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HOW WE SPEND OUR YEARS.*

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"We spend our years as a tale that is told."—PSALMS 90 : 9.

THE year eighteen hundred and ninety-one has gone. Its times and incidents, once present, are now fast receding from our view, as if borne upon an ebbing tide, never to return. As we look backward, past joys sparkle like white-caps in the distance, and then vanish; past sorrows rise and swell in dark-blue waves, and diminish as they recede. The year has rolled out its last wave of privilege and opportunity, and disappeared forever. Nothing now remains but to bid it a last reflective farewell. As an appropriate farewell reflection, I propose the sentiment of the text: "*We spend our years as a tale that is told.*"

What renders the parting affecting is that they are *our* years. "We spend," says the psalmist, "*our* years." Oh, it is sad and solemn to part with anything that is ours! Whatever is so related to us as to be designated by this language of self-

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appropriation is dear to our hearts. *Our* father, *our* mother, *our* home, *our* church, are expressions of the dearest affinities of life. A day, if we can only call it ours—as, for example, the day of our birth—is more precious than all other days. We feel sad to bid it adieu and leave it forever. So with a year when it is linked to us by the same personal relation.

IN WHAT SENSE, THEN, WE INQUIRE, DOES THE PSALMIST CALL THE FLEETING YEARS OF LIFE

“OUR YEARS”?

There is not a single one of them that, strictly speaking, we can call our own. We have no right of proprietorship in them or authority over them. We can neither command, nor control, nor guide them. There is no Gibeon on which the hours pause at our bidding; no Ajalon where the night-watchers await our pleasure. Even Queen Elizabeth, with all the power and wealth of a kingdom at her control, could not command one inch of time.

And yet the years are ours; ours whether we will or not. They are linked to us as by a personal, responsible, and indissoluble relation. In the first place,

THEY ARE OURS TO ENJOY.

Enjoyment is the appropriation by which a thing becomes truly our own. Without this there can be

no real possession. A blind man may own one of Raphael's angels, but he cannot in the highest sense say, "It is mine." It is his by the law of property, but not by the law of nature; for as he cannot enjoy it, he is incapable of that appropriation which makes it truly his own. Just so the years are ours to enjoy. This was their primeval design. God made the years to be the measure of our joys; but sin perverts them to note the slow and weary transit of our woes. When God appointed the sun and the moon to "be for signs, and for seasons, and for days and years," it was to measure out the joys of Paradise. Each new day, and so each year, was a new gift of Heaven to enjoy. In this blessed sense the years are still our own. They come with "many a glorious throng of happy dreams." Each moment has its mercy, each hour its bursting hope, each day its "good and perfect gift," and each year its crown of loving-kindness. A year, therefore—nay, a day—unenjoyed is a robbery of self, a sin against Heaven. Better lose a jewel than a joy.

THEY ARE OURS TO EMPLOY.

Ours for the best and most valuable uses. They are our seed-time, to be employed in ploughing and sowing for the harvest of eternity. They are the woof and warp out of which we weave the web of

life. They are a mine in which there is a mass of precious treasure, which may be dug for, and will be found if the labor is applied. They are a stream flowing swiftly by us, and when once past they are gone forever; but if seized as they come, and appropriated, they may be turned to the best of uses—to grind the grist of duty or irrigate the garden of the soul. Oh yes, the years are ours to use! They are the winds of time, and if we hoist our sails we may employ them to waft us to the shores of the heavenly Canaan.

But still more emphatically the Scriptures teach that the years are ours *as a working day*. Time is a little section cut out of eternity, and given us to do our work in. Hence the command, "Go work to-day in my vineyard!" There is no soul work beyond the grave. All that a poor sinner can do for his immortal soul must be done in that short span of time which intervenes between the cradle and the grave. But there is a still more important sense in which the passing years are ours.

THEY ARE OURS TO ACCOUNT FOR.

Time is a precious treasure given to us in trust as stewards, and we are responsible, not only for the principal, but for the interest. We have not only to account for each moment received, but for

its use. We must return to God his own with usury. With every hour that God gives us he seems to say, "Take this and occupy till I come." A year past is therefore a year gone before to meet us at the Judgment. Every day is a charge against us in the book of life. Every moment that fills up the measure of our time comes to us like a messenger from another world, marks our conduct, and then hastens back with its report to the throne of God.

If, then, the years are ours by such a blessed, solemn, and momentous proprietary; if they are ours to enjoy, ours to employ, and ours to account for at the bar of God—*how do we spend them?* This inquiry, so deep and solemn in its import, is answered by the text,

"WE SPEND OUR YEARS AS A TALE THAT IS TOLD."

