

Life Through Death
Luke 9:21-27, Revelation 2:8-11

Brothers and sisters, Christians are confronted with a paradox.

On one hand we have our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ stating *“I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.”*(John 10:10) and *“I am the way and the truth and the life.”* (John 14:6)

And this isn't just a New Testament thing, looking back at the Old Testament we see that the Covenants were instituted so that God's people could have life, as Moses says in Deuteronomy 30:19 *“I have set before you, life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live!”*

All throughout the Old Testament we find the exhortation to choose life instead of death.

This is why Proverbs 10:16 points out that *“The wages of the righteous is life, but the earnings of the wicked are sin and death.”*

And we also read that God's intervention brings life; Psalm 56:13 says *“You have delivered me from death and my feet from stumbling, that I may walk before God in the light of life.”*

And Psalm 119:156 *“Your compassion, Lord, is great; preserve my life according to your laws.”*

And this past Sunday we celebrated the fact that Jesus was resurrected to life – eternal life - and has defeated the grave.

And we are given the promise in 1 Peter 1:3 *“that In his great mercy he [God] has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead”*

And echoing Proverbs 10:16 Paul states in Romans 6:23 *“For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”*

So on one hand it is quite obvious that the Christian life is about Life! Abundant Life!

But... on the other hand we have Jesus saying *“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.”* (Luke 9:23)

And while the disciples and all those who had become believers in Jesus Christ - after the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost - initially gathered publically to worship at the Temple in Acts 2 and they enjoyed the favor of all the people in Jerusalem...

Only 3 chapters later, in chapter 5, the Apostles are being flogged for preaching Christ, and by Chapter 7 Stephen the Deacon is put on trial and stoned to death by the Jewish leaders.

And by Chapter 8 an all-out persecution breaks out in Jerusalem – causing the Jerusalem Christians to scatter for fear of their lives. And in fact many did lose their lives – Saul, who became Paul, was responsible for putting many believers to death.

And this is only 8 chapters into the book of Acts – which is 28 Chapters long.

The remaining 20 chapters describe “the life” which early followers of Jesus could expect - and it often included persecution, arrest and imprisonment, beatings, the loss of social standing and family connections, and yes... death.

I guess Jesus wasn’t kidding when He said *“Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to turn “a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law— a man’s enemies will be the members of his own household.”*” (Matt 10:34-36)

So the other hand is that the realities which Christians have experienced in life were not always, and are not always what we would describe as life-giving.

And thus – Christians are confronted with a paradox, two opposing realities - and anyone who has followed Christ long enough must eventually face this contradiction.

And we must come to terms and make peace with that fact that if you choose Life in Christ you will also face death.

Now maybe this is news to you? And if it is I can understand why.

Because in North America we are primarily an individualistic society which is focused on economic prosperity through consumerism with a very strong dose of pragmatism - or in other words “I’m interested in what you’re selling only if it works for me”

So if you are going to try to sell me on the Christian faith – then you’re going to need to convince me that it will work for me.

So - what’s it got that can make my life better? Will it make me smarter, happier, healthier – more attractive?

Will it make me a better employee or employer; will it make me more successful and improve my bottom line? Will it improve my family life, keep my kids in school studying hard and staying out of trouble? Will it give me a better marriage?

In other words will Christianity give me the Good Life that I seek?

And we’ve answered back “Yes! God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life!” And that is true – it’s correct. When you choose God, when you choose to follow Jesus Christ, You choose life, a good life! And not only are there many testimonies of how God has blessed people and turned their life around once they started following Christ, the statistics often back it up.

You can Google it for yourself – and you’ll find studies that show people who are religious, or attend church regularly, or

hold to Christian beliefs are more likely to _____ fill in the blank with whatever... be happier, complete higher education, make more money, have better married lives...

There are blessings and benefits that come from following Jesus, from living a Christian life, from being obedient to how God wants us to live – and this is part of “The Life” that Jesus came to give us.

And we emphasize and preach this truth because it connects so well with where most North Americans are at. I think you understand what I’m talking about here right?

But – eventually... the other part of following Jesus comes around. The part where we have to take up our cross daily... the part where we have to walk away from things or people in our life that we enjoyed... the part where we cannot pursue what we want because it does not line up with what Jesus wants for us...

And I’m not talking about the kind of struggle that ensues in us when we really want to hurt someone to get even, or we want to cheat on our taxes - but we know that is not how Jesus wants us to honor Him. That is simply dealing with temptation.

But taking up our cross is the struggle that comes when we have to walk away from something that was good, and life-giving and enjoyable because Jesus isn’t taking us where that is.

