

A HOLY WEEK DEVOTIONAL

**THE
LAST
DAYS
OF
CHRIST**

BY: THE SHEPHERD'S CHURCH

The Last Days of Christ: A Holy Week Devotional

A NOTE FROM DEACON DAN HULT

Each year, Christians worldwide observe the week prior to Easter—and with good reason. Known as Holy Week or Passion Week, this period marked the final days in the earthly life of Jesus Christ, including His triumphal entry into Jerusalem, the Last Supper, His arrest, death by crucifixion, burial, and resurrection. It is no exaggeration to say that this week surrounding Passover in the spring of 30 A.D. was the most important week in the history of the world, so it is covered in significant detail in all four Gospels.

Over the next several days, we will be briefly detailing what Jesus was doing on each of the days leading up to His death. What follows is our best attempt to compile an accurate chronology of Jesus' life in His final week. Note that this chronology differs slightly from what might be apparent in the text and what church tradition teaches. For example, the events often associated with Palm Sunday most likely occurred on Monday instead. The traditional terms (Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, and Good Friday) are used even if the events normally attributed to those days do not line up with this chronology. Also, days are denoted using the Jewish convention in which the day begins at sundown. For example, Good Friday begins on what we would consider Thursday evening.

What follows is a collection of blog posts from Pastor Kendall Lankford first published during Holy Week 2021. They have been compiled into this document to serve as a devotional tool to help you reflect on everything that Jesus accomplished in this week of weeks. This devotional starts the Friday before Holy Week, which in 2024 would be March 22. It is our prayer that it is encouraging and stimulating to your soul.

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Friday Before Palm Sunday

SCRIPTURE READING:

John 11:1-54

DEVOTIONAL READING:

Sometime before the events of Holy Week, in a town called Bethany, Jesus raised His friend Lazarus from the dead (John 11:1-45). This, of course, was Jesus' greatest miracle to date and one that left many people amazed and believing in Him. But, not the Jewish leadership.

Instead of praising God for what Jesus had done, they were more concerned than ever with the political fallout an event like this would cause between them and Rome. If things became too unstable, then Rome would stabilize it with brute and pulverizing force. The Jews could not risk that, so from this point forward, they were making their plans to kill Him (John 11:47-53).

This murderous rage by the Jerusalem establishment caused Jesus and His disciples to retreat. They left Bethany immediately from there and regrouped in temporary seclusion near a remote wilderness town called Ephraim (John 11:54). And it was here that they stayed until today, Friday, seven days before His death.

Now let us make two things clear. First, Jesus began His final week in seclusion. On this day, He and His disciples were in retreat from the mobs that wanted Him dead. But that leads to our second point. Jesus was not in hiding because He was afraid to die. He did not retreat to the wilderness to save Himself. In fact, He would soon return to Bethany, seal His fate, face His death, and walk the Hill of Calvary with courage and joy.

He retreated on this occasion because it was not yet His God-ordained time to die. Had He stayed in Bethany, He would have been immediately arrested and killed, a week before the Passover. And because Jesus planned on being killed as our Passover lamb, He carefully safeguarded the timing of His own death with omniscient precision.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Why do you think the Jewish leadership reacted with murderous rage toward Jesus after he raised Lazarus from the dead? What were they concerned about?

2. The devotional states that Jesus retreated to the wilderness not because He was afraid to die, but because it was not yet His "God-ordained time" to die. What does this tell you about Jesus' resolve and commitment to following God's plan?
3. Jesus is described as facing His death on the cross with "courage and joy." Why do you think He had this attitude toward such a horrific death? What does it reveal about His character?
4. The devotional highlights Jesus as the "Passover lamb." How does this connect Jesus' death to the Exodus story and firstPassover in the Old Testament?
5. Have you ever had to wait for God's perfect timing for something in your own life? What did that experience teach you about faith, patience and trust in God's plan?
6. How does seeing Jesus willingly go to the cross, when He could have avoided it, Impact your view of His sacrifice for humanity? What response does it stir in your heart?

Saturday Before Palm Sunday

SCRIPTURE READING:

Luke 10:38-42, John 12:1-7

DEVOTIONAL READING:

Jesus resurfaces after a few days of laying low in Ephraim. Things were getting turbulent in Bethany and Jerusalem and He needed the extra days for things to cool down. Today, on Saturday morning, Jesus traveled back with His disciples to Bethany. It was just six days before the Passover (John 12:1). Bethany was a familiar town to Jesus. This is where He raised His friend Lazarus from the dead and it was a place that He often frequented. Because of this, Jesus was fairly well known to the locals and would have been easily recognized in the community. It was the last place He would want to go if He had aspirations of staying alive. This is especially true since an arrest order had just been published by the Jews in Jerusalem (John 11:57)

Jesus arrived in Bethany to an honorific feast. Apparently, Mary and Martha were quite eager to show their thanks, since Jesus raised their brother from the dead. During the day, Martha busily prepared the meal, while Mary and others sat listening to Jesus teach (Luke 10:38-42). This caused a momentary squabble among the sisters, but things calmed down as the evening approached. At least temporarily.

Saturday night His disciples and His friends came together for a dinner and time of fellowship to honor Him (John 12:2). These moments must have been sweet to Jesus, considering the pain and sorrow He would soon face. But they were not without controversy. During the dinner, Lazarus was reclining at the talking with our Lord deep in friendly conversation. While this was happening, Martha was likely serving, and Mary was taking a bottle of the most expensive perfume they owned and was using it to anoint her savior's feet (John 12:2). This, of course, was a beautiful act of love and kindness that she was doing for Jesus, but unfortunately, some found it repugnant (i.e. Judas). He scoffed at this gesture and complained because of the lavish expense, noting that this money could have been given to the poor. And by poor, it is clear that he meant himself. (John 12:4-6)

Jesus responded the same loving and tender way He had before, the first time controversy with Mary erupted. He did not rebuke or scoff at them; He simply taught them. He reminded everyone in attendance that this anointing was in preparation for His death and burial (John 12:7). A fact that no one seemed to understand. But Jesus knew what it meant all too well.

On Saturday night, even in the midst of this sweet joy and well needed community, He could taste the bitterness of abandonment that He would soon feel upon the cross. His heart, though joyful, must have been heavy. And as the fellowship came to a close, the sun went down on Saturday, with Jesus one day closer to His death.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why do you think Jesus decided to return to Bethany, even though there was an arrest order out for Him in Jerusalem? What does this reveal about His mindset and purpose?
2. The devotional notes the sweet fellowship Jesus enjoyed with His disciples and friends like Mary, Martha and Lazarus. Why was this time of community important for Jesus as He prepared for His death?
3. Mary is described anointing Jesus' feet with expensive perfume as an "act of love and kindness." What does this gesture communicate about her devotion to Jesus?
4. Judas objected to Mary's actions, seeing it as wasteful. Why do you think he failed to understand the significance of her act of worship? How can we guard against missing moments of extravagant love for Christ?
5. Jesus states that Mary's anointing was "in preparation for His death and burial." How does this foreshadow the events to come in the passion week?
6. The devotional says Jesus could "taste the bitterness of abandonment" even amid the joyful fellowship. Why was this suffering beginning to weigh on Him? How can meditating on Christ's suffering increase our love for Him?
7. As the sun set on Saturday, Jesus was "one day closer to His death." How can we find perspectives and live in a way that keeps the reality of Christ's sacrifice at the forefront during this season?

Palm Sunday

SCRIPTURE READING

John 12:9-11

DEVOTIONAL READING

After the celebration meal the night before, Jesus' spent all day Sunday resting in Bethany. Frankly, He would need it. Plus, His presence in the town was far from a secret at this point. Crowds of people began to learn that He was there and each of them were eager to not only meet Jesus, but also to see the man named Lazarus, whom He raised from the dead. So, traveling at this point was kind of pointless.

With that, Jesus was surrounded by swarms of inquisitive people all day long. You can imagine Mary and Martha may have been exasperated with all of the guests coming into their home, but Jesus did not seem to mind it. On His mind were more complicated times that were to come.

Now, at this point something needs to be mentioned. Church tradition has typically places Jesus riding into the city of Jerusalem on Sunday. This is where the crowds praise the Lord, lay down palms, and welcome Him into the city riding on the back of a colt. This is unlikely to have happened on Sunday. What is more likely is that those events actually happened early Monday morning.

Either way, it seems as though Sunday was a wonderful day of rest for our Lord. As much as it could be. Joy was in the air and many went away from Bethany that day believing in Him (John 12:11). But, it would not be long before the chief priests and Pharisees would find out He is here (John 12:9-10). And in their sin, they not only wanted to kill Jesus, but also Lazarus. Jesus went to sleep Sunday night in peace. Soon, there would be no peace.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Why do you think crowds were so eager to see both Jesus and Lazarus after the miracle of Lazarus being raised from the dead? What impact do you think witnessing that miracle had on people's view of Jesus?
2. The devotional notes that Jesus spent Sunday resting in Bethany amid the crowds. Why was this day of rest and refuge important as He prepared to enter the intensity of the coming week?
3. How does Jesus' welcoming attitude toward the crowds reveal His heart for people? What can we learn from His example?

