

*STUDIES IN CHRISTIAN ESCHATOLOGY.*

IV. DEATH AND THE SEQUEL.

ON any view not constructed to omit plain facts, death is an episode of inexpressible meaning. Of many people, not less brave or sensible than their neighbours, it would be true to say that death is never out of their minds ; of others it may be asserted that the most real thing they ever do, and the saddest, is to lie down and die. In the great literature of the world death stands as the last sombre enigma, before which man halts in dumb anguish or proud defiance, resenting its approach as that of a cruel and unnatural intruder, even when it closes a long happy life. Contemplated at this angle, which is that of the vast majority of the human race, it is the focus of tragedy, the one incalculable woe, giving the lie to secular optimism of every kind. Death, in short, is a reality so towering that shelter from it can be found in neither words nor silence. And men whose faith entitles them to assign it an ultimate value, thus subsuming it under universal purpose, possess an inestimable advantage, alike in life and argument, over all for whom it is the synonym of ruin.

The traditional interpretation of death, in Christian theology, makes it a penalty consequent on the Fall. This is probably accepted as it stands by comparatively few living thinkers. A modern view, which owes much to Ritschl, pleads that for redeemed men death no longer contains any punitive quality ; it has lost the character of *evil* for the Christian mind, inasmuch as it once for all liberates the renewed spirit from every mundane impediment or burden. This has often been denounced as facile, but it has a close similarity to some beautiful words of the Westminster Longer Catechism. "The righteous," we there read, "shall

be delivered from death itself at the last day, and even in death are delivered from the sting and curse of it ; so that, although they die, yet it is out of God's love, to free them perfectly from sin and misery, and to make them capable of further communion with Christ in glory." Ritschl and the Westminster divines would agree, no doubt, in holding that death is punitive for men who have not faith. That is beyond dispute ; the case is one in which a thing simply is what it is felt to be, and it is undeniable that for those who put Christ aside the threatening and lamentable aspect of death remains. But is it punitive in any sense for Christians ?

The punitive quality, if present, can be present only in subordination to higher truth. According to a great Pauline word, death is swallowed up in victory. And yet, even for a Christian, it is laden with the significant tokens and memorials of sin. To the very end, as one has said, it is a voice that speaks of responsibility. When to men of believing temper it has seemed a horror, an indignity, the last enemy, the king of terrors ; when they have anticipated with solemn feeling the last indescribable sinking of nature, the overshadowing fear, the rending of the roots of being—this is not the result merely of weak faith or beclouded insight. It is in part a just conviction that such an exit from the world does not perfectly become children of a Heavenly Father. Thus something of chastisement remains even for the faithful. It is not penalty for them as it is for one who cannot perceive Divine love in it ; for they have been pardoned, and the guilt to which alone punishment proper is relative has been cancelled and put away. But enough of weakness and corruption is in it to keep us humble, and in the noblest triumph over death is an under-current of trembling confession. There is a stooping of the soul to a law of the Divine working : " Every

branch that beareth fruit, He purgeth it, that it may bring forth more fruit." And thus all that may be felt of appointed correction in the last earthly experience is overcome and transcended not by the daring stretch of imagination that looks beyond it, or the Stoic apathy that will not acknowledge its reality, but in the lowliness of trust which says, "Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him." Very specially it is overcome through union with One who, when tasting death for every man, passed beyond the bitter cry of desolation to quiet words of self-committal into the Father's hand.

Thus death and dying will always be a theme for the Christian preacher. It is the one form of suffering no one can escape, and which it is sentimentalism to ignore. No preacher intent upon reality can ever forget those who think of death as a lonely voyage into utter darkness. These he will strive to enlighten as to its meaning for their relationship to God; it will be his aim to bring them out of levity or despair into triumphant hope. But not less plainly he will speak of its deep promise to faith, of its significance as the final task appointed by the Father, the summons to Christ's weary soldiers, the great transition that sets free the hidden powers of the soul. It must be shown that even death is gain. "To be with Christ, which is *far* better"—it is not in every mood, or at every stage of life, that we can say this either to others or to ourselves. Yet there comes to believing men a settled temper in which they can say it—can say nothing else, indeed, as the infinite prospect rises up before them.

