

“No Strings Attached”

Luke 23:33-49

Series: The Story Chapter 26 The Hour of Darkness

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Last February I was headed to Haiti with the mission team from Woodside. If you have ever traveled on a mission trip you know there are a number of last minute items to procure: socks, hat, gloves, Gatorade, Cipro. There was one additional task I needed to complete: I wanted to fix my guitar. Back in the 70s I purchased a round back bottom-of-the-line Ovation guitar from Sam Goody. I loved that guitar, used it in my high school band Equinox, wrote songs on it, wailed on it as a youth pastor and a Celebration band member. That guitar and I go way back. We logged a lot of miles together.

Yet I rarely play it now because my wife gave me a sweet, new Taylor guitar. Plus it needs a repair. It's missing a nut for the jack in the back where you plug in a chord. Without that nut the jack falls inside, tumbles around the round back and makes a funny sound whenever I play it. With my upcoming trip to Haiti, I decided to fix it and bring it along on the trip. Now, did I go to The Guitar Center for the repair? No. I elected to go to my second church, the place where I worship on my day off, the community where I fellowship with like-minded disciples, the building where I give almost weekly offerings: Home Depot. I told myself, "Home Depot has nuts. I'll go there." So I went to the aisle in where all the nuts are. And man, there were a lot of nuts there. If you walk into a hardware store with a guitar case you are guaranteed to get a lot of strange looks and odd comments. "Are you going to play a song for us?" "Got a machine gun in there?" There were a lot of people in my way in the nut aisle. I looked through one shelf after another for just the right nut. Unfortunately Home Depot let me down. No nut matched the jack. Then another customer said, "Is that an Ovation guitar?" "Yes," I replied. "How did you know?" "I work at Guitar Center," he said pulling back his jacket to reveal the Guitar Center logo on his shirt. "I'm sure we have that size nut over at our store. Did you visit our store?" "No," I said hanging my head in shame. Then he said, "Wait a minute." And to my utter surprise he reached into his Guitar Center shirt pocket and pulled out...the exact nut I needed to fix my guitar. I'm telling you: miracles happen at Home Depot.

Think about it for a minute. What are the odds that a guy from Guitar Center would be in Home Depot, in the same aisle as me at the same time as me with the exact item I needed to fix my guitar? You see, at just the right time, when I was powerless to fix my problem, God stepped in through another person to provide just what I need.

The Apostle Paul says the same about us.

You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Romans 5:6-8)

Today we arrive at the very climax of the entire Story. It happens on a Friday so dark the noon day sun ceases to shine. It unfolds on a rocky hilltop so sinister it's called The Skull. What occurs is so cataclysmic the ground convulses, shudders, and shakes. And yet, as Chapter 26 in the Story shows, "The Hour of Darkness," the greatest tragedy in time and eternity, becomes the one great hope we have for salvation, the one way home to God.

The question which may be on your mind is: Why did Jesus have to die for our salvation? One truth I hope you have discovered as you read through *The Story* is this was **God's Plan All Along**. Several of you have said to me, "I'm so glad we are in the New Testament. The Old Testament was hard. God seemed so angry and wrathful." There are some very difficult passages and at times it may have been hard for you to believe that God so loves the world.

Yet like all great stories, you need to work through the complicated characters, the confusing plot twists, the unexpected developments in the Bible if you hope to understand how all the story lines suddenly tie together. As Randy Frazee said at the beginning of *The Story*, "The Bible is not a hundred ancient unrelated paintings but a mural all knitted together to tell the story of God's great love for us and the extent to which he will go to get us back." Now that you are familiar with the great characters of the Bible, you can see how, in one way or another, each story and each character points beyond itself to a greater person: Jesus.

- Adam and Eve's sin in the Garden points to a Greater Human who passed the test in another Garden when He prays, "Not My will but Thine be done."
- The innocent blood of Abel who was slain by Cain points to a Greater Victim who shed His innocent blood for our sin.
- Abraham's call to leave home and bless the nations points to a Greater Missionary who left heaven to bless the whole world.
- Isaac who carried the wood on his back for his own sacrifice points to a Greater Son who carried the wood of the cross for our sacrifice.
- The Passover Lamb that delivered the children of Israel from the angel of death points to a Greater Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world and defeats death forever.
- Moses who united God and Israel through a Covenant written on stone points to a Greater Mediator who gives a New Covenant between God and humanity written on His flesh.
- The High Priest Aaron who offers continual sacrifices for the sins of God's people points to a Greater High Priest who offers Himself once and for all for the sins of all humanity.
- King David who defeats the enemies of God's people points to a Greater King who is victorious over our true enemies: sin, death and the devil.
- The Temple where the holy presence of God touched earth behind a curtain of fabric points to a Greater Temple in which God lived in a human body and tore that curtain in two.
- The Prophet Isaiah who points to a Greater Suffering Servant who "was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him and by his wounds we are healed" (Isaiah 53:5).

