

# THE HOPE OF GLORY

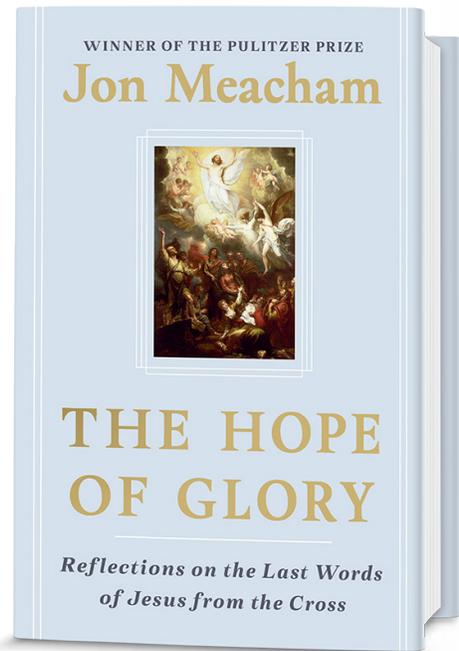
## STUDY GUIDE

# JON MEACHAM

What is truth? For Christians, the central truth of existence is captured in the death and resurrection of Jesus. Without Good Friday, there is no Easter; without Easter, there is no deliverance from evil; without deliverance from evil, there is no victory of light over dark, of love over hate, of life over death.

Yet that victory is the radical, revolutionary, and essential promise of Christianity—a promise revealed to us in the Passion of Jesus.

**This devotional series is built from** a series of reflections on the Last Words of Jesus from the cross—words spoken on a Friday afternoon that is at once impossibly remote and yet imaginatively close to hand. It is a devotional work, not a scholarly one. We are sharing these meditations in the hope that a sense of history and an appreciation of theology might help readers make more sense of the cross in a world too much given to the competing forces of hostile skepticism, blind acceptance, or remote indifference.



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## DAY ONE

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### **Scripture Reading:**

For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face.

1 Corinthians 13:12 (KJV)

### **Excerpt: (p. 19)**

The early believers were looking for history to draw to a close—soon. Why else were the gospels written decades after the Passion? Could it be because Jesus’s followers did not expect to need documents to pass on to ensuing generations because they believed that they were the last generation? . . . If Jesus were returning to rule in a new kind of reality, there would be no need for biographies, for he would be right there, having just descended with a shout. As the years passed, however, and the kingdom did not come, the early Christians composed the gospels to capture the stories and traditions in anticipation of a much longer wait—and to make the case for their “good news” to the broader world.

### **Prompt:**

What do you think we gain by reading gospels written decades after Jesus’s crucifixion and resurrection?

### **Benediction:**

O sing unto the Lord a new song; for he hath done marvellous things: his right hand, and his holy arm, hath gotten him the victory.

The Lord hath made known his salvation: his righteousness hath he openly shewed in the sight of the heathen.

Psalm 98:1–2 (KJV)

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## DAY TWO

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### **Scripture Reading:**

For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.

Romans 11:29 (NKJV )

### **Excerpt: (p. 25)**

Whatever one thinks of Christianity, Jesus gave birth to a lasting vision of the origins, nature, and destiny of human life, a vision drawn from the religion's deep roots in Judaism. Everyone is created in God's image; there is, as Paul said, "neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus"; all are equal, precious, worthy. Humility was essential; generosity, vital; love, central.

### **Prompt:**

In what ways do you model Christ's humility, generosity, and love—especially during this holy week? What gifts and callings do you engage in your pursuit of these goals?

### **Benediction:**

O Lord, our Lord,

how majestic is your name in all the earth!

You have set your glory above the heavens.

Out of the mouth of babies and infants,  
you have established strength because of your foes,  
to still the enemy and the avenger.

When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,  
the moon and the stars, which you have set in place,  
what is man that you are mindful of him,  
and the son of man that you care for him?

Psalms 8:1–4 (ESV)

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## DAY THREE

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### **Scripture Reading:**

I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats this bread will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.”

John 6:51 (NIV)

### **Excerpt: (pp. 25–26)**

So many theological questions linger, and always will: Did Jesus understand his relationship to God the Father in the way Christians now do? Luke claims he did: “The Son of man must suffer many things, and be rejected,” Jesus says, “and be slain, and be raised the third day.” Did he grasp his atoning role? John claims he did: “I am the living bread which came down from heaven: if any man eat of this bread, he shall live forever: and the bread that I will give is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.” But how much of this is remembered history, and how much heartfelt but unhistorical theology? It is impossible to say. “How unsearchable are his judgments,” Paul writes of the Lord, “and how inscrutable his ways!”

