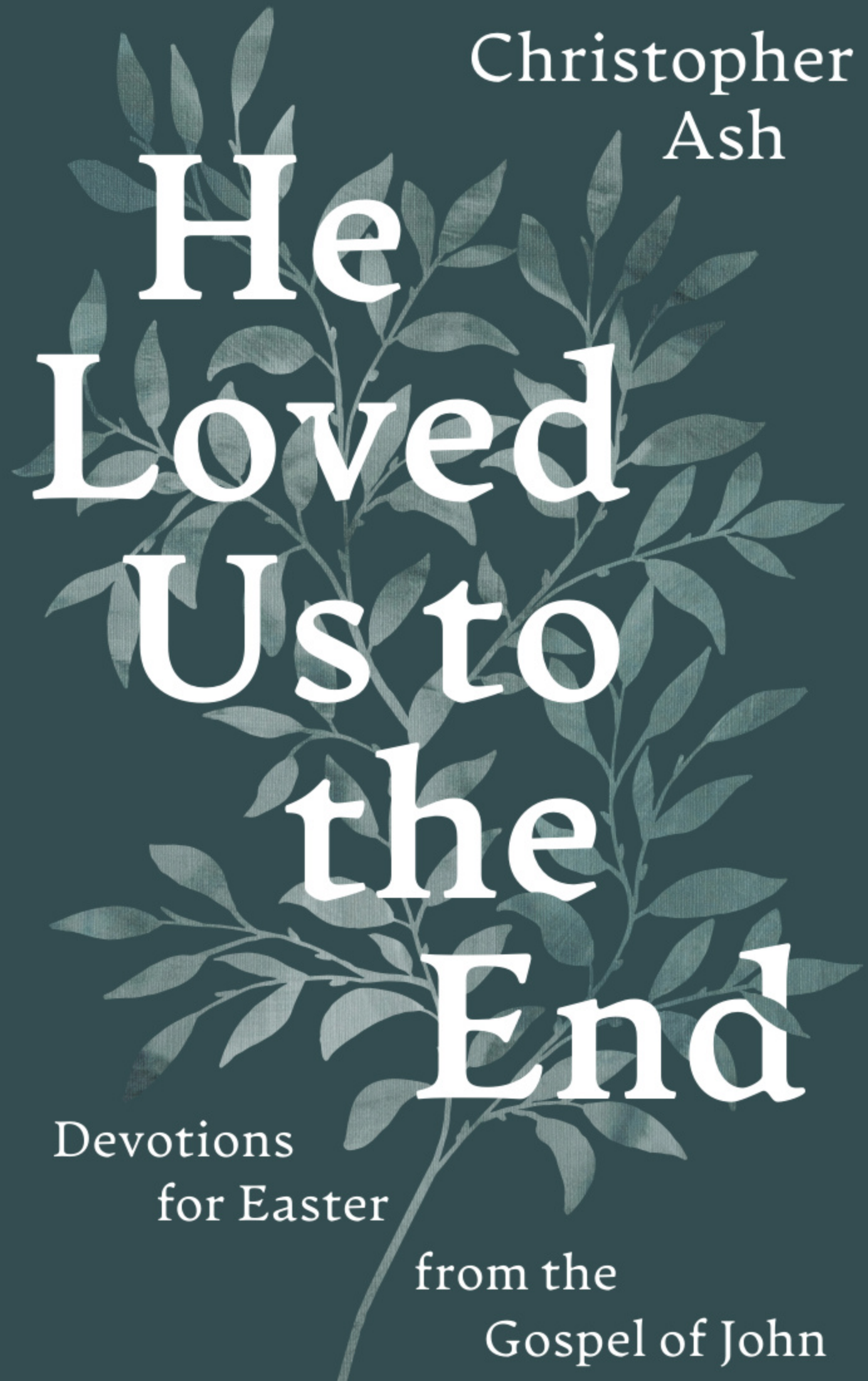




Christopher
Ash

He
Loved
Us to
the
End

Devotions
for Easter

from the
Gospel of John

“Christopher Ash has a unique ability to help readers slow down, quiet their hearts, and linger over the tenderness of Jesus. In *He Loved Us to the End*, Ash walks carefully through the late chapters of John’s Gospel, showing us the suffering of Christ and the basis of our salvation. These devotions direct our gaze upon Jesus as our loving Savior. Read it by yourself, with family and friends, or even with the whole church. I can’t recommend it highly enough!”

