

Hebrews 9:11-15
Jesus is Greater than Our Sacrifices
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3-13-16

[Intro story – the father would sacrifice everything – even his own life, to get his boy back.]

And, in essence, that's what God has done for us. To be a parent is to sacrifice for your children. And so it is with our Heavenly Father.

There is nothing that touches the heart of our humanity more deeply than this notion of sacrifice. When you witness love that is so strong that it is willing to risk it all, even life itself, you see the curtains drawn back ever so slightly to reveal the character of God.

This week as I was in the car, I was thinking about this idea of sacrifice, so I asked Siri: What's the definition of sacrifice? The act of giving up something of value for the sake of something else regarded as more important or worthy. God regards you and me as being his most prized possessions, even though we turn away. But even God, in his relationship to us, had to exchange something of value, for something of even greater worth to God.

Throughout Lent, we've been in the book of Hebrews. We now come to the heart of our faith. Thus far, Jesus has been described as greater than many things, but the center of his greatness rests in his ultimate offering, the greatest sacrifice of all: Jesus offers himself. Jesus saves us by his blood.

We don't like to talk about blood in our modern culture. Blood makes our stomachs churn, blood can infect, blood stains; but what is equally true of blood is that blood heals, blood is the very stuff of life.

In verse 11, the author alludes to the tabernacle, the tent of worship, one made with human hands. It was the place, before the altars, where sacrifices of goats and calves (creatures that had value in ancient society as they do today) were made. The innermost part of the tabernacle is where the Ark of the Covenant resided—where God's presence on earth was located.

This tent wasn't just a place the Israelites went to church or went to find shade from the noonday sun. The tabernacle was sacred, it was holy, it was where the presence of God resided. And the only way you could enter was as a purified person, cleansed from your sins and spiritually covered by the spilt blood of an unblemished substitute. It was that pure blood that covered your uncleanness.

In ancient times, blood had very powerful symbolic and religious connotations, both negative and positive. If someone says "you have blood on your hands or blood on your head" it is a bad thing; it means you were complicit in an act of violence. In ancient time, blood meant brokenness. And the solution for the brokenness was not morality training, it wasn't more religion, it wasn't self-help; it was a literal substitution of the righteous for the unrighteous.

Our sins stand between God and us, the source of our death as well as our guilt and bondage. Sin is the center of the human problem. And the fix is forgiveness. But there can be no forgiveness without the shedding of blood. Why must blood be shed? The answer is found in ancient idea that is

really quite modern. “The life of a creature,” it says in Leviticus 17:11, “is in the blood and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourself on the altar; it is the blood that makes atonement for one’s life.”

So every day, the priests of Israel stood before the altar making offering after offering, but something still stood in the way. The sacrifices they made were for the sins that took place in the past. No sooner had they had finished one then they would have to begin preparing for the next. It was an imperfect offering, it did not offer perfect peace—and so we continued the rat race of making ourselves right with God.

Now, even though blood had negative connotations in ancient times, it also had very positive meanings. Blood represents life, without blood there’s no life. When you see the Red Cross Bloodmobile, I’m guessing no one’s gag reflexes kicks in. Because you know that people are sharing their blood, so that someone else might be healed, might be rescued, might be saved by blood. There is power, power, wonder working power in the blood. When one person gives their blood for another, there is redemptive power at work.

There’s a writer by the name of Brennan Manning, a Catholic monk and spiritual writer who has written a number of beloved books on Christian formation. In one of them, he talks about how he got his name. Here’s what he says:

While growing up, his best friend was Ray. The two of them did everything together: bought a car together as teenagers, double-dated together, went to school together and so forth. They even enlisted in the Army together, went to boot camp together and fought on the frontlines together. One night while sitting in a foxhole, Brennan was reminiscing about the good old days in Brooklyn while Ray listened and ate a chocolate bar. Suddenly a live grenade came into the foxhole. Ray looked at Brennan, smiled, dropped his chocolate bar and threw himself on the live grenade. It exploded, killing Ray, but Brennan’s life was spared.

When Brennan became a priest, he was instructed to take on the name of a saint. He thought of his friend, Ray Brennan. So he took on the name Brennan. Years later, he went to visit Ray’s mother in Brooklyn. They sat up late one night having tea when Brennan asked her, “Do you think Ray loved me?” Ray’s mother got up off the couch, shook her finger in front of Brennan’s face and shouted, “Jesus Christ—what more could he have done for you?!” Brennan said that at that moment he experienced an epiphany. He imagined himself standing before the cross of Jesus wondering, Does God really love me? and Jesus’ mother Mary pointing to her son, saying, “Jesus Christ—what more could he have done for you?”

