

POINT OF NO RETURN

"It is appointed unto man once to die, but after this the judgment" (Hebrews 9:27).

Every person has a physical body. For a time it is the dwelling place of the soul. Sooner or later, every physical body comes to the end of its losing battle against the forces of nature or disease.

The most perplexing and serious problem of living is life itself. It is relatively simple to learn the techniques of making a living. Most of our educational institutions are geared to the task of teaching people how to make a living. We can enter one of the hundreds of vocations, and therein earn enough money to buy the food and clothing which are necessary to sustain and adorn the body. Yes, we can make a living. But how much more difficult it is to learn how to live!

A study of God's Word reveals that the truths which are summed up in Christ offer the only adequate and satisfactory answer to the question: How can a man know how to live?

What is life? Why are we here? Who are we? What are we doing? Where are we going?

These are the basic questions which trouble every thinking man. If your body is all there is to you, if you are purely and simply physical, then those questions are not hard to answer. In that event you would merely be another animal in a physical world; your purpose would be to eat, drink and die; for you there would not be any existence after death; you would simply return to the dust and you would become extinct. Such a philosophy would not be reasonable, inspiring or optimistic.

But these are not the only answers to those important questions. There is another set of answers, and it stems from the basic fact that we are the creations of God. For us, life on this earth is a probation period, and in it we are to acquire moral and spiritual worth. We are on trial. If we react correctly, if we use our capacity for fellowship with God, if we learn the spiritual lessons of life, then there is for us a certain destiny. If we do not, there is another destiny. Finally we are to return -- the body to the dust, and the spirit to God.

We cannot conceive that God created this world in all its complication, or that He made man in His own image without some high and holy purpose in it all. The reasonable and satisfactory explanation of human life is that our present physical existence is a probationary period in which each one has the opportunity to prepare for heaven and to escape hell. Life on this earth is part of the divine process by which men who will open their hearts to God are being remade by Him into a pattern of love and service. This opportunity for preparation is limited by the span of this life. We are preparing here for life hereafter.

It is sin which disqualifies one for heaven. What is the qualification for one who is to stand in the presence of the great Judge on the Judgment Day? The Psalmist wrote this answer: "He that hath clean hands, and a pure heart." Are your hands clean? Is your heart pure? Or, is there the mark of sin upon them? Sin must be forgiven and the heart must be purified during the probationary period. And God says that forgiveness and cleansing come only through the life, the death, the atonement and the personality of Christ. To Him, in repentance and faith, we confess our sins, and through Him comes our forgiveness and cleansing.

Your present life is important. Don't let anyone tell you that it isn't. It is probationary and preparatory. Life is one-directional. You cannot relive the past. There is no reverse gear to which you can shift when things get rough. But, though you cannot back up, you can be changed. Your past cannot be relived, but it can be blotted out. You can start anew and afresh, as long as this physical life lasts you. But death is coming.

Then comes death. "For it is appointed unto men once to die." And death is the point of no return. It ends the probationary and the preparatory and ushers in the permanent. Hear it again, death is the point of no return.

The subject of death is not at all popular. People do not like to think about it, and do not care to hear it discussed. It carries with it the thought of separation from one's loved ones, friends and activities. Even though the fact of death is not a pleasant thought, it is good for us to give ourselves to the consideration of it. In a lecture to his students in the Pastor's College, C. H. Spurgeon once said: "Young men, do not let any sentiment prevent you from warning men to prepare for death."

Just before he passed away, Alexander the Great, the famous conqueror, said: "I have given time and thought to everything but death, and that is the most important thing that I could have considered." Somehow, people just do not like to think about death, much less to face it. Even at a burial artificial grass is placed over the clods and the casket is banked with flowers in an attempt to hide the hideous fact of death. Quite naturally, those who have not made preparation to die do not like to be reminded of death. But they forget that God's Word has much to say on this subject, and in the preaching of Christ death was never forgotten.

