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CARRY ON IN FAITH



Thomas P. Leiker



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Part I: The Last Days With Jesus

An Intense Human Experience

The real human experience of Christianity began in the last days of Jesus' mortal life during what is known today as the Triduum: the Lord's Supper on Holy Thursday, the passion on Good Friday, and the Easter Vigil (Holy Saturday). While these may have seemed like the last days with Jesus, they bled into the first days with him. Everything that took place during those three days was set in motion at the beginning of the week, a culmination of Jesus' intense human experience. Many smaller scenes turned out to be major events leading up to Jesus' death and resurrection, beginning with his appearance on what is known today as Palm Sunday. The gospels relay the experience; other writers have provided more of the details.

In the modern world we face an intense human experience like no other. Our nation has been in states of war, fighting around the globe, and squabbling at home. Nations have witnessed devastating earthquakes with increased violence, hurricanes rip cities from the ground, and man-made disasters push humanity to the limits. Our misuse and abuse of God-given resources, the planet itself, is

becoming painfully obvious. Our institutions and trusted icons are threatened by scandals and sinfulness. What many are willing to render unto Caesar has become more than they are willing to render unto God.

This list of troubles could go on and on. These events parallel the times Jesus warned about during his last days. If we were told that our very lives depended on it, would we set aside time to walk with Christ as individuals and as a whole body, as the gospels call the faithful to do?

Jesus knew his own timetable and was preparing his spirit to move from being human to divine. Along the way, everyone who reached out to him was able to receive his touch in return. Jesus taught continuously. He prophesied of his own demise and resurrection and talked about good times and end times. Sometimes his words cut to the quick, but they were ever so true.

Q *Reflect on what you already know about the final week of Jesus' human life. How do you walk with Jesus today? Offer your prayers, works, joys, and sufferings for his intentions.*

To Touch the Hem of Jesus' Garment

At an earlier time, two unlikely believers reached out to Jesus on the same day and were touched by him in most powerful ways. These two incredible stories of faith appear in the same gospel reading because of their connection. Jesus was dealing with some of the most unique events of his ministry and had moved to the eastern side of the Sea of Galilee, to gentile territory under the dominion of Gerasa, and was immediately confronted by their demons, literally. The message—that faith in Jesus led to the kingdom of God, available to everyone, Jew or gentile—became a central theme in the

gospels. Through faith in Jesus, anyone could be healed in mind and body. Up to that point in time, he had said very little about himself as the route to the Father, the source of all healing. Little did the world know that from that day on, he would be the Bread of Life, the Good Shepherd, the Light of the World, and the Vine. He would be all things to those in need of him.

After Jesus had again crossed the Sea of Galilee, he was back among the Jews, and a large crowd awaited him. Jairus was the “ruler” of a Jewish synagogue (which did not have rabbis as they would today). Some were very comparable to a mission church, “ruled” by a man who usually was a virtuous layperson, well-versed, well-educated, and acceptable to the community. Although the Gospel of Luke strongly indicates Jesus was returning to an area northwest of the sea, none of the three synoptic gospels names the place where Jairus lived.

Using a little official authority, the synagogue ruler made his way to the front, where Jesus was teaching, and knelt before him. He told the Lord that his daughter was near death, and he believed if Jesus would lay his hands on her, she would live. Moved by the man’s great faith, Jesus accompanied him...as did the crowd. They were all pressing in, trying to get some sort of contact with the Messiah.

One of those people was a woman whose illness was not unlike leprosy, causing her to hemorrhage for twelve years. She had spent everything she had on cures, but to no avail. The Bible indicates she endured even greater suffering due to some of those healing attempts. She said, “If I could but touch the hem of his garment, I would be healed,” and she managed to do just that. The bleeding and clotting dried up immediately, and she felt wellness taking hold.

Jesus seemed to be a little staggered by the drain of God’s power as it flowed from him to cure the woman. He immediately acknowledged it, asking who touched him. The apostles told him it could have been anyone in such a huge crowd. The woman, realizing she had been found out, approached the Lord, trembling, and knelt at his feet. She told Jesus her whole story. He replied that her faith had saved her, and she could go in peace, cured of her affliction.