DAVE FURMAN, Chancellor, Gulf Theological Seminary;
Author, *Being There; Embracing God in your Suffering*

“Christopher Ash has a remarkable gift for helping readers slow down and hear the word of Christ. In *He Loved Us to the End*, he walks us carefully through John’s account of Jesus’ passion, weaving together rich biblical reflection and warm pastoral application. Ash’s Sunday reflections are short but powerful—helping us to consider Jesus in the Psalms as we prepare for our corporate worship gathering. The result is a devotional that is both deeply theological and wonderfully accessible. Whether you’re looking to prepare your own heart for Easter or searching for a book to give to a friend exploring the meaning of the cross, this volume will point you again and again to the steadfast love of Christ.”

TONY MERIDA, Pastor, Imago Dei Church;
Author, *Love Your Church*

“Utterly compelling. Christopher Ash walks through John 18 – 19 in a way that brings Jesus’ final hours to life in your mind’s eye, uncovering the significance of details that you’d never noticed before or that are easy to rush past. I finished this thoughtful devotional with a deeper appreciation for the Easter story and, more importantly, for the man at its heart.”

RACHEL JONES, Women’s Ministry Lead, Kings Church,
Chessington; Author, *The Quiet Time Kickstart*

“A masterclass in devotional writing, staying true to the text but at the same time inviting you to sit at Jesus’ feet. Christopher Ash’s expositions of the final chapters of John’s Gospel show us the very heart of Jesus. A wonderful aid for the days leading up to Easter.”

DEREK W.H. THOMAS, Chancellor’s Professor,
Reformed Theological Seminary; Teaching Fellow,
Ligonier Ministries

“I am so thankful to Christopher for this book, which takes us slowly through these chapters and helps us to sit in and ponder the shocking reality of what was actually happening to Jesus. I was confronted afresh by the treachery and horror of sin—of my sin—and in the light of that, I was deeply moved by seeing and experiencing ever more of what it cost the Lord Jesus to love us to the end.”

ANDREA TREVENNA, Women’s Minister, St. Nicholas’
Church, Sevenoaks; Author, *The Heart of Singleness*

“Christopher Ash, with a pastoral pen and a scholar’s expertise, guides readers into the heaviness of the cross—to help us feel the glory, gravity, and goodness of the gospel. This book is a ticket for the journey of enjoying the Christ who died and is alive forevermore. Peer into these paragraphs and pages and behold the love of your Lord.”

J.A. MEDDERS, Director of Theology and Content, Send Network; General Editor and Fellow, The Spurgeon Library;
Author, *Humble Calvinism*

