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What shall it profit a man...



if he loses himself
& gains the world?

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“Every true leader is in the business of God. The good news is that God’s business does not yield losses. Most leaders fail because they claim to be in a business whose owner they never know!”
(Israelmore Ayivor)

I saw that giving even all my life to God (supposing it possible to do this and go no further) would profit me nothing unless I gave my heart, yea, all my heart, to Him (John Wesley)

“Solomon got more hurt by his wealth, than he got good by his wisdom” (Thomas Brooks)

“He that serves God for money will serve the Devil for better wages” (Sir Roger L’Estrange)

“Put God to work for you and maximize your potential in our divinely ordered capitalist system”
(Norman Vincent Peale)

Introduction

This MyQ&A paper discusses the Lord’s double-barrelled question: “*For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world, and loses himself? For what will a man give in exchange for himself?*” But first, a consideration of the context.

Location

Jesus, with His disciples was in Caesarea Philippi; and began to teach them that He must suffer, be killed, and rise again the third day. And Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him. But He turned and said to Peter, “Get behind Me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to Me; for you are not setting your mind on God’s interests, but man’s” (Matthew 16:21-23, Mark 8:27-33, Luke 9:18-22).

Lord's response

*Then Jesus said to his disciples and the crowd, “If anyone wants to come after Me, he must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow Me. For whoever wants to save his life (**psuche, soul**) will lose it, but whoever loses his life (**psuche, soul**) because of me will find it. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world, and loses himself (**psuche, soul**)? For what will a man give in exchange for his life (**psuche, soul**)”* (Matthew 16:24-28, Mark 8:34-38, Luke 9:23-25).

Just as He exemplified personal sacrifice by a willingness to suffer, be killed, and rise again the third day, so too, their future was based on, personal sacrifice. He expressed that act in these terms: *whoever wants to save his **life** will lose it, but whoever loses his **life** because of me will find it. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world, and loses his **life**? For what will a man give in exchange for his **life**.*

‘Life’ is *psuche*, usually translated as ‘soul’, a word used in Genesis 2:7 to describe the complete man that God had created, when He breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a ‘living soul’ (living, breathing being, *nefesh khayyah*).

Nefesh khayyah usually refers to the whole person. Indeed, because a man's breath carries his words, his growls of anger, his sighs of passion, his gasps from fear, his snorts from indignation and his pantings from desire, (*nepesh*) often serves as the collective phrase for all a living being's doings and feelings and even one's potential for future doings and feelings.

When someone speaks of "my *nepesh*," he doesn't refer to a part of him, but to all of him as a living and acting being (Genesis 12:13, Judges 5:21, 2 Samuel 18:13). Strikingly, (*nepesh*) is frequently used with the meaning of 'a person', or rather more literally: 'a breather'. *Nefesh* doesn't seem to cover plants; if a *nepesh* has blood, the blood is where the *nepesh* resides (Genesis 9:4, Leviticus 17:11, Deuteronomy 12:23), which is obviously precisely how respiration works: conveying oxygen from the air into one's blood ([Abarim Publications](#)).

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Profit and loss

So, if we substitute 'person' or 'himself' for 'life' or 'soul' in the texts above, we have this:

*"If anyone wants to come after Me, he must deny **himself**, take up his cross, and follow Me. Whoever wants to save **himself** will lose **himself**, but whoever loses **himself** because of me will find **himself**. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world, and lose **himself**? For what will a man give in exchange for **himself**."*

When Jesus famously told Peter (Satan, the Adversary, Opposition, Resistance) to get behind him (16:23), and his disciples to 'come after Him' or to 'come behind Him', He used the same word (*opiso*). In effect, He told Satan to get out of His present field of concern, and that He would deal with him later. Conversely, Jesus invited His disciples into the future He opened to them ([Abarim Publications](#)).

That future starts with the imperative to deny oneself. Of what, could we ask? It's to deny kinship with the natural relationships between family groups and tribes, and switch allegiances. As Luke put it, *If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father, mother, wife, children, brothers, and sisters, as well as his own life, he can't be my disciple* (14:26ff). That is, God is to be loved more than family or self.

