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A Lesson About Dying

ERIC TIMOTHY GUILD

As a missionary in rural Tanzania I work in an evangelistic context where few people know much about Christianity. The gospel message is very new to them. They understand very little about the Lord and what it means to be his disciple. In the tribal culture with which I work, the customs surrounding death and burial are perhaps the most important rites of transition and symbols of reality. Thus, in my ministry Romans 6.3-4 is extremely valuable because it uses language that is central to the life of the people among whom I minister. Understanding the Christian life in terms of death and burial teaches them many important lessons about faith. First, this passage helps new believers understand their baptism as an entrance into unity with Jesus. This means they are not experiencing simply a rite associated with institutional religion, but a relational faith with the living Lord. Second, this text is helpful in understanding the Christian's struggle with sin. Third, it communicates the hope Christians have of living new, changed lives with Jesus, both in the present and future.

When teaching either non-Christians or Christians who are young in faith, I often use Romans 6.3-4 to explain the meaning of baptism through immersion—which is to die, be buried, and rise with Christ. But this text explains much more than immersion as the mode of baptism. Baptism is not simply the way to enter the church or join a new religion. When someone chooses to follow Christ she enters into unity with him (Rom 6.5). However, this is an unusual kind of unity—it is a unity in death, burial, and resurrection life. The difficult reality is that to be unified with Christ and to be raised with him, we must be unified in his death. To follow Jesus is a call to die (Matt 16.24-25) or, in effect, to commit suicide. We are called to put to death our “old self,” to kill ourselves, by being crucified with Jesus (Rom 6.6).

DEATH: A DAILY REALITY

One of the striking differences between life in rural Tanzania, working among the Sukuma tribe, and our former life in America is the ever-present reality of death. The people with whom we work in the Sukuma villages constantly live with death. While they do not celebrate death, neither do they hide from it. In fact, their daily life is ordered around it.

Unlike Americans, with refrigeration and food processing, African villagers must slaughter a family animal to have meat to eat. Killing, skinning, and butchering animals is a daily occurrence in the village and is just one example of the constant presence of death. I remember the first time I was asked to participate in slaughtering a goat. I was surprised at how hard I had to push to slice through the tough skin of the neck. I remember the look of fear in the animal's eyes and how that look turned into a vacant stare. I remember as well how the grass turned red, stained by blood. These killings are frequent occurrences, and they make death part of daily living.

The lives of the Sukuma people are also laced with burial. These rural villagers have a high death rate because of poverty, malnutrition, and disease. People die on a daily basis. This is true everywhere, but perhaps it is more commonly visible in a rural African village. In addition, because the Sukuma live within

large, extended families, it is likely that a family will experience multiple deaths in a given year. These are not just neighbors who die, they are family members, and their deaths are significant events. When somebody dies, the people of the village do not call an ambulance to take away the body. They make all the preparations themselves. They wash the body, prepare it for burial, dig the grave, and bury the family member who has died. Everyone attends the funeral and comes prepared to give food and money to help the family of the deceased.

I have attended many funerals in the short time I have lived in Tanzania. All the relatives and neighbors come to sit at the home of the deceased. Often they stay for several weeks to mourn the death of this person. Perhaps the most significant activity takes place after the burial. People sit in groups, and each person shares

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his or her experiences and personal relationship with the dead person—daughter, brother, cousin, student, etc. By doing so they define who the dead person was. It is their way of claiming identity for the dead person and affirming the meaning of relationship. In Tanzania, one is defined by one's relationships, not by possessions. As if they were making a jigsaw puzzle, they use their stories as the puzzle pieces so that they can outline exactly what that one missing piece looks like. Since this is an oral culture, the community tries to remember

the knowledge held by the one now dead. This process includes discussing issues such as any outstanding debts, property or possessions, and talking about the roles and positions the deceased held. It gives identity to the dead person in a communal setting. It also speaks to the fact that death has brought about a change in the village. Therefore, the community seeks to restore order and peace in all these areas that are touched by a change of relationship. Everyone shares together in the loss that this person's death brings, and everyone tries to answer the question, "How will we go on?" Putting the pieces together helps them go on.

