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Grace Fellowship Church, Port Jervis, New York

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Remembering Palm Sunday

Selected Scriptures

Prayer: *Father God, we do thank you and praise you for this week that we have coming up. I thank you and praise you for this day, Palm Sunday, the day where the entire city came out to recognize the King, at least for that day for that time it was real. Father, I pray as we look into your word, as we look into remembering Palm Sunday and remembering the rest of this week, I pray for an extra measure of your grace, I pray for your Holy Spirit's presence, I pray as we open up your book, you would guide us, give us your strength, give us your wisdom, and again, we pray that you would enable us to make this a permanent part of our lives. I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Shortly after the death of Moses, his successor Joshua began the task of leading his people from the desert, the place where they had been for the last 40 years, and he was leading them to the promised land. But to do that required a miracle. They had to cross the Jordan. And the Jordan River was at flood stage. They had to cross it to enter the promised land. And Joshua was to lead

them, and God chose him for this impossible task really in order to lift him up because he was going to be the new Moses. Joshua 3:7 says: *The LORD said to Joshua, "Today I will begin to exalt you in the sight of all Israel, that they may know that, as I was with Moses, so I will be with you."* So God instructs Joshua to have the priests bear the ark of the covenant all the way up to the banks of the Jordan, and as soon as their feet touched that river, the waters parted and then began to pile up as a heap on either side. The entire nation of Israel passed through the Jordan just like their ancestors had passed through the Red Sea on dry ground. Joshua 4:4-7 says this: *Then Joshua called the twelve men from the people of Israel, whom he had appointed, a man from each tribe. And Joshua said to them, "Pass on before the ark of the LORD your God into the midst of the Jordan, and take up each of you a stone upon his shoulder, according to the number of the tribes of the people of Israel, that this may be a sign among you. When your children ask in time to come, 'What do these stones mean to you?' then you shall tell them that the waters of the Jordan were cut off before the ark of the covenant of the LORD. When it passed over the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off. So these stones shall be to the people of Israel a memorial forever."*

So Joshua has one man from each tribe go to the middle of the Jordan and there from this newly dried out ground they were to

fetch a stone in order to build a memorial. We ask why in the world did God command that? Well, one of our greatest human failings is forgetting. Joshua wanted to ensure that that would never happen. Now, just think for a second. If you were to cross a major river in the middle of its flood stage, and if you saw with your own eyes a river held up high and piled up high by the very hand of God, do you think you would ever forget that? Well, you might think you wouldn't but you would. The answer is yes, you would eventually forget it. You see, no matter how spectacular the event, eventually our memories dim and dull and diminish, to where they finally run out, and we don't remember. You know, people think oh, that's impossible. Understand, it took only six weeks for the Jews to completely forget the miracles that got them out of Egypt. Six weeks. Exodus 16 says this: *They set out from Elim, and all the congregation of the people of the Israel came to the wilderness of Sin which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month -- that's six weeks -- after they had departed from the land of Egypt. And the whole congregation of the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness, and the people of Israel said to them, "Would that we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the meat pots and ate bread to the full, for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger."* Joshua was going to lead the children of the people who 40 years

earlier had forgotten that God had done the very same thing when he had parted the Red Sea. Joshua said, *these stones shall be to the people of Israel a memorial forever.* A memorial is just a reminder, and Israel desperately needed one. They had forgotten the plagues, the quail, the bitter water being turned sweet, the pillar of fire by night, the cloud by day and they had not suffered just some momentary lapse in memory, they had repeatedly, pointedly and willfully chosen to forget the God who would warn them in Deuteronomy 6:12: *Then take care lest you forgot the LORD, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.* The Jews were not careful. The Jews forgot their God. You see, we don't often think of forgetting as something wrong, something off, something sinful, but God does. David in Psalm 103 said: *Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits.* Proverbs 3:1 says: *My son, do not forget my teaching, but let your heart keep my commandments.*

