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SERMON VI.

BY REV. JOHN M. KREBS, D.D.,
PASTOR OF THE RUTGERS STREET PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, NEW-YORK

THE DECLINE OF LIFE ; OR, HOW OLD ART THOU ?*

“How old art thou ?”—GENESIS xlvii. 8.

THE scene to which we are here admitted, as spectators, is a presentation at court.

At the drawing room receptions of the British sovereigns, perhaps no more brilliant assemblies could be gathered in all the world. Yet, all seems cold state and ceremony. Hundreds of the noblest of the land, in splendid array, pass in a continual stream before the throne ; and borne on by the tide of courtiers, there comes, here and there, the new face of some blushing girl or some ambitious stranger, who, for a moment, is greeted with the customary token of royal recognition, and the exact measure of condescension prescribed by court etiquette, and then the throng of “fair women and brave men”—the *debutante* and the courtier alike—are hurried onward, and the interview with the sovereign is over.

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There is something more remarkable, and attractive, and impressive, because more hearty, in the scene before us. It is laid in a royal palace, adorned with all the barbaric magnificence and gloomy grandeur of Egypt, the most ancient, and at that time, the most powerful monarchy in the world. Pharaoh and his court are evidently moved with the deepest interest in the group of strangers who are now introduced to the king. They are presented by the prime minister—a youth still, of fair and ruddy aspect, in whose eyes are trembling the tears of filial affection and joy. He leads forward a hoary-headed man, bent, not more with the weight of unusual years, than with the oppression of long-enduring and various sorrow. The presentation is not a mere ceremony. The patriarch and his family are come by the monarch's invitation to reside in his land, blessed with the plenty stored up through the forecast and statesmanship of that old man's best-beloved child, now become the second in rank in the kingdom, the favorite and most trusted servant of the throne.

And how interesting to Jacob and Joseph was the hour when this aged father was presented to Pharaoh by this dutiful son. Through what changes both of them had passed! And now, after the lapse of years, during which the father had mourned for his beloved child as dead, that betrayed and exiled son is restored to his arms, and the unnatural, but now penitent and reconciled, brethren of Joseph, are come to share the wonderful prosperity which enabled him to provide an asylum for his family, under the protection of the powerful monarch in whose presence they stand re-united.

The venerable man courteously renders to Pharaoh the salutations which became the introduction, does homage to the sovereign, and, with gratitude due to his benefactor, he supplicates the blessing of the God of Israel upon the king and upon his land. On the other hand, the monarch is struck with surprise and admiration, by the aspect of the venerable stranger. And, while he respected his years, it was probably to set him at his ease, that he opened a conversation with him, by putting a very natural, yet to really aged persons, not an unwelcome question: "And Pharaoh said unto Jacob, How old art thou?"

May not this question be properly brought home to us?

Another year has just passed over our heads. We have enjoyed those festive interviews, and exchanged those friendly salutations which are customary at the inauguration of a "New Year." But should there not be serious reflection on the flight of time? The season marks it. It is full of admonition, and while its quick recurrence reminds us that "God requireth that which is past," its own momentous importance may add solemnity to the inquiry:

How old art THOU?

Ponder it in your own hearts. Not only those who have begun

to decline in the journey of life, but the youth, who looking forward with eager excitement, anticipate with confident hilarity, the prospect of many years to come. "Kings of the earth, and all people, princes and all judges of the earth, both young men and maidens, old men and children"—not one of them, but has a personal interest in this question, and a lesson of duty to derive from the answer. It is pregnant with questions for the soul :

How old art THOU ?

To this question I propose to reply for you ; and I have no doubt that the answers I shall put in for you are undeniably true.

I. There is not a person here so old as Jacob, nor that is likely to be, nor one that expects, or dreams, ever to be so old. One hundred and thirty years he had already seen. Nearly twenty years more would be added to his age. And of the whole sum of near one hundred and fifty years—long as it seems to us—nearly nine tenths were already spent and gone !

