

Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit.

THE DOORS OF THE SHADOW OF DEATH.

A Sermon

PUBLISHED ON THURSDAY, JANUARY 5TH, 1905,

DELIVERED BY

C. H. SPURGEON,

AT THE METROPOLITAN TABERNALE, NEWINGTON,

On Lord's-day Evening, September 24th, 1876.

“Hast thou seen the doors of the shadow of death?”—Job xxxviii. 17.

LAST Sabbath our spirits flew forward as far as the judgment-day. We stood with wondering awe to gaze upon the great white throne and the fillet of gold about the head of the reaper who gathered in the harvest of the earth; we trembled as we saw the other angel take the sharp sickle and reap the world's vintage and hurl it into the winepress of Jehovah's wrath, where it was trampled under foot until the blood of men flowed forth in torrents. Our excursion at this time will not take us so far in human history. We shall halt at a nearer stopping-place. We shall not journey even to the resurrection: only to the doors of the shadow of death.

The question is, “Hast thou seen the doors of the shadow of death?” and the answer implied is—“No.” In this chapter God is questioning Job, in order to show him his inability and his ignorance; to each question which the Lord puts to the patriarch a negative answer is expected. “Hast thou entered into the springs of the sea?” “Hast thou walked in the search of the depth?” “Have the gates of death been opened to thee?” “Hast thou perceived the breadth of the earth?” Job had done none of these things.

Well, then, Job, “Hast thou seen the doors of the shadow of death?” The only answer the patriarch could have given or that we can give is “No.” We can get as far as the gates of death, but we cannot pry within. Apart from revelation we have no information about the dreary land beyond, that land which lies enshrouded, as far as we are concerned, in perpetual gloom. We cannot tell when or how we ourselves shall die, so little do we know of the dread mystery. The message will some day come to us that the pitcher is to be broken at the cistern, but when it shall come we little dream. It may be much nearer than we think, and, on the other hand, it may be farther off than we have feared. We are all, in this life, something like the prisoners confined during the dreadful French revolution. They were shut in, so that they could not escape; and

every morning there came a man with a little slip of paper who read out the names of that day's victims, who were then hurried to the tumbrel which was in waiting outside to drag off its weary load to death. So every morning comes the death angel into the world, and he reads out the names of such a one and such a one; we miss our comrade who has been called, and we grow so accustomed to the routine that, alas! we think too little of having missed him. But we are waiting, each one of us, till the missive shall come for ourselves, yet we know no more when we shall die than does the ox in the pasture, or the sheep in the fold.

Neither do we know what it is to die. We know, in a certain sense, what the act of death is; but what is the strange feeling with which the soul finds itself houseless, forsaken of the body which falls about it like a crumbling tenement,—what it is to have the link severed which keeps the mortal bound to the immortal—the spiritual caged within the material,—what that is, we do not know; neither hath any told it to us. We have watched others passing; we have stood by the bedside of the dying; we have witnessed the last gasp; and still it remains a secret what it is to die. We only know that these gates of the shadow of death are so shut upon us that we cannot hold any intercourse whatever with the world beyond, save only as there is an everlasting fellowship in the person of Christ between all that are in him; so that

“The saints on earth, and all the dead,
But one communion make.”

Indeed, we are so shut off from the other world that we never even dare to pry behind the curtain which God hath thrown across the abode of spirits. There have been necromancers in all ages who have desired to intrude into these mysterious regions, and they have pretended to have done so. Their craft is to be abhorred as hell; woe unto the man that cometh near to them! They are, as far as Christians are concerned, to be utterly loathed, for, where the Lord hath hung up a curtain and shut the door, it is not for you and me to intermeddle, lest in eating those sacrifices of the dead we be found to be having fellowship with devils, and be cast down to share their doom.

“Hast thou seen the gates of the shadow of death?” We are content to give the answer which Job must have given, that we have not seen them and do not wish to see them. Between those iron bars we do not wish to pry. What the Lord reveals we are content to learn from his Word, but we wish to know nothing more.

Now, dear friends, that being the case, we shall only in meditation go down to those gates as far as we may lawfully go, and speak only about what we may actually know, not dreaming or doting about things beyond our ken. There have been some poets who have sung of descents to Avernus and of the circles of the Inferno. Ye need not that I go through Dante's majestic conceptions, or tell how Milton sings of worlds unknown. Ours is a far less ambitious business. We have no poetry to make: we have simple facts to state.

