

## THE BETTER RESURRECTION.

THE eleventh chapter of the Epistle to the Hebrews is the roll-book of a noble army. Human history records the triumphs of knowledge and courage and energy; the Divine history records the triumphs of faith—that great power which rises from earth to God, and passes from time into eternity. One of the brightest pages of this Divine history is found in the Old Testament. The writer of this book looks to it, as a man might look up to the sky in a clear night when it is alive with stars, and he sees it all bright and blazoned over with the names and deeds of those who have done valiantly, through their trust in the living God. He begins to count them one by one, and then they crowd upon him so thick and thronged that they cannot be reckoned up in order. They gather into clusters and constellations, like the seven stars and Orion, “clouds of witnesses,” set there on high for spectators and examples.

Among these are found two groups mentioned—“Women received their dead raised to life again: and others were tortured, not accepting deliverance; that they might obtain a better resurrection.” There is a comparison here; but, before looking at it, we shall try briefly to show the meaning of the words.

This inspired writer teaches us that these ancient saints were believers in a resurrection to eternal life. It is strange that this should ever be doubted. It seems clear they were, when we think of the very instinct of the

spiritual life—of such expressions as those of David: “I shall be satisfied when I awake with Thy likeness”—or of the language of Martha and Mary when they were still standing on Old Testament ground: “I know that he shall rise again in the resurrection at the last day.” Their faith could not have the same certainty and clearness which ours should have; but that they did look forward to a life to come there can be no question. They gave the best evidence of their faith, for they submitted to the most cruel tortures, and to death, that they might obtain a better resurrection. But what are we to understand by a *better* resurrection? If we look to the first clause of the verse we shall see—“Women received their dead raised to life again.” This was one kind of resurrection, a restoration to the life of this world, and to achieve it was a great triumph of faith. But there is another and superior resurrection—to the life of the eternal world—and the faith which carries men to this is of a nobler kind, because it is more difficult. The meaning will be more clearly seen if we render the words so as to bring out this comparison—“Women received their dead again by resurrection; and others, that they might obtain a better resurrection, were tortured, not accepting deliverance.”

The women who thus received their dead are recorded in the Old Testament. There was the woman of Sarepta, in Sidon (1 Kings xvii. 17), whose child was raised by Elijah; and there was the Shunammite woman (2 Kings iv. 18), who had her child restored by Elisha. But there must have occurred also to the mind of the writer those women whose history is given in the New Testament—the widow of Nain and the sisters of Bethany—and therefore, in speaking of this subject, we shall keep them also in memory. Those who were tortured, not accepting deliverance, may have been such men as Isaiah, who is said to have come to a violent death by persecution, and

the martyrs to the true Jewish faith in the time of Antiochus. In the New Testament there were men like John the Baptist, and James, and Stephen, who, when they could not retain life with a good conscience, freely surrendered it.

There are then two spheres of faith—that of those who brought their dead back to a resurrection in this life, and that of those who pressed on for truth's sake to a better resurrection in the heavenly life. The first of these has given place to the second, in the midst of which we live; and we shall consider these three things—the better resurrection—the higher faith required for it—and the means by which this higher faith may become our own.

I.—We have to consider *the better Resurrection*.

Let us imagine an event we must in all likelihood meet, or which many of us may already have passed through, when some object of our dearest affection has been torn from us by death. There is the utter blank of desolation—the light of the eyes in which we could read tenderness and truth quenched—the heart that beat to us, as no other on earth, motionless—no ear to listen to us, though we had the most bitter griefs to tell—no counsel or comfort, where we could always find it, however sore bestead. And if there came, in that day of darkness, one who gave us back our dead to be with us, to listen to our history of grief—of this very grief—to take our hand in his again, and make us feel he was ours as before—more than before—what could we ask, what could we think of better than this? It happened once at Bethany: a woman received her dead raised to life again, and a poet has attempted to describe it—

“Her eyes are homes of silent prayer;  
Nor other thought her mind admits,  
But—he was dead, and there he sits;  
And He who brought him back is there.”

