

“WHEN THE PRESSURE’S ON”
(Matthew 26:47-56)

Every athlete knows what it’s like to be in a pressure-packed moment where winning or losing depends on how you perform. I’ve often wondered what’s it’s like for a gymnast on the balance beam at the Olympics – one little wobble and you’re done. Or imagine you’re a baseball player up to bat at the bottom of the ninth inning with two out. Or you’re a field goal kicker lined up to kick with three seconds to go in the Super Bowl with the game on the line. Or a golfer standing over a putt on the 18th green at the Masters. Pressure. Some athletes seem to thrive under pressure and are said to have the “clutch gene.” Other athletes wilt under the pressure and get labeled as a “choker.” Some athletes, if they’re in a slump and lacking confidence, will hire a sports psychologist to help them perform better under pressure.

How we respond to pressure tells us a lot about who we are. You can be relatively calm and confident in normal circumstances, but when something unexpected pops up – or when something doesn’t go as planned – or you’re suddenly put on the spot – who you really are is exposed. In the heat of the moment, we’ve all done things we wish we could take back – we’ve said things we’ve regretted or not said things we wish we had.

In our passage this morning in Matthew 26 we come to one of the most intense moments in history as Jesus is arrested and led away to His death. At this critical moment all of Jesus’ disciples wilt under the pressure and make choices they will later regret. But standing tall, cool, and calm is Jesus. This story, as with all stories in the Bible, is written as an example for us to learn from, so that when our moments of pressure come, we will respond in the same way Christ does.

All of the events of Matthew 26-27 take place in a very short window of time. On Thursday of passion week, the night before Jesus goes to the cross, He gathers with His disciples in the Upper Room where they eat the Passover meal and Jesus institutes the Lord’s Supper. During the meal Judas slips out and arranges a deal with the Jewish religious leaders to betray Jesus. They’ve been looking for a way to arrest Jesus, but knowing how popular Jesus is, they want to arrest Him quietly and secretly in a way that does not stir up a riot. They get their chance to do so when Judas comes to them and offers to take them to Jesus under the cover of darkness. Judas knows he will find Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane – a place Jesus often went for prayer and solitude.

After the Passover meal, Jesus and His disciples – eleven of them at this point – make their way from the Upper Room to Gethsemane. The garden of Gethsemane is just outside the old city of Jerusalem, across the Kidron Valley, and on the lower slope of the Mount of Olives. In the garden, Jesus is hit by the enormity of what is about to happen to Him on the cross, and enters into an extended time of prayer. He’s in the midst of an intense spiritual battle in which Satan is tempting Him, and trying to lure Him away from the cross – to avoid it and run the opposite direction into the wilderness. Jesus falls to His knees and prays that, if possible, His Father take from Him the cup of suffering. Yet, He says, “Not my will, but yours be done.”

After three rounds of temptation and prayer, He comes to a place of firm resolve and inner peace. He’s ready to fulfill His mission and go to the cross. Verses 45b-46 says, “Look, the hour has come, and the Son of Man is delivered into the hands of sinners. Rise! Let us go! Here comes my betrayer!”

Jesus is about to face the most pressure-packed 12-18 hours in history. He's going to be arrested, go through a series of six trials, He will be beaten, cursed, and mocked, He will be betrayed and abandoned by His closest followers, be forsaken by His Father, and endure six grueling hours on the cross. How our Savior responds under pressure is nothing short of remarkable. But his disciples act much differently, and it begins with Judas.

Verses 47-50, “While he was still speaking, Judas, one of the Twelve, arrived. With him was a large crowd armed with swords and clubs, sent from the chief priests and the elders of the people. Now the betrayer had arranged a signal with them: ‘The one I kiss is the man; arrest him.’ Going at once to Jesus, Judas said, ‘Greetings, Rabbi!’ and kissed him. Jesus replied, ‘Do what you came for, friend.’”

Judas is one of the most infamous figures in history, and his name has become synonymous with betrayal. There are a lot of ways that people can hurt you, but none are more devastating than betrayal – when someone you've known and trusted – someone you've spent time with and invested in – turns on you. In Dante's *Inferno*, betrayers were sent to the Ninth Circle, the lowest level of hell.

King David was betrayed by his own son and most loyal advisors, and he writes about the pain of betrayal in Psalm 55... “If an enemy were insulting me, I could endure it; if a foe were raising himself against me, I could hide from him. But it is you, a man like myself, my companion, my close friend, with whom I once enjoyed sweet fellowship as we walked with the throng at the house of God” (Psalm 55:12-14). The closer the relationship, the greater the pain of betrayal.

