

# Reflections on the Savior's Last Week

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*A study of the events leading up to the Resurrection can draw us closer to the Savior and foster a deeper understanding of the Atonement.*

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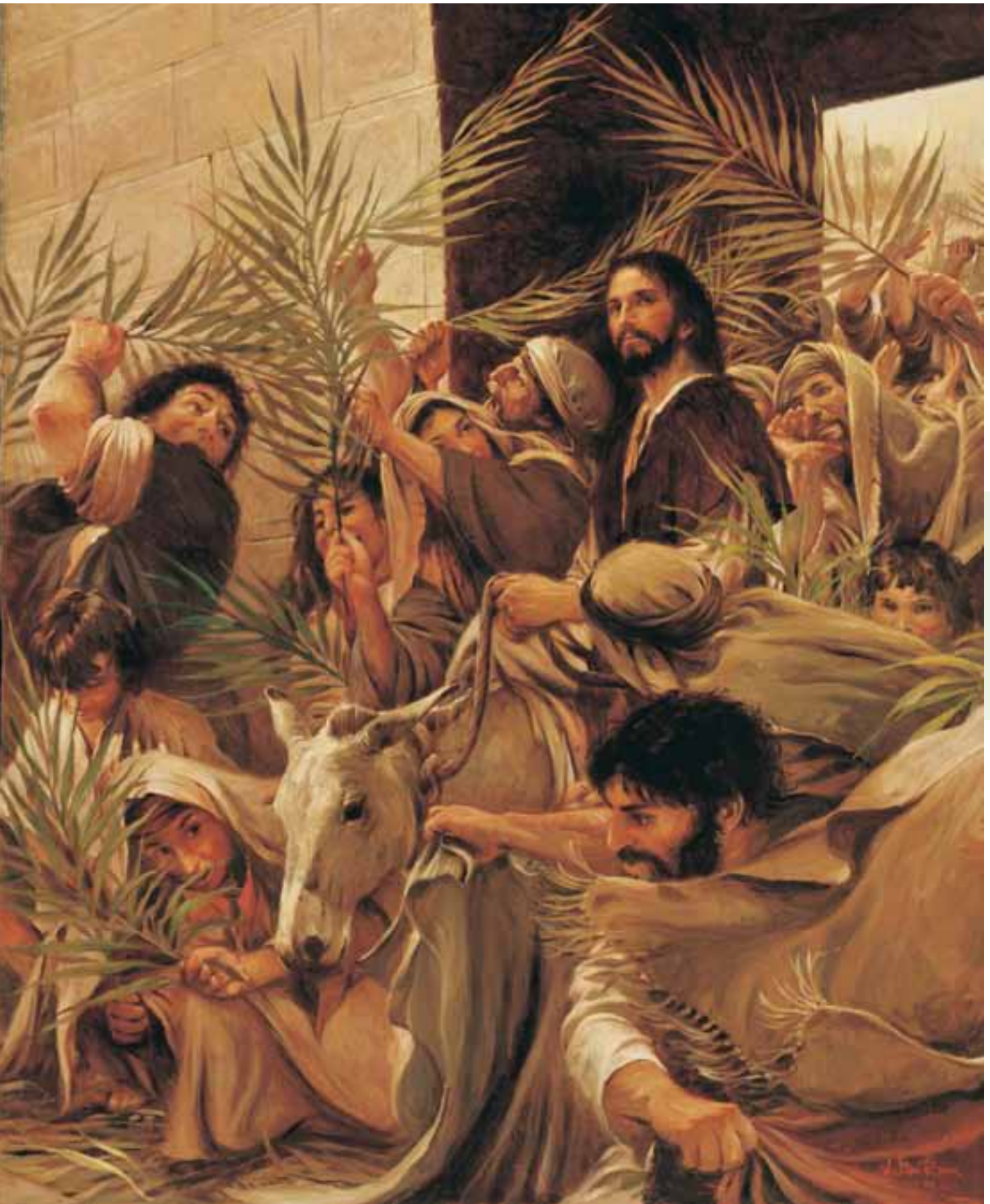
As we approach the Easter season, Christians worldwide prepare to commemorate the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ by reading and reflecting upon the scriptural accounts of the last days of His mortal ministry. The most important parts of this story—the Savior's atoning work, consisting of His suffering in the Garden of Gethsemane, His crucifixion, and His triumphant rising from the tomb—are well known to Latter-day Saints. We are grateful for Restoration scripture that gives us added insights and understanding of their significance.

