

Finding *Renewal* in the Love of God

Unit 5: Claiming Life in Renewal through Sacrifices of Love

Unit Introduction

Sacrifice cuts to the core. It overwhelms logic. It leaves the opposition speechless.

The story of Jesus did not fit commonly held spiritual beliefs existing in the first century, a time when a man's spiritual life clearly existed separate from his physical body. These two lives did not meet; what was spiritual was good; what was physical was evil. Thus, how could one explain Jesus? How were they to understand the Christian life? Christ, if he were God (as early Christians certainly taught he was) *could not* have come in the flesh. How does God, who is spirit (thus, pure), become flesh (that is, evil)? And just how is it that that spirit dies? In Greek thought, it was the spirit that existed prior to birth and the spirit that lived on after the body died. The lowest form of life, the physical life, was strictly temporal.

Due to the perplexities of Christianity, some early believers attempted to justify popular spiritual belief with Christian teaching. By the beginning of the second century several theories developed into full-blown philosophical movements that attempted to respond to these questions. For example, one group believed that Jesus of Nazareth was a man—just a man chosen by God as the receptacle that would receive the spirit of the Christ. While the spirit remained, Jesus of Nazareth was the Christ, but just about the time he cried out, “My God, My God, why have you abandoned me?” that spirit departed, leaving the man Jesus to die on the cross alone. A second group claimed that Jesus only

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“seemed” human. A third group claimed that in Jesus, both spiritual and physical life existed together, but distinctly separate. Under this theory, the Christian received the spiritual life of Jesus, and in doing so was born to a new life that lived a separate existence alongside the physical life in the body. As a result, life existed in extreme dualism. In the flesh, man could do no good; in the spirit, he could do no evil. Since it was the spiritual man who would be saved, some even believed that the behavior of the physical man had little, if any, effect on a Christian's spiritual life. Since sin ruled the physical life, immoral behavior was to be expected. The physical body would die. At that time, the fullness of spiritual life would go on eternally, unhampered, pure and like God in every way. So, as John speaks to Christians of his time, we see him attempting to directly dispel these errors.

Such confusion about Jesus rendered the story of the cross unintelligible. Either the man who died on the cross was just a man like every other man (thus there was no surrender by God or Christ—and no model of surrender for us) or only the physical part of Jesus surrendered to the cross. Where *then* was the sacrifice? If Jesus himself did not sacrifice, why should we?

The story of the cross gets to the heart of Christianity. God *gave* his son; Christ *gave* his life. To be in the image of a spiritual God, we must *give*, as well. To be like God, one cannot hoard one's life; it must be shared. “This is what real love is: It is not our love for God; it is God's love for us. He sent his Son to die in our place to take away our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another.”

So what about love? What are its bounds? How do I love like Jesus loved, like God loves? Does God's love call me toward those God loves, and if it does to whom will I go? I believe it was Brian McLaren who asked this thought-provoking question: is it possible that God really loved *the world* so much he gave His only son? Do I love the world—and doesn't 1 John 2.15 tell me *not to love the world*?

The thing that surprises me (and I think it surprised the religious leaders of Jesus' day), is that I believe Jesus did love the world. He didn't love worldly things, he didn't approve of sin—or even wink at it—but he loved worldly *people*. 1 John 2.15 tells me not to love the worldly ways of the world, not to avoid sinful people. Spending time with worldly people does not make me *one* with them, but I am to be *one* with Christ, who surrendered his life, his whole identity to live a life of sacrifice among sinful men, walking beside them, and calling them “friend.” Even as he surrendered to the humiliation of death on the cross, he continued to pray for them, “Lord, forgive them; they do not know what they do.”

The cross changed everything because it put flesh on God's love and taught us what it means to be (re)made in the image of God. In fact, Christ himself was changed at the cross. He *became* a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God there.

Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested. Heb. 2.17-18

It is not the *story* of the cross, but the sacrificial *state* of the one who goes to the cross that creates eternal consequences. It is not the *telling* of the story (as wonderful as it is) that saves and influences; it is *living* sacrificially, reenacting the surrender and love of the cross. The Jesus of the cross learned what it was to be *a man* on the cross—not a macho man, strong enough to call down a legion of angels as a herald of his power and authority. He learned what it was to be a *sinful man*—one who dies as a consequence of sin (sin he did not commit).

Gods are *not* meant to die, *but neither were children of God!* Sin changed all that. Sacrifice was required; *someone*—some worthy sacrifice—had to choose death—to choose others over himself. The cross required that Jesus value unworthy sinners more than He loved himself. Only then was sin destroyed.

Dear friends, if God loved us that much we also should love each other. No one has ever seen God, but if we love each other, God lives in us, *and* his love is made perfect in us.

1 John 4.11

God chose death—the death of his son. Jesus chose death: “No one takes [my life] from me, but I lay it down of my own accord.” We complete God's plan when we, like our father and brother, choose death—giving up what I want, what I desire, what makes me look good—for someone who hardly notices. I am most like God—most what he designed—when I sacrifice.