

this subject can be judged satisfactory, even in a scientific point of view, in which due place is not given to the solemn fact of the universal consciousness of sin, and the profoundly significant phenomena of conscience.

ARTICLE V.

THE DEATH OF JESUS CHRIST; ITS PHYSIOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE.

BY WM. O. AYRES, M. D., LECTURER ON NERVOUS DISEASES IN THE DEPARTMENT OF MEDICINE, YALE UNIVERSITY.

WAS it like an ordinary death? The two thieves could not die, and were killed by the soldiers. Was Jesus Christ *killed* by the agonies of the crucifixion? Have we reason to believe that any other human death has ever occurred in the same way that this occurred? These are very momentous questions and they are worthy of the most scrutinizing study that we can give them. We will follow them in three lines of thought:

- I. The physiological principles which are involved.
- II. The claims which Christ makes for himself.
- III. The facts as they occurred at the time of his death.

I. THE PHYSIOLOGICAL PRINCIPLES.

Without discussing at all the absolute nature of *life*, we are fully entitled, in the present state of our knowledge, to assume that it has in itself an inherent persistence of continuance which necessarily insures its duration, until it is destroyed by forces exterior to itself. Of itself it is self-existent. Be its mode of commencement what it may, it is doing its own special work, and it ceases to exist only when external forces destroy it.

We find but one law of life. The same principles and rules prevail from the most simple and undifferentiated types of vegetable life to man, the most differentiated of all; and we may

take man alone as our illustration, having this advantage in so doing, that we can appeal to historical experiences and to our own personal consciousness. For while man, by his intellectual, his cerebral, nature is utterly beyond all other animals, and entirely separated from them, yet he is as truly and fully an animal as any quadruped of them all, and it is his animal nature alone which we are now to consider, for that alone is subject to the laws of life, and of course to the event of death.

It is within our experience, it is a part of our consciousness, that no man has control over his own life, either to hold it or to loose it. We feel well assured that it may pass from us at any minute, for we have no mastery over the details of our environment, and what a moment may bring forth no man can foretell; but we are fully as well assured that it does not depend on our own choice to say, "Now I will die," and with that the physical end will come. This we know to be utterly beyond the range of our ability. Many and many a one in anguish of soul, or even in frightful agony of body, has longed for death and has prayed for death—has begged for death at, say the physician's hands (hands *inexpertus loquor*) and always because the power to lay down one's own life was not at his command. For any man to say, "I lay down my life—I have power to lay it down," involves an absurdity. It would be not only a monstrous falsehood, but, as we shall see a little later, a dreadful blasphemy.

The causes of death are innumerable and endlessly varied, but they have all one common feature, they convey with them the element of depression. They act in antagonism to vital force, and that force is an entity whose energy must be lowered till it is destroyed. Death can come in no other way. Discarding external violence, we group other causes in general under the sweeping term of *disease*, though in our death-certificates allowance is made for "old age," which simply means that the wear and tear of continued years may count as the depressing agent which has destroyed the vital force. But in every case we admit and assume that the death has been due exclusively to agencies over which the man himself could exercise no control.

We find no instance in which he could be said to lay down his life of himself.

A second fact is this : While we certainly have no power over the close of life, except to destroy it by external violence, we almost as certainly have no power over its origination. We can safely say that no human efforts have yet succeeded in developing life *ab initio* ; in causing life to exist where no life was before, and we are forced to the conclusion that all life is due to antecedent life, and that a Power greater than that of man or of the existing *Natural Forces*, as they are designated, is needed for its origination.

The evidences for substantiation of this proposition are entirely negative, but they are overwhelming in their weight. They have come successively to light from the fact that the importance, and in fact the absolute necessity, of establishing the initiation of life by means of natural forces (chemical, electrical, or what not), was so sharply felt by those who believe that there is an unbroken succession in nature from below upward, that from inorganic materials the series runs smoothly up to organic essence—first, in its simplest forms and types, and thence to those most complicated and differentiated—all being controlled by Law without the possibility of intervention from without, that their efforts for years and years were unceasing to show that life could be originated where it had not previously existed. I say that these efforts *were* unceasing, because I think that they, at the present time, have practically ceased, and that the attempt has been very unwillingly abandoned. The effort was almost entirely in one line of action. An infusion of organic material of some sort—it might be vegetable, it might be animal—was prepared and was then “sterilized,” as it was claimed, commonly by the agency of heat, and every precaution was taken that germs from without could have no access to it. It was held to be true that if in such an infusion, hermetically sealed, living bodies were subsequently found, they must have originated *de novo* ; it was a case of spontaneous generation.

