



HOLY WEEK

Lenten Truths from Unwitting Witnesses



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*Please receive this devotion booklet
as a gift from the
Martin Luther College campus family.
We pray that our Lord would
strengthen your faith
through his Word.*

*Note that the paintings—and one woodcut—are all by Lucas
Cranach, a German painter who was a friend of Martin Luther.*

Introduction

An Unwitting Witness: *“I know who you are—the Holy One of God!”* (Mark 1:24)

No, it wasn't a confession of faith given by one of Jesus' followers. Those words were uttered by an evil spirit—a demon. He was in a state of panic in the presence of God's Son. Even though that fallen angel wasn't looking to Jesus for salvation, he did speak the truth about him.

As we search the pages of Scripture, we find that evil spirits weren't the only ones who spoke the truth about Jesus apart from faith in him. We find some of the best examples of this recorded in our Savior's passion history. From religious leaders to an infamous governor, there were those who recognized the truth about Jesus and yet rejected him as the Messiah. In spite of their unbelief, their testimonies about Jesus served God's purpose.

In this devotional booklet for Holy Week, we will consider a few of the messages that came from Jesus' enemies related to his suffering and death. Although they may have been condemning Jesus, ridiculing him, or living in fear of him, their words were true enough. May God the Holy Spirit bless our meditation on these statements about Jesus, enabling us to grasp their truth and strengthening our faith in our Savior. We consider the following: *“Lenten Truths from Unwitting Witnesses.”*

Author

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Palm Sunday



Caiaphas: *“It is better for you that one man die for the people.”* (John 11:49-52)

Little did he know. Caiaphas sounded so arrogant. “You know nothing at all!” he said to the Jewish ruling council (the Sanhedrin). But little did he know.

They were gathered together to figure out what to do about Jesus. Things were getting out of hand. At Bethany, less than two miles from Jerusalem, Jesus had just raised Lazarus from the dead; Lazarus had been in the tomb for four days! Many people had seen this astounding miracle. Some of the eyewitnesses had scurried back to Jerusalem to inform the Jewish leaders, who hated Jesus. And now they hastily gathered to plot their next move.

Their concerns were small-minded and selfish. They couldn’t deny the fact that Jesus was “performing many signs.” But they feared, “If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our temple and our nation.” As if the temple and the nation belonged to them. As if that’s all that mattered.

Enter Caiaphas, the high priest that year. He speaks up to sell his scheme: “You know nothing at all! You do not realize that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish.”

Little did Caiaphas know! He rejected Jesus in unbelief because he was not concerned about the far more important issues: sin against the holy God, guilt that demanded God’s perfectly just punishment, the gracious promise the God of their fathers had made to send them a Savior from all of this, a Messiah.

Little did Caiaphas know that even as he spoke, God was using him as his unwitting prophet, to prophesy the *truth* about Jesus, the truth that lies at the very heart of our faith. This truth is that, according to our loving Father’s plan, “It is better . . . that one man die for the people.”

Jesus was about to die as our Substitute. He was about to take our place, to make atonement for our sins. His perfect life, offered in death “for the people,” was about to save not



only the Jewish people but all people. Jesus was about to die “for the scattered children of God, to bring them together and make them one.” That means you and me, and the whole Christian church on earth and in heaven.

Caiaphas unwittingly foretold the truth. The truth, as he intended it to play out, failed miserably. But it played out perfectly according to God’s perfect Plan. Indeed, the one man did die for all people, and that one man has won for us Paradise and has gathered us into the communion of saints. Little did Caiaphas know. Thank God that we know!

“It is better to take refuge in the Lord than to trust in man. It is better to take refuge in the Lord than to trust in princes” (Psalm 118:8-9). Lord Jesus, on this Palm Sunday we humbly bow before you—the God-man, our Substitute—and cry out with those first Palm Sunday crowds: “Hosanna! O Lord, save!” In you we put our trust; what can man do to us? Amen.

Author

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Monday



False Witnesses at Trial: *“He will destroy the temple . . .”* (Mark 14:57-58)

The false witnesses were right in one respect—Holy Week was about destroying and raising up temples. They were focused on the tearing down; Jesus was intent on lifting up.

