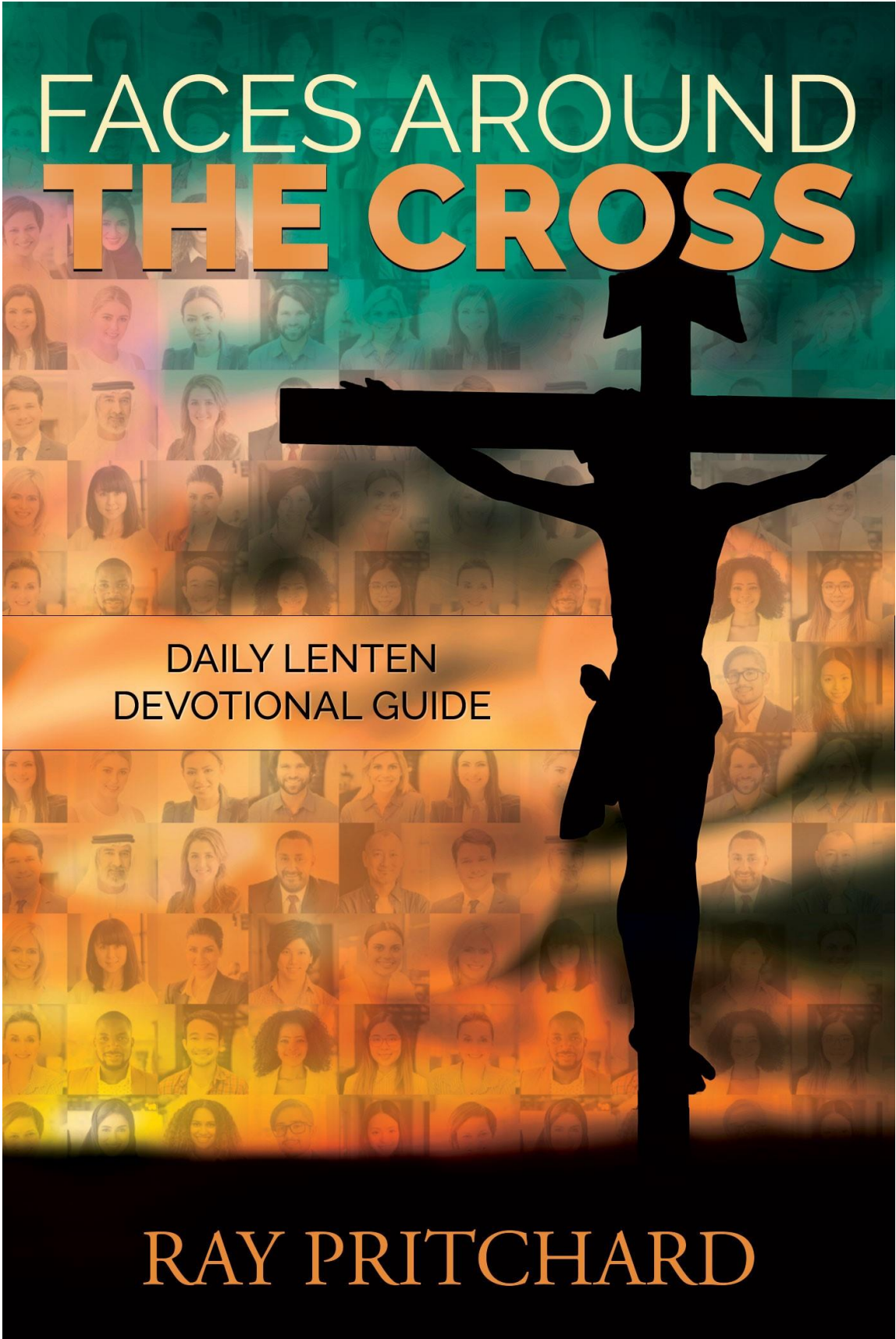


FACES AROUND **THE CROSS**



DAILY LENTEN
DEVOTIONAL GUIDE

RAY PRITCHARD

**This Lenten devotional guide comes
from Keep Believing Ministries.**

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Were You There?

That's the question asked by a beloved spiritual: "Were you there when they crucified my Lord?"

No, we weren't there, but we have the next best thing. We have the stories of those who were there when Jesus entered Jerusalem for the final time. We know who they were, what they said, what they did, and in many cases, we know why they did it.

In this Lenten series we will meet the men and women who were the "faces around the cross." Our journey begins with a blind man who found the miracle he needed, and it ends with a man who could see but couldn't recognize Jesus on the road to Emmaus. In between, we'll meet a woman who poured perfume on Jesus' feet and then wiped his feet with her hair. Herod thought Jesus was a joke, while Pilate's wife couldn't keep him out of her dreams. We'll meet a thief who didn't believe and one who did. We'll spend several days thinking together about Judas. We know what he did, but after two thousand years, we still wonder why he did it. Many other men and women will cross our path as we walk with Christ on the road to the cross and the empty tomb:

Caiaphas who came so close to the truth.
Martha who served Jesus with her good deeds.
Peter who loved Jesus and then denied him.
Thomas who doubted and then believed.
Barabbas who lived while Jesus died.
The naked man who ran away.
Pilate who tried to do right but gave in to the crowd.

Through all these different "faces around the cross," we'll gain a new picture of our Lord Jesus. My prayer for you this Lenten season is that these daily devotions will help you to believe all over again.

Each day I've added a link to a YouTube music video. I hope you'll take a few moments to watch the videos because the music reinforces the message of the written devotions.

The forty-seven devotionals take us from Ash Wednesday all the way to Easter Sunday. Since the dates of Lent change each year, we have numbered the days so this devotional will fit during any Lenten season.

No one who met our Lord ever stayed the same. That's still true today. As we begin, let's make a simple prayer of commitment: "Lord Jesus, I am ready to follow you!"

Day 1

Bartimaeus: A Blind Beggar Meets Jesus

"Many people told him to keep quiet, but he was crying out all the more, 'Have mercy on me, Son of David!'" (Mark 10:48).

Desperate times call for desperate measures.

Almost no one paid him any attention. He had been blind for as long as anyone could remember. And he had been in the same place, on the road outside of Jericho, sitting, waiting, hoping someone would see him beg and would be moved with pity or guilt to toss a few pennies his way. Motive didn't matter, money was money, and in this case, quite literally, beggars could not be choosers.

No one puts "Blind Beggar" on their list of career choices. Outside of being a leper, it was the lowest rank in Jewish society. The blind had to beg unless they had a family that could care for them. This man apparently had no one, so day after day he sat there, eating the dust kicked up by the passing parade of people and animals on a hurry to get to Jericho to do business.

One day Jesus showed up, and his life changed forever.

Give Bartimaeus the credit he deserves. When he heard Jesus was passing by, he saw his chance and cried out for mercy. He even called him by his Messianic title, "Son of David."

He admitted his need.

He cried out for help.

He would not be deterred by those who tried to shush him.

He knew what he wanted Jesus to do for him.

He asked for what he needed.

He received his miracle.

He immediately began to follow Jesus.

Repeatedly in the gospel of Mark, Jesus exposes the moral blindness of his disciples. They thought they knew him better than they did. But here is a poor blind beggar who sees better than they do. Having received his miracle, he follows Jesus down the road, not knowing it would lead to a Roman cross.

George Beverly Shea loved to sing a song based on this story called [Then Jesus Came](#) that begins this way:

One sat alone beside the highway begging,
His eyes were blind, the light he could not see;
He clutched his rags and shivered in the shadows,
Then Jesus came and bade his darkness flee.

When Jesus comes the tempter's pow'r is broken;
When Jesus comes the tears are wiped away.
He takes the gloom and fills the life with glory,
For all is changed when Jesus comes to stay.

Today we begin our Lenten journey called "Faces Around the Cross." Each day between now and Easter Sunday, we'll look at the people who met Jesus during his final days. We begin with Bartimaeus because he stands for all of us. Whether we know it or not, we are hopeless and helpless until Jesus passes by.

Have you met him?
Do you know him?

And the greatest question of all: Will you follow him wherever he goes, even when the road leads to a cross? Bartimaeus couldn't have known what was ahead, but he knew enough to follow the One who had given sight to his blind eyes.

Follow Jesus.
That's where our journey must begin.

Lord Jesus, open our eyes and help us to see you clearly. Give us gritty determination to follow wherever you lead. Amen.

Day 2

Lazarus Must Die!

“The chief priests decided to kill Lazarus also because he was the reason many of the Jews were deserting them and believing in Jesus” (John 12:10-11).

He was back from the dead.

No one could deny that fact. In the first place, Bethany was a small village where everyone knew everyone, so no one could deny that Lazarus had died. It happened like this: He got sick, he died, and they buried him.

Nothing out of the ordinary.

What happened next made headlines. Jesus came along and raised him from the dead. That was startling enough. But no one could deny any part of it because it happened publicly.

Lazarus was dead.

Then he was alive again.

You could argue about how it happened, but the basic facts were there for all to see. The Jewish leaders had a problem on their hands. You can't have dead men coming back to life. It upsets the normal order of things. If word spreads that this man Jesus can raise the dead, people will flock to him by the thousands. They will come from everywhere to see this man whose word defeats death. Word would spread to the Romans who didn't like local uprisings. They frowned on charismatic leaders who attracted great crowds. If the Romans got involved, it would mean nothing but trouble for the Jewish leaders.

But that was only part of the problem. *Lazarus was Exhibit A of Jesus' awesome power.* If you let a man like Lazarus run around telling his story, pretty soon everyone ends up believing in Jesus. Suddenly the whole Jewish system is in jeopardy. So they decided on a simple solution.

Lazarus must die!

Miracles are always a double-edged sword. Religious people feel threatened because Jesus doesn't fit into their man-made boxes. Better to destroy the evidence than to admit a miracle took place.

The same thing happens today. If you take your stand for Jesus, someone won't be happy. You may get in trouble. In some parts of the world, you may pay with your life for being a Christian.

We don't know if the Jewish leaders actually killed Lazarus. Maybe they didn't have to because they ended up killing Jesus a few days later.

But he wouldn't stay dead either!

Let's take away two lessons today. *First, don't be surprised when some people reject you because of your Christian testimony.* Jesus said this would happen. *Second, remember that the worst our enemies can do is kill us.* We go to heaven when we die, and our bodies are raised when Jesus comes again. If we lose, we win!

So go ahead and stand strong, be bold, live for Christ, endure hardship, stand up for what you believe. The worst that can happen is the best that can happen. Our future is secure because it doesn't rest on us; it rests on the faithfulness of God who raised Jesus from the dead.

Make me bold, Lord Jesus, to bear witness for you today. I pray that my testimony will lead many people to believe in you. Amen.

Musical bonus: Keeping with today's theme, here's a reggae version of [Stand Up for Jesus](#) by Carlene Davis.

Day 3

Caiaphas: Unconscious Prophecy

“It is to your advantage that one man should die for the people rather than the whole nation perish.” He did not say this on his own, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus was going to die for the nation” (John 11:50-51).

Raising the dead is risky business.
You never know how people will respond.

You would think everyone would be delighted to have Lazarus back again. Certainly his friends and neighbors were glad to see him, and Mary and Martha rejoiced in their brother’s return from the grave. As word spread that Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead, thousands flocked to him.

And why not?

No one ever came back from the dead. You lived, you died, and that was the end of the story. But then Jesus came along and rewrote the ending. Suddenly life came forth from death. But not everyone was happy. The Jewish leaders hated the news because they couldn’t handle a big “Jesus movement” in Israel. Apparently no one questioned the miracle itself. No one claimed that Lazarus had never died or that somehow they swapped the body or faked his return from the dead. As the Jewish leaders admitted in John 11:47, Jesus had done many signs that proved his divine origin. The problem became partly political. How could they manage this “Jesus movement” so it didn’t upset the Romans? They wanted to keep the peace so taxes would continue flowing to Rome.

Enter Caiaphas, the Jewish high priest. He suggested killing Jesus to keep the peace. Better one man die than the whole nation perish. It reminds me of Mr. Spock’s famous remark in one of the *Star Trek* movies, “The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few.” Caiaphas is willing to have Jesus murdered to keep the peace so Rome didn’t get upset.

But here’s the fascinating point. When John records the story, he adds the comment that Caiaphas was actually predicting the substitutionary atonement of Christ. The Jewish leaders thought by killing Jesus, they were saving the nation from the wrath of Rome. So they killed him, and in A.D. 70 the thing they feared happened anyway when the Roman army burned Jerusalem and destroyed the temple.

It turns out Caiaphas was right, but not in the way he thought. Through his death, Christ brought salvation not only to Israel, but to the whole world.

John Piper offers this comment:

In the mind of Caiaphas, the substitution was this: We kill Jesus so the Romans won't kill us. We substitute Jesus for ourselves. In the mind of God, the substitution was this: I will kill my Son so I don't have to kill you. God substitutes Jesus for his enemies.

This event took place about a week before the crucifixion. In a few days Caiaphas will come face to face with Jesus. Little does he know that his words predict the true meaning of Christ's death on the cross.

But God knew!

As we continue this Lenten journey, each day brings us a little closer to the cross. In these early days, let's remember that though wicked men put our Lord to death for sinful reasons, God overruled it all to accomplish his great plan of salvation. He used Caiaphas' unconscious prophecy to let us know the hand of God was at work. Out of man's greatest evil, God wrought the greatest good. We are saved by what bad men did to the Son.

There is no greater proof of Romans 8:28 than the bloody cross of Christ.

Lord God, you are amazing! Even the wrath of man must praise you. What men meant for evil, you meant for good. Tattoo this truth on my heart today. Amen.

Musical bonus: Listen as David Phelps reminds us of God's amazing plan in a song called [End of the Beginning](#).

Day 4

Zacchaeus: No Hopeless Cases

“All who saw it began to complain, ‘He’s gone to lodge with a sinful man!’” (Luke 19:7)

Zacchaeus never won the “Most Popular Man in Jericho” award.

He had three strikes against him. Strike one: He took money from hardworking people. That was bad enough. Strike two: He worked for the Romans, which made him suspect to every patriotic Jew. Strike three: He skimmed off some of the money for himself.

So he’s a tax collector working for Rome and lining his own pockets. No wonder people didn’t like him.

Then along comes Jesus who not only summons him down from the tree but invites himself over for a meal at Zacchaeus’ house. No wonder the people were murmuring at Jesus. If you had taken a poll that day and asked, “Name the most hated man in Jericho,” Zacchaeus would have been named on 99% of the ballots. Virtually everybody would have said, “This is the worst man in town.” And then you’d ask the second question, “Who is the least likely person to want to see Jesus?” Zacchaeus would once again have been at the top of the list. People had written off this crooked tax collector long ago.

Sometimes in our effort to share the gospel, we get discouraged. We think our friends and loved ones are never going to listen. We try to share Christ at work. We try to share Christ with our friends and our neighbors. We try to build bridges. We try to get to know people who don’t know the Lord. We get discouraged when they don’t respond quickly. Sometimes they go months and years without responding at all. We look at them and conclude that they are hardened to God. Zacchaeus reminds us not to jump to hasty conclusions. If you had looked on the outside, you would have written him off because society had written him off. But in his heart, the Holy Spirit was working, waiting for the day when Jesus would arrive.

Thank God, there are hungry hearts everywhere. Just because you don’t see the signs on the outside doesn’t mean that on the inside your friends and loved ones haven’t climbed up in a tree to see Jesus as he passes by. From the outside it may not look like anything is happening, but on the inside God is at work.

Evidently Jesus stayed at his home. No wonder people got upset. Religious types often get offended at the people Jesus chooses to be his followers. Isn’t it true, then as now, that some people are offended by the fact our Lord loved to be with the worst of sinners?

There are no hopeless cases with Jesus. He's not ashamed to hang out with drunkards and prostitutes and crooked tax collectors. Here's a real shocker: He'll even spend time with religious people if they want to spend time with him.

I'm glad Jesus hung out with Zacchaeus. If there's hope for him, there's hope for me too. We all get to heaven on the same plan: the free grace of God.

You never know when Jesus may find another Zacchaeus up a tree.

Thank you, Lord, for amazing grace that saved a wretch like me. Help me to keep believing for those who don't yet know you. Amen.

Musical bonus: Let's sing along with the Brooklyn Tabernacle Choir as they perform [Worthy is the Lamb](#).

Day 5

Saint Martha of Good Deeds

“So they gave a dinner for Him there; Martha was serving them” (John 12:2).

There are many examples of hospitality in the Bible, but perhaps none so interesting as the story of Mary and Martha in Luke 10. You remember that Jesus was coming to Bethany with his disciples. When Martha heard about it, she **"opened her home to him"** (Luke 10:38). Naturally she wanted everything to be just right, so she spent her time bustling around cooking, cleaning, checking the silverware, and sweeping the floor. Meanwhile, her sister Mary was just sitting there—cross-legged on the floor, no doubt—listening to Jesus talk.

