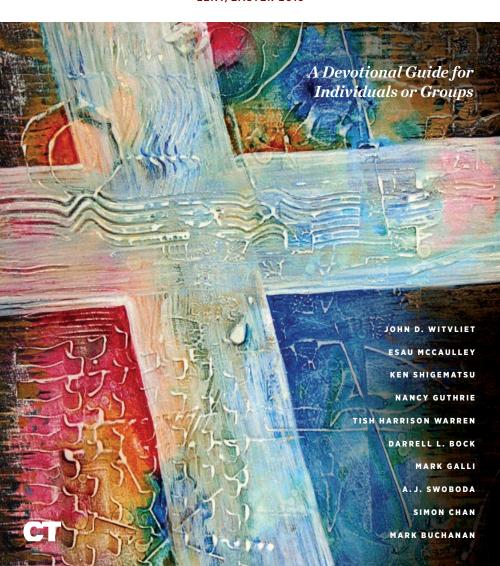
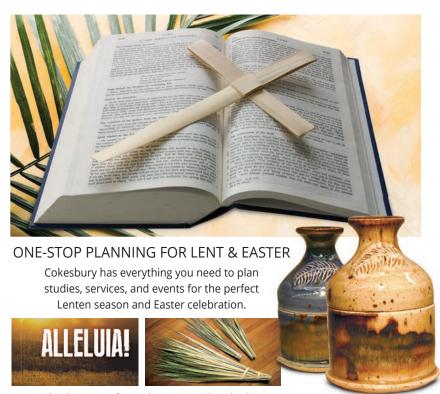
# THE CROSS

LENT/EASTER 2019

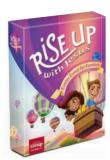




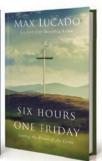
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## Introduction

**The word** *devotion* draws upon the Latin root for "vow"—it's a centuries-old word that conveys a solemn promise, a zealous dedication, an ardent love. It connotes loyalty, commitment, consecration, sacrifice. What greater exemplar of devotion is there than Jesus himself, who "made himself nothing" and "humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross" (Phil 2:7–8)?

In this CT devotional guide, we look closely at the devotion of Jesus as he made his way toward Calvary. These biblical scenes surrounding his passion invite us to also consider different facets of our devotion to Jesus—what devotion looks like when we face opposition, how devotion plays out in our relationships, what devoted love looks like in times of despair or joy. When we survey each of these scenes from Jesus' journey to the Cross, may we find ourselves utterly compelled to conclude: "Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all."



Kelli B. Trujillo Editor



From the author of Misunderstood Jew & Short Stories by Jesus

# ENTERING THE PASSION OF JESUS A BEGINNER'S CUIDE TO HOLY WEEK

## Dive deep into the history of the last days before the crucifixion.

Jesus' final days were full of risk. Every move he made was filled with anticipation, danger, and the potential for great loss or great reward. In *Entering the Passion of Jesus* author, professor, and biblical scholar Amy-Jill Levine explores the biblical texts surrounding the Passion story and elaborates on the risk we all face in our Christian experience.

#### The book's six chapters include:

- Jerusalem: Risking Reputation
- The Temple: Risking Righteous Anger
- Teachings: Risking Challenge
- The First Dinner: Risking Rejection
- The Last Supper: Risking the Loss of Friends
- Gethsemane: Risking Temptation

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Amy-Jill Levine is University Professor of New Testament and Jewish Studies and Mary Jane Werthan Professor of Jewish Studies at Vanderbilt Divinity School and College of Arts and Sciences. An internationally renowned scholar and teacher, she is the author of numerous books including *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus, Short Stories by Jesus,* and *The Meaning of the Bible: What the Jewish Bible and the Christian Old Testament Can Teach Us.* 



Learn more at AbingdonPress.com/Passion

### How to Use This Resource

Each article in this resource concludes with a suggested Scripture reading and reflection prompt that you can use to guide your own time of prayer and contemplation of God's Word. To dive deeper into each biblical scene, you can also use the **Bible Study Guide** on pp. 50–55, where you'll find exploratory questions for individuals or small group discussion.

This guide is designed to be **flexible**; you can read through the articles **at your own pace** during Lent, Easter, or any time of year. Alternately, use or customize one of these suggested reading plans.

#### 9-WEEK STUDY PLAN

Use this reading plan, beginning the week of Ash Wednesday, to align with Lent and the beginning of the Easter season.

Week of March 3:

"Utter Devotion"

Week of March 10:

"For All Nations"

Week of March 17: "Poured Out"

Week of March 24:

"My Will Be Lost in Thine"

Week of March 31: "They Failed Him"

Week of April 7: "Confident Resolve"

Good Friday—April 19: "Mercifully Forsaken"

Holy Saturday—April 20: "Waiting in the Tomb"

Easter Sunday—April 21: "Love That Will Not Let Go"

Week of April 28: "Hope for the Journey"

#### 10-DAY STUDY PLAN

This plan provides daily readings centering on Holy Week and Easter.

Saturday, April 13: "Utter Devotion"

Sunday, April 14: "For All Nations"

Monday, April 15: "Poured Out"

**Tuesday, April 16**: "My Will Be Lost in Thine"

Wednesday, April 17: "They Failed Him"

Thursday, April 18: "Confident Resolve"

Friday, April 19—Good Friday: "Mercifully Forsaken"

Saturday, April 20—Holy Saturday: "Waiting in the Tomb"

**Sunday, April 21—Easter Sunday**: "Love That Will Not Let Go"

Monday, April 22: "Hope for the Journey"

#### A CHRISTIANITY TODAY SPECIAL ISSUE



EDITOR IN CHIEF:

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PUBLISHER: Jacob Walsh

Published by Christianity Today 465 Gundersen Dr.

Carol Stream, IL 60188 Printed in the U.S.A.

EDITORIAL DIRECTOR: Ted Olsen

CREATIVE DIRECTOR: Alecia Sharp

Cover image by kathleenmadeline / Lightstock

PROJECT EDITOR: Kelli B. Trujillo

For more, visit ChristianityToday.com

PROJECT DESIGNER: Michael Chuchvara

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COPY EDITOR: Jenna DeWitt

MARKETING: Leanne Snavely, Katie Bracy

> PRODUCTION: Cindy Cronk

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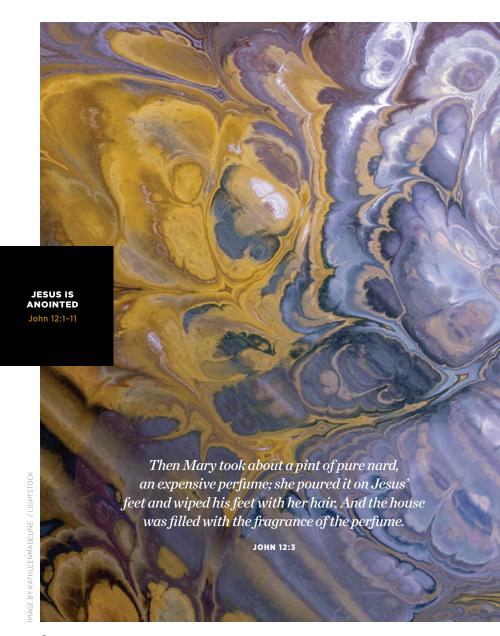
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THE JOURNEY BEGINS

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Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.

**MATTHÉW 16:21** 



## Utter Devotion

Mary's act of extravagant worship points us toward the Cross.

How fitting it is to begin a Lenten journey focused on utter devotion to Jesus with Mary of Bethany. In a scene of generous hospitality and intimate fellowship, Jesus, Mary, Martha, and Lazarus have gathered in the afterglow of Lazarus' return to life. Lazarus is reclining at the table with Jesus. Martha, ever the active servant, is serving food. Artists depicting this scene reach instinctively for the warmest possible palette of colors and pain themselves to depict facial expressions of an almost unimaginable degree of warm-hearted tenderness.

Then Mary offers her gesture of devotion to Jesus, lavishing a full pint of exquisite perfume over Jesus' feet and upending conventions of decorum by unfurling her hair to wipe them. Just a few days before, Jesus, Mary, and Martha were confronted by the stench of Lazarus' decaying body. Now, with Lazarus, they are basking in the aroma of luxurious perfume.

Following three years of ministry in which observers responded to Jesus in such oppositional and awkward ways, what a remarkable picture of true devotion this is—Mary's unashamed, humble, extravagant gesture. Nothing here resembles a grudging obeisance to a distant deity or an agreeable but half-hearted engagement in typical religious protocols. This is whole-hearted adoration of a loving Lord.

Just a few verses into the story, we can already sense God's call to each of us to follow Mary's lead, to become disciples of utter of devotion to Jesus. Korean songwriter Chung Kwan Park invites worshipers to identify with Mary's adoration by singing, "to my precious Lord I bring my flask of fragrant oil; kneeling down, I kiss his feet, anoint them with the oil." Try singing that on your knees, imagining what kind of love

would lead you to readily part with a year's wages as a fitting response to the Lord of life. Even the act of imagining it stretches our vision.

And then the scene turns noticeably chilly. Judas's response sounds reasonable at first, a perfect blend of concern for both social justice and fiscal prudence. Wouldn't it be better to take the full year's wage that purchased the perfume and give it to the poor? But John quickly tells us that Judas's words do not ring true. Judas is a pilfering group treasurer who cared only for his own gain. Jesus rebukes him, "Leave her alone," sending artists to reach for stone-cold grays to depict the judgmental, hypocritical disciple.

