

Portraits of Easter

PORTRAIT ONE

PREPARING FOR THE PASSION

About a month before Jesus traveled to Jerusalem to suffer and to die on a cross, he raised his dear friend Lazarus from the dead. This miracle took place in the small town of Bethany about two miles east of the holy city. It led directly to the events that followed. St. John wrote in his gospel that “from that day on they plotted to take his life” (John 11:53).

Jesus often rested in the home of Lazarus and his sisters, Mary and Martha. Jesus again traveled to Bethany on the caravan road from Jericho the week prior to Palm Sunday.

In Jericho Jesus had met and saved a tax collector, Zacchaeus. As he traveled to his friends’ welcoming home, Jesus met and healed two blind men; one of them named Bartimaeus on the way into town and another on the way to Jerusalem.

The four evangelists then relate the events that took place after Jesus and his disciples arrived in Bethany and that occurred throughout the following week. Their inspired records are not always in chronological order. Some events are compressed. However, regardless of exact order, the gospel writers devote a total of 28 chapters, about one third, of their books to the final week of Jesus’ life.

CHRONOLOGY OF HOLY WEEK

Saturday, Palm Sunday Eve

Jesus and his disciples arrived at Bethany, home of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. It was six days before the Passover. Mary took a pint of pure perfume and anointed Jesus’ feet. Judas Iscariot hypocritically argued the money should have been used for the poor instead. Jesus said, “Leave her

alone. . . It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial. You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me” (John 12:8). Many people came to see both Jesus and Lazarus, whom Jesus had raised from the dead.

Discuss: What did Jesus mean by “the day of my burial”?

Palm Sunday

This Sunday gets its name from the branches the crowd threw down on the road. Jesus told two of his disciples to go ahead of them into the village of Bethphage and get a donkey and her colt. They found them as Jesus said. The owner was more than happy to have such a well-known figure make use of them, something no one else had done.

In fulfillment of Zechariah 9:9, “Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion! Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey,” the world’s Savior humbly rode from the ridge of mountains to the east, west across the Kidron Valley, and up into the holy city.

Two crowds singing their hosannas, songs of praise like Psalm 118, came together; those coming with Jesus from the east and those coming out from Jerusalem to meet him.



Together this mass of people welcomed Jesus as the promised Messiah, “the one who comes in the name of the Lord” (Matthew 21:9). They threw their outer garments and palm branches on the ground. The branches were a sign of welcome and victory.

The Pharisees told Jesus to silence the people, but he would not. Prior to this, Jesus

was hesitant to receive public acclamation because of the misunderstanding of the nature of the kingdom; most thought his was an earthly kingdom with an earthly king. Now that



Jerusalem model

his hour had come and he would show the true nature of the kingdom of God, Jesus not only permitted such adoration but gladly accepted it.

Jesus told his enemies that if the people did not praise him, “the stones would cry out” (Luke 19:40).

As Jesus came near to Jerusalem, his heart was breaking over its collective rejection of him as the Messiah. “As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it” (Luke 19:41). Jesus prophesied the great destruction of the city that came to pass under the Romans in A.D. 70. It was now late in the day, so Jesus returned to Bethany to spend the night with the apostles.

Discuss: Were the people who worshiped Jesus as the Messiah the same ones who cried out for his crucifixion on Friday morning?

Monday

On their return to Jerusalem the following morning, Jesus and the Twelve came



upon a fig tree. Jesus was hungry and because the tree had leaves but bore no fruit, he cursed the tree so that it withered.

Jesus’ action was a condemnation of outward, superficial faith that does not bear any real fruit. He taught the disciples that real faith can move mountains, if need be, and such faith will receive whatever it asks for in his name. (See Mark 11:23,24. This was the only miracle Jesus performed that included a curse.)

Jesus went to the temple area when they arrived in the city. He discovered that the merchants who provided worshipers with animals and the monies for their temple

offerings had encroached so close to the worship area that its quiet and sanctity had been compromised. Their helpful service to people had turned into greed. Jesus quoted Jeremiah 7:11 in judgment against them. “My house will be called a house of prayer, but you are making it a ‘den of robbers.’” (Matthew 21:13).