Martha didn't like it. The more she thought about it, the angrier she got. Finally she interrupted Jesus with a complaint we can all understand. **"Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!"** (Luke 10:40)

Jesus' answer has often been construed as a rebuke to Martha's busyness, but that's not exactly right. **"Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken from her"** (Luke 10:42). Martha's problem was not that she was bustling around getting things done. No, without Martha the meal would never be served. Jesus and his disciples would starve if they had to depend on dreamy-eyed Mary. Martha's problem was that she forgot why she was doing all the work in the first place. She was "distracted" and "worried" when she should have been glad Jesus had come to her home.

We thank God for those dedicated servers who focus on meeting physical needs, especially those who spontaneously and gladly open their homes to others. Who is ready to host a visiting missionary? Who will open their home for a Sunday School class social? Who is glad for the teenagers to come over? Who would make available a spare bedroom for an unwed mother waiting to have her baby? Who is ready to provide a meal on a moment's notice? Maybe the question is not *who*. Maybe the question is, should it be *you*?

God bless all the Marthas of the world. Someone has to visit the nursing home, someone has to knit blankets for the new babies, someone has to take a meal to a sick person.

When the story is told of Mary pouring oil on Jesus' feet, we rightly focus on her extravagant generosity. But don't forget her sister Martha. Who planned the meal? Martha. Who prepared it? Martha. Who served it? Martha. Who do we remember from that night? Mary. That's how life is sometimes. I'm not sure what Martha thought about her emotionally-expressive sister. I

imagine that sometimes she rolled her eyes, and sometimes she felt like saying, “Come back to the kitchen and give me a hand.”

It takes all kinds to make a world. Tomorrow we’ll talk more about Mary. But for today, let’s give three cheers for the Marthas of the world. They serve in the nursery, work in the kitchen, keep track of the supplies, and they organize the leaders who drive the kids to summer camp.

God bless all the Marthas in our midst. They too are serving the Lord, and without them nothing would get done.

Lord Jesus, I pray for eyes to see the needs around me, and I pray for a heart to respond with servant hands, ready to do whatever needs to be done. Amen.

Musical bonus: Ponder the powerful words of the [Servant Song](#).

Day 6

Mary: Extravagant Love

“Then Mary took a pound of fragrant oil—pure and expensive nard—anointed Jesus’ feet, and wiped His feet with her hair. So the house was filled with the fragrance of the oil” (John 12:3).

Some things can’t be explained rationally.
This is one of those things.

Nard was an oil extracted from the root of the nard plant, grown in India. It was, as John notes, very expensive. A pound of nard equaled 300 denarii as Judas reckoned it, meaning it cost the equivalent of nine months of salary for a working man in Jesus’ day.

It’s hard for us to fathom that, or to think about it properly. In today’s terms, it would be like spending \$30,000 on a bottle of perfume. Who does that? You can buy a nice car for \$30,000.

Not only does she have a jar of expensive oil, she also pours it on Jesus’ feet. John says the fragrance filled the house. I’m sure it smelled wonderful. It ought to smell good for that kind of money. John points out that Judas objected to this “wasteful” extravagance, but Matthew and Mark make it clear the other disciples joined in. They were indignant that Mary would spend so much on perfume that was just poured out on Jesus’ feet. Why not use the money to feed the poor? Good question. We’ll talk about that tomorrow.

Mary responds this way to Jesus because he performed the amazing miracle of raising her brother Lazarus from the dead. That miracle proved Jesus was much more than a teacher or a prophet. She knew he had power and authority that could only come from God. Her desire to honor Jesus moves her to violate the customs of the day. A woman would not normally sit at a man’s feet, much less let down her hair in public, and certainly not wipe his feet with her hair. It was a very private act that others were permitted to see. Jesus’ comment that she anointed him in view of his coming burial would not have made much sense at that moment. It was true, of course, but they wouldn’t understand it until after the crucifixion.

I don’t think Jesus means Mary had been given some special insight into his coming death. It seems none of the disciples saw clearly what was about to happen. Mary’s extravagant gesture was just that—an expression of her unrestrained love for Jesus in response to all he had done for her and her family.

True love, deep love, honest-to-goodness love can't be explained. Even when you see it, you don't understand it. Judas had a good point, but so what? Love has its reasons, and those reasons can't always be spelled out.

Mary's gift to Jesus was so extravagant and so radical that his top men couldn't understand it. I'm sure I would have reacted as they did. But if my faith never leads me to do things that make no sense to others, including my Christian friends, perhaps I'm playing it too safe. If everything I say and do seems perfectly comprehensible to the world, then I need to do some soul-searching. The world says Mary was a fool to do what she did. Would the world ever say that about me?

That's too close for comfort, which is one reason this story is in the Bible.

Spirit of God, shake me up so I will wake up and not be ashamed to be counted a fool for Christ's sake. Amen.

Musical bonus: CeCe Winans recorded a powerful song based on this story called [Alabaster Box](#).

Day 7

Judas: Phony Compassion

“Then one of His disciples, Judas Iscariot (who was about to betray Him), said, “Why wasn’t this fragrant oil sold for 300 denarii and given to the poor?” (John 12:4-5)

In thinking about this story, keep two things in mind:

1. Judas isn’t yet the Judas we know when this takes place. John says Judas was “about” to betray Jesus. Mary anoints Jesus on Saturday night. Judas will betray Jesus in four days. So Judas isn’t the bad guy he’s about to become when he makes his objection.
2. When Matthew and Mark tell the same story, they both point out that many of the other disciples made the same objection. Judas may have been the one to speak up, but he said what the others were thinking.

In the days to come, we’ll have other opportunities to examine Judas in more detail. At this point in the story, no one has any reason to suspect his coming betrayal. After all, you don’t put a questionable person in charge of the money-bag. You give it to someone you trust. This means Judas was highly regarded by the other disciples, and it also means they were not good judges of character. Judas fooled them completely.

That brings us to his objection. Remember that 300 denarii would be worth at least \$30,000 today. Where did Mary get the money to buy that expensive nard? No one knows, and it is useless to speculate. What can’t be denied is that her gift was radical, and, in the eyes of the disciples, reckless. Why “waste” the perfume by pouring it on Jesus’ feet? Why not give it to the poor?

Jesus’ response shows that he welcomes Mary’s extravagance: **“Leave her alone; she has kept it for the day of My burial. For you always have the poor with you, but you do not always have Me”** (vv. 7-8). If you read that one way, it makes Jesus sound rather callous, as if he doesn’t care about the poor. But he is alluding to Deuteronomy 15:11, **“There will never cease to be poor people in the land; that is why I am commanding you, ‘You must willingly open your hand to your afflicted and poor brother in your land.’”** It’s as if Jesus is saying, “Don’t use your phony compassion as an excuse to criticize Mary. The law commands you to show kindness to the poor. You are always to care for them. Nothing is stopping you from taking your money and giving it to them right now.” Seen that way, the words of Jesus are both a rebuke and a challenge: “Spend your own money on the poor, and stop criticizing Mary for showing such amazing devotion.”

Jesus was clearly pleased Mary showed such love. That doesn't conflict with caring for the poor. But in this case, Mary chose the better part even though the men thought she was crazy to do what she did. But she was right, and they were wrong. And Judas was worse off than anyone knew that night.

Mary showed her uninhibited devotion to Jesus, which shocked the men who saw it. In this case, radical love is better than phony compassion. There are several lessons here, including the obvious one that we shouldn't criticize those who express their love differently than we do.

Do you love Jesus? Good, then don't be afraid to let the world know and don't worry if others don't understand.

Lord Jesus, I pray to be set free from a judgmental spirit. Let my compassion for others be as real as my love for you. Amen.

Musical bonus: Selah takes a familiar campfire song and gives it an African twist in their version of [I Have Decided to Follow Jesus](#).

Day 8

Trouble at the Temple: A Crook's Paradise

“Jesus went into the temple complex and drove out all those buying and selling in the temple. He overturned the money changers’ tables and the chairs of those selling doves” (Matthew 21:12).

Sometimes you’ve got to clean house.
In this case, Jesus decided to clean his Father’s house.

The ancient Jewish sources give us lots of information about the money changers. Each year at Passover Jerusalem swelled with observant Jews from all over the Mediterranean world who spoke different languages and used different monetary systems. If Jews from other nations wanted to offer a sacrifice at the temple, all those different currencies had to be changed into the local currency.

Besides providing an essential service for visiting Jews, the money changers also charged interest on their transactions and also marked up the prices during the “high season” around Passover.

You can see where this is going.

I read an article by an author who offered a wry observation on human nature. *Anything that can be corrupted already is; we just don’t know how.* Experience suggests he is probably right. After all, the Bible says “all men are liars” (Psalm 116:11). That doesn’t mean everyone lies all the time, but it does mean lying comes easily to all of us.

What started as a useful and necessary service to travelers became a “den of thieves” where the unscrupulous money changers ripped off pilgrims who came from Rome, Egypt, Mesopotamia, Cappadocia, and all parts of the Middle East. They were weary after traveling a long distance, they were in a strange culture, in a crowded city, with a great desire to take part in the Passover celebration. So of course they were easy targets, “low-hanging fruit,” so to speak. It was a con artist’s dream because you set up your tables in the temple complex and waited for people to come to you. Then you charged them double or triple or five times or ten times or whatever you could get. The pilgrims paid it because they didn’t know any better.

Let’s call it a crook’s paradise.

Then Jesus shows up and spoils the party. He cleansed the temple because its leaders were corrupt and greedy. The priests made money off the backs of the poor people who had no other option. They had turned the temple from a house of prayer into a noisy, money-grubbing circus.

Jesus hated that.

He hated the businessmen who took advantage of the poor.

He hated the priests who were in on the deal.

He hated those who acted unjustly while claiming to worship the God of justice.

Jesus despised what these profiteers were doing. Injustice is always wrong, but injustice in the name of God is doubly evil. He took a whip, waded into the crowd, and overturned the tables. He ran the money changers out of business.

A plaque at the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C. contains this quote from Yehuda Bauer: "Thou shalt not be a victim, thou shalt not be a perpetrator, but, above all, thou shalt not be a bystander."

Good words to ponder as we journey with Jesus to the cross.

Are we bystanders as life passes by?

Or will we care enough in Jesus' name to get involved?

Lord, forgive us for our indifference while evildoers take advantage of the weak. Give us eyes to see, a voice to speak, and the will to act. Amen.

Musical bonus: Greg Allen delivers a heartfelt version of the classic hymn [Alas! And Did My Savior Bleed](#).

Day 9

Jerusalem Has a Question

When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred up, saying, "Who is this?" (Matthew 21:10)

Here we have a remarkable moment in history.
A whole city is thinking about Jesus.

At this moment, as Jesus enters on Sunday of Passion Week, riding on a donkey, welcomed by cheering crowds, the people of Jerusalem don't know what to make of it. Over many centuries, they thought they had seen it all, and they had until Jesus showed up that day.

They had never seen anything like that.

The translators handle the city's reaction in different ways. Jerusalem was

Stirred,
Excited,
Moved,
Shaken,
Trembling,
In an uproar,
In turmoil,
In shock,
Unnerved.

What would happen today if Jesus came to London or Paris or Singapore or Delhi or Lagos or Rio or Berlin? Would those cities experience a similar reaction? What if Jesus came to Chicago or Miami or Honolulu or Houston or Boston? Would anyone notice? I'm sure someone would do a selfie with Jesus and post it on Instagram. Someone else would tweet reactions from the crowd and compare it with reactions to Adele's concert in New York: "Adele wows crowd, reaction to Jesus divided." Both parts of that statement would be true.

The vast crowds in Jerusalem had gathered for the Passover. But as rumors about this rabbi from Nazareth swept the narrow streets, everyone had a theory. He was a good man; he was a fraud. He worked miracles; he faked it somehow. His followers understood him; they were deluded. Could he be the Messiah? That's crazy talk. Why did he ride a donkey? Why did the people say, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord?"

What can we learn from this citywide curiosity about Jesus? For one thing, it reminds us there is a God-shaped vacuum in every human heart. People want to know the God who made them, and nothing apart from God will ever fill that vacuum in the heart.

In that moment, crystallized in time, an entire city was thinking about Jesus. His destiny (and theirs) hung in the balance. That moment would not come again. It was a biblical “Day of Visitation” when God revealed himself in a powerful way to his people. In this case, he sent his own Son who entered the city as King Jesus.

On Sunday the city was transfixed by the man from Galilee.
On Friday he was crucified outside the city walls.

When Jesus came, God was “visiting” his people. He showed himself in word and in deed to be the mighty Son of God from heaven, the long-awaited Messiah. But his own people would not listen to him.

They could have known. They should have known.
There is a message for those with ears to hear.

If we do not respond to God’s call, we will one day face his judgment.
If we brush aside his blessings, we will answer for it eventually.
If we think we have forever to say yes to Jesus, one day we will be rudely surprised.

It’s good to think about Jesus. It’s better to follow him.
It’s good to be excited about him. It’s better to commit your life to him.

One day long ago, a great city trembled with excitement when Jesus came to town. They even asked the right question: “Who is this?” But they never cared enough to discover the right answer.

Spiritual excitement is good, but only if it leads you to the truth.

Lord God, grant that our excitement may be matched by a desire to know the truth, lest we get stirred up and somehow miss Jesus altogether. Amen.

Musical bonus: Out of Eden puts a new melody to the traditional hymn [My Faith Has Found a Resting Place](#).

Day 10

The Magnetic Christ

“Now among those who went up to worship at the feast were some Greeks. So these came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and asked him, ‘Sir, we wish to see Jesus’” (John 12:20-21)

You never know who’s going to show up for a party.

In this case, some Greeks showed up in Jerusalem for the Passover Feast. In our day, that would mean “men from Greece,” and it could mean that in this case. But in New Testament times, the term “Greeks” covered all the non-Jews, i.e. the Gentiles. These aren’t Greek Jews who came for the big event. They are Gentiles from who knows where who have come to Jerusalem to join in the worship. That probably puts them in the category of Gentiles who became Jewish converts or perhaps they were “God-fearers” (like Cornelius in Acts 10) who offered prayers to God and showed kindness to the poor.

Why did they want to see Jesus?

No doubt they were fully aware of the ruckus Jesus created when he cleansed the temple. We know the whole city was talking about him. If Twitter had existed back then, #WhoisJesus would have been a trending hashtag. Who was this man who could walk on water, heal the sick, and raise the dead?

The Greeks couldn’t be sure how Jesus would receive them. That’s why they approached Philip who told Andrew and together they told Jesus. We don’t know if Jesus ever met the Greeks in person because they aren’t mentioned again. But Jesus uses the occasion to announce the time of his death has come. Then he illustrates what must happen. As a seed must die in the ground to bring forth much fruit, so Jesus must die so many will believe in him. He adds a fascinating prediction in verse 32, **“I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.”** He is thinking of his coming death on the cross. Certainly these unnamed Greeks were included in the “all people.” Even before the cross we see the magnetic power of Christ.

German Theologian Rudolf Stier explained the significance of these Greeks coming to Jesus:

“These men from the *West* represent, at the end of Christ’s life, what the wise men from the *East* represented at its beginning.”

You never know when Magi will show up in Bethlehem looking for the King of the Jews, and you never know when Greeks will show up in Jerusalem looking for Jesus.

This should give us hope for our friends and loved ones. We can't know what other people are thinking. If we could see the hearts of our loved ones, we would discover the Holy Spirit is at work even though today they seem far from Jesus.

Don't despair.
Don't stop praying.

One final note. Many years ago I listened to Dr. Lee Roberson preach the gospel at Highland Park Baptist Church in Chattanooga, Tennessee. On the pulpit, just above where he placed his Bible and notes, there was a little plaque that said, "Sir, We would see Jesus." He put it there to remind himself (and anyone else who might preach there) of the preacher's sacred obligation to magnify Christ in all things.

There are hungry hearts everywhere. You never know when someone will show up looking for Jesus. Make sure you know how to help them find him.

Lord Jesus, thank you for opening the door of heaven to anyone who believes in you. Give me faith to keep praying for my friends who do not yet know you. Amen.

Musical bonus: Al Denson reminds us that many people, more than we think, say [Take Me to the Cross](#).

Day 11

Little Ones to Him Belong

“When the chief priests and the scribes saw the wonders that He did and the children shouting in the temple complex, *Hosanna* to the Son of David! they were indignant”
(Matthew 21:15).

Jesus loved children, and children loved him.
But not everyone loves Jesus, and some people find children a bother.

When the religious leaders heard the children shouting “Hosanna to the Son of David!” they wanted Jesus to do something about it. In one sense, you couldn’t blame them. Everything was spinning out of control. First, Jesus enters the city on a donkey. Second, everyone in Jerusalem is talking about him. Third, he creates a ruckus when he throws out the money-changers. Fourth, he starts healing people. Fifth, the children start praising him.

Behind the scenes, the leaders have already decided Jesus must die. But they didn’t want to start a riot in the process. They needed a way to kill him without turning Jerusalem into a war zone. What they need is a plan of action. We’re still very early in the Passion Week. In a few days, one of Jesus’ top men will defect. That will give them the opening they need. But for the moment, somebody needs to do something about these children and their infernal racket!

