

LESSON 1

“But we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1 Corinthians 1:23, 24).

THE OFFENSE OF THE CROSS

Matthew 16:16-23; 26:31-35;

Mark 8:27-33; John 6:60, 61

The great apostle Paul said, “God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Galatians 6:14a; KJV). The glory of the cross comes out of the agony of the cross. The Son of God turned His death on the cross into a glorious victory. God’s great heart for all people was revealed at the cross. He said it all through His Son’s death. What more could He say? Therefore, Satan has tried his hardest to blind people to the glory of the cross. He has sought to make it repulsive and ridiculous to our intelligence so that we will reject it. To recognize the “offense of the cross,” therefore, is crucial. God has chosen to save us through the cross, but the devil seeks to lead us to scoff at it. If you do not understand the “offense of the cross,” then you will probably miss what the god of this world, the devil, is doing! To misunderstand his designs is to allow yourself to be deceived by his designs!

Sermons, songs, books, art, and daily conversations all vibrate with the cross. How, then, can there be any offense in it? Some talk of “sweet baby Jesus” or “a helpless man dying on a cross” and view Jesus as “a harmless man.” This has made the story of the cross seem like a sentimental fairy tale. Popular preaching has removed the violence, blood, and cruelty inherent in the cross; it has made the cross painless and consequently sterile.

No one living today has seen a crucifixion. Such a death was humiliating beyond words. From our setting, it is almost impossible for us to grasp the agony of it. We put the cross in our church architecture; we think of it as beautiful and ornate. However, the cross is not “appropriate architecture”; it is not just “a meaningful story.” Men glorify the cross while they miss the meaning of Jesus’ death. The cross is not sentimental storytelling; it is the historic death of the Son of God for man’s sins.

We love life; the cross is a presentation of death. We crave victory; the cross begins with defeat. We seek peace; the cross results from war. We love beauty; the cross is ugly. The cross is diametrically different from what mankind seeks to have. Critics protest, “How dare God be God!” Nevertheless, He is, was, and always will be! He, as the only righteous God, chose for His Son to bear our sins through an agonizing death on a cross. Jesus sternly told His disciples that He would offend people (Matthew 16:16–23; 26:31–35; Mark 8:27–33; John 6:60, 61). Christ even used a Greek word that means “scandalized,” saying that His followers would be offended in Him (Mark 14:27–31).

Of course, unbelievers were offended by Jesus! Who could accept a crucified common criminal as Savior? In polite Roman society, the word “cross” was almost an obscenity, a word that was shunned in public. The thought of Jesus being crucified was too much for Peter; he tried to protect Jesus from it. He was agitated. Jesus reacted quickly to Peter, identifying him with Satan! (Matthew 16:23). We do not want Jesus to be Jesus! However, the cross was the battleground for Jesus. He “sweated blood” in Gethsemane and prayed that God, if it were possible, would find another way (Luke 22:40–44). People can manage their enemies, but they cannot always manage their friends. Jesus had to react quickly and firmly to Peter’s rebuke. Peter knew the Old Testament Scripture that pictured the tree (the cross) as a curse (Deuteronomy 21:23; Acts 5:30; Galatians 3:13), and he did not want Jesus to die that way. Jesus rebuked him and told him to get out of His way, for He was going to the cross.

Paul was not ashamed of the gospel (Romans 1:16, 17). Are we? The temptation is always to change the cross, to minimize it. Paul talked about “the offense of the cross” in Galatians 5:11 (NKJV). He also revealed Christ as “a rock of offense” (Romans 9:31–33). He taught the cross as a stumbling block for the Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles (1 Corinthians 1:17–25). We will not understand the salvation that Jesus brought until we understand the cross. At the cross God said that the only way to defeat sin is through the righteous judgment of sin. If the cross does not matter, then nothing matters!

Probably nothing on earth is as controversial, offensive, or divisive as the cross. No one ever made people angrier than Jesus did and does!

