

THE ABOLITION OF DEATH

The first Thanksgiving came after that dreadful winter which deposited on the wind swept hillside cemetery half of the colonists. Only 7 members of the colony were healthy enough to tend the sick, yet, they gave thanks. Why? Because, my friends, they had a different view of life and death than we of the 20th century. Take death, for example, Hewett Barton Babbage (?) in his book MAN IN NATURE AND GRACE speaks of the modern attitude toward death. He says, "Modern man is pathologically afraid of pain and death." A school of American educationalists are busily engaged in revising nursery rhymes. No longer are the ears of children to be offended with tales of violence and sudden death. Grimm's fairy tales, the tales of Hans Andersen are all to be revised. All references to evil and wickedness, to suffering and death are to be suppressed and expunged. In the future children will learn about the "three blind mice who all ran after the farmer's wife who cut them some cheese with the carving knife. Did you ever hear such a tale in all your life?" Of the same school of educationalists are those most chiefly concerned in proclaiming what are called 'the facts of life.' No longer are children to be threatened with complexes and laden with inhibitions. The facts of life are to be openly proclaimed.

Dr. Benjamin Spock has written an enlightened guide in his COMMON SENSE BOOK OF BABY AND CHILD CARE. Millions of copies have already been sold and the doctor advises, "Tell the children all about the facts of life but never" he warned, "tell them about the facts of death." Yes, tell them about the beginning of life but nothing about the end. So we are presented with this astonishing situation, on one hand the facts of life openly proclaimed and, on

the other hand, the facts of death hidden, denied, ignored and suppressed. This is a far cry, my friends, from what happened in the days of the Pilgrim fathers.

The fear of death today results largely from the fear of coming judgment. "It is appointed once or men to die," says Scripture, "and after this cometh judgment." This is the basic explanation of man's nervous fear and secret apprehension. Epicurus said long ago, "What men fear is not that death is annihilation but that it is not." As Baggage says, "If death were extinction, how simple everything would be, we could then say with cheerful irresponsibility, 'Let's eat and drink for tomorrow we die.'" But we know that death is not the end, that after this cometh judgment.

My friends, it is the certainty of inescapable death and the uncertainty of that which is to follow that is the most dread anguish in the world. Let me give you an example from political and literary biography. You all know of Fedor Dostoevski. He was arrested with other members of a reading circle and charged with offenses against the censorship of Russia and on December 22, 1849, the forty four accused men were taken to the drill ground of Semianovski (?). The sheriff read out the sentences, again and again the fateful words were pronounced, "Sentenced to be shot." Years later Dostoevski used to hear them as he awoke in the night. The accused were forced to put on the white shirt of the condemned and for more than 20 minutes they stood in the bitter Russian cold, 50 degrees below freezing point. A priest invited them to make their confession and only one did so. They all touched the crucifix with their lips, kissing it eagerly, hurriedly, just as though they were anxious to grasp something that might be useful to them afterwards. Dostoevski kept thinking and actually said, "It is impossible, they can't mean to kill us." However, his nearest companion pointed to a cart near the scaffold with coffins covered with a large cloth. About 20 paces from where he was standing were three posts. The first three

prisoners were fastened to them with white caps drawn over their faces so they could not see the rifles pointed at them. Then a group of soldiers took their stand opposite each post. Dostoevski was the eighth, therefore, he would be among the third lot to go up. He had about five minutes to live. Those five minutes seemed to be an almost interminable period...an enormous wealth of time. He seemed to be living in those minutes so many lives that there was no need as yet to think of the last moment so he divided up the time into parts, one for saying farewell to his friends, two minutes for that, then a couple more for thinking over his own life and all about himself and then another minute for a last look around. He contrived to kiss the two nearest to him. He thought of his brother, Michael, and his family and then embarked on those two minutes which he had allotted for looking into himself. He put it to himself as quickly and as clearly as possible that here he was a living, thinking man and that in 3 minutes he would be a nobody, or somebody, or something, or what and where? Worst of all was this thought, what would I do if I were not to die now? Men not condemned to die esteem life far too lightly. What if I were returned to life again? What an eternity of days and all mine! How I should grudge and count up every minute of it so as not to waste a single instant. This thought became such a terrible burden on his brain that he could not bear it. He wished they would shoot him quickly and have done with it. He just waited and waited. There was a terrible fear. He felt feeble and helpless. There was a choking in his throat. He did not lose his wits but he was absolutely powerless to move. Then when the soldiers had actually loaded their rifles there was a shouting and other noises and an officer came galloping across the square waving a white handkerchief. He brought a gracious pardon from the emperor. Dostoevski's sentence was commuted to four years in prison in Siberia and four years of service as a private soldier. Then the cart was uncovered. It didn't contain coffins but convict uniforms. The sentence of death had been only

a threat, a lesson not to be forgotten but one who had been blindfolded to be shot had gone mad and never recovered. Not one escaped without life-long injury to his nervous system.

