

How not to save your life

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[0 : 00] This morning's reading is from Luke chapter 17, verse 20 to 37. Once on being asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, Jesus replied, The coming of the kingdom of God is not something that can be observed.

Nor will people say, Here it is, or there it is, because the kingdom of God is in your midst. Then he said to his disciples, The time is coming when you will long to see one of the days of the Son of Man, but you will not see it.

People will tell you, There he is, or here he is. Do not go running off after them. For the Son of Man in his day will be like the lightning, which flashes and lights up the sky from one end to the other. But first, he must suffer many things and be rejected by this generation. Just as it was in the days of Noah, so also will it be in the days of the Son of Man.

People were eating, drinking, marrying and being given in marriage up to the day Noah entered the ark. Then the flood came and destroyed them all.

[1 : 21] It was the same in the days of Lot. People were eating and drinking, buying and selling, planting and building. But the day Lot left Sodom, fire and sulphur rained down from heaven and destroyed them all.

It will be just like this on the day the Son of Man is revealed. On that day, no one who is on the housetop with possessions inside should go down to get them.

Likewise, no one in the field should go back for anything. Remember Lot's wife. Whoever tries to keep their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life will preserve it.

I tell you, on that night two people will be in one bed. One will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding corn together.

One will be taken and the other left. Where, Lord? They asked. He replied, Where there is a dead body, there the vultures will gather.

[2 : 31] Well, my first question for you this morning is to ask you to consider who has the right to tell you how to live your life.

Who can direct what you will do? Maybe some of the younger children, maybe they will grudgingly admit that their parents have that authority. But it is, with good reason, a well-worn cliché to have the teenager slamming the door out the room yelling, You're not the boss of me.

And perhaps at the moment all of us, we're increasingly resentful of different people telling us what we can and cannot do. Various government authorities, not least. Some of us even questioning, do they actually have the right to require whatever it is that they require at the moment?

Even if their motives are good, do they have that authority? Do they have that right? The question is, who has the right to tell you what to do? We don't like being told what to do, do we?

At the worst extreme of that, I guess, we rightly condemn slavery in all of its forms. That kind of extreme case of people telling others what to do. And similarly, sadly, much too close to home.

[3 : 47] But we recognise, don't we, that one person in a marriage trying to control the other's behaviour, that that is a form of abuse. There is a really bad side to telling others what to do.

We don't like it ourselves. And yet, yet on the other end of this equation, the Heidelberg Catechism, written 450 years ago, give or take, it asks, what is your only comfort in life and death?

And the answer comes that I am not my own, but belong with body and soul, both in life and in death, to my faithful Saviour, Jesus Christ. I am not my own.

It asserts, doesn't it, this catechism, it asserts that to be not my own, that to surrender control and power and authority to another, it asserts that this is not just acceptable, but actually that this is our only true comfort.

It's good to let someone else be in charge. This catechism asserts that assurance in life and death, confidence comes from surrendering my will to another.

[4 : 57] I am not my own. And I'm sure part of what lies behind that answer in the catechism, I'm sure part of it is this verse that we're focusing on this morning. Luke 17, verse 33.

Whoever tries to keep their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life will preserve it. This attitude, this is one of the ways in which the Christian faith is radically counter-cultural, isn't it?

We're profoundly at odds with what's taught in our schools. We disagree with the messages that we're fed day after day by advertisers, by TV producers, by our newspapers, by our friends.

This assertion stands opposed to so much of what our culture says. In fact, it stands opposed to what really we would have to call our own instinctive expectations, doesn't it?

Our own hearts say to us, no one can tell me what to do. God says, give up your life. God says, give up your life. Now, maybe for some of you who are listening to me, maybe that prevailing message that comes into us, maybe that message makes sense.

[6 : 08] I mean, after all, absent faith in God, if you don't believe what God says in his word, if that's you, well then it makes sense, doesn't it? That preserving your life is your highest goal. And that's preserving your life in both senses of the word.

It's kind of preserving your life in the sense of avoiding death at almost any cost. And it's also preserving your life in the sense of clinging to it. Grasping your life as your own.

Asserting your right to say, I will do with it as I please. And avoiding anyone who tells you what to do. That makes sense. It does. It's a consistent worldview.

One life. Live it. Make the most of it. It makes sense. At least, it makes sense if you start from the premise that there is no God.

It makes sense if you presuppose that this life around us now that this is all there is. It makes sense if everything ends at death. Preserve life at all costs. Assert your own authority over what you will do.

