

A DISCOURSE

DELIVERED ON THE OCCASION OF THE DEATH

OF

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SERMON.

Psalm xxxvii. 37, 38:—Mark the perfect man, and behold the upright: for the end of that man is peace. But the transgressors shall be destroyed together: the end of the wicked shall be cut off.

The dread of death, is the most universal, as well as the strongest, of all living instincts. It is idle for any human being to pretend exemption from its dominion. It exists as a mere instinct; independently of any rational grounds for apprehension, in regard to its future consequences. It is apparent in full force in the lowest reptile and insect; notwithstanding the dogma of the naturalists, that they are insusceptible of pain. It seems to be a condition of life in every form, implanted by the Creator, as a means of its preservation from the effects of casualty or violence.

This shrinking from death, in the case of the human race, is greatly strengthened by the rational grounds of dread, as to what the consequences may be. The mere love of life would render even annihilation appalling. But there exists beyond this, in every human bosom, however degraded or depraved, an obscure conviction that death is not annihilation; that the consciousness of the soul will survive, and that its personal identity is continued beyond the death of the body. And the conviction is much clearer, and stronger still, that if the conscious being is preserved, its state must be determined by its present character. And inasmuch as the conscience of every human being testifies that he is fallen

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and guilty, the inference is irresistible, that his future condition must be a subject of great and anxious apprehension. He may have been able to keep the consequences of his guilt at bay in some degree, by the various occupations and devices of life; but he knows that there is within his own bosom, an instrument of torture, which he was sure was placed there, for purposes of punishment; and which he knows he will not always be able to evade. The whole constitution of his moral being testifies too clearly to be mistaken, that he is in relation to another and infinitely higher being, whose favor is indispensable to his happiness; and also that this relation is all disordered. On every hand, therefore, he is surrounded by circumstances which conspire to render death an anxious and appalling thing. He may shut his eyes to the danger, and divert his thoughts from its threatening impendency: but he knows that this will no more avert these dreaded evils, than the convulsive shrinking of the poor criminal will stay the descending axe of the guillotine, or the dead-fall of the gallows. He may call to his support whatever of doubt or scepticism he may be able; but doubt or scepticism on such a subject, is but a poor and ghastly support. It is like the marauder, hunted down and overtaken by the ministers of justice, impressing into his defence, a few craven slaves, whose services are reluctantly rendered, and who are themselves trembling and ghastly with fear. And when the conflict comes, as come it does, deserted, confounded and overwhelmed, he finds himself seized and dragged in terror to judgment and execution. In plain sober fact, to every human being, conscious of guilt, and unpardoned, death is appalling in the last degree: and it is reasonable; it is right that it should be.

Notwithstanding the universal dread of death spring-

ing out of the very heart of humanity, the scriptures uniformly claim that this king of terrors has been vanquished by the Lord Jesus Christ, on behalf of his people; and that death, to the Christian believer, is no longer an object of rational apprehension, but the handmaid of grace and the minister of glory. Nor is it only by revealing an adequate provision for his release from the evils of life and the condemnation of guilt, that they claim on behalf of the Christian, to have cast a light from heaven upon the appalling gloom of the grave; but they everywhere, as in our text, set the death of the righteous, in broad and bold contrast, with that of the wicked, as a great and constant *fact*, in human experience. The end of the one is peace; that of the other destruction.

It has long been common to cite the dying testimony of men, both good and bad, in evidence of the truth of religion. It is said, and we believe is universally admitted, that in no single case, has the Christian ever regretted his religious devotion when he came to die; and on the other hand, it is the common, if not the universal experience, of those who were not Christians, to deplore their neglect of religion in life and health, and generally to grasp at the last moment after some religious support, with frenzied and desperate eagerness; or failing in this, to die in unutterable agony of spirit.

This is certainly a strong testimony to the importance and truth of religion. But is there any certainty that this testimony is well founded. Is it more influential or more emphatic than the testimony of the lives of these same men. That it is *honest*, no one will doubt; for death is at least an *honest hour*. But may not this testimony be mistaken or enthusiastic? May it not be the result of fear, induced by mere education? This is im-

plied in what is often said, and more often thought, by the careless and the sceptical. That it is not so, is capable of demonstration, thus :

