

There is a story that makes the rounds on social media that popped up in my feed again this past week. Maybe you've heard it; it goes something like this:

Many years ago, when I worked as a volunteer at Stanford Hospital, I got to know a little girl named Liza who was suffering from a rare and serious disease. Her only chance of recovery appeared to be a blood transfusion from her five-year-old brother, who had miraculously survived the same disease and had developed the antibodies needed to **combat the illness**. The doctor explained the situation to her little brother, and asked the boy if he would be willing to give his blood to his sister. I saw him hesitate for only a moment before taking a deep breath and saying, "Yes, I'll do it **if it will save Liza**."

As the transfusion progressed, he lay in bed next to his sister and smiled, as we all did, seeing the color returning to her cheeks. Then his face grew pale and his smile faded. He looked up at the doctor and asked with a trembling voice, "Will I start to die right away?"

Being young, the boy had misunderstood the doctor; he thought he was going to have to give her all his blood.

Now, this story is almost certainly not true, as a quick check of Snopes.com reveals that a version of this story has showed up in multiple books and movies over the past 100 years. But the reason this story tugs at our heartstrings is that it taps into something that seems to be a deep truth, that the greatest love of all is to lay down our lives for someone else. This is why this little boy's willingness to give his blood to his sister is so moving, because he believed he was giving his life for her, dying so that she could live. This is why we honor those who serve in the military. It is why we are moved by the story of the first responders who risked their lives to save others in the World Trade Center on 9/11. There is something about the idea of substitutionary sacrifice, of giving our lives for another, of dying in another's place, that evokes awe, wonder, admiration, and oftentimes even tears.

This theme of substitutionary sacrifice is one of many themes that runs through the Bible, and as we begin Holy Week this week, it is a theme that will find its culmination on Good Friday, as Jesus dies on the cross. This morning, I would like to tell the story, the grand story, of substitutionary sacrifice in the Bible and why it helps us understand the meaning of the death of Jesus and the love of God for you. I won't be able to touch on every story, of course, but I will touch on five of the most important highlights this morning.

Story number 1 comes from Genesis 22:1-14. After many years of waiting, God has given Abraham and Sarah a son, Isaac, through whom will come a great nation, God tells them. But in chapter 22, God tests Abraham's willingness to obey him by telling him to take his son Isaac to Mt. Moriah and sacrifice him there as an offering. Abraham obeys, trusting that God will provide a solution:

Genesis 22:7-8 - Isaac spoke up and said to his father Abraham, "Father?" "Yes, my son?" Abraham replied. "The fire and wood are here," Isaac said, "but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" ⁸ Abraham answered, "God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son."

And God does stop Abraham from sacrificing his son, and provides a lamb for Abraham to sacrifice instead. God tells Abraham in v. 12:

Genesis 22:12-14 – "Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son." ¹³ Abraham looked up and there in a thicket he saw a ram caught by its horns. He went over and took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering instead of his son. ¹⁴ So Abraham called that place The LORD Will Provide. And to this day it is said, 'On the mountain of the LORD it will be provided.'"

And as they burn the lamb, you can imagine Isaac looking and saying "this lamb died in my place." On the mountain of the Lord, the substitute is provided.

Story 2 comes from the Exodus. Abraham's family becomes the nation of Israel, and the nation ends up in slavery in Egypt. The people cry out to God in their slavery, and God raises up Moses and Aaron to go to Pharaoh and tell him to let the people go. Pharaoh refuses for nine plagues, but then comes the tenth plague:

Exodus 12:3,6-7,11-14 – Tell the whole community of Israel that on the tenth day of this month each man is to take a lamb for his family, one for each household...⁶ Take care of them until the fourteenth day of the month, when all the members of the community of Israel must slaughter them at twilight. ⁷ Then they are to take some of the blood and put it on the sides and tops of the doorframes of the houses where they eat the lambs...¹¹ This is how you are to eat it: with your cloak tucked into your belt, your sandals on your feet and your **staff in your hand**. Eat it in haste; it is the LORD's Passover. ¹² "On that same night I will pass through Egypt and strike down every firstborn of both people and animals, and I will bring judgment on all the gods of Egypt. I am the LORD. ¹³ The blood will be a sign for you on the houses where you are, and when I see the blood, I will pass over you.

No destructive plague will touch you when I strike Egypt. ¹⁴ “This is a day you are to commemorate; for the generations to come you shall celebrate it as a festival to the LORD—a lasting ordinance.

