

MAKING THE PASSION PERSONAL

A Journey with Jesus to the Cross and Beyond

by Tricia McCary Rhodes

DAY ONE --The Beginning of the End

He who knows not the Christ of Calvary knows not God, and He who does not thus know, knows not anything that is worth knowing.

R. E. March

Reflect

Quiet your heart before God. Seek to release the worries, cares, distractions, and decisions of your day into the Holy Spirit's hands.

Read the following verses out loud as a prayer and invitation to the Lord.

Show me your ways, O Lord, teach me your paths; guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my Savior, and my hope is in you all day long.

Psalm 25:4-5

Invite Jesus to open your spiritual eyes in a new way. Welcome Him as your companion and guide on this spiritual journey.

Think about the cross for a few minutes. What images come to your mind? Does the thought of the cross touch you deeply, or has familiarity with it produced complacency?

What would you like God to do within you through this journey? Write this out as a prayer. (Your experience and grasp of Christ's suffering will be much more meaningful if you take the time to write prayers, responses, meditations or simple truths you glean along the way. Any kind of writing journal, a spiral notebook, or notepad on the computer can be used to chart the special moments as you make the Passion personal).

Read

*And He came out and proceeded as was His custom to the Mount of Olives;
and the disciples also followed Him.*

Luke 22:39

As was His custom . . . These are telling words about where Jesus will spend his final hours of freedom. The Mount of Olives is a familiar place. He has been here often; only a week ago descending from it on a donkey, the crowds crying hosannas, laying palm branches at his feet.

On the nights following the triumphal entry, while his followers found rest in homes preparing for Passover, Jesus most likely slept here. He didn't have to travel far, just a few hundred feet up a stone path off the Jericho road.

What consumed his thoughts in those lonely hours? Was he exhausted from long days of teaching and healing in the temple below? Did he struggle to summon enough energy to walk down each morning, knowing the demands for his touch would be endless and overwhelming? Tonight on this mountain great anguish awaits the Messiah, but has he agonized over the coming crucifixion here before?

The full moon illuminates the way, regal cypress trees swaying in the breeze against the sable sky. Surely a quiet gloom accompanies them; Jesus talking, the men trying to keep pace, not wanting to miss a word. Once in a while he stops and faces them, expressing wistful thoughts and distant dreams.

He speaks of love, his love for the Father, his love for them, and their love for each other. Perhaps the intimacy is unsettling. It takes time to comprehend such words. But time is running out. They move on, following their beloved Rabbi.

Stopping near a gate, Jesus gazes at the starry host above. Then, lifting his hands to his Father, he prays a long, poignant prayer for these faithful few. When he is done, he searches their faces for a sign of comprehension. Seeing only questions he cannot answer in their eyes, the Son of God turns toward the entrance to the garden of Gethsemane.

It is a beautiful place, the night air in the foothills warm, the breeze from the brook Kidron blowing gently. The Garden's huge twisted trunk olive trees are laden with fruit. At harvest, the olives will be pressed until precious oil fills the vats. This "place of crushing" is a fitting finale for the One whose life breath will soon be pressed from him.

As was his custom . . . The Mount is fraught with familiarity, even to Judas, the missing disciple, who within a few hours will confidently lead the army of betrayers to the Savior's side.

Jesus surveys the city for which he has known such deep compassion one last time. What does He see? Families relaxing, stomachs full and hearts warmed by Passover celebrations? Children being tucked in and candles snuffed out? Is the air peppered with the rumble of conversation or outbursts of innocent laughter among friends?

Amidst all this, does Jesus behold a lost and dying world, ignorant of their own need, unaware of the price he will soon pay to find a place in their hearts? As he gazes into the darkness below, what grips his soul?

It is the beginning of the end. As night takes hold, the blackest days of Christ's short stint with humanity close in. Within hours, all of history will be catapulted toward that event for which there is no turning back. The beginning of the end.

Respond

The journey to the cross is one of introspection. It is a time for mourning over the sins we have committed, which nailed Jesus there. In Scripture, ashes were often a sign of repentance. Many people begin their journey to the Cross on Ash Wednesday (first day of the Lenten season) by having a cross of ashes put on their foreheads to symbolize their repentance of sin and need for a Savior.

Today, reflect on your own need. Consider your personal sin and disobedience. Be prepared to embrace a sense of mourning before God as you begin this journey. Yet even as you may grieve, receive afresh the love of Christ who died for you.

When God has spoken or moved you in some way, write a prayer of response. This might include words of praise, confession, petition, worship, or even questions you have -- just be authentic as you open your heart.

A Prayer

Lord, let me walk with you through these final moments. Let me hold your hurt, live in your loneliness, and experience what it cost you. For somehow, in embracing your pain, I may comprehend your love. Perhaps by grappling with your grief, I can conceive of your commitment to me. And in dying your despicable death, I might gain my own soul. I do not ask this lightly. I know I cannot come to the Cross without being changed. Let me walk with you, Jesus -- make me ready for the journey.

DAY TWO -- Man of Sorrows

*In the cross God is revealed not as One reigning in calm disdain above all the squalors of earth,
but as One Who suffers more keenly than the keenest sufferer –
"a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief."*

Oswald Chambers

Reflect

Begin with words of gratitude to God. Thank Him specifically for the life and love you have gained through salvation.

Ponder the following verse. What does it mean to you? Ask the Holy Spirit to make it meaningful to you in a personal way. *For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.* (1 Corinthians 1:18)

Write a prayer of thanksgiving based on what you've seen in your prayer journal. Ask God to speak to your heart today. Affirm his presence during this time of meditation and prayer.

Read

And He said to them, "My soul is deeply grieved, to the point of death..."

Mark 14:34

The hour is late. Stillness settles like an eerie cloud over Jerusalem. As he enters the gate in the wall around Gethsemane, Jesus motions to Peter, James and John to come with him. The others sit down quietly to wait -- for what they do not know -- as the three follow into the recesses of the garden.

Jesus moves slowly, perhaps stopping to lean against a gnarled tree trunk. White knuckles protrude from tightened fists and his head hangs in weariness. Peter, James and John glance at each other, wondering what to do. Their teacher has never been like this before. They saw him cry when his friend Lazarus died, and only a week ago as he entered Jerusalem. He sobbed out loud over the neediness there. Yet that was a strong cry -- laced with sadness perhaps, but not despair.

This is different. Overwhelming sorrow consumes the Christ. Through clenched lips, He utters: *My soul is deeply grieved to the point of death . . .* a beleaguered bellow from the depths of his being.

What must it be like to grieve to the point of death? The language here speaks of both physical pain and mental anguish. Jesus knows not only agony of soul, but feels life itself slipping away as distress distills in his veins. Perhaps he could die even now -- simply close his eyes, let his heart break, and be swept into eternity's glorious gates.

Instead, He laments aloud the condition of his soul. *My soul is deeply grieved to the point of death . . .* Does he hope to be comforted? Wish things could be different? Is all this a surprise to the omniscient One? Didn't he know before he came that his heart would tear in two? Does the omnipotent Son of God have no power over the pain that threatens to undo him?

As sporadic sounds waft through the air from the valley below, a deathly quiet pervades the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus grieves. Perhaps John reaches out, but hesitates at the look of torment in his teacher's eyes. Peter looks around, ready to do something, anything to end this agony. Jesus' body begins to shake. The man James once thought would be king is now pale, gaunt, and powerless.

Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief . . . strange words to describe a Deity. But he had given it all up -- didn't consider equality with God something to cling to. Now what must the Messiah think? Does he long for a taste of the days when angels sang and all of creation cried out to his exalted Presence? Would he shed his royal robes so readily, in light of this smothering sadness?

Is the love that once sent him spinning into a woman's womb faltering, even a little? A resounding *no* echoes through the halls of eternity. The wretchedness written on the face of Christ will play itself out to the bitter end. Anything less would leave God's children hanging in the balance, bound in the slave market of sin's great camp. This he cannot allow. In some strange way, God the Father is pleased to crush his only Son.

And so, as travelers below settle down for another night's sleep, God's eternal plan marches forward. Earth's countless inhabitants are oblivious to the waves of emotion crashing into the cosmic Christ, threatening to drown him with their force. *My soul is deeply grieved to the point of death.* He mourns, but life goes on.

Respond

Wait in the stillness of God's presence for several minutes. Have you ever lost someone or something dear to you? Lifelong plans and dreams? Friendship? Mother? Father? Child? Think back to that time, or try to imagine the kind of grief that can only be described as agony -- both physical and mental.

Consider the words Jesus spoke: *My soul is grieved to the point of death.* Hear His voice speaking them. (Grieve means to feel deep sorrow, to mourn) What might Jesus have been mourning in that moment? Ask God to give you a sense of the kind of sorrow Jesus was experiencing as He spoke those words. Wait and listen.

Read (or sing) the words to the old hymn below. Consider the face of Christ in the Garden as you do.

Hallelujah! What a Savior

Phillip P. Bliss

*"Man of Sorrows!" what a Name
For the Son of God who came
Ruined sinners to reclaim!
Hallelujah, What a Savior!*

Spend some time in worship. Speak words of adoration, thanksgiving, awe and wonder. Sing, lift your hands, kneel in praise for One who would grieve as Jesus did and yet go on.

Write a prayer of response in your prayer journal.

A Prayer

Man of sorrows . . . You have looked sorrow in the face and wept in its wasteland. And though you grieved to the point of death, you did not die. Not then. Oh God, in the soil of your sadness, seeds of hope are planted for a dying world. Let me search deeply this moment of yours. Open wide my eyes that I might glimpse your eternal sacrifice. Take me into your dark night, and we will acquaint ourselves together with the paradox of grief's glory.

DAY THREE -- Only the Father

The passion will inevitably remain extraneous to us until we go into it through the very narrow door of the "for our sake" because only he who acknowledges that the passion is his fault truly knows the passion. Everything else is a digression.

Raneiro Cantalamessa

Reflect

As you subdue your heart, gently thank God for being with you today. Take a couple of minutes to affirm Christ's presence here.

Read the following passage aloud, making it a personal prayer.

O God, you are my God; I shall seek you earnestly; My soul thirsts for you, my flesh yearns for you, in a dry and weary land where there is no water. Thus I have seen you in the sanctuary, to see your power and your glory. Because your lovingkindness is better than life, My lips will praise you. So I will bless you as long as I live; I will lift up my hands in your name.

Psalm 63:1-4

Ask the Holy Spirit to be your teacher and comforter through this time with Christ. Consider the prophetic descriptions of Jesus from Isaiah 53, listed below. Slowly speak each of the phrases, contemplating what it may mean.

- a tender shoot
- a root out of parched ground
- no stately form or majesty that we should look upon Him
- nor appearance that we should be attracted to Him
- despised
- forsaken of men
- man of sorrows
- acquainted with grief
- one from whom men hide their face
- we did not esteem Him

What do you see in Christ that perhaps you haven't really comprehended before?

Read

Remain here and keep watch with Me.

Matthew 26:38

Jesus moves away from these who have been his closest companions for the past three years. Yet he hesitates, perhaps wishing he could recapture the warm camaraderie they've known. He reminisces over Peter charging the ocean's waves in blind faith, and remembers the feel of John's head against his chest as they dined a few hours ago. Recalling their naiveté and earthy take on life is like a soothing balm to the restlessness within his soul.

He searches their faces for some glimmer of hope. But there is little anyone can do now as spiritual forces in heavenly places draw their swords for battle. The fate of his final hours flashes in front of him, and Jesus pleads: *Remain here and keep watch with me.*

Such a simple request. Has he ever asked these men to do anything for him before? From the moment he called them from their businesses and boats, did he depend on them at all to meet his needs?

He fed the five thousand -- first the disciples and then the multitude. Did anyone make sure *his* stomach was filled with the broken bread and dried fish? He calmed the wind when the night wore thin and their terror grew, but did any of them think to offer *him* a warm blanket or bowl of broth? A few hours ago he washed their feet -- did anyone wash *his*?

He blessed the children, healed the sick, raised the dead, taught the eager, and loved the masses. Was there ever a time when he asked for help? A time when he felt his frailty and leaned on those who seemed stronger for the moment? A time like this one?

Moving a stone's throw away, Christ begins to wrestle with the Father's plan to redeem mankind. His cries grow louder, but the men have fallen asleep. They hear nothing.

Remain here and keep watch with Me. He asks for so little, but they can't give it. These ones to whom Jesus gave his every waking moment for three years cannot stay awake for one hour at his request.

After a while he rises. Unable to continue the vigil, he crosses the few steps back to their side. John's eyes fly open, then drop in shame. Peter props himself up against a

tree, determined not to let the Master down again. James wets his eyes with dew from the fallen leaves, longing to do the right thing. But when Jesus turns away, their heads drop as if drugged, escaping their own hidden turmoil. He stumbles back to the rock, his loneliness more intense than ever.

It must seem an eternity that Jesus agonizes in prayer before he returns, once again seeking his followers' nebulous aid. "Couldn't you even watch for an hour?" he asks.

What fills his voice? Frustration? Fear? Anger? Disappointment? Sorrow? No one tries to answer. There are no words left to speak.

In the end, there is only the Father. He hovers near his child, though the agonizing dialogue between them is the start of a severing that will tear the Godhead apart. Visions of that moment torment the Son until he wonders if he can continue. He pleads with his friends; *Remain here and keep watch with Me*, but only the Father hears.

Respond

Sit quietly contemplating the darkness that surrounded the disciples that night. See Jesus a short distance from you, His heart beginning to break, His cries growing louder and louder. Imagine yourself falling asleep, oblivious to His pain. Hear Him gently calling you by name: *Could you not watch for one hour?*

Why do you think the disciples did not watch with Jesus? Why do you fail Him at times? Why were the disciples so out of touch with how terrible this time was for Christ? Are you at times out of touch with the true suffering of Christ? Why?

Ask God to give you spiritual insight into what Jesus was about to experience as He asked the disciples to watch with Him. Spend a few moments in prayer over this.

Write a prayer using some of the phrases from Isaiah (e.g., *Lord, you were a tender shoot, like new life coming forth, fragile . . . and I crushed you*)

Be quiet for at a period of time, allowing this experience to settle within your heart.

A Prayer

Oh my Lord, I long to understand the extent of your isolation, the impact of your lonely pain. Did you ever feel at home during your stay on earth, or did you experience abandonment from the moment you burst upon this dark planet? I too have let you down a thousand times and I cannot for one moment

judge the disciples who slept while you grieved. I long to join you now though. My heart beats as yours breaks and in my spirit I offer you a shoulder upon which to weep. Let me remain and keep watch with you this day.

DAY FOUR -- In Struggle we See Him

*Organized religion has domesticated the crucified Lord of glory,
turned him into a tame theological symbol.
Theological symbols do not sweat blood in the night.*

Brennan Manning

Reflect

Take some time to become still in God's presence. Slow your breathing through the following exercise:

Inhale: Breathe in the peace of Christ.
Exhale: Breathe out anxiety of the day.
Inhale: Breathe in the gentleness of Christ.
Exhale: Breathe out mental clutter and distraction.
Inhale: Breathe in freedom in Christ
Exhale: Breathe out that which binds you
Inhale: Breathe in the joy of Christ
Exhale: Breathe out discouragement
Inhale: Breathe in the love of Christ
Exhale: Breathe out selfishness, and personal agendas.

Continue doing this until you feel ready to meet God according to His plan. Offer yourself to Him for His purposes during your time of contemplation at the Cross today.

Read

And He went a little beyond them, and fell on His face and prayed, saying, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; yet not as I will, but as You will.

Matthew 26:39

Jesus moves beyond his disciples, falling to the ground a few feet away. Pressing his face into the soil he once breathed into being, his body shakes in violent struggle. From the pit of his soul a child cries: "*Abba--Daddy.*" He writhes, groans and pleads for another way.

My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me. A heart-wrenching plea. Is this the Son of God? Weak? Frail? Fighting to hold on? Surely the Father longs to rescue him from this terrible plight. Can't the whole thing end right here? Perhaps, except for the words he summons the strength to add: "Nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will."

Throughout his life on earth, this is how it has been. Whether in the clamor and chaos of relentless crowds or the silence of solitary nights, Jesus has pursued the Father's will, for the Godhead celebrates a love affair unimaginable to human minds. Yes, for God so loved the world . . . but the Son so loves his Father that he fights the darkness with desire to obey.

The flesh-and-blood battle is real. It saps Jesus of strength, and twice he walks away from it, perhaps to catch his breath, or renew his determination. Each time he returns, it is the same. Needy, frightened, childlike, he seeks another solution for sin-sick humanity.

The Father holds out His hand, but it clutches a bitter cup. Jesus glances into its depths. The contents would be vile, filthy, nauseating, even to those who have experienced sin personally. But to the Christ, whose heart is undefiled, the stench of it rises up, its dark substance looming like an oozing sore.

His shaking intensifies. Perhaps he envisions himself taking the cup, drinking its bitter dregs until the poison of sin infects his whole body. His insides heave, catching in his throat.

A faint light to his side distracts him momentarily. Turning, he sees an angel. Is it Gabrielle who announced his coming birth to a teenage girl just a few decades ago? The archangel Michael, sword drawn, ready for battle? Or is it an unknown seraph, sent to soothe his brow and comfort his suffering soul? Somehow Jesus finds strength in the presence of this celestial being and prays once again: *My Father, if this cannot pass away unless I drink it, Your will be done.*

With these words the full agony of it all sweeps through the Garden like a tornado, churning the body, soul and spirit of the Son of God until he almost passes out. Bloody sweat from bursting capillaries pours from his face, large drops staining the ground.

All the forces of Heaven and Hell await the outcome of Christ's struggle in this place. Demons laugh at his weakness, angels weep at what he has become. The Father stands back, unwilling to intervene. Jesus faces poverty of soul...and eternity hangs in the balance.

Respond

Contemplate the faces of Jesus we see in this experience:

A child: scared, crying out in baby talk -- *Daddy, abba...*

A fully human man: feeling the terror of the future, pleading for another way.

An obedient Son: drawing from deep within to say *Your will be done Father.*

A fountainhead of love: looking into his Father's eyes, and finding the energy to obey.

Try for a moment to imagine the cup the Father holds out. Look into it. What do you see? Observe your own sinful attitudes and actions swirling within. Think about the apathy and rebellion of the entire human race, of every generation represented in that cup. See the kinds of sinfulness you encounter daily in your world -- the violence, hatred, immorality, and greed.

Then, consider the heart of Jesus as the Father held out the cup to Him. What must He have felt? Why? What was His greatest source of struggle?

What would your life hold today had Jesus dashed the cup to the ground, refusing to drink its bitter dregs? Don't rush with this question. Evaluate it deeply, pondering days and nights of an existence without redemption.

Write a prayer of thanksgiving in your journal. Thank Him that He loves you, and that He loved the Father enough to obey. Rest in the Presence of this love.

A Prayer

Dearest Savior, I find myself wanting to run from your struggle. I'd rather see you fighting battles on my behalf, waging war against demonic armies. Maybe I'm afraid of what I'll see if I look too close at the cup you cried out against. Oh God, immerse my callous heart in the dark waters of Gethsemane. Weaken me with the weight of my unworthiness, and perhaps I will glimpse my own soul in that vile and putrid cup. May I cry out in desperation as you did: "Abba... Father..."

DAY FIVE -- Human . . . and Weak

... only one act of pure love, unsullied by any taint of ulterior motive has ever been performed in the history of the world, namely the self-giving of God in Christ on the cross of undeserving sinners. That is why, if we are looking for a definition of love, we should look not in a dictionary, but at Calvary.

John R. Stott

Reflect

Spend a few minutes quieting your heart before God. Think of the word "passion." It means "unfailing commitment" and is synonymous with words like ardor, fire, fervor. See Jesus with an ardent, fervent, fiery commitment to go to the Cross. Worship Him.

Perhaps the most famous verse in the Bible is John 3:16 -- *For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.* Meditate on the truth of this, trying to grasp it as if you have never heard the words before.

Write out a prayer of thanksgiving based on this verse.

Read

*Keep watching and praying, that you may not come into temptation;
the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.*

Mark 14:38

The battle in the Garden continues to wear on Jesus until it feels as if his very breath has been knocked from him. He gasps. Reckoning with the weakness of his own flesh reminds him of the three sleeping nearby.

Rising, Jesus studies their faces across the way. What does he see? Fragility? Naive trust? Does he reflect on their inclination to falter when put to the test, their frailties that he has come to know all too well? What concerns lie heavy on Jesus' heart as he watches them sleep?

There is James who, hours ago, sought to secure a status for himself that will never be. And Peter, who for all his bravado hides a little boy inside, often cowering in fear of failure. Sweet John, wanting nothing more than to love and be loved. All three sound asleep, oblivious to the horror the coming hours hold.

Does he feel compelled to warn them, to somehow get through to them before it is too late? *The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.* Only a few minutes remain -- how can they possibly understand?

For two long nights they will face the darkness and try to deny that their Messiah has deserted them. The questions, the fears, the endless whys will tear at their budding belief system. Hopelessness could creep into the empty moments and anger plant its bitter seeds. If his own battle to trust his Father is this fierce, how will they ever survive?

Jesus' voice echoes in the dark night with uncharacteristic harshness, like a parent fearing for his or her child's safety. *Keep watching and praying that you may not come into temptation; the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.*

How he must long to fortify their faith, to invigorate them with determination, to make certain they pray without ceasing through the hours to come. How hard it will be to leave them. The time together is almost gone.

Still they slumber, unaware of the intense emotion he experiences on their behalf. Turning away, he mutters almost to himself, "Go ahead and sleep. . . get your rest . . . you will need it."

What can he do after all he's done? What can he say after all that's been said? In a matter of moments they too will confront head on the grim reality that *the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.*

Respond

Meditate for a few moments on how Jesus felt, knowing what His disciples would be facing. Can you imagine the intensity of his concern? Consider his compassion for them, even in the midst of his own intense personal struggle.

Galatians 5:17 says: *For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please.* Based

on this verse, what battles do you think the disciples will be facing in the ensuing hours?

What struggles do you face even now to follow the Spirit? Is your own flesh weak? Contemplate the reality that Jesus knows your every struggle, especially when your faith falters and you cannot see God's hand. Look at your own life and spiritual journey. Hear Christ saying to you, "Watch and pray." How will you answer?

Write a response commitment in your prayer journal.

A Prayer

Lord, in the midst of your own agony, your followers inhabit your heart. How you loved them. How you love me. And how you must grieve at my oblivion to the danger lurking in the shadows of faith. I too need your gentle admonition to watch and pray, in a world that seems void of your touch at times. In the living of life -- moment by moment, day by day -- and when darkness tempts me to forget all you have said and done, let me hear your voice calling: watch and pray.

DAY SIX -- Resolution

Without Gethsemane, there would have been no Golgotha. The blood and water that flowed from His wounds on the cross were preceded by bloody sweat that poured from His pores as He suffered the agony of a death more painful than the physical death on the cross, the death of the will.

Michael Card

Reflect

Be still and know that God is present both within you through His Spirit and around you. Settle yourself for a few minutes with this thought. Welcome Him in your own words.

Read and/or sing the following old hymn as a prayer, preparing your heart to contemplate the Cross of Christ today.

O Love Divine, What Hast Thou Done?

Charles Wesley, 1742 Public Domain

*O Love divine, what hast thou done!
The immortal God hath died for me!
The Father's co-eternal Son
bore all my sins upon the tree.
Th'immortal God for me hath died:
My Lord, my Love, is crucified!*

*Is crucified for me and you,
to bring us rebels back to God.
Believe, believe the record true,
ye all are bought with Jesus' blood.
Pardon for all flows from His side:
My Lord, my Love, is crucified!*

*Behold Him, all ye that pass by,
the bleeding Prince of life and peace!
Come, sinners, see your Savior die,
and say, "Was ever grief like His?"*

*Come, feel with me His blood applied:
My Lord, my Love, is crucified!*

Read

Arise, let us be going, behold the one who betrays me is at hand.

Matthew 26:46

Resolution. With forceful voice and rapid stride Jesus returns from his final time of prayer, startling the dreaming disciples. Displaying a determination that eluded him a few minutes ago, he charges the impending doom, Gethsemane's agony behind him. *Arise, let us be going; behold the one who betrays me is at hand!*

Exactly when did Jesus recover from his saga of tears and bloody sweat? Did he spring to his feet at some point, or struggle to stand, stamina spreading slowly throughout his limbs?

The three look around in confusion. For the past week, hope and dismay have taken turns tossing them about as they watched and listened to their teacher. A few hours back he shared Seder with them -- a precious memory tainted only by talk of a betrayer. But on the walk here to the Mount, he promised he'd be with them forever.

Moments ago, through their groggy sleep they'd heard agonized weeping, yet now he strides toward them. *Arise, let us be going; behold the one who betrays me is at hand!* This is no weak resignation to fate.

What propels him forward with such gritty tenacity? Does Jesus find strength in his compassion even for those gathering at the bottom of the hill, intent on his destruction? Did something of cosmic significance occur as he cried the third time, "Your will be done?" Did the heavens shake while angels sang songs of joy? Or did the moonlit sky echo back with Sovereign silence?

