

# “DEATH IS AT HAND: BE READY”

## THINKING ABOUT DEATH WITH ABRAHAM BOOTH

**A**braham Booth (1734-1806) was among the most important Baptist pastors of his day and was highly regarded by many as one of the soundest theologians of the English Calvinistic Baptist denomination in the eighteenth century. He was frequently asked to preach at special events, among which were funerals. A recent edition of Booth's sermons contains sixteen extant sermons, seven of which are funeral sermons or addresses. In what follows, we briefly look at these seven sermons to see how an important Baptist theologian of a bygone era can help us think about death.

### “KING OF TERRORS”

What is critical for Booth is that by the time that one dies, one's eternal destiny is fixed. “When death has taken place on a fellow creature,” Booth stated, “his final state is fixed, either in happiness, or in misery, that is inconceivable and everlasting.”<sup>1</sup> Life then is serious business for when it is ended one's eternal future is irrevocably decided.

In two of these funeral sermons—the one he preached for Benjamin Wallin (1711-1782) and the one that he gave at the funeral of Samuel Stennett (1727-1795), both of whom had participated at Booth's ordination in 1769—he emphasized that “death breaks every social connection” and “destroys all our domestic and civil relations.” All of the ties that bind human beings to one another are shattered at death. It even “separates the two constituent parts of man.” A person's soul or immortal spirit goes into the invisible world of spirit, while the body is left “a deformed mass of senseless matter”—“consigned...to worms, to dust and putrefaction”—awaiting the resurrection, either to eternal life or to eternal damnation.<sup>2</sup> The prospect of such a dissolution brings with it fear, even for the believer.<sup>3</sup> Little wonder Booth could describe death as “the king of terrors.”<sup>4</sup>

It is noteworthy that Booth was careful to point out

that death does not issue in non-existence.

What, then, is the immediate consequence of death? Do we cease to exist, or, do we lose our consciousness? By no means; for both Scripture and reason enforce the belief of a future state of conscious existence.<sup>5</sup>

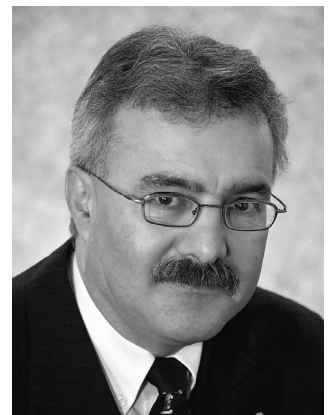
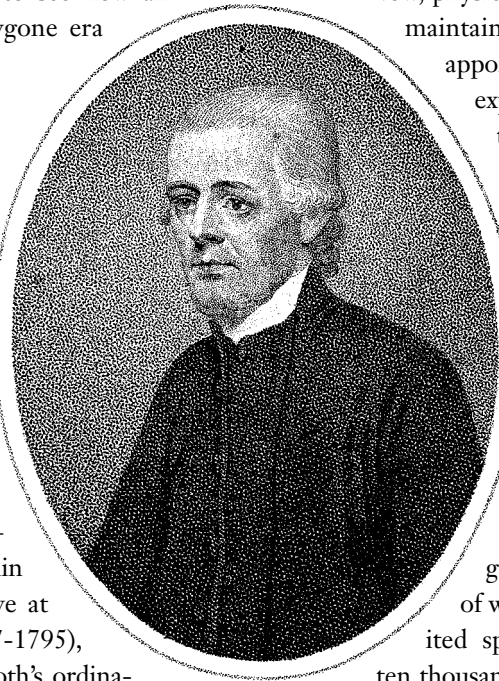
### “THE WAGES OF SIN IS DEATH”

Now, physical death is the result of sin.<sup>6</sup> As Booth maintained, “death is an effect of sin, an appointment of God, and the strongest expression of divine justice, that is visible to us in the present state.”<sup>7</sup> Again, he could say: “Death owes his existence to sin. On sin his empire is founded, and by it he maintains his dominion over mankind.”<sup>8</sup>

