

# *Sacrifice and Life*

## WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

Last in a five-part series

May 26, 2019

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*Deuteronomy 30:19–20 (CEB)*

<sup>19</sup>I call heaven and earth as my witnesses against you right now: I have set life and death, blessing and curse before you. Now choose life—so that you and your descendants will live—<sup>20</sup>by loving the Lord your God, by obeying his voice, and by clinging to him. That’s how you will survive and live long on the fertile land the Lord swore to give to your ancestors: to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

*Matthew 10:34–39 (NRSV)*

<sup>34</sup>“Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.

<sup>35</sup>For I have come to set a man against his father,  
and a daughter against her mother,  
and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law;  
<sup>36</sup>and one’s foes will be members of one’s own household.

<sup>37</sup>Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; <sup>38</sup>and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. <sup>39</sup>Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.

*Mark 14:22–25 (NRSV)*

<sup>22</sup>While they were eating, he took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to them, and said, “Take; this is my body.” <sup>23</sup>Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, and all of them drank from it. <sup>24</sup>He said to them, “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many. <sup>25</sup>Truly I tell you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God.”

*John 10:10 (NRSV)*

<sup>10</sup>The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

*Romans 12:1–2 (CEB)*

So, brothers and sisters, because of God’s mercies, I encourage you to present your bodies as a living sacrifice that is holy and pleasing to God. This is your appropriate priestly service. <sup>2</sup>Don’t be conformed to the patterns of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds so that you can figure out what God’s will is—what is good and pleasing and mature.

*Philippians 2:2–4 (NRSV)*

<sup>2</sup>[M]ake my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. <sup>3</sup>Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. <sup>4</sup>Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.

*The abundant life is found in sacrifice, not self.*

What lies on the path to the Good Life? It is easy to fall into the trap of thinking that the Good Life lies at the end of a lot of me-time, that a life of meeting my perceived needs is the best way to a life of abundant goodness. But look around you. Are Americans more or less happy than they were a half-century ago? The correct answer is less happy, despite all the advances in wealth, GDP, women’s rights, and more. And the decline is most pronounced among young adults,<sup>1</sup> which bodes ill for the future.

This follows from a book I read nearly fifteen years ago, *The Progress Paradox: How Life Gets Better While People Feel Worse*, by Gregg Easterbrook. In it he documented the trends of American and European life since the end of World War II. On page after page, Easterbrook demonstrated that just about every objective indicator of social

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<sup>1</sup> From “The Happiness Recession,” in the *Atlantic* magazine, April 2019.

welfare, from per-capita income to home size to education levels, have trended upward with hardly any interruption. Yet, in a 1996 poll, 52% of respondents said the U.S. was worse off than when their parents were growing up and 60% expected things to get worse still. Only 15% felt things were improving. This was in the midst of an economic boom and before 9/11. And now scholars are writing about a “happiness recession” in the *Atlantic*.

The story of the last seventy years has been one of the average person getting better and better off, of practically everything getting better – everything except happiness. God’s Word urges us to grasp that stuff and self are not the foundations of the Good Life, the Abundant Life, but instead, self-sacrifice and a community built upon it are the essentials to the life we seek and God desires for us.

### *The hard sayings of Jesus*

Spend even a little time in the gospels and you soon start coming across some hard things Jesus says, such as the parable of the laborers in the vineyard, which we looked at a few weeks ago. On my bookshelf, I have a copy of *Preaching the Hard Sayings of Jesus* by a father and son team. The father, James Carroll, is a life-long Presbyterian pastor. His son and co-author, John, is an associate professor of New Testament at Union Theological Seminary. In the book, they look at a number of Gospel passages that rock us back on our feet, or at least should. For each passage, the scholarly son wrote an interpretation of the passage and the pastoral father took the son’s work forward to a sermon. They seek to knock us out of our “easy chairs of faith.”

Nearly all the hard sayings are in the context of Jesus teaching his disciples, reshaping their understanding of God and God’s kingdom, and of their own place and responsibilities in it. Jesus knew that he had a lot of work to do and pulled no punches in helping them to understand the gospel in all its glory. As John Carroll wrote, “Jesus dares to replace our vision of things with a new one. . . . And so Jesus, in challenging our familiar and comfortable world, can only succeed by making exaggerated claims, by painting extreme images. He must, in a word, *attack* the world that we have allowed to define us, the life we love so much, in order to give us a new life.”

One of today’s Scripture passages contains Paul’s words about the “renewing of our minds,” this fundamental reshaping of each of us. Perhaps we could think of Jesus’ hard sayings as the fire-hardened steel chisels that it takes to break through all our defenses so that we can emerge from our shell and see the light of God’s love in all its fullness. We must not shy away from the hard sayings; rather, we must embrace them and pray for understanding.

### *Finding your life*

So . . . Jesus says he came not to bring peace, but a sword, to set a son against a father and more, and then said something about losing our life so we can find it. This brief passage from Matthew (above) is both hard and disconcerting. We hear a call to loyalty and finding our life, but doesn’t it seem pretty over the top?

