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NEW YEAR'S SERMON FOR 1847.

A YEAR CONSIDERED AS A PART OF HUMAN LIFE.

We spend our years as a tale that is told.—PSALM XC. 9.

IN the margin this is rendered "as a meditation," in accordance with the usual meaning of the Hebrew word *הרהר*. Some have rendered it "as a thought," the most rapid of all things; some "as a sigh," a brief expression of sorrow that escapes from us and vanishes. In our common version it is rendered, "as a tale that is told;" an idle story that is designed to amuse for a moment; that is not worth seriously regarding or making an effort to remember; that soon passes away from the recollection. According to this interpretation, the meaning is, that life is suffered to pass as if it were a matter of no consequence; that it is spent in no employment that is really becoming our condition; and that it is worn away by trifles which leave no permanent impressions, and which produce no important results.

Either of these interpretations conveys not an unapt account of life as it is usually spent; and either of them will accord with the object which I have in view this morning. Either of them would furnish an appropriate description of the life which many of us have led during the past year. That year has gone for ever, like a tale that is told; like a passing thought; like a sigh that is gently breathed forth, and is soon over. By many of us it has been spent without any deep sense of the value of time; of the true objects of existence; of the bearing which the passing year has on our future being; of the importance of a year regarded as a part of human life.

At the beginning of a new year it is proper to look over the past, and to inquire, as we form our plans for the future, what is the purpose for which God has placed us in this world? The joys of the past year live now only in the recollection. Its sorrows.

have been passed through, and, like the joys which we have experienced, are not to be recalled. Our departed joys leave the heart sad that they are passed; the sorrows that we have experienced leave it sad at the memory of the loss of friends, or property, or health—at the memory of blasted hopes, and of disappointments in our fondly-cherished plans. In spite of ourselves, and amidst all our attempts to be cheerful, no matter what the year may have been to us, there is a sombre feeling which comes over the soul, corresponding to the sombre season of the year; and in the midst of our rejoicings the mind will be pensive and sad. We cannot help saying to ourselves: “We shall never experience these pleasures again. We shall never again grasp the hand of the friend with whom we began the year, but who has passed away for ever. We shall never now see the fulfilment of the hopes that we then cherished, which seemed to us so bright and cheering in the prospect. We shall not be able to recall the hours that we have wasted in indolence or folly; to carry out the plans which have been defeated by the allurements of sensuality, or the fascinations of pleasure; or to secure now on our own character the happy influence which *might* have been secured if that whole year had been devoted to virtue and true religion. We shall never be able to go back over that part of our journey, to correct the errors that we have committed; and to extract the poisoned barb with which, by ingratitude or unkindness, we have pierced the bosom of a friend. We shall never have an opportunity of asking pardon of him whom we have injured, who is now in his grave; nor can we recall the harsh word or the unkind look that has fixed itself indelibly in the memory of those who love us. We cannot re-summon from the past this part of our probation as it hastens away to join the distant centuries in the land of shades, and make it now tributary to our salvation.”

A year, as our lives are bounded, may be a different thing to us from what it is to other beings. It is different from what it was to the antediluvian patriarchs, when almost a thousand of our years gave them an opportunity of repairing past follies, and regaining what might have been lost—for a year bore scarcely a greater proportion to their lives than a month does to ours. It is different to us from what it is to an angelic being, to a redeemed spirit, to a lost soul; for by them it is not passed as a season of probation, and life with them is not soon to give way to another order of things. A year on earth; a year in heaven; a year in hell; if time is thus measured there, has its distinct features in each place. We are not concerned now, however soon we may be, with what a year is to the dwellers in other worlds, but we are much concerned to know what relation it sustains to our own existence here, and what bearing it may have on our existence hereafter. With this view, I propose to ask your attention, as a suitable subject for meditation at the close of one year, and the commencement of another, to this topic—*a year considered as a part of human life.*

