

**The Main Thing Is the Main Thing**

**TWELVE**

CHOOSE TO LIVE

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*For whoever wishes to save his life  
will lose it; but whoever loses his  
life for My sake will find it.*

Matthew 16:25

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*For whoever wishes to save his life  
will lose it, but whoever loses his  
life for My sake and the gospel's  
will save it.*

Mark 8:35

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*For whoever wishes to save his life  
will lose it, but whoever loses his  
life for My sake, he is the one who  
will save it.*

Luke 9:24

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## The Main Thing Is the Main Thing

**D**uring summers in my younger days, I was a lifeguard at the community pool. My responsibility was to save lives. Possibly, but highly unlikely, I could lose my life in the process. In war, a person may save another person's life and in doing so lose his own. In fact, Jesus came to die in order that man may live forever in His presence. Forfeiting one's life for another life is not that difficult a concept to grasp. That, however, is not the point Jesus makes in the passages under consideration.

Jesus is coming to the end of His earthly ministry and now gives an apparently nonsensical statement to his followers. "To save is to lose and to lose is to save." The issue was not the giving up of one's life for another person. Rather, He spoke of giving up one life-narrative for a very different one: physical life with transitory implications versus spiritual life with eternal implications.<sup>1</sup> Most of those who heard His words no doubt left shaking their head, saying, "What did He just say? This teaching is counterintuitive. It is 180 degrees out of phase with our normal thought process." But from God's perspective it is right on target. Jesus is turning everything upside down from the tables in the temple to messages for His followers.

He spoke of a new direction in thinking and therefore in behavior. It was a complete change of perspective on what was really important. The appeal is not for the fainthearted. Rather, it is targeted toward those who desire to grow in close fellowship

## CHOOSE TO LIVE

with Christ, based on love and evidenced through obedience and service.

### Issue Two Alternatives within the Paradox

On the five occasions when Jesus addressed the paradox (see the chart, *Alternatives within the Paradox*), He presented two opposing alternatives. A person could either lose his life while trying to save it or find life in the process of losing it. These are two sets of cause-and-effect, two choices. Saving results in losing, while losing is saving.<sup>2</sup>

<b>ALTERNATIVES WITHIN THE PARADOX</b> (Parallel Passages)			
<b>Event</b>	<b>Text</b>	<b>First Condition</b>	<b>Second Condition</b>
1	Matt. 10:32–39	Find Life, Lose Life	Lose Life, Find Life
	Matt. 16:24–27	Save Life, Lose Life	Lose Life, Find Life
2	Mark 8:34–38	Save life, Lose Life	Lose Life, Save Life
	Luke 9:23–26	Save Life, Lose Life	Lose Life, Save Life
3	Luke 14:25–35	———	Hates Life, — —
4	Luke 17:31–34	Save Life, Lose Life	Lose Life, Preserve Life
5	John 12:24–26	Loves Life, Lose Life	Hates Life, Keep Life

Each choice has its own outcome. The obvious question is, To what does *life* (which can also be translated “soul”), and *save* refer? In fact, this is where theological perspectives begin to come to light. The two major conflicting views, Reformed theology and Free Grace theology, are illustrated in the chart, *Different Views of*

## THE MAIN THING IS THE MAIN THING

*the Paradox*, segmenting the two different alternatives: (1) save life to lose life and (2) lose life to save life.

<b>DIFFERENT VIEWS OF THE PARADOX</b>		
<b>View</b>	<b>Cause</b>	<b>Effect</b>
<b>First Alternative</b>	<b>Save Life</b>	<b>Lose Life</b>
Reformed View	Devotion to World (physical preservation)	Relationship Issue (never established → hell)
Free Grace View	Devotion to World (physical preservation)	Fellowship Issue (no intimacy with Christ)
<b>Second Alternative</b>	<b>Lose Life</b>	<b>Save Life</b>
Reformed View	Devotion to Christ (possibly martyrdom)	Relationship Issue (established → heaven)
Free Grace View	Devotion to Christ (possibly martyrdom)	Fellowship Issue (intimacy with Christ)

### First Alternative “Save Life to Lose Life”

#### *Save Life—First Alternative*

Within the *first alternative*, both theological views essentially agree on the meaning of *save life*. Devotion to the world’s system, values, and standards, with the goal of hanging on to life with all its possessions and physical enticements is generally accepted by both views. A Reformed-view spokesman says, “This is a terrible folly of the man whose will it is to save his life...he may enjoy every earthly delight and think himself safe.”<sup>3</sup> Agreeing, another writes,

## CHOOSE TO LIVE

This man clings to that sinful life of his, holding on to it tenaciously. He reminds us of the rich fool described in Luke 12:16-21...He imagines that material possessions, or else pleasure, prestige, fame, can bring him the inner peace and satisfaction he is looking for.<sup>4</sup>

