

Holy Week 2021

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Welcome to a special edition of the Engage God Daily. We're going to provide a devotional every day, from Palm Sunday to Easter Sunday, as we walk through the final events in Jesus' earthly life.

Easter is about the unexpected.

A king who has neither riches nor throne. A hero who is captured and condemned. A ruler who sacrifices himself for his people. An innocent who is executed as a criminal. An eternal deity who chooses to experience death. A crucified Messiah who is raised to life. Many of us are so familiar with the story of Jesus that we can fail to appreciate just how astonishing the events we remember and celebrate this week are.

Holy Week, the week between Palm Sunday and Easter Sunday, is a time when Christians all over the world are reflecting on Jesus's betrayal, arrest, and crucifixion and then rejoicing in his glorious resurrection. The historical events we remember this week remind us of the awesome love God has for us. The story of Easter offers us hope that pain and suffering will be defeated, and that new life can come out of the grave. We need the story of Easter.

Each day we're going to encounter the story of Easter straight from the pages of Matthew's Gospel. This is a story we all need to know and share, so if you're not already, consider working through this week's Engage God Daily with family or friends. Take time each day to pray and reflect on what your Savior did for you, and the hope it gives you for the future. Engage in meaningful conversations about what the stories from Holy Week mean to you.

Day 1 | Jesus' Triumphal Entry

When Jesus enters Jerusalem for the final time, his life and ministry are coming to a climax. Jesus had created quite a stir in the outer provinces of Judea. He taught with undeniable authority, openly challenged the religious leaders, healed the sick, and even raised the dead. Many people were beginning to recognize that Jesus was more than a Rabbi or even a prophet. Could it be that he was the long-awaited messiah, king of Israel?

When Jesus arrived in Jerusalem for the Passover celebration, tensions were high. Two views of Jesus were in conflict. The Jewish religious leaders saw him as a trouble-making, rabble-rouser and were plotting his death. More and more, the ordinary people were expecting a great liberator who would free them from Roman oppression and re-establish the earthly kingdom of Israel. The manner of Jesus' arrival into Jerusalem announced his kingship without contradicting its unexpected nature. Before the king would reign, he would choose to die.

Read

Matthew 21:1–11

¹ As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage on the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, ² saying to them, “Go to the village ahead of you, and at once you will find a donkey tied there, with her colt by her. Untie them and bring them to me. ³ If anyone says anything to you, say that the Lord needs them, and he will send them right away.”

⁴ This took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet:

⁵ “Say to Daughter Zion,
‘See, your king comes to you,
gentle and riding on a donkey,
and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.’”

⁶ The disciples went and did as Jesus had instructed them. ⁷ They brought the donkey and the colt and placed their cloaks on them for Jesus to sit on. ⁸ A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, while others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. ⁹ The crowds that went ahead of him and those that followed shouted,

“Hosanna to the Son of David!”
“Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!”
“Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

¹⁰ When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred and asked, “Who is this?”

¹¹ The crowds answered, “This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee.”

Reflect

All four Gospels record Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem. They depict him riding a donkey as the crowd lays their cloaks before him, waves palm branches and shouts “Hosanna!” What do all these symbols mean? Jesus’ arrival is being treated as a royal procession.

“Hosanna” is a Greek form of the Hebrew words translated “Save us” in Psalm 118:25. This Psalm was among those commonly used during Jewish festivals. In Jewish worship, “Hosanna” had already come to be used more as an exclamation of praise than a prayer.¹ Also from Psalm 118 come the words, “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!” The people are expecting Jesus to defeat Rome. They’ve heard of his miracles. Some have even witnessed them first hand. They’re eager for victory.

There will be victory, but it won’t be what his admirers were expecting. The King would sacrifice his life to save those oppressed by an enemy even more powerful than the great empire of Rome. He would conquer the enemy that enslaves all of humanity — sin and death.

This won’t be Jesus’ final triumphal entry. Revelation 19 tells us that when Jesus comes again, he will ride a white horse and “with justice he judges and wages war. His eyes are like blazing fire, and on his head are

¹ R. T. France, *Matthew: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 1, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 303.

many crowns.” (verses 11–12). No one will ask “Who is this?” Every knee will bow, and every tongue will confess that he is the King of kings and the Lord of Lords. When his kingdom comes in its fulfillment, all who oppose him will perish. The time to pledge allegiance to King Jesus is now.

