

THE
NATIONAL PREACHER.

No. 12.

NEW-YORK, MAY, 1831.

Vol. 5.

SERMON CII.

BY WILLIAM B. SPRAGUE, D. D.

ALBANY, N. Y.

THE PROBABILITY OF PERDITION INFERRED FROM PRESENT
IMPENITENCE.

REVELATION, XI. 11.—*He that is unjust, let him be unjust still; and he that is filthy, let him be filthy still.*

THERE is a depth of meaning in the descriptions which the Bible has given of the final condition of the ungodly, which the boldest human mind is utterly inadequate to fathom. There is the most fearful imagery employed on this subject which lies within the compass of human language. There is weeping, and wailing, and gnashing of teeth. There is the smoke of the torment that ascendeth up for ever and ever. There is the worm that always gnaws and never dies. There is the pit over which hangs the blackness of darkness. There is the resurrection of damnation, and the lifting up the eyes in torment, and the being trampled under foot by Jehovah in his righteous indignation. I say that in this imagery there is a depth of meaning which we cannot fathom; but this circumstance renders it not the less but the more dreadful; for the implication manifestly is, that the woes which are to constitute the portion of the ungodly, and which are to break upon them in an everlasting storm, are really out of the bounds of our present conceptions; that no one can know all that is implied in the loss of the soul, until he learns it by experience.

That the statement now made will generally be assented to by this congregation, even by that part of it who are not professedly the followers of Christ, I cannot entertain a doubt; and if each individual were interrogated as to the fact whether he really believes what the Bible has said on this subject, I should expect, at least in nearly every case, to receive an affirmative answer. Why then, I am ready to ask, this entire unconcern which prevails in so many minds in respect to the salvation of the soul? If there be a fearful hell before the ungodly, wherefore is it that the ungodly do not fear it? How is it that these probationers for eternity, who, in acknowledging the truth of the Bible, acknowledge that they are themselves exposed to an eternal perdition, are after all apparently as much at ease, and move about in circles of levity with as entire thoughtlessness, as if they were really only the creatures of a day? I

VOL. V.—No. 12.

will tell you the solution of this; it is that they do not after all expect to perish. They have some loose calculation in their own minds that at some period or other they shall become religious: the precise time may be or it may not be determined upon; but at all events it is to precede their entrance into eternity. I doubt not, my friends, that all of you who are conscious that this great work is yet upon your hands, are at this moment precisely in this condition; fully intending to wake up and attend to it before you die. But it is my business, in this discourse, to attempt to show you that this will probably prove to be a delusion; in the language of my text, that those of you who are unjust now will be unjust still; that those who are filthy now will be filthy still; in other words, that **THE FACT THAT AN INDIVIDUAL IS AT THIS MOMENT PUTTING OFF RELIGION, FURNISHES GROUND FOR A STRONG PROBABILITY THAT THAT INDIVIDUAL WILL PERISH.**

I know, my friends, that this may seem to many among you a startling doctrine; and really it is so: but if I can prove to you that it is true, I hope you will not refuse to look at it seriously. May I not hope, too, that each one will hear for himself; and if the argument should be sound, that each of you, as I pass along, will bring home to his own conscience the appalling reflection, "this proves that, humanly speaking, the chances are in favor of my destruction; that it is fearfully probable that death will to me prove the gate of a dark and wretched eternity!"

I say then, that the fact that any of you are at this moment putting off religion, furnishes ground for a strong probability that you will perish. Listen, and see if it is not so.

1. For, in the first place, *you can never expect that any better adapted means will be used for your salvation than have been used already.*

Look back upon your life, and see how God has been dealing with you. Many of you were in infancy dandled on the knee of piety; were brought to the altars of God for baptism; were instructed and counselled to fear God, by the lips of parental affection; and were privileged to come morning and evening to the domestic altar. All of you have, from your earliest years, had access to the word of God, in which the path to heaven is so clearly marked out that the wayfaring man, though a fool, need not mistake. You have also enjoyed the privileges of the Sabbath and of the sanctuary; have heard from the pulpit, in instances almost innumerable, the most solemn appeals and the most tender exhortations; have listened while the prayers of God's people have been going up as a cloud of incense towards heaven; have frequently witnessed the celebration of that most impressive ordinance in which are represented the love and the death of Christ; and have had the obligations to join in this celebration tenderly urged upon you. Most of you, I have no doubt, have passed through scenes of special religious attention, in which many around you, and not improbably some of your near friends, have been the subjects of renewing grace; seasons in which the path to heaven was thronged by inquiring multitudes, and

