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**SERMON CII.**

BY WILLIAM B. SPRAGUE, D. D.

ALBANY, N. Y.

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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

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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!

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## SERMON CIII.

BY WILLIAM B. SPRAGUE, D. D.

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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-

uals. Witness the case of Nebuchadnezzar, and of Herod, and a multitude of others. Destruction came upon them, not only in a terrible form, but at an hour when they did not expect it; and it was the more awful because it came as a surprise. And let me say, the same thing will hold true, in a greater or less degree, of all sinners, as it respects their final doom; while it will be especially true of those who have sinned against great light, and with a high hand.

The precise point, then, which I propose to illustrate in this discourse is, that **THE DESTRUCTION WHICH WILL OVERTAKE SINNERS AT LAST, WILL BE TO THEM A MATTER OF AWFUL SURPRISE.** It will be at once unexpectedly dreadful, and dreadfully unexpected.

1. This will appear, in the first place, from the fact that *God's wrath against the wicked is constantly accumulating.* If God's word be true, one sin exposes the soul to eternal perdition. We shall not stop here to vindicate God's justice in this constitution of things, for that were unnecessary, inasmuch as he himself hath said, "the soul that sinneth"—not that sinneth a thousand times—not that sinneth through a whole life, but "that sinneth, shall die;" and it is enough for us to know that such a declaration never could have gone out of the mouth of the Lord, unless it had been just. If, then, a single violation of God's law exposes the sinner to an eternal punishment, tell me what must be the effect of a state of impenitence continued during a whole life? If the first sin you ever committed provoked God, do you think that the second provoked him less; and that as he saw you become accustomed to sin, he came to think as little of it as yourself, and has not even charged your sins against you? Do you not remember that the Bible speaks of the sinner treasuring up wrath against the day of wrath? And can you reflect a moment without perceiving that reason and conscience both decide that it *must* be so? To suppose that it were otherwise, would be to annihilate God's moral government, and to trample the Divine character in the dust.

Now, sinner, take God's law for your standard, and enter into your secret chamber and commune with yourself; and see to what conclusion you come in respect to the number and the aggravation of your sins. Perhaps you are appalled at the undertaking, and are ready to shrink from it on the ground that most of your sins, especially your sins of heart, have escaped your remembrance. Take then a single week; or if you please, bring it down even to a single day, and see how many sins of omission and of commission, of heart and of life, rise up before you. Where has been your love to God? Where your faith in Christ? Where your gratitude for mercies received? Where your penitence for past offences? Where your earnest and importunate prayers? Where your faithful efforts to advance the spiritual interests of your fellow-men? On the other hand, have you not excluded God from your thoughts? Have you not refused to listen to the calls which he has sent you in his word and in his providence to attend to the things of your peace? Have you not even resisted the strivings of his Spirit, and driven away serious impressions

by rushing into the cares of the world, or into scenes of gaiety, when, if you had cherished them as you ought, you might have been brought into the kingdom? I do not pretend to say that it is possible that you can, by any effort of mind, recall *all* your transgressions—that I know were impossible; but of this you may be certain,—that the more you think of your sins, the more sins you will find to think of; it will be a field on which you will never lack for something new; for all the conduct of your life and all the operations of your heart will bring up to your view something omitted which you ought to have done, and something done which you ought to have omitted.

Bear in mind now that the progress of God's wrath has exactly corresponded with the progress of your guilt. He has been no idle spectator of any thing that you have been doing or leaving undone. If, then, the first sin which you committed was enough to ensure to you eternal perdition, to what an aggravated perdition must you be doomed for a whole life of transgression; transgression, too, persevered in amidst even the tender expostulations of dying love? If God's wrath against the sinner has been accumulating during all this time, Oh, who can estimate its fearful amount?

Now when all this comes to strike upon the sinner, may it not be justly said that he has "come down wonderfully?" It is most likely that his thoughts concerning it have hitherto been few; but even if he has dwelt upon it frequently, and has exerted his imagination to the utmost to conceive what the final condition of the lost must be, his strongest conceptions have fallen infinitely short of what he finds to be the reality. His sins have been accumulating faster than he had ever conceived, and by means upon which he had never spent a thought. And God's wrath has been accumulating just as fast. Oh, must he not sink under it, when the whole catalogue of his sins are spread before him, and the whole amount of wrath comes down upon him?