But what is your life ? It is a vapor which appeareth for a little while, and then vanisheth away. Threescore years and ten, perchance fourscore, perchance ninety, in all. But what are these to your eternity ! And what are they, when we think how many of yours are gone from your possession forever ? For the question, "How old art thou ?" carries with it the startling implication that, whether the years appointed to you be few or many, a very considerable part of your allotted time is already passed away. And if your by-gone years were as many as Methuselah's, yet it does not seem so much to have had them, when we reflect that however brilliant they may have been, or more likely filled up with hopes deferred making the heart sick, the tale is almost told out, and hastens to its end. How pathetic was that exclamation of Charles X. of France on being informed of the death of his brother, Louis XVIII., and of his own accession to the throne. The poor, old, foolish king, that would no more be admonished, coming forth, as it were from prison to reign, looked toward the uneasy throne to which his tottering steps were bearing him, and with a pang of bitter recollection, let drop these words that so well expressed the vanity of this late offering to ambition: "And I, I am so old !" In this view, of how many may it not be said, "Your days in store are few." When you, who are forty, sixty, or more, look backward, the whole of the past seems as yesterday, and as a watch in the night; and it makes the time that yet may possibly be yours, seem fearfully brief indeed. As for the most of you, who are still young, we know that they will never live to be old. The observation of all generations teaches this striking, this appalling fact. And even of the diminished period that is allotted to you, how soon will the remnant expire ! How old art thou ? This question—I repeat it—reminds you that a considerable portion is already sealed up and laid away, with the years beyond

the flood. Its mercies and enjoyments, its afflictions and its sins, its privileges and opportunities—all, all, irrecoverably exhausted! You will never live them again, you will never see them again, till there is unfolded to you at the judgment-seat, the register of that report they bore of you to heaven!

How short a time it is since you hailed the preceding New Year! The sands of its successor are swiftly falling in the glass. Who can tell how many years are in store! While the narrow limit of the longest life is every day becoming narrower still.

The story is told of an Italian state prisoner, who after some weeks confinement, became suddenly aware that his apartment was become smaller. He watched, and saw with horror, that a moveable iron wall was gradually encroaching on the space, and that as the movement came on, it must soon crush him to death, and he could calculate it to a day! But you have not that advantage. John Foster, yet more appropriately, resembles our time to a sealed reservoir, from which issues daily a certain small quantity of water, and when the reservoir is exhausted, we must perish of thirst; but we have no means of sounding it to ascertain how much it originally contained, nor whether there be enough remaining even for to-morrow!

And now, my hearers, if I may here use the thought of another, let me ask you if you are a Christian, and if so, how old are you in grace? What progress have you made? How long is it since you were first in Christ? Is it forty years since you were born again? Is it but one? This is the true life. What are its stages with your soul? Are ye yet babes, or strong in manhood; or, matured in piety, are you flourishing like the palm tree, and growing like a cedar on Lebanon? What attainments have you made in knowledge, in faith, in purity, in patience, in self-control in love, and joy and peace? What fruits have you put forth, and who is the better for your religion? What good have you done? Whom have you sought to benefit by your labours and your example, your gifts and your prayers, and your sacrifices for Christ and for the bodies and souls of men? There should have been healthful and vigorous growth, by this time, You are old enough of a certainty, to be both wiser and better since you first saw the Lord. Or, have you been stationary only? Which is the same as to say fruitless, selfish, a consumer, but not a producer of good, a barren fig tree, and a cumberer of the ground, fit only to be hewn down and cast into the fire?

Are you a Christian, and ripening for heaven? Then, O thou afflicted and tost, then are you drawing nearer to heaven. The port is not far off. The years you have counted off, have brought you nigher to it. The passing years, the few that are yet to come, every one speeding your approach to the celestial city. It will not be long, ere you shall have done with sins, and conflicts, and toils,

your pilgrimage be over, and your soul shall enter into rest. "For now is your salvation nearer than when you believed. Happy ye who are as men waiting for their Lord."

