

U. P. Garrison

1862

THE
NEW-JERSEY PREACHER:
OR,
SERMONS
ON
PLAIN & PRACTICAL SUBJECTS.

BY SOME OF THE MINISTERS OF THE GOSPEL,
RESIDING IN THE STATE OF NEW-JERSEY.

VOL. I.

Edited by George S. ...
1862 V.

Woodward
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Now then, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech
you by us; we pray *you* in Christ's stead be ye reconciled
to God....2 Cor. v. 20.

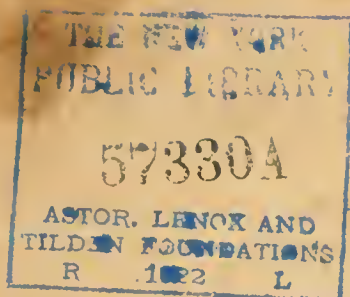
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1863

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New Jersey
ZIX



District of New-Jersey, ss.

BE IT REMEMBERED, that on the thirty-first day of March, in the thirty-seventh year of the Independence of the United States of America, George S. Woodhull and Isaac V. Brown, of the said district, have deposited in this office, the title of a book, the right whereof they claim as proprietors, in the words following, to wit:

"The New-Jersey Preacher, or Sermons on plain and practical subjects. By some of the ministers of the gospel residing in the State of New-Jersey. Vol. I. Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us; we pray you in Christ's stead, be ye reconciled to God.—"2 Cor. v. 20."

In conformity to the act of the Congress of the United States, entitled, "An act for the encouragement of learning, by securing the copies of maps, charts and books, to the authors and proprietors of such copies, during the times therein mentioned;" and also to the act, entitled, "An act supplementary to an act, entitled an act for the encouragement of learning, by securing the copies of maps, charts and books, to the authors and proprietors of such copies, during the times therein mentioned, and extending the benefits thereof to the arts of designing, engraving and etching historical, and other prints."

ROBERT BOGGS,

Clerk of the District of New-Jersey.

SERMON XVI.
ON A DEATH-BED REPENTANCE.

Matt. xxv. 10.

And, while they went to buy, the bridegroom came ; and they that were ready,
went in with him to the marriage ; and the door was shut.

BY SAMUEL S. SMITH, D. D. L. L. D.

NEW-JERSEY PREACHER.

SERMON XVI.

Matt. xxv. 10.—And, while they went to buy, the bridegroom came ; and they that were ready, went in with him to the marriage ; and the door was shut.

UNDER the simple and familiar images of this parable, are conveyed truths the most interesting to mankind, the most awful to sinners. Sincere repentance and the habits of a holy life, are, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, the only preparation which can justly be relied on for a peaceful death, and a happy immortality. But sinners, mistaking the nature of repentance, as if it consisted merely in the tears extorted by the terrors of their last hour ; or in the bitter reproaches which they make to themselves for the folly and madness of their worldly pursuits, when the world itself is seen to be perishing from their embrace ; mistaking the nature of heaven, as if it consisted in a happiness independent on the regeneration of the heart, resolve to enjoy the world, while they have powers to taste its pleasures, or to pursue its interests, and to postpone their preparation for eternity, till, at length, they leave it to the dreadful hazard of a death-bed. To destroy this most dangerous and fatal error, and to preserve men always awake to their everlasting interests, so that neither death nor judgment shall find them unprepared, is the great object of our blessed Lord in this parable. For this end he pictures to us the surprize and consternation of foolish virgins who were employed at a marriage to be in waiting for the bride-

groom ; but who, having neglected their duty, were not in readiness to receive him at his coming, and were in consequence, excluded from the honors and joys of the nuptial festival.

The structure of the fable is founded on an eastern custom of celebrating marriages at a late hour in the evening. The bridegroom and his attendants were received at the house of the bride by a train of virgins bearing lamps or flambeaus in their hands. In the case here imagined, a part being wise and attentive to their duty held themselves in readiness to fulfil their office whenever their Lord should appear ; the rest being thoughtless and improvident, left their lamps unfurnished with oil, trusting that they should have time to replenish them after the first signal had announced the approach of the bridegroom. But, while they were buried in profound forgetfulness, a sudden cry was made from every side ;—*behold the bridegroom cometh ; go ye out to meet him !* Then appeared the folly of those who, in the season of preparation, had neglected their proper duty. While they were seeking in vain to repair their error, and, in the hurry and confusion of their spirits, were continually committing only new mistakes, the bridegroom had already come and entered into his apartments ; those who were ready entered along with him, and *the door was shut*. After which, there was no more admission either for attendant, or for guest.

