

# Dying Like a Seed



## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week's Study:** *1 Sam. 2:12–3:18; 13:1–14; Zech. 4:1–14; Rom. 12:1, 2; Phil. 2:5–9.*

**Memory Text:** “I tell you the truth, 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” (*John 12:24, NIV*).

Jesus' picture of a kernel of wheat dying is a fascinating analogy of our submission to God's will.

First, there is the falling. The kernel that falls from the wheat stalk has no control over where or how it falls to the ground. It has no control over the ground that surrounds and then presses over it.

Second, there is the waiting. As the kernel lies in the earth, it does not know what the future holds. It cannot “imagine” what life will be like in the future, for it is only a kernel of wheat.

Third, there is the dying. The kernel cannot possibly become a wheat stalk unless it gives up the safe, comfortable situation as a kernel. It must “die”; that is, it must give up what it has always been before it may be transformed from a seed into a fruit-bearing plant.

**The Week at a Glance:** If we know that God's will is best for us, why do we have such a hard time accepting it? What example of submission has Christ left for us? How do you see the analogy of the kernel of wheat applying to your own life?

*\*Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, December 22.*

## Submission for Service

**Read** Philippians 2:5–9. What important message is there for us in these verses?

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Contemporary culture urges us all to demand and assert our rights. And all this is good and is often the way it should be. But, as with Jesus, the will of God may ask us to freely give up our rights in order to serve the Father in ways that will make an eternal impact for God’s kingdom. This process of giving them up may be difficult and uncomfortable, creating the conditions of a crucible. Look at how Jesus did this (*Phil. 2:5–8*). These verses describe three steps that Jesus took in submitting Himself to the Father’s will. And at the beginning, Paul alarmingly reminds us: “Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus” (*vs. 5, NIV*).

In order to be in a position to save us, Jesus gave up His equality with the Father and moved to earth in the form and limitations of a human being (*vss. 6, 7, NIV*). Jesus did not come as a great and glorious human being but as a servant of other human beings (*vs. 7, NIV*).

As a human servant, Jesus did not live a peaceful and long life but “became obedient to death.” But He did not even die in a noble and glorious manner. No, He was “obedient to death—even death on a cross!” (*vs. 8, NIV*).

**In** what areas of life is this example of Jesus a model for us? If rights and equality are good and should be protected, how would you explain the logic of sometimes needing to give them up? Now read verse 9. In what way does this verse help us to understand the logic of submission to the Father’s will?

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**Pray for wisdom from the Holy Spirit, asking, What rights am I holding on to right now that actually might be a barrier to submitting to Jesus’ will in serving my family, my church, and those around me? To what extent am I willing to endure discomfort to serve others more effectively?**

## *I Have to Teach Tomorrow . . .*

▶ **Key Text:** *John 12:24*

▶ **Teach the Class to:**

**Know:** Serving God may require us, in some sense, to die to the bundle of needs and wants we call the self.

**Feel:** A desire to follow Jesus Christ's example in surrendering all to God's will.

**Do:** Be willing to listen to what God calls us to do, and possibly to give up, and to direct our lives accordingly.

▶ **Lesson Outline:**

### I. Dying to Live (*Phil. 2:5–9*)

**A** Why does the Bible repeatedly use death as a metaphor for the Christian's relationship to his or her former self?

**B** In what sense is this death really like death? In what sense does it just feel like it?

**C** Why does God want us to go through this seemingly very traumatic process?

### II. A Kernel of Wheat (*John 12:24*)

**A** How did Jesus' life model our spiritual journey? Is it fair to compare Jesus' mission with ours as followers of Christ?

**B** In our culture, survival by any means necessary is paramount. The best thing we can say about someone is that he or she is a survivor. What might Jesus say about this supersized, self-preservation instinct?