The cross offends because God, not man, is right. (1) God is right because our problem is sin. (2) God is right because the only answer to sin is the cross! Sinners are lost, without hope, and hell-bound. This offends us. Most of us cannot admit that we are lost enough to need salvation. Sinners do not wish to know, or to be reminded, of their guilt. Saying that we are sinners contradicts our proud, selfish, stubborn, and sinful hearts. Christ died for the ungodly, that is, for sinners (Romans 5:6–8). We all qualify!

The cross offends because sinners do not deserve, cannot earn, and cannot buy salvation. We see here the offense of grace! Jesus paid it all. Grace does not rid sinners of their responsibility. What justice demanded, grace provided. Jesus is the “Lamb of God” (John 1:29, 36). He was not only rejected by man (John 1:10, 11); but, when He paid the price for our

sin, He was also forsaken by God (Matthew 27:46). Sinful man is eternally helpless without Jesus! Man cannot imagine or explain the cross—he can only humbly believe in it. This offends us.

The cross offends because we cannot respond “our way.” Jesus said, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me” (John 14:6). His statement is rigid, narrow, exclusive, intolerant, and judgmental. . . but it is the truth. Such a declaration is offensive (see Acts 4:11, 12). Do we seek to please men or God? (John 12:42, 43; Acts 5:29). No sinner can be saved apart from Jesus. The time has come for us to put the cross where God put it. Jesus said, “And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to Myself.” Then John wrote, “But He was saying this to indicate the kind of death by which He was to die” (John 12:32, 33). God Himself . . . gave Himself . . . to save us . . . from ourselves!

THE WEEK THAT CHANGED THE WORLD

“Jesus answered and said, ‘. . . Now judgment is upon this world; now the ruler of this world will be cast out. And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to Myself.’” (John 12:30–32).

Matthew 21—25; Mark 11—13;
Luke 19:29—21:38; John 11:55—12:50

We now turn to the week of weeks! This was the week when God (Jesus) died! It was the week of God’s greatest work (His work through the cross)! It is overwhelming! To study this week is our highest privilege. We look at it, think about it, and hold it in our hearts. God’s greatest treasure—the gospel message of Jesus’ dying on the cross to bring victory over sin and death—has been stored in us, earthen vessels, frail pots of clay (2 Corinthians 4:7).

When the details are put together, the Gospels reveal only approximately forty-plus days in the life of Christ, yet the narration of this week gives numerous details concerning His activities. What Jesus did in this one week consumes one-third of the Gospels; it makes up one-half of the Gospel of John. The mere space given to it tells us that this week is all-important. During His ministry, Jesus avoided Jerusalem. Now, He set His face to go to Jerusalem (Luke 9:51). He was in total control; He went to Jerusalem to die.

What did Jesus do during this time? He taught and taught! He was teaching even on the cross! He was teaching until the bitter end. The Jews claimed that they wanted the Messiah; yet, when He came, they had Him crucified! He did not fulfill their concept of a Messiah. Does He fit ours? Can we accept the biblical Christ?

Let us look at the week that changed the world. All eternity depends on what Jesus did in this week and how we respond to it.

SUNDAY . . . A Day of Acclaim

The Anointing

(Matthew 26:6–13; Mark 14:3–9; John 12:1–8)

The first event on Sunday was the anointing of Jesus. He was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper: “So they made Him a supper there, and Martha was serving; but Lazarus was one of those reclining at the table with Him” (John 12:2). At the supper, Mary anointed Jesus with expensive oil. Its worth was approximately a year’s wages for a common man.

The first lesson that we see here is the lesson of receiving. Throughout His life Jesus had given, not received. That changed on this day. Perhaps it is easier to give than to receive in times of crisis, but Jesus taught both.

The true character of Judas surfaces here as he said, “Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and given to poor people? . . .” (John 12:4–6). It is amazing how the apostles thought they could openly criticize Jesus! Their rebuke of Jesus was harsh and disrespectful.

Benevolence is a blessing to us and to others. Serving Jesus is of even greater importance than benevolence. Whatever is given to Jesus for Jesus cannot be thought of as “waste.” Jesus exposed Judas’ guilty motives, and He honored Mary’s extravagant gift of love. Anything love gives to Jesus is always too little.

