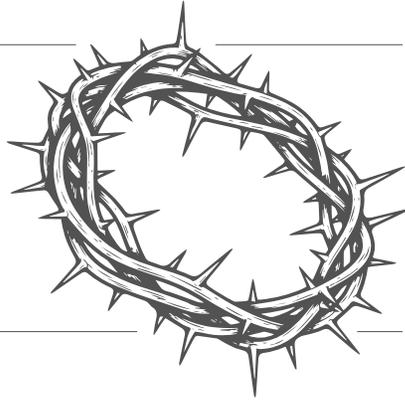

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Lenten Devotions were written by Dr. Kari Vo.
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MOVING OUT

TEXT: John 20:19-23 - On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." When He had said this, He showed them His hands and His side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent Me, even so I am sending you." And when He had said this, He breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld."

Look at the way this story moves. We start in the evening—move to a place where the doors are locked—to the disciples, inside—and then down to the fear in their hearts. Things are closing in, all the way.

And then Jesus comes!

And Jesus says, "Peace be with you," and shows them His wounds. And we start moving outward again. Out from the gladness in their hearts, to Jesus breathing on them, to Him sending them into the world to share the good news of the forgiveness of sins—with the Holy Spirit working through them.

Even when it feels like the walls are closing in on us, there is no place, no time, when Jesus cannot come to us. And when He does, He brings us life and peace and gladness—and eventually, work to do in His world under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. And Jesus is with us forever.

WE PRAY: *Lord, come to me, and let me find peace and joy in You. Amen.*

Reflection Questions

- When you are afraid, how do you find help?
- When has Jesus come to you during a time of fear or suffering?
- Tell about a time when the Holy Spirit used you to help someone else.

IF YOU COULD SEE GOD ...

TEXT: John 1:1, 4-5, 11-12, 14, 18 - In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God ... In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. ... He came to His own, and His own people did not receive Him. But to all who did receive Him, who believed in His Name, He gave the right to become children of God ... And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen His glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. ... No one has ever seen God; God the only Son, who is at the Father's side, He has made Him known.

There are some human wishes that almost everyone has. If only I could see God, and know what He is like. If only I could tell how He feels about me. If only I could know Him, really know Him, as I know my family, my friends ...

The Bible tells us we can know God this way—because God has come to earth as a human being, our Savior Jesus. The story is in the four Gospels. And so now we can know the once-invisible God, just as we know other people—this God who loves us so much He laid down His life to rescue us. Since Jesus has risen from the dead and promises to share that life with everyone who trusts in Him, we have all eternity to know and love Him ever more deeply.

WE PRAY: *Dear Lord, teach me to see You in Scripture and in my own life—and especially how much You love me. Amen.*

Reflection Questions

- As you grow in your knowledge of God, what do you think God most wants from you?
- Why do you think so?
- What do you personally most want with regards to God?

UNEXPECTED

TEXT: John 1:29, 32-34 - The next day [John the Baptist] saw Jesus coming toward Him, and said, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” ... And John bore witness: “I saw the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove, and it remained on Him. I myself did not know Him, but He who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is He who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’ And I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God.”

There’s something strange going on in John 1:25-37. It looks like Jesus is hanging around in the crowds where John is baptizing. He’s not making Himself known, He’s just there, standing or walking, several days in a row—and nobody seems to notice Him.

Except for John himself! John eagerly points Him out, more than once, and tells what he saw on the day of Jesus’ Baptism. As a result of his testimony, John loses two of his own disciples to Jesus. And John is glad.

Why? I think because John has fulfilled the mission God gave him. Now the work passes to Jesus, God’s own chosen sacrifice—the Lamb who will lay down His life to save God’s people. Jesus’ work will take Him into death itself, as He takes away all our sin and guilt through His death on a cross. And then He will rise from the dead, giving life to all of us who trust Him to save and forgive us. He will baptize us with God’s Spirit, and we will be children of God forever.

WE PRAY: *Lord, help me to recognize You when I’m not expecting You! Amen.*

Reflection Questions

- Why do you think Jesus was hanging around in the crowds that way?
- What was the result of His presence?
- When has Jesus shown up in your own life unexpectedly? What happened?

THE ONLY ONE WHO MATTERS

TEXT: John 20:11-12a, 13-14, 16a - But Mary stood weeping ... [and] she stooped to look into the tomb. And she saw two angels in white They said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping?” She said to them, “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid Him.” Having said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing, but she did not know that it was Jesus. ... Jesus said to her, “Mary.”

I love how Mary behaves in this story. On Easter morning, Mary discovers that Jesus’ body is missing and runs to tell the disciples. After that, she goes back to the empty tomb to cry some more. That’s no surprise.

But then see what happens. She looks inside the tomb again, and sees two angels! At any other time, she would be excited and amazed. But not now. They ask her a question, and she answers them politely, but then she turns away from them as if they didn’t matter at all ... because they don’t, with Jesus missing. Who cares about angels without Jesus?

And then Jesus speaks to her. Less than a minute later, she’s got her arms wrapped around Him, overjoyed. No wonder Jesus has to say to her, “Let go!”

Mary has it right. The only One who matters is Jesus. He is the One we cling to, the One we rely on and place all our faith in. And when He sends us to tell others the good news of His death and resurrection, we go—because we love Him.

WE PRAY: *Lord, I’m so glad You’re alive and with us forever. Amen.*

Reflection Questions

- Do you find Mary’s behavior believable?
- Why or why not?
- Why do you think Jesus chose to appear first to an ordinary woman rather than to Peter, John, or one of His family?

GIFT OF LOVE

TEXT: John 19:38a, 39-41, 42b - After these things Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly for fear of the Jews, asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus, and Pilate gave him permission Nicodemus also, who earlier had come to Jesus by night, came bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds in weight. So they took the body of Jesus and bound it in linen cloths with the spices, as is the burial custom of the Jews. Now in the place where He was crucified there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb in which no one had yet been laid. ... since the tomb was close at hand, they laid Jesus there.

I don't know if Jesus knew ahead of time what would happen to His body. He certainly died trusting the Father to deal with it, since He knew that on the third day God would raise Him from the dead. And He knew the Bible foretold that His body would not decay, and that His burial would be connected to a rich man (see Psalm 16:10; Isaiah 53:9).

I'm glad God trusted Jesus' care to us, to those who love Him. Joseph and Nicodemus were among Jesus' followers, though secretly until this time. I'm sure they thought this would be the last gift of love they could ever give Jesus. They thought everything was over. But it wasn't. For Jesus had already loved them and all of us to the point of death—and very soon, in just a day or two, He would rise from the dead, to give us all life and joy that will last forever.

WE PRAY: *Lord, thank You for trusting Your people to love You this way. Amen.*

Reflection Questions

- Do you think Joseph and Nicodemus got in trouble for their actions?
- Have you been involved with the care of someone who is dying or dead?
- How was this a gift of love?

STRANGE COMPANY

TEXT: Mark 1:12-13 - The Spirit immediately drove [Jesus] out into the wilderness. And He was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. And He was with the wild animals, and the angels were ministering to Him.

Let's follow Jesus out into the wilderness. What do you see, as you look around?

Well, the Holy Spirit Himself has sent Jesus out there. So there's God. Satan's there, too, trying to tempt Jesus. There are good angels as well, though it's not super clear what exactly they're doing. And then there are the wild animals. This is who Jesus has for company.

That's a pretty good list of living beings, from God all the way down to the animals. But one thing's missing. Where are the human beings?

Jesus is the human being here. He is our representative, doing on our behalf what we could never manage. He spends 40 days being tested—"Do miracles to meet Your own needs! Force God to prove His power and faithfulness to You, instead of trusting Him! Turn away from God and grab for earthly power!" And unlike us, Jesus stays faithful!

The lovely thing here is that Jesus, the Son of God, is also the Son of Man. He has become one of us, subject to the same needs and trouble—hungry, alone, tempted. And why? Because He loves us, and wants to rescue us from evil and bring us home to God. Because He loves the Father, who sent Him to save us by dying on a cross and rising from the dead, sharing that life with us.

WE PRAY: *Dear Jesus, thank You for becoming like me. Help me to call on You when I'm in trouble and need You so much. Amen.*

Reflection Questions

- Would it have been good enough if God had sent an angel to rescue us?
- Why or why not? Give your reasons.
- Jesus is human forever. What feelings do you have about that?

