

I shall not die but live

A sermon preached by Dr M J Hyde at the Harvest Thanksgiving Service, at Hope Chapel, Barton-le-Clay, on Wednesday evening, 2nd October 2019

‘I shall not die, but live, and declare the works of the Lord.’ (Psalm 118:17)

We stand in the midst of what the hymn writer calls, ‘Life’s uncertain paths.’ (Philip Doddridge, *Gadsby’s 331*) There is only one certainty – that one day we must die. It is as certain as the day of our birth. As surely as we were born, so we must die. Life and death are the two opposites that are set before us in our text, ‘I shall not die, but live, and declare the works of the Lord.’ That is the subject which I feel laid on my mind this evening to bring before you – the matters of life and death.

These are solemn matters. We know not what a moment or an hour may bring forth, and when we are brought face to face with death, it brings this solemn question: Are we found in this word, ‘I shall not die, but live’?

I must just begin by defining the terms here, ‘I shall not die, but live.’ In the world, and in our churches, we tend to speak of death as occurring at the moment when we cease to breathe. But this is to define death too narrowly, restricting its meaning to only one of its aspects. Death, as it is understood in the Word of God, is more than that.

For example, we read that God told Adam, ‘In the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.’ (Genesis 2:17) Yet Adam continued living. When I was a boy I used to wonder about this, because as we tend to define death, Adam did not seem to die! But we have to realise that death is the wages of sin. Death is not just when the soul leaves the body and we cease to breathe or show signs of natural life. That is natural death, but a worse form of death is spiritual death. Spiritual death is separation from communion and fellowship with God. This gives us some realisation of what it meant when we read, ‘Thou shalt surely die.’ Adam did die. He died spiritually. He lost communion with God. He was shut out from the comfortable presence of God. He realised that he was naked before God – there was no hiding place, no resting place. When the Lord

walked in the garden in the cool of the day, Adam was a troubled soul. Why? Because he had died spiritually. And spiritual death is the precursor to eternal death. Eternal death is eternal separation from the comfortable presence of God. It is to be forever in the presence of an unreconciled God, a God who is angry with the wicked every day. That is the death that is set before us in our text here.

What do we know of the solemnity of death? Because that is what will order our lives before God here. That is the beginning of wisdom. ‘The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.’ (Proverbs 9:10) We must be brought to realise that we are sinners before a holy God, that we have sinned and come short of the glory of God, and that our only just desert is eternal damnation.

But then our text also sets before us life. The Psalmist said, ‘I shall not die.’ I shall not die that eternal death. I shall not suffer that eternal separation from God. Instead I shall live (and, consequent on living, ‘declare the works of the Lord’). What is that life? It is more than natural life. Spiritual life is reconciliation with God, fellowship and communion with God restored. And eternal life is to be brought again into his comfortable presence for ever, to eternally enjoy his favour and presence and blessing.

In coming to our text this evening, I would like to notice four things.

I. Firstly, the words in their immediate context.

II. Secondly, the words as they apply to the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. This psalm is a Messianic psalm, and that is the doctrine underlying our text this evening – the work of Jesus Christ. It is the work of Jesus Christ which brings this transformation from death to life.

III. Thirdly, the experience in the souls of the Lord’s people – what it is to be brought to be enabled to say, ‘I shall not die but live.’

IV. Finally, wherever there is experience, there must be the outworking of practice in our lives. ‘I will declare the works of the Lord.’

I. The death of the Passover lamb

This psalm is one of the ‘Egyptian Hallel’ psalms, as they are known – one of the psalms of praise used at the Passover. They begin in Psalm 113, and this is the last of them. As far as I am aware, the Jews still sing them at the Passover. At the last supper, Jesus and the disciples, ‘when they had sung an hymn, they went out.’ (Mark 14:26) I favour the interpretation that *these* psalms (from 113 to 118) were the words that he sang. They include these blessed words, ‘I shall not die, but live.’ As he went to the cross, with the cloud coming down on him, he trusted in his God. ‘I shall not die, but live.’ And they include these words about the effect of his death. ‘The stone which the builders refused is become the head stone of the corner. This is the Lord’s doing; it is marvellous in our eyes. This is the day which the Lord hath made; we will rejoice and be glad in it.’ (Psalm 118:22-24)

This psalm, then, was sung at the Passover. The Passover was that solemn night when the children of Israel were to be brought out of the land of Egypt. Death hung over the land. That night, the land would be divided by life and death. Life was only found in one way, and that was under the precious blood of the shed lamb on the doorposts. It was only on the basis of that blood that a soul could say, ‘I shall not die, but live,’ because the order had gone forth in the land, that only those who were found under the blood of the slain lamb would survive that night. Otherwise the Angel of the Lord passing by would slay the firstborn in every household. None would escape. There was no salvation in simply being an Israelite – you had to have the blood on the doorpost.

Of course, the sentence of death was confined to the firstborn child – some commentators would suggest the firstborn male child. Imagine what this would mean for the eldest child in your family. The word comes from the father into the household that this night, the destroying angel is going to go forth in the land – and it is *your* life – the life of the eldest child – that will be required. But the father explains that there is a way of escape. He is to take a lamb – a firstborn lamb, a perfect lamb. It is to be offered; the bones are not to be broken. It is to be roasted with bitter herbs. It is to be eaten, not sodden, not raw. It is to be eaten entirely. The blood of that lamb is to be sprinkled on the lintels and on the doorposts.