**C** Did Jesus know how His radical act of self-abnegation would turn out? Was He assured of success?

### III. Listening (*1 Sam. 3:10*)

**A** How can we hear and know God's voice?

**B** Western and particularly American culture regard self-reliance not only as a good thing but as strictly necessary for a responsible adult life. Does self-reliance in this sense conflict with the Christian emphasis on relying on God?

**C** We are told not to rely on our own judgment. Is this an absolute? Are there times when we should use our own judgment and critical faculties?

▶ **Summary:** Salvation is free, but its end result is that we stop living the lives we led before. We need to let God guide us to become different from, and better than, our old selves.

## Dying Comes Before Knowing God's Will

Many Christians sincerely seek to know God's will for their lives. "If only I could know God's will for my life, I would sacrifice everything for Him." But even after promising God this, we still may be confused about that will. The reason for this confusion may be found in Romans 12:1, 2. Paul is describing how we can know God's will, and he makes an important point: If you want to know what God's will is, you have to sacrifice first!

Read Romans 12:1, 2. Paul writes that we will be able to "test and approve what God's will is" (*vs. 2, NIV*) when:

1. We have a true understanding of "God's mercy" for us (*vs. 1, NIV*).
2. We offer ourselves as living sacrifices to God (*vs. 1*).
3. Our minds are renewed (*vs. 2*).

It is only the renewed mind that truly can understand God's will. But this renewal hinges on our death to self first. It was not enough that Christ simply suffered for us—He had to die. It is the same with us.

**Ask** the Holy Spirit to show you any areas in which you are not completely "dead." What things does the Holy Spirit need you to give up in order to become a "living sacrifice" for God?

When areas of our lives are not completely dead to self, God permits crucibles to bring them to our attention. However, our suffering not only helps us confront our sin, it also gives us an insight into Jesus' giving Himself up for us. Elisabeth Elliot writes, "The surrender of our heart's deepest longing is perhaps as close as we come to an understanding of the cross. . . . Our own experience of crucifixion, though immeasurably less than our Savior's, nonetheless furnishes us with a chance to begin to know Him in the fellowship of His sufferings. In every form of our own suffering, He calls us to that fellowship."—*Quest for Love* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Fleming H. Revell, 1966), p. 182.

**Read and pray over Romans 12:1, 2. Think about the things you need to give up in order for you to become a sacrifice. How does this help you to understand the sufferings Jesus faced for you on the cross? How can this knowledge help you enter into fellowship with Jesus and His sufferings?**

## Learning Cycle

### ► **STEP 1—Motivate!**

**Just for Teachers:** Step 1 of the Natural Learning Cycle links the learners' experiences to the lesson. Help your class members answer the question, *Why is this lesson important to me?*

A young single man once said, "I'm a little afraid to ask God to help me find the right woman to marry. I'm afraid that God will pick someone I won't like. Knowing what God values, He will expect me to live the rest of my life with a religious, but probably unattractive, wife!"

Many are concerned about submitting to God. It is difficult, especially for self-actualized, goal-oriented people, to believe that submission to God's will is safe. It seems better to make our own choices, even though we've proved ourselves wrong quite often.

Jesus was the perfect example of submitting to the will and purposes of His all-knowing Father in heaven. In this lesson, we want to inspire our class members with the joy and peace of submitting their lives to God.

### ► **STEP 2—Explore!**

**Just for Teachers:** This step of the Natural Learning Cycle presents information learners can use to help them better understand the lesson. Help your class members answer this question, *What do I need to know from God's Word?*

## Bible Commentary

### I. Submission for Service

Philippians 2:5–9 traces Christ's *life cycle*: He begins in heaven, accepts a demotion to humanness, and so is rewarded with a heavenly status even higher than before.

The key theological point is that His incarnation is *voluntary*. It was not merely Christ's humanity or suffering that earns Him heavenly merit: It is His having *chosen* to endure this existence. A reluctant, grudging, or forced submission would have been useless to the plan of salvation.

