

THE GOSPEL MESSAGE

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Laying Down Our Lives

Zach Crane

From the moment God breathed into man's nostrils the breath of life (**Genesis 2:7**), two abiding truths have been abundantly clear. 1) Life is sacred and precious to God. 2) Mankind, sadly, often fails to concur.

When God confronts Cain for murdering Abel in **Genesis 4**, Cain appears to immediately grasp the serious implications of God telling him, *"the voice of your brother's blood cries out to Me from the ground"* (**verse 10**). Upon receiving his sentence, Cain declares his punishment *"greater than I can bear!"* and concludes that *"anyone who finds me will kill me"* (**verses 13-14**). I find it interesting that, while capital punishment is never mentioned anywhere in God's judgment, Cain considers himself a walking dead man. Despite this being the first recorded instance of a man taking the life of another, the inherent value of life – and the consequences for abusing it – seem to be firmly established and understood.

A few chapters later, in **Genesis 9**, Noah and his family emerge from the ark after the flood to receive a blessing and enter into a covenant with God. Included in this blessing is God granting humanity all things -- every animal and every green herb alike -- for sustenance. Then, in verse 4, God makes what seems to be a rather strange prohibition when He says, *"But you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood."* God goes on to say in subsequent verses, *"Surely for your lifeblood, I will demand a reckoning,"* (**verse 5**) and, *"Whoever sheds man's blood, by man his blood shall be shed; for in the image of God, He made man"* (**verse 6**).

Here is another clear indication of the value God has placed on man's life and how seriously He views what's done with it.

God included similar statutes in the law He delivered to Israel several hundred years later. **Leviticus 17** is largely focused on instilling a proper understanding of, and respect for, the sanctity of the blood, and, in turn, the sanctity of life. God was concerned with how Israel esteemed, valued, and respected life. It mattered to Him what they did with the life He gave them – to whom and what they devoted it. Failure to bring a sacrifice and its blood to the proper place, to be presented by the proper person, for the proper purpose resulted

in that person being cut off from the people. To misuse or misappropriate the blood was serious business to God. And **verse 11** of **Leviticus 17** seems to provide insight on why that was.

*For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you upon the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood that makes atonement for the soul (**Leviticus 17:11**).*

Not only does this passage foreshadow the atonement and propitiation provided by the blood of Christ (the ultimate measure of how highly God values life and the lengths He went to preserve it), but it also strikes at the very heart of what life is all about. God gives life for the good and benefit of the soul. Based on what I gather from scripture, any other use is a misuse – and something for which God will demand a reckoning.

Sadly, humanity's inclination is often to expend and exhaust precious, God-given, life-pursuing, fleshly pleasures and

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desires. Think of all the lives absolutely consumed with, and squandered on, selfish ambition. Or the millions of lives each year simply snuffed out because they are deemed inconvenient or unwanted. These are the results of a corrupt perspective on life. This is what makes idolatry so despicable. It reduces something precious and potentially useful and glorifying to God to nothing, to something that contains and offers no life. When God is not recognized and honored in His rightful place, life becomes just another commodity, something to consume at our discretion.

This mindset leads to the type of sad situation described in **Ezekiel 34**, where even Israel's "leaders" and "shepherds" had become bloodthirsty. They ate the fat of the flock, clothed themselves with their wool, and ruled with force and cruelty. All the while, they neglected their responsibilities to feed the

continued on the next page...

flock, strengthen the weak, heal the sick, bind up the broken, bring back those driven away, and seek the lost. Precious lives were lost as a result.

That would be an extremely sad and depressing end to Israel's (and humanity's) story if God didn't go on in that same chapter to promise the coming of the Good Shepherd. A Shepherd who would seek out the lost, bring back the scattered, feed them in good pasture, bind up the broken, heal the sick, and lay down His life for the sheep. What a wonderful thing to know that God values our souls to the point He was willing to redeem them with the precious blood of Christ. How humbling to think that the One by whom all things were made did not come to be served but to give His life a ransom for many. And how sobering to know that we are called to love one another as He loved us and to follow His example in laying down our lives for one another (**1 John 3:16**).

As Peter learned, this doesn't require one to go down in a blaze of glory. Nor does it often unfold in dramatic and heroic scenes of self-sacrifice. In **John 13:37**, Peter thought he was ready to literally lay down his life for Christ's sake. But he soon found out he wasn't. Instead, Christ reveals to Peter in **John 21** that what He truly desired was much more involved. Peter was going to lay down his life by tending and caring for His flock – a life spent nurturing and promoting the welfare of souls. What better way to spend the life God has graciously given us? It's what God desires and what God deserves.

*Implore you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service (**Romans 12:1**).*

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The Purpose of the Church

Wade Stanley

One of the unfortunate consequences of a splintered and divided Christendom is the general disagreement about the purpose of the church. Some want church to be a Spirit-fueled rock concert. Others want church to be a group therapy session where hurts and sorrows are shared and feelings affirmed. Still others see the church as a mechanism by which humanity can remake the world.

In a world of confusion and contradiction, we must turn back

to the Bible. Paul, in the book of Ephesians, shows the church fulfilling several vital purposes in the life of a disciple.

Glorify God

*"...to him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen" (**Ephesians 3:21**).*

To glorify means to honor and praise. To speak words of excellence. To assign the highest status to God.

The church glorifies God through the example we set by the lives we live. In the sermon on the Mount, Jesus urges, *"Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven"* (**Matthew 5:16**). When we do well, we create an opportunity for the world to honor God. Therefore, as we endeavor to do well, let us seek to glorify God.

