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THE CHRISTIAN'S ATTITUDE TOWARD DEATH.

BY PROF. BENJAMIN B. WARFIELD, D.D., LL.D.

“For we know that if the earthly house of our tabernacle be dissolved, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For verily in this we groan, longing to be clothed upon with our habitation which is from heaven: if so be that being clothed we shall not be found naked. For indeed, we that are in this tabernacle do groan, being burdened: not for that we would be unclothed, but that we would be clothed upon, that what is mortal may be swallowed up in life. Now he that wrought us for this very thing is God, who gave unto us the earnest of the Spirit. Being therefore always of good courage, and knowing that, whilst we are at home in the body, we are absent from the Lord (for we walk by faith, not by sight): we are of good courage, I say, and are willing rather to be absent from the body, and to be at home with the Lord. Wherefore also we make it our aim, whether at home or absent, to be well-pleasing unto him. For we must all be made manifest before the judgment seat of Christ; that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he hath done, whether it be good or bad.”—2 CoR. 5: 1-10.

NOWHERE more fully than in the opening chapters of the Second Epistle to the Corinthians does Paul describe the trials and distresses of the life that he was living as ambassador of Christ. He had been lately thrown to the beasts

at Ephesus, and had escaped, almost miraculously as we may well believe, with bare life. While recovering, perhaps slowly, from the deadly injuries thus received, the news reached him of the threatening defection of the churches of Galatia, and of the danger of that in Corinth, and added mental to his physical distress. For the good of his children in the Lord he controlled the expression of his sorrows, and sent to each of these churches a letter of admonition and instruction, only venturing in that to the Galatians on the pathetic appeal which consisted in calling their attention to the large, misshapen, and painfully formed characters in which alone he could now scrawl the accustomed line or two which he added with his own hand at the end of his letters. Meanwhile things came once more to a climax at Ephesus. Under the leadership of one Demetrius, the craftsmen who made profit out of the service of Diana raised a tumult against the Apostle's preaching; and assembling in the theater, "all with one voice about the space of two hours cried out, 'Great is Diana of the Ephesians!'"—not the first instance in history, nor likely to be the last, when volume and continuance of sound are made to do duty for argument.

Warned by this that the public mind in Ephesus was no longer in a condition to profit by his preach-

ing, Paul departs for Macedonia, apparently before the time appointed for the return of his messengers from Corinth, hoping to meet them on the road. But Titus does not come even at Troas (2 Cor. 2: 13); and torn with anxiety the Apostle pushes on into Macedonia. There at length his returning messengers meet him, and, better than that, bring him good news. The Corinthians allow his authority, and have humbled themselves to his rebukes; and that beloved church at least has ridden safely over the crest of the wave that threatened to submerge it. The burdened heart of the Apostle overflows, and he writes to the Corinthians out of his very soul. For once we see within him, and learn how the stupendous trials which pressed upon him affected his thought and feelings.

Amid all these sufferings, the mere allusions to which, lightly touched as they are, appall us, he is upheld by his sense of the greatness of his work and of the greatness of his hope. Though his outward man is being literally worn away, he need not faint; for his inward man is being renewed day by day, and all this affliction, terrible as it is, is light compared with the eternal weight of glory which it is working for him. His courage draws its force, thus, from his confidence in his future reward. It is because he looks not at the things that are seen,

which are temporal, but at those that are not seen, which are eternal, that he can bear all things. Like Moses, he looks unto the recompense of reward, and endures as seeing the Invisible One. Like Abraham, he is content to dwell in tents for a season, because he looks for the city which hath the foundations, whose builder and maker is God. It is, indeed, with just this last figure that the Apostle expresses his feeling here. The reason of his strength, he tells us, is because "we know that if our earthly tent-dwelling be destroyed, we have a house from God, a dwelling not made with hands, eternal, in the heavens." What are earthly sufferings to one who looks upon his very bodily frame as but a tent, in which he sojourns for a time, and expects the laying of it aside to be merely a step toward entering into a mansion prepared for him by God himself?

