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SERMON CCCXIII.

ETERNITY CONTEMPLATED.

A NEW YEAR'S SERMON.

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PSALM XXXIX: 4. "Lord make me to know mine end, and the measure of my days, what it is, that I may know how frail I am."

It was once alleged as a complaint against a certain minister by his hearers, that he did not preach to the times. He replied, that he thought it might be pardoned if, while so many were preaching to the times, one poor servant of Christ preached for eternity. The reply carries in it a weight of meaning which deserves the most serious consideration, and will give a direction to my thoughts in the present discourse. I wish to lead your views away from time, and fix them on eternity; to annihilate, as far as possible, the distance between this and the end of your earthly course, and bring directly before you the scenes of that invisible world, in which we must all very soon take up our everlasting abode. For the present hour, then, let the world with all its too absorbing concerns, be curtained from our view, and let us walk together in solemn, thoughtful step, on the shores of that vast ocean "which we must sail so soon." If the prospect be less inviting than some others that might be presented, it may, nevertheless, be more useful in its influence, and leave us, at the close of this service, better prepared to go back to the duties and cares which we have to meet in this state of our probation and temporary abode.

"O! eternity! eternity!" exclaimed an infidel, as he lay in despair upon his death-bed; O! eternity, eternity! Who can paraphrase the words for ever and ever? I feel the difficulty. There is a meaning in them which our limited powers cannot fathom. The finite cannot comprehend the infinite. As we stretch our minds to take in the boundless prospect, we sink back in conscious weakness, and feel that it is but a glimpse that we can get of the illimitable scene which lies before us, and which we designate by the term eternity. If we go to the Dictionary, we find that term defined to be duration, without beginning or end. In this view, we

SERMON CCCXIV.

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PROBATIONARY DISCIPLINE.

LUKE xiii, 6, 9. He spake also this parable: "A certain man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came and sought fruit thereon, and found none. Then said he unto the man of his vineyard, Behold, these three years I came seeking fruit on this fig tree, and found none: cut it down; why cumbereth it the ground? And he answering, said unto him, Lord, let it alone this year, also, till I shall dig about it and dung it: and if it bear fruit, well: and if not, then, after that, thou shalt cut it down."

THIS beautiful parable illustrates in the most striking manner, the dealings of God with his rebellious creatures. The wide world is his vineyard; its inhabitants are the trees that he has planted for eternity. Those that bring forth fruit in its season are called "trees of righteousness, the planting of the Lord that he might be glorified," and shall flourish in immortal beauty in the Paradise of life. He seeks fruit from all, and uses a thousand merciful expedients to produce it; and for its production there is an allotted period, in the infinite goodness of good; a period in which His mercy waits upon the sinner, while yet the opportunity of repentance and pardon is afforded, and the blessed Spirit of God is ready to sanctify the soul.

The truths taught in this parable are of infinite importance; the nature of our situation as probationers for eternity; the nature and purpose of God's discipline in regard to us; and the consequences of abusing that discipline, or of neglecting it and suffering it to be wasted, are all brought to view. Let us dwell for the moment upon each of these topics; and may the Spirit of God bless this parable for our souls.

I. First, then, we inhabit a world of probation. The three score years and ten that we spend here are only the narrow portal to an existence of endless duration, endless retribution. We are constantly forgetful of this truth, constantly unmindful of the solemn warning of that word probation, with reference to our future state. We are on trial for the destinies of eternity. This is what gives to time all its value. Why is a year to us of such amazing importance? It is because we are immortal, because eternity is before us, because the years of our existence are never to find an end. A year is valuable, not because earthly interests and worldly transactions are involved in its flight; not because

power and riches may be lost or won, empires founded or overturned, cities enriched or laid in ruins; but because business is transacting for Eternity, because the interests of Eternity are crowded into moments, because every one's character for Eternity is forming, and every one's work for Eternity accomplishing, and every one's doom deciding, in this fleeting transitory span of time. Time with us is precious, because we are to live when time shall be no longer, because on every moment that passes, the destiny of immortal beings hangs suspended. Every thing we do, think, say, goes to make up the account we are to render at the bar of judgment; and all the discipline, to which we are subject as moral beings in this world, bears upon our Eternal destiny. Time with us is precious, because it is the season of hope. What we sow here, we reap hereafter, and if we please, we may sow the seeds of everlasting blessedness.

