

**John 18:1-11 [NIV]**

*When he had finished praying, Jesus left with his disciples and crossed the Kidron Valley. On the other side there was a garden, and he and his disciples went into it.*

<sup>2</sup> *Now Judas, who betrayed him, knew the place, because Jesus had often met there with his disciples. <sup>3</sup> So Judas came to the garden, guiding a detachment of soldiers and some officials from the chief priests and the Pharisees. They were carrying torches, lanterns and weapons.*

<sup>4</sup> *Jesus, knowing all that was going to happen to him, went out and asked them, "Who is it you want?"*

<sup>5</sup> *"Jesus of Nazareth," they replied.*

*"I am he," Jesus said. (And Judas the traitor was standing there with them.) <sup>6</sup> When Jesus said, "I am he," they drew back and fell to the ground.*

<sup>7</sup> *Again he asked them, "Who is it you want?"*

*"Jesus of Nazareth," they said.*

<sup>8</sup> *Jesus answered, "I told you that I am he. If you are looking for me, then let these men go." <sup>9</sup> This happened so that the words he had spoken would be fulfilled: "I have not lost one of those you gave me."*

<sup>10</sup> *Then Simon Peter, who had a sword, drew it and struck the high priest's servant, cutting off his right ear. (The servant's name was Malchus.)*

<sup>11</sup> *Jesus commanded Peter, "Put your sword away! Shall I not drink the cup the Father has given me?"*

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We're in John 18 today, if you'd care to turn there in your Bible. The 18th chapter of the gospel of John.

I wonder what comes to your mind when you hear the words, "sacred space."

"Sacred space"?

Some might automatically think of a church sanctuary, a cathedral, a tomb, a shrine — some sort of religious edifice.

But for those who've had occasion in life to encounter God in an intimate and powerful way, chances are the place, or maybe the places, where that has occurred are more likely to be what comes to mind when they hear "sacred space."

It is that physical place where something spiritually big happened. You remember that place.

Maybe for you it *is* a church sanctuary or an altar rail. Maybe it's a place in nature — a lake, a forest, a dock, a beach. Maybe it's a grove, such as I talked about with the kids.

Maybe there was a literal mountain-top that was a spiritual mountain-top in your life.

Maybe it's that chair where you sit and pray in the mornings. Maybe it's a hospital room or chapel. Maybe it's a cemetery where God made Himself powerfully known in your life.

Wherever it was, whenever you think about it a mix of emotions probably come to mind. But one of them is very likely a strong sense of serenity, of peace — a certainty that whatever may be disruptive or chaotic in your life, God is bigger, God is greater, God is more

powerful. And God will make things right, sooner or later, one way or another.

There is a reassuring sense in that sacred space that God is walking with us, or maybe carrying us, as the poet says, through our difficult days.

Yet, it is not the space itself that's truly sacred, is it?

The space is sacred to us because it was in that place that we encountered God for who He really is, and as we were willing to see and hear and receive from Him, He brought divine perspective to the rest of our lives.

God's mere presence can do that, can bring peace to our minds and order to our chaos. He doesn't have to actually fix our situation. He doesn't even have to say anything. He just has *to be* — and as we will recognize Him and receive Him there, that's how that space becomes sacred to us.

Is there a place like that in your life?

It seems to me that Gethsemane was one of those places for Jesus — which is, maybe, hard for us to grasp. But I think it's true, because the gospels tell us how, from time to time, He needed points of special connection with His Heavenly Father.

And because John tells us there in verse 2 that Jesus went to Gethsemane often, I think this was one of those places, and I'd like us to consider today a couple of things that happened there.

The word "gethsemane" means "oil press," which leads us to believe that the garden that John speaks of here was a grove of olive trees that would have contained a press for extracting olive oil.

It was just outside Jerusalem, on the mount of Olives. It was probably a private garden surrounded by some sort of wall, and likely owned by a follower of Jesus who gave Him access.

It was a familiar place to Jesus — we know that because Judas knew right where to find Him.

Luke tells us that, on this trip to Jerusalem, Jesus spent each night on the Mount of Olives. Jewish law said that all pilgrims had to stay in the vicinity of Jerusalem during Passover, and this place would have qualified as "vicinity."

Others believe Jesus' familiarity with this grove indicates He had been here many times before, on previous trips to Jerusalem.

In either case, on this night, since Jesus knew His time on earth was short, He wanted to be with God, with His friends, and in a place He knew and trusted. And so, He went to the garden — the grove — that night, with much weight upon Him, hoping to meet there with His Heavenly Father.

And God the Father did meet Him there, in spite of the tremendous violation of the space that occurred.

Jesus went there because it was known, safe, and trusted, and yet we're told how it was brutally invaded

on this night by, actually, a remarkable number of people. John says there in verse 3 that a “*detachment of soldiers as well as officials from the chief priests and Pharisees*” arrived there, “*all carrying torches, lanterns and weapons*” – all led there by Jesus’ disciple, Judas.