But Scripture is silent, and leaves the joy unspoken of as too great. And yet if we could for a little rise above feeling, and appeal to reason—the reason which comes of faith—we might see that there is a better resurrection.

For think of the *place* of it. However quiet and happy the home might be to which the earthly life was brought back, it was part of a world which was smitten with the curse. Cares and fears, and dangers and griefs, were always ready to invade it. Bethany, with its tranquil retreat, was near Jerusalem, with its stormy passions, and it felt their terrible throb. I think sometimes of the joy that was in it when Lazarus was brought back, and then of the consternation which entered it on the day of Calvary, when the great Friend was taken away. Or, I think of the scenes that followed Christ's death, when Olivet was the marching ground of Roman armies, and the temple perished in flames and blood. Better for Lazarus and Mary and Martha if they were not there to look on it, but had reached that higher home, where "desolation and destruction, and the famine and the sword" cannot come. And, if we think of the body as the place to which the soul is brought back, it is a home that has also the curse resting on it, subject to pain and disease, which often make death to be chosen rather than life—to long torturing agonies, and to those strange depressions which cloud the soul, so that to those who look out at the windows everything is darkened.

It is otherwise with the place of the better resurrection. It can be most fitly described in the language of God's own Book: "There shall in no wise enter into it anything that defileth, neither whatsoever worketh abomination or maketh a lie. And there shall be no more curse—and there shall be no night there—and they need no candle, neither light of the sun; for, the Lord God giveth them light, and they shall reign for ever and ever." And the

body which here depresses the soul shall be framed to lift it up, to give it perception and vigour, insight and wing, made like unto Christ's glorious body; for, "the earthly house of this tabernacle shall be dissolved, and they shall have a building of God, an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens."

Then think, by way of comparison, of the *company* in the place. In the case of all those who were raised again to life in this world, we find that they were restored to the family circle—the child of the Shunammite and the daughter of Jairus, the son of the widow of Nain and the brother of Martha and Mary. There was an anxiety, if I may so speak, to surround them with their nearest friends when they opened their eyes again, that the first faces they looked on might be those of kindred—of father, mother, brother, sister. It was a merciful arrangement, to break the strange transition, to soothe the agitated wondering spirit. But there was surely something more in it than this. It was, I think, also predictive. For if these resurrections, as a whole, were intended to help men to the faith of a power stronger than death, they were also intended to lead us to something of the manner of the life beyond. Do they not shadow out this truth, that God will begin our life again among those we have known and loved, and cause us to open our eyes in the bosom of what we shall feel to be a family and a home, with faces round us that are dear and familiar, and voices, whose tones we know, ready to reassure us? If it were not so—if the spirit had to awake all solitary, and pursue its way cut off from its past of life and love, we could not call it the better resurrection. Even in heaven, "the echoes and the empty tread would sound like voices from the dead." Bethany would have something of the blissful, in the joyful reunion of souls, which heaven itself could not show; and therefore we must believe that there also

God will "set the solitary in families," and that in some way broken household ties will be re-knit "in the day that the Lord bindeth up the breach of His people and healeth the stroke of their wound."

Only there will be something better in it. In this world our dearest friends become at times more dear to us. Some glow in them, or in us, suffuses the soul, and we feel that they are more ours, and we can be more theirs—times when we see deeper into each other's nature and melt into one spirit—those times, above all, when we know that we are touching one another in the thought and life of God. Now, in that heavenly world, we shall have the best at their best. The feeling of sad distrust which sometimes comes over us, as if the truest human friendship had an element of selfishness in it, shall pass away. What we gain here, at intervals in some chosen crisis of our life—the meeting of souls in one, and profound untroubled trust in the sense of it—shall then be a fixed condition. This must be part of the meaning of that word, "They shall see eye to eye, when the Lord shall bring again Zion." Nor do I need to say how that company shall be enlarged—what a grand and glorious compass it shall take in, indicated in the saying of the Apostle, "Ye are come unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly and church of the first-born which are written in heaven." So that, while the heart has its centre in a home, it shall not grow narrow, nor stagnate there, but move out on wide wing, and make its friendships among all the families of the redeemed. So deep and true in its love, and yet so comprehensive—a Father's house with many mansions—shall be the state of the better resurrection.

