

What Is Jesus' Sacrificial Kingdom?

At Anabaptist Perspectives our vision is to use digital media to encourage allegiance to Jesus' sacrificial kingdom. Why do we describe this kingdom as sacrificial? Foundationally, our king established his reign through his sacrifice. Crucially, his sacrifice shows us how to live and relate to others. Finally, the whole of life is to be devoted to God as an offering.

As Anabaptists emphasize, God's kingdom is not "right-side-up" by the world's standards, but "up-side-down."¹ Visions of God's kingdom that imagine imposing God's rule through violence, or the power of the state, are false to Christianity. Jesus calls us to something different. That is why we speak of his kingdom as "sacrificial."

Sacrifice is not only about difficult things. Suffering is not the essence of sacrifice, but relationship is. Sacrifices are sacred, relational gifts offered to God. New Testament sacrifice is about living our life in relationship with God. It is about partnering with him and living as his ransomed and consecrated people and operating from the mind of Christ.

Our King Established His Reign through His Sacrifice

Jesus was vindicated by the resurrection, and his current kingship is shown by his ascension and sending of the Spirit.² Before these came his death. By his blood he ransomed us for God. The Lion of the tribe of Judah stands as a lamb that was slain.³ We belong to Jesus as his servants because he ransomed us from the "futile ways inherited from [our] ancestors" with his precious blood.⁴

There is much discussion about how Jesus ransomed us for God by his blood. My concern in this essay is not to detail the way in which Jesus' death brings about our reconciliation with God. Rather, I want to explore a few passages in which Jesus' death is compared to various Old Testament sacrifices.

Sacrifices in the Old Testament were gifts offered to God by the people. Such an offering might be accepted by God, or it might not. Sacrifices were to be given from the best of what one had, and blemished offerings were not acceptable. Offerings were to be given in the right way, by appropriately consecrated and cleansed people. There were requirements both for the worshiper and for the priest who brought the offering to God. But, an offering was not acceptable simply because it met the regulations and was offered by a priest. God did not accept offerings from those living in sin and injustice, or without a contrite heart.⁵

Jesus' sacrifice went beyond the Old Testament sacrifices in that he was himself both the gift and the priest. Jesus was fully accepted by God. We, in turn, can be accepted "in him," and in him, we are a kingly priesthood who can offer spiritual sacrifices.⁶

Jesus is described as a Passover lamb. This was the sacrifice eaten as God ransomed a people from the power of Egypt. It is the sacrifice reflected in the Lord's supper where we are given his body to eat.

1 Corinthians 5:7-8 Get rid of the old yeast, so that you may be a new unleavened batch—as you really are. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. Therefore let us keep the Festival, not with the old bread leavened with malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

Jesus' death is described as a sin offering. This was offered in recognition of sin. It was normally an animal, but in cases of poverty it could be some other type of food.⁷ The sin offering was mostly burned, but some of it was eaten by the priest so that the priest could bear the sins of the people.⁸ The blood of the sin offering was for purging and cleansing, even as Jesus' blood makes us holy. The letter to the Hebrews points out that the flesh of the sin offering was burned outside the camp, just as Jesus was killed outside Jerusalem. Believers are also to go "outside the camp" and identify with his shame.

Hebrews 13:11-13 The high priest carries the blood of animals into the Most Holy Place as a sin offering, but the bodies are burned outside the camp. And so Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood. Let us, then, go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore.

Jesus gave himself as a fragrant offering. Various offerings are described as a sweet smell to God. God was pleased with the worshiper and accepted his worship.

Ephesians 5:1-2 Follow God's example, therefore, as dearly loved children and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

Jesus' Sacrifice Shows Us How to Live and Relate to Others

The scripture passages in the previous sections call us to live in light of Jesus' sacrifice. Love as he loved and gave himself for us. Bear the shame he bore. Live without the "leaven" of malice and wickedness and with the "unleavened bread" of sincerity and truth. There are other ways, too, in which Jesus' sacrifice illuminates our walk.