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## Willingness to Listen

“The Lord came and stood there, calling as at the other times, ‘Samuel! Samuel!’ Then Samuel said, ‘Speak, for your servant is listening.’ ” (1 Sam. 3:10, NIV).

Have you ever heard that still, small voice of the Holy Spirit but ignored it? Consequently, everything went wrong, and you thought to yourself later, *Oh no, why didn't I listen?*

First Samuel describes a story of an old man and two wicked sons who didn't listen to the Lord and a little boy who did. Though there were strong warnings from God, those who needed to change their course didn't.

**Read** their story in 1 Samuel 2:12–3:18. What contrast is made apparent here between those who listen to God and those who don't?

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Eli's sons had other things on their minds than the things of God. And even when Eli, after hearing what God wanted, spoke to his sons, he didn't seem to do anything else. And his sons were obviously not ready to submit the details of their lives to God's will. What a contrast to the young Samuel!

Preacher Charles Stanley describes how essential it is to cultivate openness to God's voice in what he calls “shifting into neutral.” He says: “The Holy Spirit . . . does not speak for the sake of passing along information. He speaks to get a response. And He knows when our agenda has such a large slice of our attention that it is a waste of time to suggest anything to the contrary. When that is the case, He is often silent. He waits for us to become neutral enough to hear and eventually obey.”—*The Wonderful Spirit-Filled Life* (Nashville, Tenn.: Thomas Nelson, Inc., Publishers, 1992), pp. 179, 180.

**What do you think Stanley means by becoming “neutral enough”? When you think about your openness to God, what things often prevent you from being “neutral enough to hear and eventually obey”? What do you need to do in your life to cultivate openness to God's voice and a decisiveness to be obedient to His direction?**

*Learning Cycle* CONTINUED**II. Dying Comes Before Knowing God's Will***(Read Romans 12:1, 2.)*

To interpret this teaching of the body as a living sacrifice solely in terms of eating the right foods is a weak and ultimately false understanding of the apostle's message here. Read this not as a proof text for health reform but rather as a Christian Shema (the central Jewish faith statement of Deuteronomy 6:5): Christians must submit to God the totality of their loyalties, thoughts, and actions, including their bodies and all the varieties of work, play, worship, and service the body is capable of. To sacrifice your body mostly by being scrupulous in diet is a distortion of Paul's message and ours.

**III. Willingness to Listen**

**Consider This:** First Samuel 3:1 says that direct revelation from God was rare in Samuel's time. Is it as rare today? Given the uncommonness of experiences like Samuel's, how do we distinguish the genuine voice of God from the stirrings of our own desires, or even from the delusions of unbalanced minds? How do we direct and reassure those who are listening for God's voice and feel they're hearing nothing?


**IV. Self-reliance***(Review the story in 1 Samuel 13:1–23.)*

Readers may be sympathetic with Saul here. After all, he takes initiative to move forward in a dangerous situation, while Samuel reacts as an overcontrolling old grouch. But knowing the end of the story (*1 Sam. 31:4, 6*), we cannot help seeing Samuel's reaction (bad-tempered as it was) as a reflection of God's feelings: that Saul is once more overstepping his authority and succumbing to hubris.

**Consider This:** Leaders must show self-confidence and initiative for people to follow them. How do leaders balance those qualities with submission to God's authority?

**V. Substitutes***(Read Zechariah 4:6.)*

“Zerubbabel will not accomplish this task [of rebuilding the temple] with

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## Self-Reliance

When Eve sinned in the Garden of Eden, it wasn't simply because she doubted God's word. At the heart of the problem was her belief that she had enough wisdom to decide what was good and right for herself. She trusted her own judgment. When we rely on our own judgment as opposed to trusting God's Word, we open ourselves up to all sorts of problems.

The story of Saul describes the steps to self-reliance and the tragedy that so quickly follows. Samuel anointed Saul as God's king (*1 Sam. 10:1*). Then he gave Saul specific instructions (*vs. 8*), but Saul disobeyed.

