



The Gospel Day by Day

A Holy Week Devotional

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A few years ago, I realized I knew a lot about Palm Sunday and Good Friday, but I could never remember what Maundy (Thursday) meant, and I had little idea of what Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday of Holy Week were all about.

I decided to spend some time with Jesus in the various gospels. With the help of some good resources, I read different accounts of the different days of Jesus' last week of earthly life as a human.

I learned a lot about funny names of days I'd never heard, but the biggest thing I discovered was the good news of the gospel announced again in this astounding story.

This year I decided to rework and revise all of the devotionals for you, my wonderful Living Story subscribers. I urge you to set aside twenty minutes each day of Holy Week to remember the strange and wonderful events. This guide includes:

- links to Scripture
- a very quick devotional with gospel implications
- a brief prayer

I hope you enjoy using it as much as I enjoyed making it! Please feel free to contact me if I can help you!

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Palm Sunday

John 12:12-19

Most of us know about Palm Sunday, the day of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. All four gospels record this incident, and many of us have witnessed the often humorous re-enactments with happy children bearing palm branches down the church aisle. (Don't you enjoy the branch-carrying styles—with some employing them as swords, while others wave them high and still others simply drag them along the ground?!)

Let's look at some key events.

The story begins with Jesus instructing two of his disciples to go into the village, where they will find a donkey. When they return with the donkey, Jesus mounts it and rides into Jerusalem.

This event is odd for several reasons. First, Jesus rarely called attention to himself or to the fact that he was the Messiah. Second, kings didn't ride donkeys. The Jews would have, should have understood the sign. They knew the prophecy from Zechariah 9:9 that both John and Matthew quote,

“Fear not, daughter of Zion;
behold, your king is coming,
sitting on a donkey's colt!”

In this way of entering Jerusalem, Jesus drops a major hint that he really is The King of the Jews, the Royal Son of David. The large crowd receives him with fanfare fitting a king. They lay down their cloaks and their palm branches as a sign of humble service. They shout, “Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel!” Hosanna means both “save” and “praise.” For the moment, the crowd is thrilled—Jesus is finally acting like a king. And yet they still do not fully understand what kind of king Jesus is.

The Pharisees, ironically, **do** understand that Jesus' kingship means the end of life as they know it. That's why they intensify their efforts to kill him.

Five days later, many in the Hosanna crowd will literally change their tune, shouting, "Crucify him!" Jesus is not the king they expected. They are disappointed and angry and feel duped.

GOSPEL IMPLICATION:

Jesus has never been a political savior, a powerhouse king, conquering for the sake of his own might and glory. Jesus is the sacrificial Savior, a humble king, conquering death and sin for God's glory and for our salvation.

We must see our own sin in the crowd's; both on Sunday and Friday. We must see it in the Pharisees'. Too often, we want Jesus to be our kind of king, addressing our "felt needs" rather than our spiritual needs. We want him to serve us—in our way and in our time.

PRAYER

Jesus, forgive us for shaping you into the king of our own making. Thank you that you came to serve us, as the foot-washing, body-breaking, blood-shedding King. Because you did, we are free to serve you. Amen.

Fig Monday

Matthew 21:18-22; Mark 11:12-14

The strange name given to the Monday of Holy Week originates with one of the key events. Let's look at two key events of this day:

1. The curse of the tree: Matthew 21:18-22; Mark 11:12-14:

Jesus curses the fig tree for not bearing fruit. His disciples are confused. What has the fig tree done to deserve cursing?

Like the disciples, we need to know that the fig tree represents the Israelites. In Jeremiah 8:13, God says,

"When I would gather them, declares the Lord,
there are no grapes on the vine,
nor figs on the fig tree;
even the leaves are withered,
and what I gave them has passed away from them."

Again and again, the Israelites had the "makings of a fig tree," the capacity to bear fruit. The failure of the Israelites was that they had leaves but no figs; in other words, "They worship me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me" (Isaiah 29:13).

GOSPEL IMPLICATION:

Religion will never save. If we pretend to worship God, but our hearts are disconnected, we are not really worshipping. For their failure to worship God, the Israelites deserve death; for our failure to put God first, we too deserve death. The good news of the gospel is that Jesus dies in our place.

2. More moneychanger trouble: Mark 11:15-19: We don't often see Jesus apparently lose his cool (he doesn't really lose it), but here, filled with righteous indignation at the religious leaders and moneychangers, he starts turning over tables.

GOSPEL IMPLICATION:

Jesus' righteous anger is aimed at the "religious folk" who charged a fee for salvation. Today there continue to be "moneychangers" who lead people astray, telling people that salvation requires "Jesus plus—good deeds, good behavior, more money, etc."

