

*FACTORS OF FAITH IN IMMORTALITY.*<sup>1</sup>

## II.

It may seem paradoxical, but it is literally true, that historically immortality and martyrdom are correlative terms; and it is only those who have in their moral life an experience which is of one piece with that of the martyrs who can have any assurance of immortality, or even any idea of what it means, or of the grounds on which faith in it rests. The two great factors concerned in its production in the true religion are those we have now mentioned; an overpowering experience of the redeeming love of God, and a response to that love so absolute and unreserved that it does not count life itself dear to be true to it. Spiritually, the Christian faith in immortality is conditioned by these two things; where they both exist, faith rises to its highest power. Where faith is feeble, it is where either or both are inoperative. Is it not worth while to ask, in a generation in which faith is feeble, and doubters many, whether it is possible for some people to believe in immortality, or rather whether they have any right to believe in it. It is a stupendous idea, when we really take it in; and to grasp it as not merely an idea but a reality implies spiritual strength on a corresponding scale. How *can* a man believe in immortality who has invested his whole being in things which perish as he uses them? How can he believe in immortality if he does not know something which is better than life, if he is not identified with a cause and an interest to which life itself may well be surrendered? He cannot do it. He cannot evade the conditions under which the faith in immortality, as true religion knows it, was born, and by which it is sustained, and still believe. The man who has nothing in life he

<sup>1</sup> The Drew Lecture for 1910, by the Rev. Prof. James Denney, D.D.

would die for has nothing in life worth living for ; and the life which is not worth living will never believe in its own immortality. A great moral possession, like faith in immortality, must always be bought with a great moral price ; a man must sell all that he has to buy it. What Plato said long ago about the materialists who grasped rocks and oaks as the only realities—that they required to be improved before they could be argued with—may be said without censoriousness of many who doubt immortality to-day. As it appears in the history of the true religion, faith in immortality is part of a development in which an intimate experience of God's love is responded to by an unreserved surrender of the life to Him, and there is no reality in thinking or speaking of it apart from these conditions. What is implied about the soul, or about human nature, by the fact that experiences like this are possible for it, is an ulterior question ; but no doctrine of the soul will do the soul justice which does not argue back from these experiences ; and no metaphysical doctrine of the soul can ever be demonstrated *a priori* which will enable us to deduce these experiences from it. Every discussion of immortality, to be real, must move in a world which is ethically and experimentally conditioned throughout.

I can understand that some one should find a great blank in all this, as a study of the factors of faith in immortality, especially as they appear in the true religion. What, it will be said, of Jesus, who destroyed death and brought life and immortality to light ? What of the truth that it is Christ in us who is the hope of glory, or that as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive ? What, in particular, of the Resurrection of Jesus ?

To begin with, it is important to notice that Jesus in His lifetime is a signal illustration of such faith in immortality as characterises the true religion—a faith the factors

in which are an assurance of God's love, and an absolute martyr devotion to Him. There is nothing in history to parallel the calmness and certainty with which Jesus speaks of the life beyond death and inspires others to speak of it. "In my Father's house are many mansions." "To-day shalt thou be with me in Paradise." "Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit." In Jesus, as in those whom He is not ashamed to call brethren, such assurance is of one piece with His certainty of the Father's love, and with His devotion, even to death, to the Father's will. It is not an accident that the calmest and most untroubled faith in immortality known to human history are found in the spirit where both these factors of faith have had their perfect work—the spirit of Him who knew God not only as friend but as Father, and who laid down His life in the Father's service. It is not an accident, but a confirmation of what we have already seen to be the essential truth as to the origin of such faith. We must bear this in mind in what follows.