I pause to note how sin messes up the religious mind.

They should have welcomed Jesus; instead they wanted to kill him.
They should have thanked him for cleansing the temple; instead it infuriated them.
They should have praised him for healing the sick; instead it rattled them because they couldn’t deny it and they couldn’t stop it.
They should have joined with the children; instead they wanted Jesus to rebuke them.

This little episode fits perfectly with what we know about Jesus and children from other passages. When parents brought their children to Jesus, the boys and girls were not afraid of him. He picked them up in his arms, put his hands on them, and blessed them. Little children are smarter than we think. They know when they are loved, and they respond with love to those who love them. No wonder children flocked to him. No wonder parents loved him.

When the religious leaders wanted Jesus to make the children stop shouting “Hosanna to the Son of David” (a Messianic title), he not only refused, he quoted Psalm 8:2, **“You have prepared praise from the mouths of children and nursing infants.”** In context it means God uses the praise of the weak to drown out the insults of his enemies. *The Message* puts it this way:

Nursing infants gurgle choruses about you; toddlers shout the songs that drown out enemy talk, and silence atheist babble.

Some people mock the faith of a child. That is a terrible thing to do. Some cast doubt and make jokes as if only adults can believe in Jesus. How sad, how tragic, how truly evil that we should make fun of God's little children.

Here is the ultimate irony. Though the religious leaders did not rebuke the money-changers for polluting the temple, they decided to pick on the most vulnerable target of all—little children. But Jesus sides with the children.

Stop them—no!
Jesus loved to hear children singing.

The world is wrong about Jesus and wrong about children. God bless boys and girls who love Jesus and are not ashamed of him.

As Jesus himself said in Matthew 19:14, **“Of such is the kingdom of heaven.”**

*Spirit of God, give us the simple faith of a child that we too might sing the praises of Jesus.
Amen.*

Musical bonus: Joey+Rory bring a country flair to [Jesus Loves Me](#).

Day 12

Jesus Receives A Compliment from His Enemies

“Then the Pharisees went out and laid plans to trap him in his words. They sent their disciples to him along with the Herodians” (Matthew 22:15-16).

Twenty years ago my older brother took me to visit a cemetery outside Florence, Alabama, near the remains of an antebellum mansion called Forks of Cypress. The mansion was built in 1830 by James Jackson, an early settler of northwest Alabama. My brother and I walked among the ruins of the mansion and then crossed the country road into the dense forest on the other side. After a quarter-mile, we found the Jackson family cemetery. There was no sign marking the spot—only a five-foot-high stone wall surrounding about fifty graves. Inside we found a tall marker over James Jackson’s grave with a long inscription extolling his virtues, which were many.

As I walked along, my eyes fastened on the marker of one of his sons. There was a name, a date of birth and a date of death, and a five-word epitaph: “A man of unquestioned integrity.”

Five words to sum up an entire life. Sixty-plus years distilled into five words. But what truth they tell.

“A man of unquestioned integrity.” I cannot think of a better tribute.

In the Bible one man stands out above all the others as the preeminent example of integrity—Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. He was the only truly blameless person who ever walked this earth. All the other great men had their weak points. But not Jesus. No one could pin an accusation on him to make it stick. Not even his enemies.

Matthew 22:16 tells us how his opponents sized up his character in the last few days of his life. The statement comes from the Pharisees who **“laid plans to trap him in his words”** (verse 15). They sent some of their well-trained disciples to trick him with semantics. Ponder carefully their opening remarks: **“Teacher, we know you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You aren’t swayed by men, because you pay no attention to who they are.”**

This isn’t just a compliment. *It’s an honest evaluation of Jesus by men who intended to murder him.* What does Integrity involve?

· Reputation: **“We know”**

- Commitment to truth:
 - In words: **“You teach the way of God.”**
 - In relationships: **“You aren’t swayed by men.”**
- Consistent lifestyle: **“You pay no attention to who they are.”**

Even as they attempted to trip him up, Christ’s enemies had to confess that his reputation, his commitment to truth, and his consistent lifestyle made him a man of integrity.

Why is this important? If Jesus had any skeletons in his closet, this was the moment to display them publicly. But they didn’t because they couldn’t because Jesus was exactly what he seemed to be. His life matched his lips; his deeds matched his words; his character backed up his claims.

That’s what integrity is all about.

We hear a lot these days about family values and the need to rediscover virtue in American society. But the basic building blocks of virtue are very simple. We’ve known them all along: honesty, perseverance, faithfulness, kindness, loyalty, self-control. The problem isn’t in the knowing—it’s in the doing.

My mind wanders back to a forgotten tombstone and those five simple words; “A man of unquestioned integrity.” I’m not sure what anyone will write on my tombstone. But I wouldn’t mind if someone felt I deserved those five words.

It’s a noble goal for all of us.

Lord, help me to live so no one will be surprised to find out I’m a Christian. Amen.

Musical bonus: Listen as the St. Michael’s Singers challenge us to [Lift High the Cross](#).

Day 13

Render to Caesar—and to God!

“Therefore give back to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s” (Matthew 22:21).

No one likes paying taxes.

We’ll start there because that’s where the Pharisees and the Herodians started. It helps to know these two groups didn’t like each other, but they both wanted Jesus dead. Because most Jews hated the Romans and hated paying the taxes the Romans imposed, the Pharisees and Herodians came up with a question for Jesus that was meant to trap him.

Here’s the question: “Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar?” It’s tricky because if Jesus says no, he wins popular approval, but the Herodians will report him to Rome as a revolutionary, bringing swift reprisal from the army. If he says yes, he satisfies Rome but loses face with the masses who hated their Roman overlords.

Jesus doesn’t directly answer the question. Instead, he asks his questioners for a coin. The Roman denarius had the image of Emperor Tiberius on the front with the inscription, “Tiberius, Caesar Augustus, Son of the Divine Augustus.” On the reverse was “Pontifex Maxim,” meaning “High Priest” of the ancient Roman religions. Besides being a monetary unit, it also promoted idolatry because it deified the Roman emperor.

Since Rome issued the coin with the emperor’s image, it meant the emperor “owned” that money. The same is true today. An American \$5 bill has a portrait of Abraham Lincoln, meaning it is legal tender issued by the government. I happen to have a handful of bills in my wallet right now. None of them have my picture. If I tried to pass off bills with my image as real money, I would soon be arrested for counterfeiting.

Jesus’ answer has two parts:

- 1. Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar.** Jesus seems to be saying, “Look at the coin. Caesar’s image means the coins belong to him. Give him what he demands,” which means “Pay your taxes.”
- 2. Give to God what belongs to God.** We can understand this properly by asking, “Whose image do we bear?” Just as the Roman denarius was stamped with the image of Caesar, we have been stamped with the image of God. He made us, he owns us, and we owe our life to him.

There is a deeper sense in which Jesus is saying, "You need to decide what matters most. If Caesar wants money, give him money, but Caesar is not God. Pay your taxes, but do not forget your higher allegiance." The Lord wants to make sure we "give to God what belongs to God." He's not just talking about money. We owe the Lord everything. We must not hold back on him.

The familiar hymn [Take My Life and Let It Be](#) shows us the true application. In successive verses, the song says:

Take my Life.
Take my Hands.
Take my voice.
Take my silver and my gold.
Take my will.

And then finally,

Take my love; my Lord, I pour
at thy feet its treasure store.
Take myself, and I will be
ever, only, all for thee,
ever, only, all for thee.

If we follow that progression, we will always end up in the right place. We will take all we have and give it gladly to the Lord, and we will be "ever, only, all for thee."

No wonder they were amazed and could not answer him. His words hit too close to home.

Will you give to God what belongs to him?

My Lord, when I am tempted to hold back, may I remember that you never held back but gave yourself for me. Please help me live ever, only, all for you. Amen.

Day 14

The Sadducees Ask a Trick Question

“At the resurrection whose wife will she be, since the seven were married to her?” (Luke 20:33)

Talk about a run of bad luck.

A woman marries a man who dies leaving her with no children to carry on the family name. So along comes the younger brother who marries her and then dies leaving her with no children. Then another brother and another one and another, until she has married all seven brothers who all managed to die leaving her childless.

And the natural question is, “Whose wife will she be in the resurrection?”

It’s hard not to laugh out loud when you read that story, which is exactly the point the Sadducees wished to make. They concocted a ridiculous example to show the absurdity (to them) of the whole idea of a resurrection of the dead. But Jesus turns the tables on them by saying, in effect, “Fellows, you’ve got it all wrong. You think the next age will be nothing but a continuation of this age. But it’s not. The rules that govern this age don’t govern the next age.”

Jesus then goes to the deeper point that God is not the God of the dead but of the living (Luke 20:38). He adds a wonderful phrase, **“For to him all are alive.”** Here we have the truth underlying the Christian belief in the resurrection of the dead. *God will raise the dead because he cannot fail to keep his promise.* He who calls himself “the God of the living” will not leave his people in the grave. Our hope for the future rests not in science, not in speculation, not in some proof text, but in the character of God himself.

If he is our God and we are his people, death is not the end of the story. *A better day, a brighter day, a glorious day of resurrection awaits all the people of God.* In the meantime, between now and then, we go to be with the Lord. This is what Paul meant when he said, **“To die is gain”** (Philippians 1:21). Not even death can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

When death comes to us, we can know this much for certain. The Lord who has been with us throughout our earthly journey will not abandon us when we need him most.

If you want to know the truth about life after death, there are only two ways to be sure:

- 1) See for yourself. All of us will do that eventually.**
- 2) Take the testimony of someone who knows.**

This is where the words of Jesus take on life-changing power. He's been there, he entered the realm of death, he experienced it fully, he was as dead as anyone has ever been. On the third day he came back from the dead, never to die again. We have the authoritative word of the Son of God who emerged from the grave with the keys of death and Hades in his hand. Because of Jesus, we are not left to wonder what happens when we die. Death cannot change our relationship with God because he is not the God of the dead but of the living.

Those who know Jesus have entered into a relationship that even death cannot sever. *Our hope for the future is as secure as the promises of God.* For the Christian, death is not the end but the beginning of life forever with the Lord.

Lord Jesus, you have defeated death once and for all. We look forward to that wonderful day when the dead in Christ will rise immortal and incorruptible. Even so, Come, Lord Jesus. Amen.

Musical bonus: In 1941 Merrill Dunlop wrote a hymn based on Isaiah 53. The last verse seems especially appropriate for today's devotional. Let's listen to the Sixteen Singing Men perform [He Was Wounded](#).

Day 15

The Widow and Her Mites

“This poor widow has put in more than all those giving to the temple treasury” (Mark 12:43).

Let’s get one thing straight. It’s “mites” plural, not the widow’s mite, as some people say. The term itself comes from the King James Version, which used “mites” to translate the Greek word *lepta*, a term that referred to a tiny coin worth almost nothing at all. If she had dropped in one coin, it would be a *lepton*, but she put in two coins, thus the plural term *lepta*.

Does that matter?

Yes and no. It doesn’t matter in the sense that this poor widow had almost nothing to start with, so it’s the difference between putting one penny versus two pennies in the offering plate. Either way, you can’t meet your budget with one penny or with two.

It’s also true we often favor the rich over the poor. That was a problem in the early church when the ushers would give the man with a gold ring the best seat in the house while making the homeless fellow stand in the back (see James 2:1-10). Big gifts impress us because we can do so much more with \$5 million than with \$5.

And, really, what good is 2 pennies?

But Jesus sees it differently. Don’t miss the fact that Jesus sat down across from the temple treasury and watched as the people came with their offerings. Jesus pays attention to who gives and when and where and why. Those things matter to him.

Think about this. Jesus not only knows how much we give; he also notices how much we keep for ourselves. He’s not impressed when a man worth \$100 million makes a \$5 million gift. In Jesus’ eyes, he didn’t give as much as the widow who gave two tiny coins.

He gave out of his surplus.
She gave out of her poverty.

Here comes this poor widow. She is about 60, maybe 5’4”, body worn from long years of labor, dressed in a simple hand-sewn smock. As she approaches the treasury, she clutches two pennies in her hand. It is the smallest copper coin in Judea, worth almost nothing. It’s all the money she has. She throws the coins in the mouth of the receptacle. They make a tiny clink when they hit the bottom. Quickly she turns to go away. No one speaks to her. She’s just another widow. In a moment, she is gone. No one notices her.

No one except Jesus.

In his eyes, her gift was bigger than all the rich people who brought their coins to the temple that day. No doubt his words shocked the disciples. No one but Jesus could have made that judgment. A great mind-reader . . . and a great heart-reader . . . was in the temple that day. He saw the gifts, and he judged the givers.

Jesus turns the values of the world upside down. We look at the outside; God judges the heart. We look at the amount on the check; Jesus looks at what it cost us to make the gift.

In his eyes, a rich man who gives a million dollars matters very little. But a widow who gives away her last two pennies earns his praise. In her act, Jesus saw a moving display of the true spirit of sacrifice. There is a lesson here for all of us. Our money is best used when we give it away.

Lord, forgive me for hoarding what you have given me. Help me to be generous with my time, my talent, and my treasure. Amen.

Musical Bonus: Steven Curtis Chapman reminds us that [My Redeemer is Faithful and True](#).

Day 16

The Judas in All of Us

“What are you willing to give me if I hand him over to you?” So they weighed out 30 pieces of silver for him” (Matthew 26:15).

With this entry, our series on “Faces Around the Cross” takes a turn in a new direction. From here on out, our focus will be solely on events surrounding the death of Christ.

It is now Wednesday of Passion Week. The whole city of Jerusalem is in turmoil over this man called Jesus. Who is he? Where did he come from? How does he work his miracles? And the greatest question—Is he really the promised Messiah, as some say?

Meanwhile, the religious leaders bide their time, looking for an opportunity to arrest him. Filled with hatred and envy, they have already decided Jesus must die. Getting rid of Jesus would keep the peace and also rid them of a man they cannot control and cannot defeat. But how will they do it?

Enter Judas, the most mysterious of all the disciples of Jesus.

As far as we can tell, Judas saw all the miracles Jesus performed. He was in the boat when Jesus calmed the storm. He saw Jesus turn water into wine. He helped pick up the leftovers after Jesus fed the 5000 with five loaves and two fish. He must have been standing there when Lazarus came out of the tomb. Not only that, he heard Jesus give the Sermon on the Mount. He listened to his parables. Judas was there when Peter said, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

He heard it all.

He saw it all.

He walked with Christ every day.

He was one of Jesus’ handpicked men.

He knew the Son of God personally.

Make that list as long as you like. Add one other fact. *No one ever suspected him.* Peter never said to John, “Hey, Judas seems a little shifty to me.” Bartholomew evidently never wondered about his motives. James never suspected he was pilfering from the money bag. As late as the Last Supper, when Jesus predicted someone would betray him, no one pointed at Judas and said, “He’s a traitor.”

We'll have more to say about Judas in the days to come. But for the moment, let's focus on the fact no one suspected him. What happened to him could happen to me. What he did, I could do. If I think otherwise, then I have missed the point of this story. Judas is a lot like us, and we're a lot like him. In fact, the more religious we are, the more like Judas we are. After all, you can't get much more religious than being an apostle. He was as "in" as any person could ever be.

And yet he betrayed the Lord.

Is Judas alive today? No, but his spirit still lives in all those who play the religious game. It lives in those who come to church for what they can get out of it. It lives in all those who are pretending a commitment to Jesus Christ that isn't real in their hearts. It lives in all those who just go through the Christian motions. It lives in those who come to church, give their money, follow the rules, and yet don't love the Lord Jesus.

There's a little Judas in all of us. If we think anything different, then we're more like Judas than we know.

Spirit of God, search my heart and reveal any false way within me. May my Christian profession be matched by genuine love for Jesus. Amen.

Musical bonus: Francesca Battistelli offers a prayer we can all share: [Lead me to the Cross](#).

Day 17

Peter's Feet

“You will never wash my feet—ever!” (John 13:8)

Feet stink when they are dirty.

That's a human fact, not a cultural observation. After a long, hard day, your feet have absorbed a pounding. If you wear sandals, they have been exposed to dirt everywhere. If your feet are in socks, they are likely to be sweaty. And then you have all the usual foot problems--ingrown nails, corns, calluses, cracked heels, and for some people, fungus of various kinds.

In those days you normally washed your own feet after the host offered you a basin of water. You knelt down, removed your sandals, washed your feet, and then dried them with a towel. If a man had servants, they might be delegated to do the job for you. This was the mark of high achievement in society: that servants washed the feet of your guests. *But under no circumstances would the host wash the feet of his guests.* The master would never stoop so low as to wash the feet of those beneath him.

Slaves washed feet.
Masters never did.

That's why Peter is shocked when Jesus stoops down and begins to wash the feet of his disciples. Everything was upside down! They should be washing *his* feet; he shouldn't be washing *theirs*.

Jesus came to a world of dirty feet.

Our journey through life is much dirtier than we think. You never know what you might step in that will leave you defiled and unclean. We don't like to think about that, but it is true. No matter how hard we may try to stay clean, we are all dirtier than we think, and we end each day dirtier than when we started.

