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# THE CHANGING WORLD AND THE UNCHANGING GOD.

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“And, Thou, Lord, in the beginning hast laid the foundation of the earth; and the heavens are the works of thine hands. They shall perish, but thou remainest: and they all shall wax old as doth a garment; and as a vesture shalt thou fold them up, and they shall be changed; but thou art the same, and thy years shall not fail.”—HEB. i. 10, 11, 12.

HERE we have disclosed to us in most impressive terms the contrast between the mutability of all created things and the unchanging God

The earth, with its apparently firm foundations and the seemingly steadfast heavens, are declared to be alike unsubstantial. As they represent what is supposed to be most durable, there is something startling in the quiet assertion, “they shall be changed,” “they shall perish.”

But if the pillared firmament can be shaken, if the great globe itself is to dissolve as an exhalation and vanish like a vision of the night, then the inference is irresistible that all that mortal men can construct by manual skill or mental force; that all the pageants of time and sense, that all the creations of genius and all the pomp and pride of human glory, are still more evanescent.

Nothing terrestrial bears the stamp of indestructibility. The things that are seen are temporal, and not only so,



but instability is their characteristic even during their brief survival.

It is so evident that this law of change is divinely decreed that we are impelled to inquire for what ends God fills human life with so much perturbation. This is my theme to-day—the ethics of change, the moral uses of vicissitude; and I hope to show that the very fluctuations of our present state of being, that what we call the accidents that befall men; that the crosses and disappointments which are so common, as well as the blessings that fill the heart with gratitude and joy—that these are so many instrumentalities by which God shapes and moulds human character, and by which he teaches men how so to use this present life as to be prepared for life eternal. The Scriptures assert that a life of continuous prosperity and success breeds false security, leads men to presume on the future and to forget God. “Because they have no changes, therefore they fear not God.” They take what we call providence as the natural course of human events, and, gliding along on a smooth sea with prosperous gales, there is nothing to remind such that there is one who rides upon the clouds and directs the storm, and then at his will makes all calm again.

So far as the *fact* is concerned that change characterizes human affairs, there is nothing that is more readily, and nothing that is more generally, admitted. In a great variety of ways the Scriptures announce this truth and try to impress it upon the memories and hearts of men. Sometimes they state the fact in plain, didactic language, and sometimes they use the most graphic and glowing figures, that by imagery and metaphor they may deepen the impression that the world is a world of perturbation, and that God intends us to live in the midst

of vicissitude. I find this stated in one short line which inspiration has put upon record: "The fashion of this world passeth away." "The *pageant* of this world passeth away" like the plays performed on the dramatic stage, where the scenery is perpetually shifting, where actors come and go, where there are representations of imaginary situations and delineations of imaginary characters and events, the one rapidly following the other, until the curtain drops and the play is over. "All the world's a stage," and the actors are the men and women whose smiles of joy and tears of woe make up the comedy or the tragedy of the fleeting show. And so time moves on until it runs its appointed round, and the great curtain drops on the drama of completed human history.

We have the same truth announced under a different figure, where inspiration tells us that, "Here we have no continuing city." Many of the works of men possess great permanence. The great capitals of Old World empires, with their stately temples, with their strong, triumphal arches, with their massive walls fortified by tower and bastion, with their gigantic granite amphitheatres—these were structures that seem to have been destined to defy the hand even of that greatest of all destroyers, time. And yet these cities became the prey of successive conquerors. Again and again they were captured and pillaged and desolated, and the banners of successive victors waved in triumph over the towers that were deemed impregnable. At last decay and disintegration followed the ruthless work of the invader, and a mightier force laid those cities low, until the time has come when the very sites they once occupied is a matter of dispute.

Antiquarians engage in long controversies as to the very places where these imperial cities stood, some of

them that bore the boastful name of "Eternal." How will it be with the cities of the present generation? I shall not remind you of Macaulay's prediction of a man sitting in the midst of a vast solitude on a broken arch of London bridge and sketching the ruins of the cathedral of the world's metropolis. I have no predictions to make with regard to the doom of the mighty cities that now dominate the nations, and into which all the resources of power and influence seem to be concentrating; cities by and by to rule the continents, and ultimately to rule the world.