Christopher Ash

He Loved Us to the End

Devotions for Easter from
the Gospel of John

The Good Book
COMPANY

He Loved Us to the End

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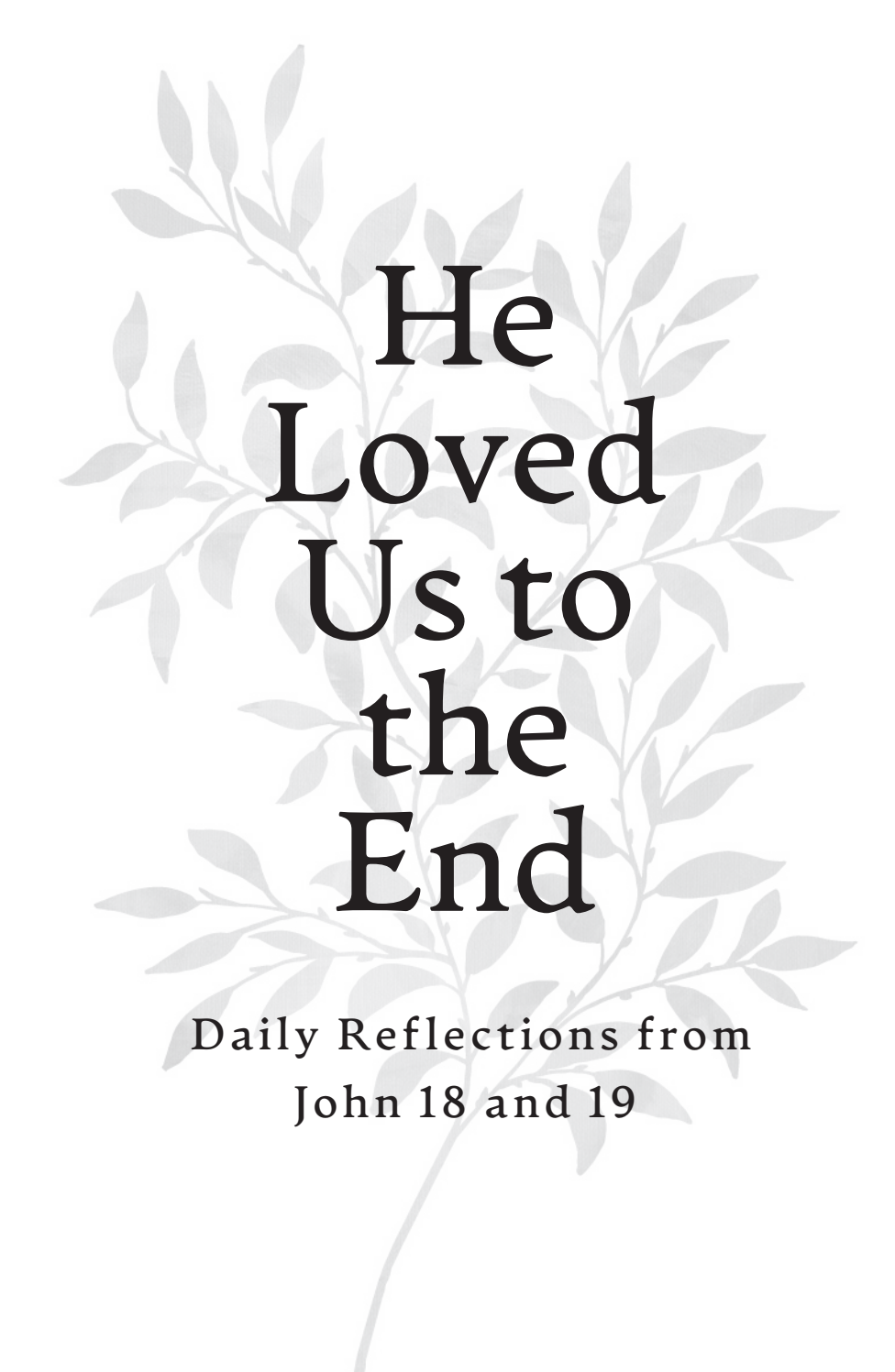
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He Loved Us to the End

Daily Reflections from
John 18 and 19



Introduction

Let me invite you to walk with me through the story of the love of Christ. I hope it will do you good. I hope it will draw you to worship. I hope it will nourish you in faith, as it has for me. On weekdays and Saturdays, we are going to travel slowly through chapters 18 and 19 of John's Gospel before ending with the resurrection on Easter Day.

For those who think of these weeks before Easter as Lent, we are going to start on what has traditionally been called Ash Wednesday. For others, please just think of this as a devotional walk to the cross and resurrection.

At the start of each week, on Sunday, the Lord's Day, we will break our series in John's Gospel to ponder a psalm or part of a psalm that bears on our themes and that Jesus might have sung in his prayers and praises.

I have used the English Standard Version for our devotions, but you will be able to follow easily enough in any good English translation.



Day 1

Ash Wednesday

When Jesus had spoken these words...

John 18:1

Come with me on a slow and thoughtful walk with Jesus as he is betrayed, arrested, tried and crucified (as recorded in John's Gospel). Our journey begins with the phrase, "When Jesus had spoken these words..." John looks back to the prayer of Jesus and the extraordinary final evening with his apostles (including what is sometimes called "The Upper-Room Discourse"). All of that seems to be encompassed in "these words". As John begins the story that leads to the crucifixion, he wants us to remember that it follows on from what Jesus has just spoken.

