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THE CHURCHMAN

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CLERGYMEN AND LAYMEN OF THE
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"As Our Hope is."¹

IN our Lord's time the Jews were much divided in opinion respecting Life after death. The Sadducees, as we are told in Acts xxiii. 8, said that there was no resurrection, neither angel, nor spirit; the Pharisees, and the people, believed in a Resurrection from the dead and in a future kingdom of God. There is no doubt as to our Lord's opinion. The doctrine of the Life to come formed, we might almost say, the background of His teaching. In the Parables addressed to the populace and in the exhortations spoken to His followers, Jesus never hesitated to regard life on earth as the vestibule to the life of heaven. The sorrows and sufferings and hardships of life on earth are part of the discipline that prepares the soul for the life eternal. At the same time, He uses no language that could be condemned as depreciative of the life in the body. He does not speak as an Oriental ascetic, denouncing matter as inherently evil, or the bodily frame as the creation of the Prince of darkness. According to the teaching of Jesus, men and women are the children of God, and have received from their Heavenly Father the gift of a mortal body as well as the gift of an immortal soul. The body is a temporary trust; the soul partakes of the true life and is made for the life eternal.

"Be not afraid," He says, "of them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul; but rather fear him which is able to destroy both body and soul in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? and not one of them shall fall on the ground without your Father. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not therefore, ye are of more value than many sparrows. . . . He that findeth his life shall lose it; and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it" (Matt. x. 28-31, 39). "For whosoever will save his life shall lose it, and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it. For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own life (or soul)? or what shall a man give in exchange for his life (or soul)?"

The true "life" of man, that of his soul, according to Christ's teaching, is beyond the reach of human violence. It is moral evil,

¹ One of three addresses delivered in Westminster Abbey by the Dean, the Rt. Rev. H. E. Ryle, D.D., and now published as a volume, "Life After Death," by Mr. Robert Scott, price 2s. net.

not physical injury, that alone can impair his capacity for everlasting welfare. It is spiritual death, not the death of the body, that man ought to dread.

It is for this reason that our Lord so often insists upon the momentous significance of this mortal life in its bearing upon man's eternal destiny in the world to come. Think, for instance, of the Parable of the Wheat and the Tares (Matt. xiii. 40-43) ! Think of the three Parables of the Ten Virgins, the Talents, and the Sheep and the Goats (Matt. xxv.) ! Observe how, throughout, the teaching assumes that the continuity of personal character is preserved beyond the grave. The true passport to an eternal blessing hereafter is not to be looked for in the boasted descent from Abraham, or in the minute observance of the Levitical law, but in the moral sonship of God, as evidenced in the simple fruits of a loving and honest purpose of heart.

Time will not allow me to linger over this aspect of our subject. But it is important to remind you, in passing, that our Lord never hesitated to employ the words and phrases of imagery in which the popular religious thought of the day among the Jews was wont to clothe their anticipations of a Life to come. Christ makes no attempt to use terms which the people would not understand. He makes use of the language which the Jewish Apocalyptic literature had made familiar. In order to present to His hearers' minds that which was unimaginable by their faculties, He had recourse to the metaphors and symbols which were in common use. He was more patient, more broad-minded, as Dr. Sanday has called it, than we are inclined to be, in accepting the symbolical language of popular theology, necessarily imperfect, fanciful and pictorial though it may be.

"I say unto you," He says, "that many shall come from the east and the west, and shall sit down (that is, be guests at the banquet) with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. viii. 11). "I will not drink henceforth of this fruit of the vine, until that day when I drink it new with you in the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. xxvi. 29). In these two passages our Lord adopts the popular imagery of the great feast with which the Messiah should inaugurate His reign, and at which the blessed should be privileged to attend in the company of the patriarchs and the prophets.

Another time, when He is addressing the disciples, He makes use of the promise that “ in the regeneration, when the Son of man shall sit on the throne of his glory, ye also shall sit upon twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel ” (Matt. xix. 28).

