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Sermons

IMMORTALITY.

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Because I live ye shall live also.—JOHN xiv., 19.

LIFE, death, eternity—how vast, how deep, how solemn these three words, so familiar to us all! Who can measure, who can fathom their meaning? In the midst of life we are surrounded by death and confronted by eternity with its boundless prospects of weal and woe. Life on earth ends in death, and death is but the dark door to another life which has no end. Astronomy cannot tell whether this visible universe has boundaries or not, and what lies beyond. Theology cannot determine the locality of that invisible universe from which no traveller returns, nor the direction and length of that lonely passage which carries the disembodied spirit from its present to its future abode. But this we do know—and it is enough for our comfort—that in our Father's house are many mansions, and that our Saviour has prepared a place for all His disciples. There is an abundance of room for all even within the limits of this universe, and for aught we know, the spirit world may be very near and round about us. There are exalted moments in our life when we see the heavens open and the angels of God descending and ascending. Life is a mystery, a glorious mystery with a heaven beyond, but a terrible mystery with annihilation or endless punishment in prospect.

The immortality of the soul is a universal instinct and desire of the

human race. Like the idea of God, it is implanted in our intellectual and moral constitution. We cannot think backward without reaching an ultimate cause which has no beginning; we cannot think forward without arriving at a result which has no ending. God and eternity precede time and succeed time, and time itself is filled with both. We cannot conceive that a wise Creator should make man in His own image and endow him with the highest faculties without ordaining him for endless existence. He cannot intend the head of His creatures, the master-piece of His hand, to perish like the brute. He cannot allow virtue to suffer and iniquity to flourish without some future adjustment which will give to every one his due and restore the harmony of character and condition. It seems impossible that a rational being filled with infinite longings and capable of endless progress should be suddenly cut off in the beginning of its career, "like the empty fabric of a vision leaving no wreck behind." It seems impossible that the mind, which proves its independence of the body and matures in strength while the body declines, should be dissolved with its material tent. No husband can close the eyes of a beloved wife, no parent can commit a child to the cold grave, no friend can bid farewell to a bosom friend, without the ardent wish of the recovery of the loss and a meeting again in a better world, where tears of parting are unknown. Every consideration of God's goodness, love and justice, of man's capacities, desires and hopes, and of surrounding nature, with its perennial renovations of seasons and transformations of death itself into new forms of life, forces upon us the belief in the immortality of the human soul.

But after all, philosophy and science can lead us only to the probability of immortality, and there is a vast step from probability to certainty. The starry heavens above and the moral law within may well have filled the great philosopher of the last century with ever-growing reverence and awe; but beyond the starry heavens and behind the moral law lie the sublimer regions of faith, which fill us with deeper reverence and which alone can give us solid comfort in life and in death.

Another profound and keen thinker of the nineteenth century, who had mastered all the systems from Plato to Kant, when he stood at the open grave of his only child, could find no comfort in any philosophical argument, but only in the all-powerful prayer of Christ, "Father, I will that they also whom Thou hast given me be with me where I am" (John xvii., 26); and in the assurance of His beloved disciple, "It doth not yet appear what we shall be; but we know that when He shall appear we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is" (John iii., 2). Supported by these firm assurances, he said, and trusting therein my child's immortal life, I repeat from my heart the words of Holy Writ, "The Lord gave and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord!" (Job i., 21.)

Faith in Christ who can never die, who is the conqueror of death and the prince of life, gives us the best security for our immortality. In union with Christ the future life is an immortality of bliss; out of Christ it is an immortality of woe.

Let us glance, first, at the notions which prevailed among the heathen and Jews on this subject before the advent of our Lord, that we may see the difference.

1. The heathen ideas of the future life were vague and confused. The Hindoos, Babylonians, and Egyptians had a lively sense of immortality, but mixed with the notion of endless migrations and transformations through various forms of vegetable and animal life. The Buddhists, starting from the idea that existence is want, and want is suffering, make it the chief end of man to escape such migrations, and by various mortifications to prepare for annihilation or absorption in the unconscious dream-life of Nirwana. The popular belief among the ancient Greeks and Romans was that man passes after death into the Underworld, the Greek *Hades*, the Roman *Orcus*. According to Homer, Hades is a dark abode in the interior of the earth, with an entrance at the western extremity of the ocean, where the rays of the sun do not penetrate. Charon carries the dead over the stream; Acheron and the three-headed dog Cerberus watch the entrance and allow none to pass out. There the spirits exist in a disembodied state and lead a shadowy dream-life. A vague distinction was made between two regions in Hades, an Elysium (also "the Islands of the Blessed") for the good, and Tartarus for the bad.