DYING AND LIVING WITH CHRIST

Of course, in following Christ we do not literally kill ourselves and physically die. However, we are called to enter "into *his* death" by giving up life allegiances to ourselves or other authorities (Rom 6.3). This represents a change of relationship and personal allegiance. This change is a death to self to the extent that we are "buried with him by baptism into death" (Rom 6.4). In baptism we undertake a symbolic and a physical burial. The concept of burial communicates a sense of finality and of closure with the past. This reality helps us teach that just as no one would leave part of a dead body unburied, all of our allegiance to sin should die and, instead, be given completely to the Lord. Therefore, our death and burial create a relationship with Christ, which is one of unity. We have a living relationship with Christ which encompasses all of life.

All the believers I minister to struggle to resist turning back to the old ways of sin and to remain faithful to their commitments to the Lord. In Romans 6 the significance of death is in dying to, or gaining freedom from, sin (Rom 6.2, 7, 11). The issue is the change in allegiance from the power, authority, and reign of sin to the power, authority, and reign of Christ. The hope of our unity with Christ is that "we too may live a new life" in service to a new master (Rom 6.4, 14). How do we experience our own new and sinless resurrection life in Christ? How do we live to God and yet also die to sin? Since baptism is a death and burial, do we not defeat and die to sin and the old body of sin? The real work of dying and defeating sin was accomplished in the death and burial of Jesus Christ. For us the work of realizing that change in allegiance, that crucifying of the old self and putting away the body of sin, is incomplete; and so it is a continuing process (Rom 7).

Death is largely hidden and glossed over in western culture, and often we are not fully aware of its reality. We are shocked at seeing its real gore, at seeing the grass turn red with blood and seeing the eyes go blank. While some of the reasons for this are beneficial, we lose something of what it means to be human, finite, and mortal. Understanding some of the realities of death and burial helps us to understand the event and process of salvation as relational faith.

How well does our ministry focus on life-changing consequences and the impact of our service and allegiance to Christ? Do we teach baptism as entrance into a relational faith with the living Lord? Do we encourage active thinking about personal death and burial, even long after the baptism has taken place? Or do we regard this rite as a passive event? How does our ministry build upon the experiences of dying to sin and burying the old body of sin? Do we oversimplify the hard work required to kill and bury sin and to maintain our new relationship of unity with Christ? Do we emphasize the individual believer's role, or do we see value in the role of the Christian community in this death and burial?

LESSONS ABOUT DYING

Our ministry, both in teaching and practice, could focus more on the lessons we learn from death and burial. Our dying to sin needs to be just that—a death. We should expect that our living struggle to crucify and kill the old self, which is hopelessly infected with sin, can be painful, messy, smelly, and ugly. It will cause suffering, perhaps quickly or slowly, to us and to others as well. It means a loss of skills, abilities, and knowledge related to the old self and the old life. Dying to sin means slowly but surely destroying, piece by piece, sinful behavior, and leaving it to rot and decay. We should expect to feel conflicting emotions. We feel great joy in giving up burdens and entering new life with Jesus; but we also may feel sorrow and fear in giving up our known, comfortable, sinful ways of life. Perhaps one might even fear to go on living this new, unknown way of life in Christ. We may expect to feel cold and alone, since it is *our* sin and *our* temptation that we must leave, with finality, while many others around us continue living in their sin.

Our death to sin should be concluded with a burial by the living community. Our allegiance to Christ means that we really do bury, or do “away with,” our “body of sin” (Rom 6.6). We can anticipate that our new selves, while living a new life in Christ, will need to mourn the loss of the old self. At the same time, we should anticipate the urgent need to remove the disease-bringing, dead body of sin. We should expect the burial process to continue until we finish sorting out and getting rid of sinful, “leftover” possessions and relationships, whether with family or the larger community. There is no aspect of our lives that can be left untouched, because death affects all of life. All those around us, including the new, sinless self, must change the relationship with the body of sin and its behaviors. All those present for the burial must act together to answer the question of “how to go on” in this new, unknown life, and all must participate in that new life. Those alive in Christ should mark the “grave” of this dead body of sin. We should continually remember that the present is different from the past: that something has died and been buried, never to return.

CHOOSING LIFE OVER DEATH

The amazing standard Paul applies to Christians is that we can live new lives now that we are really dead to sin. When we live in submission to Jesus, he lives and reigns in us, giving us the power to choose life over death. He gives us the power to choose not to return to the old life of sin. We have the future hope of resurrection, but also the present hope of life that is free from slavery to sin. Furthermore, instead of defining our reality by our earthly and sinful relationships, either in life or at death, our relationship with Christ identifies who we really are. That relationship gives us our value. Because of our unity in Christ's death, burial, and resurrection, we now find our true identity in him.

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