

The Christian's Right Perspective

'Whoever loves his life loses it' (John 12:25)

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We have a number of Scriptures to read to prepare us for our study, first of all from the Old Testament and then from the New. So we begin to read in the book of Genesis.

Now Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers they hated him even more. He said to them, 'Hear this dream that I have dreamed: Behold, we were binding sheaves in the field, and behold, my sheaf arose and stood upright. And behold, your sheaves gathered round it and bowed down to my sheaf.' His brothers said to him, 'Are you indeed to reign over us? Or are you indeed to rule over us?' So they hated him even more for his dreams and for his words. Then he dreamed another dream and told it to his brothers and said, 'Behold, I have dreamed another dream. Behold, the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to me.' But when he told it to his father and to his brothers, his father rebuked him and said to him, 'What is this dream that you have dreamed? Shall I and your mother and your brothers indeed come to bow ourselves to the ground before you?' And his brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the saying in mind.

So Joseph went after his brothers and found them at Dothan. They saw him from afar, and before he came near to them they conspired against him to kill him. They said to one another, 'Here comes this dreamer. Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits. Then we will say that a fierce animal has devoured him, and we will see what will become of his dreams.' (37:5–11, 17–20)

Before the year of famine came, two sons were born to Joseph. Asenath, the daughter of Potiphara priest of On, bore them to him. Joseph called the name of the firstborn Manasseh. 'For,' he said, 'God has made me forget all my hardship and all my father's house.' The name of the second he called Ephraim, 'For God has made me fruitful in the land of my affliction.' (41:50–52)

Now let's turn to the New Testament, and the Gospel of John.

Jesus therefore no longer walked openly among the Jews, but went from there to the region near the wilderness, to a town called Ephraim, and there he stayed with the disciples. (11:54)

And Jesus answered them, 'The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. If anyone serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there will my servant be also. If anyone serves me, the Father will honour him. Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? "Father, save me from this hour"? But for this purpose I have come to this

hour. Father, glorify your name.' Then a voice came from heaven: 'I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.' (12:23–28)

God give us fruitful understanding of his word.

As our topic this evening, I wish to refer to the words of our Lord Jesus that we have just read in John 12:25: 'Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.' And since that is the main thrust of our study, let's spend just a few moments making sure we understand its basic terms.

The Greek words involved

In the Greek, from which our English versions are made, there are two words for *life* in this verse. One is the Greek word *psyche* and you can forget that now because it means life in the sense of *soul life*. It's a word frequently used in the New Testament and sometimes it's a job to know how to translate it in any particular context. Sometimes it will mean 'life', but it is also the standard word for 'soul'. Therefore, for our purposes, let's translate it as 'soul life', meaning not just our life measured by so many years of breathing and digesting our food and so on, but life in its full sense—all that goes to make up human life.

Time is a part of our life, and when we talk about our lives, we frequently talk about 'spending' them. You can't put your life in a box in the bank until the Lord comes from heaven, and then say, 'Half a minute, Lord, I put my soul in the bank; let me go and collect it.' You can't do that with life. Ordinary physical life has a time element to it and we have to spend it: we are spending our life every minute of every day.

But then, life is not just physical existence. Our *love* is a part of our life, surely. Isn't your love part of you? You have to spend it because you can't keep love in a box. And then of course, there's our *energy* and our *talents* and our *hate*. All these things are bound up with our soul life and we have to spend it.

The other Greek word for life is *zōé*. 'Zoology' is its common English translation, but in the Greek New Testament it means more than animal life. It's the word that is consistently used in connection with *eternal life*, and eternal life is a *spiritual* life. So in this one verse there are the two ideas of life. There's life in this world—our soul life that we constantly have to spend. Then there's a question of eternal life. We shall have to think about the connection between the two of them and then seriously consider our Lord's word when he said, 'Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.'

What is meant by 'whoever hates his life in this world'?

Here we've got to be very careful. It does *not* mean—let me underline that 'not'—that we have to despise or dislike our life in this world. It's God who gives us our life, and every hour of every day we ought to be grateful to him for the gift of life. We must avoid all misrepresentations of Christianity that have taught people to go and shut themselves away in a secluded monastery or something, to be hard on the body and despise life in all its fullness. That is not Christian doctrine. 'God richly provides us with everything to enjoy' (see 1 Tim

6:17). He is the author and preserver of our daily life and has put mechanisms within our bodies that if we injure ourselves or temporarily become ill, the body has means of helping itself to recover. We're not to hate life then, in the modern sense of the word 'hate'.