Nothing has really changed. The plan is the same. The stage is set, props put into place. The lead supporting actor executes the final details of his role as betrayer. And players move into position for the drama of all centuries.

Respond

What do you think went through Jesus' mind as he spoke the words; "Arise let us be going, the one who betrays me is at hand"? What emotions might he have been

experiencing as he prepared for his own arrest? What kinds of thoughts do you think filled his mind? Spend a few minutes considering these things.

At least three times in the past Jesus had described his final fate to uncomprehending disciples, speaking with great urgency: *And He began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things.* (Mark 8:31).

How do you think you might have felt upon hearing these things? On one occasion Peter was so distraught he took Jesus aside and insisted He not talk that way. Jesus rebuked Peter, then turned to the crowd and admonished them: *If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's will save it.* (Mark 8:33-34)

Read Jesus' response aloud. Hear Him speaking these words to you as if you were the only one left with Him that day. What is he saying about your own life? What will it mean for you to accompany him on the rest of this painful journey?

Respond in prayer to the challenge Jesus gives here. Write it out in your prayer journal.

A Prayer

Dearest Redeemer, even now you lead the way to your execution. Will I follow as you take up Your Cross? Your strength sobers me, and I wonder how you prepared for this moment. I look at your determination to obey and weak excuses die on my lips. I want to walk with you still, though I wonder how close I can stay as you move to your death. If I turn back, remind me of this moment when you set your face like flint to the stormy seas that awaited you.

DAY SEVEN -- Betrayed by a Kiss

*And even so, with the meekest of gestures, has the war for the world been engaged.
With a kiss. And the kiss has a tooth. And the snake that struck the Lord has
a back of fire and a body of human opinion.*

Walt Wangerin

Reflect

Read the following verses, slowly and thoughtfully: *How blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered! How blessed is the man to whom the Lord does not impute iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit!* (Psalm 32:1-2)

Read them again, placing your name in them. Reflect on what Jesus has done to forgive your transgressions and cover your own sins. Offer Him a heart of thanksgiving.

To betray someone is to be false or disloyal to them. Ask God to reveal your own heart over the past few days. Have you been false? Disloyal to His call on your life? Ponder your own capacity to betray Christ day by day. Confess your neediness to Him and receive His forgiveness.

Read

But Jesus said to him, "Judas, are you betraying the Son of Man with a kiss?"

Luke 22:48

Jesus watches the steady snake of torchlights weave its way up the hill. As darkness holds back the dawn, a night owl hoots in the distance. Peter, James and John shiver, trying to shake the sleep from their minds. They summon the rest of the disciples, troubling questions plaguing them. Where are they going? And why does their Master keep talking of betrayal?

As the eleven men huddle together near Jesus, a crowd sharing an unlikely rapport advances up the hill. Roman soldiers with orders to arrest some rabble rouser lead the way. Jewish high priests who know they cannot accomplish their goal without the help of "unclean" Gentiles, join them, swallowing their pride. The temple guards follow, clubs and swords ready to meet expected resistance.

They all tread quietly -- some arrogant, some angry, some irritated at having their sleep interrupted, still others simply curious. Near the front of the throng a Jew named Judas from the distant village of Kerrioth glances furtively about, nervous energy characterizing his movement. Priests on either side urge him forward.

As they near the Garden of Gethsemane, a figure emerges from the shadows. "Who are you looking for?"

Startled, Judas tries to slip behind a Roman soldier. The others stop, some stumbling over each other in surprise. The military leader pulls himself up, and barks: "Jesus of Nazareth."

"I am he."

In tandem the entire crowd falls backward as if felled by a single stroke of lightning. After a moment's confusion, they struggle to their feet, baffled and embarrassed.

The quiet stranger from the shadows, asks again. "Who are you looking for?"

This time several call out. "Jesus, Jesus of Nazareth."

"I am he. I am the one you look for -- let these others go."

Jesus offers the betrayer a chance to walk away with these words, while the soldiers look on in confusion. They have come to arrest a hardened criminal, a dangerous interloper -- not this common man who stands before them. No one knows quite what to do.

Looking into the crowd, Jesus watches for his one-time follower. Nudged by the priests, Judas steps forward and throws his arms around his teacher.

"Rabbi." He kisses Jesus slowly -- first on one cheek, then the other.

Does Jesus' face burn when those lips touch His cheeks? Does he kiss Judas back, holding him close for just a second amidst the crazy chaos of the night? Time is suspended, the onlookers frozen in awkward stillness as they observe the painful interaction.

Judas, are you betraying the Son of Man with a kiss?

Betrayed by a kiss. It could have been so much easier. Judas could have stood at a safe distance, pointing a finger while the soldiers rushed in. He could have called out from afar--"that's the one--there he is, he's your man."

Judas, are you betraying the Son of Man with a kiss?

No reprimand. No rebuke. Just piercing words that rock the money-keeper to his very core. The Redeemer reaches out in the face of lethal disloyalty and fixes forever his own terrible fate.

Respond

Try to imagine the scenes in the garden that night -- disciples waking from restless sleep, Jesus intent on revealing himself, angry religious leaders and powerful soldiers forming a silent, but deadly mob, and one man embracing betrayal as a way of life. Place yourself there.

Sense what Jesus must have felt as the crowd approached. Consider what it is like to have someone you deeply love betray you in such a way. Hear the tender voice of Jesus.

Meditate on 1 Timothy 1:15: *It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of all.* Consider that you too are a sinner, perhaps worse even than Judas in the moment he betrayed Christ. Offer a prayer of gratitude that Jesus receives you daily to His side, loving you unconditionally. Write a response in your prayer journal.

A Prayer

Oh my Lord, how many wounds you must receive in your journey to the cross? This one must leave your heart raw. Betrayed by a kiss. I want to stand back and point my finger at Judas. And yet, how often have my lips burned your face with disloyalty? How many times have I reached for your touch, yet held my own heart at a distance? I long to say I will never betray you Lord, but you know my heart. Hold me close when I do...especially when I do, for the road away from your side is a desperate one.

DAY EIGHT -- Alone

My Jesus! loaded with contempt, nail my heart to Your feet, that it may ever remain there, to love You and never leave You again.

Saint Alphonseus Liguori

Reflect

Take some time to set your heart towards God today. Acknowledge His presence and commitment to reveal himself to you.

In the Old Testament, a redeemer was one who could pay your debts and free you from the tyranny of wealthy landowners to whom you were enslaved. In the same way, Jesus has redeemed you from Satan's tyranny and the darkness of his kingdom.

In light of this, offer a prayer from Psalm 19:14 to the Lord, meditating on what it means: *Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O LORD, my rock and my Redeemer.* Personalize this for today and write it in your own words.

Read

Then all the disciples left Him and fled.

Matthew 26:56

Jesus touches Judas' face, aching sadness pulling at the corners of his mouth. "Friend, do what you came to do."

Then everyone seems to move at once. Judas slips to the edge of the mob as the religious leaders press in around Jesus. At last they've got him, this one who has mocked them over and over again with answers they couldn't dispute amidst crowds clamoring for his touch. Tonight he won't find it so easy.

Time is of the essence, the cover of darkness the priest's only hope for completing their plan. The blasphemer must be tried, convicted, and sentenced to death in their own courts well before his foolish followers greet the morning light.

The disciples are stunned, paralyzed with shock. "What do you want us to do?" one of them manages to ask, but Peter has sprung into action. Tearing his sword from its sheath, he stabs at a man who has Jesus by the arm, slicing off his ear.

The servant of the high priest screams, grabbing at the gaping wound. Soldiers try to quell the growing chaos, barking orders that no one seems to hear. Tensions mount and fear fills the air.

Jesus kneels to pick up the severed ear. The crowd is silenced, collectively holding their breath as he restores it to the man's head. Turning to his disciples, he admonishes them to put their swords away, searching their faces for a sign that they understand.

How many times has he warned them of this moment? What will it take for them to realize that this is the way it must be? Don't they see the choice he is making for them, for the world?

They'd like it to be so simple, a clash of force. That kind of battle he could win in an instant. He glances upward, comprehending something they can't even imagine. Moving his hands across the misty night air, he tries to explain.

"Thousands and thousands of angels would come in an instant to wage war on my behalf, if I asked. But I have a cup to drink. Can't you see that this is what the prophets foretold?"

The disciples hesitate, glancing at each other. Peter reluctantly withdraws his sword, as the others follow suit. Questions swirl within them, but there is no more time for answers.

The priests, relieved at the respite, urge the soldiers to do their job. They grab Jesus hands, binding them behind him with rough twine. He does not resist.

Then all the disciples left him and fled. One by one they disappear. Maybe they try to hide in the massive foliage of olive trees. Perhaps they hurry down a lesser-known path to reach the safety of their families. Even now they may be mixing with the crowd, unnoticed and unidentifiable as followers of Jesus of Nazareth.

He looks into the eyes of the religious leaders who have been dogging his steps all week. "Day after day I have been with you and you could have taken me then. This too the prophets said would happen -- this is your hour and the power of darkness."

Incensed at his arrogance, the priests press in, demanding action. The soldiers tighten the twine until it cuts into the flesh of his wrists and shove him forward. Jesus glances around for the last time at the Garden he has come to love so well, looking for a final familiar face.

Then all the disciples left him and fled. Alone. Does he recall other lonely moments across the span of his short life on earth? His forty-day fast in the wilderness? Quiet mornings in prayer down the dusty paths of Jericho? Long dark nights when sleep eluded him and he sought solace in the Father's arms?

Solitude is nothing new to Jesus, yet this is so very different. This time, He goes to lay down his life. This time he will not return to his disciple's side to teach and heal and soothe their souls with his tender touch. This is the end. And Jesus has never been more alone than in this moment when *all the disciples left him and fled.*

Respond

Have you ever been alone, truly alone? Where there was no one to call, no place to go? Have you ever felt abandoned by those you loved? Consider what Jesus felt in that moment when they all fled. Think of all He had done and said to them. Think of all He will do in the coming hours. Muse on His pain.

Do you flee from the Cross at times? Do you tend to rush past the pain of the sacrifice Christ made, relishing instead the power of resurrection?

It is the Cross of Christ that writes His love on our heart. Without a grasp of this, we will flounder and fail in our Christian walk. Many years after Jesus' death, John wrote: *We love, because He first loved us.* (1 John 4:19)

Have you really understood that we cannot love God on our own, cannot conjure it up? We love because He loved us first. This is the message of the Cross. Write a prayer of confession, commitment or worship in response to the Lord.

A Prayer

Dearest Shepherd of my soul, now you walk through the valley of the shadow of death. . . alone . . . so very alone. Did they scurry away like rats returning to the gutter of their existence? Did they look back, or try to catch your eye one more time? You walk a lonely road, my Lord, and I feel the pain of abandonment in my own gut. I follow you. . . truly I do. Though none go with me, still I will follow . . . I pray it is so.

DAY NINE -- Questioned

In all our lingering at Calvary, perhaps we are at no time more helpless than when we attempt to survey the fullness of the Savior's love. Calvary must speak for itself. Nor is it a mute testimony. It is vibrant and vital in its expression. It speaks volumes.

S. Franklin Lodgson

Reflect

Engage in quiet reflection on your personal journey to the Cross thus far. What has God spoken to you in the quietness of your Spirit? Though it is a sad journey at times, what gifts of joy has focusing on Jesus' final days brought to you? Worship the living Lord who gave Himself for you as you think on these things.

Ephesians 5:2 says *...and walk in love, just as Christ also loved you and gave Himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God as a fragrant aroma..* See the events of Jesus' final days as a fragrant aroma to God -- an offering on your behalf. Write a prayer of thanksgiving in your journal.

Read

*He was oppressed and He was afflicted, Yet He did not open His mouth;
Like a lamb that is led to slaughter, and like a sheep that is
silent before its shearers so He did not open His mouth..*

Isaiah 53:7

The Roman centurion issues an official order to arrest Jesus of Nazareth as the soldiers slip a rope over his head. Priests hiding their glee, hasten home to gather the high court. Jesus examines the faces that surround him. Does anyone look at him -- really look at him? Do they notice the tenderness in his eyes or the lines of sorrow etched on his face?

Someone pulls on the rope, as Jesus plummets forward. The fateful trip down Mount Olivet has begun. Only 100 feet below, mothers, fathers, sons and daughters sleep off their Passover meal in peace, unaware of the catastrophic events to come.

The cumbersome group reaches Jerusalem quickly, taking care to keep their prisoner obscured from pre-dawn worshipers. Down dark and empty streets soldiers push and pull at the Christ, caring nothing for his welfare. *Like a lamb that is led to the slaughter.*

After a while they reach the palatial residence of the Roman governor. From daunting towers, guards observe the procession as it stops outside the gate. The soldiers, tired from the long night, await orders to return to their barracks.

For a while it seems as if everyone has forgotten Jesus. He gazes at the incredible architecture of Castle Antonia, knowing that it was built to protect the temple he will soon be accused of plotting to destroy. Does his heart grieve for the form of religion the impressive edifice now represents? For the rules and regulations that have replaced relationship with the living God, in the hearts of His chosen people?

Voices begin to rise as leaders of the various factions argue about what should happen next. The priests demand that they turn Jesus over to them, as their own court is gathering even now to deal with the situation. The soldiers talk amongst themselves, concluding with relief that this is indeed a religious issue. They release him and Jesus is pulled along once again. *Like a lamb that is led to the slaughter.*

After a while the priests and temple guard reach two great palaces, side by side. They pause, unsure what to do. One palace belongs to Caiphas their leader, whose orders they now follow. But before that is the home of Annas, his father-in-law.

Everyone knows that Annas is the most powerful Jew in all Judea. Though no longer the official chief priest, he continues to rule behind the scenes with an iron hand. With five sons, a grandson and a son-in-law as high priests, his influence is far-reaching. What would their chief priest emeritus think if he saw them leading the procession past his house?

At that moment, Annas appears on his bedroom balcony, beckoning them to bring the prisoner into his audience chambers. Eager to watch the old master handle the situation, the religious leaders scramble for a spot within the palace walls, thrusting Jesus to the front.

A hush fills the room as Annas enters. With beady eyes he scans the crowd, stopping at the man he's heard so much about. He glares at Jesus as if sizing up an opponent before a fight, while his mind races. *Can this be the one? Can this be the revolutionary who has turned our city upside down -- whose angry outburst in the temple cost me a day's profits?*

The thought of his financial losses irks Annas all over again, and he relishes ideas of what he could do to Jesus. *If only I didn't have to abide by these ridiculous requirements of law. Everyone knows that trials must take place after dawn before a quorum of Sanhedrin.* Finally the old man breaks the strained silence.

"Where then are your followers, Jesus of Nazareth? What has happened to those *men* you call disciples? Huh?" Annas sneers and shakes his head.

"And what exactly do you teach? Come, enlighten me."

Jesus ponders the question and for the first time since his arrest, opens his mouth to speak: "I've never tried to hide what I teach. You know I've been in the temple and synagogues -- hundreds have heard me. Why don't you ask some of them what I have taught?"

A stinging crack fractures the uneasy tension in the room as one of the temple guards slaps Jesus: "Is that the way you answer the high priest?"

Annas, secretly enjoying the show, says nothing.

Jesus ignores the biting pain. This wound is one of many more to come, mild by comparison. He looks cautiously toward the guard. "If what I have said is wrong, then be a witness against me. But if not, then why hit me?"

Appalled at his audacity, the guard pulls back to strike again. This time Annas stops him, silencing the murmuring crowd. "Enough of this. Tighten his ropes and take him to Caiphas. I have no more use for him."

And he who came to set prisoners free is bound once again. The Prince of Peace has become a spectacle, an evening's entertainment for the religious elite. *Like a lamb that is led to the slaughter*, the carpenter from Nazareth stumbles along, closing the curtain on one more scene in this desperate drama.

Respond

Consider the journey for Jesus -- from Gethsemane to Jerusalem. Think of being bound -- pulled by a rope around the neck like a dog. Hear the jubilant cries of those who plotted his arrest. Feel the humiliation of being shoved in front of the chief priest. As you think on these things, remember that there was never a moment when Jesus was not choosing his own path -- He came for this purpose.

Read the following passage aloud, thoughtfully, personalizing it.

Then you will say on that day, "I will give thanks to you, O LORD; for although you were angry with me, your anger is turned away, and you comfort me. Behold, God is my salvation, I will trust and not be afraid; for the LORD GOD is my strength and song, and He has become my salvation."

Isaiah 12:1-2

Write out a prayer of affirmation based on these verses.

A Prayer

Oh Lord, they hit you -- a stinging slap echoes in my ears even now. I want to cry at the injustice of it all. I feel your pounding heart, your swelling cheek . . . Dearest friend of sinners, I too am one jerking the rope, pulling you closer to the Cross. My sins, my sins supply stinging slaps to your precious face. Keep me so close to your heart, that I may never get past this troubling reality.

DAY TEN --At a Distance

You and I may give one another the impression of being earnest, godly Christians, but before the Cross we have to admit that we are not that sort of person at all. At Calvary the naked truth is staring down at us all the time from the Cross, challenging us to drop the pose and own the truth.

Roy Hession

Reflect

Prepare spiritually to hear God's voice today. He speaks, saying: *I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have drawn you with lovingkindness.* (Jeremiah 31:3) Hear these words spoken directly to your own heart by Jesus. In prayer, complete these thoughts:

Jesus, because your love is everlasting . . .

Jesus, because you have drawn me to yourself . . .

Jesus, because you draw me with acts of love and kindness . . .

Offer yourself to Him, as you return His love.

Read

And Jesus said to him, "Truly I say to you, that this very night, before a rooster crows twice, you yourself will deny Me three times."

Mark 14:30

During the interrogation by Annas, the crowd in the courtyard has grown. A maid is assigned to watch the gate, opening it only for those with official business. Hearing a familiar voice, she turns and sees John, one of Jesus' disciples. Because her family has done business with his for years, she lets him in, wondering why he would want to be here.

Another man tries to follow, but she pushes him back. John turns and asks permission for his friend to enter with him. She shrugs, cracking the gate open. "You too? Another follower of the carpenter from Nazareth?" She asks as he passes.

"Of course not." Peter answers and moves to a nearby fire, trying to blend in with the others in the courtyard. John goes into the palace to check on Jesus.

It isn't easy for either of them to be here. Putting their lives in danger, they have followed the crowd from a distance, down Mount Olivet and into the heart of the city, while the other disciples fled for safety. Peter's heart breaks at what they've done to his beloved teacher. He cannot leave him now.

Yet he has just denied even knowing Jesus. What does he think as he warms his hands? Why would this giant of a man fear the opinion of a courtyard maid? Heart pounding, Peter ponders his motives while trying to make small talk with the guards around the fire.

Suddenly one of them points right at him. "Why -- you have the voice of a Galilean. You must be one of the prisoner's followers!"

Peter opens his mouth, uncertain what to say. Others join in. "Yes -- you must be, or why would you be here? You're surely not one of us."

Bristling at their sarcasm, Peter rails at them, "I don't know what any of you are talking about." He glances around the circle to see if they believe him, but they've already changed the subject.

Trying to appear calm, Peter rises and finds a place to sit where he is hidden by shadows. Somewhere in the distance, a rooster crows. Again, Peter struggles. *Why have I done this? I've never been afraid before -- I've fought my way out of more brawls than I care to remember ... so why can't I tell the truth now and face the consequences?*

The minutes stretch into an hour. Peter stares at the eastern sky. No sign of dawn -- will it ever break? And where is John? Why doesn't he come and give some word of their Master?

Inside the palace walls, John watches them tighten Jesus' ropes. He sees the bleeding lip and swollen face and knows it hasn't gone well. If only he could get his attention, just to let him know he and Peter have come. He tries to weave his way through the crowd, but the temple guards are pressing everyone back.

"Out -- everyone out. We must take him to our chief priest."

The guards move quickly, dragging Jesus in their midst. A bystander runs outside to spread the news. "He's coming -- they're bringing the prisoner through the courtyard

to Caiaphas." Word spreads from servant to maid, from guard to priest, from fire to fire.

Peter's hands begin to shake. He has tried to remain hidden since they recognized his Galilean accent. But the coals from the fire where he stands have burst into flame, illuminating his face.

"You -- it is you! You're the one who cut off my uncle's ear when they tried to arrest the carpenter. You *are* one of his men."

Spewing foul and angry words, Peter denies ever having been in the presence of Jesus the Christ. But no one is listening now, the commotion across the way having caught their attention. The prisoner is being jerked and shoved through the courtyard.

Suddenly Jesus stops. For a brief second silence fills the air. He looks straight into the eyes of Simon Peter, his boisterous and bold disciple. What does he see? The wretchedness of shame? The hopelessness of failure? Does he wish he could reach out to Peter, to comfort him in some way and reassure him of his love?

"Get moving," a guard yells, and the rope is pulled once again. Jesus moves on.

Peter feels as if his stomach has been turned inside out. He must get out of here. Pushing his way toward the gate, a distant screech pierces the raucous revelry of the crowd, stopping Peter in his tracks. A rooster crows for the second time.

Haunting words batter his mind, relentless words, sickening words: *...before a rooster crows twice, you yourself will deny Me three times.*"

Peter turns and runs, hot tears burning his cheeks . . . past the castle gate, down a dark road, running, running, running till he can run no more. Collapsing on the hard ground, he sheds bitter tears, remorse filling every fiber of his being.

He has failed his teacher, his Lord, his friend. And nothing can ever soothe the ache in his gut, except perhaps a touch from Christ himself. But for now, that cannot be. Before this night is over, the Master will face the sentence of death. And Peter can only weep.

Respond

We often think of Peter as the one who betrayed Christ, but in reality, he was one of the only ones who stayed near Him after the arrest. What might have been his

thoughts, feelings and fears as he followed at a distance? Place yourself in the courtyard that night. See yourself being asked about your relationship to Christ. How would it feel to deny him, as Peter did? Do you at times deny him by your life? Your words or lack of words?

Jesus was neither surprised, nor discouraged at Peter's failure -- He knew it would happen. In fact, after His resurrection, He sought Peter out. Their conversation is not recorded -- just the fact that it took place (1 Corinthians 15:3-5). Imagine those moments together. If it were you, what would you want to say? To do?

Consider your own weakness, failure and sin. Christ is not surprised, nor discouraged. Come to Him today to receive His love and forgiveness for all the ways you let Him down.

Write a prayer of response.

A Prayer

Oh Lord, how often I follow you at a distance. The cost of staying by your side is just too great. And I have denied you -- maybe not with words, but in a thousand deeds of disobedience. I need to see your eyes of love across the courtyard of my life, but too often I find myself running away, burning tears coursing through my days. Seek me out Lord -- draw me to your side with the lovingkindness I sorely crave.

DAY ELEVEN -- Accused

You will understand that spitting scene that night when God lets you see your own heart.

Alexander Whyte

Reflect

Prayerfully come before your Father this morning. Rest in His presence.

Consider for a moment that Jesus' death on the cross was the ultimate sacrifice. Yet, in every event leading to the cross, He continually lets go of things that are by all rights his. Read the following verses:

Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

Philippians 2:5-8

For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich.

2 Corinthians 8:9

What specific things did Jesus give up in coming to redeem you? Speak these things aloud in a prayer of thanksgiving from your heart.

Read

But Jesus kept silent . . .

Matthew 26:63

By now almost the entire Sanhedrin gathers in the palace of their chief priest. Caiaphas is confident they will convict the carpenter from Nazareth of blasphemy. The law requires nothing short of death for such a charge. Feeling the blood coursing through his veins, Caiaphas flushes in anticipation.

Weariness is beginning to show on Jesus' face. He waits quietly while Caiaphas summons the witnesses. One by one they bring charges against him, but no two are alike. Every priest knows that the law requires two witnesses to convict.

Caiaphas scowls, calling for more testimony. Finally one man proclaims that he heard Jesus plotting to destroy the temple. Another agrees, but the details of their stories don't match.

Frustrated at the weakness of their case, Caiaphas addresses Jesus who has not yet spoken. "Do you not answer? What is it that these men are testifying against you?"

But Jesus kept silent. The entire council watches their leader to see how he will handle the prisoner's impudence. Things aren't going according to plan.

Like a flash, Caiaphas envisions his political power and social prestige vanishing before his eyes. Storming from his lofty chair, he thrusts a bony finger in Jesus' face. "I command you, by the living God, tell us whether you are the Christ, the Son of God."

His voice echoes throughout the chamber. Jesus raises his eyes and surprises everyone by answering: "I am. There will come a time when you will see the Son of man sitting at the right hand of power, and coming with the clouds of heaven."

"BLASPHEMY!" Caiaphas screams as the room breaks into angry chatter.

He rips his cloak down the center seam, signaling his offense at Jesus' claims. How dare he quote the sacred Scriptures like that? How dare he speak with such audacity! He signs his own death sentence!

"We have all the witnesses we need right here! You have heard it for yourselves. What do you think?"

In unison they cry: "He deserves death!"

Chaos ensues as some of the council members rush up to Jesus. Gathering around him, they begin to push him back and forth. Hands tied and unable to catch his balance, he stumbles, completely at their mercy.