JESUS UNDERSTANDS

TEXT: Luke 5:1a, 3b-6, 8, 10b-11 - On one occasion, while the crowd was pressing in on Him to hear the word of God, [Jesus] ... sat down and taught the people from [Simon Peter's] boat. And when He had finished speaking, He said to Simon, "Put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch." And Simon answered, "Master, we toiled all night and took nothing! But at Your word I will let down the nets." And when they had done this, they enclosed a large number of fish, and their nets were breaking. ... But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord." ... And Jesus said to Simon, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching men." And when they had brought their boats to land, they left everything and followed Him.

I wonder how Peter felt, kneeling in front of Jesus on that boat. He must have been waist deep in flopping fish! Just a little earlier he had been treating Jesus like someone who didn't know what He was talking about. And now he realizes ... what? Well, that Jesus understands fish?

More important, Jesus understands people. He knows that Peter is weak and sinful. And yet, He still calls him to help bring others to the kingdom of God. Jesus calls us too, in spite of our sins and weakness. He will use us to tell others about the One who loves us all so much He died and rose to save us and to make us His own.

WE PRAY: *Lord, You know I am weak. Please use me anyway. Amen.*

Reflection Questions

- Why do you think Jesus chose ordinary fishermen to be His disciples?
- Would you have made such a choice? Why or why not?
- Jesus loves and calls you, too. What goes through your mind when you think of answering Him?

LOVE STORY

TEXT: Luke 23:44-46 - It was now about the sixth hour, and there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour, while the sun's light failed. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two. Then Jesus, calling out with a loud voice, said, "Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit!" And having said this He breathed His last.

Good Friday is the story of how God died. This is the story of how the God who made everything, and who can never die, did die—laid down His life on purpose, dying on a cross. He became a human being on purpose, for just this reason—so that He could suffer and die. Because His enemies needed Him.

Who were those enemies? Me and you. All people who have turned away from Him and gone after what we wanted instead. It didn't take long for us to break our world, our lives, our very selves. And we couldn't put ourselves back together. But God could, and He did.

Because He loved us. Because He wanted to rescue us—remake us—bring us home to be part of His family, as His dearly loved children, alive and well and happy with Him forever, in His kingdom. This is why Jesus died on that cross. This is why He did what He did, willingly. For you in particular—because He loves you. And now that He has risen from the dead, He calls you to belong to Him and be with Him, forever.

WE PRAY: *Lord, I love You. Keep me with You forever. Amen.*

Reflection Questions

- Has Jesus ever blamed us for what happened to Him? Why not?
- How does He feel about us, then?
- How can you tell?

TOUCHABLE

TEXT: Matthew 26:26-29 - Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is My body." And He took a cup, and when He had given thanks He gave it to them, saying, "Drink of it, all of you, for this is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in My Father's kingdom."

I am so glad that Jesus gave us something of Himself we could touch and taste before dying, rising, and returning to heaven. Because sometimes I need more than just words and stories. I need something that speaks to my body, my five senses—something that says, "This is real. You can touch and handle this for yourself." And that's what Communion and Baptism do for me.

Jesus gives Himself to us this way because He knows us—because He made us. He cares about our bodies, just as He cares about our minds and spirits. They matter to Him! And so He provides Himself to us in this visible, touchable, tastable form. He gives us yet another comfort to help us during these years before His return.

And by giving us Himself, He becomes the foundation for our own bodies as well. By giving Himself to us as our food, Jesus joins us to Him forever—more intimately than we can imagine. Jesus' own body and blood, crucified and risen from the dead, is ours forever, and we are His.

WE PRAY: *Thank You, Lord! Amen.*

Reflection Questions

- Why do you come to Communion?
- Would it be enough if you just read the Bible and listened to preaching?
- If Jesus comes this close to you, what does that tell you about His feelings for you?

KNOWING JESUS' HEART

TEXT: John 2:1a, 3-7a - On the third day there was a wedding at Cana in Galilee ... When the wine ran out, the mother of Jesus said to Him, "They have no wine." And Jesus said to her, "Woman, what does this have to do with Me? My hour has not yet come." His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever He tells you." Now there were six stone water jars ... holding twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus said to the servants, "Fill the jars with water."

I love Mary's faith in her Son Jesus. When she asks Him for help and gets a mysterious answer, she doesn't even bother arguing or asking questions. She just tells the servants, "Do what He tells you."

And Jesus honors that! He does His very first miracle, turning water into wine. Jesus saves the party and the bridegroom's reputation as a host. And Jesus' brand-new disciples believe in Him.

What did Mary know about her Son that made her so confident? I think she knew that He is kind and compassionate, as well as endlessly creative. Maybe she didn't expect the miracle, but she knew He would find a way to help, because His love would compel Him.

And it did—just as it compelled Jesus to go to the cross to suffer and die for us when His hour had finally come (see John 17:1). Because He loves us, He saved us from the power of evil; and when He rose from the dead, He promised to share that same life with all of us who trust in Him.

WE PRAY: *Lord, I know Your heart. Thank You for saving me. Amen.*

Reflection Questions

- What do you think Mary and Jesus said to each other later?
- What do you imagine the bridegroom had to say?
- What do you think Jesus would say about a problem you're facing? Why not ask Him now?

PERSONAL

TEXT: Luke 9:18-22 - Now it happened that as [Jesus] was praying alone, the disciples were with Him. And He asked them, "Who do the crowds say that I am?" And they answered, "John the Baptist. But others say, Elijah, and others, that one of the prophets of old has risen." Then He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" And Peter answered, "The Christ of God." And He strictly charged and commanded them to tell this to no one, saying, "The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised."

I wonder what it was like for the disciples, invited into such a personal area of Jesus' own life. I mean, it says that Jesus was praying alone—and yet, it also says, "the disciples were with Him." And they would have heard every word He said, all the concerns on His heart—because in that time and place, people almost always prayed aloud. It must have been like being invited into Jesus' heart.

Clearly Jesus had some very important things to talk with His Father about. His mission to save us from sin and death would have been at the top of the list. No wonder Peter was able to identify Jesus as "the Christ of God!" Though he doesn't seem to have understood that Jesus was planning to suffer, die, and rise from the dead in order to carry out His work. Listening to Him pray, and living with Him daily, wasn't enough for Peter to understand. Not yet. But we understand—because Jesus did these things for us, too.

WE PRAY: *Thank You for loving me, dear Lord. Amen.*

Reflection Questions

- Do you usually pray privately or with other people?
- Why?
- If you'd like to hear Jesus praying for you, read John 17, especially verses 20 through 26.

FINISHED

TEXT: John 19:30 - When Jesus had received the sour wine, He said, "It is finished," and He bowed His head and gave up His spirit.

What is finished? Most obviously, Jesus' sufferings are finished—because He gives up His spirit to God and dies.

But I think He means more than that. Jesus has finished the work of His whole life—everything He came into the world to do. His conception and birth as a human baby, the long years of growing up in an ordinary family. Then His ministry—all the hard work of teaching and healing and caring for people who were like sheep without a shepherd. And the years of training disciples who kept missing the point, people who would become the foundation for the Christian church, responsible for bringing the message of Jesus our Savior to the whole world. All of that is finished now.

But there's even more. Because God saw this moment before He ever created the world with its people, before we fell into sin. And still He chose in love to go through with it. Through Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, through all the judges and prophets and ordinary people who carried on the knowledge of God, and who prepared the way for Jesus' coming. God has been working through all of them, up to this moment. And now all of that too is finished—fulfilled—at rest.

There will be a short time to rest—not long—before the joy of Jesus' resurrection. Then the work of gathering in the nations will begin, and it won't end until Jesus comes back to earth in glory, to bring us all home. But not yet.

WE PRAY: *Lord, thank You for what You did for me. Amen.*

Reflection Questions

- How do you feel when a long plan comes to a successful end?
- How do you think God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit felt about this?
- What "It is finished!" moment are we looking forward to now?

SOUR WINE

TEXT: John 19:28-30a - After this, Jesus, knowing that all was now finished, said (to fulfill the Scripture), "I thirst." A jar full of sour wine stood there, so they put a sponge full of the sour wine on a hyssop branch and held it to His mouth. When Jesus had received the sour wine

I wonder about the sour wine they offered Him. Because we can take that two ways—as a kind of mockery, the way it is in Psalm 69:21, which may be the Scripture that Jesus was fulfilling. Or we can think of it as an act of mercy—because the sour wine is most likely posca, something Roman soldiers drank—and it's supposed to taste that way. They are sharing their own drink with Him, to make him a tiny bit more comfortable.