Biblically speaking the cross is where something that was blameless and good went to die, to be sacrificed - and when we take up our cross to follow Jesus it means that something in our lives that is good and life-giving is also sacrificed.

And this is a very difficult part of following Jesus for us North Americans to reconcile with.

We are quick to celebrate Good Friday... praising Jesus for His sacrificial death on the cross – especially since it is on our

behalf and therefore we don't have to endure such a thing!
We are quick to celebrate Easter Sunday... praising God that
Jesus has defeated death and been raised to eternal Life – that
is the major selling point for us!

But we can't reconcile Abundant Life with anything connected
to Death because we see the life and work of Jesus Christ only,
and solely as a one-time historical event which effectively
negates the impact of death in our life now.

And this is true brothers and sisters – but remember that
Heresy (false teaching) is a one-sided emphasis and
application of the truth.

The life and work of Jesus Christ is a One-time-for-All event;
the cross reaches back to the beginning of time and forwards
to the end of time...

In the person of Jesus Christ the entire creation is already
made new, we are perfected and healed and fully alive - that
work is complete and finished in Him.

But although God's plan to restore the Creation is already
complete in Jesus Christ – as we live in time, we must wait for
it to be fulfilled.

And just by starting to understand this distinction between
Completion and Fulfilment, between the already and the not-
yet, that we live in the time between these two times... that
begins to help us reconcile the Abundant Life and Death. (and avoid heresy)

Because it helps us to see that the manner in which the life
and work of Jesus Christ was accomplished - is also a pattern.
It's a dynamic for how God brings about and fulfills what Jesus
has completed - in our day to day existence in this time
between times.

In other words the way in which Jesus produced that
abundant life for us, also become the way in which we receive
it, and grow in it and go further in that Life. So what that
means is Life comes through Death.

God accomplished this in Jesus life and work and He is bringing about the results of this life and work in our lives in the same way – Life through Death.

Now don't misunderstand what I'm saying here and fall into the equal and opposite heresy, where instead one-sidedly talking about Abundant Life that you are now one-sidedly talking about Death all the time.

We reconcile the emphasis on life with the means by which life was achieved by confessing that in the scriptures we see God working by the dynamic of Life coming through Death.

And this is what Jesus is trying to help the disciples understand in the passage we read from Luke 9 this morning.

Because just previous to what we read, Peter has confessed that He and the other disciples believe that Jesus is God's Messiah.

Now that is a loaded term for Peter to bring out, it invokes all sorts of amazing and wonderful Old Testament promises of deliverance and freedom which bring about Life for God's people.

And it is only natural, that as the disciples had read about promises of deliverance and freedom that they had begun to imagine, or expect that these promises would be fulfilled in a manner which seems consistent with what is promised.

A Messiah who will deliver and restore the glory of nation Israel will accomplish that deliverance in a glorious and splendid manner.

The Kingdom of Heaven which the Messiah is to establish on earth, will be established in a heavenly manner, with some sort of display of divine power – like when Moses parted the Red Sea, when the sun stood still in the sky for Joshua, or when Samson killed 10,000 armored Philistines with only a donkey's jawbone.

These are the kinds of thoughts no doubt that ran through the disciples' minds when Peter says *"you are God's Messiah!"*

But as we read this morning Jesus says – don't tell anyone about this... and then He tells the disciples *"The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life."*

So Jesus is trying to explain to the disciples that His work as God's Messiah isn't going to line up with their expectations – but rather that it is going to come about through suffering and death!

Furthermore, anyone who wishes to follow Him as the Messiah, and help bring in God's Kingdom- is going to have to follow Him through that suffering and death as well.

But – most importantly – that they should not view His suffering and death as something shameful which they should try to avoid, instead, they must remember that in the end this

is about Life, Life comes through death... and that is why it is worth enduring the shame of how Jesus is going to bring this about.

That is why Jesus explains that you don't want to try to keep your life by avoiding death - only to find out that is how you actually lose your life...

And then Jesus finishes teaching the disciples that Life comes through Death, by summarizing this teaching with a statement that we often find very puzzling, he says *"Truly I tell you, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God."*

And I've usually understood puzzled over that verse, wondering what Jesus meant by saying that some people wouldn't die before he was going to return in glory with the Kingdom of God.

And this misinterpretation reveals our one-sided North American focus on the "Life only" portion of what Jesus

accomplished. We read into this that Jesus is saying that some people are going to be spared from death – that’s awesome, imagine getting an assurance from Jesus that you’re not going to die and that you will live to see the Kingdom come! Amazing!

But, brothers and sisters, what Jesus is really saying here is that the disciples don’t actually know what suffering for a cause is really about – and they won’t truly know what it means to suffer unto death for something until the Kingdom of God is completed when Jesus is resurrected.

