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SERMON CCCXCVI.

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PHILADELPHIA.

THE DEATH OF A MOTHER.*

"I bowed down heavily, as one that mourneth for his mother"—Psalm xxxv. 14.

THERE is a peculiarity in every kind of bereavement. There is enough to separate it from all other modes of trial, to produce a peculiar state of feeling, and to convey its own lessons to the soul distinct from those imparted by any other divine dispensation. The loss of a wife—a friend, a companion, a sympathiser in trials, a fellow-heir of the grace of life, a sharer of the joys and a divider of the sorrows of our pilgrimage; of a son who we hoped would be our stay and staff in old age, and perpetuate our name when we are dead; of a daughter whom we have tenderly nourished and tenderly loved; of a sister, the companion of the playful days of childhood, and a kind friend as she advanced with us to the maturity of life; of a father, the counsellor and guide of our youth—each one of these bereavements has its own sad lesson to convey to the soul; each one touches a cord in the heart which vibrates only then. It is a part of our duty and discipline here, carefully to gather up these lessons, and apply them to our own souls.

In the text it is supposed that the death of a mother affects those who are bereaved by her loss in a peculiar manner, and that such a loss is among the heaviest of sorrows. "I bowed down *heavily*, as one that mourneth for his mother." To see the force of this text it is not necessary to suppose that this is the heaviest of *all* the sorrows which we can experience, nor is it necessary to make any comparison between this and the other forms of bereavement which we may be called to endure. All that is necessary to say is, that there are cords of the soul touched then which have

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SERMON CCCXCVII.

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DEATH AND IMMORTALITY.

"Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was; and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it."—Eccles. xiii. 7.

THIS text contemplates the human body at the point of dissolution. It closes an allegorical description of the gradual decay of our physical powers, until that important crisis is reached, when the soul is separated from the body; the latter descending to the grave, and the former taking its flight to the judgment.

Solomon exhorts us not to postpone the duties of religion, and preparation for death, until those evil days—*i. e.* the period of old age and infirmity—come on, in which we shall say, we have no pleasure in them. He then describes the indications of old age creeping on and shading every prospect which was once so bright and attractive to the youthful eye. Even the sun, moon and stars will be less brilliant. A film will gather over the eye premonitory of the darkness of death. The keepers of the house—the strong and active limbs—shall tremble. The teeth shall fail—the back shall bend, and the ear no longer discriminate between the voice of a bird and the daughters of music. The old man shall be full of fears "He shall be afraid of that which is high, and fears shall be in the way." His head shall blossom white as the almond tree; and the weight of a grasshopper shall prove a burden. Even desire shall fail. Extinguished in the soul are the very impulses to labour and activity. Other minds must now contrive for him, and other hands must supply him. What now remains but for the silver cord to be loosed, and the wheels of nature to break at the fountain! Then all is over. "The dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit unto God who gave it."

I. The first point suggested by the text, on which for a few moments, we may profitably dwell, is, that the soul is here recognised as an existence distinct from the *body*.

Solomon asserts that the body is dust; *i. e.* a material substance. It is the same essentially as the ground on which we tread. The stroke of death identifies it with dust. Scarcely could it be believed, prior to this event, that our bodies are but clay tenements. Whilst the soul animates them, they seem in every respect dissimilar to the senseless clod. How unlike, in its texture and colour, is the flesh to its kindred dust! The eye, that inlet of beauty and knowledge, from which the light of mind streams and flashes, and the soft silken lock that trembles to the slightest breath, are but finely organized dust. Penetrate the tomb where beauty reposes, and not a trace will you discover of the once admired form. All that can be found are the rotten fragments of its coffin, or the cold black mould it has enriched. Indisputable evidence this, that the body is but organized matter, and is the same essentially as the ground on which we tread! Nature, in this instance, gives her testimony to the truth of revelation. The sacred writer, speaking of the reunion of dust with dust, affirms that it was so originally. The allusion is to that act of creative power by which primeval man came into existence. "The Lord God," says Moses, "formed him," that is his body, "of the dust of the ground." What thus sprung from dust is destined, by a retributive act of divine justice, to return to dust.

But whilst the body is manifestly but organized matter, and must be resolved into its kindred element, the *Soul* on the contrary is a separate existence, immaterial and indestructible.

