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NOT GOD OF THE DEAD BUT GOD OF THE LIVING

Sermon by the Rev. T. F. Fullerton, Pastor of St. James Presbyterian Church, Charlottetown.

Science May Deny or Philosophy Doubt Immortality, but Life Would be Incomplete and Meaningless if Death Ends All—Belief in a Future Life Uplifting and Comforting.

(Reported by The Guardian Stenographer)

Text:—Mark 12th. chap. 27th verse. He is not the God of the dead but the God of the living.

In the text we have chosen for our consideration this morning we have the expression of the line of thought, or be it still, the line of feeling which had produced in the religious section of the Jewish race, what has been well described as the "greatest revolution which the human mind had ever experienced," the revolution by which man had come to consider or suspect himself to be immortal.

This is the argument by which our Lord now meets the rationalistic Sadducees and is in principle the same argument which has made almost every thinker a believer in immortality.

Still as ever the tragedy of death is with us, heart-breaking pitiless tragedy. While from the depths of desolated souls, anguished and bereaved of all they cared for, rises amid the surging sea of sorrow and the vain strife of hope and fear the old unanswered question: "If a man die shall he live again? In all other departments of knowledge the thoughts of men have been widened by the process of the sun until the world has been transformed, as it is today, into a veritable theatre of wonders. We turn however to the magnificent work of science in modern times, and from all her laboratories comes the universal declaration, "The grave is the goal of existence." We consult the oracles of philosophy and with equivocal tongues they falter. "There may be a life after man has thrown off the muddy vesture of decay."

Religion however offers its supreme consolation and speaks forth her hopes of a glorious resurrection in a life that is immortal, and human life rolls on as if the tragedy of death had never been. Does the light wax or wane upon God's acre? Have we any certainty, or only the lengthening shadow over the sacred places where our dead lie? We stand in the presence of a great mystery where a reverent silence is golden and where we dare not dogmatise.

The light, however, that prompted the word, "He is not the God of the dead but the God of the living," which lifted out of despair the pious Jew, is with us still. It is not the light of science with its calculation and demonstration. It is from above—"the light that never was on sea or land." The sense of God bequeathed from the beginning, inherent in the constitution and developed into the consciousness of human affinity with the Divine, through the revelation of Jesus Christ, is the one warrant we can have for the life that cannot die. "I shall not die but live," is not the produce of reason with its argumentative powers but is an intuitive conviction. There is but one satisfactory fortification for the hope that is within us. "God lives in me and in him"—the soul passionately longs for immortality and believes that the Everlasting Father has bestowed it.

He is not the God of the dead but the God of the living, and rejoicing in this, Faith and Hope exultant rise into the deathless life. It is this that prompted the familiar lines of the Christian poet:—

And falling with my weight of cares, Upon the world's great altar stairs, That slope through darkness up to God, I stretch lame hands of Faith and grope And gather dust and chaff and call To what I feel is Lord of all.

And faintly trust the larger hope.

Life would indeed be a mockery, empty, meaningless, if death ended all. For us however the intuition of life eternal—the living God in a man abiding—is at once a reality and an aspiration.

Our text teaches us that it is inconceivable that a being who has once been deemed worthy to hold communion with the unseen and universal should really be the mere creature of a day. A being honored by the distinct consciousness of the presence of God has the strongest evidence of immortality and must surely be reserved for some higher destiny than a mere going down into silence.

"Thou art just; Thou wouldst not leave me in the dark." The inadequacy of the present life to satisfy the demands of moral consciousness—the ineradicable aspirations of the human spirit, not only or chiefly for happiness but for knowledge and holiness—the enormous contrast between the capacities with which human nature has been endowed and the meagre realisation which can be given to them within the span of this earthly life—the energy with which reason affirms that justice ought to prevail in the affairs of men when contrasted with the equally emphatic teaching of experience that justice does not as yet prevail; all go to show that life is not complete here. It is but a fragment. Surely it is incompatible with the justice of God that it should remain so. Our strongest evidence for immortality lies not in our perfections but in our imperfections. We cannot believe that the soul reaches with faithful effort, and thrilled with Divine hope the mountain peak, only to topple over the precipice into nothingness. We dare not dis-parage the clearness and definiteness which is added to our longings after immortality by the belief in Christ's risen and eternal life, symbolised and attested by the vision of the Apostle. The love then manifested is the love that still pursues us as is stronger than death. They sin who find a limit

