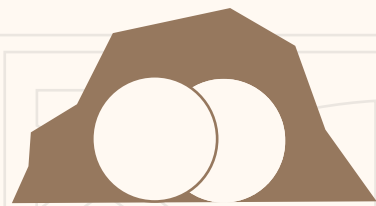


HOLY WEEK DEVOTIONAL





March 28 | Matthew 21:1-11

Israel was a nation formed specifically by God and for God, unique among every other nation before or after. There was no speaking about their kings without reference to the King and Jesus made two critical claims during his earthly ministry: Jesus claimed to be Israel's King and more importantly, he claimed to be the King of the universe. And if Jesus is King over all kings and the Lord over all lords, then that means that each and every person is called to bow before him, whether we're talking about the Roman emperor or the power-hungry head of the local bowling league. The rulers of Jesus' day understood this, which brought them into sharp conflict with Jesus as they sought to keep their own power by undermining him and leading others to reject him as well.



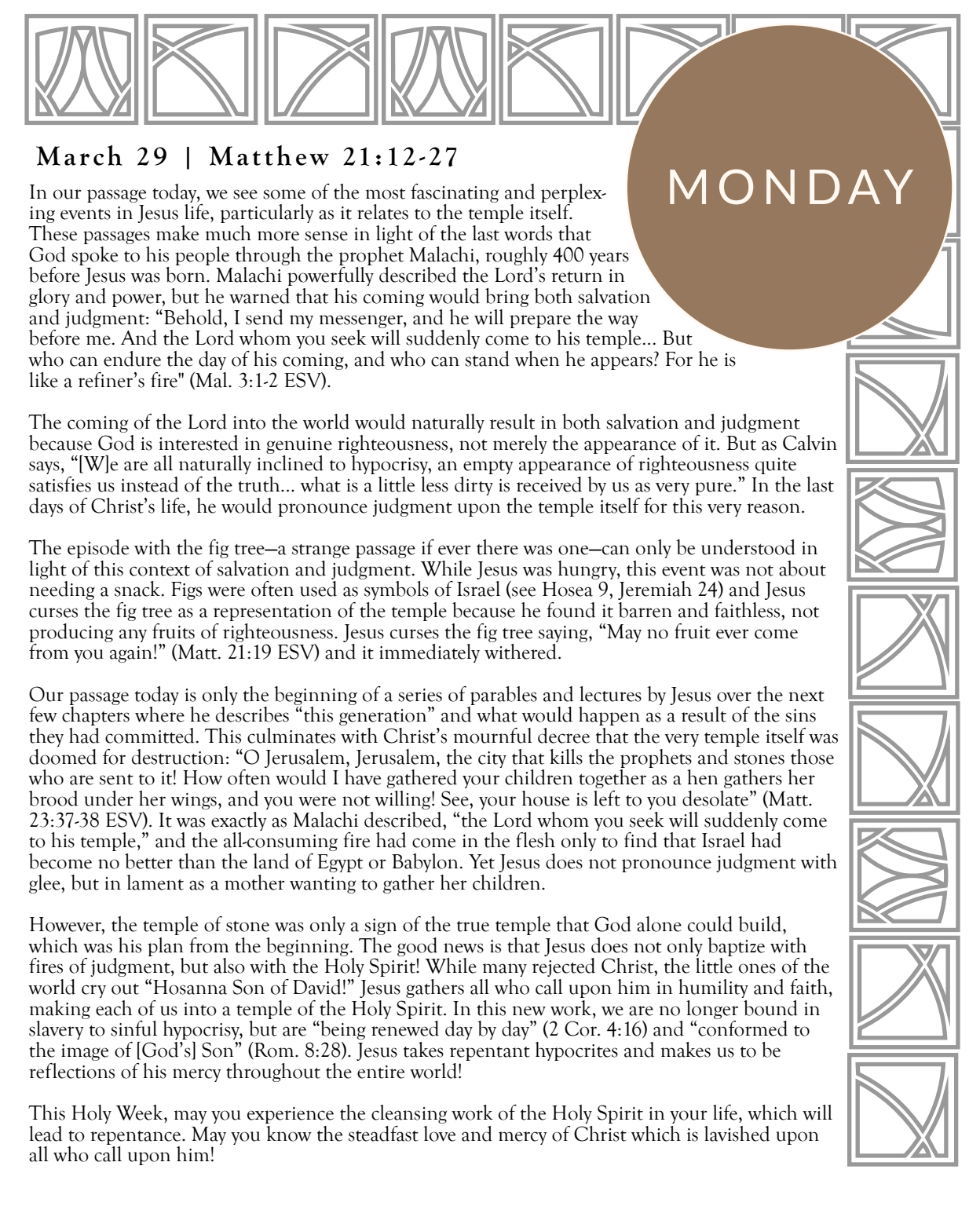
In the final week of Jesus' life, the conflict between the rightful King and the world's kings comes into its greatest focus. This begins when Jesus enters Jerusalem on the back of a donkey. The triumphal entry is unimpressive. God is not riding the majestic stallion, crowned with laurel branches, surrounded by the wealthy and glorying in loud shouts of praise like the kings of his day. This sharp contrast is precisely the point, and it should never be downplayed or glossed over. Worldly power is doomed to be overturned by the power of God, but Jesus demonstrates that the power of God is made known in and through weakness, so that God might show that it is he alone who accomplishes all things.

