

TO DIE OR NOT TO DIE!

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A SERMON
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“Willing rather to be absent from the body and to be present with the Lord.”
2 Corinthians 5:8

I ONCE heard two good men holding a dialog with one another. I should not like to have the task of saying which I thought the better man of the two. I believe them both to be sincere followers of the Savior, and both of them I think have a good hope through grace.

One of them said he should be glad to go to heaven. He wished that his time was come. He did not see anything here worth living for, and he should be only too glad if now the summons should reach him, that he should cross the river and arrive in the promised land.

The other brother said he did not feel so. He thought he had many reasons why he would rather just live than die. He thanked God that he had lived to see the church in prosperity, and it made his heart glad. He should like, he said, to be a sharer of the church’s joy for years to come. Besides, he had those he loved on earth, and he said perhaps it might be a weakness in him, but certainly he could not join in the other brother’s aspirations—at least not to the same extent.

I stood by. I do not know that I volunteered *then* any very strong words by way of notice of what either of them said, yet I took notes of their conversation, and thinking the matter over, it suggested to me a few thoughts, which I shall endeavor to present to you tonight. May the topic be interesting and may you feel your own interest in it.

Now, there was one of the brethren who would *rather not depart but stay*. I will take up that side of the question first, and show when such a desire is wrong and when it is right. The other brother, like Paul, said he would *rather depart*, for he thought it far better. I will take up that side of the question afterwards, and show when that too is wrong and when that too is right. I think they must both be sifted, and to pronounce a judgment upon either prematurely as right or wrong would be to perpetrate an injustice and to commit an error.

Sometimes it is wrong for a Christian man to say, “I do not want to die—I would rather live,” and one of the first cases is *when that Christian has grown worldly*. I think it was Dr. Johnson, who being taken by one of his friends over to his fine house and along the walks of his beautiful garden, observed to him—“Ah! sir, these are the things that make it hard to die.”

To leave the comforts of life, to go from a nest that is well-feathered, and to stretch our wings into the air; to leave the house which our industry has builded, the objects familiar to our senses, the projects that absorb our interest, and above all, the family about which our affections are entwined—I say willingly to leave these is difficult.

All these are so many strings tying us down like the ropes which fasten the balloon which would mount if once its cords were cut. But brethren, this is wrong in a Christian man. What is there in this present world that he should love, compared with the world to come? Has Christ taught him to find his solace here? Did Christ come from heaven that we should find a heaven here below?

Nay, rather He has taught us that the enjoyments of this world are not fit meat for the noble spirits which He has re-created. Men must eat angels’ food, they cannot live by bread alone. The world was never meant to fill a believer’s soul. He may find some contentment in it, for “Every creature of God is good, and is to be received with thanksgiving,” but to set this world in comparison with the next so as to

be unwilling to let it go in order to receive the crown of life—this were folly, this were madness, this were wickedness in the godly man. In such a sense as that the thing is wrong.

And again, when the Christian wishes to stay here, *because he has a secret fear of dying*, it is wrong. Brethren, I would not speak harshly to those who, “by fear of death are all their lifetime subject to bondage,” but I would speak encouragingly to them. What did Christ come into the world for? He came to deliver those who are subject to this bondage and did Christ come in vain?

Nay, brethren, then let us shake off these chains. They are unworthy of the men who have a part and lot in Christ Jesus the Redeemer. Afraid to die! Why, you are afraid of a stingless enemy—afraid of a shadow. Nay, you are afraid of heaven’s own portals, you are afraid of your Father’s black servant whom He sends to bring you to Himself!

Be more afraid of living than of dying, for there are more fears in life than in death. In fact, to the Christian there is no fear in death. “Oh, but,” say you, “the pains and groans of death!” “No,” say I, “they are the pains and groans of life.” There are no pains and groans in death. Death occupies but an instant. ’Tis but, as it were, a pin’s prick and all is over.

