

# Making Sense of Sin and Sacrifice

Hebrews 9:24-28

Religion can be divisive. In fact, nothing is more divisive than the three “S’s:” sin, sacrifice, and salvation. Salvation is a topic I’ve written about before (including a chapter in my upcoming book) and I’m sure I’ll write and speak about it again. Some believers think that some are in and some are out. I believe everyone’s in, but that is not the topic for this sermon. This is a message about the other two “S’s:” sin and sacrifice. How are these two connected? How are they connected in Jesus? Why is it important to make the most of our partnership with God? This is part one of a double feature sermon series. The second part examines the question, “what is the heart of Christian faith?” Sin and sacrifice are part of the symbolic language of faith. What these terms mean to us is important. We are doing something similar to what the New Testament writers did long ago. We’re trying to answer the question, “what does Jesus’ cross mean to us?”

The history of religion testifies to the close connection of sin and sacrifice. Ancient Jewish practice connected the two through the time of Jesus. Animal and other burnt offerings served to make things right and the practice only stopped with the destruction of the Temple (70CE). The question remains unanswered if the practice would return should the Temple ever be rebuilt. The Old Testament has shadows of human sacrifice as in the story of Abraham and Isaac.

Another way that sin and sacrifice are connected in religious history is through the scapegoat tradition. With a scapegoat, sins were symbolically transferred to an animal that was then sent into the wilderness to die. Other cultures and religions have the scapegoat tradition as well. One pays for sins of all. To be the victim was considered a great honor in many traditions who at times, was considered to have attained a measure of divinity. Some victims even welcomed being sacrificed. That does not sound very healthy today.

In terms of biblical background, the high priest of Israel enters the Holy of Holies once of year on the Day of Atonement to offer sacrifice to make intercession for the people. This was the image used by the writer of Hebrews:

<sup>24</sup>For Christ did not enter a sanctuary made by human hands, a mere copy of the true one, but he entered into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf. <sup>25</sup>Nor was it to offer himself again and again, as the high priest enters the Holy Place year after year with blood that is not his own; <sup>26</sup>for then he would have had to suffer again and again since the foundation of the world. But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the age to remove sin by the sacrifice of himself.

The cross is imaged as a cosmic holy of holies. Jesus gave himself as a sacrifice, one not required to appease God. He was laying down his life for his friends and eliminated any need for sacrifices to gain atonement -- not a perpetual sacrifice, but an ultimate sacrifice. It recalls the vision of Jeremiah (31: 33-34):

But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, “Know the Lord,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

Jesus is imaged as a Passover lamb for the meal of commemoration in preparation for the journey of the Exodus. This image was strong among early believers who were all about making atonement (reconciliation) with God. Theologian Paul Tillich taught us that we come from

eternity and are destined for eternity, but now cut off from eternity in an existential loneliness (anxiety). We long for reconnection, for atonement, and to be awake to oneness. The answer most cultural traditions give is sacrifice.

What was Jesus doing on the cross? Simply, he was dying because of Rome. Crucifixion was reserved by Rome either for perpetually runaway slaves or for those who represented political threats to Rome – sedition. Clearly, Jesus was executed for his opposition to the state. He was offering non-violent resistance to violence and thereby exposing the domination system as evil, unjust, and violent

Jesus in the image of the Passover lamb recalls the message of Moses both to Pharaoh and Israel. God was repudiating an all-too-human system in which the few dominate the many and hoard the wealth. They keep power by force, violence, coercion, and the cooperation of people in the middle. The new reality is that Pharaoh's apparent wealth is really scarcity and Israel's apparent poverty is really abundance. Non-violent resistance reveals the moral bankruptcy of domination systems. They masquerade as good, but are revealed as corrupt.

Events in our nation, the government is revealed as a corrupt system that does bidding of the powers of darkness. Wall Street, drug companies, insurance corporations, and other special interests represent a power that overwhelms and overpowers our elected leaders of good intention. The result keeps most of us relatively powerless while a few accrue more power and wealth. The gap between us grows wider and we often feel powerless to stop that.

At a global level, well meaning and idealistic countries such as the United States, get caught up in protecting our interests and suddenly we find we are responsible for atrocities, for supporting evil leaders, and for exploiting the poor. Such is the power of the Powers. We still believe we are acting for the good, but we're often not and the vast majority of the world's population feels powerless. Their situation feels more helpless as they feel squeezed. Recent economics, in the recession and the macro-economic trend toward China, the United States is offered an opportunity to identify with the poor rather than react with violence and force to get "what's ours" or individually "what's mine."

The example Jesus offers is non-violent: to identify with the poor and embrace their reality as ours. Jesus invites us to trust that God identifies more with their plight than with our accruing power. Jesus challenges us to see that our ultimate best interest lies in cooperating to ensure that everyone has enough and that all are included – to believe that bounty in life only comes when we stop grasping for more to fill the void. It only comes by embracing the wealth already within us.