We are all living for Eternity. You have sometimes heard the careless and thoughtless, the men of the world and the votaries of pleasure, designated as those who are not living for Eternity. But they *are* living for Eternity, and that too with a dreadful energy, and in a dreadful sense. There is not a human being who is not every day, every hour, living for Eternity. The merchant in his counting-room, the mechanic in his work-shop, the seaman on the ocean, the husbandman on the land, the miser and the spendthrift, the laboring man and the indolent, the physician, the lawyer, and the clergyman, the man of poverty and the man of wealth, the thoughtful and the thoughtless, the pious and profane, the praying man, the scoffer, and the atheist, all, all live for Eternity. None can avoid it, no occupation can prevent it, no power of thoughtlessness can throw off the dread responsibility. The christian and the impenitent, the converted and the unconverted, are living equally for Eternity; but there is this vast difference: the christian is *conscious* of it, and takes care *how* he lives; and watches for the strait and narrow way that leads to eternal blessedness; the impenitent man is unconscious of it, and in reckless, voluntary blindness, rushes to eternal ruin. Such is our probationary state, so brief, so solemn.

II. In the second place, the nature and purpose of God's discipline in regard to us are presented in this parable. In this brief period of preparation for eternity, God is at work as well as we. Brief as it is, it is enough for us to work in, enough for God to work in. With him, one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. So they are with us, with respect to our own immortality, and our work for the world to come. Enough for God to display the exhaustless riches of His grace and expedients of His wisdom in our moral discipline; enough for us, through a wise improvement of His mercy, to work out our own salvation, or through a vile and brutish neglect and abuse of that mercy, to make sure our everlasting perdition.

In this period, God is working, never wearied, for our good.

This is the nature and purpose of all his discipline in regard to us. He is ever seeking to bring his creatures to repentance, and to make them partakers of his own holiness. From the store-house of infinite wisdom and infinite love, he pours upon them influences of goodness, and surrounds them with circumstances adapted to aid those influences, to produce the fruit he loves to behold. With the efforts of his grace he combines the wise expedients of his providence, and all he does is for the improvement of their character, to make them holy, and therefore happy. He is "long-suffering toward us not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance." Behold what amazing resources He displays, and with what unsearchable riches of grace, and of patience, He lavishes his gifts. Influences richer than the Universe, he pours upon us. Exertions of wisdom and love, matured in His councils from Eternity, and executed for us in the fulness of time, He brings in all their redeeming and renovating energy, to bear upon our fallen state. Motives of power to allure the minds of loftiest archangels he sets before us. Truths of glorious and awful import he reveals to our minds. He sends the spirit of God to bring into near view the forgotten realities of Eternity, and almost lifts the veil that separates the future world from mortal sight. By the power of that Divine Agent the conscience within us is roused to execute its work, and the Law on Sinai is proclaimed in our ears, and we are made to know its dreadful sentence, and to feel that under its condemnation we are hastening to the judgment. By day and by night God is striving with us to arrest us in our downward course, and to turn our feet from the way of death. "In a dream, in the visions of the night, when deep sleep falleth upon man, in slumbering upon the bed, then he openeth the ears of man, and sealetH their instruction, that he may withdraw man from his purpose, and hide pride from man."

By the power of the same Divine Agent, the scenes and agony in the garden of Gethsemane, the mysterious glories a Savior's dying love upon Calvary, and the melting entreaties of that love in the offer of pardoning mercy, and the invitation to everlasting life, are ever before us. The book itself, that contains these wonders, these soul-arresting mysteries of moral grandeur, is ever in our eye, attracting our notice, forced on our attention, quoted for our good, referred to in all pages, an inmate of all families. Its teachings are with us in all places of our education, and the very institutions of society reflect its influences. Its voices of warning are echoed from a thousand sources, and its solemn and affectionate spirit has been breathed into a thousand familiar volumes. Its own expositions, above all, are of such amazing earnestness and power that no reflecting mind can withstand them, none can remain utterly insensible in the midst of them. Its light flashes like a flaming sword across the path to hell, as though it would bar all access to the world of wo, and its pleading remonstrance never ceases ringing in our ears, Turn ye, turn ye for why will ye die?

Then, along with the Bible, there is its fellow laborer, the holy Sabbath, ceaselessly renewing its persuasions, and calling us back to God. A seventh portion of our whole time, its influences are at work upon us. When the noise of the world has subsided, so that the voices of Eternity may be heard, then its power comes over us. The very sight of the house of God, even amidst the whirl of the world's business, is a memento of Eternity, and every week we are regularly summoned to our preparation for the last great day. Around us are the visible disciples of the Savior, journeying heaven-ward; the profession of the weakest of them speaks to the conscience, and the life of the holiest is a continual sermon all the week long. And the death-beds of the righteous and the wicked, oftentimes more than all things else awaken us to reflection.

