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THE BOOKS OF HOMILIES: Book 1—IX. An exhortation against the fear of death

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For the Easter season, I am reading the Books of Homilies, using John Griffiths' 1859 edition (https://prydain.files.wordpress.com/2012/09/the_two_books_of_homilies.pdf).

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Transcript

An exhortation against the fear of death. It is not to be marveled that worldly men do fear to die. For death depriveth them of all worldly honours, riches, and possessions, in the fruition whereof the worldly man counteth himself happy, so long as he may enjoy them at his own pleasure.

And otherwise, if he be dispossessed of the same without hope of recovery, then he can none other think of himself but that he is unhappy, because he hath lost his worldly joy and pleasure. Alas, think of this carnal man! Shall I now depart forever from all my honours, all my treasures, from my country, friends, riches, possessions, and worldly pleasures, which are my joy and heart's delight? Alas, that ever that day should come, when all these I must bid farewell at once, and never to enjoy any of them after. Wherefore it is not without great cause spoken of the wise man.

O death, how bitter and sour is the remembrance of thee to a man that liveth in peace

and prosperity in his substance, to a man living at ease, leading his life after his own mind without trouble, and is therewith all well pampered and fed. There be other men, whom this world doth not so greatly laugh upon, but rather vex and oppress with poverty, sickness, or some other adversity. Yet they do fear death, partly because the flesh abhorreth naturally his own sorrowful dissolution, which death doth threaten upon them, and partly by reason of sicknesses and painful diseases, which be most strong pangs and agonies in the flesh, and use commonly to come to sick men before death, or at the least accompany death, whensoever it cometh.

Although these two causes seem great and weighty to a worldly man, whereupon he is moved to fear death, yet there is another cause much greater than any of these afore rehearsed, for which indeed he hath just cause to fear death, and that is the state and condition whereunto at the last end death bringeth all them that have their hearts fixed upon this world, without repentance and amendment. This state and condition is called the second death, which unto all such shall ensue after this bodily death, and this is that death which indeed ought to be dread and feared, for it is the everlasting loss, without remedy, of the grace and favour of God, and of everlasting joy, pleasure, and felicity. And it is not only the loss for ever of all these eternal pleasures, but also it is the condemnation both of body and soul, without either appellation or hope of redemption, unto everlasting pains in hell.

Unto this state death sent the unmerciful and ungodly rich man that Luke speaketh of in his gospel, who living in all wealth and pleasure in this world, and cherishing himself daily with dainty fare and gorgeous apparel, despised poor Lazarus, that lay pitifully at his gate, miserably played, and full of sores, and also grievously pined with hunger. Both these two were arrested of death, which sent Lazarus, the poor miserable man, by angels and nuns unto Abraham's bosom, a place of rest, pleasure, and consolation. But the unmerciful rich man descended down into hell, and being in torments he cried for comfort, complaining of the intolerable pain that he suffered in that flame of fire.

But it was too late. So unto this place bodily death sendeth all them that in this world have their joy and felicity, all them that in this world be unfaithful unto God, and uncharitable unto their neighbours, so dying without repentance and hope of God's mercy. Wherefore it is no marvel that the worldly man feareth death, for he hath much more cause to do so than he himself doth consider.

Thus we see three causes why worldly men fear death, one because they shall lose thereby their worldly honours, riches, possessions, and all their heart's desires, another because of the painful diseases and bitter pangs which commonly men suffer either before or at the time of death. But the chief cause above all other is the dread of the miserable state of eternal damnation both of body and soul, which they fear shall follow after their departing out of the worldly pleasures of this present life. For these causes be all mortal men which be given to the love of this world, both in fear and state of death

through sin, as the holy apostle saith, so long as they live here in this world.

But everlasting thanks be to Almighty God for ever. There is never one of all these causes, no, nor yet they altogether, that can make a true Christian man afraid to die, which is the very member of Christ, the temple of the Holy Ghost, the Son of God, and the very inheritor of the everlasting kingdom of heaven. But plainly contrary, he conceiveth great and many causes, undoubtedly grounded upon the infallible and everlasting truth of the word of God, which move him not only to put away the fear of bodily death, but also for the manifold benefits and singular commodities which ensue unto every faithful person by reason of the same, to wish, desire, and long heartily for it.

