

M 2 · W E E K S I X

Death, Forgiveness and Love

Three quintessential topics that shape every paradigm — and the only way out of the spiritual hospital bed.

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

Do I love like this?

WEEK SIX

Recap

DEUTERONOMY 26:9 · NIV*He brought us to this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey.*

Last week we discovered that we are not anachronistic. God made us for "such a time as this." We are created for a purpose, and that purpose is manifested in the advancement of the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom is people. God's new temple resides in every person who accepts Him as Lord and Savior.

Your design reveals your destiny. You are not a mistake. The sum of all that has happened to you, both good and bad, can be used to help others. Sometimes, God uses our greatest hurts to set the trajectory of our lives. Our makeup may determine how we accomplish our purpose, but our heart determines our course. God will give you an affinity for a people, and there you will find your destiny. You may be called to help guide young people, or sit with the elderly in their last days. You may be called to walk with men through addiction or divorce, or you may be called to build a well in Rwanda. God will use your passions to help others if you'll allow Him.

Your purpose is to help build the Kingdom. The Kingdom is people. God didn't send His Son to die for a building. He sent Jesus to die for everyone because He loves us all, and it is His will that *none* should perish (2 Peter 3:9).

It is difficult to be a Kingdom builder while we are still in a spiritual hospital. The first four weeks, we discovered more about ourselves and asked the great existential question, "Why do we exist?" We looked introspectively, discovering our spiritual gifts and learning about our design. This week we will focus on three important topics: *death, forgiveness, and love*. Our view of these quintessential topics will shape our paradigm and chart our course. We need to have a healthy view of all three in order to move out of the spiritual hospital bed and start helping others.

WEEK SIX

Death

ROMANS 6:23 · NIV*For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

We have sterilized death in our society. Since Abraham Lincoln was embalmed in 1865, Americans have embraced the embalming process, and today most Americans will be viewed in a casket looking more youthful and well-groomed than most of us are in our everyday lives. Furthermore, most Americans live in cities, far away from their food sources. We do not see the violence that occurs when something gives its life for our sustenance.

Hunters understand the process of death, and most of the hunters I know honor their kill by using every part of the animal that's possible and letting scavengers feed on the rest. I have looked into the eyes of an animal that I was about to kill for food and felt the mixed emotions of exhilaration, gratitude, and remorse. I have seen its light pass from it, while its blood slowly dripped into the soil. When you process meat for yourself, you understand that we eat food because something had to die. Even wheat is cut down, crushed, and ground into bread. Death is all around us. If you've ever farmed, you've seen the hundreds and thousands of rodents, snakes, birds, and reptiles that are killed in the cultivation of potatoes, corn, beets, soybeans, and fruit. Much of our sustenance is derived from death.

Death by violence, death by cold, death by starvation — these are the normal endings of the stately and beautiful creatures of the wilderness; ... life is hard and cruel for all the lower creatures, and for man also in what the sentimentalists call a "state of nature."

THEODORE ROOSEVELT

For many, getting back to nature is idealistic and lacks the veracity of its cruelty. But God promised us a land flowing with milk and honey. These two food items are the only two that stem from life. Nothing dies in the cultivation of milk and — if done correctly — honey. God's promised land is a land without death.

Yet we are conjoined to death. Our very baptism is a symbolic ritual of our old selves dying and the raising up of a new creation. Life and abundance happen on the side of obedience, but sin has a cost. The Old Testament demonstrated that sin must be paid for by blood. The priest put his hand on the head of the sacrificial animal, symbolically transferring his sin to the animal and then slaughtering it, sprinkling its blood on the altar. We no longer sacrifice animals for our sin, because Jesus was the ultimate sacrifice when He died on the cross. We weren't there to witness it. We did not see the cost of our sin.

Our society has pushed death into a well-manicured corner. Instead of embracing death as part of life, we do our best to ignore it. Psychology has shown that those who embrace death as part of life are better adapted to life and are even happier people. The Bhutanese are some of the happiest people on earth, yet their GDP is in the bottom third of the world. Making money isn't their focus; the focus for Bhutan over the past 40 years has been on the happiness of its citizens, the meaning of life, and their own human frailty. Their word for human frailty is *mitakpa*, which means "impermanent." Embracing the impermanence of life — understanding that it can end at any moment — helps them live with more

purpose. How would we live if we lived every day as if it were our last?

