

“The Day I Died”

Romans Wasn't Read in a Day – part #5

Romans 6:1-14

Spoiler alert: In case it wasn't immediately obvious, I am not, in fact, dead. My heart is still beating, my lungs are working, and last time I had my annual physical, my doctor did not suspect I was a vampire, zombie, or other supernatural creature. However, I titled this message, “The Day I Died,” to exaggerate a point: for a Christian, transition to new life in Christ can actually be compared to physical death.

How many of you have ever moved to a new house? My family has lived in six towns in the last 20 years. That means, from Marshall to St. Ignace, there are five houses where we once slept, ate, raised our children, had birthday parties, and so on. And that doesn't even include my childhood home, which I saw in Tawas last week. Here's the strange thing: whenever I drive past one of these towns, I have a strong desire to cruise slowly through my old neighborhood and look at the house. True story: when I picked up my brother in Traverse City two weeks ago, I actually took a detour and went past our old house in Bellaire. Although I was sorely tempted, I didn't stop. Here's why: I no longer live there. That house isn't mine anymore.

I have not had any near-death experiences, but I have gone through many major life changes, including moving. I've lived in a foreign country. I've changed my career from engineering to ministry. I've gotten married, had three children. Some of those changes were natural, some of them not so much. Yet, in each transition, a part of me “died.” It was no longer possible to go back and live the old way in the old place.

In John 12:24-26, Jesus famously said, “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much grain. He who loves his life will lose it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.” (NKJV)

Christians live with a strange paradox. To gain your life, you have to lose it. Jesus uses the example of a seed. When buried in the ground, a seed experiences a form of death; yet with water, sunlight, and warmth, that “dead” seed becomes

a new plant, as different as an oak tree is from an acorn. That is how Jesus wants us to live our lives. Filled with the love of God and the knowledge that we are forgiven, our thoughts, words, actions should be remarkably different than before we met Jesus. It's as different as moving from a shack in the woods to a five-bedroom townhouse in the suburbs, except the “house” is really us. Jesus is our new homeowner.

Our society has a weird relationship with death. On one hand, no one likes to write their own will, plan their own funeral, or talk about their own mortality, even though we know at some point, we will all pass away. Yet we commonly exaggerate, saying, “I’m starving!” “You’re killing me!” “I died laughing,” and “I was scared to death.” In pop culture, people are fascinated with ghosts, vampires, zombies, and more.

I think the church should teach the exact opposite viewpoint. Until we met Christ, we were ghosts – we were dead in our sin. We were zombies, walking around without purpose, allowing sin to eat our brains, hearts, and bodies. OK, that's a little gross, but by comparison, our real lives in Christ a true resurrection. As Paul says, “If anyone is in Christ, they are a new creation. The old life has gone; the new life has come.” (2 Cor. 5:17)

Paul spills a lot of ink trying to get this idea straight in our heads, explaining this spiritual truth, that new life in Christ is a radical change. Remember, Paul knew what it meant to die to your old life. He used to be a persecutor of Christians, a zealous Pharisee, someone controlled by anger and pride. Then he saw Jesus in a brilliant light, and Paul became the greatest missionary the world has even seen. People literally didn't believe it was the same man. Listen to Acts 9:20-21 - “At once Paul began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God. All those who heard him were astonished and asked, ‘Isn't he the man who raised havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on this name? And hasn't he come here to take them as prisoners to the chief priests?’”

Do you know what Paul called his former life? “Garbage.” “Rubbish.” (Philippians 3:8) The only thing that mattered to him now was Christ, and Paul was determined to make his new life count.

Look again at what Paul's words in Romans 6:1-4. “What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means! We are

those who have died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.”

Paul is answering the rhetorical question, “If Jesus forgives us, why can't we intentionally continue sinning?” Even after we choose Jesus as our Savior, we still must choose whether or not to continue our old habits. It's like asking, “If I just had a triple bypass surgery, why can't I eat a bacon-double cheeseburger every day?” The answer seems obvious, but yet, that is how some Christians try to live. No, Paul says, we died to sin. He uses an analogy from baptism. We were buried with Christ, so we could be resurrected with him.