Then, another imperative kicks in requiring the follower to take up his cross. One must die to live. Initially, on the way to Golgotha, Jesus carried His own cross (John 19:17), then the soldiers commandeered Simon of Cyrene, the father of Alexander and Rufus, to carry the cross of Jesus (Matthew 27:32, Mark 15:21, and Luke 23:26). Cyrene was a city in the eastern part of Libya; the North-African country directly west of Egypt and straight south of Italy and Greece. Cyrene was originally one of five major Greek colonies, which were conquered by the Persians and reconquered by Alexander the Great.

Cyrene remained one of the great intellectual centres of the classical world, and scholars of all styles travelled from and to it. Many of these were Jews as Cyrene was home to an extensive Jewish community. Perhaps the account of Simon of Cyrene represents a commentary on the quality of the academic tradition of Cyrene, and its dedication to resistance against Roman totalitarianism ([Abarim Publications](#)). Since Jesus had told his followers that they had to carry their own crosses, the pressing of Simon into the service of bearing the cross of Jesus behind Him, is remarkable as an example of compliance, not resistance. Simon was to learn the meaning of the Lord's imperative to willingly follow Him, not to be coerced.

The cross could be of any size or shape, but was specifically designed to display victims and keep them alive and in brutal agony for days. It was as much an instrument of deterrence as it was of execution, designed to fill observers with fear and disgust, and drain them from any further wish to rebel or revolt. Death occurred not only on the cross but also beneath it, to the people staring in horror and disbelief. This secondary death was the death of people's autonomy, will and dignity but it left their beastly bodies alive to perform work in Rome's vast slavery mill. It's the most disgusting form of viral oppression ever suffered by humankind. This public display of hanging the offender on a tree was common in the old world (Esther 2:23) and even commanded in the Law (Deuteronomy 21:22).

Rome spread a culture of mad fear that spread like a fungus and thrived on ignorance, compliance and lethargy. The only difference between Adolf Hitler and emperor Augustus was that Augustus managed to beat his adversaries. The rest was the same. The imperial hell that he created was identical to the mechanical society of grids and hierarchies that Adolf had in mind, and even after Rome formally split and finally fell, the spirit of Rome lived on and reincarnated in the mediaeval "Holy" Roman Empire, and Nazi Germany ([Abarim Publications](#)).



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Profit and loss continued

25 *Whoever wants to save **himself** will lose **himself**, but whoever loses **himself** because of me will find **himself**.*

26 *For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world, and lose **himself**? For what will a man give in exchange for **himself**?*

Most of the action words in these two verses are initiated and performed by 'whoever wants to' follow the Lord. However, 'lose' in v26 is passive, that is, the loss is inflicted upon him by another. More of that shortly.

'Save' is part of a cluster of words that revolves around wholeness and soundness, and so means safe and sound, alive and well, to find what is lost or repair what is broken. If a man wants to save himself, he will have to 'lose' himself, a rather nasty word (*apollumi*), meaning to exterminate, eradicate totally, to wipe out and away. However, whoever does that in the cause of Christ finds himself, as in *finding a pearl of great value* (Matthew 13:46), and sees himself as Christ does.

So, the Lord puts the world on one side of the scales and the man on the other. The world (*kosmos*) means the ordered world, the civilised, governed and cultured human world. It does not refer to the planet or some earthly realm or territory, or even the biosphere at large. That is, it doesn't mean anything physical or tangible but rather the elements of human order that define humanity and which separates humans from wild animals: the functional diversity and societal layers, the institutions of government, the rules and norms and fashions, even the languages, markets and monetary systems (Abarim Publications). In our world, we measure profit and loss, so, if a man pursues this type of world, makes it his ambition to get more of it and seeks his satisfaction there, does he realise that in making such a gain, his loss is greater?