I. A year, however it may be spent, is, in respect to each indi-

vidual, a very material part of his active life; of life that amounts to any thing. We speak much, as the Bible does, of the shortness of life; and yet we seldom form any correct idea of the reality on the subject, and are perpetually liable, in our anticipations, to make life longer than it really is. We fix the limit at seventy years—a limit brief in itself; not often reached; rarely passed. But even if life were made sure to us for seventy years, there are great and important abatements to be made from those years as to any positive efficiency in regard to the real purposes of existence. Let there be abstracted from those years, as life is in part ordered, the period of unconscious infancy; the period of playful childhood; the period in youth when we are merely *preparing* for the future—a time often extending into manhood; the periods of sickness, of sleep, of needful relaxation; of the infirmities of age, and a very large portion of the three-score years and ten will be absorbed. I do not say that the playful period of childhood, or the forming season of youth, or even relaxation, sickness, and infirmity, are wholly useless, and are to be cast out of the estimate of our actual existence; but I speak of what is commonly understood *as life*, when a man may make money, not merely learn how to make it; when he may cultivate his farm, not merely learn the art of doing it; when he may preach, not merely study to become prepared; when he may construct a steam-engine, not merely learn how to handle his tools; and when he may visit his patient, or plead a cause at the bar, instead of poring over his Galen or Coke. Abstract all that we *must* from life, and you take away much of what seems to be its enormous length to a child, and explain the reason why it appears so short to him who has run through it. If he had *had* seventy years of uninterrupted vigor and health, when he could have prosecuted life's great enterprises day and night, without sickness, infirmity, or sleep, life might appear long to the old man, too. But such is *not* life. Seventy such years are now unknown to man; he may count his lot a rare exception who can number any thing like fifty such years. The average length of active life is far below this standard.

What, think you, is the average life of the mass of men who have survived the perils of infancy and childhood, and who have passed through the season of preparation, and have entered upon their active duties? The average life of a minister of the Gospel is said now to be less than twenty years; and after all the long season of education in childhood and youth; after all his self-denial in procuring an education; after his seven years' patient toil in a college and seminary, and often at an expense beyond all his patrimony, what life holds out to the minister of religion in promise is, that he may labor not thrice as long as he has been employed in the mere business of making preparation. It is possible that the average of life in other professions *may be* somewhat more, but it is probable that this would not be a very unfair statement of all who are called to grapple with public duties; to meet the excitement at the bar, or in the hall of legislation; or to have all

the sensibilities of our nature taxed when seeing a patient lying in peril of death. The average life of the farmer is greater; that of the seaman, and the soldier, and the miner, and of various classes of manufacturers, less; and these twenty revolving periods commonly measure active human life. A year, then, becomes a very material part of our earthly existence.

Again. The real amount of active and efficient life, so short at best, is often greatly diminished by two other causes. One is, that many *begin* life late, and the early portion of what might have been their vigorous or useful existence, is spent in accomplishing little. Cromwell was a farmer until he was past his fortieth year, nor until that period did he appear with any degree of prominence on the stage of public affairs. Cowper composed the *Task*, translated the *Iliad*, and wrote nearly all his poems after he was fifty, and has left few memorials of what he did during what is commonly regarded as constituting nearly the whole of life. The early part of what might be vigorous and active life, is often spent in idleness, or in dissipation, or in abortive schemes; and in such cases the individual has advanced far on his way before there is any serious purpose of accomplishing any thing that will make mankind acquainted with the fact that he ever lived. Thus many a one that becomes a Christian, has spent his early years, and the best part of his life, in dissipation and riot; in vanity and frivolity; in unbelief and sensuality; and the time in which he can now truly *live*, and accomplish anything in the real purpose of living, is crowded into the period when already the infirmities of age begin to creep on. The other circumstance is this: life is often greatly abbreviated in its *closing* period. I mean not merely by death, or infirmity, but by other causes. A man has gained what he wished, and withdraws from the world. He has won a battle, and retires to repose on his laurels. He has amassed a fortune, and retires to enjoy it. Or he becomes disappointed by a few bold and unsuccessful efforts, and gives over in despair. When young, he plumed his wings for a lofty flight, and meant, like the eagle, to ascend and look at the sun; but the waxen plumes melted, and he fell to the earth to attempt to rise no more.

