

Losing Life & Finding Life



LARRY DEASON

One Step Closer to Jesus Series

About the Author

Larry Deason has been proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ for 40 years. He has served the Body of Christ as deacon, elder, preacher, missionary, counselor, teacher and writer.

Larry's seminars have been presented throughout the Northeastern United States, Texas, California and Florida. He has also presented seminars in Australia, New Zealand, Tonga and the Fiji Islands.

While doing mission work in New Zealand Larry co-founded and taught for four years at the *Tauranga Two-Year Bible School*. He also co-founded and directed the *Northeast School of Biblical Studies* where he taught for 12 years. He also consulted in the establishing of the *South Pacific Bible College* in New Zealand. Larry has been a guest lecturer each year for the past 23 years at the South Pacific Bible College.

Larry Deason has written more than 20 booklets, books and in-depth study guides. The books have been distributed in all the states in the USA and in more than 70 nations worldwide including China, Eastern Europe, and Russia.

Larry and his wife Helen have been married for 50 years. They have two daughters, five grandchildren and three great-grandchildren.

Larry Deason continues to do mission work, present his seminars and distribute his books worldwide.

To
Jesus Christ
My Personal
Lord and Savior,
Who is the
Focus of my life.

My orientation in His Amazing Grace and
His Love my motivation in loving all others.

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by

Larry Deason

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Romans

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(The Fallacy and Failure of Legalism)

Losing Life and Finding Life

*“For whoever wants to save his life
will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me
and for the gospel will save it.”*

Mark 8:35

*But whatever was to my profit
I now consider loss for the sake of Christ.
What is more, I consider everything a loss
compared to the surpassing greatness
of knowing Christ Jesus, my Lord,
for whose sake I have lost all things.*

*I consider them rubbish,
that I may gain Christ.*

Philippians 3:7-8

*“Losing life to find life
is the basis of Christianity
because it is the essence
of Christ’s own
character and experience.”*

Losing Life, Finding Life

Probably no teaching of Jesus Christ is more difficult for us to accept than the admonition uttered to His disciples immediately after Simon Peter had confessed Him to be “the Christ, the Son of the living God”:

*From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life. Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. “Never Lord!” he said. “This shall never happen to you!” Jesus turned and said to Peter, “Out of my sight, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.” Then Jesus said to his disciples, “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. **For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it.**”¹*

The Paradox: Losing Life in Pursuit of Life

It was difficult enough for the disciples of Jesus to

come to terms with the idea that this One, whom they had come to know as Israel's promised Messiah, would be rejected and painfully executed at the instigation of His own people. His talk of being "raised to life" was beyond their comprehension. No less baffling was this paradox of losing one's life in order to find it. One day, they would come to realize that their own lives would be woven in to the same pattern as that of their Lord: suffering, then glory; death, then resurrection. In the meantime, Jesus repeatedly taught the same lesson: losing life in order to find it.

The Problem:

Life Pursued Apart from Jesus is Life Lost

This theme was emphasized by Jesus in many different ways on numerous occasions throughout His teaching ministry. He spoke of "losing life" as a prerequisite to finding one's proper relationship to God, to one's very self, to other human beings, and to things and events in the external world. There is no way to properly approach Jesus' teaching concerning the central issues of life and relationship to God unless we come to terms with this truth. Without a personal comprehension of "losing life to find life," there can be no understanding and appreciation of what it means to live and walk by *faith*; there can be no realization of *hope* in joyfully anticipating the future; there can be no initiation

into the fulfillment and fruitfulness that *love* brings about in the human personality. To reject or ignore this teaching of Jesus is to guarantee that we will fail to live abundantly, meaningfully, and victoriously in this world of pain, perils, and problems. But a word of caution is crucial: *The teaching of Jesus cannot be separated from His personality and His redemptive work.* The teaching of Christ is indivisibly bound up in the Good News of His saving life, death, resurrection, and ascension into heaven. The teaching must not be isolated from the gospel itself, for it is incomprehensible apart from Jesus that His life-saving mission. His teaching is not a hastily scribbled prescription that merely relieves the symptoms of spiritual sickness. It is, rather, God's own personal portrait of our human souls: exposing what we really are, revealing what He created us to be, and enabling us to become whole human beings in His Son.