The Intermediate State was a subject of anxious questioning in circles of primitive Christianity, and this anxiety St. Paul felt it quite worth while to treat considerately. He would not brush it aside as a foolish curiosity; as

he could, he dealt with it. The dead, he wrote to his converts, have no more than the living passed out of a saved relationship to the Lord. They are not far from Christ; they are with Him, for at the last He will *bring* them to meet the survivors. This is a note which recurs in the Pauline writings. From a Saviour like his St. Paul anticipated nothing but the best and highest. God, he knew, would not bid him be satisfied with partial or piecemeal redemption. When he is moving at the supreme height of faith, and looking across the gulf of death, he sees life full, immediate, and everlasting in company with Christ. Reunion with Him fills the prospect. This incontestably makes an impression very unlike that left by various shadowy suggestions often put forward in later times, to the effect that the soul, between death and judgment, must traverse an indefinite period of maturing or purifying, as an indispensable preparation for direct vision of God. Quite apart from Roman ideas of purgatory,<sup>1</sup> the notion is tolerably familiar in Protestant books that the departed spirit, to be presentable before God, is bound to undergo, after death, a certain process of resting or ripening. In the Father's house is a vestibule, and there the new guests must

<sup>1</sup> As to the Romish purgatory an incisive writer has said: "The object of detention there is not to teach wisdom by suffering, or to train weak wills towards good. The will of the "holy souls," it is expressly taught, is already from the moment of death perfectly fixed towards good. You can no more sin in Purgatory than you can sin in Paradise. The only object of Purgatory is to be not purgative, but simply retributory; you are paid out there for sins for which you have not paid a sufficient mulct in temporal suffering before death" (A. E. Taylor, in *Mind*, for July, 1912). This is put somewhat too sharply. To say that "the only object of Purgatory is to be not purgative but simply retributory" does not represent quite accurately the tone of Roman dogma. Thus in a Bull of Eugenius IV (1431-1447) it is declared: *Si vere poenitentes in Dei caritate decesserint, antequam dignis poenitentiae fructibus de commissis satisfecerint et omissis, eorum animas poenis purgatoris post mortem purgari*, where the purgative character is plainly asserted. Still, the emphasis is almost wholly laid where Professor Taylor lays it.

wait awhile. Is not this one more instance of unwillingness to believe that in Christ we are offered a complete salvation ? Does not the sudden insertion of a preparatory time imply that grace is conditioned in God's offer of it by man's ethical achievement, and even in a sense that we shall actually be further from Him then than now ? Now, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ ; then, there will be felt barriers and partitions. Any one who believes that men are forgiven only in so far as they are forgivable, that redemption is something provisional and as it were divisible, and dependent on rather than creative of the holiness of the receiver, will no doubt find it a natural thing that Christian souls should mature in a place of preparation, as not being fit to meet God instantly. But in this what most strikes one is its unlikeness to the New Testament. The glory of the authentic Gospel is that the love of God does not wait upon our fitness. It gives all, and only gives, and by this giving in lavishness and without calculation it makes men like itself. "Fitness" is a thought born of morality, not religion ; and neither in this life nor the next can the believer accept it as indicating or controlling the relation of the Father's mercy to human need.

There emerges at this point the old problem whether we can regard it as really credible that "the souls of believers are, at their death, made perfect in holiness."<sup>1</sup> Many people, in view of the short limits of our knowledge, ask themselves whether this has any reality that our minds can apprehend. Are not the probabilities all in favour of saying that we shall start again very much where we left off here ? How is it thinkable that the long work of sanctification, advanced on earth but a little way in many years, should complete itself fortuitously and in a moment ? Was the dying thief made perfect in an hour ? What we know of

<sup>1</sup> *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, qu. 37.

moral life, and of the normal changes by which it is qualified, lead us rather to believe that the interrupted task will be resumed at the point of interruption, but under conditions more hopeful by far. In particular, is there anything in the mere fact of death to induce a change so abrupt, so radical, so permanent ?