So, as a kind of headline for this whole story, I want to take us right back to the start of John 13, where John tells us:

Now before the Feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. (v 1)

In chapters 13 – 16 Jesus speaks lovingly to his own. In chapter 17 he prays for his own. The phrase “his own” refers immediately to the twelve apostles but also to those who will later believe in him through their testimony (v 20). It means every man, woman and child whom the Father has given to the Son in eternity and therefore whom the Son has promised to raise up on the last day (6:37-40). It means everyone down the ages who believes in Jesus—an uncountable multitude from every nation, people and language (Revelation 7:9).

John tells us that Jesus has already loved his own who were in the world. For the past three years, ever since he chose and called the apostles, he has loved them, day by day. The Gospels paint the story of that love.

And now John says, “He loved them to the end”. This means both to the end of time and—perhaps even more important—to the utmost limit of love. He could not love them more. There is no love beyond the love with which Jesus loves his own. It is not possible to find or even to imagine a greater love than this.

Chapters 18 and 19 of John’s Gospel show us that love extended to the utmost limit of devotion. As we ponder John’s story, sentence by sentence, word by word, moment by moment over the coming weeks, let us remember that every phrase is telling the story of Jesus’ love. This love does not hang in space like some abstract theory. This is the love that comes to you today.

He knows your heart; he sees your circumstances; he reads your sorrows and knows your joys; he comprehends your hopes; and his searching eye gazes on your fears. And he loves you. Ahead of you in these coming

weeks is the story of his love. This love is “to the end”. There can be nothing in your life, your relationships, your circumstances, your health, your hopes or your fears that is beyond the reach of his love. Treasure that as you read day by day.

For Reflection

- What in your life can make you doubt the unchanging love of Jesus?
- Set each of your sorrows against the amazing love of Jesus. Ask God to fill your heart with the assurance of his love, however hard your trials.

Prayer

Father in heaven, I bow in worship and adoration at the unchanging, passionate love that you pour out for me in Jesus, my Saviour. Forgive me when I forget and do not feel the wonder of that love. Pour that love into my heart afresh today by the Holy Spirit, that I may feel again how deeply Jesus loves me. In Jesus’ name, amen.



Day 2

Thursday

When Jesus had spoken these words, he went out with his disciples across the Kidron Valley, where there was a garden, which he and his disciples entered. Now Judas, who betrayed him, also knew the place, for Jesus often met there with his disciples.

John 18:1

We have here a “going out” and a “coming in”: an exit and an entry. From the start of chapter 13, Jesus has been with the Twelve in the upper room in Jerusalem. Before long, Judas Iscariot “went out”. (The same verb is used in 13:30.) Again and again we are told that Judas will betray him: “The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon’s son, to betray him” (v 2); “one of you will betray me” (v 21). Jesus said, “It is he to whom I will give this morsel of bread when I have dipped it” (v 26). So, when he had done so, he gave it to Judas Iscariot. Then, after Judas had taken the morsel, Satan entered into him. Judas immediately *went out*. “And”, says John, “it was night” (v 30).

Later in the evening, Jesus “went out” and did so with the Twelve, minus Judas Iscariot. Earlier, Jesus had

said, “Rise, let us go from here” (14:31), and it is possible they left the upper room at that point and began walking through the city. But now they have left the city behind and are crossing the valley of the brook or wadi Kidron, on the east of Jerusalem, to the Mount of Olives on the other side.

First Judas goes out, and then Jesus goes out with the Eleven. But then there is a “coming in”. Literally it reads, *where there was a garden, into which he entered, he and his disciples*. John emphasises that this garden is entered into. It is, it would seem, enclosed. Jesus does not take his people to an open space but into a garden that perhaps has walls. John also stresses that Jesus entered together with “his disciples”.

To those with long Bible memories, this might seem hopeful. After all, it was with expulsion from a garden that the sad human story began after the Fall (Genesis 3:23-24). And now Jesus brings his disciples into a garden.