There is in every man a "*moral sense*," which is the inlet of moral truth, just as the bodily senses take in the truths of outward nature. This moral sense when honestly and fairly exercised, is just as certain and correct in its perceptions, as are the external senses. The reason why all men do not see fundamentally alike, on the subject of religion, just as they see alike in the world of sense or of science, is that they are full of prejudice. The visual medium of the moral sense is colored and distorted by sin. But let that medium be purified,—let prejudice be set aside, and it is as unerring, within its own proper limits, as our intuitive perception of any other truths. It will no more accept what is false, in the great elements of religious or moral truth, than the intellect will, in matters of science. The moral faculties will no more mislead us, when fairly and honestly exercised, in regard to the doctrines of God, of sin, and of our accountability, than the intellectual faculties will, in admitting the fundamental axioms of mathematics, or natural philosophy. To suppose otherwise, would be just as much an impeachment of the Creator, as to suppose that our senses deceive us. It would be to suppose that God had made man to mock him with uncertainty touching his highest interests. It is incredible. It is impossible. Now if all men, when stripped of prejudice, and called to testify upon the great elementary truths of religion, as is confessedly the case with dying men, give one concurrent and undeviating testimony, as they do, then it is just as certain that the truth thus testified to, is really true, as that the disc of the moon is round and not square, or that the sun is the source of light and not of darkness. It is

a matter of simple perception. It is not the result of a long and intricate chain of reasoning. The truths of religion are not innate in the mind, they are not cognitions of the reason, any more than the truths of science. But the mind is so constituted, that when they are once revealed to the moral sense, they are apprehended and recognized as true, just as the understanding accepts as true, that two and two are four, or that every effect must have a cause. The uniform testimony of dying men, that there is a reality in religion, therefore, is just as conclusive as the uniform testimony of mankind, to the truth of the information received through the outward senses. And if a rare case of exception to this general testimony should be found, we would put alongside of analogous cases of physical or mental deficiency in regard to matters of sense or science. There are some, who, from defective eyes, cannot see the difference between totally different colors; between red and blue; or green and yellow. So, it would not be very strange, if we should find persons with a moral sense so disordered, as not to be able to discriminate truth from falsehood. They may be either cases of moral malformation; or, what is more probable, the defect may be the result of crime or disease. But they cannot shake our confidence in the unanimous conviction, and concurring testimony of all the world besides. We accept, therefore, as indubitably genuine, the experience of dying Christians. It is no outbreak of enthusiasm, but true and veritable reality. So are the terrors of the impenitent, and unpardoned; not wild and disordered *phantoms*, but sober, living, undoubted *truths*, in human experience.

Death may be resolved into two distinct effects: the one is the dissolution of the body; the other is the change in the condition of the undying spirit. It is im-

portant to notice this distinction; because religion alters neither the fact, nor the repugnance to the first. The dread of dissolution is a mere instinct of life, which neither springs from reason, nor submits to its control. The best Christian who ever lived, when forced into the conflict with death, may instinctively resist its approaches. Like the Apostle, he may "desire to depart," and he may be "confident, knowing that when he is absent from the body, he is present with the Lord," and yet there is a blind and uncontrollable instinctive repugnance to the physical act of dissolution. Unthinking men sometimes construe this, as falsifying the Christian's professions of willingness to die. But it is not so. With this mere instinct, religion has nothing to do; except indirectly, by overbearing it, by means of affections of a higher and more controlling kind. "The body indeed is dead," says the Apostle, making this very distinction, "because of sin,"—thus much of the evil is unavoidable—"but the spirit is life because of righteousness." It is the condition of the spirit in its relations to God, and its intrinsic happiness or misery, that religion controls. It is this which distinguishes the death of a man, from that of a worm. It is here that the sting resides. It is the uncertain destiny of the spirit, which makes death so solemn, so important an event; and it is precisely this which religion removes. The sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law; but thanks be unto God, who giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. It is by taking away the curse of the law, through the satisfaction rendered by the Saviour, by thus reconciling man to his Maker, by pouring the light of heaven upon his immortality, and by purifying his soul and pouring into it the constant stream of perfect blessedness, that religion gives us the victory over death.

It is in virtue of these triumphs over its most formidable powers, that death is ours. It is because it is no longer the gateway to perdition,—no longer the occasion of eternal unchangeable misery,—no longer the means of confronting the corrupt and guilty soul with a pure and angry God,—no longer the executioner of divine and endless punishment; it is because it is no longer an *evil*, that death is ours. Nor is this all. It is not a barren victory, that Christ has achieved for his people. He has not only stripped this dreadful foe of his terrors, but converted him into a friend. Death to the Christian, in the spiritual and true sense of the word, is not only, not an evil, but to the believer, it is a positive blessing. It is not a penalty, but a promise. It is not a minister of vengeance, but a servant of grace. His instinct may shrink back, but his heart does not fear,—nay welcomes it, as a true benefactor, as a companion and guide to the heavenly world. The grave may be narrow; but it is the gateway to glory. It may be dark, but it opens upon the light of immortality. “Precious in the sight of the Lord, is the death of his saints.”

