

THE GREATEST WISDOM

The Astonishing Message of the Tree of Sacrifice

By: Michael Stepakoff

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Cover designed by Cover Designer

An official publication of Rabbi Michael Stepakoff
Visit our website at www.templej.org

Printed in the United States of America

First Printing: December, 2019
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ISBN -9781672011303

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THE MESSAGE:

What is the greatest wisdom? When you read the title of this book, naturally you want to know up front. So, okay. I'll tell you up front. Well, sort of. I wish it was that easy. But I suppose if it was, then we'd all have it by now.

Simply put, the greatest wisdom is the message of the tree of sacrifice. Note the expression "tree of sacrifice" can be referenced in a variety of different ways. More commonly, the "cross."

*"For the message of the cross (tree of sacrifice) is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God."*¹

So, there you have it. Up front. The greatest wisdom – the tree of sacrifice. Right? Wrong!

¹ 1 Cor. 1:18. (All scripture references taken from the Tree of Life Version, "TLV," unless otherwise indicated).

The greatest wisdom is not the tree of sacrifice. Nor the “cross,” if you prefer that terminology. It is the *message* of the tree of sacrifice, the *message* of the cross which is, as Shaul said, the “power of God.”

Shaul (Paul) was one of the elite Jewish rabbinic scholars of his time, called forth by Yeshua to be a messianic Jewish Apostle unto the Gentiles. Shaul characterized the message that he preached in this way:

*“We proclaim Messiah crucified—a stumbling block to Jewish people and foolishness to Gentile people, but to those who are called (both Jewish and Greek people), Messiah, the power of God and the wisdom of God.”*²

Obviously, the power of God and the wisdom of God is not in the image of the tree. Images don’t set people free. Truth sets people free. But, furthermore, the power of God is not in what happened at the tree. It is in the *message* of the tree.

At the tree, Yeshua paid the price for the sins of the world. But that will do you no good unless and until you grasp on to the *message* of the tree. It

² 1 Cor. 1:23,24.

is that message which draws people to God, and which enables people to be set free by what He did at the tree. Without that, it is like a pot of gold left on a table and never claimed. It is the message through which we are drawn to God, cleansed of sin, and transformed into His own children.

There is a reason why the Son of God came to us as a Jewish Rabbi. What do Rabbis do? They teach. Everything Yeshua said and did, therefore, was a message. Including when He went to the tree of sacrifice. Especially when He went to the tree of sacrifice.

In the message of the tree of sacrifice lies the greatest wisdom. Which leads us to ask: Okay, so what exactly is that message? And that is where things can get hairy. Because here's the kicker:

“And whoever does not take up his cross and follow after Me isn't worthy of Me.”³

When it comes to the message of the tree of sacrifice, this is where the rubber meets the road. The message of the tree of sacrifice is not just a message about Yeshua going to the cross to be crucified...it's also a message about you and me.

³ Mat. 10:38.

But this is not a book that will tell you that you need to sacrifice and suffer. God forbid. In fact, quite the opposite, this book is about happiness, joy, and freedom. It will teach you how to have overcoming victory, even in the midst of a perishing world. Even, if one suffers personal trials and tribulation, there is good news in the message of the tree. There is always hope for healing, deliverance, prosperity, peace and much rejoicing.

Sadly, many people do misconstrue the message of the tree of sacrifice as if it's about sacrifice and suffering. Not so. Sacrifice and suffering are not the path to freedom. This is where our freedom lies: *“You will know the Truth and the Truth will make you free.”*⁴

But what in the world did Yeshua mean in going around saying over and over that we must take up our cross in order to follow Him?⁵ In His day, crucifixion was well-known. There were Jewish people being murdered by the Romans by the tens of thousands in this sick and gruesome manner, in order to strike terror into the hearts of the people. And here is Yeshua telling us we must be crucified, like these poor miserable souls whose

⁴ John 8:32.

⁵ See, e.g. – Luke 14:27, Mat. 16:24, Mark 8:34, Luke 9:23.

bodies were frequently in plain view rotting away on the crosses. So, this is what I must do in order to be worthy to follow Him? I think I'd say, "So this is what you call the 'good news?'" Then I'd say, "Thanks, but no thanks." And so would you. Whether or not you admit it.

