

~Other Speakers A-F: Samuel Davies:

On the Death of King George II

by Samuel Davies

(Delivered on January 14, 1761, at Princeton College. It is interesting to note that Davies himself died shortly after delivering this sermon, on February 4—at the age of 37.)

"How the mighty have fallen!" 2 Samuel 1:19

George is dead! George, the mighty, the just, the gentle, and the wise! King George, the father of Britain and her Colonies, the guardian of laws and liberty, the protector of the oppressed, the arbiter of Europe, the terror of tyrants and France! George, the friend of man, the benefactor of millions, is no more! Millions tremble at the alarm. Britain expresses her sorrow in national groans. Europe re-echoes to the melancholy sound. The melancholy sound circulates far and wide. This remote American continent shares in the loyal sympathy. The wide intermediate Atlantic rolls the tide of grief to these distant shores; and even the recluse sons of Princeton College feel the immense bereavement, with all the sensibility of a filial heart; and must mourn with their country, with Britain, with Europe, with the world—George was our benefactor too. In his reign, a reign so auspicious to literature, and all the improvements of human nature, was this foundation laid—and Princeton College received its existence. And though, like the sun, he shone in a distant sphere, we felt, most sensibly felt, his benignant influences cherishing science and her votaries in this, her new-built temple.

In doing this humble honor to the memory of our late sovereign, we cannot incur the suspicion of mercenary mourners, paying homage to the rising sun. But we indulge and give vent to the spontaneous, unselfish sorrows of sincere loyalty and gratitude, and drop our honest tears over his sacred dust, who can be our benefactor no more; too distant, too obscure and undeserving, to hope for the favorable notice of his illustrious successor. Let selfish ambition put on the face of mourning, and all the parade of affected grief, within the reach of the royal eye; and make her court to a living prince, with all the ceremonial forms of lamentation for the deceased; but let our tears flow down unnoticed into our own bosoms. Let our grief, which is always fond of retirement, vent itself without ostentation, and free from the restraint of the public eye. It will at least afford us the generous pleasure of reflecting, that we voluntarily discharge our duty unbribed and unselfish; and it will give relief to our bursting hearts, impatient of the suppression of our sorrows.

How the mighty have fallen! Fallen under the superior power of death! Fallen under death—the king of terrors, the conqueror of conquerors;
whom riches cannot bribe;
whom power cannot resist;
whom goodness cannot soften;
whom dignity and nobility cannot deter, or awe to a reverential distance!

Death intrudes into royal palaces—as well as into humble cottages!

Death arrests the monarch—as well as the slave!

The royal robes of majesty—and the filthy rags of beggary—are equal preludes to the shroud!

A throne is only a higher precipice, from whence to fall with greater noise and more extensive ruin—into the grave!

Since death has climbed the British throne, and from thence snatched "George the Mighty"—who then, can hope to escape? If temperance, that best preservative of health and life; if extensive benefit to half of the world; if the united prayers of nations; if the collected virtues of the king—could secure an earthly immortality—never, O lamented George, never should your fall have added fresh honors to the trophies of death!

But since this king of Britain is no more—then let all the nobles of earthly courts—be prepared for their "long homes" in the dust! Let those earthly idols—prepare to die like men; and to sink down to a level with beggars and worms—in the clay!

Let subjects be wise and consider their latter end, when the alarm of mortality is sounded from the throne; and he who lived for their benefit, dies for their benefit too;—dies to remind them, that they also must die!

But how astonishing and lamentable is the stupidity of mankind! Can the natural or the moral world exhibit another phenomenon so shocking and unaccountable? DEATH sweeps off thousands of our fellow-mortals every year! Our neighbors, like leaves in autumn—drop into the grave, in a thick succession! And our attendance upon funerals is almost as frequent—as our visits of friendship. Nay, sometimes death enters in at OUR windows, and ravages our families before our eyes!

The air, the ocean, the earth, and all the elements—are armed with the powers of death; and have their pestilential vapors and inclemencies, their tempests and inundations, their eruptions and volcanoes—to destroy the life of man!

A thousand dangers lie in ambush for us! Nay, the principles of mortality lurk in our own bodies! And sickness, the herald of the last enemy, often warns us to prepare!

Yet how few realize the thought—that they must die! How few familiarize to their minds—that all-important hour, pregnant with consequences of great, of incomparable, of infinite importance! How many forget that they must die—until they feel it; and stand fearless, unapprehensive, and insolent—upon the slippery brink of eternity—until they unexpectedly fall, and are engulfed forever in that boundless ocean! "It is appointed unto men once to DIE—and after that to face JUDGMENT!" Hebrews 9:27

The sons of 'Adam the sinner', those fleeting phantoms of a day, put on the air of immortality upon earth; and make no provision for their existence in the proper regions of immortals beyond the grave. We pilgrims and strangers imagine themselves everlasting residents; and make this transitory life their all—as if earth was to be their eternal home—as if eternity was but a fairy land, and heaven and hell but majestic fantasies!

