

Dying Like a Seed



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Phil. 2:5–9; Rom. 12:1, 2; 1 Sam. 2:12–3:18; 1 Sam. 13:1–14; Zech. 4:1–14.*

Memory Text: “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; . . . but if it dies, it produces much grain” (*John 12:24, NKJV*).

Jesus' picture of a kernel of wheat dying is a fascinating analogy of our submission to God's will. First, there is the falling. The kernel that falls from the wheat stalk has no control over where or how it falls to the ground. It has no control over the ground that surrounds and then presses over it.

Second, there is the waiting. As the kernel lies in the earth, it does not know what the future holds. It cannot “imagine” what life will be like in the future, for it is only a kernel of wheat.

Third, there is the dying. The kernel cannot possibly become a wheat stalk unless it gives up its safe, comfortable situation as a kernel. It must “die”; that is, it must give up what it has always been before so it may be transformed from a seed into a fruit-bearing plant.

The Week at a Glance: If we know that God's will is best for us, why do we have such a hard time accepting it? What example of submission has Christ left for us? How do you see the analogy of the kernel of wheat as applying to your own life?

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, September 17.

Submission for Service

Read Philippians 2:5–9. What important message is there for us in these verses?

Contemporary culture urges us all to demand and assert our rights. And all this is good and often is the way it should be. But as with Jesus, the will of God may be for us to give up our rights freely in order to serve the Father in ways that will make an eternal impact for God’s kingdom. This process of giving them up may be difficult and uncomfortable, creating the conditions of a crucible.

Look at how Jesus did this (*Phil. 2:5–8*). These verses describe three steps that Jesus took in submitting Himself to the Father’s will. And at the beginning, Paul alarmingly reminds us: “Have the same mindset as Christ Jesus” (*Phil. 2:5, NIV*).

In order to be in a position to save us, Jesus gave up His equality with the Father and moved to earth in the form and limitations of a human being (*Phil. 2:6, 7, NIV*).

Jesus did not come as a great and glorious human being, but as a servant of other human beings (*Phil. 2:7, NIV*).

As a human servant, Jesus did not live a peaceful and long life but became “obedient to death.” He did not even die in a noble and glorious manner. No, He was “obedient to death—even death on a cross!” (*Phil. 2:8, NIV*).

In what areas of life is this example of Jesus a model for us? If rights and equality are good and should be protected, how would you explain the logic of sometimes needing to give them up? Now read Philippians 2:9. In what way does this verse help us to understand the logic of submission to the Father’s will?

Pray for wisdom from the Holy Spirit, asking, “What rights am I holding on to right now that actually might be a barrier to submitting to Jesus’ will in serving my family, my church, and those around me? To what extent am I willing to endure discomfort to serve others more effectively?”

Dying Comes Before Knowing God’s Will

Many Christians sincerely seek to know God’s will for their lives. “If only I could know God’s will for my life, I would sacrifice everything for Him.” But even after promising this to God, we still may be confused about what His will is. The reason for this confusion may be found in Romans 12:1, 2. Paul is describing how we can know God’s will, and 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 what God’s will is” (*Rom. 12:2, NIV*) when the following things happen:

1. We have a true understanding of “God’s mercy” for us (*Rom. 12:1, NIV*).
2. We offer ourselves as living sacrifices to God (*Rom. 12:1*).
3. Our minds are renewed (*Rom. 12:2*).

It is only the renewed mind that truly can understand God’s will. But this renewal hinges on our death to self first. It was not enough that Christ simply suffered for us—He had to die.

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 in order for you to become a “living sacrifice” for God?

When areas of our lives are not completely dead to self, God permits crucibles to bring them to our attention. However, our suffering not only helps us confront our sin—but it also gives us an insight into Jesus’ giving Himself up for us. Elisabeth Elliot writes, “The surrender of our heart’s deepest longing is perhaps as close as we come to an understanding of the cross. . . . Our own experience of crucifixion, though immeasurably less than our Savior’s, nonetheless furnishes us with a chance to begin to know Him in the fellowship of His sufferings. In every form of our own suffering, He calls us to that fellowship.”—*Quest for Love* (Grand Rapids, MI: Fleming H. Revell, 1996), p. 182.

Read and pray over Romans 12:1, 2. Think about the things you need to give up in order to become a 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?

