Matthew - Commentaries by Thomas Leslie Mather

Father Give Me: Meditations on Luke, Matthew 26:24

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IS LIFE WORTH LIVING?

A Sermon on Eternal Punishment, by Bishop W. R. Nicholson Text

"It had been good for that man if he had not been born."—Matt. 26:24

That man! A fearful distinction. That man! Our eyes are riveted on him. It had been good for him if he had not been born. And we know who said it. He who spake as never man spake.

That man died nineteen hundred years ago. Where is he, then? Is he in heaven? What? In heaven, and his life there a curse to him? In heaven, and so wretched that it had been good for him that he had never lived? In heaven? The question is its own answer. Awfully certain it is that there is at least one man, who, having died, is not in heaven, is not blessed, had better not have been born. And that man? Judas.

Now, what has been, may be again. What has befallen one man, may befall another man. If Judas is not in heaven, then many another dead one may not be there. Nay, is not there; for so the Scriptures declare.

But a prodigious thing it is to have a person pointed out to us, by the finger of God, as one for whom never to have existed had been a blessing. It is something awful in the extreme, that the concealing veil of the great future is shoved aside for a brief instant, to enable us to follow with the eye the lurid destiny of a particular man, who is even named to us; that our attention, instead of listening to merely general statements of the future wretchedness of the wicked, is gazing at an actual instance, is trembling with a secret of the invisible world, is crying out, This is the man, this is he. Such a disclosure is that of our text. "The son of man goeth," said Jesus, "As it is written of Him; but woe unto that man by whom the Son of man is betrayed! It had been good for that man if he had not been born." So is opened to us a window of the world beyond.

There can be but one meaning of these words. If, in any case, non-existence is better for a person than existence, it can only be because of the wretchedness of that existence. If, in any case, non-existence is better than existence, it can only be that there is to that person neither annihilation nor want of consciousness; but only continued existence in wretchedness felt. For, since a wicked man has some enjoyment, although it be but in the pleasures of sin for a season, how, therefore, can it be true that it were better for that man— that is, so far as he himself is concerned— never to have lived, and enjoyed himself, simply for the reason that he is now to be either annihilated, or bereft of feeling? Enjoyment he has had; and that fact remains, even though he now cease to exist, or cease to be conscious; so that it cannot be true that not to have lived at all had been a good thing for that man. On the supposition of annihilation of the wicked, or even of their sinking into utter insensibility, our text is an absurdity. If, in any case, nonexistence is better than existence, it can only be because of continued consciousness of misery. And this is confirmed and demonstrated by what Jesus says in connection with the text— "Woe unto that man. It had been good for that man if he had not been born." By its being good for a man that he had not been born, a woe is meant. But what woe to a man can there be, if the man does not exist or is not conscious? Or, is it that the being annihilated is itself the woe? Not so; for that would make the words mean, Woe to that man, for he shall be annihilated. Whereas what the words do say is, Woe to that man, forasmuch as he was ever born; which implies that, having once had existence, his existence is a continued consciousness, and therefore the woe is in that consciousness.

Again, if, in any case, non-existence is better than existence, it can only be that that continued consciousness of woe is endless. For if there come an end of whatever woe, and then there be an eternity of blessedness and joy, it would not be true that it had been good for that man if he had not been born.

Such is the meaning of these words of Jesus: He does not Himself analyze and reason them out, but leaves them in their brevity and simplicity to our own thoughts. And the power of their appeal to us is peculiar. When you hear it said that the whole is greater than any one of its parts, your perception of the truth of it is as quick as the lightning's flash; and it is almost with the power of that intuition you hear Jesus say of a certain man, "It had been good for that man if he had not been born." What it is meant to express, what its piercing truth, what its solemnity and awfulness, you need no argument to show you. Men may seek to mystify it, may throw over it their doubts and prejudices and sophisms; all which are as flimsy as gauze. In spite of the jargon of objections to the truth of future punishment, of which the natural heart is so prolific, amid the din and roar of false reasonings, these words of Jesus are ringing in our ears, are shining in our eyes. Their sound will not be hushed, the light that is in them will not be put out.

Was Jesus cruel in that He spoke these words? He, who was just now passing into the dread eclipse of Gethsemane, who bare our sins in His own body, and suffered the punishment, that we might not suffer it; who sweat blood in the anticipation of it; whose agony on Calvary for our redemption was the concentrated essence of His own love and the Father's love and the Spirit's love; who said to all the weary and heavy-laden, "Come unto Me, and I will give you rest"; who said to the broken-hearted woman who was a sinner: "Thy sins are forgiven"— HE cruel? Oh, such words as these He said of Judas because He must. Infinite love had done its best. There remained but the office of justice.