4. Why were the Jewish leaders not only wanting to kill Jesus, but also Lazarus according to John 12:10-11? What threat did Lazarus' resurrection pose to them?
5. The author speculates that the "triumphal entry" into Jerusalem likely happened on Monday rather than the traditional Sunday timeline. Does adjusting that sequence change your perspective on these events in any way?
6. The devotional ends by noting Jesus went to sleep Sunday night in peace, but says "Soon, there would be no peace." What thoughts do you imagine were weighing on Jesus as He anticipated the suffering to come?
7. How can meditating on these final restful moments for Christ before His passion help prepare our hearts for reflecting on His sacrifice during this season?

Holy Monday

SCRIPTURE READING:

Matthew 21:1-10, Mark 11:1-10, Luke 19:28-48, John 12:12-19

SCRIPTURE READING:

Early the next day, Jesus departed with His disciples from Bethany and arrived at the Mount of Olives. This area was a sort of suburb of Jerusalem and overlooked the city on its Eastern side. And while the vast majority of churches around the planet celebrate these events as "Palm Sunday," it is likely that they occurred on Monday.

While at the Mount of Olives, Jesus instructed two of His followers to go into an adjacent town and bring to Him a new mule that had never been ridden (Matthew 21:1-8). This was a tremendous honor in the ancient world and one of the nicest thing that was done for Him this week. It would be on this new mule that the Lord would ride into Jerusalem, with tears flooding His eyes (Luke 19:41-44). Three things became clear in this display.

FIRST- As He rode toward the looming city, on the back of the bumbling colt, He was fulfilling messianic expectations for the end-time King, even though His disciples did not immediately understand it (John 12:16). In Zechariah 9:9-10, written 500 years before, the prophet foretold that a final King of Israel would ride victoriously into Jerusalem, humbly on a donkey, and would set up His eternal Kingdom there. In Zechariah 9:10, we discover this is an eternal Kingdom that will bring peace and hope to all the nations. Jesus most certainly began that work then and continues to do that work from God's throne room today.

SECOND- Just as king Solomon had done before Him (1 Kings 1:33-37), Jesus rode into the city on the back of a donkey as the true Son of David (Matthew 21:9). Like Solomon, He did this to announce His Kingdom and reign to the nation. Like Solomon, men and women were celebrating as He went (Mark 11:9). But, unlike Solomon, who had a crown of gold placed upon his head when he arrived, soon Jesus would have a crown of thorns placed upon His brow. Unlike Solomon who was elevated to a fancy throne, Jesus would be elevated onto a cross to die. And while the prestige and splendor of Solomon's house may look like victory, and while the scourging of Jesus and His gruesome death may look like defeat, Jesus shows that He and His Kingdom are greater than Solomon's. For, at the end of Solomon's life, he was in love with various idols and his kingdom would soon be permanently divided. Not so with Jesus, who is still enthroned as King with a Kingdom that will never end.

THIRD - As Jesus rode into the city, He also wept. We wept because Jerusalem is the city that kills the prophets. It was the city who would kill God's Son. And in so doing, God's Kingdom would be taken away from them and given to a people who would bear its fruit (Matthew 21:43).

After the pomp and circumstance awaiting Him in the city, our Lord went one last time to the temple mount before leaving Jerusalem. He went to see the temple in peace. He went to look at it before he was embroiled in controversy. It is likely He went to weep over it as well. And it is likely that He went to pray and think through the actions He would take the very next day when He cleansed the temple (Mark 11:15-17). As evening approached, Jesus and His disciples left the city and returned back to Bethany to await the dramatic events of Tuesday morning (Mark 11:11)

DISCUSSION QUESTION:

1. Why was it significant that Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey that had never been ridden, fulfilling the prophecy in Zechariah 9:9-10? What did this symbolize about His identity as the Messiah?
2. The devotional draws parallels between Jesus' entry and King Solomon's coronation. How does Jesus ultimately exceed and fulfill a greater role than even Solomon?
3. Why did Jesus weep as He approached Jerusalem (Luke 19:41-44)? What did His tears reveal about His heart for the city and its people?
4. The temple held deep significance for Jesus. Why do you think He wanted to go observe it in peace before the controversies of the coming week?
5. Considering all the celebrating crowds, how does Jesus' instruction to His disciples to get the donkey demonstrate His intentionality and sovereignty over these events?
6. After the triumphal entry, Jesus retreated back to Bethany for the night. What does this rhythm of engagement and withdrawal reveal about how He prepared Himself?
7. As we reflect on this climactic moment, what most strikes you about the humility, sorrow and kingship that Jesus displayed in His entry to Jerusalem?

Holy Tuesday

SCRIPTURE READING:

Matthew 21:12-17, Mark 11:15-19, Luke 19:45-46

DEVOTIONAL READING:

Jesus arrived at Lazarus' house in Bethany later than people normally travel. After an emotional ride into the city of Jerusalem and a reflective trip to the temple, one would expect our Lord to sleep in and take it easy. He did not. Jesus awoke early in Bethany and promptly returned to Jerusalem where several key events occurred.

THE MORNING,

On His way into the city He became hungry, so He stopped by a nearby fig tree to eat. When He saw that nothing was on the tree, He cursed the tree and sentenced it to perpetual fruitlessness, which would result in it being chopped down, and used as firewood. This act confused disciples (Mark 11:12-14) and intrigues many of us today. Why was Jesus so angry at a fig tree? As you might suspect, there is more going on in this scene than at first meets the eye.

The text tells us that Jesus was hungry. Perhaps, He and His disciples awoke before Mary or Martha could prepare breakfast? This of course is speculation. But what is crystal clear is that Jesus did not curse this tree out of divine supernatural immaturity. He is not so bitterly disappointed at this tree that He throws a Zeus-like hissy fit and zaps the tree. Instead, He is doing what many of the prophets of old would do. He is performing a lived out miracle, which is called a "sign act", that was meant to be a wordless parable to showcase an important truth. These usually involve extreme cases of judgment as in the case of Isaiah walking about naked for 3 years of his ministry (Isaiah 20:20-24), Ezekiel building and attacking a model city (Ezekiel 4:1-3) or Hosea marrying a prostitute to showcase the marriage God had with adulterous Israel (The whole book of Hosea). So when Jesus acts out this parable, cursing the fig tree, He is pronouncing swift judgment on Jerusalem.

The tree represented the city of God, the one who was supposed to be healthy and bearing the fruit of God (Isaiah 5:1-7). But, instead of finding this city healthy and about the Lord's work, Jesus found her spiritually withering and barren. And as He curses this simple tree, the overarching point is that the end is coming for Jerusalem and her temple. Her fruitless days will soon be over. In forty years, a single generation from the events of this week (Matthew 24:1-3), the Roman armies would descend upon the city and burn it to the ground, just like a dead fig tree that was long overdue to be thrown in the camp fire. This scene was a lived out parable of the judgment of God upon the

fruitless city. Think about the symbolism. Jesus curses a fruitless tree en route to a fruitless city. The meaning takes on vivid severity when we see it for what it is.

FROM THERE,

Jesus continued into Jerusalem and approached the fruitless temple, which was the epicenter of the rot and was the same temple He had inspected the night before and found no fruit. On Tuesday, like a wise gardener, He began pruning the dead branches as a last ditch effort to save the tree. This meant cleansing the temple from the paganism that was infecting it.

In the temple, specifically in the court of the Gentiles (The outermost court), men and women were buying and selling, exchanging currency, and filling this courtyard with all kinds of commerce and industry. This pushed the Gentiles and all of those who were infirm or ceremonially unclean outside of the temple with no place to worship Yahweh (Mark 11:15-16). Instead of it being a place of prayer for the Gentile nations, sinful men had turned it into a den of liars and thieves who would make a profit off of their cold and dead religion. Like the barren fig tree Jesus cursed, Jesus diagnoses their fruitless deeds, drives them out with a corded whip (John 2:13-17), and promised to give the Kingdom over to those who would produce His fruit (Matthew 21:43).

Do you see the irony? Jesus went into a fruitless city, would take away the kingdom from the fruitless people, and would give it to the Gentiles, who would, by the Spirit's power, bear much fruit. The whole lived out parable of the fig tree was coming true right before their very eyes.

ONCE THE TEMPLE WAS CLEANSED,

All those who were driven from the outer courtyard returned. This would have included the Gentiles. Yes! And praise God for that! But, it also included those who were perpetually unclean!

According to the Law of Moses, people who suffered various diseases or other physical abnormalities would need to be kept at a distance from the temple. The reason is deeply embedded in the ceremonial law of Moses, but the short answer is that God's presence is ferociously Holy. Even perfectly clean priests would need to go to extraordinary lengths to be in His presence, so there was a danger of approaching God in a cavalier way. Unfortunately, the Pharisees relished policing the courtyard and prohibiting people from approaching God. They functioned as the purveyors of God to the masses and were more than happy to exclude anyone from knowing God who crossed them or how they interpreted Moses.

And while it is clear they misunderstood the entire heart of the law, Jesus demonstrates it by cleansing the temple and then healing the sick, the lame, the infirm, and the diseased (Matthew 21:14). In this way, He not only provided them access to the temple, He provided them with the entire point of the temple, by meeting with them face to face. For in that encounter, the weak, the sick, and the infirm were approaching their covenant God face to face with Jesus Christ.

