

SERMONS,

PREACHED

IN THE PARISH CHURCH OF

HIGH WYCOMBE.

BY

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SERMON XIV.

THE BREVITY AND VANITY OF HUMAN LIFE.

PSALM xxxix. 5.

Behold, thou hast made my days as an handbreadth, and mine age is as nothing before thee; verily, every man, at his best state, is altogether vanity.

THESE simple words have an energy in them, which none but a dying man can fully understand. We may indeed have felt something of their meaning, as we have heard them read over the corpse of a beloved friend, but then this feeling has been neither deep nor lasting. We have heard the death-bell toll, we have followed the ashes of a fellow-mortal to the tomb, and we have perhaps breathed a sigh or shed a tear to human vanity; but we have not long retained the impression to which the mournful scene has given rise. The cares or pleasures of the world have again called for our whole attention, and we have again given it them. In one short day perhaps, we have forgotten that man is mortal and that his life is vanity. We have forgotten that the words we have heard read over our departed friend, must soon be read over our own cold remains; that the same death-bell will shortly toll for us; that our poor bodies must soon be the tenants of a grave as silent and as dark as his.

In compassion however to our thoughtless hearts, the Almighty sometimes steps out of the track of his ordinary dealings with us, and forces these truths on our recollection. By some sudden and awful stroke, he makes his providence preach them to us in a voice so loud, that all must hear it, and so plain, that all must understand it.

Such a blow has been lately struck within our own borders.* That dark and mysterious providence which the mind neither of men nor of angels can penetrate, has sent death, in one of its most affecting forms, into the very happiest of our palaces; and now calls upon a whole nation to look on, and remember that man, even in “his best state, is altogether vanity.”

The sad particulars of this solemn event are familiar to us all. They have fastened themselves on every mind, and have deeply affected every heart. Of its consequences to our country, we know nothing. They are all hidden behind the veil of futurity, and no human sagacity can penetrate them. There may indeed be mercy in the afflictive dispensation, but as far as our feeble

* This sermon was preached November 19, 1817, being the day on which the lamented PRINCESS CHARLOTTE of Wales was interred.

eyes can reach, we see nothing but judgment for England in the stroke. O how loudly does it call upon every inhabitant of this sinful land to humble himself before the Lord, and “to turn to him in weeping, fasting, and in praying!”

It is not however my wish to call your attention to the political causes of this event. Neither will I pain your feelings by attempting any panegyric on her who has been made the subject of this mysterious providence. She is now removed far beyond the reach of any praise of ours; or if her departed spirit is still permitted to hover over the country that she loved, she will find a panegyric, stronger than words can give, in the throbbing hearts and streaming eyes of a mourning land. Instead of dwelling on that conjugal affection and filial piety, that train of virtues, which graced her character and endeared her to us, let us rather strive to see our own nearness to that world whither she is gone. Let us view this solemn visitation as dying men. It addresses us in this character, and speaks to us a language which affects not a nation only, but a world; not time only, but eternity. O may the Spirit of God send home its sacred lessons to every heart!

The psalmist’s words lead us to consider, first, the reasons why the fleeting days of life are called our days; secondly, the shortness of these days; and, thirdly, their vanity.

I. *Why then does the psalmist call the days of life our days?*

There is not one of them which we can strictly call our own. The stream of time keeps rolling on, and not the smallest portion of it can we hold within our grasp. .

1. But still the fleeting days of life may be called our days, because *they bring to us innumerable mercies as they hurry on*. We cannot stop them, but there is not one of them, that is not commissioned to drop many mercies on our heads as it passes over us; mercies for our bodies, mercies for our families, mercies for our country, mercies for our souls.

2. These days too may be called our days, because *they are days in which we are allowed to work for eternity*.

We shall live for ever, but we shall not for ever have the power of benefiting or injuring our souls. There is no work of conversion beyond the grave, no work of salvation in eternity. There are no means of grace in that unknown world, no Bible, no ministers, no renewing Spirit, no inviting Saviour, no saving cross. All our work must be done before we come to the grave, or all beyond it is one never ending night, “in which no man can work.” 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 tomb.

3. The days of our life may be called our days, because *they are days for*

which we must hereafter give an account. We have no real property in their hastening hours. They are one after another lent to us to be returned again. They are lent us to be employed for their Master's use. "Take this," he says with every hour that he gives us, "and occupy till I come." 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.

