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DON'T WASTE

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YOUR LIFE.

John Piper

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Don't Waste Your Life (Group Study Edition)

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CHAPTER 4

MAGNIFYING CHRIST THROUGH PAIN AND DEATH

Living to magnify Christ is costly. This is not surprising. He was crucified. He was treated like a devil. And he calls us to follow him. “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” (Mark 8:34). He says it will probably not go better for us than for him. “If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul,¹ how much more will they malign those of his household” (Matthew 10:25).

But suffering with Jesus on the Calvary road of love is not merely the *result* of magnifying Christ; it is also the *means*. He is made supreme when we are so satisfied in him that we can “let goods and kindred go, this mortal life also” and suffer for the sake of love. His beauty shines most brightly when treasured above health and wealth and life itself. Jesus knew this. He knew that suffering (whether small discomforts or dreadful torture) would be the path in this age for making him most visibly supreme. That is why he calls us to this. He loves us. And love does not mean making much of us or making life easy. It

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means making us able to enjoy making much of him forever—no matter what it costs.

WE BOAST BEST IN THE CROSS WHEN WE BEAR IT

And it costs us dearly. The normal Christian life is one that boasts only in the cross—the blazing center of God's glory—and does it while bearing the cross. "Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:27). Bearing the cross is the means by which we are increasingly liberated to boast in the cross. Suffering is God's design in this sin-soaked world (Romans 8:20). It portrays sin's horror for the world to see. It punishes sin's guilt for those who do not believe in Christ. It breaks sin's power for those who take up their cross and follow Jesus. And because sin is the belittling of the all-satisfying glory of God, the suffering that breaks its power is a severe mercy.

Whatever makes us more and more able to enjoy making much of God is a mercy. For there is no greater joy than joy in the greatness of God. And if we must suffer to see this and savor it most deeply, then suffering is a mercy. And Christ's call to take up our cross and join him on the Calvary road is love.

BONHOEFFER'S RADICAL BOOK FOR MY GENERATION

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a gift to my generation of students. I pray that his costly message will be rediscovered in each generation. Even though he died at the age of thirty-nine, his life was not wasted. His life and death continue to speak with power. He was hanged in the concentration camp at Flossenbürg, Germany, on April 9, 1945. He had been a pastor and teacher and leader of a small training school for the confessing church and had participated in the Protestant resistance movement against the Nazis.

The book that set fire to the faith of thousands in my generation was called *The Cost of Discipleship*. I read it on Christmas break during my senior year in college. Probably the most famous and life-shaping sentence in the book was, “The cross is not the terrible end to an otherwise God-fearing and happy life, but it meets us at the beginning of our communion with Christ. When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.”² Fleeing from death is the shortest path to a wasted life.

Bonhoeffer’s book was a massive indictment of the “cheap grace” that he saw in the Christian Church on both sides of the Atlantic. He believed in justification by grace through faith. But he did not believe that the faith that justifies could ever leave people unchanged by the radical Christ they claim to believe. That was a cheap response to the Gospel. “The only man,” he said, “who has the right to say that he is justified by grace alone is the man who has left all to follow Christ.”³

THE CHRIST-EXALTING PARADOXES OF LIFE

A life devoted to making much of Christ is costly. And the cost is both a consequence and a means of making much of him. If we do not embrace the path of joy-laden, painful love, we will waste our lives. If we do not learn with Paul the Christ-exalting paradoxes of life, we will squander our days pursuing bubbles that burst. He lived “as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, yet possessing everything” (2 Corinthians 6:10). The Calvary road is costly and painful, but it is not joyless.

When we embrace with joy the cost of following Christ, his worth will shine in the world. The cost itself will become a means of making Christ look great. The apostle Paul had one great passion in life. We have seen him say it several ways: to know nothing but Christ and him crucified (1 Corinthians 2:2); to boast only in the cross (Galatians 6:14).

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PAUL'S SINGLE PASSION IN LIFE AND DEATH

He talked about his great passion another way that shows us how the cost of making much of Christ is also the means. He said to the Philippian church, “It is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (Philippians 1:20-21). Here the question is raised and answered: How do you honor Christ by death? How can the cost of losing everything in this world be a means of making much of Jesus? Let’s listen carefully to Paul. Christ has called us live for his glory and to die for his glory. If we know how to die well, we will know how to live well. This text shows both.

Again we see Paul’s single passion in life—“that . . . Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death.” If Christ is not made much of in our lives, they are wasted. We exist to make him appear in the world as what he really is—magnificent. If our life and death do not show the worth and wonder of Jesus, they are wasted. This is why Paul said that his aim in life and death was “that . . . Christ . . . be honored.”

