

DEATH - THE GREAT LEVELLER

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The Protestant Faith

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The poet Shelley describes an Eastern ruin bearing this inscription:

"My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings;
Look on my works, yet mighty, and despair."

The poet comments:

"Nothing besides remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare,
The lone and level sands stretch far away."

From our human viewpoint, death makes all equal. This is a sentiment which finds expression in the Old Testament. The most mighty potentate of Babylon who dispensed life and death with a word becomes in death as weak as the weakest princeling. "Thy pomp is brought down to hell, and the noise of thy viols: the worm is spread under thee, and worms cover thee." (Isaiah 14:11).

Although it is the one certain event in life, no one likes thinking about death, and this shows that it is an alien intrusion. It is not part of God's design. We cannot understand death apart from what the Bible says about it, namely, that death is the consequence and penalty for sin and for rebellion and turning against God. "Through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, so death passed upon all men, for that all sinned." (Romans 5:12). Physical death is only the outward aspect of death; in its real nature it is separation from God in the area of our spirit. Separation and death is the inevitable consequence of even a single sin which is not forgiven. For those who have not received Christ as their Saviour the future is black indeed. We should all look death fully in the face and realise that it is the reward of our sins and that grim though it is, it is merely an outward index of the much more awful darkness of complete separation from God, the source of all light. This is what we have brought on ourselves by our sins. Everyone of us, Christian or non-Christian, deserves this fate; but by calling on Jesus as our Lord, we will escape it for by the death of Christ, we have been redeemed from it. Where we have been forgiven in Christ, death has lost its sting; for Christ

has passed through it and risen triumphant over it. We should never think of death without thinking also of Jesus Christ the vanquisher of death. As the result of our justification and forgiveness in Jesus, God gives us His spirit. His spirit and our spirit are united in fellowship, and His spirit, which raised up Christ from death will make alive again our dying bodies. This has important relevance about how we think of those who, trusting in Christ, have passed through the veil of death. Plainly, this is a matter so beyond human experience, that we can only look to God's word for information as to their state. The Bible makes it clear that at the moment of death, the Christian passes into the presence of Christ Himself - "absent from the body, present with the Lord".(2 Cor.5:8)

The present life lived in fellowship with Christ is a life of joy and happiness, but it is nothing compared to the joy which the Christian enters on at the moment of death, indeed the future is so much more full of bliss and fellowship with Christ that St. Paul can describe his experience of Christ in this life, full though it was, as absence from the Lord compared to what he will experience at the moment of death when he will then be present with the Lord. This new life that follows death, St. Paul described as very far better (Phil.1:23) and affirmed that to die is to gain (Phil.1:21). As he contemplates his own death he tells his friend Timothy that he has finished his course and from henceforth there is laid up for him the crown of life. Timothy was to think of the apostle after death as crowned in Christ's presence. A very happy and blissful concept.

In teaching these things St. Paul was simply following his Master who had assured the penitent thief on the cross that that very day he would be in paradise with Jesus. What can describe more succinctly the bliss that our Lord's words of assurance gives. Earlier in His ministry, Jesus had taught by way of parable that the beggar Lazarus, immediately on his death would be conveyed by the angels to Abraham's bosom while the rich man for his part was in torment in Hades. The imagery of the parable is of course Jewish, in which Abraham's bosom stands for heaven. But the teaching of the parable is clear and conforms with the rest of the New Testament that at death

we, who are in Christ, are in the bliss of the heavenly presence. This is how we should think of our Christian friends. Thus the Bible contradicts clearly any notion of soul-sleeping at death, this would not be "far better" or compare to being in paradise. The notion contradicts the whole tenure of the New Testament.

Christ is now seated at the right hand of God in heaven. We are already seated with Him through the Spirit's presence in our hearts (Eph. 2:6). Death will mean a fuller experience so real that the present may be described as absence. God is a gracious God full of loving kindness and He has for His children inexplicable joys at His right hand for evermore. We should rejoice in this truth and count the troubles we may be involved in now as we serve God thankfully in this life, to be of little moment compared to the glory of the future, when the Saviour will say to us, 'Well done, faithful servant, enter into the joy of your Lord'.

The custom of prayers for the dead obscures this truth, that is why it is to be condemned. A review of the religions of antiquity as well as heathen religions today, shows that the wish to make prayers and offerings to help the dead, is a very natural sentiment in the human heart. So it is not surprising that when a hold on Biblical religion weakens in Christian countries, the practice of prayers and offerings for the dead re-emerges. It is notorious how prominent a place this practice occupies in the modern Roman Catholic Church, but it is also finding a place once more in the revisions of the Church of England Prayer Book, which have been embarked upon in various parts of the world.

God's forgiveness is so complete for those who are in Christ, that from the point of view of His acceptance of them, He sees no blemishes in them. He sees only Christ's perfect righteousness. There is, therefore, no barrier to prevent them entering at death the holiest of holies into God's very presence where they need no prayer. To persist in praying for those asleep in Christ, is to deny God's word that they are in bliss.

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