See, the reason why we don't see forgetting as a sin is it's not because it's something we don't do, it's because it's something we all do. It is so common a failing, so common a sin, that we don't even categorize it as sin. We think of forgetfulness as something akin to being left-handed or color-blind, yet forgetfulness can range from being simply annoying to profoundly sinful, and it all depends on what is forgotten and who is affected by it. You know,

if I forget to feed my goldfish, it's not really that big a deal. If I forget to feed my newborn baby, it's a much bigger deal. Forgetting to show up at the company picnic, again, is not the same as forgetting to show up at your own wedding. You know, again, it all has to do with what is forgotten and who is affected by it. And when we forget God, we forget the biggest "who" and the greatest "what" there is. And the reason why we do so so often is because forgetting God appears to have no apparent consequence. You know, if I forget my wedding, or if I forget to feed my children, I'm certainly going to hear about it, even my goldfish are going to stink if I forget to feed them, but if I forget God, apparently nothing happens. The sun still rises, sun still sets on the just and the unjust alike, life just continues to go on. Moreover, as the Psalmist said in Psalm 73: *The wicked prosper.* Those who forget even the thought of God continue to do so with absolute impunity.

So what is the point of remembering if the consequences of forgetting are basically nonexistent? Well, God knows all about that argument because he's heard it all before. Listen to what God says in Malachi 3, he says this. He says: *"Your words have been hard against me, says the LORD. But you say, 'How have we spoken against you?' You have said, 'It is vain to serve God. What is the profit of our keeping his charge or of walking as in mourning*

before the LORD of hosts? And now we call the arrogant blessed. Evildoers not only prosper but they put God to the test and they escape." Well, that was the argument. And today in this present life, really there is no obvious distinction between those who serve God and those who do not. That's how the argument went. But you know, even God acknowledges that. But he goes on to say in verse 16: *Then those who feared the LORD spoke with one another. The LORD paid attention and heard them, and a book of remembrance was written before him of those who feared the LORD and esteemed his name. "They shall be mine, says the LORD of hosts, in the day when I make up my treasured possession, I will spare them as a man spares his son who serves him. Then once more you shall see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between one who serves God and one who does not serve him. Need I add the distinction one who remembers him and one who does not. Job 8:12 says this: While yet in flower and not cut down, they wither before any other plant. Such are the paths of all who forget God; the hope of the Godless shall perish.*

Have you forgotten God? You know perhaps, perhaps you were thinking a question like that really, really needs a qualifier because we need to ask what constitutes forgetting God? What level of consciousness does God expect from us in the first place? Well, Deuteronomy 6:5 says this, it says: *You shall love the LORD your*

God with all of your heart and with all of your soul and with all of your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes, you shall write them on the door posts of your house and on your gates.

So, what constitutes forgetting God? Well, I think the answer from scripture is simple. It's living any part of my life as if God wasn't a part of it. I mean, God says there are four parts of your day when I should be a part of your thinking, when I should be in your heart: When you sit down, when you walk, when you lie down, and when you rise. Now, that's God's way of saying I should be on your mind and in your heart 24/7/365. Now you may think that's a little bit overboard, kind of fanatical, a little bit much, a little impractical, you know, you might think it's going to create a whole class of people who are so heavenly minded that they're no earthly good, as the cliché goes. Well, the fact is, that is simply not true. The most engaged folks I know are people who have God on their minds constantly. In fact, being heavenly minded is the key to being of any earthly good.

Listen to what C. S. Lewis wrote in Mere Christianity. He said:
If you read history, you will find the Christians who did the most of the present world were just those who thought most of the next. The apostles themselves who set on foot the conversion of the Roman Empire, the great men who built up the middle ages, the English evangelicals who abolished the slave trade, all left their mark on earth precisely because their minds were occupied with heaven. It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this. Aim at heaven and you will get earth "thrown in." Aim at earth and you will get neither.

You see, the problem with the world and also with the church today is that it aims only at earth. It has forgotten that we are dust, that we did not invent ourselves, that we are mere creatures put here for a purpose by a creator. That purpose is to glorify God, and that's not something that we can only do on Sunday mornings. And so we ask ourselves the question so how much of my consciousness is God entitled to? Well, the answer has to do with who we think we are and what we think we're here for. You see, if our purpose for existing is God's glory, then what part of our conscious thought is to be excluded? We say all the time whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God. When do we do that? Well, Deuteronomy 6 says when you sit down, when you walk, when you lie

down, and when you rise. 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year. That about covers it.

Now, before you throw your hands up in despair, I want to revisit that scripture in Deuteronomy 6, because the very next verse says what we are to do with God's commandments. It says this. It says: *Tie them as symbols on your hands, bind them on your foreheads, write them on your door frames and on your gates.* You know what all these devices are, these techniques are? These are reminders. Reminders. And you know why God gives us these reminders is because he knows how easily we forget.