[7 : 11] It makes sense. But Jesus says that isn't the whole picture. This verse comes in the context of Jesus talking about his coming return to earth.

When, says verse 34, of two people in one bed, one will be taken and the other left behind. And so on. Jesus lays out. Jesus says this life is not the whole picture.

You must lift your horizon. You must see beyond what is immediately before you. You must see the reality of your situation. And the truth of the matter is, if you try to keep your life, if you cling to your life at all costs, if you defend your autonomy against all comers, if you do that, you will lose your life. It's only in losing your life that you can preserve it. So my call to you this morning is simple. Give up your life.

Stop trying to preserve your life because you will not succeed. Give it up. Surrender totally to the King of Kings. Why? Because he is worth it.

[8 : 20] Because his glory deserves it. Because he demands it from you. And because he promises that therein you will find life. Friends, this is vitally important.

In many ways, this definitive once and for all giving up of our lives. This surrender to Jesus as Saviour and as Lord. In many ways, that is the most important thing for us to see this morning. This is the most important call. But it's not the end of it. In fact, that's just the beginning. I want to suggest that most of us who have done that, that most of us who have said to Jesus, I know I need you to save me.

Here's my life. I want to suggest that most of us who've said that, we've only begun the journey. How many of us? How many of us, if we're honest with ourselves, if we're honest with God, how many of us can actually say that we have lost our lives?

That's what's required here, verse 33, isn't it? Whoever loses their life will preserve it. Not whoever gives God a bit of their lives. Not whoever endures some minor discomfort.

[9 : 30] No, whoever loses their life will preserve it. You notice back in verse 22, did you notice most of this section, it's addressed to the disciples. It's addressed to people who are already following Jesus.

Surely verse 33, then, is a call to be more fully committed. It's a challenge to be completely devoted, isn't it? Because I have to warn you, I have to warn you, Jesus isn't really interested in a timeshare in your heart.

Jesus isn't really looking for part-time workers. Jesus demands total commitment 100% of the time. Revelation 3.16, Jesus warns the church in Laodicea, Because you are lukewarm, neither hot nor cold, I'm about to spit you out of my mouth.

Half-hearted isn't good enough. This isn't here a call to spend a couple of hours a week thinking about God, is it? No, Jesus says, come and die.

Luke 9.23, he says, Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. Take up their cross daily.

[10:38] John Piper says, Daily Christian living is daily Christian dying. He says, To die daily, the way Paul did.

To take up our cross daily, the way Jesus commanded. It is to embrace this life of loss for Christ's sake and to count it gain.

That comes from this book, John Piper, Don't Waste Your Life. This is an excellent book. It's well worth reading. If you want to find yourself wanting to dig in more after this morning, this would be a great book to get.

You can buy your own or you can borrow mine with all the handy highlightings of all the best bits already flagged up for you. Just give me a shout. You're welcome to borrow it. Here's the thing.

If you think that what God wants from you is a little bit of your time, you haven't understood what he's saying. If you think what he wants from you is some kind of partial commitment, you haven't understood who he is.

[11:50] You haven't understood what he's entitled to. So my call to you this morning is simple. Give up your life. All of it. This isn't a one-time thing.

This isn't a small thing. This isn't a minor thing. This isn't for when it's convenient. This changes everything. This demands that every moment be devoted to one purpose and one only, the glory of God.

This demands that we live and speak in such a way that the surpassing worth of Christ crucified is progressively seen and savoured by more and more people.

That it is increasingly savoured by us in our own lives and increasingly apparent to others around us that they too come to savour Christ, to rejoice in him crucified.

See, so often our ideas of what God expects are so small, aren't they? So everyday. So humdrum.

[12:46] Sometimes when somebody's trying to raise money, sometimes they'll say, well, just give £10 a month. That's the price of one cup of coffee a week. Surely you can afford that.

That's a fine strategy as far as it goes. It's not very ambitious though, is it? Do you think God wants you to spend slightly less money on coffee? Or do you think he claims authority over all of your finances?

We're so safe, so ordinary, so middle class, aren't we? We assume the same things everybody around us assumes. So we wouldn't say to a family, oh, you really don't need a bigger house. Your children really can share a room. It really won't hurt them. Instead of pouring your money into a fancier house, get real about how much money you could invest in the furtherance of God's purposes.

We wouldn't say it to another. Perhaps we wouldn't even cross our minds for ourselves. What about some actual sacrifice? Forget your pocket change.

