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DISCOURSE

Delivered at the Funeral

OF THE

REV. TIMOTHY WOODBRIDGE, D. D.

Rev. Dr. Peabody,
with the affectionate regards of
Wm.

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A

DISCOURSE

DELIVERED AT

SPENCERTOWN, N. Y.,

ON

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 11, 1862,

AT THE FUNERAL OF THE

REV. TIMOTHY WOODBRIDGE, D. D.,

WHO, DURING HIS WHOLE MINISTRY,

WAS THE SUBJECT OF TOTAL BLINDNESS.

BY WILLIAM B. SPRAGUE, D. D.,

PASTOR OF THE SECOND PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ALBANY.

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DISCOURSE.

REVELATION VII., 15.

—AND SERVE HIM DAY AND NIGHT.

This is part of the report which the Apostle John made on his return from his visit to the Third Heavens. In the sublime vision with which he was favoured, he saw what it was impossible to express in human language, and hence the wonderful description which he has written of the result of his explorations is to be considered as only a faint approximation to the glorious reality. I have selected from this description a single clause, with a view to make it the basis of a few remarks bearing upon these funeral solemnities. With this passage in our eye, we will glance at the nobler service to which those who have been trained to do God's work on earth, shall be advanced in Heaven. They are represented as "serving Him day and night."

And what is the *nature* of the service which they render? It is, in its general character, the same with that to which they have been accustomed on earth, differing chiefly in purity and extent, as the combined result of the perfection to which they are advanced, and the more glorious economy of the world in which they dwell.

The first characteristic feature of this service is that it is *intelligent*. Knowledge is, in the very nature of things, antecedent to action. There is no truly spiritual and acceptable service rendered to God on *earth*, which is not identified with intelligent reflection. You cannot praise God or pray to Him acceptably, without some knowledge of his character. You cannot exercise repentance for sin, or faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, without understanding the more prominent features of the plan of redeeming mercy. You cannot perform those works of faith and labours of love to which you are called, as Christ's disciples, without knowing at least the fundamental principles of evangelical obedience. And if knowledge is necessary to the acceptable serving of God on earth, not less surely is it an essential element in the more perfect service rendered to Him in Heaven. There,

as the intellectual faculties are wonderfully invigorated and enlarged, the mind's acquisitions will be proportionally increased; and all this knowledge will be taken up, and rendered in the highest degree practical, in the employments of Heaven. When the Christian serves God here,—though he serves Him intelligently so far as he serves Him truly and acceptably,—yet he is oppressed with a sense of the imperfection of his views and the scantiness of his knowledge. As his thoughts range from one attribute of the Godhead to another,—from one part of the evangelical economy to another,—he feels that he is only lingering about the vestibule of theological science; that he is only taking his first lesson in the grand mystery of godliness. And in Heaven, and even through eternal ages, he will always be a learner—the period will never come when there will not be infinite depths in the character and works of God which he has no line to fathom; when there will not be new treasures of glory to reward his continued researches. Nevertheless, the difference between Heaven and earth,—even that portion of Heaven which lies most contiguous to the dark valley and the brightest spot which

we find in this house of our pilgrimage, is as the difference between the full splendour of noonday and the faintest dawn of the morning. The first act of service which the saint performs for his God, after becoming glorified, is dictated by a measure of intelligence,—an insight into the mysteries of Providence and Grace, of which he had here not even a remote conception. And in all the service that he renders through eternity, he will act up to the highest measure of his intelligence; while his activity will serve continually to exalt and brighten his intellect. Oh how unlike, in this respect, are the offerings which God receives from earth, to those which He receives from Heaven! What a difference in the service of those who see through a glass darkly, and those who see face to face!

Again: The service which is rendered by the inhabitants of Heaven, is a *sincere* and *heartly* service. Here you recognize another of the essential characteristics of the service which Christians perform while they are yet in the body; for, as God looks directly at the heart, and estimates the act performed by the motive that dictates it, nothing that does not bear the stamp of sincerity

can be acceptable in his sight. Nevertheless, the Christian is conscious that his thoughts and feelings do not always go along with his actions; that his affections sometimes grovel in devotion, when they would seem to rise; that other motives than those which his conscience approves, often dictate those acts or offerings which his conscience will not permit him to withhold. But in Heaven it will not be so—there the saint will have no painful consciousness of insincerity—every expression of homage will go up from the heart; every act of beneficence will have its origin in the heart; there will be no sad misgivings in the review of privileges enjoyed or duties performed, because the heart has not been in them; and even the scrutinizing eye of the Searcher of hearts will be able to discern nothing that involves the least departure from perfect sincerity.