It is a rare instance, where one toils patiently on from youth to old age; forming a preparation for future usefulness by diligence and virtue in early life; securing all that was gained in youth by constant industry, and adding unceasingly to the treasured stock of wisdom, knowledge, and virtue, until the old man is gathered to his fathers like a shock of corn in his season, fully ripe. Newton was one such man—a man by his native talent “placed at the head of the race,” and by his diligence setting an example to the humblest of mankind, who would wish to accomplish anything in wisdom or learning. Our own country at the present time contains one such man—yet lingering among us, but sinking to an honored grave—who may not be improperly mentioned here; a man who began life earlier than almost any who have been distinguished in public affairs, except the younger Pitt, and who has

gone now beyond the common limits of human existence; who made all of life at its commencement that could be made of it, and who, when other men withdrew from public affairs, seemed resolved to show the world what can be made of its close; who has accumulated more knowledge in the departments to which his attention has been turned than any other living man; who has filled up all his days with diligent acquisition and the discharge of great public duties, and who will probably die, after all the obloquy heaped upon him, as the most honored man—except one, with whom no mere mortal is to be compared—of the generations through which he has lived. But these are rare exceptions. They show what life *may be*, not what it commonly *is*. Usually short in itself, it is greatly abridged either at its beginning or its close; and a year, therefore, is a very material part of human existence.

II. A year is important as a part of human life, because it is, with many, a forming period, determining all that is to come. A single year, in certain circumstances, may do much more on this subject than many years at another period; and while, perhaps, to multitudes, that particular year may be undistinguished from others, yet to many it has an importance which no other one can have. It is to them *the decisive year*; the year that will be remembered though all others shall be forgotten. Let me illustrate this thought with reference to the year which has just now closed, and which, to many, ever onward will have an importance which can pertain to no other period of life.

1. It has been such to those who have during that year determined on their profession or calling in life—an act that is, probably, to shape your whole future course; to determine the nature of your studies, your plans, and your associates; and which is ultimately to measure the amount of your usefulness or your celebrity in the world.
2. It is so in regard to those who have entered on some new form of business—an act that will perhaps determine whether they will be rich or poor, honored or disgraced, when they leave the world.
3. It is so in respect to those who have formed new friendships, entered into new business relations, or contracted marriage—acts that are to affect all their destiny here below, perhaps their everlasting doom beyond the grave.
4. It is so in regard to those who have formed some plan to be developed far on in life—whose fruits they do not expect to see until many years shall have rolled away.
5. It is so in regard to those who, during the year, have surrendered themselves to some insidious form of temptation. They began the year strong in the principles of virtue. During the year those principles have been assailed with a force which they did not anticipate, and which they were not prepared to resist, and they yielded. They have taken friends to their embrace, from whom at the beginning of the year they would have recoiled with abhorrence. They have admitted conceptions of guilt to their bosoms, to which, until the year now closed, they were strangers. They have visited places of amusement or infamy, for the first time, from which a year ago they would have turned away with

unutterable loathing. They have, for the first time, indulged freely in intoxicating drinks; allied themselves with dangerous companions; contracted habits of evil, destined hereafter to grow with their growth, and strengthen with their strength; and to which they are hereafter ever to be slaves. They have for the first time disobeyed a father's and a mother's law in being found in a place of revelry and sin. They have for the first time drawn tears of anguish from a mother's eyes, or caused a sister to blush at the mention of her brother's name. These things send an influence ever onward; and far on in some future scene of poverty and disgrace; in the lonely dungeon; an outcast, in the alms-house, or dying with a broken heart, a wrecked and ruined man, the year 1846 will be remembered as, by a bad eminence, the forming period of your life. That momentary act of yielding to temptation; that indulgence in some guilty passion; that hour when first you drank a social glass, never dreaming that you *could be* a drunkard, may seem to be unimportant to you now, and the year which has just closed may appear to have no special moment as distinguished from others; but the time may come when, in the beautiful and sad language of Job, with reference to the year of his birth, you may "open your mouth and curse" it, and say: "Let that year be darkness, let not God regard it from above; neither let the light shine upon it. Let darkness and the shadow of death stain it; let a cloud dwell upon it; let the blackness of the day terrify it. Let it not be joined unto other years; let it be solitary; let no joyful voice come therein. Let the stars of its nights be dark; let it look for light but have none, neither let it see the dawning of the day." 6. Again. The past year has been important above other years in reference to those who have given up the heart to God; who have renounced the world, and who have begun truly to live to the honor of their Creator. By them that year will be remembered with songs and rejoicings for ever. It will determine their character, their course, their destiny during all the present life; and then their character, their companions, their destiny to all eternity. It will be remembered by them with joy, when they lie on the bed of death; when they stand at the bar of God; and when "the heavens shall be rolled together as a scroll."

