

Dying Like a Seed



SABBATH—DECEMBER 15

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S LESSON: 1 Samuel 2:12–3:18; 1 Samuel 13:1–14; Zechariah 4:1–14; Romans 12:1, 2; Philippians 2:5–9.

MEMORY VERSE: “What I’m [I am] about to tell you is true. Unless [if not] a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only one seed. But if it dies, it produces [grows] many seeds” (John 12:24, NIV).

JESUS' PICTURE OF A GRAIN OF WHEAT DYING is an interesting example of our surrender (giving ourselves) to God's will (plan).

First, there is the falling. The grain that falls from the wheat stalk (plant) has no control (power) over where or how it falls to the ground. It has no control over the ground that surrounds and then covers it.

Second, there is the waiting. As the grain lies in the earth, it does not know what the future holds. It cannot “imagine” what kind of life it will have in the future. This is because it is only a grain of wheat.

Third, there is the dying. The grain cannot become a wheat stalk unless it gives up its safe life as a grain. It must “die.” This means that it must give up its past life so that it may be changed from a seed into a fruit-bearing plant.

THE WEEK'S LESSON UP CLOSE: If we know that God's will is best for us, why do we have such a hard time accepting it? What example of surrender has Christ left for us? How is the example of the grain of wheat used in your own life?

SUNDAY—DECEMBER 16**SURRENDER (TO GIVE ONE'S SELF) FOR SERVICE
(Philippians 2:5–9)**

What important message is there for us in Philippians 2:5–9?

Today's modern world encourages us all to demand and fight for our rights. And all this is good and is often the way it should be. But, as with Jesus, the will (plan) of God may ask us to freely give up our rights so that we can better serve the Father. We do so in ways that will have a lasting influence (change) on God's kingdom. This way of giving up our rights may be difficult and uncomfortable. And this leads to the conditions of a crucible.¹

Look at how Jesus did this (Philippians 2:5–8). These verses describe three steps that Jesus took in surrendering (giving) Himself to the Father's will. And at the beginning, Paul warns us: "You should think in the same way Christ Jesus does" (verse 5, NIV).

Jesus put Himself in a position to save us. To do so, He gave up being equal with the Father and came to earth as a man limited by (trapped in) a human body (verses 6, 7, NIV).

Jesus did not come as a great and glorious human (person). Instead, He came as a servant of other humans (verse 7, NIV).

As a human servant, Jesus did not live a peaceful and long life. But He "became obedient to death." But He

did not die a noble and glorious death. No, He was "obedient to death—even death on a cross!" (verse 8, NIV).

In what areas of life is this example of Jesus an example for us? If rights are good and should be protected, how would you explain the need to give them up? In what way does Philippians 2:9 help us to understand the reason for surrender (giving ourselves) to the Father's will (plan for our lives)?

Pray for wisdom from the Holy Spirit. Ask Him, "What rights am I holding right now that really might block my surrender to Jesus' will? How much am I willing to suffer so that I can serve others better?"



Jesus was "obedient to death—even death on a cross!" (Philippians 2:8).

MONDAY—DECEMBER 17**DYING COMES BEFORE
KNOWING GOD'S WILL (PLAN)
(Romans 12:1, 2)**

Many Christians try hard to know

1. crucible—a boiling pot for purifying metals. It also represents a testing time, or time of suffering that strengthens character, or who we are.

God's will for their lives. "If only I could know God's will for my life, I would sacrifice [give up] everything for Him." We may have made a promise to God to do this. But we still may be confused about His will. The reason for this confusion may be found in Romans 12: 1, 2. Paul is describing how we can know God's will. He makes an important point: If you want to know what God's will is, you have to sacrifice first!

Read Romans 12:1, 2. Paul writes that we will be able to "test and approve [accept] what God's will is" (verse 2, NIV) when:

1. We have a true understanding of "God's mercy" for us (verse 1, NIV).
2. We offer ourselves as living sacrifices (gifts) to God (verse 1).
3. Our minds are renewed (verse 2).

It is only the renewed mind that truly can understand God's will. But this renewal depends on our death to self² first. That Christ suffered for us is not enough. He had to die. It is the same with us.

Ask the Holy Spirit to show you any areas in which you are not completely "dead." What things does the Holy Spirit need you to give up so that you can become a "living sacrifice" for God?

There are areas of our lives that are not completely dead to self. So, God allows crucibles to bring them to our attention (notice). Our suffering helps us deal with our sin. And it gives us a

better understanding of Jesus' giving Himself up for us. Elisabeth Elliot writes, "The surrender of our heart's deepest desire is perhaps as close as we come to an understanding of the Cross. . . . Our own experience of crucifixion³ may be much smaller than our Savior's. But it gives us a chance to begin to know Him by taking part in His sufferings. In every form of our own suffering, He calls us to that fellowship."—Adapted from Elisabeth Elliot, *Quest for Love* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Fleming H. Revell, 1996), p. 182.

