

THE FAVORITE TEXT OF FAMOUS PEOPLE - General Douglas Mac Arthur

“Life For Today - Hope For Tomorrow”

Dr. John Allan Lavender

Jn.11:25a

Many years ago the armies of France and England were engaged in mortal conflict. Napoleon and Wellington were struggling for survival. For a time it was uncertain as to how the tide of battle would turn and the people at home were anxious for some word.

It was long before radio or telegraph. News had to be taken by runner from the battlefield to the shore where a sailing vessel brought it across the channel to the coast of England. From there it was signaled overland to London by means of semaphore.

When the result of the historic battle was finally known, and the news had come across the channel to England, it was picked up a short distance away and signaled on to the next station until it came to London.

Atop Westminster Abby the semaphore began to laboriously spell out the message --

“W-e-l-l-i-n-g-t-o-n D-e-f-e-a-t-e-d.”

Before further word could come, a dense fog settled down on old London-town, and with it came heartache and sadness. Then, as suddenly as it had come, the fog lifted and the semaphore began spelling out the rest of the message --

“W-e-l-l-i-n-g-t-o-n D-e-f-e-a-t-e-d T-h-e E-n-e-m-y.”

With those words, sadness gave way to gladness and sorrow gave way to joy.

In a similar way, some nineteen hundred years ago, a battle of unparalleled importance was waged on a lonely, barren hill outside the walls of old Jerusalem. To those who watched the conflict, it seemed as if the man who hung upon the cross had lost the day. His brutal death and subsequent burial in a borrowed tomb were stark bits of tragic evidence that this was the end of Jesus. As the

cold, dank fog of dark despair settled upon their souls, the tear-dimmed eyes of the disciples only saw the words:

“C-h-r-i-s-t D-e-f-e-a-t-e-d.”

But thanks be to God, their grey, psychic fog soon lifted. Those who strolled sadly into the garden that first Easter morn were to leave rejoicing.

The bad news --

“C-h-r-i-s-t D-e-f-e-a-t-e-d,”

was changed into the glad news --

“C-h-r-i-s-t D-e-f-e-a-t-e-d D-e-a-t-h.”

Some of you may recall that story because I shared it with you last Easter. However, I’ve begun on this note today, and because this Christian adaptation of a fairly familiar episode out of the life of two great generals, is closely tied to the favorite text of a third famed military figure, General Douglas A. Mac Arthur. In a letter dated August 7, 1960, this great American wrote --

“Dear Dr. Lavender:

I have received your letter of August 3, asking that I indicate a passage in the Bible which has been most helpful to me. It would be difficult, indeed, for me to select a single verse as the most inspirational from the myriad passages in the greatest of books which are so immutable and everlasting. But perhaps one example can be given, arising from a most serious illness which recently assailed me. I was given but thirty-six hours of life.

I remembered the gospel of St. John where it says a certain man named Lazarus of Bethany, the town of Mary, was desperately sick even unto death. When Jesus was told, he said this sickness was not unto death, and he called upon Lazarus to come forth. And Lazarus arose from the dead. And Jesus said, ‘I am the resurrection and the life; he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live.’ And so I came through.

With every good wish to you and your congregation.

Most Sincerely,

Douglas MacArthur”

This timely restoration to life on earth suggests the glorious resurrection to life in heaven provided by our Lord, to those who trust in him.

The desire for immortality has always been a part of humanity’s higher hunger. This longing for life after death has been expressed in imperishable words by the poets. In entrancing revelations by the prophets. In noble and profound ideas by the sagas of the ages.

Many centuries before Jesus, such great minds as Socrates, Plato and Aristotle guessed at the immortality of the soul. They reasoned, and rightly so, that man’s brief tenure upon this spinning cosmic ball could not be the sum total of his existence. They were convinced that out there beyond this life’s horizon there was more.

As Robert J. McCracken suggests,

“They simply could not persuade themselves by any kind of logic
or argument, that man’s ultimate destiny was a rendezvous with dust.”

