

Self : – Devastation and Discovery

This is the third aspect of ‘Five Ways Dead – But Very Much Alive’¹

and the second way in which we are joined to the death of Jesus – AND to his resurrection!

“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.” (Matthew 16:25, Mark 8:35, Luke 9:24)

Three times this saying of Jesus is recorded; we can’t just pass it by. He also says very much the same in two more passages, **Luke 17:33** and **John 12:25**.

At first glance, it looks as though Jesus is speaking about those who physically die for his sake, and we might think: “That’s not me; I am not likely to become a martyr for the sake of Jesus.” But a quick look at the words here will help us to see that yes, it **does** apply to us, all of us . . .

‘Save’ is the Greek word *sōzō*, to ‘make safe’, and is the usual New Testament word for being saved and delivered. Mark and Luke use it twice in this verse; Matthew has ‘find’ for the second time: “. . . *he is the one who will find it.*”

The original Greek for ‘lose’ is much stronger than most of our modern translations. Perhaps the translators did not dare to give the literal meaning, which is ‘totally destroy’. The same word is translated ‘perish’ in **John 3:16** and is used in many references to the Jewish authorities seeking to ‘destroy’ Jesus. A very final end is in view!

Less scary, but just as radical, is the literal meaning of the word translated ‘life’. It is the Greek word *psuchē*, meaning ‘soul’, and is in fact translated as ‘soul’ in the very next verse! It is, of course, the root of all our English ‘psych-’ words, such as ‘psychology’, ‘psychosomatic’ and many others. They are all to do with our personalities, the way we function and respond. The soul has been described as our ‘mind, will and emotions’, which seems to sum it up pretty well. Francis Schaeffer’s expression ‘the mannishness of man’ seems to be in the same vein.

So, what is my soul? How can I define it? ‘What makes me to be me’; my personality; my individuality, my ‘me-ishness’? In many ways, it seems that I don’t have a soul; my soul is what I am, who I am. Also, there is of course my body, my physical self, plus that part of me which is often confused with the soul – my spirit, which is designed for communication with God.

Right back in **Genesis 2:7**, in the account of the creation of Adam, it says “*Then the LORD God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being.*” The word translated here as ‘being’ is the Hebrew word *nephesh*, most often translated as ‘soul’. So somehow there is a link between our physical bodies and our soul or personality. Our own self-awareness teaches us the same thing.

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So, with that little bit of background understanding, we come to Jesus’ words. What he seems to be saying is this:– “If you try to preserve your own personality and individuality and make it safe, you will end up seeing it destroyed completely. If, on the other hand, you allow your own personality and individuality to be completely destroyed, you will actually save it and find it.”

We each have a reaction against the extreme nature of ‘complete destruction’, and think that Jesus cannot possibly want to see our personalities totally obliterated. Yes, we need to see that Jesus sometimes used hyperbole (‘over speak’) to emphasise a point,² but that doesn’t mean that we can simply write off these verses and assume that he didn’t really mean what he said. He did.

¹ For the first two, and a general overview, see <https://justonecandle.substack.com/p/five-ways-dead> or <https://www.justonecandle.uk> (Search for ‘Five Ways Dead’).

² ‘A camel through the eye of a needle’, ‘straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel’, and so on!

We are looking at what we might call 'death to self', which sounds like something we would all like to avoid, but have we seen that these verses contain the promise of 'resurrection', a new sort of self that is much better than the old version?

We are familiar with the verse that tells us that *"Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, . . . for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God."*¹ Let's adopt that approach and look at the 'joy' set before us, the benefits of the 'resurrection' that follows on from the 'death' which we would all prefer to avoid . . .

This new personality which is different but still ourselves, recognisable but changed – and going on being changed . . . The person we have always wanted to be – but the transformation has always seemed just beyond our reach . . . Not marred by those character defects which we know we have but would like to hide . . . All the fruit of the Spirit² visible in our lives consistently all the time . . . Filled with the Holy Spirit and responsive to his leading . . . In short, more and more like Jesus himself!