2. The destruction which will come upon sinners will be to them a matter of fearful surprise, inasmuch as in the present life *God's wrath, for the most part, seems to slumber*; at least, they receive no direct expressions of it. It is true, indeed, that God is giving them warnings enough both in his word and providence; and if they did not close their ears against them, they could not fail to be alarmed; and they will never be able in the day of their calamity to charge God with having concealed from them their danger. Nevertheless, he treats them here as probationers for eternity; he sets life and death before them; but he does not unsheath his sword, and point it visibly at the sinner's heart. The sinner reads perhaps of the awful terrors of God's wrath, but he does not now experience them. He does not find that the elements are armed for his destruction. The thundercloud rises, and rolls, and looks terrific, as if it were borne along by an avenging hand; but the lightning that blazes from it passes him by unhurt. Pestilence comes; and if he sees it cut down the sinner, he sees it cut down the saint also; or perhaps the saint dies, and the sinner lives. He sleeps quietly upon his bed: no invisible being whispers in his ear any thing in respect to the wrath to come; and he dreams perhaps of beauty, and

of pleasure, and of mirth, without the intrusion of a solitary image of gloom. In short, not one of the vials of God's wrath can be said to be open upon him. There is nothing which he interprets as an indication of anything dreadful in the future.

Now must not all this be a preparation for a fearful surprise at last? If God had taken the sinner directly in hand at the commencement of his career, and had made him a visible object of his indignation, and had all along given him a dreadful foretaste of the future in the present, why then the destruction that awaits him might be substantially what he had disciplined himself to expect; but after having had no premonitions of it, or rather nothing which he has regarded as premonitory, it cannot but produce awful consternation. If you see a cloud rising, and approaching, and growing thicker and darker, you are not surprised if there comes a peal of thunder that shakes the earth; but if when the sun was shining in his strength, and there was no cloud visible, and the atmosphere was serene and fresh, and the sky all over beautiful—if at such a moment, the voice of God's thunder should suddenly be heard in the heavens, and the world should seem to move from its foundations, you would be horror-struck at the unusual phenomenon. The same thing substantially will be true of sinners at the last. Destruction will burst upon them like a wild tempest in a serene and cloudless morning.

3. Not only have the wicked during the present life, received no signal expressions of divine vengeance, but *they have been constantly receiving expressions of the divine goodness*: and this is another circumstance which will serve to increase the surprise that will be occasioned by their destruction. You cannot look around you—you cannot recur to your own experience, without finding abundant evidence that God is continually showering favors upon the evil and the unthankful. How many blessings do sinners enjoy growing out of the constitution which God has given them in connexion with the circumstances of their external condition! They have food, and raiment, and houses, and friends: they have the means of intellectual improvement—of regaling the taste and imagination among the beauties of nature: they have the comforts of social intercourse; and the endearment connected with domestic relations; and, little as they profit by them, they have the means of grace—the Bible, the Sabbath, a preached gospel, and even the influences of God's Spirit—every thing that is necessary to fit them for heaven. They have as many temporal blessings, and sometimes more than the real children of God; and from the dispensations of God's providence towards them, it would be impossible to infer that there was to be any thing dreadful in their destiny hereafter.

Now these numberless expressions of divine goodness which the wicked are continually receiving, have a tendency to lull them into a yet deeper security, and to prepare them for a more fearful surprise when the day of calamity and wrath finally comes. The mere absence of any signal manifestation of God's displeasure, as we have seen, actually has this effect; much more will it be

likely to follow from their being the subjects of numerous positive blessings. They secretly flatter themselves that it is impossible that a God who does them so much good here, should inflict any great evil upon them hereafter : or if they are too thoughtless of the whole subject even to make this inference in form, still their long experience of God's mercies must prepare them for a tremendous disappointment when the change actually comes. What a fearful transition will it be from this world, in which there are so many blessings, to a world in which existence itself becomes a curse ! Oh, will not the sinner feel that he has "come down wonderfully," when he finds his doom fixed among the lost, and thinks how lately he was in a world of hope, and was cheered by a thousand expressions of the divine bounty ?

