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The Dying Christian's Retrospections and Anticipations.

DISCOURSE

DELIVERED ON OCCASION OF THE DEATH OF

JOHN BOYNTON,

MAY 4, 1862.

BY

REV. SAMUEL T. SPEAR, D. D.,

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S E R M O N .

“For I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love His appearing.”—2 TIM. iv. 6-8.

WHEN this passage was penned by the apostle, he expected soon to die. He refers to the event as a departure—“The time of my departure is at hand.” He refers to himself as ready to meet this event—“For I am now ready to be offered.” He was prepared to die. He was not afraid to make an exchange of worlds. And whether he should fall as a martyr, or in the ordinary course of Providence, made no essential difference in the thoughts and hopes of his mind.

The RETROSPECTIVE movements of his mind at this time contain the sweet and cheering testimony of his own memory and conscience, that in former years he had endeavored to illustrate and embody

the life of the true Christian. Paul was no vain boaster; he did not depend upon his personal virtues; yet he had the consciousness that for him to live was Christ. He had not forgotten, and he could not forget, the manner of his antecedent life. He had some knowledge of his own character. His judgment in respect to that character is expressed in these simple, yet very comprehensive words—"I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith." Look a moment at these items.

"*I have fought a good fight.*" He was then Paul "the aged," perhaps sixty or seventy years of age; for more than thirty years he had been engaged in the Christian service; and, viewing it as somewhat analogous to the toils and struggles of the soldier's life, he now says—"I have fought a good fight." He had met all the trials, and encountered all the perils of this service, displaying the patience, the endurance, and courage of the Christian hero. The life of Paul, as it incidentally appears in the book of the Acts, and as we gather its tone and temper from his own writings, abundantly justifies this language. He was a bold and earnest man, having confidence in his cause, and willing to peril all for its honor.

"*I have finished my course.*" Here the Christian life is presented under the metaphor of a race

to be run—a very common figure in the rhetoric of Paul. Once, he did not count himself to have apprehended ; once, forgetting the things which were behind, and reaching forth unto those things which were before, he pressed toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus ; once, he appeared as the ardent and energetic racer, laying aside every weight, and seeking so to run that he might be sure to obtain ; but now he is at the end, has reached the goal, and won the prize, and hence has finished his course. His work is done.

“*I have kept the faith.*” When the apostle entered upon the Christian life, he made a covenant with his Saviour to serve Him, to maintain, defend, and preach the doctrines of His gospel, to live as a follower, and die as a servant. He pledged his faith to the Son of God ; he took the oath of allegiance to the King of Zion ; and, though great difficulties and dangers had crossed his path, though enemies without and enemies within had assailed him, though there was much in his earthly condition to discourage and dishearten his mind, still, upon now casting his eye over the whole scene, and that too in the honest moment of expecting soon to meet the Judge of quick and dead, he could say and he did say, “*I have kept the faith.*” He had done so everywhere, and on all occasions, being alike true to his principles and loyal to the Christian banner.

You thus see what Paul *thought* of his own life, and also how he felt in regard to it, when viewing himself as standing in the dawn of the immortal future. His thoughts were pleasant; and his experience calm and serene. The terrors of dying, even by the dreadful process of martyrdom, seem not to have disturbed the quiet and composure of his happy spirit. He expresses no fears, and pleads for no release. He waits for the event more like an angel than a man, being fully prepared to meet it. *Such* retrospections, such memories of the past, such self-approving thoughts springing up in the bosom of conscious virtue, we shall all want, when called to walk through the lonely valley of the shadow of death. They form a noble legacy, a wealth of thought and feeling which the world is too poor to buy, and death too feeble to destroy. In their absence, and especially their reverse, it is a terrible thing to die.

The ANTICIPATIONS of the apostle were as brilliant and far-reaching as it is possible to conceive. His meditations were not confined to the past; they went forward into the future; and as to their character, his own words are a sufficient guide—"Hence forth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, shall give me at that day; and not to me only, but unto all them also that love His appearing." In this lan-

guage you see, first, the connection existing in Paul's mind between the glorious future of which he was thinking, and the manner of his previous life. The term "henceforth" indicates this connection. Nothing is clearer than that he contemplated his past life as intimately related to his future hopes. It furnished the premises, at least in part, from which he gathered those hopes. It was because he had fought the good fight, finished his course, and kept the faith, that he now expected to receive the prize. He connects the exercise of hope with the consciousness of his own moral condition.