Either way, Jesus accepts it. It's the last thing He does before dying.

Why? I think it ties up with something He said right after giving His disciples Communion for the first time. He said, "I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes" (Luke 22:18). Now, with Jesus' death just moments away, God's kingdom is breaking into our world with a rush—this hour, this very moment, into our darkness and sin. And when Jesus rises from the dead on Sunday, the glory of the Kingdom will shine like the sun—and we who trust in Jesus will live in it, in joy and blessing, forever.

WE PRAY: *Thank You, Lord, for bringing Your kingdom to us. Amen.*

Reflection Questions

- What do you think of, when you think about the kingdom of God?
- How does it show itself even now, on earth, before we die?
- How do we get into God's kingdom as citizens? What does Jesus have to do with it?

LISTEN TO HIM!

TEXT: Luke 9:29, 30b-31, 33a, 34b, 35 - And as [Jesus] was praying, the appearance of His face was altered, and His clothing became dazzling white. And ... Moses and Elijah ... who appeared in glory and spoke of His departure, which He was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. ... And as the men were parting from Him, Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is good that we are here. Let us make three tents, one for You and one for Moses and one for Elijah." ... a cloud came and overshadowed them ... And a voice came out of the cloud, saying, "This is My Son, My Chosen One; listen to Him!"

Peter makes his suggestion about the tents "as the men were parting from" Jesus. That sounds like Peter realized they were saying goodbye, and wanted to stop them—wanted to prolong the glorious moment with Jesus and the others, up on that mountain.

But it doesn't work that way, does it? Even in our own lives, we get brief glimpses of the glory of God—and then we're right back in the middle of chores and work and appointments. Or worse than that, we're walking the road to Calvary—facing a kind of suffering that makes the glory seem like a distant memory.

When that happens, all we can do is obey God the Father: "This is My Son, My Chosen One: listen to Him!" Jesus knows the road to the cross very well. He knows suffering and death, and He knows resurrection, too. And when we have to walk those roads as servants of Jesus, He promises to be with us—because He has redeemed us. We are His.

WE PRAY: *Lord, when trouble overwhelms me, help me listen to You! Amen.*

Reflection Questions

- What "glory moments" have you known in your life?
- Jesus says, "A servant is not greater than his master" (John 15:20b). What does this tell you about suffering in our own lives?
- How do you listen to Jesus in your daily life?

IN A HURRY

TEXT: Mark 10:32-34 - And they were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them. And they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid. And taking the twelve again, He began to tell them what was to happen to Him, saying, "See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be delivered over ... and they will condemn Him to death ... And they will mock Him and spit on Him, and flog Him and kill Him. And after three days He will rise."

I'm not surprised to hear that Jesus' followers were afraid. I would be, too, if Jesus told me all about His suffering and death—and not for the first time, either (see Mark 8:31, 9:31).

But the really weird bit is that Jesus seems to be in a hurry to get there! He is walking ahead of them. Who hurries to their own execution?

Jesus does, apparently. He says while preaching, "I have a Baptism to be baptized with, and how great is My distress until it is accomplished!" (Luke 12:50). And He says to Judas when he goes to betray Him, "What you are going to do, do quickly" (John 13:27b).

It's a very human thing, to want to get suffering over and done with. And Jesus is human, just as we are. But the hurry is probably more than that—because Jesus is on a mission to save us all, the people He loves, from the power of evil. He knows His own death and resurrection will set us free and give us life. No wonder He's in a hurry!

WE PRAY: *Lord, thank You for loving me so much. Amen.*

Reflection Questions

- When you have to suffer, do you go quickly, or do you drag your feet?
- What good things does Jesus give us through His death and resurrection?
- How do you think Jesus feels now, knowing that He's done everything necessary to give you life forever?

DARKNESS

TEXT: Matthew 27:45-46 - Now from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land until the ninth hour. And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" that is, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?"

I am glad Jesus cried out to God as He did: "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" Because I think every one of us who lives long enough will go through a time when our hearts say the same. When we lose someone we love to death or a broken relationship—when we get a terrible diagnosis—when we've had a year full of evil stacked on evil stacked on yet more evil, and we just can't take it anymore. Then we cry out to God in our darkness, because we have nobody else to cry out to.

Jesus knows our darkness, because He shared it. He, too, knows what it is like to pray and get no answer, to feel the absence of God just as strongly as we've ever felt His presence. He knows it as we know it—by experiencing it. And He gave words to it, the words of Psalm 22.

This comforts me, because if Jesus could say those things, it cannot be wrong for me to say them, too. If He can have those feelings, I can have them. And even when I'm in the darkest time of my life, I know that God Himself—God incarnate as a human being, has been here before me. He is with me now, even when I cannot see or sense Him. And He will not let me fall.

WE PRAY: *In my darkness, Lord, speak for me and stay with me. Amen.*

Reflection Questions

- Why do you think Jesus says, "My God" here, and not his usual "Father"?
- Read Psalm 22. What in it reminds you of Jesus?
- In your darkest times, who was there for you?

FINAL TRUTH

TEXT: Luke 19:35-36, 37b-38 - And they brought [the donkey] to Jesus, and throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it. And as He rode along, they spread their cloaks on the road ... His disciples began to rejoice and praise God with a loud voice for all the mighty works that they had seen, saying, "Blessed is the King who comes in the Name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!"

Jesus is visiting Jerusalem for the last time, and He knows it. He's been to this city many times before—as a newborn baby, presented to the Lord in the temple; as a boy, surprising the teachers with His understanding; again, to cleanse the temple of the traders in its courts. But this is the last time, and He's coming to die.

So this time, Jesus comes to His own city as King and Messiah, openly. He borrows a donkey, fulfilling the prophecy in Zechariah 9. He also allows His followers to tell the truth about Him as loudly as they like, for the very first time. And they do, praising God and shouting, "Blessed is the King who comes in the Name of the Lord!"

Now the truth is out there, for anyone with eyes to see and ears to hear it. Some will believe. And others will refuse, and crucify Him—but even that will serve God's purpose. Because Jesus will use His death to save all God's people, anyone who is willing to put their trust in Him. And through His resurrection three days later, He will rescue us from death, bringing us into God's heavenly Jerusalem as forgiven people of God.

WE PRAY: *Lord, teach me to know and love You with all my heart. Amen.*

Reflection Questions

- Why do you think Jesus finally let His followers shout the truth about who He is now?
- Why does He choose a humble donkey instead of a war horse?
- How are you learning to know Jesus better?

HOSANNA!

TEXT: Matthew 21:12, 14-16 - And Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who sold and bought in the temple, and He overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold pigeons. ... And the blind and the lame came to Him in the temple, and He healed them. But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the wonderful things that He did, and the children crying out in the temple, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" they were indignant, and they said to Him, "Do You hear what these are saying?" And Jesus said to them, "Yes; have you never read, "'Out of the mouth of infants and nursing babies You have prepared praise'?"

It's interesting that the one thing the religious leaders bring up to Jesus is the fact that the children are crying out, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" They don't mention the merchants He drove out of the temple courts; they don't mention the healings, though they saw them. Apparently they feel on safe grounds complaining about the children—who are recognizing Jesus as the promised Messiah of David's family.

Jesus refers the leaders to Psalm 8:2b, which continues this way: "... because of Your foes, to still the enemy and the avenger." According to Jesus, the praise of the children comes directly from God; the complaints come from God's enemies.

And no surprise, for what the children are saying is "Hosanna"—which translates, "Save us!" Jesus has indeed come to save them and all of us as well. Through His death He will break the power of God's enemies, including the devil; and through His resurrection He will give life to all God's children who trust in Him.

WE PRAY: *Thank You for saving me, Lord. Amen.*

Reflection Questions

- Why don't the leaders mention the merchants Jesus threw out?
- Where do you think the children learned Jesus is the Messiah?
- When and how do you praise God?

“THEREFORE”

TEXT: John 11:1, 3-4a, 5-6 - Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. ... So the sisters sent to Him, saying, “Lord, he whom You love is ill.” But when Jesus heard it He said, “This illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. [Therefore,] when He heard that Lazarus was ill, He stayed two days longer in the place where He was.

The Greek word in verse 6 is usually translated “therefore”—as in, “Jesus loved this family. *Therefore*, when He heard that they needed Him, Jesus deliberately stayed away till it was too late.”

What! That’s a strange way to love someone, isn’t it? You hear that their brother needs you desperately; therefore, you stay just where you are. Most people would call that hate, not love.

