

Death and Redemption.

A SERMON

BY REV. THOMAS HILL, D.D., LL. D.

PREACHED AT PORTLAND, MAINE, AUGUST 10, 1879.

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S E R M O N .

1 COR. XV. 56, 57. THE STING OF DEATH IS SIN, AND THE STRENGTH OF SIN IS THE LAW; BUT THANKS BE TO GOD, WHICH GIVETH US THE VICTORY THROUGH OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST.

In that charming volume of Emerson, published anonymously forty years ago, in which he treats of Nature in relation to man, he says that every natural fact is a type of some spiritual fact, and thus becomes a symbol by which to express the spiritual fact. Without this symbolical power of outward nature, we could not have any language. All words, even those expressive of the most refined spiritual abstractions, were originally figurative; they directly expressed some outward thing or action.

To get language in which to describe the real evils of sin,—the moral defect of the will, and the injury done to the man himself by his transgression of the law of God, we are obliged to have recourse to the seeming evils of the physical world. In the economy of the external universe, we believe that “all things are well and wisely put,” and that blighted buds, abortive fruits, mildews, drougths, floods, swarms of locusts, and other seeming plagues, are, in the long run, producing beneficial results. Nevertheless, to us as individuals, in regard to present personal interests, all these things seem evils, and are therefore effective when used as symbols of real evils;—such as blasted character, and the permanent injury done by sin to the soul of the sinner.

Thus, also, death is a wise and merciful provision for the well-being of the animated races; and especially for man himself. Without the death of the mortal body we should lose many of the greatest pleasures and benefits of this life:—the number of souls for whom this world is the primary school would be but a fraction of what it now is; the tender relationships of parent and child, brother and sister, youth and manhood, infancy and age, would not be, as now, the basis of our best education, of the sweetest memories, and the holiest hopes of life. Death, so far from being a curse to our race, is one of our greatest blessings. Even the uncertainty of the hour of its approach, and the fact that it so often seems premature, cutting off the young, the strong and the useful, undoubtedly work, on the whole, great benefits to mankind, in fostering sobriety, prudence, forethought, seriousness, and other valuable elements of character. Nevertheless, it must be admitted that for the present, for personal, individual plans and aspirations in this world, premature and sudden death, whether of a man himself, or of his dearest friend, seems one of the most fearful evils.

It thus naturally becomes, in human language, a type of the greatest of real evils. The death of the body is used as a symbol of the loss of spiritual life in the soul. When a man loses his faith in his God, and in his fellow men, his interest in truth and virtue, and in the well being of his kind, becoming wholly absorbed in selfish greed of things that perish in the using, his life, having no longer any hold on what is of eternal and imperishable worth, may fitly be termed death. The writers of the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures frequently use the word death in this figurative sense: "The soul is dead that slumbers;" the

soul is dead when the man is dead to honor, dead to love, dead to truth, dead to the merciful goodness of God, dead to the beauty and harmony of the creation, and alive only to selfish aims, to the indulgence of his own passions and desires. So common is the use of this figurative meaning of death among these religious writers, that it is often very difficult to distinguish in which sense they are using the word, and we are even led sometimes to suspect that the writers themselves confuse them, and that they, when they speak of sin bringing death into the world, for the moment think that sin brought about the death of the body. But I cannot find, either in St. Paul, or in the book of Genesis, sufficient proof that the writers deliberately held this view, which has, by prosaic interpreters, been ascribed to them. They were writing rhetorically under the impulse of the strongest religious feelings; their language is carefully chosen; it gives the clearest and strongest expression to their thought; but it is not to be interpreted as metaphysical definition and dogmas; it is the warm outpouring of religious faith.

In the text, however, St. Paul is unquestionably speaking of the death of the body; since the passage is at the close of an impassioned plea for faith in the resurrection of the soul after the death of the body; and would lose all point if death were understood as referring to spiritual death.

The sting of death, says the Apostle, is sin. To an innocent man death would have comparatively no terrors. The Apostle's idea seems to be that of the poet who tells us that it is thro'

The dread of something after death,
That "conscience makes cowards of us all."

I know that some commentators interpret "sting" here as the mortal weapon, and so interpret the Apostle as saying, "It is by means of sin that death kills both the body and soul." But this seems to me to be far-fetched. The sting of a bee, or even of a scorpion, is seldom fatal; but it gives acute pain. In the original Hebrew, the prophet Hosea uses a word which means destruction. Had the Apostle quoted direct from the Hebrew, he might have said, "Death has power to destroy only through sin;—death does not destroy the righteous, they live unto God forever." But he quotes, instead, from the inaccurate translation of the LXX, that he may emphasize rather Death's power to give anguish. The sting of Death is sin; what especially makes the sudden approach of death fearful is the consciousness of ill-desert, and the fear that after death comes the judgment.

