

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *Bibliotheca Sacra* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_bib-sacra\\_01.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bib-sacra_01.php)

# THE BIBLIOTHECA SACRA

---

## ARTICLE I.

### IMMORTALITY.

BY EX-PRESIDENT JOHN BASCOM, D.D., WILLIAMSTOWN, MASS.

WHILE the doctrine of immortality has, in the development of human life, gained in comprehensiveness and in the conviction with which it lays hold of the mind, it is still very far from being possessed of its full force. It remains much less distinct, much less stimulating, much less corrective and consolatory, than it of right ought to be. The scope of life is entirely altered by it, and its best incentives cannot be profoundly and pleasurably felt without it. Whatever view we may hold of the dignity of human nature, of the self-contained and self-rewarding character of its virtues, still the motives of attainment and the rewards of attainment are greatly reduced in value by the brevity of our lives. The morning is bright, but the sky is soon clouded over; a storm is at hand, and this passes into the darkness of night. Natures intense and broad are dwarfed by the littleness of little things crowding constantly upon them. The world is held at arm's length only by an exhaustive effort, and the same sense of defeat creeps stealthily in upon all. The duration of the race brings no relief to the solitude of the individual, but the reverse rather. Those whose life we would share pass on, and we are left behind. The im-

mortality of the race is only the accumulated mortality of its constituents, and out of these pitiful products no great sums can be compounded.

As a matter of fact the human spirit is much expanded and comforted by the doctrine of immortality, even as now held, though we pursue our path with uncertain and trembling steps. We go to the grave with reluctance, we find consolation in forgetfulness, and there is no cheerful road between the two worlds familiar to our feet. We believe with a spasmodic effort of faith which wrenches the soul while it heals it.

Why is this? If we are immortal, that immortality is deeply planted in our nature, and will spring from it not less certainly, and with no more mystery, than the flower and the fruit from the bud pregnant with them. If we are able with hope to scatter the seed year after year, we should be able as cheerfully to commend our spirits to the resuscitative power of the spiritual world.

Undoubtedly the reasons of this timidity are close at hand, yet they are reasons which insight and courage should overcome. Immortality is not so connected with the physical world as to be a matter of experience or of prediction. The most we can say of the physical relations of a future life is that there is nothing in our present dependencies to disprove new and higher dependencies. We float on seas whose sustaining power we never fully understand, and it is presumption for us to say that there are no different seas or deeper waters beyond the horizon. How long did that great and omnipresent power, electricity, come and go in the world while we were hardly aware of its presence. We are still ignorant of its nature, and wait on a service sure to be rendered no matter how slightly comprehended. The universe is not so narrow, nor its possibilities so well known, as to give us ground for affirming that

the physical world will fail us when a real spiritual demand, prepared for from the beginning of the world, shall overtake it. Still our path lies in an unexplored region, and hope and fear alike have play concerning it. Situated as we are in a physical world in which so many of our predictions rest on what we see and handle, it is not surprising that the want of suitable physical grounds for immortality should be severely felt. The lack of any returning footsteps from the invisible world leaves our faith exclusively to its own spiritual resources.

Another reason why the belief in immortality has pushed its way but slowly among men is the difficulty which always arises when truth and error, rational and fanciful beliefs, long intermingled in our experience, must at length be separated. We find the need of our Lord's command, Let the tares and the wheat grow together till the time of the harvest, lest in plucking up the one we pluck up the other also. When the truth is but a small portion of a complicated system of error, it is easily lost in the superstitions with which it is associated. A future life has been supported by dreams, has given rise to a belief in ghosts and the malign influence of the dead over the living. It has also given occasion to a belief in horrible inflictions and in sensuous pleasures. It has reproduced in their own most fatuous forms the follies and mistakes of our present experience. When these false impressions begin to give way, and the unsoundness of this fanciful extension of human passion comes to be felt, it is not surprising that the tendency is strong to abandon the notion of immortality, as a center of confused and contradictory notions. The air is felt to be more pure and wholesome when we return to our own experiences, rid of these disturbing and unverifiable ideas.

This movement has concurred with that comprehensive

movement which, under the name of science, has drawn attention to physical facts, capable of exact statement and associated in definite causal relations. While the doctrine of immortality has still retained possession of the mind, the sense of difficulty has increased in connection with it, and the feeling of distance and uncertainty, great under all circumstances, has clouded the future life. When a remnant of spiritual phenomena, as those associated with mesmerism or those incident to subconscious investigations, have been retained, there has been a willingness to strengthen the doctrine of immortality by facts of so disputable, vague, and uncertain a character as to offer very little proof in connection with so august and far-reaching a belief as that of a future life. Immortality, if it is true at all, is so profoundly true as not easily to affiliate with insufficient and secondary proof. It should rather stand out as the inevitable issue, the undeniable fulfillment, of a great system of things. It is incorporate in spiritual events as their controlling and explanatory idea.

