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"THERE IS NO DEATH"

A Radio Address by Rev. Ralph S. Meadowcroft

(Delivered in the absence of Dr. Ralph W. Sockman)

In the early days of my work in the ministry I used to think one would grow accustomed to the fact of death. As one funeral succeeded another I looked for a certain casual attitude to develop, and with it an almost professional ability to say just the right words of comfort. But that has not happened. Each bereaved family occupies a sort of closed compartment of their own. It is an event unrelated to all the other happenings in life. And there are no right words to say for one is face to face with a situation you cannot get used to.

Haven't you felt that way? It's all very well to try to rationalize it, to say that it is inevitable and must come to everyone. That is quite true, but when you come up against it such reasons take from it none of its finality. Death is like standing upon the deck of a ship out in the ocean on a cloudy night. Not a star shines in the sky. You look out, hearing the swish and roar of the sea, but you can see nothing, just inky-black darkness.

That is why men and women shrink away from death. It is a universal reaction. Go down into the slums of a great city on a Winter night. In some doorway you will see a poor miserable wretch shivering with cold and hunger. His clothes are rags; he is unclean and half-starved. Life has not a single gleam of hope for him. But he would fight like a maniac against death. The finality and the unknown is his terror. Oh, it's all very well to speak of this matter as something quite natural,-- it does not seem that way when it comes. Next to life itself, death is perhaps the most baffling problem of our lives.

Fifty years ago there was a period when Atheism had a popular appeal. In this country, Colonel Bob Ingersoll spell-bound huge audiences as he demolished God with a fury of oratory. Across the ocean, the movement was led by Robert Blatchford. He had a group of preachers who went from one town to another, even the little villages were not overlooked, while his Sunday papers spread doubt and skepticism among thousands whose convictions were not strong enough to resist him. The Blatchfordites were as enthusiastic in their destruction of God as were the Salvation Army in their establishment of Him. Each Sunday in his newspaper editorials, Blatchford denied the existence of God and of immortality. "When you die that is the end of you," he said. "Belief in a future life is only for the ignorant superstitious folk. No intelligent person can believe such nonsense." A quarter of a century rolled by, and one day Mrs. Blatchford died. At last, Robert Blatchford actually came face to face with his

own conclusions. It was made all the more difficult for him because their marriage had been supremely happy. But as he stood beside the grave his creed collapsed like a house of cards. He could not believe that the sweet spirit he had loved was dead. And in the five years that followed, those who read his paper understood the tragedy of that man as he tried to believe in the immortality he had so long denied.

Is death the end? Are we saying a final absolute Good-bye? Surely there is no problem more directly applicable to your life and mine. We are creatures who love, and therefore must face death with a question. Can Jesus Christ solve this riddle for us?

Not only can He, but He is the only one who can speak with authority about that vast realm which is beyond the grave, for He alone of all men came from out there. And He has something very definite to say.

Sometime ago a woman died. She had lived a truly good life; in daily conduct she had proved her Christianity. One of her friends could not sleep the night after hearing of her death, so took up the Bible and started to read. Her eyes fell upon the words "God is not the God of the dead, but of the living." Strange coincidence? -- yes, but that is the solution of Christ in this mystery. There is no death, there is life, here and hereafter. We change homes but life goes on.

Indeed you cannot read the teaching of Jesus without realizing how saturated it is with the belief in eternal life. He lived every day with reference to what is to be. He did not care that He only lived about thirty years instead of seventy; His concern was the He lived those thirty years in such a way that He would live forever. And He told us that that is how we should live. Everything that He did and said points up to this great truth. You must treat a man, however poor and cheap he may seem to be, as sacred because he is born with the possibility of immortality. This world is a sacred place, for it is the school where we are educated for that greater life beyond. You can understand the Christian religion fully in only one way; it is a great road along which we are travelling to the eternal home.

This is one of the most distinctive elements in the teaching of Jesus. Have you ever thought how little the world knows about immortality apart from Him? The great religions of the Orient have no such definite faith. All they hope is that we shall finally become extinct. Hinduism and Buddhism teach that man is a creature who will some day be re-absorbed in the great God and thus cease to exist, as a distinct personality. And logically they have developed civilizations which are largely indifferent to human welfare. Ancient religions thought death was a dark and horrible experience. In the religions of Egypt, when men died they descended into the caves of the dead where their only joy was the nightly passing of the sun-god in his golden barge. Even the Hebrew religion was uncertain of immortality two thousand years ago, while Mahomet was influenced by his Christian neighbors. Christianity stands out as the one great

searchlight which plays up into eternity. Jesus, the one person in history who came down from God, is the one who teaches there is no such thing as extinction. And Christianity is the religion which has put man on a pedestal, teaching that because he is the immortal child of God, he must be free, bonded in a brotherly society which knows no distinction of color or race. It is Christianity which has pulled man forward on his long march of spiritual progress, and which must still inspire Him to further advance. It is the religion of man's immortality which is the spiritual force of civilization. For this world and the next, "God is not the God of the dead but of the living."