Many instances of success were from time to time reported, the living objects observed being always members of that almost

infinitely numerous group of organisms which of late "have turned the world upside down," known in general language as *Bacteria*; no higher or more differentiated types were claimed, or even expected, and even of these, when the experiments came to be minutely scrutinized, the evidence of success was invariably wanting. The certainty of perfect sterilization could scarcely be secured, for more and more complete trials have clearly shown that thus far we have no sure knowledge of the degree of temperature which will certainly destroy the *spores* of these microscopic organisms. And, as already stated, so persistent have been the failures of success in securing spontaneous generation, that I think scarcely any writers claim it as anything more than a *possible* factor; no one asserts that it has ever been demonstrated.

But one very serious difficulty meets us in relation to this matter which should be clearly stated. Supposing that success had been secured; supposing that *Bacteria* had shown themselves in very truth, would that have been an origination of life? *Certainly not*; for the simple reason that the very existence of a *Bacterium* necessarily shows the existence of antecedent life. It is impossible that it should be the first of a series of living beings. Our knowledge of the *Bacteria* is as yet very limited; even their very nature is disputed; they are animal—they are vegetable—who knows? But this one thing we do know, whatever they are they have not the power of assimilating for their nourishment carbon not already organized. They cannot decompose carbonic acid; its carbon must have been previously set free for them. That is to say, they are dependent for their power of life on preceding life. Spontaneous generation can never commence with *Bacteria*.

Those who hold that no interference from external power with what are known as *natural laws* is possible; that in fact there is no power superior to physical forces, and that no appeal can be made in the light of true science to anything except that which can be tested by physical means, claim, of course, that, though the originating of life has not yet been demonstrated, we are to believe it *will be*. It will be, because theoretically it

ought to be. The doctrine of unbroken, upward progress from the lowest to the highest requires it. The rapid accumulation of knowledge renders it impossible for us to say to-day what may be brought to light to-morrow. This has a semblance of reason in it, but it is only a semblance. It is a convenient support (?) on which to fall back, for it cannot be attacked and demolished as being too vague. But to what does it amount? It is merely an improved supposition; nothing more, and it comes in opposition to all past experience. We find certain results and sequences invariably to follow certain antecedents, so invariably that we say we have found a natural *law*; of these there are many, and one feature of them all is that their sway is uniform. Universal experience to the present time has shown that no one has ever known life to originate in any other way than the one so well known. Are we not, therefore, fairly entitled to assert that we have here a natural *law*, which, like the others, is sure to be uniform?

And, as further bearing on this point, we are entitled fairly to take into the account the fact that life as a force is widely and radically distinct from any and all of the other forces of nature. It associates itself with them, acts with them, uses them for its own purposes and necessities; but it also acts independently of them, and is not amenable to their laws. It is, in truth, a force *sui generis*. It is the only one, so far as we know, that has the power of self-perpetuating; the only one which has the element of persistence, because it maintains its own existence by means of its own inherent faculty of assimilation and renewal.

To what, then, can I trace the origin of a force so peculiar in all its features; so unlike all other forces? The laws which control and actuate all inorganic matter fail me. I find life existing as a fixed fact; I find every reason to be convinced that no natural forces—meaning physical—have ever produced it. As a scientific man, I am compelled to infer that there must be some power beyond that of which my senses are cognizant; something which is to me a mystery. As a Christian man, I believe that extraneous Power to be the one that I

accept by faith, the infinite God, and in that belief I consider that I am following the laws of true scientific induction. I hold all natural laws to have been of divine and infinite origin; but those which pertain to inorganic matter were apparently called into existence long before life (as we use the term) was manifest on our globe. And when life began at the first, and at all subsequent impartations, it implied an act of divine energy. I can come to no other conclusion. Interpret in whatever mode we may, the expression "breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living soul," it seems to me a necessary item of adoption that our life is a divine gift in the beginning, for I am satisfied that nothing less than Infinite Power could have been competent to the act. And the corollary from this conclusion seems to me plain, that the only Being who could have the absolute control of life, must, of necessity, be equal in power with the One who originally gave it. And with this we come to the second line of thought specified.

