

Week 29

Jesus Dies for Us

Guide: Present at Calvary



We pause this week to be with Jesus in death. There are few moments of intimacy greater than the privilege of being with someone we love in the last hours of his or her life. We want to enter into the whole scene that surrounds his death and the treasured memories of the early Christian communities.

We also want to connect the meaning of Jesus' death for us with the realities of our everyday lives. We want to consciously move through our days with a heightened sense of awareness about how his death gives hope to us in our fidelity, our struggles, each day.

We begin by prayerfully reading the accounts of the scene at Calvary, in Luke and John. We enter these scenes with our own imagination—where we choose to stand, where we look, what others are saying, what we feel. It is very important to imagine the scene of taking him down from the cross and, perhaps to join in the tender cleaning of his body and the sorrowful carrying it to the tomb. The reality of death is complete. We then can let these images fill the background of each day. From the earliest conscious thoughts of our morning to the final concluding thoughts of our day, we want to let ourselves be touched by the death of Jesus for us.

We can be especially conscious about four areas of our lives, to which Jesus' dying brings life and freedom:

- *Our Sin.* What we have done, what we are doing, and what we are tempted to do to separate ourselves from God, as well as all the ways we fall short of self-sacrificing love.
- *Our Diminishment.* Any of the ways we experience death: our growing older, our failing health, a physical or personal handicap, perhaps our own approaching death, experiences we have that are humiliating, our inadequacies, being rejected, financial difficulties, family stresses, a broken relationship, feelings of hopelessness, being disillusioned, the experience of depression, the loss of a loved one,
- *Difficulties with Others.* All the conflicts in our day-to-day life with difficult people that lead to mutual suffering, hurts, and the breakdown of unity.
- *Sin in the World.* The stories that fill the headlines and the day-to-day world around us: war, genocide, dehumanizing social structures, the unjust distribution of the world's wealth and resources, political oppression, abortion, child abuse, the drug economy, all senseless violence, capital punishment, bigotry, demagoguery, the destruction of our environment, dishonesty, infidelity, greed, consumerism.

Use the resources here to help with this wonderful week of being with Jesus in his death for us. Use the stations of the cross to enter the experience more personally.

Let us all give thanks each evening for the one who shows us the deepest meaning of the Good News—we are free from the power of sin and death over us. By entering our life and death completely, Jesus fell into the hands of a loving God, who raised him and us to life, redeeming all sin and death forever.

Some Practical Help for Getting Started This Week

Spending a week with Jesus at Calvary is really not very difficult. It is only a matter of focus. It is made easier by our having grown in love with Jesus over the past four months. We know we are loved sinners. We have experienced his call to join him in his mission. We have prayed with growing desire to understand his life and have felt the power of his showing us who he is, in great detail. Now we come to experience how completely human he was.

We want to be touched by the meaning of his death for us. This is not a week of theological reflection. This is a time to focus on the reality of death. Our culture rarely faces the reality of death. We distance ourselves from its experience. For all of the death and violence around us, few of us have witnessed anyone's death or touched a dead body to experience the coldness of death's lifelessness. People rarely die at home, and funeral homes take the body of a loved one fairly quickly and embalm it, put makeup on its face and hands, dress it up, and lay it out, like the person is only sleeping.

This makes it more difficult for us to imagine looking up at Jesus hanging in this terribly cruel and unbelievably painful form of execution. It makes it doubly difficult to imagine his lifeless body—the sign of the reality of his death. But as we focus each morning on our desire to be with him in his death, the graces we have received up to now will help us desire to follow him all the way to the end of his life.

As we focus on each area of our lives touched by the death of Jesus, as outlined in the guide, we can end each day with some words of gratitude. Perhaps I will want to express my feelings out loud or in writing. Each night, the expression of gratitude and intimacy grows. Perhaps I have a cross in my home, or even in my bedroom, which I can make a point of looking at or touching reverently. I might be moved to begin and end each day by tracing a cross on my forehead or over my heart as I wake up and before I sleep. This can help us consciously focus at the beginning and end of each day. With such a focus each morning and evening this week, leading to our walking through each day with a heightened awareness of the power Jesus' dying has for my faith, hope, and love today, I will never be able to look at a cross again without being powerfully reminded of the love that that sign means for me.

Use the other resources offered this week, perhaps especially "The Stations of the Cross" Web page. Let "For the Journey" and the "In These or Similar Words . . ." deepen the experience further. The God who has brought us this far will be with us to give us more than we can ask or imagine.

For the Journey: At the Foot of the Cross

We adore you, O Christ, and we bless you, because you have embraced us while embracing the cross. When pain can make a person self-preoccupied, there walks Jesus still ministering with his gentle words and gestures. We watch him and listen to his words from the throne of the cross. "Forgive them . . ." With our imaginations we are privileged to witness God's final statement about who we are.

