

GLORIFICATION THROUGH DEATH

by Francis L. Patton

Patton's reflection on the paradox that glorification comes through death, illustrated from nature, human sacrifice, and Christ's resurrection. He argues that generous self-expenditure for God rather than fruitless self-conservation is the path to true glory.

1 Chapters

Table of Contents

1. Glorification Through Death

Glorification Through Death

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Verily, verily, I say unto you, except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone; but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit.—John 12:24.

We all know that it was necessary for Christ to die, and that his path lay through the valley of the shadow of death. I do not take this text to illustrate this idea, but to concern myself with a line of illustration which has no reference to His death, and so will avoid the suggestion. We have here, in the first place, the enunciation of a principle which goes far toward unifying the moral and spiritual history of our world. Glorification through death is a principle that may be seen in various spheres of observation, and in the, relation of the individual to the race. For instance, a man of ordinary education has a family of boys and girls. He has reached that time of life, the sure sign of middle age, perhaps a little beyond, when he ceased to raise the question that he has been raising about himself, How shall I make the best of myself? and he begins to raise the question—the only question he thinks of after that—What shall I do for them? “Well,” he says, “I had but a limited education; they shall have the best the country can give or they are willing to take. I had but few opportunities; there is no lack of opportunity for them. I had many a rough encounter when I first set out in the world; they shall have the advantage of my accumulated earnings to set them up in life.”

Sure enough, the boys grow up and fill positions that the father and mother did not fill, and could not fill; and by and by they all come home again, and as they look on the dead man’s face they say, or rather they seem to say, “Father did well by us,” and they may very well say it. His hand had wrought for them; his head had thought for them; his heart had beat for them; this is the long result—the father lies in his coffin, and the children go their several ways in life, and repeat in their own experience the story; and so “the individual withers, and the world is more and more.” And this principle of glorification through death is illustrated further in the fact that, when the lower forms of life or civilization disappear to make room for the higher, the one dominating phase of the doctrine of evolution is the seeming unity with which it invests everything; because, imagine it true, and there at once you see how moving are the poet’s words:

I held it truth, with him who sings To one clear harp in divers tones, That men may rise on stepping-stones Of their dead selves to higher things. This is the story not of the potential, but of the actual. And what is true of the material world is true of the spiritual world. The history of the spiritual world is a history of displacement. You may account for it by the love of glory or by the sentiment of revenge, but we know that God’s glory is the final cause, and it is all explicable upon the great scale of divine providence. We all understand that there is a definite relationship between our present and the past, and that we today are the heirs of all that civilization that has gone. Our acts are the result of all that has gone before. They were the seed and we are the harvest: “Except a corn of wheat fall into the earth and die, it abideth alone; but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit” The mass of this early civilization survives in the civilization of today. Where do you go to find the

origin of the great principle of civil liberty? Where do you go, but to that crowd of sturdy peoples who lived along the banks of the Rhine, and whom Tacitus describes, or to those sturdy barons at Runnymede who extorted the Magna Charta from King John? It is just as true in the sphere of science or philosophy. It is a far cry back to Thales of Miletus, and yet our own boasted century, the nineteenth, and this which may have boasts of its own, has a close relation to the civilization of the very far past. Our astronomy is different from their astrology, and our chemistry is different from their alchemy, but they are closely associated. We see further than they did sometimes, just because we are as pigmies borne on the shoulders of a giant. This principle of glorification through death is illustrated once more in that a new and expanded form of life is the fruit of death. Take the railroad at the proper season of the year, and see the corn standing as a dazzling glory in the fertile fields of the golden West Mark how towers herald the approach to the towns and cities, and ask what they stand there for? These are the nation's treasure-houses. These are the storehouses of the world. This is the annual coronation of nature, and simply so many illustrations of the text: "Except a corn of wheat fall into the earth and die, it abideth alone; but if it die it bringeth forth much fruit."

