

THE CROSS AND THE SELF – LIFE

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John 12:24-26—verily, verily I say unto you, except the grain of wheat falling into the ground die, it abides alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. He that loves his life shall lose it, and he that hates his life in this world shall keep it to life eternal. If any one serves me, let him follow me; and where I am, there also shall be my servant. And if any one serves me, him shall the Father honour.

Let's have a word of prayer:

Dear Lord, our hearts bow before Thee. Thou hast once again exhibited Thy great love towards us. Thou hast placed before us the cross and You crucified. Dear Lord, Thy love has constrained us. There is only one way before us. We must follow Thee. Do show us once again the way of following Thee. We want to follow Thee as close as possible. Deliver us from the world, deliver us from the law, and deliver us from our flesh, that our whole being may be possessed by Thee. May Thy name be honored in us. Prepare us for Thy return. Lord, we long to see Thee. Come quickly. In Thy precious name we pray. Amen.

We thank the Lord for gathering us together these days. Even though we seem to be talking much about the cross, we must remember that it is Him crucified. He is the One who makes the cross what it is today. The cross is only a way, a means, the only way, the prescribed way of God, and this way will lead us to Christ. This way will lead us to the eternal purpose of God. What should always be before us is God's eternal purpose—Christ and His Church. So by going in the way of the cross may we really arrive at God's eternal purpose.

We talked about the cross and the world. Why must we be delivered from the world? So that Christ may be our world. We talked about the cross and the law. Why? It is that Christ, His grace, may be our law. And we talked about the cross and the flesh. Why must we be delivered from our flesh? Why can we not be ourselves? It is because we want Christ to be all and in all to us. So let us have Christ always before our eyes, and as we look steadfastly upon Christ, it will give us strength to take up our cross and follow Him.

We first talked about the cross and the old man. The old man is Adam, but that Adam is a corporate person. All who were born into this world are in Adam. This was our position before, but thank God, when our Lord Jesus was crucified on the cross, the Bible tells us that our old man was crucified with Him. Thus we are delivered from the power of sin that we may be able to serve our God. This is a position that we have in Christ Jesus. We, today, are no longer in Adam; we are in Christ Jesus. And because we are in Christ Jesus, we are dead to sin and made alive unto God. This is a position that we must always maintain by faith.

Then we talked about the cross and the flesh. From our position we now come to our condition. From the eternal truth, we now come into experience in the Holy Spirit. They who are of the Christ have crucified the flesh with the passions and the lusts. We know that the deeds, the works of the flesh are very manifest. They can easily be seen. But thank God, those who are in Christ Jesus will walk by the Holy Spirit. And the Holy Spirit will strive against the flesh and deliver us from our flesh, that we may live according to the Spirit, and that will be life and peace.

THE LIFE OF THE FLESH

Now we would like to go a step further. We will fellowship on the cross and the self-life. The self-life is the life of the flesh. In other words, the cross deals not only with the works of the flesh; the cross will go deeper into the very life of the flesh. Unless the life of the flesh is being touched, even though the deeds of the flesh have been dealt with, the work is still unfinished. So in the work

of the cross of our Lord Jesus and the work of the Holy Spirit, He will go very deep into the very life of our flesh, that Christ really will be our very life. In order to understand this, for the sake especially of the younger people, probably we need to go back to the very beginning when God created man.

CREATION OF MAN

In Genesis 2:7, we find that God used the red earth, the dust of the earth to form a human body. The Psalmist said, "Our body is fearfully and wonderfully made." Just think that God could take the most common, cheap material and make a human body, which is a masterpiece. By this body we have world consciousness because by the five senses of this body, we are in touch with the world around us. And the Bible tells us that God breathed His breath of life into the nostril of that form. There is the breath of life coming out of God Himself that reaches into that earthly form. That breath of God becomes the spirit of man because God is Spirit. So He breathed into man and that breath becomes the spirit of man, that man will be able to communicate with God. So our spirit gives us God-consciousness.

Then, when God's Spirit, God's breath, entered into that earthly form, a third element was formed, and the Bible says, "Man became a living soul." Soul is where our personality dwells. With our soul we know ourselves. It gives us self-consciousness. You are what you are. You know what you are because you have a soul. Through your thinking, through your emotion, through your will, your opinion, you express yourself. So the Bible says, "Man became a living soul." There is a created life in man, and that created life in our soul makes us "living." That is how we are created.

When we were created, so far as God's order is concerned, our spirit should be at the top because it is by our spirit that we are in touch with God the Spirit. So far as our soul-life is concerned, when it was created, it was neutral; that is to say, it was neither sinful nor righteous nor holy, because at that time, the living soul did not have the knowledge of good and evil. So it had to look to the spirit for direction; it was dependent upon the spirit. And by the spirit, it knew God's will, so that it was able to obey God and work it out in the body. That was how we were created.

