

Jesus Steps Forward

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[0 : 00] We're going to read now this morning in our Bibles. You'll find it in John's Gospel, chapter 18, which is page 904, if you have one of the Church Visitors Bibles. Edward Lobb is starting a little series now for the coming weeks on John, chapter 18 and 19.

And so we read this morning the first section of chapter 18, verses 1 to 14, when after the chapters that tell of Jesus' particular teaching in the upper room, just before his betrayal to his disciples. Now he goes and takes his disciples to face the betrayer and to face those who will lead him to his trial and ultimately to his death on the cross.

So verse 1 of chapter 18 says, when Jesus had spoken all these words, that is the teaching of the upper room, he went out with his disciples across the Kidron Valley, where there was a garden which he and his disciples entered.

Now Judas, who betrayed him, also knew the place, for Jesus often went there with his disciples. So Judas, having procured a band of soldiers and some officers from the chief priests and the Pharisees, went there with lanterns and torches and weapons.

[1 : 26] Then Jesus, knowing all that would happen to him, came forward and said to them, whom do you seek? They answered him, Jesus of Nazareth.

Jesus said to them, I am he. Judas, who betrayed him, was standing with them. When Jesus said to them, I am he, they drew back and fell to the ground.

So he asked them again, whom do you seek? And they said, Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus answered, I told you that I am he.

So if you seek me, let these men go. This was to fulfill the word that he had spoken. Of those whom you gave me, I have lost not one.

Then Simon Peter, having a sword, drew it and struck off the high priest's servant and cut off his right ear. The servant's name was Malchus.

[2 : 28] So Jesus said to Peter, put your sword in its sheath. Shall I not drink the cup that the Father has given me? So the band of soldiers and their captain and the officers of the Jews arrested Jesus and bound him.

First they led him to Annas, for he was the father-in-law of Caiaphas, who was high priest that year. It was Caiaphas who had advised the Jews that it would be expedient that one man should die for the people.

Amen. May God bless to us. This is his word. Well, friends, good to see you all.

Let's turn up John's Gospel, chapter 18, please, which you will find on page 904 in our big church Bibles, page 904.

And as Willie mentioned earlier, the plan is for a few weeks to work our way through the 18th and 19th chapters of John's Gospel.

[3 : 42] And I've chosen these chapters because they take us to the first of the two most important events in the history of the world, which are the death of Christ and the resurrection of Christ.

It's perhaps rather surprising that the two most important events in world history should take place in a period of less than 48 hours. But it's the truth and the Bible bears powerful testimony to it.

Now, I'm giving to this series the title, The Truth Behind the Facts. And what I mean by that is that the life of the world, the life of everything going on around us, is full of facts or actions.

Things happen. People act in certain ways and they do various things. But it's not always obvious what those facts mean or what those actions mean.

For example, you might one day see a man walking briskly down Bath Street. But you can't tell just by looking at the man what his action in walking down the street means.

[4 : 50] So he might be on his way to a solicitor. Because he's heard that his great aunt, Jemima, has died in Sydney, Australia. And he knows that she's been planning to leave him a large legacy of thousands of Australian dollars.

So he wants to go to the solicitor to make arrangements to have the money transferred from A to B. On the other hand, he might be walking briskly down Bath Street because he's very hungry and he wants to get to the Blue Lagoon.

Before it shuts for the afternoon. Or he might have been upset by a man that he knows and he wants to go to that man and give him a Glasgow kiss. But the observable fact is that the man is walking rapidly down Bath Street.

But you can't interpret that fact unless somebody who knows that man very well explains the meaning of his action to you. There's truth behind the fact.

But you can't understand that truth without an authoritative explanation. Now it is a fact that Jesus was crucified outside Jerusalem in the springtime of the year in about 31 A.D.

[6 : 00] That fact is recorded in the Bible several times in the New Testament. And it's also recorded by secular historians who were writing during the first and second centuries A.D.

There's no serious historian who would deny the fact that Jesus was put to death by crucifixion. But the question is, what did that crucifixion mean?

What is the truth behind this undeniable fact? After all, there were many people crucified in the first century under the harsh regime of Roman law. And crucifixion, as I'm sure you know, was a form of execution reserved for the lowest of the low.

For the worst kind of malefactor. But why was Jesus crucified? He was not the lowest of the low.

Pontius Pilate, who was the Roman governor of Judea at the time, he would have said that Jesus was crucified because he was a troublemaker and he'd been threatening the peace and stability of the province of Judea.