Jesus knows how it’s going to look and sound. The family will not understand until the end that God is doing this on purpose, to glorify Jesus. They will be hurt. Who can Jesus trust to bear that pain? Who loves Jesus enough to trust Him, even when He comes late with no excuse?

Mary and Martha love Jesus that way. And their trust is justified when He raises their brother from the dead.

We love Jesus because He died and rose to save us. And yet, we too have times when it looks like God has come to us “too late” for what we wanted or needed. What then?

WE PRAY: *Lord, make me someone who loves and trusts You, even when I don’t understand Your ways. Amen.*

Reflection Questions

- Who in your life trusts you so much that they will commit you to helping, even though they can’t ask you first?
- Tell about a time when someone trusted you that way.
- Would you want Jesus to trust you that much, even though it caused you some pain? Why or why not?

NEVER OUT OF REACH

TEXT: Luke 23:39-43 - One of the criminals who were hanged railed at Him, saying, “Are You not the Christ? Save Yourself and us!” But the other rebuked him, saying, “Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this Man has done nothing wrong.” And he said, “Jesus, remember me when You come into Your kingdom.” And He said to him, “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in paradise.”

I wonder about this man. Had he ever met Jesus before, in the days when they were both free? Did that meeting plant the seed of faith, which blossomed only while he was dying? Or was it just what he’d seen from Jesus while they were both hanging from a cross that impressed him?

Whatever it was, it worked. And it gives me hope for some people I care about in my own life—people who are broken, lost, and seem to have no interest in God. If Jesus could save the criminal hanging next to Him, then He can reach the people I’m concerned about, too. Nobody is out of His reach.

And nobody is out of His love. For Jesus is going out of His way to rescue anyone He can get His hands on, even as He Himself is dying. This man will be the first to walk into the kingdom of God with Jesus, going home to the Father—the first of the billions saved by Jesus through His death and resurrection. But he won’t be the last.

WE PRAY: *Lord, I’m worried about _____. Please reach this person I care about with Your mercy and new life. Amen.*

Reflection Questions

- Do you know any non-Christians well?
- If not, how could you get to know and love some?
- If so, ask the Lord to use you to draw them closer to Him.

FINAL CONCERNS

TEXT: John 19:24b-27 - So the soldiers did these things, but standing by the cross of Jesus were His mother and His mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw His mother and the disciple whom He loved standing nearby, He said to His mother, "Woman, behold, your son!" Then He said to the disciple, "Behold, your mother!" And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home.

It seems to me that, during His hours on the cross, Jesus was wrapping up His final concerns, one after another. And one of them was for His mother—who had followed Him to Jerusalem for Passover, and who very likely had no one in her family to depend on after Jesus' death—"For not even His brothers believed in Him" (John 7:5).

But Jesus can see His disciple John standing right there—and he, too, will need comfort and support from someone else who loves Jesus as he does. So Jesus gives them to each other.

He does the same for us in His church today, doesn't He? Because even though Jesus has suffered, died, and risen again to give us new, everlasting life, we still have a broken world to live in—and without the visible, tangible presence of our dear Lord. So He gives us each other. And through the love of our fellow believers, we see Jesus reflected—and the Holy Spirit keeps us going, until the day Jesus returns to take us home with Him.

WE PRAY: *Thank You, Lord, for the help and comfort You've given me through Your people. Make me a source of care for others as well. Amen.*

Reflection Questions

- When you are suffering, what do you turn to in order to feel better?
- Are Jesus' people on that list? Why or why not?
- When have you seen Jesus work through a sinful, broken follower of His to show love and help to you or someone else, in spite of their faults?

GOING WITH JESUS

TEXT: John 12:1-3 - Six days before the Passover, Jesus therefore came to Bethany, where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. So they gave a dinner for Him there. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those reclining with Him at table. Mary therefore took a pound of expensive ointment made from pure nard, and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped His feet with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

Have you ever smelt pure nard? It has a strong, penetrating smell—the kind of smell that sticks to your skin for days afterward. No wonder the house was filled with the fragrance!

Mary's hair must have smelled of it for quite a while. Jesus' feet as well—maybe even to the cross. If so, then she was able to give Him one gift of love that would go with Him all the way to His death—where she herself could not go.

Because where Jesus was going, none of His disciples could go—not even those who loved Him most. John and Mary stood under His cross watching. But they could not help Him as He carried the burden of human sin and shame—as He faced temptations to come down from the cross, as His enemies dared Him—as He fought the powers of evil, and won. Jesus did that alone, because He loved us. And He rose from the dead three days later, to come back to us triumphant—sharing with us the gift of His own everlasting life.

WE PRAY: *Lord, stay with me always. Amen.*

Reflection Questions

- When you suffer, do you want company or not?
- How is Jesus with you to help when you suffer?
- Are you glad that He has promised always to be with you? (See Matthew 28:20.)

TIME TO DIE

TEXT: John 12:20, 21b, 23-24, 27-28a, 31-33, 36b - Now among those who went up to worship at the feast were some Greeks [asking,] “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” ... And Jesus answered them, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. ... Now is My soul troubled. And what shall I say? ‘Father, save Me from this hour’? But for this purpose I have come to this hour. Father, glorify Your Name. ... Now is the judgment of this world; now will the ruler of this world be cast out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to Myself.” He said this to show by what kind of death He was going to die. ... [Then Jesus] departed and hid Himself from them.

Jesus has a strange reaction to the coming of the Greeks! He goes into an anguished meditation on His own death, and then He leaves and hides Himself. Why?

Jesus’ own short ministry has been spent mainly among the Jews; He knows that evangelizing the nations is the job of His church. When this delegation of Greeks comes to Jesus, it shows that the age of the church is beginning, and Jesus Himself is about to die. And this fact overwhelms Him.

And yet, we have reason to be glad. Because Jesus overcomes the temptation to save Himself, and submits once again to the cross and resurrection. Which means that now, anyone who believes in Him, Jew or Gentile, has life forever.

WE PRAY: *Lord, thank You for choosing to save us. Amen.*

Reflection Questions

- Have you ever had to choose between your own wellbeing and that of someone you love?
- Was it easy or difficult? Why?
- What does Jesus’ choice say about how He feels about you?

POWER OR WEAKNESS?

TEXT: Matthew 27:39-43 - And those who passed by derided Him, wagging their heads and saying ... “Save Yourself! If You are the Son of God, come down from the cross.” So also the chief priests, with the scribes and elders, mocked Him, saying, “He saved others; He cannot save Himself. He is the King of Israel; let Him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in Him. He trusts in God; let God deliver Him now, if He desires Him. For He said, ‘I am the Son of God.’”

I wonder if it was a temptation for Jesus, to do what they were saying—to come down from the cross in the hopes that they would in fact believe in Him. Oh, He knew they were mocking Him. But He faced that temptation through every step of His ministry, to get people to believe through acts of power instead of weakness—to gather followers through miracles and promises of earthly victories. And this is more of the same. Should He use His power as the Son of God to save Himself through a miracle? Or go through with God’s plan, suffering, dying, and trusting that God the Father would raise Him up from the dead?

We know what Jesus chose. And He goes on choosing it in our lives as well—all the times when we beg God to do miracles for us, and He replies instead, “My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Corinthians 12:9b).

WE PRAY: *Lord Jesus, when You insist on having me muddle through my life the hard way, instead of doing miracles for me, help me to trust You. Amen.*

Reflection Questions

- If Jesus had done what they suggested—what would have happened to us?
- Why do you think God says “no” to our prayers for miracles so often?
- How do you continue to trust His love for you, even when He says no?

SETTLING JESUS' ESTATE

TEXT: Luke 23:34b-35a - And they cast lots to divide His garments. And the people stood by, watching.

When people die, there is usually someone whose job it is to settle the estate. They follow the directions of the person's will, if there is one; and they make sure the person's heirs get what once belonged to him or her.

Jesus' estate was a very simple one. There was nothing to divide except for the clothes He stood up in—a robe, a tunic, a loincloth, sandals, perhaps a cloth to cover His head. That was it. The soldiers took care of settling His estate, gambling at the foot of His cross.

And yet Jesus left other goods to divide among His heirs, too—though it's the Holy Spirit who's acting as His executor. Jesus left us the forgiveness of our sins—all our shame and guilt, washed away forever. He left us peace with God, and a place in God's family as His own children forever. He left us healing from all the brokenness evil has brought into our lives. And He left us everlasting life—a gift He shares with us in joy, now that He has risen from the dead and will never, ever, die again.

