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LIFE BY DEATH

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C. J. Phipps

“LIFE BY DEATH,”

AND AN

“EXAMPLE FOR CHRISTIAN MOURNERS.”

TWO SERMONS

PREACHED AT

SAINT MARY'S CHURCH, BURY SAINT EDMUND'S,

ON

SUNDAYS, FEBRUARY 13 AND 20, 1848,

On the Death of G. G.

BY

C. J. PHIPPS EYRE, M. A.

Perpetual Curate of Bury St. Mary's, and Chaplain to the Right Hon. Lord Methuen.

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S E R M O N .

“AND RACHEL DIED.”

GENESIS XXXV. 19.

THE time and manner of her death must have increased the anguish of survivors. Under any circumstances, the loss to an affectionate heart of his Rachel, of her who has been the delight of his eyes, more unto him in her single self than the whole world besides, yea, as his own soul,—such a loss, whatever be its attendant circumstances, must be the bitterest sorrow a man can pass through. It is not one of life's weaker and more distant ties, but a very heart-string which is snapped asunder. The arrow of affliction has fallen upon the very centre of feeling, in the point of keenest and most exquisite sensitiveness. A wound bleeds which time does not staunch, but rather re-opens and re-freshes. A chasm is effected, to be felt the more painfully when months are passed away, nay, beyond supply ever again

on this side heaven. No after affection can make amends for violence done unto the first love. The bereaved must "go softly" and solitarily all the days of his life.

But when that loss occurs at the moment, or as the result of childbirth, when the babe's life has been the mother's death, and instead of her there is now only her lost image, an image ever to re-call to the mind of the lonely one the object and cause of his anguish, a pledge of love the more caressed and prized because it is the living memorial of regretted death,—then is the bitterness of that most bitter of all afflictions deepened a thousandfold. And such was Jacob's trial—such the woe of that day when it was said unto him "a man child is born;"—a Benjamin, but a Benoni, his remaining solace, but his lasting sorrow. Rachel had his heart without rival. Years of toil were but as short hours to win her. The love of the sister, deceitfully yielded, could not alienate or weaken the first affection. At last, Laban "gave him Rachel his daughter to wife also." But Leah was "the joyful mother of children," while Rachel was childless. Polygamy brought with it the usual penal consequences, family discord and division; facts and sufferings being, as yet, in the place of precepts, to prove its contrariety to the original and divine ordinance of

married life. Passionately and unconditionally the envious Rachel cried, "Give me children, or else I die." The object of the prayer was natural, but its peevish spirit, and irrespectiveness to the Divine Will, sinful. "Who knoweth what is good for a man in this life?" Who shall dare to covet for the reins of Divine rule in his own hands? What short-sighted mortal should pray for temporal mercies absolutely, and without submissive regard to the choice of Him, who foreseeth the end in the first purpose or step to its accomplishment, and knoweth indeed what is best for us? Lot gave way to his selfish and worldly longings, in the choice of the well-watered and rich plain of Sodom, smiling in fruitfulness like "the garden of the Lord", to call forth, and win, such love and dangerous feelings; but he had no happy day until God burnt him out of that wicked city. Discontentedly in the wilderness, Israel cried for meat. The prayer was met; quails were given; but "he sent leanness withal into their souls." Again, they would have a king, when the Lord was their king. Such a step would establish their nationality and rank, in the eyes of bordering states; their armies would move orderly, and so victoriously, under the plans and command of one man, an unquestioned authority. Hence they sought permission to make an election; the Divine

anger was provoked; but its exercise was seen, in the gratification of the ungrateful request, and not in its denial. "He gave them a king in his anger, but took him away in his wrath." And so fretful Rachel prayed, "Give me children, or else I die," and she died indeed; not in the failure, but by the answer of the prayer; in the possession, and not in the absence of the coveted blessings. Who will not now tremble, lest he should be too earnest in the petition for earthly mercies? Who will attempt to extort from God? Ask conditionally. Ask submissively.

Not what we wish, but what we want,
Do thou, O Lord, supply;
The good unasked in mercy grant,
The ill, though asked, deny.

