

A
CENTURY SERMON,

PREACHED IN

NEWARK, NEW-JERSEY,

JANUARY 1, 1801 ;

CONTAINING

A BRIEF HISTORY

OF THE

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

IN THAT TOWN.



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N E W A R K :

PRINTED BY W. TUTTLE & Co.

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1807.

A CENTURY SERMON.

PSALM LXXVII, 5.

**WE CONSIDERED THE DAYS OF OLD, THE YEARS OF AN-
CIENT TIMES.**

BY the indulgence of Divine Providence, by the preserving goodness of heaven, we are brought to the beginning of another Year. And this is not only the beginning of another Year, but it is the beginning of another Century of years. This is truly a great and interesting day. Some things are great and interesting because they are rare, and their rarity suggests most solemn, momentous, and useful considerations. I sincerely congratulate you, my brethren, that you are arrived at this joyful period. You are not merely brought to another New-Year's day, but you are preserved to the beginning of another Age, a new epoch of time. The usual salutations of this peculiar day, will be reciprocally passed with elevated minds, and with a dignified pleasure. Wherefore, my dearly beloved Brethren, with a heart full of affection, I cordially wish you all a happy New Year.

And not only may this year be a year of felicity to you, but may the New Century be crowned with goodness to you, as far as you may be permitted to enter into it, and to your children, and children's children. May the richest blessings of heaven, in things temporal and in things spiritual,—may the blessings of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, ever rest upon you, and upon all your posterity to the latest generation.

It is a melancholy thought, yet of solemn certainty, that none of us, now before God, shall ever live to behold such another day. We never saw such a one before; and nothing is more sure than that our eyes shall never behold another. What incalculable numbers of men are swept from the face of the earth in the short space of a hundred years! It is a rare thing,—it is a kind of phenomenon, to see a person who is a hundred years old. Where one reaches this age, many thousands die long before it. And not only the youngest of us here present will be consigned to the mansions of the dead before this century runs out; but all the nations, all the present inhabitants of the world. For in respect to the few exceptions, whose age is protracted beyond this period, it is not worth while to take them into account. And not only shall we and the whole world go off the stage in this century, but more than ten times the number of all who are now alive on the earth. Multitudes will come into existence and die before the commencement of such another era.

Contemplate the busy children of men ! What hurry, tumult, and confusion fill the world ! How are the tribes of ambition pressing and struggling to climb the ladder of preferment ! What multitudes are exerting all their genius in the invention and enjoyment of new pleasures ! And what hosts are toiling and pressing forward in ardent pursuit after the glittering objects of time and sense ! Would not an indifferent spectator, taking a view of this labouring, driving, and busy world, suppose that the inhabitants of it fancied that they should live forever ? How great is thy infatuation, O guilty and dying man ! Know you not that your breath is in your nostrils, and that you must quickly enter into that world where your state will be eternally fixed ? Whatever may be the blindness, stupidity, and madness of man,—however little he may realize his mortality,—it is absolutely certain that he has but a short time to live. “ He cometh forth as a flower, and is cut down, he fleeth also as a shadow, and continueth not. His days are swifter than a post, than a weaver’s shuttle. They are passed away as the swift ships, as the eagle that hasteth to the prey.” These things ought to moderate our ambition, humble our pride, wean us from the vanities of this world, and excite us to prepare for our latter end.

How can we better improve this commencement of a New Year and a New Century, than by reflecting upon the Providence of God during the past Century, and in previous times ? Good people, in ancient and modern

days, have usefully employed a portion of their time in recollections of this sort. The Psalmist declares his conduct relative to this matter in the words of our text: "I have considered the days of old, the years of ancient times." He reflected, with wisdom and deep consideration, upon the times and seasons past, for his humiliation and improvement in virtue and piety. He had experienced, in his life, many and great vicissitudes: sometimes he walked in the valley of adversity; at other seasons on the mount of joy. It becomes us to imitate this holy example. And for this purpose we shall take a cursory view of the history of this Town, specially of this Congregation, from the first settlement of the place.