Think then of the *essence* of this eternal life. Its essence consists in its entire freedom from sin. It is the presence of sin in our nature which is at the root of every other

evil, and deliverance from suffering in heaven is connected with perfect deliverance from sin. "The inhabitants shall not say I am sick, for the people of the land are forgiven their iniquity." Doubt about God and distrust of Him are the most painful of all things to any one who feels what the soul's life ought to be—a perfect repose in God's love that there may be freedom and happiness in His service. This world to most Christians is a fitful struggle to attain a portion of this. When Moses said, "I beseech Thee, show me Thy glory," he was answered that he could not see God's face, but that His name would be made to pass before him, as "the Lord God merciful and gracious." It is still the utmost we can hope for here, and we do not always enjoy it. But of the resurrection state it is said, "They shall see His face; and His name shall be in their foreheads." That must be a happy condition when all of them shall feel the blessedness of the man whose iniquity is forgiven, and the subject which often causes anxious thought, "can I look to God as my friend and Father?" shall be settled for perpetuity—no doubt, nor shadow of a doubt upon it, but quietness and assurance for ever. And when there shall be not only no guilt on the conscience, no sin in the heart, no lurking sympathy with it, but every fibre of the root of poison extracted, and the tree of life shall find its counterpart in the perfect fruit of every redeemed soul! How blessed must that state be when there shall be no envy, nor uncharitableness to any one, nothing of humiliation or shame for having done or cherished what is impure and base, nothing of the feeling of lurking evil within, which makes us wishful, if it were possible, to hide our hearts from the sight of God! This is an ideal which it never entered into man's heart to conceive, which the Gospel alone has taught us, and which we feel to be worthy of God and of our spiritual nature. It is the prize of the better resurrection, for, when the

Apostle speaks of pressing forward to the high calling of God in Christ, he connects it with this, "If by any means I might attain unto the resurrection of the dead" (Phil. iii. 2).

But we have to think also of the *security* of this state. These resurrections of earth were a return to a world of change and death. Were it not for the great ends to be served, it seems a hard thing to oblige one who had fought a good fight and gained the victory, to enter the lists again. After the joy of reunion, would come the thought, "But we have to part once more," and all the anxiety of sick-beds, the tears of farewells, the bitterness of death must be renewed. The shadow has been retarded on the dial-plate, not removed—who shall be mourned next, when there is no great Deliverer to bid death restore his prey! Once to be raised to this world is twice to die. But children of the heavenly resurrection "die no more; death hath no more dominion over them." The shadow is all behind, the light before, and the light shall no more go down. We can imagine, in some degree, the thrill of rapture at Bethany, when these women received their dead raised to life again, and the joy of the moment swallowed up, for a little, the fear of the future. But to be able to contemplate the future steadily and see every cloud gone; to know that the last fight is over for all who welcome one another on that blessed threshold; to have the power to turn to death and say, "O thou enemy, destructions are come to a perpetual end,"—Who shall help us to imagine this?