That, to the firstborn child, must have been the sound of good news. One moment the news had come that they should die – and here, now, is a glimmer of hope, a way to escape the sentence of death.

So they set about the preparation. What urgency there must have been in the heart of the firstborn to see that the preparation was made properly! As the father went to choose a lamb, we can imagine that the eldest child would have wanted to go with him. They would have wanted to trace out that it was really a male lamb less than a year old. They would have wanted to ensure that it really was perfect – because if it was not, the blood would have been of no effect. As they saw the lamb slain, they would have wanted to ensure no bone was broken. They would have wanted to ensure that it was eaten with the bitter herbs. They would have wanted to ensure that the blood was applied to the doorposts and the lintel – because if there was a failure in any part, they were to die.

But, the eldest child, having seen the preparation made, having been with the father every step of the way, having seen the lamb being taken, having seen it offered, having partaken of it, having seen the blood on the doorposts – *now* they can join in the song of praise, with faith. They are not resting on anything they themselves had done. They were not resting on any sword they had to hand to see off the angel. They were not resting on their own strength or their own good health. Their life could not be saved by any of those things. But they were resting only on the blood on the doorposts, and on the basis of that blood *alone* they could sing, ‘I shall not die, but live.’ What a song! What faith! ‘I shall not die, but live!’ A way had been made for them to live. They could go to bed and sleep soundly, because of the promise, and because of the blood that was sprinkled on the doorposts. They could be certain of this fact, ‘I shall not die, but live.’

That is the gospel! We read in the New Testament, ‘Christ our passover is sacrificed for us.’ (1 Corinthians 5:7) As we are in life’s uncertain path this evening, the same sentence of death has gone out throughout the land. We do not know what a moment, or an hour, may bring forth. As Joseph Hart says concerning the sentence of death, ‘Sometimes short’s the warning.’ (Gadsby’s 814) We read those solemn words in Luke’s Gospel, ‘Thou fool, this night thy

soul shall be required of thee.' (12:20) As was quoted in prayer, I have to ask the question of myself, and I must ask the question of you:

How stands the case, my soul, with thee?
For heaven are thy credentials clear?
Is Jesus' blood thy only plea?
Is He thy great forerunner there?

(John Kent, *Young People's Hymnal* 235)

If death should visit your house this evening, where would you be? We can put these things off. We can say, 'Well, tonight I'm in good health.' But there is a day coming when we will not be able to put these things off. There is a day coming when death will catch up with us. Why? Because here we are on death row. We are all under the sentence of death. We all have sinned and come short of the glory of God, with no exceptions whatsoever. We have sinned and come short of the glory of God, and 'the wages of sin is death.' (Romans 6:23) 'The soul that sinneth, it shall die.' (Ezekiel 18:4) That death is not the escapism which the world dreams of. Many people believe in annihilation, or they believe they just pass out of this state, and that is the worst that happens to them. But the word of God declares that for those that die in their sins, the punishment is eternal death, 'the blackness of darkness for ever.' (Jude 1:13) In one sense only the Lord's people really understand even a little of what that must be like. There are moments when we have to pray with the psalmist, 'Be not silent to me: lest, if thou be silent to me, I become like them that go down into the pit.' (Psalm 28:1) Going down to the pit means dying, and especially in the sense of being separated from the comfortable presence of God. To feel the separation in our souls – that is a foretaste of hell! The day is coming to each one of us, when our destined place for eternity will become clear, and what we deserve as sinners is eternal separation from the comfortable presence of God.

But there is the gospel! The gospel makes known a way of escape for the firstborn, and a way of escape for those who find themselves on death row, that they should 'not die, but live, and declare the works of the Lord.' What is that way? It is typified by the Passover. The Passover was a pattern, a picture of the work of the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. He himself is the Passover

who is sacrificed for us. He is the Lamb. ‘Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world,’ (John 1:29) said John Baptist. The Saviour was prefigured in all the lambs which were sacrificed in the Old Testament. From the animal that was slain in Eden by the Lord to make coats of skin for Adam and Eve, through the offerings of Abel, the ram that was caught in a thicket which was offered by Abraham, to all the sacrifices of the ceremonial law – they all pointed to this Lamb, the Lamb of God, the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, ‘which taketh away the sin of the world.’

(a) A prepared lamb

Christ our Passover Lamb was prepared. He was prepared by the Father. Just like the lamb was prepared by the father on behalf of the firstborn in Egypt, so our Father, the Lord God of heaven and earth, prepared a way for his sons and daughters, his children, to be delivered from the Angel of Death.

What preparation he made! He made preparation in eternity past in the everlasting covenant, when he elected in his Son a number which no man could number. He gave them to his Son, and made his Son the surety of the covenant, who would stand in their room and place, and come and bear the punishment that was due to them.

And the Father made preparation down through the ages of the Old Testament. He proclaimed the gospel in types and shadows. He brought together his people, so that when the gospel came it would spread immediately to every nation of the world in all four corners of the earth.

Then the Father prepared a body for his Son. ‘A body hast thou prepared me,’ the Son says (Hebrews 10:5). The Father prepared the body which the Son took to himself in the incarnation. That was all part of the preparation made by the Father for the salvation of his people.

