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## THE RIVER OF DEATH

BUNYAN portrays death as a deep river with no bridge. Our forebears called death the “honest hour.” Sooner or later we all must deal with the solemn reality and awful importance of the eternal state, and while there is no room for a Christian’s morbid preoccupation in these things, making actual preparation in these things, making actual preparation for one’s departure is not a bad idea.

It is said of the seventeenth century Puritan hope that death was something for which to prepare during life, as morose as this may sound to the modern mind. The preparation frequently culminated in what they called “death-bed exercises.” There was such a desire within the Puritan heart to die as one lived that the process of passing from this life into the next required, wherever and whenever possible, a testimonial to the reality of the glory into which one would soon pass. Ideally, this would be done in the presence of family or friends. The “exercises” of some notables, including Richard Baxter, Edward Payson and Andrew Fuller, have been recorded for us. Each experience was different. Some showed great strength in passing because they saw, as it were, the glory to come from this side of the river of death. Others took longer to pass through, manifesting weakness and agitation of spirit. Some bore in their bodies acute disease and suffering into this final conflict.

In Christian and Hopeful, Bunyan gives us two death experiences. As they begin to cross the River of Death, it is Christian

who cries out in fear of being swallowed up by the waves and begins to despair of ever seeing the City. The Tempter, it seems, would even harass the dying Christian with transgressions both past and present and flood the soul with despair. It is possible that faith, hope and love can become weakened in the midst of final onslaughts on our souls. Hopeful, on the other hand, responds, “Be of good cheer, my brother. I feel the bottom, and it is good.” Here was one who was given complete victory over his fears, and the king of terrors held no power over his mind as he passed through the same waters as Christian.

Both pilgrims experienced the crossing in different ways, yet both made it across to the Celestial City. Archibald Alexander of Princeton Seminary was a student of religious experience and he writes,

The difference between the comforts of dying saints may be attributed first to divine sovereignty, which distributes grace and consolation as it seemeth good to him; secondly to bodily temperament, some persons being more fearful than others, and more prone to suspect their own sincerity; and thirdly to the nature of the disease by which the body is brought down to the grave. (*Thoughts on Religious Experience*, p.130)

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