



THE  
WEEK  
THAT  
**CHANGED**  
THE  
WORLD

THE  
WEEK  
THAT  
CHANGED  
THE  
WORLD

Devotionals by **Ryan Denison**

Photos by **Shannon Skokos**

Photo captions by **Dr. Jim Denison**

All biblical citations, unless otherwise noted, are from The Holy Bible: English Standard Version (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2011).

© 2018 Denison Forum. All rights reserved.



Welcome to the week that changed the world. When this week began, Jesus of Nazareth was continuing his earthly ministry of teaching, preaching, and healing. When it ended, he had atoned for the sins of humanity and risen from the dead.

No week in history has changed history as did Holy Week.

I am greatly indebted to several contributors for their work on this guide. Ryan Denison, a PhD student with B. H. Carroll Theological Institute, serves as Research Coordinator with Denison Forum. He compiled the biblical events outlines and wrote the devotionals for this booklet.

Shannon Skokos and her husband, Ted, are very dear friends. Their support was instrumental in beginning the Denison Forum in 2009; they have remained great encouragers and partners in this ministry. They traveled to Israel with me in Spring 2017, where Shannon took the pictures included in this guide.

Kaitlyn Slight, our graphic designer, did a superlative job with layout and artistic design. Minni Elkins and Blake Atwood provided editorial direction and support. I have written the descriptions that accompany Shannon's wonderful photographs.

As you travel on pilgrimage with Jesus through these pivotal days, may you be drawn closer to your Lord and find new encouragement to serve him gratefully in our culture.

He is risen indeed!

James C. Denison, CEO  
Denison Forum

# PALM SUNDAY

## ***Biblical events:***

- *Disciples borrow the colt*
  - Matthew 21:1–6, Mark 11:1–6, Luke 19:29–34
- *Triumphal Entry*
  - Matthew 21:7–11, Mark 11:6–10, Luke 19:35–44, John 12:12–19
- *Jesus weeps over Jerusalem*
  - Luke 19:41
- *Jesus leaves to go to Bethany*
  - Matthew 21:17, Mark 11:11





Sunrise over Jerusalem, the Holy City. Jerusalem is spiritually significant to more than half of the world's population.

The city was known as Salem (Genesis 14:18), the capital of Melchizedek. It was conquered by the Jebusites, who renamed it Jebus. David captured it and made it the capital of the Jewish nation around 1058 BC (2 Samuel 5:7, 9). His son, Solomon, built the first Jewish Temple here.

The city was destroyed by Babylon in 586 BC and rebuilt under Zerubbabel and Nehemiah. It was destroyed a second time by the Romans in AD 70. Israel became a nation again in 1948, with Jerusalem as its capital.

The events of Holy Week occurred in this Holy City and in nearby Bethany.









The “Old City” of Jerusalem, a small section of the modern city. The Old City’s population is around 37,000, while the larger city is home to more than 850,000 people. The Old City is less than a kilometer square, surrounded by walls completed by Suleiman the Magnificent in 1538. It is divided into four “quarters”—Muslim, Christian, Armenian, and Jewish—and houses many of the most significant sites in Christian history.

Seven gates pass through the city walls. Each is constructed with a sharp turn so enemies could not charge through on horseback and battering rams would be more difficult to use. In addition, the gate visible to the right in this picture is the Eastern Gate. According to Jewish tradition, the Messiah will enter Jerusalem through this gate when he returns one day. For this reason, the Muslim authorities sealed the gate and placed a Muslim cemetery in front of it. Of course, no human powers can defeat the King of kings and Lord of lords (Revelation 19:16).







A close-up of the Dome of the Rock, a Muslim shrine completed in AD 691. It encloses a rock that is part of Mt. Moriah, where Abraham offered Isaac to the Lord (Genesis 22:1–14). A thousand years later, David purchased this site for an altar to God (2 Samuel 24:18–21).

Here, Solomon built a temple that stood for four centuries until it was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 BC. The Jews began rebuilding their temple after returning from exile; King Herod enlarged it so significantly that it became known as Herod's Temple. It was destroyed by the Romans in AD 70.

Muslims believe that Muhammad ascended to heaven from this spot before returning to Mecca. To them it is the third-holiest place on earth (after Mecca and Medina). For this reason, after they gained control of Jerusalem in AD 637, they constructed the Dome of the Rock on the site.

## ***Palm Sunday: Triumphal Entry and Jesus Weeps over Jerusalem***

Matthew 21:7–11; Mark 11:6–10; Luke 19:35–44; John 12:12–19

As we begin to consider Holy Week and the days leading up to the first Easter, it can be easy to take for granted all that went into the Lord's final preparations. Every conversation Jesus had with the religious leaders, every interaction with the people in and around Jerusalem, and every moment he spent with his disciples had a purpose that took on even greater meaning because he knew it would be among his last.

Unfortunately, Christ's disciples would not fully understand the events of this holy week until he was raised to life once more. Their preoccupation with who they thought Jesus should have been prevented them from embracing who he had truly come to be. Tragically, Christians today continue to make the same mistake. So, as we enter into a closer study of Christ's final days, let's do so with hearts truly open to understanding anew what it means for Jesus to be the Messiah we need, even if he is not always the Messiah we want.

### ***The Triumphal Entry***

By the time of Christ, Jewish scholars understood the prophecy in Zechariah 9:9–10 to speak of the long-awaited Messiah's victory over the nations. In it, the prophet wrote of the coming king riding on a colt, the foal of a donkey, as he spoke peace to the nations and established a rule that would

extend to the ends of the earth. This type of universal dominance was at the very center of Jewish hopes and dreams, to the point that they felt as though it was their divine right to experience it one day.

Given this background, it's understandable that those who believed Jesus to be the Messiah would risk Roman wrath to praise him (Luke 19:37–38). The palm branches they waved and set in his path were a visual sign to all present that they fully believed Jesus to be their conquering hero (John 12:13).

When Simon Maccabeus entered Jerusalem after purifying the city and gaining the Jews their short-lived freedom roughly 170 years prior (1 Maccabees 13:51), the crowds reacted in the same way. We can be sure that the symmetry was not lost on those observing Palm Sunday. This connection reinforces that the people welcomed Jesus as a political savior

rather than a suffering servant, believing themselves to be getting in on the ground floor of the Messianic revolution their people had waited nearly six hundred years to see.