The entire point of the temple was being fulfilled before their eyes in Jesus Christ. And, as a result, anthems of praise began reverberating from the outer courtyard in ways that had never been heard before! The moment was pandemonium. The crowds were clearly excited, crying out “Hosanna to the Son of David”, which means “Son of David save us now” (Matthew 21:15). Unfortunately, not everyone there was filled with praise.

This loud and public display of affection to Christ, sadly, did not last long. The Jewish elites who saw all of this going down, not only refused to celebrate, they also openly challenged Him. In spite of all of the good God was doing through His Son, they took this moment to critique Jesus and to also denigrate the crowd who praised Him (Matthew 21:16). They sensed power slipping from their hands and they were ready to do whatever it took to get it back.

After a short exchange, Jesus departed the city once more. He left to spend the night again in Bethany (Mark 11:19). While Jesus and His disciples were sleeping, the power brokers in Jerusalem were awake and planning how they might destroy Him (Mark 11:18). Things were certainly heating up in Jerusalem.

DISCUSSION QUESTION:

1. Why do you think Jesus cursed the fig tree? What was the symbolic significance of this acted parable?
2. The devotional states that Jesus was judging Jerusalem and the temple for being spiritually fruitless. What evidence from the passage supports this interpretation?
3. Why was Jesus so angry and forceful in driving out the merchants and moneychangers from the temple courts? What did their presence represent?
4. How does Jesus' welcoming and healing of the blind and lame in the temple courts display His heart? What does it reveal about true worship?
5. The religious leaders criticized Jesus and the crowds praising Him as the "Son of David." Why do you think they responded this way? What does it show about their spiritual condition?

6. The passage notes the growing tension, with the Jewish leaders beginning to plot against Jesus at night. How would you describe the escalating conflict during this week?
7. What insights does this event give into who Jesus is and the opposing spiritual forces at work during His final days?
8. How can meditating on Jesus' actions to judge sinful practices and welcome the outcast challenge or encourage you today?

Holy Wednesday

SCRIPTURE READING:

Matthew 21:18-22:14, Mark 11:20-12:12, Luke 19:47-20:18

DEVOTIONAL READING:

RECAP

Jesus and His disciples returned to Lazarus' house on Tuesday night after a long day of ministry. As you will recall from Tuesday, Jesus and His disciples awoke early and walked 45 minute walk into Jerusalem. Along the way He cursed a fruitless tree, visited a fruitless temple, cleansed it, and personally healed scores of people who were lame, sick, and infirm. After this, a worship service broke out in the temple courtyard and Jesus had a brief interaction with the Pharisees before leaving and walking back to Bethany (Mark 11:19). So, you can imagine, after that 45 minute walk, everyone must have been exhausted. But, this did not stop Him from waking early and heading right back to the city for one of His final showdowns with the Jews.

THE FIG TREE REVISITED

Before arriving again in the city, the group passed by the fig tree that was cursed on Tuesday morning (Mark 11:20). Peter apparently took notice of the shriveled tree and stopped the group for a moment of discussion (Mark 11:21). This occasion gave Jesus one of His final opportunities to teach His disciples, this time instructing them on faith, prayer, and forgiveness (Mark 11:22-26). But He was far from finished with teaching for the day. As they all made their way into the city and then onto the temple mount (Mark 11:27a) His teaching on various topics had just begun.

JESUS' QUID PRO QUO SOLUTION

At the temple, Mark tells us that Jesus was confronted by the angry religious mob who had been planning His demise from the night before (Mark 11:27b). Their charge against Him was leveled in a series of carefully worded accusations disguised as questions. They began by saying: "By what or whose authority are you doing these things?"

Now, Jesus had a very important decision to make that would affect everything, especially the timing of His death. He could tell them directly that God had already condemned them, giving the Kingdom to the tax-collectors and sinners (Matthew 21:31-32, 43), but that would have gotten Him arrested and killed on Wednesday instead of Passover. He

also could have ignored the question and went on about His business, but given the volatility of the religious mob, doing that may have inflamed their anger even more, so this did not seem like a viable option. So, instead, Jesus wisely leveraged the fact that the onlooking crowds were standing nearby, watching with rapt attentiveness, and Jesus knew the Pharisees would never act in such a way that the crowds would turn on them. They may have wanted Him dead, but they would not crush their lust for power and popularity among the masses.

Before answering their question directly, Jesus gave them a quid pro quo scenario. He offered them the following deal: if you will answer my question, then I will answer yours, which seemed straightforward enough. But, by turning the tables and having them answer His question, He was actually showing them who had the authority and who did not.

Jesus asked them: “Was the baptism of John (the Baptist) from heaven, or from men? Answer Me.” Jesus knew if they denied the baptism of John, they would lose their stranglehold on the people who loved John. But, if they affirmed John, they would look utterly foolish for wanting to kill Jesus (Mark 11:32). In this simple rhetorical move, Jesus put the Jewish leaders in an impossible situation that would turn the crowds against them regardless of what they chose. In the end, He not only avoided their trap, but also humiliated them in their non-answer and delayed His death, once more safe guarding His demise until the just right moment of Passover week.

JESUS CAPITALIZES ON THE MOMENT

Given that the Jewish leaders were now bound to begrudging public civility (since they could not kill Him in front of the crowds - Mark 12:12). Jesus took the moment to offer His strongest public rebuke of them to date, offering two scathing parables, that you can read for yourselves in the following passages:

1. The Parable of the Two Sons (Matthew 21:28-32)
2. The Parable of the Vineyard (Matthew 21:33-44)

The point of both parables was the same, the Jewish leaders were being removed from authority and punished by God for their lack of repentance. God had sent His one and only Son to them, and in the hardness of their hearts they were going to kill Him. But in killing Him, He would become the new foundation (a cornerstone - Matthew 21:42-43) on which men and women would now be built up in faith. No longer would they need the priests and their laws, the Pharisees and their burdens, or even the sacrificial system that was not sufficient to save them. Now, they would need only Jesus who would save them from their sins and make them fruitful again in Him. Jesus settled the question of authority right before their eyes. But, in the wicked hearts of the Pharisees, Scribes, and Sadducees, the matter was far from settled.

THE LEADERSHIP REGROUP

There had never been a time when the Jewish Leaders had been so thoroughly challenged and yet so incapable of responding. Out of fear of the crowds they retreated for the moment (Matthew 21:46), but they were far from finished challenging Him. Tomorrow, we will see part two of this confrontation. We will also see Jesus' vivid prophecy of Jerusalem's downfall along with the late night preparations for their Last Supper together and exit to the garden of Gethsemane.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Why do you think Jesus revisited and pointed out the withered fig tree to his disciples? What lesson was he teaching them about faith, prayer and forgiveness?
2. In the confrontation at the temple, why did the Jewish leaders question Jesus' authority? What were they hoping to accomplish?
3. How did Jesus' response, by asking them about John's baptism, reveal His wisdom and authority? What did this confrontation expose about the true motives of the Jewish leaders?
4. Explain the meaning and significance of the two parables Jesus told - the parable of the two sons and the parable of the vineyard tenants. What judgment was Jesus communicating?
5. Why were the Jewish leaders unable to arrest Jesus at that time, even though they wanted to? What held them back?
6. The devotional states that Jesus was delaying His death until the "right moment of Passover week." Why was the timing so crucial? What does this reveal about God's sovereign plan?
7. Though publicly rebuked, the passage notes the leaders regrouped to challenge Jesus again. What does their hardness of heart and continual opposition reveal about the spiritual battle taking place?
8. As you reflect on Jesus' bold teaching and the animosity of the Jewish leaders, what prompts admiration, conviction or questions for you personally?

Maundy Thursday: Day Before He Died

SCRIPTURE READING:

Matthew 22:14-26:29, Mark 12:13-14:25, Luke 20:19-22:20, John 12:20-50

DEVOTIONAL READING:

Over the weekend, Jesus established His final ministry outpost in the familiar town of Bethany. From there, He has entered into the city several times for strategic and messianic reasons. On Wednesday, Jesus enters Jerusalem on a collision course with the Pharisee's at the temple mount. This encounter left them temporarily humiliated, rebuked, and retreating. Today, on the final Thursday of Jesus' life, we will see their response.

JESUS TEACHES ON THE TEMPLE MOUNT

There is no indication that Jesus left the temple mount on Wednesday evening and went back to Bethany. There is also no indication that He didn't. Either way, on Thursday morning, Jesus was once again teaching the people publicly at the temple (Mark 14:1-2). This was happening while the religious leaders were sequestered away, secretly working on a plan to trap Him and arrest Him (Mark 12:12; Matthew 22:15).

It was perhaps in this moment, early on Thursday, that Jesus taught His famous parable of the wedding feast (Matthew 22:1-14), which highlighted how Israel had rejected their God and how His Kingdom would be given to the Gentiles. "For many are called, but few are chosen" (Matthew 22:14).

It is also likely that while Jesus was teaching this very parable, a group of Gentiles arrived at the temple in order to listen to Him (John 12:20). Do not miss this point. The only reason Gentiles could come and hear Jesus speaking at the temple, is because He cleansed the temple 2 days earlier. Without that event they would not be able to come. Now, there was finally room for the nations to come to Him.