the gates of immortal life seemed to be thrown wide open. Moreover, God has dealt with you variously in the ordinary course of his providence ; on the one hand, has poured mercies innumerable into your cup, and on the other, has blasted your fond hopes, has caused your dwellings to be hung in mourning, and brought you, by sickness, it may be, to the very margin of the grave. And with all these means he has been constantly offering you his Holy Spirit ; and when you have bid this Divine agent depart from you, he has whispered in your ear in accents of kindness, " why will ye die ? "

Now I ask, when do you expect that any other or better means will be used for your salvation than have been used already ? When can you expect that the invitations of the gospel will be urged upon you with more persuasive tenderness than they have been in years that are past ? What will there be in the administration of the ordinance of the supper to impress you with the love of Christ hereafter, which there has not always been hitherto ? What effect will the sight of others pressing into the kingdom be likely to exert upon you in coming years which it has not exerted already ? And wherefore should you look for any different effect from mercies and afflictions than you have already experienced ? All these are the means of God's own appointment for bringing sinners to repentance : these means you have hitherto enjoyed, and by your own confession they have not accomplished their object. Suppose you should enjoy them to your dying day, where is the ground for concluding that they will hereafter be more effectual ? If they have done nothing for you up to this hour, when you have enjoyed them under the most favorable circumstances, is it not rash to hope that they will do more for you hereafter, when your circumstances will, in all probability, have become far less favorable ? I speak as to wise men : judge ye.

2. Another consideration to prove the truth of our doctrine is, that *probably in respect to most of you, the greater part of life is already past.*

It will be acknowledged, on all hands, that life is the only period of probation ; that whatever is done to secure the salvation of the soul must be done on this side the grave. The average length of human life is estimated, I believe, at twenty-eight years ; of course an individual who has lived fourteen years, has reached half-way to the average limit of man's probation ; and if he has passed that period, he has entered upon the latter half of the whole space (estimating it on the common principles of human calculation) which God has given him to prepare for eternity. But, lest it should be said that this is an unfair estimate, as the greater number of conversions do not take place under fourteen, we will substitute the age of twenty ; and this, surely, is more favorable than facts will warrant, for not only is it considerably beyond half of the whole period, but it includes the season in which the number of conversions is far greater than during any other portion of life. You, then, who have lived to the age of twenty strangers to religion, will probably go to the grave strangers to it ; because you have lived out more than half the common

period of probation, and that part of it too, in which, judging from all analogy, the chances for your conversion were most numerous. Far be it from me to say that you never will be converted. It is not for me to decide what may be done in God's adorable sovereignty; but if we form our conclusions on this subject as we do on other subjects, in relation to which we can reason from facts, I see not how you will avoid the conclusion, that the probability is much against you. And if this be true of those who have lived only to the age of twenty years, and even less, what shall be said of the condition of those who have already passed the ordinary limit of life—who have attained to forty, fifty, or even threescore years? There are those here who would have reason to tremble, if human life, instead of finding its common boundary at the age of twentyeight, should ordinarily be extended to threescore years and ten; for they have already gone far into the latter half of this period. Tell me, ye men of all ages, can you reasonably expect to live as much longer as you have lived already? If not, does not the fact of your being unreconciled to God at this moment, have a fearful bearing upon your probable destiny throughout eternity? Is it not manifestly a delusion that you are embracing, when you sit down at this late hour and count upon the hope of future repentance?

