

Dying to Live

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[0 : 00] We all, every single one of us, have a natural instinct to not die. Okay? A built-in survival mechanism.

A way that we will do everything we can to stay alive. That is in us. Without even thinking, that's what we do. And we experience this survival mechanism in different ways at different times. I actually remember one of the most distinct memories of my survival instinct was when I was in my 20s, a group of us went to hike down what's called Suicide Gorge.

If you know what that place is, it's down by the mountains near Franschuk. You'll know why it's called that. Because in this hiking trail, you've got to jump down a number of cliffs into pools of water below.

It's called cliffing. If you've ever been cliffing, you know what that entails. Jumping down into these pools that seem very far away.

[1 : 11] And we were cliffing down Suicide Gorge. And we came to the longest, the highest jump that you've got to do. And it was 14 meters. Okay?

That might not sound like much. It looks like a lot from up there. And it is to jump 14 meters into a little pool of water is quite scary. And I remember standing there and I said to myself, Okay, now a few people have jumped before.

And I said, Okay, now I'm going to jump. I'm going to jump now. And then I decided to jump, but my body wasn't coming with me. So only in my mind was I jumping.

But my body, my legs, and everything else decided, Nope. No, we're not going to do that. And so I eventually had to actually think about something else. Completely trick my mind into not thinking about jumping and then jump.

So my body didn't have time to react. But that's my built-in survival mechanism. And we all have a built-in survival mechanism. This natural instinct not to do anything to endanger our life.

[2 : 18] Or to lose our life. Let me tell you this morning, that is one of the reasons why living as a Christian doesn't come naturally to us.

Because of our survival mechanism. You see, because Christianity at its heart, and maybe you don't know this yet, but at its heart, when you boil it down, Christianity is a call to die.

And that is what Jesus is teaching us this morning in this passage. And He's teaching this concept to His disciples. But what we see right away as He starts teaching about this call to die, His disciples, their survival instincts kick in.

And it makes it very hard for them to accept what Jesus is saying. And the same is true of us. It's very hard for us to accept that being a Christian means nothing less than giving up our lives.

And we think that there are different ways that we can be a Christian without having to quite go there. And Jesus challenges that assumption.

[3 : 36] And He says that there is no other option. Christianity is a call to die. And so today what we're going to do as we read this passage, we're going to discover why there's no other option if you truly want to follow Jesus.

And the first reason we see as we start reading is that we learn that following Jesus means following Him into death.

Okay, so we talk about following Jesus. We have a course called Follow Jesus. And being a Christian is about following Jesus. But we've got to remember, and Jesus is telling His disciples here, where He went.

He went to death. The rest of Matthew, we're in a critical part of Matthew now. And from here on out, Jesus is on His way to Jerusalem to die. And if we want to follow that Messiah, we follow Him to that cross.

Following Jesus is following Him into death. Okay, so if you were here last week, we came to a very important part of Matthew where the disciples finally discovered who Jesus is.

[4 : 39] They finally, after 16 chapters, they've come to realize who this man standing in front of them is. He is no ordinary man. And He is, they came to realize, He is the Christ. What that means is He is the one God has sent to defeat evil in this world and establish God's kingdom on this earth.

And it's a huge revelation. And it's a key point in the story in Matthew's gospel. But now, right after that, right after they have come to the point of realizing who Jesus is, here for the first time, Jesus now explains how He's going to achieve His mission.

Let's see what He says from verse 21. 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, the chief priests, and the teachers of the law, and that He must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.

Okay, so this is the first time the disciples are hearing this. They do not expect this. Now, of course, we know. We know that that's why Jesus came. We've got the benefit of hindsight, right?

We know why it was necessary for Jesus to go to Jerusalem and die because only the death of God's Son could break the power of sin in this world, could break evil's hold over people.

[6 : 10] As we remembered earlier in the service, He was our Passover who was sacrificed for us. Only the death of God's Son could pay for the sins of others, and so free people from the penalty of sin and the power of sin so that we can live under God's rule and be members of His kingdom one day.

