

## IS THE FATE OF A SOUL FIXED AT DEATH?

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--A REMARKABLE SERMON BY REV. DR. HOLMES--

WESTMINSTER Presbyterian Church was filled Sunday afternoon when the pastor, Samuel Van Vranken Holmes, D.D., delivered a sermon on Eternal Hope. This was the fifth and last in a series of Lenten addresses by Dr. Holmes on Life's Last Realities. Dr. Holmes said:

"In concluding our course of studies in Life's Last Realities, we come to a problem which, difficult as it is, [R4002 : page 166] must not be shirked. It is a problem to which allusion has heretofore been made, but which I have purposely postponed for discussion until the end: What is to be the final destiny of those who die in their sins?

"You will remember that, in our study of judgment after death, we reached the two-fold conviction that retribution in the life to come is inevitable because grounded in a general moral necessity, and that such retribution must necessarily entail moral separation from goodness and from God. Now, in the face of these facts, is there any hope of better things for sinful men hereafter? Or are we shut up to the belief that such men must spend an eternity in pain and punishment and without hope of moral and spiritual recovery? And this problem has an importance and interest far greater than any general speculative concern as to human destiny. I told you the other afternoon, in our discussion of heaven, that one of its most blessed realities would be the reunion with those whom we have loved and lost. And I am sure that, in almost every heart, there is love and longing for some one who has passed out of this life, caring little or nothing for Christ or the things of the Spirit, and whose last days, it may be, were clouded by sin and shame. What, then, of such? Must we give up all hope of seeing them again, of meeting them by and by, knowing, as we do, that inevitable desolation separates the good and the evil when the secrets of all hearts are disclosed?

## DESTINY FIXED AT DEATH?

"Of course, you know what the teaching of the Church on this question has been for centuries, and what it continues to be in certain quarters today. But one must be blind indeed to movements in the modern religious world who is not aware that a great change has come over the minds of thinking people in regard to this matter. For a mighty and ever-growing doubt has arisen within a generation as to the irrevocability of destiny at death. The conviction has come to be very common today among educated men that there is every possibility of moral change for a human soul in the future life; and this conviction, too, is based, not on mere human speculation, but on the unmistakable implications of the Master's own teachings.

"Personally, I do not believe that Jesus taught the doctrine that human destiny is fixed at death, that after the dissolution of the body the chance of moral change is withheld from men, and that those who die in their sins are condemned to everlasting torment. I believed it once, but I thank God that I believe it no longer; and the implied threat in that doctrine is no more to multitudes of men today than 'the rattling of a medicine man's gourd.' Instead, the world of thought is rapidly coming to believe that, for every man who survives the death of the body, there is opportunity given to be united to God in Christ, and for so long as there is the slightest survival of individual spiritual life. Moreover, this belief rests upon solid foundations.

## UNDEVELOPMENT HERE

"In the first place, it is a purely arbitrary assumption to affirm that moral finality is reached at death. Such a

doctrine is not taught explicitly anywhere in the Scriptures, and the several passages sometimes cited in its support are capable of very different interpretations --interpretations more completely in harmony with Jesus' teachings elsewhere. No more is there anything in the nature of death itself to put an end to the possibility of change. Apart from the awe and mystery attaching to death, there is no reason for assuming that at its crisis man's destiny is irrevocably fixed. The entire position of the Augustinian theology at this point is pure and gratuitous assumption.

"On the other hand, a wider observation of this life and a deeper knowledge of men have conspired to reveal the incomplete and undeveloped state in which a vast majority of souls leave the world at death. They do not make sufficient moral progress here to settle the moral issue involved for all time. Most of those who die have by no means reached that stage of character where moral change is impossible. They are only on the threshold of development. They have just begun to recognize the importance of moral choices. And, as one of our modern theologians has well put it, 'It would be very strange if so solemn an experience as death were withdrawn from among the experiences that might influence the final decision of the soul.'