I've officiated burials and baptisms, and I love comparison Paul speaks of. Going into the water is like being buried. Coming back out of the water is like returning to life, but a totally different life: an oak tree from an acorn, a butterfly from a cocoon, a chicken from an egg. Christians are commanded to surrender our lives to God so that we can fully embrace the new life Christ offers us. Holding on to anything in the past is like trying to move back into the old house when it's empty, or worse, when someone else is living in it.

If we're going to live as Christ intends, there are several questions each one of us needs to answer. First and foremost, will you die to your old life of sin and accept the love, grace, and forgiveness Jesus offers you? Will you let Jesus come in and rearrange your life, your heart, your priorities? Will you begin a loving relationship with your Creator?

I'm going to assume, for the sake of this message, that you answered “Yes” to that first set of questions. So allow me to get practical. I guess the old engineer in me is still trying to come out. Let's think about these questions next:

What does it mean to die to sin? What does it mean to die to myself?
What does it mean to die with Christ?

If you've ever tried giving up a bad habit, saying, overeating or swearing, you know how difficult it is to die to yourself. In fact, it's really impossible. It is no coincidence that the first two of the 12 Steps in AA are: 1) admit you are

powerless over your problem, and 2) believe that a higher power can restore your life.¹

So let me conclude with three ideas, three steps of my own, that we can all do to die to ourselves so that we can live for Christ

First, surrender. Give up control. Admit you are powerless. Take your hands off of the steering wheel of your life. A good friend of mine has this poster that succinctly sums up the fundamental truth of the universe. 1) There is a God. 2) You are not He.

If we live to only serve ourselves, we will never experience resurrection in Christ. If we let go of ourselves, not only will we find our lives, as Jesus promised, we will actually find the joy, contentment, and peace that we are seeking. There is a reason Paul began Romans with the words, "Paul, a slave of Christ." Paul had learned the secret to contentment: he lived to serve Christ alone, not himself.

To die to yourself, you have to surrender. That's the first step. The second step is to rethink your purpose in life. The goal of life is not to be happy. It is not to consume and live for pleasure. The real purpose you were created was to worship God Almighty. Rick Warren says, "You were planned for God's pleasure."

I admit, I died a little at my ordination service a few weeks ago. According to our UM polity, I serve "at the pleasure of the bishop." Ordination is a life-long call to ministry, to the appointment system, to living in connection with other Methodists, laity and clergy. I know that my purpose now is to serve God by worshipping Him, loving others, and to offer my body as a living sacrifice for God. (Romans 12:1) I fully accept that call and purpose. I, in fact, surrender to it, for the sake of Christ.

Surrender. Rethink your purpose. The third step is focus on what is eternal. And by "eternal," I don't actually mean the "afterlife." If you've been around me long enough, you've heard me say, "Eternal life starts the very moment you believe in Christ, and it continues on into heaven for eternity." That's very different than saying eternal life starts when you die or when you go to heaven. In fact, I believe that's a very boring view of Christianity. At camp, my friend, Rod said, "Staying stuck is a tragedy." Every hero has a journey to take.

¹ <https://www.aa.org/the-twelve-steps>

Luke Skywalker leaves Tatoonine. Frodo Baggins leaves the Shire. Ariel leaves the ocean. The Apostle Paul didn't stay inside after he was baptized, waiting for Jesus to take him to heaven. Paul traveled through the known world. Paul was laser-focused on what was eternal. In the same way, everything we do in this life should bring God's eternal kingdom one step closer to reality.

Surrender. Rethink your purpose. Focus on what's eternal. That's how you begin to die to yourself and live for Christ.

At some point, you've probably come across one of those little pamphlets or tracts that start with this question: "If you died today, would you go to heaven?" As much as I appreciate the evangelistic effort, I would turn that question on its head. "If you have already died in Christ, how are you living today so that others can experience the kingdom of heaven now?" When you can answer that question, you will be following God's will.

Let's pray.

Memory Verse:

2 Corinthians 5:17 (NLT)

"This means that anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun!"

Reflection Questions:

1. When have you made a major change in your lifestyle? (A career change, a new health habit, etc.) How did you change? What was your motivation?
2. What are some "old things" (habits, addictions, choices) that people cling to in life? What feeling and emotions weigh us down?
3. What does it mean to be baptized into Christ's death and raised with him into new life? What are the marks of that life?
4. Baptism can have different meanings and forms. How do you understand baptism?
5. What is good about a fresh start? Why do we need that new beginning in Jesus?