There is one thing more, without which the thought of this better resurrection would be incomplete—the *presence* to which it introduces. The best of these other resurrections brought their subjects into the earthly presence of the Son of God, but this into His heavenly fellowship. At times we look back with longing desire to the intercourse which some of our fellow-men had with the great Saviour



and friend of sinners—to the Galilean hills, and the house of Bethany, and the upper chamber of Jerusalem. We cannot escape this. His presence was so near, and human, and homelike. And yet they did not enjoy it as we think. There was the veil of their imperfect vision, and of His humiliation, between. It is the light from His resurrection which lets us see so much more in Him, and which stirs up these desires. And, in the better resurrection, this will be completed. Christ will not be farther from His friends in His exaltation, but nearer to them. For as the human nature in Him was intended to bring the Divine more close to us, so the more we see the Divine in Him, the closer shall we feel the human. The more of God we feel in humanity, the more there is of true humanity to touch us. And it seems as if, after He rose, His friends felt a deeper power in His words, a more tender and tremulous sympathy in His nature. Think of Mary's cry of rapture when He spoke to her by His open grave, of the burning heart of the two as they walked to Emmaus, of the joy of the disciples when they saw the Lord, and let us be very sure that this, and far more than this, is felt by those who have entered His presence, not only beyond His death, but beyond their own.

It is true their resurrection is not yet complete in itself, but it is, as they are, complete in Him; His hand is on their grave, His peace is in their heart. He bids them rest for a little season, and they wait in calm and happy expectancy, with an unalloyed and satisfying foretaste, for they have already felt that to depart and to be with Christ is far better.

II.—We come now to the *higher faith* required for this resurrection. It needed very great confidence in the living God to believe that He could reanimate the dead frame which the soul had quitted for a few hours or days; but to face entire decay and mouldering dust, and to believe that those who sleep in it shall yet awake and sing, this

requires a frame of soul still nobler. Let us mention some of its features that we may aim at them.

It needs more of what I may call the *patience* of faith. The faith of the sisters of Bethany demanded one great effort and the battle was gained. But ours cannot be so compressed. We have to bury our dead out of our sight, to wait the weary days and years, and "feel God's heaven so distant." Poor children of sorrow know what it is to be cheered by the first rush of comfort when they think of their happy change, and then to have the coldness of hope deferred creep over them, to realize the long and lonely way they have to walk before they meet them again. "Till the heavens be no more, they shall not awake, nor be raised out of their sleep." This needs patience. We must endure the scorn of unbelievers, the talk of unchanging earthly laws rolled like the great stone to the door of the sepulchre, and must listen to the taunts of those who rejoice most when they think that they hear the iron gates of a materialistic universe grate in upon the grave as an eternal prison. We have to struggle with the murmurs of our own hearts, that it is hard in God to put us to so long and so sore an encounter. If we had but one grand heroic effort, we sometimes say, we could nerve ourselves for it, but this harassing warfare, day after day, with fightings without and fears within, is more than we can bear. And yet there are those who have endured it all, of whom the voice from heaven has said, "Here is the patience and faith of the saints."

It needs also more of what we may call the *sanctified imagination* of faith. The circle of these earthly resurrections was very narrow and very simple compared with that which we expect. Their faith had only to bring back their dead to the old accustomed house, the well known seat, the familiar haunts. Ours has to win out a footing for itself from the void and formless infinite, where the scenes and

inhabitants and states of mind are so different that our friends seem to have passed away beyond our knowledge. Our thought falls back like a bird whose wings find the air too thin. "If we could only see them for one little minute," we say, "as they are, we should walk on, so satisfied and calm in heart, till we meet them again." But the very light in which they live makes their state so dark to us." Yet there are those who have risen above this also. There is an imagination of faith, not unbridled nor unscriptural, which has formed for itself a true and real world beyond death, which gives substance to things hoped for, and thereby helps to the evidence of things not seen. The Bible has encouraged it by its figures, "the tree of life," "the river of life," "the city of gold," "the Father's house of many mansions,"—and imagination has no nobler work than to enter among these visions and brood and muse till they become a palpable and real world; and till those who are not, because God has taken them, are seen walking there. "Now," says the most vivid of such true dreamers, "just as the gates were opened to let in the men, I looked in after them, and behold the city shone like the sun; the streets also were paved with gold, and in them walked many men, with crowns on their heads, palms in their hands, and golden harps to sing praises withal. Which when I had seen, I wished myself among them."