Why did God have an altar built out of the stones taken out of the dry ground of the center of the river Jordan? Again Joshua 4:7: *"So these stones shall be to the people of Israel a memorial forever."* A memorial is something that stirs up what? It stirs up your memory. See, God knows us. He knows how quickly we forget. Think about what was the purpose of the Passover celebration, what was the purpose of the Day of Atonement, of the Feast of Tabernacles? It's so you will not forget. Remember what Jesus said when he instituted the Lord's supper, do this...what? In remembrance of me.

Well, that brings me to the point of this message this morning.

Today marks the beginning of the passion of the Lord Jesus Christ. And we who forget so easily have been given by God an entire week to prepare to celebrate the greatest event in the history of humankind. That's Jesus Christ's triumph over death and his resurrection, and Palm Sunday starts a week of remembrance of that event. Now, there are 52 weeks in a year. This week coming up is supposed to be like no other week because the event of the resurrection is like no other event. All history, human, divine, natural, and supernatural flows forward or backward from that single event. Today is Palm Sunday. Today's the day that marks the Lord's triumphant entry into Jerusalem, and John 12 says that the multitude met Jesus there with palm branches, that they lay them down as we sing "*Hosanna, blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.*"

We pass out palm branches on Palm Sunday, and why do we do that? Why do we have this pile here? It's to help us remember. Do you remember what Jesus did as he approached Jerusalem at the height -- at the height of his triumph? The crowds were shouting, the Pharisees were fuming, every single person in Jerusalem was overwhelmed with Jesus. The only person who was not overwhelmed was Jesus. It says in Luke 19:41: *And when he drew near and saw the city, he wept over it.* Jesus wept. He wept for a blindness that would culminate days later with even more shouts. Shouts for

his crucifixion. Shouts for his blood to be on their heads and on the heads of their children. Jesus wasn't weeping for himself. He was weeping that light had come into the world and that men preferred darkness. He knew with absolute accuracy every last detail that would unfold in the next few days, and we know that he knew all about it because shortly before he arrived in Jerusalem, he said in Matthew 20: *"See, we are going up to Jerusalem. And the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn him to death and deliver him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified, and he will be raised on the third day."* See, at the very height of his triumph, Jesus already knew his fate because he already knew his purpose. He had not come to earth as a teacher or a ruler, as an example, he had come to earth as a sacrifice. His purpose was to lead a spotless, flawless life and so earn the right to have the blood drained from his body, to splatter on the wood and the cross and the nails and the ground. That blood, the blood of God himself, that blood alone would atone for my sin and yours. This was the moment his entire public ministry was pointed at. It wasn't his teaching, it wasn't his living, it wasn't his miracles that brought him to Jerusalem; it was his impending execution.

Three years earlier at the start of his public ministry, he was baptized by John the Baptist who declared: *"Behold the Lamb of God*

who takes away the sins of the world." Now, the purpose of that lamb was to be sacrificed. For three years as Jesus healed and taught and ministered, he knew, he knew that his primary mission was death. That thought was never, never beyond his consciousness. And we know that Jesus wept because the scripture says so. What we don't know because he's left no record at all is whether or not Jesus ever laughed. Jesus knew every single day of his adult life that he was here to be slaughtered, and unlike us, he didn't need any reminders. So the question is could he ever forget his purpose long enough to laugh? Could he ever for one moment wipe out the imminence of the torture he faced every single day? We struggle to remember. Did he struggle to forget? I don't know. I do know that the palms and the crowds and the hosannas, they made him weep. And I know that Palm Sunday helps me remember that. It starts off a whole week of remembrance.

Now, the next day of that week is holy Thursday. It's known to some as Maundy Thursday after the first word of the Latin anthem that is sung on that day. Holy Thursday is a day set aside to commemorate the Last Supper. The Last Supper was a Passover meal which in itself is a meal designed to help the Jews remember, to keep them from forgetting what God had done while they were still slaves in Egypt. God told the Jews to take a lamb, and to slaughter it, spread its blood over the door posts and lintels of

their house because that night God was sending his final plague on Egypt. The angel of death would come down that night and kill the first born of all Egypt. And if the angel saw the blood of the lamb on the door post, it would pass over that house, and they would be spared. And to remember that event, Jews slaughtered a lamb for every Passover service. So Jesus celebrated the Passover Supper that night before he went to the cross. He partook of the Passover lamb. The next day he was the Passover Lamb. The lamb whose shed blood would cover the sins of his sheep.

