

HOLY WEEK

A DEVOTIONAL



PREFACE

During the week leading up to Easter Sunday Christians all around the world prepare to celebrate the good news of Jesus Christ's death and resurrection. This week, commonly referred to as Holy Week, leads us to retrace the final days of Jesus as the story of God's grace in the gospel reaches its climatic fulfillment.

During this week we meet the paradoxical greatness and lowliness of Jesus in life transforming ways. As we walk with him through his final days we see him as the Lord of the temple yet the lamb in the temple. The one who curses a fig tree yet dies cursed on a tree. The master of creation yet the servant of humanity. Moment by moment we watch as Jesus Christ reveals more and more the meaning of his coming crucifixion and resurrection. And as we follow him in the writings of the New Testament we are led to discover hope for sinners and sufferers in the scandalous love of the gospel.

So this year we are inviting you to journey with Jesus in the pages of scripture toward his cross and empty tomb through this short devotional for the six days of Holy Week. Each day you will find a scripture passage to read as the Bible retells Jesus' last days on earth. After you spend time reading God's word there is a short reflection and questions for spiritual renewal. We hope that as you walk with Jesus through these fateful days of Holy Week you will become more alive to the kiss of God in the gospel. The kiss that changes everything.

HOLY MONDAY

READ MARK 11:15-19

It was certainly the last place to be if you don't like conflict. There Jesus stood, in the outer halls of the temple, flipping tables, tossing chairs and running people off. Jesus, meek and mild? What on earth is he doing?

What provoked the holy ire of Jesus wasn't so much the existence but location of those currency changers and animal salesmen. As people were walking into this most sacred place where sinners and sufferers meet the living God you could hardly hear a word over the commotion of sheep bleating and price haggling. In an effort to streamline the experience God's people had distorted worship into a distracted box to check, and God into a magic genie they could summons through the right religious deeds.

Jesus makes his opinion of the matter clear citing two Old Testament verses. Isaiah 56 had looked forward to a future temple which would be "a house of prayer" for all nations. Jesus contrasts this glorious expectation with what he currently sees, "a den of robbers." The verse comes from Jeremiah 7, where God's people had formed a habit of going about their business stealing, murdering and committing adultery, only to return to the temple for worship with a misplaced confidence that this outward religious act could make up for an internal sin problem. Sadly, Jesus saw a similar empty, heartless religion before his eyes. Thousands of people visiting the temple, distracted, going through the motions, checking the box and relying on outward acts to make up for an internal problem.

And so just like God promised the destruction of the temple in Jeremiah 7, in making this public spectacle Jesus was announcing that the current temple's sell-by date had come and gone as well.

Yet the confrontation of Holy Monday was pointing to the compassion of Good Friday, where on the cross, like the temple in Jeremiah 7, Jesus, the true temple, was destroyed for our heartless, empty religion. Yet not to exercise judgment but give grace. And resurrected three days latter as our temple "not made with human hands," Jesus finally ushered in the glorious expectation of Isaiah 56, a true and greater temple where now anyone and everyone, no matter how far you've strayed, no matter how big your sin, can meet the living God through the Good Friday grace of Christ.

FIG TUESDAY

READ MATTHEW 21:18-21

“Potential” is a word we use a lot. In sports we speak of young, up and coming stars with “potential.” At work we hear about the new employee who’s green but has a lot of “potential.” It’s a word that can fill us with hope or disappointment, as in “they *had* so much potential, but it never came to be.”

As Jesus approached the fig tree in Matthew 21 his eyes were met with the initial potential of satisfying his hunger with its sweet fruit. In fact, the tree was all but promising it. Normally figs weren’t in season yet, but this particular tree full of leaves (a sign that its fruit was in) was advertising to all who walked by, “come and eat, there’s plenty to go around!”

Yet when Jesus reached out to grab a fig, all he got was a handful of leaves. In disappointment Jesus cursed the fig tree and instantly it withered. Amazing! Yet perhaps a bit harsh? Cursing a tree that wasn’t bearing fruit, and out of season, no less? Is Jesus wielding supernatural power in a childish fit?

Like the clearing of the temple, Jesus is using this as an object lesson. The fig tree was guilty of false advertisement. It promised fruit, life and growth, yet was bearing none. While it looked healthy on the outside, it was dying on the inside.

