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The Gospel of John **L. In the Garden** **John 18:1-27**

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He came into the garden in the cool of the evening, calling out for His beloved. It had long been their custom to meet each other there, that they might walk together for a while – conversing in that easy intimacy born of deep and reciprocal love. But this evening something was different. It was in the air – He could sense it. Perhaps already He knew everything. He went through the garden calling and calling, “*Where are you?*” But this night there was no answer.

Until at last He found His beloved, hiding in the bushes – Adam and Eve, betrayal and guilt written all over their faces. “*What have you done?*” He asked them – though surely He already knew. They then lied to Him, they attempted to cover over their guilt by blaming one another and then blaming the serpent. But the deed was already done. The damage was already done. Love, the most fragile of all the flowers in that garden, had been trampled into the dirt. In that Garden of Eden, so long ago, our sin soured everything. Our sin broke apart the intimate relationship with God for which we were created, and in which we find our only true and eternal joy.¹

Another garden, on another night so many troublesome years later, God is waiting to meet with His beloved yet again. But this time it is they who come searching after Him. This time it is they who are crying out, “*Where are you? Where are you?*” This time it is the creature seeking out the Creator. Only they are seeking Him, on this night and in this garden, not to worship Him, not to bow down before Him and beg His mercy, not to confess the foolishness of their sin and the failure of all their attempts to live apart from Him. No, they come into the garden on this night in order to seize Him. They come with swords and soldiers to put Him into chains. They come with torches and lanterns that they might take Him into their hands and put Him to death.

But what is even more startling than their utter disobedience, than their utter ignorance as to what they are seeking to do, is the fact that He permits them to do this, there in the garden. There, in this second garden, the Lord, the God of love, gives Himself into the hands of His beloved, givens Himself into their betrayal of His love.

And to make it all more terrible, one of His own – one in whom He had deeply invested His Word, His power, and His affection – is there leading them to Him. Earlier in the evening, Jesus had confronted Judas at the table, sending Judas out with the words, “*What you are going*

*to do, do quickly.*² And Judas, the Gospel is careful to note, had gone out into the darkness. To turn away from the One who is the Light of the World is to go out into the darkness. And now, in darkness, he leads them to Jesus. They come in the darkness with their pitiful lanterns and torches to arrest the One who is the Light of the World.³ They come in the wicked and woeful darkness that had long ensnared the souls of humankind as they turned away from that Light. They come in the darkness to extinguish the Light.

And He does not flee from them. Escape would have been so easy for the Son of God. But, instead, He steps toward them. He finds them before they can find Him. He finds them and goes toward them and says to them, “*Whom do you seek?*” They answer Him, “*Jesus of Nazareth.*” He replies, “*I am he.*” And the instant He says those words, “*I am he,*” suddenly they all, as one, begin to draw back. They fall down upon their knees. Why? They are armed with swords and spears, He carries nothing in hands. They are many, He is but one. Why do they draw back in fear when He says to them, “*I am he.*” It sounds like nothing more than a simple answer to their question. But clearly they have heard in that answer something else, something that momentarily terrifies them to the core of their being.

Perhaps it was this. The answer Jesus gives to them, in the original language, has two possible meanings. It can mean, as we take it to mean here, nothing more than, “*I am the one you are seeking.*” But it can also mean far more powerful and profound: “*I AM.*” “*I AM.*” When Moses stood before the burning bush, conversing with God, at one point he put this question to God: “*If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what should I say to them?*” And God said to Moses, “*I AM.*” “*Say this to the people of Israel, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’*”⁴ “*We are seeking Jesus of Nazareth,*” the soldiers tell Him. And Jesus answers them, saying, “*I AM.*”

And, for just a moment, their souls recognize Him – or, at the very least, for just a moment their souls entertain the possibility that He really might just be the One He claims to be – “*I AM,*” God in the flesh. And they fall to the ground out of instinct, out of what little is left in them of reverence for the Most High God – for what else can a sinner do in the presence of the Most High God but fall to his or her knees in fear and trembling. They fall to the ground in fear of what they are doing, in fear over all that they have already done, in fear that they have somehow come into the presence of the Living God.