"How the mighty have fallen!" Shall not this loud alarm awaken us out of our vain dream of an earthly immortality? When the mighty has fallen—shall not the feeble tremble? If the king of a people must cease to live, shall not the people expect to die? If deaths of the common people are so frequent or insignificant, that they have lost their monitory force, and are viewed with as much indifference as the setting of the sun, or the fading of a flower—shall not the death of a king, the death of the king of Britain, constrain his subjects to realize the prospect of their own mortality, and diffuse that universal seriousness among them which that prospect inspires? If thus improved, this public loss—would be a public blessing; and the reformation of a kingdom would be a greater happiness, than the life of the best of princes. Thus improved, how easy and how glorious would the death of George the Second render the reign of George the Third, who now sways the scepter, and in whom the hopes of kingdoms center! To govern subjects on earth, who are prepared for the hierarchy of heaven, would be a province worthy of an angel.

Since the mighty has fallen, since George is no more—how vain are all things beneath the sun! Vanity of vanities; all is vanity! Can the riches of Britain, or the honors of a crown; can the extent of dominion, or the laurels of victory—now afford the least pleasure to the royal corpse which lies senseless in the dust; or to the royal soul which has winged its flight to its own region, to the eternal world! No! all these are now as insignificant as mere nothings to him, as the conquests of Alexander, or the riches and honors of the Henries and Edwards, who filled the same throne centuries ago.

If even kings cannot extract perfect happiness from things below; if the gross, unsubstantial, and fleeting enjoyments of life are in their own nature incapable of affording pure, solid, and lasting felicity—must we not all despair of it? Yet such a happiness we desire; such we need; nay, such we must have; or our very existence will become our curse, and all our powers of enjoyment, but capacities of pain. And where shall we seek for it? Where—but in the supreme Good? Let us "lay up for ourselves treasures in heaven—and be rich towards God;" and then we shall live in perpetual affluence and consummate felicity—when crowns, and thrones, and kings—nay, when stars, and suns, and worlds—are sunk into one general ruin!

But though crowns, and thrones, and kings, though stars, and suns, and worlds, sink into one general ruin—there is one gift of heaven to mankind which shall survive; which shall flourish and reign forever; a gift little esteemed or solicited, and which makes no brilliant figure in mortal eyes; I mean true religion. True religion! O brightest ornament of human nature! O fairest image of the divine! O sacred spark of celestial fire, which now glimmers with but a feeble luster—but will shine bright in the night of affliction; will irradiate the thick gloom of death, and blaze out into immortality in its native element! This will be an unailing source of

happiness, through the revolutions of eternal ages.

And may I be the man to whom God shall bestow this most precious gift of divine bounty! Then let crowns and kingdoms be scattered with an undistinguishing hand—to the worthless and the brave, to the wise man and the fool; I will not murmur, envy, nor despond. These majestic trifles are not the tests of real worth, nor the badges of heaven's favorites; it is gospel holiness which marks out the happy man; which distinguishes the heir of an unfading crown; and when the dubious conflict of life is over, shall inherit all things, and sit in triumph forever with the King of kings, and Lord of lords!

But is his senseless dust, all that is left of the greatest of kings? Has he suffered a total extinction of being? Is he entirely dead to himself, to the universe, and to God? No, he lives immortal! He lives in the immense region of spirits, where monarchs and kings are private men: where all the superficial distinctions of birth, riches, power, and majesty, are lost forever: and all the distinction that remains, arises from virtue and vice—from our having acted our part well or ill in the station where we are fixed; whether on the throne of majesty, in the chains of slavery, or in the intermediate classes of life.

There, royalty appears disrobed and uncrowned before God, who regards not the rich more than the poor. There triumphant tyranny, that bade defiance to human power, is blasted and degraded by the frown of Omnipotence. And there, those rulers of men, who were the servants of God, are advanced to a higher sphere of dominion and beneficence; and the badges of earthly majesty are superfluous to their dignity, and would but conceal their real worth. There they are clothed with the robes of salvation, and the garments of praise, and wear crowns of unfading glory, infinitely brighter than those which the gold, and gems, and glittering trifles of earth can compose! There our charity would place our departed sovereign in a station as much superior to that of king of Great Britain—as an angel to a man. But it is not for mortals to pry into the inviolable secrets of the invisible world.

When we view him in this light—the medium in which people and things appear in eternity, we no longer revere the king. The crown, the scepter, and all the regalia of earthly majesty—vanish! But we behold something more venerable, more majestic, more divine—the immortal! The soul stripped of all the empty parade and pageantry of outward show, and clothed with all the godlike regalia of its own nature—illustrious in its own intrinsic dignity! This view of kings and emperors does not diminish—but heighten and brighten their majesty. This is the most venerable and striking attitude in which kings and emperors themselves can appear; though in this view peasants and slaves claim an equality with them. All equally immortal! And what renders the nature of man, or even of angels, so important, so noble, so divine—as immortality? This makes the man, infinitely superior to the monarch; and advances the offspring of the dust—to a kind of equality with the natives of heaven!

"Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade—kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials." 1 Peter 1:3-6

(Note: The above is an excerpt from a much longer sermon.)