The fig tree is a picture of the spiritual state of the temple-goers Jesus just cleared out. They gave off the impression of maturity but were lacking fruit. The Bible has a word for that—hypocrisy. And so in cursing the fruitless fig tree Jesus is pronouncing a judgment on the hypocritical members of God’s people, who for all of their outward displays of obedience weren’t bearing internal fruit. It was nothing more than hollow religiosity, leaves but no figs.

The danger is just as real for us today. We can easily find ourselves leading a group, taking meals, serving on Sundays, and discipling kids all without bearing spiritual fruit. You may read this and think, “That’s me, but I could never let people see the true me. I could never let people in on the places of hypocrisy in my life.” Yet actually that’s just what the gospel invites us to do.

Holy Week begins with Jesus cursing a fig tree and ends with Jesus cursed on a tree, crucified on behalf of hypocrites like you and me. And what is the result of this? An alluring grace that leads the dying criminal next to him to a place of redemptive vulnerability, finding in Jesus a friend of sinners, who actually isn’t repelled but drawn to our deepest sin.

SPY WEDNESDAY

READ LUKE 22:1-6

Everything in this brief passage reads like a hunt. The Gospel writer Luke begins depicting the religious leaders keenly on the trail of their prey. For some time now the chief priests and teachers of the law have had Jesus in their crosshairs, watching and waiting for the right opportunity to get their man. And it appears that time has finally come.

The religious bureaucracy's moment arrives when it's revealed that they aren't the only ones hunting the Son of God, Satan has been tracking him as well, coiled up, waiting for his chance and now he's sprung into action.

Verse 3 begins with the most frightening words that can be written about someone, "then Satan entered Judas." Luke isn't referring to some demonic possession we may have seen in a movie, rather he's describing evil influencing Judas in the direction of betraying Jesus. Suddenly, the whole barrier of Jesus' popularity has been removed. One of his own number will hand him over when Jesus is alone, out of the public eye. At last the priests, scribes and Satan can snatch their prey with no one else the wiser.

Despite this cosmic conflict between God and Satan at work beneath the surface, we can't miss the tragic culpability of Judas. Luke is careful to describe him as "Judas...one of the Twelve." Judas had spent the last three years in full-time ministry with Jesus, experiencing firsthand his power and love. Yet Judas' partnership with evil reveals a sobering truth—proximity does not imply intimacy. Judas had ate, slept, preached and prayed with Jesus yet his heart remained cold to the depth of his need and the heights of Jesus' compassion. He was so close yet tragically so far from Christ.

Judas' betrayal is an urgent warning to us today. It can be tragically easy to assume that because we are doing many things for Jesus we have true intimacy with Jesus. Yet Judas' story is a reminder that proximity to Jesus is not the same as intimacy with him.

So how do we cultivate intimacy with Jesus? Perhaps the last place we would think to begin—our sin. Intimacy begins with repentance, a time to locate ourselves in relation to Jesus and say, "I'm far from you here." From there we're led to rejoice in what Judas could never rejoice in, the towering heights of Jesus' love, who on Spy Wednesday allowed himself to be hunted down like an animal to win you.

MAUNDY THURSDAY

READ JOHN 13:1-17

“Where did Jesus go?!” That is what any of the disciples would have thought when they looked up from their food to realize that Jesus had left his place at the table. The disciples would have eaten the Last Supper laying on their side at a U-shaped table. As the host of the meal, Jesus was sitting in the middle, the seat of honor. Only, he’s not there anymore.

It must have been an absolute shock to that first disciple looking around for Jesus to discover that he’s found him...at his feet. It’s the last place on earth you would ever expect Jesus to be! He, the master, beneath his disciples? Surely this can’t be.

Footwashing was something reserved for the lowest of servants in the ancient world. But Jesus reverses the expected roles. He undresses and puts on the clothes of a servant. He humbles himself from the place of honor at the head of the table takes the place of dishonor at the feet of his disciples. Jesus who is so great, stoops so low, gets a bowl of water and starts to wash the dirt in between his disciples toes. Can you imagine the feeling the scandalous grace of God’s hand scrubbing your feet?

Yet this shocking display of humility is dramatizing an even more startling act of service Jesus will perform in less than a day’s time. On Maundy Thursday, the great and revered Teacher assumed the role of a despised and humiliated servant for the good of his disciples, and on Good Friday the great and revered God of the universe assumed the role of a despised and humiliated sinner for the good of you. The One who is so great stooped so low and on the cross washed your sins not with water but his own blood. There can be no greater act of humility, service and love, yet as the writer of Hebrews reminds us, Jesus was glad to do it.

