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The Sermons of Dan Duncan

Philippians 1:21-30

2013

"To Be Or Not To Be"

TRANSCRIPT

Thank you Mark, and good morning. We are continuing our studies in the Book of Philippians, in chapter 1. We're going to finish the chapter with verses 21 through 30,

²¹For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. ²²But if *I am* to live *on* in the flesh, this *will mean* fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which to choose. ²³But I am hard-pressed from both *directions*, having the desire to depart and be with Christ, for *that* is very much better; ²⁴yet to remain on in the flesh is more necessary for your sake. ²⁵Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all for your progress and joy in the faith, ²⁶so that your proud confidence in me may abound in Christ Jesus through my coming to you again.

²⁷Only conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or remain absent, I will hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel; ²⁸in no way alarmed by *your* opponents—which is a sign of destruction for them, but of salvation for you, and that *too*, from God. ²⁹For to you it has been granted for Christ's sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake, ³⁰experiencing the same conflict which you saw in me, and now hear *to be* in me.

Philippians 1:21-30

May the LORD bless this reading of His Word and bless our time of study in it together.

(Message) I'm not a betting man, but I would bet that if any of us knows only one line from Shakespeare, it's the line that I've taken as the title of our lesson. That line from Hamlet, "To be, or not to be, that is the question..."

Hamlet was a troubled soul and was wondering what is better? To live and suffer what he calls "...The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune..." or to escape it all, "...To die—to sleep...", and maybe, "...to dream", he says.

But as he's thinking about all this he then worries, "Well, what dreams may come?"; and, "there's the rub"; that's the problem. "It's the", as he says, "the dread of something after death...", what he calls, "...the undiscovered country..." Neither option appeals to him: to live on in this, what he considers kind of a crummy world and lousy life—or to check out. But death was a little scary, so he decided that he would stay—and he admits, "Thus conscience makes cowards of us all...". That's really pretty good stuff when you begin to reflect upon all of that—as far as it goes at least. Conscience does make cowards of us all.

Well, not all. Not Paul; his conscience was clean. So when he faced that same problem and that same question, he faced it with complete confidence—and he answered it with joy. That's how he begins our passage in Philippians 1. He has told the Philippians that for him, "To live is Christ, and to die is gain." (vs21). Either way it was good.

But in verses 22 and 23, he weighs the advantages: Living 'means fruitful labor'—but dying would mean being with Christ. And that he says, "is very much better." Now that is the Christian view of life and death. Life is worth living—and death is not dangerous. There is a good death for the Christian.

Now that attitude comes with having a conscience cleansed by the blood of Christ. 'To live', 'to be', for Paul, is "fruitful labor." It's not just surviving the slings and

arrows or occupying space and time. Life is meaningful. It's being 'light in the darkness.' It is a life that counts; and counts not just for time, and not just for the lives of those around us, but counts for all eternity.

Specifically here, the fruitful labor was building up the church, helping the Philippians. But death, he says in verse 23, "is very much better." So he says he did "not know which to choose." (vs22). Not that it was up to Paul, (he wasn't suggesting, of course, that it was), he means that he didn't know which he hoped for; which to really pray for—his release from prison or his martyrdom for the faith.

Now that's not some dismal death wish on his part, but it is an expression of the fearlessness, the confidence, and the joy in what was to come. He was not afraid of what was to come, whatever it may be. He certainly was not afraid to die—it meant going home. That's the sense of the statement in verse 23. He calls death 'his departure': So death isn't disintegration.

I read a book some years ago, (it was published in 1997 by a prominent physician from Harvard Medical School), titled *The Measure of our Days*. It took the title from Psalm 39, verse 4, (KJV). The author, Jerome Groopman, is not a believer, (in fact, he's an agnostic), but a good physician and a man who was concerned for his patients—and he wrote about them. They were all terminal and each chapter was devoted to a patient.

One of the early chapters, I think it was maybe the first chapter, he wrote about a young man who was a businessman, (a very fearless businessman who took a lot of chances in business), and was facing death and wanted extreme measures taken. He wanted anything done that would save him. But there was nothing that could be done; and so Dr. Groopman tried to comfort him.

