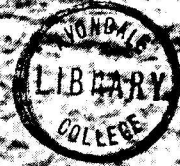


NOT FOR CIRCULATION



THE TRUTH ABOUT DEATH



BY DESMOND FORD

PHILIP, remember that you must die!" Thus said a slave of the ruler of Macedon daily to his royal master, long centuries ago. Modern-day Philips and their subjects would fain forget this fact.

We now live in an era which does not hesitate to publish abroad the facts of life but which prefers to ignore the fact of death.

"Birth, and copulation, and death.

That's all the facts when you come to brass tacks:

Birth, and copulation, and death."

So wrote T. S. Eliot. But today we have reversed the trend of centuries with reference to these "brass tacks." While once death was constantly kept before all, and the other "facts" glossed over, today's practice is the reverse. Reviewers of literature point out that there is hardly a significant novel or play of the past twenty years which contains a deathbed scene in it with reference to any major character, despite the fact that such was a typical subject for writers in earlier centuries.

A certain great newspaper, known throughout the world, does not permit the use of the word *death* in any of its columns; and similarly one of the most popular writers on child care, Dr. Benjamin Spock, counsels parents to pass over the fact of death in discussions with their children. In harmony with the same trend is the "beautifying" of the dead and the transformation of cemeteries into scenic parks.

Despite this apparent conspiracy of silence, it is obvious to any thoughtful person that it is impossible to live aright without taking in all the facts of life, which facts include, as one of their most significant, the certainty of death. As it is impossible to solve simple mathematical problems without all the figures, and as it is impossible to balance an account without complete records, so it is hopeless to live aright without taking into account the approaching of life's end. With all eternity stretching before us and with the launching into that eternity inevitable, it is sheer insanity to live as though immortal. Said Bunyan of old, "If a man would live well, let him fetch his last day to him, and make that his company-keeper."

Only the foolish, therefore, refuse to ask whether there is any truth in the traditional view that this present life is a probationary time and that the character now developed will determine destination and destiny. Furthermore, a frank inquiry regarding death seeks not merely for some assurance of the perpetuation of one's own life but asks also with yearning urgency concerning the fate of loved ones who have gone and the possibility of reunion with them. In practically every home there exists at least one vacant chair which poses an insistent question regarding eternity.

But why ask questions which none can answer? The silver-tongued infidel orator, Robert Ingersoll, at the graveside of his brother lamented, "Life is a narrow vale between the cold and barren peaks of two eternities. We strive in vain to look beyond the heights. We cry aloud—and the only answer is the echo of our wailing cry." Is this true, that only in vain do we strive to look beyond the heights? Was the pessimism of Bertrand Russell warranted when he asserted, "I believe that when I die, I shall rot, and nothing of my ego will survive"?

Two thousand years ago there appeared in time and space One who solved the enigmas of life and death. He broke up every funeral He attended, including His own. The names of Nain, Jairus, Lazarus, and Golgotha remain as historical allusions to Christ's triumph over death. He Himself has broken its chains and risen victor over the grave. He is our sole authority in this realm, and we do well to seek His testimony regarding death.

Both before and after His own death Christ spoke with certainty upon this theme. His words are words of hope, courage, and assurance such as none other has ever spoken on this dread topic. To those who believe in Him, He says, "Fear not; I am the first and the last: I am he that liveth, and was dead; and, behold, I am alive for evermore, Amen; and have the keys of hell and of death." "I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live; and whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die." Revelation 1:17, 18; John 11:25, 26.

This last cryptic statement He explains elsewhere by alluding to death as being merely a sleep. Regarding the dead daughter of Jairus, Christ declared, "She is not dead, but sleepeth";

and concerning Lazarus our Lord asserted, "Our friend Lazarus sleepeth." Luke 8:52; John 11:11. Church history records that the figure of sleep became central to all early Christian thinking about the dead and was reflected by countless catacomb inscriptions of the first century. While the pagan Romans practiced cremation, contemporary Christian believers buried their loved ones. The famous catacombs under and about Rome are said to house about seven million dead, and these constitute seven million witnesses to the fact of Christ's resurrection and the certainty of the coming resurrection of all.

IN DECLARING death to be but a dreamless sleep Christ was echoing words He had inspired Old Testament seers to write centuries before. Prayed the psalmist, "Lighten mine eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death." Psalm 13:3. Over fifty times Bible writers used the term *sleep* with reference to the dead.

Martin Luther once stated: "As to purgatory, I think it a very uncertain thing. It is probable, in my opinion, that, with very few exceptions indeed, the dead sleep in utter insensibility till the day of judgment. . . . On what authority can it be said that the souls of the dead may not sleep out the interval between earth and heaven, or hell, or purgatory, in the same way that the living pass in profound slumber the interval between their downlying at night and their uprising in the morning?"—Michelet's *Life of Luther*, Bohn's edition, p. 133.

