



LIFE'S DEAD ENDS

Preached by

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"I am the door; if any one enters by me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture."

John 10:9

"I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly."

John 10:10

Roads are marked much better than in the past. Yet even today we occasionally get on a road that is a "dead end." How exasperating it is to discover that the road, or the street down which you are driving, goes no place. About once a year my father used to hire a team at a livery stable in order to take us for a ride in the country. He liked to take back roads much to the exasperation of my mother. She would always want to know where we were going. I can hear my father's standard reply, "If you follow the telephone poles you are sure to come out somewhere." How well I remember the many times we would follow the telephone poles right up into a farmer's barnyard. There the road ended! It seems that in Albany it is standard practice to fail to mark, on the city maps, the streets that have dead ends. Perhaps it is planned to have these streets go all the way through, but today you suddenly find that you cannot get through.

This summer I read a book by R. S. Clemmons on Adult Education and was fascinated by this sentence: "In middle life we face life's dead ends." The author then goes on to describe middle age as a time of disillusionment. As young people we have great dreams. We plan all of the things we are going to do. Then comes the awful let-down when one day we realize that our dreams are not going to be realized. The boy, who entered the bank with his eye on the president's chair, discovers that he will never sit in it, but must remain in a subordinate position all his life. The salesman, who dreamed he would head

the company, sees other younger men promoted over his head and realizes that he will always remain a salesman. The teacher, who saw himself as the head of the school, or at least at the head of his department, finally has to admit that he has gone as far as he can. The woman, who has pictured her dream house, resigns herself to live in a rented flat. The father and mother, who have longed for the ideal family life, face the reality of unappreciative or, at least, unattentive children. It would seem that we are at a dead end.

Religion has talked about crooked roads, wide roads, narrow roads, right roads, and wrong roads, but the great problem is the problem of the road that goes no place - it is the problem of the dead end. There is a legend that Peter was fleeing from Rome just before he suffered martyrdom. As he was going out of the city he met Christ coming toward the city. Christ asked him the famous question: "Quo Vadis?" I remember that we had a book by that name on our book shelves when I was a boy. That title attracted me but no one at home knew any Latin and it was much later that I learned what it meant. Whither goest thou? After hearing that question, Peter is supposed to have turned around and to have gone back to Rome to his death. "Quo Vadis?" Every day ask yourself that question: Where am I going? Does this road lead anywhere? Am I on one of life's dead ends?

There are two groups of people to which I want to speak this morning. First, there are many in the congregation who are just starting out in life. It is possible for you to avoid life's dead ends. You should scrutinize very carefully every road you take. Through the centuries it has been shown time and again that some roads lead nowhere and mankind has put up signs that can save you endless time. There is a vast difference between the right for you to live your own life and the wisdom of following the best experience of the ages. Someone has said that the greatest fall-

acy of the twentieth century is the belief that the ancients were not too bright! No one wishes to deny to you the right to choose your own road, but you must determine whether you wish to sacrifice the appearance of freedom in the interest of time. Quicker than you realize time runs out.

This is examination time for many of you. Soon you will be writing in those blue books. Do they still use blue books? (After this sermon was preached a member of the faculty of State College brought me a collection of examination books that rivalled the rainbow). You go into an examination, sharpen your pencil, open your blue book, and then take a look at the questions. Then you look at the clock. There seems to be so much time. You work along and suddenly, to your horror, you discover that it is time to turn in your book and you have not finished. In every area of life time runs out on us with this same suddenness. We once lived almost under the shadow of Greylock Mountain in the Berkshires. We were always going to climb it. One day we actually got ready to start but it rained and we told ourselves that it was no day to climb a mountain. We moved away before we climbed it. You say that now there is a road up Greylock and one can drive to the top in his car. But that is no way to go up a mountain! There comes the day in every person's life when he can say, "So much to do, so little done." How many times I have heard parents say the tragic words, "I was so busy, I was always going to do things with my family, but suddenly they were grown and gone." You might as well save yourselves some time by using the best experience so that you will avoid dead ends.

On the other hand you must be sure that you are getting your directions from someone who really knows. This is where your freedom of choice comes in and this is one of the most difficult decisions you will ever have to make. Once a year I have to go to a meeting at Methodist Hospital in Brooklyn. I go to New York

by train and then take the subway over to Brooklyn. Each year I think I know which train to take and I think I know how much time to allow, but I always get lost and arrive late. There are so many subways in New York. Added to this is the fact that most New Yorkers travel one route all their lives and know nothing about the rest of their city. They are lost when they get off that route. Finally, I apparently ask someone who knows the route and I have to go back a long distance and start all over again and I am late again for my meeting. If you would avoid life's dead ends ask someone who knows the roads of life.

