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SERMON CXCIX.

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**Delivered on the Sabbath after the
DECEASE OF THE LATE PRESIDENT HARRISON.**

*“Cease ye from man, whose breath is in his nostrils : for wherein is
he to be accounted of?”* Isaiah, 2 : 22.

The believer in a superintending Providence, who presides over all the affairs of men, can find no apology for inattention to passing events. Conduct so indevout, is rebuked alike by reason and Scripture. No knowledge is so practical and important to ourselves as the knowledge of God. But how is this to be acquired? Are not his *acts* the best exponents of his character? Are not the dealings of his Providence his own living voice, with which he speaks to the children of men, in language distinct and audible? The utmost modesty, I know, becomes a being of yesterday, when attempting to scan the ways of Him whose counsels are a great deep. Stretching over so large a space, and requiring the whole of time for its completion, many parts of the great plan of Providence must remain inscrutable and mysterious to our mortal vision. They are like the many springs and wheels of an involved and intricate mechanism ; seemingly they work adverse one to another, but when the result comes out, the harmony of the whole will be seen. It is but a part of God's ways which we see ; and the adaptation of one event to another, on a vast scale, and the fitness of all events to a final end, can be made clear only when the whole plan is completed.

It is plain, therefore, that the dealings of Providence never can supersede the necessity of a written revelation, as a method of human instruction. These are too involved and incomprehensible to be a guide unto the simple. Seemingly discordant and irreconcilable, by themselves, they would often confound the wisdom of the wisest, and perplex the mind of the most studious and saga-

cious. Observe, accordingly, the fallacious construction which men, unenlightened by revelation, have put upon passing events to their own bewildering and distress; perverting, oftentimes, the mysteries of Providence into the service of error and superstition. It is the Scriptures of God which alone are capable of interpreting aright the movements of Providence. God cannot deny or contradict himself. It is his word which explains his Providence—it is his Providence which illustrates and confirms his word. Whatever appears dark and adverse in outward events, religion teaches us to resolve into the wisdom of Him who seeth the end from the beginning, and who out of seeming evil evolveth good; while, in return, the dispensations of Providence paint to the eye and trumpet to the ear of man, those various lessons of piety which, when taught in other forms, often fail to affect him. Hence it generally occurs, that deeper impressions and more powerful effects are produced, when the declarations of God concerning the vanity of all things human are repeated in the solemn tones of afflictive events, than when read on the printed page, or heard in the calm retreats of the sanctuary.

The rational faculties attain to their best exercise when removed as far as possible from things sensible, into the region of the abstract and spiritual; but the *heart* of man feels the most acutely, when, withdrawing from things remote, it is made to bear the pressure of things near, visible and tangible. When thus stricken by the hand of God, and full of sorrowful experience, the voice of man is no farther needed, except it be to interpret Providence, and guide the emotions already excited in consonance with religion.

You have already anticipated, my brethren, the application of these remarks to that recent dispensation of Divine Providence by which God is to-day speaking to this whole people; the aspects and relations of which are so public and prominent, that not to observe them would betray the most criminal levity. For the first time since the organization of our civil government, its chief executive officer has been removed by death. That is a novel experience through which this nation is now passing. Never before have we been taught, after this manner, the nearness of that relation which connects each and every citizen in our land with the man who is elevated to preside over its affairs. Observation has misled me, if it be not true, that this event has developed a beauty and a power in this feature of our government which before was never even suspected. Our red brethren in the West have always been accustomed to designate the President of the United States as their "Great Father." It is a title far above that of king or emperor. Amid the asperities of political excitement, and the collisions of party feeling, men have scarcely thought of any such relation; but when death has come to sunder the tie, a whole people is visited with a sorrow, in some respects, not unlike that which

children feel when bereaved of a parent. Men are actually surprised to find themselves thus affected. In their animated desire to elevate favorite candidates to the chair of chief authority, they had not even thought that there was, in every bosom, a latent feeling of personal relation to that office itself, which, in an event like that which has now occurred, would create a common sympathy superior to sectional preferences and party animosity.