As this event was concluding, a messenger from Jairus' house arrived and reported that he need not bother the Master any further; the official's daughter had died. Jesus reassured the man and told him to just have faith, and they went on to his house. In those days, professional mourners were hired in advance of someone's death to mournfully lament and cry (keening), often covering themselves with sackcloth and ashes when the death was announced. This was the scene Jairus brought the Lord to. When Jesus told the group to stop, that the girl was not dead but only sleeping, they laughed and ridiculed him. Jesus had the house and yard cleared of all people but Jairus, his wife, and their family. Then, accompanied by his inner circle—the apostles Peter, James, and John—the Lord made his way to the girl's bedside. He took her hand, lifted his eyes to the Father, and told the twelve-year-old girl to rise. She did, walking around the place without affliction. The witnesses were utterly amazed. He instructed them to tell no one, but his request was not carried out.

Q *How have you or someone you know experienced the healing touch of the Father through Jesus' hand? Have you ever prayed for healing of mind or body?*

Lazarus' House

Only a few days before his triumphant ride into Jerusalem on what became known as Palm Sunday, Jesus had called on the Father to raise his friend, Lazarus, from a decomposing state of death to a living, healthy, and restored human being. Even though he had previously raised the young girl from death, this was easily his most amazing miracle to date. And by all accounts, it was witnessed by great numbers of believers and non-believers alike, and created a problem for Jesus' enemies. Pharisees, who feared Jesus' following

was growing out of control, ran to the Sanhedrin to report and demand something be done to stop him. From that day on, Jesus was heavily escorted by his apostles, at Thomas' insistence.

A man named Caiaphas was the high priest that year, a title that gave him the authority of a prophet and freedom to say what he wanted. He prophesied that Jesus should not only die for the nation, but also that his death would serve to gather the children of God who were scattered abroad.

Knowing of the plot being formed against him, Jesus left Lazarus' home in Bethany and headed for the town of Ephraim, which bordered an extensive wilderness. While in Ephraim, Jesus privately taught the apostles many things. He reassured them of God's kingdom and revealed his passion, death, and resurrection to them again, with more urgency and bluntness than before. As time was drawing near for Passover, he made the choice to return to Jerusalem, circling around through Jericho, back to Bethany first.

Q *Jesus was not even safe in the home of his dearest friends, and he evaded his would-be captors, and even had doubts about fulfilling God's plan. Has fear ever kept you from doing God's will?*

Bartimaeus and Zacchaeus

On the trip to Jericho, Jesus gained notice again by curing Bartimaeus the blind beggar and sitting at table in the home of Zacchaeus the tax collector.

Bartimaeus the blind beggar represented the underside of Jericho. This was a city that may have already been nine thousand years old during Jesus' time. The people were above average in income and pride. At the same time, they had a large number of suffering and impoverished that they scarcely took care of. Bartimaeus represented that group.

When word came that Jesus and his companions were on their way there, it meant prosperity for the community and a chance to touch Jesus. It also meant that the lower classes of people needed to be hidden away, that the citizens not be embarrassed by the suffering and pain in their city. Bartimaeus was hidden from view, but that didn't quiet his voice. When he heard Jesus' band approaching, he began to cry out, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me." Some of the crowd tried to silence him, but the blind man called out all the louder.

Finally, Jesus was near enough that he heard the voice among the commotion, and he asked that the beggar be brought to him. Disciples rounded up the blind man and told him to relax. He wasn't being carted away, but instead the Lord was calling for him to come forth. When Jesus asked what he wanted, Bartimaeus simply replied that he wanted to see. Jesus told him to go forth, that his faith had saved him, and the blind man was restored his sight. There was a new attitude in the crowd. Those who once spurned the beggar suddenly became friends of the friend of Jesus. Not only had the Lord restored his vision, but he also gave Bartimaeus a new opportunity.