I. First, then, we ask you to come down as near to the gates of death as we may, in meditation, VIEWING DEATH IN GENERAL for a few minutes.

Look ye up in vision to these terrible portals; and do you not observe, as you stand before them, that *these gates are always open*? Never, day and night, are those gates of death shut, for at all hours there is traffic through them. Men die at midnight, as they did in Pharaoh's palace, and men die at noon, as the child did who said, "My head, my head," and whose father said, "Take him to his mother," and who then fell asleep in her lap. They die in spring-time, and the flowers sweetly waking from the earth adorn the hillock which marks their tomb, and they die in summer, and know nothing of the sweet flowers that bloom and perfume all the air. They drop like autumn leaves, and the winter, howling their requiem, bears many of them away. There is never a moment, I suppose, at any time when the fall of feet may not be heard by listening ears that are hard by the gates of deathshade. The dead have always been coming since Abel led the way—one perpetual stream, never ceasing day nor night.

Let us remember also that *multitudes have now passed through those iron gates!* Ye cannot count the hosts who have entered. The calculating machine might fail, and the powers of mind utterly quail before the mighty total. We speak of them as the great majority, and earth with her more than thousand millions has but a slender congregation of living persons compared with the congregation of the dead. What multitudes, I say, have passed through from the first day until now. Sometimes there has been a rush when death's jackals, the kings and princes of the world, have driven their prey in troops through them by means of bloody wars. At other times, men in hosts have rushed through those gates pursued by plague or famine; and always by human decay or disease men have come up to these gates, ever, ever, ever passing through. The stream of passengers through the gates of death goes on, on, on. While you and I are sitting here, they are stepping between the posts. Perhaps some dear to us are nearing the portals. We ourselves are, certainly, on the way, and at all times our fellow creatures are being swallowed within the gaping jaws which never shut.

If you will stop here a minute, and look, and have eyes strong enough in the shade to *mark who they are that come*, you will see there a man leaning on his staff. But did you notice that there also went by him little children that had not yet learnt to speak? You see the strong man come on a sudden, running away from life; and you see the invalid who had long waited for his summons: you may tell his bones as he passes down to his grave. Do you see yonder man? There is nothing special about him; he looks just like another. He was a king once; there is little royal about him now. Do you see that other man? He was once a beggar; he does not now seem a bit more beggarly than did the monarch. They have neither of them brought any store with them; they come here penniless—all of them, and they pass through with empty hands.

Titles, grandeur, estates, position, fame, all are left behind. They come a great crowd in a liberty, equality, and fraternity of death, a common brotherhood that will never be realized in life. Do you see them going? In view of this general levelling, you may set small store on the distinctions of this world. I have come to reckon that nothing is worth seeking after but that which will survive the tomb.

Through that gate you have seen many go in thought to-night. Will you please to remember that *no one has ever returned*, with the exception of a few restored by miracle. Through that way they go, but there are no steps backward. Gone, gone for ever. Once the breath has left the body, I think that the soul shall not revisit its old haunts, or know anything of all that is done under the sun. But whether that be so or not, it is certain that they will not come back in the old familiar form. They are gone. They cannot return. It is idle to weep and wish them amongst us again: floods of tears cannot restore them. As for the tree that is cut down, at the scent of water it will bud; but rivers of precious water from weeping eyes cannot cause these dead ones to live again.

Now, concerning these gates of the grave, we may say further that, though they are thus thronged, *there are very few that ever come there as voluntary passengers*. Man dreads to die. It is right that he should, so long as it does not come to a fear that is bondage. Understand this—that God has implanted within us all the desire to live, for right ends and purposes. There are a few that pass that way in a hurry or of their own consent. Ah, dreary souls that take away their lives! To what has a man come when he dares to contemplate such an insult to his Maker? He that gave thee breath may take it back, but thou mayest not give it up thyself. To die by your own hand is not to escape from suffering, but to plunge yourself into it for ever; for we know that no murderer hath eternal life abiding in him. Therefore he that murders himself, if he knows what he is doing, gives sure evidence that eternal life is not in him. We must all go through those gates, but we must gallantly bide our time, and take arms against the sea of trouble that now awaits us; then at last, if we be Christ's, and all of us may be his, and know we are his, when our captain bids us come to him, we will bow our heads and pass through the gates of iron, not fearing for a moment. Our Lord will come to meet us, and our soul will stretch her wings in haste, and fly fearless through the shadowed portals, nor feel aught of terror as she passes them.