### **Prompt:**

How would you answer the author’s question? Did Jesus understand His relationship to the Father the way we now do? Did He grasp His atoning role?

### **Benediction:**

I will sing of the Lord’s great love forever;  
with my mouth I will make your faithfulness known  
through all generations.  
I will declare that your love stands firm forever,  
that you have established your faithfulness in heaven itself.  
You said, “I have made a covenant with my chosen one,  
I have sworn to David my servant,  
‘I will establish your line forever  
and make your throne firm through all generations.’”

Psalms 89:1–4 (NIV)

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## DAY FOUR

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### **Scripture Reading: The First Word**

There were also two others, criminals, led with Him to be put to death. And when they had come to the place called Calvary, there they crucified Him, and the criminals, one on the right hand and the other on the left. Then Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do.” And they divided His garments and cast lots. And the people stood looking on. But even the rulers with them sneered, saying, “He saved others; let Him save Himself if He is the Christ, the chosen of God.” The soldiers also mocked Him, coming and offering Him sour wine, and saying, “If You are the King of the Jews, save Yourself.” And an inscription also was written over Him in letters of Greek, Latin, and Hebrew: THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS.

Luke 23:32–38 (NKJV )

### **Excerpt: (pp. 37–38)**

Yet my sense is that we take the wrong lesson from Jesus’s declaration of forgiveness if we read it—as many preachers do—as an affirmation of the wideness of God’s mercy . . . If God’s plan required his Son’s death and resurrection, then why would the agents of that plan require absolution? We are taught that Jesus had to die as a ransom for many. Without his suffering, death, and resurrection, then there would be no salvation, no new heaven and new earth. . . .

### **Prompt:**

How would you answer the author’s question: If God’s plan required his Son’s death and resurrection, then why would the agents of that plan require absolution?

### **Benediction:**

You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me.

Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high; I cannot attain it. . . .

If I say, “Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light about me be night,” even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is bright as the day, for darkness is as light with you.

Psalms 139:5–6, 11–12 (ESV)

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## DAY FIVE

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### **Scripture Reading:**

“All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”

2 Timothy 3:16–17 (NIV)

### **Excerpt:**

**(p. 42)**

We are called to use our minds as well as our hearts in reading the Bible, deciding, through the use of reason, whether a given passage is an actual report or a theological device. The Bible was not FedExed from heaven, nor did the Lord God of Hosts send a pdf or a link to Scripture.

**(p. 44)**

The first word we hear from the cross, then, is a reminder that all we are to hear is not to be taken uncritically. In a prayer published in the 1549 English Book of Common Prayer, Scripture is, rather, to be heard, read, marked, learned, and inwardly digested with care and an appreciation of context. Reason and faith are the wings with which we can rise from the darkness of ignorance and despair, seeking forgiveness and nothing less than holiness in a profane world.

### **Prompt:**

What Scriptures do you meditate on for learning about God? For correcting habits (yours and suggesting for others)? How do you distinguish between the historical, figurative, and prophetic verses in your time of intimate study, prayer, and worship?

### **Benediction:**

But I am like a deaf man; I do not hear, like a mute man who does not open his mouth.

I have become like a man who does not hear, and in whose mouth are no rebukes.

But for you, O LORD, do I wait; it is you, O Lord my God, who will answer.

Psalms 38:14–16 (ESV)

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## DAY SIX

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### **Scripture Reading: The Second Word**

One of the criminals who were hanged there was hurling abuse at Him, saying, “Are You not the Christ? Save Yourself and us!” But the other answered, and rebuking him said, “Do you not even fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? “And we indeed are suffering justly, for we are receiving what we deserve for our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong.” And he was saying, “Jesus, remember me when You come in Your kingdom!” And He said to him, “Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise.”

Luke 23:39–43 (NASB)

### **Excerpt: (p. 51)**

The words mark the culmination of the central work of Jesus’s public ministry, which has been centered on the proclamation of a kingdom in which the last shall be first. . . . That Jesus was an exclusively political figure, however, seems unlikely. If he had been, it is hard to believe that he alone would have died. Rome would have targeted his immediate followers as well. Why not crucify at least a few of the disciples, none of whom were even arrested, if a full-scale revolt was thought to be in the offing?