It cannot be expected, in the narrow limits of a single discourse, that I can enter into the *civil* history of this Town; and with regard to the ecclesiastical history, all I can say must consist of a few brief hints; as I possess no documents or written materials whence even these hints are derived, except what have been taken from the relations of old people to me in former times. Therefore it must not be expected that they will be very accurate; nor will I vouch for the perfect truth of all that may be said. But I will deliver nothing but what wears the appearance of truth. Those which are facts, shall be faithfully stated as such; those which are only probable, shall be so represented.

Though the first settlement of this Town, and the formation of the first Church in it, are events not more remote than 134 years, yet various circumstances are lost, and many others must be attended with undesirable uncertainty and obscurity.

About the year 1664, after king Charles II of England had made a gift of New-Jersey, with other territory, to his brother the Duke of York, the Duke, in a very short time, sold this colony to Carteret and Berkly; and they, desirous to settle their lands, published large and favourable accounts of the country, offering very handsome privileges and immunities, to induce people in other parts to come and purchase the same. The goodness of the lands, and the easy terms of settlement, were exhibited in pretty high colours, and immediately commanded the attention of many persons at a distance.

In the year 1666 or 1667, certain people of Connecticut, about Guilford and Branford, having heard the fame of New-Jersey, sent two or three persons to view the country, to learn particularly the terms of purchase, the state of the Indians, &c. They returned and made a report to their constituents, in all respects very favourable; and were soon sent back, empowered to bargain for this township of land, to purchase of the Indians, to make a proper location for a town plot, and to

do every matter and thing to secure the propriety of the lands, and lay a foundation for their immediate settlement.

The gentlemen appointed to this service appear to have been persons of superior abilities, of well informed minds, of strong judgment, and deep penetration. Their proceedings, which are apparent in the plan of the town, the wideness and straitness of the streets, &c. abundantly prove this. John Treat and John Curtis, who both died in the year 1704, the former in his 65th, and the latter in the 62d year of his age, were two of them.*

In 1667 or 1668 the place was settled by about 30 families from the above-mentioned towns in Connecticut. These first settlers brought a minister with them; and they became a Christian Church as soon as they became a settlement.

The first minister was Mr. Pierson. It is said that he was episcopally ordained in the town or neighbourhood of Newark, in South Britain, which perhaps might have

* The little colony are said to have attempted a settlement at Cape May; but finding that part of the country unhealthy, and hearing a good report of this place, they came and explored it. The name given to the place by the Indians was Passaic, which is still retained by the river in the neighbourhood.

originally suggested the name of this Town. It is also reported that he was equally displeased with the tyranny of Charles I, both in Church and State, and with the civil madness and religious enthusiasm which prevailed under Cromwell ; and that he annexed himself to the party in that country which were called moderate Presbyterians. He was one of those who disliked the usurped authority and arbitrary measures of the civil government, and he was no less dissatisfied with the rigorous and high proceedings of the ecclesiastical courts. He continued in England some years after the beheading of the king ; but probably finding things little meliorated by Cromwell's revolution and usurpation, he came off with a few friends and followers to America, about the year, as is supposed, 1654, or 1655. They attempted different places of settlement in this country ; but at last fixed in Connecticut, in or near Guilford. Whether from the rough and inhospitable face of that new country, from a disposition to wander, or from whatever other unknown cause, he and some of his followers, with a few additional adherents, became the first settlers of this place.

How long Mr. Pierson lived, cannot be fully ascertained ; but it is probable that he was the minister of the Town not less than eleven or twelve years. He was an old man when he settled here, and he became incapable of public service before he died. He was a man of learning and piety, and possessed natural abilities above the

common level. He was eminent for his wisdom, prudence, and discretion ; and probably died about the year 1680 or 1681.