And the strength of sin is the law. Without a moral law, clearly revealed in the ethical instincts, and proclaimed by the prophets, the transgressor might easily persuade himself that he had not sinned. Even as it is, with the moral law clearly revealed in the moral instincts of the race, in the inspirations of ethical genius, and in the words of religious teachers, re-echoing its commandments in the name of God,—there are men who seem deficient in moral sense, they are morally stupid, blind to the reality of right and wrong; and there are others wilfully blind, fulfilling the homely proverb that "none are so blind as those who will not see." In them the saying of Horace is fulfilled, "the court of conscience gives a false decision because the judge has been bribed." In plainer words, there are, even to-day, apologists for every form of sin; deliberately defending the grossest crimes; and

apparently without the slightest sense of shame. These men deny the existence of the moral law, and persuade themselves of its non-existence before they can thus shake off all sense of sin. A clear moral sense perceiving the validity of moral commandments, makes manifest to us our transgressions, yet gives us no appreciable addition to our power to resist temptation; no new power to keep the law. The revelation of a moral law increases our guilt, intensifies the internal conflict within us between our passions and our better judgment; yet gives no aid, of consequence, to our nobler nature. This is what St. Paul means by saying that the strength of sin is the law. He even appears in another epistle to agree with Ovid in thinking that an express prohibition often awakens the desire to transgress; it arouses the spirit of liberty within the young heart, and that treacherously gives succour to the forbidden passion; so that when the commandment comes, sin revives, and we die.

It is true that some natures are so fine, born so free from the earthly taint, and so early drawn into the sweetness of Christian faith and obedience, that they never know much of this terrible struggle within, which made Paul cry out, "Miserable man that I am! who shall deliver me from this body of death,"—this body dead to all higher things. It is equally true that others are so dead to the finer requirements of the law, so content with themselves and with their commonplace, ordinary sort of goodness, that they look upon such spiritual experiences as unreal. Their ethical instincts are not sufficiently sensitive; their moral perceptions are not sufficiently clear to show them the perfect ideal of duty; therefore, they cannot see how continually they are falling short; how much

higher and nobler they make their lives; above all, they do not recognize their unspeakable and imperative obligations to God, nor their total inability to discharge them; therefore are self-conceited and self-righteous, and have no fear of death or judgment.

But could their eyes be opened to see the perfection and strictness of the moral law, then they would also feel the strength of sin; and, in struggling to escape from it, would be brought into sympathy with the great Apostle, whom they now so ignorantly undervalue. The sting of death is sin and the strength of sin is the law. The law reveals to us our own transgressions, our weakness, our waywardness and perversity, the impossibility of attaining perfection, the certainty of loss, which may be called retribution, from every offence against the perfect law. And this consciousness of sin, and fear of punishment makes the approach of death doubly fearful; even by nature we fear a premature death; every holy sentiment of love and duty toward our kindred and friends would lead us to avoid an early death; but it is, after all, "the dread of something after death" which gives the sharpest sting to the majority of those who fear his approach.

But, adds the Apostle, "thanks be to God, who giveth us the victory, through our Lord Jesus Christ." He hath abolished death and brought life and immortality to light; he hath reconciled us to God, so that we no longer look to God merely as to a law giver, judge and avenger, but as to a Heavenly Father. Christ hath taken away our sins, so that we no longer dread the something after death, but rather look with longing to join the company of the redeemed, and be forever with them and with the Lord. Jesus has been set forth as a new mercy seat, over which

we may hold communion with God; and also as a propitiatory sacrifice, through whose death we are delivered from the death of sin; we are washed from our sins in the stream which flowed from his wounded side; therefore death is for us deprived of his sting, and we are made triumphant conquerors over the grave. Such are the glowing figures in which the writers of the New Testament set forth the spiritual facts of Christ's work in the believer's soul; the facts made known to the believer in his actual experience of a transition from sin and fear, to righteousness and peace and joy.

But this glowing, figurative language has been subjected, by prosaic men, to prosaic interpretation. Many commentators, although truly religious men, have insisted upon giving curiously literal meanings to such Scriptural phraseology; others, not being religious, have endeavored to reduce it to mere fanciful and erroneous vagaries of the Apostles' thoughts. Such, however, has not been the course of the great body of pious Christians. In all ages, and in all communions of the church, humble and faithful souls have seized upon the central thought of the Apostolic writers, even though received, second-hand, from the lips of fallible preachers; they have clung with their hearts' affections to the Man of Nazareth; they have leaned on his word and promise as upon an immovable rock; they have been touched to the depths of their souls at the sight of his labors and sufferings, especially at his tears in the garden and his agonies on the cross; they are subdued into faith and obedience by his exhibitions of wisdom and of power; they are lifted into triumphant hope and unshaken confidence by the story of His resurrection and ascension. His personal history thus becomes

the very life of their souls; it is his wounds that heals theirs; they overcome their sins by the new motives which love toward him has awakened in their hearts, and by the holy influences of the spirit which He promised, and which He sends; this victory lifts them into a higher and more divine life, and fills them with a pledge and foretaste of a heavenly peace and joy to come.

These are facts more real and more important to the believer than any other facts whatever. And the Christian believer sets forth these great facts, of present salvation, and the assurance of future glory, in the Scriptural phraseology which I have quoted or paraphrased. He feels within himself that it is to these facts that the Apostles were bearing witness when they wrote such phrases; and that no man can improve the beauty and strength of the Apostles' testimony.