What drove Judas to betray Jesus? How could a man whom Jesus Himself chose to be one of the twelve – someone who had been right there with Jesus over a three-year period, watching Him preach and teach and perform miracles – someone who was so trusted by the rest of the group that he was appointed their treasurer – how could he so coldly and callously hand Jesus over to be killed? The simple answer is that Judas wanted Jesus to be something different than what He was, and when Jesus did not live up to His expectations, Judas turned on Him.

What's so amazing about Judas is how skillful he was in covering-up who he really was. I think that in the beginning – when Jesus first called him to be a disciple – that he was thrilled and honored. Like many Jews, Judas longed for a strong, determined leader who would lead a political rebellion and overthrow Rome. He believed Jesus was that man, and Judas would be right there by His side – ruling and reigning with Him in glory. Judas was all into Jesus for what he could get out of it – he wanted power and money and prestige – but He didn't want Jesus. Although he was in the inner circle – one of the twelve – he never loved Jesus and never believed that Jesus was his Savior from sin.

As time went on and Jesus started talking about dying on the cross and establishing a heavenly kingdom instead of an earthly one, Judas became more and more disenchanted with Jesus. All of his feelings about Jesus – kept hidden for so long – spilled a few days earlier when Mary poured out her expensive perfume on Jesus. When Jesus didn't rebuke her for wasting it, He got angry. And when Jesus said that she was anointing His body for His death, it was the last straw. He realizes that Jesus has no intention of leading a political insurrection, but will give Himself up to die. That very night he goes out and makes a deal with the religious leaders to show them where Jesus is.

In verse 47 Judas arrives at the garden with a large crowd armed with swords and clubs. What a scene this must have been. When I was a kid, I went to a passion play in the Black Hills with my parents – it was outdoors at night – and the scene I remember the most was the arrest of Jesus where the soldiers – it seemed like hundreds of them – came in mass to the garden carrying torches and lanterns.

The large crowd was a mixture of Jewish palace guards and Roman soldiers, carrying clubs and swords. John's gospel says that a "detachment" of soldiers came with Judas – which would be between 400-600 soldiers. Not all of them would go on every mission, but even if it were 200 soldiers it seems like a lot of soldiers to arrest one man. But the religious authorities do not want to take any chances. They don't know how many followers are with Jesus and what kind of resistance they might put up.

Judas had a pre-arranged signal with the soldiers that the one he kissed was Jesus, and He's the one they needed to arrest. It's likely that not everyone in the mob knows what Jesus looks like, and it's dark, so in a brazen act of treachery, Judas approaches Jesus like he normally would and gives him a kiss. A kiss in first-century culture was a common greeting and a sign of deep respect, honor, love, and loyalty – especially between a student and his rabbi or teacher. For Judas to kiss Jesus at the same time he's betraying Him is especially cold and heartless. Proverbs says that foes disguise themselves as friends, and an enemy multiplies kisses.

If you're Jesus, and Judas kisses you, how would you respond? To start with, a good backhand across his face might feel appropriate. I'd then do everything possible to smear their name and tell everyone what a rotten, despicable person they are. Jesus simply says, "Friend, do what you came to do."

How can Jesus be so calm, so gracious? Although He's fully God, He's also fully human. He feels hurt and pain just as we do. But Jesus responds with grace because He has already wrestled all His feelings and emotions out in the garden. He knows the price He'll pay in going to the cross – including betrayal – and He's willing to pay that price. In the garden He finds the resolve and determination through prayer to voluntarily give Himself over to His enemies and go to the cross. A few hours later, as His enemies mock and sneer at Him on the cross, He says, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

1 Peter 2:23 says that Jesus' actions under pressure set an example for us for how we are to respond in similar circumstances... "When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly." It's good to remember that anything you've gone through – betrayal, injustice, abuse – Jesus knows exactly how you feel – and He says two things. The first is: Don't retaliate – either physically or verbally. Retaliation might initially make you feel better, but you end up hurting yourself more than the other person. Life is too short and precious to hang onto a vengeful attitude.