But it is not of the world meaning of this truth I want us to think this morning, rather what is its significance for you and me. Probably everyone of us have said Good-bye for the last time to someone we have loved very dearly. Our first reaction has been great sorrow. We have wept sad tears and an utter loneliness has filled our hearts. Life goes on, of course, but it is never the same. The loved one is gone; the chain of companionship has been broken. There is no agony like the agony of death; no grief so bitter as the grief of parting.

And it must always be so, for even God cannot take that away. If you love you must suffer when the loved one is gone. Why even when we part for a little while it is hard. As often as possible we go home and visit the family. The days of joyous fellowship in the family circle speed by, and all too soon comes the last evening, a time of forced gaiety and deliberate refusal to think of the morrow. But it comes, and with it the journey to the station. Somehow the station always seems gloomy and ugly on that day. We stand beside the train waiting for the call to get aboard. And we wait around, with no words to say, an aching throb in our throats as we force back the emotions which struggle for release.

God cannot take that away, friends. The only way to stop that is to stop loving people, and few of us are willing to pay that price. When death comes, our hearts will plumb the depths of sorrow. Even Jesus could not stop the breaking of His mother's heart as she wept beside the Cross. That is the price we must pay for love.

But sorrow need not be darkened with fear. To the Christian, death is not forever. It is a farewell, to meet again. As we steam out of the station I usually go to the back of the train to get a last view of the family standing there. And already my heart is full of that next time when we shall be moving into that station, and they will be watching for us coming home. And don't you see, that is what Jesus Christ is saying to us every time some dear one begins the great journey. For a time, farewell -- but only for a time. They live, and we are going also to that eternal home when our time comes. Believe that -- it is one of the great truths Jesus came on earth to teach us.

"But I go laughing in my heart. I know  
There is no death, 'tis but a phantom fear  
That haunts the soul apart from God. Christ rose.  
The stone was rolled away, and echoing  
His voice startled Death's sentry guards. 'Behold,  
I live forever and have cast the keys  
Of Hell into the bottomless abyss.'

"Lift up your heads ye golden gates, for all  
To enter in who will to walk the way.  
Christ lives, and around the living Christ new worlds  
Burn to their birth in light, new triumph songs  
Make music mid the silent stars and swell  
Like ocean's thunder on a sounding shore.  
Life! Life! More Life! Christ lives for evermore."

(Studdert Kennedy)

For the division between us is less a barrier than we realize. Each part of a Gothic church has a symbolic meaning. The nave, where the people are seated, is the symbol of life here upon earth. The choir, on the other hand, represents the life beyond death. These two parts of the church are separated by the rood, which stands for death. In some of the old churches of Europe, this rood is a heavy screen, so heavy that often the organ is built on the top of it. The choir and altar can only be seen dimly beyond; you have to go up close and peer through the arches of the screen. Now that kind of a rood is looking at death from the viewpoint of this life. To us death is like a vast wall over or through which we cannot see. But in my own church here in New York the rood has no screen at all. It is a low stone parapet and only a few steps separate the nave from the choir. That is looking at death as those who have passed through it see it from the other side. To us it is a terrible barrier, but to them, it is just a few steps. That is the real view of death, for we only partly understand these things, but those who have passed through the experience understand it more completely.

Moreover they are not cut off from us, so that we can have no connections with each other. Some Christian people have tended to forget that we and they are still related by prayer. When they were alive with us here, we prayed for them, and God answered those prayers. Well, they are with God just as much now as when they lived here on earth. Certainly they are not beyond the reach of His help. Therefore, the God who heard our prayers and answered them in this world, can make those prayers effective in the next world also. So there is still a living relationship between us. Oh, I know it is not the same as when we were together. You can't see, and hear, and talk with them. It is like writing a letter to those who are hundreds or thousands of miles away. Certainly that is not the same as being together, but it's a blessed privilege to write and receive the family letters. Thus, we can write our prayer letters to God for those whom we love, until we meet them again.

And you know, I often think they are waiting for that re-union just as eagerly as we are. I remember three years ago when my brother and his wife came to visit us. Early in the morning we went down to the pier to meet them. The ship was already alongside and we stood there watching the deck for a glimpse of them. There was little talking on the dock. Faces were anxious, waiting, watching. A mother looking for her child; a husband for his wife -- somehow you felt that love was very present all around you. Suddenly my brother came around a corner of the deck. He scanned the crowd on the pier, quickly, searchingly. Then we saw each other, and joy was flaming in our hearts.

Yes, I think it's going to be like that some day. We are going to them and they are waiting for us. They have not died; they have gone home. For the God who rules all things, the things which were and are, and are yet to be, in whose arms they rest, this God is the God of the living and not the dead. Jesus takes away the fear of death, for He destroys the delusion of its actuality. In its place He gives us the joy and the certainty that there is no death, for "where I am" He says "there shall you be also."

A prayer for all our friends and loved ones who have gone to be with God, and by whose presence heaven has been made more like home for us.

O heavenly Father, we remember this day before Thee all our loved ones and friends and we pray Thee that, having opened to them the gates of larger life, Thou wilt receive them more and more into Thy joyful service, that they may win with Thee, and Thy servants everywhere, the eternal victory, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

A prayer for all who are sad and bereaved.

Almighty God, Father of mercies and giver of all comfort; Deal graciously, we pray Thee, with all those who mourn, that, casting every care on Thee, they may know the consolation of Thy love; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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