The contrast could not be more pronounced: Mary is generous; Judas is greedy. Mary is humble; Judas is arrogant. Mary is selfless; Judas is selfcentered. Judas stands aloof; Mary kneels in humble adoration. Together, they serve as vivid contrasting illustrations of Jesus' own teaching: "where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matt. 6:21).

Jesus' rebuke of Judas comes to us as a further invitation to true discipleship—to turn away from all that is greedy, self-centered, and cold-hearted.

WHAT A REMARKABLE
A PICTURE OF TRUE
DEVOTION THIS IS—MARY'S
UNASHAMED, HUMBLE,
EXTRAVAGANT GESTURE.

To repent for all the times we have cloaked our own inner greed in statements of exterior piety. To resist any temptation to look down our noses at acts of worship that appear to our own haughty selves as eccentric, peculiar, over the top.

Many sermons on this episode stop right here, stressing the call to utter devotion of Jesus, challenging its arrogant opposition. And yet, this misses an essential dimension of this text—and of the

gospel. For Mary's lavish gift is not just any perfume. It is perfume meant for Jesus' burial. Jesus tells us so (John 12:7).

So imminent is Jesus' death that he blesses Mary's gesture as perfectly acceptable in the context of an expected pattern of service to the poor, as if to say, "You will rightly be loving and serving the poor at all times, but this is truly my death week" (v. 8). As the Gospel of John repeatedly shows us, Jesus knew he was going to die.

Here we learn that Mary may well sense this, too. She has purchased a burial ointment fit for a king. She pours it out as a prescient way of announcing "the hour has come." In contrast to so many depictions of Jesus' followers as haplessly clueless and then terribly disillusioned by Jesus'

death, Mary here offers knowing devotion. She accepts the unnerving truth that her Lord will work his wonders in an unfathomably countercultural, even scandalous, way.

For those of us who follow Jesus, it is tempting to be attracted by a vision of the Christian life that is filled with warm hospitality and even extravagant worship, but that has no real room in it for a suffering and dying Lord or for the dying-to-ourselves way of life into which Jesus calls us.

The temptation will come to us on Palm Sunday to reach for happy major-key praise songs to sing while carrying palm branches instead of sturdy minor-key odes which announce, "Ride on, ride on in majesty; in lowly pomp ride on to die."

The temptation will come to skip from Palm Sunday to Easter, with little attention to the pathos and severe injustice of Jesus' suffering and death. FOR MARY'S LAVISH GIFT
IS NOT JUST ANY PERFUME.
IT IS PERFUME MEANT FOR
JESUS' BURIAL. JESUS
TELLS US SO.

The temptation will come, again and again, to serve a Lord who is quite different in our imagination than the one depicted in John's gospel—to treat Jesus' passion and death as a momentary exception in the story of divine glory, rather than as the supreme example of it.

True, we are not called to lavish burial perfume at the feet of a Savior on his way to the cross and tomb. We worship a risen Jesus. But the extravagant, humble way of devotion set before us is still profoundly shaped by the simple fact that the divine plan of salvation arrived at Easter only after Jesus' passion, death, and burial. We worship a Lord whose power is made perfect in weakness, whose glory shines especially brightly as he washes his disciples' feet and offers himself on the cross. This is the Lord who calls to us this Lent, "Come, follow me."

**John D. Witvliet** directs the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship and teaches at Calvin College and Calvin Theological Seminary in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

**Contemplate** John 12:1–11, considering Mary's example of extravagant worship and utter devotion to Jesus. How is her action compelling to you? Why is it significant that Jesus connects her action to his death? Pray, inviting God to draw you into ever-deepening devotion to him.



## For All Nations

May our hearts be captured by God's vision for peace and reconciliation.

**The black Baptists of the South** are not known for adherence to a liturgical calendar, but we *do* know Palm Sunday and Easter. Palm Sunday is the tremor before the earthquake of our resurrection celebration. The palms and shouts of "Hosanna!" are a preparation for something greater: the acclamation that Christ is risen. But what did Jesus want to teach us when he entered Jerusalem astride a donkey?

Immediately following Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem amid waving palm branches, Matthew, Mark, and Luke record that his next stop is to clear out the temple. What does Christ's clearing of the temple have to do with palms and the parade from earlier?

Further, how ought these events shape our discipleship? What can these actions of our Lord show us about how we might live, reflecting his lordship in our lives?

While these events are often viewed separately, the temple and palms speak with a common voice. They reveal God's vision for peace between ethnicities and our reconciliation under the universal kingship of Jesus. To hear that common voice, we must pay close attention to the Scriptures used to interpret Jesus' actions.

Palm Sunday begins with Jesus on the outskirts of Jerusalem instructing his disciples to bring him a donkey to ride into the city. The Gospel writers make it clear that this royal gesture is a dramatic enactment of Zechariah 9:9. The section quoted in the Gospels says, "Do not be afraid, Daughter Zion; see, your king is coming, seated on a donkey's colt" (John 12:15).

The sign of the king of the universe coming on a donkey's colt has been the fodder for hymns, possibly the most famous being the line "Ride on in majesty; in lowly pomp ride on to die." In this reading of Jesus' actions, Palm Sunday reveals his humility. This interpretation has much to commend it. I, however, want to highlight a theme that is often missed.

When we see the wider context of Zechariah 9:9, we observe a focus on the reconciliation of the nations: "Rejoice greatly . . . . See, your king comes to you, righteous and victorious, lowly and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. I will take away the chariots from Ephraim and the warhorses from Jerusalem, and the battle bow will be broken. He will proclaim peace to the nations. His rule will extend from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth" (Zech. 9:9–10, emphasis added). The coming of the Messiah will signal the end of war in Israel. The weapons are put away! Instead of words of violence, the Messiah will speak words of peace to the nations.

WE MUST LONG TO BE
RECONCILED TO OUR
BROTHER OR WE MISS A
CRUCIAL ASPECT OF WHAT
PALM SUNDAY TEACHES.

Here, the coming of the Messiah does not involve the destruction of the nations but the extension of blessing to the nations.

The words "from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth" (v. 10) are drawn from Psalm 72:8. Psalm 72 says that the Abrahamic promises of blessing to the nations will be fulfilled through the just, righteous, and international rule of the Davidic king: "May his name endure forever; may it continue

as long as the sun. Then all nations will be blessed through him, and they will call him blessed" (Ps. 72:17).

Jesus' choice of Zechariah 9:9–10, then, says that God's plan of bringing blessing to the nations will occur in and through his reign. Palm Sunday isn't just about humility; it also about the expansive kingdom of the Son. We remember Palm Sunday rightly when we remember that God has called the divided peoples of the earth to peace and reconciliation. We must long to be reconciled to our brother or we miss a crucial aspect of what Palm Sunday teaches.

When we see Palm Sunday as a testimony to the reconciliation of divided peoples under the reign of the Messiah, then the temple clearing takes on a new meaning. Consider the text Jesus cites to defend his actions: "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'" (Mark 11:17).

The first half of this verse comes from Isaiah 56:7, which focuses on God's expansive vision for the nations: "'And *foreigners* who bind themselves to

the Lord to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord... these I will bring to my holy mountain... for my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations.' The Sovereign Lord declares—he who gathers the exiles of Israel: 'I will gather still others to them besides those already gathered'" (Isa. 56:6–8, emphasis added).

Isaiah sees a day when Jews and Gentiles will worship God together. He also envisions God going beyond the ethnic boundaries of Israel to gather the ethnicities of the world to himself. According to Jesus, the leaders of his day were preventing the temple from becoming the "house of prayer for all nations." The temple clearing shows that same concern for the nations and their relationship to God as Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. Jesus isn't simply concerned about the corruption of the temple; he's concerned about what that corruption means for Gentiles encountering God.

The temple and the palms, then, speak with one voice. Jesus is engaged in two symbolic actions with clear Old Testament foundations from Zechariah 9:9–10 and Isaiah 56:6–8. These texts speak to God's desire for the peoples of the world divided by strife to be reconciled under the kingship of the Messiah and to join together in the worship of the one true God.

As we contemplate the King of Kings riding on a donkey, are our daily lives—our values, our relationships, our choices, our churches—shaped by the reality that his kingdom is global and multiethnic? As we consider Christ's confrontation in the temple, are we confronted, too, by his convicting vision of *all nations* making up his church?

We remember the events of Palm Sunday and the clearing of the temple properly when our hearts are captured by the vision of the church as the place where the nations speak peace to one another and worship the triune God together. Our life together is not an implication of the gospel; it is a manifestation of it.

**Esau McCaulley** is assistant professor of New Testament at Northeastern Seminary and the author of an upcoming book on African American biblical interpretation.

**Meditate** upon Matthew 21:1-17. How do the Old Testament passages cited here enrich your understanding of Jesus' actions? Are you captured by this vision of God's expansive kingdom of all nations and ethnicities? Pray, considering how God is calling you to peace and reconciliation.



## Poured Out

When his death was imminent, Jesus revealed what he prized most.

**On what poet John Donne** calls "the world's last night," Jesus gathered some of his closest students in the Upper Room in Jerusalem to share a meal with them. Jesus "knew that the hour had come for him to leave this world" (John 13:1); the following day he would be nailed to a cross. On this last night, when death was imminent, Jesus revealed what he prized most: servanthood.

Although Jesus' disciples had been with him for three years, they were still confused about the true nature of his mission. On the previous Sunday, Jesus had come into Jerusalem riding on a donkey, and a large crowd of people had lined the streets. They cried out, "Hosanna to the son of David," believing that God would save them through a great king like David. Jesus' disciples were hoping he would ride that wave of popularity until he was elevated to the throne as king and Messiah.