You see, it was not by coincidence that Jesus was crucified at the exact time that the Jews were celebrating Passover. John's gospel tells us of the timing of the crucifixion. It states in John 19: *Now it was the day of Preparation of the Passover.* On the very day the Jews in all of Jerusalem were slaughtering their lambs to remember how the blood of the lamb had protected them from death, at that very same moment, Jesus Christ, the lamb of God was also being slaughtered so that his blood could save us from death. And that was no coincidence. Holy Thursday is a day designed to help us remember the Passover.

Now, the next day of holy week is Good Friday. That's the day that we remember our Lord's crucifixion. I have vivid memories of this day as a child. It was to be a day of profound sorrow. No

shopping, no sports, no TV, no games, silence from noon to 3:00 p.m., and we were not particularly observant Roman Catholics, but you know, I believe they got that right. I think we Protestants on this day often miss out on that. See, this is the day to focus on the mocking, on the slaps to the face, on the spitting and the taunts. The question: *Who struck you?* The sport the soldiers made of the King of the universe. The crown fashioned from two-inch thorn briars forced into his head, and again the taunt: *Hail, King of the Jews!* We remember the floggings, leather thongs with bits of metal and bone on their ends designed to tear flesh from bone. We remember the wicked procession, Jesus forced to carry his own cross. We remember him stripped and nailed and hoisted all to the gloating and mocking of those that he came to save. Good Friday is supposed to be a dreadful day of remembrance because we focus on what took place on the cross. There was no noble shouldering of man's sin there; that would not do. What many misunderstand is at the cross Jesus didn't just nobly pay the price of our sin. No, the spotless one instead became our sin.

2 Corinthians 5 says: *For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*

You know, when I think of remembering Good Friday, I always think of remembering that passage in Joni Erickson's book "When God Weeps," because just about every year, we read that passage for the

exact reason that we are speaking of, so that we will remember. Joni picks up the crucifixion at the driving of the first nail. This is what it says:

"As the man swings, the son recalls how he and the father first designed the medial nerve of the human forearm, the sensations it would be capable of. The design proves flawless. The nerve performs exquisitely. Up you go! They lift the cross. God is on display and can scarcely breathe. But these pains are a mere warm-up to his other and growing dread.

He begins to feel a foreign sensation. Somewhere during this day an unearthly foul odor began to waft, not around his nose, but his heart. He feels dirty. Human wickedness starts to crawl upon his spotless being, the living excrement from our souls.

The apple of his father's eyes turns brown with rot. His father! He must face his father like this! From heaven the father now rouses himself like a lion disturbed, shakes his mane, and roars against the shriveling remnant of a man hanging on a cross.

Never has the Son seen the Father look at him so, never felt even the least of his hot breath. But now that roar shakes the unseeing world and darkens the visible sky. The Son doesn't recognize these eyes. "Son of Man! Why have you behaved so? You have cheated, lusted, stolen, gossiped, murdered, envied, hated, lied. You have cursed, robbed, overspent, overeaten, fornicating,

disobeyed, embezzled, and blasphemed. Oh the duties you have shirked, the children you have abandoned! Who has ever so ignored the poor, so played the coward, so belittled my name?

Have you ever held your razor tongue? What a self-righteous, pitiful drunk. You, who molest young boys, peddle killer drugs, travel in clicks, and mock your parents. Who gave you the boldness to rig elections, foment revolutions, torture animals and worship demons? Does the list never end? Splitting families, raping virgins and acting smugly, playing the pimp, buying politicians, practicing extortion, filming pornography, accepting bribes. You have burnt down buildings, perfected terrorist tactics, founded false religious, traded in slaves, relishing each morsel and bragging about it all. I hate, I loathe these things in you! Disgust for everything about you consumes me! Can you not feel my wrath?"

The father watches as his heart's treasure, the mirror image of himself, sinks drowning into raw, liquid sin. Jehovah's stored rage against humankind from every century explodes in a single direction.

"Father! Father! Why have you forsaken me?!"