Let us concede for a moment the force of these reasons, and ask only what then is before us. Apparently a second life which in essential quality repeats the life of earth. There, as here, it is clearly implied, we may look for effort and aspiration ; with a measure of attainment, no doubt, but also with failure, discontent, and the same underflow of rebellion against relativity and frustration as darkens much of the present. There, as here, we shall have a struggle to wage between the Divine Will and evil powers operating in ourselves at least, if not also in the environment. Hope will still be set upon an infinitely distant goal, and this goal will form, as now, the natural termination of a process of moral and social evolution. If the Christian consciousness of to-day is satisfied with a future life of this character, one can only say that it is much altered since St. Paul's day. Nothing in such a prospect could ever awake a joy unspeakable and full of glory. Nothing in it could lead an apostle to speak of it, in words quivering with passion, as radiant transformation into the very image of Christ. "As man grows spiritually," says Tyrrell, "he asks more and not less." He asks, indeed, a transcendent order of experience, in which desires after holiness shall be satisfied ; "in which sorrow, pain, temptation and sin shall be done away ; in which the struggle shall be explained, justified, and brought to eternal rest."<sup>1</sup> In short, a heaven which is earth over again—with evil, therefore with conflict, with conflict, therefore with possible defeat—is radically unequal to the pre-

<sup>1</sup> *Christianity at the Cross-roads*, 125-6.

monitions of Christian faith. It is discredited from the very outset by the mere fact that we can conceive what is far better.

Moreover, it will not do to speak of death solely as a physical episode, with the view of disparaging its alleged purifying power. As Moberly has pointed out, we simply do not yet know the possibilities of humbling and cleansing discipline which may lie hid within the experience of dying.<sup>1</sup> It must be considered that by death the soul passes into a life of felt nearness to God perhaps as much transcending the loftiest hours of earthly devotion as these do the first faint movements of faith in a young convert, and that death would not be death which did not abolish the tempting influence of the flesh. In the light of these presumptive facts, the suggestion that beyond the grave believers may find themselves at once above sin's reach will not appear so precarious. Cases are known in which men and women have been once for all delivered from the tyranny of a particular besetting sin through a sudden awakening to the gracious presence of God. Is it incredible that unimaginably close fellowship with Christ, made possible within the veil, may kill all sin then and there? Attained sinlessness is not, of course, equivalent to perfection. Much may rather be said for the position that it is only on the basis of sinless life that progress towards perfection can begin.

The most formidable objection to older views on this point is directed to the notion of sanctification as completed at a stroke, but this point is, I think, fairly met by a further argument. On any theory which does not hold that sin in the redeemed is everlasting, it is difficult to see how sudden and cataclysmic moral transformation *somewhere* is avoided. Let the soul carry over sinful tendencies into the new life, and even there it has nothing more in front of it than a

<sup>1</sup> *Atonement and Personality*, 114.

*progressus in infinitum.* Advance never ends in full realisation. If endeavour were ever to be crowned by perfect attainment, then, however brief the last stage, only a miracle could bring it to a close, which would be equally miraculous in the case of mature and of immature goodness. In brief, sinlessness at death is unquestionably a difficulty for thought, but the difficulty of sinfulness after death is, on the whole, much greater.

From the first the Church appears to have been in two minds respecting the immediate sequel of death for those who have not in this life attained to conscious fellowship with God. The veil drawn, in gospels and epistles, over the fortunes of such as have not faith is very dark. Yet by introducing, even in faint allusion, the thought of Jesus' mission to the dead,<sup>1</sup> the New Testament makes room for the hypothesis that death may not be for all the knell of opportunity. However obscure the Petrine words, they indicate that the notion of saving contact with Christ beyond the veil had crossed the writer's mind and not been rejected forthwith as unthinkable. Orthodox Protestantism, in righteous zeal against every view which makes the future of the soul dependent on the activities of an earthly priesthood, would hear of no reserves. The world to come is painted in two colours, pure white and black. Resistance to superstition has become rigid dogmatism. It was proclaimed as certain that the limits of God's love are known; that they are fixed, in the case of *all*, by the soul's attitude to God at death; and that whatever is possible, it is not possible that Christ should be revealed to any who have left this world devoid of conscious faith. This is a negative certitude to which no man has a right.

