

Mackintosh, H.R., *Immortality and the Future: the Christian Doctrine of Eternal Life*, New York: George H. Doran, pp. 229 - 244.

We have seen that with regard to those who die in hostility to God a nearly complete agnosticism is imposed upon us by the very nature of Christian faith. It does not at all follow, however, that we are condemned to a like nescience about the experience, after death, of the redeemed. Indeed, the circumstance that the believer is sure of the *fact* of a blessed immortality is plainly against total nescience, since, as in the case of the Theistic problem reality and content are only partially capable of abstraction from each other; we cannot know *that* a thing is without in some sense knowing *what* it is. We are led to ask, therefore, how far it is possible – to say what “heaven” will be like, at least in faint outline. Can we fix the main characteristics of that life beyond the grave?

To raise this question is in no sense an attempt to break down the reserve of Scripture. It is assumed that we know only in part, and see darkly, as in ‘a glass. A medieval legend tells of two monks who had debated much regarding the nature of the heavenly life, one contending that it must be *taliter*, or similar to earth, the other conceiving it as *aliter*, otherwise than here below. They agreed, finally, that whichever died first should, with God’s permission, appear to the other, announcing which of the two was right. After death, therefore, one of them visited the survivor in a dream, bringing this message: *Nec taliter, nec aliter, sed totaliter aliter*. “Not as thou didst think, nor yet as I, but different utterly!” The world to come will be a world full of surprises. But this inevitable ignorance of form or detail leaves the question on our hands whether or no certain determinate beliefs about heaven may not as such be implicit in faith, and be instinctively recognised in that character when they are pointed out, say, by the preacher.

I mean, of course, the genuine utterances of the believing consciousness; not random suggestions of fancy, such as occur in bad eschatological hymns. The region is one where we speak not in science but in faith. On the other hand just because faith is opposed to sight and yet includes knowledge, there is something real and true to be said respecting the life beyond. Gazing forward, we see more than a field of shapeless mist.

The unlikeness of heaven to earth has been insisted on so emphatically, in restraint of imagination, that it is worth while to note how religion at its deepest rather assumes a fundamental *likeness*. The preacher who speaks of the next life must speak of it in terms of its affinities in the present. He must prolong our holiest

experience beyond the grave, and draw down the heavenly into the days and years we are living now. This the Fourth Gospel does habitually; it refuses to acknowledge any distinction of then and now within the one experience of “eternal life.” “Life,” man’s highest good and God’s chief boon, is no earth-born thing in the sense that we can produce or earn it; but we still may have it on earth as a firstfruits, an instalment of the richer possession kept in store. If it is true that “Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love Him,” yet to this the apostle adds: “But God hath revealed them unto us by His Spirit” (1 Cor. ii. 9, 10). To the believer in Christ, the quality of the coming life is not alien or remote; he looks on to the fuller bestowment of an experience which already has attested its own content and sufficiency. Now it is from the vantage-ground of this actual experience that we ask how far that glorified form of life, called heaven, can be known. Obviously, to vindicate its likeness to spiritual life here and now is by no means to cast doubt on the truth of its unlikeness, or to miss the fact that present experience, at its loftiest, points forward to a transcendent completion. We gradually become aware of two contrasts, the perfect solution of which lies in the future: first, that between the inner riches of faith and their defective outward expression. Existence as we know it is a vehicle so unequal to the life of God as to impede its full manifestation. “It doth not yet appear what we shall be.” Next is the tension or distance between seed and fruit, between the creative divine origination of new life in the soul and its promised consummation. “Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect!” So that to the believer his experience must appear very much a living contradiction. He longs to be perfectly that which he is, to enjoy what in principle is already all his own.

Taking “heaven” as a short name for that perfect future experience of which we now have an earnest, we begin with the position that heaven consists in the unhindered possession of God. No other starting-point is admissible; our hope is specifically religious only as it rests on Him. I am not now speaking of motive but of content, and in the content of Christian hope God is first and last, It is the lesson of all mysticism that He is precious for His own sake, that gifts are nothing save as they are enjoyed in Him. He is Himself salvation, His loving power the fount and guarantee of all blessings.

