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John W. Deventer
West Palm Beach

SERMON.

“YESTERDAY, TO-DAY AND FOREVER.”*

BY REV. JOSEPH R. WILSON, D. D.

AS you may well imagine, my emotions to-day, if you will allow me for a moment to speak of them, are such as only myself can understand. I will, therefore, not attempt to explain them or to account for them. I have indeed no embarrassment that is not a part of these emotions, except the embarrassment of not being able to say what ought to be said about this interesting and perhaps important occasion. I have felt so ever since my feet pressed again the familiar pavements and looked along the familiar streets, and saw the old windows looking out upon me as they used to do; I have felt at home, and have always felt at home here, in the past as well as now, and I believe that I always shall, because of the affection that I have for you, and the reciprocated affection that I believe you have for myself, unworthy as I am of the least token of it.

While I was pastor here there was no cloud upon the sky, except perhaps a little one as big as a man's hand, and the blame of that cloud was always with me. It is not surprising, therefore, that I should have experienced the emotions that I have to-day, both pleasurable and painful. But I have always thought that it was not in good taste, if indeed it was proper at all, for a minister to speak in the pulpit of himself. There is only one Shepherd, there is only one Bishop, and he is the centre of our theology, as he is the centre of our affections and the glory of our hopes.

* Delivered *extempore*, and stenographically reported by Miss Gertrude E. Jenkins.

Joseph R. Wilson

Let me say, then, what I have to remark upon the passage that you will find in Hebrews, xiii. 7, 8:

“Remember them which have the rule over you, who have spoken unto you the word of God; whose faith follow, considering the end of their conversation: Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, and to-day, and forever.”

I do not know what special reason the Apostle had to speak to the Hebrew scattered believers touching the importance and propriety of the recollecting them that ruled over them in spiritual things, for this is the reference. It has not much reference to you; you have always remembered them that had the spiritual rule over you, and you are remembering him who has this important and responsible rule this day.

What I wish to speak of, dear brethren, is that Lord and Bishop to which I have referred. What I wish to speak of is the unchangeableness of Jesus Christ. What changes there are, everywhere, in our congregations and communities! What changes have been here amongst yourselves! This very building is altered, and altered for the better: one of the handsomest houses of God that I have ever seen. The pastors are changed, and that also, allow me to say, my brother, for the better; and you have occasion to rejoice in the fresh acquisition of young, vigorous manhood, and to place him in rule over you in love. It all looks strange to me; here is the organ, that used to be at that end, and I hear the same voices speaking to me from the past, but still changed. Some of you have gray hairs that did not use to have them, or grayer hairs that formerly had gray ones: and some of those that I baptized girls, are now young ladies, and some of them have children of their own, baptized. And the young lads that I used to be so fond of, and to take so often by the hand, are now young men and laborers in the church and in the circles of business, and are making their mark for excellence of character.

Changes all these. We all have changed, dear brethren,

and we expect, one of these days, to experience the greatest change of all; when our mortal shall put on immortality; when time shall open its last door to us, the door that shall usher us into eternity; when we shall step from one room here, that we occupy, to a bigger and brighter room beyond; that change that we will experience when our feet are passing the threshold that separates our experiences here from the results of those experiences yonder; when indeed many of you, all, I trust, who now look upon the river of death as a big, broad, and angry stream, will find, when you place your feet in the waters, the swelling waters, behold! the stream will have become a rill, and you will step across to be forever with the Lord, and to congregate with those who, in the past seventy-five years here, have gone before.

Changes! I wish it were proper, and I wish I could speak of those who have thus gone, making their last change; some of those dear old women that are the comfort, the joy, the support of the pastor's heart and labors. I scarcely dare mention one without mentioning many, but I cannot help thinking of one who was so dear to me, and so dear to the great mass of this people, Mrs. Taylor; she has gone before.

But I will not enter upon these sentimental views to any larger extent; I simply wish to point out to you, as I have intimated already, that there is One that never has changed, and that never will change, the same always to us, as he has been to our fathers and mothers before us, as far back as can be traced the line of our spiritual ancestry. He is the same always. There is one change which we experience, which is due to the fact of his being unchangeable, and always loving us and helping us. I have found in my own experience, as doubtless many of you have, that as you have climbed the hill of life to reach its top, beyond which you know is the setting sun, that you cannot now well perceive, only the twilight that precedes it; as you go higher and higher up, you more and

more forget yourselves and become more and more charitable towards other people ; somehow, in the light that is breaking upon you from that sun, you see your own faults more fully, and the faults of others less conspicuously. You will change, therefore, as you have advanced in the Christian life, in charity.

