

LOOKING TO JESUS

— A 31-DAY DEVOTIONAL —



INTRODUCTION

Looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, is the first step to receiving new life in him (Heb. 12:2). As you prepare your heart for Easter, there is no better way than to look to Jesus.

In this 31-day series, follow Jesus's journey to the cross through all four Gospels, and look to him to learn what it means to follow Jesus as his disciple.

From the triumphal entry into Jerusalem to the empty tomb on Easter morning, this series traces the path that Jesus and his disciples walked. These events and teaching from Jesus show us the heart of Christian faith, and guide our own paths.

By walking alongside Jesus on his journey to the cross, we will see more clearly what Jesus has done for us and what it looks like to follow him.

Practical and accessible, this series will help you look to Jesus again in Lent and Easter.

DAY 1

Read: Hebrews 12:1-3

Running Where Jesus Ran

Looking to Jesus . . . (v. 2)

Where do you look when you're running? You could look behind you, where you've already run, but if you do, you might trip. You could look to the side at the sights around you, or even down at your feet, but you might bump into someone or something. The best place is to keep your eyes on the path, where you are headed. Then you can run well.

In the book of Hebrews, we are invited to run with our eyes fixed on Jesus. He is the "pioneer and perfecter of [our] faith" (v. 2 NIV). The race marked out for us as believers is a path Jesus has already run. His path was difficult, including death and resurrection, but Jesus fixed his eyes on "the joy that was set before him" (v. 2). There are no promises that walking as a disciple of Jesus will be easy, but he went ahead of us to show us the way. Christians are to fix their eyes on Jesus and consider how he ran his race so when we encounter suffering or hostility because of Jesus, we will not "grow weary or fainthearted" (v. 3).

In order to run like Jesus, we need to fix our eyes on him. For the next month, all the way until Easter, we will be focusing on the last week of Jesus's life, the journey to the cross. The hope is that with our eyes on him, we will not give up or quit following him (v. 3).

As you pray, ask Jesus to help you fix your eyes on him.

DAY 2

Read: Matthew 16:21-26

Take Up Your Cross

Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. (v. 24 NIV)

What does it look like to follow Jesus? Peter was confident he knew how to follow Jesus. Chosen and called to follow Jesus (Matt. 4:19), Peter had spent every waking moment with him. When Jesus asked the disciples, “Who do you say I am?” Peter said boldly, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” (16:15-16). In response, Jesus proclaimed that Peter’s confession would form the foundation of the church. However, for all that Peter thought he knew, he often missed the mark. Right after Peter’s declaration that Jesus was the Messiah, Jesus told his disciples where his path would lead: to Jerusalem, where he would suffer, die, and then rise again after three days.

Peter refused to accept it. He took Jesus aside to correct him: “This shall never happen to you” (v. 22). But Jesus rebuked him: “Get behind me, Satan!” Peter’s words weren’t from God but reflected merely human concerns (v. 23). When we choose to follow Jesus, we’ll need to deny ourselves and take up our cross (v. 24) too. This is the only way to save our life. We can gain everything else, but if we don’t follow Jesus all the way, that gain is actually loss (vv. 25-26).

Following Jesus is not a path up to power, fame, wealth, security, or success. Instead, it’s a path downward in humility. This month, we’ll follow the path Jesus walked and learn how to take up our cross too.

As you pray, ask Jesus to help you take up your cross and follow him.

DAY 3

Read: Mark 14:1-11

Prepared for Burial

She has done a beautiful thing to me. (v. 6)

Sometime during the meal, a woman came in. She brought a bottle of perfume, likely the most valuable item she owned, worth up to a year's wages. She took it, broke the jar, and poured it on Jesus's head (v. 3). Those gathered with Jesus looked at her action and said, "Why was the ointment wasted like that?" (v. 4).

What the world calls waste, Jesus calls beautiful. The woman recognized that Jesus was most important. If she had only one jar to give, only one precious thing to pour out, only one life to live, she was going to give it to Jesus. There were many good, decent, or right ways to use her perfume, but she saw Jesus and knew there was only one best thing: Jesus himself. She broke the jar, poured it out, and Jesus called it beautiful.

Jesus also called it beautiful because she prepared Jesus for his burial. "She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for burial" (v. 8). Nard is a powerful, fragrant perfume. Song of Songs mentions nard in describing the love between the bride and the groom (1:12). This intensely aromatic, heady scent would have lingered in Jesus's hair and on his skin for days to come. So as Jesus headed toward his burial, he could take in a deep breath and be constantly reminded of who he was doing this for. Everything Jesus endured in the next few days, he did for the love of his bride, the church.

As you pray, thank Jesus for loving you enough to endure everything for you.

DAY 4

Read: Matthew 21:1-11

Triumphal Entry

Hosanna to the Son of David! (v. 9)

As people lined the streets, throwing their cloaks on the ground before Jesus, they cried out, “Hosanna!” which means, “Lord, save us!” As much as it was praise, it was also a deep cry from the gut. A cry for everything wrong to finally be set right, for everything lost to finally be found, for everything broken to finally be made whole. They cried out for a king who would save them.