Is this what we want? What would we give to see all this happen in our lives, in a real, down-to-earth, practical way? It's time to look at the other side of the equation, but let's just revisit what we have learned about 'death to sin'. They are very closely related . . .

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We have looked at 'Character Defects' and how we can begin to see those unwelcome traits being removed from our lives, consigning them to death because we have been joined to the death of Jesus, and 'coming out the other side', beginning to experience the positive qualities of the resurrection life of Jesus by the Holy Spirit at work in our lives.

Our inclusion in the death and resurrection of Jesus is a 'once for all' event. God has done it and we don't need to repeat it or ask him to repeat it. BUT taking hold of that and seeing it work in our lives is definitely an ongoing process. In fact, because we know that it is our Father who **has** placed in his Son, we can rely confidently on that foundation as we learn to discard the old self and put on the new. Paul's imagery in **Colossians 3:4-17** is beautifully clear; he uses words meaning to remove and put on layers of clothing:–

*"When Christ, who is our life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory. Therefore **consider the members of your earthly body as dead** to immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed, which amounts to idolatry . . . put them all aside: anger, wrath, malice, slander, abusive speech from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, since **you laid aside the old self** with its practices, and **have put on the new self** who is being renewed to a true knowledge according to the image of the One who created him – in which there is no Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and freeman, but Christ is all, and in all. So, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, **put on** a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you. Beyond all these things **put on** love, which is the perfect bond of unity. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body; and be thankful. Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms, hymns, spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God. Whatever you do in word or deed, all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father."*

Does that all sound a little artificial? Like a game of 'let's pretend' – ? Like children dressing up as they pretend to be kings and queens, heroes and villains? Something that is unreal, window-dressing perhaps, hoping to impress others and maybe even fool ourselves? Let me say this very clearly: **This process only works if we know that we have been placed IN the Lord Jesus Christ, joined to him in his death and resurrection, and that we are actively taking hold of that fact.** Without that, yes, we could find ourselves living a lie, fooling ourselves, hoping to fool others and maybe even thinking that our Father can be hoodwinked too. As King David found out, the Lord desires (literally,

¹ **Hebrews 12:2**

² **Galatians 5:22-24**. See the link to 'death' in **v.24** !

‘delights in’) ‘truth in the innermost being’.¹ We won’t get away with that attempted deception! The words might sound the same but it is the reality that counts!

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So, getting back to what the Lord Jesus said about losing our lives/souls and finding or saving them. Is he really talking about **total destruction** of everything that makes me myself?

Let’s start from the beginning of what he said:– “*whoever wishes to save his life/soul will lose it*”. ‘Save’ means ‘make safe’, so basically he is speaking about our desire for ‘insurance’ that our personality and all our individual qualities will not be destroyed or even damaged.

Self-preservation is one of our most basic instincts; we surround ourselves with all sorts of protection – physical, financial, reputational, personal and so on – so the suggestion seems hard to take, that hanging on to all that makes us unique as individuals will only result in catastrophic loss.

Paul reminds us in **Philippians 2:5-11** that Jesus faced a very similar challenge but on a massively larger scale. As the eternal Son of God, he had been there before the beginning of all things; he was equal with the Father and the Holy Spirit; he ‘existed in the form of God’; he had always possessed infinite creative and sustaining power.² But he didn’t reckon that equality to be something to hold onto, ‘he emptied himself’ and humbled himself right down the scale: as a human being in a created body; as a ‘bond-servant’ (the word really means ‘slave’); as one condemned to die by the most degrading form of execution.

And the result? “*For this reason also, God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*” That was ‘the joy set before him’!

But Paul starts that passage with these words: “*Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus . . .*” So Paul thought it was possible for ordinary Christian believers to have the same approach. He had proved it in his own life, as he shows in the next chapter of the same letter, **Philippians 3:4-14**. How on earth was he able to do that, proud law-abiding Pharisee that he was? How can we do the same?