WE PRAY: *Dear Jesus, thank You for Your gifts! Amen.*

Reflection Questions

- Have you ever inherited something? What was it?
- Now that Jesus is alive again, has He taken back His possessions?
- What is the best gift Jesus has given you, in your opinion right now? Why?

PREPARED

TEXT: Luke 22:7-12 - Then came the day ... on which the Passover lamb had to be sacrificed. So Jesus sent Peter and John, saying, "Go and prepare the Passover for us, that we may eat it." They said to Him, "Where will You have us prepare it?" He said to them, "Behold, when you have entered the city, a man carrying a jar of water will meet you. Follow him into the house that he enters and tell the master of the house, 'The Teacher says to you, Where is the guest room, where I may eat the Passover with My disciples?' And he will show you a large upper room furnished; prepare it there."

It seems clear that Jesus has already made His own preparations for this meal. To have a man instead of a woman carrying water in that culture is strange enough that it looks like a prearranged signal—and perhaps it is. The master of the house clearly knows who the unnamed "teacher" is, and has already furnished the upper room for them. Jesus wants privacy. He plans to let His enemies seize Him, but not until after He has a last meal with the disciples, when He can comfort, teach, and prepare them for what's to come.

So now the disciples prepare—sacrificing a lamb, cooking it, and getting together all the other dishes. And dinner is ready.

God the Father has also made His preparations by sending Jesus Himself as the perfect, sinless Lamb who will take our sins away forever. As a result of His death and resurrection, all of us who trust in Him will eat at the heavenly banquet with Jesus our Savior when He returns in glory.

WE PRAY: *Lord, prepare my heart for You. Amen.*

Reflection Questions

- How do you prepare for honored guests?
- How is Jesus preparing a place for you in heaven? (See John 14:1-6.)
- What does that say about the way He values you?

WASHING FEET

TEXT: John 13:4-5, 12b, 14 - [Jesus] rose from supper. He laid aside His outer garments, and taking a towel, tied it around His waist. Then He poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was wrapped around Him. ... [Afterward] He said to them, "Do you understand what I have done to you? ... If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet."

What is this washing, that Jesus does to us and commands us to do to each other? Why is it so important that He says, "If I do not wash you, you have no share with Me"? We get a clue when Jesus says, "The one who has bathed does not need to wash, except for his feet, but is completely clean." There's only one bath I know of that makes a person clean forever, and that is Baptism. And so this daily washing of feet—what is it, then? It must be the ongoing, continuing forgiveness Jesus gives us for the sins we commit every day of our lives. When He washes us, He restores us to the perfect cleanness He gave us at Baptism, and we are glad.

Jesus can do this because He has paid the price for our cleansing at the cross with His own blood. Because of His death and resurrection, we who trust in Him are no longer sinners doomed to destruction; we are God's own children, who live with the life Jesus gives us. And we follow His example, washing the feet of our brothers and sisters, forgiving them when they sin against us—just as Jesus forgave us.

WE PRAY: *Dear Jesus, thank You for washing me! Amen.*

Reflection Questions

- When does Jesus wash you clean of your daily sins?
- How and when do you forgive your neighbors?
- When you have trouble forgiving, where can you find help?

ROYAL COURT

TEXT: Luke 23:32-34a - Two others, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with Him. And when they came to the place that is called The Skull, there they crucified Him, and the criminals, one on His right and one on His left. And Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

They put the two criminals on either side of Jesus. Given all the references to Jesus as the King of the Jews, I suspect they were trying to make this look like a royal court—Jesus in the most important place, with His courtiers on either side. And all those who came to look at Him would play the role of people appearing before a king's throne—come to pay their respects or to ask for something.

Of course this was meant to be a horrible joke. It was another way of abusing Jesus—and there was probably some anti-Jewish feeling too, not surprising coming from the Roman soldiers. But what they didn't realize was that in fact they had set up a true throne room—where Jesus reigns as our King and Savior.

See it in your mind—Jesus with a cross for a throne. His crown is of thorns, and His courtiers are thieves. He has a nail through His hand, instead of a scepter in it. And His royal robes? His own blood—shed to cover our sin and shame, and to make us His own forever.

WE PRAY: *Lord, You died and rose again for me. Help me to live as Yours, in love for You. Amen.*

Reflection Questions

- Jesus prayed for His enemies. Do you have enemies of your own?
- If so, consider asking Him to teach you how to deal with them according to His own wisdom and love.
- People visit courts to ask for help. What would you ask from Jesus today?

CAREGIVER

TEXT: Matthew 27:33-35 - And when they came to a place called Golgotha (which means Place of a Skull), they offered Him wine to drink, mixed with gall, but when He tasted it, He would not drink it. And ... they ... crucified Him.

Jesus wouldn't drink the wine mixed with gall. It was a sedative and painkiller, probably intended to make the soldiers' job of crucifying Him easier. But it looks like Jesus wanted to go through His suffering with a clear head. And so He turned it down.

Why? Jesus was finishing His work for us—the work that would bring us all out of spiritual slavery to sin, death, and evil. He would take no chance of things going wrong. If that meant more pain for Him, He was willing.

We can see another reason. Jesus was still taking care of the individuals around Him—a handful of His followers, standing at the foot of His cross; the criminals on either side of Him, who had a last chance to believe in Him before they died; and even the soldiers themselves, who had no idea whom they had just crucified. Even as He hung on that cross, Jesus continued to give them what they needed. He would keep watch over them and us until His own death—and then His resurrection.

WE PRAY: *Lord, You've always put my needs above Your own. Thank You for loving me this much. Amen.*

Reflection Questions

- When have you cared for someone even though it cost you?
- Were you glad to do it? Why?
- When Jesus remembers what He did for you—how do you think He feels about it? About you?

BACKSTABBER

TEXT: John 13:21b-27, 30 - [Jesus] testified, "Truly, truly, I say to you, one of you will betray Me." The disciples looked at one another, uncertain of whom He spoke. One of His disciples, whom Jesus loved, was reclining at table at Jesus' side, so Simon Peter motioned to him to ask Jesus of whom He was speaking. So that disciple, leaning back against Jesus, said to Him, "Lord, who is it?" Jesus answered, "It is he to whom I will give this morsel of bread when I have dipped it." So when He had dipped the morsel, He gave it to Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot. Then ... Satan entered into him. Jesus said to him, "What you are going to do, do quickly." ... So, after receiving the morsel of bread, he immediately went out. And it was night.

Jesus must have been lying very close to Judas to be able to hand him the morsel and speak to him without being overheard. I suspect Jesus' back was to Judas' chest, just as John's was to Jesus' own. If so, Jesus went through much of the meal with His betrayer literally at His back—and He knew it, too.

And yet, that knowledge didn't stop Jesus from trying to turn Judas back to the right way. He washed his feet. He honored him with the morsel. He even confirmed that He knew Judas was going to betray Him (see Matthew 26:25).

Jesus loved Judas to the very end. Jesus loves us—and when we sin, He shows us the same mercy, trying to turn us back to Himself. He refuses to give up on us—even when it means suffering death on a cross. And now that He has risen from the dead, He gives us life and love with Him forever.

WE PRAY: *Lord, keep my heart faithful to You forever! Amen.*

Reflection Questions

- Could Judas have changed his mind?
- Why do you think so?
- Will Jesus take us back when we sin?

HOPE AND LOVE

TEXT: Mark 14:32a, 33-36 - And they went to a place called Gethsemane. And [Jesus ...] took with Him Peter and James and John, and began to be greatly distressed and troubled. And He said to them, "My soul is very sorrowful, even to death. Remain here and watch." And going a little farther, He fell on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from Him. And He said, "Abba, Father, all things are possible for You. Remove this cup from Me. Yet not what I will, but what You will."

Sometimes hope produces the worst pain. Up to this point, Jesus has been saying to His disciples, very clearly, that He would in the future be handed over to His enemies, be mocked and flogged and crucified—and then He would rise from the dead. There has been no doubt in anything He said.

But now, here in the garden on the last night of His life, it looks like that perfect conviction has been withdrawn. Like any man, Jesus is subject to the tortures of hope—the thought that just possibly, God the Father might find another way to save the world. A way that would allow Jesus to escape the future He has known for years.

And so, like any man, He prays. He prays in desperation, asking God for that possible loophole—but always adding, "Yet not what I will, but what You will." Because He loves the Father, and He loves us, and He is not willing to lose us for any price—even His own life.

And when hope fails Him, Jesus turns back to love. He rouses His disciples so they can make their getaway. And then He turns His face to the cross, for all of us.

