



From the
CROSS
to the
CROWN



MEDITATIONS FROM
GLOBAL CHURCH LEADERS FOR
HOLY WEEK & EASTER



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GLOBAL CHURCH LEADERS FOR
HOLY WEEK & EASTER

Contributions from the *Africa Bible Commentary*
and *Praying Through the Psalms* by
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From the Cross to the Crown: Meditations from Global Leaders for Holy Week & Easter

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- Nurturing national movements for biblical preaching (Langham Preaching)
- Fostering the creation and distribution of evangelical literature (Langham Literature)
- Strengthening the theological training of pastors and leaders by qualified evangelical teachers (Langham Scholars)

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MONDAY OF HOLY WEEK

THE COST OF DISCIPLESHIP

Meditation from Luke 9:21-27

Around Easter time, street vendors in Latin America peddle ‘cheap crosses.’ But in reality, there is no such thing as a cheap cross, for though salvation is free, it is not cheap. It cost God the life of his only Son, and it will be costly for us too. This cost has been forgotten in an age that preaches forgiveness without requiring repentance; administers baptism but not church discipline; takes communion without practicing confession; and, in general, promotes a Christianity without discipleship.

The importance of discipleship is clear from the fact that variants of this word occur more than 290 times in just the Gospels and Acts. The word itself literally means a learner and refers to someone who follows another person’s teaching. Thus, in the Gospels we read of the disciples of John, of Moses, of the Pharisees and of Jesus.

Although the word ‘disciple’ is found only twice in the Old Testament, the concept was widely practiced. Joshua was Moses’ disciple, Ruth learned from Naomi, Samuel led a school of prophets and Elisha was a disciple of Elijah. Being a disciple involves more than just being a student. It implies a personal attachment to a particular person who shapes the disciple’s whole life. It approximates the traditional African practice whereby an apprentice lives with his or her teacher, learning by watching, listening, and participating in everything the master does. The apprenticeship ends only when the apprentice can do what the master does. This passing on of knowledge and experience is essential, for there is no success without a successor. One sure way of preparing one’s successors is to disciple them.

Disciples are also imitators, mimics who try to act like their master. We can also learn more about discipleship by looking at the relationship between Jesus and his disciples. Their discipleship was a personal response to the call of Jesus and involved abandoning their own concerns and comforts. Some found this calling too demanding and turned back.

Jesus spoke clearly about the cost of discipleship, stressing that it would involve suffering. He called his followers to self-denial, cross bearing, putting him above all other relationships and taking a stand for him.

PRAYER FROM PSALM 16

My accomplishments and victories are not my concern. I yearn to be under your protection and care, and in fellowship with you. When you are my portion then I am a winner, and my reward is the greatest prize. When I am in your hands then I am at the center of your will. O my soul, let the Lord be your counselor.

O Lord, if you walk before me that means I follow you. There are many who follow other people and other gods and as a result their pain multiplied. But I, O Lord, shall walk behind you and follow you wherever you go. You are the fountain of blessings and the refuge of humanity. You are pure goodness, and there is none apart from you.

TUESDAY OF HOLY WEEK

REMEMBRANCE

Meditation from Luke 22:14-20

Luke's account of the actual supper begins with a description of Jesus and the disciples at the table. Jesus expresses how much he wanted to eat this Passover with his disciples before his suffering, since this will be the last occasion he will do so before its fulfilment in the reign of God. In the same way, he shares a cup of wine with them with the comment that he will not drink wine again until the reign of God has come. Jesus is telling his disciples that this will be their last meal together before his suffering. The next time they share such a meal it will be to celebrate the 'fulfilment' of such meals after the coming of the reign of God.

In addition to celebrating the Passover, Jesus also instituted a completely new ordinance, the Lord's Supper. It was to serve as a set of vivid symbols to remind his disciples of his body and blood given for them and for their deliverance until he came again. It would also be a sign of the new covenant that he was about to inaugurate with his blood. At all future celebrations of the Passover – either in accordance with the Jewish ritual or in the forms that evolved in Christian communities – they are to repeat these acts in remembrance of Jesus who gave himself on their behalf.

We ought to pay closer attention to the meaning of the sharing of the bread and wine in remembrance of Jesus Christ. Western countries tend to operate on the principle that writings remain, but spoken words are fleeting. This principle does not hold true in Africa where spoken words do not vanish but remain to guide the community through the centuries. In many African communities, a wise older woman or man will call a child or younger person and give her or him food and drink. While the young person eats and drinks, the older person narrates the entire public wisdom and history of the ethnic group or society. This word, which brings wisdom, must not only be received, but must be swallowed together with the food and drink – actually, it has to be chewed and eaten in the biblical sense. It should become part and parcel of the flesh and blood of the listener, so that this person generates and gives birth to life abundantly.

