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CHAPTER I

WHAT IS DEATH?

DEATH IS UNIVERSALLY REGARDED as a "fearful thing." Everywhere and in every age man fears death. One of the oldest writers of the world describes it as a land of darkness where the light itself is as darkness. Such manifestation of fear comes not from the lowest order of life only but from the highest human nature. This is perhaps the last fear that is overcome in the heart of the trusting saint. There is no experience of life so generally dreaded as death, and there is no topic about which people are so reticent to speak as death.

The Chinese people have long been taught by dark superstition that to name any evil condition or circumstance, however casually, is to invite that evil thing to befall the one who speaks of it. Hence, their custom is to evade using in conversation any word significant of pain, disease, accident, death, or other misfortune. In place of such terms, they employ roundabout and obscure allusions.

People may deny any tendency toward such a superstition; nevertheless, they try to evade thinking or talking about death, lest in so doing they bring it nearer. All know well how inevitable is their approaching farewell

to earth; but none-the-less they cultivate the delusive habit which implies that they can postpone what they ignore, and divest all terror from what they persist in forgetting. That is a dangerous position to assume.

It has been well said that life can never mean as much to those who stubbornly turn their backs on death as to those who frankly face it and learn to understand something of what it is and what it does to them.

From all available records there have been only two persons to go from earth without passing through the experience of death. These two were Enoch, "the seventh from Adam"; and Elijah, the fearless and uncompromising prophet of Jehovah who lived and labored in the olden lays of Israel's history in the land of promise. Nothing is recorded of Enoch save that he "walked with God: and he was not; for God took him" (Gen. 5:24); and that he prophesied concerning the coming of the Lord to execute judgment upon the ungodly (Jude 14, 15). There is not one word since his passing concerning his present state. But on the other hand, much is written concerning Elijah. Of him it was prophesied that he would return before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord (Mal. 4:5, 6). And when John the Baptist began his ministry in the wilderness of Judea, it was thought that he was Elijah risen from the dead. But John steadfastly denied that he was Elijah. And a little later Elijah did appear in person on earth and was seen by men. When the Lord was transfigured on the mount, Elijah was one of the witnesses of that marvelous event; he was recognized by Peter, who wanted to build a tabernacle for him, as well as one each for the Lord and for Moses. The two heavenly visitants were representatives; Moses, of those

who pass through death, and Elijah, of those who will not pass through it. Not everyone will sleep (that is, die), but those who do not die will be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye (I Cor. 15:51, 52).

It is estimated that there are more than two billion people living in the world today. In fifty years most of these will have gone from earth. In a hundred years only a little handful will be left, and these only for a few more days. It will be written of them that they have died, and the roll of the dead begun in Genesis, the fifth chapter, will be enlarged by the addition of another generation.

Since death is an experience which none will likely escape, it behooves everyone to learn all he can about it in order to be prepared to meet it when it comes. There are of course various opinions among men concerning death. Lecky describes death as "the melancholy anticlimax to life," and many share with him this conception. Death appears to those who entertain this view as a terrible contradiction of man's destiny, the blasting of all his hopes, and the ending of his brief experience as a human being—a terrible enemy to contemplate.

To some, death is purely a natural event; it belongs to this life as do many other experiences. It is a part of the process of living, for which man is no more responsible than for his birth. And as such, he need concern himself no more about it than about other matters pertaining to life here.

To others, death is regarded as a gracious intervention to remove one out of the distressing experiences which cannot be disposed of in any other way. It comes to relieve the aged of their infirmities, the weak, the weary, and the worn of these unbearable ills of life.

But there is far more to man's death than the working out of natural law. Death is infinitely more than the natural and inevitable breaking down of man as he is now constituted. Death reaches immeasurably beyond the mere consummation of man's existence here. To think of death as being no more than physical dissolution is to share the pagan view that man is no more than an offspring from the animal and falls under the same law of death. But when man appeared on the earth, he was as something new in the world of life. Here was a rational and an accountable being made in the "image of God"; a creature come to dwell on earth, capable of an entirely different kind of life from that of the animal creation and with great possibilities of progress and happiness. He bore in himself the evidence that he was created for a destiny unlike that of all other creatures, a destiny to be fully realized only in eternity.