For death shall be to him no death at all, but a very deliverance from death, from all pains, cares, and sorrows, miseries, and wretchedness of this world, and the very entry into rest, and a beginning of everlasting joy, a tasting of heavenly pleasures, so great that neither tongue is able to express, neither eye to see, nor ear to hear them, no, nor for any earthly man's heart to conceive them. So exceeding great benefits they be which God our heavenly Father, by His mere mercy, and for the love of His Son, Jesus Christ, hath laid up in store and prepared for them that humbly submit themselves to God's will, and evermore unfeignedly love Him from the bottom of their hearts. And we ought to believe that death, being slain by Christ, cannot keep any man that steadfastly trusteth in Christ under his perpetual tyranny and subjection, but that he shall rise from death again unto glory at the last day, appointed by Almighty God, like as Christ our head did rise again, according to God's appointment, the third day.

For St. Augustine saith, The head going before, the members trust to follow and come after. And St. Paul saith, If Christ be risen from the dead, we shall rise also from the same. And to comfort all Christian persons herein, Holy Scripture calleth this bodily death, a sleep, wherein man's senses be, as it were, taken from him for a season, and yet when he awaketh, he is more fresh than he was when he went to bed.

So although we have our souls separated from our bodies for a season, yet at the general resurrection we shall be more fresh, beautiful and perfect than we be now. For now we be mortal, then we shall be immortal, now infect with diverse infirmities, then clearly void of all mortal infirmities. Now we be subject to all carnal desires, then we shall be all spiritual, desiring nothing but God's glory and things eternal.

Thus is this bodily death a door or entering unto life, and therefore not so much dreadful, if it be rightly considered, as it is comfortable. Not a mischief, but a remedy of all mischief. No enemy, but a friend.

Not a cruel tyrant, but a gentle guide, leading us not to mortality, but to immortality. Not to sorrow and pain, but to joy and pleasure, and that to endure for ever, if it be thankfully taken and accepted as God's messenger, and patiently born of us for Christ's love, that suffered most painful death for our love, to redeem us from death eternal.

According hereunto, St. Paul saith, our life is hid with Christ in God, but when our life shall appear, then shall we also appear with Him in glory.

Why then shall we fear to die, considering the manifold and comfortable promises of the gospel and of holy scriptures? God the Father hath given us everlasting life, saith St. John, and this life is in His Son. He that hath the Son hath life, and he that hath not the Son hath not life. And this I wrote, saith St. John, to you that believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have everlasting life, and that you do believe upon the name of the Son of God.

And our Saviour Christ, saith, he that believeth in me hath life everlasting, and I will raise him from death to life at the last day. St. Paul also saith that Christ is ordained and made of God our righteousness, our holiness and redemption, to the intent that he which will glory should glory in the Lord. St. Paul did contemn and set little by all other things, esteeming them as dung, which before he had in very great price, that he might be found in Christ, to have everlasting life, true holiness, righteousness and redemption.

Finally St. Paul maketh a plain argument in this wise, if our heavenly Father would not spare his own natural Son, but did give him to death for us, how can it be that with him he should not give us all things? Therefore if we have Christ, then have we with him and by him all good things, whatsoever we can in our hearts wish or desire, as victory over death, sin and hell. We have the favour of God, peace with him, holiness, wisdom, justice, power, life and redemption. We have by him perpetual health, wealth, joy and bliss everlasting.

It hath been heretofore showed you that there be three causes wherefore men do commonly fear death. First the sorrowful departing from worldly goods and pleasures, the second the fear of the pangs and pains that come with death, last and principal cause is the horrible fear of extreme misery and perpetual damnation in time to come. And yet none of these three causes troubleth good men, because they stay themselves by true faith, perfect charity and sure hope of the endless joy and bliss everlasting.