And this leads me to say that the service of the ransomed will be a perfectly *holy* service. They have served God with a measure of holiness here below, but it has fallen far short of both his requirements and their capabilities. They have carried about with them a body of sin and death. It has often borne them down when they have

striven to rise. They have felt the workings of indwelling sin, when they have longed to feel the operations of God's gracious Spirit. They have gone forth to some service which their Master has required of them, and have found the tempter on the ground to beat them back. They have been weary and irresolute, where they should have been strong to labour, to endure, to resist. They imagine they have performed a good act; but when they come to scrutinize, perhaps they find that sin has not only mingled with it, but actually dictated it. But when they have once passed the heavenly portals, they serve God in the perfection of holiness. No irreverent or unhallowed thought is there. No polluted or grovelling affection is there. No tempter and no source of temptation is there. No influence that can cool the warm breathings of devotion, or paralyze the hand of beneficence, or discourage the spirit in its longings for glory upon glory,—nothing of all this is there. Perfect purity pervades the whole man; and it stamps all the service which he performs. His last unholy or imperfect act was before the process of dying was fully accomplished. Where he is now, all that he does, is, not only in act but

in principle, fully conformed to the holy will of God.

It is also a *varied* service which the ransomed in Heaven perform. Heaven has not unfrequently been represented as a scene of perpetual worship; as if the faculties of the glorified were always engaged in one direction. But this is undoubtedly a mistaken view; and if there are some passages of Scripture that, insulated, would seem to justify it, we discover the error at once, by bringing them into their legitimate connection. No doubt the direct worship of God and the Lamb will form a most important part of the saint's employment in Heaven; but he will be a student there as well as a worshipper. He will be searching into the reciprocal relations of the Divine attributes, to see how they qualify and melt into each other, and how each one derives glory from all the rest. He will be studying the volume of Providence, comparing the past with the present, tracing the lines of order and wisdom, where there once seemed nothing but confusion and discord. He will be constantly penetrating farther into the mysteries of Redemption, discovering new points at which mercy and truth, righteousness and peace,

are harmoniously blended. And who shall say that he will not also still continue a student of the works of Nature; that, having the New Heavens and the New Earth for his subject, he will not prosecute his researches into this department of God's works with an energy, and zeal, and success, that he never knew before? Who will say that, so long as this world stands, the glorified saint shall not make frequent excursions to this, his native region, to mark the progress of Christ's kingdom here, or perhaps to watch around those who were dear to him when he was on earth, and are no less dear now that he is in Heaven? Aye, who will assure us that he may not have commissions to execute in other worlds; that he may not pass from one world to another with far greater facility than we do from one neighbourhood to another; and thus be at home, I had almost said, all over the regions of immensity? Yes, there will be abundant employment for all the faculties. But the mind will never become weary of any of its diversified occupations; for there will be no labour in any such sense as to include the idea of difficulty, or conflict, or painful effort.

The services of the ransomed will also be *social*

and *harmonious*. Their *worship* will be eminently social—they cry one to another, saying, Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord of Hosts. They are represented as an innumerable multitude,—ten thousand times ten thousand and thousands of thousands, casting their crowns at the Redeemer's feet, and singing the new song, commemorative of his wisdom, and power, and love. And they are united in other exercises than those of worship. They prosecute together their sublime investigations: they are all interested in the same objects, and bend their thoughts and regards towards them,—if not with equal, yet with intense, earnestness; and, as they rejoiced to be fellow helpers on earth, so they rejoice still more to be fellow helpers in Heaven. It is not always that even Christians on earth are united in their wishes, and purposes, and pursuits; and sometimes, owing to their imperfect state of sanctification, they even interfere with each other's designs, and thus become mutual hindrances rather than helps on the journey to Heaven. But when Heaven is once reached, all jealousies, and alienations, and unreasonable surmisings, will cease; and each will prosecute his efforts for the advancement of the Divine

glory, and for the higher perfection of his own nature, in unison with all the glorified around him.