Change the illustration and borrow one from the humbler phases of the animal world, like the caterpillar, which eats up the floor of the leaf on which it creeps, until, by and by, as it begins to realize that its life is nearly done, it sets its house in order, turns undertaker, weaves itself a silken shroud, and awaits the dawning of its resurrection day, and soars away a bright-winged butterfly—a beautiful illustration of the text: "Except a corn of wheat fall into the earth and die, it abideth alone; but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit." That is the story of our life. We are born, and we grow; we go on our way, renew our infancy with impaired faculties, and then we pass away. Life is a battle, and we win our greatest victory when we lie down on that battle-field and die. Life is a race, and the goal is at the grave. Life is a journey, and the path that we take lies straight for the valley of the shadow of death. The valley is dark, but beyond the darkness and across the river I see the lights of the celestial city; I get an echo of the angels' song, and the glimpse that I get tells me that it is worth all it costs to die. The principle of glorification through death is illustrated in the death of Judaism. Judaism was a divinely founded institution—a theological seminary. The purpose of it was to disseminate the knowledge of the one living and true God. With the approach of the pagan world and Christianity it gathered up its energies to give birth to Jesus of Nazareth. That is what it existed for; and in the throes of the birth-struggle Judaism died. Let us not speak reproachfully of Judaism, for the glory of Christianity is the glory of Judaism with an added glory: "Except a corn of wheat fall into the earth and die, it abideth alone; but if it die, it bringeth forth fruit."

Once more (for this is our Lord's own illustration concerning Himself), the principle of glorification through death is illustrated in the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ Himself. We see Jesus made a little lower than the angels and crowned with glory and honor. He suffered that we might conquer. He drank the bitter cup in order that we might taste something of the sweetness of the joys of His Father's house. He has settled the question of His own place, and of our place too, in the scale of being. The question whether the finite and the infinite can ever come together has been solved in the doctrine of the incarnation. We do not want any more to sing the old song, which never amounted to very much in the way of music or poetry:

I want to be an angel, And with the angels stand, A crown upon my forehead, A harp within my hand.

We do not want anything of the sort. Angels never rise so high nor stand so low as man. They know nothing about sin or repentance or salvation through Jesus Christ, and are not worthy to sit with Him who judges the ten tribes of Israel. This text not only fastens on us this principle of glorification through death, but, in the second place, it gives us a twofold vindication of death, the first being the perils of survivorship, and the second being the promise of grace. Death is one of the most philosophical things in the world; and if you put yourselves in the right attitude toward it, it is one of the kindest agencies in nature. There is such a thing as a time to die; for two reasons at least.

One is the solitude of old age—the peril of survivorship—“Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone”; it abideth alone. You can imagine a person very old. His eyes have grown dim. Generations have grown old and died, but he still lives on. He is too old to take kindly to the new ideas, or to see much reason for the changes taking place. He is too old to have an interest in the present, too old to have any friends, and at last he lives, and lives, and lives, until he seems like a monumental intrusion into the present, an object that people stop to look at when they are in a reflective mood and wish to mark the flight of years. Who would not court a new-made grave rather than risk the perils of survivorship?

Then there is the promise of grace. Our blest Lord hallowed the grave by His presence, and left it upon the morning of the third day. The promise of Christ gives us a connection with His own glorious resurrection; and planted with Him in His death, we shall be with Him in His glory. And so the message comes to you and to me: Be not afraid. Do not hesitate to go down, even into the grave. Our Lord has not made it unnecessary for us to die, but He has robbed death of its terrors. He has made easy the approach; He has festooned the entrance with flowers; and we ride through its portals, singing as we go, “O grave, where is thy victory? O death, where is thy sting?” and we turn to discover that the door of death is the gate of heaven.

Again, this text teaches one other truth. As we read it, we can not very well help being impressed with the idea that there is embodied in it the thought that there are two contrasted modes of being: a fruitless conservation and a prolific decay. The seed corn is very tenacious of life, and there is a story that grains taken from an Egyptian mummy have been planted and have germinated in English gardens. I believe that this is not so, but the tenacity of wheat in respect to life is true. It abideth; but it abideth alone. Let it reproduce itself, and by and by there will be enough of harvest to feed a nation. We must make a choice between a fruitless conservation and prolific decay. And this choice comes to us in so many ways. We see it in the sphere of prejudice. Prejudice is often, but it is not always, right. It is very often misplaced or perpetuated beyond a time when it does any good. (You never find a man cherishing a prejudice, because he says he is “standing up for a principle.”) It was good enough when he started; it served its purpose at first; but it has outlived its usefulness, and is now just a prejudice. A good many years ago, at the foundation of the London Missionary Society, a speaker said, “We stand today at the funeral of bigotry.” There is not a word of objection to that, except that these obsequies have been so unduly protracted. God send the day when men shall recognize the lineament of Jesus Christ in one another’s face, whether they be Presbyterians, Episcopalians, or what! And this principle, this choice, whether there shall be a