However, not all were excited about the response Jesus received. The religious leaders, who doubted Christ's legitimacy and feared the Roman response to his ministry, would implore him to silence the crowds (Luke 19:39). Their reaction was also understandable. Even a normal, uneventful Passover was enough to make the Romans nervous, and they routinely doubled or tripled the number of soldiers present in the city during such occasions to guard against any unrest that might develop. Jesus' entrance would not have gone unnoticed, and the government's policy, when faced with even the hint of a challenge to its authority, was often to kill first and ask questions later. While it's easy to criticize the religious leaders

for their failure to embrace Jesus' ministry, we must remember that they had good reason to fear the prospect of a political Messiah.

### *Jesus Wept*

Of course, what was lost on everyone in attendance that day, from the Pharisees to the crowds chanting "Hosanna," was the fact that Jesus hadn't come to be the savior they expected. They were all so focused on the Christ they wanted that they missed the Christ they needed. As a result, Luke tells us that "when he drew near and saw the city, he wept over it, saying, 'Would that you, even you, had known on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes'" (Luke 19:41-42).

Jesus would go on to forecast the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple because of Israel's attempts to break free

of Roman oppression in their own strength rather than the Lord's. He would echo these sentiments again on the way to the cross (Luke 23:28-31). And while the violence wrought by that mistake was indeed tragic, the reasoning behind it appears to have been the true source of his sorrow.

Early Christians, though persecuted and ridiculed for their faith, lived at peace with the Empire where possible. By contrast, the Jews challenged the military might of the world's strongest power to a battle they could only have won with the Lord's help. Such help would not come because the war was of their choosing rather than God's.

And so Jesus wept because he knew that their rejection of him would not only drive them further from the Father they truly longed to serve but would also lead to the death of nearly six hundred thousand of his



people and the destruction of the Temple they held so dear.

### ***Does Jesus Weep Over You Today?***

Despite three years of lessons, miracles, and clear statements to the contrary, Jesus faced the final week of his life knowing that even those closest to him had still misunderstood a vital part of his ministry. And he wept from the knowledge that the sheep he longed to shepherd (Matthew 9:36) were going to suffer greatly as a result.

It can be easy for us to make the same mistake today. Like the Jews, those of us who have lived most of our lives in a Christian context can easily take for granted that we understand what it means for Jesus to be the Messiah. We remember his sacrifice on our behalf and rejoice at his resurrection, but we often do so without

considering what it all truly means for our daily walk with him.

Jesus died to restore our relationship with the Father, a relationship that began anew the moment you accepted his offer of salvation. He is just as much the king of our lives today as he will be when we leave this life and step into the fullness of his presence. The primary thing that will change on that day should be our location, not our commitment.

Jesus wept because the people he loved so dearly would not accept him as their king unless it was on their terms, and he knew the price they would pay as a result. Let's be sure the same cannot be said of us this Easter.

# MONDAY

## ***Biblical events:***

- *Jesus curses the fig tree*
  - Matthew 21:18-19, Mark 11:12-14
- *Jesus cleanses the Temple*
  - Matthew 21:12-13, Mark 11:15-17, Luke 19:45-46
- *Jesus heals at the Temple*
  - Matthew 21:14-16
- *Jesus returns to Bethany*
  - Mark 11:19

On Monday, Jesus entered and cleansed Herod's Temple. After this magnificent structure was destroyed by the Romans, all that remained was the western retaining wall used to enclose the Temple Mount (the area where the temple stood). The elevated walkway in the picture leads to the Temple Mount itself.

This Western Wall is sometimes known as the Wailing Wall. Since non-Muslims are not permitted to pray on the Temple Mount itself, this is the closest to their temple the Jewish people are allowed to pray. Non-Jews from around the world also gather at the Western Wall plaza to pray; many leave written prayer requests wedged between the massive stones of the wall. When these crevices become full, the Jewish authorities remove the written prayers and bury them as sacred to God.

The Lord said of this site, "My eyes and my heart will be there for all time" (2 Chronicles 7:16).









These stones have stood in this position since the time of Christ. Here we can see remains of an arch that carried first-century worshipers up to the temple. A “picture frame” effect was carved into the edges of each stone under orders of King Herod.

The foundations of the wall actually extend many feet below the present plaza. Jesus’ hearers must have been incredulous when he said of the temple, “There will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down” (Matthew 24:2). And yet, this retaining wall is all that remains of their glorious temple.



This is the largest stone in the Western Wall, weighing more than a 747 jetliner. It is visible only to those who travel down tunnels carved beneath the Western Wall plaza.

These “temple tunnels” take us down to the original foundation level of the Western Wall. Here we find an alcove lined up directly with the former temple. In this alcove, Jewish women gather to pray every hour of every day.



## ***Monday: Jesus Cleanses the Temple and then Ministers to the Needy***

Matthew 21:12–16; Mark 11:15–17;  
Luke 19:45–46

Yesterday, we focused on Jesus' entry into Jerusalem amidst the praise of the crowds and the objections of the religious leaders. Upon seeing the city, however, our Lord was overcome with grief at the fact that neither those who revered him nor those who reviled him truly understood him, and he knew that they would all suffer greatly as a result.

Today, we're going to pick up the story from Matthew's Gospel, where he describes the

first thing Jesus did upon returning to the Holy City the next day.

### ***Jesus Cleanses the Temple***

Passover was big business for those in a position to profit from the religious fervor and perceived obligations of the millions who would annually crowd into Jerusalem at this time of year. Old Testament rules regarding the sacrifices they had to offer in order to make amends for their sins were quite clear. In the end, what was meant to be a somber time of genuine sacrifice and supplication largely devolved into the sort of rote, transactional religion found in pagan temples throughout the rest of the Empire.

To be sure, there were many in the swarms of people for whom such offerings meant a great deal, and the Lord accepted their sacrifices gladly. But the greatest problem was

found with those who should have known better and whose job was to help guide the people into God's presence. Instead, they often chose to line their pockets and profit, both materially and authoritatively, from the business of religion. And while Scripture does not seem to portray the religious leaders as vendors in these transactions, they clearly looked on in approval as their fellow Jews were taken advantage of.