**Read** the next part of the story in **1 Samuel 13:1–14**. What did Saul do that led to his own downfall?

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There are three steps that led Saul down the road to self-reliance so soon after having been made king. The problem is that none of the steps were that bad in themselves. Yet, they contained the seeds of tragedy because they were each taken independently of God. Notice the order in which Saul's fall occurred.

1. Saul said, "I saw" (*NIV*)—the scattering of his troops and Samuel's absence (*vs. 11*). Saul was under pressure, and he evaluated with his own eyes what was happening.
2. Saul moved from "I saw" to "I said"—that the Philistines would conquer them (*vs. 12, NKJV*). What he saw with his own eyes shaped what he said, or surmised, about the situation.
3. Saul moved from "I said" to "I felt"—compelled to offer sacrifice (*vs. 12, NKJV*). What Saul thought now shaped his feelings.

All of us have done this: We rely on our own human eyesight, which leads us to rely on our own human thinking, which leads us to rely on our own human feelings. And then we act on these feelings.

**Why do you think it was so easy for Saul to follow his own judgment, even though he had God's clear instructions still ringing in his ears? If we know that we are so fragile and have such imperfect knowledge, why do we still try to rely on ourselves? What can we do to learn more to trust in the Lord's commands than upon ourselves?**

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Learning Cycle CONTINUED

the might and power that a royal figure usually commands, however. Rather, he is to put himself in the service of God's Spirit. It is difficult to understand, and even harder to believe, that the Spirit of God can and does prevail in place of power and might. Contemporary instincts often run in the opposite direction. Even if we confess that by the Spirit of God the world was created, it is easier to think of this Spirit as a subtle influence than as the world-creating and transforming power of the Lord of hosts."—*The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. VII, p. 772.

### ► STEP 3—Practice!

**Just for Teachers:** This step of the Natural Learning Cycle will assist you in helping your class members find the answer to the following question: **How can I practice the information I just learned?**


#### Class Activity:

Because of its poetic structure and language in Greek, scholars suspect that Philippians 2:5–11 may be an inserted hymn or worship litany, either composed by Paul or quoted from another Christian writer and already familiar to Paul's readers. The passage frequently was used in worship in early Christian times.

Read it with your class today as a responsive reading. (Since people will have different Bible versions, you must either supply copies of the text or use reading no. 842 in *The Seventh-day Adventist Hymnal*.) Remind your class that they are participating in a worship activity enjoyed by Christians of 2,000 years ago! Try to imagine how this reading sounded when read aloud (or, more likely, incorporated in some sort of variant) in a house church in Ephesus, beneath the trees at a river baptism in Philippi, in catacombs beneath the streets of Rome, or in an early European cathedral.

#### As You Read Together, Invite the Class to Contemplate These Questions:

- Am I modeling my life attitude upon Christ's?
- Christ was submissive to His Father's will. Am I?
- Am I a servant to others?
- Would I be obedient to God, even if He asked me to give up my life?
- Can I wait for heaven to be exalted, or am I ambitious to be exalted here?

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## Substitutes

As we saw yesterday, submission to God's will can be undermined as we rely on our own strength. It also is possible to rely on other substitutes for God. When some people feel depressed, they go shopping for something to make them happy. When some feel inadequate, they pursue fame. When others have difficulties with their spouse, they look for someone else to give them intimacy and excitement.

Many of the things we use can relieve the pressure, but they do not necessarily solve the problem nor teach us how to handle the situation better the next time. Only supernatural help from God can do that. The problem is that many times we try to depend on substitutes for God rather than on God Himself.

Here are three substitutes that we may use instead of God:

1. Using human logic or past experience when we need fresh divine revelation.
2. Blocking problems from our minds when we need divine solutions.
3. Escaping reality and avoiding God when we need communion with God for divine power.