That's why Jesus told Peter that although he was clean already, he still needed to have his feet washed. **“A person who has had a bath needs only to wash his feet”** (v. 10). Two different words are used here—one meaning a complete bath and the other meaning to wash something. *Coming to Christ is like taking a bath.* We are made clean as our sin is washed away. But we still need daily cleansing.

When we come to Christ, the guilt of our sin is removed forever. Because we live in a dirty world, we need cleansing every day.

Regeneration cannot be repeated.
Cleansing must be repeated.

Think about the course of your life over the last 24 hours:

You have said things you ought not to have said.
You have responded unkindly or too quickly.
You have done things you ought not to have done.
You have left undone acts of mercy.
You have not been perfect, nor have I.

That's why we need what Jesus offers. We need to be cleansed again every day. We need salvation that takes away the guilt of sin and provides for daily cleansing. *Jesus fits us for heaven, he removes the guilt of sin, and he daily cleanses us from every sin when we call on him (1 John 1:9).* Through his bloody death on the cross, Christ provides all we need, now and forever.

We are great sinners who need a great Savior. We have one in Jesus Christ, who stooped so low that he was not ashamed to wash our dirty feet.

Lord Jesus, thank you for your blood that washes my sin away. I ask you to wash my dirty feet so I might walk closely with you today. Amen.

Musical bonus: Selah performs a moving version of [How Deep the Father's Love](#).

Day 18

Selling Out the Son of God

“Judas Iscariot, who also betrayed Him” (Mark 3:19).

When the gospel writers give us their accounts of Jesus’ final days, two men take center stage: Peter and Judas. In every New Testament list of the twelve apostles, Peter is always first, Judas always last. They are forever joined by the fact they both failed grievously and in very public ways.

But only one man was restored.
The other man went to hell.

Let’s focus for a moment on Judas. Consider his experience leading up to his betrayal:

- He was personally chosen to be an apostle by Jesus Christ.**
- He forsook all to follow the Lord.**
- He spent 3 1/2 years traveling the length and breadth of Israel with Christ.**
- He saw all the miracles of Christ in person.**
- He heard Christ give his famous discourses.**
- He watched as Christ healed the sick, raised the dead, and cast out demons.**
- He was sent out to preach the gospel along with the other apostles.**
- He was one of the leaders of the apostolic band.**
- No one ever suspected him of treason.**

In terms of experience, whatever you can say about the other apostles, you can say also about Judas. Everywhere they went, he also went. He was right there, always by the side of Jesus. He heard it all, saw it all, experienced it all. However you explain his defection, you cannot say he was less experienced than the other apostles.

It is now A.D. 65. Thirty years and more have passed since the crucifixion of Jesus. Matthew sits down to write his gospel. When he comes to list the names of the apostles, he begins "Peter, James, John" and then the others. Judas is last, always. But never just "Judas" but "Judas who betrayed him." When Mark writes his gospel, it is the same: "Judas who betrayed him." When Luke writes his gospel, it is the same: "Judas who betrayed him." Then 30 years after that, John—by now in his 80s or 90s—writes his gospel. He called him "Judas who was later to betray him."

They never got over what happened. The passage of time did not dim the enormity of his crime. It was as heinous to them in their old age as it had been when they were young.

When you get right down to it, Judas should have been a better man or a worse man. If he had been better, he would not have done such an evil thing. If he had been worse, he would not have felt such remorse. As it was, he was bad enough to do the deed and good enough to be unable to bear the guilt of it.

What would it take for you to sell out the Son of God?

Would you betray him for money?

Would you betray him for a better job?

Would you betray him to keep the job you have?

Would you betray him to save your own skin?

Would you betray to save your family?

Would you betray him because he didn't live up to your expectations?

Would you betray him if you thought you could win the favor of important people?

These are searching questions that may be easier to ask than to answer. I ask you not to take them lightly. The one main lesson from Judas' life is lost unless we at least ask ourselves the questions.

My Lord, I pray for a faith so real and so deep that it cannot be bought or sold for any price. Amen.

Musical bonus: Here's an acapella version of [In Christ Alone](#) by the group Eli Eli.

Day 19

Bickering at the Last Supper

“Then a dispute also arose among them about who should be considered the greatest” (Luke 22:24).

This may be the strangest episode of all.

It’s not that the disciples were bickering. That happens all the time. Get a group of people together—any group of men or women—and soon they will start jockeying for position. We live in a dog-eat-dog world. You’ve got to look out for number one, climb to the top of the heap, and don’t look back because someone might be gaining on you.

Somewhere I picked up a cartoon that shows a man driving on the expressway. The caption reads, “At 20, I couldn’t wait to get on the road. At 30, I learned how to go from 0 to 60 in eight seconds. At 40 I found that I’d been holding the map upside down and at 50, I discovered I had the wrong map altogether.”

That’s the story of an entire generation. My generation. The Baby Boomers. We were told, “Get up early, work hard, climb to the top, step on people if you have to, look out for number one, do it now.” Then when we got going about 150 miles an hour, we found out, to our utter dismay, the map was upside down. What we were looking for was in exactly the opposite direction.

So here are the disciples, gathered with the Lord in the Upper Room. In just a few hours, Jesus will be denied, betrayed, tried, beaten, scourged, humiliated, and then crucified. What do the disciples do? They start arguing about who among them is the greatest. But that’s not the worst of it.

This argument about “Who’s the greatest?” breaks out after Jesus shares the bread and the cup with his men. That’s almost unbelievable.

Or maybe not.

Holy moments only last so long. Soon enough the flesh rears its ugly head. We do the same thing when we leave a worship service deeply moved by a sense of God’s presence and then get into an argument in the car on the way home. As James 3:9-10 reminds us, with the same tongue we bless God and we curse others. How quickly we turn from holiness to bitterness, from gentleness to contention. We pray and recite our memory verses, then we wound those we love most with unkind words.

Rather than indict the apostles, I simply observe how human they are. After sharing in the sacred emblems of the body and blood of Jesus, they begin to bicker about who is the greatest among them.

J. C. Ryle has an apt word about this sad state of affairs:

At this very season, the last quiet time they could spend with their Master before His death, this little flock begins a dispute, as to who should be the greatest! Such is the heart of man, ever weak, ever deceitful, ever ready, even at its best times, to turn aside to what is evil.

He goes on to note that thousands who consider themselves humble cannot bear to see another promoted ahead of them. We should instead remember what John the Baptist said about his influence compared to Jesus' influence: "**He must increase, and I must decrease**" (John 3:30).

If we truly want to be like Jesus, then we will take his words to heart: "**I am among you as one who serves**" (Luke 22:27). Rather than rebuke them for their selfish ambition, he calls them to a higher standard.

This story makes me think of these words from a beloved spiritual:

"It's me, it's me, O Lord, standing in the need of prayer
Not my brother, not my sister, but it's me, O Lord,
Standing in the need of prayer."

Lord Jesus, when I am tempted to claim a higher place, remind me that you weren't ashamed to become a servant and wash my dirty feet. Amen.

Musical bonus: Sam Robson helps us focus on Christ with his rendition of [Be Thou My Vision](#).

Day 20

The Other Judas

“Judas (not Iscariot) said to Him, ‘Lord, how is it You’re going to reveal Yourself to us and not to the world?’” (John 14:22)

Talk about a tough break.

Judah was the name of one of the sons of Jacob in the Old Testament. He became the founder of the tribe of Judah, from which the Messiah (Christ) would be born. In Jewish circles, Judah was a very good name. That’s why lots of parents in the first century named their sons Judah.

But there’s a catch. The name Judah is pronounced Judas in Greek.

Did you know there were two apostles named Judas? We know about Judas Iscariot who betrayed the Lord. But there was another Judas in the apostolic band. In Acts 1:13 he is called Judas the son of James. But when John wrote his gospel, he simply called him “Judas (not Iscariot).”

That’s what I mean by a tough break.

You followed Jesus for 3 ½ years, you walked the dusty roads of Galilee and Judea, you saw the miracles and heard the teaching. You were there when the religious leaders accused Jesus of being in league with the devil. When so many others left, you stayed with the Lord because you believed in him. You were in the crowd during that midnight melee on the Mount of Olives when the bad Judas betrayed the Lord. You didn’t betray Jesus with a kiss. It was the other guy.

Now you’re stuck with a good name dragged through the mud by the treacherous act of the only Judas most of us know about. But that’s not fair because the “other Judas” was a righteous man who never betrayed Jesus. History suggests that in later years he took the gospel into the region of Mesopotamia.

John 14:22 gives us the only recorded words of the other Judas: **“Lord, how is it you’re going to reveal Yourself to us and not to the world?”** When Christ was on the earth, the only way to know him was in person. But when he left, he sent the Holy Spirit to indwell each believer.

We are not orphans.

Jesus did not leave us alone.

Here is a wonderful promise. You can know the Lord, and he can be at home in your heart every single day. The heart has a living room, a dining room, a bedroom, a kitchen, a computer room,

a TV room, many closets, and an attic. Too many believers keep Christ in the entryway, as if to say, “Jesus, I’ve got you in the door. Now stay there and don’t bother the rest of my life.” But the Lord wants to enter every room. He wants to enter your kitchen, your bedroom, your library, your TV room, your computer room, and he wants access to every closet and even to the “attic” of your heart. As long as you keep the doors locked, he can never be “at home” in your heart. And you will never be happy as a Christian.

The question is not, “How much of the Lord do I have?” but rather, “How much of me does the Lord have?” Until Christ is at home in your heart, he will always seem like a stranger to you even though he lives in you.

He’s not just watching me; he’s with me.

He’s not just with me; he’s in me.

He’s not just a visitor; he’s at home in my heart.

This is a wonderful truth, and we have the “other Judas” to thank for asking the question in the first place.

O Christ, come in and make yourself at home in my heart today. Amen.

Musical bonus: Let’s listen as Bart Millard sings [Down at the Cross](#).

Day 21

When Did Satan Enter Judas?

“Jesus replied, ‘Did I not choose you twelve—and one of you has the devil in his heart?’”
(John 6:70 Phillips).

Jesus always knew the truth about Judas.

We know that because Jesus told his disciples in John 6 that one of them was “a devil” or “the devil” or as J. B. Phillips renders it, has “the devil in his heart.” Two things are noteworthy about that revelation. First, it takes place six months before the cross, and second, when he says it, the other apostles have no idea he’s talking about Judas.

We don’t know everything we would like to know about Judas and his motives. We don’t know if he signed up with bad intentions. Or did he become disillusioned along the way? Did he expect Jesus to overthrow Rome and liberate the Jews? We don’t have to assume Judas signed up with the intention of betraying Jesus. We only know he never believed in Jesus the way the others did, and yet he managed to hide his true feelings for all those long weeks and months and years the apostles spent together.

On two separate occasions we read that Satan “entered” Judas. Luke 22:3 says Satan entered Judas just before he approached the chief priests to offer to betray Jesus. John 13:27 says Satan entered Judas just after he took the bread at the Last Supper and just before he left to lead the chief priests to find Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane.

What can we conclude from this? *First, his heart was never right.* He never truly believed. Whatever his original motives for following Jesus, his heart grew hard and dark and cold. *Second, his unbelief made him a prime target for Satan.* Unbelief opens the door to all manner of sin. First we question, then we doubt, then we choose not to believe, and then we find ourselves falling into deep sin. I heard Chuck Swindoll quote these words:

“Sin will take you farther than you want to go,
keep you longer than you want to stay,
and cost you more than you want to pay.”

On the day Judas signed up, he would have bristled at the suggestion that one day he would betray Jesus with a kiss. But that’s where he ended up, which makes his story all the more tragic.

It didn’t have to end that way.
It never does.

Satan could not “enter” him unless Judas had left the door wide open. His anger, his greed, and his disillusionment all conspired to make him an easy target for the devil. It’s not like Satan is omnipotent. He’s not. He’s more like a burglar prowling through a neighborhood, trying one door after another until he finds one the owner forgot to lock. Why break in through the back door when you can stroll in through the front door?

I started by asking the question, When did Satan enter Judas? Certainly the devil entered him twice near the end to provoke him to betray the Lord. But in a deeper sense, Satan had his man all along.

Judas was the easiest target he ever had.

We should all take a solemn lesson from Judas. Don’t leave the door open for Satan to enter your heart. Please don’t say it could never happen to you. We all say that just before we fall.

Search me and try me, O Lord. Set my heart aflame with true love for you. I pray for your Spirit to burn away the smallest traces of unbelief. Amen.

Musical bonus: King’s Kaleidoscope has given us a contemporary version of [Jesus Paid it All](#).

Day 22

When a Good Man Falls

“Even if all fall away, I will not” (Mark 14:29).

Peter meant every word.
He really believed it.
That’s where we must begin.

It’s easy to make him look bad because we know how this story ends, but give Peter his due. He really meant what he said.

He was boasting . . .
He was overly-optimistic about himself . . .
He was too dismissive of the other disciples . . .
He had no sense of the danger he was in . . .

That’s all very true.

But that’s not where we start. Say what you want about Peter (and there’s a lot to be said), but he was no coward. When trouble came, Peter’s first instinct was to run *toward* the battle and not away from it. Yes, his big mouth got him in trouble, but he’s also the only guy with the courage to get out of the boat. That’s why we don’t talk about “Bartholomew walking on water.” Only Peter was willing to risk it all.

How, then, should we understand his boastful words?

If you had asked Peter six hours earlier to name his strong points, no doubt he would have listed boldness and courage right at the top. He would have said, “Sometimes I put my foot in my mouth, but at least I’m not afraid to speak up. Jesus knows I’ll always be there when he needs me.”

When Satan attacked, it came so suddenly, so swiftly, so unexpectedly the “bold apostle turned to butter.” By himself Peter is helpless. In the moment of crisis, Peter failed at the very point where he pledged to be eternally faithful.

Should this surprise us? After all, why should Satan attack only at the point of your self-perceived weakness? *If you know you have a weakness, that’s the very area you will guard most carefully.* If you know you have a problem with anger or with laziness or with lust or with gluttony, will you not be on your guard lest you fall?

But it is not so with your strengths. You tend to take those areas for granted. You say, "That's not a problem for me. I have other problems, but that area is not really a temptation at all."

Watch out! Put up the red flag! There is danger ahead. When a person takes any area of life for granted, that's the one area Satan is most likely to attack.

It happened to Peter. It will happen to you and me sooner or later.

Never again would Peter brag on himself like he did that night. Never again would he presume to be better than his brothers. Never again would he be so cocky and self-confident. All that was gone forever, part of the price Peter paid for his failure in the moment of crisis.

It is a good thing the Lord allows this to happen to us. By falling flat on our faces, we are forced to admit that without the Lord we can do nothing but fail. The quicker we learn that (and we never learn it completely), the better off we will be. Failure never seems to be a good thing when it happens, but if failure strips away our cocky self-confidence, then failure is ultimately a gift from God.

For Peter, the worst and the best is yet to come. For today, let's remind ourselves not to boast. You're not as strong as you think you are, and neither am I. Peter was a good man who thought too highly of himself, and under pressure he denied the Lord.

Don't let that happen to you.

Lord Jesus, when I am tempted to boast, remind me again of how weak I am. Without you I can do nothing. Amen.

Musical bonus: Sam Robson helps us apply this truth with his version of [I Need Thee Every Hour](#).

Day 23

Good News for the Fallen

“Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers” (Luke 22:31-32).

I don't think Peter understood what Jesus was saying.

A sense of timing may help us here. Let's suppose Jesus said these words in the Upper Room about 10 PM. Peter had no idea what was about to hit him. He didn't know about Gethsemane, the Judas kiss, the arrest, and the trial before Caiaphas. Most of all, he had no idea he was about to deny Christ three times.

Five hours later, he knew what Jesus meant.

Let's note two encouraging facts about the way Jesus treated Peter: **1) He never criticized him and, 2) He never gave up on him.** Jesus knew about Peter's denial long before it happened. He knew what Peter would do, he knew how he would react, and he knew the kind of man Peter would be afterward. That's why he said, “When you have turned back.” Not if ... but when! He knew Peter's heart was good, and he knew after his terrible sin, he would return to the Lord. Isn't that wonderful? *Jesus has more faith in Peter than Peter has in Jesus.* He knew Peter had important work to do - “Strengthen your brothers” - but it couldn't happen without his fall and his restoration to the Lord. It had to happen that way or else Peter would never be fully effective for Christ.

There is an important principle at work here. A bone that is broken often becomes stronger after it is healed. Something in the healing process makes the break point stronger than it was before. The same is true of a rope that breaks. In the hands of a master splicer, the rope once repaired becomes stronger than it was before.

The same thing is true of our failures. *God can touch our broken places and make us stronger than we were before.* Though we fall and fall and fall, and though our faces are covered with the muck and grime of bitter shame, by God's grace we can rise from the field of defeat to march on to new victories.

That's what happened to Peter. His guilt was turned into grace; his shame into sympathy; his failure into faithfulness.