The second lesson we see in this setting is that true friends are costly. Jesus was at Lazarus’ home. Earlier He had raised His friend Lazarus from the dead (John 11). That resurrection became part of the motivation for Jesus’ crucifixion. Our good works can sometimes cause hate and persecution.

The Triumphal Entry

(Matthew 21:1–11; Mark 11:1–11;
Luke 19:29–41; John 12:12–15)

Jesus had never had a “praise welcome.” He chose to have one here. He got on a donkey and rode into town as the King of the Jews. In doing so, He forced people to make a decision about Him. “Accept Me or kill Me!” He was saying. He carefully planned His “Triumphal Entry.”

He sent two disciples to get a colt that had never been ridden. This is amazing! Farmers would rarely allow this. The colt’s owner must have known and believed in Jesus. The donkey He rode had to be borrowed because Jesus was a “Penniless King.” He went to the subjects; usually subjects go to their king. Then people spread branches and clothes upon the road before Him. Jesus got a “praise welcome”! The people shouted, “Hosanna,” which means “Save, we pray.” His jubilant entrance fulfilled Zechariah 9:9.

As Jesus arrived at Jerusalem, He was overcome with emotion—His heart broke with sorrow. He cried over Jerusalem (Luke 19:41). He cried audibly over those who were going to reject Him. Jerusalem had been God’s chosen city. Ten thousand memories were vanishing; time was running out. Jerusalem was about to be totally destroyed (A.D. 67–70).

As Jesus rode peacefully into town on the donkey, His actions did not bother the Romans. The crowd on this Sunday was made up of Galileans; but the crowd on Thursday and Friday were Judeans, and they cried for His death. When the Prince of Peace came to town, He was honored by the singing of “Hallel Psalms.” However, this forced the Pharisees to take action. They thought the world was following after Him (John 12:19).

The Pharisees were horrified! They commanded Jesus to rebuke (or silence) His disciples, but Jesus refused. If His disciples had not praised Him, the stones would have cried out with praise of Him (Luke 19:40). This “praise welcome” was monumental. While Jerusalem had refused to listen, the people could not fail to see!

Jesus had His “praise welcome.” Will we give Him one?

MONDAY . . .

A Day of Authority

Jesus had now arrived in Jerusalem. He would never be “Man of the Year” on the cover of a magazine or receive the Nobel Peace Prize, but He became our Savior! He rode on a donkey (a symbol of peace); He did not ride on a horse (a symbol of war). Since Solomon, no king had ridden into Jerusalem on a donkey.

The issue, as always, was authority. Jesus would now present His credentials.

Jesus Cursed a Fig Tree

(Matthew 21:18–22; Mark 11:12–14, 20–26)

Jesus was hungry. He saw a fig tree with leaves and was disappointed to find no fruit. He condemned this tree forever. This is not the Jesus most of us have created in our minds. His action on this occasion is one of only two negative (destructive) miracles that Jesus performed (see Matthew 8:28–34). It harmed nature, but not humanity.

He was giving an object lesson that the apostles had to learn. The sin was pride and hypocrisy. The fig tree claimed to have fruit. It did not. Jewish leaders claimed to be of God. They were not. The Jews should have been humbled to be called by God. Instead, they thought they were superior and invincible.

Peter was amazed by the sudden death of that fig tree. Why should he be amazed? The apostles had seen Jesus walk on water, heal the sick, and raise the dead. Still, they were shocked to see the fig tree wither at Jesus’ command!

Jesus Cleansed the Temple

(Matthew 21:12–15; Mark 11:15–19; Luke 19:45–48)

Next, Jesus went to the temple. Without introduction, He began teaching. On the side, He healed the blind and the lame. The chief priests and the scribes saw the marvelous things He did (Matthew 21:15). The temple area was to be revered, but it was abused! The people were using it as a shortcut through Jerusalem; they were using it as a place to exercise avarice and greed.

