

The Death of Self

by A.B. Simpson

The sermon emphasizes the importance of dying to self and living for Christ, highlighting the dangers of self-will, self-confidence, and self-glorying.

Scripture: Romans 7:18, Galatians 2:20

Topics: "Self-Denial", "Surrender to Christ"

Description

A.B. Simpson emphasizes the necessity of dying to self in his sermon 'The Death of Self,' using the allegory of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac to illustrate the believer's journey from self-will and self-confidence to a life fully surrendered to Christ. He explains that true spiritual growth requires not only the death of sin but also the relinquishment of the self, which can manifest as pride, self-sufficiency, and self-glorying. Simpson warns that self-centeredness leads to spiritual failure and dishonors God, while the remedy lies in embracing the love of Christ and allowing Him to live through us. He encourages believers to seek a deeper relationship with Jesus, which will naturally lead to a life of self-denial and service to others.

Transcript

"Not I, but Christ." Gal. ii: 20.

The story of Abraham, Ishmael and Isaac is a parable, illustrating this text. The casting out of Ishmael is most clearly declared in this very epistle to be an allegory setting forth the spiritual experience of the believer when he dies to the law and sin through the cross of Jesus Christ, and comes into the resurrection life of his Risen Lord. But there is something more than the experience of Ishmael and our deliverance from the power of indwelling sin. In the patriarchal story, this was followed by the offering up of Isaac on Mount Moriah, and there can be no doubt that this sets forth the deeper spiritual experience into which the fully consecrated heart must come, when even the sanctified self is laid upon the altar like Isaac upon the mount, and we become dead henceforth, not only to sin, but to that which is worse than sin, even self.

There is a foe whose hidden power

The Christian well may fear;

More subtle far than inbred sin

And to the heart more dear.

It is the power of selfishness,
The proud and wilful I;
And ere my Lord can live in me,
My very self must die.

This is the lesson of Isaac's offering and Paul's experience. "I have been crucified with Christ," that is the death of sin; "nevertheless I live," that is the new life in the power of His resurrection; "yet not I, but Christ liveth in me," that is the offering of Isaac, the deliverance from self, and the substitution of Christ Himself for even the new self; a substitution so complete that even the faith by which this life is maintained is no longer our self-sustained confidence but the very "faith of the Son of God who loved me and gave Himself for me, that is, instead of me, and as my Substitute.

I. THE FORMS OF SELF.

We read in the book of Joshua of the three sons of Anak, who formed the Anakim, the race of giants who held the city of Hebron before Caleb's conquest, and were the terror of the Israelites. Literally Anak means long-necked, and represents pride, confidence, willfulness, and self-sufficiency. The first of the Anakim may be called,

Self-will, the disposition to rule, and especially to rule ourselves; the spirit that brooks no other will and its own law and god. Therefore the first step in the consecrated life is unconditional surrender. This is indispensable to break the power of self at the centre, and to establish forever the absolute sovereignty of the will of God in the heart and life of the Christian. We cannot abide in holiness and we cannot be wholly used for God until self-will is so utterly crucified that we could not even think for an instant of acting contrary to His will or without His orders. This is obedience, and obedience is the law of the Christian life and must be absolute, unquestioning, and without any possible exception. "Ye are my friends if ye do whatsoever I command you."

It is true that God requires of us in the life of faith the exercise of a very strong will continually, and there is no doubt that faith itself is largely the exercise of a sanctified and intensified will, but in order to this it is necessary that our will be wholly renounced and God's will invariably accepted instead, and then we can put into it all the strength and force of our being, and will it even as God wills it, and because He wills it. In short, it is an exchanged will; the despotic tyranny of Anak exchanged for the wise, beneficent yet still more absolute sovereignty of God.

