

Matthew 16:24-28

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Jesus concludes His revelatory conversation with His disciples in Caesarea Philippi by informing them that they too must die if they are to follow Him. Jesus gives the paradox of discipleship, that they must lose their lives for His sake if they are to find their lives. He promises to repay their faithfulness, and prophesies that some of them will see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom before they die.

The parallel gospel accounts of this teaching are found in Matthew 10:38-39, Mark 8:34-9:1 and Luke 9:26-27.

Jesus is still having a private conversation with His disciples while in Caesarea Philippi. In this conversation with *His disciples*, Jesus has already confirmed *His* identity as the Christ/Messiah and *the Son of God* (Matthew 16:16-17). He promised to establish *His* church and that it would overrun the gates of Hades (Matthew 16:18). He promised to give Peter the keys of the *kingdom* (Matthew 16:19). He showed the necessity of *His* impending death in Jerusalem at the hands of the elders, and of *His* resurrection (Matthew 16:21). At that point in the conversation Peter suggested that *Jesus* avoid God's plan for Him to die (Matthew 16:22). *Jesus* instantly rejected this suggestion as Satanic (Matthew 16:22-23).

Jesus ends this very important conversation with a proposition, a paradox, a pair of questions, and two prophetic promises.

Then He told *His disciples* that it is not only *Jesus* who *must lose His life*—*anyone who wishes to come after Him must follow His* example and die as well. *Jesus* was informing *His disciples* that it is not just Him who *must die*—but you also *must die* yourselves if you are going to *follow Me*:

If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me.

This is similar to what *Jesus said to His disciples* when He sent them out to proclaim *the kingdom* to the lost sheep of Israel.

“And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me.”
(Matthew 10:38)

The Proposition

The opening clause of *Jesus's* proposition addresses who the offer is for—*anyone who wishes to come after Me*. It is an invitation to *follow Jesus* and become *His* disciple.

The propositions' next two clauses state the requirements of being a disciple—*he must deny himself, and he must also take up his cross and follow Me*.

To *deny* oneself means to set aside one's own interests in exchange for God's interests (Philippians 2:3-8). This is precisely what *Jesus* just told Peter that *he* was not doing as Peter was following Satan in trying to persuade *Jesus* not to be killed in Jerusalem (Matthew 16:22-23). Denying one's self is putting to death one's own ambitions and desires. These ambitions and desires must constantly be set aside if we are to be like *Jesus*.

It turns out that setting aside our own natural desires is an enormous benefit. And it also turns out that replacing them with God's interests actually lead us to our highest self-interest. To be like *Jesus* begins with choosing the same attitude, or mindset that *Jesus* chose. Paul walks his faithful partners in the gospel through this in his letter to the Philippians. Paul exhorts them to choose the same mindset *Jesus* chose when He left a very comfortable and wonderful circumstance in heaven to become human and learn obedience, even to death on a *cross*, in order to walk in obedience to His Father. As a result, *Jesus* was exalted above every name. (Philippians 2:5-11). *Jesus* makes clear that He will share His reward with all who overcome, as He overcame, and *pick up their own cross* (Revelation 3:21). Viewed truly, to set aside self is to set aside the greatest obstacle to tread the path of our deepest fulfillment.

The second requirement for a disciple of *Jesus* is to *take up his cross and follow Me*. A *cross* was the Roman's public method of executing criminals. It was physically torturous and socially humiliating. Its victims were often stripped naked, nailed to a "T" or "X" shape of wood, and left to dehydrate and suffocate to death outside city walls or along byways for all to see. A *cross* was an instrument of painful death and great shame. The image *Jesus* is putting into the minds of *His disciples* is for them to embrace the suffering and shame from the world—to the point of rejection, loss, and even physical death. *Jesus* will soon set this example literally when He is crucified. And He expects *anyone who wishes to come after Him* to have the same outlook on the world and *the kingdom* as He does, and accordingly to choose to *follow Me*. That is to *follow His* example. It is these disciples *Jesus* will reward greatly.

