

My Last Message

The incident of passing from life to death is usually regarded as a lonesome experience. Comparatively few people are called each day and aside from close friends, the world does not pause to note their going. Funeral services are usually sad and solemn occasions, when as a matter of fact it has always seemed to me they should rather be the occasion of quiet thoughtfulness on things that may really be helpful. It is a beautiful trait of human nature that we usually think kindly of the departed and sometimes the minister over-emphasizes the virtues of the deceased and makes the loss to friends and community seem even greater. But the good or evil that a man has done in life has been determined long before the funeral service. The torch that he has tried to carry will be handed to another and the great world program will go on without interruption. When you think of it, you are impressed with the fact that the multitudes that have lived and died upon the earth since the beginning of time, have been like a numberless army as compared with only a scattering regiment that remains today. In that beautiful poem of William Cullen Bryant, "Thanatopsis", he expresses this thought in a way that almost startles us: — "Thou shalt lie down with patriarchs of the infant world — with kings — the powerful of the earth — the wise — the good — fair

forms and hoary seers of ages past, all in one mighty sepulcher the golden sun, the planets, all the infinite hosts of heaven are shining on the sad abodes of death through the still lapse of ages. All that tread the globe are but a handful to the tribes that slumber in its bosom — and what if thou withdraw in silence from the living and no friend takes note of thy departure? All that breathe will share thy destiny. The gay will laugh when thou art gone, the solemn brood of care plod on and each one as before, will chase his favorite phantom: yet all these shall leave their mirth and their enjoyments and shall come and make their bed with thee".

There is another way of viewing death, however, which has always seemed the comforting thought to me. A mother called her boy to the bedside when the parting time had come and said, "My son, do not think of me as being dead. We are all traveling along the pathway of life and I have just crossed over a little hilltop out of sight for the time being, but afterwards you will join me again and we shall travel on together through countless ages."

So long as memories linger with the living, we need not be separated from our friends by death. Memories and the power of reproducing mental pictures are among the rich blessings that God has given the human family. Again and again we can live over the pleasant hours of

association and we can see the personality and imagine we hear the voice of the one that has gone on ahead.

When these words are being written, I know as little about the future world as anyone. When these words are read... I will have departed from this pain-racked body and be in the spirit world. There have been many beautiful theories about the future, but we cannot lift the curtain to know what we may expect. I have always liked to think of the spirit world as being even more closely linked with this life than we have imagined, and if it be true that those who have gone on before have the privilege of looking back on the scenes of earth, then I am sure that my greatest pleasure would be to see the members of my family and my friends traveling pleasantly along life's pathway and living life up to its fullest and highest possibilities.

In this last message to my friends, I want to discuss some of the lessons that I have tried to learn in life. For after all, life is a school. Some of us get poor grades. Some of us fail, but we are all students. What I want to say is not in the way of a preachment, but simply the expression of some of the lessons that life has brought to me.

To get the most out of life, I believe it is necessary to get the true vision of and the proper relationship to what we recognize as a Higher Power. Let us remember that

what we today call the Christian faith is comparatively young upon the face of the earth, but as far back as even tradition goes, men have always recognized that there must be some higher power of creation and guidance. Just to believe this fact in a general way does not necessarily change our lives greatly. But if we make it a real influence, we must accept it daily as a guiding power in our lives. Some folks call it conversion, some refer to it as a "new birth", while countless others experience the relationship but do not give it a name.

There is a beautiful story in the gospels that when the Christ was about to be born, that great event was revealed in some mysterious manner to wise men in foreign lands. We do not know how the message was conveyed, but it must have been impressive for we find some of these men traveling long distances by camel and following a star even to the little town of Bethlehem. In keeping with the dignity of their position and their mission, they first visit the ruler, Herod, thinking that he might have full information. He is quick to sense the danger that might come to his personal ambitions and position, and requests the visitors to return and tell him what they find. But the story ends with the simple statement, "And being warned of God in a dream, that they should not return to Herod, they departed into their own country another way". As a matter of fact no one

ever finds the Christ and returns to his old life over the same way. We do not expect to find the Christ in a manger today, but to get the most out of life we must find him. The selfish man, when he has traveled his little narrow path and finally found the Christ, goes out over the broad road of human brotherhood. The man who has lived life in the back alleys of sin and depravity, when he finds the Christ will also find the sunlit road that associates him with better living. Even the poor inebriate, who in his senseless condition has traveled what seemed to him like a corduroy road, has sometimes found the Christ and then discovered that a smooth highway lies ahead of him.