Jesus rode into Jerusalem heralded by the crowd as Savior and King. A few days later he would be hanging from the cross in apparent defeat. God often defies our expectations, but having faith means trusting in him even when his ways are inscrutable to us. It means that we pledge ourselves to King Jesus and obey him even when it’s difficult. We worship him as God, believing that the one who designed the universe has a plan for us as well.

It’s not always easy to have that kind of faith. But Easter reassures us that our trust is not in vain. We can trust the love of a Savior who would suffer and die for us. We can trust in the power of a God who raises the dead.

Prayer

As you begin Holy Week, ask the Father to prepare your heart to receive his Word. If it is helpful, use this prayer to guide you.

Father God, I want to worship you earnestly and fully this week. I know that there are callous places in my heart that have been toughened by rebellion and sin. Please reveal those areas and soften my heart so that I might trust you more deeply and obey you more completely. Help me respond to others with more tenderness and compassion so that I might imitate your Son in showing love and grace. I love you Father and long to know and love you more. In Jesus’ precious and holy name, I pray. Amen.

Day 2 | The Last Supper

Hundreds of years before Jesus walked the earth, God was preparing the way for Christ’s arrival through his chosen people, the descendants of Abraham. The book of Exodus tells of how God rescues Israel from slavery, abuse, and death in Egypt and leads them to the promised land. These events were central to the identity of the Jews, and remembering them became part of their worship of Yahweh.

Generations of Jewish people have celebrated Passover and remembered the mercy of God who spared them from judgment and then led them out of slavery and into a new land. On Jesus’ final night before his crucifixion, he would celebrate the Passover one last time with his disciples. This “Last Supper” had special significance. Just hours after this meal, Jesus would take on the sins of the world. His sacrifice enables escape from God’s judgment and freedom from slavery to sin and death.

Read

Matthew 26:17–30 (NIV)

¹⁷ *On the first day of the Festival of Unleavened Bread, the disciples came to Jesus and asked, “Where do you want us to make preparations for you to eat the Passover?”*

*¹⁸ He replied, "Go into the city to a certain man and tell him, 'The Teacher says: My appointed time is near. I am going to celebrate the Passover with my disciples at your house.' "*¹⁹ *So the disciples did as Jesus had directed them and prepared the Passover.*

²⁰ When evening came, Jesus was reclining at the table with the Twelve. ²¹ And while they were eating, he said, "Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me."

²² They were very sad and began to say to him one after the other, "Surely you don't mean me, Lord?"

²³ Jesus replied, "The one who has dipped his hand into the bowl with me will betray me. ²⁴ The Son of Man will go just as it is written about him. But woe to that man who betrays the Son of Man! It would be better for him if he had not been born."

²⁵ Then Judas, the one who would betray him, said, "Surely you don't mean me, Rabbi?" Jesus answered, "You have said so."

²⁶ While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take and eat; this is my body."

²⁷ Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you. ²⁸ This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. ²⁹ I tell you, I will not drink from this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom."

³⁰ When they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.

Jesus, knowing his time is short, gathers his disciples to celebrate the Passover. Families all over Israel were gathering for this meal, a time to remember and celebrate God's great act of rescue. Jesus, surrounded by men he clearly loves and had been pouring his life into, wants to prepare them for what is to come.

With all the disciples gathered, Jesus takes the opportunity to make a startling announcement. Among his beloved followers is a traitor, one who has been masquerading as a disciple, but whose heart does not belong to Jesus. Matthew makes sure that the depth of this betrayal is not lost on us. The disciples knew that there were many outside their circle who opposed Jesus, but were shocked that there could be someone treacherous on the inside.

As part of the Passover meal, the host would present and interpret the different elements. This night, Jesus takes two of these elements, the bread and the cup, and gives them new meaning that pointed to the salvation that he would provide. The phrase "blood of the covenant" would have sounded familiar to his disciples.

In the Old Testament, a blood sacrifice was required for binding a covenant and receiving forgiveness. At its root, all sin is against God and atonement must be made. Disobedience comes with a cost. Through the prophet Jeremiah, Yahweh laments the ways in which Israel has broken covenant with him, and speaks of a new covenant in which his law will be "written on their hearts" and enable them to "know him." When Jesus proclaims that his blood is poured out for the forgiveness of sin, his disciples would have remembered God's promise spoken through Jeremiah to "forgive their wickedness" and "remember their

sins no more” (31:31-34). Christ’s sacrifice would be complete. He would pay the price for our disobedience, so our sins could be forgiven.

