

OUR SURETY OF ETERNAL LIFE

We have again been reminded this morning that death awaits us all—that life is but a short-lived show: that in the natural order, we must disappear as completely from the scene as the bubble that breaks on the ocean's surface. We have been exhorted to keep the fact in view. There is wisdom in the exhortation. It is what David prayed for.

“Teach me to know mine end, and the measure of my days, how short it is.”

And Moses: *“So teach us to number our days.”*

The remembrance of death as the certain issue of all our matters now in hand, has a wonderful power in it to make man more humble, more merciful, more wise. Most men prefer to forget it, and to indulge in those excitements and associations that will keep them in forgetfulness. They live in a state of insensibility to the meaning of life while it lasts, and then go frantic when death delivers his summons, whether on board of a sinking ship or in the quiet of the bedchamber. They are happy who look the subject well in the face beforehand, and adapt themselves to wisdom's behest. To such, the subject is delivered from all its gloom, and is even invested with a certain degree of attractiveness. It is seen in its true place in human history, and the comfort it yields is in more directions than one. Death is not a pure evil when taken with its surroundings. By itself, it would be nothing but evil; but it cannot be taken by itself. It is a part of a system of things, and can only be estimated rightly when taken in connection with the whole. It has been spoken of as a punishment. It is more than this: it is also a remedy—a remedy for an evil which would be much sorer without it. It is God's prevention against the development of permanent evil in the universe. When we look round on the evil that now prevails, we can say, how much worse it would be were there no death. How awful would be the lot of a man if his life of frailty, fatigue, and weariness—exertion, struggle and competition; ignorance, baseness and malice; ingratitude, hatred and blasphemy; stupidity, pride, and arrogance—were everlasting. How maddening if there were none of the alleviation that comes by death to this madhouse of sinners. How dreadful that the earth should thus be filled for ever with devilry as waters cover the sea. Death is not only a punishment: it is the cure of sin—a negative cure truly, but still a cure—an arrangement by which sin is prevented from getting the upper hand in the long run, by which we might say the situation is kept clear for the purpose that God has of causing good to gloriously triumph at the last.

Then in its personal relations, there is a comfort in it which grows with increase of years and wisdom. Most men of capacity are liable to feel as Job said: *“I would not live always:”* for the reason that they experience the truth of what Solomon said, that *“all is vanity and vexation of spirit.”* They find life a burden and a weariness in its unrealised aspirations, and in the prevalent abortiveness of the highest capacities in the overwhelming mass of the population. The constant pressure of care, the constant friction of endurance, the constant recurrence of inevitable and countless disappointments in the highest range of desire towards God and man. The perpetual aimless marchings and countermarchings of life, bring at last a sense of futility that finds comfort in the thought that there are bounds to the individual experience of vanity, that the horizon is shortened ahead; that death awaits to administer a calm that will bear no ruffle. This would be a poor comfort apart from the other fact that we have to look at. It would be a demoralising submission to the grim inevitable, which is about all there is in the lustreless philosophy of the natural man. It is considered the highest attainment of virtue in one of the systems of the wise of this world—the system of Brahma, I think it is—when a man reaches the point of contemplating with comfort his absorption into the indistinguishable ‘All’ at death. This is nothing more nor less than the weariness of the corruptible resigning a man to extinction. What else can be expected where the purpose of God to emancipate us from the corruptible is not known or believed? It is this purpose that gives death its greatest comfort to those who in life are but waiting *“All the days of their appointed time.”*

This purpose is, in a sense, an affair of experience. It is a purpose in measure performed. Death is not the only thing that has a place in the history and the life of man upon the earth. Resurrection is in that history as really as death—Christ as really as Adam. All the facts connected with Christ show us resurrection begun. Look at them for a moment. When I say the facts connected with him, I do not mean the facts of his biography, the facts of his own personal case, or of his own

generation. They lie much more broadly and strongly than these, though these are very strong. Christ is part of a whole from which he cannot be detached. To see him rightly, you must see him in his relation to the whole. He appeared at the end of a nation's life which began with Moses, and during which the prophets prophesied. He appeared in correspondence with their work—not as a man and a work all by himself. They all spoke of him. *“Him of whom Moses in the Law and the Prophets did write,”* was the natural description of him by one disciple to another when first found. We look at Moses and see that he was not a finished work. He and the law that came by his hand all give indications of but a work begun. Moses was but the pier of one side of an arch. Paul's comment defines the case.

“He was faithful in all his house for a testimony of those things that should be spoken after.”

Moses' own declaration is in the same sense.

“I have not done these things of mine own mind.”

“After my death, ye will utterly corrupt yourselves, and evil will befall you in the latter days.”

“A prophet shall the Lord your God raise up unto you like unto me; him shall ye hear in all things.”

All the prophets that came after Moses point in the same way forward to one who should victoriously establish the work of God in the earth. Christ appears at the end of the economy of things to which Moses and the prophets stood related.

“Once in the end of the (Jewish) world hath he appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself.”

All that went before Christ are therefore a witness to him, as said Paul,

“To him gave all the prophets witness.”

