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“And how can they hear without a preacher?”—ST. PAUL.

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PREPARING TO MEET GOD.

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TEXT.—“Prepare to meet thy God.”—Amos iv: 12

THIS text is a serious one, and yet we have no intention of treating it in a manner either sombre or lachrymose. Our aim is only to state facts as they unquestionably exist, and to feel those facts in a measure that is proportionate to their import and earnestness. To do more than that would be an extravagance; to do less than that would be to charge myself and you with cowardice and insincerity.

“Prepare to meet thy God!” We have no theory to urge as to the details of that “meeting” which these quoted words intimate. We know nothing about the geography of the event, and nothing as to its attendant circumstances of time and manner. But it is a part of the common dowry of the world’s thought everywhere that that mystic crisis in our life known by us as death, will in some way bring us into solemn encounter with Him with whom we have to do. “It is appointed unto every man once to die and after death the judgment.” Much, and perhaps almost all, that has been presented as composing the accompaniments of the judgment scene may be false in fact and material, and coarse in form. The pulpit has probably said a great deal more about the judgment day than it knows, and art, which is rather on irresponsible creature at best, has certainly expatiated upon it with a license from which the seriousness of the interests involved ought to have restrained it. And yet, after all such discounts have been made, you and I, and when I say “you,” I mean nine-tenths of you, and more likely ninety-nine hundredths of

you, vaguely and yet pretty seriously at times, apprehend that that mystic crisis known by us as death will in some peculiar way bring us into solemn encounter with Him with whom we have to do. I am not speaking just now, you see, of what the Bible says about it, but of that inward spot of sensitiveness that gets touched when the Bible’s utterances are pressed home upon it.

And this certainly, at any rate, we shall all of us be agreed upon—even that odd hundredth—that that mystic crisis known by us as death is one that every member of this congregation will in an exceedingly short time encounter. Now, friends, there is no use, there is no sense, there is no philosophy, in resenting the references there are just now being made to our mortality, and to the rapid approach of the day when we shall wind up, or have wound up for us, our earthly activity and pilgrimage. It is neither moral heroism nor philosophic heroism to undertake to escape the reality and the proximity of a certain fact by keeping deadly silent upon it or hanging up a curtain in front of it. The ostrich never helps itself at all by hiding its head in the sand. We are mortal, and we shall all of us be gone before a great many years more have come about, even those of us who live the longest. So long as we retain fixed residence in any community, we hardly realize the vastness and steadiness of the procession that by day and by night is quietly and noiselessly winding its way from the world that is here to the world that is unknown. I have stood in this pulpit but nineteen years,

but I never go back now to the little church that I was ministering in when called here, for the number of my old friends still worshipping in that country sanctuary is so much smaller than the number of my old friends whose bodies are sleeping outside in that beautiful Lenox churchyard, that the place has been, year by year, growing unspeakably lonesome to me. And that is only nineteen years.

You look at a tree in the autumn and it is only occasionally you see a leaf fall from it, but in daytime and night time, in sunshine and rain, the leaves do continue their silent dropping, and it is not a great while before the last leaf has changed from green to crimson and lingeringly fluttered down to join its companions of the year that is gone. It is in such ways only that we become conscious of the strength, the steadiness and the swiftness, of the tide that is bearing us all toward the world and the times that are yonder. Now I am not trying to conjure up any sentimental or morbid appreciation of the brevity of life. The sentimental and the morbid are bad enough anywhere and nowhere so bad as in the earnest concerns that connect us with life, death, religion, and immortality.

But the fact in the case is that we are living, some of us, very much as though we never expected to die. That is not because the evidences of human mortality are not sufficiently apparent, but because we purposely seal our eyes to those evidences and stupefy our hearts to their unwelcome suggestions. And there will be those, probably, who will go away from the church here this morning almost angry at the references made to death and the certainty of it, and the swift approach of it. If there is any such spirit of resentment it will not be because I have said anything about it that is untrue, but because what I have said has made them think for a few minutes upon a matter that they are taking a good deal of pains not to think about, and that they almost imagine becomes less a fact because of their not thinking about it. Now if it happens that I am speaking to anyone who has no idea or suspicion

