

CHAPTER III

THIS LIFE IS BUT A PREPARATION FOR ETERNITY

1. THAT this life, since its destination is elsewhere, is not (properly speaking) a life at all, but only the prelude to a real and everlasting existence, will be evident, firstly, from the witness of our own selves, secondly, from the world, and, thirdly, from the Holy Scriptures.

2. If we examine ourselves, we see that our faculties grow in such a manner that what goes before paves the way for what comes after. For example, our first life is in our mother's womb. But for the sake of what does it exist? of the life itself? Not at all. The process that here takes place is intended to form the embryo into the suitable abiding-place and instrument of the soul, for convenient use in the life on earth which follows. As soon as this preparation is finished we burst forth into the light because in this stage no further development is possible. In the same way, this life on earth is nothing but a preparation for eternity, and exists in order that the soul, through the agency of the body, may prepare for itself those things which will be of use in the future life. As soon as this is accomplished we go hence, because further undertakings are of no avail. Many of us, also, are snatched away unprepared or are hurled to destruction, just as abortive embryos are produced from the womb, destined not for life but for death. In each of which cases

God, it is true, gives His permission, but man is the guilty cause.

3. The visible world itself, from whatever point of view we regard it, bears witness that it has been created for no other end than that it may serve for the progeneration, the nutrition, and the training of the human race. For as it pleased God not to create all men at the same moment, as was done with the angels, but only a male and a female who should increase by generation; and, as a sufficient length of time was necessary for this purpose, He granted some thousands of years. And in order that this period might not be confused, silent, and dark, He spread forth the heavens and placed in them the sun, the moon, and the stars, and commanded these, by circling round, to measure out the hours, the days, the months, and the years. Further, because the beings whose birth was contemplated were corporeal and needed a place to dwell in, space to breathe and move in, food to nourish them, and clothing to adorn them, He constructed in the lowest part of the firmament a solid substratum, the earth. Around this He poured the air, He irrigated it with waters, and bade plants and animals of various kinds to spring forth; and this not only to supply necessary wants, but also to promote enjoyment. And because He had made man in His own image and had given him a mind, in order that its proper nutrition might not be wanting to that mind, He divided each class of creatures into many species, that this visible universe might be a continual mirror of the infinite power, wisdom, and goodness of God, and that by its contemplation man might be compelled to marvel at the Creator, moved to recognise Him, and enticed to love Him, when the might, the beauty, and the sweetness that lie invisible in the abyss of eternity shone out on all sides through these visible manifestations, and suffered themselves to be handled, seen, and tasted. Thus the world is nothing but our nursery, our nurturing place, and our school, and there is, therefore, a place beyond, whither we shall be transferred when we are

dismissed from the classes of this school and are sent to that university which is everlasting. Reason alone makes this truth manifest, but it is more plainly visible in the divine oracles.

4. God Himself testifies in Hosea that the heavens exist for the sake of the earth, the earth that it may produce corn, wine, and oil, and these in turn for man (Hosea ii. 21, 22). All things therefore, even time itself, exist for the sake of man. For no longer a duration of time will be granted than is necessary to fill up the number of the elect (Rev. vi. 11). As soon as this is accomplished the heavens and the earth will pass away and the place shall know them no more (Rev. xi. 1). For a new heaven and a new earth will appear, in which justice shall dwell (Rev. xxi. 1; 2 Peter iii. 13). And finally, the way in which the Scriptures speak of this life show that it is nothing but the preparation for that to come. For they call it a way, a progress, a gate, and an expectation, while us they call pilgrims, newcomers, sojourners, and lookers forward to another and lasting state (Gen. xvii. 9; Psalm xxxix. 12; Job vii. 10; Luke xii. 33).

5. Now this we are taught by the facts themselves and by the manifest condition of all men. For what mortal has ever existed who, having been born, has not disappeared again from the earth, since we have been destined for eternity. This being the case, it follows that our state here is one of transition. Whence Christ says, "Therefore be ye also ready, for in an hour that ye think not the Son of Man cometh" (Matt. xxiv. 44). And this is the reason (as we learn from Scripture) that God calls some hence in early youth; for He sees that they are ready, as was Enoch (Gen. v. 24; Wisdom iv. 14). Why, on the other hand, does He show such long-suffering toward the wicked? Because He does not wish that any should be overtaken unprepared, but that he should repent (2 Peter iii. 9). If, however, any man abuse the patience of God, He bids him be snatched away.

6. As, then, it is certain that our sojourn in our mother's

womb is a preparation for the life in the body, so certain is it that our sojourn in the body is a preparation for the life which shall follow this one, and shall endure for ever. Happy is he who leaves his mother's womb with limbs well formed! Happier a thousand times is the man who shall bear his soul hence in purity and cleanliness.