



LUTHERAN HOUR
MINISTRIES

JESUS CHRIST:

Man On A Mission

2012 LENTEN DEVOTIONS

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THE JOURNEY BEGINS

Wednesday, February 22, 2012

Read Mark 8:22-30.

He asked them, "But who do you say that I am?"

Peter answered Him, "You are the Christ."

Mark 8:29

If you were one of Jesus' 12 followers or disciples, you would have seen some amazing things. You watched Him give sight to the blind and hearing to the deaf. You saw Him raise lame people to their feet and send them on their way walking, running and leaping. You heard Him speak a word to the winds and watched as it suddenly grew calm, and the huge waves immediately dropped down into the glassy sea. You even watched Him raise dead people to life again. Every time you think you have seen it all, Jesus does something even more mind blowing than the last.

There are all kinds of rumors floating around about who Jesus is. Some think He is John the Baptizer raised from the dead. Others think He is the great miracle-working prophet Elijah, who was taken up alive into heaven (see 2 Kings 2:11-12). Now He asks His disciples "Who do you say that I am?"

Speaking for all the others, Peter answers, "You are the Christ." Peter and the others have seen and heard enough to know that Jesus is the Son of God who came to be our Savior. In the coming days Jesus will reveal His mission to them—the reason He came as that tiny Baby in Bethlehem's manger and grew up among us.

Who do you think He is? That is a question we each need to ask today and each day of this journey together. It is a question that will shape our life on earth and our eternal future, when this earthly life is over.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, You worked great miracles to reveal Yourself to Your followers. Help me to see and believe in You in the weeks to come. Amen.

NOW LET'S TALK ABOUT MY MISSION

Thursday, February 23, 2012

Read Mark 8:29-31.

And He began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again.

Mark 8:31

What is your mission in life? What do you think you were put here to do? Some of us find it difficult to answer that question. But for Jesus the answer is crystal clear. The reason He became human and was born into this world at Christmas was to suffer and die for us.

At Christmas when you look at that baby lying in Bethlehem's manger, suffering and death is the farthest thing from your mind. But there are already hints about where His life will lead. If He had not come to suffer, then why was He lying in a feeding trough when He should have been lying in a soft crib? Why was He raised by a carpenter as His foster-father, when that meant He would take up that trade and everything that goes with it: the cuts and bruises, the blisters and calluses?

If God's Son became human to share our life and to transform it for us, He had to share all of it. His was not to be the life of ease and luxury few enjoy, but the very opposite—the worst experiences people have. He had to know poverty, physical suffering, grief, loneliness, abuse, ridicule, torture, rejection and, finally, death. That was Jesus' mission: to exchange His life for ours, to overcome our suffering by His own suffering and free us from death by His own death.

And more than that, Jesus tells His disciples the end of the story: He will not remain dead. In three days He will rise again.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, You did not hold Yourself back from suffering. Instead, You sacrificed Your life to save us all. Thank You for giving meaning and a purpose to my life. Amen.

THERE MUST BE SOME MISTAKE

Friday, February 24, 2012

Read Mark 8:31-33.

And He said this plainly. And Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him. Mark 8:32

It was just a routine check-up and Ann expected everything to be fine. She felt good, was sleeping well and had plenty of energy; she even had been losing weight like she wanted. The doctor said she was in perfect health, but he wanted her to take a routine test. She left his office in high spirits. But when she phoned for the results on Monday, she felt like she'd been slapped in the face; she had cancer.

Peter must have felt a similar shock when Jesus said He "must suffer many things, be rejected and be killed." He couldn't wrap his mind around it. We can almost hear him saying, "Jesus will suffer and die? There must be some mistake. Jesus is God's Son, the promised Savior. He can't die! He has to save us from the Romans." He turned Jesus aside and tried to straighten Him out.

Peter must have been shocked and hurt when Jesus turned and forcefully said, "Get behind Me, Satan!" After all, Peter had only the best intentions for Jesus.

But Jesus knows mankind's true enemies are not political rulers like Tiberius Caesar, but spiritual rulers like Satan, death and hell. They must be defeated, and the only way to defeat them is to walk the road of suffering and death. Jesus' suffering is necessary. It was so necessary He will permit nothing and no one to stand in His way. Jesus is determined to save us from our sins and win eternal life for Peter, His disciples and all people.

THE PRAYER: Lord You showed such determination to save us from our enemies. Give me such determination to follow You in all circumstances. Amen.

A PARADE OF CROSSES

Saturday, February 25, 2012

Read Mark 8:34-38.

*And calling the crowd to Him with His disciples, He said to them,
“If anyone would come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his
cross and follow Me.” Mark 8:34*

Would you be willing to sacrifice a new car or house today, if you knew you would enjoy a better car or house down the road? Jesus was teaching Peter and the other disciples that He was making a sacrifice that would make it possible for all of us to share a perfect and glorious future with Him forever.

But He warns us that all who wish to follow Him must be ready to share His rejection and suffering. Jesus said, “If anyone would come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me.” That must have stopped the disciples in their tracks. They were all too familiar with these bloody processions.

In 71 B.C., the Romans put down a slave revolt led by a former gladiator named Spartacus. Starting in the city of Capua, 6,000 of Spartacus’ followers carried their crosses on the road to Rome and were each crucified along the way. Sixty-seven years later a Jewish rebellion broke out in Jerusalem after the death of King Herod the Great. The Romans swiftly put it down and 2,000 ringleaders carried their crosses to their death.

As Jesus spoke His followers could picture themselves as condemned criminals, carrying their crosses behind Him. Soon they would see their Lord and Master take up His own cross to die for them. Soon after they would face opposition and rejection for their faith in Him. But Jesus promised great glory awaited those who denied themselves to follow Him—eternal life in a new and perfect world.

THE PRAYER: Lord, You faced frightening opposition on Your mission to save us. Give me courage to face opposition for You. Amen.

IT JUST GOT PERSONAL

Sunday, February 26, 2012

Read Mark 9:2-10, 30-32.

For He was teaching His disciples, saying to them, "The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill Him. And when He is killed, after three days He will rise." Mark 9:31

Have you ever asked an engaged or married couple how they first met? Often they were just friends until one day their friendship was transformed before their very eyes; they realized they wanted to spend the rest of their lives together.

That helps explain what happened when Jesus took Peter, James and John up a mountain by themselves. In an instant, His familiar appearance was transformed before their very eyes. His divine glory as the Son of God began shining through His human face and body. They were seeing Jesus' full glory as the Christ, the Son of the living God. Afterwards, Jesus ordered them to keep it to themselves until He rose from the dead.

Leaving the mountain behind, Jesus leads His disciples through Galilee on His way to Jerusalem. Along the way He makes His second prediction of His coming suffering and death. But this time He adds a chilling detail: He will be "delivered into the hands of men." Someone close to Him—someone who should stand up to defend Him will, instead, hand Him over to His enemies.

If you've ever been betrayed by a close friend, family member, or even a husband or wife, then you know what bitter pain will strike Jesus when He watches one of His own disciples bringing soldiers into the garden where He often meets with His disciples.

But in the midst of all the bad news, Jesus makes another promise: after three days He will rise from the dead.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, You were betrayed into the hands of Your enemies to save me from eternal death and suffering in hell. Help me when I face betrayal from those close to me. Amen.

ONE LAST PREDICTION

Monday, February 27, 2012

Read Mark 10:32-45.

(Jesus said) "See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn Him to death and deliver Him over to the Gentiles. And they will mock Him and spit on Him, and flog Him and kill Him. And after three days He will rise." Mark 10:33-34

Nearing Jerusalem Jesus predicts for a third time His coming suffering and death. This time He adds even more detail than before. He mentions two betrayals: first, one of His 12 disciples will betray Him to the Jewish authorities; then those Jewish authorities will hand Him over to the Roman governor Pontius Pilate, after they have condemned Him to death.

With amazing detail Jesus then describes the various sufferings He will endure at the hands of Pilate's soldiers: their mocking crown of thorns, their contemptuous spitting, the flogging He will endure at their hands and, finally, being killed by them.

Imagine knowing you are going to die a horrible death and knowing all the frightful details ahead of time. You have the power to walk away, but you don't because by your sacrifice you can save your loved ones from death. That's the path Jesus is on, laying down His life so we can live with Him forever.

Now it's time to complete His mission. He has arrived at Jerusalem for His last week, a week that will see yet another moment of glory before His suffering, death and resurrection.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, with firm resolution You set Your face to go to Jerusalem to suffer and die for us and to rise again on the third day. Lead me to hold fast to Your great love and tell others of Your salvation. Amen.

A HERO'S WELCOME

Tuesday, February 28, 2012

Read Mark 11:1-11.