’Tis life that gives the pains. The sighs, the groans, and the strife, are not those of death, but those of life struggling against death, when the strong man will not yield himself. So says one of our poets:

*“How deep implanted in the breast of man
The dread of death! I sing its sovereign cure.
Why start at death?—Where is he? Death arrived
Is past; not come or gone; he’s never here.
Ere hope, sensation fails; black-boding man
Receives, not suffers, death’s tremendous blow.”*

Brethren, when Jesus Christ died for our offenses, and was raised again for our justification, He “loosed the pains of death.” Our old divines were wont to say—“Then there are only a few loose pains for the believer to suffer.” Death seizes not the Christian with the strong grip of an officer of justice. Rather does death beckon the soul away to be present with the Lord.

Let those fear to die whose sins lie heavy on their consciences. Let those fear to die who have heaped sin upon sin, who have rejected the atonement, have trampled on the blood of sprinkling, have cast behind their backs the invitations of mercy, and live and die in their sins.

But you—you fear death—you whose sins are forgiven, you who are clothed in Jesu’s righteousness, you to whom death is admission into immortality, you to whom death is but the end of dying, and the beginning of life—you fear death? Why sirs, surely you know not what spirit you are of. Such fear of dying is wrong in the Christian. Let him strive against it, and by getting more grace, let him overcome his dread.

Then again, if the Christian’s fear of dying is *the result of his doubting his interest in Christ*, that is wrong. We have no right to doubt. “He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved,” but some read it as though it said, “He that doubteth shall be saved.” In this very verse, the apostle says, “We are always confident.”

Now, some divines hate the very word “confidence” and some professors of religion think that a Christian has nothing to do with confidence. And yet, the apostle says, “We are always confident.” And indeed, the apostle knew what was the proper spirit for a believer—not that he might not be trembling between death and life, between hope and fear, with “ifs,” and “buts,” and “peradventures,” for his only rocks.

No, that is not the spirit of a child of God. One would think, to hear some men talk, that the atonement of Christ was a quagmire, a bog, or bending ice, which might give way under our feet. But beloved, it is not so. It is a rock more lasting than the rocks on which this earth is piled, and more enduring than the solid columns which support heaven’s starry roof.

Why fear then? Why doubt? Why tremble? Such pining after life, such fears of death, because we doubt our Savior, are disreputable in a Christian man. Let us seek to overcome them, that so, being always confident, we may be willing to depart, which is far better.

One more point I ought not to pass over here, albeit I do not know in which scale to put it—whether to call it right or wrong. When the Christian had rather stay here *because he has a large family dependent upon him*, and he says, “How can I die?” “Ah!” he says, “the apostle Paul had not a house to maintain and a responsible business to manage for the support of his dependent household. He lived in single blessedness, and when he journeyed he took all his stock-in-trade with him. But if I were to die just now, I should leave my widow without provision, and my children would be all but penniless orphans.”

Well now, that is a right consideration. The religion of Christ does not teach us to deny our natural affections, and if any man desires not to provide for his own household, he is worse than a heathen man and a publican. But mark, if that care get to be disturbing care, if it is a distrustful care as to God’s providence, then it is wrong, for many a time has a believer closed his eyes in perfect peace, though he knew that he left his dear ones without a heritage, for he has put God’s promise between his lips—“Leave thy fatherless children, and let thy widow trust in me.”

I think I may tell a story that might aptly illustrate this. Though some be here whom it concerns, the name not transpiring it can do no hurt. I have heard of a poor laboring man, whose children were at that time struggling for their bread, and suddenly the pangs of death came on him. And as he lay dying, this was the legacy he left his children—children, mark you, who are at this day, many of them rich, and all of them together with his widow to her dying day, have been comfortably provided for.

He said to his wife, as he was dying—“You will find so many shillings in that box over there”—and you would think he was going to say, “Take care of it, it is the last I have.” But no. He said, “I owe just that sum of money to Mrs. So-and-So down in the village, take it and pay her. It is all I owe in the world, and then I can die content.”