As Jesus enters Jerusalem to shouts of Hosanna, he both confirms our hopes and defies our expectations. The church’s normal title for this story is the “Triumphal Entry.” Jesus enters like a king and receives recognition and praise. Jesus is King. He is the king who God promised. However, his entry into Jerusalem was anything but triumphant. He came “humble, and mounted on a donkey” (v. 5, quoting Zech. 9:9). Jesus’s arrival in Jerusalem proclaimed him as King, yet not through a display of power, but humility. Jesus is God’s answer to the cry of “Hosanna!” yet not in the way we expect.

Jesus is the king who comes to the people, comes to those crying out for deliverance. But he comes in humility, not as a conqueror. Jesus comes not to drive out the Romans, not to fix the world by force, but to save it by his sacrifice. Jesus entered Jerusalem not to conquer, but to lay down his life on the cross to forgive our sins.

Holy Week begins with shouts of “Hosanna!”—with the cry for salvation. It’s a cry that’s answered in Jesus.

As you pray, ask Jesus to help you receive him as King.

DAY 5

Read: Mark 11:15-19

Cleansing the Temple

He entered the temple and began to drive out those who sold. (v. 15)

The temple was designed to be a space for people to meet with God. However, when Jesus entered the temple, what did he find?

It was already full. Jesus entered the space created especially for his presence and found it already full. It was already cluttered with money changers, buying and selling animals for sacrifice. Not only was there no room for Jesus—no room for the presence of the King—but this crowded temple court was the Gentile court where outsiders could come and worship. And there was no room. No room for the outsider, no room for the presence of the King in that space.

So Jesus cleaned house. When Jesus entered the space designed for him, he was incredibly disruptive. He flipped tables, drove out merchants, and refused to let people carry merchandise through the temple. He took what hindered, what distracted, what got in the way of deep fellowship with him (for both Jews and Gentiles) and removed it. In cleansing the temple, Jesus himself was making it possible to more fully embrace the King.

What keeps you from worshipping Jesus? This Lent, instead of resisting, maybe we should invite Jesus to do this disruptive work. Let him cleanse and fill the space that was created just for fellowship with him. Let him remove what clutters our hearts and lives so that we can love our God and our neighbor.

As you pray, ask Jesus to come and cleanse you so you can be filled with his presence.

DAY 6

Read: Mark 12:28-34

The Greatest Commandment

Which commandment is the most important of all? (v. 28)

Have you ever walked up to a group of people in the middle of a conversation? It can take a while to catch up. You hear them talking about someone or some event, but because they're already in the conversation, they know just what they're talking about it. How long would it be before you felt you understood enough to start speaking? You'd have to listen for a while to get enough clues to understand.

Jesus's ministry began in the middle of a theological conversation. There are hundreds of commands in the law of God. For centuries, Jewish teachers had debated which was the greatest and most important. There was universal agreement on the greatest commandment—love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength (Mark 12:30; see Deut. 6:5). However, there was significant disagreement on which commandment ranked second. Some argued for keeping the Sabbath (Exod. 20:8-11), while others argued for loving your neighbor (Lev. 19:18). So, when asked which commandment is greatest, Jesus was invited to join a centuries-old conversation.

When asked to get to the heart of God's law, Jesus turned to two commands to love: we are to love God above all else and with all that we are, and we should love our neighbors. Those who heard Jesus's answer saw the wisdom in him. Though Jesus entered the conversation as it was going, he spoke the truth. When we consider the heart of what God requires from us, we do well to hear these words of Jesus.

As you pray, ask Jesus to help you to love God and your neighbor.

DAY 7

Read: Luke 20:20-26

Give to Caesar

Whose image and inscription are on it? (v. 24 NIV)

For decades, our coins in Canada all had a picture of Queen Elizabeth II on them. Quarter, nickel, or dime, all displayed the queen's face. With the coronation of King Charles III, we have had to mint new coins with the king's face. Every new coin will have the image of the king on it.

Roman coins were no different. Those who hated Jesus sent spies to trap him by asking him a question about paying taxes to the hated Romans. If Jesus said they should not pay, the spies could report Jesus to the governor and get him arrested. If Jesus said the people should pay taxes, he would lose credibility with his followers. Jesus cleverly avoided this trap by asking for a coin. The coin would have had Caesar's face—his image—on it. In Jesus's teaching, those coins belonged to Caesar because they were made in his image and likeness. But humans—you and I—we are made in God's image and likeness. We can give our coins to the emperor, but not ourselves, because we belong to God. Jesus answers the question about taxes by pointing to a deeper truth—you ultimately belong to God, not Caesar.

You were made in God's image. You have relationships and jobs and responsibilities that may rightly demand some things from you, but only God can demand your whole self. Caesar can take his due (Rom. 13:7), but don't give to Caesar what belongs to God. Give your life to the one you belong to.

As you pray, ask Jesus to help you to give yourself to him.

DAY 8

Read: John 13:31-35

Love One Another

By this all people will know that you are my disciples. (v. 35)

How would the people around you know that you believe in Jesus? Is it by what you wear—a cross necklace or Christian T-shirt? Will it be by the music you listen to? Or by the bumper stickers on your car or the signs on your lawn? How would someone know you're a follower of Jesus?