The biblical use of the word is based in Old Testament Hebrew. Let me quote you an example. Jacob had two wives and their two servants, so he had four in all. The first one he married was Leah, but he didn't really want her. He preferred the second one, Rachel. The Bible says, 'When the LORD saw that Leah was *hated* . . .' (Gen 29:31). What does that mean? That Jacob couldn't stand the sight of her and hated the woman every time he looked at her? Of course not. She was the mother of quite a number of his children. Hate in this kind of context means that she took second place to Rachel, the favourite wife. In that Hebrew idiom, 'to hate' is to give second place to something.

So in this verse, 'Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life,' our Lord is saying, 'Whoever gives his life second place in this world, behind some other big priority, will keep it for eternal life.'

So much then for our study of the basic words of our text, and now we come to another matter.

The context in which the Lord Jesus spoke these words

It was after he had raised Lazarus from the dead (John 11). Instead of the authorities being delighted and awestruck at such a wonder that Jesus Christ could raise a dead body from the grave and give it new life, they gathered together in council and determined to destroy him. They said to themselves, 'If we let this man go, then the Romans will come and do away with our place [the temple] and our nation.' The high priest said, 'You know nothing at all; you must be more skilled in politics. It's better that this one man would die rather than the whole nation perish' (see John 11:47-50). He meant that Jesus politically had to die, so that the nation could be saved, but God was behind it all and Jesus had to die for his people and for the children of God spread throughout the world. So, when he raised Lazarus from the dead the Jewish authorities took their final decision to bring him to his death. When they decided that, our Lord withdrew from them.

The significance of Ephraim

With his flair for referring to the Old Testament, John tells us that he departed to a place called Ephraim. Why bother to tell us the name of this obscure town? Ephraim means 'fruitful'. When Joseph had come to power in Egypt and Pharaoh had given him the keys to every granary and made him Minister for Agriculture and Fisheries, he married an Egyptian girl, the daughter of Potiphera the high priest. She eventually gave him two sons. The first one he called Manasseh, meaning 'forgetful': 'God has made me forget all my hardship and all my father's house' (Gen 41:51). Because of all the glory of his present position he called the second son Ephraim, meaning 'fruitful': 'God has made me fruitful in the land of my affliction' (v. 52).

So our Lord came and dwelt in Ephraim and he subsequently said of himself, 'unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit' (John 12:24).

The story of Joseph

So let's think first of all about Joseph. Genesis tells us that as a young lad his father gave him a coat of many colours and his brothers didn't like him for that. But there was more. Joseph had dreams and he told his brothers that he dreamed that they were in the harvest field and Joseph's sheaf of corn stood upright and the other eleven sheaves all bowed down before his sheaf. The brothers weren't slow to see what that meant. 'Are you telling us,' they said, 'that you're going to rule over us?' (see Gen 37:5–8). 'What pompous cheek,' they thought, 'typical teenager. We'll see that never happens.'

But then he had another dream. He told his brothers, 'The sun, the moon, and eleven stars all fell down and worshipped my star.' Well that didn't just upset his brothers, it upset his father too. His father said, 'Young man, get in your place. What ideas have you got in your head? Shall I and your mother and your eleven brothers bow down and worship you?' And his brothers hated him for it, though his father stored it up in his memory (see vv. 9–11). You see, the question was, what was the cause of those dreams?

The Bible is very realistic when it comes to dreams. It says in one place that dreams can come because you've had such a busy day that, when you try to sleep, the mind keeps working (see Eccl 5:3). You're churning over the details of the day and trying to make plans for the future, and it comes out in very bizarre dreams. Other dreams come because you've had too much supper, and you can't digest it. But the Old Testament says that in those days some dreams came from God (see Gen 20:3). Suppose God was behind Joseph's dreams? So his father kept the matter in his mind.

Presently, while his brothers were away with the flocks, Jacob sent Joseph to see how they were getting on. Eventually he found the way to them and, when they saw him coming in the distance, the eleven brothers said to themselves, 'Ha, look who's coming. If it isn't this dreamer.' They decided they would slit his throat and cast him into one of the pits, 'then we shall see what will become of his dreams' (see vv. 18–20).