During the early days of that week, Jesus battled his enemies word for word. He countered their rhetoric with truth. He opposed their maneuvers with a crystal plan. He answered their desire for death with his life. Jesus engaged his enemies with so much wisdom and love.

But then during the fake trial came their rigged testimony: “We heard him say . . .” Jesus at this point didn’t object to how they misrepresented what he said. He didn’t clarify what he meant by “temple.” And he didn’t correct their critical misunderstanding.

He could have. Jesus could have torn down their argument, but he didn’t. Two years before, what Jesus actually had said was this: “Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days” (*John 2:19*). The witnesses added “made with human hands” to Jesus’ statement. But the temple Jesus referred to was his body. The temple in question was the living divine presence of God among them. And, as Jesus originally had said, he was not the one who would destroy the temple. The Jews themselves would. And they did in several senses of the word: They destroyed the physical presence of God’s covenant, the temple of Zion, by rejecting the Messiah and capstone of that covenant. And they killed God’s presence by demanding the crucifixion of Christ. Jesus’ enemies tore down both temples, building and body.

As so often happens, the enemies of Jesus didn’t get the words right. Instead of paying close attention to Jesus’ particular words, they followed their particular agenda. Even Jesus’ friends tend to do this: we look to Jesus to attack the enemies of our own personal plans or arguments.

In the heated trial, Jesus didn’t object, argue, or correct. He certainly could have, but he wasn’t trying to build a different temple, as the false witnesses claimed. He was going to raise



the old one. He didn't have to argue and tear down, because in a few days everything would be clear. Jesus was the temple, the powerful and transcendent presence of God. He did not come to destroy; all of us would do that. Jesus came to lift up, and in three days he would. He would raise his body from death, the payment for all sin. His resurrection would offer life even to his enemies. He would raise the body of all believers into a temple holy and pleasing to God.

Because Jesus' enemies didn't get it right, and we often don't, Jesus did. "Destroy this temple," Jesus said, "and I will raise it again in three days."

Dear Jesus, thank you for answering your enemies and our sin with grace, power, and truth. Raise us to new life as redeemed stones in your holy temple. Amen.

Author

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Tuesday



Sanhedrin: *“He has spoken blasphemy . . .”* (Matthew 26:65-66)

Caiaphas was losing control of this trial. Witnesses came forward with accusations against Jesus, but none of them could agree. This was happening too fast. Jesus wasn't supposed to be arrested until after the Feast of Passover. Then Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin could have had witnesses lined up to put an end to the menace that was Jesus Christ. But then Judas offered to betray Jesus, and they couldn't say no to that gift.

But they weren't ready. Jesus sat there silently as false witness after false witness made an accusation. Caiaphas' blood boiled as Jesus refused to give these false charges the dignity of a response. Caiaphas and the entire Sanhedrin grew frustrated as the clock kept ticking into the wee hours of the morning. Finally, at 3 am, Caiaphas could take it no more. He went from judge to prosecutor: “I charge you under oath of the living God: Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God.”

Any member of the Sanhedrin who may have been drifting off to sleep was wide awake now. This was the reason they were all here after all. Would Jesus claim to be the Messiah?

The fate of humanity hung in the balance. The Sanhedrin didn't realize it. They saw an opportunity to get rid of a threat who jeopardized their authority. Jesus could no longer remain silent. Now was the time for him to clearly announce to the religious leaders he was the Messiah. He answered Caiaphas with the words the Sanhedrin had been waiting to hear: “You have said so . . . But I say to all of you: From now on you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven” (*Matthew 26:64*).

In a fit of mock rage, Caiaphas tore his clothes. The whole Sanhedrin had heard it. They had what they wanted. They could declare Jesus guilty of blasphemy. The penalty: death.

But what Jesus said was not blasphemous. He spoke the truth as only he could. The men who put Jesus on trial



didn't understand that Jesus was there to take away their sins. He endured the suffering of that farce of a trial not because he had to, but because he loved them.