With what force and truth does this beautiful fable represent to us the infinite danger of delaying our repentance, and preparation for eternity till the moment when God is calling us by the voice of death to appear in his presence. The bridegroom hastens to his joys, and does not wait to give time for the foolish virgins to

repair their neglect. He commands the door to be closed and no more listens to the entreaties by which they solicit to be admitted to his presence. Such is the terrible state of an impenitent sinner on his death-bed—The *season of repentance* and the *season of the divine mercy*, both, are past.

Attend, my brethren, to these interesting ideas.

1. The sinner, on his death-bed, will want *time* for that great change which must pass upon his heart in repentance.—Do we not perceive that all important improvements either in our intellectual powers, or our moral habits, are the effect of long and assiduous culture? Leaving out of our view, what in the regular and common course of divine providence, ought not to be expected, every extraordinary operation of the divine power upon a sinner's heart, can we believe that a change so great as that which is produced by repentance in the entire systems of our views, of our affections, of our pursuits and habits, and in one word in our whole nature, should be the sudden and unprepared effect of the surprise and terror of our last moments? To what purpose would be that long season of discipline, those multiplied and daily repeated means of grace, afforded by God to cultivate the heart for heaven, if after they have been abused and mispent, their end can be attained in one critical instant at the close of life? No, this does not accord with the moral constitution of man, nor with the established order of the moral world. God in the ordinary course of things, seconds by the gentle influences of his Holy Spirit, the convictions and persuasions which his word and providence are calculated to produce upon the heart. But, shall we forever look for miracles in favour of those only who have wasted opportunities, and

means, and time, and *wantonly resisted* the merciful operations of the spirit of God in their *proper season*? Let it be remembered also, that peculiar difficulties oppose themselves to this change. It is not merely the renovation of a heart which, though not enlightened, is not an enemy to the truth; which, though not holy, is still innocent, and offers no obstacles to divine grace. It is the regeneration of a heart *corrupted* as well as *blind*; which *hateth the light, neither cometh to the light, lest its deeds should be reproved*: it is the conquest of passions which oppose their whole force to the law of divine truth: it is the eradication of perverse and sinful habits which have struck their *roots deep* into the whole mass of our nature. Are these works which can be effected in a few moments? Victories which are easily obtained? Ask the experience of all the truly penitent. What struggles, what conflicts, have they been obliged to maintain with a blind and hard heart before it could discern the beauties of holiness, or be penetrated with the love of the Redeemer! What a long and distressing warfare with a stubborn and rebellious will, before it would submit to the grace of the gospel! with a sensual imagination continually assembling before the soul the ensnaring images of vice; with irregular passions continually hurrying them into sin! How often have they been obliged to return foiled from the contest; and, after they seemed to have made some progress towards an entire victory over their lusts, have they been again overcome in the moment of temptation, and had all their labours to begin anew! Yes. it is only after many long and arduous conflicts that the pious have been able to conquer the dominion of sin in the soul; and to attain at last to the kingdom of heaven.—Can you then, O sinner!

presume on accomplishing this great work in the rapid instant which you may still enjoy on a death-bed ; in the short and tumultuous interval between the attack of diseases and their fatal period? Were the mind in the most favourable state for exerting her full powers, how little could be done in that brief time for eternity! But urged by extreme disease upon her destiny, and overwhelmed by her fears, she is still less able to accomplish so great a change. Her distracted thoughts incessantly hurry her from her work to her danger, and again from her danger to her work. All her efforts are feeble and confused. She besieges heaven in all the importunity of prayer. It is her only, and now almost vanishing hope. But, ah! she expires without being able to attain the consolation of hope.