[13:47] God demands authority in the big budget decisions. The holiday you're saving up for, the mortgage, the car payments, the retirement savings. God claims authority over these things. Not a few pence.

Hundreds and thousands of pounds. They're his. Not that it's wrong to buy these things. Not that we have to say no to all of them necessarily. But giving up your life might mean giving up a bit of comfort.

Don't you think? Yes. Yes, a few pounds a week from a bunch of people over the span of a year. It adds up, it does. In aggregate, it can and does make a difference.

But it's not that ambitious, is it? There's churches here in our own presbytery. Churches whose income is nowhere near enough to fund a full-time minister. In towns of thousands of people.

With barely, if any, credible gospel witness. We're going to make a lot more of a difference in that kind of a situation with a few hundred pounds a month than a couple of quid, aren't we?

[14:51] For some of us, for some of us, maybe giving up our lives includes giving away not 10% of our income, but 20%, 30%, 50%. And our money is but one small example of how our thinking is

so small.

We like our safe little ways of telling ourselves that we're doing something for Jesus. We sign the petition. We occasionally admit to our colleagues on a Monday morning that we were at church yesterday.

It's so small. What are you going to do when Christ calls you to sell your comfortable house here? To move and live in the schemes? To live with those who have been failed by our society and too often failed by the church as well?

What are you going to do when Jesus tells you to give up that comfortable salary? And to go and to serve? To go and to help others as a teacher or a nurse? When he tells you to surrender your time? To serve him with the time that you call your free time? To serve him with all of your time? What if he's calling you to be a church minister? To go and work for a Christian charity? What if he's calling you to these big things?

[15:56] We have to sit lightly, says Jesus, to even our lives. Verse 33. Cling to your life as though it were your position. As though you were captain of your destiny. Cling to your life and you will lose it.

Surrender your life to him and to his purposes. And he will preserve you unto everlasting life. Just think for a moment. Think what have men and women sacrificed for important causes down through the centuries?

The sacrifices made during World War II. The sacrifices we've made over the past year in the name of preserving life. Mother's Day today.

What sacrifices do parents make for their children every day? Sometimes small, sometimes huge. It's good. It's right. It's right to sacrifice for the sake of others. I am not for a moment diminishing that.

But what I am saying is the cause of Christ is greater than all of these other causes. Jesus, the glory of God is of greater worth than any other concern imaginable.

[17:03] So what sacrifice is too much for such a cause? How ill it becomes us that we willingly sacrifice for these lesser causes.

That which we will not sacrifice for the greater. If some were willing to give their todays for the sake of our tomorrows. Well, what price am I today?

For the sake of another's eternity. What price am I today for the sake of God's glory? What price am I today? Surely it is no price at all.

Because to me to live is Christ. And to die is gain. My friends, give up your lives. Some of you. Some of the older teenagers. Some of you, you're in the midst of university applications and interviews. Or you're making arrangements for whatever's next. Some of you are in the thick of that right now.

[18:11] I hope, I pray, that you're making those decisions sold out for God's glory. And his alone. I hope you've actually stopped to ask whether the path that school assumes you're on is the path God wants you to be on.

Maybe even stop to ask whether the path your parents assume you're on is the one God wants you to be on. Boys and girls, if you think, if you think that you're going to have fullness of life by pursuing the salary and the comfortable life, then you are buying into a lie.

It is not true. If you try to keep your life, you will lose it. If you try to claim it as your own, if you try to seek happiness in such a way, you will lose your life.

The only way to lasting happiness is to give up your life. So you should at least be asking the question, does God want me to spend my life declaring his glory in another country?

Does he want me to be pastoring a church? Does he want me to use my ability with languages?

Does he want me to use that to go and help translate his word? To serve people across the world who still today hear what God has said at one remove.

[19:22] Does God want me to do radical things? You should be asking. I mean, don't mishear me. These are far from the only ways to serve God. I do need to plan at some point a series on the value and dignity of work.

You can honor God in almost any job. And maybe he does want you to do a very ordinary job, but that leaves you with lots of time for family and for church.

Or maybe he does want the big salary so that you can fund other work that he is doing. Maybe.

Giving up your life might lead you down any number of different career paths, but you must at least

ask the question, what does it look like for you to begin today to live such that you can say to live is Christ?

Younger teenagers too, I hope you're already asking this question. You're starting to think about the path of your lives ahead, aren't you? Are you asking the question, what does it look like to give up my life?

