

Chapter 26: The Hour of Darkness

Today's Equipping Point:

Practice _____

Covenant elements

1. You “_____” a covenant, because it involved shedding blood.
2. Second, an _____ or _____ laid out expectations of both parties.
3. Third, there was an exchange of _____.
4. Then a _____ was required.
5. Then an _____ was built, as an outward reminder.
6. The parties then usually shared a _____.
7. And last, _____ often occurred.

Then He took the cup, and gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, “Drink from it, all of you. For this is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins.

Matthew 26:27-28

The Old Testament atoning process was _____:

Yes, the old requirement about the priesthood was set aside because it was weak and useless. For the law made nothing perfect...If the first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no need for a second covenant to replace it... But those sacrifices are an annual reminder of sins, because it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins...The gifts and sacrifices being offered were not able to clear the conscience of the worshiper. They are only a matter of food and drink and various ceremonial washings—external regulations applying until the time of the new order.

Hebrews 7:18-19, 8:7, 10:3-4, 9:9-10

Concerning Jesus:

First he said, “Sacrifices and offerings, burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not desire, nor were you pleased with them” (although the law required them to be made). Then he said, “Here I am, I have come to do your will.” He sets aside the first to establish the second. And by that will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God.

Hebrews 10:8-12

Isaiah 52:14

NIV: Just as there were many who were appalled at him— his appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any man and his form marred beyond human likeness.

GNT: Many people were shocked when they saw him; he was so disfigured that he hardly looked human.

The Message: Everyone was appalled. He didn't even look human— a ruined face, disfigured past recognition.

NLT: Many were amazed when they saw him—beaten and bloodied, so disfigured one would scarcely know he was a person.

Psalm 22

¹ *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*

*Why are you so far from saving me,
so far from the words of my groaning?*

⁶ *But I am a worm and not a man,
scorned by men and despised by the people.*

⁷ *All who see me mock me;
they hurl insults, shaking their heads:*

⁸ *"He trusts in the LORD;
let the LORD rescue him.*

*Let him deliver him,
since he delights in him."*

¹¹ *Do not be far from me,
for trouble is near
and there is no one to help.*

¹⁴ *I am poured out like water,
and all my bones are out of joint.*

*My heart has turned to wax;
it has melted away within me.*

¹⁵ *My strength is dried up like a potsherd,
and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth;
you lay me in the dust of death.*

¹⁶ *Dogs have surrounded me;
a band of evil men has encircled me,
they have pierced my hands and my feet.*

¹⁷ *I can count all my bones;
people stare and gloat over me.*

¹⁸ *They divide my garments among them
and cast lots for my clothing.*

¹⁹ *But you, O LORD, be not far off;
O my Strength, come quickly to help me.*

Discussion Questions

1. Why did Jesus have to die?
2. What have His wounds healed you from?
3. How does it make you feel to be so indebted to a Person? What is your response?

Teaching Script

[Play a clip from the movie Titanic showing how characters spent their last few minutes.]

If you knew the time of your death, how would you spend your last hours?

It's an age-old question, but as we face the darkest hour in human history, the impending death of the Lamb of God, it bears repeating. In the movie *Titanic*, we learned much from the different characters' actions in the last moments of their lives. The captain, in total denial, entombed himself in the Conn. The ship's architect, in a meaningless gesture, adjusts the minute hand on a mantle clock. An older husband and wife, scared and only seconds from drowning, held each other close. A mother, knowing the imminent danger but wanting to spare her children a few moments of sheer terror, reads to them quietly. And amid total chaos on the deck, a string quartet plays a hymn that is all but ignored, but gives a backdrop of dignity and grace to the scene.

Knowing that His time had come, Jesus spent His last few hours with His disciples. Scripture tells he knew everything that was going to happen to him. His dread was so palpable that even as an angel came and ministered to Him, His horror at enduring the full fury of God was such that he sweated drops of blood. This condition, known as *hematidrosis*, is the effusion of blood from veins. Under extreme distress, capillaries just under the skin dilate and burst, mingling blood with sweat. When He said, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death," it was literal.