Jesus concludes the meal with a look to the future that also conveys his love for his followers. The disciples would have to go on without Jesus’ physical presence, but can rest assured that he will be waiting for them to share in the blessings of his father. This is a blessing that is extended to us as Christ’s followers. One day we will all be united in God’s Kingdom, and we will celebrate together all that he has done and all that he has planned.

Pray

Take time to reflect on Jesus’ last meal with his disciples, and the Lord’s Supper that we still observe today. Reflect on the love Jesus had for his followers, even Judas who betrayed him. Rest in his great love for you. Let God’s grace draw you to repent for the ways you are thinking and acting that contradict his ways. Experience his forgiveness and rejoice in the future you will have with Jesus after his return.

Day 3 | The Garden of Gethsemane

Most of us know the knife-in-the-gut feeling of being rejected, abandoned, or betrayed. It’s excruciating. Though he demonstrated endless compassion and wisdom in his time on earth, Jesus knows those feelings too.

Having just celebrated the Last Supper, Jesus is surrounded by his closest disciples. These are people he’d poured his life into for years, yet they will fail him during his greatest time of need.

Read the Word

Matthew 26:31-56

³¹ Then Jesus told them, “This very night you will all fall away on account of me, for it is written: “I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.” ³² But after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee.”

³³ Peter replied, “Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will.”

³⁴ “Truly I tell you,” Jesus answered, “this very night, before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times.”

³⁵ But Peter declared, “Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you.” And all the other disciples said the same.

³⁶ Then Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to them, “Sit here while I go over there and pray.” ³⁷ He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with him, and he began to be sorrowful and troubled. ³⁸ Then he said to them, “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me.”

³⁹ *Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, “My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.”*

⁴⁰ *Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. “Couldn’t you men keep watch with me for one hour?” he asked Peter. ⁴¹ “Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.”*

⁴² *He went away a second time and prayed, “My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done.”*

⁴³ *When he came back, he again found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy. ⁴⁴ So he left them and went away once more and prayed the third time, saying the same thing.*

⁴⁵ *Then he returned to the disciples and said to them, “Are you still sleeping and resting? Look, the hour has come, and the Son of Man is delivered into the hands of sinners. ⁴⁶ Rise! Let us go! Here comes my betrayer!”*

⁴⁷ *While he was still speaking, Judas, one of the Twelve, arrived. With him was a large crowd armed with swords and clubs, sent from the chief priests and the elders of the people. ⁴⁸ Now the betrayer had arranged a signal with them: “The one I kiss is the man; arrest him.” ⁴⁹ Going at once to Jesus, Judas said, “Greetings, Rabbi!” and kissed him.*

⁵⁰ *Jesus replied, “Do what you came for, friend.”*

Then the men stepped forward, seized Jesus and arrested him. ⁵¹ With that, one of Jesus’ companions reached for his sword, drew it out and struck the servant of the high priest, cutting off his ear.

⁵² *“Put your sword back in its place,” Jesus said to him, “for all who draw the sword will die by the sword. ⁵³ Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels? ⁵⁴ But how then would the Scriptures be fulfilled that say it must happen in this way?”*

⁵⁵ *In that hour Jesus said to the crowd, “Am I leading a rebellion, that you have come out with swords and clubs to capture me? Every day I sat in the temple courts teaching, and you did not arrest me. ⁵⁶ But this has all taken place that the writings of the prophets might be fulfilled.” Then all the disciples deserted him and fled.*

Reflect

God created human beings to live together and rely on one another. When he made the very first human, he said “it is not good for the man to be alone” (Gen. 2:18). Relationships are essential to who we are. God himself lives in supernatural harmony in a bond our minds cannot fully grasp: one God existing as Father, Son and Spirit.

Yet because of sin, our human connections can be the source of tremendous pain. Selfishness, fear, resentment, anger, cowardice and stubbornness can make relationships that were meant to strengthen and bless us tear us down. Sometimes even in spite of our best efforts, our relationships can lead to big disappointments.

Though we may have poured ourselves into relationships that end up hurting us, we have a Savior who endured much worse. Jesus sympathizes with our pain because the ones he loved most failed him completely.

Remarkably, even Judas' betrayal and the disciple's cowardice and lack of faith did not prevent Jesus from dying for them. It was their sin, along with ours, that he would pay for on the cross. We can find great hope in Jesus' disciples because they were as imperfect as we are.

Take time today to thank God for saving you. Be honest with him about your current struggles with sin and doubt. We've all missed the mark as followers of Christ. Happily, he wasn't looking for disciples who were good enough to save. We are not worthy of his perfect love and goodness, but he gives it to us anyway. Jesus sacrificed himself for us because we need of saving. He then gives us his Spirit to shape and transform us into who he created us to be. We come to Christ broken and soiled, but because of the cross we have the assurance of healing, restoration, and new life.

