

St. Paul: Weekly Devotions

03.29.15 for Holy Week

Today we begin a very special week, the only time in which we follow, day by day, the work that Jesus did for us. Our lessons next Sunday focus on Jesus' resurrection from the dead, but before we celebrate Easter we want to take the time to recall and meditate upon Jesus' sacrifice that bought us eternal life.

Palm Sunday:

The whole crowd of disciples began joyfully to praise God in loud voices... As [Jesus] approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it and said, "If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace - but now it is hidden from your eyes. The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side."

In the classic Greek tragedy, the hero of the play suffers from a flaw in character which will inevitably lead to a terrible downfall. The audience is able to see it coming, but is powerless to stop it as the

character walks straight into the disaster.

That's what is happening here. Jesus arrives at his beloved city of Jerusalem, the place whose very name meant "city of peace." He comes with wonderful news: God desires to forgive and restore his people. The Messiah they have awaited is here at last!

But they won't listen, and Jesus knows what the result will be. Rejecting God's gift, they will seek an earthly savior. Some years after Jesus' return to heaven, they will rebel against the Romans, thinking that God's plan is for their political freedom. The Romans will destroy the city and kill men, women, and children in a terrible massacre.

The people cheer, but how does Jesus feel? He hears the people's joy – but he grieves because they will not receive their Savior. When do you share both Jesus' joy and his grief? In this Easter season, can you be sad and joyful at the same time?

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, I love to rejoice with you. Teach me also to grieve with you, so that my heart like yours overflows with love. Amen.*

Monday

The next day as they were leaving Bethany, Jesus was hungry. Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to find out if it had any fruit. When he reached it, he found nothing but leaves, because it was not the season for figs. then he said to the tree, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again." And his disciples heard him say it.

On reaching Jerusalem, Jesus entered the temple area and began driving out those who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves, and would not allow anyone to carry merchandise through the temple courts. And as he taught them, he said, "Is it not written: 'My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations'? But you have made it a den of robbers."

The winter is only just ending. Spring has just begun. Would you go up to an apple tree expecting to find fruit? Of course not! Like you, Jesus knew that the tree he saw would have no figs, but he chose the tree as a metaphor for the people of Judah. They looked green and leafy, as if they were alive, but they were dead. They bore no fruit for God.

From there, Jesus walked to the temple where he found the temple courts filled with merchants. People were passing to and fro, carrying merchandise, restocking their tables. Salesmen were hawking their wares and haggling with customers.

I think that many of us would look at the temple and see a wildly successful ministry. There were lots of people there. Everyone seemed to be having a good time. Contributions were strong. In our practical minded, Monday, workday lives this is the kind of thing we want to see. Members sometimes say, "Isn't the church, after all, really a business?"

Perhaps, in a way that's true. But the temple had been built to be the scene of Israel's offerings. This was the place where they were to come, burdened by their sins, and find forgiveness. This was the place to which they were to come with their needs and prayers, and know that God would hear them. Instead, the people were busy, not with God, but with their own things.

Like the fig tree, they were green with the blessings God had given, but they had no fruit. They would not turn to the Savior, and as a result they were spiritually shriveled up. So Jesus angrily cleansed the Temple of what they really loved – money. The next morning, Tuesday, the disciples would see that the tree had withered, a sign of greater judgment to come.

Jesus began his Monday with an unpleasant task, but he knew that this was the week that he would repair all the people's sins and offer them a life greater than ever. How is your week beginning? Is it all about work and money? Or is the temple of your body filled with God's Spirit.

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, my thoughts on this Monday are filled with material things, with schedules and meetings. Like leaves, these things have value. But let my life be adorned with fruit, and filled with love and faith in you. Amen.*

Tuesday

[Jesus said] "What do you think? There was a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work today in the vineyard.' 'I will not,' he answered, but later

he changed his mind and went. Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, 'I will, sir,' but he did not go. Which of the two did what his father wanted?"

"The first," they answered. Jesus said to them, "I tell you the truth, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him."

