**THE WAY EVERLASTING: SERMONS BY JAMES DENNEY**

**15. IMMORTALITY by JAMES DENNEY**

*"If a man die, shall he live again?"*

*Job 14:14*

**1.** Who has not asked this question, in suspense, in hope, or in fear? We know that we must all die: we know that those who are dearest to us must die: can our eyes penetrate beyond the veil which death lets fall? Is there any answer in the nature or heart of humanity to the question of Job, "If a man die shall he live again?"

If we look at the history of nations and religions, we see that the whole tendency of man has been to answer the question in one way. "Looking at the religion of the lower races as a whole," says Dr. Tylor in his Primitive Culture, "we shall at least not be ill advised in taking as one of its general and principal elements the doctrine of the soul's future life." The idea of the extinction or annihilation of man in death is indeed not so much a natural as a philosophic or doctrinaire one; an untaught mind is incapable of it, and it only appears as a fruit of reflection or speculation. The natural inclination of man everywhere is to believe not in his extinction, but in his survival. The ideas attached to the word may be vague, but they are real, and they exercise a real influence upon the life. Their effect is seen, sometimes in the burial customs of savage races - as in the interment of the warrior's weapons, or the artificer's tools, along with him, or more terribly in the slaughter of his wife or his slaves, that he may have all that he needs with him in the spirit land; sometimes in the widely diffused worship of ancestors, which implies not only that the dead are believed to live, but that they have command over powers which may injure or benefit the living.

**2.** What strikes one most in looking at this wide spread, one may truly say this universal, faith in man's survival of death, is its moral neutrality. All men survive, and they survive in practically the same condition, whether they are good or bad. The world into which they pass is conceived as a shadowy unsubstantial place, and the life of those who tenant it corresponds. The ancient Greeks called this place Hades, or the realm of the unseen; the ancient Hebrews called it Sheol, which probably means the hollow place, the sub-terranean abode which was entered by the grave. The descriptions which are given of it in the Old Testament are numerous and depressing. Man existed in it, but did not live. He had no communion there either with the living God or with living men. It was a pale transcript of life, but not life in reality. It was a realm of darkness, dust, and endless silence, unbroken by the vision of God, or the voice of praise. The best men shrank from it with horror. The feeling with which they regarded it will be sufficiently illustrated by these lines from the Psalm of Hezekiah: "I said, In the noon tide of my days I shall go into the gates of Sheol. ... I shall not see the Lord, even the Lord in the land of the living: I shall behold man no more with the inhabitants of the world. ... But Thou hast in love to my soul delivered it from the pit of nothingness, for Thou hast cast all my sins behind Thy back. For Sheol cannot praise Thee, death cannot celebrate Thee: they that go down into the pit cannot hope for Thy truth. The living, the living, He shall praise Thee, as I do this day: the father to the children shall make known Thy truth." Many have been astonished and perplexed at finding such utterances in the Bible. They do not see how to reconcile them with the idea of any revelation made by God to man. But the truth is that such vague beliefs in man's survival, common as they are to the Hebrews and innumerable other races, are not a part of revealed religion at all. The instinctive belief that man survives death is only the point of attachment, so to speak, for a true faith in immortality. It is that in human nature which the spirit of revelation takes hold of, exalts, connects with God, fills with moral and religious contents, and makes effective as the great source of hope, courage, and consolation. The history of revelation, so far as this article is concerned, is the history of a process in which the instinctive belief in man's survival, with all its indifference to moral distinctions, was transformed into the New Testament faith in eternal life for the good, and the eternal loss of the wicked.

