

Jesus' Last Days



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Matt. 26:1–16, Luke 12:48, Matt. 26:17–19, 1 Cor. 5:7, Matt. 26:36–46, Matt. 26:51–75.*

Memory Text: “‘This very night you will all fall away on account of me . . .’” (*Matthew 26:31, NIV*).

In this lesson, Jesus is now entering the final moments before the cross. The world, even the universe, begins to face the most crucial moment in the history of creation.

So many lessons can be derived from the events that we will look at this week, but as we read, let's focus on one—freedom and free will. Look at how the various characters used the great and costly gift of freedom. Look at the powerful and even eternal consequences that arose from the use, one way or another, of this gift.

Peter, Judas, and the woman with the alabaster box all had to make choices. But most important of all, Jesus, too, had to make choices, and the greatest one was to go to the cross, even though His human nature had cried out against it: “‘O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will’” (*Matt. 26:39, NKJV*).

The irony is incredible: the gift of free will that we had abused brought Jesus to this very moment, where Jesus—using *His own* free will—had to choose whether or not to save us from the destruction that our abuse of free will would otherwise have brought us.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, June 18.

A Beautiful Work

We are now entering the last days of Jesus' life on earth. He has yet to go to the cross, has yet to be resurrected, and has yet to reveal Himself fully as the crucified and risen Savior of the world. However much those who followed Jesus loved Him and appreciated Him, they still had so much to learn about who He was and all that He would do for them. Looking back, with the entirety of the Bible at our disposal, and especially Paul's powerful explanations of the atoning death of Jesus, we know so much more about what Jesus was going to do for us than His followers did at the time of this story.

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

Notice how Matthew places the story of Jesus' head being anointed (which probably happened prior to the triumphal entry) within the growing plot to kill Him. While some of His own people were planning to do Him harm, this woman poured out unrestrained love and devotion upon Him, with her "alabaster flask of very costly fragrant oil" (*Matt. 26:7, NKJV*).

While the disciples were lamenting the waste, Jesus called what she did "a beautiful" work. By this action, very extravagant outwardly, the woman was revealing the true depth of emotion in her heart toward Jesus. Though she surely didn't know all that was to come or what it would mean, she understood enough to know that she owed so much to Jesus; and thus, she wanted to give back so much, as well. Perhaps she had heard His words, " 'For everyone to whom much is given, from him much will be required' " (*Luke 12:48, NKJV*). Meanwhile the disciples, who had surely seen more of what Jesus had done than had that woman, still missed the point entirely.

"That ointment was a symbol of the overflowing heart of the giver. It was an outward demonstration of a love fed by heavenly streams until it overflowed. And that ointment of Mary, which the disciples called waste, is repeating itself a thousand times in the susceptible hearts of others." —Ellen G. White, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 5, p. 1101.

What should this story tell us about how we should be responding to what we have been given in Jesus? Using our free will, what "beautiful" work can we perform for Him in response to what we have been given in Him?

The New Covenant

Read Matthew 26:17–19. Why is it so significant that this was the time of the Passover? See also Exod. 12:1–17, 1 Cor. 5:7.

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

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

Jesus was pointing them to the deeper meaning of the Passover. Deliverance from Egypt was a wonderful manifestation of the Lordship and power of God, but in the end it wasn't enough. It wasn't the Redemption that the Hebrews, or any of us, really needed. We need the Redemption that is in Jesus: eternal life. "And for this reason He is the Mediator of the new covenant, by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions under the first covenant, that those who are called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance" (*Heb. 9:15, NKJV*). Jesus points them to the real meaning of the wine, the real meaning of the bread; they were all pointing to His death on the cross.

Thus, unlike the animal sacrifices that pointed forward to the death of Jesus, partaking in the Communion service points us back to it. In each case, the emblems point us to Jesus on the cross.

And yet, the Cross doesn't end the story. When Jesus says to the disciples that He won't drink of the fruit of the vine until that day "when I drink it new with you in My Father's kingdom" (*Matt. 26:29, NKJV*), He's pointing them to the future, to the Second Coming, and beyond.

Think about Jesus' words that He won't 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 intimacy He will have with us? How can we learn to experience that intimacy with Him now?

