

Forty Minutes to Live

Sermon #0937

Study by W. D. Frazee—February 9, 1963

What a great blessing to know the Bible is the Word of God.

"Go to now, ye that say, To day or to morrow we will go into such a city, and continue there a year, and buy and sell, and get gain. Whereas ye know not what shall be on the morrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapour, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away. For that ye ought to say, If the Lord will, we shall live, and do this, or that But now ye rejoice in your boastings: all such rejoicing is evil. Therefore to him that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin" James 4:13-17.

Perhaps you would be interested in hearing this text as Phillips translates it:

"Just a moment now, you who say we are going to such and such a city today or tomorrow. We shall stay there a year doing business, and make a profit. How do you know what will happen even tomorrow? What, after all, is your life? It is like a puff of smoke, visible for a little while, and then dissolving into thin air. Your remarks should be prefaced with, If it is the Lord's will, we shall still be alive and do so and so. As it is, you get a certain pride in yourself in planning your future with such confidence. That sort of pride is all wrong. No doubt you agree with the above in theory. Well, remember that if a man know what is right and fails to do it, his failure is a real sin." James 4:13-17 (Philip's translation).

Nine weeks ago in Greenville, Texas Bill Beths was preaching to his church in the morning, and announced his sermon for the evening. He went away to his home to be alone with God in preparation for that evening's sermon. He came into the pulpit, read his text, and said, "I am going to give you a free translation of it that I heard a number of years ago." With that he slumped. There was a thud, and he fell over dead in the pulpit. His last sermon was the morning sermon, not the evening sermon. The last words his church heard from him was what he gave on the touch of the Master's hand. You might be interested in some things he said in that morning's sermon. Neither he nor the congregation knew that would be his last sermon to them. He said:

"I meet fellows and ask them to give testimonies to what Jesus means to them.

"Well, they say, 'Thirty-five years ago I met the Lord in a meeting.' I did not say anything about meeting the Lord thirty-five years ago. I said, 'What does Jesus mean to you today? What about this week. Is your commitment to Jesus Christ current? Is your experience with Jesus Christ current?'

"I meet people who hang onto prejudices and hates and old mistakes, sins and strife and problems, and a tongue that spreads like fire. I see people hang onto these things as if it were life itself. Surely we must meet the Lord, but we must keep our experiences up to day, ever minute of every day."

He didn't know when his last sermon was. I don't know when my last sermon is. But that is only half of it. You never know when the last sermon you listen to is. It isn't just the preacher who has an uncertain life. Everyone in the congregation, if he dares to face up to it, may at any hour be listening to the last words he will hear. And every worker for God should have that deep in his consciousness, and on the surface of his thinking. I preach as never sure to preach again, as a dying man to dying men.

The urgency of the Gospel is to bring us face to face with the decision today that we would make if we knew it were our last. To some that may seem a somber thought. Certainly it is a sober thought, and sober men should think soberly. It is only the drunken that can afford to fiddle while Rome burns. It is only the crazy and mad who can dance while the Titanic goes down. This world is a sinking ship, and every day one hundred thousand funerals are held, and a hundred thousand are dead that must be buried tomorrow.

What is your life? After all, it is like a puff of smoke, visible for a little while, and then dissolving into thin air. And there are those whose philosophy is, So what? Let's eat and drink and be merry while we live whether it is a day or a year, because we are soon a long time dead.

While men can die in a moment, it is also true that they will wait the judgment in a moment. The passing days and years and centuries are as nothing to the man who sleeps the sleep of death. One moment he is alive, perhaps saying good-by. The next moment he awakes to meet the judge of the earth. You and I know that according to the Bible some people are going to wake up a thousand years later than others. It will be wonderful, if we have gone to sleep, to wake up a thousand years ahead of the great majority.

"Blessed and holy is he that hath part in the first resurrection: on such the second death hath no power"
Revelation 20:6.

The dying thief hanging on the cross by the Savior looked across and saw Jesus in His dying agony, and held out the hands of his soul and said, "Lord,

remember me when Thou comest in Thy kingdom." That was his last prayer, and it was answered. Jesus said, I tell you today, you will be with Me in paradise.

Those were among the last words of Jesus before He breathed His last breath that dark day. In His heart life was but for one thing—to reach souls. Up to the moment of death His heart was burdened for others. God give us that burden to use every day as if it were our last, every hour as if it were the last one we were to have.

That first resurrection when the thief, with many others who have accepted Christ in his life, will respond to the call of the Life-giver, and come forth to immortality is going to be a thrilling day. Very real. Very literal. All who sleep in Jesus will share with Him the joys of eternity. A thousand years later there is going to be another resurrection.

"But the rest of the dead lived not again until the thousand years were finished" Revelation 20:5.

