

THE IMMORTAL HOPE

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Much misunderstanding exists as to the sphere of science and the kind of testimony she can give to a future life. Professor Simpson can speak for reputable scientific achievement:—"Science has helped much in other matters, and some have looked for assistance there, but to the problem she makes no direct contribution; it is difficult to see how she could. At the same time, she throws certain sidelights on the question that do help just a little in its illumination. Physical science can offer to the imagination lines of thought along which the soul or its ethereal counterpart are at least intellectually separable from the grosser material in which it is obliged to accommodate itself here, in order to hold intercourse with other souls and come into relation with the material world. . . . In short it is simple dogmatism that would deny immortality; on scientific ground at any rate, we have not the knowledge to take up such an attitude." Sir William Osler makes this comment:—"In the presence of so many mysteries which have been unveiled, in the presence of so many yet unsolved, the scientific student cannot be dogmatic and deny the possibility of a future state. . . . He will recognize that amid the turbid ebb and flow of human misery, a belief in the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come is the rock of safety to which many of the noblest of his fellows have clung; he will gratefully accept the incalculable comfort of such a belief to those sorrowing for precious friends hid in death's dateless night. Whether across death's threshold we step from life to life, or whether we go whence we shall not return even to the land of darkness, as darkness itself, he cannot tell. Nor is this strange. Science is organized knowledge, and knowledge is of the things we see. Now the things that are seen are temporal; of the things that are unseen science knows nothing, and at present has no means of knowing anything."

Science in the nature of things is limited to the present world. She cannot prove or disprove immortality. The basis of belief in immortality rests upon a much broader conception than the scientific view of this world. It appears in connection with the philosophical interpretation of the universe and finds its vindication in the revelation of this Kingdom of God. The moral and spiritual considerations are therefore the supreme things in support of immortality. Whilst this is true we must not overlook the contribution which science has indirectly rendered to the assurance of immortality. The one great service science has rendered is that she has created a standard as to the value of testimony and laid bare the principles valid in reasonable evidence. These must apply universally as the universe of God in nature and man is one, yielding a unity of thought and experience. The scientific spirit and method can be applied to all lines of inquiry touching immortality and the results reached are equally valid in experience. There is such a thing as scientific demonstration of a spiritual fact and it is in this consideration that science becomes a help in the study of immortality.

With the inherent tendency to cherish the immortal hope and especially the personal yearning occasioned by the departure of loved ones it seems strange that humanity should so often recoil from a wholehearted acceptance of this great hope. Upon closer scrutiny it is found that this indifference or helplessness arises from the acceptance without critical investigation of certain facts which in themselves constitute insuperable objections to the reasonableness of this hope. Some of these will now be considered.

First, there is the barrier of theological misconception. In the past there was much to justify prejudice. With a positive assurance on the part of religious leaders that the number of the lost was very large, and the number of the saved was very small and that the lost must spend eternity in a lake of liquid fire, it is not to be wondered at that the human imagination shrank from an immortality which implied such awful consequences. It is, of course, impossible to say to what extent this theological dogmatism turned men's interest from immortality, but from the criticism urged against it the view must have been widespread and the scepticism resulting therefrom must have been equally serious. But here it is necessary to distinguish between a fact and the interpretation of that fact. For a long time people believed that the earth was flat and that the sun moved round it. It is now known that the earth is spherical and moves round the sun. The rejection of the antiquated popular theory which everyone held at one time does not affect the fact that the phenomena are just the same as formerly although explained entirely by different principles. The fact remains, the false interpretation has perished. In any study of immortality it is necessary to keep this distinction in the foreground. We may reject theological conceptions of immortality and yet unhesitatingly accept the phenomena which gave rise to the same conceptions as valid facts. We ought, however, to undertake anew their legitimate interpretation. The important things are the facts of consciousness and the world of truth coming in Jesus Christ. These are facts which mean something and point somewhere. The various motions of the boat anchored in the harbor indicate currents of wind and tide as these press against the tiny craft. The relation of the boat to these unseen powers can be ascertained. The invariable turning of the soul to a future life as the tides and winds of eternity bear down upon it indicate some valid principles and relationships. As an old writer puts it: "We love we know not what; and therefore everything allures us. As iron at a distance is drawn by the loadstone, there being some invisible communication between them, so is there in us a world of Love to somewhat, though we know not what in the world that should be. There are invisible ways of conveyance by which some great thing doth touch our souls, and by which we tend to it. Do you not feel yourself drawn by the expectation and desire of some great thing?" Every honest attempt to interpret human life must consider these unseen influences. There can be no doubt that an unimaginative literalism has distorted eternal principles and symbolic language has been treated as scientific statement. The Scriptures warn against this tendency and seek to lay bare the principles of the moral world which are also the principles of the eternal world. Whatever the final truth may be it is indisputable that the future life is the extension and logical development of the present always considered in the light of God's loving purpose in Jesus. When the theological misconceptions have been rejected the fundamental facts of the moral and spiritual world stand before us unscathed. The scientific method refuses to dismiss any particle of evidence because false use has been made of it in the past. The facts are now before us on their merit apart from anything that has been said concerning them. In addition to the old arguments the modern world bristles with new questions and many reputable scientists boldly claim that they have demonstrated the survival of the soul beyond death by having personal communication with the departed.

(To be continued.)