

*Jesus Christ
and the
Unbroken Life.*



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Jesus Christ and the Unbroken Life.

(By ANTHONY C. DEANE, *Canon of Windsor, and
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In our Lord's view, life is not of the body but of the soul. Such a phrase as "dead in sin" seems to us a metaphor; Jesus would count it literal truth. In His sight, life and death are apart from physical existence; it is the outward being and decay which men call "life" and "death" that are mere shadows of reality. Judas, slinking off to make his shameful pact, is truly dead, despite the fierce beating of his pulse. Lazarus, though he sleeps in the tomb, is alive; only a reluctant metaphor, borrowed to satisfy dull disciples, will term him dead. Judas hates; how can he be living? Lazarus loves; how can he be dead? Physical existence is not to be confused with life, the one being nurtured by material food, the other by loving obedience to God's will. "This do," said Jesus, "and thou shalt live." The existence of the Penitent Thief, for all we know, may have begun forty or fifty years earlier; his life began on Good Friday.

Life, then, as Jesus used the word, is the divine gift of all who claim it by obedience. Let a man obey Christ's call, and already he is passed from death unto life, and "he that believeth on Me," said the Master, "shall never die." He is not to receive a new life when his time on earth is done; **his new life begins here, and has no end.** A famous bishop of old time wrote two books which have helped many; of one the title is "Holy Living," of the other "Holy Dying." But for Jesus one theme sufficed, and that was holy living. So far as we have record, He said not a word to His disciples of preparation for death; His business was to fit them for life. Let them walk that road, and never will they reach its end. What we name death is but a deep cutting through which runs the road of life. Its air strikes chill and its shadow is heavy, but, as he nears it, the pilgrim has a glimpse to show that the road runs through without a break, and that glad sunshine waits on the farther side.

His doctrine of the unbroken life makes clear the true value of our time on earth as Jesus sees it. Often this has been misinterpreted. Popular belief has conceived vaguely that the disciple's task here is simply to prepare for a Day of Judgment, and to reach such a standard that he may be given place on the Judge's right hand. This gained, his old identity and past deeds will affect him no more; thereafter, all they of the right hand will begin in Heaven a new life on equal terms. That theory is not to be reconciled with the doctrine of the unbroken life, and without that doctrine as its source the detailed teaching of Jesus has no coherence. **Personality, He implies, is eternal.** "To-day shalt thou be

with Me" was His word from the Cross—"thou," not "thy spirit" merely, but thou, thy full self, the man that thou art.

In His doctrine of the unbroken life, Jesus found worth and dignity for our existence here. Each moment of communion with God, each effort after good, each conquest of evil, enriches personality for ever. Whatever of good, too, we may bring to others will last as their enduring gain. To enrich character, since character is eternal, is to fulfil the command of laying up treasure in heaven. And the thought is not to be limited to that which (by a false distinction) we call "moral" good. It touches all by which life may profit. We may hear a question whether it be "worth while" for the old to undertake tasks which must be left incomplete, whether he is wise who begins a new habit, or study, or enterprise, when "his life is almost over." But, however brief the residue of his physical existence, his life is never to be over! "Art is long, life is short," was the pagan lament. "Art is long, life is eternal," is the Christian reply. Every grain of added knowledge, of widened sympathies, of deepened love, which we can acquire in this stage of life will better the equipment with which our next stage of life will be begun.

Again, then, we have a hint of the reason causing our Teacher to set such high store by docility. By the open mind and the eager heart comes growth of character; through the knowledge of God grows the love by which, as Jesus showed, our fitness for the Kingdom is to be measured. The demands made of a disciple may be set out at length in a multitude of words, but their essence is this : **he must love to learn, and he must learn to love.**

Thus we may account the unity of life to be a principle near the heart of our Lord's teaching. It goes far to explain why one utterance of His may seem to picture earthly life as unimportant, because it is but a passing phase, while another makes much of it, because the life here shapes the life hereafter. In the view of Jesus, it is life which out-values all else; other teachers have bidden men use life to help the world, Jesus bids them use the world to help life. For the world passeth away, but the life in God is eternal.