When we come to Christ himself, he is his own witness. Such a man—if we had only his character, his precepts, his deportment to go by—is inexplicable apart from the divinity which he claimed. But we have more than his character: we have his works—the things he did. They testify of him in the one possible sense only. Nicodemus gave voice to the verdict of common reason:

“Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God, for no man can do these miracles that thou doest except God be with him.”

Consider the self proclaimed argument arising out of the shortness of time he did the works. For only three years and a half did he traverse the Holy Land, healing the sick, and performing impossible marvels; and yet by so short a work, though only a provincial carpenter, he has established his name in the earth, with a durability that defies the utmost combination of human enmity to uproot it. Only extraordinary works could produce so extraordinary an effect. But that is not all. He was killed, as he said he would be. It was the plan which he announced in his teaching. It was no accident. It was no triumph of his enemies such as when a man's foes get the better of him by numbers, perseverance, or stratagem. He disclaimed beforehand any view of this sort.

“No man taketh my life from me. I lay it down of myself that I may take it again. This commandment have I received of my Father.”

He came into the world expressly that redemption might be wrought out by him in the condemnation of sin in its own flesh, and in the restoration of life to that flesh by the Father's favour.

“For this cause came I unto this hour.”

Therefore, he said, though desiring the cup to pass,

“Not my will but Thine be done.”

In all these very utterances, he is his own witness, for surely never man spake like this. But go a step further. The crucified Christ could not be kept dead. He said beforehand he would rise the third day; and on the morning of that day, the grave in which he had been placed was empty. His enemies said his disciples had stolen the body. This was the only way they could meet the testimony of the disciples of Christ's resurrection. In truth it was a confirmation of the testimony. It was proof first of all that the enemies of Christ had not possession of the body of Christ. It had disappeared. Could they have obtained access to the dead body of him they crucified they would gladly have exhibited it publicly and so silenced for ever the testimony of the resurrection. But no: by the story they put into circulation they confessed the crucified body had disappeared. There were two versions of the mystery before the public. The disciples said Christ had risen. The authorities said the disciples had

stolen the body. How absolutely incredible—yea, impossible—was this version will appear to any one who thinks for a moment. How could the disciples, who were all scattered and broken-hearted, get at a body guarded by soldiers? Suppose they could, why should they want to get at it? Of what advantage could a corpse be to them—the evidence of their own delusion; the seal of their own discomfiture? Oh, say the Jews, they wanted to say he had risen. But why should they want to say this? What were they to gain by saying Christ had risen if he had not risen? Themselves it brought into trouble; what did it do for others? What benefit did they propose for others in proclaiming the resurrection of Christ? We have their words; we know their proposals.

“Through this man is preached unto you the forgiveness of your sins.”

“If Christ be not raised, your faith is in vain; ye are yet in your sins.”

“If thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved.”

Is it conceivable that men could find motive for a fraud in such proposals? The idea is monstrous.

It is inconsistent with the universal experience of human nature. The man who can believe it, is either phenomenally shallow or astonishingly credulous, or possessed of a wondrous power of shutting his eyes against evidence that he does not like.

The resurrection of Christ is the only fact that fits and explains the procedure of the apostles, and to this fact, consider the amount and nature of the evidence. From the tactics of unbelief, it would seem that witnesses are to count for nothing when the thing spoken to is unacceptable. A new principle of jurisprudence is to be observed in this case. “A witness must be false if he speaks to a thing that I don’t want to be proved.” This is what it comes to ye wonderful wiseacres! The rule hitherto has been to show a witness false, and thus invalidate his testimony; but if the witnesses are men of probity, and their testimony agree, it must be received. Here we have 500 witnesses, divided up into groups, speaking to various branches of the evidence. First, we have Mary, she saw the Lord immediately after his resurrection, receiving from him a message to deliver to the disciples reminding them of what he had said would happen. Then we have the other Mary, and several women, who, visiting the sepulchre, find the grave empty, and the clothes that had wrapped the body of Christ, all neatly folded, and placed in a corner by themselves. Then we have the same group seeing Christ on their way back to report. Then we have Peter, to whom, being out, Jesus showed himself alone. Then we have the two going a foot-journey in the country with whom Christ conversed, at first, ‘incognito,’ and then revealed himself. Then we have the eleven, less Thomas, to whom Jesus showed himself and conversed with them when they were all assembled. Then we have the same company, plus Thomas, on a second occasion. Then we have Peter and others to whom Jesus separately showed himself while they were engaged in a fishing expedition on the Sea of Galilee. Then we have the company of about 500 to whom Jesus showed himself in one of the hilly seclusions in the neighbourhood of that same sea which he had previously hallowed by his miraculous ministrations to the multitude. Then we have the whole company of the disciples from whom Jesus took his final departure and ascended in their presence from the summit of the Mount of Olives. Now all these proved worthy to be believed by their course before and after. Their course before this was this: they identified themselves with and assisted a teacher who commanded all Israel to repent, saying,

“Except your righteousness exceed the righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter the Kingdom of Heaven.”

