

The Story Series
Week 26: The Hour of Darkness
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Over the last five weeks, I have been retelling the life story of Jesus Christ as recorded in the New Testament. Today we reach the most significant event in Jesus' entire life. I am so glad that you are here, because if you missed today, you might as well have missed everything. The Passion story of Jesus dying on the cross is *that* important. It is the event upon which everything else in the Bible either stands or falls.

Everything that we have talked about thus far has pointed us to this one defining moment in the life of Jesus. It's the defining moment in *The Story* because it deals with something that defines us – namely sin, or our separation from God. When we go against that which God has commanded, our relationship with God becomes broken. Think about a relationship you have with a spouse or good friend. When we do something to jeopardize that relationship, tension becomes apparent between the two of you. You no longer feel at one or in-sync with each other. There is a feeling of brokenness.

Well so it is with us and God. When we chose to go against the will of God for our lives, our relationship with God becomes tense and broken. Our relationship is not as it should be. We become at odds with the One who is the very source of all life and goodness. And that predicament saddens the heart of God. As we discovered time and time again as we made our way through *The Story*, God's greatest desire is to have a relationship with us. God desires to do life with us.

Because of our sinful nature, of us choosing our own selfish ways over the life-giving ways of God, God knew that on our own, we would never be found worthy to be called children of God. Time and time again, we fall short of what God expects of us. It sounds like a guilty verdict. But God chooses to do something incredible that will once and for all solve this predicament. God's solution is the cross. As Jesus hangs on the cross, he cries out, "It is finished." Case closed.

But *what* is finished? ***It*** is finished, Jesus says. To what is Jesus referring? What mission was accomplished? How was the world different after Jesus died than it was before? Why is the cross such a BIG deal?

Believe it or not, the enemies of Jesus can help us answer this question. His enemies, of all people. As we listen in on their conversation, they inadvertently explain the meaning of the cross for us. In the twenty-seventh chapter of Matthew (Matt 27:41-42), the religious leaders mock Jesus saying, "He saved others, but he can't save himself! So he is the King of Israel, is he? Let this Messiah come down from the cross right now, and we will believe in him."

What so amazing about those words is how extremely accurate they are! Indeed, Jesus can not come down from the cross and save himself because Jesus is dying on our behalf. Jesus,

the sinless Son of God (as we discussed last week), is sacrificing his innocent life so that we, the guilty ones, can go free. Our salvation, our freedom, depends upon Jesus offering his life for ours.

But why is that? Why is our salvation dependent upon Jesus' death? Why couldn't God just pardon us? We've already established that God is in control, that God is all-powerful, that God can do whatever God wants to do. So why doesn't God just pardon our offense?

Some people say to themselves, "God will pardon any sin I commit, because that's just what God does. It's God's job to forgive us, so no worries!" What we often forget is that forgiveness is costly. Yes, God always forgives us, but it comes at a very high price. It's the same as talking about our American freedom. Our freedom was not free, but it came at a great cost – the cost of millions of brave men and women who willingly sacrificed their lives so that we could enjoy the freedom we have today.

In the same way, God gives life and freedom to the world through the sacrificial death of his Son. That's the New Testament *Story* in a nutshell: God offering his Son upon the cross in order that we might live.

Throughout the pages of Scripture, God is portrayed as holy. God's not just better than we are, God is beyond us. God is above, higher than, set apart from all others. God's thoughts are not our thoughts, God's ways are not our ways, the Bible says. There is something totally and utterly different about God. And this set-apart-ness of God is seen most clearly in the way that God deals with sin.

The Bible says in Habakkuk (1:13) that God detests the sight of evil. There is something about our rebellion that brings about disgust in the heart of God. If you are a parent, you know that awful feeling inside of you when your child chooses to do something that you have told them not to do. As the children of Israel wandered in the wilderness, they acted out against God. God says, "For 40 years I was angry with that generation." The word used for *angry* literally means "nauseated." When God's holiness encounters our rebellion, it makes God sick.

I wonder: why doesn't our rebellion against God cause the same reaction in us? Knowing how gracious and loving and committed God has been to us, should not our rebellion to God's goodness make us feel sick to our stomach? In today's society, it seems as though we have removed "sin" from our vocabulary. Anything goes. Whatever seems right to you is OK with God. If such logic were true, then the cross would have never been necessary.

But indeed God has spelled out – in very specific terms – how we are to live our lives. And our choosing to disregard God's commands, to see them as mere suggestions, jeopardizes our relationship with God. And therefore, in order to reconcile our relationship, in order to deal with the consequence of our rebellion, the cross becomes necessary.

According to the Bible, the heart of the problem has always been the problem of the heart. We do not fully give our heart over to God. We refuse to acknowledge God as our Creator, as ruler of our lives. We live as God-less people, meaning that we make God *less* than God

should be in our lives. That's sin. We do not give God the authority and devotion that God deserves for being Lord of our lives. Instead of submitting to God, we instead stubbornly live life however best fits us. We work God into our lives only when it is convenient.

