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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE BLESSED HOPE: A SERMON ON THE DEATH OF MRS. FRANCIS CUNNINGHAM ***

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“THE BLESSED HOPE.”

A SERMON

ON OCCASION OF THE

DEATH OF MRS. FRANCIS CUNNINGHAM.

BY THE

REV. E. HOARE, M.A.,

Incumbent of Trinity Church, Tunbridge Wells.

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1855.

The substance of the following Sermon was preached at St. Peter's, LOWESTOFT, on Sunday, the 19th of August, 1855, after the death and funeral of Mrs. FRANCIS CUNNINGHAM, the beloved wife of the beloved Vicar of the Parish.

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With great animation of spirit, and remarkable energy of natural character; with an unwearied watchfulness over the young, and a no less laborious care for their parents; with a fervent missionary spirit, only equalled by her zeal in the work at home; with real natural eloquence, and an admirable tact in her intercourse with all kinds of character; with a tender sympathy for the afflicted, and a most friendly kindness to all who needed friendship; and above all, with an unceasing spirit of believing prayer, she laboured for forty years in the parishes of Pakefield, Kirkly, and Lowestoft, in the happy service of the Saviour whom she loved; till at length after meekly receiving at her Lord's hand the gradual decay of voice and strength, she peacefully fell asleep in Him on August the 12th, 1855.

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“The path of the just is as a shining light, which shineth more and more unto the perfect day.”

1 THESSALONIANS, 4. xiii.

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“But I would not have you to be ignorant brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope.”

This world is full of sorrow, for the simple reason that it is full of sin, and wherever sin is, separation and sorrow are certain, sooner or later, to follow in its train. So have they followed at

this present time, for the event that has brought us together is a separation that has called forth a general sorrow throughout the place. It has not been merely respect that has led to so kind and almost universal an exhibition of feeling throughout your town, for respect is, after all, but a cold thing, and there has been nothing cold on this occasion. There has been a deep and tender sympathy, the mournful sense of real bereavement in very many affectionate hearts.

Now let us none suppose that real, true, heartfelt, and sympathizing sorrow is inconsistent with the christian character, for if such a thought could be for a moment entertained, it would be removed at once by the one simple statement, "Jesus wept." The tears of true sorrow, therefore, are in perfect harmony with the character of Christ. Sorrow is not eradicated by the Gospel, but has its character changed by it. The Holy Spirit does not harden the heart against grief, but comforts the mourner in the midst of it. The deep waters are not frozen, so that the child of God can coldly walk across dry footed; but they retain their character, and are deep waters still; and the believer is held up in passing through them, so that, though deep, they cannot overflow him. The effect is much the same as that of the coloured glass upon the light; the light shines still, but a new hue is given to it. Just so is it with sorrow. Like the light it remains within the soul, and is not extinguished by the power of grace; but like the light passing through the coloured glass, it acquires a new colouring, and is beautifully softened by the sacred hope presented to us in Christ Jesus. Thus the passage does not simply say "that ye sorrow not," for if it did, it would imply that grief was sinful, but it says "that ye sorrow not even as others that have no hope," so teaching us that through still felt, sorrow may be softened within the heart.

The passage also teaches what is the principle by which this change is to be effected, viz: hope; for when there is no hope, there is nothing left but the sorrow of the world. I feel therefore that I cannot select a safer subject for our careful study on this solemn day. The Spirit indeed appears especially to have stamped it with his own authority as peculiarly suitable for such a season, for He has said in v. 18, "Wherefore comfort one another with these words." May He grant then his own blessing on the words which shall be now spoken! May He raise our thoughts to things above! May he teach us to realize the blessed hope! And may He so make use of the present sorrow as to prepare our souls for a tearless re-union before the throne of Jesus!

I. The first thing to be noticed in the passage, is the light which it incidentally throws on the *present state of departed believers*.

The prominent point of hope presented to our view is very clearly the glorious coming of our blessed Lord, with the accompanying resurrection and reunion of his saints. But the present position of the soul is three times incidentally mentioned, and each of these times is described under the beautiful figure of sleep. Twice are our dear brethren described as those "which are asleep," and once as those "which sleep in Jesus."

What then are we to understand by this expression? Are we to regard it as proving their present state to be one of unconsciousness or stupor? God forbid! for then how could such a spirit as hers that has now left us, say, "To me to live is Christ, to die is gain." She could truly say during her life time, "I delight to do thy will O Lord," and it could be no gain to such an one to sink down into stupor and inactivity.