When God Incarnate entered the city and saw what was going on, he was filled with a righteous anger—the kind one might expect a shepherd to show against those preying on his sheep—and put an end to the blasphemy. He quoted Isaiah 56:7 in accusing them of transforming the temple from “a house of prayer for all the nations” to a “den of robbers.” (Mark 11:17). In so doing, they'd hindered God's people from entering into his presence and caused them to stumble—

an offense that Jesus took very seriously (Matthew 18:6).

Christ's judgments on the religious order of his day were nothing new, however. Earlier in Matthew's Gospel, we find Jesus telling the religious leaders to “go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, and not sacrifice,’” a quote from Hosea 6:6 that called out the manner in which those leaders had lost sight of what the Lord truly values (Matthew 9:13). After all, it was never the sacrifice that made one clean in God's eyes, but rather the penitent heart within the person who offered it, and that hasn't changed. God has always welcomed those who genuinely desire him, and we see Christ embody this truth in the next verses.

### ***Jesus Heals***

Unique to Matthew's Gospel are additional details regarding what happened after Jesus

cleansed the temple of those who had defiled it. While Mark and Luke quickly move on to the response by the religious leaders and subsequent events of the day, Matthew takes a moment to describe how the money changers were replaced by the blind and lame who couldn't get to Jesus prior to this point. He then proceeded to heal them in the presence of what was, presumably, a rather large crowd given the commotion he had caused prior to this point.

While the crowd in attendance would have comprised people from all walks of society, including both Jews and Gentiles, Matthew writes only of the response Jesus received from the children who shouted his praises and the religious leaders who indignantly asked that he silence them. In so doing, the Gospel writer invites us to choose which we will do. And while the decision may seem simple, how often do we truly experience

the Lord with the kind of joyous devotion exhibited by these children?

Christ's criticism of the religious leaders in this passage rings tragically true for far too many believers today, myself among them at times. You see, the Greek is clear that Jesus' question to the religious leaders in Matthew 21:16 carried a double meaning. In asking if they'd read David's words regarding the praise from children (Psalm 8:2), he was also asking if they had not taught that passage as well. Their knowledge of God's word and familiarity with the truth didn't protect them from the sort of self-centered religion that left little room for true worship.

### ***How Is Your Temple?***

Holy Week provides an amazing opportunity to remember all that God has done to restore our relationship with him. Simply going to

church or reading a devotional such as this, however, is no guarantee that we'll truly encounter the Lord.

Jesus stands ready to clear out the temple courts of our hearts this week and remove every barrier that would keep us from him. But we won't experience the fullness of his presence or the restoration only he can provide if we don't first allow him to do so. That process will not be easy, and it will not be comfortable, but it will be worth it.

How is your temple looking today?

# TUESDAY

## ***Biblical events:***

- *Disciples see the withered fig tree*
  - Matthew 21:20–22, Mark 11:20–21
- *Jesus debates with the chief priests about his authority*
  - Matthew 21:23–27
- *Jesus debates with the Pharisees and Herodians*
  - Matthew 22:15–22, 34–46
- *Jesus debates with the Sadducees*
  - Matthew 22:23–33
- *Jesus issues seven woes to the Scribes and Pharisees and Jerusalem*
  - Matthew 23:13–36, 37–39
- *Jesus foretells the destruction of the Temple and teaches on the end of the age*
  - Matthew 24
- *Jesus teaches on the Kingdom of Heaven*
  - Matthew 25

## ***Tuesday: Jesus Teaches on the Kingdom of Heaven***

Matthew 24–25

After cleansing the temple and healing the needy in his midst, Jesus returned to Bethany, where he and his disciples stayed with Mary, Martha, and their brother, Lazarus. They needed this time to reflect and recharge for what promised to be another busy day. Tuesday was filled with arguments against the religious leaders who had sent their best in a last-ditch effort to discredit Jesus in front of the crowds hanging on his every word. It didn't work, and Matthew tells us that "from that day on no one dared to ask him any more questions" (Matthew 22:46).

Once the challenges to his authority passed and he could finally get away, Jesus proceeded to teach his disciples about what they could expect regarding the kingdom he'd come to inaugurate. And while they may have expected talk of battles, victory, and earthly dominion, he instead spoke mainly of hardship, patience, and service. It was not the lesson they wanted, but those who truly loved him would soon realize that it was exactly what they needed to hear.

So, let's take a closer look at that message and the kingdom of which he spoke, as their need continues to be ours as well.

### ***Waiting for the Kingdom***

Matthew references the kingdom of heaven more than thirty times in his Gospel, a sign that it was clearly a point of emphasis for Jesus throughout his ministry. Still, the final



week of Christ's life is where we find his most in-depth teachings on the subject.

Jesus began with a series of instructions regarding what his followers should expect leading up to the final days. Given that they largely thought that his earthly reign was imminent, the talk of tribulation, false prophets, and astrological phenomena must have seemed strange, to say the least. After all, they thought, Christ was about to conquer the Romans and restore Israel to its rightful place as rulers of the known world, and they hadn't seen any of these signs yet.

Their confusion must have only grown as Jesus continued to teach that no one knows the day or hour when the Son of Man's reign will begin. They thought they knew, or at least had a pretty good idea. They'd just risked the wrath of the Romans and their own religious leaders to follow him,

and they stood by him as he repeatedly upended everything they thought they knew about their relationship with God. If he wasn't about to establish his dominion over the earth, why were they risking so much to follow him?

When he went on to describe how they should wait patiently yet expectantly, always living prepared for the final days, it must have further confused and even irritated those who thought that's what the Jewish people had been doing for the better part of six hundred years. This was Christ's inner circle, the ones who should have understood even if no one else did, and still they sat on the side of that mountain confused as ever. So, Jesus concluded his teachings on the subject with a story to help them understand what's truly valuable in his kingdom.