Willingness to Listen

“The LORD came and stood there, calling as at the other times, ‘Samuel! Samuel!’ Then Samuel said, ‘Speak, for your servant is listening’ ” (1 Sam. 3:10, NIV).

Have you ever heard that still, small voice of the Holy Spirit but ignored it? Consequently, everything went wrong, and you thought to yourself later, *Oh no, why didn't I listen?*

First Samuel describes the story of an old man and his two wicked sons who didn't listen to the Lord and a little boy who did. Though there were strong warnings from God, those who needed to change their course didn't.

Read their story in 1 Samuel 2:12–3:18. What contrast is made apparent here between those who listen to God and those who don't?

Eli's sons had other things on their minds than the things of God. And even when Eli, after hearing what God wanted, spoke to his sons, he didn't seem to do anything else. And his sons were obviously not ready to submit the details of their lives to God's will. What a contrast to the young Samuel!

Preacher Charles Stanley describes how essential it is to cultivate openness to God's voice in what he calls “shifting into neutral.” He says: “The Holy Spirit . . . does not speak for the sake of passing along information. He speaks to get a response. And He knows when our agenda has such a large slice of our attention that it is a waste of time to suggest anything to the contrary. When that is the case, He is often silent. He waits for us to become neutral enough to hear and eventually obey.”—*The Wonderful Spirit-Filled Life* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1992), pp. 179, 180.

What do you think Stanley means by becoming “neutral enough”? When you think about your openness to God, what things often prevent you from being “neutral enough to hear and eventually obey”? What do you need to do in your life to cultivate openness to God's voice and a decisiveness to be obedient to His direction?

Self-Reliance

When Eve sinned in the Garden of Eden, it wasn't simply because she doubted God's word. At the heart of the problem was her belief that she had enough wisdom to decide for herself what was good and right. She trusted her own judgment. When we rely on our own judgment as opposed to trusting God's Word, we open ourselves up to all sorts of problems.

The story of Saul describes his steps to self-reliance and the tragedy that so quickly follows. Samuel anointed Saul as God's king (*1 Sam. 10:1*). Then he gave Saul specific instructions (*1 Sam. 10:8*), but Saul disobeyed.

Read the next part of the story in **1 Samuel 13:1–14**. What did Saul do that led to his own downfall?

There are three steps that led Saul down the road to self-reliance so soon after having been made king. The problem is that none of the steps were that bad in themselves. Yet, they contained the seeds of tragedy because they were each taken independently of God. Notice the order in which Saul's fall occurred.

1. Saul said, "I saw" (*NIV*)—the scattering of his troops and Samuel's absence (*1 Sam. 13:11*). Saul was under pressure, and he evaluated with his own eyes what was happening.

2. Saul moved from "I saw" to "I said"—that the Philistines would conquer them (*1 Sam. 13:12, NKJV*). What he saw with his own eyes shaped what he said, or surmised, about the situation.

3. Saul moved from "I said" to "I felt"—compelled to offer sacrifice (*1 Sam. 13:12, NKJV*). What Saul thought now shaped his feelings.

All of us have done this: we rely on our own human eyesight, which leads us to rely on our own human thinking, which leads us to rely on our own human feelings. And then we act on these feelings.

Why do you think it was so easy for Saul to follow his own judgment, even though he had God's clear instructions still ringing in his ears? If we know that we are so fragile and have such imperfect knowledge, why do we still try to rely on ourselves? What can we do to learn to trust in the Lord's commands more than trusting in ourselves?

Substitutes

As we saw yesterday, submission to God's will can be undermined as we rely on our own strength. It also is possible to rely on other substitutes for God. When some people feel depressed, they go shopping for something to make them happy. When some feel inadequate, they pursue fame. When others have difficulties with their spouse, they look for someone else to give them intimacy and excitement.

Many of the things we use can relieve the pressure, but they do not necessarily solve the problem or teach us how to handle the situation better the next time. Only supernatural help from God can do that. The problem is that many times we depend on substitutes for God rather than on God Himself.

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

1. We use human logic or past experience when we need fresh divine revelation.
2. We block problems from our minds when we need divine solutions.
3. We escape reality and avoid God when we need communion with Him for divine power.

Zechariah helps us to focus on what really matters when we are tempted to use substitutes. After many years away, the exiles had finally returned from Babylon and immediately began to rebuild the temple. But there was an incredible amount of opposition to this (some background 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. What does God mean in Zechariah 4:6? How could the completion of a building project be affected by the Holy Spirit? What does this teach us about the relationship between the Holy Spirit and the practical things that we do?