Before that throne, brethren, is an ever open volume, in which all our sad abuse of time is recorded. Every sinful act of our lives is written there, every hasty word, and every unholy thought. Thousands of sins which we have long forgotten or never thought of, are still as fresh in that awful record, as at the very moment when they were committed. They are all waiting there to meet us again at the bar of God. Where then is the man among us, who can seriously think of such a book as this, and feel no "searchings of heart" at the thought? O if we could but be allowed to take one glance at one of its dark and crowded pages, with what trembling haste should we fly to a dying Saviour, and cling to his cross! The record of his sins for only one day, would be enough to fill the heart of the most careless among us with fear and trembling for his whole life.

II. Let us proceed to consider, secondly, *the shortness of these days which the psalmist calls our own.* "Behold," he says, "thou hast made my days as a hand-breadth, and mine age is as nothing before thee."

We all know that when we speak of the shortness of anything, there is always implied in the term a comparison with something else of longer duration.

1. Hence we may observe that our days are short, when compared, first, with *the period once allotted to the life of man.*

Immediate death was the sentence denounced against the sin of our first parents. "In the day that thou eatest thereof," said the Lord, "thou shalt surely die;" but the patience of God lingered nine hundred years before he demanded of the first criminals their forfeited lives. Their immediate successors too enjoyed, for the greater part, nearly as long a respite. We count our years at the most by scores, but the men before the flood reckoned theirs by centuries. At an age when we are sinking into the grave, they were but just entering upon life. Their glass generally ran on for nearly a thousand years, while "the days of our age are three score years and ten; and though men be so strong, that they come to four score years, yet is their strength then but labour and sorrow; so soon passeth it away, and we are gone."

2. Our life too seems short, when compared with *the duration of many objects around us.*

The same sun that now shines upon us, shone more than five thousand years ago on our fathers. The moon that enlivens our nights, has seen nearly two hundred generations of men rise and fall. Even the works of our own hands remain much longer than we. The pyramids of Egypt have defied the attacks of three thousand years, while their builders sunk perhaps under the burden of four score. Our houses stand long after their transient proprietors are gone, and their names forgotten. Where is now the head that planned, and the hands which built, this house of God? They were all reduced to ashes five hundred years ago. The very seats we sit on have borne generations before they bore us, and will probably bear many after us. The remains of those who once occupied the places we now fill, are underneath our feet, and we must soon join them in their vaults to make room for other generations. Before another century has begun its course, these walls will resound with other voices, other feet will tread these courts, and another race of men will say of us, "Our fathers; where are they?"

3. How striking too does the shortness of life appear, when compared with *the eternity of God!* "Mine age is as nothing before thee," says the psalmist; "nothing in comparison of thee."

The existence of the Lord Jehovah never had a beginning, and can never have an end. "From everlasting to everlasting," he is God. Compared with the eternity which he inhabits, the longest life shrinks into a mere point, a nothing. Indeed no duration of time, however long, will bear the comparison. Thousands and millions of years are no more here, than a day or an hour. If we take as many years as there are grains of sand upon the sea-shore, and as many more as there are particles of dust in this huge globe of earth, and bring into one reckoning all these multitudes of years, the mighty sum bears no more proportion to eternity, than a moment, a twinkling of an eye, bears to ten thousand ages. Such a calculation confounds the mind by its immensity; but the whole amount would be a mere point, yea, less than a point, in the reckoning of eternity.

4. We may see something also of the brevity of life, if we compare it *the work we have to do.*

The eternity of which we have been speaking, is our own. When God gave us life, he made us heirs of it. The immense inheritance has been entailed upon every one of us, and we must spend it either in the height of happiness or in the depth of misery. Now the present life is given us to lay up a treasure for this eternity; to work out, by the power of divine grace, a salvation which shall stretch itself through its countless ages. Great as this work is, multitudes of the human race have performed it. They have been strengthened by Christ, and, though utterly helpless in themselves, they have now obtained a treasure in eternity, with which the collected riches of a world cannot for one moment be compared. We ourselves also must work out this

great salvation, and work it out too in this short life, or live for ever in hopeless misery.

Viewed in this solemn light, as the only season of preparation for eternity, to what a fearful importance does time at once rise! How ought we to value its fleeting hours! Its shortness makes it infinitely precious. Tell a man that he has only a day to labour in order to secure food, and ease, and happiness, for a hundred years, and mark how that man will prize every moment of that short day! how intent he will be upon his work! how dead to every other object! Invite him, under such circumstances, to the song and the dance; call him to scenes of revelry and dissipation; offer him the richest baubles the world can give; and the man will spurn them from him; all the haunts and pursuits of vanity will be sickening to his soul. How is it then, brethren, that we who have but a few short days to live and to prepare for eternity, can be so idle and so easy? How is it that we have so much time to spare for the world, for vanity and sin?