Something wet hits his neck, then his chin, his cheek, his eye, until his face is covered. What must it be like to realize people are spitting at you? To know you are the object of such utter contempt? To be incapable of even wiping off the filthy spittle?

One of the temple guards grabs his own sash and blindfolds Jesus.

Whack.

"Who hit you? Tell us if you know -- why don't you prophesy for us?"

Whack.

Laughter fills the room. "Come on *Messiah*. Tell us who hit you that time. Surely you know -- after all you *are* the Son of God."

Does he long to respond? To astound them with answers in the midst of their juvenile cruelty? To prove in this absurd arena his claim to Deity?

Whack.

Whack.

Whack.

Jesus staggers with each blow, but those around him are too caught up in their game to care about his weakened state. Dizzy and overcome, he finally gives in, letting them throw him about.

The wounds have begun in earnest for the sacrificial lamb. Vile and vain, the religious leaders taunt him . . . jeering . . . spitting . . . pummeling his face with their palms.

But Jesus kept silent. Not a word passes his lips, either in protest or in pain.

Finally they tire, drifting off in twos and threes to await the dawn. Caiaphas glances back at the battered prisoner. Let him be. He won't be going anywhere in his condition.

When morning finally comes, the guards drag Jesus to his feet, pushing him along the way to the Temple for the "official" trial. This time they seek no witnesses as he stands before them. Caiaphas asks the critical question. "If you are the Christ, then tell us right now."

Carefully Jesus mouths an answer through swollen lips. "If I tell you, you won't believe me, and if I ask you, you won't answer."

At first the elders are put off. This won't do -- it isn't blasphemy. But Jesus isn't finished. "From now on the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the power of God."

Frustrated with the way His words seem to go in circles, Caiaphas demands: "Well, are you the Son of God, then?"

"Yes, I am."

"Blasphemy! Let us take this impostor to our governor."

Among the worshippers in the temple courtyard, Judas shuffles anxiously about, regret eating at his insides. Upon hearing the verdict against Jesus, he bursts into the council chambers where a few priests remain, seeking to give back the money he earned for the betrayal, perhaps to assuage his guilt.

When they will have no part in his atonement, he hurls the coins at their feet, and runs out. While the priests are still pondering this new development, a tormented Judas enters an empty field and hangs himself from a tree, branding the annals of history with his death. Guilt with no relief . . . sin without forgiveness . . . despair with no way out.

The death of Jesus too, will soon stain the pages of perpetuity. Though he has no personal guilt to expunge or sin to atone for, he will hang from another kind of tree, spilling his precious blood for a world lost in darkness, and who knew him not.

Respond

Contemplating the details of Jesus' trial is a painful preamble to his gruesome death. But it is important to do so, because His suffering did not begin on Calvary. Spend a few minutes imagining the scene at the house of Caiaphas. Jesus chose to speak only at certain times, most of the time remaining silent. This greatly angered the chief priest.

Do you demand answers from Jesus that at times He chooses not to give? How do you respond? Anger? Rejection? Discouragement? Lack of faith?

Contemplate what Jesus must have felt when the taunts began. Imagine the nauseous feeling other men's saliva on your face when your hands are bound behind you. Think what it would be like to be one of those doing the spitting.

This is the living God and there is no reason he should endure this kind of treatment. No reason except one – Love divine and incomprehensible. Confess your unwillingness to accept Christ's silence at times. Pour out from your heart expressions of gratitude and adoration for your Savior who loves with this kind of intensity. Write a few sentences of response in your prayer journal.

A Prayer

Oh precious redeemer . . . what can I say to you -- you who have been spit upon and ridiculed. You whose face is now misshapen by the blows of sinners. You who bleed, and fall. . . and yet utter not a word. I cry, but my tears seem a trivial testament to the torment you endure. What can I say? Nothing. Silent sorrow is my only recourse. I pray your heart can sense my grief.

DAY TWELVE -- Things He Could Have Said

*Christ is to us just what his cross is.
All that Christ was in heaven or on earth was put into what he did there...
Christ, I repeat, is to us just what his cross is.
You do not understand Christ till you understand his cross.*

P. T. Forsyth

Reflect

In quietness, listen to the sounds around you. Seek to enter a sense of rest, letting outer noises become a distant hum. Set your heart toward the living God by expressing your thankfulness that He is always here, ready to meet you.

Contemplate the greatness of God, especially in light of His commitment to redeem you.

For this reason you are great, O Lord GOD; for there is none like You, and there is no God besides You, according to all that we have heard with our ears. And what one nation on the earth is like Your people Israel, whom God went to redeem for Himself as a people and to make a name for Himself, and to do a great thing for You and awesome things for Your land, before Your people whom You have redeemed for Yourself?

2 Samuel 7:22-23

Pray through the Scripture above, beginning with the words, "O Lord God, there is none like Thee who . . ."

Read

I find no guilt in Him.

John 18:38

By now the streets are teeming with morning worshippers. Many stop to stare at the odd procession. Jewish pilgrims recognize their most powerful leaders heading the entourage. But who is the prisoner? Probably some poor beggar -- clothes dirty, face looking like he barely survived a drunken brawl.

Once again Jesus is a spectacle. A few fall in line, forsaking worship to satiate their lust for the bizarre. There may even be an execution -- why else would the Sanhedrin be bringing this one to Pilate?

What might Jesus see in the faces as he passes by? A mother whose tiny child he once brought to life? A teenager who sat one day on a hillside listening to him teach? An old man who shared in the miracle meal of fishes and loaves? How do they respond when he catches their eye? Offer silent support? Turn away, embarrassed?

Outside Castle Antonia once again, the growing group stops. Refusing to enter the Gentile's residence and face defilement, Caiaphas sends for Pilate. Soon he appears at the top of the stairs near the gate.

"What are you accusing him of?"

The Jewish leaders, irritated at Pilate's attitude retort: "If he hadn't done evil things, we wouldn't be here."

Pilate shakes his head. One more false messiah, one more fanatic claiming to be sent from God. When would these backwards Jews ever stop their foolish games? "Take him then, and judge him yourselves."

Turning to leave, Pilate hears them call out words He cannot ignore. "He is guilty of death and we can't execute him. That is why we are here."

Sighing, Pilate gestures to his soldiers to bring the accused into the palace. By now he is curious -- what could this man have done to stir them so? How powerful can he be?

"Well, is it true -- are you the King of the Jews?" He asks in mild amusement.

"Did someone tell you this, or are you asking for yourself?" Jesus quietly reponds.

"I'm not a Jew -- your people, your own priests have brought you here. What in the world have you done to make them so afraid of you?"

"I do have a kingdom, but it isn't in this world. If it were, my followers would be fighting for power and control even now. If it were, I wouldn't even be here. But my kingdom is of another world."

Jesus' mystical rhetoric frustrates Pilate. He needs a simple answer to determine guilt. Why won't the man just deny the charge, ending this whole fiasco? He tries again.

"Are you a king then?"

Jesus looks off as if daydreaming. "I was born for one reason. I came into this world for one thing only -- to speak the truth. Every person who recognizes truth hears what I am trying to say."

Bored, and eager to eat breakfast, Pilate rises.

"What is truth anyway?" He says almost to himself, as he motions for them to bring Jesus back out to the palace steps.

Pilate looks down at the Jewish religious leaders who have given him nothing but trouble as a Roman governor in Judea. *I find no guilt in him.*

Seeing their plan start to fall apart, the elders cry out.

"This man is trying to pervert our nation."

"He refused to give honor to Caesar."

Pilate glances over at Jesus, whose eyes are surveying the crowds that have gathered. "Why don't you defend yourself?"

"He says he is a king!"

Once again Pilate probes at the prisoner: "Don't you hear all they are saying? Why don't you answer these charges?"

There are so many things Jesus could say in this moment. *I am King of kings and Lord of lords! I am the Alpha and the Omega. For my own pleasure I created all things. I am the first and the last -- in me every one of you lives and moves and has your being.*

But he says nothing.

Pilate, marveling at the calmness with which the prisoner awaits his fate, proclaims again: *I find no guilt in him.*

Shouts fill the air -- loud angry accusations.

"He stirs up the people everywhere he goes."

"All through Judea he has been teaching and causing an uprising."

Fearing loss of control, Pilate searches his mind for a solution to this craziness. He must have legitimate charges or Tiberius might hear of it and remove him from office. On the other hand, these Jews have caused so many problems with their fanaticism -- what if they instigate a riot? How will he explain that?

"From Galilee to here, he has incited the people."

Pilate is stopped short at this claim, reveling in the simple solution before him.

"Galilee? Did you say he is from Galilee? Well, then, take him to Herod -- he is here in Jerusalem too. Let him deal with the Galilean."

It seems a stroke of genius. First, Herod will be honored, and perhaps put in a good word for him in Rome. Second, maybe he will take the Galilean home and try him there. Then all this will be a thing of the past.

Pilate turns to go, glancing briefly at the ill-placed prisoner.

Jesus, physically exhausted and weak from hunger, watches Pilate leave. The soldiers pull him roughly back down the stairs.

What does he hear in the midst of the crowd? Chatting, laughing, people excited at the turn of events? Lonely onlookers losing hope in the man they once thought would change their world? Religious zealots, meticulous about keeping the law, but lost at any rate?

Like a beating drum, the march moves on. Pious pilgrims prepare for their day of rest, and the plan for the Lord of the Sabbath turns another prophetic page.

Respond

Think for a moment of all the things Jesus could have said each time charges were brought against him. Consider the things he could have done -- to the Sanhedrin, Pilate, the soldiers, the onlookers. Given the reality that he was fully human, *and* fully God at every moment, contemplate his ongoing choices to endure all that He went through. Respond in loving words of worship and thanksgiving.

A Prayer

With accusations hurled about you, did you ever want to just stop the whole thing -- to whisper truth into the depravity of lies that filled the air my Lord? And I wonder where they were -- those who might

have defended you. . . Nicodemus. . . Josephus. . . and your disciples. . . and where would I be if I were one of them? Give me grace to answer honestly, Lord.

DAY THIRTEEN -- Hoping For a Sign

"Come now my soul, and worship this man, this God. Come believer, and behold thy Savior. Come to the innermost circle of all sanctity, the circle that contains the cross of Christ, and here sit down."

Charles Haddon Spurgeon

Reflect

Breathe deeply as you affirm God's presence with you in this quiet time and place. Acknowledge your need for Him by confessing any sins that His Spirit brings to mind. Thank Him for healing and forgiveness that flows through His blood at Calvary.

Meditate quietly on the following passage:

For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps, who committed no sin, nor was any deceit found in His mouth, and while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously; and He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed.

1 Peter 2:21-24

Write a prayer of thanksgiving for the truths that you see here.

Read

Now Herod was very glad when he saw Jesus; for he had wanted to see Him for a long time, because he had been hearing about Him and was hoping to see some sign performed by Him.

Luke 23:8

Sounds of morning life fill the air as Roman guards march the prisoner to the palace where Herod resides during Passover. The procession passes through the already bustling marketplace where people busy themselves setting up stalls. It is almost

impossible to see Jesus now for the crowd that surrounds him -- Roman soldiers, temple guards, high priests and curious citizens with nothing better to do.

It is a short walk to the palace, but Jesus hasn't slept in at least 24 hours. Does he tire of the jostling, the tugging and pushing that prod him on when his feet falter? Does his head throb from the bruises of the night's beating? Or does he draw his reserve from some inner place of strength, a place no one has been able yet to destroy?

Troubling grief must occupy the heart of Christ as they approach the entrance to this place where his cousin John was beheaded only months ago. A weak man, Herod had ordered the execution simply to appease his incestuous wife. Dread must surely stir within as Jesus anticipates his own encounter with the evil tetrarch.

At the palace, anticipation fills the air. Herod has wanted to see Jesus for a long time, having heard tales of miracles and bold teaching. Secretly, he fears John the Baptist has come back to life. Now he will be able to see for himself and do away with him for good, if necessary.

From the chamber where he waits, loud laughter resonates. Herod and his entourage can't wait to see this strange Galilean rumored to have raised the dead and turned water into wine.

When the group finally arrives, the prisoner is a disappointment. Disheveled, dirty, bruised and bound, it is hard to believe he can perform miracles, much less entice whole villages to follow him.

Herod paces a circle around him.

"Who are you really? And why have they brought you here?"

The crowd shuffles with nervous energy as Jesus fails to respond.

"Is it true you heal the sick? Raise the dead? Are you from God, or is all this a hoax?" Herod stops directly in front of Jesus, demanding an answer.

There is none.

With growing frustration, he tosses out a series of questions, none of which elicits a reply. Finally, convinced that this couldn't be the brash John the Baptist, Herod tires of the fiasco. He looks around the room. As if on cue, the priests and scribes begin to call out angry charges against Jesus, accusing him once again of blasphemy and treason.

Herod's soldiers, disappointed that they've seen no miracles, shake their heads in disgust and begin to ridicule him. "Mighty miracle man -- you can't even untie your hands!"

"You can't do miracles -- You're just a washed up prophet."

A priest shouts above the mocking soldiers. "It doesn't matter what he is -- he is stirring people up against the government -- he is a threat to Caesar."

Herod laughs out loud. "Him -- a threat? How could he be a threat to anyone? He's harmless . . . pitiful, a weak excuse for a man."

One of the soldiers makes a sweeping bow before Jesus, feigning submission. The others jeer as they kneel around the would-be king.

Herod joins in, donning one of his royal robes and placing it on Jesus' shoulders. The sight of the bedraggled prisoner dressed as a king, amuses even the high priests.

What thoughts must plague Jesus now? Surrounded by royalty, does he remember the throne he left behind when he came to a fallen earth? Does the robe he wears remind him of the robes of white his death will secure for sinners such as these?

Is the mental cruelty being thrust upon him now, even more painful than the physical injuries he has sustained from last night's beating? Knowing what he knows, how can he keep taking this abuse?

Quickly becoming bored with the whole thing, Herod turns to leave. "Take him back to *my friend, Pilate*. Tell him I find nothing worthy of death in this man."

An unusual alliance -- Pilate, the Roman procurator and Herod, the Jewish Tetrarch -- enemies up to this very moment. But politics makes strange bedfellows, and another piece of the passion puzzle fits nicely into place.

Respond

Consider Jesus enduring this kind of ridicule. How did He do it? What sustained Him? In his humanity, what do you think He experienced in those moments?

See yourself as one of the soldiers, bowing in mockery before Him. Look into His eyes and seek to comprehend His thoughts and emotions.

Re-read the passage from 1 Peter that you read at the beginning. According to this verse, how did Jesus endure? Imagine Him going through this process over and over again. Praise Him that He chose to do so when He could have walked away. Offer Him your personal worship and gratitude.

A Prayer

King of kings and Lord of lords . . . they mock you. You didn't perform for them and so they scorn your very presence. I think I understand their evil hearts my Lord. How often I have disdained your Presence for something more tangible, something to satisfy my senses rather than sear my soul. This is how I mock you dearest Savior -- forgive me . . . forgive my foolish squandering of your precious grace.

DAY FOURTEEN -- Absolved

*The very existence of the cross, and of the crucified Christ,
forces us to make a crucial decision:
Will we look for God somewhere else, or will we make the cross, and the crucified Christ,
the basis of our thought about God?*

Alistair E. McGrath

Reflect

The Psalmist poses the question: *I will lift up my eyes to the mountains; from where shall my help come?* Then he answers: *My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth.* (Psalm 121:1-2).

Quietly consider this reality. Allow your mind to reflect on the truth that the Maker of heaven and earth is personally concerned with the details of your life, ready to send help whenever you call upon Him.

Seek to focus solely on God who meets you here, asking him to remove mental distractions. Ask Him to write His word for you from the Cross on your heart this day.

Read

*But they cried out all together, saying,
"Away with this man, and release for us Barabbas!"*

Luke 23:18

Back at the Praetorium they push Jesus up some steps to a platform where the growing crowd can see easily see him. The strange scene of this commoner with battered face now decked in a royal robe sets tongues wagging. Summoning the high priests and other leaders to the front, Pilate holds up his right hand to silence the crowd.

"You brought this man to me at dawn, accusing him of inciting people against the government. I have listened to all you say, I have questioned the prisoner myself, and I find him innocent of these charges. Herod agrees and has sent him back to me. Therefore, I will have him scourged and released."

Confident that this compromise will appease the priests, Pilate turns to leave. Near the front of the crowd a group of well-known freedom fighters are calling his name. One of his attendants leans over to explain that the men showed up a while ago, requesting he release their leader, Barabbas, following the custom of the Roman government to release a Jewish prisoner every Passover as a sign of peace.

To Pilate, it seems the gods have smiled upon him. Of course -- this is what he can do with the innocent Galilean -- let him go and be done with it. Surely given the choice, any God-fearing Jew would prefer Jesus' release to that of the murderer, Barabbas.

Ignoring the defiant revolutionaries, Pilate calls out to the high priests: "What if I give you the king of the Jews? Would you like me to release him?"

Any answer they might give is drowned out by the cries of Barabbas' friends for his emancipation. Tempers flare as the morning sun beats down its relentless heat. As Pilate observes the growing unease, a breathless messenger runs up the steps, handing him a sealed envelope.

Inside is a hastily scribbled note from his wife. *Have nothing to do with the carpenter from Nazareth. Last night I had a terrible dream about him and I have already suffered much today because of it.*

Pilate glances up to see the crowd scrutinizing his every move. The priests and other religious leaders have dispersed among them, championing their cause, stirring up the people.

Wanting to be done with it all, Pilate thunders, "Tell me now -- which of the two men shall I release to you?"

A thunderous roar rises up in response. *Away with this man, and release for us Barabbas!*

Pilate stares at Jesus, who is silently watching it all. Sadness has settled on his bruised face, his weary body slightly bent, a pitiful sight.

What does Jesus see in the agitated mob? What must he feel as he watches the freedom fighters demand their leader's release? Their loyalty is fierce and fearless. Where are the men who promised they'd never leave *him*, never deny *him*, follow *him* to death if need be? These renegades battle brazenly for political liberation -- who will carry on *his* revolution to liberate the souls of men?

Pilate ponders how to handle this one who has created such a furor among the Jews. The crowd is getting out of hand -- how easily this mess could ruin his reputation in Rome as a powerful leader. What in the world should he do?

"Take him and scourge him." He barks at the soldiers, while the crowd looks on.

They drag Jesus away, every eye watching, wondering if the weakened prisoner can possibly survive the horrific flogging to come. Pilate follows along, weary with the whole thing.

Can it still be morning? The day seems unbearably long to priests and procurators, but for the Man of Sorrows, it has only begun.

Respond

Consider the moment when crowds called for the release of Barabbas. Besides murder and robbery, he was guilty of the same things Jesus had been accused of -- seeking political power and creating an insurgency against the government. But in the end, Barabbas will be set free.

See yourself as Barabbas, sitting in a dark cave awaiting your sentence of death. Feel your own guilt. Experience the shame of failure, the fear of eternity in darkness. Then consider how it feels to have someone open the gate, loosen your bonds and set you free, no questions asked.

Barabbas was freed when Jesus should have been. Through Jesus' death, you are set free. Reflect on the reality of this. Feel the joy of it. Thank God, pour out your gratefulness to Him. Write the following in your own words as a prayer of thanksgiving: *Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!* (Romans 7:24)

A Prayer

I am that prisoner Lord that deserves to die. I have committed crime after crime against the living God and I have no one to demand my release. No one except you. How can I ever comprehend that at this very moment you stand before the Father doing just that? Praying for me? How will I ever grasp the mystery that You went to Your death, innocent of every charge, while I am free today? To me, these things are incomprehensible and inexplicable.

DAY FIFTEEN -- Scourged

*Of all the pains that lead to salvation this is the most pain, to see thy
Love suffer. How might any pain be more to me than to see
Him that is all my life, all my bliss, and all my joy suffer?*

Julian of Norwich

Reflect

Today we will look at the scourging of Jesus. This may be difficult, painful, and can even be repulsive. Spend enough time in God's presence to prepare your heart. Read aloud or sing the words to the following old hymn:

There is a Fountain, Filled with Blood

William Cowper, 1722, Public Domain

*There is a fountain, filled with blood, drawn from Emmanuel's veins.
And sinners plunged beneath that flood, lose all their guilty stains.
Lose all their guilty stains, lose all their guilty stains,
And sinners plunged beneath that flood, lose all their guilty stains.*

*E'er since, by faith, I saw the stream Thy flowing wounds supply,
Redeeming love has been my theme, and shall be till I die.
And shall be till I die, and shall be till I die;
Redeeming love has been my theme, and shall be till I die.*

Zechariah prophesied of this fountain, long before Christ came to shed His blood. *In that day a fountain will be opened for the house of David and for the inhabitants of Jerusalem, for sin and for impurity.* (Zechariah 13:1). Spend some time in silent gratitude for the cleansing streams provided for your own sin and impurity.

Paul wrote of his desire to know the fellowship of Christ's sufferings (Philippians 3:10). The word "fellowship" referred almost to a sense of partnership. Offer yourself to walk in communion through these sufferings of the Lord, asking Him to reveal Himself to you in a fresh way today.

Read

*The chastening for our well-being fell upon Him,
and by His scourging we are healed.*

Isaiah 53:5

Inside the palace courtyard, soldiers prepare for the scourging, paying little attention to Jesus. With business-like precision one rips the robe from his shoulders and another removes the rest of his clothes. A grim-faced Jesus offers no resistance.

Exposed . . . vulnerable . . . defenseless in every way. Does he commune in spirit with his Father as the morning air assaults his naked body? Is this part of the cup he cried out against in the Garden only hours ago?

Roughly they drag him to a column stained with layer after layer of blood. Pushing him to his knees, they lift his arms above his head, securing them to the post. A soldier stands to his right and another to his left, awaiting the order to begin. Does Jesus see frail sinners in need of a Savior behind their hardened eyes?

Each holds a vicious looking whip, several feet long. Halfway down it is split into numerous leather strips to which pieces of sheep bone are attached. Two lead balls hang at the end of every strip.

Jesus knows a brief moment of cool relief as he rests his cheek against the column.

"Begin!" The command is given.

The soldier on the right, well trained and competent from years of experience with the flagellum, strikes the first blow. A crack resounds throughout the courtyard, spilling over into the silent wake of those who wait outside.

At first, the bones make tiny cuts on Jesus' back, the iron balls raising red welts that quickly turn to purple bruises. With each blow, Jesus' body recoils. Before he can even catch his breath, another strike is administered.

Crack.

Silence.

Crack.

Silence.

And on and on it goes until the first soldier tires. The second steps in quickly, not missing a beat. By now the small cuts are bleeding profusely, and a few of the large bruises are breaking open.

Jesus' strength fails, the loss of blood making him lightheaded and dizzy. He winces now only slightly with each lash of the whip.

Crack.

Silence.

Crack.

Silence.

Blood is beginning to gush from several places. Soldiers turn away, feigning busyness to avoid the horrid sight of gaping wounds. Tiny ribbons of flesh are all that remain on Jesus' back.

The officer is just doing a job -- one he's done a thousand times before. But does he have any idea to whom he inflicts such hideous blows?

Crack.

Silence.

Crack.

Silence.

Crack.

The two soldiers take their turns, oblivious to the condition of the prisoner until Pilate enters and calls a halt to the bloody operation. The victim has not moved for several minutes now. If he dies here, they will all face grave reprimands, and the loss of their esteemed position in the royal army.

Quickly they move to untie him. Flanking him on either side, soldiers lift the near unconscious prisoner to his feet. Jesus manages to open his eyes briefly, and somehow

finds the fortitude to stand. Searing pain slices through him as they drape his clothes over his battered body.

Then he is led out to the platform. The crowd waits in anticipation for the grand finale of their morning merrymaking. Soldiers on either side secure his feet and gingerly step away. Somehow he manages not to collapse. Pilate, frustrated and frightened because of his wife's dream, looks at the beaten down would-be king.

Rancor resonates in his curt challenge to the crowd: *Behold the man!*

And demons delight. The Father hangs his head and weeps, for though he could heal the mass of bleeding tissue with a word, He won't. The words of the prophet Isaiah play a haunting melody through the halls of heaven. Today the Son of God is bruised for the iniquities of a dying world, and by his stripes, humanity can finally be healed.

Respond

Take a minute to contemplate the moments of scourging Christ endured. As you form this picture in your mind, read the following passage:

Surely our griefs He himself bore, and our sorrows He carried; yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, and by His scourging we are healed. All of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; but the LORD has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him.

Isaiah 53:4-6.

In every bruise that each ball of lead inflicted, see your personal sin. With each bloody cut the leather and bone made, see the healing you have come to know in Him. Write this passage out in your own words as a prayer of worship.

Receive forgiveness and healing, rejoicing (perhaps in a bittersweet way) that Jesus endured what he did.

A Prayer

Must I go on Lord Jesus? I can barely stand to see myself through the gaping wounds on your back. My stomach churns and I want to walk away. The journey to the Cross is fraught with a thousand deaths and I'm not sure if I am prepared to embrace each one. To know the fellowship of your sufferings is not so simple. Sustain me in my quest dearest Savior and I will seek to share your sorrow.

