

6. The Passion Week

Texts: Mark 11:1-11, John 13:1-17, 15:9-17.

Quotes:

- This one event of the cross of Christ is a final revelation both of the character and consequence of human sin and of the wonder and sacrifice of divine love. *Alan Stibbs*
- He who has surrendered himself to it knows that the Way ends on the Cross—even when it is leading him through the jubilation of Gennesaret or the triumphal entry into Jerusalem. *Dag Hammarskjöld*
- The way of the cross leads home. *Jessie B. Pounds*

Introductory questions

How would you sum up the events of passion week? Was it inevitable that Jesus would die? What is significant about Jesus' triumphal entry? Why did Jesus cleanse the temple—again? What's the meaning of the footwashing? In preparing his disciples for what was to happen, what did Jesus concentrate on? Why is it important to ask for the meaning?

Discussion ideas

There is much to think on during this final week of Jesus' earthly life—in fact much of the gospels are taken up with just these seven days. Many questions arise. Why did Jesus curse the barren fig tree? What about the colt that had never been ridden—why did the onlookers let the disciples take it? How did the crowd turn so quickly from welcoming joy to despising hate?

Then there's the text in Mark: "Jesus entered Jerusalem and went to the temple. He looked around at everything, but since it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the Twelve." Mark 11:11 NIV. What is that all about? Why did he want to look around at everything? Hadn't he see it all before? What was the problem with the lateness of the hour?

Then there is the question, as the lesson (Sabbath afternoon) asks, "how much sense does it make to worship a man executed as a criminal in the most shameful and barbaric manner?" In the words of John Neville Figgis, "Anyone can believe that Jesus was a god: what is so hard to credit is that He who hung upon the cross was the God. That is what you are asked as Christians to believe." From our perspective in history it is very hard for us to realize what it really meant to ask people to believe in a crucified Lord.

Yet interesting and intriguing as all such questions may be, we must not miss the vital theme. It is summed up by John: "he now showed them the full extent of his love." John 13:1 NIV. This comment is made just before he washes the disciples' feet. But is it only applicable to that? It seems far more likely that John was now introducing the final scenes, and saying that all the events that followed, most particularly the cross, revealed the full extent of Jesus' love.

Jesus' great appeal to his followers is to remain in his love. In fact John 15 centers on this, linking love and command, as if they could be cause and effect, (or effect and cause!) In fact, this is the inescapable conclusion of the cross that gives the lie to common ideas of propitiation, punishment and wrath. For since even God cannot command love, then the appeal of the cross is truly that, and by following his commands he do remain in his love! If this really is to be seen as Jesus showing the full extent of his love, and if Jesus is God, and if Jesus is the revelation of God, then the Cross is truly "God saying to the world, 'I love you.'" Billy Graham.

Ellen White Comments

It is our duty to love Jesus as our Redeemer. He has a right to command our love, but He invites us to give Him our heart. He calls us to walk with Him in the path of humble, truthful obedience. His invitation to us is a call to a pure, holy, and happy life--a life of peace and rest, of liberty and love--and to a rich inheritance in the future, immortal life. Which will we choose--liberty in Christ, or bondage and tyranny in the service of Satan? . . . If we choose to live with Christ through the ceaseless ages of eternity, why not choose Him now as our most loved and trusted friend, our best and wisest counselor. {LHU 98}

Our Saviour manifested for us a love that the love of man can never equal. When we were bruised and dying, He had pity upon us. He did not pass us by on the other side, and leave us, helpless and hopeless, to perish. He did not remain in His holy, happy home, where He was beloved by all the heavenly host. He beheld our sore need, He undertook our case, and identified His interests with those of humanity. He died to save His enemies. He prayed for His murderers. Pointing to His own example, He says to His followers, "These things I command you, that ye love one another"; "as I have loved you, that ye also love one another." John 15:17; 13:34. {COL 381-2}

