

# **GOD IS SELF-SACRIFICING**

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## **Learning from the One Who Lays It Down**

### ***Discovering God (Part 6)***

**Text: John 10:1-21**

### **Recovering a Knowledge of God**

As wonderful as life is in so many respects, many of us look at our world today and wonder how we are ever going to get out of the messes that still seem to afflict us so sorely. Many people appear stuck in fairly unremarkable relationships at home or work. Our political process seems broken by a fundamental incapacity to see our common interests or devise ways of pursuing them together. We become obsessed with our differences and fearful of others and absorbed with our entertainments to an extent that we seem unable to seriously contemplate how we might reach out to one another instead of building higher walls. It is for all of these reasons that the most urgent need today is for human beings to regain or discover a clear vision of God.

Observing this gathering calamity decades ago, A. W. Tozer wrote that: "The decline of the knowledge of [God] has brought on our troubles... It is impossible to keep our moral practices sound and our inward attitudes right while our idea of God is erroneous or inadequate. If we would bring back spiritual power to our lives, we must begin to think of God more nearly as he is... A rediscovery of the majesty of God will go a long way toward curing" what most ails us at the present time.<sup>1</sup> Only a fresh vision of God will reorient us on the inside in the manner needed to begin to truly reorient our world on the outside.

As we've discussed in recent weeks, however, gaining this understanding is difficult. Puffed up with religious or atheistic pride, we often crusade through life guided far more by our own sense of sufficiency than by dependence on His. Blind to the staggering goodness by which God has given us so much, we obsess on the things we don't have. Doubtful of God's total trustworthiness we run into pain or problems and despair of the ultimate outcome far too quickly. Apparently ignorant of how lavish God's love truly is, even we who claim His name struggle to make room in our pews, our hearts, or our budgets for the needs of other people. Unable to grasp with our ant-sized minds the towering height of his holiness – his true intelligence, power and purity of character -- we persevere in thinking that we'll get into heaven or escape hell because of our relatively fine performance. Even many of us who have been around churches for years, still struggle to comprehend that that to encounter the dazzling brilliance of God's full glory in our sin-sick state would be like an insect meeting a bug-zapper the size of the Sun.

We would be in even more serious trouble were it not for the fact that God is not only sufficient, good, trustworthy, loving, and holy, He is also self-sacrificing. And if we can

take this truth about Him more fully into us – if we can let God’s self-sacrificing nature touch and transform us – then perhaps more of the life-change we’ll explore further next week, can start to begin. So let’s think about that together this morning.

### **The Love of a Father**

In the movie, *Armageddon*, we are introduced to a burly oil-mining veteran by the name of Harry Stamper, played by actor Bruce Willis. Stamper has been called upon to take part in a last-ditch mission to save the human race from a massive asteroid on an unstoppable collision course with planet Earth. Landing a space shuttle on the surface of the deadly rock, Harry and his compatriots drill a hole deep into the asteroid’s core and drop into it a nuclear bomb that might just split the asteroid in two and makes its halves miss the Earth.

At the climactic moment that the charge has been set and the shuttle is about to lift off the asteroid, something goes terribly wrong and it becomes clear that someone will have to stay behind and manually detonate the bomb. Without hesitation, Harry Stamper chooses that job. In the final minutes, Harry speaks by videophone to the command center in Houston and says his last words to his daughter, Grace, played by actress Anne Tyler. With tears streaming down her cheeks, the daughter bumbles to her Dad: "Everything good I have inside of me I have from you. I love you so much. I am so proud of you. And I'm so scared." "There won't be anything to be scared of soon," Harry assures her. "I'll look in on you... I love you, Grace."

Moments later, Harry kneels on the surface of the asteroid as it violently shakes with volcanic eruptions. Struggling to maintain hold of the detonator, he watches the shuttle safely escape. And then Harry stares with longing at the beautiful blue planet rotating quietly in space. A gentle smile creases his rugged face as he whispers, "We win, Gracie," and then presses the detonator.

Suddenly the screen fills with a racing stream of images as seen through the love of this father’s eyes. We see back in time to a sunny day when Harry is pushing his laughing little girl on a backyard swingset. We’re treated to a blur of images reflecting the glorious and grainy moments of miraculous human life. We see a moment out in the future when Gracie will be dressed as a radiant bride on her wedding day. And then the asteroid erupts in a blinding explosion, fractures in two, and careens clear of our planet, as the saved of the Earth explode in wild cheers.<sup>2</sup>

### **The Love of THE Father**

Long ago, Hollywood learned to draw its best themes from the storyline of the Bible. It is no accident that the daughter’s name in that movie is Grace, though she should have more properly been called "Graced," for that is what she is in this tale. She and the entire human race were graced by a love willing to sacrifice himself for their sake, and

this is true of you and me today. The Apostle John put it like this: **“How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!”** (1 John 3:1).

The Bible teaches that God saw the consequences of sin and evil hurtling at human life like an unstoppable force. Unlike the main character in the Hollywood movie, God himself would not have been destroyed if He did nothing. Unlike the Hollywood tale, this destruction was actually the just-deserts of a planet that had forsaken its Creator. But at a level infinitely larger than the love of Harry Stamper for his daughter, God looked with compassion at the children of this Earth and chose to intervene in a way that required of Him a cataclysmic self-sacrifice.