Self-confidence is the next of Anak's race. It is the spirit that draws its strength from self alone and disdains the arm of God and the help of His grace. In a milder form it is the spirit that trusts its own spiritual graces or virtues, its morality perhaps, its courage, its faith, its purity, its steadfastness, its joy, and its transitory emotions of hope, enthusiasm, or zeal. It is just as necessary to die to our self-sufficiency as to our self-will. If we do not we shall have many a fall and failure until we learn, with the most triumphant and successful laborer that ever followed the footsteps of his Lord, that "we are not sufficient of ourselves to think anything as of ourselves, but our sufficiency is of God." The sanctified heart is not a self-constituted engine of power, but is just a set of wheels and pulleys that are absolutely dependent upon the great central engine whose force is necessary continually to move them. It is just a capacity to hold God; just a vessel to be filled with His goodness, held and used by His hand; just a possibility of which He, in His

abiding life, is constantly the motive power and impelling force. The word "consecrate" in Hebrew means "to fill the hand," and beautifully suggests the idea of an empty hand which God Himself must continually fill.

Self-glorying is the last and most impious of these Canaanitish tribes. He takes the very throne of Jehovah and claims the glory due unto Him alone. Sometimes it is a desire for human praise. Sometimes it is more subtle, the pride so proud that it will not stoop to care for the approval of others, and its supreme delight is in its own self-consciousness and superiority, ability or goodness. Metaphysicians have sometimes made this happy distinction, that vanity is an inferior vice to pride. Vanity only seeks the praise of others, but pride disdains the opinions of others and rests back in the complacent consciousness of its own excellency. Whatever its phase may be, the root and principle is the same. It is impious self, sitting on the throne of God, and claiming the honor and glory that belong to Him alone.

These three forms of self are illustrated by three very solemn examples in the word of God. Saul the first king of Israel is a fearful monument of the peril of self-will. His downward career began in a single act of disobedience, a disobedience which seemed to have respect to a mere question of detail, but which was really an act of self-will, a substitution of his choice for God's express command. The prophet Samuel characterizes his sin in these very expressive words, "To obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams. For rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft (or devil worship), and stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry. Because thou hast rejected the word of the Lord, He hath also rejected thee from being king." It is evident from these words that the very essence of Saul's sin lay in this element of willfulness and stubbornness which had dared to substitute his own ideas and preferences for the word of Jehovah. From this moment his obedience was necessarily qualified and of course worthless, and God sent His prophet to choose another king, who, although full of human imperfections, had this one thing on which God could fully depend, namely, a purpose to obey God when he fully understood His will. Therefore God calls David "a man after my own heart who shall perform all my will." David made many mistakes and committed many dark and terrible sins, but they were when under strong temptation and when blinded by passion and haste, but never with the purpose of disobeying God, or, at the time, with the consciousness that he was transgressing. The sad, sad story of Saul's downward descent and final and tragic ruin should be enough to make us tremble at the peril which lies before the willful soul, and to lead us to cry, "Not my will but thine be done."

We have just as marked an instance of the peril of self-confidence in Simon Peter. Strong in his transitory enthusiasm, and ignorant of the real weakness of his own heart, he honestly meant what he said, when he exclaimed, "Though all men should deny thee yet will I never deny thee." But alas! the shameful denial, the upbraiding look of Jesus, the bitter tears of penitence and the sad days of the crucifixion that followed had to teach him the lesson of his nothingness, and the necessity of walking henceforth with downward head in the strength of the Lord alone.

We are not left without as vivid and impressive an object lesson of the last form of self-will—the pride that glories in its own achievements or excellencies. "Is not this great Babylon that I have built?" cries Nebuchadnezzar, in the hour of his triumph, as he looks upon that splendid city, which was indeed a paragon of human glory, and surveys in his imagination the mightier empire of which it was the metropolis, an empire which literally comprised the world. If mortal could ever have cause to glory in earthly magnificence, Nebuchadnezzar had, for God Himself had compared him and his kingdom to a majestic head of gold and had symbolized his power under the figure of a winged lion, combining the majesty and sovereignty of the eagle and the lion in one splendid image. But the very instant that vain-glorious word

reached the ears of God, the answer fell from heaven like a knell of judgment, "The kingdom is departed from thee. And they shall drive thee from men, and thy dwelling shall be with the beasts of the field, till thou know that the Most High ruleth in the kingdom of men, and giveth it to whomsoever He will." This is the glorying of the carnal heart, but even the follower of God may mingle his own self-seeking and his own honor with his work for God and thus impair his usefulness and lose his own recompense.