My motives, in alluding thus distinctly to this mournful event, cannot be misconstrued by those who will testify that this sacred desk was never prostituted to the purposes of party. The ministers of religion are called to a higher vocation than to indulge in political speculations, or supply fuel for political excitement. Leaving it for others to discuss what are to be the probable effects of this unexpected providence on our civil affairs, it will be my province, as a teacher of religion, to present those aspects of the event which are consonant with the instructions of the holy Sabbath.

1. I cannot but think that this dispensation of Providence was designed to teach this people the vanity of *human dependence*. It has pleased God to accomplish most of his purposes on earth by human instruments. Now it is one of the most common modes in which the natural atheism of the human heart develops itself, that there should be so prevalent a disposition to deny the agency of the Supreme, and confide entirely in an arm of flesh. It is so in the family. Children hang upon a father, and think scarcely at all of that higher hand on which he himself and they depend. So it is in the church. There has ever been a proneness to trust in favorite men and measures, forgetful of her entire dependence on her invisible Lord and Head. Pre-eminently so is it with the state. It is frightful to think what an amount of atheism there is in reference to civil affairs. More confidence is felt and expressed in the wisdom of man than in the all-wise and powerful agency of God. The sagacity of rulers, the skill and experience of governors, the prudence of legislators, the wisdom of cabinets; in short, the agency of man in some form occupies a place, in the thoughts of man, far above all sense of dependence on Him, who, from on high, declares "counsel is mine and sound wisdom: by me kings reign, and princes decree justice; by me princes rule, and nobles, even all the judges of the earth."

To cease from this dependence on men and to trust in God only, while it is the first lesson of piety, is one of the most difficult of all attainments. Therefore it is that God employs violent measures to aid its accomplishment. Intending that men should devoutly recognize his superintending authority, he breaks down and casts aside the instruments which have been made to occupy his place. He enters the domestic circle, and removes the "strong staff" on which many lean, that wounded hearts

may turn to Him and put their trust in Him only. He visits his church, and selecting those who are as the pillars of the house of God, to whom Zion looks as to her great strength, puts them in the grave that He may be exalted, and in him alone may his people trust. In like manner he invades the nation which has grown unmindful of him, frustrates its wisest counsels, disappoints its most sagacious anticipations, and removes its chosen helpers.

Let it not be set down as an arrogant and presumptuous attempt to interpret the providence of God, when I remark, that (if a disposition to trust in ourselves characterizes us as a people,) then there has been a series of remarkable events in our recent history which appear to have been designed expressly for its rebuke and correction. I look back to a period less than ten years ago, and recount the consternation which pervaded this city,

“ ———When the blessed seals
“ Which close the pestilence were broke,”

and thousands were withering, in a moment, before the breath of the great destroyer. Emphatically walking in darkness, as it did, evading the researches of science after its causes and its cure, it would seem that God intended that this visitation should be resolved into his own immediate agency, thereby teaching men their entire dependence on him for life, and breath, and all things. Did that religious feeling extend, and was it perpetuated as designed? Was God recognized and adored in this terrible event as he should have been? A short interval elapsed, and the scourge again returned. Was it productive of the intended effect? Or was there an abounding atheism which provoked the displeasure of heaven? Not many months passed away and the hand of God was again visible in another form. The devouring element, gaining ascendancy over man, consumed, in a single night, millions upon millions of wealth. A spectator of that terrible scene myself, and an observer of the dismay which, for a season, existed, I confess to you that the impression made on my mind of the criminal inattention to the hand of God, and the indomitable spirit of self-confidence and self-dependence which almost universally prevailed, is even now as painfully distinct in my recollection as are the terrors of that eventful night. It was hard to humble ourselves under the hand of God; and the elasticity of a self-confident spirit threw off the pressure, and went forth again in its own strength. Again did God assert his own supremacy, and bring to nought the counsels of the wise. Unexampled embarrassments perplexed all mercantile affairs, and men's hearts failed them from looking for the things which were to come to pass. And again it was hard to discern the agency of God in all this, and devoutly to recognize our constant dependence on him for stability of purpose and cer-

