

Introduction

Holy Week. Matthew's Gospel spends 8 entire chapters on Jesus' last week. Mark and Luke spend six; and St. John gives a whopping ten of the twenty-one chapters in his book to the subject. You see, for the writers of the Bible, this week was the climax -- the high point -- the pinnacle of Jesus life; and they considered even the trivial matters of each day to be of sparkling importance.

Today, we, too, are going to look at some of the details. We're going to become Jerusalem, for a moment, to remember, vividly, our Lord's work for us as Savior as He Himself displayed it from day to day.

PALM SUNDAY

Matthew 21 (SALLY)

⁸A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, while others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. ⁹The crowds that went ahead of him and those that followed shouted, "Hosanna to the Son of David!"

"Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"

"Hosanna in the highest!"

¹⁰When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred and asked, "Who is this?"

¹¹The crowds answered, "This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee."

Several important details are necessary to really understand the events of Palm Sunday. **First of all, it was the Passover week** -- a week when the Jewish people annually celebrated their escape from Egypt and all that God did for them through Moses and the 10 plagues. During this week people flocked to the city of Jerusalem -- it grew from 50,000 people to a city of 250,000. In fact, it was so crowded that Jesus Himself stayed the town of Bethany, about two miles from Jerusalem proper.

In addition, not only was there the excitement and the crowds of Passover week, but **people were especially enthused this year**, because they thought that this Jesus, who had been performing miracles and healings throughout the land, might enter the city to become their new earthly king. So, this was not just Jerusalem as normal -- this was a fired up Jerusalem, a packed Jerusalem, a Jerusalem that was gathered for religious purposes and was looking for liberation from their God.

A third important thing is that Jesus is riding on the wings of a **tremendous miracle**. You see, shortly before He left for Jerusalem, He raised His friend Lazarus from the dead. And many, who had come in for the festival, had witnessed this event

So, when Jesus enters the city, He is surrounded by two groups of people overwhelmingly enthused by the possibilities His entry might bring. There are the crowds hovering around Him as He comes IN from Bethany, and there are the crowds who are rushing OUT from the city to see Him.

Perhaps this gives you some indication of why Jesus gets such a grand reception, with palm branches and loud hosannas. These people are excited for -- a king -- a Savior -- a new and greater Moses.

Now Jesus could easily have taken advantage of this. Fact is, if He wanted to, He could've incited the crowds to make Him king right then and there and driven away the arrogant religious leaders who despised Him and ultimately engineered His crucifixion.

But Jesus knew His mission and He knew His place. His was not to be a royal king on an earthly throne. His was not to be a destiny of pomp and circumstance. His was to be the Savior of mankind who would suffer and die on behalf of the people.

And so that is what He does. He accepts the praise, knowing it is only superficial, and rides on toward the way of the cross. His day ends as He stares at the city mourning that it has lost its true focus for God and has replaced it with a thin veneer of rigorous rituals.

Jesus returns to Bethany that night not elated, but sad, and intends to return the next day with a message from God.

MONDAY

Mark 11 (BEN)

¹⁷And as he taught them, he said, "Is it not written:

" 'My house will be called
a house of prayer for all nations'? But you have made it 'a den of robbers.'"

On Monday, Jesus begins what would be a two-day period of trying to re-awaken Israel. He wanted them to know that they had turned living faith into dead tradition; and that they were now, because of this mistake, missing the Messiah for whom they had yearned and prayed.

On the way in to Jerusalem Jesus expresses this message to His disciples through His cursing of the fig tree -- an image that showed God's wrath against this faith facade.

Then, when He gets to Jerusalem, Jesus' actions are much more dramatic. He walks up to the temple and sees all the buying and selling that is going on. The merchants are there in full force offering the animals and grains for sacrifices at exorbitant prices due to the high demand. The clinking of coins was loud; the smell of the animals pervaded; the hustle and bustle of harried people. And it was all, right there in God's House, done, supposedly, in honor to Him.