But heaven stops its ears. The Son stares up at the one who cannot, who will not, reach down or reply. Two eternal hearts tear. Their intimate friendship shaken to the depths. The Trinity had planned it. The Son endured it. The Spirit enabled him.

The Father rejected the Son whom he loved. Jesus, the God man from Nazareth, perished. The father accepted his sacrifice for sin and was satisfied. The rescue was accomplished." Good Friday is the day God gives us to remember that.

The next day is Holy Saturday. The church is, as it were, at the Lord's tomb meditating on his passion and death, awaiting his resurrection with prayer and fasting. Holy Saturday commemorates the time the entire universe held its breath. For Jesus' death to have been an acceptable sacrifice, it too would have had to have been like his life, flawless. If the Lord Jesus Christ's entire life and death had been marred by any sin whatsoever, then death and the grave would have claimed him and Satan would have had the ultimate victory. It's been suggested that hell itself feasted and partied assuming they had triumphed during this time. And so Saturday is a day of pensive waiting anticipating Sunday.

And Sunday is the most glorious day of the entire Christian calendar. Sunday is the day we celebrate the triumph of mercy and justice over sin. It's a day of worship and praise and thanksgiving like no other day all year long, or it's a day of new outfits and chocolate bunnies and Easter eggs. See, it all depends on what you choose to remember and what you choose to forget.

Now, I said at the beginning of this message that we who forget so easily have been given by God an entire week to prepare to celebrate the greatest event in the history of mankind, and so the question that I want to raise for all of us this morning is this. What are you going to do with this week? You know, three times a year God called ancient Israel to celebrate feasts, and all work was to stop. Everyone ceased what they were doing to appear before the Lord. Even the Army was to cease all of its military duties. God said in Exodus 34: *For I will cast out nations before you and enlarge your borders; no one shall covet your land when you go up to appear before the Lord your God three times in the year.* You see, three times a year God said everything's got to stop. Three times a year, God broke through the pagan wills of Israel's enemies and made them cease coveting Israel's land. Even the covetous desire of Israel's enemies had to stop while Israel tended to what really mattered. They were about the business of remembering, remembering God's deliverance from Egypt and his provision for Israel. This was a sacred task. Well, this week we are about the business of the deliverance of the universe from the bondage of sin, the sacred triumph of the Prince of the universe over the power of death, the resurrection that gives eternal life to all who place their trust in Him.

So the question is what are we planning this week? I bet you

Wal-Mart's got a giant sale for Easter. I'm sure the malls are going to be packed. There's gardens to be tilled. There's spring cleaning to be done. There's time to change the oil in the car. We remember those tasks, and that's okay, we remember those tasks all too well. I'm not saying that all life is to cease this week, but I am saying this is the week to change our perspective. So what do you plan to do with it? You know, as in ancient Israel, the responsibility for these households rested with the man. So this morning I want to particularly address the husbands. I want to ask will this week be any different than any other week in your households, men? Growing up in our household, we used to use the passion week as a time to set the stage. We used to watch Franco Zeffirelli's film, Jesus of Nazareth. I still think it's the best Easter film that was ever done, but it's a six-hour movie, and so we used to divide it into chunks, and every day of the week, we would watch a chunk of it just to keep us focused. I'm sure most of us plan on being here for the Good Friday evening service, but the question I want to raise is what about the rest of the week? Perhaps you want to use devotionals, maybe Christian music, maybe read from scripture, but I exhort you this morning, make this week different from the other 51. Ask God for wisdom, ask him to help you remember what Colossians 2:13 proclaims. It says this: *And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us*

all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him.

You see, Easter is the day that we celebrate the fact that the empty tomb is proof that Jesus won. And because he won, we win eternally. So let us never forget that. Praise the Lord, oh, my soul, and forget not all his benefits. Let's pray.

Father God, I just thank you for the uniqueness of this week coming up. I thank you for the means that you've given to us to jar our memories, to keep the concept of what it is you've done for us in the sending of your Son, your perfect Son, to pay the penalty of our sin. Father, I thank you for this week. I pray for Holy Thursday, I pray for Good Friday, I pray for Saturday as well, as well as Sunday. Lord, may these days be unique in all the year. May they be not like any other week. May you give us the wisdom to focus in on what you've done for us, and what spectacular results have come from that. I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.