But still they are said to sleep in Christ, and the beautiful suitability of the expression may be seen from two points of view.

In the first place, death is the separation of the immortal spirit from the mortal body, and the body alone now lies sleeping in the grave. When we assembled around that opened grave on Friday, it was to leave there the body. We committed her body to the grave, "earth to earth, dust to dust, ashes to ashes."

And this body may be justly said to sleep. It sleeps, for it is without feeling. There is no pain or languor now, no advancing illness, or exhaustion from decaying strength. This is all over now, and the poor body sleeps in Jesus.

Then again it is a sleep, for the time of labour has now passed. That beautiful and cheerful activity which for twenty-five years has been such a blessing and example to this place, is now over. The night is come when she cannot work, and let us who remain learn the lesson that while the day lasts, we must be, like her, most vigorously employed for God.

And lastly it is a sleep, for it is not permanent, but only for a time. The night is quickly passing; already we see the streaks of morning; and when the Son of Righteousness appears, the sleeping body shall spring from the couch of its slumber, and take its place in the great company before the throne of a risen Lord.

Thus the body may be well said to sleep in the tomb. But the immortal spirit who shall fetter, who shall entomb it? The immortal spirit never sleeps, it needs no sleep, for it knows no fatigue, and the language of the Scripture is, "They rest not day and night, saying Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, which was, and is, and is to come." Rev. iv, 8.

But again, with reference to the soul itself, the present state is well represented by the figure of sleep, and for this reason: that sleep is the season of repose, and the repose of those we love above is perfect. You remember the voice heard from heaven, the voice of the Holy Ghost bearing testimony on this peaceful subject, "I heard a voice from heaven saying unto me, 'Write, blessed are the dead which die in the Lord from henceforth: Yea saith the Spirit, that they may rest from their labours.'" They rest, therefore, in sweet repose, but repose is not insensibility. It

involves no want of consciousness, and accordingly you have two passages apparently conflicting, but really in perfect harmony, the one saying that they rest, the other that they rest not, for the one refers to labours, the other to thanksgiving; the one describes the perfection of repose, the other the equal perfection of joyous, unceasing, and unfatigued activity.

Thus as to all that shall harass, distress, and grieve, there is repose or sleep. The world may be distracted by war and all its horrors, but the soul above is undisturbed by the tumult, for no storm can ruffle the calm surface of the sea of glass. There may be bitter sorrow filling many a broken heart, but it is unknown there, for as God himself has undertaken to wipe away all tears from their eyes. No fears or doubts are known there, for they are all allayed and scattered by the actual presence and perceptible love of their Saviour himself in the very midst of them. Above all there is no sin there. While sin lasts there can be no repose; but there, sin never enters; it may be sought for, but cannot be found, for it is all blotted out by the blood of the Lamb, and is remembered no more before the throne of God. And so it is with the beloved spirit now departed. She has wept, and those who knew her best remember well what a true mourner she was, and how deep was her feeling of heartfelt grief when it pleased God to remove from her the dear relatives whom she tenderly loved. But she weeps no more; every tear is dry, and every sorrow passed for eternity. She has had her fears, her doubts, her conflicts of soul, but there are none now; her race is run, she rests in her Lord, she sleeps in Jesus. She has struggled against sin, she has wrestled with God for holiness, as many of you know well, who have had the privilege of uniting with her in the outpourings of her soul before the throne. But it is all past now. There is not a spot in the white robe: she reposes a spotless conqueror before God.

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As to all that may distress, therefore, there is repose. But as to the sinless emotions of a living soul, we have the clearest evidence of Scripture that there is all the joy of activity without fatigue. No! there is no stupor, nor any want of consciousness to that light and lovely spirit. It is all life now, and life unfettered by the clogs and hindrances of decaying flesh. Memory is not dormant, for remember the vivid glow of gratitude with which the living ones before the throne adore the Lamb for having redeemed them by his blood from the various nations of mankind. Nor hope, for in that same song we find the joyful anticipation of their future reign. Nor praise, for the language of heaven is full of praise; and wherever the ransomed spirits speak it is in praise. Think not that the love is lost or deadened, for these sweet hymns in which so many amongst you have so often rejoiced to join with the departed. It is dangerous in such a matter to attempt to draw aside the veil, and we must not venture to let go imagination; but yet it seems as though we could almost perceive the new joy at the new song; the deep emotion, the elevated expression, and the hallowed animation with which she has already taken her place in the blessed chorus before the throne of her Lord.

