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"THE LIFE ETERNAL"

A Radio Address by DR. RALPH W. SOCKMAN

Since this is Easter in war time, perhaps it is fitting that the keynote of our message should be a command. It is this: "Fight the good fight of faith; lay hold on eternal life." That was an order given by a veteran officer of Christ's army to a young recruit.

The first feature of this command which stirs my faith is that it was backed by experience. At Easter time it is the voice of experience which I want to hear. When a person talks to me about how to meet death, I wish to know first whether he has ever had encounter with the Grim Reaper. The man who said "Fight the good fight of faith; lay hold on eternal life" was Saint Paul. And by the time he gave this command to Timothy he had looked life in the heart and had looked death in the face. He had been through peril on land and sea. He had been through the kind of campaign to which he was calling young Timothy. Looking back on his own life he could say, "I have fought the good fight. I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of life." Paul knew the road by which he had fought his way to his faith in eternal life as well as General Bernard Montgomery knows the roads by which he has fought his way across North Africa to the gates of Tunis.

Let us review for a moment the course by which Paul had come to his confidence in the life eternal. He had been born Saul of Tarsus, and had belonged to the Pharisee sect. As a devout Pharisee, he had shared the belief in a life beyond the grave, - a belief, be it remembered, which has been held among all peoples in all ages. But despite his traditional belief in immortality, he did not credit the current reports about the resurrection of one Jesus of Nazareth. In fact the stories of Jesus angered Saul beyond measure. To him the followers of the Nazarene were fanatics and he set out to exterminate this pestilential new sect. He was present on the day when one of the Christians named Stephen was stoned. Then as the stones fell on Stephen, the dying man looked up with beatific face and cried, "I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing on the right hand of God." That radiant face of the dying Stephen haunted Saul of Tarsus. What had Stephen really seen? What was it that made these suffering Christians believe their Lord was alive? What was the secret of the power which the crucified Jesus still exerted over his followers? These were the questions which kept pricking Saul's mind.

Then one day on the Damascus road he ceased to kick against the pricks of these questions. He surrendered his rebellious will. He went off alone for months to think it through. Then he came to Jerusalem and met the disciples who had been present on Easter morning. He heard their stories

of the Easter event. And Saul, the persecutor of the Christian sect, became Paul the powerful preacher of the risen Christ. The events which had transformed the disciples from defeated refugees into triumphant confident heralds of the resurrected Christ convinced Paul also. And he went forth to the Gentile world shouting, "O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? * * Thanks be to God which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."

Such was the experience through which Paul came to his conviction of immortality. When I behold him, I see his face weatherbeaten with the storms of life's roughest weather. Yet he came through to a calm clear faith in the future life. And that helps me beyond words.

Let us hear again Paul's command, "Fight the good fight of faith; lay hold on eternal life," because it strengthens my belief that there is an honesty in this universe which will keep faith with a faith like Paul's. At this very moment millions of our fellow-citizens are fighting for our country. They are sustained in their struggle by the faith that they are safeguarding the freedom and security of their own land and of their brothers beyond the sea. What would we think of our government if having led our lads into the deserts of Africa, it were to mock them with a mirage, if after the war it were to say to the returning soldiers, "Sorry, my boys, but your faith in freedom was only to spur you on. It's all over now." Why, a government which played false to the soldiers who had kept faith with it would be beneath contempt. Can the administration of this universe be less honorable than the government we demand for our nation? If so, then whence come these ideals of honesty and fidelity in governments?

I believe that there is an integrity at the heart of this universe which implants in our hearts the ideal of honesty. I believe that the Creator who keeps faith with his lowly creatures like the birds also keeps faith with his highest creatures like Paul. I believe what William Cullen Bryant wrote to the waterfowl:

"He who, from zone to zone,
Guides through the boundless sky thy certain flight
In the long way that I must tread alone
Will lead my steps aright."

Certainly the God who is honest enough to keep faith with the migrating instinct of the birds will not lead a noble soul like Paul to life's end with the hope of immortality and then dash that dream against the rock of extinction. And, remember, Paul is only one of the vast innumerable host out of every tongue and nation who have come to life's end still looking ahead. And it is those who have achieved most in this world who most crave the chance to do greater things beyond. However they may differ in character from the Divine Man of Nazareth, they are one with him in wanting to go on working in the other rooms in Our Father's house of many mansions. I believe that the Creator is honest enough to keep faith with the greatest souls which he has begotten.

Let us hear a third time of Paul's command, "Fight the good fight of faith; lay hold on eternal life," because it strengthens my belief that there is a love at the heart of this universe which will keep faith with love like Paul's. Saint Paul knew love at its noblest and best. He had confidently declared: "Love beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things. Love never faileth." Whence comes love like that of Paul's? We commonly say that water cannot rise higher than its source. Therefore, there must be love in the heart of the Creator as great as that of Paul's.

Also we are seeing love rise to pretty high levels in these our times. We are seeing men die to-day for love of country. "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends." How do you explain the heroic sacrifice of our soldier boys, the vicarious love of mothers who suffer for their children, the willingness of martyrs to give their lives for a cause or of missionaries to die in disease-ridden regions of China or India? I say, how do you explain such love on the part of men if the universe itself be heartless? Well, I can only explain these outpourings of human love by believing that they are drawn from springs in the divine heart. When I see how soldiers sacrifice, how mothers serve, how Jesus went to his cross, I cannot believe that the Creator who begets such love lures it on to life's end only to drown it in a sea of nothingness. If that be the end of all our loving, then God is less than a father and Jesus the most cruelly deceived man that ever lived. But I believe that the All-Powerful is the All-Loving too. I believe that "God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life."

