

HEAVEN.

GALATIANS ii. 20; ST. JOHN xiv. 2, 3; xvii. 24.

THE Christian teaching, that death means life, and more abundant life, sounds like a paradox. But, if it be a paradox, it is not peculiar to the Christian faith. Throughout the universe life is conditioned by death, and every advance in life implies and necessitates death. Nothing can live save as it extracts nourishment from air, or water, or earth, or from vegetable and animal tissues, by a process which involves the decomposition of that on which it feeds. A thousand good creatures of God die every year that I may live; and that I may grow, I myself am for ever dying in a thousand different forms. Processes of waste and reparation, of loss and gain, of destruction and reconstruction, are essential to all life, and to all advance in life. That which we commonly call "death" is but the last visible gradation of a series which no man can number; and as all previous deaths are conditions of life, so also, so pre-eminently, is the last. To die, to fling off "this muddy vesture of decay," is to enter into larger happier conditions, in which psychical processes and developments take the place of physical; in which we shall live after the spirit, not after the flesh: in which, that is, the highest kind of life we have attained here will move onward and upward toward its ultimate perfection.

We often mourn and complain,—when we have lost those whom we love, we often complain very bitterly, that "in vain our fancy strives to paint the moment after death;" that we know "so little," or

even that we know "nothing," of the state on which they have entered. We forget how much is involved in the mere affirmation that they have entered on a new and higher stage of life,—an affirmation which pervades the Christian Scriptures from end to end. And we fail to catch and brood over the many hints and intimations of the conditions of that life with which these Scriptures abound. Were we more meditative and more studious, were we even as earnestly bent on discovering what the life to be is like as we commonly assume that we are, we should soon learn so much of the blessed conditions of those who "die in the Lord," that death would be transfigured before our eyes; and, instead of mourning for the happy dead, we should rejoice over them with a joy unspeakable and full of glory.

It is but a little while since I tried to shew¹ how much reason we have, in Holy Writ, for believing that the laws of continuity and development hold good, and work as wondrously, in the state after death as confessedly they do in the present stage of our existence; that there is no ground for assuming that death effects a sudden and monstrous change upon us, so that we are no longer the men we were or do not recognize either ourselves or those whom we once knew best: but that, on the contrary, there is much ground for believing that, with identity unchanged and unimpaired, we shall pass into a state in which we shall be surrounded by all happy and favourable conditions, both for shedding off whatever remains imperfect in us and for developing whatever is fair and noble and good. And in the

¹ See THE EXPOSITOR, vol i. pp. 267-279.

New Testament, besides the scriptures there cited, there are many passages which, while they abundantly confirm that view of the life to come, teem with hints and suggestions which add to and enlarge our conceptions of the heavenly life, if only we brood over them till they yield us their wealth of meaning.

In the present paper I propose to consider only two or three of these passages, in the hope that I may set my readers on considering for themselves the scores of similar passages, with the "letter" of which, at least, they are no doubt familiar.

1. I have already said that we often forget how much is involved in the word "*life*;" how much, therefore, is implied in the assurance that, when we die, we rise into a new and higher form of life. In the New Testament we are told, again and again, that they that have done good will enter into life, even as they that have done evil will enter into judgment. But until we reflect upon it, or till some side-light falls on it, we do not feel the force of this familiar promise. Such a side-light, such an aid to reflection, we may get from any scripture which describes that passage from death to life through which every believer in Christ enters into vital fellowship with Him. Let us take Galatians ii. 20.

When St. Paul wrote, "Nevertheless I live," he penned words which would form a noble epitaph for the tomb of any man who died in the Lord. But, when he penned those familiar words he was not writing an epitaph; he was rejoicing, not over his death *in* the flesh, but over his death *to* the flesh and sin. "I am crucified with Christ," he said; "*his*

death for sin carries with it *my* death to sin. But *though* dead, nay, *because* dead, I live; nay, more, Christ lives in me." What he meant by this apparent paradox, this life in death, we all know. A gracious change had passed upon him. A pure and noble development of his spiritual life had taken place. Once a sinner, he had found the Friend and Saviour of sinners. Once living to and for himself, he had learned to live for others by learning to live to Christ. Once seeking his own salvation by a strict and rigid adherence to the letter of the Law, he was now willing even to become accursed from Christ that his brethren might be saved. Charity had replaced Selfishness as the main-spring and motive of his life. This gracious change implied a death,—a death to selfishness, to sin, to law, and even to a selfish craving for his own salvation. And this death, in its turn, implied and was the essential condition of a new, larger, and more generous life. He could *only* live for others as he died to self. He could only live in the spirit as he died to the flesh. He could only live unto God as he died to the world.

Now this interior spiritual change is the highest we can know on this side the grave,—this passing through death into a higher type of life. And, therefore, it yields us our finest and truest illustration of the last change. When we are promised that the death of the body shall conduct us to an ampler and higher spiritual life, we may well believe that at least we shall pass through a change like that we experience at our conversion, like that which St. Paul experienced at his conversion.