Stephen Covey said we should begin with the end in mind. We should think about the narrative of those standing around our coffin and live accordingly. We must receive the finality of death to understand that our sins have a cost. Jesus died because of our sin. Adamic sin altered the world, where once lion and lamb lived in harmony. Sin changed all of creation. A proper view of death will help us grieve appropriately for our sin.

GRIEVING CONSEQUENCES VS. SIN

Grieving our sin isn't grieving the consequence. If the banker gets caught embezzling and is facing prison time, he may feel regret — not necessarily because he has sorrow for his behavior, but because he longs for freedom. Grieving the sin means that you have sorrow for the way you once were, but that you've seen the goodness of God and that His way is what you desire.

TWO PATHS OF GRIEF

There are two ways we can grieve our sin. **2 Corinthians 7:10** says, "Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death." Both Peter and Judas had sorrow for their sin. Judas threw the money he received back into the temple and then hanged himself. Peter went fishing and was restored by Jesus on the beach. Jesus broke the curse of the words Peter spoke; Judas snuffed out all chances of being restored. We can choose which path we take with our sin. It is good to see the consequence of our sin, to fear it, to understand it — but to be sorrowful for the sin itself is a matter of the heart.

WEEK SIX

Forgiveness

There is an ancient elixir in mythology called Nepenthe that helps a man forget his pain. But Nepenthe doesn't exist. There's nothing short of a lobotomy that can make you forget your pain. Our natural response to pain is to avoid it. God gave us the ability to feel all types of pain in order to protect us. He gave us our memories to help us gain wisdom. Pain is essential to our growth and to keeping us from repeating mistakes.

Forgiveness is not forgetting. Forgiveness is not condoning injustice. Forgiveness is not reconciliation. Forgiveness is letting go.

To forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover that the prisoner was you.

LEWIS B. SMEDES

That is freedom. **John 8:36** says, "So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed." You've been set free by the only One who can set you free.

The fulcrum of the Gospel is forgiveness. Christ paid the price for our sin through His death and resurrection. We cannot approach a holy God unless we are righteous — and none of us are righteous. **Romans 3:23** says, "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Yet His blood covers us, so that God can look upon us, love us, and see us as righteous. **Hebrews 10:19** says, "Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus..." God has freely forgiven us of our sins. The death required has been satisfied. Jesus paid the price. Our debt is paid. We are forgiven — not only for the sins we committed up until the moment of salvation, but for every sin we have ever committed, ever will commit, and even ever thought of committing. God's grace is sufficient. He has paid it in full. When you die, there will be nothing for you to do except to saunter through the gates of Heaven knowing that Jesus paid the price.

However, we share in the responsibility of forgiveness. When Jesus taught His disciples how to pray, He said this line in what has become known as the Lord's Prayer: "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors" (**Matthew 6:12**). Clearly, Jesus is placing the responsibility of forgiving others on us. He further clarifies it in the following story:

MATTHEW 18:21–27 · NIV

²¹Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?" ²²Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.

²³Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. ²⁴As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold was brought to him. ²⁵Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.

²⁶At this the servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.' ²⁷The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt, and let him go.

MATTHEW 18:28–31 · NIV

²⁸But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins. He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded. ²⁹His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.'

³⁰But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt.

³¹When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened.

MATTHEW 18:32–35 · NIV

³²Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. ³³Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' ³⁴In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.

³⁵This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

You play a role in your own forgiveness. It is essential for us to take inventory of all those we have wronged and those who have wronged us. We should constantly be self-assessing whether we harbor unforgiveness toward anyone.

A good litmus test for our hearts is found in the writings of King David:

PSALM 35:11–15 · NIV

Ruthless witnesses come forward; they question me on things I know nothing about. ¹²They repay me evil for good and leave me like one bereaved. ¹³Yet when they were ill, I put on sackcloth and humbled myself with fasting. When my prayers returned to me unanswered, ¹⁴I went about mourning as though for my friend or brother. I bowed my head in grief as though weeping for my mother. ¹⁵But when I stumbled, they gathered in glee; assailants gathered against me without my knowledge. They slandered me without ceasing.

David ran from Saul for sixteen years, yet never lifted his hand against the anointed of God. Saul was delivered twice into David's hands, yet David refused to kill Saul. When David went to live in the land of the Philistines — the very people who sent forth Goliath — the Philistine general said these words about him: "Is this not David, who was an officer of Saul king of Israel? He has already been with me for over a year, and from the day he left Saul until now, I have found no fault in him" (1 Samuel 29:3). David's own enemies could find no fault in him. He lived in a way that was beyond reproach. David was a man after God's own heart (1 Samuel 13:14). David's life should be studied in order for us to become men after God's heart.