Pray

In prayer, reflect on the grace that God has shown you. If you're feeling frustrated, afraid, angry, sad, or all of the above, take a moment to breathe in the grace of God and exhale those negative emotions one by one. Then praise the Father for his grace.

Day 4 | Jesus' First Trial and Peter's Denial

Because we are created in God's image, we have an innate sense of justice. We like to see the guilty held accountable for their actions and nothing seems more unfair than when someone is punished for something they didn't do. We hate it when someone accuses us wrongly, or even worse, when that charge is believed. It is difficult for us to accept when an innocent is condemned. Yet while the particular charge may be false, no one is truly innocent. We're all guilty of something. Except for Jesus.

No one has ever been able to claim true innocence besides Jesus. Not only was he innocent of the crimes for which he was arrested, but he was completely sinless. His trial was a mockery of justice that he endured for our sakes.

Read the Word

Matthew 26:57-27:10

⁵⁷ Those who had arrested Jesus took him to Caiaphas the high priest, where the teachers of the law and the elders had assembled. ⁵⁸ But Peter followed him at a distance, right up to the courtyard of the high priest. He entered and sat down with the guards to see the outcome.

⁵⁹ The chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin were looking for false evidence against Jesus so that they could put him to death. ⁶⁰ But they did not find any, though many false witnesses came forward.

Finally two came forward ⁶¹ and declared, "This fellow said, 'I am able to destroy the temple of God and rebuild it in three days.'"

⁶² Then the high priest stood up and said to Jesus, "Are you not going to answer? What is this testimony that these men are bringing against you?" ⁶³ But Jesus remained silent.

The high priest said to him, "I charge you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Messiah, the Son of God."

⁶⁴ "You have said so," Jesus replied. "But I say to all of you: From now on you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven."

⁶⁵ Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, "He has spoken blasphemy! Why do we need any more witnesses? Look, now you have heard the blasphemy. ⁶⁶ What do you think?"

"He is worthy of death," they answered.

⁶⁷ Then they spit in his face and struck him with their fists. Others slapped him ⁶⁸ and said, "Prophecy to us, Messiah. Who hit you?"

⁶⁹ Now Peter was sitting out in the courtyard, and a servant girl came to him. "You also were with Jesus of Galilee," she said.

⁷⁰ But he denied it before them all. "I don't know what you're talking about," he said.

⁷¹ Then he went out to the gateway, where another servant girl saw him and said to the people there, "This fellow was with Jesus of Nazareth."

⁷² He denied it again, with an oath: "I don't know the man!"

⁷³ After a little while, those standing there went up to Peter and said, "Surely you are one of them; your accent gives you away."

⁷⁴ Then he began to call down curses, and he swore to them, "I don't know the man!"

Immediately a rooster crowed. ⁷⁵ Then Peter remembered the word Jesus had spoken: "Before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times." And he went outside and wept bitterly.

27 ¹Early in the morning, all the chief priests and the elders of the people made their plans how to have Jesus executed. ² So they bound him, led him away and handed him over to Pilate the governor.

³ When Judas, who had betrayed him, saw that Jesus was condemned, he was seized with remorse and returned the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders. ⁴ "I have sinned," he said, "for I have betrayed innocent blood."

"What is that to us?" they replied. "That's your responsibility."

⁵ So Judas threw the money into the temple and left. Then he went away and hanged himself.

⁶ The chief priests picked up the coins and said, “It is against the law to put this into the treasury, since it is blood money.”⁷ So they decided to use the money to buy the potter’s field as a burial place for foreigners. ⁸ That is why it has been called the Field of Blood to this day. ⁹ Then what was spoken by Jeremiah the prophet was fulfilled: “They took the thirty pieces of silver, the price set on him by the people of Israel,¹⁰ and they used them to buy the potter’s field, as the Lord commanded me.”

Reflect

Peter loved Jesus but was controlled by fear. Judas followed Jesus but was controlled by greed. The chief priests despised Jesus and were controlled by self-interest. Both Peter and Judas regret their actions. Yet Judas’ remorse falls far short of the genuine repentance that leads Peter to restoration and reconciliation with his Lord. The chief priests show no regret or remorse, only more hypocrisy.