The tenth plague is that every firstborn son will be killed, except for those households where a lamb has been slain and its blood put on the doorposts. And so, this lamb was slain so that the nation could go free. The lamb’s blood saved them from slavery, rescued them from death. And to commemorate, the people of God were to eat the Passover meal every year, to remember that they have been set free by God, to look on the lamb and remember that **this lamb died instead of me, so that I could go free.**

And so God delivered the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, and they traveled to Mt. Sinai, where God gave Moses the covenant and the law, which is story #3. When God gave Moses the law at Mt. Sinai, he instituted something called the **sin offering**, a way for sinful humans to be made right with a holy God.

Leviticus 5:5–6 - When anyone becomes aware that they are guilty in any of these matters, they must confess in what way they have sinned. ⁶ As a penalty for the sin they have committed, they must bring to the LORD a female lamb or goat from the flock as a sin offering; and the priest shall make atonement for them for their sin.

And then there is the **Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur**, the annual day set aside for confessing sin and receiving forgiveness. In Leviticus 16, in the instructions for the Day of Atonement, the high priest would choose two goats: one would be sacrificed as a sin offering, and the other would make atonement by being sent out into the desert.

Leviticus 16:20–22 - “When Aaron has finished making atonement for the Most Holy Place, the tent of meeting and the altar, he shall bring forward the live goat. ²¹ He is to lay both hands on the head of the live goat and confess over it all the wickedness and rebellion of the Israelites—all their sins—and put them on the goat’s head. He shall send the goat away into the wilderness in the care of someone appointed for the task. ²² The goat will carry on itself all their sins to a remote place; and the man shall release it in the wilderness.”

Once again, those who had sinned could look at this animal and know that it died so that they could be forgiven and free.

Over time, the nation of Israel gets bigger and wealthier, and begins to forget their God. Soon they find themselves in exile again, enslaved by another nation, Babylon. And again, they cry out to God. But this time the prophets begin to speak of a greater slavery that is affecting the whole world and a greater exodus that is going to happen. Story #4 is found in Isaiah, written in the seventh century before Jesus' birth, and is a story of sacrificial suffering that involves not an animal, but a human being:

Isaiah 53:1–12 - Who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed? ² He grew up before him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of dry ground. He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. ³ He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain. Like one from whom people hide their faces he was despised, and we held **him in low esteem**. ⁴ Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. ⁵ But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed. ⁶ We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. ⁷ He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did **not open his mouth**; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. ⁸ By oppression and judgment he was taken away. Yet who of his generation protested? For he was cut off from the land of the living; for the transgression of my people he was punished. ⁹ He was assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death, though he had done no violence, nor was any **deceit in his mouth**. ¹⁰ Yet it was the LORD's will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and though the LORD makes his life an offering for sin, he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the LORD will prosper in his hand. ¹¹ After he has suffered, he will see the light of life and be satisfied; by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and he will **bear their iniquities**. ¹² Therefore I will give him a portion among the great, and he will divide the spoils with the strong, because he poured out his life unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors. For he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.

After all of these years of lambs being sacrificed for the sins of the people, all of a sudden we have this. Isaiah prophesies about a greater rescuer will come – not an animal, but a human – who will save the whole world from sin by bearing their sin on his back and dying as a sacrificial substitute for their sins.

Centuries pass, until one day God raises up a man named John, who baptizes people for the repentance of sin, because he tells them that he is preparing the way of the Lord. And then one day, this happens:

John 1:26–31 - “I baptize with water,” John replied, “but among you stands one you do not know. ²⁷ He is the one who comes after me, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.” ²⁸ This all happened at Bethany on the other side of the Jordan, where John was baptizing. ²⁹ The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!

³⁰ This is the one I meant when I said, ‘A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.’ ³¹ I myself did not know him, but the reason I came baptizing with water was that he might be revealed to Israel.”

John sees Jesus, and calls him the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. It’s a strange thing to call someone, unless you understand what the lamb has symbolized throughout their nation’s history.

Jesus grows up, teaches God’s truths and does many miracles. And then, on Palm Sunday, Jesus enters Jerusalem riding on a donkey. The crowd that has gathered for Passover believes that Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah King who has arrived to deliver them from their Roman oppressors and restore the kingdom of Israel to glory once again. Now, Passover takes place on the 14th of the month Nisan. Jesus enters Jerusalem four days before Passover. **Remember what we read earlier** in Exodus 12: God told the Israelites in Egypt that on the 10th day of Nisan, they were to take a lamb without defect, and care for it until the 14th day, when the lamb would be killed and its blood put on the doorposts so that the angel of death would pass over their house.