The scenery of life, all that has wonderfully, magically changed, as we have gone up higher, and instead of the eye of youth, we look over the spectacle with the eye of age. But there is One always the same ; and I do not now refer to him so much as God, as well I might, especially, my brethren, in this day when the deity of Jesus Christ is doubted and disputed among theological circles, where formerly there was nothing but faith and confidence. But if you were to take away from the Christian heart the thought that Jesus Christ is God, that he is Immanuel, God with us, what have we left of that Christianity which in one sense is as old as God, its author, who will also be its glorious and glorified finisher? Jesus Christ, as God, is the same now—that goes without saying if we believe in his Godhead—that he always was, that he was to the angels before he became incarnate, that he was to the fathers with whom he walked, that he was to the prophets whom he inspired ; but as God-man, Jesus, the Christ in human nature, flesh of our flesh, blood of our blood, and bone of our bone, our humanity gathered up in him, he has been the same always.

You have often thought of him, as you saw him walking in the garden of Eden, for it must be remembered that it is a fixed truth now, that the Jehovah of the Old Testament is to be regarded as the Jesus of the New. Wherever, then, the Lord was in the past, Jesus was ; and so he took Abel by the hand, and you see him in the sacrifice that Abel offered, and that was as a sweet smelling savor to God above ; he was in that garden. And you see him in the smoke of the sacrifice, and you behold him calling Abraham, and walking with Abraham

and telling him where to go, and what to do, so that "Abraham saw him and was glad," we are told. It is not necessary to speak of Enoch; in the midst of the obscurities of the antediluvian period, when all seemed to be so confused, and much of it so dark, a pillar of light arises, and it is labeled "Enoch." Jesus, the Son of God, the Son of man, was the object of his worship. I need not speak of David in the past; I need not speak again of the prophets, nor is it necessary to speak of the church in its past history. That would never have been the triumphant church that it has proved to be on many an occasion of battle and of victory, had it not been that the Son of God was walking amid his children, as in the furnace that time when the fires were kindled about those three children—as they are called—and consumed them not. The church, therefore, has come down into the present from the past, with the smoke of the past upon it, with the tearings of the past exhibited in its garments, and with the victories of the past still kindling in her eye, that church, the same in principle and in practice under the Old Testament dispensation as now under the New. It has had Jesus Christ for its leader, enthroned him in its heart, and he is all that is needed in order to complete her course. In that sense, Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, the yesterday of the world, the yesterday of Zion, where so many changes have since taken place, but no change in him, the leader; however there may have been changes in those that were led, none in the captain of our salvation.

I need not speak, or more than speak, of Jesus Christ as he is to day; for this dispensation is like the old one, as I have already indicated, only more free, more generous, more comprehensive, taking in now the world, as it formerly took in only the Jewish nation, with here and there a proselyte, reluctantly received. This dispensation is the dispensation of the Holy Spirit, who is here, and has been here from the opening of this present dispensation as the representative of the Lord,

who sent him, and who went away for the purpose of sending him, saying, "It is expedient for you that I go away, for if I go not away the Comforter will not come unto you; but if I depart I will send him unto you"; and "he shall receive of my things and shall show them unto you."

So that, wherever the Spirit is, wherever the Spirit preaches, and he preaches not alone in the sanctuary and with us preachers, but he preaches also in this word of God, the Author of which word is the Holy Ghost, the immediate author, you may say. And so he is in this dispensation as he was in the heart of Enoch; as he appeared in the devotions of Abraham, as they kindled upon his son, Isaac; and in that kindling light he saw another son, the Son of God, whom he worshipped. And as that Redeemer by his Spirit dwelt in the hearts of his people in the past, so he dwells in the hearts of his people now. If it were not so, there would be no church in this place; if it were not so, we would not be able to celebrate the seventy-fifth anniversary of the First Presbyterian Church in Wilmington. It is because he has lived with you thus far, and proposes to live with you in the future, that you are what you are. Oftentimes you are tempted to attribute it to yourselves, to the doctrines you expound, to the prayers that you offer, and to the much well-doing that has characterized this people; that had it not been for all that, this would not have occurred, would not have taken place, would not have been established. That is all well; but the inspiring agent of it all is he who lives in the hearts of his people; for the church grows not from without, but, like the noble tree of the forest, it grows from within; it grows from the heart outwardly, and that inward heart and spirit has always been the Lord Jesus, the same to-day that he was yesterday; who has said in words that ought to be put in letters of gold, it seems to me, in every church building, or at least written in letters of brightness in every believer's heart, "I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world." Could