This is evident from the scriptural account of its creation. The tenor of the narrative, in relation to the formation of the body, is, that the Almighty completed its mechanism ere yet it had the power of life or motion. "He then breathed into its nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living soul." What language could speak more plainly the separate existence and diverse nature of the soul and the body! The one is a thing of material workmanship. It is constructed entirely out of the dust. The other is not *fabricated* but *inspired*. It was born, if I may so speak, out of the breath of God.

It is a *living* soul; essentially vital, *i. e.*, indestructible. It has neither extension, solidity, nor parts. The causes which operate to dissolve the body can have no such effect, so far as we can see, over the soul. Attentively consider the account given by Moses. It will convince you that in its origin, its nature, and its destiny, the soul is an existence distinct from, and altogether unlike the body. That which came from the breath of the Almighty was more than mere *animal* life. Besides intelligence, it possessed moral affections, boundless capacity, and unspotted holiness. In short, the soul of man was an humble type of its great original, in whose nature there is nothing material, for "God is a Spirit."

Had not sin entered to mar and break down this primeval structure, what a permanent and blissful union would have subsisted between the soul and the body! Without an unlawful or presumptuous stretch of the imagination, we may suppose the soul delighted with her new abode. Its curious workmanship excited her admiration. Its sensitive power over the beauties of creation awakened her wonder. It was a natural and delicate medium of sympathy between herself and the created glories of the universe. Little did she think how soon she was to be driven out of it; and that, by her own criminal act, she was to pull down into the dust this tabernacle of the flesh. Little did she dream, that time would ere long lay his shrivelled hand upon that open brow, and leave there the deep furrows of anxiety; or that death would dim that eye and stiffen those limbs and resolve that body into a mass of putrefaction. But so it was; and so to this day it continues to be. Every hour as the mortal remains of some are heard slowly rumbling through our streets, are we impressed with the truth that "Sin has entered into the world, and that "the wages of sin is death."

But is this the end of man? When you have placed his body in the dust, and shaped the hillock over his grave, is there no more of him? Is this the end? The text says, no. It is but the material part that sleeps in the tomb. "The spirit has appeared before God who gave it." Here then is a direct and positive affirmation of the separate existence of the soul, and of its immaterial, *i. e.*, its indestructible nature. If, in the dissolution of the body, death effects no essential change upon the soul; but simply allows of its departure to the presence of God, it is manifest that the latter cannot be identified in its elementary nature with the body. They go, at death, in different directions. The one goes back to mingle again with its original dust, and the other as an accountable agent, is recalled to the presence of him who gave it existence.

By the dissolution of the body, and the temporary separation of the Soul from it, neither personal identity nor personal responsibility is materially affected, much less annihilated. There is in every human Soul an individual moral stamp, as characteristic as the differing features of the human body. It respects not only the redeemed in contradistinction from the wicked; but also the varying traits and attainments of each individual. Speaking of Abraham, whose body had slept for ages, the scripture says, in proof that his individual soul was recognized as existing in a separate state far away from the slumbering body; "God is not the God of the dead but of the living."

Again. We may consider the body as a mere mechanical structure, adapted to the purposes and circumstances which mark its present state of being.

It is manifestly, in all its parts, arranged with a view to the convenience, use, and enjoyment of the present world. The eye is adapted to receive and transmit the rays of light, so as to form a perfect image near the brain : which image is the medium of perception. In like manner, the lungs are adapted to the air—the ear to sound—the nerves to touch and sensibility—the taste and smell, to food and fragrance. Some of these faculties, it is said, will perform their functions even after the Soul has departed. The eye, for instance, will give an image on the retina, and the ear will vibrate to sound. But *ideas* are no longer received by the image or the vibration. The mansion is deserted.

We grant, that so intimate is the connection in this life between the Soul and the body ; so mutually dependent, so sympathetically blended are they ; that upon the breaking up of the mortal machinery, from whatsoever cause, the vital principle ceases, and the soul departs.

So far as we can see, there is in the structure of the human body an adaptation to the scenes and circumstances of the present life *only*. There is nothing in its physical organization that points to a future state. Its connection with and its influence over the Soul has, as we shall see, an important bearing on the present responsibility, and future destiny of the latter. It fulfils this mission, and then, by the decree of heaven, it expires. The part which it is to act in a future state requires a new organization, adapting it to a higher and more ethereal medium. Such a change it is destined to undergo. “ It is sown a natural body, it will be raised a spiritual body.” Its resurrection is practicable by the power of God, and is certain by the promise of God.