THE TREE OF LIFE

Then you remember that God put man in the Garden of Eden. It was a garden of pleasure because God created all kinds of fruit trees to be the food for the physical body of man. Then in the midst of the garden, God planted the tree of life. God had already given people a created life. They became living souls. Why did God put the tree of life in the midst of the garden? It is because that tree of life represents the very life of God. It is the divine life, the uncreated life of God. It shows that God's heart is to give His own life to man. Man was created in the image of God and after His likeness. In other words, in the whole creation, man is the only one who has the capacity of receiving God into himself. It is God's will that man should receive His uncreated life into his created life. That will enable him to fulfill all the missions that God has commissioned him with, and fulfill God's purpose for man.

THE TREE OF THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOOD AND EVIL

By the tree of life, God planted another tree. It is called the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Some people think that the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is a bad tree because God told man of all the trees in the garden he could freely eat including the tree of life. But the tree of the knowledge of good and evil he could not eat because on the day that he should eat thereof he would surely die. So people think that the tree of the knowledge of good and evil must be a bad

tree. I wonder if you would agree with me? I feel that God would never put a bad tree in the Garden of Eden, so it cannot be a bad tree. I feel it is the second best. The tree of life is the best because it gives us God's own divine life, and if we should eat that tree, that divine life will come into our spirit and become the life of our spirit. And this tree of the knowledge of good and evil is actually the food for our soul, as all the other trees are food for our body. There is no knowledge that is higher than the knowledge of good and evil. Scientific knowledge or philosophy cannot be compared with the knowledge of ethics, the knowledge of good and evil. That tree will be the food of the soul of man because our soul longs for knowledge. Our soul is satisfied with knowledge, with the knowledge of good and evil.

Why did God forbid man to eat that tree of the knowledge of good and evil? Number one, He wanted them to eat of the tree of life. Number two, He knows that without the life of God and if you have the knowledge of good and evil, it will bring you to death. You know what is good, but you do not have the life, the power to do the good. You know what evil is, but you will yield to evil, and the result will be death. That is the reason why God wants people to seek after the life of the Spirit, and by that life he will be able to live and fulfill God's purpose. But if man should take the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, he would decide what is good and what is evil. He would become independent of God. And as Satan suggested, they would be gods, and the result is death. Unfortunately, our forefathers, instead of eating the tree of life, they took the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Because of that the Lord said, "On the day that you eat, you shall surely die." But Adam lived nine hundred and thirty years, and he had many sons and daughters. In other words, his body seemed to be living, and his soul seemed to be living, but what is it that was dead? His spirit was dead. His spirit lost the ability to communicate with God the Spirit.

DEATH OF THE SPIRIT

What is death? Death is the cessation of communication with its proper environment. When the body is dead, it has lost its communication with the world around, and when the soul is dead, he is dead to himself. When the spirit is dead, it has lost its communication with God. So, what is the condition of a fallen man? The condition of a fallen man is that his spirit is dead. It does not mean that his spirit does not exist. The spirit is still there, but it has lost its proper function. That is why you find people can communicate with evil spirits, but they cannot communicate with God the Spirit. So man became flesh—soul and body without the spirit.

What about the life of man? In the Bible, sometimes the word *soul* is used as representing man. For instance, when Jacob went into Egypt, in Genesis it says that seventy souls entered into Egypt because the soul represents the man. The soul is I, is me, where my personality dwells. So after man fell, this living soul, the life of that soul was not only contaminated, but it was even dominated by sin. And instead of man looking to God for direction, man falls into himself. So what nature, what kind of life is there in man? Man is a fallen man. Man is a man of the flesh. Man is a selfish, self-centered person. Self is the very life of the soul. That is our situation.

If you only deal with the deeds of the flesh, it is just like you are dealing with all the branches. You have to deal with the very root of the tree. How does the cross of our Lord Jesus deal with the very life of our fallen man, the life of the flesh, which is self? So this is what you find in the word of God. In the word of God in many, many places, life and soul are the same word. For instance, our Lord Jesus said, "If you love your life, you will lose it." And that life can be translated as soul. If you love your soul, you will lose it. If you lose your soul in this world for the Lord's sake, you will gain it to eternity. So this matter of soul and life is one, and it is actually self; it is I, it is me, myself. That is our condition. And the cross of our Lord Jesus has to dig deep into the very core, the very life of our flesh. This very life of the soul, which is self, must be dealt with.