*Those who went before and those who followed were shouting,
“Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the Name of the Lord!”
Mark 11:9*

There are moments when all eyes are on you—walking across the stage to receive your diploma or walking down the aisle at your wedding. It was just such a day for Jesus. As He rode into Jerusalem He was surrounded by great crowds of Jews; they had gathered from across the Roman Empire to celebrate the Passover. With high expectation they escort Him into town, shouting phrases that addressed Him as the long-awaited Messiah or Christ:

- “Hosanna” was a Hebrew word that means “save now.” The crowds are calling on Jesus to rescue them from the great danger in which they found themselves.
- “Blessed is He who comes in the Name of the Lord” recognizes Jesus as God's own representative coming to complete His great mission.
- “Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David” refers to God's ancient promise to set one of David's descendants on his throne—a king who would rule forever.
- “Hosanna in the highest!” calls upon all the hosts of heaven. It summons the angels and all heavenly creatures to raise their voices to God, calling on Him to save His people.

For this brief, shining moment God's people recognize Jesus for who He truly is. But just like the disciples, they fail to recognize His kingdom is not of this world. He has come to fight much more powerful enemies than the Roman governor Pontius Pilate, whose soldiers are closely monitoring the huge crowds gathering in the city.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, You received a hero's welcome into Jerusalem. Receive my thanks for the great victory You won for all of us as You suffered and died for us. Amen.

TURNING UP THE HEAT

Wednesday, February 29, 2012

Read Mark 11:15-19.

And the chief priests and the scribes heard it and were seeking a way to destroy Him, for they feared Him, because all the crowd was astonished at His teaching. Mark 11:18

Jesus had told His disciples that the chief priests and scribes would hand Him over to the Gentiles to be destroyed. But what turned these Jewish religious leaders against Him? There were many reasons, but today we see one of the biggest: Jesus interferes with their temple arrangements.

Temple worshipers must have animals to sacrifice. Many have come from great distances—too far to bring their own. So the chief priests have provided animals they can purchase, along with money-changers to convert their local currency to temple currency. So far, so good. But Jesus has a problem with where they set this trade up. The money is being converted and animals are being sold in the temple court itself, more specifically in the courtyard set aside for Gentile converts.

It's like paying good money to go to a movie you've been anxious to see, then missing it because of the noisy people talking behind you and the kids who won't sit still in front.

It's interesting to note that this commotion won't really disturb Jesus' own worship. Like all Jewish men He can pass through two courtyards beyond and leave all the noise and commotion behind. But He is furious because the Gentile worshippers cannot. On behalf of those Gentiles, He angrily turns over the tables and drives out the animals.

The Jewish leaders are infuriated because Jesus has challenged their authority and embarrassed them in front of the great Passover crowds. As the week goes on, Jesus will make them even angrier.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, You were not afraid to challenge the chief priests when they were in the wrong. Give me courage to step up and speak where I should. Amen.

WHO GAVE YOU THE RIGHT?

Thursday, March 1, 2012

Read Mark 11:27-33.

*And they said to Him, "By what authority are You doing these things,
or who gave You this authority to do them?"*

Mark 11:28

Have you ever had your authority challenged by a rebellious teenager, a co-worker or an employee? Have you ever questioned someone who had authority over you? When Jesus drove the money-changers and sacrificial animals from the temple courts, it didn't take long before the chief priests came to challenge Him. They demanded to know who gave Him the authority to overturn their system for buying sacrificial animals.

Jesus could have answered them directly. He is God's Son with full authority to restore His Father's temple to its intended purpose. But He wants them to believe in Him, and He knows they have already refused to accept the evidence His miracles provide for His divinity. So, instead, He asks them a question. He will reveal the source of His authority, if they will tell Him the source of John the Baptist's ministry: did God send him or was he sent by men?

Jesus wants them to seek God's truth, but their only concern is what the crowds will think of their answer. The crowds would be pleased to hear them say John was a prophet from God, but then Jesus would ask why they didn't obey John's message and get baptized. But if they said John's authority came from men they feared losing the crowd's support. So they chose the cowardly answer: "We don't know where John's authority came from."

Since they refuse to answer Jesus' question, He refuses to answer theirs—directly, at least. As we will soon see, Jesus will go ahead and answer their question indirectly through a parable.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, You genuinely desired to save the chief priests, who made themselves Your enemies. Thank You for desiring and winning my salvation. Amen.

A POINTED PARABLE

Friday, March 2, 2012

Read Mark 12:1-12.

They were seeking to arrest Him but feared the people, for they perceived that He had told the parable against them. So they left Him and went away.

Mark 12:12

Did you ever anger someone by challenging his or her authority? That's what Jesus did when He drove the animal sellers and money-changers from the temple. When the Jewish leaders demanded to know His authority for doing so, Jesus backed them into a corner by asking if John's baptism was from God or man. Though He wouldn't directly tell them the source of His authority, Jesus wanted them to know. To do this He used a parable to make His answer crystal clear to them.

In His parable God's people are grapevines in a vineyard. The chief priests and scribes are the tenants entrusted with teaching the people God's Word, so they will be ready for their Savior. Instead, they lift themselves up and reject the Savior and the servants sent before, including John the Baptist.

Jesus' parable hits the chief priests right between the eyes, especially the part where they reject the son, drive him out and kill him. They are furious but powerless to arrest Him because they fear the people. So they go away for now, keeping watching for an opportunity to arrest and destroy Him.

Through this same parable Jesus reveals the sufferings that await Him in just a few, short days. The chief priests will arrest Him, condemn Him to death and hand Him over to Pilate. At their insistence, the Roman governor will condemn Him, drive Him out of the city and kill Him.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, You tried to break through the stubborn hearts of the Jewish leaders, but they were not willing. Break through my stubborn heart that I may admit my guilt and receive Your full forgiveness. Amen.

THE PERFECT TRAP

Saturday, March 3, 2012

Read Mark 12:13-17.

*And they sent to Him some of the Pharisees and some of the Herodians,
to trap Him in His talk. Mark 12:13*

The Jewish leaders desperately want to arrest and destroy Jesus, but they fear the crowds. Jesus' popularity has been growing ever since Sunday, when He entered Jerusalem. Since they can't touch Jesus while the crowds are on His side, it's time to try to turn the crowds against Him.

Their first step is to butter Him up, so they can catch Him off guard with a trick question. They call Him "Teacher" and say they know He is true, doesn't care about anyone's opinion and truly teaches the way of God. Then they pop their seemingly innocent question: "Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?"

It's a brilliant trap. If Jesus wants to please the crowds He will say, "No, it is not lawful to pay taxes to Caesar." That will make the crowds happy, but Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, will move immediately to arrest Jesus. On the other hand, if He stays on Pilate's good side by saying, "Yes, you should pay taxes to Caesar," then the crowds will turn against Him instantly. It doesn't matter whether Jesus answers "yes" or "no." Either way, they've won.

Except for one thing. Jesus isn't duped. He knows it's a carefully concealed trap. So first He exposes their hypocrisy by asking why they are putting Him to the test. Then He brilliantly unhinges their trap by asking whose name and image are on the coin. Then He replies "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and unto God what is God's."

His enemies leave astonished.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, You saw through the flattery and lies of those who tried to trap You. Remind me that You see through me, so I may truly turn from my sins and receive Your free pardon. Amen.

THE OLD RIDDLE

Sunday, March 4, 2012

Read Mark 12:18-27.

*Jesus said to them, "Is this not the reason you are wrong,
because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God?"*

Mark 12:24

After the Pharisees fail to turn the crowds against Jesus, their rivals, the Sadducees, take their turn. This group includes the chief priests and isn't very popular among the Jewish people; they reject life after death and claim there are no angels, no heaven and no hell.

To embarrass Jesus they tell a riddle about seven brothers who marry the same woman. If they all die childless, whose wife will she be at the resurrection?

Jesus is not fooled. First, He quickly settles the matter of marriage in the next life. The Bible clearly teaches that marriage ends with death.

But then He turns to the far more important issue: their refusal to believe in the resurrection. He uses a familiar passage from Moses' writings—the only books of the Bible they will accept. In Exodus 3:6 God tells Moses, "I am the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob." These three fathers of Israel had died hundreds of years before. But God didn't say, "I *was* the God of Abraham . . .," He said, "I *am* the God of Abraham . . ." Clearly their spirits were living on, even after their deaths. Jesus ends with a judgment of His own: "You are quite wrong."

Their plan to discredit Jesus has failed miserably. The crowd's admiration for Him continues to grow, as they hear Him defend their faith in the resurrection and expose the folly of the Sadducees.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, thank You for teaching us clearly about the resurrection and heaven and hell. Give me faith in Your salvation that I may share eternal life with You. Amen.

A QUESTION OF HIS OWN

Monday, March 5, 2012

Read Mark 12:35-37.

