

OUR COMFORT IN DYING:¹

A SERMON.

“Lord Jesus receive my spirit.”—Acts vii. 59.

IT is proper that the minds of Christians should be familiar with thoughts of death. This seems to be the object of the prayer of Moses in Psa. xc. 12: “So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom.” It is inculcated by our Saviour, in Matt. xxiv. 42: “Watch, therefore, for ye know not what hour your Lord doth come.” In the season of health and prosperity it will be wholesome for us to remember that it is appointed unto men once to die. It will sober our inordinate desires and restrain us from abusing our abundance. And to the mind accustomed to look its destiny in the face, the sorrows of old age, of sickness and of death, will not come with the bitterness of surprise.

It is somewhat remarkable that under each dispensation the first believer's death which is recorded was that of a martyr. In the Old Testament it was that of Abel; in the New that of Stephen. Let us endeavor to conceive the awe and dreadful

¹The private correspondence of General T. J. Jackson with Mrs. Jackson was found to contain an account, and quite a full and correct analysis, of the following sermon, in a letter written August 26, 1861. The author has been induced, by what, it is hoped, will be considered a pardonable infirmity, if it is an infirmity, from the knowledge of this fact, to select it for insertion, from among the many preached in the camps. It was prepared and preached many years before to a little social assemblage in the author's pastoral charge, with especial reference to a venerable “mother in Israel” there present. On the 25th of August, 1861, the Sabbath day, the 18th regiment was encamped within a mile of the Stone-wall Brigade. The latter lay on the wooded ridge east of Centerville, Fairfax Co., Va., where the main road to Alexandria crosses it. On the right of the way was the encampment of the infantry and on the left that of the artillery and the quarters of the General. Being requested by him to preach for his command, and having secured a supply for his own regiment, the author delivered this sermon in the woods, in the presence of the General and his staff, and a promiscuous assemblage of men and officers. It seemed to him to present a subject not inappropriate to

curiosity with which the first human beings witnessed the first execution upon one of their fellows of the threatened doom, death for sin. Hitherto, the visage of death had never been seen; man only knew that it was something irresistible and terrible, which terminated the existence of the body and restored it to the dust from which it was taken. But now they beheld it; they saw the glazed eye, the sunken and pallid countenance, the marble rigidity, and above all the ghostly aspect of the corpse. How much was the terror of the spectacle enhanced by the fact that the death of their brother was by violence: that his blood was poured out in murder, and the image of humanity in him foully marred before he became food for worms!

There is also a peculiar interest in the death of the first Christian of the new dispensation; for the grave and the world of spirits had now received a new illustration. The saints of the Old Testament had, indeed, good hope that "their souls should not be left in Hades." But the instructions and the resurrection of Christ had now illuminated the tomb with a new flood of light and hope.

"There the dear flesh of Jesus lay,
And left a long perfume."

His death had now conquered the king of terrors, disarmed him of his sting, and led captivity captive. Believers, with such an example, must surely learn a new lesson of submission and courage. Accordingly, the death of the proto-martyr, although accompanied with every outward circumstance of cruelty and horror, was full of consolation and peace. Persecuted upon the unjust charge of perverting the religion of Moses, he had defended himself and rebuked his accusers' sins with a faithful boldness by which they were cut to the heart, insomuch

Christian soldiers, whose business it was to die for their country. It was hoped that the sublime truths revealed to us in this passage of God's word would be impressive to those who were out of Christ, and consoling to those who were united by faith to him; and especially, that the Divine Comforter would bless them to such as, in his secret purpose, might be appointed unto death. Subsequent events have shown that among this number was the great leader himself; and it is felt as no small favor of the Head of the church that this discourse was carried as a message of consolation and strength to that devout and consecrated heart, as was shown by the elevated joy with which he received its doctrine, and his reference to it in his letters. So may it strengthen the souls of all God's chosen ones to whom it comes, and "deliver them who, through fear of death, have been all their lifetime subject to bondage."

that they gnashed upon him with their teeth. His justification of himself and his charges against them were unanswerable; but the tyrant's argument remained to them, and they resolved at once to silence his voice and to gratify their malignity by his death. He was condemned to that ghastly mode of execution, stoning to death with stones. Surrounded with a raging multitude, who were rather wild beasts than men, he was dragged out of the city; and while a young Pharisee named Saul, afterwards the great apostle of the Gentiles, kept the clothes of the executioners, they stoned Stephen, calling upon *God*, and saying, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit."

