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Resurrection, in the Midst of Life.

“As dying, and, behold, we live.”—2 COR. VI. 9.

THERE are occasions, amid the vicissitudes of life, when the extremity of suffering, anxiety, or suspense may be likened to the deep darkness which precedes the dawn of a new spell of hope: and these occasions, these crises, mark a fresh departure of growth in grace and whole-hearted consecration.

It was after such an occasion, and one of rather extreme tension of distress, that the writer, many years ago, gained an experience of relief, as unexpected as it was welcome, in answer to much prayer.

It was on this wise: Psalm cxvi. came under his special study. Verse 15 was reached—“Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His saints.” The familiar verse had in times past been selected as the text of a memorial sermon, after the death of an honoured parishioner. But now it was seen, with a sudden surprise, in a new light; a fresh meaning seemed to illumine it, and one in direct harmony with the key-note of the Psalm, “deliverance.” Twice before, in verses 3 and 8, the term “death” occurs; and in both cases the reference is not to bodily death, but to a crisis of “trouble and sorrow” from which the Lord “delivered” the Psalmist. Surely the inference seems clear that “death” in verse 15 has the same significance. To refer it to the death of the body appears to mar the continuity of the sacred ode, as well as to make the term “precious” somewhat unmeaning. May we not believe that “death” here, as before, signifies an overwhelming experience, a deep spiritual depression, in the midst of life? And from this “death” there is a *resurrection*, a “newness of life” in a fresh plane of steadier mastery over life’s ills. Yes, and a future of increased power for service rendered to the Deliverer, as well as a heartier tribute of thanksgiving and consecration to the Lord. And is not all this—this which constitutes a “death” followed by a resurrection—exceedingly

“precious in the sight of the Lord”? The proof that it is so comes out in the immediate context of this remarkable verse. No sooner is deliverance experienced from “death”—“the cords of death” (ver. 3, R.V.)—than the Psalmist exclaims, as one conscious of a new sense of liberty, “Thou hast loosed my bonds” (ver. 16). With loosened bonds, the liberated Psalmist exclaims: “O Lord, truly I am Thy servant; I am Thy servant.” The privilege of serving is fully realized, and a resurrection of deliverance from “so great a death” (*cf.* 2 Cor. i. 10) is its source and strength. Further, praise, thanksgiving, and a new freedom in prayer (ver. 17) mark the life of the released soul.

Now this experience of “death” followed by a resurrection is not infrequent (in a greater or a lesser degree) in all earnest Christian lives. And it is well that we should thoroughly recognize it as a fact. Yes, and more; it is well that we should regard it as a definite outcome of “the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.” The whole experience constitutes a *law*, and as such it was enunciated by St. Paul in one of those paradoxes we find him laying down in 2 Cor. vi., “As dying, and behold we live” (ver. 9). And we have a still more emphatic testimony to the fact in 2 Cor. iv. 10 (R.V.): “Always bearing about in the body the dying of Jesus, that the life also of Jesus may be manifested in our body.” A very remarkable statement of the same principle occurs in the first chapter of this Epistle. St. Paul had been suffering overwhelming affliction and trouble, and he says of it (2 Cor. i. 9, 10): “We had the sentence of death in ourselves, that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God which raiseth the dead: Who delivered us from so great a death, and doth deliver.”

We have stated that the principle which is the subject of this paper constitutes a law in the realm of *spiritual* experience. And in correspondence with this principle, which governs the Christian life, we may trace a *natural* law, discernible throughout the animated creation (whether in the animal or vegetable domain) whereby, in the midst of life, periodical conditions of

depression occur, varying in duration, succeeded by conditions of revived vitality. This depression, or suspended animation, constitutes a sort of *death*, followed by a revived existence. The universal occurrence of sleep is the most obvious illustration; and under this head we may include the familiar fall of the leaf in autumn, succeeded by the bursting buds of spring.

Again, in the realm of common human experience, we may discern, in almost every worthy enterprise, that a stage is reached when there comes a sensation of depression, akin to despair, and the question has to be faced, "Shall I continue, or must I give it up?" Much depends upon our decision at this crisis. If we yield to the suggestion of despondency, character suffers, and future success in life is impaired. If we persevere, a victory has been gained, and strength of purpose is achieved. Shakespeare seems to have referred to this line of experience, and its successful mastery, in those familiar words:

"There is a tide in the affairs of men,
Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune."
(*Julius Caesar*, Act IV., Scene 3.)