WE PRAY: *Dear Savior, thank You. I love You. Amen.*

Reflection Questions

- Have you ever experienced false hope?
- Why does suffering hurt more when false hope gets mixed into it?
- How do you think God the Father felt about His side of this prayer conversation?

CONCERN

TEXT: Luke 23:27-31 - And there followed Him ... women who were mourning and lamenting for Him. But turning to them Jesus said, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for Me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. For behold, the days are coming when they will say, 'Blessed are the barren and the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!' Then they will begin to say to the mountains, 'Fall on us,' and to the hills, 'Cover us.' For if they do these things when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?"

It amazes me that Jesus was still able to think about someone else's trouble, even on the way to the cross. He sees these women weeping for Him, and He is concerned for them. Jesus knows that roughly 40 years after His death, the city of Jerusalem will fall to Roman soldiers—and that after three years of civil war, hunger, torture, and fire. And those who are willing to harm the innocent Son of God will certainly not spare the women and children who are still alive at that time.

Jesus has left instructions for His followers—they will not be caught by surprise when the city falls (see Luke 21:20-24). But for these women, He can do nothing except to suffer and die for them—and pray that they too will believe in Him and be saved.

And that is what He does—carrying the whole weight of human evil to the cross. There He uses His own body and blood to destroy the power of evil, killing it through His own death. And when He rises to life again three days later, He gives life, joy, and peace to all of us who trust Him.

WE PRAY: *Lord, thank You that You are always concerned for us. Amen.*

Reflection Questions

- Who is someone you are concerned for right now?
- How could you help them?
- Take a moment to pray for them.

CARRYING ANOTHER'S BURDEN

TEXT: Luke 23:26 - And as they led Him away, they seized one Simon of Cyrene, who was coming in from the country, and laid on him the cross, to carry it behind Jesus.

Jesus is in terrible shape after all this. He has had no sleep since Wednesday night, and no food since Thursday's Passover meal. There's no record of anyone giving Him a drink. Instead, He's been beaten, slapped, and spit on, dragged from place to place, and flogged nearly to death. He's lost a lot of blood. And there is worse to come.

Jesus is supposed to carry the heavy crosspiece out to the place of execution, to Golgotha. But He's not up to it physically. The soldiers know they'll be in serious trouble if He dies before He is crucified. So they grab a bystander from the side of the road—Simon of Cyrene.

Simon must have been horrified. Carry a cross like a common criminal? But the Romans had the legal right to force him to do it, and so he did. He followed Jesus all the way out to Golgotha.

I wonder how long it was before he found out exactly whose cross he was carrying that day—and what Jesus Himself was carrying for him. Because Simon almost certainly became a Christian—that's why his name and the names of his sons are known to the early church. And so he would have learned what Jesus carried for him and for all of us—our sin, our guilt, our shame. All the way into death—where He destroyed it forever. And then He came back to us, alive again, our Savior and our joy.

WE PRAY: *Lord, thank You for what You carried for me. Amen.*

Reflection Questions

- Do you think Simon felt honored, later?
- Have you ever had the opportunity to do something good that you didn't want to do?
- How do you feel about it now?

SIGN AND REALITY

TEXT: Matthew 26:47-50a - While [Jesus] was still speaking, Judas came, one of the twelve, and with him a great crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests and the elders of the people. Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, "The one I will kiss is the Man; seize Him." And he came up to Jesus at once and said, "Greetings, Rabbi!" And he kissed Him. Jesus said to him, "Friend, do what you came to do."

It must have been dark under those trees, in spite of the full moon. Jesus stands waiting while His eleven disciples jump up, startled—confused, half-awake, rubbing their eyes. Through the trees a crowd is coming, carrying swords and clubs, and probably torches, too. And with them, Judas—who goes straight up to Jesus and greets Him with a kiss.

What was Judas thinking—that Jesus would try to avoid His own arrest in the darkness? Apparently so, or why would he need a special way of identifying Him for the guards?

But Jesus never intended to run away. Judas had the sign of love, but Jesus had the reality. And for our sake, He would go through with it all—His arrest, suffering, death, and rising to life again on the third day. Because He loves us that much.

WE PRAY: *Lord, thank You for loving us so. Amen.*

Reflection Questions

- Why do you think Judas chose a kiss as His sign?
- How do you know if someone really loves you?
- What do Jesus' actions tell you about the way He feels about you?

POWER TO PROTECT

TEXT: John 18:4-5a, 6-9 - Then Jesus, knowing all that would happen to Him, came forward and said to them, “Whom do you seek?” They answered Him, “Jesus of Nazareth.” Jesus said to them, “I am He.” ... When Jesus said to them, “I am He,” they drew back and fell to the ground. So He asked them again, “Whom do you seek?” And they said, “Jesus of Nazareth.” Jesus answered, “I told you that I am He. So, if you seek Me, let these men go.” This was to fulfill the word that He had spoken: “Of those whom You gave Me I have lost not one.”

I doubt any of the guards had ever met such a prisoner—one who had such power He could blow them backward with the simple words, “I am.” Because if you look at the Greek words, that is what Jesus said to them—and it meant more than simply, “I am the one you are looking for.” “I AM” is the Name of God (see Exodus 3:14). Jesus is God in human flesh—and by speaking His own Name, He made it completely clear that He was the one in control, even of His own arrest.

So Jesus has all power—but how does He use it? Not to protect Himself, but to protect the people God the Father gave Him. Jesus will not allow His disciples to be arrested with Him. Jesus alone will go into suffering, death, and resurrection, because He is our protector as well—the One who saves us from the power of evil at the cost of His own life.

WE PRAY: *Thank You, Lord, for protecting me with Your love and power. Amen.*

Reflection Questions

- Who is usually in control when someone is arrested?
- Why is it important for the guards—and us!—to know Jesus cooperates by His own choice?
- What does John 10:17-18 tell us about Jesus’ actions here?

ENDURANCE

TEXT: Matthew 27:27-31 - Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the governor’s headquarters, and they gathered the whole battalion before Him. And they stripped Him and put a scarlet robe on Him, and twisting together a crown of thorns, they put it on His head and put a reed in His right hand. And kneeling before Him, they mocked Him, saying, “Hail, King of the Jews!” And they spit on Him and took the reed and struck Him on the head. And when they had mocked Him, they stripped Him of the robe and put His own clothes on Him and led Him away to crucify Him.

It must have been terrifying. Imagine 600 men, set free to abuse Jesus as badly as they wish—as long as He stays alive for the cross. And that allows a lot. Mocking, stripping, and spitting. Jamming a crown of thorns down on His head. Hitting Him over the head with a stick. And the noise! The worst of humanity, set free to abuse this innocent Man, with no one to stop them.

Jesus could have stopped them. At any time, He had the power to call the whole thing off, and He knew it (see Matthew 26:53).

But He did not, and He would not, because His mind was on us. On everyone who has ever suffered abuse, who has been beaten or harmed or mocked or sent to death unjustly, by the same powers of evil that Jesus faced now—the powers He would destroy through His death and resurrection. And His mind was also on those who did such evil, for He came to die for them, too—to redeem, forgive, and remake them new in the image of the One who loves us.

WE PRAY: *Thank You, Lord, for enduring for me. Amen.*

Reflection Questions

- When did you endure something scary or painful?
- Did anything good come of your endurance?
- Is it easier to endure if you’re doing it for someone you love?

THEATER AND REALITY

TEXT: Matthew 27:24-26 - So when Pilate saw that he was gaining nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, "I am innocent of this Man's blood; see to it yourselves." And all the people answered, "His blood be on us and on our children!" Then he released for them Barabbas, and having scourged Jesus, delivered Him to be crucified.

Pilate is being theatrical when he literally washes his hands of Jesus' blood; he is trying to dissociate himself from what's about to happen as clearly as he can. It's nonsense, of course; Pilate is the only one with legal authority to kill Jesus, and everyone knows that.

The crowd is also being theatrical with their over-the-top language, "His blood be on us and our children!" They don't really mean it; they simply want Pilate to get on with the show. They accept responsibility for Jesus' death because they are quite certain that there will be no reckoning; nobody will ever force them to pay for the evil they are doing.

But Jesus isn't being theatrical at all. He's being real—He's doing reality, with every painful step He walks, and every drop of blood He sheds. He knows that what He is doing will save everyone who trusts in Him from the power of sin, death, and the devil. His suffering, death, and resurrection are the most real things that have ever happened to us—because they take people who are dead in guilt and shame and turn them into forgiven, blessed children of God.