End of story. A political execution such as happens every day in various parts of the world, allegedly in the interests of law and order. But John the Evangelist, the author of the fourth gospel, puts a very different interpretation on the crucifixion of Jesus.

[7 : 19] John the Evangelist and Pontius Pilate, they both knew the facts very well. Jesus was crucified. He died at about three in the afternoon.

And he was buried on the evening of that Passover Friday. And Pilate probably went back to his dinner that Friday evening, glad that he'd solved a nasty political problem without causing the flow of blood in the streets of Jerusalem.

His conscience might have troubled him just a little, but by and large, he was glad with his day's work. Now, John, writing many decades later, was also glad, but for very different reasons.

And in his 18th and 19th chapters, John gives us the facts and the truth behind them, a true interpretation of those facts. John is our teacher, and he teaches us how to understand the death of Jesus.

And we do need John to teach us, because otherwise we may well get the wrong end of the stick. And it's easier to get the wrong end of this particular stick. For example, I remember being at a meeting down in England years ago, which was a training day for lay preachers.

[8 : 32] I'd been asked to go on to other people to give a talk at this meeting. And towards the end, there was an open time of discussion. And a young woman stood up and said in a rather loud and slightly cross voice, of course, Jesus's death was a failure.

Now, I don't know who'd been influencing that particular person, but it certainly wasn't Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Peter, or Paul. Because to them, to the apostles and the evangelists, the death of Jesus was not a failure.

It was an immeasurably great achievement. And without it, heaven would be eternally barred to us. Well, let's turn now to this opening section of John chapter 18, and we'll see how John the evangelist presents us both with the facts, but also with the truth that lie behind them.

His truthful interpretation comes across clearly in the way that he writes up his account of the facts. Now, the first thing that John is showing us is that Jesus purposefully gave himself up to the will of his enemies.

Look with me at verse 1. When Jesus had spoken these words, he went out with his disciples across the Kidron Valley, where there was a garden which he and his disciples entered.

[9 : 53] Now, that seems to be just a very bland statement of fact, but it's not empty fact. It's full of significance. The Kidron Valley was then, and still is, a steep little ravine that runs along the eastern side of the old city of Jerusalem, and it separates the city from the Mount of Olives, which lies a little bit further across.

So if you stand on the old city walls and you look down eastwards into the Kidron Valley, you'll then look into the Garden of Gethsemane beyond it, and there, barely half a mile further, is the Mount of Olives.

Now, here's verse 2. Now, Judas, who betrayed him, also knew the place, for Jesus often met there with his disciples.

John is showing us that Jesus deliberately went to the Garden of Gethsemane with his disciples because that was their regular meeting place, and Jesus knew that Judas would know where to look for him.

So Jesus was deliberately putting himself into his betrayer's hands. If he'd wanted to avoid the awful issue, there were a hundred hiding places in Jerusalem that he could have gone to, or he could have just melted away into the Judean countryside, which he knew well, or he could have gone northwards, 50 or 60 miles, to Galilee, where the authorities would not bother to look for him.

[11 : 19] But no, he goes to Gethsemane to make it easy for Judas because he was determined that nothing should prevent him from being crucified. Now, of course, there's history behind this.

He'd been teaching his disciples again and again over the previous two or three years that this must happen. He'd said to them, for example, in Luke chapter 9, the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes and be killed and on the third day be raised.

Now, his disciples didn't understand what he meant by that, but he knew that he'd come into the world for this very purpose. He says in Luke's gospel, chapter 13, I must go on my way, for it cannot be that a prophet should perish away from Jerusalem.

That must is a divine must. The Son of Man must be killed. I must go on my way. He knew that it was God's purpose for him to be killed.

He'd been saying similar things earlier in John's gospel. Think of John chapter 10, where he speaks of himself as the good shepherd. He says, I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

[12 : 42] Or in John chapter 15, greater love has no one than this, that a man lays down his life for his friends. Or in John chapter 12, truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone.

But if it dies, it bears much fruit. Wouldn't it be strange if Jesus, having often emphasized that his destiny is to die, should shrink back and change his mind when the moment comes?

So here in John chapter 18, he's deliberately giving himself up to the will of his enemies. Now let's read on. In verse 3, Judas appears in the garden with a band of Roman soldiers and with some of the temple police, quite a large crowd of men, along with lanterns and torches and weapons. Looks a bit like taking a sledgehammer to crack a nut. All that array just to arrest one unarmed man. It reminds me of a scene in an American film that was made in about 1970, but I guess even the younger ones may well have watched it.

Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid. Joyce, have you seen that? I thought you probably. Younger ones, raise a hand if you've seen Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid. Oh, hundreds of you, yes. Now, the story, it's a simple story.

[14 : 07] There are these two notorious outlaws, Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, and they've done awful things up in the United States and the law is on their trail. They've been robbing banks and doing stuff.

But they manage to get away from the law and they come to Bolivia and they end up in a really out-of-the-way one-horse town. But the law is on their trail and eventually they're holed up at the edge of a village square in a small village or town.

And the local chief police has called out his whole police force. And you get this scene at the very end where the two men are holed up in the shop or wherever it is or the saloon bar. And all these other men, each one armed with a rifle, creeps up onto the roofs of the houses and they're ready. And somebody comes up to the chief of police at the last moment and whispers something in his ear. And the chief looks astonished and he says, Dos hombres.

Dos. That's Spanish. Which I think means two men. Only two men. Have I brought out my entire police force at great expense just to deal with two men?

[15:12] Two brigands. Look at verse three again. Soldiers, a band of Roman soldiers, the temple police, lanterns, torches, and weapons. But Judas had greatly overestimated the difficulty of capturing Jesus because look at what happens next.

Verse four. Then Jesus, knowing all that would happen to him, came forward and said to them, whom do you seek? He comes forward.

He steps out of the shadows. He approaches them. He takes the initiative to speed up what was certain to happen. And did you notice that telling phrase there in verse four?

Knowing all that would happen to him. He wasn't surprised. He wasn't caught off guard. He knew the end from the beginning. And here he is facilitating the process.

Then he says to them, whom do you seek? It's not that he didn't know who they were looking for. He knew they were looking for him, not for Peter or Thomas or Matthew, but he's oiling the wheels of the action.

[16:19] He's making it easier for them. He's really saying, I know it's me that you're looking for. So here I am. Take me. I'm ready. I'm not resisting. I have long since settled this in my own mind that I'm about to lay down my life for my friends.

John then brings two interesting details to our attention. The first in verse five is that Judas, the betrayer, is standing there with the soldiers and with the temple police.

And you might have expected Judas to be so perturbed and ashamed that he's hiding somewhere at the back in the shadows. But not at all. He's right there in the front row.

He's brazen-faced. In fact, the other gospels say that he stepped forward at this point and kissed Jesus to confirm Jesus' identity to the soldiers.

So John is showing us that Judas was so completely sold to Satan that he had no shame or sense of shrinking at this point. In fact, John has told us that Satan entered into Judas at the Last Supper, possessed him and took him over.

[17:31] So here, just an hour or two later, we have the Satan-filled Judas, almost an incarnation of Satan, standing with the soldiers, hating Jesus, and showing his hatred with the horrible irony of a kiss.

At this point in Luke's gospel, Jesus says to the assembled crowd, but this is your hour and the power of darkness. Judas is there. Satan is there.

But little did Satan really understand who he had taken on. Now the other thing John points out is the extraordinary reaction of the soldiers and the police when they realize that this man talking calmly to them is the one that they've come out to arrest.

Normally, anybody they'd be trying to arrest would be fighting like a wild cat or trying to run away at top speed. But look at verse 4. Whom do you seek, says Jesus.

Sorry, whom do you seek, says Jesus. They answer him, Jesus of Nazareth, and he then says to them, now this is the literal translation, I am.

[18:42] And verse 6 tells us that when Jesus says, I am, they drew back and fell over each other and fell to the ground. Now John doesn't spell it all out, but his meaning is clear.

These men fell to the ground because they felt the force of the divine name, because the name I am is the name of God, which he revealed to Moses at the burning bush.

So here is this calm, majestic, indomitable figure telling them that he was God incarnate. But this name I am, which we sometimes translate Jehovah or Yahweh, it's not simply God's way of identifying himself.

It carries a further powerful implication. In the book of Isaiah, God frequently refers to himself as I am or I am he.

But he often adds other phrases. So he says, I am he, and besides me, there is no other. I am the first and I am the last.

[19:47] Who is like me? Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth, for I am God and there is no other. So that name I am proclaims not only the identity of God, but the uniqueness of God, the fact that he brooks no rivals.

With that name, he challenges every false God, every pretend God in the universe. There is no other God besides me. That's what he means. He's echoing the first of the Ten Commandments.

And when Jesus says, I am, he is summing up the central message of John's Gospel, which is that Jesus is God incarnate. There is no other.