reaching beyond threescore and ten, and who has a solid and settled conviction that death ends all—that men and women are only a superior order of cattle, and all the more unfortunate for being superior—then confessedly such references to mortality are almost necessarily, not to say properly, obnoxious for they only operate to bring to the top of the cup—already sufficiently bitter—dregs that would otherwise be left quietly lying at the bottom, to be drunk only in a moment of final dissolution. And undoubtedly ills that are inevitable and that at the same time we have no concern with, it is the best philosophy to treat as though they did not exist and not to see them, no matter how conspicuous and obtrusive they may attempt to make themselves. With such a conception of the meaning of life we would not only recommend the Epicurean maxim, "Let us eat and drink for tomorrow we die," but we would recommend to such ones to eat so much, and to drink so hard, as to forget that tomorrow they die. To pain that means pain only, ills that denote nothing except that they are ills, we shall do best to deaden our consciousness by the cheapest anesthetic we can lay our hands on. But to men and women who, like the grand majority of us, regard death not as finish but as threshold, and as threshold that is very close by, too, and as threshold over which we are going to pass, and come in some mysterious way into encounter with a God who is infinitely kind, to be sure, but infinitely holy; to such ones all attempts to slur death over, to crowd it into disregard, so to intoxicate with immediate employments or pleasures as to deaden our sensibilities to the stern realities of the grave and the judgment, are evasive, cowardly, irrational and childish. It is appointed unto all men once to die. It is well for us to think that fact over frankly in our hearts and to speak it out boldly and aloud. We shall not die any sooner for saying it, nor live any longer for not saying it. And the particular task that lies before you and me in the meantime is not prepare ourselves to die; that is a way of phrasing the matter that is

quite too common but not exactly wholesome and a great way from being inspiriting. The particular task that lies before us in the meantime is not to prepare ourselves to die, but to prepare ourselves to *live*, and to become fitted for encounter and more direct contact with Him into whose presence it has always been the world's deep thought that death will usher us. Only in that phrase that we have taken as our text, "Prepare to meet thy God," let us not emphasize too much the idea of menace, as though the words were intended as a threat. We shall be nearer the tone of God's mind in all these matters if, instead of so treating the intention of these words, we understand them as your boy understands you when you say to him, that while you do not like to put upon his young shoulders, or upon his little mind, burdens that he will grow tired and uncomfortable under, nevertheless he will be a man one of these years, with man's duties to do and man's responsibilities to meet, and that in the meantime he must be getting ready, must be "preparing" to be a man. Of course there is included in that the idea that if he does not make such preparation, it will be all the worse for him, and his adult years prove a long-drawn-out disaster, and to that extent your exhortation to your boy is a threat, and yet the prime purpose you have in addressing him in that way is that your words should be not a threat but a stimulus. It is much in the same way that we need to interpret our text, "Prepare to meet thy God;" get ready to meet Him. If you purpose-visiting a country that is new to you, and are anxious to derive from such visit the greatest comfort and largest advantage, you will do some preliminary work in the way of acquainting yourself with the country, learning something of its character and customs, of the peculiarities of its people, and a little probably of the language they speak.

And the amount of benefit you derive from visiting the country will be pretty closely proportioned to the amount of time and care you expend in getting ready to visit it, in "preparing" to visit it. And it is this same

idea of getting ready that is in what we have quoted as text, and it is a getting ready of just as distinct and practical a kind as the readiness with which a boy prepares to be a man, or you prepare to visit England, Constantinople, or Japan. As already intimated, there are a great many things connected with the life lying on the other side of the grave that we do not know and cannot know; a great many things for which, therefore, we cannot by any possibility make preparation; things upon which even the Bible throws no light and in regard to which it starts in us no suspicion. And it is one of the unique and queer things about the human mind that it is very much more apt to be theoretically interested in what it cannot know than to be practically interested in what it can know and does know. And, as hardly needs to be said, there is very often an earnestness in the inquiries which men make into the occupations of heaven, into the place where it is, and into the friendships that may subsist there, that is not in any endeavors they make to avail of and turn to practical account such information as they confidently possess. The most important thing about heaven and that from which everything else will derive its quality and shape, is the character of Him who is heaven's presiding genius: and that we know. God's character is the axis upon which the whole heavenly world pivots, and by the side of that determinative element all such questions as heavenly occupations and heaven's celestial latitude and longitude bleach into invisibility and shrink into nothingness.

What God's character is we know. In this matter, as ordinarily, while there are hosts of things that we are curious to know God so arranges that we shall be able to know all that we need to know. I emphasize this, because I am aware that the obscurity of so much that pertains to the future life is operating to make men and women irresolute and capricious in everything like preparation for the future life. They are more conscious of the points upon which they desire light than they are of the points upon which they have light. Whenever

the exertion we put forth in any direction is to be earnest, consecutive and productive, there needs to be a certain amount of distinct goal towards which those efforts shall be directed. Distinct goal creates nerve and staying power, so that with those whose gaze is confined to the mysteries and uncertainties of the unseen world their efforts toward preparation for that world are bound to be weak and intermittent. Hence the supreme importance of having a definite object of celestial regard into which we can knit our endeavors, and such definite object we have in the known character of Him whose presence in heaven, and rulership of heaven, is what really makes heaven, and determines the quality and atmosphere of heaven, and will in its own wise and beneficent way determine, in due time, all those secondary questions of heaven's occupations and the like. As a matter of sentiment or of philosophy or of theology we can ponder upon the vast mysteries of the world to come, and its associations and engagements; but all we have to do between now and the grave, is to become ready for yonder world by drawing into deep inner accord with Him who is the immanent genius and sovereign spirit of that world.