### *Sheep and Goats*

In the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats (Matthew 25:31–46), Christ describes how, in the final judgment, all of humanity will be gathered together and sorted according to the manner in which they served him by serving others. The story was not meant to give an all-encompassing theology of salvation, as Scripture is quite clear that faith in Christ Jesus is the only path to eternity with the Father (John 14:6; Galatians 2:16). Rather, this parable was meant to outline the kind of lives that true believers should live.

Note that both those who inherit the kingdom and those whose final location resides in the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels were surprised by the standards with which they were judged. Those designated for eternity with the Lord did not serve in order to receive or earn that

salvation. Rather, their service was a natural outpouring of their love for Christ. They simply loved those God had placed along their path because they knew it's what Jesus would have done.

For a group of disciples who still quarreled over who would be the greatest among them and who were still so focused on seeing Jesus live up to their expectations, this understanding must have been difficult to accept. Indeed, it wasn't until after Christ was raised from the dead and they reflected on his teaching that they began to grasp all that it entailed.

Eleven of the twelve would go on to model this life and serve as Jesus did. However, it wasn't until they set aside their preconceived notions and embraced what it truly meant to be his disciples that they were able to embody his presence to those around them.

### ***Whom Do You Serve?***

Holy Week offers us an excellent opportunity for reflection and introspection, but the danger is that we spend so much time thinking about Jesus that we forget to serve him. Throughout Acts, the early believers were given the chance to share the gospel because of the way they interacted with the world around them. The religious leaders noted that Peter and John had been with Jesus because they first took the step of helping a poor man who couldn't walk (Acts 3–4). The Lord added to their number daily because every facet of their lives offered a living testament to Christ's continued power and presence in their world (Acts 2:42–47).

What was true for them can be true for us as well. But it has to start by embracing God's kingdom on his terms rather than ours—

placing his concerns above our own and serving those he came to save.

Whose kingdom are you serving today?

# WEDNESDAY

## ***Biblical events:***

- *A day of rest for Jesus*
- *Sanhedrin members meet to discuss how they can kill Jesus*
  - Matthew 26:3–5, Mark 14:1–2, Luke 22:1–2
- *Jesus anointed at Bethany*
  - Matthew 26:6–13, Mark 14:3–9, John 12:2–9
- *Judas meets with the chief priests to plot Jesus' betrayal*
  - Mark 14:10–11

## ***Wednesday: The Plot against Jesus***

Matthew 26:1–5; 14–16

After teaching his disciples about the kingdom of heaven and the values that mattered most, Jesus and the twelve retreated to Bethany for what many scholars have termed “Silent Wednesday.” This is the only day of the week that Christ would not spend time in Jerusalem, and we really don’t know much about what he and his disciples did on this day.

Instead, the Gospel writers tell of the plot hatched by the religious leaders and the help they received from Judas. It’s an aspect of the story we often gloss over, but one that is crucial to truly understanding the manner in which the rest of the week would unfold.

### ***Understanding the Religious Leaders***

Before detailing the actions of the religious leaders, Matthew notes that the last thing Jesus told his disciples was that he would soon be handed over and crucified. While Christ and his followers were nowhere near the chief priests and elders when he said this, the Gospel writer places the statement just before their actions in order to remind us of the context in which their secret meeting at the palace of Caiaphas should be read.

While Passover week was meant to be a celebration, it would not have been a happy time for those in power. Their authority, and especially that of the chief priest, came solely from the good graces of the Romans. Caiaphas had stayed in power far longer than normal because he specialized in keeping the peace, which was the only thing that really mattered to the Empire.

To better understand just how adept he was at maintaining this balance, roughly twenty-eight chief priests would serve over the course of the next thirty years. The Jews ultimately rebelled against Rome in AD 67, and the Holy City and its temple were destroyed a mere three years later. As we can see, Jesus and the unrest he provoked posed a very real threat to the religious leaders' station.

Still, it would be a mistake to characterize the chief priests and elders as selfish individuals looking out solely for themselves. That's often how they're portrayed, but the truth is that most of them were genuinely concerned for the spiritual well-being of their people. They had dedicated their lives to understanding the teachings of the Torah and to helping others stand in a right relationship with God. Their greatest fear, even beyond losing their station, was seeing

Israel fall back into the patterns that had led to their exile some six hundred years before.

Given that Jesus challenged so much of the legal tradition that was intended to keep the Jews from straying too far from the Lord, it was only natural for them to distrust and fear his impact on the people. The tragic truth, of course, is that their defense of the Law placed them in opposition to its author. They had become so preoccupied with serving God that they'd failed to include him in the process. As a result, when he came and dwelt in their midst, they saw him as a foe rather than a friend.

None of their actions, however, can be excused by their intentions or context. They were still guilty of their sins, even if they weren't the evil men many followers of Christ believe them to have been. And by the time we arrive at this point in the life of



Christ, they had set their minds on killing the incarnate God they were pledged to serve.

***Empowered by the One They Sought to Destroy***

Despite the fact that the religious leaders had decided Jesus needed to die for Israel to survive, the chief priests and elders had wisely concluded that they couldn't risk enacting their plan during Passover. Christ's reputation with the people would have made such action far too dangerous. That decision makes the certainty of Jesus regarding his fate in verse 2 quite interesting, however.

You see, one of Matthew's primary purposes in telling the story of Christ's final week was to remove any doubt that Jesus remained in control even as others acted against him. At the same time the religious leaders were deciding that it was too dangerous to kill him,

Jesus was promising his disciples that those leaders were going to do just that. Everything that unfolded this week did so according to God's plan. He knew what would happen in the days ahead and was able to better prepare himself as a result.

When Judas approached the religious leaders to provide them with the necessary opportunity to enact their plans, it must have seemed like a gift from God. In some ways, that was true. The Lord was going to use their fallen and sinful plans to accomplish his perfect will in a manner that only he could. Such was his pattern throughout the Scriptures, and that redemption continues to be a hallmark of his handiwork today as well.

***Used by God One Way or the Other***

C. S. Lewis once said of God, "Whatever you do, He will make good of it. But not the good

He had prepared for you if you had obeyed Him.” The testimony of history continues to be that God can redeem the evil intentions of humanity to accomplish his will despite our objections. However, he would much prefer that we simply adhere to his plans from the start. He can and will bring good from our choices either way, but whether or not we experience that good ourselves is often directly related to whether he accomplishes his will through us or in spite of us.