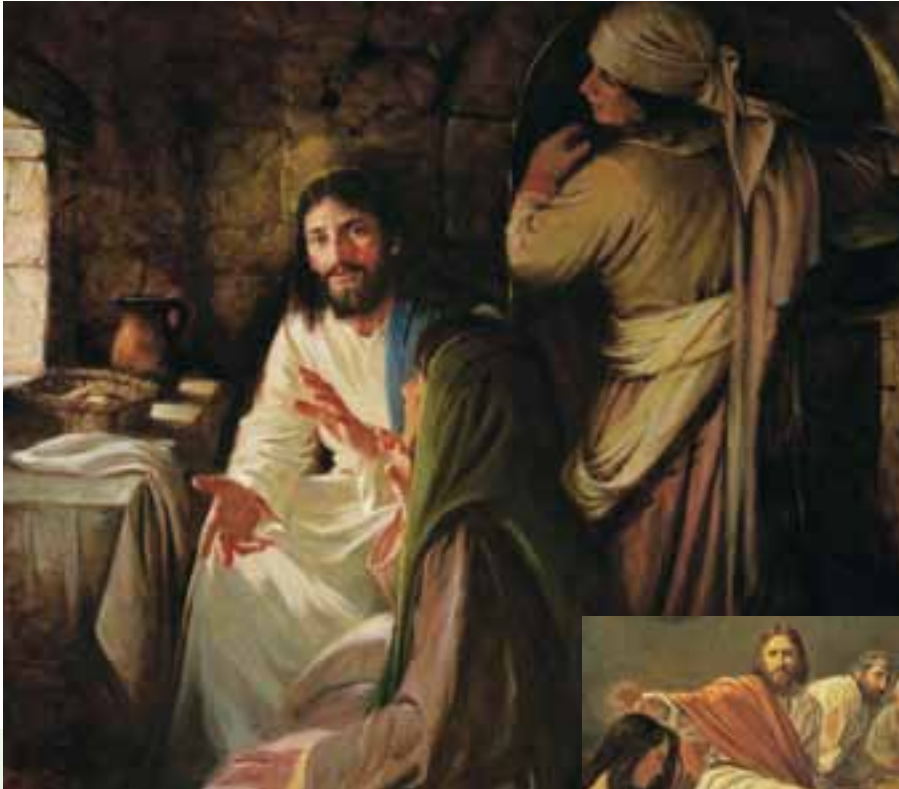
However, the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John include additional events that prepare Christians to understand the symbolism of the Atonement and why Jesus was uniquely qualified to work "an infinite and eternal sacrifice" (Alma 34:10). Occasionally the four Gospel authors differ in their emphasis of certain aspects of these events, but these differences do not detract from the historical truth of the

Savior's actions and teachings. Indeed, they give readers added insights and perspectives into "four mosaics"<sup>1</sup> that function together like different facets of the same diamond.

## Chronology

For many Christians, "Holy Week" describes a season of observance that begins with Palm Sunday and ends on Easter morning. The Gospels include many events, teachings, and parables from this week. The traditionally accepted sequence of events for this week largely follows the Gospel of Mark, though each of the Gospels provides relative time indicators for each day of Holy Week. However, the four Gospels are actually sparing in chronological detail, so the dating of some events, such as the timing of Passover, is more complicated than it might seem.<sup>2</sup> The only day of the week clearly identified is the Sunday on which Mary Magdalene and the other





**Before the Master entered Jerusalem for His final week, He had dinner with Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. During the dinner Mary anointed his feet. The Lord commended her effort, connecting this anointing with His coming death and burial.**



Judas agreed with the Jewish leadership to betray the Savior.