In light of the cosmic battle being waged over God’s plan to save humanity, the opposition to Jesus isn’t unexpected. Though Jesus lived his life in service to others, the Jewish religious leaders showed him contempt. Puffed up by their arrogance, the religious elite could not imagine a simple carpenter as their long-promised Messiah. Jesus shined a light on their hypocrisy.

Jesus also challenged the authority of the Jewish establishment. Not only did they fear losing their power but feared that this itinerant teacher from Galilee could inspire an uprising that would bring the full fury of the Roman Empire down on tiny Judea. The Roman government tolerated no dissent. In their minds, executing Jesus seemed expedient and justifiable. His innocence was irrelevant to them.

The powers aligned against the Son of God and unknowingly laid the groundwork for the ultimate defeat of sin and death. But then as now, for those rebelling against God’s authority, and those who find themselves comfortable in darkness and sin, Jesus is a blinding and unbearable source of light. But as John tells us, Jesus was “the light that shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it” (John 1:4-5).

From our vantage point, it’s easy to believe that we’d have acted differently than Peter, Judas, or the religious leaders. We’d like to believe we would have been steadfast in our allegiance to Jesus, even if it cost us our lives. But it’s entirely possible that we would have hated Jesus for exposing our hypocrisy, followed him only for what we might gain, or responded with cowardice when threatened. But even if we’d committed such heinous sin, it’s our response to the light of truth that would have mattered most. Those who embrace that light and commit themselves to Jesus will find what their heart truly desires — wholeness, peace, love, and purpose.

Pray

No matter how you’ve sinned against him, Jesus offers forgiveness and restoration. When we allow the light of God’s truth to shine into our darkness, we don’t have to be afraid. “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21). The God of justice endured the ultimate injustice to save each of us. When we repent and turn to him, we will find love and grace. As you spend time in prayer today, rejoice in the salvation and restoration that you’ve received in Christ.

Day 5 | Jesus' Trial before Pilate

All people were created by God and have dignity and worth. Yet we don't always treat each other as if that is true. Sin has corrupted the human heart so thoroughly that it is capable of desiring another's suffering and pain. We mock and deride with words, and sometimes verbal assaults turn physical.

Even if we don't participate in such victimization, we just can stand by when it happens to others, too afraid to speak up or intervene. In those moments we side with the counterfeit strength of the bully instead of showing real strength by helping the weak.

It's become an almost regular occurrence these days to hear stories of people in positions of power using their privilege to hurt, denigrate and victimize others. Invariably, there are those skulking in the background who suspected the abuse but failed to do anything about it. Neither the impulse to humiliate, nor the fear of speaking out are new. It was taken to its fullest extreme in the treatment of Jesus as he endured a mockery of a trial and a painful road to the cross.

Read the Word

Matthew 27:11-31

¹¹ Meanwhile Jesus stood before the governor, and the governor asked him, "Are you the king of the Jews?"

"You have said so," Jesus replied.

¹² When he was accused by the chief priests and the elders, he gave no answer. ¹³ Then Pilate asked him, "Don't you hear the testimony they are bringing against you?" ¹⁴ But Jesus made no reply, not even to a single charge—to the great amazement of the governor.

¹⁵ Now it was the governor's custom at the festival to release a prisoner chosen by the crowd. ¹⁶ At that time they had a well-known prisoner whose name was Jesus Barabbas. ¹⁷ So when the crowd had gathered, Pilate asked them, "Which one do you want me to release to you: Jesus Barabbas, or Jesus who is called the Messiah?" ¹⁸ For he knew it was out of self-interest that they had handed Jesus over to him.

¹⁹ While Pilate was sitting on the judge's seat, his wife sent him this message: "Don't have anything to do with that innocent man, for I have suffered a great deal today in a dream because of him."

²⁰ But the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowd to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus executed.

²¹ "Which of the two do you want me to release to you?" asked the governor.

"Barabbas," they answered.

²² "What shall I do, then, with Jesus who is called the Messiah?" Pilate asked.

They all answered, "Crucify him!"

²³ “Why? What crime has he committed?” asked Pilate.

But they shouted all the louder, “Crucify him!”

²⁴ When Pilate saw that he was getting nowhere, but that instead an uproar was starting, he took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd. “I am innocent of this man’s blood,” he said. “It is your responsibility!”

²⁵ All the people answered, “His blood is on us and on our children!”

²⁶ Then he released Barabbas to them. But he had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to be crucified.

²⁷ Then the governor’s soldiers took Jesus into the Praetorium and gathered the whole company of soldiers around him. ²⁸ They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, ²⁹ and then twisted together a crown of thorns and set it on his head. They put a staff in his right hand. Then they knelt in front of him and mocked him. “Hail, king of the Jews!” they said. ³⁰ They spit on him, and took the staff and struck him on the head again and again. ³¹ After they had mocked him, they took off the robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him away to crucify him.

