

LECTURE ON THE QUESTION, WHERE DO HUMAN SOULS GO TO IMMEDIATELY AFTER DEATH?

BY REV. W. J. MACKENZIE.

Phil. i. 23: "Having a desire to depart, and to be with Christ, which is far better."

(Continued from Last Week).

There is one other passage of Holy Scripture which I must here mention which some suppose to be against this view of the subject, namely the 18th, 19th and 20th verses of the 3rd chapter of the 1st Epistle of St. Peter, and which reads thus: "For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit; by which also He went and preached unto the spirits in prison, which sometime were disobedient, when once the long-suffering of God waited in the days of Noah while the ark was a preparing." It requires some thought to understand what this passage has to do with our subject. It has really nothing to do with it unless we believe that our Saviour did not at His death ascend to Heaven but went down to a place called *limbus patrum*, and further that He went there and delivered rebellious souls who had been imprisoned since the days of Noah. It is this supposed detention of souls in an intermediate state before being admitted to the world of happiness, that causes this passage of Holy Scripture to be brought into this discussion. Now, I can not find any reason for this interpretation of the passage. We read nothing in Scripture of a *limbus patrum*; nor does St. Peter nor any other sacred writer of Holy Scripture tell us that our Saviour delivered from prison the rebellious souls who lived in the days of Noah. I am, therefore, agreed with those interpreters of Scripture who explain the passage thus: When St. Peter wrote this passage there were certain spirits in prison. These spirits were human beings, who, when in the body, lived in this world in the days of Noah before the flood. They were wicked spirits, as we are told in the book of Genesis. God said "My Spirit shall not always strive with them." The Spirit of God is the Spirit of Christ, (Rom. viii. 9, Gal. iv. 6, Phil. i. 19, 1 Peter i. 11). Noah was a preacher of righteousness, (2 Peter ii. 5). As a preacher he was endued with the Spirit of Christ, and by inspiration and direction of this Spirit he went hither and thither preaching to the antediluvian sinners, warning them of the threatened flood and exhorting them to repentance towards God. But these incarnate spirits continued disobedient during the long time that the ark was a preparing; they wore out the long-suffering of God. At length the flood came and swept them all away. They were then, as they all deserved, confined in prison. We have no record of their having ever been released. And we ought not to be wise above what God has caused to be written concerning them.

Now, I have been led to select this subject, of the state of the soul after death, by an article which has appeared in a small but very useful and very influential monthly publication belonging to the Church. That small monthly paper does good Church work, and I feel grieved to differ with it on this one subject, for I do believe that on almost every other topic we are in hearty agreement. In a recent number of the paper is given a most admirable article warning us against "all false doctrine, heresy and schism," and ending by referring to one of the modern self-appointed evangelists, who is represented as teaching, that "immediately after death believers are received into their final state of glory." The writer of the article offers the following objections to this doctrine, viz.:—1. David hath not yet ascended. 2. They (the Old Testament Saints) without us should not be made perfect, (Heb. xi. 40). 3. Where is the necessity of the resurrection of the body and of the final judgment? Now, I must briefly answer these objections to the doctrine of the so-called evangelist, who in other doctrines is undoubtedly far astray, but in this is correct so far as it concerns the souls of departed saints being in Heaven. But the opinion that they have reached their final state of glory is incorrect, if we take, as we ought, both body and soul into account. We are expressly told that their bodies are to be raised in glory, (1 Cor. xv. 43), and even then when soul and body have been reunited who shall say that there shall be no further "changing from glory to glory into the image of Christ, at least in knowledge and wisdom?" Such a change seems needful for, at least, very young saints who go to Heaven, and who become "like Him, for they see Him as He is."

