

Jesus' Last Days



SABBATH—JUNE 11

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S LESSON: Matthew 26:1–16; Luke 12:48; Matthew 26:17–19; 1 Corinthians 5:7; Matthew 26:36–46; Matthew 26:51–75.

MEMORY VERSE: “ ‘This very night you will all turn away because of me’ ” (Matthew 26:31, NlrV).

IN THIS LESSON, JESUS IS NOW ENTERING THE LAST DAYS BEFORE THE CROSS. The world, even the universe, begins to face the most important period in the history of creation.

So many lessons can be learned from the events that we will look at this week. But as we read, let us focus on one—and that is freedom and free will. Look at how the different people in this story use the great and costly gift of freedom. Look at the powerful, and even eternal, results that arise from the use of this gift.

Peter, Judas, and the woman with the alabaster box all have to make choices. But most important of all, Jesus, too, has to make choices. And the greatest one is to go to the cross, even though His human nature cries out against it: “ ‘My Father, if it is possible, take this cup of suffering away from me. But let what you want be done, not what I want’ ” (Matthew 26:39, NlrV).

What a strange thought: the gift of free will that we have abused brings Jesus to where He has to choose whether or not to save us. Otherwise, our abuse of free will would cause us to be destroyed.

A BEAUTIFUL WORK (Matthew 26:1–16)



While the disciples were complaining about the waste of money, Jesus called Mary's act "a beautiful" work.

We are now entering the last days of Jesus' life on earth. He still has not yet gone to the cross. He has not been resurrected (returned to life from the dead) yet. And He has not yet shown Himself fully as the crucified (nailed to death on a cross) and risen Savior of the world. Those who follow Jesus love Him and appreciate Him very much. But they still have so much to learn about who He is and all that He will do for them.

With this background in mind, read Matthew 26:1–16. What is the importance of this expensive gift? And what should it teach us about how we should relate to Jesus?

Notice where Matthew puts the story of Jesus' head being anointed (washed). It probably happens before His victorious entry into Jerusalem on a donkey. It takes place during the time the priests are planning to have Jesus killed. While they are planning to do Him harm, this woman pours out overflowing love upon Him, with her "special sealed jar of very expensive perfume" (Matthew 26:7, NIV).

While the disciples complain about the waste of money, Jesus calls this act "a beautiful" work. This action seems to be wasteful, but the woman (Mary) is showing how true and deep her love is for Jesus. She surely does not know what it will mean, but she understands enough to know that she owes much to Jesus. So, she wants to give much back, too. Perhaps she has heard His words, " 'Much will be required of everyone who has been given much' " (Luke 12:48, NIV). Meanwhile, the disciples surely have seen more of what Jesus has done than Mary has. But they still miss the point entirely.

"That perfume was a symbol [picture] of the overflowing heart of the giver. It was an outward gift of a love fed by heavenly streams [blessings] until it overflowed. And that perfume of Mary, which the disciples called waste, is being poured out again and again a thousand times in the softening and sensitive hearts of others."—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, volume 5, page 1101.

What should this story tell us about what we should be doing with what we have been given in Jesus? Using our free will, what "beautiful" work can we do for Jesus in answer to what He has given to us?

THE NEW COVENANT¹ (Matthew 26:17–19)

Read Matthew 26:17–19. Why is it so significant that this was the time of the Passover?² Read also Exodus 12:1–17; and 1 Corinthians 5:7.

The story of the Exodus is, of course, a story of salvation—a work that God does for those who could not do it for themselves. What a perfect symbol for what Jesus is soon to do for us all!

What is Jesus saying to His disciples in Matthew 26:26–29? What do His words mean for us now?

Jesus points the disciples to the deeper meaning of the Passover. Freedom from Egypt is a wonderful example of the power of God. But in the end it is not enough. It is not the Redemption³ that the Hebrews, or any of us, really need. We need the Redemption that is in Jesus: eternal life. “That’s [that is] why Christ is the go-between of a new covenant. Now those God calls to himself will receive the eternal gift He promised. They will receive it now that Christ has died to save them. He died to set them free from the sins they committed under the first covenant” (Hebrews 9:15, NIV). Jesus points them to the real meaning of the wine and the real meaning of the bread in the new covenant Communion service. They all point to His death on the cross.

The animal sacrifices of the old covenant point forward to the death of Jesus. But taking part in the Communion service points us back to it. In each case, the symbols point us to Jesus on the cross.