Look at the man before and after, then. St. Paul, indeed, remained the very same man after he "saw the Lord," on his way to Damascus; and yet what a different man he became! how much more noble, spiritual, divine! His life was not broken in two, but transfigured. He did not lose his identity; even in the brief record we have of him we can trace the same personal traits, the same characteristic and distinguishing features after he became an Apostle as when he was a persecutor and blasphemer: but all these personal traits and characteristics are glorified by the change of motive and aim which had been wrought upon him by the grace of Christ.

On his conversion, moreover, St. Paul did not settle down into a mere tranquil enjoyment of happier spiritual conditions. On the contrary, he was "in labours more abundant" than before. With an inexhaustible and almost incredible energy he set himself to minister to the spiritual necessities of men,—not holding himself aloof from the vile and sinful as a being of a higher spiritual grade, but going among them as a brother and a friend, shewing them an ineffable tenderness, exhausting himself—"wasting" himself, as he puts it—in the endeavour to raise them to his own level. He felt that he had been called in order that he might call them; that he himself had been saved in order that he might at least "save some."

Does not even this poor and feeble description of the new access of life which attended his conversion suggest a very noble and attractive view of the Christian promise, that for us, too, death is

to be life, more life and fuller? If, when we die, we are to *live*, may we not take the greatest change from and through death to life of which we are conscious here as a figure of that last change? We surely may. And, therefore, we may well believe that, when we die, we shall remain the same men and women that we are now, and yet become very different men and women. *Our* life will not be broken in two, but transfigured. We shall not lose our identity; we shall still be ourselves; we shall know and be known: we shall preserve the traits of character which individualize us: but all these personal traits and characteristics will be suffused and glorified by an inward ennobling change of motive and aim. Charity will replace Selfishness. More completely than ever before we shall die to self that we may live for others, die in the flesh that we may live in the spirit, die to sin that we may live in holiness, die to imperfection that we may share the perfect life of God. It is no lazy and corrupting Paradise that lies before us, in which we shall loll on flowery meads, clothed in white raiment, with crowns on our heads and harps in our hands; but a spacious animated Heaven, in which God's love for the sinful and imperfect will beat in our breast and his labours for their salvation will engage our hands. Its white garments do but symbolize the unspotted holiness which will enable us, as it enabled Christ, to be the friends of sinners without being stained and defiled by their sins. Its crowns are but the symbols of a victory which will remain imperfect till all can share it with us. Its harps are the symbols, not of sweet self-

pleasing melodies with which we shall drown the cries of the lost, but of a noble music by which we shall seek to minister to minds diseased, and to bring a "pure concert" into hearts jangled and out of tune with the discords of selfishness and disobedience.

And if *this* be the meaning of "life," spiritual and eternal life, who will not, who ought not to desire it? What more noble end can any man set before himself than to become a partaker of the life which throbbled in the breast of St. Paul, nay, which beat, and still beats, in the very heart of Christ Himself? What room is there for the charge that, in seeking Heaven, we are aiming at a merely personal reward, and sinking into the selfishness from which it is the very office of Religion to deliver us, if *this* be the Heaven we seek,—a Heaven in which we are to have life, and to have it more abundantly, in which we are to develop our highest powers harmoniously, that we may more efficiently minister to the general welfare, that we may take part in the work of God and of Christ, and perchance even seek out and save that which is still lost? Till men can teach us a sublimer aim, and shew us a nobler Heaven, we must needs cling to this.

2. In St. John xiv. 2, 3, we read, "In my Father's house are many mansions: *if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you.* And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also." Space would fail were I to attempt to bring out half the suggestions of this

familiar but noble passage. What most impresses me personally in it is the phrase, commonly overlooked,—“If it were not so, I would have told you.” *That* would have been very hard work for Christ,—harder even, I think, than to die for our sins. Had He had to come and tell us that there was no home for us in Heaven, and no hope for us hereafter, surely his pitiful and compassionate heart would have broken under the strain. That He could so much as conceive Himself doing it is wonderful. Yet He assures us that He *would* have told us so if it had been true. And what a solemn impress of truth his assurance leaves on what He did tell us! viz., that in his Father’s house are many mansions, and that He is even now occupied in preparing a suitable place for each one of us.

The figure which gave form to his thoughts was, doubtless, that of the Hebrew Temple, with its spacious courts and its innumerable chambers, in which a vast multitude found a home, and some task to do for God, and some worship in which they might take part,—in which porters and singers, beggars and children, found a home, as well as the rabbis and the priests. Viewed under this figure, Heaven is a mighty Temple, the abiding-place of the Almighty, in which He is worshipped day and night; and in this Temple are not only broad “courts” in which all may serve and praise Him, but many “mansions,” each appropriately furnished, in which they may reside: and in these mansions a special “place” for each one of them which Christ is preparing for their reception,—exquisitely adapting it, that is, to their special tastes and needs, to the

task they will have to do, and to the happy and harmonious development of their individual character and bent.