Finding the Christ may be a sudden event in life, but getting the proper relationship to that life is a matter of growth. As we absorb the teachings of the Beatitudes and the Sermon on the Mount, we find enough power, as these things are revealed to us, to transform any life from the commonplace to the life of real service and power.

And naturally this relationship with the Higher Power brings in the matter of prayer. Someone has beautifully said:

*"If Radio's slim finger can pluck a melody from the
night,
And toss it o'er continent and sea,
If the petaled white notes of a violin*

*Can be blown across a mountain or a city's din,
If songs like crimson roses, are culled from the
thin, blue air,
Then why should mortals wonder that God hears
prayer?"*

There is a wonderful comfort and power in prayer for it gives us the personal touch with the Higher Power. But let us not misunderstand it. When we are told that faith in the most limited quantity can remove mountains, it certainly does not mean that we can change all God's plans and establish plains where he has set the mountains of earth. In our prayers we have been so much like inexperienced children who have rushed to their parents with requests that to the experienced mind are impossible. We see but for a day and yet we sometimes want to dictate policies to God, who deals with eternities. Those who believe that health can be restored by prayer have many clear cases of where apparently faith and prayer have brought results, but let us remember that there will some day come a time when there can be no extension. The power and satisfaction in prayer is not in being able to dictate to God what shall be done, but in getting into such relationship with God that we are able to understand that His plans are always best.

And then comes the relationship of man to his church. Whether it be the Jew in his synagogue, the Catholic in his cathedral or the Protestant in his modern church... we all owe it to ourselves, to our community and to our God to take some active part in the temple that is dedicated to His worship. Most Americans will shudder at the thought of a churchless community, and yet how many of our very brightest and keenest minds in every community seldom take any active part in any church. It is true the church has been the object of much criticism and perhaps has deserved some of it, but the average individual who takes no active part in it will tell you that he does not approve of the church as he sees it, and just decided to let it alone. It is certain that no organization other than one founded on a belief in divinity would have lasted through all these years, and it will probably go on regardless of the fact that millions of people do not take part in it, but the great loss is to the individuals who fail to take any part in it. Men may say they have their own ideas or plans of worship, but comparatively few carry out these private plans, and the average individual who is not associated with some form of church worship will sooner or later find that part of his life dwarfed. I stress this because I believe that any man who enters any organization dedicated to the worship of God, will receive a blessing from that association, and if every man in America would spend as

little as fifteen minutes a day in reading God's word and offering prayer, and as much as one hour of each Sunday in the house of worship of the type he might select, this country would be absolutely safe from enemies within and without.

It has always seemed to me that one of the greatest temptations which men have to face in this world is their relationship to money. We have been told that the love of money is the root of all evil and certainly, as we view the picture of life, we are impressed with how many have been wrecked on this problem. The love of money may be just as strong in the man who has failed to get it as in the man on whom a fortune has fallen. There are a few men who have attained great wealth and yet lived as simply as in the days when poverty was their lot. To become wealthy and yet maintain the great principles of justice and fairness and to walk humbly is an accomplishment worthy of note. Back in the early days we find Abraham accumulating flocks. They represented his capital. And when one day it seemed necessary that Abraham and his nephew, Lot, should separate we find Abraham leading the selfish young man out to look over the great country that lay before them and practically telling him to take his choice. Wealth had not spoiled that great old character of Abraham, but it finally became the ruination of the selfish young man Lot. How

differently it affects men. Some with the accumulation of money become simply hoarders, forgetful of the day when they must leave it all. Others seek for every possible personal gratification. They want the finest home, the most powerful automobile, the most elaborate program of travel. And these things are not to be too severely criticized (sic) for we need spenders to distribute the wealth, but when a man becomes more interested in the things that count for his own personal gratification than for the benefits they may bring to hundreds of others... then he has missed the great opportunity of life.