Men and women who take part in a movement like this in any age are worthy of belief, and are in fact everywhere believed, when they speak to matters of fact, such as seeing and speaking to a person. Their course after was this: that they persevered for years in this work, in the name of Jesus, and persisted in their testimony to his resurrection, in spite of the most grievous penalties and hardships heaped upon them by the authorities, ending in very many cases in their being put to death. The reliability of the evidence is guaranteed to the judicial faculty as no other evidence could be in a similar case. But there is something besides this. “*We are his witnesses,*” says Peter, “*and also is the Holy Spirit which God hath given to those that obey Him.*” This witness of the Holy Spirit was an important department of the evidence; for without it, it is not in the nature of things that the apostolic testimony would have been believed by such a multitude as we know, from Pliny, who accorded credence to it in the apostolic age. Its nature is briefly indicated in the statement of Mark:

“They went everywhere preaching the word with signs following;”

And in the words of Paul:

“God also bearing them witness, both with signs and wonders and divers miracles and gifts of the Holy Spirit, according to His will.”

If God thus put His seal to the testimony of Christ's resurrection, that testimony is true. If He did not, there lacks an explanation of the incontrovertible fact that multitudes embraced the faith of Christ in the first century in the teeth of the direct consequences, and in the face of the organised opposition of Law and Roman rule. Even here the case does not stop; for by the superlative stratagem of wisdom, Christ in the midst of the hottest persecution, turned the leading enemy of the day into the truest and most faithful witness by showing himself to Saul of Tarsus, afterwards known as Paul the apostle. We have his letters in which, by inspiration he is to us the interpreter of the mind of Christ. He preached successfully the faith he at first destroyed. His reason is brief:

“Have I not seen Jesus Christ, our Lord? Last of all he was seen of (or by) me also.”

He is the last and most effective of the witnesses to Christ's resurrection.

It is in view of such things we can say with assurance that resurrection, as well as death, is on the list of human experiences. It is not altogether a matter of futurity. As regards the masses of mankind, it is entirely a matter of futurity: but the fact of Christ's resurrection is a pledge of the certainty of that futurity, and therefore brings it within the practical calculations of the present with those who can read the meaning of things, Christ's resurrection though an event by itself at the moment, did not happen for itself. It had reference to others. It occurred as part of a plan. This is intimated in the phrase; *“Christ, the firstfruits,”* and more plainly in those words of Paul:

“He that raised up the Lord Jesus shall raise us up also by him.”

“Since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead.”

It is this resurrection that takes away all the gloom of death, and arrays the King of Terrors with habiliments of a welcome friend; for what does death with this resurrection in prospect do for the friend of Christ? It ends the weariness of his separation from Christ; it ends the painfulness of his conflict with evil; it ends for him the present evil world, and conducts him instantaneously from the cloud life of probation to the day of God's manifested presence on the earth. It does not do so in reality, but it does so in the appearance to the man's feelings, and practically to him that is the same thing. Not a moment's conscious interval divides the dead man from the consummation upon which the promises of God have caused him to rest in hope; because the dead know nothing, and all interval is to them as blank as the ages that preceded their birth. Death, therefore is on every hand, deprived of its repulsiveness. Whether we wake or sleep, we are (at his coming) the Lord's; and if we die before he come, it only makes our waiting the shorter.

The supreme question is our readiness to meet him; and this is an affair of mental condition as determinable by the Truth. If we allow that Truth to do its work, we shall be always ready to rise joyfully at the call. We may prevent the Truth from doing its work. We may not give it a chance. We may shut our eyes to death; we may open our hearts to the world in which we live, and become engrossed with the things upon which the world's affections are fixed: (they are multitudinous). We may so cultivate the tastes, habits, and occupations that have to do wholly with man's ways of looking at things as to become disinclined for the views and ways of wisdom. We may slowly sink into that condition in which the Bible reading seems a superfluity; prayer, a meaningless form; attendance at the meetings, a needless burden; and the ways and scruples of godliness, a childish prejudice. Alas! We may have a name to live and be dead. Christ's own prescription in such a case is:

“Repent! and do the first works, or else I will remove thy candlestick out of its place. I counsel thee to buy of me gold tried in the fire that thou mayest be rich, and white raiment that thou mayest be clothed, and that the shame of thy nakedness do not appear: and anoint thine eyes with eye-salve that thou mayest see.”

These figures of speech signify the application of the mind with steady diligence to the words of truth which God has given us for enlightenment and instruction in His ways. It is better to attend to this counsel forthwith, than to put off till the last hour strikes, and effort is of no avail. That hour is sure to come. We may think we cannot make time now. We have this matter of business to attend to, that friend to see, that urgent family matter to arrange. Well, we shall have to leave all and follow the messenger of death when he raps at our door, whether we will or not. We had better make a place now in all our arrangements for that wisdom that we shall find more precious than rubies when we stand at the judgment seat of Christ, and which, if we put off and put off under this worldly pressure, we shall find it impossible at the last to procure at any price.

Life is but a shadow: the substance is in Christ. Happy is the man that lays hold on that substance and retains it. It is to be done now by applying the heart to understanding, and letting that understanding bear fruit in a life of “*patient continuance in well-doing*,” by which God has appointed we should seek for “*glory, honour, and immortality*.”

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