Okay, so we know that. We know how important the death of Jesus is, but His disciples did not know that that's the way He was going to achieve His mission. This was total news to them. They'd never thought of this before.

It hadn't entered their concept of what the Messiah was going to do. Death was not on the table for them. They didn't expect this was how He would achieve His mission, through dying.

Well, how does that make any sense, right? And that's why you see the next thing that happens is Peter, the disciple that's kind of the leader of the disciples that speaks for the rest of them, his survival mechanism kicks in.

Because the moment he's hearing this, Jesus is going to die. He knows that that's going to have implications for His disciples. And so His survival mechanism kicks in. His natural aversion to death.

[7 : 17] And we see that in verse 22. Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him. Never, Lord, he said, this shall never happen to you. Okay, so for a disciple to rebuke his rabbi like that, that's a big thing.

But it's just not in the realm of possibility that Jesus can die for Peter. But look how Jesus replies to him.

Jesus turned and said to Peter, Get behind me, Satan. You are a stumbling block to me. You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.

So what Jesus is saying there is that Peter's survival instinct is actually getting in the way of Jesus doing what he needs to do.

And so he rebukes him back. Says he's a stumbling block. That he's not thinking about what God's plan is. But what's really interesting is what comes next.

[8 : 27] So Peter's survival mechanism is kicking in. Jesus replies that it's only by dying that he can fulfill his mission.

But then he also realizes that the same survival instinct that he's just seeing in Peter is going to make it hard for any of his disciples to follow him. And so he says this.

And this is really the verse I want to focus on this morning. Verse 24. Then Jesus said to his disciples, Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.

And so he's saying here not only is he going to go and die. But if anyone wants to follow him and benefit from that death.

So must they. They need to choose the same path that Jesus did. And they need to die.

[9 : 35] They need to choose the path of death that Jesus chose. There is no other way if they're going to follow him. So I remember back that day when we went kerfing in the mountains.

There was a bunch of the guys had done it before. And they were kind of leading us. And then the rest of us hadn't done it before. And we didn't know where to go. And so we followed the guys who had done it before.

They knew the route down. And so we started by following them. And everything was hunky-dory until they started doing these jumps. And then some of us started looking around to see if there were other ways down.

Right? Like surely this. And then we were looking. Can we go down that path or that path? And they said. Like from the bottom there after they jumped. They said no. This is the only way. Right? You have to come this way.

It's the only way down. If we wanted to follow them we needed to take the same path they took. And Jesus is saying the same here.

[10:35] He's saying this to his disciples who at this point are starting to look around to see if there's any other way down. But he says no guys if you want to follow me. This is the only way.

You must choose the path of death. You must choose the path of death if you want to follow me. But look at the verse again.

Look at it carefully. Because he doesn't just say that about his disciples. Look what he says.

Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.

Whoever. Anyone who wants to follow Jesus must take the same way that he took.

Whoever wants to be his disciple must choose the way of death. It's a very sobering verse. Right?

This verse 24.

[11:34] Because Jesus is saying this is the implication. This is what it boils down to. If you want to call yourself a Christian. If you want to follow Jesus and benefit from what he did.

This is what is needed. You must deny yourself. Take up your cross. And follow him. But what does that? What does it mean?

What does it mean to die? To follow Jesus? What does it mean to choose the path of death? And to take the same path he did? Because it's not that we must now die to atone for sins.

We can't do that. Jesus did that. I thought he did it all. But now he's saying now we must die as well. And it surely doesn't mean that we must die an atoning death.

We can't do that. And it's not necessarily saying we must now die as a martyr. We must go to Somalia or Iran or somewhere and make sure we die for Jesus.

[12:35] That's also not what it's saying. Although following him might involve that. And so what does it mean to die as a Christian? Well look at how Jesus describes it in this verse.

He uses two main ideas. Deny yourself and take up your cross. What do those things mean? Well denying yourself.

When Jesus says you've got to deny yourself if you want to follow him. It basically means you've got to let go of what you want from this life.

And you've got to forsake the life you could have otherwise had if you weren't following Jesus.