Reflect

Like most bullies, Pilate is ultimately a coward. Though he had armies at his disposal, he bends to the will of the angry mob instead of standing up for justice. The religious leaders are guilty, Pilate is guilty, and the crowd is guilty. They are all complicit in the death of the only innocent man who has ever lived.

It is bitter and perverse irony that the ultimate King of kings was mocked and shamed in this way. That God allowed such treatment out of love for us should bring us to our knees in worship. The mercy that God displayed is truly amazing because the pain and humiliation that the Son of God endured is a witness to the evil of which humanity is capable. Yet God chose to offer us a chance to be redeemed.

Barabbas was a violent outlaw and insurrectionist. While Jesus is sentenced to die, Barabbas, a truly guilty man will go free. But then, Jesus’s sacrifice allows all sorts of guilty people go free. Former rebels, thieves, bullies, liars and worse not only escape eternal punishment, but receive welcome in the family of God. On some level, we are all Barabbas. This is at the heart of the good news that we are to spread throughout the world. Because justice is satisfied by Jesus’ death, sinners can be forgiven and transformed by the Spirit.

The human heart has been so corrupted by sin that the only hope is a complete transformation. When we place our faith in Christ, we aren’t just rebuilt or refurbished; we are reborn and made new. Of course, we don’t always act as if that’s true; we seem to forget who we are in Christ and live in ways that are inconsistent with who we are as his follower. But his mercies are new every morning and our Father will never give up on us. Ultimately Easter demonstrates the power of goodness and life over evil and death. We can choose to live as if that victory is already ours, because it is.

Pray

What praise and thanks will you offer God for his mercy? Consider writing out a prayer of gratitude to him. Even as our world has walked through a scary and difficult time, we can be grateful that because of

Jesus, we have peace with God.

Pray that the Spirit gives us eyes to see those suffering from injustice, and the courage to fight on their behalf. Let's not stand by when another is victimized, mistreated, humiliated, or falsely accused, but let's stand up against the powerful and shout "No!" Any sacrifice we make on behalf of the victimized will not be in vain.

Day 6 | Jesus' Crucifixion

Jesus' journey had to lead to the cross. Jesus warned his disciples that this is where his destiny lay. The King would now be executed as an enemy of the state. Execution by crucifixion was reserved for the most reviled criminals. Stripped naked, nailed to a cross and left to a slow and excruciating death, there was no more tortuous or humiliating way to die. Yet that is how the beloved Son of God was treated by the very people he came to save. He hung on that cross utterly alone, separated from the Father as he bore the sins of a rebellious world.

Read the Word

Matthew 27:32-56

³² As they were going out, they met a man from Cyrene, named Simon, and they forced him to carry the cross. ³³ They came to a place called Golgotha (which means "the place of the skull").

³⁴ There they offered Jesus wine to drink, mixed with gall; but after tasting it, he refused to drink it. ³⁵ When they had crucified him, they divided up his clothes by casting lots. ³⁶ And sitting down, they kept watch over him there. ³⁷ Above his head they placed the written charge against him: this is Jesus, the king of the Jews.

³⁸ Two rebels were crucified with him, one on his right and one on his left. ³⁹ Those who passed by hurled insults at him, shaking their heads ⁴⁰ and saying, "You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! Come down from the cross, if you are the Son of God!"

⁴¹ In the same way the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders mocked him. ⁴² "He saved others," they said, "but he can't save himself! He's the king of Israel! Let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him. ⁴³ He trusts in God. Let God rescue him now if he wants him, for he said, 'I am the Son of God.'" ⁴⁴ In the same way the rebels who were crucified with him also heaped insults on him.

⁴⁵ From noon until three in the afternoon darkness came over all the land. ⁴⁶ About three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" (which means "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?").

⁴⁷ When some of those standing there heard this, they said, "He's calling Elijah."

⁴⁸ Immediately one of them ran and got a sponge. He filled it with wine vinegar, put it on a staff, and offered it to Jesus to drink. ⁴⁹ The rest said, "Now leave him alone. Let's see if Elijah comes to save him."

⁵⁰ And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit.

⁵¹ At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth shook, the rocks split ⁵² and the tombs broke open. The bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life. ⁵³ They came out of the tombs after Jesus' resurrection and went into the holy city and appeared to many people.