And not just for the future, what does it look like to give it up right now? What's different at school tomorrow when you have given up your life for the Lord? Of course, this isn't only a question for young people though, is it?

[20 : 44] It's a necessary question for us at any and every stage to take a careful look at our lives and say, does my life look like I have given it up for Christ?

Is it apparent to those around me that his glory is my highest aim? Why do people get to the point of a midlife crisis? Well, I think it's because they look at their life and they say, this isn't what I signed up for.

I demand more. I demand better. This is so insignificant. We think our lives are our own and so we throw a tantrum when they aren't what we expect them to be.

Instead of saying, Jesus, this is your life. Do with it as you choose. We've lost a sense of duty.

We've given up on the idea of sacrifice. We'll help one another, sure, as long as it doesn't actually cost us anything to do so.

As long as we don't have to go too far out of our way. Now, whether it is a full-blown midlife crisis or not, if you are dissatisfied with your life, if you're dissatisfied right now, it seems to me there are two possibilities.

[21 : 59] One, you may be wasting your life. And two, you may not know how to be satisfied with the right things. See, if you're looking at your life and saying, really, is this all there is?

Then maybe that's because there's not enough going on in your life. It might be that you're acting as though all there is to life is heading out to a job that doesn't interest you, doing it in a kind of disengaged, uninterested fashion, coming home and using the TV to switch your brain off even further.

Well, no wonder you're dissatisfied. It might be. It might be that you're discontent, you're dissatisfaction. It might be that that is God's means of prompting you, that there is more he wants you to do.

That there is some task of much greater significance that lies before you. It may be that that discontent is his wake-up call to do something different.

And yet it may be, it may also be, that there are satisfying things right there in front of you. Maybe your discontent is a failure to embrace what is already there.

[23 : 03] Maybe it is a failure to do that excellently. Scripture calls you to delight yourself in the wife of your youth. Are you doing that or are you focused on the way she frustrates you or ignoring her completely?

Delight yourself. Goes for women too. Similarly, scripture tells us there's dignity in work. Dignity even in repetitive, ongoing labour that seems to have no end result, no end in sight, though the laundry basket fills up again.

A fresh batch of things to be manufactured comes down the line. The shelves are empty once again and must be restocked. One bunch of children is taught and the next comes along. The same, the same, the same, over and over and it feels like it goes nowhere.

And yet, there is dignity in it. There is nobility in doing a job well. Your job performance is part of the means by which you adorn the gospel.

Your attitude, your approach, the way you demonstrate to your colleagues that you are satisfied in God, the way you show that you strive to do well not from fear of man, not because you're worried about what your boss will say, not in an attempt to win favour, that you strive for excellence from a place of confidence in God, from a desire to honour Him.

[24 : 24] My friends, this speaks volumes. Give up your life. Give it up in the service of God, whether that means a radical change of direction, or whether it means a fresh attitude to your present endeavours.

See, giving up your life for God has implications for the work that you do. It has implications for your leisure time as well. Are you spending your time off profitably? Are you spending your holidays well?

Are you exercising the mind that God gave you, or are you encouraging it to vegetate? Are you rejoicing in the world that He has made? It's okay, it's good to spend time in relaxation, it's good to have holidays, it's beneficial to recharge.

And for many of us, holidays may well be a good time for deliberately spending more time together as a family that maybe gets squeezed out, loses the uninterrupted time it might benefit from at other times.

It is good to have holidays. But if all you want from your holiday is to switch off, then I'm not sure you're making good use of the time God's given you. And if you're, if you're now looking forward to retirement, or you've reached retirement, and you're imagining that that retirement is going to be an uninterrupted series of cruises and endless rounds of golf, if that's what you're looking forward to, if that's what you're imagining, let me tell you, you are planning to waste your retirement.

[25 : 45] That's not what losing your life for Jesus' sake looks like. What does it look like to give up your life for Jesus' sake in your later years? Well, it doesn't necessarily look identical to how it looked in years past, does it?

The changes in our bodies, our energy levels, this is part of how God's designed us to be. But different doesn't mean nothing. I think of a lady from back when we lived in Derby.

She had a profitable working life and retired quite some years ago now. She's an active grandmother. She loves her family well, not least in supporting her own children by caring for their children.

She teaches in the Sunday school. She's a charity trustee and the treasurer for that charity. And she's part of the school assembly team from her church, taking something like 30 assemblies in a normal year, proclaiming the truths of God's word to these children.