As He cleansed the temple, Jesus did not attack men, but He did run them out. He did rearrange the furniture. He quoted the Bible: “My house shall be called a house of prayer”; but you are making it a robbers’ den” (Matthew 21:13; see Jeremiah 7:11). He was not a coward or a “sissy.” He was a “man among men.” He not only was physically strong, but He also used the Scriptures mightily. His language was pointed and true.

Jesus Continued His Teaching

(John 12:20–50)

In the midst of all this, a delegation of Greeks came, wanting to see Jesus (John 12:20). While the Jews sought to kill Him, the Greeks sought to hear Him! Philip was always bringing someone to Jesus. He partnered up with Andrew, and

they approached Jesus. Jesus knew “His hour” had come, yet He continued to teach profound truths. He taught that seed must die to live and that those who love their lives will lose them (John 12:21–26).

Then Jesus said in the presence of others who had gathered, “Father, glorify Your name.” For a third time in the life of Christ, a voice spoke out of heaven (John 12:28). To some it sounded like thunder, but to Jesus it was a promise of victory. Satan was to be cast out by His death. Jesus declared at this time, “And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to Myself” (John 12:32).

In spite of this glorious teaching that was accompanied by a mighty miracle, the Pharisees refused to believe. Jesus concluded, “. . . they loved the approval of men rather than the approval of God” (John 12:42, 43).

TUESDAY . . . A Day of Activity

Of all the days recorded in the Scriptures, Tuesday was the busiest day in the life of Christ. When He cleansed the temple, He hit the Jewish leaders in their pocketbooks. This got their attention. The Jews had to pay the temple tax with the Hebrew shekel. Those coming to Jerusalem had to exchange their Roman denarii or Greek drachmas into temple shekels in order to pay the tax. The money changers charged an exorbitant amount to change the worshipers’ money. The Jewish leaders had made a “robbers’ den” out of the temple.

They became angry with Jesus and asked, “Where did You get your authority?”; “Who are you?”; “Who do you think you are?” They thought they could quickly run this Galilean out of town. If He answered them by saying, “God,” He lost, for they would charge Him with blasphemy. If He answered them by saying, “Man,” He still lost, for they would have said He had no right to do what He did. However, Jesus turned the situation around by asking, “Where did John the Baptist get his authority?” Jesus fought fire with fire. They refused to answer Him. So Jesus did not answer them! (Matthew 21:23–27; Mark 11:27–33; Luke 20:1–8). The Jewish leaders tried to demean Jesus by asking for His credentials: “Where did you go to school? You are not a priest, an ordained rabbi, or a graduate of Jerusalem Seminary.” They soon found out that He was “The Great Debater.” He exposed their foolishness.

Jesus taught three parables on this day. The apostles asked Jesus why He taught in parables and what He meant (Matthew 13:10, 36). He said that this practice eliminated those who were merely curious from being among His followers. Parables are not “children’s stories.” They gently guide you into convicting yourself. Jesus taught with all His heart. He presented the parable of the two sons (Matthew 21:28–32). Publicans and harlots will enter into God’s presence when some “religious folk” will not. Publicans and harlots did not crucify Jesus. The terrible deed was done by God’s nation, Israel. This was God’s city; it was Jerusalem. In it was God’s temple, but in it Jesus would soon be crucified. It is shocking to see how vicious, blind, proud, and prejudiced that religionists can be.

Next, Jesus told the parable of the wicked renters who killed the landlord’s son (Matthew 21:33–41; Mark 12:1–12; Luke 20:9–19). He spoke of the stone that could have saved Israel but was cast aside. The Jewish leaders knew that Jesus was talking about them. He told the parable of the marriage feast (Matthew 22:2–14). Relatives and friends not only rejected the invitation, but they even used the occasion for murderous sport. The king who was having the wedding for his son was furious and said, “Go therefore to the main highways, and as many as you find there, invite to the wedding feast” (Matthew 22:9). When the privileged shut themselves out, the common were invited. No wonder the common people heard Jesus gladly (Mark 12:37).