He's the only Savior. And when his enemies here in the Garden of Gethsemane, when they fall back and fall over each other, are we not seeing a foretaste of what the Apostle Paul writes about in 1 Corinthians 15 when he says, for Christ must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. Here in the Garden of Gethsemane, we have a glimpse of the King in his majesty before whom every knee in the end will certainly bow.

[21 : 03] It's better to bow now in love and gratitude than to be forced to bow in shame and disgrace on the day of judgment because we've refused to submit to him when we had the opportunity.

I am. It's a self-revelation but it's also a command. And let's come back to verse 7. Again he asks, whom do you seek?

And again they say, Jesus of Nazareth. And Jesus answers, I told you that I am. So if it's me you're seeking, let these men, that's the 11 apostles, let these men go.

Now again he's hastening the process. He's clarifying their understanding. He's helping them in their task. He's saying, I know that you're only interested in one man and that man is me.

So let these others go. Matthew and Mark tell us at this point that the 11 took to their heels and fled. Luke and John don't mention that point but you'll see that John adds here at verse 9 that the sparing of the 11 was a fulfillment of what Jesus had said earlier that not one of the men given to him by the father would be lost.

[22 : 23] So do you see how the truth emerges from behind the facts? John is showing us Jesus' deliberate intention to hasten the process of his betrayal. Why?

Because Jesus knows, Jesus has always known, that this horrific crisis had to be faced and had to be got through. It was the price of our salvation.

It was a price that had to be paid. If he had sidestepped the agony and the crucifixion, there could have been no forgiveness of sins for us and no hope of eternal life.

Everything would have been lost. He was purposefully giving himself up to the will of his enemies. But it wasn't only the will of his enemies that Jesus was submitting to.

And this brings us to a second point. And that is that he was deliberately submitting also to the will of his father. The will of his enemies was malicious and murderous.

[23 : 25] But the will of his father was deeply merciful. Let's pick up the trail. Just look at Simon Peter's impulsiveness at verse 10. He draws his sword.

He strikes out at the high priest servant Malchus and cuts off his right ear. All done in just a moment. So loyal, apparently.

And yet, how disloyal Peter was about to be in verse 17. But it's Jesus' reply to Peter in verse 11 that tells us what Jesus' agenda really is.

Put your sword into its sheath, Peter. Shall I not drink the cup that the father has given me? He's saying to Peter, not that way, not like that.

Are you trying to prevent me from doing what I must do, the thing that I came to do? It's very similar to what Jesus had said to Peter a year or two previously. Get behind me, Satan.

[24 : 27] You don't have in mind the things of God, merely the things of men. Look again at verse 11. He's saying to him, Peter, you are trying by violence to stop me from doing what I have to do.

But I am determined, Peter, to drink the cup that my father has given me. Now, what is this cup? It's a strange idea, the cup that the father has given him.

If fathers give their children a cup of something to drink, normally it's something pretty wholesome, isn't it? Even if it's just water or weak tea or diet Coke. But this cup, which the father is asking, in fact, commanding his son to drink, is nothing less than the cup of God's anger poured out against human sin.

Now, there's a lot of Old Testament background behind this, but I just want to give you one example of it. Again, in the prophet Isaiah. In Isaiah chapter 51, God is telling his people that he has punished them fiercely for their sins.

He has sent them into exile and through the long years of exile in Babylon, he has chastised them for their rebellion against him. And in chapter 51 of Isaiah, the Lord brings them great comfort and he tells them that their punishment is now over.

[25 : 47] I'll quote, thus says the Lord, your God, who pleads the cause of his people, behold, I have taken from your hand the cup of staggering. the bowl of my wrath, you shall drink no more.

So God is saying to his people that he's exhausted his anger against them. How? By sending them into exile to Babylon back in the 6th century BC. But now, their exile is over.

They can return to Jerusalem. They have drunk the cup of God's wrath. But when Jesus came, some 600 years later, his task was to drink the final and most toxic cup of God's anger.

God's righteous anger poured out on the whole human race because of our endemic rebellion against him. That cup of God's wrath back in the 6th century BC was partial and temporary and limited.

But the cup that Jesus had to drink on the cross was the ultimate poison chalice. It was the full expression of God's indignant anger, God's fury, as Paul calls it, against our sin.

[27 : 00] Our sin in choosing autonomy and self-rule rather than choosing the loving rule and leadership of our Heavenly Father. So Jesus is saying to Peter here in verse 11, don't try to stop me, Peter.

These events, dreadful as they are, have to be played out. How can I not drink this cup that the Father has given me? I came for this very purpose, you foolish Peter.