Embracing the Free Grace view, one advocate writes, “The phrase ‘save a soul’...seems to have a technical meaning of ‘preserve your physical life.’”<sup>5</sup> He continues saying, “This phrase is found eleven times in the LXX [Greek translation of Old Testament], and in each case it has the notion of preserving one’s physical life.”<sup>6</sup> He argues that to “save life” in this first alternative “refers to physical preservation.”<sup>7</sup> Another adds that to “save life” refers to “selfishness sought to protect life for one’s own use and gratification.”<sup>8</sup> He continues, saying,

It is natural to want to live one’s life here and now to the full, but to do so was to sacrifice its eternal value. Living like that was selfish living and could really have no enduring significance or worth. Such a life was gone as soon as it was lived.<sup>9</sup>

### *Lose Life—First Alternative*

As shown on the chart, *the two theological views disagree* on the meaning of *lose life*. For the Reformed camp it is a salvation issue, with heaven and hell in the balance. On the other hand the Free Grace view embraces a fellowship position, seeing intimacy with Christ the main point of Christ’s teaching. For the former group nonacceptance by God and therefore eternal separation from God is addressed. Whereas the issue of the latter view is the forfeiture of intimacy with God by those He had already accepted as His own.

An advocate for the Reformed view indicates that the gaining or losing of life is “a matter of life or death, of everlasting life

## THE MAIN THING IS THE MAIN THING

versus everlasting death.”<sup>10</sup> From this perspective, “to lose life” in the first alternative refers to having no saving faith. Another in support of this view says that lost life refers to the future judgment at the return of Christ, so those who lose life are “lost so as to perish forever.”<sup>11</sup> “Though he enjoys every earthly delight, his...[life] has really perished, for it is doomed.”<sup>12</sup> Continuing in this same vain another writes,

He may gain possession of the whole world, but will remain in all essentials a beggar without any hope of reward [reward of heaven] when the final day of reckoning comes and the Son of man returns in glory.<sup>13</sup>

On the other hand, the Free Grace view rightly argues that to “lose life” cannot refer to a physical aspect because “then a man would be preserving and losing his physical life at the same time.”<sup>14</sup>

“Of course our Lord was dealing in metaphor. One cannot *literally* both lose and save the life.”<sup>15</sup> Instead losing one’s life “refers to the inner self within an individual which experiences the joys and sorrows of life, i.e., the person.”<sup>16</sup> For example, those who are devoted to the world system “forfeit true life now.”<sup>17</sup> Concurring, another suggests that the “essence of the loss of ‘life’” is “life minus all that men of the world call ‘life.’”<sup>18</sup> “It follows from this

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that no amount of temporal gain can possibly compensate for the loss of one’s life.”<sup>19</sup> For it is “a life preserved from the standpoint of temporal experience, but lost for the standpoint of eternity.”<sup>20</sup> It is wasted and therefore “spiritually valueless.”<sup>21</sup>

## CHOOSE TO LIVE

### Second Alternative “Lose Life to Save Life”

#### *Lose Life—Second Alternative*

Moving to the *second section*, again *both theological views essentially agree* on the meaning of *lose life*. Saving one’s life in the first alternative is now contrasted with losing life here in devotion to Christ as opposed to the world. Here martyrdom for Christ’s sake is a possibility.

Commenting on the second alternative, a Reformed spokesman says, “One ‘loses’ his life in the present sense by devoting oneself completely to Christ, to the service of those in need, and to the gospel.”<sup>22</sup> Addressing the possibility of martyrdom, another adds, “This man may even become a martyr and lose not merely many earthly treasures and advantages but earthly existence itself.”<sup>23</sup>

Representing the Free Grace view, a proponent believes that losing one’s life refers to physical loss and possibly martyrdom.<sup>24</sup> Continuing the explanation of losing one’s life, another states that those who had devoted themselves to Christ “could know that their temporal experience of human life had not been wasted or annulled by selfish and self-serving pursuits.”<sup>25</sup>

#### *Save Life—Second Alternative*

Again as in the first alternative, *both theological views disagree* on the meaning of *save life* here as well. The Reformed view again takes a salvation perspective, while the Free Grace view once again holds a fellowship position. The former understands the issue to be acceptance of eternal life, while to the latter the main concern is the walk of faith and fellowship.

For the Reformed view, a supporter writes,

The person who offers this devotion saves his life, that is, his



## THE MAIN THING IS THE MAIN THING

soul or as we can also say, *himself*. The *self* here indicated is the inner being as influenced by divine grace. It is by losing oneself—looking away from self in order to serve the Master and his “little ones” (cf. Matt. 25:40)—that one can ever be saved.<sup>26</sup>

From this perspective, saving one’s life refers to the reward of eternal life.<sup>27</sup> Another continues with the eternal-life viewpoint when he indicates that “the loss is only minor whereas the gain is immense and eternal.”<sup>28</sup>

On the other hand the Free Grace view takes the meaning of *save life* in a metaphorical sense. One author says,

To save the soul in this sense is to secure for it eternal pleasures by living a life of sacrifice now. We are apparently, according to Jesus, developing an inner character which will be preserved (saved) into eternity. There is a connection between our life of sacrifice and our capability to enjoy and experience eternal fellowship with God...finding of real life now as well...the finding of a meaningful and blessed life.<sup>29</sup>

Agreeing, another Free Grace advocate says,

To find therefore in Jesus a focus for living, which superficially seemed to sacrifice so much that men hold dear, was to discover the secret of extending the value of that life into an eternal future.<sup>30</sup>

### In Pursuit of the Main Point

Jesus presents us with radical teaching. It does not concern dying so that others can live, but rather *dying so that one can really*

## CHOOSE TO LIVE

*live.* The main point is whether the spiritual implications refer to eternal life (heaven or hell) or fellowship (intimacy with Christ).