Every year the Israelites celebrated Passover, and what that meant is that on the 10th day of Nisan, thousands of lambs would be driven up to Jerusalem throughout the day. The historian Josephus tells us that one year a census was taken of the number of lambs slain for Passover and the figure was **256,500**. That means that Jesus is entering Jerusalem on the 10th of Nisan, on a donkey, surrounded by lambs who are about to be slain for the Passover. Symbolism, anyone? And just like the Passover lamb, Jesus would go to the temple to be “examined” to ensure that he was without defect, without sin, so that he could be an acceptable sacrifice.

And then, at the Last Supper, Jesus gathers with his disciples to celebrate the Passover. But as he takes the bread and the wine, he changes the story to make it about him. Typically, a presider would explain the Passover ritual, telling through

the elements of bread and wine, how God rescued their forefathers from slavery in Egypt. This is the bread of affliction, which our forefathers ate in the wilderness. The cup represents the deliverance that God has brought to His people. **But Jesus changes the story to make it about himself.**

Matthew 26:26–28 - While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, “Take and eat; this is my body.” ²⁷ Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, saying, “Drink from it, all of you. ²⁸ This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.

Who does that? Imagine taking the story of the 4th of July, of our independence, and saying that it is really about you? That is the closest parallel to what Jesus is doing here. Jesus says that the bread and wine are about him – his body, and his blood. He will suffer and die so that they might go free. He is saying that there is a greater Exodus about to happen, to which that first Exodus pointed. Not deliverance from slavery to a nation, but deliverance from slavery to sin and death itself. He will die to rescue them from slavery to sin, and then enter into a new covenant with them. **Notice once again the language of substitutionary sacrifice**, as he tells them that his broken body and poured out blood will forgive their sins.

But there is something strange about this meal. The bread is there, the wine is there, but where is the main course? Where is the lamb that they can point to and say “this lamb died so that we could go free?” Where is the Lamb???

He’s standing right there. Jesus is the Lamb who will be slain so that the world might go free.

And then after supper, he goes out to the Garden of Gethsemane, where we read this:

Matthew 26:37–39 - He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with him, and he began to be sorrowful and troubled. ³⁸ Then he said to them, “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me.” ³⁹ Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, “My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.”

And in Luke’s account of Gethsemane, we find this:

Luke 22:42–44 - “Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done.” ⁴³ An angel from heaven appeared to him and strengthened him. ⁴⁴ And being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground.

As Jesus leaves the last Supper to go out to pray to the Father, he says that he is “overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death.” The phrase “overwhelmed with sorrow” comes from a Greek word which is used to denote the most extreme anguish which the soul can feel—excruciating anxiety and torture of spirit. And Jesus is in such agony that he is sweating blood, a phenomenon called hematidrosis that only happens under extreme stress and anguish. Why is Jesus experiencing such sorrow, such anguish, such torture in His spirit?

We find the answer in what he prays. Listen again to v. 39: “*My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.*” He asks the Father to take away from him “the cup.” At first glance, that phrase may seem to simply refer to a difficult ordeal. But when you look back through the Bible, you discover that the cup has a more precise meaning:

Isaiah 51:17 - Awake, awake! Rise up, Jerusalem, you who have drunk from the hand of the LORD the cup of his wrath, you who have drained to its dregs the goblet that makes people stagger.

Jeremiah 25:15–16 - This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, said to me: “Take from my hand this cup filled with the wine of my wrath and make all the nations to whom I send you drink it. ¹⁶ When they drink it, they will stagger and go mad because of the sword I will send among them.”

Revelation 14:9–10 - A third angel followed them and said in a loud voice: “If anyone worships the beast and its image and receives its mark on their forehead or on their hand, ¹⁰ they, too, will drink the wine of God’s fury, which has been poured full strength into the cup of his wrath. They will be tormented with burning sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and of the Lamb.

Are you getting the picture? The cup is more than just a simple metaphor for a difficult ordeal. **The cup is a metaphor for God’s wrath, God’s righteous judgment on human sin, God’s punishment for evil and wickedness.** It causes men to stagger, to beat their breast, to go mad. When Jesus asks the Father to remove the cup from him, if at all possible, he is asking the Father if there is any other way to save us that would not involve having to bear the wrath of the Father on human sin. Can

you understand why Jesus was overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death, why he was sweating blood?