OUR SHAME AND OUR TREASURE

Notice the unusual way he makes this clear in verse 20: “It is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all *ashamed*.” Stop here just a moment. Shame is that horrible feeling of guilt or failure when you don’t measure up before people whose approval you want very much. It’s what the little child feels in the Christmas program when he forgets his lines, and the tears well up, and the silence seems eternal, and the other kids snicker brutally. I remember these horrible times. Or shame is what a president feels when the secret tapes are finally played, and the

foul language and all the deceit emerges, and he stands disgraced and guilty before the people.

What then is the opposite of shame? It's when the child remembers the lines and hears the applause. It's when the president governs well and is reelected. The opposite of being shamed is being honored. Yes, usually. But Paul was a very unusual person. And Christians ought to be very unusual people. For Paul, the opposite of being shamed was not *his* being honored, but *Christ's* being honored through him. "It is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed, but that . . . Christ will be honored in my body."

What you love determines what you feel shame about. If you love for men to make much of you, you will feel shame when they don't. But if you love for men to make much of Christ, then you will feel shame if he is belittled on your account. And Paul loved Christ more than he loved anything or anyone. "Whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord" (Philippians 3:7-8).

Whenever something is of tremendous value to you, and you cherish its beauty or power or uniqueness, you want to draw others' attention to it and waken in them the same joy. That is why Paul's all-consuming goal in life was for Christ to be magnified. Christ was of infinite value to Paul, and so Paul longed for others to see and savor this value. That is what it means to magnify Christ—to show the magnitude of his value.

DOESN'T DEATH MAKE MAGNIFYING GOD IMPOSSIBLE?

But what if someone objected to Paul at this point and said, "Paul, we see how valuable Christ is to you now—how you enjoy his fellowship, how he gives you a fruitful ministry and delivers your life from spiritual shipwreck. But what will all that mean in the hour of death? Where is the value of Christ then?"

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If being a Christian costs you your life, how will that help you make much of Christ? Won't that rob you of the very life that can magnify him?"

So Paul adds at the end of verse 20 that his eager expectation is that "Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life *or by death*." Death is a threat to the degree that it frustrates your main goals. Death is fearful to the degree that it threatens to rob you of what you treasure most. But Paul treasured Christ most, and his goal was to magnify Christ. And he saw death not as a frustration of that goal but as an occasion for its fulfillment.

Life and death! They seem like complete opposites—at great enmity with each other. But for Paul—and for all who share his faith—there is a unity, because the same great passion is fulfilled in both—namely, that Christ be magnified in this body—our bodies—whether by life or by death.

In Philippians 1:21, Paul gives a packed summary statement explaining how he is so hopeful that Christ will be magnified in his living and in his dying: "For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain." Then in verses 22-26 Paul explains both halves of this statement so we can see in more detail how Christ is magnified by life and by death.

Let's take these one at a time.

PAUL'S DISCOVERY OF PETER'S SECRET

First, "For me . . . to die is gain." I wonder if Paul in his conversations with Peter in Jerusalem had talked about dying? I wonder if Peter told him about that experience recorded in John 21 when Jesus, after his resurrection, said to Peter, "When you were young, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted, but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go" (John 21:18). Then John adds this explanation in his Gospel: "This [Jesus] said to show *by*

what kind of death [Peter] was to glorify God” (John 21:19). God had decreed that Peter would make God look great in his dying. I don’t doubt that when Peter and Paul gave each other the right hand of fellowship, the manly grip of their hands and the meeting of their eyes communicated this one common passion: to magnify Christ crucified—the blazing center of the glory of God—even in death.

But how are we to magnify Christ in death? Or to put it another way: How can we die so that in our dying the surpassing value of Christ, the magnitude of his worth, becomes visible? Paul’s answer here in Philippians 1 is found first in the connection between verse 20 and verse 21. These verses are connected by the word “for” or “because.” Boil it down to the words about death: “My eager expectation is that Christ be honored in my body by death, for to me to die is gain.” In other words, if you experience death as gain, you magnify Christ in death.

HOW IS DYING GAIN?

Why is that? Verse 23 shows why dying is gain for Paul: “My desire is to depart [that is, to die] and be with Christ, for that is far better.” That is what death does: It takes us into more intimacy with Christ. We depart, and we are with Christ, and that, Paul says, is gain. And when you experience death this way, Paul says, you exalt Christ. Experiencing Christ as gain in your dying magnifies Christ. It is “far better” than living here.