If you are one of the Lord’s people, you will rejoice to examine this preparation work of the Father. You will rejoice to trace out the preparation that the Father has made in giving his own dear Son and bringing him into this world.

Some people seem to speak disparagingly of doctrine, and some of the truths that are proclaimed in the Word of God, as though they are not necessary. But

if you were the firstborn on that night of the Passover, you would be watching over every detail. Because if *one* detail had failed, then the sacrifice would not have been acceptable – there would have been no escape for you. Everything was necessary. The Lord's people hang their all on the precious blood of Jesus Christ. Surely then we will delight to trace over the perfect provision made by the Father. The Lamb he has provided, the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, the perfections of his humanity, the perfections of his deity, the bringing together of these two natures in the incarnation so that this offering would be a perfect offering, so that his blood would be sufficient to take away all sin and to cleanse from all unrighteousness. We will delight to trace out in his life and in his person his law-keeping righteousness, and worship him for the way that righteousness has been wrought out for us.

Tis he, instead of me, is seen,
When I approach to God.

(John Newton, *Gadsby's* 119)

This evening, if your life hangs in the balance, these are the things which will be important. You will want to trace out in detail the provision that the Father has made for you. 'The Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world.' What beauties we find in it!

(b) A suitable lamb

Here is one who is *suitable* to our need. The Lamb is God himself, fully God. This gave all the value of deity to his sacrifice. What other offering could have sufficient merit to take away sins against a holy God? Yet he is also human – a real man. As a real man he was able to suffer, bleed and die – because God could not suffer, bleed and die. As a real man, he was capable of being made under the law. As a real man, he was able to stand in the place where we stood. As a real man, his obedience could be accepted in place of our disobedience to the law. You see the necessity for our Saviour to be God and man, the God-man – for our Saviour to be, 'Immanuel ... God with us.' (Matthew 1:23) We can trace out how these things came to pass. The angel came to Mary to tell her that the Holy Spirit would overshadow her, and that the thing that would be formed in her womb would be a holy thing, the Son of God incarnate. That

is where our salvation hangs – the Lamb which the Father prepared is exactly suited to our need of life, our need of salvation from death.

This Lamb was a perfect lamb – ‘without blemish.’ O how sweet it is to trace this out in the life of the Lamb Jesus. He was ‘holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners.’ (Hebrews 7:26) Only an offering like this would do. We see not only the blessed perfections of his essential person and his character. We see the blessed perfections of his life, his righteousness before the law. Of course there was no defect in the righteousness of Jesus Christ – but we want to be enabled to see it plainly by faith. We should go with the firstborn in Egypt, as he watched the preparation made, and be able to confirm, ‘This is a perfect Lamb!’

(c) The blood of the lamb

What urgency is there in your soul this evening about these things? If your life hangs on it, you know you cannot leave these things until tomorrow. You cannot treat these things as though they do not matter.

Every day this is what the Lord’s people have to rest upon – the suitability and sufficiency of the salvation that has been provided in Jesus Christ as declared in the Word of God. That is where our hope draws strength from day by day. Daily, we wrestle with the powers of hell. Daily, we walk Paul’s experience, ‘O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?’ (Romans 7:24) Daily, we must come here, with the firstborn, to view again the preparations, to again examine the Lamb who was offered for us. Daily we have to ask the Father to show us the blood on the doorposts. Daily we have to ask the Father to let us partake of our share of the flesh of the Lamb – for it was to be eaten by all within the household. ‘Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, ye have no life in you.’ (John 6:53) This is where the Lord’s people must come (or would desire to come) every day of their lives. ‘None can keep alive his own soul.’ (Psalm 22:29) A portion is necessary daily. Application of the blood of the Lamb is needed daily. Without it, it is death! But day by day the Lord opens our eyes to behold these things. Day by day he feeds us on Jesus Christ and teaches us more and more of the precious perfections of Jesus Christ. This is what we rest on for salvation and this is how we grow in grace.

As you know, one of our Articles of Faith (Number 20) is about growth in grace. It speaks so experimentally about the life of grace in the Lord's people. It says something to this effect – that growth in grace is a day by day increasing knowledge of our sinfulness and our wretchedness, and the fact that of ourselves we would only have eternal despair. But also – and this is the important bit, on the other side – a growing knowledge of the suitability, of the fullness, of the preciousness of Jesus Christ, which teaches us to live godly.

That is what it is to grow in grace. That is how growing in grace happens – through a daily felt sense of our need that drives us to Jesus Christ and conforms us to his image. A daily sense of this death that is deservedly approaching. All the while we feel we have some natural life within us, all the while we feel we have some satisfaction here below, all the while we think we have something to plead of ourselves, we will not worry about the preparation of the Passover. The firstborn could go about his business on every other day not worrying about a lamb, or blood on the doorposts. It was only once he had a sense of *tonight* – '*this night thy soul shall be required of thee*' – that he was driven to take shelter under the blood of the lamb.

This is what the Lord's people need – to be daily brought here. To be daily in the exercise of watching the preparation and taking refuge behind the blood – tracing out the perfections of the salvation that has been provided by the Father, in Jesus Christ, for sinners such as us, and making use of it as the only safe resting place.

