

*The Story: My Life For You*  
*By Jason Huff*  
*Psalm 22:1-8,16-31, Colossians 1:10-20, Mark 14:12-26*

Our final Scripture reading today comes from Mark 14:12-26. Listen now to God's Word. "On the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, when it was customary to sacrifice the Passover lamb, Jesus' disciples asked him, "Where do you want us to go and make preparations for you to eat the Passover?" So he sent two of his disciples, telling them, "Go into the city, and a man carrying a jar of water will meet you. Follow him. Say to the owner of the house he enters, 'The Teacher asks: Where is my guest room, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?' He will show you a large upper room, furnished and ready. Make preparations for us there." The disciples left, went into the city and found things just as Jesus had told them. So they prepared the Passover. When evening came, Jesus arrived with the Twelve. While they were reclining at the table eating, he said, "I tell you the truth, one of you will betray me-- one who is eating with me." They were saddened, and one by one they said to him, "Surely not I?" "It is one of the Twelve," he replied, "one who dips bread into the bowl with me. The Son of Man will go just as it is written about him. But woe to that man who betrays the Son of Man! It would be better for him if he had not been born." While they were eating, Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take it; this is my body." Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, and they all drank from it. "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many," he said to them. "I tell you the truth, I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it anew in the kingdom of God." When they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives."

One of my favorite movies is the film **Dave**. Kevin Kline plays the title role, a guy who makes a living as a presidential impersonator. When the real president, a corrupt, self-absorbed man, has a heart attack, his inner circle holds on to power by paying Dave to do what he does best – only in the Oval Office. But there's a problem...Dave's genuinely nice and hates the corruption he sees in government. He makes changes that help ordinary people. By the end of the movie, Dave has to leave the White House, but he's left his mark. There's a poignant scene with a secret service agent that had once distrusted him. As Dave heads out, the agent tells him, "Dave...I would have taken a bullet for you." Dave's kindness had so touched this man that he would have sacrificed himself for Dave's sake. It's a funny movie worth seeing, but that moving scene makes me think of this question...

Who would you sacrifice yourself for?

Most of us would hope that we would do it for our children, that if they were in danger, we would rescue them at the cost of our own lives. For a family member, perhaps, or a really close friend, we might risk it. There are some professions, like firefighters and police officers and the military, where brave men and women know there is the possibility they may die to save lives. But as the Apostle Paul writes in the book of Romans, "Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die." Our first thought is self-preservation. If there's the chance we might get hurt or suffer or even die to help someone else, we don't usually dive in without weighing the risks. These days, honestly, we distrust one another to the point that we rarely risk offering to help a stranded motorist or someone who obviously needs help. We're afraid that if we try to be a good Samaritan, *we'll* wind up being the one bloodied on the side of the road.

Sacrifice is at the heart of the last week of Jesus' life. As we discovered as we read through the Old Testament over the past several months, the sacrifice of certain animals was the means God instituted for His people's sins to be temporarily covered and for them to be restored to right relationship with Him. But they abused the privilege. The Pharisees believed that between their law-keeping and their sacrifices, they were perfect before God. In Jesus' final days, we not only see the sacrificial system rejected by God, we see it replaced entirely through Jesus Himself.

At the tail end of last week's reading, we saw Jesus enter Jerusalem, visit the temple, and drive out all the moneychangers and salesmen. Often, this event is called the "cleansing of the temple." But the Bible doesn't call it that, and it could also be called the "rejection of the temple." The moneychangers, the people selling animals for sacrifice – they weren't the problem so much as a symptom of the problem. The temple was no longer a place of worship; it was a place of business. The temple was selling false righteousness. Pay your money and earn your way to heaven; the more you pay, the more you can be assured of God's favor. The courts set aside for the Gentiles to worship were filled with people looking to make money selling salvation. God did away with this corrupt system and established a new one through His son. The new sacrifice would not be one made day after day to cover sins – it would be a once-for-all sacrifice that would remove sin entirely. But a fundamental truth remained – for sin to be removed from the equation, a sacrifice had to be made.

As the week progresses, the religious leaders decided that Jesus needed to die in order to preserve the nation of Israel. He was undermining everything they had worked for. This was no surprise to Jesus. As the leaders approached Judas to betray his master, Jesus was well aware of what had to happen. Over and over again, He had told His disciples that He had to die. As they ate the Passover meal on Thursday night, Jesus established what we now call the Lord's Supper, telling His disciples that they should remember Him when they ate and drank, as He was being readied to give His body and blood as a sacrifice for us.

As the night progresses, Jesus is betrayed into the hands of the religious leaders. Passing from the Jewish rulers to the Roman procurator Pontius Pilate to the puppet king Herod and back again, no charges stick to Him; He is free from guilt. But that doesn't matter. In clear and gross injustice, Jesus is handed over to be crucified. His sacrifice is not like the animals killed quickly on the altar; instead, He suffers one of the most cruel execution methods known. Though He was innocent, pure without blemish, He became sin for us, taking on our sins in His death to defeat sin and death on our behalf.