St. Paul, even, seems for a moment to be diverted from the primary line of thought, when he makes the resurrection of Christ the promise and proof of man's resurrection. The doctrine of immortality cannot rest securely on the reappearance of Christ. The connection lies rather in the opposite direction. His resurrection was at best but a secondary and subordinate event, addressed to a few; while immortality is a belief finding its way into the thoughts of every man, and everywhere seeking personal, independent, and sufficient proof.

What, then, is the ground of our belief, a ground so universal and adequate as to be open to all minds? It seems to us to be found in the ethical element, which is the chief and distinguishing feature in the nature of man, that which makes

him cognizant of character, and of the issues of character in a Kingdom of Heaven.

No two types of conduct can well be more distinct than that offered by intellectual faculties centered in the gratification of appetites and passions, and that presented when these faculties are absorbed in the fulfillment of ethical impulses and profoundly affected by the affections which go with them. The appetites and passions may gain immediate gratification, but life, as a spiritual product, begins at once to miscarry under them; the affections may be long deferred and only partially satisfied, and yet character constantly gains ground. If the physical life, divorced from the spiritual life, reaches its objects, it is blasted before the fruit appears. If the spiritual life is thrust back and oppressed by circumstances, it may still steadily gain power. It can thrive without attainment, and attainment never passes into satiety. Spiritual buds may for the moment prove abortive, but they are still waiting for better conditions. The prophecy of life is always in them. If no future should come to them, we should feel that the best life the world had had perished; that there had been a fatal miscarriage, not in the accidents but in the substance of being.

The doctrine of evolution, by virtue of its explanatory power, has come to be the key-note of the world. In this form and by this method, events have gone coherently forward, and now expound each other. Things cease to be accidental or unfortunate, because they belong to a system that embraces them all, and needs them all. But the only evolution which is open to man is that of a purer, higher, more comprehensive ethical life, a conjoint life in which all impulses find extended and harmonious play. Any seeming progress which men make in neglect of ethical law is baffled within itself, and shortly perishes.

If evolution has forced its way from the beginning until

now, making all barren marches serviceable, overcoming all obstacles, and reaching results but dimly foreshadowed in their incipient forms, we may be proportionately sure that this creative tendency is not exhausted, and that yet higher phases of life will crown all that have gone before. This principle of development, so fruitful in every form of inquiry, offers a guarantee of that ethical unfolding which is the basis of social growth among men; which aggregates and accumulates all gains and makes the individual masterful by virtue of the community to which he belongs, and enriches the community by the breed of noble citizens. Any final failure or abortion overtaking such a movement is impossible, contradicted by all that we know of the history of the world from the least to the greatest of its events. The entire fabric of knowledge would fall to the ground, if causes were no longer progressive, if they were the mere tumult of waves subsiding into rest. Our thoughts have so long fed on this notion of a glorious sequence of events, that, if it ceases to have truth, we are left in an intellectual desert with no clue to farther exploration.

The doctrine of a distinct purpose, of pure thought, as lying at the center of the world — the doctrine of theism — is a guarantee of immortality. The more we apprehend the universe in the light of this notion, the more controlling do we find ethical ideas to be. Every event reaches its final purpose and full expression in righteousness. By this growth of righteousness the darkness of the present and past is overcome, and it stretches out into the future with ever-increasing promise. The coming spiritual order is taken up into the divine mind as the real aim and true secret of creation. We can hardly accept, or hold fast to, the conception of a divine purpose without this farther field of thought offered by a future life. All our schemes become too narrow and straitened to give the mind

any poise. There is no room for the wings of thought, and nothing for them to beat against. It is in reasoning of this ethical and spiritual order, with its inclosed impulses and elastic action, that the doctrine of a future life emerges, and, with genetic force, builds itself up as a settled conviction, an adequate explanation of the failures of the past, the progress of the present, and the hopes of the future — of success ever springing up afresh in the soil of defeat. Of this prevalence of the notion of immortality and its ever-growing force in the world, there can be no doubt. What is its rational force?

