


The Covenant Pulpit



“Unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies it produces many seeds.”
John 12: 24

Life: It's to Die For

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Pastor Lazlo Tokés died three times. First he died to his dreams. He left a prestigious pulpit in his native Hungary when God called him to a struggling ministry among despised minorities in Timișoara, Romania.

Then he died to his career. The Communist authorities put the squeeze on his Bishop to muzzle his preaching. Pastor Tokés refused to compromise the gospel, so the Bishop ordered him to vacate his tiny apartment at the church. After the authorities cancelled his ration card, his family survived on handouts from members in his congregation.

Finally he died to life itself. The secret police were coming to arrest him. Everyone knew that once the dreaded *Securitate* hauled anyone away, they were never seen again. His parishioners begged him to go into hiding. He responded with the words of Martin Luther: "Here I stand. I can do nothing else. If I die, then I die."

A goon squad came in the dark of night on December 16, 1989. To their surprise, 300 parishioners surrounded the church with arms locked together in solidarity. Inspired by their pastor's willingness to die, they were willing to give up their lives too. Word of their standoff with the secret police spread and thousands of people joined them. The bully boys from the *Securitate* retreated, and a revolution that started with the tearing down of the Berlin Wall six weeks earlier had come to Romania.

The next day a 100,000 people stormed the Communist headquarters in Timișoara, shouting in unison, "God is alive. Jesus is alive." Word of the uprising spread to the capital city of Bucharest and almost a million people marched in the streets shouting, "God is alive. Jesus is alive."

Dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu had ruled the country with sadistic cruelty for 25 years. To hold onto power he created the *Securitate* with the largest network of spies and informants in Eastern Europe. Ceaușescu declared Romania to be atheistic, but demanded to be worshipped like a god. This brutal dictator and his scheming wife destroyed their nation's economy and systematically looted billions from the treasury.

Yet, within nine days, a pastor's courage brought them down. As protestors surged through the streets, the army turned on their dictator. On December 25th a military court tried Nicolae and Elena Ceaușescu on the charge of genocide. Within two hours they were convicted and executed. A pastor who was willing to die to self changed the world, but the dictator who lived for self was swept into the dustbin of history.

Lazlo Tokés proved the words of Jesus in John 12:24, "...unless a kernel of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds." Pastor Tokés took courage from this stanza of Martin Luther's great hymn, *A Mighty Fortress is Our God*:

"...Let goods and kindred go, this mortal life also
The body they may kill; his truth abideth still..."

From Jesus' words we learn the principle of Easter that's true for Martin Luther, Lazlo Tokés and every one of us:

You cannot *really* live until you die.

There can be no resurrection without a death. Jesus turns the wisdom of this world on its head. The idea that you cannot live unless you die was hard to swallow 2,000 years ago, and it's just as hard to grasp today. Yet, on this truth hangs our eternity.

When Jesus made that statement in John 12:24, he was within days of his crucifixion. Verse 20 says that some Greeks had come up to Jerusalem to worship during the Passover. In verse 21 they rush up to one of the disciples. "Sir, we would like to see Jesus." In the original Greek text, there is a sense of urgency. They are pleading, "*We really want to interview Jesus!*" The ancient historian Herodotus wrote,

"The Greeks are always seeking truth. They will travel to one end of the earth to another in a frantic search to find some new god that will satisfy their longing for something more."

The French philosopher Pascal said, "There is in each of us a God-shaped vacuum." St. Augustine wrote, "God has created us for himself, and we will be restless until we find our rest in him." This restlessness has driven these Greeks to the temple in Jerusalem during the holiest season of Judaism. They are desperate to fill their God-shaped vacuum.

But their temple experience had to be a disappointment. As Greeks, they couldn't get any closer to God than the outer Court of the Gentiles. The inner courts were exclusively for Jews. And the innermost courts were reserved only for Jewish priests. The Holy of Holies could only be accessed by the High Priest once a year. These Greeks might as well be a million miles from God. Then they hear about this Galilean Rabbi who

has captured the imagination of the city. Still empty and searching, they come to Jesus looking for answers to their God-longing.

Their urgency causes Jesus to respond in verse 23, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.” These guys are utterly lost, and religion has put up all kinds of barriers to keep them from God. But Jesus *is* God in the flesh. He has come to earth for no other reason than to bring lost and excluded people to himself. Later he says in John 12:32,

“When I am lifted up from the earth I will draw all men to myself.”