There is not a more pitiful picture in the long panorama of the Bible than that morbid and grumbling prophet, sitting outside the gates of Nineveh under a withered gourd, his face blistered and swollen with the scorching sun and his eyes red with useless weeping; asking God that he might die, because his ministry had been dishonored; and presenting a spectacle of ridiculous melancholy and chagrin while all around him millions were rejoicing and praising God for the mercy which had just delivered them from an awful catastrophe. Poor Jonah! God had given him the most honorable ministry ever yet accorded to a human being. The first foreign missionary, he had been sent to preach to the mightiest empire on the face of the globe and the imperial city of the world, proud Nineveh! His preaching had been successful as no mortal ever had succeeded. The whole city was lying prostrate on their faces at the footstool of mercy in penitence and prayer through his words, and the nation's heart, for a moment at least, was turned to God. And yet so full of himself had all his work been, so utterly was he absorbed in his own credit, reputation and honor, that when God listened to the penitent cries of the Ninevites and revoked the sentence which Jonah himself had uttered, and rendered his prophecy null and void, so that instead of his word coming to pass he himself would probably be afterwards ridiculed as a fanatic and idle alarmist, poor Jonah became disgusted and exasperated and like a petted child went out and threw himself upon his face on the ground and asked God to kill him, just because He had by His mercy spoiled his reputation as a true prophet. He could not see, as God did, the unspeakable horror and anguish that had been averted. He could not see the joy of the divine heart in exercising mercy and in hearing the penitent cries of the people. He could not see the great principle of grace which underlies the divine threatenings. He could not see that great-souled pity, that felt for the one hundred and twenty thousand infant children of the great capital, or the dumb brutes, which would have moaned in their dying agony, if Nineveh had fallen.

All he could see was Jonah's reputation as a true prophet or what people might say when they found that his word had not come to pass; and with that one little worm gnawing at the root, his peace and happiness, like his own gourd, withered away, and God had to set him up as a sort of dried specimen of selfishness, to show the meanness and misery of the self-life that mingles its own glory with the sacred work of the glorious God, and which, ever since the days of Jonah, has rendered it impossible for God to use many a gifted man, and has blighted the church of Christ and rendered vain the ministry of thousands because God could not use them without giving to men the glory which He will never give to another. God had tried to kill Jonah before He sent him to Nineveh, for He knew the secret bane of his heart, and so He immersed him for three days and nights in the sea and buried him in the bowels of a whale; but out of that Jonah came, as a great many other people come out of the experience of sanctification with a big self, supreme even in the sin-cleansed soul. Oh let us lift up the heart-felt prayer,

O to be saved from myself, dear Lord,

O to be lost in Thee!

O that it may be no more!

But Christ that lives in me!

II. THE EFFECTS OF SELF.

It dishonors God and sets up a rival on His throne. The devil was not altogether a liar when he said to our first parents, "Ye shall be as gods." This is just what fallen man tries to be, a god unto himself. This is the essence of the sin of selfishness, that it puts man in the place of God by making him a law and an end unto himself. Whenever, any person acts, either because it is his own selfish will, or for his own self-interest, purely as an end, he is claiming to be his own god and directly disobeying the first commandment, "Thou shalt have no other gods besides Me." Moreover, in assuming the place of God, he is doing it in a spirit the very opposite of God's, for God is love, and love is the very opposite of selfishness. He is thus mimicking God and proving, at the same time, his utter unfitness to occupy His throne by his unlikeness to Him.

