

The Story / “The Heart of the Story”
Chapter 26: “The Hour of Darkness”
March 29, 2015

How many of you guys know what a flexitarian is? It’s a real word; I didn’t make it up! Here’s a scene from the Big Bang Theory. I want you to listen to Penny, because she’s a flexitarian, though she doesn’t know it...

(Big Bang Theory “I’m a Sagittarius, I’m a vegetarian” 36 sec video clip)

That Sagittarius part is just funny. It’s the last part that is all flexitarian. She says: “I’m a vegetarian, except for fish, and the occasional steak – I love steak!” You see a flexitarian is someone who calls himself a vegetarian, except for their favorite meats. One flexitarian says: “I really like vegetarian food, but I’m not 100% committed.” She says, “I usually eat vegetarian, but I really like bacon.” Well that makes sense to me. So I think I might give up my war against vegetables and become a flexitarian too. In fact, I’m planning on planting a garden this Spring. I’m just looking for some of these seeds, because that’s my favorite vegetable. Now that’s just wrong, isn’t it? By the way, have you seen one of these shirts: “Roses are red, bacon is red; poems are hard, bacon!”

So a flexitarian is a vegetarian who is not 100% committed ... kind of like a lot of Christians. But I am really glad that Jesus was not a flexitarian, or you and I would have a real mess on our hands. And if there was ever a week when Jesus was tempted to be a flexitarian, less than 100% committed, I think it would have been his last Passover week. Thank God he was all in. You see, Jesus knows what’s going to happen – it’s going to be really hard; he’s been telling his disciples what’s going to happen, and he still goes to Jerusalem to pick a fight. He’s got a price on his head; they are looking to kill him; and he just goes in. With all the people flooding into Jerusalem for the Passover, he could have kind of slipped in and slipped out. But he went there to pick a fight. Dave Stone calls Jesus a godly man, and a manly God. That’s pretty good, and it’s dead on.

Well, I want to focus on a couple scenes from this Passover week that are just huge. When you actually unpack what Jesus is doing, it’ll blow your mind.

Now, Passover week opens up with this weird scene. All the people are excited – that’s not the weird part. You see, Passover was one of their 3 pilgrim festivals. Every Jew who could, made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. They would usually finish their pilgrimage on foot – they’d walk up the mountain to Jerusalem on foot. But Jesus told his disciples to get him a donkey, because that’s how the prophets had said the messiah would enter Jerusalem. So Jesus rode in on a donkey. You see, Jesus was coming to make a point, and pick a fight.

Well, when Jesus makes his entrance, all the people are stoked. Finally! Finally this Jesus is going to make his move! And they are cutting palm branches to wave and put under his feet. And they are laying their clothes on the ground in front of him. And they are yelling out, “Hosanna” (Save us! Rescue us!). They are pumped. And there is Lazarus, with Jesus. He had been dead, four days! Now he’s the hero of the Walking Dead.

You see, they’ve been waiting – for hundreds of years – for a Messiah. They had been waiting for someone to clean up the corruption of their temple, to kick out the Romans and restore their freedom, and their prosperity, and their power, and their glory. And this Jesus had potential. He can heal the sick; he can feed thousands with a happy meal; he can cast out demons without any fuss; he can raise dead people; he can tell storms to hush – and they listen, somehow. So, kicking out a few Romans should be right in his wheelhouse.

Truth is, there had been a lot of wannabe messiahs before Jesus. The book of Acts in the Bible tells us about a dude named Theudas, who, it says, “claimed to be somebody.” According to the Jewish historian Josephus, Theudas claimed to be the messiah (kind of like, “Theudas Christ).” He claimed he could part the Jordan River and make the walls of Jerusalem fall down (like Joshua). But eventually he was captured by the Romans, and decapitated. And after three days, he was still dead.

