

## The War and the Other World.

### 3. WHAT CAN BE KNOWN ABOUT THE OTHER WORLD ?

OUR position with regard to this question is very different from our position with regard to the one which has just been discussed. We saw that, with regard to the problem whether there is any other world beyond the grave, those who accept the authority of Scripture find there a complete and decisive answer. Somewhat scantily, and often obscurely, the Old Testament reveals to us that there is a future life in which men are rewarded or punished for what they have done in this life: those who are called "the dead" are still alive. In the New Testament this doctrine is taught with absolute sureness and clearness, and it has the emphatic and supreme authority of Christ Himself. We saw also that even for those who do not regard the witness of Scripture as final, or the teaching of Christ as more authoritative than that of the noblest of human teachers, there exist reasons which render the hypothesis that life and consciousness are continued after death more probable—and indeed we may say much more probable—than the contrary hypothesis. But in discussing the question before us we have no such advantages. Even with the help of Scripture we cannot learn very much that can be regarded as certain respecting the other world; and apart from Scripture our estimates of what is possible and probable are for the most part less trustworthy than in the other case. Hence the frequent designation of all that lies beyond the veil of death as "the unknown." It would seem as if, in this intensely interesting subject, with regard to which all conditions of men in all ages have exhibited a deep craving for information, only the very minimum of information has been granted to us. We have had revealed to us just enough to enable us to shape our lives with propriety, and nothing more. Nothing has been revealed with a view to gratifying what is a natural, and almost an inevitable, curiosity. We have been clearly told that there is a future life, and that our condition in it depends upon our behaviour in this life; and it is intimated that the rewards for loyal service, and the penalties for wilful disobedience, are alike beyond our comprehension. Over and above this all is uncertain and obscure, and we may reverently believe that a clear and decisive

revelation of answers to the numerous questions which have been raised respecting the condition of those who have passed out of this world by death would do us no good, and in some cases might do us harm.

The cause of this obscurity and uncertainty is not that Scripture is almost silent on the subject ; the passages which bear on it are fairly numerous, and not a few of them are utterances attributed to our Lord. We may find a group of passages which seem to teach one doctrine fairly clearly, and yet we dare not adopt this as correct, because another group of passages seems to teach something quite different. For instance 1 Corinthians xv. 28, Romans xiv. 11, Philippians ii. 10, 11, Revelation v. 13, seem to teach the ultimate triumph of good over evil and the final salvation of all. On the other hand, Matthew. iii 10, 12, xiii. 30, 40-42, 49, 50, John xv. 6, Hebrews vi. 8, Revelation xix. 20, xxi. 8, seem to imply the final destruction of the wicked ; evil is to be abolished, not by being converted, but by being annihilated. Yet again there are passages which have been supposed to imply that the fate of the wicked will be endless torment ; Mark ix. 43, 48, Matthew iii. 12, xiii. 42, xviii. 8, xxv. 41, Luke iii. 17, Revelation xiv. 11, xix. 3, xx. 10. One of the causes of this apparent inconsistency is that hardly anywhere have we our Lord's exact words. Although He sometimes spoke Greek (as probably with the Syro-phenician woman and almost certainly with Pilate), yet He habitually spoke Aramaic, of which we have only a more or less accurate translation. Even where the translation is accurate the original Aramaic may have become blurred in transmission before it was translated. In every one of the few cases in which St. Mark endeavours to give us the Aramaic original there is difficulty in believing that it is exactly what was said. Moreover, a study of our Lord's words, when the four Gospels are placed in parallel columns, shows that the Evangelists allowed themselves considerable freedom in reporting them. Sometimes they give us their own interpretation or expansion of what was said rather than the words that were actually spoken. This is specially true of the First and Fourth Evangelists. And there can be little doubt that there has been a certain amount of confusion between the Destruction of Jerusalem and the Day of Judgment, words which were said with regard to the one being transferred to, or being mixed up with, what was said with regard

to the other. All this shows, not that we have lost the substance of Christ's teaching, but that we must be cautious in interpreting and drawing inferences from the language in which it has come down to us. The substantial harmony between the four reports, and their agreement in tone, and sometimes even in wording, with what we have in Acts, in the Epistles, and in the Apocalypse, is sufficient guarantee for the general truthfulness of the record of our Lord's language. Moreover, there is a great deal of it that is quite beyond the Evangelists' powers of invention. A perusal of a few chapters of the Apocryphal Gospels will convince us of that. There we see the kind of things which early Christians, even with the canonical Gospels to copy from, imagined when they tried to invent what Christ might have said and done on occasions which have not been recorded in the canonical Gospels.