One of my pastors used to say, in essence, "It is a lie that Jesus died so we don't have to die."⁹ Biblical Christianity calls us to share Christ's death and to carry our own cross. We are united with him in his death so that we may be united with him in his life.¹⁰ We seek to know the fellowship of his suffering so that we may know the power of his resurrection.¹¹ Jesus' cross and Jesus' death were greater than our death and our cross. They accomplished what ours cannot. Yet the scriptures emphasize over and over our participation in his death.

Colossians 1:24 Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church...

Galatians 6:12-17 It is those who want to make a good showing in the flesh who would force you to be circumcised, and only in order that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ ... they desire to have you circumcised that they may boast in your flesh. But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. ... I bear on my body the marks of Jesus.

Specifically, we are called to respond to evil in the way that Jesus did on the cross. The martyr Stephen echoes the words of Jesus when he cries out "Lord, do not hold this sin against them..."¹² The cross is our example in the smaller sufferings of life as well.

1 Peter 2:20b-24 Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness.

The cross was Jesus' sacrifice that bought for himself a people. At the same time, it is the godly response to evil and difficulty. Allegiance to Jesus' sacrificial kingdom means imitating his sacrifice. Overcoming evil with good, loving our enemies (and our friends), dying to our self-will, our pride, and our boasting and entrusting ourselves to the Father who cares for us and to the vindicator who judges justly.

The Whole of a Believer's Life Is Devoted to God in Joyful Sacrifice

Leviticus 7:15-16 The meat of their fellowship offering of thanksgiving must be eaten on the day it is offered; they must leave none of it till morning. If, however, their offering is the result of a vow or is a freewill offering, the sacrifice shall be eaten on the day they offer it, but anything left over may be eaten on the next day.

We must repudiate certain popular definitions of sacrifice. Sacrifice is not about what one gives up, but about what one gives. Sacrifice is not making tradeoffs between my various desires and goals; sacrifice is devoting myself and resources to God. Sacrifices are sacred, relational gifts.

Think about the various animal sacrifices of the Old Testament. In all cases the animal was *given* and devoted to God. It was not necessarily "*given up*" by the worshiper. Sometimes it was. Some animals were burned whole. Other times the worshiper would eat (and enjoy) the animal (examples would be peace offerings, during Passover, and firstborn animals).¹³ Like any other gift, presenting a sacrifice has a cost, but sometimes the gift is enjoyed together by the recipient and the giver (compare our modern practice of taking someone out to eat).

To say that Jesus' kingdom is sacrificial means that all of our life is offered as a sacrifice to God. 1 Peter tells us that we are a redeemed and consecrated priesthood that can offer spiritual sacrifices to God. But what does that mean? What are our spiritual sacrifices?

We saw Jesus described as a sin offering in Hebrews 13. That passage goes on to describe sacrifices we can offer; we can praise God by confessing that Jesus is Lord and use our materials goods to bless others.

Hebrews 13:15-16 Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that openly profess his name. And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.

Romans 12 brings our entire life into the realm of worship. Paul urges us to present our bodies as living sacrifices which can be holy and acceptable to God as spiritual worship (*logiken latreian*).

Romans 12:1-2 I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

The Greek term for “spiritual” in this passage is related to the word *logos*. Hence the rendering in some versions of “reasonable” or “rational.” Presenting our bodies to God as instruments of righteousness and offering our devoted lives is a worship service that is spiritual or rational in character. It is not presenting something physical through temple ritual but engaging our higher nature in devotion to God. We present our bodies in worship when we act from a renewed mind.

The rest of the passage elaborates on this offering, emphasizing our work and our relationships. Think realistically about what God has given you and use his gifts diligently. Appreciate and honor the roles and accomplishments of others. Be patient with difficult people. Persevere through difficulty. Don't take your own revenge. Romans 12 depicts the beauty of a life offered to God.