The religious leaders and their sinful plots played a crucial role in accomplishing God’s plan to redeem all of humanity. Yet they missed out on his blessings because they played their part in opposition to the Lord instead of alongside him.

As we continue in our study of Christ’s final days, let their example serve as a warning that what was true of them can

just as easily be true of us if we presume to know what’s best for God’s kingdom without first asking the king.

Whose will are you trying to accomplish today?

# MAUNDY THURSDAY

## ***Biblical events:***

- *Jesus washes the disciples' feet*
  - Mark 14:10–11
- *Last Supper/Passover meal*
  - Matthew 26:20–30, Mark 14:17–26, Luke 22:14–30
- *Teaching in the Upper Room*
  - John 13
- *Jesus prays in Gethsemane*
  - Matthew 26:36–46, Mark 14:32–42, Luke 22:39–46
- *Jesus is betrayed and arrested (Thursday night/Friday morning)*
  - Matthew 26:47–56, Mark 14:43–52, Luke 22:47–53, John 18:2–12





This is the so-called Upper Room, a medieval structure near the place where Jesus took the Last Supper with his disciples. It was constructed by the Crusaders in the twelfth century as part of the Church of St. Mary of Zion. The site was restored by the Franciscans in the fourteenth century before being converted to a mosque by Muslims in 1524.

Since the establishment of the modern State of Israel in 1948, Christians have been allowed to return to the room for worship. The biblical Upper Room was also the probable location of the Pentecost miracle (Acts 1:13; 2:1).



A first-century sculpture found at this site and incorporated in this pillar. It depicts a pelican allowing her young to eat her flesh and drink her blood. This was a very early symbol for the Lord's Supper (1 Corinthians 11:23–26). The fact that it was discovered in this area lends credibility to the site's historical significance.









This is part of the  
Garden of Gethsemane,  
where Jesus prayed  
and prepared to be  
arrested and crucified.  
“Gethsemane” comes  
from two Hebrew words  
that mean “olive press.”  
Here our Lord chose to  
die for us.



The Eastern Gate of the Old City as seen from the Garden of Gethsemane. The Garden was located on the Mount of Olives, just east of the city. Troops marching by torch light made their way out of the city, down the Kidron Valley, and up the Mount of Olives. Jesus waited there, knowing that he could still turn and flee into the forest and escape. He chose to be arrested, tried, tortured, and crucified to atone for our sins.





## ***Thursday: Jesus Prays in Gethsemane***

Matthew 26:36–46

Christ spent the last day before his arrest and subsequent crucifixion observing Passover with his disciples and laying the final groundwork for the trials to come. It's unclear to what extent his followers could sense that something was wrong, but it seems natural to conclude that they wished they had approached the day differently when looking back on it, especially when it came to their final moments with the Lord. As we'll soon see, it can be easy for us to make the same mistake.

### ***Getting Away to Pray***

After taking the Passover meal with his disciples, Jesus led them outside of town to the Mount of Olives overlooking Jerusalem. It was a place of quiet seclusion, where he could get away simply to be with the Father. That Judas knew to find him there likely indicates that it was also one of Jesus' favorite spots and that he took his disciples there frequently. Prayer was a vital part of Christ's time on earth and something that he tried to share with his followers. This night would be no different.

But before going away to pray, Jesus warned the disciples that they would soon fall away from him. The sense of finality in his statement demonstrates that these were more than idle words of caution. Their reaction, however, reveals that they failed to heed his warning. Instead, as ones who had already

given so much to be with him, they took the notion as a personal affront.

Peter, in particular, fiercely defended his loyalty to the Lord, and it's clear that this was not mere blustering on his part. He'd prepared himself for the trials to come, as he understood them, and proved as much when he attacked the high priest's servant during Christ's arrest (John 18:10). What he wasn't prepared for was to stand with the Lord in his death rather than his glory. Those were the battles of which Jesus warned and the ones he knew they were ill prepared to face. And so, Jesus beseeched the disciples to join him in prayer that they might gain the necessary strength for what lay ahead. Jesus knew that if he needed God's strength, they surely would as well.

### *The Disciples Sleep while Jesus Prays*

Throughout the Gospels, we find examples of Christ's public prayers. This is one of the only times, however, that we get a glimpse into his personal time with his Father. The depiction shows Jesus at his most human, asking simply if there were any way other than the cross to accomplish what needed to be done.

We hear genuine fear and struggle in his words, a sign that even the knowledge of the resurrection was not enough to make the path to the cross an easy one to walk. He was a man in search of solace and in need of a friend. Luke tells us that an angel appeared to him during this prayer and strengthened him, but even that was not enough to prevent him from being in such anguish that "his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground" (Luke 22:44).

Such anguish was further amplified by the fact that Jesus would have spent the final portion of his time in prayer seeing the torchlights of the soldiers as they drew closer with each passing moment. The Mount of Olives offers a clear view of the gates that the group would have used to approach Christ. Given the difficult and thick terrain, it's unlikely they would have made good time. Jesus watched them come, knowing full well that at any point he could run and escape with ease. Words simply cannot express what it must have been like to watch his fate inch steadily closer, knowing full well what was to come if he chose to remain.

And if his circumstances were not already trying enough, his disciples repeatedly fell asleep when he most needed their presence. The first time, he simply warned them again not to waste the chance to receive God's strength. The second time, we're told

that no words were expressed, but simply a look of disappointment that left them speechless (Mark 14:40). The last time, they woke to the torchlights of soldiers, led by one of their own, who had come to take away their Lord.

### ***Don't Sleep on God***

Nothing about the details of this story as found in the Gospels is essential to advancing the basic narrative of Christ's betrayal and arrest. We could understand his path to the cross just as well without them. Clearly, God wanted us to read of Jesus' prayer and the failures of the disciples for a purpose beyond simply understanding how he got to the cross.

The basic truth of these verses is that the disciples failed their Lord when it came time to act because they first failed him when it came time to prepare and pray. If we're

not careful, it can be easy to make the same mistake today.