In the Parable of Dives and Lazarus, He pictures Lazarus, in the future state, reclining in Abraham’s bosom (Luke xvi. 23) as a child in its father’s lap. To the Penitent Thief He gives the assurance that on that very day he should be with Him “ in Paradise,” the abode of bliss (Luke xxiii. 43). Language of this kind would not have sounded strangely to Jewish hearers. It was the language of symbolism used by teachers and writers of that time.

Similarly, when our Lord speaks of the Rich Man, in Hades, being tormented with a flame and longing for water to cool his tongue (Luke xvi. 23) ; or when He describes the place “ where the worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched,” “ the outer darkness where shall be the weeping and gnashing of teeth,” we shall make a mistake if we suppose that our Lord is making a rediction of the condition of the lost, which requires from us a literal interpretation. This has too often been applied in the interests of ecclesiastical denunciation. But in regard to the unknown future, our Lord adopts the current symbolical imagery of the day. There was an imagery in terms of rest and happiness ; there was an imagery in terms of distress and torment. It is a solemn thing that we need to recollect, that, under the imagery of Gehenna, our Lord warned His hearers that death, by itself, and without repentance, does not purge from sin, and that sin unrepented is after death the torture of the soul, and the source of its estrangement from the Vision of Divine Love.

But although our Saviour made frequent use of the symbolism of the popular theology, there were occasions on which He was ready to speak with greater plainness and with far less reserve. This is quite conspicuously the case, as perhaps we should have expected, when he meets the controversial casuistry of the Sadducees in reference to the Resurrection. By bringing up an absurd instance of a woman with seven husbands, they thought to bring ridicule upon the doctrine with which our Lord had openly associated himself. In reply He points out how utterly their imaginary case fails to support them. The Resurrection Life is not to be confounded, as they had been guilty of confounding it, with a mere prolongation of earthly conditions and relationships. It is a new state of life,

no more admitting of being defined than the life of the angels under terms of time and space and human society. Having thus corrected a widespread erroneous impression, and one which even now probably is commonly held, He proceeded to administer a sharp rebuke to His questioners. They claimed to be deeply versed in the knowledge of the sacred Scriptures of their people. But they had evidently never fathomed the spiritual significance of the famous passage in Exodus (iii. 14, 15), in which God had spoken of Himself to Moses as "the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." Now God is not the God of the dead, but of the living. The Patriarchs, therefore, must be living. Physical death had not annihilated them. They retained their true life. Unto men they seemed to be no more. All have their true life in their relation to God. The Sadducees had made a great mistake; and the cause of their mistake was their failure to understand their own Scriptures. The reality of the Future Life was thus definitely affirmed by our Saviour in the course of His controversy with His opponents (see Matt. xxii. 23-33; Mark xii. 18-27; Luke xx. 27-40).

But, as indeed we might expect, it is in our Lord's final discourses with His followers that He dwells most tenderly and emphatically upon the subject. The first note of His wonderful and comforting message to them is struck in the following words: "If any man serve me, let him follow me; and where I am, there shall also my servant be" (John xii. 26). And the reference in the last clause is evidently to the life that shall be hereafter as well as to the life on earth. Later on, when St. Peter has vehemently asserted his readiness to follow his Master even unto death, our Lord makes answer: "Whither I go, thou canst not follow me now; but thou shalt follow me afterwards" (John xiii. 36). Undoubtedly those words had reference to St. Peter's martyrdom, when he follows his Master more than thirty years later; but they are words which have shed a bright ray of hope and comfort upon the last hours of every faithful servant of Jesus Christ. It suffices such a one to be assured that in leaving his earthly home he is following his Lord.