These reflections are naturally suggested by the scene before us. It is the unanimous testimony of those who witnessed the last sickness of our departed friend, that it furnished a most beautiful and edifying illustration of the power and triumphs of religious truth. This, indeed, is just what all who knew him well, would have expected. From early infancy, his character is said to have been remarkable for propriety and correctness; and since he has professed to be a subject of the renewing grace of God, he has steadily maintained a consistent and edifying walk. It is not meant to assert, that he was faultless, either as a man or a Christian. The warmth of his temperament would sometimes betray him into impa-

tience and irritability of temper, which occasioned him much sorrow; and in his own judgment a besetting sin of his life, was what he termed his pride of heart. But surely we may say that where sin abounded, grace superabounded. For he was constantly humbling himself in view of these very imperfections, deplored by none so much as himself,—I might almost say, visible to none but himself.

I presume I speak the universal feeling of the institution to which he belonged, when I say, that no member of it has possessed, in a higher degree, the confidence and respect of all, even the most thoughtless on religious subjects, among us. He was a living embodiment of correctness and fidelity of Christian principle, and sincerity and warmth of Christian feeling. Without the remotest appearance of obtrusiveness, he was seldom remiss in the performance of any duty, whether public, social or personal.

I have been favored with the sight of full memoranda of the leading incidents of his last sickness; from which the want of time, however, forbids me now to draw at any considerable length. The leading characteristics of his experience, during this trying period, are tenderness of conscience, in view of all his past failures; an humbling sense of his own character and deserts as a sinner, together with overflowing gratitude to Christ as a Saviour; an ardent affection for his Christian friends; and an irrepressible and all absorbing desire for the salvation of such as he knew to be strangers to genuine piety. He seldom spoke without giving expression to one or other of these Christian experiences. The last mentioned desire drew from him on several occasions, the most solemn appeals, and the most affecting expostulations, addressed to impenitent friends. But these were

scenes too sacred to the parties interested, to be made the subject of public description. God grant that they may never forget the earnestness and anxiety of their dying friend, till they are led to Christ.

He was never weary of descanting on the preciousness of the Saviour. When intense bodily pain extorted from him expressions of restlessness or impatience, he would instantly recall them, when reminded of the love and sufferings and glory of Christ, and give vent, in their place to strains of self abasement, gratitude and joyous hope. The simple name of Jesus, would at once recall him from the wildest of those mental wanderings, which occasionally marked the latter stages of his disease. During the severest of his painful trials, his faith never wavered for a single moment; and often rose from the heart broken accents of penitence, to seek expression in the triumphant language of the inspired Apostle. "O how wonderful," he exclaimed, "that God should raise *me* up to glory. Thanks be unto God who giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." "Oh," said he again, "I am perfectly willing to die. How happy it will be, to be with Jesus, to be at rest. I am weary, *weary*. You cannot appreciate what it is to be weary." When asked if it was still true, in the language of that beautiful hymn, that

"Jesus can make a dying bed
Feel soft as downy pillows are?"

He answered, "Yes, it *is* true—blessed Jesus." "I shall soon," said he again, "be with my Jesus, and there meet my father and mother, and relations and friends. How sweet—how transporting—how enrapturing the thought!" His feelings towards the close repeatedly sought expression in the melody of those well known hymns, which have so often served to waft the spirits of

God's people from scenes of suffering and death, to the throne of immortal light and glory :

“Jerusalem, my happy home,
Name ever dear to me.”

“There is a land of pure delight,
Where saints immortal reign.”

“Think,” said he, “of that word *reign*, we do not know what it means here.” He enjoyed especially the singing of the hymns beginning,

“On Jordan's stormy banks I stand,
And cast a wishful eye,” &c.

and that other,

“I would not live away : I ask not to stay
Where storm after storm rises dark o'er the way.”