tainty of success in the marts of business, in the relations of credit, and in the paths of the sea. Again was the spirit of self-confidence permitted to develop itself, we fear, with too much of a real disregard to the voice and providence of God. Various measures for relief were proposed and urged; divers opinions advanced; parties were formed; favorite schemes discussed; some looked to the right hand, and some to the left; some to this man, and others to that; but few, we fear, looked upward to Him from whom help cometh. And now, when the utmost wishes and hopes of the majority were accomplished, I hear a voice from heaven, saying, "Cease ye from man, whose breath is in his nostrils; put not your trust in the son of man, in whom there is no help. His breath goeth forth, he returneth to his earth; in that very day his thoughts perish. Happy are they who have the God of Jacob for their help, whose hope is in the Lord God, who made heaven and earth, the sea and all that in them is."

The agency of God in the affairs of nations is as real as in the concerns of individuals, and never does a nation attain unto His favor, till this supreme authority is devoutly recognized in all that pertains to internal economy, to foreign relations, to the pursuits of business, and the enactment of laws. That people whom God intends to bless he will afflict, till every human dependence be forsaken, and the lesson be learned and practised, of an habitual acknowledgment of his presence, a strong confidence in his arm, and a careful obedience unto his commandments.

2. The tendency of that event we are now considering, I observe, in the next place, must be to rebuke and allay a prevailing *spirit of party*.

No one has been a calm observer of recent events without experiencing many sad regrets in view of the prevalence of this great evil, and many forebodings in reference to its probable issue. Am I required to define the lawful limits of party preferences, and demonstrate in what cases it is excessive and disastrous? I have only to reply in a word,—that spirit of party is evil, and only evil, which is superior to the claims of pure patriotism, and the expression of which is allied to passions selfish, vile and corrupt. It has been urged by some, as a serious objection to the morality of the New Testament, that it omits to inculcate patriotism as a specific virtue. How groundless the objection is will appear, when we consider that patriotism is included within the great law of love, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and soul, and thy neighbor as thyself;" and that to have insisted on the practice of patriotism by itself might have been to erect that into an independent feeling, separate from the universal claims of christianity; a feeling which when thus divorced is always prone, as history proves, to be excessive and ruinous.

Against life, and interest, and excitement even in relation to national affairs, religion has nothing to object; but a truly

patriotic heart, animated by pure motives, swelling only with virtuous emotions, can bear to be heated through and through without the ebullition of one angry or sinful feeling. Compared with this rule of love, how alarmingly prevalent have been the evils of a party spirit. How much that was truthless; how much that was selfish; how much that was unkind; how much that was angry, alas! how much has been said and done, the whole spirit of which was opposed to the love of country and to the love of God. And now, when brethren of the same household, citizens of the same country, were well nigh intoxicated with this feeling; when all was eagerness and excitement, a ghastly figure enters the arena—it is DEATH! He waves his skeleton arm, and all is still. What instructor is so impressive concerning the folly of strife as this speechless messenger! Did you ever stand by the grave of one against whom you had in life been at enmity? Was it not with a compunction of conscience that you looked down on the poor, helpless remnant of mortality, wondering how you could ever have quarrelled with a worm of the dust like yourself? How mean, how worthless, how unworthy appear those objects which party feeling has presented, in comparison with the sublime realities which death forces on the attention. What a great calm it brings over the agitated spirits of men. How it hushes noise—how it subdues excitement. I thank God that there are so many proofs that, before his own providence, party spirit has fallen prostrate, and that, in the presence of death, men are made to feel that they are brethren still. Let us hope that this effect may not be temporary or limited; but that a more conciliatory spirit, a spirit more consonant with the providences and word of God, may pervade the future counsels and conduct of this whole people.