Jesus allowed himself to be convicted so that you would never have to be convicted by the Father, the Righteous Judge of the earth. Jesus' answer to Caiaphas reminded those religious leaders that one day the tables would be turned. They sat in judgment over Jesus in that moment, but Jesus would sit in judgment over them for all eternity. Thankfully, God will judge you based on what Jesus endured for you.

Lord Jesus, Prince of Peace, thank you for enduring injustice on our behalf. Help us to reflect the great love you showed in life in our lives as well. Amen.

Author

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Wednesday



Pilate: *“I find no basis for a charge against this man.”* (Luke 23:4)

He was a relatively minor Roman government official who just so happened to find himself in the middle of a Jewish dispute. Now he’s famous. For centuries Christians have recited the familiar line of the Apostles’ Creed: that Jesus Christ “suffered under Pontius Pilate.” The statement is true, but that’s not exactly how Pilate wanted things to go.

The passion history reveals that Pilate tried several times to deflect the accusations of the Jews against Jesus. In fact, Pilate was so certain of his assessment that three times in the course of negotiation he made the same claim: he’d discovered “no basis” for the charges the Jewish leaders were making. That statement was true as well, but that’s not how things ended up going.

It seems that Pilate had a troubled relationship with the Jewish community. Luke’s gospel relates the account of some “Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices” (chapter 13). The Jewish historian Josephus explains that Pilate’s often insensitive actions at times stirred up Jewish resentment. With rebellion brewing in Jerusalem, Pilate looked for the path of least resistance.

So, innocent Jesus was unjustly accused, tried, and punished. Hatred and hostility won the day. Pilate was, in effect, bullied into submission. What drama! What a compelling—and infuriating—story!

We may be angry with the Jewish leaders. We might consider Pilate a pathetic individual. But this scene also compels us to make an honest assessment of our own character. How easily we could be charged as weak and wrong on so many counts!

This is not just the history of injustice. This is the history of salvation—of how things had to happen. Pilate was, after all, entirely correct. The charges of “subverting the nation” and “opposing the payment of taxes” did not hold any weight. Truthfully, no one could accuse Jesus of ever doing anything unlawful. As such he was not, as we are, subject to death. So



the surrender of Jesus' life had to follow an unjust path. The guiltless died for the guilty. And Pilate simply stood by, hoping against hope that this insurrection would fade away. All he could do was "wash his hands" and declare, "I am innocent of this man's blood."

That, of course, was just wishful thinking. Despite his own wife's plea, "Don't have anything to do with that innocent man" (*Matthew 27:19*), Pilate handed Jesus over to be crucified. He even fixed a sign to the top of the cross: "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews" (often abbreviated with Latin initials: INRI). Yet again, that statement was true. The suffering and death of our perfect King, Jesus Christ, was the greatest injustice of all time—thanks be to God!

If my sins give me alarm and my conscience grieve me, let your cross my fear disarm; peace of conscience give me. Help me see forgiveness won by your holy passion. If for me he slays his Son, God must have compassion. Amen. (CW 98:4)

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Maundy Thursday



The Crowd: *“His blood is on us and on our children!”* (Matthew 27:24-25)

No amount of water could have washed the guilt off Pontius Pilate. As governor of Roman Judea, he had responsibility for justice and order in his province. The trial he gave Jesus offered neither.

Goaded by an angry mob of Jesus’ Jewish enemies, Pilate condemned to a criminal’s cross a man he judged innocent. Then he feebly attempted to pronounce himself not guilty of Jesus’ murder by symbolically washing Jesus’ blood from his hands. In a few words—“It’s your responsibility!”—he tried instead to splash Jesus’ blood on the crowd that screamed for his execution.

And they welcomed it. They wanted it. “His blood is on us and on our children!” they cheered. They took the blame—they claimed the credit—for Jesus’ death and not just for themselves, but for their descendants. They painted their own generation and those to follow with his blood.

These enemies of Jesus meant to do harm, to commit wrong, and they did. They killed the Lord of Life. They, “with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross” (*Acts 2:23*).

