

THE AMERICAN NATIONAL PREACHER.

No. 1, Vol. XXII.

JANUARY, 1848.

Whole No. 353.

SERMON CCCCLXVI.

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NEW YEAR'S SERMON FOR 1848.

DEPENDENCE ON THE FUTURE.

"To-morrow shall be as this day, and much more abundant."—ISAIAH 56 : 12, *last clause.*

IF we have ever occupied some elevated and commanding position, we must have observed, that the scenery, at a great remove from us, far surpassed in beauty that which was directly under the eye. The spot we descried far off in the mighty distance, was of all others the most interesting; and we have sometimes thought that could we but reach that spot, we might settle down with perfect content, because there we should find none of those anxieties and discomforts which mar almost every scene in which we mingle.

We are all aware that there is deception here, and we explain it upon this simple principle, that in the distant perspective we really perceive only an outline, which our imagination fills up and colors. I allude to this, as an experience with which perhaps we are all perfectly familiar, and the explanation of which as thus given, we are ready to admit. Now, I do not lay an interdict upon this play of human fancy, or say, that it is wrong ever to allow the mind to follow it and to be amused with its beautiful delineations. I would not condemn the indulgence of imagination, any more than the exercise of memory or of judgment; a day dream may be very pleasant, and the most fanciful reveries can never harm us, if they do not affect us improperly towards sober realities. But, should the tendency of such fancy pictures, and such visionary enchantments be to disgust us with the objects around us, and make us dissatisfied with the circumstances amid which Providence has called us to move, should they indispose us toward the duties of our present station, or lead us lightly to

estimate, if not utterly to neglect the advantages which belong to it, then imagination becomes the master, instead of the servant of judgment, and the sooner its spell is broken and its enchantment dissolved, the better for our interest as well as our enjoyment. How idle, how ruinous is it to everything like peace of mind, to be perpetually sighing after the fancied beauties of some distant, and perhaps inaccessible habitation, and thus to become indifferent to the realities and dissatisfied with the comforts of one's actual home.

It must be evident to every one, that what is thus true of space, is equally true of time. The coloring which fancy throws over the distant scenery of nature is no more beautiful, nor captivating than that which hope throws over the perspective of the future. How apt we are to live amid coming scenes. How constantly do we find ourselves forming our calculations, and laying out our plans for futurity, and rejoicing, by anticipation, in pleasures we have yet to reach—thus are we perpetually framing, and peopling with images of our own creation the worlds in which we expect to dwell. "To-morrow," we think, "shall be better than to-day." The scenes before us are brighter than any which are past, or present—the results yet to be evolved, grander and richer, than any which have been developed; the enjoyment expected more intense and permanent, than any we have hitherto experienced. Thus we make up the deficiencies of the present, by the anticipations of the future; our enjoyment to-day is owing to the vision of to-morrow, our happiness is the creature of our expectations, and hope gives us fortitude for endurance, and energy for action.

Now you do not understand me as finding fault with this peculiarity of our nature, a peculiarity belonging to us, as we came from the hand of our Creator, or as denouncing the impropriety and wickedness of forming plans for the future. We might as well try to put an arrest upon the movement of the natural world, as to prevent man from looking forward; we cannot help it, and if we could, religion forbids the indulgence of an improvident spirit.

And yet, there is a distinction to be maintained, between the right exercise and the perversion of any faculty of the human mind. There is nothing wrong in the simple exercise of hope—nothing foolish or criminal in the anticipations of the future. But when our expectations, as immortal creatures, are altogether earthly, when they are connected with irrational, because unfounded, confidences, when our calculations for the future lead us to overlook or underrate privileges or advantages actually in possession; when they lead us to neglect the duties of to-day under the impression that they may much more easily, and in a better manner be performed to-morrow; when, in short, hope becomes the

parent of procrastination, then are we living under an influence which controls us only by means of its deceptions, and which must be disastrous, as it can end only in disappointments, painful and bitter, as our calculations have been confident, and our hopes sanguine.