Jesus himself gives us the answer: if you love one another. After Judas left to betray Jesus, Jesus turned to his disciples and said he didn't have much time left. He'd go where they couldn't go: to the cross, resurrection, and ascension. The disciples went wherever Jesus went, but not there. Then Jesus gave them a commandment that holds true for all his disciples throughout the ages: "Just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another" (v. 34). We have been loved by Jesus and we must show Christlike love to our brothers and sisters in Christ. Following this command demonstrates to the world that we're Jesus's disciples (v. 35). Here's the test: do we love one another?

How will people know you believe in Jesus? It won't be by what you wear, what you eat, or your social media profile, but by how you love your brothers and sisters in Christ. If we slander, mistreat, or hate our fellow Christians, our lives proclaim that we don't really know Jesus. But if we love as he loves, then everyone will know we're his disciples.

As you pray, ask Jesus to help you love others as he has loved you.

DAY 9

Read: Luke 20:9-19

The Vineyard

I will send my beloved son; perhaps they will respect him. (v. 13)

Setting the table for dinner, I called upstairs for my son to come down. After calling three times, I sent my daughter to get him. He didn't listen when I called, but I hoped he would listen when my daughter came up the stairs to get him.

Jesus told a parable of a man who planted a vineyard. Throughout the Old Testament, God used this image for Israel. They were the vine and vineyard of God. Israel's leaders were those entrusted with tending God's vineyard. In Jesus's parable, harvest time comes and the owner wants his fair share. He sends first one slave, then another, then another, but all of them are rejected, beaten, and cast out. Those trusted to work the vineyard don't respect those the owner sent. Despite repeated attempts, the vineyard owner reasons that perhaps they'll listen if he sends his beloved son. But the workers see this instead as an opportunity to kill the owner's heir and seize the inheritance for themselves. Jesus concludes the parable with the promise that the owner will return in judgment upon the workers. Jesus's hearers were shocked at the parable. They understood immediately that the servants sent repeatedly by the owner were the prophets, who had consistently been rejected by Israel's leadership.

When God sent his Son, those in leadership did not receive him but viewed him as a threat. They saw his coming as an opportunity to seize the vineyard for themselves. God has sent his Son, Jesus, for us. How have we received him?

As you pray, ask Jesus to help you receive him.

DAY 10

Read: Matthew 22:1-14

The Wedding Banquet

Everything is ready. Come to the wedding feast. (v. 4)

What's the best meal you've ever eaten? My guess is you didn't pick your favorite meal based solely upon taste. Unforgettable meals often involve friends, family, fun, and good food. The best meals are filled with love, fellowship, and joy.

In this parable, Jesus compares the kingdom of heaven to a wedding feast. The invitation to the kingdom of God is an invitation to a meal of fellowship with the King. Jesus's call to repentance—to turn around and face God—is a call to joy. This is why Jesus's message is called “good news”!

Many are invited—the list is long and made completely by grace. But in this parable, we see a double invitation—those who receive it must accept the invitation and show up when the call comes. When we hear the good news, we are invited to say yes to Jesus. We are called to respond in faith. But the Christian life doesn't end there. That's where it begins.

When the King calls, when invitation to discipleship and joy gets personal, that's when we must drop whatever we're doing and go where the King says, wherever he calls us to go. We're called to a life of joy where the King and his kingdom changes, sanctifies, and shapes every area of our life. Faith that says, “Yes, I want to come to the party” is faith that shows up when the King calls.

As you pray, thank Jesus for his invitation to the heavenly banquet.

DAY 11

Read: Matthew 25:1-13

Are You Ready?

The wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. (v. 4)

Jewish weddings in the first century were celebrations for the whole community. At one point, the groom would come at night to the bride's house to bring her to their new home. It was the bridesmaids' job to meet the groom and escort the bride, carrying torches to light the way. These bridesmaids knew the groom would come, but not exactly when. They had to be ready to light their torches whenever the announcement came. To be unprepared would have deeply insulted both the bride and the groom.

The difference between the wise and foolish virgins in the parable was not that they fell asleep but that one was prepared and the other was not. The foolish assumed the wait wouldn't be long, so they just had to bring their lamps. The wise knew the bridegroom might be delayed, so they were prepared with enough oil.

There will be a wedding at the end of all things. At that point, it'll be too late to get ready, too late for repentance and faith. When the virgins fell asleep, they were either ready for the bridegroom to come or not. At his coming, it was too late. For the foolish, the door was shut and they heard, "Truly, I say to you, I do not know you" (v. 12). When we die, we must be ready. When the dead are raised at the last day, it will be too late to go looking for oil, too late to turn to God in repentance and faith. Are you ready?

As you pray, ask Jesus to make you ready and eager for his return.

DAY 12

Read: Matthew 25:14-30

Talents

I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. (v. 25)

Why do we serve God? Is it duty or thankfulness? Is it love? Is it fear? A little of all of them? Our reason for serving is rooted in what we believe to be true about God's character.