So how does our holy God respond to us when we act in this manner? Does God give us the benefit of the doubt, pretending that we must have just had a weak moment and forgotten what God has commanded? No! God could not just turn a blind eye and still be holy. A holy God must hate sin, otherwise he would not be holy. That's the truth the Bible teaches. God cannot and will not compromise his holiness by indulging us. God must deal with sin by punishing it, as any good and righteous parent would do.

So how does God punish sin? You would think that God would hold us guilty sinners accountable, to teach us the costly consequence of our rebellious choices. But from the very beginning of the Bible story, we see that's *not* how God works. Remember when God tells Adam and Eve not to eat the fruit of the forbidden tree otherwise they will die? Well, Adam and Eve chose to eat the forbidden fruit, but God does not kill them. Instead, God banishes them from the Garden, allowing them to live, just no longer in the glorious presence and protection of Almighty God.

What this tells us is that there must be more to God's nature than just being holy. The holiness of God would have killed Adam and Eve without a second thought. They were guilty; they deserved punishment. But God chose to have mercy on them. God chose to act lovingly towards them despite their rebellion. God is holy, yes, but God is also love. With all of the options available to God, God chooses love, not because we are so lovable, but because God's very nature is love. Love is not something that God chooses to do; love is God's very nature. Love is who God is.

As so this God we come to know in the Holy Scriptures can be defined as "holy love." As St. Paul explains it, "God is just, yet the One who justifies." There it is: the holy love of God. If God was just holy, we would be destroyed. But if God was simply love, the lack of discipline and direction would destroy us. A holy God cannot disregard sin, but a God of love cannot disregard his children. And so what is God to do?

Our God of holy love does something that is beyond understanding. The God of holy love chooses to become human, chooses to become one of us, and lives a sinless life – the kind of holy life that God envisioned for us all along. And then this sinless, holy God dies a sinner's death to pay the price of our rebellion. God picks up the tab of our sin debt. "Paid in Full" God stamps upon our life.

All of this plays out on the cross of Calvary. As Jesus hangs on the cross, darkness falls across the whole land; the earth shakes; rocks split it two – all to represent the sin of the world that separates us from God. On the cross, as Jesus bears the weight of the world's sin, he cries out, "It is finished." God's great plan to save us is complete. All is well. No longer does our sin define who we are. Rather, we are defined by *whose* we are. We are God's redeemed people, purchased through the blood of the sinless Lamb of God. We are people who will never again be separated from the love of God.

When thinking through the crucifixion account, St. Paul comes up with this summary statement in 2 Corinthians. He writes, "For our sake, God made Christ to be sin (who knew no sin) so that through Christ we might become right with God." (2 Cor. 5:21) God poured his holy, sin-hating wrath upon Christ so that he could pour his soul-saving love out upon us.

So the cross becomes for us a beautiful symbol of the holy love of God, the place where God's justice and God's love meet; the place where the debt of our sinful condition is paid in full through the loving, sacrificial arms of our Savior. The cross becomes the lens by which we can clearly see the nature and plan of God. And both God's nature and God's plan are driven by one thing and one thing only: LOVE. "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son," so that everyone who believe that he is the Savior will not perish, but have eternal life. "God did not send Jesus into the world to condemn the world, but to save it."

The cross is the defining moment in God's master plan to win us back. God just couldn't imagine spending eternity without us, and so God says, "I'll do whatever is necessary to make sure that you will be with me for all time."

Do you sense the great, deep love that God has for you? And do you understand the tragedy of not fully understanding the cross? The writer of Hebrews says, "So we must listen very carefully to the truth we have heard, or we may drift away from it... For how can we escape if we neglect this great salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ?"

Indeed, there is no escape without the cross. There is no hope without the saving arms of Jesus. Without the cross, there is nothing. But through the death of Jesus on the cross, we are given everything we need to receive abundant life – both now and in the world to come.

In October 1987, Northwest Airlines flight 225 crashed after taking off from the Detroit airport. One hundred and fifty passengers died. There was only one survivor, a four year old girl named Cecilia. The rescuers found Cecilia wandering around the wreckage of the plane. She was in such good condition that they wondered if she was even a passenger on the plane. But when they checked the list of passengers, there was Cecilia's name.

She survived because her mother, realizing that the plane was about to crash, unbuckled her own seat belt, knelt in front of her daughter and put her body on top of her daughter, wrapping her arms completely around her. Consequently, the mother felt the full force of the fall, and Cecilia did not. The mother died; Cecilia lived.

That is what God has done for you on the cross. God, in the person of Jesus Christ, has wrapped himself around you, sheltering you, saving you from the full force of the fall due to sin. Christ died. We live. Thanks be to God!

Amen.