II. THE CLAIMS WHICH CHRIST MAKES FOR HIMSELF.

Reference may be made to the expressions in John vi. 35, "I am the bread of life," and in John xiv. 6, "I am . . . the life," but without laying stress upon them, for their primary, and perhaps their exclusive, allusions are to spiritual life; though it seems to me that probably the mind of the speaker was filled at the same time with the idea of his own absolute power over all life, spiritual and physical, and that the words may well convey to us more vivid impressions of the absolute divinity of Christ than we are accustomed to receive from them. But the same words, "I am . . . the life," when spoken to Martha (John vi. 25) almost certainly have their main relation to physical life. Lazarus had passed through the experience of physical death, and for this his sister was mourning. And when Jesus assured her that her brother should live again, she accepted the statement as pertaining only to an indefinite, distant future, but was at once met with "I am the life," and the immediate result showed its signification. Nothing of this refers at all to spiritual life, and it is plain that Jesus intended

that all the observers should understand that the absolute power of life, its origination, was his by his own inherent right, and he proved it by imparting life where life did not exist. He made the claim and he established it, and even the Pharisees acknowledged its force—he must be put away or they must acknowledge his divinity.

But the most explicit statements and claims which Christ makes of life-power are given in the tenth chapter of John's Gospel. In verse 15, "I lay down my life for the sheep." In verses 17 and 18, "I lay down my life that I might take it again. No man taketh it from me, but I lay it down of myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again." Those are his words, and they sound to us appropriate because we recognize the divine nature of the speaker. Imagine them uttered by any other man who ever lived, and how they would sound!

It by no means satisfies the requirement to infer that "I lay down my life" simply signifies "I voluntarily submit myself to the circumstances and the forces which will cause death. I could easily make my escape and save my life, but I choose to sacrifice myself, for the sake of ulterior results." Many a brave and devoted man has done that, and has been honored in all time for it. Jesus Christ expressly specifies his meaning, so that there can be no mistake—"I have power to lay it down." Who has not, if understood in that sense? Any one of us can submit himself to circumstances in which external forces will take away his life, and certainly would not think of making any claim on that account. And in the very next words comes the correlated expression which explains the one preceding, "and I have power to take it again." It is manifest that the two acts are mentioned as being of equal dignity; the power required for the one is the equivalent of the power required for the other.

No fair interpretation can fail to bring out the idea that Christ intends in these words to state distinctly that he has the absolute power of life and of death, and that when the end of his physical life shall come, he will put away his life voluntarily

by *laying it down*, not by its being taken from him. The power to do this, as we have seen, is not within human reach, it is not a human power. The power required to resume his life after it had departed is nothing greater than that of laying it down, for either one of them is absolutely divine. To my mind the resurrection of Jesus Christ conveys no stronger assurance that he is equal with the Father than does his death, though the resurrection stands by itself in the whole extent of the world's history, and human death *looking* like that of Jesus Christ is of constant experience.

It is well at this point to meet an objection which, but for one circumstance, might fairly be made. How can we prove that that death on Calvary was real? Cases of apparent death and subsequent recovery are not by any means uncommon. A cataleptic attack, for instance, may last much longer than from Friday till Sunday, during which there shall be every appearance of actual death, though ordinarily without the total loss of vital heat, and even in that respect we have no evidence whatever as to the condition of the body of Jesus, after its sepulture. But, independently of catalepsy and that class of conditions, we have evidence which cannot be questioned, that some of the enthusiasts of the Oriental religions can voluntarily induce a state of suspended animation, perfectly simulating death in every respect, which shall continue for weeks,—and how much longer we have no means of knowing,—and then resume complete and active vitality. Many instances of this might be cited, but a single one may suffice, for the public and official testimony cannot well be disputed.

