

Laying down your soul

By [David Williams](#)

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"No greater love than this," Jesus intones, and then he talks about laying down his life for his friends.

There's always been a resonance to this passage that I've struggled with. Here, a text that seems to speak of dying for a band of brothers, and of the cross as blood sacrifice. The cross is important to me, it is. It is the mark and emblem and proof of who Jesus was, and why he was so important.

But so is every other part of my Teacher's life, and everything that he taught and did. When his specific instructions on how to live are subordinated to a theology that places no ethical demands on us beyond obeisance, Christian faith becomes a stunted thing. The cross has meaning because of who was upon it, and what they taught and lived. What that person taught and lived has meaning because of how far he was willing to go to show that he meant it. The two cannot be separated.

This tends to be read in terms of his willingness to die, physically and materially, as a sacrifice. That's certainly how I've read it, particularly in the context of the "Farewell Discourse," in which this teaching occurs. Jesus, talking about his dying. That's how I've read it. Here, an evocation of that blood-sacrifice demand that seems so peculiar in Christian faith, that God requires that a perfect human being must bleed and die for the world to be made whole.

I still struggle with the whole concept of substitutionary atonement, mightily, [as did my spiritual teacher](#).

But I was noodling around in the sweet simple Greek of John's Gospel the other day, and suddenly something about this passage walloped me. Because as the community of the Beloved Disciple retold the story of their Master, Jesus does not say "lay down his life for his friends."

Instead, in the awkward, strangely evocative patois of literally translated Greek, [the Beloved Disciple's Jesus says this in John 15:13](#): *Greater of this love not yet one is*

*having, that any the **soul** of him may be placing over the fond ones of him.*

Greek is a little different, eh? But what smacked me upside the spirit was this: The word used in that text that gets translated as "life" does not mean "life" in the sense I thought it did.

It's *psychen*. *Psyche*, like the English word that arises from it, does not refer to organic process, not blood and bone and breath. It's more than that. There that word is. Soul. I lay down my soul for those I love.

This passage has never been just about physically dying.

It seems, frankly, like an even more profound sacrifice, one written not in meat alone, but in the deep compassion of a whole person, body and awareness and all, turned to serve another.

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