Christ is not interested in the pomp and circumstance of political charades, unlike all the pretenders to the throne. Ironically, while worldly eyes see Jesus as a pauper prince with a motley crew of unfortunates, those who are not esteemed by the world are the very ones who joyfully welcome him crying, "Hosanna—save us!" Jesus came proclaiming the way of true righteousness, which gave hope to the lowly that finally God's kingdom would prevail for the good of the world. But talk of true righteousness likewise strikes fear into the hearts of the corrupt, realizing that their time was short. We will see this all the more clearly as this week goes on.

Today many forcefully declare that Jesus wasn't political, but this perspective can only come from misunderstanding who Jesus is -King- and the world into which he was born. The idea of "separation of church and state" simply had no meaning in the first century. God's people understood this, which is why they had such great hope, even as Jesus' enemies understood that he was a direct challenge to their reign. Our modern views on government have caused us to imagine wrongly that it could be possible to talk about God and what He requires while "not being political," as if God's concern for faithfulness and morality and righteousness ends the moment you start talking about society as a whole.

As the apostle Paul said powerfully, "The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent [and] he has given assurance to all by raising [Christ] from the dead" (Acts 17:30-31). The good news is that our King has come, not only to die but also to raise all things to new life with him. There is not one area of our lives or anywhere else in the world in which he does not intend to see his will done "on earth as it is in heaven." This Holy Week, may you look to your life and consider the ways in which you are living out of step with the will of our Lord, knowing with great assurance that Jesus always answers the prayer, "Save me!"





March 29 | Matthew 21:12-27

In our passage today, we see some of the most fascinating and perplexing events in Jesus' life, particularly as it relates to the temple itself. These passages make much more sense in light of the last words that God spoke to his people through the prophet Malachi, roughly 400 years before Jesus was born. Malachi powerfully described the Lord's return in glory and power, but he warned that his coming would bring both salvation and judgment: "Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple... But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire" (Mal. 3:1-2 ESV).