**3.** Of course I do not mean that apart from revelation men never in any degree transcended the vague ideas of the future to which I have referred. In many pagan religions the conception of the future life filled a great space; in some, it even absorbed the attention of the worshippers to the exclusion of everything else. On this ground some have preferred the religion of ancient Egypt, for instance, or the religion of Persia, to the religion of the Old Testament. Certainly the future life bulks far more largely in both than it does in the Old Testament. Every one, to speak only of the former, knows the extraordinary care which the Egyptians bestowed upon their dead. Everyone knows about the mummies, in which the body was preserved for thousands of years, that the soul, which could not live without it, might survive too. Everybody has read descriptions, or seen pictures, of the Egyptian tombs, the everlasting houses of the departed, so much more solid and enduring than the abodes of the living. Everyone has heard of the Book of the Dead - the most ancient book in the world - and of the judgment of souls in the underworld, in which the Egyptians were taught to believe. Are not all these symptoms of a more advanced religion than we find among the Hebrews? I do not think so. It might be enough to reply that the Egyptian religion has died, and that that is God's verdict upon it; whereas the Hebrew religion lived, grew, and lives on to the present day in the fullness of the Christian faith. But it may also be pointed out that the Egyptian faith in the future, whatever its religious impulse may have been at first, became hopelessly demoralized at last. Man's standing in the judgment came to depend, not on his life and character, but on his due observance of a thousand rites or charms which had no moral significance whatever. A religion which at a first glance seems to be of peculiar moral promise is found on closer inspection to be a tangle of superstitious observances in which reason and morality have perished together. A mere preoccupation with the future could not redeem it from its ethical worthlessness; it was dead even while it lived, and now we can only examine it in its remains. Its history has an antiquarian interest; it is not vitally related to the world's hope. It is a striking illustration of God's providential care of Israel, that though Israel lived long in Egypt, and was more or less in contact with Egypt for 1500 years, this dead faith in the life beyond - this non-moral, non-religious interest in what came after death - was never suffered to taint or pervert the simpler ideas of the chosen people. They might have nothing but the instinctive tendency to believe in man's survival, but at least they had it uncorrupted, and in due time God could make it grow to more.

**4.** But if religion did not of itself develop a true faith in immortality, was there no other power at work in human nature which could do so? We have all heard of arguments for the immortality of the soul: did not they result in anything? The true home of such arguments was Greece, and the great philosophers of that country, particularly Plato, speculated on the nature and the destiny of man. They felt there was something Divine in human nature, as well as something which seemed to them to be only of the earth. The mortality of the body they could not deny, nor did they wish to do so. They conceived of it not as the necessary expression and organ of the soul, but as a burden, a prison, a tomb; it was their one hope and desire that man's immortal part might one day be delivered from it. The Greek philosophers, too, as well as the great poets, rose above that moral neutrality which I have spoken of as characterizing the instinctive faith in man's survival. They saw rewards and punishments in the once undistinguishing future. Heroic men were admitted to some kind of blessed existence in Elysian fields; while the conspicuously bad, giants, tyrants, lawless profligates, were tormented in some kind of hell. Such ideas, however, were confined to a limited circle; they did not interest themselves in the common people; and however much we may admire the nobleness of the poets and philosophers of Greece, it is not to them, any more than to the priests of Egypt, that the world is indebted for the hope of immortality.

**5.** Why was it then, we may ask, that both natural religion and speculative philosophy proved ineffective in their treatment of the future, and of man's relation to it? Why do we prize even the Old Testament in which the hope of immortality, to say the least, is so inconspicuous, above other religious authorities in which it figures so much more prominently? The reason is plain. These religions and philosophies failed because they wanted the one thing from which faith in immortality could securely and healthily spring - the one and only ground on which it could arise rich in moral and religious contents, full of consolation, of inspiration, of strength: a true conception of God, and of man and his relation to God. It is quite true to say that Israel had hardly any ideas about the future, and shrank in horror from those it had; but Israel had God, and that was everything. Israel knew that there was One only, the living and true God, from everlasting to everlasting, infinite in goodness and truth; Israel knew that God had made man in His own image, capable of communion with Him, and only blessed in such communion; to Israel, to see good was all one with to see God; with God was the fountain of life, in God's light His people saw light. This faith in God was greater than Israel knew; it could not be explored and exhausted in a day; it had treasures stored up in it that only centuries of experience could disclose, and among them was the hope of immortality. The believing nation of Israel, like Bunyan's pilgrim, unconsciously carried the key of promise in its bosom, even when it was in the dungeon of Giant Despair.