The word, which was heard, 'eaten' and 'drunk' within the community represented by the elders, has to be shared responsibly in a communicative manner within the community so as to bring new life to each and every member. Once again, *he took bread, gave thanks and broke it and gave it to them, saying, 'This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me.'*

PRAYER FROM PSALM 118

Perhaps I cannot give anything, but I can give thanks in everything. Therefore, I command you, my soul, to stop complaining. Instead, start praising the Lord, whether it is summer or winter.

When I discover the depths of my corruption, I need to remember the mercy of the creator. His mercy is eternal and is stronger than any catastrophe. Let us therefore praise the Lord, for his loving kindness is forever.

I lift up my prayers, as if I am in a desert without water. His mercy comes down like rain, and my pastures become green. The Lord, through the Messiah, has opened the gates of righteousness, and I no longer have to retreat.

Because of his mercy, today is a day of salvation and glory. Today is a day of praise unto the heavenly Savior, the one who created men and women. Praise the Lord for he is good, and his loving kindness is forever.

WEDNESDAY OF HOLY WEEK

TOTAL DEVOTION

Meditation from Matthew 26:6-16

In the middle of the meal, a woman entered and poured some very expensive perfume on Jesus' head. The anointing is significant because the word Messiah or Christ refers to someone who is anointed for his mission. Jesus, however, welcomed this action as a premature, but not inappropriate, preparation for his burial.

All four Gospel writers use this story with variations. But the differences in the details do not take away from the symbolic value of the action. The woman is a model of total devotion to Jesus. Her story is told in her honor wherever the story of the death of Jesus is told. This privilege is not available to most of the other disciples, whose names do not appear except in the official lists. This woman put all her resources at the disposal of the Lord. Matthew records the disciples' indignation at what they saw as a waste of resources that could have been used to take care of the poor. Some, excluding Judas Iscariot, may have honestly been concerned about the poor. But their reaction revealed their lack of understanding of who Jesus was and of the significance of the occasion in God's plan of redemption. Jesus' reply did not say that their concern for the poor was misplaced, but rather that their time with him was very short.

The story of Judas is easily one of the most tragic ever told. His name has become a byword for betrayal. He was a close friend, a compatriot, a companion of three years and the trusted treasurer of the group. That is what makes his betrayal so horrible. The proverb is true that says *Icikupempula: e cikulya* ['that which visits you is the very thing that eats you', meaning that the person who causes you harm is a close friend].

Judas' problem was that he followed Jesus for what he could get out of it. His aim was to make it to the very top of the 'cabinet' of the new regime in the kingdom of God. Similar motives seem to drive many who enter the public service in Africa today and many who enter the church. For Judas, it proved to be a disastrous policy, for he was exposed for his shallow commitment and unashamed ambition for material gain. For the price of a slave, he betrayed his master. Judas' story is a salutary reminder of the foolishness of following Jesus for what can be gained. Jesus warned that whoever saves his life will lose it, and Judas proved this to be the case.

PRAYER FROM PSALM 55

Cast your burden on the Lord, and he will take care of you. Pray for your enemy, and the Lord will protect you. O Lord, how beautiful are your promises!

May my heart be healed from the wounds of betrayal caused by my close friend! He was the twin of my spirit and my close companion; we knocked at your doors together. O Lord! I expect evil from my enemies, but my pain greatly intensified when Judah was born in the house of your beloved ones. He broke the covenant and destroyed our agreement. I thought that he was your friend. I would have preferred to meet a roaring lion rather than to be stabbed in the back by the companion of your children, my brother!

But I trust in God and cast my burdens on him. I know that you will take care of your children today. This is your credible promise, and I trust in your word.

MAUNDY THURSDAY

THE HIGH PRIESTLY PRAYER

Meditation from John 17:6-25

After praying for himself, Jesus went on to pray at length for his disciples. As though reasoning with the Father, Jesus explains why he is moved to this specific prayer for them. He mentions the fact that the disciples belonged to the Father and had obeyed him, their true knowledge of the Father and of Jesus, the fact that their actions had enhanced Jesus' glory and the fact that they would soon be left alone.

The first thing he requested for his disciples was protection by the Father's power – not so much protection of their physical bodies as of their unity. The need for Jesus' prayer has been illustrated again and again in Africa. In tribal clashes, believers have betrayed their brothers and sisters in the Lord for fear of being killed by their own tribespeople. Jesus stressed the importance of the unity of believers; however, he did not guarantee that they would be able to maintain this unity without sacrificing their own lives. Once Jesus was no longer with them as a unifying factor, the disciples would be exposed to the hatred of the world and to the attacks of Satan, who is referred to as the evil one to emphasize his wickedness.