That's essentially what it means to deny yourself. It's to let go of what you want.

To deny what you want out of this life in order to follow Jesus. He's saying you can't have both. You can't follow him and get what you want. You've got to deny yourself if you're going to follow him.

[13:35] And this forsaking the life you could have had is not just something that the super committed Christians do. It's not just something that the missionaries who give up their job and go to another country to do mission work do.

This is something Jesus says that whoever wants to follow him must do. All Christians are called to do this. To make choices in their life.

To make their choices about life no longer based on what is best for them and what they want. But now based on what Jesus wants.

And we make a lot of choices in life, right? Where to live. What job to get. And the natural inclination is to make those choices based on what is best for me.

Or at least what is best for me and my immediate family. But Jesus says no. If you want to follow him, the basis for those choices must change to what is best for the kingdom.

[14:41] What does Jesus want? That's the first way we deny ourselves in the choices we make in life. But also in giving, sacrificing time and money towards God's work.

Forsaking what I could have otherwise used that money or spent that time on. That's another way we deny ourselves if we're following Jesus. Accepting interruptions in our lives to do what God wants rather than what I want.

At the very least, we deny ourselves by choosing to come to church rather than play my sport on a Sunday.

You see, Christians must actually choose to die in hundreds of little ways each week. If they want to properly follow Jesus. They've got to deny what they want and they've got to put what Jesus wants in the kingdom first.

That's the first way we are called to take this path of death in our lives. But also Jesus goes on to say you've got to take up your cross.

[15 : 49] Now what does that mean? What does it mean to take up your cross? We often use that to talk about tolerating an irritating neighbor or something.

You know, I've got to bear my cross. But that's not what Jesus means. It's much more serious than that. Especially because of what it meant to his disciples.

Because they knew what he meant, taking up your cross. Now, of course, they didn't know that that's how Jesus was going to end up dying. That's not what he was referring to. He was referring to what they all knew as the way the Romans executed people.

And they had seen and witnessed this. This was a well-known means of execution in a world where they had Roman occupation. And crucifixions were very well known as the most brutal way to be executed.

But they were known not only because they were very, very, very painful way to die, but because it was a very shameful way to die. The thing about crucifixions is it wasn't just you were nailed to a cross, which was painful enough.

[16 : 55] It was that you were rejected by your society. It was for the lowest of the low people. It was for the worst people. And you had to walk out of the city bearing this cross.

You had to leave society and get spat on and get mocked. It was a shameful rejection as well as a painful death. And so when Jesus says, you as a Christian, if you want to follow him, you've got to take up your cross.

He means you've got to be willing to be rejected by society and suffer for associating with Jesus, who society is going to reject.

Now, for many, this might include actual death, as it does and has in history for many Christians in persecuted countries. But even if we're not in a persecuted country yet, what it does include is things like being sidelined and criticized for standing against the values everyone else embraces in society and standing for biblical values.

It means losing favor with people. It means losing opportunities that we otherwise may have enjoyed. It means losing friends for naming the name of Jesus and publicly identifying with him, taking on his name, not being ashamed to talk about him and be known as a Christian.

[18 : 30] Not just as a Christian. You know, it's acceptable to be known as a Christian, but not a Jesus freak. No, that person who keeps talking about Jesus, who makes a big thing about Jesus. No, the moment you mention that, the moment you bring his name into your world, it's going to cause a reaction.

People don't like it. And Jesus is saying, if you're really going to follow him, these are the kinds of things that will happen. Because that's what really following Jesus entails.

That is the path of death that you've got to choose if you follow Jesus. And that's when our survival mechanism starts to kick in.

When it's those kind of challenges we face. When we read the Bible and we come to church and we realize that's what following Jesus is about, you know what happens?

Our survival mechanism kicks in. And we will do everything to avoid going down that path. And we will try to rationalize it. And we will say, no, that's not quite what the preacher meant.

[19 : 35] That's not quite what the Bible is saying. But we will look for any other path. Can't we? Yeah. Isn't there a way we can still be a Christian and not have to die like this?

