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ARE YOU AFRAID OF DEATH?

5DN Broadcast Address by the Reverend
LANCE R. SHILTON, B.A., B.D.

Rector of Holy Trinity Church, Adelaide.

Trinity Sermon, No. 12

A detailed black and white illustration of a Gothic Revival church tower, featuring a clock face and a cross on top, set against a background of trees and a fence.

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ARE YOU AFRAID OF DEATH?

The process which is considered normal for us is to pass from life to death; but when Jesus rose from the dead, the reversal of this was assured. Now it is possible for each one of us to pass from death to life and to be able to say, in the words of St. Paul as given to us in I Corinthians 15, verse 44, 'Death is swallowed up in victory.' Or, as it is translated for us in the New English Bible: 'Death is swallowed up. Victory is won.'

Are you afraid of death? Do you joke about the subject simply because you are scared to talk about it seriously? Do you hate to hear the word 'death' mentioned because it gives you a sense of insecurity? Do you refrain from mentioning it because somehow you think it may be what is called 'tempting fate'? Are there unanswered questions about Heaven and Hell in your mind which unsettle you? Then, let us see what the Bible has to tell us about death.

The state of death has been the subject of much speculation from earliest times, amongst people ancient and modern; in times of peace and war; amongst the aged and the young; amongst the primitive and the civilized. Theories concerning it in endless variation are found in all religions. Even if we confine the enquiry to the branches of Christianity, itself, we are met with considerable divergencies among professing Christians. In some cases these divergencies may, or do, constitute serious error. On the other hand, the Scriptural teaching is as clear and definite as in any other aspect of its revelation. The chief requisite in the enquirer is for a careful examination of what the text of Scripture actually says.

First, we notice there is unavoidable physical death. In Hebrews, chapter 9, it says: 'It is appointed unto men once to die', and evidence of this is all around us. There is no difficulty in recognising this truth, because it is obvious. Psalm 89 says: 'What man is he that liveth and shall not see death?'

From the moment a child is born, the fight against death begins. The mother devotes years of attention to the protection of the life of her child; she watches the food, the clothes, the environment, the medical check-up and inoculations. But in spite of her loving care, the child has already begun to die.

Today there are something like two billion people living on this planet; almost all of them will be dead in less than one hundred years. I wonder do you realise that fifty five million people die every year, which works out at the rate of about one hundred a minute. A city with a population of one hundred thousand passes into eternity every day. The average life expectancy is forty years. We are all running a race, in which the most for which we can hope is a little more time. We can't outwit our opponent for very long. We know that death will win. That physical death is unavoidable.

Secondly, there is inexcusable spiritual death. What do we mean by 'spiritual death'? In Romans 8, it tells us that to be 'carnally minded' is death - to have our minds set upon the things of this world, is death. In Ephesians 2, it tells us - as St. Paul wrote to the Ephesian Christians - 'You who were dead in trespasses and sins, wherein in time past ye walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience....' And in I John, we have it very clearly and simply stated: 'He that hath not the Son of God hath not life.' The Scriptures, you see, are clear in their statements that apart from Christ and the new life He brings, we are all spiritually dead - dead in our trespasses and sins. This condition exists now, in this life. We may be perfectly healthy specimens in "Al" condition, like some vigorous sportsmen, but we can at the same time be spiritually dead. A person may be trying to live a good life and measure up to a certain code of behaviour, but at the same time be spiritually dead. A person may attend church and yet be spiritually dead. Unregenerate man is in a state of spiritual death, which may be defined as estrange-

ment and separation from God. A person may read his Bible, and have read it from cover to cover several times, and yet, at the same time, he may be spiritually dead, that is if that person looks at it only from an intellectual point of view.

And there may be those who pray, who really pray their heart out, and yet their prayers do not ascend any further than the ceiling because fundamentally they are spiritually dead. This spiritual death is evident in each and every person who is apart from the life of Christ.

