

## ***GOOD FRIDAY SERVICE***

### **PRAYERFUL MEDITATION ON THE PASSION OF JESUS ACCORDING TO SAINT JOHN**

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Good Friday, April 3, 2026

*On this Good Friday noon, we are gathered to remember events that took place on another Friday nearly 2,000 years ago— events that were to change the world and the lives of countless millions, if not billions, and continues to this very day. It is my hope that by praying our way through Passion Narrative we have just read, a story that may have become so familiar as to lose some of its meaning or impact, we may gain a deeper understanding of not merely the details of the story itself, but the life-changing truth and promise it contains.*

*To do this I have divided the Narrative into nine parts. I will briefly summarize a portion of the text we have just read, then respond to that section of the Passion Narrative with a conversational prayer, as if we are speaking directly to Jesus himself.*

#### 1) John 18:1-11

***It is to a garden, across the Kidron valley, the one we know as Gethsemane, that we once again journey. It is to that garden that the trusted disciple, Judas Iscariot, comes with a detachment of soldiers to betray Jesus and have him arrested.***

#### *A prayer*

Jesus, what was that night like for you? According to Matthew, Mark and Luke's accounts, earlier that evening you were gathered with your disciples to celebrate Passover; a meal commemorating the Exodus—God breaking the chains of Israel's enslavement in Egypt. Luke tells us that as soon as that meal was over, your disciples began arguing about who would be the greatest in your Kingdom.

Did they understand your response that “the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves?” John’s Gospel has you giving your disciples a “*new*” commandment, to love one another as you had loved. And to demonstrate what you meant, you got down on your knees before your disciples and washed their feet; you, their master, became their servant.

And yet, in a short few moments, that atmosphere of love was brutally shattered by your betrayal by your friend, Judas. You trusted Judas. You would never have put him in charge of your community’s finances had you not. So his betrayal must have cut all the more deeply. Was Judas motivated by the gain of 30 pieces of silver? Was that all you were worth to him? Or, was it something else—a political agenda? Did he have expectations that you didn’t, or *wouldn’t*, fulfill? Did he hope for a political solution that you were not willing to give? Did he perhaps hope that by forcing the issue, by aiding in your arrest, you would call in the legions of angels at your disposal and usher in your kingdom with power and drama? I suppose we can’t really know, can we? How telling it is, though, that instead of urging your disciples to defend you, you ordered them to sheath their swords. “Am I not to drink the cup the Father has given me?”

Some how you seemed to know that the only path to ultimate freedom from the tyranny of sin and death to total reconciliation with God was through the cross that lay ahead. Like Moses leading Israel to freedom by crossing through the sea, you were destined to lead all of humanity to *ultimate* freedom and life by way of a cross.

It would be so easy, Lord, for us to sit here, in comfort—without the overt threat of political punishment for pledging our allegiance to you—and point a finger of judgement at Judas. We must ask ourselves, what would any of us really have *done* if we were in his shoes? If we are being honest, we must recognize a little reflection of ourselves in Judas’ actions. For we, too, conspire in our own ways against you. We may try to claim innocence, or at least *ignorance*, but we, too, betray you in ways big and small. We, too, sell you out—and usually for a lot *less* than 30 pieces of silver.

**Forgive Judas, Lord.**

**Forgive us, too.**

## 2. John 18:12-27

***After his arrest, Jesus is sent to the High Priest, Annas. His disciple, Peter follows him into the courtyard, where, confronted by several people Peter encounters there, he denies knowing Jesus ... three times.***

### *A prayer*

Oh, Jesus. First Judas betrays you and now Peter denies you! Peter! You had predicted this very thing: You had told Peter, "Before the cock crows (that is, before this night is over), you will have denied me three times!" You knew all along! *How* did you know? Were you able to see the future in some divine, all-knowing way? Or was it through your own *humanity* that you had come to know human frailty, and what it was capable of? But Peter was your *friend*. He had shown such great faith, such great *understanding* when he proclaimed you as the Messiah. He showed great bravado when just a few moments ago he tried to defend you with a slash of a sword. But with you in captivity, and his life threatened if he were somehow connected to you, his courage failed him, and he caved.

But don't we do the same? Doesn't our allegiance to you stand only the fairest of weather? Sure, we proclaim you as our Messiah in the comfort and routine of our worship services. But when we are called to follow you, to take a *real* stand on principal, to lay claim to our identity as Christians, as your followers, don't *we* too often, fail? If we can't even find time in our too-busy lives to practice the disciplines that will grow our faith, how can *we* be expected to risk our lives or livelihoods out of loyalty to you? It's sort of pathetic when we stop and think about it.

The wonderful thing, though, is that while you knew Peter would deny you, you still loved him and you forgave him. And by your grace, and through your Spirit, he was eventually turned around to become one of countless living stones upon which you would build your church.

So, use us, Jesus. As you did with Peter, use us. Help us to find strength in the face of adversity. Help us to find the courage to stop all the excuses as to why we can't find time for you. Help us to stand firm in our allegiance to you.