It will be also a most *joyful* service to which the ransomed will be devoted. On earth, the service of God, though far happier than any other in which mortals can engage, is still often performed amidst floods of tears. It has in it, indeed, the elements of great joy; for it brings the soul into contact and communion with its God; it fixes the faculties upon heavenly objects; it gives a foretaste of the brighter glories of the world to come; it supposes the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, to have possession of the heart; but, after all, the happiness which it brings with it, is liable to frequent abatement and interruption. Sometimes the Christian has to serve God amidst the hidings of his Father's countenance—and where is his happiness then? Sometimes he has to serve Him, when he is painfully uncertain in respect to his own adoption, and fears that he has mistaken the operations of nature for the workings of grace—and where is his happiness then? Sometimes, as he is going forward in his Christian course, the world does its utmost to embarrass his efforts and impede his progress,—possibly pours

contempt upon his Christian profession, and labours hard to effect his ruin ; or else the providence of God causes the billows of adversity to rise and dash over him, blasting his worldly reputation and filling his cup with bitterness—notwithstanding there may be much in the service of God to neutralize these various sources of unhappiness, yet, so long as the Christian continues an *imperfect* Christian, he will not be able to rise entirely above them—he will sometimes go forth to his work, clad in the garments of heaviness. But not so after he has reached the fullness of the stature of a perfect person in Christ. There will be every thing then to minister to his joy, and nothing to detract from it. His faculties will operate without obstruction from without or within. All the truths and objects with which he is conversant, will be great, and holy, and immortal. All the society with which he will be united, will be the society of pure and exalted minds. In all the service which he performs, he will be constantly going forward from glory to glory.

And finally, it is a *grateful* service which the saint in Heaven renders. Is not the spirit of

gratitude, Christian, the life of all your praises and thanksgivings here? Is it not the remembrance of the love of God, as displayed especially in your redemption, that makes it easy for you to deny yourself and follow Christ through evil report? Were it not for a sense of the benefits which Christ's death has procured for you, in common with all his ransomed ones, do you believe that you would have such warm aspirations for going to dwell with Him and serve Him in brighter worlds? Believe me, this same feeling will continue to move and animate you, when you are at work for God in Heaven. With every anthem of praise that you take up, with every enterprise of benevolence on which you enter, with every fresh inquiry into the mysteries of providence or grace that you institute, you will associate the recollection of Him, who, though He was rich, for your sakes, became poor. Gratitude, gratitude will forever shout that new and noble song,—“Worthy is the Lamb that was slain, to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honour, and glory and blessing.”

Such is the nature of the service that is rendered by the redeemed in Heaven. But the text

declares not only that they serve God, but that they serve Him "*day and night.*" What does this imply? It implies that this service is *without interruption*, and *without end*.

Here we can labour but for a little time, before we have occasion to recruit our exhausted faculties by repose. How grateful to the husbandman to have night come, that he may rest the frame which has been wearied by the hard labours of the day! How grateful to the scholar, who devotes himself to the acquisition of knowledge; how grateful to the statesman, who is busy for the promotion of his country's welfare; how grateful to the soldier, whose life is divided between the tedious march, and the camp, and the battle field; how grateful even to the philanthropist, who is forever going about on errands of benevolence;—to have the hour come, when he may pause in his active career, and resign himself to quiet repose. This is part of the economy of Providence in respect to the Christian, so long as he inhabits this earthly tabernacle. There is no constitution on earth so strong that it can exist long without sleep; and the ability of men to labour depends upon scarcely any thing more than the fact that they have their

stated hours of rest. It seems a great loss of time that one-third of human life should thus be spent in absolute inaction, until we remember that this is the divinely constituted means of rendering the other two-thirds availing to purposes of labour.

