

Chapter 4

The Reign of Death

THE WHOLE incident of the entrance of death into the world by Adam's disobedience, may be considered as the next exhibition of the visible hand of God in human affairs—an exhibition reaching down to our own day in the continuance and propagation of the death constitution then miraculously established. It has become quite unfashionable to suppose that death entered into the world at that time. It is universally accepted in learned circles that death has always been in the world. So far as their view is founded on manifest truth, it will be received by every mind that desires to know what is true. Birth, growth, and death have, doubtless, been the law of animal and vegetable existence ever since they appeared on the earth, as proved by the embedded and fossilised remains which have been exhumed at all depths in every part of the earth; but this does not touch the question before us. The question is—the mortality of Adam's race; how did it come? Was the race created subject to death? or did death come as a specific divine super-addition for a reason that came into play after Adam was made? No light is thrown on this problem by the fact that other and lower animal organisms have always been subject to death; because if Adam was separately introduced afterwards, in the image of the Elohim, as lord of all the inferior creation, it is reasonable, even apart from testimony, to suppose that his case was separately and specifically dealt with. If it be urged that the fossil remains of the past include human remains, as well as remains of the inferior races, the answer has to be made that there is a lack of scientific evidence that these remains are identical with the Adamic race. The animal and vegetable remains are those of species now largely extinct, belonging to pre-Adamic ages; and analogy would require that what are considered human remains, if they are human remains (which is by no means certain from the evidence) are the remains of an anterior race, existing at a remote time, when as yet the earth had not been overtaken by the convulsion which brought it to the state (developed in darkness and submerged in the deep) depicted to us in [Gen. 1:2](#). The Adamic race is a new start; and our enquiry relates to it. Did it commence mortal, or was it brought down to a mortal state after it appeared?

It is impossible to get any light on this question from geology or any other natural source. Speculation on the subject on scientific premises is only pretentious maundering. There is a short and satisfactory way to the root of the matter. As on many other subjects, so in this, the resurrection of Christ is the key of the whole position. If Christ rose from the dead, Paul, his specially selected apostle, is an inspired declarer of truth. Consequently, his dogmatic assertion that “by one man (Adam) sin entered into the (human) world and death by sin” is a settlement of the question. Paul's dogmatic assertion does not stand alone. It is founded on and endorses the Mosaic account, which is itself commended to our confidence as divine on separate and independent grounds. However unfashionable it may have become, therefore, and however unscientific and far behind it may seem, the man stands on logically unassailable ground who holds that death did not come into the world with Adam, but by him after he came; that at first, he was free from the action of death in his organisation; that though not absolutely immortal in the sense of being indestructible in nature, he was in that state with respect to the working and tendency of his organisation, that death did not wait him in the natural path, but had to be introduced as a law of his being before he could become mortal. His was an animal nature that

would not die left to itself—a natural body free from death. The difference between this state and the immortality to which we are invited in Christ, and which Adam would have attained in the event of final obedience, will be discerned in the fact that the latter immortality is the immortality of a spiritual body; the immortality of a higher nature; a body with higher gifts, powers, and relations. An elephant lives a hundred years, and man sometimes lives a hundred years, but the human century is the century of a higher life, higher capacity, higher intelligence, higher enjoyment than the elephantine century; but they are both a century. Extend the century indefinitely; let the elephant live on and the man live on—for ever; then we should have the difference illustrated between the deathlessness of Adam the living soul or natural body, and the immortality he would have attained by change into the likeness of the divine nature.