The book of Acts also mentions Judas, the Galilean, who led a revolt during the days of the census. According to Josephus, Judas founded the zealots (kind of a first century Jewish al Qaeda, or Isis). When the Romans caught him, he and 2000 of his followers were crucified, and their crosses were left standing as a warning: Don’t mess with Rome. As a boy,

Jesus (who was also a Galilean), probably saw those crosses on which the Romans killed people who claimed to be the Messiah.

Altogether there were at least 18 wannabe messiahs we know of in Jesus' day. The people would get pumped, the Romans would get ticked, and the wannabes would die. But still the people were stoked, about Jesus. They had seen his resume; they had seen him flex his muscles. If he can heal the sick, kick out demons, still storms, and raise the dead, he's got to be the one – so they are all about palm branches, and throwing their clothes on the ground in front of him, and shouting their hosannas.

(Luke 19.41) And here's the weird part of the scene. Jesus is crying. In fact the word here is strong: he is "weeping." The people are cheering, Jesus is crying ... and they are not tears of joy. His heart is broken. (Luke 19.42) He says, "How I wish today that you of all people would understand the way to peace." "If you only knew what peace will cost." "I want you to find peace; I want you to have real peace. But it's not what you think it is; and it's not where you think it is; and my path - to bring you peace - will be so hard." "But right now, peace is hidden from your eyes." So they are cheering, and Jesus is weeping. It's a weird scene.

Because Jesus knew what was really going down. You see, Jesus was riding into town on the Sunday of Passover week for a reason. This day is important. Do you guys remember what Passover is all about? It goes all the way back to Moses, and the Exodus, and the 10 plagues. If you have been following along in The Story, you might remember that the 10th plague was about this death angel. God sends a death angel to pass through Egypt that night, and to kill the firstborn of every house ... unless. Moses tells the Jews that if they will kill a perfect lamb, and if they'll spread its blood on their doorposts, the death angel would "pass over" their house. They would be saved by the blood of a perfect lamb.

Now that's kind of weird, kind of macabre, but it was set-up. God was setting them up for Jesus. You see, from that year forward they were to select their lamb on a Sunday – the Sunday before Passover. It was lamb selection day. They would choose a perfect lamb that would die, so they could live. Are you getting it? Do you remember John the Baptist? We talked about him a few weeks ago. Do you remember how he said something so strange about Jesus? (John 1.29) He says, "Behold, the

lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world.” They had no idea what he meant ... then. Well, that’s what Jesus is doing. He is entering Jerusalem on lamb selection Sunday. Because he is entering Jerusalem as the perfect lamb – to be sacrificed -- to take away the sins of the world. But they had no idea: so they were cheering, and he was weeping.

Now I want to press fast-forward for a couple minutes. I’m going to tell you some of what happens over the next couple days, but we’re not going to slow down and unpack it. I hope you read chapter 26 in The Story last week. It will fill in some of the details – powerful stuff. Anyway, Jesus goes to the temple and basically shuts it down for a while. He makes quite a scene. I told you he was coming to Jerusalem to pick a fight. Well, he starts tossing over tables and driving out the moneychangers, and the guys who were selling the animals, and the t-shirts, and the hats, and the \$5 hotdogs and cokes. Not just because they were corrupt (though they were), but because the whole templething was about to be replaced. And over the next few days the tension just builds. Jesus is right out in the open, challenging their leaders. And they send their best to trip him up; and he just keeps knocking them down... So they make their deal with Judas.

And now it’s Thursday. This day is special. Jesus knows he’s going to be busy on Friday, so he gets his disciples together on Thursday for a last meal – their “Passover” meal. Now, if you would like to have some sense of what that meal was like, I’d encourage you to come to our special “Passover Seder” this Friday. We’re going to try to reenact what that night might have been like. It’s pretty powerful stuff.