Jesus told a parable involving three slaves. Their master had trusted them with his property while he was away. They were each given different amounts of money, but all were enormous amounts. One "talent" was roughly 15 years' wages for a day laborer. When the master returned, two of the slaves had doubled what was entrusted to them. However, the third had buried the money in the ground and done nothing with it. Both the first two slaves were commended, but the last one was berated. Why? The first two slaves were trustworthy (v. 21, 23), but the last slave was afraid (v. 25). The first slaves were not praised for savvy investments but for being faithful with what they were given. The last slave was afraid of the master. He didn't lose any money, but his strategy was based upon fear. That fear kept him from using what he had been given for the sake of his master.

Why do we serve God? If we serve out of fear, we'll always hold back and be tempted to take God's gifts and bury them in the ground. However, if our service is rooted in faithfulness, we trust in God's kindness and use all we have and all we are for his glory.

As you pray, ask Jesus to help you serve out of love, not fear.

DAY 13

Read: Matthew 25:31-46

Sheep and Goats

He will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left. (v. 33)

Sheep are followers, but goats go their own way. In John 10, Jesus says sheep hear the voice of the shepherd and “follow him” (vv. 3-4). Sheep don’t have to be the smartest or the craftiest animals. They simply trust their shepherd and listen to him, knowing he’ll guard and take care of them. We’re to be like sheep.

Goats are another story. Goats aren’t known for listening or for following. Goats think they know the best way themselves. They will chew anything, climb over anything, go anywhere they think they can.

In Matthew 25, Jesus compares his return in glory to a shepherd separating sheep from goats (vv. 31-33). The proof, the visible evidence, of whether someone is a sheep or a goat is seen in how they treat the weak, the hungry, and the outsider. Jesus says that how we treat them is how we treat him. To reject or neglect such people is to reject or neglect him. Whether we welcome the stranger or not will be evidence of whether we truly welcome Jesus or not (vv. 34-46). This is what Jesus says to us.

Sheep follow the shepherd, but goats go their own way. Jesus is on the move toward the weak, the poor, the outcast, the naked, the imprisoned. Discipleship is following Jesus. Don’t be a sheep because you are afraid of being a goat, although the judgment is real. Be a sheep near Jesus that follows him.

As you pray, ask Jesus to lead you like a shepherd.

DAY 14

Read: John 13:1-17

Foot Washing

He poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet. (v. 5)

Do you make sure to wash your hands before dinner? Most of the time, you probably wash your own hands. However, in the ancient world, it was customary to wash your feet before a meal. People walked on the dusty roads and their feet were filthy. When you entered a house, the host would ask one of the servants to wash the guests' feet.

Yet, when Jesus celebrated the Passover with his disciples, he did not ask a servant to wash their feet. Instead, Jesus got up from the table, took off his robe, tied a towel around his waist, poured water into a basin, and began to wash his disciples' feet (vv. 3-5). Jesus—their teacher and master—took on the lowest position of foot washer, the role of a servant. Peter was scandalized and refused. When Jesus insisted, Peter went in the opposite direction and asked that Jesus wash all of him. Jesus patiently continued to wash their feet (vv. 6-10). When he finished, he explained what he had done. Although he was their superior, he didn't insist on a higher position or the role of honor but humbled himself to do the work they'd think was beneath them. In doing so, he set them an example to follow (vv. 12-17).

Jesus shows us that greatness is found in humility. Though he has the name that's above every name (Phil. 2:9), Jesus humbled himself and calls his disciples to follow him in this path of humble service.

As you pray, ask Jesus to teach you to walk in his humble way.

DAY 15

Read: John 14:1-7

I Am the Way

I will come again and will take you to myself. (v. 3)

Jesus left for a purpose. The disciples were troubled. They couldn't understand why Jesus was leaving. Yet, Jesus told them that he was leaving for their good (and ours) to prepare a place for them (and us) in heaven, and he went to be the way to get there (vv. 1-3).

It's like we're each lost in a dense forest. Everyone is trying to find their way out of the woods, but we only get more lost than when we began. Cut by brambles and exhausted, we easily take false trails that lead us nowhere. Then the owner of the house on the far side of the forest comes, cuts a path through the forest, finds us, and then leads the way through the woods to his house. "If I go and prepare a place for you," Jesus said, "I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also" (v. 3).

Jesus not only prepares the house for our arrival, but he brings us there himself. "I am the way, and the truth, and the life," Jesus asserted. "No one comes to the Father except through me" (v. 6). Jesus entered heaven because we couldn't get there ourselves. He cut his way into the thick, dense woods of our world and opened the way for us into the Father's house.

Our hearts do not need to be troubled. For although Jesus has indeed gone away, he has gone ahead to be our way into the Father's house.

As you pray, thank Jesus for making a way for you into the Father's house.

DAY 16

Read: John 14:25-29

Sending the Spirit

The Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things. (v. 26)

I once ran a 5K race. I trained, but as someone who isn't a natural runner, I hated almost every minute. I was slow and miserable. However, when I turned the final corner toward the finish line, there were people lining the street to cheer on the runners. Suddenly, instead of hobbling, I picked up the pace. I managed to run well for those last several hundred meters because of their encouragement.