PRAYER:

Lord, this Fig Monday, we ask your forgiveness for our likeness to both the fig tree and the moneychangers. Forgive us for pretending to worship you when our hearts are really invested in other gods. Forgive us for acting as if there is any other way to be saved than through Jesus' death on the cross. Amen.

Teaching (or Trap) Tuesday

Mark 11:20-25; Mark 11:28-12:40;

Matthew 23:39

Historically, there is no name assigned to Tuesday, so I chose these names myself (can you tell!?!). Jesus continues teaching—both his disciples and the religious leaders who are trying to trap him.

1. Jesus teaches the disciples: Mark 11:20-25.

Passing the cursed fig tree on their way back to Jerusalem, the disciples notice it is now withered. Jesus gives a brief but significant lesson on faith, prayer, and forgiveness.

GOSPEL IMPLICATION:

The disciples will soon face a task that will seem far more impossible than praying a mountain into the sea. In Jesus' dark-houred death, they will desperately need faith that hope will rise again.

They will come to know that Jesus' death and resurrection profoundly changes their story: they are forgiven, freed of sin, guilt, and death; and they are empowered to forgive others.

2. Jesus teaches the religious authorities trying to trap him: Mark 11:28-12:40; Matthew 23:29.

The religious leaders question Jesus' authority: who authorized him to take the actions in the temple? In the sections that follow, Jesus pulls out all of his teaching stops: questions, parables, illustrations, and finally, the provocative "woes" of Matthew 23:1-37 (**WHOA!**). We might say Jesus had a "**come-to-Jesus**" meeting with them.

GOSPEL IMPLICATION

Jesus, knowing his teaching will further enrage them, persists in pointing them (and us) to their/our desperate need for a Savior. God's grace is the only hope for their/our hardness of heart, self-righteous attitude, and stubborn refusal to see.

PRAYER

Lord, forgive us for our lack of faith and forgiveness. Soften our hearts that we may see our sin. When we doubt your strength and might, help us to remember that you are the God who raised Jesus from the dead. Help us to trust you enough to forgive others and to pray with the faith that moves mountains, knowing that you are the Redeemer and Restorer of all things. Amen.

Spy Wednesday

Matthew 26:6-16

The "spy" of Spy Wednesday is the betrayer, Judas. While it is a dark day, we also witness an extraordinary act of worship. There are two significant events:

1. A woman anoints Jesus at Bethany: Matthew 26:6-13.

(Note: In John's account, this story takes place before the Triumphal Entry). Mary, the-sister-of-Martha, pours an entire jar of very expensive ointment (think Chanel No. 5) over Jesus' head. The disciples are indignant—Judas speaks the words in John 12:5,

"Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?"

John editorializes, "He said this, not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief, and having charge of the moneybag he used to help himself to what was put into it." Yikes!

Jesus always loved and honored women. Jesus chastises the disciples for their objection, praising Mary, saying she has "done a beautiful thing," and "she has done it to prepare me for burial." He concludes, "Truly, I say to you, wherever this gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will also be told in memory of her" (Matthew 26:10-13).

GOSPEL IMPLICATIONS:

The gospel calls us to worship extravagantly, with pure hearts and loud, messy praise. The gospel also frees us from the subtle hypocrisy and greed that can taint our hearts of worship.

2. The beginning of betrayal. Judas offers to deliver Jesus to the chief priests: Matthew 26:14-16.

No longer resisting the devil (Jn. 13:2), and apparently provoked by this final failure of Jesus (in his mind), Judas decides to turn Jesus in for thirty shekels of silver.

In the coming days, more men will desert and deny Jesus. Let's not kid ourselves—these betrayals hurt Jesus, but not as much as the seeming betrayal of his Father, which led Jesus to cry out on the cross, *"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"* (Matt. 27:46).

GOSPEL IMPLICATIONS:

It's tempting to point fingers at Judas and Peter and say, "How could they!" but the fact is, it is my own betrayal of the Creator God that sent Jesus to the cross.

The bizarre reversal of Easter is that because Jesus suffered betrayal for us, we can never suffer betrayal in the same way again. Although others may harm us, we always know there is one who will never leave nor forsake us.

PRAYER

Dear Ever-Faithful Father,
May we stop and step back and truly survey the wondrous cross on which our Prince of Glory died. May we recognize our treachery toward you and receive your sacrifice for us. May we truly comprehend the depth and breadth of your love for us and your complete forgiveness of our sins. As we do, draw us to worship as Mary did, extravagantly and spectacularly. Amen.