Those thoughts may suffice about death in general.

II. Now, in the second place, let us go down to the doors of that deathshade, and stand some moments VIEWING SAINTLY DEATHS. I wish only to speak simply about them.

First, I remark that *all saintly deaths are not pleasant to look upon*. Some of the grandest men that ever lived have died in a storm. Martin Luther's death-bed was troubled. I do not wonder that when a man has done such glorious mischief to Satan's dominions, he should not be suffered to enter into his rest without one more struggle with his foe. John Knox, again, had a fierce

battle when he came to die. He found it hard, though he triumphed at the last even as Luther did. And many that have served their Master well, instead of shoutings of joy and singing of hymns in their departure, have had to lay hold with all their might upon their crucified Saviour in order to sustain their hope. There is something right about this too, it becomes a lesson to us all. "If the righteous scarcely be saved, where shall the ungodly and the sinner appear?" And if to die is sometimes hard work to a man who is known to be a true believer and who has shown to others that he is really saved, what shall they expect in the hour of death who have no such confidence in God?

Yet, beloved, standing at the doors of death to-night, I must confess that, as far as I am concerned, of those I have seen passing through, who have believed in Christ, *most of the saints have passed through gladly*. They have entered the gates with a cheery note, with a song, or with a Hallelujah. I cannot forget the times in which I have been asked to sing at dying beds when I could not possibly have done it for very choking of sympathy with those about me. But the dying man has sung, and the dying woman has joined sweetly in the hymn, and when we seemed to feel as if it might be too much for the failing strength we have been asked by the saint who was ready to depart that we might sing another verse. While they have been

"Sweeping through the gates of the new Jerusalem,"

they have wanted us to sing them home. If I had to tell where I have seen the most joy on earth, I should certainly not say at the bridal feasts, for that joy has much that is flimsy about it; in many that partake in that festival the sentiments are often unreal. But the joy of the dying man—the joy of the expiring saint—has something so deep, so sublime, yet so simple in it, that I know not where to equal it, whether I am permitted to search in the palaces of kings or in the homes of content. The greatest joy on earth is, after all, the joy of departing saints. So you may stand at the gates of deathshade, and hear them sing as they pass through. Some of them you may hear saying extraordinary things. Haliburton cried, "Have at thee, death! Have at thee, death!"—as if he fought and conquered the grim foe without a fear; others have shouted, "Victory, victory, victory, through the blood of the Lamb!" in their last moments. Sorrow there has been, but joy there has been oftener far.

Concerning the doors of the shadow of death, let me say that *there are stores of grace laid up hard by these gates of the grave for saints when they come thither*. You must not expect, dear friends, to have dying grace in living moments. You must not expect at this time to have grace to die with, when, perhaps, God intends you to live another fifty years. What would you do with such grace? Where would you put it? You shall have it when you come to die. Only trust in Christ to-day, and do you his bidding; when the dying time shall come the dying grace shall be afforded you.

In addition to this, I believe that God not only gives his people grace to die, but, in their last moments, *some of the saints get visions of another world before they enter the gates thereof.* I am persuaded that the glow and the glory that I have seen on some men's faces when they have been dying have not been of earth; that the strange light that lit their features, and the wondrous smile of ineffable delight with which they have fallen asleep, have not been things of time. They could not have been created by their present circumstances, for their surroundings have been all to the contrary. The radiance from the world beyond has been upon them. What strange things, too, they have said! Some of them have been hard to comprehend, for the expiring saints have spoken a language more of heaven than of earth, as if they knew things which were unlawful for them to utter, and must not speak so as to be understood. Stray notes from harps of seraphim they have caught, and they have tried to sing them here below, but have failed. Yet have we heard enough to let us know that God has partly drawn up the jalousies, and permitted them to see through the lattice and to behold the King in his beauty. Angels, too, we doubt not, come to those gates of death. Why should they not? They came to Jesus in Gethsemane. They are bidden to take care of the Lord's people, lest they dash their foot against a stone. I have no doubt that they minister to the heirs of salvation, for it is written that, when Lazarus died, angels carried him into Abraham's bosom. The angelic bands wait, I believe, at these gates of death to help the righteous in their last extremity.