III. A year is an important portion of human life, when considered as a part of probation for eternity. We have already seen that it is a material part when considered in its relation to *active* life, whatever may be regarded as the object of living. It is especially so, however, when considered as a part of the probation for a future state, and when we reflect on the manner in which it is actually spent by the mass of mankind. The period of probation for eternity is indeed commonly much longer than what I have spoken of as the *active* life of man; for it includes not only vigorous and healthy manhood, but childhood and youth—the very best period of life regarded as probation; the period of sickness, bereavement, and trial—times when, though a man can do little for

the present life, he can do much for that which is to come; and old age, which though the least favorable of all the periods of life as a season of probation, is still a time when, though the old man can no longer go to the bank or the exchange; when he can no longer plead the cause of injured justice, or lift up his voice in the senate house, he may *possibly* secure the salvation of his soul.

Life—all of life, except unconscious infancy, the ravings of delirium, the stupefactions of disease, when the mental powers refuse to perform their office, and perhaps some forms of old age, second *infancy*, when there is no memory, or judgment, or sense—is a season of probation for eternity. It has indeed other objects, for there are duties growing out of our relations here; and, if man is to be himself the expounder of the design for which he lives, it has many other objects, and probation is the least and the last. But whatever other objects there may be for which man is to live, he is in all things a candidate for another world, and all other things are to be subordinate to that. He is here with reference to a changeless state of being. He lives and acts for that, whether he is conscious of it, or cares about it or not. Each word, thought, deed, sends on an influence beyond the present life; the account is closed at the end of each year, nay, each moment; and he will meet every thing which he has done, registered with unerring accuracy, the moment he crosses the line which divides one world from another. If this be so, then a year of human existence has an importance which is not attached to it by the great body of men, for the results of conduct during one year may be multiplied beyond our power of computing now, into the joys or sorrows of eternity. And if this be so, then the fact that a year is wasted, or what is the same thing, *misimproved*, in regard to this great purpose of being, has an importance which claims the attention of every traveler to another world. To the great mass of mankind, it is a sad fact, that the year which has just now closed has been thus a wasted year in regard to the great purpose for which God sent them into the world. They may have improved it for other purposes, but not for this. They may have gained much, but they have secured nothing of that purity of heart without which no one shall see God. They may have won many conquests, but they have secured no victory over the "lusts which war against the soul." Nay, to human view, so far from making *advance* in preparation for heaven, they are *receding* while life wears away. At the close of the year, they were, so far as we can see, less likely to be saved than they were at the beginning. They had less tenderness of feeling; less susceptibility of impression; less disposition to attend to religion; less respect for the Gospel; and they were more under the dominion of worldliness and sinful affections; more engrossed in the cares of life; more proud and unteachable; more tenacious of their opinions; more under the influence of companions and associates who "cause to err," and who lead the soul away from God.

As there can be no doubt that there are some of this very de-

scription in this house to-day, I beg leave to address myself to you directly. You will concede the point, I trust, that life is a season of probation—a point which you will probably be as ready to concede now, when we have passed through another year, and when you *see* how little a year accomplishes in regard to the usual objects of human pursuit—as you would be at any time. How then has that departed year been spent by *you* as a part of probation? What advances have you made in the real purposes of existence? What is now the probability of your salvation compared with what it *seemed* to be when you began the year? Let me state a few things, all of which you will doubtless admit to be true.