4. God sometimes not only gives to the wicked a common share of temporal blessings, but *distinguishes them by worldly prosperity* : hence another reason of the surprise which they will experience at last. It is no uncommon thing for the wicked to be greatly prospered in the accumulation of wealth. Sometimes they become rich by inheritance, without any exertion of their own ; and sometimes their own ingenuity and enterprise in acquiring property are crowned with signal success ; and they rise from absolute poverty to the possession of millions. Sometimes they acquire an extensive influence ; are elevated to stations of high worldly honor ; and are even permitted to rule over a state or an empire. Sometimes they are gifted with distinguished intellects, and rise high in the scale of mental improvement, and their productions are sought for with avidity even beyond the limits of a continent. And sometimes their naturally amiable qualities, and discreet deportment, and it may be their deeds of benevolence, (for many a wicked man performs such deeds,) render them extensively and deservedly the objects of esteem and even of admiration. Now under these various influences the wicked become inflated with their self-importance, and think of themselves far more highly than they ought to think, and I may add, far more highly than the world think of them. All this is a sad preparation for the approaching change. It is fitted to keep the thought of that change out of mind ; and to keep them so absorbed in present gratification, and especially in the indulgence of pride, that if the thought of what is future is forced upon them, it still makes no abiding impression. There never was a fairer example of the case of which I am now speaking than Herod, as he sat upon his throne, making an oration to the populace, and snuffing up their phrensied adulation when they would have made him believe that he was a god and not a man. The event, you know, proved that he was set in a slippery place ; and so it has proved in respect to many others of the splendidly wicked.

Do you not readily perceive that these worldly distinctions, of which the wicked are often the subjects in this life, are fitted to heighten their surprise when they come to experience God's wrath in another ? Think of the rich, and the great, and the noble, of this world, who have been accustomed to receive a homage which has sometimes fallen little short of idolatry, finding

themselves in the prison of despair, with no sound but the sound of their own wailing—with no society but the society of the reprobate—with no light but the light of everlasting burnings! Have not these persons come down wonderfully? When they compare what they once were with what they are now, and what they are to be through eternal ages, will they not regard the change as supremely dreadful and overwhelming?

5. I observe, once more, that the destruction which will finally overtake the wicked will be to them a matter of great surprise, inasmuch as *they will in some way or other have made confident calculations for escaping it*. It will be found, no doubt, that many of them had flattered themselves with the hope that the doctrine of future punishment might turn out to be false; and some will have been left through their own perverseness to believe the lie that the good and the bad will at last be equally happy. There will be others who will have wrought themselves into a conviction that destruction might be averted by some easier means than those which the gospel prescribes; and may have chosen to trust to the orthodoxy of their creed, or the kindness of their temper, or the morality of their life. There will be others who will have intended ultimately to escape destruction by becoming true Christians, but who were looking out for some more convenient season. One thing will be certain in respect to all: they will have intended to come out well at last. Not an individual among all the sufferers in hell but will have expected finally to be saved.

But mark now the disappointment! The Universalist dies; and behold, that awful doctrine of future and eternal punishment, which he had once disbelieved, proves true; and he lifts up his eyes in that very torment which he had perhaps derided as a dream of fancy. Unfortunately, he could not be cured of his Universalism by any remedy less pungent than the flames of hell. The good-natured moralist dies, and to his astonishment he finds that there was truth in the doctrine of regeneration; and that the proper element of an unholly heart is the world of wo. The self-confident hypocrite dies, and he finds that all his high professions, and arrogant denunciations, and undoubting hopes, were consistent with his lying under the wrath of God, and will be consistent with his feeling the strokes of that wrath for ever. The delaying sinner dies; and he finds that he has delayed too long—that the period of his retribution has begun long before he expected that the season of his probation would terminate. The youth had expected to live to middle age, and the middle-aged man had expected to live to old age, and even the old man had expected to live a little longer; and while they were severally deferring their repentance, each died, and found out by an appalling experience that this is the only world of probation. There are probably those in this house who will hereafter be examples of the awful cases to which I have now referred; but I venture to say there is not one here who really expects it, and has made up his mind to encounter this dreadful doom. The gayest youth before me does not intend to perish—the greatest worldling before me does not intend to perish—the oldest sinner before me does not intend to perish; and you never will intend to; but

notwithstanding all your intentions; there is great reason to believe that such will be your doom; and Oh, what a surprise would it be to you, if you should really find yourself in the arms of the second death!