But being a follower of Messiah, living the "Messianic life," is not about martyrdom. Martyrdom has its time and place in history. Messianic life, however, is not about suffering horror and misery as a sacrifice for the greater good. That may happen, you can't completely rule it out. But it isn't likely. So don't go looking for it. After all, there's enough of suffering in the world as is that the Lord didn't send His sheep out into the world to go looking for more of it.

The message of the tree of sacrifice is a message of salvation. It has to do with overcoming victory, *in spite of* suffering. Because it is a message not just for tomorrow, but for today!

So never succumb to the idea that suffering is the path to victory. Truth is the path. And Truth comes from the message of the tree. It's the greatest wisdom, and it will set you free...if only we can take hold of it.

So, what could Yeshua have meant in telling us we must “take up our cross” in order to be His talmidim? A talmid is a student or disciple. Is there any greater wisdom than the wisdom of being a student of the Lord Himself? But first, you must “take up your cross.”

Or as Shaul knew it from His own personal life, having been called by Yeshua from the world of rabbinic elitism: *“I have been crucified with Messiah.”*⁶

Or in the same manner, what did Yeshua mean in saying:

*“He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for My sake will find it.”*⁷

Find your life by losing it? Huh? Isn’t that a contradiction? Exactly!

Because so, too, the greatest wisdom is the tree of sacrifice. A total contradiction. A King must be mighty and powerful. How much more mighty must be the King who was sent down from heaven to reign over the whole earth! Yet, this King who is

⁶ Gal. 2:19.

⁷ Mat. 10:39. See also Mat. 16:25, Mark 8:35, Luke 9:24, John 12:25.

Lord of all the earth is to be crucified? Preposterous! Exactly.

Folly to the world but to those who get the message, it is the wisdom and the power of God.

So, too, when we are told “whoever will lose their life shall find it.” Absurd! Exactly.

Yeshua is telling us something over and over throughout the time that He walked through the land of Israel preaching the good news of His message. It is a point which He drove home by most plainly illustrating it at the tree of sacrifice. What point? Well, I’m not going to just tell you. Because if I did that, then you’d take it and put it into a petri dish to examine, dissect and analyze it. And in so doing you’d miss the point altogether. So, you’ll have to read on. That is if you care to. And hopefully, the point of His message will become brighter and clear as you go on. But for the moment, let me just add this:

When we are told that we must lose our life in order to find it, this not only is contradictory, but assuming we take it to heart and then go out and try to do it, it presents us with a very clear dilemma. Which is why most people either ignore it altogether, or otherwise, they take it to mean we are supposed to sacrifice and suffer in order to

“lose our life for the sake of the gospel,” or something like that. As I’ve said already, this is not accurate.

So, before you react that way, take a good look at this instruction which Yeshua gave about losing one’s life to find it. After all, who is going to bring this about? Who is going to lose who’s life?

This whole matter of losing my life in order to find it, which we can also call “taking up your cross,” is a matter more commonly referred to as the “death of self.”

The dilemma of seeking the death of self is plainly obvious, but it is typically ignored. Here it is: If “I” seek to lose my self, “I” will only emphasize my self all the more by trying. After all, who is going to bring about the death of self? You? So long as “you” go about trying to get rid of “you” then you’re not really getting rid of “you.” Are you?

In fact, “you” is only being aggrandized all the more by carrying on the shenanigan of doing away with itself. That is the essence of the religious game. And it’s very easy to be playing it without even realizing it. It’s the façade of the carnal believer. That is the person who is so devoted to learning and obeying the way of God that he or she

has totally missed it. Because the devotee (i.e. “you”) always gets in the way of God.

When you’ve gone so far and made so much effort trying to give yourself up to God, the unavoidable result is more and more of “you.” It’s like the person who is so devoted to being humble that he is proud of it.

You could say, well, I’m not going to do anything then, I’ll just wait until God does it. Yet, by not doing something, you are doing something. Doing nothing is doing something. That’s just another way of playing the religious game.

