

Scripture is full of metaphors- images and analogies, symbols and similes to help us make sense of mysteries. **What are some of the metaphors that help us understand baptism?** (death and rebirth, being clothed with Christ, water washing away sins). **What are the images Jesus used for himself?** (Shepherd, light, word, gate, vine, bread). And similes for the kingdom of heaven: Jesus said, **“The kingdom of heaven is like...”?** (pearl of great price, lost coin, lost sheep, lost son, scattering seeds on different soils, wheat and weeds planted together, a great banquet...). But two thousand years later- in a new world, culture, and language- some metaphors are more accessible to us than others.

*Now if you belong to Christ, then indeed you are Abraham’s descendants, heirs according to promise. I’m saying that as long as the heirs are minors, they are no different from slaves, though they really are the owners of everything. However, they are placed under trustees and guardians until the date set by the parents. Gal 3:29-4:2*

Paul describes himself as a slave of Christ. He uses slavery to describe the Galatians’ identity before baptism- a strange metaphor for us. Our version of childhood is much different from slavery. And our understanding of *slavery* is not a temporary status prior to inheritance. We accept this Bible language, but it is not the most helpful imagery for us; if Paul were to write now, he might use different metaphors to communicate his devotion to his Messiah Jesus.

Before baptism, we were minors. Watched over by a variety of guardians and trustees. The pagan system, from which the Gentile Galatians came, was a shoddy trustee. Unhealthy. Abusive. There was a better guardian for Paul and his fellow Jews: the Torah. A benevolent parental substitute. With regulations that were perhaps developmentally appropriate until an heir was old enough to become an adult inheritor, understanding the meaning behind the rules. But the Torah became part of the world’s system, keeping people separate. Jews from Gentiles, slave from free, men from women. Not relational oneness. Replacing rules with relationships isn’t easy. But Paul says it is time to move from being children/minors/with slave-like status-dependent on the Bible as a rule book- to inheriting, understanding the Spirit behind the rules.

So- the Law, the Torah, the Old Testament. When Paul wrote Galatians, the Temple was intact, Levitical priestly practice was firmly in place. **What are the practices that constituted faithful Torah observance?** (circumcision, kosher eating, Sabbath observance, blood sacrifice, feasts).

Like all symbols of Torah observance, blood and sacrifice are helpful metaphors. Sin causes death. Selfishness, violence, separation from fellow human and from God- death for ourselves and for others. Blood sacrifice shows that sin bleeds the life out of us. In the temple, the cost of sin was front and center; restoring relationships between God and others took time, money, and intention. Bringing a sacrifice provided a palpable way to make amends, to *do* something. These symbols are helpful; they engage all of our senses, our whole bodies, in the process. It was a reminder of the cost of life, our mortality, and our connection to the animal world as their blood buys our blood. This is all part of the Torah, the Law, along with holy days and observances designed to continually return our focus to God.

You observe religious days and months and seasons and years. I'm afraid for you! Perhaps my hard work for you has been for nothing. Galatians 4:10-11 (CEB)

But the Sabbath is helpful, created for human beings. Feasts help us recall God's work, remind us of God's faithfulness. **What might be the problem with observing holidays and seasons?** Good things- like celebrating Passover, keeping the Sabbath, living in tents for Sukkot- can become a problem. The metaphors get lost, twisted, and made into rules.

What about blood sacrifice? When we sin against each other, we are draining the life out of each other. But **what are the limits, or even the problems, with the metaphor that sacrifice and spilling blood enacts forgiveness for sins, or buys forgiveness from an angry God?**

Throughout the Hebrew Bible, God is clear that sacrificing one's children is an abomination. The surrounding nations also practiced blood sacrifice, offering their children as the highest sacrifice their gods. This is abhorrent to Yahweh. When we apply the metaphor of sacrifice- of the lamb's blood covering us so that the angel of death passes over us- to Jesus, we must take care. To cast Yahweh in the image of Moloch who demands human sacrifice, particularly the sacrifice of God's own firstborn son Jesus, is dangerous. What kind of God would demand the blood of his own Son? Is that the God we serve? I don't think so! Blood is a symbol. Sacrifice is a metaphor.

After the temple was destroyed by the Romans in 70AD, Judaism found in the Torah a different way of understanding cleansing from sin that did not require blood. As cultures develop, we see physical practices as metaphors and find new ways to access these meanings.

Jesus submitted to death by mob violence, the religious establishment, and the ruling political empire- but not because his Father required blood to wash away our sins. Jesus died for our sins: of killing the innocent, of the powerful protecting their positions by sacrificing the weak, of violence vanquishing peace. It shifts the blame to say Jesus died because God sacrificed him, rather than we killed the Son of God with our religious, political, and corporate violence.

God desires faith and faithfulness. Jesus' life and death exemplified both: faith in God' love and goodness to surpass all suffering and loss, and faithfulness to the point of allowing himself to be killed. Jesus trusted God's love, the relationship, to trump the cross' curse and death's finality.

The Old Testament contains 298 references to blood and 250 to love. The language of blood eclipsed the language of love. In the New Testament, blood is mentioned 87 times and love is cited 234 times. Love wins over blood. The love, life, faith and faithfulness of Jesus- expressions of all of those qualities of the Father- washes away our sins. Today we will sing about the power of love, instead of blood. Because blood means life, faith, faithfulness, and love: *Nothing but the Love of Jesus*. We will also trade white purity for the scriptural image of becoming clean like wool. Wool needs a lot of cleansing; like wool, we are in process. Baptism becomes ongoing cleansing. So we will try *clean as wool* rather than the loaded language of whiteness of snow. I hope you will find this new imagery powerful and life-giving.