As Jesus continued teaching into mid morning, His message began to shift. He had begun by talking about 2 kingdoms. One was dying (Jerusalem) one was rising (The Kingdom of God). But now, Jesus shifts to HOW all of this will be possible. How will the Old Testament Kingdom be replaced? How will God's New Testament Kingdom be established? He tells the crowds that all of it will come about through His death, when He said "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified" (John 12:23).

This was Jesus' way of alluding to the cross (John 12:32-33). For on the cross, our King would not only establish His dominion and universal reign, but by the cross, He would also draw all men unto Himself (John 12:32). An illustration of the world-wide scope of His salvation.

Not surprisingly, no one standing there that morning understood what He meant (John 12:34). As much as there is a clear Kingship theme in the Holy Week passages there is also a pronounced confusion on the ears of everyone who heard what He was saying. No one understood then. Only those whom the Holy Spirit awakened understood later.

In this moment, Jesus was so troubled that He had to pause His public address in order to pray to His Father (John 12:27-28). Astonishingly, God responded to Jesus audibly, but many in the crowds dismissed the miracle as rumblings of thunder or angelic voices (John 12:29). The irony was thick. Israel was a nation who believed God had spoken to them audibly at Mount Sinai, but shrugged it off when it happened right in front of them in the mountain city of Jerusalem. This hard-hearted unbelief was the reason judgment was coming to Israel (John 12:31).

A RELIGIOUS DEBATE WITH GOD

At some point in the morning, Jesus' teaching was interrupted by the entire assortment of Jewish religious leaders, who had come again to challenge Him. Normally, Pharisees, Sadducees, and Scribes were too busy arguing amongst themselves to accomplish anything meaningful, together but on this day, they chose to unite in their hatred for Christ in order to work as a team.

One by one they cross-examined Him, using their most challenging questions to stump Him (Matthew 22:15-45; Mark 12:13-40; Luke 20:19-44). Their goal was to expose Him as a religious fraud, a messianic imposter, in front of the people. By doing this they would have substantiated their accusation that He had no right or authority to do or say the things He was doing or saying. But once again, they were left humiliated by His superior wisdom. From that moment on, no one dared to ask Him another question (Matthew 22:46).

While the religious leaders stood angry and silent, Jesus publicly and thoroughly denounced every facet of their failed ministry (Matthew 23; Mark 12:38-39). He reiterated the awful judgment that was coming upon the nation (Matthew 23:34-36). But, promised that the worst judgment would come upon these wicked leaders (Mark 12:40) and their corrupted city (Matthew 24).

As Jesus was leaving the temple mount, around noon, He was filled with sadness and compassion for the city that continually refused Him (Matthew 23:37-39). Jesus knew that severe judgment was coming and He felt tremendous heaviness about it. Even to the point of tears.

JESUS LEAVING THE TEMPLE MOUNT

At this point, Jesus and His disciples left the temple mount to go down to the Mount of Olives. While moving in that direction, one of His followers pointed out the wonderful buildings that made up the temple complex above them. Indeed they were wonderful! These buildings had become a marvel of the ancient world and a tourist attraction for all architectural aficionados. In a very real sense, the temple complex had put Israel on the map.

Perhaps the unnamed disciple was attempting to break the ice here. He had just witnessed Jesus' scathing rebuke of the Jewish leaders and heard His teaching on the coming judgment. It is possible that he thought it a good time to talk about something more positive, like the pride of their nation, the Jewish temple. But it is here that Jesus provides extra clarity on the coming judgment. He warns that the temple would be burned to the ground with no stone left connected. This obviously upset His disciples and spilled into the teaching that Jesus provided when they arrived at the Mount of Olives. There He not only spoke of the coming judgment, it seems He took a couple of hours to teach His frantic disciples about the end of the Jewish age, which you can read about in Matthew 24; Mark 13; and Luke 21:10-38. Suffice it to say, the Jewish era was coming to an end. And the Kingdom of God was coming in power.

BACK IN JERUSALEM

We do not know how long Jesus and His disciples reclined at the Mount of Olives, but it was long enough for the religious leaders in Jerusalem to intensify their plans to kill Him (Mark 14:1-2). Formerly they were looking to arrest Him publicly, but after they were thwarted twice and humiliated by Him, they were now determined to seize Him secretly (Matthew 26:3-5). It appears that Judas had already approached them days earlier with his sadistic proposition (Matthew 26:14-16; John 12:4-6)

THE LAST PASSOVER

As the afternoon hours waned on the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two of His disciples back into the city to prepare the Passover meal (Mark 14:12-16). When evening came, Jesus and His disciples joined them to celebrate the Passover meal together (Mark 14:17). With that, we must understand one critical detail about time.

To the Romans, the new day began around midnight, much like the way we account time in the modern world. But to the Jew, the new day began around 8PM, when the sun had fully set. This is important. Because as the little group finished eating the Passover, so Thursday came to a close. The rest of the events that happened this night, are accounted, from the Jewish perspective, as happening on Friday. So it is here we stop for today. Tomorrow, we will see how the Passover meal ends in utter betrayal. How Jesus is arrested during a late night prayer session, charged in a corrupt court proceeding, and murdered for a crime He did not commit.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Why do you think Jesus spent so much time publicly teaching at the temple during this final week, even as the opposition against Him intensified?
2. The devotional notes the significance of the Gentiles arriving to hear Jesus teach at the temple. How does this connect to Jesus' teachings about the Kingdom being taken from Israel?
3. When Jesus says "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified" (John 12:23), he is alluding to his crucifixion. Why was the cross so central to establishing God's kingdom?
4. The passage describes the crowds' confusion over Jesus' words about his death and glorification. Why do you think they struggled to understand? How can we ensure we rightly comprehend the significance of Christ's sacrifice?
5. Describe the united opposition Jesus faced from the Jewish religious leaders during this interrogation at the temple. What does their hardened unbelief reveal?
6. After rebuking the leaders, Jesus laments over Jerusalem with tears (Matthew 23:37-39). What does this display about His deep love and compassion?
7. How did Jesus prepare His disciples for the coming judgment and transition by teaching them on the Mount of Olives (Matthew 24)?
8. As you reflect on these events drawing closer to Christ's death, what most strikes you about His redemptive mission and the escalating spiritual battle?

Good Friday: The Day He Died

SCRIPTURE READINGS:

Matthew 26:30-27:61, Mark 14:26-15:47, Luke 22:21-23:56a, John 13:1-19:42

DEVOTIONAL READINGS:

As the week waxed on, tensions between Jesus and the Jewish establishment hit an all-time high. When we left Jesus and His disciples, they were just finishing up their Passover meal while the powers of darkness were encroaching.

THE UPPER ROOM (8:00 PM)

Once the clock struck 8:00 PM, Jesus entered into His final day. Once the meal was finished, Jesus stood up from the head of the table, disrobed, and took on the role of a servant. While He was most certainly their Lord and master, He knelt down to wash His disciples' feet (John 13:4-11), a role usually reserved for the lowliest servant in the home. That was the point. Jesus was modeling for His disciples the kind of life that He was called to live and the kind of life they would be called to live as well. No longer would they be focused on themselves, or worried about their status, but humbly focused on the needs of others (John 13:12-20).

When Jesus rose from this shocking display of servant leadership and love, He sat back down at the table, took the bread and the wine, and distributed it to His disciples. This is called the Lord's Supper (Luke 22:14-24), which is far more than an after dinner snack. Jesus was demonstrating how He would serve them best by dying on their behalf. Just like He knelt down to clean them with rags, His body would be broken for their purification. Just as He cleansed their dirty feet with water, His blood would be shed to make them whole. Jesus was showing them a foretaste of His Gospel, just moments before He would be called to live it.

The irony is that the disciples do not get it. Not at all. In fact, while Jesus was demonstrating radical humility, sacrificial love, and service, an argument broke out among His followers on who was the greatest (Luke 22:24-27). They were still jostling to be first in His Kingdom, when Jesus had just modeled that the first should be last (Luke 22:24-30). One can scarcely imagine the heaviness of heart that Jesus must have felt here. His disciples were bickering and missing the point. One of His nearest and dearest followers would soon deny Him three times (John 13:36-38). The rest would abandon Him and scatter (Mark 14:50). And His friend and fellow disciple, Judas, was moments away from handing Him over to be killed (John 13:21, 26).

Seconds later, Satan entered into Judas and he left to carry out His murderous plot (John 13:27, 30). The disciples still had no clue what was happening (John 13:28-29). Instead of becoming bitter with what was going around Him, Jesus took those final moments of freedom, His last hour in the upper room, to instruct His followers and to prepare them for His death. You can read these words of comfort in the following passages. As you read, try imagining that you were in the room with Him. He is about to be arrested and killed. And everything He says in these passages are spoken against that bloody backdrop.