God did not prevent the opposition to the temple or spare Zerubbabel from the stress of dealing with it. And God will not always protect us from opposition. But when opposition comes, God may use it as a crucible to teach us to depend on Him.

When stress comes, what's your first reaction? Food? Television? Prayer? Submission to God? What does your answer tell you about yourself and the things you need to learn or to change?

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

Submission to God’s will comes as we die to our own desires and ambitions. This opens the way for true service to others. We cannot live for God without becoming sacrifices and living in continual openness to God’s voice. For us truly to submit our wills to our Father’s will, we must recognize the dangers of relying on ourselves and on substitutes for God’s Word and power. As submission to God’s will is at the heart of a Christlike life, God may allow crucibles to teach us dependence on Him.

“The neglect of Eli is brought plainly before every father and mother in the land. As the result of his unsanctified affection or his unwillingness to do a disagreeable duty, he reaped a harvest of iniquity in his perverse sons. Both the parent who permitted the wickedness and the children who practiced it were guilty before God, and He would accept no sacrifice or offering for their transgression.”—Ellen G. White, *Child Guidance*, p. 276.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 As a class, talk about the incredible condescension of the Son of God in coming to earth as a human being in order to die for our sins. What does this tell each of us about what self-sacrifice and self-denial for the good of others means? Though we certainly can’t do anything like what Jesus did, the principle is there and should always be before us. In what ways can we, in our own spheres, emulate the kind of submission and self-sacrifice that Jesus showed us at the cross?
- 2 For many people, submitting to God without knowing what will happen next can be a terrifying thing. How would you counsel people who are relying on themselves rather than God? What would you say to help remove their fears of not knowing—or being able to control—the future?
- 3 As a class, spend some time praying for people you know who have difficulty in submitting to God’s will, that they may see that trusting God’s will is the only route to a lasting peace. At the same time, what practical things can you do for these people to help them see that they can surrender to God and that His way is the best? In other words, how can God use you to help others know of His love and willingness to provide?

Part 12: Father Is Baptized!

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY

The day of Father's baptism finally arrived, and he arrived with Mother and Junior at Manaus Central Seventh-day Adventist Church, a larger church where the baptism would be held, in Manaus, Brazil. About 400 people were seated in the main sanctuary. Pastor Sergio Alan A. Caxeta, president of the Adventist Church's Central Amazon Conference, whose territory includes Manaus, asked Mother how she felt as she and Junior took a seat on the front row. "We're fine," she said, smiling happily.

The pastor acknowledged feeling uneasy until that very afternoon. Then he had prayed, "Lord, please help me. I'm not sure about my own strength. I want Your peace so I can have the certainty that Your power is here when I baptize Eduardo." After the prayer, all doubt had vanished.

Ricardo Coelho, pastor of the family's Alpha Community Church, led Father to the second floor, where seats were reserved for Alpha's 300 members. Father greeted Dilma Araujos dos Santos and her son Clifferson, who first introduced the family to the Adventist Church, and the others. Then Pastor Ricardo asked Father to return downstairs to don a baptismal gown.

As Father descended the stairs, a man suddenly darted up and rushed toward him. Father turned to look at the man and, as their eyes met, the man's pupils slid up into his head and his eyes went white. Then the man fell down and writhed on the stairs. "I've been ordered to kill him!" he shrieked.

Concealed in a pocket, the man was carrying a small dagger, the type that Father once had used to sacrifice animals at the temple. But before the man could pull out the dagger, Pastor Ricardo and several other men lifted him up and led him to a back room, where they found the weapon.

A short time later, Father waded into the baptismal pool. Alpha church members sang a hymn from the second floor as he went under the water.

Afterward, Pastor Ricardo told the congregation about the attempted attack and invited a physician, Luiz, up to the front to speak. Luiz, who had examined the attacker in the back room, was a frequent guest at the church but had never committed his life to Jesus. "I didn't understand the reality of the great controversy between Christ and Satan until today," he said, his voice shaking. "I saw it right here. Praise the Lord that nothing bad happened. It was God's power." He began to weep. "As a cardiologist, I felt for the attacker's pulse," he said. "I have never seen anything so abnormal. His pulse was too fast. No human could have such a high pulse rate and live."

The experience changed Luiz's life, and he decided to be baptized.