MONDAY

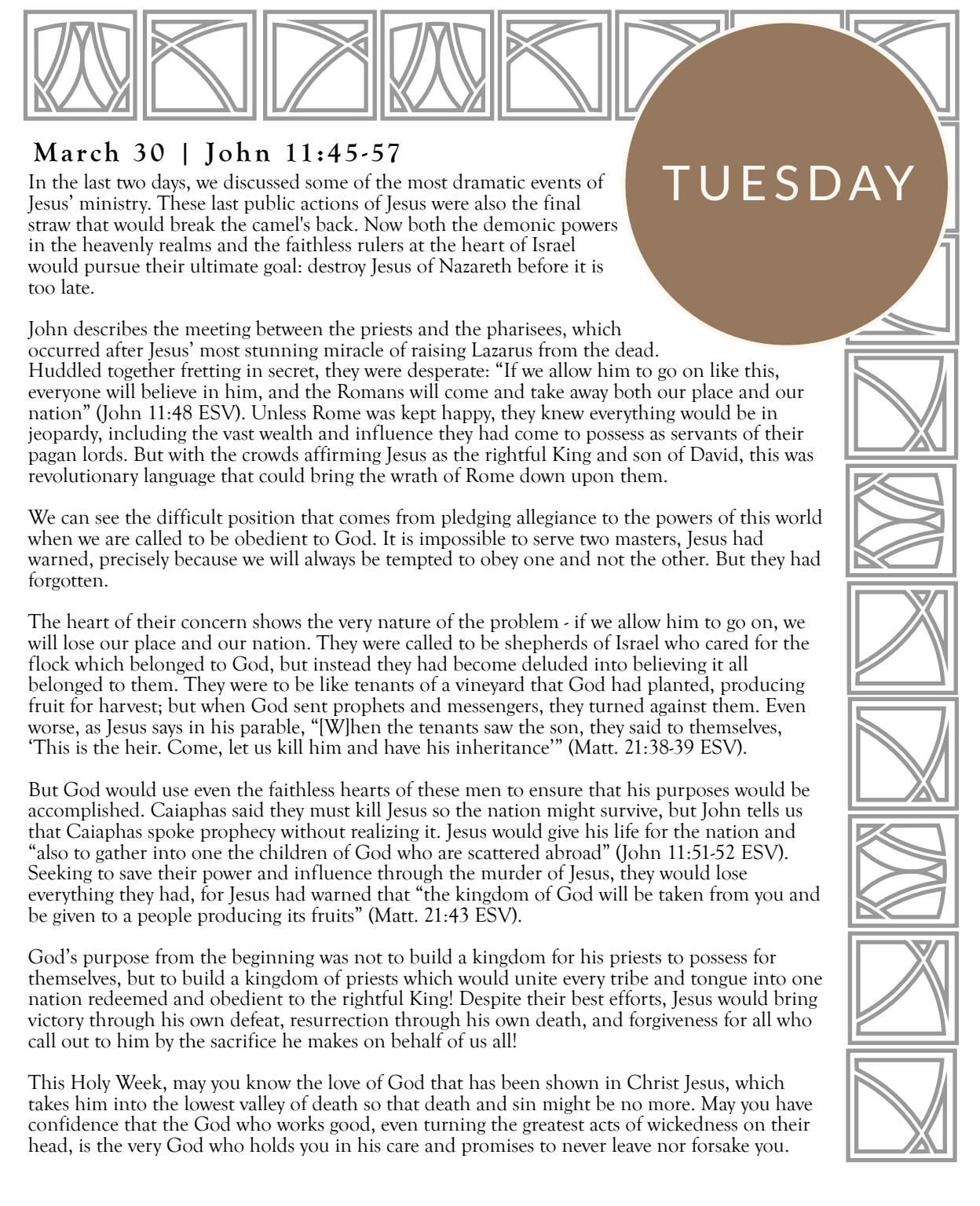
The coming of the Lord into the world would naturally result in both salvation and judgment because God is interested in genuine righteousness, not merely the appearance of it. But as Calvin says, "[W]e are all naturally inclined to hypocrisy, an empty appearance of righteousness quite satisfies us instead of the truth... what is a little less dirty is received by us as very pure." In the last days of Christ's life, he would pronounce judgment upon the temple itself for this very reason.

The episode with the fig tree—a strange passage if ever there was one—can only be understood in light of this context of salvation and judgment. While Jesus was hungry, this event was not about needing a snack. Figs were often used as symbols of Israel (see Hosea 9, Jeremiah 24) and Jesus curses the fig tree as a representation of the temple because he found it barren and faithless, not producing any fruits of righteousness. Jesus curses the fig tree saying, "May no fruit ever come from you again!" (Matt. 21:19 ESV) and it immediately withered.