But quickly the fear passes and they recover their nerve. Quickly they are back on their feet and fingering their swords and following through with their mission. But before He will submit to arrest, Jesus first acts to protect the eleven disciples who have now gathered around Him in the commotion. “*Let these men go,*” He says to the soldiers and officers. Jesus, the Good Shepherd⁵, protecting His sheep so that the wild beasts cannot get to them.

But one of the sheep, on his own, transforms into a wild beast. Peter grabs at his sword and lunges with it toward one of those before Jesus. He strikes the man on the ear – and instantly Jesus rebukes Peter. How many times had He tried to explain to Peter and the others that this was going to happen, that this was how it had to be, that this was what God intended in the sending of His Son to earth? Had He not said to Peter specifically regarding Peter’s objection to this point, “*Get behind me Satan. For you are not on the side of God, but of man*”⁶?

And here He once again must rebuke Peter: “*Put your sword into its sheath; shall I not drink the cup that the Father has given me?*”

And with that, they bind Jesus and lead Him away to the High Priest, the same High Priest who had earlier carried the day in the Sanhedrin by arguing that it was better for this one man to die for the sake of the people, than for the whole nation to perish. Better for one man to die for the sake of the people – how true those words turned out to be – though not at all as the High Priest imagined or intended them. But truly, in this one Man’s death, all people can now find life.

The high priest proceeds to question Jesus about His teachings – as if to give some pretense of legal legitimacy to what they have already decided to do with Him. Jesus responds that He has taught openly, not keeping His words in secret: “*Ask those who have heard me what I said to them; they know what I said.*” And, for this answer, one of the officers standing near Jesus reaches out in anger and strikes Jesus with his hand – the first of many blows that shall fall upon Him before this night is through. Jesus answers both the blow and the high priest by offering what amounts to one last opportunity for the high priest to repent of this crime, saying, “*If what I said is wrong, bear witness about the wrong; but if what I said is right, why do you strike me?*”

But there is, of course, no repentance. And in the high priest’s lack of an answer to this assertion, the perversity of this inquisition is laid bare. Jesus is innocent by the laws of Israel, by the holy Word of God. Jesus has only taught the Truth, for Jesus Himself is the Truth sent from God. The high priest cannot even begin to correct the teachings of Jesus because it is the teachings of Jesus which define correctness. It is the high priest who is wrong. It is the warped and sin-twisted theology of God’s own people that is in error – the very error that has led them to this horribly mistaken conclusion that Jesus, their promised Messiah standing before them, is nothing but a liar and a corrupter of the truth. The true High Priest, Jesus, shows up the inadequacy of the false high priest. And the false high priest can think of no other response but to send Jesus further down along the road to His death. Confronted with the Truth from God, the false high priest of Israel chooses to cling to the lie.

In the meantime, outside in the courtyard, Peter is losing his own personal battle with truth. To Peter’s credit, he has followed Jesus to the high priest’s house. Remember what Peter, earlier that same evening, had boasted? “*Lord, I will lay down my life for you!*”⁷ And Peter has given substance to his boast by following Jesus, at great personal risk, into a very dangerous situation. But Jesus had told Peter that Peter could not follow Him on this particular path.⁸ For it is Jesus who must die for Peter, not Peter for Jesus.

And so Peter fails, just as Jesus said he would. Remember how Jesus had answered the inquiry of the soldiers in the garden by answering, “*I am*”? Listen to Peter. A servant girl approaches him and says to him, “*You’re not one of his disciples, are you?*” And Peter answers, “*I am not.*” Then someone standing by the fire with Peter asks him again, “*You’re not one of his disciples, are you?*” And again Peter answers, “*I am not.*” And then it happens one more time, a third time – just as Jesus had said it would. And no sooner had that last denial left Peter’s lips, then off in the distance a rooster crows, just as Jesus had said it would.⁹ Peter has denied

knowing Jesus three times – Peter has traded the truth for a self-protecting lie. Peter has chosen the cover of darkness over his loyalty to the light.