To the disciples this commandment was new; for they had not loved one another as Christ had loved them. He saw that new ideas and impulses must control them; that new principles must be practiced by them; through His life and death they were to receive a new conception of love. The command to love one another had a new meaning in the light of His self-sacrifice. The whole work of grace is one continual service of love, of self-denying, self-sacrificing effort. During every hour of Christ's sojourn upon the earth, the love of God was flowing from Him in irrepressible streams. All who are imbued with His Spirit will love as He loved. The very principle that actuated Christ will actuate them in all their dealing one with another. {DA 677-8}

"These things I command you, that ye love one another." The greatest cause of weakness among those who are looking for the Lord's second coming is lack of love and confidence. This causes suspicion. There is a lack of frankness; the way is hedged up by supposition. Some one discovers a supposed defect in a brother or sister, and he acts on this supposition, as if it were true. When criticism and faultfinding, and a desire for the highest place enter the church, the serpent, disguised, enters with them, leaving a trail of evil wherever he goes. {RH, October 17, 1899}

Extra material

The final challenge to Jesus comes in the closing scenes. His death is engineered by those who claimed to be so right and virtuous, the ones who crucified the Lord of glory to save their own misguided concepts of God. These self-righteous hypocrites who hurried home to keep the Sabbath law after executing the Lord of the Sabbath. Those who tithed the herbs in their garden, but ignored the weightier matters...

Even in the final moments, the theme returns. Once the sanctimonious hypocrisy of the Jewish leaders is revealed since they would not touch the "blood money" Judas had returned, even as they arranged Jesus' judicial murder.

Jesus' words provide a haunting commentary on those who do evil from a sense of religious justification:

"Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.... For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven." Matthew 5:10, 20.

In the events of passion week leading up to the crucifixion we see demonstrated the essential truths of God's kingdom. Jesus prays for his torturers. He asks for forgiveness for his crucifiers. He assures the thief on the cross beside him of salvation. He makes arrangements for his mother. In his agony he does not curse or condemn as others would. He experiences God's withdrawal, yet even so commends himself to God. In this witnessing death, Jesus impresses even the centurion commander of the execution squad who sees divinity there. In the final words of Jesus himself: "It is finished." It is completed. It is accomplished. It is achieved.

The radical Jesus is radical even in death.

7. Passage to Calvary

Texts: Matt. 26:57-68; Luke 22:66-71; John 18:2-9, 12-23.

Quotes:

- The symbol of the New Testament and the Christian Church is a cross, which stands for a love faithful despite physical agony and rejection by the world. No amount of air-conditioning and pew-cushioning in the suburban church can cover over the hard truth that the Christian life... is a narrow way of suffering; that discipleship is costly: that, for the faithful, there is always a cross to be carried. No one can understand Christianity to its depths who comes to it to enjoy it as a pleasant weekend diversion. *W. Waldo Beach*
- We now have a new definition of the atonement! If the deepest curse of sin is what it does to our self-esteem, then the atoning power of the Cross is what it does to redeem our discarded self-worth. *Robert Schuller*

Introductory questions

Why is the blasphemy charge so significant? What do the religious leaders reveal by their actions? How do you understand Jesus' response to their question? What strikes you in the story of the betrayal by Judas? If you had been there in the Sanhedrin, how would you have voted? What picture of God does Jesus reveal here? What about Pilate's wife's dream?

Discussion ideas

These passages focus on the interrogation of Jesus by the Jewish authorities. Despite making what is perhaps the clearest admission by Jesus that he is the Christ, the Son of God, the reaction is the charge of blasphemy. (As a side point, this makes it absolutely clear that Jesus *did* make such claims—for otherwise the charge would not have been validated. Everybody knew what was the real issue here—is Jesus God?)

Even here, however, Jesus allows each to make a choice. When directly challenged, he points out that he has spoken and acted in public—in other words, that they should examine the evidence, and not simply ask him to make a claim. The whole life and work of Jesus reveals his divinity, but as Jesus says, “If I tell you, you will not believe me, and if I asked you, you would not answer.” Luke 22:67-68 NIV.