We do well to remember that all our conclusions, negative as well as positive, destructive as well as constructive, rest upon the same underlying feeling, — confidence in rational powers. Denial has no precedence over affirmation. The one, like the other, must look for support to inherent probabilities, to rational coherence. The one thing we all assume is the reliability of reason. We may commend careful inquiry and suspended judgment as a method, but skepticism has no advantage over belief. Both are our estimate of the probable flow of events. When we consider the progress of human thought, we see at once that the conflict of belief and unbelief does not lie between equal and independent tendencies, but that large areas of knowledge have been won by belief, and that unbelief is only telling when it is preparing the way for new belief. All the great lines of thought have established themselves by means of a slow, sifting process, applied to the mixed material of knowledge. Very little treasure-seeking in the intellectual world has issued in precious metals or precious stones, capable of indefinite storage; but rather in products like garments and grains and fruits, always in a process of change. It is not nearly so much in stable commodities that the wealth of the world consists as in unstable ones, open to use and returning in



new quantities and varieties by means of it. Most of the efforts of man to secure something permanent come under the rebuke of time, and the things thought eternal linger on as relics and ruins. This is even more emphatically true of intellectual than of physical products. The theories of conduct, the theories of social states, the theories of science, are all undergoing change, and the only thing fixed about them is their genetic force. The one thing observable in progress is the variety of directions in which the faculties of men find exercise, and the value of the general results. Man does not go astray by thinking, but by not thinking; not by weighing phenomena and by drawing from them the lessons appropriate to the moment, but by neglecting facts and running hastily or negligently away from them. The process of thought, as long as it is a process, is corrective; it only loses value by losing movement.

While our courage is daily strengthened by the astonishing reaches of thought, we are still hampered by hesitancy and uncertainty in directions where, after all, our gains have been the greatest. We know that much the same elements with which we deal in the world are everywhere present in the universe, that the same rational formulæ prevail in it through its entire breadth, and that the mathematical conceptions, so potent and so exact with us, are equally potent and exact in its most outlying members. We calculate an eclipse, and the response is as precise as if we were dealing with objects in the plain before us. There is no stumbling, no hesitancy, in carrying ideas to the ends of the visible universe. Everywhere the tread of mind is firm and forward.

Yet the most constant, progressive, and fruitful processes of thought are found in the civic and social and spiritual worlds. Here man learns to define his own personal wants, and to make proof of his collective attainments. Civilization

and enlightenment, always on the increase, mean nothing but a better and still better understanding of man's necessities and the lines of mutual ministration in connection with them. No matter how obscure, conflicting, and inadequate our claims on each other may be, we are always catching sight of new harmonies and finding the path of reconciliation. Ethical intelligence means, and has always meant, the power to estimate human wants, to feel the full circle of the forces at work on human welfare, and to bring out of them needed fulfillments. Far from being burdened by a sense of weakness and failure in these final products of thought, this highest reach of understanding, we have occasion to recognize rather the growing fertility, the increasing coherence and uplift, of those spiritual experiences by which we return, again and again, to the light, no matter how often darkness has overtaken us. Man is rational by virtue of his ever renewed power to reinvigorate thought, and repose on processes of inquiry and reflection which are constantly rebuilding the foundations of faith. This is what spiritual life means, increasing vision which fascinates and satisfies the mind that attains it; contentment that rests quietly on its own center. The integrity of reason, above all of the ethical reason, abiding in its own light, is the postulate of the spiritual world. We may, in the haste or the boldness of the spirit, venture too far in one or another direction, with no sufficient clue; we may drop into bigotry and conventional faith when our work is just begun, but one thing we cannot do, gird the mind too frequently, tread the world too hopefully, trust too confidently, to the veracity of the events and thoughts which inclose us, and thereby fall into a fool's paradise of groundless convictions. All grand lives have shared this spiritual inspiration, and this inspiration has never betrayed them. It has shown astonishing capacity in bringing success

out of failure, and in redeeming its own errors by the temper in which it has made them.

There remains one more inquiry, which, from the beginning, we have had chiefly in view. Why, in this doctrine of immortality, are we so long left to tread the air? Why have we not wings by which we can at once strike the air and make of it a highway? This belief appeals to so much in human nature that it readily finds its way among men. To the most of them it comes not as a personal conviction, but as a conventional sentiment, its uses already assigned it. If the expectation of immortality is associated with lower impulses, while it may retain influence, it cannot gather that proof and conviction which enthrone it in thought. A sensuous immortality, while it addresses itself to our present experience, frames conceptions so much beyond its reach as never to escape the sense of uncertainty. We cannot walk by any path from physical facts to the region beyond the grave, and a sense of ignorance and doubt necessarily overtakes any movement in that direction. We are dealing with the unknown, and leaving behind us all familiar and pleasant things. While, therefore, the imagination may frame a future agreeable to dominant desires, there is nothing in our sensuous experience to fill in the chasm or make the journey grateful.