And this, I may remark, is but a special use of a general doctrine, which prevails throughout the Bible. The life that now is completes itself in that which is to come; and hence, what the future will be is always determined by what the past has been. It is for this reason that those who die in the Lord are blessed, that they rest from their labors, and their works do follow them. Piety is able in this way to infer its own future, assigning a reason for the hope of glory. Paul in this way realized to himself the prospects of his soul after death. Knowing what he had been, he was able to see what he would be.

You may notice, secondly, the individuality and positiveness of the apostle's expectation—"Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteous-

ness." The apostle speaks in the first person, and speaks also with the full assurance of hope, in effect saying, "I myself am soon to share in the bliss of heaven."

Many Christians in these modern times seem to be afraid to hope with full assurance. They believe that the promises of God are true, and hence that all Christians will be saved, and also that they will be saved, if they are Christians; yet they hesitate in applying these promises to themselves. Paul had no such fear. He did not say, "I believe in the final salvation of the righteous;" nor did he say, "If I am not mistaken, there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness." He speaks of the matter just as a man speaks of any thing in respect to which he has no doubt. His hope is clear and positive. He once said, that for him to live was Christ, and just as easily that for him to die would be gain, on some accounts having a desire to depart and be with Christ, which was far better. The apostles and early Christians had a style of piety that cleared up all the doubts of saintship, making the future always resplendent with the hopes of heaven. They rejoiced with joy unspeakable, and full of glory, receiving the end of their faith, even the salvation of their souls. They took joyfully the spoiling of their goods, knowing that in heaven they had a better and an enduring substance. "Henceforth

there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness," is as positive as it is personal. Happy the man who can safely make this language his own. Though we may not all be Pauls in intellectual gifts, yet we may all walk in the footsteps of this model saint, and share with him in his hopeful visions of the future.

I turn your thoughts, thirdly, to the object of the apostle's hope. He designates it as "a crown of righteousness," and describes it as being "laid up" for him. Conceiving of himself as having finished his course, he is now waiting to step across the stream of death to receive the celestial coronation of victorious and triumphant saintship. By "the crown of righteousness" he means the future and eternal rewards promised in the gospel to all those who receive and faithfully serve the Lord Jesus Christ. These rewards constitute this crown, won in the cause of righteousness, and conferred as an expression of the divine approval. The Scriptures do all that can be done by language, to impress our minds with the value of this crown, this heavenly reward of a well-spent life. Our language being derived from earth, is but a poor instrument with which to describe heaven; yet, it being the best we have, the best we can use or understand, God has taxed all its powers to give us the most vivid and enrapturing conception of the heavenly

life. He tells us that those who are wise shall shine as the brightness of the firmament, and those who turn many to righteousness, as the stars for ever and ever. The Saviour declares that the righteous shall shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Paul speaks of heaven as "a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory," in comparison with which glory he reckoned the trials of this life as scarcely deserving a mention. Though the earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved, he was comforted with the knowledge that he had a building of God, an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. Peter sets forth the same object under the title of an inheritance, incorruptible and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for those who are kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation. To this inheritance all true Christians are entitled, being heirs of God and joint-heirs with Christ. It is a treasure laid up in heaven, where moth and rust do not corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal. The life of heaven is often described as a state of rest, of peace and repose from the storms and tumults that rage on earth. No eyes are weepers there; no pains of the body or soul are felt in that world; no groans are heard; and even death itself is dead. The former things are passed away. The society is that of an innu-

merable company of angels, of the general assembly and church of the first-born, which are written in heaven, of God himself, the Judge of all, of the spirits of just men made perfect, and of Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant. The intellectual ascendancy of the soul in heaven is as much exalted above the highest range of earthly thought, as is the stateliest form of present knowledge superior to that of prattling infancy. The employments of the mind are as pure and blissful as the occasion is grand and immortal. Songs of praise and hymns of love—the heavenly utterances of beatified being—roll along the sky of the endless life. Palms of victory, harps of gold, badges of royalty, robes of white, a city of gems, a river of life, clear as crystal—such is the select imagery of the dignity, glory, and purity of those who are admitted to the Paradise of God. All the grandeur and beauty of nature, all the descriptive power of the most vivid and exciting contrasts, the intensest words of language, the richest pencillings of poetry, the largest conceptions of human thought, all are summoned to the task of drawing a picture of heaven.

