

Pondering a Paradoxical Proverb

Introduction

Sixty years ago Jim Elliot said, “He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.” This paradox echoes the wisdom of Jesus, “whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. ... unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. Anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for **eternal life**.” (Mark 8:35; John 12:24-25, NLT, bold font added)

Jim Elliot truly believed and followed Jesus, laying down his life as a martyr so that the Waodani people could hear and receive **eternal life** through Jesus Christ. A movie and book showing the life-work of Elliot and his team mates (including the astonishing impact of his martyrdom) was produced in 2005, titled, *End of the Spear*. This film “was one of the few independently released Christian movies to made over \$1,000,000 in its first three weekends of release.” https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/End_of_the_Spear

The paradox about 'saving/losing' our earthly life has a wider application: we may hold tightly onto earthly possessions and not share with the poor and needy. Such stinginess is foolish. As it is written, “Give freely and become more wealthy; be stingy and lose everything. The generous will prosper; those who refresh others will themselves be refreshed. ... It is more blessed to give than to receive.” (Proverbs 11:24-5, NLT; Acts 20:35; Luke 6:38; Mark 10:21-30; Luke 14:12-24; Deuteronomy 15:10)

Likewise, Arabic proverbial wisdom says, “If you do charity your house will always be rich.” (NB not just materially rich but in the truest sense, spiritually) A Kurdish proverb perhaps captures the paradox better, “What you give away you keep.” When we pour out our lives in sacrificial service to others we're not impoverished but enriched and blessed in the truest sense, spiritually.

Thought-provoking statement

John chapter four recounts how Jesus met a Samaritan woman at a well and sparked her curiosity by offering her 'living water.' He explained that 'living water' is, in fact, a gift from God, '**eternal life**', adding that whoever drinks this special water will never thirst again. She didn't quite understand what he meant, thinking she would no longer need “to keep coming here to draw water.” This puzzling, if elusive, word picture of 'living water' resonated with the longing for **eternity** which God planted in every human heart. (Ecclesiastes 3:11)

On another occasion Jesus presented a similar thought-provoking paradox; “whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a **ransom** for many.” (Mark 10:44-45, NLT, bold font added)

What did Jesus mean by giving his life as a **ransom**? The psalmist provided a clue some 900 years earlier pointing to the hope of a redeemer who pays the required **ransom**. “I listen carefully to many **proverbs** and **solve riddles** with inspiration from a harp. Why should I fear when trouble comes, when enemies surround me? They trust in their wealth and boast of great riches. Yet they cannot redeem themselves from death by paying a **ransom** to God. Redemption does not come so easily, for no one can ever pay enough to **live forever** and never see the grave.... But as for me, God will redeem* my life. He will snatch me from the power of the grave.” (Psalm 49:4-15, NLT, bold font added) Notice the allusion to **eternal life**, i.e. living forever.

In John 3:14-16 Jesus spoke about **eternal life** using a perplexing analogy, “And as Moses lifted up the bronze snake on a pole in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him will have **eternal life**. 'For this is how God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have **eternal life**.'” (NLT, bold added)

What does the expression 'lifted up' mean? We know that Jesus was lifted up on the cross and laid down his life as a **ransom** in the place of sinners. (John 1:29) He was slain as a perfect **lamb** in fulfillment of sin offerings as required under the Law of Moses and in fulfillment of prophecy. (“God himself will provide the **lamb** ... he was lead like a **lamb** to the slaughter” [Genesis 22:8, Isaiah 53:7, NIV])

Humanly speaking the sacrificial death of Jesus appears foolish, yet Scripture declares it was God's wise plan. By means of dying the Messiah overcame/defeated Satan who holds mankind enslaved to the fear of death all their lives. (Hebrews 4:14-15; cf. Genesis 3:15; 1 Corinthians 1:18ff) Make no mistake, Hebrews 4:14-15 is profoundly puzzling and paradoxical, similar to the earlier passages.