The first objection to the doctrine that the souls of the faithful at death go immediately to Heaven, is "that David hath not yet ascended." So said St. Peter on the Day of Pentecost, as recorded in Acts ii. But read all St. Peter's address and you will find that he is simply speaking of David's body having not yet ascended. He said "the patriarch David is both

dead and buried, and his sepulchre is with us until this day." His body has not risen from that sepulchre and ascended into Heaven. But had Peter asserted, on the occasion, that the soul of David had not yet ascended to Heaven, doubtless the multitude would have been ready to stone the apostle to death. This manner of speaking as a body as though it were the person is quite common with ourselves, and is common in Scripture. Thus, in St. John's Gospel, the 20th chapter, we find Mary at the sepulchre of Christ, weeping and saying, "they have taken away my Lord, and I know not where they have laid Him." What did she mean? She meant only the body of her Lord. And even St. John himself says, at the end of chapter 19th, "In the garden was a new sepulchre wherein was never man yet laid; there laid they Jesus." What does St. John mean? He means undoubtedly that it was only the body of Jesus that was there; for on that very day the apostle had heard Jesus on the cross say to the dying thief, "This day thou shalt be with Me in Paradise;" and on the evening of the day before he had heard Jesus say, "Now I go to Him that sent Me," and then pray, saying, "Father, the hour is come; glorify Thy Son, that Thy Son may glorify Thee: and now I come to Thee." (St. John xv. 5, xviii. 1, 13). These words may well teach us what our Saviour means when He says to Mary at the sepulchre, "I am not yet ascended;" that is, in the common manner of speaking, not ascended in the body, which had just been raised from the tomb.

The second objection is based on the words of Hebrews xi. 40: "God having provided some better thing for us, that they without us should not be made perfect." This is confessedly a difficult passage to explain; and different commentators give very different and conflicting meanings to it. We might, therefore, well dismiss it as containing no certain argument on either side of the present question. But whatever be its true meaning there can be nothing in it against the doctrine for which I am now contending, because we find the same inspired writer, in the following chapter, thus contrasting the new with the old and darker dispensation of grace: "But ye are come unto Mount Zion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly and Church of the first-born which are written in Heaven, and to God the Judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect, and to Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant." Who are those whose names are written in Heaven? Probably those who continue faithful on earth; because thus our Lord spoke to His faithful apostles, saying, "Rejoice, because your names are written in Heaven." But who are the just men whose spirits are made perfect? And where are those just spirits? Who are they but the ancient patriarchs of whom the inspired writer had just been speaking, and all others like them who had "died in faith," but who in this world "desired a better country" that is, an heavenly, (xi. 16). Where are they? Have they not yet reached that better, that heavenly country? Surely a fair and unbiased interpretation of this portion of Scripture would lead us to reply, "They are in the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, where the innumerable company of angels are, and where Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant is seen in His glory." They are where Abraham the father of the faithful is, and to whose bosom the soul of poor Lazarus was carried by some of the innumerable angels who surround the throne of God.

But the greatest objections to this doctrine are indicated in the questions, "Where then is the necessity of the resurrection of the body and of the final judgment?" First, with regard to the objection, "Where is the necessity of the resurrection of the body?" I suppose the difficulty implied may be something like this:—If the souls of the saints are quite happy and contented in Heaven what is the use of bringing them back and reuniting them to a resurrection body? Now, we might as well ask "Why should not the germ of the butterfly be left in the egg? Is it not contented and happy there up to its present capacity? Or when it has attained to the higher degree and honour of a perfect caterpillar, why not let alone and enjoy the happiness and contentment of feeding on leaves? Or when it has become a contented and happy chrysalis what necessity for any other change?" All such questions we perceive to arise from man's ways of thinking which are not God's ways. That chrysalis, no matter what you may think, has a yet higher destiny which God the Creator has ordained for it. And that which was before but a poor crawling caterpillar is seen at last rising and soaring on wings of beauty, and sipping sweetness from the flowers of summer. So there is a higher destiny for departed saints. "We know not what we shall be," says the apostle. There is a new era yet to come in the life of the saints, as we are told in 1 Cor. xv. 23-29. Happy and contented though they have been in the heavenly paradise, yet God has ordained for them a mighty change—a change in the twinkling of

an eye, when the saints shall no longer be mere spirits of just men made perfect, but the just men shall be perfect in body as well as in spirit; the body having been raised, spiritualized, glorified, made like unto Christ's glorious body and reunited to their spiritual nature. That change will undoubtedly be a higher development of our whole nature. What though it succeed the soul's having been in Heaven? What valid objection can there be to it? Is it not in accordance with what we find in other departments of God's wondrous works?