But when we consider the nature and properties of the Soul, we at once discover something that has reference to another state of being. If, as in the unconscious brute, there were indications of nothing more than *animal* life ; if the habits and propensities of the living agent evinced no traces of immortality, we might well be in doubt as to the separate existence and indestructible nature of the soul. But on this point there *can* be no doubt. There is in man more than mere emphatic life. Between him and the brute creation there is a very broad distinction. From a necessity of his nature, he is obliged to admit moral obligation—to feel himself the subject of praise and blame. He can be impressed with the knowledge of God, and with a sense of accountability. Now, that part of the human nature in which these thoughts, and feelings, and moral impulses dwell, is the human soul. Too subtle for the examination of our senses, it discovers its nature only by its operations and effects. This is the deathless principle in man. Its imperishable nature is neither proved nor disproved by the possession of animal life ; but is seen in the scope of its intellect, and in the exercise of its high moral faculties. Organized matter may have animal life ; but

mere animal life, is of itself, no proof of immortality. The essential and distinctive attributes of a Soul are found in the higher faculties of reason and moral responsibility.

Whilst therefore we find in the body nothing that indicates a future state—its organization relating only to the circumstances of our earthly condition—we have no reason to wonder, that at death it should return to its kindred dust. And if, in the soul, there were no more indications than there are in the body, of a separate existence and a future state, we might be justified in the conclusion, that men like brute animals died to live no more. But when we find in man, a capacity for unlimited improvement—~~which~~ the brute has not ; when we find a longing after immortality ; a conscience or moral faculty ; an apprehension of future happiness and misery—neither of which can be predicated of brutes—we are compelled to make a distinction between animal life and the immortal soul. We see at a glance that the soul, unlike the body, is adapted to a future state, and craves a provision for eternity. At present it is an imprisoned chrysalis, its latent energies restricted by the casement that confines it ; but the era of its expansion and its liberty is yet to come. Casting off at death its exuviae, it will develop the strength to suffer or to enjoy, of its own appropriate immortality.

Thus is the soul emphatically the man. It is reason's throne. It is the wild fancy's habitation. It is the only proper subject of praise and blame. Its union with the body though wonderful is not absolutely necessary either to its existence or its activity. It can and it does exist apart from the body. Whilst awaiting the resurrection and reunion of that body, it neither passes through a purgatorial purification, nor sleeps in a dreamy elysium. In scope and activity, its unfettered powers may rival the energies of Lucifer or of Gabriel. Tracing the good man's soul in its flight to eternity we may say with Young—

" See how it presses on the angel's wing,
Which is the Seraph, which the child of clay ?"

II. The character and responsibility of the soul are affected, in a very important sense, by its union with the body.

It has pleased the Almighty God to place the human soul and body in such close connection with a view not simply to the convenience and pleasure of our present relations ; but as a test also of the moral affections. In the original transgression the body we know was the means of exciting the soul to wrong. The forbidden fruit was " pleasant to the eye and good for food." The sensual propensity which ought to have been resisted was indulged. Hence " lust having conceived brought forth sin." And since that fatal event, the body, acting still more powerfully on the soul, is influential in affecting its moral feelings, and so shaping its destiny

for eternity. The abuse of the body to purposes of evil is universal. We make it the instrument "of unrighteousness to sin." We allow it to controul the desires and the affections. We give it more influence than Gods law will justify. Many idolize it; and all by nature and practice are more or less its slaves. Behold the Epicure saying, "What shall I eat and what shall I drink:" and the pleurist asking for some new excitement of the senses: and the fashionist decorating the body at the expense of the soul: and the libertine converting himself into a brute! All these, by abusing the body, load the soul with deep criminality as it passes on to the limit of its probation.

If the life that now is were the boundary of human existence there might be the shadow of an apology for all this. The voluptuary might riot. Ambition might snatch the laurel reeking with tears and blood. Wealth might build her Babylons, and swell with conscious pride. Men might seize the passing pleasure as they were crowding to the gulph of annihilation. The alternate laugh of joy and shriek of despair; the shout of drunken deaouch and groans of dissolving nature; the song of merriment and the dirge of death might be heard at once, nor produce that shuddering horror which we feel when thinking of the Soul and of its destiny. But the same inspired author who has said, "the spirit shall return unto God who gave it," has declared also "that for all these things God will bring us into judgment."