This view of life shews us too the vast importance of everything we say and do in it. All our words and actions are connected with eternity by a chain which never can be broken. We shall hear of every one of them again in an eternal world. They are seeds planted in heaven or in hell, and are producing for us there, this very hour, either the sweetest or the deadliest fruits.

If we thus compare human life with the period once allotted to it, with the long duration of many objects around us, with the eternity of God, and the all-important work of laying up in Christ a treasure for eternity, we shall be constrained to acknowledge that the psalmist's complaint is not an unmeaning one; that our days are indeed as an hand-breadth and our age as nothing.

Observe too that in making this comparison, we have given to life its longest duration. We have said nothing of the countless thousands of the human race, who are daily cut down in the maturity of manhood and the bloom of youth. One half at least of those who enter this world of death, are called out of it before they have seen seven of its years. We have said nothing of the stroke which can reach the infant before it sees the light, and lay the mother in the dust, though shielded by health, and strength, and youth. Neither have we said anything of the time that is consumed in sleep, and in procuring the supplies necessary for our existence. Many hours of all our nights are hours of oblivion, and many of our days are days of nothingness. Take these from human life, and how poor a pittance is there left! If however we pass over all these things in silence, and give to life all the hours and advantages it can lay claim to, the conclusion is the same—it is “a shadow that departeth;” a flower that “in the morning is green and groweth up, and in the evening is cut down, dried up, and withered;” “it is a vapour that

appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away.”

Plain as this truth appears, it is by no means easy to get it permanently fixed in our minds. We acknowledge the shortness of life, and yet when we look forward to years to come, our feelings strangely belie our words, and life seems to stretch itself out a long extended line. But what do we know, brethren, of the years that are to come? We must go for an estimate of life to the years that are past. We know something of them from experience. What then is their language? Ask the man who is bending under the weight of four score years. He will tell us, that “the days of the years of his pilgrimage” have been “few and evil;” that his lengthened life appears to him only “as a tale that is told.”

Mark too the silence with which the few years allotted to us pass away. They make no noise as they roll over our heads. The stream of time flows on with the profoundest stillness. It passes by us, and we see it not. All that we know is, that it has passed us; and we can only wonder that it should so soon be gone. If we look back to that part of our life which has already run its course, we can retrace but very little of it. We remember it only as we remember a dream. It is full of confused images which we cannot distinctly recollect, and which serve only to perplex and bewilder the memory. And yet the events of these years, which we now so indistinctly remember, once called into exercise all the energies of our minds. Some of them filled us with delight, and some harassed us with vexation and grief. All however from our cradle to the present hour, seems now but little better than one humiliating blank: and just the same, a few months hence, will the present time appear to us, crowded as it now is with pleasures, cares, and fears.

There is also another painful thought connected with the silent rapidity of time—the longer we stay in the world, the swifter does its flight appear. A year to a man is not more than six months to a child. Our days seem to rush on with a more silent and rapid motion the nearer they draw to the goal of death, as though they were eager to bear us away to our destined eternity. The fact is, that time, correctly speaking, is nothing more than a succession of ideas; these ideas are less numerous, and the impressions they make less deep and permanent in old age than they are in youth; and consequently the road of life has fewer marks to remind us of our progress.

III. But here perhaps it may be said, “What if the period of life is thus transitory? Man is a great and noble being, and has powers that enable him to crowd into this short existence a consequence and dignity suited to his greatness.” The words before us however speak no such language. There is another truth declared in them, which pours contempt on all human greatness. They tell us, not only of the shortness of life, but of *the vanity*, the

utter nothingness, of man. This is the testimony they give; “Verily, every man, at his best state, is altogether vanity.”

And is the Bible the only teacher of this humiliating truth? No. The events of every day, the observation and experience of almost every hour, speak the same language. With what a mighty voice, my brethren, is the solemn truth now sounded in the ears of every inhabitant of this land! There is a tomb opened today, that sends it home to our very hearts.

1. It shows us the nothingness of man, by forcing us to remember *the precariousness and little worth of all the earthly blessings we call our own*. There is not one of them, which we can be sure of retaining even for an hour. Have we a beloved child, our only hope and solace in a dreary world? Death, before we are aware, may strike a blow which will leave us childless. Have we a wife, endeared to us by innumerable offices of love? She may be a corpse tomorrow. O how loudly does such a stroke as this call upon us to have no idols upon earth, to sit loose to the dearest earthly connections, and to cling closely to our God! A husband or wife, parents or children, are wretched substitutes for the rock of ages. We rejoice over them in the morning, but “the wind passeth over them in the evening, and they are gone.”