Therefore, you can’t die to yourself by doing something. Nor can you die to yourself by doing nothing. So, are we to do something? Or not do anything?

Do you see the mess we are in? That is our dilemma as human beings. We can’t save ourselves; it is a work of divine grace exclusively. And yet, we don’t know how to be in divine grace. The “answer” is that we must lose our life. Then we will find it. Yet, this takes us right back to the problem, because we have no means by which to “lose ourselves.”

Hence the human condition is one in which we are trapped in a great paradox. We must lose our

life to find life, but the one who is trying to do the losing is the one who needs to get lost to begin with. The whole matter has to be a work of divine grace, but we are left guessing how to be under divine grace.

Yeshua gave a great example whenever He was asked, as He often was, “Rabbi, what is the greatest commandment?” Incidents of this are told repeatedly in the New Testament.⁸

The official answer to that question as found in the Torah was no mystery. It was always believed and taught by the Jewish elders that to “*Love the Lord your God with all you heart, soul, and strength,*”⁹ is the greatest commandment.” Yeshua added to his response the second greatest commandment, again from the Torah, “*And you shall love your neighbor as yourself.*”¹⁰

Again, nothing new or earth shattering. The Pharisaic and other religious leaders who vehemently opposed Yeshua at every turn, and who ultimately conspired to have Him crucified, would not have disagreed that those are the two greatest commandments. After all, it had been said before,

⁸ See, e.g.: Mat. 22:35-40, Luke 10:25-27, Mark 12:28-34.

⁹ Deut. 6:4,5.

¹⁰ Lev. 19:18.

including by them. Nor would they disagree with what Yeshua added: “*On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.*”¹¹

So what’s the big deal? No one would dispute the idea that to love God and to love your neighbor is the heart of God’s law. But the question is – who can do it?

The answer to the question is illustrated most vividly by the message of the tree of sacrifice. The answer is – no one can do it.

That’s a tough pill for many to swallow. If you won’t swallow it, then you’ll always take Yeshua’s message the wrong way. Many people take the message as a moral superlative, and they trudge on with the idea I will now meet the goal. Yes, I will love God with all my heart, and love my neighbor as myself. Good luck. It shall never come to pass. And you’ll only hurt yourself trying.

This is how we make hypocrites of ourselves, carrying on with the idea that Yeshua came to us from heaven bearing something like the ten commandments, providing a higher plane of morality for those who learn and practice it. In the moment the wisdom of God comes, you can see the absurdity of this, the first thing that happens is

¹¹ Mat. 22:40.

that it makes you laugh. You laugh at yourself in particular. Wisdom has a way of giving us Joy unspeakable. It soothes the soul as it frees us of the burden of trying to save it ourselves.

Yeshua was not a moralistic teacher going around telling people what they ought to do in order to get right. He didn't go around saying, "We ought to love God and love our brothers and sisters." Those two commands are the heart of the law, sure, but the purpose of the law is to convict.

"For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin."¹²

No one will ever come to believe in a Savior until they at last come to realize that they need one.

The law serves that purpose to convict us. It gives us "knowledge of sin," not in the sense of instructing us on all matters moral; but rather, in the sense of teaching us that we are each and every one of us sinners. Not that it's okay. It's not okay. But if we can't set ourselves right through learning a moral code and committing to live by it, well, then what hope do we have? Exactly! This is the

¹² Rom. 3:20.

message of the tree. But you'll never take hold of it so long as you think you can set yourself right.

For even when it comes to the heart of the matter – love – we all come short. If you think you can love God *with all your heart*, then I say you are completely deluded. Maybe that sounds strong, but until we come to realize the delusion we are under, there is no way to grasp the message of the tree.

Human nature is that we love our selves too much for loving another being *with all our heart, soul, and strength*. Moreover, if you think you can love your neighbor as much as you love your self, you are equally deluded.

So, what is Yeshua attempting to convey in answering these questions about what is the greatest commandment, or what shall I do to inherit eternal life, or how can I become your follower? He cites the law only to tell us, as He so often did, that to fulfill the law we must do something that can't be done. Love God with all your heart and love your neighbor as yourself. Yeah right. Nobody can do it. What's the point then? That's exactly the point. To teach us that we cannot fulfill the law. For if we could, then what need for the tree of sacrifice?