The book of Hebrews also describes *Jesus* as our example, "who for the joy set before Him endured the *cross*, despising the shame..."(Hebrews 12:2). To despise something means to give it no value. When followers of *Jesus* *deny* themselves and *take up* their crosses, they are despising the things this world values. They are not afraid of the hatred and punishment it gives for those who do not *follow* its ways. And the reason they have so little regard for the pleasures and pains of this world is because they are living for the greater joy, reward, and *glory* of *the kingdom*. Denying one's self and taking *up* one's *cross* are the small gate and narrow path that leads to life (Matthew 7:14). They are daily opportunities to be like *Jesus* by sacrificially serving others and to enter *His kingdom*.

In fact, Luke's account includes the word "daily" in *Jesus*'s statement:

"And He was saying to them all, 'If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me.'"
(Luke 9:23)

This adjective emphasizes how this denial and "death" is not intended to be understood over-literally. No one can literally be crucified "daily" because crucifixion by its very nature ends a

person's earthly existence. But metaphorically, a person can *take up* their *cross* daily and put to death the deeds and desires of their flesh. They can say "no" to the rewards promised by the world, and "yes" to the rewards promised by God.

This adjective "daily" also indicates that *Jesus's* statement is an "entering the *kingdom*" proposition and not a "getting into heaven" proposition. We enter the *kingdom* by walking by faith and trusting God through our actions (Matthew 7:21). We are born again and made part of God's family by simply believing in *Jesus* as God's *Son* (John 1:12; 3:16). God's kingdom is not of this world, not yet (John 18:36). In order to enter His spiritual kingdom while walking in this physical world, it requires believers to set aside the world, and walk in the ways of *Jesus*.

The Paradox

Jesus then explained this *kingdom* proposition with a paradox. *For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it.* This statement can be described as "the paradox of discipleship." *Jesus* had presented the paradox of discipleship to *His disciples* before.

"He who has found his life will lose it, and he who has lost his life for My sake will find it. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it."

(Matthew 10:39)

The Greek word translated as *life* and *soul* in these verses are the same. They are "psuche." "Psuche" is the self. "Psuche" is the inner essence or core identity of who a person is. It is no less than a person's heart with all its loves, desires, and will, plus his mind with its consciousness and reasoning. "Psuche" is not merely the sum of all those things about a person. It IS who or what that person is. The body is merely a house, or tent. We will eventually "move" dwellings, and shed our tent for a fine mansion (John 14:12).

Everyone is a *whoever* who *wishes to save his* "psuche." No one *wishes* to have *his* aspirations crushed. No one *wishes* to *lose his* identity or *his* personhood. No one *wishes* to *lose his* "psuche."

And here *Jesus* is telling *His disciples* that everyone who seeks to *save his* "psuche" by means of this world will *lose it*. *The world* and its kingdoms cannot give or preserve your "psuche." It will deform and erase your identity. It will stomp on your destiny and leave no *profit* or reward in exchange for giving it your all. The surest way to *lose* your "psuche" is to invest it within *the world's* systems. It is ironic and tragic that everyone who seeks to *save* their "psuche" by means of *the world*, *loses it*. The promises of the world are all empty, and amount to nothing, while the promises of the kingdom of God are guaranteed by God Himself.

Jesus does teach *His disciples* how they can *save* their "psuche." And that is by losing *it for My sake*. If we refuse to invest our *life* in *the world* system and instead invest *it* in God's *kingdom* we *will find it*. This is the paradox of discipleship. The disciple of Christ chooses to *lose his life* precisely in order to *find it*.

When a person chooses to abandon *the world's* way of doing things, the way of acting selfishly and viewing everyone as a rival or a means to get ahead, they forfeit what *the world* has to offer. And when they choose to act as *Jesus* did by sacrificially giving Himself to love God and serve others, they gain their “psuche.”

Saving the “psuche”—saving a person’s *life*—saving a person’s *soul* does not mean saving a person from eternal damnation into eternity with God. The Bible implies that it is a believer’s spirit that is saved from eternal damnation and death into everlasting life (Romans 8:16; I Corinthians 15:44; Ephesians 2:4-5). A believer’s *soul* is saved as his mind, heart, and will are conformed into the character and likeness of *Jesus* (Romans 12:2; Hebrews 10:39; James 1:21, 5:19-20; I Peter 2:11). Spiritual salvation is justification in the sight of God, and this comes only through having enough faith to look upon *Jesus* on the cross, hoping to be delivered from sin (John 3:14-16). Saving the “pusche” is being sanctified, or set apart, for the works of God.

