

## The War and the Other World.

### 2. IS THERE AN OTHER WORLD ?

FOR the Christian who accepts the Gospel narratives as a trustworthy record of what the Divine Master taught there can be only one answer to this question, and that an absolutely decisive one. The Gospels contain ample evidence that Jesus Christ taught that there is another world to which human beings go when they leave this world ; and it is incredible that such a Teacher, on such a question, would mislead His followers, or allow them to think erroneously. The majority of the Jews, before Christ came, believed that there was a future state after life in this world was over, and He emphatically confirmed them in this belief. The minority who questioned or denied this doctrine He severely condemned : " Ye do greatly err " (Mark xii. 24-7 ; Matt. xxii. 29-31 ; Luke xx. 34-8). He assured the penitent robber that he should in a few hours be with Him in Paradise (Luke xxiii. 43) ; and in a large number of passages He spoke of the " eternal life " which is to follow this life, and of the fact that hereafter men will receive the reward of their conduct in this life, whether for good or for evil (John iii. 15, 16, 36, iv. 14, 36, v. 24, 28, 29, vi. 27, 40, 47, 54, xii. 26, xiv. 3 ; Matt. vii. 22, 23, xiii. 41-3, 49, xvi. 27, xxv. 31-46). As already indicated, this kind of teaching was not new among the Jews. We find it obscurely indicated in various places in the Old Testament, and quite clearly in the later books, written during the two centuries immediately preceding the birth of Christ, when the Jews had begun to be influenced by Greek thought, which on this topic was loftier than their own (Dan. xii. 1, 2 ; Wisd. ii. 23-iii. 8 ; Book of Ecclesiastes xxxvii.-lxxi. ; 2 Macc. vii. 11, xii. 43-5, xiv. 15).

This doctrine of a future state in another world did not need any confirmation after Jesus Christ had given His emphatic sanction to it ; but there is evidence enough that it was continued by His disciples, who assume it as a matter of course (1 Thess. iv. 13-18 ; Gal. vi. 7-10 ; Phil. i. 23 ; etc.), and defend it when it is questioned (1 Cor. xv. 12-58). The Apocalypse again and again implies it ; and from the closing of the canon of Scripture to the present day the doctrine has been regarded as an article of faith among Chris-

tians. "If in this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all men most pitiable" (1 Cor. xv. 19). Cf. 1 Peter iii. 18-20, iv. 20.

But there are many persons with whom the authority of Scripture has little weight. They would say that all that has been urged above proves no more than that before the beginning of the Christian era many persons, both Jews and Gentiles, believed in a future state after death, but that their reasons for doing so, so far as they are known to us, are not convincing. Seeing that the great Teacher of Nazareth adopted it, those who became disciples of course did so; and this proves, not that the doctrine is true, but that it is attractive, and that in this, as in other things, the influence of the greatest Teacher which the world has ever seen has been enormous. A doctrine may be very attractive even to wise and good men without being true, and no human teacher, however great, is infallible. People often believe that a thing is true because they wish it to be true, and that is probably the chief part of the explanation that so many millions have believed and continue to believe in a survival of existence after death.

This method of weakening the reasons for a belief in the existence of a life beyond the grave supplies us with an argument in support of it. Whence comes this very widely spread desire for a future life? It is so widely spread through all the ages of which we have any record, and in so many branches of the human race, whether savage or civilized, that it is sometimes spoken of as universal. The evidence which is now at our disposal shows that it is not absolutely universal, for there seem to be some tribes in which neither belief in the doctrine nor a desire for its truth can be found to exist, and there are certainly individuals to whom the thought that death may be annihilation brings neither terror nor repugnance. There are probably many persons who, without being influenced by dread of retribution for misconduct, would be quite content to lose consciousness for ever when they pass out of this world. Nevertheless, the immense majority of mankind have wished and believed, and continue to wish and believe, that death does not put an end to all conscious existence; and this general belief is shared even by those whose lives are such that they would welcome any evidence that could convince them that there is no possibility of their being called to account in another world for what they have done in this. We ask, therefore, whence comes

this widely spread desire, and this still more widely spread belief? Such feelings and convictions may have been planted in us as intimations that the doctrine is true. Or they may have grown up in the hearts of men because the accumulated experience of mankind showed them that the doctrine *ought* to be true, for there are so many perplexing facts in the life in this world which admit of no explanation if this world is the only one. The only reasonable solution of the difficulties is that there is another world, better than this one.