(d) The safety provided by the lamb

You see, once the firstborn saw all the demands of God fulfilled (as we see all the demands of the law fulfilled in Jesus Christ) – the lamb provided, exactly as it had been laid out by God, killed, the blood shed, the blood placed on the lintel, exactly according to the directions of God – *then* the eldest child could have hope.

They could not hope in anything they had done. As I said, they could have no hope in their own strength, or their own ability to ward off the destroying angel. They could not go out and explain to the slaying angel, 'I'm an Israelite, I've been brought up an Israelite, I was circumcised the eighth day, according

to the righteousness of the law I'm blameless.' Those things were of none effect before the slaying angel. Neither are they of any benefit to you. Your upbringing, your righteousness, your chapel-going – all these things are of no effect whatsoever when you are on death row. Only one thing is important – to find the law of God fulfilled for you by the substitute, by the Passover lamb. Because through the Passover lamb, and that alone, the firstborn could sing, 'I shall not die, but live.' This was the hope that they went to bed on that night. This was why they could sleep well until the morning, when they had to get up and go out early and escape the hand of the Egyptians.

This is what we will be able to rest on in the solemn day when we also shall be brought out of this land of Egypt finally. The solemn day when the world will not be able to hold us – when, before God, it will have to give us up.

In that dread moment, O to hide
Beneath his sheltering blood!
'Twill Jordan's icy waves divide,
And land my soul with God.

(John Kent, *Gadsby's* 1093)

(e) Praise for the lamb

Then you see, the firstborn was called to declare the works of the Lord. Not to be silent. The children of Israel were not to be silent about the Passover. When their children asked them, 'What mean ye by these things?' they were to tell them.

When the Lord saves a sinner by grace, this solemn responsibility is laid on us, to 'declare the works of the Lord.' This is what we are saved for. The chief end of man is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever. We were created for this end, to glorify God. When we fell, this was still the whole purpose of God in redeeming a people out of the fallen mass of humankind. 'This people have I formed for myself; they shall shew forth my praise.' (Isaiah 43:21) That is why we are saved by grace. We are saved by grace so that, 'at the name of Jesus every knee should bow ... and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.' (Philippians 2:10-11) That is the

end of everything that is happening on this earth. That is the end of the work of salvation in Jesus Christ, the glory of God in eternity to come.

Why was Israel brought out of Egypt that night? To be to the praise of a delivering God, that they should declare the works of God who had saved them. In that solemn night of separation, when the blood separated between those who would live and those who would die, God brought them out of the land of Egypt, through the wilderness, and into the Promised Land. Why? So that they would declare the works of the Lord.

How poor they were at it – and how poor we are! We murmur too often instead of praising him. But what a privilege if we have got a hope of being able to praise him perfectly in the life to come. In the words of William Cowper,

But when this lisping, stammering tongue
Lies silent in the grave
Then, in a nobler, sweeter song,
I'll sing thy power to save.

(William Cowper, *Gadsby's* 160)

I have branched out a little further than I intended at this stage, in dealing with the antitype – the believer – as well as the type – the firstborn. However, this is the context of our text. The original context of these words is that this is a Passover psalm. It was a song of praise at the end of the Passover, when the blood had been shed, when they were about to lay down for the night, when the worship was finished. This was how worship finished: 'I shall not die, but live.' They could sleep on it.

II. The life of the Lamb of God

The second point I wanted to come to is Christ in this psalm. It is Christ that underlies the statement of our text this evening. Christ, the Passover Lamb.

This psalm is a Messianic psalm. We have the Lord's own confirmation of this. Jesus Christ quotes these words about himself in the three synoptic gospels, when he told the parable about the vineyard. The lord sent various servants to visit the vineyard, but the workers killed them. At last he sent his son, who they

also killed. The Lord commented at the end of the parable, ‘Have ye not read this scripture; The stone which the builders rejected is become the head of the corner: this was the Lord's doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes?’ (Mark 12:10-11) He spoke this about himself.

The apostles took this up too. Peter, preaching before the council, says, ‘Be it known unto you all, and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom ye crucified, whom God raised from the dead, even by him doth this man stand here before you whole. This is the stone which was set at nought of you builders, which is become the head of the corner. Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved.’ (Acts 4:10-12)

As this is a psalm about the work of Jesus Christ, it is a psalm about a victor. This psalm speaks of victory. The Messiah, the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, was afflicted sore. – ‘The Lord hath chastened me sore.’ What he had to go through so that he could be a Saviour of sinners! ‘But he hath not given me over unto death.’ Although he was afflicted, yet he can say, ‘I shall not die, but live.’

It was necessary that he would fulfil all the demands that were laid on him by the Father. ‘I came down from heaven, not to do mine own will, but the will of him that sent me.’ (John 6:38) What was the will of him that sent him? That he would lay down his life for his sheep. ‘I lay down my life for the sheep.’ ‘I lay down my life, that I might take it again.’ My life, ‘no man taketh it from me’ (John 10) – it was freely given. It was the Father’s will, and it was his own will too. He freely gave himself. He poured out his soul an offering unto death. ‘He is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth.’ (Isaiah 53:7) ‘When he was reviled, reviled not again.’ (1 Peter 2:23) ‘The chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed.’ (Isaiah 53:5)

This is the one who is set before us here, ‘The Lord hath chastened me sore: but he hath not given me over unto death.’ Instead, he says, ‘I shall not die but live.’ Why? Why could Jesus Christ say that? Because of the certainty of the success of the work that he was working out. His death made it certain that life would follow.