But the Cross does not end the story. Jesus says to the disciples that He will not drink of the fruit of the vine [wine] “ ‘until the day I drink it with you in my Father’s kingdom’ ” (Matthew 26:29, NIV). Jesus points them to the future, to the Second Coming and beyond.

Think about Jesus’ words, that He refuses to drink of the fruit of the vine until we are with Him in His Father’s kingdom. What does this say about the kind of closeness He would like to have with us? How can we learn to experience that closeness with Him now?



The Communion service points us back to the death of Jesus.

DEFINITIONS

1. covenant—agreement or promise between God and His people.
2. Passover—a Jewish festival that begins in March or April and lasts for seven or eight days. Passover begins with a special meal that reminds Jewish people of how God helped their ancestors escape from Egypt.
3. Redemption—salvation (being saved) at the heavy price of Jesus’ death on the cross.

GETHSEMANE (Matthew 26:36–46)



The cup from which Jesus did not want to drink was separation from God.

DEFINITIONS

4. Garden of Gethsemane—the place where Jesus spent His last night on earth before His crucifixion.

During Passover week, the priests sacrifice thousands and thousands of lambs at the temple just up the hill from the Kidron Valley. The blood from the lambs is poured onto the altar and then flows down a channel to a brook (small stream) that runs through the Kidron Valley. The brook may have turned red from the blood of the lambs. Jesus and His disciples would have crossed over the red waters of this brook on their way to the Garden of Gethsemane.⁴

Read Matthew 26:36–46. Why is the Gethsemane experience so hard for Jesus? What is really happening here?

It is not physical death that Jesus is afraid of when He prays that the cup will pass from Him. The cup from which Jesus does not want to drink is separation from God. Jesus knows that to become sin for us and to die in our place He will have to accept upon Himself the anger and punishment of God against sin. Then He will have to be separated from His Father. Breaking God's holy law is so serious that it requires the death of the lawbreaker. Jesus comes because He is going to take that death upon Himself in order to save us from it. This is what Jesus will have to face for us.

“With these thoughts of the struggle going on in His mind, Christ's soul was filled with sadness of separation from God. Satan told Him that if He became the ransom [sacrifice] for a sinful world, the separation would be eternal. He would belong to Satan's kingdom and would never again be joined with God. . . . The awful moment had come—that moment which was to decide the future of the world. The fate of all people trembled in the balance. Christ might even now refuse to drink the cup of guilty man. It was not yet too late. He might wipe the bloody sweat from His brow and leave man to die in his sin. He might say, *Let the lawbreaker receive the penalty of his sin, and I will go back to My Father.* Will the Son of God drink the bitter cup of great suffering? Will the innocent [Jesus] suffer the results of the curse of sin, to save the guilty?”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, pages 687, 690.

How should Jesus' willingness to do what He did for us influence every part of our lives, especially when it comes to helping others? How can we learn to be better examples of the character (thoughts; feelings; actions) of Jesus, in our lives?

JUDAS SELLS HIS SOUL (John 6:70)

How sad is the story of Judas! Had he died before his last journey to Jerusalem, he might have been among Bible history's most honored heroes. Church buildings could have been named after him. Instead, his name is forever joined with dishonor.

Read John 6:70 and Luke 22:3. How do these verses help to explain the actions of Judas?

Of course, blaming Satan for what Judas does is fine. But it begs the question: What is it about Judas that assists the devil to lead him to such dishonor? After all, it is even said that Satan wants to destroy Peter too (read Luke 22:31). But the difference must be that Judas refuses to give himself fully to the Lord. Judas must be hanging on to some sin, some character weakness that helps Satan to lead him to do what he does. Again, we see another powerful result of free choice.

Read Matthew 26:47–50 and Matthew 27:1–10. What lessons should we take from the sad story of Judas?

In Matthew 26:47–50 we see Judas leading a group of soldiers (about 600 soldiers), chief priests, and elders. What a great moment of power for Judas! When you have something that people really want, you have great power, as Judas does here. That is fine for as long as you have what they want. But they care about you only because of what you have. Then after they get from you what they want, they no longer need you. Within hours, Judas will be alone and with nothing.

