

Identity and Potential

Recently, I've spent some time looking through my packets of seeds. It's something I usually do at this time of year, getting ready for the new start of Spring, even getting a few seeds sown to get a really early start.

Jesus talked about seeds. Our minds may jump immediately to the parable of the sower, but there is another key passage in **John 12:20-26**. It is linked to other passages in **Matthew 10:37-39**, **Matthew 16:24-26**, **Mark 8:34-37** & **Luke 9:23-25**, but it is only in John that Jesus uses the picture of a grain of wheat.

There seems little doubt that Jesus is talking about himself and the results of his death in a few days' time. The Greeks wanted to see him, and previously he might have said (as he did to the woman from Tyre in **Matthew 15 21-28** & **Mark 7:24-30**), "*I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel*". But now his death was imminent, and his glory too, and that glory was to be shared with all the nations. We don't know if the Greeks met him or not, but the implication is that they probably did.

So this passage is about Jesus' death and resurrection. Until he had passed through death, he could not receive the glory. If Satan had succeeded in persuading him to go for spectacular world-style 'success', without the need to go to the cross, he would simply have been an amazing man. The glory which he had with the Father before the foundation of the world (**John 17:5**) would have been forfeited like a gambling stake, and he would not have been able to take it up again. Perhaps that may help us to see a little more of the risk that was built into God's awesome rescue plan!

But this is not only about Jesus. If we read on, we can see that he starts including all those who want to serve and follow him (**v.26**). All the other parallel passages speak about his disciples, not himself. It is this passage in John that links them together. Let's look at the key words in each of them:—

Matthew 10:39 *"He who has found his life will lose it, and he who has lost his life for my sake will find it."*

Matthew 16:25 *"For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it."*

Mark 8:35 *"For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it."*

Luke 9:24 *"For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake, he is the one who will save it."*

John 12:25 *"He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it to life eternal."*

The Greek lesson (!) In all these cases, the word translated 'life' is the Greek word 'psuche', meaning 'soul', from which we get all our 'psych-' words, like 'psychology'. The word translated 'lose' means 'utterly destroy' – a much stronger meaning! 'Save' means what we would expect – 'rescue, keep safe, preserve', from which Jesus' title of Saviour also comes. 'Find' can mean either to hit on something by chance or to discover it by searching. Try fitting these meanings into the verses.

People have often tried to define the human soul. Nowadays it is often confused with the spirit, but the Bible is very clear about the fact that body, soul and spirit are quite distinct. Someone has said that our soul is our mind, will and emotions, and that seems to me to be pretty good for a short definition. Our soul is what makes us ourselves, our personality, our 'me-ishness'. When we say that we like (or dislike!) someone, we are usually responding to what we find in the other person's soul.

So, what is Jesus saying?

First, that if you try to establish yourself, find your fulfilment in all that you are as a person, preserve, develop and hold onto your personality – then you will lose the whole thing, it will be utterly destroyed, it will come to nothing.

Second, that if you will say goodbye to all of this 'self-fulfilment' approach and put the whole lot down – your ambitions, your dreams, your status, your rights, even your individuality and your life itself – then (and only then) you will find the true fulfilment of new life (resurrection life!) which will last into eternity.

The picture of the grain of wheat is a powerful one. It has **identity** and **potential**. If it keeps its own identity, its potential remains unrealised. If it wants to realise that potential, its identity must be sacrificed.

When I was at school, we studied grains of wheat under the microscope. They were fascinating – all the different parts of the seed, the germ of life, the energy storage areas, the protective layers, and so on. We could have told you lots about the characteristics and identity of those seeds. Today, with chemical analysis and DNA testing, we could find out the nutritive value and parentage of the grain, probably with recommendations for good crops and the use of the flour – and again, lots more.

So much for the **identity** of the grain. But, by examining it, dissecting it, analysing it and putting it under the microscope, we had denied each grain its **potential**. To see that, we would have had to take them out of the laboratory and into the garden, bury them and let them grow. As soon as the growth process had started, if we looked for our seeds, we would have found only the decaying remains of the protective layers. All the rest would have virtually disappeared – certainly changed beyond easy recognition!