### **Prompt:**

What about the events of the Passion and or the events described within these seven last sayings signals to you that Jesus was more than a political figure?

### **Benediction:**

All thy works shall praise thee, O LORD; and thy saints shall bless thee.

They shall speak of the glory of thy kingdom and talk of thy power;

To make known to the sons of men his mighty acts, and the glorious majesty of his kingdom.

Thy kingdom is an everlasting kingdom and thy dominion endureth throughout all generations.

Psalms 145:10–13 (KJV)

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## DAY SEVEN

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### **Scripture Reading:**

He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God.”

Revelation 2:7 (KJV)

### **Excerpt: (p. 52)**

Today, you will be with me in Paradise: God is all-powerful and far beyond our control and our comprehension. His mercy is available to all, even if the ways and means of grace remain mysterious, veiled from our eyes and our understandings. Let us just pray that we, too, may one day dwell in communion with the Lord and all those whom he has chosen to forgive. For we will need that forgiveness and that grace every bit as much as the condemned man who had the wisdom to call out to Jesus. The question is whether we will have the courage and the humility to make the same plea.

### **Prompt:**

When you think about dwelling in communion with all those God has chosen to forgive, which people in your community stand out as most in need of forgiveness—God’s and yours? What Scriptures imbue you with courage and humility to extend that forgiveness?

### **Benediction:**

To you, O LORD, I call; my rock, be not deaf to me, lest, if you be silent to me, I become like those who go down to the pit.

Hear the voice of my pleas for mercy, when I cry to you for help, when I lift up my hands toward your most holy sanctuary.

Psalms 28:1–2 (ESV)

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## DAY EIGHT

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### **Scripture Reading:**

But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.

James 1:22 (NKJV)

### **Excerpt: (pp. 57–58)**

The charge to John to care for Mary is a reminder that we must be, as the Epistle of James put it, doers of the Word and not hearers only. The gospel injunction about how we are to conduct ourselves in this world is clear.

### **Prompt:**

What Scriptures come to mind when you think about this injunction from James?

### **Benediction:**

I will meditate on your precepts  
and fix my eyes on your ways.

I will delight in your statutes;  
I will not forget your word.

Deal bountifully with your servant,  
that I may live and keep your word.

Open my eyes, that I may behold  
wondrous things out of your law.

I am a sojourner on the earth;  
hide not your commandments from me!

Psalms 119:15–19 (ESV)

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## DAY NINE

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### **Scripture Reading:**

Then the King will say to those at his right hand, “Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.” Then the righteous will answer him, “Lord, when did we see thee hungry and feed thee, or thirsty and give thee drink? And when did we see thee a stranger and welcome thee, or naked and clothe thee? And when did we see thee sick or in prison and visit thee?” And the King will answer them, “Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.” Then he will say to those at his left hand, “Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.”

Matthew 25:34–45 (RSV)

### **Excerpt: (p. 59)**

The story of Jesus is a guide and a gate; it urges us to do unto each other as we would have others do unto us, and in so doing we are drawn ever closer to the cross—the emblem of unselfish love. We are free to decline the invitation, of course, and many do. But the invitation is still there, forever open. “Come and see,” Jesus said to those who would become his disciples at the beginning of his ministry.

### **Prompt:**

Why do you think so many decline the invitation to do unto others as we would have others do unto us? What could cause someone familiar with Matthew 25 to dismiss the stranger, the naked and destitute, the sick, the imprisoned? What could change that?

### **Benediction:**

Light dawns in the darkness for the upright;

    he is gracious, merciful, and righteous.

It is well with the man who deals generously and lends;

    who conducts his affairs with justice.

For the righteous will never be moved;

    he will be remembered forever.

Psalms 112:4–6 (ESV)

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## DAY TEN

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### **Scripture Reading:**

Now from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land unto the ninth hour. And about the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying, Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani? that is to say, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? Matthew 27:45–46 (KJV)

### **Excerpt: (p. 65)**

If, as the faithful suppose—and as the gospels, in their Passion predictions, insist—Jesus was fully briefed on his earthly mission, then how could his cry be taken literally? Why ask whether God has forsaken him? Why cry in pain when he must have known that resurrection lay ahead?

### **Prompt:**

How would you answer the author’s question? Does a closer review of the Psalm Jesus quoted here (Psalm 22) influence your answer in any way?

### **Benediction:**

Ye that fear the LORD, praise him; all ye the seed of Jacob, glorify him; and fear him, all ye the seed of Israel.