**If you could use Peter, certainly you can use us as well.**

### 3. John 18:28-40

***We next witness a rigged trial where the clearly-innocent Jesus is condemned to death by the politically vulnerable Roman prefect, Pontius Pilate, and where, in exchange for Jesus, the guilty domestic terrorist, Barabbas, is set free.***

#### *A prayer*

Jesus, who was Barabbas? What kind of man was he? Some variations of Matthew's Gospel suggest that *his* first name was Jesus, too. So when Pilate put the choice before the crowd he would have asked the crowd to choose between Jesus Barabbas and you, Jesus who is known as Messiah. Pilate must have thought that the choice would be a simple one. Of *course* the crowd would have wanted you freed, you were innocent and Barabbas was a murderer. You had lived your life forgiving people their sin and advocating a way of peace that embraced even our enemies; Barabbas lived his life dedicated to revenge and the violent overthrow of the Roman government. Surely the crowd could see that you deserved to be free. After all, wasn't this the same crowd that had been shouting their love for you with their cries of "Hosanna!" just a few days earlier? But now they didn't. They shouted instead for the release of Barabbas. What a perversity of justice! An innocent man is condemned to death, a guilty man set free.

But isn't this what grace is all about? It seems so cruel and unfair, and yet because *you* were sentenced to die, *we*, like Barabbas, are allowed to *live*. We, who deny you, who betray you and abandon you, are given freedom because of you.

**We are ashamed of our own betrayals, Lord. *And* we are grateful for you.**

4. John 19:1-7

***Next, Pilate hands Jesus over to the soldiers where he is flogged, beaten on the face and mocked.***

*A prayer*

We read that you were flogged, Lord. Flogged? You weren't just flogged, Lord. You were beaten almost to death by the Roman soldiers, Lord. That's what Rome did. We know about the cat and nine tails that the Romans used to flog their prisoners, the ones with the little lead weights that would tear at the prisoners back—that tore at *your* back, Lord. Roman law allowed for forty lashes, minus one. (As if the soldiers beating you cared at all for the law.) After just a few lashes, most humans would be close to passing out from the violent concussions and pain.

But that wasn't all. John says that they wove a crown of thorns and “put” it on your head. They didn't just “put” it on your head, they *jammed* it on, Lord, until the thorns ripped and punctured your scalp! They clothed you in a purple robe and mocked you by shouting out “Hail King of the Jews” beating you on the face until your nose was broken and your face bruised beyond recognition. How did Isaiah put it?

“So marred was his appearance, beyond human semblance?”

And for what purpose? To put you in your place? To prove to the world that you were *not* a king?

The strange thing, Lord, is that your submission to this kind of abuse and torture, on our behalf, was proof that indeed you were a king. Oh, not of a race of people, or a geographical area. You were showing yourself to be King of Kings, and Lord of Lords. You were wounded and broken so that we, your subjects, might find healing for our lives. Again, Isaiah foretold:

Surely he has borne our infirmities  
and carried our diseases;  
yet we accounted him stricken,

struck down by God, and afflicted.  
But he was wounded for our transgressions,  
crushed for our iniquities;  
upon him was the punishment that made us whole,  
and by his bruises we are healed.

**Jesus, help us to understand the truth echoed in Isaiah: you were wounded so that we might be healed. Out of love for the whole world, you were willing to be punished, so that we might become whole.**

5. John 19:8-16a

***Brought again before Pilate, Jesus remains defiantly defenseless and unnervingly silent***

*A prayer*

Why the silence Lord? Why did you remain silent? You could have spoken. You could have defended yourself. But instead you were silent.

There is great power in that silence, Lord. When you refused to answer him, Pilate really lost his cool, didn't he. He knew you were innocent. He seemed to look to you to give him something, *anything* to use in your own defense. But you stayed. . . silent.

And maybe, in spite of the taunting of the crowds, the cries for your crucifixion, the threats -- maybe, in spite of all that, he would have released you. After all, Pilate was not known for caving in to the wishes of the people, but for his brutality and insensitivity. He might have released you just to show his disdain for the people . . . That is until he heard those words, "We have no king, but Caesar, the Emperor." Then it was all over. Then it became political. Then Pilate knew that if he did release you, it could cost him his career, his livelihood—maybe even his life.

But Lord, would we have done better than Pilate? When our livelihood is threatened do we find the strength to do the right thing nonetheless? So often, if we are honest, we do not.