And he tried to comfort him by explaining death the way his father had explained it to him when he was a child. His father explained that, "Death isn't anything to be afraid of—it's like being unborn. We become what we were before we ever were, just nothing." The patient assured him, very strongly, that 'That was no comfort; it's a counsel of despair.'

Paul had a very different view of death. He was *departing*, (not dissolving), because life is more than atoms and impulses. The soul, as the psalmist says in Psalm 90, 'flies away'. (vs10). Paul says we "depart". (vs23). The word *depart* means something like 'sail away'; and it's used of a ship 'weighing anchor' for a voyage.

Death is like that for the believer. We leave this world for another, for a better one, a better place. We set sail for a far country—not Hamlet's undiscovered country, not some shadowy, unknown realm. We know about it: It's a realm of Light; it's a place of rest. It's where resolution is found; where problems are solved; where the Father, (we're told twice in the Book of Revelation in chapter 7 and chapter 21), wipes away all tears from our eyes. He solves the problems. There's no sorrow; it's all joy.

Now we don't know a great deal about all of that, about that country we're going to. We know it's a place of fellowship and joy, and all of that—but the greatness of it is really beyond us. But we know about it—and Paul was ready for that. For him, the thrill of heaven, though, is not what we often think about; what we even sang about this morning; 'the gates of gold', (probably better put 'the gates of pearl and the streets of gold'). That's certainly part of it, but for Paul the thrill of heaven was Christ. Heaven is a place, it's a glorious place. But it's far more than that. It's a Person—it is Christ; and Paul wanted to depart to be with Him. Now that's hardly a gloomy outlook on life or death. It's surely triumphant.

Both options presented Paul with great opportunities—but both also put Paul in a hard place. He says 'He was hard pressed between the two options: being with the Philippians or being with the Savior.' He loved both. —But the "better" option was to be with Christ.

This has been called "Paul's dilemma." And I'm not sure that's really the right way to describe it—that's the right word to use because according to Webster, a *dilemma* is, 'a choice between equally unfavorable alternatives'. It's being between 'a rock and a

hard place.' Hamlet was the one who was in a dilemma. Paul was 'pleasantly pressed'. He was happy. —Either way, it was a win-win for him.

So if we want to think of this as a *dilemma*, and call it that, then it was an 'agreeable one'. And it is for every believer. Whether we think it is or not, it truly is. Christ has for us defeated death; and gained eternal life for us. Death will come, (if the Lord doesn't come before that), it will come and it will take hold of us—but it can't hold us permanently. It's a very temporary, in fact, it's an instantaneous thing—and it's victory forever.

"We are", as Paul said, "more than conquerors", Romans 8, verse 37. What a great description that is of us; "more than conquerors." Now you may not feel like that. You may not feel like a conqueror today, or tomorrow, or every day of your life. But nevertheless, that's what we are.

And the thought of dying, I suppose, is not always that comfortable a thought to us. After all, we're leaving the world that we know, that we're familiar with, for one that we only know vaguely because it's only described rather vaguely in Scripture. We're leaving friends and family that we love and that doesn't always excite us. It doesn't excite me, I'll admit, but that doesn't change what is. That doesn't change the reality, and the reality is that 'we are conquerors in Christ.' He has gained everything for us. And whether you understand that fully, and whether you revel in that and rejoice in it, as the apostle Paul did or not, it is true and we have a glorious destiny. And the closer we grow to Christ; the more we know Him; the more we love Him the more we will realize the great hope that we do have.

Paul did—he was "hard pressed" between living and dying. (vs23). That was his problem. It was a pleasant problem: where to be, and who to be with. He resolved it in verse 24; and he did so in the way that we should resolve issues as well—and that's by doing or seeking what is best for others. He put the interest of the Philippians ahead of his own. He writes in verse 24, "Yet, to remain on in the flesh is more necessary for your sake." That would mean more labor for him; which meant hard labor, physical difficulty.

Paul had suffered much in his life: beatings and imprisonment. He told the Galatians, at the end of the Book of Galatians, that he had scars on his body. And you can just imagine that if you'd ever seen Paul take off his shirt, his back would have been like leather with all the deep scars that he had received from the floggings and the beatings he'd undergone. He, no doubt, lived his life constantly in pain, chronic pain.