(1.) First, you have passed through another year, during which you have been all the while on trial for eternity. You have been in the world where this is the great purpose for which it was made, and is preserved. You have lived in the world where the Son of God became incarnate and died to make an atonement for sin; where the offer of salvation is made to all human beings; where the Holy Spirit comes to apply salvation to the hearts of transgressors; where many have been prepared for heaven. You have passed the year amidst great privileges and advantages; in a Christian land, with nothing to hinder you from becoming a Christian if you chose; and where, perhaps, during the whole year you have regularly heard the gospel.

(2.) Secondly, you have spent the year without religion. You began it without religion; you have gone through all its changes without it; you have closed it without it. Neither at its commencement, or during its progress, or at its close, have you had any true love to God, or repentance for sin, or faith in the Redeemer. At no period during the year, have you been prepared to die. At no period, if you *had* died, would you have entered heaven. The year to you has been, in regard to the great purposes of life, a *wasted* year; and were it stricken out now from the list of your years, you would suffer no loss by it in regard to the salvation of the soul. You do not yourself believe that you are any *better* prepared to meet God than you were when the year began.

(3.) Thirdly, many whom I address have gone through the year without having taken one step, or even cherished one sincere desire, to secure their salvation. In all that year you have not penitently and seriously kneeled, and asked God to have mercy on your soul. You have not once sat down to read the Bible with a desire to know what you must do to be saved. You have not listened to the gospel with a deep personal interest—a sincere wish to know what the truth is, and what a man must do if he would be happy when he dies. You have not formed a distinct plan or purpose *ever* to make this a serious matter; and amidst all the schemes of which the year has been prolific; all the subjects of inquiry—commercial, financial, political, scientific, or moral which have occupied your attention, the question how a sinner may be

saved, and an immortal soul made happy, has come in for no share of your investigations.

(4.) Fourthly, whatever you may have *gained*, you have gained nothing on this the most important of all subjects on which the mind of men can ever be employed. You may have gained a friend; you may have gained property; you may have done something towards establishing a reputation which will not at once be forgotten when you are dead. But, in this great matter of salvation, you are as poor as you were when you began the year, and have done nothing to secure the treasures where "moth and rust do not corrupt," or to make clear your "title to mansions in the skies."

(5.) Fifthly, with some of you, the year has been passed in utter frivolity. Its chronicle would be a sorry record, on which you yourself would blush to look, of time spent at the toilet, in trifling conversation, in frivolous amusements, in reading that which did nothing to improve the understanding, or to purify the heart; in idleness, in gossip, in needless slumber, in pastimes whose only object was to make you forget that there *was* such a thing as *time*. You had already forgotten that there was an *eternity*; and the aim of living has been to make the whole of existence a *blank*. Perchance, also, some whom I address have spent the year in scenes whose recollection in days to come will only pour burning sulphur on a conscience laid bare to the wrath of God.

(6.) You are then, sixthly, now nearer the grave, but not nearer heaven, than you were when you began the year. You have a harder heart; you are more under the influence of the world; you are bound to this life by more attractive ties; you are less accessible to the gospel; you are more disposed to turn away from the counsels of wisdom. There was more hope of your salvation to human view at the beginning of the year than there is now. "Hope deferred" in regard to your salvation, has "made the heart" of many a friend "sick;" and already a father and a mother begin to look upon the prospect that you will be saved with despair.

Think then how short life is at best; how few are its active years; how important a portion a single year *may* be, and *is*, of your earthly existence; and then think of a whole year more, now absolutely wasted in regard to the great purpose for which God placed you in the world. Think how little you have gained that is worth living for even on the lowest principles of calculation about the value of things, and how soon even that little may be taken away; and then think what you have lost. To-day, you might have been a Christian. The light of salvation, with the cheering light of this beautiful morning, might have shone on your path; the peace which results from reconciliation with God might have taken up its permanent abode in your heart; and the last sun of the year which has just "hastened to its setting," might have gone down on you as a child of God, and an heir of salvation. Though it had been the last time that you were to behold

him, and this morning's sun might have greeted other eyes but not yours, your souls would have had peace; for you would have gone where there are brighter skies, and where there is no need of "the light of the sun or the moon."

