

The Night Before Good Friday

If you knew tomorrow was your last day on earth, what would you do?

I imagine most of us would spend every second left with our family and loved ones, probably somewhere quiet and secluded. We would savor every moment, relive every precious memory and make sure nothing is left unsaid.

Two thousand years ago, Jesus had a night not unlike that.

This weekend, hundreds of millions of Christians in America and across the globe will remember Jesus' death on Good Friday and celebrate his resurrection on Easter Sunday. My church and I will also reflect on the meaning and significance of these holy days.

But before this hallowed weekend arrives, we should pause for a moment and remember that before there was a Good Friday—or even an Easter Sunday—there was a Thursday night.

The night before he died, after the Last Supper, Jesus took his disciples to the Mount of Olives to pray. The Gospel of Luke says his anguish was so great that he sweated blood—a rare condition known as hematidrosis in which the blood vessels that supply the skin's sweat glands rupture when a person is under extreme stress. He knew what was about to come; the clock was running out of time. It would be the last time he had a moment alone by himself and with his disciples before his death. What would he do?

The Gospel of John tells us that right before he was arrested, and subsequently tried and crucified, Jesus prayed a long prayer. In fact, it's the longest prayer recorded in the New Testament. In this "Last Supplication," Jesus—though completely aware of his coming death—focuses more on his disciples and those who will believe through their message

than on himself. His chief request to the Father is that he would make them one.

“Holy Father, through Your name keep those whom You have given Me, that they may be one as We are one,” prays Jesus for his disciples (John 17:11). He knew his impending death would be their greatest trial. Their faith would be tested like it had never been tested before, and in that moment the success of the early church would hinge on their unity.

But Jesus was also looking beyond those around him that night, to those who would put their faith in him through the ages.

“I do not pray for these alone,” continues Jesus. “but also for those who will believe in Me through their word, that they may all be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You. May they also be one in Us, that the world may believe that You have sent Me.” (John 17:20-21)

Even then, at that agonizing hour, Jesus wanted his followers to understand that the credibility of the cross and the empty tomb would be contingent on the unity of the church. Without unity, the church loses its ability to effectively communicate the message of the gospel.

Today, as we’re on the verge of Good Friday and Easter Sunday, I believe the church in America needs this message more than ever before.

Division abounds in almost every segment of America. Sadly, it exists even between Christians and in most churches. We’ve allowed politics and even theology to divide and fragment us. We might all be celebrating Good Friday and Easter Sunday this weekend, but we’re certainly not all celebrating together. This isn’t what Jesus intended for his followers.

I firmly believe unity in America begins in the church. It’s in the church where any dividing barrier—whether racial, political or social—should come down. As Billy Graham would

say, "The ground is level at the foot of the cross."

In this time of great division, the church must lead the way in modeling unity. That's what Jesus asked of us the night before Good Friday. {eoa}

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