In its beautifully vivid way, the story goes on to tell us what became of Joseph. He eventually became the man who was to interpret Pharaoh's dreams. Being advised by God about the famine that was to come, he counselled Pharaoh as to what to do. He saved Egypt economically, and its citizens from death by starvation. And not only Egypt, but a lot of the little countries around, and even his father and brothers in Canaan. No wonder, when his second child was born, he called him Ephraim. 'God has made me fruitful,' he said, 'in the land of my affliction.'

Joseph's God-given objectives

Then we ask an important question: how did he get from his initial dreams to their fulfilment in Egypt? You'll know the story. First of all, his brothers hated him and decided to kill him. He was thrown into the pit and then, at Judah's suggestion, they decided not to kill him but make money out of him. They sold him to some Gentile merchantmen who were passing by.

He prospered in Egypt and was faithful in the house of one of the leading politicians of the day, until he was falsely accused by the Egyptian's wife and put in prison. Many a night before he went to bed, I suspect he wondered and wondered, 'What about my dreams? Will they ever come true?'

After some years, two of his fellow prisoners had dreams as well. One of them was the chief steward and the other was the baker. Joseph interpreted their dreams to the effect that Pharaoh would release both of them from prison. One would be restored to office, to his former glory, and the other would be executed. As he said goodbye to the one who was going to be promoted, he said, 'You will remember me, won't you, when it goes well with you?' But the man completely forgot Joseph for the time being, and the prison door shut on him again (see 40:14, 23). I wonder how many times he asked, 'What about those dreams? Will they ever come true?'

Yes, they came true, but we notice what he had to go through first. It was by the way of suffering, down into the pit, and long years in the dungeon before he became fruitful. Then he called his son Ephraim, 'God has made me fruitful in the land of my affliction.'

Did our Lord have any God-given objectives?

And so we come back to our Lord. Remember where we left him? He was in a little town called Ephraim. Having raised Lazarus from the dead, he discovered that the Jewish authorities were now determined to kill him. What should he do? What should his tactics be? I hesitate to use the word and I must put it in inverted commas. You'll know what I mean if I say to you, do you suppose that at this time our Lord had any God-given 'dream' of the future, any God-given objective?

Of course he had.

The story of Lazarus

Let us notice some of the things that the Lord did just at this stage. John 11 tells us how Lazarus, a friend of his, took ill. The man's sisters sent a note to the Lord Jesus that said, 'he whom you love is ill' (v. 3). They thought he would come at once and heal Lazarus, but he didn't. He stayed where he was and his friend Lazarus died. To the disciples' astonishment, our Lord said to them, 'I am glad that I was not there' (v. 15). That must have been difficult for them to understand. 'Lord, why didn't you heal him from a distance? You could have healed him, and even now you could raise him from the dead.' 'No,' said Christ.

He let the man die and then made it very clear what his programme was. He came to Bethany and raised the dead Lazarus from his grave. It was a marvellous miracle and a sign that one day the Lord shall come.

The coming of Christ for believers

For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. (1 Thess 4:16-17)

When Lazarus was risen from the dead they had to take the grave clothes off him, but eventually he went back to death. It was only a sign. When the Lord Jesus rose from the dead, they didn't have to take the grave clothes off him, he came right through them and left them behind in the sepulchre. What a wonderful thing it shall be when he comes again. That shall be the great reality of which the raising of Lazarus was but a sign.

Our Lord to Martha, 'Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live' (John 11:25). You say, 'What do you mean, "though he die"? Doesn't everybody die?'

Not everybody will die, for some believers will still be alive when the Lord comes. But even if believers have died, 'yet shall [they] live'. Live in resurrection life, of course—of the first resurrection. 'And everyone who lives *and believes in me* shall never die' (v. 26).

If you should be alive when the Lord Jesus comes and you are a believer, you'll never die physically. You'll be caught up together with the resurrected saints to meet the Lord in the air.

May I ask you a question? When our Lord raised Lazarus from the tomb, was he aware of that great coming event when 'the Lord shall descend from heaven with a shout' to call his people home?

Of course he was aware of it.

The marriage supper of the Lamb

After he came back from the city he went to Bethany, and Martha and Mary and Lazarus made him a supper. What a lovely occasion that was. There were the living sisters, Martha and Mary, and Lazarus their brother, raised from the dead. They sat at this supper in the presence of the Lord Jesus. Can you think of anything like it in the future?

You say, 'Well of course, when the Lord comes, the marriage supper of the Lamb shall take place.'