We see no signs of decay and dissolution in the sovereign cities of the earth in the present time; and yet there is a sense in which the old text is just as true of London and Paris and Berlin and New York and San Francisco as it was true of those cities of which I have just made mention, that "Here we have no continuing city." The city may remain, but you and I must go.

How few of the inhabitants of any city live in houses which they themselves built. The great majority of people occupy houses through which the representatives of successive generations have passed; and with regard to those who built and who own the dwellings in which they live, they are but the temporary tenants. Presently their children will sit at the head of the table and manage all the affairs of the household, and sometimes talk very tenderly and very kindly about what father and mother did in their day. We are only the transient inhabitants of the places we call home, and therefore it is true of us that "Here we have no continuing city." The very habitations endeared to us, it may be, by many hallowed associations, will fall first into the hands of our children and afterwards they will pass into the hands of utter strangers, and it may be that the very tradition

will be lost as to who once lived there and as to who was the founder of the house.

But it is not worth while, in the illustration of my theme, that I should ask you to indulge in retrospects. It is enough to invite you to give me the testimony of your present observation. What is it? It is this: that you see the inhabitants of any city with which you are familiar very rapidly changing. There is not a month that I do not meet with some one who visits this church who worshipped here, it may be, ten or twenty years ago. I hear the same old, sad story. They all say that it revives many pleasant memories to be within these walls again, but as they look over the congregation it is a new and strange one to them. It was only here and there that they recognized a face that they had ever seen before. There may be one man in this house, but not more than one, who heard the first sermon that I preached here. We constantly see changes in the people around us, whether we live in the town or the country. Last week you settled an account with a man, but you will never settle another account with him, and the reason is that he has gone to his last account. The other day you met with a man and you shook hands with him. You did not dream that that friendly pressure was the last. The other day a neighbor of yours moved into another residence. Well, since then you know he has moved again, and now he has found another home. It is the place we call the long home. A few Sundays ago one sat beside you in the church, and heard just what you heard. He listened to the same discourse to which you listened. He united in singing the same hymns of praise. He heard the sounds that mercy utters from the cross, but now no voice of invitation, no melody of Zion awakens one emotion. Nothing stirs the heart that lies

so chill and still in the coffin, and no music penetrates that dull, cold ear of death. "Here we have no continuing city."

This is a fact that ought to do more than make us pensive; it ought to remind us that the same changes we see in our friends they see in us. You meet a friend that you have not seen for several years, and, you do not tell him so, on the contrary, you avoid giving him any intimation of what you observe, but you are very much startled to see what a change time has made in him; to see how white his hair has become, and how decrepit his form is, and how uncertain his movements are. Well, he looks at you, and just what is passing through your mind is passing through his. So we are all moving along on the same stream, and we are all moving along with exactly the same rapidity. You think people grow old a great deal faster than you do, but we are all borne upon the bosom of the same flood and with a common celerity. None of us have it in our power to look up as Joshua did and say: "Sun, stand thou still" until I complete this grand enterprise to which my heart is linked, and to which my life is consecrated. Alas! we cannot lengthen out the short allotted span, no matter how intense may be the desire to live, no matter how impassioned may be the longing to complete the chosen task. Nothing can turn back by one degree the dark shadow that moves with dread certainty over life's dial. We have no continuing city.

Again the figure changes, and the Bible reminds us that "life is a day," not like a long, lingering, summer day; rather like a crisp, winter day, bright but brief. You watch the delicate flush of dawn, and it almost brings tears into the eyes to see the tender grace and sweetness of the early summer morning. By and by

the landscape grows brighter and the heavens more brilliant, and the sun goes up to its zenith; but it does not stand there in the mid-heaven, for presently it begins to decline, and by and by it goes down with a sombre, mellow glory, not so bright and not so cheery as the morning ray, but with a pensive glory it goes down to its western bed, and then the evening comes. So infancy is that tender break of day; that sweet, bright dawn; but how quickly infancy merges into youth, and how soon youth matures into middle age. Then, when middle age comes, how swift the decline and how soon the shadows of evening and the cold dews begin to settle around us. Then comes the night, "in which no man can work."