When we think of Jesus' sacrifice, this is normally what comes to mind, and rightfully so. This is how God worked out our salvation in the mystery of His grace. And yet the last days of Jesus' life are marked by another kind of sacrifice as well. It's seen before the Passover meal, when Jesus gets a basin and washes His disciples' feet. Peter reacts violently, and it wasn't just Peter's brash personality getting in the way. In their culture, very few people ever wore shoes, and who knows what you stepped in as you walked along. By law, your servant could be asked to do almost anything, but washing your feet was not one of them. Even a slave had more natural dignity than to wash his master's feet. Jesus tells His disciples that if they are to be a part of Him, they must let Him wash their feet. The God of the universe does what could not be asked of the lowest person in society. In Jesus Christ, God lays aside all His glory and honor, sacrificing everything that is rightfully His to serve us utterly. Jesus does not sacrifice just His body – His whole person is given to us.

Jesus tells His disciples that they should do the same – that they are now to serve others as He has served them. Yet Jesus' closest friends fail to sacrifice at the time Jesus needs them most. We all know about Peter promising to always stay by Jesus' side only to deny Him three times. But it's not just on Peter's shoulders – the disciples had agreed they were traveling to Jerusalem to die with Jesus. They had all committed to Him, yet when the time for genuine sacrifice arrived, they all fled. We can sympathize with the disciples. All of us would have hesitated to follow Jesus to a painful death too.

Yet even in smaller sacrifices, the disciples mess up. After supper, Jesus went to the Mount of Olives with His disciples to pray. Jesus was in deep distress. Of all people, He knew the exact pain He would suffer as He died...knowing not just the physical torment that awaited but the terrible truth that during those nine hours, the Father would turn away from Him for the first time ever. In bearing the sins of the world, Jesus would suffer the punishment we deserve for our treason. While He knew He would triumph, it did not relieve the reality of His death that was mere hours away.

Jesus asks His disciples to watch and pray with Him as He goes before His Father in prayer. But they don't. They don't work together to make sure they are awake to tend to Jesus. They know He is suffering; He cannot hide it. But they shrink back into themselves. They fall asleep. Jesus attempts to wake them three times, asking them desperately if they would not stay up as He prays, yet they cannot make the sacrifice of even a couple of hours sleep for Him. We find that the disciples don't truly make any sacrifice for Jesus until the Holy Spirit comes upon them after His resurrection. The good news about the story yet to come is that when the Holy Spirit leads them, they are sold out to Jesus, and the remaining disciples do eventually give Him their all, living and dying for Him.

As I think about the last week of Jesus' life, it makes me ask the question: what is sacrifice about, anyway? We know the word, but what does it really mean? Why is it so important to God? How does it relate to Jesus? As a dictionary says, sacrifice is the “surrender of something for the sake of something else.” In a religious sense, sacrifice is giving something up to please or appease God or a deity. But in a larger sense, sacrifice is about giving up something for something even better. You don't spend all your money on yourself; you make sacrifices so that your children can afford to go to school and you can give to your church, so others less fortunate might not go hungry or without shelter. In some sense, we choose to make sacrifices all day every day – we choose to one thing and not another because we believe it be in our overall best interest.

But deep sacrifice – times when we have to give up something that benefits us greatly – that's difficult. Would we take a bullet for someone else? When push comes to shove, would we give our lives in service to any cause or any belief we hold? For us to die for something, it would have to be pretty important. In the recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, we hear the mourning of those who have lost loved ones in the service of America and we want to know, was it worth it? Did it make a difference? Was their sacrifice for something greater than themselves? Those aren't questions we're here to answer this morning, but they point us in the direction of the bigger question...is anything worth risking our lives to save? Would we die for the president? Would we die for our best friend? Would we die for the guy next door we don't really know?

When we face that question honestly, we see why what Jesus did on the cross was so overwhelming. Jesus did not die so that good people could get into heaven. Far from it. Scripture states that Jesus died for sinners, for people who aren't good. He died for sinners while they were still sinning. It wasn't as if people stopped sinning and then God said, "Oh, OK, you obeyed me so now I'll get that salvation thing going." No! The apostle Paul writes, "While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." Take the idea of sacrificing yourself for someone important or good and set it on its head. Would you sacrifice yourself for that inlaw who always pushes your buttons? Or that friend who betrayed you? Someone that hurt you? That person who hurt your family? The likelihood of your saying "yes" goes down with each question.

But Jesus gave Himself so that sinners could be saved – sinners who had not yet turned to God, people who had actively turned away from Him. As Jesus heads to the cross, He looks at those who are in the midst of crucifying Him and says, "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing." Jesus died so that anyone could be saved who would one day repent and believe. The hymn "To God Be The Glory" reminds us who Jesus died for when it says, "The vilest offender who truly believes that moment from Jesus a pardon receives." There's not a person on earth to whom Jesus would say, "You have sinned too much for me to save." No matter our guilt, no matter our sins, no matter how unlovable and unforgivable we feel, Jesus was willing to die for you. That's the amazing thing about Jesus...you are never beyond His grasp. His sacrifice will wash you clean if you turn to Him in honest faith.