When we are told, in general terms that, after death, we shall possess *life* for evermore, the mere promise of life is full of happy suggestions for us, so soon as we reflect on what an access of spiritual life involves. But "life" is a large word, and we crave something more special and definite. Here it is, then, in this gracious assurance that there are many mansions in our Father's house, each adapted to the wants of this class or that (or why are there "many" of them?), yet all under one roof; and that, in some one of these mansions, a special and suitable "place" is being prepared for each of us. Not only, therefore, shall we preserve our identity in the world beyond the grave, but that identity will be respected and provided for. All that is most characteristic in us will have its due training and environment. He who knows us best, He who knows us altogether, is even now taking thought for us, considering what conditions we need, what tasks, what discipline, what companions, what joys, and getting them all ready for us against we come. The whole large world of Heaven is ordered by his infinite wisdom and love; its whole society is organized by Him, and so organized that we shall each find in it the very place we are fitted to fill, the very work we are able to do, the very training and auspicious conditions that we severally require.

Is not this, too, a happy and attractive conception of Heaven? Is there anything base or selfish in **craving** such a Heaven as this? If we heartily

believed in it, should we lament that even our dearest friend was called to enter it?

3. In St. John xvii. 24, we read that, as He prayed, our Lord said: "Father, I will that they also whom thou hast given me be with me where I am, *that they may behold my glory!*" If we linger on that last phrase till we feel what is meant and involved in beholding the glory of Christ, we get a new conception of the heavenly blessedness. We behold Him manifesting forth his glory as we read the Gospels. What would we give, what would we *not* give, for another Gospel, with new stories of his wondrous life from day to day, with new parables as tender and charming as that of the Good Shepherd, or the Good Samaritan, or the Prodigal Son, and new discourses as calm and simple and profound as the Sermon on the Mount! God could give us such another Gospel; for if all the things which Jesus did and said should be written every one, we should have a new and larger Bible; and doubtless He *would* give us a new Gospel, or even a new Bible, if it would be good for us to have it.

How often, too, do we wish that we could have seen but a part of the Gospel story *enacted*, that we could have walked with Christ, if only for a single day, and have seen the mighty works He did and heard the gracious words that fell from his lips!

But what, after all, would new records of his earthly life be, or what even that we should have seen his face and listened to his words as He walked among men, compared with that which lies before us? The Past holds much which we shall never willingly let die; but it is in the Future that our

true home lies and our true blessedness. We, who would give much to read a new Gospel, much also could we have witnessed one of Christ's works or have listened to but one of his discourses, are to see a whole new Gospel enacted before our eyes, and *that* as much more glorious than the Gospels written by the Evangelists as Heaven is higher than the earth! We are to behold Christ in his glory. And it will not be a dumb Christ on whom we shall look, or an inert inactive Christ, but a living, transfigured, glorified Christ, whose words will still give life and whose acts will still be acts of mercy and love. We shall see Him as the favoured Three saw Him on the Mount, but in a light even brighter than that of the sun. We shall see him as St. Paul and St. John saw Him in vision, when they were caught up into Paradise, and beheld wonders and listened to words which could not be uttered in the tongues of our imperfection; but we shall see Him more clearly than they who had but eyes of flesh, and more continuously, for we shall go out of his Presence no more for ever. And, best of all, as we behold Him in his glory, we shall be changed into the same image, from glory to glory, until we are *satisfied* with his likeness.

As we meditate on these and kindred hints of the glory that awaits us, our hearts are filled with an unconquerable hope, an unutterable thankfulness; the sting is taken from death, the victory from the grave. If only we could heartily, and at all times, believe in this high teaching, we could neither fear death for ourselves, nor mourn when those who are dear to us as our own soul are called to pass through

that dark Portal which, though it rear itself so frowningly before our eyes, glows with the light of life on the *inward* side. If only we heartily believed that those whom we have lost are with Christ, the same as we knew them, with all their familiar traits and affections, but yet transfigured by a great ennobling change of motive and aim; if we believed that, when they died, Christ came to receive them to Himself and to instal them in that mansion, that place, which He had made ready for them, and in which they now find tasks, services, training, joys exactly and exquisitely adapted to unfold all that is best and highest in them: if we believed that they now behold his glory, that they see Him enacting a new and greater Gospel than that of his earthly life,—how could we dare to mourn for them? how should we not, rather, rejoice that they had been delivered out of the pains and imperfections of this present world into such joy and felicity as *that*? Nor could death have any terror for *us* if only we were heartily assured that, when we die, we too shall live unto God; that He will receive us into his house, into his family, where, surrounded by all blessed and auspicious conditions, we shall move onward and upward, from court to court of the Heavenly Temple, until we stand in the very presence-chamber of the Lord Almighty and All-gracious.

We believe in God, and in Christ; let us also believe in his revelation of the life to come.

CARPUS.