His son, Abraham Pierson, who had been educated at Cambridge College, possessed very distinguished talents and accomplishments ; but had neither the meekness, patience, nor prudence of his father. He was, in a sort, settled with his father as a Colleague, some years before his death ; and matters were peaceable in the Town, and went well in the Church, while the father lived ; but soon after his death, some became uneasy with the young man. His abilities, and the pride of directing, were far beyond any thing that the congregation had been accustomed to witness. He continued with them only a few years ; then removed into Connecticut, settled at Killingworth, supported there an eminent character, and died in a good old age, in the year 1708. In his time, to wit, in 1701, the College of Connecticut, since known by the name of Yale College, was instituted : and his fame was so superior, at that time, for erudition and other qualifications, that he was appointed the first President. He still continued pastor of the Church in Killingworth, and took the care of the College in that town ; which offices he held till his death.

The next minister in this place was Mr John Prudden, who must have been more than 40 years of age when he was settled here. It is probable that he served the congregation about 12 or 13 years.

In process of time, for reasons unknown to us, he relinquished his pastoral office, and lived many years afterwards in the Town, in a private capacity. He sustained a worthy character, as a man of sense and religion, though he does not appear to have been a popular preacher. Many years after his dismissal, I find him employed in a Presbytery in this place, in a very difficult cause, respecting a candidate who had conducted himself with impropriety in this and in other places. He departed this life, 1725, in the 80th year of his age. His charge of this congregation must have ceased near 26 years before his death.

Drawing to the close of the 17th century, it is proper here to make a few observations.

1. The Town, after its first settlement, does not appear to have increased much, either by an ingress of foreigners, or by persons emigrating from New England, with which they always had a near connection. There was an addition to this Church, worthy of notice, about the year 1670. When the impolitick and mad persecution under that headlong and debauched king, Charles II, raged with horror in Scotland—when some suffered death, some were banished, and many more fled from the kingdom for the sake of religion and a good conscience—three of those persecuted persons came to this Town, were with great pleasure received by the Church, and

became eminent and ornamental members of it. The names of these three young men were Niesbit, Young, and Clisby ; whose posterity are still among us.

2. It may be observed, that the Town early obtained the character abroad of being an unhealthy place, subject to fever and agues, and intermittents ; which was probably the case. This might have discouraged its population by inhabitants from abroad. It was also a place which lay considerably out of public view ;* and the high contentions between them and the proprietors about their lands, as also frequent bickerings about religious and ecclesiastical matters ; all these things might have been a discouragement to foreigners from coming among them. Therefore they remained, for a long time, a remarkably unmixed people. The lowness and coarseness of the living of your forefathers, in the last century, would hardly be credited, were it related to you. They lived upon the simple produce of their own farms ; and they had but very indifferent mechanicks among them. Their trade and commerce were very inconsiderable ; and money was generally scarce. A person who could expend £5 a year in groceries and other luxuries, was deemed by his neighbours rather a high and extrava-

* The unhealthiness of the Town was owing to causes which have long since ceased to exist : and the new course of the gravel has, for many years, placed the Town on the public road from New York to Philadelphia.

gant liver. The common salary which they allowed their minister, was about £30 a year; and this was frequently raised with great difficulty, and ill paid.* The heads of the Town did not live in a style superior perhaps to the poorest people in it now. They were a remarkably plain, simple, sober, praying, orderly, and religious people.

3. This Town, in 1696, received a patent from the proprietors, covering all those lots, in various places, called parsonage lands. It would be too tedious to enter into the detail of perplexities, lets, and difficulties, which they had in this business.

But I must proceed :

Their fourth minister was Mr. Jabez Wakeman, who was settled here about the year 1701; a young man of very distinguished abilities and accomplishments, and a remarkably popular preacher. He possessed superior talents for the pulpit. But, to the great affliction of the Town, he lived only about three years. He died in 1704, in the 26th year of his age, exceedingly lamented, and leaving a most amiable character.

* It was a bountiful fee to the clergyman, when he received half a dollar, or a six shilling bill, for marrying the children of the first families in the place.