Because we don't want to lose friends. We don't want to give up our goals in life. We don't want to lose opportunities.

And so we'll convince ourselves that we can be a Christian without that cost. You know, we're experts at convincing ourselves how to be Christians without the cost. And so like Peter does here, we'll object to this path of death.

We'll convince ourselves we can avoid it, that death is not necessary. Well, what does Jesus have to say about that? Notice again how he replied to Peter.

Notice what he said. Get behind me, Satan. That's the moment Jesus hears Peter saying there is another way.

[20 : 46] You don't have to die. He says, get behind me, Satan. That's a very harsh thing to say. Why does he say that? Well, I'll tell you why I think he says that. Because Jesus realized he was actually talking in that moment.

Because he's heard it before. That voice that says, there's an easier way. You know where he heard it? He heard it in the wilderness.

Back in chapter 4. Do you remember that? When he was being tempted by Satan in the wilderness? One of the major temptations that Satan brought to Jesus was, oh, there's an easier way, Jesus.

You don't have to get hungry here. Turn the stones into bread. You don't have to go this route to get the kingdoms. I'll give you the kingdoms. There's an easier way.

This is Satan's go-to strategy for preventing people to go the way that God is calling them to go. There's an easier way.

[21 : 46] He's been doing it ever since the beginning. You don't have to give up things to follow Jesus.

You don't have to deny yourself to do what God wants you to do. He's been doing that since the beginning. Eden, the Garden of Eden. Our first ancestors, Adam and Eve.

What did he say to them? You don't have to deny yourself this fruit. That, you know, there's an easy way. There's a way that doesn't involve self-denial.

That's his go-to strategy. And we've got to be careful when we fall for it like Peter did here. Because Jesus says here very clearly, we can't deny what Jesus is saying here in these words, if you truly want to follow him, you can't avoid the path of death.

You have to choose to take it. Now, maybe at this point in the sermon, you're saying, well, if that's the case, then maybe you're not sure that following Jesus is for you.

[22 : 56] If it's all or nothing like this, if it's so involved. You know, you just want it to be a casual Christian. And this is now the next level. Maybe this is not for you.

Well, that's why you need to hear the next reason Jesus gives. Because he goes on. He's probably thinking, you know, people might actually give up now. And so he continues.

And he gives us the second reason we need to choose the path of death. And that is because it's the only way to find real life. Look what he says in verse 25.

For whoever wants to save their life will lose it. But whoever loses their life for me will find it.

Will find it. That's how you find life. You want life, real life? You find it. You find it by losing the life you think you have now.

[24 : 00] Because there's two lives available to each human being. There's two lives we get to choose from. There's this life. On earth.

And then there's the life to come. And the life to come. That is real life.

That is the life that God made humans for. We haven't experienced it yet. We've only experienced this frustrating, passing away, temporary life with all its frustrations.

This life where we've got to work 50 weeks of the year just to get two weeks of leave that we can't even enjoy because we're too stressed. And we're just trying to de-stress. And then we've got to work 50 years just to get a retirement and save up enough money that we'll be too old and frail and sick to enjoy.

And we think this is life? Really? And we think this is it? No, this is not what we were made for. We were made for something much greater.

[25 : 05] God made us for real life to come. But you can't have them both. You can't have this life and the life to come.

To have the life to come, you need to die to this one so that you can follow Jesus properly into the life to come. If you want to keep this life, if you want to chase the things that this life has to offer, and get what you want now in this life, well then you can't have the life to come.

Jesus couldn't have said it in a simpler way. Right? Whoever wants to save their life will lose it. But whoever loses their life for me will find it.

A child can understand that. You get to choose either this life or the life to come. If you want this life, then you don't get the life to come. If you want the life to come, you've got to lose this life.

It's very simple. You can't have the life to come if you want to keep this life. Because if you keep this life, it will actually be impossible to follow Jesus properly, who is the only way.

[26 : 22] Because he's the only one who's died for our sins. So that we can have the life to come. And so choose. It's like investing money. Now anybody who's invested money will know the concept of not spending money now so that you can enjoy it later.

