

## MURDERING OUR DARLINGS

Genesis 22:1-18; Matthew 9:14-17; John 11:38-44 (NASB)

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The great consummation and joy for writers is to be published. They plan, write, and carefully polish their work. Then they try to convince a publisher that their work should be published. Every publisher receives thousands of manuscripts a year and chooses only a few of them. Plenty of good manuscripts are rejected.

The process of turning a good manuscript into a great one which will be published is the painful process of editing. Large portions of every good manuscript must be thrown away or redone before it becomes great. Imagine spending hours or days writing a part of a book and then realizing that you must cast it into the dumpster. Often the sweetest words, the quotable polished gems, and the heart tugging vignettes must be slain for the good of the whole. Writers have given this process an appropriate name: murdering their darlings. The grim reality is that the greater joy of being published will simply never happen unless they relentlessly murder their darlings.

These is very much like what Jesus Christ tells us about the life of faith in him. The goal of embracing the life and joy found in him will require us to eject things, to abandon things, and to relentlessly slay the things which get in the way. Jesus said: "**For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world, and forfeit his soul?**" (Mark 8:36). If that warning means anything, it means that hanging onto things can ruin our faith and even send us to hell.

### 1. SLAYING OUR PRECIOUS PERSONAL THINGS

Abraham, the father of our faith, is our example of being willing to trust God and slay our precious personal things. One of the richest and most perplexing short passages in the Bible is when God asked Abraham to sacrifice his son, Isaac, the very one through whom God's promises were to be fulfilled: "**Now it came about after these things, that God tested Abraham, and said to him, 'Abraham!' And he said, 'Here I am.' He said, 'Take now your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I will tell you.'** So Abraham rose early in the morning and saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him and Isaac his son; and he split wood for the burnt offering, and arose and went to the place of which God had told him. On the third day Abraham raised his eyes and saw the place from a distance. Abraham said to his young men, 'Stay here with the donkey, and I and the lad will go over there; and we will worship and return to you.' Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son, and he took in his hand the fire and the knife. So the two of them walked on together. Isaac spoke to Abraham his father and said, 'My father!' And he said, 'Here I am, my son.' And he said, 'Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?' Abraham said, 'God will provide for Himself the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.' So the two of them walked on together. Then they came to the place of which God had told him; and Abraham built the altar there and arranged the

**wood, and bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Abraham stretched out his hand and took the knife to slay his son" (Genesis 22:1-10).**

Why would God do that? And why would both Abraham and Isaac agree? There is no more pregnant human picture of our heavenly Father's willingness to sacrifice his own Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, and the Son's willingness to lay his own life down as a sacrifice to God. Make no mistake, Isaac had to be moving in faith as well as his father, Abraham. He could have escaped, but he did not. Neither did Abraham stop the sacrifice: **"But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven and said, 'Abraham, Abraham!' And he said, 'Here I am.' He said, 'Do not stretch out your hand against the lad, and do nothing to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me.' Then Abraham raised his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him a ram caught in the thicket by his horns; and Abraham went and took the ram and offered him up for a burnt offering in the place of his son. Abraham called the name of that place The LORD Will Provide, as it is said to this day, 'In the mount of the LORD it will be provided'" (Genesis 22:11-14).**

God gave the substitute sacrifice, which is further explained in Hebrews: **"[Abraham] considered that God is able to raise people even from the dead, from which he also received [Isaac] back as a type" (Hebrews 11:19).** Somehow Abraham believed in the resurrection of the dead even at that early stage in redemptive history. Normally the thing being sacrificed is totally given over to God. Apparently Abraham had already done that in his heart with the life of his son. The act of receiving his son back, who was as good as dead, is a picture of our heavenly Father sacrificing his only Son and then receiving him back in his resurrection on the third day.

If you do not want to be trapped by this logic you should run away before I explain it any further. The joy of the faith life took Abraham to the top of what is now the Temple Mount in Jerusalem with his son, a knife, and stack of wood! In order to embrace the joy of resurrection he had to be willing to "murder his darling"--to sacrifice the son of the promise! And the grace and mercy of the Father who did not spare his own Son yet spared Abraham's son. Abraham did not know what God was going to do but he committed himself to it anyway, and discovered something God considers more precious than gold, namely, a faith which has been tested in the fire and found to be true.