But his Redeemer, who had so recently passed to his throne through a similar ordeal, did not forsake him. By the power of the Holy Ghost he vouchsafed to his dying servant a vision of the glory of God, and of Christ standing on his right hand, which was sufficient to repay for the agonies of a violent death. How amazing, my brethren, was the contrast between that scene, which was obvious to the eye of sense, and that different one which disclosed itself to the eye of faith at the same time? The one presents us with a solitary, helpless sufferer, the centre of a group of murderous assailants, prostrate, crushed with innumerable blows, his dying countenance begrimed with dust and blood, and his palpitating form mangled almost beyond the semblance of humanity. But oh! behold the other! Look up! There opens before us that heavenly court, which violence, sin and death can never enter, radiant with light ineffable, displaying the throne of Almighty justice, now newly occupied by the God-man, who rises up at his martyr's cry, and with a countenance combining unutterable human love and pity with the terrible glories of deity, stretches forth his hand, lately bleeding for us on the cross, now armed with the sceptre of the universe. At his beck the liberated soul leaps from its poor, dishonored tenement, leaving it all insensible to its wrongs, and mounts, beaming with love and triumph, to the inviting arms! Blessed compensation. What are the pains of dying compared with such a reward?

Could we see invisible things we should often witness similar contrasts at the bedsides of the departing people of God. That which our senses make known to us is a gloomy, shaded room, a couch, a circle of tearful, solemn watchers and a gasping, pal-

lid mortal, in what men call the agonies of death. But could we see in the light of the upper sanctuary, we should more correctly call them the agonies of birth. One moment the sufferer is hovering in insensibility upon the faint line which separates life and death, or wrestling with the strong throes of his last struggle. The next, the body lies a corpse, and the suppressed wail of bereavement from the survivors fills the chamber of death. But could we follow the ransomed spirit, as it soars to its home, how different would be the world of glory which bursts upon its sight, and the shout of joy with which it enters in?

But I have proposed, my brethren, to consider especially the proto-martyr's dying prayer, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit."

First. This seems to teach us that Stephen regarded Jesus Christ as very God. There are sundry places in the Scriptures where this prime doctrine is not so much dogmatically asserted as unintentionally, though clearly implied. These evidences of our Saviour's divinity are, in one aspect, even more satisfactory to the mind than the set and formal assertions, because so obviously sincere expressions of the sacred writer's inmost heart, and because they show how this cardinal truth is interwoven with the believer's whole experience. We are told by Scripture that Stephen was an eminent saint and an inspired man. The heavens had just been opened to him, and the celestial realities had been disclosed, with the position of Jesus at the right hand of the Father. And now, immediately after this vision, and amidst the solemn emotions of the last hour, he prays to Jesus Christ, addressing to him the most momentous petition which the creature can raise to deity. Your English bibles read: "They stoned Stephen, calling upon *God* and saying, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." You will notice that the word *God* is printed in italic letters; by which our translators would signify that there is nothing in the original answering to it, but they have judged it better to supply it in order to complete the sense. In my judgment it would have been more correct to have it as it stands in the Greek: "They stoned Stephen, invoking and saying, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Thus the intention of the evangelist, which was to state that Christ was the object of his prayers, is made clear. But even though his meaning be lost in this point, the petition which is raised to Jesus Christ in the last clause is one which no scriptural believer could address

to any other than God. He alone is the proper object of religious worship; and the man is blind, indeed, who would entrust his everlasting all in the article of death to any other than an omnipotent arm.

In every office of the Redeemer the enlightened Christian feels that he could not properly rely upon him for salvation unless he is very God. It is "because he is God, and there is none else," that Isaiah invites "all the ends of the earth to look unto him and be saved." But in the hour of death especially, the Christian needs a Saviour who is no less than God. An angel could not sympathize with our trial, for they cannot feel the pangs of dissolution. A human friend cannot travel with us the path through the dark valley; for the creature who yields to the stroke of death is overwhelmed, and returns no more to guide his fellow. The God-man alone can sustain us; he has felt the mortal blow, for he is man; he has survived it, and returns triumphing to succor us, for he is God. Unless this divine guide be with us we must fight the battle with the last enemy alone and unaided. Just when the struggle becomes most fearful to the soul, the veil of approaching dissolution descending between it and all this world shuts it off in the outer darkness; and then, in vast solitary night, must the king of terrors be met, with no human arm to succor and no ear to hear the cry of despair that is lost in the infinite silence. So must you die, my friend, and I. Though wife and children, and officious comrades be crowding around your bed, and loved ones be stooping to receive your last sigh to their very hearts, and your dying head be pillowed upon the bosom which was the dearest resting place of your sorrows while living, the last approach of death will separate you from them all, and you will meet him alone. The icy shadow of his dart, as it comes near your heart, will obstruct all the avenues of sense by which their sympathy can reach you. Even then, practically, you will die alone; as truly alone as the last wanderer in some vast wilderness, who falls exhausted on the plain, and sees nothing above but the burning sky, or around save the boundless waste; as truly alone as the mariner who, when the ship is rushing before a gale through the midnight sea, drops from the mast-head, and buffets vainly with the innumerable billows amidst the pitchy darkness, while his despairing shriek is drowned by the tumult of the deep.