Then, there is the recurrence of times and seasons. The months are marked, and warn us of the flight of time. The seasons, with their changes, have a moral for the conscience. The closing year solemnly addresses the soul. Then, in the midst of life we know that we are in death. His shafts fly thick around us. The bells toll at his bidding, and the funeral passes, and momentarily awes every spectator. The tombs of our fathers are around us, and we visit the graves of our friends.

Thus by God's providences he gives power to the provisions of his grace, and the institutions of the gospel. He sends judgments to awaken us, chastisements to rebuke us, afflictions to loosen the ties of earth, and break the bondage of sin, and makes us hate its pleasures. He sends, in oft-repeated sicknesses, forerunners to remind us that death is on the way, and in oft-repeated bereavements, messengers to make us feel that this is not our rest, and to say to us: "Be ye also ready." By his afflictions He would humble us, by his mercies He would lead us to gratitude, by all his dealings He would bring us to repentance. "Lo, all these things worketh God oftentimes with man, to bring back his soul from the pit, to be enlightened with the light of the living." The voice that breaks from everything around us, and is awakened by the monitor within us is this: "Prepare to meet thy God!" The stars that look down from heaven seem to utter it; the sun and the moon in their courses proclaim it. Everything that God hath made speaks to us of Him, and in that declaration of His character, reminds us that our destiny is in His hands, and that the hour is coming when we shall stand before Him in judgment, and suggests to us the question, Am I ready to meet my God?

Now the question comes to us amid all these efforts of our Heavenly Father for our good, what have we done with them. what use have we made of them? What return have we given for them? Amid all these influences, numberless and powerful. of providence and grace, what is our character in the sight of God? Have they been wasted upon us, or are the trees, around whose roots God has softened and enriched the earth, and upon whose branches He has shed the dews of His grace, fair to the sight of

their owner, and laden with the fruits of righteousness? Have we lived to God's glory, or have we been empty vines, bringing forth fruit unto ourselves? Are we now trusting in Christ for the pardon of our sins, continuing daily in repentance and prayer, living with ceaseless reference to eternal realities, endeavoring in all things to please God; and thus, through his abounding grace, ripening in holiness for his blissful presence?

It is a solemn thing to look back through any period of life, and attempt to confute the number and power of God's gracious efforts for our eternal good. What abundant time and opportunity we have enjoyed for communion with Him; what privileges for perpetual growth in grace, what means of acquisition in the knowledge of the Scriptures and the love of Christ, what a rich succession of sabbaths and seasons of prayer, and what mighty inducements for holy dilligence in the use of all these privileges! What must that depravity be, which could pass through such a series of blessed influences, such an ordeal of God's saving mercy, such an unbroken effort of His goodness, and come out unchanged!

Lord, with what care hast Thou begirt us round!

Parents first season us; then schoolmasters

Deliver us to laws; they send us bound

To rules of reason, holy messengers,

Pulpits and Sundays; sorrow dogging sin;

Afflictions sorted; anguish of all sizes;

Fine nets and stratagems to catch us in;

Bibles laid open; millions of surprises;

Blessings before hand; ties of gratefulness;

The sound of glory ringing in our ears;

Without, our shame; within, our consciences;

Angels and grace; eternal hopes and fears!

Yet all these fences, and their whole array,

One cunning bosom-sin blows quite away!

III. The view we have now taken of God's salutary discipline in regard to us, though most imperfect, inadequate, and feeble, prepares us in some measure to consider, in the third place, the consequences of abusing that discipline, or of suffering it to be wasted.

In the first place, let it be remembered that the present scene of probation is the only season in which that precious ameliorating discipline can be enjoyed. There is no change of character in Eternity, there are no means of grace beyond the grave. It is not the place of hope, but of destiny. There are no invitations of a Saviour's love, no offers of pardon, no motives to repentance. There are no Bibles, no sabbaths, no attendant influences of the Holy Spirit. Here, and here only, the power of these blessed agents and influences is tried upon us. There the season of probation is ended, and retribution takes its place. The man who dies unchanged amid the power of God's goodness enduring for his repentance, but wasted upon him, will live unchanged in his iniquity, and hopeless in the sufferance of its penalty, for ever and ever, For the sentence is, "He that is filthy, let him be filthy still," and "as the tree falleth, so it lieth;" and he whose soul rejects the

strivings of the Spirit here, and passes into eternity unmoved and unrepentant from all the exhibitions of a Saviour's love, and unarrested in a world of hope by all the movements of God's providence and grace in his behalf, will find, in a world of despair, that there remaineth no more sacrifice for sin, but a certain fearful looking for of judgment and of fiery indignation.