This better resurrection needs more of the *spiritual insight* of faith. The faith of those who received their dead back to the present life had a visible Helper with wonder-working power standing before them. God was pleased to vouchsafe them such aid because they required it. Their faith could take but short steps, and His hand was put out to uphold its infant goings. Our faith has not such aid. It has a harder, but a nobler work. It must seek to live as seeing Him who is invisible. It must rest for its ultimate foundation, not on any outward sign, not

even on any uttered word as spoken to the ear, but on the nature of God Himself, and the life He infuses into the soul, on that basis which Christ has given it; "God is not the God of the dead, but of the living." Christ Himself must be known to us in His ever living spiritual power. "I am" —not "I promise," but "*I am* the Resurrection and the Life;" and then it follows, "He that hath the Son hath life." This is harder, we say, but it is nobler. There are men who have risen to it, to whom the unseen Christ has been as sure a reality as the sunlight, and who have gained through Him a more glorious vision than sunlight ever disclosed. "They saw the King in His beauty, and the land that is very far off."

III.—Consider some of the ways in which we may strengthen ourselves in this higher faith.

The first thought is one addressed to *reason*. We read here of men who were tortured, not accepting deliverance, that they might obtain a better resurrection. They surrendered all that life holds dear, and life itself, from loyalty to the God of truth. Not only is the Bible full of this, but the course of history. The noble army of the martyrs is seen in every age, marching on, by scaffold and through fire, into the unseen. I do not appeal to them now to confirm the truth of any one doctrine, but to prove this, which lies at the root of all doctrine, that the soul of man can love truth more than life. If you will think of it reasonably it will give you a conviction that in man there is a principle more than can be given by dead matter, and that the system of the universe must be framed in some way to meet this fact. Can we imagine that their self-devotion was founded on delusion, and that God has made His world so that the noblest and divinest deeds in its history have a perpetual falsehood at their heart? Then the temporisers and hypocrites would be the wise men, and the faithful unto death would be the self deluded fools. Even

if a man were to say "There is no God," would not a universe that grew up to moral perception by the strength of a lie—that cheated true men in order to build up truth—would not such a universe be a self-contradiction, and a thing of deserved contempt? It would falsify our holiest instincts, and be at everlasting war with the soul's deepest voice. And, therefore, as we believe in the honest structure of the universe, we believe in God, and, believing in God, we must hold that these men were advancing through death to a great reality. You may see kindling on their faces the reflection of an eternal sunrise, the light of the better resurrection.

The next thought we draw from the contest is one, addressed to *the heart*, "Women received their dead raised to life again." Observe the expression, "Women—*their* dead." That side of human nature which has the deepest affection is clinging to *its* dead, claiming an abiding right of possession in them, and aiding faith to draw its lost treasure back to its arms. And it is a striking truth that in all the resurrections of which we read there was not only strong faith, but deep love—the love of woman. When He raised the daughter of Jairus, He took in with Him the father and the mother of the damsel. When He saw the widow of Nain weeping, He had compassion on her, and said unto her, "Weep not;" and He said unto the young man, "Arise," and delivered him to his mother. When He saw Mary weeping, and the Jews weeping which came with her, He was moved to perform His greatest work, and cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come forth!" And Christ Himself was no exception. There were tears of women heard outside His grave; and He listened and yielded to their love as well as to their faith; and they too received their dead raised to life again—the ground and the pledge of every other resurrection to life eternal. Let us not think that these things are without a meaning. God