To such hazard is the delay of repentance till the close of life exposed, even if you could enjoy the utmost you can promise yourselves, the warning of a death-bed. But *this warning*, fruitless as it commonly is, you *may not* enjoy. Death often lies in ambush for his prey, and in the moment of the deepest security, suddenly seizes upon it. Will you then risk your everlasting salvation on the delusive, the hopeless promise of a death-bed repentance? Will you reply to all the invitations, the admonitions, the remonstrances of religion, *I resolve to repent before I die?* Death may arrest you while you are forming the resolution. Your next step may be to the tribunal of your judge. The same moment may sound the alarm of the coming of your Lord, and forever close the door against you.—This is the first danger of postponing re-

pentance till the approach of death ; the sinner will want *time* to accomplish so great a work.

2. As he will want *time*, he will also want the *powers necessary to attend to it* as becomes the important and arduous nature of this duty.

The work of eternity is to be done ; and what can be expected in the few days, or perhaps the few moments in which the last fatal disease commonly finishes its dreadful course, from a *weak and fainting mind* ; from a *confused and faltering reason* ; from a *heart in which the sources of life are almost extinguished* ? Perhaps acute pain takes from the wretched sufferer all power of thinking except upon his miseries. Perhaps, sunk in a profound lethargy, he rather *dozes* than *lives* ; and his flighty thoughts resemble the wanderings of a dream. If the fever seizes on his brain what wild and incoherent fancies fill and distract his mind ? How can we reason with him on his duties, and his eternal interests, who receives false impressions from every object around him ? How can he know his Saviour who knows not the friends who are weeping by his bed-side ? All then is chaos and confusion in the soul ; and the powers of reformation and repentance are lost with the powers of reason and reflection.

To some who hear me I may, perhaps, confirm this argument from their own experience. Have you, at any time, been brought, by the hand of God, near to the gates of death ? Urged upon your destiny, as you thought, and trembling before the justice of heaven, what composure of mind did you then possess for the great work which was before you ? What clear discoveries could you attain of divine things ? What tumults agitated your breast ! What fruitless struggles did you maintain with an impeni-

tent heart without being able to make it relent ! What efforts did you make to break through the profound darkness which covered your soul without being able to see any light ! What confessions did you make of the past sinfulness of your life, but without being able to appease conscience ! With what earnestness did you assail the throne of grace, but without being able to calm your terrors. What resolutions did you make of amendment, if God should spare you to recover from that bed ! Ah ! this is *commonly all the fruit of a death-bed repentance* : it consists only in resolutions for *the time to come*, which the dying sinner does not live to execute ; which if he did live, he would probably forget with returning health. Did you not then do as much for your salvation as, in the same circumstances, you are likely ever to do again ? What was its fruit ? Ah ! what would have been the fearful destiny of the soul, if she had then been called to her judgment ? And, will you again hazard your everlasting interests on that desperate hope—the hope of repentance on a death-bed, from the wreck of which you have but just escaped ? Your Lord will then come to call you to *judgment*, not to extend to you *new mercies* ; to receive your *account*, not to *repair the errors of a mispent life*.

To all these representations, will the sinner oppose the power of God which is able to change the heart in a moment and is not limited to any order of means or of time ; and the mercy of God which is ever ready to hear the cries of the miserable, and the perishing ? The almighty power, the infinite goodness of God we cannot deny. They are truths precious to every sincere christian. But in drawing such expectations from them, you would

make them the grounds of the most unwarranted and dangerous conclusions. For,

3. The impenitent sinner, in the last moments of a mispent life, will have no *reasonable foundation of hope in the divine power and mercy.*

The moral order of things, not less than the natural, has its fixed and certain laws. Moral changes are usually the slow effect of culture, and of time—of the gradual developement of truth, and the application of proper motives to the heart. And is it reasonable to expect that God will depart from this order only in favour of a sinner at the close of a life spent in despising or abusing the means of grace which he has afforded him? But is not repentance, you ask, the gift of God? May it not, therefore, be imparted at any moment? This question, I will answer by another. Is not every blessing of divine providence equally the gift of God? But, are those blessings *ever* bestowed independent of the natural means with which he has been pleased to unite them? Is it not God who bestows on you the abundance of harvest? But, will you ever *reap* if you have not *sown*?