Am I cruel, who seek to prolong the voice of Jesus, and to echo the alarm, that men may be aroused from their fatal fond security? The city of Sodom was doomed. "Escape for thy life; look not behind thee," said the angel to Lot; and he laid hold upon him, and brought him forth, and set him without the city. Was the angel cruel to Lot?

But now what was the occasion of Jesus' speaking these words? What did Judas do? He betrayed the Savior of mankind. He sold Him for money, and delivered Him into the clutches of murderers. He flung from him the Savior's boundless grace, and shut his heart, as with lock and bars, against the Spirit's gracious work. This is what he did.

Now, of course, we cannot do the same form of sin that Judas did; for the Lord Jesus is not now with us in body. But we can commit the essence of that sin. Analyzing the character of Judas, we find him to have been selfish, covetous, greedy. And these elements of character— do they not, in varying degrees, abound in the men of this generation? And, if un-repented of, will not these sinful feelings, as surely as night follows day, rush headlong into ultimate full and final rejection of the Savior? The Holy Spirit will cease to strive, the hardened heart will have bartered Jesus for money, or worldly pleasure, or the prizes of ambition, or the Lucifer-like satisfaction of pride, and here and there yonder, another Judas, and another and another, of each of whom Jesus will repeat, It had been good for that man if he had not been born. Such are the responsibilities of life.

And now, in conclusion, a question starts to the lips. Is life worth living? The weary heart, the ages all along, has been asking it. Today thousands of voices are repeating it. Meanwhile, many are making the vainest efforts to answer it by the taking of their own lives. Is life worth living? No! Yes!

No. To Judas, life was not worth living. "It had been good for that man if he had not been born." He rejected Christ. That is the explanation. Thus locking himself out from all blessed influences of the gracious Spirit of God, for the Holy Spirit teaches and sanctifies only with Christ for His subject-matter— he opened his soul to the ravages of hell. And Judas took his own life; thereby, however, only transferring his existence from this world to that of the dread unseen. His answer to the question was, No. His own conscience undersigned the decision of Jesus, It had been good for him if he had not been born. Now, in the case of any loser of Christ, can the answer be different? To every final unbeliever, no matter what his pleasures and his splendors at present may be, no, life is not worth living.

Yes. To John, and James, and Peter, and Matthew, and others of the eleven, life was worth living. When Jesus said of Judas, "That man," He distinguished him from the rest, and therefore of them He said in effect, Good for them that they had been born. They had received Christ, were hearty believers in Him, were washed from their sins in His atoning Blood, were at peace with God, were born again, were children of God, and heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ Himself. All this— does it not make life worth living? The believer in Christ has a new life; a life the same as Christ's, a principle of vitality God-born, pure, incorruptible, divinely joyous; a new life that shall never end, going on with uninterrupted flow through the act of death, and thenceforth, forever and forever, in closest union with the Everlasting, Adorable, Almighty, All-loving God-man. Is not this worth living for?

This earthly life, indeed, is burdened with troubles; but even here the Christian's new life is as a thousand rainbows spanning the storm. Nay, crowd my life with ever so many more troubles, fill it to the brim with aches, and pains, and pangs, and sorrows, and toil, and disabilities, make me to be a Job, aye, a hundred Jobs in one, even then to bear and to smile, to suffer and to sing, to work and wait and hope, might be to me heaven begun on earth. Worth living? Oh, yes! Blotted out of existence would I be, if I could? No, never, for I have the Lord Jesus Christ.

And now which is it? Your life— is it worth living, or is it not? Are you washed in the blood that cleanseth, or are you not? If not, then, by God's grace, make your life worth living; for so easy of access is the Blood of Jesus. He that believeth— he it is that is saved. And remember that, once having been born, you exist, and your existence you cannot get rid of. You may kill yourself, still you exist. And is it not better that you should now make your life worth living by trusting in the Lord Jesus Christ than that eternity should echo to the fact of your unceasing existence, and re-echo and echo again, that appalling note of wretchedness, "It had been good for that man if he had not been born"?

O Thou loving Savior, whose mercy is higher than the heavens and is deeper than hell, but who art as just as merciful,

Amen, and Amen!

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