The Apostle then contemplates the wearing away of his present body with patience. But we must observe that it is not exactly death that he longs for. He is burdened here, and sighs for relief from the burdens of this life, that somehow mortality may be swallowed up by life. But he shrinks from death. He could wish to be alive to greet the Lord when he comes, and so put on the habitation which is from heaven over this earthly tent, rather than be

found naked on the coming of that glad day. Not that he expects to live until the Advent; he only could find it in his heart to wish it; he is in entire uncertainty as to the issue, and accordingly adds, "That is, of course, if, when we do put on" (or "when the putting-on time comes") "we shall be found not naked." How instructive meanwhile it is to observe this great soldier of the cross, who was "in deaths oft" and "died daily," shrinking with purely human feeling from the act of death; how magnificent must have been his courage, a courage rooted in nothing human, but in a divine faith and hope. For scarcely has this cry of human nature escaped from him before he proceeds, as if quietly reasoning with himself, to declare that God has wrought us for the very purpose of swallowing up our mortality in life, and given us even here his Spirit as earnest of his intention. And his contemplation being thus withdrawn from self and cast on God, his shrinking from death disappears too. "Being, then, of good courage always," he declares, "and knowing that while we are at home in the body we are away from home from the Lord (for it is by faith that we are walking, not by appearance), we are of good courage, I say, and are well pleased rather to go away from home from the body and go home to the Lord." Thus faith conquers

the natural fear of death. As much as he fears it, he longs for the Lord more, and the most direct path that leads to his side, however painful or even unnatural it may be, he will joyfully take.

Paul's whole heart is now before us. He is burdened in this life and longs to be with his Lord. He could wish that the Lord would hasten his coming, and thus "clothe him upon" with immortality; but if this is not to be he earnestly desires even in nakedness of soul to be with him, and welcomes the fearful and unnatural portal of death as access to him. It is the model of the Christian's attitude toward life and death and the life that lies beyond death. Let us seek to make it such for our bruised hearts to-day,* and endeavor to understand from the Apostle's uncovered soul what should be the attitude of our souls toward these great mysteries.

I. First of all, then, we may learn that this life which we are living here cannot be a satisfactory living to a Christian. "In this tent-dwelling," says Paul, "we groan, longing to be clothed upon with our habitation which is from heaven." "We that are in the tent," he repeats, "groan, being burdened,

* This sermon was preached on January 17, 1892, the first Sabbath after the death of Prof. Charles Augustus Aiken, Ph.D., D.D.

with a view to the swallowing up of mortality in life." And lest we should think this a state of mind peculiar to himself, as one "in labors more abundant," let us remind ourselves that he elsewhere represents it as characteristic of Christians, broadly declaring that they "who have the first-fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves, groan within ourselves, waiting for our adoption, to wit, the redemption of our body." This is indeed the whole drift of that great chapter, the seventh of Romans, in which the conflict of the Christian life, that ineradicable strife between the implanted good and the natural evil within us, is vividly portrayed, ending with the heart-rending cry, "O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me out of this body of death?" It is a body of humiliation, as the Apostle elsewhere calls it, a body of death, a body of sin, with which our spirits are now clothed. How can we fail to long for deliverance from it?

One of the characteristics of the true Christian attitude, then, is that we should be dissatisfied with the life which we are now living in the flesh. This is, of course, not inconsistent with the contentment which is equally a mark of the Christian attitude. The contentment with his lot which the follower of Jesus is called upon to feel and to exhibit, is, at bottom, contentment with Christ and his provision

for us, with God and his providential direction of us; so that whatever our Father in heaven sends us we are well content to receive, and whatever hardness he desires us to experience we are glad for his sake to endure. Paul longed to be delivered from this body of death, but he was no stranger to a Christian's content. Years after this he writes to the Philippians that he still cherished his "desire to depart and be with Christ," yet since living in the flesh meant fruit of his work and was needful for them, he was glad to forego what for him was "very far better," and abide with them all for their progress and joy in faith. To be content to fill the place which God assigns us and to do the work which our Lord requires of us is quite consistent with the deepest dissatisfaction with our own Christian attainment and the most passionate longing to perfect our course. To speak of consistency here is indeed short of the mark. The very ground of our dissatisfaction with self is, that we are not what Christ would have us be and fall sadly behind filling the place for which God designs us. Just because we are content with him, we cannot be content with ourselves. And just so long as to us "who would do good, evil is present," as, though we "delight in the law of God after the inward man," we "see a different law in our members bring-

ing us into captivity under the law of sin which is in our members," we must cry, "O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me out of the body of this death?"

It is for us to ask our souls seriously this day whether this is the case with us. The human heart is very subtle; and it may be that some of us who would fain reply with a hasty "yes" may find cause, on consideration, to doubt whether our dissatisfaction is with self or with God—dissatisfaction with the dispensations of his providence, by which some messenger of sickness or sorrow or failure has visited us. In the bitterness of the moment we may feel glad to leave this world of our misery or our shame, not knowing that the long-suffering of God leadeth us to repentance. The truly Christian dissatisfaction is not such. It is with self and the meagerness of our Christian attainment. And it shows itself in an eager desire not so much to depart from the world as to depart from sin and to sit down in the heavenly places with Christ.