But, as noted above, physical death is not the end of the story. As Booth explained:

Could we follow, in contemplation, the departed spirit of a sinner who died under a charge of guilt; could we form a complete idea of what a lost soul must feel in the lim-

ited space of ten thousand ages, or even of a thousand years; we should be shocked at the thought and quite confounded. How awful, then, beyond imagination awful, must be an eternal state of suffering! Yet this, my fellow mortals, even this is the fruit and the unavoidable consequence of sin, where sovereign grace



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## **THE DEATHS OF OTHERS ARE WARNINGS OF OUR APPROACHING END. IN PARTICULAR, THE DEATH OF A LOVED ONE IS “A CALL FROM GOD TO SELF-EXAMINATION, TO AN IMPROVEMENT OF TIME, AND TO SPIRITUAL MINDEDNESS.”**

does not interpose its benign agency, to redeem and regenerate, to sanctify and save. “For the wages of sin is death” [Romans 6:23]; even that death, which stands opposed to life eternal.<sup>9</sup>

Bad as physical death was, eternal death was much worse.

### **“READY FOR DEATH”**

Nothing can delay death’s coming: not “the aids of medicine, the tears of relatives,” or “the prayers of pious friends.”<sup>10</sup> That we all must die—unless the Lord returns before that time—is one of the great certainties of life in this world.<sup>11</sup> It is the better part of wisdom, then, Booth advised, “frequently to meditate” on this matter—that is, give serious thought to the reality of death and our relationship with the One who is Lord over death, namely Christ.

We need to pray “that we may be ready for death at any moment, and found of the Lord in peace.”<sup>12</sup> Or as Booth puts it in his sermon at the funeral of Joseph Swain: “Life is uncertain: death is at hand: be ready.”<sup>13</sup>

The deaths of others are warnings of our approaching end.<sup>14</sup> In particular, the death of a loved one is “a call from God to self-examination, to an improvement of time, and to spiritual mindedness.”<sup>15</sup> Thus, in an almost macabre turn of phrase, Booth could emphasize that in the midst of life we are in the presence of death—literally: “We are, if I may so speak, in *Golgotha; the place of skulls*. We tread on human dust, and are encompassed with all the gloomy apparatus of death.” This means, Booth argued, that we must have a “deeply serious turn of mind.”<sup>16</sup>

But how can one be ready for death? Ultimately by being at peace with God. And that, Booth argued, is found in one place only: faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. In Booth’s words: “the glorious gospel of the blessed God, reveals a Saviour for the chief of sinners—a Saviour, whose atoning blood is equal to all our guilt; whose mediation is commensurate to all our wants; and whose grace abounds over all our unworthiness.”<sup>17</sup>

This does not mean that believers are delivered from the pain of temporal death. But they are “furnished with pardon and peace” through faith in the “vicarious work of Jesus. And through “the regenerating energy of the Holy Spirit” their hearts are “fitted for communion with God” and thus

“they have a solid foundation for hope of eternal felicity.”<sup>18</sup> And so Booth affirmed that “as the Lord Redeemer overcame death, and the grave, and every enemy, so all his followers shall be finally victorious and everlastingly happy.”<sup>19</sup>

### **“CHEERING, CHARMING, RAVISHING TRUTHS!”**

While death is a terrible thing for both believer and unbeliever, the former has a rich hope in the face of death. First, Booth argued, when a believer dies, his or her soul is immediately and “completely sanctified” and goes into the presence of God to “behold the glory of Christ.”<sup>20</sup> And then, because Christ has been raised from the dead, we have “an incontestable proof and an infallible earnest” that the bodies of all who put their faith in him shall likewise experience resurrection. Christ’s resurrection was a victory not gained for himself alone, but one for all of his people.<sup>21</sup> Thus, Booth declared: “Jesus shall raise the dead, and reanimate the sleeping dust of the saints.” And then their risen bodies will be like their souls, entirely and “eternally free from sin.”<sup>22</sup> And so shall death itself be destroyed.<sup>23</sup>

Among Booth’s funeral sermons, that for Samuel Gill (d.1786) stands out, for in it Booth said very little directly about death. Instead, he focused on the believer’s being with Christ after he or she leaves this world. At one point in the sermon he asked his hearers to “contemplate the departed spirit of a saint in the heavenly world.” What kind of affection will fill his or her heart? Love!