Read and pray over Romans 12:1, 2. Think about the things you need to give up so that you can become a living sacrifice. How does this help you to understand the sufferings Jesus faced for you on the cross? How can this knowledge help you enter into fellowship with Jesus and His sufferings?

TUESDAY—DECEMBER 18

WILLINGNESS TO LISTEN (1 Samuel 3:10)

Have you ever felt that still, small voice of the Holy Spirit in your heart but did not obey it? Later, everything went wrong, and you thought to yourself later, *Oh no, why did I not obey?*

First Samuel describes a story of an old man and his two wicked sons. The sons did not listen to the Lord.

2. death to self—willingness to change our lives completely for Christ's sake.

3. crucifixion—when Jesus died on the cross.

But a little boy did. There were strong warnings from God. But those who needed to change their ways did not.

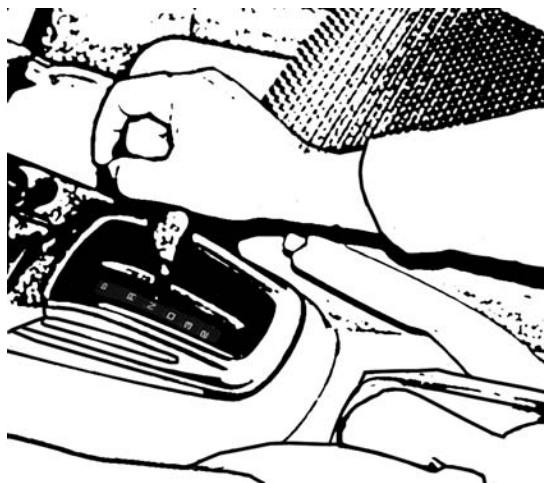
Read their story in 1 Samuel 2: 12–3:18. What difference is clear between those who listen to God and those who do not?

Eli's sons had other things on their minds than the things of God. Eli heard what God wanted and did speak to his sons. But he did not seem to do anything else. Eli's sons were clearly not ready to surrender (give up) their lives to God's will (plan). How different it was with young Samuel!

Preacher Charles Stanley describes how important it is to keep yourself open to God's voice. He calls it "shifting into neutral." Stanley says, "The Holy Spirit . . . does not speak for the sake of sharing information. He speaks to get an answer. And He knows when our schedule has stolen a large share of our attention. So much so that it is a waste of time for God to suggest anything new until we follow what He has already said. When that happens, the Holy Spirit is often silent. He waits for us to become neutral [quiet] enough to understand and obey."—Adapted from Charles Stanley, *The Wonderful Spirit-Filled Life* (Thomas Nelson Publishers, Nashville, Tenn.: 1992), pp. 179, 180.

What do you think Stanley means by becoming "neutral enough"? Think about keeping your heart open to God. If you do, what things often prevent you from being "neu-

tral enough to understand and obey"? What do you need to do in your life to keep open to God's voice and decide to be obedient to His direction (leading)?



The Holy Spirit waits for us to "shift" our lives into neutral so that we can become quiet enough to understand and obey His voice.

WEDNESDAY—DECEMBER 19

RELYING ON (TRUSTING) SELF INSTEAD OF GOD (1 Samuel 13:1–14)

Eve sinned in the Garden of Eden. This was not because she doubted God's word. The real problem was that Eve believed she was wise enough to decide what was good and right for herself. She trusted her own judgment (thinking). When we depend on our own judgment instead of trusting God's Word, we open ourselves up to all kinds of problems.

The story of Saul describes the

steps to breaking away from God and the sad events that so quickly happen. Samuel anointed (chose) Saul as God's king (1 Samuel 10:1). Then he gave Saul certain instructions (verse 8), but Saul disobeyed.

What did Saul do that led to his own downfall in 1 Samuel 13:1–14?

There are three steps that led Saul down the road to being independent of God after he became king. The problem is that none of the steps were that bad in themselves. But they held the seeds of sadness because Saul had acted on them without depending on God. Notice the order in which Saul's fall happened.

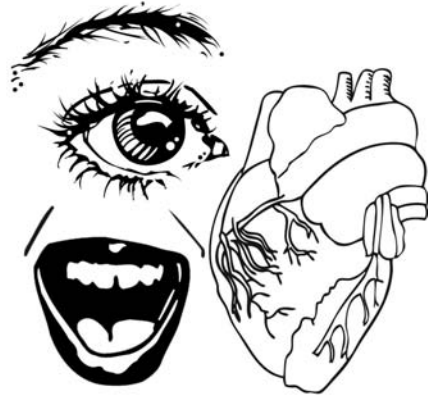
1. Saul said, "I saw" (NirV)—the scattering (falling apart) of his troops and Samuel's absence (verse 11). Saul was under pressure, and he judged with his own eyes what was happening.

2. Saul moved from "I saw" to "I said"—that the Philistines would defeat them (verse 12, NKJV). What Saul saw with his own eyes influenced⁴ what he said, or surmised (thought), about the situation.