Our passage today is only the beginning of a series of parables and lectures by Jesus over the next few chapters where he describes "this generation" and what would happen as a result of the sins they had committed. This culminates with Christ's mournful decree that the very temple itself was doomed for destruction: "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See, your house is left to you desolate" (Matt. 23:37-38 ESV). It was exactly as Malachi described, "the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple," and the all-consuming fire had come in the flesh only to find that Israel had become no better than the land of Egypt or Babylon. Yet Jesus does not pronounce judgment with glee, but in lament as a mother wanting to gather her children.

However, the temple of stone was only a sign of the true temple that God alone could build, which was his plan from the beginning. The good news is that Jesus does not only baptize with fires of judgment, but also with the Holy Spirit! While many rejected Christ, the little ones of the world cry out "Hosanna Son of David!" Jesus gathers all who call upon him in humility and faith, making each of us into a temple of the Holy Spirit. In this new work, we are no longer bound in slavery to sinful hypocrisy, but are "being renewed day by day" (2 Cor. 4:16) and "conformed to the image of [God's] Son" (Rom. 8:28). Jesus takes repentant hypocrites and makes us to be reflections of his mercy throughout the entire world!

This Holy Week, may you experience the cleansing work of the Holy Spirit in your life, which will lead to repentance. May you know the steadfast love and mercy of Christ which is lavished upon all who call upon him!



March 30 | John 11:45-57

In the last two days, we discussed some of the most dramatic events of Jesus' ministry. These last public actions of Jesus were also the final straw that would break the camel's back. Now both the demonic powers in the heavenly realms and the faithless rulers at the heart of Israel would pursue their ultimate goal: destroy Jesus of Nazareth before it is too late.

John describes the meeting between the priests and the pharisees, which occurred after Jesus' most stunning miracle of raising Lazarus from the dead. Huddled together fretting in secret, they were desperate: "If we allow him to go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation" (John 11:48 ESV). Unless Rome was kept happy, they knew everything would be in jeopardy, including the vast wealth and influence they had come to possess as servants of their pagan lords. But with the crowds affirming Jesus as the rightful King and son of David, this was revolutionary language that could bring the wrath of Rome down upon them.

We can see the difficult position that comes from pledging allegiance to the powers of this world when we are called to be obedient to God. It is impossible to serve two masters, Jesus had warned, precisely because we will always be tempted to obey one and not the other. But they had forgotten.

The heart of their concern shows the very nature of the problem - if we allow him to go on, we will lose our place and our nation. They were called to be shepherds of Israel who cared for the flock which belonged to God, but instead they had become deluded into believing it all belonged to them. They were to be like tenants of a vineyard that God had planted, producing fruit for harvest; but when God sent prophets and messengers, they turned against them. Even worse, as Jesus says in his parable, "[W]hen the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, 'This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and have his inheritance'" (Matt. 21:38-39 ESV).

But God would use even the faithless hearts of these men to ensure that his purposes would be accomplished. Caiaphas said they must kill Jesus so the nation might survive, but John tells us that Caiaphas spoke prophecy without realizing it. Jesus would give his life for the nation and "also to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad" (John 11:51-52 ESV). Seeking to save their power and influence through the murder of Jesus, they would lose everything they had, for Jesus had warned that "the kingdom of God will be taken from you and be given to a people producing its fruits" (Matt. 21:43 ESV).

God's purpose from the beginning was not to build a kingdom for his priests to possess for themselves, but to build a kingdom of priests which would unite every tribe and tongue into one nation redeemed and obedient to the rightful King! Despite their best efforts, Jesus would bring victory through his own defeat, resurrection through his own death, and forgiveness for all who call out to him by the sacrifice he makes on behalf of us all!