Tuesday was a busy day in Jesus' last week of ministry. It would be his last full day of teaching, and the Bible tells us quite a lot about it. You can read about all the events of Jesus' day in Matthew 21:18 through 26:16.

Entering the city in the early morning, his disciples saw the withered fig tree. Then they went to the temple courts where Jesus taught and his enemies lingered, trying to find something of which they could accuse him. They tried to set traps for him.

Beginning with a short story of two sons, Jesus goes on the attack. He directly

accuses them of unfaithfulness - even saying that the immoral people they despise are receiving God's forgiveness, but they are not.

He follows this story with the parable of the wicked tenants, in which he says that God will come and take away their inheritance. He tells about a royal wedding banquet in which those who were originally invited lose their place because they reject the invitation, but the people of the street are welcomed instead. In one story after another, Jesus challenges his opponents.

They try to trap him with a question about taxes, but Jesus turns it back on them. They try to trap him with a question about marriage in heaven, but Jesus uses it to prove their whole argument wrong. And then Jesus gives a series of warnings to those who believe that they can be justified by their good works.

At the end of the day Jesus returns to Bethany with his disciples, still teaching as they walk. He warns them sternly that the end of times is fast approaching, when there will be many attempts to deceive them and lead them away

from faith in him. Finally, they share supper in the house of a man named Simon who had been a leper, and there a woman anoints Jesus with precious perfume. Jesus says it is to prepare him for burial. As all the rest prepare to sleep, Judas goes out into the darkness to arrange a price to betray him.

Are you tired? What a day! So much happened in that short time, but there was really only one point in all Jesus' teaching. The world will offer many things. Some may even seem very good and moral and important. But only one thing matters - that we remain in him.

Are Tuesdays busy days for you? And are your thoughts pulled this way and that, as the many false teachers tried to do? Like the disciples we may be confused. But all will be well if we follow the Savior. Remain in him!

Prayer: *Dear Jesus, let me dine with you this evening. If only I could anoint you with a gift as the woman did. Lord, receive my broken and repentant heart as your own, and let me follow you to the cross. Amen.*

Wednesday

There is no Bible reading today. There is no mention of this day in the Gospels. Apparently Jesus did not enter the city today. He remained at the home of Lazarus and Mary and Martha in Bethany.

On Sunday Jesus entered the city to great tumult and rejoicing. Monday was a day of physical confrontation as Jesus cleansed the temple. Tuesday was a long day of teaching, facing his enemies and accusing them of their falsehood. Now Wednesday is a day in which nothing happens.

What would such a day be like, after the confrontations of the 3 days before – and knowing what the next days would bring? How do you feel on the day before a big surgery – or the day before a major change in your life? How do you think Jesus spent his day?

If he sat and talked with his disciples and his friends, he was always aware that plans were being laid to kill him.

If he spent the day in prayer, his prayers must have focused on the days to come. He must have known what he would suffer.

Perhaps this Wednesday is like the time we spend in hospital waiting rooms, anxiously praying and thinking about all the possible paths the future might take. But Jesus' future is already planned.

Thursday will begin with the familiar preparations for the Passover, but it will end with Jesus' arrest and trial. It will seem to them as if all is lost, but God will still be unveiling his plans.

When nothing is happening in your life, something is happening. When you are bored and cannot think what to do, there is one who is already doing - already working out his plan, even on the quiet days.

Today Jesus and his disciples take a deep breath before the plunge. Perhaps you can take some time today to do the same. Pray. Watch. Think. Wait. Trust.

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, I have times in which it seems as if my life is on hold and nothing is happening. Help me to wait and trust that you are using even those times to my blessing. Let me fill those times with prayer, and wait for you to bless me, even if it be through a season of sorrow. I trust in you. Amen.*

Maundy Thursday

On the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Where do you want us to make preparations for you to eat the Passover?" He replied, "Go into the city to a certain man and tell him, 'The Teacher says: My appointed time is near. I am going to celebrate the Passover with my disciples at your house.'" So the disciples did as Jesus had directed them and prepared the Passover.

