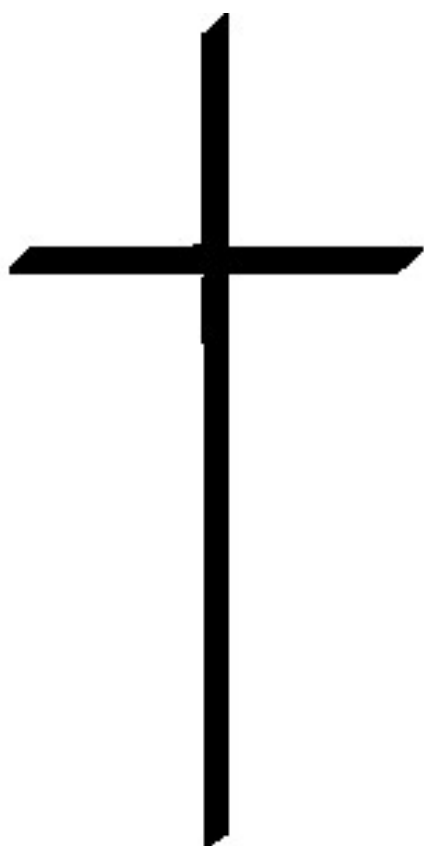


# Journey to the Cross

## Devotional Guides



Week One

You may not be aware of this, but the four gospels spend an extensive amount of material specifically on the last week Jesus was alive. Here is how it breaks down in terms of each gospel:

A third of Matthew, from Matthew 21-28

A third of Mark, from Mark 11-16

A quarter of Luke, from Luke 19-24

Nearly half of John, from John 12-20

It is clear, from the sheer amount of content, that the last week of Jesus' life was of immense importance. Because He knew the cross awaited him, every action He took or word He spoke became all the more critical.

This series of devotions is called "Journey to the Cross," and is an attempt to bring into view some of the many experiences and teachings of Jesus leading up to His crucifixion on the cross. The devotions will serve in a three-fold capacity.

They will help each of us prepare our hearts for Easter. The 40 days preceding Easter have, in historical Christianity, been celebrated as the season of Lent. While the methods used to celebrate these days have varied, each Christian tradition has aimed to use this time to help Christians get spiritually ready for the good news of Easter.

They will help you get to know some church members you may not have met yet within the congregation. I asked each of our staff members to cover one week of devotions by writing one devotion themselves and by utilizing members from within their ministry sphere as the writers for each devotion. The composite of devotions intentionally covers a wide variety of members at Central. From some of our newest members, to some of our longest tenured members, from student ministry parents, to senior adults, my desire was for us to hear from parts of the congregation other than the groups we normally interact with and thus expand our understanding of how God is at work within the life of Central.

They will prepare you for the sermon each Sunday. I began the series knowing the 7 sermons I would preach beginning on February 21 and extending to April 4, Easter Sunday. From those 7 sermons I picked 6 characters, themes, or passages from the last days of Jesus that would help prepare the way for the sermon to occur on the following Sunday. As a result, if you have followed these devotions during the week, then your heart will be all the more prepared for worship each Sunday!

It has been my privilege to get to read these devotions in advance and you are in for a treat! The layout of each devotion begins with a Bible reference at the top of the page - you should read the passage first. From there, our writers have given wonderful explanations and illustrations that serve to help us know what is occurring within the text. The devotions conclude each day with some application questions that force us to do something with the truths we have just studied.

Please note, there will be a new week of devotions available to be picked up each Sunday, and we will post the devotions online so that anyone not able to come in person can still participate.

Remember, the best is yet to come!

Rob

# Triumphal Entry

Written by Katie Braddock

## Scripture:

Matthew 21:1-11

I've always loved the story of the Triumphal Entry because of sweet memories of little children waving palm branches through the sanctuary singing "Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!" I'm an enthusiastic, pep-rally loving kind of girl, and this moment in the Scriptures is full of excitement and anticipation.

The Jewish people have made their annual trip into Jerusalem to celebrate Passover. Despite the oppressive Roman rule, the atmosphere feels festive and full of energy. News of Jesus of Nazareth has been buzzing through the streets as the people speak of blind Bartimaeus who can now see. A man was paralyzed and Jesus commanded him to walk! Lazarus, living just one town over, walked right out of the tomb after being commanded by Jesus to do so! Could this be the long-awaited, son of David, prophesied King? Jesus has deflected questions about his Messianic role so far. The crowds hear that He is arriving in Jerusalem and gather in mass to catch a glimpse of the man for themselves.

And then, there He is. He enters the city riding a young donkey. The Jewish people instinctively recognize this significance because of their familiarity with the Scriptures, and the specific prophecy of the Messiah arriving on the back of a colt. Jesus of Nazareth is now clearly claiming his rightful place as the Messiah - their long-awaited King. His first public confirmation. The crowds greet Him with a king's welcome - waving palm branches, spreading their cloaks on the dirty ground, and shouting their affirmations and support. Gracious, what a parade! Jesus' journey to the cross has begun.