Jesus sees this sham and does, in a vivid way, the exact same thing He did to the fig tree. He pours out the wrath of God against sin and hypocrisy. Jesus overturns the tables and will not allow anyone to come in with merchandise to sell.

Naturally, this made Jesus a few enemies. And not only from the Pharisees and teachers of the Law -- but also from some of the general population, like the merchants, who thought they could capitalize on religion.

But Jesus stood for truth -- He was the truth -- the truth of God, which is never compromised by personal gain or popularity or stature. Instead, it follows the will and ways of God in spite of the cost.

TUESDAY

Mark 12

(SALLY)

³⁵While Jesus was teaching in the temple courts, he asked, "How is it that the teachers of the law say that the Christ is the son of David? ³⁶David himself, speaking by the Holy Spirit, declared:

" 'The Lord said to my Lord:

"Sit at my right hand
until I put your enemies

under your feet." ' ³⁷David himself calls him 'Lord.' How then can he be his son?"

The large crowd listened to him with delight.

(BEN)

³⁸As he taught, Jesus said, "Watch out for the teachers of the law. They like to walk around in flowing robes and be greeted in the marketplaces, ³⁹and have the most important seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at banquets. ⁴⁰They devour widows' houses and for a show make lengthy prayers. Such men will be punished most severely."

Tuesday of Holy Week was a day distinguished by challenge and by Jesus' teaching. Challenge started off the day as Jesus' enemies brought a barrage of questions in an attempt to trap Jesus and confuse Him. In short, to make Him less and less popular with the people. You'll remember, for instance, the question about whether Jesus supported paying taxes to Caesar. That happened on Tuesday.

But Jesus emerges, instead, as the prophet par excellence; who does not allow Himself to be trapped and who, instead, challenges His accusers to examine their inconsistencies. His answer concerning taxes was brilliant. He took a coin and asked whose inscription was on it. When the answer given was Caesar's, He replied, 'Then give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's.' This silenced the critics, who had hoped to either make Him an enemy of Rome or any enemy of Israel, but who achieved neither.

Teaching took up the rest of Jesus' day in Jerusalem. Some of Jesus' most famous words are offered on this day. He again challenges the Religious leaders concerning the meaning of true faith and God's love for sinners with His parable of the Prodigal Son. The Parable of the Tenants in the Vineyard predicts His death at their hands. And the Parable of the Wedding Banquet points out that the pompous men have lost their place in the kingdom due to their hardness of heart.

Jesus then turns to the topic of the End Times and Judgment Day, reminding the people again that true faith comes not from ritual and tradition; but from belief in God's free gift of grace. Some of His parables illustrate this point, such as the Parable of the 10 Virgins and the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats. Jesus also gives some of the signs of the end times and utters the famous words, 'no man knows the day nor the hour of the coming of the Son of Man.'

The day ends with two powerful examples of God's love. Jesus commends the faith of two unusual candidates. The first, a poor widow, who offers her last two copper coins into the temple treasury. The second: the sinful woman, who anoints Jesus' feet with perfume.

To the Jews, these women were in a lowly position, with little to offer. To the Lord, they stand out as shining gems.

WEDNESDAY

Luke 22 (SALLY)

³Then Satan entered Judas, called Iscariot, one of the Twelve. ⁴And Judas went to the chief priests and the officers of the temple guard and discussed with them how he might betray Jesus. ⁵They were delighted and agreed to give him money. ⁶He consented, and watched for an opportunity to hand Jesus over to them when no crowd was present.

Wednesday, believe it or not, was a day off for Jesus. In the Gospels we have no record of any action or message given by the Lord; and we can only assume that he either did some more teaching, or He spent some final personal moments alone with His disciples and a few hours of peace prior to the agony He knew was coming

However, Wednesday was a busy day for others. The plot to murder Jesus was finalized by the spiritual leaders of Israel including the High Priest, Caiaphas. They affirmed their desire to get rid of this man Jesus Christ, and they plotted to do it as soon as possible.