**6.** The great passages in the Old Testament, in which the hope emerges, come upon us suddenly, as the finding of the key came upon the pilgrim. This passage in Job is one. The tried man is in the very extremity of his distress. He feels - for so he interprets his distress - that God for some reason is angry with him, and that His anger will endure till he dies. His disease is mortal, and will carry him to his grave. But is that all? Job finds his faith in God come to his relief. For God is righteous, the vindicator of righteousness, and it is not possible for him to abandon a righteous man as Job would be abandoned, if his death ended all. The idea comes to Job through his faith in God, that Sheol may not be the final outlook, and he puts it into the pathetic prayer: "O that Thou wouldst hide me in Sheol, that Thou wouldst keep me secret until Thy wrath be past, that Thou wouldst appoint me a set time and remember me!" How patient such a prospect would make the suffering man. How uncomplainingly he would face the dreary under world if he knew that it was only a temporary interruption to his communion with God. "All the days of my warfare would I wait till my release should come. Thou shouldest call, and I would answer Thee: Thou wouldest have a desire to the work of Thine hands." This is only the yearning of the soul, its faint anticipation, born of faith, of what might be; but in a later passage we see it flame up triumphantly, though it is but for a moment. "I know that my Redeemer liveth, and that He shall stand up at the last upon the earth, and after my skin hath been thus destroyed, yet from my flesh shall I see God, whom I shall see for myself, and mine eyes shall behold and not another. My reins are consumed within me" - that is, I faint with longing for that great vindication. Both in Egypt and in Greece faith in immortality, such as it was, rested simply on conceptions of man's nature; here, as everywhere in revealed religion, it rests on the character of God. He is the Eternal Righteousness, and His faith is pledged to man whom He calls to live in fellowship with Himself. All things may seem to be against a man; his friends may desert him, circumstances may accuse him; but if he is righteous, God cannot desert him, and if he must die under a cloud, even death will not prevent his vindication. His Redeemer lives, and one day he shall again see God. And to see God is to have life, in the only sense which is adequate to the Bible use of the word.

**7.** In the Book of Psalms we have the same type of conviction presented from another point of view. The Psalmists write, as a rule, as men in the actual enjoyment of communion with God. Their life is not merely human, it is Divine as well. The fountain of it is with God. God Himself is their refuge and their portion; as one of them says, they have no good beyond Him. In their experience the Divine and the human interpenetrate each other: they see and enjoy God. Perhaps it is one consequence of this intense consciousness of God's presence and grace that they think so little about the future. Having God, they have everything, and no time, past, present, or to come, can make any difference to them. But sometimes they do deliberately face the thought of death, and then we see their faith shine out. What has death to do with such a life as theirs? Is death stronger than God? If He holds us, can it pluck us out of His hand? Never. The Old Testament saints in the sublime hours of their faith had a sublime sense of their eternal security with God. "Thou shalt guide me with Thy counsel, and afterward receive me unto glory." "God will redeem my soul from the hand of Sheol, for He will receive me." "Thou wilt not leave my soul to Sheol, neither wilt Thou suffer Thy holy one to see corruption. Thou wilt show me the path of life - athwart that pathless gulf; in Thy presence is fullness of joy; in Thy right hand there are pleasures for evermore." Nay we even find words of triumph over the last enemy which the New Testament in its loftiest mood can only borrow: "I will ransom them from the power of the grave; I will redeem them from death: O death, where are thy plagues? O grave, where is thy destruction?" The weapons of the King of terrors are struck from his hand, and death is swallowed up for ever. It was along this line of religious experience, inspired by faith in the living, true, holy, and gracious God, that the true hope of immortality entered the world.