It leads to every other sin and brings back the whole power of the carnal nature. For while self alone attempts to keep the heart it finds sin and Satan too strong. A self-perfection is not possible for any man. There must be more than "I" before there can be victory. In the seventh of Romans the apostle tells us what "I, myself" can do and that is, ineffectually struggle. In the eighth it is what "Christ in me" can do, and that is victory and everlasting love. The man or woman who only goes so far as to receive Adamic purity, if such a thing be included in the Gospel at all, will soon have the next chapter of Adamic history, and that is the temptation and fall. But the man who receives Christ to dwell within and keep the heart by His mighty power, shall rise "to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ."

The self-life leads back to the dominion of Satan. Satan's own fall began probably in a form of self-love. Made to be dependent on God every moment, probably he became independent; and contemplating his own perfection, and thinking it was something that was his own, he became separated from God, and then inevitably fell into rebellion against Him and eternal rivalry, disobedience and all that can be the opposite of the divine and the holy. And so still, any soul that becomes self-constituted or occupied with its own virtues, and tries to be independent of Jesus, either as the source of its strength or the supreme end of its being, will fall under the power of Satan and share his awful descent. Where can we find a sadder illustration of the end of self than in the story of Saul? He began with Saul and ended with Satan. The first chapter is self-will, the last is the awful night at Endor and the bloody day of death and ruin on Mount Gilboa.

It is fatal to the spirit of love and harmony. It is the opposite of love and the source of strife, bigotry, suspicion, sectarianism, envy, jealousy and the whole race of social sins and grievances that afflict the Christian life and the church of God. It is the mother of the strifes and sectarianisms of the church from the very beginning. Where it prevails there can be no true unity, no happy co-operation. You never can have a harmonious church or a happy family where self is predominant in the hearts of the people. The very secret of Christian co-operation and happy church life is "forbearing one another in love," endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace, "in honor preferring one another."

It mars our work for God. Self-will will try to force the chariots of God's power and grace upon our own side-tracks, and that God will never permit. Self-confidence will seek to build up the kingdom of Christ by human means and unsanctified instrumentalities, and presume to go where God has not sent and to do what God has not qualified us by His Holy Spirit to do. The result is, it is but crude work, defiled by worldliness and sin, impermanent and unfruitful, as much of the Christian work of to-day is, in all the churches of Christ. And above all others, the spirit of self-glorying will try to use the pulpit, the organ gallery, the subscription books, the religious paper, the charitable scheme, the very mission for winning

souls, as a channel for developing some brilliant character, or to glorify some rich man or woman, or minister to the spiritual self-sufficiency of some successful worker; and God is disgusted with the spirit of idolatry, and His Holy Spirit turns away grieved for the honor of Jesus. Until we are so yielded to our Master that He and He alone can be glorified in our work, the Lord cannot trust us with much service for Him or it will simply become the pinnacle of the temple from which the devil will hurl us down.

Self makes us unhappy. It is a root of bitterness in every heart where it reigns. The secret of joy is hidden in the bosom of love, and the arms of self are too short ever to reach it. Not until we dwell in God and God in us, and learn to find our happiness in being lost in Him and living for His glory and for His people, shall we ever know the sweets of divine blessedness. All the world cannot fill this hungry heart. All our spiritual treasures only corrupt if we hoard them for ourselves. Only water that runs is living water. And only when it is poured into other empty vessels does it become wine. The self-willed man is always a miserable man. He gets his own way and does not enjoy it, and wishes after he has had it, that he had never got it, for it usually leads him over a precipice. The self-sufficient man can never know the springs which lie outside his own little heart, and the self-glorifying man, like poor Herod, is eaten of the worms of corruption and remorse with which God always feeds the impious soul that dares to claim the honors due to Him alone.