Bible writers know nothing of the theory that the dead exist consciously in heaven or in hell prior to the resurrection. Asserted Job, "If I wait, the grave is mine house." Job 17:13. Neither the widow's son of Nain, nor Lazarus, had anything to testify concerning experience after death.

It was the breath given by God which first animated the faultless body of the first man and bestowed consciousness, and the testimony of Holy Writ is that death simply reverses the process. "His breath goeth forth, he returneth to his earth; in that very day his thoughts perish." Psalm 146:4. Thus the dust returns to the earth "as it was," and the spirit, or breath, returns "unto God who gave it." (Ecclesiastes 12:7; Genesis 2:7.) Declared our Lord, "The hour is coming, in the which all that are in the graves shall hear his voice, and shall come forth; they that have done

good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation." John 5:28, 29. Note that it is from the graves that the dead come forth, not from heaven or hell.

What a mockery the common view of immediate reward at death makes of Christ's invitation to the righteous at the end of the world: "Enter thou into the joy of thy lord." Matthew 25:21. Paul affirms that without the coming resurrection "they also which are fallen asleep in Christ are perished." (1 Corinthians 15:18.) Three basic Christian doctrines—the second advent of Christ, the judgment, and the resurrection—are rendered void by the heresy of the conscious state of the dead.

WILLIAM TYNDALE, famous translator of the Bible, declared to his papist opponent, "Ye, in putting them [departed souls] in heaven, hell and purgatory, destroy the argument wherewith Christ and Paul prove the resurrection. . . . If the souls be in heaven, tell me why they be not in as good case as the angels be? And then what cause is there of the resurrection?" (See Tyndale's Preface to New Testament, edition 1534.)

About a century later John Milton, author of "Paradise Lost," wrote:

"The death of the body is the loss or extinction of life. The common definition, which supposes it to consist in the separation of soul and body, is inadmissible. . . . For what could be more just, than that he who had sinned in his whole person, should die in his whole person? Or, on the other hand, what could be more absurd than that the mind, which is the part principally offending, should escape the threatened death; and that the body alone, to which immortality was equally allotted, before death came into the world by sin, should pay the penalty of sin by undergoing death, though not implicated in the transgression?"—*The Christian Doctrine*, "Of the Death of the Body."

Dr. J. A. Beet, renowned Wesleyan scholar, about the turn of this century gave study to the subject of immortality and published his conclusions in a volume entitled *The Immortality of the Soul*. After studying the historic position from early centuries he says:

"To sum up. The phrase, *the soul immortal*, so frequent and conspicuous in the writings of Plato, we have not found in pre-Christian literature out-

side the influence of Greek philosophy; nor have we found it in Christian literature until the latter part of the second century. We have noticed that all the earliest Christian writers who use this phrase were familiar with the teaching of Plato; that one of these, Tertullian, expressly refers both phrase and doctrine to him; and that the early Christian writers never support this doctrine by appeals to the Bible, but only by arguments similar to those of Plato. . . . We have failed to find any trace of this doctrine in the Bible. . . . It is altogether alien, both in phrase and thought, to the teaching of Christ and His apostles."—Pp. 53, 54.

In chapter four of his book Dr. Beet considers the doctrine as held by contemporary scholars and reviews the then-current works dealing with inherent immortality. But time and again he stresses the point that these writers use little or no Scripture to support their theories. For example, reviewing Dr. Salmond's book, *The Christian Doctrine of Immortality*, he says:

"Certainly he brings no proof from the Bible or elsewhere for the popular doctrine of the immortality of the soul. He thus affords strong presumption that it is not taught there, and that it does not rest on any reliable evidence."—P. 72. Again on the next page, in speaking of Dr. Welldon, he states, "He endeavours to say something for the immortality of the soul without appealing to the Bible."

A well-known modern theologian, Dr. Oscar Cullmann, has written similarly:

"For the first Christians the soul is not intrinsically immortal, but rather became so only through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and through faith in Him. It also becomes clear that death is not intrinsically the Friend, but rather that its 'sting,' its power, is taken away *only* through the victory of Jesus over it in His death. And lastly, it becomes clear that the resurrection already accomplished is not the state of fulfillment, for that remains in the future until the body is also resurrected, which will not occur until 'the last day.'"—*Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Dead?* p. 17.

LEST we follow the error of others and quote only the ideas of men rather than the plain statements of Scripture, the Bible is now allowed to speak for itself on this subject of mortality.

"The King of kings, and Lord of

lords; who *only* hath immortality." Timothy 6:15, 16.)