It is not surprising, therefore, that hopes of future pro-

<sup>1</sup> 1 Peter iii. 19; iv. 6.



bation for some lives should now prevail widely. By certain thinkers the occasion for such probation is placed just after individual death, by others at the ultimate manifestation of Christ; and since we are in complete ignorance whether future existence at all resembles the present in temporal quality, it is difficult to be sure that these views after all really diverge. At all events their divergence matters little; we are interested rather in their agreement that men who have not utterly rejected the Divine love, and therefore cannot be described as obstinately wicked, will after death hear the words of life and peace. The problem is clearly forced to the front by the felt lack of harmony between the universality of Christ's message and the fact that His Gospel, thus far, has been presented only to a fraction of the race. And relief is found in the faith that the resources of God are infinite. Heathen who have not heard Jesus' name, children who die young, imbecile minds, all those to whom the beauty of holiness has never been presented here—these, and others in like case, may look for something better than to be dismissed into the rayless night of perdition. The chance of being saved is still theirs, and for the Christian mind "salvation" has no apprehensible meaning except as it denotes a spiritual union with God, which is mediated through Jesus Christ. The attempt has occasionally been made to turn the edge of the argument as a whole by contending that even in this life all men do have the opportunity of identifying themselves with supreme goodness—that this indeed is plainly taught in the picture of Judgment with which Matthew xxv. closes. There, we are told, it is the Gentiles' record in this life which is made the touchstone of destiny. They had that in them, it is urged, which made its voice heard on behalf of goodness; and the way in which they have dealt with its appeal for those who needed services of love decides how it shall be

with them. Whether this is the true sense of the passage much depends on the prior question who are the subjects of judgment—all mankind, Christians, or the non-Christian world ; but apart from this, the suggested application leaves our feeling of justice disquieted. Surely the point is that if we say the heathen had their conscience, bidding them help the needy, and fixed their place in the eternal world by their response, yet we too had our conscience, making its appeal ; and what alone availed to break us down and change our heart was the direct presentation of Jesus, over and above. What might not they have become, had our additional privilege been theirs ? There is no obvious equality in conditions between those who are rejected on the score of failure to obey conscience and those who besides have felt the influence of a Person able to save to the uttermost. Let them meet Jesus, somehow and somewhere, let them feel the unique and amazing power to evoke faith which, as all believers know, resides in Him, and who shall say they too may not answer Him with trust and love ? And what is true of heathen lives is credible also in the case of others among ourselves who, so far from definitively rejecting Christ, have, through the apathy of His followers, missed all real contact with His grace.

It is said that any such hypothesis must destroy the value of preaching, but the truth of this is far from evident. We are not now considering those who have distinctly faced the Gospel, set forth in Christian lives or worthy evangelism, and as distinctly have put it aside, not because they failed to understand it, but because they understood it only too well. What is now said gives no colour to the suggestion that in the next life all men, without exception, will find a doorway open into the love of God. Nothing certainly could be more unlike the apostolic message. It is impossible to conceive a preacher deeply conscious of his obliga-

tions, yet exerting himself to persuade men that nothing is decided in this life, that we are not choosing to-day what shall be in the great to-morrow. To hold such language is to discount the moral solemnity of actual experience. If anything is certain, it is that procrastination in religion, the wish to postpone decision for God to an easier day, makes it harder than ever to part with evil. It is deliberate choice of an illusion which even this life will unmask; is there any reason why it should be different on the other side of death? No; what we most need to have developed in us is the certainty that God is here and now. "He cannot ever be nearer us than He is, though we shall realise Him better. We are as much in eternity to-day as we shall ever be, though one day we shall know what now we dimly feel." The Christian preacher, therefore, ought to be anxious about his hearers. If he feels as St. Paul felt, he will be afraid of what may come to those who turn away from Jesus and repel the great spiritual world of love and life and truth that lies around us, waiting to break in and transmute our souls. But the fullest recognition of this may be combined with the hope, or even the conviction, that Christ will one day be presented, for acceptance or rejection, to those who have not been permitted to know Him here. Those who cherish this hope—which, it need hardly be said, they are unwilling to put as a dogma—cannot admit that what they believe in is properly designated a "second" probation. At least, if the probation vouchsafed to Christians is defined by both things, the appeal of conscience and of Christ; if it is only because they have responded to Jesus that in the end they are able to stand before God, then a large class must exist who have not traversed *this* probation even once. "Future" probation we may rightly say, but not "second."