The knife attacker, it turned out, had struggled with satanic possession for some time. The evil spirits left when a pastor gave him Bible studies several months later. Through Father's baptism, at least two souls were led to Jesus.

Your Thirteenth Sabbath Offering will help open eight churches in the South American Division, including four in Brazil, where Father (EDUARDO FERREIRA DOS SANTOS) and his family live.

Key Text: *John 12:24*

Study Focus: *1 Sam. 2:12–3:18; 1 Sam. 13:1–14; Zechariah 4; Rom. 12:1, 2; Phil. 2:5–9.*

Part I: Overview

Death is a fascinating element in all religions. In biblical Christianity, death has two connotations. On one hand, death is the result of, and punishment for, sin. On the other hand, our life with God starts with death—death to sin. Only when we experience this death to sin can we fully enjoy life in God’s kingdom. Death to sin leads to overcoming and confronting the death that is the result of sin. But both events are possible because of Christ’s death for us.

Lesson Themes: This week’s lesson highlights two major themes.

1. Death to sin sets the framework for the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit Himself personally implements the transformation of our characters unto the image of Jesus Christ and empowers us to live lives of sacrificial service and obedience to God.
2. If we do not experience death to sin, we will continue a life of self-centeredness and self-service, a life of sin that, in fact, leads to death.

Part II: Commentary

The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil (*Gen. 2:9, 17*)

Quite a name for a tree! But God designated the tree by this name in the Garden of Eden when He instructed our parents on the preservation of their lives: “ ‘Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die’ ” (*Gen. 2:16, 17, NKJV*).

Two points are important for our present discussion. First, the biblical text does not allude to any poisonous or mind-altering substances contained in the fruit of the forbidden tree. On the contrary, God created all things “good” and “very good”; He did not create anything incomplete, imperfect, bad, or evil (*Gen. 1:21, 31; see also Gen. 2:1–3*). Sin and evil were not present in God’s perfect creation, but, rather, “entered the world” through Adam’s act (*Rom. 5:12, NKJV*). In addition, during the temptation, the serpent insists that if Eve eats of the forbidden tree, her “ ‘eyes will be opened’ ” and she “ ‘will be like God, knowing good and evil’ ” (*Gen 3:4, 5, NKJV*). Eve, then, “saw that the tree was good for food, that

it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree desirable to make one wise,” and she ate and served her husband, as well (*Gen. 3:6, NKJV*). The result of the consumption of the forbidden fruit was that “the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked” (*Gen. 3:7, NKJV*). Also, the tree is not named “the tree of knowledge” of God or of knowledge, in general, but “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil,” relating it to morality.

Thus, the name of the tree and the narrative of Genesis 2 and 3 indicate that what changed was Adam and Eve’s perspective, their view, their attitude, and their relation to God. Their choice was a matter of moral disobedience or rebellion against God. The expression “to know good and evil” in the Bible refers to moral maturity, when a person becomes an adult and autonomous, or a moral judge (*see Deut. 1:39, 2 Sam 14:17, 1 Kings 3:9, Isa. 7:16, Heb. 5:14*). The issue around the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was who was the judge, and who was the source and standard of morality. By forbidding the eating of the fruit of the tree, God established Himself as the ultimate Source of morality on earth in the same way that He was in the universe. By eating from the tree, Eve and Adam decided that they were the source of morality. It is one thing for someone to exercise morality and distinguish between good and evil through the prism of God’s revelation (*Deut. 30:14–16, 2 Sam. 14:17, 1 Kings 3:9, Heb 5:14*). But it is another thing to set oneself as the source and standard of morality over against God’s revelation and command; to do so is tantamount to declaring oneself God, to rebel against God, and to want to overthrow His throne.

This is exactly what the serpent suggested (*Gen. 3:4, 5*), and this is exactly what Satan had done in heaven and continues doing on earth (*Isa. 14:13, 14; Ezek. 28:2, 12–17*). Thus, the serpent suggested to Eve that by eating the forbidden fruit, “‘your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil’ ” (*Gen. 3:5, NKJV*). Being “like God” does not mean to become divine in nature but to be the source of one’s own morality, defining what is good and evil. This independence is self-sufficiency and autonomy from God, an act of sedition that constitutes replacing, or substituting, God with ourselves or somebody or something else.