Now that is a simple, solid and distinct goal of endeavor, and no more fringed with a margin of uncertainty than are the brilliant stars that just now throng our evening winter landscape. Here you see we are upon foundations that lie away down underneath all that stratum of idea where human philosophies and theologies root and vegetate. We understand the qualities that inhere in God's mind and heart, and the world agrees upon them. We none of us ever write them with quotation marks nor with a point of interrogation. You may raise all kinds of questions about inspiration, about the history of the Bible, about the divine authority of scientific accuracy of the Genesis records, or about the personality of the Holy Spirit or the relation of God the Father to God the Son. But when you are through with all that, and have demolished your adversaries, and your

adversaries have demolished you, you are still agreed with yourselves and agreed with your adversaries, too, as to what God is at heart and as to what therefore the intrinsic quality of the heavenly world is certain to be.

To be prepared to be at home in a world so constituted and to stand comfortably and joyously in the near presence of a God so described, is the supreme object and task of your three-score years and ten.

First of all, we understand each other perfectly in saying that God is nothing so much as a God of infinite tenderness. He feels every man's burden as His burden. His children are dearer to himself than He is. That is what fatherly love means always. If He builds it is that He may house His children. If He accumulates, it is that He may feed His children. The Bible means that when it says that God is love. You and I mean it when we say that God is love. We could not say that of Him if we thought that He was trying to see how strong, abundant and powerful He could be, just for the sake of being strong, abundant and powerful. We do that, but we should not like Him and, still less, love Him, if He did that. We are seeing how much of one kind and another we can get. We agree with each other in believing that He is seeing how much He can bestow. We like to keep; God likes to distribute. We may be very comfortably fixed as regards this world's goods and yet, perhaps, deal in nickels when the great causes of human amelioration are brought before us. We should not want to say that God was love if we supposed He dealt in nickels. We have a very high ideal of what God is and ought to be. Of course He can do more than we can; that is not the point. The point is whether the less that we can do with, we enjoy doing with, in the same way that we all believe He enjoys doing with the greater that He has to do with. And if we do not; if our first impulse is always to grasp and His always is to scatter; how can we ever be at our ease in His presence? How can we be comfortable in a heaven that He administers, and where the governing principle will always be that which

constrained God to give His Son and constrained Jesus Christ to give His life? In that particular, my friend, do you think that you and I are quite "prepared" to meet God? Is it not rather plain that the more sure we are that God has a big heart, that loves all over and all around, the more painful it is going to be for us to come any nearer to Him if we have a heart that is turned in on itself and is studying to see how much it can get and how much of what it gets it can keep?

Then, too, God is infinitely holy. He hates sin. Do you? Excuse the bluntness of the question; but do you? Do you enjoy keeping the Commandments? Do you revel in the Sermon on the Mount with all its principles of matchless purity and beauty? Would you have enjoyed keeping company with Jesus Christ? You are sure He was sinless. Would you have relished His companionship? You know God is sinless. Will you like and enjoy Him? This means myself just as much as it means you. You admire Christ two thousand years off, but how about enjoying a heaven that is administered on the Christ principle, and how about walking forever and ever with a God who is of such a character that Jesus Christ answers as a fair and faithful expression of His qualities of heart and life? These are hard questions, but preparing to meet God is a very practical business. It is not an affair of sentiment to shed a few inexpensive tears over. It means that you and I have a great deal to do yet before we cross the mystic threshold, and we do not know how much time we have to do it in.

Now you can turn away, impatiently if you will, from the truth I have spoken this morning, but that will not make the truth any less true. You

can drop into the familiar commonplace chat as you stroll up the avenue, but it still remains a fact that it is appointed unto you once to die and after death the judgment, and that your days are all numbered. The places that now know you will soon know you no more forever. Not a great many years will have passed before these pews and this pulpit will be occupied by those to whom we that occupy them now will be no more than a memory, and not even so much as a memory. And we shall be—gone! The mystic threshold will have been passed and our life begun in the world that is now unknown. These are great and eternal realities. Life means too much, the pressure of truth is too urgent and distinct, for us to trifle with the swift years that are bearing us onward; and the interests at stake too endless and profound to let us postpone the serious task to which alike the Word of God and the voice of an awakened conscience summon us. If we would dwell with God we must be like Him. If we would rejoice in his presence we must first have learned to do His will and to love the things which He loves.

May God so teach us to number our days that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom, and so crowd upon our consciences the earnest truth that has been spoken that there shall be among us a decisive taking hold of this great and supreme business of life, that of entering into the Spirit and coming into the friendship of God, so making our earthly pilgrimage more full of blessing to the world through which our pilgrimage-route lies, and laying the foundations of an eternal sojourn with God and with those of every age who have learned to love Him and to rejoice in His holy and blessed will.