THE GRAIN OF WHEAT

In John 12, when our Lord Jesus entered into Jerusalem for the last time, great crowds followed Him. Even some of the Greeks that came to the festival wanted to see Jesus. It seems as if the whole world went after our Lord Jesus. It was a most glorious time in the life of our Lord Jesus when He was on earth. So when these Greeks asked for help from Andrew and Philip, what did our Lord say?

John 12:23 says, "But Jesus answered them saying, The hour is come that the Son of man should be glorified." Maybe even the disciples thought this was the time that our Lord would be glorified, that He would now sit on the throne and rule over the whole world. But strangely, immediately after our Lord said, "The time of my being glorified is now here," He continued and said, "Verily verily I say unto you [truly truly I say unto you], Except the grain of wheat falling into the ground die, it abides alone; but if it die, it bears much fruit."

In other words, to our Lord, the time of being glorified was His death. He is the grain of wheat. In the whole world, you have only tares, darnels, because all who are in Adam are darnels, are tares. Our Lord Jesus is the only grain of wheat. God became Man; the Word became flesh and tabernacled among men, full of grace and truth. He is *the* grain of wheat. He said, "If the grain of wheat fall into the ground but abide alone...." It falls into the ground, but it does not die. It abides alone. He speaks of Himself because He is the grain of wheat that fell into the ground. He came into this world and took up the form of a man. He lived in this world for thirty-three years and demonstrated to the world what man should be. What is the man that God is after? He demonstrated it.

On the Mount of Transfiguration He was suddenly transfigured; glory filled Him. Moses and Elijah appeared and talked to Him about His exit. How would He go out of this world? He came into this world by emptying Himself and taking up the form of a man. Now how will He exit from this world? They were talking about this matter, and as they were talking, suddenly Peter woke up and saw that Moses and Elijah were going to leave. He wanted them to remain, so he blurted out, "Lord, it is good to be here. Let us make three tabernacles, one for You, one for Moses, and one for Elijah. We will just stay here." And God cut him off. A cloud of glory overshadowed them and they heard a voice: "This is my beloved Son in whom I have My delight. Hear Him." Suddenly Moses and Elijah disappeared. When they opened their eyes, they saw Jesus only.

If our Lord Jesus had made His exit from the world on the Mount of Transfiguration, then there would be only *the* grain of wheat. But thank God, our Lord Jesus refused to make His exit on the Mount of Transfiguration. Instead, He came down from the mountain and faced towards Jerusalem, because this grain of wheat not only must fall upon the ground, but it must die. And if it dies, it bears much fruit. In other words, the outer shell of that wheat must be decayed in order that the life within it may be able to come forth and multiply into many grains. So our Lord Jesus explained this parable to us.

DEATH OF THE SOUL-LIFE

In verse 25 He says, "He that loves his life shall lose it, and he that hates his life in this world shall keep it to life eternal." Our Lord is the first grain of wheat, and He fell into the ground and died. His outer man was decayed, so the life within Him was able to be released and produce many fruits. And you and I are the result of that.

The soul-life of our Lord Jesus is without sin. His soul-life is selfless, but even He must go to the cross and die so that His life may be released and be given to all of us. How much more must our soul-life, our self go to death? If our soul-life does not go to death, then the life of Christ in us will have no opportunity to bear fruit. So our Lord Jesus said, "If you love your soul-life, that is

your self, you will lose it and if you hate your soul-life in this world, you will keep it to life eternal.”

TREASURE IN EARTHEN VESSELS

Let us use another illustration. Second Corinthians 4:7-12 says, “But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the surpassingness of the power may be of God, and not from us: every way afflicted, but not straitened; seeing no apparent issue, but our way not entirely shut up; persecuted, but not abandoned; cast down, but not destroyed; always bearing about in the body the dying of Jesus, that the life also of Jesus may be manifested in our body; for we who live are always delivered unto death on account of Jesus, that the life also of Jesus may be manifested in our mortal flesh; so that death works in us, but life in you.”

We who have believed in the Lord Jesus we are but earthen vessels. Look at us. Even if this body is so wonderfully made, yet it is earthly in nature. So we are but earthen vessels. But thank God, He put a treasure in the earthen vessels. I always wonder, if you have a treasure, would you put it in an earthen vessel? You will not. You will put a treasure in a golden box. But that is the wonder of God. He is willing to put the treasure in an earthen vessel. And the treasure, of course, is our Lord Jesus. God puts Christ Jesus into you and me, earthen vessels. But the purpose of putting that treasure there is not for that treasure just to be kept there unnoticed. God’s purpose is that the surpassing greatness of the power of that treasure may be manifested through the earthen vessel. It is not the power of the earthen vessel; it is the power of the treasure. The earthen vessel is opaque. Only the treasure has light. God’s purpose is that the light of that treasure may be manifested and the surpassing power may be manifested.

