

Death and Beyond.

OF the very few good results to be traced to the war, perhaps one for which we may well be grateful is that it compelled us once again to face the question of a future life, and, what is perhaps even more important, to revise some of our earlier views regarding it.

"If a man die, shall he live again?" is a question man has been asking from very early times; and to judge by the interest its discussion still occasions, it is by no means devoid of the power to stir thought and attention even to-day. Though dim and largely superstitious in its earlier expressions, the conviction that this life is not, and cannot be, the end of existence, has become more firmly rooted in human consciousness with the passing of the years. If there is no such thing as a hereafter, the thought immediately arises, "To what end this waste?"

There are two lines of approach to the consideration of this theme: one surveys the arguments solely from the standpoint of human survival; the other associates the whole matter with religious faith, and starting with that premise, endeavours to discover what is the teaching of Christianity concerning it. The former way of approach has to do with the scientific and philosophical grounds for belief in immortality; the latter traces its belief to the Bible and argues not simply for human survival, but for eternal life. Whatever proof may be forthcoming in the realms of physics and psychology for immortality, that does not satisfy the profoundest need of the soul. Survival alone may be something almost abhorrent unless accompanied by the joyous hope that the Christian faith affords. It is this line of enquiry, therefore, we shall now briefly attempt to pursue.

The Bible draws a marked distinction between what is termed physical life and what we speak of as everlasting life; and it is with the second that it is chiefly concerned. The first is regarded as something temporary, incomplete, fleeting; all the figures employed to express it suggest how transient and uncertain it is. But when the Bible refers to the life beyond, invariably it does so in a manner that reveals its essential importance and the need for the acceptance of certain spiritual truths for its realisation.

If we would be fully conversant with what the Bible has to say on this subject, we must begin our study in the Old Testament, for it is there we find the roots of those ideas that

later became translated into the convincing faith of the New Testament.

The first thing one discovers is that the Old Testament has really very little to say about the future life—at any rate prior to the two centuries immediately preceding the Christian era. Until then, whatever ideas were held were for the most part very crude and ill-developed. Nevertheless, there is one fact that for our present argument is of importance: immortality in the Old Testament, as well as in the New, is always found to be related to and dependent upon God. For that reason we are warranted in affirming that all Christian teaching on this theme must have its springs there. Whatever modifications are necessary from time to time as the result of enlarging views and increased knowledge, this basic principle remains, which no progress of thought or discovery can contravene. However indebted, therefore, we may be to science for the support it may give to the theory of survival after death, as Christians we claim that eternal life as revealed in the Bible is something far more to be desired, and altogether beyond the competence of science to prove or disprove.

The earliest conceptions among the Hebrews associated immortality with Sheol—to them a place of shadows and darkness, possessing no moral significance whatsoever. They gave no thought to the possibility or otherwise of rewards hereafter. Sheol was a place where God did not enter and from which consequently all light and joy were excluded. Its inhabitants were conceived as mere “shades of the dead,” still retaining their familiar appearance perhaps, but having neither souls nor bodies. God was thought of as living always in His people, not amongst the dead. Any notion the Hebrew entertained regarding a life to come was more closely associated with the future prosperity of his nation than with belief in personal immortality. So long as his national hopes and aspirations could ultimately be fulfilled in either his children or their descendants, he could die in peace and utmost content. It was only as time went on and national hopes failed to be realised, when the nation was broken up through exile and other causes, and when disparity between conduct and reward became apparent and life's inequalities manifested themselves, that the people's thoughts turned to the possibility of another existence in which these contradictions would be adjusted, where there would be some close correspondence between behaviour and material prosperity.

Yet even so, the new hope that began to fill their vision was not so much one of personal immortality as of the transference of the kingdom for which they looked from an earthly environment to a heavenly. If, they argued, this happier state of affairs

is incapable of realisation here, why not in some other realm? Later this view was still further developed into the conception of the Kingdom of Heaven, the New Jerusalem of the Apocalypses. In no way does the Old Testament contemplate heaven or hell as we have come to interpret these terms. They were a later product. To the Hebrew mind everything centred in God. If God were present little else mattered; if God were absent then all was dark. Apart from God there could be no life at all, either here or hereafter.

In the New Testament we find a somewhat different atmosphere, though the underlying thought remains unchanged. Immortality is still found to be conditional upon man's relation to God. Apart from that a life beyond has no place either in the teaching of Jesus or in that of His apostles. "This life is in His Son; he that hath the Son hath the life." Let us consider in the first place what Jesus had to say.

