

THE LORD'S LAST DAYS ON EARTH

Matthew 26; 27

Part of the lesson time must be spent upon the literal story of the the trial and crucifixion to be sure the order of events is known. The principal effort should be to bring out the thought that the cross symbolizes victory, the victory of the Lord's goodness and truth over all the forces of evil. It should also be pointed out that the Lord's victory can enable us to conquer, if we accept His guidance and look to Him for strength. We must obey Him if we are to be partakers in His victory. In telling of the betrayal suggest that we also may betray the Lord by not trying to live according to the teachings we profess to believe. All the classes should be told that the Holy Supper was instituted by the Lord during His last celebration of the Passover, and that it takes the place of the Passover for the Christian Church.

Doctrinal Points

The cross symbolizes the Lord's victory over evil.

There is no temptation we can face which the Lord did not face and overcome.

The Holy Supper takes the place of the Passover for the Christian Church.

Notes for Parents

Our lesson on Palm Sunday told us how the Lord entered Jerusalem on the first day of the last week of His earthly life and was welcomed as a king.

When we read the rest of the story of that week, we may at first wonder how the people could so easily have been persuaded to turn against the Lord and put Him to death, but if we remember how often we make good resolutions and almost immediately break them, we shall understand.

There are three incidents in these two chapters which bring this lesson home to us. One is the act of Judas and his later repentant despair. We are accustomed to think of Judas as the example of everything bad, but Judas often shows himself in us. Whenever we do what we know to be wrong in order to obtain some immediate advantage, “Judas” is acting in us.

The second incident is the desertion of the Lord by all His disciples when He was captured (Matthew 26:56). And the third is the story of Peter's triple denial of the Lord. The fear of what “other people” will think and do undoubtedly sometimes keeps us from doing wrong, but also sometimes it may keep us from doing right. The really strong man or woman is the one who studies the teachings of the Lord in the Word for himself, meditates on them, and carries them out steadily no matter what others may think or do. Remember the first two verses of the first Psalm.

This is what the whole story of the Lord's earthly life teaches us, and especially the story of His death on the cross. He knew the hearts of all men—of the people and of His disciples. He knew just what was going to happen. And He went steadily forward, overcoming each temptation as it came, and fulfilling the Law and the Prophets, until He could say, “It is finished.”

For the New Church the cross is the symbol of the Lord's victory, of the final triumph of divine love over all the evils that had accumulated in human nature. It stands forever as a sign to us that if we will only be faithful, nothing that happens to us in this world can harm our souls. “Fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul.” The Lord of His own will permitted the people to do their worst to Him in order to prove to them and to all men in all times that “with God all things are possible.”

Primary

If you center the lesson around Peter's denial of the Lord, you can impress upon the children the importance of being faithful to the Lord—that is, of doing right because the Lord says it is right, no matter how strong may be our temptation to do wrong. Use the simple story of the rejection and crucifixion

of the Lord as a background for this major lesson. Give as much as possible of the simple story of the Lord's last week on earth, connecting it with the Palm Sunday lesson. Stress the Lord's victory on the cross and what it means for us. Tell the children that there is not a single temptation which they feel that the Lord did not feel and overcome, and that if we keep Him close to us always in our minds and pray to Him when we are tempted, He will give us strength to say "no" to our bad impulses and thoughts.

You remember how the Lord rode into Jerusalem on an ass on Palm Sunday, and how the people welcomed Him as king. That was the beginning of the last week of the Lord's life on earth. The people would have been glad to have Him rule over them, for they knew how much He could do for them, but their leaders did not want Him because they wanted to go on having their own way and telling everybody else what to do. So they told the people that Jesus was not their king, and they finally persuaded them that He should be put to death.

He spent Monday and Tuesday teaching in the temple.

At night He went out to Bethany to stay with His friends, Mary, Martha, and Lazarus.

Jerusalem was crowded with people who had come to celebrate the Passover.

Do you remember what the Passover was?

On Thursday evening the Lord and His disciples ate the feast together in Jerusalem.

The Lord knew all that was going to happen, and He knew that even His twelve closest disciples would not stand by Him. At His last meal with them, He told them that one of them would betray Him. This meant that one of them would tell His enemies how they could capture Him. When the Lord told the disciples this, do you think they began to look at each other and say, "Are you the one?"

What did every one of them ask Him?