A CRACKED VESSEL

But how can that be when the treasure is hidden in the earthen vessel? Unless that earthen vessel has cracks, unless that earthen vessel is broken, then the power of the treasure will have no chance to exhibit itself. Now that speaks of all of us. We have Christ, the treasure, in us, and the power of that treasure is going to be manifested; but our soul is like an earthen vessel and we just imprison that treasure within us. We love ourselves, and because we love ourselves, we refuse to be cracked, and we refuse to be broken. We treasure the earthen vessel more than we treasure the treasure within the earthen vessel. Is it not true that we all love ourselves, even though we are so ugly? We still love it; we do not abhor it. And because we love our self-life, therefore Christ has no opportunity to manifest His power. But thank God, that is where the Holy Spirit begins to work. The Holy Spirit will arrange our environment. He will arrange people around us. He will arrange our circumstances. He will arrange things to happen according to His wisdom. He will arrange everything around us in order to crack us, to break us.

That is why Paul says, “In every way afflicted, but not straitened.” Sometimes we find ourselves being surrounded. We have no way out, but thank God, even though we are surrounded, there is still an upward way God opens to us. Sometimes “We see no apparent issue, but our way not entirely shut out.” I like Phillips’ translation. He said, “We come to our wit’s end but not to our life’s end.” We do not know any way out, but somehow God opens the way out.

You know, it is almost like scenery in China. We say that the scenery in Qui Ling surpasses all other scenery, But Yangshuo’s scenery surpasses Qui Ling. Now I have been there, and actually in Yangshuo itself, there is nothing. But on the way from Qui Ling to Yangshuo, you have to take a boat. As the boat begins to sail, you come to a point where it seems as if the river ends, but when you arrive there, you find there is a passage sideways, and that is where the scenery really is. And in

our life, it is like that. Sometimes the Holy Spirit will lead us forward and we come to a dead end. We think that we are finished, but suddenly, God opens a way out. That is the way.

Then it says, "Persecuted, but not abandoned." People may persecute us but God will never abandon us.

Then, "Cast down, but not cast out." I like Philips translation again. He said, "Knocked down but not knocked out." In boxing you may be knocked down but you are not knocked out yet. You stand up again and continue to fight.

I believe we have all gone through such experiences. These are the arrangements of the Holy Spirit. Why is it that He put you in such a condition? He has a purpose behind it. He wants to break you, to break your self-life, that Christ may be manifested. So the Bible says, "You bear in your body the dying of Jesus." In the original it has the meaning: "You bear in your body the putting to death of Jesus." The death of our Lord Jesus has power. His death is able to put you to death. Who wants to die? Who is willing to die? But the death of our Lord Jesus has the power to put you to death, that the life of Jesus may be manifested in you. So this is the way that God has provided for us to break us down that He may build us up. What is broken down is ourselves; what is built up is Christ. There is no other way. If you try to keep your life, you lose it. If you are willing to lose your self-life in this world for the sake of Christ and for the gospel's sake, then you will gain it to eternity. You will inherit the kingdom of the heavens.

We would like to analyze it a little more. We will see how the cross will deal with every aspect of our soul-life. Your soul-life, your self, is expressed in your emotion. Who is using your emotion? It is your self, your soul-life that is using your emotion. So your emotion expresses yourself. Your emotion is different from the other one. And then at the same time, it is our mind, our thinking that expresses ourselves. And it is our will, our desire, and our opinion that expresses ourselves. And we will see how the cross will work in these areas.

THE CROSS DEALS WITH THE EMOTION

In Matthew 10:34-39 our Lord Jesus told his disciples, "Do not think that I have come to send peace upon the earth: I have not come to send peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man at variance with his father, and the daughter with her mother, and the daughter-in-law with her mother-in-law; and they of his household shall be a man's enemies." He who loves father or mother above me is not worthy of me; and he who loves son or daughter above me is not worthy of me. And he who does not take up his cross and follow after me is not worthy of me. He that finds his life [that his is soul, self-life] shall lose it, and he who has lost his life for my sake shall find it."

Our Lord Jesus knows that our soul-life, our self, needs to be purified. Even in this matter of human love, which is the highest, noblest expression, behind it is self. It is not pure love. It is governed by self, selfishness. So our Lord Jesus wants to purify even our emotion. He said, "If you love your father or mother, brother or sister, husband or wife, children, even your own life above Me, you are not worthy of Me." This is a very strict demand. If you want to follow the Lord, if you want to be like your Lord, you have to love Him above all these loves. Now God wants us to love our father and mother because this is the first commandment with promise. In the Old Testament time if a child did not love his father or mother, even cursed his father and mother, he would be killed. So God wants us to love our father or mother, but God wants to purify our love from self.