In the second place, let it be remembered that every mercy of God which the sinner has wasted, will be to him, in the period of remorse, a source of never-ending anguish. In every providence disregarded, every privilege abused, every effort of the Holy Spirit disobeyed and slighted, he has armed a foe against his own soul through Eternity. God's blessed grace is not to be trifled with. His wasted mercies work their own revenge. Every precious sabbath thrown away, every holy sermon unheeded, every gracious warning despised, every invitation rejected, will be a remembrance of exceeding agony in the world of woe. The images of abused mercies will rise up in judgment against him, they will track his path, they will hunt his soul, no longer in the form of mercies, but of fiery fiends. We know that there is nothing in *this* world more bitter, than the recollection of the kindness of friends, recompensed with ingratitude. If life were full of *such* recollections, life would be full of misery. But eternity *will* be filled with such recollections. From God we have received nothing but mercies; to God the impenitent have returned nothing but sins: mercies on the one side, guilt and ingratitude on the other. Eternity will be filled with a never-ending crowd of the memories of God's goodness trampled under foot, but now recoiling in agony upon the soul.

Let it be remembered, in the third place, that every neglect and abuse of God's gracious discipline, hardens the soul in sin. • As the months of probation roll round, and successively find the sinner unrepentant, they leave him more obdurate and hopeless in his state. He becomes habituated to God's mercies, and they cease to move him; accustomed to God's judgments, and they cease to alarm him. Providences lose their power, warnings are more unheeded, invitations and entreaties are met with careless indifference, the strivings of the Holy Spirit are repelled with dim stupidity, there is no arrow in God's quiver that reaches the soul. One after another, the whole storehouse of his expedients is proved and wasted, and every renewal of the trial finds them less efficacious than before. The tree that, amid all the efforts of the dresser of the vineyard, yields no fruit this year, is more confirmed in barrenness the next. Procrastination does its deadly work; the habit of iniquity grows too strong to be overcome, the heart too insensible to be softened. Ephraim is joined to idols; let him alone.

Let it be remembered, in the fourth place, that life is utterly uncertain, and that, though God is plenteous in mercy, there is a limit to his forbearance. He will not always suffer our delay; he will not for ever wait upon the sinner. Already He may have said: "This year thou shalt die!" Already, in regard to some of the

congregation, in the plenitude of health and spirits, Death may have received his individual commission. As God walks through and surveys his vineyard, in regard to how many do we hear him saying: "Lo! these three years I come, seeking fruit on this fig-tree, and find none;" and if he should now add: "Cut it down; why cumbereth it the ground?" it would be just and right. It is wondrous mercy that that command has not already been issued; for not three years alone, but very many years, has he sought fruit but found none.

My friends, if you had a tree endued with an intelligent will, capable of giving its fruit in its season, and upon its cultivation you had bestowed great care; if you had planted it in a pleasant, sunny, advantageous situation, and shielded it from the frosts and the winds; if you had caused the early and the latter rain to fall on it softly, and the sweet dews of heaven to visit it in their season: if you had loosened and enriched the soil in which its roots were striking, and made it soft with showers, and blest the springing thereof; and if, amid all this tenderness of cultivation, this profusion of care, the plant thus patiently and sedulously nourished should refuse to open for you its blossoms, or to yield for you its fruit, remaining a barren, unsightly stock in your enclosure, is there any doubt you would say, "Cut it down; why cumbereth it the ground?" And if, in addition to all this, it should send out from its branches a withering influence, to blast the luxuriant region where you had planted it, you would say, "It is nigh unto cursing, and its end is to be burned."