At the commencement of the Final Discourse, He says: "In my Father's house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you" (John xiv. 2). It is with those famous words that He seeks to comfort and encourage

His disciples as they begin to realize that the end of His earthly ministry is at hand. According to one line of interpretation, He would remind them that just as in the Temple, which was the symbol of the Eternal Home, there were dwellings for priests, levites and servants, so also in the palace of the Heavenly King there is room and to spare for all, however varied they might be in calling and age and responsibility. “ And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and will receive you unto myself : that where I am, there ye may be also ” (John xiv. 3). His death is not to be regarded as their desertion. He is going ; but He is going to prepare for His followers places which, as He seems to imply, would not have been open to receive them before His death and rising again. He casts, as it were, a glorious beam of light upon the way, which all must tread, of the Shadow of Death. He does not go into particulars beyond those which are essential for reassurance and for comfort. Death is not going to sever them from Him. In the Life to come they will be together. His home will be their home : He has prepared it for them. That is sufficient.

The meaning of His calm, loving words seems clear. There may be much in that Last Discourse which it is hard for us to understand. But when He speaks of death and the Life to come, the language is quite simple. He refers again, later on, in the course of the Great Prayer of Consecration, to His expectation of death and of that which should be afterwards : “ I am no more in the world, but these are in the world, and I come to thee. . . . Father, I will that where I am, they also may be with me ” (John xvii. 11, 24). There is nothing there of symbolical imagery. It is the direct statement of short, simple words. And do we not feel that, as we and our loved ones face the great change which death brings, this is the assurance and comfort that we need ? Earthly courage fails : but as we go down the bank and the cold waters touch our feet, it will make all the difference that we have the Saviour’s hand in ours ; and that we shall be where He is.

We realize that it was in the firm strength and confidence of this new Christian hope St. Paul was able to say with such sovereign faith : “ We are of good courage, I say, and are willing rather to be absent from the body, and to be at home with the Lord ” (2 Cor. v. 8). “ For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. . . . But I am in a strait betwixt the two, having the desire to depart, and

be with Christ, for it is very far better : Yet to abide in the flesh is more needful for your sake " (Phil. i. 21, 23, 24).

Let us also observe how the same sure and certain confidence, which breathes in our Lord's words of comfort to His followers, is shown in the moments of His own last agony upon the Cross. Death then appears to Him no more as the extinction of life than when He was conversing with His disciples. With words of unshaken and inspiring certainty He makes His great promise to the poor malefactor hanging from the Cross at His side : " To-day shalt thou be with me in paradise " (Luke xxiii. 43). They were to enter together, not as shadows but as persons, into the Life of the world to come. Thus the poor " Penitent Thief," without membership of Church, without blessing of Sacrament, without knowledge of Creed, received the promise of admission to the Heavenly Home and of the companionship of the Saviour. Was he not the prototype of a vast multitude whose offering of ignorant, honest, penitent hearts is never unheeded by the all-embracing love of our Divine Redeemer, who came to seek and to save that which was lost ?

The last utterance from the Cross summarizes the Lord's own teaching in reference to the Life Everlasting : " Father," He says, " into thy hands I commend my spirit " (Luke xxiii. 46). The pilgrimage of the body has come to an end. The Spirit Life, to be clothed again according to the Father's Will in the glorified vesture of the Life Everlasting, is surrendered into the keeping of the Heavenly Father. Thousands of the servants of Jesus Christ have passed into their rest with these or similar words upon their lips.

How eagerly we strain our vision to pierce the veil which shuts from us the sight of those that have gone before us ! Jesus Christ knew well the longing of His followers that the teaching He had given them about the other life might be placed beyond the reach of doubt and cavil. He would not that the impression of His firm testimony as to the Life to come should be dissipated by the sight of His crucifixion and death and burial. And so for forty days He manifested Himself in the glorified Body of the Resurrection to the disciples. . . . In Him, and through His Resurrection, we see that God's law for mankind is life, because it is love ; and that there is no extinction of God's gift of life in the dissolution of the bodily frame. Jesus Christ has gone from mortal sight " to prepare a place for you."