Under these conditions, with this mental and emotional burden to carry Himself, let's observe how Jesus spent His last hours:

- He abandoned all pride, all dignity—and washed their feet. It wasn't enough that He would be humiliated beyond measure in a few hours, being displayed on the cross like a piece of meat hung up at the butchers. He chose on His own to embrace humility and wash the feet of those who would deny Him, even the one who would betray Him. Humility had been the key teaching in the last week of His life; He had to squelch arguments about who was greatest among the disciples, and who would sit on His right hand and His left. But in a stunning gesture, He silenced those childish squabbles by performing a service usually left to the lowest slave, and then said, "Go and do likewise."
- He focused on their peace and comfort, not His own. They had no idea what was coming, but instead of turning inward and becoming self-absorbed, He spoke words of encouragement to them, men who couldn't understand now, but who would need these words later. Listen to his compassion:

"Don't let your hearts be troubled...(THEIR hearts!)...I will come back and take you with me...you will do even greater things than I have...you may ask for anything in my name and I will do it...you will receive another advocate to help you and be with you forever...I have told you these things that you may have peace...Take heart! I have overcome the world."

Had His disciples known what was coming, the absurd claim that He had “overcome the world” would have been the worst kind of low comedy.

What must they have thought later as those words rung in their ears... “I have overcome the world”... while the professional torturers systematically removed flesh and muscle from his body? “I have overcome the world” as they watched this mangled body fastened with nails to a 200-pound piece of wood as entertainment for soldiers who rolled dice for his clothes? “I have overcome the world” indeed.

- But not only did he abandon all pride, and focus on His followers rather than Himself, He affirmed the one timeless relationship He had—the same one that was about to be broken. He said He was in the Father and the Father was in Him. He said the Father was doing His work in Jesus. He said the Spirit will come to help, to advocate, to lead into truth. Just hours before this eternal, perfect community was temporarily severed, as Jesus took on the sins of the world, He reaffirmed it and promised its blessing to His disciples.
- And finally, He prayed for them.

The selflessness of Jesus was never more apparent than here, where His final hours were focused not on Himself, but on those He had taught and nurtured the last three years.

And there’s our Equipping Point for today, our key to leading well.

Practice selflessness.

If Jesus, at a time so intense and stressful that He sweat blood, could think more of His disciples and their well-being than Himself, could you and I this week lay aside our self-pity, our occasional wallowing, and focus on our family, on others? Regardless of your encounter with the boss earlier? Regardless of the pressure to “get ahead?” Regardless of the emotional baggage we carry with us on a daily basis? Might you and I consider, as servant-leaders, to pray intentionally for others, to somehow wash their feet, regardless of our own pressures? To do so would be to emulate Jesus in a striking way—even if no one else knew about it!

The Passover was approaching so they prepared a customary feast. But this was no ordinary Passover meal; Jesus was about to change history. He took the unleavened bread and cup of wine from the Passover meal and instituted the New Covenant. This moment was the fulfillment of all the covenants and agreements throughout history. We need to pay close attention to the nature of this promise.

A covenant was more than a bargain or gentleman’s agreement. You’ll remember the elements of a covenant from when we studied Abraham back in September—these are on your outline:

1. First, you didn't "make" a covenant; you **"cut" a covenant, because it involved shedding blood.** To this day we still say we "cut a deal" to describe a commitment we expect to honor.
2. Second, **an oath or promise laid out the expectations of both parties.**
3. **Third, there was an exchange of clothing,** representing an assumption of identities. Sometimes the parties would exchange belts, because belts often held swords and other forms of protection, and this signified protection for your covenant partner.
4. **Then a blood sacrifice was required.** You'll remember that this was a large animal that was cut in two mirror slices from head to tail. The parties dug a shallow trench, and laid the two halves on either side of the trench, allowing the blood to flow into it. Then the partners would lift their robes and walk through the blood-filled trench to symbolize the gravity of their commitment, as if to say, "May this happen to me if I break this covenant."
5. Often **an external sign was built,** such as an altar or pillar of stones as **an outward reminder.**
6. **The parties then usually shared a meal,** usually of bread and the sacrificed animal. A meal was a sign of trust and intimacy—it would have been unthinkable to betray someone with whom you had dined.
7. **And last, name changes often occurred** to reflect the "oneness" of this covenant. Abram's name was changed to Abraham, Sarai to Sarah, and of course in the marriage covenant, the wife takes on the husband's surname.