Anyway, that night the disciples are arguing. It’s so stupid. Do you know what they are arguing about? One of them says, “I call shotgun!” “I get front seat!” I’m serious. They are fighting over who gets to sit next to Jesus. It’s a kindergarten argument: “I’m the greatest; I want to sit next to Jesus.” “Uh uh! I’m the greatest; I want to sit next to Jesus.” You ever hear your kids, or your grandkids have these fights? Well, they have an excuse – they are little!

You see, the disciples don’t get it yet. (Mark 10.45 / Matthew 23.11) Jesus had told them: “I didn’t come to be served, I came to serve.” And he tells them, “Those who are the greatest in my kingdom, are those who are the

greatest servants.” But that was a lesson they had a hard time believing. Because they lived in the real world, like you and me. In the real world you don’t turn the other cheek; in the real world you keep score. And in the real world you don’t pray for your enemies; you pray against them. And in the real world the first shall be first, not the last will be first. This is hard stuff.

And then to drive it home Jesus does something that blows their minds. He gets up from the table, and he pours some water into a bowl, and he wraps a towel around his waist, and he begins to wash their feet. Now you need to know that that job was reserved for the lowest person in the room. Their feet are dirty, because they are all wearing sandals, and walking on dirt roads. And they are all looking around and thinking – someone ought to wash these feet; but I’m not doing it, because I’m not the lowest.

So Jesus says, let me show you who the lowest person in the room really is. And he picks up the towel, and the bowl, and he kneels down, and starts washing their feet. ... Does that make any sense, to you? Not out there; but this is kingdom of God stuff. And Jesus says, “In my kingdom, the greatest are the servants. Even I didn’t come to be served, but to serve – and to give my life, as a ransom, for your sins.”

And here’s what takes it to another level: Jesus didn’t just wash the feet of those who deserved it. Did you know that you are surrounded by people you ought to be serving? And it’s so hard, because they don’t deserve it. How do you keep on serving a husband who has been kind of thoughtless and mean lately? How do you keep on serving a wife who hasn’t said a kind word to you or been physically receptive to you for a long time? How do you keep on serving a kid who is a jerk, and an ingrate? How do you serve a parent who has been abusive, or a co-worker who stabs you in the back, or a friend who keeps on taking, but never gives back? At some point you’ve just got to protect yourself, don’t you? It’s someone else’s job to wash their feet, for a while.

And then Jesus just kind of smacks you upside the head. Did you know that he wasn’t selective about whose feet he washed ... at all? There are 12 guys at the table – all of them with serious issues. All of them twits. Peter, who is going to betray Jesus 3 times; in just a few hours, he’ll turn on him – and Jesus knew it. Thomas, the cynic. Thomas is going to

argue with the other disciples. “I don’t believe that Jesus raised from the dead. I won’t believe it till I see him myself, till I touch him myself.” Judas. Judas is there, at the table. Do you realize that just minutes before Judas goes out and betrays Jesus, Jesus washes his feet. And he knows exactly what Judas is about to do! Do you get that? Kind of makes our whining seem kind of hollow, doesn’t it?

And then Jesus takes his disciples out to a garden at the foot of the Mount of Olives – a place called Gethsemane. It’s dark; the time is getting really short. He drops 8 of the disciples off, and takes three further in: Peter, and James, and John. (Matthew 26.37-38) And it says he “plunged into an agonizing sorrow.” He says to them (this is from The Message): “This sorrow is crushing me. It is breaking my heart.” And he starts to pray, so hard, it says, that the capillaries under the skin of his face break and he begins to sweat blood. It’s the worst day of his life here on earth.

Because, Jesus still had options. Even there in the garden, he had options.

- He could fight, like the zealots. He was young; incredibly powerful; he had charisma – the crowds would follow him to the death, if he chose.
- Or, he could withdraw like the Essenes. He could just retreat into the desert and start a safe little commune. People would follow him.
- Or, he could bend and collaborate with the Sadducees, the Priests. After all, think of the good he could do with the Temple as a platform.
- Or, he could collaborate with Pilate, with the Romans. Imagine influencing the Roman Empire from the inside, the good he could do.
- Or he could even call on God, his Father, to deliver him. He could ask dad to spare him. Or he could ask for legions of angels to be his bodyguards. For pity sakes, it would take just one. And maybe one more miracle at that level would make everybody turn to him.