To our Lord's mind all thought of an hereafter was closely identified with His teaching concerning the Kingdom of God. As has been noticed already, that idea had its roots in the Old Testament; but Jesus amplified it and gave to it a wider application. He made it central in all that He sought to impart to men regarding the nature and purpose of God. As we follow His thought along this particular line it becomes evident that to Him the Kingdom had both an earthly and a heavenly significance—the frontiers overlapped, the boundaries intersected each other. He could pray: "Thy Kingdom come, as in heaven, so on earth." For Jesus the Kingdom meant the reign of God everywhere: here amidst the stress and strain of this world's duties, and there in the higher realms of glorified service. That the Divine will should be done in the hearts of men—that was the burden of His desire, and to its achievement He urged His claim with all the power of its winning appeal. Nor did Jesus set any bounds to the time of the Kingdom's coming. In many instances He describes it as already come. "If I by the finger of God cast out demons, then is the Kingdom of God come upon you." But to Him it was also in process of coming. "The Kingdom of God is in the midst of you." And yet again, He looked for the Kingdom as a glorious future possibility. Most of our Lord's "Kingdom" parables seem to bear this interpretation, while other passages point directly to the fact that He looked for a day when the Kingdom ideal might be fully perfected and God's rule prevail throughout the universe.

In the teaching of Jesus, too, we find definite reference to personal immortality. What may have been somewhat vaguely implicit in late Hebrew thought and writing Jesus made gloriously explicit. There is nothing nebulous about His utterances on this

matter, but a clear declaration that there is a life beyond for those who are prepared to fulfil the conditions. What those conditions are we shall notice more precisely later. For the moment it is necessary to consider the bearing of our Lord's resurrection upon our enquiry, and to ask what value it has for our belief in a life to come.

It is frequently supposed that our faith in a future existence depends almost entirely upon the fact that Jesus rose from the dead. But does it? The evidence is that, important though the doctrine of the Resurrection is as an integral element in Christian belief, our hope of a life beyond rests upon something much deeper. The Resurrection was not an isolated event. That is to say, Jesus could have risen from the dead without it affecting us in any way whatever, except as a cause for wonder and astonishment. What our Lord's rising from the dead really indicates is exactly what has already been noted regarding the teaching of the Old Testament, namely, that eternal life derives from God and is conditioned by the soul's relation to God. We belong to a spiritual order, of which we are made heirs by faith in Jesus Christ. As our Representative He has broken the powers of death, so that by union with God in Him we are assured of a like victory. That oneness with the Father that made possible His triumph over death and the grave gives equal promise to us of a similar resurrection.

Thus there is set upon life a valuation that nothing else can give to it. The span of a few years cannot possibly exhaust the meaning and possibilities that such a conception of life affords. The inference is—and is it not more than an inference? is it not the substance of all New Testament teaching?—that resurrection and life as Jesus understood them are blessings one may enjoy here and now. It is gloriously possible for us to pass from death into life and so at once enter upon that eternal pilgrimage that any dissolution of our bodies is powerless to impede. The intervention of death is not necessary to assure us of the fact of resurrection; it can be the experience here of all who avail themselves of entrance into that life which results from personal union with God in Christ.

The teaching of Paul and other writers in the new Testament amply supports what has been said regarding that of Jesus. There is no contradiction as some would persuade us there is. All hope of a life to come for the Early Church depended upon a condition of faith-union with Christ. Apart from the creation of such the possibility of immortality found no support. Because Jesus has fulfilled in Himself the great reconciling ministry that brings us into living relation with God, all the Divine life revealed in Jesus is made ours through Him. He being one with God and

the sharer of eternal life with God, we through Him partake in that life too. Because He lives, we live also. Whatever corroboration of this teaching may from time to time emanate from other quarters, the Christian claim rests absolutely upon Scripture, which declares that life hereafter is conditional solely upon man's personal and immediate relation to God as made known in Christ.

Regarding the question of judgment and final destiny, which must be taken into account if we would do full justice to this argument, we find that in this principle for which we have been contending we have something that is of considerable help in lighting us along an otherwise dark and uncertain path. No examination of the subject of a future life can afford to ignore the fact of sin, for it is inextricably woven into the warp and woof of our existence, and therefore has consequences far beyond this present life as well as in it. Sin separates from God, and for that reason affects all our relation to Him. We believe that for those who accept of God's provision in Jesus Christ, there is salvation from sin and deliverance from its power to destroy our spiritual life; but what of those who do not avail themselves of this provision? Is their refusal in no way to affect any future condition into which they may enter? To imagine that in the life beyond all start upon equal terms, as it were, without any reference to the kind of life they have lived here, is surely to undermine the true meaning and spiritual value of this present existence. If it is not disciplinary and preparatory, wherein lies its purpose? We feel assured that there is a principle of continuity linking the present with the future, so that as our course here closes, so shall the other begin. Righteousness must be rewarded and sin bring the inevitable consequences of its guilt. But how? That is the question that has occasioned great disputation in the past, and is still a fruitful cause of much diversity of opinion.