Are you not a christian? Ah! what a question is this! And how old art thou? Thy time was given thee for the service of God, for working out thy salvation, for serving thy generation, for securing eternity through repentance toward God and through faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. And is all this yet to be begun? How much of this, the chief end of your being, have you left undone? How much of usefulness and blessing to the world, how much of truest consolation to yourself, how much precious time and opportunity have you wasted and squandered like a thoughtless spendthrift? And now, so many years as you have lived, so much of your own space for repenting, for believing, for seeking peace in the kingdom of God, for godly living, for doing good, for improving your talents for your own welfare and the welfare of your fellow-men, and for glorifying God, is gone, gone, and worse than wasted! Does it not become you to begin at once with all diligence to retrieve life and make sure of the waning day of salvation, to walk circumspectly, to redeem the time, and by wise economy of what remains and is ready to die, to recover, if haply you may, the losses you have already and so disastrously incurred? Every year that opens, every day that dawns, speaks to you with a more awful urgency: "To-day, if ye will hear his voice harden not your heart," "escape for thy life," "tarry not," "flee for refuge to the hope set before you," "work while it is called to-day, for the night cometh in which no man can work," but the wicked and slothful shall be recompensed by their abused and indignant Lord.

II. How old art thou? I answer again, for you. You are old enough to have endured afflictions, from which you ought to have extracted spiritual profit.

"Few and evil have the days of the years of my life been"—"the days of the years of my pilgrimage"—"nor attained to the days of the years of the life of my fathers, in the days of their pilgrimage." How true a representation of Jacob's life do these graphic expressions make.

It was a "pilgrimage," literally. Frequently obliged to change his residence, an exile to Mesopotamia, to and fro in Canaan, and now into Egypt. In the earth he was but a stranger and a sojourner as all his fathers were. The ancient patriarchs seemed to have no fixed habitation. They wandered from place to place. They had a burying-place, and for this they sought more earnestly than for a dwelling. A pilgrim is as one without a home, subject to toil, to travel about, exposed to every discomfort and danger. And thus it is with man. His life itself is hurried along by the ever-flowing tide. Like a traveller, from the very day of his birth

he must set out, be always astir, pursue his journey, amid numberless annoyances and perils, meeting uncounted trials, and seldom finding repose for his weary footsteps.

"Evil," is another characteristic of Jacob's life. His early flight from home; the frauds and oppressions of Laban; in the day the drought consumed him and the frost by night, and sleep departed from his eyes; the dissensions of his wives and of his children; the shame of Dinah, his only daughter, and the blood-stained revenge of her brothers; the unnatural wickedness of Reuben, his first-born; and the loss of Joseph; and not least, the woe that was threatening in the yet recent demand for Simeon and Benjamin as hostages to the unknown governor of Egypt; all these are but specimens, each, and every one, the source of deepest distress, accumulated till he complains, "All these things are against me," and he fears that his "grey hairs will be dragged in sorrow to the grave."

But does he stand alone? Is there in the mirror no familiar form—thy own features? "Man is born to trouble." It is his birth-right and inheritance, and he enters upon it as soon as he is born. The cries of infancy, the tears and sobs of childhood, the outburst of physical pain, soon changed to the heavier sighs extorted from the sad, sick heart. And as youth and manhood advance, trouble and sorrow spring up in their path and bear more productively their bitter fruit. There are sunny days—it would be thankless to deny it—and "smiles with tears meeting;" but the days of darkness are many.

How old art thou? Ah! whether you be old or young, you know what it is to feel pain, loss, bereavement, disappointment, and blighted hopes, mortification, ingratitude, fear and dread! Enough to make you realize that it is not mere poetry, nor gloomy distempered fanaticism, which declares that "earth is all vanity, false, as 'tis fleeting;" experience enough that the fair fruit of Sodom and the clusters of Gomorrah which have tempted your appetite, yield but bitter ashes to the taste; enough to urge you to aspire to the fairer inheritance which is incorruptible and undefiled, and which fadeth not away. Look back only upon one year. Has there not been cause for weeping; has there not been distress and anguish? Ah! my hearers, every heart knoweth its own bitterness.