The state of mind I have thus set before you is the one to which the words of my text give expression, and one against which the whole strain of inspired teaching is directed. The Word of God comes home to us, rebuking these strong confidences and inordinate hopes for the future, by telling us that they are wholly unfounded, since we do not know whether the developments of that future will honor one of our confidences, meet one of our calculations, or answer one of our hopes. This is the argument of inspiration, and yet of all arguments, it is perhaps the most difficult to commend to the human mind. Who of us does not find it almost impossible to entertain the thought which it involves? Who of us can bring himself to think, that his wisest and best digested plans may come to naught, his strongest confidence prove to be utterly worthless, and his longest cherished and most sanguine hopes be entirely blasted? And yet this is the sentiment which the Bible would have us to understand and incorporate among our elements of thought and feeling; and it strikes us that we can never ponder it so well as upon an occasion like the present. We occupy to-day* a position which commands the past, where our thoughts naturally run back over the scenes which have been enacted and the events which have transpired, and where we can gather up the lessons of the months which have fled, and as we study them, see how clearly they illustrate and impressively enforce the sentiment before us, as they throw the light of facts upon the vanity of most of our future confidences.

We would carry you then to-day in pursuit of our general object, amid some of the walks of ordinary life over which you have already travelled, and where yet we find you. We enter the scenes of earthly business, and we hear from many directions and from many lips the utterance of complaint, as we see many signs of dissatisfaction, if we are not compelled to listen to the sighs, and groans of a deep and bitter disappointment. But a short time since, in these same circles, and upon these same walks, everything was different. There were joyous faces and sanguine hopes. There was one, perhaps, who should have talked of our melancholy and misanthropic spirit, had we attempted to throw in a suggestion of doubt between his mind and the vision which entranced and captivated him. Borne high by hope upon the wave of prosperous experiment, he feared no mountain-billow which might overwhelm him, he dreaded no hidden rock upon which his proud bark might strike, and be dashed to pieces. But

* The first Sabbath of the year.

we come to him now and ask him how the event compares with his previous confidence? Where are his plans and enterprises, now—those wondrous plans which were certainly to evolve such happy results, and upon which his heart was set so strongly? Events wholly unlooked for, and aside from every one of his calculations, have changed the aspect of everything, to him. The foundation upon which he stood, perhaps has gone, he feels that his confidence has deceived him. Is there to be found in this world a human being who ever rightly anticipated the changes which have actually taken place in his own personal history? Is there one, let his powers of calculation, and skill in management be ever so great, the course of whose affairs has been in accordance with his preconceived views, his sanguine expectations, and his distinct and confident prophecies? The most sagacious statesman, the most wily politician, the man of clearest and far-reaching fore cast, has been utterly disappointed, no less than the man of the weakest intellect, and, I had almost said, of the most thoughtless improvidence. And what does it all mean? How are we to explain the unexpected changes which constantly take place, the disappointments which so often try and even break the human spirit? Are they mere fortuities, the results of accident or lawless chance, furnishing no salutary or impressive lesson for the human mind to study? This is entirely too atheistical. No! there is a God, who reigneth in the earth, and he has been moving unseen amid the elements around us, controlling and regulating all things. Not a sparrow falleth to the ground, nor a hair from our heads, without his notice, nor without design. And the movements which are constantly taking place, defeated plans, blasted hopes, withering, crushing disappointments, are but the rebukes which a God of Providence is administering to the spirit which so constantly controls us, as it whispers in our ear, "Tomorrow shall be as this day, and yet more abundant."

The world is full of illustrations of my general thought. The difficulty with us is not to discover them, but to make a selection from the mass which lies on every side around us. I do but tell you that with which you are already familiar, when I say with regard to every man, that his circumstances are scarcely in any one point of view, what a short time since, he confidently expected they should be. We have all of us been carried along sometimes unconsciously, but always really, by influences which never entered into any of our calculations, and have passed through changes, against which, as we did not foresee them, we could make no provision. It is not a morose and ascetic spirit, which has often represented human life as a collection of disappointments. Every one has, to a greater or less degree, found out from his own experience the truth of the representation. We often fail entirely even of pursuing the ends which we originally con-

templated, as we certainly do, of the points which we expected to reach. I start out for action with all my plans well laid, I advance a step or two, when a circumstance very trifling in itself changes all my determinations, and in a little while I am surprised to discover how totally different from my original intention, is my present course.