Oh, the joy and delight to be at last at home with the Lord. Dear ones who have died in Christ will be raised again, and if we're alive until that event we will be caught up to be forever with the Lord. We shall feast with him in the paradise of God.

The coming of the King

Then our Lord left Bethany. He told his apostles to provide him with a donkey, and he rode into Jerusalem on its back. What for? To deliberately fulfil the prophecy of Zechariah: 'Behold [Jerusalem], your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey' (9:9).

I ask you again, when our Lord took that donkey and rode into Jerusalem, was he not aware that when he returns to Jerusalem for the second time, he shall not ride on the back of a donkey: he shall come on the very clouds of heaven (see Matt 24:30)? The wonder of it, that we shall see him. 'Oh, I shall see him descending the sky, | Coming for me, for me'.¹

It caused such a stir in the city that the Pharisees said to one another, 'Gentlemen, you're getting absolutely nowhere. Look, the world has gone after him' (see John 12:19), and they were the more determined to destroy him. 'The world has gone after him,' and it shall be so

¹ Author unknown, 'Jesus my Saviour to Bethlehem came', pre-1895.

one day. When he comes again the whole world shall bow the knee, willingly or enforced, to the Saviour.

So these events were not only historical, they cast a shadow of greater events to come.

Suffering had to come first

Joseph had his dreams, God-given dreams of what the future should hold, but he had to face the fact that, to be fruitful and supreme, he must go through the experience of suffering. All these are wonderful signs of what shall yet be. The resurrection of Lazarus, the supper with the Lord at Bethany, the coming of the King into Jerusalem, the world gone after him—but how could it happen?

Our Lord stayed in Ephraim until the time was come, and then he went to Jerusalem. He gathered his apostles around him and said the words that have been the point of our study, 'unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit' (John 12:24). It is a law of nature that a kernel of wheat left on the shelf remains a kernel of wheat. There's no fruit. If ever it is to bear fruit, it must fall into the ground and metaphorically die. Our Lord was now facing reality and John records his words, 'Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? "Father, save me from this hour"?' (v. 27). We must not underrate the reality of what our Lord said. His soul was troubled. Must he 'fall into the ground and die'? Was there no other way? He saw the cost of it, and said, 'Now is my soul troubled.'

Was it too costly?

Tell me, if this great work of redemption was going to cost our Lord so much, was it really worth it? For instance, he raised Lazarus from the dead: he had the power to do it by his summons and command. But it was just a physical revivification and Lazarus went back to death. If there is to be a real resurrection and Lazarus raised from the dead, and we are changed and caught up to heaven, is it worth it if it meant that our Lord must die?

They made him a supper in Martha's house and the fellowship was lovely; but if ever they were to be brought to the marriage supper of the Lamb, it would mean our Lord's suffering and death. Was it worth it? Even as they feasted together, one of his disciples gave his opinion that the amount Mary had spent on the ointment was a waste of money. 'He's not worth that much' (see 12:4-5). Many of the other disciples were taken in by it and joined with Judas in his complaint.

What about us? If you had been standing by the Lord Jesus when he uttered those words, 'Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say?' would you have tried to comfort him and say, 'But, Lord, it would really be worth saving me'? Would you? What was a whole world of people to him? He had created the heavens and the galaxies and everything else; he could create another human race if he wanted. Shall we tell him, 'Lord, it is worth your suffering'? The crowds were about to welcome him as he came into Jerusalem. He knew enough to know that a few days later they would crucify him.

Was it worth it?

There was no other way

To translate those historical happenings into the glorious future, there was no other way. He must 'fall into the ground and die.'

'Now is my soul troubled,' says he. 'And what shall I say? "Father, save me from this hour"?'

And then he added, 'But for this very cause, I came to this hour; if I don't go through with it, the whole reason why I was born into this world falls to the ground.' And quickly he added, 'Father, glorify your name.'

'Then a voice came from heaven: "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again"' (see vv. 27-28).

We have sung his praise because of his great decision, but in our closing moments we must listen to the principle applied to us. Shall we listen? Do we want to be fruitful for God? 'Whoever loves his life shall lose it' — whoever counts his *soul life* as a secondary thing in this world shall turn the temporary into something eternal. But if I'm going to be asked to count my physical life with all that it involves — my soul life, my loves, my ambitions, my time, my talents, my money and whatever else — not as the primary objective, that will pose another question.