The Resurrection of Jesus is unquestionably a factor of supreme importance in the Christian faith in immortality. Not that faith in immortality actually owed its existence to the Resurrection: we have seen already that it existed before. But for those who saw the risen Saviour, and for those who received their testimony, the Resurrection gave faith a new vividness and certainty. The God in whom they trusted, and to whom they were resolved to be true even to death, made bare in it His holy arm, and acted decisively for the confirmation of their faith. In the Resurrection, death was abolished not in faith merely but in fact; life and immortality, which had often seemed doubtful and obscure, were brought finally and triumphantly into the light. To men who had seen the Lord, the life beyond death henceforth transcended in reality

both death itself and the life which led up to it, and the contagion of their assurance passed like fire from heart to heart. It would be an illusion, however, if we supposed that it passed independently of those factors of the faith in immortality which we have already seen to be operative even in Jesus. The Resurrection of Jesus was not a resurrection *simpliciter* : it was not the revelation, in the case of Jesus, of something which inevitably awaited all human beings in virtue of their inalienable human nature ; it was the resurrection of One who had known the Father's love and died to fulfil the Father's will ; and when it took possession of men's hearts, it took possession of them as a power in which divine love, and martyr faithfulness, and the victory over death were inseparable elements of one whole. These elements interpenetrated from the first, and if our thoughts and words about immortality are to be real they must interpenetrate to the last. The Risen Lord does not give us a faith in immortality independent of the factors which generated faith from the beginning ; but by the working of His spirit in us, uniting us to Himself, He enables us to realise those factors as they were present in His own life : He makes us immovably sure of God's love, and He enables us to become conformed to His own death. It is in this sense that Christ in us is the hope of glory. This is the way, and even for Christians it is the only way, of attaining to the resurrection from the dead. If we are begotten again to a living hope by the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, it is because that resurrection vivifies in us the experiences from which faith springs, and sets its divine seal upon them. To say this is not to disparage in the least the historical fact of the Resurrection : by that fact the Christian religion stands or falls. It is only to remind ourselves that what is sometimes called the historical fact of the Resurrection is also, sometimes, too abstractly and therefore unreally

conceived ; and that if we wish to apprehend the truth we must take account of the Resurrection as an indivisible whole, in all its relations, spiritual as well as historical. We must think of it as what it was—the Father's glorifying of the Son. It is this which inspires all the high utterances of the New Testament about immortality. The speakers are conscious that the Resurrection is a supreme revelation : it shows what God can do for man, and what man is capable of receiving from God. But this revelation is made in the person of one whose life constrained those who knew him to feel that in His case the final victory of death would be not only an indignity but an incredibility. "It was not possible that *He* should be hol en of it." And it is through a fellowship of life with Him—a fellowship, wrought by the spirit of the Risen Saviour, in that life which is revealed to us in the days of His flesh—that we grow into an assurance of immortality like that in which He lived and died.

In the New Testament utterances about immortality, to which reference has just been made, we have a singular proof, too easily overlooked, of the immense power with which the Resurrection of Jesus entered as a factor into the Christian faith that death has been finally overcome. The New Testament, it is not too much to say, is the only book in the world which speaks worthily and adequately of immortality ; and this unique and remarkable power is bound up with that conception of immortality which it owes to the Resurrection of Jesus. If immortality is real, it is stupendous ; the effect of believing in it is or ought to be an enlargement of the mind in comparison with which all that we owe to the discovery of America or to the Copernican astronomy would shrink into insignificance. If we are to believe in it, it must be because it has produced in those who preach it an uplift or expansion of nature corresponding to it in magnitude ; we must be conscious, as