In the ancient world, those people gathered on the street cheering the runners were known as advocates. To his followers, Jesus made no secret that he was leaving. He was going to be glorified (on the cross). He was going to the Father (in the ascension). However, Jesus promised that when he went to the Father, the Father would send the Holy Spirit as an Advocate in his name. The Holy Spirit would teach the disciples everything Jesus said and remind them what he had told them (v. 26), but would also be their encourager. The Spirit would come alongside the disciples (actually filling them) so that they could continue in the way of Jesus.

All disciples of Jesus are running a race. We are all called to move in the way of Jesus. Though Jesus has left earth to go to the Father, he has not left us alone. He has sent the Holy Spirit so that we can “run with endurance the race that is set before us” (Heb. 12:1).

As you pray, ask God to fix your eyes on Jesus and fill you with his Spirit.

DAY 17

Read: John 15:1-11

I Am the Vine

I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. (v. 5)

A windstorm left tree branches strewn across my yard. What would happen if I took one of those broken branches and planted it in the ground? Would it grow? No! The branch had been broken and cut off from the tree, its source of life, and could not live anymore.

“I am the vine,” Jesus said to his disciples, “you are the branches” (v. 5). It’s only by being attached to Jesus Christ, by being united with him in an intimate and live-giving connection, that we can do anything at all. In Christ—in relationship to Christ—we have life, but apart from him is only death. As a branch is nothing but a dead stick apart from the vine, we’re nothing but dead wood apart from relationship to Jesus Christ (v. 6). In the vine—in Jesus Christ—there’s life. Apart from him, we can do nothing. We live because he lives. We live nourished by the vine.

God joins us to Jesus Christ by the Spirit. He prunes our hearts and lives, all so that we can bear fruit for the glory of God (vv. 2, 8). When we belong to Jesus Christ, when we’ve been united to him, the true vine, our lives will begin to show evidence of it. Not only will we no longer love sin, but we’ll begin to love God, his righteousness, and seek to live in thankfulness.

As you pray, ask Jesus to make you abide in him and bear fruit.

DAY 18

Read: Mark 14:17-25

Body Broken for You

Take; this is my body. (v. 22)

Growing up I always wanted to be like one of the disciples—until I started to read the Gospels more. The disciples were a mess most of the time. They squabbled and missed the point. But Jesus didn't give up on them. They were weak misfits, and they struggled with doubts. But Jesus called them anyway.

At the heart of this passage is what is known as the Last Supper, the Passover meal that Jesus ate with his disciples (vv. 22-24). Jesus took bread, broke it, and gave it to the same disciples who would betray, run away, and deny him a few hours later. Jesus took a cup and drank it with the disciples—Judas and Levi, Peter and Thomas, and the rest.

When Jesus gave them the bread and the cup, he told them that he was giving them himself. Jesus knew them better than they knew themselves, and still he gave himself to them, gave himself for them. He broke bread with the weak and foolish, with the runners and deniers, even with the betrayer himself. He shared a cup with them, not because of anything good or righteous or laudable in them, but because of his great love for them. They were welcomed because of his grace and love and compassion.

What a stunning enactment of the gospel. Jesus the beautiful, the worthy, the holy, the righteous, the perfect Son of God, eating with them, with us. Today, I know that I am like the disciples—an ordinary person, accepted and loved by God.

As you pray, thank Jesus for giving himself to you and for you.

DAY 19

Read: Matthew 26:26-29

Blood Poured Out

. . . poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. (v. 28)

Centuries before that Last Supper, God's people had lived under oppressive slavery in Egypt. God sent Moses and did mighty wonders to break the power of Pharaoh (Exodus 7-12). After nine plagues, God told every Israelite to choose a spotless lamb for their family, to kill the lamb, and put its blood on the doorposts of their home.

At the Passover, the blood of the lamb on the doorposts averted the tenth plague—death of the firstborn. When Jesus headed to Jerusalem at Passover, he accomplished the greater Passover. All the lambs that were sacrificed pointed ahead to the great “Lamb of God” who would take away the sin of the world (John 1:29). This Lamb would have his blood painted, not on the wooden doorframe of houses in Egypt, but upon the wood of a cross outside Jerusalem. This Lamb wouldn't guard the people from physical death but from the second, eternal death.

Jesus is the Passover Lamb (1 Cor. 5:7). It's no accident he was crucified during the festival where the lamb was sacrificed to remember how God protected his people from death and delivered them from oppression. It was no accident Jesus sat at that Passover meal and said of the cup, “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (v. 28). The true Passover Lamb has come. By trusting in the Savior whose blood was shed on the cross, both Jews and Gentiles are covered and delivered from the judgment.

As you pray, trust in Jesus whose blood was shed for you.

DAY 20

Read: John 17:1-5

Glorify Your Name

Glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you. (v. 1)

If you knew this was your last day on earth, what would you do? You might try to accomplish everything that you have put off for years. Or maybe you would choose to abandon your responsibilities! On his last night, Jesus chose to pray.