We cannot embrace Christ without embracing His cross. To follow Him means the death of self-centeredness and self-rule. Because Jesus had taught that He would be killed and then raised on the third day, Peter rebuked the Son of God: "This shall never happen to You!" This "noble sentiment" of Peter was immediately exposed by the Lord for the Satanic deception that it was: "You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men." In confessing Jesus as "the Christ, the Son of the

Living God,” Peter had spoken the purest words of divine revelation and orthodox Christianity. But in repudiating the teaching that Christ would lose His life in crucifixion in order to find it again in glorious resurrection, Peter denied His Lord as surely as he later would in the courtyard of the high priest. Losing life to find life is the essence of Christianity because it is the essence of the experience of Jesus of Nazareth. Those who follow Him must embody His teaching, even as He embodied it. The Jesus who died to conquer sin and rose again to conquer death in the arena of human history must dwell in us. In union with Him, we can die to the rule of sin and death, and live joyously and victoriously in the presence of God.

“I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.”²

Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has master over him. The death he died, he died to sin once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus. Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body...³

We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may be revealed in our mortal body.⁴

For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.⁵

“If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters—yes, even his own life—he cannot be my disciple. And anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple...In the same way, any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple.”⁶

The Solution:

A Transformation of Life Through Jesus

It is not just a matter of being Christ's disciple; it is a matter of life and death. God wants us to have life.

“I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.”⁷

And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life.⁸

Jesus said to them, “I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you... Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me.”⁹

Each of us should ask himself or herself: Am I living my life to its fullest potential? Is there a meaning or purpose, some divine intention for my life, that I am missing? If I find that my life seems to lack solid meaning, if my life is less than satisfying even in the face of life’s difficulties, I must ask myself whether I am in harmony with God’s will, God’s mind, and God’s method of living life.

When Jesus said that “whoever wants to save his life will lose it,” He meant that all who seek to live for selfish reasons and from self-centered motives will, in the end, lose everything that can rightly be called “life.” Even memories of enjoyment and pleasure will finally give way to the mockery

of worthlessness and madness. The promise life once seemed to hold will ring hollow and empty, like the hole in the ground that threatens to devour not only our bodies, but all of our achievements, ideals, and hopes. The Bible speaks of “loss,” “ruin,” and “eternal destruction.” Those who are determined to “do their own thing”—to live as though they created themselves and sustain themselves for the purpose of their own selfish desires—will lose the lives that have been entrusted to their stewardship.

“Then the man who had received the one talent came. ‘Master,’ he said, ‘I knew that you are a hard man, harvesting where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered seed. So I was afraid and went out and hid your talent in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you.’ His master replied, ‘You wicked, lazy servant! So you knew that I harvest where I have not sown and gather where I have not scattered seed? Well then, you should have put my money on deposit with the bankers, so that when I returned I would have received it back with interest. Take the talent from him and give it to the one who has the ten talents...And throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’”¹⁰

The steward in Christ's parable refused to accept his God-given responsibilities because he refused to honor God *as* God. He was deliberately ignorant of the true nature of God, and lived in fear and insecurity. The wicked, lazy steward was without excuse, as are all who refuse to acknowledge God's sovereign authority and infinite kindness and love. The Father has fully revealed His nature to us in Jesus Christ, His Son. God can be known personally, loved wholeheartedly, and trusted completely. We are His, by right of creation and by right of redemption. We can, however, choose to rebel against God's rightful claim on our lives.

Life can be selfishly hoarded and squandered on egocentric concerns. Such a misuse of this sacred trust will eventually be brought to account, and the stewardship forfeited. On the other hand, we may freely choose to "lose" our lives by handing ourselves over to God (as we know Him in Jesus Christ). As the Son has always submitted His life to the Father ("Yet, not as I will, but as You will"), even to the point of dying for us on the cross, we may choose to put God and His will in Christ at the center of our lives. In doing so, we realize the purpose of our lives here and now, and enter into a relationship with God that will never end.

*The Reality:
Emergence of New Life
Under the Lordship of Christ*

It is not only a matter of having life after death, but also of enjoying fullness of life *before* death:

As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient...But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved.¹¹

“I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life.”¹²

I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life.¹³

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!¹⁴

The kingdom of heaven is not only awaiting us beyond this present world; it also exists on earth here and now, whenever and wherever people submit to Jesus as Master and Savior of their lives. As people grow physically by reason of time, exercise, and nourishment, so do we also grow in this new life, toward the goal of the likeness of Christ, who is Himself the image of God the Father. God provides for the growth and nourishment of His children in Christ through His Word, His providence, His people, and His indwelling Holy Spirit:

*All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.*¹⁵

*It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.*¹⁶

*And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.*¹⁷

What God has in mind for us is beyond the comprehension of human imagination, and so is His power to bring it about. He can do

*...immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us...*¹⁸

When we understand this, we will gladly surrender ourselves to God in Christ, so that He can make us what He wants us to become. As hymn writer Isaac Watts so beautifully expressed:

Love so amazing, so divine
Demands my soul, my life, my all.