we listen to them, that they breathe an ampler ether, a diviner air, and that their accent is not of earth, but of heaven. And this is what we do find in the New Testament, thanks, undoubtedly, to the Resurrection of Jesus. Think of passages like the fifteenth chapter of first Corinthians, or the fourth and fifth of second Corinthians, or the eighth of Romans, or the first of first Peter, or the seventh of Revelation. I will quote only one. "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy begot us again unto a living hope by the Resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, unto an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for you, who are guarded by the power of God through faith unto a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time." The amplitude and elevation of a passage like this, which, apart from other New Testament utterances, is, I venture to think, unparalleled, is at once an argument for the Resurrection of Jesus—surely such a quickening and enlargement of human faculty as it exhibits must have had an adequate cause—and a proof that the specifically Christian faith in immortality has in that Resurrection one of its indispensable factors. The same holds of the other passages mentioned above. If we look at them simply as human documents, in which the mind is seen exalted to a power hitherto strange to it, they bear convincing testimony to the Resurrection of Jesus which inspired them; and the want of any real parallel to them elsewhere shows that nothing but the Resurrection of Jesus can beget such soaring and triumphant faith. It is not enough to say that He is a factor in the Christian faith in immortality; as we have seen already, all its factors meet in Him, and are divinely attested in His Resurrection. He has the right to say, I am Resurrection and Life.

In these references to the factors of faith, and especially of Christian faith, in immortality, one thing has never been mentioned, and another has fallen into the background. That which has not been mentioned is the desire to be reunited to those whom we have loved here, and from whom we have been parted by death. It is not easy to say how far this natural need and craving of the heart has contributed to make the supernatural life beyond death credible. There are men who have not been attracted by the idea of immortality till they saw their children growing up around them, and could not face the idea of a final dissolution of the bond of love which made them all one. Literature has many poignant illustrations of this and similar feelings. The heart clings even through death to those whom it has loved. "He lies by the ships a corpse"—says Achilles of his friend—"unwept, unburied, Patroclus; but him I will not forget, as long as I am myself among the living and my limbs bestir them; and if men do quite forget the dead in Hades, yet even there will I remember my dear comrade!"<sup>1</sup> "Tomb, bridal chamber, eternal prison in the caverned rock, whither I go to find mine own, those many who have perished, and whom Persephone hath received among the dead! Last of all shall I pass thither, and far most miserably of all, before the term of my life is spent. But I cherish good hope that my coming will be welcome to my father, and pleasant to thee, my mother, and welcome, brother, to thee; for when ye died with mine own hands I washed and dressed you, and poured drink offerings at your graves; and now, Polynices, 'tis for tending thy corpse that I win such recompense as this!"<sup>2</sup> Antigone was a martyr to the obligations of family duty, but although natural affection was to this extent spiritual-

<sup>1</sup> *Iliad*, xxii. 386 ff.

<sup>2</sup> Sophocles, *Antigone*, 891 ff. Jebb's translation.

ised in her case, its root in nature is not to be ignored when we think of its tenderness and strength. The most wonderful sanction for the instinct with which human love reaches out into the unseen and takes possession of it is given in St. John's Gospel, "In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. For I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you I come again and will receive you to myself, that where I am, there ye may be also." "*If it were not so, I would have told you.*" The instinct with which the heart moves in this direction needs, according to Jesus, no justification: had the truth lain in another direction he would have given us explicit warning. Nevertheless, when we look at the faith in immortality in human history, we cannot say that the desire for reunion with friends has been a large factor in producing it. It is rather something which makes it welcome, and can be woven into it, than an effective cause contributing to bring it into being.<sup>1</sup>

The factor of faith which has fallen into the background is the moral demand for retribution. In the Greek belief this had, as a rule, a conspicuous place. As we have already seen, Plato teaches explicitly that the bad would have too good a bargain if death ended all. In this precise form the idea of retribution does not bulk largely in the Christian faith in immortality. This faith is concerned rather with what God will do for those who are in Christ than with what will befall the wicked; an independent interest in the fate of the wicked is not characteristic of the New Testament. But the factor of faith which appears in Plato as the necessity of retribution does appear in the New Testa-

<sup>1</sup> The contrary, however, would seem to be supported by such a sentence as the following from Tolstoi: "Je veux dire que ce ne sont pas les raisonnements qui vous mènent à admettre la nécessité de la vie future, mais lorsqu'on marche à deux dans la vie, et que tout à coup votre compagnon disparaît, là-bas, dans le vide, qu'on s'arrête devant cet abîme, qu'on y regarde—la conviction s'impose, et j'ai regardé!"