Jesus is the true Servant, the true Sacrifice, the true Light, the true Lamb and the true Lord. If you do not read the Old Testament you will miss how all the plot threads of God's Story tie together in one Person: Jesus. The place they come together is at the Cross. Jesus' death is not a mistake or a plan B. It is God's plan before Adam and Eve ever sinned.

So why did He have to die? That is another lesson we learn from the Old Testament. **All Other Plan Fails.** I hope no one in this church walks away from the Old Testament thinking, “Boy those Israelites were bad sinners.” The truth is: they are us and we are them. I truly respect those God used to write the Old Testament. Most families white wash and cover up their family secrets and sins. The Jewish people told the honest truth about themselves and about us. In so doing, the Old Testament drives home the point that our every attempt to save ourselves will fail. Prophetic warnings didn’t turn us back. Heroic kings didn’t save the day. Endless animal sacrifices didn’t wipe away our guilt. Wise teachers didn’t set us straight. Hundreds of laws didn’t keep us from sin. That’s why Paul, a Pharisee who tried to follow every letter of the Law, concluded Christ died for us because we are powerless to save ourselves.

This is why Christians make the bold claim that Jesus is the only way to salvation (John 14:6). No one can be saved by their good works or religious rituals – not even Christians. Some accuse us of arrogance. “You Christians think you are right and everyone else is wrong.” No. Christians believe we are all wrong and Jesus is right. We are all helpless. We are all powerless. The Son of God didn’t come to save just the Christians. He came to save the world. Some may say, “Aren’t you being offensive to other faiths by saying Jesus is the only way?” I certainly hope not. The truth is: I’m more concerned about offending God. If I believe God could save us by some other way – by rituals, rules, and religion – then I am saying God foolishly wasted the life of His only Son. You know the power of the disease by the strength of the medicine needed to cure it. If our salvation requires nothing less than the death of God’s own Son, there is nothing I can do to stop this disease except accept the cure He offers.

Yet you may still wonder: why does our salvation require the death of the Son of God? **God Plan is to Die in Our Place.** On that dark Good Friday there were many who told Jesus to save Himself. After His trial before the Sanhedrin and Pontus Pilate, the third and final trial of Jesus unfolds while He is on the Cross. The crowds, the rulers of the Sanhedrin, the Roman soldiers all assemble around Golgotha to hold court. Each person present is judge and jury waiting to pass a final verdict on this man. Luke, our court artist, draws the scene in a very significant way. He starts with the spectators and bystanders who are farthest from the cross. They are silent like the gallery of a courtroom, watching the action and waiting for something to happen.

Then Luke takes us up a little closer to the Cross where the rulers of the Sanhedrin stand. They hurl the charges they made in the first trial.

They said, “He saved others; let him save himself if he is God’s Messiah, the Chosen One.” (Luke 23:35)

Prove that you are the Christ, come down off that cross! Save yourself! Now Luke takes us a step closer to the foot of the Cross where the Roman Soldiers make fun of the so-called Jewish Caesar. Over his head they fix a parchment that announces his treasonous crime to the world. “This is the King of the Jews” Look what he’s come to - a King nailed to his wooden throne. They play dice games for his cloak and offer him some sour wine to toast his kingdom, his power and his glory. Then they repeat the charge made at his second trial, “If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself.” (Luke 23:37) Prove you are greater than Caesar, come down off that Cross! Save yourself!

But nothing happens. There is no army of angels as on the night he was born. No voice from heaven as on the day of his baptism. No disciples who promised to go the death with Him. No Moses or Elijah on his right and left as on the day of his Transfiguration. The only two

people beside Him now are criminals. Finally, one of those criminals delivers the last charge against Jesus.

“Aren’t you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!” (Luke 23:39)

The question hangs in the air. Matthew tells us

About three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, “Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?” (which means “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”) (Matthew 27:46).

