

# DYING TO LIVE, Part 2

## *Losing to Find*

By Rev. Will Nelken

*Presented at Trinity Community Church, San Rafael, California, on Sunday, March 9, 2008*

---

We must lose the life we have, in order to find the life we want. No one can achieve the life they really dream of having by their own power or wit. Only God, who gave you the dream of the life worth living, can take you there. But it will be by a path you would not choose.

When you think of “losing,” what comes to your mind? Perhaps these:

- Losing hair
- Losing weight
- Losing your mind
- Losing the game
- Losing hope

Today, let's consider losing as a means of ultimately winning.

Some resist altogether the notion of losing; they won't permit it in their vocabulary. Such people like to say, “I've read the end of the book...we win!”

Well, I have read the end of the Book, too, and we DO win. But I have also read the middle of the Book, and that doesn't always *look like* winning to me.

But this was no surprise to God; He designed it this way. Listen to the teaching of Jesus, from each of the four Gospel writers:

*Matthew 10:37 If you love your father or mother more than you love me, you are not worthy of being mine; or if you love your son or daughter more than me, you are not worthy of being mine.<sup>38</sup> If you refuse to take up your cross and follow me, you are not worthy of being mine.<sup>39</sup> If you cling to your life, you will lose it; but if you give up your life for me, you will find it.*

*Mark 8:34 If any of you wants to be my follower, you must turn from your [own] ways, take up your cross, and follow me.<sup>35</sup> If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake and for the sake of the Good News, you will save it.*

*Luke 17:33 If you cling to your life, you will lose it, and if you let your life go, you will save it.*

*John 12:24 I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat is planted in the soil and dies, it remains alone. But its death will produce many new kernels—a plentiful harvest of new lives.<sup>25</sup> Those who love their life in this world will lose it. Those who care nothing for their life in this world will keep it for eternity.*

If we put together the essential teaching from these four sources, we may come up with a composite like this:

*“If you love your life in this world and cling to it, try to hang on to it, you will lose it; but if you care nothing for your life in this world and give it up for me, and for the sake of the Good News, you will find it and save it and keep it for eternity.”*

These are certainly some of the most challenging words from the Master's lips. How are we to do this? Especially in light of the enormous drive within us to pursue and preserve our life at any cost! (Remember the first message in this series?)

This is not a venture for the faint of heart. Apart from trusting that Jesus can accomplish *in* us what He has required *from* us, we will never do this. *Only faith* can take you on this journey. Only faith can keep you on this path.

So, do you have such faith? By the way, such faith is not a "jolt of confidence," nor a mind persuaded that "failure is not an option." In fact, such faith trembles with uncertainty about oneself and one's circumstances, yet is fully convinced that God is "able to perform" what He has promised (Romans 4:21).

How, then, do we proceed?

The first step is the *willingness* to let it go. Easier said than done, perhaps, but nonetheless necessary.

The second step may be to *actually* let it go. If you thought the first step was difficult, think again.

It's sort of like skydiving. My friend Jeff and his wife, Annette, decided to go skydiving to celebrate their anniversary. (Marriage itself may be said to be a sort of death-defying leap!) First, there is the willingness to go up on the plane with that little chute strapped to your back; second, there is the act of jumping out of the plane while thousands of feet above the earth with no visible means of support.

Of course, in real life, the steps may be reversed. Something of real, personal value actually may be taken away through no choice of your own. But, even after the fact, the only positively effective response will be to choose to let it go.

*Job 1:21 I came naked from my mother's womb, and I will be naked when I leave. The Lord gave me what I had, and the Lord has taken it away. Praise the name of the Lord!*

Think about this: What does God know about losing? Luke tells the stories of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son, as examples of God's loving pursuit of something precious that has been lost. For, you see, God the Creator has experienced the loss of Adam's race. The man that He made, His crowning creation (made in His own image), was given the freedom to choose his own way instead of God's way — and that's just what the First Couple did. But that's just the beginning of the Book. The rest of the Book tells us how God is all about finding; He searches *until* He finds.

Then consider God's awesome rescue mission: He sent His Son, Jesus, born as one of us, knowing that He would be misunderstood, maligned, and rejected, and have to suffer the kind of death necessary to pay for humanity's sins. God knew that in that awful moment He would have to turn away and let His Son suffer the consequences of our sins alone, without divine comfort.

So God is genuinely acquainted with losing and its associated grief.

Perhaps you have suffered the loss of a dream, or a loved one, or something else precious to you that seemed to dim your entire future. Maybe you have lost all of the above and more. The more we relished the anticipated outcomes, the more painful the losses, and the more difficult to regain our emotional equilibrium.

A woman writes on her blog: “When you feel led in a direction, then the course changes without your control and you are left stunned, that is called death of a vision.”

Although many people assume that a vision is simply to be created or fulfilled, typically, a God-given vision has a four-stage life: birth, death, second-death, and rebirth. Where do I get this idea? It’s a Biblical pattern.