And the opportunity came when he walked Judas Iscariot. Judas was one of the twelve apostles and followers of Jesus. Throughout generations people have speculated as to what prompted Judas to turn on the Lord. Some say He was greedy for power and personal gain. Some say he was trying to force Jesus to act and make Himself an earthly king. We don't know.

All we do know is that he approached these conspirators with the offer: 'What will you give me if I turn Him over to you?' And the answer was, 'Thirty pieces of silver' -- the price of a slave in Biblical times. Our Lord Jesus was betrayed by one of His dearest friends for the price of a slave.

MAUNDY THURSDAY

Matthew 26 (BEN)

²⁶While they were eating, Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take and eat; this is my body."

²⁷Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you.

²⁸This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. ²⁹I tell you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it anew with you in my Father's kingdom."

³⁰When they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.

Maundy Thursday gets its name from the Latin word mandatum, which means 'command' -- For on Maundy Thursday Jesus gave His last command to His disciples: 'Love one another.' Jesus said this in the context of the Passover meal He was celebrating with His followers that Thursday evening.

On that evening it was the yearly tradition for all of God's people to gather in their homes to recall the events of the Exodus and the first Passover, where God's people were released from slavery in Egypt and were delivered from the angel of death who passed over the Israelite doors covered by the blood of the unblemished Passover Lamb.

In this Maundy Thursday Passover celebration, however, there was a new lamb. It wasn't the kind that was eaten by the people. It was the Lamb of God who was about to be killed, but whose blood would save many from eternal death. In fact, at a special point in this Passover celebration, Jesus created the new covenant that was established in Himself; "take eat, this is my body. Take, drink, this is my blood." Thereby transforming the Passover meal, which looked into the past, into the Lord's Supper, a meal for the present.

Jesus is also known to have washed the feet of His disciples on this night, indicating His willingness to become the servant and savior of all.

Following all of this, rather late in the evening, Jesus then goes out to one of His favorite locations, the Mount of Olives, and to a Garden there called Gethsemane. While in that garden Jesus prayed the deepest and most heart wrenching prayer of His life. 'Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done.' An angel attends Jesus after this prayer, but the mission still lie before Him -- for it was the exact reason why God had brought Jesus to this moment.

The sadness of the moment was only heightened by the discovery by Jesus that His closest friends had used this time to fall asleep rather than watch with Him. But sleep was soon ended as a crowd of soldiers, led by Judas, entered the Garden. When Judas kissed Jesus, the highest sign of love and friendship in the Middle East, the soldiers knew who it was they had come for. And all the other disciples fled, though not before Simon Peter had made a mockery of everything

Jesus stood for by striking out with a sword before running away in terror like all the rest. And so, as Jesus stooped to heal Malchus, that bystander wounded by Peter, it was the last act of healing He would do. For His hands and arms were quickly bound and He was dragged to Jerusalem for a speedy trial.

Tried first by Annas, the father-in-law of the current High Priest, the members of the Sanhedrin were rounded up in the middle of the night for a quick miscarriage of justice. Though no witnesses could be found who agreed on any charge, at last Caiaphas, the High Priest, tore His garments in a rage and demanded the death sentence upon Jesus. All agreed and it was decided to approach Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, for the official order of execution.

One other event happened that night. One that few observed in the midst of all this frantic activity, but an important one for us. Jesus was being dragged out by the soldiers who would mock Him and spit on Him and otherwise beat Him in the hours to come. But outside in the courtyard of the High Priest there was a lone disciple waiting for news of what was occurring.

Though he had earlier run away in the Garden of Gethsemane, he had to know what was to happen to Jesus. But as he was warming Himself at the fire, a little girl approached him with the simple remark that he was one of Jesus' followers. Almost without thinking he broke out into a cold sweat with the words: 'I don't know what you're talking about.' Moving toward the gateway to get away from the prying eyes, another little girl saw him and quickly blurted out: 'This fellow was with Jesus.' With an oath, the panic stricken disciple cried out: 'I don't know the man!'

But now, everyone was curious, and at last the accusation went out: 'Surely you are one of them, listen to your accent.' At this, St. Matthew tells us, Peter began to call down curses on himself as he swore to them, 'I don't know the man.' Immediately a rooster crowed somewhere in the background fulfilling the earlier prophecy of Jesus.