Imagine the dilemma when, upon entering the Upper Room in Jerusalem to share the Passover meal with Jesus that evening, they discovered that there was no servant to wash their feet. To understand the significance of this omission, you need to know that the roads of ancient Palestine were not paved, so people's bare or sandaled feet became quite dusty. Donkeys, stray dogs, and other animals traveled the same roads. What's more, homes in ancient Palestine did not have modern toilets, so people spilled their waste into the streets. Hence travelers' feet also became soiled with animal and human excrement. Food washing was a necessity, but it was considered such a menial task that Jewish households assigned the duty to a Gentile slave, woman, or child.

Partway through the evening meal, Jesus, whom the disciples called "master," suddenly removed his outer clothing and wrapped a towel

around his waist. He poured water into a basin, began to wash his disciples' feet, and then dried them with a towel (John 13:4). Everyone was shocked, and Simon Peter exclaimed, "You shall never wash my feet" (v. 8). Jesus' act was unprecedented—there is no record in antiquity of a rabbi stooping to wash the feet of his students. In fact, such an action would have been considered "unclean" according to the Jewish purity code and therefore not permissible.

Jesus Christ was God in human flesh (John 1:1, 14), and so, like no other human being before or since, he embodied true greatness. In this moving portrait, we see that the greatest person of all time revealed God's true character by humbly serving those around him. In Philippians 2, we read that although Jesus was "in very nature God," he didn't use his status as God for his own selfish advantage. Instead, he poured himself out to serve others. Some translations render the Greek, "Jesus emptied himself" (v. 7), but the most accurate translations emphasize that "Jesus poured himself out" like water to serve others. This is a quintessential image for the living God. The gods of the ancient world were capricious, vindictive, and self-serving, but

the one true God of the universe—the God we see in Jesus Christ—serves.

WE ARE CALLED TO ASK,
"WHERE IS MY CROSS?"
HOW CAN WE LAY DOWN
OUR LIVES IN SELF-GIVING
LOVE FOR OTHERS?

Some preachers suggest that Jesus gave up his *power*, but the truth is that he was able to serve precisely because he knew how powerful he was. According to the Gospel of John, Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power and that he had come from God and was returning to God. Because of this confidence, he was able to

humble himself by washing the feet of those he "loved ... to the end" (John 13:1). Because Jesus knew that he was loved and cherished by his Father, he had the strength to give up his *privilege*—not his power—as the most important person in the room. In serving his disciples that night, Jesus foreshadowed how we would serve the entire world in an even greater way the next day, as he offered his life for us on the cross. He bore our sin and shame so that we could experience forgiveness for our sins and receive fullness of life, now and in the world to come.

Last summer, I visited Nagasaki, Japan, where 26 Japanese martyrs were crucified for their faith in Christ on February 5, 1597. Over the course of a month, they were forced to trek from Kyoto to Nagasaki, a journey of about 600 miles. When they arrived on the hill where they were to be crucified, one among them wasn't given a cross because he was only 12 years old. The boy asked, "Where is my cross?" So he became the 26th martyr.

When we follow Jesus Christ, our lives may flourish. But we must never forget the way of Jesus is also shaped literally and figuratively by the cross. As some theologians put it, we are called to a "cruciform" way of life. This doesn't mean, of course, that each of us will die a literal martyr's death, such as those 16th-century Japanese martyrs or the 21 Egyptians martyred in Libya in 2015. But Jesus teaches that if we want to be his disciples, we are called to take up our cross daily and follow him.

IN THIS MOVING PORTRAIT, WE SEE THAT THE GREATEST PERSON OF ALL TIME REVEALED GOD'S TRUE CHARACTER BY HUMBLY SERVING THOSE AROUND HIM.

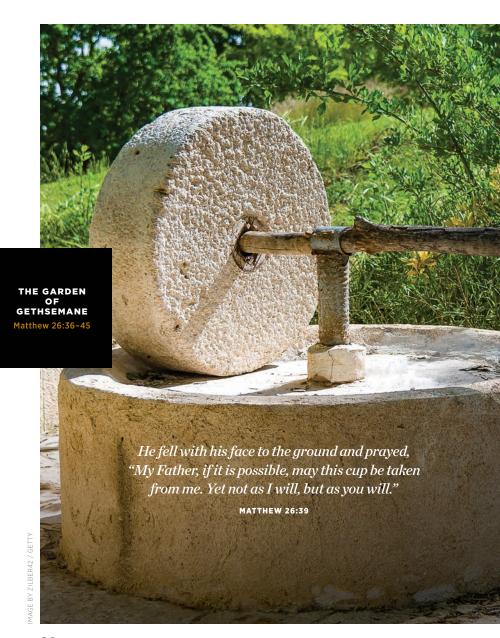
With the 12-year-old Japanese boy, we are called to ask, "Where is my cross?" How can we lay

down our lives in self-giving love for others? When we choose humble acts of service each day, we take up our cross and follow the way of Jesus. The true greatness modeled by Jesus comes in surrendering our privileges as we serve others. If, like Jesus, we feel a sense of power because we know we are loved by our Father, and we know where we have come from and where we are going, then we can live a truly great life—one in which we humbly serve one another and help to make our world a place that reflects the values of our Servant-King.

Ken Shigematsu is senior pastor at Tenth Church in Vancouver, British Colombia. He is the author of Survival Guide for the Soul and God in My Everything.

**Reflect** upon Jesus washing the disciples' feet during the Last Supper in John 13:1-17. Consider how extreme this act was to his first-century disciples; how does it challenge you? Pray, expressing your desire to follow Christ by surrendering your privilege and pouring yourself out in self-giving love.

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## My Will Be Lost in Thine

The struggle-andjoy-of surrender.

When we sing the old hymn "I Am Thine, O Lord," Fanny Crosby provides us with words to express what we want to say to God on our best days:

Let my soul look up with a steadfast hope, And my will be lost in Thine.

Certainly this is a worthy aspiration—that our desires would be so conformed to the will of God that they would become indistinguishable from his. Yet we often find our desires in conflict with his. When we said "Your will be done" as part of the Lord's Prayer as we gathered with the saints last Sunday, we meant it . . . or at least we *wanted* to mean it. But it was a vague notion at that point. Today we find ourselves a bit offended by what God seems to be requiring of us. His will—which requires self-denial—has come into conflict with our will that is bent on self-preservation. We've begun to wonder if it is really possible that our will could ever be lost in his.

It is at this point in the struggle to submit that we find companionship, hope, and help as we peer into the scene that takes place in Gethsemane, a garden on the Mount of Olives given a name that means "oil press." As we gaze into the darkness of that night, we can see that Jesus is being squeezed like an olive in a press, to the point that his sweat is dripping off of him like drops of blood. We can see that he is sorrowful and troubled. Then we hear him say to the disciples he has brought along with him, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death" (Matt. 26:38).

This is the same Jesus we've heard command the storm to be still, drive out demons from a man, and make bold claims of being the way,

the truth, and the life. We're used to hearing him speak with strength and conviction. But on this night, we overhear sobs of weakness.

I remember reading that Jesus was "overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death" about six months after the death of my six-monthold daughter, Hope, who'd been born with a rare metabolic disorder. I wrote two words beside the verse in my Bible that day: *Jesus understands*. Jesus understands what it is like to experience sorrow so heavy that it feels like it is pressing the life out of you.

We read, "Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, 'My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me,'" (Matt. 26:39).

What is this cup? Jeremiah 25 speaks of a cup in the hands of God that's filled with the wine of his wrath against sin. This was the cup that was being handed to Jesus to drink. In eternity past, Christ covenanted with the Father to drink this cup. It's what he came to Earth to do. Yet here in the Garden there is a very real human struggle going on between obeying the Father and avoiding the Cross. Somehow it helps me to know that Jesus wrestled with the Father's plan for his life and

JESUS WAS ABLE
TO SUBMIT WHAT
HE WANTED FOR
THE SAKE OF WHAT
HE WANTED MORE.

his death even as he sought to submit to it, because I, too, have wrestled with the Father's plan for my life even as I have sought to submit to it. Maybe you have too.

We tend to think that if we are good enough, if we are godly enough, if we can get enough people praying for whatever it is we are desperate to see God do, then God will be inclined to say "yes" to our prayers—that we'll be able to bend God's will toward

what we've determined to be the best outcome. But clearly goodness and godliness does not obligate God to say "yes" to our prayers. If anyone ever deserved to have his prayers answered in the affirmative, it was Jesus. But the obedient Son's plea to his loving Father is met with silence—seemingly a tacit "no" from God. The Father said "no" to Jesus so that he could say "yes" to you and me for all eternity. Jesus drank the cup of wrath to the dregs so that you and I can drink from the cup of salvation forever in the greater Garden to come.

Even though Jesus was struggling as he told the Father what he wanted, he was resolute about what he wanted most of all. We see it in verse 39: Jesus said, "Yet not as I will, but as you will." And, after asking the second time, he says, "My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done" (v. 42).

Jesus was able to submit what he wanted for the sake of what he wanted more. He had a greater longing that trumped and trampled his desire to avoid enduring the judgment of God; it was to fulfill the purpose and plan of God.