In Matthew's account of the Last Supper, Jesus said:

Then He took the cup, and gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you. For this is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins."

Matthew 26:27-28

Yes, in fact, this was a true covenant...look back at those 7 elements on your outline:

1. Jesus said, "This is *My* blood of the covenant." The promise was "cut."
2. The promise or oath was clear: He came to give His life as a ransom—and your part is, as we said last week, to believe—to believe He is the Son of God.
3. There was an exchange of clothing: Jesus became man and then dressed Himself with a towel as a servant. Believers are to take on Christ's identity and He took on ours. We're called to don our own towels and serve others.
4. The blood sacrifice: Christ Himself was the animal cut in two. And then God Himself walked between the halves, in the blood-filled trench, taking full responsibility for the covenant, because we could never uphold our end. God has arranged it such that salvation is His thing, a work He did through Jesus' sacrifice, a covenant He seals with His Holy Spirit.
5. The sign or the witness of this covenant is baptism: the outward expression of the inward transformation—dying to self and resurrected to a new life with new focus, new priorities, and a new purpose. Baptism is an altar built to commemorate the sacrifice of our lives.

6. The last meal Jesus shared with His disciples is a meal that we repeat with the bread and the wine at communion. Christians celebrate this symbolic meal as a sign of our covenant relationship. Just as a meal together is a sign of trust and intimacy, so Jesus asks that we remember Him as His Spirit joins us together by nourishing our souls as we eat and drink.
7. And just as a bride's name changes at the covenant of marriage, so Jesus does the same for us. He said in Revelation:
"To him who overcomes, to him I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone and a new name written on the stone which no one knows but he who receives it."

Revelation 2:17

What was about to take place fulfilled not just the covenant with Abraham, but the Passover that freed the Jews from Egypt. And do you remember that the ninth plague in Egypt, the one that preceded the 10th plague of death, was the plague of darkness? I don't think it's any accident that darkness was the ninth plague, just before they sacrificed the Passover Lamb and spread its blood on their doorpost. Because on the day Jesus died, darkness covered the whole land from noon until 3 p.m. Josephus the historian tells us that on Passover Fridays, the lambs were typically slaughtered right about 3 p.m., before twilight, so there would be ample time to complete all the preparations before the Sabbath started at 6 p.m. At this moment, Jesus painted His blood on the doorpost of heaven, and freedom was delivered to everyone in slavery to sin.

The importance of this perfect sacrifice cannot be overstated. From the time the Law was given to Moses, the process of atoning for the people's sins was temporary—**the Old Testament atoning process was a stopgap measure**. Listen to the Hebrew writer in three places:

Yes, the old requirement about the priesthood was set aside because it was weak and useless. For the law made nothing perfect...If the first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no need for a second covenant to replace it... But those sacrifices are an annual reminder of sins, because it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins...The gifts and sacrifices being offered were not able to clear the conscience of the worshiper. They are only a matter of food and drink and various ceremonial washings—external regulations applying until the time of the new order.

Hebrews 7:18-19, 8:7, 10:3-4, 9:9-10

In other words, think of the Old Testament system of atonement as a dialysis machine. The rituals of sacrificing animals, utilizing the scapegoat, and the High Priest entering the Holy of Holies once a year was a provisional remedy to cleanse God's people of their sins, much like a dialysis machine is a stopgap measure to cleanse the blood. Without functioning kidneys, an external process is required to intervene and provide purification.

But Jesus provided the internal remedy. Jesus is the kidney transplant that purifies us from the inside, not through ceremonial washings and external practices.

Listen again to the Hebrew writer describing Jesus:

First he said, *Sacrifices and offerings, burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not desire, nor were you pleased with them* (although the law required them to be made).

Then he said, *Here I am, I have come to do your will. He sets aside the first to establish the second. And by that will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God.*

Hebrews 10:8-12

And what did this once-for-all-time, turnkey, perfect solution cost? Unimaginable pain, complete humiliation, and, of course, His life. Most of us have probably seen *The Passion of the Christ* movie, but some scholars suggest it was even worse than that. To bear on His body the full fury of the wrath of God for all of humanity's sins, His sacrifice wasn't going to be quick and painless. For there to be justice, for God to be God and judge the sin of the world, more was required. Isaiah says,

He 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. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all...It was the LORD's will to crush him and cause him to suffer.

