

# I Have Come to Give You Life

Pastor Chuck Hoover

Scripture: Luke 15:3-7  
John 10:6-11

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Several months ago I was working at my computer late at night when my cell phone rang. I opened the cover and the screen said I had a message. I went into the message center and there was a picture. It was of my son Paul holding a two-year-old girl in his arms. She is happily looking at the camera with a big smile on her face.

Above the picture was a caption which read, "When I First Met Her She Was Dead." Now that may seem to be a very strange title to a picture until you know that Paul is a paramedic. "When I first met her she was dead."

I remember when it happened. About eight months ago, this little girl was playing in the backyard with friends. It was fenced in but a slat was missing from the fence and the little girl crawled through the fence and went down to a creek that ran below the property and fell in.

Her father and some friends were visiting on the patio when he suddenly realized his daughter, Elizabeth, was missing. He instinctively knew where to look. He jumped the fence, ran down to the creek and found her, face down in the water. He pulled her out carried her up to the house. She was not breathing. Immediately he began giving her CPR and one of his friends called 911.

Paul got the dispatch at his station that day. His station was not far from the house. He knows the area well. He figures he got there in 4 minutes. He immediately began working on her. She had no vital signs, no heartbeat, and no respiration. She was dead.

He figures she was down at least 12 minutes not counting how long she was in the creek before her father got her. Finally, her heart started. She took a breath. He put her in the ambulance. They rushed her to the hospital. Paul worked on her all

the way. His partner drove. The attending doctor at the hospital gave her only 5 percent chance to survive as more than a vegetable. She beat the odds. She has come through with no sign of physical or mental handicap.

The picture Paul sent me was taken when her mother and father came to the ambulance station to thank Paul for saving her life. He speaks of what a thrill it was to see her running around the station, climbing through the ambulance. He says the hardest part of his work... is to loose a child. He knows what that is. And the greatest reward in his profession is to be able to say, "When I first met her, she was dead, and now she lives."

That caption over the picture haunted me. I couldn't forget it. "When I first met her, she was dead." It wasn't long until it started sounding like a Sermon title. And suddenly I could hear Jesus saying, "When I first met you, you were dead, spiritually dead." My preacher instincts took over and this sermon is the result...it literally wrote itself.

Quickly, a text came to me. Jesus said, "I have come that you might have life and live it more abundantly." There's my text. And that message follows Jesus talking about himself as the Good Shepherd...so there's my scripture lesson, the Parable of the Lost Sheep.

Just track Jesus through his ministry and there are so many people he met to whom he could say, "When I first met you, you were dead...spiritually dead." Peter, James and John the fisherman...they were spiritually dead when Jesus called them from their fishing boats to become "fishers of men." And they left their boats and began following Jesus.

He gave them new life.

There were many others...

Mary Magdalene, whom Jesus cleaned of an

evil spirit. She came alive as a faithful follower of Jesus.

And there was Nicodemus who came sneaking to Jesus by night searching for spiritual life. Jesus told him he had to be “born again.” Nicodemus didn’t have a clue what Jesus was talking about. It was pretty hopeless for him to find new life...but he did. He even came with Joseph of Aramathia and helped place Jesus in the tomb.

There was the Samaritan woman at the well. She was spiritually dead when Jesus met her. He offered her “living water” and she had no idea what he was talking about. In their long conversation he enlightened her and gave her new life.

The Roman Centurion found such new life in his encounter with Jesus that Jesus said of him. “I have not found such faith, not in all of Israel.”

This illustrates several of the many people Jesus met, of whom he could say, “When I first met you, you were dead.”

Jesus’ only failure of those he met, you might think, was the Rich Young Ruler. He asked Jesus what he needed to do to inherit eternal life. He turned away in sadness when Jesus told him he should go, sell his wealth, give to the poor and come and follow him.

But there is a beautiful legend that never found its way into the Bible which tells of this man being in Jerusalem at the time of Jesus’ crucifixion. And he follows the crowd to Golgotha. Then standing at the foot of the cross, hearing Jesus’ words as he died, (Words like, “Father forgive them for they know not what they do.”) and he goes, sells his possessions, becomes a disciple of Jesus and spends the rest of his life helping the poor. “When I first met you, you were dead, now you are alive.”

My son, Paul, has been a paramedic 16 years. He has arrived at a lot of scenes when it was already too late. He treasures that picture holding little Elizabeth Hansen in his arms. He can say, “When I first met her, she was dead.” And know that he was able to give her life. This gives him special satisfaction in his profession. He says, “Elisabeth is my reward for those I have lost.”

He has seen it all. He is not a hardened

professional who can turn off his emotions. Twice he has had to take two weeks off to get it together, after a horrific accident...like the high-speed crash, which took the lives of three kids...a 12 year old and two high school teenagers.

I would like to share with you a special event in my professional life, which was very rewarding. I served the Church of the Foothills in Tustin for 7 years. (That’s back 40 years ago when Gary and Peggy were members.) In the church was a couple, a mother and father, who were at their wits-end in dealing with a problem son. Peter was into drugs and had joined a violent gang. He was heading for real trouble. His parents asked me to call him and see if he would come and talk with me. I called, and to our surprise, he did. He came. He was spiritually dead when I first met him but under his cocky façade, I felt there was hope. It was almost like he was looking for a way out. I kept inviting him back and he kept coming.

I did a lot of counseling at that church and experienced what I considered a lot of failures but with Peter I had hope. I always prayed with and for him.

