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The Story: The Hour of Darkness Psalms, Isaiah (various verses)

I need your help. We are calling our summer sermon series, *Fearless Q–Dare to Ask*. For twelve weeks we will tackle the toughest questions Christians face, and you will provide those questions! Please take this insert, write down the thorniest question you would love to ask your pastor, and drop it in the basket on the way out. The most popular questions will form the series. These will be great to invite your non-Christian friends to and should provide good fodder for your LifeGroups. And here's a treat for me: my daughter Rachel, who begins her last year of seminary next fall, will preach one of those sermons on August 13-14. So, I hope you'll help us out!

During our eight-month journey through *The Story* we have searched for what we called "The Scarlet Thread"—the Old Testament glimpses of Jesus. For thousands of years, God's people waited for the promised Messiah—the savior of the world. Three weeks ago, at last the Messiah appeared. Amazing Jesus set the place on fire. The streets were packed with adoring fans, all of them whispering: "Could this be the One. This must be the One, right?" People couldn't get enough of Jesus... until he started with the crazy talk: saying he would be arrested and killed. This made no sense. Messiahs didn't get crucified. But Jesus repeatedly warned his disciples this was coming. They didn't like it. They didn't get it. And it put a dent in his popularity.

How many of you have back up plans? Plan B in case Plan A doesn't work? Plan A is for my computer not to crash; Plan B is Carbonite. Plan A this winter was for trees not to fall on my house during the storm; Plan B was having my chainsaw right outside my front door. Plan A is having power; Plan B is my generator. Plan A is not having an earthquake; Plan B is a clean garbage can full of food and supplies (which are all out of date now, come to think of it.) You get the point. We hope for our Plan A, but prudent people have a Plan B—a backup plan.

So was the crucifixion of Jesus Plan A or Plan B? Many people imagine the cross was a backup plan; an audible called by God at the line of scrimmage when he realized things weren't going well. "Uh oh," the Father says, wringing his hands, "the whole world is in rebellion. What am I going to do about this sin thing? Oh my. Well, I guess I could send my Son to die as a sacrifice or something... that might solve the problem."

We must understand this: the crucifixion of Jesus—the death of the Son of God—was never Plan B. It was always Plan A. Not a last second "Hail Mary" God threw up

in hopes that things might work. The sacrificial, atoning work of Jesus on the cross was always—from the beginning—the plan, and I hope to prove that to you today.

I want to show you 16 ways in which the passion of Jesus was predicted—16 strands of the Scarlet Thread, in some cases, written 1,000 years before his birth. Any one of these predictions you might dismiss as coincidence. But when one after another lines up, you get the idea that, from the beginning, God intended to demonstrate his gracious love for us by offering up his only son to pay the price of sin we could never pay. This journey will not be easy; at times, it will be brutal... PG-13. But will you join me?

Let's begin. Jesus had twelve disciples—twelve friends. One of them, Judas, betrayed him. At the Last Supper, Jesus said his betrayer would dip a piece of bread in a common bowl. 1,000 years earlier, King David predicted this: "Even my close friend, whom I trusted, he who shared my bread, has lifted up his heel against me." Psalm 41

Why did Judas betray Jesus? For money. How much? 30 pieces of silver, the price of a slave. After Jesus was arrested and Judas realized what he had done, he tried to return the money. When the priests refused, he threw it at their feet in the temple, went out and hung himself. The money was used to buy a potter's field south of Jerusalem.

500 years before this, Zechariah wrote: "...so they paid me thirty pieces of silver. And the LORD said to me, 'Throw it to the potter.' So I took the thirty pieces of silver and threw them into the house of the LORD to the potter." Zechariah 11:12-13

When Jesus was arrested, he was brutalized. They bound him, spit in his face, blindfolded him and, punched him repeatedly in the face, mocking him with the words: "Prophecy to us, Messiah. Who hit you?" 300 years earlier, Isaiah wrote: "I offered my back to those who beat me, my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard; I did not hide my face from mocking and spitting." Isaiah 50:6.

When Jesus was taken before an illegal religious court, he refused to speak. Though falsely accused, he refused to defend himself and was sentenced to death. Isaiah predicted this: "He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, do he did not open his mouth." Isaiah 53:7

Jesus was taken before the Roman ruler, Pontius Pilate, the only one who could carry out a death sentence. Pilate knew Jesus was innocent and tried to free him, but the Jewish leaders whipped the crowd into a frenzy and Pilate was afraid. In one of the iconic acts of cowardice, he washed his hands, declaring that Jesus' blood was upon them, not him.

Pilate ordered Jesus scourged—which meant that he was stripped naked, stretched tight and his back and front, including his genitals, were flayed with a lash of many leather strands, all tipped with metal and bone and glass. After 39 lashes, his entire body was one gruesome open wound. To compound the humiliation and pain, they clothed him in a robe of royal purple and pressed a crown of wicked, 3-inch thorns into his scalp. By the time they were done with this torture, Jesus was unrecognizable.