⁵⁴ When the centurion and those with him who were guarding Jesus saw the earthquake and all that had happened, they were terrified, and exclaimed, "Surely he was the Son of God!"

⁵⁵ Many women were there, watching from a distance. They had followed Jesus from Galilee to care for his needs. ⁵⁶ Among them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of Zebedee's sons.

Reflect

The events surrounding Jesus' death are full of cruel and brutal ironies. The soldiers and the crowd mock Jesus as king of the Jews without realizing that he is the King of all. They do not see that he has chosen this fate and given up his power so that he might sacrifice himself for the world he created.

Matthew relates events that help us understand the significance of Jesus' death. The tearing of the temple's curtain signified the end of the separation between a holy God and sinful people. The resurrection of the dead gives us a foretaste of Christ's second coming when all the dead in Christ will rise. By his death on the cross both sin and death are defeated.

He endured it all, so we could be reconciled to God as his beloved children. He did it for me and he did it for you. The beloved hymn reminds us of this truth: "Jesus paid it all. All to him I owe. Sin had left a crimson stain. He washed it white as snow."

When we go through difficulties in our lives we can feel as if God has abandoned or even forsaken us. When we suffer the destruction that comes from our sins or the sins of others, we can lose hope. When disease or disaster ravages our bodies or steals our loved ones, we can wonder, "where is God?" In those moments we need to look at the cross and have our faith affirmed. Jesus sacrificed everything to save us. We can trust a God that loves us that much, even in dark days.

Pray

Remembering what Jesus did for us on the cross can help us get through hard times. The Son of God endured the pain of the cross and separation from the Father because he loved us. How can you remind yourself of all that he's done when you are tempted to lose faith?

Take some time today to praise and thank Jesus for what he has done for you. You can trust Jesus to guide and direct your life. Ask him to reveal to you how you should live in light of his sacrifice.

So far this week we've witnessed all the pain, humiliation and sorrow of Jesus's arrest, trial and crucifixion. We've seen him betrayed by those who should love him, mocked by those who should recognize him, and murdered by those who should fear him. But it's not over. God's love is going to win.

Day 7 | Jesus' Burial

It must have felt like it was over. After Jesus cried out and drew his last breath, it was done, wasn't it? Since we know how the story ends, we know that Easter is coming. We know that from death comes new life and mourning will turn to joy. But grieving, scared, and scattered, the disciples thought it was over.

Read

Matthew 27:57-66

⁵⁷ As evening approached, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who had himself become a disciple of Jesus. ⁵⁸ Going to Pilate, he asked for Jesus' body, and Pilate ordered that it be given to him. ⁵⁹ Joseph took the body, wrapped it in a clean linen cloth, ⁶⁰ and placed it in his own new tomb that he had cut out of the rock. He rolled a big stone in front of the entrance to the tomb and went away. ⁶¹ Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were sitting there opposite the tomb.

⁶² The next day, the one after Preparation Day, the chief priests and the Pharisees went to Pilate. ⁶³ "Sir," they said, "we remember that while he was still alive that deceiver said, 'After three days I will rise again.' ⁶⁴ So give the order for the tomb to be made secure until the third day. Otherwise, his disciples may come and steal the body and tell the people that he has been raised from the dead. This last deception will be worse than the first."

⁶⁵ "Take a guard," Pilate answered. "Go, make the tomb as secure as you know how." ⁶⁶ So they went and made the tomb secure by putting a seal on the stone and posting the guard.

The other Gospels help us fill in the sketch of Joseph of Arimathea, the rich man who prepared a resting place for Jesus' body. He was a member of the Jewish ruling counsel and a "secret" disciple.

The Pharisees arranged for Jesus' tomb to be secured. Little did they know that they were actually providing evidence that would strengthen the disciples' post-resurrection claims. How could they have faked the resurrection if the Roman military had secured and guarded the tomb?

However, at this point, no one seems to be taking the possibility of an actual resurrection seriously, in spite of what Jesus claimed. The Pharisees assumed anything that appeared miraculous would be a "hoax" and the disciples ran away, full of doubt and grief. The women remained and kept vigil over the body.

Historically, the Saturday between Good Friday and Easter is called "Holy Saturday" and it's a day of reflection, waiting and asking, "what comes next?" There are times in our own lives that we will experience a personal "Holy Saturday." We will all experience times when tragedy comes like a rogue wave and knocks us off our feet. Whether it's a death, a financial crisis, an illness, or any other disaster, we're left dizzy and disoriented, frightened, and unsure. The pain of loss and the uncertainty of the future is our own Holy Saturday. Perhaps you're experiencing one now.