On the night before he died, Jesus prayed to be glorified so that the Father's name would be glorified (v. 1). When someone is glorified, they are elevated, lifted up so people can look to them. The purpose of Jesus's glorification, the purpose of his exaltation, is so that the Father would be glorified in all the earth. That God's name—his goodness, his mercy, his justice, his righteousness, his holiness—would be lifted up like a banner for the whole world to see.

How was Jesus to be glorified? Through the cross. Glory is connected with honor, but the cross was the greatest instrument of humiliation conceivable for people in the ancient world. It was in this lowest place, this place of deepest shame and humiliation, that Jesus would be lifted high and God's glory would be revealed.

As followers of Jesus, we can begin to pray like Jesus. We can pray that the name of Jesus, our crucified and risen Savior, would be lifted high in our church gatherings, in our cities, in our countries, in our world, so that the Father would be glorified to the ends of the earth.

As you pray, ask God to glorify his name so that the world would know him.

DAY 21

Read: John 17:6-17

Whole and Holy

Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. (v. 17)

What is Jesus's desire for the church? On his last night, he took time to pray for his band of disciples—the future fledgling church—that they'd be whole and holy.

Jesus prayed that his disciples would be whole, not broken and scattered. He also prayed that the Father would protect them so they'd be one (v. 11). In his prayer, Jesus clarifies that if we hold fast to God's Word, we will experience hatred from the world (v. 14). He doesn't want us removed from this situation but rather protected within it (v. 15). Jesus isn't telling us to retreat from the world by creating a whole separate Christian subculture. Instead, he prays that the Father would protect us from the evil one so we can be one, as the Son and the Father are one (v. 11).

Jesus also prays that his disciples, who eventually would become the church, would be holy. God's people don't belong to the world, but we live in it. God's truth—embodied in Jesus himself and his teachings, and revealed to us in the Scriptures—makes us holy (v. 17). It sets us apart to live in a different way. We don't live like those who belong to the world, who follow its patterns, morals, and virtues. We follow God's ways as disclosed in his Word.

Right now, the church doesn't always look very whole or holy. But Jesus's prayer will be finally answered. God promises that the church will one day be just what his Son prayed it will be.

As you pray, ask Jesus to make his church whole and holy.

DAY 22

Read: Matthew 26:36-56

Gethsemane

Remain here, and stay awake with me. (v. 38 NRSV)

A lot of time as a parent involves being with your kids—making lunches, cleaning clothes, stopping fights, helping with homework. All of that is good and even a joy in many ways. But there's also something beautiful about getting toward the end of the day and sitting on the couch and looking over and seeing your kid looking at you. They don't need anything, but you motion them over and they climb onto your lap. In that moment, them being with you is a gift to you. You didn't need it and yet it's a gift.

“Remain here, and stay awake with me.” On that night long ago, in his very human grief and agitation, Jesus asked the disciples to be with him, to remain with him, as he prayed. At other times, Jesus left the disciples behind to go off by himself to a quiet place to pray. But not here. When he was grieved and agitated, even to death, Jesus wanted his disciples with him. He took them with him to Gethsemane to prayer, and he specifically asked Peter, James, and John, “I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and stay awake with me” (v. 38 NRSV).

In his darkest hour, Jesus wanted the disciples with him. For us, here and now, we rejoice in all the times and in all the ways that God is with us. But prayer is also a way for us to be with God.

As you pray, take time in silence to be in God's presence.

DAY 23

Read: Mark 14:43-52

Betrayal

The one I will kiss is the man. (v. 44)

Those you love the most can also hurt you the most. When a friend decides not to spend time with you anymore, it hurts more than when you never see a stranger again. The closeness you used to have makes the loss all the more painful.

Judas used a gesture of love to betray Jesus. He had walked with Jesus as a disciple for three years. He had heard him teach, seen his miracles, witnessed Jesus's compassion toward the poor, and taken in his proclamation that the kingdom of God was there in their midst. Yet Judas came that night with armed guards. He had sold Jesus out and prepared to hand him over to people who wanted to kill him. To identify Jesus in the dark, Judas came close, called him "Rabbi," the title of respect used by disciples to address their masters, and kissed him (vv. 44-45). A kiss is a sign of affection, love, and closeness. But Judas used it to turn his back on Jesus and hand him over to death.

Jesus was betrayed not only by Judas but was abandoned by the rest of his disciples. One of the disciples pulled out a sword (he came prepared!) and cut off the ear of one of the attackers (v. 47). Eventually all the disciples fled into the night. Those who loved Jesus most turned their backs on him when it mattered most (v. 50). Yet he didn't turn his back on them, or on us. Instead, he turned his face toward the cross.

As you pray, thank Jesus for always loving you.

DAY 24

Read: Luke 22:54-62

Peter's Denial

Woman, I do not know him. (v. 57)

Jesus stood before the high priest and religious leaders. They questioned him about his identity and brought false witnesses (Matt. 26: 59-60). Jesus knew where this would lead, and he calmly refused to engage. The result—they condemned him, as they had planned (vv. 66-71).

While Jesus sat on trial in the high priest's house, Peter was on trial informally in the courtyard. When asked if he was a disciple—whether he was with Jesus—Peter claimed not to know Jesus at all (vv. 56-57). Peter faced the same question again, but instead of waking up to what was happening, he doubled down on denial (v. 58).