This answer not only expresses an inevitable fact, the rapid transit of life, but involves a censure. "We spend," literally, we consume, we waste our years, as if in listening to a tale that is told. Let us, then, dwell for a few moments upon the points of the comparison here presented.

WE SPEND OUR YEARS ILLUSIVELY—AS A TALE
THAT IS TOLD.

The point of thought here is the correspondence between the false, unreal, fictitious way in which

many spend their years, and the dreamy, excited illusions we experience in listening to a romantic tale. The comparison, you observe, is not to a sober history, but to an airy fiction. The allusion of the text is evidently to the legends, poems, and tragic romances which in the earlier ages of the world, especially in Oriental countries, were recited from house to house by traveling bards and minstrels. Those who listened to these engaging recitals—like those who now gaze upon a theatrical illusion—imbibed the spirit of the ideal scene, and were wrought into sympathy with the actors, till for the time being they lived and breathed under the spell of the enchantment, and then awoke to find it all an illusion.

Such, to vast multitudes, is life—a vain, unreal scene, a fictitious delusion, a succession of wanton hopes and bitter disappointments. They imbibe the spirit of the world; are wrought into sympathy with the passing pageant; hurry with feverish excitement from scene to scene and from act to act in the drama of life; and at its close awake to the realization that they have walked in a vain show, they have been the victims of a false and artificial excitement, they have wasted emotion in idle and foolish sympathies, and are now ending their years as a tale that is told.

Who, indeed, is there that to some extent has not experienced this illusion? Who has not found the magnificence of life's promise lost in the poverty of the accomplishment? Youth is fresh and bright with hopes never to be realized. Middle age is eager and sanguine, grasping after expectations which end in vacuity and disappointment. Old age, worn, sobered, wrinkled with care, and covered with the dust of toil, confesses that its days have been "few and evil." Industry digs for a hid treasure, which often disappears, like the fabled chest, as soon as the crowbar rings upon its iron lid. Ambition climbs for laurels that wither in its grasp. Pleasure, like a hummingbird, recedes from the silly child of sense as he approaches to seize it, and retiring from flower to flower, eludes his speed and cunning. Thus in a vain, unreal illusion "we spend our years as a tale that is told."

Is life, then, with its crowd of incidents and objects, an unreal phantasm? Is this great world, with its busy enterprise and potent energy, a dream, a pageant, a mere minstrel's tale? Nay, verily! The world, and life in the midst of such a world, is a reality. The illusion is not in life or in the world but in ourselves—in our own distorted vision, in our own deceitful and wicked hearts. The real be-

comes a fiction when viewed through a false medium, and even sober truth becomes falsehood when misconceived or falsely applied.

As a matter of experience, we all know that life is just what the mind and heart make it. The outer is but the exponent or expression of the inner life. The soul spreads its own hue over everything. To a fresh, genial spirit life is joyous and the world is clothed in a wedding-garment; whilst to the somber, melancholic mind all nature is shrouded in a funeral-pall. In the case of each the shroud and the bridal-robe are woven in the loom of their own feelings. "The universe," says another, "is the express image and direct counterpart of the souls that dwell in it. Be noble, and all nature replies, 'I am divine'; be mean, and all nature dwindles into contemptible smallness." To this we may add: be holy, and life is real and glorious; be sinful, and life perverted from its proper use is a gross delusion.

Solomon represents himself as having constructed a magnificent pile of every good thing under the sun, only to find it vanity in the end. What was the reason of Solomon's disappointment? He mistook the proper use and design of the good things of life, and thus, by his own perversion, they became an illusion. "Solomon," says a commentator, "would

have found no disappointment in his houses if he had used them as houses ; nor in his wealth if he had used it as wealth ; but instead of this, he made them things to love and put his confidence in, and in that view all his successes were vanity and vexation of spirit."

Here, then, is the true solution of life's illusion. It is deceitful only as we use it deceitfully ; it is false, because by perverting its end and uses we practice deception upon ourselves. Life properly understood and virtuously fulfilled is a scene of sublime reality, an arena of noble deeds, a discipline for the development of love, faith, and patience, and a school for exercise and evolution of immortal powers. Then let us break the spell of this false enchantment ; for, believe me,

"Life is real, life is earnest,
And the grave is not its goal ;
'Dust thou art, to dust returnest,'
Was not spoken of the soul."

WE SPEND OUR LIVES AMUSIVELY, AS IF LISTENING
TO A TALE THAT IS TOLD.