The crowds who saw and heard Jesus were amazed at his teaching. “All the people hung on his words” (Luke 19:48). Jesus continued to call people to himself during his last days of earthly ministry. Jesus’ actions continued to fuel his enemies’ anger. They became more and more determined in their efforts to kill Jesus. They had to be watchful, however, because of Jesus’ popularity with the people.

Jesus and the apostles then returned to Bethany to be with their friends and spend the night.

Discuss: Does Jesus’ clearing of the temple this time and one other time earlier in his ministry, have anything to say about fund-raising in a congregation?

Tuesday

Tuesday was the busiest day for Jesus during Holy Week. He returned with his disciples to Jerusalem. Jesus spent much of the day in conversation with the elders, scribes, Pharisees, and Sadducees. The Lord did not avoid his enemies but faced them. He confronted them with their sins of hypocrisy and self-righteousness and called them to repentance. Sadly, his call went generally unheeded. “Yet at the same time many even among the leaders believed in him (John 12:42).

The elders and chief priests questioned Jesus about his authority to teach in the temple area. Rather than give them a direct answer, which they did not deserve, Jesus used the example of John the Baptist. He asked them, “John’s baptism—where did it come from?” (Matthew 21:25). If they said from heaven, they would condemn themselves for their unbelief. If they said from men, they would be in trouble with the people who recognized John’s ministry was from God. The same reality applied to Jesus’ ministry, so they would not answer.

Several familiar parables and incidents took place on Tuesday. Jesus told the parable about the tenants who first killed the servants and then even killed the master's own son. When the chief priests and Pharisees heard it, "they knew he was talking about them" (Matthew 21:45).

It was on this day that Jesus spoke his well-known words: "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's" (Matthew 22:21). The Pharisees had tried to trick Jesus into saying whether or not it was lawful for the Jews to pay taxes to the hated Roman government.

The Sadducees came to Jesus with a mocking question about marriage in heaven. These men were the secularists among the Jews. They did not believe in the resurrection from the dead and future life or in angels and demons. They rejected the idea of a spiritual world and only accepted the Law of Moses as the Scripture. They believed in free will.

Jesus answered their question about which of seven brothers who had been married to the same woman on earth would be married to her in heaven. Jesus taught them there is no marriage in heaven. People will not be given in marriage after the resurrection. Jesus gives us his reassuring words to use against all who try and trick us with such foolish questions: "You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God" (Matthew 22:29).

Much of what Jesus taught on this day was spoken against the Pharisees. It was one of them who came to Jesus with a question about which of the commandments was the greatest.

Jesus taught that there is no one commandment greater than any other. The only law is to love. The First Table to love our God above all else, and the Second Table to love our neighbor as ourselves both flow out of love that is commanded by God.

Jesus went on to ask the Pharisees, "What do you think about Christ? Whose son is he?" (Matthew 22:41). Once again our Lord silenced them when they answered that he is the Son of David. Why then did David also call him Lord? The seven woes follow as Jesus exposes the Pharisees' false teachings about the law and their hypocrisy. (See Matthew 23:13,15,16,23,25,27,29.)

Jesus spent the rest of the day delivering a variety of discourses on subjects ranging from the signs of the end of the world to the great value of the widow's mite because she offered everything she had. Here we have the familiar and beloved parables of the wise and foolish virgins, the talents, and the king's segregation of the sheep and the goats to his right and left hands.

It was on Tuesday evening that the Sanhedrin met and were approached by Judas Iscariot. Judas agreed to betray Jesus into their hands at an opportune time for 30 pieces of silver, the going price of a slave.

Jesus returned once again to the relative peace and quiet of Bethany.

Discuss: What elements of Jesus' discourses can we put to use in our discussions with enemies of Christ? What is our ultimate goal for them?

Wednesday and Thursday

The evangelists are silent about any specifics that transpired on Wednesday. It is understood that Jesus spent the day away from Jerusalem. "He had concluded his public ministry, and this day was dedicated to communion with his heavenly Father in prayer and with his disciples to prepare them for what was about to come" (Ylvasaker, *The Gospels*).