And preaching and teaching and traveling in Paul's age, and in his condition, must have been draining and demanding. But his love for them, for those Philippians, for the church, motivated him. And his love for Christ, the opportunity to serve Him, to serve the One who had saved him, and to advance the cause of the Gospel, and to help the Lord's people...all of this constrained him—he wanted to serve.

George Whitefield was a man like that. He was a man very much like the apostle Paul. He crossed oceans and continents to preach the Gospel. He has been called the greatest evangelist since the days of the apostles. He was buried in Newburyport, Massachusetts, where he died after preaching. He preached the last night of his life.

It's a pretty moving story of how he stood and got out of bed after having preached all over New England. People clamored to hear one more sermon by him, or another sermon by him, not knowing it would be his last. When he came to the door of the house he got out of bed, he held a candle in his hand at the top of the stairs, preached a sermon, went back to bed—and died.

Well, he's buried under the pulpit of The First Presbyterian Church in Newburyport. And next to the pulpit is a cenotaph, a monument; and on it is written that he crossed the Atlantic 13 times and preached over 18,000 sermons in his lifetime. 13 crossings of the Atlantic in wooden ships were hard crossings, and very dangerous. That was laboring for the Lord. Whitefield used to say, "I am often weary in the work, but never weary of it."

And that was Paul's attitude. He was the Lord's servant first of all, and trusted Him. He trusted that the Lord knew what was best for him; and whether or not it was time for him to rest from his labors or continue on in those labors and continue on with

the Philippians. As he considered the situation and as he considered the need of his friends, he, Paul, concluded, he was "convinced", (vs25), that continuing on for their spiritual growth was God's will for him. So he tells them that. He tells them in verse 25 that he expected to do that very thing, "I will remain and continue with you all for your progress and joy in the faith."

Now, when he speaks of "the faith" here, he means the Christian creed; all that we believe; the doctrine and the practice of the Christian life. But that involves faith; that involves the act of faith; that involves the act of believing. In fact, that is essential to growing in the faith and the joy of the faith. And as we grow in our faith, our personal faith, we grow in the faith and in our understanding of truth and what is real. And everything Paul teaches in this passage is based on that. It's based on faith. It's based on believing what has been revealed by God.

How do you know what Paul says here is true? It's a great passage. We were talking about this before we came in this morning, 'What a great text of Scripture this is!' Verse 21 itself is a great text for a sermon. But how do we know it's true? How do you know there is life after death, that death is not being 'unborn', that it is *departure*, it's going to a greater place, it's going to heaven? How do you know that?

Well, you know that by faith. We believe what God has told us. We believe what God has revealed. Now we have proof of it—and we have historical proof. We have the four Gospels that all testify to the resurrection of Jesus Christ. We have the epistles. We have 1 Corinthians 15 where Paul lays out a lot of the historical evidence in the number of witnesses that saw and touched the resurrected Jesus Christ—and that confirms all of the promises that are given. And those written documents of eyewitnesses are historical documents. We have historical testimonies.

But, having said that, ultimately we know the witness of the Scriptures is true by faith. Now if that's maybe a little disconcerting, a little alarming to you—that we know it ultimately by believing it, well that's true of everybody. Everyone in this life; scientists,

historians, whatever, live by faith. Everybody lives by faith. Believer and unbeliever alike live by faith.

How do you know that I'm speaking to you? How do you know that I am in front of you? This may not be the best illustration or example of my point, but how do you know that? Well, you can say, "Well, I see you, I hear you. Obviously." In other words, you believe your senses. You believe what your eyes are telling you, what your ears are telling you. You believe that. But how do you know it's not fooling you? Well, you're trusting in that. You trust them. You trust your senses. You don't even think to question them. We all live by faith.

We live by faith that this is an orderly world—and that we're going to go out and things are going to be the way they are every day. We live by faith that it's really safe and not going to be hit by a meteor, (we don't have that strong of a faith about that after last week. *Laughter.*) But nevertheless we live by faith, either in our abilities to discover the truth or in God's gift of revealing it. Either in human reason or in revelation—but everybody believes, everybody lives by faith.