To the bereaved relations and personal friends of our deceased young friend, let me say that amidst the pain which such a loss must occasion, there is everything to comfort your bleeding hearts. Oh what a difference between the death of a Christian and one who is not ! Nor let your hearts linger in despondency over the untimely blight of your too fond hopes of his future usefulness. He, for whose service these hopes were enlisted, saw that his work on earth was done ; or it may be, he saw that this very death, may, in fulfilment of your highest hopes, and in answer to your prayers accomplish more than his life. And then he is not lost to the cause of Christ. He is only transferred to a higher sphere of service. That character, mature, correct and lovely as it was, though clouded with imperfections and sin, has already burst into a fulness of beauty and strength, such as years of earthly toil and trial, could never have produced ; and such as your highest anticipations or imaginings could never have reached. Oh what light, resplendent and glorious, does the gospel shed upon these otherwise dark and mysterious dispen-

sations. Those long cherished hopes of his usefulness, so grateful to your hearts, were only in the bud; but now behold them suddenly expanded in all the beauty and fragrance of heaven. The weary servant of Christ, has become to the eye of your faith, a seraph in glory. The poor toil worn missionary by anticipation, is suddenly transformed into a glorified saint; or it may be, clothed with the knowledge and power of the upper world, returned again as a ministering spirit to you, and to the dark race, for whose salvation he was preparing to labor. These thoughts which Christianity suggests, may not indeed, rob this bereavement of all its bitterness,—for it was intended that you should feel it,—but they alter its whole character. They take it out of the class of evils, and place it in the class of blessings. This may not rob the shaft of its point, but it takes away its poisoned *barb*. It may not prevent the pain of the wound, but it applies a balm, that soothes and ultimately heals it. To you, too, this affliction, if sanctified, not only differs from the “sorrow of the world;” it is its very opposite. The one is a proof of paternal love; the other the infliction of judicial wrath. The one is a means of grace, the other an earnest of eternal death. The exhortation is, therefore, neither unmeaning nor unnecessary, “My son despise not thou the chastening of the Lord, nor faint when thou art rebuked of him.” What strength, what life, should it infuse into the weak, afflicted, fainting Christian, to know that “the sufferings of this present time, are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us.”

To those among his associates, who like him professed to be followers of Christ, his life furnished a precious and beautiful example of Christian character and duty. The respect inspired by his life, and the universal and

heartfelt sorrow for his death, are a striking proof, how much simple goodness can accomplish. With no factitious advantages, with no remarkable brilliancy of parts, with only a sound and disciplined mind, solid attainments in scholarship, and high moral culture, such as every one among us may attain, if he will, he has left to us an example and an influence, which those who have once felt, will never cease to feel. The admonition which his life and death have left us, is to this effect;—that if we would make our influence felt, if we would do good to others, the great thing is to attain a high degree of goodness ourselves. There is no power so little valued, as the power of simple goodness; and yet there is none comparable with it in efficiency or permanency. He did not, as no wise man will, neglect the diligent cultivation of his intellect, or the attainment of knowledge. But his cultivation and his attainments were subordinate to his high, steady, moral and religious aims. It was for this, that we will remember him; and it was for this, that we will cherish and love and honor his memory. His religion was not, as genuine religion never is, fitful or transitory. It was genial, steady and consistent. To exert his power, you must cultivate his spirit, and emulate his devotional character. The power of doing good, lies not in what is termed address: nor in studying how we can say the best things in the most impressive way,—not in forced exhortations to duty, and still less in censorious criminations for its neglect, but in cultivating the heart, in keeping up the glow of genuine religious principle and fervor, in keeping our light burning, not in cold phosphorescent flashes, but in a warm and steady flame. It is the power of grace in the heart, and not the conventional language of religion on the lips, that is the true source of moral power in society.

Never absent from his post without cause, and never neglecting his duties as a student, he was the last man among us to countenance that mistaken zeal, which prompts some good young men to neglect their studies, for the purpose of embarking prematurely on the great work of teaching others; instead of seeking to qualify themselves to enter upon that work in due season, with a well cultivated and well stored mind. Nor, on the other hand, did he allow, as too many do, successful attention to his studies, to draw him off entirely from timely efforts to do good. Many who hear me can bear affecting testimony to this fact. You can recall his affectionate, sincere and sometimes earnest hints and admonitions, wrung from him by a sense of his duty and your danger;—admonitions which his diffidence strove to repress, but only rendered more beautiful, and more pungent by the effort. His vacations were spent chiefly in laboring to do good; and we have reason to believe that many, after his cold remains have mouldered back to dust, will yet rise up to call him blessed. His Sunday School classes, of both colours, shared largely in his sympathies and prayers; and the sad testimonies they have given of grief for his loss, is the best proof of the extent of that loss, in their unsophisticated but truthful judgment. Oh can it be, that his solemn warnings and affectionate entreaties shall be lost upon those young hearts. "Tell them," said he, with almost his dying breath, "I shall never see them again,—tell them to love Jesus," and then added, "none but Jesus, none but Jesus."