*And as Jesus taught in the temple, He said,
“How can the scribes say that the Christ is the son of David?”
Mark 12:35*

Two groups of Jewish leaders have questioned Jesus. Now it's His turn to ask them a question. The Old Testament experts, the scribes, teach that the promised Messiah or Christ is a descendant of King David. The Jews would never expect a highly respected ancestor to call a descendent “my Lord.” So Jesus asks how the Christ can be David's descendant and, at the same time, be his Lord?

Jesus' question gets right to the heart of the Jewish leaders' refusal to accept Him as the promised Messiah. They think they have it all figure out, but they never really considered what the Old Testament was saying about the promised Messiah. He would be both God and man at the same time. When they look at Jesus, the leaders clearly see He is human, but they refuse to accept that He could possibly be anything more. They ignore Jesus' miracles that prove He is the mighty Son of God.

That is what the Christmas story teaches us. God's eternal Son became human and was born of His human mother Mary. So as a human he was a descendant of David. But as God He is the almighty Son of God.

The great throng of people hear Him gladly, but the majority of Jewish leaders refuse to listen and learn. Instead, they lick their wounds and keep looking for a chance to arrest and destroy Him.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, thank You for revealing the truth that You are not just an ordinary man. You are the eternal Son of God, who became human and came down to save us from our sins. Bless me to believe and always trust in You. Amen.

WATCH OUT FOR THOSE SCRIBES

Tuesday, March 6, 2012

Read Mark 12:38-40.

And in His teaching He said, "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes and like greetings in the marketplaces."

Mark 12:38

Do you know anyone who acts holier than everyone else? You know, that person who thinks he is closer to God than you are—and let's everyone know it?

In Jesus' day many of the scribes acted like they were holier than everyone else. But Jesus knew how far from His holiness they really were. They misinterpreted the Bible and invented traditions to establish a way of life they thought would make them holy. But all the time they were missing the true path of holiness that God's Word revealed: believe in God's promised Messiah.

Their idea of holiness was walking around in long robes, being called "rabbi" when they were greeted in the marketplaces, having the best seats in the synagogues and at the feasts. They devoured widows' houses by preying on their generosity or sense of guilt. Finally, they loved stringing together long, eloquent but faithless prayers that impressed their listeners without ever really seeking God.

Jesus shattered their public image. He did this first by asking them a question they couldn't answer. Then He warned the crowd to flee from the condemnation that would fall on the scribes for missing the point of the Bible. Though they called themselves experts, they failed to understand that Jesus was the fulfillment of the Scriptures.

His warning also extends to all of us who are tempted to think we are holier than everyone else. Our holiness only comes from the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, our promised Savior.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, fill me with a true love for Your Word, that reading it daily I may see You and grow in my faith and understanding. Amen.

A FALL-BACK PLAN

Wednesday, March 7, 2012

Read Mark 14:1-2.

It was now two days before the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread. And the chief priests and the scribes were seeking how to arrest Him by stealth and kill Him.

Mark 14:1

Have you ever made it your mission to accomplish something important and noble, but you were met with resistance you couldn't overcome? With the Passover festival only two days away, that is where the Jewish leaders find themselves.

They fear Jesus is about to proclaim Himself the Messiah in the temple courts and lead a revolt that will be crushed by the Roman legions, taking down the temple, the city and themselves. They know they have to do something to save Jerusalem—but what?

Over and over they had tried to turn the crowds against Jesus, but He has been too smart for them. So they have to adopt a fall-back plan. They still want Jesus dead, but they are not willing to consider an assassin or a mob hit. They will have to look for a sly but legal way to capture Him. It is clear to them they will have to wait until the huge Passover crowds have left the city after the feast. In the meantime, all they can do is wait and hope Jesus won't make His move during the feast.

Jesus is on a mission Himself. He knows they are plotting to take His life, but He knows something they don't. Just as He had predicted before entering Jerusalem, He knows one of His own 12 will soon provide the opportunity they don't expect. And through that betrayal their mission will be accomplished—and so will His.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, the Jewish leaders thought they were doing the right thing in their attempt to destroy You. Open my eyes to Your truth so that I may stop resisting Your will and receive the benefits of Your suffering and death for my sake. Amen.

OPPORTUNITY KNOCKS

Thursday, March 8, 2012

Read Mark 14:10-11.

Then Judas Iscariot, who was one of the twelve, went to the chief priests in order to betray Him to them.

Mark 14:10

The Jewish leaders expect they'll have to wait until after the Passover Feast to destroy Jesus, but they would love the chance to take Him out before He can proclaim Himself King. But how can they do that if they have no idea where He goes when He melts back into those huge crowds at night?

Then out of the blue, lightning strikes. One of Jesus' disciples asks what the Jewish leaders will pay if he betrays Jesus to them. What great news! This is the chance they were looking for. An insider could lead them to the time and place where they can arrest Jesus quietly away from the crowds. They agree to give him money and send Judas out in stealth, seeking the right opportunity to hand Jesus over to them.

We don't know Judas' motivation. Perhaps it was simple greed. Maybe it was something nobler. Maybe he thought he could force Jesus to defend Himself and take His place as the King of the Jews.

But oddly enough Judas' betrayal will cause exactly that. Jesus will be crowned and enthroned as the King of the Jews. But He will wear a different kind of crown and sit upon a different kind of throne than anyone would suppose. His will be a crown of thorns and a cross-shaped throne.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, You entered our world in a strange way—in swaddling cloths and lying in the manger. And You left our world crowned in thorns and enthroned on a cross. Thank You for suffering and dying in my place that I might live and reign with You in heaven forever. Amen.

THE WHEELS BEGINS TO TURN

Friday, March 9, 2012

Read Mark 14:12-21.

*And as they were reclining at table and eating, Jesus said,
"Truly, I say to you, one of you will betray Me, one who is eating with Me."
Mark 14:18*

Judas has been slyly watching for the moment Jesus is away from the crowds, and the Jewish guards can arrest Him. Now that opportunity arrives. Jesus is in the city celebrating the Passover supper alone with His 12 disciples. Judas only has to wait for the opportune moment to excuse himself, slip away and report their location.

But before that moment comes, while they recline around the table on cushions, Jesus says something that sends shivers down Judas' spine. "Truly, I say to you, one of you will betray Me, one who is eating with Me." Judas can probably hear his heart pounding. How can Jesus possibly know his secrets? With terror he watches his fellow disciples asking one by one around the table, "Is it I?" Now it's his turn. Trying hard not to betray his guilt, Judas adds his response to theirs, "Is it I?"

Jesus sees the darkness driving Judas and feels the pain of betrayal by one He loves. He looks ahead to Judas' demise. He knows how His disciple will regret his decision, attempt to return the silver coins in vain and then go out and hang himself in utter despair. Jesus states, "It would have been better for that man if he had not been born."

Jesus earlier predictions about His sufferings are coming true, "...the Son of man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the scribes."

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, You protected Judas from the other disciples and chose not to betray him into their hands. Thank You for protecting me from all harm, and promising never to hand me over to my enemies. Amen.

THE LAST SUPPER

Saturday, March 10, 2012

Read Mark 14:22-25.

*And as they were eating, He took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to them, and said, "Take; this is My body." ... And He said to them, "This is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many."
Mark 14:22, 24*

Have you ever thought what you would do if you knew tonight's dinner would be your last meal on earth? What would you say to your loved ones who surround you? How would you try to comfort and prepare them? What words of wisdom would you leave them, especially knowing you will die a horrible, scandalous death sure to cause them great pain and confusion—execution as a condemned criminal?

Jesus left His disciples the greatest gift He could. It was a gift built on the Old Testament sacrifices that had pointed to His death for many centuries. When a worshiper brought his sacrificial animal to the priest, he laid his hand on the animal's head. As he confessed his sin, God transferred his guilt onto the animal, which was then killed in his place. In one special sacrifice the meat of that sacrificial animal was roasted and then given back to the worshiper and his family to eat. By eating the very body of the sacrificial victim who died so they might live, they were reassured they were forgiven by their God.

Gathered together around the table, Jesus gave His disciples His own body, miraculously united to the bread—the very body that would carry their guilt and sin to the cross. In the wine He gave them His own blood, soon to be shed for the forgiveness of all people. As Jesus' followers continue to receive His body and His blood in Holy Communion today, they receive the assurance of their forgiveness for Jesus' sake.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, thank You for leaving Your disciples and us a wonderful memorial of Your suffering and death in our place. Amen.

FIERCE LOYALTY

Sunday, March 11, 2012

Read Mark 14:26-31.

Jesus said to him, "Truly, I tell you, this very night, before the rooster crows twice, you will deny Me three times."

Mark 14:30

With ever-increasing detail Jesus has been predicting His suffering, death and resurrection. Earlier at this Last Supper, He identified Judas as the disciple who will betray Him. Now He turns to the remaining disciples and predicts what they will do; each of them will fall away, flee and abandon Him.