Thursday morning dawns, and it's an important day. Have you ever woken up to the smells of cooking and known that this was a special festival day? Your mother has work for you to do, cleaning and dusting. The good plates are brought out and the table set. Your favorite foods are being made and there are bowls to lick and samples to enjoy.

The Passover feast was such a familiar day. The house must be cleansed of every trace of yeast, the symbol of sin. Special unleavened bread must be baked. Someone must take the lamb to the temple and offer it in sacrifice, bringing home the portion that would be used in the meal. Other symbolic foods

are readied. Glasses of wine are poured. At last all is ready.

This was not just any Passover. This is the last time that Jesus will share this feast with his friends. He had already arranged a place for them to be together. It's in the city because that is where he needs to be in order to be arrested and tried, but in a secret place so that they would not be interrupted until this special time is done.

Now they gather in the upper room. Jesus washes the feet of his disciples. This is a task normally left to a servant, but none of the disciples would stoop to fill the role, so Jesus does it himself. It is a fitting introduction to the events to follow. Jesus will put himself last, beneath us all.

Interrupting the Passover liturgy, the familiar words they had often shared, Jesus adds his own. "Take and eat, this is my body." "Drink of it all of you, this is my blood of the covenant..." Jesus gives himself to them... and to us.

After the meal is finished, they sing a hymn together and then go out to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray. As Jesus prays, he hopes to be strengthened by the prayers of

his friends, but they are too sleepy after a long day and a good meal. The angels watch and wait with Jesus.

We know what it's like to be exhausted after a day of feasting and visiting. Perhaps in your house there have already begun to be preparations for an Easter meal. Decorations brought out. Cleaning begun.

But in the midst of celebration there is a more important story being told beneath the surface. In our worship and in our communion, in our family meals and in our prayers, God desires to give us more than happiness. He desires to strengthen us for the tasks ahead. He desires to build us up in faith. He desires us to be prepared to follow Jesus to the cross, and beyond to the victory over the grave!

In all the celebration, pray for these things first.

Prayer: *Come, Lord Jesus, be my guest. Not only at my meals but in every moment of my day, be my companion so that I may grow strong and follow you faithfully. Help me to bear my cross, whatever it may be. Amen.*

Good Friday

After they had mocked him, they took off the robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him away to crucify him.

Did you sleep last night? After a good meal - perhaps after attending worship on Maundy Thursday evening, you climbed into bed and found the rest you needed at the end of a long day.

Jesus' did not sleep last night. After the supper, after the hours spent in prayer, at last Judas arrived with a mob. Jesus was seized and dragged away. He was interrogated as they sought evidence on which to convict him.

Although it was illegal to hold a trial at night, the core leaders of the Jews met in secret to try him. Not all of the Jewish elders supported this decision. But all through the night the others sought a way to prove him guilty of something worthy of death. At last they had it from Jesus own mouth. "Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God." "Yes, it is as you say..."

As the sun came up the council was convened and a quick official trial was opened and closed. Jesus was bundled

off in the early dawn to the palace of the Roman governor so that they might have the proper permission for a death sentence.

In the space of a few hours Jesus was examined, passed off to King Herod to be examined more, beaten and returned. In the effort to have Jesus released, Pilate had him beaten again. But it was not enough. The crowd, recruited by Jesus' enemies, called for his blood. He was given over to the executioners.

It was about 9a.m. when Jesus' hands were nailed to the cross piece and it was lifted into place on top of the vertical post. His feet were nailed to the post and he was left to die.

We might think of many things to say at such a time. Words about the pain, about the injustice, about our tormentors. Jesus first words on the cross were about us. "Father, forgive them. They don't know what they are doing."

From 9 until noon Jesus hung on the cross, slowly weakening. People in Jerusalem and all over the world went about their business, working, shopping,

resting. Just like you. At noon the sky was darkened, and it remained dark until 3pm. At last Jesus' suffering was ended, and he let out a last breath.