With all the hard sayings, it is best to begin with the basics. The Good News is our proclamation that Jesus is Lord<sup>2</sup> – no one else, nothing else. And if Jesus is Lord, then, well, Jesus is Lord. Merriam-Webster’s defines lord as “a ruler by hereditary right or preeminence to whom service and obedience are due.” That works for me. There may be many minor lords and kings and powers in this world that demand service and

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<sup>2</sup> Christians will often say something like, “Jesus is Lord of my life.” Well, alright, but I think it misses the mark. The point of the *evangelion* is that Jesus is Lord of everyone, whether they know it or not. It is not my agreement that makes Jesus Lord, it is God who has made Jesus Lord. Jesus is Lord even of those who deny him. Read the great Christ-hymn of Philippians 2:5-11 on this. To put it another way, the *evangelion*, the Good News, is not a private proclamation; it is a very public proclamation that encompasses all of God’s creatures and creation.

obedience, but there can be only one Lord, one King of kings, one Lord of lords. For the many millions living within the Roman empire, the Lord of Lords was Caesar. But the Christians proclaimed that the Lord of Lords is Jesus, to whom even Caesar would one day bow.

And as the Lord of Lords, Jesus demanded undivided loyalty to himself. If that meant a son would be divided from his father, then so be it, Jesus came first. If it meant that a daughter would be shunned by her mother, then so be it. Jesus came first. You and I don't live in a world where our loyalties are likely to be tested in so direct a way. But in the lives of the early Christians such tests came far too often.

And because Jesus is Lord, finding the life we seek must begin by submitting to this Lord who loves us and gave himself for us, who gave his life so that we could find true life. Our Lord sacrificed himself so that we might have abundant life. Here lies the path to the life we seek.

### *The hard chisels*

Take a moment and read through all of today's Scripture passages. "This is my body . . . this is my blood . . . those who lose their life for my sake will find it . . . figure out what God's will is . . . set aside your selfish ambition . . . look to the interests of others, rather than your own . . . choose life!" The Bible is constantly challenging us to see this world and ourselves in a very different light than most of us were taught.

In the two verses from Romans 12, Paul does not concentrate on Jesus' teachings but on the implications of what Jesus has *accomplished*. And what Jesus has accomplished is so profound, so creation-altering that the only proper response is to offer ourselves, our entire beings, as a living sacrifice, for God has demonstrated that he is worthy of nothing less (v. 1). We can never stay as we once were. The trip to the Good Life demands nothing less than our transformation, the complete and utter renewing of our minds such that our thoughts, feelings, and actions are conformed to the ways of God, for in that find the abundant life Jesus came to give us.

How does this transformation happen? How can we put to death the old self (the living sacrifice) and put on the new self (the renewing of the mind)? Only by the grace of God. This renewing of the mind is the work of God's Holy Spirit (see Romans 8:5-9). If it were up to us alone, we couldn't get there. Make a trip to Barnes and Noble and count the self-help books. Many of these are filled with excellent advice. The problem is that we just don't actually do much of it. No, only by grace can we ever hope to live a life that is pleasing to God. And a life that is pleasing to God is the Abundant Life.

### *"Filled with all the fullness of God"*

In Easterbrook's chronicling of American anxiety and unhappiness, so much of it seems to stem from a deep dissatisfaction and emptiness. We might chase after lots of stuff and status in this life as we seek to fill our hearts, but as Augustine wrote more than 1500 years ago, our hearts will not rest until they rest in God, or as Paul puts it in his letter to the Ephesians, until we are "filled with all the fullness of God" (Ephesians 3:19).

But what an odd phrase. How could we possibly even speak of being filled with God's fullness? We are not God. Is it simply some sort of nice sounding but meaningless sentiment? Of course not. Rather, it is the climax of a prayer. Paul prays that the Christians, individually and as a body, might be strengthened in their inner being, rooted and grounded in love as they come to comprehend and to know the limitless love of Christ. Paul prays that Christ might dwell in the hearts of these Christians. And all of this takes our eyes and hearts ever upward to the very fullness of God.

When Christ dwells in our hearts, we gradually come to see that the path to the abundant life isn't marked by self and stuff, but by sacrifice and self-giving love. Fred Craddock put it well:

What we do know for sure, however, is that Paul regarded as inappropriate to the body of Christ the selfish eye, the pompous mind, the ear hungry for compliments and the mouth that spoke none, the heart that had little room for others, and the hand that served only the self.<sup>3</sup>

Jesus showed us the path of sacrifice and Paul called the earliest believers to walk that path every day. It is the path of love, true love, life-transforming, world-transforming love.

## Daily Bible Readings

*More on sacrifice and life*

**Monday, Psalm 16** “You show me the path of life.”

**Tuesday, John 11:17-28** “I am the resurrection and the life.”

**Wednesday, John 15:12-17** “No one has no greater love than this . . .”

**Thursday, Ephesians 3:14-21** Filled with all the fullness of God.

**Friday, Philippians 2:6-8** Jesus’ sacrifices

**Saturday, 2 Corinthians 11:21b-29** Paul’s sacrifices

## Scott Engle’s Bible Classes

### Monday Evening Class

We are studying Paul’s letter to the Ephesians. It is a great time to join us!

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

### Tuesday Lunchtime Class

We are studying the book of Kings (1&2).

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall

*About the weekday classes:*

Join us whenever you can. Each week’s lesson stands on its own. This is very “drop-in.” Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible.

On occasion Scott must cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check [www.scottengle.org](http://www.scottengle.org) to make sure the class is meeting.

### Scott’s 11:00 Sunday Class in Smith Worship Center

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

Current series: *The Apostles’ Creed: what we believe and why it matters*

Video of each week’s class is posted here: [vimeo.com/groups/scottsbiblestudy](https://vimeo.com/groups/scottsbiblestudy)

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<sup>3</sup> Fred B. Craddock, Philippians, *Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Atlanta, GA: J. Knox Press, 1985), 38.