In ancient Israel it was common to anoint bodies as part of burial rituals. The Hebrew word *Messiah* and the Greek word *Christ* both mean “the anointed one,” reflecting Jesus’s position through these titles. In earlier periods the Israelites also anointed living people to serve either as right-ful kings or as high priests.

We, like the disciples, must come to know that Jesus is the Son of God and gain a testimony of what He did for us. As we reflect on the roles He played during the last week of His mortal life, we need to remember that as our Savior He is both a king and a priest.

### **The Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem**

John notes, “On the next day much people that were come to the feast, when they heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem,

“Took branches of palm trees, and went forth to meet him, and cried, Hosanna: *Blessed is the King of Israel that cometh in the name of the Lord.*

“And Jesus, when he had found a young ass, sat thereon; as it is written,

“Fear not, daughter of Sion: behold, *thy King cometh, sitting on an ass’s colt*” (John 12:12–15; emphasis added).

While a donkey does not seem to be a regal mode of transportation to modern readers, Old Testament kings, especially David, commonly rode donkeys. Furthermore, the prophet Zechariah had specifically foretold that the messianic king would come in this fashion (see Zechariah 9:9). The waving of tree branches is often associated with *Sukkot*, the autumn Festival of Tabernacles that commemorates the wandering of the children of Israel in the

women found the empty tomb (see Matthew 28:1; Mark 16:1–2; John 20:1).

Rather than trying to cover all the events and parables of Holy Week, let us try to understand Jesus Christ and His mission by approaching the week broadly, pausing at selected points to reflect on symbolism.

### **The Anointing at Bethany**

John 12:1–9 recounts that Martha served a special dinner to Jesus, some of His disciples, and her brother, Lazarus, who had recently been raised from the dead, before the Master entered Jerusalem for His final week. During the course of the meal, Lazarus’s other sister, Mary, anointed Jesus’s feet. Judas Iscariot rebuked her for wasting the precious ointment in this way, but the Lord commended Mary, connecting this anointing with His coming death and burial. Matthew 26:6–13 and Mark 14:3–9 preserve a similar incident, which they place later in the week at the time

wilderness. Once they were in the promised land, however, this festival emphasized the harvest but was also associated with the coronation of Israelite kings. Furthermore, in the period between the Old and New Testaments, the Festival of Tabernacles developed millennial associations, based largely upon the prophecy that in the last days people of all nations would come to Jerusalem “to worship the King, the Lord of hosts, and to keep the feast of tabernacles” (Zechariah 14:16).

The triumphal entry, remembered today on Palm Sunday, provides a joyful prelude to the many sad events that would intervene between this point and the miracle of the empty tomb. It represents one of the few times during His mortal ministry when Jesus was recognized as the king He is. However, the triumphal entry also serves as a symbol of Jesus’s Second Coming, allowing us to look forward to the day when He will return in glory and all will accept Him as king.

### **The Cleansing of the Temple and the Cursing of the Fig Tree**

In one of the more dramatic events early in the week, Jesus proceeded to the courtyards around the temple, overthrew the tables of the money changers, and then drove out those involved in the buying and selling of sacrificial animals. Although modern readers may interpret the cleansing as necessary because these activities were immoral, particularly because they occurred on temple grounds, this business did serve a purpose. Pilgrims traveling from great distances often would not have been able to bring their own animals for sacrifice and would have needed to exchange foreign currency for coins acceptable for temple offerings.

However, Jesus rebuked the money changers and other businessmen, stating that they had made His Father’s house “a den of thieves” (Matthew 21:13; Mark 11:17; Luke



**When Jesus rebuked the money changers, stating that they had made His Father’s house “a den of thieves,” He may also have been rebuking the corrupt leadership at the temple. As the rightful king and the actual Son of God, He had the right to enter and cleanse the temple as well as to retake authority from those who had usurped it.**

19:46). The term “thieves” as used here comes from the Greek *lēistai*, which not only means “robber” or “bandit” but also “revolutionary” or “insurgent.” Because the temple leadership in this period was notoriously corrupt, the Savior’s rebuke may have been directed in part at them for allowing, and likely profiting from, these activities. For more than two centuries the high priests had been political appointees rather than members of an appropriate priestly family. Jesus’s condemnation of the leadership might suggest that He was unmasking them as false authorities who had usurped power over the sanctuary and were misusing their assumed positions.