But God used this twisted joke on justice for his own purpose. His enemies murdered the Savior, but his death—his blood—paid for the sins of all people of all time, including these killers. The death of God’s Son bought the world back from God’s law, which justly demanded payment for sin. Only Jesus could pay that price. Only his blood could save.

And only his blood could wash away guilt. People try to cleanse themselves with the water of nice tries, good intentions, and worthy deeds. They scrub the guilt with excuses, scour it with rationalizations, or soak it in comparisons to other people’s faults. And nothing works.

Nothing, except the blood of Jesus.



Pilate endures in history as the weak ruler who condemned the only truly innocent man there ever was. Such a sinner, that Pilate. But he was not worse, was not a greater sinner before God's law, than any other human being. None of us can claim to be holier than Pilate. Every one of us is just as much a sinner. We're just not as famous. Such a sinner, me.

But "the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin" (1 John 1:7). We are forgiven. God turned the horrible events at Pilate's palace for the good of the world. He even turned the guilty words of Jesus' enemies into a blessing. He changed the curse they called upon themselves into a truth that his faithful people understand and cherish: His blood is upon me. I am washed. I am clean.

May his blood be upon my children too.

Dear Jesus, you have washed me clean of guilt and sin with your holy blood. Help me to live a life that thanks you by what I pray and say, by what I try and do. I trust your salvation. Amen.

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Good Friday



Chief Priests & Teachers of the Law:

“He saved others . . . Let this Messiah, this king of Israel, come down from the cross . . .” (Mark 15:31-32)

Suppose he had? Come down off that cross, that is.

Jesus could have. He who hung on that cross was the same One who had just the evening before said, “Do you think that I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels?” (*Matthew 26:53*). He had an angelic army at his bidding; no human force could have kept Jesus on that cross.

“He saved others, but he can’t save himself!” The chief priests and teachers of the law may have been elbowing each other in twisted glee at what they thought was the just fate of an upstart pretender to the throne. “Messiah? King of Israel? Just look at him now! He’s getting what he deserves.”

“He can’t save himself.” No, someone might have responded, it’s that he *won’t* save himself. He *could* have. He wasn’t on that cross because he was at the mercy of his enemies. He wasn’t executed because he was incapable of rescuing himself. He didn’t die because he was powerless in the presence of his antagonists. Rather, Jesus willingly went to the cross to pay the wages of our sin. He chose not to save himself so that he could save us. Love kept him on that cross, where he got what we deserved.

Ironically, however, those mockers were speaking the truth. They saw a weakened, broken, dying man nailed to a cross and said, “He can’t save himself.” That was actually true, but in a way that they could not comprehend. He could not save himself from the cross because that cross was the way that he would save us. He took our place on the cross to pay the wages of our sin; he suffered hell for us there; he took our penalty, and because of his death, our sin has been paid for.

There is more irony. Jesus’ enemies sarcastically referred to him as “this Messiah, this king of Israel,” in an entirely dismissive way. But what they said was true. They thought it would be obvious to any onlooker that there was no way



the battered and bleeding Jesus could be the long-awaited Messiah. By that time, the Jewish community had largely shifted their idea of the coming Anointed One to the political realm; they expected the Messiah to defeat the Romans and reestablish David's government as an independent kingdom. But "*this* Messiah, *this* king of Israel," had an infinitely larger task: Jesus was "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (*John 1:29*). Mission accomplished.

"Come down now from the cross," Christ's enemies mocked. Thank God he didn't.

"What wondrous love is this that caused the Lord of bliss to bear the dreadful curse for my soul, for my soul?" Jesus, we stand before your cross with heads bowed, sorrowful that it was our sin that put you there, thankful that you bore that dreadful curse of sin for us. In your mercy, please accept our quiet, humble adoration for the grace that has paid for our sin and made us your own. Amen.

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Saturday



Centurion: “*Surely he was the Son of God!*” (Matthew 27:54)

The Jews who were crucifying Jesus really should have put two and two together.

Especially during the Passover, the Jewish people took time to remember just how *powerful* their Heavenly Father was. They celebrated that their God was so powerful even mighty Pharaoh had to let God’s people go from their slavery in Egypt. With his ten plagues against Egypt, God had left no room for doubt: God is all-powerful.