But it is also ominous, for John makes a point of telling us that “Judas, who betrayed him, also knew the place”. Of course he did, “for Jesus often met there *with his disciples*” (which used to include Judas). So far only Jesus and the Eleven have come into the garden. Will Judas also come in?

This garden is not a place to hide inside. Jesus deliberately and intentionally takes his disciples with him into a space that simultaneously speaks of hope (memories of Eden) and danger (the threat of Judas).

We have only just begun our journey through the story of Jesus’ love. But already it reminds us that

Jesus, in his wise love, still takes his disciples into places that speak both of hope and of danger. Perhaps he has done that with you now, at the time you are reading these words. You carry with you the hope of Eden restored, the promises of the gospel, the down payment of the Holy Spirit in your life. Your life is hidden with Christ in God (Colossians 3:3).

And yet Jesus seems deliberately to have brought you to a place of darkness and threat. Things are hard. But remember this: he has done so in his love. He will love you to the end. This place in which you find yourself is not an accident or a break or gap in his love; it is exactly the place to which he has deliberately brought you in his love. In the next few days we shall see why he does this.

For Reflection

- Take time to consider the “place” in which you find yourself just now, with Jesus the Saviour. Does it feel in any way like a place of hope and a place of danger?

Prayer

Almighty Father, I thank you for Jesus your Son, who is my Saviour. And I thank you that, just as he deliberately brought his disciples to a garden on that fateful night, so he intentionally brings me where he chooses, and that all this is the outworking of his purposes of wonderful love. I thank you in Jesus’ name. Amen.

A decorative illustration of a leafy branch, possibly olive, arching across the top of the page.

Day 3

Friday

So Judas, having procured a band of soldiers and some officers from the chief priests and the Pharisees, went there with lanterns and torches and weapons.

John 18:3

Judas has come to join the disciples in the garden, as he had often done before. Perhaps there were other occasions when Judas or another disciple turned up a little later than the rest and this was not in itself unusual. It could even be encouraging when the twelfth man arrives to complete the group. Maybe on other evenings that was so. But not on this night.

Today we feel the terror of the threat to the disciples. John tells us who Judas had procured to come with him. First, “a band of soldiers”. The word “band” is literally a detachment or cohort of Roman soldiers. A full cohort consisted of 600 soldiers. Even if not all 600 came, this was surely an example of overwhelming force. The Romans were good at this—in Acts 23 they deployed 470 armed men to protect one prisoner! Presumably the number here was because they thought they might

find a fierce armed gang of disciples set on insurrection. But here they are, a small unthreatening group approached by an intimidating unit.

Second he brings “some officers from the chief priests and the Pharisees”—members of what we would probably call the temple security services. So Judas comes with the power of Rome—the imperial occupying power—and the power of the Jewish authorities.

These men carry “lanterns and torches” as if they were men of light. But they are men of darkness. When Judas earlier went out from the upper room, John says significantly that “it was night” (John 13:30). Judas is now a man with darkness in his soul, and he brings along men he has persuaded to join him in a work of darkness, for these men also carry “weapons” to do evil. Ironically, the lanterns and torches mean that there is nowhere for the disciples to hide from the powers of darkness.

Picture yourself having entered the garden with Jesus, as a member of his church (for the apostles are, in a way, his church in embryo.) You are trapped. And coming to get you is an overwhelming force that combines the powers of Rome and of the temple. In some way, this is a picture of the plight in which each one of us finds ourselves in this world. We are trapped by the power of sin, to which we are enslaved. We are condemned to eternal death, for this is the wages of our sin. And even after we turn to Christ, we are threatened daily by the world (humankind in hostility to God and his Christ), the flesh (our own sinful nature) and the devil (the prince of darkness). And there is—or there appears to be—no escape.

Although we may know how the story ends, it is worth pausing at this terrifying moment in the drama, because this is you and this is me as the church of Christ. Many of our brothers and sisters throughout the world daily experience the terror of violent persecution. They understand very clearly what it is to be threatened by overwhelming forces of darkness. We too ought to know what it is to be trapped in a culture or under a religion that is deeply hostile to Christ. It may seem strange to have such a downbeat entry in a daily devotional. But we will feel the wonder of what comes next all the more if we pause to feel the fear.