conservation that is fruitless, or an expenditure that is generous, meets us everywhere. It meets us in our relationship to the past. There is a sort of medievalism cherished and fostered by some people with an odor of sanctity—they love things which are old. And there is a vandalism that destroys the old, and worships the new, because it is new. My friends, they are both wrong. Let us look at our inheritance of the past in proof of this. Hold fast to that which is true, and do not hold anything that is not. Read the great formularies of worship with the critical light of modern thought, and hold on to that which is true. The Jerusalem Chamber is not holy ground, the Westminster divines were not inspired. If they said what was true, it is because of the truth of what they say that we hold on to it, not because they said it. And what is true in regard to these formulas holds true in reference to our own individual life. But there are times, I suppose, when people who live in a city as busy as this is, and where the engagements of the week run over into two weeks, and where every hour has its own employment, there are times, I suppose, even here that people have leisure to sit still while the fire burns; and in these choice stolen hours, I suppose, figures of long ago come out upon the canvas, and stand there in bold relief; and we say that they were happy days. Imagine that dear old room, and those pictures of long ago coming before us, when our imagination was all aglow. I can imagine that the door-bell might ring, and that one of those that we have not seen for fifty years was announced. I can imagine the conversation that would ensue. We would talk excitedly for twenty minutes, and then the conversation would flag, and before the hour was up we would be completely disillusioned, and would see that our paths had diverged. All that sort of thing was good in its way and time, but it is not the time for it now. Of course, we must have a foundation for the house. Still we do not live in the cellar. We live upstairs in the sunlight, and experience says we do well. These past incidents of life are just the foundation, and it is the superstructure after all that you build upon; and unless a man is willing to part with the past, he is going to make a mistake. Unless we learn to do better today the things that we did yesterday, and paint a better picture today, and write a better poem than the last, and are more proficient in our arts, we are just as good as dead. We are eternally improving and moving on. There is a conservation, steadfast and still; and there is a forgetfulness and a generous prodigality of past attainments that is prolific of vast results. There is your health. What are you going to do with it? You had better wear out than rust out any day. You can see people who make themselves obnoxious to you by their everlasting attitude of complaint. There is something better for a man to do than to take care of his health, and he will probably live longer if he does not. Is a man who has an intellect expected to have nothing better to do than to play nurse to his body that he has to summer in the North, and winter in the South, and to clothe with purple and fine linen, and fare sumptuously every day, and give it now and then a trip to Europe—a body that is bound to die? There is your life. What are you going to do with it? There is your money. What are you going to do with it? Why, invest it, and be careful about your security, and don't be careful about the interest, and keep on investing and reinvesting, until it will take the figures of astronomy to count it. As fortunes go now, astronomy is not in it. Invest it, and then what do you do? There are so many things that some people might do and do do, that so many more people might do. They might perpetuate their names by doing something for the Church, for education, and for the world, and its moral, spiritual, and intellectual advance. God be praised for this! You, who have cast your bread of benevolence upon the waters of Christian philanthropy hope that you will receive it after many days. This world's history shows that our forests have not been cleared by the brawn of men who lived in comfortable homes. How have our liberties been secured? By the blood of men who

counted no service too great. Can we do that? William of Orange might have lived a long life, but he stripped himself of land and fortune, and planted himself in deadly opposition to Alva, and died a monument to the fall of Spanish tyranny. Yes, my friends, in humbler spheres it is your privilege, and mine, in the house of this tabernacle, to choose between the alternative of a conservation which is fruitless and an expenditure that is substantial, generous, and prodigal. It is a choice for us to make. Wrap yourselves in your mummy folds, and live for yourself or, in generous forgetfulness, live for God and country, and for fellow men while you live, and when the hour comes, without fear, if need be, drop into the ground and die.

Help us, O Lord, to endure as good soldiers of Jesus Christ. Help us to do our duty so completely that every day we do better and become better and be with Christ. Help us that we may be ready for death, and in that last encounter may be as brave as in all the other encounters of our lives. Give us this faith to the end. For Christ's sake. Amen.

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