

Passiontide Sermons
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London: Longmans, Green, and Co. 1891

SERMON XVIII.
THE DEATH OF THE SOUL.
Preached at St. Paul's on the Fifth Wednesday in Lent, March 23, 1887.

PSALM vi. 5.

For in death no man remembereth Thee: and who will give Thee thanks in the pit?

THE sixth is the first of those seven Psalms which the Church of Christ has chosen as most fully expressing the true and deep feelings and resolves of a sincerely penitent soul. The other Penitential Psalms are Psalms xxxii., xxxviii., li, cii, cxxx., cxliii. There are many Psalms with aspirations too lofty and thoughts too wide and deep for many of us to enter at all fully into them. But if we are not men with high powers of contemplation and insight, we are all of us sinners; and, if it is to be well with us hereafter, we must all, while in this life, learn the lesson and utter the sincere and heartfelt language of Christian repentance. And therefore these seven penitential Psalms are especially deserving of being committed to memory: that we may say them to God, when we are walking alone by day, or lying awake at night, and so may learn to think and feel as true penitents should; that hereafter, through the Merits and Death of Our Saviour Jesus Christ, we may be accepted, notwithstanding our sins, in the last great Day.

Now of these seven, the sixth Psalm will be easily understood by any one who has passed sleepless nights in which temporal anxieties, dangers, or misfortunes have brought before him, as such things do, the reality and pressure of his personal sins. The Psalmist sees that God is judging him; he prays that the judgment may be remedial and not merely penal; that God will not rebuke him in His indignation nor chasten him in His sore displeasure. Earthly troubles and personal sins are blended in his view; they go hand in hand as cause with its swift-following effect. God has turned away from him, as it seems: he prays God to turn towards him again and to rescue him, and he grounds this prayer on his strong yearning to praise God in the time to come, as he could no longer praise Him if he should die, for his troubles are such as to threaten death; and "in death no man remembereth Thee: and who will give Thee thanks in the pit?" Why is this? Why is God remembered by no man in death? What is this "pit" in which no man gives God thanks?

It is clear, when we look to the words which David used, that he means by death bodily death, and by the "pit" that place of the departed which the Jews called Sheol, just as it is conceived of and described in the Jewish Scriptures, and especially in the Psalms. As the writers of the Psalms think over the destiny of man, they constantly have in their minds that yawning abyss into which all that is mortal in the end finds its way—that great underground meeting-place and abode of all the dead, to which every earthly grave was, as it were, a gate, in which all was still and silent, from which were shut out alike the light of the sun and the Light of God's Presence. Here no prayers were uttered: hence no praise would ascend to God: here man still lived; but it was a maimed and imperfect and

half-paralysed life, in which all the higher energies of the soul had ceased to work. This it was to be “among the dead, like unto them that are wounded and lie in the grave, who are out of remembrance and are cut away from Thy Hand.” “For the dead praise not Thee, O Lord: neither all they that go down into silence.”

The Psalmist, however, knew of a blessed life beyond Sheol. Thus David, speaking in the Person of Christ, exclaims: “Thou wilt not leave my soul in Sheol, neither wilt Thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption: Thou shalt show me the Path of Life: in Thy Presence is the fulness of Joy, and at Thy Eight Hand there ‘are pleasures for evermore.’” Again: “As for me, I shall behold Thy Presence in Righteousness, and when I wake up after Thy likeness, I shall be satisfied with it!” On the other hand, it is said of men who in this life are in honour and have no understanding, that they lie in the hell like sheep, and death gnaweth upon them.

Here, of course, we must remind ourselves that God’s Revelation is gradual. As He did not tell the world all at once what is His true Nature and what His Attributes: so He did not tell men all at once, all that He has since told them, about the destiny which awaits us after death. Christ our Lord has carried the light of His own Presence into that dark underworld; and we Christians know more of its real character than did our Jewish ancestors in faith. We know that those who die in a state of grace enter not heaven as yet, but Paradise—an intermediate state in which they are gradually becoming more and more ready for the fully unveiled Beauty of the Most Holy. We know that just as the lost enter upon a fearful looking-for of judgment and fiery indignation, which is not yet the place of punishment: so the saved are in an antechamber of heaven, the door of which will open for them at the last great day. Of this truth the supreme Revelation was made by our Lord upon the Cross. “Today” (He said to the penitent thief), “to-day shalt thou be with Me in Paradise;” and the Paradise of which He spoke was certainly neither heaven nor yet the place of punishment. Is it conceivable that the enfranchised and pardoned soul of the penitent thief was so paralysed by death as to be unable to praise his Deliverer, or to pray for others who might yet share in his deliverance? No the Christian dead, saved and believing, live, we may be sure, no sterile life in that world of waiting and preparation: they too cry, “How long?” they pray and they give praise. They join already in the Eternal Song that rises uninterruptedly within the Sanctuary of Heaven, though as yet its echoes only reach them through the chinks of the golden gates. Of them it cannot be said, that in death they do not remember God, and that in their place of waiting they cannot give Him thanks for the mercies of Redeeming Love.

When then we Christians use David’s words we must think less of that death of the body with which this life closes than of the death of the soul, which may take place while the body is still alive. David’s words do not obtrude this latter sense, but they do not exclude it: and of the two senses which, like so much in Holy Scripture, they bear, it is the deeper and more spiritual one. Worse far than the death of the body is the death of the soul by sin. Darker and more noisome far than the pit of Sheol, as the Hebrews thought of it in their twilight of faith, is the prison-house which even in this life may be tenanted by a fallen soul,—a prison-house from which, humanly speaking, a perverse will, and the tyranny of habit, and repeated violations of the known Law of God, seem to forbid escape. Certainly, in this moral death, no man remembereth God; God is, for a soul thus dead, as though He did not exist; His Power and His Justice, His Tenderness and His Beauty are alike nothing to it. Certainly in this pit of corruption a soul has not the heart

and nerve to praise the All-Holy; it would think of Him, if at all, with sulky and indolent aversion, as of a Being whose very Perfections are to it but a grievance and a reproach.

And yet there are times—while life lasts—when even such a soul as this may be touched by the Voice and Hand of the All-Merciful. One look like that which He turned upon Peter in the Judgment Hall; one word like that which Paul heard as he lay in the dust on the road to Damascus, may be the starting-point of the change. The first act of the awakening soul is to pray, “Turn Thee, O Lord, and deliver my soul: O save me for Thy mercy’s sake. For in death no man remembereth Thee, and who will give Thee thanks in the pit? O Christ Jesus, Who earnest into the world to save sinners, stretch forth Thy pierced Hand in power and compassion; and save—even me.”

At all times of the year, at all times of life, the great change by which a soul, lost in sin, may, through God’s power, turn and give itself to God, is possible. May He make this Lent a blessed time, perhaps to some of us here, perhaps, through our prayers or efforts, to others whom we know; that thus we may understand the Easter Song,—ancient, but always new:

“O Jesu, from the death of sin
Save us, we pray; so shalt Thou be
The everlasting perfect Joy
Of all the souls new born to Thee.”