Thus a man finds himself in very different circumstances from those in which he expected to be ; the place of his residence is not where he thought it should be. His character, perhaps, is the very opposite to that which he intended to form. He means to be honorable by emulating the course of one who had gone before him, and who had reached the highest point of earthly distinction ; and yet, how it happens he cannot tell, he is astonished and broken-hearted as he sees others pass by him in the race, and seize upon the objects on which he had fixed his eye, and which he fondly hoped ere long to reach. He means to be rich, and plans accordingly, and yet he finds himself struggling onward with a bare subsistence, and perhaps not even securing that, while another, of far less sagacity in planning, and less energy in execution, whose prospects were not so flattering as his own, amasses the fortune which he expected to gather, and rides by him in all the pomp and pride of gilded splendor. Whatever may be his end or whatever his measures to reach it, he thinks the world is full of good and moves forward without suspicion and without fear ; but he very soon finds that it is not always a friend who looks pleasantly upon him ; that the smile of apparent approval is not an evidence of good will, and that professions may be falsified and promises broken as easily as made. To be dependent upon others is to be friendless ; to need assistance is to be almost sure of its refusal. Oh ! how different is all this from his wishes, his plans, his hopes ! Thus are the darling schemes and fondest anticipations frustrated, as time rolls on and evolves events. Sagacity contrives, patience matures, industry laboriously executes, and disappointment smiles at the fabric which has been so curiously reared and so beautifully adorned, and at the moment its completion is expected, the stern hand of reality sweeps the whole away, or leaves only the ruins to tell of its former existence.

Scarcely different is the result in those cases where the issue of our course is in exact accordance with our previous plans. Success crowns our efforts, we reach the point we had in view, we seize the object at which we grasped, and yet we are creatures of disappointment. We thought that if we could attain a particular spot, or gain a particular object, or put ourselves in a particular position, we should need nothing more to fill up our cup of joy. We have amassed our gold, we have reached our eminence, we have secured our fame, we have built up our reputation, yet

neither wealth, nor position, nor fame, is what we expected to find it. We are depressed in the midst of our joy, disappointed in the midst of our success, we are as far removed from happiness as ever, and we sicken and pine in view of the proofs which our own experience is furnishing us of the vanity of human confidences.

I surely need not stop to defend the appositeness of these illustrations of my general thought, taken from our temporal circumstances, for I have been but detailing an experience with which, to a greater or less extent, all are perfectly acquainted. You feel not only the truth of what I have uttered, but the forcefulness also with which that truth demonstrates the emptiness of all earthly dependence; and perhaps not a day passes which does not heave into being something to contradict the lying spirit which tells us, "To-morrow shall be as this day, and much more abundant."

We pass, then, from the natural to the spiritual world, and seek there also for illustrations. It is one of the common-places of human thought, that the scenes of the present have an intimate connexion with, and important bearing upon, those of a future world. We are passing onward through a day of probation, and through the events of time, to the hour of retribution and the realities of eternity. The fact here stated makes, generally speaking, but a feeble impression, and yet there are times when it takes a deep and strong hold upon the mind, and awakens the most painful emotions. No thought can be more dreadful than that of an eternity unprovided for. A sense of hopelessness, ascertained and utter, is so dreadful, so unnatural, so crushing, that not one of us could endure it unrelieved, a single hour. Oh! how a feeling of despair unhinges the mind, furrows the countenance, and gives wildness to the eye. Who in this world knows anything of despair, in reference to the world which is to come? And yet there are but few, if, indeed, any, who consider themselves in every respect prepared for an exchange of worlds. The most spiritually-minded and devoted Christian finds, upon an examination of his heart and circumstances, that there is something he wishes to do, some attainment he must make, some duty he must perform, before he can consider himself prepared for his last account, and he is often calculating with a good degree of confidence, upon making that attainment and discharging that duty before he shall hear his summons to the judgment-seat.