DAY SIXTEEN -- Final Questioning

Where have your love, your mercy, your compassion shone out more luminously than in your wounds, sweet gentle Lord of mercy? More mercy than this no one has than that he lay down his life for those who are doomed to death.

Bernard of Clairvaux

Reflect

Has the Cross become a place of familiar consolation to you yet? Are you beginning to feel a drawing in your soul to reflect often on the sorrows of Calvary? Take a few minutes as you quiet your heart to consider what the Cross of Christ means to you after reflecting on it through the past days or weeks.

John wrote: *We have come to know and have believed the love which God has for us. God is love* (1 John 4:16) Are you beginning to know God's love in a deeper way through this journey? Are you coming to a place of truly believing it?

Reflect on these things and ask God to do an even deeper work as we draw nearer to Christ's death.

Read

But they shouted all the more, "Crucify Him!"

Mark 15:14

The battered prisoner barely stands, a solemn symbol of Rome's power to destroy. Wanting to get away from it all, and confident the extremely brutal beating will satisfy the Jewish priests, Pilate asks once again: "Then what shall I do with Jesus who is called the Christ?"

Before the words are out of his mouth a loud cry ensues: *Crucify him. You crucify him.*

"Me? But I believe he's innocent. Tell me -- what evil has he done? Take him yourselves and crucify him -- I find no guilt in him."

Pilate knows his offer is an empty one, for the power to execute lies with him alone. Try as he might, he cannot extricate this man's future from his own hands.

Jesus struggles to keep his balance. He has lost so much blood, his head at times seems to float above him. Standing here, he is the only who really knows the details of how this drama will end. Does he wish he could just speak and be on his way to Golgotha? If this entire crowd suddenly stopped to listen to *him*, what would he say?

"He says he is the son of God, and by our laws, for this he must die." A high priest makes his voice heard above the crowd.

Superstitious fear grips Pilate upon hearing these words. Son of God? He hasn't heard this charge before. Is this why his wife warned him to steer clear of this man? Does he have mystical powers? Watching the broken prisoner, it seems nothing could be further from the truth.

Turning quickly, Pilate motions for them to bring Jesus back into the palace. He must get to the bottom of this.

"Where do you come from?" Knowing the answer already, Pilate gives the prisoner a chance to deny their charges of a claim to Deity.

Jesus looks at him, but says nothing.

"Why won't you talk to me?" Pilate pleads, baffled again by this one who offers no self-defense. It is unheard of – truly he must be crazy.

"Don't you understand that I have the power here, that with a word I can release you *or* crucify you?"

Looking off as if in a trance, Jesus smiles slightly. Is he moving through the caverns of his eternal memory to a time before the foundation of the world? Does he see the moment before his incarnation, when he stepped down from heaven to redeem mankind? Does he recall his agony of a few hours past when he made the choice to drink this very cup? What thoughts drive him to finally respond to Pilate?

"You have no power over me, except that which is given to you from above. The one who turned me over to you has the greater sin here."

Pilate bristles at the affront to his authority, but senses a strange relief. He has done all he can do. He looks once more into the eyes of the Christ, frustrated at his failure to figure this odd prisoner out. Shaking his head, he walks back onto the platform, leaving him behind with the guards.

Distant cries for execution tick like a time bomb in Jesus' ear. But perhaps he garners a measure of strength in the words of truth he has just spoken. For though he feels his wounds in every excruciating move of his body, no one can take his life from him -- he alone has the power to lay it down.

Faces flash across his mind -- fishermen, priests, prostitutes, mothers, children, tax collectors, doctors, friends and enemies. In every countenance he sees a desperate need for a redeemer. For these he came. . . for these he presses on.

Respond

Examine the weariness Jesus must have felt as he was constantly passed from one person to another. He allowed Himself to be completely at their mercy. Physically he must have been in torment. Take a few minutes to contemplate the physical and emotional state of Jesus at this time.

On many previous occasions, Jesus could have been arrested or killed, but escaped (See John 8:59 and 10:39). Reflect on the reality that every moment of this experience is not only preordained by the Father, but chosen by the Son.

Earlier, Jesus had prayed: *Father, the hour has come; glorify Your Son, that the Son may glorify You, even as You gave Him authority over all flesh, that to all whom You have given Him, He may give eternal life.* (John 17:1-2)

To glorify means to confer honor, praise, to magnify. Jesus seems to be saying that the Cross is an honor to him. Consider this in light of His suffering. Consider this in light of His desire in verse two -- to give you eternal life. Write a prayer in which you glorify Christ -- give him the honor, praise and worship due Him as He faces the cross.

A Prayer

Do you call this glory my Lord? I will never comprehend this thing -- that you considered the cross an honor when you could have commanded all heaven and earth to bow down before you. But though you despised the shame, this death you will soon embrace exalted you to heights we may never completely fathom. Let me see this my Lord, that I might love your glory as never before...the gruesome glory of redeeming love.

DAY SEVENTEEN -- Crucify Him!

*And, unfortunately, it is certain that I am also one of that crowd
that doesn't give much thought to what happened.
I, who am even able to write these things about the passion while remaining impassive,
whereas it should only be written about in tears.*

Raneiro Cantallamesa

Reflect

Take the time to silence other sounds today -- unplug the phone, put a sign on your door, turn off radios, CD players etc. In silence, be still and know God speaks to you. Thank Him for meeting you here day after day, never failing.

Ask God to reveal to you the true condition of your heart. Read the following three verses slowly and thoughtfully, letting God shine His light as you evaluate:

Transgression speaks to the ungodly within his heart; there is no fear of God before his eyes. For it flatters him in his own eyes concerning the discovery of his iniquity and the hatred of it.

Psalm 36:1-2

If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us.

I John 1:8

Because you say, "I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing," and you do not know that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked.

Revelation 3:1

Do you see yourself as wretched, poor, needy, full of sin? This is important in order to fully appreciate Christ's death for you. Write a prayer of commitment to seek this kind of heart, based on these verses.

Read

And all the people answered and said, "His blood be on us and on our children!"

Matthew 27:25

The clamorous crowd objects when Pilate appears on the Praetorium platform alone. Throughout the morning, rumors of the prisoner's dangerous past have spread like gangrene. Ire emanates from the growing mob as their eagerness for execution intensifies.

"If you let him go, you are no friend of Caesar's."

"He calls himself a king -- that makes him an enemy of Caesar!"

Pilate watches their loyalty to the Roman conqueror in amazement. Recognizing the insanity of the farce before him, he ponders such drivenness to destroy. Yet, their threat must be taken seriously. If word reaches Tiberius that he is befriending an insurrectionist, his political future will be in grave danger. Shaking his head, Pilate goes to retrieve the prisoner.

Within minutes a stumbling Jesus is escorted onto the platform, Herod's robe now gone. Some of the blood from the scourging has dried, binding his tunic to his back. His face, though bloated and bruised, looks pasty white, his eyes nearly swollen shut.

What must the Christ be thinking now? Does he drift in and out of consciousness, barely aware of the noisy chatter below? Does he dream of a seraph coming to cool his brow or bind his broken body?

Judgment is nigh for the one who will one day judge the world. What does he think of these accusers who stand before him now as judge and jury? What does Jesus feel for the procurator who persists in proclaiming his innocence?

Taking his official seat on the platform, Pilate orders the soldiers to bring the prisoner forward for sentencing. The late morning sun beats down and a servant rushes to hold an umbrella over Pilate's head. No shade is offered the Christ who leans weakly against a soldier's arm.

"Here is your king!" Pilate taunts the religious leaders.

"Take him away. Crucify him!" They cry back.

"What? Shall I crucify your king?"

"We have no king but Caesar." One priest calls out, the crowd chiming in with a chant-like drone.

Pilate, astonished at their fervor, motions to a guard. The noise dies down as he sets a basin of water before him. Reaching into the bowl, the procurator rinses his hands slowly and methodically, as if practicing some ancient ritual. Finally, he looks up and announces with authority: "I am innocent of the blood of this righteous man. See to it yourselves."

His blood shall be on us and on our children! A high priest shouts. Making a mantra of the sacred words, priest after priest affirms his own willingness to assume responsibility for Christ's punishment. As his accusers, the law requires nothing less, but in this moment when doubts would seem reasonable, they relish instead their role as witnesses for the prosecution.

His blood shall be on us and on our children! The dreadful sound slices through the air like another blow assaulting Jesus the Christ. These who glory in teaching others the ways of God, can't possibly comprehend the eternal significance of the words they speak.

For it is not this sham of a trial that sends Jesus to Calvary, but a people who've fallen short of God's glory. No human being can ever wash their hands of him, but the blood he sheds there fills a fountain where all may plunge, losing their guilty stains. *His blood be on us and on our children*, for it has the power to heal an eternity of hell within our hearts.

Respond

Hear the words like a chant in your own ears: "His blood be on us and on our children." What must Jesus have felt when the sound of it filled the air? What might He have wanted to say?

Consider the punishment Jesus is about to undergo. See yourself as morally responsible. Say quietly, "Your blood is upon me...Jesus."

Read the following verses aloud as a prayer of worship and gratitude that you can come to the healing waters of Christ's shed blood today and everyday.

Your lovingkindness, O LORD, extends to the heavens, your faithfulness reaches to the skies. Your righteousness is like the mountains of God; your judgments are like a great deep. O LORD, you preserve man and beast. How precious is your lovingkindness, O God! And the children of men take refuge in the shadow of your

wings. They drink their fill of the abundance of your house; and you give them to drink of the river of your delights.

Psalm 36:5-8

A Prayer

Oh Lord, your blood is on me and my children. I say it with shame. I cannot even look into your eyes, for the sadness there re-opens the wounds of my sinful heart, and like an infected sore, they ooze with sordid filth. But I must look -- I must, for through the sorrow, you invite me to come and be cleansed. And so I will -- let your blood be on me, and in me and over me until I am pure, precious Redeemer.

DAY EIGHTEEN --Sentenced

Thorns, it seems, always accompany visits to glory. No one who has walked in Christ's presence will ever be allowed to strut.

Jamie Buckingham

Reflect

Rejoice today that God is here. Turn your thoughts toward Him, asking that He reveal Himself to you in a unique way through this time with Him.

Hundreds of years before Christ was sentenced to die on Calvary, Isaiah prophesied of the Passion, saying: *Just as many were astonished at you, My people so His appearance was marred more than any man and His form more than the sons of men.* (Isaiah 52:14) Read this verse again as you prepare your heart to see the fulfillment of it in today's reading.

Read (or sing) the words to the following old hymn meditatively, offering them as your own prayer to the Lord.

O Sacred Head, Now Wounded

Bernard of Clairvaux, Public Domain

*O sacred head, now wounded, with grief and shame weighed down,
Now scornfully surrounded, with thorns your only crown,
O sacred head, no glory now from your face does shine;
Yet, though despised and gory, I joy to call you mine.*

*Men mock and taunt and jeer you. They smite your countenance.
Though mighty worlds shall fear you and flee before your glance.
How pale you are with anguish, with sore abuse and scorn!
Your eyes with pain now languish that once were bright as morn!*

*My burden in your passion, Lord, you have borne for me,
For it was my transgression, My shame, on Calvary.
I cast me down before you; Wrath is my rightful lot.
Have mercy, I implore you; Redeemer, spurn me not!*

*What language shall I borrow To thank you, dearest Friend,
For this, your dying sorrow, your pity without end?
Oh, make me yours forever, And keep me strong and true;
Lord, let me never, never outlive my love for you.*

Read

And they began to acclaim Him, "Hail, King of the Jews!"

Mark 15:18

Pilate watches the crowd with a mixture of disgust and alarm. How he deplores giving them their way. But what else can he do? God knows he has tried to release this eccentric Jew, but now it seems he's out of options. He summons a centurion, mouthing terse orders.

The priests and elders continue their abrasive cries for crucifixion. Jesus sways to one side. He appears to be on the verge of verge of passing out.

The centurion returns holding the arm of Barabbas. Pilate declares his official release and the crowd cheers as he reunites with his fellow revolutionaries below. Meanwhile, the soldiers flanking Jesus pull him along to the palace courtyard. Breathing a collective sigh of relief, the priests and elders are confident that execution is inevitable.

The crowd begins to break up. Some head to the temple for worship, while others move to the marketplace to buy unleavened bread for the day's meal. Many remain, waiting for the prisoner to be led out to the place called Golgotha.

Inside the courtyard, hundreds of soldiers form rows in military precision to prepare for the imminent death march. What a pitiful sight is the accused -- one more man with a messiah complex. How could he have ever made any claim to royalty? What would make him dream such dreams?

A few joke at the absurdity of the whole thing. One soldier grabs a thin branch covered with long hard thorns from a pile of firewood nearby, and begins to weave it into a wreath to crown the would-be king.

Seeing them, a captain from the Italian regiment takes off his military robe. With dramatic flare, he drapes it across Jesus' shoulders, bowing deeply as he backs away. One by one others pick up the revelry, laughing and taunting the Christ. Finished

with his crown, the soldier stands back and admires his artwork, placing it on Jesus' head to mimick an official coronation.

"*Hail, King of the Jews!*" he cries out jovially. Others crowd around, fawning over Jesus as they drop to their knees and salute with words of cheer.

"Godspeed oh mighty one!"

"Rejoice oh great ruler!!"

Hail, King of the Jews!

A centurion calls out: "His scepter -- he is a king, he must have a scepter!" Someone grabs one of the branches from the pile and places it in Jesus' right hand.

He is so very alone now. What must he feel in this crowd? At least his own people, though they knew him not, expectantly awaited the Messiah foretold in sacred Scripture. Whether they loved or hated him, Jesus' claims were always taken seriously.

But these Gentiles -- have they ever wanted a savior? Or does the power they hold rob them of any sense of their need? When Jesus looks at them, does he see the frailty behind their pride? In the mocking faces, does he see some who will one day follow him? Does he gaze into the eyes of a Cornelius and secretly rejoice at what he will be, once the price has been paid for his sins?

The blood drips down into his eyes and across his face, the makeshift crown slipping from his matted hair. Someone grabs a branch and hits at it, embedding the barbs in his skull. Lust for blood spurs other soldiers to join in pounding Jesus' head with reeds.

Soon their abuse grows to a feverish pitch. One squares off, slaps Jesus and spits in his face. A few others follow suit. The fun and games have become a sadistic sport, with Jesus the impotent victim.

Hail, King of the Jews! Crowned with thorns, the King of kings finally faces death's mournful march. Eternal darkness looms over the One to whom every eye will one day look, though for now his battered face is repulsive to see. Weak and powerless, the Son of God advances toward a host of hell's demons to wage the final war for the souls of men.

Respond

The walk to Golgotha is almost here. Consider the emotions Jesus must face at this moment. Think of His physical state. Contemplate the mockery that He faced from the Romans. See this scene before you, and then read the following description of the exalted Messiah, Jesus Christ:

I saw one like a son of man, clothed in a robe reaching to the feet, and girded across His chest with a golden sash. His head and His hair were white like white wool, like snow; and His eyes were like a flame of fire. His feet were like burnished bronze, when it has been made to glow in a furnace, and His voice was like the sound of many waters. In His right hand He held seven stars, and out of His mouth came a sharp two-edged sword; and His face was like the sun shining in its strength. When I saw Him, I fell at His feet like a dead man. ...

Revelation 1:13-17

Consider the contrast. Reflect on what Jesus endured in light of the reality of His Deity. Write a prayer of adoration based on these thoughts, using 2 Corinthians 8:9 as a basis: *For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich.*

Spend some time in quiet contemplation of these things.

A Prayer

Oh my Lord of lords -- You, whose head should bear only crowns of gold, are wreathed with nasty thorns. You, who should be hailed as matchless King, are ridiculed with words of salutation. You, whose heavenly anthem should drown all other sounds, are deluged with derisive taunts. Every melody of love loses its luster in light of this haunting song you sing. How can we ever join the chorus, except with tears?

DAY 19-- Led Away

*At the head of the procession of life, then, is a thorn-crowned Man, his pains healing our pains,
his wounds answering our wounds, his love taking our sin.*

Earl Stanley Jones

Reflect

Today the walk up Calvary begins and it is important to prepare for God's voice. Contemplating the cross can be emotional, spiritual and even physical. Ask God to help you focus, letting other cares dissipate in light of the love you will see. Be quiet in His presence for a few minutes.

Read the following prayer (taken from *The Book of Common Worship*, Presbyterian Church), offering each phrase from your own heart to the Lord for this time.

Forbid O God, that we should forget, amid our earthly comforts, the pains and mortal anguish that our Lord Jesus endured for our salvation. Grant us this day a true vision of all that He suffered, in His betrayal, His lonely agony, His false trial, His mocking and scourging, and the torture of death upon the cross. As Thou hast given Thyself utterly for us, may we give ourselves entirely to Thee, O Jesus Christ, our only Lord and Savior. Amen.

Read

And they led Him out to crucify Him.

Mark 15:20

A sudden hush falls over the courtyard as Pilate enters with his entourage. The prisoner, sickly and silent, stares blankly at the ground. Rivulets of blood from the thorny wreath drip down his face and there are new bruises where the soldiers hit him with reeds.

Pilate shakes his head in disgust. The centurion in charge, only slightly embarrassed at his men's crass behavior, strips Jesus of the cloak used to mock him moments ago. Seeing Pilate's anger, he quickly barks orders for his men to bring the other prisoners out and prepare for the crucifixions.

Just then, three soldiers enter the courtyard, each carrying a wooden plank. Weighing almost 100 pounds and measuring six feet long, the beams are an ominous reminder that Rome's most grueling form of execution will soon take place.

Can Jesus even lift his head? The effects of the scourging alone could claim his life here in the courtyard. What strength of will is required for him to fight these throes of death? Given the horror of the price yet to be paid, what keeps him from letting go and embracing the end right now?

The men move to place the heavy beam across Jesus' left shoulder. Bringing his arms up around it, they tie each hand to the wood so it cannot drop it on the road to Golgotha. The massive weight against the open wounds on his back cause him to hunch over in anguish. Each attempt to straighten back up brings even greater pain as the rough wood rubs into his raw flesh. How much more can one body take?

The centurion in charge motions to the soldiers. Jesus, pushed to the front and flanked on all sides by officers of the Roman army, moves through the arches of the palace courtyard and into the street. Several priests and elders wait to accompany the procession. Families line the narrow road that will take the prisoner away from town to the foot of Golgotha.

Jesus' eyes blink in the glaring sun as he tries to survey the streets of Jerusalem one last time. In the marketplace, men and women conduct the business of life, and boys and girls play merrily as if it were any other day. The journey that began in the heart of his Father before the foundation of the earth, has only 650 yards to go. Yet for this one whose broken body screams in pain with every step, it spans an eternity of torment whose end cannot even be fathomed.

Respond

Sit very still, listening the sounds of Jerusalem -- the busy marketplace, the hustle and bustle of ordinary life. Hear the sounds of your own world today -- phones, traffic, radios, TV's, talking, laughing etc. Now, in your mind, freeze frame these two scenes side by side. In the middle of them, see Jesus, beaten, barely able to move, bent under the weight of the crossbeam. Sense the significance of a world that goes on, oblivious to the reality of a living sacrifice being led to the slaughter on their behalf.

Consider the days of your own life when you are unaware, insensitive to Christ's journey to the Cross, to the extreme price He paid for you . . . for you. Contemplate the kind of love that gives and gives, even in the face of apparent indifference.

Respond with worship, tears, repentance, rejoicing -- whatever God places in your heart.

Write a prayer beginning with these words: *Lord Jesus, you walk today and everyday to Calvary, while I...*

A Prayer

Lord Jesus, you walk today and everyday to Calvary, while I make beds and drive carpools. You bleed, wounds festering, body failing, while I pay bills and play tennis. You trudge along, one lonely step after another while I make phone calls and go shopping. Lord Jesus, you walk today and everyday to Calvary for me -- grant that this thought will crash through my callous oblivion, piercing my busyness with pangs of broken-hearted love.

DAY TWENTY -- Via Dolorosa

*When we look at his cross, we understand his love.
His head is bent down to kiss us. His hands are extended to embrace us.
His heart is wide open to receive us.*

Mother Teresa

Reflect

Come in deep reverence to spend time in God's presence today. Gently open your heart -- see yourself taking off your shoes to enter the holy of holies where God will speak to your own heart.

Read the following verses as a prayer back to Christ

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities-- all things have been created through Him and for Him. He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together.

Colossians 1:15-17

Ponder these realities about the exalted Lord, as you encounter this same Jesus on the Via Dolorosa -- the way of suffering -- today.

Read

They took Jesus therefore; and He went out, bearing His own cross . . .

John 19:17

Conducting crucifixions during Passover is no easy task in this city whose population swells every year at this time with tens of thousands of worshipping pilgrims. The road is narrow, making the soldier's job of clearing the streets for the procession nigh impossible. The jostling about causes Jesus to grimace, strength waning with each step.

The other two prisoners, much stronger for not having been beaten or scourged, are pressed ahead of him. Still, Jesus must stop often. Feet bloodied from the rocks strewn along the path, he can scarcely catch his breath through the agony of searing

pain. Fever infuses his flesh. He lurches forward. Dazed and almost delirious, his broken body finally collapses face down in the dirt.

Arms askew, the crossbeam lands heavily on his shoulders, pinning him to the ground. To those whose curiosity compels them to watch the pitiful scene, it appears he may have died. Word passes up the line and the centurion halts the procession. Hurrying back to the place where Jesus lays, he surveys the crowd.

"You there -- yes you. Come here."

Simon, a large man from Cyrene in North Africa, steps back, hoping they don't mean him. Having just come in from the country to take his sons to the temple, he tries to turn and be on his way.

"You -- I said you -- come take this stake and carry it to Golgotha."

With these words an ordinary father, a preoccupied pilgrim is pressed into service for the Savior of the world. Does wrath at Rome's invasion of privacy burn within him? Does he feel for his fellow Jew who's been treated with such cruelty? Does he have any idea how this single event will impact history? Will Passover ever be the same for Simon, the Cyrene?

Soldiers untie the beam from Jesus' wrists and pass it to Simon. Fearful that the prisoner will die before the official execution, the captain of the guard leans down to pull Jesus gently to his feet. Staggering, he opens his eyes.

A distant sound breaks through the stillness that has surrounded the scene at Jerusalem's gates. As the group moves out, it grows louder. The earsplitting noise is chilling -- women with no self-control, weeping and wailing for the one who cannot carry his own cross.

Who are they? Professional mourners, given the task of lamenting the death of any and all who face crucifixion? Women whose husbands once left them behind to join the radical rabbi's movement? Friends of the victim's mother, Mary? Or women who perhaps not long ago found compassion in the eyes of this one now condemned to death?

When the procession draws near the mournful dirge, Jesus stops and looks into the crowd. A tear runs from one blue-black eye down his face. From deep within he summons a strange stamina and speaks with the authority of a prophet.

"Daughters of Jerusalem, don't weep for me. Weep for yourselves and for your children."

The crowd is hushed, tear-stained faces bewildered at Jesus' sudden burst of energy. He continues.

"A time is coming when you will believe that it is a blessed thing to be barren, to never have had children in this evil world."

The women murmur among themselves. What is he saying? Empty wombs are the curse of Jewish women. How could that ever be a blessing?

Scanning their faces, Jesus goes on. "You will beg the mountains to fall and crush you and the hills to cover you completely. For if these things happen to a green tree, what will happen to those that are dry?"

Soldiers weave through the crowd, trying to break it up as they press the prisoner forward. What a strange man. A few seconds ago, battered and broken, he collapsed under his own crossbeam. Now he stands strong, admonishing the crowd with words none of them seem to understand.

Even in the throes of agony, Jesus seems compelled to warn men and women of the wrath to come. What kind of yearning fills his heart? Does he see those who will reject his offer of salvation, even after he has paid such a price? Does he feel for some who mourn now, but will never truly repent? In this moment, does he intercede to the Father for ones such as these?

And the march moves on. Jesus, who for one brief moment forgot his pain, winces again with every step. As they pass through a nondescript neighborhood, people watch the spectacle from their rooftops, calling out their own opinions of his innocence or guilt. Pharisees with their phylacteries containing the sacred words of Scripture flank the procession on either side. And the living Word of God moves outside city gates, with only a hill left to climb.

Respond

Place yourself in the street of Jerusalem that day. When Jesus falls, would you gladly carry his cross? Would your heart break with the women? What would you do as He passes by? Wipe his face with a cool cloth? Offer him a drink of pure water? Look into his pain-wracked eyes and tell him you are sorry he suffers so?

Spend some time contemplating this, then offer your response to Him. Try to tell Him how you feel this moment, and what you would do to change things if you could.

A Prayer

Oh God, I am a woman mourning today. I want to wail at what they have done to you, to weep gut-wrenching sobs over your mutilated back and pummeled face. I want to stop the whole thing and make it go away. I want to have never been the reason for your journey down Via Dolorosa. How foolish the thought. For I have sinned and it is the weight of this -- not a wooden beam -- that hurls you to the ground. I mourn, for what else can I do?