So I would urge you who are young to commit your lives to Christ and to profit by His teachings for His Way does not lead to a dead end. We know what some of these dead ends are. Fear and worry. Jesus said, "Be not anxious." God will take care of you. Every day I see people who refuse to believe that. I visit these people in hospitals, I talk with them in my office. I witness their trouble in their homes. Resentment and hate is a dead end. Through the ages people who have followed this way have ended up nowhere. Undisciplined living is a dead end. Jealousy, self-centeredness, double-mindedness - you will find these ways marked in your Bible and one who is truly Christian will not follow these ways.

But there is another group here this morning and I want to talk with you. You are the people who are already at the end - the dead end. You would not listen and here you are. What can Christianity say to you or what can Christianity offer you? First, it is necessary for you to get going in the other direction. Maybe you can turn around, maybe you will just have to back up to the place where you can get on a main road. It must be your decision not to stay where you are. Religion may give you the realization of your predicament. Religion may open your eyes to your situation. But no one except yourself can get you started in another direction. Some people try to

drive on and get stuck, others become discouraged and just sit, a glorious few get going. Do you remember the story of the Prodigal Son. The Bible says, "When he came to himself he said..." And then he proceeds to do the things that were necessary to get himself back to his father's house.

Second, you can be sure that when you start God will guide you. When I lived in Amsterdam there was a street named Railroad Street and it was a one-way street. You turned from Main Street into Railroad if you followed the signs. But once in a while someone would come up Railroad Street and try to get out into Main Street. There was a big, rough, and rather unsympathetic policeman who directed traffic right by that street. He lacked understanding as well as sympathy. For example, he once stopped a car, gave the driver a comprehensive statement on the traffic laws and then said, "Where do you come from?" The driver answered, "Boston." With an uncomprehending stare our man in blue retorted, "Then what are you doing with a Massachusetts license plate on your car?" Well, this was the man who greeted you as you came up this one-way street the wrong way. He would usually wait until the driver got exasperated and blew his horn. Then he would stomp over to the car, deliver his lecture and say, "Back up!" How many times I have seen people trying to back all the way down that street and around the curve at the end without help from anyone. You understand, I am sure, when I say that this is unnecessary for a Christian. Not only will God guide you - you simply cannot find the way alone.

One reason why you are at a dead-end is that you have been convinced that you were self-sufficient. You knew that you could take care of yourself. You needed help from no one. American culture has bred this into us. We think of the pioneer spirit as the spirit of independence, the spirit that asks no odds from anyone. Yet even here we failed to understand

the true pioneer. For the pioneer was willing and needed the help of others. There were burdens that he alone could carry, but there were many other ways which demanded that he receive willingly the help of his fellows. There are times in our lives when we can be too independent. Sometimes it is blessed to receive, yes, it is necessary to receive.

In the third place, it is important for us to realize that any road is a dead-end that does not have meaning. Could it be that you need to be shown how to make your life more fruitful? Could it be that you have failed to see a turn which leads past what you think is the dead end? Just the other day I was on a street in Albany and said to myself, "I am at a dead-end." But I went just a little further and after just a bit of rough road I came through. Essentially salvation consists in opening the way to new life. Because of the terrible time he had Diaz named the southern tip of Africa, "The Cape of Storms." As time went on and as men began to see the importance of the route which was opened around the tip of the continent the name was changed from "The Cape of Storms" to "The Cape of Good Hope." This could happen in your life. What seems to be the Cape of Storms today may become the Cape of Good Hope for you. I do not mean that you can do this yourself. The good news which I have is that God will do this with you. Our concern for ourselves is changed to reliance upon God's love and grace. Perhaps your dreams need to be revised. Perhaps your goals were ill conceived. Perhaps you should seek to discover what God's will is for your life.

A few Sundays ago we talked about Christ as the door to life. It was New Year's and we were thinking about standing on the threshold of a new experience as well as a New Year. We said that it made a great deal of difference, sometimes, what door you used. There are times when your whole impression of a building is changed by the entrance you use. You will re-

member that I spoke of, our church and pointed out the various entrances which are possible. If we come in one door we might think we were entering a hotel because we should walk straight into the kitchen. Another entrance leads us into a hallway, another brings us to the chapel, still another causes us to walk into the sanctuary and straight to the Cross. That Sunday I said that our whole year could be conditioned by the entrance we used.

In this same passage in the tenth chapter of John, Jesus says, "... if any one enters by me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture." Phillips translates this last phrase, "He will be safe and sound; he can come in and out and find his food." I do not think I am stretching this too far to see here the possibility of a free life that has movement and that is not a dead-end. Later in the same chapter Jesus says, "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." Certainly that does not suggest a dead end. To have this sort of life does not mean that we shall get everything we want. It does not mean that people will always do what we want them to do. It does indicate that we shall find significance in the life we are living. We shall wake up in the morning eager for the day ahead. We shall go to bed at night, not satisfied with our accomplishments, and yet feeling that the day has had meaning and is not wasted. We shall look to the future with hope, and with expectation; for we shall feel that our life is moving toward something that counts.