He is predicting his being lifted up on a Roman cross. On this cross he will bear the sins of lost people. He will become the sacrifice that satisfies divine justice, smashing forever all the barriers between these Greeks and his Father. His crucified body will become their open doorway into the Holy of Holies. That’s what he means when he says in verse 23, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.”

But his Jewish disciples hear Jesus’ words through very different ears. When he talks about “the Son of Man glorified,” he is using terminology that they have heard since childhood. Some five hundred years before, the Jewish prophet Daniel had a vision when he was a captive exile in Babylon. He saw the nations of the world rise up as beasts of prey against Israel: first Babylon, then Persia, after that Greece, and finally Rome. But, in Daniel 7:13, the ancient prophet sees a Jewish Messiah who will rise up in glory and smash the final beast, Rome. This Messiah will establish a worldwide kingdom, and people from every nation will worship the God of Israel. Daniel calls this Messiah “the Son of Man.”

The Jews have been waiting for *The Son of Man* for 500 hundred years. Caught in the cruel jaws of that beast called Rome, they are impatient for their Liberator. And now Jesus says that he is that he is that “Son of Man” who is about to be glorified. His disciples are sure that Jesus is about to rise up in glory, and they will rule with him in his glorious kingdom. They got a foretaste of this glory earlier in the day when the crowds had welcomed him as a conquering hero. They are already arguing amongst themselves about who will get the highest position of glory in the new world order.

And here you see the contrast. To Jesus, his glory is in being lifted up nailed to a cross to save Greeks. To his disciples, glory is being lifted up on thrones to lord it over Greeks. To Jesus, glory is about others. For the

disciples, it is about themselves. But, at this moment, he turns his disciples' worldview upside down with three life principles. Two thousand years have come and gone, and they are as revolutionary for his disciples today as they were back then:

1. You can't bear fruit in your life unless you first die.

Jesus begins verse 24, "I tell you the truth..." What he is about to say is an agricultural fact of life: "...unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds." Scientists cannot explain this mystery. A dead seed lies buried in the soil for weeks. And then, defying all logic, it comes alive. A single seed produces a stalk of grain with multiple seeds that have within them the potential of vast wheat fields that can feed the whole world.

But people desperately try to hold on to life. Imagine what would happen if the farmer ate his seed, or stored it in his barn? Most of us hoard our lives that way. We hold on to our dreams and visions, refusing to let go. We hold on to relationships the same way. We squirrel away our money as a hedge against future disaster. We fight to keep our position and reputation. We want to control everything. But, in a supreme act of faith, a farmer opens his hands and drops his seed into the earth. It lies there dead and buried, and he waits throughout the long winter for some sign that there will be a crop in the spring.

But Jesus is certain that death always produces fruit. He knows that unless he dies, these Greeks and billions of other humans have no hope of heaven. He knows that he must physically die for people who are spiritually dead. He must carry their sins because they can't, and pay for their sins because they are unable. He has to be crucified, dead, and buried—like a kernel of dead wheat. Because, only if he dies can he come back to life and they experience eternal life. For three days heaven and earth wait with baited breath. These are days of darkest despair for his disciples. But Sunday is on the way.

Jesus makes a promise. His death will result in life. Not only for his crucified body, but for millions of people who are spiritually dead. Understand the truth Jesus is sharing: our only hope for life, whether we are Greeks or Neapolitans, is in his death, burial, and resurrection. To receive this eternal life, you must die to your own efforts to earn or control your destiny, and put yourselves totally in Jesus' hands.

2. Only by dying can we live.

In verse 25 Jesus goes on to add, “The man who loves his life will lose it, while the man who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.” This is confusing to a lot of folks. Our age talks a lot about self-love. Dr. Phil and every other pop psychologist constantly tell us that the most important thing for mental health is to love ourselves. Yet Jesus tells us that the key to eternal life is to “hate” our life. If we love our life we will lose it. If we hate it we will gain life.