Jacob had been at Bethel, where, as we read, a domestic affliction had met him. An old and loved servant, who had nursed his mother, and watched, doubtless, over the birth and growth of the grand-children of her departed mistress, died at this place. I can conceive the loss to have been very great just at this juncture. The experienced and interested nurse was gone, and Rachel, in her extremity, must now, perhaps, be under the care of a stranger, a midwife of that country; a discomfort certainly, if not a danger. To the honour of the servant and her master's family all were much affected by the event, and not only wept over the grave,

but called the tree, which threw its shade over the mound of death, Allon-backuth, the oak of weeping. "And they journeyed from Bethel," and were now almost in the desired country,—almost in the place of mysterious, blessed child-bearing,—that Ephrath, where, afterwards, the anguish of one of Eve's daughters was the world's life, and the wail of the new born was that of the Incarnate Son of God,—Jacob's heart flushed with hope, as once more the promised Canaan opened before him, his father-land, his divinely allotted portion—when he is called to meet the bitterest of all sorrows, before he cross its borders. The moment is come, or the fatigue tells. "Rachel travailed and she had hard labour. And it came to pass, when she was in hard labour, that the mid-wife said unto her, Fear not, thou shalt have this Son also." The well-meant encouragement has no influence upon the failing mother. There is no reply. The feeling steals over her that all is over, so turning her eyes towards the little and innocent cause of such a sorrow, she exclaims—Benoni,—Benoni,—child, child of my affliction—and expires. The infant is spared, the mother is removed. In the prime of life there is death, and the bond of wedded love is snapped for ever. Who, who can express the woe of that day, the bitterness of that loss! O death, void of mercy and respect of persons!

That she should die, this was a grief to him; that she should die in travail, this was deeper trouble, this was unspeakable weight on a burden, apart from this addition, scarce tolerable. Benoni indeed, a sorrow to all—to the dead one—to the bereaved one—to the motherless Joseph—to all who knew and loved. Who cannot enter into and sympathise with such sorrow? Whose heart will not the story of its repetition chill, in the family of those dear or nigh to us? Who will not “weep with them that weep?” Who will not cry over the bereaved one, “The Lord hear thee in the day of trouble, the name of the God of Jacob defend thee. Send thee help from the sanctuary, and strengthen thee out of Zion.” Who will not pray over them that shall never now look upon a mother’s smile, hang on a mother’s lip, and know that matchless, gentle, needed care, “as one whom his mother comforteth may the Lord comfort you?” And who amongst Eve’s daughters, that hath been spared this death, will not see the fitness, and the beauty of that holy, happy, service in Christ’s Church, wherein we give thanks over a life spared, a family unbroken, “for that it hath pleased Almighty God to give safe deliverance from the pain and peril of childbirth.”

The afflicted Parent called the babe Benjamin. The other name was Rachel’s last word; how could he use

often, and it might be on occasions of needed chiding, such a sacred name? It would be a constant memorial of the mother's death, and we are sure no such monitor was required. The name given instead, or perhaps only added, signified the son of my right hand, that is, the boy of my tenderest love, the child to stand in, though he can never fill, the vacant place in the wounded heart,—set upon my right hand for a blessing—the stay and joy of my remaining years of loneliness and age.

Near the place of death, Jacob interred the earthly remains of his Rachel, marking the precise spot by a column or monument, as it is written, "Jacob set a pillar upon her grave: that is the pillar of Rachel's grave unto this day." And as that pillar marked the sacred spot, and told the sad story to every passer-by in that day, the record of it now speaks to us—speaks, not merely to touch our feelings, but to teach us lessons. In its simple tale, "So Rachel died," a thoughtful mind can read many a useful and pious lesson. Stand in imagination, then, Christian Brethren, by that memorial of Jacob's bitter mourning over his deceased Rachel, or by any other headstone, which bears upon its lines the same heart-rending affliction, the same story of life and death, of the bereaved husband's sorrow, of the mother removed and the infant preserved,—and what seems it to say to you? "So Rachel died."

I. Can you not read, in that word, of man's ruin and God's Justice? What is such a pillar but the memorial of the creature's sin, and so of the creature's suffering. The woman "was first in the transgression," and hence the multiplication of her "sorrow and conception." She gave guilty heed to the suggestion of the Evil One. Against an express command, persuaded by the promise of unknown good, and in the fever of flattered pride, she plucked and ate the forbidden fruit. Therefore the sentence of sorrow was pronounced against her, and holds against every daughter inheriting the fallen nature of this Great Parent, "in sorrow shalt thou bring forth children." The penalty is not removed, is not lightened. "A woman when she is in travail hath sorrow, because her hour is come;" alas, not merely the hour of death feared, but of death realized—an hour that limits, or closes, a precious life. Such is sin's sad wage. She who brought in the guilt has tasted, and must continue to taste, the extreme of its attendant grief. The pang and the peril are the constant memento of the deserved punishment. The law of life was made, by the creature's sin, a law of anguish and frequent death. The mother's joy must be at the cost of the multiplied sorrow. "So Rachel died"—Here then, brethren, is the token of sin's bitterness and God's wrath upon it; the

