"THE CHRISTIAN UNDER–STANDING OF DEATH"

A Sermon by

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Fort Worth, Texas

Vol. XI May 28, 1972 No. 32

Scripture Reference: Romans 8:35-39

Back in 1778 the French skeptic and man of letters, Voltaire, lay on his death bed. His sister-in-law, a pious Roman Catholic, ventured to speak to him about the world to come, and it is reported that he sat up indignantly and said: "Enough of this talk! One world at a time. This is enough for me." And with that he slumped back on his pillow and died. These last words of Voltaire were destined to become his most famous, for they seem to epitomize an emerging attitude toward death and all that lies beyond it. One hears this feeling expressed again and again today in one form or another, and I wonder – just how adequate is this as a philosophy of life? Is taking "one world at a time" and immersing ourselves exclusively in time and space the best way to live? On this Memorial Day Sunday, when our thoughts turn instinctively toward a remembrance of death, I think it would be well to ponder this prevalent attitude. Is a consideration of death and what lies beyond it a relevant human venture,

or is it a waste of time or a form of escape from the real issues of life?

The first thing to note about Voltaire's words is that they need to be seen as a reaction to an over emphasis in the opposite direction. Life had been so harsh and brutal in the Middle Ages that the world to come had been exalted at the expense of history. Even the Church encouraged people simply to endure "this vale of tears" and put all of their hopes in the rewards of the next life. However education and elemental science gradually began to develop, and the wonder and possibilities of this present world began to become visible and appealing, and as often happens in history, the mood proceeded to swing from one extreme to the other, and moved from being solely concerned with the world to come toward an exclusive preoccupation with the realm of time and space. And this is the mood that tends to dominate our horizon today, particularly among the young. Death and the beyond are not subjects that interest us much. We do not like to think about them, much less talk about them. Sam Keen suggests that what sex was to the nineteenth century Victorian, death is to the twentieth century Americans. It is a subject we prefer to ignore. The word "death" itself is carefully avoided and with considerable effort we concentrate all our attention to the here and now and away from "pie in the sky by and by" philosophy that seems to be outdated otherworldliness.

And yet I wonder: given the full range of human experience, is it really possible to live in one world at a time? Is this true to our deepest natures and affections? I have reason to question that it is, and I have come to this conclusion, not in thinking about my own survival, but in doing what we did a few moments ago; namely, remembering beloved human beings who have already died. A young man once said to me that belief in life after death was an expression of egotism and immaturity. "How preposterous," he said, "for a worm of a man to think he ought to live on forever and ever!" I countered his words by saying this is not how I first became interested in the subject. It was not out of concern for my survival that death and the beyond became objects of my curosity, but in relation to

someone I had loved and lost. Not egotism, but love – this is what made the approach of "one world at a time" first seem shallow and inadequate to me. When you really care for another human being, this is not the sort of thing that you can cut off at a given moment. You keep on caring about that person, even when they die, which means it does make a differance what that existence is like. Is it an abyss of nothingness or a higher realm of becoming? Does that specific personality one has loved remain intact or does that one cease to be? If you have never loved or never lost then maybe "one world at a time" is a big enough realm to live in. But to the great host of us, such a limited sphere is by no means adequate. Our concern has long since grown wider and deeper than time and space or the here and now, not because we are egoists, but because part of us is now a part of that other realm. For that reason we cannot help but care what happens in the beyond. By virture of our relational powers, we humans have become bigger than history – our concerns reach out to the mystery that surrounds us on all sides. Therefore, it is neither egotistical nor immature nor a form of escapism to be concerned about this subject of death. Because of our love, what happens there makes a differance here. In this light, then, let us lay aside the facade of indifferance that has become so characteristic of our time, and honestly look at the event of death in the light of the Christian Gospel. What does it have to offer us in the way of reality? Most assuredly, it does not answer every question in detail or eliminate all the pain, for death remains an experience of mystery and darkness that must be lived through, not just thought out. However, the Christian Gospel does offer a perspective here – a way of thinking and feeling and believing about this momentous event that can give us hope and courage if we are willing to receive it. What, then, is the perspective of light set around this darkness?

Let me put it this way: death, according to the Bible, is best understood as another experience of birth. It is a portal, a rite of passage, yet another step in God's great process of becoming that is infinitely bigger than time and space. Death is not regression, or disintegrating back into nothingness. It

is rather progression – more like birth and growth than anything else. Think about it for a moment – when we were first conceived and called out of nothingness into being – we lived in the narrow confines of our mother's bodies and there developed capacities of hearing and seeing that were not utilized in that place. And then we were born – dying in a sense to that smaller world, but at the same time thrust into a larger realm of becoming. Here capacities that we could never have developed in the womb get a chance to mature and yet not even time and space are adequate for all our human potential. Just as the womb was not sufficient enough for the development of full humanness, neither is history, which is why the Bible interprets death as yet another experience of birth where we move into an even more complex and intense sphere of becoming, there to continue our pilgrimage of growth and development and fulfillment. Therefore, the experience of death could be likened to a curtain being drawn across a life. However, this does not signify the end of the drama for that personality, it is really only the end of Act Two. Being born into this world initially is the end of Act One. Being born into the realm to come is the end of Act Two. And the point is: there is another Act to follow this one! According to the Bible, death is not regression back into the realm of nothingness, but progression into God's infinite life of becoming. "It does not yet appear what we shall be" – this is the open-ended hope of the Gospel.

But what is the basis of this perspective – that sees death as a form of birth and life as moving not just into the valley of the shadow of death but through it to light on the other side? The dynamism here is not human power or ingenuity but rather the unique love of the God who is our reason for being in the first place. I never tire of saying that God's purpose for creating was basically one of joy. He found the fact of aliveness so overwhelmingly wonderful to share this with creatures made in His image, and this is why He called us out of nothing into being. And this love which gave us our lives initially is also an eternal, individual and utterly sufficient love, and right here is the basis of our perspective of hope about death.