Peter objects. Confident of his own undying loyalty, he sets himself above the others; even if each of them falls away, Peter boldly claims he never will.

Jesus responds with another detailed prediction: this very night, before the rooster crows twice at the brightening dawn, Peter will deny knowing Jesus three times.

Peter refuses to accept the Son of God's words and stands by his self-confident promise, as do the others.

At times we contradict Jesus as boldly as Peter. How can Jesus tell me I will be punished in hell unless I trust in His sacrifice when I'm clearly a good person? How can Jesus claim that "No one comes to the Father except through Me," when I think there is some truth in every religion and no single one can claim absolute authority? (See John 14:6).

Jesus didn't argue with Peter, and He doesn't argue with us. He knows time will reveal His Word is true and every contrary thought an empty lie. So He meekly goes on His way, leading His disciples from the upper room to a quiet garden, where His sufferings will soon begin.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, sometimes I am absolutely sure of myself, but I remember Peter was too. Humble me to listen to You, for You suffered and died for me, and rose again to bring me to Your everlasting kingdom. Amen.

INTENSE PRAYER

Monday, March 12, 2012

Read Mark 14:32-36.

*And going a little farther, He fell on the ground and prayed that,
if it were possible, the hour might pass from Him.*

Mark 14:35

Have you ever gotten terrible news like you were losing your job, your home or your doctor is telling you he's done all he can? You hope it's all just a bad dream, but you know it isn't. How can you stand toe to toe with life's disasters when all you want to do is run away and hide?

That's how Jesus felt as He guided His disciples into the Garden called Gethsemane. He knew the next morning He would be nailed to the cross. He knew He would feel His Heavenly Father unleash His furious wrath against the totality of mankind's sin, including yours and mine.

Jesus asked His disciples to keep watch, then went ahead a short distance and fell with His face to the ground. Using the Aramaic word for "daddy" He prayed, "Abba, Father, all things are possible for You. Remove this cup from Me." He was not eager to be cut off, forsaken and forced to face the uncontrolled wrath of His Father.

In the difficult times of our lives, we often try to escape our sorrow. Perhaps it's through sleep, alcohol, drugs or gambling. But that is the time we most need to pour out our deepest fears and sorrows to our Heavenly Father in prayer, as we confess our failings to God and cling to Jesus' promise to forgive us and hear and answer all our prayers.

For one, long, grueling hour Jesus poured out His grief, sorrow and dread to His Father. But in loving obedience He prayed, "Not what I will, but what You will."

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, teach me how to pray, especially in those times I need it the most. Amen.

WILLING BUT WEAK

Tuesday, March 13, 2012

Read Mark 14:37-42.

*And He came and found them sleeping, and He said to Peter,
“Simon, are you asleep? Could you not watch one hour?”
Mark 14:37*

It's almost painful seeing Jesus laying flat on His face, pouring out His heart to His Father in the garden. Wrestling with His own sorrow and grief, He struggles to accept the bitter mission His Father has set before Him. After a grueling, exhausting hour Jesus wearily rises to His feet and walks over to His disciples.

In bitter disappointment He finds them asleep. They couldn't even keep watch with Him one hour. Jesus gently awakens Peter and urges him to pray. He knows Peter is willing to stand by Him, but it's one thing to pledge your allegiance in a quiet upper room; it's quite another thing to be surrounded by guards with no way to escape.

Jesus leaves Peter and the others and returns to struggle through His sorrow and grief. He prays so intently that the tiny blood vessels beneath His skin burst and blood mingles with His sweat. After another exhausting hour He returns to find the disciples sleeping again.

After a third time praying the same thing, Jesus returns to awaken them. He knows the time has finally come. In the distance He can see the torches of the guards on their way to arrest Him.

During our life there are so many times we need to be in watchful prayer, pouring out our sorrows, fears, troubles and doubts to the Lord, but, instead, we sleep on. Thankfully, Jesus remains at the Father's right hand holding vigil over every minute of our lives, interceding for us in every hour of need.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, forgive my spiritual drowsiness and my weak prayer life. Keep watching over my life and praying for me before Your Father. Amen.

ALL ALONE

Wednesday, March 14, 2012

Read Mark 14:43-52.

*Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying,
"The One I will kiss is the man. Seize Him and lead Him away under guard."
Mark 14:44*

It's amazing how much we rely on our family and friends to be there when our life spirals out of control. When you face your final hour, wouldn't you like to have your wife or husband at your side, and your children and friends gathered around you?

It was one of Jesus' closest friends, one of His hand-picked disciples who was leading the guards on their way up the Mount of Olives toward the Garden of Gethsemane. In the blackness Judas knows the guards won't be able to make out which of the dark figures is Jesus, so he gives them a signal: the man he will kiss is Jesus. How must it have hurt when His friend used the age-old sign of love and affection to betray Jesus to His enemies?

Peter reacts in an instant. He draws his sword and swings it at the head of the nearest guard. It slices off the high priest's servant's right ear. Peter means well, but again he is trying to keep Jesus from completing His mission, putting himself in great danger in the process. So Jesus commands him to put his sword back into its sheath and, as Luke tells us, Jesus healed the servant's ear.

As Jesus' friends see Him surrender to the guards, they turn in panic and flee into the dark night, leaving Him all alone with His enemies.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, You suffered not only from Your enemies, but from Your friends who betrayed, denied and abandoned You. When my friends fail or desert me, remind me You will always be at my side. Amen.

STANDING IN SILENCE

Thursday, March 15, 2012

Read Mark 14:53-61a.

*But He remained silent and made no answer. Again the high priest asked Him,
“Are You the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?”
Mark 14:61*

If you were watching someone who was falsely accusing you, do you think you could stand by without saying a single word to defend yourself?

Jesus is on trial before the Jewish council. The chief priests, elders and scribes hear witness testimony they are counting on to condemn Jesus to death. And Jesus stands by silently watching and listening.

When they are unable to obtain truthful testimony from qualified witnesses, the leaders turn to false testimony. To them, destroying Jesus is worth whatever means they have to use. It is shocking and outrageous, but Jesus stands in silence, even though He is completely innocent of all charges.

According to Roman law, which Pontius Pilate will follow when Jesus stands trial before him, Jesus' refusal to defend Himself is an admission of guilt. So why does He stand by silently, refusing to defend Himself? Jesus Christ is standing in our place.

Each of us is guilty before God, condemned by our sinful thoughts and selfish words. If we were standing before God—as we all will when our earthly life ends—we would be the ones standing silently. We would have nothing to say to defend ourselves or explain away our guilt. We deserve God's condemnation and everlasting punishment in hell.

But Jesus stands silently in our place. He is carrying our sins, prepared to suffer and die, so we can live. Jesus takes our punishment upon Himself and gives us the reward for His perfect life of obedience. He takes our hell, so we can inherit His heaven.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, You stood in silence taking my place, paying for my sins. Open my mouth to share Your story of love and Your great salvation. Amen.

A LAST GAMBLE

Friday, March 16, 2012

Read Mark 14:61b-65.

*... Again the high priest asked Him, "Are You the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?"
Mark 14:61b*

The high priest's case against Jesus is unraveling right in front of him. Despite the false witnesses he has called forward, he lacks the agreement between two witnesses that Jewish law requires. With no other options left, Caiaphas takes a big gamble—an all-or-nothing bet. He turns to Jesus, puts Him under oath, and asks Him if He is the promised Christ, the Son of God, whose Name is too holy for the high priest to speak.

Jesus could deny it and walk away free. But Jesus will never deny the truth. He answers "I am." But before the high priest can tear his garments in shock and the court raise their outraged objection, the previously silent Jesus pours out a powerful warning of the day He will return as their Judge, "and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven."

Thinking the case is now sewn up, the high priest declares all his fellow council members witnesses and asks their verdict. They condemn Jesus of Nazareth guilty of blasphemy, claiming to be God's Son. He deserves death.

Now they begin abusing the Christ before they hand Him over to Pilate. With blows, strikes and spitting, they pour out the rage they have held back for so long—and Jesus begins suffering the physical abuse that will set us free from God's wrath forever.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, You made the good confession, warning the Jewish leaders of their own coming judgment. Help me to heed Your warning and turn to You in faith before it is too late. Amen.

PETER'S FALL

Saturday, March 17, 2012

Read Mark 14:66-72.

And immediately the rooster crowed a second time. And Peter remembered how Jesus had said to him, "Before the rooster crows twice, you will deny Me three times." And he broke down and wept.

Mark 14:72

While Jesus is in the high priest's house silently listening to the lies being hurled against Him, Peter stands outside in the courtyard—lying to save his neck.

It all began innocently enough. After Jesus' arrest Peter followed the guards clear up to the courtyard. He snuck in with them to see the outcome of Jesus' trial—an outcome Jesus had predicted a number of times before.