DISCOURSE:

- Jesus Comforts His Disciples (John 14:1-6)
- Jesus Prepares His Disciples (John 14:7-16:33)
- Jesus Prays For His Disciples (John 17)
- Jesus Sings With His Disciples (Mark 14:26)
- Jesus Departs With His Disciples (Mark 14:27)

ARREST (10:00 PM)

After an hour-long discourse with His followers, Jesus and His disciples left the city. They crossed the well known Kidron Valley and headed back towards the Mount of Olives, where they stopped at one of Jesus' favorite places, a garden (John 18:1). Judas knew it well, since Jesus often met with His disciples there (John 18:2), so it is not surprising that He and the mob found Him easily. Jesus was not hiding.

While He awaited the arrival of the unholy brute squad, He went off by Himself to pray. (Luke 22:39-41). He left the larger group of disciples to sleep, while appointing Peter, James, and John to pray and keep watch (Mark 14:33-34), while He went a stone throw's distance ahead of them.

It is likely that these three men were finally beginning to understand the gravity of this moment. Perhaps they heard Jesus' grief as He cried out in tearful agony (Luke 22:44). Perhaps thinking about who might betray Jesus had them emotionally exhausted. Whatever the reason, the text tells us they collapsed into sleep from their sorrow (Luke 22:45).

After an hour of crying out to God in prayer, Jesus resigned Himself to the will of God. He stood knowing what was about to happen and He gave Himself fully to the task. He went back, one final time to awake His sleeping followers, which was right about the time Judas and his Roman Cohort arrived (John 18:3-4)

Judas greeted Jesus with a friendly kiss, so that the Roman mob would know who to arrest (Luke 22:47-48). While Jesus was a well known figure among the Jews, the Romans did not know, apart from this most intimate betrayal by Judas, who He was.

The moment hung in the air as if time had stood still. On the one side the Romans were likely assessing the size of Jesus' group and mulling over strategy. On the other side, the bewildered disciples must have been wondering what was about to take place. The moment apparently was too much for Peter, sensing His Lord was about to be taken from them. In an instant, he leapt into action, swinging the sword he was carrying at the first person he met, which was Malchus, a slave of the high priest (John 18:10).

If Jesus had not immediately called off Peter (John 18:11) and healed the young man's ear (Luke 22:52), a blood bath would have ensued. And while Jesus does condemn the marauding party for not arresting Him publicly (Luke 22:52-53), He does submit to the arrest, was bound, and was carried out of sight from His followers (Luke 22:54).

DELIVERY (11:00 - 11:30 PM)

Jesus was brought first to the retired high priest Annas (John 18:12-14), before being taken to his son-in-law, and current high priest Caiaphas (Luke 22:66-71), who had assembled the council of elders against Him. Peter followed along behind (Matthew 26:58).

TRIAL (12:00 AM)

During these proceedings, false and inconsistent charges were being leveled against Him in the chamber (Mark 14:55-59). And since a case in Jewish law could not be substantiated, except on the basis of two witnesses, this sham trial sputtered on without finding a single shred of incriminating evidence (Matthew 26:59-60).

At some point in the proceedings, 2 witnesses stood up with a consistent account (Matthew 26:61). They quoted Jesus' words concerning the temple; that He would destroy it and it in three days raise it up again (Mark 14:57-58). This accusation angered everyone in the room, who not only completely misunderstood what Jesus was saying, but had grown to love this building more than the God it was dedicated to.

Upon hearing this witness, Caiaphas himself interrogated Jesus, who at first remained silent (Matthew 26:63), but eventually gave the wicked priest the ammunition he needed to pull the trigger on Jesus (Luke 22:66-71). The charge was blasphemy against God and there would be no escape for Jesus (Matthew 26:65).

Outside the chamber, Peter had followed along to investigate what was happening and was inconspicuously warming himself by a fire. But, while trying to keep his identity a secret, two servant girls and a bystander recognized him, culminating in his threefold denial (Matthew 26:69-74). Just as Jesus had prophesied, the rooster crowed (Mark 14:72), Jesus and Peter made eye contact somehow (Luke 22:61), and Peter ran away bitterly weeping (Luke 22:62). Jesus was now fully alone with His accusers, who mocked and beat Him periodically until morning (Luke 22:63-65) and on one occasion spat in His face (Matthew 26:67). When morning came, they bound Him and led Him to Pilate for sentencing (Matthew 27:1)

SUICIDE (4:00 - 5:00 AM)

Around the same time that Jesus was being prepared for transport and sentencing before Pilate, Judas was in deep remorse for what he had done. It is likely that he watched the entire trial, and now seeing Jesus condemned, wanted to undo what he had done (Matthew 27:3-4). The Jewish leaders of course refused to take the money or release Jesus, which prompted Judas to fling the money at them and to go outside the city and hang himself in grief. It truly would have been better if he were not born (Matthew 26:24).

SENTENCING (5:00 AM)

With no sleep in nearly 24 hours, Jesus prepared to stand trial in front of Pilate, who wanted nothing to do with this Jewish fiasco (John 18:28-31). The city had already swollen to ten times its population and keeping the rebellious Jews under control was Pilate's primary occupation. Condemning one Jewish insurrectionist to pacify the raucous crowds may have been politically dangerous if things got out of hand.

Although the Jews did Pilate the favor of secretly condemning Jesus, away from the crowds who loved Him, and by bringing Him early in the morning for sentencing before the city awoke. Had they not done this, Pilate may have lost control of the city, which would have cost him his career and maybe even his life. He was walking on eggshells and hoping to quell the mob. In fact, on several occasions the Roman governor attempted to dismiss the charges brought against Jesus by interviewing Him individually (John 18:33-38), interceding for Him before the crowds (John 18:38-40), and offering to release Him instead of Barrabas (Mark 15:9). When that did not work, He pawned Jesus off on the Jewish King Herod to do with Him as he willed (Luke 23:6-10).

In the end, His attempts were futile. The crowd did not calm. Herod would not exonerate Him. And soon Jesus was standing in front of Pilate once more, with the Jews crying "Crucify Him" (Mark 15:14) and charging "You are no friend of Caesar's" (John 19:2). Pilate knew that the Jewish people could end his career if that rumor got out. Caesar accepts no sedition. So Pilate adopted a modified approach. Still attempting to rescue Jesus, but doing enough damage as to even the judicial balances (Luke 23:16). He determined to punish Jesus and then release Him.

SCOURGING (9:00 AM)

By punishment, Pilate ordered a Roman scourging to be executed upon Jesus (John 19:1) This was forty lashes with a diabolical whip, sometimes referred to as the cat of 9 tails, which would rip off the flesh and muscle exposing vital organs, bones, and leaving the victim nearing circulatory shock.

If this were not brutal enough, the Romans guards mocked Jesus, pressing razor-like thorns in the shape of a crown into His skull. They robed Him in royal purple, gave Him a mock scepter, and bowed jeeringly to ridicule Him and abuse Him (John 19:2-3). It is likely while Jesus was being beaten, Pilate's wife managed to send a message to him about her dream the night before. She told him that she was deeply troubled concerning Jesus and warned her husband not to condemn this innocent man (Matthew 27:19). Pilate would likely be hoping the Jewish people would relent without Him stepping in.

Although, it seems as if Pilate underestimated the Jewish hatred for Jesus, since this did nothing to quell the crowds (John 19:5-7). They yelled all the more "Crucify Him" and began rioting to force his hand (Matthew 27:23-24). In a moment of desperation, Pilate caved, seeing no way the Jews would relent. And with his job and life at stake, Jesus was just not that significant to him. It was at this point Pilate rose to wash his hands, symbolically assuaging himself of any guilt (Matthew 27:24). At the same time, the Jewish crowds were all too eager to have Jesus' guilt fall on them and their children (Matthew 27:25). A guilt that would be executed in the years ahead.

CRUCIFIXION (11:00 AM)

Fourteen hours earlier, Jesus was in an upper room, singing, praying, reclining, and worshiping with His friends. Fourteen hours later, He was physically unrecognizable. Once Pilate turned Him over to be crucified, the heavy cross beam was laid on His exposed shoulders (John 19:17). Every unsanded splinter from this rough cut board pierced the exposed meat and nerve endings that screamed in agony. He was barely able to stand. So weakened by the scourging He collapsed in the street. At this point, a man from the crowd was chosen (Luke 23:26) to carry his cross beam the rest of the way (John 19:18).

Calvary, the execution site, was known as the place of the skull (Matthew 27:33). It was a hilltop advertisement to the power of Rome and the futility of insurrection. Once Jesus staggered to the top of the hill, His wrists and feet were pierced with nails the size of railroad spikes, and He was hoisted up and affixed to the main beam of the cross. According to the ancient prophecies, He was placed between two criminals (Isaiah 53:12), while the soldiers divided up His possessions (Psalm 22:18). Above His head was the mocking propaganda "Jesus the Nazarene, the King of the

Jews”, written in three languages so that everyone could read it and take notice (John 19:19-20). “This is what Rome does to would be kings”, the obvious meaning underneath those words.

In a moment of lucidity, Jesus looked down to see His mother staring up at Him in horror. Jesus loved her. And now, hanging on a cross would love her once more, charging John, His beloved disciple, to look after her when He was gone (John 19:25-27). Inside His mother’s heart was breaking.