God does not force us to confess he is Lord, to accept him, and to follow his ways. As always, God provides sufficient evidence to believe but does not remove the possibility of doubt. He wishes to have freely-given acceptance and admiration, the love that cannot be commanded.

It is the height of irony that the Son of God is sentenced to death for being just that. The charge of blasphemy and its consequences reveal far more than the religious leaders might have intended. For in this they clearly show what kind of God they believe in, and it is not the God revealed by Jesus. So perhaps they are “right,” for they seek to destroy the God they don't believe in...

Judas' betrayal of Jesus can also be seen as a rejection of an unwanted God. The God Judas wanted was not the one revealed by Jesus either. In trying to force Jesus' hand, Judas finally discovers that the person he had followed was not to be manipulated, that he could not decide Jesus' agenda, and that in trying to use Jesus to his advantage he doomed himself to disaster. It does not take much thought to see how often we try to “exploit” God in this way, to make him in our image, and in so doing miss the real truth about God.

Ellen White Comments

There is one great central truth to be kept ever before the mind in the searching of the Scriptures—Christ and Him crucified. Every other truth is invested with influence and power corresponding to its relation to this theme. . . . The soul palsied by sin can be endowed with life only through the work wrought out upon the cross by the Author of our salvation. {FLB 50}

By the sacrifice Christ was about to make, all doubts would be forever settled, and the human race would be saved if they would return to their allegiance. Christ alone could restore honor to God's government. The cross of Calvary would be looked upon by the unfallen worlds, by the heavenly universe, by Satanic agencies, by the fallen race, and every mouth would be stopped....Who is able to describe the last scenes of Christ's life on earth, His trial in the judgment hall, His crucifixion? Who witnessed these scenes?—The heavenly universe, God the Father, Satan and his angels." *Signs of the Times*, July 12, 1899.

Extra Material

The Cross is the deepest, strongest and best answer from God to us. How much he does love, how far he is willing to go, how badly he wants us back. A personal God made personally known.

"No one has ever seen God. The only Son, who is the same as God and is at the Father's side, he has made him known." (John 1:18 TEV).

You want to know what God is really like? You want to know who he is? Then look at Jesus, and you'll find your answer. "Whoever sees me sees also him who sent me," said Jesus. "I and my Father are one." And again: "Now you have known me...you will know my Father also, and from now on you do know him and have seen him." (John 12:45, 14:7 TEV).

We know him best and see him best on the Cross.

In London's National Gallery you can find many representations of Christ on the Cross. Altar pieces, miniatures, great panoramas: all depicting this central event of Christianity. As I considered one particularly sentimental portrayal, I heard one bystander remark to his friend:

"It's all very moving, but why did he do it? Why did Christ die? What was it for?"

To which came the swift reply: "Oh, it's just like the pagan sacrifices. This was the blood payment of guilt to appease an angry god."

Overcoming my native British reserve, I ventured to suggest that on the contrary it was God dying there on the cross, and that by doing this God as Jesus was the Answer.

To which I received the dismissive reply that "If Jesus is the Answer, I don't understand the Question," as the two moved off, giggling.

Sad—but people still don't see it. They look to the cross with admiration for many reasons: as a magic formula to gain credit with God, as a talisman to ward off evil spirits, even as a lucky charm to be worn around the neck. They miss the whole point—and even Christians have got the Answer wrong!

Unless we understand *what* God was showing us on the cross, then we shall never understand him and his true nature. The cross is the divine answer to all the criticisms, charges, and misrepresentations that have been hurled at God down through the ages. *God's truth is there.*

Hard it is, very hard,

To travel up the slow and stony road

To Calvary, to redeem mankind; far better

To make but one resplendent miracle,

Lean through the cloud, lift the right hand of power

And with a sudden lightning smite the world perfect.

Yet this was not God's way, Who had the power,

But set it by, choosing the cross, the thorn,

The sorrowful wounds. Something there is, perhaps,

That power destroys in passing, something supreme,

To whose great value in the eyes of God

That cross, that thorn, and those five wounds bear witness. *Dorothy L. Sayers*

8. Darkness at Noon

Texts: Matt. 27:42, 45; Mark 15:31; Mark 5:33; Luke 23:44.