All those therefore have great cause to be full of joy that be joined to Christ with true faith, steadfast hope and perfect charity, and not to fear death nor everlasting damnation. For death cannot deprive them of Jesus Christ, nor any sin can condemn them that are grafted surely in him, which is their only joy, treasure and life. Let us repent our sins, amend our lives, trust in his mercy and satisfaction, and death can neither take him from us, nor us from him.

For then as St. Paul saith, whether we live or die, we be the Lord's own. And again he saith, Christ did die and rose again, because he should be the Lord both of the dead and quick. Then, if we be the Lord's own when we be dead, it must needs follow that such temporal death not only cannot harm us, but also that it shall be much to our profit, and join us unto God more perfectly.

And thereof the Christian heart may surely be certified by the infallible or undeceivable truth of Holy Scripture. It is God, saith St. Paul, which hath prepared us unto immortality, and the same is he which hath given us an earnest of the Spirit. Therefore let us be always of good comfort, for we know that, so long as we be in the body, we be as it were far from God in a strange country, subject to many perils, walking without perfect sight and knowledge of Almighty God, only seeing him by faith in Holy Scriptures.

But we have a courage and desire rather to be at home with God and our Saviour Christ, far from the body, where we may behold his Godhead as he is, face to face, to our everlasting comfort. These be St. Paul's words in effect, whereby we may perceive that the life in this world is resembled and likened to a pilgrimage in a strange country far from God, and that death, delivering us from our bodies, doth send us straight home into our own country, and maketh us to dwell presently with God for ever in everlasting rest and quietness, so that to die is no loss, but profit and winning to all true Christian people. What lost the thief that hanged on the cross with Christ by his bodily death? Yea, how much did he gain by it? Did not our Saviour say unto him, This day thou shalt be with me in paradise? And Lazarus, that pitiful person, that lay before the rich man's gate, pained with sores and pined with hunger, did not death highly profit and promote him, which by the ministry of angels sent him unto Abraham's bosom, a place of rest, joy, and heavenly consolation? Let us think none other, good Christian people, but Christ hath prepared and made ready before the same joy and felicity for us that he prepared for Lazarus and the thief.

Wherefore, let us stick unto his salvation and gracious redemption, and believe his word, serve him from our hearts, love and obey him, and whatsoever we have done heretofore, contrary to his most holy will, now let us repent in time, and hereafter study to correct our life, and doubt not, but we shall find him as merciful unto us as he was either to Lazarus or to the thief, whose examples are written in holy scripture for the comfort of them that be sinners and subject to sorrows, miseries, and calamities in this world, that they should not despair in God's mercy, but ever trust thereby to have forgiveness of their sins and life everlasting, as Lazarus and the thief had. Thus I trust every Christian man perceiveth by the infallible or undeceivable word of God that bodily death cannot harm nor hinder them that truly believe in Christ, but contrary shall profit and promote the Christian souls which being truly penitent for their offences depart hence in perfect charity, and ensure trust that God is merciful to them, forgiving their sins for the merits of Jesus Christ, his only natural Son. The second cause why some do fear death is sore sickness and grievous pains which partly come before death and partly accompanieth, or cometh with, death, whensoever it cometh.

This fear is the fear of the frail flesh and a natural passion belonging unto the nature of a mortal man. But true faith in God's promises and regard of the pains and pangs which Christ upon the cross suffered for us miserable sinners, with consideration of the joy and everlasting life to come in heaven, will mitigate and assuage less those pains, and

moderate, or bring into a mean, this fear, that it shall never be able to overthrow the hearty desire and gladness that the Christian soul hath to be separated from this corrupt body, that it may come to the gracious presence of our Saviour Jesus Christ. If we believe steadfastly the word of God, we shall perceive that such bodily sickness, pangs of death, or whatsoever dolorous pains we suffer, either before or with death, be nothing else in Christian men but the rod of our heavenly and loving Father, wherewith he mercifully correcteth us, either to try and declare the faith of his patient children, that they may be found laudable, glorious, and honourable in his sight, when Jesus Christ shall be openly showed to be the judge of all the world, or else to chasten and amend in them whatsoever offendeth his fatherly and gracious goodness, lest they should perish everlastingly.