Most frankly, Jesus enabled the disciples to know His mind concerning that part of life which is spent on earth. What did He reveal of the life beyond? Enough for our need, doubtless, but too little for our desire. Who has read the Gospels without wishing often for an ampler disclosure? Yet His reserve but emphasises our Lord's greatness as a Teacher. They who share His calling will be the first to own this truth. They know how rare is the perfect sympathy which quite controls the teaching by the need of the taught. Suppose a master whose most intimate thought, whose keenest devotion, are for a part of subject too abstruse for his pupils. How hard for him to forget it when he

teaches, to spend himself wholly in making clear the rudiments! How readily he may persuade himself that what interests him must be of profit to others! But at heart he knows that it would perplex them, would weaken their grasp of the simpler truths he should be content to teach; so that a vivid sympathy and a selfless perception of his task will keep him silent on the higher theme.

Such sympathy and such perception had Jesus. Not for a moment of His life on earth did He lose touch with the world unseen. Of that not merely the voice from Heaven or the Transfiguration, but His daily bearing, gave witness. Possessed of this knowledge, He must have yearned to impart it to His friends. He must have longed to tell them of Heaven's glories, to describe the place which He would go before them to prepare. But love restrained Him. For their sakes, He must teach as they were able to bear. They were slow to receive His interpretation of their present world, and "if I told you earthly things and ye believe not, how should ye believe if I tell you heavenly things?" Not His own pleasure, but the end of serving His disciples to the uttermost, governed both the speech and the silences of Jesus.

It may be pleaded, however, that He did not address His earliest disciples only, that consciously He spoke through them to all who should come after. Therefore might He not have bequeathed some record of words which, had they but bewildered the Twelve, would have brought comfort unspeakable to a myriad disciples of later times? It may seem enough to reply that His love could not err. Perhaps it had been impossible for an evangelist, dazed by revelation transcending all limits of human thought, to find language for its record. Again, such revelation of future glories might distract us from present duties. Like the Apostles after the Ascension, we should stand gazing up into Heaven while a thousand tasks waited our toil on earth. That were fatal indeed to the design of Jesus. Here on earth lie our tasks; here life imperishable is to be begun and nurtured; here the Kingdom of God is to grow, slowly, and by the aid of human effort. "Thy Kingdom come" is a prayer for the world's need, not for the world's end. Therefore a fuller revelation of the life hereafter would be to our loss did it hinder the life here. All day long we should have our gaze fixed upon the distant glories of the sky, leaving untilld the field at our feet.

We do well, then, to honour the wise and unselfish reticence of Jesus. It is a rash presumption, surely, which offers us confident descriptions of Heaven, of Hell, of the Intermediate State, claiming to disclose what God has left concealed. Yet, if our Lord said little of Heaven as a place --and His words, "My Father's House," should satisfy all our need--He was able to describe some conditions of the life in Heaven. Scattered and guarded as are these sayings, they avail to quiet many anxieties. To none other can we go;

"Thou, Lord," we cry with Peter, "hast the words of eternal life."

Beneath them all is the idea of life's unity. The personal life persists—enriched and purified, but not fashioned anew. For "you," for the disciples themselves, for Peter, James and John, for men, not for impersonal phantoms of humanity, is the place prepared. Therefore, as personality endures, all that is of personality's essence—love and memory, capacity, mirth and tender friendship—must needs be eternal. How, then, can we be doubtful of conscious reunion in life's next stage? Consider one example—millions of others would be as apposite, but this chances to be well known. Figure, if you can, Robert Browning parted from his love of his wife. Suppose him to meet her beyond death unthrilled by her presence, and to pass her by unheeding. Term him spirit, angel, enfranchised soul, what you will; this is not Robert Browning. Or conceive a future state wherein Robert Browning, his true self still, finds his yearning to be frustrated, his hopes vain, his visible companionship with his wife lost to him for ever. Term that place what you will; for him it is not Heaven. Indeed, of a stage intermediate between life on earth and final happiness that is, perhaps, the most appealing evidence that the bliss which lacks reunion must be bliss incomplete. The joy of those who have gone before is great already, but not while we are sundered from them can it be full, that they without us should not be made perfect.