Again the figure changes, and we are told that life is like the "troubled sea." If there is anything whatever that is an impressive emblem of life, it is the sea with its unrest; the sea with its perpetual moan; the sea that is always changing its face—bright and blue when the heaven is clear above, black and ominous when clouds darken the sky; sometimes sleeping in a deceitful calm, and then, at the wind's voice, waking into fury; the sea with its tides ebbing and flowing through its mighty heart, and with resounding surge washing the shores of all continents. Oh! what an emblem this is of human life! Life, with its surprises and fluctuations, with its uncertainties and perpetual perturbations.

I do not know of anything that is seen, or that has been created, that does not bear the impress of change and decay. This is true of all the works of men to which I have made reference; but there are some works of men that are far more permanent than great cities, than triumphal arches, than colossal columns. It is a great mistake to think that these things represent what

is most enduring in the world. There is the kingdom of mind—the kingdom of mind that outlasts matter—the triumphs of mind, and the structures that genius rears which are far more enduring than those that the architect can ever erect. See how the intellects of men have been held spell-bound in unquestioning obedience to the great philosophies that in turn have subjugated thought and given direction to the ethical beliefs of mankind; the philosophies of Plato, of Aristotle, of Epicurus, and the successive philosophies which have displaced them in modern times—the one chasing the other like shadows over a plain. Sir Walter said one day, as he looked at a painting and shook his head: “A painter is mistaken if he thinks that by a picture he can perpetuate his fame.” Said he, “No man can perpetuate his fame in that way, because the picture fades and the canvas upon which it is painted by and by crumbles. The only thing that endures is literature.” My friends, I do not know of a more sad mistake than that. With the exception of a few of the classic Greek and Roman writers, whose pure style, like the pure air of Egypt, keeps bright and fresh the colors of the interiors of their tombs, there is nothing more ephemeral than literature. The very art of printing, which preserves all other arts, will by and by make literature an impossibility so far as immortality is concerned, because of the very multiplication of those products of the human intellect. Go into the great libraries of London, or Paris, or St. Petersburg, or in some of the American cities, and you see nothing more sad than those vast shelves crowded with the works of men that once commanded the attention of their generation, but their books lie as unnoticed as mummies in Egyptian tombs. There they lie embalmed, without the possibility of a resurrection. A great library is a mau-

soleum of dead thought. Therefore, there is no hope of obtaining anything like a permanent renown, even through that long-surviving influence.

When we come to *science*, we think if there is anything that is settled and fixed we will find it there. Not so; there is as much fluctuation in science as there is in general literature. A text-book that was an authority twenty years ago, is only worth the price that the buyer of old paper would give for it; and what are called the exact sciences are so inexact that a book on geology or chemistry that was printed ten years ago is worthless now and everywhere rejected.

But there is one thing far more permanent than the noblest creations of genius, and that is *nature*; but nature itself is not an exception to the law of change. Look at the mountain, look at the sea, and you say, "There is something over which time has no influence." Wait a bit. A man comes, we will say, from the Old World. He emigrates in his boyhood to this country, and after a lapse of fifty years he has a great longing to go back and see his native village. He has a thousand tender memories about it, and thinks if he could only see that village once more he would be willing to leave the world satisfied. He makes the trip and finds the place. Almost at the first glance he says to himself: "I am disenchanted." What an air of desolation and loneliness rests over the place. He walks about and does not recognize a single face as one he ever saw before. He walks about, and people cast careless glances at him as they would at any stranger, but nobody looks at him a second time. He goes to the house where he was born, but it is not tenanted now; it is a ruin. And then he says, "Well, there is one place where I can go and get comfort. I will go to the little spot sacred to

the memory of the loved and lost." He goes there, and finds the enclosure broken down. He finds the graves grown over with weeds and briars. He finds the headstone lying some distance from the grave and broken in two; and there is not a place in the world that looks more desolate and lonely. Nobody ever visits that spot now; it is a dolorous solitude. Once affection lingered and wept there, but now all the sighs that are heard there are the sighs of the night wind through the drooping willows, and the only tears are the cold dews that trickle down the broken marbles. "Well," he says, "all this is changed, but nature is not changed." He looks around, and there is the old familiar river, and there are the hills that look just as they did when he last saw them. He says, "Thank God that I find something that is not changed"; and yet, my friends, that is a superficial observation. The whole physical globe is undergoing a perpetual change. The close observer notices how the coasts of some continents are rising, and how the shores of others are depressed. The close observer sees how the ocean now sweeps over vast tracts that once were cultivated, and how others that were once submerged form the homes of busy men. The perpetual mountains crumble, and the everlasting hills bow as they are disintegrated by frost and fire, by the action of the wasting storms and wearing streams. Therefore, we should not be surprised at the statement made in the text: "Thou, Lord, in the beginning hast laid the foundations of the earth, and the heavens are the works of thy hands. They shall perish, but thou remainest; yea, all of them shall wax old as doth a garment; as a vesture shalt thou fold them up and they shall be changed, but thou art the same, and thy years shall not fail."