For spiritual natures, to possess God means to have fellowship with Him, and fellowship as we must think of it includes knowledge, enjoyment and assimilation. Each of these has the promise of completion. Not that we do not

know God here; the substance of faith is that in Jesus we apprehend His very mind and-heart. Nevertheless it is a limited apprehension; ever and again we are led to confess that He dwells in light inaccessible, that His judgments are unsearchable and His ways past finding out. Hence the prospect of knowing Him face to face, even as we are known, is something new and very great, the importance of which comes out with a sudden clearness if we try the experiment of thinking it away. ‘Whom having not seen ye love’ is one thing; ‘We shall see Him as He is’ is another thing, and the difference of the two is the measure of what a Christian means by heaven. The body and the world are great facts that come under the will of God and are to be received with thanksgiving, but they are far from being entirely transparent media for our relation to Him; there is an opaqueness removable only by death. Obstacles will then disappear once and for all. We shall actually see God, and seeing Him will be our life.

In this great hope, the Christian mind is aware of no distinction, as regards the object of future communion, between God and Christ. That distinction is felt to be irrelevant at this point and in this context. It is not that Christ is thought of as vanishing impersonally in the depths of Godhead. No future would have any value which did not offer a closer intimacy with Him. We are not now so near to Him as we long to be. Every conception we form of Him, on-the-basis of redemption as an experience, makes way with lengthening life for a conception higher and yet higher, till the conviction is forced upon us that an amazing revelation of His glory is still to come of which all we have hitherto learned exhibits only a faint trace. The future would grow dark if we became persuaded that our communion with Christ was never to outgo the limits of the present, never to be more continuous, more profound, more enthralling. But a faith like St. Paul’s pierces the clouds of time and anticipates a fellowship with Christ that is not merely as good as the present, but “very far better.” Christ has that to give men, through immediate communion with Himself, which it is impossible even to describe in any language we can use, but which is the necessary crown of his redeeming work. No one need suppose that ideas of this sort are only a pietistic luxury. On the contrary, we cannot dispense with them if we are to live worthily as His disciples, To remove the hope of seeing Christ beyond the grave, in an unclouded fellowship, is to cut the root of Christian life and power. We cannot imagine a point at which our sense of indebtedness to Him will terminate, or our desire to serve in payment of the obligation. Many things we shall outgrow and leave behind, but not the consciousness of owing everything to God’s love in Jesus, the historic Mediator.

“Sight” in heaven, as contrasted with “faith” on earth, does not mean that no further need will exist for the attitude of trustful dependence; rather the love of God will for ever reach us through the Son, in whom divine mercy and human faith are both perfect.

Still, it must be that one day all baffling difference between Christ and the God He mediates to us will pass away. That difference is felt too often now. “Even in Christ, who is God manifest in the flesh,” it has been said, “we often see the flesh and not God.”¹ It is one of our chief troubles that the Father and the Son seem at times to be unlike, and a distracted faith projects behind the Saviour a mysterious and inscrutable realm of divine life of which Jesus is no index, and from which terrible unknown forces may break out. This fear lest God in part should not resemble Christ, lest He should be at times indifferent or hostile, is the form of unbelief that most easily besets the religious mind. And part of faith’s implicit promise is that we shall yet see God and Christ as wholly one. The life and activity of Christ will be known as conveying to us all the love and life and power of the Godhead. Communion with the Father and with the Son are two aspects of one fact – we *believe* that now, and only sin can cloud our belief in it, but we shall *see* it hereafter as we do not see it now.

The knowledge of God in which such fellowship consists is also a personal enjoyment of Him. Love to God, in men made perfect, has no more to struggle with its opposite, and the heart at leisure from sin and selfishness must draw an unmingled gladness from that supreme communion. Not only so; but the knowledge and enjoyment of God, in a world where everything reveals Him, will refine and mould the soul in His very image. As in this life, we shall be changed by beholding; and if the receptivity of the beholders is become quite mature, both in capacity and will, then at last the glory of the divine nature will be mirrored truly in the children of the Father. To gaze on God will be assimilation. It is not a mere passive consciousness of God’s presence but an active sharing in His mind and will.