Really? Better than all the friends at school? Better than falling in love? Better than hugging your children? Better than professional success? Better than retirement and grandchildren? Yes. A thousand times better. When I preached my candidating sermon for the pastoral position I hold now, this passage of Scripture was my text. That was January 27, 1980. I wanted to show the people from Scripture the single, all-embracing pas-

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sion of my life—to magnify Christ in all things whether by life or death.

At this point in the message, the question arose: Is death better than life? Is departing to be with Christ better than staying here? I said to them:

If I didn't believe that, how could I dare to aspire to the role of pastor—anywhere—not to mention at Bethlehem Baptist Church where 108 members are over 80 years old and another 171 over 65? But I do believe it, and say to every gray-haired believer in this church, with all the authority of Christ's apostle, the best is yet to come! And I don't mean a fat pension and a luxury condominium. I mean Christ.

I averaged one funeral every three weeks for the first year and a half of my ministry. And many more after that. It was a sobering and sweetening season for a young pastor. It knit my heart together with many families as we bade *farewell* to friend after friend. And *faring well* is exactly what we believed they did.

IF WE LEARN TO DIE WELL, WE WILL LIVE WELL

What we have learned from Philippians 1 so far is that death (whether by natural causes or by persecution) is a means of making much of Christ. If we suffer or die on the Calvary road of obedience with Christ, the cost of following him is not just a *result* of making much of him, but a *means*. Death makes visible where our treasure is. The way we die reveals the worth of Christ in our hearts. Christ is magnified in my death when I am satisfied with him in my dying—when I experience death as gain because I gain him. Or to say it another way: The essence of praising Christ is prizing Christ. Christ will be praised in my death, if in my death he is prized above life.

Jesus said, “Whoever loves father or mother more than me

is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me” (Matthew 10:37). When the hour comes for everything to be taken from us but Christ, we will magnify him by saying, “In him I have everything and more. To die is gain.”

If we learn to die like this, we will be ready to live. And if we don’t, we will waste our lives. Most of us have some years to live before we go to be with Christ. Even the oldest among us must ask the question, “If we love Christ, how can he be magnified in my behavior this afternoon, this evening, this week?” So we turn to the other half of Philippians 1:21: “To me to live is Christ.”

TO LIVE IS CHRIST

What does Paul mean: “To live is Christ”? He begins his explanation in verse 22: “If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me.” But that is a strange explanation: “To live is Christ” becomes “To live is fruitful labor for me.” What is the fruit that comes from Paul’s work? And how is “to live . . . Christ”? The answers come in verses 24-26.

In verse 22 Paul has said, “If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell.” Now in verse 24 he says, “To remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account.” So evidently the fruit that Paul’s life produces is not only for himself but is very needful for the sake of the Philippian believers. So the phrase, “For me to live is Christ” now becomes “For me to live is to produce fruit that you all need very much.” Then verse 25 tells us what this fruit is that the church needs and that Paul’s life will produce: “I know that I will remain and continue with you all, for your progress and joy in the faith.” So we can see Paul gradually clarifying what he means by “For me to live is Christ.”

First, it means: My life is dedicated to producing fruit (verse 22). Second, it means: My life is devoted to producing a fruit

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that is very necessary for you to have (verse 24). Third, it means: My life is devoted to increasing your faith and helping it to overflow with joy (verse 25).

Now the crucial question is: Why in Paul's mind is it one and the same thing to say on the one hand, "For me to live is Christ," and to say on the other hand, "My life is devoted to your progress and joy in the faith"? I think those two statements are virtually synonymous for Paul in this context.

I LIVE FOR YOUR PROGRESS AND JOY IN FAITH

To see this we need a definition of faith. Ordinarily faith would mean trust or confidence you put in someone who has given good evidence of his reliability and willingness and ability to provide what you need. But when Jesus Christ is the object of faith there is a twist. He himself is what we need. If we only trust Christ to give us gifts and not himself as the all-satisfying gift, then we do not trust him in a way that honors him as our treasure. We simply honor the gifts. *They* are what we really want, not him. So biblical faith in Jesus must mean that we trust him to give us what we need most—namely, himself. That means that faith itself must include at its essence a treasuring of Christ above all things.

Now we are in a position to see why Paul's two aims for his life are in fact one. According to verse 20, his aim is *to magnify Christ in life*; and according to verse 25, his aim is *to promote the progress and joy in the Philippians' faith*. That is why he believes God might let him live. This would be his life: to labor for their "progress and joy in the faith."