But we believe it, we believe the Word of God because we have been given spiritual eyes to see it. It is supernatural. We see what others can't see; but we really do see it. We really do have spiritual eyes to see it. The Holy Spirit is truly within us—literally within us, in a heart that's been made new with new abilities and a new mind to understand—and therefore we know it's true. And the Holy Spirit confirms that; He bears witness with our spirit that it is true.

We think of that as a subjective reality. It can be understood that way, but it's still objective in that it's real—within us, but real. The Holy Spirit is giving, within our hearts and our minds, confirmation of the truth of all of this—so that we know it is true. And the more we learn, the clearer we see it all and the stronger our faith becomes—and the greater our convictions become.

Paul speaks of that in verse 26. He wanted their confidence to “abound in Christ Jesus”. He wants them to increase in all of that, in their confidence and their joy. He knew that progress in the faith results in greater joy in the faith. You want to have joy in

life? You want to have confidence in life? Read the Word of God and believe what you read. As we grow in our faith and knowledge, we progress. We increase in our confidence and we increase in joy.

That's what Paul hoped to facilitate in their lives. He knew these things were needed in their development. They're needed in the development of all of God's people. He knew that those Philippians, whom he loved so much, needed that; so he was convinced that he would remain to minister to them for their progress and joy.

In the meantime, while they waited for his return, he had some counsel for them on how they were to behave. It begins in verse 27 with the adverb "*Only*" and puts a lot of emphasis upon this; "Only conduct yourselves..." It's as if here were saying to them, 'I hope to come to you, but it may not be for a while, if at all. Nevertheless, whether I come or not, here is the essential thing: Conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the Gospel of Christ.'

That word, *conduct*, is interesting. It's a Greek word that is based on the Greek word for 'city', *polis*. And we get *metropolitan* from that, as well as different words. Our word is based on that word for *city*. And that was an important word for the Greeks. At the time Paul wrote, (and long before that), Greece was a place but it wasn't really a country—not as we think of a place as a country. It was made up of city-states. Athens was its political/social entity. Sparta was the same. They would join together when they were fighting a foreign invader, like the Persians. But if that wasn't the case, then they'd fight each other, because the main social/political structure was the city, the "city-state."

And so *citizenship* in the cities was very important to the Greeks; and it meant 'living together', 'joining in partnership': That's what a *citizen* was. That's what citizenship was; it was partnership. They fought together as a city. They lived together. They cooperated for the function of their society, for the good of their community. And that's the idea that Paul's communicating here when he tells them to "conduct themselves"; 'Do so in that way.' He's instructing them to live up to their responsibilities to one another. They were a city within a city.

And then later on, he put a great deal of emphasis upon this subject of *citizenship*, and where our *citizenship* lay. It is not in this world, it's in the next; and our greatest loyalty is to one another. And he wanted to hear that they were *conducting* themselves in a way of loyalty and help toward each other; that they were united and cooperating. He urges them to do that in two ways, by "standing firm", and "striving together." (vs27b). This is the language of soldiers and athletes: Standing firm in battle and striving to win a contest.

It indicates that they were in something of a spiritual battle back in Philippi. And we're always in spiritual battles, wherever we are. But there was some things specific, evidently, going on because he writes of their opponents in verse 28 and verse 30, where he makes reference to the same conflict that he had when he was there. And you'll remember when Paul was there in Philippi, in Acts chapter 16, he was arrested by the authorities. And evidently there was some opposition from the political authorities there in Philippi to the Gospel and the church. Philippi was, as I pointed out, a very Roman town, where it's likely that emperor worship was practiced. So the state was very likely opposing the church.

But we also know from chapter 3 of the Book of Philippians, that heretics had come to town. Paul refers to "the false circumcision", (vs2), which is a reference to Judaizers. These people annulled grace by adding works to faith. It's not works as the fruit of justification: that's orthodoxy. Paul teaches that; that where there's justification there will be fruit; where there's the new birth, there'll be evidence of the new life.

That's not what the Judaizers were saying. They were saying, 'In order to gain that, you have to add something to your faith. Faith is not enough. You have to add a ceremony; you have to add circumcision.

