

Devotions for Holy Week, March 30-April 3, 2026

Monday of Holy Week – Prayer for the Week (Palm Sunday)

Almighty and everlasting God, You sent Your Son, our Savior Jesus Christ, to take upon Himself our flesh and to suffer death upon the cross. Mercifully grant that we may follow the example of His great humility and patience and be made partakers of His resurrection; through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

I sometimes wonder if people pay enough attention to these prayers we say on Sunday. If they did, would they still say “Amen” so readily? The prayer notes that God sent his Son, our Savior Jesus, to take up our flesh and to suffer death on a cross. So far, this sounds good. But read that next sentence carefully. We would like God to grant us to follow Jesus’ example of humility and patience.

Are you sure you want to pray that prayer? Do you want God to say “Yes” to that request? I was driving during the pandemic and heard a firsthand account by a middle-aged Italian man who narrowly escaped death from COVID-19. He spoke of the crushing loneliness of being in the busy hospital, but no one was willing to spend time with him. The nurses and doctors would come in, attend to him, but quickly leave, unwilling to be exposed longer than necessary. The rest of his hours were spent alone. Because of the sickness and the breathing equipment which saved his life, he could hardly sleep. The hours crawled by as he lay there for over two weeks with only the sounds of the ventilator to mark the moments. He was grateful to the staff who saved his life, but he felt that he had gone through a hellish loneliness. He said he would cherish every moment with his family for the rest of his life.

We pray for patience in this prayer. Patience is necessary when bearing difficult things. I think I would rather pray that God keeps the difficult things away from me. That is not a bad prayer, Jesus prayed it in the Garden of Gethsemane, but it is not this prayer. This week, as we come to contemplate the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus, we pray not for difficult things to be kept far from us, but that God give us the humility and patience of Jesus when such things draw near.

Pray this prayer. God answers prayer.

Tuesday of Holy Week – Isaiah 50:4-9a

⁴The Lord GOD has given me
the tongue of those who are taught,
that I may know how to sustain with a word
him who is weary.
Morning by morning he awakens;
he awakens my ear

to hear as those who are taught.

⁵ The Lord GOD has opened my ear,
and I was not rebellious;
I turned not backward.

⁶ I gave my back to those who strike,
and my cheeks to those who pull out the beard;
I hid not my face
from disgrace and spitting.

⁷ But the Lord GOD helps me;
therefore I have not been disgraced;
therefore I have set my face like a flint,
and I know that I shall not be put to shame.

⁸ He who vindicates me is near.
Who will contend with me?
Let us stand up together.
Who is my adversary?
Let him come near to me.

⁹ Behold, the Lord GOD helps me;
who will declare me guilty?

This reading from Isaiah, written many centuries before Jesus' birth, gives us a glimpse into the mind of Christ as he approaches his suffering and death. Do you remember the prayer we prayed yesterday, when we asked God for the same humility and patience that Christ evidenced? Today we get to see that humility and patience from the inside, as Jesus experienced them, and as we experience them in Him.

Isaiah sees first a listening obedience. Morning by morning God awakens my ear to hear. God's creative and redemptive Word speaks to us and calls forth the faithful trust which we need. This leads to the obedience. The prophet sees that Jesus will endure many hard things. His back was given to those who struck him, his beard pulled, he was mocked and humiliated. As we read the passion narrative this week, keep in mind that Jesus does this obediently. The Father has sent the Son to die for the sins of the world. The Son has obeyed the Father's request.

That ear, open to God's instruction, however, also has become a means for God to impart a faithful trust. Jesus sets his face like flint before the Sanhedrin, Pilate, and the soldiers because God has made a promise. He shall not be put to shame. He shall be vindicated. We come to the events of Holy Week with the end in sight. God has promised you and me the same resurrection. It is still terrifying to stand at the abyss of death. It looks so terrible, long, and dark. But Christ stood there too and stands there today with us. He holds our limp hands in his strong and perforated hands and asks this question, "Who is your adversary? Who contends with you?" He has the answer too, "Is it not the death that I have already conquered, the

accuser whose charges I have already cleared? Let them come near, we have already defeated them.”

Jesus knows what it is like to stand before the monster whom you fear. He prayed in the garden that this cup be taken from him. But he also trusted his Father’s promise to him. He set his face like flint and endured the cross. Today he has risen from the dead so that he can stand with you before that which causes you to go pale in fear. The LORD God helps you. Trust him.

Wednesday of Holy Week – Psalm 31:9-16

⁹ Be gracious to me, O LORD, for I am in distress;
my eye is wasted from grief;
my soul and my body also.

¹⁰ For my life is spent with sorrow,
and my years with sighing;
my strength fails because of my iniquity,
and my bones waste away.

¹¹ Because of all my adversaries I have become a reproach,
especially to my neighbors,
and an object of dread to my acquaintances;
those who see me in the street flee from me.

¹² I have been forgotten like one who is dead;
I have become like a broken vessel.

¹³ For I hear the whispering of many—
terror on every side!—
as they scheme together against me,
as they plot to take my life.