With this in mind, a royal interpretation of the triumphal entry suggests an interesting historical connection between Jesus as king and the temple. From the time of Solomon until the destruction of the first temple by the Babylonians, the temple had been, in effect, a royal chapel adjacent to the king’s palace. Ancient kings were *adopted*



**The cursing of the fig tree may symbolize a demonstration of the Lord's power over things on earth. In addition, the house of Israel, like the fig tree, had been called upon to produce good fruit by observing and keeping all the commandments of the Lord. But it was largely barren.**

at their coronations at the temple as sons of the Lord (see Psalm 2:7), a foreshadowing of how Christ was not only the rightful king but also the actual Son of God. He had the right to enter the temple, to cleanse it of activities that distracted from proper worship, and to retake authority from those who had usurped it.

About this same time, Jesus cursed a fruitless fig tree just outside of Jerusalem. The tree withered away soon thereafter (see Mark 11:12–14, 20–21). When the disciples asked about this, Jesus explained that if they had faith and did not doubt, they would be able to do even greater things. There may be layers of symbolism in the event, such as a demonstration of the Lord's power over things on earth. In addition, the house of Israel, like the fig tree, had been called upon to produce good fruit by observing and keeping all the commandments of the Lord. But as a group, they were barren. Particularly in Mark's account, where the story of the fig tree brackets the cleansing of the

temple, this incident suggests that the house of Israel, like the fig tree, had not lived up to its potential.<sup>3</sup> The cursing of the fig tree and the overturning of the money changers' tables, taken together, may foreshadow the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple some 40 years later.

### Teachings in the Temple

During the first part of this week Jesus spent the nights in Bethany but came to the temple each day to teach. The Lord delivered some of His most profound lessons at this time. However, He was not without His detractors. These included the chief priests and elders, who repeatedly questioned Him regarding His authority. Jesus deftly thwarted their attempts to discredit Him; at the same time He denounced their hypocrisy.

The verbal sparring over authority elicits another connection to the triumphal entry: Jesus was the rightful leader in Israel, while the chief priests and elders were usurpers who had set themselves up in Jerusalem and in the temple as leaders of Israel. They were, in fact, the wicked tenants who were falsely exploiting the Lord's vineyard, had rejected the prophets sent to them, and would soon beat and kill the Son (see Matthew 21:33–46).

Interestingly, the chief priests questioned Jesus in an attempt to find fault with Him at the same time that the Passover lambs for the year were being checked for faults. Thus, symbolically the Savior had already begun acting in His role of the lamb for the Atonement's great and infinite sacrifice.

### The Olivet Discourse

Leaving the temple, Jesus took His disciples to the Mount of Olives. There He gave them a prophetic discourse that dealt with the imminent destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, and also focused on the destruction of the world at the Second Coming (see Matthew 24:1–46; Mark 13:1–37; Luke 21:5–36; see also Joseph Smith—Matthew). This prophecy once again reminds us of the triumphal entry. Jesus had entered Jerusalem seemingly as a recognized Messiah, and many



**Above: On the evening before He was crucified, Jesus partook of the Last Supper with His disciples. This meal references the Passover meal, in which ancient Israel celebrated deliverance from the angel of death.**

**Right: While teaching in the temple, Jesus deftly thwarted the chief priests' attempts to discredit Him. At the same time he denounced their hypocrisy.**



priests sacrificed the paschal lamb in remembrance of the unblemished animal whose blood saved the children of Israel and whose flesh was

seemed to have expected Him to ascend the throne as king and political leader at that time. Although that was not His immediate purpose, the Savior explained that He would, in fact, return in glory as king of all the earth. He then taught the people through parables—such as the parable of the ten virgins and the parable of the talents—what they and we must do to prepare for His return.

