**

sheep who lays down his life for his sheep" (10:11). Three times in quick succession, Jesus tells his disciples that he lays down his life for his sheep (10:11, 14, 17). Notice how Jesus says it the third time, "I lay down my life—only to take it up again later. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have the authority to lay it down and the authority to take it up again" (10:17-18).

Jesus is not the tragic victim of circumstances beyond his control. He is a good shepherd who willingly lays down his life for the sheep. No one takes his life from him. He lays it down himself.

To be clear, people victimize Jesus in this story. His own people misunderstand him and misjudge his motives. His closest disciples betray him. His arrest proceeds on trumped-up charges—an innocent man sentenced to die on a Roman cross by a rogue court as a common criminal.

Yet, Jesus refuses to play the victim card. The most victimized person on the planet never plays this card. Even on the cross, Jesus is not a victim. He prays for his victimizers: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34). His final words on the cross, “It is finished,” are not the cry of a defeated man (John 19:30). Even in death, Jesus remains the victor.

So what does this sermon have to do with my life? Two things come to mind.



First, don't play the victim. It is tempting when people inflict injustice or evil against us to play the victim card. Resist every

temptation to play victim.

I do not mean for a moment to diminish the wrong and damage inflicted on you. Some of you are the recipients of someone's abuse or mistreatment. Yet, the danger going forward is thinking of ourselves as victims for what has

happened to us. We can assume a victim mentality. We blame other people for our predicament. We make excuses for ourselves. We refuse to accept responsibility for our actions going forward. As long as we live in a perpetual state of victimhood, we live in a self-imposed prison.

This leads to my second observation, which offers a remedy to this victim cul-de-sac in which we find ourselves. If you have trusted Jesus with your life, you are a victor with Christ. This is not some Pollyanna, syrupy, Joel Osteen name-it-and-claim-it fake promise. It is living into the transformed life Christ offers us. Jesus announced earlier in John's gospel, "If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed" (8:36). This is the Magna Carta for every follower of Christ. We are not victims. We are victors in Christ.

Christ as victor is a primary theme in Paul's letter to the Romans. Hear these words of triumph: "We are more than conquerors through him



[Christ] who loved us" (8:37). Paul continues, "For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (8:38-39). We are more than conquerors. We are not victims. We are victors with Christ.

We will rehearse the improbable victory story over the course of this next week. Today, we commemorate Jesus riding into Jerusalem with people waving palm branches and

singing, “Hosanna. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord” (John 12:13). Yet, the good vibes will turn on a dime when “Hosanna” disintegrates into “Crucify him” within a matter of a few days. We will gather on Maundy Thursday to rehearse his Last Supper with his disciples. On Good Friday, we will gather to recall Jesus’ death on a cross. We will congregate on Easter to celebrate Christ’s resurrection from the dead. His resurrection insures and prefigures our resurrection to eternal life. God will take the worst thing that possibly could happen and will turn it into the best thing that possibly could happen—Jesus’ victory over sin and death.

This triumph leads Paul to conclude the 15<sup>th</sup> chapter of First Corinthians this way, “Death has been swallowed up in victory” (15:54). Paul mocks death as a defeated power. “Where, O death is your victory? Where, O death is your sting?” (15:55). He summarizes, “But thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (15:57). We will sing of this victory tonight in Parts II and III of Handel’s Messiah. Never mind the Masters’ Tournament. You can tape it. Come to the concert!

Repeat after me. I am not a victim. I am a victor through Jesus Christ. Not a victim, but a victor. I am not a victim of my circumstances.

“We are more than conquerors through him who loved us.”



V I C T O R