And so Jesus’ startling act at the Last Supper points us to two great truths for not only becoming a Christian but growing as a Christian. First, I need to be washed. There is dirt on my soul that I cannot clean, sin that I cannot atone for. Second, by faith, I have been washed. Through the cross, at immeasurable cost to himself, Jesus in love has cleansed me with his blood, making me whiter than snow. Hallelujah! What kindness.

GOOD FRIDAY

READ LUKE 23:26-49

Nature has a way of telling us about something happening which the naked eye cannot perceive. I can remember looking out at the sky one evening to see a strange collision of purple and black. It looked as if the clouds were about to vomit. Moments later a tornado touched down.

As Jesus hung on the cross we read as rulers, criminals and crowds all provide unwitting commentary on what's happening. But by the time we get to verse 44 creation itself begins to speak. Luke tells us that from noon until 3pm the lights went out, the sun stopped shining and Jesus Christ endures the agony of crucifixion in utter darkness. The image draws our minds back to Old Testament passages such as Amos 8:9, which describe this same phenomenon in connection with God's judgment at the day of the Lord. God's wrath, the response of his holy love to our sin, has finally come...only in a twist that no one could have foreseen, the shadow of judgment has fallen on his own Son.

The paradox of the moment is heightened as we read the centurion presiding over Christ's crucifixion offer his judgment of the whole event, "surely this was an innocent man." The innocence of Jesus is the key note Luke has been trying to strike in his retelling of the crucifixion. Seven times Luke has a third party declare Jesus innocent, culminating in a non-Jewish Roman soldier who just oversaw the entire event from Jesus' first flogging to final breathe. Innocent, yet cloaked in the shadow of divine judgment. How can this be?

Much like I looked at the evening sky as a strange collision of colors signaled a powerful fury of tordanic active was about to descend, in these sacred hours on Good Friday we look at the cross and see an even more terrible, awesome collision of wrath and mercy as a powerful fury of divine grace was about to descend. On the cross we see the unceasing love of God at work. Because in his holiness God must judge the wickedness of sin, to do otherwise would be to deny his very nature. Yet in his compassion he has chosen to exhaust that wrath on his innocent Son. Amazing grace!

And here's what this changes for us right now. From the moment we place our faith in God's son not spared for us we can now be sure that God will never be angry with us again. Though he grieves our sin and may discipline us for our good, we need not fear a moment where he looks at us with anything but pure, unashamed love. In Christ, God's not angry at you, but loves you with the same delight and joy he has for Jesus.

HOLY SATURDAY

READ 1 PETER 3:18-22

“I believe in Jesus Christ, God’s only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary. He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried; he descended into hell.”

So begins one of the most famous statements in the Christian faith, the Apostle’s Creed. Yet as we recite it, it’s that last phrase that seems a little hard to come out. Jesus *descended into hell*?

There are various ways Christians throughout the centuries have attempted to understand what happened in the days between Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection.

1. Jesus *spiritually* descended to hell on Holy Saturday to defeat death and proclaim victory over Satan.
2. Jesus *figuratively* descended to hell on Good Friday, as he experienced the wrath of God on the cross.
3. Jesus *literally* descended to hell after his crucifixion to preach the gospel to those who had died before his coming.
4. Jesus *didn’t* descend at all, Christians have mistaken what 1 Peter 3:18-22 and other passages teach.

Without space for further explanation, it would seem the first option is the best way to understand what happened on Holy Saturday. Jesus died the same any person does. In the days between his burial and resurrection, Jesus’ physical body remained in the grave, while his soul descended to the place of the dead. While there Jesus did not suffer but rather proclaimed that in his death and impending resurrection he is the victorious King over death and the devil. You could summarize it this way, what happened on Holy Saturday? A victory tour.

Jesus’ descent means many things to our faith, one being that we can face our own death with hope. Jesus died a real death, the same any of us will. Yet in experiencing death, Jesus also defeated death. On Holy Saturday Jesus went on a victory tour, proclaiming that he is King over everything, even the grave!

Meaning, as we all one day face death, through faith in Christ we can be confident that he will bring us through victorious too. Death will be scary and painful, yet we can rejoice now because on Holy Saturday Jesus descended to the dead, and proclaimed there, “you have no claim on me!”



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