As a Christian man he died, and left to his children a better heritage than many a peer of the realm has bestowed, though he has given estates over the acres of which a bird’s wing might flag in the attempt to fly. And I say from that very moment—and there are those here who can bear me witness—from that very moment, that man’s family rose in circumstances. From that very instant, they began to rise in respectability and position in life, and they make it their boast that their father left them such a heritage as that.

Oh! Christian man, you may in the strength of an unwavering faith in God close your eyes in peace. Let not your social position too much disturb you, but while you make all the provision you can, let not your provision ever stint you in your generosity to Christ’s cause, or mar the peace with which you go to your death-pillow.

He that has been with you will also be with your seed. I cannot boast many years of observation—I cannot say as David did—“I have been young and now am old, yet have I not seen the righteous forsaken, nor his seed begging bread,” but there be many grey-headed ones who can say that, and set to their seal that God is true.

Having thus brought out what I think the wrong side of the matter, let me now show you when I think it may be right for the believer to say, “I would rather live than die.” And that is, first, *when he feels that he has not yet done much for his Master, and a field of labors is just opening before his eyes*. “Oh!” says he, “I should not like to go to heaven yet, for I have done so little for Him on earth.”

As a valiant soldier, with the field of battle in view, he wants to win a victory. The fight is just beginning and he has not had an opportunity of distinguishing himself. He has been in the rear-rank, and he says to himself, “I want an opportunity of rushing to the front and winning my new laurels, so that before the battle is over I may be distinguished for serving my country.”

So many a young Christian may, with a noble ambition, say—“I do not want my part in the battle to be over yet. I had rather stay a little longer, till I have fought the good fight and finished my course.”

Christian! Christian! if you say thus, who can blame you? Your desire to remain is commendable indeed.

But perhaps we have been long in the field, and we are saying—"I do not want to die yet, because the laborers are few. Oh! let me stay till I see others raised up to preach the Gospel that I love. Great Commander of our hosts, let my hand hold Your standard till another hand stronger than mine shall grasp it. Let me stand in the fore-front of the battle, till You find someone else to bear the world's opprobrium, and tug and toil for souls even in the very fire."

I can quote Carey, and Ward, and Pierre, who when they were laid down with sickness at Serampore, prayed that they might live a little longer, because every godly man in India was then worth a thousand. They seemed to say, "If any would come and take my place, gladly would I go to find repose. But I have to keep this gap, or guard this bulwark, oh Captain, call me not away, lest Your name be dishonored, and Your enemies get to themselves triumph."

If Elisha said, "My Father, my Father, my Father, the chariot of Israel, and the horsemen thereof"—much more can you conceive the charioteer of God, who has long held in the rapid steeds, standing upright in his chariot, as he feels the death-film gathering over his eye, and he is about in sheer exhaustion to cast down the reins, because he can hold them no longer, you can hear him cry, "Let me just live until I can pass the reins to my successor's hands, and transfer, like Moses, the guardianship of Israel to a Joshua, who shall lead them into the promised land."

In those two cases, and there may be others—it would be allowable for the believer to say, "To abide in the flesh is more needful for *you*, and therefore I prefer rather to live than die."

I now take the second stage of the controversy and shall try to deal fairly with that. When is it right, and when is it wrong for a believer to wish to go to heaven?

First, it is wrong *when he wants to get there to get away from his work*. Sometimes, when we have got a hard task to do for the Lord, we wish that the rest would come, and we talk almost peevishly of the "rest that remains for the people of God." There are some lazy spirits who would like an everlasting Sabbath, when they might always sit still and do nothing. That is their notion of heaven—

*"There on a green and flowery mount,
Our weary souls shall sit."*

My own constitutional idleness always makes me look forward to heaven as a place of rest, for in everything I do I am obliged to drive myself to do it for the Master's sake. And there be many, I dare say who suffer from a torpid and sluggish liver, to whom the thought of heaven as a place of rest is generally the paramount one.