The Lord delivers loss

26 *For what does it **profit** a person if he gains the whole world but **loses** himself? Or what can a person give in exchange for his life? 27 For the Son of Man will **come** with His angels in the glory of His Father, and then He will reward each person according to what he has done. 28 I tell you the truth, there are some standing here who will not experience death before they see the Son of Man **coming** in His kingdom"* (Matthew 16:26-28).

A man may be enriched by receiving worldly gains from another party for the action is passive, but somewhere else delivers him a resounding loss at the same time. To describe this loss, the Lord employed the word (*zemioō*), which is passive, because the Lord is handing out the rewards (Abarim Publications). Unquestionably, the loss the Lord delivers this worldly-pursuing man is spiritual, for Jesus had put profit and loss in spiritual terms when He referred to the man who loses himself because of Christ will find himself. Which means of course, that there is nothing of this world order that a man may give the Lord to recover the loss of himself.

This loss, this reckoning, this forfeiture, occurs when the Son of Man will come with His angels in the glory of His Father, and then He will reward each person according to what he has done (v27). But, when might this be, for there is lack of consensus in the literature about the Lord's coming with the angels, and the coming in His kingdom in verses 27-28. Do they refer to the one coming, or two? Did the Lord mean His resurrection, ascension, and the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70? Is it the transfiguration or the coming of the Holy Spirit in view? For what it's worth, here is my take on it.



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Son of Man Coming

According to Serge Ruzer, “the Son of Man” appears three ways in Jewish tradition. First, in Jeremiah (49:18, 33, 50:40, 43) “son of man” or “son of Adam” equals “man” in general – all men. The same means “born of a woman” found in the Dead Sea Scrolls and in Galatians 4:4. In this general sense, the phrase is found in a few Gospel texts, for example, (Mark 2:27-28): “And he said to them, ‘The sabbath was made for man, not man for the sabbath; 28 so *the son of man* is lord even of the sabbath’.”

The individual sense of the son-of-man/son-of-Adam phrase is repeated throughout the book of Ezekiel in the manner in which God addresses the prophet. This sense is present in Matthew-Mark-Luke, when Jesus speaks about himself, mostly in premonition of his future tragic fate. It might have been common to say “the son of man” instead of “I” when referring to something disastrous awaiting the speaker. There are cases where the distinction between the general and individual, pertaining to Jesus, is blurred, as in Luke 9:58: “Foxes have dens and birds of the air have nests, but the son of man has no place to lay his head.”

A third distinctive use of “the Son of Man” appears in Daniel 7:13-14.

*I kept looking in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven One like **a Son of Man** was **coming**, and He **came** up to the Ancient of Days and came near before Him. To Him was **given** dominion, glory, and a kingdom, that all the peoples, nations, and men of every tongue might serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion which will not be taken away; and His kingdom is one that will not be destroyed.*

From early first century AD, the “son of man” here has been interpreted as a person, as the Messiah. Daniel’s perspective is of one in heaven from where he sees ‘One like a Son of Man coming to receive His kingdom, or as Matthew put in 16:28, ‘coming in His kingdom’. The ‘in’ (en) in verse 28 may be one of the rare cases when it is used with verbs of motion, implying that the text reflects the results from a motion inward, instead of the actual movement ([Abarim Publications](#)).

In that sense, the Lord’s predicting that some of His disciple then present would not experience death before they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom (16:28), likely refers to His imminent transfiguration (Matthew 17:2, Mark 9:2, Luke 9:28), only explained by Luke:

*Now about eight days after these sayings, Jesus took with him Peter, John, and James, and went up the mountain to pray. As he was praying, the appearance of his face was transformed, and his clothes became very bright, a brilliant white. Then two men, Moses and Elijah, began talking with him. They appeared in glorious splendour and spoke about his **departure** that he was about to carry out at Jerusalem (Luke 9:28-31).*

The explanation that I refer to is revealed in the conversation that took place between Jesus and Moses and Elijah. The focus of their three-way discussion was the Lord’s departure or exodus, or His going out and going up that He would accomplish by His death in Jerusalem, His resurrection, and ascension to glory. Moses and Elijah would be particularly interested in that subject given the spectacular nature of their departures from earth. Moses was secretly buried by God, and Elijah went to heaven in a whirlwind. In my view, this is what the Lord meant when He said: *there are some standing here who will not experience death before they see the Son of Man **coming** in His kingdom*” (Matthew 16:26-28). That is, He referred to His coming in or into His kingdom, when upon His ascension he received the Kingdom from the hand of the Ancient of Days.