Quotes:

- Christianity is a religion about a cross. *Leon Morris*
- The dogma of the divinity of Jesus should have died on the cross, when the man of Nazareth gave up the ghost. *Lemuel K. Washburn*
- Jesus knew his worth, his success fed his self-esteem.... He suffered the cross to sanctify his self-esteem. And he bore the cross to sanctify your self-esteem. And the cross will sanctify the ego trip. *Robert Schuller*

Introductory questions

What was especially significant about the sign Pilate had made? Why was it a real temptation for Jesus to come down from the cross? Why did God not intervene? Why did Jesus cry out as he did—was this a sense of failure? What is the relevance of the centurion's comment? Most of all, what do we see of God in Jesus on the cross, and of his answers?

Discussion ideas

The crucifixion is both attracting and repelling. In recognizing the wonderful love of God, we are drawn to the cross. But in its harsh reality, its cruel suffering, it rightly repels us. It is here that we see the consequences and answers to the universe-wide rebellion; the results of sin; and the lengths God will go, not just for our salvation, but to restore harmony throughout the universe. Here we see God as he really is.

So what do we see? The king of the Jews, as Pilate said? Yes, and yet from the Jewish leaders point of view, no. He is the despised, rejected king. Is he the victim of Roman brutality, the national leader cruelly executed to warn others? Yes from Pilate's perspective perhaps, and yet again no. Is he, as the mockers around the cross sarcastically say, the Son of God? No, not for them, and yet yes!

The issue is always about who Jesus is. For if he is truly God, then—but if not... As the mockers recognized, perhaps unconsciously, the fundamental point is Jesus' divinity: "He trusts in God. Let God rescue him now if he wants him, for he said, 'I am the Son of God.'" Matthew 27:43 NIV. So why didn't God rescue him? Why did he not make a dramatic gesture right there, and cow the mockers through a display of blazing power and glory?

Why didn't God rescue Jesus? Because Jesus is God, and this was his choice. Not because he had to go through the motions of making a sacrifice to placate the Father, but because only through choosing to do this could God answer the questions over his nature and character, could he end the domination of sin and evil, and could he save us from our guilty selves.

When Jesus gives the heart-rending cry from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" what does this tell us? The natural consequence of sin, the fatal results of separation from God, the bitterness of loss. Remember it is God there on the cross—as Ralph Turnbull says, "This was no mere quotation of the Psalm, but an expression of intimacy with God." When Jesus finally dies, saying "It is finished," what was finished? The work he came to do, which was to reveal the Father. Not simply some ritual sacrifice, but the conclusive proof of who God truly is. At the very end, Jesus prays his last prayer, committing himself once again into the safe and trustworthy hands of his caring Father.

Ellen White Comments

“To the angels and the unfallen worlds the cry, “It is finished,” had a deep significance. It was for them as well as for us that the great work of redemption had been accomplished....Not until the death of Christ was the character of Satan clearly revealed to the angels or to the unfallen worlds. The archapostate had so clothed himself with deception that even holy beings had not understood his principles. They had not clearly seen the nature of his rebellion.” *The Desire of Ages* 758

The death of Christ upon the cross made sure the destruction of him who has the power of death, who was the originator of sin. When Satan is destroyed, there will be none to tempt to evil; the atonement will never need to be repeated; and there will be no danger of another rebellion in the universe of God. That which alone can effectually restrain from sin in this world of darkness, will prevent sin in heaven. The significance of the death of Christ will be seen by saints and angels. {5BC 1132}

Extra material

“‘It is finished.’ It is hard for us to know the intonation with which these words of the dying Christ were spoken. If they came as the sufferer’s sigh of relief, they must also have been the worker’s glad cry of achievement. Everything had been done that could be, man had been offered a sight of God as He really was. For those of us who believe that, in seeing Jesus, we see God, the Cross is not a coarse framework of blood-stained wood, but the most precious emblem of man’s dearest hopes; it is the great pledge which we sorely need, that love is stronger than hate, grace than sin, life than death.” H. R. L. Sheppard, *Two Days Before*.