Why was it? Whence was it? Trouble springs not from the ground. It was meant to admonish you that this is not the place of your rest. It came in merciful rebuke. He does not willingly afflict, but he administers correction. His fatherly chastening should have begot reflection, perhaps the remorse of awakening conscience. It was designed to sanctify. Among Christians, though no present affliction is joyous, but grievous, nevertheless, **after they have suffered awhile, it yieldeth the peaceable fruits of**

righteousness to them that are exercised thereby. And sinners have found in the trouble that disturbed their guilty repose, the grace and calling that led them to godly sorrow, and the repentance that needeth not to be repented of.

Such have been His dispensations, not for his pleasure, but for our profit.

And now how is it with your soul ? Is it well ? Can you say that it has been, and yet is, well with thee ? Have your sorrows taught you to look away from the things that are temporal, and awaking a longing for those which are eternal ? Have they be-got conviction ? Have they led you to abandon sin, and broken its dominions ? Have they produced in you greater conformity to Christ, disciplined you to patience, made you modest and moderate, meek and sympathizing, and persuaded you to rest satisfied with the consolation that abounds by Christ and to be sanctified by the full assurance of hope ?

Unless this, you have only lost so much of earthly happiness, without any gain or compensation ; nay you have incurred greater guilt. You may have fainted unworthily under his re-buke : or you may have despised and defied the chastening of the Lord. But in either case, you have forfeited the blessing that is mingled with the cup of bitterness, and failed of that spiritual health which God conveys to the contrite soul through the discipline of His merciful providence.

III. How old art thou ? You are old enough to have committed much sin, to realize it, and feel what work you have made for bitter but salutary repentance.

The wicked go astray from the womb, speaking lies. The evil nature resides in every soul of man—the deceitful and selfish heart, the folly and the perverse way, the neglect and the disobedience, the frivolous pursuit and waste, the deadly trans-gression, the stab of conscience, the wounding and the dishonor, the evil done to your own soul, the evil done to the souls of others whom you have seduced into the partnership of your sins !

I would not merely urge the general common-places that prove human depravity, Let me appeal to conscience, not altogether seared—it may be, all alive and sensitive to the probing.

Ye aged ! review your life. Call up the ghosts of the past. Ah ! lurking there in the corners of memory, how many deeds ye would not for all the world, your fellow-men should know ? How many desires not good, and plans impure and unjust ? How many mercies that besought you with their affecting voice and tender persuasion, to consecrate yourselves in living sacrifice to God ? How many kindnesses ungratefully requited ? How many slighted calls, when the goodness of God allured, and the terrors of the Lord alarmed and warned, when loving parents wept and prayed over your wayward youth, and faithful ministers

intreated your manhood, and still, down to hoary hairs you are invited to return to God? And how is it this day? Ah! Christian, I know something of thy heart. Thy own soul remembers and is pierced, and is humbled within thee, even whilst thou turnest to thy forgiving Saviour to thank him that he hath not suffered thee to forget his way altogether, and that he hath, often restored thee to the paths of righteousness. And ye aged that live in unrepented sin! Does this question "How old art thou?" does it pierce and rend thy heart? What is the record of thy past years, and scores of years, that even now perchance thou darest not confront, and hast striven to forget the registry? What transgressions without relenting? What broken vows of amendment? What cherished impenitence and hardness? What inveterate unbelief? Ah! it is incurable, after all the resistance thou hast made to the appeals of heaven and the strivings of God's spirit? What more to be done for thy salvation than has been done? What more solemn truths and solemn scenes to waken thee, than those thou hast already and so often heard and beheld? What other Saviour has heaven to offer than the loving, suffering, atoning, Jesus from whom thou hast so often turned away? How is it with thee? The days of thy youth shall not return to thee. Thy very life is ebbing fast. Its flush and flood are gone. Thy tottering feet are set forward at the grave's mouth, and thy next step——! Art thou prepared to meet thy God, to stand before thy Judge, to here thy doom? Why are your thoughts troubled? Accusing conscience tell me why? Thou knowest that thou art an unpardoned sinner, that thou canst not give account for one of a thousand iniquities, that unrenewed in heart, thou art not fit for heaven! And, while the Judge standeth at the door, thou art afraid to encounter his face! Why, even now, whilst thou art in the way with him why dost thou not seek to become reconciled to God?