3. The probability that those of you who are unconverted will always remain so, is to be inferred *from the nature and power of habit.*

You well know that it is the tendency of every habit to grow strong by indulgence. For instance, a habit of intemperance, or of gaming, when it is first commenced, is comparatively feeble; but let it be continued, even for a little period, and it becomes strong; and after having been indulged for many years, in attempting to encounter it, you have to grapple with a giant. You would all of you look with much more hope of reformation upon one who had just turned his feet into these forbidden paths, than upon one who had been walking in them long—so long as to have acquired a desperate hardihood. Now the vices to which I have referred are only particular forms of wickedness; and what is true of these, is true of all others—that habit renders them difficult to be overcome. It is true of sin, even in its most general and least startling forms—such as inconsideration, the love of pleasure, practical unbelief—the longer they are indulged, the harder it is to forsake them. But sin, in any form, habitually indulged,—even the principle of sin in the heart, where its operations are entirely concealed from the world,—I hardly need say, will destroy the soul. Now tell me, you especially who have lived a considerable time in a course of sin, whether you see nothing appalling in this consideration. This habit of impenitence, from the very laws of the human mind, was more likely to be broken up in its incipient state, or at any preceding period, than it is now; for this obvious reason, that it has been constantly, however gradually, gaining strength; and there never was a time in which it was capable of resisting so strong a moral influence as at present. If, then, it has never been broken while it was comparatively feeble, how can you expect that it will be

more likely to yield when it has "grown with the growth, and strengthened with the strength?" If you could not give up the less, is it not presumption to expect that you will more readily yield the greater? Here again, I say nothing of what God, in his sovereignty, may do; but I say with confidence, that upon the principles on which men calculate, there is that in your prospects which ought to appal you.

4. It is probable that those of you who are unreconciled to God will always remain so, from the fact that *the idea of your being converted supposes a change of which there is not at present the least indication.*

Suppose you are, at this moment, entirely indifferent to religion, and you are unwilling even to think of it—this world appears to you so great and good; its honors, or its pleasures, or its wealth, have gained so strong a hold of your affections, that, for the present, you are disposed to regard nothing else. Now I ask you to look, and judge for yourself, and say whether you can discern in your present condition a single symptom of conversion; whether, in all this carelessness, and giddiness, and worldliness, there be any thing which even seems to indicate the prospect of a change? Do you not perceive that in taking for granted a future conversion, you take for granted that you will be willing hereafter to submit to that which revolts your feelings now? But can you give any reason why you should not be as willing to submit to it now as hereafter? or why you should submit to it with more alacrity hereafter than at present? Is not the language of your conduct virtually this,—“I will not embrace religion now, so dear to me are the pleasures of sin; and though there is nothing to indicate that these pleasures will ever be less dear to me than they now are, yet I will embrace it hereafter?” I ask you, will such a conclusion bear to be looked at by the eye of reason for a moment? Surely this is not sober argument, but the sophistry of a deceitful heart.

But suppose that you are in some degree awakened, and are even oppressed, not only with a sense of danger, but guilt, I dare not say that the probability is very much in your favor, even then. That it is a more hopeful case than the one which we just contemplated, admits not of question. But how many times have you been awakened before? Perhaps once, perhaps twice, perhaps thrice, perhaps even more. And notwithstanding these repeated seasons of conviction, you have never been converted. If, then, you have repeatedly been as near or even nearer the kingdom than you are now, and have fallen back into a habit of carelessness, why will you not, to say the least, be as likely to relapse into the same habit from the point which you have now gained? If your own experience, then, is to be taken as the standard, you must acknowledge that the chances are still against you.

But suppose that instead of looking at your own experience, you look at the experience of others, and see if you will be brought to any different result. I appeal then to the testimony of Christian ministers who have been most conversant with cases of conviction of sin,—I appeal especially to the records of revivals of

religion,—I appeal to your own personal observation, for the truth of the fact, that the greater number of persons who are awakened do not become the subjects of even a hopeful conversion. I have known a meeting of inquiring sinners, consisting of nearly one hundred persons, whose countenances wore the solemnity almost of the world of spirits—and when a few months after I looked at the individuals of whom it was composed, and saw a large part of them walking in the broad road, and only here and there one who seemed to have found the way towards heaven, I could not forbear to exclaim, “Lord, what is the wheat to the chaff?” If this be so, then it is surely rash to build very confident hopes of conversion on the mere fact that you are awakened; for if the mass of those who are awakened are not converted, you cannot but perceive that the probability is still against you.