record of the awful consequence of the wilful transgression, and the lasting evils of all departures from God. It is to be observed, however, that the dispensation of free grace makes special provision for the alleviation of the merited suffering. In the Gospel there are promises of good corresponding to the several sentences of sorrow, under which the grant of a prolonged season of patience and mercy is vouchsafed to fallen man; and by these promises, in the case of the believer, the inevitable ills of life are met and soothed. Thus, side by side, with the sentence of justice, the law of pain and sorrow of conception to which the woman is doomed, must be written the inspired promise by St. Paul to Timothy, "notwithstanding, she shall be saved in child-bearing, if she continue in faith, and charity, and holiness with sobriety." The anguish of the Virgin Mother hath brought in the salvation. Through her child-bearing a special mercy and comfort are provided in the peril, or in the death. The mother shall be borne through the moment of trial, sometimes with safety, always with freedom from sorrow as a punishment, or a curse. Its character is softened, changed. And resting on the issue of the Virgin's travail, in the exercise of faith and confidence in the woman's promised Seed, the incarnate, crucified Son of God, there is to

her a full and peculiar promise, that she "shall be saved in the Lord with an everlasting salvation." Thus "the curse is turned into a blessing." The record of the first sin remains, and its just consequence is yet real, though there is a promise of rich mercy to such as must endure it. The token of the judgment is yet felt, though lightened by the assurance of the Divine mercy to the children of Grace, when under the effects of it. And so the pillar over Rachel's grave is the memorial of original sin, and God's justice.

II. Is it not also the memento of God's grace? So Rachel died, but life was by that death. She expired, but another breathed. And this is God's method of goodness everywhere; life comes out of death, beauty out of decay, joy out of suffering. The plant casts its leaves, and dies down to its mother earth, covering with its remains the scattered riches of its own seed-bell; and so the grave of its moist dust becomes the cradle of life for another successor, to grow in its stead, and wear again its lost beauty. And "one generation passeth away and another cometh." This steps off the further point of the path of its pilgrimage, and so the other occupies it, giving, in its turn and by its death, the stage of life to a third, which follows close upon the beaten track to the same destiny. Death is requisite for life; life is

by death. And so it is in the kingdom of God's grace. This is the law of life eternal, it comes by death. By sin there was death for life; by grace there is life for death. There was "a pillar," a tree set up on earth, to effect, to record that change;—set up by the instrumental hands of wicked men, but by the direct, though secret, interference of God. That "pillar," that tree was the Cross. It shewed, indeed, that death had been instead of life, for it spoke silently, but expressively, of sin, of Divine displeasure, of the creature's guilt, and loss, and punishment. It told that a sentence of death, eternal death, held against all, who had the nature which the Crucified thereon assumed, and suffered in. That merited death He met, passed through, and endured. The curse of our sin "He bare, in His own body, on that tree." He was the sponsor for the condemned sinner; the wage of his sin, which is death, He took; yea, "He tasted death for every man." And so He became "the Life." His blood was our ransom, His reproach our glory, His rejection our adoption, His poverty our enrichment, His humiliation our exaltation, His anguish our peace, His tears our triumph, His death our everlasting life. He received the Father's displeasure, that we might receive again His grace and favour. He was the just and we the unjust, and so He suffered, "the just

for the unjust, that He might bring us to God." And there is no other way to life, to the life of reconciliation and acceptance,—the life of a restored, pardoned, happy child,—but that which is opened for us in Him. There is no other name, by which man may be saved, but His—"other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Christ Jesus." We live only by Him and in Him.

And the life of regeneration, like that of redemption, comes out of death. Christ died for sin, and we have the life of the Father's favour; we die to sin, and so have the life of the Father's image. The new man of grace appears when the old man of nature expires: we must "reckon ourselves to be dead indeed unto sin," before we can be "alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord." Heavenly childship involves a new life; it is the reception and realization of a new principle, a new law of moral being, the restoration of the intellectual and religious tendencies of man to their suitable object, and original source. New tastes guide the pursuits, new motives regulate the judgment. There is life by new rules, and for new ends; yea, "if any man be in Christ he is a new creature; old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new." Henceforth we "live unto Him who died for us and rose again." But

this life comes out of a death; yea, says St. John, there is a passage from death to life. Self is crucified and then sanctified. There is a death to the world and then a life to heaven. "We are buried with Him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life." When "all carnal affections die in us, and all things belonging to the Spirit live and grow in us," then out of death comes life. And so the Spirit quickeneth. Indeed, this is the method of all his secret doings; He not only brings heavenly childship out of death, but perfects it after the same sort; always producing light out of darkness, joy out of bitterness, hope out of hopelessness, happiness out of trial, peace out of pain. For, can there be the peace of God without the pain of previous contrition? Can there be a happy hope of pardon without an earlier conviction of guilt? Can you walk in the joys of faith without the tears of repentance? Was not Christ "perfected through suffering," and are not we? He officially, we really; He in work, we in character. Through tribulation we must pass to heaven. There can be no beauty, no perfection without suffering: this is the law of Providence. And so, also, there cannot be that purest, heavenly beauty—the "beauty of holiness"—without suffering; and, hence,

“what son is he whom the Father chasteneth not?” This is the method of the Father’s grace; our life is by death : Christ died for sin, and we live to God: we die to sin, and so live unto God; and thus have we at once the child’s dignity and character, the new relationship producing, as its necessary consequent, the new spirit.