"Moreover, as I tried to point out in a previous address in this series, no conceivable life in the future can possibly deprive men of moral and spiritual accountability. The doctrine that 'moral strain' is only for this life, that in heaven man is free from moral activity and that in hell his moral responsibility is ended and he is compelled to suffer only for the sins committed in the flesh--this doctrine is intolerable and impossible. The moment a man ceases to be an active moral agent, he becomes less than a man, he sinks to the level of an automaton. And if, as is clear, the future life is as morally active and responsible and as full of solemn ethical meaning as the present, then a free moral agent will be capable of choosing good even if he is in hell. Wherever living spirits are, the law of growth and progress, with all the corresponding possibilities of degeneration and death, must be carried with them and must hold for eternity.

## **CHANCE FOR LOST SOULS**

"Now, if all that has thus far been said is true, if the final destiny of man is not fixed at death, and if moral and spiritual choices are open to him in the future life, then is it conceivable that God can fail of winning gracious victories of love over countless souls whom the world has reckoned lost? Over against the dogma of a hard and unrelenting theology at this point, I prefer to place the teaching of my Master in the parable of the lost sheep, wherein he tells us that the Good Shepherd will not cease to search for the one that is strayed and is lost 'until he find it.' For God will surely never falter in his quest for the sinning and unrepentant, so long as opportunity is left to recover them. Just because God is good and loving and sovereign, just because of that wondrous divine compassion which we witness on Calvary, we may have confidence that multitudes of souls without number shall finally be restored to holiness and happiness and heaven.

"Only let it be remembered that such a restoration will come about, not through any forensic process or legal fiction, but through the only salvation that can ever really avail here or hereafter--the salvation wherein God helps man to make an end of sin in his own soul, and wherein he imparts to him the life of the **[R4002 : page 167]** Spirit. No man will ever be saved hereafter in any way, other than that in which he is saved here. No redemption is ever possible that does not involve a departure from sin and a humble, resolute quest after holiness. Therefore, let no man think that this is an easy doctrine, that he can keep on sinning and living in selfishness until by and by an indulgent God will rescue him from punishment by judicial fiat. This universe of ours is a universe of inexorable moral laws, and the hope of a final restoration does not mean that a single one of those laws will ever be broken. So long as men continue in wilful sin, no salvation could possibly be accomplished. Moreover, delay only renders redemption the more difficult. Hence it is well that here and now we turn to the Christ, and begin to find life in him, and through him likewise to know God; for the Master has told us that this is life eternal, to know God and Jesus Christ whom he has sent.

"And now a single and solemn question remains to be answered. What if there be any who shall persistently

refuse to be recovered, who, in a future life as in this, shall spurn the love divine and sink deeper and deeper in selfishness and sin? What is to be said of their final destiny? It is certain, as has been seen, that persistence in sin makes heaven impossible, so long as that persistence endures. But, on the other hand, to posit an endless hell for wickedness is to posit an endless dualism, continuing through the endless [R4003 : page 167] reign of sin in certain hearts. Such dualism would spell defeat for a sovereign God.

"There is, however, a simple alternative, and one that I believe is implicit in the teachings of both Jesus and Paul--that when a soul, through its persistence in sin, comes to the point where it is morally irrecoverable, it comes also to its final death. Paul distinctly tells us that immortality is an achievement, and the inference is plain that some souls may finally fail of immortality. Moreover, throughout the New Testament, immortality is correlated with goodness, 'possible where goodness is, impossible where goodness is not.' With Jesus the issues of the future are presented, not in terms of pleasure and pain, but in terms of life and death. 'For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have aeonian life.' 'For what shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his psychological life?' These and other utterances of Jesus seem to indicate that eternal life is a possibility only, and is the alternative of death and extinction. The only really indestructible elements of personality seem to be the moral and the spiritual. In the processes of organic evolution, 'the living creature at no stage remains alive so long, and only so long, as it conforms to the conditions of living.' Shall we think otherwise of the human soul? When a soul has reached the stage of moral and spiritual development which Paul describes in the phrase 'being in Christ Jesus,' it is the possessor of eternal life. But when a man has continued in sin, has gone on dwarfing his moral and spiritual nature until every appeal of God is in vain, is it not in accordance with the analogies of life that extinction is the certain outcome?"