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When, therefore, we speak of sleeping in Christ, we must not understand a state of insensibility, or any want of consciousness; but of sacred rest, of conscious, intelligent rest, in the peaceful enjoyment of the presence of the Lord. But as stated already, this rest, however glorious, is only the intermediate state, and it is mentioned as it were, incidentally, while drawing your thoughts to the crowning point—the grand expectation of the church of Christ.

II. Let us consider then, secondly, *The bright hope of the whole family.*

By the whole family, we mean the whole vast multitude of the children of God, “the whole family in heaven and earth;” now divided for awhile into two classes, the living and the departed; but really one in Christ, and about to be one in their common enjoyment of the blessings of his advent. Of these two portions neither has reached beyond the range of hope. The blessedness of the departed is unbounded now, but there are greater things in store for them; their cup seems full, but it shall be fuller still when Christ comes. The resurrection, not the death-bed, is the hope of the believer. We look not so much to the day when we enter the grave, and dear friends in bitter weeping part with us, as to the happy hour when we shall quit it, and those same friends rejoicing rise with us.

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To this long expected hour the passage clearly refers, “For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him. For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we which are alive and remain, shall not prevent them which are asleep. For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the Archangel, and with the trump of God; and the dead in Christ shall rise first.”

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The first point to be here noticed is clearly *the resurrection*. Death has been already said to be but a sleep, for it is not permanent. “She is not dead but sleepeth,” may be applied to her whom we left in the grave on Friday. That grave shall shortly give up its tenant, and very body, that tendering beloved body, shall arise again in fresh life and beauty. As the springs from the acorn, and the butterfly from the chrysalis, so shall that animated form rise forth with a fresh and heavenly animation; that very hand shall hold the palm, and that very voice unite once more in the praises of her Lord.

But though the same, it will be infinitely more glorious. You have seen lately a beautiful planet shedding its soft light over the ocean, and, evening after evening, it has appeared very lovely, but yet how far does it fall short in splendour of a summer’s sun in a cloudless sky! Just such we are taught in 1 Cor. xv, 41, is the wonderful difference between the dying and rising body. It was a bright and beautiful star that has been shedding forth its lovely light these many years in the midst of you; but, though beautiful, it is not to be compared to what we are about to behold in the resurrection. It was sown in corruption, little by little laying her low; but it shall be raised in incorruption, no more to be silenced by disease, or to give up through decay of strength. It was

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sown in dishonour and though dearly loved must be buried from the view; but it shall be raised in glory, to form a part of the triumphant retinue of the King of Kings. It was sown in weakness, and perhaps it was one of the most beautiful features of her character that that weakness was so meekly met, and so cheerfully submitted to; but it shall be raised in power, the power of undying strength, and everlasting life from God. It was sown a natural body, subject to the multiplied infirmities of a ruined, fallen, sin-stricken humanity: and none felt their hindrances more than she did; but it shall rise a spiritual body, fully fitted for spiritual work, without impediment and without decay. Can we wonder then that with such a prospect full in view, the Apostle should write to the bereaved Thessalonians, and remind them "concerning those which are asleep, that they sorrow not even as others which have no hope?"

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But this is not all. There is another blessing promised, and that is *reunion*.