"Seek for glory and honour and immortality." (Romans 2:7.)

"Whosoever believeth in him should not *perish*, but have *everlasting life*." (John 3:16.)

"And death and hell were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death. And whosoever was not found written in the book of life was cast into the lake of fire." Revelation 20:14, 15.

"Fire came down from God out of heaven, and *devoured* them." Revelation 20:9.

"So man lieth down, and riseth not: till the heavens be no more, they shall not *awake*, nor be raised out of their *sleep*. O that thou wouldest hide me *in the grave*, that thou wouldest keep me secret, until thy wrath be past, that thou wouldest appoint me a set time, and remember me! If a man die, shall he live again? all the days of my appointed time will I wait, till my change come." Job 14:12-14.

"Behold, I shew you a mystery; We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, *at the last trump*: for the trumpet shall sound, and *the dead shall be raised* incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this *mortal* must put on immortality." 1 Corinthians 15:51-53.

THE unscriptural doctrine of natural immortality teaches the autonomy of sinful man, his independence of God. But the gospel proclaims the reverse—namely man's complete dependence upon God for life and righteousness. The essence of sin is independence of spirit, the feeling that one can get along without one's Maker, and it was to this attitude that Satan lured our first parents when he promised that by disobedience they could become as God. (Genesis 3:5, R.S.V.) No wonder then that this false teaching of man's conscious state in death underlies most heathen religions, spiritism, and modern heresies. It is time to return to the Biblical viewpoint.

If, then, Scripture declares that man is a mortal, dependent being, how may immortality become his?

"All that a man hath will he give for his life," records the writer of Job, and yet the Word of Inspiration declares that some will surrender even life itself for love's sake. "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down



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his life for his friends." John 15:13.

Thus there is one thing, and only one, that is stronger than love for life, and that is *love* itself. Here is the key to immortality. Our God is love. (1 John 4:8, 16.) Love is a mightier force than even death, and the love of Christ has "abolished death, and hath brought life and immortality to light through the gospel." (2 Timothy 1:10.) Romans 6:23 tells us that "the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord."

Christ satisfied the demands of justice and paid the penalty for a violated law. Because He was visited with the wages of sin, we need not be. "He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all." "When thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin, . . . he shall see of the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied." Isaiah 53:5, 6, 10, 11.

Thus Christ could promise, "If a man keep my saying, he shall never see death." John 8:51. Christ did not mean that a believer, through acceptance of the gospel, would immediately become immortal but rather that the natural death which comes upon all men has

for him lost its sting. A believer's faith in Christ renders death as innocuous as "forty winks."

We should notice the condition mentioned by Jesus: "If a man keep my saying." The union of the soul with Christ is accomplished by faith, but this union is demonstrated by obedience. He says, "Why call ye me, Lord, Lord, and do not the things which I say?" "If ye know these things, happy are ye if ye do them." Luke 6:46; John 13:17. And the beloved apostle writes, "He that saith, I know him, and keepeth not his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him." 1 John 2:4.

While no soul is saved by obedience, neither can he be saved without it. Obedience testifies to the quality of saving faith. While we are not saved by virtue of our keeping of the commandments, we can certainly be lost forever by willfully breaking them. "For if we sin wilfully after that we have received the knowledge of the truth, there remaineth no more sacrifice for sins, but a certain fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indignation." Hebrews 10:26, 27.

It is "he that doeth the will of God" who "abideth for ever" (1 John 2:17), for the characteristic of him who has become a partaker of Christ is joyous, wholehearted surrender in all things.

Such harmony with heaven's way inevitably results in a life which measures with the life of God.

The disciple who leaned on the bosom of his Lord and who penetrated His thought more than any other has summed up the answer sought by our quest. "This is the record, that God hath given to us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. *He that hath the Son hath life; and he that hath not the Son of God hath not life.*" 1 John 5:11, 12.

Christianity is not a creed, but a Person. It is not the pursuit of mere outward ritual, but the transformation of the soul by the receiving of the Son of God. To have all else but Him is to have nothing; but to receive Him is to receive all, including eternal life. This Victor over the grave graciously assures each one today that "whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life," and He reassures by adding, "Him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out." (John 3:15; 6:37.)

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One of the most meaningful questions ever put to Jesus Christ was, "Lord, to whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life." John 6:68. Yes; where can we go for help but to our Creator? Truly there is no hope in the counsels of man. Despite flashes of brilliance, even the wisest of men fail to provide the ultimate answers to life. Only God has these. He says, "Come unto me, and I will give you rest." Rest, joy, dynamic, satisfaction, hope—all these are yours in Christ. Our free Bible course will make all this very plain. Simply send in the coupon at the left. There is no obligation.