It is the case of a Fakir who, in 1837, at Lehore, voluntarily passed into a state of apparent death, in the presence of Remjeet Singh, was interred in a tomb whose only door of access was closely locked, the lock being sealed with Remjeet Singh's private seal, and remained thus closed for *six weeks!* The Indian ruler, who was entirely sceptical as to the ability of the Fakir to return to vital action as he had promised, had placed a detachment of his own private guard on duty to watch the tomb day and night, report being made each two hours. At the ex-

piration of the time, Remjeet Singh invited Sir Claude Wade, who had been cognizant of the burial, though he had arrived a few hours too late to be present at the event, to witness the disinterment. The seal was found perfect, the tomb absolutely undisturbed, and no doubt existed in the minds of the two that it had remained so for the six weeks past. The tomb was opened in their presence; the man was found "cold and stiff as a mummy," eyes sunken and glazed as in death, flesh shrivelled and everything indicating that the body had been dead a long time, though without decomposition. An English medical man whom Sir Claude summoned could find no indication of life. The two gentlemen sat down, each taking a hand of the Fakir in his own, so that there might be no possibility of collusion, and the Hindoo friends of the Fakir commenced the work of resuscitation, by means of heat, friction, etc. After many minutes signs of life were manifest, and in less than an hour the man was fully recovered, to the intense astonishment of all except the Hindoo enthusiasts, who had had all the time perfect faith in the Fakir's powers.

This seems utterly incredible, on the face of it, but it is stated by Sir Claude himself, and the testimony of the two noblemen cannot reasonably be questioned, more especially as it is abundantly supported by other instances in numbers. Now, the bearing of these facts on the biblical narrative is manifest and it is important. All our hopes for eternity hang on the reality of the death of Jesus Christ. Paul says: "If Christ be not raised, your faith is vain; ye are yet in your sins." No trance, no suspended vitality, can afford a resurrection. What can we reply to a sceptic who refers us to the Oriental strange experiences, and asks us how the events of Calvary are any more wonderful than they? We should be perplexed to give any satisfactory reply, were we not saved from the difficulty by the savage thrust of the soldier's spear. If the Lord of life had not already *laid down* his own life, that would have ended it. The blow was no child's play. The doubting Thomas was invited by the risen Jesus to put his *finger* into the print of the nails, but to thrust his *hand* into the wound of the side. The

broad head of the Roman spear had evidently left an opening which admitted of such exploration, and that could not be made without almost instant death. Whether the Greek *Φέρε τὴν χεῖρά σου, καὶ βάλε εἰς τὴν πλευράν μου* gives us any indication of the locality of the wound may be doubted, but whether the spear entered the pleural cavity or the abdominal makes small difference; either one would be fatal.

How little did the brutal pagan know, when in pure, cold-blooded, cruel indifference he gave that savage blow, what a magnificent work he was doing for the verification of the claim of that man to be the Son of God! He was apparently dead but the scepticism of later ages might honestly question the reality of that death had not his brutal and seemingly causeless act rendered the reality a thing of certainty. I have no doubt that the divine object of allowing the deed and inspiring its record may be referred to this very provision against even the possibility of doubt. To demonstrate his own power over life, Jesus laid down his own voluntarily; to demonstrate to all future ages the absolute fact of his death, the spear cut its way savagely into his dead body with a gash which to a living man would have caused death on the instant. Thanks to the Roman's stolid brutality! The vital importance of his act has been much disregarded.

III. THE FACTS AS THEY OCCURRED AT THE TIME OF HIS DEATH.

In this regard we can safely assume two points as being beyond doubt. First, the crucifixion in itself and its circumstances was not different from other crucifixions inflicted by the Roman authorities. Second, Jesus Christ was, at the time, in perfectly sound condition physically, for no Jewish sacrifice could be accepted of a victim not absolutely "without blemish." He was making the crowning *real* sacrifice which was to be the termination of a long line of typical sacrifices, and we cannot suppose it possible that he was physically less perfect than the types had been. He came to the sacrifice free from disease or debilitation. He was placed on the cross in his full strength at the third hour; at the ninth hour his head dropped forward,

because he had *laid down his life*, as he had said that he should do. This was surely not a natural event; it was not a common event. It is stated that Pilate was astonished at it; he would not even believe it when told of it by Joseph, but sent for the Centurion, and inquired of him as to the truth. And we have abundant evidence that the surprise of Pilate at the early death was well warranted, and that the victims of that horrible mode of punishment often lingered in their agonies for days.