The character and destiny of the soul in a future state is made to depend on its characteristics in this life. Its inhabitation of the body has much to do in fixing these characteristics, and of course in shaping its eternal destiny. If the body is abused; or preferred to the soul, if its wants and pleasures are consulted more than the interests of the soul, it will inevitably augment the guilt and condemnation of the sinner.

And here we all stand acknowledged culprits even at the bar of conscience. Condemnation rests upon every soul of us. In this respect we have all abused our nature and broken the law of God. And were salvation to depend on our works, not one soul of us could be saved. But, blessed be God, we have a better ground of hope, laid in the merit and sufferings of the Son of God. Wherever and to whomsoever *his* name is made known a new feature is given to human probation. But if this last this only hope be rejected, the sinner dies without remedy. He dies for ever.

The term of this probation is, for wise seasons, made shorter in some cases than in others. Three score and ten is the scriptural limit. A few overleap this boundary whilst millions come short of it. Adrift on the current of life, men seldom think that every moment they are forming a character to which death will give immutability. Enters this thought into the bosom of the busy merchant

building his only hopes on this sandy shore? Does the son of pleasure, pampering his idolized body, does *he* reflect that the death-angel is but awaiting the signal to send him horror struck before his God? Look at the careless rejector of the gospel! He throws away his soul, when duty comes in conflict with desire, with a hardihood that challenges the Almighty, and sets at defiance eternal retribution. But is God indifferent to all this? It is true, he is long suffering. He lengthens out their probation. "The sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily." But He has a limit set which they cannot pass. When the sinners cup of iniquity is full, there is a movement among his ministers of wrath; and whilst one is weaving his shroud, and another measuring him for his coffin, the paleness of death gathers upon his face, and he lays himself down to die. This slight indisposition he imagines, will speedily pass away. So think the friends also. But the light talk of hope dies away into suppressed whispers of anxiety, and death, like a nightmare, is seen creeping upon his cold bosom. "The dust must now return to earth as it was, and the spirit must return to God who gave it." There is no discharge in this warfare. Go the Soul must, prepared or unprepared. Inexorable death! He hears no prayer—admits no parley—grants no reprieve. His approach appals the stoutest heart. But why are we afraid of death? Is it because of the pain that precedes the convulsive gasp? Is it the winding sheet—the coffin—the cold damp vault—the mouldering corpse, that so wither up the heart? These have their influence; but these are not all. It is conscious guilt—it is the thought of retribution that curtains the death-bed with its horrors. And what can break their force when eternity is lowering in awful grandeur on the dying eye? There is, thanks be to God, one thing which *can* break their force; but that, alas, in ten thousand instances, has been scorned or neglected. The sinner, rejecting Christ, has ventured to meet the storm *alone*. Horrible is the death of an unbeliever; for he dies "without God and without hope." Then goes the Spirit into the presence of Him who gave it. After death is the judgment. Quick as thought flies the soul to the tribunal of God.

Death, my hearers, is a common event. You can scarce look out of your windows but a funeral train is passing by. The dust is returning to the dust. The soul is pressing on to its final account. To your door the summons will soon come, and the grand question is, are you ready? Is your house in order, your lamp trimmed and burning, your salvation sure?

"What are your hopes beyond the grave,
How stands that dread account?"

Are you straining every energy up to the work of your salva-

tion? Are you subordinating every earthly concern to that of the undying Soul? Are you throwing your affrighted spirits into mercy's arms? Are you smiting the heavens with your cries of anguish? Ah no; the lethargy that precedes death is upon many of you; from which I fear you will awake not, until the terrors of a dying hour apprise you that it is too late for ever. Avert your eyes from this dreadful precipice you cannot. Step by step you are moving towards the brink. Your feet will soon press the crumbling margin. "O for some guardian angel nigh!" O for an arm then to cling to! The body sentenced and sealed, for death, cries to you; prepare. The soul reeking with guilt, shuddering at the thought of eternity—cries out, prepare. Conscience, filing already the vials of wrath, cries, prepare. Heaven with its glories, and Hell with all its horrors, cry out prepare; prepare to meet thy God!