Soon the Pharisees and the Herodians came together to entangle Jesus in His words. The Pharisees hated the Herodians and believed they were traitors—but they hated Jesus more. The two groups presented a trick question to Jesus: “What about the poll tax?” Jesus, holding a coin, said, “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s; and to God the things that are God’s” (Matthew 22:21). This shocked them into silence. No one could argue with His answer to their question. When the Sadducees came to Him, they only offered silliness. Jesus was direct with them. He said, “You don’t know the Scriptures” and “You don’t know the power of God” (Matthew 22:29–34). The persistent Pharisees returned with a lawyer, who asked, “What is the greatest command?” Jesus answered, “Love God foremost,” and then added the second greatest command: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” His answer silenced the lawyer. Jesus then asked them who the Messiah really was. They offered no response. At this point, the debates ended.

Following all of this, Jesus preached the most scathing sermon in the Scriptures (Matthew 23). We know it is in the Bible, but we usually do not connect it with the cross. He called the Jewish leaders “snakes” and “blind guides.” He pronounced seven woes, in which He branded them “hypocrites.” “How can you escape the condemnation of hell?” He asked them. Then He cried, “Jerusalem, Jerusalem . . . ! How often I wanted to gather your children together, . . . and you were unwilling” (Matthew 23:37; Luke 13:34).

As they walked away from the temple, His disciples asked Jesus three questions about the fall of the temple: “When will these things be?”; “What will be the sign of Your coming?”; “When is the end of the age?” Jesus dealt with these questions in Matthew 24, Mark 13, and Luke 21. Shortly before the cross, He was still teaching. In this context we see the “widow with the two mites” (Mark 12:41–44). Amidst all the hypocrisy, God sent this humble widow to remind all

people for all time what true giving to God actually is! What a God!

Trouble was ahead! In spite of the crowds and the critics, Jesus taught His disciples three profound parables: the parable of the ten virgins, the parable of the talents, and the parable of the sheep and the goats (Matthew 25:1–30). No servant of God ever preached as Jesus did that day, but His preaching fell on deaf ears. What a day!

WEDNESDAY . . . **A Day of No Activity**

After the argumentative wars on Tuesday, God gave Jesus a day off. He vanished. We do not know where He was, with whom He spent that day, or what He did. The silence thunders at us! The Pharisees had rejoiced over the rout of the Sadducees by Jesus, but their humor quickly turned to hatred when Jesus silenced them. Jesus was “The Great Debater.” His enemies reasoned, “Since we cannot answer Him, we must kill Him.”

Jesus may not have been busy on this day, but Judas was. His betrayal was not impulsive—it was deliberate. The Sanhedrin was also busy, meeting in a secret session. Satan, too, was busy. Wednesday was the calm before the storm. Wouldn't you guess that Jesus spent that day with God?

THURSDAY . . . **A Day of Action**

Jesus awoke on Thursday morning never to sleep again. The “hour” had come. Following a respite on Wednesday, Jesus renewed His march to the cross. He was in charge of what was going to happen. Others thought they were, but they were not. Jesus initiated and brought about the cross. He was determined, but not in a hurry.

The objective for this day was to prepare the Passover meal (Matthew 26:17–19; Mark 14:12–16; Luke 22:7–13). Jesus told His disciples to find and follow a man carrying a pitcher of water. This is fascinating! He would be the only man in Jerusalem doing that, for it was “women's work.” The apostles did as Jesus said. A room was found prepared. Consider how amazing this is! They needed a large room. The Passover was for a group. Jerusalem was overflowing with people. Surely, there were no empty rooms. Not only was this room empty, but it was also ready! How could this be? God's awesome providence was at work here! God works in our lives too. He can make impossible things possible.

Jesus had a deep interest in eating this Passover with the apostles (Luke 22:14–16). Several reasons can be given for this: (1) Jesus announced His desire to eat the Passover because of His approaching suffering. He wanted and needed the apostles' companionship. (2) Furthermore, this was to be God's last Passover meal. Jesus nailed the law of Moses to the cross (Colossians 2:14). What God gave, God took away. (3) Jesus is now our continuous Passover (1 Corinthians 5:7). (4) In this situation of eating the Passover in the upper room, Jesus initiated His Supper.

