

THREE NAILS ONE PURPOSE

*40 Readings for Following Christ
to His Cross and Resurrection*



JOHN S. LEWIS

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Nikolai Ge, *The Last Supper*, 1866, Oil on Canvas

A Word from Matthew (26:20-25)

When evening came, Jesus was reclining at the table with the twelve. And while they were eating, he said, "Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me." They were very sad and began to say to him one after the other, "Surely you don't mean me, Lord?" Jesus replied, "The one who has dipped his hand into the bowl with me will betray me. The Son of Man will go just as it is written about him. But woe to that man who betrays the Son of Man! It would be better for him if he had not been born." Then Judas, the one who would betray him, said, "Surely you don't mean me, Rabbi?" Jesus answered, "You have said so."

Judas Speaks

Jassover Eve had finally arrived. As the sky darkened, we gathered around the table to share the traditional meal that celebrated our liberation from Egyptian slavery. Our past celebrations had been filled with laughter and animated conversation. Tonight, only soft voices filled the room.

As you know, I went to the Sanhedrin just a few days earlier, keeping my scheme hidden from the others. Perhaps that was why it felt especially warm in our upper room, and I was the only one sweating.

Jesus took his place as host at the head of the table. He asked me to sit to his right. I swallowed out of surprise but quickly smiled to acknowledge the unexpected honor. I sat down, my mind scrambling to figure out why he chose me over everyone else.

Soon after we started eating, a shocking statement tumbled from his lips. He said, "I speak to you the truth: one of you will betray me." Now, we all knew there were people out there who sought to betray Jesus; this was the very reason we were hiding here. But our Master was predicting the unthinkable. One from his intimate inner circle of faithful leaders would turn him over to the authorities.

Peter knocked over his cup, spilling wine onto the table. John coughed, choking over a bite of his food. "Surely you don't mean me, Rabbi," each of my co-disciples asked. Each one was simultaneously seeking to declare his innocence, searching his brothers' faces for hints of who might be the betrayer.

Meanwhile, my mind raced. Was Jesus talking about me? If so, how could he possibly have known of my plans? Had someone else seen me sneak away the other night and reported it to him? Trying to look calm, I glanced around, relieved to see that none of their eyes were fixed on me.

Yet Jesus did not seem concerned. His response was cryptic, “My betrayer is the one who has dipped his hand into the bowl with me. What will happen to me has been foretold in Scripture, but woe to my betrayer! He will wish he had never been born.” Well, I reasoned, we’d all dipped our hand into his bowl over the years. His clue hardly helped anyone stand out as the betrayer.

I was relieved none of the others seemed suspicious of me. After all, I had deceived myself into thinking I wasn’t really betraying Jesus. I was actually helping him. When all was done, I was sure the Master would even thank me, seeing how helpful my plan was for everyone and his kingdom.

Still, I decided it was smart to respond to him like the others had. I turned to him and raised the same question in a lower tone: “Surely not me, Rabbi?”

He turned and whispered, “You have said so.”

At that moment it occurred to me that Jesus did know about my Sanhedrin scheme. I interpreted my sitting in the seat of honor as Jesus’ affirmation of my plan, a sign that he actually wanted me to be the catalyst for the coming events. I now see differently: sitting at his favored position would protect me from the disciples believing I was the betrayer. All this I missed as I dipped my bread into his bowl.

It was only after the arrest and trial that followed when I was finally honest about my wrong motives. How could I have been so blinded by my own prejudices? Jesus did indeed see everything, including my self-delusion of innocence as well as my greed and heart desire for control. Even though I was a misguided schemer, he let my plans stay their course. He knew my disloyalty was to be woven into his Father’s plan for the world’s salvation.

Jesus’ path of suffering and my betrayal were no accident and no surprise to him. If only I could have understood earlier.



