

Thomas Guthrie

## MAN'S GREAT DUTY

Lay hold on eternal life.. 1st Timothy v1: 19.

ON the deck of a foundering vessel stood a negro slave - the last man on board, he was about to step into the life-boat at her last trip. She was already Loaded almost to the gunwale; to the water edge. Observed to bear in his arms what seemed a heavy bundle, the boat's crew, who had difficulty keeping her afloat in such a roaring sea, refused to receive him unless he came unencumbered and alone. He pressed to his bosom what he carried in his arms, and seemed loth to part with it. They insisted. He had his choice - either to leap in and leave that behind him, or throw it in and stay to perish. He opened its folds; and there, warmly wrapt round, lay two children whom their father, his master, had committed to his care. He kissed them; bade the sailors carry his affectionate farewell to his master, and tell how he had faithfully fulfilled his charge; and then, lowering the children into the boat which pushed off, the dark man stood alone on that sinking deck - and bravely went down with the foundering ship.

Such arms slavery binds; such kind hearts it crushes! A noble and touching example that of the love that seeketh not her own! yet it shews how the means of salvation may be inadequate to the occasion. So no poor sinner need perish, nor lose eternal life. There is room for all in Christ. Our cry to the perishing, Come to Jesus Come; "yet there is room."

While there is eternal life in the gospel sufficient for all, none are specially excluded from its benefits. Those only are excluded who exclude themselves, and refuse to be saved on God's own terms. His proclamation of mercy to a lost, rebel world, is clogged with no exceptions. After our brave men had crushed that terrible revolt which some years ago shook our Indian Empire to its foundations, and filled many of our homes with grief, an amnesty was proclaimed, but not to all. Some were by name excluded from its grace; and, as might have been expected, these desperate men fought it out to the last in the fastnesses and deadly jungles of Nepal. They did not come in to accept the amnesty. There was no reason why they should. It was not for them. Heads of the revolt, and guilty of cold-blooded murders, as well as of the blackest treachery, there was no hope of mercy held out to them; and so, standing to their arms, they resolved to spin out their lives to the last thread, and sell them at the dearest price. What a contrast to this, the gospel! Whatever be men's sins and crimes, none are excluded, by name or by character, from the amnesty which God proclaims, from the benefits of eternal life, "Whosoever cometh unto me," says Jesus, "I will in nowise cast out;" on no account; for no crimes - no depth of guilt - no length of resistance to my gracious offers; let him come with all the sins on his head which any man ever committed or it is possible for man to commit; let him come in life's last worthless hour, I will not turn away from him - from the vilest, hoariest sinner; I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked - nor am I willing that any should perish, but that all should come to me and live. Thus, though the words of my text are addressed to a man of God, they admit of a wider than their first application; and, therefore, to those that are not, as well as to those that are, men of God, in his great name we address this call, Lay hold on eternal life. There is enough of it to supply the wants of all. No child of Adam stands excluded from its precious blessings.

I. Consider our need of eternal life.

Greatest gift of God! eternal life is deliverance from eternal death, the curse of a broken law, and the doom of a burning hell. Eternal life is eternal blessedness - the pardon of sin's guilt, and freedom from its tyrannous power; the pleasures of a pure heart, and the enjoyment of peace with God; joy without any bitter admixture, and riches without wings; health that never sickens, life that never dies, and a glory hereafter that never fades away; perfect holiness in the likeness, and perfect happiness in the bosom of God. These are what we need; and how great is our need of them? How great our need, was once well expressed by Rowland Hill. A preacher, who threw his whole soul into his work, he was challenged for the vehemence of his voice and manner. Unlike some whose

dull, cold, unimpassioned manner in the pulpit, led an infidel to say that he doubted whether the preachers themselves believed in a hell, he spoke like a man who saw the people hang over perdition; and heard their long, piercing shrieks, as one after another they lost their hold, and dropped into the fiery gulf. Exception being taken, as I have said, to his energy and vehemence, Hill told how he had once seen a vast bank of earth, below which some men were at work, suddenly rend asunder; and leaving its bed, precipitate itself forward to bury them alive before they could utter a cry, or move a foot to escape. And who then, he asked, found fault with me, because, in my anxiety to save them, my cries for help were loud enough to call the neighborhood to the rescue, and be heard a long mile away. Left there, they perished, miserably perished - needing what God, not man, always is, "a very present help in trouble." The moral of the story is very plain. These poor men, buried below a mass of earth, gasping for air, choking for want of breath, in instant danger of perishing, did not stand in greater, nor so great, need of strong arms to dig them out, as all men do of eternal life.