Christian, know that Easter Sunday's coming. Our beloved Jesus, Savior and Lord, has defeated death. The tomb could not hold him! Resurrected by the Father, the risen Jesus is victorious over the forces of chaos, destruction, and decay. We may feel like we're waiting an awfully long time for the stone to be rolled away and Jesus to emerge, but trust that the day will come. God will bring beauty from ashes and new life from death. If it feels like Saturday, rest in the knowledge that Sunday is on its way!

Pray

Take some time on this “Holy Saturday” to reflect, particularly if you are in a place of waiting or wondering “What comes next?” Spend some time with the Father, praise the Son for all the endured, and ask the Spirit to strengthen you and give you hope. Prepare your heart to celebrate the resurrection tomorrow!

Day 8 | Jesus' Resurrection!

The grave could not hold Jesus Christ! Death had no claim on him. The very disciples who ran and hid were about to see their Lord, and his resurrection was going to give them courage. Jesus was going to empower these followers to spread his message far and wide. The gospel was going to change the world.

Read

Matthew 28:1–20

²⁸ After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb.

² There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. ³ His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. ⁴ The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men.

⁵ The angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. ⁶ He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. ⁷ Then go quickly and tell his disciples: ‘He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him.’ Now I have told you.”

⁸ So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples. ⁹ Suddenly Jesus met them. “Greetings,” he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshiped him. ¹⁰ Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.”

¹¹ While the women were on their way, some of the guards went into the city and reported to the chief priests everything that had happened. ¹² When the chief priests had met with the elders and devised a plan, they gave the soldiers a large sum of money, ¹³ telling them, “You are to say, ‘His disciples came during the night and stole him away while we were asleep.’ ¹⁴ If this report gets to the governor, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble.” ¹⁵ So the soldiers took the money and did as they were instructed. And this story has been widely circulated among the Jews to this very day.

¹⁶ Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. ¹⁷ When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. ¹⁸ Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you

always, to the very end of the age.”

Reflect

On a glorious Sunday morning nearly 2000 years ago, our beloved Savior stepped out of his tomb. Having defeated the power of sin, death and Satan, Jesus is now gloriously alive and will never taste death again. His resurrection will ultimately be ours. The resurrection gives us assurance that our destiny is an eternity with Christ.

All the pain, humiliation and violence that Jesus suffered led to resurrected life. And now, *we* can have new life. Everything changed on that Sunday morning. God raised his son from the dead and gave him all the authority in heaven and on Earth. Jesus is the eternal victor, and as his followers, we are victorious too.

The cross reminds us that death does not get the final word. Over the course of our lives, people we love will die. The pain of those losses are sharp and deep. In times of grief, we can remember the empty tomb. Those who die in Christ will experience eternal life.

The cross reminds us that sin is not our master. While we will still struggle to obey, we have hope. The Spirit is with us. If God can make something beautiful out of the horror of the cross, how much more can he transform us, making something beautiful out of our lives, no matter what our circumstances or failures.

Before he ascended into heaven, Jesus gave his followers a vital mission. We get to tell others what he has done and invite them into the family of God. When they are troubled and lost, we pass on the hope given to us — there is a God in heaven who saves! There is vibrant, new life awaiting us at the end of the age.

If you are in the midst of a difficult trial, go to the foot of the cross. Whether you feel beaten up by a sinful habit, oppressed by circumstances, or just plain, old tired, the resurrection of Jesus can give you hope. You are loved, secure and have a new identity in Christ. Rest in what he has done and embrace all that you are because of Jesus.

- Get specific. What does Easter mean to you this year? How is remembering the forgiveness granted to you because of the cross and the new life that is yours because of the resurrection speaking to you today?
- How do you need to act on what the Spirit has shown you this week?

Pray

The news of what Jesus accomplished for us through his death and resurrection is too good to keep to ourselves. Jesus has commissioned us to go and share what we know. Start with your own story. What has Jesus done for you? Pray that God will give you the opportunity to share with others that the new life you've experienced through Jesus can be theirs as well. Pray for the words to tell them that a life following Jesus can be one full of joy, in spite of the ups and downs we face in a fallen world. No matter what, in Christ we have victory.

At Easter many people are more open to hearing about why we celebrate. They wonder if there is more to this holiday than bunnies and eggs. Pray that God would reveal someone who needs to know about Jesus. Invite them to celebrate with you at church this Sunday! You both may be glad you did.

Happy Easter! He is risen indeed!