Thursday was the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread. The only thing on everyone's mind was the celebration of the Passover that evening. Jesus commissioned Peter and John to make the necessary preparations, and they did.

THE STORY BEHIND...

"THERE IS A FOUNTAIN FILLED WITH BLOOD"

by William Cowper (1731–1800) and Lowell Mason (1792–1872)

William Cowper (pronounced Cooper) is one of God's gifts to those who suffer from anxiety and depression. Born in 1731, William was the fourth child of the British chaplain to King George II. William's three brothers and sisters died, and his mother died while giving birth to her fifth child when William was six years old. William was sent to a boarding school at which he was terrorized by a bully for

two years. From ages 10 to 18, Cowper enjoyed better experiences at Westminster School, developing a love for poetry. He followed his father's wishes and studied law, but while preparing for the bar exam, he went into a deep depression that nearly led to his suicide. Always tormented with the feeling that he was guilty before God and condemned a sinner, the rest of Cowper's life would be haunted with extreme bouts of anxiety. Some friends recommended that he commit himself to an asylum that was run by a poet and committed Christian. William agreed, spending 18 months in an institution where he slowly recovered. While in the asylum, he began reading his Bible and became closer to his Savior.

The remainder of Cowper's life was spent in and out of depression. Yet in between those horrible times, he wrote some of the most beautiful hymns ever penned, including "There Is a Fountain Filled with Blood" (originally titled "Peace for the Fountain Opened"), "God Moves in a Mysterious Way," and "Oh for a Closer Walk with God." His final comment on his deathbed was, "I am not shut out of heaven after all." Famed poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote a poem titled "Cowper's Grave" in which she said, "Earth surely now may give her calm to whom she gave her anguish."

LUTHER'S INSIGHTS

"As he [Jesus] approached the city they went before and followed him with songs of great joy, saying: 'Hosanna to the Son of David!' and spread their garments in the way and cut branches from the trees and strewed them in the way, the whole scene was most glorious. But in the midst of all this joy he begins to weep. He permits all the world to be joyful, while he himself was bowed with grief, when he beheld the city." [From his sermon for the tenth Sunday after Trinity, 1525]

BETHANY

During this very trying week of Jesus' life, he found some refuge at the home of his dear friends Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. As mentioned earlier, he had come down from Galilee, through Jericho, and then proceeded "up" to Jerusalem. (See Luke 19:28.) This

terminology relates to the fact that Jericho is located 800 feet below sea level because of its location near the Dead Sea, while Jerusalem is built on hills that rise about 2,500 feet above sea level. (This was the route Jesus referred to in his parable of the good Samaritan. The man was traveling down from Jerusalem to Jericho when he was robbed and beaten.)

Bethany was a small town just two miles east of Jerusalem on the far side of the Mount of Olives. Today it has a population of about 3,600. Known as el-Azariye in Greek ("the town of Lazarus"), it was home to sisters Mary and Martha and their brother, Lazarus. Simon the Leper, whom Jesus also healed, had his home in Bethany as well. It is located on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. (This Bethany should not be confused with the town of Bethany "on the other side of the Jordan," as mentioned in John 1:28.)

Today, as in so much of the Holy Land, the town of Bethany is the home of several large churches. The Church of St. Lazarus was built by the Roman Catholics in 1954 over the remains of a 4th-century church. A short distance away is the entrance into the supposed tomb of Lazarus, which is entered by a flight of 24 steps.

For Jesus and his apostles, Bethany was a home away from home, especially during the final week of Jesus' life. Mary, Martha, and Lazarus were dutiful hosts to see to it that Jesus and his close band of followers were well cared for. It was the raising of Lazarus that brought special attention to Jesus' ministry and gave new reason for his enemies to want him dead. The raising of Lazarus was the high point of Jesus' miracles. Although Lazarus never speaks a word in Scripture, he became a symbol of the hatred felt toward Jesus. John 12:10 tells us that there was a plot to kill Lazarus also.

After Jesus' resurrection, Bethany played one last role in Jesus' life. "When he had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them. While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven. Then they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy" (Luke 24:50-52).