II. We cannot help observing, as a second important truth which we may learn from this unique record of Paul's inner experience, that even to the Christian death remains an undesired guest. Although the Apostle groaned under the burden of his body of sin, and therefore eagerly wished to pass

out of this bodily life, yet he expresses a strong desire not to die. He longed rather for the coming of his Lord, that he might go to him without dying. He shrank from death; and it cannot be wrong for other Christians like him to shrink from death. We learn from this at once that though this bodily life which we are now living in the flesh is an evil, and every truly Christian soul will long to be delivered from it, a bodily life in itself considered is not an evil, but a good, and every rightly constituted man must cling instinctively to it. Death is unnatural and rightly terrifies its victims. Even more—death is evil, sin's offspring, Christ's enemy, Satan's servant; and every Christian heart must stand aghast before it. It is only because our Lord and Saviour lies now behind death that we can tolerate the thought of it. To whom of us has this dread presence not come to snatch from our arms one we loved better than life? It has been our comfort and joy that we were surrendering him to the even more loving arms of our Saviour. Since Christ has died, how much of the terror of death has departed! He has broken its sting, which is sin, by removing its strength, which is the curse of the broken law. Since he has lain in it, how much of the gloom of the tomb has gone! But have we not needed all this comfort which we could gain?

The gloom of the tomb still overhangs it; it must, it ought to do so. And terrible death remains terrible still; it bears on its front still the dreadful legend which marks it as God's threatened punishment of sin.

III. In its closest analysis, the horror which we have of death turns on the unnatural separation which it brings about between those life-long companions, the soul and the body. And this leads us to the third great truth which is here brought before us. It is plain that the state of the blessed dead between death and the resurrection, when considered in itself alone as a condition—apart from their case, circumstances, and situation—is an undesirable state, because a state of unnatural separation between soul and body induced by and the fruit of sin. We are apt to think more of the body bereft of its animating and informing principle: even the bodies of our beloved are dear to us. But it is observable that Paul's solicitude seems to be less for the deserted body than for the naked soul. It is its unnatural and sin-born nakedness at death which appalls him; and in this unclothing of the soul he finds the horror of death.

In this sense the state of the blessed dead while awaiting the resurrection, as it is not their final state, is an imperfect state and therefore an un-

desirable state. In no other sense, however. It is a state of entire happiness; the soul is with the Lord. It is a state of, so far as the soul is concerned, completed salvation, finished sanctification, entire holiness. The Romish invention of purgatory, by which for the great majority of the saved a period of purification of longer or shorter duration and of greater or less suffering is interposed between death and "the going home to the Lord," is not only a baseless but a wicked invention, at war with every statement of Scripture in the premises, and with every dictate of the truly Christian consciousness alike. The same is true, of course, of all the fancies of the so-called ethical theology of our day which agree in supposing the saved soul to carry remainders of sin with it into the other world, because in its subtle and often only half-conscious antagonism to the supernatural this school of thought finds difficulty in believing that God cleanses the soul at death from its remaining sin, according to his Word; and looks only for a self-cleansing by the soul itself in its own activity, which of course would be, however aided by the Spirit, gradual and slow. It is not only the Westminster Confession, but also the Scripture, which teaches in every form of language, and with every circumstance of emphasis possible, that "the

souls of the righteous are at their death made perfect in holiness, and are received into the highest heavens, where they behold the face of God in light and glory, waiting for the full redemption of their bodies."

The sole element of truth in the teachings just adverted to lies in the one fact that redemption is incomplete until the resurrection. It is the soul alone which is immediately transferred into holy bliss. The body lies moldering in the grave; and though "even in death," in the beautiful language of the Westminster Larger Catechism, the bodies of Christ's members "continue united to Christ, and rest in their graves *as in their beds*, till at the last day they be again united to their souls," their redemption is not "full" until the resurrection. The salvation is complete, but it is as yet only an incomplete man that is saved. As the separation between soul and body is not natural to man, as God made man's nature, but is the fruit of sin and the penalty specifically threatened to sin, the work of redemption is not "full" until Christ conquers his last enemy, Death, and comes again in triumph, reuniting the souls and bodies of all his saints.