This appeal of a future life to existing conditions and its dependence on them for incentives, are everywhere illustrated in history. The active and the brave have desired some farther field for their qualities, and they have found it in the rewards of the blessed. Those whose impulses were more sensuous have promised themselves sensuous pleasures. The uninviting and gloomy notions which the Greek and the Roman associated with Hades were doubtless due to their inability to give

any fitting extension to their present experience. They had too much intellectual and moral perception to carry forward life fearlessly in a sensuous form, and at the same time they had too little ethical development to throw themselves unreservedly on higher and more spiritual conceptions. The moment Christianity loses spiritual hold, it suffers the same weakness. The Jesuits, laboring among the Hurons, requested that a variety of pictures of souls suffering future punishment should be sent them, while one representation of souls in Heaven would suffice. They desired illustrations which would make the most direct and effective appeal to the Indian mind, and also those most consonant with its own thoughts. When the punishments of the lost are in the foreground, the spiritual heavens are so darkened down as to conceal in life the light and promises which belong to it. We come to rely on fear, not hope, for a sense of reality.

The doctrine of immortality depends on the person addressed, and the experiences to which it gives extension, for its value and convincing power. Awakened under one set of impressions, it will have the force and continuity which belong to those impressions. If we are creeping through the world on hands and knees, we shall never distinctly find or overpass the bounds of the Kingdom of Heaven.

The grounds of belief and the sense of reality are greatly altered when a future life is guaranteed to us in extension of an ethical life, which has become to us the sum and substance of being. An ethical life that is a central reality, the deepest, most abiding, and rewardful experience, a conviction that overreaches and gives character to all other convictions, restores to the mind, losing the sense of spiritual values under the heedless and benumbing strokes of fortune, the solidity and coherence of its purposes, convinces it at once of the profound truth

associated with current events, and of the certain issue of these events in a larger and better and clearer life. These strong terminal buds in our immediate experience unite the present to the future and the future to the present, making of them one development. The doctrine of immortality is an achievement, and can be present in power only as the issue of that spiritual growth whose flower and fruit it is to be. As a dogmatic statement, it has only a dogmatic, not a vital, conviction. It sinks into the life with no more depth or familiarity of feeling than belong to the creed of which it is a portion. Any amplification of heavenly pleasures or extension of future sufferings appeals only to sensibilities more or less wayward and irrational, and begets only the disturbed and obscure vision which goes with them. We grow into the form and conviction of immortality, and it becomes the interpretation of our entire lives. We possess it and are possessed by it because this is the strong, consolatory, and rational attitude of the soul within itself. All power is personal, but this power is preëminently personal, because a supreme personal life is achieved by means of it. The mantle of the shell-fish, resting on and secreting its coating of shell, rough outwardly and smooth inwardly, pearl on this side and rude defense on that side, is not more of its very self than is that rational activity of the human mind which frames for itself a rational world. It is to very little purpose that the conclusions of a mathematical process are announced to the pupil unless his own mind has reached them. We understand the spiritual world, we live in it, solely by sharing its convictions, and enjoying its pleasures. These processes and these powers are inseparable. This is the lesson which Peter's essay to walk on the water teaches us. Looking to Christ the thing seemed possible, looking at the water it at once became impossible. This is the philosophy of mind. While it may appear to enter-

tain the thoughts that are addressed to it, they at once take on the interpretation it gives them. Convictions are not shadows of something outside the mind, shaped exactly to the facts which give rise to them; they are the product of the mind's own activity toward the world in which it is inclosed.

The sense of reality is not given to the mind, is not asserted for it by another mind; it grows up within the mind, the product of its own experience. It is the heart of the bud, instinct with its own life, that at length blossoms of its own impulse. This is the victory over death, faith in the life we have, a life that understands itself and asserts itself according to its own measure. The divine inheritance is never something simply given, but the power to ask and receive all things in one indivisible act. The nature and ground of immortality, the certainty of immortality, arise as convictions in the soul by experience and by proof, proof that allies itself to experience, and experience that passes into proof. The proof is the certainty that adequate purposes lie always at the heart of the world; the experience is that we have already entered on a life which is thus daily germinating into fuller life.

We are not waiting for an adequate declaration of immortality, we are waiting for a convincing experience of its true nature. Not till ethical impulses fully disclose themselves can we escape hesitancy and uncertainty. The unfolding of spiritual facts in the mind and the sense of their force and extension are one and the same thing. The two assertions of Paul cannot fall apart: To live is Christ, to die is gain. A fellowship in righteousness is a transcendent blessing, both as an immediate fact and as a future promise. There is a sense in which we know all that we are capable of knowing. If we would know more we must be more. We put all our skill into framing the mirror of truth, and then habitually wipe it that it

may suffer no obstruction in receiving and imparting the image.

We are being taught the nature and conditions of immortality, and as we learn them immortality as a heavenly vision rises on the horizon, the projection of the spirit's true potentiality in the field before it. Any assertion of a future life leaves the mind, aside from this inner disclosure, at fault both as to the form and the significancy of immortality, both as to the images and incentives associated with it. We believe and win the wisdom of belief by a deeper, wider, and more vital apprehension of the life we already possess. This is the spiritual path and the only path to spiritual life.