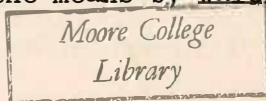
Thirdly, there is inevitable eternal death, or the 'second death'. This indicates a state where spiritual death, or separation from God, is unalterably fixed. This second death is eternal separation from God. The death of your body is nothing compared to the conscious everlasting banishment of the soul from God. The Bible teaches us that we are immortal souls. Your soul is eternal and will live forever. The real you - the part that thinks, that feels, that dreams, that aspires; the ego, the personality - will never die. The Bible makes it very clear that each one of us will live forever in one of two places, Heaven or Hell; and there is no intermediate place. Will a loving God, then, send a man to Hell? The answer is 'Yes' and 'No'. Man condemns himself by his refusal of God's way of salvation. In love and mercy God is offering to men and women a way of escape, a way of salvation, a hope, and anticipation of better things. Man, in his blindness, his stupidity, his stubbornness, his egotism and his love of sinful pleasure, refuses God's simple method of escaping the pangs of eternal punishment. Napoleon, standing on his rock prison on the South Atlantic, said: 'I die before my time. My body will be given back to the earth to be done with as men please and become the food of worms. Such will be the fate of him who has been called 'the Great Napoleon'! What an abyss between my deep misery and the eternal kingdom of Christ, which is proclaimed, loved and adored and is extending over the whole earth!'

Some try to reason their way around this truth by claiming a universalism. In effect, their belief is that eventually all will be saved, all will be delivered, and there is no need to worry because God in His great love will just have nothing to do with punishment; He will forget all about it. But this is not what the Scriptures tell us. It plainly emphasises that it is 'whosoever believeth on Him shall have life'. There are no grounds at all for this universalism. And some have the idea of annihilism or annihilation, when, they say, those who refuse to see God's plan will eventually be annihilated; they will cease to exist altogether - it is not a matter of going to one place or the other - they just cease to exist. But there is not a single word in the revelation which God has given to us in the Scriptures that would support such a view. It is purely speculative reasoning on the part of people who are trying to excuse their way out of a situation.

Others would say that there is a second chance; that in this life or in the next life there will be another opportunity for us to receive the way of salvation which is before us in Christ. But, again, the Bible knows nothing of a second chance. Right through the Scriptures the emphasis is upon 'now'. It says, 'Now is the day of salvation.' 'Now is the accepted time.' 'Today if you will hear His voice harden not your heart.' Just as surely as the Bible pronounces Hell for the sinner, it also pronounces Heaven for the believer.

But what do I mean by 'the believer'? Not a person who has an intellectual belief only, but one who has put his whole trust in the God who has done everything for him. We have it given to us in John 3: 17 - 'God sent not His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved.' 'He that believeth on Him is not condemned ...' This is the way out.

Fourthly, therefore, there is the voluntary death of Christ, and this is the means by which we enter into life.



The gruesome agony of the Cross and the death which Christ died for us is too wonderful for finite minds to fathom. The sharpness of that death extracts the fatal sting and opens the Kingdom of Heaven to all believers, so that one writer said that death has become an evangelist which points the stung and stricken soul to the Saviour. As we look upon the brow of the hill of Calvary, we realise that there was the voluntary death of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ; and because of His death all those who believe on Him have the assurance of everlasting life, for He said, 'I go to prepare a place for you, and I will come again and receive you unto myself, that where I am there ye may be also.' We may say from personal experience, 'Thanks be to God, Who giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.'

Fifthly, there is the daily death of the Christian. Having entered into this wonderful experience of the forgiveness of sins, and the assurance of our salvation; having put our faith in the Cross of Calvary and realising that the Christ of God has taken our place there for us, then we need to give ourselves entirely to Him. It means a death to self. St. Paul said, 'I am crucified with Christ. Nevertheless, I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me, and the life which I now live I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.' Again, he said to the Romans, as he listed the various persecutions through which he was pleased to go for Christ's sake: 'For Thy sake we are killed all the day long.' This is not surprising when Jesus promised His followers not an easy time, but asked them to measure the cost of discipleship, and said: 'Take up your cross daily. Deny yourself and follow Me.' There is a daily death for the Christian as he has done with self. As he enters into service for Christ, he realises that he must 'die' daily. Samuel Rutherford said: 'When I am dying, how glad I shall be that the lamp of my life has been blazed out for Thee!'

St. Paul said, 'Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, unmovable; always abounding in the work of the Lord for-as-much as ye know that your labour is not in vain, in the Lord.'

We move from death to life. Death, then, is swallowed up in victory for us. When we face the unavoidable physical death, when we admit the inexcusable spiritual death, when we turn from the inevitable eternal death, and when we trust in the voluntary death of Christ, and when we experience the daily death of the Christian, what, then, is the nature of the life in to which we pass?