For Reflection

- Think for a minute about the forces that threaten your life in Christ. Take a moment to name them.
- Do any of them masquerade as the forces of light, as it were, carrying torches with them?

Prayer

God, my Heavenly Father, I ask today that you will open the eyes of my heart that I may see more clearly the powers arrayed against the church of Christ—that I may see them as they threaten me, that I may feel with a sober realism the fear that arises as I face them. But help me to feel this fear only in the knowledge that Jesus, my Saviour, is with me. Amen.



Day 4

Saturday

*Then Jesus, knowing all that would happen to him,
came forward and said to them,*

“Whom do you seek?”

They answered him, “Jesus of Nazareth.”

Jesus said to them, “I am he.”

Judas, who betrayed him, was standing with them.

*When Jesus said to them, “I am he,” they
drew back and fell to the ground.*

John 18:4

The disciples are invisible in these verses. They are somewhere there in the garden, perhaps trying vainly to hide, threatened—as we saw yesterday—by the overwhelming forces of darkness. What we see is Jesus standing alone, face to face with all who threaten his people. Four things about Jesus are interwoven here: what he knows, what he does, what he asks and how he answers.

He knows “all that would happen to him”. John is clear and emphatic about this. The words “Then Jesus...” could be translated “Jesus therefore...” What he does and what he says here spring from what he knows. This

is extraordinary. He knows he will be tried, condemned and crucified. And *therefore* he comes forward to face the soldiers, the Jewish guards and Judas. He chooses to stand in front of his disciples and look eye to eye at the foe. Such is his love.

He knows, he comes forward and then he asks a question: "Whom do you seek?" Behind this question lies another: *Do you need all these soldiers and weapons? Do you have a worthy target for your hostility?* They answer, "Jesus of Nazareth". I imagine the Roman soldiers had very little idea of what was going on. They had been told to go and arrest some Jewish troublemaker from the north of the country, where Nazareth was, and "Jesus of Nazareth" was the name on their order sheet. No doubt the officers from the priests and Pharisees knew rather more. But the man who knows most of all is Judas, who is "standing with them", his position reflecting where he now belongs. Before, he would have stood with Jesus. But no longer. Now he stands with the powers of darkness. He has joined the many against the one solitary Jesus. From the look of things, Judas has chosen the wiser side, hasn't he?

And then Jesus answers, "I am he". Literally just "I am"—two words that can simply mean "Yes, that's me" but can also hint at the divine name in the Old Testament: "I am who I am" (Exodus 3:14). And something—John does not tell us what—in his manner, his voice, his presence and these simple words causes them to pull back in awe and fall down to the ground in worship, or at least fear. It must have been an extraordinary and unforgettable sight: that large band of soldiers

falling prostrate on the ground. What authority dwells in Jesus of Nazareth!

The Jesus who stands in front of his church, facing the powers of darkness, is just one man from an insignificant village in the north of the country—a nobody and certainly no threat to the Roman Empire! And yet... He stands there as the eternal God the Son. We shall learn more in the coming days about what he will do for his people. But, for today, let us pause to bow in adoration at the humility and the majesty knitted together in our Saviour, the man who is God, as he stands for us before all the powers of darkness. What a Saviour!

For Reflection

- Take some time to picture this scene, to fix its drama and its characters, its light and its darkness, in your mind and heart. See here your Saviour standing alone for you.
- Ponder for a moment where Judas “stands” and how this speaks of his real allegiance. Pray that you will never stand in that same place.

Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, I come before you today, not in abject terror as these men did but in loving adoration. I bow before the majesty of your divine person; you are God the Son from all eternity. I bow before the humility that is content to be known as Jesus from Nazareth. Above all, I bow before the wonder of your love for me, and I thank you for facing every power of darkness for me. Amen.



The First Week of Lent



Sunday

Today we read extracts from Psalm 55, a psalm of betrayal.