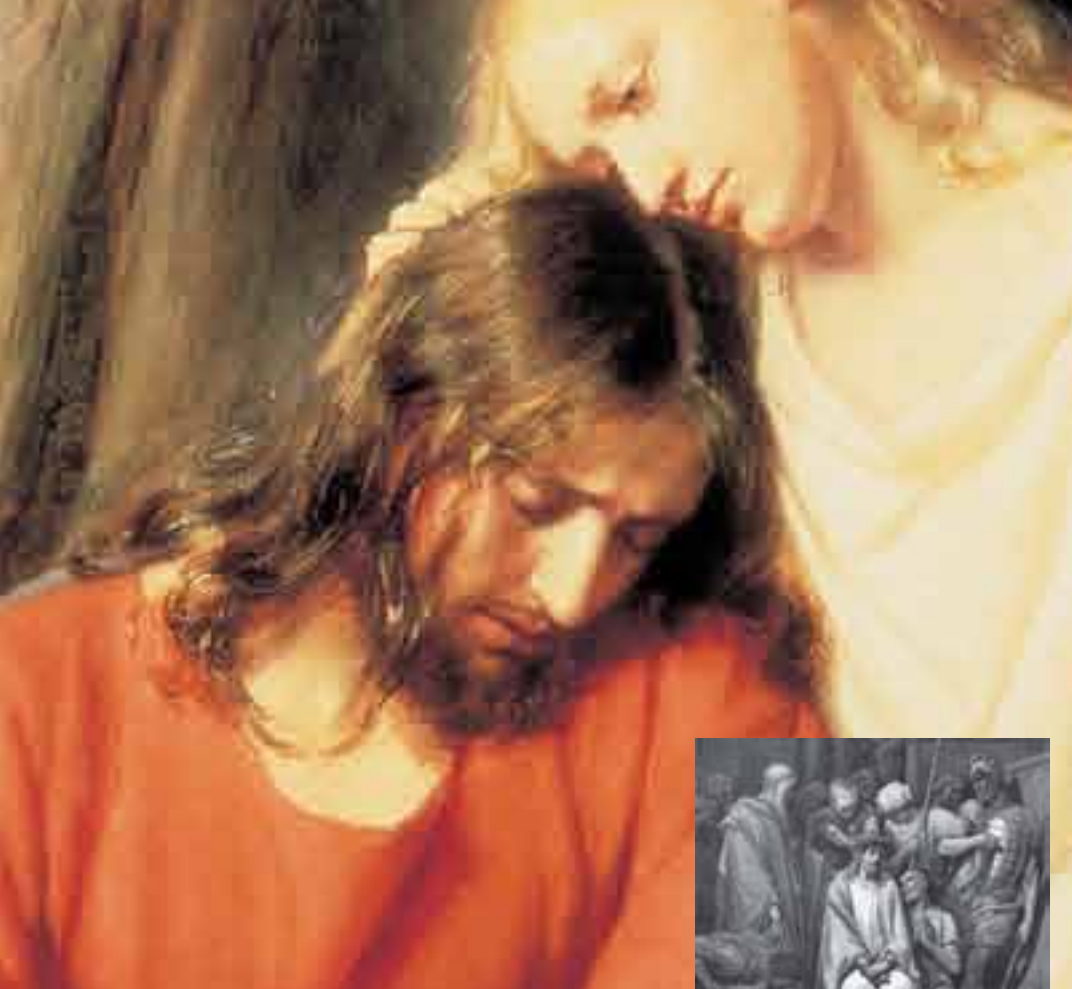
### **The Last Supper**

After describing these events, all four Gospels shift their emphasis from Jesus's authority as rightful leader and teacher to His priestly role as the one who would perform a sacrifice and His role as the sacrificial lamb who would suffer and die for all mankind. The Jewish Passover plays a significant symbolic role here. In recalling the ancient Israelites' deliverance from bondage in Egypt, the Passover festival focused in particular on Israel's deliverance from the angel of death. During the yearly celebration the

now eaten as part of a festive meal.