Maundy Thursday

Matthew 26:20-30; John 13:3-20;

Mark 14:32-42

You probably know that Thursday is the day the Last Supper was celebrated, and you may also know it's the day Jesus washed his disciples' feet. But do you ever wonder what in the world "Maundy" means? I did, so I looked it up. The short version is that Maundy is related to the Latin word "mandate." Let us turn to the story to hear Christ's mandate to the first disciples and to us. "a new commandment I give unto you, that you love one another...." (John 13:34a)."

We focus on two main scenes from Maundy Thursday:

1. Feasting, teaching, and cleansing: Matthew 26:20-30, John 13:3-20:

- Feasting: On Maundy Thursday, the Passover Feast is re-created as the Last Supper. This feast will become what we now call Communion, which Christians regularly celebrate in remembrance of Christ's sacrifice.
- Teaching the way of the cross: The Teacher gives the new commandment "that you love one another...as I have loved you."
- Cleansing the sin of his followers: Jesus, the Servant King, removes his robe, and kneeling, washes the grimy, soiled feet of even those who will betray him.

GOSPEL IMPLICATIONS:

Jesus fulfills the commandment he gives to his disciples; as he does so, he makes it possible for us to love and forgive. The gospel calls us to..

- Feast: Take regularly the spiritual nourishment of Christ's body and blood, broken for us. Doing so empowers us to forgive those who betray us.
- Serve: Lower ourselves to the dirt to wash the feet of those who will or have betrayed us.

(Note: Humbling ourselves in this way doesn't mean we submit ourselves to abuse. Instead, we serve the abuser by continuing to point him to truth and grace).

2. Jesus prayed. And suffered. And prayed. Mark 14:32-42

In the poignant scene in the Garden, Jesus instructs the disciples to "wait and pray." Alone, he goes deeper into the Garden to intercede with his Father. In agony, he sweats blood. He prays the prayer that reminds us he is human: "Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me." (Mark 14:36).

The disciples sleep. An angel comes to Jesus and strengthens him (Luke 22:43-44). Jesus prays again, even more earnestly. The betrayers arrive, and Jesus gives himself up to them.

GOSPEL IMPLICATIONS

"Awake, oh sleeper, arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you!" (Eph. 5:15). We are so like the disciples, struggling to watch with Jesus one bitter hour. The great gospel hope is that God's mission depends on his faithfulness, not ours.

PRAYER

Dear God,

It amazes me that you answered Jesus' desperate cry with the only response that would reconcile us to you – No. You could not let the cup of suffering pass from Jesus. He had to drink it all on our account. Thank you, glorious Father, for allowing Christ to suffer death that we might be raised to new life with him. It is a truly bizarre story, this gospel. Amen.

Good Friday

Matthew 26:57-65; Mark 15:1-5

Today is perhaps my second favorite day of Holy Week—the day that originated the phrase, "It's Friday, but Sunday's coming!" (which is actually from an

Easter meditation by S.M. Lockridge, which is quoted [here](#)).

Many terrible, and yet, paradoxically, beautiful things happened between Jesus' garden prayer and arrest and his crucifixion.

- Judas and his "band of soldiers" made up of chief officers and Pharisees, cart Jesus off to Caiaphas, the high priest's father-in-law (Matthew 26:57).
- After a Sanhedrin all-nighter, Caiaphas finally draws out the so-called blasphemy he seeks from Jesus and sends him to Pontius Pilate (Matthew 26:62-65).
- Pontius Pilate senses a trap and does everything he can to get Jesus out of there. He even tries to satisfy the crowd's bloodlust by having Jesus severely flogged, hoping still to release him. But in the end, Pilate gives in to the crowd's demands and sends Jesus to his death (Mark 15:1-5).
- Note that through all of this, Jesus is the one in control. The hour has now come, and his Father has not allowed the cup to pass from him. He will die, crucified on a cross, but not because of treacherous Jews, betraying friends, or Roman officials. Jesus dies on the cross because it is God's plan for him to do so.
- And this is where the good arrives on this apparently "terrible, horrible, but very very good day."

GOSPEL IMPLICATIONS

IT IS FINISHED. When Jesus died on the cross, he cried out, "It is finished." If you do one thing on this very good Friday, ponder this three-word phrase and its profound implications—for the glory of God, for the defeat of evil, for your simple life.

As N.T. Wright explains, "...in Jesus' world that word 'finished' is what you wrote on a bill when it had been settled: 'Paid in full!'...When God the creator made his wonderful world, at the end of the sixth day he finished it. He completed his work. Now, on the Friday, the sixth day of the week, Jesus has completed the work of redeeming the world. With his shameful, chaotic, horrible death he has gone to the very bottom, to the darkest and deepest place of ruin, and has planted there the sign that says 'Rescued'."