Here is the hope we find in catching this glimpse into Gethsemane. Here we discover that it really is possible to overcome our own wants, to push through them into glad surrender. As we are joined to Jesus by faith, his perspective

HERE IS THE HOPE WE FIND IN CATCHING THIS GLIMPSE INTO GETHSEMANE. HERE WE DISCOVER THAT IT REALLY IS POSSIBLE TO OVERCOME OUR OWN WANTS, TO PUSH THROUGH THEM INTO GLAD SURRENDER.

begins to shape our perspective, his power begins to flow into us and through us. We discover that, by his Spirit, he is actually changing what we want. We begin to enjoy an inner strength and rest—a firm confidence that whatever God asks us to endure is purposeful. We begin to truly believe that the joy of surrendering to his will is going to be worth whatever it may cost. We trust that as our will is lost in his, we will not ultimately lose out.

As we bring our wants and pour them out before our Father, we increasingly find that we can say along with Jesus, empowered by his Spirit, "I want your will to be done, not mine." And he gives us the grace we need to say it, not through gritted teeth, but with open hands.

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**Consider** Matthew 26:36-45. What is your attention drawn to as you reflect on Jesus' struggle in Gethsemane? How might your life be more characterized by his words, "Not as I will, but as you will"? Pray, expressing your desire to fully surrender your will to the Father.



## They Failed Him

The disciples' worst moments underscore the world's greatest truth.

A gift of Lent is that its focus on sin, darkness, and death is an antidote to any lingering sentimentality that we seek to bring into Easter. This season of Lent insists, emphatically, that we—each and all—are sinners. We are victimizers, not just victims; hedonists, not just heroes. If themes of devotion to Christ and discipleship induce visions of an unswerving and even path of ever-increasing spiritual success, the practice of Lent and the pages of Scripture disabuse us of any such notion.

In the midst of Christ's passion, death, and resurrection, we find an embarrassingly painful display of the weakness, confusion, even imbecility of his earliest followers. In each unfolding event of the week, the apostles disappoint. During the Last Supper, Jesus tells his friends that one of them will betray him and that they'll all abandon him. They respond by telling Jesus that he's underestimated them and by arguing about who is the greatest, the most loyal disciple.

Then, they fall asleep, more than once, in Gethsemane, too weak to be a friend to Jesus when he most needs one. Then, they panic and draw swords against those who arrested Jesus. Next, in a scene recounted with cringeworthy detail, Peter swears up and down that he doesn't know Jesus even though it's pretty obvious to everyone around him that he does.

A damning refrain haunts the story of Holy Week: "Everyone deserted him and fled" (Mark 14:50).

They bumbled through the week, first arrogant, then afraid, then hiding. They were cowardly, disloyal, and unfaithful. These holy martyrs and saints, these dearest friends of Jesus, failed miserably and utterly at the time of greatest crisis, when courage was most needed.

It's heartbreaking. We watch Peter come undone, weeping after the third rooster crow, and Judas backpedaling as he tries to return the blood money

he sought. From the majority of Jesus' followers, we encounter nothing but silence. They simply walked away. It's almost too much to take. How must they have felt? Were they ashamed? Did they feel foolish? Guilty? Did they make excuses?

One thing is clear: The Gospels are not a story of the triumphant early church or hero apostles. The founders of our faith come off looking terrible. Yet, within weeks, these same men were proclaiming the gospel with such abandon that now, thousands of years later, we believe because of their teaching and testimony.

As painful as it is to watch as those closest to Jesus abandon him, this subplot of Holy Week gives me hope. It is good news that the crux of Chris-

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tianity, that which compels me to believe, is not the coherence of abstract principles writ by holy men or the perfect lives of Christ's followers but is instead a claim to historic fact. This story of Jesus happened in time and space with messy, broken men and women who didn't understand at the time that their friend and teacher was in the process of saving the world.

Several years ago, I went through a brief, difficult season of doubt. I could not get away from a simple question: Was Jesus resurrected or not? Whatever uncertainty I felt about weaknesses in the church and in my own life, whatever frustration I had as I wrestled with difficult doctrinal questions, I was and

am anchored by the reality that the truth of the gospel does not rest on my feelings or preferences, but in Jesus and the claims made about who he is, what he did, how he died, and, most importantly, how he triumphed over death. The reason I believe anything at all is because I believe in the resurrection of Jesus. I begin with the concrete, historic claim of an empty tomb, and finding that claim true, everything else I believe flows from there.

Something earth-shattering must have happened to turn a group of sniveling, confused, bumbling, hiding, fearful men intent on saving their own skin into apostles who lived radically and boldly, each separately willing to be brutally killed to proclaim the resurrection of Jesus. The most compelling explanation I can find is that the testimony of the apostles must be true. According to N. T. Wright, every other ancient messianic movement upon

the death of their leader either dissolved or found a new leader to be their appointed messiah. It would've made sense if the disciples retreated into obscurity or proclaimed James, the brother of Jesus, as the new, better hope of the world. But they didn't.

The disciples had little hope to offer anyone, except that of a resurrected Messiah—an idea so preposterous, so unimaginable, that even they didn't believe it until they saw the risen Christ themselves. When they did, their lives were changed. The early church was birthed, proclaiming the unlikely good news that Jesus is the hope of the world, eternal, unchanging, risen. This terrible, comforting subplot of Holy Week reminds us that from the beginning, those who proclaim Christ were as broken and fearful as we are. And yet, in the providence of God, I find the testimony of these men more compelling because of their failures and their surprising transformation than I otherwise would.

As a pastor, and as a practiced sinner myself, it's clear to me that to learn to be disciples together means to learn to deal with failure—failures in ourselves and in others. What can we learn about devotion from these followers of Jesus who utterly failed in their own devotion? How can their failure speak to us—us who doubt, us who even deny and betray this Jesus we claim to know and love? These stories humble us. There is only one protagonist in the Christian story, one truly good guy, and it is not us.

And these stories give us hope. Each of us and all of us together are law-breakers, bumbling and broken—and so were the Holy Apostles. But a risen Christ came to them, shocked them, and they believed. The resurrection of Christ, the truth of the gospel, is not made true or false by us who proclaim it. Instead, it makes us, broken vessels, into truth bearers. It's too good to be true—and it's true.

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**Read** Mark 14:41–52, engaging your imagination to consider what the disciples likely felt and thought during this experience. What's your reaction to their abandonment of Christ? Pray, reflecting on how their failure points toward the truth of the Resurrection and the heart of the gospel message.



## Confident Resolve

What we can learn from Jesus' response to opposition.

When we approach Easter, there are many things we think about: Jesus' death in our place, the disciples' lack of understanding, God's choice to have women be the first witnesses to the empty tomb, resurrection hope. There is a multitude of directions to go when thinking about the end of this most significant week in history.

But there is one we rarely consider: *how* Jesus got through that experience. Yes, we note Gethsemane where he wrestled with his coming fate and eventually handed it all over to God. But what did that mean for him? Is there anything for us to learn from how Christ faced the intense rejection by the world that the Cross represented?

During the entire second half of his ministry, Jesus taught his disciples that they would face opposition, resistance, and rejection just as he did. Their spiritual development depended upon how to cope with this reality—a reality our churches today are struggling with as we move into an increasingly post-Christian context. John O'Sullivan, former editor of the *National Review*, defines it this way: "A post-Christian society is not merely a society in which agnosticism or atheism is the prevailing fundamental belief. It is a society rooted in the history, culture, and practices of Christianity but in which the religious beliefs of Christianity have either been rejected or, worse, forgotten."

What can Jesus' arrest and trial teach us about our own calling in such a world? How do we best remember what many in the world have forgotten?

Jesus was betrayed by one of his own. He was examined about his identity by the Jewish leadership. He faced Pilate with his life hanging in the balance, depending upon what he would say. The stakes were high as he stood before the Roman governor. As we contemplate Christ during his trial, what can we learn?

First, trusting the Father, Jesus did not fight back or reflect fear in the face of the rejection. The scene with Pilate is revealing. Pilate is shocked that Jesus did not respond as he'd expect someone in Jesus' situation would. In fact, Mark 15:5 says Pilate was *amazed*. Jesus' way of engagement with opposition is not like that of the world. As bad as the circumstances were (and as grim as they looked to Peter, who denied the Lord at about the same time), Jesus knew that the call the Father had given to him included this space. No hard fight back was required.

Second, Jesus rested in the confidence of his identity. He was secure in this place. As John the Evangelist notes, Pilate was surprised when Jesus initially made no reply to the accusations against him. Then, in John 19:11, we see Jesus' response, which is rooted in the security his identity in God provides him: "You would have no power over me if it were not given you from above."

Earlier Jesus had told Pilate, "My kingdom is not of this world" (18:36). This previous exchange took place as they debated the nature of truth. For

REJECTION WILL COME, JUST AS IT DID FOR THE MASTER, BUT HOW WE RESPOND TO IT SHOULD REFLECT THE PATH HE TOOK. Jesus, God the Father and his way—connected as it is to Christ himself—was the truth, so there was no need to whine about what was happening, nor any need for rebuttal, nor any need to act out of fear. 1 Peter 3:14 expresses the idea this way: "But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. 'Do not fear their threats; do not be frightened.'" Rejection will come, just as it did for the Master, but how we respond to it should reflect the path he took.

Third, we rest in the confidence that vindication and justice will come. When we face opposition, it can seem so risky to let such circumstances go, to not fight back. But Jesus' confidence was not set in the present; he knew a day of vindication would come. This is clear in Jesus' answer to a question the Jewish leadership had posed, asking if he was the Messiah. "I am," said Jesus. "And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven" (Mark 14:62). Jesus' reply was not only an affirmation that he was the Messiah but an assertion that he would sit with the Father in heaven—a remark the Jewish leadership considered to be blasphemy (v. 64). In fact, Jesus' claim would have been blasphemous had it not been true.