Well, now, I do not think that we ought to wish to go to heaven to have done with work. Suppose you were to employ a laborer, and he came to you about ten o'clock in the morning, and said, "Master, it is a very hot day, I wish it was six o'clock at night." You would say, "Let me see, how many hours have you been at work—there is your money, take it and go. I want none of those laggard fellows about my premises that are always looking for six o'clock."

Or suppose you had another man engaged by the week, and you met him on Thursday, and he said, "I wish it was Saturday, sir, I wish it was Saturday night." "Ah," you would say, "a man that always looks for Saturday night is never worth his master's keeping. Just go on with your work till it is finished, and then when Saturday night comes it will be all the more welcome to you."

And yet, brethren, you and I have been guilty of that same unworthy listlessness with regard to the things of Christ. We have wanted to get away from the work. It was too hard and too hot for us, so we would even wish to skulk into heaven that we might repose our wearied souls upon the green and flowery mounts.

Now, all that is wrong. Get up with you, get up with you! "Six days shalt thou labour and do all that thou hast to do; but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the LORD thy God." If you murmur at the six days

of labor for Christ Jesus in His vineyard, how shall you hope to enjoy with Him the eternal Sabbatism that remains for the people of God?

Some, too, wish to get away from this world *because there is some little discouragement that they have met with in laboring for Christ*. Jonah thought he would rather go to Tarshish than to Nineveh. There are many spiritual Jonahs who had rather go to heaven than they would go to their pulpits again, or to the place where they have been taunted, ridiculed, and persecuted.

It is the same spirit of disobedience and unbelief. They want to get out of the work, and away from the discouragements of it, and so they say they would like to go home. I knew a man a little while ago—and he who tells the tale knows by experience the truth of it—I knew a man who, thinking of his own responsibility, and of the solemn work which lay upon him, having met with some rough words, and being somewhat cast down, wished to go to heaven.

And he has been ashamed of himself ever since, for he thought within himself—what business had he the first time he met with an enemy, to say to his Captain, “Please let me go home.” We have read this last week some excellent stories of valiant men. There are a few instances that ought perhaps to be told for our encouragement.

There was a certain officer in a certain battle, which we need not mention, but which ought to be called forever, “The Battle of the Spurs.” This gentleman, finding there was no chance, rode as quickly as he could to Washington to say it was a mistake. Yes, of course that is what he went for, he was not at all afraid.

Of course he did not return home, because he did not like the look of the campaign, or thought there might be a chance of his being cut down. Perhaps that was not the reason. Perhaps he was a very brave man, and so he showed his back to the enemy, thinking that the back alone of so brave a man would be enough to confound his foes. Perhaps that was it.

And perhaps that may be the reason why you and I want to go to heaven when we get a little uncomfortable. But to tell you the truth, I suspect it was abominable cowardice. And I suspect it is the same with you and with me. We get cowardly and afraid of the world lest its opposition stain our pride. Afraid of Satan, whom it is our duty to resist, and tender of the flesh, which it is our great duty to mortify and not to pamper.

And withal we are distrustful of God as our helper. 'Tis then we fretfully say, “Let us go to heaven.” I fancy I hear Martin Luther talking like that! Melancthon did it once, but Martin Luther said, “No, no, Melancthon, you are not going to heaven yet. I will not have it,” and down he went, and prayed while Melancthon said, “Let me die, Luther.” But Luther said, “No, we want you, and you are not to be let off yet, you must stand in the thick of the battle till the fight changes and victory is ours.”

Thus, to wish to get away from our appointed place of trial and conflict, because of discouragements, is wrong in the extreme.

And some there be—I would not speak severely but truthfully—some there be who want to go to heaven, *to get away from the Lord's will on earth*. They have had so much pain, that they would like to be released from it. We cannot, we will not blame them. If we had the same sufferings, we should have the same desire.