It is not, indeed, a pleasant thought that Christ's enemy, dreadful Death, retains dominion over even this lower element in our nature after death and on

through what may well prove to be countless ages, until the Lord comes again in the epiphany of his glory, and in visible conquest over the last of his foes. Do we wonder, in view of such a fact, that the Old Testament saints, in the comparative twilight of revelation, sitting, if not in darkness, yet not yet in the full illumination of the day of salvation, could scarcely speak of death without a shudder, or of the land beyond death except as "a land of darkness and the shadow of death"? Or do we wonder that in the fullness of New Testament light the apostles teach us to long rather for Christ's coming than for death, to wait for that rather than for this, with expectant patience indeed, but also with strong desire? Have we not, indeed, uncovered here the one secret of the gloom that hangs over the Old Testament allusions to the other world, and as well, of that strong emphasis that is placed in the New Testament on the Second Advent which has puzzled many, and which, being misunderstood, has given birth to much Chiliastic error? It was important in the period of preparation that men's minds should not escape from the conception of death as the penalty of sin; and only when life and immortality were ready to be brought fully to light was it safe to make them fully understand the bliss that lay behind death. And now, when preparation has

passed into the glorious reality of a completed sacrifice for sin, it is equally important that we should keep in mind that we do not obtain our entire salvation, that all the terrible harvest which springs from sin is not fully garnered by any one of us, until our enraptured eyes behold him who is the Redeemer from sin descending from heaven in like manner as he went into heaven. We are still reaping fruitage from our sin, even after we go abroad from the body and go home to the Lord, or, better, just because in order to go home to the Lord we must needs go abroad from the body.

Let us praise God that he saves the soul at once utterly; and, naked as it may be, takes it home to himself and grants it continual fruition of his favor, while it awaits in his sheltering arms the perfecting of its old companion the body. How great a mercy that our Lord enables us to know that our dead are perfectly holy and happy at once, and that it is only the insensate body that awaits in the disgrace of the tomb the great day when he shall come to be glorified in all his saints. But it is equally important to keep ourselves reminded that they gravely err who speak with scant respect of the body which has also in its measure been a habitation of the Spirit, and is also joined to the Lord, referring to the soul as released from a prison when it is freed

from what they are pleased to term the clog of clay. We cannot emphasize too strongly that human souls were not created to exist apart from matter, and so far from needing to be separated from their bodies for their completest freedom, are incomplete and naked things away from their dwelling-houses of clay. It is the glory of Christianity to provide a salvation adequate to the whole man ; and though it be only gradually realized, and the soul be taken to bliss long before the renewed and glorified body is prepared for it, yet it is accomplished in the end, and the complete man stands before his God, justified, sanctified, glorified. . The saints of God have prelibations of their glory. Even in this world they are received into the number of his sons, and are made temples of the Holy Ghost. When their period of service below is accomplished, their spirits are cleansed from remainders of sin and received into the presence of God. But the day that marks the beginning of their heavenly perfection and of their completed bliss is not the day in which they believed, although in that act their whole salvation was in principle involved ; nor yet is it the day in which they depart to be with Christ, although in that they enter into glory ; but it is to be the day of Christ's glorious coming and of the resurrection of the saints. And this is the reason of the empha-

sis on the Day of Judgment in the Bible ; it is the day in which the inheritance, incorruptible and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for Christ's people, shall be fully revealed.

IV. It is time that we were throwing stress, however, on a further blessed truth brought to us by this passage, and indeed underlying it as one of its foundations ; and that is that this intermediate state of the blessed dead, although imperfect when compared with their final state, when the whole man shall partake of the divine glory, is, apart from that comparison, unspeakably blissful, and to be infinitely desired and longed for by every Christian soul. We remember that Paul, with a clear sense of all the unnaturalness of a separation of the soul from the body, yet wished rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord, and declared to depart and be with Christ to be "very far better." Just so soon as he remembered that while we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord, he desired to go away from home from the body that he might go home to the Lord. Perhaps no clearer insight could be given of the infinite bliss of the saved soul in heaven than is afforded by the fact that it is so great as to make it intensely to be desired even at the expense of so unnatural a mutilation. Paul does not conceal from his readers that

he would rather, for himself, that the coming of Christ should be hastened, so that the conquest of Death, the last enemy, might be completed, and he be glorified, soul and body, without death. But presence with the Lord was so to be yearned for, that, if this was not to be, he was well pleased to depart from the body itself and go to the Lord. It is well to let our hearts dwell on this revelation of bliss. What comfort it brings us for those who have died in the Lord! And perhaps it may entice our own hearts to long to lay aside our body of sin and enter into the inheritance of the saints beyond the grave.