Now an angel might tell you, or the dresser of the vineyard, if, with the axe in his hand, at the command of his Lord, he should speak to you, might say, and would say, that this is but a picture of your own situation, if your hearts are alienated from God. He has planted you wholly a noble vine, and you have become "the degenerate plant of a strange vine." From childhood and youth, the influences of heavenly grace have fallen upon you, the efforts of God's providence have surrounded you, the early and the latter rain of the Spirit has visited you; but your heart for all this is no better: it is hardened, careless, ungrateful. You have lived amid the shining beams of the sun of righteousness, and have grown within the very garden of the Lord; but all these privileges, and all this tender care of God, have been wasted upon you; despite of it all, you are worthless in the sight of God. Behold, these many years he has come seeking fruit upon you, and has found none. These many years he has been upon the point to say, "Cut it down; why cumbereth it the ground?" but mercy has interposed; let it alone this year also, and if it bear fruit, well; if not, then, after that, thou shalt cut it down. Yet you are still not only unproductive in God's service, but in the example of your forgetfulness of God, shedding a destructive influence over all around you. There is a fearful portrait of such a character, and a dread prediction of the fate resulting from it, in the language of the

Apostle: "For the earth, which drinketh in the rain that cometh oft upon it, and bringeth forth herbs meet for them by whom it was dressed, receiveth blessing from it; but that which beareth thorns and briers is rejected, and is nigh unto cursing, *whose end is to be burned.*"

This is the last consequence, the consummation of consequences, for eternity. The man thus cut down, dry and withered, is to be burned in the fire of his own sins. This is the testimony of our blessed Lord, in a discourse of unequalled tenderness, but of great solemnity: "If a man abide not in me, he is cast forth, as a branch, and is withered; and men gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned." Couple this with the declaration of Christ in the same gospel: "If ye believe not that I am He, ye shall die in your sins," and you have an image of that fire from which God's discipline of grace and mercy in Christ would save you, but of which, if God's efforts are in your case wasted and unavailing, that discipline will but constitute a part of the fuel. "As therefore the tares are gathered and burned in the fire, so shall it be in the end of this world. The Son of Man shall send forth his angels, and they shall gather out of his kingdom all things that offend, and them which do iniquity; and they shall cast them into a furnace of fire; there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth."

These truths are always solemn, but they come knocking at the soul with unusual solemnity when we are closing up another year of our accounts for Eternity, and entering upon a new year of our eternal accountability. The Dresser of the Vineyard is going about among us, and watching us, and marking us. Methinks we may see him laying down his axe at the root of this and that fruitless tree. With what mournful tenderness does he regard its barren and unsightly branches! If thou hadst but known, even thou, in this, the day of thy visitation, the things that belong to thy peace! Of many a tree the Lord of the Vineyard has said: Only one year more. Of many a tree this was said *last year*; and every day of *this year* there will be some trees cut down, of which the one year more of careful, kindly digging and manuring and watering, has come to its close without fruit. Only one year more! Of some it may be said: Only one month *more of that year*; and this month of January may be to you that one month only more. But this month of January, though it be the winter month of nature, may be to you the spring month of grace; and though it *may* be the last month of your life, the closing month in the final year of God's waiting upon you in mercy, yet, if you will now set about the work, it may be to you the month of Christian life, of springing blossoms, and of ripening fruits; and ere it closes, the Dresser of the Vineyard may joyfully say: "Lord, it is done as thou hast commanded; and lo! here is the fruit." And then the tree shall not be cut down for the fire, but transplanted, with all its heavenly life and beauty, to flourish in the paradise of God!

But I say, if you will *now* set about the work; and if this *should*

be the last month in your last year, you have not an hour to lose. If this should be your last month, and if you find yourself wasting its first sabbath, entering upon, and getting advanced in its first week, without sorrow for sin, without prayer for the Divine Mercy, without looking to Christ, without flying to Him, and crying every day, "Lord, save me, I perish!" then there is scarcely any more probability that the Christian life will begin with you in this month, than there is that in the midst of the frost and snow in which all nature is locked up around you, there will open the softness of spring, and the tender grass and flowers of summer, and the ripening harvests of autumn; for it cannot but be that much depends on the manner in which you begin this opening month. The first sabbath in it may be the very dividing line between hope and hopelessness, between the possibility of salvation and the certainty of endless ruin. It may be the sabbath that contains the germ of your eternal destiny!

This may be the case, even if God should give you a year more; if this, instead of being the last month in your last year, should be the first month in one year more of God's kindly care about you. The first sabbath and the first week may contain the prediction of your last. Oh, then, close it not without God, and spend not another day in the heedless, prayerless, unrepentant manner in which you may have commenced it. Call home your thoughts, and fix them on the great decision. Go, though for the first time, perhaps, in all your life, to Jesus Christ in secret, and begin this year of sabbaths with sorrow for sin, with prayer for mercy, with faith and hope in your Divine Redeemer.