As the night grows colder, the guards start a fire to keep warm—a fire whose light betrays Peter to a servant girl. When she claims, "You also were with the Nazarene, Jesus," Peter lies to save himself.

Making his way to the gateway Peter is confronted by another servant girl. Again, he denies being one of Jesus' men, and a rooster crows.

After a little while the bystanders speak up. They recognize Peter's Galilean dialect and conclude he is one of Jesus' followers. Backed into a corner, Peter repeats his lies. But this time he calls curses down on himself and swears he doesn't know Jesus, and the rooster crows a second time.

Inside, the Jewish counsel reconvenes at the breaking of dawn and formally condemns Jesus. As He is led away to Pilate, Jesus turns and looks down in the courtyard at Peter who remembers Jesus' words (see Luke 22:61). Back in the upper room, Peter had been so sure of himself, but here he has just denied Jesus three times to servant girls and bystanders. As Jesus is taken away, Peter breaks down and weeps bitterly.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, like Peter I often rely on my own cunning, strength or loyalty. Show me how weak I really am, so I may trust You alone to save me. Amen.

THE SILENT KING

Sunday, March 18, 2012

Read Mark 15:1-5.

But Jesus made no further answer, so that Pilate was amazed.

Mark 15:5

Having condemned Jesus, the Jewish leaders now bind Him, lead Him away and deliver Him over to the Roman governor Pontius Pilate—exactly as Jesus predicted several times before. Many years before, the Jews lost the right to execute criminals. Now their leaders are forced to deliver Jesus to Pontius Pilate, who alone has the power to execute Him or set Him free.

The Jewish leaders stand before Pilate and accuse Jesus of many things. Only one charge truly concerns the governor. He asks, “Are You the King of the Jews?” A rival king within the Roman Empire would be a serious matter demanding action from Pilate. Jesus only answers, “You have said so.” Though it seems an elusive answer, Jesus is admitting He is a King, but showing He has no plans to overthrow the Roman Emperor.

Satisfied that Jesus is no political threat, Pilate listens to the other charges raised against Him, but Jesus remains silent. Pilate is amazed. He doesn’t understand why a man would remain silent and not defend Himself, since silence usually is an admission of guilt.

Jesus refuses to fight to prevent His death because God His Father has sent Him to suffer and die to save the world. As He tells Pilate in John’s Gospel His kingdom is not of this world (see John 18:36-37). And His subjects are all those who trust in Him as their Lord, Savior and King.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, You are my King who suffered and died to save me from death. Remember me and bring me into Your kingdom when You come again on Judgment Day. Amen.

A HOSTAGE RELEASE

Monday, March 19, 2012

Read Mark 15:6-10.

*And he answered them, saying, "Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?"
Mark 15:9*

After listening to all the charges, Pilate is convinced Jesus is innocent. So why doesn't the Roman governor just set Him free?

Pilate has been painted into a corner by a combination of political affairs in Rome, the political maneuvering of his rivals and his own underestimation of Jewish sensibilities. He knows his political future depends on how he handles this delicate case. He wants to set Jesus free, but he needs the agreement of the Jewish leaders. Maybe the annual hostage release will do the trick.

Every Passover the Roman governor offered a hostage release to win the good will of the Jewish crowd. Usually he let the people choose between two political prisoners who had spoken against Rome, but otherwise wouldn't be too dangerous to release.

But this time Pilate knows he is going to have to "up the ante," if he wants to set Jesus free. Instead of offering the usual harmless prisoners, Pilate offers a choice between Jesus and the most dangerous criminal in his jail. He offers them a choice between Jesus and the infamous murderer, Barabbas. He was convinced the Jewish leaders would never want to see Barabbas go free.

But Jesus knows better. As He predicted many times before, He will be condemned to death by crucifixion. The crowds will demand Barabbas be set free, and Jesus will take his place. In a powerful picture of what He did for each of us, Jesus will take the murderer's place and die, so he might live.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, Your compassion for us is amazing. You were willing to take a murderer's place and give up Your life that he might live. Help me always put my trust in You. Amen.

THE CLOSING TRAP

Tuesday, March 20, 2012

Read Mark 15:11-14.

*And Pilate again said to them,
“Then what shall I do with the man you call the King of the Jews?”
Mark 15:12*

Pilate thinks he has it all figured out. He is confident the high priest will consider the convicted murderer Barabbas a much greater threat than Jesus. But like so many times before, he underestimates the Jewish leaders. They fear Jesus' influence over the festival crowds more than they fear Barabbas. So they convince the crowd to call for the murderer's release and demand that Jesus take his place.

Pilate is dumbfounded and knows he has fallen into a much weaker position. And it only gets worse. Everything he tries to do to sway the crowd fails—whether he calls Jesus the “King of the Jews” or asks what evil Jesus has done. The only result is a growing chorus of shouts: “Crucify Him!”

Like Peter in the high priest's courtyard, Pilate is trapped and feels his political life slipping away. If a riot breaks out at this high festival, word will get back to Caesar and his career will be over—if not his life. Now it's either Jesus or Pilate. So Pilate does the only thing he can: he surrenders Jesus to their heated demands. Turning Jesus over to his soldiers, Pilate washes his hands of the whole affair.

It must have been a strange day for Barabbas. Hearing the guards' footsteps he is prepared to be crucified for his crimes. Instead, they remove his chains and tell him to go—the crowds have chosen him. The murderer walks away free. Jesus takes his place—and ours.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, Pilate knew You were innocent, but he condemned You to crucifixion to save himself. Receive my thanks for Your great salvation. Amen.

SCOURGED

Wednesday, March 21, 2012

Read Mark 15:15.

So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released for them Barabbas, and having scourged Jesus, he delivered Him to be crucified.

Mark 15:15

Pilate has washed his hands of Jesus. Now the Roman soldiers take over. The Romans customarily scourged condemned criminals before crucifying them. So Jesus is stripped, bound to a column and scourged mercilessly. Mark records it briefly, then quickly passes on. For Jesus it was anything but brief.

In the ancient world scourging was a common punishment for lawbreakers, and it still continues in parts of our world today. The Jewish law provided for the whipping of the guilty, but it limited the punishment to 40 blows. Roman scourging was not nearly so lenient.

Roman floggings were meant to bring a criminal close to death. Metal and sharp pieces of bone were tied into the thongs. They dug deeply into the victim's back and shoulders, tearing the body to shreds. Even when a scourging victim was not crucified, he often died from the trauma of the beating. If he survived he was certainly crippled by it. The Old Testament prophet Isaiah predicted Jesus' scourging when he wrote, "But He was wounded for our transgressions; He was crushed for our iniquities; upon Him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with His stripes we are healed (Isaiah 53:5).

Jesus' flogging shows us just how great God's wrath is at our sins. But in a more powerful way it shows how much greater is His love and mercy, as He gives His own Son to suffer and die to save us.

By the time the officer stopped the brutal flogging, Jesus had lost a great amount of blood. Sadly, Jesus' sufferings were not over; the soldiers were just getting started.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, in Your brutal scourging I see the terrible wrath of God I deserve for all of my sins. Show me Your incredible saving love that made You willing to receive such torture for me. Amen.

KING OF THE JEWS

Thursday, March 22, 2012

Read Mark 15:16-19.

And they clothed Him in a purple cloak, and twisting together a crown of thorns, they put it on Him. And they began to salute Him, "Hail, King of the Jews!"
Mark 15:17-18

The scourging is finished. Jesus collapses to the ground, and He is released from the column. As He slowly gathers His strength and rises to His feet, the mockery begins. Roman soldiers often mocked condemned criminals, and here before them stood the beaten man, who was supposedly the King of the Jews.

If He was a king, then certainly He needed to be dressed like one. They took a purple cloak and threw it roughly over his bloody shoulders. Only someone with open wounds over a large part of his body can understand the pain that coursed through our Savior's body.

But if He is a king, then He must have a crown as well. So they formed a crown from thorn branches and roughly jammed it down on His head, piercing His sensitive scalp. He also needed a scepter—the symbol of a king's strength and power—so they put a reed in His hands. Then they ripped it from His grasp and struck it over His thorn-crowned head, showing just how powerless this King of the Jews was.

Jesus suffered greatly from the Roman soldiers both physical and emotional brutality. But He was also suffering for them, taking on Himself God's punishment for the horrendous way they were abusing His one and only Son.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, because of Your great love for me and all people You humbled Yourself to be mocked, beaten and abused. Help me to always rejoice in Your boundless love. Amen.

THE PROCESSION TO GOLGOTHA

Friday, March 23, 2012

Read Mark 15:20-22.