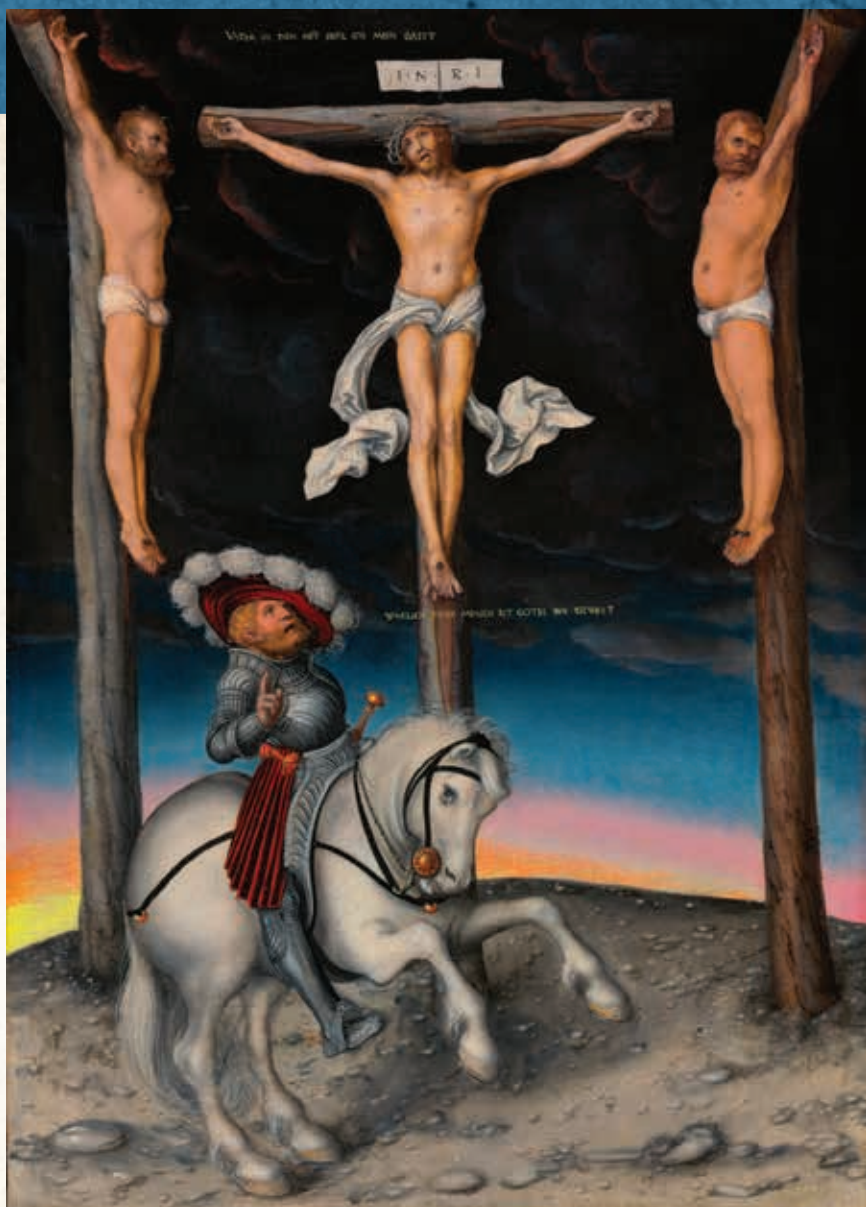
So they should have put two and two together when they considered Jesus, hanging on the cross. Because that kind of almighty power runs in the family.

Any of his miracles should have been enough. With his feeding of the five thousand, his raising of Lazarus from the dead, or his countless other miracles, Jesus had been showing the world how powerful he was. And now, at his death, he made one final show of power: An earthquake shook the foundations of the earth itself.

It wasn’t one of the Jews who finally put two and two together. “*When the centurion and those with him who were guarding Jesus saw the earthquake and all that had happened, they were terrified, and exclaimed, ‘Surely he was the Son of God!’*”

When the Roman soldiers saw this final show of power, they realized who was hanging on that cross. It was God’s Son! How could he be anyone else? Only God’s Son could share the Father’s power to make the earth tremble and to terrify even Roman soldiers. But if this really was the powerful Son of God, then why was he allowing himself to die on a cross?