For he hath not despised nor abhorred the affliction of the afflicted; neither hath he hid his face from him; but when he cried unto him, he heard.

My praise *shall be* of thee in the great congregation.

Psalm 22:23–25 (KJV)

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## DAY ELEVEN

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### **Scripture Reading:**

“Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.”

Philippians 4:8 (RSV)

### **Excerpt: (p. 68)**

When I am asked, as I occasionally am, how it is that I can believe in God, I answer as honestly and straightforwardly as I can. I believe in God on the same evidence that I believe in love: Both are invisible forces with visible effects. Sometimes these effects are noble, redemptive, warm, thrilling, and transporting; sometimes, when love goes wrong and turns to self-regard, or to jealousy, or finally to hate, then it produces corruption and disorder.

### **Prompt:**

How do you answer this question when asked? Is Philippians 4:8 useful in developing your answer?

### **Benediction:**

May Your lovingkindnesses also come to me, O LORD, Your salvation according to Your word;

So I will have an answer for him who reproaches me, For I trust in Your word. And do not take the word of truth utterly out of my mouth, For I wait for Your ordinances.

Psalms 119:41–43 (NASB)

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## DAY TWELVE

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### **Scripture Reading:**

When Jesus therefore had received the vinegar, he said, It is finished: and he bowed his head, and gave up the ghost.

John 19:30 (KJV)

### **Excerpt:**

(p. 85) What, exactly, was finished, or accomplished? Those there at the hour of his death believed one thing; Christians now believe another.

(pp. 87–88) The alleviation of the evident pain and injustice of the world is the ongoing work that Jesus began and that we should continue. The earth is not a temporary place that will disappear on the last day. It will, rather, merge with heaven, which means “God’s space.” Therefore, one should neither need nor want a ticket out of the created order into an ethereal realm. One should instead be hard at work making the world godly and just.

### **Prompt:**

How would you answer the author’s question: What was finished?

### **Benediction:**

Many, LORD my God, are the wonders you have done, the things you planned for us. None can compare with you; were I to speak and tell of your deeds, they would be too many to declare.

Sacrifice and offering you did not desire—but my ears you have opened—burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not require.

Then I said, “Here I am, I have come—it is written about me in the scroll.”

Psalms 40:5–7 (NIV)

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## DAY THIRTEEN

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### **Scripture Reading:**

1 Corinthians 15:58–9 (NIV) Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.

### **Excerpt: (p. 90)**

So which is it—heaven for Christians who say they are Christians, and hell for everybody else? What about babies, or people who died without ever hearing the gospel through no fault of their own? Who knows? We surely don't.

We must, therefore, act on the knowledge we do have, and we know that we've been told to love God totally and to love one another as ourselves—as Jesus, quoting Leviticus, teaches are the greatest commandments.

### **Prompt:**

How would you answer the author's question?

### **Benediction:**

I will praise thee; for I am fearfully and wonderfully made: marvellous are thy works; and that my soul knoweth right well.

Psalms 139:14 (KJV)

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## DAY FOURTEEN

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### **Scripture Reading:**

Can you fathom the mysteries of God? Can you probe the limits of the Almighty?

They are higher than the heavens above—what can you do? They are deeper than the depths below—what can you know?

Their measure is longer than the earth and wider than the sea.

Job 11:7–9 (NIV)

### **Excerpt: (p. 104)**

Believers reply that God made us with free will, for love coerced is no love at all, only tyranny, and God wanted us to choose whether to love him or not, to obey him or not. Evil of human devising exists because we make reprehensible choices and have, as Paul said, fallen short of the glory of God. Evil from nature or disease is a mystery; God has not told us everything and has his own purposes beyond our understanding. If we knew everything, we would be God, not men.

These answers are fine as far as they go—but still children die, things go wrong, and hearts get broken, so the answers don't go very far. I certainly can't dispose of the challenges to Christian belief, nor can I make an entirely rational case for the existence of God. What I can do is join a vast chorus of voices who see religion as intrinsic and seek to make their home in the ethos of a faith that suggests an order and a direction amid the confusions of life.

### **Prompt:**

What Scriptures do you lean on to help make peace with the mysteries of evil?

### **Benediction:**

Be still before the LORD and wait patiently for him; fret not yourself over the one who prospers in his way, over the man who carries out evil devices!

Refrain from anger, and forsake wrath! Fret not yourself; it tends only to evil. For the evildoers shall be cut off, but those who wait for the LORD shall inherit the land.

Psalms 37:7–9 (ESV)