Today people might say, 'You have to be baptized', 'You have to do this or that.' 'It's not enough to believe, there's ceremonies that must be involved.' And that's what these "false circumcision", as Paul calls them, were advocating.

It's the same problem we had in Galatia. It was a problem that Paul had to deal with all over that part of the world. These heretics would come in soon after he'd left, and he had to deal with those who were trying to compromise the Gospel.

And that was happening there in Philippi. They were in a battle. They were in a battle, evidently, with the authorities, but they were in a battle for the truth. And Paul was urging them to behave as soldiers; 'Be like soldiers.' Some of the Christians probably were, literally, soldiers. That was a place where a lot of the veteran Legionnaires of Rome retired.

And it's not unlikely that there, in the church of Philippi, that a number of the converts were former Roman soldiers, and he gives this picture that would be very vivid in their thinking: Of the soldier in armor, standing firm in their formation and not giving in to the pressures of the enemy's attack; it's like those 300 Spartans who stood at Thermopylae, (which wasn't too far from Philippi). There is a lot of military associations with that city and that area of Greece.

And so they were to behave like soldiers, to be "standing firm". But also, as he explains, to behave like athletes and be standing, not against, but together, like a team in the arena, competing for a common goal, "striving" for it. Here, the goal he's promoting is the Gospel.

The Christian life is lived in the arena. That's where we're living our life constantly—in the arena. So there's never a moment when we can be disconnected from one another; we need one another, constantly, in this Christian life. We don't fight the fight alone. We're not intended to fight in that way, and we will never fight the good fight successfully in isolation—alone. We are to be standing together. We need to be united for instruction and counsel and encouragement. And that, as we will see in the weeks to come, is one of the great themes of this book, 'standing united in the faith.'

Paul gives some encouragement of his own in verse 28, where he tells them not to be "alarmed" by their opponents. 'Don't let them put you in a panic', is what he's saying; that's the idea. The word '*alarm*' was used of horses being startled and

stampeding. So Paul was saying, 'Don't do that. Don't be like that; stay composed; stand firm.' Ultimately he says, 'This is from God.' The persecutions they were undergoing, the hardships they were going through, he says, this is "from God." He sends persecutions, (or if you prefer), He allows them to come into our lives.

But however we want to put it, they fit within God's plan and purpose. They're part of that. Now that doesn't make the difficulty, hardship, persecution easy, but it does put our trials in the hands of One who loves us. Or at least it is recognizing that the trials are in His hands; in the One who controls their outcome for our good—which should give us calm and strength to endure them.

We know these things just don't happen by chance. God's in control; and that should encourage. And that strength, that endurance, (that we should have as a result of understanding that), is "a sign", Paul says, "of your salvation." (vs28). Just as the hostility of these enemies is a 'sign of their destruction', (and he means destruction in the fullest sense of the word), the eternal destruction, perdition, of these enemies of the Gospel is proven by their opposition to the people of God. That's the end of all of this: These enemies will lose all—and we will triumph forever—all because of God's grace. He's in control.

Again, that doesn't minimize the suffering and the hardship of such things, but it does give hope in it. I often think, and I think it's true, that everything in life is a test. How will we respond to life's challenges? Will we trust in the LORD, or will we panic? And I can't say that I always pass the test. Nevertheless, I know by faith, based on God's Word, I know that we have every reason to trust in the LORD and be calm in the midst of whatever the circumstances of life are.

Proverbs 3, verses 24 and 25 give that counsel. "When you lie down, you will not be afraid; When you lie down, your sleep will be sweet. Do not be afraid of sudden fear Nor of the onslaught...when it comes." Now, it doesn't say that the onslaught won't come. The onslaught will come. Life's full of those. But don't fear. It's not your

destruction. You are safe. God is sovereign—never doubt that. Even in this or that time of trial, God's sovereign. That's what gives you the strength to endure it.

As Paul explains in verse 29, "It has been granted for Christ's sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake." That's an amazing verse. And that quite simply states that faith, saving faith, is a gift. It's not something we produce, it's something that's produced in us. It's given to us. It has been granted; gifted; "graced", (more literally), to believe.