But then it is that Jesus Christ draws near as an omnipotent Saviour. He alone of all the universe has fathomed the deepest abysses of death, has explored all its caverns of despair, and has returned from them a conqueror. He is not only sympathizing man, but omnipresent God, who can go with us into the *penetralia* of the court of death. When our last hour comes, then let us say, brethren, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." "When I pass through the valley of the shadow of death, be thou with me; let thy rod and thy staff comfort me."

Second. I am taught by this prayer of the martyr to expect an immediate entrance into the blessed presence of Jesus Christ. I see here that Stephen believed that "the souls of believers are, at their death, made perfect in holiness, and do immediately pass into glory." He evidently did not expect that the grave would absorb his spirit into a state of unconscious sleep, to last until the final consummation; or that any *limbus*, or purgatory, was to swallow him for a time in its fiery bosom. His faith aspired directly to the arms of Christ, and to that blessed world where his glorified humanity now dwells.

Some would persuade us that death is an unconscious sleep; that the soul is not a distinct substance, possessed of its own being and powers of thought independent of the body, but a mere *phenomenon*, the result of the body's organic action, as sound is of the vibration of the musical chord; and that so there is an absolute suspension of the soul's conscious existence until such time as the body is reared from the dust in the resurrection. So thought not the inspired martyr. He manifestly regarded his spirit as separable from the body, and therefore as true, independent substance. The latter he relinquishes to the insults of his enemies; the former he commits to Jesus Christ. So taught not that Saviour and his two favored disciples when they showed us Moses and Elijah in glory. So promised not the dying Redeemer to the penitent thief, when he said, "This day thou shalt be with me in Paradise." His body was left upon the tree a prey to the brutality of his executioners, and probably to ravenous birds. Yet his soul, the true being, passed with his dying Redeemer into immediate blessedness. So believed not Paul when he said that "to him to live was Christ and to die was gain," and that "to be absent from the body was to be present with the Lord." And would he ever have been in a strait betwixt the

two desires, to live and labor for his converts and to die, had the latter been a sleep of dreary ages in the dust? Surely this zealous laborer for Christ could not have hesitated between the choice of such a useless, unconscious blank on the one hand, and a life of praise and of happy activity on earth on the other hand, albeit it was chequered with toils and persecutions.¹

How much more dreary would not the tomb be if the sentient, thinking soul were engulfed in it along with the body? Nor is there an answer in the saying that its loss will virtually be no loss, because the soul will be totally unconscious of it at the time. But it would not be unconscious of it before and after. Man is a being of forecast and of retrospection; and it is impossible that he should not recoil with dread from the absorption of his own active, thinking being by this realm of annihilation, and the dedication of so many ages which might have been filled with usefulness and enjoyment to fruitless non-existence. Such is not our creed, my brother. If only we are in Christ by true faith, the grave will have naught to do with that which is the true, conscious being. Is the tomb dark and doleful and chill, and loathsome with the worm and the dust? What is that to me? I shall never lie there; I shall never feel the gnawing worm. The coffin lid will never confine me! The spirit, the conscious, spontaneous, thinking, knowing, feeling thing, which constitutes the true man, the *I*, which alone can hope or fear, or experience the tooth of pain, will have soared away to a brighter realm before these abhorred scenes overtake it. Only the poor, disused tenement, the unconscious clay, will be their victim.

It is with equal comfort that the believer's mind is emancipated from the fears of a purgatory beyond death. The efficacy of Christ's vicarious righteousness is asserted in terms which forbid the thought that any retribution will ever be exacted of one who by a true faith has become interested in Him. "There is now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus." "Who shall lay any thing to the charge of God's elect? It is God that justifieth; who is he that condemneth"?² "For by one offering he hath perfected for ever them that are sanctified. . . . And their sins and iniquities will I remember no more. Now, where remis-

¹ See Luke ix. 30, 31; Luke xxiii. 43; Phil. i. 21; 2 Cor. v. 8; Phil. i. 23.