But in Heaven they serve God during night as well as day. There the faculties of the mind are so strengthened and renovated that they need not the repose which nature now craves for them. The saint in glory can pursue his investigations in one direction or another; he can sink into the depths, or soar into the heights, or move off on an angel's wing into far distant worlds; and, at each successive stage of his progress, find his intellect increasing in energy and glowing with brighter splendour. And after the grave shall have given back the body to its old inhabitant,—a glorified body to meet a glorified spirit,—still there shall be no diminution, but a mighty increase, of the energies both of body and of soul; and the whole glorified man will never be capable of weariness,—never cease from action. And as there will be no interruption to this service, so neither will there ever be an end. Let your imagination loose upon the mighty future; let it constitute each

particle of matter in the universe the representative of millions of ages; and when you shall have travelled over this vast duration as many thousands of millions of times as there are drops of water in the ocean,—even then you will only have entered on your career of serving God. Eternity, Eternity is to be the measure of your service; or rather the fact that it is eternal proclaims that it is immeasurable.

If such be the dignity and such the duration of the service which awaits the ransomed of the Lord in the next world, then how blessed a thing is it for the Christian to die—for death, though moving in such deep darkness, introduces him to this nobler service, and thus marks one of the grandest, brightest epochs of his whole existence. And if this be true, as undoubtedly it is, of even the weakest of Christ's disciples,—of him who is saved so as by fire,—what shall be the measure of glory that will attend the service of him whose whole religious life has been an harmonious embodiment of the Christian graces,—an epistle for Christ, known and read of all men? Especially, what shall be the point of exaltation to which the faithful minister of the Gospel shall rise,—who,

from having been wisely and diligently employed in winning souls here below, has entered upon the higher service of the eternal temple—above all, what shall be the future glorified condition of such an one, who, after having spent a long life as an ambassador for Christ, comes down to his grave as a shock of corn fully ripe? Verily, this is the case with which we have to do in these funeral solemnities. An able, faithful, venerable minister we are assembled to bury; and yet it is not he, but a mere mouldering representation of him—for the spirit, that which emphatically constituted the man, has, we believe, already become arrayed in blood-washed robes, and entered on the heavenly service. We are here not so much to weep over his remains as to listen to the impressive utterances from his coffin, and to thank God that our faith can follow him upward, where his ruling passion for glorifying his Master burns with far brighter lustre, and has an infinitely grander field for its exercise, than it had ever known upon earth.

It is due to myself to say that I am quite sensible of the embarrassing circumstances in which I have undertaken this service; and nothing but the assurance that it was the expressed wish of

the lamented subject of it that it *should* devolve upon me, could have overcome my scruples so far as to lead me to attempt it. I do not mean that I am not familiar with the general character of DR. WOODBRIDGE, but, as my personal acquaintance with him was limited to a few pleasant interviews, and an occasional interchange of letters, I have not had the opportunity which many of my brethren doubtless have enjoyed, of becoming minutely acquainted with his more distinctive characteristics. In the slight intercourse which I have had with him, however, he has impressed himself strongly upon my mind as a man of mark ; and in the brief estimate of his character which I am now to attempt, I shall draw partly from the material which he has himself lodged in my memory ; partly from the testimony of his friends who have known him much better than I have ; and I may add, to some extent also, from his own autobiography, in which, in chronicling the events of his life, he has unwittingly thrown a flood of light upon his character also.

I shall detain you but a few moments upon the history of his life, as his own beautiful record of it is within reach of you all. Few men have

been so much honoured as he in descent; having, in the line of his ancestry, on one side, the immortal EDWARDS, and on the other a succession of excellent ministers, whose record is both on earth and in Heaven. He was born on the 24th of November, 1784. The place of his birth and early education was the fine old town of Stockbridge; where the great and good Dr. West was exercising his ministry with patriarchal dignity, and where the Sedgwicks, and other families of high consideration and culture, gave the general tone to society. The atmosphere, both intellectual and moral, into which he was thus introduced, was healthful and invigorating. Having been fitted for College under the instruction of a venerable minister, who was also an excellent teacher, in Connecticut,* he entered Williams College in 1799, with the highest aspirations for learning and the brightest prospects of success. But in the second year of his college course, he was overtaken with what seemed to be one of the greatest of all earthly calamities,—the loss of the sight, first of one eye, and then of the other, by which he was plunged into total darkness. This untoward event

* Rev. Ammi R. Robbins, of Norfolk.