Secondly, He says, entrust the person who wronged you to God. Let God take care of them. "Vengeance is mine, sayeth the Lord, I will repay." Part of the reason we want to retaliate is because of our strong sense of justice. We don't want the person who harmed us to get away with it – we want them to be held accountable. God says, "I'll do that – either in this life or in the next life – justice will be done." Once you entrust your offender to God, you can walk free. The burden of justice is now in the God's hands. Instead of lashing out at Judas, Jesus simply says, "Friend, do what you came to do."

The next reaction we see, in the heat of the moment, is our good friend Peter... Verses 50b-51, “Then the men stepped forward, seized Jesus and arrested him. With that, one of Jesus’ companions reached for his sword, drew it out and struck the servant of the high priest, cutting off his ear.” Matthew doesn’t tell us who the sword-wielding disciple is, but John spills the beans... it’s Peter. If John hadn’t told us this, we would have guessed it was Peter. Just a few hours earlier Peter told Jesus he would die for Him, and now he follows through on his boast and tries to prevent Jesus from being arrested. He’s not about to go down without a fight. He gets out his sword and starts swinging, but all he gets is a poor guy’s ear. It’s pretty clear that Peter was aiming for the guy’s head, but missed.

Luke’s gospel tells us that Jesus touched the man’s ear and healed him. This, by the way, is the only miracle where Jesus heals a fresh wound. He simply touches the man’s ear and it’s instantly reattached and normal. You have to wonder if this guy became a Christian. Even in His darkest hour, Jesus takes the time to show love and compassion to His enemy.

Peter had never bought into the idea of Jesus’ going to the cross. Nine months earlier, when Jesus was with His disciples at Caesarea Philippi, He tells His disciples for the first time that He must go to Jerusalem and be crucified. Peter takes Jesus aside and rebukes Him... “Forbid it Lord that this should ever happen to you.” Jesus says, “Get behind me Satan. You are not setting your mind on God’s interests, but on mans.” Now, nine months later, Peter is doing the same thing. He doesn’t understand that it is necessary for Jesus to go to the cross, and he thinks he can stop the soldiers from taking Jesus.

Under pressure, Peter responds in the flesh. Remember, in the garden, instead of praying and engaging in spiritual warfare, Peter sleeps. And now when he’s put on the spot, when the pressure comes, he pulls out his sword and starts swinging, and all he does is create a bloody mess. If he would have listened to Jesus and submitted to the plan of the cross, if he would have been prayed up and had his spiritual armor on, he would have gotten behind Jesus and not out in front of Him, He would have kept his mouth shut, and kept his sword in its sheath.

In this pressure-packed moment, Jesus not only has to deal with a betrayer among His own, but He has to deal with a reckless, impulsive disciple who is trying to prevent Him from going to the cross. Notice how He responds in verses 52-54... “Put your sword back in its place,” Jesus said to him, “for all who draw the sword will die by the sword. Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels? But how then would the Scriptures be fulfilled that say it must happen in this way?”

Jesus tells Peter that his actions are wrong for three reasons. Number one, if you live by the sword, you’ll die by the sword. If you use violence against other people, that same violence is likely to be used against you. If Peter had succeeded in killing the servant, he would have likely been executed by the Roman authorities. By healing the man’s ear, Jesus likely saves Peter’s life.

In a deeper, spiritual sense, Jesus is telling Peter that by using the sword, he’s fighting the wrong enemy and using the wrong weapon. Our real enemy, Ephesians says, is not flesh and blood – it’s not people, it’s not politicians, it’s not the world we see around us – our real enemy is the world we can’t see – it’s the unseen forces of darkness led by Satan that influences people and culture and leaders and institutions. He is the prince of this present, evil world system opposed to God. It’s good to remember that those who oppose the gospel are not our enemies as much as they are victims of the enemy.

Peter also uses the wrong weapon. 2 Corinthians 10:3-4 says, says, “We do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds.” Here Paul reminds us that as believers we do not fight all the wrongs of this world with earthly weapons – with our fists and with our words and with our swords – we fight with spiritual weapons – we pray, we read and obey God’s Word – which Hebrews says is a double-edged sword that penetrates our deepest thought and attitudes – we exercise our faith, and we put on our spiritual armor. All earthly weapons do is cut off ears and creates a mess.

What is so puzzling to Jesus’ disciples, and puzzling perhaps to us, is that Jesus – who possessed the power of heaven to perform any miracle, doesn’t wave His hand and make His enemies disappear. In verse 53 He says, “Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels?” Right then and there – surrounded by perhaps hundreds of soldiers with clubs and swords – Jesus could have snapped His fingers and had twelve legions of angels come and destroy them. How many are twelve legions of angels? A lot. A legion is a Roman army is made up of 6,000 soldiers – and 12 times 6,000 equals 72,000. What exactly can 72,000 angels do?