He did not know what we now know. The God who challenges us to murder our darlings in order to embrace the joy and life of Christ was in fact willing to sacrifice his only-begotten Son for us. Would you give your son or daughter in order to please God? Every parent who sends a child to the mission field must face that question. Would you give yourself, like Isaac? He was big enough to run away, and he did not. Would you slay your dearest things for God?

One of our dearest possessions is our own private opinion about everything. We have freedom to form opinions about a broad range of issues in Christ, but not where God has spoken clearly. Another dear thing is our cash. Another is our private desire for how we want our life to go. Abraham was willing to sacrifice his son. God the Father did, in fact, sacrifice the Son who had never sinned to pay the penalty for our sin. He will not force us to murder our darlings but an unwillingness to lift the knife over our precious personal things proves that we do not yet know him.

## 2. EJECTING OUR BELOVED RELIGIOUS HABITS

A strange fact of New Testament history is that some of the disciples of John the Baptist had trouble accepting Jesus. They were following the road of asceticism, which is defined as the idea that deprivation is good for the soul. They noticed that Jesus and his disciples were on a different track. It all came to a head when Jesus and the disciples attended a party at the house of Levi the tax collector, later called Matthew: **"Then the disciples of John came to Him, asking, 'Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but Your disciples do not fast?' And Jesus said to them, 'The attendants of the bridegroom cannot mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them, can they? But the days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast.'"** (Matthew 9:14-15).

The disciples of John were hanging onto a pattern of religious life focused on sin and repentance just like the Pharisees. It was a pattern of perpetual sorrow. Jesus' answer to their question has been endlessly parsed through the centuries, but he basically said: "It's not appropriate to continue in religious sorrow when the solution to the sorrow is with you. I am here! There'll be plenty of reason for sorrow when I am in the grave, but now you should rejoice!"

He then used two illustrations of how the explosive new life in Jesus cannot be held by the old religious patterns: **"But no one puts a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment; for the patch pulls away from the garment, and a worse tear results. Nor do people put new wine into old wineskins; otherwise the wineskins burst, and the wine pours out and the wineskins are ruined; but they put new wine into fresh wineskins, and both are preserved"** (Matthew 9:16-17). Both the patch of new cloth and the new wine represent the joy and life he brings. Because of the context of feasting versus fasting, the old garment and the old wineskin represent old religious habits which are inappropriate for the new thing Christ is doing.

John's disciples had moved into repentance and faith just before the full good news of Jesus would be proclaimed. Their religious patterns were partly shaped by John, partly by true Judaism, and partly by legalistic Pharisaism. Those were the only patterns they knew. And they were beloved. So beloved that when Jesus began teaching with authority, healing, casting out demons, and modeling a new way of faith based on joy and life in him, they did not immediately join him! They were not bad people, they just did not appreciate that no one can graft a little patch of Jesus onto their old religious patterns. No one can contain the new wine of Christ in the old religious habits.

The invasion of time and space by Christ required the disciples of John to eject their beloved religious habits. Their darlings had to be murdered in order to embrace the new joy and life found in Jesus. The application of this to us is subtle. If we have embraced Christ we are already in the joy of the new wine. But have our beloved religious habits gotten in the way of what Jesus is doing now? He is always seeking and saving lost people, which means that with every successive generation the target moves. That means that every one of us is going to be told by Jesus, at some point, to murder our darlings. We may have religious patterns and habits which are now in the way of reaching our generation for Christ. They may be intensely good for us and still be in the way of what Jesus is doing now.

When I came to this church years ago I told the pastoral search committee that I would not be able to take the church back to patterns from the past which worked then because I was not around and did not know them. Furthermore, the pattern of change only ever moves forward. No one can take a church back to a set of beloved religious habits from the past and have them be effective for the mission of Jesus. The newest song we sang in our services at that time was a quarter of a century old, and most were much older. That meant that there was a whole generation whose songs were not being sung, whose instruments were not being played. The results of the previous generation's unwillingness to eject their beloved religious habits for Jesus' sake were just what you would expect. The young abandoned the church. The modern church may go down in history as the church which, by refusing to murder her darlings, lost her spiritual children.