Self-love always leads to a fall. The boasted wisdom must be proved to be foolishness. The proud arm must be laid, like Pharaoh's, in the dust. The self-sufficient boast, like Peter's, must be answered by his own failure. The disobedient path which refuses God's wise and holy will, must be proved to be a false way. Every idol must be abolished, every high thing brought low, and no flesh glory in His presence. Oh, beloved, if you are going on in your own will, your own strength, for your own gratification and glory, beware! Thorns lie in your pathway, serpents lurk beneath your feet, yawning abysses, perilous precipices, angry tempests, midnight darkness, many a sorrow, many a tear, many a fall, await you. "He that trusteth in his own heart is a fool." "There is a way that seemeth right unto a man, but the ends thereof are the ways of death."

Oh, let us ask our faithful God to save us from this tyrant that dishonors God, that leads us into captivity to Satan, that withers love, mars the work of God, poisons all our happiness; and plunges us into failure and ruin; and so to show us that we are nothing, that we shall be glad to have Christ live in us, our "all in all."

III. THE REMEDY FOR SELF.

God often has to let self have its way until it cures us effectually by showing us the misery and failure which it brings. This is the only good there is in our own struggling, that it shows us the vanity of the struggle and prepares us the more quickly to surrender to God. And so sometimes even our disobedience is overruled to make us fear to repeat the experiment or to venture again one step beyond our Father's will. Let us beware, however, how we attempt the experiment ourselves, for there is always one step too far ever to return.

God has placed around us the blessed restraints of other hearts and lives as checks upon our selfishness, and links, which almost compel us to reach beyond ourselves and, work with and live for others. He has made no man independent of his brethren. "We are fitly framed together" and so grow into a holy temple in the Lord. We are adjusted, one to His bone, and, by that which every joint supplieth, the body is ministered unto and groweth into the fullness of His stature. The church of Christ is no autocracy where one man can be a dictator or a judge, but a fellowship where One alone is Master. Any work which develops into a one-man despotism becomes withered. It is true that God has ranks of workers, but they are all

harmonious and linked in heavenly love. The man who cannot work with his brethren in mutual comfort and harmony has something yet to learn in his own Christian life. True, God does not require us to work with unsanctified men; but there are plenty of sanctified ones, thank God, to-day, where any earnest heart can find a congenial fellowship of service; and while He will teach any of us by ourselves, and wants us to be independent of our brethren in the sense of leaning on them instead of God, yet He does require that we should be able to co-operate with them for God, submitting ourselves one to another in the fear of God, one sowing and another reaping, and both rejoicing together, "bearing one another's burdens and so fulfilling the law of Christ," "true yoke-fellows." And so by innumerable phrases and figures He has taught us the blessed truth of Christian cooperation in the spirit of self-renunciation and mutual confidence and love. Let us receive these blessed lessons and helps, and let Him so slay in us the self-asserting "I" that we can be true yoke-fellows, and like David's men, be able to "keep rank" in the great host of God.

The love of Jesus is the divinely appointed prescription for the death of self. Paul expresses it beautifully, "We thus judge that if one died for all then were all dead. And that He died for all that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto Him that died for them and rose again." Many of us have seen at some time a young, beautiful, petted, luxurious and selfish girl, growing up surrounded with wealth, affection, admiration, adulation, until she was wholly spoiled, and became the centre of the circle in which she lived, her whole being perverted by her selfishness. But we have seen that girl years afterwards, and we would not have known her had we not traced the intermediate steps. She was now a self-denying, loving wife and mother, her whole being devoted to the happiness of that husband whose fortunes she had followed amid poverty, obscurity and separation from all her former friends; sharing his penury, toiling for his comfort, and nursing as a faithful and loving mother, the little children who had come into her arms, with the love that never wearied, that felt no task too hard, and no work too menial. What has made all the difference? What has cast out that idol, self, from its throne? Nothing but love. That man has won her heart. He has come in and taken the place that it had occupied; it is cast out and he reigns. That is the simple story of the death of self in the Christian life. It is the love of Jesus that has excluded it, and never, until we become fascinated with His affection, and won in complete captivity to His love, shall we cease to live unto ourselves. Then, like that girl, we will follow Him anywhere. We will toil and suffer with Him. We will be content without many things that before we thought we must have, because His smile is our sunshine, His presence is our joy, His love, shed abroad in our hearts, is our heaven, and we cannot speak or think of sacrifice or suffering, our heart is so satisfied with Him.