Nor can we see any cause for death in a strong, healthy man within so short a time. No dangerous wounds had been inflicted, and there could be no very serious loss of blood. The *nail* driven through each hand would and probably did open and destroy the two palmar arteries, both the superficial and the deep, but it would be by laceration and not by cutting, and thus the flow of blood would be largely prevented, while the pressure caused by the weight of the body as it hung with full force upon the lacerated hands would still further check the arterial bleeding. It may seem heartless to reason thus concerning the dying sufferings of our blessed Saviour, but I am forced here to look at the case merely as a professional man; that is, only in its physical and physiological aspects. The mere suspension would involve no speedy death, though it of course must produce intense suffering. Death in the case of ordinary men came from the exhaustion of nerve force, that is, of vitality, from one or all of four causes—pain, the burning heat of the sun, thirst, and hunger.

None of these could be expected to make speedy work and in fact they commonly did not. The crucified man died only when utterly *worn out* by his sufferings. Christ died at the end of six hours. It seems, therefore, to me altogether probable that we cannot reasonably look to natural physical causes as being likely to produce the death of Jesus Christ at the time, and in the manner of its actual occurrence. But, going one step further, is it fair to infer that the death was hastened by *mental* suffering to that extent that six hours brought the end. We have every reason to believe that Christ was a man of a very sensitive nature, for he showed it constantly. His disposition

was affectionate and he must have felt most acutely every manifestation of neglect and treachery to himself on the part of those whom he loved and who had been professing to love him. The conduct, therefore, of the men whom he had chosen and appointed as apostles must have within the few preceding hours wounded him most sadly. But in addition to this came also the universal contempt and ridicule of all those who were watching him; their insulting remarks; their manifest rejoicing and triumph. How could these things fail to wound him most severely? And yet it is my belief that now they scarcely touched him at all. He knew that these timid men who had forsaken him and fled, would very shortly be spreading the truths which he had taught them, with a boldness and power which nothing could withstand; he knew that even in this hour of agony the Son was being glorified; he knew that his work was almost finished, and the effects of contempt, of treachery, of all earthly and personal things, I think did not weigh heavily upon him. And yet, allowing them all the weight and force which can possibly be attached to them, they cannot in my judgment have crushed out his life within so brief a space.

No one can be more inclined than I am myself to give full credit to mental causes for their ability to produce stupendous physical results. I admit their potency, and apply the belief in daily treatment of disease, with an earnestness which few practitioners are ready to match. I have seen many and many a life wrecked and eventually destroyed by mental causes only, and multitudes of diseased conditions induced by them which are continually referred to other sources. But one characteristic always attends them. They work *slowly*; the element of time enters largely into their action. A sudden and violent emotion may, it is true, cause instantaneous death, but I believe this result *never* occurs with a healthy physical system. There must have been previous diseased exhaustion to render such an event possible. At least all my experience allows me no other conclusion, and I cannot find any reason to admit that the mental sufferings of Jesus Christ caused his death at "the ninth hour."

It has been suggested that the "weight of the sins of the world" pressed so heavily upon him as to crush him physically. As to that I know nothing; I can offer no opinion. It is reaching out into a domain which, as a physiologist, I dare not enter. I might offer conjectures, but that I am not willing to do, and they would be worthless, for I have nothing on which to base them. One point I may specify, and nothing more. When at the ninth hour the sufferer uttered that bitter cry, as apparently the blackness of darkness came over him, almost at the instant he said, "It is finished," and his head dropped forward because his life was gone.

The conclusions to which this line of reasoning have brought me are these :

I. The death of Jesus Christ was totally unlike any other that has ever occurred.

II. It was not produced by natural causes, or by any external cause.

III. It was an act of divine power, equal and correlative with his resurrection.

IV. No other human being has ever shown the power of originating life.

V. The possession of this power gives perfect proof of the divinity of Jesus Christ.