Best of all, I should like you, as you come with me to these doors of deathshade, to notice that *there is a blood-mark right across the entrance.* If you look down there is the print of a footstep unlike that of all the rest, for it is the print of a foot that once was pierced. Ah! I recognize that mark; my Lord has gone that way. I have not yet myself been down to the doors of deathshade, but he, my Saviour, has been there; he has passed through them indeed, and yet he lives. Hence, the joy of the believer is, that when he passes through, because Christ liveth he shall live also, and because Christ is risen he shall rise too. I could not believe the resurrection if it were not certain that Christ has risen. But if ever there was a fact in history that is well attested beyond all conceivable doubt, it is the fact that he who was put into the grave by the Jews, and whose tomb was sealed, rose again from the dead on the third day. All his people shall also rise, because he has led the way. O gates of deathshade, we dread ye no longer, since Christ has passed through your portals.

And see, brethren, for the believer, *all round those gates of deathshade bright lamps are burning.* Do you not see them? They are lamps of promise. "When thou passest through the rivers I will be with thee, and through the rivers they shall not overflow thee." "O death, I will be thy plagues." You know how the Lord of the pilgrims has given the assurance over and over and over again, in all shapes and ways, that he will not leave nor forsake his people, but that he will help them even to the end, and cause them when

they walk through the valley of the shadow of death to fear no evil because he is with them.

The gates of the grave, then, as far as believers are concerned, are not places of gloom at all. We ought often to go there. It is greatly wise to be familiar with our last hours—to antedate them and to die daily. Make a friend of death. Oh, go to the graves, not to weep there, but that thou mayest not weep when thou goest there. Often strip thyself and go through the rehearsal of thy death, that when the time shall come it may be no strange work for thee to die since thou shalt have died daily for, it may be, fifty years at a stretch.

III. Now, lastly, and very sorrowfully, a few words VIEWING THE DEATH OF SINNERS. Down to these grim gates the ungodly must go as well as the people of God. To every one of them is the lot appointed. Let us speak the truth about them solemnly and tenderly, with tears in our heart, though sad words be on our lips.

The death of ungodly people is not always terrible. There are many that die and are lost, of whom David says in the psalm, "Like sheep they are laid in the grave." They never cared for the house of God nor regarded the Sabbath; they knew nothing of prayer, or of faith. Their consciences have become seared. They played bravado with God, and he has given them up, so when they come to die they take it coolly enough. They "shuffle off this mortal coil" almost without a fear, and they that stand around say, "Oh, he died so sweetly—such a happy death." Ah me! ah me! ah me! Saints die struggling often, and sinners often die in dreadful peace. I say "dreadful," for have you never noticed the stillness—the awful silence—of nature before a tempest, when there is not a breath of air, and not a leaf stirs on the trees; the very clouds seem to hang still in mid heaven, and earth and sky get more quiet and still more quiet, and our very breath becomes intensely stifling in the dread stagnation, till with peal on peal at last the dread artillery of heaven begins to shake heaven and earth. Such is the death of many an ungodly man—a treacherous calm. Oh, what an awakening for him when in hell he shall lift up his eyes, far from every hope of mercy! Pray God you may not die so. I should not like to die stupified; I would prefer to be in my senses. Presumption is a drug which stupefies the soul, and because of it men often die at peace, full many of them. But it were better far they had never taken that dire drug, but could really look into the future, if perhaps even at the last moment, while their feet were sliding, they might find grace enough to start back and lay hold on everlasting life that they might not descend into the abyss below. Because their eyes are blinded there are many that die peaceably enough, and are lost.

Of impenitent men I may say that, when they come to die, *many of them are not at peace*; a very large number of such people shrink back from the doors of death, because, in the quiet chamber, memory begins to work. Then the evil deed, then the midnight scene, then the neglected Sabbath, then the unread Bible, then the throne of grace forsaken, all claim to speak; and as the clock goes tick, tick upon the wall, the mind begins to go over childhood, youth,