This Holy Week, may you know the love of God that has been shown in Christ Jesus, which takes him into the lowest valley of death so that death and sin might be no more. May you have confidence that the God who works good, even turning the greatest acts of wickedness on their head, is the very God who holds you in his care and promises to never leave nor forsake you.

TUESDAY



March 31 | John 14:1-31

In these final hours together, Jesus takes care to strengthen his disciples and provide them comfort. Jesus understood that his darkest hour and theirs was quickly approaching as “the ruler of this world” was coming to seize him (John 14:30 ESV). We have paid close attention to what was happening visibly on the earth, but we must never forget that Jesus did not come only to free us from wicked earthly rulers, but to defeat the devil who had opposed humanity from the first days in the Garden. We do not fight against flesh and blood, Paul reminds us (Eph. 6:12). Neither was Jesus.

WEDNESDAY

Speaking of his death, Jesus told his disciples, “For this purpose I have come to this hour... now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be cast out. But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself” (John 12:27, 31-32 ESV). By his death on the Cross, Paul tells us that Jesus “disarmed the [spiritual] rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them” (Col. 2:15 ESV). But “[n]one of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory” (1 Cor. 2:8 ESV). Jesus knew he was headed for victory, but his victory would appear like the most horrible defeat. When God is present, however, what appears to be powerful is actually powerless, and what appears to be weak is truly invincible. When all the darkness of the world converge upon them, Jesus calls them to trust him and his words so that they would rejoice knowing that he was accomplishing the will of God.

All too often when we look at the state of the world, we are tempted to believe that this is evidence that God’s kingdom is powerless or that the kingdom must not be present at all. When we face great trials and tragedies, or feel the weakness of our flesh, we often see this as proof that perhaps God isn’t working in our lives, or that he can only work in their lives (whoever “they” are) but surely not ours. Jesus counters this very way of thinking. While the devil was about to act with ferocious power to see Jesus dead, the Lord says, “He has no claim on me” (John 14:30).

More often than not, we are tempted to believe that we would be much better off if Jesus had never left, but only in leaving us could he go and prepare our place. Even more, it is in his physical absence that Christ would then send to us the Holy Spirit, so that God would now dwell within us in a way that had never been seen in human history. In this last year we have witnessed how the nations still rage and how earthly rulers contend for power, encouraging us to hate their enemies in disobedience to the Lord. We have seen great death and great fear cripple the entire world, bringing even the global economy to a near absolute standstill. Day by day we’re encouraged to place our hope in these things. But in the midst of it all, those with open eyes can see Jesus standing at the right hand of God and clothed in glory, reigning over all things.

We can rest in the comfort that the Lord knows our frailty and the weakness of our nature as children made from dust, looking at us with compassion as our great shepherd. Because he has died, so too have we, and all our sin has been left in the grave. Because he lives, so too shall we, and we know that when he appears we will be glorified even as he is. Because he goes to the Father, he prepares for us a place and sends the Holy Spirit to lead us always to him. This Holy Week, whatever darkness you face, may you hear these words of Jesus and know that he is speaking to you: “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you... Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid” (John 14:27).



April 1 | John 13:1-20

I don't consider myself a "procrastinator," but whenever I have a deadline of any kind, I'm always more productive the closer I get to the due date. If you've ever been a student, you know what I'm talking about. The "time crunch" causes us to devote more effort and energy to accomplishing the task at hand. I've never met anyone in school that starts their final paper on the first week of classes.

MAUNDY THURSDAY

Our passage for today tells us that Jesus was facing the "time crunch." In this passage it says, "Jesus knew that his hour had come [and] having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end" (John 13:1 ESV). It's difficult to imagine a more beautiful line, but Jesus extends to us a love that stops at nothing. In his waning hours, Jesus continues to show himself to be a different kind of King than any of us could have imagined. Taking off his own garment and kneeling down, Jesus began to wash his disciples' feet.

Peter expresses his outrage, recognizing that Jesus was about to do an unbelievable and dishonorable thing. Culturally speaking, the person of honor would have had their feet washed by the lowliest servant. Here Jesus stoops down to clean the dirty feet of his followers in order to demonstrate all the more clearly that unless we are washed by Jesus, we have no hope to be cleansed at all.