It is worse than this with the man out of the kingdom of God. What can be more terrible than a hopeless death? From what does the mind shrink more instinctively than the thought of putting one's head upon a dying pillow, without an interest in Jesus Christ, and sinking into one's last sleep without any comforting presage of the future? Unconverted men will bear me witness that they do,

not expect to die as they are, and unchanged to enter upon a scene of eternal realities. Nothing is more distinct to their apprehension than their entire unfitness for such a wondrous transition, and an alteration in their character and position is embraced among the most confident of their hopes. They have more than once given promises to this effect to a wakeful and a remonstrating conscience, and have perhaps most distinctly, most deliberately, and I am sure most sincerely, formed their plans and matured their purposes. They intend to be Christians before they die. Now what does this mean? What disclosure does it make concerning their state, if it does not show them lying in the lap of the enchantress who borrows her witchery from the fascinations of the future, and charmed into composure by the soft notes which she sings, "To-morrow shall be as this day, and much more abundant." Here is a vain expectation leading a man to overlook his present advantages, and neglect his present duties, and to decline doing that which he knows and feels ought to be done to-day, upon the strength of the deceitful presumption, that he may do it much more easily to-morrow.

Now, at this very point, I would have you to pause a moment and look back upon the past, and see if you cannot gather from its lessons a powerful rebuke of this prevalent spirit. I address the Christian, and ask him, in all kindness, if his condition in a spiritual point of view to-day is at all answerable to his previous hopes and calculations? Tell me, you who are in the kingdom of Jesus Christ, is there one of you who has discharged all the duties he meant to discharge, or has made all the attainments he intended to make? Are you the spiritually-minded disciple you expected to be upon this first Sabbath of the year? And yet we all formed our plans, as we thought, with a great deal of wisdom. It may be that we began their execution with some good promise of success, but some trifling circumstance, some slight but unexpected change in our earthly condition, our relations or our position, intervened, diverted our attention, and altered the whole current of our thoughts, and by subjecting us to new trains of influence, led us to other and different plans, and our purposes of spiritual improvement, if they have not been wholly forgotten, remain wholly unexecuted.

It is precisely so with unconverted men. They can remember the searching exhibitions of Divine truth which poured light in upon their minds, and the touching, and tender, and powerful appeal of the gospel which awakened strong emotions in their bosoms. They can remember, perhaps, hours of deep distress, when their spirits were bowed down and almost crushed by the dispensations of Providence, as those whom they most loved were taken away from them, or as God had to do with their conscience;

and they felt the fearfulness and painfulness of sin. There were purposes, then, intelligent and solemn, of repentance and obedience to Christ, and they have not been "few and far between." They mark, at very short intervals, the path upon which men travel, and present themselves now in such numbers to the memory, that they can hardly enumerate them. Go back then, if you please, to some foregone moment of your existence, some of those impressive scenes, or some of those hours of thoughtfulness to which we have alluded, and endeavor to call up, as distinctly as you can, the exercises which then belonged to you, and as your memory traces them with a faithful pencil, bear with this simple question, Did you expect that this first Sabbath of the year should have found you out of the kingdom of God, without a hope for the eternal world, and with so little interest upon the subject of the great salvation, and so utterly unmoved by your dreadful neglect of it? And has the past no lesson for *you* to learn? Does it throw no light upon the developments of the future? As you see how its confidences have deluded, and its promises deceived you, and betrayed your too pliant and trustful spirit into the hands of him who would destroy you, you need no argument from me or from any one else, to show you the folly of trusting to the morrow; or if you do, you can have it, as the picture of the past is thus held up to your view, and its powerful appeal against false trusts, tells upon your spirit. No! no! you need no other argument than this. So far as religion is concerned, you are to-day a disappointed man, and your present condition is as diverse from all your plans and calculations as it could have been, had you aimed at results directly the opposite of those your intentions contemplated.

This, however, is not the only light in which human disappointments must be studied; there is another, more solemn and more painful. All our calculations for the future proceed upon the presumption of future life. We expect to live, and so, at least, to have time to carry our purposes into execution. And yet I take it upon myself to say, that amid all our calculations not one can be found so rash as this. I feel when I utter this sentence, involving, as it does, the thought of the uncertainty of human life, that I am addressing myself to (of all others) the most difficult service I am called to perform. The subject is in its own nature so trite, its illustrations are so common-place, because it has been made a theme of such incessant declamation; it is, moreover, in every view of it, so familiar, and withal so distasteful, that we feel oppressed when we speak of it, and would resign our duty, if we dared, into other hands.