These are just a few examples. She is actively seeking ways to serve God, ways to serve her church, ways to serve her family, to serve her community. Or most of you know Angus Howant.

[26 : 51] Angus is a retired minister. Does that mean he's stopped? Well no, he continues to serve the church across the presbytery and further afield. He served us here at Covenant Church as interim moderator.

Does Angus have the energy to continue as a full-time minister? No. But does that mean he has nothing to contribute? Of course not. He still preaches God's word with some regularity.

What does it look like as a retired man to lose your life for Jesus' sake? We're not all the same. It will look different for different people. But the question is the same.

How can I best serve God? What does he want of me? Give up your life. Older women are called by Paul in Titus 2 to teach and disciple younger women.

Are you doing that? Of course it's not only the older women who should be teaching the younger generations. It's the men too, isn't it? Living for Christ looks different at different stages of life.

[27 : 52] For those of you who've been walking with him for many years, well surely there comes a time where your focus shifts. Shifts away from learning more yourself onto passing on what you've learnt.

Mentoring, guiding, encouraging, equipping. Paul writes to the Philippian church. He writes to them that he's confident he will remain in the flesh for their sake. God's going to keep him on earth for the good of the Philippian church.

So for whose sake does God keep you in the flesh? Why are you still here? Didn't write that down. That one just came out.

It's a question though, isn't it? God has a reason. Go find it. We aren't the same. It might look different for different people, but the call is the same.

Give up your life. The ministries of many a church, many a giant of the faith. These ministries have flourished not so much according to their own efforts, but by the prayerful support of committed older saints.

[28 : 55] Do you know how encouraging it is when I get a message from my granddad telling me that the prayer group he runs in the local care home, that they're praying for me and my family? Who could you be praying for?

Who could you be encouraging? Give up your life. Giving up your life may look radically different to what you're doing now.

It may look very similar. It may look very ordinary. I remember singing as a teenager I'm going to be a history maker in this land. I and my contemporaries we were convinced we were going to do big

dramatic things for God.

And on one level that's right, that's good. At its best, singing that expressed some of what we're saying here. It expressed that willingness to surrender our lives and spend them doing whatever God wished from us.

And maybe from some of you he does want what might be considered great things. Maybe some of us should be following in the steps of William Wilberforce fighting tooth and nail to end injustice.

[30 : 03] He was a history maker and clearly driven by his evangelical convictions. God may want that from some of you to be a George Muller, Katie Luther, John Calvin, Florence Nightingale, the men and women that we were learning about when we went through that Everyone a Child Should Know series.

Maybe some of you might be included in version 10 of those cards a century from now. Maybe. But the truth is most of us won't be history makers.

I'm reading at the moment Donald MacLeod's book on Scottish theology from 1500 to 1700. It really is well worth a read. Again, you can borrow it when I'm done if you like. But for every name that he focuses on in that book, for everyone who he mentions, how many people were around them?

How many people were anonymous and unremarked? How many men didn't go to the General Assembly, didn't go and preach before kings and correct them for their excesses?

How many men faithfully pastored their own church, didn't write anything that's still being quoted 400 years later? And how many men and women in those churches lived their lives committed to God's glory, genuinely desiring to serve God, but actually made little obvious impact?

[31 : 22] Or did they waste their lives? Is God pleased only with the grand, with the dramatic? Does he value church ministers more highly than nurses and rubbish collectors and missionaries more highly still, of course? Does he?

Of course not. Give up your lives. It may look radically different, it may look very ordinary, but in service to God's glory you have this blessed assurance that whoever loses their life will preserve it. Let's pray. Lord God, thank you for this precious promise. Thank you for the reassurance that in losing our lives for you we give up nothing of eternal significance.

Thank you that in losing our lives we find them, we preserve them. Lord Jesus, we are sorry when we have failed to respond wholeheartedly to your call, when we have not lived for you with every aspect of our beings, when we have clung to control in a particular area of our lives.

Lord, help us even this afternoon to see where we have done that, to take that sober look that asks whether the big change is needed, whether you are calling us to something radically different.

[32 : 53] Lord, give us the time to think that through, give us the wisdom to know how best to serve you and where you want us to continue in many ways as we are.

Lord, show us, show us that area that we're clinging to. Show us what we're refusing to let go of that we might lose our lives, that we might give them up for your sake.

In your name we pray. Amen. Amen. For Eink for Eink for Eink and ford