Gethsemane

During Passover week, the priests sacrificed thousands and thousands of lambs at the temple just up the hill from the Kidron Valley. The blood from the lambs was poured onto the altar and then flowed down a channel to a brook that ran through the Kidron Valley. The brook may have actually 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.

Read Matthew 26:36–46. Why was the Gethsemane experience so difficult for Jesus? What was really happening there?

It wasn't physical death that Jesus was afraid of when He prayed that the cup would pass from Him. The cup Jesus dreaded was separation from God. Jesus knew that to become sin for us, to die in our stead, to bear in Himself the wrath of God against sin, He would have to be separated from His Father. Violation of God's holy law was so serious that it demanded the death of the perpetrator. Jesus came precisely because He was going to take that death upon Himself in order to spare us from it. This is what was at stake for Jesus, and for us.

“With the issues of the conflict before Him, Christ's soul was filled with dread of separation from God. Satan told Him that if He became the surety for a sinful world, the separation would be eternal. He would be identified with Satan's kingdom, and would nevermore be one with God. . . . The awful moment had come—that moment which was to decide the destiny of the world. The fate of humanity trembled in the balance. Christ might even now refuse to drink the cup apporportioned to guilty man. It was not yet too late. He might wipe the bloody sweat from His brow, and leave man to perish in his iniquity. He might say, Let the transgressor receive the penalty of his sin, and I will go back to My Father. Will the Son of God drink the bitter cup of humiliation and agony? Will the innocent suffer the consequences of the curse of sin, to save the guilty?”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, pp. 687, 690.

How should Jesus' willingness to do what He did for us impact every aspect of our lives, especially when it comes to helping others? How can we learn to model better the character of Jesus in our lives?

Judas Sells His Soul

How sad the story of Judas! Had he died before his last journey to Jerusalem, he might have been among sacred history's most venerated heroes. Church buildings could have been named after him. Instead, his name is forever linked to betrayal and treachery.

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

Of course, blaming Satan for what Judas did is fine, but it raises the question: What was it about Judas that enabled the devil to lead him to such treachery? After all, it was even said that Satan wanted to get Peter, as well (*see Luke 22:31*). The difference, however, must be that Judas refused to give himself fully to the Lord; he must have hung on to some sin, some character defect that enabled Satan to come in and lead him to do what he did. Again we see another powerful consequence of free choice.

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

In Matthew 26:47–50, we see Judas guiding a detachment of soldiers (about 600 soldiers), as well as chief priests and elders. What a tremendous moment of power for Judas! When you've got something that people really want, you possess tremendous power, as Judas does here. That's fine, at least for as long as you have what they want. But if they care about you only because of what you have and then eventually they get from you what they want, they finally 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? In today's terms, the amount has been said to equal 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 him! And as the story shows, he lost even that. He didn't get to enjoy any of it; instead, he threw it all back at the feet of the ones who first gave it to him. What a powerful example of how, in the end, anything that causes us to turn away from Jesus, anything that causes us to lose our soul, is as useless as was that money to Judas. Judas was so close to eternal life; and yet, he chose to throw it away for nothing.

Peter's Denial

Jesus knew beforehand about Judas's freewill decision to betray Him, one of many instances in the Bible showing that God's foreknowledge of our free choices in no way infringes upon the freedom of those choices. And He knew not only of Judas's betrayal but also that Peter, despite all his bravado, would at the crucial moment flee and then deny Him.

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

Often we have the idea that Peter denied Jesus simply because he was afraid. Yet, it was Peter (according to John 18:10) who had the courage to pull his sword against Roman soldiers! Peter was willing to go out in a blaze of glory—until Jesus stopped him.

So, what changed in Peter from the moment he's brandishing a sword to just a little while later, when he's denying he knows Jesus? Why did he say that he wasn't a disciple? Why does Peter say, " 'I do not know the Man!' " (*Matt. 26:72, NKJV*)?