God's vote in this dispute, blasphemy or exaltation, is really what Easter is all about. Jesus was saying, essentially, "You might do to me whatever you want, but a day is coming when the Father will vindicate me and give me my place at his side where I will be your judge." The reality of his coming vindication gave Jesus the confidence to be faithful as he was accused and tried. Jesus did not take things into his hands because he knew the Father had his back. The Resurrection we celebrate was God's vindication of Jesus' claim.

There is an irony in this that should not be missed. This word from Jesus about the Son of Man seated at God's right hand is technically what got him crucified. The religious leaders had struggled to get testimony they could take to Pilate—then Jesus supplied that testimony

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himself. The leadership understood the point Jesus was making, but they failed to believe it. After he was beaten and mocked, they took him to Pilate where he was crucified for sedition—for making himself a king Rome did not appoint, because Jesus' kingdom was not of this world.

Jesus was so committed to going to the Cross for us that he provided the very words which got him crucified. He did it because he knew God would vindicate him three days later. That is how deep his love for us is.

How can we respond to resistance or rejection? Like Christ did. We trust God in the face of opposition. We rest in the identity God gives us so we need not fear that rejection and overreact. We know that in the vindication tied to Jesus we find our own restoration when all will be set right. In this is the way of the Cross.

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**Contemplate** John's account of Jesus' arrest and trial in John 18:1–19:16. How would you characterize Jesus' response to questioning? His demeanor? How do you desire to respond to rejection or resistance in the way of Christ? Pray, inviting God to strengthen your own confidence and security in him.

Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" (which means "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?").

MARK 15:34



## Mercifully Forsaken

Sharing in the suffering of Christ.

**As Jesus hung on the cross**, Mark records, "at three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, '*Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani*' (which means 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'" (15:34).

Here Jesus speaks a word we could have spoken. Not always, not everywhere. But there are times when this word has become our word, words he may have taken right out of our mouths: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Sometimes this word remains unspoken, but the sentiment is a steady reality—a daily, ongoing experience of God's absence. We wouldn't quite say we're forsaken, but neither would we say God is a living reality. Other times the experience of God-forsakenness is much more keen. You are at a place of deep and profound need, but God is not showing up. There is nothing but silence. Why does God sometimes seem to fail us just when the chips are down, just when we need him most?

Let's not paint an overly dreary picture here. We Christians don't believe tragedy is the last word. Indeed, God does marvelous things. But it's precisely the manifest goodness of God that makes those moments of forsakenness so much harder to bear.

Yet if we would have eyes to see, we'd see that the goodness of God is actually *most* manifest in these moments of forsakenness. In fact, it is in the very experience of forsakenness that he is revealing himself to us afresh.

We often glibly say that we want to be like Jesus. We want our lives to be like his life. We want our values to be shaped by his values. We want our relationship with God to be like his relationship with God. So we pray to be like Jesus. But we're generally blind to the full reality of who Jesus is.

We want to be shaped by the glorious Jesus. We want to heal the sick and raise the dead; we don't want to feel his grief at the unbelief of Jerusalem. We want to speak eloquent words of wisdom, but we don't want to say to anyone, "Get thee behind me, Satan," or "You brood of hypocrites!" We want to be raised to new life but go to great lengths to avoid the cross. We want an intimate life with God but never want to know the experience of being forsaken.

But to share in the life of Jesus means to share in all of his life, and that means to share in his suffering.

Now, I'm about to venture into a deep mystery here. Who can say what Jesus experienced on the cross? What exactly was the nature of this forsakenness that he exclaimed? We know in one sense that Jesus' death, and his forsakenness, was utterly unique, never to be repeated. In his death and his death alone—and in nothing we experience—do we stand secure in our redemption. In him alone was God reconciling the world to himself, not counting our sins. Period.

But if Christ's incarnation—which includes his forsaken crucifixion—is a participation in humanity and thus our participation in him, then

TO SHARE IN THE LIFE OF JESUS MEANS TO SHARE IN ALL OF HIS LIFE, AND THAT MEANS TO SHARE IN HIS SUFFERING.

all humanity shares in Christ's forsakenness, and to freely share in this forsakenness by faith becomes a way we grow fully into Christ-likeness. Whatever it meant for Jesus, it surely means this much for us: It means to know the abandonment that is the dead fruit of human sin and evil. It means to recognize the incomprehensible distance between us and an infinite and righteous God, to recognize again the terrors of life outside of life in him. It means also to

grieve, not unlike Jesus, over our own and our world's hardness of heart ("O Jerusalem, Jerusalem!"). It is indeed a fearsome thing to fall into the hands of the living God, for it means to suffer in ways not unlike the suffering of Jesus.

Again, let's not wax tragic here. This is not the end of the story. Forsakenness would be tragic had Jesus not risen from the grave. We would not have the courage to talk about this sobering reality if it were not Easter. Nor is this the constant refrain of our Christian lives. God is good and will not tempt us with forsakenness beyond our ability to endure.

Still, they come, these times of forsakenness. We are wise to remind ourselves that the Cross is indeed part of the story of Jesus, and to the degree we would be like him, it becomes part of

our story. We can know Jesus, can be one with Jesus and the Father, only when we know this.

Gerhard Forde, in his On Being a Theologian of the Cross, says it simply: "It is only through suffering and the cross that sinners can see and come to know God." That's why Paul says what can seem so absurd: "For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him . . . that I may know him and the power of

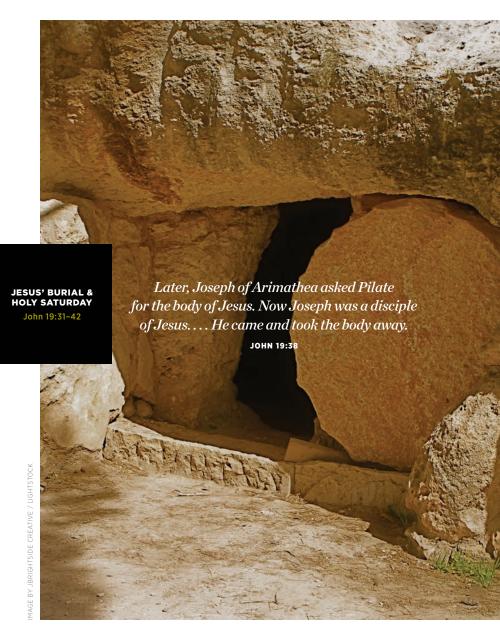
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his resurrection, and *may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death*, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead" (Phil. 3:8–11, ESV, emphasis mine).

For us to suffer the loss of all things means, among other things, to suffer the loss of the props that have become idols. It means to crucify a faith that avoids the Cross. It means to recognize that not even the experience of forsakenness saves us, but only Jesus himself. To suffer the loss of all things means to say with Paul, "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal. 2:20, ESV).

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**Meditate** upon Jesus' death, recorded in Mark 15:21–39. What strikes you about his words (v. 34)? Reflect on the role suffering and seeming forsakenness play in the life of devotion to Christ. Pray, inviting God to deepen your understanding of what it means for you to share in his suffering.



## Waiting in the Tomb

The darkness and uncertainty of "awkward Saturday."

I call it "awkward Saturday": that holy day to sit, wait, hope—unsure of what's to come tomorrow. Saturday is the day that Jesus, and all understanding, lay dead. A medieval theologian, Anselm, once described the kind of faith that comes with Saturday—fides quaerens intellectum: "faith seeking understanding." By that, he meant that faith isn't something that arises after moments of understanding. Rather, faith is something that you cling to when understanding and reason lay dead.

We don't believe once we understand it—we believe in order to understand it. Saturday's like that: offering a day of waiting, a day of ambiguity, a day when God is sovereign even if our ideas and theologies and expectations about him are not. It is the day that our ignorance is our witness and our proclamation. Truth is, our intellect will always be one step behind in our love of God. We don't love God once we understand him; we love God in order to understand him.

English author and mystic Evelyn Underhill hit it on the head: the eternal God of the universe is mysteriously a "nearness yet otherness." On Saturday, God is close but so far away. The traditional recipe for Christians is that we look at Friday and Saturday through the lens of Sunday. By that, I mean we look at Friday and Saturday in light of the Resurrection in the same way we watch a scary movie we've seen a million times. It's scary the first time we see it because we don't know what will happen. But when we've seen it, we don't experience it the way we did when we first saw it. Consequently, we don't experience Saturday as the first disciples did.

When we think about Saturday, we must do so rejecting our knowledge that Jesus *will* rise. Those in the first Saturday didn't know that. They were unaware. The theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar brings a penetrating point to

the table on this. He says that we prematurely move from Friday to Saturday and from Saturday to Sunday. We shouldn't. He writes, "We must . . . guard against that theological busyness and religious impatience which insist on anticipating the moment of fruiting the eternal redemption through the temporal passion—on dragging forward that moment from Easter to Holy Saturday."

When we experience Good Friday and Holy Saturday, Balthasar is saying, we shouldn't be too quick to move to Sunday. We must sit in Saturday, not too "theologically busy" and "religiously impatient" to squat in the tomb for a day. Of course, to a certain degree that is true; the only problem with such a statement is that those original disciples—disappointed after watching their best friend hang helplessly on the cross of a criminal—didn't know what Sunday would bring. Their Saturday didn't know Sunday was coming. Their Saturday was final.