But why death? Why did Jesus have to die to save us? It's because sin is serious in the eyes of God. Sin is rebellion against God and an offense against Him. The only payment for sin is death...as Paul writes in the book of Romans, "The wages of sin is death." In the Old Testament, God accepts animals as a temporary sacrifice in place of the life of the guilty party. The person who had sinned gave up an animal they owned to be set right with God. But that sacrifice didn't cover future sins...and some sins could not be covered by sacrifice. For those sins, the only acceptable price was the life of the guilty party. The old sacrificial law, the book of Hebrews said, was only a shadow of the good things that were coming in Jesus – the old sacrifices could never make perfect those who draw near to worship.

But in Jesus' sacrifice, God reconciled the world to Himself. Through it, He makes us spotless and holy in His sight. We could never make a sacrifice for ourselves that would remove sin from us and make us holy, so God did it for us through Jesus. God's justice required the penalty be paid for sin; God's grace through Jesus paid the penalty on our behalf. That's the beauty and wonder of Good Friday – Jesus Christ became the perfect sacrifice for all who would believe. The Roman instrument of a tortuous death would become the symbol of freedom for Christians, who accept that God's Son died in our place. While we may yet die, we will live with God forever, eventually resurrected and made whole because the debt is gone, the chains are broken, and the hold of sin is utterly destroyed.

When we begin to understand the full measure of Christ's sacrifice, when we realize that all of us are sinners condemned by our insurrection, that we are not good people God needed to save but broken people God wanted to save, we realize the immense love God has for us. His love is beyond compare, beyond measure, beyond what anyone on this earth would dare do. Jesus surrendered His life for our sakes. That means we have value to God beyond what we could even begin to count. If we have that kind of amazing worth, then we can love ourselves as new creatures in Christ Jesus...and when we follow His command to love others as we love ourselves, it will mean something beautiful.

As we conclude today, that's what I want us to think about for a moment...the sacrifice that Christians are called to make. Jesus called on us to be servants to one another, to care for each other, to wash each others' feet – for there to be nothing so beneath us that we wouldn't do it for one in need. Jesus asks everything of us...He asks us to live for Him because He died for us. And yet, this is not sacrifice in the traditional sense. We don't give up ourselves to repay Jesus. We could never do that anyway. And the sacrifice we make is not in exchange for something greater down the road. Our salvation is already assured when we repent and believe. The sacrifice we make is to follow in the footsteps of our Lord, to obey His teachings, to honor who He is and what He has done.

Is this kind of self-sacrifice on behalf of God merely difficult, or is it impossible? The actions of the disciples give us some insight into that. Before the Holy Spirit came, despite all of Jesus' teachings, despite their love for Him, they couldn't do it. They all left Him to face His fate before the religious leaders alone. Even when He returned to them at the resurrection, as we'll discuss next week, they doubted. They didn't go running through the streets when He returned. They're holed up in a room praying and waiting. But when the Holy Spirit comes, they give their lives boldly, preaching and teaching, enduring hardships and calamity – nothing is beyond them. The disciples are really and truly different. Their attitudes and actions are transformed just as Jesus promised. While they still grow in the knowledge and grace of God and sometimes stumble along the way, their sacrifice is a joy to them.

The question we must ask ourselves is this: is sacrifice on behalf of our Savior a joy to us? Now for every believer, there will be times when the sacrifice asked of us is painful. There are places in our lives that are more difficult for us to hand over to God – for one, it's the checkbook; another, shyness about our faith; still another, humble service to the lowly or imprisoned. Times of trouble challenge us all. But is your faith journey always one of joyless obligation, or is it most typically marked with delight in what you can do to serve the Savior even in difficult times? As the disciples' lives showed, we aren't capable of serving God on our own; we need the Spirit to empower us in our weakness to live and serve as God directs.

If your spiritual life is not just in a slump but a rut, if you feel like coming to church and helping others is just so much work, if you're not grateful but just burdened to give of yourself to God, then turn to the Holy Spirit. Ask God to guide you through the difficulties and give you joy in your service to Him. Call on Him to transform your heart so that your only burden is the burden to serve others as Jesus served you in giving His life for your sake. And if you're not sure the Holy Spirit is a part of your life – if you've never given your life to God in humble belief and asked Him to free you from your heavy load of sin, to turn your heart towards Him and away from your rebellion – then do it today. You will find that service and sacrifice on behalf of God will be far sweeter than any sin you have tasted for a season.

Jesus came to earth for more reasons than we can possibly number – but this week, we remember that He was born for this very moment. He lived in order to be the spotless lamb without blemish, the sacrifice that would satisfy every claim that could be made against us. As we are reminded by the Apostle Paul, we are called in the light of God's mercy to be living sacrifices, holy and acceptable in God's sight. May we joyfully serve in the world as Christ served us.