Having witnessed the gallant nature of the human spirit as it struggled upward against disease and despair, difficulty and defeat, they could not believe it could be destroyed by a mere mechanical defect in the complicated piece of fleshy plumbing in which it was housed.

They clung tenaciously to a belief in the immortality of the soul. But, never once did they ever dare to dream the body could rise up and follow it. To them, immortality meant a sharp and sudden rending of the soul *from* the body. They saw it as a form of existence in which the spirit, being freed by death from its earthly prison-house, continued on throughout eternity in a disembodied state.

But thanks be to God, the resurrection of Jesus Christ put the sickle to that misconception. It gave people the hope of something grander than a mere, “shadowy continuance in a spirit-world.” It revealed the possibility of a vital new relationship with God in which *both* body and soul

participate, as they are united in a new and glorified personality prepared and equipped to dwell in that blessed place which our Jesus called, “my Father’s house.”

Resurrection, then, is a distinctly Christian answer to humanity’s higher hunger. It is a satisfying extension of that vague, impersonal sub-Christian concept of mere continuance after death. Sometime. Somewhere.

In this text, which General MacArthur has numbered among his favorites, Jesus makes an astounding claim.

“I am the resurrection and the life, he that believeth in me though he be *dead*, yet shall he *live*.” That’s incredible!

To the mind of man, death has always been the epitome of evil. It has always stood for the darkest and the worst. But by virtue of his resurrection, Jesus Christ turned death from an ominous Omega, into a glorious Alpha. He made it a passageway, instead of a terminus. An event, instead of a state. A transition, instead of a condition. A bright beginning, instead of a dark and tragic end.

There was a time when men thought of life as “a narrow neck of land, betwixt two unbound seas.” Now we know this isthmus is not life, but death, and the person who has committed himself or herself to Jesus Christ, is poised upon this tiny plot for an instant, as it passes from the inland lake of this planet, to the shoreless ocean of life in our Father’s house.

In that characteristic beauty with which Alexander McClaren always spoke, in his masterful message, The Living Dead, McClaren said,

“The grave has a door on its inner side. We roll the stone to its mouth and come away thinking we have left them there until the resurrection. But when the outer access to earth is fast closed, the inner portal which opens on heaven is set wide, and God says to his child, ‘Come, enter into the joy of the Lord.’ Death is a superficial thing, and a transitory

thing. A darkness that is caused by the light, and a darkness that ends in the light. A trifle, if you measure it by duration. A trifle, if you measure it by depth.”

King David caught a momentary glimpse of the true significance of this passing thing when, in that beloved shepherd’s Psalm, he referred to death as a “walk *through* the valley of the shadow.” He knew, from having spent many nights on the lonely mountainside, that a shadow can frighten you, but it cannot hurt you. He also knew from long exposure to the burning desert sun, that where a shadow falls there must be light above to cast it. I am that light, said Jesus, and when the shadow falls, *look up*, for, “I am the resurrection and the life, he that believeth in me though he be *dead*, yet shall he *live*.”

The *fact* of death remains, but its character is changed forever. It is now but a phantom thing without solidarity. An instantaneous step across “the bridge of sighs.” A misty, murky veil which, when drawn aside, reveals that sinless, fadeless, tireless, painless, deathless, better part of life for which these threescore and ten years are but a preparation.

Many have asked, “What will it be like on the other side?” When one contemplates the answer, he hardly knows how to begin, or where to end, for “the half has not (or *cannot*) be told.” But, for the moment, let me say just this, that life which comes after death is not less real, but truly real. Not less vital, but truly vital. Not less beautiful, but truly beautiful. Not less meaningful, but truly meaningful. In the picturesque speech of Tagore,

“Death is not snuffing out the last flicker of light. It is putting out the candle, because the dawn has come.”

There is a sense in which the life we have here is lived “under wraps.” Our spirits are surrounded by a kind of mortal crust which limits us in terms of time and space and being. But, when through death, we make the transition from darkness to light and are “absent from the body,” when we “out-soar the shadow of our night and awaken from the dream of life,” we shall be free from all that limits flesh as, “corruption puts on incorruption and mortality puts on immortality” (author’s

paraphrase).

