

# The Misery and the Majesty

Daniel 7:9-14, John 18:1-27 (ESV)

July 15, 2007

“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.... When Jesus said to them, ‘I am he,’ they drew back and fell to the ground.” Armed Roman soldiers and Jewish officers, when confronted by the Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:6 (ESV)), retreated and fell to the ground. Their reaction upon hearing Jesus say, “I am”—the Greek here does *not* include the word “he”—their reaction upon hearing Jesus say, “I am,” echoed the reaction of Moses who hid his face before the burning bush from which he heard the voice of God identify himself as “I AM WHO I AM” (Exodus 3:1-14 (ESV)). Only Judas the betrayer remained standing stupidly and stubbornly in front of the Lord of the universe before whom he, too, should have bowed to the ground.

The contrast could not be sharper. Even the arresting soldiers—if only for a moment, if only in a partial way, if without any real understanding—even the arresting soldiers acknowledged Jesus as Lord. Poor Judas, in his last appearance in the Gospel according to John, stands frozen in his eternal defiance. Which shall it be for us? Shall we bow before the betrayed, condemned, crucified, and now resurrected Lord of the universe? Or shall we continue to believe in, and to insist upon, our own importance, our own goodness, our own righteousness, our own deservingness? The contrast could not be sharper. The choice could not be clearer. The consequence could not be more profound. Which shall it be for us?

The soldiers’ worship did not last long. There is no evidence that their piety ran deep. Their brief encounter with the Lord of the universe seems not to have converted them and not to have had any saving impact upon them. We do not want to make too much of it. Indeed, this passage tells us much more about the power of Jesus Christ than about the piety of the Roman soldiers or the Jewish officers. Jesus knew all things. No one took his life from him; he gave it freely on our account (John 10:18 (ESV)). Even after the soldiers and officers arrested him, Jesus instructed them to release his disciples, and they did so. Even as he stood on trial before Annas, Jesus was confirmed in what was right while his detractors persisted in the wrong. As Jesus answered Pilate, who ordered his crucifixion, “You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above” (John 19:11 (ESV)).

So here, when Jesus said, “I am,” and the soldiers and officers drew back and fell to the ground, much more is said about the power of his person and presence than about any genuine piety on their part. And yet, if only for a moment, if only in an unknowing way, in fact, if only in an unwilling way, the powers of this world acknowledged the greater power of the Lord of the universe. When the Judge of the universe spoke his name, at least a sense of dread overcame them, if not of appreciation. They had a glimpse of the end of time, a preview of meeting their Maker. But Judas stood by unimpressed. Judas refused to bend the knee. So, given the choice—and surely that is why this difference is set before us—given the choice, which shall it be for us? Shall we acknowledge our Lord, even in our own halting, broken, and less than appropriate ways? Or shall we stand forever proud and aloof? I can think of no greater question facing us.

The implications reach into every aspect of our lives. Shall we yield our allegiance to the Lord? Or shall we reserve that for the dollar? Shall we worship the Lord the way he wants to be worshiped? Or shall we try to impose our will upon him? Shall we insist upon pluralism, diversity, inclusivity, and tolerance, the great, high, supposed virtues of the world in which we live? Or shall we acknowledge him alone as the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6 (ESV))? Shall we follow him as the light of the world? Or shall we seek our own way? Conversely, shall we promote ourselves, our families, or our nation above all others? Or shall we seek the eternal kingdom of God? Shall we delight in the vitalities of the world? Or shall we seek the One who alone gives life to the world? In short, shall we bow? Or shall we stand? The implications seem to be endless. What shall we do?

We would scarcely come out any better if we sought to emulate Simon Peter instead of Judas Iscariot. Not only did Peter draw the sword and cut off the right ear of Malchus, servant of the high priest, but also he thrice denied that he was a disciple of Jesus Christ. In words seemingly calculated not only to deny his discipleship but also to repudiate Jesus’ lordship, Peter counters Jesus’ repeated “I am” with his own repeated “I am not.” At one level it was a cowardly answer to a direct question. At another level it was a profound theological conclusion that not to be a disciple of the living Lord was simply not to be at all. I submit to you today that this continues to be true. Either we are, to the extent that we believe in God and believe in his Christ, or we are not, to the extent that we deny them both. Which shall it be for us?

From Judas who betrayed Jesus, to the soldiers who arrested him, to the officers who bound him, to the servant girl who accused his disciple, to the high priest who questioned him, and to Peter who denied him, this is hardly a story of human goodness. There is little here to celebrate. There is little here to emulate.

There is little here to encourage us to think well of ourselves. What else is there here for us?

There is one other figure who shines forth brightly and serenely throughout this reading from the gospel:

Behold, with the clouds of heaven  
    there came one like a son of man,  
and he came to the Ancient of Days  
    and was presented before him.  
And to him was given dominion  
    and glory and a kingdom,  
that all peoples, nations, and languages  
    should serve him;  
his dominion is an everlasting dominion,  
    which shall not pass away,  
and his kingdom one  
    that shall not be destroyed.

How did this grand vision from Daniel come to be fulfilled in Jesus Christ? In all honesty, it was acted out here on earth in just the opposite of the way it was seen and told in heaven. In the vision, the son of man came with the clouds of heaven. On earth, the Son of God was captured in the night. In the vision, the son of man was presented as royalty. On earth, the Son of God was hauled in as a bound criminal. In the vision, the son of man appeared before God. On earth, the Son of God appeared before man. In the vision, the son of man was rewarded with an eternal kingdom. On earth, the Son of God was condemned by an earthly king. In the vision, the son of man was given glory. On earth, the Son of God was humiliated. In the vision, the son of man lived forever. On earth, the Son of God was crucified. At every point, what was acted out here on earth was the opposite of what was seen and told in heaven.