The very thought of death is a reminder that we have only one life to live here. If that life is a failure, there is no possibility of retrieving it. Each person has the opportunity of doing the work that is given him to do, but if this opportunity is lost he will not have another. And we have no right to complain that there is no other, because Christ had to finish His work here within a single life. This life, short as it is, is long enough to become what God wants us to be, and to do what He wants us to do.

Our text announces two absolute certainties. They stand out like two searchlights on a black night. Even as Christ appeared but once to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself, so these two things occur to every man but once, and they will never be repeated.

I. The Certainty of Death.

From the days of Adam until the present, men and women have gone through the gate of death. "Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned" (Romans 5:12). Billions have played their part on life's stage and only two of them have escaped death's icy grasp. Enoch was translated to the unseen world without submitting to death. Likewise, Elijah escaped death by ascending in a chariot. All others have passed through the gateway of death. Unless Christ returns during your lifetime and mine, none of us can escape death.

If we are not to contemplate our appointment with death in the mood of casualness, or consternation, or coldness, how then? In the mood of Christian confidence and realism. There are at least three things about death which we ought to face frankly.

1. Its reality.

Death is real. Call it by some other name, if you will, but the fact of death remains. The physical organism ceases to function. Whatever the immediate causes, whatever the attending circumstances, the breath goes out of the body, the color goes out of the cheeks, the sparkle goes out of the eyes, and the warmth goes out of the hands. Then the physician renders the official verdict: Dead!

You may wish it were not so. You may deny that it is so. Neither wish nor denial is of any avail.

2. Its universality.

The grim reaper is no respecter of persons. Good and bad, young and old, healthy and afflicted, wise and foolish, all must go. It is not true that poor men die, while rich men escape death. It is not true that uncultured men die, while educated men escape death. Money can do a lot of things, but it cannot buy off death.

3. Its uncertainty.

By this I mean the uncertainty that surrounds the time and place and circumstance of death. For us the manner, time and place of death are uncertain. But the fact that we shall die, unless Jesus returns, is absolutely certain. As the old Persian proverb says, "Death is a black camel which kneels at every door." Death generally comes when we least expect it. It may be nearer than you think.

David said to Jonathan: "Truly as the Lord liveth, and as thy soul liveth, there is but a step between me and death" (I Samuel 20:3). Since death is a certainty, and the time of death is so uncertain, what should we do? From the pages of God's Word the answer comes swift and urgent: "Set thine house in order, for thou shalt die and not live." How tragic for those like Caesar Borgia, who exclaimed in his last moments, "I have provided, in the course of my life, for everything except death; and now, alas! I am to die, although entirely unprepared."

II. The Certainty of Judgment.

God speaks of a second appointment, "After this the judgment." Death does not end it all, although many unsaved people wish it would and try to deceive themselves and others by saying that it does. When a man goes through the gate of death, he goes just as he has lived. Death leaves his essential nature untouched. "As the tree falls, so shall it lie." The kind of death one dies depends upon what kind the life has been.

Death is not a going out of existence. Death has a sequel. Regardless of how much men may try to escape the judgment, before it they will have to answer for what they have said and done in this life. "He hath appointed a day, in which he will judge the world" (Acts 17:31). After life has run its longest course, after medical skill has exhausted its resources, after loving hands have been withdrawn in sheer helplessness, after the final words have been uttered, after the tired heart has ceased to beat, after death has counted its toll -- "after this the judgment."

The fact of the certainty of judgment has been announced to us in order that we might prepare for it. After death comes judgment. There is no second chance after death. After death there is no time or opportunity to repent and to believe. After death there is no salvation. After death comes the judgment. For the sinner, on this side of death there is grace and mercy, but on the other side of death there is only judgment and condemnation.

All must die, and one day every sinner must stand before the great Judge, Whom he has rejected here. There will not be any appeal to a higher court. The door of mercy will be closed forever. Are you prepared for death, and for the judgment? If not, you can and should make the necessary preparation now. Christ the Saviour is pleading with you to accept Him and thereby receive mercy, forgiveness and salvation. Won't you receive Him now, and be prepared for death and its sequel, the judgment?