intended that our deepest heart affections should be the helpers of our highest hopes, and the instinctive guarantees of a life to come. When the Shunammite woman came to the prophet to tell him of her dead son, she said, "Did I desire a son of my lord? Did I not say, Do not deceive me?" As if she had said, "Now that he has been given and taken away, I *am* deceived; my heart has been drawn out only to be mocked!" And if it were so that God had bestowed on us these yearning affections, and then taken away their objects for ever, He would be torturing us hopelessly by that which He has put into us of the most tender and pure. We have a right to reason that He would either have made our love less deep and lasting, or that there must be a final home in which its longings shall be realized. Augustine has said, "The love of man builds the cities of men, the love of God builds the city of God" But the love of man also helps to build the city of the skies. Every pure affection points to it; every happy Christian home is a pledge of it; every bereaved heart is a Divine reason for it. A ground this why we should make our family ties so loyal and sacred that they shall keep our dead still ours, and bind us irrevocably to a life to come.

The last way we mention of confirming ourselves in this faith is addressed to the *spirit*. It is gained by the exercise of that spiritual insight to which we have already referred, leading the way to a spiritual life. The object of this sight, and the source of this life, is described by the sacred writer in words that follow: "Looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before Him, endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God." Reasoning about immortality may lead us so far, and the instinct of the heart may lead us farther; but I know of no certainty save what grows from union with the dying and risen and living Son of God. Some men may speak

of this as mystical, and regard us as visionaries ; but they are words of truth and soberness, and have been tested in the calm, constant life, and happy, hopeful death, of thousands upon thousands of our fellow-men. It is not only possible to some, but open and offered to all, to become so conscious of God's sustaining grace, in duty and in trial, to be so joined in fellowship to an unseen but real presence, that we shall feel we have a life formed in us which can never die. There is a spring of immortality not only welling out from the throne of God, but ready to rise up in every heart that will admit Him who is the true God and eternal life. It is this faith entering into the soul as a vital principle which formed those ancient martyrs who counted it all joy to face suffering and shame, and to meet death, when the God of truth summoned them. They are sleeping, wide apart, in the catacombs of Rome and the Greyfriars of Edinburgh ; and it was no vague guess, no nebulous haze of sentiment, that made them fill those graves ; but because Christ's own life in them had made them partakers of the powers of the world to come. It has been asked by some who hang garlands on their sepulchres, "Who would be martyrs now-a-days?" and they add "that the bitterness of the question lies in its truth." Those who make such a statement might surely ask themselves whether the principles held by them can possibly be the same on which these heroic souls of old lived and died ; and they might further ask themselves whether the principles can be true which are confessedly unable to nerve men against the last extremity of duty and of trial. I thank God, and I am sure many can thank Him with me, that we have known men who would have been martyrs, and that we know them yet—men who have proved their allegiance to truth so fearlessly against reproach and loss, who have faced the "arrowy sleet and hail" of the bitterest calamities so calmly and nobly, day

by day, as to make us feel with the surest conviction that they could have walked to the scaffold or the stake.

This is not a thing to promise for ourselves, but no man shall stop me of this boasting on behalf of men and women I have known. We may not be able on our own part to realize God's grace as so powerful in us that we could meet, here and now, the martyr's death. But one thing we can seek to do. We can let Christ's life rise in us as a life of humble obedience to the will of God. We can say in the sorest trial, "I would not have it otherwise when it is He who puts the cup into my hand; I would not choose to live if He has seen the time fit for me to die." And, even if we cannot yet advance to this, we can let our life be a following of God's will day by day; we can learn what it is daily to die to sin and self, being made conformable unto the death of Christ. And then, when the crisis comes, we shall be ready for it. The martyr's spirit descends on him when the fire is kindled, and the Christian's willingness to depart comes when his Master calls. There is the same grace for both, and the same triumph. "Thanks be to God who giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."

JOHN KER.

---

*THE AIM, IMPORTANCE, DIFFICULTIES, AND  
BEST METHOD OF SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY.*

SECOND PAPER.

WE have already seen that the aim of Systematic Theology is to discover, and to arrange in order, whatever can be known about God and about the mutual relations of God and man. And we have seen that this is the noblest aim ever proposed for human research.