- ¹² *For it is not an enemy who taunts me—
then I could bear it;
it is not an adversary who deals insolently with
me—
then I could hide from him.*
- ¹³ *But it is you, a man, my equal,
my companion, my familiar friend.*
- ¹⁴ *We used to take sweet counsel together;
within God's house we walked in the throng ...*
- ²⁰ *My companion stretched out his hand against his
friends;
he violated his covenant.*
- ²¹ *His speech was smooth as butter,
yet war was in his heart;
his words were softer than oil,
yet they were drawn swords.*
- ²² *Cast your burden on the LORD,
and he will sustain you;
he will never permit
the righteous to be moved.*

(Psalm 55:12-14, 20-22)

“We may read these strains as expressing David’s feelings in some peculiar seasons of distress, and as the experience of Christ’s Church in every age ... Yet still it is in Jesus, the Man of Sorrows, that the Psalm finds its fullest illustration. His was the soul that was stirred to its lowest depths by scenes such as are described here.”

(Andrew Bonar, *Christ and His Church
in the Book of Psalms*)

A decorative illustration of a leafy branch, possibly olive, arching across the top of the page.

Day 5

Monday

So he asked them again, “Whom do you seek?” And they said, “Jesus of Nazareth.” Jesus answered, “I told you that I am he. So, if you seek me, let these men go.”

John 18:7-8

In the next two chapters we watch a strange and surprising scene. Today we see what Jesus does; tomorrow we learn why he does it.

It is easy to skim over these words. But they tell us something that is astonishing, just simply in human and political terms. If a force of armed police go to arrest a suspected troublemaker or even a terrorist and they find him accompanied by other men, what do they do? Obviously, they arrest them all. It would be more than a police chief's job is worth to arrest the leader and just let the others go free, ready—one would assume—to appoint a new leader and continue their troublemaking. No, the reason for sending this large force of arms is precisely to take the whole group into custody, however many they find. It would be very surprising if this did not happen, especially with ruthlessly efficient Romans involved.

So what is Jesus doing here? He asks them once, “Whom do you seek?” and, when they say, “Jesus of Nazareth”, he replies, “I am he” (or just “I am”). They fall down in fear. So now, as they begin to recognise something of the power of his presence, he asks again. Again they reply, “Jesus of Nazareth”.

Having now got them twice to say that it is he they are looking for, he goes on with these vital and surprising words: “So, if you seek me, let these men go”. As he speaks immediately after they have fallen to the ground before him, these words come with a strange authority. The obvious answer would be “Most certainly not. You are all coming with us into custody.” But somehow they do not—they dare not—refuse him. His words are spoken not so much as a polite request but more as an authoritative command.

When we listen to him say, “Let these men go”, we hear him begin to do something for us. We are not going to suffer alongside him; he is going to be taken away for us, in our place. There will come a time when we suffer with him, but it is not yet. First, he must do for us that which we cannot do for ourselves. Those words—“let these men go”—demonstrate that he loves us to the very end. By what he is about to endure, he will set us free. By nature we are trapped, like the disciples in the garden—locked in slavery to sin, guarded by the law of God, which condemns our failures and transgressions, immured in darkness, cold and without hope in the world. We too, like those first disciples, are face to face with an overwhelming force that has the power to take us away to a terrible end. Unless our Master stands

before these powers as our majestic Saviour, we have no hope. And so today you and I can rejoice to hear him facing the darkness for us and saying over your name and over mine, *Let these men, these women, these children go free*. To those words the powers of darkness have no answer. Nothing can separate us from the love of Christ, our mighty Saviour.

For Reflection

- Take time to consider how every one of us is like the disciples in the garden at this moment. In what ways are you trapped and threatened with captivity and judgment?
- Hear afresh Jesus say over you, *Let—insert your own name—go free*. Believe afresh that the powers of darkness must obey that command.

Prayer

Almighty God, I speak to you today as a sinner. Your good and perfect law surrounds me and condemns me for my sins—my conscious and deliberate disobediences and my unconscious and all-pervasive sinful nature. Yet I can thank you and praise you for Jesus, my strong Saviour. Grant that today my heart will thrill to the freedom for which he has set me free. Amen.