When to the man of wealth the budget of his personal expenses exceeds the amount he expends for the benefit of others, he has the wrong viewpoint. He may operate a factory where he gives employment to hundreds of happy employees. He may contribute to the cause of education or to health improvement for the masses. In fact there are so many ways open to every man to be of service in his own selected field, if he simply becomes interested in his own personal gratification, he has missed the plainly marked road to happiness. We are plainly told that "life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which a man possesseth", but somehow it seems to be a lesson that is hard to learn. It brings to us the story of the old king who sought for

happiness until he finally imagined that if he could wear the shirt of a happy man, it might bring to him that experience. And so he dispatched a courier to find the happiest man in all his kingdom and to procure his shirt. The messenger comes back and reports, "I found the man but he did not have a shirt."

Another test that most of us have found a hard one is the control of temper. In the days of impetuous youth we wanted to settle everything by force. We learned to speak harsh words in a high pitched voice and imagined that we had won our point. When the Master suggested that when struck on the one cheek we should turn the other, it hardly seems likely that He meant we should invite further punishment, but rather that we are still in control of the temper that rises so quickly. It is no evidence of being a weakling or a coward to have control of temper... quite the contrary. Think over all the tests you have ever had and the times when you actually won are the times when you were under control. Profanity, to which so many resort in moments of anger, is only an evidence of shallow thought. If every man might see at evening time a picture of all his acts for the day and hear the reproduction of his language, it might bring quick reform. To live the life of control may require more power than to govern a city, but it certainly means the better way.

The patience of Job has been praised and held as an example all through these ages. And yet there may be all about us those who have equalled (sic) his record for we find everywhere some beautiful examples of patience. To the person who wants things done at once, it may be very hard to wait, but when we think how out of proportion we get most things in life, we are impressed anew with the virtue of patience. Here for example is a man leaving on a pleasure trip and because his train may be five minutes late he is filled with complaints. Near him is the man who has a really important trip to make but does not have the money to buy a ticket, and we find him patiently planning how he may arrange for the trip. We become greatly agitated about some little matter of dress, food or entertainment as though our very lives depended upon this trivial matter. When we can once fairly appraise the relative importance of the things that enter into life, it will be far easier for us to wait patiently for both the trivial and the important things.

The effect of honesty in even the smallest statement or act of our lives is most frequently under-estimated. If we permit the spirit of carelessness in the small things, we are surprised how elastic may become the conscience when the real test arrives. To know that we have told the truth even to the smallest detail, to know that we have been honest in even the most trivial transaction... these

are the things that give a real man the satisfaction that brings power and confidence.

I have written you fully about these things in this my last message because they are lessons I have been trying to learn all through the years of my life. No one knows better than myself how often I have miserably failed in all of them, but I thank God for the continued opportunities I have had to try again. To me there has come during the past months the experience of living under the shadow of death. To feel that you have been marked with the sign of death and to daily expect its early arrival is not usually considered a desirable experience, but it may have its virtues. It gives us the opportunity to season and test our faith. Anyone who has a real faith in God should find that faith a sustaining power in whatever test may come. Someone has said that "faith grows best in solitude", but I am sure it grows stronger with testing. It seems clear to me now what the Psalmist meant when he wrote, "Yea, though I walk through the valley and shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for Thou art with me; Thy rod and Thy staff they comfort me." As I come to the end of life, I feel ready for the future. It is with a calm and sustaining faith that the will of God is best. In youth I read these words which have ever lingered with me, and I quote them as the closing sentence of this message-"So live that when thy

summons comes to join the innumerable caravan which moves to that mysterious realm where each shall take his chamber in the silent halls of death, thou go not like the quarry slave at night scourged to his dungeon, but sustained and soothed by an unfaltering trust, approach thy grave like one who wraps the drapery of his couch about him and lies down to pleasant dreams.”

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