

*THE TASTE OF DEATH.*

“Of a truth I say unto you, There are some of those standing here, who shall in no wise taste of death until they see the kingdom of God.”—LUKE ix. 27.

THE Synoptic parallels coincide; but Mark ix. 1 adds “coming in power,” and Matthew xvi. 28 substitutes “the Son of Man coming in His kingdom.” All agree in the strong phrase *οὐ μὴ γεύσωνται θανάτου*.

The meaning of this difficult text has been constantly discussed, and no less than seven or eight different interpretations have been given to it. This wide divergence on the part of the commentators is partly due to a want of unanimity as to the proper context to which the words belong,—whether to the preceding or to the succeeding section; but more especially to a disregard of the full significance of the phrase “shall in no wise taste of death,” which for the most part is treated as if merely equivalent to “shall not die.” The words are, further, in consequence of this, generally accepted as denoting a promise of exceptional privilege to a few, and the possibility that they may be a warning of exceptional doom has escaped notice.

The determination of the special context to which the words belong is of the first importance towards arriving at their true meaning. All three accounts agree in placing the passage in the same relative position as regards what precedes and succeeds it. Our Lord had been inculcating the necessity of self-denial and a daily bearing of the cross, and had contrasted the value of the world gained and the life lost, adding in the Marcan and Lucan account the fearful warning that of those who in this life should be ashamed of Himself and His words, He would be ashamed when He came in glory. Matthew’s phrase bears the same tenour, though it is not couched in the same language. He dwells upon the recompense that will be meted out to

every man according to his deeds at the Second Advent. At this point there follows in each of the Synoptists the passage with which we are dealing. And then immediately succeeding it also in each of the Synoptists follows the narrative of the Transfiguration. The question to be decided is, To which of the two sections does it belong? Most editors of the Greek text (including Westcott and Hort) and the Revisers have connected it with the former and not with the latter section; and they appear to be right.

The Marcan tradition, probably following the original Petrine discourses, has preserved what we may call blocks of narrative, separate in themselves, and not necessarily connected either in time or subject-matter with the other blocks of narrative to which they are contiguous. Now the opening words of the narrative of the Transfiguration give one the impression of commencing a new section of narrative, while the words under discussion as naturally appear to be the solemn close of a different section. This impression is strengthened by the want of internal connexion between the two. The Transfiguration offers no adequate fulfilment of the kingdom of God coming with power, or of the Son of Man coming in His kingdom, whereas 'that coming in glory' has just been mentioned in the verses preceding our passage. Nor would there have been any point in solemnly ("Verily, I say unto you") making a statement that some of those present would not die before something happened that was to happen in less than a week. We conclude therefore that the passage is to be taken, not as the introduction to the Transfiguration section, but as the close of the preceding series of exhortations.

Placed in this connexion the passage gains a new light. The "coming of the kingdom" or "of the Son of Man" stands in immediate parallelism with the "coming in

glory" for the last judgment just spoken of, when each man will be rewarded according to his deeds, and those who have refused to bear the cross and to confess the Son of Man in their earthly life will be rejected by Him. Thus the words become a warning for those of the Jews standing by who were, or would be, ashamed of Christ on earth. Such an interpretation would seem to follow naturally from the context; for a promise would be out of place here at the close of a series of hortatory warnings, and to the "coming of the kingdom" is given the same full meaning alike in the two consecutive verses. It *must* refer to the Second Advent in the preceding verse, and it ought to have the same meaning in this one. No doubt in one sense, and a very familiar one, Christ's kingdom "came" in the potential establishment of the Church on the day of Pentecost; it "came" also in the destruction of Jerusalem, when the visible remnants of the old Covenant were swept away and the gospel left in possession of the field; but neither of these "comings" seems to fully correspond with what the words demand. We can see, looking back upon the scene, what was involved in the day of Pentecost for the Church; but to *contemporaries* it could hardly have suggested itself as a fulfilment of a "coming of the Son of Man." Moreover, the destruction of Jerusalem, terrible and overwhelming as it was to the Jews and to the Hebrew Christians, was not an event which especially impressed the Gentile Christian, or furthered the extension of the Church. It was a judgment upon the apostate race far more than a fresh access of strength to the new kingdom.

The view of the passage above advocated finds ample confirmation in the form of the words used. The force of the phrase "taste of death" must now be examined. It is clear from New Testament usage that this is no mere Arabian figure used rhetorically for simple physical

death. On this point it will be sufficient to quote Dr. Westcott on Hebrews ii. 9.

“The phrase, which is not found in the Old Testament, expresses not only the fact of death, but the conscious experience, the tasting the bitterness, of death. Man, as he is, cannot feel the full significance of death, the consequence of sin, though he is subject to the fear of it; but Christ, in His sinlessness, perfectly realized its awfulness.”

The note bids us compare Matthew xvi. 28 (our present passage), and John viii. 52. But in the note on this latter passage Dr. Westcott seems to take a different view. He lays stress on the inaccuracy of the Jews' citation of Christ's words—“If a man keep My saying, he shall never see death (*θεωρήσῃ θάνατον*),” which they altered into “he shall never taste of death (*γεύσῃται θανάτου*);” and adds, “The believer, even as Christ (Heb. ii. 9), does ‘taste’ of death, though he does not ‘see’ it in the full sense of verse 51.”

But it is quite possible that Christ in His discourse had really used the phrase they cited, although it does not appear in the condensed report of what had preceded. A similar instance of a phrase quoted from an unrecorded utterance is found in John xii. 34, on which Dr. Westcott's note is very clear.

The account of the phrase given in Hebrews ii. 9 seems the more satisfactory one; and if it is retained in the present passages (Matt. xvi. 28; Mark ix. 1; Luke ix. 27) and John viii. 52, we avoid any ambiguity in the English use of the word “taste.”

We thus conclude that no believer “tastes of death,” though he does pass through it as a portal to life. The tasting of death is the full conscious experience of its bitterness, and this has been done away by Christ's death and resurrection for those who are His. The Saviour's

words therefore imply that although some of those present would *die*, they would not *taste* the bitterness of *death* until His second coming to judgment. The phrase thus refers to spiritual death, the second death, which will be the state of the unbelieving.

The ambiguous use of the word "taste" has been already mentioned. We commonly use it in two different senses: (1) of fully experiencing the flavour of anything which may be either pleasant or unpleasant; and (2) of *sparingly* in contrast with *freely* partaking of anything. This latter use is derived from the former, and is not an original sense of the word. The slight partaking is a result of the full taste experienced. Thus our Lord "tasted" the stupefying draught offered Him before He was nailed to the cross, and discovering its nature refused it (Matt. xxvii. 33, 34); the "tasting" implying, not that He only took a little, but that He fully recognised the mixture by its flavour. Similarly the ἀρχιτρίκλινος "tasted" the water made wine, and was struck with the excellence of its flavour (John ii. 9). Indeed, the verb γεύεσθαι seems to be nowhere used in the New Testament in the latter of the two senses given above. St. Luke uses it in its common Hellenistic sense of ordinary eating at a meal (xiv. 24; Acts x. 10; xx. 11; xxiii. 14). So, too, St. Paul in Colossians ii. 21 employs it in connexion with ascetic abstinence from certain kinds of food. But the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews uses it uniformly of *spiritual* experience (ii. 9; vi. 4, 5)—a sense which is also found in 1 Peter ii. 3, and also (we venture to think) in the passage at the head of this paper, of spiritual death.

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