You and I will be there at that closing judgment, either inside the city looking out or outside the city looking in. And between righteous and wicked, saved and lost, there will be a great gulf fixed. There will be no passing over from one to the other. If human emotion is in any way then as it is now, oh, what a longing there will be from some on the outside as they see inside to cross over that gulf. And oh, what a longing there will be on the part of loved ones within the city as they look across the gulf to find some way to cross over and bring back a brother or sister, a father or mother, a husband or wife, a friend or neighbor. But that day is gone. The opportunity has passed. The dreadful reality of the judgment will face men and women as the life record of every son and daughter of Adam is flashed on the screen for the universe to see. Each individual is brought face to face with destiny.

Death can come in a moment, and it may bring a long sleep, but the sleep is unconscious. The awakening is just as quick and sudden. There have been occasions where a man has been in an accident, and was saying a sentence. He lost consciousness with that sentence half said. Hours or days later he awakens in the hospital and finishes that sentence where it was left off.

So the wicked will resume the current of thought in that final resurrection as they meet God in judgment. Death works no change in the character. But when the great judgment comes and men meet the record of life, the most terrible part of the punishment will not be the fire. Believe me, it will be terrible fire. On that point, in our endeavor to get away from the unreasonable terrors of a burning hell, I think sometimes we go far too much to the other extreme. I think sometimes we may leave the impression that about all there is to hell is the fire comes down and you are dead. No. Jesus knew all about what was coming. He warned us again and again.

"And if thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell" Matthew 5:29.

"And if thy hand offend thee, cut it off: it is better for thee to enter into life maimed, than having two hands to go into hell, into the fire that never shall be quenched: And if thy foot offend thee, cut it off: it is better for thee to enter halt into life, than having two feet to be cast into hell, into the fire that never shall be quenched"" Mark 9:43, 45.

No, the fire is not going to be quenched. Men suffer on until every sin has met its penalty, every transgression has met its pain. You say that is a terrible thing. Yes, it is. It is the reality of justice. It is in mercy to the universe that God lets the universe see the sad, terrible, awful results of sin. And it is in mercy to you and me that He tells us about it today. We ought to be facing it in our own lives, and sharing that sense of reality with others. As dying men speaking to dying men, we should warn them of the fate of the lost, and point them to the way home, the way of refuge, the way of safety and security.

A moment ago I suggested the most terrible thing about hell is not the fire. The fire is going to be terrible and far beyond the imagination of men. But I repeat, there is something far more terrible than the fire.

"And I say unto you, That many shall come from the east and west, and shall sit down with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven. But the children of the kingdom shall be cast out into outer darkness: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth" Matthew 8:11-12.

The worse thing about hell is not the fire, it is the separation. Being cast out into the darkness, abandoned by God. A darkness that the lurid flames of hell cannot light up. A soul darkness in the midst of which the lost cry out, and there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth. You and I cannot imagine what it might be, for we have never experienced it. You may have been in a mental agony at some time because of guilt upon your soul, or because of some conflict that your mind was passing through. But you have never been through this, my friends, because God has always been with you. But this is being cast out. This is the fate of the lost.

How willingly God would leave His throne and go down there into the flames and darkness of hell and take it all for even one of those lost ones. How do I know? That is exactly what He did. He left His throne and became incarnated. He took our flesh that He might take our suffering and death. When He went to Calvary upon Him was laid the iniquity of us all. When He went to Calvary He went out into the darkness, abandoned by God. It was that cry in the darkness forced from His lips that showed He was experiencing exactly what we are studying. "Why hast Thou forsaken Me," He cried. He was taking our place.

So I repeat, I know He would do it down there at the last judgment day if it would save a single soul. But the sad and tragic thing we ought to face this morning is that when that final judgment comes, there is not a single one of those lost ones that could be benefitted by another chance. That chance is now. Behold now is the accepted time. Behold now is the day of salvation. When the night falls and the day

ends, when probation's door closes either by the death of an individual, or by the final withdrawal of mercy, it is because even God could do no more.

A number of years ago I was visiting a friend of mine in a distant city. We spent several days together. The last evening of my stay we were out on a little trip together. As we drove along toward his home my heart was drawn out to talk to them. As we drove into the garage I asked them if we could just sit there and talk. I had something on my heart. I said, "I love you folks very much. I have know you for many years. One of these days one or the other of you is going to have to stand by the sick bed and see the other one deep in illness or pain, and perhaps stand by the coffin. The way you are getting along at the present time it would be a terrible tragedy, because you would stand there and weep and mourn over the way you have talked to each other. While life lingers get close to God and each other."

It was not too many years after that before what I talked about took place. Thankfully it did not bring death, but it brought earnest thinking.

Husbands, think about your wives. Wives, think about your husbands. If you had to attend a funeral tomorrow is there anything you would wish you had said that you hadn't said? Is there anything you have said you would wish you had not said? We need to think through both ways. I have been called to preach many a funeral. Sometimes when I see loved ones weeping and wailing and bringing the flowers, and kissing the dead one that knows nothing of the love expressed, I wonder in my soul how much of it is a vain attempt to atone for the failures while life lasts.