1. Jesus knows He is making a statement of kingship when he rides in on that donkey. What is your relationship with the King? Are you a curious onlooker in the crowd or a humble servant, laying your cloak on the ground before Him? What evidence in your daily life supports this?

# The People's Expectations

Written by Karen Carnes

## Scripture:

Zechariah 9:9-10

John 12:13, 15-18

Luke 19:34-38

Today is the day. The Jews, who have traveled to Jerusalem for Passover, rejoice as they see their new king riding into town on a donkey. They believe He is the one who will deliver them from poverty, servitude, unjust punishment, and unbearable taxation. They long for Him to overthrow the Romans and sit on His rightful throne, the throne of David. They are not free. They live in bondage, wondering where their next meal will come from and how they will pay the exorbitant taxes levied by the Roman government. They are oppressed by the Roman soldiers and political leaders. But Jesus has arrived. They've seen Him perform miracles, they've heard Him preach with passion about the Kingdom of God. As He rides, they wave palm branches and spread their cloaks along His path. They praise Him and honor Him as their long awaited king. But is He? Has He come to save them from their earthly oppression? Is He a conquering king who will overthrow the Romans? This is their hope. Even the disciples have expectations of greatness. They are certain that Jesus will appoint them as rulers in His kingly court. The joy of these followers cannot be contained, but not so for the Pharisees, Sadducees, and leaders of the Jewish people. They've made deals with the Romans. They overlook the crimes of the authorities and in return, they live in nice homes and never worry about their next meal. They want a Messiah who will affirm their positions of honor. Jesus is a threat to their way of life, and they must do away with Him. Different people, different expectations. Jesus has come and He is the King. He can free them, but He wants to free them from the bondage of sin. He is compassionate, but He isn't focused on the cares of this world. He is focused on His Heavenly Father and His Kingdom. He's the Messiah they need, but is He the Messiah they want?

1. If you had been living under the daily oppression of the Romans, do you think you could have seen past your earthly problems to realize that Jesus had come to bring you into an eternal relationship with the Father?
2. Can you see past the earthly problems of today to realize that God wants our focus to be on things above and not on the things of this world?

# What Did the Disciples Expect from the Messiah?

Written by Carol Stanford

## Scripture:

Matthew 20:20-28

Mark 10:34-45

“Hey, will you do me a favor?”

When you hear those words do you say “Yes” without hearing the question or do you immediately say “No”?

Jesus was asked that exact question by brothers, James and John, two of the 12 disciples. (The gospel of Matthew stated their mother was with them; in the gospel of Mark, she isn’t mentioned). They wanted a favor from Jesus. Jesus listened to their request for prestigious places in His kingdom. He questioned their readiness, and then said He could not grant their request. Huh? Jesus is God – He can do anything! But yet He said that designating those positions is up to God the Father, not Him. That’s deep!

Their request suggested a desire for power, position, and prestige in the Messiah’s earthly kingdom. They had been with Jesus throughout His ministry and still did not get it. He told them in the earlier verses (Matthew 20:18-19/Mark 10:33-34) exactly what to expect when they arrived in Jerusalem. He didn’t mention an earthly kingdom. Yet, because they knew He was the Messiah, they still expected Him to have an earthly reign. When the other disciples heard the request, they got mad because they wanted earthly positions of prestige too. They expected this from the Messiah. C’mon guys - you’re not listening to Jesus.

Jesus took time to set them straight. He described leadership in His kingdom. He said it is about servanthood, selflessness, and sacrifice, not about position, prestige, or power. It is about serving others and sacrifice, just as Jesus, our Messiah, demonstrated. (These guys did finally get it, and they followed Jesus’ example of servanthood and sacrifice.)

## Application Questions:

#1. What are you asking of Jesus that isn’t in line with who He is?

#2. Where is Jesus asking you to serve, sacrifice or be more selfless?

# **Who Were the Pharisees and Why Were They Opposed to Jesus?**

Written by Brad Cooper

## Scripture:

Luke 19:38-40; 45-48

Matthew 23:1-7

The Pharisees were a very influential religious sect of Jewish leaders preceding and during the time of Christ. The Pharisees believed the Law that God gave to Moses was twofold, consisting of the Written Law and the Oral Law (i.e., the teachings of the prophets and the oral traditions of the Jewish people). As leaders, the Pharisees were viewed as the earthly authority on religious expectations in the time preceding Christ's physical arrival.

The Pharisees opposed Jesus for a variety of reasons. First, the Pharisees were simply jealous of Jesus. Large crowds flocked to Jesus which threatened the Pharisees influence over the common people. Jesus taught love, forgiveness, and inclusion instead of judgement, disdain, and scorn as the Pharisees did. Second, Jesus exposed the Pharisees as a group of hypocritical ritualistic religious leaders. As the scripture in Matthew 23:4 states about the Pharisees, "They tie up heavy, cumbersome loads and put them on other people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them." In simple terms, they did not practice what they preached. The Pharisees were almost completely focused on the ritualism of their religion instead of the relationship aspect that Jesus so adamantly preached. Third, the Pharisees felt threatened by Jesus. He confronted their religious ritualism and boldly brought attention to their hypocritical nature. To put it simply, Jesus threatened their control. Those who were in positions of power and authority, as the Pharisees were, feared losing their power and authority.