On the evening before He was crucified, Jesus held the Last Supper with His disciples. The first three Gospels explicitly identify this meal as a Passover meal, and Passover imagery is replete throughout the meal (see Matthew 26:17–30; Mark 14:12–26; Luke 22:7–39). During the meal, Jesus instituted the ordinance of the sacrament using bread and wine as symbols of His own body and blood. As Elder Jeffrey R. Holland of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles has said:

“This ordinance commemorating our escape from the angel of darkness should be taken more seriously than it sometimes is. It should be a powerful, reverent, reflective moment. It should encourage spiritual feelings and impressions. As such it should not be rushed. It is not something to ‘get over’ so that the real purpose of a sacrament meeting can be pursued. This *is* the real purpose of the meeting. And everything that is said or sung or prayed



**Above:** In Gethsemane, the Lord took upon Himself the weight of our sins and sorrows.

**Right:** Jesus was symbolically led to the altar of sacrifice as He carried our burdens, was betrayed by a friend, and subsequently suffered great indignities and death.



answered. There, in the Garden of Gethsemane, the Lord offered another prayer, during which He suffered such agony that He sweat great drops of blood (see Luke 22:44). Somehow Jesus took upon Himself the weight of our sins and sorrows (see Mosiah 3:7; D&C 19:16–19). As Elder Bruce R. McConkie (1915–1985) of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles testified:

“We do not know, we cannot tell, no mortal mind can conceive, the full import of what Christ did in Gethsemane. . . .

“We know that in some way, incomprehensible to us, his suffering satisfied the demands of justice, ransomed penitent souls from the pains and penalties of sin, and made mercy available

in those services should be consistent with the grandeur of this sacred ordinance.”<sup>4</sup>

The Gospel of John preserves a series of farewell remarks that began at the Last Supper and continued through Jesus’s experience in Gethsemane (see John 13:31–17:26). Focusing on Jesus’s relationship with the Father, His love for us, and His injunction that we likewise love and serve one another, these moving words provide us further models for our weekly worship services.

### **Gethsemane**

The Savior’s farewell words end with the beautiful Intercessory Prayer, sometimes called the great high priestly prayer, wherein Jesus prayed that His disciples “be one” as He and the Father are one (see John 17). Following this prayer, Jesus retired to a garden on the slopes of the Mount of Olives, where He began the process of Atonement by which this prayer could be

to those who believe in his holy name.”<sup>5</sup>

Reflecting upon what Jesus did in Gethsemane deepens our love for Him. In making us “one” with God, Jesus not only saves us from sin and death but also heals us.

### **Betrayal, Judgment, and Abuse**

In an ancient Israelite sacrifice, the penitent worshiper laid his hands upon the sacrificial animal, symbolically transferring his guilt before the priest led the animal away to be slaughtered and offered on the altar (see Leviticus 1:3–5). Likewise, Jesus was symbolically led to the altar as He carried our burdens, as He suffered betrayal by His friend and apostle Judas, and as He endured the subsequent indignities at the hands of both Roman and Jewish leaders through His arrest and trial (see Matthew 26:45–27:26; Mark 14:41–15:15; Luke 22:47–23:25; John 18:2–19:16). These experiences were part of His descending “below all things” (D&C 88:6).

ABOVE LEFT: DETAIL FROM, IN THE GARDEN OF GETHSEMANE, BY CARL HEINRICH BLOCH, COURTESY OF THE NATIONAL HISTORIC MUSEUM AT FREDERIKSBORG IN HILLERÖD, DENMARK, MAY NOT BE COPIED. LEFT INSET: THE CROWN OF THORNS, BY PAUL GUSTAVE DORE. ABOVE RIGHT: THE CRUCIFIXION OF CHRIST, ARTIST UNKNOWN, COURTESY OF THE CHURCH HISTORY MUSEUM.