Therefore, when we come to inquire into the moral uses of vicissitude, and what is the grand purpose for which God has placed us in a world of such mutation, we can give briefly, in closing, this answer: it is that we may fix our thoughts and hopes upon something that is both permanent and satisfying.

There are other uses at which we may glance, but this should arrest our supreme regard.

In the fifty-fifth Psalm there is a most pathetic picture. Old King David, wearied with the cares of office, is sitting on the flat roof of his house one evening. He has taken off his crown. It is too heavy, and he has laid it down upon the parapet. He has laid his sceptre at his feet, and sits there and sighs: "Would I were a shepherd lad again. O, that the innocence and sweetness of my early life might come back to replace the pomp and the burdensome cares of empire." Then he looked up and saw a little flock of doves flitting across the sky, their soft plumage glancing in the sun, growing dimmer as they recede, until they reach the western hills, and he said, "O that I had wings like a dove, for then I would fly away and be at rest. O for rest! Rest!"

Vastly mistaken is the man who compares himself to a noble oak, striking its roots deep into the earth, with its great strong branches shooting upwards, upon which the storms of heaven break when they strike it. Man has no such permanence, no such independence. He is more like a vine which has to grow upon a massive wall or upon a strong pillar, otherwise it trails upon the ground and perishes. The worst thing a vine can do is to trail around another vine. Both will fall, and, locked in fatal embrace, will perish. If a vine becomes fruitful, it must be trained to a pillar or a wall. Ah, so it

was with that great and yearning heart of David that sought rest. He was taught to say: "Put not your trust in princes, nor in the son of man in whom is no help; his breath goeth forth, he returneth to his earth; in that very day his thoughts perish." "In that very day man returneth to his earth"; the earth that is *his* because he came out of it and goes back to it; "earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust." "In that very day his thoughts," no matter how original, how lofty or how profound—it may be thoughts too tender or too delicately personal to be expressed—nevertheless, "In that very day his thoughts perish."

Again. If we ask, then, for the ethics, the religious lessons of change, another answer is that God has placed us in the midst of these perturbations to keep our life from becoming stagnant. If there was no change we would all become imbecile. I say if there was no change in the intellectual world, men would, by and by, drivel into impotence. Change is necessary to stir up and quicken and freshen life, just as thunder and storm are necessary to purify the sultry, stifling air. If it were not for these vicissitudes there would be no intellectual and no spiritual development. Change is God's benediction to humanity. No man knows what he can do until he is put in a new situation that calls forth his energies. No man knows the resources that slumber within himself until the exigency comes that wakes them into efficiency. So God puts adversity and prosperity in the world to balance each other and to discipline and develop what is best in man.

Another reason why we are placed in such a world of change is to keep us from presuming on the future. You remember the description that one of the evangelists gives us of the world's fool of the first magnitude—

the greatest fool whose biography has been written—who said, “Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years, eat, drink and be merry,” as if the soul could be nourished by what grows in the vineyard and the field. The fool uttered a soliloquy, but there were two voices. It was a dialogue; another speaker broke in and said: “This night,” not in some future year, but “this night, thy soul shall be required of thee.”

Again. Life's changes teach us to avoid the perils of both prosperity and adversity. Do you know the danger of too much success, of a life of uninterrupted prosperity? You say, selfishness and indifference to the interests and happiness of others. It is all that, but another danger of too much prosperity is *discontent*. You thought I was going to say that is the danger of adversity; but one danger of prosperity is discontent. The most discontented men on earth are those who roll in riches and do not know how to make their investments or how to keep their accumulations. The most discontented women on earth are women living in a superabounding luxury that enervates and surfeits without satisfying. In their discontent they utter more complaints and murmurs in a single day than the poor woman who, stitch by stitch, makes her livelihood in the garret where she toils for her daily crust.

