

DEATH AND ITS SEQUEL

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

This subject is not at all popular. No one likes to think about it or to hear it discussed. It carries with it the thought of separation from one's loved ones, friends, and activities. While the fact of death is not a pleasant thought, it is good for us to give ourselves to the consideration of it. Charles Haddon Spurgeon, in a lecture to the students in his Pastor's College, once said: "Young men, do not let any sentiment prevent you from warning men to prepare for death." Just before he passed away, the famous conqueror, Alexander the Great, 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.

Death is a certain event and has been so since the time of the first man's disobedience and expulsion from the Garden of Eden. From the days of Adam until the present hour, men and women have gone through the gate of death. It was through man's sin that death gained its entrance into the world. "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. There have been billions who 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 the lot of all mortals by ascending in a chariot. All others have passed out through the gateway of death.

Unless Christ returns during our lifetime, none of us can escape death, for we read in Genesis 3:19: "In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread until thou return unto the ground; for out of it was thou taken: for dust thou art and unto dust shalt thou return." All have to assent to the simple and solemn pronouncement that death is at length the common human lot. While some of you may not want the preacher to talk about it, still you should sit down with yourself and God long enough to face the fact of death intelligently and with deep religious sensitiveness.

In an effort to banish the thought of death, men have turned to various futile devices. The old Egyptians hit upon the idea that death would no longer startle or disturb us, if only we could become familiar enough with it. So they set a grinning skeleton in the chief place at their dining tables. One certainly cannot handle death sensibly by saying familiarly, "How do you do! I see you so often that I don't mind you at all, really."

The opposite method was employed by a corrupt old king of France, who issued an order that death was never to be mentioned in his presence. He forgot that, while you can put the hush-hush on spoken words, you cannot silence the voice of inner fears. But one cannot handle death sensibly by saying fearfully, "Oh, you horrid thing, go away from me. I don't want so much as the mention of your name. You upset me so."

The ancient Stoics, along with their modern successors, had still another way of tossing off death without really preparing for it. Death is inevitable, they said, so let us meet it with hearts of steel. Let us be grimly indifferent to it. But one cannot handle death sensibly by saying fiercely, "You can seize me if you will, but I am determined not to whimper about it. You will find my heart frozen against you." The trouble with that cheerless philosophy is that if a man succeeds at it--and the "if" is a big one--he has succeeded in doing something that is no credit to him.

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 remains. The physical organism ceases to function. Perhaps accident cuts it down. Perhaps violence crashes upon it. Perhaps disease lays it low, or perhaps it simply wears out with old age. 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. The march of humanity is one of death. On the average 3,600 an hour of the sons and daughters of men travel down the road of their inescapable mortality to keep their appointment with God.

2. Its universality.

Death is a race-wide fact. The grim reaper is no respecter of persons. Without distinction, we must shortly part with all our earthly enjoyments, friends, property, and religious opportunities. 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. It is not true that colored men die, while white men escape death. Money can do a lot of things, but it cannot buy off death. When the famous French wit, Voltaire, was dying, he said to his physician, "Doctor, I will give you half of my fortune if you will keep me alive six months." It was a useless offer, for the doctor could not assure him that he had six hours more to live. When lying on his deathbed, Professor Hobbes of Great Britain said, "If I had the whole world to dispose of, I would give it for one day."

These men, like all who had gone before them, were powerless to stay the dreaded approach. "What man is he that liveth and shall not see death?"

3. Its uncertainty.

I do not mean the uncertainty of the fact, but the uncertainty that surrounds the time and place and circumstance of death. All the things that surround death--the manner, the time, and the place--are for all of us uncertain. But the fact that we shall die, unless Jesus comes, is absolutely certain. 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 for you than you think. As 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. In the light of the fact

that the time of death is so uncertain, what should we do? The answer comes swift and urgent, from the sure pages of God's Word, "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." For the Christian, death is not to be feared. He passes from behind the dark curtains into the glorious sunlight of God's presence. For him death is not a dark valley to remain in, but a tunnel which leads to the land of glory where Jesus has gone to prepare a place for those who love Him.