But yet does it not sometimes amount to this, “Father, I see the cup is there, and I know I ought to drink it, but if the cup cannot pass from me, let me pass away from it”? Does it not sometimes amount to this, “This furnace is very hot, Lord, take me out of it to heaven at once”? Does it not come to this, “Lord, You have tried me so sorely. I do not like these trials. I have an objection to Your will, and I should like to be removed from the necessity of enduring it”?

Such people never do die, remember, for years afterwards, because the Lord knows they are not fit to die. When we want to die to get away from our pains, we generally keep on living. But when we are able to say, “Well, let it be as He wills. I would be glad to be rid of pain, but I would be content to bear it if it is God's will,” then patience has had her perfect work, and it often happens that the Lord says, “It is well, My child. Your will is My will, and now it is My will that you should be with Me where I am.”

And now, bear with me patiently, while I try to show when such a desire as this is not only undeserving of censure, but truly praiseworthy, exceedingly commendable, and eminently to be desired. Brothers and Sisters, if you long to go to heaven *because you are conscious of your daily sins and want to be rid of them*—if, seeing your perpetual mistakes, transgressions, and iniquities, you are saying,

*“Sin, my worst enemy before,
Shall vex my eyes and ears no more;
My inward foes shall all be slain,
Nor Satan break my peace again,”—*

it is a good desire, for to be perfectly holy is an aspiration worthy of the best of men. You may—I am sure you will—in the thought that you shall be without spot or wrinkle, or any such thing, say, “Jesus, make no tarrying, but quickly take Thy servant to Thyself.”

Suppose, again, that *you wish to serve God better than you do*, and you say, “Oh! my Master, I cannot serve You here as I would. I would like to be removed to heaven, not that I might leave off serving You, but that I might serve You day and night in Your temple, that I might fly on Your errands, sing Your praises without ceasing, and adore You before Your face with raptures here unknown.”

Then, inasmuch as it is a proper thing for the servant of God to desire to be a better servant, and a more faithful and obedient steward, it must be right and proper for him to long to be conformed unto his Master’s image, that he may serve his Master without imperfection. Oh! methinks, brethren, this should be one of the strongest reasons to make us long to get from this world and gain the promised home.

Again, when you and I have been at the Lord’s table, or in some service where we have had great enjoyment, we have gone home singing in our hearts,

*“Now I have tasted of the grapes,
I sometimes long to go
Where my dear Lord the vineyard keeps,
And all the clusters grow.”*

You have had the earnest and you want to have the whole of the redemption money. You have tasted of Eschol’s grapes, and you want to go and live in the land that flows with milk and honey. If you did not want to go, it would be as strange as it would be wicked.

Oh Jesu! When we have sipped Your love, we have longed to bathe in it. When we have tasted some of heaven’s dewdrops, we have longed to drink of the river of God that is full of water. When we have come up some of the lower knolls of the hill, we have panted to climb the mountain’s summit, and stand where God dwells in the high places of eternity.

*“Hopeless of joy in aught below,
We only long to soar,
The fullness of His love to feel,
And lose His smile no more.*

*“His hand, with all the gentle power,
The sweet constraint of love,
Hath drawn us from this restless world,
And fixed our hearts above.”*

Such earnestness make us pant for heaven and it cannot be wrong if such is the case.

Again, *when you have had near fellowship with Christ, when you have seen His face and leaned your head upon His bosom*, it would indeed be a strange thing if you did not wish to be with Him where He is. I would not believe that a woman loved her husband if she never cared for his company. The

affianced one has seen her betrothed husband but for a moment, and she wishes to see him again, and longs for the time when they shall never part again.

And so the heart that is affianced to Christ longs to be happy, pants for His embrace, and to sit with Him at the marriage supper. If I were to compare Christ with wine, I would say He is such wine that the more you drink, the more you long to drink. If I compare Him to food—though He stops one hunger, He gives us another.

Oh! I think that was a splendid thought of Rutherford's, when, having floated upon the river of Christ's fellowship, he said—"Oh! that my ship would sink and founder in the sea! Oh! that it would go down till forty fathoms of His love should reach over the mast head of my highest thoughts! Oh! to be swallowed up in Christ, to be lost in Him, as the ray is lost in the sun, and the drop in the sea!"