A tale is usually a momentary, trifling amusement. We listen, not for any serious or valuable purpose, but to be entertained or to pass away an idle hour. It is followed by no good or perma-

nent results. The emotions, whether sportive or serious, terminate with the story, and both are speedily lost and forgotten. And in a manner similar to this are the years of life spent by no small part of the human race. The hearers of tales are not more perfectly the votaries of amusement during the period of rehearsal than are multitudes during the whole progress of life. In this way they waste, consume their years, as one who listens to a tale that is told. Many are active, energetic, industrious; but the great purpose at which they aim is enjoyment, without a wish exercised or an attempt made to become wise, virtuous, or useful. Mere butterflies, they flutter from field to field and from flower to flower, heedless that the summer in which they sport will be soon succeeded by a season of frost and death.

This may be true just as much of the active, energetic man of business, or of the stirring housewife, as of the mere child of passion and pleasure. They may pursue the enterprises and endure the toils of life for purposes merely amusive. The whole aim of all their plans and projects may be to say to their soul at some future day: "Soul, take thine ease; thou hast much goods laid up for many years; eat, drink, and be merry."

To such the successive stages of life bring no

solemn reflections. They consume one year and enter upon another, inquiring only, "how to-morrow shall be as to-day, only more abundant." Instead of learning, from past errors and past sins, future wisdom and reformation; instead of being admonished by reproofs, alarmed by judgments, solemnized and softened by affliction, and charmed to gratitude and repentance by the mercies of a gracious Providence, they hurry from enjoyment to enjoyment, and bustle from sport to sport, imbosomed and lost in the present gratification, forgetful that endless happiness must be gained, or endless misery suffered, in the world to come.

Now, against this mere amusive wasting of life the censure of the text is directed. Oh, how different is this manner of employing life from that to which it was destined by our Creator! By him it was intended to be to each one of us a day of probation and of grace, a season in which we were to renounce our sins, accept of the mercy offered to us through a Redeemer, and secure a title to a happy immortality. To turn it, then, from this grand object to purposes of mere amusement is one of the grossest of all perversions. It is to ignore the design of our Creator; it is to sink the soul into subserviency to the claims of the

flesh, and it is to barter the birthright of our immortality for a mess of earth's pottage. If one of yonder stars should resign its glorious sphere and "sink to darkle in a rayless void," it would not be a greater perversion of the design of its creation than for an immortal soul, that might shine as an orb of light, to forego the distinctions of its spirituality, to burrow in the dust of worldliness, and pale its splendors amid the follies and lusts of an earthly carnalism.

If, then, the purpose of life is so important and life itself so solemn, how have you spent the past year? Have you consumed, wasted it for mere purposes of self-gratification, and are you now bringing it to a close amusively, as a mere tale that is told? The time is short, but to spend this shortness easily is arrant folly. He who wastes the life that now is sins against the life to come.

WE SPEND OUR YEARS SWIFTLY, AS A TALE THAT
IS TOLD.

The former points of the comparison involved a censure, but this confronts us with a serious, solemn fact—the rapid transit of our years, the swiftness with which we pass from station to station in our hurried journey to the grave. "We spend our years as a tale that is told." Hours fly like words,

weeks like sentences, months like chapters, and life like a tale quickly told.

“The very breath which frames my words
Accelerates my death.”

“We die daily,” says the Apostle; die as fast as time flies. We talk of dying, and die while we are talking. Existence here is a continuous death.

“Our birth is nothing but our death begun,
And cradles rock us nearer to the tomb.”

Oh, what a fleeting, evanescent thing is life! “A vapor that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away;” a wind that is present for a moment, and anon it is gone; a shadow that flits across the plain; a flower that blooms in the morning with a freshness and beauty that charms the eye, and in the evening it withers away; a journey from the cradle to the grave, rapid as the passage of the weaver’s shuttle:

“A fire whose flames through crackling stubble fly,
A meteor shooting from the summer sky,
A bowl adown the bending mountain rolled,
A bubble breaking, and a fable told.
A noontide shadow and a midnight dream.”

These are emblems which aptly proclaim our earthly course.

Few who have passed the season of youth have failed to observe how imperceptibly we advance in years; how year after year is stealing on with a

stealthy and even pace, and without our notice is bearing us into age and toward the darkness of the tomb. We grow old and approach our dying hour without being aware how rapidly we advance. The boy, the youth, the man, is looking forward to life, till suddenly he awakes from his dream and finds his life is chiefly spent. His years have sped away he knows not how, like a tale that is told.