Jesus says, quoting Psalm 22, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Though the terrible agony of separation weighs so heavily, Jesus still trusts in his Father. “Though he leave me, still will I trust in him”, to paraphrase Job. (For despite the precise words of Job, “Though he slay me,” etc., it is not God killing his Son on the cross.)

Remember the rest of the Psalm that is on the lips of Jesus. Though it begins in utter, abject despair, it ends in victorious trust in God. In this way, Jesus’ cry becomes not only a statement of horror and pain, but an affirmation of unshakeable trust. Even though, at that moment, Jesus in his suffering felt his Father leave him and give him up, he remained convinced of the trustworthiness of God. In his feelings of despairing defeat, his faith looked to assured victory. Whatever his sense of abandonment by the Father, he was not about to betray his mission or his conviction about the consummate trustworthiness of his eternal Father.

God suffered too. Surely, though the Son felt separation from the Father when Christ took upon himself the effects of all the sins of the world, the Father as God was still intimately involved in the cross. He is not a disinterested bystander, or worse still, a Shylock demanding his pound of flesh from his Son as payment for forgiveness. That same Psalm 22 (v.24, NIV) says: “He has not despised or disdained the suffering of his afflicted one; he has not hidden his face from him but has listened to his cry for help.” The Father answered Jesus’ cry of agony.

Though that curtain of separation caused by sin was very real to Jesus, and though his Father “gave him up,” God was still there. Caring and loving; intimately concerned for the salvation of humankind and the harmony of the universe. Jesus’ death was not a sacrifice to mollify the Father’s anger or wrath, to make the Father love human beings, or to persuade him to save them. On the contrary, Jesus was the means through which God could pour out his love into the world, so that through him all who wished could return to him and be received back into fullest trust. Only through him could God be revealed to the world: “God’s only Son, who is nearest to the Father’s heart, has made him known” (John 1:18 NEB).

9. He is Risen

Texts: Matt. 28:9, John 11:1-46, 20:10-18, Rom. 6:4-6, 1 Cor. 15:3-8.

Quote: What changed these very ordinary men (who were such cowards that they did not dare stand too near the cross in case they got involved) into heroes who would stop at nothing? A swindle? Hallucination? Spooky nonsense in a darkened room? Or Somebody quietly doing what He said He'd do—walk right through death? What do YOU think? *J. B. Phillips*

Introductory questions

Why did Jesus spend Sabbath in the tomb—why not resurrect immediately? Why did Jesus not appear to Pilate and the Jewish leaders? What does the resurrection really prove? How do we answer those who claim Jesus did not really come back to life? What does the resurrection of Jesus say about God, the great controversy, and the future of the universe?

Discussion ideas

We cannot truly understand the cross except in the light of his resurrection. All too often, focusing on elements of sacrifice, we miss the whole point. Jesus died, *but then he rose again!* Without the resurrection, what would the cross be but a magnificent gesture? The resurrection gives the cross meaning and certainty, for without the resurrection there is no future.

A major criticism of many “theories of the atonement” is that they leave out the resurrection. The emphasis is on making blood-payment, on providing sacrifice, on moral influence, on being a legal substitute and so on. But these images cannot contain the transforming, amazing demonstration of resurrection. They limit the act of God to transaction and payment, or “mere” moral appeal, and can be as dry as bones, as lifeless as a dead body. But the resurrection makes the atonement pulse with life, confirms the animating power of God, and guarantees the present and future presence of God. *Now that’s atonement!*

The resurrection of the dead together with Jesus makes the point. They are the “firstfruits of the kingdom,” the practical proof that God intends to raise all his trustworthy children. As Paul comments, without the resurrection, our faith would be in vain. (“From a Greek word that means ‘useless,’ or ‘of no purpose,’” comments Wednesday’s lesson.)