Most days, we can look around and think we have all the strength we need to face the trials we can see. In many cases, we may be right. Often times, however, the purpose of prayer is to prepare us for the trials that only God knows are coming. Throughout Scripture, we find examples of the Lord using times of peace to ready his people for times of conflict. The instances when they allowed him to do so typically resulted in victory. When they didn't, defeat was all but inevitable.

None of us can know what the future will bring, and it's possible that we'll wake up tomorrow with everything we need to face the day. The only way we can be sure of that is to heed God's call to prayer and preparation while we still have the time to do so. This won't necessarily lessen the pain or hardship

that such trials may bring, but it can help us persevere and overcome them with the same strength and courage shown by our Lord.

Are you ready to face tomorrow?



# GOOD FRIDAY

## ***Biblical events:***

- *Jesus goes before Annas*  
- John 18:13–24
- *Jesus before Caiaphas and part of the Sanhedrin*  
- Matthew 26:57–75, Mark 14:53–72, Luke 22:54–65, John 18:19–24
- *Jesus before the full Sanhedrin*  
- Matthew 27:1–2, Mark 15:1, Luke 22:66–71
- *Jesus before Pilate*  
- Matthew 27:2–14, Mark 15:2–5, Luke 23:1–5
- *Jesus before Herod*  
- Luke 23:6–12
- *Jesus before Pilate again*  
- Matthew 27:15–26, Mark 15:6–15, Luke 23:13–25, John 18:28–19:16
- *Crucifixion*  
- Matthew 27:27–54, Mark 15:16–39, Luke 23:26–49, John 19:16–37
- *Burial*  
- Matthew 27:57–61, Mark 15:42–47, Luke 23:50–54, John 19:38–42



The exterior of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, the site believed by many to be the location of Jesus' crucifixion, burial, and resurrection. Queen Helena, mother of Emperor Constantine, arranged for a church to be built on this site. That structure was damaged by a Persian invasion in AD 614 and destroyed by Muslim authorities in AD 1009.

Crusaders rebuilt the church in 1149, essentially in its current form. Six Christian communities worship here—Catholics, Greeks, Armenians, Coptic Orthodox, Ethiopian Orthodox, and Syriac Orthodox. The church is believed to house Calvary, the "Stone of Anointing" (where Jesus' body was prepared for burial), and his tomb.



The Edicule, a small chapel inside the Holy Sepulchre enclosing what many believe to be Jesus' tomb. Its first room holds the Angel's Stone, thought to be part of the stone that sealed Jesus' tomb. The second room is the tomb itself. To the rear of the Edicule is a rough chamber thought by some to be the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea.



مَهْرَةُ الْمُجَاهِدِينَ الْإِسْلَامِيَّةِ

أَحْمَدُ بْنُ عَبْدِ اللَّهِ بْنِ مُحَمَّدٍ رَسُولِ اللَّهِ



This is known as “Gordon’s Calvary” and is believed by many Protestants to be the place of Jesus’ crucifixion. British Major-General Charles Gordon noticed the site in 1883. A number of ancient tombs had already been discovered in the area; Gordon determined that one could be the tomb of Christ.

We know that Jesus’ death occurred “near the city” (John 19:20) but “outside the gate” (Hebrews 13:12). This site meets both requirements and is believed by many scholars to be the place where our Lord was crucified.

## ***Friday: The Courage of Unlikely Disciples***

John 19:38–42

After his arrest at the hands of the chief priests and elders, Jesus was brought before an illegal tribunal and then taken to the Roman leaders the following morning. Despite repeated efforts to release him, Pilate eventually yielded to the threats and protests of the religious leaders and sentenced Jesus to death.

The narrative of Christ's crucifixion is one that most believers have grown up with, and rightfully so, as it's central to our salvation story. But we often move too quickly from

his death to his resurrection and miss a very important story in between. It's to that passage and the actions of two brave but unlikely disciples that we address our attention today.

### ***The Potential Consequences of their Courage***

To fully understand the courage demonstrated by Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus in this passage, it's necessary first to appreciate the context in which they asked to receive the body of Christ. Both were members of the Jewish council that had condemned Jesus less than twenty-four hours prior to this point. Nicodemus is mentioned only in John's Gospel, but Luke tells us that Joseph had not consented to the Sanhedrin's decision regarding Jesus, and it's safe to assume the same could be said of his partner in the burial of Christ as well.



Still, the Gospels are not clear as to the nature of their dissatisfaction. Neither had been a public follower of Jesus during his life because they feared the other Jewish leaders. While they may not have approved of what the Council did, it's unlikely that they voiced their opposition. Given that trepidation, their actions now illustrate the shift that took place at seeing their Lord wrongly tortured and murdered.

The decision to go to Pilate was unlikely to remain a private one. Both knew that by taking this step, their fellow religious leaders would learn that they desired to show respect to the man who had been the enemy of their compatriots. Getting rid of Joseph and Nicodemus would have seemed a small task compared to what they had just achieved in orchestrating the murder of Jesus. They risked, at a minimum, their place on the council and, more likely their lives, to show

their Lord the respect in death that they should have afforded him in life.

The potential for judgment by the other religious leaders would only be an issue, however, if they survived long enough to face it. In going to Pilate to request the body of Jesus, they essentially demonstrated their loyalty to a man just executed as an insurrectionist, the most serious of crimes one could commit in the eyes of Roman leaders. While Pilate's hesitancy to crucify Christ likely gave Joseph some hope that Pilate would not do the same to him, Joseph could not have known that when he made the request. He was still telling the man in charge of keeping the peace in the Empire's most combustible city that he served and respected a man killed as an enemy of the state.

### *What is True Courage?*

Joseph and Nicodemus offer us the chance to examine the question of what it truly means to be courageous. As described, neither man showed the conviction to serve Jesus publicly during his life and ministry. Yet they were part of a very small group that showed the courage to serve him in his death. Do their later actions compensate for their former?

The truth is that sometimes it takes a moment of difficulty to serve as the catalyst for change. During their lives, both Joseph and Nicodemus served the Lord in secret because it was possible to do so. The cross, however, made such passive discipleship impossible. If they continued to stand with the council, they stood against Jesus. If they stood with Jesus, it likely put an end to their religious careers. When pressed to make the choice, they chose Christ.