What makes the difference? The life of the seed. All gardeners know that seed can **look** fine but not germinate. Sometimes it's our own fault – maybe we water too much, or not enough, allow them to get too hot or too cold. But even when we have a full tray of seedlings, there are usually a few gaps. The conditions must have been OK, so why did some seed not grow? Obviously they were dead ones. If we sow some of last year's seeds, we probably have even more gaps – more dead ones.

Fresh seeds usually germinate more reliably. If you keep seeds and don't plant them, you still have the individual seeds, but there is no life, no increase, no harvest, nothing to show for it but a packet of seeds. After a while, there is no point in even keeping the packet, as the seeds will all be dead. So, like me in my garden, you chuck them out and get some more.

Jesus says the same. Keep the seed, and each one remains alone, unproductive and showing no life. Allow the seed to 'die' by being hidden in the ground and losing its own identity, and the result is **a harvest**.

As soon as we start applying it, this becomes an unpopular message. It seems like a nice picture, but if it means that my own plans and programmes have to be sacrificed, then will I try to find ways around it? "What's wrong with personal fulfilment?" "Why can't I realise my full potential as a human being?" "Surely God gave me all my abilities to be used and maximised, didn't he?"

It's just that our Father's way of bringing us to fulfilment takes us first through the 'death' of self-preservation, where all that we are and hope to be and achieve is laid before him in a sacrifice that cannot be taken back. Not a sacrifice that looks craftily to the 'deal' on offer and pretends to give all to try to get more back, but a real letting go with no hope of recovery. Often we struggle with this so much that the Holy Spirit needs to bring us to the point of total desperation.

The result is not that we just get given back to us the things we sacrificed, but a totally new 'soul-life', resurrection born out of burial, different but somehow the same, very like the life of the wheat plant springing out of the shrivelling husk of the old grain.

When he was 22, Jim Elliot summed this up by writing, "**He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.**" Just over six years later (1956), he and four other men gave their lives bringing the gospel to a remote tribe in Ecuador, South America. But his physical death was not the giving that Jim wrote about. Years before his death he had started to discover the reality of a life of 'dying daily' – and finding resurrection daily as well!

Do we want this? Have we experienced it before but it is no longer real to us? Jesus tells anyone who wants to follow him that '*he **must deny himself and take up his cross daily***' (**Luke 9:23**), so it is evidently not just a 'once-for-all' crisis to pass through. But still, the Lord must bring us to the point where we are willing for everything to go so that we can follow him. It is perhaps a dangerous prayer to ask him to bring us to that point. Essential, but dangerous. As Jesus says in this passage in **John 12:26**, "*if anyone serves me, he must follow me.*"

Once we are willing for everything to go, the actual 'dying' is not something we have to **achieve**, whether by great acts of self-denial or service, or by tremendous emotional outbursts. We shall find that 'dying to self' is something that we can **receive**, because our Father has included us in the death of Jesus on the cross. In **Romans 6:1-11**, Paul makes it clear that, if we have been born again, we have already been joined to the death (and resurrection!) of Jesus. (See * below)

I believe these principles apply to corporate as well as individual spiritual life. If any fellowship of believers tries to hang onto its identity and individual characteristics, it may well survive, and even apparently thrive, but it will 'remain alone'. Only by being ready to 'die', laying down everything – identity, image, success, tradition, growth – will the true potential begin to be realised. This corporate 'grain of wheat' process depends on the same process going on with individuals in the body.

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When we break bread together, we are affirming by our actions that we are part of the death of Jesus – it is not just a sentimental 'remembering' but rather an active participation in what God has done for us in him. As Paul says in **1 Corinthians 10:16**, "*Is not the cup of blessing which we bless a sharing (= participation) in the blood of Christ? Is not the bread (loaf) which we break a sharing in the body of Christ?*"

Perhaps we shall be able to use these symbols as a way of celebrating what our Father has done for us? ". . . And he himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by his wounds you were healed." **1 Peter 2:24**

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* I have found Watchman Nee's *Normal Christian Life* very helpful on this theme.