ment in wider relations. The Christian hope is a hope in the coming of God's Kingdom. When it comes, God Himself comes to do right by all who have been wronged, and to establish righteousness in undisputed sovereignty. The motives to faith which were once specially connected with retribution find their place in this larger context. Retribution has justice done to it when it is subordinated to faith in the righteousness of God, and in the kingdom of righteousness in which God's sovereignty is to be realised. In the Christian religion it holds, as a factor of faith in immortality, a real but a secondary place. The primary factors are those which have been already considered—the love of God to man, the capacity in man of an absolute devotion to God, and the power of Christ's Resurrection. If these are real and rational, so is the faith to which they give birth. It is as legitimate as they are, and neither more so nor less; and until we are able, on the basis of experience, to estimate for ourselves the value of these factors of the faith, the faith itself is simply beyond our reach. We do not know what it means, and we do not know upon what it rests. It is equally out of our power to confute or to confirm it.

It is impossible, at this stage, to consider what inferences can be drawn as to the nature of man or of his soul from such a faith in immortality as has here been reviewed. Most people probably would say that it implied some kind of affinity between the human and the divine—that it agreed with and therefore confirmed the idea that man is made in the image of God. How this is to be scientifically construed is a further question, but there are two remarks, suggested by the whole subject, with which, as bearing on this question, I will conclude.

The first is, that the affinity of the human for the divine must not be interpreted in such a way as to signify that

the human soul partakes in the eternity of spirit, and that when death comes, and all the natural relations which determined its individuality are destroyed, it is absorbed again in the divine as a drop of water which has somehow been lifted from the ocean falls back again into its bosom and as a drop ceases to be. To represent the nature of the soul thus would be to deduce from man's faith in immortality, and from all the factors in experience which go to generate it, a conception of the soul at variance with the very thing it had to explain. It is idle to start except on an experimental basis, and what the experimental basis requires is a doctrine of the soul or of human nature consistent with such an ethically conditioned faith in personal immortality as has actually emerged in human history. A doctrine of man or of the soul to which personal immortality is insignificant and impossible stands in no relation to the premises in experience from which we have started and from which we cannot but start. To put it briefly: individual men believe, because they have experiences which inspire such faith, that under given conditions they will be saved in Christ; and it is a mere irrelevance to this genuine and legitimate faith in personal immortality when we are presented with a doctrine of the soul which shows how all men unconditionally will be lost in God.

The second remark is this. The affinity between God and man, which is presupposed in that living and religious faith in immortality which we have been considering, must not be exaggerated to mean that individual blessedness is eventually secure to all apart from such experiences as those upon which faith in immortality is historically seen to be dependent. Apart from these experiences, so far as we can tell, the conception of immortality would never have risen upon the mind; and if we have a doctrine of man which demonstrates personal immortality *a priori*,

such a doctrine also can only be described as irrelevant to all that makes the question of immortality one of vital interest to us. I have no desire to question what has been called the natural and essential immortality of man. What I wish to emphasise is that, though true, it is a truth without moral significance until it is brought into the moral world ; and that the moment it is brought into the moral world it is experimentally conditioned in the ways we have seen. It owes its meaning, its value, its certainty or dubiety, and the hopes or fears which attach to it, to the attitude which men assume to possible moral experiences. Human nature is, indeed, capable of these experiences ; it is capable of life in and for God, and therefore of life against which death is powerless ; but it is only as it accepts the life in God that the hope of immortality becomes real. Such a hope, in the Christian or in any high sense, is the greatest moral possession a man can have, but no doctrine of the soul can put it beforehand in his grasp. It has to be won by every man for himself, as he welcomes the love of God, fights the good fight, and experiences the power of the Resurrection of Jesus. Our being is beyond our power, and we can no more annihilate than we could have created it ; but what does vacant being mean ? It is the experience of the soul which is important, here or hereafter, not its existence merely ; and to give interest and reality to our thoughts of it, here or hereafter, it is on the basis of experience we must stand.

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