Second, and consequently, eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, rebelling against God and attempting to sit on His throne, leads to death. That is why God immediately warned Adam and Eve that eating from the forbidden tree leads to death (*Gen. 2:17*). God is the only Source of life (*Gen. 2:7; Deut. 30:20; John 1:1–4; John 4:13, 14; John 6:32–35; John 11:25–27; John 15:1–5; Rom. 6:23; Col. 1:16, 17*). For a creature to sit on the throne of God is tantamount to removing himself or herself from the only Source of life, which is the same as consigning oneself to death.

But such death is not an ordinary death. It is a willing separation from God, a decision not to live according to God’s government (*1 John 3:4*;

Isa. 14:9, 10, 16; Ezek. 28:2, 9, 16, 17). This separation is the essence of sin and of death. We do not know what Adam and Eve thought when they heard the word “death,” but they surely thought of something grim. But we, after 6,000 years, know all too well that death is a tragedy.

Death as the Solution to . . . Death

Is there a solution to death? Yes! And we know it from the essence of the gospel: “The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (*Rom. 6:23, NIV*). How, though, do we receive this gift of eternal life? Paradoxically, the gift of eternal life comes with . . . death! Two types of death are indicated here. First, Jesus Christ died in our place and for us; He took our death upon Himself and gave us the hope of eternal life (*John 3:16, Rom. 3:25, Rom. 5:8, 2 Cor. 5:21, 1 Pet. 1:18–20*). Second, our own death is indicated, as well. But this death is not punishment for sin; Jesus died that death in our place. Rather, our death is to sin itself. This death (to sin) is required if we want to enjoy eternal life and God’s kingdom. Sin is a controlling power that keeps us separate from God (*Rom. 7:18–20, 23, 24*). To be saved from its power, we need to die to sin and be alive to Jesus and to the Holy Spirit (*Rom. 7:4–6*)! This death is symbolized by baptism (*Rom. 6:1–4*). Paul presents the most beautiful depiction of this process: “If we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection, knowing this, that our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin. For he who has died has been freed from sin. Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him, knowing that Christ, having been raised from the dead, dies no more. Death no longer has dominion over Him. For the death that He died, He died to sin once for all; but the life that He lives, He lives to God. Likewise you also, reckon yourselves to be dead indeed to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (*Rom. 6:5–11, NKJV*).

By “death to sin” the Bible means exactly what it says. It does not say that we attain to eternal life by literally dying. We are not—and cannot be—paying for our sins with our own deaths. There is no salvific merit in our deaths. The only literal death that counts for our salvation is the death of Jesus Christ on the cross. Neither does the Bible use “death to sin” to communicate an indifference to the world, as in Buddhism, for instance. God created the world perfect for our enjoyment and for us to care for it (*Gen. 1:26–28, Gen. 2:15*). Death to sin, then, means accepting the Lordship of God and the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives and rejecting the control of sin (*Rom. 8:1–11*). We enjoy obeying God and serving Him. We are transformed into the image and mind of Christ, who did not

consider holding on to power, but stooped down to earth and took our status and our place to save us (*Phil. 2:2–8*).

Part III: Life Application

1. It is true that we have what we call fundamental rights. But we live in a very complicated world of sin, a world that, more often than not, tends to ignore or trample upon our rights. Read *Philippians 2:1–9* again. The incarnation of the Son was the crucible of crucibles! How does Jesus' example help you go through the various crucibles created by sin, even if this means losing your fundamental rights? What is the crucial element for you in this passage that changes your perspective on overcoming the trials of your life?

2. The story of Samuel is more than a story about simply hearing as an auditory act of registering someone's words to us; it is about obeying what we hear. The prophet's name itself meant "God heard" (*see 1 Sam. 1:20*). God heard and was merciful to Hannah (*1 Sam. 1:17, 19, 20, 27*). Samuel heard and obeyed God. Realizing that Samuel does not at first recognize God's voice, Eli teaches Samuel how to relate to God: "Speak, LORD, for Your servant hears" (*1 Sam. 3:9*,

NKJV). In fact, the rest of the book of Samuel—indeed, the entire Bible—is about hearing and obeying, or the lack of obedience: at some point, the people stopped hearing God, and thus God stopped hearing them. One big problem in our lives is that we listen to each other, we listen to God (through His revelation), but we fail to take His words to heart and obey them. How can you better listen to and hear the members of your family? How can you better hear and obey God? Think of three ways to meaningfully improve your way of hearing and relating to other people and to God.

Notes