You and I have no way to really appreciate what it is for God to dwell in the dimension in which He has His existence. The Bible gives us poetic images of this. It describes God as existing in a place beyond all physical need, a place of glorious light and endless life, a place in which He is surrounded by flawlessly beautiful and powerful beings whose pleasure it is to glorify and enjoy him forever. But God sacrificed that. Paraphrasing the Apostle Paul’s words in Philippians 2, Eugene Peterson describes it this way: **“He had equal status with God but didn't think so much of himself that he had to cling to the advantages of that status no matter what. Not at all. When the time came, he set aside the privileges of deity and took on the status of a slave, became human! Having become human, he stayed human. It was an incredibly humbling process. He didn't claim special privileges. Instead, he lived a selfless, obedient life and then died a selfless, obedient death—and the worst kind of death at that: a crucifixion”** (Philippians 2:6-8).

Even though we don’t fully understand it, many of us recognize – at least in concept -- that the descent of God into human flesh had to have been an incredible sacrifice. Think how hard it is for some of you Snow Birds to return to Chicago in the wintertime! What God in Christ experienced was an infinitely greater climate change. Think of going from being above an angel in heaven to being a bug crawling around in a sewer and you’re getting a bit closer to the status change.

And it wasn’t just a one-time transition. It wasn’t like being transferred for a season to a branch office in Scranton or sitting in after-school detention and knowing that you have no choice now but to stick it out till you get to go home. At any time during his earthly life, Jesus could have instantaneously re-assumed his former glory. When confronted by idiots and followed by fools, when plagued by hunger or thirst, when having his body tortured by sadists, he could have with a single eye-blink reassumed his blazing glory and “Zap!” He’d be back to His former comfort, surrounded by his former companions. We forget that life here for HIM, was a moment-by-moment sacrifice. With each passing second, He just kept laying his privileges down.

And then, when the moment of ultimate choice came... When his enemies were hurling insults at him and cheering each agonized breath he struggled to draw while writhing on the cross... When all it would take was a thought to *zap them* like the bugs they were.... When He had to choose between the obliteration hurtling justly at the human race or the obliteration of his own life to pay the price that would save them, Jesus fixed his eyes on the joy set before Him. Somehow, He was able to look past all those wicked faces distorted by their hatred or enjoyment of the spectacle and see that blue planet spinning in space. Somehow, He was able to think back in time to that day when He pushed Eve on the swingset of Eden. Somehow, He was able to look forward in time and see the Bride (his redeemed church) as she would look on her wedding day. And Jesus pressed the detonator.

And in a cosmic reaction that remains something of a mystery still, there was a great shudder in the invisible realm as all of the righteous judgment upon sin was absorbed by Christ, His life was snuffed out, and the awful destiny hurtling toward us, broke in half, and Death's final victory on one side and Evil's final curse on the other side passed us by – leaving us with some shockwaves still but graced nonetheless with the gift of new life – if we choose to accept that gift.

### Like God

This is what God is like. He's like an oilfield worker who volunteers to travel across space, set Himself down on a chunk of hurtling hell, and lay down His life so that others may live. He's like the greatest mind and heart our little brains can imagine, who volunteers to leave the halls of glory and travel all the way down to a stinking, dung-filled pasture, to walk among dumb sheep, and to lay his life down to save them from the evil that would otherwise steal their souls, kill their bodies, and destroy them forever. God is like Jesus. Jesus IS God, voluntarily sacrificing himself in many ways, that you and I **"may have life, and have it to the full"** (John 10:10).

The question I want to pose before letting you go today is this: "How does knowing what God is like, shape what we are like?" The essence of self-sacrifice is choosing to do something that you did not have to do. It is letting go of something you did not have to give up. It is going someplace you did not have to go. It is saying something you did not have to say. It is providing something you did not have to offer. **"No one takes my life from me,"** said Jesus, **"but I lay it down of my own accord"** (John 10:18).

Having been graced by God's self-sacrifice for our benefit, where and how can you and I exercise self-sacrifice toward the people He loves in these days ahead? Last night, dozens of kids from our middle school ministry literally lay down their bodies for the sake of others. They chose to sleep outside in the cold to identify with the needs of the homeless in our region and raise resources to help them. Maybe you'll volunteer to forego a luxury this week so that some of your resources can help someone else gain a

necessity. Perhaps what you are called to lay down is your pride or pain in some important relationship of your life. Few self-sacrifices are as difficult as forgiving someone who has wronged you; yet in doing so, you will never be more like God. Maybe your calling is to lay down your right to speak the wisdom you have, so that someone else can be heard. Perhaps you'll lay aside your desire to BE served in your home, church, or workplace and take up a more active commitment to BEING a servant of others.

**“Greater love has no one than this,”** said Jesus, **“that he lay his life down for his friends”** (John 15:13). Amazingly, Jesus even did so for his enemies, in hope of making them his friends. How about you? God may not be asking you to fly to an asteroid or go to a cross, but if you really know Him, then there will be something of yourself that, in the service of love, you will choose to lay down. What is it?

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<sup>1</sup> A.W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy*, p. viii.

<sup>2</sup> *Armageddon* (Touchstone Pictures, 1998); directed by Michael Bay, written by Robert Pool and Jonathan Hensleigh. Thanks to Bill White of Paramount CA for this illustration.