Let us note the superiority of their state to ours here. The evil of our present life is positive evil; all that can be called an evil in the soul-life in heaven is negative only. By which it is intended to say that the holiness and bliss of the disembodied soul in heaven is perfect of its kind; it has only not yet been made a sharer in so complete a glorification of human nature as is destined for it. While, on the other hand, in this life not only do we lag behind the positive attainment there and thus live on a lower plane, but there is a weight of positive evil upon us, a law of sin reigning in our members. Ah, if we could only catch a glimpse of what perfect holiness really is, how would we long to be

separated from this body of sin and enter into it at any cost! We observe, therefore, that though the separation of soul and body is in itself an unnatural thing, the separation of our redeemed and sanctifying soul from this body of humiliation in which we now live is a thing to be greatly desired, not because it is a body, but because it is a body of sin. The bliss of the intermediate state is thus infinitely more to be desired than anything that can come to us on earth; it is only less desirable than the completed redemption which is yet to come.

And of this complete redemption it is the earnest and pledge. It is the completion of the salvation of the higher element of our nature, and bears in itself the prophecy and promise of the completion of the salvation of the whole man. It is to be desired, then, as the storm-tossed mariner desires the haven which his vessel has long sought to win through the tossing waves and adverse winds—gate only though it be of the country which he calls home, and long though he may need to wait until all his goods are landed. It is the end of the journey, when the friends come out to meet us. It is within the Father's house, where the greeting rings, "Bring forth the best robe and put it on him." Should the prodigal be impatient for the coming of the robe? The bliss of the holy, happy dwelling

with the Lord is such that even were there nothing beyond we should joyfully seek it; and it is the promise and the surety of a yet grander future.

But the Apostle throws his emphasis on the chief joy of the intermediate state. Christ is there. To go abroad from the body is to go home to the Lord. No wonder he prefers nakedness of soul with Christ to personal completeness away from Christ. And no wonder since his day many a bed of suffering has been smoothed, and many a soul has gone forth brightening the face of even the deserted body with its smile of joy as it hears the words of its Saviour, "To-day thou shalt be with me in Paradise." No wonder Christian song is vocal with the sigh

"O mother dear, Jerusalem!
When shall I come to thee?
When shall my sorrows have an end,
Thy joys when shall I see?
O happy harbor of God's saints,
O sweet and pleasant soil,
In thee no sorrows can be found,
No grief, no care, no toil!

"Jerusalem the city is
Of God our King alone;
The Lamb of God, the light thereof,
Sits there upon his throne.
Ah, God! that I Jerusalem
With speed may go and see,—
Jerusalem! Jerusalem!
Would God I were in thee!"

V. Do we not share these yearnings? May God grant that in his own good time each of us may indeed be permitted to join the innumerable throng of praising saints about his throne. Dare we confront the possibility that it may not be so? The Apostle seems to confront it. For, on reaching this point in his statement, he makes a sudden and strange transition. He had reached the climax: "We are of good courage, I say, and are well pleased rather to go away from home from the body, and go home to the Lord." Here he might be expected to pause. But he continues; and the words which he adds demand our serious attention: "*Wherefore also we make it our aim, whether at home or away from home, to be well-pleasing unto him. For we must all be made manifest before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he hath done, whether it be good or bad.*" Thus he turns from the glories of his inheritance in Christ in heaven to the duties which he owes him on earth; from the consideration of what he may attain in him to the danger of losing it all; from the bliss of dwelling with Christ to the dread of standing before his judgment-seat. His purpose is obvious, and the addition of these solemn words ceases to be strange. It is not enough to contemplate the glories of heaven; we must seek

to make those glories ours. They are given to whom they justly belong; we must all stand before the judgment-seat of Christ and receive according to the deeds done in the body, whether good or bad. And note the finality of this judgment. The Apostle plainly does not contemplate the possibility of any reversal or of any change; the verdict upon what is done here is the irreversible doom of all the future. And therefore it behoves us to be well-pleasing to him.

Oh, the troops upon troops that have laid aside the trials and labors of earth, well-pleasing to their Lord, and entered into their rest with him!

“Death’s wings beat round about us day and night;
Their wind is on our faces now.”

While yet our farewell to them on this side of the separating gulf was sounding in their ears, the glad “Hail!” of their Lord was welcoming them there. May God grant to each of us to follow them. May he give us his Holy Spirit to sanctify us wholly and enable us when we close our eyes in our long sleep to open them at once, not in terrified pain in torment, but in the soft, sweet light of Paradise, safe in the arms of Jesus!