Martin Luther King Jr. once noted, “The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy.” Joseph and Nicodemus demonstrated the measure of their courage when circumstances required it most.

### *The Measure of Our Courage Today*

The cross of Christ continues to be an inflection point for would-be disciples of Jesus. Many are willing to follow the Lord when the consequences for doing so are nominal. When we reach the point that it becomes impossible to serve in secret, or when we have to endure real risks for doing so, the measure of our discipleship becomes clear.

Joseph and Nicodemus offer an important example of how our past commitment doesn't have to define our relationship with

God going forward. History remembers both men fondly because they had the courage to stand for Christ when few others did. The same can be true of us today as well.

Whatever the history of your commitment to the Lord may be, Easter offers us an excellent time to reevaluate the degree to which we're willing to be courageous in the pursuit of God's will. This side of heaven, there will always be time to offer Christ the same commitment he made to each of us on that fateful Friday nearly two thousand years ago.

Will you?

HOLY SATURDAY

## ***Saturday: Disciples Hide in Fear and Mourning***

Yesterday, we examined the courage shown by Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus following the death of Jesus. Their decision to step out of the shadows and demonstrate their public commitment to Christ should challenge us to examine the degree to which we're willing to stand for our Lord in difficult times.

Today, we're going to examine the reaction of another group who failed in comparison to those two men. While Scripture doesn't give us any details about what occurred on the Saturday following Christ's death, the actions of the remaining eleven disciples on Friday, and the state in which they were found on

Sunday morning, paint a rather clear picture. So, let's take a look at their actions, or lack thereof, and the grace available to each of us when we fall short.

### ***Broken Men***

When we last saw the disciples as a group, they were with Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. When the soldiers came to arrest him, Christ asked that his disciples be left alone (John 18:8). His captors complied, and most of the disciples turned to flee just in case the soldiers changed their minds. Peter and John would eventually follow Jesus back to the meeting place of the council, though doing so was hardly an example of courage on the part of Peter, as he would deny any affiliation with Jesus three times that night, just as Christ predicted.

John was the only disciple, along with several of the women, to be present at the foot of the cross. The rest were presumably hiding in fear and mourning, knowing that the courage they had pledged on Thursday failed them when they needed it most (Mark 14:31).

It would be easy to criticize the disciples for their reaction to the crucifixion of Christ. After all, he'd repeatedly stated that his death would not be the end, but rather, that he would rise again shortly thereafter. Still, they'd seen Jesus raise others from the dead, but surely he couldn't raise himself. No, the man they'd left their homes, families, and businesses behind to follow for the past three years was dead. There would be no glorious revolution against the Romans, no restoration of Israel, and no places of honor for them. Their hopes and dreams for a better future had died alongside Jesus, and all they could think to do was sit and mourn.

If we were in their shoes, would our reactions be any different?

Brokenness was only natural given all they'd experienced, and it was amplified by the questions of whether or not things could have been different if they'd simply had the courage to act when the time came. Fortunately, they would soon get a second chance, and the story of Acts is filled with examples of how they would not make the same mistake twice.

### ***Redemption Requires Something to Redeem***

While the disciples' redemption story would not begin until Sunday, we can't fully appreciate all that God accomplished through them without first understanding all that had to be redeemed. When we looked at the story of Joseph and Nicodemus yesterday,



we saw a glimpse of what can happen when people find the courage to act on behalf of the Lord. The remaining eleven disciples offer us a similar and just as powerful example of that truth.

One of the best things about the Bible is its ability to speak to everyone in one way or another. All of us will experience times when an example of the redemption we need to experience can be found in either Joseph and Nicodemus or the eleven remaining disciples.

For some of us, little about our lives demonstrated a commitment to Christ until a moment of decision came and we rose to meet the challenge. When it did, our faith crystalized and left us with a point of reference to which we could return when future challenges or the day-to-day affairs of life threatened that commitment. For others, our dedication was absolute

during the moments when living for Christ was simple. Apathy wasn't necessarily our problem, but we fell away in times of trial or when that once smooth path grew a bit rocky. Such failures can cause us to question whether or not we were truly committed in the first place, and rightfully so. After all, the crowds who shouted "Crucify him! Crucify him!" on Friday included many of the same people who had shouted "Hosanna!" only a few days prior. However, the example of the disciples proves that no amount of failure can ever place us beyond the reach of God's redemption.

### ***Finding Ourselves in the Story***

The truth is that most of us will go through periods of life where our commitment wavers. Sometimes this will be the result of our circumstances and the challenges that arise simply by living in this fallen world. Yet, even the blessings of life can be twisted to

draw us further away from God when they cause us to forget just how much we need him. Scripture is replete with examples that demonstrate how apathy is often the natural state of our walk with the Lord.

But whatever the cause may be, the examples of the thirteen men we've examined over the last two days demonstrate that our commitment to God is only as good as the present moment. Our past dedication, for better or worse, will never determine our present devotion. Whether this fact strikes you as good news or bad today, take heart in the fact that God stands ready to help you provide an example to others of what it truly looks like to follow him.

Your redemption story is always at hand. Will you embrace it?

# EASTER SUNDAY

## ***Biblical events:***

- *Empty tomb discovered*
  - Matthew 28:1–8, Mark 16:1–8, Luke 24:1–12
- *Resurrection appearances*
  - Matthew 28:9–20, Luke 24, John 20:1–21:25

The exterior of the Garden Tomb, believed by many to be the site of Jesus' burial and resurrection. This tomb was cut into solid bedrock. A Byzantine church was later built on the site, expanding the door and changing the front wall. The trough in front would have contained the stone originally rolled over the doorway.

In 1924, an ancient winepress was discovered near the tomb, evidence that the area was once the garden of a wealthy person. Three cisterns were also discovered, one with a capacity of 200,000 gallons. Many scholars believe that this site matches every biblical description of the place where our Lord was buried and raised from the dead.













The interior of the Garden Tomb, believed to be the place where Jesus' crucified body was laid. After Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea prepared his body for burial (John 19:38–42), it would have been placed vertically in the opening on the left. The Byzantine cross painted on the wall includes Greek letters signifying the words “Jesus Christ, Alpha Omega.”