Sin has brought death into this world; and we are all of us involved in the calamity - buried in the ruins of the fall. We may not have sinned as others have done; that is very possible. But in vain the Pharisee thanks God that he is "not as this publican;" in vain the self righteous, shrinking from the touch of some low and loathsome outcast, says, Stand aside, I am holier than thou. Ah, pity rather than pride is the feel big with which the best men regard the worst; conscious, as they are, that they would have been no better than others, had they been left to themselves, and exposed to as great temptations! All by nature lying under the same sentence of condemnation, pride, which is not for angels, still less befits felons- those whose crimes have brought them to a common prison, and doomed them to a common death.

But, though we have sinned less than others, we cannot be saved by merit; even as, thank God, though we have sinned more than others, we may be saved by mercy. How idle to talk of other men being greater sinners than we are - to flatter and deceive ourselves with that! He drowns as surely who has his head beneath one inch of water, as he who, with a mill stone hung round his neck, has sunk a hundred fathoms down. Let the strain of the tempest come, and the ship that has one bad link in her cable, as certainly goes ashore to be dashed to pieces on the rocks, as another that has twenty bad. It is, no doubt, by repeated strokes of the woodman's axe that the oak, bending slowly to fate, bows its proud head and falls to the ground, and it is by long dropping that water hollows the hardest stone. But those who speak of great and little, of few or many sins, seem to forget that man's ruin was the work of one moment, and of one sin. The weight of only one sin sank this great world into perdition; and now all of us, all men, lie under the same sentence of condemnation. Extinguishing every hope of salvation through works, and sounding as ominous of evil in men's ears as the cracking of ice beneath our feet, or the roar of an avalanche, or the grating of a keel on the sunken reef, or the hammer that wakens the felon from dreams of life and liberty, that sentence is this - "Cursed is every one that continueth not in all things written in the book of the law to do them."

Such is our position; and instead of shutting our eyes to it, like the foolish ostrich that hides her head in the bush when the hunters are at her heels, it is well to know and to face it. We are either lost or not lost. If not, by all means "sleep on and take your rest." I should be sorry to disturb you. If the waves dance and play round your ship as she ploughs through a silver sea; if gentle zephyrs fill her sails; if no sound is heard but the song of the watch on deck, and the gentle dash of mimic billows as they break on your bows, lulling to slumber and happy dreams; then, happy voyagers, with a bright moon riding the calm heaven above, and wide sea-room below, "sleep on and take your rest."

But if, instead of this, a shock has come that makes your ship shiver from stem to stern, if hurrying feet tread the deck overhead, if signal guns are flashing and booming through the darkness, if the rattling cordage tells that they lower the boats, if men pale with fear, rush into the cabin to cry, We sink; and if, when we leap from bed on the floor, the water, rushing through many a yawning seam, splashes on our naked feet, the time is not for sleep - but for instant action, and such cries as this, O sirs, what shall I do to be saved! Who can miss the application of this to our condition? With that curse of a broken law impending over us, in danger of perishing every moment so long as we are out

of Christ, how should we cry, Save me, I perish; and give immediate heed to the call, that Christ, seeing our danger, rises from his throne in heaven to sound down, Lay hold of eternal life.

II. Consider how we obtain eternal life.

Nothing in one sense more difficult, yet in another easier - a wish, a word, a look, and it is ours! I have read the story of a captive who, immured in Austrian prison, with no tool but a nail in his bleeding hands, wrought night by night for twelve weary months, to mine its solid walls. Agitated by alternate hopes and fears, he at length accomplished his task; and then, on a dark, blustering night, by means of a rope that he had twisted, he swung himself over the dizzy depth; and, reaching the ground, swam the moat, and was free! What will a man not do, and not dare, for dear life and sweet liberty! But for eternal life-for the precious liberty of the sons of God, you have no such time to wait; nor hardships to suffer; nor desperate risks to run. You have only to wish, and, as if struck by a magician's rod, the walls of your prison house open. You are free.

During long years of care, and fears, and harassing thought, how do many toil for wealth; to be rich! And how often do their efforts fail! and, even when they have succeeded, how have we seen fortune, in a fit of caprice, suddenly desert her favorite; and his riches take themselves wings and flee away! But now, at this very moment, far happier than any worshipper of Mammon, you may enrich yourselves with wealth such as the fairy wand of old story never gave its possessor - when, only waving it, the dust of the road changed into gold, and the fountain, in place of water, sent up a jet of precious stones; every liquid drop, as it leapt into the air and fell back into the marble cistern, turning into a diamond, or ruby, or pearl.