The cycle has turned again since then. The challenge to eject our beloved habits for the sake of the next generation is upon us. Those who argued for changes which made sense to them are now arguing against them for the same reason. We will have to murder our darlings in order to grow. There is no way around it.

### 3. ABANDONING OUR SELF-EVIDENT HUMAN WISDOM

So much for our precious things and our beloved habits. Embracing the life and joy of Christ also means that we must remove human wisdom whenever it is in the way of God's working. What would you give up in order to see miracles? Jesus walked some friends through this question so that we would all learn this crucial dynamic of faith. The background to the following passage is that Lazarus had gotten sick and died, and the family had buried him: **"So Jesus, again being deeply moved within, came to the tomb. Now it was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus said, 'Remove the stone.' Martha, the sister of the deceased, said to Him, 'Lord, by this time there will be a stench, for he has been dead four days'"** (John 11:38-39).

The wisdom of Jesus blows away the wisdom of mankind. Martha was freaked by what Jesus commanded: "But Lord, don't you remember? We're Jews, and, um, we have this system of burying people within twenty-four hours. We roll the stone in front of the tomb, and then all the bad stuff can happen in there." We all have such human wisdom as we pursue the life of faith as individuals and as a church. We are very resistant to putting such wisdom aside, even when Jesus commands us.

Jesus responded to Martha with one of the sweetest, most challenging promises he ever made: **"Jesus said to her, 'Did I not say to you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?' So they removed the stone. Then Jesus raised His eyes, and said, 'Father, I thank You that You have heard Me. I knew that You always hear Me; but because of the people standing around I said it, so that they may believe that You sent Me.' When He had said these things, He cried out with a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come forth.' The man who had died came forth, bound hand and foot with wrappings, and his face was wrapped around with a cloth. Jesus said to them, 'Unbind him, and let him go'"** (John 11:40-44).

We are all hoping that in the life of faith Jesus will not only raise the dead but he will also remove the stone and the grave clothes. But that would not be faith at all! It would be like watching a movie. There are times when Jesus calls us to abandon what seem like self-evident axioms of human wisdom in order to see a miracle. We have to silence our objections and remove the stone. We have to approach the mummy and remove the grave clothes at Jesus command. Faith cannot be faith unless we do something which often flies directly in the face of what we think must be true.

At the moment when we must abandon our human opinion we must remember Jesus' sweet word: "**Did I not say to you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?**" Jesus Christ chooses to include us in his miracles! We do not do the miracles, but he may require an act of faith before he will do them. It is certain that there are acts of divine intervention that Jesus wants to do and he has given us commands to act in faith, but we know better! Lord this plan stinketh! Lord, starting ministries to reach postmodern people stinketh! Changing everything I like in church stinketh!

On the contrary, Jesus commands: "Take the impediments away and I will work. Roll away the stone. Remove the grave clothes."

## CONCLUSION

In what area of life and ministry do you need to see the glory of God? I need it all over, and so do you. Our church needs it. Abraham was willing to sacrifice his most precious thing in order to embrace the joy of faith in God. Jesus called the disciples of John to eject their beloved religious habits in order to move into the explosive life found only in him. Martha and her family was willing to remove the impediment of human wisdom to see the glory of God.

Jesus forces no one, but he challenges us to murder our darlings as a prerequisite to seeing his miraculous work among us. We can refuse and turn down the work of God for our precious personal things, our beloved religious habits, and our sensible-sounding human wisdom. We can indeed refuse, but then we will not be the church anymore, and we will forfeit the joy and the life of Christ.

Make a list of things that are stuck, wrecked, or needy, and then repeat to yourself the words of Jesus: "**Did I not say to you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?**" Pray: "Lord, show me the precious things, the beloved habits, and the points of human wisdom that are in the way. I give them to you. Only let me see Jesus!" That's a prayer God will answer.

The need to murder our darlings may be the reason some of us have not yet come to Christ. That's a perspective that deserves a rethinking. There is no substitute for the life found in Christ, and the only way to it is by repentance of our sins and faith in him. Don't miss it!