DAY TWENTY-ONE -- Golgotha

*I want to recover the truth that Jesus was not crucified on an altar between two candlesticks,
but on a garbage heap at a crossroads of the world...
where soldiers gambled and cynics talked smut.*

George McCloud

Reflect

Sit in hushed silence with God today, enjoying Him, relishing these moments as precious gifts to you and blessings to Him. There is sorrow in the cross, but also great joy. The anticipation of joy is what enabled Jesus to endure the horror of Calvary. Read the following quote slowly and offer it as a prayer (or give your own) to the Lord based on the joy you sense as you consider the cross today.

How Splendid the Cross

*How splendid the cross of Christ!
It brings life, not death;
light, not darkness;
Paradise, not its loss.
It is the wood on which
the Lord, like a great warrior,
was wounded in hands and feet and side,
but healed thereby our wounds.
A tree had destroyed us;
a tree now brought us life.*

(Saint Theodore of Studios in *Breakfast with the Saints*.)

Read

And they brought Him to the place Golgotha, which is translated, Place of a Skull.

Mark 15:22

The small hill outside the Gennath Gate in Jerusalem buzzes with activity. The other two criminals begin their ascent while Jesus lingers at the bottom, trying to muster enough strength for the short climb.

Two major roads intersect at the base of Golgotha. Merchants from the port of Joppa in the west and travelers from Samaria and even further south, have a clear view up the fifteen foot slope as they enter the city.

Crucifixion has proven an effective deterrent to crime for the Roman government. On any given day, a number of beams bearing the bodies of the accused proclaim to the passing masses that a vile death awaits those who break their laws.

Golgotha – place of the skull -- has garnered a reputation far and wide. No one knows how it got its name, but stories abound. Some say it simply looks like a skull, with two caverns for eyes and a large jutting rock formation for a nose. Others believe it earned the name from the thousands of criminals that have been executed here. Whatever one might think, the mount outside the city gate is worthy of its title. It is a symbol of death to all whose lives it touches.

Soldiers shout loudly at those crowding the busy crossroads. They must get this prisoner up the last leg of their journey before he passes out or dies. Every step Jesus takes, every movement in his body, inflicts pain beyond comprehension. Centurions on either side now hold his arms, gently guiding him forward.

Passersby who happen to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, hurry away, quickly covering their children's eyes at the sight of the gruesome prisoner. Those who have followed since the trial at Castle Antonia jostle and push ahead, having set their sites on getting a good view at the foot of the three beams.

What occupies the mind of Christ as he faces the final steps to his death? Does dread eat at his resolve? Is he fraught with the kind of fear that makes hearts pound and stomachs heave? Does he long to draw on his divinity to somehow infuse strength into his broken body?

As they reach the top, a soldier orders Simeon to drop the crossbeam. Another moves toward Jesus, handing him a metal cup. How thirsty he must be. Has he had so much as a sip of water since his arrest in Gethsemane? The offer must seem like a gift, a respite from the swirling onslaught within and without.

What does he think as he holds it in his hands? Does this cup remind him that only hours ago he held another, pleading for it to pass? This cup holds sour wine mixed with myrrh, an analgesic to deaden his senses and ease the pain. As he lifts it to his split and swollen lips, does he remember the bitter taste of sin from the cup he so desperately resisted in the Garden?

The soldiers are uncertain what to do when Jesus hands the cup back after barely tasting the foul potion. Their leaders prefer civilized executions, and without sedation crucified criminals often scream in agony. Never before has anyone refused to drink the drug. The soldier who poured the wine finally shrugs, tossing the contents out. Does Jesus consider that even now he could dash the cup of man's sin to the ground like the sticky wine on the grass at his feet?

Like the bodies of animals which priests took outside the camp to burn after sprinkling their blood on the holy place, the stench of Jesus' flesh will soon waft through the air outside Jerusalem's gates. But first, the blood of the Lamb must be spilt on this altar that was fashioned before the foundation of the world.

Respond

In your own mind, stand at the top of Mount Calvary. See the crowds coming and going below. See the massive Temple and the beautiful city of Jerusalem. Hear the conversations of those who've come up the hill. Watch Jesus take the final steps to the top. Imagine his emotions, thoughts, and fears.

Carefully consider the following verses:

For the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the holy place by the high priest as an offering for sin, are burned outside the camp. Therefore Jesus also, that He might sanctify the people through His own blood, suffered outside the gate. So, let us go out to Him outside the camp, bearing His reproach.

Hebrews 13:11-13

See Jesus suffering outside the gate of Jerusalem. Go to him, bearing (figuratively carrying) his reproach (suffering, reviling, upbraiding). This simply means to feel within and have a deep appreciation for all he endured, willing to suffer yourself, if it will further His kingdom.

After a while, write a few words expressing your thoughts and compassion to Christ.

A Prayer

Lord, you who own the cattle on a thousand hills now suffer reproach on one of them. The scent of your sacrifice is a stench in the nostrils of those who do not understand, those who look the other way, those who clutch their rebellion to their blackened heart. But to me Lord, it is sweet -- sometimes too strong

for my sinful soul -- but sweet nonetheless. Help me to breathe deeply that your aroma of death might finally permeate my heart of hearts.

DAY TWENTY-TWO -- Nailed to the Cross

And if we men and women of this latter day wish to gaze into the awfulness of sin, we shall have to take our stand at the mystic confluence of midnight and noonday and abide in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Warren Wiersbe

Reflect

Set your heart toward God today. Acknowledge His presence with you, thanking Him for His faithfulness. Ask Him to give you a tenderness toward His Son in these final hours.

Jesus made an amazing promise concerning His death. *And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to Myself.* (John 12:32) Consider this truth as you focus on Jesus being lifted up to die in today's narrative. Stop at times while you are reading, and speak this verse aloud, offering a heart of gratitude that because He died, you have been drawn to Him.

Read

And when they came to the place called The Skull, there they crucified Him...

Luke 23:33

The four soldiers assigned to the prisoner named Jesus move quickly into action. First they strip him of his clothing. When they reach the inner garments, blood and flesh tear from wounds already festering with grisly infection. Jesus' eyes roll back in his head in agony. The crucifixion has begun.

Women turn their heads in shame at the sight of his bare body. The extent of his wounds shocks even the soldiers who tend take their task of execution lightly. One grabs the loincloth and begins to wrap it around Jesus' waist and through his legs. If he were a Gentile, he would be hung naked. It is a small concession to the Hebrew people whose sacred beliefs abhor nudity. When they finish, they lead Jesus over to the crossbeam, instructing him to lay down and place his arms out across the rough wood.

Sometimes prisoners resist and have to be shoved to the ground, head banging on the wood. But Jesus responds with perplexing submission. His head falls back, the crown

of thorns pressing deeper into his skull. Mustering his strength, he raises up level with the crossbeam. Dirt and leaves cling to the open wounds on his back and legs.

What must it be like for the Son of God to finally lay down his life? How does it feel to stretch his arms out on the crossbeam of crucifixion? Does he embrace this moment for which he entered the human race? Can he yet see the joy of victory somewhere in the vast expanse of eternity?

One soldier holds Jesus' right arm in place. The other positions the tip of an iron spike, five inches long and almost a half inch across, in the middle of his wrist. An expert in the art of crucifixion, the soldier lifts his hammer and with one strike embeds the nail through the flesh into the wood. The pinging thud echoes across the hill as the crowd watches.

When just a trickle of blood appears, the soldier is relieved that he hasn't severed any main arteries. To do so would bring death too quickly. The longer it takes, the greater the suffering, and the more likely people will see and be cowed into fearful allegiance to the Roman government.

The spike crushes numerous nerve endings, and Jesus moans. Bolts of pain shoot down the length of his arm. Before he can catch his breath, they extend his left arm. The sound of hammer against iron rings again in the ears of onlookers. Now pain radiates through both arms, up his neck, through his ears and eyes, until it feels as if his head might explode.

As they finish, the centurion gives the signal and they lift the wood above their heads, suspending Jesus in midair. The other two soldiers place forked poles under the beam, carrying it towards the empty stipe. The weight of Christ's body pulls on his wrists. Each fraction of movement wrenches him, sometimes swinging his torso forward. Every wound inflicted up till now fades in proportion to this.

A sign hangs on the center stipe, identifying Jesus and his crime. The soldiers push on their poles until the crossbeam snaps into place under it. Jesus presses his feet against the wood, trying to lift himself from the suffocating grip of the cross.

Taking hold of his left foot, a soldier places it on top of the right, pressing them down to drive the final nail through Jesus' arches. Though once again little blood is shed, an intense ache grips the muscles in Jesus' legs. He now hangs between two criminals, only a few feet from the ground. The soldier's job is done and those left to watch settle in for the long wait.

Does Jesus close his eyes, focusing on the time he'll be freed from his broken body to return to his Father? Does the agony in his feet remind him of the enemy whose head he will soon bruise? Does he look out at those who watch, making mental note of who has come, and who has not come, to his crucifixion? Or does he scan the vast city of Jerusalem and beyond, weeping once again at such spiritual poverty?

The Son of Man is lifted up and thereby will one day draw all men to himself. But for now searing spasms in his arms and legs are a tortuous reminder that death is not easy and will not come quickly. There are battles yet to fight, victories not quite won and a price not yet paid for the sins of a dying world.

Respond

Contemplate this moment when Jesus is raised up on a cross to die. Consider all he has been through up to this point in preparation for it. Spend a few minutes thinking about each of the three nails as they go into His flesh. Try to comprehend what He may have experienced as the crossbeam was attached to the stipe.

Beyond the physical agony, consider that few were there to support him. Other than Peter who betrayed him, and John who now stands near -- his closest friends have not shown their faces since Gethsemane. Also, ponder the shame of a crucifixion where friend and foe and stranger watch you, knowing the crime you are condemned for. When you feel you can identify in some small way with Christ as He is lifted up, write a prayer, a poem, a meditation, a thought to express your heart to Him.

A Prayer

Jesus, my Jesus, hanging in the wind, sun burning, body bare save for a loincloth and wounds too many to count. I wonder why you hold onto life amidst Golgotha's death-grip. You said if you were lifted up you'd draw all men to you. Is this what you meant? Lifted up like this? The perplexity of such a plan plagues me still. Yet you hang there and I am irresistibly drawn to your side. I cannot turn away -- not now, not ever.

DAY TWENTY-THREE -- Forgiveness

What do you weep at, if you do not weep at this?

Dante Alighieri

Reflect

The next several days will be spent at the foot of Jesus' Cross. Make sure you have enough time, and a quiet place to focus. Rest in the compassionate presence of God who loves you and gives his life for you. Softly, slowly speak or sing the words to the following old hymn.

And Can It Be That I Should Gain?

Charles Wesley, Public Domain

*And can it be that I should gain
an interest in the Savior's blood?
Died He for me, who caused His pain?
For me, who Him to death pursued?
Amazing love! how can it be
That Thou, my God shouldst die for me?*

*He left His Father's throne above,
So free, so infinite His grace!
Emptied Himself of all but love,
and bled for Adam's helpless race;
Tis mercy all, immense and free;
For O my God, it found out me.
Amazing love! how can it be
that Thou, my God shouldst die for me?*

Read

But Jesus was saying, "Father forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing."

Luke 23:34

The hustle and bustle of life goes on below the crucifixion mount. Though travelers stop now and then to offer inquisitive stares, the bodies hanging there are a disturbing sight, and most hurry on to their business within the city.

Those who've come to watch the crucifixions form an eclectic group -- religious leaders with heads held in haughty disdain, soldiers there to do a job, and curious onlookers who hope for some entertainment from this one rumored to possess magical powers.

There is another group, separate from the rest. One man and a handful of women huddle a short way from the center cross in stoic silence, grief covering their tear-streaked faces. Some recognize John as the follower of Jesus, his arm around an older woman who cannot take her swollen eyes from the scene before her.

Jesus, now flushed with fever, feels suffocation closing in like a vise as he gasps for breath. Raising himself up on his feet to exhale and relieve the constriction in his chest, he is jolted by sharp pains shooting through his calves, and within seconds must drop down again.

The soldiers, callous from exposure to a thousand days like this one, look for ways to occupy the time. Loud laughter bursts from their midst, as they entertain each other with crass stories and coarse jokes. Those in charge of the crucifixion flank the three crosses. They must stay to the end, making sure no one takes a body down before proof of death.

One of them notices the pile of clothing on the ground at Jesus' feet. Calling to the others, he asks how they want to divide it. They examine each piece, shaking their heads. Not much worth having this time -- bloody stains have ruined most of it. Someone must have removed the head covering during the scourging, for it alone appears unsoiled.

The captain quickly claims it for himself, while the others haggle over the rest. One takes the worn sandals, another the girdle and a third the robe. The only thing left is the inner tunic. It is so saturated with blood that one cannot see the original color. Someone suggests they divide it into four parts -- the only fair way to dispose of the fifth piece of clothing, worthless though it might be.

Trying to find a good place to tear it, they soon realize there are no seams. Turning it over and over, they are amazed. Superstitious and fearful of the strange garment, no one wants to bother with it. Laughing, they pass the crusty cloth around, deciding its

fate through a guessing game with their fingers. The winner tosses the seamless tunic aside.

Above the revelry the three condemned to die hang silently, save an occasional groan or cry from one of the robbers. Jesus does not make a sound. The soldiers look them over, and satisfied that death is not imminent take their positions once again.

Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.

Those near the cross are startled by the voice of the one hanging in the center. What a strange thing to say. Who tugs at Jesus' heartstrings this moment? Cold and calculating soldiers who have no idea that he may one day save their souls? Stony-hearted priests and elders who've made an idol of their rules and abandoned the living God? Passersby whose lives are so empty they find diversion in the horror of a crucifixion?

Some draw closer as if they hope to hear him a little better. It is difficult to read the expression on Jesus' face after having uttered his first words from the cross. Both gentleness and anguish seem to cloud his eyes. Seven times Jesus will find the fortitude to lift himself and speak cryptic words as he hangs from the cross. But in this first moment, the compassion that has compelled him to walk each step thus far, streams from his soul.

Father forgive them, for they do not know what they do.

In the unseen realm, God the Father gently nods his head, and angel's heart's break at such amazing love.

Respond

Close your eyes and experience this moment at the cross. See the soldiers laugh and joke as they divide Jesus' clothes. Smell the sweat in the air as the morning sun burns down. Hear the rumble of conversation among the high priests. Look at Jesus hanging there. See His eyes on you. Hear Him say "Father, forgive" for every act of sin, rebellion, apathy or disobedience you have ever committed or will commit.

Read the following verse, very slowly. *But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.* (Romans 5:8) Worship God and thank Him. Write a prayer based on this truth.

A Prayer

Dearest Savior, I hear your voice breaking through the heat of a summer morning and the busyness of my days.. And I am back there -- standing at your feet with heartless soldiers and hard-hearted priests. I too have sealed your fate with my sins, and am in desperate need of compassion. So tenderly you offer forgiveness to them . . . to the world . . . to me. Your voice descends like a gentle rain on the desert of my heart until I am soft and pliable in your nail-scarred hands.

DAY TWENTY-FOUR -- King of the Jews

*Behold what great contempt hath the Lord of Majesty endured,
that his confusion may be our glory; his punishment our heavenly bliss!
Without ceasing impress this spectacle, O Christian, on thy soul!*

Dionysius

Reflect

Come to God's throne today in reverence and awe for the power He holds over all things. Affirm His right to be Lord over your own life. Humble yourself before Him, asking Him to purify you from sin. Thank Him for the price He paid that you can come boldly into His throne-room.

Read the following Psalm aloud as a praise to the King of kings.

*Ascribe to the LORD, O sons of the mighty, ascribe to the LORD glory and strength.
Ascribe to the LORD the glory due to His name; worship the LORD in holy array. The
voice of the LORD is upon the waters; the God of glory thunders, the LORD is over
many waters. The voice of the LORD is powerful, the voice of the LORD is
majestic...The voice of the LORD makes the deer to calve and strips the forests bare;
and in His temple everything says, "Glory!" The LORD sat as King at the flood; yes,
the LORD sits as King forever.*

Psalm 29, selected

Write a prayer of worship and exaltation, personalizing His status in your own life.

Read

*And they put up above His head the charge against Him, which read,
"THIS IS JESUS THE KING OF THE JEWS."*

Matthew 27:37

For a moment, stillness surrounds the scene at Golgotha. Soldiers close their eyes for a morning nap, while on-lookers converse quietly, wondering how long they'll have to wait for the condemned to take their final breaths. John and the women do not take their eyes from Jesus face, hoping moment by moment for some sign that his suffering is coming to an end.

Jesus presses his feet together, digging his toes into the wood to lift himself up again. He spews out air, then gasps like a drowning swimmer who knows he is about to go under. His battered face has taken on a purplish hue, making him look grotesque and surreal. It is almost impossible to recognize him.

He drops back down, his face contorting with pain as the weight of his body drags on his weak arms. The inscription that his head pressed against a moment ago is now smeared with blood. Yet the words written on it can be clearly seen, even by those on the road below. *This is Jesus, the King of the Jews.*

These are sacred words, written in the language of the Hebrew Torah. They are powerful words, written in the language of the Roman conqueror Caesar. And they are universal words, written in Greek, the language that will soon record the Gospel of Christ for all the world and every generation to come.

The import and symbolism of the title has not been lost on Caiaphas, the chief priest. Confident that he has destroyed Jesus' influence in life, he now fears what could come of him embracing a martyr's death. He is furious that Pilate has encouraged such a thing by giving Jesus of Nazareth this epithet. Only a few minutes ago he sent a group to demand that the wording be changed.

The number of priests and elders on the mount has dwindled. Those that remain hover anxiously, whispering among themselves. Watching Caiaphas seethe, they wonder what will happen if his demand is not met. They soon find out.

The return of the three priests breaks the stillness on the mount. Their visit has not been successful. Quickly they tell their story to the others. First they had demanded Christ's real crime of treason be listed on the sign with his name.

Shocked at Pilate's refusal, they regrouped, finally insisting that he at least add the words "He said I am" to the inscription, so everyone would know this was a false claim by a crazy zealot. But Pilate was adamant.

"What I have written, I have written" he had uttered through clenched teeth.

No one had dared argue further, and so they had left. Caiaphas questions them again and again, his voice growing louder and angrier. He is consumed with disgust for the Roman procurator.

Does anything in the heart of Jesus want to live up to this irreverent coronation? To rattle the earth beneath their feet or shatter the sky above them? Does he consider at

all what he would gain by displaying his majestic might? Does he recall the beauty of the throne he once knew, as he hangs here from a cross on a hill called Golgotha?

The soldiers on guard duty, aroused by the noisy priests, begin to pace from cross to cross. If only this would go a little quicker. The one in the middle surely can't last much longer, but the other two could stay alive well past sundown.

One of them, curious after hearing the priest's interchange, examines the words written on each criminal's cross. He mulls over the message that hangs above Christ. *This is Jesus, the King of the Jews.*

But for now the king wears a crown of thorns. His majesty's royal robes have been left behind on heaven's gates, bloody stripes and gaping wounds adorning his shoulders instead. And the weight of a sin-sick world hangs from the nail-pierced hands that once fashioned it into being. Jesus is dying, but oh how slow the death.

Respond

Consider the physical agony Jesus now faces as He must lift Himself up on his feet in order to exhale. See the suffering on His face as He does. Know that to even look at Him is sickening. *So His appearance was marred more than any man, and His form more than the sons of men.* (Isaiah 52:41b).

Yet He is still the King of kings and Lord of lords. Contemplate the love that keeps Him from even now asserting His rightful place. Kneel at His feet and worship Him.

A Prayer

My King, I am your subject even now as your face, marred beyond recognition, looks down at me. I can still see the compassion in your weary eyes. I feel the weight of my sin pressing your shoulders down each time you must drop, your arms the only support your body knows. And I bow down. I wash your feet with my tears dear and precious Redeemer. What more can I do to ease your pain?

DAY TWENTY-FIVE -- Mocked

*And age by age the Lord Christ is crucified. And we too have crowded eagerly to Calvary
and nailed Him to His cross, and laughed up into His face, and watched Him die,
and gone our way well pleased and much relieved that we have
hustled Him out of the way -- yes, even we.*

Arthur John Gossip

Reflect

Step back from the Cross for a few minutes and think of Jesus as the eternal One who once proclaimed: *Be still and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted on the earth.* (Psalm 46:10). Worship the exalted Lord, and rest in the quiet of His presence.

Scripture speaks of Jesus as one rejected by men, but choice and precious in the sight of God (1 Peter 2:4). Have you ever considered how very precious Jesus was to God the Father? The love they share has always been and always will be. The God who exists outside of time and space, watches men mock Christ for this brief second of eternity, but to Him the beauty of His Son burns ever brighter. Let this reality soak in as you read of this scene today.

Read

*And those who were passing by were hurling abuse at Him, wagging their heads, and saying,
... If You are the Son of God, come down from the cross.*

Matthew 27:39-40

For all practical purposes today is just another day to the inhabitants of Jerusalem. Pilgrims prepare food for the Sabbath. The smell of unleavened bread wafts through the air as children play in the streets. From home to home, the conversation at times touches on the carpenter convicted of treason, who now hangs on Golgotha's hill. Some brag of having seen him do miracles. Others scoff at such nonsense.

The sun beats heavily on those condemned to die. Jesus now sweats profusely, his body rapidly dehydrating. Overcome by chills, he begins to shake from head to toe. Throbbing wrists pound out his pulse, until it beats like a drum inside his head.

He tries to lift himself and breathe, but this time his calves knot up immediately. He falls, wrenching his arms, dislocating one of his shoulders. His eyes fly open and he almost passes out at the torturous pain.

Soon the rumble of conversation around the crosses is interrupted by a raucous group of travelers making their way up the hill. "Aha! There he is. Just look at him."

Shaking their heads in contempt, they take turns mocking Jesus. "Hey -- you up there! You -- you who said you could destroy the temple and build it in three days! Save yourself then!"

Laughter breaks out among them. Surely this isn't the man who roared through the temple just yesterday! Where is his pious power now? What a disappointment to those who hope for some messianic magic. Christ hangs in silence before the taunting crowd.

If You are the Son of God, come down from the cross!

What does this suffering servant think as they flaunt his impotence in his face? Does the failing condition of his body make him oblivious to their jeers? Or does he hear their scorn like a distant chant and long for a touch of kindness from someone, somewhere?

If You are the Son of God, come down from the cross!

Others watch in dismay. Why won't Jesus do something? Is he really going to die? Was every miracle a sham, every word of wisdom a pretense? Flickering flames of hope are slowly extinguished in those who thought it would be different. The would-be messiah will not come down.

Some turn to leave. There will be no miracles, and the gruesome moment of death on a Roman cross is not worth waiting for. Others continue to sneer, jabbing at Jesus like jesters of the macabre. And the only one who could change things now, fights for every agonizing breath. The Son of Man still has much to suffer.

Respond

The physical torture of Jesus is immense, but we now move to psychological torture. Consider the kind of atmosphere surrounding the cross as Jesus suffers so. Hear the loud, jeering voices challenging him to prove himself. Imagine the intensity of emotions the people feel -- contempt, disgust, disappointment, hopelessness, anger,

insecurity or others. See their words like arrows piercing the heart of the One who dies even now for them. Imagine you are one of them -- ridiculing Him, rejecting Him, dismissing His claims to Deity.

Confess to Him the times you have taken His suffering lightly, have held it at a distance, never seeing yourself in the abuse he suffered.

Hebrews 2:10 says: *For it was fitting for Him, for whom are all things, and through whom are all things, in bringing many sons to glory, to perfect the author of their salvation through sufferings.*

Meditate on the words: *It was fitting* as you contemplate all Jesus has endured on Calvary so far. Offer Him your love, adoration and worship. Write a prayer of thanksgiving based on this verse.

A Prayer

Oh Lord, how little they understood why you hung there on Calvary. They created you in their own image and when you didn't perform to their expectations, they had no more use for you. They just didn't know did they? So many times I too have demanded you do as I ask, dismissing your claim on my life when you don't. I stand here with the mockers, passersby who missed completely the eternal significance of your impending death. And in my selfishness I too miss it day after day. Forgive me dying Savior, for actions that speak louder than words.

DAY TWENTY-SIX -- Scorned

*Around the Silent Sufferer surged the brutal slaughter
and flung its showers of barbed sarcasm in His holy face.
The Prisoner has become the sport of the executioners.*

William Henry Bierderwolf

Reflect

Let a sense of peace fill your heart as you come to the cross today. Ask God to speak to you afresh, to reveal in some new way the glory of a Savior who lays down His life in love. Ask Him for the privilege of sharing in His suffering.

Psalm 22 is a prophecy of Jesus' time on the cross. It tells us more of Jesus' thoughts as He hung there. Ponder the first part of this Psalm, seeking to understand what He felt as you prepare to continue your journey with Jesus.

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Far from my deliverance are the words of my groaning...O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but I have no rest.

But I am a worm and not a man, a reproach of men and despised by the people. All who see me sneer at me; they separate with the lip, they wag the head...Be not far from me, for trouble is near, there is none to help. They open wide their mouth at me, as a ravening and a roaring lion.

(Psalm 22:1-13, selected)

Read

In the same way the chief priests along with the scribes were also mocking Him among themselves and saying, "He saved others; He cannot save Himself."