[Read Matthew 26:22.] Try to remember this verse, for it teaches us that we should all recognize how easily we ourselves do wrong, and that we should be ready to blame ourselves rather than always trying to put the blame on somebody else.

The Lord showed them how to keep a new feast instead of the Passover.

All Christian people keep this feast in memory of the Lord.

Do you know what it is called?

After supper where did the Lord and His disciples go?

How did Judas betray the Lord?

The Lord was tried before the religious court and then before the Roman governor.

No real fault could be found with Him, so they had the people lie about Him.

They put Him to death because they did not want to live as He taught them.

What was done with the Lord's body?

See how much you can remember of the Easter story.



Junior

Do something in this class with the history of the Passover and the institution of the Holy Supper in its place. Then go on to the story of the trial, crucifixion, and burial, and end with the meaning of the cross in our own lives.

How did the Lord enter Jerusalem on Palm Sunday?

What did the multitudes feel about Him?

What did the children shout?

The Lord knew that this feeling would not last. Read Matthew 20:17-19.

The Lord spent Monday and Tuesday of His last week teaching in the temple, but by that time the feeling against Him, stirred up by the scribes and Pharisees and priests, grew so strong that He did not come into the city on Wednesday. For He did not sleep in the city. At night He went out to Bethany, a little village nearby, and stayed at the home of His friends Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. Then on Thursday evening He came into the city again to celebrate the feast of the Passover with His disciples, knowing just what was going to happen to Him.

What did the Passover feast commemorate?

During supper, what new feast did the Lord institute?

The Lord told His disciples that the bread was His body and the wine His blood. He was speaking to them in a parable as He always did. Our real selves are our feelings and thoughts. The real "body and blood" of the Lord are His goodness and truth. So when people partake of the Holy Supper, it is a symbol of their desire to receive

the Lord's unselfish love into their hearts and His truth into their minds.

Where did the Lord go to pray after the supper?

What was His prayer?

When we pray to be saved from some physical disaster or to be relieved of some physical affliction, we should always remember to add, "Nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt," for the Lord knows and does what is best for each one of us.

Who betrayed the Lord?

Did the Lord know he was going to do it?

Why did He not stop him?

What tempted Judas to betray his best friend?

We read that when he realized what he had done, he went out and hanged himself. We often do things we know to be wrong, imagining that somehow nothing really bad will come of it, and then we are horrified at the actual results.

Read carefully the story of the Lord's trial and crucifixion. Judea had its own king in the time of the Lord, as well as its own priesthood, but it was subject to the Roman Empire, and the Roman governor was the only one who had power to condemn a man to death. The Lord's trial was a false trial. If you will read the testimony that was brought against Him and His answers, you will see that no proof was even offered that He was not what He claimed to be—they simply refused to believe Him. The real reason they put Him to death was that if they had accepted His statement that He was the Messiah, they would have been bound in the eyes of the people to accept what He said of the true way of life, and they did not want to change their ways or lessen their selfish control over the people.

What did the disciples do when the Lord was seized?

What did Peter do?

How was the Lord put to death?

What was done with His clothing?

Where was His body placed?

What measures were taken to prevent His resurrection?

These two chapters show us that even the temptation to do wrong in order to save our lives can be overcome in the Lord's strength. The cross is the sign of the Lord's final and complete victory over all the temptations which men can ever feel. Whenever we are tempted, if we think of the Lord and ask His help, we shall be able to stand firm.

Intermediate

Since the Intermediates are or will soon be of proper age for confirmation, stress the institution and correspondence of the Holy Supper. Then go on to the meaning of the crucifixion and the correspondence of some of its details, letting the interest of the young people determine which you discuss.

When the Lord entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday the people, who really wanted His help, received Him gladly; but the scribes and Pharisees, who feared that He would take away their power, were displeased at His coming. The Lord did not try to please them. During Monday and Tuesday He taught boldly in the temple, and much of His teaching was unhesitating condemnation of the scribes and Pharisees and admonition to the people not to follow their example. At first, for fear of the people, the priests and scribes did not dare molest Him, but gradually they succeeded in turning the people against Him, so that by Tuesday night He left the city not to return until Thursday night, when He came in for the Passover feast. Throughout the week He spent His nights at the home of His friends Mary, Martha, and Lazarus in Bethany.