Manifestly the allusion is to the inflowing tide. But this is preceded by the ebb, which falls lowest before the highest spring tide.

We will now return to our main subject, having fortified our recognition of the great principle "RESURRECTION in the midst of Life," by reference to wider laws of *Nature* and *Experience*, which seem to illustrate and prove the matter before us.

And we do this because, if, as we believe, the main principle that forms the basis of our whole line of thought is correct, it should throw light upon some prominent facts in sacred history. We select four, out of many more, as being of a leading character, or else as having become "bones" of contentious criticism. We think that in some cases difficulties of interpretation have arisen just because the main purport has not been clearly understood.

1. Our first illustration is that memorable occasion (Gen. xxii.) when God "did *prove* (R.V.) Abraham" by commanding him to offer up his son Isaac, the son of promise, the heir

through whom all nations of the earth were to be blessed. That this was a real command, and a real statement of fact, we cannot doubt. Under no other interpretation can we understand the words of high approval contained in verses 15 to 18, in which Jehovah founds His renewal of blessing upon the fact, "Because thou hast done this thing, and hast not withheld thy son, thine only son," and, again, verse 18, "Because thou hast obeyed My voice." This great event, the readiness of Abraham to offer up his son Isaac, which is frequently referred to in the New Testament, formed the eighth, and final, recorded revelation of God to this patriarch.¹ It was, in fact, a sort of climax of probation, so great, so overwhelming, so contrary to human conception, that only God Himself could have conceived it, and even He because He could say of Abraham, "I know him." Jehovah proved a faith the nature of which He knew, that He might make this faith in its tremendous issues and in its typical bearing monumental and unique. St. Paul and St. James refer to this event, the one to prove that the *faith* justified, the other that the *works* justified this "father of all them that believe."

And what was the whole gist of this great historic event? Life out of Death. In other words, Death and Resurrection, a foreshadowing of Calvary's Cross, and the deserted sepulchre on the third day. This is no vague conjecture. The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews definitely tells us (Heb. xi. 17-19) that Abraham "offered up his only begotten son . . . accounting that God was able to raise him up from the dead; from whence he did also in a parable receive him back" (R.V.) *cf.* John viii. 56. "My day." "The fulfilment of all that was promised to him" (Westcott, *in loc.*).

2. Our second illustration is the casting of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego into the burning fiery furnace, by order of Nebuchadnezzar, because they refused to worship the golden image which he had set up (*vide* Dan. iii.). This

¹ *Vide* Gen. xii. 1-3, xii. 7, xiii. 14-17, xv. 1-6, xv. 18, xvii. 1-21, xviii. 17-19, and the passage before us Gen. xxii.

furnace surely typified death, and their deliverance was a foreshadowing of resurrection. And the fact that the flames burned their bonds and set them free, while not a hair of their heads was singed, affords a striking comment on the words of Psalm cxvi. 3 (R. V.) and 16 (*vide* above), "Thou hast loosed my bonds."

3. And now we recall the experience of the prophet Jonah. The Lord brought upon this disobedient messenger a severe token of His just chastisement. He "prepared a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights" (Jonah i. 17). Now, as though to silence all adverse criticism of this historic event, we have our Lord's double allusion to it in express terms (*vide* Matt. xii. 40, xvi. 4). And the former of these gives the clue to the nature of Jonah's experience. It was a death followed by a resurrection, and thus it became a type of Christ's dying and rising again for us men and for our salvation.

4. The fourth and last illustration brings us back to the Apostle Paul, whose words "As dying, and, behold, we live," head this paper. We can have no doubt that the carefully narrated experience given us in 2 Cor. xii. of the "thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure" (ver. 7) was a very real and memorable event in his life-history, and one which was very momentous in the great lessons it taught him. We know not what was the nature of the overwhelming and painful discipline, nor need we care to inquire. Enough is told us to show that the Apostle was deeply depressed; he had "the sentence of death" in himself. And out of this grievous affliction he might not be actually delivered in response to his reiterated prayer. But he received abundant answer in a far richer degree. He rose to a higher stage of spiritual living. And out of this "thorn in the flesh" is brought into existence the gracious assurance which formed a keynote of St. Paul's after life (ver. 9): "He said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for My strength is made perfect in weakness."