Maybe because Peter realized that he didn't know the Man, didn't know what His coming was for and didn't know what His arrest meant. So, in a moment of panic, he denied he ever knew Him. Perhaps Peter denied Jesus when he realized that he didn't understand what Jesus was doing. He gave up when he saw what *he thought* was Jesus giving up. Peter was still putting too much faith in his own understanding rather than putting his full faith in Jesus, even despite all the incredible signs he had seen and even despite his bold confession of faith in Jesus as the Christ (*Matt. 16:16*). Peter's denial should tell us that all the miracles and signs in the world won't keep us faithful to God until our hearts are fully surrendered to Him.

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

Further Thought: In 1959, two hoodlums 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 resentment in this community. I have even heard on more than one occasion that the man, when found, should be hanged from the nearest tree. Let us not feel this way. The deed 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 in our hearts. The doer of this act is going to find it very difficult indeed 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.’ ”—Truman Capote, *In Cold Blood* (New York: Modern Library, 2013), p. 124.

Putting aside questions about capital punishment, we can see here a powerful expression of the kind of grace 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 accurately He had read his heart, the falseness of which was unknown even to himself.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 713. He knew what was in Peter even before Peter knew; and He knew what Peter would do even before Peter knew. And yet, His love and grace remained constant despite Peter’s having no one to blame but himself for his actions. As we deal with people who make similar mistakes, how crucial that we learn to extend grace to them just as we would wish it for ourselves.

Discussion Questions:

- ① “Every story of conversion,” 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 imply other than that if humanity were to be saved, Jesus would have to give up His life? Why? Why was the death of Jesus, the Sin Bearer, absolutely essential? Why couldn’t there have been another way for God to solve the problem of sin in the light of the great controversy?

Try Jesus: Part 2

One Saturday afternoon a few weeks later, we were busy running errands and cleaning house when someone knocked at the door. I opened it to find a woman and two men whom I had never seen before. They were smiling and said that they had brought a Bible for Lauren Moore. “Are you Lauren?” they asked.

Soon I was smiling too as I explained that Lauren was my daughter. I called Lauren, and enjoyed the surprised looks on my guests’ faces when a seven-year-old girl bounded down the stairs and introduced herself as Lauren Moore. The strangers smiled warmly and gave Lauren her new Bible. Lauren was so excited that she jumped around, hugging the Bible to her.

A few weeks later, the friendly woman who had given Lauren the Bible returned and introduced herself as Gayle. She asked whether Lauren had read her Bible yet and would she like some Bible study lessons to help her understand what she was reading. Lauren enthusiastically said Yes to the lessons. When Gayle learned that our son, Dane, didn’t have a Bible, she promised to bring him one too.

The next Saturday afternoon Gayle arrived with Dane’s Bible. The trio sat down at our kitchen table while Gayle patiently helped them take the first baby steps into God’s Word, using Bible study lessons she had brought for them. The children enjoyed the lessons so much that Gayle promised to return every week.

At first we were a little doubtful about what the Bible lessons might try to teach our children, but we decided that it would be good for them to learn some Bible principles. I listened in on the Bible studies as I went about my housework. It was so interesting that Neal and I sometimes left our tasks and listened more carefully. After the lessons as I walked Gayle to her car, I sometimes asked her to explain certain points more carefully. I had never met a Christian like Gayle. She always seemed so happy, and she listened patiently to all of our questions. Her answers were simple yet deep, and she was so humble that my respect for her grew.

To be continued in next week’s Inside Story.

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Matthew 26:31*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Understand that the distance between human commitment and unfaithfulness is small indeed but that God’s faithfulness toward us is absolutely certain.

Feel: Personally sense the human heart’s fickleness and develop a self-awareness that will protect them from Satan’s attempts to overtake them unaware.

Do: Absorb spiritual lessons from the mistakes that Christ’s followers made, resolving to overcome those weaknesses through study and prayer.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: Christ’s Final Hours Bring Eternal Life.

- A** What prompted Judas’s betrayal against Christ although Christ was forever faithful toward him?
- B** How did physical weariness compromise the disciples’ spiritual fervency?
- C** Why did government officials permit Christ’s opponents to humiliate and crucify Him?

II. Feel: Christ’s Crucifixion Breaks Human Hearts, Paving the Pathway of Salvation.

- A** How did Peter’s denial of Christ expose his undetected character weaknesses?
- B** How did Peter’s humiliation and subsequent repentance later facilitate his spiritual renewal?