Thus, Yeshua often tells us to do what we could never do:

Take up your cross. Lose your life for my name sake. Love God with all your heart and your neighbor as yourself. Yeah, right.

Yes, indeed, Yeshua had a great sense of humor. But if we take ourselves too seriously, we will miss the point of His message. No one is going to pluck out their eye if it leads them astray. Your righteousness must exceed that of the Pharisees, well, it would take a lifetime to learn all that and it still wouldn't be enough. Just as it isn't for them.

Yeshua tells us to do what can't be done, because it drives us to the one solution – God. Whether regarding how we must fulfill the law, or how we can see the Kingdom of God, or how to be His disciple, He always leaves us grasping at straws as He tells us to do what can never be done. Why?

Well if you asked Him that question, He might answer just like this:

*With men this is impossible. But with God all things are possible.*¹³

¹³ Mat. 19:26 (NKJV).

This is illustrated nowhere more vividly than in the message of the tree of sacrifice.

Because self can't die to self. As long as we seek or endeavor or strive to do it, we are only emphasizing the one who is supposed to be lost. Which aggravates the problem as the self which is claiming to be dead becomes cloaked in a veneer of religiosity. Now an element of deception is added to it.

The sincere person who sees this problem inevitably comes to the conclusion – I can't do it God must do it. Yay. Spot on. But now what?

This conclusion, though accurate, only gives rise inevitably to the quest for trying to discover how to get God to do it. Which is the old problem all over again.

That is to say the "me" that is supposed to be done away with is now consenting that God must do it, but is so busy trying to get God to do it that it's not really about God doing it, instead it's about me and more of me.

Do you see the nature of our problem? The human condition is one in which we are trapped in a delusion. And we are perishing in it. The Truth will set us free, but we could walk right by the

Truth a million times and, not recognizing it, say “none for me thanks.”

The Truth is given to us plainly in the message of the tree of sacrifice. It is the greatest wisdom...if only we can take hold of it.

Everywhere Yeshua went He preached the same message. Whether by words or illustrated by his deeds, the message was clear: The Kingdom of God is at hand.

“Now after John was put in jail, Yeshua came into the Galilee, proclaiming the Good News of God. ‘Now is the fullness of time,’ He said, ‘and the kingdom of God is near! Turn away from your sins, and believe in the Good News!’¹⁴

After spending time in one location, sometimes He was run out of town. Other times, if the people tried to get Him to stay, off Yeshua went to another town, in order to preach the same message:

But He said to them, “I must proclaim the Good News of the kingdom of God to the other towns also. It was for this purpose I was sent.”¹⁵

The “good news” or “gospel” is the message of the kingdom of God. The tree of sacrifice was an extension of that message. Actually, it was the fulfilment of it. Yeshua wanted the world to know

¹⁴ Mark 1:14

¹⁵ Luke 4:43.

that He came to bring the Kingdom of God to Mankind. That is why, knowing what He would do at the tree, Yeshua preached in a way to get people to understand that you can't get yourself into the Kingdom of God. Not unless you could go to the tree and die for people's sins. But you can't. And you wouldn't do it anyway.

Why is His message called good news? Because He spoke of the kingdom as if it was "near" or "at hand" "in the midst of you" or even "within you."¹⁶ If it was still far off in the future, that's not good news for us today. It might be good news in the future, but is that all the hope we have? For a great big beautiful tomorrow? What did Yeshua give us in the meantime?

Clearly, if it's good news it must be good news for today, as well as for tomorrow, otherwise it's not really good news at all. Not from our perspective today anyway. Because nobody is okay with living only for tomorrow. Sure, many folks will claim they are okay with it, but it's not sincere. Living for tomorrow thus becomes an excuse, a cop out, for not living today.