Be it true that this picture is given mostly in the form of figures; true, that we cannot completely understand the heavenly life till death shall make us wiser; and yet who can doubt the desirableness of that life, that “crown of righteousness” which

the Bible presents as the sequel and reward of Christian virtue pursued in this vale of tears? True, this reward is for the present merely an object of faith; and still this faith may well leap with joy under its own animating vision. What is this life through which we are passing, with which we are so familiar, and of which death is the end, in comparison with that to which we are going? What, to the good man, is death itself, but a transit to his heavenly home? Here he ceases to breathe, that there he may begin the song of Moses and the Lamb. The sting of death is sin; yet, thanks be to God, who giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. And let me tell you, that one of the methods of gaining this victory, is to fill our minds with large and hopeful views of the life to come. It is the design of inspiration thus to impress human nature, to comfort the pilgrims of earth, to quiet their fears, and make saints cheerful in the exchange of worlds. God would have us regard it as gain to die; not an evil, but a positive advantage. He has made heaven exceedingly attractive.

Whence, then, as a fourth item, comes this crown of righteousness? The apostle had mentioned his own fight in the battle of life, his own effort in running its race, and his own fidelity in keeping the faith of the gospel; to these pleasing features of the past he had alluded as the antecedents and condi-

tions of hope ; and yet he failed not to refer to the cardinal doctrine of salvation by grace, as embodied in that gospel which he preached with so much fervor to others. Notwithstanding all that he had done as an apostle and a saint, and all the sufferings which he had endured in a long and laborious service in the cause of his Master, he still regarded the "crown of righteousness" as a gift, given to him by the Lord, the righteous Judge. He understood the doctrine of grace. This very Paul was himself a sinner, and well did he know the fact. He knew, too, that the curse of the law was out against him as a sinner. He also knew that there is now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit. He knew that plan of grace divine by which eternal life is the gift of God through Jesus Christ our Lord. Paul was no legalist, no boasting Pharisee, no pompous and self-conceited claimant, in his expectation of future glory. Though he had striven to win the prize, and though the sweet memories of the past gathered their rich testimonials around the present, still he was content to accept the crown of righteousness as a gracious gift, and recognize the Lord, the righteous Judge, as the gracious Giver. Such was his theology as to the source of this crown, the hand that would place it upon his head, and the power that would admit him to a

citizenship in the skies. He knew that in that day for which all other days were made, Christ would say to His redeemed people, "Come, ye blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world." He knew that the Saviour would crown all those whom, according to the terms of His own gospel, He was pledged to crown, excluding none from heaven who ought to be there, and admitting none who ought not to be there. Paul did not expect to seize the prize from the hand of its august Giver, but rather to receive it as a token of His favor, as a mark of His approbation and good pleasure in a well-spent Christian life.

And this, I may remark, is the way in which we shall all be admitted to heaven, if admitted at all. We shall have nothing to claim, though much to receive. The Lord whom we now serve, the Jesus whom we trust, through whose death we hope for pardon, will be the righteous Judge in the final day. In the person of this Judge we shall meet our Saviour. He will know His own, and to each of His own will give the crown of righteousness. If we have not been ashamed of Him on earth, He will not be ashamed of us in the sanctuary above. Not a child of grace shall escape His notice. Not a disciple of His kingdom shall fail of the celestial crown. Whom He justifies, them He also glorifies.

The last clause of the text, "And not to me only, but unto all them also that love His appearing," refers to the second advent, when Christ will come without sin unto salvation, raising the dead and judging the world. To believe the doctrine, to rejoice in it, and love the idea of this glorious appearing of the Saviour, is also referred to as one of the marks of the true Christian. None but Christians can thus think and feel; and hence the apostle declares that the crown shall be given "unto all them also that love His appearing." Though we cannot tell the day nor the hour when the Son of Man will come in His glory, still we know that He will come; and were this event to occur in our own personal life-time, if we are Christians, we should welcome the advent, and love the Saviour's appearing. The majesty, glory, and awfulness of the scene would not make Him less our Friend, nor us less His friends. To us, as individuals, it would be equivalent to dying, to gaining the results of death without the mortal struggle. We should be caught up in the clouds to greet and hail the coming Jesus, our vile bodies being changed in the twinkling of an eye, this corruptible putting on incorruption, and this mortal putting on immortality. True, the pillars of nature would tremble under the tread of her God; yet if our moral state were such that we could welcome Christ and love His appear-