And this his correcting rod is common to all them that be truly his. Therefore let us cast away the burden of sin that lieth so heavy in our necks, and return unto God by true penance an amendment of our lives. Let us with patience run this course that is appointed, suffering for his sake that died for our salvation, all sorrows and pains of death, and death itself joyfully, when God sendeth it to us, having our eyes fixed and set fast ever upon the head and captain of our faith, Jesus Christ, who, considering the joy that he should come unto, cared neither for the shame nor pain of death, but willingly conforming and framing his will to his father's will, most patiently suffered the most shameful and painful death of the cross, being innocent and harmless.

And now therefore he is exalted in heaven, and everlastingly sitteth on the right hand of the throne of God the Father. Let us call to our remembrance therefore the life and joys of heaven, that are kept for all them that patiently do suffer here with Christ. And consider that Christ suffered all his painful passion by sinners and for sinners, and then we shall with patience, and the more easily, suffer such sorrows and pains when they come.

Let us not set at light the chastising of the Lord, nor grudge at him, nor fall from him, when of him we be corrected. For the Lord loveth them whom he doth correct, and beateth every one whom he taketh to be his child. What child is that, saith St. Paul, whom the Father loveth, and doth not chastise? If ye be without God's correction, which all his well-beloved and true children have, then be ye but bastards, smally regarded of God, and not his true children.

Therefore, seeing that when we have in earth our carnal fathers to be our correctors, we do fear them, and reverently take their correction, shall we not much more be in subjection to God our spiritual Father, by whom we shall have everlasting life? And our carnal fathers sometime correct us, even as pleaseth them, without cause. But this Father justly correcteth us, either for our sin, to the intent we should amend, or for our commodity and wealth, to make us thereby partakers of his holiness. Furthermore, all correction which God sendeth us, in this present time, seemeth to have no joy and

comfort, but sorrow and pain.

Yet it bringeth with it a taste of God's mercy and goodness towards them that be so corrected, and a sure hope of God's everlasting consolation in heaven. If then these sorrows, diseases, and sicknesses, and also death itself, be nothing else but our heavenly Father's rod, whereby he certifieth us of his love and gracious favor, whereby he trieth and purifieth us, whereby he giveth unto us holiness, and certifieth us that we be his children, and he our merciful Father, shall not we then, with all humility, as obedient and loving children, joyfully kiss our heavenly Father's rod, and ever say in our heart, with our Savior Jesus Christ, Father, if this anguish and sorrow which I feel, and death which I see approach, may not pass, but that thy will is that I must suffer them, thy will be done. In this sermon against the fear of death, two causes were declared, which commonly move worldly men to be in much fear to die, and yet the same do nothing trouble the faithful and good-livers when death cometh, but rather giveth them occasion greatly to rejoice, considering that they shall be delivered from the sorrow and misery of this world, and be brought to the great joy and felicity of the life to come.

Now the third and special cause why death indeed is to be feared, is the miserable state of the worldly and ungodly people after their death. But this is no cause at all why the godly and faithful people should fear death, but rather contrarywise their godly conversation in this life, and belief in Christ, cleaving continually to his merits, should make them to long soar after that life that remaineth for them, undoubtedly after this bodily death, of this immortal state, after this transitory life, where we shall live evermore in the presence of God, in joy and rest, after victory over all sickness, sorrows, sin, and death. There be many both plain places of holy scripture, which confirm the weak conscience against the fear of all such dolers, sicknesses, sin, and bodily death, to assuage such trembling and ungodly fear, and to encourage us with comfort and hope of a blessed state after this life.

St. Paul wisheth unto the Ephesians that God the Father of glory would give unto them the spirit of wisdom and revelation, that the eyes of their hearts might have light to know him, to perceive how great things he had called them unto, and how rich inheritance he hath prepared after this life for them that pertain unto him. And St. Paul himself declareth the desire of his heart, which was to be dissolved and loosed from his body, and to be with Christ, which, as he said, was much better for him, although to them it was more necessary that he should live, which he refused not for their sakes. Even like as St. Martin said, Good Lord, if I be necessary for thy people, to do good unto them, I will refuse no labour, but else, for mine own sake, I beseech thee to take my soul.