**8.** It would have been natural once to pass from the Old Testament to the New almost without the consciousness of interruption, but this is hardly permissible now. When we consider the two in reference to the subject before us, it is obvious that in the New Testament the faith in immortality has new features. In particular, it has become quite definitely a faith in the Resurrection. The growth of this peculiar form of the belief in immortality has been laboriously investigated, but not with entire success. The sacred books of the Persians, who certainly believed in some kind of resurrection, have been diligently explored, and many who know that the religion of Israel received no impulse from Egyptian ideas of the future suppose that it was strongly influenced by contact with Zoroastrianism. But the real fountain of the hope in immortality has been already indicated, and when we look at the Resurrection as it appears in Zoroastrianism and in Jewish apocalyptic literature on the one hand, and in the New Testament on the other, it is not more the similarity than the contrast by which we are impressed. In these other books, we are in a world of lawless fantasy, where anything is said of the future because nothing is known; in the New Testament we are on the same ground of historical fact and religious experience which is characteristic of the Old. Consider for a moment how the case stands.

**9.** Christians believe in their own resurrection to eternal life, because they believe in the Resurrection of Christ. But faith does not depend upon - it does not originate in nor is it maintained by - the Resurrection of Christ, simply as a historical fact. The Resurrection of Jesus is not simply a fact outside of us, guaranteeing in some mysterious way our resurrection in some re mote future. It is a present power in the believer. He can say with St. Paul - Christ liveth in me - the risen Christ - the Conqueror of Death - and a part, therefore, is ensured to me in His life and immortality. This is the great idea of the New Testament whenever the future life is in view. It is indeed very variously ex pressed. Sometimes it is Christ in us, the hope of glory. Sometimes it is specially connected with the possession, or rather the indwelling, of the Holy Spirit. "If the Spirit of Him that raised up Jesus from the dead dwell in you, He that raised up Christ from the dead shall quicken also your mortal bodies through His Spirit that dwelleth in you." It is easy to see that the religious attitude here is precisely what it was in the Old Testament, though as the revelation is fuller, the faith which apprehends it, and the hope which grows out of it, are richer. Just as union with God guaranteed to the Psalmist a life that would never end, so union with the risen Saviour guaranteed to the Apostles, and guarantees to us, the resurrection triumph over death. Here is a faith in immortality which is moral and spiritual through and through - which rests upon a supreme revelation of what God has done for man - which involves a present life in fellowship with the risen Saviour - which is neither worldly nor other worldly, but eternal - which has propagated itself through all ages and in all nations - which in Jesus Christ invites all men to become sharers in it - which is the present, living, governing faith of believing men and women in proportion as they realize their union with the Saviour: a faith infinite in its power to console and inspire: a faith not always easy to hold, but demanding for its retention that effort and strain in which St. Paul strove to know Him, and the power of His Resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, becoming conformed to His death, if by any means he might attain to the resurrection of the dead. And all this, which fills the epistles of the New Testament goes back to the words of Jesus Himself: "Abide in Me, and I in you"; and, " because I live, ye shall live also".

**10.** "If a man die," asked Job, "shall he live again?" Let us put it directly, If I die, shall I live again? It is not worth while putting it as a speculative question: the speculators have not been unanimous nor hearty in their answer. Faith in immortality has in point of fact entered the world and affected human life along the line of faith in God and in Jesus Christ His Son. Only one life has ever won the victory over death: only one kind of life ever can win it - that kind which was in Him, which is in Him, which He shares with all whom faith makes one with Him. That is our hope, to be really members of Christ, living with a life which comes from God and has already vanquished death. God has given to us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. Can death touch that life? Never. The confidence of Christ Himself ought to be ours. If we live by Him we have nothing to fear. "He that eateth My flesh and drinketh My blood hath eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day." "Verily, verily I say unto you, if a man keep My word, he shall never see death." "I am the Resurrection and the Life: he that believeth in Me, though he were dead yet shall he live, and he that liveth and believeth in Me, shall never die." Believest thou this?