Because almighty power isn’t the only thing that runs in the family. That’s why the Jews who were crucifying him should have been the ones to put two and two together. Especially during the Passover, they took time to remember not just how powerful, but how *loving* their Heavenly Father was. They celebrated that their God was so loving he would bend the laws of the universe to free his people from slavery in



Egypt. With his loving actions toward his people, he had left no room for doubt: God *is* love.

This Saturday before Easter, thank God that he lets you put two and two together as you consider Jesus, who died on the cross for you. Only God’s Son could share the Father’s boundless love to use—or to set aside—his almighty power to free you from the slavery of sin. With his loving sacrifice for the sins of the world, Jesus left no room for doubt for those Roman soldiers, and for you: Jesus *is* love.

Like Father, like Son. “Surely he was the Son of God!”

Dear Heavenly Father, thank you for sending your Son, who set aside his power to die on the cross out of love for us. Amen.

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Easter Sunday



Chief Priests & Pharisees:

“We remember that while he was still alive that deceiver said, ‘After three days I will rise again.’” (Matthew 27:63-64)

Three times! Three times Jesus gave his disciples a clear road map of events for the first Easter weekend (*Matthew 16:21; 17:23; 20:19*). He would suffer. He would die. He would rise. So why was it that those hard-of-heart chief priests and Pharisees displayed a clear memory of the Messiah’s message while the disciples did not? The inspired gospels record the disciples struggling with doubt and fear. Even days after the resurrection, Jesus rebuked them “for their lack of faith and their stubborn refusal to believe those who had seen him after he had risen” (*Mark 16:14*). They cowered behind locked doors, frightened for their lives. Apparently, overwhelmed by grief, they could not remember Jesus’ assurances about the third day.

Yet the chief priests and Pharisees remembered clearly what the Christ had predicted. And in their stubborn rejection of Christ, they sought to thwart his message. They went to Pilate seeking to prevent any shenanigans that might give an illusion of a resurrection: “Give the order for the tomb to be made secure,” they said. “Otherwise his disciples may come and steal the body and tell the people that he has been raised from the dead.”

Why such effort? Why fear his corpse? In spite of their unbelief, the Pharisees and chief priests knew the historical track record of this Rabbi from Nazareth. Before hundreds of witnesses, Christ had demonstrated his divine power: miraculous healings, feedings of thousands, resurrections of corpses. When Lazarus’ corpse, dead four days and malodorous, had walked forth from the tomb at Jesus’ command, those hardened religious leaders wanted to kill him so he wouldn’t become a walking sermon about Christ’s power over sin and death (*John 12:10*).

Now that Jesus has been crucified, they remember his own resurrection prediction. Did they perhaps suspect he would keep his word? Going to Pilate, they sought the best security system of the time. Pilate acquiesced, sealing the stone and posting a guard. In so doing, he gave the world irrefutable



evidence that there were no grave robbers. Jesus lives, just as he said he would.

And therein is our eternal comfort. Christ is no deceiver; he is the Truth. His tomb is no place of deception; it's a place of victory. May we never doubt his Word or ignore his promises. May his victory—a victory sealed to us in Baptism, a victory that guarantees his promises—remain our comfort, our cheer, our confidence. He says: “I go to prepare a place for you. . . . Because I live you also will live. . . . I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die.”

Thanks to you, O Christ victorious! Thanks to you, O Lord of life! Death has now no power o’er us; you have conquered in the strife. Thanks because you did arise and have opened paradise! None can fully sing the glory of the resurrection story. Grant me grace, O blessed Savior, and your Holy Spirit send, that my life and my behavior may be pleasing to the end, that I may not fall again into death’s grim pit and pain, whence by grace you have retrieved me and from which you have relieved me. Amen. (CW 147.2,4)

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It is our prayer that the devotions in this booklet will assist you in focusing on the work of our Savior in the week leading up to his death and resurrection.



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