From the Reformed perspective, spiritual implications of the second half of each alternative of the paradox are heaven or hell. Devotion to the world results in eternal separation from God, while devotion to Christ brings eternal life. On the other hand, the Free Grace view has an entirely different outlook. Seen from the standpoint of a believer's obedience to God's Word, devotion to the world is

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displayed in disobedience, whereas devotion to Christ is evident in obedience. The former results in the forfeiture of fellowship, and the latter brings growing intimacy with Christ.

Obviously your point of view affects how you understand the life-saving or life-losing choices. From the Reformed standpoint, "We cannot have both, only one of the alternatives can be ours."<sup>31</sup> The choice is heaven or hell. Likewise the Free Grace perspective echoes a similar sentiment, "men must choose. They cannot have both. If you gain one, you lose the other."<sup>32</sup> Nevertheless from the Free Grace position the choice is whether to experience moment-by-moment fellowship and companionship with Christ. Whichever perspective is biblically correct, each student of the Word must choose between a relationship issue (the Reformed view) or a fellowship concern (the Free Grace position).

Understanding that the basic definition of save is to deliver, both theological views accept *save your soul/life* in the first of the two alternatives to refer to being delivered from worldly obsessions and from physical death. However, both positions completely dis-

## THE MAIN THING IS THE MAIN THING

agree on the meaning of save your life in the second alternative. For the Reformed view, “save your life” is *deliverance from hell* with heaven as the reward. Their key issue is the decision to believe in Christ, saving one’s soul from hell. On the other hand, from the Free Grace point of view, “save your life” means *deliverance from indifference* to God into growing intimacy with Christ. From this position fellowship with God relates to present, progressive salvation or sanctification, experiencing abundant life. Choices made by those who are believers in Christ that enhance fellowship with the Savior saves one’s life from uselessness and wasteful existence.

## CHOOSE TO LIVE

### *Chapter 12, NOTES*

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1. Zane C. Hodges, *A Free Grace Primer* (Denton, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 2011), 407-408.
2. From one perspective, *finding, saving, or loving life* results in *losing life*. On the other hand, the consequence of *losing or hating life* is in *finding, saving, preserving, or keeping life*.
3. R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Luke's Gospel* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1961), 520.
4. William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978), 499.
5. Joseph C. Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings* (Hayesville, NC: Schoettle, 1992), 116.

Dillow provides an illustration of this use: “The rich young fool (Lk. 12:19-23) stored up his goods so that his **psyche** [soul/life] could rest and be joyous” (117, emphasis his).

6. *Ibid.*, 117. Dillow footnotes the eleven instances: Gen. 19:17; 32:30; 1 Ki. 19:11; 1 Sam. 19:11; Jud. 10:15; Job 33:28; Pss. 30:7; 71:13; 108:31; Jer. 31:6; 1 Macc. 9:9.

Concurring, Hodges writes, “In the Greek Bible as a whole (which includes the Greek translation of the Old Testament) the expression ‘to save one’s soul’ had chiefly the same significance which it had in ordinary secular Greek. It meant “to preserve the life” (Hodges, *A Free Grace Primer*, 407).

7. Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings*, 117.
8. Hodges, *A Free Grace Primer*, 84.
9. *Ibid.*, 83.
10. Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Luke*, 497.
11. R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1943), 419.
12. *Ibid.*, 645.

## THE MAIN THING IS THE MAIN THING

13. R. V. G. Tasker, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), 161.
14. Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings*, 117.
15. Hodges, *A Free Grace Primer*, 408 (italics his).
16. Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings*, 117.
17. Ibid., 118.
18. Hodges, *A Free Grace Primer*, 83.
19. Ibid., 411.
20. Ibid., 408.
21. Ibid., 409.
22. Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Luke*, 499.
23. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Luke's Gospel*, 520.
24. Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings*, 117.
25. Hodges, *A Free Grace Primer*, 84.
26. Hendriksen, *The Interpretation of St. Luke's Gospel*, 499 (italics his).
27. Ibid., 497.
28. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Luke's Gospel*, 520.
29. Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings*, 117-18.
30. Hodges, *A Free Grace Primer*, 83.
31. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Luke's Gospel*, 520.
32. Hodges, *A Free Grace Primer*, 86.