What will our resurrection body be like? It will be like the glorified body of Jesus, who when he arose, saw, heard, touched, tasted and shared in all the experiences common to people, but with new freedom. He was not a bodiless spirit, but lived, and moved, and had his being, in a truly glorified sense. And when, in Paul's matchless phrase “we shall be *like* him,” and shall possess a spirit-body like that which he now enjoys, his liberty shall be our liberty. His glory shall be our glory. His life shall be our life. His joy shall be our joy.

Perhaps this blessed future will be a bit more in focus if, for a moment, you turn your attention to the past. There was a time when you lived in a world of water, within your mother's womb. As a tiny embryo you possessed a life and personality which were distinctly your own. When through birth you moved into the atmosphere of air, you possessed the same life and same personality which had been yours in the earlier element of water. The difference being, that in the wider world of air, you had greater liberty and capacity than you had had in the previous world of water.

In a similar sense, that same extension of liberty and capacity will take place when, through death, you are *born* into the state of the spirit. Your personality will be the same as it was in the atmosphere of air, and the still earlier world of water, except then, instead of being temporary and transient, it will, by the grace of God, be permanent and everlasting.

Don't think of your future “spirit-body” as being less real than the mortal flesh you now enjoy. Solidarity and reality are not the same. Lead is not more real than air. Sod is not more real than sound. The fact that your glorified “spirit-body” will be liberated from the liabilities of flesh, does not mean it will be less real. If anything, it will be truly real, because it will be like the very glory of God himself.

A little lad who had just turned six was suddenly stricken with a fatal disease. When the doctor arrived, the first thing the youngster asked was,

“Can you make me well by Sunday?”

The doctor asked, “Why?”

The lad responded,

“Yesterday my Sunday school teacher showed us the tabernacle.

We saw everything on the outside, but there was a curtain across the inside. My teacher said the priest went behind the curtain to speak to God. Next Sunday she’s going to show us what’s on the other side.

I want to be there, because I want to see the place where God is!”

A tear rose in the doctor’s eye and meandered down his cheek. He brushed it away, and laying a loving hand on the little boy’s brow he said softly,

“Son, I promise that by next Sunday you’ll see the other side!”

And he was right! Within a few short hours the lad’s bed was empty. His spirit had pulled aside the veil and he entered into that “house not made with hands, eternal in the heaven,” where God is.

The Necessity of Believing in Jesus

Lest I give rise to false hope and unfounded optimism, let me point out this wonderful promise has a contingency. Belief in Jesus. “I am the resurrection, *he that believeth in me*, though he be dead, yet shall he live.”

The basis of our future hope is not in any fine, but futile, effort of our own. It lies in our acceptance of God’s blessed son as Lord and Savior. Jesus made it clear that every man’s feet are on one of two paths.

The first leads to separation from God and eternal death far more tragic than we are even permitted to imagine this side of eternity. The second leads to life with Him, forever unfolding and growing in its abundant richness. Every man must choose which path he will follow. With all his being, God wants you to choose the right path. He wants you to live with him now, and

forever. So do I. As I bring my comments to a close, I plead with you,

“Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved.”

A few months ago Helen Frazee-Bower, a Christian poet from Kentucky went to be with the Lord. Over the years Mrs. Frazee-Bower has given us a number of hymns and poems. I’ve quoted several of them, but none can surpass the one she wrote a few days before she died, called This Is Death.

This is not death, but triumph and reward:

To walk by faith through all life’s little day

And then, at eventide, to meet the Lord

And hand in hand with him to go away.

This is not death—this is abundant life,

Eternal life, the freeing of the soul

For bliss beyond earth’s time of toil and strife.

This is not death, but the immortal goal.

But this *is* death: In trespasses and sin

All through life’s journey carelessly to roam.

To find the door—and never enter in.

To see the truth—and never take it home.

Unmindful of the Christ, to draw each breath

As though this world were final.

This is death.