Do we have dreams for the future?

May I put it to you? Have you got any dreams, or do you just go muddling along? Young folks have dreams. What are your dreams for life and for the future?

You say, 'Yes, I have dreams. I know what I want to be. I'm going to work hard at school and get my exams. Then I'm going to get a career and the most beautiful wife there ever was, a decent home and a car and other such things, and I'm going to do well.'

Yes, why shouldn't you, but is that your total dream? The old Greeks used to distinguish between something that is an end in itself, and something that is merely a means to an end. What's the difference?

Sometimes parents are asked, 'What is your aim for your son?'

'I'm going to get him through to a college or university or something.'

'Whatever for?'

'So that he can get a good job.'

'I see, and earn a lot of money?'

'Yes, why not?'

'What for? What does he want the money for?'

'Don't be silly. He's got to live, and he wants to get a house and a wife and children. That's what he needs the money for.'

'Oh, I see.'

'Children today are very expensive, and if you want to get them into university it's going to cost you a lot of money.'

'I can see that. So he's come to university to get a good degree, a good job, and earn a good amount of money, so that he can marry a good wife and get a nice house and have his children well educated, so that they can go to university. What will they want to go to university for?'

'So that they can get a good job and earn a lot of money, and get a house and a wife and then have children.'

'Oh, I see, and what's that for?'

'What are you talking about? So that they can go to university and get a good job. Isn't that all there is in life?'

For some people it is, but what they're in danger of doing is taking the *means* of life as though it were the *goal* of life. That's a desperate mistake. We are to live to the full, but let me ask you, what's the purpose of living? Is it just to have a good career, a wife, children, a nice house, and enjoy yourself? You've got bigger dreams than that, haven't you?

Have you got any really big dreams?

You say, 'What are the big dreams?'

Ah, that the Lord is coming, and they're more than dreams, they're God-given certainties. Visions of what the future shall be when the Lord comes and we're raised to be with him and, as Scripture says, we shall reign with him (2 Tim 2:12). That's the big goal; that's the big dream. That's the reason the whole universe was made and we within it. It's God's vision for the future. To go after lesser things, make them our dreams and neglect the big things, is to reap eternal disappointment: 'He who loves his life, and lives just for this world, shall lose it.'

The old poem has it right. 'Only one life, 'twill soon be past, | Only what's done for Christ will last'.² Those who are prepared to treat these things as merely a means to an end, and make Christ and his glorious future their main objective, shall find that even the temporary activities of life take on an eternal value.

And so we come to the end of our study with the words of our Lord ringing in our ears, 'If anyone serves me, he must follow me' (John 12:26). Follow him where? As he spoke, he was on his way to Jerusalem to give his life as a ransom for many. It's not that we have to atone for sins—of course not, but he calls us to follow him deliberately, training ourselves in his values and being prepared for whatever sacrifice and suffering and cost it involves, so that, by his grace, we may bring forth fruit for God, not only here in time but in God's great eternity too.

Shall we pray.

Blessed Lord Jesus, we have stood with thee, as here on earth thou didst face the great issue before thee. The purpose of thy coming was to fall into the ground and die so that there might come an uncountable harvest for the glory of God and the salvation of men. We thank thee for thy sense of eternal values, and that the saving of us was part of thy purpose. Help us therefore now, Lord, to follow thee. Give us good, clear and right perspectives on life and good vision of the future, we do

² C. T. Studd (1860-1931), 'Only one life.'

beseech thee, so that 'the eternal glories gleaming afar may nerve our weak endeavour'.³ And as we go about life here, thankful for it and all thy benefits, may we look beyond it to thy great eternity. So help us, we pray, and make our study fruitful in our lives to thy glory. For Jesus Christ, thy Son's sake. Amen.

³ James G. Small (1817-1888), 'I've found a friend; O such a friend' (1866).

About the Author

DAVID W. GOODING is Professor Emeritus of Old Testament Greek at Queen's University, Belfast and a member of the Royal Irish Academy. He has taught the Bible internationally and lectured on both its authenticity and its relevance to philosophy, world religions and daily life. He has published scholarly articles on the Septuagint and Old Testament narratives, as well as expositions of Luke, John, Acts, Hebrews, the New Testament's use of the Old Testament, and several books addressing arguments against the Bible and the Christian faith. His analysis of the Bible and our world continues to shape the thinking of scholars, teachers and students alike.