Notwithstanding the personal engrossment of the final and single-handed struggle with the king of terrors, he had still time and sensibility left, to feel for his impenitent friends and companions in College. Possessed with

a calm assurance of his own salvation, through grace, his anxieties were deep and exciting, in consequence of what he felt to be the awful danger of many of his friends. Standing upon the threshold of eternity, he was appalled not by his own danger but yours: and from that awful limit of possible salvation, he sends back his affecting expostulations and entreaties, to those whom he has left in the bondage of guilt. For some of you he risked his still undecided chance for life, in the hope of persuading you, by personal sollicitation, to accept the blessed offers of peace and salvation. Suffer me to recall to you these precious and costly admonitions of your late companion and friend. What, my dear young friends, must be your danger, when at such a moment, when life with all its precious interests was trembling in the balance, he felt constrained to exhaust his ebbing strength, and expend his last breath, in kind warnings for your good. Surely it is a testimony whose force you cannot but feel, both to his affection and your peril. And if he, thus standing on the verge of life, and bathed in the approaching effulgence of eternity, had such conceptions of your state, O is it unreasonable to urge you to reflection and anxiety on your own behalf.

To all his fellow students, I could wish to be the mere mouth, to give utterance to the solemn lessons that are now streaming from that voiceless coffin; or rather may I not say, the mouth of God, speaking in powerful but silent tones, from the lips of your companion now sealed forever. For after all, we should take a sadly defective view of this providence, if we should fail to see in it the hand, and hear in it the voice of God. Yes, He it is, who speaks to you from the death bed, the coffin and the grave of Aikin. He it was that sent him here to confirm by his modest, beautiful, consistent and believing example, our faith in

the truth and power of the promises. It was His forbearance that spared you, who are unprepared,—perhaps conscious in your own bosom that you are covered with defilement, and reeking with guilt in the sight of God,—while he strove to wake your slumbering consciences, by calling from your side one who was all ready for his summons. Let me entreat you to ask yourselves the question, if the bolt that has fallen at your feet, and lays your daily companion prostrate before you, had stricken you down, what must have been your destiny for ever? And let me remind you that it was owing to no foresight, or skill, or power of your own, that it did not. The shield that protects you, is held over your head by the unseen hand of that Saviour, whom you slight and neglect, or perhaps malign. If you will not be startled by a sense of your danger, will you not be moved by the mercy and forbearance which has thus spared you; perhaps some of you through sickness and danger as threatening as that of your friend. And if these considerations, thus enforced by the voice of God over the grave of your companion, should fail to move you, then I ask in unfeigned anxiety, what hope have you that you will ever be arrested and saved. Can it be, that any who hears me is so wedded to destructive sin, already so hardened in waywardness and disobedience to God, that a providence so close, so affecting, so solemn, makes no impression on his heart? If I speak to one such person, let me ask again what reasonable hope he can have, that anything will arrest him, or break the power of sin over his soul? Many of you have pious, praying parents and friends, interceding for you with an anxiety you cannot conceive;—an anxiety that would be turned into agony, did they know, as you do, the extent of your wanderings. Let me in this day of your merciful visitation, affectionately urge and entreat

you—let me come down, as it were, and personally implore you, to consider your ways, and turn unto the Lord your Redeemer, lest his anger should be kindled but a little and ye perish from the way. The day is coming when you too must lie down in pain and weariness, to die. And Oh if you have not Christ when you come to die, what will you do? How different will be your closing struggle to those who witness it. How appalling even to the heart of a stranger, should you die among strangers; how agonising to that of your friends, if you should die in their bosom! No voice of comfort from the coffin or the grave to soothe the anguish of your parents, or heal the bleeding hearts of your fond sisters. “Poor young men,” to use the compassionate language of that voice which we shall hear no more, when told that some of his classmates had called to enquire for him, “Poor young men, if they go on as they are, they will lose heaven.” To whom among you, is this dark saying to be fulfilled? Will not some who hear me devote the remainder of this sad day to pondering their relations to God, and weighing the question, what they must do to be saved? And may we not hope that this precious death may be the beginning of better days among us?