But now we have seen that faith is essentially treasuring Christ. The word "joy" in verse 25 ("for your . . . joy in the faith") signals that this treasuring is a joyful treasuring. And if Christ is joyfully treasured, he is magnified. That is the single,

all-embracing passion of Paul's life. In other words, Paul is saying, "My life is devoted to producing in you that one great experience of the heart by which Christ is magnified—namely, being satisfied in him, joyfully treasuring him above all else. That's what I mean when I say, 'For me to live is Christ.' That is, for me to live is your Christ-magnifying faith."

THE CHRISTIAN LIFE IS MANY DEATHS

It would be a great mistake at this point if we separated the way death honors Christ from the way life honors Christ. The reason this would be a mistake is that the life of a Christian includes many deaths. Paul said, "I die every day!" (1 Corinthians 15:31). Jesus said, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross *daily* and follow me" (Luke 9:23). Daily Christian living is daily Christian dying. The dying I have in mind is the dying of comfort and security and reputation and health and family and friends and wealth and homeland. These may be taken from us at any time in the path of Christ-exalting obedience. To die daily the way Paul did, and to take up our cross daily the way Jesus commanded, is to embrace this life of loss for Christ's sake and count it gain.

In other words, the way we honor Christ in death is to treasure Jesus above the gift of life, and the way we honor Christ in life is to treasure Jesus above life's gifts. This is why Paul used the same word "gain" in relation to Christ at death and in relation to Christ in life. Not only did he say, "To die is *gain*," but he also said, "Whatever *gain* I had [in life!], I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may *gain* Christ" (Philippians 3:7-8).

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PAIN AND PLEASURE AS WAYS TO MAKE MUCH OF CHRIST

All of life for the Christian is meant to magnify Christ. This can happen through pleasure, and it can happen through pain. We are focusing here on the pain. The reason for this is not that a thousand pleasant things don't come our way as Christians. Nor is it that we should not enjoy them as gifts of God and glorify him with thanksgiving. We should. That is what the Bible teaches. "Everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer" (1 Timothy 4:4-5). And it is true that "The one who offers thanksgiving as his sacrifice glorifies me" (Psalm 50:23).

The reason I don't stress this is that we are spring-loaded to see the pleasant side of truth. We are fallen, comfort-loving creatures. We are always on the lookout for ways to justify our self-protecting, self-securing, self-pleasing ways of life. I know this about myself. And I am glad that this is not all bad. God "richly supplies us with everything to enjoy" (1 Timothy 6:17).

HOW WE HANDLE LOSS SHOWS WHO OUR TREASURE IS

But what I know even more surely is that the greatest joy in God comes from giving his gifts away, not in hoarding them for ourselves. It is good to work and have. It is better to work and have in order to give. God's glory shines more brightly when he satisfies us in times of loss than when he provides for us in times of plenty. The health, wealth, and prosperity "gospel" swallows up the beauty of Christ in the beauty of his gifts and turns the gifts into idols. The world is not impressed when Christians get rich and say thanks to God. They are impressed when God is

so satisfying that we give our riches away for Christ's sake and count it gain.

No one ever said that they learned their deepest lessons of life, or had their sweetest encounters with God, on the sunny days. People go deep with God when the drought comes. That is the way God designed it. Christ aims to be magnified in life most clearly by the way we experience him in our losses. Paul is our example: "We were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead" (2 Corinthians 1:8-9). The design of Paul's suffering was to make radically clear for his own soul, and for ours, that God and God alone is the only treasure who lasts. When everything in life is stripped away except God, and we trust him more because of it, this is gain, and he is glorified.

WASTING LIFE BY RUNNING FROM PAIN

This design for the Christian life is so crucial that we should open our eyes to see how extensively the Bible speaks about it. Untold numbers of professing Christians waste their lives trying to escape the cost of love. They do not see that it is always worth it. There is more of God's glory to be seen and savored through suffering than through self-serving escape. Paul puts it like this: "Though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison" (2 Corinthians 4:16-17). "Momentary" refers to a lifetime in comparison with eternity. "Slight" refers to suffering and death compared to the weight of everlasting joy in the presence of God. This is what we gain if hold fast to Christ. This is what we waste if we don't.

God designs that tribulations intensify our hope for the

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glory of God. Paul says in Romans 5:2 that we have access by faith into grace and “rejoice in hope of the glory of God.” Then he tells us in the next two verses how that hope is preserved and sweetened: “More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces *hope*” (verses 3-4). This hope that grows and deepens and satisfies through suffering is the hope of verse 2, the “hope of the glory of God.” We were made to see and savor this glory. And God, in love, will use whatever trials are necessary to intensify our savoring of his glory.