III. Do: Christ’s Substitutionary Sacrifice Invites Human Acceptance.

- A** How might believers maintain a vibrant relationship with Christ after they have accepted Jesus as Savior and Master?
- B** How might Christ’s followers develop that personal spiritual surrender beautifully exhibited by Christ’s prayer?

► **Summary:** Experiencing Christ’s final earthly hours breaks the human heart’s embrace of self-centeredness, therefore inviting human souls to accept Jesus’ salvation and companionship.

Learning Cycle

►STEP 1—Motivate

Spotlight on Scripture: *Matthew 26:31*

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: Experiencing the final earthly hours of Christ is transformational. As He broke Satan’s stranglehold, He enabled sincere seekers to choose eternal life.

Just for Teachers: “It will do you good, and our ministers generally, to frequently review the closing scenes in the life of our Redeemer. Here, beset with temptations as he was, we may all learn lessons of the utmost importance to us. It would be well to spend a thoughtful hour each day reviewing the life of Christ from the manger to Calvary. We should take it point by point, and let the imagination vividly grasp each scene, especially the closing ones of His earthly life. By thus contemplating His teachings and sufferings, and the infinite sacrifice made by Him for the redemption of the race, we may strengthen our faith, quicken our love, and become more deeply imbued with the spirit which sustained our Savior.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 4, p. 374.

Opening Activity: Represent Christ’s crucifixion week using a time line. Classes that meet outdoors might do this by simply creating lines on the ground. Classes that meet indoors might utilize poster board or dry erase boards. Alternately, this topic may be discussed without visual aids.

Locate the events studied this week in Matthew along the time line, noting the day of the week and the time of day (using approximations such as “nighttime” and “afternoon” as indicated). First, list the principal characters within each “scene.” Next, imagine the atmosphere of each “scene” (for example, gloomy, tension-filled, somber, agonizing), and list them on your time line. Now invite participants to close their eyes, visualizing together a particular “scene.” Have them verbalize the emotions they experience through their imagination. Invite members to share their understanding of Christ in each scene.

Consider This: If believers “let the imagination vividly grasp each scene” regularly, even daily, how might their spiritual experience be energized?

►STEP 2—Explore

Just for Teachers: Crucifixion constituted an intensely cruel form of execution. Bodily weight was suspended by arms and legs, securely

fastened to crosses with spikes and/or ropes. Before death occurred, the skeletal system frequently suffered dislocated joints. Breathing became nearly impossible, because the collapsed body cavity compressed lung function.

Romans employed other torturous methods, including burning victims alive; feeding victims to carnivorous animals, as the Medo-Persians once did with Daniel; beating; dragging bodies behind wild horses; and branding criminals with plates of red-hot iron. None of these tortures, however, exceeded crucifixion in agony suffered. Victims typically lived several days, whereas other execution methods usually caused death more quickly. (Ironically, this cruelest of human tortures has been memorialized with gold-plated, diamond-studded jewelry. This would be tantamount to producing gold-plated electric chairs or silver-plated lethal injection chambers.) How remarkable that God's sacrifice transformed something unthinkably painful into an incredibly beautiful symbol of divine benevolence.

Bible Commentary

I. Farewell to Friends *(Review Matthew 26:1–46 with the class.)*

Matthew's final chapters chronicle Mary's extraordinary act of extravagant affection. Lazarus and Martha's Bethany house was frequented by Christ and His disciples. Here, together with her siblings, Mary entertained Jesus Himself.

Friendships thus forged meant everything to Jesus. Christ sought and appreciated human companionship, understanding, and affection. The Hebrew family formed the foundational element of human society. Jesus gathered His family from like-minded kingdom seekers, united through spiritual connections more than human bloodlines. Mary cannot be considered a mere casual acquaintance, because her relationship with Christ more nearly approximated "sister." Mary was that spiritually wandering sister for whom Christ wrestled until she eventually yielded to His merciful overtures. Finally, released from Satan's grasp, she dedicated herself unreservedly to her Friend, Jesus.