WE PRAY: *Thank You, Lord, for saving me in reality. Amen.*

Reflection Questions

- The crowd's words were meant to function as a curse. How does God change it into a blessing?
- How does God put Jesus' blood on us and our children?
- What are the results of Jesus' blood on us?

TINY MIRACLE

TEXT: John 18:10-11 - Then Simon Peter, having a sword, drew it and struck the high priest's servant and cut off his right ear. (The servant's name was Malchus.) So Jesus said to Peter, "Put your sword into its sheath; shall I not drink the cup that the Father has given Me?"

I love this last tiny miracle that Jesus does, just before they take Him away to suffering and death. His heart goes out to one of His enemies—a man sent to arrest Him! And Jesus touches his ear and heals him (see Luke 22:49-51). The fact that John can tell us Malchus' name means that it's very likely he wound up in the early Christian church as a believer in Jesus.

To be sure, there is more than just simple compassion going on here. Jesus is protecting Peter as well—because it would be hard to drag Peter into court when everyone can see his victim has two healthy ears!

Then, too, Jesus wants Peter to understand what we all too often forget. Jesus is Peter's protector, not the other way around—and right now, He is carrying out the plan that God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit determined before the beginning of the world, to save Peter and all of us from the power of evil. Jesus will drink the cup of suffering and death to the bottom. And when He rises on the third day, He will share His everlasting life, joy, and peace with all of us—everyone who trusts in Him.

WE PRAY: *Lord Jesus, thank You for drinking that cup for my sake, and giving me life in You. Amen.*

Reflection Questions

- What do you think Malchus said to his family when he got home?
- Does God ever need us to protect Him?
- Is it ever a good idea for the church to use force to do what we think is right?

SEEING PEOPLE IN NEED

TEXT: Matthew 26:55-56 - At that hour Jesus said to the crowds, "Have you come out as against a robber, with swords and clubs to capture Me? Day after day I sat in the temple teaching, and you did not seize Me. But all this has taken place that the Scriptures of the prophets might be fulfilled." Then all the disciples left Him and fled.

This must have been the last thing the disciples heard as they fled into the darkness. Jesus is making it clear to His enemies that what they are doing is both wrong and ridiculous—and yet, it's happening to fulfill the prophecies in the Bible. It's the only protest He'll make; He will not refuse to go with them, He will not call down thousands of angels to rescue Him. But Jesus does make this one protest. Why?

I think it's because Jesus is always our Savior, and He can't see people as enemies—only as the people He will die for, in just a few hours. And so He tells them the truth they need to hear the most at this moment. Perhaps they will remember it, later, after He rises from the dead. Perhaps it will grow, like a seed in their hearts, and produce the good fruit of faith. Perhaps.

Jesus does this for us as well. Even when we are deep in sin, He is still looking out for us, finding ways to call us back to Himself. He will not give up on His enemies, and He will not give up on us.

WE PRAY: *Lord Jesus, help me to hear You when You are trying to reach my heart. Amen.*

Reflection Questions

- When you are in danger, how do you think about the people who are against you?
- How does Jesus' attitude differ from yours?
- Do you think Jesus' appeal succeeded with anybody? Why or why not?

NO KING BUT CAESAR

TEXT: John 19:12-16 - From then on Pilate sought to release Him, but the Jews cried out, "If you release this Man, you are not Caesar's friend. Everyone who makes himself a king opposes Caesar." So when Pilate heard these words, he brought Jesus out and sat down on the judgment seat at a place called The Stone Pavement, and in Aramaic Gabbatha. Now it was the day of Preparation of the Passover. It was about the sixth hour. He said to the Jews, "Behold your King!" They cried out, "Away with Him, away with Him, crucify Him!" Pilate said to them, "Shall I crucify your King?" The chief priests answered, "We have no king but Caesar." So he delivered Him over to them to be crucified.

What a horrifying thing to admit. For these are God's chosen people, the descendants of Israel—and God is supposed to be their King. But now, faced with Jesus, God come in the flesh, they won't have Him. They will do anything rather than receive Him as Messiah and King—anything, up to and including crucifying Him. They would rather have Caesar—because Caesar, they think, will not threaten their position. (They learned otherwise about 40 years later, when Jerusalem fell to Titus and Vespasian.)

But we face this same choice too, don't we? We can put our trust in earthly powers—in politicians, in rich men, in those who command troops and weapons. Or we can put our trust in Jesus, who shelters those who trust in Him by laying down His own life for us—and who rises from the dead to give us everlasting life in His kingdom.

WE PRAY: *Jesus, You are my King. Keep me trusting You forever. Amen.*

Reflection Questions

- Why would earthly rulers see Jesus as a threat?
- Who has your first allegiance, above everyone else?
- Why?

WHO'S ON TRIAL?

TEXT: John 19:6a, 7b-8a, 10b-11 - When the chief priests and the officers saw [Jesus], they cried out, "Crucify Him, crucify Him! ... [Jesus] ought to die because He has made Himself the Son of God." When Pilate heard this statement, he ... said to Jesus, ... "You will not speak to me? Do You not know that I have authority to release You and authority to crucify You?" Jesus answered him, "You would have no authority over Me at all unless it had been given you from above. Therefore he who delivered Me over to you has the greater sin."

By this point, Pilate has lost control of the trial. He knows Jesus is innocent, but he still can't set Him free. And Jesus Himself is behaving like a judge—explaining to Pilate that what he is doing is sin, yes—but not as bad as Judas' sin, because Pilate at least has his divinely appointed office as judge to hide behind.

Pilate finds himself on trial—just as the Council did, just as Herod and Judas himself did. And the deciding question is the same: What will you do with Jesus—this innocent Man, this Son of God?

We know what they did. And we too had a hand in it, because it was our sins, our guilt, that sent Jesus to the cross. Because He loves us, He took our death, and gave us a share in His own resurrection. And as a result, God looks at us and says, "Not guilty." He sees us in His Son Jesus—covered in His innocence, forever forgiven, newborn children of God.

WE PRAY: *Thank You, Lord, for taking our judgment. Amen.*

Reflection Questions

- Do you worry about God's judgment?
- How does Jesus take that fear away from us?
- Why would God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—plan to do such a thing for you?

CLOTHING

TEXT: Mark 14:51-52 - And a young man followed Him, with nothing but a linen cloth about his body. And they seized him, but he left the linen cloth and ran away naked.

I wonder about this young man. Tradition suggests that it was Mark himself, the future Gospel writer, and that he was connected to the family that hosted Jesus' Last Supper. If so, it's easy to see how a curious young man might have sneaked out of bed late that night to follow Jesus and His band of disciples out to Gethsemane. If he had to go quickly, he might have grabbed the first thing that came to hand—rather like wearing a bathrobe.

The young man got more than he bargained for. He wasn't expecting to see Jesus arrested. He wasn't expecting the crowd to come for him also. As it was, he barely escaped. He left the linen cloth behind—saving his own skin, yes, but at the cost of his dignity.

He also left Jesus—and that was his blessing, not his loss. Because Jesus would take his place, and ours, in the suffering that was to follow. To rescue all people from sin, death, and the devil, Jesus would accept flogging—condemnation—and death on a cross. And then He would rise from the dead, three days later, to cover our sin and shame with the white robes of forgiveness and mercy. Because Jesus loves us and took our place, we now live with Him as God's own children forever.

WE PRAY: *Lord, thank You for covering my shame and making me Yours. Amen.*

Reflection Questions

- What do you grab when you're in too much of a hurry to dress normally?
- How do you cope when you feel embarrassed or ashamed?
- Does it help to know that Jesus has taken away all your sin, shame, and guilt, replacing it with the white robes of His forgiveness?

JESUS SPEAKS

TEXT: Matthew 26:62a, 63-65a, 66-68 - And the high priest stood up and said, "Have You no answer to make?" ... But Jesus remained silent. And the high priest said to Him, "I adjure You by the living God, tell us if You are the Christ, the Son of God." Jesus said to him, "You have said so. But I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven." Then the high priest tore his robes and said, "He has uttered blasphemy. ... What is your judgment?" They answered, "He deserves death." Then they spit in His face and struck Him. And some slapped Him, saying, "Prophecy to us, You Christ! Who is it that struck You?"

Jesus kept silent during His trial before the high priests and other leaders. This upset His enemies, as they couldn't get their false witnesses to tell the same story—and without that, their case would fail. Their only hope was to force Jesus Himself to say something incriminating.