A Prayer for the Heart

Oh Lord, I can hear my heart say, “Surely you don’t mean me?” Like Judas, I am often unaware of the extent of my scheming and how I betray your better purposes when I try to take things into my own hands. Yet even when I am blind to your perfect plans and deaf to your words of love and guidance, you give me a place of honor at your table. Jesus, I believe I can love my betrayers and enemies as you have loved me, even if sometimes the enemy is myself. Help my unbelief.

Reflect

How does knowing that Jesus was fully aware of Judas’ imminent betrayal speak to me about Christ’s character?



Tintoretto, *Jesus Before Pilate*, 1567, Oil on Canvas

A Word from Matthew (27:1-2, 11-14)

When morning came, all the chief priests and the elders of the people conferred together against Jesus in order to bring about his death. They bound him, led him away, and handed him over to Pilate the governor. Now Jesus stood before the governor; and the governor asked him, “Are you the King of the Jews?” Jesus said, “You say so.” But when he was accused by the chief priests and elders, he did not answer. Then Pilate said to him, “Do you not hear how many accusations they make against you?” But he gave him no answer, not even to a single charge, so that the governor was greatly amazed.

Pilate, Governor of Palestine, Speaks

Phe Jews are difficult and complex subjects, always stubborn and arrogant, but I’ve found they are especially dangerous during Passover. I had long decided that indulging them, as my predecessors had done, was the wrong way to control them. After crucifying more than my fair share of the rebels, those who had complained saw who was in charge, and their initial resistance fizzled.

Still, I don’t want Rome to think I have lost control here. I have since sought to find balance--keeping them under my power but still remaining on their good side.

I remember well the night when one of my men woke me and brought the prisoner Jesus to me from the previous night’s trial. This defendant must have threatened their well-protected power; why else would they break their holy law by not waiting the whole twenty-four hours to finalize their verdict?

I dressed and thought more about this case; the real issue was probably another one of their religious disputes. But why would they want me to ensure his death sentence? I only have the authority to execute someone who has violated Roman law. If their case was indeed based on a religious dispute, I would gladly dismiss it.

The judgment hall doors flew open wide and I walked inside to take my usual place. Ironically, the meeting began with their religious zealots at the other entrance refusing to step into our Roman courtroom. They claimed it would make them ritually unclean before their God.

How irritating. I shook my head at their hypocrisy; they were illegally rushing this trial to a death sentence yet still insistent on keeping their Jewish laws so they could eat tomorrow's Passover dinner with a clear conscience!

The other Jewish leaders took their seats, which were arranged at what they must have deemed a sanitary distance across the room.

I looked at the defendant and compared his serene face to the frenzied accusations. None of their stated charges matched who appeared to me as a harmless, rural preacher.

When one of them yelled, "He claims to be King of the Jews," I sat up straight. I definitely could not dismiss this charge outright. Wanting to hear from him, I stood and inquired of the accused man, "So, are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus answered quietly as he met my gaze, "You have spoken the truth. I am the King of the Jews."

His countenance was clear and seemed to penetrate right into my soul. However, I detected no fanaticism, rebellion, hatred, or even the slightest bit of anger. My spies had no knowledge of any plot to overthrow Emperor Tiberius...so what did his words mean?

As the leaders continued their wild accusations, Jesus refused to say anything more. "Don't you hear what they are saying about you," I asked. "Why don't you defend yourself?" If he had spoken up, I would have easily granted him freedom, but alas, I couldn't get another word out of him. Searching his eyes, I started to suspect something more profound was happening here in the moment beyond my understanding. His resolve to die, even this travesty of justice, was, in his mind, no accident.

A Prayer for the Heart

Thank you, Jesus, for the strength of your silence, prophesied by Isaiah so long ago: "He was silent and did not open his mouth, like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, like a sheep that is silent before his shearers" (Isaiah 53:8).

I spend much of my life defending my innocence, holding on to my rights, and protecting myself from injustice or being wrong. Jesus, forgive and have mercy on me. I admire your deep confidence that all was well when all the evidence seemed otherwise.

My King, amid life's chaos, teach me to pray and listen like you did. Lord, whenever I am tempted to be defensive, I believe you will help me to see and speak just like you did. Help my unbelief.