Mark 15:31

As if on cue, the priests and elders take up the ridicule of Christ that the passersby began. With hostility in their hearts, they banter among themselves loud enough for Jesus to hear as he hangs above.

He saved others, but he cannot save himself.

"Yes -- if he is God's chosen one -- the Christ, then let's see him save himself!"

Jesus watches but says nothing. Is he envisioning what would happen if he did save himself? Can he see demons binding those below, sealing their slavery to sin for eternity? Or do his own words -- *If you want to save your life, you must lose it* -- reverberate in his mind?

A mixture of self-righteousness and relief fills the priests as they see Jesus failing to respond. Surely now all his foolish followers will see what a counterfeit this one is who claimed to be the Christ. Their taunts grow in contempt.

"Look -- there's the *King of Israel!*"

Boisterous laughter peppers the air at the absurd idea. "Sure -- he's a *King* so let him come down from the cross -- then we'll all believe in him!"

Nodding in sarcastic agreement, the elders glance at Jesus, wondering if he'll say or do something now.

What can he say? What words can change the evil in the hearts of men who glory in his humiliation? What can he do? Come down from the cross and command them to bow and give him his rightful place? How well he understands that if he did, the price for sin would remain on their heads, a price none of them can ever hope to pay.

Throughout the ridicule, Caiaphas has stood aloof, arms folded, enjoying his moment of triumph. The envy that once ate at his insides has turned to loathing. He remembers the claims Jesus made only a few hours ago. What a stupid fool.

"He trusts in God. If God loves him so much, let him deliver him right now. After all, he says he is God's own Son!"

Once the chief priest speaks, it seems everyone wants to join in the revelry on Golgotha's hill. Soldiers, inebriated from the wine they have drunk all morning, revert to their earlier game of pretending Jesus is a king.

A couple make grandiose bows before the cross. Another holds up a chalice with the sweet beverage and says, "Come now oh *King of the Jews*. It is time for you to save yourself!"

Snickering, they stagger around the cross, toasting each other in gaiety at the game that provides a break from the monotony of the day.

Like a roar, the scorn at Golgotha reaches the portals of heaven. Myriads of angels mourn, each one yearning to jerk the stakes from Jesus' hands and feet. But the love of God is a mystery into which angels can only long to look. The Savior of the world will not save himself and let mankind be damned to the hopelessness of hell.

Respond

Many people minimize the price Christ paid for sins because they believe since He was God, He had the power to do whatever He wanted to as He hung there, or because He knew He would rise again. This is exactly why the price He paid was so great. He could have drawn on His supernatural strength at any moment. He could have forced the issue of His Deity, but He chose not to. He chose to embrace the cross as a man, impotent and unable to change things.

This is a true mystery. Consider how Jesus had the force of the universe at His disposal, while he chose to endure the pain, the scorn, and the agony of it all. Contemplate the wonder of a love like this. Read or sing the words to the following hymn aloud:

What Wondrous Love is This?

Alexander Means, 1835, Public Domain

*What wondrous love is this, O my soul, O my soul!
 What wondrous love is this, O my soul!
 What wondrous love is this that caused the Lord of bliss
 To bear the dreadful curse for my soul, for my soul,
 To bear the dreadful curse for my soul.*

*When I was sinking down, sinking down, sinking down,
 When I was sinking down, sinking down,
 When I was sinking down beneath God's righteous frown,
 Christ laid aside His crown for my soul, for my soul,
 Christ laid aside His crown for my soul.*

*To God and to the Lamb, I will sing, I will sing;
 To God and to the Lamb, I will sing.
 To God and to the Lamb Who is the great "I Am";
 While millions join the theme, I will sing, I will sing;
 While millions join the theme, I will sing.*

A Prayer

I wish they understood my Savior, why you wouldn't save yourself, but I confess my own perplexity. What kind of love is this? I see Your name, sullied by the sins of those You created for glory. I see Your honor, disdained by unholiness in hearts you fashioned for Yourself. And still You go to Your death, choosing to endure each moment of torment. I stand here where men scoff and you hang in agony and do not save yourself, and I can only say my Lord, Your Cross confounds me still.

DAY TWENTY-SEVEN -- Two Responses

*When the true meaning of the crucifixion dawns upon us,
then the whole sordid, bloody, painful death shall make us tremble before its glory.*

Ben M. Herbster

Reflect

Make a conscious effort to stop the activity in your mind as you come before the Lord right now. Slow your thoughts down until you can focus on Him. Consider the holy calling He has given you to participate in His sufferings. Ask Him to make this comprehensible to your heart through His Holy Spirit. Read the following words of Thomas A'Kempis, reflecting on them and your own life.

Jesus hath now many lovers of His heavenly kingdom, but few bearers of His Cross. Many He hath that are desirous of consolation, but few of tribulation. Many He findeth that share His table, but few His fasting. All desire to rejoice with Him, few are willing to endure any thing for Him. Many follow Jesus unto the breaking of bread; but few to the drinking of the Cup of His Passion. Many reverence His miracles, few follow the shame of His Cross.

(From *The Imitation of Christ*).

Pray for Divine revelation into the condition of your own heart as you contemplate the cross today.

Read

And He said to him, "Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise."

Luke 23:43

The chorus of mockery surrounding Jesus swells with dissonant notes. Drunken soldiers, pious priests and sordid onlookers take turns deriding the one who says nothing in return. So intent are they in their scornful quest, none notice the sky starting to swallow the sun at midday.

One of the thieves watches Jesus carefully. For him, hope is slipping away, the terror of death closing in. If this miracle worker beside him has some secret plan, now is the time to execute it. Hoisting himself up, he rails at Jesus.

"Well are you the Christ or not? Why don't you save yourself and us then?" Energy spent, he sags back down, rolling his eyes in disgust.

Jesus turns to him, but he looks away, escaping into his lonely torment.

"How can you say such a thing?" A weak voice challenges from Jesus' other side.

"Don't you fear even God Himself? You are here, condemned to die. You and I -- we deserve to be here for the crimes we committed. But this man has done nothing wrong."

Forcing his words into the muggy air before his knees collapse, the repentant thief stares at his comrade in crime, but his words fall on deaf ears. For a moment, the sounds of scorn fade into the distance.

"Jesus."

Through his hazy distress Jesus slowly turns his head to his right. No one has ever addressed him with such simple familiarity.

"Jesus, will you remember me when you come into your kingdom?"

What an ironic plea offered to the one whose royal reign must seem a distant dream in this moment. What does Jesus feel as the poignant words break into his private reverie? Surrounded by scoffers, what might it mean to hear this solitary voice of support?

Jesus opens his mouth, but cannot speak. Summoning every bit of energy left in his body, he lifts himself, and between gasps for air, calls out: *Truly I...say to you, today...you...shall...be with me...in...Paradise.*

With me -- never have such beautiful words been spoken. Long ago God's heart must have broke as he ushered his beloved children out of Paradise into a fallen world. But now, in his second word from the cross, Jesus opens the door to the garden of God's presence and lets one sinner in. A fitting reminder that soon the price will be paid for him to fling wide the gates to all who accept his sacrifice for their sins.

With me. Does the thought of such fellowship invigorate Jesus' heart? Can he glimpse for a moment the joy of eternity with those he suffers for even now? Will his final hours of death be more tolerable, recalling the penitent thief on his right -- the first-fruits of the Atonement?

The sky grows gray at Golgotha. More of the crowd starts down the slope toward home, fearing bad weather. Not even witnessing death by crucifixion is worth tolerating a Jerusalem thunderstorm. The soldier's games have lost their savor, so they settle down in various stages of drunkenness to await the end. Only the priests remain the same -- proud, haughty and consumed with contempt for this one who hangs near death.

And angels rejoice at a sinner saved, though their dance is bittersweet.

Respond

Two men hung with Jesus on the cross. Both had equal access to Him. But consider the differences:

One spoke ridicule -- The other spoke truth.

One took no responsibility for his sin -- The other saw his need.

One saw Jesus as a ticket to freedom -- The other saw Jesus as a Savior.

One hurled abuse -- The other pleaded for grace.

One faces an eternity of hell -- The other entered God's presence that day.

Place yourself there and ask God to show you your own heart. Which thief are you most like? Are there times you can relate to both of them?

Hear Jesus saying these words: *With me*. What does it mean to be in God's presence -- to be with Him? Spend some time contemplating this -- with Jesus on the cross, with Jesus in death, with Jesus in resurrection, with Jesus in victory . . .

Write a prayer of response.

A Prayer

Dearest dying Lord, deep peace fills my heart when I think of the words you spoke so simply, so eloquently. With me...I hear the words and watch you suffer, and I am overcome by the thought. I live in the warmth of your embrace. I languish in the light of your kindness. I abide in the hollow of your heart. Oh Lord -- to be with you is my one great joy, my hope and reason to live. Let me never settle for less than the simplicity of this.

DAY TWENTY-EIGHT -- One Last Act of Caring

*Whenever anything disagreeable or displeasing happens to you
remember Christ crucified and be silent.*

John of the Cross

Reflect

Prepare your heart to receive from God today and to give back to Him. Spend a few minutes reflecting on how He has blessed your life. Thank Him aloud specifically for these things. Offer these verses as a prayer back to God.

My heart is steadfast, O God; I will sing, I will sing praises, even with my soul. Awake, harp and lyre; I will awaken the dawn! I will give thanks to you, O LORD, among the peoples, and I will sing praises to you among the nations. For your lovingkindness is great above the heavens, and your truth reaches to the skies. Be exalted, O God, above the heavens, and your glory above all the earth.

Psalm 108:1-5

Consider for a moment the mother of Christ. Recall how as a teenager, an angel came and told her she would give birth to the Savior of the world. After her questions were answered, she responded: "Behold the bond-slave of the Lord; be it done to me according to your word" (Luke 1:38). Think of what her life was like as Jesus' mother. Today, walk with her to the cross and see her son being crucified.

Read

Woman, behold, your son!

John 19:26

The Jerusalem sky grows darker by the minute, yet no clouds can be seen. Those who remain at Golgotha are beginning to feel the weight of the air on their skin. A sense of inexplicable dread settles on the crucifixion crowd. The mockers of a moment ago now wish only for a speedy end to the day's events.

Jesus, with eyes shut, pants in short, sharp breaths. His lungs feel as if they are exploding within his chest. How easy it would be to give in, to let himself be strangled by the air he can't exhale. But it is not yet time.

He pushes down on his feet. Trying to hold himself up, he spews out breath and gasps for air. There is no relief now to the cramping in his legs, yet he continues to push down. He scans the hill, taking in face after face, until his gaze settles on the small group of women nearby.

He recognizes his two aunts, and Mary of Magdala, whose devotion to him has been such pure joy in these last months. But all who are watching the eyes of the condemned can see that the woman who captivates his heart is the one leaning against the disciple named John. Overcome with grief, Jesus tries to smile at his mother.

What does he feel when his gaze meets that of the woman who bore him in her own body? Does his heart break at the sorrow he inflicts on her? Does he remember how he's tried to prepare her for this? How as a child in the temple, he told her he had to be about his father's business? Or the day he gently rebuked her, saying his family were those who chose to follow him, and not those related by blood?

Holding himself up with the sheer force of will, he watches the small group draw closer to the cross. His mother weeps quietly as she looks up at her beloved son. It is almost too much to bear.

Woman...behold...your...son.

Disturbed by the distress in his voice, Mary holds out a hand in the air, as if longing to caress his face. Wracking sobs shake her insides, but she holds her head high, refusing to take her eyes from her son's face, though her heart tears in two. John tightens his grip around her shoulder, wishing he could do something, feeling powerless.

"Behold, your mother!" Jesus speaks directly to his brave young disciple. Then without warning, his legs collapse and he drops. John and Mary keep staring, hoping for another word. Jesus tries to encourage them with a nod, but pain contorts his face into an absurd grimace. He closes his eyes.

John gently turns the mother of Christ from the cross, intent on following his master's final instructions. What more can he do for this one who loved him so in life? Moving back a few feet, the grieving group bows their heads, as if in prayer.

Every now and then Mary looks up, hoping for some sign of movement from her child who hovers near death. How she must abhor the burden she bears in these final hours. The shame of illegitimacy brought her first-born son into the world, and now the shame of crucifixion will take him from it.

"Be it done unto me according to Thy word," Mary once said to the angel who illuminated her life with God's wondrous plan. Since Jesus' inglorious birth in a manger, she has not wavered in her commitment, but this time the anguish of letting go must be beyond description.

Darkness descends on Golgotha and demons begin their premature celebration of the Redeemer's defeat. The Son of Man it seems has given up, death's grip closing in on him like a vise. But the battle isn't over yet. And though the Prince of Darkness may wield his victory flag in glee, the Lord of the universe has not yet finished the fight.

Respond

Wait quietly upon the Lord as you ponder this scene at Calvary. Consider the intense emotions of Jesus as he says good-bye to his earthly mother. Reflect on her unique pain -- both that of a mother seeing her son suffer so, and of God's chosen vessel knowing her task is completed in this way. Thank God for her presence at the cross, and for that of John -- the one disciple who stayed, and took no thought for his own life.

Consider Mary's words: "Be it done to me according to Thy word." As you reflect on the Cross of Christ, are you able to offer yourself this willingly? Write a prayer expressing your thoughts in this moment at Calvary.

A Prayer

My precious Lord, give me the courage to pray as your own mother did, "Be it done to me according to Thy word." And when I waver, let me remember that though surrender to your will may cost me a thousand deaths, nothing I suffer can compare with the agony you faced on Golgotha's hill. Oh that I might join You there, learning of You and loving You. Let me die to gain your glory and live to bring You pleasure. Let it be, O God, let it be.

DAY TWENTY-NINE -- Darkness

*Were you there when they crucified my Lord?
Sometimes it causes me to tremble... tremble... tremble.*

Old Negro Spiritual

Reflect

Offer yourself completely to the Lord, letting your heart rest in His presence. The time spent contemplating the cross today may be serious and sobering. The result can and should be troubling as you grasp even more of the price Christ paid for your sins.

Read the following verse a couple of times, putting your name in it. *Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us-- for it is written, 'CURSED IS EVERYONE WHO HANGS ON A TREE.'* (Galatians 3:13)

Consider that Christ became a "curse" for you. Write a prayer expressing your heart to God concerning this truth.

Read

Now from the sixth hour darkness fell upon all the land until the ninth hour.

Matthew 27:45

Only a few hours have passed since the nails were first driven through Jesus' wrists and feet. With each grueling moment it becomes harder to hang on. But he has a cup to drink and the final dregs of sin's poisonous nectar await him.

Clenching his teeth, Jesus tightens the throbbing muscles in his arms in order to raise himself once again. The nails have torn at his wrists, making the holes larger. Before he can catch his breath, he slips and must push himself up again. After several tries he manages to extend himself long enough to exhale and replenish his lungs with fresh air.

Then, as if from nowhere, an inky film spreads across the gray sky, turning it completely black. Panic breaks out at Golgotha as people stumble around, bewildered by the strange phenomenon. The soldiers grope their way to the crosses, making sure no one tries to free the condemned. With such a bizarre turn of events, anything seems possible. The crowd huddles in small groups, afraid to move, unable to see even one foot in front of themselves. It is as if the sun has disintegrated.

What goes through the mind of Christ as light leaves the land? Does he remember the days of Creation when the earth was formless and void and darkness hovered over it? Does the memory of an eternal expanse undefiled by a people destined to sin, call him back to the Father's side? Does he long to shout; "Let there be light," and end this noon time terror?

Hearts pound fearfully in those left on the mount. The blackness is almost palpable and it seems the sun will never shine again. Though the air is hot and muggy, a chill settles on the soldiers and priests. The absence of light at midday fills them with despair.

With every second, Jesus swallows more of mankind's sin. Every disobedient deed, every lustful stare, every evil longing, every act of hatred, every transgression ever perpetrated and every sin yet to be committed, flows like poison into his very soul -- drink after drink, until he reaches the dregs of the cup. And in the drinking, a teeming swamp of depravity slowly engulfs the Christ.

He who has never known sin *becomes* the epitome of evil. Darkness oozes in and around him and clutches at his soul, it's tentacles dragging him down into the swirling waters of Satan's vile dominion.

And the Light of the world is extinguished for a few hours on a hill called Calvary. Men who love darkness rather than light demand a sign, and God gives them a sky that matches the blackness of their own hearts. No greater horror has ever existed in the history of the world than this day when *darkness fell upon all the land*.

Respond

Try to imagine the total darkness that descended on Calvary. Contemplate the physical impact of it first. Then, reflect on a world where Light-- every vestige of God's presence -- is gone, and only the darkness of evil remains. Place yourself in the midst of the most vile circumstances you can imagine where sin reigns and no good exists -- no kindness, love, joy, compassion, trust, gentleness or peace.

The atmosphere is terrifying -- hatred, bitterness, lust, greed, rage, lying, cheating, murder, rape, gossip, backbiting...Hopelessness so severe people gnash their teeth and rail at each other. This is what reigns on Calvary when Jesus drinks in the sin of the world and becomes a curse for you and for me. Give yourself enough time to feel the complete despair such darkness demands. Envision your own sins -- yesterday's, today's and tomorrow's in the cup Jesus drank there.

When you think you comprehend to any degree, the price Jesus paid for you in those three hours of darkness, read these verses: *For He rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.* (Colossians 1:13-14.)

Feel the relief of this truth, rejoice in the wonder of it, and worship your Redeemer with a heart of pure and overwhelming gratitude.

A Prayer

Oh my God, the darkness frightens me even now. My hands shake and I scream for light. I cannot live except you illumine my sinful soul. How can you drink this cup? I cannot comprehend it, but this I know -- had you stopped short and refused even the final drop, I would dwell for eternity in the vast depravity of darkness. Oh my God, I fall on my knees.

DAY THIRTY -- Forsaken

*There is something infinitely profounder than pathos in the death of Jesus;
there is a mystery we cannot begin to touch.*

Oswald Chambers

Reflect

Breathe deeply as you settle your heart before God. Release the distractions of your day, concentrating on the presence of Christ in and around you through His Spirit. Do this until you feel ready to contemplate what God has for you today.

Quietly read Amos 8:9-10, a prophecy of the darkness at Golgotha.

"It will come about in that day," declares the Lord GOD, "That I will make the sun go down at noon and make the earth dark in broad daylight. Then I will turn your festivals into mourning and all your songs into lamentation; and I will bring sackcloth on everyone's loins and baldness on every head. And I will make it like a time of mourning for an only son, and the end of it will be like a bitter day."

Imagine the atmosphere God describes. See rejoicing turning to mourning, and happy songs turn to loud mournful laments at the gloom of a world without Light. Ask God to reveal the reality of this so that you may mourn for His only Son as you come to the Cross today.

Read

*And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying,
"ELI, ELI, LAMA SABACHTHANI?" that is,
"MY GOD, MY GOD, WHY HAST THOU FORSAKEN ME?"*

Matthew 27:46

The darkness on Golgotha is so thick that no one dare move. The air wrecks of hopelessness. Sweeping depression descends on every one who attends the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth. Some shake with terror, others weep in silent despair. Priests clutch their phylacteries like good luck charms, but relief doesn't come.

Jesus writhes in agony as he drinks the final drops from sin's vile cup. His back is a mass of infection, pus oozing from raw sores. His grotesque face contorts in the blackness at midday. Thankfully no one can see his repugnant form. When finally he swallows the last of the bitter potion, his body explodes in convulsions of wracking pain.

Flinging himself up with inhuman strength, he screams: *My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?*

The priests, startled at first, find themselves strangely discomfited at this show of weakness, their depression deepening. The soldiers, sobered from their drunken states, fight their own internal demons. Abject woe wrenches the hearts of the women who hear their beloved Rabbi scream in the distance.

What rips such a plea from the bowels of the crucified one? Is hope completely obscured by the darkness of the sin he carries? Is the onslaught of demonic forces threatening his determination to endure till the end?

My God, my god, why have you forsaken me? He calls to God, but there is no answer. What inner turmoil must plague the son at this severing of his triune soul? From Gethsemane till now, God the Father has refused to intervene. What kind of wretchedness wields its way into His son's heart at such rejection? Does Sovereign silence sabotage his struggle to obey for even an instant?

With great force, Jesus is plunged back down, paralyzing the muscles in his arms. Then, for no apparent reason, the sky begins to lighten. Those nearby look up to examine the face of the one who has screamed in such distress. How can one explain what they see? For though wracked with pain, and battered beyond belief, something strange emanates from his eyes. It almost seems a look of relief.

And God the Father weeps great sobs, shaking the heavens with his grief. How hard it has been to restrain himself while watching his son endure such agony. How he has longed to intervene -- to subdue the suffering for even a moment. What torment he has known in every drop of sin his son has drunk.

But His righteousness requires a reckoning with the sin of mankind, and so the plan put into place so long ago must be carried out to the bitter end. Never has the world known a moment such as this, when mercy triumphs over judgement, and love restrains the Almighty and silences His voice. The price is paid -- by the Son who dies and the Father who could save him, but declines on behalf of a lost and dying world.

Respond

It is beyond our human comprehension to fathom what happened when Christ took on the sins of the world. Yet, as His followers, we must try. Place yourself in that state of darkness once again, and listen to Jesus cry from the cross: *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?* What would it be like to know your only parent will not help you in your time of greatest need?

In reality, God did not turn His back on Jesus, but chose over and over not to intervene, that the price of sin might be paid in full. As you hear Jesus cry out, consider both His pain and the Father's. Consider the agony of watching your only child suffer, knowing you must not reach out to help.

Read the following verses and rejoice that He is your source of eternal salvation.

In the days of His flesh, He offered up both prayers and supplications with loud crying and tears to the One able to save Him from death, and He was heard because of His piety. Although He was a Son, He learned obedience from the things which He suffered. And having been made perfect, He became to all those who obey Him the source of eternal salvation.

Hebrews 5:7-9

Spend some time in worship for all that has been done to purchase you from sin's grip. Write a prayer based on these verses.

A Prayer

Father God, how rarely have I thought of your pain in watching your Son die as He did. I dismiss it with theological theories and lofty explanations. But you were there. You did not leave -- that perhaps would have been easier. You stayed... and you watched... and you wept... and you did nothing. You refused to act -- truly I am unworthy of such love. I rest in my unworthiness and ponder the mercy flowing down for one such as me.

DAY THIRTY-ONE -- Thirsty

How do you approach the thirst of Jesus? Only one secret -- the closer you come to Jesus, the better you will know His thirst. Jesus thirsts even now, in your heart and in the poor – He knows your weakness, He wants only your love, wants only the chance to love you.

Mother Teresa

Reflect

Come to the oasis of God's refreshing presence as you seek Him today. Spend a few minutes thanking Him for the living water, which is always available for you to drink. Consider what it means to be truly thirsty, and unable to quench your thirst.

Another prophecy of the crucifixion is found in Psalm 69. Read the following verses and contemplate the emotions of Christ as he hangs in the final moments on Golgotha.

Save me, O God, for the waters have threatened my life. I have sunk in deep mire, and there is no foothold; I have come into deep waters, and a flood overflows me. I am weary with my crying; my throat is parched; My eyes fail while I wait for my God.

Those who hate me without a cause are more than the hairs of my head; those who would destroy me are powerful, being wrongfully my enemies; what I did not steal, I then have to restore.

Reproach has broken my heart and I am so sick. And I looked for sympathy, but there was none, and for comforters, but I found none. They also gave me gall for my food and for my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink.

Psalm 69:1-4,20-21

Read the verses again, ponder them and ask God to reveal the deeper truths revealed in Jesus' cry: *I thirst*.

Read

After this, Jesus, knowing that all things had already been accomplished, in order that the Scripture might be fulfilled, said, "I am thirsty"

John 19:28

The faint light spreading across Golgotha stirs groups of onlookers who have been frozen in fear. Most hurry home, anxious to leave behind an overpowering sense of dread and despair. The four soldiers, superstitious about the receding darkness, stand apprehensively near the crosses. Soon, stilted conversation begins as different ones offer their opinion on the black sky and the forlorn cry from Jesus' lips.

One of the priests surmises: "Clearly, he is calling for Elijah!" Nervous snickers ensue as they discuss the absurdity of such a plea.

The physical pain for Jesus drones on, a persistent vibration in every cell of his failing body. Yet, the agony on his face is different now. In the eye of suffering's terrible storm, it almost seems he has found a place of rest. He looks out over Jerusalem, recalling his days and nights of obedience to his Father. Now, in this moment, a sense of completion settles in his soul. He has done what he came to do.

Death is near. Jesus pants faster, gasping for air with each try. His lungs ache from the stress, and his throat burns with each breath. His heart must work harder and harder to pump blood throughout his body. Dehydrated and no longer able to swallow, he manages to push himself up just enough to mouth the words, *I am thirsty*.

What goes through his mind as he speaks? Is it physical thirst that compels him to cry out so? Or do the words tell a deeper story? Does he thirst on behalf of a lost and dying world who are desperate for a taste of the living water only he can give? Is he gently reminding those who will follow him, that in quenching the thirst of humanity, they quench his own thirst? That a cup of water given to the least of these, will now and forever, be a cup of water for him?