Their fifth minister was Mr. Nathaniel Bowers, who was settled perhaps in 1706, and was their minister probably not more than 9 or 10 years. He was dismissed for reasons not now known; and died in 1721, in the 34th year of his age.

In his time, to wit. in 1703, the second Church in this Town was built of stone, a little to the north of the first Church, which was a small wooden building. It was an exceeding great exertion of the people to erect it; and it was the most elegant edifice for public worship at that time in the colony, however mean it may now be considered. There were very considerable difficulties and contentions in the society to get it as large as it was. It was hardly believed that the inhabitants of the Town would ever become so numerous as to fill it. Although the place had been settled 40 years, it has been said, that when the walls were knee high, all the inhabitants, men, women, and children, could have sat upon the same. It was so great an undertaking for the Town, that it was the best part of 30 years before the inside of it was finished. Vigorous attempts were made for its enlargement in 1754 and '55, when it wanted a new roof and many repairs. The plan of enlarging it was laid aside; but in 1756 it was new covered and repaired; and is now converted into a Court-House.

After the dismissal of Mr. Bowers, in their long vacancy, a certain Mr. Buckingham reached for them,

two or three years ; but it does not appear that he was ever regularly settled here. Warm disputes arose in the congregation respecting him ; some being his zealous friends, and others his more zealous opponents. His christian and ministerial character was left under a dubious aspect. However, in process of time, he left them and returned to New-England ; where he obtained a settlement, lived useful, and died in reputation.

The sixth minister settled as pastor of this congregation, was Mr. Joseph Webb ; who was ordained here, by the Presbytery of Philadelphia, October 22d, 1719. You will please to observe that the Presbyterian Churches in Philadelphia, Abington, and the whole colony of New-Jersey, were, at that time and before, under the care of the Presbytery of Philadelphia. The ministers present at his ordination, were Mr. Joseph Morgan, Mr. Jonathan Dickinson, Mr. John Pierson, the son of the second, and grandson of the first minister of this place,* and Mr. Robert Orr. He was settled here with great unanimity ; and for some years there was much tranquillity and comfort in the Town. They had been one people, of the same denomination, and had always been Presbyterians in their ordinations, modes of Church government, discipline, and worship. There were no sectarians or public divisions among them. It is true, a

* Mr. Pierson was the minister of the Church in Woodbridge, at present under the care of the Rev. Dr. Roe.

difference obtained between the original usages of the Church, in respect to the form of administering the Lord's Supper, in the times of the Piersons, their first pastors, which was supported by the persecuted from Scotland, already mentioned—and some of their later ministers, who introduced what I have always considered an unhappy custom, that of dismissing the congregation, and administering the sacrament in a private manner. Leaving this—in process of time, a very considerable incident fell out, which kindled a greater flame in the congregation than has been since known. A trivial charge was brought against one of the members of the Church; which, coming at length before the Presbytery, was repeatedly tried by that body with a solemnity far beyond its importance. The Presbytery almost always decided in favour of the accused, with slight reflections on the Church, and with ardent endeavours to keep peace in the Town, and prevent a separation. It would be a long undertaking to go through this controversy. Mr. Dickinson was called hither to preach upon the occasion; and a laborious controversy between him and Mr. Beach took place in consequence, till all parties were weary of reading the pamphlets. The matter alluded to, was the beginning of the Episcopal Church in this Town. One or two leading characters declared themselves dissatisfied with the Presbyterian form of Church government, and that they believed the Episcopal mode, as practised in South Britain, was nearest to the gospel rule. Hence originated the Episcopal

Church in this place, in the years 1732, '33, and '34. The history of this affair, in its origin and progress, consists not with my present limits.* Passing this,—many of the Presbyterians became dissatisfied with Mr. Webb, in the course of these heats and controversies. The final issue