And Paul doesn't explain this. He doesn't need to explain this—the Philippians knew that. They knew that faith was a gift. They rejoiced in it. And why wouldn't we? Why wouldn't we rejoice in that? I say 'Why wouldn't we', because people don't. They want to resist that. I don't know how Paul could say it more clearly. It's been granted to believe. It's been gifted to believe.

But if it's hard for some to comprehend, then ask yourself, how else could it be? If, as Paul wrote in Ephesians chapter 2, and verse 1, "You were dead in your trespasses and sins," how else could the dead believe unless it were gifted to them, unless it were granted to them. If it is true, as Paul wrote in Romans chapter 3, in verse 11 that, "There is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God", then He must seek and find us and give us faith—or we will not ever seek and find Him: "There is none who seeks..."

If it's true, as Jesus said in John chapter 6, verses 37 and 44, (which you've studied recently with Mark in the adult Sunday School class), that, "All that the Father gives Me will come..." (vs37), who is going to come? Those who seek and find the Lord? No. Those whom 'the Father has given to Him'.

And then He adds, "But no one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him." (vs44). Well, how else can we believe, how else can we do the very things that Paul talks about, unless the Father draws us. It must be given; that's very clear; it's obvious.

At least it's obvious to me. I think it's obvious, probably, to most of you, that faith is a gift. And Paul is not trying to teach that to the Philippians. He's not trying to instill

within them sovereign grace—they understood that. They knew that. This is the basis for what he's going to teach them. This is the assumption of the verse that God is sovereign. He gives faith. And that same God who gives faith also gives trials—and that's what he wanted them to know.

But to be encouraged by this, they had to know that God's in complete control. He's absolutely sovereign in all of these events of life. And so his instruction is that we're to be joyful, because God's in control of it all. He gives you your faith, He even gives you the trials.

And it may not make the trials pleasant knowing that ultimately they come from God. But what it does inform us of is, even though those trials are difficult and painful, disappointing...all of that, they're not a mistake and they're not the bludgeonings of chance. It's of God; and it is good because it is from God. And it's always for a good purpose: It is 'for Christ's sake.' We suffer for His name's sake. And that puts things in perspective. And that's what Paul was doing. It "has been granted", (vs29), meaning it is 'a gift.'

This word, as I indicated earlier, is from the word *grace*. Suffering for Christ, (really, all of the trials of life, not just suffering for the Gospel specifically), but all the difficulties of life are as much a gift from God as faith is.

You think about that for a moment, and you wonder, 'Well, okay. Where is the blessing in that? Where's the blessing in suffering?' That's a fair question because suffering, hardship, pain, is not good in and of itself. It's a part of the curse that's going to be removed. But the fact is, God does use it—and He uses it in the Christian's life for his or her benefit.

First, you can examine this in a variety of ways, but first, of course, 'to suffer persecution for Christ's sake' is an opportunity to be a witness for Him, to represent Him well before the world. And in that way possibly lead people who are lost, to faith as they see the way we stand firm in the midst of the trials of life, the difficulties of life; persecution itself—that's a witness.

And that historically, on many occasions, has had a huge effect upon people and brought about great revival as a consequence of the way people suffered for the faith. The world saw it and God used that to bring them to a saving knowledge of Himself. Suffering for the Gospel patiently and without blame is a way of being a great witness.

But on a personal level, suffering can draw us closer to Christ. We begin to understand what He experienced for us as we go through difficulties—particularly persecution. But even in the difficulties of life, we're drawn closer to Him in those times, in times of distress, in times of uncertainty. When a man loses a job, he knows that he is dependent upon the LORD, and looks to Him. And often it's in those times of trial that we draw close to the throne of grace, and that's what trials produce in us.

And suffering for our faith brings assurance of salvation. It certainly does in the way we respond to it. It does when we undergo persecution. It is what Christians experience in this world; it's to be expected. It is a sign that we are one with Christ. Paul reminds them in verse 30 that it was his experience in Philippi, 'It is the same conflict which you saw in me.' That sometimes is life for the Christian in a world that is lost: In a world that is opposed to Jesus Christ, you'll be opposed. If you're with Him, you're going to be opposed.

