

CHAPTER 7, SESSION 7: GOD IS SELF-SACRIFICING

CHAPTER CHALLENGE

The idea of a God who self-sacrifices is powerfully moving and beautiful. Unfortunately, to get to this idea there is a lot to be said about God theologically. For some people the theological work may be very challenging and even intimidating—especially the section titled, “A Dialogue with St. Athanasius.” Encourage your group in any way possible to stay with the chapter even if they aren’t getting every idea. They can come back to the book again and again and get more out of it each time including the important theology of this chapter. For now, they should joyfully receive what they are ready to receive.

SUPPLIES

- 📺 DVD—*The Passion of the Christ* directed by Mel Gibson
- 📺 DVD player/TV or computer and video projector

WELCOME

Recite Colossians 3:1-14 together, then enter into the silence.

5 MINUTES OF SILENCE

PRAYER TO END THE SILENCE

*O Risen Christ, you go down to the lowest depths
of our human condition,
and you burden yourself with what burdens us.
Still more, you even go to visit those who have died without being able to know you.
And even when within us we can hear no refrain of your presence, you are there.
Through your Holy Spirit you remain within us. Amen.* —Brother Roger, *Songs and Prayers from Taizé*

SOUL-TRAINING [15 minutes]

Divide into small groups of three or four and discuss your experience of reading the Gospel of John. To help you begin, you might use these questions:

1. What did you notice that you had not noticed in your previous readings of the Gospel of John?
2. How would you describe the effect this week’s reading had on you?
3. Reflect on the soul-shaping exercises you continue to practice. Exercises done so far include: sleep, awareness of creation, silence, counting your blessings, praying the 23rd Psalm, keeping margin in your life, *lectio divina* and memorizing Scripture. What are the gradual effects they are having on you, your narratives and your life? What practices have you not done since the week they were introduced? Why?

ENGAGING THE CHAPTER [25 minutes]

THE BIG IDEA IN THIS CHAPTER: Self-sacrifice is an essential part of the character of God.

MAIN POINTS

- ☞ For many, the need for God to become human and to die for us is difficult to understand and explain.
- ☞ Athanasius was the first person to give a clear explanation of the incarnation and resurrection by showing how these events are a part of a larger narrative of redemption.
- ☞ God takes the risk of experiencing unrequited love.
- ☞ The glory of God lies in self-sacrifice.
- ☞ In becoming one of us, Jesus has done everything he could for us—pointing us to the Father, teaching us about the kingdom, dying for our sins and giving us new life.
- ☞ The paradox of self-sacrifice is that in weakness there is strength, in forgiveness there is empowerment and in vulnerability we become invincible.
- ☞ We are made in God’s image, which means we have the capacity for self-sacrifice. The closer we are to God, the more often we see this capacity at work.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. This chapter begins with a story of the author’s sister being uncertain of the necessity of the cross. Before reading this chapter, how would you have explained Jesus’ need to die on the cross?
2. On page 135-38 the author gives us an imaginary conversation with Athanasius based on his book, *On the Incarnation*. Look back over this section and share parts that you really enjoyed and parts that raised questions for you.
3. The author introduces the idea that God feels both joy and pain. How do you feel about a God who feels pain? Why?
4. “Maybe vulnerability is true strength” (p. 140). This idea runs against cultural narratives that many of us hold. Who in your own life have you seen demonstrate strength through vulnerability?
5. “At the heart of the universe is this one principle: self-sacrifice is the highest act. The grain of wheat must die in order to give life. The cosmos reflects the nature of the God who created it” (p. 141). Can you name other examples of creation revealing this principle? Have you ever considered it a characteristic of God to be self-sacrificing? What impact does this statement have on your own feelings toward God?
6. What was your reaction to the Brennan Manning story, specifically, the understanding that Jesus could not have done any more for us (pp. 142-43)?

BREAK [5 minutes]

ENGAGING THE WORD [15 minutes]

The following Scripture study follows a *lectio divina* format. Use the Scripture below as your text (Philippians 2:6-11). Decide who will read the Scripture each time.

- ☞ *The first time the Scripture is read, allow the word to soak into your mind. Allow a few minutes of silence.*
- ☞ *The second time the Scripture is read, note any word that God seems to be emphasizing. After the reading, anyone can share the word or phrase that spoke to them, but do not elaborate.*
- ☞ *Read the passage a third time allowing God to reveal to you the significance of this word. Spend three to five minutes in silence, conversing with God. After the silence, anyone who is willing can share what they felt God spoke to them through the passage. As we go along, I will remind you what we are to do after each reading.*

[Jesus], though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.

Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Phil 2:6-11).

EXPERIENCING TRANSFORMATION [20 minutes]

Few films have captured Jesus' sacrifice like Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*. While the brutality of the movie can be overwhelming for some people, it is helpful to use the following clip as a tool leading to deeper meditation on the self-sacrificing nature of God, as well as God's goodness and beauty. Say:

We are going to watch a clip from the movie The Passion of the Christ directed by Mel Gibson. While the movie itself is rightfully very, very graphic, the segment we will watch is less so. Nevertheless, it gives us a clear image of what it means to say that God is self-sacrificing. Following the scene, we will spend a few minutes in silence, contemplating God's love revealed for us through this story.

Scene begins as Jesus lifts up the bread during the last supper. If possible, pause the clip as the raindrop/teardrop is just about to hit the ground, giving us a chance to look up at the cross. Leave this image on the screen and give the group about 5 minutes to silently consider Christ's sacrifice.

End the silence with this brief prayer:

God of grace, we often think of your power, your goodness, your might and your rule, but often we overlook that at your very heart you are self-sacrificing. Draw us deeper into your heart that we might fall more deeply in love with you. And though it is frightening to us at times, we humbly ask that you would help us to grow as your children, that we would in our finite ways resemble you and display your characteristics with our very lives. Amen.

Use these questions to discuss the movie clip:

- ☞ What about that clip was the most powerful to you?
- ☞ How does the film speak to you?
- ☞ How would you like to respond to the sacrifice that Jesus makes for you?

GO IN PEACE [5 minutes]

Read the quote below to the group to close your time together.

Here is a key principle of the Kingdom of God: What we let go of will never be lost, but becomes a thing of beauty. No wonder the manger and the cross are the two most beautiful images this world has ever seen. In the incarnation God, who created millions of spinning galaxies, chose to become vulnerable, and in so doing, heaven came down and kissed the earth. In the crucifixion God, who could not die, subjected himself to death and in so doing lifted the whole world to himself (p. 145).

God loves you so much he became vulnerable for you. Go with that amazing good news.

FOR THE COMING WEEK

- ☞ Read chapter 8, "God Transforms."
- ☞ Early in the week schedule time for solitude, the soul-shaping exercise for the week. You will need to schedule time for this practice and let others in your life know who may be affected by it.
- ☞ Memorize Colossians 3:15-16.