Concerning the character of the future life, and more especially when viewed from the standpoint of sin and future retribution, there are three main opinions between which for the most part thought is divided. The first is what may be termed the orthodox view. This insists that a person's eternal destiny is fixed at death; that the future holds alternatively everlasting life and everlasting punishment. As a soul passes over so it must go to one or other of these two states, and at that moment its disposition is settled without any possibility of change. The second view is what is known as universal salvation. Those holding it claim that the idea of souls being eternally lost is contrary to our conceptions of Divine love as revealed to us in Jesus Christ. Supporters of this doctrine, therefore, believe that

ultimately all will have the opportunity of accepting the provision of salvation God has made and so will enter into the fullness of the inheritance promised in the life to come. The third view is known as potential immortality. While it is exceedingly difficult for the majority of people to accept the doctrine of everlasting punishment in the way that earlier theologians did, and at the same time feeling that the doctrine of universal salvation does not give due place to the moral implications of sin, the idea of potential immortality offers a midway line of approach that at once gives due place to the teaching of Scripture in the way we have already seen, yet in no way outrages our sense of the character of God on the one hand or weakens our judgment as to the heinousness of sin on the other.

No little confusion has resulted from the fact that all too frequently a wrong interpretation has been put upon such terms as Hades and Gehenna. The former, it should be noted, corresponds to the Old Testament word Sheol, while Gehenna was possibly the place used for the purpose of purifying. It was a heap where refuse was destroyed. That in itself is suggestive of what we are convinced is always the Divine intention. The wood and hay and stubble are to be burned, but not the gold and silver, except in so far as thereby they shall be purged and purified. And if that process of purification is not complete at the moment this present existence terminates, are we to say that it must consequently cease for ever? If so, then surely it must cease for all of us, because not one of us is completely purified by a very long way.

When the question is approached thoughtfully and with unprejudiced minds, we feel that it is a very narrow view of God and of His purpose for mankind that would limit the reaches of His working to the span of life as we know it here, and argues that beyond this present God is cramped so that He cannot do even what His heart may crave to do. It is incompatible with our conceptions of Divine love and righteousness to say that a sudden accident or some other unexpected form of death is to seal a soul's destiny for ever. Think of those who, during the war, were hurled into eternity by the flight of a stray bullet or shell. To argue that such occasions seal the doom of human souls is to attribute to God a spirit such as we have not learned in Jesus Christ. If God is omnipotent, as we claim He is, are we justified in limiting the operation of His power to this life? The only satisfactory view is the one which looks at this existence and the one beyond as two phases of one great experience. As Jesus declared: "In My Father's house are many abiding-places"; but though many they are all in the one house. If we insist that the moment of death is to determine the future

without any possibility of change, it means that sin is more powerful than God, that God's love is unavailing to overcome it. No doctrine of God is sufficient that denies to Him the use of every means within His reach for bringing even the most hardened and rebellious soul within the bounds of His eternal mercy and saving grace. And until every effort that can be employed is exhausted, we may be sure God's patience and all-gracious goodness will reach out to the uttermost limits in the hope of winning those still outside the fold.

But that is not to say, as universalism does, that ultimately all will be brought within the compass of God's redeemed. Potential immortality allows for the possibility that some will persistently resist the overtures of God's love until they shall be so alienated from all deeper feelings and sense of response as to be altogether incapable of accepting the life held out to them. It is terribly possible that a time may come for those who deliberately turn from God when all hope of union with Him is destroyed, when every finer aspiration has become so atrophied that no response whatever is forthcoming. If that is not death, what is? Surely that is the spiritual death of which Paul speaks. If, as we have tried to show, eternal life depends upon faith-union with Christ, to enjoy no such union must of necessity involve death. Unending life in God is the potential possession of all through faith in Jesus Christ. To believe it and accept it is to enter forthwith that life which now is and which will come in ever greater measure as here and hereafter we yield more fully to its urge; but to refuse it is to imperil our soul's welfare and to lay ourselves open to the danger of hardness and rebelliousness such as may eventually prove our eternal undoing. So to cut ourselves off from the springs of life can result in nothing but extinction, for to be separated from God is to be denied our sole means of existence.

No doctrine of a future life, therefore, is either satisfactory or worthy of serious consideration that does not give due place, first, to our conception of God; and second, to the idea that life is all of a piece, death being not an arbitrary but an incidental dividing line. At the same time we have to interpret that life as being always conditioned upon our fulfilment of that relationship which is both basic and essential for all Christian belief.

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Perhaps it should be made clear that, while modern spiritualist methods of approach to this subject, as well as other movements of a like character, are fully recognised, the scope of this article does not allow of their being included in our survey.

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