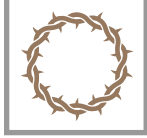
What a humbling picture of the King we serve! But as F.F. Bruce says, "The form of God was not exchanged for the form of a servant; it was revealed in the form of a servant." Jesus is not acting like a servant, as if it were a temporary role to play- this is the very character and nature of God on display! As we have seen this week, Jesus is not like the rulers of this world, nor is his kingdom anything like the kingdoms that they have built.

Jesus calls his disciples to faith asking, "Do you understand what I have done to you?" (John 13:12 ESV). The physical washing that takes place for Jesus' disciples ultimately points to a more significant cleansing of their very hearts by the Holy Spirit. Through the powerful illustration of feet washing, Jesus faithfully and mercifully demonstrates that God's Kingdom differs greatly from that of this world. In Jesus, we see that the way to this Kingdom is through the cross. Ultimately, pure and right standing before God is only possible because our King and Savior laid aside his heavenly glory, in order that he might make a way for us to follow by pouring out his blood in place of ours.

But what can all this mean for us now? The answer is simple: "do just as I have done to you." The One who knelt to wash his creation's feet calls you to do the same as a participant in the work of God's Kingdom. Each one of us has been united to Christ our Savior and he has sent each one of us into the world, just as he was sent by his Father, in order that we might demonstrate the nature of God's kingdom in our daily life as well.

As you approach Good Friday and Easter this year, remember that Jesus himself was rejected for your acceptance. Believe that by looking to Jesus, you can experience God's unconditional love and mercy. Take hold of the eternal promise of grace, which is in Christ, who by his finished work freely offers forgiveness for sin and adoption into the family of God. Those who do will "never be put to shame" (Romans 10:11 ESV).





April 2 | Luke 22:39 - 22:71; Luke 23:1 - 23:56

Each year, I find myself wondering if it will ever get easier to read the stories of Christ's last hours. The opposite feels true. Another year has passed in which God has shown himself to be faithful - to be the very God who would be revealed by the Cross. Particularly when we face the horrors of this world and tread the valley of the shadow of death, God captures our hearts more fully as he builds more monuments of grace in our journey toward Christlikeness. As the living God becomes all the more precious to you, the darkness of the Cross gets deeper still.

If we see the Cross as only punishment and wrath, we have misunderstood. The gospel doesn't tell us that "God so hated the world that he gave his only begotten Son." It certainly doesn't say "God hated his Son so that somehow he could love awful, wretched people like us." The Cross is shocking because it is the most visible demonstration of God's love and faithfulness and mercy.

As Christ said before, "[F]or this purpose I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name" and the Father spoke from heaven and promised, "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again." As we saw Wednesday, Jesus answered, "This voice has come for your sake, not mine. Now is the judgment of this world; now will the ruler of this world be cast out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself" (John 12:27-32 ESV). The Cross is Christ's revolution against the devil by destroying both sin and the power of death by taking it upon his incorruptible nature. He is lifted up as the new tree of life, planted where all the powers of hell and darkness gathered in violence against him.

To worldly eyes, the Cross is nothing other than a monument to the ancient serpent who now killed the last Adam even as he seduced the first. Without eyes to see, we might be tempted to ask, "Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it?" (Rev. 13:4 ESV). But when God is present, what appears to be powerful is actually powerless, and what appears to be weak is truly invincible.

While the Cross was the world's greatest evil, it reveals Christ looking at his people and having "compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd" (Matt. 9:36 ESV). While the Pharisees and Romans and criminals mocked him, the Cross was the place where Jesus says, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you... [l]et not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid" (John 14:27 ESV). To the sound of the weeping women gathered for his dark vigil, the Cross was Jesus who "having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end" (John 13:1 ESV).