So, let’s go back to 16:27 when *the Son of Man will come with His angels in the glory of His Father, and then He will reward each person according to what he has done*. What coming is that?

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His Coming with the angels

Here are the seven NT texts that mention His coming with angels. These are in addition to the angels attending the Lord's first advent. When on earth, Jesus received angelic worship (Psalms 102:6), as predicted in Psalms 97:1-12. Accordingly, when Christ became incarnate, angels thronged round his manger-cradle, proclaiming his advent, and celebrating it in a burst of choral praise. Angels ministered to him after the temptation, and sustained him under his great agony. Angels attended at his resurrection, and haunted for a time his empty tomb. Angels encompassed him in his final ascension to glory.

*1. For the Son of man shall come in the glory of his Father with his **angels**; and then he shall reward every man according to his works (Matthew 16:27).*

*2. But when the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the **angels** with Him, then He will sit on His glorious throne. And all the nations will be gathered before Him; and He will separate them from one another, as the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats; and He will put the sheep on His right, and the goats on the left (Matthew 25:31-33).*

*3. Whoever therefore shall be ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation; of him also shall the Son of man be ashamed, when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy **angels** (Mark 8:38).*

*4. While the apostles looked up into the heavens, two men (compare Luke 24:4 and John 20:12; two men were **angels**) stood beside them and said, "Ye men of Galilee, why stand ye gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen Him go (Acts 1:11).*

*5. For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a loud command, with the voice of an **archangel**, and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first (1 Thessalonians 4:16).*

*6. When the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with His mighty **angels** in blazing fire. He will inflict vengeance on those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus (2 Thessalonians 1:7-8).*

*7. And when he again brings his firstborn into the world (oikoumene), he says, "Let all the **angels** of God worship him!" (Hebrews 1:6).*

Texts 2, 4 and 7 above indicate that, like His first advent to earth, angels will accompany Him on His second advent. The Hebrews 1:6 text is clear. World (*oikoumene*), is not the earth (*ge*), nor the (*kosmos*), the regulated and ordered world, but (*oikoumene*). This word describes the world's inhabited regions, as opposed to wildernesses, but it quickly came to denote all settled lands in the known world ([Abarim Publications](#)).

The meaning of text 7 above is contested. While some suggests that 1:6 introduces a new citation, others agree with the interpretation above that, having dealt with Christ's first advent and ascension (Hebrews 1:1-4), verse 6 is referring to a "bringing in" which is still future, that is the second advent ([The Expositor's Greek Testament, Peter Pett, Alford](#)). Alford says that could not find any analogous instance in prose of a transposition of 'again' (*palin*) in its ordinary sense. In Hebrews, when (*palin*) is joined to a verb, it always has the sense of 'a second time' (Hebrews 4:7; 5:12; 6:1; 6:6), and so 'again he might bring', for the writer is speaking of *the world to come* (Hebrews 2:5).

Indeed, to gather all nations before Him and reward every man according to his works, to inflict vengeance on those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus, it is to the world of mankind that the Lord will come.

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Conclusion

As we discovered, the Lord's question, *For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world, and lose himself?* has some components not usually recognised. Interestingly, as we have noted, both *profit* and *lose* are passive. The *profit* is an enrichment received from someone else, and likewise *lose* is passive, that is, the loss is inflicted upon him by another. Are both the profit and loss rewards handed out by the Lord? 'Yes', I think is the answer because as we have seen, the man who actively seeks a safe and sound lifestyle in this world system instead of seeking to find those things in Christ is responsible for pursuing the loss of Himself. And, that is the answer to the Lord's question, which we must find because He left the question unanswered.

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