There is a deep spiritual reason why the Lord was crucified during the celebration of the Passover week. He is called the Paschal Lamb. The crucifixion was the culmination of a long succession of struggles and victories by means of which He overcame the hells, the powers of evil which had grown so strong in the world that no man could resist them in his own strength. As the Passover commemorated deliverance from bondage in Egypt, so the Holy Supper, instituted by the Lord to take its place for all Christians, commemorates our deliverance by Him from bondage to hell. He said

that the bread and wine were His body and blood, and this means that they are symbols of the divine love and wisdom which we must receive into our hearts and minds if we are to be His followers.

The Lord could have saved Himself from the cross. Read Matthew 26:53. But if He had stopped short of physical death, He could not have shown us the way through it. He could have saved Himself by so mighty a miracle that all His enemies would have been forced to recognize Him as God. But their hearts would not have been changed. They would have obeyed Him through fear, but they would have been no happier. They would merely have been His slaves instead of the devil's. The Lord does not want slaves.

The rejection of the Lord by the people after He had been received as king marked the end of their church as the means of the Lord's presence among men. Judas, among the Apostles, pictured the ancient Jewish Church. So he betrayed the Lord and then killed himself. When we acknowledge the truth and then reject it because we do not want to live according to it, we kill the truth in our minds and as a result cause our own spiritual death. The end of that church as an intermediary between the Lord and men was also pictured by the rending of the veil of the temple at the time of the crucifixion.

The parting of the Lord's garments among the soldiers and the casting of lots was in fulfillment of a prophecy which we find in Psalm 22:18. John 19:23-24 gives us a little fuller account of this. The Lord's garments stand for the letter of the Word, and His "coat" or inner garment pictures the internal sense. People today "divide the Lord's garments" when they accept from the letter of the Word only what they can use to support what they want to believe. But the internal sense cannot be treated in this way—it is "woven without seam."

Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus (John 19:38-40) were members of the church's high court or Sanhedrin. They had not agreed with the others in condemning the Lord. They were not brave enough to stand alone against the almost overwhelming opinion, but after the crucifixion they had influence enough with

Pilate to be given the permission to care for the Lord's body, and they placed it in a new tomb. The request of the chief priest and Pharisees to have the tomb sealed and guarded showed that they were afraid of the Lord even after they had rejected Him. When people today reject the Lord, they sometimes spend a great deal of effort in bolstering up their position with arguments, not realizing that the arguments are merely foolishness in the ears of those who believe in the Lord and have experienced His power in their own lives.

Basic Correspondences

- the bread of the Holy Supper = divine love
- the wine of the Holy Supper = divine wisdom
- the Holy Supper = the reception of the Lord's love and wisdom, which alone can deliver us from bondage to evil



Senior

The difference between the New Church teaching and that of some other churches in regard to the crucifixion is important for this class. The general story will be familiar to most of them. What is pictured by Judas and his betrayal of the Lord should be brought out, as well as the transition from the ancient Hebrew to the Christian dispensation.

The triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday was, as the Lord knew, really the beginning of the end. But the temporary support of the multitude gave the Lord an opportunity to denounce the scribes and Pharisees openly and to cleanse the temple. In much the same way, there are moments in our lives when our sense of the Lord's kingship and power is so strong that we can see our own sins and hypocrisies in clear light and condemn them. Like the crowd we soon lose this fervor amid the temptations of our daily environment, but its effect persists and strengthens in us the small beginnings of regenerate life.

We have in us all the qualities represented by the twelve disciples including Judas, who represents the quality of the Jewish Church

of that day, which was in externals of worship without its internal. It was at the close of the Passover feast that Judas betrayed the Lord. The very truth which guides and supports the good merely incites in the evil greater resistance. When at this feast the Lord instituted the Holy Supper, He called the bread and wine His body and blood because they represent His goodness and truth. The reception of these by Judas resulted immediately in His betrayal of the Lord. We should remember this when we come to the Lord's supper, and be sure there is no hypocrisy in our reception of it.

Swedenborg tells us that the Lord's final and supreme temptation was the temptation to save men against their wills. In submitting to death upon the cross instead of saving Himself by a miracle He overcame this temptation. To do what is right "as it is written" in the face of popular scorn, of desertion by one's friends, of inevitable suffering is proof of the highest courage. This is what the cross means both in the Lord's life and in the lives of all of us His followers who are bidden to take up our cross and follow Him.