occasioned his immediate separation from college ; but it did not operate to break his spirit, or, in his own view, to materially cloud his prospects. With an energy of purpose that nothing could shake, and an ardour of spirit that nothing could damp, we find him immediately going forth to the study of the Law, of course using the ear instead of the eye as the medium of acquisition. In connection with the legal profession, he did not dissemble that he had hopes of political eminence, which may not improbably have been strengthened, if not originated, by his near relationship to several individuals* who had occupied, or were occupying, some of the highest civil stations. But in the year 1809, the subject of religion presented itself to his mind as a matter of personal and urgent concern, and the result was that he consecrated himself not only to the glory of his Redeemer but to the ministry of reconciliation. As the Andover Seminary had then just been established, and was thought to offer greater facilities for theological education than could be furnished by any private teacher, he directed his course thither ; and, under the teachings of those

* Pierpont Edwards was his uncle, and Aaron Burr his first cousin.

eminent men,—Griffin, Woods and Stuart,—he received his training for the sacred office. His appearance in the pulpit, from the beginning, awakened a very unusual interest, and everybody marvelled that a man who was spending his whole life in darkness, could produce such luminous and thrilling discourses. I distinctly remember to have read, at that early period, with great admiration, a published Sermon of his, delivered before a Charitable Society in Hartford, and to have heard it widely spoken of, in connection with his blindness, as an extraordinary production. After preaching more or less in various places, he accepted an invitation, in 1816, to minister to the then languishing and almost broken down church at Green River; though he was not actually set apart as its Pastor until about two years afterwards. Here he laboured with great zeal and a good measure of success, during a period of twenty-six years. Several revivals of religion, of great power, attended his ministry, in which he recognized the richest tokens of the Divine favour, though he became satisfied, at a later period, that these merciful visitations were not a little marred by an admixture of human infirmity and passion. In 1842,

he accepted a call to become the Pastor of this church, and continued in that relation until 1851, when it was terminated by the resignation of his charge, followed by the amplest testimonials from the Presbytery within whose bounds he was cast. After his pastoral relation was dissolved, he supplied the Congregational Church in Alford, Mass., during three successive summers; and there, as in his other fields of labour, he showed himself an earnest and faithful minister of Christ, gained a permanent place in many hearts, and accumulated a rich treasury of grateful recollections. His last years he spent here, in dignified retirement, exerting himself in various ways for the public good, enjoying the affection of his friends and the confidence of the community, until death finally came to transfer him to a higher sphere.

That Dr. Woodbridge possessed an intellect of much more than common vigour, and every way worthy of his honourable descent, must have been apparent even to those who had only the most casual intercourse with him; and his amount of knowledge, pertaining not only to his profession, but to almost every department of human thought and action, especially when taken in connection

with the fact that one principal channel of communication between his mind and the outer world was cut off, was truly wonderful. What he knew once, I believe he knew always; and so carefully were the results of his hearing and reflection arranged and preserved, that his mind became a vast depository of principles, and facts, and reasonings, which he always knew where to find, and when and how to apply. His power of conversation I have rarely known exceeded—the pertinence and richness of his thoughts, and the fluency of his utterance, amounting sometimes to a perfect avalanche of glowing words, never failed to render him an object of marked interest in any society. He was cheerful, and genial, and amiable in his spirit, and threw sunshine upon all who came within range of his social influence. His lips were always the faithful exponent of his heart, and it was at no one's option whether or not to credit to him an exuberance of candour. He was predisposed to a kindly estimate of the characters and motives of his fellow men; inso-much that his charity was sometimes suspected of having almost got the better of his judgment. He had none of that false regard to consistency that

would lead him to hesitate, for a moment, to correct a mistake or acknowledge an error, of which he had become convinced. He had great constitutional ardour of spirit; and this, united with an enlightened and active conscience, and a heart that responded quickly to all God's claims, made him a most vigorous and efficient labourer in the cause of his Master. Not only was he careful and diligent in the discharge of his appropriate duties as a minister, but he was ready to *every* good work that came within the range of his efforts. He was especially interested in every thing pertaining to the cause of sound education; and I understand that your own flourishing academy is, to a great extent, a monument of his enlightened public spirit. He was always upon the alert to benefit the young by every means in his power, not only counselling them to keep out of all forbidden paths, but encouraging their aspirations for learning, and giving them all the facilities for it which were at his command. I have heard, too, what all who knew him would have expected—that he was an earnest patriot; that while his heart bled, it did not faint, in view of the calamitous scenes through which the country is now

passing; that he believed that the cloud will ere long pass off, and a clear and glorious sky break forth, that will call forth shouts of thanksgiving for God's gracious interposition, from one end of the nation to the other.