How happy for you, if this should be the case! and how happy the lot of the Christian who this year begins a new year for God! He looks back upon the past, he sees where God's tender mercy was at work upon him, pruning him, stirring up the earth about his roots. He remembers this and that special mercy. It was God's discipline of love, and, like that of suffering and sorrow, too costly to be wasted. He remembers this and that sore trial. That also was God's discipline of love. The Dresser of the Vineyard was there, purging the tree, that it might bring forth more fruit. The trials of the year have been messengers of love and not of wrath. And have they gained their end? Is there now more fruit? Is the soul brought nearer to God, and has it made a delightful and manifest advance in holiness toward heaven? Is there more of the spirit of adoption, more of humility, a deeper and more constant sense of dependence upon Christ, a more settled and decisive habit of daily watchfulness and prayer? Is there more of self-denying benevolence, a more constant habit of seeking others' good, a truer love to souls, a deeper, more fervent desire for the spread of the Redeemer's kingdom, a better practical effort to make others partakers of the grace of Christ? Is there more of the spirit of kindness and gentleness and tenderness in intercourse with others? Is there less of the spirit of the world, and more of the

spirit of heaven? Are *all* the fruits of the spirit more abundant, under another year of the gracious discipline of God? Is the heart's hold on the world less firm and tenacious, and its hold on heaven firmer, stronger? Are its affections more set upon "the things that are above," and less fondly cleaving to, less occupied by, the things of earth? As the soul gets nearer to heaven by a year, do the pursuits of heaven, and the spirit of heaven, more manifestly occupy the soul?

These are questions of self-examination, as we set out on a New Year, most salutary in their tendency, and important to be faithfully answered. How long God will continue his precious disciplinary work upon us, no man for himself can tell. This only a man knows, that the more of the fruits of the Spirit there are in his heart and habits, the nearer he is to heaven, the more surely and brightly the seal of his Redeemer is set and shining upon him. He belongs to God, and every day is a step into God's blissful presence. But if, under God's discipline, a man be not growing in his likeness, then every step in which, by the flight of time, he advances nearer to God, carries him farther from heaven. Time carries him to God, but character and destiny mark him as the fruitless withered tree to be burned. In the record of God's wasted mercies, you may see, as plainly written upon his habits, as if it were carved upon the bark of a dead tree in the vineyard: *For the fire.*

The season is a precious one, with its voices of solemnity as well as of cheerfulness, its lessons of instruction and gratitude. Much depends in our Christian course this year on the manner in which we commence it. A man may set out with new vigor in his heavenly race, and may fill up every day of this year with such devotedness to Christ, that it shall constitute the year of all years for grateful recollections, and praises, and eternity. The beginning is everything. The first Sabbath is, as it were, the corner-stone of this year's temple of life. Let it be laid in grace, let Christ be the foundation, and every stone that is laid afterward, every successive day's additions will be connected with Him, sacred to Him, built for his praise. The first Sabbath in a man's new year is generally as a bud, containing the germ and prediction of all the leaves that are to unfold from it. If there be evil habits, if there be neglect of prayer, if there be the omission of God's word, in the first Sabbath and the first week, do not these evil things almost always run through the whole year, like threads of death in the warp of life which God is weaving?

Let a man take good care of his first Sabbath, and the first Sabbath will be likely to take care of all the year. Let a man begin it with Christ, and go through it as if he were unrolling a prophecy of his character and habits, his trains of thought and feeling, his spirit of prayer, his dependence on divine grace, his religious habits in every way. If an angel should say to a man in the morning: "This day will be the type of all your year, and I am commissioned to warn you of it, for every week and every day hereafter will be

woven out of the threads of feeling and of action you fasten to this day," with what care and solemn earnestness would such a man spend that Sabbath! How much of holy joy would he wish to concentrate in it, in what pleadings with God would he pour out his soul, how much would he strive to experience of the preciousness of Christ, what humble contrition for sin would he labor after, how would he endeavor to make the day a foretaste, or at least a gate, of Heaven, and what labors of benevolence and love would he put in fervid motion, what desires and efforts for the advancement of his Redeemer's kingdom! At the very least, with what care would he keep at the foot of the cross, striving to have his Saviour's strength made perfect in his own weakness!