Now the holy fathers of the old law, and all faithful and righteous men which departed before our Saviour Christ's ascension into heaven, did by death depart from troubles unto rest, from the hands of their enemies into the hands of God, from sorrows and sicknesses unto joyful refreshing, into Abraham's bosom, a place of all comfort and

consolation, as scriptures do plainly by manifest words testify. The book of wisdom saith that the righteous men's souls be in the hand of God, and no torment shall touch them. They seemed to the eyes of foolish men to die, and their death was counted miserable, and their departing out of this world wretched, but they be in rest.

And another place saith that the righteous shall live for ever, and their reward is with the Lord, and their minds be with God, who is above all, therefore they shall receive a glorious kingdom, and a beautiful crown at the Lord's hand. And in another place the same book saith, the righteous, though he be prevented with sudden death, nevertheless he shall be there where he shall be refreshed. Of Abraham's bosom Christ's words be so plain that a Christian man needeth no more proof of it.

Now then, if this were the state of the holy fathers and righteous men before the coming of our Saviour, and before he was glorified, how much more then ought all we to have a steadfast faith, and a sure hope of this blessed state and condition after our death, seeing that our Saviour now hath performed the whole work of our redemption, and is gloriously ascended into heaven, to prepare our dwelling places with him, and saith unto his father, Father, I will that where I am my servants shall be with me, and we know that whatsoever Christ will, his father will the same, wherefore it cannot be but, if we be his faithful servants, our souls shall be with him after our departing out of this present life. Saint Stephen, when he was stoned to death, even in the midst of his torments, what was his mind most upon? When he was full of the Holy Ghost, saith Holy Scripture, having his eyes lifted up into heaven, he saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing on the right hand of God. The wretched truth, after he had confessed boldly before the enemies of Christ, they drew him out of the city, and there they stoned him, who cried unto God, saying, Lord Jesus Christ, take my spirit, and doth not our Saviour say plainly in Saint John's Gospel, Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that heareth my word, and believeth him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and cometh not into judgment, but shall pass from death to life.

Shall we not then think that death to be precious, by the which we pass unto life? Therefore it is a true saying of the prophet, The death of the holy and righteous men is precious in the Lord's sight. Holy Simeon, after that he had had his heart's desire in seeing our Saviour, that he ever longed for all his life, he embraced or took him in his arms, and said, Now, Lord, let me depart in peace, for mine eyes have beholden that Saviour which thou hast prepared for all nations. It is truth, therefore, that the death of the righteous is called peace, and the benefit of the Lord, as the church saith in the name of the righteous departed out of this world.

My soul, turn thee to thy rest, for the Lord hath been good to thee, and rewarded thee. And we see by holy scripture, and other ancient histories of martyrs, that the holy, faithful, and righteous, ever since Christ's ascension, or going up, in their death, did not doubt but that they went to be with Christ in spirit, which is our life, health, wealth, and

salvation. John, in his holy revelation, saw a hundred forty and four thousand virgins and innocents, of whom he said, These follow the Lamb Jesus Christ, wheresoever he goeth.

And shortly after, in the same place, he saith, I heard a voice from heaven saying unto me, Write, Happy and blessed are the dead which die in the Lord, from henceforth surely, saith the spirit, They shall rest from their pains and labours, for their works do follow them. So that then they shall reap with joy and comfort that which they sowed with labours and pains. They that sow in the spirit of the Spirit shall reap everlasting life.

Let us therefore never be weary of well-doing, for when the time of reaping or reward cometh, we shall reap without any weariness, everlasting joy. Therefore, while we have time, as St. Paul exhorteth us, let us do good to all men, and not lay up our treasures on earth, where rust and moths corrupt it, which rust, as St. James saith, shall bear witness against us at the great day, condemn us, and shall like most burning fire torment our flesh. Let us beware therefore, as we tender our own wealth, that we be not in the number of those miserable, covetous, and wretched men, which St. James biddeth mourn and lament for their greedy gathering and ungodly keeping of goods.