Lastly. On the pillar raised over Rachel’s grave, I can read a lesson on the promised manifestation of Divine power. “And Rachel died;” out of death came life; instead of the old and anguished, there was the young and joyous; Rachel is lost, but Benjamin lives.

“Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground, and die, it abideth alone; but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit.” “Some man will say how are the dead raised up, and with what body do they come? Thou fool! That which thou sowest is not quickened except it die, and, then, the Lord giveth it a body as it hath pleased Him.” It dies to live, it decays to bud. The parent seed mingles with the earth, and so there is being to the offshoot. The grave of this poor flesh will be the cradle of its new life. Its decay is its glory, its wasting the method for its new youth. For “it is sown in corruption,” to be “raised in incorruption;” it is “sown in dishonour,” to be “raised in glory;” it is “sown a natural body,” to be “raised a spiritual body.”

“Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God.” And so “this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. And when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality,” then shall it be said that He hath indeed “changed our vile body that it may be fashioned like unto His glorious body, according to the mighty working whereby He is able even to subdue all things to Himself.” And thus in man’s resurrection, as in his ruin and redemption, death will be by life, life out of death; and Rachel’s pillar, telling the sad story of her decease, warns us of the Divine sentence of suffering upon sin; reminds us of the grace of God in Jesus Christ for the pardon of sin, and the removal of the sorrow, its just consequence, as also of the promised power and purity in the resurrection day.

O glorious day of this mighty power of God! How heart and flesh long for it. To have a new body purged from all these vile humours, these fatal weaknesses, these low appetites, these weary sicknesses,—lightened for ever from those burdens which now injure it, weighing it down to sorrow and to suffering,—a pure and suitable companion for the renewed spirit, no longer unfitting it for fellowship with the spiritual world, but itself so wondrously fashioned as to be still

material, and yet "spiritual," fashioned after the great model, the Man Christ Jesus,—this will be indeed to realize "the redemption of the purchased possession." Then this fleshly frame will be no engine of pain, no cause of falling, no inlet of temptation, no clog upon holy joy, no weary laggart in heavenly service. "There is no night there," for it sleeps not; "the inhabitant shall no more say I am sick," for it wastes not. Nay "they rest not day or night" in their rapturous rejoicings, and so it is an endless Sabbath. And yet, though so marvellously changed, the resurrection body will be the same, no new material properties added, the same in face and figure; so that, as the body of the risen Christ had upon it the history of the past, engraven so distinct and deep that the eye and finger of an incredulous Apostle was forced to recognise and read it, and yet was spiritual, and independent of the commonest laws to which we know matter to be subjected, a marvel to the disciples, as they were all convinced that it was the very same form they had loved, and spoken with, and ministered to,—in our resurrection state there will, I think, likewise be a recognition of known and loved features, the same, yet changed,—the form of the corruptible not put off, but the incorruptible put on—the saint "not unclothed, but clothed upon, that mortality may be swallowed up

of life,"—the earthy purged and arrayed in glory—body, soul, and spirit, "blameless before the presence of Jesus Christ." Thus, methinks, shall they know, and speak, and love, who have been one unto each other in Christ in this dark and fading world; they will walk together in "those sweet societies," blend voices in those endless hallelujahs, and bow and praise together before the throne; Jacob is with Rachel, and all tears are wiped away; Rachel mourneth no more for her children, for they are with her for ever.

Brethren, Is this hope of a joyful resurrection yours? Have you in prospect this new body, this new life? O, where is the proof or the pledge of it? There must be this even now, certainly, distinctly, or you cannot have with warrant "this hope:" that is, there must be on you the seal of the Holy Ghost, the mark of God. Where then is your token of a Divine childship? Where is the living faith in Christ that secures it, and the growing heavenliness of mind which attends it? Where is the spirit of prayer which strengthens it, and the life of love and service which manifests it? Where is the "walk with God" which realizes it—the abiding presence and power of the Comforter, its author, source of progress, and perfection? Search and assure your hearts on these points. Then you "will rejoice in hope

of the glory of God." You shall say over your Rachels,—
"lovers, and friends, and acquaintance put far from
you"—yours in the tie of earthly relationship, and as
knit together with you in the mystical body of Christ,—
"not lost, but only gone before." Thus shall each say
unto himself, "why art thou cast down, O my Soul,
and why art thou so disquieted within me?" for,
"we know that if our earthly house of this tabernacle
were dissolved, we have a building of God, an house
not made with hands, eternal in the heavens."

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