We are all born into a material world in a physical body. We are constantly concerned with the task of physical survival. It is easy to succumb to the idea that life is purely biological, the universe entirely material, and that each person is a self-contained unit whose only responsibility is to maintain bodily health and happiness. Of course, man *is* biological in nature; the universe *is* physical;

the individual must be concerned about personal health and survival. The fatal flaw in this “natural” way of thinking is seen in the words “purely,” “entirely,” and “only.” As noble and God-given as the physical side of life is, we must ask: Is there more? Whether or not we are Christians, few would say that Jesus of Nazareth should be ignored when He speaks about the nature of human life:

Jesus answered, “It is written: ‘Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.’”¹⁹

“Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the one who can destroy both soul and body in hell.”²⁰

Then he said to them, “Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.”²¹

“Life is more than food, and the body more than clothes.”²²

Our full human potential lies far beyond the physical, although the physical world is the training ground of our stewardship. If we are faithful with a little, God will entrust to us much more. God has

given us life, personal abilities, a physical body, and material possessions. We are responsible to invest and spend them in His interests, for His purpose. To submit *everything* we are and *all* that we possess to Jesus Christ is the only way to properly exercise our trust of *His ownership*. The Lord's will for each of us is that we follow His son in losing our lives for the purposes of God, in order that we might find them new again in His kingdom!

*Jesus replied, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. The man who loves his life will lose it, while the man who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant will also be. My Father will honor the one who serves me."*²³

Unless we die to our self-centered interests, we will know only the meaningless, shriveled existence of fading flowers that are killed by frost before they ever germinate and bloom. *When we die to egoism and selfishness ("lose life"), we come into life that centers on God's will and His purpose ("find life").* That which is united to the eternal "I AM" can never die, nor does it lose its

identity. On the contrary, it becomes more “itself,” since it now fulfills the purpose for which it was created. One’s personality is not annihilated; it is made new, repaired, renovated, revitalized, regenerated. The only thing that is destroyed is the old self-centeredness, the old, wrong relationships; that is, the “body of sin.”²⁴

Are we willing to die? Here is the paradox: In pursuit of life, one would naturally tend to “get out there and grab it by the throat.” We are conditioned from an early age to believe that “God helps those who help themselves.” Jesus tells us that God helps those who humbly admit their own helplessness, who abandon the “pull-yourself-up-by-your-own-bootstraps” philosophy. It is the poor in spirit who are blessed, says Jesus. The whole world says, “Storm the citadel of life and grab all the gusto you can, because life is quickly passing by: a short, warm moment in a long, cold infinity.” He who is Truth has entered our world and has brought life and immortality out into the broad daylight, where all who so desire may plainly see. “Lose your life,” He says, “so that you may find it again, even as I was dead but am alive again forevermore.” And He asks the sobering question:

“What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, and lose or forfeit his very self?”²⁵

The devil offered Christ the whole world on the condition that He would worship him (Egoism Personified!). He had once succeeded in ruining humanity by inducing Adam and Eve to grasp for themselves what God had forbidden. But the “Last Adam,” Christ, had not regarded even His rightful divine position as something to be selfishly grasped.²⁶ He would not now grasp for power which the Father would restore to Him in His own time and in His own way. People often sell their lives for far less than “the whole world”: 30 pieces of silver, a pot of red stew, a moment of forbidden pleasure, a financial empire built on corrupt motives and methods. Will we believe Christ or Satan? Will we grasp life, or lose life in order to find it?

***The Transition:
From Old Life to New Life***

Imagine your heart (inner self) as the throne room of your life. Within that throne room, there are two entities, contending with one another for the right to rule your life. The two entities are God and Self. If God is enthroned, then Self must die; if Ego (Self) is crowned, then God (in Christ) is once again judged worthy of death. In our freedom to choose, each of us stands in the place of Pilate: we must crucify either our righteous King (Christ) or the lawless rebel (Self)!