What do I mean when I say that this love of God is eternal, individual, utterly sufficient? First of all, it means that the act of creation did not take place carelessly or irresponsibly. What God does He does with a sense of eternal purpose, which is another way of saying that He does not spawn a lot of creatures and play with them for a while and then grow disinterested in them and let them disintegrate in forgetfulness.

When I was serving in middle Tennessee, I knew a retired farmer who used to sit around a country store and whittle all day long. This man really had remarkable gifts in this area, and some of the figures that he would carve had incredible detail and shape to them. The trouble was he did not realize the extent of his gift. When other people would compliment him for what he had done or tell him he ought to save these works and even sell them, he would shrug off the words in indifference and toss the objects into the stove as soon as he would finish them. Here was a creator who was careless about his creating. The Good News of the Bible is that God is not like that wood carver. When He calls a person out of nothing into being, an act of utter seriousness takes place and a bond of everlastingness is established. The way a father feels about a child is an analogy of how the Creator feels for His creation, and this is what I mean when I say the love of the Creator is eternal. According to our text of this morning, there is no abandonment in the love of God. The love of the Creator is a permanent thing. It does not last for just three-score and ten and then trail off into forgetfulness. What God makes He loves, and what He loves He loves everlastingly.

It follows from this kind of quality that the love of God is also an individualized reality. By this I mean that every single person matters to God in his uniqueness. The very fact that He never makes any two people just alike is a clue to His appreciation of individuality, and the Bible assures us that God's love is not just general and collective, but of such a nature that He literally loves each individual as if there were none other in all the world to love, and He loves all as He loves each. This means that the eternal love of the Father is dedicated toward the

preservation and fulfillment of each individual. It is not His will that even one of His "little ones" should perish. He does not look on individuals as rain drops that finally make their way back to the sea there to be merged into an indivisible whole, but each individual is a value in himself that the eternal love of God is intent on conserving.

I heard once of a man who was taking a survey of a rural community. He went to a home where there were several children playing in the yard, and began by asking the mother how many children lived in the home. She responded by saying: "Well, there is Harry and Susan and Richard and David." The poll taker interrupted her impatiently and said: "Not the names, just the number." To which the mother answered icily: "But they are not numbers, they are names." And this is the way the Bible depicts the attitude of God. He does not love us by the acre or in large lots. There is nothing wholesale about God's affection. He loves each one as if there is none other in all the world to love, and He loves all as He loves each.

And rounding out the Biblical image of God's love is the fact that it is utterly sufficient. What do I mean by this? I mean that God's power is equal to His purpose. What He wants to do He is able to do. This is really the crucial issue as far as the event of death is concerned. If God only had power and was not animated by love, then fear would be our lot, for this is the make-up of despots. On the other hand, if God had abounding love and yet was powerless to effect this against His enemies, He would be pitied as One who was admirable but ineffective. However, the Bible affirms that both of these realities are present in God, and the resurrection of Jesus is the climactic revelation of this fact. In this event, once and for all, God demonstrated what He wanted to do and was able to do. After evil had done everything that it could possibly do to His beloved Son, God was able to raise Him up intact and more alive than ever before, and here is the event in history that enables us to see most clearly what God is really like. He not only wants to love men eternally and individually; He has the ability to match His willingness. And this is the basis of the

perspective of hope set around the event of death. It is rooted, not in human nature or power or ingenuity, but on the kind of God who is our reason for being. He who gives us our lives initially does this responsibly, individually and in utter sufficiency. Saint Paul sums it all up by describing God as the One "who makes the things that are out of the things that are not" and as the One "who makes dead things come to life again." Here in a nut shell is the Biblical image of God that speaks to the event of death. He is the One who creates out of nothing, not just once, but again and again. And even when what He has created becomes marred and defaced, He is still willing to create again and in the midst of death regives the gift of life once more. Dr. William Hull has pointed out that the life of Jesus is bounded on both sides by this kind of God. At the beginning is the miracle of the empty womb, at the end the miracle of the empty tomb. On the one hand is the God "who makes the things that are out of the things that are not." On the other hand is the God who has the power "to make dead things come alive again." And it is because He is like this that we can face the event of death with courage and hope. To be sure, Jesus does not give explicit details about what the next world is actually like. One of the most astonishing things in the Gospel is that after Jesus arose from the grave and came back to be with his disciples, He did not have one word to say about the specifics of life beyond death. The whole thrust of His message was to trust in the love of the Father and to keep venturing forward to the not-yet-experienced in courage and in hope. He who gave us our birth, first into life and then history can be depended on to give us life again in what I call "Act Three" – the life beyond.

And in the final anaylsis, this is how the Christian is to regard death. The crucial issue here is not knowing all the particulars about eternity but rather trusting Him who gives our lives initially. He has a concern for us that is everlasting and individual, a purpose for us that is wider and bigger than our brief experience in history, and the power to move us, not just into "the valley of the shadow of death" but through that valley to the light on the other side. Because of this kind of hope we are not rele-

gated to living in "one world at a time." We can, in fact, participate meaningfully in both worlds at once. How? By understanding death as a form of birth and coming to trust Him who brought us out of nothingness into our mothers' wombs and then out of our mother's womb into the larger world of history. I tell you, this kind of One can be trusted to birth us into yet another realm of becoming! Therefore, "let not your hearts be troubled." Believe in God! He is the One who can make the things that are out of the things that are not, the One who can make dead things come to life again. He has already given us so much. How can we doubt that there is more to come?

Published weekly by Broadway Baptist Church, Fort Worth, Texas