The Scripture uses the term *death* in a number of ways. There is a death which relates to man's physical nature, that is, of his body. Then there is spiritual death, which relates to man's natural state in relation to God. The natural, the unregenerate man, is described as "dead in trespasses and sins"; he is "without Christ"; being an alien from the commonwealth of Israel, and a stranger from the covenants of promise, "having no hope, and without God in the world" (Eph. 2:12). There is, then, a living existence that is called "death," or a death in life which is not a cessation of being, but a continuation of living existence in alienation from its Creator, and in rebellion against Him. Death, in a spiritual sense, is a state and condition in the same way that spiritual life is a state and condition. The Lord said, "This is life eternal, that

they might know thee, the only true God and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent." In contrast with the spiritual life, there is also spiritual death, which takes place prior to the death of the body. Spiritual death may reign while the natural life continues. "I know thy works, that thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead" (Rev. 3:1). This is what is meant by being "dead in trespasses and sins," for, "to be carnally minded is death, but to be spiritually minded is life and peace." Therefore, the "wages of sin" is the continuation of spiritual death, which is separation from God, the Author and Source of life. "God is not the God of the dead but of the living." Thus death holds sway, even while the man is naturally alive in all his faculties.

Again, the word *death* is used in a figurative or secondary sense. The prodigal son is described by his father as "dead," when in reality he was only in a "far country," and away from home. Paul, also, described the pleasure-loving and pleasure-seeking woman as dead while she liveth (I Tim. 5:6). The term *death* is likewise used to describe the eternal state of the wicked, which is called "the second death." It does not mean destruction, annihilation, or cessation of being; but life that is estranged from God, a life that is lost forever in a world of darkness. It is *second* relatively to the preceding physical death of the wicked in unbelief and rejection of God. That the second death is not annihilation is shown by a comparison of Revelation 19:20 with Revelation 20:10. After one thousand years in the lake of fire, the beast and the false prophet are still there, undestroyed.

While each of the various usages of the word *death* seem to convey a different meaning, the central idea in

each instance is the same. Its basic meaning is *separation* from life or from something that is most desirable.

It is physical death, however, that is to be the primary subject of this study, that is, death as it relates to the body as presently constituted. This is the death usually thought of when the subject is mentioned. And it is the one people most dread, if they dread any. As another has pointed out, with a good deal of force, most people do not *fear* death; they simply *ignore* it. While they cannot forget that death is in the world, since every funeral reminds them of it, they practically regard themselves as immortal. This attitude toward death was never truer than of this present age, which hates meditation, especially on disagreeable subjects. At least until the war, it was too much, "act, act in the living present," as if there were no future worth considering. Probably it is true that much of the weakness of the Christian life of today results from this one-sided insistence on present duties and the absolute ignoring of future rewards and punishment, and even so potent and arresting a fact as death itself.

What then is physical death? It is the separation for the time being of the soul from the body. This is an experience which men dread, and rightly so, for it does mean much for one to pass from all he knows to the unknown land—to cast off all moorings, and set forth upon an uncharted ocean, bound for a port which he has never visited, and from which he has met no returning visitor. If there are any stirrings of curiosity left in one after the siftings of the world, he should await the journey with desire to know what lies beyond. And if he is prudent, he will endeavor to prepare himself for the true land of his heart's desire by speaking its language here and practic-

ing its ways like the expectant traveler who learns beforehand something of the tongue and manners of the land to which he intends to go. The land to which he goes is to be his eternal home.

Physical death is the final breakdown of the body, which the Psalmist describes as fearfully and wonderfully made; it is the total disintegration of this marvelous structure. And let it not be forgotten that it is only the body that dies. Its elements have only returned, for a time, to that state in which they existed before a spirit sent from God took them into a strange partnership which will never be completely and finally broken. It is the dissolving of our earthly house of this tabernacle, from which "we are willing rather to be absent" in order "to be present with the Lord."

Death seems to end all, but in reality it ends nothing. It does not even break the continuity of life. At best it is only an incident in the great program of living. And the separation between body and soul for a time really makes but little difference so far as the essential man is concerned. The Lord, by His own death, has robbed death of its sting and the grave of its victory. Hence, while death can destroy for a little while the house in which the person lives, it must leave untouched the life, the mind, the soul, the spirit—the person himself. By the Lord's death, death is forever destroyed, brought to nought, forever eliminated from life, "made of none effect." His death has changed the whole meaning of death for the believer. Instead of being the dreaded door into oblivion, it has been transformed into the gate of life, through which the Christian enters upon the full fruition of all the blessed things for which he has longed. It ushers in the perfect

life, and makes possible the perfect service. Left alone, the death of the body would have been sealed in eternal death. But Christ Jesus came for the express purpose of destroying death. And this He did by dying. He thereby brought life and immortality to light through the gospel (II Tim. 1:10). It was not man who got the victory over death; death got the victory over man. Man did not, nor can he alone, overcome death. Jesus Christ the Lord did that for believers. They get the victory through the Lord Jesus Christ alone. "Thanks be unto God which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." As someone has said, "For the believer, death was 'destroyed' *de jure* at the cross, and will be 'abolished' *de facto* in the glory." The last enemy to be destroyed is death.