Do you understand this?

Now in a strange sort of way, this is a promise to them - that indeed they can be assured that they will be his disciples...

Because Jesus has just told them that to be his disciples they had to take up their cross - and now he is assuring them that when His work is completed, after His resurrection, they will

indeed have the opportunity to “taste death” and so confirm that they are His disciples.

That is why in Acts 5:41, after the apostles had been whipped it says *“The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name.”*

Life comes through death – that’s the dynamic by which God brings about new life, eternal life, abundant life in our lives and into this world.

So, why is it important for us to know and understand this brothers and sisters?

Well, that is kind of obvious right – it’s so that we don’t go through a crisis of faith when we encounter taking up our cross and having to deny ourselves in order to follow Jesus.

Up to this point in our Christian lives we may have only experienced the blessing of abundant life from choosing life

over the kind of death we reap from the sin and disobedience which previously characterized our lives...

If we are not aware of this dynamic, we will be unprepared to take up our cross, we will not understand why suffering and death is coming into our life?

We might mistakenly think that we are being punished for something? That there is some unconfessed sin in our life or that we are not praying hard enough or fervently enough...

And that is not the case – rather you are being brought through a time where God is working to bring about more Life in your life and it means going through some death.

Now brothers and sisters you have noticed that I've called this Life through Death a "dynamic" and not a principle or a law...

Because there is wisdom and discernment needed on our part to know when God is working through this "dynamic" in our life – because God can work in other ways in our lives as well

and sometimes those very things I just said are not the case... may very well actually be the case.

But in other instances it will not be the case... and we need to persevere and endure and as Jesus says in Rev 2:10 *"Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer.... be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you life as your victor's crown."*

Now it makes it very easy to discern what kind of situation you are in when you are facing obvious and outright persecution because you are a Christian and you are doing Christian activities like attending worship, reading the bible, praying in Jesus name and sharing the gospel about Jesus.

And there are many fellow Christians in other parts of the world right now who are facing this kind of persecution – and we can and should pray that this kind of persecution would stop, we can and we should speak out against it and ask our Gov't to do what it can to intervene on the basis of Human rights...

But biblically speaking it's even more important that we pray these brothers and sisters of ours that they will not be afraid, and that they will not lose faith as they are being tested, but that they will stay faithful and receive the reward of Life that comes through Death.

And for us here in North America, we can prepare ourselves to better understand and discern the times when God is working this dynamic in our lives and in the lives of our families and churches by starting to embrace the notion and practice of "sacrifice" once again.

We need to start to identify something that we are willing to sacrifice in order to follow Jesus and be a Christian – and remember sacrifice isn't sacrifice unless it is something that is good and life-giving and it costs you.

I'm not talking about making up false rules or being legalistic about what Christians can or can't do – but I'm talking about knowing what good things you need to deny yourself – or your

family if you are a parent - because it means that you get to receive at God thing.

For example, what good thing are you sacrificing for the privilege being able to gather with fellow Christians and come into the presence of God in worship this morning?

Sunday mornings may be a wonderful time to spend together as a family going out for breakfast, it may be a time when your kids can participate in sports, it might be a time where you can catch up on some much needed sleep – but... Life through Death – what is the better thing you will gain by sacrificing one of those good things in order to be in God's presence at worship.

We sacrifice for all sorts of other things don't we brothers and sisters... we scrimp and save to put our kids through a particular school, to give them music and arts opportunities, to let them make family connections with our relatives back home...

We sacrifice to get our careers and businesses established, to support a particular political candidate or cause, or to get out the gym and exercise and eat right and be healthy...

We understand what it means to sacrifice for these things ...

But for some reason when Jesus says *“What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit their very self?”* we don’t understand that Jesus is telling us that we are sacrificing to gain the wrong things, that we are sacrificing at the expense of gaining the one thing that it worth sacrificing for.

So are we supposed to stop making sacrifices for these other things? No – but if we understand the value of making a sacrifice for something that only gives us short term gain in this life... why are we not applying the principle of sacrifice for something that gives us long term gain in eternal life!

That’s why the Apostle Paul says *“physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come.”* (1 Tim 4:8)

So if we begin to make a point of sacrificing something as part of what it means for us to follow Jesus and worship and serve Him – then when God determines to bring more Abundant Life into our lives through an intensified period of death – we will be prepared to endure it, preserve and stay faithful during it, and anticipate that more Life awaits us on the other side it.

So brothers and sisters, let me leave you with the last verses of both of our readings this morning – that these words of Jesus would go with us today...

Jesus says to us *“truly I tell you some who are hear will not taste death until they see the Kingdom of God”* and *“Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who is victorious will not be hurt at all by the second death.”*

Amen.