- Abraham – 1) Given a promise of a great nation of descendants, 2) His wife is barren, 3) He and his wife become too old, 4) Given a son in his old age. (25 years between the promise and its fulfillment.)
- Joseph – 1) Given a vision of leadership, 2) Sold into slavery, 3) Put in prison – twice, 4) Becomes the ruler of Egypt and the savior of his family. (40 years between the dream and its fulfillment.)
- Israel – 1) Promised freedom and a land of their own, 2) Trapped at the Red Sea, 3) Wandering in the desert, 4) Possessing the Land. (40 years between the promise and its fulfillment.)
- Mary – 1) Told by an angel she would bear the Savior, 2) Rejected by her fiancé, Joseph, 3) Rugged trip to Bethlehem, 4) Supernatural birth and visitors.

Take also Adam, whose sin started the decline of the entire race; he and Eve were promised a redeemer who would “crush the serpent’s head,” but *thousands* of years passed, during which the ministry of the priests failed to make a lasting change, as did that of the judges and the kings and the prophets. But, “in the fullness of time...” Jesus was born to Mary “to save His people from their sins.”

And then, of course, there was the vision of Jesus as Messiah with which His disciples struggled: 1) Identified at baptism and by His miracles as the Son of God, 2) He refused to become king of Israel, 3) He was arrested and crucified, 4) He was raised from the dead.

When God gives a person a vision, that vision must usually die unfulfilled. In some cases, there is a second-death that involves the collapse and humiliation of human plans and schemes, confirming the person’s utter inability to accomplish the vision on his or her own. During this phase, our connivance, contrivances, and calculated agendas seem only to hinder the work of God. Then, God miraculously revives and fulfills the vision in an unexpected, supernatural way.

It is in this vein that Paul questions the faith of the Galatians:

*Galatians 3:3* *How foolish can you be? After starting your Christian lives in the Spirit, why are you now trying to become perfect by your own human effort?*

You cannot complete what the Spirit has begun in your life by fleshly efforts or methods.

Monica prayed fervently that her pagan son, Augustine, would not go to Rome and there become corrupted by the city’s culture. Augustine was already a pagan. In spite of her prayers, Augustine went to Rome. However, in Rome he heard Ambrose preach and surrendered his life to Jesus Christ. After some years, Augustine was appointed to be the Bishop of Hippo, where he wrote several spiritual classics. He was the most frequently read author in Europe for a thousand years.

Monica’s vision was that her son would become a Christian. God gave her the desire of her heart — and turned a million other mother’s sons to Christ through Augustine. But Monica’s preferred method — preventing Augustine from going to Rome — for which she fervently prayed, also would have pre-

vented him from hearing the great Ambrose. Augustine was a pagan, but also an intellectual. Ambrose, too, was an intellectual and a great Christian and a bishop.

Do you see how God had prepared just the right agent to reach Augustine and just the right example of a Christian man to provide a pattern for Augustine to follow? Monica had been praying in a way that was contrary to God's plan, although the essential outcome was the same; she tried to dictate or advise God as to how and where God should make Augustine a Christian. God, in His loving wisdom, denied her specific requests, yet gave her the ultimate desire of her heart.

God's goals will always be bigger than we can achieve with human resources and they will always meet with insurmountable opposition. Our only recourse will be to cry out to God for supernatural intervention – and that will bring Him glory! What God has determined, He will do, if we will actively trust Him for it!

Let me offer an object lesson, using a rock, a used battery, and a bowl of candy. How does each of them represent a kind of hindrance to fulfilling our God-given goal? And, how could we respond to each?

- Rock – obstacles in our way, must be overcome.
- Used battery – weariness on our path, must be endured.
- Candy – tempting distractions all around us, must be resisted.

Flexibility is also key. Pastor Rick Warren says it is expressed in the other beatitude: "Blessed are the flexible, for they shall not be broken."

You will not play with mazes if you cannot be flexible, for when you reach a dead end, which inevitably you will, you must back up and try another tactic in order to reach the goal.

Pursuing a God-given goal requires determination on our part, but how can we discern whether our determination is due to a "thick-headed, one-tracked focus" or an "unrelenting resolve" to honor the Lord? Ask yourself these three questions:

- Am I exercising patience and discipline, or brute force?
- Am I implementing creativity, or pushing ahead with little thought?
- Am I stuck on one method, or considering other alternatives to reach the goal?

A God-given goal may seem unlikely to begin with, but once pursued it will soon become *impossible*, even doubly-impossible, until we throw ourselves on the mercy of God and seek a supernatural fulfillment.

Paul said, "I focus on this one thing: Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead, I press on to reach the end of the race and receive the heavenly prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us." (Philippians 3:13-14)

Forget about what you have accomplished in the past, or failed to accomplish. Are you willing now to renounce your own way — figuring it out, hedging every bet, doubling your insurance — and lean on Jesus Christ to do in you and through you what you could not achieve for yourself?

Will you lay aside your ways in order to take up Jesus' ways? That's when abundant life really begins.