(a) A death that made life certain

It was certain that Jesus Christ would live and not die because of divine justice. God had set out the terms of the law. On the fulfilment of these terms, divine justice was met. God's justice itself could demand no more. That is why the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ was certain to live, and not die.

Jesus Christ made the payment that was demanded by the law. 'Without shedding of blood is no remission' of sins (Hebrews 9:22). He shed his blood freely on behalf of his people. And as he passed through death, he said, 'It is finished.' (John 19:30) He was announcing that his work was complete, the demands of God's justice were satisfied.

'And when Jesus had cried with a loud voice, he said, Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit: and having said thus, he gave up the ghost.' (Luke 23:46) This was an active death. I would like to emphasise that, this evening. We should never think of Jesus as a conquered person. We should never think of him as if he had been conquered by death. In fact, it was in his death that he conquered. 'I shall not die, but live,' and live because of the kind of death he died.

Hugh Martin, the Scottish theologian, has a wonderful phrase, where he says, 'Christ's death is life eternal, swallowing up death in victory – supressing my death, and living for me and in me – eternal life still.' Even as Jesus died, he lived. Death could not hold him. Yes, his body had to be laid in the grave, and there he had to enter into the furthest step of humiliation. He had to come to the place where sin brings his people, even into the grave. But there, he says, 'my flesh also shall rest in hope. For thou wilt not leave my soul in hell; neither wilt thou suffer thine holy one to see corruption.' (Psalm 16:9-10)

Even in the grave, even in death, Jesus could say, 'I shall not die, but live.' Why? Because he had met the demands of the law. The law could make no further claims on him. Everything it had demanded on behalf of his people had been paid – fully paid. 'It is finished,' he said. There is nothing left to be charged to their account. As Toplady says,

Payment God cannot twice demand,
First at my bleeding Surety's hand,
And then again at mine.

(Augustus Toplady, *Gadsby's* 227)

It was all paid. And because it was all paid, death could not hold him. The grave could not hold him. The law had no more demands on him. Therefore he had to rise from the dead. Rise from the dead he did, on the third day, 'very early in the morning the first day of the week.' (Mark 16:2)

As it says a few verses on from our text, 'The stone which the builders rejected is become the head of the corner.' The Pharisees had no need for this stone. They had no need for this precious Saviour. They rejected him. 'He came unto his own, and his own received him not.' But others realised they were on death row. Others were convinced of their sin, and brought to the place where they realised they needed a Saviour. 'He came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.' (Luke 5:32) He became the Saviour, not of the self-righteous builders, but of the sinners. 'But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God.' (John 1:12) They received him because they saw in him, proclaimed by him, the only way of salvation, the only hope for their poor soul. His precious blood was the only way to their life. And when they came to depend on him, and to lean wholly on him for salvation, 'as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God.' *They could say, and they shall say, 'I shall not die, but live.'*

(b) A life that provides life for others

Because of the death which Christ died, his people live. 'Now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the firstfruits of them that slept.' (1 Corinthians 15:20) He is the firstfruits, they will rise to life as a consequence of him dying and rising. Because of their connection with him, because he, having fulfilled the demands of the law, had to rise, so they will have to rise with him. The grave could not hold him, no further charge could be laid to him, and consequently he had to rise, he *must* rise, and rise victorious, and enter into heaven. 'Lift up your heads, O ye gates; and be ye lift up, ye everlasting doors; and the King of glory shall come in.' (Psalm 24:7) That describes the moment

when the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ entered heaven victorious – victorious over death, and victorious over ‘him that had the power of death, that is, the devil’ (Hebrew 2:14), – and his people follow along behind him in this glorious, victorious entrance into life.

Why can they say, ‘I shall not die, but live’? Because they live through his death. He has died in their place. He has died the death that was due to them. He swallowed up hell on their behalf. He suffered, in his holy human soul, the separation which sin has made – the hiding of the Father’s face. ‘My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?’ (Matthew 27:46) That was him drinking up the death that was due to his people. The effects of sin, the wages of sin, the hell that was due to us. Eternal separation from God was drunk up. The price was paid. As the Apostle John says, ‘he is the propitiation.’ He has turned wrath away, he has taken away the cause of wrath, the separation. So now there is no longer any separation, and therefore he has come and preached peace to them which were afar off, proclaiming that a way of access has been made. The Father has been reconciled to his wayward children. So union and communion is established between the sinner and his God – life giving and sustaining communion.

That is the outcome of the work of Jesus Christ. The outcome of the work of Jesus Christ is that the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, and the fellowship and the communion of the Holy Spirit, will be with you always. That is the effect in our souls of the work of Jesus Christ. We have eternal life, eternal communion with God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Here we only experience this life in a very small measure. We cannot experience it in its fullest measure, while we have the frailties of natural flesh and while we still have a body of sin and death. But when the Lord’s people are brought to heaven, to join the spirits of just men made perfect, there they enter into the fullness of that communion. No more sin, no more separation, no more source of any separation – but one with Jesus. One with Father, Son and Holy Spirit. That is life. That is what it is in our text, ‘I shall not die, but live.’ *Living* means eternal life.