Jesus was overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death because in the garden, he began to experience the Cup – the wrath of God, separation from the Father. And it caused him to stagger, to sweat blood. In Gethsemane, the Father gave Jesus the choice. This is just a taste of what you will experience on the cross – do you still want to do this? Will you still do it? Will you love me even though I will crush you? Will you die for these people who can't even stay awake with you?

And Jesus says, “Not my will but yours be done.” And He drinks the cup of God's wrath for us.

Hebrews 2:9 - But we do see Jesus, who was made lower than the angels for a little while, now crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.

And taste death he did as he went to the cross to die for our sins. The sacrificial system, the lamb, the cup was of course pointing to the once for all sacrifice of the Servant, Jesus, who took up our sins upon himself and paid the penalty once for all.

Mark 10:45 – “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

And as Peter says:

1 Peter 1:18-19 - For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, ¹⁹ but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.

Jesus was the ransom for sin, the atoning sacrifice, by his death covering the debt we owed for contributing to evil and death in the world.

2 Corinthians 5:17–21 - Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! ¹⁸ All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: ¹⁹ that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. ²⁰ We are

therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. ²¹ God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Jesus became sin and we gain his righteousness. The sacrificial system, the lamb, the cup was of course pointing to the once for all sacrifice of the Servant, Jesus, who took up our sins upon himself and paid the penalty once for all.

Hebrews 10:1–4, 10-14 - The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming—not the realities themselves. For this reason it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship. ² Otherwise, would they not have stopped being offered? For the worshipers would have been cleansed once for all, and would no longer have felt guilty for their sins. ³ But those sacrifices are an annual reminder of sins. ⁴ It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins... And by that will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. ¹¹ Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. ¹² But when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, ¹³ and since that time he waits for his enemies to be made his footstool. ¹⁴ For by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy.

He has made us perfect forever by His death for us. From Palm Sunday to the cross, we see the culmination of this theme of substitutionary sacrifice, as Jesus takes our place, takes your place, willingly giving His life for you out of love, that you might be forgiven, that you might be right with God, that you might have eternal life.

Isaiah 53:4–6 - Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. ⁵ But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed. ⁶ We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

Christ is our Passover lamb. In John's vision in Revelation, John weeps because no one in heaven and on earth is found who can save humanity from their sins. But then he sees this:

Revelation 5:6–14 - Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing at the center of the throne, encircled by the four living creatures and the elders... ⁷ He went and took the scroll from the right hand of him who sat on the throne. ⁸ And when he had taken it, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb. Each one had a harp and they were holding golden bowls full of incense, which are the **prayers of God's people**. ⁹ And they sang a new song, saying: "You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased for God persons from every tribe and language and people and nation. ¹⁰ You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth." ¹¹ Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled the throne and the living creatures and **the elders**. ¹² In a loud voice they were saying: "Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!" ¹³ Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, saying: "To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!" ¹⁴ The four living creatures said, "Amen," and the elders fell down and worshiped.

Substitutionary sacrifice is the highest form of love. This is what moves the heart, what captures the affection. Nothing moves us and captures our heart like sacrificial love, one dying in the place of others. And all of the stories point to this one, Jesus dying for your sins, dying in your place so that you might have eternal life. Come to the cross and contemplate what He has done for you until you see it, until you worship Him, until you know His love for you.

And if you have been saved, go and honor your Savior by loving as He loved you. When Jesus celebrated the Last Supper with his disciples, he told them to do this in remembrance of me.

1 Corinthians 11:23–26 - For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, ²⁴ and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me." ²⁵ In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." ²⁶ For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

He could have meant “eat a meal in remembrance of me”, which is what most of us do when we celebrate communion. But he also may have meant “do what I am doing in remembrance of me. Allow yourself to become like broken bread and poured out wine for the world.” Because when you decide to follow God, you get in line behind a suffering Savior who calls you to join him in suffering for the hurts of the world, in order to heal the world. And many of you who are serving God are here this morning suffering, because you have been serving Him and feel like broken bread and poured out wine.

There is no love greater than substitutionary sacrifice, being willing to suffer and even die for another, in the place of another. This is the love that Jesus has for you. This is the same love you show whenever you forgive someone or treat someone not according to what their sins deserve. This is the love you show when you take on the hard work and bear the burden for others. How can you lay down your life for others?