II. The Certainty of Judgment.

Think now of the second appointment about which our text speaks. "It is appointed unto men once to die, and after this the judgment." Now death does not end all, although many wicked people wish it would and try to deceive themselves and others by saying that it does. Beyond all its solemnity, this impressive statement does honor to man. It declares that death leaves his essential nature untouched. After death he is still man--no affection or principle of nature is lost. And, when a man goes through the gate of death, he goes just as he has lived. "As the tree falls, so shall it lie." What death is depends upon what the life has been.

Death is not a going out of existence. Death has a sequel. There is one more thing which must be faced, and that is the judgment. It does not matter how much man may deny the reality of it, or how much he may try to escape it, nevertheless the Bible teaches in clear and unmistakable terms that there is a time of judgment coming. Before the judgment bar, man will have to answer for the things he has done in this life. "He hath appointed a day, in which He will judge the world." Acts 17:31. "In the day when God shall judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ according to my gospel." Romans 2:16. "So then every one of us shall give account of himself to God." Romans 14:12. "And I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God; and the books were opened: and another book was opened, which is the book of life: and the dead were judged out of those things which were written in the books, according to their works. And whosoever was not found written in the book of life was cast into the lake of fire." Revelation 20:12, 15. God keeps books, and in His accounting department there is no mistake. The good goes down with the bad; the record is clear, and sinful man must face that record. Only the unsaved will stand before that judgment seat. The saved will not stand there because they have been cleansed by the blood of Christ.

The deepest instincts of the human spirit are in agreement with the Bible when they tell us that death does not "end all." There is an "after this!" "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."

If you were to ask me, How long after death will this judgment take place? the only answer that I could give is that it will not occur until after the second coming of Jesus Christ our Lord. But do not get lost in secondary considerations. The precise time or place or process of the judgment is not so important as the plainly revealed nature and purpose of it.

1. It will be a judgment of disclosure.

Jesus said, "For there is nothing covered that shall not be revealed; and hid, that shall not be known." God is going to bring all the hidden things to light. Those hypocrisies that have never been renounced, those dishonesties that have never been confessed, those lies that have never been acknowledged, those disloyalties to virtue that have never been repented of--they are not dead and buried. The Psalmist was right when he said: "Thou hast set our iniquities before Thee, our secret sins in the light of Thy countenance."

2. It will be a judgment of demonstration.
When the secrets are all revealed, when all the ways and works of God have been seen in their true light, when human character and destiny have been evaluated in the terms of the redeeming cross of Jesus Christ, God will not have a critic left among all the teeming multitudes of mankind. All will have acknowledged the perfections of His character, the depths of His love, and the stainless purity of His unassailable justice. It will be, in this sense, the judgment of demonstration.

3. It will be a judgment of destiny.
In Revelation 20 there is a powerful description of the judgment--the Great White Throne with the dead, small and great, standing before the Judge when the books are opened, including the books of conduct and "the book of life." And then the climax: "And whosoever was not found written in the book of life was cast into the lake of fire."

This fact of judgment has been announced to us in order that we might prepare for it. After death comes judgment. After death there is no second chance. After death there is no time to repent. "After this the judgment" excludes all hope of a probation on the other side of the grave. After death there is no salvation. After death comes only judgment and no mercy. This side of death there is mercy and grace. For a sinner, on the other side of death there is only judgment and damnation.

Some say that God is a God of love and will not send any man to hell. It is true that He is a God of love, but He is also righteous and just, and His holy law demands that sin must be paid for. Jesus paid the price and all man needs to do is to accept the gift of salvation. Furthermore, God does not want to condemn man, but man brings his own condemnation. "For God sent not His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved. He that believeth on Him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God." John 3:17-18.

All men must die, and one day all sinners must stand before the great Judge. There will be no escape then; neither will there be any second chance. There will be no appeal to a higher court. The door of mercy will be closed forever. Are you prepared? If not, you can make the necessary preparation now. The Saviour, Christ Jesus, is pleading with you to accept Him and thereby receive mercy, forgiveness, and salvation. Won't you accept Him now in order that you may be prepared for death and its sequel, the judgment?