Worship God

*And do not be drunk with wine, in which is dissipation; but be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord, giving thanks always for all things to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ (**Ephesians 5:18-20**).*

Paul contrasts the drunkenness typical of pagan worship with "being filled with the Spirit." When filled with the Spirit, we should "speak to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs." Or, to put it another way, God expects Christians to sing when we get together.

When the church sings "psalms and hymns and spiritual songs," we "make melody in our hearts to the Lord." Singing from our hearts implies that our singing is an act of spiritual worship. In the Bible, the heart often represents our spiritual person. So when the church meets, God expects us to worship Him spiritually.

Peter says more about spiritual worship in **1 Peter 2:5**, *"you also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ."* In **verse 6**, Peter quotes **Isaiah 28:6**, which describes Jesus as a "stone, a chosen and priceless cornerstone." Likewise, in **Ephesians 2:20**, Paul describes Jesus as the "chief cornerstone" upon which God builds His church.

Jesus is a living stone, and like Jesus, God makes us living stones by which He "[builds] up a spiritual house." Contrary to what some might think, churches are not material buildings of brick and mortar, concrete, and drywall. The house of God is the people of God, the living stones. And it's made up of people because God dwells in His people – He does not live in

houses made with men's hands.

And within this spiritual house, God calls upon His people to offer up spiritual sacrifices: the writer of Hebrews says our words of praise are a sacrifice, "Therefore by Him let us continually offer the sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to His name" (13:15). In a spiritual house, God expects His people to worship Him spiritually.

Strengthen our Fellow Christians

In **Ephesians 1:22-23**, Paul describes Jesus as the head and the church as the body: "And He put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all." Building upon this imagery, Paul shows the church depends on each member doing their part to unite the body and make it stronger.

...from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love (Ephesians 4:16).

When every part works together and operates properly, the church can grow and build itself in love.

But the church can only accomplish this objective if it meets regularly: the writer of **Hebrews** exhorts in **10:24-25**,

And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching.

Verse 25 emphasizes the importance of the church meeting regularly. We must get together, especially when times are increasingly demanding for Christians.

And when we get together, we need to "consider one another to stir up love and good works." When I attend church, I must pull my mind away from "what will I get out of this" and drag it toward "what can I give my fellow Christians?" If I give careful thought, I can think of ways to inspire love and good deeds in the lives of my fellow Christians. Maybe I can offer an encouraging word. Or I can motivate them by setting a loving example.

Whatever the case, the writer of Hebrews, tells me to think about how I can inspire my fellow Christians. And if every church member attends to how they can inspire others to serve, it would inevitably increase my motivation.

Uphold the Truth

God builds the church on a three-fold foundation of the "apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone" (**Ephesians 2:20**). The apostles and prophets form

part of the foundation because, to them, God revealed the mystery, "which in other ages was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to His holy apostles and prophets" (**Ephesians 3:5**). God spoke through the agency of His Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit spoke through the agency of the apostles and prophets. Therefore, we build on the church's foundation by heeding the truth revealed by the Holy Spirit through the apostles and prophets.

As Paul tells Timothy, the church is "the house of God...the pillar and ground of the truth" (**1 Timothy 3:15**). "The ground" is another word for a foundation, and together with a pillar, the foundation of a building holds up the structure. The church is called by God to hold up the truth, elevate the truth, to make the truth visible to all of creation. When the church "speaks the truth in love," we build on the foundation of truth laid by Jesus Christ, His apostles, and prophets; we become the mechanism by which God declares the truth to the world.

Preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ

When equipping ourselves with the armor of God, Paul tells us to "shod your [our] feet with the preparation of the gospel of peace" (**Ephesians 6:15**).

The gospel is the good news of Jesus Christ. The Word became flesh. He resisted all forms of temptation and remained sinless. He delivered a message from God. He died for our sins. God raised Him on the third day following His death.

Paul describes it as "the gospel of peace" because the sacrifice of Jesus secures our peace with God – through the forgiveness of sins, we are no longer God's enemies.

God calls His church to spread the good news of Jesus to the world. Paul asks in **Romans 10:14-15**,

How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach unless they are sent? As it is written: "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the gospel of peace, who bring glad tidings of good things!"

Paul says to believe, we must hear. For one to hear, another must preach. And for there to be a preacher, one must be sent. And who will send the preachers? It must be the church! Our purpose as the church is to preach to those who have not heard and believed. And as Paul quotes from the book of Isaiah, God calls His people to perform a beautiful work.



Please check your expiration date!

Blessed Are the Dead

Laura Muriel Cox, 97, of Lakewood, CO passed away on Monday, August 29. Sister Laura was a pillar of the church on **Jay Street** (later **Jefferson Avenue**) in **Lakewood, CO** until it closed. A widow for many years, she married **Eldon Cox** later in life and traveled with him throughout the United States, encouraging small churches from Arizona to Colorado to Missouri. Brother Eldon preceded her in death. Sister Laura endured much heartache having lived through the death of two husbands and two sons. She also lived through the closing of the church on Jefferson Avenue, a church she tirelessly and selflessly served for decades. Your editor has often thought of Sister Laura as a present day Phoebe — a true servant of the church and a helper of many, including your editor. Sister Laura remained a faithful member of the Lord’s church in **Nixa, MO** until her death.

Glory to God!

The church in **Fayette, MO** rejoiced when **Angela Davis** was baptized for the remission of her sins on November 6.

Here and There

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Special Meetings

2022 Meetings

December 27-29... Youth Rally, Gregory Blvd., Raytown, MO

December 27-29.....College Rally, Lone Jack, MO

The Gospel Message

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