On the surface, Jesus seems to be calling us to self-loathing. But, the original Hebrew concept for “love” and “hate” have to do with the thing you are most committed to. If you love your life it means that it is your primary focus of attention. You are self-centered. You will do anything to protect yourself, and the worst thing that can happen to you is to lose ultimate control of your life. To hate something is to abandon it. It is to shrug your shoulders and say, “I can live without it. It doesn’t control or dominate my life.” Jesus is saying that if we try to control our lives, we have already lost everything. We can never give our life to Jesus if we aren’t willing to abandon it to him.

He said in Matthew 16:24&25, “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life must lose it...” First Century Jews had seen enough crucifixions to understand this. They knew that when man picked up his cross, he was never going home again. He was saying goodbye to his family, his possessions, and any dreams he had for the future. He was already dead before he was ever crucified. Lazlo Tokés knew that he was as good as dead. But he belonged to Christ—body, mind, and soul. He picked up his cross and he waited for the secret police to come. He could have gone into hiding, like a seed buried in a sack in the barn, but he didn’t. His parishioners picked up their crosses that night. But from their *self* death, millions were set free. Nine days later, the dictator who frantically tried to save his life was dead.

There is only one way to save your life. Jesus wanted both Greeks and disciples to understand this truth. You must die to our own efforts to control your life, and put yourself totally in Jesus’ hands. You must trust in his death, burial, and resurrection as your only hope of eternal life.

3. Greatness comes through service.

In verse 27 Jesus goes on to say, "Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant will be. My Father will honor anyone who serves me." Jesus died, and so must we. Jesus came as a servant, and so must we. His disciples were always grabbing for their own glory, constantly trying to upstage each other, and forever arguing about which one would get the highest position in his kingdom. Nobody loved their lives more than those disciples. Maybe that's why they all ran out on him when the going got tough. People who love their lives will do anything to save their skins. Over and over, Jesus had told them, "He who is least in my kingdom will be greatest." Repeatedly, he told them that it's the way of this world for people try to lord it over each other. But in his kingdom, leaders are servants.

The latest *Newsweek* gives a depressing update on the *Me* Generation. It seems that the *My Space* and *American Idol* generation is self-absorbed, celebrity-driven, and exhibitionist. So are the parents of this generation. From politicians to parents to preachers, people are obsessed with being number one. Few people are interested in dying to self and serving others. In an age of self-interest, it's no wonder that every institution, from government to banking houses to churches, are crumbling before our eyes. But there is an answer: "My father will honor anyone who serves me." Death to self is the key to servanthood, and being honored by God is its reward. Imagine what would happen in our homes, our neighborhoods, our churches, and our governments if we would die to self so that we might live again in Christ? Its disciples like Lazlo Tokés who transform their world. They know that life is really something to die for!

Every Easter I remember Christian Dance. He was only six when he died. We watched in horror as the cancer ravaged his little body. Several days before he died we experienced the annual visit of the butterflies as they migrated through Tulsa on the way south. They usually only stayed a few days before moving on, but during those precious few days they filled our city with a frenzied riot of magnificently-bright yellow.

Someone brought Christian a huge yellow butterfly that had been captured and put in a glass jar. I watched as little Christian held that bottle in his hand without smiling. Then he said to Marcia, "He's not free, mommy. He's trapped just like me in my body. I can't run anymore, and he can't fly. Please let him go, mommy." So Marcia opened the window of the hospital room, unscrewed the lid, and let the butterfly escape. Christian intently watched him fly away out the

window. After a few moments a faint smile crossed his face. “Mommy, soon I’m going to leave this body and fly away to heaven, just like that butterfly.” We all struggled to hold back our tears.

A couple of weeks later, all the butterflies had long disappeared and we buried little Christian. Gary and Marcia were disconsolate with grief, as were we all. A friend and I drove them home after the funeral. We couldn’t imagine the pain of returning to that empty house.

But, as we turned down that country lane, an amazing—even miraculous—sight greeted us. The front lawn and trees were covered with yellow butterflies. As Marcia walked across that living yellow carpet, we all watched in wonder. As the butterflies scattered into the air, one of them circled back and landed on her nose. For the longest time it gently caressed her nose with its wings and then flew away.

Like a dead seed multiplying life, it is a mystery how those butterflies were still in that yard so many days after the rest had left. But Marcia knew that God was giving her a message. Her son had died encased in a cocoon of death, but he had risen like a butterfly to fly away to heaven. Her little boy’s hope came from the words of Jesus that he had learned in Sunday school, and it is the hope of every disciple: You can’t *really* live until you die.

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