Before death completely overtook Him, He had to endure the voluminous taunts, sneers, and mocking that entered His well preserved ears. People on the ground jeered at Him. One of the other men crucified beside Him taunted Him. But one man, the other crucified wretch, saw Him for who He was. This was heaven’s first citizen. A forgiven thief that Jesus welcomed (Luke 23:39-43). Jesus, knowing everything was now accomplished, asked for a drink, again to fulfill the prophecies (Psalm 22:15). Once he tasted the sour wine, He uttered “It is finished” signifying that forgiveness was now accomplished (John 19:30). It would not be long now.

PLAGUE (12:00 PM)

As Jesus faded in and out of consciousness, darkness fell upon the earth for about three full hours that day (Luke 23:44).

SHOUT (3:00 PM)

During the third hour of darkness, after hanging on the cross for four agonizing hours, Jesus gave up His Spirit and breathed His last breath (Luke 23:46-47). The great teacher and rabbi spoke His final words as a quotation of Psalm 22, reminding everyone watching that they had not only perfectly killed Him, but perfectly fulfilled the prophecies of David concerning Him. And after uttering “My God, My God, Why have you forsaken me?” (Psalm 22:1; Mark 15:34) He breathed His last.

DEAD (3:00 - 4:00 PM)

When Jesus breathed His last breath on the cross, several cataclysmic events happened. First, an earthquake broke out upon the land (Matthew 27:51) causing the Roman guard below Jesus to admit that Jesus really was the Son of God. The temple veil that guarded the way into the holy place was also ripped from the top to the bottom (Luke 23:45). This signified that God would no longer dwell in a temple made with human hands, but on the basis of Jesus Christ’s sacrifice, would now dwell in the hearts of the forgiven and redeemed sinners. Finally, Matthew tells us that even the graves were opened, and many Old Testament saints came out, walked around, and appeared to many in the city (Matthew 27:52).

BURIED (BEFORE SUNSET - 7:00PM)

Jesus' death had triggered the end of the old world and the dawning of a brand new age. This would be especially apparent on Sunday morning when the tomb was empty! Until then, the religious leaders ordered His body taken down as quickly as possible, so as not to defile their Passover celebrations (John 19:31-37). For the time, it would be placed in a borrowed grave (John 19:38-42). Friday was over at 8:00PM. It began at a dinner table and ended at a tomb. This concludes the events of Good Friday.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. As you read the detailed account of Jesus' arrest, trials, mockery, and crucifixion, what emotions or thoughts were stirred within you? What impacted you most profoundly?
2. The devotional highlights how Jesus embodied true humility and servanthood by washing the disciples' feet at the Last Supper. How can meditating on this example challenge and shape our attitudes and actions?
3. Despite Jesus' clear teachings, the disciples still argued about who was greatest. Why do you think they struggled to grasp the upside-down nature of Christ's kingdom? How can we safeguard against similar spiritual blindness?
4. Pilate's actions revealed his moral cowardice in condemning an innocent man. Yet the devotional notes how Jesus remained resolved in fulfilling God's plan. What can we learn from Christ's strength under excruciating suffering?
5. The tearing of the temple veil symbolized open access to God through Christ's sacrifice. How does this highlight the beauty and power of the gospel?
6. Describe the significance of the earthquake, tombs opening, and saints appearing after Jesus' death. How do these events point to the cosmic implications of what just occurred?
7. As you reflect on these horrific yet miraculous events, what does the cross reveal to you about God's holiness, justice, love and power?
8. How can focusing on the details of Good Friday deepen your gratitude for Christ's redemptive work and increase your devotion to following Him?

Holy Saturday: While in the Tomb

SCRIPTURE READINGS:

Matthew 27:57-66, Mark 15:42-47, Luke 23:50-56, John 19:38-42

DEVOTIONAL READING:

After overseeing the murder of Jesus, the Jewish leaders walked down Calvary's Hill, into the city, and presided over the most important religious festival in their calendar, the Passover. It would be like preaching a sermon hours after you shot and killed someone. Their hearts were so hardened that the paradox of it all did not seem to register. And as the sun went down, and Saturday dawned, the city went back to a state of normalcy. For now. In relation to Jesus, it may not seem like much could be reported. But as you will see, much was happening on Holy Saturday.

JOSEPH OF ARIMATHEA

After Jesus died, the body would need to be claimed. That is, if someone wanted to honor it through burial, it was their responsibility to come retrieve it. Abandoned bodies, on the other hand, would be left in the elements to decay or be eaten.

This is where Joseph of Arimathea enters our story. He was a wealthy aristocrat (Matthew 27:57), a respected member of the Jewish Sanhedrin (Mark 15:43), and a secret follower of Jesus (John 19:38). We do not know how long Joseph had been a follower of Christ, but it is clear that his first public act of service happened on Saturday. Joseph went to Pilate, got permission to claim Jesus' body, and then to put Him in his own new garden tomb (Matthew 27:60).

While this act was extremely kind, and a bit dangerous for Joseph to out himself in this way, it was also prophesied by the prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 53:9). Whether Joseph actively or passively participated in fulfilling the prophecy, we do not know. Either way, God is totally in control. And no promise He proclaims will ever stand unfulfilled.

NICODEMUS

Nicodemus, the well respected Jewish leader who came to Jesus by night (John 3), apparently became a disciple along the way. We are not sure when this happened, but it is clear that it did. On Saturday, Nicodemus joined Joseph of Arimathea to help prepare Jesus' body for burial (John 19:39) by collecting all of the spices and linens needed. Even in His death, they were emboldened to serve Him.

By the time these two collect Jesus' body, wrap Him, and place Him in the tomb, it is already Saturday (The Jewish Sabbath). This Sabbath, a high holy Sabbath because of Passover, which means no work could be done. So, whatever bodily preparations were left unfinished, those would need to wait until Sunday morning, when the Passover was over.

MARY THE MOTHER OF JESUS AND MARY MAGDALENE

In all of the commotion that was going on, Mary (Jesus' mother) and His friend Mary Magdalene, lose account of Jesus' body. Mark tells us that they were looking around anxiously trying to find where He had been laid (Mark 15:47). This must have been a frightening experience for both of them. But, given that Joseph and Nicodemus had precious moments to spare before the Passover, and likely rushed to get Jesus in the tomb, it is not surprising that they got out ahead of both women. Once the two found the body, their anxiety abated, and they busied themselves preparing the spices, which would need to be applied after the Sabbath (Luke 23:54-56)

THE JEWS

The Jewish leaders awoke on Saturday morning with one important loose end still left to be tied up. They remembered that Jesus had predicted His resurrection on the third day. From their own testimony, they did not believe a resurrection of this nature was possible, but it did occur to them that someone might steal the body, hide it, and claim that He had been raised. They could not let this happen (Matthew 27:63-64).

To rectify the situation, the Jews visit Pilate in the morning and petition for the tomb to be guarded by Roman soldiers. Pilate authorizes this, and tells them to use their own personal Roman guard (Matthew 27:65) to make it as secure as they can. They also sealed the stone, just in case someone made it past the guards, they would not be able to open the tomb (Matthew 27:66). This is what happened to Jesus' physical body. But what happened to His soul? Where did Jesus' spirit go after He died? Did He go down into hell, as some the creeds have suggested? Or did He go to heaven to be with His Father? Let us explore that point together.

WHERE DID JESUS GO AFTER DEATH?

While on the cross, Jesus told the repentant thief that he would be with him in paradise (Luke 23:43). So where is paradise? Where did Jesus meet with that thief in the immediate hours following His death and in the lead up to His resurrection? It is likely that paradise here refers to the realm of the dead, which in the Old Testament, is called Sheol. Sheol was the place where the righteous (1 Samuel 28:13-14) and unrighteous (Psalm 31:17) would go when they die. It was a place with locked gates (Isaiah 38:10) and bars (Job 17:16) that existed in the land of darkness (Isaiah 14:9) and was designed to keep souls secure until the resurrection.

In the New Testament, Jesus tells a parable about this place (Luke 16:19-31). He calls it Abraham's Bosom. In that parable He divides this realm into two compartments. The main realm is where the unfaithful and unbelieving go for torture (Luke 16:23). Then the minor realm is where the faithful and believing saints of old were taken by angels, held under lock and key, until the resurrection occurred.

So where did Jesus go? Based on what Jesus says in Luke 16, Joe Rigney has said:

Following His death for sin, then, Jesus journeys to Hades, to the City of Death, and rips its gates off the hinges. He liberates Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David, John the Baptist, and the rest of the Old Testament faithful, ransoming them from the power of Sheol (Psalm 49:15; 86:13; 89:48). They had waited there for so long, not having received what was promised, so that their spirits would be made perfect along with the saints of the new covenant (Hebrews 11:39–40; 12:23). - Joe Rigney

This seems entirely likely, since Matthew even tells us that Old Testament saints were walking around the city of Jerusalem, after Jesus died (Matthew 27:52-53). This only makes sense, if Jesus somehow set them free. Whatever was happening to Jesus in between His crucifixion and resurrection, Sunday morning was coming. His body would be reunited with His Spirit, He would rise to life, and ascend to God to inherit His Kingdom (Daniel 7).

