

THE GOD WHO KILLETH*

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IN many places in the Bible, reference is made to an aspect of God's work which is both awesome and necessary. In the Old Testament we hear of this divine action: "The Lord killeth, and maketh alive" (I Sam. 2: 6). It is in the New Testament, however, that we get a deeper insight into the essential character of this divine work, inasmuch as we here find defined what it is that must die in man, namely, our old self (the ego), or that which the Bible calls the flesh. More than once the New Testament states quite directly that the flesh *must* be done away with, that it must be crucified (Gal. 5: 24; Rom. 6: 6).

In our present day and age this significant part of God's saving work is, on the whole, not proclaimed and preached with any degree of clarity. In consequence we find that many awakened and converted people limp around, having neither peace nor assurance. Many of these men and women remain in this spiritual condition over a prolonged period of time, often in very great agony of spiritual suffering.

May I venture the guess that there are none in this day and age whom our preaching has greater difficulty in giving true help than these people. This situation may well be caused by the helplessness we sense as we stand face to face with a spiritual condition which we do not seem to be able to understand. The truth of the matter is that these men and women fall a bit outside of our ordinary and superficially accepted patterns of the cure of souls. In fact, it would seem quite clear that these people would definitely get more spiritual help only if, once again, we were to preach something of that mystery which the Scriptures call God's mortifying work.

If that should happen, they would get an adequate answer to their perennial query: "Why does God withhold from me his assurance and his peace? Why is God so harsh in his dealings with me?" In truth, these are the exact questions which the Bible answers with

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such frank simplicity: *God killeth*. There is something in the human heart that must be killed, and it is that resistance which God desires to kill, whether we understand it or not.

Now, what is this thing that must be killed? "I died," Paul says (Rom. 7: 10). It is the old "I," the ego, that must be done away with. The self-life must be broken and utterly crushed—and not only the self-life in the form of egotism; but the life of the self itself in its relation to God. It is this religious self and its self-sufficiency that, above all else, must be crushed and annihilated.

This basic confidence in myself, in my own grasp of things spiritual, this stubborn confidence in the efficacy of my own will, my own religion and morality, this self-confidence which always sets itself up in opposition to God, it is this self which is the fundamental hindrance to my salvation by grace; it is this everlasting trust in myself that must be killed.

The mortification of this innate and rooted self-confidence is, perchance, the most difficult work that God has to do in us. This natural faith in ourselves is the deepest cancer in the life of fallen man.

God explodes the old self-life by an internal spiritual explosion. He drives the self on and on until it has exhausted all its energies and lies, at length, before God—surrendered and mortified. Let us examine this process a little more in detail.

An ordinary natural man, who lives like most people do, will not deny, before himself, that he has both faults and imperfections. Even so, the old self remains of good cheer. All these flaws will be changed and improved at the appropriate time. For the moment, however, it does not fit into the scheme of things to make any effort in bringing about a radical change in one's accustomed habits of life.

But, then, God explodes this position of self-complacency. Through God's Word and an awakened, sharpened conscience, this natural man comes to see that what his situation calls for is nothing less than a complete conversion, a totally new life.

This discovery does not, however, crush the old ego. On the contrary, it has now received a truly grand and serious assignment, namely, to produce a conversion. So it sets about this new task in a spirit of full earnestness. Up till now, it has lived a thoughtless and frivolous life, but all that is to be changed, for now this self is going to become converted.

But, then, God explodes even this. Through God's Word and an awakened, sharpened conscience this natural man comes to understand that conversion actually is something totally different from that which it first seemed to be. Conversion means nothing less than a change of one's mind.

Not even this discovery, however, can subdue the old ego. On the contrary it now proceeds with increased earnestness. It beseeches God daily for a new mind and a new attitude. It converses with God in the Word and in sacred meditations. It fights against sin; and this, not only against sin in word and in deed, but against evil thoughts and lusts and imaginations. It will admit that this struggle is none too successful, but the old self is not without hope. Gradually the situation will improve, when the ego has been given time to practice how to become God-fearing and holy.