One of the soldiers grabs a reed from a hyssop plant, putting a sponge on its tip. He dips it in his own cup of cheap wine and holds it to Jesus' lips. The priests and elders, put off at the act of kindness, call out barbs and taunts once again.

"Ha -- leave him alone and see if Elijah will come and take him down!"

"Yes -- let us see if Elijah will come and save him now!"

The laughter resumes, though it lacks the force of their earlier sarcasm. The vinegary wine burns Jesus' cracked lips and parched tongue, dripping down his face. The sun grows brighter, beating down on his matted head, while his body shivers uncontrollably.

Within the city, the celebration of Passover comes slowly to an end. Families have broken bread, and offered their finest lambs in sacrifice and homage to Jahweh. And on the hill outside the city gates, the Lamb of God stands at the very threshold of death, having at last offered himself as the ultimate sacrifice for a world bound by sin.

Respond

Let yourself feel a small sense of the peace that Christ is experiencing on a spiritual level at nearing completion of the work on the cross. Yet, know that the physical pain continues. Imagine His thirst, having had nothing to eat or drink for hours, hanging in the hot sun, tongue swollen and lips cracked open and dry. Then consider His longing to give living water to all who want to drink. Hear Him say; *I thirst*. Contemplate His voice and these two words for a while. What does it mean to you?

Read Psalm 22:14-15, reflecting on Jesus' state of mind. *I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint; My heart is like wax; it is melted within me. My strength is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue cleaves to my jaws; and you lay me in the dust of death.*

How will you respond to his thirst? What difference will it make in your own life? Write a prayer of response to Him as he calls to you personally: *I thirst*.

A Prayer

Oh Jesus how I long to quench your thirst. I see you there and I want to run with a cool glass of water from a fresh spring. For this is what you did for me when my soul dwelt in a dry and thirsty land. You came rushing in, oh River of life and now from my innermost being flow forth springs of living water. I will quench your thirst dearest Savior. To a lost and dying world, I will offer a cup in your name.

DAY THIRTY-TWO -- It is Finished

*Blessed Redeemer, precious Redeemer,
seems now I see Him on Calvary's tree.*

Avis B. Christiansen

Reflect

Spend some time as you begin today just being silent, stilling all the sounds within and without. Breathe in His great love and breathe out your own self-centeredness. Breathe in His commitment to you, and breathe out your own commitments to things with no eternal value. Ask God to purify your heart.

Read or sing the words to the following hymn, contemplating the depth of each phrase.

Beneath the Cross of Jesus

Frederick C. Maker

*Beneath the cross of Jesus I fain would take my stand.
The shadow of a mighty Rock within a weary land.
A home within the wilderness, a rest upon the way,
From the burning of the noontide heat, and the burden of the day.*

*Upon that cross of Jesus mine eye at times can see
the very dying form of One who suffered there for me.
And from my smitten heart with tears two wonders I confess:
The wonders of redeeming love and my unworthiness.*

*I take, O cross, thy shadow for my abiding place.
I ask no other sunshine than the sunshine of His face.
Content to let the world go by, to know no gain or loss.
My sinful self my only shame, my glory all the cross.*

Read

When Jesus therefore had received the sour wine, He said, "It is finished!"

John 19:30

Every eye in the small crowd left at the cross is on Jesus. Death is imminent and many are curious to see how he will go. Passersby who have stayed till the end still hope to get their money's worth. Perhaps the would-be king will perform some last minute miracle. The priests, anxious for him to breathe his final breath, keep a detached vigil at his feet.

The thieves on either side of Christ have begun to thrash about, groaning loudly. But unlike most victims of crucifixion, Jesus does not fight the throes of death. Hanging there so still, it appears perhaps he has passed on.

But then he moves. Gingerly he presses his bloody feet into the stipe once again. Lifting only a couple of inches, his eyes scan the vast horizon, then settle on those below. Forcing the air from his lungs, he sucks in as much as he can. Then, as if to announce to all that his time has come, Jesus cries out haltingly: *It...is...finished!*

What images flash across his memory as he utters these final words to mankind? Does his short span on earth now spin like a panorama of events through his mind? Visions of Peter throwing out his nets for the catch of a lifetime, then leaving it all behind to follow him? Parents, bringing their children to sit on his lap and be blessed? Adulterers, prostitutes, liars and thieves, coming to him for restoration? Religious leaders hungry for spiritual truth, seeking him out in the middle of the night? The blind seeing, the lame walking, the demonized set free and even the dead coming back to life?

Does he recall the dozens of prophecies concerning him, rejoicing that every one is finally fulfilled? Can he hear his Father proclaiming once again, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased?"

It is finished. He speaks words replete with symbolism, and some standing here wonder what he means. He could be saying so many things: It is accomplished...the debt is discharged...the plan has been executed...the task is complete. Even the soldiers stop and stare, turning the three words over in their minds.

Satan hears and gloats in tawdry triumph. He calls for the festivities to begin, believing he has won after all. Demons dance and toast each other, drinking to their own degradation. The Son of God will die like everyone else.

It is finished. Jesus wraps his dying words in an eternity of truth. By one man, sin entered the world, bringing the condemnation of death to all. And now by one man, the grace of God and gift of eternal life can be freely given to those who believe. "Paid

in full" is stamped upon the certificate of debt hanging over Adam's race. The new covenant in Christ's blood can at last take effect.

It is finished. In his final seconds, as Jesus considers the world into which he came, perhaps one thought prevails. Soon he will have a people for his own possession, an inheritance to present to his Father, that they might see His beauty, and live in the wonder of triune love, tasting at last the eternal joy for which mankind was made.

This has cost him dearly, and many will never understand how much. But from the foundation of the world, the heart of the infinite I AM has waited for this moment when Jesus the Christ, dying a despicable death on a Roman cross, can proclaim, *It is finished.*

Respond

Stop for a moment, breathing in the sense of wonder that filled Christ as He saw His completed work. Consider all the days and nights that have led up to this -- especially the last several hours. Contemplate the suffering that He endured. Hear Him saying to you, naming you by name: *It is finished. Your sins are forgiven, washed white as snow. Your debt is paid. You are free. I have redeemed you not with silver or gold, but with my precious blood. You are bought with this painful price. Now you will see my glory. I delight to give you my love. It is finished.*

Romans 8:31-32 says: *What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things? Think of these words in light of your understanding of Christ's death on the cross. What new meaning do they have? Offer a prayer of worship and thanksgiving based on these verses.*

A Prayer

Oh my Father, you are truly for me . . . for me. What in the world can I say to such a thought? You spared nothing -- not even your own precious Son, that I might know you and live in the circle of Your love for eternity. How can I ever doubt You? How can I ever question Your plans for me? You, who freely give me all things, have given me Yourself. What more could I ever need to satisfy this soul?

DAY THIRTY-THREE -- The End

*As you gaze upon the cross, and long for conformity to him,
be not weary or fearful because you cannot express in words what you seek.
Ask him to plant the cross in your heart. Believe in him, the crucified and now living one,
to dwell within you, and breathe his own mind there.*

Andrew Murray

Reflect

There are mysteries we will never fully understand concerning the death of Jesus on the Cross. Ask God today to open your spiritual eyes to something new concerning His sacrifice. Place your heart at the foot of His Cross, content to spend time meditating, reflecting and rejoicing at what has happened. Remember Jesus' words to Pilate that the power to take His life comes only from God (John 18:11). Thank Him for making the choice even to the very end that enables your own redemption.

Read

*And Jesus, crying out with a loud voice, said,
"FATHER, INTO THY HANDS I COMMIT MY SPIRIT."*

Luke 23:46

Six hours have passed since the crucifixion began. The soldiers, sensitive to every nuance of death on a cross, know the end is nigh for the peculiar criminal in the middle. He is going quickly compared to most, but to those who love him, every minute must seem an endless marathon of misery.

He has become abhorrent to look at. His hair clings to his head with stale sweat and spit. His face is ghastly, swollen, bruised and mangled, rivulets of dried blood from the crown of thorns now etched like furrows on his face.

His back resembles raw meat. Lacerated from the scourging, the wounds have bred ugly abscesses in the hours he has repeatedly rubbed against the stipe. The holes in his hands and feet have torn, and his whole body shakes in the tremors of one succumbing to infection.

Watching him now, it is as if time is suspended on Calvary. Almost in slow motion, he lifts himself. Then, with a force that shocks even the most disengaged bystanders, he screams: *Father, into Thy hands I commit my Spirit.*

With this, he exhales all the air left in his lungs. His body collapses and in one final act of humility, Jesus the Christ bows his head, giving up his spirit. He is gone, completing the cycle for which all of creation has longed since Adam first sinned in the Garden of Eden. From the Father he came into the world, and now to the Father he returns.

This final exclamation is a mystery to all. There is no sound of defeat, certainly not words of despair. This is the cry of a conqueror and the voice of victory. No one knows quite what to make of it.

All of antiquity has led up to this, and all history will point back to it. To many it will seem a foolish thing that one claiming to be God's Son should die like this. But to those who will be washed in the healing streams of the blood shed on Golgotha's hill, the war cry Jesus bellows as he embraces death -- *Father, into Thy hands I commit my spirit* -- is the very power of salvation.

Respond

Can you imagine what it must have felt like to hear Jesus shout these final words? Consider the strength he felt, the complete sense of control he had over his own destiny. Even at the conclusion of such terrible suffering -- even while his body shrieks with pain, he cries out with strength and power. Consider the joy he must have felt as he offered his spirit back to the Father from whence he had come. What an incredible reunion they must have had. Rejoice with the living God at this moment of victory.

Read these verses quietly:

When you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions, having canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us, which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross.

Colossians 2:13-14

Read them again aloud, placing your name in the passage, turning it into a prayer of praise (e.g. *Oh God, when I was dead in my vile sin, You made me alive together with You...*) Write it out and commit to rejoicing throughout this day at the truth of it.

A Prayer

Oh God, I hear your victory cry and I want to shout too. My heart has wept with you and now I rejoice in your joy at going to your Father. I see you leaving that Cross, and there stained with your life's blood are my own sins -- a certificate of debt I could never pay -- nailed to the wood with the nails that once held you there. But you are gone, you have paid it all and I wonder how I can ever express my praise.

DAY THIRTY-FOUR -- The Earth Responds

*But as we gaze, it is not pity that we feel, but a profound reverence,
for there on Calvary is the great turning point in the course of human affairs.*

Hughell Fosbroke

Reflect

Come to the Lord today with simple gratitude for His great love. Rest in Him for a few minutes, offering words of adoration.

Consider the turning point in history that Jesus' death brought about. Besides the spiritual impact, think of how our world revolves around the event -- our calendar being based on it. Muse for a few minutes on the concept that for over 2000 years, the gospel of Jesus Christ has spread continuously, changing lives of people from every race and nation as it now spans the entire globe. Ask God to plant a sense of awe about this within you, as you reflect on the first minutes after He died.

Read

And the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.

Mark 15:38

The very bowels of the earth reverberate at the death of Jesus of Nazareth on a hill outside Jerusalem. Those attending the crucifixion notice it first -- a rumbling beneath their feet. Soon the ground begins to roll in ripple after ripple, causing many to lose their balance.

Then, without warning the hillside ruptures, creating zigzag crevices large enough to swallow one whole. Giant boulders simply disappear from view, and confusion runs rampant on Golgotha and throughout the city. Hebrew families, recalling ancestral stories of God's judgment through acts of nature, wonder what great sin has taken place.

It is the time of the evening sacrifice, and several priests have made their way to the Temple to burn incense. They, too, feel the ground quaking, and as they clutch tables to keep from falling, something incomprehensible occurs. With a sound like the roar of the sea, the heavy curtain separating them from the Holy of holies begins to come apart at the top. The fine linen shimmers and shakes, it's shades of purple, violet and scarlet blending into one.

Frozen, the priests watch as the veil which normally takes 300 of them to handle every year on the Day of Atonement, tears in two from top to bottom. It is an awesome and frightening sight to behold. In splendorous display, the Ark of the Covenant stands gleaming before their very eyes. Stunned, the priests begin to back away.

What must they feel as they encounter this sacred object? Does the cloud of God's presence hover over the mercy seat as it did in Moses' day? Do they fall in wonder, or cower in fear before the God who ordained so long ago that only one man enter this place, and only once a year? Will some of these priests soon put their faith in Jesus the Messiah, as a result of what they've seen here?

The earth continues to convulse, and what happens next defies the wildest imagination. Boulders that once sealed tombs begin to break apart, and through the rubble, bodies that have long been dead arise. No one will ever know how many are given this resurrection gift, but in the coming week, many of these miracle men and women will shock family and friends as they appear throughout Jerusalem.

No one can deny that something of cataclysmic significance is taking place in this moment of crucifixion. The earth shakes, rocks shatter and the dead come to life. The veil of the temple tears in two, admitting common priests into the Holy of holies where God's presence resides and the blood of bulls is sprinkled annually to atone for sin. Almighty God acknowledges the death of His Son in a dramatic way.

And yet all these things are merely a shadow of the beauty and power in the veil of Jesus' flesh that was rent, sprinkling his blood across the altar of history. For this Sacrificial Lamb atones for sins, not once a year, but once and for all, leading the way for mankind to live forever in the wonder of God's holy presence.

Respond

Ponder for a moment the freedom you have to enjoy God's presence day in and day out, knowing His Spirit will never leave you. Leviticus details God's plan for a Day of Atonement for the Israelites. (Chapter 16). In it, only one person was allowed in the place where God's presence resided, and then only once per year, to offer sacrifices for the sins of all. If anyone disobeyed, they would die.

In light of that, ponder the truths in the following passage:

Every priest stands daily ministering and offering time after time the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins; but He, having offered one sacrifice for sins for all

time, SAT DOWN AT THE RIGHT HAND OF GOD... Therefore, brethren, since we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus by a new and living way which He inaugurated for us through the veil, that is, His flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.

Hebrews 10:11-22, selected

Thank Jesus Christ for everything this passage tells you about your relationship with Him, and salvation through Him. Write a list and offer it up as a sacrifice of praise to the Author of your own salvation.

A Prayer

Jesus, I remember the first time I saw, really saw the beauty of your Being. Holiness and humility, justice and mercy, righteousness and grace – all that you are, my soul could finally see, because you suffered and died on Calvary. You led the way, you rent forever the veil between us and I followed you in. I ran through your broken body and spilt blood into the Holy of holies where you shone the light of your glory...how great my joy.

DAY THIRTY-FIVE -- Reactions

And, as you sit and gaze, it will be born in you that only a crucified Savior could meet your need.

William Sangster

Reflect

Wait before God today, rejoicing that He is faithful to meet you here, regardless of what you have done, or what you feel. The truth that He never leaves or forsakes you is a foundation you can rest in right now.

Read the following verses aloud, personalizing them as a song of praise to the living God. Rejoice that you are able to proclaim the tidings of His salvation because of His work on the cross.

Sing to the LORD a new song; sing to the LORD, all the earth. Sing to the LORD, bless His name; proclaim good tidings of His salvation from day to day. Tell of His glory among the nations, His wonderful deeds among all the peoples.

Psalm 96:1-3

Read

And when the centurion, who was standing right in front of Him, saw the way He breathed His last, he said, "Truly this man was the Son of God!"

Mark 15:39

Though the earth has begun to settle down, Calvary's crucifixion crowd is plagued by unrest. The few small groups of people left, long to run, to escape the terror of what they've just experienced. They do not know that what happened here has affected the entire universe.

The soldiers cautiously approach the dead criminal. Images from the past six hours assault their minds, filling them with apprehension. The centurion in charge lifts his hands as if beseeching the heavens, his eyes glued to the face of Christ. Jesus' countenance is a peaceful one, his bruises and cuts seeming to have faded with his passing.

How different this death from all the others the soldiers have witnessed. Never have they seen one in such a dreadful condition maintain control of his final moments. Each soldier is absorbed in thought, pondering the paradox that one brutally nailed to a cross could determine his own destiny, even to his last breath. A hushed stillness surrounds the small circle of soldiers, and in awe the centurion whispers: *Truly this man was the Son of God.*

Another group stands in hushed reverence before the cross. There is Mary of Magdala, whom Jesus once set free from the torment of seven demons. Her shell-shocked eyes stare silently at the body of Christ in death. There are his aunts, and other women who had left everything to follow him, gladly supporting Jesus and the disciples out of their own resources. Exhausted, they hold each other in quiet grief, weeping no longer.

And there is his mother, Mary. On her knees, she rocks back and forth with face in hands, not making a sound. John stands at her side, fighting back the flood of emotion within him.

Some religious men, uncertain and frightened by the turn of events, begin to beat at their breasts, pleading for God to have mercy on their souls. Others simply shake their heads in disbelief. The last of the crowd begins to break up and a subdued procession winds its way down Golgotha's hill, back to the business of life.

Most are filled with relief that the ordeal is over. Many are numb, confused and emotionally spent. But in the moments after the death of Jesus on Calvary's cross, one soldier encounters the Savior. *Truly this man was the Son of God.* In childlike trust, he speaks words of faith, and like millions who will join him for centuries to come, nothing will ever be the same.

Respond

Think of what the centurion experienced when he realized who Jesus was. Contemplate the sense of awe that filled him, and the faith he demonstrated when he spoke aloud what he saw.

Do you remember when you first discovered the truth about Jesus Christ? Whether it was as a child through a Sunday School book, as a teenager, or as an adult, take the time to reminisce those moments. Relive in your heart the wonder and fresh awareness that Jesus died for you. Embrace anew the joy of your salvation.

Write a prayer of gratitude for your personal salvation.

A Prayer

Dearest Savior, truly you are the Son of God. I too cannot look at you in death, without wonder. How you suffered...will I ever be able to think of it without feeling the freshness of your wounds, or reliving the grief of your sorrow? Holy One, righteous in all your ways, I adore you, but you deserve so much more. Give me grace, Lord, to live for your pleasure, to fight for your honor, and magnify your worth for a world that is yet to believe.

DAY THIRTY-SIX -- Water and Blood

Stand at the foot of the cross, and count the purple drops by which you have been cleansed; see the thorn-crown; mark His scourged shoulders, still gushing with encrimsoned rills... And if you do not lie prostrate on the ground before that cross, you have never seen it.

Charles Spurgeon

Reflect

As you come before the Lord today, consider what it must have been like to have been a Hebrew celebrating Passover. For centuries, fathers have used this annual event to pass down to their children the story of Jehovah's faithfulness in sparing them from death in Egypt, by having them mark their door-posts with the blood of a pure, unblemished lamb. (See Exodus 12)

Ephesians 1:7-8 says: *In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace, which He lavished on us.* Reflect on the fact that Jesus' blood is a sign over you, a gift of His lavish grace, that you may escape terrible judgment and punishment, and embrace new life. Jesus is our Passover Lamb. Muse on this for a few moments.

Now, very slowly, read the following passage:

If you address as Father the One who impartially judges according to each one's work, conduct yourselves in fear during the time of your stay on earth; knowing that you were not redeemed with perishable things like silver or gold from your futile way of life inherited from your forefathers, but with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ.

1 Peter 1:17-19

Read it again, offering specific words of thanksgiving for everything it tells you about yourself, and your relationship to Christ.

Read

And he who has seen has borne witness, and his witness is true; and he knows that he is telling the truth, so that you also may believe.

John 19:35

As evening draws near, only the soldiers and a handful of priests remain on Golgotha. The two thieves continue to groan occasionally, raising up as they spew out each agonizing breath. Jesus seems shrouded in death, yet no one knows for sure. With the Sabbath approaching, Caiaphas worries that they won't all die before sundown.

Sacred law is clear on this, no criminal is to hang from a tree overnight. The thousands of pilgrims who've come to Jerusalem for Passover, will certainly question his own authority if these bodies are left to hang.

Disturbed, he sends one of the elders with an urgent message to Pilate, requesting an order for the bones of the dying men to be broken. Once this is done and they can no longer lift themselves up to exhale, they will suffocate in a matter of minutes. As he waits for an answer, the chief priest paces impatiently, wanting to be done with the whole sordid saga. Finally, a runner approaches with the order bearing Pilate's seal.

The centurion reads it, and picking up a large iron bar, motions to one of the soldiers to begin. The soldier nods and moves to the thief on the right, striking a vicious blow just below the knees. The criminal cries out, then collapses. The bar is handed off to another soldier, who does the same to the thief on the left.

The third soldier takes the bar and approaches Jesus, but just as he lifts it up, the centurion calls out for him to wait. The three soldiers step back with questioning looks. The centurion knows that Pilate will want proof of death, but for some inexplicable reason feels compelled to keep them from breaking this one's bones. Clearly Jesus is dead, and has been for a while. Why bother?

Torn, he finally reaches down, pulls out his lance and faces Jesus. Quickly plunging it into his heart, he sees something very strange streaming from the side of Christ. Thick red blood pours out, but something else as well -- a clear liquid much like water.

The centurion and other soldiers exchange curious glances. What an odd crucifixion this has been. Nothing about this prisoner's behavior has seemed normal. Now, he bleeds blood and water, a sight they've never seen in all the hundreds of executions they've witnessed.

Night is beginning to fall and the last of the priests and elders, content that Jesus is dead, hurry home before the sun sets in the west. The soldiers begin to clean up the area around the crosses where debris from the day is scattered.

As news of the mysterious phenomenon of blood and water spreads throughout Jerusalem, some pause to consider what it might mean. There are those who say Jesus died of a broken heart.

One day, this scene will flash in front of every person who has ever walked this earth. Every eye will gaze at Jesus' pierced side, and they will mourn as if they have lost their only son, for all of mankind has played a part in his gruesome death. But today on a hill outside Jerusalem, only a few stragglers witness the amazing enigma of blood and water flowing from the side of the carpenter from Nazareth.

Respond

Spend some time gazing at Jesus in death on Calvary. Allow your mind to recall various scenes from this place -- the words He spoke, the compassion He showed, the gentleness He demonstrated, and the choice He continued to make to offer Himself on your behalf till the very end. As you contemplate these things, worship Him.

Read the following prophecies from Zechariah 12:10 and Revelation 1:7.

I will pour out on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the Spirit of grace and of supplication, so that they will look on Me whom they have pierced; and they will mourn for Him, as one mourns for an only son, and they will weep bitterly over Him like the bitter weeping over a firstborn.

BEHOLD, HE IS COMING WITH THE CLOUDS, and every eye will see Him, even those who pierced Him; and all the tribes of the earth will mourn over Him. So it is to be. Amen.

Look on the One that you too have pierced with your own sin. Feel a sense of mourning at your part in His death, but also rejoice that He will come again in glory as the King of kings, and all will understand the price He paid. Offer words of praise for this reality. Write a prayer of thanksgiving.

A Prayer

Jesus, even now, I look at you -- at your side as it flows with water and blood. It is a fountain I cannot drink from enough dearest Savior. I feel your heart break for me, and I know that I too have pierced you with my indifference, my rebellious clutch at control, and my callous disregard for the price you paid to change all this. I see in your blood the great sacrifice and I take comfort in the cleansing streams that ever flow from your side. Wash me here Lord, and I will be whiter than snow.

DAY THIRTY-SEVEN -- Taken Down

For in the cross of Christ, as in a splendid theater, the incomparable goodness of God is set before the whole world. The glory of God shines, indeed, in all creatures on high and below, but never more brightly than in the cross.

Calvin's St. John

Reflect

We have walked the entire journey with Christ to the cross and soon his body will be taken down. What joy we can embrace as we comprehend His great achievement on Calvary. Quiet your heart before God, and read (or sing) slowly the words to the following old hymn. Let the words set your heart toward your precious Redeemer.

When I Survey the Wondrous Cross

Isaac Watts, 1715

*When I survey the wondrous cross, on which the prince of glory died.
My richest gain I count but loss, and pour contempt on all my pride.*

*Forbid it Lord that I should boast, save in the death of Christ my God.
All the vain things that charm me most, I sacrifice them to His blood.*

*See from His head, His hands, His feet -- sorrow and love flow mingled down.
Did ere such love and sorrow meet, or thorns compose so rich a crown?*

*Were the whole realm of nature mine, that were a present far too small.
Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all.*

Has your time spent at the Cross produced this kind of response?

Read

And Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen cloth.

Matthew 27:59

In Jerusalem, lavish preparations are being made for the evening meal at Castle Antonia. Pilate, exhausted from the long day's events, soberly sips a glass of wine. The

Jew from Nazareth continues to plague his thoughts. Visions of death by crucifixion linger and the procurator becomes increasingly agitated.

A persistent pounding at the door startles him from his morbid musing. A servant informs him that Joseph from the town of Arimathea, a member of the Sanhedrin, requests an audience. Now what? Pilate shakes his head. Will this thing ever go away? But Joseph is a wealthy and powerful man. It would not be prudent to refuse to see him. He instructs the servant to bring him in.

Joseph strides forward with brisk confidence. "Sir, it is the very sacred custom of my people to bury the dead before sundown. Time is short and I would like to request permission to take the body of Jesus of Nazareth and prepare it for burial."

Pilate examines the distinguished religious leader. How odd that one of those responsible for Jesus' death, would now want to give him an honorable burial. Still, Pilate relishes the thought of being done with the whole thing.