Christ's kingdom is not of this world because in his kingdom, even we who are guilty can cry out, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." Because he bore each and every sin and faced our every darkness, he can now say, "[Y]ou will be with me in paradise." He goes to the Cross so that it might become true for all people - every tribe and tongue - that in Christ we are "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession" who now live to "proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Pet. 2:9 ESV).

This Good Friday, may you know that the Cross is the surest evidence that God's love for you can never be defeated. Today, may you worship Christ as the angels of heaven did that day.





April 3 | Hebrews 8 & Hebrews 9

HOLY
SATURDAY

Our passage today is quite different from the gospel narratives we have been reading this week, but it is fitting for Holy Saturday when we remember the time in which Christ remained under the power of death. The book of Hebrews is a masterpiece that shows, chapter by chapter, all of the ways in which Jesus had fulfilled every covenant promise that God had made. We have spoken at length this week about Christ and his kingdom. Hebrews makes clear that there can be no going back after the day of the Lord has come because the eternal King has also become our great High Priest. Apart from him there can be no forgiveness.

We can only understand the full significance of Jesus' crucifixion within the context of the sacrificial system that God instituted under the old covenant. Hebrews 9:22 describes that the law required "that nearly everything be cleansed with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness" (Heb. 9:22 ESV). Purification by blood was central and in the law given through Moses, only the shedding of blood could provide a covering for sin. We see this principle from the very beginning of God's story.

When sin entered the world, God killed an animal to cover Adam and Eve in its skins (Gen. 3:21). When God rescued Israel from Egypt, it was the blood of the Passover lamb sprinkled above their door which saved them from death (Ex. 11-12). Hebrews makes clear that all of the sacrifices, the priesthood, and the temple itself were "copies" and "shadows"—faint reflections of heaven. They all were intended to be signposts leading us directly to Christ and what he alone would accomplish. He is "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world" (John 1:29).

Jesus is not merely a lamb, nor only a man, but "the Author of life" (Acts 3:15 ESV). Hebrews tells us that Jesus is "the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature" (Heb. 1:3 ESV). The temple in Jerusalem had Caiaphas—a high priest who perverted justice and sought to destroy the very God of Israel who had come in the flesh. God's people have Christ who is a greater High Priest than any below because he reigns over the heavenly temple which "the Lord set up, not man" (Heb. 8:2 ESV). Jesus "entered once for all into the holy places [by] means of his own blood" and is therefore able to secure for us "an eternal redemption" (Heb. 9:12 ESV).

When all humanity had fallen into sin, God the Son took on human nature to accomplish what we failed to do and now we have been saved "from the wrath of God" (Rom. 5:9 ESV). As Karl Barth powerfully wrote, "God's wrath had to be revealed against the ungodliness and unrighteousness of men. But only God could carry through this necessary revelation of His righteousness without involving an end of all things. [This] is just what did happen on the cross of Golgotha: that double proof of omnipotence in which God did not abate the demands of His righteousness but showed Himself equal to His own wrath; on the one hand by submitting to it and on the other by not being consumed by it."

As Holy Week comes to a close, I invite you to trust in Christ. We have a "great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Heb. 4:14-16).



April 4 | John 20

Our passage today in John's gospel encourages us to remember that the beginning of our story with God was in the Garden. Christ's journey toward Golgotha started in Eden.

On the day God began to create, the darkness of the deep had no light of its own. It "was" a nowhere "place" of nothing in the time before time began- nothing to see, nothing to feel, nothing at all. Until God the Father, through the Word, spoke the command as the Spirit hovered over the deep, "Let there be light." At the command of God, darkness gives way to the dawn.

Redemption follows this same pattern. Humanity had become a people dwelling in darkness, hopelessly united to Adam through whom "death spread to all because all sinned" (Rom. 5:12 ESV). It was as Jesus said, "people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil" (John 3:19 ESV). Our salvation is much more than a simple financial transaction of Jesus paying our debts. Our salvation required nothing less than new creation itself.