And so the high priest used the Name of God to force Jesus to say who He is: the Christ, the Son of God and Son of Man. It was completely illegal, but it worked—because Jesus will never dishonor the Name of His Father.

Jesus' own words sealed His death warrant. Because none of His enemies could imagine that what He said might be true—that the Christ, the Son of God, might actually be standing before them, on trial for His life. On trial for our lives—because Jesus' death means our life, and His resurrection means that everyone who trusts in Him will become children of God forever.

WE PRAY: *Lord, I believe that You are the Son of God—and my Savior. Thank You. Amen.*

Reflection Questions

- Why do you think Jesus is refusing to speak?
- What does Isaiah 53:7-8 have to say about it?
- How do His words give us life?

"BEHOLD THE MAN"

TEXT: John 19:1-5 - Then Pilate took Jesus and flogged Him. And the soldiers twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on His head and arrayed Him in a purple robe. They came up to Him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!" and struck Him with their hands. Pilate went out again and said to them, "See, I am bringing Him out to you that you may know that I find no guilt in Him." So Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. Pilate said to them, "Behold the Man!"

Pilate says to the crowd and Jesus' enemies, "Behold the Man." Look at Him—this Jesus, scourged and bleeding, barely able to stand up. Look at Him—wearing a robe the same color as His bruises, crowned with thorns. Who is He to you?

Is He your King? Will you have Him, bruised and bloody? Will you acknowledge Him as your own? Will you follow Him, even to the cross? Will you accept the gifts He gives you there—forgiveness for your sin, covering for your shame, love for you, you personally—forever?

If you want Him, you can have Him—for He has promised that. He never lies: "Whoever comes to Me I will never cast out" (John 6:37b). He wants you—He has made that very clear: "If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink" and "Come to Me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (John 7:37b, Matthew 11:28). Now that He has died for you and risen from the dead, He will keep you at His side forever—sharing His life and joy with all His people (see John 17:24).

WE PRAY: *Lord, I do want You. Keep me as Your own. Amen.*

Reflection Questions

- What does it mean, to be Jesus' own?
- How does He give Himself to you?
- If you have belonged to Him for some time—are you glad of it?

FOR THIS PURPOSE

TEXT: John 18:33-36a, 37-38 - So Pilate [asked], “Are You the King of the Jews?” Jesus answered, “Do you say this of your own accord, or did others say it to you about Me?” Pilate answered, “Am I a Jew? Your own nation and the chief priests have delivered You over to me. What have You done?” Jesus answered, “My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, My servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. ...” Then Pilate said to Him, “So You are a king?” Jesus answered, “You say that I am a king. For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to My voice.” Pilate said to Him, “What is truth?”

This part of Jesus’ story makes me want to cry. Because Jesus is usually silent during His Passion. But here, for once, He is talking—quite a lot, too! Why?

He tells us: It’s “to bear witness to the truth.” Jesus is evangelizing Pontius Pilate, the man who will condemn Him to death. He cares for Him that much.

And if Jesus loves Pilate that much—cares that urgently about his life, his salvation, his blessedness—then there’s no way I can avoid another fact. Which is that Jesus cares just that much about me and about you. We are not faceless bits of humanity to Him. We are individuals He urgently loves—people He died and rose to save. He came for just that purpose, to make you His own.

WE PRAY: *Lord, since You want me that much, I’m Yours. Amen.*

Reflection Questions

- Are you ever tempted to think Jesus can’t possibly be interested in you?
- How can you be certain that He is?
- Jesus has deliberately tied Himself to you for all eternity. Why would He do that?

FALLEN—AND FORGIVEN

TEXT: Luke 22:54b-57a, 61a, 62b - Peter was following at a distance. And when they had kindled a fire in the middle of the courtyard and sat down together, Peter sat down among them. Then a servant girl, seeing him as he sat in the light and looking closely at him, said, “This man also was with Him.” But he denied it ... And the Lord turned and looked at Peter. And Peter ... went out and wept bitterly.

Peter’s story hurts to read. It’s so easy to see how I could have done the same thing.

Peter starts out swearing he will never deny Jesus, even if he has to die for Him (see Matthew 26:35). But like the other apostles, he runs away in fear when Jesus’ enemies come to arrest Him. Then he changes his mind, and tries to follow Jesus again—but he’s following “at a distance.” That’s never a safe way to follow Jesus—especially when fear is driving you.

Then, once Jesus’ trial starts, Peter goes and sits down. Where? Among the very men who arrested Jesus! Among His enemies! And of course they notice him and ask questions. Peter loses his head, and in fear for his own life, denies knowing Jesus at all. His ruin is complete.

But that’s not the end for Peter. Luke tells us that “the Lord turned and looked at Peter.” What was in that look? Sadness, I’m sure. But also love—the love of the Savior who was carrying Peter’s sins and mine—and yours!—toward the cross, where He would destroy them forever. And Jesus’ forgiving love came out in full after He rose from the dead, when He brought Peter back as one of His own.

WE PRAY: *When I fail You, Lord, forgive me! Amen.*

Reflection Questions

- Why does Peter fall so quickly?
- What happens in Peter’s life after Jesus forgives him?
- Consider privately: What has Jesus forgiven you for? Take a moment to thank Him.

ALL OF US

TEXT: Mark 15:1-5 - And as soon as it was morning, the [Jewish leaders] bound Jesus and led Him away and delivered Him over to Pilate. And Pilate asked Him, “Are You the King of the Jews?” And He answered him, “You have said so.” And the chief priests accused Him of many things. And Pilate again asked Him, “Have You no answer to make? See how many charges they bring against You.” But Jesus made no further answer, so that Pilate was amazed.

When the sun came up, the council sent Jesus to Pontius Pilate—the Roman governor who ruled Judea. They had to do this, because they wanted Jesus dead—and as a conquered nation, they no longer had the right to put people to death. So they handed Jesus over to a non-Jew, that is, a Gentile.

What this means for us today is that *all* human beings were involved in what we did to Jesus. We can’t blame the Jews or the Gentiles—it’s all of us. If His own people betrayed Him and handed Him over, it was the Gentiles who carried out the death sentence—even though they knew He was an innocent Man.

So the guilt belongs to everybody. But because God loves us, Jesus’ mercy and forgiveness belong to everybody, too—He gives it to anyone who will take it. That’s because Jesus willingly suffered and died for every human being in the world. He took away all of our evil at the cross; and when He rose from the dead, He became the Source of life for all of us who believe in Him, no matter who we are.

WE PRAY: *Thank You, Lord, for taking me as Your own. Amen.*

Reflection Questions

- What does it mean to say that Jesus is the “King of the Jews”?
- What does Romans 15:12 have to say about Jesus and the Gentiles?
- What does Jesus say about how both groups relate to Him in John 10:16?

TWISTED

TEXT: Luke 23:6a, 7b, 8b, 9b, 11-12 - When Pilate ... learned that [Jesus] belonged to Herod’s jurisdiction, he sent Him over to Herod ... [Herod] had long desired to see Him, because he had heard about Him, and he was hoping to see some sign done by Him. [Jesus] made no answer. ... And Herod with his soldiers treated Him with contempt and mocked Him. Then, arraying Him in splendid clothing, he sent Him back to Pilate. And Herod and Pilate became friends with each other.

There’s something twisted in this little story. Pilate doesn’t want to be responsible for Jesus, even though judgment is his job. He knows Jesus ought to be set free, but he also knows he hasn’t got the courage to do it and take the consequences. So Pilate is delighted to hand Jesus over to Herod.

Herod isn’t interested in judging Jesus rightly either. He’s just looking for a miracle show—and he doesn’t get it. So he mocks Jesus and sends Him back.

And the result of all this? Pilate and Herod become friends, almost literally over Jesus’ dead body. How twisted is that?

I wish this was a rare situation in our world, but it’s not. People do this—we duck our responsibilities, we ignore what we’re supposed to do in favor of protecting ourselves or even finding a little amusement. And so the innocent are condemned.

But God uses even this. Jesus in His innocence is ignored, traded around, and finally condemned—and we, the guilty ones, are set free. Jesus lovingly takes our place under judgment, and gives us forgiveness and life through His own death. And when He rises to life, three days later, He shares that life with all of us who trust in Him.

WE PRAY: *Thank You, Lord, for making me Yours forever. Amen.*

Reflection Questions

- Do innocent people always get proper judgment in the courts?
- Why do you think as you do?
- With Jesus, do you ever have to worry about God’s judgment again?