manhood, married life, and to remember and to bring up sin. It is not every sinner that is such a fool as to be able to remember a wasted life without some terror or regret. Fear, too, is generally busy, for the mind begins to ask, whether the thought is pleasant to the dying person or not, "Where am I going?" and there is a something in man that does not let him believe that he is a mere animal. Look at your wife, man—you that believe all living men to be mere beasts. What is that dear body of your wife whom you have loved these many years? Well, principally so much water and so much gas; when that is taken away there is a small residuum of earthy ash—that is all. And that is what you have loved—so many pounds of water and gas and earth! No, sir, you have not. You have loved a woman. You have loved a thing infinitely better than dead earth and water and gas. You know that. You do not believe that your mother is only mere water and gas and earth, nor your child, nor yet yourself. You cannot persuade yourself to accept such materialism as that. There is a something in this body that is better than this water, and gas, and earth, a something that will consciously exist when these have been dissolved: and there is that within all of us that makes us believe it whether we will it or not. Hence, at the portals of death there comes into the mind the question, "Where am I going?" And if the heart cannot answer that question by saying, "I am going where Jesus is: I am going to my Saviour, in whom I have trusted, who has washed me from my sin,"—then fear comes up and the man begins to say, "Oh, how can I go forward? The Bible tells me I am going to judgment, and I am unfit for judgment,—that I am going to resurrection, and what must it be for a sinful body like mine to rise from the dead? I am going to condemnation, and already in my conscience I am condemned. How can I go? How can I stop? Ah, must I leave thee, O earth, and cannot I enter thee, O heaven? Then whither must I fly?" Not many ungodly men can manage to shake off such thoughts as these in the dread prospect of departure.

Let me say, further, that *near these gates of deathshade is a very difficult place in which to seek the Lord.* When a man gets troubled with memory and fear, and his body is racked with pain, he is very ill-fitted to listen to the voice of Jesus. I would not discourage a dying man for a moment from looking to Jesus. If he desireth salvation, if he will but believe in the Christ of God, he shall have eternal life even at the last. But speaking from what I have seen, the most of men in the article of death are quite unfit for thought; quite unable to feel anything beyond the stabs of physical anguish, and quite incapable of faith. No man knoweth how far God's mercy goeth; but, if that mercy be given to faith, I cannot see how it can be extended to some dying men. Delirium, a wandering mind, an aching head—oh, these will give you quite enough to do in dying, without having to seek your peace with God then. It is task enough only to die, to take a tearful farewell of those babes and of the partner of your life; it is enough to die, without then having to begin to cry, "God be merciful to me a sinner." Hast thou seen the doors of deathshade? If thou hast, thou wilt not choose them as a place to repent

in, thou wilt rather choose the present time to seek the Lord—now while yet thy mind is fresh and vigorous, and he is waiting to be gracious.

I must not detain you more than another minute or two, but let me remind you that *at the doors of deathshade is the place of testing and the place of stripping*. The man comes there, who has professed to be a Christian, and if he is not, how the rags of his self-righteousness are torn off! Or he says, "I was no professor of religion: I was better than that, I was an honest man." Now it turns out at last that he was not even true to his God, and his fancied honesty drops off him like a garment. Build castles in the air, if you will, but death is a wonderful dissipator of all your magic. At the shadowy gates nothing will do for you or for God but reality. If the religion you have and the hope you have will not stand the test of self-examination and heart-searching sermons, certainly it will not stand the test of a dying hour. What a stripping time it will be! Now, my lord, you must take the last look at your coronet: that will never encircle your brow again. Now, look through the window at your broad estates: you will not be able to call a foot your own. Even the six feet of earth in which you lie will only be yours as long as the charity of your successors will permit you to slumber in peace. Good-bye to your money bags. Farewell to the market and the exchange! You have got your wealth with much labour, but you are forced to leave it now—every penny of it. None of it can go with you.

Worse still, *the gates of deathshade are the places of farewell*. An ungodly man has to bid farewell sometimes to a Christian wife. Kiss her cheek, man: you will never see her again. You have a Christian child—a dear child that has lately joined the church, but you are no follower of Christ, when you come to die, they will bring her to your bedside, and you will have to say, "Good-bye, Mary. I shall never see you again, or if I do it will be only as Dives, who looked up and saw Lazarus far away in Abraham's bosom, but with an awful gulf between." Some of you unconverted brothers, how will you like to be separated from your Christian sisters? Some of you daughters—how will you like to be divided from your father and your mother, who will be in heaven? Oh, all of you say, "We would like to meet in heaven as unbroken families." Young girl; young man; what if thy name should be left out when Christ shall summon home his own? Certain it is that deathshade gates are the places of everlasting farewell. God grant you may never have to take such farewell of any of your kin who are in Christ, but may ye soar up to heaven and be raised with them when the trump of the archangel sounds.

Thus I have, as best I could, talked of the end of the earthly life. O souls, prepare to meet your God, for you may have to meet him ere another sun has risen. I beseech you, by the living God, whose servant I am, postpone not repentance and faith; but now, while mercy's white flag is to the front, and God waiteth to be gracious to you, bow before the cross of Christ, trust in Jesus, and be saved. The Lord bless you, for Christ's sake. Amen.