Here is the proof: *Peter did much more for Jesus Christ after his fall than he did before.* Before his fall, he was loud, boisterous and unreliable; afterward, he became a flaming preacher of the

gospel. Before his fall, he was a big talker; afterward, he talked only about what Jesus Christ could do for others. He was the same man, but he was different. He was still Peter through and through, but he had been sifted by Satan, and in the sifting the chaff of his life had been blown away.

Peter still speaks to us today: "If you think you've fallen short, if you feel like you've denied him, look at what happened to me." Do not despair. God still loves you. If God can forgive Peter, he can forgive anybody. He loves you, He always has, and He always will.

There is hope for all of us - the best of us, the worst of us, and the rest of us. If you have fallen, he can pick you up again. If you are broken, he can make you whole again. If you have failed, he can make you useful again. If you have lost your courage, he can give it back to you again.

Take heart and believe the good news. If he did it for Peter, he can do it for you.

Heavenly Father, we thank you that the blood of Jesus is enough for our past, our present, and our future. When we fall, you pick us up because you are the God of second chances. Amen.

Musical bonus: We all share this prayer by the St. Cecilia choir: [Lord, I Want to be a Christian](#).

Day 24

Jesus Speaks to His Men

“You are those who have stood by me in my trials. And I confer on you a kingdom, just as my Father conferred one on me, so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom and sit on thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel” (Luke 22:28-30).

The final act has been set in motion, the die has been cast, all the players are on the stage, the wheels of injustice slowly grind away. Evil times have come. Even now Judas is on his way to betray the Lord Jesus.

But before the final drama unfolds, Jesus says something very significant to his men: **“You are those who have stood by me in my trials.”** He remembered his men had been with him from the beginning. They had seen it all: the good times and the bad, the miracles and the controversies, and when thousands of Sunshine Disciples had left him, these eleven men had stayed by his side. They were not much to look at; they weren’t educated or powerful or eloquent. They didn’t have much to recommend themselves. Maybe we wouldn’t have picked them as part of our support team. They were mostly blue-collar, country types who felt a little uncomfortable in a big city like Jerusalem. They were fishermen and farmers and tax collectors and political zealots. They really didn’t have that much in common.

But thrown together by their allegiance to Jesus Christ, over the years they had become a team. Now their Captain looks at them for the last time and says, “I haven’t forgotten that you stood with me when everyone else ran away. That means a lot to me. I’m going to tell you something you won’t understand right now. But later on, you’ll look back on this moment and remember my words. The day is coming when I will have a kingdom of my own. It’s hard to believe right now, but it’s true. Better days are coming. I won’t forget that you stood by me in my darkest hours. I’ll make it up to you in ways you can’t even imagine. When that day comes, you’ll not regret your faithfulness, just as I have not forgotten it. You will be with me in my kingdom, eating and drinking and ruling the people of Israel. I know that may sound like wishful thinking right now, but don’t forget I told you these things. Nothing means more to me than this: You were with me in the time of my trial.”

Here’s an amazing fact. Even as he speaks these words, Jesus knows that in a few hours all these men will desert him (Mark 14:50). Under enormous pressure, scared and tired and disoriented, they will all scatter when the soldiers arrest Jesus.

He knows that, and he still says, “You stood with me in my hard times.” What a Savior who can honor those who serve him, even when that service is less than perfect.

No one is 100% faithful to Jesus. We all struggle in many ways. We serve a great Savior whose grace covers even our future failures.

Stay faithful today. That's all we can do. No one will ever regret serving Jesus. The rewards are out of this world.

Lord Jesus, thank you for forgiving grace that covers my sin. I pray for enabling grace that I might be faithful to you today. Amen.

Musical bonus: We all need encouragement to stand with Jesus. Let's listen as the Newsboys challenge us with [Guilty](#).

Day 25

The Spirit is Willing But . . .

“Stay awake and pray so that you won’t enter into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak” (Mark 14:38).

It had been a long day.

For that matter, it had been a long week. It started with the big meal in Bethany followed by vast crowds greeting Jesus as he entered Jerusalem followed by all the commotion when he cleaned out the temple followed by days of controversy in the temple precincts. The city was clogged with pilgrims coming to Jerusalem for Passover. Everyone was talking about Jesus, wondering who he was and where he came from. Meanwhile, dark clouds of opposition had gathered round their Master. You couldn’t ignore it. You could sense the hatred, feel the rage, see the faces contorted with anger. Even without being told, they knew *something* was going to happen to Jesus. Something bad. Something horrible. But what it was, they could not say.

Then came the Last Supper on Thursday night when Jesus washed their feet and gave them the shocking news that one of them would betray him. Judas had left, but no one knew where he had gone. Now it is almost midnight in Gethsemane. They have come with Jesus to watch with him as he talks to his Father.

But they were so tired, so weary, so frightened, so confused, so worn out from the pressure that they fell asleep. Thinking about it that way, one could hardly blame them. We all have our breaking point. Fatigue makes cowards of us all. We fight to stay awake, and then we wake up four hours later, dazed and confused.

Against all that, we have these words of Jesus. They are spoken in sorrow, not in anger. If there is rebuke here, it is gentle. Jesus knows what tomorrow must bring. He sees clearly the “cup” he will soon drink. Knowing all that, he urges his disciples to stay awake and pray.

What Jesus said to them, he says to us: “The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak.” We will fight this battle every day until we finally go home to heaven.

But we must fight!

If we sleep when we should stay awake, we ought not be surprised when we find ourselves falling into temptation. Pressure and stress wear us all down, but it is precisely then we must be most vigilant.

“Let us live like men on enemy ground, and be always on our guard” (J. C. Ryle).

This calls for earnest prayer. It is the opposite of sleepiness or laziness or coldness or indifference. Have you ever noticed how easy it is to be distracted when you pray? Just as you bow your head, the phone rings, or you get a text message, or some music distracts you, or you suddenly remember you have to check the roast in the oven. A thousand things come crowding into your mind. Sometimes it seems as if the devil's best work comes when we decide to pray. He unloads his full armory of distractions against us.

Better a short prayer from the heart than a long prayer that puts you to sleep.

Brothers and sisters, let us take to heart the words of Jesus. We need a jolt of spiritual Red Bull to wake us up.

Lord Jesus, help! Our flesh remains so weak. You fought and won the battle. Help us to watch and pray so we might win the battle too. Amen.

Musical bonus: Here's an invitation we all need. Let's listen to [O Come to the Altar](#).

Day 26

Malchus and the Midnight Miracle

“When Jesus’ followers saw what was going to happen, they said, ‘Lord, should we strike with our swords?’ And one of them struck the servant of the high priest, cutting off his right ear” (Luke 22:49-50).

Midnight in Gethsemane.

Jesus has been praying alone. In the distance the disciples can see the flickering lights as a group of soldiers crosses the Kidron Valley. They are led by Judas.

It all happened so quickly. A brief conversation, a hurried kiss on the cheek, the soldiers step forward to take Jesus away. In the confusion and semi-darkness, Peter knows he has to act, has to do something to protect his master. Grabbing his sword, he takes a wild swing, aiming at no one in particular. The sword finds its mark, but not as Peter intended. If he hoped to scare off the soldiers, it didn’t work. If he hoped to inspire the other disciples, that might have worked had not Jesus stepped in.

He lopped off the ear of the high priest’s servant. No doubt the servant fell to the ground and began screaming in pain. Blood must have come spurting out of the hole where his ear had been. The soldiers would have drawn their swords, ready to kill Peter. But before things got out of hand, Jesus touched the servant’s ear, healing it instantly. And just like that, the crisis is over.

But the disciples never forgot it. Years later this midnight miracle shows up in all four gospels. Only John tells us it was Peter who swung the sword and Malchus was the servant’s name. Only Luke tells us Jesus healed his ear.

*Sometimes when you follow Jesus, you have to lose in order to win. That’s what Jesus meant when he said to Peter, “**Put your sword back in its place for all who draw the sword will die by the sword**” (Matthew 26:52). Brute force does not advance Christ’s kingdom. We cannot accomplish God’s work by bullying people into submission. When we try that approach, it may produce short-term results, but it backfires in the end because the appeal to brute force means we don’t really believe in God. *If we did, we wouldn’t try to take matters into our own hands.**

I don’t blame Peter for not fully understanding those words. It’s after midnight, and he is tired, distraught, confused, angry, worn out, upset, and in his despair he wants to do something, anything, that will rescue Jesus.

But Jesus doesn’t need his help.
He doesn’t want to be rescued.

What seems to be the cluttered rush of events turns out to be the plan of God unfolding to bring salvation to the world. When evil seems to be winning, Christ calmly submits, knowing that in the end, God's will must be done.

When Jesus restored Malchus' ear, it was the last miracle of bodily cure Jesus ever wrought. *It reveals the true heart of Jesus.* In this little story we see how Jesus treats his enemies. When they come for him, he does not resist. When they are hurt, he heals them. He receives their attacks and then is led away to die for the very men who are putting him to death. He will not use his divine power to escape their clutches. He only uses his power to heal those who have been hurt by his followers.

What a Christ!

Lord Jesus, teach me to trust you when I am tempted to lash out. Where there is hatred, let me sow love. Amen.

Musical bonus: Alan Jackson offers an upbeat version of the famous gospel song [Power in the Blood](#).

Day 27

Runaway Disciple

"Now a certain young man, having a linen cloth wrapped around his naked body, was following him. They caught hold of him, but he left the linen cloth behind and ran away naked" (Mark 14:51-52).

You don't hear a lot of sermons about this passage.

Mark is the only one who mentions it, which leads many people to suspect he is the young man in question. Mark 14:50 tells us all the disciples deserted him and ran away.

Don't pass over that too quickly. Think about what those words mean:

All the disciples drank the cup at the Last Supper.
All the disciples pledged to die with Jesus.
All the disciples now desert him.

Whoever this young man was, he wasn't one of the eleven remaining apostles. He was an anonymous disciple, a young man who had followed Jesus. We don't know anything else about him. We don't know how he ended up in Gethsemane in the middle of the night. Maybe he saw the line of torches as Judas led the temple police across the Kidron Valley and up the Mount of Olives. Or perhaps he followed Jesus and the apostles after they left the Upper Room.

This was not a good night to be seen with Jesus. In this case, everyone fled. Think about that.

Peter ran away.
John ran away.
Matthew ran away.
They all ran away.

This young man left his robe in the hands of the soldiers, then he too ran away. So now the scene is set. Judas betrays Jesus who is arrested and taken away for trial. But Judas' treachery is magnified by the wholesale desertion of the disciples. As the garden empties in the middle of the night, Jesus stands alone in the midst of his enemies. His friends have deserted him. He now goes alone to face his destiny. This was "the hour" appointed by his Father.

In 1958 Ray Overholt wrote a gospel song called [Ten Thousand Angels](#). Here is the first verse and chorus:

They bound the hands of Jesus in the garden where He prayed;

They led Him thro' the streets in shame.
They spat upon the Savior so pure and free from sin;
They said, "Crucify Him; He's to blame."

Refrain

He could have called ten thousand angels
To destroy the world and set Him free.
He could have called ten thousand angels,
But He died alone, for you and me.

The last line catches the sense of what happened to Jesus: "He died alone for you and me." Many hours later, in the climax of his suffering, he would cry out, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" *This was but a little foretaste of that moment.* First, his friends forsake him. Then the Father turns his back on the Son as he bears the sin of the world.

Perhaps it is good that we don't know the identity of the young man who fled naked into the night. It forces all of us to ask, "Would I desert Jesus too?" The answer is, you never know what you might do under pressure. In a sense, this story illuminates Romans 3:12, "All have turned away."

Left to ourselves, we all turn away from Jesus. But left alone, he does not turn away but walks with steady steps toward the cross.

Too many times I have failed you, O Lord, but you have never failed me. When I abandoned you, you went to the cross for me. Amen.

Day 28

Caiaphas: Close But Not Close Enough

“Now Caiaphas was the one who had advised the Jews that it was expedient for one man to die on behalf of the people” (John 18:14).

He was so close to the truth.

But close is never enough when it comes to Jesus.

Sometime in the early hours of Good Friday, after midnight and before dawn, Jesus stood before Caiaphas, the high priest of the Jewish people. False witnesses testified, but they could not get their stories straight. Jesus remained silent. When Caiaphas asked, “Are you the Christ, the Son of God?” Jesus quoted Daniel 7 in response. Enraged, Caiaphas accused Jesus of blasphemy.

We must not miss the ultimate irony of Caiaphas' story. A week earlier, when word spread Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead, the Sanhedrin met to consider how to handle the "Jesus problem." That's when Caiaphas uttered his most famous line. **“It is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish”** (John 11:50). When John told the story, he adds that Caiaphas said more than he knew because his statement was a prophecy of the death of Christ, how his bloody death would provide salvation for everyone who believes in him. In just one sentence Caiaphas uncovered the heart of the gospel.

One man dies for the many.

The innocent dies for the guilty.

The just dies for the unjust.

The Son of God takes the place of guilty sinners.

Caiaphas was so close to the truth. So close, but not close enough. He was a religious leader who ought to have known that everything in the Old Testament pointed to Christ. *His story proves being a religious leader doesn't guarantee any degree of spiritual enlightenment.* He was so blinded by his hatred of Jesus that he could not see who he really was. He even spoke the truth unknowingly and prophesied what Christ would accomplish by his death.

Let us not think we are immune to the same tragic mistake. *In our zeal to serve God, we may end up opposing him.* Our only hope is to cast ourselves upon the Lord, admit our weakness, and pray for true enlightenment that comes from the Holy Spirit.

And that leaves us with the question the high priest asked his men sometime after 2 AM on Friday morning: "What do you think?" *Caiaphas had every reason to come to the right answer*

to that question, and somehow he missed it. He could have known the truth--and should have known it--because one fateful night in Jerusalem the Truth was standing right in front of him.

That night Jesus stood on trial before Caiaphas--only it wasn't Jesus who was on trial. It was Caiaphas. He stands exposed as a religious leader who feared what he did not understand and hated what he could not control, who condemned to death a man he could not intimidate. When he condemned Jesus, he condemned himself for sacrificing justice in the name of expediency.

Let his story stand as a solemn warning, especially to every religious person reading these words. Jesus is still a problem for the world. He is still on trial in every human heart. Each one of us must choose what we believe about the Man from Galilee. Let us take our stand with Jesus, and the example of Caiaphas will not have been given in vain.

Lord Jesus, I pray for courage to take my stand for you today. Amen.

Musical bonus: Do you feel like singing today? I hope so because we have a video of a vast congregation in Royal Albert Hall in London. Join with them as they sing [Crown Him with Many Crowns](#).

Day 29

Did Judas Repent?

“When Judas, who had betrayed him, saw that Jesus was condemned, he was seized with remorse and returned the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders” (Matthew 27:3).

There are two things perplex us about Judas. **First**, why did he do what he did? **Second**, after he had done it, why did he feel so guilty? He was so evil he sold the Lord Jesus for thirty pieces of silver. Yet afterwards, he felt such remorse that he committed suicide.

Perhaps the place to begin is at the end of the story. It is now early Friday morning in Jerusalem—sometime between midnight and dawn—and the Jews are finished with Jesus. They have had their kangaroo court with their trumped-up charges and their false witnesses. Annas has had a round with Jesus and so has Caiaphas. Their verdict is clear—this man is a blasphemer who deserves to die. The religious leaders set out to take Jesus before Pilate, the Roman governor, because he is the only one who can order Jesus put to death.

In his hands Judas held the little bag containing the thirty pieces of silver. He hadn't even bothered to count it. No one noticed him now. It was like he was yesterday's news. No one had any use for a traitor.

Through the long night he had waited, hanging around the edges of the crowd, listening for some word of how things were going. What exactly did he expect? No one knows for sure. But if at midnight he wanted to see Jesus die, by sunrise he had changed his mind.

He took the bag of money and tried to give it back, but the chief priests laughed at him. They had no more use for him or his money. They had what they wanted.

In desperation, Judas cried out, "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood." Every word was true. *He* had done it; what he had done was the worst *sin* imaginable; he had *betrayed* the Lord Jesus who, though he was *innocent*, was about to pay with his *blood* for Judas' crime.

With that, he threw the money back into the temple, the coins clinking and ringing as they hit the stone pavement. As Judas turned to go, the 30 pieces of silver stayed behind. Judas not only lost his Lord, he also lost his money. Very shortly he would lose his life.

One final question: Does the Bible say Judas ‘repented?’ The older translations do indeed use that word in Matthew 27:3. "Seized with remorse" would be a more accurate rendering. Although Judas was gripped with the wrongness of what he had done, he never asked for forgiveness. There is a world of difference between those two things. Many people who feel

sorry for their sins never come to God and ask for forgiveness. Judas tried to undo his betrayal, but it was too late. I do not doubt he wept bitter tears as he threw the money back into the temple. But his remorse (as sincere as it was) was not true repentance, and it did not lead to forgiveness. It led instead to suicide.

Bitter tears over our stupid mistakes do not substitute for the broken heart that leads to repentance.