Zechariah helps us to focus on what really matters when we are tempted to use substitutes. After many years away, the exiles had finally returned from Babylon and immediately began to rebuild the temple. But there was an incredible amount of opposition to this (some background can be found in Ezra 4–6). So Zechariah came with this message of encouragement to Zerubbabel, who was leading the work.

**Read** this message in Zechariah 4:1–14. What does God mean in verse 6? How could the completion of a building project be affected by the Holy Spirit? What does this teach us about the relationship between the Holy Spirit and the practical things that we do?

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God did not prevent the opposition to the temple nor spare Zerubbabel from the stress of dealing with it. And God will not always protect us from opposition. But when opposition comes, God may use it as a crucible to teach us to depend on Him.

**When stress comes, what's your first reaction? Food? Television? Prayer? Submission to God? What does your answer tell you about yourself and the things you need to learn or to change?**

*Learning Cycle* CONTINUED► **STEP 4—Apply!**

**Just for Teachers:** In this fourth and final step of the Natural Learning Cycle, you will want to encourage class members to make a life response to the lesson. Help them answer this question, **With God’s help, what can I do with what I have learned from this lesson?**

Accustomed as we are to thinking that we have at least some control of our own destiny, some find submission to God’s will difficult. Class members may well wonder how they are to submit. Our self-determination is strong. Especially for take-charge people, the concept of surrender to the will of another in practical areas of life is difficult, especially if such a choice appears uncertain or unclear. I may want to submit to God’s will, but if faced with a decision, I may still wonder, *How am I to know what choice God wants me to make?*

**Two Responses May Help to Clarify the Idea of Submission:**

- 1 Help the class understand that submission is an attitude more than a road map. Those who submit to God’s will may not feel that they have more information than other people do, but they certainly will make better choices.
- 2 Though we don’t know all of God’s will, there are plenty of areas in which Scripture has made God’s will perfectly clear. If we submitted only in those areas in which we’ve no doubt of God’s will, that alone would help us open our hearts to God’s further leading.

**Further Study:** Read Ellen G. White, “Eli and His Sons,” pp. 575–580; “The Presumption of Saul,” pp. 616–626, in *Patriarchs and Prophets*.

Submission to God’s will comes as we die to our own desires and ambitions. This opens the way for true service to others. We cannot live for God without becoming a sacrifice and living in continual openness to God’s voice. For us to truly submit our wills to our Father’s will, we must recognize the dangers of relying on ourselves and on substitutes for God’s Word and power. As submission to God’s will is at the heart of a Christlike life, God may allow crucibles to teach us dependence on Him.

“The neglect of Eli is brought plainly before every father and mother in the land. As the result of his unsanctified affection or his unwillingness to do a disagreeable duty, he reaped a harvest of iniquity in his perverse sons. Both the parent who permitted the wickedness and the children who practiced it were guilty before God, and He would accept no sacrifice or offering for their transgression.”—Ellen G. White, *Child Guidance*, p. 276.

### Discussion Questions:

- 1 As a class, talk about the incredible condescension of the Son of God in coming to earth as a human being in order to die for our sins. What does it tell each of us about what self-sacrifice and self-denial for the good of others means? Though we certainly can’t do anything like that, the principle is there and should always be before us. What ways can we, in our own spheres, emulate the kind of submission and self-sacrifice shown to us by Jesus at the Cross?
- 2 For many people, submitting to God without knowing what will happen next can be a terrifying thing. How would you counsel someone who is relying on themselves rather than God? What would you say to help remove their fears of not knowing—or being able to control—the future?
- 3 As a class, spend some time praying for people you know who have difficulty in submitting to God’s will, that they may see that trusting God’s will is the only route to a lasting peace. At the same time, what practical things can you do for these people to help them see that they can surrender to God and that His way is the best? In other words, how can God use you to help others know of His love and willingness to provide?