On the other side of the coin were tax collectors. Jews who were employed by the Romans as tax collectors earned a specific hatred from the people. Publicans, as they were known, were in charge of taxing and turning the funds over to the Romans, but they were also allowed to charge extra fees and taxes and keep the money for themselves, so long as it did not become a riotous issue for the Romans. Zacchaeus was just such a man, serving the district of Jericho, where he was likely the most despised man in town. While Bartimaeus represented the lowly and suffering, Zacchaeus was rich and independent.

Aside from that, this publican was a man of small stature, which further caused him to be somewhat of a bully. He never hesitated to call on his guards to force his will on the people of Jericho. When he heard that Jesus was coming, he could have easily demanded the best seat in the house, but instead unassumingly climbed a tree so he could secretly see over the crowd and view the Lord as he passed by.

As fate would have it, Jesus walked right up to the tree where Zacchaeus clung, and he spoke up to him. The Messiah told the tax collector to come down because he was expecting to have dinner at his house that very night. It could be that Zacchaeus was one of the few people in town who could entertain a large party on short notice, and he immediately took responsibility to do so.

The crowd of reverent Jews gathered near Zacchaeus' home and complained to each other that Jesus had chosen to eat in the house of their hated enemy with the rest of his scurvy bunch. Inside, however, Jesus talked to the tax collector in a way he'd understand; he told the parable of the ten talents (coins). The story is about those who sit idly by, resting on their laurels rather than doing good deeds continuously. He told Zacchaeus and the others, for those who believe and continue their conversion, more will be given. "To everyone who has, more will be given, but from the one who has not, even what little he has will be taken away." His message was about continuing to do the best with whatever one has, growing in the faith.

The tax collector realized that Jesus was talking about the commandment to love God and care for one another, that the more one puts out for others, the greater their return will be in the kingdom of God; for he who shares what he has, more will be given to fulfill God's purpose. He repented of his crooked deals and proclaimed then and there that he would give half of what he owned to the poor. Further, Zacchaeus said he would do the right thing by those he had cheated in the past and return to them what he had taken and pay it back with interest. Jesus placed great value in the chief tax collector's repentance, blessed his house and praised his conversion. One undocumented legend is that Zacchaeus eventually became a bishop at Caesarea.

Q *Conversion to Jesus Christ is a day-to-day process. We are called to draw closer to the way, the truth, and the life in Jesus every day. Do you make an effort to grow in faith daily? What can you do to increase that effort?*

Palm Sunday

Six days before Passover, Jesus returned to Lazarus, Martha, and Mary in Bethany, and several true personalities emerged. Lazarus was the good friend and host; he reclined at table and chatted with Jesus. Mark's Gospel says this gathering took place in the home of Simon the Leper, who was probably one of those cured by Jesus. Mary, Lazarus' sister, used expensive ointment to anoint the feet of the Lord; her faith had become one of complete devotion. Martha, although she also served the Lord, became overwrought with the work ethic of being properly hospitable. Judas whined about wasting oil on Jesus' feet when it could have been sold for a handsome price and "given to the poor."

When word got out that Jesus was staying with his friends, the crowd returned, many more than before. They were not only there to see Jesus, but the miraculous Lazarus. In a likely attempt to avoid the crowd, the party had been taken to a place other than Lazarus' house. When the report reached the chief priests, planning began not only to arrest Jesus, but that Lazarus should also be put to death. His being alive was enough to stir Jesus' followers.

The next day, Jesus moved his base to Bethphage, a little village overlooking Jerusalem on the Mount of Olives (Mount Olivet, Jebel et-Tur). It was from there that he went on to make the triumphant entrance into Jerusalem, celebrated on Palm Sunday. There were already others working behind the scene to set up his final days, perhaps without even knowing what they were contributing to the story. Matthew reveals that Jesus dispatched two unnamed disciples to find a donkey and a colt tied up near the entrance to the village of Bethphage and to bring them back to him. There was even a secret code should anyone attempt to stop them. They were to respond to any question with the words, "The Lord has need of them," and they would be detained no further.

When Jesus rode into Jerusalem, the conversion he had brought to the people seemed obvious. They were strewing his path with the leaves of palm trees as they cheered, calling him the "Son of

David” (which would mean in their way of speaking that he was indeed the Messiah). Pharisees along the way were terribly upset by the adulation, and they insisted Jesus rebuke and silence the mob. He responded that if they were silent, even the stones would speak up in their place. God’s word would not be silent. The chief priests were drawn to the fray because of the crowd and the growing belief.