David was quick to forgive. He was quick to admit his wrongs. Like David, we must set down our unforgiveness — even that directed at ourselves. Do we mourn when bad things happen to those who belittle us, gossip about us, or hate us? Do we fast for our enemies? What a powerful concept. According to Psalm 35, we should. We are called to be light and to love our enemies, even as we love ourselves. What a difficult thing. I believe it's impossible without one key ingredient.

WEEK SIX

Love

I used to end the forgiveness lesson by asking the men in my small group to take inventory of those they need to forgive. We still need to do that — but there's one thing we must have in order to forgive others. *Love*.

Love may be the most misused word in our vocabulary. We say we "love" chocolate or that we "loved" a movie. We even say we love one another, but is our love limitless, or does it have boundaries? Do we really have an authentic love for others — the kind that God has for us? In Romans 12:9–21 we find thirty love commandments. These commandments are impossible to uphold without authentic, God-authored love:

ROMANS 12:9–13 · BSB

Love must be sincere. Detest what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Outdo yourselves in honoring one another. Do not let your zeal subside; keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, persistent in prayer. Share with the saints who are in need. Practice hospitality.

ROMANS 12:14–21 · BSB

Bless those who persecute you. Bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice; weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud but enjoy the company of the lowly. Do not be conceited. Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Carefully consider what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible on your part, live at peace with everyone. Do not avenge yourselves, beloved, but leave room for God's wrath. For it is written: "Vengeance is Mine; I will repay, says the Lord."

On the contrary, "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him a drink. For in so doing, you will heap burning coals on his head." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

How does God love us?

ROMANS 8:38–39 · BSB

For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor principalities, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Ask yourself, "Do I love like this?" Is it possible for me to live out the thirty commandments given to me in Romans 12? I believe it is impossible for man, but with God all things are possible (**Matthew 19:26**). Remember the verse that says, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments" (**John 14:15**)? Part of the "Freedom" curriculum written by Pastor Chris Hodges of Church of the Highlands teaches us that we're probably reading this verse with the wrong emphasis. Many focus on the "keeping" part of the verse and not on the "love" part. If we love God, we find it easy to keep His commandments. Our focus should be on loving God. Why is this important? Because true freedom comes through obedience. We are free in Christ, and we find joy in keeping His commandments when we love Him. Romans 12 becomes easy to accomplish when we focus on loving God.

How do we love God? How do we love at all? The mystery is solved in **1 John 4:19**: "We love because He first loved us."

We love, because. Because. He first loved us.

The revival at Asbury College started after one of their pastors taught on this passage. The message wasn't "turn or burn" or repent, but rather the message focused on receiving the authentic love of God. We can love authentically — as Christ loved us — only when we receive the beautiful, cleansing, edifying, pure, holy, unfettered, complete, and transformative love of Christ. The verse uses the condition "because." We love, *because*. He first loved us.

I ask you this question: Do you feel that God loves you? Do you feel right now the wonderful grace of His love? Can you close your eyes and feel His grace and forgiveness?

ZEPHANIAH 3:17 · NKJV

The LORD your God is among you; He is mighty to save. He will rejoice over you with gladness; He will quiet you with His love; He will rejoice over you with singing.

God loves you very much. He doesn't look upon your sin, nor is He trying to squash you like a bug. Many people believe that God is out to get them, or that He's playing human "Whack-a-Mole" with their lives. That's simply not true. God has a good plan for your life (**Jeremiah 29:11**). God adores you. Our approach to God determines how we love others. It is essential to being able to fulfill His commandments, to love, and to forgive.

Since forgiveness is our part — it is requisite to being forgiven — then we must be diligent in forgiving others. **Matthew 10:8** says, "Freely you have received; freely give." We have been forgiven much; therefore, we should forgive much. Your forgiveness is dependent on how you forgive.

WEEK SIX

Week Six summary

The wage of sin is death. A wage is something we've earned. Our sin — and even our sustenance — has a cost. God's desire is for you to live in a land full of milk and honey, a land where there is no death. However, since sin abounds, creation requires death to fulfill life.

When we focus on death, it helps us live our lives with better vision for what is truly important. The paramount in life, after our relationship with God, is our relationships with one another. Since those relationships are so essential, God wants us to freely forgive one another. We receive His forgiveness, and Jesus made it clear that God will forgive us in the same manner that we forgive others.

Forgiveness is a byproduct of love. We love others *because* Christ loved us first. When we receive His love, then we are able to love others, forgive others, and live with purpose.