1. In the review of our subject, we may see, in the first place, *how blinding is the influence of depravity*. We have seen that the surprise which sinners will feel when destruction overtakes them at the last, will be in consequence of their blindness and insensibility to their actual condition. It will not be because they have had no warnings of their danger, for God has warned them faithfully both by his word and by his providence; but it will be because they would not heed the warnings; because they flattered themselves either that they were not true, or that the punishment to which they related might be escaped in some other way than that which the gospel points out, or else that they would repent and turn to God at some future more convenient season. On some one or other of these grounds, they go on strengthening their habit of carelessness, rejoicing in the way of their heart and the sight of their eyes, and treasuring up wrath against the day of wrath. How is it that these same persons are rational, and many of them eminently wise on subjects in which this world alone is concerned, and yet in relation to this most momentous concern display the folly of madmen? The secret of it lies in the fact that in respect to their spiritual interests they are blinded by sin. The devil whispers falsehood in their ears, and they believe it; the great God who cannot lie thunders truth in their ears, and they doubt it. They do not see things as they are; and there is danger that the film will not be removed from their eyes until the adversary can lose nothing by their being undeceived. Dare you cherish in your hearts an evil which, while it will certainly bring destruction upon you, will serve to keep the woes which are preparing for you out of sight until all efforts to escape them will be to no purpose!

2. Our subject teaches us that *it is a most awful calamity to relapse into a habit of carelessness after being awakened*. For the sinner to awake out of sleep is to take the first step towards escaping from the wrath to come. It is by no means certain that he will secure the salvation of his soul even though he be awakened; but so long as he remains asleep his condition is absolutely hopeless. The fact, therefore, of his being awakened is a fact of deep interest to him; and if he should relapse, he would go back into a state, continuing in which there is no hope for him: he would in all probability sink into a deeper slumber than ever. Here then is an admonition to you who are awakened not to trifle with your convictions. If I were to designate the greatest calamity that could possibly befall you, I should speak of your going back to a habit of carelessness. And if any of you have actually gone back, God only knows whether you have not sealed your own reprobation.

3. We learn from this subject that *there is no class of men so much to be pitied as those who are perhaps most frequently the objects of envy, and none whose condition is so much to be envied as those whose circumstances are often looked upon as the most undesirable*. I have no doubt that there are many who regard the proud, opulent worldling with envy; while the humble,



pious child of want is perhaps only thought of for his supposed degradation and wretchedness. Wait a few years and see how these two characters will change places; or rather how inconceivably degraded and miserable will be the former, how inconceivably happy and blessed the latter. He who had wanted nothing that this world can give, comes to his dying bed, and there he wants what this world cannot give; and in his way he supplicates it; but it is too late. He who had lacked the common comforts of life, but had been rich towards God, finds in his last extremity grace sufficient to disarm death; grace sufficient to brighten the prospect as it opens upon his dying eye. Ah, he had treasures laid up which the world did not see; treasures which he could command when he needed them most! And at the end of the dark valley, heaven opens upon him with all its strains of melody, and all its crowns of gold, and all its thrones of glory; and in that world he finds his everlasting home; and in all that happy community there is not one who is not his friend; and through eternal ages he will mingle in their joys, their thanksgivings, their alleluiahs.

But the poor sinner, on the other hand, who had made gold his god, and who had proudly triumphed in the distinction it procured for him,—oh, how he will curse his own infatuation; how he will reprobate that idolatry of this world to which he has sacrificed his soul! Oh, how poor he will feel, who once felt so rich, when he finds himself stripped of everything but his guilt, and thrown into the prison of God's wrath! Let no one then be so foolish as to envy the proud and prosperous sinner. Rely on it, better be any thing else than he. True, indeed, he walks now at ease, and in self-security; and so he may continue to walk a little longer; but these dreams in which he is indulging are a preface to his plagues. If you should ever stand by his death-bed, it will be strange if you do not see something to appal you. It would not be strange, when his spirit has fled, if you should seem to hear a fresh sound of wailing coming up from the pit.

4. Lastly: *Who of you will turn a deaf ear to the warning which this subject suggests to flee from the wrath to come?* To this wrath, need I say, every one of you who is impenitent, is exposed every hour? While I am speaking you are in jeopardy. Who among you is so brave that you dare to encounter it? Who among you can measure or attempt to measure this awful perdition, and yet use no exertion to escape it? I pray you, my dying hearers, to dismiss this infatuation. I charge you not to slumber another night upon your beds, until you have done something to avert the doom which now stares you in the face. I am anxious to know whether this warning is to be lost upon you or not. Do you sleep still? Is there no sign of waking? Are you resolved that you will go away and be just as you have been before? Go, then; but remember there will ere long be a change: remember that as God's word is true, you will at last *come down wonderfully*.