God has a *double* right to rule in our lives, for He is our *Creator* and our *Redeemer*, in Christ Jesus. Egoism (the attitude of self-centered pride) is an insurrectionist, trying to seize control of what rightly belongs to God: *life*. Egoism attempts to evade this truth by making noble protests against “surrendering responsibility for my own life.” But life was never ultimately “ours” to begin with. We are not our own creators, much less our own saviors! Our lives are a stewardship, a trust from God. Our freedom, our responsibility, and our true human dignity consist only in choosing to give back to God the lives He entrusted to us. Self (egocentricity) must abdicate the throne of our lives; but, being a lawless rebel, Self will not willingly choose to do so. Christ is an infinitely stronger personality than Self, and can force Self off the throne of our lives. But whereas Self despises our human freedom and dignity, seizing our lives by deception and turning us into slaves, Christ will not violate our right to make informed choices. He will depose the tyrant Self and reign on the throne of our hearts only at our own invitation and request.

“Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come and eat with him, and he with me.”²⁷

To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” They answered him, “We are Abraham’s descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?” Jesus replied, “I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.”²⁸

So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God’s law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!²⁹

God’s Word tells us that there is a living that brings forth death, and a dying that brings forth life. If Christ rules our lives, we will come to see life as He sees life: we will have the mind of Christ. The mind of Christ is sometimes called “the mind of the Spirit.” Both expressions simply mean “agreement

with God; submission to God's will." Since God is love and holiness, and egoism is self-centeredness, it is obvious that the "mind of the Spirit" and the "mind of the flesh" (NIV, "sinful nature") are mutually exclusive. They are opposites, as "Christocentric attitude" is opposed to "egocentric attitude."

Those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what that nature desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace; the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God...For if you live according to the sinful nature, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live, because those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.³⁰

The egoism, the old selfishness, cannot please God. It cannot even subject itself to God, for it is "anti-love" by its very nature. That is why the Bible insists that the egocentric attitude must be crucified. It is not wrong to have the desires and appetites that are inherent in human nature. But when self-centeredness gains control of our hearts, it immediately proceeds

to twist and distort every good gift of God. It perverts our natural, God-given desires and incites us to find in every divine commandment an opportunity to selfishly disobey God. It deliberately ignores, stifles, and tramples on every claim of God upon our lives. Until, by God's grace, we become sufficiently aware of our wretched, desperate condition apart from God, we will continue blindly down the primrose path toward bottomless ignorance, frustration, and destruction. Will we continue to grit our teeth and affirm, in the face of every evidence to the contrary, that we possess within ourselves sufficient power, wisdom, and resources to run our own lives?

The truth that we must face, the truth that can set us free, is that we need God. God *created* us in such a way that we can find wholeness and fulfillment only in right relationship to Him. He has given us Himself, in the person of Christ, so that everyone who chooses to become free from the tyranny of Self can do so, by enthroning the living Christ as Lord of his or her life. Led by the Spirit of the risen Jesus, we can commit ourselves to genuine discipleship. When we surrender to Christ's teaching, example, and authority by turning from self-centeredness and being truly converted in His name, He is no longer "outside looking in." He comes to live inside us, working in us and through us. We have now become parts of the spiritual organism (body) through which the Spirit of the risen Christ now does God's will on earth:

For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.³¹

Death to the Old Nature, Life Through the Spirit

New life in Christ is not a mere dreamer's quest, like the search for a "holy grail" or a pot of gold at the rainbow's end. It is present reality into which we may enter the moment we are ready to remove Self and all of its vain idols from the throne that rightfully belongs only to God:

No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money."³²

I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.³³

For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want...The acts of the sinful

*nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of anger, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like...But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control...*³⁴

The throne of our lives cannot endure two kings whose characters and conduct are so opposed to one another. It is not that a decision *should* be made; it is rather that a decision *must* be made. Let us frankly admit to ourselves that when we attempt to rule our lives egocentrically (self-centeredly), we find ourselves expressing the kind of disgusting behavior that Paul has described as acts of the “sinful nature” or “the flesh.” That which the Spirit of God produces in our lives when Christ is enthroned in our hearts is called the “fruit of the Spirit.” This list is as lovely as the former list was loathesome.