Two things command our attention: the authority of the Scriptures and Jesus' obedience. Jesus kept God's law! He was born, lived, and died under the Law. He obeyed the Law to the letter and in the right spirit (Matthew 5:17–20), but He did not yield to the man-made rules of the Pharisees. *Do not devalue the Scriptures. Oppose false teachers and false teaching in the spirit of love.*

We now come to Thursday night, the beginning of the Jewish Friday. As Jesus was about to die, the apostles fussed over who was the greatest (Luke 22:24–30; see John 13:1–20). Could it be that Judas was involved in this? He had led in the tirade against Mary and the anointing that honored Jesus (John 12:1–8). His spirit displayed the kind of heart he had.

Every group has to have a leader or leaders. Someone must be responsible. Jesus designated Peter, James, and John. Could there have been resentment, jealousy, or a power struggle going on?

Judas' betrayal of Jesus was no impulsive decision. The seating at the meal could have triggered the outburst, but the problem was far greater. Jesus had taught against the heathen idolatry of power, saying, “It is not this way among you” (Matthew 20:20–28; see Luke 22:24–27). James and John (with their mother) had requested special privilege and power. Jesus said much about “pushing and shoving” for chief seats (see Matthew 23:6–12; Mark 12:38–40). We have similar problems with pride and arrogance today. We can overcome these by developing the humble attitude displayed by Jesus (Philippians 2:5–8).

How did Jesus handle all that He had to endure? He did not yell, threaten, or harshly rebuke. If we had been in charge in place of Jesus, we would have prayed to God, “We need a whole new group of disciples!” Instead, quietly, He taught and taught! He picked up a towel and washed their feet (see John 13:1–15). The silence was deafening. It was shattered by Peter's outburst: “You will never wash my feet.” Firmly, yet gently, Jesus silenced Peter. The Son of God began laying the foundation for His church with a towel. He declared Himself to be “The Servant” (see Luke 22:27). He then began the first of many warnings to His apostles, but they were given without success. It is easier to wash feet than it is to be washed. Jesus washed the feet of those who were present and also washed Judas' feet. Could this act have pushed Judas across the line?

At the Passover meal, Jesus announced the betrayal that was coming. Because of what we now know, we might think of Judas as being the unanimous choice to be the betrayer, but that was not the case. The apostles did not believe that another one among them would betray the Lord . . . but each thought he could (Matthew 26:21–25; Mark 14:18–21; Luke 22:21–23; John 13:21–30). Judas asked, “Is it I?” (Matthew 26:25; John 13:26, 27; NKJV). The Lord gave him a piece of bread. Amazingly, the other apostles totally missed it. Judas knew that Jesus knew! Years ago, Reuel Lemmons had a provocative sermon entitled, “And It Was Night,” based on John 13:30, which says, “So after receiving the morsel [Judas] went out immediately; and it was night.” God is light; sin is darkness. Judas left the light for the darkness. Satan’s entrance into Judas was not mystical or supernatural. Judas allowed and welcomed him in. How tragic it is to leave light for darkness! Judas left before Jesus said the words in John 13:34, 35: “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.” Sin does catastrophic harm; part of the tragedy of sin is in what you miss. Judas missed so much! He never saw the risen Lord.

After Jesus dismissed Judas, He instituted His Supper . . . the memorial we call the Lord’s Supper (Matthew 26:26–29; Mark 14:22–25; Luke 22:17–20; 1 Corinthians 10:16–21; 11:23–30). John 6:48–60 is not a reference to the Lord’s Supper, but it is doctrinal truth. To be saved we must ingest Christ—His life, doctrine, and salvation. The Lord’s Supper was initiated in an assembly. The early church assembled to partake of it (Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 10; 11). New Testament worship glories in its simplicity—the bread and a cup. En route to His death, Jesus was still teaching. John 14 was given in the “upper room,” at Jesus’ last meal. John 15 and 16 tell also of the continued guidance that He gave to His apostles.