The word "abolish" means to render idle, inactive, inoperative, to deprive of strength (I Cor. 15:26). Christ abolished death by introducing man to spiritual life, so that physical death is no longer a penalty, but is henceforth "but the gateway of life immortal" (see John 11:26). In His own personal resurrection the Lord abolished death. The stone was rolled away, not to permit Him to come out, but to show that He was no longer there; and since that is true, the believer is not looking for death; he is looking for Him who triumphed over death. Death still exists, but it no longer "reigns" over man (Rom. 5:14-17). And even as a physical fact, its abolition is decreed, "the last enemy to be destroyed is death" (I Cor. 15:26).

There is much to be learned about death from the Word of God. But even after learning all that may now be known, doubtless there will be much that remains to be learned. But one can well afford to wait, content with what God has been pleased to reveal. It is enough to

know that Jesus Christ the Lord, that great Shepherd of the sheep, went this way before His followers. And He goes this way still, as the personal Friend and Helper of all His true disciples when they walk in the "valley of the shadow" of death; and since that is true the believer can sing triumphantly, "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me."

There are two ways of looking at death—two standpoints from which to view it. Surveyed from nature's point of view, death is much to be dreaded. It is man's last enemy, his most terrible foe. There is nothing which individuals possess that death will not take from them—riches, honors, dignities, pleasures—all, in short, that the human heart values—all that goes to make up the sum of human happiness in this world. Everything that man possesses here must pass away under the withering touch of the hand of death, and what a person might have been becomes a thing of the past. The opportunities of which one does not take advantage pass into the yesterday of his life. Warnings which came to him, and which he did not heed, will face him as he comes to the time of reckoning. The wealth, the honor, the splendor of this world cannot purchase one moment's respite from the cruel grasp of the king of terror. When death comes, all must go. It comes as the great thief to kill and to destroy.

But there is another way of looking at death. It is from the standpoint of the believer. In I Corinthians 3:22, there is a most unusual item set down in that marvelous inventory of the believer's possessions. "All are yours," says the apostle, and among the "all," he puts "death." Think of this! What a strange possession! "Death is

yours." How can this be? How has it come to pass that man's last enemy, his most dreaded foe, that from which he shrinks with such horror, this terrible thing called death, should actually be an item in the Christian's possession?

The cross furnishes the answer. Christ died, the Just for the unjust, according to the Scriptures, for the believer's sins. Thus He has taken the sting from death, for the sting of death is sin; and He has not only removed the sting but has completely changed the character of death for the believer.

Speaking of the sting of death reminds one of the story which Dr. James M. Gray used to tell to illustrate the removal of that sting. One summer day, a farmer was stung by a bee. Dr. Gray visited him at the time, and he told him about the incident. "Well," said the farmer, "there is one thing that brings me a good deal of satisfaction anyway; that bee will never sting another man!" "Why," asked his visitor, "did you kill it?" "No," said he, "but do you not know that a bee has only one sting, and when it stings a man, it leaves the sting in him?" Death has but one sting, and that one was lodged in the body of Christ on the cross. And since that is true, death may alight upon the believer, but there is no sting in it for him. Its power to torment is gone. Death is no longer the jailer of the grave, but the porter that opens the gate of paradise.

Thus it is that death is the Christian's possession. What a marvelous change! Viewed from nature's standpoint, man belongs to death; but from faith's standpoint, death belongs to man. In the old creation there is not so much as a single thing which death does not take from man; in the new creation, on the contrary, there is not a single

thing which death does not give to him. There is not a privilege, not a blessing, not a dignity, which he possesses as a Christian that he does not owe to death. He has life through death; forgiveness of sins through death; everlasting righteousness through death; eternal glory through death—all through the precious death of Christ.

Glorious fact! Death belongs to the Christian. Since that is true, should he any longer fear it? Surely not, for its character is so completely changed that if it should come to him, it could do him only the very best service; namely, to dissolve his connection with all that is mortal; to snap the link that binds him to scenes of sorrow and trial; to deliver him from a world of sin and wickedness, and introduce him to a scene of ineffable bliss, holy repose, and unbroken communion.