But we cannot do so—an obligation rests upon us, and however painful, we must discharge it. Constrained then by a sense of duty, though we must repeat what has been a thousand times

said upon a subject which for ages has had no novelty about it, we must speak, relying simply upon this confidence, that he who has "ordained by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe," can carry home the best known truths to the conscience in such a manner as to render them more effectual than those upon which we most rely, as seeming to give us the best promise of success.

We were speaking of the vanity of confidences for the future in view of the uncertainty of human life ; and we would have you turn over only a few leaves in the volume of history, and read their contents. Of those who began life with you, how many, think you are remaining ? See, I beseech you, how the ranks of your early associates have constantly thinned out. Your hearts, it may be, have bled, as one and another, and a third have been cut down by your side, of those in whose society you delighted, and with whom you took counsel as to your earthly plans and interests, or shared your earthly joys. And yet their confidence in life was as strong as is yours now ; their plans were as well laid, their hopes as sanguine, their prospects as bright, as are yours now ; and while, as it is now with you, the future stretched itself out before them, filled with scenes, and peopled with the images which an ardent fancy had called into being, and they were hastening with eager impetuosity to seize upon the bright objects which dazzled their vision, some sudden stroke laid them low, and terminated their earthly course and their earthly hopes together.

Or go into the silent and solemn graveyard, and as you tread, on every side, upon new-made graves, upon which as yet perhaps not a blade of grass has grown, ask yourselves how many of those who are sleeping there in the stillness of the sepulchre, expected that this day should find them the prey of worms, and the victims of corruption ?

Amid that throng, which, only during the past year, has gone down to people the mansions of the dead, there was a young man, a mother's pride and a father's hope. His youthful mind had been early imbued with religious truth, and that truth had been so fastened upon his conscience by parental instruction and parental prayer, that he could not disengage himself from its influence ; and he had his plans and purposes of repentance, but "tomorrow" sounded very sweetly, and charmed him into forgetfulness of them, while he had yet one thing to accomplish—one earthly plan to execute, one transient joy in which to participate, and with which he thought religion would interfere ; and there he lies beneath the clods of the valley, while his spirit has gone with its unfinished plans and unfulfilled purposes, to the God who gave it. And there is an epitaph which records the name and age of some child of fashion, who forgot her God, amid the frivo-

lities of earth, who was too much engaged with the vanities and idolatries of the world to think of that Savior whose voice she could not but hear, and whose love she could not but feel to have been great.

And there is another, the man of business, cut down in the prime of life, hurried away from scenes of enterprise and action, from those unfinished undertakings which engrossed his soul, and which he thought he might safely complete, before he gave his attention to eternal things ; and there is yet another, the man of three-score years and ten, who had oft " resolved and re-resolved yet died the same." The bridal wreath has been exchanged for the winding-sheet, the hue of health for the pallid aspect of death, the hurry and excitement of worldly business and pleasure, for the stillness and repose of the tomb. There are no circumstances in which we can be placed, where a voice from the past does not reach us ; not a confidence, however strong, in reference to which a voice of warning does not come to us from some new-made grave, to caution us against the folly of trusting to to-morrow.

Of how many disappointments, during the last year, think you, does God's book of remembrance keep the record ?—and disappointments, too, deep, bitter, fearful, because eternal ;—disappointments, compared with which life's heaviest trials are lighter than vanity—the disappointments of human spirits who expected much and have been reft of everything, who have failed of the great salvation, which they never intended permanently to neglect, who meant to rise and live in heaven, but who sank, and made their bed in hell.

And Oh ! how many of you are treading in their footsteps to reach a like disappointment. I know you could not feel as you do, and act as you do, but for your strong confidence in to-morrow. I admit, there is wonderful power in temptation. I admit, there is great fascination in the things of time and sense ; and the tendency of earthly objects is to engross the soul. But then there is a greater power in the things of the world which is to come. There is a mightier fascination about the brightening glories and flashing fires of eternity. There is that in the verities of the gospel which can take a stronger hold upon the mind, if they were but looked at. And every man may break the power of this world, and bring himself under the mightier influence of eternal realities, if he would but possess himself of this conviction :—These realities are just before me. Yes ! this is the secret of men's carnality, and neglect of the gospel—" To-morrow shall be as this day, and much more abundant."