But, then, God explodes even this spiritual position. Through the Word and the sharpened conscience, the awakened soul discovers that the new mind that God expects to find in man is *love*. And strangely enough, to *love* God is the only thing he cannot achieve or do. In general the natural man can accomplish quite a bit. He can offer serious prayers to God. He can hear and read the Holy Writ with reverence and worshipful attention. He can renounce sin and a godless life. He can sacrifice of his time, energy, and means to God and to his cause. He is even capable of a certain amount of martyrdom for the sake of the Christian name. All this, and yet he never succeeds in *loving* God. His conscience tells him, calmly and incisively: "It is not for God's sake that you are doing all these works, but in your own interest. Now, as always, you love yourself above all things."

Not even this discovery, however, crushes the old ego. It has another escape route. And it is truly strange that earlier use of this way out has not been made: it is the path of repentance. After all, the Bible tells—and with what eloquence!—how willing God is to welcome and to receive the repentant sinner. Furthermore, this is also the message which is heard from every pulpit in the land: that nothing more is needed in order to be saved than to come to God as a repenting sinner, receiving forgiveness for Christ's sake.

But God bursts asunder even this. Through the Word and the sharpened conscience, the awakened soul recognizes that his repentance is just as egotistical as all the rest of the works that he has been

doing. Of course, he can regret his sins. But he does not lament the fact that he lives a life in revolt against God and thus saddens the loving Divine Heart. No, like any other egotist, this man feels remorse because of the unfortunate consequences of his sins for himself. Aside from that kind of remorse, his heart is as cold as ice and as hard as stone. He admittedly sees that he disobeys God and sins against him every day, but this fact does not truly upset him.

The truth of the matter is that the old self is not completely defeated even now. It has one more escape route. Indeed it is more than remarkable that this way out has not been seen before. It is the path of *faith*. The New Testament proclaims that the sinner now, in the new covenant, is saved by faith, and by faith alone. And all preachers keep on explaining this truth so eloquently: Only believe!

Now, at length, the awakened soul begins to put all his heart into this work of believing. This time he must succeed, since it is necessary only to believe—nothing more.

But then God bursts asunder even this approach. One discovers that it is not so easy to believe. There is certainly nothing *only* about the “only” in “only believe.” The honest soul keeps telling itself that it probably never has tried anything quite so difficult as the thing called faith.

Of course it is not difficult to believe in what the Scriptures say about the grace of God and God’s work of vicarious atonement and about justification by faith alone. But how can one believe that all this holds true in his own case? Not exactly that his sins are more numerous or greater than those of other men, but how can God forgive a sinner, who does not repent and who does not hate sin?

Behold, now it has happened! Now God has killed the old self. It lies absolutely exhausted, mortified. It had tried *everything*, all it had heard, and all it had itself been able to fathom and plan. Each time it had believed that it could save itself. Now, however, it possesses no further routes of escape. And exactly for this reason it can no longer discover any possibility of being saved. This it is that Søren Kierkegaard calls “the absolute despair of self.”

The Holy Scriptures say something to the effect that “what things soever the law saith, it saith . . . that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God” (Rom. 3: 19). It

is such a miracle that has now happened with this sinner. God has now achieved his own purpose through this hard and painful process of mortification. This soul has now been given to Christ, as the Apostle says: "Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ" (Gal. 3: 24).

Having, in this manner, convicted him of sin, the Holy Spirit can now also convince the sinner of righteousness (John 16: 8). Now, at length, the Holy Spirit can reveal and unveil to him, who was mortified, the deepest mystery of the Gospel, that Christ was made to be sin for us, that we might be made the righteousness of God in him. The soul can see now what is meant by the good news of God that justifies the ungodly (Rom. 4: 5). He experiences now the truth that, "If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new" (II Cor. 5: 17).