3. Saul moved from "I said" to "I felt"—he felt a strong desire to offer sacrifice (gifts to God) (verse 12, NKJV). What Saul thought now influenced his feelings.

All of us have done this: We depend on our own human eyesight,

which leads us to depend on our own human thinking. This leads us to depend on our own human feelings. And then we act on these feelings.



Like King Saul, we often depend on what we see, say, and feel to help us make choices instead of depending on God.

Why do you think it was so easy for Saul to follow his own judgment? Saul had God's clear instructions, but he did not obey. We know that we are so weak and our knowledge is so imperfect. But why do we still try to depend on ourselves? What can we do to trust more in the Lord's commands than upon ourselves?

THURSDAY—DECEMBER 20

SUBSTITUTES (Zechariah 4:1–14)

As we saw in yesterday's lesson, surrender (giving one's self) to God's will (plan) can be made difficult when

4. influenced—to have power, or an effect, over persons or things.

5. substitutes—someone or something that takes the place of another person or thing. Jesus is our Substitute because He died for our sins.

we depend on our own strength. It also is possible to depend on other substitutes for God. When some people feel depressed (sad), they go shopping for something to make them happy. Others search for fame. When some people have difficulties with their spouse, they find someone else to give them love and excitement.



People often depend on something other than Jesus to make them happy.

Many of the things we use can bring short-term help. But these things do not solve our problems nor teach us how to handle our situations better the next time. Only help from God can do that. The problem is that many times we try to depend on substitutes for God rather than on God Himself.

Here are three substitutes that we may use instead of God:

1. Using human reasoning or past experience when we need God's leading.
2. Blocking problems from our minds when we need God's answers.

3. Escaping (running away from) reality and avoiding God when we need to pray to God for His power.

Zechariah helps us to focus on what is really important when we are tempted to use substitutes. After many years away, the people of Israel had finally returned to their homeland from Babylon. And they quickly went to work rebuilding the temple. But many enemies were working against this project. (Some helpful background to this story can be found in Ezra 4–6.) So Zechariah came with this message of encouragement to Zerubbabel, who was leading the work.

Read this message in Zechariah 4:1–14. What does God mean in Zechariah 4:6? How could the finishing of a building project be influenced by⁶ the Holy Spirit? What does this teach us about the relationship between the Holy Spirit and the useful things that we do?

God did not stop the enemies of the temple. He did not protect Zerubbabel from the stress of dealing with his enemies. And God will not always protect us from our enemies. But when we have enemies, God may use them as a crucible to teach us to depend on Him.

When stress comes, what is your first action? Food? Television? Prayer? Surrender to God? What does your answer tell you about

6. influenced by—to be affected or changed by the power of another person or thing.

yourself and the things you need to learn or to change?

FRIDAY—DECEMBER 21

ADDITIONAL STUDY: Read Ellen G. White, “Eli and His Sons,” pp. 575–580; “The Presumption of Saul,” pp. 616–626, in *Patriarchs and Prophets*.⁷

“Surrender [giving oneself] to God’s will comes as we die to our own desires and ambitions [what we hope to be or own]. This opens the way for true service to others. We cannot live for God without becoming a sacrifice [living gift] and keeping open to God’s voice. For us to truly surrender our wills to our Father’s will [plan], we must be very careful about the dangers of depending on ourselves and on substitutes for God’s Word and power. As surrender to God’s will is a very important part of a Christlike life, God may let crucibles teach us to depend on Him.

“The failure of Eli is brought clearly to every father and mother in the land. Eli failed to show proper love and use discipline⁸ as a father should. As a result, he gathered a harvest of sins in his wicked sons. Both the parent who permitted the wickedness and the children who did it were guilty before God. God would accept no sacrifice or offering for their sins.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *Child Guidance [Training]*, p. 276.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

❶ As a class, talk about how humble the Son of God was in coming to earth as a human (person) to die for our sins. What does it tell each of us about self-sacrifice and self-denial for the good of others? We certainly cannot do anything like that. But the principle (rule) is there and should always be remembered. In what ways can we, in our own small worlds, copy the kind of surrender and self-sacrifice that Jesus showed us at the cross?

❷ For many people, surrender to God without knowing what will happen next can be a scary thing. How would you advise someone who is depending on himself or herself rather than God? What would you say to help remove his or her fears of not knowing the future?

❸ As a class, spend some time praying for people who have difficulty in surrendering to God’s will. Pray that they may learn that trusting God’s will is the only way to having a lasting peace. At the same time, what useful things can you do for these people to help them surrender to God and believe that His way is the best? In other words, how can God use you to help others know of His love and willingness to care for them?

7. patriarchs and prophets—patriarchs were leaders in early Bible times, such as Abraham and Isaac, or other leaders of Israel, such as Moses; prophets are men or women sent by God to warn us about what will happen in the future.

8. discipline—training that makes you a stronger and better person.