Luke’s Gospel tells that Jesus wept for the fate of the city before he entered it. From the place overlooking Jerusalem, he spoke in prayer, telling the populace they had missed the things that brought peace to the heart, that their opportunity to find these things through him was lost. He said their fate would be surrounded by their enemies and the city would be brought down even to the last stone. Popular opinion is that Jesus was speaking of the Roman invasion that destroyed the Temple and much of the city in AD 70, a thought that may be reconsidered when contemplating the history of the Jews and the conditions Israel lives with, even today.

Once in Jerusalem, Jesus went to the Temple and the crowds followed him. When people heard he was there, they came to him with every ailment and suffering. The priests were indignant to his healing in the Temple, and they also insisted that he silence the crowd and stop what he was doing. He rebuked the suggestion, which was just one step closer to sealing his fate.

The time had not come for him to be taken, so Jesus left Jerusalem that night and returned to Bethany. He was formulating the words and deeds, the prophecies, and the passion. Passover drew closer, and he wasn’t going to stay away from Jerusalem for too long. What he revealed over those next few days is nothing short of incredible. As his time drew down to days and hours, the intensity of his message grew stronger.

Q *Crowds would gather close to the Lord, many just to hear what he had to say. Others were sick or suffering. Each believed Jesus had a special message for their lives. Do you believe that Jesus has a special message for you? Relax, open your mind, and listen for it.*

Monday of Holy Week

Monday is the least celebrated day of Holy Week, and in our era, most of those gatherings are in the Episcopal and Orthodox Churches, two Christian faiths that have more than a passing similarity. It probably wasn't such a subdued occasion in the Lord's day.

On Sunday, Jesus had entered Jerusalem through the Golden Gate, which was directly before the Temple and held in Jewish tradition as the way the Messiah would enter the city. He was mobbed by friends and enemies. Jesus traveled back and forth from there through Bethphage to Bethany, remaining as incognito a traveler as his stature would allow, further delaying any attempt to arrest him. On Monday, Jesus sought solitude early before continuing his public ministry later. The signs of what was to come were beginning to wear on him, and his entrance into Jerusalem was quieter than the day before.

In one of his many works, *The Passion and Death of Jesus Christ*, Saint Alphonsus de Liguori tells a parable of a king, lord of many kingdoms, and his one and only, beautiful, holy, and wondrous son, who could not possibly have been loved more by his father. The young prince had affections for one of his slaves, who had been found guilty of a crime and sentenced to death. The prince offered himself in place of the slave. The king was vigilant in maintaining and guarding justice, and he accepted his son's condemnation that the slave might go free and escape the punishment well deserved. The son thus took on the role of malefactor for a crime he didn't commit, and the slave was freed.

Later in his book, the doctor of the Church agrees with two others, Saint Augustine, who said there is "nothing more conducive to the attainment of eternal salvation than to think every day of the pains which Jesus Christ suffered for the love of us," and Saint Bonaventure, "the wounds of Jesus are wounds which soften the hardest of hearts, and inflame the most frozen souls."

Even before the fact, Jesus was feeling his role in the parable

Liguori would one day tell. His passion inflamed frozen hearts but also kindled his staunchest enemies. He was on edge but remained focused on his mission. On Monday morning when he left Bethany, again headed to Jerusalem, he stopped at a fig tree, and finding it bare, condemned the plant and it withered in that moment. Even under the pressure, Jesus was still able to teach. The Lord informed observers, as he acted out his own parable, that as he had willed the tree to wither, so too could they who held their faith in the Father even move mountains. Jesus would tell his disciples, at the Last Supper, that some will not produce good fruit, and it is better that they are taken away so the healthier branches can.

Q *Since the beginning, God has given humanity dominion over the plants and the animals. The Old Testament Book of Leviticus even has planting instructions for farmers. Consider all the things we hear about the unhealthy care of our planet. Connectedness to all things is part of God's plan. Do you feel connected to other people? To other things?*

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