We see this kind of behavior all the time. Someone gets caught doing wrong, and instead of owning up to it, they dig in their heels and protest even louder, bluffing that if they protest loudly enough, their accusers will just let it go. It was the same with Peter. When asked a third time, Peter denied it again and, at that moment, a rooster crowed. Jesus turned and looked at Peter across the long distance of the courtyard and Peter realized what he had done. He went out weeping (vv. 59-62).

Who was on trial? Jesus was on trial before the high priest, and Peter was facing a trial of sorts in the courtyard. However, it is we who are truly on trial as we read this story. How will we respond? Will we condemn Jesus like the high priests, deny him like Peter, or embrace him like a disciple?

As you pray, ask Jesus to help you to always hold fast to him.

DAY 25

Read: John 18:28-40

Trial before Pilate

Are you the King of the Jews? (v. 33)

What kind of king do we actually want? Do we want a ruler like Pilate, or are we willing to follow a king like Jesus?

Jesus, the King of kings, stood before Pilate, the governor. Pilate was like many rulers before and after him—he projected strength but was truly weak. He had been appointed the prefect of Judaea, based on political connections. But changes were coming, and his reign was fragile. In condemning Jesus, he was trying to please the local religious leaders, to keep himself safe and in power.

In contrast, Jesus was about to pour out his life for the sin of the world, sacrificing himself, but his kingdom would be secure forever. Pilate asked, “What is truth?” (v. 38) and did whatever made sense for political expediency. Jesus was committed to the truth and is the truth.

Pilate’s rule always felt threatened and was never secure. But Jesus’s kingdom is built on the love of God. It is secure eternally; nothing can break or beat it down. His kingdom is strong enough that the King suffers for his people instead of making them suffer for him.

What kind of king do we actually want? Do we want a ruler like Pilate, or are we willing to follow a king like Jesus? One has a crumbling kingdom, the other a kingdom that will last forever. One rules to protect himself, the other rules by sacrificing himself. One kingdom is founded on force, the other on truth.

As you pray, ask God to make your heart truly long to follow King Jesus.

DAY 26

Read: Matthew 27:32-37

Simon the Cyrene

They compelled this man to carry [Jesus's] cross. (v. 32)

I don't think this was how Simon thought his day would go. Since Simon was from the distant region of Cyrene, he was likely a faithful Jew who had come to Jerusalem for the Passover. He wasn't there to see Jesus. As far away as he lived, he would likely never have heard of Jesus. Yet, by God's grace, he was brought into the story. Simon was forced to carry the cross of Jesus, who was weary from the trial, the beatings, the mockery, and the weight of what lay ahead of him—headed toward his death. The condemned usually carried their own crosses, but when Jesus couldn't continue, these soldiers compelled a passerby to carry it. Simon brought it all the way to Golgotha, where the soldiers immediately crucified Jesus (vv. 33-37).

Carrying the cross and witnessing Jesus's crucifixion no doubt changed Simon's life that day. How do we know? His name is mentioned. This means he was likely known to the Christian community. Mark 15:21 identifies him as "the father of Alexander and Rufus." The only reason to include these names and details is because believers in the early church knew Simon and his two sons. They could ask them directly about what had happened on that Friday.

The cross of Jesus can change a life. It changed Simon. He could not have expected to be caught up in God's work of redemption, but God had other plans. The cross of Jesus can change your life too.

As you pray, ask God to change you through the cross, just like Simon.

DAY 27

Read: John 19:16-25

Crucifixion

. . . The Place of the Skull, which in Aramaic is called Golgotha. (v. 17)

Sometimes, where something takes place matters. Sand from the beaches of Normandy means something different than sand from Holland, Michigan. Saying “I do” at a wedding is different than answering in the kitchen when asked if you want a cup of coffee. Where something happens matters.

Where Jesus was crucified matters: Golgotha, “The Place of the Skull” (v. 17). This story really starts in the garden, with Adam and Eve (Gen. 2). They lived in harmony with God and creation. But when temptation came, they broke that harmony. They listened to the lying voice of the serpent. They ate the fruit God commanded them not to eat, and sent the whole of creation careening into sin (Gen. 3:1-14). However, in his mercy, God did not abandon his creation. Instead, included in his judgment upon the serpent was a promise: “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel” (v. 15). God promised that one day, Eve’s offspring would defeat the serpent, once and for all.

It’s no accident that Jesus’s feet (heels!) were pierced on a hill called “The Place of the Skull.” In Jesus, that promise of the ages has come true. By his pierced hands and feet, Jesus has crushed the head of the serpent—gaining victory over sin, death, and the devil. On Golgotha, Jesus fulfilled God’s great promise to redeem his people.

As you pray, thank Jesus for the cross.

DAY 28

Read: Mark 15:33-39

Curtain Torn in Two

The curtain of the temple was torn in two,
from top to bottom. (v. 38)

During the Covid-19 pandemic, as an American living in Canada, I could not go home. The border was closed. After several years of being unable to travel, I was finally able to visit my family in the United States. Emotions flooded me as I went through customs. The barrier was gone and I could finally go home.