Once more: The truth which I am endeavoring to establish is evident from the consideration that *at any given period, far the greater number of individuals in a Christian land are, to all human appearance, unconverted.*

It is true we are always liable to mistakes in the estimate which we form of men, as we know nothing of the heart except by the external conduct; and that is often of so mixed a character that we are at a loss whether a principle of holiness or of sin is predominant. But though there are cases in which the application of the scriptural rule may be attended with great difficulty, yet this difficulty does not exist in respect to persons who are immoral, or who are manifestly thoughtless of religion, and seeking their whole enjoyment from the world. We say unhesitatingly, and even with their own consent, that *they* are unconverted. It is fair too as a general rule, at least it is sufficiently charitable, to take the opinion which people express, either directly or indirectly, in respect to themselves; and inasmuch as, by not confessing Christ before the world, they virtually acknowledge their unfitness to do so, they ought not, and for the most part they do not, complain if we acknowledge the correctness of their judgment, and set them down as not being on the Lord's side. Taking either of these standards of judging, then, either the conduct or the profession, is it not manifest that far the greater part always have been—are at this moment, even among ourselves—in an unconverted state? How few are there, comparatively, who even profess to be the followers of Christ; and may I not add, with fearful emphasis, how much fewer who give evidence of being his followers! Take out of the church all the lovers of pleasure, all who make religion a mere matter of form, all, in short, whose Christian character is in any way equivocal, and how large a number do you honestly believe would be left? How large a proportion of the individuals who walk our streets, and enter our churches, and I must even say, come to our communion-tables, do you really believe the Searcher of hearts sees to be his faithful followers? If the proportion of the whole number be very small, and if so far as we can judge it has always been so, I ask again, whether there is nothing here that looks ominous in respect to your own destiny? You are now among the unconverted; and the unconverted are the majority, and always have been the

majority : far the greater part who have come down to the bed of death have given the most melancholy evidence that they were unprepared to die. Do you not perceive then that the analogy against your being converted is just ~~so~~ much stronger than it is in favor of it, as the proportion of those who are not converted is greater than of those who are? Is not the conclusion equally irresistible and overwhelming?

I here close my argument. And now I appeal to you whether I have not dealt fairly and honestly with your understandings; whether the doctrine which I proposed to establish, startling as it might at first have seemed, or as it may still seem to you, is not sustained by considerations which it is impossible to gainsay? If, then, you can discover no flaw in the reasoning by which we have been brought to the fearful conclusion that the fact of your being unconverted now, renders it probable that you will always remain so, and will finally have your portion in everlasting burnings, I entreat you as wise men to hold this conclusion to your minds; to look your own condition full in the face; and not, as you have done a thousand times before, to turn away from it because it is alarming. Rely on it, when you have been calculating on a future conversion, your depraved feelings have got the better of your understanding; sober reason, as I trust you are now satisfied, conducts to a directly opposite conclusion. I ask again, will you not hold this conclusion to your minds? Will you not let it mingle itself with your thoughts after you have retired from this house, and in coming days and weeks? Will you not suffer it to have its legitimate influence on your conduct?

But methinks I hear some one say, "that would be a discouraging influence. If the fact be really so that there is a probability that I shall perish, then it were useless to attempt any exertion: I will fold my arms, and sit down, and submit to my fate as quietly as I can." But my friend, you are taking counsel here of the depravity of your heart, and not of reason or common sense. You do not act thus in your worldly concerns, and you would say of the man who should act thus that he was at least on the verge of insanity. Suppose you were to hear that a large estate of yours was in danger of being lost, and that the chances were even much in favor of its being lost, but that still by timely efforts you might possibly secure it—would this intelligence lead you instantly to abandon all concern for it, or would it not rather rouse you to the most diligent exertion to prevent its passing out of your hands? Or suppose you were to learn that your child at a distance was dangerously ill, and that for want of some medicine which you had in your possession he would probably die, and that with your utmost diligence there was only a chance of your reaching him before the fatal crisis, would this discourage you from all effort, or would it cause you to speed your way towards the beloved object, that if possible you might reach him seasonably to save his life, and if not, that you might have the satisfaction to reflect that you had done all that was in your power? And wherefore should you adopt a different course in respect to the salvation of your soul? Why should you act with earnestness on a small degree of

probability where some temporal good only is to be secured, or some temporal evil averted, and build an argument on the same degree of probability for the utter neglect of your soul's salvation? If your case were absolutely *hopeless*, why then indeed there would be nothing to be done, and there would be no motive to attempt any thing; but so long as there were even a ray of hope, you would stand convicted of madness in not waking to effort; for the loss on the one hand, and the gain on the other, defy all the powers of human calculation.