² Rom. viii. 1, 33.

sion of these is, there is no more offering for sin.”¹ I will not detain you uselessly by following all the thorny sophisms by which this most potent engine of superstition and priest-craft is supported. One conclusive view will show you that it cannot be true. The passages cited teach, beyond a peradventure, that no other penal retribution exists or is required for the guilt of the believer’s sins than that of Christ’s sacrifice. I now add: neither is it possible that any purifying chastisement, sent in love and not in judgment, by purgatorial fires after death, can be inflicted upon believers, for the reason that *when they die they are at once made perfectly holy*. How can that be purged which is already absolutely clean? But that justified sinners are at death immediately made perfect in holiness is taught beyond dispute, where we are told that they go directly from death to heaven, and that heaven is a place of perfect purity. “Lazarus died and was carried by angels to Abraham’s bosom.” To the thief it was said, “This day thou shalt be with me in Paradise.” Stephen, looking up from the bloody ground which was about to be his death-bed, said to a present Saviour, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” “If our earthly house be dissolved, we have a building of God in the heavens.” “To be absent from the body” is “to be present with the Lord.” But “corruption doth not inherit incorruption.” That upper sanctuary is the assembly of “the spirits of just men made perfect,” “and there shall in no wise enter into it anything that defileth.”²

On these impregnable foundations rests the blessed assurance of our immediate glory after death. “And I heard a voice from heaven saying unto me, Write, Blessed are the dead which die in the *Lord* from henceforth: Yea, saith the Spirit, that they may rest from their labors; and their works do follow them.”³ Dreary would be the Christian’s death-bed, indeed, if the best prospect which could be offered him amidst the decays of nature were but this: that he must pass from the toils of life and the pangs of dying to fiercer pains beyond the grave, of uncertain duration, which could only be abridged by the piety and doubtful care of survivors. Blessed be God, such is not our hope; but when once life’s pilgrimage is ended, if we live in faith and love towards

¹ Heb. x. 14–18. See also Ps. ciii. 12; Micah vii. 19; Rom. v. 1.

² Luke xvi. 22; xxiii. 43; Acts vii. 59; 2 Cor. v. 1, 6–8; 1 Cor. xv. 50; Heb. xii. 23; Rev. xxi. 27.

³ Rev. xiv. 13.

God, the eternal peace begins. The pains of our last struggle are the last experience of evil to which the ransomed spirit is called forever.

Third. We learn from the text to what guidance the Christian may commit his soul during its unknown journey into the world of spirits. Let us endeavor, my brethren, to obtain a practical and palpable conception of that world. I believe that heaven is as truly a place as was that paradise of the primeval world where the holy Adam dwelt. When we first arrive there we shall be disembodied spirits. But finite spirits have their locality. The clearer evidence, however, that heaven is a literal place is, that it now contains the glorified, material bodies of Enoch, of Elijah, of Christ, and probably of the saints who rose with their Redeemer. But where is this place? In what quarter of this vast universe? In what sphere do the Man Jesus and his ransomed ones now dwell? When death batters down the walls of the earthly tabernacle, whither shall the dispossessed soul set out? To what direction shall it turn in beginning its mysterious journey? It knows not; it needs a skilful, powerful and friendly guide.

But more; it is a journey into a spiritual world, and this thought makes it awful to the apprehensions of man. The presence of one disembodied spirit in the solitude of night would shake us with a thrill of dread. How, then, could we endure to be launched out into this untried ocean of space, peopled by, we know not what, mysterious beings? How would we shrink with fear at the meeting of some heavenly or infernal principality, rushing with lightning speed through the void, upon some mighty errand of mercy or malice, clothed with unimagined splendors of angelic attributes, and attended by the hosts of his spiritual comrades? How could we be assured that we should not fall a prey to the superior power of some of these evil angels? How be certain that we might not lose our way in the pathless vacancy, and wander up and down forever, a bewildered, solitary rover, amidst the wilderness of worlds? This journey into the unknown world must, else, issue in our introduction to a scene whose awful novelties will overpower our faculties; for even the very thought of them, when they are permitted to dwell upon our hearts, fills us with a sense of dreadful suspense. Truly will the trembling soul need some one on whom to lean, some mighty,

experienced and tender guardian, who will point the way to the prepared mansions, and cheer and sustain its fainting courage. That guide is Christ: therefore let us say, in dying: "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit."