My friends, we are all as surely condemned to death as was Dostoevski. The Bible says, "In Adam all die." There is no discharge in that war. It was Elizabeth I who on her death bed cried out, "A million pounds for a moment of time," but we can't bribe the grim reaper whoever we are. But, my friends, we offer you good news unlimited. For the second thing to say is just as surely as Dostoevski, we have been reprieved. Even more surely, he was reprieved to die again.

I read in the II epistle to Timothy, chapter I, verse 10 that Christ hath abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the good news. You say, abolished death? People still die. My friends, we need to understand the language of Scripture. The New Testament speaks of death and the judgment as already having been finished with, legally, in Christ because he died and was judged in our place. We know that, empirically, death remains but according to the New Testament it has lost its power. Christ has abolished it, he has drawn its sting. For the Christian death is now only a sleep. That is good news, my friends. To understand that we need to realize that Christ was our representative as surely as Adam. The Bible says that we were crucified with him, that we rose with him, that we ascended with him, that we sat down in heaven in heavenly places with Him. Do you see it, my friends? His death was ours, his resurrection was ours. Let me give you an illustration or two. You remember David of Old Testament times, he was the good shepherd. He was also a prophet and a general and a king. He never lost a battle because he represented, in his good aspects, the great savior, the great good shepherd, the greatest prophet of all, the greatest captain or general of any army, the king of kings, Christ, who never loses a battle. David represented him. Think, for example, David's

first conflict, remember, it was with Goliath, the giant. David was so slight, small, and apparently unarmed and it was decided that if David won the battle, then Israel would be the conqueror of the Philistines, declared so by their representative's victory. But if Goliath won, then the Israelites would be the slaves of the Philistines but when David won and cut off the head of the giant with his own sword, just as Christ destroyed Satan with his own sword of death on Calvary, then it was that the Israelites cried out, "We've won, we've won!" But, my friends, they had been hiding in the rocks, behind the trees. It was David who won for them and that is the way it is with our general, our good shepherd, our prophet, our king, our David. David means beloved. He represents the beloved son of God who on Calvary won a victory for all of us, my friends. When he abolished death by his resurrection the whole human race legally rose with him and thus one day all will rise who believe that death is now only a sleep.

Take the story of Samson. You remember Samson awaking at midnight, going up to the mountains with the door posts, the doors of the city, ascending with those to the hilltop, a beautiful figure of our great judge and savior because all the judges of Israel were redeemers or saviors, and here again Samson in his good aspects represents the true judge and redeemer, our Lord Jesus, who woke from the sleep of death and took the power of death, the gates of death to heaven itself as a conqueror. They were his trophies and then later when Samson is between two pillars, as Christ later was between two thieves; you remember that Samson bowed himself and willingly died thus destroying the oppressors of his people. Samson did more for his people in his death than in all his life and so it was with Christ.

My friends, when the Son of God died on Calvary he destroyed death. He has turned it for all who believe into a sleep. That is why Christ could say, "Whoever lives and believes in me shall

never die.” They may sleep, my friends, their mortal remains may be buried or cremated but they sleep in Jesus, one day to rise again in fullness of life and they will have an existence that will measure with the life of God himself. The good news of the Gospel is that sin and Satan and death, all of our enemies, have been finished with by Christ. And so in John 5:24 we read, “He that believeth has everlasting life. He does not come into judgment but has passed from death unto life.” My friends, do you believe it? Do you see it? Heaven begins here. Immortal life is not something to be received one day, it is ours the moment we believe and as long as we believe. He that believeth has eternal life. It does not say, will have, he has it now. Do you believe?