Reflect

How might Jesus' lack of rebuttal or defense speak to my experience of being misunderstood or misinterpreted by others?



Benjamin West, *The Women at the Sepulchre*, 1805, Oil on Panel

A Word from Matthew (28:1-6)

After the Sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning and his clothing white as snow. For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. But the angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay.”

Mary Magdalene Speaks

From the moment Jesus drove out my seven demons, I have loved and followed him. His arrest and death came so unexpectedly; the body of my beloved Master came off the cross crushed and lifeless.

I remember staring up at his limp, broken body with his mother, Mary, trembling next to me. I wept, sure that all my hopes had been burned to ashes. On the Sabbath day after Jesus’ death, we could do nothing but grieve—and deeply grieve we did, especially his mother.

When the sun appeared the following day, its rays could not diminish our despair. We were certain true light would never dawn again. Everything was dim. My soul echoed with his final cry, “My God, why have you forsaken me?” Jesus’ predictions of rising from the dead had faded from my memory and could offer me no comfort.

My determination to honor my Lord, however, did not waver. Sunday, at dawn, several women joined me in collecting linen and spices to take to the tomb. The thought of seeing his bloody, lifeless body was pushed aside by our unwavering commitment to this last act of loving service.

When we arrived, those Roman soldiers guarding the premises could see we were no threat and let us pass. They asked us how we would remove the stone without their help. Our walking slowed as we pondered the question. *If they didn’t move it, how would we get inside the tomb?* We hadn’t thought about how we would push aside the stone ourselves.

We immediately got the answer! A violent earthquake shook the ground under our feet. I cried out, grasped Mary's arm, and then looked up to see, glory to God, a being that stood beside the tomb. He could only be an angel dressed in a white garment more radiant than the purest snow! The early rays of sunlight reflected off him, illuminating the ground beneath his feet. My mouth hung open as he effortlessly rolled away the stone from its groove at the tomb's entrance.

As the tomb was opened, the Roman guards turned, intending to run far away, but ended up falling face down, unable to move or look up. Our group of women were equally afraid, but our feet would not move. The white of our faces must have matched the white of the angel's garments.

The angel spoke to us, eye to eye, "Do not be afraid! I am from God. All of heaven knows why you came this morning; you are looking for the dead body of Jesus. Your mission this morning is no longer to anoint his body but to come in and see for yourselves that he has risen. You are surprised, but you should not be. Jesus told you all that after he suffered and died, he would rise from the dead."

And so, in that garden, on the first day of the week, the light of a new creation dawned right before us.

We edged forward, aching to believe. Our vision slowly adjusted to the darkness as we crouched down to enter the tomb. We saw with our own eyes the stone bench where the Master had been lain. I walked in, touched the empty slab, and saw the linens nearby. My friend Mary suddenly laughed, a beautiful sound that echoed in the empty tomb. The tears that glittered in our eyes were joined with more joyful gasps, laughs, and disbelief.

We didn't yet understand, but we believed!

You might wonder at God's wisdom to have chosen women as the resurrection's first witnesses, those who aren't taken seriously in daily life or in a courtroom. Remember: God often chooses the world's unlikely people for special tasks. It's his way.

Yes, Jesus is alive! His promised resurrection makes clear that his death was undoubtedly no accident; rather, it stands out as the central chapter in the story of new life.



A Prayer for the Heart

Lord Jesus, those who have long known this story's ending can find it hard to feel the wonder we ought. I am thankful for the story of Mary Magdalene at the tomb, which makes the story so alive!

Jesus, your resurrection today brings the true hope of new life to all people, in all places, in all circumstances. Your Easter promise is that we will one day rise up from the dead and out of our own tombs. Amid all the compelling evidence to the contrary, this world is blooming with your resurrection life, the life that is more powerful than death. Yes, Lord, I believe! Help my unbelief.

Reflect

What heaviness of heart or burden might I bring to the risen Jesus? What do I want to receive from him today?