The danger of adversity is doubt—doubt of God's providence, and finally a denial that there is any providence—until at last the person says: “I am no worse than other people, but God seems to think so. He afflicts me, and I do not have anything but trouble. I doubt whether there is any providence at all.” And so blank denial of a fundamental truth is the result of too much adversity.

On the other hand, while prosperity has its dangers,

it opens the way for the cultivation of graces which otherwise would not exist. If there were no prosperity, where would be room or possibility for humility and for self-denial? The only man who can deny himself is the prosperous man; the only one who ever really denies himself is the man of abundance. The poor man is all the while compelled to live a life of self-denial; but the man of abundance can voluntarily choose such a life, and so cultivate a grace that would otherwise be impossible. Where there is no trial there can be no trust. Where there is no bereavement there can be no resignation. Where there is no disappointment there can be no hope, for how can one hope for what he already possesses? How can the graces of love, joy, peace and holy aspiration grow if they are never exercised? The vicissitudes of life are the divinely ordained instrumentalities by which God disciplines men and develops their truest and noblest Christian manhood.

Lastly. Experience and revelation unite in teaching that the soul must have some foundation on which to build and rest secure, which is not subject to mutation; something as enduring as its own immortality, and as satisfying as its capacities for happiness. But this it cannot find either in the material or intellectual creations of men—not in the noblest or most enduring of them; it cannot find it in human love, however pure and constant; it cannot find it in wealth or fame or power; it cannot find it in nature, whose well-ordered harmonies seem sweet and unvarying as the song of the morning stars.

Where, then, is the foundation on which the deathless soul may erect its immortal hopes and find its eternal rest and peace and blessedness? The answer comes, all else must change and pass away, "BUT THOU RE-

MAINEST." God is the soul's infinite necessity, the soul's eternal satisfaction. He alone is immutable. He cannot be changed by anything that is without, for there is nothing external to himself which he did not create. Creatures possess no powers which he did not confer on them, and he never formed anything that was capable of harming himself. Therefore, he can be changed by nothing from without. Nor from anything within. Being self-existent, he is dependent upon none for his life. Being perfectly happy, he can never wish to be anything but what he is. Being omnipotent, he has power to be what he wishes to be; and being eternal, he can be what he wishes to be forever. A being infinitely blessed can desire no change, for were there any height of happiness or glory above him he would not be infinite.

Through the measureless eternity he will sit upon his throne in the unimpaired greatness of his supremacy. So perfect is he that the flight of unnumbered ages will not behold the kindling of another beam in his immeasurable glory, nor will the flight of unnumbered ages behold amid these glories one ray, now beaming, quenched.

The greatest change ever made in a human life is sometimes caused by a single bereavement, and yet the sorest bereavement may be so sanctified as to become the greatest benediction. There are losses which leave the soul so desolate, so emptied of every earthly joy, that it cries out after God with an intense and impassioned longing never felt before. Were there no God to help, its desolation would deepen into despair.

One way, then, by which the soul learns to know God is through its own great necessities which he alone can satisfy. Were we never in trouble we never could know what a loving Father he is. Did we shed no bitter tears

we never could know how soft the hand that wipes them away. If bereavement never caused our hearts to bleed, we could never know how gentle the hand is that binds them up. Our sorrows teach us that he can comfort with more than a mother's tenderness. When we taste the wormwood and the gall, and thus suffer the experience of the bitterness of sin, then we can sing,

“Sweet the moments, rich in blessing,  
Which before the cross I spend”;

or, changing the measure, as we emerge from the darkness, we can prolong the song in strains like these :

“The opening heavens around me shine  
With beams of sacred bliss,  
When Jesus shows his heart is mine,  
And whispers, I am his.”

Then the soul's wish for wings like a dove's is satisfied. It fluttered a moment against the window, and then a friendly hand reached forth and took it into the gospel ark, there safely to abide and sweetly to rest with the life hid with Christ in God, preparatory to the time when a nobler rest shall be enjoyed in the place where the discipline of vicissitude will be needed and known no more, and where the only change will be from one degree of glory to another as the soul advances in endless conformity to the divine image of purity and blessedness in the eternal kingdom of the Father.

“I shall behold thy face in righteousness; I shall be satisfied with thy likeness.”

“O long-expected day, begin.”