## Application Questions:

In what ways does Jesus threaten your comfort and control as he did the Pharisees?

As a Christian, what are you doing outside of the ritual of church attendance to build your relationship with Christ?

# When We See the Cross

Written by Grace Moore

## Scripture:

Matthew 16:1-12; 22:23-33

Luke 19:43-48

Acts 4:1-4

Every Christmas, when I see a cross I smile. Growing up when my Daddy saw a cross at Christmas, he would jokingly state, “Now they know we celebrate the cross at Easter not at Christmas.” It was even better if perfectly positioned next to a manger scene. My brother and I as kids would make certain to point one out to him each year.

I imagine the Sadducees would have felt the exact same way except they wouldn’t want to celebrate the cross at Easter either. Their observation might be, “Don’t they know there is no resurrection of the dead? Why on earth are they putting up that cross!” It would definitely not be a laughing matter. These wealthy and powerful leaders of the Jewish community believed strictly in the Torah and nothing else.

Throughout the New Testament, you will find the Sadducees in direct opposition with Christ. The Sadducees would ask Jesus manipulative questions to try and discredit Jesus and who He said He was and is. However, He answered their questions in such a powerful way that it silenced them and revealed their unbelief.

Those that truly know the mystery of the cross (which is God’s redemptive plan from the very beginning through His Son Jesus Christ death on the cross and resurrection from the grave) we can’t imagine Easter without the cross or the resurrection. But isn’t that exactly what we do when we habitually sin or do not take the time to acknowledge Christ in our daily lives? We are forgetting about the resurrection and we cheapen the meaning of the cross. We end up becoming like the Sadducees who ignored the Gospel. My prayer for all of us during this time of Lent is that our focus would be on Christ’s resurrection and whenever we do see a cross that we would smile and be reminded of a Wonderful Savior and Beautiful Jesus who shed His blood for us.

## Application Questions:

Do you believe in the resurrection of Christ and eternal life for those who put their faith in Him?

How might our daily walk with Christ look different if we truly take the resurrection of the grave and eternal life seriously?

# Expectations of the Herodians

Written by Bob Denson

Scripture:

Matthew 22:15-16

Often times today we see that politics and the actions of politicians are more focused on how they can get more power (or stay in power) than on doing what is right and best for the people. You might be surprised to know things were not much different in Jesus' time. When Jesus came to this world, he brought with him a message of hope, salvation, love and caring for others, so how could that not be something that everyone embraced? The answer is simple: selfishness. Jesus was opposed by virtually all the different power groups of that day to include the Pharisees, Sadducees and Herodians. These groups of powerful people were not interested in evaluating the content of Jesus' message but rather only focused on how his message might impact the power and position they had achieved. Most of us have heard of the Pharisees and Sadducees, and understand why they opposed Jesus, but who were the Herodians and why did they oppose Jesus?

The Herodians were a group of Jews who believed that Herodian Rule was the best approach to governing and saw anything that opposed that as a threat to their power and position. They are mentioned in two of the gospels (Mark and Matthew) and are always presented as hostile to Jesus. We first see the Herodians in the book of Mark where Jesus has been preaching and healing people, and his popularity was increasing. In this story the Herodians join forces with a group they also disagreed with, the Pharisees, to plot to kill Jesus because he healed a man's withered hand on the Sabbath. While you would think that healing someone is something to be celebrated, they viewed this miracle solely from the perspective of how this could increase Jesus' popularity, which they perceived as a direct threat to their power. The other mention of the Herodians comes in Matthew, during the last weeks of Jesus' life. Jesus' popularity has dramatically increased so they once again team up with the Pharisees to try to trick Jesus into saying something that will get him arrested. In those days the Jews were under Roman rule so paying taxes to Rome was something the Jews resented and was a hot-button issue. The Herodians and Pharisees conspired to raise this issue with Jesus in a public forum with the intention of getting him "on the record" as to whether he thought the Jews should pay taxes to Rome or not. This was actually brilliantly conceived however Jesus outsmarted them with his answer to "render unto Caesar what is Caesar's and render unto God what is God's".

Looking back it's easy for us to criticize the self-centered actions of the Herodians, but in today's "me first" society we can easily get caught up in basing our decisions and actions on what we think benefits us the most. God reminds us that this world is not our home, and Christians are called to be salt and light, willing to put others needs over our own. The Herodians were focused on their selves and missed Jesus' message, a message of salvation for all, because they could not see past their own selfish desires.

Question – Have you been so caught up in the struggles and stresses of daily life that you have missed Jesus' message for you?

Question - As we approach the Easter season, what motivates your actions and where do you place the priority in your own life?

God's desire is for everyone to be saved, and for those who are Christians to live our lives with a "kingdom based" or eternal focus, focusing outwardly on serving others and spreading the Gospel rather than inwardly on personal gain.





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