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Why do you think Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus came forward at this point to care for Jesus' body? What risks were they taking by publicly identifying with Christ?
2. The devotional notes that Mary and Mary Magdalene lost track of where Jesus' body was taken initially. How might you imagine they felt during this confusing time?
3. Why were the Jewish leaders so concerned about the tomb being secured and guarded? What did this reveal about their hardness of heart despite witnessing Jesus' death?
4. The devotional explores where Jesus' soul went after His death based on Scriptural insights. Why is this an important aspect of Christ's experience to understand?
5. How does the idea of Jesus descending to the realm of the dead, proclaiming victory and setting captives free align with or challenge your previous perspectives on this?
6. Matthew 27:52-53 describes Old Testament saints appearing in Jerusalem after Christ's death. What impact might witnessing this have had on people?

7. As you contemplate Jesus' body in the tomb and His soul in the realm of the dead during this liminal time, what new appreciations does it give you for His redemptive work?

8. How can meditating on the whole story - from Christ's death to where His body and soul went before the resurrection - deepen your gratitude for the gospel this Easter season?

Resurrection Sunday: Kingdom Begins

SCRIPTURE READINGS:

Matthew 28:1-20, Mark 16:1-8, Luke 24:1-53, John 20:1-31

DEVOTIONAL READINGS:

After the darkest day in human history, and the empty, voided, silence of Saturday, Sunday dawned. Today is the dramatic conclusion of Jesus' final week!

THE DISCIPLES RETREATED TO GALILEE

Sometime between the agonizing events on Friday and the glorious events on Sunday, the disciples retreated into a hole somewhere in the city. Jesus prophesied they would scatter and they did. They were bitterly afraid of the Jews (John 20:19), who had just killed their Lord and they naturally would have wondered if they were next.

THE GUARDS AT THE TOMB

Meanwhile, back at the tomb, the Roman guards were carefully watching the grave so that no one could steal Jesus' body and so that no one could claim that He had been raised (Matthew 27:62-65). But, early on Sunday morning, perhaps even before the sun had fully risen, an earthquake broke through the silence, and shook the stone loose that was blocking the entrance (Matthew 28:2a). The guards were thrown into a fit of panic, especially after discovering that it was an angel, sitting atop the stone in dazzling clothing, with a face like lightning, that had caused it (Matthew 28:2b). Matthew tells us that these men shook in fear and became as dead men, probably blacking out from the fear and shock of it all (Matthew 28:3-4).

THE WOMEN AT THE TOMB

Not long after the guards were incapacitated, Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Jesus arrived at the tomb (Matthew 28:1) bringing spices to prepare His body for the inevitable decomposition it would experience (Mark 16:1-2). They were traveling with Johanna and some of the other dear women who were a part of Jesus' discipleship community (Luke 24:10). As it is in certain areas today, women were much safer traveling in larger groups.

Once they arrived, they would have seen the carnage that the earthquake left behind along with Roman troops who were still lying lifeless on the ground in front of them (Matthew 28:11). The entire scene may have looked like a warzone after the victors departed. And with the massive tombstone rolled away (Mark 16:4), it would not be difficult for any number of scenarios to flood their minds.

John tells us that Mary Magdalene specifically wept when she saw these things, imagining that Jesus' body had been taken by force (John 20:11). The other women were also deeply perplexed and could not make sense of what they were seeing (Luke 24:4). Perhaps they imagined the Jews that killed Him had now stolen away His body to make a sadistic point.

As Mary continued weeping, she neared the darkened tomb, stooped and looked inside, not sure what she would find (John 20:11). The other women also joined with her, even going inside the tomb to see if they could find His body (Luke 24:3). He was not there.

As the women huddled together in the darkened tomb wondering what was happening, they were shocked to discover they were not alone! For an angel was sitting on the very spot where Jesus' body had been laid (Mark 16:5-6). At just that moment, another angel, perhaps the one who was sitting on the stone above, also came into the tomb (Luke 24:4), which caused the women to collapse in fear (Luke 24:5). After consoling them (John 20:13), the angels showed them the spot where Christ had been laid (Mark 16:6), and reported to them that He had indeed risen from the dead (Matthew 28:6).

The women were clearly confused. Who wouldn't be at a time like this? So the angel reminded them of the words that Jesus had taught them, how He would be killed at the hands of sinful men and resurrected on the third day (Luke 24:7). Jesus had mentioned these things often. And now in the dark hollow tomb, those familiar words began inciting belief in them, but they did not yet fully understand those words yet either (Luke 24:8). They were at the moment of excitement, but still perplexed enough to be frozen in their steps. The angel went on, telling them that it was their God appointed duty, to be the first witnesses of the resurrection of Christ. They were to go and report this good news to their brothers, the disciples, who were fearfully cloistered together in the city (Matthew 28:7a). He wanted these dear sisters to go and convince their brothers to leave the city of Jerusalem and to go to Galilee where Jesus Himself would meet them (Mark 16:7).

But, it was clear that Mary was still perplexed and broken. Perhaps she was unable in this moment to process all of the details that were coming into her. Imagine walking up on this scene, stepping over lifeless soldiers with weapons, entering the tomb of your Lord and best friend, meeting an actual angel, and then trying to process everything he told you. Our heads would have been spinning and so was hers. In moments like these our hearts, with all of the emotions we are feeling, need a moment to simply catch up to the data flooding our brains.

As Mary turned away from the angels to process what was just spoken to her, she saw a man standing right in front of her, but lacked the ability in that moment to recognize Him (John 20:14). Perhaps tears were streaming from her eyes. Perhaps Jesus prevented her from seeing that it was Him. Whatever the case, she was before this man a broken woman and unsure what to do, or say, or think.

It is likely that Mary fell at this man's feet, a sign of total humility and helplessness. While she lay below Him, Jesus spoke tenderly to her, saying: "Woman (a term of endearment), why are you weeping?" (John 20:15a). Mary responded to Him from the ground below, supposing that He was the gardener in charge of the cemetery grounds, which was a luxury only the rich could afford. She looked up at Him and words began spilling out of her, begging Him to turn over the body, if He had any idea where it was, or who had taken it (John 20:15b).

Jesus looked intently at her, and sweetly spoke her name in that good old way He always had spoken it, simply saying "Mary..." It was that one word that brought clarity flooding back into her. When those sound waves reached her ears she knew! (John 20:16a) This man was Jesus! It was her beloved, Lord! And from that humble position she cried out "Rabboni!" (meaning "my teacher!"). At the same time she wrapped her hands around his feet (John 20:16) in a beautiful moment of worship and devotion (Matthew 28:9).

Jesus helped her to her feet and gently redirected all of their excitement to the task at hand. He wanted Mary and the other women to be His witnesses. To report this news to His brothers (John 20:17-18) so that all of them could meet with Him together in Galilee (Mark 16:7).

After seeing Jesus alive, they left with an incredible amount of excitement and joy. Perhaps it was greater than they had never felt before (Matthew 28:8; John 20:18). From the tomb, they rushed back to tell the men.

THE GUARDS COME TO THEIR SENSES

After the women swiftly left, the lifeless guards awoke, and realized the tomb was now empty. In perfect horror, they fled into the city to report these events to the Jewish leaders (Matthew 28:11) trying to get out in front of things to save their own lives. Normally an event like this would cause a troop of soldiers to be killed on the spot. But doing this would have confirmed their account, and would have signaled to the entire city that Christ lived and was resurrected. This would have been disastrous for the Jewish council, who led the city with an iron religious fist.

Instead of recognizing that Jesus had in fact been raised from the dead, which should have led to repentance, their foolish hearts were darkened and they switched into damage control. Sensing their unique dilemma, they paid the soldiers off (the ancient equivalent of an NDA) and began disseminating a false report throughout the city that Jesus' body was stolen (Matthew 28:11-13). Matthew even tells us that the rumor survived several decades after the events and was still being spread around the time he was writing his Gospel.

The leaders also promised to protect the vulnerable soldiers from the death penalty, should their governor find out, but they could never share what really happened on that Sunday morning (Matthew 28:13). The religious leaders were so blind in their sin, not even an empty tomb, an earthquake, and an attacking angel from God would cause them to repent and turn from their sin.

A NOTE ABOUT THE WITNESS OF WOMEN

As the women ran back to meet the brothers, they did so in a world where they were not considered credible witnesses. They were not allowed to testify in a court of law, and they would have never been trusted to relay such an important message. And the King of kings, the sovereign Lord, entrusted these dear sisters to be His first Gospel heralds. The irony of redemption in Christ's Kingdom is breathtaking.

It is also a curious feature that this event was honestly recorded. The disciples, who knew the culture, would have known that this was a scandalous detail. Think about it, what man in that culture would sit down to write an important work, which features himself and other men hiding in fear, while being confronted with the courage of a woman. The only way that happens at that time and in that place is if the account was true and they recorded it just like it happened. They would not have made that detail up. They would have written themselves as the heroes if they did.

But thankfully they kept this detail in, primarily because it was true. And, perhaps, also to show the world the tender view that Jesus had towards women. He had female disciples in His community. He spoke kindly to them. Called them out of their sins. And invited them, side by side with men, to join in His brand new Kingdom. Not as second class citizens. But as full members!