The term for “detachment” or, “cohort,” means, in military terms, somewhere between 200 and 1000 soldiers. And we don’t know for sure if these were Roman soldiers or temple guards – an argument could be made for each and maybe both.

But whoever they were, even the lowest number would have constituted an enormous crowd there at that little hillside garden. They were hostile and loud and angry, and they shattered any earthly peace in that place on that night.

But you see, no crowd of any size was able to shatter the *divine* peace that came to Jesus that night, because God, His Father, had met Him there, and that was enough.

It was enough for Jesus to resist even the attempted defense of His friend. Peter stood up for Him, but Jesus told Peter, after he’d lashed out with his sword there in verse 11, “*Peter—put your sword away! Shall I not drink the cup that the Father has given me?*”

“*Shall I not drink this cup? Shall I not do the will of God here?*”

Can you feel the power in that statement?

Even though He was unjustly accused –

Even though He was betrayed by a friend –

Even though He faced what He knew would be a horrific death –

God His Father had met Jesus there with the power to accept and face the terrible future.

And not only that, God gave Him the grace and power to bless those who persecuted Him – to heal, Luke tells us, the ear of this man, Malchus, that Peter had cut off with his sword.

So, you see, even though the soldiers were successful in arresting and leading Jesus away that night –

Even though God did not change the *circumstance* that drove Jesus to the garden –

Even though God did not change the *outcome* of the event –

God *did* come in great power and assurance and peace to Jesus.

God came and powerfully ordered Jesus’ thoughts and priorities such that He was able to *embrace*, and even *defend*, the very thing that He’d just asked God to, if possible, remove from Him.

God the Father showed up there in *power* and made a *big* difference – a *real* difference; and that’s what makes a space sacred.

It’s never the space itself.

It’s the God who occupies it – and works powerfully within it.

When Jesus returns as King to a redeemed, restored creation, I wonder if He’ll go to that garden – that olive grove – where His Father so powerfully met Him just when He needed Him the most.

Not that Jesus would build any shrine there, as we’re tempted to do in those situations. You and I, we tend to make the place holier than the God, and Jesus would never do that.

But I wonder if He would feel the presence of His Father there all over again – if just being in the place would remind Him of how much God His Father loves Him.

I realize Jesus’ divinity and humanity make all this sort of tricky and touchy, but you know, in Jesus’ humanity there in the garden – much like His humanity in the wilderness at the beginning of His ministry life, in His humanity, we don’t even know – we can’t really grasp – how much those moments affected all of us – all of history – and affect all the future – all creation!

Things could have been so different – we don’t know for sure what could have been.

What we do know, though, is that our Heavenly Father came when Jesus called Him, that He sanctified that space, and that He powerfully gave Jesus what He needed in order to go on in His mission – to fulfill His purpose.

And that made that space sacred to Jesus.

But you know, there was someone else who experienced that grove as sacred space that night – and to their great shock and surprise, I’m sure.

I’m talking about those soldiers who were there.

What happened to those soldiers there is one of those odd events the Bible records – so odd, in fact, that many have tried, through the years, to diminish it – or even reject it as fantasy.

Now, you need to know, if you don’t already: we don’t look at the Bible that way. We don’t pick and choose what we want to believe from this book. Of course, we consider context and genre and the original languages and all that. But we don’t judge Scripture. We let the Bible judge us, realizing that we’re limited and may wind up being wrong in some ways.

So, that said, what about this business of the soldiers, who, “*drew back,*” verse 6 there says, “*and fell to the ground*” when Jesus told them, “*I am he.*”

You can picture it: dozens and dozens – hundreds – of uniformed, armed men recoiling backward and falling down – falling over like lines of dominoes – when Jesus simply says, “*I am. I am who you are looking for.*”

What really happened there?

Some have said, “Well, they must have just stumbled over themselves.” The first guy tripped over a rock or something and then they all fell down.

Others have said they were apparently so shocked that Jesus just came right out and gave Himself up, that they just fell over backward. They obviously weren’t used to their enemies being so willing and compliant.

Ah, but really – honestly – doesn’t your gut tell you it has to be more than just something like that?

Something more just had to be going on here than clumsiness or amazement. I mean, these were professional soldiers. Guys like that don’t just fall over at some slight little thing.

You know what *had* to be going on here? It *had* to be God showing up in power!

It had to be God marking this place as sacred, even to these soldiers.

It had to be supernatural, and it was most likely due to Jesus' response to them, which, regardless of how your English version translates it, is simply two words in the original Greek, *ego eimi*. "I am."

Verse 4 there, "*Jesus, knowing all that was going to happen, went out and asked them, 'Whom do you seek?'*

*They answered, 'Jesus the Nazarene.'*

*He told them, "I am."*

You see – what this is – is the "I am" of God Himself.