The great sorrow of this day is separation. It is a sense of separation, of loss, and bereavement, that has drawn forth so many tears. Indeed there is little besides to cause a tear. As far as she is concerned there is no cause for sorrow. If ever there was one of whom it might be said "she fought a good fight, she has finished her course, she has kept the faith," it was of her. She was one who walked before God faithfully, who loved affectionately, who laboured cheerfully, who trusted simply, who rejoiced unfeignedly, and now she has sunk gently into the arms of her Lord, to repose there in perfect peace till the time comes when she shall be called forth to accompany His advent. Can we say there is sorrow in all this? Can we exclude the thoughts of even joy at such a conclusion of such a course? Yes, there is sorrow, and that because there is separation, and wherever there is true affection, the separation, however peaceful, must leave a void which nothing else upon earth can fill. The home is left desolate after all, and however sweet the assurance for the departed above, the heart still aches when left alone to tread a solitary path below. How beautifully then is this met in the passage! There is to be a reunion as well as a resurrection. We shall not rise separately, but as a reunited body in Christ. There is one beautiful clause that clearly teaches this,— "Then we which are alive and remain, shall be caught up, *together with them*, in the clouds." So that our blessed Lord when he comes against will not merely restore life, but companionship. He will undo all that death is doing. Death kills, He raises; death divides, He unites; death keeps us at a distance from those who are gone before, He brings us once more together, so that with them we should have the joy of one common life and glory. Nor will the ties of life be lost or forgotten in that new and sacred fellowship. The strong affections which God has planted will not be obliterated in the grave; for you remember that remarkable passage in this very epistle, in which the Apostle anticipates the joy of meeting these very Thessalonians at that blessed hour. In chap. ii, 19, he says "What is our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing? Are not even ye in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at his coming?" He clearly then expected to meet and recognize these converts at that day. For nearly 1800 years both he and they have slept in their graves, but the close and intimate tie that then united them shall appear with undiminished strength in their resurrection, and the risen Apostle shall rejoice in his risen converts before the Lord. Then will be the day for the regathering of broken families, and the healing of broken hearts. Then will be the reunion of the minister with the people, of the parent with the child, of the brother with the sister, of the husband with the wife; a reunion without the possibility of separation, for there shall be no more death, and the promise is that together with them we shall ever be with the Lord.

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But the passage carries us one step higher still, viz: to *the uninterrupted enjoyment of the presence of our Lord himself*.

There is first the resurrection, then the reunion, but the crowning promise of the whole is an everlasting fellowship with Christ himself. "So shall we ever be with the Lord." Now this must ever be the longing desire of the child of God. Nothing created can ever satisfy the soul that is born again of the Spirit. Friends may cheer, and counsel, and animate, and sympathize, but they cannot really satisfy, and a union with Christ is the only thing that can give abiding peace. You, whose privilege it was to kneel beside the loved and departed one in prayer, and to unite in the outpouring of the soul before her God, you can well remember how ardently she thirsted for Him; not merely for his gifts but for himself, that we might be satisfied with his love and filled with his Spirit. It was this ardent desire that led to her early rising in winter and summer, in order that she might make use of the blessed privilege of communion with God. It was this that made the Lord's day a delight to her soul, for she could rejoice in it as one altogether separated unto him. She thirsted to have her soul filled with the love of Christ, and when we reflect on such a character, what a power is there in the promise, "So shall we ever be with the Lord"! Then all thoughts will be absorbed in him, all hearts satisfied in him; and whether we be found among the living to be changed, or the dead to be raised, all will be one in him, to behold his glory, to hear his voice, to wonder at his love, and though faintly, yet sinlessly, to reflect his character. "Beloved now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be, but we know," we do not merely think, or hope, but we *know*, "that when he shall appear we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is."

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Such then is the blessed hope with which our God has directed us to comfort each other in the day of sorrow; and though our perception of it be but imperfect, we must all admit that it is sufficient. If this be not enough what more can we require? But before we close it is important that we all bear in mind that there is a limitation to the promise; not indeed as to the excellence of its rich gifts, but as to the persons by whom these gifts will be enjoyed; and there are two short clauses in the passage, which though short are very full, and mark with the utmost clearness who those are that shall be partakers of this blessed life. They are those who "sleep in Jesus"; or in

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other words those who are "dead in Christ." The whole work is the simple result of the great and perfect redemption wrought out by our Blessed Lord. If it had not been for the atonement there could have been no forgiveness, and no fellowship with God; and without his resurrection there could be none to follow for his people. All springs from redeeming Love, and all is enjoyed simply through Christ. Those that are without Christ must be given up to hopeless sorrow, for to them the passage is without its joy. But to those who are in him; not merely in his church, but in him; forgiven through his blood, justified through his righteousness, baptized by his Spirit into his body, to them the words are full of inexpressible consolation, and present a prospect so brilliant that it may well raise the heart above the sorrow of the intervening separation.