There is another thing here to be considered: it is that notwithstanding the chances according to all the rules of legitimate calculation are against any individual sinner being converted, yet we do know that many will be converted, though we cannot designate them; and here is a ground for encouragement. Let it be remembered also that notwithstanding the truth of our doctrine, yet the reason why it is true, is not that men are doomed to perdition by an arbitrary decree that has no respect to their own character; (*that were a perversion of the true doctrine of providence*;) but because they choose death, or the course which leads to death, rather than life, when life and death are both set before them. The probability, then, that you will perish, results not from the fact that you cannot be saved, but that you will not be saved; that you will continue till you die to reject the offers of eternal life.

And now, beloved hearers, if I do not mistake, the subject on which we have been meditating, has, as it respects some of you, raised a conflict between your judgment and conscience on the one hand, and your inclinations on the other. On the one hand, you cannot resist the conviction that these things are so; that the probability is decidedly in favor of your being doomed to an eternal communion with the wailings of the lost; and reason tells you that this is an appalling consideration. On the other hand, you shrink from the effort necessary to escape this tremendous doom,—and there is the plea of business, and the plea of pleasure, and the plea of carnal apathy, all united in favor of some future more convenient season. In this conflict shall reason or feeling be triumphant? In respect to most of you I have reason to fear that it will be the latter; and to every such case I may appeal for a further confirmation of the truth of what you have heard. Such a course will prove that you can still hold out against warnings and exhortations; that you can practically determine, even after this subject has been brought distinctly before you, that you will still stifle conscience and insult Jehovah. In short, it will be an important item in that evidence which proves that you are probably to suffer forever. We shall expect to hear of you again, not indeed perhaps plunging into gross excess, but losing yourself in the haunts of thoughtlessness or in the whirl of business, apparently and really unmindful that you are in the least jeopardy. But there are those among us who will look upon you with an eye of compassion; who will wish we could lay hold of you and save you from perdition; who, when we think of you with respect and kindness, will feel our hearts throb and sink at the reflection that you are probably to have your por-

tion among the lost. I have said, you may refuse to look at this subject now, but the day is coming when it will urge itself upon you, and you will not be able to turn away from it. When sickness shall have taken you out of the ranks of pleasure and business, when death with its clustering horrors shall look you in the face, and show you his mandate, and point you to the door of the pit; and one step farther onward—when the everlasting abyss opens beneath the eye, and the sound of wailing ascends from it, and the storm and the lightning of God's wrath are blazing and raging over it,—Oh tell me, how will the subject of this discourse appear to you then!

SERMON CIII.

BY WILLIAM B. SPRAGUE, D. D.

THE WICKED SURPRISED BY THEIR OWN DESTRUCTION.

LAMENTATIONS, I. 9.—*She remembereth not her last end : therefore she came down wonderfully.*

THE occasion of the writing of this book was the destruction of Judah and Jerusalem by the Chaldean army, and the consequent dissolution of the Jewish state. In this first chapter, the prophet bewails the miseries which had come upon his much-loved city; contrasting her deplorable condition with her former state of prosperity and magnificence. And in the verse which contains our text, he speaks of the fearfulness of her ruin, and charges it upon her own guilty inconsideration. "*She remembereth not her last end ; therefore SHE CAME DOWN WONDERFULLY.*"

The tremendous calamities that now came upon the Jewish nation, seem to have been an occasion not only of great distress, but of great surprise. Jerusalem came down wonderfully, inasmuch as she came down at a time when she did not expect it, in a manner which she did not expect, and to a doom which she did not expect. From having been the joy of the whole earth, she became a field of utter desolation.

There are certain great principles in the divine administration, the operation of which gives a degree of uniformity to the divine proceedings. For instance, it is the manner of our God to visit with signal destruction those who have proudly set at naught his authority in a course of prosperous wickedness. Such was his treatment of Jerusalem. From the haughty elevation to which she had risen, she was suddenly brought down into the dust: her pomp, and her glory, and the noise of her viols, all departed. So it has been with individ-