If I don't go to the cross, if I don't, in my own body, bear the death-dealing anger of God against the human race, there is no salvation for humanity. I have to go through with it.

Don't stop me. It's the reason why I came. The Father loves the world and I love the world and that's why I'm going through with this. Well, friends, how can we respond to this passage?

Let me suggest two appropriate responses for us. The first is, let's be reassured. John writes these things to assure us of the truth.

[28 : 06] The truth behind the facts is that the death of Jesus was not a failure nor was it a random act of murderous violence. John is showing us how Jesus deliberately, knowing, as verse 4 puts it, all that would happen to him, stepped forward and handed himself over to his enemies.

Perhaps you turn back with me a few pages to chapter 10 in John's Gospel. John chapter 10 and verses 17 and 18. Here we have the Good Shepherd passage and Jesus is the one speaking here and in verses 17 and 18, his words give us a further reassurance of his complete mastery over the whole situation.

So verse 17, for this reason, he says, the Father loves me because I lay down my life, he means willingly, I lay down my life that I may take it up again.

No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority. I've been authorized by the Father. I have authority to lay it down and I have authority to take it up again.

this charge, this commission, I have received from my Father. Aren't those words masterful and magnificent? Who is in charge?

[29 : 32] No one takes my life from me. I lay it down of my own accord. My Father has charged me to do this, but I do it willingly, purposefully.

So friends, let's be reassured by this. We often need reassurance because we're fragile little things. Our faith needs to be regularly reassured. We need reassurance just on the human level of life, don't we?

Think, for example, at work. We often need reassurance that what we're doing is at least a reasonably good job. If the boss says to you once you've put a lot of effort into something, if the boss says to you, well done, you've handled that situation really well, it makes you feel better, doesn't it?

You feel better about your position and your prospects. In marriage, even, we need to have reassurance, don't we? If you're a married man, you probably say things sometimes to your wife that you regret afterwards.

Isn't that right? Nasty words, occasionally, which produce a chilly kind of atmosphere in the kitchen. And then you feel rotten, don't you? You feel bad about yourself and you go to her with your head hanging low and you say to her, I'm sorry for being a complete pig and a total rat.

[30 : 45] Do you still love me? And she says to you, of course I do, you ninny. Now if we need reassurance on the human level like that with our relationships, we also need it with the most important relationship of all.

That's our relationship with the Lord, our everlasting relationship with him. Because we're fragile people, we sometimes think, am I loved by the Lord? Am I eternally saved?

Has the death of Jesus really opened up to me the doorway to heaven? And John's account of the final hours of Jesus before his death is written to reassure us of the clear-sighted, masterful, purposeful way in which Jesus submitted both to the murderous will of his enemies and to the merciful will of his Father.

So let's be deeply reassured. In fact, one of the main reasons for coming to church regularly and for reading the Bible story over and over again is to be reassured of the truth of the gospel.

It's because we're fragile people that we need to come here frequently. If we stay away from the Bible, if we stay away from church, our faith and our understanding flicker and burn dim.

[32 : 03] But to keep on regularly drinking in the truth of what Jesus has done for us, to keep seeing his wonderful, purposeful action is to have our reassurance built up over and over again to a point where finally nothing will shift it.

But as well as being reassured, secondly, let's be thankful and joyful. this Passover Friday is rightly called Good Friday, but it was a terrible Friday.

The Lord of Glory was executed like a common criminal. The most foul injustice was committed. But we call it Good Friday rightly because behind the injustice of man lies the justice of God and the love of God and the purpose of God, God's purpose to share the world to come with all who have repented and put their trust in Christ.

The thankfulness and the joy are muted in John chapter 18. We really have to wait for his other great book, the book of Revelation, before we feel the force of those countless voices in the heavenly city who are praising the Lamb of God who was slain.

But we can say our own hallelujahs and we can know what it is to be filled with joy as we think over again and again and again of Jesus laying down his life for us deliberately and purposefully.

[33 : 30] Then Jesus, knowing all that would happen to him, came forward and said to them, Whom do you seek? They answered him, Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus said to them, I am.

Well, let's bow our heads and we'll pray. Dear God, our heavenly Father, how wonderful it is that you have loved the world so much that you gave up your only Son, that all who believe in him should not perish but have eternal life.

And we pray that this wonderful fact, this truth of your saving love and saving purpose in the work of Jesus would sink deeper, ever deeper into our hearts, bringing that deep joy and sense of deep assurance.

and we pray that you'll give us courage and grace to tell others this wonderful good news. And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.