And so this scene that began in the garden comes to a close. The night is not yet half past – and darker hours are still ahead. Until the great darkness of the day ahead – the great darkness of the prophesied and terrible Day of the Lord descending upon the earth at the hour of His death upon the cross.¹⁰ But even in this deepening darkness, we remember something we read at the very beginning of John’s Gospel: “*The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.*”¹¹ Even in this deepening darkness, we remember something that Jesus Himself had said: “*I have come into this world as light, so that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness.*”¹²

That is as profound a promise as any that could be spoken to us. That when the world seems to have descended into darkness, that when the darkness seems to have overcome all the light even in our own individual lives, there is, shining still, a Light in this world – a Light illumining hope, a Light leading the way to our deliverance, a Light that the darkness can never overcome. Just as the darkness of earthly night must always yield to the dawn of a new day, so too shall all the darkness of human suffering, human cruelty, human brokenness, and human sinfulness finally be made to yield to the power of the One who is this world’s True Light. The darkness may cover us for a little while, but joy comes in the morning – for the Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness shall never overcome it. We hold to that promise with all our might.

But, for now, let us linger for just a moment longer in that garden before we turn to follow Jesus along the rest of His journey to the cross. In the garden, just after Peter had struck off the ear of the high priest’s servant and Jesus had rebuked him, Jesus went on to say something – something profoundly important. He said, “*Shall I not drink the cup that the Father has given me?*” And with those words of Jesus, we are transported back to that first garden again. Back to that first garden in the very moments after God had banished Adam and Eve from the garden and placed an angel with a flaming sword to bar them from ever entering again. Back to that first garden, with God still pierced by the sting of the betrayal He has just received from His beloved ones, still grieving for what has been lost by their betrayal – lost not just to them, but also to Himself.

And in that moment, surely, is when God began the plan that was to lead all the way down through the centuries to that very night with Jesus in this second garden across the Kidron Valley. This second garden where God, this time garbed in human flesh, would come looking to meet with His beloved ones yet again, and would walk with them yet again in the cool of the evening all the way to the cross upon which they would hang Him to die.

That plan God had made that He would not destroy us, but deliver us; not forget us, but redeem us; not forsake us, but forgive us. Not to reject us forever for what we have done in rejecting Him. But, instead, to heal us, and to heal our relationship with Him, and to bring us back to the eternal beauty and goodness of His garden. All of this is what is meant by those words Jesus spoke as they bound His hands and led Him away to die: “*Shall I not drink the cup that the Father has given me?*” It is the very voice of our God saying, “*How can I not seek*

them, forgive them, bring them back home to my garden. Bring them back home into the embrace of my boundless love for them.”¹³

There, in that garden outside of Jerusalem, on the night in which Jesus was arrested, God comes seeking for us once again. This time that our sin may be forgiven and that we should be reconciled to Him, brought close once again to our Heavenly Father. This time that our walk with Him might begin again, might begin anew, with nothing ever again able to separate us from Him. This time that our life in the garden of His boundless love should be restored forever.

¹ Genesis 3. This connection between the two gardens was first suggested by one of the early church fathers, Cyril of Alexandria in the early fifth century B.C. I was helped here also by Tom Wright, John for Everyone, Part Two (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), p. 102.

² John 13:27.

³ John 8:12.

⁴ Exodus 3:13-14.

⁵ John 10:14-15.

⁶ Matthew 16:23.

⁷ John 13:37.

⁸ John 13:36.

⁹ John 13:38.

¹⁰ “Day of the Lord”: see, for example, Isaiah 13, Joel 2, Amos 5, Zephaniah 1, Malachi 4.

¹¹ John 1:5.

¹² John 12:46.

¹³ John 3:16-17.