¹⁴ But I trust in you, O LORD;
I say, “You are my God.”

¹⁵ My times are in your hand;
rescue me from the hand of my enemies and from my persecutors!

¹⁶ Make your face shine on your servant;
save me in your steadfast love!

My parishioner lay quietly in his bed within his assisted living center room when I went to see him. His wife had died, a constant companion for over half a century, often nattering in his very large ears. Now she was gone. He was lonely and very much alone. The staff were not neglectful, but staff can never replace a wife. Children came to visit, but they went home and left him with long hours and much grief. He asked me why God did not just take him home.

These words are read in this Holy Week because they speak to Jesus' passion, the fact that his disciples all fled and left him alone, the plot against his life, and so much more. They convey the emotion of Holy Week for Jesus: Terror on every side (vs. 13). As I read them, however, I cannot help but think of my friend in his room, alone with his grief. I read verse 11 and am reminded of that: I have become a reproach, especially to my neighbors...those who see me in the street flee from me. But I do not think it was anything like the loneliness which he endured.

My parishioner in the care facility had a hard time hearing me. He is with Jesus now. But when I visited him, we said the Lord's Prayer together. I loudly blessed him with the benediction he had heard in church thousands of times. The psalmist's final verses were Jesus' hope as he came to the bitter hours of trial, crucifixion, and lying in a tomb. And they are our hope as well. I trust in you God because you are my God. My times are in your hand. Rescue me from my enemies and persecutors. Make your face shine upon me and save me in your steadfast love.

I remind myself of these words as I walk out of nursing homes and care facilities and into the world where I get to live with my family. This man's times and all our times are in God's hands. I walk out of that room, but Jesus does not. He does not walk out of your life either. He has experienced the whole of humanity so that his face could shine on you and so that he could save you in his steadfast love.

Maundy Thursday – Philippians 2:5-11

⁵ Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus,⁶ who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped,⁷ but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. ⁸ And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. ⁹ Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰ so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹ and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

I think we often make a critical mistake about humility. We imagine that being humble is being down on ourselves, telling everyone that we are not very capable or good. But such mealy-mouthed self-deprecation is in fact often another form of pride. True humility is not denying what you are. True humility is owning what you are good at but bending low for the sake of another's need. Imagine the star of the local basketball team, be it high school, college, or professional, it doesn't matter. He walks by a bunch of young boys playing a game of basketball on a school playground. True humility is not the denial of his talent and ability. True humility is joining in their fun, playing with them, likely teaching them a few things, but not being above them. True humility, the good kind of humility, would not sneer at their ineptitude and mistakes. True humility lowers the self to them.

Now ramp that up a million times and more. Jesus' true humility does not loathe the contemptible and rebellious creatures that we are. He takes upon himself our frail and mortal frame. He is born and lives a life of service. He walks to Calvary's brutal hill. He dies. But this is not a denial of his divinity or his perfection. This is in fact the assertion of those very things. He bends low in service because he is God and knows it. He makes himself nothing, takes on that servant form, becoming obedient even the torturous death of crucifixion because he owns his right to heaven's throne. He is God.

This Holy Week you will have extra opportunities to go to church. Do it. Listen and partake. Don't be so self-centered that you imagine you do not have time or that you imagine such things are beneath you. Christ could have said the same about Mary's ministrations to the infant Jesus. She was a first-time mother who might not have known exactly what to do with a newborn infant. His friends were sometimes not very good friends. His creatures were terrible at praising him; instead, they killed him. But he bent low for their sake, enduring the cross for their sake.

But also hear the second half of this song which the Philippians sang. God raised him up. Christ has gathered our lives into his own. He has met us at the very lowest but most common point of every human life – death. No one fails to die. But when we die, we fall into Jesus' capable hands. He has been exalted to a place above every other. Every knee bends at his name. There is no humiliation, no, not even death, which surpasses God's ability to reverse.

Good Friday – Passion according to St. Matthew

This reading is the entirety of chapters 26 and 27 of the Gospel according to St. Matthew. What does one say by way of meditation on that?

I suggest you watch and listen to a little video:

<https://www.facebook.com/bachfestmalaysia/videos/521053865475858/>

This is from the Bach Festival in Malaysia. Who knew such a thing existed? One of the things which the COVID pandemic did was bring all sorts of things to us via YouTube. It was shared with me by a dear friend. It is a little odd to see that the musicians and singers are largely Malaysian, but that is the point I want to make. Pay attention to the words (they are printed in English at the bottom of the screen.) This Friday which we strangely label "Good" draws our attention to Christ serving the whole world. People in the ancient Roman Empire, people in modern day America, Germany, Malaysia, and every other corner of this benighted globe.

A few chapters earlier, in Matthew 20, on his way to Jerusalem, we hear Jesus make this startling claim:

²⁵ Jesus called them together and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. ²⁶ Not so with you.

Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant,²⁷ and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—²⁸ just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

When we read his passion, we read the account of the Son of Man doing what he says in chapter 20: serving all and giving his life for the ransom of the whole world.