In glory to come, we will still draw life from Jesus Christ – from Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Heaven is not a place where we become independent. Heaven is a

place where we enter into the fullness of dependence. We lose comfort here because we are unwilling and unable to be dependent only on him and his precious blood. But when we are brought to heaven, then we will enter into the fullness of dependence on God. ‘For the Lamb which is in the midst of the throne shall feed them, and shall lead them unto living fountains of waters: and God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes.’ (Revelation 7:17) The Lamb shall feed them – that is dependence. What glorious dependence it is!

What other life do you want this evening than life in Jesus Christ? To know what the apostle says, ‘The life which I now live, I live by the power of the Son of God,’ (Galatians 2:20) that life which is hid with Christ in God. That is the life that the Lord’s people seek. That is eternal life. It is life that can never die. It is life that can never be lost. It is life forever – life to him, in him, for him. ‘I shall not die, but live.’ And all of this comes to us through the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ went to the cross, he died. Because of his manner of dying, he lived. He rose again from the dead. As the apostle says, not only was he ‘delivered for our offences’ (delivered to the death that was due to us), but he was also ‘raised again for our justification.’ (Romans 4:25) That is the ground of the hope of the Lord’s people. Because Jesus lives, we must also live. ‘Because I live, ye shall live also.’ (John 14:9) That was what Jesus said. ‘I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly.’ (John 10:10)

This life that is referred to in our text is not just the restoration of life here. Let me just emphasise this for a moment. We should be careful not to have such a low view of what salvation is. What is provided for us in Jesus Christ is not just a restoration of what we had in Adam. Adam was peccable – he had a mutable righteousness, he could fall. But Jesus Christ is impeccable. What we are given in Jesus Christ is an immutable, irreversible, indestructible righteousness. We are given a life in which we can never die. The work of grace is summed up so beautifully in the song of Hannah. ‘He raiseth up the poor out of the dust, and liftest up the beggar from the dunghill, to set them among princes.’ (1 Samuel 2:8) He does not just take the tramp and wash him down and give him a new set of clothes. No, he puts him in a place where he can

never return to the dunghill again, where he can never dirty his garments again. He sets him among princes! Friends, that is what is accomplished by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We shall not die, but the complete opposite, we shall live an eternal life, a life which can never die.

Is that a comfort to some poor soul this evening?

Preserve the power of faith alive
In those who love thy name;
For sin and Satan daily strive
To quench the sacred flame.

Thy power and mercy first prevailed
From death to set us free;
And often since our life had failed,
Had it not been in thee.

(John Newton, *Gadsby's* 193)

This is where we can come to rest – upon a life which can never die, because it is the life of Jesus Christ, eternal life.

III. The transformation of a sinner from death to life

In the third place I would like to consider the sinner's experience of this transformation – from death to life.

When it comes to the experience of these things, we have to begin with the death in our text.

Do we know what it is to be afraid of eternal death? Do we know what it is to be a dying sinner? All the while we can live as though tomorrow is our own, as though we have no concern in the face of eternity, unafraid of God, unafraid of the searching of his righteous law – then we will have no worries about our death. We will have no concerns, no seeking after life in Christ, no hunger and thirsting after his righteousness.

You know if that's you this evening, unconcerned by the prospect of eternal misery. You know if these things are strange tales to you. You know whether

you need the gospel or not. You know whether you need a Saviour or not. That is where the separation must begin.

But as the Holy Spirit brings us to realise that we have sinned and come short of the glory of God, and to realise that, except for free and sovereign grace, hell must be our destined place, he also brings us to seek *urgently* after life. Because the alternative is death. Or as Mr John H Gosden often said in his sermons, ‘the alternative is hell.’ That is the alternative to life in Christ.

It is solemn that we can be reminded of our mortality naturally without it having any effect spiritually. The doctor can tell us that we are seriously ill and going to die. We can see an accident, or have a near-miss (as the world might call them). These things may have an effect for a time, but naturally they do not set us seeking after life. It takes grace for things like this to drive us to seek life. We can even be convinced naturally that death is not just the ceasing of our breath, but that after death we will step into hell – yet without seeking after life unless the Lord has mercy on us.

O what a mercy, what a blessing, if you can trace in your life a day when the Lord came to convince you of your sin, the fact that you had sinned against God, and that hell was your just desert. What effect did that have? Did it not drive you to seek life in Jesus Christ?

Perhaps there are some here who wonder whether they know anything of that. The law work in the Lord’s people differs. In some, the work of grace is so beautifully described as a gentle flame. ‘So gentle sometimes is the flame.’ (Joseph Hart, *Gadsby’s* 30) Sometimes the Lord’s people scarcely know whether he has begun with them or not. But do you feel your need of life? Do you feel your need of Jesus Christ, who has provided life by his death? Can you live without Jesus Christ? Or is your cry, ‘Give me Christ, or else I die’? Or can you look back to a time when it *was* so?

Solemnly, sometimes even the Lord’s people become hardened, even in the face of death. Unless the Lord keeps alive the work of grace, we are still dying sinners. The Lord will teach his people that ‘none can keep alive his own soul.’ (Psalm 22:29) The Lord bring his people to realise that unless he keeps alive

the breathing in their souls after Jesus Christ, and unless he keeps them exercised, they will be as dead as they ever were.