The Gospels speak very little of the disciples' immediate response to Jesus' death on Saturday. But before the sunset on Friday, a man named Joseph of Arimathea came to Pontius Pilate to request Jesus' cold, dead body, that it might be properly buried. John 19:38 reads, "Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate

for the body of Jesus. Now Joseph was a disciple of Jesus. . . . He came and took the body away."

MORE OF FAITH THAN WE'D LIKE TO ADMIT CONSISTS OF SITTING IN THE TOMB, A SIDE OF FAITH MANY OF US PROBABLY DIDN'T SIGN UP FOR.

It's a subtle verse you could easily move past, but acres of meaning await within it. According to John—after the crowds fled and the slowly muffled screams of the executed ceased—Joseph made the sorrowful journey to receive Jesus' body as Friday drew to a close. Slowly, carefully, Joseph lowered the cross, pulled the large

Roman nails from Jesus' fragile hands and feet, and carried him in his arms.

Allow your imagination to paint the devastation of pulling those nails and along with them uprooting your greatest dreams and hopes. Imagine how awkward it would have been then and there. The darkness was never thicker. Hopes and dreams were dashed. Years earlier, most likely, Joseph had left behind his life of predictability and safety to follow an unknown Savior, only to have his vision crushed the night before. Now Joseph held his dead dream in his arms. He hadn't signed up for this. This wasn't in the fine print. What a failure. What a waste.

But Joseph still showed up.

Joseph asked for Jesus' body. It wasn't forced upon him. He experienced the burden of it by his own choice. Part of being a Christian is carrying the body of your God to its place of rest. It's heavy. Very harsh. Beyond awkward. But you have to be open to it. It won't be forced upon you. Who would ask for the heaviness of Christ? Who desires the corpse of

Jesus? Who asks for this kind of stuff?

A Christ-follower does.

More of faith than we'd like to admit consists of sitting in the tomb, a side of faith many of us probably didn't sign up for. Joseph probably didn't. And while maybe we didn't anticipate those dark moments of waiting, they are nonetheless holy moments. Faith isn't just Good Friday and Easter Sunday; faith is awkward Saturday too. So much SLOWLY, CAREFULLY, JOSEPH LOWERED THE CROSS. PULLED THE LARGE ROMAN NAILS FROM JESUS' FRAGILE HANDS AND FEET, AND CARRIED HIM IN HIS ARMS.

is sitting in that tomb with the soon-to-be resurrected Lord. It's so dark. So damp. So scary. The silence is deafening.

But there is hope in there. Even the ants that normally crawled the contours of the rocks rejoiced. The air praised God. The rock, which would later be rolled away, yearned to jump for joy. The full tomb knew that resurrection was under it all. Because in that kind of dark, there's a kind of beautiful light. Not a normal light. Not the light of the sun, or the light of a lamp, or the light of a flashlight. A different light that few can see. The light in the full tomb goes much deeper than physical light.

And in that kind of darkness, there's a glory. In the tomb, the darkness is thick. But that's where God is.

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Reflect upon John 19:31-42; consider, also, Scripture's silence regarding the day that followed. What do you imagine the experience of Joseph and Nicodemus was like? What does this reveal about their devotion to Jesus? Pray, considering situations in your own life in which God is calling you to wait in uncertainty.







## Love That Will Not Let Go

Even as Mary clings to Christ, she also goes out to bear witness.

**The Resurrection is an unprecedented event** in history. In the words of C. S. Lewis, it is a miracle of the New Creation. Something of which the world has had no previous experience at all has entered the old order and radically altered it. The great reversal has begun. The new wine has burst the old wineskins. Even familiar relations with Jesus in the old creation no longer suffice. Now, it seems he can only be recognized by those to whom he chooses to reveal himself.

The story of the Resurrection is also the story of human love at its best. When all else fails—even faith and hope—love comes through intact. It may be weak in comparison to divine love, but it is strong enough to move the heart of the Lover. Such is the love of Mary Magdalene.

What makes Mary's devotion to Jesus unique may have begun early in his ministry when he cast seven demons out of her (Luke 8:1–3). Mary had known the terrifying power of spiritual enslavement and the exhilarating freedom of following Christ her teacher. Here was a Rabbi who treated women very differently. From that day, her admiration and love grew.

Mary followed Jesus to Jerusalem. When all the other disciples fled (Mark 14:50), she stood in solidarity with other women to witness his agonizing death on the cross (Matt. 27:55–56). Love refuses to be cowed. Love perseveres when hope is extinguished. Mary witnessed Jesus' limp body being taken down from the cross. He was dead! But love will not give up.

She continued to follow Jesus to the point where she could go no further. The tomb was finally clamped shut. Sabbath was about to begin. She had to leave, but not without first taking note of where his body lay (Mark 15:47).

Mary could not wait for the Sabbath to be over. At the first streaks of dawn, she hurried to the tomb. Love drove her back. Perhaps all she wanted

was to be with the Beloved—if only to run her hand over the cold, defiant rock that blocked the tomb's entrance. But further dismay greeted her: The stone had been removed and the body was gone. Without a second thought, she hurried back and reported it to Peter and John.

John reached the tomb entrance first and hesitated, but Peter, true to form, barged in. The sight defied explanation, for they "still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead" (John 20:9). Peter and John tried to figure out what might have happened. They were practical men looking for plausible explanations, and finding none, they decided to leave.

But Mary lingered. She would not give up so easily. *But where is he?* Why? No, it can't be—perhaps a jumble of foreboding thoughts filled her

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mind. Could it be the work of grave robbers? Perhaps anger welled up at the thought of unconscionable men desecrating Jesus' body. Mary could take it no more; she broke down in tears.

She moved closer to the tomb and saw two angels. Their brief exchange suggests that they seemed harmless, ordinary folks. Just then Jesus appeared and asked: "Why are you crying?" But Mary could not recognize the voice. Thinking that he was the gardener,

she pleaded with him to tell her where he might have carried away the body of Jesus, saying, "and I will get him"—I will *carry* him (John 20:15). She did not consider how she would do it. These are the words of a determined woman. Whatever it took, she'd find the body and carry it back.

Was Mary so blinded by her tears that she could not recognize Jesus? Not likely. The Gospels record other instances when the resurrected Jesus was not recognized until he chose to make himself recognizable, such as the two disciples on the road to Emmaus who only recognized Jesus through the breaking of bread. For Mary, the voice of the "gardener" suddenly sounded familiar when Jesus called her by name.

Mary's love had been stretched to breaking point—almost. But then Jesus revealed himself and spoke her name in the familiar voice that she had heard countless times before. In the depth of despair, her "teacher" had found her. She recognized his reassuring voice. She instinctively clung to him, driven by love that will not let go.

But she could not make Christ exclusively her own. Love must at some point yield to the will of the Lover: "Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God'" (v. 17).

Following Jesus had brought Mary to the brink of despair, but love finally broke through the old order. She became the first witness of the risen Christ and the first bearer of the Good News: The Father of Jesus is now our Father and Jesus is now our brother (Heb. 2:11-12). But Mary was not a witness in the formal sense, for in her culture a testimony was validated by at least two witnesses and, among

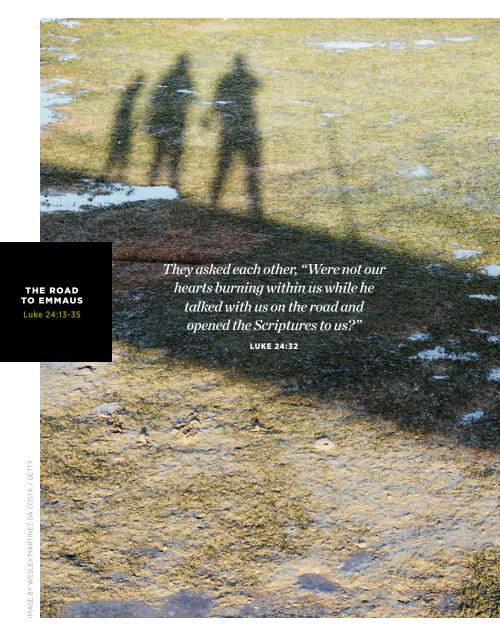
WHEN ALL ELSE FAILS-EVEN FAITH AND HOPE-LOVE COMES THROUGH INTACT.

the Jews, the status of a woman as a witness was a contested issue. What Jesus did for her can only be understood as an act of pure love in response to her singular devotion.

Mary Magdalene's relentless pursuit of her Beloved exemplifies the spiritual quest for deeper union with God. Like other contemplatives, mystics, and saints in subsequent Christian history, Mary teaches us that love never fails—even when hope fails. It sustained her through the dark night of Holy Saturday into the dawn of Easter. Even as Mary clings to Christ, she also learns to let go. The ecstasy of her reunion with the Beloved was not meant to be for her alone to enjoy. He called her to go into the world and bear witness to the Resurrection: "I have seen the Lord!" From Mary, we begin to understand why love is the greatest theological virtue (1 Cor. 13:13). From her, too, we learn that however much we relish mountain-top experiences of intimacy with God, we must also descend to bring the Good News of the living Christ to a dying world.

Simon Chan served as Earnest Lau Professor of Systematic Theology at Trinity Theological College, Singapore. Now retired, Chan is the author of several books including Grassroots Asian Theology and Spiritual Theology.

**Read** John 20:1-18, reflecting on Mary's experience, actions, and reactions. How does she exemplify devoted love? How are you, like her, drawn to cling closely to Jesus? Pray, considering how God is calling you, also, to go and tell others.



## Hope for the Journey

The slow and burning heart of faithfulness.