Again, what tortures have I seen people patiently endure, through a long protracted illness, to regain in health heaven's best earthly boon? But you have only to join the crowd, like the woman of old, to press through the throng, and lay your eager, trembling finger on the dusty hem of a Saviour's robe, to possess a health that never sickens; and is proof alike against the sharpest arrows of disease, and the dart of death. Again, see yonder, amid the smoke of battle and in the throat of the deadly breach, how an ambitious soldier, bleeding from many wounds, fights his way upward to win an earthly crown! wins it, but lives not to wear it. He is just seen on the top of the fire-girdled battlement; he has just time to wave his bloody sword; and ere his less fortunate comrades have time to envy him his honours, the mark of a foeman's rifle, he is struck through the heart; and, reeling back, falls headlong from the heights of fortune into the ditch below - dead as a stone. But you have no such risks to run; no such dangers to face. In the quiet house of God - there or anywhere else - now - at this moment - you have only to reach out the hand of faith, and it grasps the crown; a crown of glory that fadeth not away. One short step carried the thief, and may carry you, from eternal death to eternal life. So near at all times are we to heaven or to hell. What a solemn position! Do you ask, What shall we do to inherit eternal life; to be saved? I reply with Paul, Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved; but reject him whom I offer, and you may be damned, - lost this hour, and lost for ever.

The gift of God, say the Scriptures, is eternal life, through Jesus Christ our Lord. He purchased it for us by his sinless obedience, his sufferings, his atoning death. For that great end his infant head was pillowed on straw, and his dying head on thorns; for that great end, his lowly cradle was a manger, and his death-bed was a bloody cross; and what it cost him so much to buy, his Father is ready to bestow "without money and without price." He gives it for the asking; nay, more, much more than that, rare thing in the experience of the poor and needy, he presses his bounty on our acceptance. On these streets, I have seen the poor hanging on the steps of the rich, and refusing to be ordered away; to move pity, laying bare their sores; and holding out their skinny hands to implore men's charity. But whoever saw the rich following the poor, with a hand filled with gold; pressing money on their acceptance; stopping them; entreating, beseeching, imploring them to take it? Yet thus, to the amazement both of angels and devils, God does with you, in offering his Son; and through him, the

gift of eternal life. The truth is, he knows how wretched our fate if we refuse his mercy. He has looked on the fire that never has been quenched; He has heard the wail of those that are for ever lost; and as a father over his poor prodigal, a mother over her fallen daughter, he yearns over you - crying Turn ye, turn ye, why will ye die?

III Consider more particularly what we have to do to obtain eternal life.

Do! It is not to make ourselves worthy of it; nor to attempt to merit it; nor to wait till we are holy before we come to Christ. Salvation is not of works, but of faith. " Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost; which he shed on us abundantly, through Jesus Christ our Saviour, that, being justified by his grace, we should be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life - this is a faithful saying." We have nothing to do then, but to believe; to open the door and receive him into our hearts, who is knocking there. Jesus is ready to come in, as a king into his palace - followed by penitence, humility, goodness, meekness, temperance, hope, peace, joy, charity; a long, shining train of graces. It is only by the hand of faith that we can lay hold of Christ. Do you say, But I cannot believe! I reply, true! you cannot of yourself, for, No man, says Jesus, can come unto me except the Father which hath sent me, draw him. Still, if you ask faith of God, he will certainly give it; working it in you by the power of his Holy Spirit. For what argument is at once so unanswerable, and so comfortable as Christ's. "If ye, then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask him." Thus, by the aid of the Spirit, and through the exercise of faith, you are to lay hold on the Saviour; and laying hold on him, though it were in the hour of most imminent destruction, and in the very jaws of death, you lay hold of life - of eternal life.

In his voyage to the Polar Regions, Kane, when involved with his brave companions among broken ice fields, found himself placed between two mighty, moving bergs. Each a towering, floating mountain of ice, they rapidly approached to give battle -threatening to crush his ship between them, like an empty shell. The danger was imminent; destruction seemed inevitable. There was not a breath of wind to fill their sails; and their ship, as if herself paralyzed with terror, lay still on the water - waiting her doom. At that moment of terrible suspense, when no power of theirs could extricate them, or clear their way through the ice that choked the only path of escape, just then, a low, water-washed berg, set in motion by some strange current, came driving up from the southward. If they could follow in its wake, it might make a way for them through the floating ice; and they might yet be saved - plucked from the very jaws of destruction. Their despair was now turned into hope. It neared them; it is passing them. They seize the opportunity; and, God blessing the attempt, succeed in planting an anchor on its slope - holding on it by a whale line.