300 years earlier, these words: "...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...³ He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Isaiah 52:13; 53: 3

Jesus was led to a hill called the Place of the Skull. He was stripped naked and laid on a cross. Two spikes were driven through between his wrist bones and one through his heel bones, his feet turned sideways. Then he was lifted up to be slowly and painfully asphyxiated. As he hung there, every bone in his body was on display. Often, the victim's arms were dislocated as the cross was dropped into place.

1,000 years earlier, the psalmist wrote: "Dogs have surrounded me; a band of evil men has encircled me, they have pierced my hands and my feet. I can count all my bones; people stare and gloat over me.... I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint." Psalm 22: 16-17; 14.

As Jesus hung dying, the soldiers cast lots for his outer robe. Psalm 22: "They have divided my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing." Psalm 22:18

Jesus was crucified between two criminals. Isaiah saw this: "...he was numbered with the transgressors..." Isaiah 53:12

At one point Jesus, in shock from the pain and loss of blood, cried out, "I thirst." They filled a sponge with wine vinegar and lifted it to his parched lips on the tip of a branch. Psalm 69:21: "...they gave me vinegar for my thirst." Psalm 69:21

Ordinarily, soldiers would take a heavy iron bar and break the legs of the victim to hasten death. But when they came to Jesus, he was already dead. "...he protects all his bones, not one of them will be broken." Psalm 34:2

To ensure he was dead, the centurion pierced Jesus' side with a spear and out poured water and blood; his heart had literally been broken. Psalm 22:14: "My heart has turned to wax; it has melted away within me." Ps 22:14

And finally, after Jesus was dead, he was taken down and buried by his wealthy friend, Joseph of Arimathea, in his own, unused tomb. "He was assigned a grave with the wicked and with the rich in his death..." Isaiah 53:9

Even the words of Jesus from the cross remind us of the echoes of ancient scripture. Psalm 22:1: "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" Psalm 31:5: "Into thy hand I commit my spirit..."

And what about those poignant words found in John 19: "It is finished." What did Jesus mean by that... that he was about to die, that the executioner's work was done, that the Word become Flesh, the creator of the universe, was about to be murdered by his own creation? "It is finished." Finally, mercifully, it is finished!

Perhaps, but it means something way more than that. It means that God's plan of salvation—the plan in place from the beginning, the plan to redeem broken humanity through the sacrifice of the eternal son upon whom would be laid the sins of the world—that plan was finished. This is the Scarlet Thread we have been following for eight months. It was hinted at back in Genesis 3 when the Serpent deceived Eve, God cursed him with this warning about a one-day Messiah: "...he will crush your head and you will strike his heel." Jesus had been struck by the serpent in heel and wrist, but his death brought a crushing blow down upon Satan's head. In that moment, destroyed!

It was the plan hinted at when Abraham was told to sacrifice his only son Isaac on Mt. Moriah—the same area where Jesus would be crucified—and then God replaced Isaac with a ram of his own provision. It was the plan hinted at during the Exodus when, on the night of Passover, a lamb without blemish was slain and its blood spread over the door of every Jewish home; every family under the blood was saved. It was the plan hinted at when the people of Israel were attacked in the wilderness by vipers. Moses lifted up a bronze serpent on a pole; when they looked to it, they were saved.

And it was the plan hinted at most magnificently in Isaiah 53: ⁴Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. ⁵But 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... ⁶We 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.
Isaiah 53:4-6

For eight months we glimpsed the Scarlet Thread. Today's entire message is scarlet: a flood of crimson that pours forth from ancient prophecies, fulfilled point by point in the betrayal, arrest, torture and crucifixion of Jesus. The cross was always God's Plan A for saving us. When Jesus cried out, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me," in that moment, the entire weight of the sin of the world crushed down upon him. He, the perfect, sinless Lamb of God, took all of the nastiness, corruption and guilt of the world upon himself. That act of atonement made him so filthy that even his beloved Father turned aside. Jesus, who always

prayed to his Abba, his Daddy, could only cry out, "My God, My God... have even you forsaken me?"

It is the ugliest, darkest moment in human history—when pure good was immersed in pure evil. If the story ends here, it is the greatest of tragedies. But it does not, as we will see soon enough. But let's not jump there too quickly. For a moment—for this week—we enter into the darkness of the cross. Why? Because this is the horrible price Jesus paid to save you... and me. All that you just heard me describe—every evil, horrid thing done to him—he took upon himself so that we might be spared it. It should have been me and you upon that cross, but Jesus said to his Father, "No. I love them. I will go." That was the Plan. That was always the Plan.