*And when they had mocked Him, they stripped Him of the purple cloak and put His own clothes on Him. And they led Him out to crucify Him. And they compelled a passerby, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming in from the country, the father of Alexander and Rufus, to carry His cross.
Mark 15:20-21*

Finished with their mockery the soldiers rip the blood-soaked cloak from Jesus' shoulders, and another wave of excruciating pain crashes through His body. Roughly dressing Him in His own clothes, they line Him up with two other condemned criminals.

Next they bring three rough-hewn crossbeams and drop them across the condemned prisoners' shoulders. A complete cross is far too heavy to carry, so they will drag these crossbeams to the execution site. There they will be attached to the uprights already in place. The gates of the palace are opened, and the 600 soldiers of Pilate's Jerusalem cohort push their way through the Passover crowds, making a road for the grisly procession.

It is not a great distance from Pilate's palace to the place of crucifixion. Jesus' legs tremble and ache with each step, as He struggles to carry His crossbeam down the narrow road leading outside the city. After His sleepless night, His beating at the hands of His Jewish enemies and His brutal flogging, He repeatedly stumbles and falls. Realizing Jesus is simply too weak to carry His cross, the soldiers compel a passerby named Simon to carry it for Him. Looking at the faces along the way and speaking words of comfort to those who weep, Jesus slowly makes His way to the Place of the Skull—Golgotha.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, You stumbled and fell under the staggering weight of our sins. But You kept getting up and refused to stop until You completed Your course. Give me courage and strength when I grow weary and exhausted, so I may finish my course until the day I can rest with You. Amen.

NO PAIN-KILLERS

Saturday, March 24, 2012

Read Mark 15:23.

*And they offered Him wine mixed with myrrh, but He did not take it.
Mark 15:23*

The Roman execution procession finally reaches Golgotha—the Place of the Skull. In preparation for the crucifixion, the soldiers offer the prisoners wine mixed with myrrh. A medieval Jewish scholar named Maimonides explains the custom:

“When one is led out to execution, he is given a goblet of wine, containing a grain of frankincense, in order to benumb his senses, for it is written, ‘Give strong drink unto him that is ready to perish, and wine unto the bitter in soul.’” (Talmud, Sanhedrin 43a)

“The beverage was a mixture of myrrh and wine, given ‘so that the delinquent might lose clear consciousness through the ensuing intoxication.’” (Talmud, Sanhedrin 13)

The myrrh contains two compounds that reduce a person’s sensitivity to pain. Of course, the soldiers aren’t doing this because they feel sorry for the criminals; they never offered the myrrh before scourging a criminal. They do this to make their job easier. It’s difficult to crucify unwilling victims, especially if you have to nail them to their crosses.

According to Matthew, Jesus first tastes the wine, but then refuses to drink it because of the myrrh. Why? He is taking our place in hell, suffering the torment that for us would be eternal and unending. If He is to satisfy God’s justice He must receive God’s full wrath with no anesthetic, no pain-killers.

It shows Jesus’ remarkable love and strength in that He voluntarily stretches out His hands and receives the nails without struggling or protesting. Jesus lays down His life of His own accord, and no one takes it from Him. (See John 10:18.)

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, You took the full brunt of God’s wrath at my sins without accepting anything to blunt the pain. Thank You for suffering all I deserve, so I never will. Amen.

GAMBLING FOR HIS CLOTHES

Sunday, March 25, 2012

Read John 19:23-24.

*And they crucified Him and divided His garments among them,
casting lots for them, to decide what each should take.*

Mark 15:24

In every crucifixion, Rome wanted to send a powerful warning to the nations it had conquered. If you commit the crimes this man committed, you will suffer the same fate. So the Romans made crucifixion as public and shameful as possible. They hanged the criminals along the main roads leading into a city, and they removed their clothing before crucifying them.

If Jesus drank the wine mixed with myrrh, the pain might have been slightly diminished. Yet one last time His clothes are ripped from His tattered back, as He is stripped to be crucified. When He is hanging from the cross, the four guards assigned to watch over Him will divide His clothes among themselves. They will separate them into four piles—one for each. Then they will take hold of His long tunic. Since it is seamless and woven in one piece, they will not be willing to tear it. Instead, they will cast lots to see who will win it. Jesus watches as they gamble for the clothes off His back.

Shame is a word the Romans wanted associated with crucifixion. They wanted that shame to be a powerful deterrent to keep the peace among their conquered nations. Jesus saw it differently. There was no shame in fulfilling God's will or saving the world. In Hebrews we read, "Looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God" (Hebrews 12:2).

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, You refused to let shame drive You from Your mission, but humbled Yourself to save us. Give me strength to bear whatever shame I may face for trusting in You. Amen.

CRUCIFIED

Monday, March 26, 2012

Read Mark 15:25.

And it was the third hour when they crucified Him.

Mark 15:25

Life is strange. Events that are so horrible for some are so positive for others.

For the Jewish priests it has been a tumultuous series of events. Two days before it looked like the whole world was going to follow Jesus. They wanted Him dead, but the crowds left them powerless. They could only hope He wouldn't use the Passover festival as the occasion to declare Himself the Christ, the King of the Jews. But everything changed when Judas showed up. They were able to arrest Him apart from the crowds, condemn Him to death, and even force the reluctant Pilate to order His execution. They couldn't have planned it any better. Before the crowds could return to Jerusalem, Jesus was already hanging on the cross.

For Jesus it must have seemed like an eternity: the sorrow-filled dinner; the agonizing hours of prayer in the garden; seeing His friend Judas leading the arresting guards; the hostile and unjust Jewish trial; looking into Peter's eyes after his third denial; the trial and condemnation of Pontius Pilate; the scourging, mocking and crown of thorns; the grueling road to Golgotha; the nails piercing His hands and feet.

On the cross God brings together the best and worst: His boundless love and His fiery judgment, His wrath and His forgiveness, heaven and hell. Because of the sins we committed He pours, His furious wrath on His Son. Because of the perfect obedience of His Son Jesus Christ, He pours His love and forgiveness out for you and all people.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, hanging from the tree You poured out Your life to give us peace, joy, forgiveness and eternal life. Give me confidence in Your salvation and transform my darkest days into days of joy, peace and light. Amen.

JESUS OF NAZARETH, KING OF THE JEWS

Tuesday, March 27, 2012

Read John 19:19-22.

*And the inscription of the charge against Him read, "The King of the Jews."
Mark 15:26*

The Romans used crucifixion to control areas prone to rebellion. But unless the people knew why the criminals were being executed it could never be a deterrent. So each cross held an inscription, naming the criminal and the crime for which he was being crucified. The inscription was written in the legal language (Rome), the common language of the Empire (Greek) and the local language of the people (Aramaic).

Pilate's inscription identified Jesus by His childhood home Nazareth. The crime for which He was being executed was given as "King of the Jews." The chief priests objected; they never considered Jesus their King. The inscription should read "This man said 'I am King of the Jews.'" But Pilate had heard enough. They had threatened him and forced him to condemn a man he knew was innocent.

God Himself stood behind Pilate and gave him strength to stand firm on this. God's own Son was indeed the King of the Jews. That is how He had been revealed to the wise men when the Christmas star guided them to Jerusalem, where they asked the location of the one born King of the Jews. They foreshadowed that Jesus—the King of the Jews—would extend His Kingship over all nations.

And though it may not look like it, as He hangs on the bloody cross, Jesus is exercising His Kingship. He is laying down His life to protect His subjects and to rescue them from deadly peril. His reign won't end on that cross either. It continues today and for all eternity.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Jews, thank You for laying down Your life to save and protect Your people from sin, death, Satan and hell. Remember me in Your kingdom. Amen.

COMPANY ON THE CROSS

Wednesday, March 28, 2012

Read Mark 15:27.

*And with Him they crucified two robbers, one on His right and one on His left.
Mark 15:27*

Jesus certainly wasn't the first person to be crucified. Crucifixion was practiced in the ancient Near East long before His day. In 519 B.C. 3,000 political enemies were crucified on one occasion by Darius the First in Babylon. In 71 B.C. the Roman general Crassus crucified 6,000 slaves, who had fought with Spartacus. So having three criminals crucified together was not unusual.

We know very little about the two criminals crucified with Jesus. Mark calls them "robbers." Jesus used this same word in His parable of the Good Samaritan to describe the highway robbers who beat the man, stole his clothes and left him for dead. Mark also used this word to describe murderous rebels, when he first introduced Barabbas: "And among the rebels in prison, who had committed murder in the insurrection, there was a man named Barabbas" (Mark 15:7). Though we don't know their precise crimes; these were clearly vicious men.

If Jesus was guiltless why would He be crucified with such vicious criminals? Jesus went to the cross because He was being punished for all our sins, not because of anything He had done. He carried all the atrocities of Hitler, Stalin and Mao and bore their guilt before God—and our own sin and guilt too. So it was fitting that He be crucified along with one robber on His left and another on His right.

