

"LIFE AFTER LIFE"
May 26, 1991

TEXT: John 3:3 "Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God."

I do not suppose there are many here who have never heard this scripture before. After all, it contains two of the most famous verses in all the Bible: John 3:3 ("Unless one is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God") and John 3:16 ("God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.") But today I would like to do something a little different with them. Since tomorrow is Memorial Day, I would like us apply those well-known verses to the concept of "Life after Life."

That title, by the way, is also the title of a book by Dr. Raymond Moody, a medical doctor who has talked to hundreds of people who at one time or another had been officially pronounced dead. And he was amazed to discover that, almost without exception, they told the very same story.

First, they said, they found themselves floating above their bodies, watching what was going on. They felt neither pain nor discomfort. But though they could see and hear everything perfectly, no one could see or hear them. Then they heard a loud buzzing sound and found themselves drawn at great speed through a dark tunnel. At the other end, they found a deceased relative or friend who welcomed them. They also saw a bright light --or sometimes a figure clothed in white-- who lovingly showed them all that had ever happened in their lives. And, finally, they were told they were not finished yet and would have to go back. With that, they found themselves back in their bodies again.

That consistency of that pattern seems to have surprised Dr. Moody, but it need not surprise us. For centuries, our faith has taught that there is, indeed, life after life. That, no matter how much sadness death may bring; it is, nevertheless, a natural part of life.

But we too often seem to forget that. We think of death as something foreign. Something sinister "out there" that intrudes upon life. We speak of someone being "struck dead" as if he had been attacked by something foreign to our existence. But that is not the case at all. Like ice and snow, death sometimes comes when we are not ready for it. And so it brings sorrow and pain. But, like ice and snow, it is natural just the same. As natural as birth, adolescence, maturity, and old age.

In the fifteenth chapter of First Corinthians, St. Paul writes, "What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. And

what you sow is not the body which is to be, but a bare kernel, perhaps of wheat or some other grain . . . So it is with the resurrection of the dead." In other words, death is not only unavoidable. It is also natural. As natural as the sowing and reaping of grain. It is part of life's natural cycle, as we read in the third chapter of Genesis, where it says, "You are dust, and to dust you shall return." That is not to say that death is easy to accept. It is not! But we do not have to make it even harder by regarding it as something foreign.

Nor is it punishment, though it often seems that way to loved ones left behind. Those who deal with grieving families often hear someone say, "If only I had done such and such, perhaps he would still be alive." Where that kind of talk is just a normal symptom of grief, soon dealt with and resolved, then little harm is done. But when grief fastens onto it and can not --or will not-- let go, then it can do great harm.

So I repeat. Death is not foreign. It is not a defeat. And it is not punishment --either for the dead or for those who survive. It is simply one of life's many transitions, what Dr. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross calls "the final stage of growth." Like other stages of life, it can be hard on us, and hard on those around us. But it leads to life and not extinction. That is why the psalmist wrote, "Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil." Not "into", but "through."

Saint Paul writes in First Corinthians, chapter fifteen, that "Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. (1 Corinthians 15:50) Or, as we heard in this morning's scripture, "Unless one is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God." But he also adds that "When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: 'Death is swallowed up in victory.'" (1 Corinthians 15:54)

That, then, is death's function. It is life's final healer. As Benjamin Franklin wrote, "Life is a state of embryo, a preparation for life. Man is not completely born until he has passed through death." I can not prove that. And Dr. Moody can not do so either. Those who chose not to accept his findings will tell you that his pattern stems not from reality, but from a kind of schizophrenic reaction to trauma.

I can not prove there is life after life, but I believe it with all my heart. I believe that, like everything else in God's creation, death is for us and not against us. Why? Because, I believe that "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." And I believe our Lord when he said, ". . . Because I live, you will live also. (John 14:19)

Admittedly, we do not know what lies beyond the grave. But we do have hints. In the book of Revelation, for instance, we find this beautiful vision:

"I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband; and I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away." (Revelation 21:2-4)

That is comforting. But more comforting still is Jesus' promise: "I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also . . . Yet a little while, and the world will see me no more, but you will see me; because I live, you will live also. (John 14:2-19) I believe that, and, for me, it is enough.

Mind you, I am not saying that the thought of death is easy. And I am certainly not saying that there is anything wrong or unchristian about grief. Grief is a universal and very natural emotion. It does not mean that we are weak, or that we are lacking in faith. It only means that we are human and that we have loved someone special. Even Jesus wept before the tomb of Lazarus.

The thought of death is not easy, but if we understand it, if we accept it as natural and useful, if we see it as for us and not against us, we can deal with it constructively, and, in the end, it can strengthen us, not crippled us.

While our son was in the Persian Gulf, I found strength in two verses from the book of Romans. I share them with you now. "I am persuaded that neither death nor life . . . nor things present, nor things to come, nor . . . any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 8:38-39 KJV)

On this Memorial Day Sunday, let us think of those who are no longer with us. Let us admit we miss them. Let us shed our tears. But let us also offer thanks. Thanks to God that His Love and Power are sovereign even over death. Let us praise God now that one day we shall praise Him in the presence of those we miss so much. "Then shall come to pass the saying that is written: 'Death is swallowed up in victory.'"