One great principle has now emerged clearly. The life everlasting is a life constituted by moral selfhood in which personality lasts on and assumes its perfected form. This, as is well known, has been denied by varied forms of aesthetic mysticism. In recent years Troeltsch has resuscitated an Oriental or Neoplatonic form of theory, according to which human individuality is consummated by absorption; the soul is lost in God, a provisional and temporary fellowship of love on the other side of death being finally replaced by the dissolution of personal life, as finite spirits return to and are submerged in the infinite

life of Deity. Union of wills is a mere transition point, and though it may persist for a season even beyond the grave, the last scene in the drama is the confluence of the minor human tributary with the boundless ocean. The only thing to be said of this is that it directly falsifies the Christian thought of God. His is a holy love, and in virtue of holiness it keeps the limits of moral being and will invade no man's personality, whether in this world or the next. A life which cannot diffuse its utmost riches within the forms of personal communion, and to which the vital impulses of self-maintenance and self-impartation are only impediments to be swept away, is emphatically not the life of Him whom Jesus loved and trusted. To represent a moral order in which personal love for persons is the supreme unifying principle as being finally supplanted by an ethically disparate order where no place remains for a plurality of finite conscious centres, and still more, perhaps, to picture this closing dispensation of impersonality as following upon an indefinitely long period after death in which personality still prevails, is to confess the despair of thought. Anti-personal mysticism, so far from clarifying our ideas of the future life, renders clear thinking an impossibility. No doubt a certain sort of mind welcomes the prospect of dissolution as opening a door of escape from personal *ennui*, but to most the result will seem a moral horror. The truth is, an experience not in any way attached to a self-conscious mind is a non-ens. Similarly, the prospect of an ultimate Nirvana in which Christ and believers equally should be drowned in unconsciousness must repel both reason and faith. The whole construction is one proof more that no one can override moral realities with impunity, and that only a short step leads from the alleged superhuman to what is really sub-human and sub-ethical. Doubtless all these quasi-Buddhistic arguments might have force if there had been no such person as Jesus. In reality they count for nothing, because in Him we have known the love of God as a love that seeks not the final abrogation of personality but its preservation and enrichment.

Heaven, then, means that the spiritual communion with God in which His children here find blessedness will be carried on in a new and perfect way. This relation to God is the decisive fact. Yet although the first and deepest fact, it is not, the whole fact on which the believing mind lays hold. We cannot think of God in abstraction from the Kingdom of which He is Head, or conceive the Father apart from His children. Here is the point at which mysticism gives no satisfaction. It has always drawn a picture of a single finite consciousness in solitary communion with God. There is an excellent saying of Dr. Bigg to the effect that the formula of Stoicism was "My soul and

God," whereas the Christian formula is "My soul, my brother's soul, and God!" The New Testament makes no provision for unattached Christians, never, indeed, seems to contemplate their existence, its interest being wholly given to a society animated by a Spirit uniting all the members into one body; and in like manner its conception of the immortal future, always, is that of a Kingdom or community in which soul is one with soul in the overshadowing love of God. Love of God is there the controlling force; but to this, as we know even here, love of man is no hindrance, for God's own love, as it has been put, is felt as an enveloping pervasive atmosphere, from which individual loves draw meaning and power. Nearness to God is the bond of finite hearts. It does not contract my interests to be close to Him; rather I am the more capable of intensified and unselfish care for my neighbour as He unites me to Himself. Hence the believing thought of death and all that follows it will include the anticipation of a common life such that, just because each individual is now in unimaginably close communion with God, minds can enter more deeply and truly into each other than present experience admits of, or any experience possible in a finite system in which spiritual intercourse depends on the imperfect medium of words or acts. Here, our faculty of sympathetic consciousness is narrowly limited, and what we may call the machinery of love's expression fails, often, in our sorest troubles; part of heaven's promise is the abolition, for good and all, of these defects and obstacles to mutual care.

In the light of these considerations I cannot but feel that the question, "Shall we know each other after death?" has frequently been canvassed with a timorous caution very seriously at variance with Jesus' great thought of God. We may, indeed, reject that thought; but once we have accepted it as our own, no real doubt as to the coming reunion with beloved dead friends is in keeping with the Christian gospel. When doubt is felt, it is nearly always due to the well-nigh incurable individualism that afflicts modern religion. Of this the Bible has no trace. Part of Israel's mission was to rise beyond the self-centredness of Greek ideas of immortality and to unveil the divine purpose to establish a Kingdom or communal life of the blessed, in which the individual attains the goal only through the whole of which he is a member. Similarly in the New Testament, what is held forth is the prospect of a divine society, begun on earth, and made perfect hereafter, a society composed of all saintly souls, each ministering to all the love and gifts of God. None can be blessed in isolation. Reunion with lost friends, accordingly, is not a sentimental detail in pictures traced by fancy; it is part of the hope guaranteed in Jesus. If we

know the God present in Jesus, we know too, as it has been put, that "He has no private blessing for me apart from the rest of the family."² In the unseen world, as in this, each new gift unites us not only to the Father, but to all the brothers of His household.