We must confess that there are millions who have only animal life, who are dead in trespasses and sins, why? Because they do not believe the good news. Well why don't they? Perhaps it is because they think they are too good to need the good news. Human nature is Pharisaical even at the best. Religious people, even religious leaders, are very slow to accept the real good news of Scripture. Every man, regardless of his church affiliation or lack of it is at heart a Pharisee. He believes he can establish his own righteousness and that then God will love him. Take, for example the story of John Wesley, the biographer, Fitchet, (?) says of Wesley, “He had sat at the feet of many instructors and had read many books, he had been a sacerdotalist, an ascetic, a legalist, all in turn, nay, altogether and, yet, through all these stages he had persistently misread the true order of the spiritual world. He believed that a changed life was not the fruit of forgiveness but its cause. Good works, he held, came before forgiveness and constituted the title to it. They didn't come after it as the effects. He had in every mood of his soul, that is, missed the great secret of Christianity, lying so near and level to the intelligence of a child, the secret of a personal salvation, the free gift of God's infinite love through Christ, a salvation received

through Christ and by faith, a salvation attested by the Spirit of God and verified in the consciousness.”

My friends, what this biographer read in Wesley’s biography revealed the secret of that spiritual giant-- original poverty-- but it also reveals the secret of our original poverty. Let me read you some things from Wesley himself beginning with his childhood and running onto his manhood. Here is John Wesley: “I was carefully taught that I could only be saved by universal obedience, by keeping all the Commandments of God in the meaning of which I was diligently instructed but all that was said to me of inward obedience or holiness I neither understood nor remembered so I was, indeed, as ignorant of the true meaning of the Law as I was of the Gospel of Christ.” Then Wesley speaks about his experience as a school boy. “What I now hoped to be saved by was (1) not being so bad as other people, (2) having still a kindness or religion, (3) reading the Bible, going to church and saying my prayers.” Then Wesley, talking about his later years, before his conversion said this, “By my continued endeavor to keep His whole law inward and outward to the utmost of my power, I was persuaded I should be accepted of Him. I even thought I was then in a state of salvation.” Not too different for many of us, is it? After his failure as a missionary, into his diary went these words, “I was strongly convinced that the cause of that uneasiness was unbelief and that the gaining of a true living faith was the one thing needful for me but, still, I fixed not this faith on its right object. I meant only faith in God, not faith in or through Christ. I knew not that I was wholly devoid of this faith, only thought I had enough of it.” But, my friends, after John Wesley heard Luther’s word about the good news, about salvation full and free because of Christ’s works, Christ’s doing, Christ’s sufferings, then Wesley wrote this: “I felt my heart strangely warmed, I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, now for salvation and an assurance had been given me that he had taken away my sins, even

mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.” Ah, there it is my friends, when we are saved from guilt we are saved from sin and death.

It is possible to be just so near to success and yet so far away. So much that is taught in religion is right, but not quite right, true but not entirely true. It is true that God seeks our obedience to all his commandments but it is not true that salvation comes as a result of our law keeping. Read Galatians 3:10 that tells us we have no hope that way, that whoever tries to gain salvation by keeping the Law is under the curse of the Law. It is true that a man must have faith, repent and confess his sins but it is not true that these are to be sought before coming to Jesus. It is as we come just as we are that faith, repentance and confession are born along with a new heart that is ever the fruit of looking to Christ and away from self. We are, indeed, saved by works, too, but they are Christ’s works which climax on the cross. Ours are not good enough. It is indeed true that all true Christians obey but they do not obey in order to be Christians but because they have already become such by trusting in Christ. Christ and Christ alone is all that we are needing. Strength, willingness, all else in the Christian life come with the seeing of Christ in his death for us.

Now, my friends, let me ask you does your life reflect Luther’s world or Wesley’s, that is to say the Luther who found that the good news was that the righteousness of God is the gift that he gives to all who believe. Or does your life reflect that of Wesley’s, trying hard to be good so God will accept your righteousness?

One modern writer has said this, “If we are conscious of our needs, we should not devote all our powers to mourning over them; while we realize our helpless condition without Christ, we are

not to yield to discouragement, we are to rely upon the merits of the crucified and risen Savior. Although millions in need to be healed will reject his offered mercy, not one who trusts in His merits will be left to perish for the believer is not called upon to make his peace with God, he never has, nor ever can do this. He is to accept Christ as his peace for with Christ is God and peace.” That says it beautifully, doesn’t it? “Good, merry and glad tidings,” as Tyndale says, “that makes a man’s heart to sing and his feet to dance.”

How can I convince you, my friends, of the importance of believing this good news? Death should remind us for in the midst of life we are in death, that grim reaped never sends a notice card. One short life, twill soon be past and only what is done for Christ will last.