Whereas the charge against Jesus before the Jewish authorities was one of breaking religious law by blasphemy, the one laid against Him in the Roman trial was political: the argument that Jesus claimed to be a king was an offense against the Roman order. After both the Jewish hearing and the Roman trial, Jesus was subjected to abuse: mocking, scourging, spitting. This abuse had been prophesied in both the Old Testament and the Book of Mormon. As Isaiah prophesied, “With his stripes we are healed” (Isaiah 53:5). Jesus willingly suffered our pains, afflictions, and infirmities that He might “take upon him the pains and the sicknesses of his people” and that He might “know . . . how to succor his people according to their infirmities” (Alma 7:11–12).

### The Death of the Lamb of God

It is popular in many religious traditions to focus on the extreme suffering of Jesus’s scourging and crucifixion, but the Gospels themselves are sparing of such brutal details. Instead, they emphasize the words and symbolic acts that fulfill prophecy. These include His crucifixion between two bandits or criminals; the division of His garments; the offering of cheap wine, or “vinegar” (Psalm 69:21) to assuage His thirst; the fact that His legs were not broken; and the piercing of His side. Significantly, the greatest suffering that our Lord experienced on the cross does not seem to be anything that man inflicted upon him. Jesus’s cry, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34) may reflect, as in Gethsemane, that His carrying the weight of our sins necessarily separated Him from His Father in a way that He had never experienced before.<sup>6</sup>

Jesus died as a ransom for all. President Gordon B. Hinckley (1910–2008) taught:

“No member of this Church must ever forget the terrible price paid by our Redeemer, who gave His life that all men might live. . . .

“This was the cross, the instrument of His torture, the terrible device designed to destroy the Man of Peace, the evil recompense for His miraculous work of healing the sick, of causing the blind to see, of raising the dead. This was the cross on which He hung and died on Golgotha’s lonely summit.



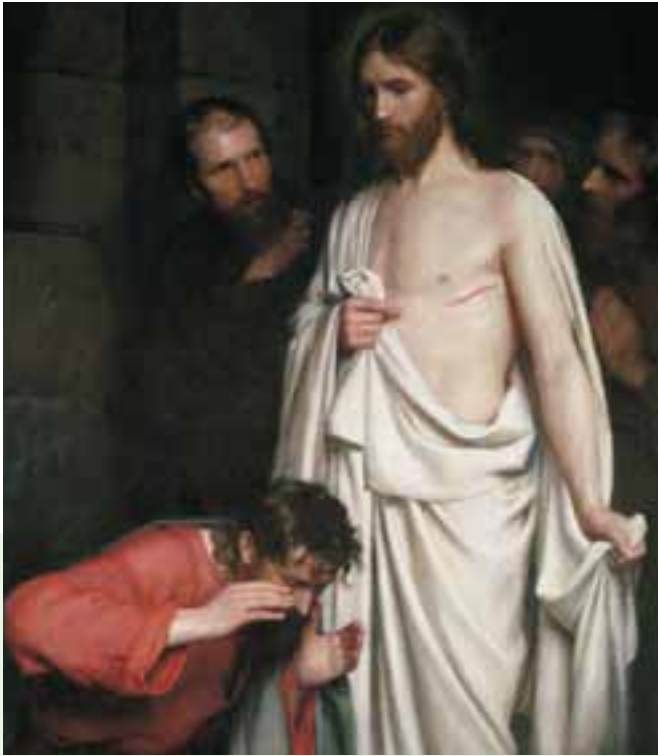
**Jesus promised the Nephites that even as He was lifted up on the cross by men, so all men will “be lifted up by the Father, to stand before me” (3 Nephi 27:14–15).**

“We cannot forget that. We must never forget it, for here our Savior, our Redeemer, the Son of God, gave Himself, a vicarious sacrifice for each of us.”<sup>7</sup>

Jesus’s being lifted up upon the cross is a fundamental component of the gospel message as later defined by Jesus Himself to the Nephites when He promised that even as He was lifted up by men, so all men will “be lifted up by the Father, to stand before me” (3 Nephi 27:14–15). Foreshadowed by the brazen serpent that Moses raised in the wilderness, Jesus was lifted up that all might be saved if they would but look to Him (see Numbers 21:6–9; 1 Nephi 17:41; Alma 33:19–22).