Notice I say, "living today" as opposed to "living *for* today." There is a difference. Living for today is the Roman *carpe diem* attitude of being only responsible for today without any concern for

¹⁶ See, Luke 17:20-21.

tomorrow. This is not the message of the kingdom of God. The message, as pertaining to today, is that “I am *alive* today.” But we don’t naturally see it this way. Because we don’t naturally see the Kingdom of God. We must be born anew to see it. Meanwhile, we remain trapped in our own delusion of self-righteousness. That is why the old self must die, giving rise to a new birth. It’s the only way to be alive in the eternal moment.

Not only did Yeshua speak of the kingdom as good news, but more importantly, He demonstrated it. By healing the sick, providing food for the multitudes, setting people free from oppressing spirits, He illustrated the point – the Kingdom of God is right here before your very eyes.

If you saw a paralyzed man get up and walk; or sight given to a man born blind; or Lazarus come forth from the grave after four days, you might be convinced. But as much as they marveled at His marvelous works, somehow, generally speaking, the people still didn’t get what Yeshua was talking about.

The most vivid illustration of His message that the kingdom of God was at hand, was when He suffered a gruesome death at the tree of sacrifice, and then proceeded to arise from a sealed tomb three days later, showing Himself alive to His followers. The point was always being made – what

you are seeing here is that very Kingdom which you seek and hope for. Here it is, folks.

Like a fish put right into their hand, Yeshua put the Kingdom of God directly into their grasp...but a fish can easily slip away. Especially if you clutch too hard. Because remember – it is exceedingly difficult, if not impossible, to catch a fish with your bare hand. Likewise, though the Kingdom is “at hand,” how can we take hold of it? I can tell you this: The Lord must put the fish into our hand. But, then, you want to know how do we get Him to do that? And even if He does, how do we keep from losing it.

This is the whole point of the tree. The coming of the kingdom into an individual life is God’s work, not ours. Thus, if we reach for it, it eludes us. If it is placed into our hand, and we clutch too hard, it slips away.

Masses of people heard the words and saw the works that Yeshua did to convey His message of the kingdom. But generally, people did not get it. The fish swam away. In fact, when Yeshua was being crucified, even His closest disciples all skedaddled. Except for one – Yochanan (John) stayed with Him. You have to wonder, if perhaps John understood something that the others did not. Something in the Rabbi’s teaching.

After He rose from the dead, He “opened their minds to understand.”¹⁷ This continued to happen after He ascended into heaven.¹⁸

The ascertainment of wisdom is a work of God’s grace thru the outpouring and indwelling power of the Ruakh Adonai (Spirit of the Lord). If only we could grasp the fact that wisdom comes to us by God’s grace. But it takes wisdom to grasp onto that wisdom. Otherwise, it slips away like the uncatchable fish.

So, you say, how do I get that wisdom so that I can grasp on? And then you go round and round looking for it and trying to get it. Which denies the whole premise, that it comes from God by grace. His work, not ours.

So it is that we live in this self-contradictory, paradoxical world, in which we want and/or need the wisdom to “see the Kingdom of God,” but that wisdom comes only from God. Meanwhile, we lack the wisdom to get it because the wisdom to get wisdom, too, comes only from God.

Put another way: We need wisdom to get the wisdom to see the Kingdom of God. But we don’t know how to get the wisdom we need. Nor can we get it, because it is not a human thing, it comes by divine grace. But where do we get the grace?

¹⁷ Luke 24:45.

¹⁸ See, Acts 2:1-4.

This problem is illustrated by Nicodemus, as recorded in the gospel of Yochanan. Nicodemus, who was a high-ranking member of the Jewish religious establishment, was astonished by Yeshua's teaching. So much that he snuck out at night to visit Yeshua's camp. Yet, the only instruction Nicodemus got concerning how to discover the Kingdom of God was utter nonsense:

“Unless you are born anew you cannot see the Kingdom of God,” said Yeshua.

Unto which Nicodemus responded logically: *“Can a man enter his mother's womb and be born a second time?”*

And Yeshua retorted: *“The wind blows where it wishes and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.”*¹⁹

There is an element of smart-aleckiness to this dialogue. I can just see Yeshua smirking or even laughing as He spoke with Nicodemus. Something that is often missed by those who study the scriptures is the outright humor in Yeshua's sayings. Humor is brought forth by contradiction. Especially situational humor. Yeshua was constantly pressing us to see our own contradictions that we might get free of them. Yeshua was funny, but always for the purpose of

¹⁹ John 3:1-8.

conveying His message – the message of the kingdom of God. The funniest humor is the kind that has meaning, particularly which exposes some deeper truth about human life.