We have watched the violence of scourging, crowning with thorns, stumbling under the weight of the cross, and the mockery of his tormenters. Now we stand with Mary where it is not violent but safe. At the foot of the cross we can say anything we want or anything we usually say about ourselves, but those words and images pale in meaning and importance when we stand at his feet and receive what he is saying over us. We are safe here; we stand in the shadow of the cross. This shadow cancels our personal shadows, our guilt and shame. There can be some shame in our spirits flowing from our realization that it has taken all this to impress on us how loved we really have been all during our wanderings and strayings.

As he is dying, the crowds give up their jeering and move away to continue their celebrating of the Passover within the city of Jerusalem. We stay in the quiet celebration of the “new and everlasting covenant.” Doubts and fears have chased most of his friends away, but he has remained faithful, and we pray to receive encouragement to our staying faithful to him. Away from the shadow of the cross, our shadows lengthen and our past infidelities incline us to not believe and not receive all that he has said about us while on his journey to the cross of cancellation. We gratefully return to our watching place, his watching place. We listen to his final benediction and pledge of faith in his Father’s care.

Ignatius asks those making the Exercises to quietly receive at this second Eucharistic celebration all that is offered. We look up at this cruciform altar and ponder the words of the prophet Isaiah: “Here is the Servant of the Lord. He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief and we esteemed him not” (Isaiah 53:3). We pray with our hands open to accept this mystery of our being loved this much and for always. At the foot of the cross our arguments falter and our questions about worthiness are rendered absurd. We watch, we listen, we are safe, and we find ourselves created anew, again.

“Who has believed what we have heard?” (Isaiah 53:1). We do, as we refuse to turn away with clenched hands of unworthiness and shame. We stand there until we feel safe to let them take him down. It is a holy stand we take these days of receptivity. “He was wounded for our sins, he was bruised for our iniquity; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his stripes we are healed”(Isaiah 53:4).

In These or Similar Words . . .

What happened? Dearest Jesus, how did it all come to this? How is it that I am looking up at you hanging there in such incredible agony? We are huddled here in fear and disbelief. Your mother, the other women. John. A few others.

I look at you writhing in pain, unable to breathe, pulling yourself up by your nailed wrists just to gasp for air. I see you look down at me with your warm, familiar eyes veiled in pain, but it is still you. I see my dear friend, the one who has been with me through so many terrible moments in my life. Now I stand here with you, unable to do anything.

Oh, Jesus, why? Why did this happen? I know intellectually that it was to enter so fully into my life and my pain, and the pain of everyone else. But so much pain? How can one person bear it all?

I realize that as I stand here, I have been holding on to your mother’s arm. Mary, who is so grieved that she is having a hard time standing. Mary, who has sat with me for so many hours as I’ve talked with you about my life. Now I see her almost doubled over in grief. Oh, Jesus, I don’t want you to even see her pain because it will only add to yours.

She understands so well that your life is slipping away. We watch and pray and hold on to each other, this small knot of silent people who love you so much. Then I realize that as much as you mean to me, as much as I don’t want you to die, I can’t stand to watch you suffer either. Please God, let him be at peace. Let him pass out or die. Don’t let him suffer so much.

But still, you continue to gasp and pull yourself up to breathe, in spite of the torturous pain as the nails rip down into the nerves in your arms. We listen as you pray, continue to ask the father for help, and then, finally, surrender to him. Your pale body, covered with dirt and blood trembles a final time and then is still. Mary turns to her sister and falls into her arms, but she has no tears left. The rest of us hold one another in silence and numbness. The soldiers come and take down the body, and as it drops to the ground, Mary lifts you into her arms.

Oh, the pain in her face as she sees you! I want to help her. I want to be there for her because I know you would want me to be there. She holds your lifeless body gently and with such love, just as she did for so many years. She looks at me silently, tragically. I find a jar of water and I use my cloak to get it wet. If only I can

wash the blood off your face. If only I can stop the blood from running down from the thorns. I want to do this so Mary won't have to keep seeing you in such pain. Mary Magdalene and I remove the thorns from your head and wipe your face as your mother kisses it.

Dear God, help us! Be with us in this pain and confusion. Jesus, help us to make some sense out of your suffering. Help me to see how you are a part of my suffering each day and how this act joined you to the deepest sufferings of all of us.

Thank you, God, for the gift of Jesus. Thank you, Jesus, for your life in mine. I feel it somehow, even in the midst of this.

Scripture Readings

Luke 23:26–56

John 19:16–42

Psalm 31