This would be the room seen by Peter and John after his resurrection (John 20:1–10). Many scholars believe that it was from this room that Jesus rose from the dead as our Lord and Savior. As more than a billion Christians will proclaim today,

"HE IS  
RISEN!  
HE IS  
RISEN  
INDEED!"

## ***Easter Sunday: The Guards Report***

Matthew 28:11–15

Choosing a single aspect of Easter Sunday to examine is difficult, to say the least. All that Jesus accomplished on this day is so fundamentally important to the heart of the gospel message that it almost feels wrong to leave any element out.

However, in keeping with our attempts to examine aspects of the story that often go overlooked, I'd like to turn our attention today to an event found only in Matthew's Gospel: the report by the guards stationed at Christ's tomb. Few passages offer as profound a demonstration for the legitimacy of the Christian message as these five verses, and it's worth taking a moment to remind ourselves of why it's so reasonable

to believe in the risen Christ and all that his new life entails. At the same time, these verses and the example of the chief priests also offer a sobering reminder that we often continue to make their mistakes today.

### ***A Questionable Tale***

If Christ's resurrection were not real, the easiest way to debunk the myth would be to simply bring his body out of the tomb. As such, it's important to note that in all their attempts to counter the gospel message, neither the Jews nor the Romans ever challenged the reality that Jesus' body was missing when Sunday morning came. In fact, the religious leaders were sufficiently aware of Christ's claims of resurrection prior to his death that they stationed guards outside the tomb to prevent the disciples from making any attempts to steal the body and perpetuate such a rumor.

Following the resurrection, the first thing these soldiers did was to report the events to the chief priests. We'll examine the implications of that action for the religious leaders shortly, but it's worth noting the unlikelihood that the report given by the soldiers included them waking up to simply find an empty tomb. That was the story they devised, and if they wanted to discount the truth of Easter Sunday, then it's one of the few that could seem even remotely plausible. However, when considering all that would have had to take place for the disciples to steal the body, it quickly becomes far-fetched and desperate.

To start, the disciples would have had to find the courage to potentially fight armed soldiers in order to retrieve the dead body of a man they'd abandoned at his hour of need, only to then propagate a rumor that placed them directly in the crosshairs of the Jewish leaders and Roman government they

so greatly feared. While that's possible, it's hardly in keeping with the behavior we might expect, given their actions to this point.

Next, these formerly terrified men would have had to roll away a stone so sizable that the three women who first approached the tomb that morning were certain they would be unable to budge it (Mark 16:3). However large this stone may have been, removing it was unlikely to be a quiet endeavor. That it could have been cleared without waking the soldiers is difficult to believe.

Finally, the chief priests instructed the soldiers to say that it was Christ's disciples who had stolen the body while they were sleeping, yet how could they know the identity of the thieves if they'd been asleep at the time? The explanation reveals the desperation of those who, even when faced with the truth of Christ's resurrection, refused to believe. And while it is

easy and justified to criticize their decision to do so, a closer look at their reasons might reveal that we also make similarly flawed choices in our commitment to the Lord.

### ***Choosing to Believe a Lie***

The religious leaders had dedicated years to undermining Christ's ministry. As he grew in popularity and influence, their fears of what he might bring about grew as well and resulted in an illegal plot to kill him. Imagine their desperation now that a mere three days after their perceived victory, they came face-to-face with evidence that they'd made a mistake. Try to fathom how crushing that must have been, how their minds must have raced in an effort to make sense of it all. Could Jesus really have been the Messiah? Could all the things he'd claimed be true? Had they been responsible for murdering God's Chosen One?

Such thoughts and questions would have to wait, though, as concealing these rumors was a far more pressing matter. Even if Jesus was who he claimed to be, the threat he posed to the Jewish people hadn't changed. He could still instigate a disastrous rebellion against the Romans. He could still lead people away from the only Law that could keep them close to God. If anything, his threat had only increased now that word would begin to circulate that he was alive. The future of their people hung in the balance, and it was up to the religious leaders to ensure Israel's physical and spiritual survival.

Can you begin to understand how such thoughts might have clouded the truth of the resurrection? How, even when faced with such seemingly irrefutable evidence that Jesus was the Messiah, they could double down on their mistakes?

### *Seeing Ourselves in the Chief Priests*

The truth is that few of us are good at honestly assessing our faults. When presented with evidence that we're in the wrong, most of us grow defensive and look for ways to shift the blame or cling to even the smallest sliver of hope that we could still be right. In so doing, we place barriers in the way of our growth and maturation as followers of Christ.

Ultimately, we'll never become the people God created us to be if we can't own our shortcomings and seek help from the One who knows exactly how to move us forward.

Easter is a time to celebrate the fact that God conquered sin and death to redeem us and offer a path to restored communion with him. It's also a time, however, to remember that his work in us is far from complete. Salvation is the start of our journey back to God, not the end,

and, on this side of heaven, we will always live in tension between our old and new lives.

As C. S. Lewis notes, "No creature that deserved redemption would need to be redeemed . . . Christ died for men precisely because men are not worth dying for; to make them worth it." So, the next time you come face-to-face with the fact that we're all still far from perfect, don't double down on your mistakes by attempting to justify or explain them away. Rather, embrace the chance to be proven wrong and rejoice at the opportunity to grow as a result.

That's what Christ's first followers did, and the results "turned the world upside down" in short order (Acts 17:6).

Will the same be said of us?





Nearly two thousand years ago, a Galilean carpenter rode a donkey into the city of Jerusalem. Human history has never been the same.

What happened during the eight days from Palm Sunday through Easter Sunday sparked the mightiest spiritual movement the world has ever seen. The resurrection of Jesus Christ transformed the lives of his followers, empowered their proclamation of his gospel, and “turned the world upside down” (Acts 17:6).

Today, more than two billion people around the world proclaim Jesus Christ as their Lord. *The Week That Changed the World* is your invitation to join them. He is risen indeed!

“HUMAN  
HISTORY  
HAS NEVER  
BEEN THE  
SAME”



[denisonforum.org](http://denisonforum.org)