There is another reason for caution. Any teacher who tries to instruct others respecting the unseen world must use terms expressive of human experience in this world, because a report of human experience in the other is lacking. He must speak as if men and women there are very much as they are here, *viz.*, under the conditions of space and time, and with bodies similar to those which they had in this life. Christ Himself was under this necessity. We see this plainly enough in the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus. Consequently a great deal of the language used is symbolical and must not be understood literally. Even that which might possibly be literal need not be such; and we may fall into grievous error by making a literal interpretation and then proceeding to argue from it.

When we pass from the teaching of our Lord to that of St. Paul respecting the other world we are not free from all these causes of uncertainty. It is true that we have (with the exception of a few doubtful readings) the exact words which he dictated, or (on rare occasions) wrote with his own hand. Nevertheless, so far as language goes, his teaching is not always harmonious. One general characteristic of his theology is its want of system. Each time that he treats of a topic he tries to make his meaning clear to those whom he is then addressing, and he does not seem to care whether the language which he uses then agrees with what he has said in some previous letter. Possibly he did not always remember the exact words which he had used before; certainly he was not afraid

of saying now what was verbally inconsistent with what he had said before. This is specially true of his language respecting the Last Things. Sometimes he speaks quite distinctly of a Judgment (2 Cor. v. 10); sometimes there does not seem to be room for one (1 Thess. iv. 16, 17). Sometimes God is the Judge (Rom. xiv. 10), sometimes Christ (1 Cor. iv. 4; 2 Cor. v. 10). In 1 Corinthians xv. the spiritual body, suitable to existence in eternal life, seems to be given at the resurrection: in 2 Corinthians v. it seems to be given at death. The *How* of the future life he does not attempt to define. The spiritual body will be *our* body, however much it may differ from the material body which dies and is dissolved; personal identity will not be broken. And union with Christ will not be broken; death has no power to destroy that. He says very little about the future condition of the wicked, whom he calls "those who are perishing" (1 Cor. i. 18; 2 Cor. ii. 15, iv. 3; 2 Thess. ii. 10), which perhaps means eternal loss rather than absolute destruction.

These surprising differences in Scriptural language respecting a future state, which sometimes seem to amount to real inconsistency, prepare us for a considerable variety of opinions respecting this difficult subject, according as one or other of the Scriptural expressions be adopted as giving the correct view. But, in fact, the opinions, in their variety, go beyond that which is found in Scripture, and of some of them one could hardly say more than that they are not expressly contradicted by anything in the Bible, and that they must stand or fall by their own intrinsic probability. Among the points which are in dispute are these. (1) Is there an intermediate state or not?—a question which is closely connected with the question whether there is to be a general Resurrection and a general Judgment or not. Here we have a triplet of questions of serious moment, and in each case one of the alternatives must be false. Many persons suppose that each soul is judged at death, and then receives the spiritual body in which its existence is continued. (2) If there is an intermediate state between death and the final Judgment, are those who are in this condition conscious or unconscious? To suppose that they are unconscious is practically much the same as supposing that there is no intermediate state. (3) Assuming that they are conscious, is a change in their condition possible? Do the good improve in goodness, and do the

bad have another opportunity of reformation? Or do both remain in the condition in which they were when death took place? If the latter is correct, the value of the intermediate state does not seem to be great. (4) If a second probation is allowed to the bad, will it be granted to all of them, and be continued until all are saved? Or will it be confined to those who have never had a fair opportunity in this life of knowing and doing God's will? (5) Assuming that the punishment of the bad does not merely consist in their having no share in the life to come, in what does it consist? Are they subjected to torture similar to that of being burned alive in this world, and is this torture endless?—an atrocious view which has been prevalent for centuries and perhaps is not yet extinct. Or does it consist in mental suffering, which ends, when it has done its work, either through the annihilation or the conversion of the sinful soul? Or again, does it consist in loss rather than in suffering, and in a loss for which there may be no remedy? It will be observed that the alternatives grouped under these five heads admit of being united in different combinations, so that the sum total of possible opinions is very large indeed.