The second thing Jesus prayed for was the disciples' sanctification. He stresses that this sanctification will be brought about by the truth, that is, by their increasing knowledge and understanding of God's word. The disciples would need such sanctification because they would be living in a world that did not value it but was opposed to God's will. They did, however, have a pattern to follow: Jesus himself, who submitted totally to the will of God.

Jesus had prayed for unity for his disciples, and now he prays for it for all believers. Their unity is to be patterned on the unity of the Father and the Son. But not only is this to be the model for their unity, they are also to share in this relationship. Like the Father and the Son, believers are to be united in working towards their goal of bringing the world to believe in the Father and the Son.

The second thing he prays for all believers is that they will be reunited with him and able to see Jesus' full glory. All those whom the Father has given to Jesus will participate in this reunion. Jesus has shared his glory with these believers, but he wants them to share it even more fully. Jesus concludes his prayer with a restatement of his submission to the Father's will, which will result in the believers being brought into still closer unity with and submission to the Father and to Jesus.

PRAYER FROM PSALM 133

When brothers and sisters meet together, they embody the unity of the family; our joy and delight multiply.

We who come from every tribe and every tongue are united in love. The perfume of divine grace and the rainbow of mercy clothe us. We love this heavenly fellowship where we enter the dwelling place of the Lord. There we discover that our high priest has engraved our names on his chest! He is a priest forever.

He prays for our unity and intercedes with powerful supplication that ends division. His blessing is poured down on all of us, like the waters of Hermon that turn us into green trees. It fills our land with love and unity.

O Lord, I pray today for the unity of the people of God, the sons of the great King and the daughters of the divine family.

GOOD FRIDAY

THE CROSS

Meditation from Mark 15:33-41

Then the sky darkened, and for three hours, from noon (*the sixth hour*) until 3:00 p.m. (*the ninth hour*) darkness enveloped the land. The darkness was a sign from heaven to teach sinful humanity about God's judgment and the horror of what was taking place on the cross. The horror is captured in the desolate cry of the Son as the Father turned away from him because he was taking on himself the full curse of the sins of the whole world. Utter darkness is appropriate for that dramatic event at Calvary, for what was happening there remains a mystery inscrutable to mere mortals. Jesus was taking our place, enduring the wrath of God that each of us deserves for our personal sins, a wrath that results in eternal separation from God.

It is said that when this gospel story was once told to a remote people group who had never heard it, the village chief interrupted the narrator when he came to the point where Jesus was unjustly hung on the cross to die. The chief exclaimed, 'Take him down! I belong there!' He got the message. Each of us must come to the point where we recognize that Jesus took our place on that cross.

Some of the bystanders misinterpreted Jesus' cry *Eloi, Eloi* in verse 34 as being *Elijah, Elijah*. Apparently one of the soldiers ran to get a sponge, dipped it in wine vinegar and offered it to him on the end of a long stick. The aim may have been to keep him conscious a little longer in order to prolong his suffering, or to see whether Elijah would respond.

Mustering his strength, Jesus uttered another loud cry, as he *breathed his last*. This suggests that Jesus did not die of exhaustion, as was usual with crucifixions. His life was not taken from him; instead he gave it up voluntarily when it was the right time to do so. He died as all humans do, yet he died like no human ever will, for he died in the place of all who would recognize that he had hung on the shameful cross in their place.

Jesus' death was accompanied by an amazing spectacle within the temple. The curtain separating the Holy of Holies from the rest of the temple was torn in two, indicating that there was now direct access to God, with no more need for human intermediaries.

PRAYER FROM PSALM 31

Lord, deliver me. O my rock, refuge, and shelter, save me. My eyes are consumed with intense grief; deep sadness is over me. But my life is in your hands. I am sick and my body is tired. My throat is dry because of bitter humility. Weakness and sadness clothe my life, and my tongue is constantly complaining in the midst of temptations.

Before your eyes, I am like transparent glass. You look into my inner soul, but because of your grace, I am no longer scared. Shine with your sun on my darkness, and bring your life to my feebleness. Make my praises and singing like that of the birds. Fill me with grace, healing, and sensitivity to heavenly realities.

I thank you! You, the greatest potter, can re-create my heart. I trust you today, knowing that you listen, see, and judge with justice. Remove my humiliation and restore to me the joy of praise, whether I am here with my people or there with my ancestors.

HOLY SATURDAY

CHRISTIAN SERVICE

Meditation from John 19:31-42

Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus undertook to bury Jesus. They were both secret disciples and members of the Sanhedrin. Because it was the highest Jewish authority recognized by the Romans, those who belonged to it were powerful members of society.

By asking for Jesus' body these men risked the enmity of their fellow Jewish leaders who had brought about Jesus' death. Unfortunately, today we seldom see a similar attitude of service to Christ in those who have become important, whether as government ministers, members of parliament or civil servants.