Every day, about 155,000 people die in our world. Every day 7 billion people live, work, play, struggle, weep, hope. Jesus was only a single individual, and yet his death on that day changed the meaning of both life and death for all the others, because Jesus death drew the sting from death itself. And with his death Satan's power over us was ended.

What will you do with this day? Will you find an hour to watch and pray with Jesus? Could you spend the time to read the 26th and 27th chapters of Matthew and remember? How will you praise God for this profound gift?

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, I stand in awe of your love for me. No words can express the immensity of what in those few hours you achieved. Lord, I pray, let me never forget this day. Let this day change all the other days that remain for me. And when, in my final hour, I breathe my last, let me rest in you. Amen.*

Saturday

Once again there is no Scripture for this day. Saturday was a day of silence among those who had loved Jesus.

The Sabbath began with the appearance of the first star at sunset on Friday evening. Jesus' friends and disciples had scattered. They were in hiding in the homes of friends, or wherever they could find refuge.

It was left to a secret follower of Jesus, a wealthy man named Joseph of Arimathea, to come forward and claim his body. He was accompanied by Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish Council who had visited Jesus at night. Pontius Pilate granted permission, and Jesus' body was taken down and given to them.

Quickly, because no work could be done once the Sabbath had begun, they wrapped Jesus' body in a long piece of clean linen and laid it in Joseph's newly carved tomb. They would hope to return later, when the Sabbath was done, to prepare the body properly.

Now the sun has set and Saturday, the Sabbath, has

begun. Through the long evening and the dark night Jesus' followers were alone - some here - some there - left with their thoughts. What did they pray? What did they ask God that night? All their hopes were gone. They had thought that with the Savior's coming that all the world's injustice and sin would end. But now they huddle in fear for their lives.

As the sun came up on Saturday, they may have walked to the synagogue. It was Jesus' habit always to go, to read and hear God's word, to pray, and to share with other worshipers. If his disciples were in worship that day, what word from the scrolls of the Old Testament did they read? Did they even hear them? As the morning turned to noon, did they begin to gather with other disciples to grieve and to remember?

Finally, the evening fell once again. With the first star, the Sabbath would end as it had begun, and for a brief time the markets would open so that the women could quickly buy the spices they would need to care for Jesus' body tomorrow. They carried their fragrant packages home

and thought about the sad task that awaited them on Sunday morning.

It's different for us, isn't it? We know the end of the story, that Jesus will rise from the grave. Easter no longer holds a surprise for us. But there are many other days like this in our life - days of waiting - days of grief - days in which we seem to be holding our breath.

But God has not paused. He did not stop in his work of saving us and caring for us. While his friends grieved, Jesus was declaring his victory in heaven and in hell. And while you grieve - while your life is on hold - Jesus is at work in your life also. He has declared victory over your sins and failures, and there will come for you too a day of surprise and astonishment. A day of resurrection and life!

Prayer: *Victorious Lord, I praise you that you have so wonderfully conquered sin and death. I am here, still caught in this world's cares and concerns. I live by faith and not yet by sight. But increase my faith, so that I may see by the eyes of faith the new life you have for me. Amen.*

Easter Sunday

Now after the Sabbath, toward the dawn of the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb.

It's Easter Sunday at last! It is the end of a long, dark week. We've followed Jesus through scenes of conflict, foreboding, accusation, torment, death, and sorrowful waiting. At last Easter dawns bright and clear and we put on our best clothes to go to worship.

What do you expect to find?

The women expected to find a cold crypt, a cold stone, and the cold dead body of their friend. But they found an empty grave and a warm, living, and powerful Savior! Their lives were changed forever!

What do you expect to find at church today? Some nice hymns? A cup of coffee and a donut? An encouraging sermon? I pray you find the living Jesus Christ, the same Savior who is waiting for you as he waited for his friends.

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, I am coming. Greet me and lead me. Amen.*

Join us for worship this special week!

Maundy Thursday	7pm
Good Friday	12:30pm 7:00pm
Easter Sunrise (Liberty)	6:30am
Easter Celebration at Liberty	8:30am 10:45am
Easter Celebration at Earhart Followed by Easter Breakfast	9:15am