Could Judas have repented? Yes.

Did he? No.

John Trapp remarked, "Till we have sinned, Satan is a parasite; when we have sinned, he is a tyrant." Caught by the tyrant, Judas lost everything, including his soul.

Proximity to Jesus cuts both ways. If you spend enough time with Jesus, your heart will grow soft or hard. Judas hardened his heart to the point that he would not repent. He locked the door from the inside and threw away the key.

O Lord, teach me to guard my heart today. Deliver me from evil within and without. Amen.

Musical bonus: If you need some encouragement today, take time to listen to this faith-building performance of [It Is Well with My Soul](#).

Day 30

Peter and Me

Jesus answered, "I tell you, Peter, before the rooster crows today, you will deny three times that you know me." Luke 22:34

Why did Peter deny knowing Jesus?

The answer is not difficult to find. Peter was scared, and he was tired. That doesn't excuse his conduct, but it does make it understandable. After all that had happened, Peter finally ran out of strength.

He never expected to be questioned by a servant girl. Her question caught him totally off-guard, and he blurted out an answer almost without thinking. But once he denied knowing Jesus there was no turning back. He had to play out the string.

I think Peter was ready to die for Christ that night. Just two hours earlier he was whacking off somebody's ear. No, Peter was no coward. He knew the risk involved in going to the courtyard of the high priest. I think (though I cannot prove this) that if Peter had been brought before the high priest, he would have said, "Yes, I am a follower of Jesus" and with a smile on his face, he would have followed his Master to the cross. That's the kind of man he was.

What happened? *He was totally unprepared to be questioned by a servant girl.* She caught him off guard, and he lied about knowing Jesus. But one lie leads to another. As Alexander Maclaren put it, "One sin makes many. The Devil's hounds run in packs."

What happened to Peter was no fluke. He set himself up by a long string of bad decisions. Here are the seven great mistakes he made that night:

- 1. He talked when he should have been listening.**
- 2. He didn't appreciate his own weakness.**
- 3. He ignored Jesus' warning.**
- 4. He followed afar off.**
- 5. He warmed himself at the wrong fire.**
- 6. He was unprepared when the attack came.**
- 7. He compounded his sin by first deceiving, then denying, and finally swearing.**

Peter had no business warming himself in the company of the enemies of the Lord. As one writer puts it, "If his faith had not already frozen, he would not have needed to warm himself by the fire." By consorting with those who arrested Jesus, Peter was placing himself in a

position where he would almost certainly be exposed. He warmed himself by the wrong fire until things got too hot for him.

Peter set himself up for a fall and when it came, it was a big one. “O what a tangled web we weave, when first we practice to deceive.” *It is interesting to note that Peter fooled only himself.* The others never really believed him. They sensed he was lying. Something in his face and the tone of his voice gave him away.

Peter—the “Rock”—crumbled in the critical moment. He denied his Lord not once, but three times. It was a failure he would remember for the rest of his days. As we think of it, let us take to heart the words of 1 Corinthians 10:12, **“So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don’t fall.”**

We make a big mistake if we think we would never do what Peter did. There’s a little Peter in all of us, and a lot of Peter in most of us.

His story reminds us of the danger of talking too much, listening too little, overestimating our strength, and underestimating our weakness. Learn from Peter’s failure so you won’t repeat it.

Lord Jesus, save me from myself. Amen.

Musical bonus: Let’s listen to this acapella arrangement of [Grace Greater Than Our Sin](#).

Day 31

How Jesus Restored Peter

“Then the Lord turned and looked at Peter. So Peter remembered the word of the Lord” (Luke 22:61).

There were four steps in Peter’s return to the Lord:

1. The Rooster’s Crow. The gospels are unanimous on one point. The rooster crowed at the exact moment of Peter’s third denial. As the foul words flew out of his mouth—at that very instant—from somewhere off in the distance a rooster began to crow.

The rooster crowed, and Peter remembered. William Hendriksen put it this way, “This hidden memory will pull the rope that will ring the bell of Peter’s conscience.” Suddenly it all became clear. How rash he had been only six hours earlier, how cocky he had been, how confident of his own strength, how sure of his own abilities. The sound of the rooster meant, “Peter, I warned you this would happen and you didn’t believe me.”

2. The Look of Jesus. Luke’s account of this story contains one detail the others omit. Luke 22:61 says when the rooster crowed, **“The Lord turned and looked straight at Peter.”** Since this was the middle of the night, it must have happened just as the guards were taking Jesus from his interview with Caiaphas to his trial before the Sanhedrin. Evidently the guards were leading Jesus through the courtyard just as Peter denied Christ for the third time. At that moment Peter cursed, the rooster crowed, Peter looked up and saw Jesus looking directly at him. By this time Jesus’ face is black and blue, his eyes almost swollen shut, his cheeks bruised and covered with spittle. A trace of blood trickles from his lips. Even though it is after midnight, Peter can see him perfectly in the firelight.

He doesn’t say a word. He looks at Peter who has denied him for the third time. Everything has happened just as he predicted.

It was a convicting look. “You said you did not know me. Look at me, Peter. Look at me. Do you not know me?”

It was a compassionate look. “Peter, how weak you are. Now you know that without me you can do nothing.”

It was a commissioning look. “Weep, Peter, and remember your words. Then go and strengthen your brothers.”

3. The words of Jesus. Matthew, Mark and Luke all stress that when the rooster crowed, Peter remembered the words of Jesus. It was this memory more than anything else that brought Peter back to God. Those words had lodged themselves deep within the crevasses of Peter’s mind. So much had happened in those few hours that Peter had forgotten. But at the opportune moment, he remembered what Jesus had said.

4. Peter's tears. The words used mean Peter wept bitterly. They are a sign of his deep repentance. He realized at last what he had done, how far he had fallen, how his denials had hurt the Lord.

But Judas also wept. His tears led to suicide; Peter's tears led to repentance. Tears are good if they lead to a new devotion to Jesus Christ and a new determination to serve him. We may weep and weep, but if our hearts are not made tender and open before the Lord, our tears do us no good. For Peter, his tears signaled the breaking of his heart because of his sin. As the Psalmist said, "**A broken and contrite heart, O Lord, you will not despise.**" (Psalm 51:17)

One final point. Where did this story come from? How did it get in the Bible? It could only have come from Peter. No one else was there to tell what happened.

We wouldn't have done that. We hide our mistakes to make sure no one finds out about them. Not Peter. Once he was restored, he couldn't stop talking about what Jesus had done for him.

The real hero of Peter's story isn't Peter.
It's Jesus.

My Lord, thank you for never giving up on me even when I've given up on myself. Amen.

Musical Bonus: What was it like when Jesus met Peter on Easter Sunday? Don Francisco vividly imagines the scene in [He's Alive](#).

Day 32

A Second Judas

“While I was with them, I protected them and kept them safe by that name you gave me. None has been lost *except the one doomed to destruction* so that Scripture would be fulfilled” (John 17:12).

Where is Judas today?

Acts 1:25 says Judas left his apostolic ministry **“to go where he belongs.”** Literally, the verse reads “to go to his own place.” That gives us our starting point. Judas is in hell today. He has been there for 2,000 years, and he will be there forever. He paid the ultimate price for the crime of betraying the Son of God.

If someone asks, “Did Judas lose his salvation?” the answer is no. He didn’t lose his salvation because he never had it. *Whatever else you can say about him, he was never a follower of Jesus Christ in the same sense as the other apostles.* He was not saved and then lost. He was lost because he was never saved in the first place.

If Judas were alive today, the best place to find him would be in church on Sunday morning. He would come early, sit near the front, sing the hymns with gusto, clap during the choruses, and say Amen during the sermon. He was that kind of man. Who knows? He might be sitting next to you in the pew. Or he might even be closer than that.

Many years ago I heard an evangelist preach a sermon with the arresting title: “A Second Judas.” It was aimed at church members who were not truly born again. He told the story of Judas and then talked about himself. He grew up in the church, attended Sunday School for years, and went to a Christian college. He even became a pastor before he realized he had never truly been born again. He had been a second Judas. It was humbling and painful for him to face the fact of his own self-deception, but when he did, he was wonderfully converted by the Spirit of God.

It can happen to any of us. *Judas kissed the door of heaven but went to hell.* Jesus picked him as an apostle, but he went to hell. He lived with Jesus for three years and still went to hell. He watched Jesus walk on the water and still went to hell. He listened to the Sermon on the Mount and still went to hell. He ate with Jesus, talked with Jesus, walked with Jesus, and listened to Jesus day after day, month after month, year after year. He knew Jesus as well as anyone has ever known Jesus and still he went to hell.

Judas does us a favor if his story causes us to rethink our basic commitment to Jesus Christ. You call yourself a Christian. But are you a true follower or are you just going through the motions?

Are you a pretender or a true believer? Have you truly turned from your sins and trusted Jesus Christ? Are you a fair-weather friend of the Savior?

At the Last Supper when Jesus predicted his betrayal, the disciples were baffled and started to say, "Lord, is it I?" Don't take anything for granted, but throw yourself on God's mercy lest you too end up being a second Judas.

Lord God, free us from unnecessary fear and from foolish presumption. Grant us simple faith to believe in Jesus. May we look not to ourselves but to Christ alone for our salvation. Amen.

Musical bonus: In 1863 Charitie Lees Bancroft wrote a hymn she simply called "Advocate." It has been rediscovered (and retitled) in the last twenty years. Let's listen to Shane and Shane sing [Before the Throne of God Above](#).

Day 33

The Man Who Knew Too Much

“Pilate said to him, ‘What is truth?’ After he had said this, he went back outside to the Jews and told them, ‘I find no guilt in him’” (John 18:38).

Here is a man we’d all like to meet.

No matter how many times we read his story, it is still not fully clear what he really thought and how he really felt. His name is Pontius Pilate. He is the man who handed Jesus over to be crucified.

The record is clear about the events of that Friday morning. Pilate asked a few routine questions, things like, “What is the charge against this man?” John tells us the Jews didn’t want to answer directly. The problem was that there was no Roman law against blasphemy. That was a Jewish matter. They couldn’t say, “This man claims to be the Messiah,” because Pilate would just wave his hand and that would be the end of it. Pilate didn’t like the Jews, didn’t understand their law, and didn’t want to be dragged into some nitpicking religious debate.

Eventually he agrees to question Jesus. All four gospels agree on the first question Pilate asks—**“Are you the king of the Jews?”** That’s what the Jewish leaders were saying he said. Jesus’ answer is deliberately ambiguous: **“It is as you say,”** meaning, “Yes, I am a king, but not the kind of king you are thinking of.”

Was he a king or not? The chief priests meant to confuse Pilate into thinking Jesus was some kind of revolutionary leader, and thus a threat to Rome. It didn’t work because Jesus told him, **“My kingdom is not of this world”** (John 18:36).

It is at this point Pilate asks the question that earned him a place in history. When Jesus said, **“Everyone on the side of truth listens to me”** (v. 37), Pilate replied, **“What is truth?”** (v. 38). *No one knows exactly what he meant.* Was his question a wistful desire to know the truth? Was it philosophical cynicism? Was it a mocking joke or simply pure ignorance? Was he irritated or indifferent? Was he speaking from a deep need within? There is no way to know with certainty why Pilate asked that question. But this much we know. At that very moment, Pilate was standing closer to the truth than he had ever been before and closer than he would ever be again.

He knew the truth, thought about it, and delayed too long. Pilate had his opportunity and didn’t take it. He said, “What is truth?”, when the Truth was standing three feet away from him. He

couldn't see it; he didn't understand it; he wouldn't believe it, and therefore, he didn't follow it. He was close enough to reach out and touch the Truth, but he would not do it.

One wonders what Pilate thought about the affairs of that Friday morning. As he looked back thirty years later, did he regret his indecision? Did he say to himself, "If only I had been stronger?" It is a good rule of life to live so you have nothing to regret later.

That means following the truth when the Truth is standing before you.

Heavenly Father, help me to take my stand for Jesus today. May I not hesitate when the time comes to decide. Amen.

Musical Bonus: In 1910 Presbyterian evangelist J. Wilbur Chapman composed a hymn called "One Day" that summarized the whole life of Christ. Here's a contemporary Southern Gospel version called [Glorious Day](#).

Day 34

Pilate's Wife

“While he was sitting on the judge’s bench, his wife sent word to him, ‘Have nothing to do with that righteous man, for today I’ve suffered terribly in a dream because of Him!’”
(Matthew 27:19)

We don’t know her name.

Tradition suggests the name Claudia or the name Procula, but no name is given for Pilate’s wife in the New Testament. This is the only verse where she is mentioned.

Evidently Pilate had discussed the case of Jesus with his wife. Perhaps he had expressed his uncertainty to her. Who is this strange Jewish rabbi who seemed to have run afoul of his own leaders? What had he done that made them want to kill him? What law, if any, had he broken? What should Pilate do about Jesus of Nazareth?

We can see the providence of God at work in three different ways in this story: First, his wife had a dream about Jesus that upset her greatly. Second, she knew he was a righteous man. Third, the message arrives at the very moment when Pilate must make a decision. It is as if God is saying, “Pilate, this is your final warning.”

But there is even more to think about. During the long hours when Jesus stood on trial, only one person spoke up for him:

A woman.

A Gentile woman.

A pagan woman.

The wife of the Roman governor.

The wife of the man who answered to the emperor.

Notice the word “today.” Since Pilate’s interviews with Jesus took place early on Friday morning, this must mean his wife had the terrible dream sometime Thursday night. Perhaps God gave her an understanding that her husband had Jesus’ fate in his hands that very morning. This little vignette reminds us God can use dreams to awaken the conscience.

Pilate knew Jesus had committed no crime worthy of death. *But like many a politician caught between a rock and a hard place, he caved in to pressure from the Jewish leaders who wanted Jesus dead.*

He is guilty of moral cowardice in the moment of crisis.

He is guilty of selling out an innocent man to save his own job.
He is guilty of condemning a man he knows to be innocent.

His name has become a symbol for all the evil done to Jesus. Every Sunday, in churches around the world, Christians recite the Apostle's Creed. Only three personal names are found in the creed—Jesus, Mary and Pilate. It reads this way: "Born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate." Pilate knew Jesus was innocent. He tried four times to release him—and said, "I find no fault in him." Yet he handed over Jesus to be crucified anyway.

What do we learn from the story of Pilate's wife?

That Jesus was innocent and Pilate was guilty.
That she did the right thing and Pilate did the wrong thing.
That he should have listened to his wife instead of to the howling mob.

Mostly we learn that God is in control of all sides of every situation. Jesus dies for a crime he did not commit, and we are forgiven of crimes we did commit.

What a Savior!

My Lord, make me sensitive to your Spirit and willing to listen to others when I am in danger of sinning against you. Amen.

Musical Bonus: Lauren Daigle celebrates the saving power of Christ in [How Can It Be](#).

Day 35

The Impossibility of Indecision

“Look, he has done nothing for which he should die” (Luke 23:15 NCV).

Recently I was reading *April 1865* by Jay Winik when I came across this passage describing the battle strategy of General Ulysses S. Grant:

“In war anything is better than indecision. We must decide. If I am wrong, we shall soon find it out and do the other thing. But not to decide . . . may ruin everything.”

When I read those words, I thought about Pontius Pilate. The gospel writers tend to present the Roman rulers and Roman soldiers in a relatively good light. All four gospels make it clear Pilate knew Jesus was innocent of any crime. If you put the gospel accounts together, it appears Pilate tried four times to avoid sentencing Jesus to death:

First, he told the Jews to try the case themselves.

Second, he sent the case to Herod.

Third, he tried to placate the Jews by scourging Jesus instead of crucifying him.

Fourth, he tried to make a deal, but the people chose Barabbas instead.

It is precisely at this point that Pilate’s story becomes so fascinating. Time and again the gospel writers stress he found Jesus innocent. But what’s a man to do? I think even with all the pressure on him, Pilate would still have released Jesus with only a scourging except for one thing. The Jews played their trump card. They said to Pilate, “**If you let him go, you are no friend of Caesar**” (John 19:12). Pilate knew exactly what they meant.

Emperor Tiberius was sick, suspicious, and often violent. He would not like receiving a bad report on one of his provincial governors. Pilate had plenty of things to cover up. His past was finally catching up with him.

It was blackmail, pure and simple. And it worked. If the choice were simply between Jesus and the Jews, Pilate would let Jesus go. But that’s not exactly how it was. The blackmail made it a choice between Jesus and Rome. A man will do many things to save his job. In the end, it came down to pure self-interest on Pilate’s part.

Let me summarize the case as I see it. *Pilate never really understood Jesus, but he never wanted to put him to death either.* He wasn’t fooled by the Jews’ pious appeals to Roman law. He knew Jesus was innocent. He said so over and over again.

Fundamentally, it came down to this: Pilate wanted to release Jesus but without any cost to him personally. He wanted to let him go, but without having to take a personal stand. He admired Jesus in a way, but not enough to believe in him. Yielding finally to private blackmail and public pressure, he sentenced Jesus to die.