But the greatest objection to the doctrine seems to lurk in the question, "Wherein lies the necessity for the final judgment?" It is well that the objector uses the word *final* in connection with judgment; for a final judgment implies a previous judgment. And most certainly there is and must be such a previous judgment passed on each soul at death—a private judgment assigning to each soul his and her place in the next world. It was such a judgment that assigned to Judas Iscariot "his own place," and sent Dives, the rich man to hell, where he lifted up his eyes being in torment; and when poor Lazarus died it was by a private judgment in his favour that a most honourable place in Heaven was assigned to him, even Abraham's bosom. So, doubtless, at death each of us, by a private judgment of God, will have allotted to us our own place in the next world. Why then the final judgment? The answer is, that the final judgment is to be public, not private. It is to be a public declaration of the sentences of condemnation or acquittal, or of reward or punishment, pronounced privately on each of us, and an open declaration of the reasons why such sentences have been pronounced. The evidence for or against us will be clearly exposed to all present, and that evidence will justify the sentences pronounced. We are expressly told that the final judgment is to "bring to light the hidden things of darkness, and to make manifest the counsels of the hearts," (1 Cor. iv. 5). Such a bringing to light of hidden things is needed to satisfy us all that each sentence pronounced is a just one. This great purpose of the final judgment is intimated in various other parts of Holy Scripture. For example, in Rom. ii. 16, we are told that "we are sure that the judgment of God is according to truth." Yet because all men will not be satisfied without some proof of this we are told in verse 5th that the day of final judgment is to be "the day of revelation of the righteous judgment of God."

There are mysteries in God's providence which we cannot unfold, and which even awaken in the mind dark doubts and suspicions of the wisdom and goodness of His government. When we think of the innocent suffering unjustly and cruelly, the guilty escaping their merited punishment, the selfish, godless rich man clothed in purple and fine linen, and Lazarus the humble godly man in sore, bodily disease, begging for crumbs which fall from the rich man's table—when we think of such things we are apt to feel as did the Psalmist, (Ps. 93): our "feet are well nigh gone; our steps are well nigh slipped; and such thoughts are painful to us." Then in this world we are linked together by social ties as families, companions and neighbours, and one generation is linked thus with another. We are witnesses to a great extent of each other's conduct in word and deed, and we think that we know each other, when in fact we scarcely know the real character of some who may be living under our own roof and sit with us at the same family table. From having such an imperfect knowledge of our own character of others we are apt to form very erroneous opinions of each other's motives of action, and to give praise where blame would be better deserved, and to blame where praise should rather be given. And thus we live and die in comparative ignorance of each other's real character and consequent fitness for either Heaven or hell. These are some of the hidden things of darkness—the secrets which are to be revealed when we all appear before the judgment seat of Christ. Some of these dark things may be already revealed to the saints in Heaven. If it be our happy lot to go there when we die, but we miss from there some dear friends whom we had hoped to see there, or if we find some souls there that we could not have expected to see, we shall doubtless feel good reason in the holy will of God that such should be the case, and His will shall be ours without question or complaint.

But when Christ comes in glory with the holy angels to judge the world there will be a vast population on the earth linked with the generation before it who had passed into the spirit world, and there again with the generations who had gone before them. They had all been witnesses of each other's conduct, and had formed opinions of each other's character, and had passed some judgments on each other's deserts, but all had nevertheless their own secrets, and all were ignorant of many hidden things of darkness. But to God who searcheth the hearts and to Whom the darkness and the light are both alike, are all things naked and open. To Him are no hidden works of darkness. He has been witness of all human