But Jesus didn’t exercise any of those options. (Matthew 26.39) He prayed, “If there is any other way, God. If there is any other way to pull this off... But ... not my will, but yours be done.” He says, “I will do what I came to do. I will die. I will not fight; I will not run; I will not deal; I will not dazzle ... I will die.” (Ortberg)

Guys, that was Jesus' toughest moment, I think. Even harder than what was coming. How many of you have read the Hobbit, or seen the movies? In one part of the story Bilbo has to enter a dragon's lair to steal back a treasure his friends had lost, now guarded by a fearful dragon. He is terrified, but he decides to go in. He can hear the dragon breathing, he can smell the dragon's breath, he can see the orange glow of the dragon's skin. Here's what Tolkien writes: "It was at this point that the hobbit stopped. Going on in there was the bravest thing he ever did. The tremendous things that happened afterward were as nothing compared to it. He fought the real battle in the tunnel alone, before he ever saw the vast danger that lay in wait." And that's the kind of battle Jesus fought in that garden. That's where he fought the fight. That's where the war was won.

Now I'm going to press fast forward again, because things start happening really fast.

- Judas comes into the garden, leading some soldiers. He kisses Jesus, probably a peck on both cheeks. But Jesus just drills him: "You are betraying me with a kiss? Really?!"
- Then they take Jesus away and put him through a whole series of sham trials. They take him to the high priest, and then to the Sanhedrin. And then to Pilate. And then to Herod. And back to Pilate. The Jews want him dead, the Romans don't want to kill him. But the Jews are persistent, so the Romans give in.
- And what happens next is just brutal. The Passion of the Christ had to be an R-rated movie, if it was going to do any justice to what happened to Jesus. They strap Jesus to a pole, and they strip him naked, and they beat him with this whip. It actually had about 9 braids of leather, into which were woven bits of bone, and stone, and glass. The whip would tear into his back, and his sides, and his buttocks and his legs, and whip around to his chest, and his genitals. These soldiers were professionals. They knew how to kill a man with a whip; and they knew how to hurt him, but leave him with just enough strength for a cross.

- And then it says, “They crucified him.” That’s all it says. But they all knew what it meant. They had seen men stripped naked – magnifying the pain with humiliation and shame. They had seen spikes driven through the wrists into the crossbar. They had seen spikes driven through the feet into the post. They had watched as men died the most humiliating, the most painful death they had conceived at that time.
- They knew that what killed a man on the cross was usually suffocation. The whip, the nails – those wounds were painful, but not mortal. The victim would hang on that cross and struggle to breathe. So they would pull themselves up, the nails grinding against the bones and the tendons of their hands and feet. They would pull themselves up to breathe, and when the pain got too intense they would sag back down, and begin to suffocate again. It could go on for hours; sometimes for days.
- But the crucifiers had a Passover meal to eat, and they didn’t want to be late for dinner – waiting on Jesus to die. So they went to break his legs – which would prevent him from pushing himself up to breathe – but he looked dead already. No kidding. So they stabbed his heart with a spear.

Now ... imagine that you are in Jerusalem 2000 years ago. This would have been a sound you are accustomed to ... (SHOFAR – two blasts) Imagine hearing this sound twice a day. (SHOFAR – two blasts) Once in the morning; once in the afternoon -- when they would sacrifice a lamb for the sins of the people. When you heard the shofar, you would stop, and you would know that at that moment a lamb was dying, for your sins.