Jesus, newly risen from the dead, joins with two of his disciples—one's name is Cleopas and the other is not named—as they walk to the village of Emmaus (Luke 24:13–35). Jesus asks what they are discussing. Gloomily, they tell him about "Jesus of Nazareth," a "prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people." They speak about how the religious rulers handed him over to be crucified. "But we had hoped," they say, "that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel." They tell about the rumors told by womenfolk—more troubling than consoling—of his resurrection. One thing is for sure: The tomb is empty, bodiless.

Jesus listens and then speaks. "How foolish you are," he says, "and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?"

When they arrive at the village, these two persuade Jesus—whom they still do not recognize—to eat with them. He does, and as Jesus breaks the bread, gives thanks, and gives it to them, "their eyes were opened and they recognized him, and he disappeared from their sight. They asked each other, 'Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road, and opened the Scriptures to us?'"

The heart condition of these people is actually twofold: slow and burning. That is a strange affliction, and, I think, common. One definition of Christ's followers might be that: people of the slow, burning heart. Sorrow and hope, awe and self-pity, wonder and worry, believing and doubting, yes and no mix loosely in us, tugging us one way, jostling us another. Jesus walks the road with us. But we can look straight at him and not recognize him. Jesus opens the Scriptures to us and often something happens within—a warming sometimes, a scorching at others. And just at those moments when finally

the scales fall from our eyes and we see that, behold, it is he, it is Jesus!—at that wondrous moment, he often up and vanishes.

Our own encounters with the risen Christ are mostly like that: enigmatic, fleeting, mere glimpses, little ambushes. And we're left with the question, "Didn't our hearts burn within us? *Didn't they*?"

One of our persistent cultural myths is the myth of fulfillment—the promise that, on this earth, the fullness of all I truly need and all I really desire awaits. And it's not just a Hollywood myth. It's a Christian one too. Maybe it's especially Christian.

Me, I'm one book away from fulfillment, one conference shy, one significant experience or insight short. If I attend a marriage retreat or go on a mission trip or get involved in a real community of fellow believers or pray more, I will be fulfilled. That's the myth. It pushes and lures me personally. It is the constant thing I am asked to dispense as a pastor, apothecary-like, to all

the spiritually, emotionally, physically unfulfilled people who come to me.

THE PORTRAIT OF THE FAITHFUL IS NOT A PORTRAIT OF THE FULFILLED. WHAT DEFINES THEM—WHAT DEFINES ALL OF US ON THE ROAD TO EMMAUS—IS HOPE.

The problem is, I don't see fulfillment this side of the Jordan promised in Scripture. I see joy promised and peace. But also tribulation, soul-piercing. I see that the "great cloud of witnesses" who surround us, cheering us on, have among them those who "faced jeers and flogging, and even chains ... were put to death by stoning . .. were sawed in two ... went about in sheepskins

and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated... wandered in deserts and mountains, living in caves and holes in the ground." What's more, "none of them received what had been promised" (Heb. 11:36–39).

The portrait of the faithful is not a portrait of the fulfilled. What defines them—what defines all of us on the road to Emmaus—is hope. What defines them is a slow, burning heart. What defines them is a yearning: knowing in their bones, in spite of loss or sorrow or aloneness, that there is something more, something else, something better. What defines them is a hauntedness, a shaky but unshakable conviction that the Christ they see now through a glass darkly, in little fleeting puzzling glimpses, they will see one day faceto-face. But for now, on this road, their slow hearts burn.

We don't know anything more about these two disciples on the road.

We read on, and Luke tells us that they ran to tell the other 11 disciples and that Jesus himself showed up again: calming their doubts, demonstrating his resurrection, opening their minds to the Scriptures, commissioning them for world missions, promising to endow them with power from on high (Luke 24:36-53).

But these two get lost in the crowd. Who is Cleopas? He flits into the story and then out, never heard from again. Who is the other one? She or he hides forever behind a thick scrim of anonymity. These two are mere silhouettes. We see them in dark outline, devoid of feature. Except this: Their hearts are slow and burning.

ONE DEFINITION OF CHRIST'S **FOLLOWERS MIGHT BE** THAT: PEOPLE OF THE SLOW. BURNING HEART.

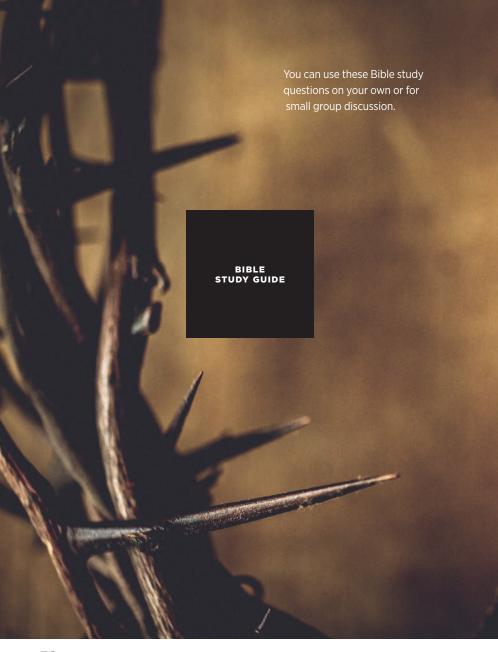
Were they fulfilled after this? No more days of feeling-you know that feeling-both empty and heavy inside? No more doubting, no more despairing? Never again missing the risen Jesus in their midst?

We don't know, because we're not told. But if the stories of the other disciples give any clue, the best response to the question, Were they fulfilled? is to answer, That's the wrong question. Fulfillment is heaven's business.

What Paul, Peter, John, Cleopas, and the other one knew was that the thing they had hoped for—that Jesus is the one who is going to redeem not just Israel but the whole world—is a sure hope. Their yearning was not a hollow wistfulness, a whistling in the dark. It was, in fact, a homing device in the heart, drawing them on no matter how long the road, no matter that the "day is almost over" (Luke 24:29), no matter that their hearts are slow with doubt and broken with grief. Even then—especially then—their hearts still burn, and they know this journey is a good one. And it's never taken alone.

Mark Buchanan is a pastor and professor. He is the author of several books, including Hidden in Plain Sight and The Rest of God.

**Consider** Jesus' encounter with the believers on the road to Emmaus in Luke 24:13-35. In what ways can you relate to the experience of these believers? How does this encounter speak to the nature of faithfulness? Pray, inviting God to strengthen you in faithfulness and kindle long-burning hope.



STUDY 1 "Utter Devotion" pp. 8-11

 Who in your life has been an example of utter devotion to Jesus? Describe that person.

- 2. Read John 12:1-11. What do you find particularly striking this passage? Why?
- 3. What can Mary's action teach us about devotion to Christ?
- 4. Read some of Jesus' teachings about devotion in Matthew 6:21, 16:24-25, and 22:34-38. How do these passages, along with Mary's actions, challenge a sentimentalized or comfortable view of the Christian life? How do they challenge you personally?
- 5. In your view, why is it significant that John describes this event as happening immediately before the Triumphal Entry and the subsequent events of Holy Week?
- 6. As you contemplate these passages, how is God inviting you to deepen your devotion to him? How do you sense Christ calling you, "Come, follow me"?

#### STUDY 2

"For All Nations"

pp. 12-15

- 1. In your experience, how do Christians generally think about Palm Sunday and Jesus cleansing the temple? Which aspects of the events are usually emphasized?
- 2. Were you surprised by the themes explored in "For All Nations"? Why or why not?
- 3. Read Matthew 21:1–17. You may also want to read parallel accounts in Mark 11:1–19, Luke 19:28–46, and John 12:12–19. What stands out to you? Why?
- 4. Read Zechariah 9:9-10, Psalm 72, and Isaiah 56:6-8. How do these passages enrich your understanding of Jesus' actions? Conversely, what's lost when this Old Testament context is overlooked?
- 5. Read Ephesians 2:14-22; consider how peace and reconciliation are ultimately tied to Christ's reconciling work on the Cross (v. 16). How does this idea challenge the church today?
- 6. "We remember the events of Palm Sunday and the clearing of the temple properly," McCaulley asserts, "when our hearts are captured by the vision of the church as the place where the nations speak peace to one another and worship the triune God together." In your devotion to Christ, how can your life be more fully shaped by his vision for the church?

STUDY 3 "Poured Out" pp. 16-19

 When have you done a menial or unpleasant task? What was it like? What was your mindset?

- 2. Read **John 13:1–17**. What do you notice or observe?
- 3. Look at Gospel accounts emphasizing other aspects of the Last Supper: Matthew 26:17–30, Mark 14:12–26, and Luke 22:7–38. What connections, if any, can you draw to the theme of servanthood?
- 4. Read Mark 9:30–35. How can Jesus' impending sacrifice on the Cross serve as a lens for understanding his teachings about servanthood?
- 5. Read Philippians 2:3-11. Ken Shigematsu emphasizes that Jesus "had the strength to give up his privilege—not his power—as the most important person in the room." Why is this distinction important?
- 6. Prayerfully examine your own sense of privilege. What would it look like to give it up in various situations in your daily life? How can you serve others as Christ served his disciples?

#### STUDY 4 "My Will Be Lost in Thine"

pp. 20-23

- 1. When have you prayed about a deep desire but were disappointed by God's apparent answer? What did you wrestle through as you processed that experience?
- Read Matthew 26:36-46. You may also want to read parallel accounts in Mark 14:32-42 and Luke 22:39-46. What words or phrases would you use to describe Jesus in this scene?
- 3. What spiritual or theological questions does this scene raise for you?
- 4. Nancy Guthrie writes of the strange comfort Gethsemane can offer those who've received God's implicit "no" in answer to heartfelt, suffering prayer. What did you relate to in Guthrie's essay? Why?
- 5. Read **Philippians 4:6–7** and **Matthew 6:9–13**. What does it look like to bring honest desires before God and simultaneously pray for God's will to be done?
- 6. Guthrie describes how God's "perspective begins to shape our perspective.... We discover that, by his Spirit, he is actually changing what we want." How is God at work in your life shaping your will to align with his? What practices best help you have an inner posture of submission to God's will?