Well! the first Sabbath is a prediction. Its tone generally speaks through the first week, its character colors the first week, and the first week ordinarily governs the year. Now, how solemn is this consideration. A man stands, as it were, at the loom of life, and ties the threads, and arranges the figures of the tapestry to be woven, and you will see that every day and week, as the shuttle flies and the piece grows, only shows what the man put in at first. Such are our habits. Every one of them has its seed, with the tree in miniature. And as every seed is a prediction, so is every habit. If then you wish for a happy New Year, put you the seeds of happiness into its first Sabbath and its first week. Put them in carefully, as if you were burying a precious charge for the resurrection. Put them in with much prayer, and, if you choose, with many tears, which are as good as a gentle rain in seed-time, and God will take care of them, and make them grow. So your Sabbath shall guide your week, and your week shall predict your year, and your happy year—happy, because holy; happy, because God is in it—shall be full of blessedness and praise as an anthem.

Let me bring it to God (a man should say) beforehand. Let me begin it for Christ, as I would have him end it. Lord, take *thou* the threads of my new life, and fasten and arrange them! None else can do it safely, and if thou do it not, Satan will be the weaver. Lord, let me live one year at least for thee! Every day, as thou renewest my life, renew *thy* life in my heart, and keep it clean and holy.

Death is still working like a mole,
And digs my grave at each remove;
Let grace work too, and on my soul
Drop from above.'

Sin is still hammering my heart
Unto a hardness void of love;
Let suppling grace, to cross his art,
Drop from above.

III. THE YEAR JUST CLOSED.

WE spend our years as a tale that is told, Ps. xc. 9., said David, **some** three thousand years ago, and time has not paused in his

flight a moment since. The flight of years teaches a most solemn and impressive lesson to all living men, and points them to eternity. Another of these years has just closed. Time has driven his swift but noiseless chariot through another stage in life's journey. We are all travellers. We pass the land-marks of months and years with unconscious rapidity. We scarcely take note of latitude or longitude in our progress. It were wise and well to pause, if we could, to review the solemn history of the past, and form stronger and steadier purposes of wiser achievement for the future. But time lingers not. He suffers no delay. His car-wheels roll on with ceaseless velocity, waiting not to eat or sleep. He hurries on his mighty train of countless passengers to the last depot in life's journey.

He who would moralize on the flight of years, has ample material for meditation. We may mourn our neglects, and sigh over our wasted or misspent hours, but time never drives his car backward. The past is beyond recall. Even while we resolve and re-resolve to be wiser for the future, the car-bell may ring and toll the end of our journey. Time scatters his passengers by the way-side rapidly and profusely, yet few are aware when their own turn is to come, till they find themselves dropped in a moment, and prostrate in their last resting-place.

Thus suddenly do men end mortal life. A feeling of sadness is excited by the end of almost everything. The end of life, the end of time, the end of all things, are solemn thoughts. It may, indeed seem trite and commonplace to moralize on the closing year; but it is not commonplace to die—to meet one's last hour on earth—to come to life's last mysterious boundary—to close up all concerns with earth, and have done with time, when the dislodged and immortal spirit shall be summoned to stretch its wings for the final flight. And yet the solemn end of life—the end of probation rapidly approaches to each and to all.

The last suns of another year have gone down for ever. Its day is spent, and its bright sun-light has faded into the darkness of by-gone ages. The year just closed has been to millions of our sinful race the end of life—the end of probation, and the closing up of their moral histories as prisoners of hope in a world of mercy. These millions have changed worlds, changed their modes of existence, gone to people eternity and swell the myriads that are assembling for the great day of judgment. What emotions of unutterable joy or sorrow have heaved the bosoms of these dying millions, as they found themselves in Heaven or in hell. What joy to some to find "life's toilsome day over"—to find an end to sorrows and to sins—an end of doubts and fears—an end of trials and conflicts with enemies visible and invisible, within and without—to have escaped for ever beyond the temptations of an evil heart and the arch adversary of souls! What joy to find themselves across the broad river—beyond the dark valley, safe in the paradise of God.