Nothing happens. God does not answer. There is only darkness and silence and death. In the end Jesus called out with a loud voice, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.” When he had said this, he breathed his last. (Luke 23:46)

The verdict of the last trial of Jesus of Nazareth is finally in: Guilty as charged. Case closed. The priests go back to the Temple convinced Jesus is guilty of blasphemy because he could not save himself. The soldiers march back to their fortress convinced He is guilty of treason because He could not save himself. The crowd disperses mourning the loss of their Messiah who saved others but could not save himself. And the criminal dies, his last chance for salvation gone with the death of the Christ who could not save himself.

The most shocking message of Good Friday is that God Himself pronounces Jesus guilty and lets Him die. Why? Many people misunderstand what happened on the Cross.

- Jesus’ death was not the ransom God paid to the devil to set us free. God does not owe anything to the devil except condemnation.
- Jesus’ death was not a trap for the devil. God does not play tricks.
- Jesus’ death was not required because we broke the Law and God has to find someone to punish so, instead of punishing us, He puts His Son to death. Jesus is not God’s whipping boy. God the Father is not an abusive parent.

To understand the Cross, we must understand two sides of God’s character. God is Just and God is Merciful. Since God is just, He cannot let sin go unpunished. No judge on earth would be just if she or he allowed criminals to continue breaking the law. Yet God is also full of mercy and love. He does not want to give us the punishment we deserve. He does not want us to be eternally separated from Him because of our sin. He wants us back. He wants us to come home. Yet all of us together cannot pay enough to save ourselves from the mess we’ve made. Only a human should pay the penalty. Only God is able to pay the penalty.

So God Himself becomes a human being. What God’s holy justice requires, God’s merciful love provides. God doesn’t force someone else to pay the penalty. God Himself dies for us. God sacrifices Himself. In Jesus, God dies in our place. Sin entered the world when Adam and Eve tried to take God’s place and be God. Salvation came to the world when God came and took our place and bore our sin on the Cross. When all the sin of all humanity throughout all history is placed upon the Son of God, He suddenly feels the separation that always exists between us and God. This is why He cries, “My God, why have you forsaken me?” In that moment, the separation caused by our sin came between the Father and the Son and there, in the heart of God, it was destroyed forever. From then on salvation is freely offered to each one of us with no strings attached.

Only one person that dark Friday truly understood what was happening: the nameless criminal dying on a cross next to Jesus. He tells his partner in crime.

“Don’t you fear God,” he said, “since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.” (Luke 23:41)

In those few words, this criminal sees the heart of the Gospel. Jesus saved us by not saving Himself. God did not send another prophet, priest, king, wise teacher, self-help guru, religious founder to show us the way out of sin. God knew that none of those would work. So God himself came and died for us. With his last breath the thief turned to the dying Christ and said,

“Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” Jesus answered him, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.” (Luke 23:42-43)

At the last moment, he received salvation with no strings attached.

Remember my Ovation guitar – the one God fixed in Home Depot? In Haiti I discovered why God fixed it. During the week we worked side-by-side with our Haiti brothers and sisters. In the evenings all of us, Haitians and Americans, sang and shared. On Sunday, while you worshiped here, we worshiped in an open air pavilion at their church in Kwok Kok. During most of these times I strummed away on my Ovation guitar while we praised the Lord. Yet every time I put the guitar down, I noticed our Haiti coworkers – Santamen, Brice, and Walmy pick up the guitar and play it. When I was at the worship service they had a wonderful praise band – drums, keyboard, singers, but no guitar player. And then God started to speak to me. “I fixed that guitar Doug because I want you to give it to these people.” “Oh Lord. I don’t want me to give it away. I’ve had that guitar since I was a kid. We’ve been together for years. I can’t give it up.” “Now Doug,” the Lord said, “I gave you that guitar and I’ve given you several more. You won’t miss it and they can use it.” “Really Lord?” “Yes,” He replied. “And besides, it’s a tiny sacrifice compared to the sacrifice I made in giving My Son for you.” So on the last night in Haiti, I did what the Lord asked of me and gave the guitar to Pastor Valentin. He was so overjoyed it was the only time I’ve seen him speechless.

As you pray about what you will commit to Share the Story and to God’s work at Woodside in 2016, pray and ask God to show you what sacrifice He wants you to make for others. This is one way for you to give thanks for the salvation Jesus won for us and freely offers us with no strings attached.