The great, grand, lesson for the day is therefore this, that we each one seek, and that without delay, for this unchanging union with Christ. You have seen amongst you the fruits of such a union, you have had residing in your midst for the last twenty-five years one who was without a doubt in Christ; who, I would rather say, is in Christ, who is with Christ, and who will rise in Him at his appearing. You have seen the character formed on such a union. You have witnessed the holy peace, the warm affection, the brightness of Christian joy, the tender and ever ready sympathy, the untiring zeal for souls, the patient labour, and the earnest endeavour to bring poor sinners to their Saviour. All this you have seen yourselves. Nor must we lay it down simply to natural character or inborn qualifications. We do not exclude these, for there was undoubtedly a beautiful character as the basis; but it was the union with Christ that gave to all its true beauty. It was the gift of the Holy Spirit earnestly sought in unceasing supplication before God. There never yet was one more ready to confess her own utter nothingness, or who felt more deeply that Christ Jesus, and Christ Jesus alone, was her every and only hope. And we must enjoy the same union if we would glorify God. Do we wish to walk in the steps of those that are gone before, or rather to follow Him whom they followed? We must seek the strength to do so in this union with Christ. Do we want to overcome sin, to fight manfully against the corruption of a depraved and fallen nature? Our only hope, and, thanks be to God! it is sufficient, is in this union with Christ. Do we desire to labour for God, and like her that is gone, to spend the powers which He has given in the delightful effort to gather in poor sinners to his kingdom? As the work must be for Christ, so the power must be in Christ, and the whole blessing granted through a union with Him. Do we wish to be able to meet the day of sorrow, and when the heart is overwhelmed to repose peacefully in the sure fidelity and tender sympathy of a gracious God who has loved us with an everlasting love? Again are we driven to the necessity of the same union, for through Him it is that the Holy Comforter descends into the soul. And do we desire to pass peacefully through the valley of the shadow of death, to be kept at peace when all around us fails, when the outward man decays, when the voice becomes silent, and the eye dim? Do we wish then to fall asleep in perfect safety? Our hope must be in that same blessed union with that same blessed Saviour; for not merely in the present may we then look up and say "I will fear no evil for thou art with me," but we may look beyond the valley and add "Them that sleep in Jesus will God bring with him."

Let this then be the deep impression produced by the day. Let us go home to consider well the nature and evidence of our own union with Christ. You, dear children in the schools, for whom it may be well said, that she "travailed in birth till Christ be formed in you." You young persons that have grown up under her care, and over whom she has watched with almost a maternal interest, since the day that you first crossed the threshold of the infant school. Take good heed every one of you to this great subject, and God grant that when Christ comes, like her, you may be found in Him. You that have been members of her different classes, and have had the privilege of uniting with her in the sweet communion of prayer and Christian intercourse, let the savour of those sacred hours long remain with you, and let the recollection ever rouse you to fresh and vigorous watchfulness as to your own union and abiding fellowship with Christ. Ye that are mourners here this day: ye that have come to this house of God with bleeding hearts. Dear Brethren, let your hearts be comforted. Think of her union with Christ. Remember well her past fellowship with him. Think of her now as sleeping with him, and soon about to return with Him. See what He has already done for her, and let the thought serve to raise your own heart heavenwards. Let it tend to satisfy your own soul in Him. Let it lead you to say, "All my fresh springs are in *thee*," and may He "supply all you need according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus!"

And, lastly, you that are still strangers to that blessed Saviour; still unconverted persons, with the burden of sin still on you; with no hope in the advent, and quite unprepared to die; let the death speak to your heart now if the life has failed to reach it. Perhaps you may be young persons trained in the schools, and under her influence from your very childhood, but still strangers to Christ. Remember then the earnestness of her exhortations, and the fervour of her prayers. Remember how she longed for your souls, and let this be the last day either of hardness or indifference. Could that voice speak from the grave how earnestly would it now appeal to you, and let the recollection of that voice now silenced move each stubborn heart to turn to God. The offer is now made to you, and none can say he is excluded. The atonement was made for all, and the offer is made freely to each individual. "Hear, and your soul shall live." It is impossible that any offer more magnificent could be made to the sinner. Here is pardon, peace, joy, union, resurrection, and everlasting fellowship with God, all offered to the most guilty sinner, and all without money and without price. Shall men remain hardened? Shall the sinner remain indifferent? Shall there be none this day resolved to cast themselves at his feet, that all sin may be blotted out through his blood, that when they depart hence, they may sleep in Him; and that when the trumpet shall sound, they may rise at his bidding, and spend eternity in the full enjoyment of his everlasting love?

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