No gift was too expensive to show her love. The Saturday night before His crucifixion the following Friday, Jesus attended a celebration honoring Him at Simon's house, also located near Bethany. Mary slipped inside the house, concealing her spikenard-filled alabaster flask. Seizing the opportunity, she impetuously emptied the fragrant ointment, anointing Christ from head to toe. Her overflowing teardrops bathed His feet. Lovingly she applied the ointment, valued as the equivalent of a

common laborer's annual wage. Judas Iscariot rebuked her extravagance, but Jesus embraced her childlike fervency. Shortly thereafter, this Judas, who protested Mary's "overpriced" devotion to Christ, would betray Him for the "underpriced" cost of a slave.

Five days later, Jesus celebrated His farewell Passover Supper with another group of associates—the Twelve. Until His return, this was Christ's final opportunity to celebrate Passover with His closest earthly friends. These disciples would shortly be entrusted with shepherding Jesus' kingdom, making decisions that potentially affected millions during their own time and future generations.

What emotions must have wrenched Christ's soul! These dearly loved companions were bickering constantly, jockeying for position, stumbling spiritually, and misunderstanding Jesus' central mission. They were violent, impetuous, childish (rather than childlike), prideful, intolerant, chauvinistic, exclusive, and sometimes abrasive. Nevertheless, Jesus loved them, their faults notwithstanding.

Even during this most sacred Jewish observance, His beloved disciples were contending about who would occupy those places highest in Christ's kingdom. Ironically, this service, portraying the humble sacrificial Lamb, formed the backdrop for haughtiness revealed through selfish ambition.

John's retelling includes the footwashing narrative. Jesus, rather than His followers, humbled Himself, becoming their servant, washing their soiled, filthy feet. Along with this act of humility, they reclined for the traditional Passover meal, which included roasted lamb and bitter herbs. Memorializing the Exodus from Egypt, Passover also pointed toward the coming Messiah, who would banish sinful rebellion and its consequences. Unfortunately, Israel misunderstood this concept, substituting political deliverance for spiritual deliverance. Contrasted with Mary's overflowing affection, this Passover experience must have been, to Christ, relatively disheartening at moments.

Consider This: How can our response to Christ be more like Mary's than like that of the disciples?

II. With Friends Like These . . . *(Review Matthew 26:51–75 with the class.)*

The phrase begun in the subheading concludes: ". . . who needs enemies?" How applicable! Judas personally escorts Christ's enemies to arrest Him, betraying Jesus with a *kiss*. So much for apostolic loyalty. During Christ's illegal night trial, He is falsely accused, bad-mouthed, and wrongfully convicted. Finally, Peter, from Christ's inner circle, publicly denies ever knowing Him.

Apparently, cowardice is contagious. Christ experiences complete abandonment, eventually questioning His heavenly Father's presence. Isolation, unlike anything that humans have encountered, engulfs Jesus. Nothing but

absolute darkness seems to loom ahead.

Consider This: How does this narrative prove Christ's thorough identification with isolated, lonely souls?

►STEP 3—Apply

Just for Teachers: “Since he [Jesus] himself has gone through suffering and testing, he is able to help us when we are being tested” (*Heb. 2:18, NLT*). Discuss how Jesus' mistreatment in Matthew's narrative enables Him to help us effectively.

Thought Questions:

- ❶ Describe events that illustrate Jesus' abandonment. How would these events enable Christ to minister effectively to lonely people?
- ❷ Describe events that illustrate injustice against Jesus. How would these enable Christ to minister effectively to people treated unfairly?
- ❸ Describe events that illustrate Jesus' betrayal. How would these enable Christ to minister effectively to victims of unfaithfulness and disloyalty?
- ❹ Describe events that illustrate Jesus' physical suffering. How would these enable Christ to minister effectively to people enduring torture, physical persecution, or the mental anguish and bodily suffering caused by illness?

►STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: Sometimes, as it has been said, pictures are worth thousands of words. Artistic expression invites creative persons to become physically involved in some activity that expresses their devotion. This week's activity is a creative project to be completed outside of class time. It allows participants to consolidate their words within a single artistic piece or express emotions that words alone could never communicate.

Activity: Using photography, sculpting, painting, drawing, or similar endeavors, create a visual piece that expresses your reaction to Christ's mistreatment as described in Matthew 26.