



ETERNAL LIFE—NOW!

by Desmond Ford

The greatest discovery of the twentieth century has been a humiliating one. It concerns not mechanical marvels, but man; not technology but anthropology, i.e. not the increasing knowledge of and power over things, but the burgeoning disillusionment about the knower himself and his demonstrated inability. Not the conquest of outer space, but the conquest of inner space — the heart and mind of man, is the greatest challenge of our day. Not the bomb, but the bomber, is the darkening threat to civilization.

No sane man would deny humanity's accelerated mastery over nature, but to include human nature within the sphere of progress would be to testify to

either ignorance or stupidity. Each material advance has been accompanied by a new threat.

All our questions about the universe and existence involve the prior question of "What is man?" Who or what is this being that asks the questions?

Slaughter on the roads mounts with the increase in cars and highways; education instead of banishing crime makes it more efficient, chemical research leads not only to medical triumphs but to moral dilemmas. The yield in

bushels to the acres has been increased, but likewise the manifestations of our lusts, hypocrisies, and fears. The theme of almost all modern literature is "Man is sick."

All of which is a far cry from the unbounded optimism which marked the turn of the century, the era of the Titanic. The romantic illusions of Utopianism have been shattered by two world wars and by recurring economic depression. Whereas the early 1900's were marked by a faith in man which matched that of the idealist Greek philosophers, more recent years have seen a reversal of sentiment and a view of human nature almost identical with that of such pessimists as the Greek

tragedians. Thus modern views of existence almost universally testify to the jaundiced eye of the beholder. Consider, for example, the confession of the playwright Ionesco in his *Notes et contrenotes*:

I have no other images of the world except those of evanescence and brutality, vanity and rage, nothingness or hideousness, unless hatred. Everything I have since experienced has merely confirmed what I had seen and understood in my childhood: vain and sordid fury, cries suddenly stifled by silence, shadows engulfed forever in the night.

In strong contrast is the triumphant testimony of the tragically handicapped Helen Keller: "I have found life so beautiful." Whom are we to believe about life, Ionesco or Keller?

Such a question reminds us that all our questions about the universe and existence involve the prior question of "What is man?" Who or what is this being that asks the questions? Only the Christian revelation as it is found in Scripture can rightly answer the question. It repudiates the two characteristic positions of the ages, naive optimism and cynical pessimism. It tells of Creation and the Fall as recorded in Genesis as the only adequate explanation of the nature of man. Man, made in the moral image of God, by disobedience has become a hybrid — half-angel, half-demon.

Three hundred years ago Blaise Pascal, scientist, mathematician and Christian, acknowledged genius of the seventeenth century, summed up the differences between Ionesco and Keller and the divisions of humanity they represent. He wrote:

Without Jesus Christ man must be in vice and misery; with Jesus Christ man is free from vice and misery; in Him is all our virtue and all our happiness. Apart from Him there is but vice, misery, darkness, death, despair.

The Christian religion, then, teaches men these two truths; that there is a God whom men can know, and that there is a corruption in their nature which

renders them unworthy of Him. It is equally important to men to know both these points; and it is equally dangerous for man to know God without knowing his own wretchedness, and to know his own wretchedness without knowing the Redeemer who can free him from it. The knowledge of only one of these points gives rise either to the pride of philosophers, who have known God, and not their own wretchedness, or to the despair of atheists, who know their own wretchedness, but not the Redeemer.¹

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The words are worth reading again. They sum up the human problem and the divine solution. Not only so, but they epitomize that most abstract and yet most practical of all branches of knowledge — theology, which in essence consists of the knowledge of God (that is, of his nature), and the knowledge of man, and the relationship between the two.

The gospel revolves around these truths. We will take one example which aptly illustrates our discussion so far. Let us consider that most beautiful of all Bible books — John.

While the first three Gospels use the metaphor of the kingdom of God to illustrate the basic message of the New Testament, Paul chose in Romans particularly the forensic metaphor of justification and elsewhere adoption and reconciliation. Life in the Spirit which is the subjective side of being "in Christ" is also a Pauline emphasis. But for the fourth Gospel all these are assumed and John chooses rather to stress eternal life (see for example 5:24 and 3:16-18,36). John has in mind a quality of existence, not just the everlasting duration of life for the saved. That quality of life is symbolized in Christ's seven miracles of transformation, all of which occur before the cross.

Though the "now" and the "not yet," the "first-fruits" and the full

harvest, must ever be distinguished, John is telling us that to receive the gospel of Christ is to receive a real foretaste of eternal life now. Let us consider the seven miraculous transformations in their order:

1. The turning of water into wine at Cana's marriage feast.
2. The healing of the nobleman's son at Capernaum. While Jesus was still at Cana, half-a-day's journey away.
3. The Bethesda healing of the impotent man who had been ill almost forty years.
4. The multiplying of the loaves and fishes for the 5,000 guests.
5. Walking on the waters of the Lake of Galilee and calming the storm.
6. The restoration of sight to the man born blind.
7. The raising of Lazarus from the dead.

These seven miracles are a symbolic portrayal of the needs of sinful man and of the sufficiency of Christ, the divine Savior. They describe our nature and his. Let us first consider these signs as they relate to our human condition, remembering that no one appreciates the good news until deeply aware of and groaning under the bad news.

