

# ATTHEW 16:1-28

## LOSING AND SAVING LIFE

*“From that time Jesus Christ began to show His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised up on the third day. And Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him, saying, ‘God forbid it, Lord! This shall never happen to You.’ But He turned and said to Peter, ‘Get behind Me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to Me; for you are not setting your mind on God’s interests, but man’s.’*

*“Then Jesus said to His disciples, ‘If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life shall lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake shall find it. For what will a man be profited, if he gains the whole world, and forfeits his soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul? For the Son of Man is going to come in the glory of His Father with His angels; and will then recompense every man according to his deeds. Truly I say to you, there are some of those who are standing here who shall not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom’” (16:21-28).*

What is it about the gospel that makes its message so attractive to millions of people around the world? Obviously, it contains many attractive features, but the one that stands out above all others is the thought that someone would *die voluntarily* for the sake of others. Jesus Himself had predicted, “And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to Myself” (John 12:32). This is exactly what the Scriptures say that Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God, did. Paul confessed

that “the Son of God, . . . loved me, and gave Himself up for me” (Galatians 2:20). In another place he said,

For while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will hardly die for a righteous man; though perhaps for the good man someone would dare even to die. But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him. For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life. And not only this, but we also exult in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received the reconciliation (Romans 5:6-11).

Peter joins in this testimony by saying, “He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed” (1 Peter 2:24).

Clearly the idea of Jesus voluntarily offering Himself on the cross for the sins of the entire world is *the* compelling concept of the gospel.

### WHAT JESUS SAID

Matthew 16:21 says that after Peter’s great confession at Caesarea Philippi, “Jesus Christ began to show His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised up on the third day.” He was about to embark on the path that would take Him to the cross. But He went further than announcing His

own impending death: He called on all who would follow Him to voluntarily give up *their* lives. Suddenly the meaning of Jesus' statement in 10:38, 39 becomes clear: "He who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me. He who has found his life shall lose it, and he who has lost his life for My sake shall find it." Jesus Himself would die, and He was calling on His disciples to follow Him to the cross itself and lose their lives for His sake.

In making this startling announcement, Jesus states *three requirements of discipleship*:

First, He said, "*Let him deny himself.*" Do not trivialize this statement! When Jesus spoke of denying self, He was not talking about giving up your favorite food or drink for Lent or declining to live the Playboy life. He was not talking about going to church and giving money now and then. Denial of self is nothing less than *renouncing the right to your own life!* It is "signing over the deed" of your life to the Lord Jesus Christ for Him to do with it as He sees fit. As Paul put it in 1 Corinthians 6:19, 20, "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body."

Second, He said, "*And take up his cross.*" This cross is not a piece of jewelry or a polished wooden ornament on the mantle. It is an *instrument of death!* Those who heard Jesus speak these words would have no difficulty understanding the significance of the cross. The Romans had virtually filled Palestine with crosses as a means of keeping a rebellious people under subjection. To take up one's cross means to accept the same fate for oneself that Jesus had accepted.

Third, Jesus said, "*And follow Me.*" Jesus is not just calling His men to follow His example of goodness, but to follow Him wherever He might lead them—even to death, if necessary.

## WHAT JESUS MEANT

You have undoubtedly heard all of this before. You can see from Scripture what it meant for the Twelve. But what does it mean for *us*? Must we *die* in order to be Christians? Should we seek martyrdom in order to be what Jesus would have us to be?

The life of the early church in the book of Acts suggests otherwise. We do not see the early

Christians deliberately seeking death at the hands of their persecutors, although we do not see them running from it. The usual interpretation of Jesus' call to discipleship is that He means that we must be *willing* to die. If this interpretation is correct, we must wonder what Jesus meant by "denying self," "taking one's cross," and "following Me." Does not the usual interpretation take the very heart out of His words and remove not only death but also self-denial and a genuine following of Jesus? This seems far too easy to match the seriousness of Jesus' words.

Verse 25 helps us to see the real meaning of Jesus' call: "For whoever wishes to save his life shall lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake shall find it." Jesus contrasts *losing* one's life with *saving* it. If "saving" one's life means not just avoiding death, but holding our lives back from Jesus and saving them for ourselves, then "losing" our lives means giving them up to Christ unreservedly. Jesus says that we *lose* what we try to *save* for ourselves. In the very act of seeking to "grab all that we can get" of life for ourselves rather than offering ourselves to Jesus as His servants, we lose what we are trying to save. We cannot "have our lives (for ourselves) and give them up too."