If you did not long for this it would be a shame indeed! If you did not long to see His face it would seem as though you had no love to Him, and would never be conformed in His image.

Brethren, I shall say no more, except to put these few thoughts together. You are a child—he is not a loving child who does not wish to see his father's face. How some of us used to long for the holidays! We used to make a little almanac, and put down the days, and mark them off one by one. Six weeks before the time we would begin to count how many days there were, and every morning we would say there was one day the less before we went home. Either he is a bad child, or he has a bad father, who does not want to go home.

Now, we have got a good and blessed Father, and I hope He has made us His true children, and we want to see His face. We long for the time when we shall no longer be under tutors and governors, but shall come home to enjoy the inheritance.

Brethren, we are also laborers. It were a strange thing if the laborer did not wish to achieve the end of his toils. It were indeed a strange thing if, industrious though he be, he did not prefer the end of his toils to the beginning. It were contrary to nature, and I think contrary to grace, if the husbandman did not long for the harvest, and if he that toils did not desire to receive the reward.

We are not only laborers, brethren, but mariners—mariners who are often tempest-tossed. The sails are rent to ribands, the timbers are creaking, the ship drives along before the blast—who does not want to get into port? Which man among you does not desire to say—"See, the harbor is near. Lo, the red lights." Who among you would not wish to cast anchor now, and say, "I have passed the floods and now I am come to my desired haven"?

Beloved, we are not only mariners but pilgrims—pilgrims of the weary foot, having here no continuing city. Who does not want to get to his home?

***"Home, home, sweet home!
There's no place like home!"***

Heaven is my home and there is no place like heaven! Nay, if you put me in a palace, it is not my home. Nay, though the world were at my feet, it were not my home. Home! home! who will not long for home?

And last, what soldier does not long for victory? He would not shun the fight, but he wishes it were triumphantly over. He does not turn his back, but breasting the foe, he marches on with deadly tramp, with bayonet fixed, keeping the line, till, going over the dead bodies of his enemies, at last he reaches the camp, takes it by storm, and puts the banner of his country where once waved the standard of his foe.

What Roman soldier did not anticipate the triumph, brethren? What Roman cohort did not expect to join in the triumphal procession? What great commander did not aspire to the vote of thanks at the capitol? Let us then pant for home. It is the end of the battle. It is the reward of victory. Let us not long for heaven to escape from the fight, but as a victory that is the result of it.

And now, what do you say? Do you say,

*“To Jesus, the crown of my hope,
My soul is in haste to be gone?”*

Oh! some of you can say it. God grant you your desire. May you find the promised rest when God’s time shall come. And I would say for myself—I would say for you—“Oh! God, in Your own time come quickly. Come quickly. Come, Lord Jesus!”

How different the feelings of those of you who have no heaven hereafter! To you Death is a chasm and there is no hope to bridge it! It is dread without a promise; it is despair without an end! Sinner, pray God that you may not die. Think not of dying, for if your troubles be great here, they will be greater hereafter.

He that commits suicide to get out of trouble leaps into the gulf to escape from the water. Drowns himself to prevent himself from getting wet. Leaps into the fire because he is scorched. Do it not, do it not. He that kills himself goes with his hands red with blood before his Maker, and goes there to his own damnation.

But soul, since you are yet alive, may God teach you to confess your sins and to seek for mercy. Remember it is to be had, for he that believes on the Lord Jesus Christ shall be saved. Trust Christ with your soul. He is worthy of your confidence. He will keep you, and will “present thee faultless before his Father’s presence with exceeding great joy.”

Taken from The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit C. H. Spurgeon Collection. Only necessary changes have been made, such as correcting spelling errors, some punctuation usage, capitalization of deity pronouns, and minimal updating of a few archaic words. The content is unabridged. Additional Bible-based resources are available at www.spurgeongems.org.