But what unutterable anguish to others, to find life's brief journey ended—its probationary years all wasted—its privileges misimproved—its offers of mercy and salvation refused or neglected, and the door of hope and Heaven closed forever. They began the year in health and strength. The sun of life was up in mid Heaven. The afternoon of many years spread out in the distance, and it seemed a long journey to the grave. The glow of health mantled on their cheek. Hope sparkled in their eye. The rich blood coursed in crimson currents through their veins. They had much goods laid up in the store-house of hope for many years. But the scene suddenly changed. The curtain dropped. The bright visions of hope were dissolved and fled away. The sun went down at noon. The shadows of life's evening gathered suddenly over them. The lamp of life flickered in its socket and went out. The beating pulse stood still. Life's pendulum ceased its vibrations. The splendid machinery so fearfully and wonderfully made, suddenly collapsed. The warm currents became chilled in their courses and ceased to flow. The drama of life was over. Its brief story is told, and its history is recorded in the archives of eternity. But of the grand catastrophe of the soul ruined, abandoned of hope—lost, undone for ever—who shall depict the awful representation? That most fearful of all tragedies, the ruin of the soul, will be acted on the great stage of eternity, when the curtain of time shall rise and be rolled together as a scroll.

To that mysterious world—to that vast assembly—to that grand assemblage on the great day for which all other days were made, what multitudes have gone the past year! Gone unexpectedly—and some gone unprepared—gone to feel the keenest anguish and bitterest regrets, that life's golden hours and infinite privileges, so freely bestowed by an indulgent and long-suffering God, have been lost, and lost for ever! From that spirit-land, what voices of salutary admonition and warning come echoing back to these shores of time, to meet the crowd of travellers as they are hastening on to the world of retribution!

Dear reader! Listen to those still small voice as they whisper in solemn accents of the year—of the end of life—of invisible scenes, and the final judgment.

The days of the last year are numbered. They have gone before thee to bear their report to the recording angel, and to tell him how thou hast spent them—to what plans and purposes of good they have been devoted, and with what sincerity, and zeal, and solemn earnestness thou hast labored in thy work of preparation to meet God, and to accomplish life's great errand.

SECRET SUCCESS IN PREACHING.

Fletcher of Madely was one of the most earnest and successful of preachers. He was a man of prayer, much prayer, and herein

lay the secret of his power. His biographer tell us, that "his preaching was perpetually preceded, accompanied, and succeeded by prayer. Before he entered upon the performance of his duty, he requested of the great Master of Assemblies a subject adapted to the conditions of his people; earnestly soliciting for himself wisdom, utterance, and power; for them a serious frame, an unprejudiced mind, and a retentive heart. The necessary preparation for the profitable performance of his ministerial duties was of longer or shorter duration, according to his peculiar state at the time; and frequently he could form an accurate judgment of the effect that would be produced in public, by the languor or enlargement he had experienced in private. The spirit of prayer accompanied him from the closet to the pulpit; and while he was virtually employed in pressing the truth upon his hearers, he was inwardly engaged in pleading that last great promise of his unchangeable Lord, 'I am with you always, even unto the end of the world.' From the great congregation he again withdrew to his sacred retreat, there requesting in secret that a blessing might accompany his public labors, and that the seed which he had sown, being treasured up in honest and good hearts, might sooner or later become abundantly fruitful."

All good ministers of the Lord Jesus do thus seek the blessing of God before and after their pulpit labors. But there is a great difference in the degree of earnestness and fervor with which they seek, and of course a proportionate difference in the degree of blessing which they gain. Some knock loudly, others faintly; some strike once, twice, thrice, others seven times; some wrestle with tears, others are comparatively formal. There is no gift of Divine Grace more precious to a minister of Christ than a spirit of persevering fervency in prayer, no gift which he ought to seek more earnestly and to cultivate more assiduously. Oftentimes, perhaps, when he is laboring away upon his discourses, and thinks that this and that presentation of truth *must* be effectual, the good effect upon his hearers is owing more to his prayers than his sermons. A minister's prayers may be compared to the powder, by firing which the cannon-ball is sent upon its errand; without the prayers, his sermons will be little better than a heap of cannon-balls without powder. There must be prayer from a heart on fire.

Some sermons are like a bright artillery-piece for a model: all finished, burnished, shining; everybody says, "What a splendid piece of ordnance!" People stand and look into its mouth, and measure its breech, and lift the ball it can carry, and admire it without fear, for there is no powder in it. It is not meant to shoot any person, but to attract admiration as a finished piece of ordnance. An elaborate model-sermon, without prayer, is a gun that a man might put his ear to the muzzle of without fear. And some sermons are like the artillery-pieces that are wheeled into line in a *sham-fight*, and fired with blank cartridges. There must be both powder and ball, if execution is to be done. Above all things, there must be much prayer. There must be prayer on fire.—*Dr. Cheever.*