If we could certify to our hearers that they had but a month, or a year to live, they could not devote this month, or this year, or any part of them, to pursuits which would shame them at the judgment-seat of Christ. You should not, any of you, be inat-

tentive to the exhortation of to-day—you should not continue indifferent to the subject of religion, and trusting to to-morrow, if we were gifted with a spirit of prophecy, and could show to each individual the exact time he had to live, if we could show to all, that men should tread upon their sleeping dust, before the earth should have performed another revolution. We cannot do this, but we can say to some, The close of this year shall find your bodies in the cold damp sepulchre. Can you believe it, and yet be unconcerned about the eternal world? But because you know we cannot compute the moment, the hour, and the day of your death—because we can only tell you that life is short, and you can be here for a few days, perhaps—you can venture to live as though you should be here for ever. No, we cannot point out the day, the month, the year, when you shall close your earthly course, we have no revelation on this point from on high—and, I may add, we need none, to assure us that some will die during this year upon which we have entered, we know this without any inspiration from above; we *know* that some who are living to-day will be in the sepulchre when this anniversary returns; and we very much fear that some of you may illustrate the truth of God's word, "The wicked is driven away in his wickedness." Oh! what words are those to describe the mode of a sinner's departure into the eternal world! It may be so with you, I warn you of it, *you* may be "driven away in your wickedness." If you are not Christians, no mortal eye may see your struggle, and no mortal tongue may be able to tell of the violent instrumentality necessary to dislodge you from this world. There may be no outward painful manifestations, but there may be an invisible wrestling—and a dreadful inward struggle, like that of one who feels an iron grasp upon him—We do not know who or when it shall be—God be thanked that we do not. We cannot tell when any one of us shall step upon another scene. We know only that any of us may soon do so, at any time, and anywhere. Where is the dread threshold of the court of our eternal judge?—Anywhere! everywhere! Some of us will cross it this year. That point will not be questioned by any who put confidence in the revelations which the experience of the past furnishes—and if it is so—if it is certain that some of you must die this year—you will not, you cannot, be guilty of the madness of throwing upon the future the work of your repentance—while God calls upon you to make your calling and election sure, you will not answer "To-morrow shall be as this day, and much more abundant." To-morrow! that voice may not be heard. To-morrow! see those poisoning scales in which your destinies are placed, and that hand just ready to strike the balance. See that opening grave—it has been dug for you—and on that spot, where shortly you shall lie, stands the long suffer-

ing Son of God, holding back the destroying angel, while he pleads *with* you and *for* you—you cannot be deaf to his entreaty “Come, sinner, haste, O! haste away, while yet a pardoning God is found.” And while you listen, there is another voice, how solemn its message, how startling its tones! It is the voice of one who moves amid the tombs—and as he points to the graves, where lie the wrecks of once manly forms, the decaying tenements of once promising and procrastinating, but now ruined spirits, he says, “Thus will I do unto thee, and because I will thus do unto thee, prepare to meet thy God.” Listen to it, ye young, ye middle aged, and ye old—listen to it—for ye are yet here. The summons has not yet gone forth for any of us—the stroke is not yet descending—the weaver’s shuttle is yet playing—the eagle has not yet descended upon his prey—ye are in a world of hope—God waits to be gracious. Oh! ye who have been approached solemnly—who have been warned faithfully—who have waited long—ye who have met every argument, every entreaty, every appeal, with this same reply, “to-morrow shall be as this day, and much more abundant”—see the great destroyer coming with your names written in his commission—and while you tremble at the summons he is about to utter, betake yourselves quickly to your closets, and there pour out your prayer, “So teach us to number our days that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom.”

SERMON CCCCLXVII.

BY REV. GEORGE SHEPARD,

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THE END AT HAND.

But the end of all things is at hand; be ye therefore sober, and watch unto prayer.—1 PETER, iv : 7.

THE same Apostle says in another connexion, “The day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night.” There are announcements very similar to the above, scattered throughout the New Testament. Paul, writing to the Philippians, exhorts, “Let your moderation be known to all men : the Lord is at hand.” Writing to Christians at Rome, he says : “The night is far spent ; the