It is not easy to say “no” to the world. The world offers things pleasant to the eyes, to the appetites and to the ego (1 John 2:16). It looks enticing. But it all leads to death, separating us from our truest and deepest desires.

This is why scripture spends so much time on this topic. It is likely also why scripture lays out so many promises of reward for believing and acting upon *Jesus's* command. A few of these scriptures are listed as an illustration:

- Philippians 2:5-11 describes that *Jesus* chose a mindset of obedience that “This is always for my best” and set aside a comfortable circumstance in heaven with God to come to earth and learn obedience to His Father, even to death on the *cross*. If we choose this same attitude, we are promised to be exalted as well.
- Romans 8:17: God is the heir of any believer, as any believer is His child and God will never reject him or her. But if we also desire to receive the reward of being a joint heir with Christ, then we must suffer the sufferings that Christ suffered. Christ suffered rejection and loss from the world, but then gained the world as His inheritance because of His obedience.
- Hebrews 12:1-2: *Jesus* despised the shame of the world, and obeyed His Father in going to His death, because of the “joy” He saw ahead of sitting down with His Father on His throne, and reigning with Him not just as God, but also as a human. Believers are exhorted to follow His example.
- Revelation 3:21: *Jesus* invites all believers to be overcomers (victors) which means overcoming rejection, loss, and even death. *Jesus* promises that any believer who overcomes, as He overcame, will share His throne with Him, enter into the joy of their Master, and reign with Him over the world.

This paradox, that we gain our *life* by laying it down, is another way of saying what *Jesus* taught *His disciples* in the Sermon on the Mount when *He said* to them “Do not store up for yourselves

treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy... but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven... for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also (Matthew 6:20-21).

By following *Jesus* and *His* selfless example, a person discovers their true identity as God created them, fulfills their destiny, and becomes complete and is satisfied with their glorious station in *His kingdom*. By following *the world*, a person *loses* all of this. Their deepest desires go unmet.

A Pair of Questions

Jesus stressed these paradoxical points with a pair of rhetorical questions.

For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?

In each instance, *soul* is “*psuche*,” the essence of each person’s identity. The answer to both questions is—nothing. *A man will profit nothing if gains the whole world and forfeits his soul*. If we were to own all the money in the world, and possess all the lands in the world, but *lose* our soul, we *lose* our self. When the choices of *life* are framed this clearly, *a man* would accept nothing *in exchange for his soul* “*psuche*.” And yet, people unwittingly *exchange* and *forfeit* their *soul* “*psuche*” for far less than *the whole world*. Sadly, this occurs each and every day. This is a tragic waste and loss.

These rhetorical questions clarify the paradox of discipleship. If *a man* is certain to *lose his* “*psuche*” and gain *no profit* by trying to *save it* through the means of this world, then it is great wisdom and the best possible investment to surrender *his* “*psuche*” to Christ so that it will be saved from this tragic loss.

Two Prophetic Promises

And this pair of rhetorical questions leads into the promises *Jesus* makes *His disciples*:

For the Son of Man is going to come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and will then repay every man according to his deeds.

The promises appear to apply to the end of the age on judgment day. On that day, *the Son of Man*—who *Jesus* was just acknowledged to be (Matthew 16:13-17)—will *come in the full glory of His Father* in heaven, along *with the angels*. And when He comes, He *will then repay every man according to his deeds*. In other words, *Jesus* will render the full reward for the actions and attitudes of *every man*.

The Bible has many passages that speak of God rewarding those who set aside the things of this world and instead sow in to His kingdom. A few are listed below:

- Mark 10:28-30 shows *Jesus* tell His disciples that He would repay them a hundredfold for anything they gave up for His sake. In this case, *Jesus* included His promise both in this

life as well as in the age to come, and inferred that the reward of this life comes through partnering with other believers who are also taking up their cross daily.