ing, all would be as well with us as if we had been sleeping for ages with the silent dead. With Paul we should receive the crown of righteousness from the Lord, our righteous Judge. Whether we pass to the future state by the ordinary providence of death, or by the miracle of a dissolving world, this crown shall be ours, if, like Paul, we fight the good fight, if we finish our course, if we keep the faith.

I have thus spread before you, in the way of brief analysis and comment, the several particulars contained in the text. You see what the apostle thought of his past life; and in view of what he thought, you also see for what he hoped in the life to come. His memories were pleasant, and his anticipations were bright and cheerful. Expecting soon to die, he expected as soon to be in heaven. Writing to his son Timothy, he left for his encouragement, and for that of all who should read his words, a statement of his experience at this critical moment, as a legacy of light and love. That surely is a blessed religion, worthy of all acceptance, which can thus inspire life and enrich death.

There is a pertinency in this passage to the case of our beloved brother, recently a member and elder in this church, whom God has just called away by the providence of death. He is the third elder of this church who has died during the period of his official service. Ransom G. Williams was the first;

William C. Bowers, the second ; John Boynton, the third ; and in the case of all three we have the pleasing assurance that death to them was gain. They were all men of great value as citizens, of exemplary lives as Christians, and eminent usefulness as members of this religious body.

JOHN BOYNTON, our brother recently deceased, was born June 6th, 1796, and was hence nearly sixty-six years of age at the time of his death. During that portion of his life which preceded his spiritual conversion, he was by education and conviction a sincere respecter of religion, and by habit a regular attendant upon the public worship of God on the Sabbath. Though not a member of the church, still he had the wisdom, for his own sake, and that of his family, thus outwardly to identify himself with the visible people of God. He placed himself in the way of receiving gracious and saving influence.

In the winter of 1831, the Rev. Dr. Carroll, who was then pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of this city, having preached a solemn sermon, appointed a series of morning prayer-meetings, to be held in the lecture-room at 6 o'clock. Our brother, then comparatively a young man, heard the sermon and heard the appointment, and was so impressed with both, that he at once resolved to be an attendant upon these prayer-meetings. Indifferent and careless persons would have made the early hour

an objection, but he did not so judge. His previous habits prepared him to feel the force of the pastor's appointment, and he did feel it. A precious revival was soon granted from the skies; sinners became serious, and began to inquire for the way of life; and at this time our deceased friend sought and found the Saviour, to the joy of his soul. He at once took an active part in these meetings, occasionally speaking, and often leading in prayer. A family altar was erected, at which the father and the husband invoked the blessing of God upon himself and his family, and soon thereafter he made his public profession of faith in Christ. He embarked, too, in missionary labors. In connection with five other persons, he procured a room, gathered a Sabbath-school, and in this way laid the foundation of the Third Presbyterian Church of this city. During an acquaintance of nearly twenty years, I have often heard him refer to these early incidents of his spiritual history, particularly the circumstances which led to his conversion.

When this church was organized in 1842, he shared with others in the infant enterprise. He was elected to the office of an elder, which office he retained till he left this city, and to which he was reelected upon his return to this congregation about two years ago, holding this office till the

Saviour has now called him to the Church triumphant.

I have no desire to speak of this excellent man in terms of extravagant laudation. I am quite sure that he would not desire it, were it in his power to dictate my words. Yet, having known him long, and known him well, and loved him much, I think it proper to pay the tribute which truth authorizes to his character as a man and a Christian.