I was reading in a library one day and I tucked out a book. Inside on the frontispiece I read these words, “Just think, one night the stars will gleam upon a cold gray stone and trace the name in silver beam and, lo, twill be your own.” Think of that, my friends, think of that. No wonder at Pentecost men who were cut to the heart cried out to Peter and the rest of the apostles, “Brethren what shall we do?” I want you to notice Peter’s reply, “Peter said to them, ‘repent and be baptized, every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.’” The moment the man receives, he receives the life of God. The gift of the Spirit is the gift of God himself and with God, eternal life for death is abolished for the believer. You have noticed, I am sure, that Peter’s first word was ‘repent.’ That’s the start and it comes by looking at the cross. The cross is the miracle working rod that brings forth the tears of repentance from our stony hearts. The trouble is, for you and me, we are too convinced that we don’t need to repent.

Let me tell you about Himie in a parable that was written in a book about modern parables. Himie had been dragged to the prison kicking and screaming, "I am innocent, I tell you," he shouted for the 755th time as the turn- key slammed his cell door. "Yeh, we're all innocent buddy," came the harsh voice of Himie's next cell neighbor. "I've been here on false wrap for 15 years now and I am as innocent as the warden, maybe innocenter." Well, after a few weeks of screaming himself hoarse about his innocence, Himie finally settled down to a routine that divided equal time between brooding over the injustice of it all and making feverish plans for getting the truth of his innocence before the right people. He spent many hours day dreaming of the governor's embarrassment when he hand delivered the pardon to Himie's cell. The governor would sputter and fumble and blush in an agony of self reproach over imprisoning such a noble innocent man while Himie would keep a stern and unreadable face. The governor would offer all kinds of enticements to mollify Himie, new cars, a fine suburban home with swimming pool and pool table, set up into his own little business, but no, Himie would sue. His revenge would be as monumental as the injustice they had wreaked upon him. Himie's little eyes glittered in the gloom of his cell as he drank in the mental picture of the day when his innocence would triumph. In the meantime Himie did what he could on the home front. When he was not writing 10 page letters to senators and congressmen he was at his post at his cell door shouting his innocence to everyone who passed by. When he didn't receive replies from most of his letters he accused the warden of tampering with the federal mail. He shouted that too. One day when Himie had been locked up in his cell for almost a year, his eyes became tired from following the long letter he was writing with a stubby pencil. To rest his eyes he went to his cell window and look out and down the courtyard. The sight of grass greenening and buds popping shocked him. There was life out there, glorious life! Somehow he had forgotten that there was an outside or, at least, that life, time and a world were still going on beyond his bars. Because his own life had been

stopped in mid-beat, because of his imprisonment he had let himself imagine that the whole world had stopped too as if waiting with caught breath for that glorious day of the triumph of Himie's innocence, that day when he would emerge from that hated prison and his innocence acknowledged but now there was that grass greening, there were those buds popping. It was too much for Himie, the grass, the buds, everything living, growing and changing except him, he was trapped. It wasn't the world that hung in suspended animation while Himie busily scribbled and shouted, it was Himie, he was the one that was trapped, immobile like a bee in amber while the rest of the world seethed by and around him. With a gasp Himie swept the carefully lettered pages from his bunk and he fell groaning into it. It was dark in the cell by the time that supper came. "Here you are, Mr. Innocent," the turn- key joked as he slid Himie's tray through the slot in the iron door. "I'm not innocent," Himie croaked, weary with it all, "I'm guilty, guilty as hell." "What did you say?" the turn- key asked strangely excited, holding his breath to catch the soft answer, "Guilty," sighed Himie, "I'm guilty." Immediately there was a rattling of a key in the lock and when Himie raised his head the door did not look right. When he got up and gave the door a tentative push it swung open broadly into the dusky deserted corridor. Peeking timidly down the corridor Himie saw that other gates were hanging open for him all the way to the front gate. There was still enough sunlight to give him a glimpse of the greening grass and the bursting buds beyond.

My friends, does that say something to you and to me? I am reading to you from John 11, "Martha said to Jesus, 'Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died, even now I ask and I know that whatever I ask God will give you and Jesus said to her, 'Your brother will rise again.' Martha said to him, 'I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.' Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life, he who believes in me, though

he die, yet, shall he live and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this? She said to him, ‘Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, he who should come into the world.’” Christ told the sisters of the one bereaved, “Believe and thou shall see the glory of God,” for death, my friends, has been abolished for all who believe in God’s love for them as shown on Calvary’s cross... believe, receive and live forever, my friend, believe today.