You see, God had been guiding the story up to this moment for 2000 years. You know that sin brings death. Either you have to die, or something -- or someone else – has to die in your place. You know it takes the blood of a perfect lamb to cover your sins. So thousands of lambs – tens of thousands of perfect lambs – had died – through the years.

(Isaiah 53.4-6) You even know the words of the prophet – though you didn’t understand them, yet. The prophet had said – of Jesus, you will

learn – “It was our weaknesses he carried; it was our sorrows that weighed him down. And we thought his troubles were a punishment from God, a punishment for his own sins! But he was pierced for our rebellion, crushed for our sins. He was beaten so we could be whole. He was whipped so we could be healed. All of us, like sheep, have strayed away. We have left God’s paths to follow our own. Yet the Lord laid on him (his own son) the sins of us all.” Do you remember how John the Baptist had said, “Behold the lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world.” Well, it’s all coming together, isn’t it?

Quite a few of you are in our life groups, and you are digging deeper into the chapter of The Story we are reading each week. Well it would be cool this week if together you can kind of go back and talk about so many of the clues there are in the Old Testament that kind of point forward to and prepare us for Jesus. There is a path that leads straight to Jesus. It’s really cool.

I told you that the shofar was blown twice a day; I didn’t tell you exactly when: it was at 9:00 in the morning, and 3:00 in the afternoon. Do you have any idea when Jesus was crucified? (Mark 15.25) Mark tells us that he was crucified the 3rd hour of the day – Roman time, which is 9:00 in the morning, our time. Now what are the odds? Doesn’t it blow your mind that the very moment they hear the sound of the shofar, and they know that the priest is sacrificing a lamb in the temple for their sins, that at that moment, just outside the walls of the city, the real Lamb of God is being sacrificed for the sins of the whole world. Go figure.

(Matthew 27.45) Matthew tells that 3 hours later – at noon -- everything goes dark. It’s kind of like God is putting his hand over the sun. Do you remember that on the day Jesus entered our world, in the little town of Bethlehem, the night sky lights up up with the glory of heaven when the angels appear? And now, when the light of the world is dying, the noonday sun goes dark. It’s kind of fitting, isn’t it?

Then Matthew tells us that 3 hours later Jesus dies – at 3:00 in the afternoon, when they hear the sound of the shofar again – because a lamb is dying, for sin. As a perfect lamb dies for their sins in the temple, the absolutely perfect lamb of God dies – for their sins – once for all.

Here's what blows my mind, again. We can't prove this, but at 9 and 3, when the sacrifices are being made, many of the Jews are praying. And according to ancient Jewish traditions, these are some of the prayers they would have been praying.

- They would be praying for redemption: "Look upon our affliction (God) and plead our cause, and redeem us (redeem us) speedily for your name's sake." Do you think God is answering their prayer, sending them (and us) a redeemer?
- And they would be praying for forgiveness: "Forgive us, O our Father, for we have sinned; pardon us, O our King, for we have transgressed." Do you think God was answering their prayer; offering forgiveness for their sins (and ours)?
- And they would be praying for a messiah: "Speedily cause the offspring of your servant David (the messiah) to flourish, and let him be exalted by your saving power, for we wait all day long for your salvation." Do you think God was answering their prayer – for a messiah, even though they never expected a messiah who would die for them (and us)?
- And this one is so cool. They would be praying for a resurrection, from the dead. "You, O Lord, are mighty forever, you revive the dead, you have the power to save." And in three days they'd see Jesus again, alive. Do you think God is answering their prayers in a way that would just boggle their minds (and ours)?

Do you see it? Jesus enters the city on lamb selection day. And on Friday morning a shofar sounds, (SHOFAR – single tone) and a lamb is nailed to a cross. And later that afternoon the shofar sounds again, (SHOFAR – single tone) and Jesus says, "It is finished," and the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world dies.

Guys, when Jesus said, "It is finished," he meant that his work on earth was done. He didn't mean that The Story is over. In reality, The Story is just getting started. But that's next week.