Let us be wise in time, and learn to follow the wise example of the wicked steward. Let us so wisely order our goods and possessions, committed unto us here by God for a season, that we may truly hear and obey this commandment of our Saviour Christ. I say unto you, saith he, make you friends of the wicked mammon, that they may receive you into everlasting tabernacles or dwellings.

Riches he calleth wicked, because the world abuseth them unto all wickedness, which are otherwise the good gift of God, and the instruments whereby God's servants do truly serve him in using of the same. He commanded them not to make them rich friends, to get high dignities and worldly promotions, to give great gifts to rich men that have no need thereof, but to make them friends of poor and miserable men, unto whom whatsoever they gave, Christ taketh it as given to himself. And to these friends Christ in the gospel giveth so great honour and preeminence, that he saith, They shall receive them that do good unto them, into everlasting houses.

Not that men shall be our rewarders for our well-doing, but that Christ will reward us, and take it to be done unto himself, whatsoever is done to such friends. Thus making poor riches our friends, we make our Saviour Christ our friend, whose members they are, whose misery as he taketh for his own misery, so their relief, succour and help he taketh for his succour, relief and help, and will as much thank us and reward us for our goodness showed to them, as if he himself had received like benefit at our hands, as he witnesseth in the gospel, saying, Whatsoever ye have done to any of these simple persons which do believe in me, that have ye done to myself. Therefore let us diligently foresee that our faith and hope, which we have conceived in almighty God, and in our Saviour Christ, wax not faint, nor that the love which we bear in hand to bear to him wax

not cold.

But let us study daily and diligently to show ourselves to be the true honourers and lovers of God, by keeping of his commandments, by doing of good deeds unto our needy neighbours, relieving by all means that we can, their poverty with our abundance and plenty, their ignorance with our wisdom and learning, and comfort their weakness with our strength and authority, calling all men back from evil doing, by godly counsel and good example, persevering still in well-doing so long as we live. So shall we not need to fear death for any of those three causes aforementioned, nor yet for any other cause that can be imagined. But contrary, considering the manifold, sicknesses, troubles, and sorrows of this present life, the dangers of this perilous pilgrimage, and the great encumbrance which our spirit hath by this sinful flesh and frail body, subject to death, considering also the manifold, sorrows, and dangerous deceits of this world on every side, the intolerable pride, covetousness, and lechery in time of prosperity, the impatient murmuring of them that be worldly in time of adversity, which cease not to withdraw and pluck us from God, our Saviour Christ, from our life, wealth, or everlasting joy in salvation, considering also the innumerable assaults of our ghostly enemy the devil, with all his fiery darts of ambition, pride, lechery, vainglory, envy, malice, detraction, or backbiting, with other his innumerable deceits, engines, and snares, whereby he goeth busily about to catch all men under his dominion, ever like a roaring lion, by all means searching whom he may devour, the faithful Christian man, which considereth all these miseries, perils, and incommodities, whereunto he is subject, so long as he here liveth upon earth, and on the other part considereth that blessed and comfortable state of the heavenly life to come, and the sweet condition of them that depart in the Lord, how they are delivered from the continual encumbrances of their mortal and sinful body, from all the malice, crafts, and deceits of this world, from all the assaults of their ghostly enemy the devil, to live in peace, rest, and endless quietness, to live in the fellowship of innumerable angels, and with the congregation of perfect just men, as patriarchs, prophets, martyrs, and confessors, and finally unto the presence of Almighty God, and our Saviour Jesus Christ, he that doth consider all these things, and believeth them assuredly, as they are to be believed, even from the bottom of his heart, being established in God, in this true faith, having a quiet conscience in Christ, a firm hope, and assured trust in God's mercy through the merits of Jesus Christ, to obtain this quietness, rest, and everlasting joy, shall not only be without fear of bodily death when it cometh, but certainly, as Saint Paul did, so shall he gladly, according to God's will, and when it please God to call him out of this life, greatly desire it in his heart, that he may be rid from all these occasions of evil, and live ever to God's pleasure, in perfect obedience of his will, with our Saviour Jesus Christ, to whose gracious presence the Lord of his infinite mercy and grace bring us, to reign with him in life everlasting, to whom with our Heavenly Father and the Holy Ghost be glory in worlds without end.

Amen.