What is issuing out of your life, and out of my life? Whoever sits on the throne of our hearts will express his rule, or kingdom, through our attitudes and actions. Do qualities of Christlikeness dominate your character with growing consistency? If your life is under Christ’s lordship, if you have lost your life to the old selfishness and found it under the rule of Jesus, God’s kingdom will bear its fruit

through your life. But a decision is crucial: your kingdom and my kingdom must surrender to God's kingdom:

“Or suppose a king is about to go to war against another king. Will he not first sit down and consider whether he is able with ten thousand men to oppose the one coming against him with twenty thousand? If he is not able, he will send a delegation while the other is still a long way off and will ask for terms of peace. In the same way, any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple.”³⁵

At the conclusion of history, the Lord Jesus Christ will return to bring judgment on all that refuse to be subjected to the kingdom of God. Now is the time to declare allegiance to the true King; when every knee must bow, it will be too late to choose sides. And if we decide to submit to the coming King before He arrives, He has already made clear what the terms of peace will be: unconditional surrender of all we have and all we are.

The New Life: A Daily Progressive Death

The principle of losing life in order to find it, when first we encounter it, seems so strange to us that we may be tempted to think that Jesus was being de-

liberately difficult. Our earth-bound minds become impatient with this paradoxical, “upside down” philosophy of life: finding by losing; living by dying; glorification through humility.

Jesus replied, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. The man who loves his life will lose it, while the man who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me.”³⁶

“Unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed.” By submitting to the Father’s plan in descending from heaven to die *as Man for man*, Jesus won a harvest of human souls, a spiritual family of redeemed brothers and sisters who would bring glory and honor to their heavenly Father.³⁷ The Good Shepherd became a sacrificial lamb so that the sheep of His pasture could become like their Shepherd.

If this principle of losing life and finding life seems unnatural, perhaps we have forgotten that nature itself has become “unnatural”; it is unlike it was

when God created it and pronounced it “very good.” Beasts, once submissive to man, must now be tamed (lose their “savage” lives); but in submission to man, they find a higher “domestic” life. Even the cursed ground, where thorns and thistles speak of man’s sin, reflects the eternal, divine principle: “Unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed.” Human nature also has become unnatural; it is beastly in its refusal to submit to its rightful Master. Jesus calls us to leave our old cold dens and lairs, to come into the warmth and peace of God’s household. He will teach us new ways that will seem unnatural to the jungle animal, but perfectly fit for children of God.

“But I don’t want to die!” we protest. Do we really prefer the frustrated hunger and anxious insecurities of the jungle, produced by generation after generation of self-centered living? Do we intend to hold out forever in the jungle—to “bite the bullet”? But what happens when we bite *through* the bullet? We will have to grind our teeth in the outer darkness, presumably until our teeth are ground down to the gums! Then what? Will we go on grinding away, until we have consumed, not only our gums and then our jaw bones, but everything that makes us recognizably human? We don’t have to. We weren’t meant to.

“I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.”³⁸

I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.³⁹

Jesus offers us abundant life on the same terms in which He Himself realized it: crucifixion; denial of self; death. Our problem is not our humanness, or natural desires or our personal individuality. Jesus of Nazareth had all of these. Our problem is sin, the essence of which is self-centeredness rather than God-centeredness, lust rather than love. This condition feels natural to us in the same way an orphanage feels natural to a child who can't remember his parents. So long have we been alienated from God in our proud, selfish “independence” that we think we were meant to rule our own lives. We could hardly be expected to feel natural when the Father whom we had long thought distant, disinterested, or dead suddenly appears to take us home. “But I thought you had abandoned me,” we cry. In fact, we had hardly learned to walk before a stranger's voice had lured us from the safety of our home; our Father had been seeking us ever since.

God doesn't “need” us, in the sense of being needy or incomplete without us. He loves us and yearns for us as a father for his wayward children. He knows

that we are inadequate to know what we really need. He would spare us the pain of struggling under the weight of His responsibilities: caring for us, teaching us, providing our needs, giving us direction and purpose. He knows that we can no more sustain our lives than we could create them. God wants us to submit to Him *for our own well-being!* He wants our lives to be well ordered, full, meaningful. Our true welfare, our very life, has always coincided with His will. We were never meant to function without the Father; in union with Him, our true persons are fulfilled and realized. Life is to be a partnership: God and I together living it out. He initiates, I respond; He gives, I receive; He directs, I obey. To desire personal fulfillment and wholeness of life without God is to desire what could never exist. But to invite God to sit on the throne of my life without Self abdicating that throne in an equal impossibility.

Denial of Self vs. Self-Denial

*Then he said to them all: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it."*⁴⁰

Clearly "denial of self" is the same as "losing one's life"; both expressions denote the renunciation of self-will and self-rule so that one can follow Christ

in doing the will of God. But further clarification is needed. Why the necessity of “daily” death to self-will? Has not the apostle plainly stated that this death to the old selfish nature is decisively realized when our faith in Christ is embodied in baptism?