STUDY 5 "They Failed Him" pp. 24-27

1. Share an example of someone acting heroically or courageously during a crisis. What do you think enabled the person to do so?

- Read Mark 14:27–31, 41–52, 66–72. You may also want to read parallel accounts in Matthew 26:31–35, 47–56, 69–75; Luke 22:47–62; and John 13:18–38, 18:15–18, 25–27. What's your reaction to the disciples' abandonment of Jesus—Judgment? Anger? Empathy? Something else?
- 3. How do you think the disciples' perception of themselves and of their devotion to Jesus changed throughout these events?
- 4. Tish Harrison Warren cites the disciples' transformation from cowards to bold witnesses as evidence for the Resurrection. In this sense, their failures serve to strengthen her devotion to Jesus. How does their failure impact your own devotion to Jesus?
- 5. Read the apostle Paul's description of himself in 1 Timothy 1:12-17. What role does facing one's failures and sinfulness play in the life of faith?
- 6. How is God currently at work in your life, using your failures or weaknesses to draw you closer to him?

#### STUDY 6

#### "Confident Resolve"

pp. 28-31

- Darrell L. Bock explores the difficulty of living faithfully in an increasingly post-Christian culture. Share examples of ways Christians today may face misunderstanding, antagonism, unfair treatment, or opposition.
- 2. When have you had these sorts of experiences? What are your instinctive reactions to such treatment?
- 3. Read John 18:1–19:16. You may also want to read parallel accounts in Matthew 26:57–68, 27:11–26; Mark 14:53–65, 15:1–20; and Luke 22:63–23:25. How would you characterize Jesus' responses and demeanor?
- 4. Bock highlights three aspects of Jesus' response to Pilate that can teach us how to face opposition or mistreatment. Which of these principles stands out to you most?
- 5. Read **John 15:18–25** and **1 Peter 3:14–16**, **4:12–19**. How do these passages comfort, encourage, or challenge you?
- 6. What's one specific way Jesus' example before Pilate is compelling you to handle a situation or relationship differently?

- Many Christians have experiences of God's seeming absence during periods of suffering. Share about (or reflect on) one such experience from your own life.
- 2. Mark Galli writes, "It is in the very experience of forsakenness that [God] is revealing himself to us afresh." As you look back upon a personal experience of forsakenness, how did it serve to deepen your faith? What did you learn about God?
- 3. Read Mark 15:21–39. You may also want to read parallel accounts in Matthew 27:27–50, Luke 23:26–46, and John 19:17–30. As you contemplate Christ's suffering, what is God drawing your attention to?
- 4. In what ways did Christ suffer? Enumerate and reflect on various aspects of his suffering and death.
- 5. Read **Philippians 3:7-11** as well as **2 Corinthians 1:3-5** and **1 Peter 4:13**. What does it mean to share in Christ's suffering? What doesn't it mean?
- 6. Consider how Paul ties together suffering and devotion in **Galatians 2:20**. How might God be leading you to shift your perspective on or reaction to suffering?

#### STUDY 8

#### "Waiting in the Tomb"

pp. 36-39

- Recall a funeral you've attended. How do you imagine the thoughts and emotions of that experience compare or contrast with what Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus experienced as they retrieved and buried Jesus' body?
- Read John 19:31–42. You may also want to read parallel accounts in Matthew 27:55–66, Mark 15:40–47, and Luke 23:47–56. What details do you notice? What did the Gospel writers emphasize?
- 3. How do Joseph and Nicodemus model devotion and discipleship here? What connections can you draw to our experience of the Christian life?
- 4. "Awkward Saturday," as A. J. Swoboda calls it, is a "holy day to sit, wait, hope—unsure of what's to come tomorrow." What spiritual value is there in entering into the uncertainty of Holy Saturday rather than mentally skipping ahead to Resurrection Sunday?
- 5. Swoboda emphasizes the primacy of love for God, particularly during experiences of uncertainty. Revisit Matthew 22:34–38. What role does devoted love play in maintaining faith? When has love buoyed you through uncertainty?
- 6. Contemplate Psalm 130:1-2, 5-6 and Hebrews 11:1. How is waiting an act of devotion? How might God be inviting you to wait in your life right now?

- If you were asked to explain the significance of Easter to a non-Christian, what would you emphasize? Why?
- 2. Read John 20:1-18. What stands out to you about Mary's and Jesus' words and actions?
- 3. In John 20, Jesus speaks of his Ascension and commissions Mary to tell others. Read Matthew 28:1-20 and Acts 1:1-11. What common themes do you find in these three passages?
- 4. **John 20:17** depicts two aspects of the Christian life: clinging to Christ in loving intimacy and going out to tell others. Read **Ephesians 3:14–19** and **2 Corinthians 5:11–21**; what do you find convicting or challenging in these passages? Why?
- 5. How is love central in both intimacy with God and evangelism?
- 6. Read 1 Corinthians 13:13. Simon Chan writes, "From Mary, we begin to understand why love is the greatest theological virtue." Reflect on the various ways Mary Magdalene exemplifies love for Christ. How do you desire to grow in your own love for Jesus?

#### STUDY 10

#### "Hope for the Journey"

pp. 46-49

- Read Luke 24:13-35. In your view, what is unique, different, or interesting about the road to Emmaus account in comparison to the other Resurrection accounts in the Gospels?
- 2. Mark Buchanan writes, "Jesus walks the road with us. But we can look straight at him and not recognize him." Yet there are times "when finally the scales fall from our eyes and we see that, behold, it is he, it is Jesus!" What's your reaction to Buchanan's observation?
- 3. Consider Matthew 28:20b and 1 Corinthians 13:12. How do these two ideas of Jesus' faithful presence and seeing him through a glass darkly interact in the Christian life?
- 4. Read Hebrews 11:1–12:3. How does this passage speak—either explicitly or implicitly—about longing, faithfulness, and hope?
- 5. Read **John 20:19–29** and **Luke 24:36–53**. How do you see longing, faithfulness, and hope also weave through these accounts of Jesus interacting with his followers?
- 6. Buchanan notes that spiritual yearning can serve as "a homing device in the heart, drawing [us] on no matter how long the road." As you consider your ongoing journey on the road of faith, how is yearning drawing you forward?

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#### "Utter Devotion"

Main passage: John 12:1-11 Also: Matthew 6:21, 16:24-25, 22:34-38

#### "For All Nations"

Main passage: Matthew 21:1-17 Also: Psalm 72, Isaiah 56:6-8, Zechariah 9:9-10, Mark 11:1-19, Luke 19:28-46, John 12:12-19, Ephesians 2:14-22

#### "Poured Out"

Main passage: John 13:1-17 Also: Matthew 26:17-30; Mark 9:30-35, 14:12-26; Luke 22:7-38; Philippians 2:3-11

#### "My Will Be Lost in Thine"

Main passage: Matthew 26:36-46 Also: Matthew 6:9-13, Mark 14:32-42, Luke 22:39-46, Philippians 4:6-7

#### "They Failed Him"

Main passage: Mark 14:27–31, 41–52, 66-72 Also: Matthew 26:31–35, 47–56, 69–75; Luke 22:47–62; John 13:18–38, 18:15–18, 25–27; 1 Timothy 1:12–17

#### "Confident Resolve"

Main passage: John 18:1-19:16 Also: Matthew 26:57-68, 27:11-26; Mark 14:53-65, 15:1-20; Luke 22:63-23:25; John 15:18-25; 1 Peter 3:14-16, 4:12-19

#### "Mercifully Forsaken"

Main passage: Mark 15:21–39 Also: Matthew 27:27–50, Luke 23:26–46, John 19:17–30, 2 Corinthians 1:3–5, Galatians 2:20, Philippians 3:7–11, 1 Peter 4:13

#### "Waiting in the Tomb"

Main passage: John 19:31–42 Also: Psalm 130:1–2, 5–6; Matthew 22:34–38, 27:55–66; Mark 15:40–47; Luke 23:47–56; Hebrews 11:1

#### "Love That Will Not Let Go"

Main passage: John 20:1-18 Also: Matthew 28:1-20, Acts 1:1-11, 1 Corinthians 13:13, 2 Corinthians 5:11-21, Ephesians 3:14-19

#### "Hope for the Journey"

Main passage: Luke 24:13–35 Also: Matthew 28:20b, Luke 24:36–53, John 20:19–29, 1 Corinthians 13:12, Hebrews 11:1–12:3

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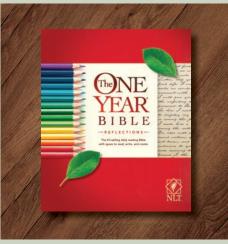
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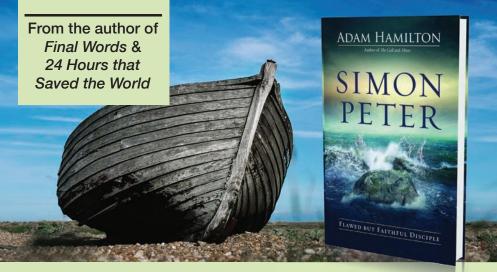
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