Among these difficulties and perplexities the one which perhaps comes home most frequently and forcibly to people of all classes is the conspicuous unfairness that is manifested in the working of society. It is quite true that, in the main and in the long run, even in this world, virtue is rewarded and vice is punished. Honesty is the best policy, and a clean life pays. But this is true *only* in the main and in the long run; and sometimes the run is a very long one, and extends to many generations. It is true that virtue is its own reward; but sometimes it is the only reward that virtue gets. The ungodly is often "in great power, flourishing like a green bay-tree," and this continues during the whole of his ungodly life. In short, the exceptions to the general rule that virtue promotes happiness, while vice promotes misery, are so numerous and so glaring that they are serious stumbling blocks to those who desire to believe that this world is morally governed. Even when virtue is rewarded and vice punished, the rewards and the punishments often seem to be utterly inadequate, and in many cases they come so long after the good and the bad conduct to which they might respectively be assigned that it is impossible to be certain that they have been rightly connected with them. Still more common, perhaps, is the case in which a person who repents of misconduct and attempts to make amends suffers far more than the hardened sinner who never even thinks of endeavouring to make reparation. These difficulties, which might perplex even those who do not believe in a Providence, render such belief increasingly difficult to those who have hitherto cherished such a belief, for our experiences of these apparent injustices are multiplied as life goes on. That is, they *would* make it difficult, if our life in this world were the sum total of our existence. But if there is in store for us a further existence in another world, in which the balance

can be trimmed and made perfectly just and adequate, then these perplexities vanish and the difficulties are solved. The Supreme Governor of the universe, by showing us that even here virtue has a tendency to prosper and vice a tendency to fail, allows us to see that His rule is a moral one ; this encourages us to believe that in another world, in which the obstacles to these tendencies will not exist, the tendencies will have their proper results in full : righteousness will be abundantly rewarded and wickedness adequately punished.

There is another kind of difficulty which often distresses thoughtful people, viz. the condition of children born and bred in the slums of our large cities, amid surroundings of almost ceaseless iniquity. Their daily and nightly experiences from infancy onwards are an almost ceaseless round of wickedness in all its forms. They are not only familiar with vice from the cradle, they are educated in it. They learn it as an occupation, an amusement, and a trade ; and they learn little else. They are thus in a worse case than the heathen, who along with much that is debasing learn some principles and practices that are not ignoble. What a hopeless problem these slum children present, if this life is the only one ! They have no chance of being anything but vicious. But if there is a future state in which those who have had no chance here can have a probation on fair terms, then this problem also is solved, and it becomes easy to believe in a just Governor of the universe.

If it be said that the doctrine of a future life is a mere hypothesis, of the truth of which there is no proof for those who do not accept the binding authority of Scripture, it must also be admitted that the doctrine of no future state is an hypothesis, of the truth of which there is no proof either in or outside of Scripture. The question is, which hypothesis is the more probable ? It has been already shown that the positive hypothesis has the advantage of being in harmony with the longings and convictions of the large majority of mankind, including all those who profess any of the most highly developed and most elevated and elevating religions. To which it may be added that those religions which ignore the existence of a future state have little chance of success in competition with those which teach it. Hence the complete failure of the Sadducee's religion in the first few centuries of the Christian era and of the Positivist religion in our own times. This world-

wide and age-wide fact seems to justify the conclusion that so persistent a demand by the spirit of man for a particular doctrine may be regarded as a revelation that the doctrine is necessary for man's well-being, and is therefore true.

This strong position is strengthened (and some investigators of the phenomena would say is enormously strengthened) by the results obtained through the labours of the Society for Psychical Research. It may be premature to say that a scientific basis for the belief in a future life has been discovered ; but the well-attested phenomena which have been collected and classified point in that direction. They give no support to the negative hypothesis.

There is, however, another class of psychical facts about the reality and value of which only the person who experiences them can judge. No one can prove either the reality of the facts or their value to a person who is disposed to doubt them ; but for the man himself they are indisputable and decisive. He is convinced that in his best moments he is in direct communion with God ; and he is confident that this communion, which is independent of the body, will be made more rather than less possible by death. That death will put an end to it for ever is incredible. Even if there were no other ground than this for belief in a continued existence after the death and dissolution of the body, the ground might be regarded as substantial. When it is added to the considerations mentioned above, the position is indeed strong. Death may destroy physical life and sensation ; but there is no proof that it has power to destroy consciousness and reflexion and communion with God.

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