

THE HOPE FOR MORTALITY

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Undated

When troubles seem too much for us, it is good to remember that only three days separate earth's darkest day from earth's brightest day. That dark Friday when the earth trembled and loyal hearts faltered, when the skies darkened and men's hearts were black with despair, and that glorious Resurrection Morn when the angel in shining white announced the Easter message, "He is not here", — these two events were but three days apart. It is from the bright vision of Easter morn that we can look back and call that Friday good.

Never was there a greater contrast between light and shadow, good and evil, joy and despair, than in these two events in the divine drama of redemption, Good Friday on Calvary and Easter morn by the open tomb. The first scene is one of storm and conflict. Even the weather contributes to the ominous nature of the action. There is a sultriness in the dusty air, clouds on the horizon, and a faint note of thunder in the distance. The painful procession to Calvary is accompanied by blinding heat and choking dust, the taunts and jeers of the crowd adding a din to the clanking armor of the soldiers. The second is a scene of wondrous peace and beauty, as the early visitors to the tomb of Jesus walk across the dew-drenched grass in the cool of the morning to find the stone rolled away and an angel instead of a body. On Friday the faithful gathered around Calvary found their hearts grow sick and faint within them as they watched their Lord on the cross, suffering as only the innocent can suffer, yet breathing a prayer of forgiveness for those who had hanged him on the cross. On Sunday the good news spread like wildfire among the followers of Jesus lifting their hearts to a new joy. The tomb could not hold the spirit of the living God. Just as the living roots of a tree can lift the heaviest paving stone so the living power of God rolled away the stone that would make death final. And the cry, "He is risen" was sounded again and again, up and down the countryside uniting the followers of Jesus until it became the mighty shout of triumph of the new Christian church. Just three days after what seemed like certain defeat to the disciples when they saw their Lord die on the cross, the Resurrection morn begins the life of the Christian church.

It is good to remember that such a short interval separates the spirit of defeat from that of triumph. Not only does it give us courage in times of despair, but also it serves to remind us that the light of God's truth is usually set against the shadows of our existence. The light of Easter morn gains its power in contrast to the shadows of Good Friday. The crown of Christ is possible only through the victory of the cross. The power of the spirit in general is seen only through those experiences which demand it. The light of immortality can be seen only against the shadows of mortality. This is perhaps the study in light and shadow which comes to our minds first as we think of the Easter story. Somehow Christ conquered death, so the Easter teaching goes; and if we believe in Him and so live that His spirit lives in us, then we are partakers with Him of the Light of immortality, and the darkness of death is pushed away as the white radiance of immortality shines in us.

So the Easter message runs. We have only to believe and the open tomb is the sign for us that we can believe in immortality. And yet it is not so easy. As Celsus, a second century Christian

remarked long ago; if this is the case, if the empty tomb is the final proof, why is it that the enemies of Christ do not also believe? It takes a leap of faith to believe, and many cannot conscientiously take that leap. Perhaps the light is too blinding. And so we cling to the earth where admittedly the light is dim, but where we feel that our feet are on the ground. And the shadow of mortality stays with us, too strong for the light to dispel.

It is probably safe to say that for vast multitudes of people in the world today the Easter hope of immortality is a pious wish, and a kind of wishful thinking. This, of course, is the official teaching in Communist countries. Religion, by offering this hope of a reward in the heavens after death, of a pie in the sky by and by, makes people content with their lot, and so religion serves, in the words of Marx, as an opiate for the people. But we need not look so far. In our own society there are many infected by secular materialism who would deny the literal meaning of Easter, some of whom are within the church. Death is final and irrevocable. All the evidence of science and our senses attest to the fact. To be sure we can live on in the memory of others or become part of a continuing cause, so the argument runs, but we must give up the idea of personal immortality. It is only a dream of those afraid to die. So the many argue. They cannot understand the vision of light that the faithful Christian sees but they see nothing strange in the self immolation of the fanatic nationalist on the battlefield. And so in spite of Easter the light grows dim, and the darkness of mortality rules the hearts of those who would be realistic about life and death, and avoid living by a pious but deluded hope.

What can the Christian answer to such an attitude? What can he say when he feels doubts arising in his own heart in spite of his faith? What can he do when he feels like Augustine who prayed, Lord, we believe; help Thou our unbelief? Our principle of light against shadow has suggested that the light of immortality can only be seen against the shadow of belief in death. Perhaps our answer may lie in this direction. Instead of examining our faith in immortality, perhaps we should examine our faith in death to see what it implies. Perhaps this will lead us to the truth of immortality, just as the darkness of Good Friday led to Easter. Let us see.

We sometimes think that the conviction that death is real is a modern scientific notion, that the belief in immortality is a primitive one. Nothing could be farther from the truth. When Christianity was first struggling to win converts to its faith in the life eternal through Christ, it ran against powerful opposition. We all know about the political conflicts in which the early Christians were involved; what is not so well known are the ideological conflicts, especially with regard to immortality. There was an important school of philosophy founded by Epicurus which taught as a way of life seeking freedom of pain in the body; freedom of trouble in the soul.