In a few days we will again encounter these two robbers—and an exchange which has brought incredible comfort to guilt-stricken people ever since.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, You were numbered with the criminals not for anything You had done but because of our sins against God's Law. Forgive and restore us. Amen.

ASTONISHED PASSERS-BY

Thursday, March 29, 2012

Read Psalm 22:1-11.

*And those who passed by derided Him, wagging their heads and saying,
“Aha! You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days.”
Mark 15:29*

To make their executions effective deterrents, Romans crucified criminals on major roads leading into cities. The road that led past Jesus' cross into Jerusalem was filled with people on their way into town for the Passover. Many of them had been in town since Sunday, when Jesus Himself had entered Jerusalem. Sleeping in tent cities in the surrounding areas, they walked into town along these roads each morning and walked back to their temporary housing at night.

Their first word “Aha!” says it all. It expresses the wonder and astonishment that fill their minds. They had been caught up in the excitement of Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem on Sunday. They had been astonished by His teachings, His answers to the challenges of the Jewish authorities and His words of rebuke. They expected something really significant was about to happen at the Passover, but they didn't expect to see Jesus hanging on a cross.

The problem was they had been judging by appearances. Early in the week when everything was going Jesus' way, they were quick to sing His praises. But as soon as they saw Jesus suffering in His mission as Christ and King, they changed their minds. They thought God was clearly revealing Jesus as a fraud and an imposter—like every other false Christ they had seen before.

As they pass by along the road they deride Jesus and insult Him. They shake their heads and turn His words against Him. Rejecting the one they had praised a few days before, they turn their backs and leave Him behind, as they continue along the way into town and up towards the temple.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, forgive the times I have turned my back on You and went my own way. Turn me back to stand before You always. Amen.

GLOATING ENEMIES

Friday, March 30, 2012

Read Mark 15:31-32a.

*Also the chief priests with the scribes mocked Him,
“He saved others; He cannot save Himself.”
Mark 15:31*

The Jewish religious leaders were not satisfied with beating up Jesus after their illegal night trial. It wasn't enough for them to see Jesus bleeding, beaten, humiliated and nailed to a cross. They want to add to His disgrace and distress by mocking Him.

Mockery is one of the most vicious ways to lash out at someone. The Jewish leaders turn Jesus' own words against Him to point out His powerlessness and to prove they were right to reject Him. And striking deepest they make fun of His Name. The name Jesus means “the Lord saves.” They find it funny that Jesus is famous for saving others from demons, disease and death itself—but He's powerless to save Himself.

From the time Jesus was conceived and born in that little town of Bethlehem, He had held back His power as God's Son. He had displayed some of that power, performing miracles to verify His message about God's kingdom, but He never used it for His own benefit. Had He chosen to, Jesus could have come down from the cross and destroyed His enemies with a breath.

But Jesus was being our Savior on the cross; He was saving us by sacrificing Himself. He was dying even for those who made themselves His enemies—the Jewish leaders gathered around Him to gloat and celebrate their apparent victory. He would leave it to God His Father to prove Him right. And He wouldn't have to wait long, just three days. All who trust in Him will enjoy His salvation forever.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, You remained silent through the gloating mockery of those religious leaders who opposed You. Thank You for dying to offer them and all of us salvation. Amen.

INSULTING CRIMINALS

Saturday, March 31, 2012

Read Luke 23:35-39.

*“Let the Christ, the King of Israel, come down now from the cross that we may see and believe.” Those who were crucified with him also reviled Him.
Mark 15:32*

The physical pain of being beaten, flogged and nailed to a Roman cross is bad enough. But Jesus also experiences the bitter pain of emotional abuse. He watches the people pass by on the road turn and fling their ridicule at Him. He hears the mockery and laughter of the chief priests and scribes. Beneath Him the Roman soldiers cruelly taunt His thirst by holding up wine-vinegar just outside of reach (see Luke 23:36-37).

Perhaps there are at least two people who can actually sympathize with Him. After all, the criminals hanging on His left and right are condemned too. They are going through much the same excruciating physical pain He is suffering. But their great pain and suffering drive them to lash out against Him. The Greek word we translate as “revile” means to insult or belittle someone—just like a couple of schoolyard bullies. Wherever Jesus turns, He is under attack.

Jesus is literally suffering what all of us deserve for our sins: everlasting punishment in hell. Throughout the Bible hell is described as a place where people are bound hand and foot and cast into utter darkness (see Matthew 22:13); it’s where they suffer great pain from the inside and the outside (see Isaiah 66:24). That is exactly what Jesus is suffering with His hands and feet bound to the cross by the nails, the great pain racking His body. And as we will see tomorrow, there will be thick darkness that will leave Him alone in His great suffering.

He did it all for you and me, so we can live with Him in the perfect peace, joy and light of heaven forever.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, You were surrounded by countless enemies, who mocked and laughed at Your distress. Thank You for taking my place in hell and giving me Your place in heaven. Amen.

DARKNESS

Sunday, April 1, 2012

Read Luke 23:44-45.

*And when the sixth hour had come, there was
darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour.
Mark 15:33*

Jesus is suffering intense physical pain on the cross. Compounding this is the emotional pain caused by the hatred of His enemies who surround Him, and His friends who promised to die beside Him but deserted Him, going into hiding instead. (Although Luke and John tell us Jesus' disciple John was near the cross along with His mother Mary and several other women, Mark ignores these and focuses in on the depth of Jesus' suffering for us.)

Now the last piece falls into place. Jesus must not only suffer at the hands of men, but now the hand of His own Heavenly Father rises against Him as well.

That wrath of God is represented by the supernatural darkness that comes over the whole land for three hours. Some claim it was caused by a lunar eclipse when the moon passed between the earth and the sun. But Passover is held at full moon, and this is a time when the moon is on the opposite side of the earth from the sun. Without explaining, Mark simply tell us darkness fell over the whole land, Luke tells us the sun's light failed (see Luke 23:45).

Deep inside the darkness God the Father is unleashing His wrath on His Son for all our sins and for the sins of all people of all time. In many of Jesus' stories He describes those who turn away from God as being bound hand and foot and "cast into the outer darkness" (Matthew 22:13b). Now Jesus Himself is enveloped by this outer darkness. It heightens His suffering as God's wrath is poured down upon Him in our place.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, You are the Light of the world. Thank You for enduring hell's outer darkness, so I can live in Your glorious light forever. Amen.

FORSAKEN

Monday, April 2, 2012

Read Mark 15:34.

And at the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" which means, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" Mark 15:34

All of Jerusalem is gripped by the dreaded darkness that came at noon and has stubbornly held on for three hours. Around three o'clock a loud voice of suffering and agony pierces through the darkness, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?"

Jesus' haunting words ring in our ears because they should be our words. Each of us deserves God's punishment for our wrongs. Each of us deserves to be condemned, bound hand and foot and cast into the outer darkness. Each of us deserves to be abandoned by God and blasted by the unending waves of His fiery wrath. "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" This is the voice of one trapped in the darkness of hell. This is the voice of one who suffers God's fiery wrath.

It is a terrifying thing to stop and realize God's wrath. We see it so clearly in everything Jesus suffered. But we have to remember that Jesus was not forsaken because of any sins He committed. He took our place as our spotless Substitute. He suffered and died in our place to free us from the curse of our sins, and our hell.

That is the reason He was born in that manger in Bethlehem so many years before. He came to suffer and die to save us from the wrath of God. And because of His perfect life, innocent suffering and death and His glorious resurrection, we can live with Him in heaven forever.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, we cannot grasp the pain of being separated from our God as You were. Thank You that because of Your sacrifice we will never have to say those haunting words. Amen.

CALLING ELIJAH

Tuesday, April 3, 2012

Read Mark 15:35-36.

*And some of the bystanders hearing it said, "Behold, He is calling Elijah."
Mark 15:35*

In the darkness the crowd hears Jesus cry out, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" They hear the Aramaic word "Eloi" and think He is calling Elijah. They are thinking of a prophecy from Malachi in the Old Testament: "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes" (Malachi 4:5). The bystanders wonder if Jesus is calling out for the great prophet Elijah to come and rescue Him from the cross.

Are the bystanders mocking Him again or might they have another reason for pointing this out? If it is just mockery, then they think it's pretty funny that Jesus is getting desperate for God to do something to rescue Him.

But, on the other hand, who knows what effect these hours of unnatural darkness have had on them? Luke tells us that after Jesus died, many of these bystanders went home beating their breast—a sign of sorrow and regret over what they have done (see Luke 23:48). Whether it was mockery or genuine curiosity, one of them ran up and gave Him wine-vinegar. Then they stood back to see what might happen.

Jesus wasn't calling Elijah. He was calling out to His Father. But this time Jesus could not call Him "Abba" or "Father." God had forsaken Him because of our sins. Yet, even though the Father had turned His back against His own Son, Jesus held on to His God, calling out, "My God! My God!" Because God turned His back on His own Son, we can be confident He will never turn His back on us who trust in Jesus as our Savior.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, thank You for being willing to lay down Your life for me. Amen.