By nature amiable, candid, sedate, equable in his temperament, cheerful in his disposition, kindly in his feelings, considerate in his words, and prudent in his course, he was fitted to invite the confidence and good esteem of others. I venture to express the opinion that he was highly appreciated by all who had the honor to know him. As a citizen, as a man of business, as a sound and discreet judge of the proprieties of life, as a safe counsellor, and a reliable friend, he belonged to that select class whom it is the instinct of our nature to admire. The grace of God, united with the natural qualities of his mind and heart, gave to his Christian character more than ordinary beauty. He was a Christian of clear and strong convictions, of firm principles, of fixed and well-regulated habits. I have seen him in a great variety of circumstances; I have seen him in the prayer-meeting; I have seen him in the Session; I have seen him in seasons of revi-

val ; I have seen him in times of difficulty ; I have heard him pray and speak ; I have made a great many Christian visits with him ; I have conversed much with him in the walks of private life ; yet I cannot now recall a single thing in all my intercourse with this brother, that is not fragrant with the evidence of sound sense and true piety. More than most men, he was free from the excesses of passion. He had a very perfect control over his own feelings. He was a charitable judge of the infirmities of others. He was conscientious in the discharge of duty. During the period of his health and strength, he was a pillar in this church, giving to its interests the best feelings of his heart, and always ready to do every thing in his power to promote its spiritual good. He loved his Saviour and he loved his God. In an eminent sense, he was a practical Christian.

The exercises of his mind, his thoughts, and feelings, when he found that his days were drawing to a close, harmonized with the general features of his previous life. He died, as he had lived, in the faith of the Gospel. Though at last suddenly called, he had, for months previous to his death, regarded his active work among men as finished. The character of his disease admonished him of the fact that he might fall a victim at any moment. He had no hope of a final release except in the

grave. Contemplating the event as approaching, he looked upon it with calmness, and seemed ready to meet it without trepidation or fear. He was cheerful and self-possessed, apparently less anxious about himself than others were for him. Not a murmur escaped his lips, though at times his patience in the endurance of pain was put to a very severe trial. The leading exercise of his mind during the whole period of his illness, cannot be better described than in his own oft-repeated words: "It is all right; my Heavenly Father knows what is best." On the Saturday prior to the Sabbath of his death, I held my last conversation with him. I said to him: "My brother, whether living or dying, you are safe in the hands of your Saviour." Pausing a moment to take in the full meaning of my words, he replied, "Yes, perfectly safe. I am conscious of no ecstasies and no very great raptures; but I have an unwavering trust in my Redeemer. On some accounts I should be glad to live; on others, it is a matter of indifference to me; in any event, let the will of God be done." In this quiet and happy posture of mind he remained; no clouds were suffered to cross his sky; his utterances continued to be Christian to the last; and when the shades of the last Sabbath evening had mantled the earth, he fell asleep in Jesus without a groan or a struggle, departing so noiselessly that those who were watch-

ing at his side, did not know the moment in which his spirit fled. He was gone ere they were aware of it. He ceased to breathe, and was in heaven. So calm and peaceful was his death, they thought him dying as he slept, and sleeping when he died.

These facts in the life and the death of our brother departed, may well afford comfort to those who mourn the loss of the husband and the father. True, they will see and hear him no more ; the circle he has so long honored and loved will feel his absence ; and yet his memory is not dead ; his example is not dead ; his essential being is not dead ; the entire elements of his Christian character have survived this shock ; and if weeping friends shall follow him as he followed Christ, they will meet him again in the land of spirits—in that house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. He has but preceded them in his journey to the skies. The grave that has covered his body, is not the dwelling-place of his soul. He is not there. His character when living, and his calm and rich experience when dying, amply justify the belief that he is now in Heaven. Let these thoughts minister the balm of comfort to afflicted minds. The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away ; and blessed be the name of the Lord. His providence is right and gracious. He makes the good man immortal on earth till his work is done, and then takes him to Himself, fitted to be a par-

taker of the inheritance of the saints in light. The Christian's death is the divine call to a higher life.

Within a few months past, three of the members of this church have heard this call of God, each of whom, as we trust, has gone home to glory. Soon we shall follow in their steps. Our days are fast wasting, and our death as rapidly approaching. Our work on earth will soon be done. The places that now know us, will soon know us no more forever. One after the other, by an order of Providence we can neither anticipate nor reverse, we shall pass into the lonely valley of the shadow of death. In God's time our time will come. What we want now, and what we shall then want, is a good hope through grace. Admonished by these repeated proofs of mortality, let us endeavor so to live, that when our last hour shall come we may adopt the language of the text, looking back cheerfully upon the past, and hopefully into the mighty future. We may so live. It is our privilege to live and die in hope. May the God of grace confer upon us all this heavenly wisdom.

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