

Why did Peter cut off the ear of Malchus, one of the people trying to arrest Jesus?

The Synoptic Gospels detail one of the most dramatic events during Jesus' arrest in Gethsemane: a disciple cutting off the right ear the high priest's servant (Matthew 26:51; Mark 14:47; Luke 22:50). John's account then fills in the details: Peter is the one who struck and cut off the ear of the servant, whose name was Malchus (John 18:10).

It was a late night after a full day, and Peter was thoroughly exhausted. In the Garden of Gethsemane, Peter had dozed off several times while he was supposed to be praying, and each time Jesus roused him. Then a mob led by Judas—a fellow disciple and friend—appeared in Gethsemane to arrest Jesus. Peter, shocked and scared, acted on impulse to defend his Lord. He swung his sword and cut off Malchus's ear in the chaos. Jesus rebuked Peter: "Put your sword back in its place, . . . for all who draw the sword will die by the sword" (Matthew 26:52). Jesus then let Himself be taken.

It is strange that Peter would cut off someone's ear in this situation. It is unlikely that he was aiming for Malchus's ear and nothing else; he wanted to cause a more serious injury. There are two ways Malchus's ear could have been hit: 1) Peter swung his sword down vertically, aiming to cleave Malchus's skull, or 2) Peter swung his sword horizontally, aiming for the head or neck. In either case, Malchus moved his head out of the way of the swinging sword, which grazed the right side of his head and removed his ear. Dodging the sword probably saved Malchus's life.

Why did Peter engage in swordplay in the first place? It seems the rash and tired apostle believed that Jesus needed help to prevent His arrest, but Jesus corrected him. Jesus had all kinds of help available to Him: "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?” (Matthew 26:53-54). This arrest was not an accident. Jesus knew it was coming. If Christ had really wanted to prevent His crucifixion, He would not have needed Peter’s little sword; all the angels of heaven would have come in an instant if summoned. But the Scriptures must be fulfilled (Mark 14:49), and Jesus had to go to the cross and “drink the cup the Father has given Me” (John 18:11). After halting the violence, Jesus reattached and healed Malchus’s ear (Luke 22:51). Amazingly, even after witnessing that miracle of mercy, the mob proceeded to arrest the Lord.

Jesus submitted to His Father’s plan and let Himself be apprehended and crucified to fulfill Scripture and pay for the sins of the world. Peter, who at that time had “merely human concerns” in mind (Matthew 16:23), tried to prevent the arrest with violence. Peter’s earth-bound perspective, fear, and exhaustion clouded his judgment the rest of that night (see Matthew 26:69-75; Mark 14:66-72; Luke 22:54-62; John 18:15-18, 25-27).