Jesus’ attention next centered upon Peter, who vowed unlimited allegiance. Jesus stated that before the rooster crowed, Peter would deny Him three times. (See Matthew 26:33–35; and John 13:36–38. Luke 22:31–34 offers more detail.) Satan desired Peter, but Jesus said He had prayed for him. Had Jesus equally prayed for Judas? Surely, He had. Not all our prayers can be answered the way we want them to be!

FRIDAY . . . A Day of Agony

Little is known about where, when, and how Jesus prayed “The High Priestly Prayer,” the real “Lord’s Prayer” (John 17). This prayer is perhaps the greatest prayer ever prayed! He prayed for His apostles, Himself, and us!

It was going to be a long night. Jesus crossed the Brook Kidron and headed to Gethsemane. *Gethsemane!* He left eight of the apostles at its gate, taking Peter, James, and John deeper into the garden. He left these three with the command to “keep watching and praying” as He went on alone (Matthew 26:41). He fell on His face before His Father. His nose was in the dirt as He prayed the same prayer three times: “. . . let this cup pass from Me” (Matthew 26:39; Mark 14:36; Luke 22:42). Critics pounce upon this prayer, suggesting a lack of courage on Jesus’ part, perhaps cowardice. If this were so, it would contradict everything Jesus is! He had come too far to give up now. Jesus was not a coward. He was not afraid of death, pain, or the cross. He was not asking God to abort the cross. This cross was God’s eternal purpose. He was not performing drama, mysticism, magic, or novelty. He was in an agony unto death. His sweat did drop like blood. As the divine Son of God, He was willing to be the ultimate sacrifice for our sins; yet, as a man, He longed for another way. This is part of the mystery of the cross.

The prayer He prayed is the most difficult one ever prayed. The entire human race was at stake. Jesus’ decision to die for us was made in Gethsemane—not at Golgotha. In this garden God said no and Jesus said yes (Matthew 26:36–46; Mark 14:32–42; Luke 22:40–46). There was more pain in Gethsemane than on Calvary. The “sweat like blood” fell in Gethsemane (Luke 22:44). No man ever suffered as Jesus suffered then. The greatest battle He fought was in prayer. This was the “Holy of Holies” in the life of Christ. His final teachings were given through these prayers.

What was this “cup”? The battle of all eternity was being fought between God and Satan. The winner would take all. Humanity was at stake. Jesus fought to conquer Satan, sin, death, and hell . . . alone! On the cross He would cry, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” (Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34). (1) He would be made to be what God hated—sin. (2) The eternal wrath of a holy God was about to be poured out upon Him. (3) For the only time in all eternity, God the Father and Christ the Son would be separated. Horror of horrors! Nevertheless, Jesus did not want out of this arrangement to save mankind. He was never arrogant in His humanity.

God answered Jesus’ prayer immediately. An angel came to strengthen Him (Luke 22:43). One angel? One? God sent two angels to Mary Magdalene and to the women at the empty tomb (Luke 24:1–7). Jesus could have called for twelve legions of angels (Matthew 26:53). He got one? A supernatural miracle could not substitute for human responsibility. No man knew better than Jesus that “. . . the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak” (Matthew 26:41; Mark 14:38). Only in humanity could sinful man be saved. The cross is of no benefit to fallen angels. Jesus went where no man could go; He, as man, did what no man could do: “In the days of His flesh, He offered up both prayers and supplications with loud crying and tears to the One able to save Him from death, and He was heard because of His piety” (Hebrews 5:7).

Even the cross did not have the anxiety of Gethsemane. The only time in Scripture Jesus called God

“Abba” (Aramaic for something similar to “Daddy”) was in that garden (Mark 14:36). In Gethsemane Jesus did not hide, run, or even fight . . . He prayed. In athletics the game is won through preparation, decision, and commitment. Jesus won the battle in Gethsemane. Make the big decision before the cross. Don’t wait until you are on it to decide.