in Heaven or earth or hell to the power of that love which worketh in us all, ever striving to lift us up to heights of holiness. The light which shone on Christ's tomb is the light that lighteth every man that cometh into the world. What brought about the resurrection of Christ was only the perfect working of a law that operates in all of us. To those who find difficulty in accepting the resurrection of Christ owing to what they deem unsatisfactory replies to historic, critical or psychological problems, we say: Do not surrender your faith in a glorious immortality. Better by far to say we believe in immortality because we believe in God. The argument of our text implies that one great supposition, Belief in God; consequently they who share Christ's own faith in God as the common Father of the whole human race—the race whose moral capacities have been illustrated by the saints and heroes of all time, an most of all by them on whom we look as something more than saint or hero, cannot believe that race to have been destined for a life so poor and so meaningless as this life actually is to many. We are, not only because we are in God and part of His being, our personality held in His personality. That which is in God's eternal being cannot perish.

Belief in God and belief in immortality must stand or fall together. There is some, it is true, who believe in God, who recognize, as has been well said, that conscience is more than a contraction of the diaphragm which somehow helps in the struggle for existence, who justify the world which we see around us on the supposition that there can be no existence beyond the grave. There are others who get into a kind of hopeless drifting carelessness of the whole matter, the result of clinging by ill custom or otherwise to belief in God and immortality, but who have no real pleasure or interest in their belief, on whom it produces no result. This want of vital faith is due to a mean conception of their own moral nature following on a mean conception of God's moral nature. Cowper, one of the finest souls that ever breathed, died refusing comfort to the last. "I feel, he said, when asked how he felt: "I feel unutterable despair." A prominent member of the Presbyterian church in this province greeted the unseen with the momentous expression "All is dark." Such results have been produced by the caricatures of which the doctrine of immortality has been exposed—by the inadequate intellectual and moral conceptions of God—by the false gospel which makes the hope of heaven and the fear of hell the sole motives of human duty. This is only a travesty of the Gospel of the grace of God. The gospel that appeals to the soul is the fatherhood of God and the immortality of the race in him. This it is which gives us endless aspiration after unreach, even unconceived perfection, and, mingled with this cry of discontent with anything that earth can give, a stern demand to do our duty here on earth. Live in and for the present, it cries, but never be satisfied with it. Follow the ever-retreating gleam; pursue ideals which can only be realised in immortal life. This is in keeping with the morality of the New Testament which is summed up in the word love. The love that is selfish is no love at all and the gospel of universal selfishness, namely, duty for the sake of reward—life here and hereafter for the sake of pleasure—is a gospel that degrades. In leaving this part of the question we need not hesitate to admit that goodness and sin can with great difficulty be the same things to the man who believes that in a few years it will make no difference to himself or to any of those whom his conduct may affect, as they are to the man who sees in his own life and in the lives of those around him a stage in the development of immortal souls. The best work of the world has been done by men who recognised that life was but the spring of which the harvest would be reaped in the eternal years—men in whose hearts lived the vision of the everlasting day.

In the hours of weakness and despondency to the poor and the afflicted, the suffering and the unfortunate, the much tempted and the tried, the marvellous value of the doctrine of immortality as the source of personal support and encouragement, consolation and inspiration, is far beyond our power of expression. To all it is the one condition of that hopefulness without which few men have the strength to live effective lives.

One whose professed philosophy was that of pleasure has said, "When a man passionately refuses to believe that the wages of virtue "can be dust," it is often less from any private reckoning about his own wages, than from a disinterested aversion to a universe so fundamentally irrational that good for the individual is not ultimately identified with universal good."

In the mind of the Christian, when the light of the home has faded and bereavement has made him feel as though he were the centre of an empty world, there should arise the thought of the great release death is to those we love and honor. They have left all the trouble of earth behind. As the faces of loved ones on earth fade away, lo, angel faces smile, which we have loved long since, and lost a while. As they died there opened on them immortal joy, divine repose, the power of the enfranchised soul. They



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