Pilate failed at precisely the point where General Grant succeeded. Grant won battles not because he was always brilliant, but because he wasn't afraid to decide. Grant's strength was Pilate's weakness.

He could never decide to do the right thing.

James Russell Lowell wrote these stirring words:

Once to ev'ry man and nation
Comes the moment to decide,
In the strife of truth and falsehood,
For the good or evil side.

Pilate's crime in many ways was worse than the sin of the chief priests. They thought Jesus was guilty and wanted him dead; Pilate knew he was innocent and sent him to die anyway. He stalled and hesitated and tried to pass the buck. He wouldn't decide so the mob decided for him.

Our greatest need is for courage to make the right choices. When the time comes to take sides with Jesus, all you need is enough courage to do the right thing.

Spirit of God, may I be brave enough to stand up for Jesus today. Amen.

Musical bonus: Of the thousands of hymns written by Charles Wesley, few are so gospel-saturated as [Arise, My Soul, Arise](#). Let's enjoy this version by Project 10 Men.

Day 36

Jesus is No Joke

“When Herod saw Jesus, he was greatly pleased, because for a long time he had been wanting to see him. From what he had heard about him, he hoped to see him perform some miracle” (Luke 23:8).

It is now early on Good Friday. Jesus was arrested sometime around midnight. *The Jews want him dead, but only the Romans have the power of capital punishment.* Thus he ends up before Pontius Pilate, the governor of Judea. Pilate is a Roman appointee who has little understanding of the Jews and their religion. His main task is collecting taxes and keeping the peace. When Jesus is brought before him, a cursory examination reveals nothing to justify the death penalty. When he hears Jesus is from Galilee, he spies a way out of the jam. Since Herod handled matters in Galilee, and since he happened to be in Jerusalem that week, he would send Jesus to Herod and let him handle this messy problem.

Now at last Herod meets Jesus. *But it didn't work out the way he had expected.* He is “greatly pleased” because he thinks Jesus is going to work a miracle for him. “Jesus, I heard you can turn water into wine. Here's a basin of water. Show us your magic.” “They say you can walk on water. How about walking across the pool in my backyard?” On and on it went, Herod firing one question after another at Jesus. He is curious, but he is not a seeker of truth. Herod is nothing but a thrill seeker. I am sure he was shocked and then chagrined when Jesus refused to speak to him: **“He plied him with many questions, but Jesus gave him no answer”** (Luke 23:9). No one ever treated him like that. The chagrin turned to embarrassment and eventually to anger.

There are times in life when silence speaks louder than words. Jesus knew that Herod was trifling with him and that his questions did not come from an honest heart. Perhaps he recalled the words of Proverbs 26:4, **“Do not answer a fool according to his folly, or you will be like him yourself.”** In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus warned against casting pearls before swine or giving what is holy to the dogs (Matthew 7:6). Herod belongs to that class of men who are so pigheaded in their spiritual blindness and so dogged in their resistance to the truth that nothing can be said and nothing should be said.

Jesus is no joke.

Do not trifle with the Son of God.

Herod met John the Baptist but learned nothing from him. He treated Jesus like he was a carnival sideshow. *When Herod killed John the Baptist, he murdered his own soul.* He lost the ability to hear the voice of Jesus. There was nothing Jesus could say that would have made the slightest difference in that situation. By his silence Jesus is saying, “You didn't want to hear the truth when John spoke. You said no. Now you will never hear the truth again.”

Let us learn this solemn lesson: *Light received leads to more light. Light rejected leads only to darkness.* God is not obligated to send the Spirit again and again and again to your heart. Now is the right time to come to Christ. *Now is the best day you'll ever have to give your heart to the Lord.* Now is the perfect moment to get serious about following Jesus.

Lord Jesus, shine your light in my heart that I may love you, serve you, and praise you now and forever. Amen

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Musical bonus: Michael Card reminds us that we are called to follow [God's Own Fool](#).

Day 37

Jesus or Barabbas?

“So Pilate decided to grant their demand and released the one they were asking for, who had been thrown into prison for rebellion and murder. But he handed Jesus over to their will” (Luke 23:24-25).

We can tell what we know in three short sentences:

Barabbas was guilty.

Jesus was innocent.

Barabbas lived, Jesus died.

We don't know anything else about Barabbas, except that today we would call him a terrorist. Prison was where he belonged. He was there because of heinous crimes. Why would anyone want him to be set free?

But Pilate severely underestimated the hatred the Jewish leaders had stirred up against Jesus. He thought his declaration of this man's innocence would be enough. Plus he couldn't think of a reason to kill him. Why would you kill a man like Jesus?

In sane times this would not make sense, but those were not sane times. When a crowd has been whipped into a frenzy, they will believe the worst about the best, and the facts don't matter. Mark 15:11 says the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have them choose Barabbas. Matthew adds that “the elders” were involved, meaning the older men, the graybeards most likely to gain a hearing. Any student of crowd psychology knows how this works. It only takes four or five men in strategic places to start the chant, “Give us Barabbas! We want Barabbas!”

Sensing the mood of the crowd, Pilate makes one last, feeble attempt at justice: **“What shall I do then with the one you call the king of the Jews?”** (Mark 15:12). But it is too late now. The crowd begins to shout, “Crucify him! Crucify him!”

Fulton Sheen remarked on this scene:

“Right is still right if nobody is right, and wrong is still wrong if everybody is wrong. The first poll in the history of Christianity was wrong!”

It was the greatest miscarriage of justice in history. Jesus must die because of one man's moral cowardice.

For Barabbas it meant he the guilty would go free while Jesus the innocent would die in his place. One ancient tradition says after he was released, Barabbas went to Golgotha to watch Jesus die. There is nothing implausible about that. Why wouldn't he go and watch the man whose death set him free?

We have not read this story rightly if we think Barabbas is bad because he was a criminal, and we are good because we are not like him.

I am Barabbas. Every man is. Murderer, thief, criminal, insurrectionist, lawbreaker, rioter. Justly imprisoned, rightly condemned, freed from punishment by a substitute who died in my place.

Barabbas stands for every Son of Adam who has ever walked on planet earth.

Barabbas stands for me.

When we finally get a glimpse of the cross of Christ, we see how great our sin really is. In the light of Calvary, all our supposed goodness is nothing but filthy rags.

The beauty of the gospel shines forth from this story. Jesus the innocent takes the place of Barabbas the guilty.

A sinner goes free.
An innocent man dies.

What appeared to be a catastrophe (the death of God's Son) provides salvation to the world.

What a Christ!
What great salvation!

It is said that Bernard of Clairvaux in the 12th century first penned the words to the hymn [O Sacred Head Now Wounded](#). The second verse speaks to the issue of our sin and the death of Christ. Let's make this verse our prayer for today:

*What thou, my Lord, hast suffered was all for sinners' gain;
Mine, mine was the transgression, but thine the deadly pain.
Lo, here I fall, my Savior! 'Tis I deserve thy place;
Look on me with thy favor, and grant to me thy grace.*

Day 38

Washing Guilty Hands

“When Pilate saw that he was getting nowhere, but that a riot was starting instead, he took some water, washed his hands in front of the crowd, and said, ‘I am innocent of this man’s blood’” (Matthew 27:24).

This is our final visit with Pilate.

Let me summarize the case as I see it. *Pilate never understood Jesus, but he never wanted to put him to death either.* He knew Jesus was innocent. He said so over and over again.

Fundamentally, it came down to this: *Pilate wanted to release Jesus but without any cost to him personally.* He wanted to let him go, but without having to take a stand. He admired Jesus in a way, but not enough to believe in him. He yielded finally to private blackmail and public pressure. So he sentenced Jesus to die.

But in the final act of a tortured conscience, he took a bowl of water and washed his hands. It was an act the Jews would understand because Deuteronomy 21 prescribes a ceremony for the case of an unsolved death. It involved washing your hands over a heifer whose neck had been broken. The ceremony meant, “I am innocent of this man’s death.”

Now Pilate basically does the same thing. There is only one problem. Pilate is guilty. *Not all the water in a thousand Niagaras could wash his guilt away.*

No, Pilate, it won’t work. Look, look, look at your hands. They are covered with innocent blood. You crucified Jesus by your indecision, your vacillation, your cowardice, your selfishness. This memory will haunt you forever. The screams from Golgotha will ring in your ears until the day you die.

He washed his hands, but the blood wouldn’t come off. He passed the buck, but it came back to him. He tried to make a deal, but the deal fell through. He tried to compromise and ended up being blackmailed. In the end, Pilate seems pitiful, frightened, weak, unable to do what he knows is right.

Pilate, what did you say to your wife that night? Did you wash your hands in front of her?

Pilate’s final question to the crowd still rings across the centuries: **“What shall I do with Jesus?”** It’s the question of the ages, and every person must eventually give an answer. There are only two possible answers. I can crown him or I can crucify him. There is nothing else, no middle ground.

Let's turn the question around and make it more personal: "What will you do with Jesus?" If he is the Son of God, then crown him the Lord of your life and give your heart to him. If he is a fraud, then by all means send him off to be crucified.

I ask the question once more: What will you do with Jesus? Pilate washed his hands, but he could never wash away his guilt. An old gospel song puts it this way:

What will you do with Jesus?
Neutral you cannot be.
Someday your heart will be asking,
"What will he do with me?"

Lord, may we not delay, but gladly say, "Jesus, I come to you!" Amen.

Musical bonus: Here's an acapella version of [What Will You Do With Jesus?](#) by the Ephrata Youth Bible School.

Day 39

Accidental Cross

“As the soldiers led him away, they seized Simon from Cyrene, who was on his way in from the country, and put the cross on him and made him carry it behind Jesus” (Luke 23:26).

We don't know much about him.

He was just a bit player in the great drama surrounding the death of Christ. For a brief moment, he steps on the stage, plays his part, and then leaves, never to be mentioned again in the Bible.

We know his name: Simon.

We know where he lived: Cyrene, a city in northern Libya, not far from the Mediterranean Sea, about 115 miles east of Benghazi. It was 900 miles from Jerusalem.

It happened something like this. Having been sentenced to death, Jesus begins to carry his own cross to the place of execution. The crossbeam alone would weigh around 100 pounds with the entire cross being around 300 pounds. To carry even the crossbeam would be a staggering load for someone in Jesus' condition.

The Romans assigned four soldiers to form a square around a man being crucified, while a fifth soldier walked in front carrying a placard naming the man's crime. They intentionally made the criminal carry the cross through the main streets, by the city gates and the market square. They wanted to frighten the city by turning crucifixion into a gruesome spectacle.

What a contrast!

Five days earlier Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey as the crowds cried out, “Hosanna! Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.”

Gone are the cheering crowds.

Gone are the shouting children.

Gone are the palm fronds.

A few days earlier the whole city asked, “Who is this man?”

Now imperial Rome answers, “He is a condemned criminal.”

The same city that welcomed him now throws him out.

He will be crucified outside the city walls, consigned to the dung heap of history.

Bloody, beaten, more dead than alive, Jesus struggles to carry his cross. Step by step he drags the instrument of his own death toward Golgotha, the Place of the Skull. Every step is agony.

The crown of thorns presses upon his brow. He has been beaten so badly his face is covered with bruises, welts and cuts. Human spit mixes with dirt, sweat and blood.

Seeing Christ stumble and fall, the soldiers realize he will never make it to his own execution. So they grab a man from the crowd.

That man is Simon of Cyrene.

Luke 23:26 says Simon was compelled to carry the cross behind Jesus. Surely this fact was meant to linger in our minds. Simon stands as a symbol for every believer. He shows us what Christ meant when he said, "Take up your cross and follow me."

This is what a Christian is. He is a Christ-follower.

This is what a Christian does. He takes up his cross and follows him.

Though we can't be certain, tradition suggests Simon and his family became followers of Jesus. If so, then this "accidental cross" became a saving cross for this man and his family.

Sometimes we find the cross.
Sometimes the cross finds us.

That leads me to ask two simple questions with eternal implications:

Have you ever found the cross of Christ?
Has the cross of Christ ever found you?

Simon has a message for you and me. If he could speak across the centuries, I think he would say, "I have found my cross. Have you found yours?"

*Lord Jesus, may I never be ashamed and never hesitate to pick up my cross and follow you.
Amen.*

Musical bonus: What was that day like for Simon? Here's a song that imagines the answer:
[Follow the Lamb](#).

Day 40

Cutting Down the Green Tree

“Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and your children”
(Luke 23:28).

This is perhaps the most overlooked statement Jesus made on Good Friday. He made it as he walked the Via Dolorosa, the “Way of Sorrows” that led to Calvary. Seeing women weeping for him as he drags the cross on the way to his own execution, he tells them three things:

1. Weep for yourselves and your children (v. 28).
2. Terrible times are coming (vv. 29-30).
3. There will be no escaping that judgment (v. 31)

Weep, but do not weep.
Weep for yourselves, do not weep for me.
Strange words coming from the Savior’s lips.

These words would be fulfilled in AD 70 when the Roman army sacked Jerusalem and tore down Herod’s temple. In the terrible days before Jerusalem fell, women and children would suffer the most, as they always do when war comes.

These solemn statements are Jesus’ last recorded words before he is crucified. Shortly he will cry, “Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing.” We must take these two statements together, and we must not separate them.

The word of *judgment*: Weep for yourselves.
The word of *grace*: Father, forgive them.

We must not pass over the illustration Jesus used: **“For if they do these things when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?”** (Luke 23:31). The meaning seems to be, “If they do this to Jesus, the tree of life, what will they do to the nation whose unbelief has made it barren and ready for judgment?” This is Jesus’ final lament over Jerusalem.

When the nation, through its leaders, rejected Jesus, there was nothing left but the judgment of God. We must apply this lesson to ourselves. What will be the outcome for any nation blessed with gospel preaching that does not receive it? Earlier in this Lenten series, I pointed out Jesus’ Triumphal Entry was a “Day of Visitation” for Israel. For a moment in time, the whole city asked, “Who is this man?” Now we have the official answer: “He is a criminal worthy of death.”

The same Jesus who said, "Come to me, all you weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest," also said, "Unless you repent, you too will perish." Both statements deserve careful attention. The day of grace comes to an end sooner or later. This is true for individuals, families, cities and nations.

Thank God, there is grace for every sinner.
But let no sinner use that as an excuse to sin.

The Lamb of God is also the Lion of the Tribe of Judah.
We must not trifle with him.

Weep for yourself. Weep for your loved ones. Weep for your nation. Pray that we will turn to Christ while we can. As the daughters of Jerusalem learned 2000 years ago, the day comes when they cut down the green tree.

Lord Jesus, forgive us for being complacent in an age of grace. Give us broken hearts for those who do not know you. Amen.

Musical bonus: Here's a song that reminds us of greeting our Lord received when he entered Jerusalem for the last time: [All Hail King Jesus](#).

Day 41

They Gambled for His Clothes

“When the soldiers crucified Jesus, they took His clothes and divided them into four parts, a part for each soldier. They also took the tunic, which was seamless, woven in one piece from the top. So they said to one another, ‘Let’s not tear it, but cast lots for it, to see who gets it’” (John 19:23-24).

Let’s begin with a simple observation. No Roman soldier wanted to help with crucifixion. It was a thankless job that could be dangerous if the one being crucified tried to fight back.

So the Romans came up with a clever idea.

The soldiers who did the actual crucifying got to split up the garments of the unfortunate victim. You might call it a little added bonus for serving on an otherwise gruesome detail. In the best of times, crucifixion was a messy, bloody, unpleasant business. No one would complain about the soldiers rolling dice for the clothes of a murderer or a thief or a terrorist.

But Jesus was different.

As the long series of trials had shown, Jesus had not committed a crime. He didn’t deserve to die. Yet here he was, the rabbi from Nazareth, the miracle-working teacher of God’s truth, the one they called the “King of the Jews,” who was in fact the Son of God.

As he hung on the cross, suspended between heaven and earth, beaten, bruised and bloody, every breath an agony, the soldiers cast lots for his clothes. After the soldiers divided the main part of his clothing, they decided to cast lots for his tunic. The fact it was seamless, woven from top to bottom in one piece, means it was a valuable piece of clothing. Such a garment would be ruined by dividing it, which is why the soldiers cast lots.

This act also fulfilled Psalm 22:18, **“They divided my garments among themselves, and they cast lots for my clothing.”** Did the Roman soldiers know they were fulfilling Scripture? Of course not. They were merely doing what soldiers sometimes do: rolling dice to decide the winner. But even in that tiny detail, we see the Holy Spirit at work. Although man’s cruelty was in full bloom that day at Calvary, nothing happened apart from God’s plan. When the Father determined his Son should die, he even arranged the rolling of the dice for Jesus’ tunic.

Though hated by the rulers, he is loved by his Father who oversees every detail of his Son’s death. Stripped of all earthly possessions, he is not stripped of his Father’s care.

What seems to be the cluttered rush of events turns out to be the plan of God unfolding to bring salvation to the world. Even the soldiers gambling for Christ's tunic fit into the divine plan.