I say to you, as our texts suggests we are dealing with the uncertainty of life. Whatever you would have wished, make it that way now. You can.

Life is too brief between the budding and fading leaf,
Between the sowing and ripened sheath for hate and strife;
We have no time for malice and for grief,
Therefore, with love make beautiful the deed, fast speeds the night.

Yes, it is coming fast. And all those petty excuses for petty strife will be like worse than nothing when you stand at the bedside of the dying, or the coffin of the dead.

Too many times the things that cause strife are merely clipped off. But you can't deal that way with Johnson grass and expect anything to happen. You know what happens when you cut off that weed. It just comes up again. Paul suggests we need to get down into the roots, lest any root of bitterness trouble you. Whether it be in the family or the church or the neighborhood, we need to get rid of those hidden things, those festering things, which spread toxin all through the life.

In other words, we need to do today what we would do if we knew that today was our last. Obviously, today may be our last. But there is a greater reason. Everything we would do today if today were our last is the thing to do if tomorrow may still be ours. It can be sweeter and richer and better in every way if we yield today to God to carry out His full plan in our lives.

I remember hearing an experience that took place on an ocean liner that was returning from Australia to the United States. Among the passengers was a miner who had been out there and made a fortune. He was carrying the gold back with him. Part of it he had in a belt he could wear around his body.

As they neared the shore, the vessel was wrecked by a storm. As it was going down men were thinking fast how to save their lives. This man wanted to save his gold. He took that belt with the gold and strapped it around him, and filled his hands with nuggets. But as the remaining moments of that vessel being afloat were fast ticking away, he stood there and made a decision. He took those nuggets of gold and threw them down. He took off that belt filled with gold and threw it down. He took three little oranges that were there, plunged off into the briny deep and made his way to the shore.

There comes a time when life is worth more than gold. That man knew that gold was heavy and would help him to drown instead of helping him to swim. He knew that when he got to shore there was nothing about that gold that he could either eat or drink. But he knew those three little oranges were not heavy enough to make him sink, and that they had something in them that might prolong his life if it were hours or days before he found food or water.

You say he made a wise choice. Yes, for what shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul? How many are weighted down by the gold that they have, or more often by the gold they think they have, lost in the struggle.

There is a famous painting of a man on a horse, riding fast along a path chasing a phantom. That phantom is beckoning him on, holding before him the prospect of fame and wealth. In the picture he is trampling over the bodies of men, women, and children with his horse. So intent is he on that phantom and what it holds out that he cares not for the bodies of those he is crushing, and neither does he see that just ahead is a precipice with a bridge that does not reach the other side. That picture leaves us just before the plunge. That is the life most men are living. Oh, I beseech you in Jesus' name, let us face up to the realities of life, and do today what we would do today if we knew we were on the brink of the precipice.

There is another side to this thing that I want you to think of. It may not be your life that is ending today, but it may be that somebody you are brought into contact with may be living his last hours. Even if your life lingers on, what are you going to do with your last opportunity to meet his last opportunity.

I was shocked as I read about an experience out in the great state penitentiary out in California. A man had killed two women in a drunken spree, and now had to meet justice. He was about to be executed. The chaplain spent the last forty minutes with this man before he walked to his execution.

What do you suppose the chaplain talked with him about? You would say he read the Bible to him. No, he didn't. He must have talked with him about his soul? No, he didn't. The chaplain talked with him about education, art, and sports. The last forty minutes of that man's life was spent talking with a chaplain about the common, everyday things of life.

You say that is terrible. What was the matter with that chaplain? But I can tell you that such a man does not know God. His philosophy of life must be a pagan philosophy. Any man who claims to speak for God who goes into a death cell and spends the last forty minutes of that man's life talking about sports, if you please, doesn't know my God.

What would you have said if you had spent those forty minutes with that man? Do you have something to tell in forty minutes of how to find the way to God instead of the way to hell? But I ask a question far more pertinent. What are you doing with the opportunities to spend with some people their last opportunity to be with you and your last opportunity to be with them.

You say, I didn't know I had any such opportunities.

Precisely. That's the problem. You do not know when that opportunity is.

When Norman Burpee went out to his work on October morning, nobody knew that was his last breakfast. Those who sat with him at worship didn't know that was the last time that young man would hear the Bible read or join in a song of praise in the hour of worship. But before the clock struck twelve that young man was lying down here in a field pinned under the tractor, injured in such a way that when help reached him he was already dead.

You and I never know when we talk with people when the last hour is. You and I never know when the last forty minutes of a man's life is. But we are spending with somebody from time to time the last opportunity we will have.

This is rather somber, gloomy. I agree it is very sober. It is sober to me as I think about it. Indeed, I preach as never sure to preach again as a dying man to dying men. But I am so glad that dying Man on the cross took another dying man with Him into the fold of God in those closing moments of life. And what Jesus in His agony did in rescuing a soul from the clutches of sin and Satan you and I can do day by day if we are watching for the opportunity, listening for the Spirit's call.

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