The most familiar interpretation of Jesus' death is referred to as *substitutionary atonement*. It reflects a legal framework with God as the judge. This image is deeply rooted in Christian tradition, though not in a primary sense until a book written by St. Anselm in 1097 CE. In this interpretation, redemption is seen as reason for Jesus' death in order to pay the price God required. In the scapegoat tradition, it required a perfect and innocent victim for the sacrifice. Such an understanding is beyond explicit biblical belief. It is not present at all in Mark's gospel (the earliest biblical gospel).

Finally, Jesus is the embodiment of divine love. Through his death, he was revealing the depth of God's love for us, revealing the path of transformational life, and how vital it is to have love for your enemy. The basic assertion of Christian faith is that God was focused in and made clear through Jesus of Nazareth in such a way that it was so clear that believers understand that life

as identical to God's life. Jesus' life and death was no accidental tragedy, but the offering of a life. The cross was a sign of the full extent of God's love shown us in Jesus. It reflects the amount of commitment love requires to transform the world.

The big question about Jesus' death is this: "Was it a sacrifice?" The answer is a clear, "Yes" and "No." "Yes" in the broad sense that Jesus sacrifice his life, as others have done, for a cause in which he deeply believed. The answer is "No" in terms of substitutionary cultic sacrifice. Jesus' death was a judgment of the powers. Was Jesus violent death inevitable? It was not required by God, but in retrospect was providential. That death was virtually inevitable because of how human beings behave. It is just what domination systems did and do to their opponents. The collision of Jesus' passion and "normal" human behavior was unavoidable. (based on *The Last Week* by Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan)

The accomplishment of Jesus' life was to show us the oneness of all life, to remove any barriers between us and God. He challenged and encouraged us to respect each other and to find non-violent ways to resolve conflicts. Knowing the cost Jesus paid, that we may also have to pay, we are to embrace the God-image in others and in ourselves. This is toward God's dream of shalom – a vision of humanity together and awake to God.

Jesus' life invited, challenged, and empowered persons to live into our role as partners with God, re-creators of the life of God in our families, our communities, and in our own lives. We are asked to live in the faith that those lives will make a difference in the world, that how we live our lives makes a difference to God. Some 1700 years ago, the Christian Church underwent a crisis of success. It became the official state church of the Roman Empire under Constantine . It was a crisis of identity. The Church would no longer be counter cultural. It was quite a conflict for an organization for which salvation was understood to be the dismantling of empire and the exposing of the domination system. So, salvation became personal piety. It became focused on a world beyond death rather than the transformation of this world -- life after death rather than life before death.

The Church in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is still struggling with that legacy -- that we must believe God sent Jesus to die so that we can be reconciled to God. As the church today, we need to take our cue from the early church that felt called to transform the world in the vision of *Shalom* by being awake to God's presence, to the Spirit's action here and now. As people of faith, Jesus invites us to trust our gifts, choose our dreams and follow them, and to invest our time and energies in being all we can be.

The language we have for sin and sacrifice is symbolic language that helps connect how we experience our lives, how we choose to live, with what Jesus taught, how Jesus lived, and what Jesus showed us about the nature of God. Think of sin as much more than breaking some religious rules and not of God's judgment of how worthless or how bad we are. Think of sin as living asleep to the God presence in us and around us -- knowing that God is, yet choosing to live as though God either is not or just does not matter. Think of sacrifice not as an effort to appease God or appeal to God's judgment of us, but as choosing to be awake to the God presence, our presence in God, like the air we breathe. Think of sacrifice as choosing to let what we see and what we feel in God, what resonates at the core of our souls, guide how we live -- not afraid, but alive.

Singer and songwriter Ken Medema asks us:

Can you hear it down the ages,  
Like a mighty trumpet sound?

A call to leave the night and step into the morning.  
It's a call to join gladness,  
In a world of war and pain,  
Yet it sounds a note of danger and a warning.  
It's a call to death and dying.  
It's a call to life and birth.  
It's a call to plant the seeds of love  
On barren planet earth.  
And it's a call to live like fools,  
By another set of rules.  
Well, it's a call to take your cross in hand and follow. (*The Call* by Ken Medema)

More than any other understanding, I choose to see Jesus as the embodiment of divine love. I see his life as revealing the depth of God's love for us, his death on the cross as showing us the path of transformational life, and his message as being love for your enemy. Affirm with me the basic assertion of Christian faith that God was so focused in and made clear through Jesus of Nazareth that believers saw his life as identical to God's life and that Jesus' cross was the sign of the full extent of God's love shown us in Jesus. We follow Jesus today so that God will be so focused and made clear in our lives and our community that God's life will be evident by how we live. Sacrifice is the amount of commitment love requires for us to transform the world in God's Spirit and in Jesus' name. More than worshiping Jesus, we are called to follow him.