The cross of Jesus is God’s way of doing all he could for us. And yet we often wonder, Does God really love me? Am I important to God? Does God care about me? And Jesus’ mother responds, “What more could he have done for you?” . . . We were made in God’s image, and he willingly sacrificed himself for others. The more we come to know this God, and the more we understand our true nature, the more natural self-sacrifice will become for us.

The whole point of this passage, the whole point of the Bible is here in chapter 9 verse 12 where it says: **he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption.**

The book of Hebrews says that Jesus is the Creator, Jesus is the one through whom all things come into being, and Jesus is the very opposite of this old way of sacrifice. Jesus is the one who, instead of demanding blood, gives it; who instead of coming down on us in wrath and judgment for our sin, receives the just punishment and takes it on himself. But if Jesus Christ is God, and he's all powerful, why can't he just forgive? What's with all the fuss over blood? It's a question we get all the time.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the great pastor and theologian of the 1940s, said it best: if you've ever forgiven a wrong, if you've ever forgiven some terrible horrible thing that someone else did to you, all forgiveness is suffering.

When some terrible evil has been done to us, there are only two responses. You can demand justice, you can make the other person pay for what they've done. But what happens when this happens is that the evil that was done to you, then passes into you and you become hard and angry and cruel. The other response is to forgive, to choose to not hold the other person culpable, but to say that this evil stops here and I choose to offer forgiveness even if it means I am the one who has to continue to suffer with it. That's forgiveness, and that's why true forgiveness always means suffering.

When we look at the cross, what we see is God coming into the world not to bring more evil and violence, not to pay it forward, but to, in himself, absorb the power of evil, to absorb the sins of the world. God was not immune to the pain in our world, but fully accepted every pain, every hurt, every wrong, and bore it in himself because he loves us and because he loves the world.

Jesus is the teacher of Love. Religious observances don't work, offering little sacrifices in the tent won't work, emulating Jesus' moral teachings won't work. The only thing that works is this gift. Jesus offers his blood, his life force, his righteousness for us. Second Corinthians 5 says that He became sin who knew no sin, so that we might become and receive his righteousness. Jesus' love transforms our entire lives because he saves us objectively. With the knowledge that Jesus has become the greater sacrifice, the perfect sacrifice, and that every evil, every sin, every heartache has been absorbed by his offering himself, that transforms us, it utterly changes every aspect of our lives.

Whenever and wherever the Christian Community gathers for worship, it follows its great high priest into the greater and perfect tent—into a sanctuary that will not decay—to join a fellowship that will not perish and sing hymns that will not cease to a God whose mercy is everlasting.

As J.K. Rowling was putting the finishing touches on her seven-part Harry Potter series, she received a lot of advice.

Parents, teachers, psychologists, and fans of all ages around the globe made one heartfelt request:

Please don't let Harry die.

A number of key characters had already met their demise at the hands of the evil Voldemort and his associates on the pages of the first six books. Even Harry's beloved owl had been struck down.

Surely, it would be wise to spare the world's children, who adored the Harry Potter narrative, the shock of his death.

Spoiler alert: Harry dies.

He sacrifices himself, taking Voldemort with him, to give life to all those who are bravely standing against Evil. There's more to the finale than that, which you'll no doubt enjoy reading on your own.

Meanwhile, when the Wachowski siblings were wrapping up the third film in their *Matrix* trilogy, fans wondered what would happen to Neo.

From the beginning, Neo had been presented as the Chosen One, the savior who would defeat the forces of Evil threatening humanity. How exactly would he pull it off?

Spoiler alert: Neo dies.

Neo willingly surrenders his life – taking Agent Smith into his own body – then dying, as if on the cross, with his arms outstretched.

Devotees of *The Matrix* rolled their eyes. Can't we have a decent modern mythology that doesn't involve echoes of the Crucifixion?

Well, that depends.

How else do you propose defeating Evil?

Psychologist and author M. Scott Peck writes: "I cannot be any more specific about the methodology of love than to quote these words of an old priest who spent many years in the battle:

"There are dozens of ways to deal with evil and several ways to conquer it. All of them are facets of the truth that the only ultimate way to conquer evil is to let it be smothered within a willing, living human being. When it is absorbed there like blood in a sponge or a spear into one's heart, it loses its power and goes no further."

"The healing of evil – scientifically or otherwise – can be accomplished only by the love of individuals. A willing sacrifice is required... I do not know how this occurs. But I know that it does... Whenever this happens there is a slight shift in the balance of power in the world."

It's possible to write off Jesus' death on Calvary as a cruel lynching; religious extremism gone amuck; a miscalculation on Jesus' part; or a gallant example of love.

The Gospels see it rather differently.

It is nothing less than the only way God can defeat Evil. God takes Evil into God's own self and smothers it there.

Or to put it a bit more simply, Jesus dies so that we might live.

Spoiler alert: He doesn't stay dead for very long.