But this immortality Adam did not attain. Nay, he lost the good natural state which was his by creation. He had to confess to having eaten of the tree which he was commanded not to eat; and he had to suffer the dread sentence which doomed him, after a life of toil, to return to the ground from which he had been taken. In the execution of this sentence, we have the visible hand of God. Left to himself as God had made him, he would not have returned to the ground: left to himself, too, the ground would have brought forth beneficially and plentifully. It required what men call a miracle to depress to the level of the beasts that perish, the noble creature formed in the image of the Elohim, and to cause the earth to yield spontaneously “thorns also and thistles. “Cursed is the ground for thy sake” ([Gen. 3:17, 18](#)). It was not cursed before. “Thou shalt die” ([Gen. 2:17](#)): this was not the prospect apart from disobedience. How were the two results effectuated? By the interposition of the Divine will causing the one and the other. The Divine power that made man and the ground “very good” at the beginning easily modified the constitution of things for evil. A slight alteration in the condition of the soil and in the distribution and proportional activity of vegetable germs, was sufficient to make it soon apparent that the curse of God was on the earth, while as regards Adam, the sentence judicially pronounced would write itself in his constitution after the example of Elisha’s imprecation of the leprosy on Gehazi who went from the presence of the prophet’s words as white as snow. Mortality has been a fundamental law of human nature from that day to this. We have all to acknowledge with Paul, the “sentence of death in ourselves” ([2 Cor. 1:9](#)). This sentence is anterior to and surmounts all questions and conditions of health. It draws an inexorable boundary line beyond which human development cannot pass, however carefully promoted. It is a circle enclosing human life—a contracting circle—which will go on contracting till it comes to the vanishing point. Men may labour for the improvement of their species: but it is in vain. All their hygienics are within the contracting circle. They may stave off the concentric collapse for a little: they may do something to ensure the highest attainable vigour for mortal life—that is, condemned life; but it is mere tinkering—valuable in its place, but of no moment in the ultimate and final relations of things. It is the truest philosophy that recognises, once for all, that at his best estate, under present circumstances, man is altogether vanity ([Ps. 39:5](#)). Paul had to say of himself and his class, “we groan within ourselves, waiting for the adoption, the redemption of our body” ([Rom. 8:23](#)). “We that are in this tabernacle do groan, being burdened: not that we would be unclothed, but clothed upon, that mortality might be swallowed up of life” ([2 Cor. 5:4](#)). The man who expects to improve on Paul’s philosophy or David’s, is bound to find himself woefully mistaken at last, and that, without waiting long in any case. Death is written in our present nature. It was written in Eden. It is the writing of God; no man can blot it out. God can, and will in the cases He chooses. He began the work at Nazareth in harmony with his own greatness. He sent forth His son in the death-written nature that in him it might be cleansed,

redeemed, and perfected. “Since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead” (1 Cor. 15:21). How the resurrection came by man is told in the life and death of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham. It came by his obedience (Rom. 5:19), but obedience requiring death as the declaration of Jehovah’s righteousness (Rom. 3:25), and the condemnation of sin in the flesh (Rom. 8:3). Jesus died unto sin once (Rom. 6:10). It touched him through Adam: but though a sufferer from its effects, he was without sin himself (Heb. 4:15). Having died once, death has no more dominion over him (Rom. 6:9). “Through death, he destroyed that having the power of death, that is, the devil”—otherwise sin in the flesh (Heb. 2:14). By him and by him alone can men attain to tins victory, for it has been wrought in him and in him only as yet. He will confer the fellowship and participation of his victory on those who come unto God by him (Heb. 5:9; 7:25; Rev. 2:7). He will do it by the power God has given him. God has given him power over all flesh with this view (John 17:2). By it, he will change the bodies of his people that they may be conformed to the likeness of his own glorious body (Phil. 3:21). The spirit of God, changing the mortal to the immortal, will thus blot out the sentence of death written in Eden. Thus one miracle will undo the effects of another. That is, God will change His own work as wisdom and love, in their times and seasons, require. God who kills will make alive; God who curses will bless; God who causes evil will bestow good: for all these things belong to Him (Deut. 32:39; Isaiah 45:7). “Of him and to him and through him, are all things.”