**Help us to do better, Lord. Help us to find the strength to stand firm even in the face of death itself. You did.**

*6. John 19:16b-22*

*Jesus is lead to a hill outside the city gates known as Golgotha (the place of the skull) and is crucified. Pilate has an inscription written and hung on the cross above Jesus. It reads, "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews."*

*A prayer*

And so Lord, you were **crucified**. It seems so sanitized when we read it. So matter of fact. Almost trite. And yet, Lord, the reality is truly grotesque! We know, from archaeological evidence what they must have done to you. How the soldiers drove thick iron spikes through your wrists, fixing them to a heavy wooden cross beam. And then how they would have attached your feet in the same manner to the vertical pole—driving the spikes either through the tops of your feet or, more likely, through your heels. Sometimes, as a gesture of cruel irony, the Romans might have attached a small wooden seat to the cross. It wasn't really a "seat"; it was barely big enough for the condemned to find a moment of relief from the full weight of their body pulling down on their arms. How their legs must have strained and eventually shook from exhaustion just to keep them from slipping off it. Forensic archeologists tell us that people who were crucified could survive for days, dying ever so slowly. And when they succumbed to death, it was from exposure and asphyxiation—the crushing weight of their body finally overcoming their strength to breath. Lord, your execution had to have been excruciating—both physically *and* spiritually. Not only did you suffer from the physical torture of crucifixion; on that cross you also bore the full and weight of our sin.

But you walked the road to Golgotha, the place of the skull, for us. You bore the pain and agony for us. Why? Because, the inscription over your head, the "titulus crucis", a sign used to announce the legal reason for your sentence of death, was ultimately true.

**Jesus, you were, and you *are*, our King. Help us to submit to your reign!**

7. John 19:23-25a

***While Jesus was dying, the soldiers cast lots for Jesus' clothes***

*A prayer*

Not even your clothing was spared, Lord. Judas sold you for 30 pieces of silver. Peter denied ever knowing you. The crowds chose a murderer over you. Pilate sold out truth to protect his career. And now, with nothing more to give, the soldiers throw dice to see who would get your tunic. The world had more concern for a piece of cloth, which the soldiers didn't want to tear, than for you!

**Jesus, can you find it in your heart to forgive? We didn't know what we were doing, Lord. We just didn't know.**

**Or did we?**

8. John 19:25b-30

***Just before the end, Jesus makes sure that his mother, Mary, would be safe and entrusts her to his beloved disciple, John. With all things being finished, he cries out "I thirst." Soldiers soak a sponge with wine and hold it to his mouth using a hyssop branch. After receiving the wine, Jesus cries out one last time, "It is finished," bows his head, and gives up his spirit.***

*A Prayer*

Jesus, at the moment that all had been taken from you. While pain racked your body, and in the midst of your excruciating isolation. . . you looked down from the cross and saw a need that had yet to be met. You saw your mother Mary, now with out a father, husband, or you to support her or give her standing in her world. And out of compassion, you gave your beloved disciple, John, the charge to care for her as his own mother. With your last moment, your last breath, you made your love real. You honored your mother in that act of love, and then you died.

How dark, how empty the world must have seemed then. Truly with your last breath having been exhaled, the light of the world flickered and then . . . went out.

9. John 19:31-42

**After this, in order to confirm his death, a soldier pierces Jesus' side with his spear, and from the wound comes blood and water. Joseph of Arimathea, a secret disciple of Jesus, asks Pilate for permission to remove Jesus' body. With the aid of Nicodemus (who brought the appropriate burial spices) they prepared Jesus body for burial and placed him in a tomb that had never been used before.**

*A brief meditation*

As we are gathered together on this Good Friday, let us take a moment to allow the full weight of Jesus' passion to sink into our minds and hearts. With the disciples, who would gather on that night in fear and sorrow, we are a people whose light has been taken away. For a moment let us extend ourselves and our thoughts into a world that is so often defined by the very absence of light.

A brief scan of a newspaper or the watching of the evening news can lead us to despair that the world will ever be at peace.

We can check off a list of things that cause us worry, we need not go into them at any great length or in detail. We are a country at war, with all of the uncertainties and unintended, if not unanticipated costs, most importantly in innocent lives. We are a nation divided in ways that may seem insurmountable, where each part of the ideological spectrum clings to its own facts and cannot see the truth in the lives of others. We face challenges as a community of faith that is called to struggle in unprecedented ways with what it means to be a people of faith, in

particular a faith in the crucified and risen Jesus, in the midst of a society that seems to find little relevance in what the Gospel of unconditional love and grace has to offer. And those who seem to claim Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior often promote ideologies that seem at odds with a God who so loved the world, the WHOLE world, that he gave his only son so that world, with all of its diversity, might be saved.

Even we, gathered this day, in this place, can experience life less as a celebration and more often as a burden to endure. Some of us face real challenges. Some have suffered loss. Some worry about the health and future of loved ones. And when those whom we love suffer from illness of the mind or body, or when death claims them, we can experience the unbearable weight of grief and despair. We are not exempt from having to bear life's burdens. We, too, as God's children yearn for the light of hope.

The disciples sat locked in an upper room confined by fear—fear of reprisal — and mourning the loss of the one who was the light of their lives. With Jesus' death, everything they had worked for, had believed in and hoped for was snatched away forever — or so they thought.

You see, what they could not have known, and what we today know by faith, is that a new and eternal dawn was soon to break forth. Death in all of its dimensions was about to be vanquished, and the chains of despair, hopelessness, and the myriad tyrannies of life forever shattered.

Behold—light is about to break forth on the horizon. How did Isaiah put it? “I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?” Do *we* not perceive it?