And yet, surely the glory of God is such that it is revealed in the humility of Christ. The power of God is such that it is revealed in the meekness of Jesus Christ. The goodness of God is such that it is revealed in the willingness of Christ to suffer the onslaught of all that is other than good. The lordship of God is such that it is revealed in the servanthood of Christ. The majesty of God is such that it is revealed in the willingness of Jesus to undergo misery on our behalf and for our sake. The absolute opposition of God to sin, death, and evil is such that it is revealed in the betrayal, condemnation, and crucifixion of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Thanks be to God! Everything that should have been coming to us has been

redirected onto him. And everything that should have been coming to him has been redirected onto us. For this reason alone do we live and breathe. Do we sometimes complain that life is not fair? We would do well to thank God every day that life is not fair. We have received not only far more, but also far different, than we have deserved.

Consider also the contrast between Jesus Christ, bound and standing trial, accepting punishment for false accusations, and Simon Peter, warming himself by the fire, refusing to acknowledge the truth about who he was. Here we find both the depths of human misery and the heights of the divine majesty of the grace of God in Jesus Christ. A few hours earlier, at the table of their last supper, Peter had earnestly and bravely declared, "Lord, I will lay down my life for you." Yet Jesus knew then it was not to be, not yet. Jesus foretold the triple denial. And then, in the darkness of the night, threatened by the recognition of a servant girl, Peter publicly and repeatedly denied Jesus Christ. Even while Jesus told the truth and was condemned for it, Peter told terrible lies and by them maintained his outward freedom, not knowing at first the price of inner misery.

Then at once the rooster crowed. Can you imagine? Surely the power of God in Christ pierced Simon Peter, in order to redeem him. The love of God crushed him, in order to make him new; the Spirit of God exposed and condemned his sin, in order to save him; indeed, Christ killed the self-centered old man, in order to make alive the new, God-centered man. Peter had left Jesus entirely alone, but Jesus caught Peter in that very moment and so captured him for eternity. Peter had fallen as far as he could, and Jesus began to draw him back. Peter could not do anything to undo the miserable sin he had committed. But Jesus Christ, in the quiet, hidden majesty of God, could. Jesus forgave, with the deep sorrow born only of love. Do you need any forgiveness in your life?

What a terrible price Christ paid for the right to take away our sin and so make us his very own! He was bound and struck, and we know that this was just the beginning of it. The one who had done no wrong had wrong done to him. The one who never hated was despised. The one who did not hurt others was hurt by them. The one who is the light of the world, who sees and knows all things, was bound, while those who remained outwardly free could not see at all who he is and what was going on.

Here, in the outward misery of his willing captivity, we begin to see the glorious, hidden, inner majesty of God. We who were made in the image of God have marred and virtually destroyed all god-likeness in us by our sinfulness and self-centeredness; Christ who is the untarnished image of God is here marred by blows and insults, so that by his utter obedience to God and his selflessness he takes all of our corruption and gonewrongness upon himself and restores the image of God to

us!<sup>1</sup> He takes the misery of human life upon himself, in order to bring the full majesty of being children of God to us. If we deny our misery, we will never know his majesty. Yet if we see his divine majesty hidden in his misery, we will also see the beginning of the way out of the human misery we have brought upon ourselves by our pretensions to human majesty.

Two people came before the session today and are to come before the congregation in order to profess their faith. Actually, they stand before God to confess again not only their own faith but also our faith, the Christian faith. What a wonderful gift they bring to us, bearing witness to us again of the majesty of God in the gospel of Jesus Christ, giving us the opportunity to join with them in reaffirming the faith even as they join with us by professing the faith. The first question is, “Do you admit that you are a sinner and stand in the constant need of the grace and mercy of God Almighty?” This invites us all to admit and to acknowledge the misery of our existence, and so to be healed of it. There is no room to try to defend ourselves. We need only to cast ourselves upon the mercy of God.

Second, “Do you believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior?” Yes, we believe in the hidden majesty of the suffering Christ who thereby lifts us into the fellowship of heaven. From all the things that compete for the human heart—money, power, pleasure, entertainment, pride, position, nation, and on and on—we pledge our allegiance to your Christ. He is the only source of reassurance, confidence, trust, faith, and good hope.

And third, “Do you promise to follow Christ as a faithful member of his church?” Yes, even of this congregation of his church! We cannot be Christian alone. It does not work that way. We need each other to love and to be loved, to help and to be helped, to lift and to be lifted, to pray for and to be prayed for, to forgive and to be forgiven, to serve and to be served, to bear witness and to receive witness, to comfort and to be comforted, to support and to be supported, to teach and to be taught, to grow together, to be healed together, to worship together, to share the gospel together, to feed the hungry, to house the homeless, to clothe the naked, to visit the sick and those in prison, and not to wallow in or to exhibit our own misery but instead to reflect and to magnify the glory and the majesty of the God and Father of our Lord, the unfailingly faithful Jesus Christ.

When Jesus said, “I am,” and the soldiers and officers drew back and fell to the ground, more is said about the power of his person than about any piety on their part. And yet, if only for a moment, if only in an unknowing way, in fact, if only in an unwilling way, the powers of this world acknowledged the greater power of the

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<sup>1</sup>John Calvin, *A Harmony of the Gospels*, Luke 22:63-71.

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Lord of the universe. When the Judge of the universe spoke his name, at least a sense of dread overcame them, if not of appreciation. But Judas stood by unimpressed. Judas refused to bend the knee. And so the question is posed: Which shall it be for us? Shall we acknowledge our Lord, even in our own halting, broken, and less than appropriate ways? Or shall we stand forever proud and aloof?

*To God be the glory forever and ever! Amen.*

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