3. Again, I observe that this dispensation of Providence was obviously intended to teach us the vanity of the world, the certainty of death, and the nearness of eternity.

In some respects the death of a king and a beggar are alike. The pains of dissolution are the same. The impotence of human aid are alike apparent. But in the effects produced on others by the decease of those whose circumstances are so dissimilar there is a difference. When death enters the cottage of the humble man, he teaches the sad lesson of human frailty but to few. When he invades a circle of wider relations, louder and more impressive are his monitions. But when, as now, he removes in an hour the most exalted in rank, God speaks therein unto a whole nation at once, saying, "all flesh is grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of grass. The breath of man is in his nostrils, and wherein is he to be accounted of, at his best estate, but a frail, helpless, dying creature." If death sometimes assumes the air of friendship, and is greeted with a melancholy welcome when he comes to the relief of the abject and the forlorn, true and terrible is his aspect to the eye of mortals, when he dims the lustre of rank, humbles the

power and quenches the glory of life. Now is it that the world is taught, in a manner most impressive, that there is no exemption from the decree and power of the king of terrors. The lofty and the lowly, the rich and the poor, lie down together under his silent dominion.

It would be difficult to conceive of any combination of circumstances better adapted to impress a people with the vanity of all things earthly, than those in which death has now achieved his conquest. The individual who has fallen, occupied the very pinnacle of society. He had attained the utmost that a lawful ambition could desire; and while his glory was yet fresh upon him, the destroyer came. Scarcely had the intelligence of his official installation reached our remoter States, ere his earthly career was finished, and his soul summoned to the bar of God. We look back a little more than a month ago, and read again the records of that day, and survey the scene of splendor and of joy, and hear the shouts of a great multitude; and while we look and listen, already it has faded away like a dream. Instead of a shout, is the dirge; instead of the joyous procession, is the funeral train, the bier, and the urn. The shadow of death has passed upon it all. Who can behold the contrast without feeling how vain, how empty, how evanescent the highest honors which the world can give! What a lesson is conveyed by this event, especially to those who are high in office, and who, from the very influences which beset them, may be supposed to be most in danger of putting far away the thought of their own mortality!

"The boast of heraldry, the pomp of power,
 "And all that beauty, all that wealth ere gave,
 "Await alike the inevitable hour;
 "The paths of glory lead but to the grave."

God is speaking unto this nation, that it is appointed unto men once to die, and after death cometh the judgment! Eternity, with its amazing realities, is very near. Very soon and the vast throng which yesterday moved through these streets, will, without exception, have passed beyond the scenes which now occupy them, into eternity. What then will be to us the honors or the obscurities of life? What to him, who is now engrossed in the solemn concerns of the eternal world, is the voice of eulogy—the solemn pageant, and these habiliments of mourning? Nothing are these to an immortal spirit. All, all on earth is shadow—that beyond is *substance*. And are no religious impressions to follow this public bereavement? Is it not a moment in which it may be expected that the thoughts of a whole nation would be turned to the life which is to come? Is the feeling which Providence has awakened to expend itself in forms and ceremonies? or is it destined to introduce and extend a more serious attention to eternal things, and a more general practice of devout piety? Fortunate for his own fame as was the time of death with this distinguished individual, thrice fortu-

nate will it prove if it shall appear to have been the means of conferring religious blessings on his countrymen. Should his untimely death be instrumental of giving a direction to the thoughts of this nation towards the truths of religion, greater benefits would thereby result, than could have followed the most prosperous administration of affairs.