"Is he dead then?" He asks. "Let us find out."

Quickly a messenger is sent to question the centurion at Golgotha. He returns, assuring Pilate that Jesus has been dead now for some time. With a sense of great relief, Pilate signs the orders to turn the corpse over to Joseph. At last, he can be rid of this confusing criminal who turned his life upside down in one day.

Joseph hurries back to Golgotha, apprehension stirring within. What has compelled him to do such a thing? Surely he will lose everything -- reputation, status, and perhaps even his livelihood. Why take such a risk? Does he regret not speaking up on Jesus' behalf just hours ago at the trial? Can it be that this is his first act of faith in the Messiah who he has so eagerly watched for all his life? Or is he simply fulfilling his duty as a pious priest to make sure the dead are buried before sundown?

On the way out of town, Joseph stops at a market stall and purchases a large piece of clean, soft linen. As he approaches the incline up Golgotha, he is sickened by what he sees. Flies hover around the body of Christ and crows circle above, ready to devour the decaying flesh. He is shocked at Jesus' physical condition.

Sobered, he hands the orders to the centurion who reads the paper, glancing up at Joseph with relief and respect. He directs the other soldiers to the cross where Christ's emaciated body hangs. One of them grips the nail in Jesus' feet with a large tool, working it back and forth until it comes out. With the Y-shaped poles, they lift the cross-beam off the stipe and lay it on the ground.

Joseph watches, fighting emotions he can't explain, as they remove the nails from Jesus' wrists. Pulling the beam from under the inert body, the centurion turns to him and nods. The honorable religious leader of the Jews kneels beside the form of a man he barely knew and surely never understood, grieved that he has waited so long to come to him.

Laying the cloth out, he gently rolls the body onto it. The simple task distresses him. Scanning the horizon, he sees the soldiers already moving toward town. He must hurry, there is little time before sundown.

Joseph is not alone. Far in the distance, a small group of women watch every move he makes. Though their hearts long to be the ones preparing their Rabbi for burial, they know they cannot approach this esteemed member of the Sanhedrin. They will watch and wait, for now.

Carefully he pulls the corners of the linen tightly together, then tucks them in. When the corpse is secure, he rises and calls for some servants to help carry it to the tomb he has prepared. The day of death is coming to an end.

Not long ago, this bruised and battered body was a beautiful baby, the Son of God full of life, wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. There, a handful of shepherds and a choir of angels celebrated his birth.

Today, the lifeless corpse is wrapped in white linen, attended by a handful of heavyhearted followers. But angel choirs surely wait in the wings now, songs of celebration on the tips of their tongues. For in the grand scheme of God's eternal plan, weeping may last for the night, but joy will come in the morning.

Respond

There were probably many times Joseph of Arimathea could have spoken out on Christ's behalf. As a member of the Sanhedrin, he attended both trials, watching them slap Jesus around, mocking him. It seems he never protested. John tells us that secretly he was a follower of Christ, yet feared the reaction of his peers. Spend some time looking at your own life. Are there times when you fail to speak the truth about Christ? Do you keep quiet when He is maligned, for fear of what others might think? Can you imagine the courage it must have taken for Joseph to reveal his commitment to Christ by asking for the body? In what areas of your walk with God do you long for this kind of courage?

Now, consider the women who have never left Jesus' side. See them standing afar, unable to intervene, to even wash the wounds of their beloved teacher in death. Yet, they do not leave. What compels them to stay? What would compel you to commit yourself to Him with such fortitude?

Spend some time in prayer over these things. Read the following passage:

What I tell you in the darkness, speak in the light; and what you hear whispered in your ear, proclaim upon the housetops...Therefore everyone who confesses Me before men, I will also confess him before My Father who is in heaven. But whoever denies Me before men, I will also deny him before My Father who is in heaven.

Matthew 10:27,33

Meditate on these things. What is God saying to you? Write a prayer of response.

A Prayer

My Savior, my friend -- I can feel the sorrow in Joseph's heart as he wraps your cold body. Oh what he missed by waiting so long. And how much of You I have not yet understood, or known, or loved because I wait, when I could run to You. Banish the foolish fears and selfish passions that keep me from You -- burn them like dross until my heart is pure, aflame with desire for you alone, oh living God.

DAY THIRTY-EIGHT -- Myrrh and Aloe

In the cross is an ocean of love yet unrevealed, a mountain of power still unreleased, and a sea of truth not yet fathomed... There is something utterly exhaustless about the provisions of Calvary.

S. Franklin Logsdon

Reflect

Bring your heart before your Heavenly Father today by slowly speaking the model prayer found below

Our Father who is in heaven, Hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done, On earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.

Matthew 6:9-13

Reflect on each phrase as you pray it, especially in light of what you have gleaned from contemplating the Cross of Christ.

Read

All Thy garments are fragrant with myrrh and aloes...

Psalm 45:8

With the help of his servants, Joseph of Arimathea carries the corpse of Jesus of Nazareth down Golgotha. Travelers stop to stare. Why would a religious man such as this become unclean by having anything to do with a dead body, especially that of a criminal?

Two women, Mary of Magdala, and Mary the aunt of Jesus, continue to follow, bringing up the rear of the only funeral march he will have. The masses who flocked to hear him teach and watch him perform miracles, have disappeared. Those whose bodies were restored by his touch, or whose lonely hearts found compassion in his eyes, now busy themselves with Sabbath preparations.

Joseph turns at the bottom of the hill and walks several yards to the entrance of a lovely garden against the slope of Golgotha. The scent of spring blossoms fill the air, a pleasant respite to Calvary's rank residue. He directs the men to take the body through an opening carved in the rocky hillside. It is a fairly new sepulcher, no corpse having ever been laid there.

The two women approach, stationing themselves just outside the garden where they can see through the door into the rock-hewn tomb. They watch as Jesus' body is placed on a stone bench protruding from the wall of the cave. When the evening sky starts to grow dim, they know they must leave. Making plans to return with spices to anoint their Master after the Sabbath, they reluctantly head back toward town.

Joseph removes the linen cloth and begins tenderly washing the bruised body of Christ in preparation for burial. He finds the process therapeutic, a source of healing for his aching heart. As he finishes with the face, a commotion outside startles him. Peering out, he sees a fellow member of the Sanhedrin entering the garden, followed by several servants bearing jars of rich-scented myrrh and aloes.

He steps outside and as their eyes meet, the two priests sense an unspoken camaraderie. Joseph understands all too well why Nicodemus comes now. He remembers rumors of him meeting with Jesus in the dark of night for religious discussion. He recalls the meeting of the council during the feast of the Tabernacles when Caiaphas demanded Jesus' arrest. Nicodemus spoke boldly then, challenging the high priests to abide by their own laws and not condemn someone without hearing his defense.

Yet like himself, in the mockery of a trial before the Sanhedrin, Nicodemus said nothing in Jesus' favor. When he could have made a difference, he kept silent. And now like Joseph, he can stay away no longer. Each man in his own way, must deal with his inner struggle and self-condemnation.

Joseph embraces his friend, kissing him on each cheek, as they begin to work side by side. When the washing is complete, the men go to work on the embalming process. They alternate wrapping the body with strips of cloth, then sprinkling the powdered spices over it, leaving the head and face exposed. The aroma of aloes and myrrh allays the stench of decaying flesh. In this poignant sundown vigil, Joseph wraps and Nicodemus anoints the body of the Christ.

When they are finished, they carry the corpse through a low opening into the dark recesses of the cave for final burial. Nicodemus takes a small cloth, saturates it with spices and places it over Jesus' face. It is done.

They step out of the darkness into the cool evening air, where Joseph locates a large boulder and calls for a group of servants to roll it across the entrance to the tomb. Hearts full of grief and regret, the two priests embrace in farewell, hurrying to perform sacred duties and join their families for Sabbath.

The Son of man who never had a place to lay his head is now put to rest in a rich man's grave. The Lamb whose sacrifice on Calvary drifted like a pleasing aroma to the Father, is now anointed with sweet-smelling spices fit for a king. As families light the evening candles and pray, the body which once held the Light of the world' rots in a cold, dark cave. It seems the final act of mankind's greatest tragedy has come to an end.

Respond

Consider the heart of Nicodemus. He was a true seeker who asked sincere questions of Christ when he came to him at night. How hard it was for him to let go of his religious preconceptions in order to trust the truth of Christ's words. Do you cling to anything today that keeps you from hearing Jesus' voice to you? Religious works? Spiritual busyness? Christian reputation? Ask God to show you what you must leave behind as you come to Jesus in His death.

In the 4th century, a church leader named Augustine wrote the following words about his own conversion. Read them slowly, savoring their depth.

Belatedly I loved thee, O Beauty so ancient and so new, belatedly I loved thee. For see, thou wast within and I was without, and I sought thee out there...Thou didst call and cry aloud, and didst force open my deafness. Thou didst gleam and shine, and didst chase away my blindness. Thou didst breathe fragrant odors and I drew in my breath; and now I pant for thee. I tasted, and now I hunger and thirst. Thou didst touch me, and I burned for thy peace.

(Saint Augustine's Confessions, Book 10)

Write a prayer to Jesus, anointing Him with the aromatic spices of your own words.

A Prayer

Lord, they rolled the stone and sealed your body in darkness. It is so hard for me to grasp that it was only a shell -- that you were no part of those burial preparations. I see how often I run after things I

hope will bring you pleasure, but I am too late, for I've been consumed with dead deeds and lifeless works. I want to learn to hear you in the echoes of silence dear Lord -- to see the flickering flame of love through the darkness of your seeming distance. I don't want to miss you sweet Savior of mine -- hold my head to your heart, and let me hear only the sound of it beating in my ear.

DAY THIRTY-NINE -- The Sabbath

*Nowhere do I more find such fruitful stillness as when I am near the cross.
Nowhere do I feel so inclined to take the shoes from off my feet.
And how do you account for it?*

John Henry Jowett

Reflect

Make this time with God a time of rest as the Jews did on the Sabbath. Mentally cease from all activity except focusing on Him. Breathe deeply and slowly. Feel the coolness of the earth in the dark tomb where Christ has been laid. Smell the aromatic spices. Anticipate the miraculous as you offer yourself to the Savior. Ask Him to reveal His truth to your own heart today.

Read the following verses aloud as a proclamation of praise and preparation in your own heart for what God will do.

Lift up your heads, O gates, and be lifted up, O ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in! Who is the King of glory? The LORD strong and mighty, the LORD mighty in battle. Lift up your heads, O gates, and lift them up, O ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in! Who is this King of glory? The LORD of hosts, He is the King of glory. Selah. Psalm 24:7-10

Write a prayer to Jesus, opening the way for Him to enter the gates of the various parts of your life.

Read

There remains therefore a Sabbath rest for the people of God.

Hebrews 4:9

The setting sun ushers in a high holy day for the Jews in Jerusalem as they celebrate both Sabbath and the feast of unleavened bread. Fathers in homes throughout the city regale their children with tales of their ancestor's miraculous exodus from Egypt long ago.

The forced rest provides much time for reflection and quietness. Even the simplest tasks are left undone, and all of the market stalls owned by Jews have closed until the

sun sets tomorrow afternoon. In obedience, both pilgrims who've come to Jerusalem for Passover and those who live here join together to keep the Sabbath day holy.

Not everyone rests, however. A small group of women huddle together in one home, consumed with sadness at the events they have witnessed over the past several hours. Every now and then someone asks Mary of Magdala to describe once again what she saw at the tomb owned by the priest named Joseph. Through the long night, no one even thinks of trying to sleep.

The men who once followed Christ mourn his death in a room upstairs. It is a sorrowful Sabbath indeed for these whose hope resided in Jesus the teacher. How they grieve. What must they feel? Hopelessness? Disillusionment? Fear? Anger? Does the thought of a future without their beloved Master rid them with anxious fears? Do they second-guess the trust they once had, feeling foolish at their gullibility? Or are they simply numb with shock?

Several members of the Sanhedrin have spent the night hours gathered in the Temple discussing concerns about the crucified carpenter. Fearing that Jesus will become more of a hero in death than he was in life, Caiaphas decides to go to Pilate and demand action.

The procurator, already weighed down with weariness, is put off when the priests arrive. Hasn't he done everything these zealots want? Why are they bothering him now? Over and over last night he awoke, sweating from a nightmare in which his hands were covered with blood and his wife was screaming at him.

He enters the courtyard, beckoning for Caiaphas to approach. "What is it?"

"Sir, we have been talking and we remember that the deceiver Jesus, when he was still alive, said he would rise again after three days. Of course we don't believe this foolishness, but we are concerned that his disciples might come and steal the body. Then they would tell all our people that he did rise, and things will be worse than when he was alive."

Pilate watches the influential religious leader. He can hardly stand the man with his oily tongue and false humility. But suddenly he is tired of dealing with him. "You may have your guard -- go with them and make the grave as secure as you can."

The priests accompany the contingent of Roman soldiers to Joseph's tomb where a stone is already in place. One pulls it back, ducking inside to make sure the body is

still there. After securing it to their satisfaction, the priests leave the guards in place, returning to the temple for Sabbath sacrifices.

Within the dark bowels of a grave, the empty frame of Jesus rests. But all is not as it seems. While disheartened followers grieve and Pharisees breathe sighs of relief, the Spirit of Christ moves throughout the cosmos, crashing through Hades' gates to proclaim victory over sin and death. In the pit of hell, fallen angels rage at the Son of God who lives after all.

There has never been another Sabbath day like this one. Mary and the others, as women are wont to do, channel their pain into plans for embalming the body of Christ. Religious leaders conduct Passover rituals and distraught disciples disappear from sight. But all the while, the Lord of the Sabbath prepares for the event which will soon send shockwaves around the world, changing forever the course of history.

Respond

Spend some time imagining the thoughts and feelings of Jesus' followers on this day. Apparently, they had no remembrance or understanding of Jesus' promises concerning His resurrection. All they knew was what they saw in front of them. Can you imagine the despair? The darkness? The lonely ache in their guts? Try to imagine what it would be like during this time, to not have a clue that something wonderful was about to break into your horror.

Thank God for the reality of His presence through His Spirit in your life. Experience His commitment to live within you, and work through you. Enjoy the truth that He has chosen you, that He longs for you and loves to commune with you. Rest for a time with these thoughts.

A Prayer

Mighty Jesus -- whirling in Spirit throughout the universe, proclaiming victory while your followers mourn. I see myself in them Lord -- embracing the dance of death while you declare life. I long to live in the realm where you move and work, though hope seems sealed up in tombs. Teach me Almighty God, the assurance of things not seen, the confidence of things hoped for -- the secret of resurrection faith.

DAY FORTY -- Resurrection

The disciples had seen the strong hands of God twist the crown of thorns into a crown of glory, and in hands as strong as that they knew themselves safe... They had expected a walkover, and they beheld a victory; they had expected an earthly Messiah, and they beheld the Soul of Eternity.

Dorothy L. Sayers

Reflect

Today is a day of victory and celebration -- a confirmation of the hope that we have in our hearts through the Holy Spirit who lives there. Begin with a time of thanksgiving for all God has done for you, especially in view of the Cross.

Read or sing the words to the following hymn, offering a heart of deep joy and awe-filled worship.

Crown Him With Many Crowns

George J. Elvey

*Crown Him with many crowns, the Lamb upon His throne;
Hark! how the heavenly anthem drowns all music but its own!
Awake my soul, and sing of Him who died for thee,
and hail Him as thy matchless King through all eternity.*

*Crown Him the Lord of life, who triumphed o'er the grave,
And rose victorious in the strife for those He came to save.
His glories now we sing who died, and rose on high.
Who died, eternal life to bring, and lives that death may die.*

*Crown Him the Lord of love! Behold His hands and side,
Rich wounds, yet visible above in beauty glorified.
All hail, Redeemer, hail! For Thou hast died for me:
Thy praise shall never, never fail throughout eternity.*

Read

I have seen the Lord!

John 20:18

When the last of Saturday's sun begins to sink below the horizon, the long Sabbath ends, propelling the women into action. Three go to purchase more supplies while the marketplace is still open. Upon their return, tender hands crush and mix dried flowers and pungent spices for hours, all of them soberly sharing this final act of compassion as another night without their beloved Jesus passes by.

When morning nears, they hurry off to the tomb. After walking some distance, one of the women wonders aloud if a stone will seal the entrance into the cave. What will they do if it is? Surely they won't have the strength to move it. A discussion ensues concerning whether they should get one of the men. But they are almost there, and no one wants to turn back now.

In the pre-dawn darkness, soldiers stand and stretch, tired from the long night. As the morning watch moves into position, the ground begins to shake under their feet. Astonished, the guards cannot believe their eyes when a dazzling creature descends as if from nowhere. With a face like lightning and clothed in brilliant white, the angel rolls the stone away and takes a seat at the top.

Every single guard faints at the sight. Coming to only seconds later, they stumble over each other as they rush frantically into the cave. Panic builds as they scan its crevices and see for themselves that there is no body there. Gripped by fear, the entire group races back towards Jerusalem, dreading Pilate's response to what has just happened.

The sun creeps slowly across the eastern sky, though the tomb is still shrouded in darkness as the women arrive. Relieved that there is no stone blocking the sepulcher's entrance, two of them go inside, only to be devastated at what they find. The body of Jesus is not there.

As they stand there forlorn and confused, the cave is suddenly bathed in light revealing the presence of two men in shining robes. Falling in fear to the ground, the women hear a message that seems beyond belief.

"Why are you looking in a tomb for someone who is alive? He is not here -- he is risen! Don't you remember what he said -- that the Messiah must be betrayed by evil men and be crucified, and that he would rise again on the third day?"

The two women glance at each other, then tear from the cave. Followed by the others, they run back to Jerusalem where the disciples continue to mourn. Breathless, they tell the men what they have just seen.

The disciples stare at them as if they are crazy, dismissing their words as superstitious nonsense. Blinded by grief, each man returns to his unique brand of sorrow.

Mary Magdalene is distraught by their response, pleading with Peter and John to believe her. "They have taken the Lord's body -- it is gone and I don't know where they have placed it."

Something in her voice stirs them. The two men hurry from the house, through the streets of the city to the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea. John, being younger and faster arrives first. He bends down and sees the empty cloths, but stays back, afraid. Peter catches up quickly and crashes into the cave, determined to discover the truth.

There on the stone bench lie the linen cloths, completely undisturbed, as if a body just disappeared within the folds. On the side lies the headpiece in a tidy roll. Slowly, faith begins to fill the crevices of Peter's broken heart.

John cautiously joins him in the cave and together they share a moment of pure incredulity. Words from the past echo through their minds -- the Rabbi had told them he would rise again -- could it be? Is it possible? Can they dare hope? Thoughtfully they walk in silence back to town.

Mary Magdalene, having followed them to the tomb, watches them leave. She begins to weep, stooping down one more time to peer into the empty grave. But this time it isn't empty. On either end of the bench where she'd seen them lay Christ, are two white-robed angels.

"Why do you cry?" one asks.

"Because they've taken my Lord away, and I don't know where they put him."

Sobbing by now, Mary hears a sound behind her. She looks over her shoulder, and the sight of a gardener gives her a glimmer of hope. "Sir, please -- if you have taken him away, just tell me where, and I will go and get him."

"Mary."

She freezes. Only one person has ever spoken her name like that. Long ago when tortured by demons and no hope of ever finding peace, she had met Jesus of Nazareth. How can she ever forget the moment when he called out, "Mary" and light rushed in, expelling the dark forces that had almost destroyed her? The scene flashes through her mind as she turns to face the one who speaks.

"Master!" Mary exclaims, rushing toward him.

"Wait Mary -- you cannot cling to me now for I haven't yet ascended to my Father. You must go and find my brothers. Tell them that I ascend to my Father and your Father, my God and your God."

Then he is gone. Mary stands for a moment in complete amazement at what she has seen and heard. Tears stream down her cheeks as she turns to go back to the disciples. *I have seen the Lord*. She tells them. The look in her eyes and wonder in her voice leaves no room for doubt that indeed, she has encountered the risen Christ.

I have seen the Lord. Resurrection hope is spawned in that moment, then spreads like a soothing ointment to all who will believe -- some having seen, and others simply by faith -- that what Jesus of Nazareth said he would do, he did. And resurrection hope transcends time, instilling eternity in the hearts of mankind.

Respond

Can you even comprehend what Mary must have felt when she heard the voice of Jesus saying her name as only He could say it? Stop and sense the wonder, the joy, the hope that must have encompassed her complete being. Place yourself there in the time, bringing with you all your fears, your unfulfilled dreams and disappointments. Hear Jesus speaking your name. Listen. Hear it again.

Fall at his feet and worship Him. Say aloud, "I have seen the Lord." Now see yourself running to those you know and those you don't know. Speak it in the streets and shout it from the mountaintops: "I have seen the Lord." Run to a world lost and dying in darkness and share with them the hope of a risen Savior.

Celebrate! Rejoice! Sing! Shout! Jump for joy! Dance with all your might! The Lord Lives! He is worthy! Give thanks! Give Him the honor and praise due His Holy Name! HE IS RISEN! ALLELUIA! For the Lord God Omnipotent Reigns!

A Prayer

Oh my Master, simple joy so fills my heart that I have no words to speak. You are not dead. You are alive. You have defeated death. And I too will live with you for eternity. How I long for the day when I will see you face to face dearest Redeemer. I will kiss your nail-scarred feet again and again, and I will touch your wounded side, holding your battered hands to my face. There I will stay, proclaiming forever, "I have seen the Lord."

EPILOGUE -- THE REST OF THE STORY

*... this Man, delivered up by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God,
you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death.
And God raised Him up again, putting an end to the agony of death,
since it was impossible for Him to be held in its power.
Acts 2:23-24*

Paul Harvey, well known American radio commentator, is famous for revealing surprise endings to unusual stories and little-known facts about popular news items. He ends every broadcast with the now-famous line; "And that my friends, is the rest of the story." What might Mr. Harvey say about the nondescript Jew from Nazareth who died on a cross 2000 years ago? Perhaps it would go something like this:

On the third day after his death, Jesus of Nazareth miraculously arose, culminating the fulfillment of over 300 prophecies from the Hebrew Scriptures. He appeared at least ten times to those who knew Him, and to as many as 500 people at one time. This was no short-lived hallucination on the part of fanatic followers. He ate with them, exhorted and encouraged them and let doubters touch the holes in His body from the spear and nails. After 40 days He ascended into the clouds in plain view of all, accompanied by angels who promised He would come again one day just as he had left.

What of the other participants in the drama of Christ's death? The high priest Annas continued a tradition of greed and repression. He raised money by extortion and bribed Roman procurators, all while proclaiming to represent God. Early records reveal his tomb near the south wall of Jerusalem by the late '60s.

Annas' son-in-law, Caiaphas, enjoyed the longest reign of any chief priest in the first century. He remained a shrewd strategist and politician, enabling his lengthy regime. His family tomb was recently discovered on the south wall of Jerusalem.

Herod Antipas, the Jewish tetrarch, cultivated his friendship with the Roman emperor Tiberius, even building a town in his honor. All the while he sought to expand his own authority, secretly craving the kind of rule his father, Herod Agrippa had known. In AD39 he was found guilty of treason and banished to Lyones, stripped of all wealth and power. He and his wife Herodias died later in Spain.

In Pilate's 10 year reign, he had numerous conflicts with the Jews. One time he overstepped his bounds, having hundreds of Samaritan Jews executed by Roman soldiers. Ordered to return to Rome, he never arrived. Tradition states that while on

the way there, he committed suicide, not willing to face a Roman trial. The only physical evidence of Pilate's existence is some coins depicting pagan sacrifices, produced with his name during his rule in Jerusalem.

The accusers and mockers of Jesus Christ are gone, little more than a footnote in history. In fact, none of them would be worthy of mention were it not for their role in His death.

Yet those who followed Christ made an amazing comeback after He arose. The small band who were too afraid to even attend the crucifixion, were transformed at Pentecost when Jesus poured out His Holy Spirit upon them. Though they faced greater danger and rejection than ever, and in fact all but one were martyred for their faith, they turned the world upside down with their fervor to spread the truth about their Master.

Jesus Christ of Nazareth completely altered the course of history. Even a casual glance at a calendar affirms the reality of his existence 2000 years ago. Everything points to the time before He lived or the time after His death. Today, the Christian religion spans the globe, continuing to impact people from every tribe and nation.

No one has ever changed individual lives like Jesus of Nazareth. No one has ever affected the world order like Jesus of Nazareth. He is not only the most unique person of all time, but through the power of His resurrection, continues to put hope in the hearts of those looking for life's true meaning.

Perhaps one of the most apt descriptions of Jesus is found every year on Christmas cards all over the world. The author is anonymous, but the words powerful:

Nineteen wide centuries have come and gone and today He is the center-piece of the human race and the leader of the column of progress. I am far within the mark when I say that all the armies that ever marched and all the navies that ever were built, and all of the parliaments that ever have sat, and all the kings that ever reigned put together have not affected the life of man upon this earth as powerfully as has that one solitary life, Jesus of Nazareth.

And that my friends, is the rest of the story.