Not only did these two men risk their positions for Jesus' cause, they also gave material goods to it. The spices that Nicodemus brought for use on Jesus' body were not cheap, and the quantity he supplied was far more than would have been needed just for anointing the body. The tomb in which they buried Jesus was Joseph's own tomb. These are men who gave generously.

Why is it that in Africa our theological institutions and Christian projects are so dependent on Western donors that we begin to wonder, 'Isn't there money in Africa?' There is definitely money in Africa. We can see it in the 'palaces' some African presidents have built for themselves, in the chains of rental houses owned by some of our members of parliament, and in the fleets of vehicles owned by the rich. But what is missing is the attitude we see in Joseph and Nicodemus, who gave abundantly and at a cost to themselves. Where are the palaces, the estates, the fleet of vehicles and the rest, for Jesus? These two men who were secret disciples of Jesus, put us to shame – even as we openly claim to be his disciples.

When Joseph and Nicodemus risked their popularity among their peers and gave as they did, they did not see beyond providing an honorable burial for Jesus. If they were prepared to do so much for a dead Jesus, how much more should we, who know him as our risen Savior, do for him?

PRAYER FROM PSALM 112

We bless you today because you bless us every day. Your blessing moves every heart, even hearts of granite. You are the source of every blessing, not money, power, or human beings. Blessed are those whom you bless.

They obey your Word and study it. Their hearts are steadfast in trust, and because of the Lord, they do not fear any news. They have courageous hearts that conquer fear and are not afraid to listen or look. Their hearts don't turn into stone. They are not content with the blessing of receiving; they care for the needy and the poor. They hear the cries of the distressed.

O Lord, turn me into a channel of your mercy so I can stand against evildoers. Empower me to stand with the oppressed and humiliated. Turn me into a channel of blessing for every needy person until the world knows that the generosity of the Lord dominates and overwhelms humankind. Today is a day of giving. So let us present our gifts joyfully and give generously in order to conquer our selfishness, self-indulgence, and greed.

EASTER SUNDAY

CROWN OF PEACE

Meditation from John 20:10-29

Jesus appeared to Mary Magdalene on the morning of the first day of the week. That evening he also appeared to the disciples who were all together. None of them could think that it had been merely a dream, for they all saw him. Nor could his appearance have been wish-fulfilment, for the disciples were not expecting it; indeed, they were afraid. Jesus was not hindered by locked doors when he came and stood among them. He had not been there before, which is why John uses the word 'came', but there was no denying that he was standing there then.

Jesus' first words to the stunned disciples were *"Peace be with you!"* Shalom, meaning peace, was a common Hebrew greeting and a blessing in the first century. It was appropriate given the disciples' circumstances. They were still recovering from what they had thought was the loss of their teacher. The world in general, and the continent of Africa in particular, needs to hear Jesus' words 'peace be with you'. Year after year, Africa remains a bleeding continent. If there is not war in the south, it is in the north; if not in the east, it is in the west, and in the central region too.

May Jesus send peace to our continent! Yet when Jesus spoke these words to the disciples, he was focusing on peace of mind and heart. May that peace, too, be our experience in Africa as we wait for the peace in the external realm. We need to grapple with the question 'What should be my contribution to the peace Africa needs?' Much of the self-inflicted lack of peace in Africa has been born of animosity based on differences – whether ideological, ethnic or religious. Jesus' words 'love your neighbor' cut across any boundaries that have been placed by our differences. We are all called to live in peace.

Followers of Christ are called upon to promote the ideals of their master – living together in peace and providing comfort to those who lack it. Those who have been widowed and orphaned by war, AIDS, famine or some other cause need to hear the voice of Jesus' followers (the church) echoing our master's words, 'peace be with you'. If the church of Christ lived up to its master's example, people's needs for food, clothing, counselling, encouragement or a sense of belonging would be met.

PRAYER FROM PSALM 127

Had the Lord not saved me I would have remained a hellish person. Had the Lord not taken care of me as an infant, death would have been my portion. Had the Lord not given me food and drink, woe would have been unto me. Had he not guarded my home and guided me, waywardness would have been my lot. Had he not comforted me in my distress, anxiety would have overwhelmed me. Had the Lord not been my friend, misery would have been my companion. Had the Lord not intervened, failure would have been my partner. Had the Lord not protected my heart with his holy word, regret would have been my bedmate.

Without the Lord my work is futile, and my life is in vain; my family and children are in vain. Without him, all my thoughts, work, words, and accomplishments are pointless. But with him I am truly blessed, even when I sleep. With him, I find pleasure, grace, and satisfaction, even as I fast. I find with him my salvation, rest, and peace.



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