This is the capstone of all that Jesus has declared already about who He is. In his gospel here, John has already reported Jesus as saying:

"I am the bread of Life."

"I am the Light of the World."

"I am the Good Shepherd."

"I am the Gate."

"I am the Resurrection."

"I am the vine."

"I am the way and the truth and the life."

Jesus has already declared all these things about Himself, and in these two words there in verse 5, He's declaring them all over again.

But you know, even more than that, this is the "I am" of the God who said to Moses centuries before, when Moses said to Him, "*Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you; when they ask, 'What is his name?' What do I tell them?'*"

And God said to Moses, "*I am who I am. You say to them, 'I Am has sent me to you.'*" (Exodus 3:13-14)

The name: the essence of God Himself, the One who has always been and will always be; the One who has no beginning and no end, no past and no future; the Source of all that is and all we are.

God is the *I Am* who cannot even be expressed without extraordinary, overwhelming power.

This is a theophany – that's the technical word for an earthly manifestation of God. And the soldiers' response here is very typical, actually, for a happening like that. You see it all through Scripture.

Manoah, the father of Samson, fell to the ground when confronted with God's presence – in Judges 13.<sup>1</sup>

The prophet Ezekiel did the same.<sup>2</sup>

This was Saul's response in Acts 9 there on the road.<sup>3</sup>

It's what John did when He saw God in Revelation.<sup>4</sup>

And on and on.

Joe Dongell says that here, before those soldiers, "Something of the divine majesty itself has been *unleashed*, knocking those nearby to the ground."

G. Campbell Morgan wrote about this: "Some burst of divine majesty halted those soldiers, the emerging of something we cannot interpret, the flaming of God's glory."

And that unleashing of God's person and power, just the power within His name, made everyone there realize – and it should make us realize even today – that this contingent of soldiers, no matter how large or powerful, had more than met its match, and they would succeed in capturing Jesus only with His own agreement and His own compliance.

No one was going to lay a hand on Him – until His hour had come.

So, you see, at Gethsemane we have a sacred space where the great "I Am," the very presence of God Himself, acts upon the lives of both Jesus *and* those soldiers.

But there was a great difference in result, wasn't there?

Jesus was able to hear and see what God the Father was doing. He wanted and received God's presence, and so that space became, for Him, one of peace and power. And God helped Him stand.

The soldiers, on the other hand, didn't want God; in fact, they were standing *against* God's presence and purposes. They wouldn't receive who He was and what He was doing, and so the space became, for them, a place of terror and weakness – a place where they fell away.

It was the same God, the same place, the same power – but very different responses and very different outcomes.

What made the difference was whether or not God was wanted, recognized and received.

And the same is true today – for you and me.

God is present with His people. He has promised He would be, which means He is here today. And He would love to make this moment – this place – a sacred space for any of us who want and recognize and receive Him.

Here and now, we can experience God's presence, His power, His guidance, and His peace. Any of us can.

The question is, will we?

Do we really want to encounter Him, and all the disruption to what's become normal to us that He typically brings?

Will we recognize Him for who He is, or will we think Him to be just a figment of our imagination?

Will we receive what His Spirit has to say to us, or will we ignore Him and keep pursuing our own way and agenda?

If we ignore and reject Him – like the soldiers, we'll fall under His power, and nothing good will change in our lives.

But if we'll receive Him, this will become a sacred space to us. This will become a place where God made a difference – where God changed us and gave us the power to do His will.

And that's what He wants to do. He wants to make us different than we are. He wants to make us what He intended us to be – both powerful and peaceful, whole and holy.

He'll do for us what He did for Jesus.

<sup>1</sup> Judges 13:20-21

<sup>2</sup> Ezekiel 1:28

<sup>3</sup> Acts 9:4

<sup>4</sup> Revelation 1:17

Do you need God to do something for you today?  
Are you looking for a garden, a grove, Gethsemane?  
God's Spirit is alive in our world, so any place can  
become that place – any place where God is wanted and  
recognized and received.

Do you want Him?

Do you recognize Him?

Will you receive Him in your life?

Let this place – this moment – become a sacred space  
for you.

Prayer:

Father, none of us here today is facing anything like  
Jesus faced there in Gethsemane, with the weight of the  
sin of all the world on His shoulders. We know that. We  
admit that.

Still, Father, our burdens are great, and we need You.  
We need your help, we need your strength, we need your  
peace, we need your assurance, we need your wisdom to  
even know exactly what we need.

Would you come and give us just what's needed?

We know you are the great "I Am."

We want you to make yourself powerfully present in  
our lives, so that, even in the midst of a sinful world, we  
can stand – and finish the work you have for us to do.  
Amen.

Closing Song: *In The Garden*

Benediction:

May God make where you are today a garden, a  
grove that is filled with His presence.