The mob led by Judas arrived. Men in a mob lose their individuality. Hatred rejects thought. The armed mob was scared—scared to death of Jesus. They did not deny or doubt that Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead. In fact, they considered killing Lazarus too (John 12:10). Judas was their solution; he gave them an opportunity to find Jesus when He was not surrounded by a crowd of followers (Mark 14:10, 11; Luke 22:3–5).

Veiled humor can be found here. Hundreds came heavily armed to arrest one unarmed prophet. Jesus stood out in the open, saying, “Here I am.” The mob fell back upon the ground! The battle was won in Gethsemane before the mob arrived. Make your decisions before the trials come.

Judas knew where Jesus would be and what He would be doing (praying), but he did not know Jesus. However, Judas still called Jesus “Rabbi” (Matthew 26:49). He still called him “friend” (Matthew 26:50). Was this sarcasm? Probably not. Did this aid in Judas’ feeling remorse? Probably. John MacArthur said that Judas “had the behavior of a saint but the heart of a sinner.”

Peter, frightened, resorted to force. Can you change an idea with a club? When Jesus took Peter’s sword, Peter collapsed like a tent. He warmed himself by the “devil’s fire” (see Mark 14:54; John 18:18, 25). In doing this, he placed himself closer to the enemy than to Christ. *Always guard where you are and with whom you are spending your time.*

In quick succession, Peter denied Jesus three times. Then the rooster crowed. Judas betrayed, Peter denied, the apostles scattered, Satan exulted, and the rooster crowed. Jesus then was shuttled from Annas to Caiaphas, to the Sanhedrin, to Pilate, to Herod, and back to Pilate. After looking into the face of Jesus, Peter went out and cried over what He had done (Matthew 26:75).

We must examine the plight of Judas to keep us from his sin (Matthew 27:3–10). He returned the money (thirty pieces of silver); it was now worthless to him. The betrayer had remorse that comes from pride, but he did not have repentance that comes from humility. He went out and committed suicide.

Jewish rulers could crucify the Son of God, but they would not touch the “blood money” or put it into their treasury. No one despises a traitor like those who have used him.

Judas could see his mistake, but he could not see his Savior. He hanged himself. No one even cut him down (Acts 1:15–26). Sin has terrible consequences. The traitor “turned aside to go to his own place” (Acts 1:25) and is never mentioned again in the Scriptures. Jesus said that he should never have been born! (Matthew 26:24).

Jesus was on the cross for six hours before He died—from 9 a.m. until 3 p.m. Chapters 6 and 7 in this book are devoted to these six hours. Let us notice here that Jesus did not have a “pre-planned funeral.” Neither His family nor His apostles buried Him. Let us marvel at God’s providence! Christ died as a pauper, but He was buried as a king! Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, aided by some women, wrapped Jesus’ body with linen and expensive spices and buried Him in a new tomb (Matthew 27:57–61; Mark 15:42–47; Luke 23:50–56; John 19:38–42). God takes care of His own! What happened to Joseph and Nicodemus? No one knows, yet we thank them! Some will do more for a lost cause than for a living hope. It is easier to bury the dead than to obey the living Lord.

You only bury those who are dead. Pilate, Joseph, Nicodemus, and the women knew that Jesus was dead. The simplest, most certified fact about Jesus is His death.

SATURDAY . . .

A Day of Absence

If Satan ever had a banquet in hell, it was on this Passover Sabbath when Jesus was a corpse. Jesus’ resurrection would bring to an end the devil’s mirth and release heavenly joy worldwide, throughout eternity.

SUNDAY . . .

Day of Appearances

On Sunday the tomb was empty. An angel asked, “Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here, but is risen!” (Luke 24:5, 6a; NKJV). If there had been no empty tomb, the world would never have heard of Jesus. He appeared first to Mary Magdalene, a woman (Mark 16:1–9; John 20:1–18). Then He appeared to the other women (Matthew 28:1–8; Luke 24:1–11) and to Peter (Luke 24:34). He walked with the two men on the Emmaus Road (Luke 24:13–33) and met with the eleven (Thomas was absent) and others on Sunday evening (John 20:19–25). This was the week that changed the world! This was the week that also will change you and me if we will study it!

*The cross . . .
there is no other way!*