

John 21:18

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Verily, verily, I say unto thee, When thou wast young, thou girdedst thyself, and walkedst whither thou wouldst: but when thou shalt be old, thou shalt stretch forth thy hands, and another shall gird thee, and carry thee whither thou wouldst not.

Analysis

Verily, verily, I say unto thee, When thou wast young, thou girdedst thyself, and walkedst whither thou wouldst: but when thou shalt be old, thou shalt stretch forth thy hands, and another shall gird thee, and carry thee whither thou wouldst not. Jesus's double **verily, verily** (ἀμήν ἀμήν/amēn amēn) introduces solemn prophecy about Peter's martyrdom. The contrast between youth and age frames the prediction: **when thou wast young** (ὅτε ἦς νεώτερος/hote ēs neōteros) versus **when thou shalt be old** (ὅταν δὲ γηράσῃς/hotan de gērasēs).

In youth, Peter **girdedst thyself** (ἐζώννυες σεαυτόν/ezōnnyes seauton)—dressed himself, prepared himself, acted autonomously. The verb implies self-sufficiency and freedom: **walkedst whither thou wouldst** (περιεπάτεις ὅπου ἤθελες/periepateis hopou ētheles). Young Peter controlled his movements, chose his path, exercised independent will.

But coming martyrdom reverses this: **thou shalt stretch forth thy hands** (ἐκτενεῖς τὰς χεῖράς σου/ekteneis tas cheiras sou)—a veiled reference to crucifixion, arms extended on a cross. The phrase **another shall gird thee** (ζώσει σε ἄλλος/zōsei se allos) indicates loss of control—others will dress him (likely for

execution), and **carry thee whither thou wouldst not** (οἴσει ὅπου οὐ θέλεις/oisei hopou ou theleis) speaks to the natural human reluctance to face death, even martyrdom.

This prophecy fulfills Jesus's earlier words: 'Whither I go, thou canst not follow me now; but thou shalt follow me afterwards' (John 13:36). Peter's brash claim 'I will lay down my life for thy sake' (John 13:37) would indeed come to pass—but in God's timing, through God's strengthening, not Peter's self-confidence.

Historical Context

Church tradition, recorded by early fathers including Clement of Rome, Tertullian, and Eusebius, confirms Peter's martyrdom by crucifixion in Rome during Nero's persecution (circa AD 64-68). Tradition states Peter requested to be crucified upside-down, deeming himself unworthy to die in the same manner as his Lord.

When John wrote this Gospel (likely AD 90-95), Peter's martyrdom was historical fact, explaining the past-tense interpretation in verse 19: 'This spake he, signifying by what death he should glorify God.' John's original readers would recognize this as fulfilled prophecy, strengthening their faith in Christ's foreknowledge and sovereignty.

The progression from Peter's self-confident boast in John 13 to his threefold denial in John 18 to his restoration in John 21 to his eventual martyrdom demonstrates how God transforms weak, vacillating disciples into faithful witnesses. The Peter who once feared a servant girl's accusation (John 18:17) would ultimately face imperial execution with courage.

Related Passages

Romans 1:17 — The righteous shall live by faith

Hebrews 11:1 — Definition of faith

Study Questions

1. How does Jesus's prophecy about Peter's loss of autonomy in martyrdom challenge modern Western emphasis on personal freedom and self-determination?
2. What does it mean that even in martyrdom, Peter would be 'carried whither he would not'—going willingly yet with natural human reluctance?
3. How should Christ's foreknowledge of our trials and even our deaths shape our perspective on suffering and providence?

Interlinear Text

ἀμὴν ἀμὴν λέγω σοι ὅτε ἧς νεώτερος ζώσει
Verily Verily I say unto thee When thou wast young shall gird
G281 G281 G3004 G4671 G3753 G2258 G3501 G2224

σεαυτὸν καὶ περιεπάτεις ὅπου θέλεις ὅταν δὲ
thyself and walkedst thee whither thou wouldst when but
G4572 G2532 G4043 G3699 G2309 G3752 G1161

γηράσης ἐκτενεῖς τὰς χεῖράς σου καὶ ἄλλος
thou shalt be old thou shalt stretch forth hands thy and another
G1095 G1614 G3588 G5495 G4675 G2532 G243

σε ζώσει καὶ οἴσει ὅπου οὐ θέλεις
thee shall gird and carry thee whither not thou wouldst
G4571 G2224 G2532 G5342 G3699 G3756 G2309

Additional Cross-References

John 13:36 (Parallel theme): Simon Peter said unto him, Lord, whither goest thou? Jesus answered him, Whither I go, thou canst not follow me now; but thou shalt follow me afterwards.