Luke tells us that, for some reason, Jesus was in close proximity, probably being hustled by the guards to some new location. But at that moment, their eyes met -- and for Peter, that glance was like the sharp blade of a razor piercing his spirit. So, one betrayed Jesus. Another denied Him. And everyone else ran away. And so Jesus went to meet the mockery of the soldiers and the coldness of Pontius Pilate all alone. Meanwhile Judas went out to ponder his wrong while Peter went out and wept bitterly.

FRIDAY

Luke 23 (BEN)

⁴⁴It was now about the sixth hour, and darkness came over the whole land until the ninth hour, ⁴⁵for the sun stopped shining. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two. ⁴⁶Jesus called out with a loud voice, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." When he had said this, he breathed his last.

⁴⁷The centurion, seeing what had happened, praised God and said, "Surely this was a righteous man."

Early on Good Friday morning it was a weary Pontius Pilate who caved in to the demands of a mob and ordered the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. He tried every effort to release One whom he knew to be quite innocent of any wrongdoing -- from releasing a notorious criminal named Barrabas in His stead to sending Him to Herod the King, to ordering the scourging of the Lord in the hopes that the crowd's lust for blood might somehow be appeased. But when he saw that his efforts were being wasted, he literally washed his hands of the matter and went inside his home to eat his breakfast. After all, what did the life of one Galilean carpenter mean when sparing Him would probably create a disturbance in the land?

And so the mocking soldiers led Jesus out to die, after first putting a crown of thorns upon His head to further humiliate this King of the Jews. Elsewhere at the time a remorseful Judas was hanging himself, unable to live with the guilt of what he had done. But for Jesus the end would not be so swift.

At nine in the morning, Jesus suffered a punishment at the hands of the Romans which they themselves decreed was only to be reserved for the lowest criminal, for the vilest slave, or for a traitor. Two others, criminals, were crucified with the Lord. And in those hours as Jesus bore the weight of mankind's sin upon His innocent self you could hear His words: 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they are doing.' 'I thirst.' 'My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?' To a repentant thief He promised paradise... To a grieving mother He promised care through His disciple John... The final: 'It is finished. Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.' And the last breath of life was breathed. -- A shameful deed from which even nature seemed to hide its face with the darkness and the shaking of the ground. And a last mournful cry of recognition from the centurion who had headed the execution party: 'Truly this man was the Son of God.'

The Gospels say that Joseph of Arimathea, a friend in secret, came forward at the last to request the body. When Pilate granted it, Joseph put it in a tomb he had prepared originally to be used for himself some day. They said it was in a garden near the place where Jesus had been crucified - and the women who had followed Him noted where He was laid.

SATURDAY

Matthew 27 (SALLY)

⁶²The next day, the one after Preparation Day, the chief priests and the Pharisees went to Pilate.

⁶³"Sir," they said, "we remember that while he was still alive that deceiver said, 'After three days I will rise again.' ⁶⁴So give the order for the tomb to be made secure until the third day. Otherwise, his disciples may come and steal the body and tell the people that he has been raised from the dead. This last deception will be worse than the first."

The Gospels tell us that all of Jesus' disciples forgot the Lord's own claim that on the third day, after His death, He would rise again. The enemies of the Lord, however, did not forget. On Saturday they approached Pilate, who heard their incredible request that a Roman guard be posted to watch over the tomb. -- incredible because Romans had better things to do than to watch corpses in the middle of the night. But, convinced that any rumor of His resurrection had to be quelled at all costs, Pilate granted the request of the leaders of Israel.

Making sure that the tomb was secure, the guard placed a Roman seal on the stone that closed the tomb, the breaking of which, by anyone, was considered an imperial crime. No one would come to steal the body of Jesus in the night to start fantastic stories about His return to life. All was secure at the end of Saturday -- or so they thought.

For something wonderful, something fantastically wonderful was about to happen in the dawning of a new Sunday that was soon to be upon them all.