4. There is one circumstance in connection with death which is very striking. It is the deep interest which is felt by survivors in the *moral character* of the departed. There is an eager inquisitiveness after the evidences of his preparation for death. There is an anxiety to know what was the conduct of the individual as he approached the confines of eternity. Did he show himself a christian? Did he express himself as being ready for the summons? Did he leave testimony that it was all well with his soul? This remarkable fact, my hearers, is one mode in which the human conscience testifies to the wisdom and necessity of being well prepared to meet a holy God. This universal habit has been forcibly brought to my attention in the present instance. With the religious character of the deceased I am wholly unacquainted. Of this I am not to speak. If evidences existed of true piety in his heart and life, most sincerely do I rejoice, praising God. But the fact of which I now speak, is the importance which is attached, in the judgment of all, to any acts, any expressions which indicate a religious turn of mind. Every thing else appears to be lost sight of in the presence of death. When the officers of state made official announcement of his decease, nothing was judged to be of greater importance to be told, than that his death was "calm and resigned." The fact that on entering the national mansion he had purchased a "Bible and Prayer-book," which, on the day of his interment, were placed beside his coffin—the fact that he signified to a religious attendant his purpose to connect himself with a christian church, on profession of his faith—why, my brethren, is so much interest attached to circumstances like these? Why do men, whether their own lives evince a regard to religion or not, speak of these facts as so very important? They are published—they are reported—they are the theme of conversation and inquiry. The reason is, as I have already said, that there is in the bosom of every man the consciousness that *true religion alone prepares any mortal to appear before the tribunal of God*. Nothing is more common than for the most irreligious, when death invades the circle of their nearest companionships, to make mention, as a matter of satisfaction, of every look, and act, and sign of the deceased, which evinced a preparation, on his part, for the great change. Every thing else loses its importance. When was it ever known, in these christian times, that the amount of a man's *possessions* was inscribed on his tomb-stone? The bare suggestion of such a thing would be construed as a mockery of death, under whose denuding hand the rich man leaveth the world naked as he entered it. But

if, in all his life, there was one virtue ; in his moral character, one trait which can afford satisfactory evidence of God's approval, this, be sure, you will find sculptured in conspicuous characters on his monumental marble ; and even there not half so deep, not half so imperishably, as on the hearts of surviving kindred.

One thing alone can prepare any for their last account. It is not rank, it is not honor, it is the belief and the practice of the Gospel of God. That which is highly esteemed among men, furnishes no passport to the presence of Divine Majesty. There is but one method of salvation proposed for any, for all. To be humble before God, is greater than to be exalted among men. To practice the duties of religion ; reverently to walk with God ; to be a penitent, sincere disciple of Jesus Christ ; this, the world themselves being judges, is of paramount consequence in the hour when death comes to terminate this earthly existence.

As an evidence of this, I have adverted rather to the convictions and admissions of men themselves, than to the explicit teachings of inspiration. When we open the word of God, the only thing which we find revealed therein, is our relation to a future and endless life. And the inquiry which the word and Spirit of God urge upon our consciences in view of death always is, am I myself prepared for the solemn transit? Feeling as I do the propriety of these demonstrations of respect towards our chief magistracy, great is my fear amid it all, that outward show, the solemn pomp of sorrow, the requiem and the march, will divert the thoughts of many from those internal communings with death, judgment and eternity, which the visitations of Providence are adapted to create. And to-day, amid the thoughtfulness and calm of the holy Sabbath, I stand here to ask each one of my dear hearers whether he is himself prepared suddenly to be removed from the scenes which now absorb his attention to the solemnities of his final account. An impetuous current is fast bearing our bodies to the grave ; whither, whither are our spirits tending ? Is the great question decided or not, whether they have yet received a direction towards the city and the throne of God ? Has the sting of death, which is sin, been extracted ? Have we committed our souls unto the Conqueror of death and the grave ? Have we trusted in Him who is the resurrection and the life ? Have we fled for refuge and hope to Him who will occupy the throne of judgment, whose smile amid the world's convulsions will be life, whose frown will be despair and death ? A satisfactory answer to inquiries like these, can alone sustain and calm in the hour when the world recedes, and its glory fades on the rayless eye. To be a true christian is the only thing which will avail when the dead, small and great, shall stand before the throne of God, and the character of each awaits its irreversible destiny. What then, in the words of the Son of God, is a man profited if he should gain the whole world and lose his own soul ?