And ye youth! Is it any better with you? Will it be any better for you to live on, and to grow harder in sin? You may live though the aged will not, and therefore, you put death afar off. You plead, "Let me rejoice in my youth and indulge the desire of my heart, and walk in the sight of my eyes." And so you set yourselves to work iniquity with greediness. But is not this to appropriate and anticipate the curse of the aged transgressor? It is the abuse of that mercy which prolongs your day; it courts the vengeance of judgment; and at the end of your career, there may be nothing left to you, but to curse your own existence, to bewail the day of your birth, and to utter the unavailing wish that you had never been born.

We rejoice on our birth-days and at the New Year. But look back to but that one year you deem so old that it must be hurried away to join the tedious and forgotten past. Call up its few, short months once more, and question them, Ah! do they not wear

the angry face of an accuser ? Do no sins rise up before awakened conscience, no broken resolutions, no deferred promises of amendment that have not yet been redeemed. And what were its last flying hours and waving wings, but a monitor to thee that thy perdition is not slumbering, and thy unlingering judgment has moved one year forward in its march to thee. How is it now ? Are you better or are you worse than you were a year ago ?

The thoughtless impenitence of youth is in itself a sad proof of their sinfulness, and a melancholy witness that you are already far gone in depravity. Already to make a mock at sin, to jest at death, to trifle with eternity, to scoff and to scorn at sacred things, to trample upon God's commandments, to shut up His Bible, to be weary of His house and His Sabbath, to reject the loving Saviour, to restrain prayer and cast off fear, perhaps to coin the ready lie, the filthy jest, the impious oath, to indulge the insipient fraud, the angry and malignant passion, and the impure desire ! Need I go on ? Ah ! does thy conscience send back no response, does thy heart tremble with no foreboding ? Then art thou already more hardened than I had deemed, and on thy shameless brow is stamped the seal of thy dishonoring guilt ! But nay, let me recall this judgment. Can we not discern some restlessness of soul, some quivering of the eye, some paling, and now some flushing of the cheek, some suppression of the breath, tell tales that thy conscience is not yet seared as with a hot iron, that thou art not yet so low and so lost as to glory in thy shame ? We hail these ingenuous emotions. "The man that blushes is not quite a brute." Let then this shame-faced consciousness awaken in thee conviction, and beget a salutary alarm, and prompt thee to confess thy sin, to Him whose precious blood can wash it all away, and withdraw thy perilous footsteps from the evil paths wherein thou art, even in the morning of thy days, so old a traveller.

IV. How old art thou ? You are old enough to be converted, and to begin to follow Christ.

For this work you can not be too young. Why is it, that, because the natural iniquity so soon appears and goes out in the sins of youth and manhood, why, should it be thought a matter of course that, the young must, in every case, pursue a certain length in impenitence and transgressions, and if this were more suitable to their circumstances, and more allowable to their impetuous dispositions, or as if, at least, it were necessary, in order to furnish the occasion and phenomena of a striking conversion ? Can they not be sanctified from the womb ? Can they not be taught the knowledge of God and the way of salvation, and be brought to the love of Christ, and be weaned from their evil propensities, even when they are weaned from the breast ? Are there not examples enough in the history of Abel, and Joseph, and Samuel, and David, and Josiah, and John the Baptist, and Timothy ; and

examples enough in the history of God's people now, and of many a Christian household, and of every church, to show that the religious training of the young, with faith in God's covenant and with direct view to their walking in the ways of godliness, from their very childhood, is not a vain thing, and that they were indeed baptised into Christ? Examples so numerous, and so genuine, and convincing; yet, nevertheless, young Christians, and their parents, and pastors, and elders, it may be, have feared to recognize them as subjects of the new birth, merely because there was nothing remarkable about them, except their simple and singular piety, their conscientiousness, and truthfulness, and prayerfulness, and their constant service of the Lord from their tender infancy. Alas! it is not always so, and, perhaps, it is we, their parents, who are most to blame for it. But one thing is clear, that the young can be converted to God, and the Bible, and the Church in every age; alike afford the abundant proof. The bulk of the Christians who are before me, are such as remembered their Creator in the days of their youth—almost in the dew of their childhood. You, then, who are old enough to hear me this day, are old enough to experience this change, to become followers of God, as dear children.