It does not lie within the purpose of this paper to discuss these various combinations, or even all the different elements which are capable of combination. That would require a lengthy treatise. But a few remarks are necessary about one or two of them. Remembering how much of the language of Scripture is metaphorical and symbolical, it may be asserted that nowhere in the Bible is it stated that the punishment of the wicked will consist in endless *suffering*, and perhaps it is nowhere said that it will be *endless*. It is said that there will be "eternal punishment" (*κόλασις αἰώνιος*), but the *κόλασις* may be some kind of deprivation, and *αἰώνιος* does not necessarily mean "everlasting." This important epithet is never attached in Scripture to any word which necessarily implies suffering, such as *βσανος*, *κόπος*, *λύπη*, *ὀδύνη*, or *ὠδίνες*. Nor does it occur with terms which denote the expression of suffering, such as *κλαυθμός*, *ὄδυρος*, or *δάκρυα*. "The weeping and gnashing of teeth" is never said to be *αἰώνιος*, and Christ is never represented as saying anything as to the duration of the pains with which rebellious servants are punished. Even "till thou have paid the last farthing" leaves it open to us to hope that the payment can be made in the prison, or that the prisoner will be freed by death.

It is one of the gains of the Revised Version that *αἰώνιος* is not translated "everlasting" but "eternal," and all that we know of "eternity" is that it is not time and cannot be measured by clocks and calendars.

The large majority of Christians think that they are bound to believe in "the heathen guess of the immortality of the soul" (Westcott, "Gospel of Life," p. 55), a doctrine which is nowhere taught in Scripture. The soul can win immortality, but it does not naturally possess it. On the contrary we are told that it can "die," "be destroyed," "perish."

Of course, if the soul is by nature immortal, much support is given to the hypothesis of unending misery, which seems to be the inevitable fate of a soul which cannot die and has failed to win eternal bliss. But we owe this superstition to interpreters of Scripture who on this point paid more attention to the speculations of Greek philosophers than to the sayings and silences of the sacred writers. If all souls are immortal, the only alternative to endless suffering is that all will at last be saved, and (as Origen said) this logically includes Satan. If souls are not by nature immortal, annihilation is a possible alternative, either at the time of physical death, or after adequate punishment for sins committed in this life has been inflicted in the other world.

The common belief that we are taught in the Bible that the human soul is by nature immortal is one of many traditional misinterpretations of Scriptural language—perhaps we may say one of the strangest, for the passages which state or imply the contrary are so numerous and so varied in wording. The alternatives which are again and again put before us, in order to help us to shape our lives aright, are not life in happiness and life in misery, but life and death. We are told that "God gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on him should not perish, but have eternal life" (John iii. 16). Christ says of His sheep, "I give unto them eternal life, and they shall never perish" (John x. 28). He is "the bread which came down out of heaven, that a man may eat thereof and not die" (John vi. 50, 51). "The wages of sin is death; but the free gift of God is eternal life" (Rom. vi. 23). "We have passed out of death into life . . . he that loveth not abideth in death" (1 John iii. 14). It is possible for one to save the soul of another from death (James v. 20). There is "a sin unto death" and "a

sin not unto death" (1 John v. 16). There is a Judge "who is able to save and to destroy" (James iv. 12).

Perhaps human vanity has had something to do with the fact that the Platonic doctrine of the natural immortality of the soul has for centuries been regarded by so many Christians as almost axiomatic. The doctrine seems to add enormously to the dignity of man. But, as has been pointed out already, those who hold the doctrine have to face a serious dilemma. If impenitent sinners pass after death into an eternity of sin and suffering, then sin is eternal. The only alternative to this is that all immortal beings will eventually, by the grace of God, be rescued from sin and receive eternal life.

Let us not forget that "eternity" is really a negative term; it expresses the "absence of time," and what the absence of time may be is beyond our comprehension. It is therefore quite possible that to ask whether eternal punishment is everlasting is as meaningless as to ask whether it is coloured.

For all these reasons it seems to be wise not to go beyond the plain statement suggested above, that there is a future state in which the reward of righteousness and the punishment of unrighteousness are alike immense, quite beyond our understanding. Also, that when we endeavour to go beyond this simple affirmation we have need to be very cautious as to what we affirm, and very diffident in affirming it—still more cautious and diffident, perhaps, about what we deny. We know very little about what is impossible in the other world. It is God's world, and therefore justice and love prevail there. This consideration suggests possibilities respecting relations which may exist between the inmates of this world and the inmates of the other. Both worlds are His, and the inmates of both are His creatures, creatures for whom His Son became man, died, and rose again; and, in the case of Christians, the inmates of both worlds are members of Christ. These possibilities will be considered in the next paper; not with a view to arriving at any dogmatic conclusion respecting them, for which the evidence that is available does not supply sufficient material; but in the hope of showing that the probabilities are distinctly on one side rather than on the other, and of inducing some of those who refuse to admit the probabilities to abstain from attempting to limit freedom of belief and action for those who do admit them.

*(To be concluded.)*

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