PRAYER

Gracious, Sovereign Lord,
You know there are seasons in our lives when it looks as if agony and death have won the day, as if nothing works together for the good of those who love God, as if you aren't really and truly good. And you know we need to remember this Good Friday which included so many horrors for your Son, our Lord, Jesus. We need to remember that he went to the darkest place of ruin to bring the greatest good and glory to this earth. And yes, we wait, on this sorrowful day, in sometimes sad seasons, for Christ to come again. But because of what you have done, we know there is such a day coming when everything sad will come untrue. Amen.

Silent Saturday

Matthew 27:62-66

And today it is silent, quiet. In the 21st century, we go about our business, running to the grocery store for last-minute brunch items, taking kids to Easter egg hunts, but in the biblical story of the first Holy Week, there is little activity.

For Jews, it would have been still because Saturday was the Sabbath, the day of rest. For Jesus' followers, it would have also been very silent because the Lord had died. They did not understand what had happened. On this Sabbath they had forgotten what Jesus had told them about his death and descent to hell and the resurrection to come.

There is some activity on this day:

The Pharisees and chief priests are busy at work. They go to Pilate and ask him to place a guard at the tomb. You see, they do remember what Jesus said about rising from the dead. They are concerned Jesus might just actually do it (Matthew 27:62-66)!

Pilate tells them to use the guard they already have, and they leave to seal the tomb and place the guard in front of it (Matthew 27:66).

GOSPEL IMPLICATIONS

The gospel is for doubters. "Lord I believe; help my unbelief" (Mark 9:24). How many times has a story unfolded with such devastating sorrow and pain that we felt this could not be what the Lord intended? Silent Saturday reminds us that such dark times will come, but resurrection will always follow. Thankfully, our hope is not based on earthly circumstances, but on the reality of the Resurrection.

PRAYER

Ever-patient Lord,
Still us on this Saturday. Help us to take time away from the fun activities to remember, to remember that the conversation between you and your beloved Son was silenced on this day all those years ago for us. Help us to wait well on hard days for the day Christ will come again and restore all broken things. Amen.

Resurrection Sunday

John 20:13-29

Christ is RISEN!

Christ is RISEN INDEED!

At last, we have reached my favorite day, the day I hate to call Easter because, after all, that conjures up images of weird giant mascot bunnies and plastic eggs with melted chocolate.

(To be clear, I have no problem with giant bunnies and eggs filled with chocolate on other days of the year :-)! But this day, this final day of Holy Week is about Resurrection, the miracle of life from death. It is a story-changer.

Christ's post-resurrection activity is given a lot of attention in Scripture. The gospel writers particularly draw attention to Jesus' appearances to different kinds of believers.

We see

...**Mary Magdalene**, so deeply blinded by grief that she momentarily mistakes Jesus for the gardener! (John 20:13-16).

...**Thomas**, defiantly refusing to believe in the resurrected Jesus unless he sees the scars (John 20:24-29).

...**the disciples**, who are (understandably?) startled when Jesus suddenly appears in the middle of a room with locked doors and pronounces a benediction over them: "Peace be with you" (John 20:19).

GOSPEL IMPLICATIONS

No truer words were ever spoken: "We believe; help our unbelief" (Mark 9:24). Jesus appears to many followers, and though all believe in him, all struggle to believe what seems too good to be true. The gospel asks us daily, "Will you believe what seems too good to be true?" It is not a fairy tale—it is the truest

tale ever told, the one story that makes sense of people who were “dead in our sins” coming alive in Christ Jesus. Christ has risen, and we who trust in him are no longer the walking dead. By the transforming work of the Spirit, we have power, reason, and hope to live our calling to “Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation” (Mark 16:15).

Can you believe it?!

PRAYER

Gracious, Powerful, Startling, Risen Lord, it is almost funny to think of your unbelieving enemies scurrying around on that first Resurrection Day, making last-ditch attempts to cover up the truth about the one who covers our sins.

We confess, we could have been them, or we could have been Peter, who denied you three times, or we could have mistaken you for the gardener, or had a long theological discussion with you and not realized you were the King of Theology, the Walking, Breathing, Theology we needed.

Help us, we pray, to humble ourselves, being willing to ride on a donkey or in a 25-year-old Datsun B-210, for love of the King.

Teach us the difference between your righteous anger and our often self-righteous anger.

Free us to worship you with abandon, anointing you with precious perfume or lavishing you with unending praise.

Work in us so that we may work for you, washing dirty feet or changing smelly diapers or hugging lice-ridden children.

Forgive us, for we know not what we do.

Forgive our unbelief. Draw us daily nearer and nearer to you that we might live boldly, as a resurrected people raised from the death of our sins by the Savior who descended into hell to put them to death. May we shout with triumph on this marvelous day,

“Joy to the world,
The Lord is come.
Let earth receive her king!”

Amen.