The hand of God is visible in a variety of other items to be briefly noted before passing from Eden. The visits of the angels we considered in the last chapter. The speaking of the serpent probably comes into this category. A speaking serpent has not been disclosed in the annals of natural history since that time. The possibility of such a thing will, of course, not be denied by any wise man. It is a mere question of throat mechanism and the relation of the necessary nerves of volition to that mechanism. The parrot illustrates such an adaptation, only minus ideas to express by this means. The serpent had the ideas and the power of expressing them, too. Was this combination the result of natural organisation, or was it an extra-natural gift as in the case of the ass that forbade the madness of Balaam? In either case, the hand of God is visible: for if it was not a miraculous endowment for the occasion, then miraculousness is visible in the withdrawal of the power as part of the degradation of the serpent. The Miltonic idea of Satanic possession or personation is of course entirely out of the question. The Satan of that theory is a myth, as we know from considerations for which this is not the place. Whether it were natural endowment or divine inspiration that led the creature to entice the woman to disobedience, the moral bearings of the incident are the same. The obedience of Adam and Eve *was put to the proof*. And this was the object intended. Left to themselves, obedience would have been a matter of course; but it is not obedience of this mild description that is commendable to God. *Obedience under trial* is what pleases God. To give Adam and Eve an opportunity for obedience of this sort, or to terminate and set aside the obedience they were rendering if it should prove of the flimsy order of a mere circumstantial compliance, this creature was placed in the way. It was a divine arrangement with a divine object. The same principle was afterwards illustrated when “God did tempt Abraham” (Gen. 22:1), that is, put him to the proof, by requiring at his hands a performance which seemed on the face of it inconsistent even with God’s own purposes in the case. There is no contradiction in this to James’ deprecation of any man saying, “I am tempted of God” (James 1:13), for in the case of James’ discourse, it is a question of enticing to evil for evil’s sake. God never does this to a just man: He tries him, and in this sense tempts him, which is another thing. We may be quite sure if we are children of God that some time or other, we

shall be similarly put to the proof. To him that overcometh (offering the stout front of a determined obedience to God to all suggestions or incitements in any direction forbidden), will the palm of victory be finally awarded. In our case, the hand of God is not visible; but the principle is the same. Allowance, however, will doubtless be made for the lesser privilege of those who like us have not been permitted to see with our own eyes the visible hand of God. The principle of God's recorded dealings would suggest this ([2 Chron. 30:18–20](#); [John 20:29](#); [Luke 12:48](#); [Acts 16:30](#); [John 9:41](#)).

Next to the part performed by the serpent, we have the visible hand of God in the qualities imparted to the trees of knowledge and life, and the expulsion of Adam and his wife from Eden, and the fiery blockade of the approach. As to the first, it was no ordinary tree that had power to open the eyes and to impart new discernments. That the tree of knowledge of good and evil had this power is evident from the things testified concerning it, and from the effects produced on Adam and Eve. The serpent said that the eating of the tree would have this effect, and its words were shown to be true by the actual result. That the serpent should state the truth in the case would probably be due to his overhearing the Elohim converse on the subject. The serpent seems to refer to them as his authority: "Elohim doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, your eyes shall be opened" ([Gen. 3:5](#)). That the effect was produced would show that the power to produce the effect resided in the tree. That such a power should exist in such a cause will stagger no one who is acquainted with the extraordinary and diversified powers resident in vegetable juices of even familiar acquaintance, not that any of them have the powers of imparting knowledge, but that they illustrate the possibility of producing mental effects by a substance of vegetable constitution. Such a tree in Eden was placed there as part of the apparatus constituting the visible hand of God in the Adamic situation. To Adam, it would seem as natural as the rest, and probably was so in the truly scientific sense; to us, it savours of miracle, merely because we do not know of such a tree, and never heard of any one having access to it since the one man for whom it was specially planted as part of the garden which "The Lord God planted eastward in Eden," there to "put the man to dress and to keep it."