Jesus made a way where there was no way. The temple curtain was a barrier between God and his people. When God gave directions to build the tabernacle (and later the temple), he commanded there be a curtain separating the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place. Only once a year could one person, the high priest, enter the Most Holy Place where the Lord dwelled. Even then, the high priest had to be purified by sacrifices. Ritually and spiritually impure, the people could not come into the presence of a holy God.

At the death of Jesus Christ, that curtain was torn in two. Through his crucifixion, as the perfect sacrifice once for all, Jesus opened “a new and living way” for us into the presence of God (Heb. 10:19-20). God’s holiness does not change, but we’re now enabled, by the saving blood of Christ, to enter into God’s presence. He has broken down the barrier by his shed blood. Significantly, the curtain was torn “from top to bottom” (Mark 15:38). God has torn the curtain. He has made the way. Jesus has God making a way for us into the Father’s presence.

As you pray, thank Jesus for making a way for us into God’s presence.

DAY 29

Read: John 19:28-30

It is Finished

He said, "It is finished." (v. 30)

At the culmination of the gospel story are Jesus's words "It is finished." And then death, and three days later, resurrection. The last words John records Jesus saying sum up Jesus's mission, life, and the very events of his death and resurrection.

What is finished? What did Jesus accomplish on the cross and in the empty tomb? Nothing short of redemption, nothing short of salvation. In dying, Jesus put death to death, he conquered sin, and set free those who are in bondage. God's whole mission of rescuing a lost and broken world he so loves is finished, accomplished in Jesus Christ dying on the cross and rising from the grave. It's in the twin acts of dying and rising that Christ accomplished salvation for sinners. It's in dying, in giving up his spirit for the sake of the lost, the broken, the guilty and shamed, that all of that old life is finished. And it's in the resurrection, in rising from the grave, that our resurrection, our eternal life is promised and foreshadowed.

On the cross, redemption was accomplished, salvation was completed. It was finished, made perfect, made complete. There is nothing to be done, nothing to be added to what Christ has finished by dying and rising again. If we repent of our sin and trust in him, Jesus says, "It is finished."

What is finished? Full redemption, God's salvation. And for all who believe in Jesus, who belong to him, the Holy Spirit echoes Jesus words over every square inch of our existence—"It is finished."

As you pray, thank Jesus for doing everything for your salvation.

DAY 30

Read: John 19:38-42

A Burial Fit for a King

. . . a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds in weight. (v. 39)

Jesus's burial was performed by two men, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus. Both were prominent men, but they were also secretly disciples of Jesus. However, by caring for Jesus's body, the secret of their discipleship to Jesus was out.

They took the body and gave him a proper burial in a tomb. The other gospels tell us that this new tomb was Joseph's and that he offered it for Jesus. As part of the burial customs, they wrapped him in linen cloths and some spices, including myrrh. The same spice that the wise men brought as a gift for the newborn king was used to honor the crucified king.

Nicodemus included 75 pounds of myrrh and aloe. This was insanely extravagant, the kind of burial that you would only ever see for a king or someone close to it. Earlier, Mary anointed Jesus with a little jar of perfume that cost 300 denarii—10 months wages (John 12:5). These burial spices could have easily been worth more than 30,000 denarii—something like 83 years' worth of income spent on the spices to bury Jesus. A lifetime's worth of income spent to honor Jesus.

During his life, Joseph and Nicodemus kept their faith secret. But at Jesus's death, they gave everything to proclaim that he was worthy of the honor of a king, that he is the true king, that the inscription written over him on the cross was true—Jesus was King.

As you pray, ask God to help you offer your best to honor Jesus as King.

DAY 31

Read: John 20:1-18

Named, Adopted, Sent

Jesus said to her, “Mary.” (v. 16)

In John’s Gospel, Mary sees but cannot see. Mary is stuck in darkness until Jesus opens her eyes to see the true story. When she hears the voice of the risen Jesus calling her, she is named, adopted, and sent. Today, as we celebrate Easter, we celebrate that Jesus is calling each of us, right alongside Mary.

Jesus called Mary by name. “She turned and said to him in Aramaic, “Rabboni!” (which means Teacher)” (v. 16). When Jesus calls you, he calls you personally. He knows your name. He calls you by your name.

When Jesus called Mary, she was adopted as a child of God and sister of Christ. Jesus called his Father, our Father; and his God, our God. He called the disciples brothers. (v. 17) When Jesus calls us by name, we become part of the family too. We know God as our loving, gracious Father and Christ as our brother.

When Jesus called Mary, she was sent to proclaim him. “Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, ‘I have seen the Lord’—and that he had said these things to her” (v. 18). The resurrection story is not meant to be kept quiet. Named and adopted, Mary was sent and announced the good news: “I have seen the Lord! Jesus Christ is risen.”

Jesus’s journey didn’t end at the cross. If you are a follower of Jesus, your journey doesn’t end with the cross either. How will you respond to Jesus’s call?

As you pray, thank Jesus for calling you by name, adopting you into his family, and sending you out with good news.

About the Author

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“[Jesus] came and proclaimed
the good news of peace to you
who were far away and peace
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EPHESIANS 2:17

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