Not only is the passage of our years rapid, but increasingly rapid as we advance in life. As the interest of a tale deepens the time passes more swiftly, until at length, absorbed in the crisis of the plot, hours flee apace, and we take no note of their passage. Just so in life. The flight of years grows swifter as we advance in age. As cares cluster and the drama deepens, hours, days, and years pass unnoticed, and men look back, worn and bewildered, wondering how it is. Time seems to run with breathless speed as we draw near the goal of death, as if it were eager to bear us to the grave. This fact none have failed to notice. The explanation is that *time*, correctly speaking, is nothing more than a succession of ideas. These ideas are less numerous and the impressions they make upon the mind less permanent in old age than in youth, and, consequently, "the road of declining life has fewer stones to mark our progress along it."

THE COMPARISON OF THE TEXT FURTHER INDICATES
HOW SHORT OUR PAST LIFE APPEARS
IN THE REVIEW.

If we take the standpoint of an aged man, and look back, his threescore and ten years seem compressed into the briefest compass. So much of the incident of life has faded from his memory, that it all seems like a tale that is told. "An old man," says another, "can live over all his years again at one sad sitting." "Childhood's happy thoughts, youth's painted phantoms, manhood's early struggles; the clutched prize, which proved a shadow; the dreaded ill which never came—what are they in the review but like the chapters of a well-wrought tale—only too natural in their telling!"

Hence the mournful review of Jacob in answer to Pharaoh: "The days of the years of my pilgrimage are a hundred and thirty years; few and evil have the days of the years of my life been." "*Few and evil.*" "For what," asks a writer, "were the living things of that history? The life of that long life? Oh, they were just the marked passages, the mere headings of chapters—his vision at Bethel, his service for Rachel, his wrestling with the Angel, his tidings of a long-lost son saving his gray hairs from being brought with sorrow to the

grave. Much of the rest of that one hundred and thirty years was one great undotted blank—the unremembered parts of a now concluded tale.”

The figure of the text includes another point of comparison.

YEARS PAST, LIKE A TALE THAT IS TOLD, ARE USEFUL ONLY FOR THEIR MORAL.

They are gone beyond the possibility of recall, and whatever advantages, or privileges, or opportunities they presented when they were present with us are now gone with them into the abyss of eternity. The past is, therefore, of no profit now, save as the food for solemn reflection.

Let us, however, as from a tale already told, endeavor to deduce the moral.

I. *To all of us it has been a year of prolonged life.*

We have enjoyed a whole year more of valuable time than we had any right at the beginning of it to assure ourselves of. The unfruitfulness of the former year might have justly subjected us to the sentence pronounced upon the barren fig-tree: “Cut it down, why cumbereth it the ground?” But the Saviour prayed, “Spare it yet another year,” and our lives were continued, and riches of time given us to spend, more than we had any right to expect. The moral, then, obviously is the

exceeding goodness and long-suffering of God, and the necessity of careful self-examination to see if we have done that which we were spared to do; if we have brought forth this year "fruit meet for the Master's use."

II. Again: *It has been to many of us a year of great spiritual opportunity and privilege.*

Let us go back and place ourselves, in thought, where we stood at the beginning of the year. What a wide door of privilege opened before us; what advantages for spiritual instruction and improvement; what opportunities for glorifying God and saving souls; what means for advancement in knowledge and growth in grace; what facilities for prayer, for holy meditation, for heavenly-mindedness, for self-examination and self-correction, for assuring ourselves of our interest in Christ and of our title to eternal life! Compute the sum of all these individual things, and consider, if effected, what spiritual enrichment you would now enjoy. Remember now that when the year began all this was possible, and what is the moral you deduce? Obviously a lesson of fervent gratitude to God for such a harvest season of privilege, and of deep humiliation for our failures to reap the benefits. A lesson of repentance for the past, and endeavors after new obedience for the future.

III. Again: *To most of us it has been a year of domestic and social enjoyment.*

Our boards have been covered with plenty, our homes have smiled with gladness, and domestic affections and family ties have endeared us to life. Let us, then, draw the moral thus: God has spared me another year to my family, and his goodness to me and mine place me under a new obligation to love and serve him. Let me, therefore, begin the new year by the more entire consecration of myself and my household; by the more faithful instruction of my children in the way of life; and with a full purpose of heart that "as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."

Time would fail to particularize. The moral of the year differs according to the position and circumstances of each individual. To the bereaved and afflicted it is a lesson of humble resignation and faith; to the tempted, an admonition to cling closer to him who was "tempted in all points like as we are, yet without sin"; to the unconverted it is a call to repentance before the door is shut; to the young, a warning that another year has passed, and that the invitation grows more urgent—"Son, give me thine heart." To one and all it is a lesson of the shortness of time, and of its increasing value as we near the terminus of life.