Whatever degree of influence may be ascribed to the grace and power of God in the regeneration of the heart, can we believe that he will extend that grace, or exert that power in favour of some sinners only to encourage so many others to contemn the established means of their salvation, and to hazard their eternal interests on the desperate contingencies of their last hour? The power of God, indeed, *can do every thing*. But has he not imposed *limits* to the exercise of his own power—the *limits of wisdom—the limits prescribed by the order of the universe?*

If the divine power affords no reasonable ground of hope to the impenitent sinner at this awful crisis, as little, perhaps, is he entitled to draw it even from the *divine mercy*; that attribute so much abused by men to the encouragement of their crimes—that attribute from which they have formed almost unlimited expectations in their last moments; that attribute which is supposed to be able to refuse nothing to the tears and miseries of an unhappy soul.

Men deceive themselves by the sentiments of compassion in their own breasts, by the strong sympathies which they often feel for their fellow sinners, and their fellow sufferers. Private compassion and public justice move on different principles. In the administration of human laws, how often do we see the sympathies of the *man* obliged to yield to the duties of the *magistrate*? The plans of the *Divine Mind*, and the operations of divine providence are formed on views infinitely beyond the reach of human understanding. They embrace the whole universe. And the destiny of each individual is linked, by more immediate or remote relations, to innumerable millions of other beings. All must be governed by the same immutable laws, and no personal considerations, however interesting they may appear to us, can alter their invariable course. Do we not see the wheels of providence move on with constant and undeviating regularity and never arrested by any of those calamities which most deeply touch our sympathy? Is all the anguish of a frantic mother who sends her shrieks to heaven over her infant expiring in agony, and who alternately implores its mercy, and accuses its justice, sufficient to suspend the inexorable stroke of death? If heaven were governed by those principles of pity which can refuse

nothing to the cries of despair, and from which the self-love of sinners expects such miracles on a dying bed, would fire and tempest, would pestilence and death every where spread such cruel ravages among the human race? Would Abraham have interceded in vain for the guilty cities of the plain? Nay, would not hell itself be unpeopled, and its unquenchable fires be extinguished? But those dreadful fires never cease to burn; and its miserable prisoners are held, and will be forever held, the hopeless victims of eternal justice.

Even the divine benignity and compassion, therefore, afford no reasonable ground of hope, at this late hour, to an impenitent sinner who has despised the means, and wasted the season, of salvation. Will God, by the facility of his compassions enter into your plans, O sinner! and, after you have indulged only your own pleasures, crown with eternal life the miserable remnants of a soul and body which have been exhausted among sinful joys? Will he save you at the last moment only to encourage so many others to destroy themselves? With what confidence will you be able to turn your dying eyes to his eternal throne to solicit for that mercy which you have always rejected, or abused while it was offered to you? Remember, that when mercy has exercised itself to its appointed limits, justice assumes the throne and measures with the line and the plummet* the sinners whom its thunders are about to destroy.

I might argue from the *habits* of confirmed holiness which are necessary to enable the redeemed to relish the pleasures, and fulfil the duties of that pure and immortal state of holiness and love where they shall dwell for-

* Isaiah xxvii. 17. 2 Kings xxi. 13.

ever. I might argue from the labours, the sacrifices, the self-denials by which the pious at last attain to the kingdom of heaven ; whereas you affect to live in pleasure and then hope to be transferred almost from the midst of your crimes to the regions of purity and glory. I might argue from the good works which follow the dead who die in the Lord, and on which, the Saviour Judge shall pronounce his sentence of benediction, and eternal life, Mat. xxv. 35. But what are the works which follow the sinner, who has been impenitent till his last moments, but the *works of his passions*; but his *follies and his sins*?

Your time will not permit me to pursue these illustrations; and, after remarking that the case of the thief upon the cross, (which has been so often appealed to on this subject,) affords no reasonable ground of hope to those who have all their lives enjoyed and abused the grace of the Saviour;—and that the parable of the labourers has no reference to a death-bed repentance, but to the late reception of the Gentiles into the church of God, I shall conclude the series of these melancholy proofs, with the awful and unqualified denunciations of the spirit of God.—*Because I have called, and ye refused; I have stretched out my hand, and no man regarded; but ye have set at nought all my counsel, and would none of my reproof, I also will laugh at your calamity; I will mock when your fear cometh; when your fear cometh as desolation, and your destruction cometh as a whirlwind; when distress and anguish cometh upon you. Then shall they call upon me, but I will not answer; they shall seek me early, but they shall not find me.*

Do you say that this doctrine represents the divine nature, all merciful and gracious, in the most austere

and gloomy light?—It represents it in that light only in which it is exhibited in the whole word of God, and in the whole course of providence.—Our most wise and merciful Creator has furnished to men the means of improvement and the means of happiness; and if they neglect the one, or abuse the other, is his goodness obliged to repair their errors and to save them from the natural consequences which, by an inevitable law, he has made to follow their crimes? No, he justly leaves the fool to reap the fruits of his folly.