The Gospel of John, which explicitly describes Jesus as “the Lamb of God” (John 1:29, 36), also connects the death of the Savior directly with the Passover. Jesus, as the unblemished or sinless lamb whose bones could not be broken (see Exodus 12:3, 5, 46), died so that spiritual death might “pass over” those who come unto Him. As





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the blood of the first Passover sacrifice was spread on the doors of each Israelite home, so too did the blood of Christ flow upon the wood of the cross.<sup>8</sup> According to one approach to the chronology of the last week suggested by the Gospel of John, Passover actually began at sunset the day Jesus was crucified. In this scenario the paschal lambs, which were sacrificed before the beginning of Passover so that they would be ready in time for the Passover meal, would have been sacrificed in the temple at the very time that Jesus was dying on the cross.<sup>9</sup>

### **The Empty Tomb and the Risen Lord**

All four Gospels begin the account of the Resurrection with the empty tomb. The angels' query to the women, "Why seek ye the living among the dead?" (Luke 24:5) continues to be a question that confronts us today, for we must find the living Christ not just in the pages of history or even the scriptures but also through the Holy Spirit in our own lives.

Among the first people to enter the tomb were the Apostles Peter and John (see Luke 24:12; John 20:3–10). However, the first person to see the risen Lord was Mary Magdalene (see Mark 16:9; John 20:11–16). Soon other women saw Him, followed by the two disciples on the road to Emmaus (see Matthew 28:9–10; Mark 16:12–13; Luke 24:13–32). Their experiences suggest that all people, not just the Apostles, have the ability to gain a testimony that Jesus was resurrected and lives today. The most powerful witnesses of Jesus's living reality were reserved for the Apostles (see Matthew 28:16–20; Mark 16:14–18; Luke 24:33–51; John 20:19–30; Acts 1:2–9), who, "by many infallible proofs" (Acts 1:3), gained a special witness of the risen Lord and received a commission to take this news to all the earth.

The miracle of the empty tomb and the subsequent appearances of the risen Lord stand as powerful reminders that the atoning mission of Jesus Christ was not limited to His suffering and death for our sins. As expressed by the Book of Mormon prophet Jacob, the goodness of God is manifest in His preparing a way to overcome the awful monsters of death and hell, which are physical and spiritual death (see 2 Nephi 9:10). Only by overcoming both of these obstacles through the Redemption and the Resurrection can God's children truly become "one" with Him again. ■

### **NOTES**

1. Richard Neitzel Holzapfel, *A Lively Hope: The Suffering, Death, Resurrection, and Exaltation of Jesus Christ*, 1999, 7.
2. Many LDS outlines of Easter Week follow President J. Reuben Clark Jr.'s *Our Lord of the Gospels: A Harmony of the Gospels*, 1957. He in turn based his chronology on late nineteenth-century Protestant studies.
3. *The Life and Teachings of Jesus and His Apostles*, 2nd ed. (1979), 142.
4. Jeffrey R. Holland, "This Do in Remembrance of Me," *Ensign*, Nov. 1995, 68.
5. Bruce R. McConkie, "The Purifying Power of Gethsemane," *Ensign*, May 1985, 9.
6. Andrew C. Skinner, *Gethsemane* (2002), 72–73; see also Bruce R. McConkie, "The Purifying Power of Gethsemane," *Ensign*, May 1985, 9; Jeffrey R. Holland, "The Hands of the Fathers," *Ensign*, May 1999, 14.
7. Gordon B. Hinckley, "The Symbol of Our Faith," *Liahona and Ensign*, April 2005, 4.
8. Eric D. Huntsman, "The Lamb of God: Unique Aspects of the Passion Narrative in John," in *Behold the Lamb of God: An Easter Celebration*, ed. Richard Neitzel Holzapfel, Frank F. Judd Jr., and Thomas A. Wayment (2008), 54–55, 62.
9. See Josephus, *The New Complete Works of Josephus*, trans. William Whiston (1999), 906.