But what a mercy if you can trace out a time in your life when you had to seek after Jesus Christ! Think back – when you were brought to see and hear under the sound of the gospel that there is a way of escape, the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world, the Passover Lamb – friends, what effect did that have?

I must emphasise this point this evening – it is not enough just to feel our need. The firstborn must have felt their need when the news of the destroying angel came. What a terrible need they must have felt when the news came that the destroying angel was going to come, and the life of the firstborn was required! You can almost see it in your mind's eye.

But some people, when they are put in a stressful situation, simply flap around and do not do anything about the situation. They simply beat the air. There are some in our churches who do not get any further than beating the air in the face of the news that the soul that sinneth, it shall surely die. They hear the gospel. They hear it proclaimed. They hear that there is a way of escape. But they find themselves in such a fret that they do not even go out with the father to look for the lamb. They do not go out to ask the father for a portion of the flesh. They do not go out to check if the blood is on the doorposts. They just sit there fretting in the house.

What a solemn response! Because, unless we are brought to trust in the blood, we will be lost. Feeling our need is not enough. Fearing death by the destroying angel is not enough. ‘Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, ye have no life in you.’ (John 6:53) Except we are brought to find our resting place in Christ, we will die and not live. All other ground will prove sinking sand. We must put our hope in Christ. We have to come just as we are, naked, filthy and wretched, and, as Toplady puts it, cling to the cross of Christ.

Nothing in my hand I bring;
Simply to thy cross I cling.

(Gadsby's 143)

Without this, I tell you there is no hope for us. If we do not have Christ, we will die, and not live.

And remember too that even the preparation has no effect of itself. The vital thing is to have the precious blood on the doorposts. I put the question to you this evening, friends. Have you ever seen the precious blood on your own doorposts? Has the blood of the Lamb been sprinkled on your own conscience? Have you ever known what it is to enter into the place Joseph Swain writes of, and find healing for your perishing soul in the blood of Jesus?

Jesus, how heavenly is the place,
Where thy dear people wait for thee!
Where the rich fountain of thy grace
Stands ever open, full, and free.

Hungry, and poor, and lame, and blind,
Hither the blood-bought children fly;
In thy deep wounds a balsam find,
And live while they behold thee die.

(Gadsby's 738)

Unless we are brought to the point where we actually close with Christ, we have no life in us. Real religion, as my grandfather often used to say from the pulpit, *has* to come to a point. Has your religion come to a point? Have you passed from death to life? Has the death of Jesus become the life of your soul? Can you say with the psalmist, 'I shall not die, but live'? If you cannot, what will become of you if death was to visit your house this evening?

How are we brought to a point? We are brought to an end of ourselves. We are brought to plead only, 'God be merciful to me a sinner.' (Luke 18:13) We are brought to lay aside all our own righteousness, and everything else we can plead. We are brought to trust only in the free and sovereign grace of God in the precious shed blood of Jesus Christ. We are brought to realise there is no other salvation. 'Without shedding of blood is no remission.' That is where faith ventures. Faith comes pleading the precious blood of Jesus.

That precious blood is shed for sinners.

The vilest sinner out of hell,
Who lives to feel his need,
Is welcome to a throne of grace,
The Saviour's blood to plead.

(William Gadsby, *Gadsby's* 527)

That is the gospel. We are brought to the throne of grace. We have to *venture* – feeling our unworthiness, feeling death within us and all about us. We have to *look* – look to Christ, as those dying children of Israel had to look to the brazen serpent, and as many as looked, lived. We have to *plead* – plead the blood at the throne of grace. Then we will find for a truth that the Saviour's blood has power to take away all sin. Do not doubt it this evening, dear soul, do not doubt it! Come, try, plead the precious blood. This is the *only* way. 'And him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out.' (John 6:37)

'I shall not die, but live.' This is the declaration of those who have been brought to rest on that blood alone. They have ventured their all on it. They venture their all on it day by day.

Perhaps you are tried and tempted this evening by the thought that once you thought you knew something of the blood, but now are not so sure. You say,

If I love, why am I thus?
Why this dull and lifeless frame?
Hardly, sure, can they be worse
Who have never heard his name.

(John Newton, *Gadsby's* 283)

Surely if I had known anything of this blood, if I had known anything of this life, surely I would not be so dead? Surely I would not be sinning still, I would be living righteously, I would be living to the honour and the glory of God? Instead all I find inside me is blackness and despair.

But, friends, where does this thought bring you? Does it not lead you to confess your deadness? 'O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?' And where did that confession bring Paul? It brought him

back to the precious blood of Jesus. Under that blood, ‘there is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus.’ ‘Who shall lay any thing to the charge of God’s elect? It is God that justifieth.’ ‘It is Christ that died.’ (Romans 8) That is how Paul lived. That is where the Lord’s people have to ground their faith day by day.

We have nothing in ourselves which allows us to expect life in the face of death. If you are looking into yourself this evening for some hope of life in you, and you are hoping that after years of profession you will have brought forth something that would give you some encouragement as you confront death – I tell you, friends, you will never find it. The Lord’s people have to come back day after day to realise that their reasons for hope and confidence are simply and solely because Jesus has died for me. We have to come to Jesus’ blood and righteousness. In the hour and article of death, only Jesus’ blood and righteousness will suffice. Then alone we can look the monster in the face and say, ‘I shall not die, but live.’