If there is no future with God, what would be the point of this life? Not that we seek reward, but that we want to be with our loving Lord. And that’s the guarantee provided by Jesus’ resurrection, also demonstrated by the (limited) resurrection of the dead together with Jesus.

Now it all makes sense! “I have many things to say unto you; but ye cannot bear them now,” Jesus told his disciples before the crucifixion. “He knew they were not strong enough to hear all the wonderful truths relative to his humiliation and death. After his resurrection they would be better able to understand and appreciate them.” {3SP 93}

So what difference does it make to believe in a resurrected Lord? Like the early apostles, who preached Jesus and him crucified, yet stressed that “God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.” For “God raised him from the dead.... God has raised this Jesus to life.” Acts 2: 36, 24, 32 NIV. The message was not one of crucifixion alone, but that *Jesus came back from the dead!* Only in seeing the whole of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection do we gain the complete picture of God that he wants to reveal to us. If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable. But now is Christ risen from the dead...” 1 Corinthians 15:19, 20 KJV. No cross without the empty tomb!

Ellen White Comments

But the plan of redemption had a yet broader and deeper purpose than the salvation of man. It was not for this alone that Christ came to the earth; it was not merely that the inhabitants of this little world might regard the law of God as it should be regarded; but it was to vindicate the character of God before the universe. To this result of His great sacrifice—its influence upon the intelligences of other worlds, as well as upon man—the Saviour looked forward when just before His crucifixion He said: ‘Now is the judgment of this world: now shall the prince of this world be cast out. And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all unto Me.’ John 12:31, 32. The act of Christ in dying for the salvation of man would not only make heaven accessible to men, but before all the universe it would justify God and His Son in their dealing with the rebellion of Satan. {PP 68-69.}

This earth has been honored and blessed with the presence of the Son of God. In the Scriptures we read of His incarnation, His teaching, His miracles, His death, and His resurrection. The effort to understand these wonderful subjects puts to the tax the highest powers of the mind, and then there is an infinity beyond which can not be exhausted. The oftener the mind is called to this study, the stronger and clearer it will become. In the daily life will be revealed the mysteries of godliness, which may be experienced, but can not be explained. Throughout the ceaseless ages of eternity the redeemed will study these subjects, ever gaining from them a deeper and clearer knowledge of God and of Christ. {ST, April 26, 1905}

Extra material

In Jesus’ glorious resurrection we see the blinding flash of divine energy, the absolute proof that God can deliver on his promises. This is the real truth, the final all-inclusive answer: God revealed, shown for what he truly is: “The light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ” (2 Corinthians 4:6 NIV).

Not a harsh, vengeful or arbitrary God who takes delight in setting up impossible rules and then punishing defaulters. Some even see God in that light at the Cross:

- executing his own Son to assuage himself
- demanding recompense for his damages like some divine loss-adjuster
- only forgiving when his ‘blood_penalty’ conditions have been fully satisfied
- making sure that his vengeance is fully sated

No wonder some have been prompted to reject this appalling God, saying things like “I want no Jesus Christ to die for me!”

Our God is not a Tyrant-God. Rather he is a God who loves and cares so very much that he was willing to take so many risks and experience so much pain—the Cross is what it costs God to win us back to himself.

“But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” (Romans 5:8 NIV). “How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God!” (1 John 3:1 NIV). “But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved.” (Ephesians 2:4, 5 NIV).

Why does he spend so much time answering our questions about him? So that we can have confidence in him. For only as we know and love God will we allow him to come in and heal the damage done by sin. Only then will we really believe his promises. Only then will we have faith in him—totally committed trust.

When we come to God and ask him: “God, who are you?” he responds by coming to us as he is, saying: “Here I am. Contrary to the lies of the Devil, all his false accusations and his terrible misrepresentations, I really am as I say—and I’ve proved it. I am love in person, and I want to love and save you. Ask me your questions, and I’ll *show* you the answers, then you will really know me and trust me.” *Which is what God has wanted all along!*

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