This goal was best achieved according to this philosophy through an intelligent pursuit of pleasure. It was not a philosophy of "eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die" exactly. For if one ate too much or drank too much or made merry in the wrong way he might die today and miserably. Better to enjoy oneself moderately, and avoid the indigestion, which comes from over-indulgence. This Epicurean teaching has deeply affected Western thinking ever since. We have only to look to our popular advertising to see that most of our attention is directed to better ways of eating, drinking, or making merry. Against the Christian ideal of joy through service to our fellows under God, the Epicureans with their materialistic emphasis taught that pleasure was

the only oasis in the desert of life. But it is the Epicurean faith in mortality that is of most interest to us here. Never have the arguments that “when you’re dead, you’re dead” been designed with greater skill or persuasiveness. The Epicurean world-view was mechanistic and materialistic, based on the atomic theory. When you die, they argued, the atomic arrangement that is your soul is destroyed and dispersed; just as your body is destroyed and decomposes to other forms. Against the Christian belief in immortality was marshaled the Epicurean belief in mortality. As we read the arguments in the Epicurean writings we cannot help but be impressed with the earnestness of the belief. These are not the result of a cool appraisal of the facts, but the expression of a profound conviction. What impresses one is the fact that they felt the need of such strong proofs. Why should one want to prove that when you are dead, you’re dead? The Epicurean goal of peace of mind, of freedom from trouble in the soul, is the answer. It was absolutely essential for them to eliminate the slightest suggestion of an afterlife, for such a suggestion would be the cause of worry and disturbances of mind. The same spirit is found in one of the kings of France. This king was not noted for a life of virtue and decency, and when it came time for him to die, his religious advisor tried to comfort him with these words; “Do not worry, Sire; God will remember you when you pass into the beyond.” And the king weakly replied: “That’s exactly what I am worried about”.

The Epicureans saw all too clearly that belief in mortality was all too difficult to maintain. It needed to be supported by proofs, for there was always the tendency for men to think in terms of a hereafter and to be disturbed. They saw that if they were to achieve freedom from trouble in the soul, they must resolutely cut off all possibility of belief in an afterlife. As we look at these proofs of mortality, we become convinced that they are hiding a profound faith. There is a will to believe, a kind of wishful thinking, that when you’re dead, you’re dead. How strange to find this, when the argument usually runs the other way, that it is wishful thinking to believe in immortality.

And yet this is not strange at all when we stop to examine the reason for this belief. Why should one want to believe in death? Make no mistake about it: the Epicureans wanted to believe in mortality, and if I am right, we will find that those who deny immortality today are those who want desperately to believe that when you’re dead you’re dead. Why should this be? The Epicureans of old and of any age, believed in death because they were afraid of life. This is always the fatal reason behind belief in death. Death and life bear this intimate relation to one another that where life is dreaded, death is sought, and where life is loved, death is pushed aside. The Epicureans lived in a cruel world: they sought release from it in a life of pleasure now and extinction at death. They believed in death, not life. And the believers of death today would teach the same outworn discredited teaching-that there is nothing in life but what we can get for ourselves here and now, that there is nothing beyond, that the best thing to do is have a good time and try to forget the end that faces us all. And they live up to their belief by indulging in material pleasures, and forgetting the life of the spirit, and by the lives they lead they destroy the spirit of life. If we but realized it (and it would be a sobering experience if we would do so) the life so many lead today under the guise of having a good time is an unconscious seeking of death. When we say, let’s cut loose, you only live once, we are seeking release. How much drunkenness is motivated by escapism, a desire to escape a pain, a trouble or boredom that one is not strong enough to face! How many motor accidents due to excessive speed are motivated by a

recklessness which is a cloak for suicidal tendencies! How many of those who counsel war now rather than the threat of war later are motivated by a desire to escape the tensions that are life, and in effect want to seek death! One can believe in death in the midst of life, when one is unwilling to accept life. This is what the belief in mortality implies: release, escape, not at some future time at an event called death—but now, always, a denial of life in the midst of life. If this be realism, better by far to be mad!

How different is the picture that belief in immortality brings! It is not a belief about something that happens to you when you die. It is an affirmation about life itself. It is good! It is enduring. It is indestructible. It is not always pleasant, of course. Only those whose minds are infected with death measure life in terms of pleasure. There are crosses in life. But life is good and is not overcome. Let the dead bury their dead, said Jesus. Let them mourn by the tombs, those who believe in death. But life goes on. Our God is the God of the living not the dead! I have come, said Jesus that you might have life, and life abundantly. And in all that he did and taught, from his appreciation of beauty to his concern for the birds and the flowers, Jesus believed in life. In the face of disease, persecution, misery, pain, cruel hatred and death, Jesus believed in life, and taught us to believe it too. And in teaching us about immortality, he is putting the capstone on the teachings of his life, by teaching us that this refers to life.

It is thus that Good Friday has led us to Easter. The Christian finds life even in death and he who would deny immortality finds death even in life. In examining the shadow we have been led to the light, just as when we truly enter into the darkness of Good Friday, we emerge, if we have faith, into the light of Easter. Ah, my friends, it is important to believe. Believe in Christ, believe in Easter, believe in life!