Another important lesson focuses on what Judas lost his soul over. Thirty pieces of silver? Today the amount would have equaled between one and four months' wages, depending upon which silver coin is meant. Even if it were ten or a hundred times that amount, look at what it cost Judas! And as the story shows, he loses even that. Judas does not get to enjoy any of it. Instead, he throws it all back at the feet of the ones who first gave it to him. What a powerful example of how anything that turns us away from Jesus can become as useless as that money is to Judas. Judas is close to eternal life, but he chooses to throw it away for nothing.



Judas threw eternal life away for nothing.

PETER'S DENIAL (Matthew 26:51–75)

Jesus knows beforehand about Judas's free choice to betray Him. It is one of many examples in the Bible showing that God's foreknowledge of our free choices does not take away the freedom of those choices. And Jesus knows of both Judas's choice and Peter's. Peter boasted of his belief in Christ. But at a certain time he would flee and then deny Christ.

Read Matthew 26:51–75. Why do you think Peter denies Jesus?

Often we have the idea that Peter denies Jesus just because he is afraid. But it is Peter (according to John 18:10) who has the courage to pull his sword against Roman soldiers! Peter is willing to die, fighting bravely until Jesus stops him.

So, what changes in Peter from the moment he swings a sword to just a little while later, when he denies he knows Jesus? Why does he say that he is not a disciple? Why does Peter say, " 'I do not know the Man!' " (Matthew 26:72, NKJV)?

Maybe because Peter realizes that he does not know the Man, does not know what His coming is for, and does not know what His arrest means. So, in a moment of panic, he denies he ever knew Jesus. Perhaps Peter denies Jesus when he realizes that he does not understand what Jesus is doing. He gives up when he sees what he thinks is Jesus giving up. Peter is still putting too much faith in his own understanding rather than putting his full faith in Jesus. He does so even with all the wonderful signs he has seen and with his bold confession of faith in Jesus as the Christ (Matthew 16:16). Peter's denial should tell us that all the miracles and signs in the world will not keep us faithful to God until our hearts are fully surrendered to Him.

In Luke's story, the third time Peter denied that he was a disciple of Jesus, Jesus Himself "turned and looked straight at Peter" (Luke 22:61, NIV). The word *emblepo* was used in the Greek to describe the way Jesus looked deep into Peter's soul when they first met. (Read John 1:42.) What can we learn from this moment for ourselves about God's love for us even when we fail, as Peter did here?

ADDITIONAL THOUGHT: In 1959, two rough men entered a home in Kansas and murdered two teenage children and their parents. Before the killers were found, the brother of the murdered father wrote this letter to the local paper. “ ‘There is much anger in this community. I have even heard more than once that the man, when found, should be hanged from the nearest tree. Let us not feel this way. The action is done, and taking another life cannot change it. Instead, let us forgive as God would have us do. It is not right that we should hold a grudge [bitter feeling] in our hearts. The doer of this act is going to find it very difficult to live with himself. His only peace of mind will be when he goes to God for forgiveness. Let us not stand in the way but instead give prayers that he may find his peace.’ ”—Adapted from Truman Capote, *In Cold Blood* (New York: Modern Library, 2013), page 124.

Putting aside questions about the act of murder, we can see in this story a powerful example of grace⁵ that Christ offers to us all. Even after Peter’s inexcusable denial, Christ forgave him and entrusted him with the work of winning souls. “Peter had just declared that he knew not Jesus, but he now realized with bitter grief how well his Lord knew him, and how perfectly He had read his false heart. The Lord saw in it the falseness that Peter himself did not know.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, page 713. Jesus knows what is in Peter even before Peter knows. And He knows what Peter will do even before Peter knows. But Jesus’ love and grace remain the same, even though Peter has no one to blame but himself for his actions. As we deal with people who make the same mistakes, it is very important that we learn to give grace to them, just as we would wish it for ourselves.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- 1 “Every story of conversion,”⁶ wrote C. S. Lewis, “is the story of a blessed defeat.” What does that mean? How have you experienced what this “defeat” is? What is defeated, and what wins?
- 2 In the story of Jesus in Gethsemane, Jesus asks that the cup pass from Him but only if “it is possible.” What does this suggest other than that if people were to be saved Jesus would have to give up His life? Why? Why was the death of Jesus for our sins very, very important? Why could there not have been another way for God to solve the problem of sin? Keep this war between Christ and Satan in mind.

DEFINITIONS

5. grace—God’s gift of mercy and forgiveness that He freely gives us to take away our sins.

6. conversion—a spiritual change from a sinful life to a holy life.