One reason why the fact of reunion has seemed doubtful, is that reunion itself has often been conceived under too gross and earthly forms. "When they rise from the dead they neither marry nor are given in marriage"—this word of Jesus is one that we still have need to ponder; and there will always be those probably who easily forget that family or social bonds are only emblems of higher unions yet to come. Assuming this, however, it is self-evident to the Christian that divine love cannot have purposed the ultimate suppression or extinction of that love of man to man which is the noblest outgrowth and fruit of history. If love be the flower of personal life, we can trust the Father to make it more deep and true, and to provide such new modes of existence as shall serve to manifest it more transparently. Here, the worst and the best in us often lie hid; there, the veil will be taken off, and what the unwearied grace of God has made of us will come out into the light, and find entrance into hearts we love. Not only so, but there seems no reason why we should not believe that the more perfect and spiritual aspects of earthly affection may keep in the future life that personal fragrance they have gathered in the passing years. Permanence, we may trust, will be given to whatever is in harmony with the Spirit of Jesus.

It is uplifting to dwell with imaginative reverence upon the new richness of fellowship that is in store for all who are one in God. We may be vividly conscious of kinship with all who love Christ, yet feel ourselves separated from many of them by our fault or theirs; or it may be that we realise impatiently how narrow are the confines of human love, how inexorable the laws of space and time forbidding us to win the close intimacy of the good and wise. It is much to know that these limits and infirmities will disappear. But if we are to come to the great multitude which no man can number, the spirits of just men made perfect, and to find delight in all souls united in fellowship with God, these minds of ours must undergo some unimaginable change. They must be dilated to the measure of a universal love. A recent writer asks: "What if the bliss of heaven means an extension of consciousness in the case of individual spirits analogous to the omnipresence of Jesus?"³

But in the field of moral life all real communion passes into service. Love to the Father proves its truth by love to His children, and love is only content when it has given as well as received. All sensuous thoughts of future

bliss die in this atmosphere. Heaven has no significance for moral beings if the noblest and most unselfish earthly toil has nothing in the world to come - that perpetuates its worth and its creative revelation of personality. God will have servants in His heavenly kingdom who are not lost in Him, but saved for life and action. To venture a description of our future work would, of course, be foolish, and our terms are in any case discredited by their sense-origin. All we know is that the experience within which service is done will be one enriched by the great harvests of history, and in which our task will be a perfect occasion for our powers.

Does not this mean that when men have dreamed of ideal societies and utopias, in which full and rich life should be mediated by relationship of unclouded trust and unselfish ministry, their dreams were better than they knew? Those visions of a golden age cannot, it is true, be fulfilled on earth in the completeness of their idea, but they bear witness to an unconquerable hope. They have inspired noble hearts, in face of pessimistic counter-arguments, even if in many instances the motives to which they made appeal have been more social than religious. The Gospel comes to satisfy these longings, on their deepest side. It promises fulfilment of them all in the eternal Kingdom of God, the faultless society of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. The schisms and divided aims of earth will be transcended not by the extinction of individual desire, but by the union of all to God, in whom life and love are one. In His omnipotence we confide to create the outward conditions essential to a perfect and unending fellowship.

The blessedness of such a common life, of which God is centre, has always been pictured by Christian faith as implying the absence of pain. Characteristic words of the Bible point to the cessation of all suffering in the future Kingdom, and they sound a note which the devout heart takes up and prolongs. "The Lord God will wipe away tears from off all faces"; "There shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away" (Isa. xxv. 8; Rev. xxi. 4). True, it would be prudential rather than Christian to make happiness the corner-stone of the future hope, for the anticipation of a Good Time Coming may be, and in abstraction from God is, only a piece of sentimentalism which in itself has no religious quality at all. The gifts of God are ours only as He is Himself our portion. None the less it is a false and unreal spirituality, alien both to Bible religion and to experience, which should predicate blessedness of a life wherein pain, sickness, war or crime may still have place. We speak in the sense of Jesus when we represent the eternal Kingdom

as the end of all tragedy and privation. His miracles, set by Him in the forefront of His mission, were the morning beams of the better day; the beginnings of God's new world, in which the purest and deepest yearnings, of the soul should be answered, and all that pains or oppresses put away for ever. Their design was to relieve hardship and restore the joy of life in God. They gave promise that

“There will at last appear

The world, the order, which God meant should be.”