* The member of the Church alluded to, was Col. Josiah Ogden, whose grand children are still alive, and are among the most respectable inhabitants of this Town. The fact was, that Col. Ogden's wheat had been cut down, and was likely all to be lost by long continued rains. A certain Sabbath presenting him with very fine weather, he was induced to draw the grain into his barn on that day; supposing that it was a case of necessity, and that he was justified in so doing. The Church thought differently, and tried, and censured him. The matter was brought before the Presbytery, and Col. Ogden was acquitted. But the breach was too wide to be healed thus. Col. Ogden and some other persons withdrew, and were the first materials of which the Episcopal Church in this Town was formed. After this separation, the Rev. Jonathan Dickinson, of Elizabethtown, was called in by the Presbyterians to preach a sermon against the points advocated by the Episcopal Church. This sermon was preached June 2d, 1736, and called forth an answer from the Rev. John Beach, Episcopal minister of Newtown, in Connecticut. Mr. Beach had been the congregational minister of Newtown; but, in 1732, withdrawing from his connection, he received Episcopal ordination, and continued the minister of that part of his congregation which still adhered to him. A long dispute ensued between these two Reverend Gentlemen, which is still before the public.

was, that application for his dismissal was made, by a major part of the congregation, to the Presbytery. One hundred pounds were offered him, with security for arrears of salary ; which proposals he accepted, and was accordingly dismissed. Mr. Webb was a man of a kind, benevolent, and religious character. He was meek, peaceable, and inoffensive ; disinclined to controversy, and therefore cultivated no talents for it. His dismissal gave great offence to the ministers and churches in the neighbourhood. All acknowledged that his abilities were not of the strongest kind ; but that he was a plain, faithful, and pains-taking minister. One thing is certain ; he was a man of a public spirit, and the general interest of the Churches and religion lay near his heart. I find he was a diligent attendant upon the public Judicatories of the Church. You will see him frequently at Cohansa, Philadelphia, and other distant places ; and deeply interesting himself in the advancement of Christ's kingdom. Though he was not a great, yet, I believe, he was a very worthy minister of the gospel. I will pass no reflections upon the Town for his dismissal ; although the worst thing they could say of him, in the times of party spirit and tumult, was that he was too peaceable, and too good. In less than two years after his dismissal, this worthy and good man came to an untimely end. He and his son were both drowned in crossing Sea-brook ferry, on Connecticut river ; which event awakened much sensibility and feeling in this Town.

We come forward in our sketches to the seventh minister of this place, who was settled with precipitation after the dismission of Mr. Webb ; to wit, the eminent and learned Mr. Aaron Burr. He was truly a great and good man, whose fame not only arose to pre-eminence in this country, but spread, in his short life, even through various parts of Europe. He was ordained and installed pastor of this congregation in the year 1737 or 1738. He was a man of superior abilities, distinguished accomplishments, eminent wisdom and prudence, and of a most uniform and dignified deportment. My feeble pencil, did it dare to attempt his portrait, would only blur and mar it, in the view of all who knew him. You have seen his character delineated with the plainness, force, and propriety of guarded truth, in his funeral sermon, delivered by the Rev. Caleb Smith ; and his picture drawn to the life, by the nervous and beautiful pen of the late Governor Livingston. After these great painters, both in the simple and sublime style, I may be excused from making a clumsy figure, which would be equally superfluous and disgusting.

I proceed in my narrative. After Mr. Burr was settled here, he taught a Latin school in the Town, with high reputation, for a number of years. In his time, the village flourished exceedingly in trade, manufactures, and agriculture. It grew in wealth, population, and respectability, far beyond any thing to which it had before attained.

In the year 1746, the College of New-Jersey was instituted ; and Mr. Jonathan Dickinson, whose fame for learning and abilities was in all the churches, was chosen the first President.* He died the next year. The trustees were greatly perplexed, as well as distressed, on this melancholy occasion. But they concluded to place the students under the care of Mr. Lurr, in Newark. Upon the experiment being made, they found that his activity, literature, and public spirit, were not only adequate to the task, but far exceeded their most sanguine expectations. Hence they soon and unanimously elected him the second President. He presided over this infant institution, in this place, for 8 years ; and fostered, and raised it to illustrious fame.

