

Jesus said, “Whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life on account of me will save it.”

Back home on the farm it was not uncommon for kittens to be born around this time of year. The momma cats liked the hay mow of our barn. The old bales of hay and straw provided nooks and crannies for secluded little dens. We kids liked to find these newborn kittens and tame them. The kittens were terrified at first. Their fur would be sticking out and their claws extended, but eventually they would trust you. You could tell when your job was done when the kitten would start to purr while lying on your lap.

The image I would like to bring to your mind is perhaps one you’ve experienced. Sometimes these kittens would be a few weeks old before we would find them. Kittens grow up quickly. These older kittens would want to run away, but if they couldn’t, they would fight back. They were still quite helpless, but they wanted you to believe they were far from helpless. They would puff out their fur, arch their backs, growl, and make that weird spitting sound with their mouths as they would strike out with their paws.

This was quite intimidating. The kittens were quite harmless, but they made me think twice. It was 99% bluffing. If the kitten were facing a real enemy, all this play-acting would be futile. All the enemy would need to do is snatch the kitten up in its jaws, and that would be the end of that.

Human beings can be like those bluffing kittens when it comes to things that are stronger than us. Sin is much stronger than us. I wish we could always and easily tell sin to take a hike, but sin often gets the better of us. Our guilt is stronger than us. We accumulated so much guilt by our evil deeds. The devil is stronger. Death is stronger. We are quite helpless. We are like kittens.

However, it is not uncommon to think we can somehow defeat these enemies. If we bristle out our fur, arch our backs, and strike out, maybe we’ll be left alone. With sin and guilt, for example, the most common strategy is simply to forget about them. As time passes, the pangs of conscience lessen, but does forgetfulness really make our sin go away? Does shutting our eyes or pulling the blanket over our heads make the monster go away?

Another strategy for dealing with sin and guilt is to fight back. Maybe God’s commandments are old fashioned or impractical. Maybe you couldn’t live the life that you want to live and still keep God’s commandments. God wants us to be happy, doesn’t he? “Live and let live” is great advice for a certain kind of peaceable life. However does this make sin and guilt go away? Maybe our conscience is soothed for yet another day, but the enemy remains.

The strategies regarding death can be similar. Nothing is more common than ignoring death. Put it out of mind so that you can more fully embrace whatever good might be coming your way. This sounds like good advice, and maybe it has its place, but does it make death go away?

Or maybe instead of taking death seriously we can celebrate life. Hopefully the person in question is good enough so that we can celebrate. Hopefully they didn’t commit any gross sins—at least not

publicly. Hopefully they were only guilty of the common and respectable sins that church people commit. Otherwise it might feel strange to celebrate. But, in any case, what does it matter? It is all for nothing. Even with all this bragging and story telling the person remains quite dead. A few short decades later, they will be quite forgotten.

In all our dealings with these forces we are like defenseless kittens. We do what we can. We put on a show. But nothing can really be done. It's all play-acting. It's all bluffing. Our very real enemies have us in their jaws whether we make a fuss or not.

I think this might help us better understand a statement of Jesus's that can be quite enigmatic otherwise. He said on one occasion: "**Whoever would save his life will lose it, but however loses his life on account of me will save it.**" We might think that we have no other choice than to playact and to bluff. We have to cope somehow. But if we commit ourselves to these strategies for dealing with these very real enemies, then we will have a very different savior in our minds than Jesus—and what a pathetic Savior it is too. A kitten pretending to be a tiger? By trying to save our own life we will lose it.

But what is the alternative? The alternative is to believe in Jesus. However, this belief will be under the cross. That means we will be in unfavorable conditions and will suffer loss. As Jesus said, "**Whoever would save his life will lose it, but however loses his life on account of me will save it.**" We must lose our life with Jesus. What does that mean? It means that we allow whatever nasty enemies who have invaded our comfy little den to bite and devour us, while believing, at the same time, that they will not be triumphant. Though they do their worst—though they have me in their jaws—I will prevail because my God is for me and not against me. God will save me when the time is right even if I should end up in their gullet, in the belly of a large fish, or in a den of lions.

Let's apply this to the enemies we've already talked about. There are a lot of ways to cope with sin, but Jesus is the only one way to be victorious. Repent and believe the good news that Jesus is the Savior of sinners. But even when we have done this, sin remains a powerful enemy. I wish that we Christians could become so strong that we could always tell sin to take a hike, but we aren't. Seasoned Christians know that the devil has very good aim with his poisoned arrows. He can find the gap in our armor so that we fall into sin quite against our will.

Our situation with death is very similar. Try as we might, we can't avoid it. This is true for Christians and non-Christians alike. We all die. The difference with Christians is that we believe Jesus when he says: "**I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me will live even though he dies, and whoever lives and believes in me will never die.**" The first part of that statement is clear enough. We believe that even if we should die, yet we will live because we will be resurrected. But what about the second part when he says, "**Whoever lives and believes in me will never die?**" The apostles died. Christians for two thousand years have died. Did none of those live and believe in him?

No. They were believers. And they didn't die—not really. They died in the belief that this slight momentary affliction of death would last but a little while; salvation comes with the morning. Sometimes the New Testament calls death a sleep. When we go to sleep at night we do not fall asleep

with horror. We know that the morning is coming. Not only will we wake up, but we will even feel refreshed and energized. So it is with those who die with faith in Jesus, the resurrection and the life.

Unfortunately, those who really *will die* are like foolish kittens who think that they can save themselves by playacting. They think they can stave off death or come to terms with it. They think memories or celebrations can make the person live on in some sense. This posturing and fuss and bother are as insubstantial as smoke. They don't know how strong their enemy is. Imagine the horror the kitten feels when their show doesn't work, but they find themselves in the jaws nonetheless. That is death.

I understand perfectly why people do playacting. It can seem like the only recourse we've got. It can seem defeatist to admit anything is stronger than us. We are told always to fight, and for good reason. We don't want to be in those jaws. Playacting is a way to convince ourselves that we need not be in those jaws. The kitten is desperate not to be picked up because it doesn't know what might happen. One thing is sure: it will lose control.

In order to be a Christian we must lose control, so to speak. We must put ourselves and our futures into the hands of a God who has told us that he has our best interests in mind even as we are going through painful or scary circumstances. And this is not like a fairy tale where the enemy is no more and can no longer hurt us. It will be like that in heaven, but not until then. The apostles said this plainly. They said, **"It is only through many hardships that we will enter the kingdom of God."** We kittens have many enemies and their teeth are sharp. However, we have hope! Even if we should die, yet shall we live, and declare the praises of the Lord.

On Good Friday it is fitting to think about our enemies such as sin and death, which are more powerful than we are. Good Friday and Easter show us that Jesus is more powerful than sin and death. However, Jesus saves in a very special way. He doesn't ignore sin and death. He doesn't go around them. He doesn't go over them or under them. He goes through them. The jaws clamped on him, just as they clamp on us. However, what looked like defeat, proved to be victory.

The same thing is true for us Christians. We cannot get rid of sin. We cannot avoid death. We go through these things. They bite and gnash with dreadful effects, but even while they are doing their worst, we believe that *we will be victorious and they will be defeated*. Jesus will see to that.

Jesus said, **"Whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life on account of me will save it."** Amen.