We should not be led to the Lord by pity for His suffering, but by admiration of His courage and by love of the qualities manifested in His earthly life, which are divine qualities. It is curious that many people today profess to be followers of the Lord while rejecting the Gospel accounts of His life, the only source of men's knowledge of Him. Such people merely use the historical figure of Christ as an effigy on which to hang their own worldly ideas of what is admirable, just as the Roman soldiers clothed the condemned Lord in a purple robe and gave Him mock worship.

All the details of the crucifixion and burial of the Lord in their spiritual sense describe the states of the church at that time. Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus (John 19:38-40) represent the "intellectual" element, the chief priests and scribes the perverted element, and the Roman soldiers the Gentiles, whose minds were at least not closed willfully against the truth. The parting of the Lord's garments among the soldiers pictures the way in which people accept such truths as they see to be useful without taking the whole. The Lord's garments picture the Word in its letter. The

“vesture” on which they cast lots was the inner garment, and represents the internal sense of the Word, which cannot be divided as the letter can.

Adult

There are two aspects of the lesson which are especially important for the Adults: the difference between the New Church teaching concerning the cross and the ideas prevailing in some other churches, and what betrayal of the Lord is in our own lives. The teacher should study the Intermediate and Senior notes also.

The Holy Supper is the one great feast of the Christian Church. It takes the place of the Passover and of all the feasts and sacrifices prescribed for the ancient Jewish Church. As the Passover commemorated deliverance from bondage in Egypt, so the Holy Supper commemorates our deliverance from bondage to the hells. The Lord Himself is “the Lamb that was slain” for our salvation, and the bread and wine of the Holy Supper are symbols of His body and blood, which are divine good and divine truth, as He Himself told His apostles. The “bread” which nourishes our souls is divine good, and the “wine” which refreshes us is divine truth. The Lord invites us all to partake of these for the strengthening of our souls against evil and falsity and their nourishment unto eternal life.

The name *Gethsemane* means “oil press.” Oil is a symbol of love. The oil press is a picture of temptation as to love, the deepest temptation of all. The Lord went to the Garden of Gethsemane on the Mount of Olives with His apostles after the last supper, knowing that Judas had agreed to betray Him. The physical suffering which He was to undergo was doubtless not even in His thoughts when He prayed that the cup might pass from Him. He did not have Himself in mind in His prayer—He never had Himself in mind—but those who were to reject the salvation which he had come to give them, as well as those who, having become His followers, were to yield to the weakness of the flesh and desert Him. He longed to save them all from committing these sins and to save them by force of His very divine power in spite of their own perverted wills.

The fact that even this deepest temptation came from what remained of His assumed humanity is shown by the change in the form of His prayer. He prayed three times, representing His turning to the Divine with all three planes, but only the first and most external prayer admitted the possibility of any change in the divine order which He was fulfilling. His disciples fell asleep, as we all do. Their sleep is a picture of our inability to keep our minds awake to spiritual realities, of our proneness to fall back into natural ways of thinking even when we have been instructed in the truth, to think in terms of worldly standards and values. This is to be spiritually asleep. So the Lord says to us, as well as to the apostles: “Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation: the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.”

In the Christian world Judas has come to be a symbol of all that is despicable. This has led to the question of why the Lord chose Judas in the first place to be one of His apostles, since the Lord knows the hearts of all. But we must distinguish between Judas the man and Judas the representative. In chapter 27 we learn that Judas recognized his sin and tried to undo it, and finally hanged himself from remorse. And Swedenborg tells us that after *True Christian Religion* was completed the original twelve apostles were sent throughout the spiritual world to proclaim the Second Coming; so we may well infer that Judas the man found his home in the heavens. From the writings we learn that he represents the church of that time, which was then in the love of the externals of worship. The affection for the externals of worship is a necessary and valuable affection but one which is easily led astray. When we, as did the scribes and Pharisees, put on outward piety as a cloak for inner selfishness and in order that we may have worldly honor and power, we are like Judas betraying the Lord with a kiss, for all outward worship purports to love the Lord.

The Lord made no effort to prevent Judas from betraying Him; neither would He permit His disciples to use force against the enemies who came to seize Him. It was necessary that His enemies be permitted to do their worst in order that His glory might after-

ward appear. As He said, He could have summoned “more than twelve legions of angels” at His will to restrain His enemies, but this would have been contrary to the divine purpose of leaving men in freedom. We are often tempted to try to force the truth upon others who do not want it, or to fight evil with its own weapons. But this method never succeeds. Truth is steadfast and uninsistent; only falsity is violent and anxious to dominate. The same weakness which prompted Peter to draw his sword led him to forsake the Lord after He was seized and to deny Him while He was being tried, for it was the feeling that material power is greater than spiritual power. It is the same weakness which prompts people in the church today to try to make the church succeed by doing “what everybody else does,” and leave the church when it does not appear to be prospering.