Isaiah 53:5-6, 10

Most of us are familiar with Isaiah 53, as hard as it is to read. But fewer people know about the previous chapter, Isaiah 52.14, where it says:

Isaiah 52:14

NIV: *Just as there were many who were appalled at him— his appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any man and his form marred beyond human likeness*
GNT: *Many people were shocked when they saw him; he was so disfigured that he hardly looked human.*

The Message: *Everyone was appalled. He didn't even look human— a ruined face, disfigured past recognition.*

NLT: *Many were amazed when they saw him—beaten and bloodied, so disfigured one would scarcely know he was a person.*

John 18 says that Jesus knew *ahead of time* everything that was going to happen to Him. So it's not hard to imagine why those capillaries burst and His sweat was like drops of blood—why He said his soul was in anguish to the point of death. It's not hard to imagine the words of Psalm 22, as the Messiah speaks through David. Read with me:

¹ *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*

*Why are you so far from saving me,
so far from the words of my groaning?*

⁶ *But I am a worm and not a man,
scorned by men and despised by the people.*

⁷ *All who see me mock me;
they hurl insults, shaking their heads:*
⁸ *"He trusts in the LORD;
let the LORD rescue him.
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¹¹ *Do not be far from me,
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¹⁴ *I am poured out like water,
and all my bones are out of joint.
My heart has turned to wax;
it has melted away within me.*
¹⁵ *My strength is dried up like a potsherd,
and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth;
you lay me in the dust of death.*
¹⁶ *Dogs have surrounded me;
a band of evil men has encircled me,
they have pierced my hands and my feet.*
¹⁷ *I can count all my bones;
people stare and gloat over me.*
¹⁸ *They divide my garments among them
and cast lots for my clothing.*
¹⁹ *But you, O LORD, be not far off;
O my Strength, come quickly to help me.*

As He was suspended between heaven and earth, the best that God had to offer endured the **worst** that man could dish out. No form of death was worse than crucifixion, because it could last for days. Exposure to the elements, the insects, even the birds of prey took a back seat to the cycle of suffocation trading on excruciating pain. Hanging suspended from the wrists, it was possible to inhale but not to exhale. When the lungs finally began to burst, the victim would bear down on his nailed feet, causing spasms as he slowly pushed himself high enough to exhale. But when your back was already hamburger, pushing yourself up a rough wooden beam would strip off any remaining flesh and muscle, exposing bone and possibly even organs. Now imagine repeating this as often as you needed to breathe, and you get some idea of the Roman expertise in inflicting as much pain as possible while prolonging the final relief of death. Jesus, substituting for us, took this as His punishment.

For 25 weeks now we've been pointing to this moment. We've said that the name of Jesus has been whispered throughout the Old Testament. We've seen Jesus as precisely the Messiah the world needed, but the opposite of what they expected. And now, on this day, everything converges: the covenant of Abraham and the animal cut in two, the Passover Lamb and the wood stained with blood, the Psalm of David, and the disturbing, graphic prophecy of Isaiah all come together on a day called, of all things, Good Friday.

On this day, darkness eclipsed the land as sin overtook the Light of the world. For the first time in eternity, Jesus was forsaken by His Father. At that moment, in the temple, the priest lifted his knife to slaughter the sacrificial lamb, while on the cross, the Lamb of God gave Himself as the perfect sacrifice. He uttered the cry for which all of history had longed: “It is finished.”

Jesus had done what He’d come to do. Redemption had been purchased, and the debt of sin was fully paid. The mob that was present witnessed a Lower Story drama: the execution of a supposed dissident. A handful of the faithful saw the cruelty of Lower Story injustice. But God saw the culmination of an Upper Story plan that had been drawn up before the foundations of the world.

And for that reason only, that history converged on this day as the will of God...for that reason only, it is not blasphemy to speak of this day as “Good Friday.” Because this was no surprise ending—it was only the beginning. It was justice, and it was mercy. And it set the stage for the greatest miracle of all.