JESUS' LAST LOUD CRY

Wednesday, April 4, 2012

Read Mark 15:37.

*And Jesus uttered a loud cry and breathed His last.
Mark 15:37*

Mark doesn't tell us Jesus' final words, only that He uttered a loud cry and breathed His last. Matthew does the same. If we want to learn Jesus' last words we must turn to Luke 23:46. But why does Mark choose to leave out these final words of Jesus?

To all appearances, Jesus had been a fake and a fraud. After all, how could the Son of God be arrested, beaten, flogged and nailed to a cross? What King of Israel would allow Himself to be mocked, insulted and spat upon? Mark wants us to see that beneath the blood, the sweat and the tears, Jesus truly is God's Son: the promised Savior and King of the Jews. To do this He points out the unusual circumstances surrounding Jesus' death—circumstances that reveal the divine majesty of the man wearing the crown of thorns.

Mark began with the intense, three-hour-long darkness. He now presents Jesus' final loud cry immediately before His death. What was so unusual about this? Criminals who died of crucifixion did not have the breath to cry out in a loud voice, especially in the moment right before their death. Yet, Jesus cries out loudly, and then He dies.

In John's Gospel Jesus had told His disciples, "For this reason the Father loves Me, because I lay down My life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of My own accord. ..." (John 10:17-18a). He laid it down for you. And in three days He will take it up again—for you!

THE PRAYER: Lord God, our Heavenly Father, thank You for revealing Your Son's divinity, even while He was holding back His divine power to save us from our sins. Amen.

A SIGN FOR THE CHIEF PRIESTS

Thursday, April 5, 2012

Read Mark 15:38.

*And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom.
Mark 15:38*

Very unusual things took place at Jesus' death: the darkness, the loud cry right before His death and the temple curtain tearing in two.

God designed the place of worship for Israel. The temple consisted of two spaces. One room, the Holy Place, was where priests entered daily to minister before the Lord. Another room, the Most Holy Place or the Holy of Holies, contained the Ark Moses built to symbolize God's presence among His people. This Most Holy Place was separated from the Holy Place by a thick curtain. No one could pass beyond that curtain into the Most Holy Place, except the high priest, and he could only enter one day out of the year. This curtain symbolized the separation from God that our sin has caused.

When Jesus died that curtain was torn in two from top to bottom. This was God's sign to Jesus' greatest enemies—the chief priests. On the cross they thought they were right and had protected God's reputation. Now one of their own priests standing in the temple sees that great, thick curtain tear in two. God was telling the priests they had crucified their Messiah and His Son. But they too had access to God now—through faith in Jesus Christ.

The torn curtain shows that our sin no longer separates us from our God. Jesus Christ has torn that barrier apart and washed us in His blood by faith. That means we are free to come before God without fear or doubt.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, thank You for tearing down the barrier of sin that separated us from Your Heavenly Father. Keep us always in this faith. Amen.

ONE VOICE SPEAKS OUT

Good Friday, April 6, 2012

Read Mark 15:39.

*And when the centurion, who stood facing Him, saw that in this way
He breathed His last, he said, "Truly this man was the Son of God!"
Mark 15:39*

The Roman centurion in charge of the crucifixion detail was a hardened Roman soldier. He had seen many crucifixions before. But this day would go down for him as the most unique day of his whole career, and Jesus would go down as the strangest criminal he would ever see.

He had seen Jesus refuse the pain-killer before He was nailed to the cross. He had watched Jesus silently endure the nails and the mockery and rebuke, unlike all the other crucified victims. Instead of lashing out or cursing those who were hurting Him, Jesus prayed for His Father to forgive them because they did not know what they were doing.

He had seen the thick darkness that came on at noon and lasted until three o'clock. And he witnessed Jesus' unnatural death, immediately after He cried out in a loud voice. (There was not just one loud cry, but four loud cries as recorded in Mark 15:34, John 19:28 and 30 and Luke 23:46). Deep down the Roman soldier knew crucified criminals just didn't die that way.

Everyone else had mocked and ridiculed Jesus, rejecting Him as God's Son. The passersby shook their heads; the chief priests mocked His name; the soldiers taunted Him with wine-vinegar; the criminals insulted Him, even Pilate's inscription mocked Him.

But one voice finally spoke differently: the centurion said, "Truly this man was the Son of God!"

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, even though Your own people rejected You, thank You for opening the eyes of this Roman soldier. Open my eyes to see who You really are through the blood and the crown of thorns. Amen.

THE TOMB

Saturday, April 7, 2012

Read Mark 15:42-47.

And Joseph bought a linen shroud, and taking Him down, wrapped Him in the linen shroud and laid Him in a tomb that had been cut out of the rock.

And he rolled a stone against the entrance of the tomb.

Mark 15:46

What feelings run through your mind when you stand at the grave of a loved one: your mom or dad, grandma or grandpa, brother or sister, wife or husband, child or grandchild, or even your best friend? Few places in this world are more raw and painful than a cemetery, especially right after you have laid a loved one to rest. It brings up all kinds of emotions and thoughts and shattered dreams. And hanging over everything is that dread quiet.

This garden grave outside Jerusalem is no different, and yet at the same time it is completely different. Cut out of the rock, it was intended to be the future resting place of a respected and wealthy Jewish council member. But now it holds the body of the teacher from Nazareth, who was cut down in His youth, a condemned criminal executed on a cross not far away.

Jesus' life has come full circle. At His birth, Joseph, His foster-father, laid Jesus in a manger in a hurriedly borrowed shelter. At His death, another Joseph hastily lays His body in a borrowed tomb.

This was a place previously untouched by death—for no dead body had ever been laid in it. But on the third day death will lose its hold and be swallowed up by life.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, Your body was laid in a tomb to await Your resurrection on Sunday morning. Remind me that my grave will only hold my resting body until Judgment Day. Give me a heart that is sorry for my sins and trusts firmly in You, so I will always be ready for that great day. Amen.

THE EMPTY TOMB

Easter Sunday, April 8, 2012

Read Mark 15:40-41; 16:1-6.

*And very early on the first day of the week,
when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb.*

Mark 16:2

Late Friday afternoon while Joseph of Arimathea was removing Jesus' body from the cross and carrying it to his own grave, several women followed him and watched. They knew Joseph had done his best, but he just didn't have time to properly anoint Jesus' body. So they decided to finish the job when the Sabbath was over. Very early Sunday morning they set out with their spices to go to the tomb.

When they entered the garden, they realized they had forgotten to get someone to roll away the huge stone guarding the entrance to the tomb. They knew they could never do it themselves.

Arriving at Jesus' tomb they saw the huge stone had already been rolled away. Entering the tomb they were startled to see a young man wearing a white robe sitting on the right side of the tomb. "And he said to them, "Do not be alarmed. You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen; He is not here. See the place where they laid Him" (Mark 16:6).

When Jesus died and rose again He destroyed death, guaranteeing that death will have no hold over us or our loved ones. On Judgment Day He will return to raise all the dead and judge all people. Everyone who trusts in Jesus' suffering, death and resurrection for their salvation will share in His victory and glory. But those who turn their back on Jesus in this life will experience a day of fear, dread, guilt and condemnation.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, thank You for conquering death through Your death and resurrection. Give me faith and trust in You that I may live with You forever. Amen.

HE WILL GO AHEAD OF YOU

Easter Monday, April 9, 2012

Read Mark 16:7-8.

*“But go, tell His disciples and Peter that He is going before you to Galilee.
There you will see Him, just as He told you.”
Mark 16:7*

If you go back to Thursday night shortly before Jesus was betrayed, you will remember Him telling His disciples, “You will all fall away, for it is written, ‘I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.’ But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee” (Matthew 26:31b-32). Now that all of Jesus’ words have come to pass, the angel tells the women to pass on the good news to the fearful disciples.

He will go ahead of them to Galilee, and they will see Him there—the same place they had spent so many days, weeks and months together. As they gather together again, Jesus will reassure them of the forgiveness He has won for all of us through His suffering, death and resurrection. Sadly, their number will be 11 not 12; Judas turned away from Jesus and refused to believe Jesus’ promises of forgiveness and restoration through His great sacrifice.

Jesus has made us a promise too. He will return for all of us on the Last Day. So while we wait and watch for His coming, Jesus tells us to gather together with fellow believers each week. United in worship we remember Jesus’ promises and rejoice in the great salvation He has won for all of us through His atoning work on the cross.

God grant you firm faith and trust in Jesus Christ and a joy-filled expectation of His return.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, thank You for accomplishing everything required for my salvation. Now keep me confident of Your promise and watching for Your glorious return. Amen.

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