THE WOMEN SHARE THE GOSPEL

As Mary and the other women burst through the secret hideout where the men were staying, they probably needed a moment to catch their breath. As soon as real words could be uttered they began enumerating the report about the empty tomb and resurrection. But, the disciples did not believe them (Mark 16:10-11). In fact, the report sounded like nonsense to them (Luke 24:9-11).

Mary specifically appeals to Peter (Mark 16:7), the de facto leader of the group, urging him to believe her testimony. Of the two components in her presentation, it is clear that He does not yet believe that Jesus is alive and raised, but after considering the likelihood that someone had stolen the body, the empty tomb became a real fear for him (Luke 24:12) and caused Him to return.

As Peter hastily got up to investigate this, the rest stayed behind, supposing Peter may be traveling to his doom. John does, however, tell us that another unnamed disciple went with him, which most believe was John Himself. For clarity, that is what we will assume as well. Therefore, Peter and John left the others and ran as quickly as they could to investigate the empty tomb together.

PETER AND JOHN AT THE TOMB

After running back to the tomb, both men arrive (John 20:3) by mid morning, with John arriving first (John 20:4). This is not a comment on Peter's age, because he is not even 25 years old at this point. This is more a

comment on the trustworthiness of John's eyewitness testimony. He is writing this particular Gospel and presenting Himself as a credible and trustworthy witness. He arrived first. He saw it. And then the leader of the disciples, Peter, came in and verified what he was seeing.

When John arrived at the tomb, there were no guards there, since they were long gone at this point, enjoying their bribe money, while rumors were already filling the city that someone had stolen the body. Even being here must have been dangerous for them, because they would have been prime suspects in the investigation. Resting against the outer wall of the tomb, John stoops to catch His breath and sees the linen garments lying in the spot where Jesus laid (John 20:6). When Peter arrived, he also saw the linens (Luke 24:12), and then became the first man to enter the tomb (John 20:6).

Once inside, He discovered the face cloth that covered the Lord's face. It was lying off to the side as by deliberate intention (John 20:7). One can assume that Peter calls out to John, at this point, so that he too may evaluate what he was seeing. John entered, saw what Peter had found, and then John believed (John 20:8), though not yet in full (John 20:9, 11). It seems the two departed rather quickly, amazed and wondering what had happened (Luke 24:12), but likely too afraid to investigate the matter further. So, in a moment they were off, to report this news to all the others.

THE TWO WALKING

Once Peter and John arrived, the group had two independent lines of evidence that the tomb was empty. But, with Peter and John having no proof for the resurrection, the room was divided along gender lines (Luke 24:24). Things could not be more confusing.

Some time later, two men inside the room decided to leave their hideout and return back to their hometown of Emmaus (Luke 24:13). This was about 7 miles north of Jerusalem and they wanted to get home before dark. This may have been dangerous, since the discipleship community of Jesus would have been public enemy number 1. But, with all of the debates and confusing things they were hearing in that room, they likely needed to get away from the group for a little while and process the situation in peace. Plus, life had to move on at some point.

As they walked along, suddenly Jesus came up behind them on the road (Luke 24:14-15). Just as Mary did not recognize Him at the tomb, so they did not recognize Him during their travels. The text tells us that their eyes were even prevented from seeing who He really was (Luke 24:16), so they walked along in ignorance. As they continued along, Jesus engaged them and inquired about what they were speaking about when He walked up to them (Luke 24:17). This shocked the two men, wondering how it was possible that anyone could be so ignorant of these events who lived near Jerusalem. Perhaps they even wondered if this traveler had been living under a rock.

The one man, who is named in the account (Cleophas), responded to Jesus: “Are You the only one visiting Jerusalem, who is unaware of the things which have happened here in these days?” After Jesus inquired further, Cleophas responded with a summary of the last 72 hours. He also indicated that both the women and two disciples had reported back to their group, but they could not understand the data and were heading home (Luke 24:17-24).

It was then that Jesus rebuked them (Luke 24:25), challenging them with the entire Old Testament Scriptures that pointed to the messiah, His death, and resurrection (Luke 24:26-27). This Bible study, on their walk home, invigorated them and caused their hearts to burn within them (Luke 24:32). Maybe what the women had said could be true? But they were still prevented from recognizing Him. When the two men arrived at their destination, a couple of hours later, it appeared like Jesus would be going on ahead of them. Instead, they urged Him to stay the night, since it would be dark in a few hours and traveling at night was dangerous (Luke 24:29). Plus, they wanted to hear more of His teaching, so Jesus accepted.

During the meal that night, in the same manner that He had done in the upper room on Friday, Jesus reclined at the table, took the bread, blessed it, broke it, and distributed it to them. In that moment, their eyes were opened and they knew that they were sitting face to face with the Risen Lord! (Luke 24:30-31). The moment they recognized Him, Jesus vanished from their sight, and they fled immediately back to the city, even though it was nighttime, to tell everyone about it (Luke 24:34-35).

THE DISCIPLES REFUSE TO BELIEVE THEM

When they arrived the disciples were not expecting visitors and must have been afraid to hear the knock at the door. With the threat of the Jewish leaders breaking down their door at any moment, any stirrings

outside the room would have been especially terrifying to them. It was at this point, the two returned and after everyone recovered from their panic attack, they began sharing their account. Normally, if two male witnesses agreed about something, and shared it with others, their account would have seemed credible. But given the fantastical nature of the news, the others struggled to believe it (Mark 16:12-13).

JESUS APPEARS TO THE UNBELIEVING DISCIPLES

While they were still relaying the account to the unbelieving group, Jesus appeared in their midst (Luke 24:36) They were so startled and frightened by the spectacle, they believed Him to be a ghost (Luke 24:37). Jesus quelled their doubts by showing them His real physical wounds (Luke 24:38-40) and also by eating some food right in front of them (Luke 24:41-43). Since popular legend established that spirits do not have physical bodies, and therefore could not actually eat, Jesus easily proved He was not a ghost in these two credible ways. He also opened up the Old Testament for them and showed them all the places that were there concerning Him from Genesis to Malachi. The text tells us that He had to open up their minds before they could even understand it (Luke 24:44-46), but once He did they eagerly accepted Him and rejoiced because of Him (John 20:20).

EASTER COMES TO A CLOSE

The events of Easter began early on Sunday morning at an empty tomb. The body was gone. The Roman guards were paralyzed. The women were perplexed and broken. The Jewish leaders were lying and spreading misinformation. And the disciples were cowering in fear and confusion. But, by the end of the day on Sunday, all of His followers were together again, worshiping Him in an upper room, and experiencing those first beautiful hours of His eternal everlasting Kingdom.

In the days ahead, they would all meet up in Galilee (Mark 16:7), an 80 mile journey northward. Jesus would commission them to take the Good News of His resurrection to the entire world (Matthew 28:18-20) and to teach everyone they shared it with to do the same. He would command them to return to Jerusalem and wait for the coming of His Holy Spirit (Luke 24:49). And... Eight days after His resurrection He would appear to the only disciple who had not yet seen Him. That disciple, though known as a doubter, when confronted with the reality of the resurrection would make the most explicit declaration ever uttered by human lips. Thomas the doubter, became Thomas the believer, with five simple but powerful words: "My Lord and my God!" (John 20:28)

This is what Easter is. Standing before the risen Christ, humbled in our frailty, and awed by His majesty. And it is my prayer, that anyone reading these events, would proclaim right along with Thomas, that He really is YOUR Lord and YOUR God!

Thank you to everyone who has been reading these devotionals. I hope they have blessed you as much as writing them has blessed me. My prayer is that we would bow to Christ as the true King. Live our lives as faithful and joyful citizens. Advance His Kingdom here on earth. And eagerly await our King's triumphant return!

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. As you read the detailed accounts of the empty tomb, the witnesses experiencing confusion and doubt, and Jesus' appearances, what stuck out most profoundly to you? What new realizations did you have?
2. The devotional highlights how the angels at the tomb instructed the women to tell the disciples to go to Galilee to meet Jesus. Why do you think Jesus wanted to reveal Himself in Galilee rather than Jerusalem?
3. Mary Magdalene was the first to see and recognize the risen Jesus. Why is it significant that Jesus entrusted this key witness to a woman in that cultural context?
4. When Jesus appeared to the two disciples walking to Emmaus, the passage says "their eyes were prevented from recognizing Him" until the breaking of bread. Why do you think Jesus temporarily withheld their sight of Him? What does this teach about spiritual blindness?
5. Despite multiple eyewitness accounts, the disciples remained doubtful and fearful until Jesus appeared to them corporately. What doubts or fears might have caused their ongoing unbelief? How were those overcome?

6. Describe the significance of Jesus opening the disciples' minds to understand the Old Testament Scriptures about Himself (Luke 24:44-46). How central is God's Word to comprehending the gospel?
7. At the end, Thomas makes the profound declaration "My Lord and my God!" After studying the resurrection accounts, what does this statement by Thomas reveal about who Jesus truly is?
8. How can meditating on the truthfulness of Christ's bodily resurrection increase our own faith, hope and devotion to following Him today? What response does it stir in your heart?

Now to Him who is able to protect you from stumbling, and to make you stand in the presence of His glory, blameless with great joy, to the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority before all time and now and forever. Amen. - Jude 24-25