One day he came into my office and he had a little brown box in his hand. He announced that he was going to turn his life around. He would end his involvement with the gang. And he was going to start coming to church every Sunday. And start reading the Bible. He gave me the box. I opened it and in it was all the paraphernalia for what he called “main lining.” There was a spoon, a candle, matches, a nylon stocking and a syringe. I don’t know whether he was using cocaine or heroin but he could put it on the spoon with a little water, heat it to dissolve it and to make it warm for his arm, put it in the hypodermic, tie off his arm to make a vein bulge and give himself a “high”.

I congratulated him on his new commitment. We prayed together for strength and courage in his new life. As he stood in the doorway to leave he reached into his pocket, pulled out another object, tossed it to me and said, “I won’t be needing this any more.” It was a switchblade knife, with a five-inch blade. (Did you hear that click. That is a frightening sound. Listen, ...that’s the sound of injury or death...

like the cocking of a gun.) This is no pocket knife. This is no penknife. This a weapon.

This knife literally gives me a shock every time I open it. You can see where Peter was going. It was all down hill. He was heading for real trouble. The Bible says "He who lives by the sword will die by the sword." And I guess we could say, He who lives by a switchblade is likely to die by a switchblade.

Well, he really did change his life. With a lot of help from Jesus, he turned his life around. Jesus could say of Peter, "When I first met you, you were dead (spiritually dead)." Does that sound Biblical? You bet!

That story took place many years ago but I've kept this hypodermic needle and knife in the back of a file drawer for all those years (I figure about 38 years). This syringe is archaic. They don't make them out of glass any more. They use plastic and they may use it only once. Then dispose of it in toxic waste.

I've researched this knife. You can find out about anything you want to know on the Internet. It was manufactured in Milan, Italy. They have a catalog there. It looks like Milan is the switchblade capital of the World. You can pay any where from \$35 to \$350 for a knife. They call them "stiletos". They guarantee 10 days delivery. I don't know how they get them into the country. This knife is listed at \$80. You can buy it cheaper in Tijuana but you can't legally bring it into the country. I've research California law. I can legally own it but it is a misdemeanor for me to carry it on my person. This is the paraphernalia for self-destruction. Peter was going the wrong direction.

To me these are symbols of a life turned around by the Holy Spirit and a personally satisfying counseling experience. I guess that's why I have kept them through the years.

About 15 years ago Peter looked me up. He came by the house. He was driving a Porsche and he had the appearance of a successful middle-aged businessman. He spoke of how happy he has been... and is...with his life. Jesus has brought him life, abundant life. "I have come to give you life," Jesus said," the abundant life." I can't find Peter now. I've looked for him on the internet and the white pages.

I'd love to see him again.

I wonder if you know what it is to be dead to the Spirit. I wonder if you can imagine Jesus saying to you, "When I first met you, you were dead." How alive are we? Are we in any way toying with the paraphernalia for self-destruction?

Jesus precedes the words of my text with the story of the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd had a hundred lambs and when he checked them one night one was missing. And Jesus left the ninety-nine and went out to find the one lost lamb.

The point of the parable is that God has infinite care and concern for each of us. He won't let us hide in the crowd. He cares for each one of us and he pursues us relentlessly to give us life, the abundant life. My son Paul knows how exciting and joyful it is to give life. Think how happy God must be over one lost sheep finding new life, once again back safe in the fold. "I have come to give you life, full, fulfilling, satisfying, joyful life."

I think the most important thought I would like you to take away from this message is for you to keep asking yourself, "How spiritually alive am I and how can I maintain spiritual vitality and depth in my life?" The recall we speak almost every Sunday in our worship service is certainly a challenging formula for guidance. It calls for us to be involved in Prayer, worship, reading the Bible, and sharing our quest with others who are on the same spiritual journey.

My first title for this message was..."The Christian Answer to Aimlessness and Isolation".

Our church does not have a Creed. A creed is a recital of things you are supposed to believe. I don't think I have ever heard the Nicene or Apostles Creeds in this church. We don't tell people what they are supposed to believe. We do have what we call a "Statement of Faith." Nobody has to believe it. It is only an introduction to some basic Christian teachings available for discussion and exploration.

One of the lines in our Statement of Faith says that the purpose of our Christian faith is "to deliver us from aimlessness and sin."

We all know what aimlessness is...we've been there, done that. It is to be without direction. It is to be adrift, to be pushed this way and that by whatever

comes along. The Christian faith offers guidance, purpose and direction in life, mainly through the teachings of Jesus. "I have come to give you life, the abundant life."

Aimlessness and Sin...? I've always had trouble with the word sin. I grew up believing that sin was dancing, playing cards, going to the movies on Sunday and drinking anything with alcohol in it...to list a few sins. It seemed like sin was anything that is fun.

My adult definition for sin now is... Anything that separates us from God or from our fellow human beings. So you can see why I choose not to use the word sin in my title.

I believe it is sinful not to make any effort to know God. Or to do things that alienate us from God. That's what sin is. The Christian answer to aimlessness and separation is to offer ways through worship, study, prayer and meditation to know God, to love Him and to love our fellow human beings.

That is the very essence of the teachings of Jesus. When Jesus was asked, what is the first and most important commandment, he said, "You shall love God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength" and the second commandment is "love your neighbor as yourself."

If we are out of touch with God and our neighbor we are in a condition of aimlessness and separation. Jesus followed that commandment with the parable of the Good Samaritan. And the purpose of that parable was to answer the question, who my neighbor is. His answer was, our neighbor is anyone who has a need for our love, our support, our friendship...

or can benefit from our love, our support, our friendship. If we are out of touch with our neighbor, we have nothing to offer. If we are out of touch with God, we are spiritually dead. Jesus, the Good Shepherd, seeks us out to give us life, the abundant life, lived with God.

"When I first met you, you were dead...now you live."