Beloved, if you would die to self you must fall in love with Jesus and let Him become to you the personal reality of Solomon's sweet Song in which the whole heart summers into a land of Beulah and a "Hephzibah" of joy.

But it is not the love of Christ merely that we want; it is the living Christ Himself. Many people have touches of the love of Christ, but He is a Christ away up in heaven. The apostle speaks of something far mightier. It is Christ Himself who lives inside and who is big enough to crowd out and keep out the little "I." There is no other that can truly lift and keep the heart above the power of self but Jesus, the Mighty Lord, the stronger than the strong man armed, who taketh away his armour wherein he trusted and spoileth all his goods and then takes forever the heart that has given him its goods. Blessed Christ! He is able not only for sin, sorrow and sickness, but He is able for you and me-able so to be our very life, that moment by moment we shall be conscious that He in us fills us with Himself and conquers the self that ruled before. The more you try to fight a self-thought the more it clings to you. The moment you turn away from it and look to Him, He fills all the consciousness and disperses everything with His own presence. Let us abide in

Him, and we shall find there is nothing else to do.

It is almost the same thing, but another way of saying it, that the baptism and indwelling of the Holy Ghost within us will deliver and keep us from the power of self. When the cloud of glory entered the tabernacle there was no room for Moses to remain; and when filled with the heavenly presence of the blessed Spirit we are lost in God and self hides away, and like Job we can say, "Now mine eye seeth Thee. Wherefore I abhor myself and repent in dust and ashes."

Beloved, these temples were reared for Him. Let Him fill them so completely that like the oriental temple of glass in the ancient legend, the temple shall not be seen, but only the glorious sunlight, which not only shines into it, but through it, and the transparent walls are all unseen.

It is not a new, but it is an appropriate thought, that all the things that God has used have first been sacrificed. It is a sacrificed Saviour, One who emptied Himself, and made Himself of no reputation, that God has so highly exalted, and given Him a name that is above every name, "that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven and things in earth and things under the earth." It was a sacrificed Isaac that God made the promised seed and the progenitor of Israel's tribes. And it was on that very Mount Moriah where Isaac was sacrificed, that God afterwards reared His glorious temple. And so it is only when our Isaac is on the altar and our whole being lost in God that He can lay the deep foundations and rear the everlasting walls of the living temple of which He is the Supreme and eternal glory.

I look back to-day with unutterable gratitude to the lonely and sorrowful night, when, mistaken in many things, and imperfect in all, my heart's first full consecration was made, and not knowing but that it would be death in the most literal sense before the morning light, yet with unreserved surrender I first could say,

"Jesus, I my cross have taken,

All to leave and follow thee;

Destitute, despised, forsaken,

Thou from hence my All shalt be."

Never, perhaps, has my heart known quite such a thrill of joy as when the following Sabbath morning I gave out those lines and sung them with all my heart. And if God has been pleased to make my life in any measure a little temple for His indwelling and for His glory, and if He ever shall be pleased to use me in any fuller measure, it has been because of that hour, and it will be still in the measure in which that hour is made the key-note of a consecrated, crucified and Christ-devoted life.

Oh, beloved, come and let Him teach you the superlative degree of joy, the joy that has learned to say not only, "My Beloved is mine," but better even, "I am my Beloved's;" and we shall find as one of our dear missionaries in China used to say, "He is willing to come into the heart of every one of us and love us to death."

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