In order to free humanity from bondage to the power of death, God took on human nature so that "he might taste death for everyone" (Heb. 2:9 ESV). Facing death on the Cross, he brought us and all our sin with him. His death was our death, and his life is now our life. Death could not hold the One who "upholds the universe by the word of his power (Heb. 1:3 ESV). Now death can no longer hold those who have been united to the eternal, risen King either. By the resurrection of Jesus Christ, God reveals that the first creation was a pale "shadow" of what God intended to do when "the sun of righteousness... [rose] with healing in its wings" (Mal. 4:2 ESV).

Creation began in a garden and it begins again in the garden by Christ's tomb, this time with Christ mistaken as the gardener. Now those who bore the "image of the man of dust," would be remade into "the image of [the] Son" (Rom. 3:29 ESV). As the Spirit of God once hovered over the darkness of the world, God again "said, 'Let light shine out darkness'" to reveal his eternal purpose: "to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God [to us] in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor. 4:6 ESV).

As darkness turned to twilight on that Easter morning, Mary witnessed the dawn of the new creation. Mary carried the very longing, grief, and hope of God's people searching for the Lord like a new Eve seeking the last Adam. If ever we are going to meet Jesus, we must meet him in the dark as Mary did that day. Christ is not a savior of those who believe they need no saving, nor the healer of those that are well. He did not come to comfort the proud, nor build up our personal empires. He has not come to bless our begrudging worship or half-hearted holiness. He says, "Behold, I am making all things new" (Rev. 21:5).

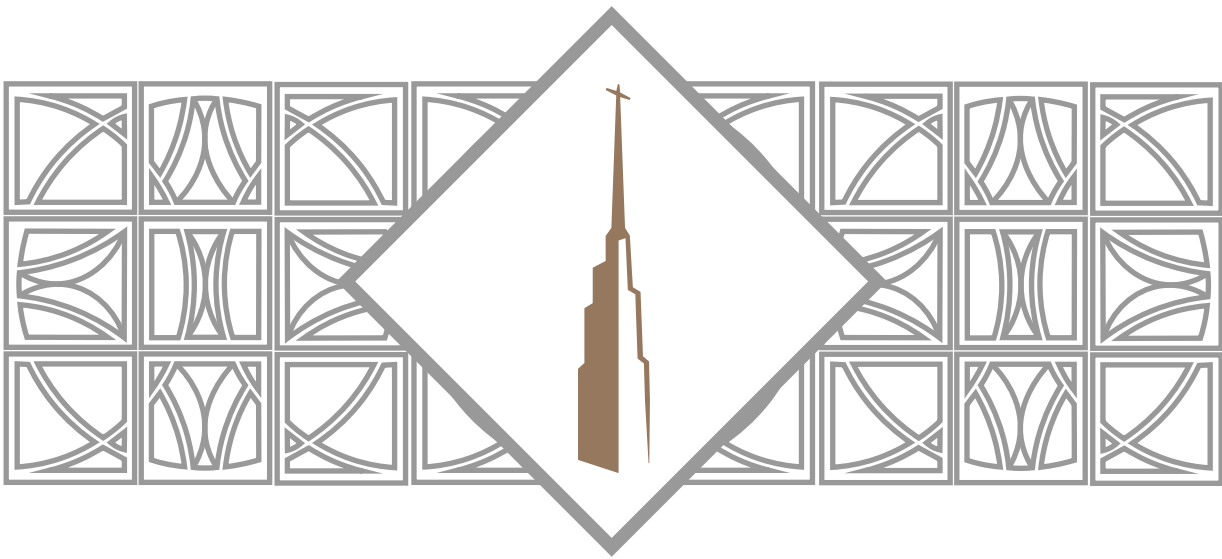
As you go from this Holy Week, I encourage you to reckon with every aspect of Jesus. He proclaims judgment for those who have no more than the appearance of righteousness but salvation for those that humbly seek him. He promises to wash away every stain and even fill us with the Spirit. He is the Lamb who was slain by the enemy, but now he eternally reigns. And at "the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Phil. 2:9-10).

This is God's story and ours.



EASTER
SUNDAY





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