But when a theological commentator undertakes to interpret those phrases as though they were metaphysically exact historical descriptions of transactions between the three persons of the Trinity, or between them and the Devil, he seems to me to incur St. Paul's rebuke of intruding into things which he has not seen. Moreover, he almost necessarily falls into self-contradictions. For example, I have just been reading a new translation of Hugo Grotius's defence of the Catholic doctrine of the atonement, against Faustus Socinus. Grotius maintains that Christ died literally in our stead, thus placating God, and inducing Him to remit the punishment of the elect. At the close of the treatise he quotes from early Christian writers to show that they also held that Christ literally died in our stead. Yet many of the quotations distinctly say that by this death in our stead, Christ placated the

Devil, and induced him to spare the lives of the elect, forfeited to the Devil by sin. Grotius does not seem to perceive that the quotations contain, therefore, a view of the atonement fundamentally different from his own. To me, both he and they appear to have fallen into two curious errors; first, confounding the literal death of the body on the cross, with the spiritual death which is the consequence and punishment of sin; secondly, seeking in the unknown and inaccessible regions of the Divine and the Satanic counsels, for an interpretation of language much more naturally and easily interpreted if we confine ourselves to the known history of the divine ministry in Galilee and Judea; and to the known facts of spiritual experience among those who trust in that Divine Teacher who died on the cross, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God.

A second illustration of the errors of a false and prosaic interpretation of Apostolic figures may be found in the comments upon sentences involving the phrase "the blood of Christ." This expression is used, first, literally, of the bodily blood shed upon Calvary; secondly, by a natural figure it stands for all the sufferings which culminated in that hour of agony; thirdly, in a very few instances, it is used for the inward source of spiritual life, the spirit and temper of Jesus.

But it is conceded, on every hand, that in most of those passages in which we are said to have been bought by the blood of Christ, or made perfect through the blood of the everlasting covenant, or washed from our sins in his blood, the word blood is used in its second sense, as signifying all the sufferings of Christ, which ended during his descent to the place of departed spirits. In his

ministry of reconciliation He thus humbled himself, even to the death of the cross; (such was the Heavenly Father's will;) and after this humiliation, rose and ascended into heaven. By that death on the cross He drew all men unto him, and became the author of eternal salvation to those who yield to his persuasion. Whatever may have been the reasons behind the fact, the fact itself is a thing patent to all observers; that it was when Jesus hung upon the cross that He drew all hearts to himself; and it was when that cross had led to the Resurrection that He filled all those hearts with triumphant joy.

It was his bleeding hands and feet, his wounded side, that drew men from their death of trespasses and sins, into the life of love and faith; what more natural than to speak of his paying the price of his own blood to redeem men from death? It was by his sufferings on the cross that He obtained an entrance into men's hearts, that He might sanctify them; it was through his death and resurrection, that He sealed the pledge to us of forgiveness and eternal mercy; this sacrifice of himself on the cross, this sealing the covenant of mercy, is the actually efficient means by which He fills us with a sense of his love, and of God's love, slays the enmity of our hearts, and gives the Holy Spirit new power to cleanse us. Why, then, need we look further, or attempt to pry into the eternal counsels of the Godhead, to find other explanations of the phrases, "Made perfect through the blood of the everlasting covenant," or "Washed from our sins in the blood of the Lamb"? What is there in such phrases, that necessarily, or even naturally, suggests the idea that his death on the cross was a penal satisfaction to God's justice for the sins of believers;—or that it was a mer-

cantile equivalent given to the Devil in return for the souls forfeited to him by sin? These theories about the unseen action of God and the Devil in unknown worlds, and in the secret council chambers, where they bargained with our blessed Redeemer concerning his work and its effects, seem to me born of the corrupted politics and imperfect justice of this world. I dislike them exceedingly; and I dislike them none the less because they prevent my using the Scriptural phraseology dear to my heart, and expressive of my deepest emotions; they prevent my using it, except at the risk of being supposed to hold the most popular of these unwarranted speculations of theologians.

I do not hold to the interpretations given to the Apostle's words, either by legal and metaphysical theorists, or by cold-hearted, sceptical rationalizers; but I do hold to the words themselves as expressions of the common sense, and trusting faith, and warm affection, of those who had known Christ by direct intercourse; fit expressions, therefore, of the faith and love awakened in me, as in all humble believers, through the Apostle's testimony.

"The sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law; but thanks be to God which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." In the beauty of his personal character, in the history of his labors and sufferings, in the dignity of his wisdom and power, in the tender and comforting words in which He pledges to us God's mercy and everlasting love, in the divine majesty with which He assures us that He himself will also visit his disciples, draw them to the Father, fill them with the influences of the Holy Ghost, and make them partakers in

an eternal and immortal life, I find a source of strength and faith, and joy, well compared to a never-failing fountain of life, and to bread which came down from heaven. It is thus that I find strength to overcome sin in my own heart; it is thus that I trust to find strength to bear me, at my appointed hour, through the dark passage of the grave.