These reflections are specially cogent in their bearing upon that other tree, of which he was not permitted to eat—the tree of life—in which resided the extraordinary power that had he partaken of it even after his condemnation, he would have lived for ever ([Gen. 3:22](#)). We may dismiss the idea that some have advanced, that Adam had been in the habit of eating this tree: and that so long as he did so, he was immortal, and that all that was necessary to secure his mortality was to cut him off from the use of the daily medicament. The prompt and energetic precautions taken "lest he should put forth his hand and take *also* of the tree of life," are out of keeping with this idea. It was a single eating in the case of the single tree of knowledge; and the "also" of this verse suggests that it was a similar contingency that was in view in the case of the tree of life. The interposition of a "a flaming sword which turned every way to keep the way of the tree of life," would have been an excess of energy if the object was merely to cut off the supply of what required to be daily taken in order to have its effect. The withering of the tree or expulsion from the garden would in that case have met all the necessities of the situation. Then it would have been strangely disproportionate with the facts to speak of Adam, "putting forth his hand and eating and living for ever," if he had to eat for ever in order to live for ever; and a rather over-vigorous use of language to call a tree of life that which had only power to impart life during the short time the quantity taken might remain in the system. The figurative use of the tree in the New Testament, to represent the life everlasting which God will give to all who receive Christ at the resurrection, is inconsistent with the notion that it had to be used constantly to be

effective. The whole surroundings of the case show that Adam had not taken of it, and that if he had, he would have become immortal. The only countenance to the contrary idea is the permission to eat “of every tree of the garden,” except the tree of knowledge in the midst of the garden ([Gen. 3:2, 3; 2:16](#)). It is argued that this must have included the tree of life. But this does not follow. The tree of life was evidently not reckoned among “the trees of the garden.” It seems to have stood apart by itself, having a “way” or approach that could be guarded ([Gen. 3:24](#)).

That a tree should have the power of imparting immortality to the eater will only strike us as strange by reason of our want of experience of such a thing. There is no end to the variety of God’s operations in the universe. Immortality will ultimately be conferred by the direct transfusion of the Spirit of God upon the substance of the accepted by the will of Christ; but it is impossible to deny that God could effect the same result in another way, by the same power differently applied. God showed Moses a tree in the desert, which, on portions of it being put into the bitter springs, healed the water ([Ex. 15:25](#)). So He could make a vegetable substance which would have a similar effect on the organs of the eater. He did actually create such a tree in the beginning; had Adam proved obedient, he would probably have been invited to eat. The event turned out otherwise, and the tree, first carefully guarded from intrusion, was in course of time removed.

The guarding of the way of the tree of life was an operation of what would be called the miraculous order. “A flaming sword which turned every way” was no natural phenomenon, yet it was not essentially different from what we may see and know any day. Destructive fire and brightness of light are familiar, if latent, properties of nature in its dullest aspects. Fire sleeps in stone, and who that has seen the electric light can fail to realise the dazzling brightness that resides in the invisible electric current or the lifeless charcoal. The difference between these and the Edenic coruscation lies in the fact that while they are passive and mechanical forces of nature as divinely constituted, this was the product of the Divine volition brought to bear locally and specifically for a limited purpose. All power is one—in God, but there are different manifestations according to His will. In the upholding of heaven and earth, we see power in a mechanical state: passive, inert, established; in what is called miracle, we see the same power acting under an intelligent impulse derived from the centre of all power—the everlasting God—the Creator of the ends of the earth.

The whole situation in Eden required the visible hand of God. The veiled hand—the indirect guidance—would not have been adapted to a time when there was but as yet a single individual, and he in harmony with the Superior Will which had given him being. The ways of Providence were for after times, when men had multiplied, and sin had introduced that confusion out of which the Divine wisdom purposes the evolution of order, and the highest good. The veiled hand belongs to times of evil only. When the ministry of reconciliation—(“to wit, that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them”) shall have accomplished its object, there will be no need for God to hide Himself from the inhabitants of the earth. His power and wisdom are now manifest, for they cannot be concealed; but His existence and His love have to be laboriously discerned. He has withdrawn the open manifestation of Himself, both from Israel and the Gentiles; but on the day that He has appointed—on the day when His earth family is complete and His will paramount everywhere under the sun, there will be an end to concealment. This is one of the great and precious promises—that we shall know as we are known ([1 Cor. 13:12](#))—that heaven will be open—([John 1:51](#)): that the tabernacle of God will be with men, and His servants shall serve Him. and they shall see His face, and there shall be no night there ([Rev. 21:3; 22:5](#)), that God will be all in all ([1 Cor. 15:28](#)).