This is why we must be like little children to see the Kingdom of God. We must stop taking ourselves so seriously and learn to see the humor in life. Without it we are missing something sacred. As Shaul put it:

“God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong.”²⁰

Yeshua never spoke in plain terms about the kingdom. Not because he was being sly, but rather, because the kingdom can't be spoken of concretely. The moment that you try to clutch it, it swims away. Why? Because you can't put the human self in control of it. It swims away. Still, we must take hold of it, or how can we ever have it? Only by the basic law of the kingdom – the law of grace. And yet, now you want to now how can I get my hands on that grace? And the answer – only by grace.

So it is, we must be born anew. But how? It is not by our own doing, otherwise, we would all have good reason to boast. How then? Yeshua would no doubt say something smart-alecky like, “The wind blows where it wishes and you know not how,”

²⁰ 1 Cor. 1:27.

Thus, when you say, “Can a man go back into his mother’s womb and be born a second time?” you are trying to take the kingdom of God in hand, to place it in a petri dish to be examined, dissected, and analyzed. The fish won’t have it. It will swim right off the moment you try.

As I have said, the teaching of Yeshua was always related to the kingdom of God. His message was vouched for by the signs and wonders and miracles that He did. But as far as His words – His teaching – He never just said plainly what He meant by the things that he said. Not because He was being evasive, but because it can’t be done. We can’t grasp it. Our minds deceive us. When we hear about the kingdom, we want to nail it down. Put it in a petri dish for examination. In the extreme, the Pharisaic leaders were doing this all the time. Tell us, Rabbi, what do mean by thus and such...?

I am not against dogma and doctrine. Not a day in my life goes by where I don’t use a nice bit of dogma to get by. Of course, there are those who say it’s not about dogma it’s about God. That is the dogma of no dogma. Rest assured, the dogma of no dogma is just another kind of dogma. We all have it and can’t live without it.

But the teaching of God is not dogma. The word “Torah” means teaching. Classically speaking, the Torah of Moses is so closely associated with the law given at Sinai, that Torah is

commonly thought of as law. This isn't accurate. The book of Genesis, for example, is almost devoid of any law.

The teaching of Moses overlaps with the teaching of Yeshua, there are clear differences. Under one, the adulterer is to be put to death. Okay, fine it teaches us how dreadful and horrible is the sin of adultery. Thank you, Moses. But death? Isn't that a bit extreme? Thus, the other teaching says, "Let the one who is without sin cast the first stone," which teaches us that all have sinned and all are deserving of the penalty of death.

So, let us not discount sin, but more importantly, let us not judge one another but love one another. Thank you, Yeshua.²¹ If only we *could* love one another...

In respect to Yeshua's teaching (His Torah), He was not a lawgiver. Yeshua did not preach observance of law. He didn't preach non-observance either, so cool your jets if you think that is suggested here. It most certainly is not.

What is suggested is that Yeshua did not preach law, he preached the kingdom of God. Which, by the way, is ascertainable not by law but only by the grace of God. Just as Yochanan said in the gospel which he wrote:

²¹ John 8:1-11.

“Torah was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Yeshua the Messiah.”²²

The issue of grace always leaves people swirling about trying to discover how to get grace...which in turn only misses the point, because now it inevitably becomes just another quest for the right laws to follow. The idea being that if you get the right method, you'll have God's grace. But there is no method. Yeshua did not give a method. Because there isn't one. What we do know is what Yochanan stated the next verse:

“No one has ever seen God; but the one and only God, in the Father's embrace, has made Him known.”²³

To put that another way: The grace of God comes by grace.

(END OF SAMPLE...TO READ ON, GET YOUR COPY OF “THE GREATEST WISDOM” AT Amazon.com).

²² John 1:17.

²³ John 1:18.

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