The Lord Jesus said: 'Verily, verily, I say unto you, he that believeth in Me, hath everlasting life.' He always distinguished between the essential, eternal life and outward things, with which it is so easily confused. That's why He said, 'Be not anxious for your life - what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink, or what ye shall put on. Is not the life more than food, and the body than raiment?' First, this life is immediate: we don't have to wait until we die to experience it - it is available to us right now! We don't have to wait until we think that we are good enough. If we do, then the sense of independence which comes when we think we are good enough will prevent us from accepting it.

In the early stages of learning to drive a car, you are very dependent upon your instructor; but gradually you reach a stage where you feel you are good enough to manage on your own. So it is with our lives. When we reach a stage when we feel we are good enough, it is then that we also feel our independence of God.

We don't need to wait until we feel we are bad enough; because we could easily land ourselves in a position where we no longer see the availability of the life which is extended to us; when we can no longer recognise the offer of Christ's salvation. This life from God is available now, and must be received now.

Secondly, it is eternal. Belief in the resurrection of Christ had a profound influence on the disciples' conception of eternal life. What was formerly a somewhat vague idea, capable only of a figurative expression, assumed a definite meaning. Life is that

higher state of existence into which Jesus had actually entered. In Christ we have not only an assurance of the promised life, but also a revelation of its nature. These disciples did not start from some abstract principle or from some philosophical speculations, but from the knowledge of a living person. Physical death no longer has any terror for the Christian when he knows that the life of the eternal Christ is in him, and he has met his Saviour face to face. Death, then, becomes an entrance into a fuller experience of the eternal life which he already possesses.

Thirdly, it is certain. Jesus said: 'I am the resurrection and the life. He that believeth in Me, though he were dead yet shall he live. And whosoever liveth and believeth in Me shall never die.'

There are very few things about which we can be absolutely certain in this life. Some philosophers would tell us that we can't even be certain of our existence; we can't be certain of the material world around us - it may be an optical illusion, it may be a mirage; we may be dreaming it. All kinds of things would mitigate against any certainty in the material realm, but when we come to spiritual truth, our certainty is not dependent upon the perception of our senses, but, rather, upon an inner experience which is absolutely undeniable. We are certain that we have this life within us. Jesus said, 'This is life eternal: that they might know Thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ Whom Thou hast sent.' We can have absolute certainty of this eternal life in our very being right now, if we would but come to Him in faith!

Fourthly, it is gratuitous. It is not something which we earn. It is not something which we can buy, but, rather, it is something which comes to us as a perfect gift from God, for 'God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.' This is the gift of God, the gift of new life; the gift of new victory; the gift of eternal life, which will come to each and every one of us, not because of our merit, or any deserving on our

part, but simply because of what Jesus has done for us. This truth cannot be emphasised too strongly or often enough, because this is the very essence of the Gospel. This is the thing which brings peace and joy and hope and life to all who will come. It is a gift from God, ready to be received by each one in humble faith and sincerity.

Fifthly, it is personal. Certainly there is a way in which this corporate life is experienced throughout the whole body of believers in the Church; but it is something which must be experienced by each and every individual - we must take it to ourselves. It must be an experience in our own hearts and lives, about which we are absolutely certain. I presume to ask you this personal question: 'Is this a personal experience of yours? Or is Christianity some vague idea? Is God some proposition fitting into a formula? Is Jesus Christ simply a good man who lived some time ago, or is He your personal Saviour? Is He the One who gives you life, personally - eternal life, abundant life, victorious life?' This life can come to each one. It is immediate; it is eternal; it is certain; it is gratuitous; it is personal - for you. Then you may say, 'Death is swallowed up in victory!' 'Death is swallowed up. Victory is won.' You have passed from condemnation to salvation; from Hell to Heaven; from despair to hope; from sin to the Saviour; from death unto life! May God grant that each one will enter into that rich experience right now, and say with the writer of this verse:

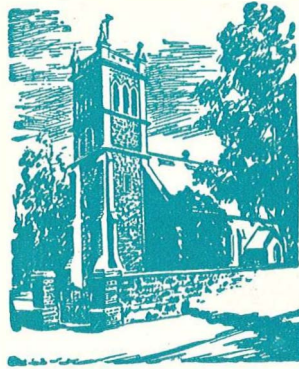
'Upon a Life I did not live,
Upon a Death I did not die -
Another's life, Another's death -
I stake my whole eternity.'

PRAYER

O, God, we thank Thee that Thou dost enable us to pass from death unto life when we put our faith in Jesus Christ, our Saviour. Enable us to do this now in all humble sincerity, that we might find the new life which He offers so freely, and enter into this experience by faith for Jesus' sake.

Amen.

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