Has he not in his mercy provided a Saviour? Is not that Saviour and his salvation *freely* offered to men? Has he not instituted means of grace abundantly sufficient for our salvation, if they are faithfully improved? The enjoyment of these mercies, at once acquits the goodness of God, and leaves the sinner without excuse; the misimprovement of them leaves him, with aggravated guilt, to suffer the just punishment of his iniquities.

It is a false and dangerous idea in religion, that after God has richly furnished to us the means of salvation, he is to save the sinner at last, independently of the use of those means, and notwithstanding their most criminal abuse. No, the course and the laws of nature progress with uniformity in the *moral*, not less than in the *natural* world. If men have despised the rules of temperance and sobriety, will all their regrets and self-reproaches restore their health, or relieve the pains and the anguish which their vices have planted in a broken constitution? If you have neglected the means of improvement in youth, will any inspiration impart to you the virtues or the knowledge which will qualify you to hold a respectable station in future life? If so much time, and so much pains, if so many labours, and so many self-

denials, as we see, are necessary to enable us to act a part with dignity and propriety on the brief theatre of the present world; are none, nay, are not infinitely *more* required to prepare us for a glorious and immortal existence? This world is our *school*, our *discipline* for eternity. And as youth impresses its character on our maturer years, so the character which we bear with us hence, shall form the basis of that endless progression which shall commence when we enter on a future state of being.

These reflections, while they vindicate this doctrine of religion from unreasonable severity and gloom, and demonstrate its analogy with the course of providence, urge us to the most faithful and earnest improvement of *our precious time*. This invaluable season, and this *only season of our salvation*, is hastening to pass away. It is consuming while we speak. And when once the summons of death, or the trumpet of the archangel, shall proclaim that time shall be no longer, that the Judge is approaching, if you have *no oil in your lamps*, while you *go to buy*, or, in all the agony of prayer intreat of heaven, Lord! Lord! open to us—then, the door shall be shut.

Do you ask if this is not robbing the last moments of men of their only remaining consolation? No, it is inviting them never to expose it to such a desperate hazard; it is inviting them to place it, in *proper season*, on an immovable foundation; on *the rock of ages*; it is destroying an idea fatal to true religion, and the happiness of mankind. For if sinners can flatter themselves with enjoying their pleasures in the full career of health, and, when they can enjoy them no longer, of obtaining salvation from the indulgence of heaven in the last crit

ical moment of a mispent life, will not their hearts forever repel all the persuasions, or the terrors which the gospel can address to them to bring them to repentance? Do you ask then, what are all those appearances of a lively and sincere repentance exhibited by dying sinners in their last moments; their tears, their prayers, their agonies of mind, their self-reproaches for the past, their resolutions for the future? Are they of no avail with a merciful God? I have already shewn that the divine government and the sympathies of mortals move on different principles. If that which touches our compassion could move the purposes of God most just and holy, or change the laws of the moral world, who would not be saved? Few can preserve their insensibility to the last moment of life. However they may have lived, all tremble, all pray, all resolve, and repent, when they see before them the opening grave, and the tribunal of judgment. Then we have heard those who never prayed before, pour out their souls with a frightful earnestness at the throne of grace: but they uttered rather the cries of despair than the prayers of penitence and faith. Those who in the days of their prosperity only scoffed at the ordinances of religion, now call for them with importunity, solicit the prayers of its ministers, and of all good men, and seem disposed to rest too much upon them, because they find nothing in themselves on which to rest. Nature is dissolving; and, having no anchor of hope in the dreadful storm, they endeavour to cast their souls, in this moment of anguish and despair, on their counsels and prayers. They seize them as a perishing warrior, one miserable and almost hopeless plank in

the universal wreck of soul and body. Good God ! how awful is the situation !—struggling in the agonies of *death*—distracted with the terrors of *remorse* and *guilt*—overwhelmed with fearful apprehensions of a *judgment* to come—to be forsaken of thee ! !—*But thou hast numbered and finished thy mercies !*