In conclusion, a single word may be added in regard to prayers for the dead. It is easy to understand opposition to the practice if we place ourselves at the point of view of the Reformers, and it is doubtful whether any Protestant writer of standing can be found to maintain the possibility of abridging by earthly intercession the purifying pains of departed saints. There are many, however, to whom traffic in masses for the departed is abhorrent, who yet see no cause to fix a point, even at death, where they must cease praying for loved friends now with Christ. While no one would claim first-rate importance for the question as a whole, it is interesting to ask what are the considerations which influence most defenders of the custom in their advocacy of it. Broadly speaking, their case is based on Pascal's well-known dictum that the heart has its reasons which the mind cannot understand.

Thus it is often held that prayers for the dead are meaningless, since we know not what to pray for. Our wishes may be out of all relation to the conditions under which the departed live. It is [of course easy to conceive [petitions to which this objection is fatal. But those of whom I am thinking would reply that it is scarcely relevant, for example, to a prayer that the departed may be near Christ and may know ever more of His glory. If it be replied that to ask even so much as this is to exhibit distrust of God, the answer has been returned that, if pressed, this at bottom would be an objection to intercession as such, since the perfect and infinite care of God is the presupposition of all prayer for others. But in neither case need any disposition be shown to dictate to God how He shall translate our wish into bestowal.

Further, prayer for the departed has been defended on the ground that it is contained by implication in prayer for the whole Church of God. If we take seriously our professed belief in one family in heaven and earth, by what

right (it is asked) shall we draw a line of division between those within this family who may be prayed for, and others who may not? May it not be maintained that the instincts or intuitions of the Christian heart refuse to acknowledge such a line, and that dogmatic theory must be called in to silence them? If the perfect Kingdom has not yet supervened, it is possible that some ultimate consummation still awaits even those who are with Jesus. When we pray for the completion of the Church in glory, can we omit saints within the veil from our forward view? If they have gone before, and await our coming, it will be asked in all sincerity what harm it can do to pray God that their unfulfilled desires may be crowned with fruition. So the Prayer-book gives thanks "for all who have departed this life in God's faith and fear; beseeching Him to give us grace so to follow their good examples, that with them we may be partakers of His heavenly kingdom." And here the whole, it is said, must include the part.

Another point made by advocates of the practice may be stated more or less as follows. They would maintain with profound conviction that it is impossible to think simultaneously of dear dead friends and of God without such a mental movement or transition as is equivalent to prayer. Thought in such a case is not thanksgiving merely, it cannot but be also intercession and commendation. It might be a final step in this argument to hold that even impugnors of the custom under review may have their position refuted by a closer scrutiny of their own minds. Perhaps by nearer inspection they may observe their own thought moving implicitly in the way now described; and nothing embraced in the instinctive motion of the Christian soul is altered in meaning or value by being made explicit. These are, on the whole, the more important considerations which have figured in the discussion.

The issue, presumably, is one not so much for theoretic argument as for the most private and spiritual feeling. In any case, we may be sure men will decide it for themselves; and hearts overburdened with grief, as they follow the dead into the world of light with longing unspeakable, will not inquire closely, or too much care, what rules of prayer have been devised by men whose minds are cast in another mould. To the demand that they must set limits to intercession they will be apt to reply that they cannot break off the utterance of fond wishes at the grave. To them it seems merely natural that at will they should speak to the Father concerning those whom He has in His safe keeping.

Who shall forbid the heart's desires to flow  
 Beyond the limit of the things we know?  
 In heaven above  
 The incense that the golden censers bear  
 Is the sweet perfume from the saintly prayer  
 Of trust and love.<sup>1</sup>

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### *RELIGION AND PHILOSOPHY.*

IN its modern form the question of the relation of religion to philosophy was first raised by Kant and Schleiermacher—by the former from the side of philosophy, by the latter from the side of religion. Against the Rationalism of the 18th century, which had made religion dependent on metaphysic, Kant demonstrated the impossibility of any theoretical or speculative knowledge of the ultimate realities on which religion hangs. Detaching religion from metaphysic, he grounded it in man's moral consciousness, in other words, in ethics. The ideas in which it moves are postulates of our moral consciousness, as certain to us as the fact of moral

<sup>1</sup> *Poems*, by Walter C. Smith, p. 175.