"It was an anxious moment," says Dr. Kane, "our noble tow-horse hauled us bravely on; the spray dashing over his windward flanks, and his forehead ploughing up the lesser ice as in scorn." The two great ice mountains, whirling on their axes, and roaring, grinding through the sea, encroach on the ship as it advances; they drew nearer, and still nearer, to each other; the channel is now narrowed to forty feet; another moment and their fate is sealed. With the promptitude of sailors, they fly to the rigging and brace the yards to clear the ice-walls. They pass clear - saved as by the skin of their teeth; and "never," writes Dr. Kane, "did men acknowledge with more gratitude their merciful deliverance from a wretched death." A striking story; and yet but an imperfect illustration of our salvation from eternal death, by laying hold on Christ. He comes from heavenward; a Saviour in our great peril, and hour of need. By your faith lay hold on Him; by your hope cast anchor on him; and you are saved. Through the raging wrath of God; through the perils of temptation; through the closing jaws of death, he will open you a triumphant way; till, safe in heaven, with harp in hand, and more gratitude of heart than the rescued seamen, you "acknowledge your merciful deliverance" from a more than wretched, even from eternal death.

#### IV. Consider when we are to lay hold on eternal life

When - but now? If the body is in great danger and means of safety and escape are offered, there is no occasion to press them on men; to cry, lay hold on life, or say, do it now. In such circumstances, how does a man improve each moment, and clutch at life? I only wish I saw people as eager to be saved from hell, as I once saw a man to be saved from drowning. It was at yonder ferry.

Procrastination, the ruin of souls, was almost his death. The time was up; the bell was rung; the gangway withdrawn; the boat in motion; when, after too many delays, he came running along the pier, and, deaf to the cries of warning, took a bold and desperate spring to catch our bulwark. He caught it, but lost his hold; fell backwards; and went down instantly - engulfed in the roaring sea. Sucked out by the receding wave, he rose to the surface a good way off. And though it was a blessed sight to see his head emerge from the water, every eye was still anxiously fixed on him. He floated on his back, but could not swim; and therefore must soon perish. And he had perished; but that then one, bearing a life-buoy aloft in his hand, came rushing down the pier at the top of his speed. Anxiety was now wound up to the highest pitch. Shall he save him? He stops; and with the spray of the stormy sea flying in his face, takes aim; now he bends like a bow; and then, rising to the spring, with herculean arm he sends the life-buoy spinning through the air, away over the waves, to the drowning man. What a moment of suspense for him; for us-the on-lookers Well thrown by man, and well directed by a watchful providence, it fell right over his sinking head. With what joy he caught it! How he laid hold of it! Never lover embraced lover with such eager, happy arms. I saw him holding on, pulled from a watery grave; and thought, Would God, that poor sinners, that every man ready to perish laid hold as eagerly of eternal life? I gave God thanks that he was saved! He might have been damned if he had been drowned. Besides, I rejoice to think how happy that night his wife and children to have him safe at home; and how bright the home which held a living father, rather than a widow stunned with grief, and children weeping by a cold, livid corpse.

But would you now lay hold on Christ, all the angels in heaven would sing, and all the bells in heaven would ring as the glad tidings were told, and your Father cried, Prepare a mansion, make ready a crown! for this my son that was dead is alive again, that was lost is found.

"Thus joy abounds In paradise  
Among the hosts of heaven,  
Soon as the sinner quits his sins,  
Repents and is forgiven."

In the name of him who purchased it, and offers it, and urges you to accept of it, I intreat you to lay hold of eternal life. He promises it now - to-day; but not to-morrow. The angels hovered, on wings of astonishment, over a Saviour's lowly cradle, and around his bloody cross; may they not be as much astonished to see a man refuse a crown of glory as they were to see the Son of God wearing the crown of thorns? Oh, what would the damned, the devils give for the offer which you hesitate to accept of? Why destroy your souls? Why scorn the love of Jesus? Why provoke a loving and long-suffering God to say, My spirit shall not any longer strive with that man - his blood be on his own head - he is joined to his idols, let him alone.

Happy day, happy day,  
When Jesus washed my sins away.

Happy day this, indeed, were you to lay hold on eternal life now! His head lies on a downy pillow whose heart is at peace with God. Light, be it orphan's or widow's lot, that of poverty, or bereavement, or disappointment, is the heaviest cross, sweet the bitterest cup, and calm in life's stormiest hour, the soul of him who has his sins forgiven - having laid hold of eternal life. Accept it then so long as it is in your offer; seize it so long as it is in your reach. Scatter money in a crowd, how they scramble for it; offer bread to the starving, how greedily they seize it; throw a rope to the

drowning, how he eagerly grasps it! With like eagerness and earnestness may the Spirit of God help you to lay hold on Christ; and, having got hold of him, to hold on - till, amid a crowd of saints ready to receive you, you are brought ashore, safely landed in the heavenly kingdom.