The cry, "They have no wine" at Cana's marriage aptly points to the lack and disappointment which characterize our existence. Man is always seeking a more exhilarating life. The youth and beauty of the marriage festival, its song and flowers, its music and dancing intimate the expectations that we all cherish as we confidently stride upon life's stage. But how quickly our illusions are dispelled! The music fades, beauty turns to ugliness, the flowers wither and the wine runs out. As men set forth the good wine first and then afterwards that which is worst, even so does the world with its gifts. What is begun with eager excitement and admiration turns to disgust and sorrow. Even health, life's greatest wealth, deteriorates and with it life's most beautiful scenes become shadowed.

The second miracle points to our lack of spiritual health. We are all typified in the nobleman's son as he lingers on the verge of death.

Unless the Great Healer speaks the word of our healing our spiritual sickness will lead to eternal death.

Not only do life's exhilarations, health of spirit and body decline but also our physical strength. This is symbolized in the crippled man at Bethesda. Trials and temptations reveal to us our impotence. Failure follows upon failure and we are plunged into despair.

But not only are we without joy, health, and strength, we also lack true nourishment. The fainting, hungering 5,000 represent us all. Until we know Christ, we suffer from spiritual malnutrition.

These miracles present a picture of the sorry plight of all humanity. The situation worsens with the fifth miracle. The fragile boat on the stormy seas is a picture of mankind without safety, ever trembling on the verge of imminent disaster and death. The sixth story, the healing of the man born blind, intensifies further our sad case as it points to our spiritual blindness from the dawn of consciousness. Finally in the man who had been dead some days we see ourselves as "dead in trespasses and sins." What a marvelous portrayal of man's sinful nature and hopeless plight! The cluster of signs in John's Gospel witness to the fact that the unconverted man is without joy, health, strength, sustenance, safety, sight and life. All the events of history, all the accounts of modern literature, all the testimony of today's news media confirm the helpless state of man as reflected in these seven stories. As Pascal affirmed: "Without Christ man is in vice and misery, in darkness, death, and despair."

But is not the gospel "good news"? What good news is there in John's portrayal of our woe? For *that* we must consider the other half of the testimony of the seven signs. It speaks of Christ's nature, of the infinite capacity of the strong Son of God to meet our need. Each of the seven miracles reveals him as being able not only to meet our peculiar problems but all similar problems. In each mighty act we see him as the Transformer. He transforms water to wine, disease to health, impotence to strength, hunger to

satisfaction, danger to safety, darkness and blindness to light and sight and death to life. All the miracles bespeak his divinity, for "these are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name" (Jn 20:31). Note how he is strong where we are weak.

Christ is no mere man only. He is God. The divinity of our Lord is our assurance of eternal life and our guarantee that he is sufficient for all our needs in this present time, as well as in the world to come. The Gospel of John has as its message the glorious truth that once we are united to Christ by living faith, our only limitation will be the welcome one of the will of God which is always good.

1. The miracle at the wedding feast reveals the power of Christ to bring a new quality of life into human existence. Water becomes wine.
 2. The feeding of the 5,000 shows his power over *quantity*. A few loaves and fishes become enough to feed an army, and there is plenty to spare.
 3. The healing of a man who had been ill almost forty years shows Christ's power over *time*.
 4. His sending of the word of healing from Cana to Capernaum shows Christ's power over *space*.
 5. His walking upon the water reveals his supremacy over *natural law*.
 6. His healing of a man who was born blind illustrates his control over *apparent chance*, i.e., over nonlaw.
 7. The raising of Lazarus testifies to Christ's power over *death*. He is "The resurrection and the life."
- Thus each of these mighty works testifies that Christ is no mere man only. He is God. The

divinity of our Lord is our assurance of eternal life and our guarantee that he is sufficient for all our needs in this present time, as well as in the world to come. The Gospel of John has as its message the glorious truth that once we are united to Christ by living faith, our only limitation will be the welcome one of the will of God which is always good. Despite our weakness and our sinfulness, all things — the failing of supply, of health, of strength, of apparent safety, etc. — work together for good. Nothing can separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. But most of all the Gospel is declaring that the spiritual ravages of our nature made by sin can be healed by our contact of faith with the living Christ.

John is as aware of the simplicity of salvation by faith alone as certainly as Paul, and therefore he uses various forms of the word "believe" approximately 100 times and in most chapters of his Gospel this concept is emphasized (see, for example, 1:7,12; 2:11,23; 3:12,15,16,18,36; 4:28,39,53; 5:24,38,44,46,47; 6:29, etc.). That salvation is free is the glorious good news told again and again.

Sense can be made of the nonsense of life only as we believe the words of Christ. Listen again to some from the most beautiful book in the Bible.

...Him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out.

...He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation but is passed from death unto life.

...he that cometh to me shall never hunger; and he that believeth on me shall never thirst.

I am the resurrection and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live.

Throughout the Gospel of John the word of the divine Christ works transformation. It raised Lazarus from the dead. That same word received and believed by you and me places us too on resurrection ground translated into the eternal kingdom of God.