[T]hat love which he had to God in the present state has not deserted him; but it is increased, it is refined and purged from all its imperfections. This love to God, therefore, being increased by brighter displays of the divine glory, and by richer manifestations of divine grace, in the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ, will be like a fountain, ever running and ever flourishing to render them happy.

This love, my brethren, is love to God’s infinite excellence, and love to God as infinitely beautiful. We now have but little love to God for the sake of his excellencies; but hereafter it shall be perfect; as God’s love is infinitely perfect, and manifested to be so to us.<sup>24</sup>

## ***BUT THE SORROWING OF A CHRISTIAN AND THAT OF AN UNBELIEVER ARE QUITE DIFFERENT. OUR SORROW IS YOKED TO THE HOPE OF OUR LOVED ONE BEING WITH THE LORD AND HAVING THEIR BODY RAISED FROM THE DEAD.***

It is because of this prospect that lies ahead for the Christian that Booth noted that Christians do not weep when a loved one dies as those who had no hope.<sup>25</sup> Weeping and sorrow are not in themselves wrong, as Booth pointed out at the funeral for Samuel Stennett:


At the tomb of Lazarus, *Jesus wept*; and at this grave my tender feelings are uncommonly strong: not only because of that high esteem which I had for my senior brother, whose corpse we have now committed to the silent sepulchre; but also on account of my having so recently stood here, to address my fellow-mortals at the funeral of his dear deceased wife.<sup>26</sup>

But the sorrowing of a Christian and that of an unbeliever are quite different. Our sorrow is yoked to the hope of our loved one being with the Lord and having their body raised from the dead.

### **A PERSONAL WORD FROM ABRAHAM BOOTH**

At some point in these funeral sermons, Booth would address the different groups of hearers in the congregation. Some were believers, some were unbelievers; some were

family and friends of the deceased, some were members of the congregation in which the deceased had worshipped. And so Booth would speak to each in turn. Following Booth's lead, permit me to close this brief reflection on death as he would close it, with a word to my readers.

Reader: what are your thoughts at the prospect of your death? Are you filled with what Booth called "cheering, charming, ravishing truths" that "fire the soul with immortal hopes"?<sup>27</sup> Booth would bid you to rejoice. Or are you an unbeliever, who has only despair and "dreadful thoughts... that freeze the blood with chilling fears"?<sup>28</sup> If this is your state, Booth would tell you that there is still time for you to turn from your sins in true repentance, believe that Christ died for sinners and that he is alive, risen from the dead. So will you find deliverance ultimately for both your body and soul from that death which is worse even than physical death, namely, death eternal in hell. 

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1 *An Address at the Interment of Samuel Stennett, D.D.* [in Michael A.G. Haykin with Alison E. Haykin, eds., *The Works of Abraham Booth* (Springfield, Missouri: Particular Baptist Press, 2006), I, 124].

2 *An Address at the Interment of Benjamin Wallin, M.A.* (Haykin, eds., *Works*, I, 51); *Address at the Interment of Samuel Stennett* (Haykin, eds., *Works*, I, 124). See also *An Address at the Interment of Thomas Wilton* (Haykin, eds., *Works*, I, 33); *An Address at the Interment of Mr. Joseph Swain* (Haykin, eds., *Works*, I, 133); *Christian Triumph* (Haykin, eds., *Works*, I, 214).

3 *Christian Triumph* (Haykin, eds., *Works*, I, 225).