Let us hear again Paul's command, "Fight the good fight of faith; lay hold on eternal life," because Paul helps me to believe in a life beyond the body. So many are troubled about the hereafter because they cannot conceive life going on while the body remains in the grave. But Paul is so realistic, and yet so reassuring, about the relation of the body to eternal life. He admits flatly that "flesh and blood cannot inherit the Kingdom of God." But he explains the resurrection of the dead by saying, "It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body." To Paul, the body is but the soul's dwelling place here. And "when the earthly house of this tabernacle be dissolved, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens."

As I ponder Paul's discussion of the body, it deepens my realization that personality does go on despite bodily changes. We are told that a human body undergoes a complete renovation every seven years. If that be true, then I myself have used up and thrown away some seven bodies during my life-time. Yet through all these changes my personal identity continues. Somewhere in each of us is an organizing center of life, called the soul or spirit, which keeps our individuality intact while replacing the worn parts of the physical structure. Thus these bodies of ours are but the changing instruments of a continuing spirit. In the light of this fact does it not seem possible, even logical, that personality can survive the extreme bodily changes of the

grave? As Sir Oliver Lodge once put it, smashing an organ is not equivalent to killing the organist. The soul of man can go on expressing itself through some instrument other than the earthly body.

A few weeks ago a radio listener sent me a choice document, written by the late Edward Madison Cameron who passed away last October at the age of seventy-eight. Some time before his death, Mr. Cameron in whimsical but delightful fashion delivered a little lecture to his aging body from which he was soon to part. Listen to these words addressed to his body: "Now you are growing old. Your hearing and strength are failing. Your resistance to cold is diminishing. You cannot climb or run as you once could. * * In a word you are running down. In a short time, perhaps a year or five or ten years, you will cease to breathe and your heart will stop beating. * * *

"When you can go no further I shall leave you and be free. * * When we separate I shall continue to exist. * * A power greater than you and I started us on our journey. Your journey is approaching its end and you are aware of it. My journey has scarcely begun and I know it because I have never been more alive. Our separation is therefore not one of sadness but of joy. You are weary and want to stop. I am longing to alight from this slowing vehicle and to go on without you."

When a person can thus view his body, he reveals the spirit that was in Paul and in Christ. "Life is more than meat." "Earth to earth, and dust to dust" was not spoken of the soul. Emerson was right when he wrote after the death of his son:

"What is excellent,
As God lives, is permanent.
Hearts are dust, heart's loves remain.
Hearts love will meet thee again."

This is the faith we assert when we stand at the grave of a loved one and say: "Forasmuch as the spirit of the departed has entered into the life immortal, we therefore commit his body to its resting place, but his spirit we commend to God, remembering how Jesus said upon the cross, "Father, into Thy hands I commend my spirit."

Let us hear Paul's command once more: "Fight the good fight of faith; lay hold on eternal life," because it strengthens my belief in a life beyond time, as well as beyond the body. Mere endless extension of time would not prove very satisfying, would it? I do not know how it is with you, but I have never lived in any place so lovely that I should wish to stay there forever. (Of course, I have never lived in southern California. Perhaps that would change my mind.) Nor have I ever done anything so interesting that I should wish to keep on repeating it for even a hundred years, to say nothing of a million. I can understand why George Bernard Shaw in his pungent way said that mere extension of earthly living would prove a curse rather than a blessing. He once declared that if God lengthened the span of our years from three score and ten to three hundred, then death would seem a deliverance rather than a deprivation. In India the belief that man

passes through a long succession of lives similar to the present one causes survival to be looked upon as a doom rather than a blessing. Hence in India the boon desired is to escape into Nirvana. No, if immortality means only perpetuation of time sequence then the prospect would not be very inviting.

But when I look at Paul and beyond to the Christ Himself, I get the feeling that their idea of eternal life is independent of time. I get a glimpse of experiences which come as Mozart said his musical compositions came. The great composer declared: "My soul gets heated, and if nothing disturb me, the piece grows longer and brighter until, however long it is, it is all finished at once in my mind so that I can see it at a glance as if it were a pretty picture or a pleasing person. Then I don't hear the notes one after another, as they are hereafter to be played, but it is as if in my fancy they were all at once."

May we not say that in such inspired moments, Mozart was laying hold of life independent of time? And is not that what eternal life is? It is life that is not measured by the ticks of the clock or by the months in a calendar. However ordinary our lives may be, have not most of us had some high moments of ecstasy or love when time was forgotten? At such moments we were touching the quality of what Paul and Christ call "eternal life." At such moments we were tasting "the powers of the age to come".

And for those who "fight the good fight of faith" these high moments lengthen and multiply. Thus they do "lay hold on eternal life" here and now. Far be it from me to compare my feeble struggles with the mighty efforts of the Apostle Paul who gave up about everything the world holds dear in the service of his Lord. But as I think of those I have loved and lost, I feel like saying with Paul, "I know whom I have believed and I am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day."

Such is my Easter faith.

PRAYER: Great God and Father of Mankind, Grant unto us the gladness of this Easter Day. Fill us with the faith that life shall triumph over death. Make us brave enough to be worthy comrades of those who are serving us in places of peril. Comfort those who suffer and console those who mourn. Fortify us for the struggles of this present time and fit us to enter the heavenly place which Thou has prepared for those who Love Thee. Through Jesus Christ Our Lord. Amen.

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297 Fourth Avenue - New York City