He was stripped of everything that we might be clothed in his righteousness. Charles Wesley's hymn [And Can It Be?](#) has a verse that speaks to this truth:

No condemnation now I dread;
Jesus, and all in Him, is mine;
Alive in Him, my living Head,
And clothed in righteousness divine,
Bold I approach th'eternal throne,
And claim the crown, through Christ my own.
Bold I approach th'eternal throne,
And claim the crown, through Christ my own.

Lord Jesus, we are amazed by how far you went for us. May our lips never fail to sing your praise. Amen.

Day 42

The Other Thief on the Cross

“Then one of the criminals hanging there began to yell insults at Him: ‘Aren’t You the Messiah? Save Yourself and us!’” (Luke 23:39).

Two thieves were crucified with Jesus.
We mostly remember the one who repented.
But what about the other one?

Here’s what we know for sure. These two men were both criminals of some sort. Luke uses a word that simply means “evildoer.” Matthew and Mark use a different word that means “robber” or “plunderer.”

It’s also helpful to know that when Jesus was first crucified, both criminals began to mock him by shouting insults. Anyone looking at the scene shortly after 9 AM would have concluded the two thieves were equally disdainful of Jesus, the man hanging from the center cross.

We’ll talk about the penitent thief tomorrow.
For a moment, let’s focus on the crook who didn’t repent.

He began to shout at Jesus, **“Aren’t You the Messiah? Save Yourself and us!”** When the text says he yelled it as an insult, the verb is the one from which we get the word *blasphemy*. The impenitent thief blasphemed the Lord Jesus by mocking his power. Note the tone of what he said, “Aren’t you the Messiah?” That’s different from saying “If you are the Messiah,” which involves a bit of doubt. What he really means is, “You’re obviously a fraud because if you were the Messiah, you would rescue yourself and us.”

Both thieves had the same experience that morning. They were both taken from their cells, both forced to carry their own cross, both had nails driven through their hands and feet, both were in terrible physical condition, and both men would shortly die. Beyond that, both men had the same chance to observe the man on the middle cross. They both heard him cry out, “Father, forgive them for they don’t know what they are doing.” Both men knew they didn’t have long to live.

One man used his dying moments to blaspheme the Lord. He obviously did not fear God. Angry and desperate, soon to face God in judgment, he did not repent.

The crowd taunted Christ and dared him to come down from the cross. Reflecting on this, William Booth said, “They claimed they would have believed if he had come down; we believe because he stayed up.”

We learn much here about the hardness of the human heart. Some people prefer hell to heaven so that is where they will go. Some will not be persuaded even when they are in the presence of Jesus.

We learn something about our Lord from this. Though the crowd taunted him to come down, he would not turn from his rescue mission on behalf of the human race. If he had come down, we would all be lost. Thank God he stayed on the cross and died for us.

Philip Bliss, beloved gospel musician and good friend of D. L. Moody, wrote ["Hallelujah! What a Savior!"](#) shortly before his untimely death in 1876. The second verse reminds us of what Jesus endured while he was dying:

Bearing shame and scoffing rude,
In my place condemned He stood;
Sealed my pardon with His blood.
Hallelujah! What a Savior!

Thank you, Lord Jesus, that you stayed on the cross all the way to the end. Hallelujah! What a Savior! Amen.

Day 43

Saved at the Last Second

“Jesus answered him, ‘Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise’” (Luke 23:43).

Jesus died between two thieves.

One man wanted nothing to do with him, but the other man wanted to be forgiven. Let’s take a look at that second thief.

Was any man ever in a more desperate situation? Brutally crucified, he is dying in agony for crimes he had committed. He is a guilty man justly punished. He deserves to die, and he knows it. By sundown, he will be dead.

His case has been tried, the judgment announced, the sentence carried out. All purely legal avenues have been exhausted. This man is as close to death as you can be and still be alive. Now at the last moment he makes one final appeal to the Supreme Court of the Universe: **“Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom”** (v. 42).

Here we have the most amazing example of saving faith in all the Bible. Jesus is hanging next to him, a bloody mess, a sight awful to behold. His feet and arms are nailed to the cross; ropes hold his body upright so it won’t fall off. Every movement is agony, every breath torture. Beneath him and behind him the howling mob screams for blood. They jeer, they hiss, they curse, they spit, they roar like wild hyenas. They cheer as he coughs up blood, they shout with approval when someone aims a rock at a piece of tender flesh. It is garish, hellish, brutal and inhuman.

Somehow this thief saw Jesus at his weakest moment, and he believed in him. He is a crucified sinner trusting in a crucified Savior. No man ever looked less like a king than Jesus did that day, yet this man saw him as he really was.

Jesus’ answer is simple and clear: **“Today you will be with me in paradise”** (Luke 23:43). What a day this was for that misbegotten criminal. *In the morning he’s in prison, at noon he’s hanging on a cross, by sundown he’s in paradise.* Out of a life of sin and shame, he passed immediately into eternal blessedness.

Remember that two thieves were crucified with Jesus that day, but only one believed. As J. C. Ryle put it:

One thief on the cross was saved, that none should despair; but only one, that none should presume.

This very bad man was saved at the very last moment. Thank God it is so. *He had lived an absolutely rotten life, yet he died a Christian death.* It happened by the grace of Jesus Christ.

Over two hundred years ago William Cowper wrote a famous hymn called [There is a Fountain](#) that includes a verse about the dying thief. To my knowledge, this is the only hymn that mentions this man:

The dying thief rejoiced to see,
That fountain in his day.
And there may I, though vile as he,
Wash all my sins away.

All that God wants from us . . . and all that he will accept . . . is simple faith in his son, Jesus Christ. When we place our faith in the Lord Jesus, in that very moment we are saved.

The question is simple. *Are you ready to die?* You have nothing to fear if you know the Lord. You are not ready to die if you don't. Do you know him? What will you do if you don't know him?

Thank you, Lord Jesus, for making a way for sinners to be saved at the very last second. With all my heart, I am trusting you as my Lord and Savior. Amen.

Day 44

Final Words of a Family Man

“When Jesus saw His mother and the disciple He loved standing there, He said to His mother, “Woman, here is your son.’ Then He said to the disciple, ‘Here is your mother’” (John 19:26-27).

Mary is older now.

Jesus has grown up. Mary has grown older too. She might be in her early 50s. Or she might be 55 now. She could even be 60 or 65. She's not a young girl anymore. She's long past the childbearing years. She's past her 20s, past her 30s, past her 40s. She's a widow now. I think that's certain. Joseph is gone. Somewhere between the time Jesus was twelve and the time he began his ministry, Joseph seems to have dropped off the scene. Mary is alone now. Her shoulders are stooped a little bit. There are a few silver threads among the gold. The carefree days of youth are gone forever.

She stands at the cross with the other women and John the apostle. She watched as they crucified her son. She heard the screams, the cries of agony as she watched her son being tortured to death. She heard the swear words of the crowd. She watched as they walked by and slapped him and spit at him. She was helpless to stop them and helpless to help him.

“There He hung before her eyes, but she was helpless. His wounds bled, but she dare not staunch them. His mouth was parched, but she could not moisten it . . . The nails pierced her as well as Him. The thorns around His brow were a circle of flame around her heart” (James Stalker).

Suddenly a cry comes from the cross. Looking down, Jesus sees his mother with John standing next to her, and he cries out, "Woman, behold your son." And to John, "Behold your mother." When Jesus said those words from the cross, from that very hour John took Mary into his home.

Why in the midst of all his agony would Jesus say something like this? *Even though he is dying in terrible torture upon the cross, he fulfills the most basic responsibility and the most sacred obligation any son ever had.* He makes sure his mother is cared for.

We want to save the world, don't we? *While we're saving the world, let's take time to do what Jesus did.* Don't ever use your great calling as an excuse to get out of your basic moral obligations. If the Lord Jesus Christ—beaten, bruised and bloody—if he had time for his parents while he was on the way to saving the world, then you have time for yours. That's a sacred principle of Scripture.

Jesus died as he had lived—thinking of others.

His first word from the cross: "**Father, forgive them,**" thinking of his enemies.

His second word from the cross: "**Today you will be with me in Paradise,**" thinking of the criminal by his side.

His third word from the cross: "**Woman, behold your son,**" thinking of his mother.

If we take these words seriously, we will commit ourselves to live as he lived and to die as he died—thinking of others.

This story teaches us the church must indeed be a family. *That must be more than a slogan because the church was founded by a family man.* In the last hours of his life he was thinking not of himself; he was thinking of others.

Go and do likewise.

My God, give me the heart of Jesus, to live as he lived, to love as he loved, and to die as he died, thinking always of others. Amen.

Musical bonus: Here's a beautiful version of [The Old Rugged Cross](#) by Guy Penrod.

Day 45

A Centurion's Testimony

"When the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, saw how he died, he said, 'Surely this man was the Son of God!'" (Mark 15:39).

What do the centurion and John Wayne have in common?

When the Biblical epic *The Greatest Story Ever Told* was released in 1965, John Wayne made a cameo appearance as the centurion who watched Jesus die. He had exactly one line: "Truly this man was the Son of God." When you watch the film, you hear the Duke's unmistakable voice utter those words.

While it wasn't his most famous role, it was a good one nonetheless because the centurion played a key part in the death of Christ. As the leader of a Roman "century" of 100 men, he was an officer held in high esteem. He had to be a man of good character, with a proven military record, who knew how to carry out orders promptly. He had to be an expert with the sword and with all other weapons.

This means the centurion wasn't just any soldier. He was a proven leader of men.

Did he know the other centurion whose servant Jesus healed (Luke 7:1-10)? It's entirely possible because Roman officers in a small region like Galilee and Judea would no doubt cross paths. If they knew each other, then this centurion would already have a favorable impression of Jesus. Certainly he would know Pilate had three times declared Jesus innocent of any crime, and he would wonder why he was being crucified. He must have heard Jesus say, "Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing." He heard him promise heaven to the penitent thief. He witnessed the darkness that fell on the earth, and he heard Jesus cry out, "It is finished!" More than that, unlike the usual criminals who died in agony, screaming bitter oaths, Jesus died quietly as he yielded his spirit to his Father in heaven. Mark 15:39 tells us he stood facing Jesus and saw *how* he died. All of that must have made a huge impression on the centurion. Finally, he felt the earthquake split the rocks in two. Taken together, he came to a conclusion that could only have come from the Holy Spirit, "Truly this man was the Son of God!"

Here is the answer to the schemes of Caiaphas, the frivolous curiosity of Herod, and Pilate's cowardly vacillation. Here is the answer to the taunts of the crowd. Here is the answer to the Jewish leaders who wanted him dead. Here, too, is the answer to Judas who betrayed him.

They were all wrong about Jesus.

The centurion got it right.

Someone asked me recently why we call this day “Good Friday.” In earlier generations, it was called “Long Friday” or “Black Friday” or “Holy Friday.” Many people think “Good Friday” is a shortened version of “God’s Friday,” meaning that out of the unspeakable suffering of Christ, God accomplished the ultimate good in making salvation available to the whole world.

The centurion somehow saw through the blood and gore and the smell of death that hovered over Golgotha. A Roman soldier figured out what the priests and the politicians missed altogether. They saw a radical, a mystic, a troublemaker. But the centurion saw the Son of God.

On this Good Friday, let us take our stand with him and say for all the world to hear: “Truly this man was the Son of God!”

Heavenly Father, today we behold our Lord nailed to a cross. From his scarred visage a light shines that death cannot destroy. Glory to Jesus forever, the mighty Son of God! Amen.

Musical bonus: As we think about the meaning of Christ’s death, let’s listen as Fernando Ortega sings [When I Survey the Wondrous Cross](#).

Day 46

Holy Saturday

“When it was evening, a rich man from Arimathea named Joseph came, who himself had also become a disciple of Jesus. He approached Pilate and asked for Jesus’ body” (Matthew 27:57-58).

Here are the facts as we know them about Joseph:

1. He was a rich man from the village of Arimathea.
2. He was a member of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish Supreme Court.
3. He had not consented to the death of Jesus.
4. He was looking for the kingdom of God.
5. He had become a disciple of Jesus.
6. He had purchased a tomb for his burial place.
7. He asked Pilate to release Jesus’ body to him.

He was a good man in a hard place. Because of his wealth and his position, he must have been a leading man in his community. It couldn’t have been easy to be a disciple of Christ and also be part of the Sanhedrin. Given the raging hatred that led to Jesus’ crucifixion, he put himself in a dangerous position by asking Pilate to release Jesus’ body so he could give it a decent burial.

Once Pilate gave permission, he purchased a linen shroud and then went to Golgotha, where Nicodemus (another secret disciple) helped him take down the body of the Lord. I am using “secret” in a loose sense here. I’m sure his family and friends knew of his belief in Jesus. But it would be dangerous to speak too openly about his faith.

The body of Jesus was in bad shape when they took it down from the cross. It bore all the marks of the abuse he had suffered. He was covered with blood, there was a hole in his side, his face was horribly disfigured, and the skin hung from his back in tatters. Joseph and Nicodemus wrapped the body in strips of linen cloth. Then they sprinkled about 80 pounds of spices throughout the linen strips. The spices made the linen strips stick together and form a tight wrap around the body. That was how the Jews embalmed their dead.

Because they had to bury Jesus before sundown and it was already late in the afternoon, Joseph volunteered the use of his tomb, one freshly dug out of the rock in a nearby garden. When they finished placing the body inside, they rolled a stone across the entrance.

Darkness fell on the garden cemetery.
Everyone had left.
Inside the tomb . . . silence.

The Bible says very little about that Saturday. We know about Good Friday and Easter Sunday, but of that Saturday in between we know almost nothing. Luke says of the disciples . . . "And on the Sabbath they rested."

The message of Holy Saturday is, "Get ready. Something is about to happen, but it hasn't happened yet." Thank God, we're not moving back toward the crucifixion.

We are Easter people marching from Good Friday through Holy Saturday on our way to Easter Sunday. We're not quite there, but we're moving in the right direction.

It's Saturday, but Sunday's coming. Let that thought give strength to your heart today.

Lord Jesus, we pray for faith to see your promises through our tears. We thank you that Saturday leads on to Sunday, and that Holy Week always ends in a resurrection. Amen.

Musical bonus: If you need a faith boost today, listen as Matt Maher sings [Christ is Risen](#).

Day 47

If Jesus is Alive

“They stopped walking and looked discouraged” (Luke 24:17).

It is Easter and there is no joy.

Two disciples are on the road to Emmaus, a little village about seven miles from Jerusalem. One disciple is named Cleopas. We do not know the name of the other disciple. As they walk along the dusty road, they leave Jerusalem far behind.

It is noteworthy that when they met Jesus on the road to Emmaus, they did not recognize him. *Every part of this story is true to human nature as we know it.* There is even a touch of humor in that Jesus is with them and they think he's dead. As they walked with the stranger, they said, "He used to do this" and "You should have been there" and "He could walk on water!" and "He was so kind" and "We never met anyone like him" and, finally, "I can't believe he's gone."

They felt their faith slipping away with every step on the road to Emmaus. They had heard the rumors of an empty tomb, but what did that mean? No one had seen Jesus yet, or so they assumed. *There comes a time in life when you have to face the facts and deal with reality.* So ends the sad tale of Jesus, a story that had such a promising beginning. They believed in Jesus, and he let them down. The third day was almost gone and Jesus was nowhere to be found. Bring down the curtain, it's all over now.

This is what Good Friday looks like without Easter. Without the resurrection, the cross is nothing but a tragedy, a story without a moral, a drama that ends before the final act.

Jesus used the Old Testament to show them how the whole Bible testifies to him. If you want to find Jesus, just open your Bible because the whole book is about him. If you want to understand the Bible, look for Jesus. He's there on every page. The whole purpose of the Bible is to point us to Jesus. He's the theme of every book from Genesis to Revelation.

After Jesus revealed himself to them, the two disciples couldn't wait to get back to Jerusalem. Even though it was late in the evening, they had to go back and tell the others what they had seen and heard. *Once you encounter Christ, nothing will ever be the same again.*

If Jesus is alive, there's no time to waste.

If Jesus is alive, everything we believe is true.

If Jesus is alive, death has been defeated.

If Jesus is alive, we are not alone.

If Jesus is alive, our sins are forgiven.

We all live somewhere between Good Friday and Easter Sunday. We are on the long Emmaus Road journey together. There are times when we feel alone and overwhelmed. Doubts creep in, our heart gives way, and we feel like we can't go on. Then Jesus comes to us and says, "You are not alone. You never were alone. Even when you thought you were alone, I was with you every step of the way."

Child of God, behold the risen Christ! You can never be alone again.

Every Easter we celebrate the great triple truth of this holy day:

The tomb is empty.

Jesus is alive.

We are not alone.

He is risen! He is risen indeed!

Father, we thank you the tomb is still empty because Jesus is alive today. Let faith rise to banish our fears. May those who doubt, doubt no more. Through him and to him who is the resurrection and the life, even Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

Musical bonus: Let's conclude our Lenten journey with this joyous rendition of [Christ the Lord is Risen Today](#).

We hope you have enjoyed this journey through the Lenten season
with us!

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