

The Safety Net

National Church Growth Research Center

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"Dying to Self"

Dear ones,

I've been thinking a lot about death recently.

A little over a week ago we had the annual Relay for Life events in Hood River to raise money to seek a cure for cancer. I walked countless laps around a track, lit luminarias in Edna Mae's honor, and reminisced with a number of her friends concerning those wonderful things that she said and did.

In the course of a week I had three friends die. Juanita Beeks in Hood River, a strong Christian woman that I had known for almost fifty years. My Christian brother Bill Pile in Los Angeles, who was my friend and prayer partner from almost twenty years back. And Tammy Faye Bakker Messner, who was not really a friend, but an acquaintance, and the friend of a friend. (You can read what I said about her on my blog of July 23.)

But all these deaths were physical. They involve separation, finality, and cessation of life. But they also look ahead to the hope of a new and better life.

And at the time I was thinking about physical death, I was also considering some Biblical teaching about a very different kind of death that we actually *choose*.

Jesus *chose death* because without it there could be no redemption and no resurrection. As much as we fear death and try to flee from it, there is evidence in the entire world that death can lead to life. *Better* life. A seed has to be planted in the ground and die before it can come forth in a much greater and better form.

The apostle Paul talked about *dying to self*, and *dying with Christ*. At the very time that I was saddened by the deaths of some friends and acquaintances, I was rejoicing at the baptisms of some teen-agers who were thus dying to self and coming to life in Christ. I was also working with a number of individuals who had been victimized by sinful behavior and habits who were deciding to put those things to death and begin accepting abundant life.

So death is a paradox. It's like going through a door. From one side the door is an exit. From the other side it is an entrance. Same door, different aspects.

In *The Great Divorce*, C. S. Lewis told of a man who had a pet lizard that sat on his shoulder. It could be cute, even endearing. But it was not really the man's friend. It was a beast, which needed the cooperation of the man in order to exist. It sought the ultimate destruction of the man. And the only way the man could ever be freed from it was to kill it.

It was hard to consider such. Surely the lizard could be tamed. Surely it wasn't so bad.

But it was bad. It was evil. It *had* to be killed.

So the man killed it, and found freedom that he had only dreamed of before.

In some research on breaking addictions, I interviewed over one hundred people who had successfully stopped smoking. They had all started young. They had all smoked at least twenty years, two and three packs a day. Camels. Luckies. The worst kind.

They had wanted to stop. They had stopped, and started again. Countless times. They couldn't stop. They tried to cut back. They made New Year's resolutions. They tried hypnosis. They tried the patch. But they couldn't stop.

But then, one day, they *quit!* Cold turkey. It was not easy. But they *quit!* They threw their last cigs in the garbage and said, "That's it. Never again."

And it worked.

How?

That was my question.

And they didn't give me any detailed answers. They just *quit!*

There usually was some strong incentive. In some cases the doctor said, "*You are developing emphysema and if you don't quit you'll be dead in six months.*" Others had portions of their lips and tongues removed because of cancer. Still others were told by their mates: "*I'm tired of kissing you and feeling like I'm licking an ashtray. You either quit, or I'm gone.*"

I guess we do most of the things we do because there is some pay-off. And when it gets to the point that the pay-off is better for stopping than it is for continuing, we change course.

People did tell me that that time that they made the solid decision was different than the way it had been before. Before they had wanted to quit, had thought they should quit, and had hoped to quit. But those things didn't work. What worked was when they *quit!* Period! When the beast was killed.

If you're struggling with something right now that always seems to get the best of you, try reading Romans 6. Read it slowly and carefully, and note the usage of the word "*death.*"

It seems to me that Paul is saying that there are two doors before us. Only two. One of them says "*Life.*" The other says "*Death.*" But, unknown to us, our Enemy switched the signs. He's a good salesman. So he advertises "*life*" that involves indulgences, pleasures, and personal choices galore. Jesus said most people take that door.

But behind that door that says "*Life*" is "*Death.*" Bill Cosby used to have a routine in which a number of people at work on Monday morning were all talking about how much FUN they had had partying on Saturday night. But in their FUN, they had gotten sick, vomited, had fights, had wrecks, and passed out. The next morning they had hangovers, and regrets. But it had all been FUN! At least that's what they kept telling

themselves.

The door that says “*Death*” actually leads to life. Just as Jesus chose to die, as far as the world was concerned, and found resurrection and eternal life, so can we.

Paul is not talking about suicide. He’s talking about something that we “*reckon*,” or “*decide*,” or “*choose*.” It’s a MIND thing. One of the problems in our society is that we do more FEELING than THINKING. Our FEELERS take precedence over our THINKERS.

And our Enemy again contributes to that. He NEVER tells the truth. He doesn’t want us to know about OUTCOMES. He only wants us to think of the desires and pleasures of NOW.

God, on the other hand, loves us so much that He tells us the truth. He tells us COSTS and CONSEQUENCES. It sounds negative and restrictive. But it ultimately brings LIFE.

The counselors who have had the greatest success rates in helping people break the addictive cycle don’t particularly like 12-step programs or anything that leads you to see addictions as diseases. They think you empower a problem by assuming it is so big that you never really break free from it. You may fall off the wagon, have relapses, and need a sponsor and a Higher Power that are there for you at all times.

The most successful people, like Dr. Claudia Black, and Dr. John Bradshaw, agree with C. S. Lewis and the apostle Paul that there are some beasts that just need to be KILLED!

So many of us are looking for strength to help us fight the battle. But the New Testament emphasizes that the battle is ALREADY WON and our place is not storming up the mountain but STANDING in the victory of the Lord! Read the last few verses of Ephesians 6. When the Christian soldier is all dressed up in the Christian armor he does not go out to slay the dragon. He prays, and stands in the victory the Lord has already won!

I spent too much of my life trying to “please God,” rather than seeing the need to “trust God.” I’m coming to see that the more we “trust God” the easier it is to “please God.” (Read that statement again, dear friends. That’s something you can take to the bank!)

When Edna Mae died I was overwhelmed by the FINALITY of it. I had had years to prepare for her departure but I wasn’t even slightly prepared! I struggled with the finality, and wept over the finality, and wished I could change the finality.

But even in her death, God was showing me that that finality has a GOOD side. He was showing me that when we choose to die to sin, there can be FINALITY in that choice. If we really die to self and to sin, there IS finality. Sin no longer has any dominion over us! We walk in a new life. We stand in a new position. When we, as Christ, choose to die, God brings resurrection!

My only regret is that I didn’t see it sooner.

I’ve spent so much time and energy trying to live life on my own merit. And that choice was only leading to death.

Pick the right door my friends. Die to self. Die to sin. Resolve to KILL those destructive habits and

patterns.

Don't wait. Do it RIGHT NOW!

When we DIE with Christ, we are RAISED with Him, and we REIGN with Him. It is final! There's nothing like it!

Yours in Christ,
Silas