What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.⁴¹

Here again is the paradox: we die (to our old, rebellious self-ruled lives) so that we might “live a new life” (of friendship and peace with the Father). This is absolutely accomplished when we, by faith, become united with the saving death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. But this objective, decisive change of relationship to God carries with it a continuing personal moral obligation to “live a new life.” We must keep saying “no” to Self and “yes” to God by following the Lord Jesus day by day, moment by moment. The old desires of “Lord Self” will continue to try and reassert their claim on our lives every day. As soon as Self rears his ugly head to

even suggest a sinful expression, we must respond, “To the cross with you!” The crucifying factor for every expression of selfishness is an expression of love:

For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age...⁴²

Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor, for we are all members of one body...He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with his own hands, that he may have something to share with those in need. Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.⁴³

We must not misunderstand Jesus on this point: He was not discussing “self-denial” in the ascetic sense of depriving oneself of certain comforts and commodities. Self-denial *can* be a part of denial of self, but the two are not equal. Denial of self is easily understood when we consider Peter’s denial of Christ:

“I don’t know the man!”⁴⁴

Here is a denial of Christ. Now there must be, for you and me, a denial of the “old self”: “I don’t know the man!” When temptation comes to call for the “old Larry,” I must answer: “I don’t know the man.” He is dead; a “new Larry” now lives under the lordship of Christ, every moment of every day.

New Life Means a New Mind

“Sanctification” means the development of that new man. The man who is in Jesus must become more and more like Him. We grow in Christ throughout the rest of our lives. God mercifully accepts us as we are, even while He graciously transforms us into the new creatures He has designed us to be.

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.⁴⁵

Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—which is your spiritual worship. Do not

*conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind...*⁴⁶

Our spiritual transformation begins with submission to Jesus as Lord, and continues by the renewing of our minds. We must again take spiritual inventory: What is foremost in my *heart*? What do I most often *think* about? What matters chiefly occupy my *mind*? What do I value most highly? We will become like that which we adore and worship. If the kingdom of God, embodied in Jesus Christ the King, is first in our thinking, we will become like Christ: loving and compassionate, righteous and holy. We need a change in our thinking, our values, and our priorities; we must embrace the paradox of “losing life to find life.”

*“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.”*⁴⁷

*Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.*⁴⁸

If anyone thinks he has reason to put confidence in the flesh, I have more...But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for

*the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ...*⁴⁹

*“The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it.”*⁵⁰

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¹Matt 16:21-25. Compare Mark 8:31-35; Luke 9:22-24.

²John 15:5.

³Rom. 6:8-12.

⁴2 Cor. 4:8-11.

⁵2 Cor. 5:14-15.

⁶Luke 14:26-27, 33.

⁷John 10:10.

⁸1 John 5:11-12.

⁹John 6:53, 57.

¹⁰Matt. 25:24-28, 30.

¹¹Eph. 2:1-2, 4-5.

¹²John 5:24.

¹³1 John 5:13.

¹⁴2 Cor. 5:17.

¹⁵1 Tim. 3:16-17.

¹⁶Eph. 4:11-13.

¹⁷2 Cor. 3:18.

¹⁸Eph. 3:20. Compare Eph. 1:18-21.

¹⁹Matt. 4:4.

²⁰Matt. 10:28.

²¹Luke 12:15.

²²Luke 12:23.

²³John 12:23-26.

²⁴See Rom. 6:1-7.

²⁵Luke 9:25.

²⁶See Phil. 2:5-11.

²⁷Rev. 3:20.

²⁸John 8:31-36.

²⁹Rom. 7:21-25.

³⁰Rom. 8:5-8, 13-14.

³¹1 Cor. 12:13.

³²Matt 6:24.

³³Gal. 2:20.

³⁴Gal. 5:17, 19-21, 22-23.

³⁵Luke 14:31-33.

³⁶John 12:23-26.

³⁷See Heb. 2:9-11; John 10:14-18.

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⁴¹Rom. 6:1-4.

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⁴³Eph. 4:25, 28-29. Compare Col. 3:5-11.

⁴⁴Matt. 26:72, 74.

⁴⁵Rom. 8:28-29.

⁴⁶Rom. 12:1-2.

⁴⁷Matt. 5:6.

⁴⁸Phil. 4:8.

⁴⁹Phil. 3:4, 7-8.

⁵⁰Matt. 13:44-46.

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