The Father, according to Jesus, is not holy love merely; He is infinite power as well; and His purpose is to bring in a lasting dispensation where a new humanity will find an environment without flaw or stain. Much certainly may be said in favour of the belief that as long as sin persists on earth even the blessed in heaven participate in Christ's sympathetic union with ‘His struggling people, and that while “Zion, in her agony, with Babylon must cope,” they too taste the spiritual pain entailed by such communion. Certainly we cannot think it otherwise, or ask for a calm not given to Christ Himself; for the servant is not above his Lord. But two things must be borne well in mind. First if the element of pain, sacrificial and redeeming, touches even the life of God, who is over all blessed for ever, yet it is as somehow subordinate, merged in a deeper joy. We too have felt how it is gladness to suffer for one we love. There is a profounder life to which certain conditions even pain can minister, although pain in itself is evil. And secondly, sin will have an end, therefore also pain, even of this intercessory and sympathetic kind, will quite cease and pass away. The final consummation of all things must be such as to satisfy even the righteous love of God.

But the absence of hostile conditions is, for spirits made one with God, the equivalent of unending progress. Too often the life of heaven has been figured as a scene of rest so changeless as to be indistinguishable from stagnation; and against this a natural protest is now made not purely in the name of modern ideals of activity, but in behalf of ideas fundamental to Bible religion. Whatever be the inscrutable enigmas of eternity and time, it must still be held that finite personal life is wholly unintelligible apart from change, and for lives inspired by God change is growth. All that is said in the New Testament, for example, as to future reward seems to point in the direction of a state not merely admitting of progress, but requiring it. So far as we can gather, Jesus gave promise of rewards differing in the case of different individuals: thus He spoke of places in the Kingdom near to Himself which shall be given to those for whom they are prepared (Mark x. 40ff.). St. Paul, too, declares plainly that each shall receive his own reward according to his own labour

(1 Cor. iii. 8).

Hence it may help to lessen the unreality of thought on the subject of heaven if we cease to figure that higher life as oppressed, so to say, by an unvarying monotony of attainment. The thought of Jesus, that place in His Kingdom is fixed by receptivity for the divine life attained on earth, may well dissipate that error, suggesting as it does that men will there have before them the most varied tasks of acquisition. The sinlessness of all is in no way incompatible with this, for it is only our incurably negative ideal of goodness that leads us to conceive sinlessness as identical with perfection. In any case, we may well believe that for the sinless there will still be “new lessons to be learned, new battles to be fought, new experiences to be gained, new services to be rendered!”⁴ In a word, it will be a life of change, of progress, of movement. The continuity of this life with the next would be severed at a stroke if the fluid and dynamic conditions of earthly moral experience were on a sudden to be replaced by static and unchanging modes. So, if heaven be a moral life, the gifts of God will still be made ours by desire and appropriation. The goal we can conceive only as a fully known divine sonship, unimpeded by any least incapacity to receive or to enjoy. Life will move within the fact of perfect love answering to, and subsisting on, the blessed love of God; and in an experience so qualified, effort is one with eternal satisfaction.

In conclusion, it way not be unnecessary to repeat that the Christian Hope is part of the living substance of faith itself. True, eschatological ideas have often been put forward which have in them nothing Christian whatever, and whose origin is rather to be sought in the influence of the higher paganism. But when these things have been cleared away, and we have made up our minds what the Christian Hope is, what it does and does not contain, let us not fail to recollect that it is not less certain than anything else to which the Gospel testifies. He who looks with faith to Jesus is as sure of the life everlasting as of the forgiveness of sins.

¹.Dale, *Christ and the Future Life*, 23.

².Forbes Robinson, *Letters*, 153.

³.E. Bevan, in the *Constructive Quarterly* for Dec. 1913, p. 803.

⁴.Adams Brown, *The Christian Hope*, 173.