IV. Declaring the life-giving works of the Lord

Finally, where the Lord works, where the Lord moves the heart, where the Lord gives life, there must be a practical outworking. ‘I shall not die, but live, *and declare the works of the Lord.*’

The apostle James tells us very plainly that ‘faith without works is dead.’ (James 2:26) If you tell me this evening that you have faith in Jesus Christ, and yet it is not seen in your life and witness, then your faith must be dead. ‘By their fruits ye shall know them.’ (Matthew 7:20)

I ask you this evening in the words of William Gadsby, Can sinners, saved by grace, remain silent? (*Gadsby’s* 703) Plenty people in the professing world today can seemingly speak of wonderful things they have experienced and mighty things they have done for the Lord. You may feel that you only have broken sentences and much spiritual poverty. But friends, can you say, ‘I shall not die, but live,’ simply because ‘Jesus has died for me’? That is what it is to declare the works of the Lord. This declaring can be done, not in the words of ready talkers, but in the lisping of a sinner saved by grace who confesses, ‘I am nothing in myself, but Jesus Christ is all in all.’

Can you speak of the difference that the work of Jesus Christ has made in your life, to the glory of God?

Then will I tell to sinners round,
What a dear Saviour I have found;
I'll point to thy redeeming blood,
And say, "Behold the way to God."

(John Cennick, *Gadsby's* 144)

I will give you one example. There was a woman who applied to the kirk session in a church in Scotland to partake of the Lord's Supper. As she sat before the elders, they waited for her profession of faith – but she said nothing. At last, when they were about to turn her away, one of the old elders said to her, 'Woman, are you a sinner?' She said, 'Yes.' He then said, 'Were you a sinner?' She said, 'Yes.' He said, 'What is the difference?' She said, 'Once I was a sinner – and I *loved* sin. Now I am a sinner – and I *hate* sin.' That showed that she had experienced the transformation from death to life. That showed that these words were right for her, 'I shall not die, but live.' And now she was declaring in simple words the life-giving, salvation-giving works of the Lord.

Once you were a dying sinner loving sin and loving death. But now the precious blood has been applied to the doorposts and lintels of your soul. You have been brought from death to life. Now you have to live the life that you live by the power of Jesus Christ – you live to him and you live in him. Therefore, although you are still a sinner, you have a hatred of sin. You are wrestling against sin. That is a testimony. That is a testimony that you shall not die, but live. Can you come in there and declare the works of the Lord? The Lord has made me hate sin! What a mighty work that is!

Maybe you feel this evening that you have nothing to declare. Everything spiritual in your soul seems so low and small. But the work of grace is a mighty work and worthy to be praised. There is nothing diminutive about it! Someone who loved sin has been brought to hate sin – that is a mighty work! A rebel has been made a child – that is a mighty work! A lion has been made a lamb – that is a mighty work! An outcast, one who was hateful and hated, an enemy from

God, has now been made a son or daughter of God, and put among the children. That is a miracle of grace! The hymn writer says:

Love I much? I've much forgiven;
I'm a miracle of grace.

(Richard Burnham, *Gadsby's* 158)

And when we are brought to realise the fullness of what is before us this evening, 'I shall not die, but live' – what we deserve by nature, and what has been given us by grace – in place of death, we have been given life – can we remain silent?

This evening is a thanksgiving service. We have many things to thank the Lord for in life, and the harvest is not least among those blessings. But this is the one thing needful. This is the one thing important, the blessing of being brought from death to life. Can you sing this evening to the praise of this fact, 'I shall not die, but live, through him who loved me, and has given himself for me'? That is the highest note of praise. It is praise to Jesus Christ. It is praise to Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and the trinitarian salvation bestowed on sinners. It is praise to a God who loved his people before the world began. A God who has loved them and has manifested his love to them. 'Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God!' (1 John 3:1) That we should be brought from death to life! That he will love us to the end, and at last bring us into the fullness of life. He will bring us to the moment when we will pass from grace to glory, when death is swallowed up in victory.

Death of death and hell's destruction,
Land me safe on Canaan's side
Songs of praises,
I will ever give to thee.

(William Williams, *Gadsby's* 462)

What a moment that will be! We mourn on this earth how poorly we show forth the praise of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. We sorrow over what poor disciples we are – secret disciples so often, ashamed of Jesus so often.

But in the moment when we pass from time to eternity we will begin to give him the praise that is due to his holy name. What a moment it will be –

When heaven's resounding mansions ring
With shouts of sovereign grace.

(Countess of Huntingdon, *Gadsby's* 938)

Can you come into our text this evening? Are you in our text? Have you got some hope, as you leave the Lord's house this evening, that there might be room for you in our text, through the precious blood of Jesus? If the gospel has given you some hope this evening, do not let it go! Go home and plead the precious blood of Jesus. Ask the Father to show it to you on the doorposts, so that tonight you would be enabled to say, with the firstborn, with an unfaltering tongue in praise to a redeeming God, 'I shall not die, but live, and declare the works of the Lord.'

May the Lord bless his Word.

Amen.