4 *Address at the Interment of Mr. Joseph Swain* (Haykin, eds., *Works*, I, 131); *Christian Triumph* (Haykin, eds., *Works*, I, 215). "Death is a formidable foe" [*Christian Triumph* (Haykin, eds., *Works*, I, 212)].

5 *Address at the Interment of Mr. Joseph Swain* (Haykin, eds., *Works*, I, 131). See also *Address at the Interment of Benjamin Wallin* (Haykin, eds., *Works*, I, 53), where Booth encouraged Wallin's church not to "lament the death of your honoured pastor, as those that have no hope; as if you feared he had either lost his conscious existence, or existed in a state of torment."

6 *Address at the Interment of Thomas Wilton* (Haykin, eds., *Works*, I, 33); *Address at the Interment of Benjamin Wallin* (Haykin, eds., *Works*, I, 51); *Address at the Interment of Samuel Stennett* (Haykin, eds., *Works*, I, 124-125); *Address at the Interment of Mr. Joseph Swain* (Haykin, eds., *Works*, I, 131-132); *Address at the Interment of Ann Williams* (Haykin, eds., *Works*, I, 235).

7 *Address at the Interment of Samuel Stennett* (Haykin, eds., *Works*, I, 124-124).

8 *Christian Triumph* [*Christian Triumph* (Haykin, eds., *Works*, I, 214)].

9 *Address at the Interment of Benjamin Wallin* (Haykin, eds., *Works*, I, 51-52).

10 *Address at the Interment of Mr. Joseph Swain* (Haykin, eds., *Works*, I, 131).

11 *Address at the Interment of Samuel Stennett* (Haykin, eds., *Works*, I, 123).

12 *Address at the Interment of Samuel Stennett* (Haykin, eds., *Works*, I, 123).

13 *Address at the Interment of Mr. Joseph Swain* (Haykin, eds., *Works*, I, 132). See also *Address at the Interment of Thomas Wilton* (Haykin, eds., *Works*, I, 33); *Address at the Interment of Benjamin Wallin* (Haykin, eds., *Works*, I, 52); *Christian Triumph* (Haykin, eds., *Works*, I, 233); *Address at the Interment of Ann Williams* (Haykin, eds., *Works*, I, 238).

14 *The Christian's Happiness in the Heavenly State* (Haykin, eds., *Works*, I, 95).

15 *Address at the Interment of Samuel Stennett* (Haykin, eds., *Works*, I, 126).

16 *Address at the Interment of Samuel Stennett* (Haykin, eds., *Works*, I, 123). See the same image used in *Address at the Interment of Thomas Wilton* (Haykin, eds., *Works*, I, 34).

17 *Address at the Interment of Samuel Stennett* (Haykin, eds., *Works*, I, 125). See also *Christian Triumph* (Haykin, eds., *Works*, I, 217-218).

18 *Address at the Interment of Samuel Stennett* (Haykin, eds., *Works*, I, 125).

19 *Christian Triumph* (Haykin, eds., *Works*, I, 213).

20 *Christian Triumph* (Haykin, eds., *Works*, I, 219-220); *Address at the Interment of Ann Williams* (Haykin, eds., *Works*, I, 236).

21 *Christian Triumph* (Haykin, eds., *Works*, I, 222).

22 *Christian Triumph* (Haykin, eds., *Works*, I, 221, 220).

23 *Christian Triumph* (Haykin, eds., *Works*, I, 221).

24 *Christian's Happiness in the Heavenly State* (Haykin, eds., *Works*, I, 92-93).

25 *Address at the Interment of Benjamin Wallin* (Haykin, eds., *Works*, I, 53).

26 *Address at the Interment of Samuel Stennett* (Haykin, eds., *Works*, I, 123). Mrs. Stennett had died just over five months earlier in March of 1795.

27 *Address at the Interment of Benjamin Wallin* (Haykin, eds., *Works*, I, 52).

28 *Address at the Interment of Benjamin Wallin* (Haykin, eds., *Works*, I, 52).