Right? That's the idea of investing. If you want to get a return later, you need to forego spending that money now. Jesus is saying it's the same with your life.

You've got to choose what to invest in. This life or the life to come. You can't have both. And if you can, if you think you've found a way where you can have both, you can be a Christian and still get what you want in this life, well then either Jesus is lying here, or you're not really a Christian.

And it's vital that we hear this this morning. As we read these verses, it's vital we let them come in and challenge us.

Because the life you choose to invest in now, Jesus says next, will determine what happens to you when he comes back. That's why it's so important to be challenged, that we're all challenged by these verses this morning, and we make our choice.

[27 : 38] Because the choice we make on what life to invest in will affect our eternity. It will affect what happens when Jesus comes back. And he says that, verse 27, have a look. For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what they have done.

What does he mean by that? That he'll reward each person according to what they've done. That doesn't sound right. You know, it sounds like it's salvation through works, right?

I thought we were saved by grace. Now he's saying he's going to reward each person according to what he's done. Well, how can he say that? Well, he doesn't mean, he's not talking here about being saved by works, but what he's talking about is that everybody will be judged according to what they did with their life, what they invested their life in.

And on that day, when Jesus comes back in his glory, you'll get what you chose. If you chose to pursue this life, well, that's all you'll get.

But if you chose to die to this life, to follow Jesus, then you'll get eternal life. And so the question I want to close with this morning to you, the question I've got to ask myself as well, that I've been asking myself all week in preparing this passage, is how have I died to follow Christ?

[29 : 09] And I think we've all got to ask that question of ourselves. Have you died yet? And if so, if you call yourself a Christian, how have you died?

What have you died to in order to follow Christ? And if you can't easily answer that question, well, then you need to spend some time with God and confess that you might very well be holding on to this life and refusing to die.

And ask God to help you to deny yourself, to take up your cross, and to really follow Jesus, because your eternal life is at stake.

Now, I know that's a scary prayer to pray, to ask God to help you to deny yourself and take up your cross. That's a very scary prayer to pray. You know why? Because God will answer it.

And maybe you're not there. Maybe you're still not quite ready to take that step. You're not wanting to pray that prayer. You're not ready to go all in to follow Jesus yet, because it goes against every instinct in you.

[30 : 23] Maybe you're still thinking there must be another way to be saved without total commitment to Jesus. You're standing at the top of that cliff, and you're looking down, and you're hesitating to jump.

Everything inside you is holding back and saying, no, don't take this jump. Well, I want to tell you, if that's you, I want to tell you one more thing about that day we went clurking in the mountains that I remember.

It was only after I took that jump, that 14-meter jump, that I got to see some of the most beautiful scenery in the ravine downriver that I would have never seen otherwise if I hadn't have done that. And you know, it's the same with choosing to jump in and follow Jesus fully. It'll require a death. It'll require that you deny yourself, that you fully identify with Jesus in the world, and you forsake the life you would have otherwise had.

It'll require a death, but doing that will become the gateway to new life, which you could never experience any other way. A life of freedom, where you're no longer living for yourself, but, you know, chasing temporary pleasures, but you're living for better things.

[31 : 45] A life, even now, that is so much more free because you realize you were never meant to live for yourself. And you start living for something greater. That's the life you get to start experiencing now, but even more than that, taking that jump and fully committing to Christ will open up an eternal life to come that will make these few passing years look like nothing.

An amazing life that God wants to give you, that He made you to have, and that is so worth dying for.

The question is, are you willing to die in order to get it? Let's pray. Lord God, we thank You for Your Word that penetrates into our very souls, that speaks to us and challenges us.

And Lord, we are challenged by this Word because it goes against our instincts to die.

But that is what You're calling us to. Lord, I pray that You would help each of us as we go out of this place later to realize what it means to deny ourselves and take up our cross and follow You.

[33 : 14] Help us to do that, Lord. Help us to jump in and fully commit ourselves to following You into life. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.