When the permanent residence of the College was determined, by the trustees, to be at Princeton, great difficulties and disputes arose between them and this congregation about the removal of Mr. Burr from his pastoral charge. The question was then new, and was discussed with much learned disquisition, whether the pastoral relation between a minister and people could be dissolved, more than the relation between husband and wife. The trustees pleaded strongly on one side, and the people on the other. The final argument which finished the business, and terminated this altercation, and must forever

* The College was established under the patronage of Governor Belcher, who named it Nassau Hall, in honor of the Prince of Orange. It was first fixed at Elizabethtown.

put an end to disputes of this kind, was what logicians term *argumentum ad hominem*. After much said about the utility, importance, and necessity of his removal, this argument was stated by the trustees to the committee of the congregation: *All covenants must be entered into by two parties, and are mutually binding ; and each party ought to enjoy equal rights and privileges in the continuance or dissolution of them.* This the committee readily granted. Then the trustees proceeded to lay down this proposition ; *that whenever a people were dissatisfied with their minister, they sued for his dismissal, and obtained it, however much the minister was opposed to it.* After stating various instances in other places, they brought the argument home to their own bosoms ; saying, *Did you not dismiss Mr Abraham Pierson, Mr. Prudden, Mr. Bowers, and Mr. Webb ;—all the ministers you ever had, except two ? And were not the most of them utterly opposed to a dismissal ? Were they ever charged either with heresy in doctrine, or immorality in practice ? Did they not plead before you their long and faithful services, your depriving them of their bread and of their living, and their incapacity, at their time of life, to enter into other business ? Did you, in these instances, suppose the agreement between a pastor and congregation bore any similitude to the marriage covenant ?* The committee were satisfied ; and the candid and judicious part of the congregation agreed that Mr. Burr should be dismissed. Accordingly, his pastoral relation was dissolved in 1755 ; and in October, 1756, he removed with the College to

Princeton ; where he died the September following, (1757;) and was buried on the Monday preceding the day of Commencement. His death was an awful stroke to the College, and inflicted a deep and extensive wound on our churches.

In the time of his ministry here, there was a remarkable revival of religion. It began in the year 1739, and prevailed in '40 and '41. It was not confined to this Town, but extended to most parts of our country. It was a very extraordinary season of experimental and practical religion, of awakenings, convictions, and conversions ; so that there was none like it before, nor has there been any like it since. Those who wish to acquaint themselves more fully with the history of this work, may obtain ample information by reading Gillie's collections.

After President Burr's dismissal, the congregation continued vacant, in a state of unhappy contention, till the year 1759. Some blamed the Presbytery for taking away their minister, others reflected upon their neighbours for consenting to his dismissal ; and by one means and another, they were divided among many candidates, until their mortifications and uneasinesses subsided by time ; and they quietly united to call their present minister, who preached his first sermon here, June 28th, 1759.

It would neither be decent nor expedient in me to bring the history of this Church lower down.

Time would not allow me to detail the disputes which prevailed in this Town, for many years, about your parsonage lands ; nor to attend to the charter which was obtained from governor Belcher, for holding all the property pertaining to this congregation ; nor to mention many other things of real importance.

These historical hints would admit of a large, useful, and religious improvement, would our time permit.

They might usefully be improved in admiration of the goodness of Divine Providence, in preserving and increasing this society ; in gratitude to God that he has given to us a goodly heritage, and has caused the lines to fall to us in pleasant places ; in praise to heaven that a Church has been continued in this place so long ; in thankfulness that you had such pious and reputable ancestors ; and in a way of excitement to be followers of their example, and wisely and diligently to improve our time. We must soon follow our fathers into the eternal world, and leave our Town and Church to others.

Allow me to close this subject in the words of the Apostle, after he had given to the Hebrews the history of their forefathers, their faith, practice, and holy living :
 “ Wherefore, seeing we also are compassed about with
 “ so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every

“weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and
“let us run with patience the race that is set before us,
“looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our
“faith.” AMEN.