Meanwhile, do they in the next stage of life know how it fares with us on earth? No decisive answer can be ventured, yet we may note the converse which the transfigured Christ held with two saints of old time, for they spake of things happening in this world, of the decease which He was to accomplish in Jerusalem.

Of this, at least, the teaching of Jesus may assure us, that the life beyond is a life of service. He clothed that idea in many of His parables, and it matches well His doctrine of the unbroken life. Man is trusted with powers that he may do service first on earth. There is scarce a limit to the diversity of these gifts, which may be of art or handicraft or knowledge, ranging from the skill which guides an empire to some little knack of friendliness which brightens a home or two. But, whatever the gift, its faithful use is both the test and the making of character. It is an essential part of a man's life. Would it seem a fit reward of faithful use that the gift should be withdrawn when the man passes from this world, that hereafter he should have no joy of it and find no scope for its exercise? That does not seem to accord with the mind of Jesus, Who taught that the reward of good service shall be the opportunity of better service. The man who has used aright his gift here will be made ruler over many things, will receive authority over five cities

or ten. The ways in which the old powers are to be put to new use must remain beyond our imagining. What, taught of Christ, we can affirm is that not one gift will be wasted, that the talk is pagan which laments "lives cut short" or "high promise that must remain unfulfilled." No life is "cut short," though some are transferred to a new setting earlier than are others. No promise is "unfulfilled," though the fulfilment may be reached beyond our sight.

It were well for us to see how direly our common forms of speech obscure, or even pervert, the teaching of Jesus. We argue over "a future life," but Jesus did not believe in a future life. **That which He offers to men is a present life**, so that he who believeth is already passed from death unto life. We admit that the "future life" must be shaped by the "present life," but mostly we view them as distinct, the first ending ere the other begins, whereas Jesus viewed life as one, as a continuous and unbroken whole. It follows that we are apt to overrate the importance of physical death, which cannot touch the true life. Certainly the accustomed phrases which Christians use of death are not to be reconciled with Christian faith. When some loyal follower of Jesus is set free from pain and sin, when he passes from this shadowed world into light, when triumphant anthems should herald him into the joy of his Lord, we spread the tidings with doleful looks, we term it "bad news" or even "a tragedy." Our grotesque phrase that "the poor man is dead." We affect, forsooth, to pity him whom the Father has welcomed home! And it is little of the Christian faith that we preach to the world by the manner of our funerals, with their dismal music and trappings of woe, when all their message should be of unselfish thanksgiving and the certain hope.

Death indeed brings its poignant sorrows, which it were heartless to ignore, and the Teacher shared them at the tomb of Lazarus. **Our compassion must be for those left solitary**, bereft of the dear companionships which transfigured life. The mother whose little child is taken, the husband who must toil alone, to gain a success which seems a mockery because it is unshared—these are death's victims, **not they who, departed hence in faith, have passed into the presence of their God.** Yet we may be sure that to understand our Lord's teaching is to feel how slight are the barriers between the seen and the unseen, between those who, in this stage of life and the next, are linked by love. Perchance no surprise will equal that which death may prove itself to be. Instincts of our body make us dread and shrink from it; we feel ourselves drawn, by the compelling force of time, nearer and nearer a harsh wall of rock, against which we shall be crushed. We reach it, and, behold, it proves but a yielding curtain. It parts as we touch it; it parts, and on the other side are the Father's arms.