Socrates, Plato, Cicero, Seneca, and Plutarch rose highest among the ancient philosophers in their views of the future life, but they reached only to belief in its probability, not in its certainty. Socrates, after he was condemned to death, said to his judges: "Death is either an eternal sleep or a transition to a new life; but in neither case is it an evil;" and he drank with playful irony the fatal hemlock. Plato, viewing the human soul as a portion of the eternal, infinite, all-pervading Deity, believed in its pre-existence before this present life, and thus had a strong ground of hope for its continuance after death. All the souls pass into the spirit world, the righteous into the abodes of bliss, where they live forever in a disembodied state, the wicked into Tartarus for punishment and purification, and the incorrigibly bad for eternal punishment. Plutarch, the purest and noblest among the Platonists, thought that immortality was inseparably connected with belief in an all-ruling Providence, and looked to the life beyond as promising a higher knowledge of and closer conformity to God, but only for those few who are here purified by virtue and piety. In such rare cases departure might be called an ascent to the stars, to heaven, to the gods, rather than a descent to Hades. At the death of his daughter, he comforted his wife with the hope in the blissful state of infants who die in infancy. Cicero reflects in classical language "the ignorance, the errors, and the uncertainty of the ancient philosophers with regard to the immortality of the soul." Though strongly leaning to a positive view, he yet found it no superfluous task to quiet the fear of death in case the soul should perish with the body. The Stoics believed only in a limited immortality, or denied it altogether, and justified suicide when life became unendurable. The great men of Greece

and Rome were not influenced by the idea of a future world as a motive of action. During the debate on the punishment of Catiline and his fellow-conspirators, Julius Caesar openly declared in the Roman Senate that death dissolves all the ills of mortality, and is the boundary of existence beyond which there is no more care nor joy, no more punishment for sin, nor any reward for virtue. The younger Cato, the model Stoic, agreed with Caesar; yet before he made an end to his life at Utica he read Plato's *Phædon*. Seneca once dreamed of immortality, and almost approached the Christian hope of the birth-day of eternity, if we are to trust his rhetoric, but afterwards he awoke from the beautiful dream and committed suicide. Marcus Aurelius, in sad resignation, bids nature, "Give what thou wilt, and take back what thou wilt."

Yet the scepticism of the educated and half-educated could not extinguish the popular belief in immortality. The number of cheerless and hopeless materialistic epitaphs is very small as compared with the many thousands which reveal no such doubt, or express belief in some kind of existence beyond the grave.

Of a resurrection of the body the Greeks and Romans had no conception, except in the form of shades and spectral outlines, which were supposed to surround the disembodied spirits, and to make them to some degree recognizable. Heathen philosophers like Celsus ridiculed the resurrection of the body as useless, absurd and impossible.

2. The Jewish doctrine is far in advance of heathen notions and conjectures, but presents different phases of development.

The Mosaic writings are remarkably silent about the future life, and emphasize the present rather than future consequences of the observance or non-observance of the law (because it has a civil or political as well as spiritual import); and hence the Sadducees denied the resurrection (perhaps also the immortality of the soul). The Pentateuch contains, however, some remote and significant hints of immortality, as in the tree of life with its symbolic import; in the mysterious translation of Enoch as a reward for his piety; in the prohibition of necromancy; in the patriarchal phrase for dying, "to be gathered to his fathers," or "to his people;" and in the self-designation of Jehovah as "the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob," which implies their immortality, since "God is not a God of the dead, but of the living." What has an eternal meaning for God must itself be eternal.

In the latter writings of the Old Testament, especially during and after the exile, the doctrine of immortality and resurrection comes out plainly. Daniel's vision reaches out even to the final resurrection of "many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth to everlasting life," and of "some to shame and everlasting contempt," and prophesies that "they that are wise shall shine as the brightness of the firmament, and they that turn many to righteousness as the stars for ever and ever."

But before Christ, who first revealed true life, the Hebrew Sheol, the general receptacle of departing souls, remained, like the Greek Hades, a dark

and dreary abode, and is so described in the Old Testament. Cases like Enoch's translation and Elijah's ascent are altogether unique and exceptional, and imply the meaning that death is not necessarily the transition to another life.

3. The Christian doctrine of the future life differs from the heathen, and to a less extent also from the Jewish, in the following important points:

First, it gives to the belief in a future state the absolute certainty of divine revelation, sealed by the fact of Christ's resurrection, and thereby imparts to the present life an immeasurable importance, involving endless issues.

In the next place, it connects the resurrection of the body with the immortality of the soul, and thus saves the whole individuality of man from destruction.

Moreover, Christianity views death as the punishment of sin, and therefore as something terrible, from which nature shrinks. But its terror has been broken, and its sting extracted by Christ.

And finally, Christianity qualifies the idea of a future state by the doctrine of sin and redemption, and thus makes it to the believer a state of absolute holiness and happiness; to the impenitent sinner a state of absolute misery. Death and immortality are a blessing to the one, but a terror to the other; the former can hail them with joy; the latter has reason to tremble. The Bible inseparably connects the future life with the general judgment, which determines the ultimate fate of all men according to their works done in this earthly life.

To the Christian this present life is simply a pilgrimage to a better country and to a city whose builder and maker is God. Every day he moves his tent nearer his true home. His citizenship is in heaven, his thoughts, his hopes, his aspirations, are heavenly. This unworldliness or heavenly-mindedness, far from disqualifying him for the duties of earth, makes him more faithful and conscientious in his calling; for he remembers that he must render an account for every word and deed at a bar of God's judgment. Yea, in proportion as he is heavenly-minded and follows the example of his Lord and Saviour, he brings heaven down to earth and lifts earth up to heaven, and infuses the purity and happiness of heaven into his heart and home. Faith unites us to Christ, who is life itself in its truest, fullest conception; life in God, life eternal. United with Christ, we live indeed, shedding round about us the rays of His purity, goodness, love and peace. Death has lost its terror; it is but a short slumber from which we shall awake in His likeness and enjoy what eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor ever entered the imagination of man. "Because I live, ye shall live also."

" Do Thou Thy benediction give
On all who teach, on all who learn,
That all the Church may holier live,
And every lamp more brightly burn."

JOHN ARMSTRONG.