I remember as a very small boy drinking a bottle of 7-Up and wishing that there were more of it. I wanted to drink it and save it too. I came up with what I thought was a brilliant plan: I would simply add water to the remaining 7-Up until the bottle was again full. Imagine my shock when I tasted my proudly-concocted drink! In the process of attempting to keep it, I had ruined what was left. The only way I could enjoy it to the fullest was to use it up, but I had refused.

Some people do the same thing with their lives. In attempting to "save" their lives from being full of self-denial and service, they "lose" them. A life unused for Christ is a lost life!

In some ways we all must die—really die—in order to save our spiritual lives:

*We must die to sin.* "Even so consider yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus" (Romans 6:11). Each of us has thousands of "deaths" to die in our lifetimes by deliberately rejecting sin and choosing to do God's will instead.

Second, *we must die to selfishness.* The man we call "The Rich Fool" (Luke 12:13-21) thought of nothing but himself. Rather than sharing some

of his amassed wealth, he thought only of tearing down his existing barns and building bigger ones. We must emphatically refuse the right to live in this way. God will allow us to do so, but it leads inevitably to death.

Third, *we must die to everything except God's will*. In order to follow Jesus, God's will must become *the* determining factor of our lives. Peter's great mistake recorded in Matthew 16:22 was in not dying to his own will and accepting the will of God. When Jesus announced His impending death, "Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him, saying, 'God forbid it, Lord! This shall never happen to You.'" Peter contended for his *own* will, not for God's. He became "Satan"<sup>1</sup> and was rebuked by Jesus as a "stumbling block" in His way, "for you are not setting your mind on God's interests, but man's."

Paul summed up the concepts of self-denial, cross-bearing, and following Jesus in these words:

I urge you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect (Romans 12:1, 2).

Christians are to live just like Jesus, voluntarily giving up our lives for another, for Jesus, who gave His life for us.

### WHY JESUS SAID IT

Matthew 16:26, 27 explains why such drastic measures are needed. A day of reckoning is coming at which we will be examined to determine whether we have used our lives for self or for Christ: "For the Son of Man is going to come in the glory of His Father with His angels; and will then recompense every man according to his deeds" (16:27). In view of this, verse 26 raises two disturbing questions. First, "What will a man be profited, if he gains the whole world, and forfeits his soul?" The answer is painfully obvious! Second, "What will a man give in exchange for his soul?" The answer to this question is not nearly so obvious, and it demands careful consideration by each of us. What *will* you give in

<sup>1</sup>The Greek word for "Satan" is the transliteration of a Hebrew word meaning "adversary." By opposing the plan of God, Peter became Jesus' enemy rather than His friend.

return for your soul? This leads to an even more disturbing question: If you are not now following Jesus, what *are* you taking in exchange for your soul? The possibilities are endless! You may be exchanging your soul for money, pleasure, popularity, the approval of friends and family, or countless other things. Whatever the answer is for your life, *that is what you are willing to take in exchange for the blessing of eternal life*.

### CONCLUSION

We love the gospel story because it tells us that Jesus gave His life for us. To share in that story, we must give our own lives to Him. If that seems like too much to ask, remember two truths:

*He gave more*. Philippians 2:5-11 says us that He emptied Himself of His divine prerogatives, took on the humble form of a servant, and allowed Himself to be killed for our sakes. You will never give that much!

*He is coming* to see what you have been willing to give for Him (16:27). Are you ready for that? If not, give Him your life today. Say "No" to whatever has been keeping you from turning to Christ and "Yes" to Him who gave all to save you.

I gave my life for thee,  
My precious blood I shed,  
That thou might'st ransomed be,  
And quickened from the dead;  
I gave, I gave my life for thee:  
What hast thou giv'n for me?

—Tommy South

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## QUOTATIONS

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Christianity is a roll-up-your-sleeves opportunity.

After crosses and losses, men grow humbler and wiser.

Franklin

A pessimist is a person who looks at the world through woes-colored glasses.

Colmes

A father was admonishing his complaining and failing son: "Son, all you need is encouragement and a swift kick in the seat of your can'ts."

Life is a continuous process of getting used to things we hadn't expected.