The Lord was tried first by the people themselves before Caiaphas the high priest. We recall that the Jews, in comparison with other nations, represent the church in us, our relation to the Lord. This is where the real trial of the Lord in us always takes place. The Lord refused to argue with Caiaphas or even to answer the false witnesses who were brought against Him. He merely asserted His divinity and pointed to the time when He would appear as their judge, and left them free to decide as they chose. So He does with us. We have all the evidence which the people then had. The Gospels stand for all time as authentic records of the Lord's life and claim. If we reject Him, it is not because of lack of evidence: it is simply because we do not wish to accept Him, because we prefer to follow our own guidance, to have our own way. The trial before Pilate represents merely our confirmation by reasonings of the decision of our will.

Many in the first Christian church theoretically and also actually regarded the cross as a punishment. Many today believe that on the cross the Lord suffered the punishment which men deserved, and so paid the price of our salvation. This is the doctrine called “vicarious atonement.” Many others—perhaps the majority—nominally reject this doctrine; yet actually many still believe it, for

they believe that because they call themselves Christians they will be saved, even if they live and think as they please, ignoring the Lord's teaching and rejecting the Scriptures which are our only source of knowledge of Him. They think of the crucifixion as a defeat and a tragedy, and feel bound to the Lord by pity for His voluntary suffering. This is not the New Church doctrine.

The passion of the cross was the Lord's final victory over all the temptations which beset our finite humanity and to which we so often yield, the final putting off of all the limitations and weaknesses which He had voluntarily assumed in the humanity He took on from Mary, in order to meet and overcome the evil forces which men had created by their misuse of His gifts and with which He could not have come in contact in any other way.

The cross teaches us that evil and falsity have no power against goodness and truth, that if we choose to walk with the Lord, not even death itself can hurt us. The thought of the cross should inspire us to say with the four and twenty elders (Revelation 11:17): "We give thee thanks, O Lord God Almighty, which art, and wast, and art to come: because thou hast taken to thee thy great power, and hast reigned."

From the Writings of Swedenborg

Apocalypse Explained, n. 400¹⁴: "It is recorded in the Word that there was an earthquake when the Lord suffered upon the cross, and also when the angel descended and rolled away the stone from the mouth of the sepulchre . . . These earthquakes occurred to indicate that the state of the church was then changed; for the Lord by His last temptation, which He endured in Gethsemane and upon the cross, conquered the hells, and put in order all things there and in the heavens, and also glorified His Human, that is, made it Divine; for this reason 'there was an earthquake, and the rocks were rent.' 'The veil of the temple was rent in twain from the top to the bottom' signified that His Human was made Divine . . ."

Suggested Questions on the Lesson

J. What happened on Palm Sunday? *the Lord's triumphal entry*

- J. Why had the Lord come to Jerusalem? *to observe Passover*
- J. What new feast did the Lord establish as He ate His last Passover?
Holy Supper
- P. What did He say one of His twelve disciples would do? *betray Him*
- P. What did each one ask? *Is it I?*
- P. Which one betrayed the Lord? *Judas Iscariot*
- J. How did Judas betray Him? *with a kiss*
- J. What did all the disciples do when the Lord was captured? *fled*
- P. What had the Lord told Peter he would do? *deny Him*
- P. Did Peter think he would deny the Lord? *no*
- P. Did he do it? *yes—three times*
- P. What made him remember what the Lord had said? *cock crowed*
- J. Before whom was the Lord first tried? *Caiaphas, the high priest*
- J. Who had to pronounce the final sentence? *Pilate, the Roman governor*
- J. What choice did Pilate give them? *to free Jesus or Barabbas*
- J. How was the Lord put to death? *crucifixion*
- J. What was done with His body? *placed in a new tomb hewn in rock*
- J. How did they try to guard against His resurrection? *sealed tomb, set guard*
- I. What do the bread and wine in the Holy Supper represent? *the Lord's divine love and wisdom*
- S. What does the cross mean to us? *a sign that evil and falsity have no real power against goodness and truth*