Dr. Woodbridge, if I am correctly informed, held the same general views of Christian doctrine, to the exposition and defence of which his grandfather's gigantic intellect had been so earnestly devoted; though his mode of presenting them was doubtless somewhat modified, in accommodation to the genius of the age, and in accordance with the peculiar bent of his own moral constitution. He evidently preached what he believed, with great simplicity and earnestness, while yet he dealt cautiously and kindly with the partialities and prejudices of men of other creeds. In reading his autobiography, I have been struck with the fact that, while there was no lowering of his standard of religious doctrine, he never hesitated to pay a deserved tribute even to those with whose religious system he was far from being in sympathy; and hence he refers to the younger Buckminster, and more than once to President Kirkland, in a style of graceful eulogy.

I never heard him preach; but, from the perspicuity and grace of his written style, and from the rapid and energetic workings of his mind in conversation, I should have no doubt that his discourses were at once able and attractive; while the deeply evangelical tone of his views and of his spirit must have given them no small power over the hearts and consciences of his hearers.

My friends, this blind man, who has had his home among you for so many years, and was so long your spiritual guide; who has been led about your streets almost to the day of his death, and has now gone up out of this night of his earthly existence to enjoy the perfect vision of a glorified immortal, was richly endowed with both the gifts of nature and the graces of the Spirit; and the fact that he has been living here among you as God's ambassador may well lead you to pause beside his coffin, and inquire how you have profited by his presence and his labours. He has gone to render an account of his stewardship—are *you* ready to render an account of the manner in which you have improved his ministry? Perhaps there are few, if any of you, whom he has ever seen in the flesh—God grant that there may

be many whom he will recognize, in the light of the judgment day, as his own children begotten in Christ Jesus, not merely through the voice of the living preacher, but through the yet more impressive and unearthly teachings of his grave.

Ministers of the Gospel, to us also our departed brother and father is delivering to-day a message of the gravest import. And that message is an urgent warning to renew our diligence in the great work to which we have devoted ourselves. Are we duly impressed with the magnitude of that work? Are we labouring for the honour of Christ and the salvation of men to the full extent of our ability? Do the interests, the perils of those committed to our charge rest as a heavy burden upon our spirits? Do we find our highest enjoyment in the tokens of a really successful ministry? Is our life chiefly valuable to us as a means of glorifying the Master we serve? If the summons to pass the veil, and look upon the face of our Eternal Judge, should come to us to-day, should we be ready to ascend, or would our hearts plead for a little delay, that we might correct some error or perform some neglected duty? My brethren, let us be absorbed in the duties of our

high vocation. Let us go about the work of each day under the full impression that the record of it *may be* the last entry in our grand account. Let us pay the best tribute we can to the venerable tenant of that coffin, by resolving that we will be steadfast to all our obligations as the ministers of Jesus, that thus we may be prepared to go, at his bidding, and render up our account with joy.

I cannot forget that there are mourners before me, who need consolation which the world is too poor to give; especially one mourner, whose gentle and loving ministrations have been, for many years, as a light shining on a dark way. Let them remember how their departed friend has laboured on in his blindness even till God was ready to receive him, and be comforted. Let them think of the light in which he now walks and the service in which he is now engaged, and be comforted. Let them anticipate the ever increasing glory which future and eternal ages will bring to him, and be comforted. And, finally, let them, in the light of his example, and in the remembrance of his words of love and power, rise to a higher standard of holy living, that thus they may be well prepared to go through the

process of holy dying, and then to ascend and share with him the exceeding and eternal weight of glory—and I know they will be comforted. May God the Comforter dwell in each of your hearts, and may all your thoughts, your feelings, your deportment, be worthy of Christian mourners.