IV. Any one year may be of unutterable importance as a part of human life, because it may be the time when probation will end, and life closed. To millions the year now closed has had this unspeakable moment. It was the period ordained of old in which they were to give up their great account; the outward boundary which God had affixed to their existence on earth. They had lived as long as infinite wisdom had judged sufficient to secure the purposes of their being, and their places were wanted for an advancing generation. A new race that was coming up needed houses where to live; land to cultivate that they might be supported; air to breathe, and a place where to prepare themselves for eternity; and it was needful for the former generation to be taken away. The Great Husbandman removed them as the farmer does the dry and withered stalks of the last year's harvest, that he may clear the ground for the green sprouts of another crop. So the earth, the great harvest-field for heaven, is swept all over of its old inhabitants every thirty years, and more than thirty millions of this cumbering population is removed each year. It is not, indeed, done all at once, nor is one place made wholly vacant at any one time; but the work is not less certain, nor the sweeping away less entire. Where are the armies of Semiramis, of Cyrus, of Xerxes? Where are the hosts that mingled in strife in the conflicts of the "Roses?" Where are the Pilgrims that settled New England? Where is Penn, and where are the Indians with whom he agreed to live in peace? Where is there a solitary human being to tell us what was on the earth at the beginning of the last century? All gone—swept away, as if they had all been cut down at once.

So of us. Of any one year, and of any one of us, there can be no certainty but that *that* year may have all the importance derived from the fact that it is the closing year of probation. To tens of millions the year which has just closed, has had the pre-eminence over all the other years of their existence, that it has sundered them from all that they held dear on the earth; that it has consigned their bodies to the grave, and sent their spirits up to the awful bar of God. Among them are not a few that we knew and loved. They began the year with us in the land of the living; as the year rolled on they gave us the parting hand, and its last sun set on their graves. Events have shown that in our individual history, that year was not to have this eminence. Whether to any specified individual this eminence among the years, shall belong to the one on which we have now entered, is known to no human being. To some of us, it *will* have that eminence, and before its close the record on the tomb will tell the passing stranger, that this was the year on which *we* learned what it is to die and stand before God.

We have entered on another year. We endeavor to cheer each other, in a world that we all feel to be full of dangers and sorrows, by mutual congratulations and kind wishes for the future. I will not attempt to penetrate the future. I would not know it if I could. I will not damp the ardor of your joyous anticipations. I will not now dwell on the prospect that many of the tender ties which bind us together, before the close of this year will be broken; that many of our hearts will bleed; that many of these eyes will run down with tears. If I live I shall see all this soon enough; if I die, you will see it in me. But I will not anticipate it now. I will join in your felicitations and wishes for happiness and prosperity. But stand, fellow-traveller to eternity, may I not also ask one thing of you? It is, that this year may be wholly devoted to the great purposes for which life is given; that you will stand no longer as the barren fig-tree, a mere cumberer of the ground; that you will this day resolve before your Maker, that, by his grace, the year 1846 shall be the last wasted, unprofitable, ungrateful, irreligious year of your lives—the last year on which you will close your eyes on truth, and live without the hope of heaven; that by the grace of God, the sun shall no longer rise and set in his annual revolutions on you a thoughtless, impenitent, unpardoned sinner. It is that you will now form a purpose by his help to reach forward to the eternal crown; and that as the days of the advancing year roll rapidly on, each morning shall witness the consecration of yourself to your God, and that in the shades of each evening you will render him praise. So living, its months, and weeks, will pass away without regret—for they will be bearing you nearer to your eternal home. So living, if you see its close, you will arrive there with far different feelings from those with which you ended the last year. And so living, if you *are* to be arrested during this year, it would not disturb or alarm you much, if “a still small voice” should be born to your ear this day amidst its joyous congratulations and its hopes, saying, “This year thou shalt die.”

“So live, that when thy summons comes to join
The innumerable caravan that moves
To the pale realms of shade, where each shall take
His chamber in the silent halls of death,
Thou go not, like the quarry slave at night,
Scourged to his dungeon; but sustained and soothed
By unflinching trust in Christ, approach thy grave
Like one who wraps the drapery of his couch
About him, and lies down to pleasant dreams.”