you preach without that, my brother? Could you live without that, brethren? Imagine him to be absent; imagine the bridegroom to be divorced from the bride, as indeed was the case in the seven unhappy churches of Asia, and the same scenes would be re-enacted, a scene of ruin and desolation, and of the saddest memories. Oh! it is Jesus, the Christ, the Son of the Living God, the Son of man, your Lord, my Lord, the Lord of us all; it is he, I am glad to repeat it this day, it is he, I for one testify, who is the all in all of every believer, whatever be his gifts, whatever be his position in the world, whatever be the number of his friends and the warmth of his friendships; it is he all the while that has kindled the fire on the hearth of the soul, and that keeps it aglow. And without him with us to-day as he was with our fathers yesterday, I for one—but it is an impossible supposition.

I am with you somewhat in weakness to-day, and will not be able to say much more. I simply wish to give my testimony here, as I have given it in years that are gone, to the value of Jesus Christ, to you personally as well as to your church collectively. And I still further have to say, that he is not only the same yesterday and to-day, but he is forever; in the future, as in the present, in the present as in the past, the same to-morrow that he is now; so that when you lie down after you pray your prayer, before you have gone into the image of death that we call sleep, you may be sure that when you wake in the morning, the same kindly face will be beaming its divine love upon your heart; then you can kneel down again and thank him for the repose of the night, and beg him for strength needed for the coming day. 'The same forever!'

And then, when this work-day is gone, and we have received our last wound and shed our last tear, and folded our hands for the last time, waiting for the hour that may yet be to come; then we will find that he is on the other side, awaiting us.

Who cares, comparatively, for those that have gone before

from our own families and from our own hearts, when they are perfected with Jesus Christ! And if, when we reach those happy shores, we run to greet the sainted ones whom we again recognize, and are beginning to ask them about their joys, and getting them to relate to us their experiences, they themselves will separate hand from hand and lead us to him who is the centre and glory of heaven, as he has been the centre and glory of the church on earth. "Come and see what is really beautiful; come and kneel with us at the feet of him at whose feet we can never kneel long enough. We have known him longer than you, and in circumstances that are different; we are glad to see you, but we are gladder of all to know that you are to see Christ, that you are to see him again, that you are to know him as he is. You never knew him as he is; the prophets never knew him as he is; the apostles never knew him as he is. But now that you look upon him, you see him as he is, as we have seen him, and we want you to come and look at him. Thus he is forever!" I repeat, Jesus is the centre, and Jesus is the end.

Now, my hearers, we learn from this passage what was the conversation of those that ruled over these Hebrews. Now I know that the word translated conversation does not mean what conversation now does to us, but it means the turn of the life; every turn of life that those preachers and leaders took was a turn, not away from Jesus, but with him and to him; he was their life, he was the food of their hearts, the joy of their hearts. At the same time, the conversation is a part of the activity of the soul: the turn of the heart is in it, the turn of the thoughts is in it, the turn of speculation as to the future is in it, the turn of recollection as to the past is in it, in our conversation. Now then, both as to the turn of life and as to the talk from day to day, what ought it to be? It ought to be Christ. Why, I cannot help thinking of those men who received this letter and of the great apostle who wrote it, to feel sure

that I know what they talked about. They had not as many things to talk about as we have; conversation was a different conversation; pecuniary interests were different; there were no newspapers to stir up strife, as sometimes they do, or to stir up thought, as often they do, and give us news, as they are appointed to do, but they talked about Jesus. Now, would it not be well for us to dismiss every other topic of conversation and take up that. Well, but it might become common, stale, flat, and unprofitable; perhaps it would be making the name too common; but to talk about Christ is to live Christ, and a man cannot but talk about that which he lives. At home, in your business abroad, in all these, let Christ be with you, and not only appear, but conspicuously appear, that all men may take knowledge of you, as they took knowledge of many in the past, that they had been with Jesus.

Now, I have done with this lesson, which I have told in the best way that was left to me this morning. Whilst we are brethren, we are brethren in the Lord; whilst we are people out of all denominations, we love one another because we love him who is the centre of all denominationalism, and who is the glory of all ecclesiasticism; and as the different peoples get nearer to him, as a matter of course they get nearer to each other. And may the blessing of God, the Saviour, the hope of our glory, be now and forever with you all. Amen.