But, farther, the young have not the experience of their elders. You know not what trials and temptations are before you, nor with what force they make their onset. You think you have power, as you are, to withstand them all. The aged thought so once, and they are weeping now over the retrospect of many a sad error and disastrous fall. What then, do you need? Is it not that you should seek the Lord, make Him the guide of your youth, lean upon His arm, and put yourself under the shield of His grace? Thus only can you meet the evil days, escape the snare of the fowler, and avoid the path of the destroyer.

Yes, you are old enough to know that you are sinners; you do know that Christ asks and argues you to come to Him. You know that you ought to seek His grace, and to obey His Gospel, and to love Him with your whole heart. You have lived long enough to have learned all this, and you have known it, even while you have been neglecting, and postponing, and disobeying it. But see now where you are on the pathway of time to eternity. Consider your ways. How old art thou? You have spent some of your choicest years and freshest affections. There is nothing to come that is so fresh, so warm, so precious, so worthy, to offer to your Saviour as the warm and tender affection of your young heart. The years to come will make you more selfish, more callous, more crafty; but they will not find you more pious, nor more disposed to be pious, if you do not use your golden opportunity and consecrate this fairest portion and spring-time of your happy age.

And all this appeals with increased force to the more matured—to the aged that are among you. Are you not old enough to be

converted to God? There was, perchance, a time when you thought you were not, Then—amid busy cares and worldly schemes—you postponed the work. Then you said to the gospel call, "Go thy way for this time, when I have a convenient season I will call for thee" How long ago was that? Were you not then in the heyday of your youth? And now, then, how old art thou, this day? Ten, twenty, thirty, forty years have gone by since then. And is thy convenient season not yet come? Oh! when, when shall it once be? Your work is harder now than it would have been had you begun it earlier. And soon it will be impossible. Your day is far spent, the night is at hand, and what will you do then? What will you do now? Are you not yet old enough? There was once a man healed of his chronic disease by a miracle; and it was recorded, perhaps as enhancing the wonder, that it was performed when he was forty years of age. Old sores and old bones are not easily cured. Perhaps the healing of your soul may require such a miracle. But not such can ever be your privilege, unless you go, and go promptly, to the Great Physician, who is able to save to the uttermost. Ah! you are old enough, heaven knows! yes, too old to wait any longer!

I do not say that you are too old to repent and be converted, too old to be healed by Christ. For you, even at this eleventh hour, if you will now hear His word, and implore and accept His grace, He still waits to be gracious. But why standest thou here idling till the sun goes down?

V. Finally. How old art thou? Old enough to die. You need not be of Jacob's age for that. Even the youth faint, and the young utterly fail. There is but a step between you and death. You may have to take that step at any time. Boast not thyself even of to-morrow, for thou knowest not what one day may bring forth.

Count not on length of days. As my eye sweeps over this vast assembly, it glances on some—who they are, God knoweth—but this I know, that twelve months from now, they will not be on earth to listen to the question, how old art thou? Already is that mighty angel poising his feet upon the sea and upon the land, commissioned to lift his hand and swear by Him that liveth for ever and ever, that your time shall be no longer. For already has the sentence gone forth from the throne, on some of you: "THIS YEAR THOU SHALT DIE!"

Oh! that ye were wise: Oh! that ye understood this: Oh! that ye would consider your latter end.

And thou, O Lord our dwelling place! do thou so teach us the measure of our days, that we may know how frail we are, that by thy mercy, in Jesus Christ, we may recover strength and salvation ere we go hence and are no more. Teach us so to number our days that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom—the wisdom that conducts to eternal life and blessedness with Thee, through Jesus Christ. Amen.