There’s a little phrase almost hiding in **v.10**: “*. . . being conformed to his death . . .*” Paul knew that he was included in the death of Jesus. He taught about it in **Romans 6 & 7** and **Colossians 2 & 3** and added his own personal testimony to it in **Galatians 6:14**: “*But may it never be that I would boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which (or ‘through whom’) the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world*”.

We are talking about hanging onto our selves or letting our selves be apparently destroyed and brought to nothing. This is not a theoretical, ‘paper exercise’. It certainly wasn’t one for Paul; he ‘suffered the loss of all things’. That will have hurt. It will not be painless for us, either.

But the enabling factor for Paul – and for us – is inclusion in the death and resurrection of Jesus. Paul and we can only walk this path because the Lord Jesus died, not only as our substitute paying the price for our sins and failures, but also **taking us with him in death and resurrection**. This seems to be one of the most forgotten (or perhaps most avoided?) truths of the New Testament. How often do we hear speakers unfolding those chapters in **Romans** and **Colossians**? Not often, in my experience. Satan is delighted. He knows to his cost that what looked like defeat for Jesus on the cross was actually triumph; what looked like total loss for Paul was in reality the key to his effectiveness for God. So when Christians avoid those truths, when they evade this **experience of truth**, the ‘prince of this world’ has little to fear.

Don’t be fooled. This whole thing is still **very much a work of grace**. This is not you and me steeling ourselves to accept loss, deprivation, suffering, reputational damage or even the apparent erasing of

¹ **Psalm 51:6**

² **Colossians 1:16-17, Hebrews 1:3**

‘my personality’, like some brand of heroic martyrs. The symptoms will be external, but the transaction is internal; we are learning to be ‘conformed to his death’ and it is by the Holy Spirit’s application of that reality to our lives that we find the grace to walk what will often be a difficult road.

But we can’t leave it there! “. . . *whoever loses his life for my sake, he is the one who will save it.*” Yes, the paradoxical promise is there for us, and its fulfilment is in two time scales: eternal and present-day.

In **2 Corinthians 4:7-18**, Paul lists some of the ‘losing’ of himself which he has needed to endure, and perhaps we need to remind ourselves that it will have been far from easy for him, but he rounds off his list like this: *“For momentary, light affliction is producing for us **an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison**, while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal.*” That’s the ‘eternal’ side of things, giving Paul immense motivation to continue embracing the ‘momentary, light affliction’ which he has already experienced. But there is a real sense of present-day benefits, too . . .

In the natural assessment of things, Saul the Pharisee had had a lot going for him, as we have read in **Philippians 3:4-14**. He challenges anyone to have had more reasons for having ‘confidence in the flesh’, as he puts it. In other words, there was a lot in his soul/life that he could have tried to save, to hold onto. *“But whatever things were gain to me, those things **I have counted** as loss for the sake of Christ. More than that, **I count** all things to be loss in view of **the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord**, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and **count** them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ . . .”* Look at the tenses of what he writes: those things in the past he **has** counted as loss; but those things in the present he **continues** to count as loss and rubbish, ‘so that I may gain Christ’.

There is an eternal perspective here, but also a day-to-day one. He wants to ‘gain Christ’. What can he mean? He is already **in** Christ; he knows that and has been preaching it for years. He wants to be more and more conformed to the life of Jesus. How will that happen? By the ongoing work of ‘death and resurrection’ in his life. What has given him that perspective? *“The surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord”* ! That’s not future but today! This is not dry doctrine; this is **truth being experienced**.

We have only scratched the surface of looking at *“whoever wishes to save his life will lose it”*, but we can see clearly from Paul that if he had chosen to hold onto those *“things that were gain to me”*, then he would have been nothing but an embittered Pharisee with no joy or positive purpose in his life, no eternal hope and no source of blessing to the countless millions of Christian believers who have read his letters. By supposedly ‘saving’ his soul/life, he would have lost it – very definitely!

“He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.”

Jim Elliot

“I am joined to the perfect life of Jesus,
All the old of myself has passed away,
In this truth I’ve found the key to express the Christ in me,
And I am more than a conqueror,
Through the life he lives in me.”

Dave Bilbrough

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