Concluding Thoughts: Allegiance as Response to Jesus' Sacrificial

Kingdom

What does it mean to give allegiance to this kingdom? Allegiance is a question of loyalty. To whom are you devoted? Are you faithful to a leader? In the proper sense of the world, only God is worthy of allegiance. To give full allegiance to anything else is to worship an idol—a vain thing unworthy of such devotion. Our vision at Anabaptist Perspectives is to encourage allegiance to King Jesus in our actions and in what we value and treasure.¹⁴

I agree with those Christians, Anabaptist or otherwise, who refuse to pledge allegiance to a flag or country.¹⁵ Nations and governments ask for allegiance they can't rightfully be given. Phrases like "die for your country" can sound noble and Christlike. Members of Jesus' sacrificial kingdom are, in fact, willing to give up their lives for the sake of others. But, of course, the phrase "die for your country" is brutally misleading. What they want is someone to *kill* for them. Further, this killing and dying is not so much for one's neighbors as for a governing regime. Every government wants its subjects to think they will be better off under their rule than under the rule of rival powers. They tell us to fight off the enemy for the good of our countrymen. But fellow countrymen are not always better off with the current government than they would be under a foreign power. Even in this current life welcoming occupiers with the love of Christ may sometimes produce better results than killing and dying to preserve the current regime. And, of course, our horizons go beyond this life.

Dimensions of allegiance related to nationalism, empire, and war have been a central theme for us at Anabaptist Perspectives. Various episodes with Dean Taylor have followed up on themes from his book *A Change of Allegiance* which explains his journey out of the US military. Many other episodes have explored themes of God's kingdom and how it relates to warfare and empire. We produced an audio version of David Bercot's book *In God We Don't Trust* which dissects the propaganda surrounding the American Revolution.

But allegiance, and the threats to it, are often quieter. How do I treat my wife? My husband? My neighbor? Do I help others? Do I wrong others sexually? Is my sexuality fully devoted to God? Am I kind? All these are questions of allegiance as well. Allegiance is directed to Jesus. But it is helpful to remind ourselves that allegiance means fidelity to his ways and to the nature of his rule, and it means a life offered in worship.

ENDNOTES

¹ Acts 2:33-36 and surrounding context. Compare Ephesians 4:7-13. Return to context↪

² Revelation 5:5-13 Return to context↪

³ 1 Peter 1:18-20 Return to context↪

⁴ Isaiah 1:11-15, Psalm 51:14-19 Return to context↪

⁵ 1 Peter 2:4-9 Return to context↪

⁶ Leviticus 5:7-11 Return to context↪

⁷ Leviticus 10:16-20; compare 6:25-30 Return to context↪

⁸ This pastor was Milo Zehr. See his essay *The Importance of Christ's Death and Resurrection* for an overview of his understanding of salvation. Return to context↪

⁹ Romans 6:3-8 Return to context↪

¹⁰ Philippians 3:8-11 Return to context↪

¹¹ Acts 7:59-60 Return to context↪

¹² Leviticus 7:11-18; Exodus 12:1-14; Deuteronomy 12:17-19 Return to context↪

¹³ I recently encountered the work of Matthew Bates through his book *Salvation by Allegiance Alone*. Bates argues "allegiance" is a better term than "faith" for talking about the saving response to Jesus. In many contexts, the Greek word *pistis* is better translated allegiance than faith. Bates argues that allegiance to king Jesus involves intellectual assent to the basic story of the gospel of the kingdom, professed loyalty to the king (or as he sometimes says "swearing allegiance"), and embodied allegiance which is responding with actions and behaviors that are

faithful to the king. While we might quibble with Bates on a few points, his work is very helpful in helping us see the intersections of allegiance, kingship, and the gospel. Return to context↪

¹⁴ For a good discussion from outside the Anabaptist world see *Theology in the Raw Episode 1074*. Return to context↪