It is a delightful belief, to which the gospel seems to give most solid support, that our Redeemer is accustomed to employ in this mission his holy angels. What Christian has failed to derive sublime satisfaction as he has read the allegorical description in the *Pilgrim's Progress* of Christian and Hopeful crossing the river of death, and ascending with a rejoicing company of angels to the gate of the celestial city. It is, indeed, but an allegory, which likens death to a river. But it is no allegory—it is a literal and blessed truth—that angels receive and assist the departing souls which Christ redeems. "Are they not all ministering spirits, sent forth to minister to them who shall be heirs of salvation?" When Lazarus died "he was carried by angels to Abraham's bosom." They are our destined companions in the upper world to which we go. With what tender sympathy will not these pure spirits assist the dying moments of their ransomed brethren of earth; and with what loving joy will they not welcome them to their home? When we were brought by repentance out of our guilt and enmity, there was joy among them. During all the long and wavering contest of the saint on this earth these ministering angels are his watchful assistants. And now that the victory is won, the culture of the soul for heaven completed, and the fruit which first budded in his repentance is matured for glory, with what glad songs will not the angels shout the harvest home? We cannot distinguish by our gross senses the presence and agency of these incorporeal assistants. Even while they minister to us they are unknown to us, by name, as in nature. But none the less are they present.

"There are more things in heaven and earth
Than are dreamed of in our philosophy."

And when the walls of the flesh are battered away by death, the vision of the spiritual world will flow in upon us unobstructed. Not seldom does the death-bed of Christ's people present instances which seem as though some gleams of that celestial light, and some glimpses of the beings who inhabit it, begin to reach the dying saint before he quite leaves the clay, through the rents which are made in his frail tabernacle by the strokes of the last

enemy. What is it that sometimes makes the sunken countenance light up in the article of death with a sudden glory, and the eye, but now devoid of speculation, beam with one more expiring flash of heaven's light? Has the soul seen through the torn veil already the angels' faces bending over its agony, and heard their tender call, unheard by ears of flesh, wooing it out of the crumbling body:

"Hark! they whisper; angels say,
Sister spirit, come away!"

But perhaps these questions are not authorized by the revelation God has vouchsafed to give us of the secrets of the other world. Yet there is one more truth which is revealed, even more glorious than this. It is that ransomed souls are the actual companions, not only of angels, but of the "God manifest in the flesh." When the martyr uttered the prayer of the text he manifestly looked to the arms of Christ as his final home. We are authorized by his example to say, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit, not only that thou mayest sustain it in the pangs of dying and guide it to its heavenly home, and clothe it in thy own robe of righteousness and answer for it in the great day of accounts, but that it may dwell with thee in a world without end. Thou didst pray, 'Father, I will that they also whom thou hast given me be with me where I am, that they may behold my glory;'¹ and thee the Father heareth always. Thou didst show the holy apostle that, after thou comest with the voice of the archangel and the trump of God, 'we shall ever be with the Lord.'² Thou has taught us that, 'when thou shalt appear, we shall be like thee; for we shall see thee as thou art.'³ Oh! blessed resting place! "In thy presence is fulness of joy; at thy right hand are pleasures for evermore."⁴ Let us, brethren, live and die like believing Stephen, and our spirits will be received to the place where the God-man holds his regal court, to go out thence no more forever. We shall see him on his throne, so gloriously earned; we shall see the same face which beamed love upon the sisters of Bethany and upon the beloved disciple, and which wept at the grave of his friend; not, as then, marred with our griefs and pensive with the burden of our sorrows, but shining as the sun. Yet that splendor will not sear our vision; it

¹ John xvii. 24.

² 1 Thess. iv. 17.

³ 1 John iii. 2.

⁴ Psalm xvi. 11.

will be the light of love. We shall see the very hands which were pierced for us; not then bleeding, but reaching forth to us the sceptre of universal dominion to guide and protect us. We shall hear the very voice which once said, "Come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy laden," bidding our worthless souls welcome to his glory. And as we gaze and adore and praise, we shall be changed by his Spirit into the same image of holiness. "This honor have all his saints.'

But, alas! all whom I address have not the faith and holiness of Stephen. They live in wilful impenitence, and call not on the name of Christ. Yet they too must pass through this iron gate of death! On whom will you call, you who have neglected your Saviour, when you pass down into this valley of great darkness; when the inexorable veil begins to descend, shutting out human help and sympathy from your despairing eyes; when death thrusts out your wretched soul from its abused tenement; when you launch forth into the void immense, a naked, shivering ghost; when you stand before the great white throne? Can you face these horrors alone? How will you endure a beggared, undone eternity?

It may be that you will seek in vain this terrible, helpless solitude, rather than the worse alternative which the justice of God may assign you. The devils who now tempt you may then become your captors, beset your dying bed and seize your wretched soul, as it is cast out from the body, to bind it in everlasting chains under darkness against the judgment of the last day.

Call on Christ, then, to-day, in repentance and faith, in order that you may be entitled to call upon him in the hour of your extremity. Own him now as your Lord, that he may confess you then as his people.