Another paradox is presented in Revelations 5:5 (NLT). Jesus the Messiah is acclaimed as “the **Lion** of the tribe of Judah, the heir to David’s throne, [who] has won the victory.” Interestingly, the very next paragraph spotlights Jesus as the **Lamb** (5 times) in stark contrast to the powerful, kingly imagery of a **Lion**. Why then does Scripture repeatedly exalt Jesus using the title, **Lamb**, which implies gentleness and humility? Christ humbly submitted himself to God, even to the point of laying down his life. Revelation 5:9 (and Isaiah 53:7) describe Messiah using the imagery of **lamb** because Jesus was willing to be slain in order to “**ransom** people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation.” (NLT)

A Cherokee proverb says, “When you were born you cried and the world rejoiced ... Live your life so that when you die, the world cries and you rejoice.” (Interestingly, Persians have a similar proverb.)

King Solomon also viewed death as 'better', implying that we may rejoice, looking forward to a better life in the hereafter. A wise saying of Solomon goes like this; “A good reputation is more valuable than costly perfume. And the day you die is **better** than the day you are born. ... A wise person thinks a lot about death, while a fool thinks only about having a good time.” (Ecclesiastes 7:1-4, NLT)

A thousand years after Solomon the apostle Paul testified that the hereafter is indeed, '**better**' than life on earth as we know it. “For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is **better by far**” (Philippians 1:21-23, NIV, bold font added)

Endnote: * Redeemer & Lamb in Scripture

The truth of God as redeemer (Psalm 49:15) is rooted in two epic stories embedded in Judaism, Christianity and Islam: The Exodus from slavery in Egypt and Abraham's test whereby God **ransomed** his son through providing a **lamb**. Down through history Jews, Christians and Muslims have deeply struggled to make sense of God's command to Abraham to sacrifice his first born son, illustrating what is, perhaps, the most mind-bending riddle in the Bible. However, to 'unlock this riddle', it is necessary to carefully examine Abraham's prophecy about God providing the **lamb**. Indeed, the imagery of a **lamb** plays an important role in the unfolding message of the prophets (e.g. Exodus 12, Leviticus 4, Isaiah 53) and then climaxing with John the Baptist in John 1:29 where he points to Jesus as the **Lamb** of God who takes away the sin of the world. Not only so, the **Lamb** is mentioned 19 times in the book of Revelation which further underscores its importance. John Gilchrist has written a brilliant piece, titled, *Isaac: The Reflection of the Father's Love*, showing how Abraham's prophecy about God providing the **lamb** was fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

As Jesus defeated Satan through his sacrificial death in Hebrews 4:12, so too, in a similar way, Christian martyrs overcome Satan, “For the accuser of our brothers and sisters has been thrown down to earth—the one who accuses them before our God day and night. And they have defeated him by the blood of the **Lamb** and by their testimony. And they did not love their lives so much that they were afraid to die.” (Revelation 12:10-11, NLT)

Appendix: Missing puzzle piece

This article does not mention sin but anyone having a basic familiarity with the Bible knows that John the Baptist's declaration of Jesus as the **Lamb** of God says he “takes away the sin of the world.” (John 1:29, NLT) Similarly Isaiah prophecies that the Messiah is led like a **lamb** to the slaughter, “Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a **lamb** to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.” (Isaiah 53:4-7, NIV, cf. Leviticus chapters 4-6)

Concluding invitation: Revelation describes a heavenly vision in which the apostle John saw a vast crowd of martyrs who had “washed their robes in the blood of the **Lamb** and made them white. ... they stand in front of God’s throne and serve him day and night in his Temple. And he who sits on the throne will give them shelter. They will never again be hungry or thirsty; they will never be scorched by the heat of the sun. For the **Lamb** on the throne will be their Shepherd. He will lead them to springs of life-giving water. And God will wipe every tear from their eyes.” The book concludes in chapter 22 by inviting readers; “Come.” “Let anyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who desires drink freely from the water of life.” (NLT) Will you accept this invitation? If you say, “Yes,” please write and let me know as I'd love to encourage you. Write to rolandclarke1139@yahoo.com