THERE IS A DIFFERENCE BETWEEN SACRIFICE AND SUICIDE

It is not wrong to pray for healing, to take medicine, to put locks on your doors, to flee unruly mobs. The Bible does not call for suicide. It is presumption to jump off the temple while quoting Scripture promises that God will catch you. God finally decides whether and when the path of obedience will lead to suffering. Satan has his place. He loves to make us miserable and tries to destroy our faith. But God is sovereign over Satan, and all of Satan’s aims to destroy the saints are designed by God for the good of his people and the glory of his name.

So it is right to flee, and it is right to stay. One may escape, and one may endure hardship. When to flee and when to stay is an agonizing question for many missionaries and urban workers and Christians in secular workplaces with great opportunity and great conflict. One person who thought more about it than most of us was John Bunyan, the pastor who spent twelve years in prison and wrote *Pilgrim’s Progress*. He could have been released from prison if he had agreed not to preach. His wife and children needed him. One of his daughters was blind. It was an agonizing decision. “The parting with my wife and poor

children hath often been to me in this place as the pulling of the Flesh from my bones.”⁴

Here is what he wrote about the Christian’s freedom to stay or flee from danger.

May we try to escape? Thou mayest do in this as it is in thy heart. If it is in thy heart to fly, fly: if it be in thy heart to stand, stand. Any thing but a denial of the truth. He that flies, has warrant to do so; he that stands, has warrant to do so. Yea, the same man may both fly and stand, as the call and working of God with his heart may be. Moses fled, Exodus 2:15; Moses stood, Hebrews 11:27. David fled, 1 Samuel 19:12; David stood, 1 Samuel 24:8. Jeremiah fled, Jeremiah 37:11-12; Jeremiah stood, Jeremiah 38:17. Christ withdrew himself, Luke 9:10; Christ stood, John 18:1-8. Paul fled, 2 Corinthians 11:33; Paul stood, Act 20:22-23. . . .

There are few rules in this case. The man himself is best able to judge concerning his present strength, and what weight this or that argument has upon his heart to stand or fly. . . . Do not fly out of a slavish fear, but rather because flying is an ordinance of God, opening a door for the escape of some, which door is opened by God’s providence, and the escape countenanced by God’s Word. Matthew 10:23. . . . If, therefore, when thou hast fled, thou art taken, be not offended at God or man: not at God, for thou art his servant, thy life and thy all are his; not at man, for he is but God’s rod, and is ordained, in this, to do thee good. Hast thou escaped? Laugh. Art thou taken? Laugh. I mean, be pleased which way soever things shall go, for that the scales are still in God’s hand.⁵

THE PROMISE AND DESIGN OF GOD

But when all is said and done, the *promise* and *design* of God for people who do not waste their lives is clear. “All who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Timothy

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3:12). And when persecution pauses, the groanings of this age remain. “We ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies” (Romans 8:23). We will groan one way or the other. As Paul said, “sorrowful, yet always rejoicing” (2 Corinthians 6:10).

That is the promise. Here’s the design. Jesus said to Paul in pain—and to all of us who treasure *him* more than pain-free living—“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Corinthians 12:8). Many professing Christians would get angry at this design. They might even scream, “I don’t care about your power being perfected! I am in pain! If you love me, get me out of this!” That was not Paul’s response. Paul had learned what love is. Love is not Christ’s making much of us or making life easy. Love is doing what he must do, at great cost to himself (and often to us), to enable us to enjoy making much of him forever. So Paul responds to Christ’s design, “Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Corinthians 12:9-10).

ALL LASTING JOY IS ON THE CALVARY ROAD

What a tragic waste when people turn away from the Calvary road of love and suffering. All the riches of the glory of God in Christ are on that road. All the sweetest fellowship with Jesus is there. All the treasures of assurance. All the ecstasies of joy. All the clearest sightings of eternity. All the noblest camaraderie. All the humblest affections. All the most tender acts of forgiving kindness. All the deepest discoveries of God’s Word. All the most earnest prayers. They are all on the Calvary road where Jesus walks with his people. Take up your cross and follow

Jesus. On this road, and this road alone, life is Christ and death is gain. Life on every other road is wasted.

NOTES

- 1 In the time of Christ this was the name for the prince of demons—that is, Satan or the devil.
- 2 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 99.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 55.
- 4 John Bunyan, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* (Hertfordshire, England: Evangelical Press, 1978), 123.
- 5 John Bunyan, *Seasonable Counsels, or Advice to Sufferers*, in *The Works of John Bunyan*, Vol. 2, ed. George Offor (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1991, orig., 1854), 726.