The world is darkness; we've been put in it, to be lights. The darkness does not respond well to that. Even though what we have to offer is life itself—it wants death, it wants darkness, and the darkness seeks to put us out. We may suffer and die for our faith, (Paul was ready to die for his), or live on for Him, for Christ. But if death came, Paul would welcome it. That is 'a good death.'

I mentioned earlier a book about death by a Harvard physician. Another one I read, published in 1993, was by a Yale physician, a surgeon, Dr. Sherwin Nuland, and the book he wrote was entitled, *How We Die*. And it's a very interesting book. He, too, was an agnostic. You have these brilliant men that study the human body, (which is general revelation), and have a deep understanding of the body and how complex it is, how

intricate it is—and they're agnostics. Why, with all their intelligence? Because faith is a gift.

Nevertheless he wrote an interesting book, and he wrote this statement, "The good death has increasingly become a myth." And what he meant by that is death is becoming very clinical: managed with drugs and often people gradually become vegetative; and they just slip away.

We can't control that. God's people leave this world in many different ways, some less noble than others. We can't control that. That may be what God's will is for your way of leaving this world.

But what we can control, at least reasonably, in a sense, we can control, (within God's sovereign will), we can control how we live with the time that we have, and how we serve Him. And when we live for Christ, we live the good life. We live a responsible life. We live a helpful life to those around us in a variety of ways: That is a life that influences those around us and that's a life that gives glory to God. And that's really what we are to control and to do.

I'll give an example. A year ago, Gary Carter died. He was a hall of fame catcher for the Montreal Expos, and then later for the New York Mets. He helped the Mets win the World Series. And about two weeks after his death, there was an article in the Wall Street Journal titled, "Gary Carter Showed Me How to Play the Game." And "by the game" the writer meant 'the game of life.'

This man was sitting in a dark room late one night, 25 years ago, smoking cigarettes, listening to a Mets game, on the verge of suicide, considering the question; 'To be or not to be?' After the game, Gary Carter was interviewed. He often would thank Jesus Christ in those post-game interviews, (which annoyed unbelieving journalists). On this occasion, though, he simply explained how he could play that night with a bad knee. And he said, "Sometimes you just have to play with pain." But that statement was kind of an epiphany for the writer. He realized that that's what he had to do. He resolved to do that. He got help—and he later became a Christian.

Proverbs 10, verse 21 says, "The lips of the righteous feed many." Our lives and words can be the right thing at the right time, spoken to people you don't even know who are listening—and be the great blessing to them, to many people, in many different ways. A life lived like that, righteously, is a good life; and it will result in a good death. And for the believer in Jesus Christ, death is always good because it's always victorious and it's always "a departure."

That cenotaph honoring George Whitefield in Newburyport ends with the date of his death and then the words, "...suddenly exchanging his life of unparalleled labors for his eternal rest." And that's what every believer in Jesus Christ does. We don't dissolve or end in some dark void; we 'exchange our labors for rest and eternal joy.'

Well may God give us the grace to labor while we can. You and I, we live in a moment—and we can think in terms of always living in the moment and life's always going to go on. It's not. It'll end. It can end at any time. Even if it ends 20, 30, 40, 50 years from now, it's like a moment. We have a very brief moment in this world. May God give us the grace to seize the moment, to live for Him, to labor while we can. The more we do, the more we will understand that, "to die is gain" and "very much better."

If you're here without Christ, that can be true for you. Come to Him; believe in Jesus Christ. It's all one must do. Christ died for sinners. He bore the penalty in their place. And all who attach themselves to Him through faith have that, and have it forever. May God give you the grace to believe, and to rest in Him. May God give that to all of us. Let's pray.

Father, we thank You for this great text of Scripture, this testimony of the apostle Paul that whether he lived or died, it was a great blessing either way. Life is meaningful. Everything we do counts as eternal weight, so what a blessing to live. But to die, for those in Christ, for those whom You've saved, well, that's very much better. We go to our eternal reward, to that glorious country of Light, of joy.

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"To Be Or Not To Be" by Dan Duncan

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Father, thank You that we have that future, that we have that glorious future, where we will all be reunited and never to be separated again. We thank You for all that we have in Christ. It's in His name we pray. Amen.

(End of Audio)