So there will be times when the demand of our Lord Jesus and the demand of our parents seem to cut across each other. And when there is such a situation, what will you do? Will you love the Lord even more than you love your father or mother? It does not mean that you should not love your father and mother, but do you love your Lord more than your father and mother? Will you follow the Lord or will you follow your parents? If your parents say, "You should not believe in the

Lord Jesus,” will you obey your parents or will you obey the Lord Jesus? And you find the cross is constituted and the Lord calls us take up our cross and follow Him. So death will come into the love side of our self-life, so that our love may be purified and Christ will be able to express through our love. That is concerning our emotion.

THE CROSS DEALS WITH OUR MIND

In Matthew 16, God revealed our Lord Jesus to His disciples, and our Lord revealed the church to His disciples. Following that He said, “I must go to Jerusalem and be killed, but on the third day I will be raised from the dead.” Then Peter took hold of the Lord and maybe shook Him a little bit: “Don’t do that; You should not die.” Our Lord turned back and said, “Satan, get behind Me because you are not mindful of the things of God; you are mindful of the things of man.” Immediately following that in verse 24 it says, “Then Jesus said to His disciples, If any one desires to come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whosoever shall desire to save his life shall lose it; but whosoever shall lose his life for my sake shall find it.”

And there you find our Jesus is dealing with our natural mind. The mind of Peter was self-centered. He did not want Jesus to go to the cross and die because he himself did not want to do that. So behind that mind was self. Our Lord dealt with that because behind self is Satan. So we must learn to take up our cross in this area of our mind in order that we may be delivered from it.

THE CROSS DEALS WITH OUR WILL

In Luke 14:26-27 our Lord Jesus turned to the crowd and said, “If any man come to me, and shall not hate his own father and mother, and wife, and children, and brothers, and sisters, yea, and his own life too, he cannot be my disciple; and whoever does not carry his cross and come after me cannot be my disciple.”

Following that He said, “You sit down and count the cost. Are you able to pay the cost of following Me? Are you able to forsake all and follow Me?” It is not just being stirred up emotionally for a moment. You sit down and count the cost, and then you make your decision. That is to say, our will has to be purified. Now if you are willing to do that, He will give you the power to do it. If you are not willing to do that, then you will not experience His surpassing greatness of power.

Why is it that the Lord calls us to take up our cross and follow Him? It is because by doing that, the self-life, the life of the very soul of the flesh may die. And the life of Christ within us may be released and may be manifested, so what come out of you will be Christ and not yourself. So first of all the Lord said, “Deny yourself.” Give up your right. Deny yourself. Peter denied the wrong person. He should have denied himself, but he denied Christ. And how often we are doing the same thing.

Brothers and sisters, who can deny himself? No one can. Martin Luther said, “I am not afraid of the pope and the cardinals; I am afraid of the pope within me. It is my self. I am afraid of that.” Do we like Job? Job said, “I abhor myself.” How can we do that unless we see the Lord Jesus? If He should reveal Himself to us, nothing is impossible.

SEEING THE LORD

During the last few days, we have talked about Jesus Christ and Him crucified, Brothers and sisters, when we were having the Lord’s Table this morning, Jesus Christ and Him crucified is openly exhibited before us. He reveals Himself to us. If we see Him, nothing is impossible. If we see Him, we will deny ourselves. If we do not see Him, we cannot deny ourselves. Job saw the glory of God, so he abhorred himself and repented in dust and ashes. This is what we need. We

need to see our Lord. We need to see His bleeding hands. We need to see His bleeding feet. We need to see His bleeding head. We need to see the blood and water coming out of His side. We need to hear Him say, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken Me?" We need to see His love. Only His love can constrain us to deny ourselves and make us willing to take up our cross and follow Him.

So may the Lord help us, that we may not only know that our old man was crucified with Christ, but we who are of Christ have crucified the flesh with its passions and lusts. Then we will be willing to lose our self-life for Christ's sake, that we may follow Him. So may the Lord lead us in the days ahead. May He always be before our eyes, and if we look up unto Jesus, by His love and by His grace, we will be able to follow Him.

Let us pray:

Dear Lord, a sight of Thee is all that we need. Reveal Thyself to us that we may all rise up, forsake all, take up our cross, and follow Thee. Where You are, there by Thy grace we will be. We ask in Thy precious name. Amen.