Well, there’s a story in the Old Testament where the Assyrian army surrounded Jerusalem, and the Assyrian king taunted the Israelite king Hezekiah and blasphemed God. Vastly outnumbered, King Hezekiah prayed to God for deliverance, and that night one angel – just one – put to death 185,000 Assyrians. If one angel can do this, what would 72,000 angels do? All Jesus had to do in the garden was give the word, and the arresting mob would be gone.

Jesus says, “Peter, put your sword back in it’s sheath because, number one, by violence you’ll only bring violence upon yourself. Number two, I don’t need your sword – I can call down angels right now to do away with these guys. And number three, I must go to the cross to fulfill scripture. Verse 54, “But how then would the Scriptures be fulfilled that say it must happen in this way?” “Peter, if we stop what’s going on here, how will God’s will be fulfilled?”

As you read through the Old Testament, you’re struck by how everything is leading up to, picturing, and prophesying about the death of Jesus – the sacrificial system was set up to show Israel how they needed a blood sacrifice to be right with God, and that someone must die in their place. The prophets talked about the Messiah suffering and being slain for the sins of the world. If Jesus had called down the angels, if He had avoided being arrested, if He did not die on the cross – then nothing in the Old Testament would make sense. Jesus tells Peter, “The cross must take place. It’s been planned from before the creation of the world. Put your sword away and submit to the plan.”

Not only was the cross planned from the beginning, so was the timing of the cross. Verses 55-56a says, “In that hour Jesus said to the crowd, ‘Am I leading a rebellion, that you have come out with swords and clubs to capture me? Every day I sat in the temple courts teaching, and you did not arrest me. But this has all taken place that the writings of the prophets might be fulfilled.’”

Jesus chides the delegation who’s come to arrest Him for their huge display of force. “Why are you bringing the SWAT team? You’d think I was some dangerous revolutionary, but I don’t even carry a weapon. I heal the sick, I make the blind to see and the lame to walk. What makes you think I’m leading some kind of military rebellion?”

Jesus also chides them for waiting until the dead of night, when no one's looking, to arrest Him. "You had every opportunity to arrest me in public – in broad daylight – when I was in the temple courts – why did you wait to use the cover of darkness?" The reason is because the Jewish leaders don't want trouble with Rome. Rome liked peace and quiet, and if a popular teacher like Jesus was arrested publicly, there might be a riot. So they come to arrest Him secretly at night.

But from God's perspective, the timing and circumstances of Jesus' arrest were all planned to fulfill prophecy. The Old Testament prophets wrote that the lamb of God would be slain on Passover – not the day before Passover or the day after Passover, but on the day of Passover because Jesus is the fulfillment of Passover – the perfect lamb of God who shed His blood for the forgiveness of our sins. Nothing that happens on this night was a surprise – it was all in the plan.

The Bible you and I hold in our hands is not just another book – it is the inspired Word of God, which tells an intricate, consistent story that all fits together. And when God lays out His plans in His book, it will come to pass just as He says.

We've seen Judas reaction to pressure, we've seen Peter's reaction, and in the last part of verse 56 we see how the rest of the disciples react... "Then all the disciples deserted him and fled." They abandon Jesus. First Jesus is betrayed, and now He's abandoned. Every one of the disciples vowed to be with Jesus 'til the end, but they never imagined that Jesus would voluntarily allow Himself to be arrested. They expected Him to exert His power and take control of His enemies. When He doesn't, they scatter and leave Jesus on His own. Under pressure, they cave. Jesus must now face the cross on His own.

Like Peter, the rest of the disciples did not listen to Jesus and submit to His plan – instead of praying in the garden, they feel asleep – and because they do not have their spiritual armor on – when the moment of truth comes, they're not prepared.

There are going to be many times – perhaps even in this coming week – when you will face pressure... someone will betray you, someone will abandon you, you'll be misunderstood, someone will make you angry, you'll be put on the spot – and how you respond depends on how spiritually prepared you are going into your situation. Like Jesus, have you been to the garden of prayer so that when your hour of trial comes you have spiritual power and protection? Are you fighting the right enemy with the right weapons? And, like Jesus, are you wholeheartedly committed to obeying God's will, even if that leads to suffering and pain? When the pressure is on, will you be like Jesus?