- Romans 2:5-11 says each person will be judged for their deeds. Those who patiently continue to do good, seeking honor, glory, and immortality from God, rather than man, will be given the reward of eternal life. The presence of eternal life is a gift, given by grace, through faith. The experience of eternal life, in its fullest, is a reward for faithful service.
- 1 Corinthians 3:10-15 indicates that each believer will have their deeds judged with fire, and will be rewarded for deeds done for the kingdom of Christ, but suffer loss for things done for the rewards of the world.
- 2 Corinthians 5:10 states that each believer will be judged to receive rewards for deeds done while in their bodies on earth, whether good or bad.

The promise of being rewarded for faithful service and obedience is not a promise relating to how to go to heaven when we die. Going to heaven is a gift that is granted by simple faith in *Jesus* on the basis of God's grace alone (John 3:14-16; Ephesians 2:8-9). This reward is God's promise to *repay His* servants for living faithful lives and following *Jesus* despite the pain the world inflicts, or the shame it stigmatizes upon those who reject its system (Matthew 5:10-11).

Jesus promises that He will pay back *every man according to the deeds*—the choices and decisions—each *man* performed in *his life* (1 Corinthians 3:11-13; 2 Corinthians 5:9-10; Psalm 62:12; Colossians 3:25; Revelation 2:23).

The reward will be great if we *lose* our *soul* for *His sake* (1 Corinthians 3:14, Matthew 25:21, 23; Romans 8:18; 2 Corinthians 4:17).

How do we lose our *soul/self* and then gain our *soul/self*?

One way this occurs is through transformation, by the renewing of our minds (Romans 12:1-2). When we lay aside a heart oriented to choose perspectives that are worldly, and replace them with perspectives that are true, perspectives from God, then we transform our *soul/self* from looking at things from a worldly perspective to looking at things from a kingdom of God perspective. This is what *Jesus* was talking about when He warned His disciples against performing acts of righteousness; doing their charitable deeds; praying; and fasting to be seen and honored by men (Matthew 6:1; 6:2-4; 6:5-6; 6:16-18). He encouraged them to live for the lasting reward of His Father's Kingdom instead of the rusty, moth-riddled rewards meted out by the kingdoms of men.

If we set aside the world and follow *Jesus* in obedience, we will gain an everlasting inheritance in *His kingdom* (Matthew 25:34; Luke 22:28-30; Colossians 3:23). And God will save our true *soul/*"*psuche*" (1 Peter 4:19) and we will be rewarded in *His kingdom* for following Him by faith in this *life*. But if we seek to keep our *soul/*"*psuche*" we will have no reward from *the Son of*

Man (1 Corinthians 3:15; Matthew 25:26). We will have squandered our one opportunity to know God by faith, for in the next life we will walk by sight.

Later in his *life*, Peter understood what *Jesus* meant far better than he did when he foolishly tried to persuade *Jesus* from losing in *His life* in Jerusalem and going to *His death* on the *cross* (Matthew 16:22). Peter writes in his first epistle:

“In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials, so that the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ; and though you have not seen Him, you love Him, and though you do not see Him now, but believe in Him, you greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, obtaining as the outcome of your faith the salvation of your souls.”
(1 Peter 1:6-9)

Jesus ended His teaching time with His disciples with a prophecy stemming from *His* own Messianic and divine authority, stating—*truly I say to you*. The prophecy was this: *there are some of those who are standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom*. The reference to *some of those standing here* were *some of His disciples* who were literally *standing* in *Jesus's* physical presence as He spoke to them. As we shall soon see, the “*some*” were specifically Peter, James, and John (Matthew 17:1).

These men would *not taste death*, that is physically die, *until they* had already witnessed *the Messiah coming in His kingdom*. By this, *Jesus* meant the event of *His* transfiguration which took place “about six days” after *Jesus* had this conversation about *His* identity and mission and gave this prophecy (Matthew 17:1).

Biblical Text

²⁴ Then Jesus said to His disciples, “If anyone wants to come after Me, he must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow Me. ²⁵ For whoever wants to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. ²⁶ For what good will it do a person if he gains the whole world, but forfeits his soul? Or what will a person give in exchange for his soul? ²⁷ For the Son of Man is going to come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and will then repay every person according to his deeds. ²⁸ “Truly I say to you, there are some of those who are standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom.”