The same mournful scene shows us too the little use which earthly blessings are to us, while we retain them. Who more blessed with all the world can give, than she whose loss has filled our land with weeping? And yet what could it all do for her in the hour of need? Neither the skill of physicians, nor the tears of a beloved husband, nor the prayers of a trembling nation, could keep off even for an hour the hand of death, or mitigate its terrors. Why then do we so much love so weak and vain a world?

2. We may be reminded of the nothingness of man, by looking also at *the utter vanity of all his schemes and prospects*.

We are ever cherishing the most extravagant hopes, and creating in our imagination the most visionary prospects. We are the mere creatures of a day, while ages would be wanting to execute what we amuse ourselves with planning. But how often are we forced to observe the abrupt termination of human schemes! Man dies, and “his expectations perish.” Years were wanting to complete his plans, but they are all cut off in a moment. The thread is snapped asunder, almost before he has begun to wind it. We daily see that one man builds, but another inhabits the house; one sows, but another reaps the corn. “Man heapeth up riches, but he cannot tell who shall gather them;” and as for his honours, the laurel fades as soon as it is placed upon his brow, and the applauses of a world, if he obtains them, are soon no more to him, than the wind that blows over his grave.

Who can tell how many hopes and projects will be buried within that tomb which has been opened today? The hand that was so often stretched out

in deeds of mercy, is now motionless; the head that seemed destined to wear a crown, is now encircled by a shroud; the generous heart that once glowed with the thought of scattering blessings round a nation, is cold as a stone. All the thousand fond anticipations connected with the name of Mother, are buried in the tomb. O let the thoughtless young among us, who are planning schemes for the time to come, look here, and see the utter vanity of all human expectations. They may say within themselves, "Today or tomorrow, I shall go here or there, and do this or that but what answer does this coffin send them? "Thou knowest not what shall be on the morrow. Thou mayest die today." O my friends, press home this answer to your hearts. Which of you is thinking with delight of the hour, that shall again bring you to the arms of some much loved friend or parent? The next tidings which that parent hears of you, may be, that you are numbered with the dead. Which of you is expecting with a trembling hope to be hailed a Mother? Before that sound may reach your ears, you and your babe may say to corruption, "Thou art my father;" and to the worm, "Thou art my mother and my sister."

The very general terms in which the psalmist speaks in the text, are also deserving of our notice. He does not say that some men are vanity, but "every man;" not the poor and the ignorant, the feeble and the old only, but "man at his best state and not only is every man vanity, but "altogether vanity."

His language is as strong too, as it is general; "Verily," says he, "every man is vanity." He speaks of it as an incontestable fact, as the result of his own actual experience.

The young and the healthy then, the wise and the learned, the rich and the great, are all included in this saying. Every man is ready to think himself exempted, but we are all on an equality here. No rank, however elevated, can lift us above the common vanity of man, nor any degree of poverty sink us below it. The palace is as much the habitation of disappointment, infirmity, and disease, as the cottage; and the robes of royalty, and the tattered garments of beggary, are alike preludes to the shroud. "All flesh is grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of grass." The flower may be finer in its texture than the common grass; its colours may be more gay, and its properties more useful; but it grows in the same soil, it has a common root, a common nature, and a common end. It is exposed to the same scorching heat, the same frost, and the same scythe. When "the grass withereth, the flower fadeth."

We have thus taken a hasty review of the picture which the psalmist has given us of human life. It would, under any circumstances, suggest to us the same inference, but when viewed in connection with the mournful occasion which has brought us here, how forcibly does it remind us all of *the great duty of consideration!*

We are all most awfully careless, brethren, about every thing which relates to the soul and eternity. This carelessness is inherent in our nature, and no power but that of God can root it out. And yet we could not have within us a more fatal enemy than this. Inconsideration is as ruinous to the soul, as any sin can be. The God of mercy is acquainted with this bane of our nature; and in compassion to our souls, he employs his providence to awake us out of this dreadful sleep. Has then the mournful stroke which is yet fresh in our memories, produced this effect? It has filled our eyes with tears and our hearts with grief; but has it made us feel the precariousness of all our earthly blessings? the vanity, the shortness, the uncertainty, of our own lives? the nearness of eternity to our own souls? Has it made us think and act as dying men? Has it led us to put such questions as these to our hearts— Am I prepared to die? Is the great business of life begun? Have I made the days which have passed over me, my days, by employing them in seeking the treasures of salvation? I see that I must soon be in eternity; what have I to hope for there? What is stored up for me in that everlasting home? My Bible tells me that the pursuits of the world and sin can only lay up wretchedness in eternity for my soul; in what other pursuits then have I been engaged? Have I been making a serious business of religion? Has it occupied more of my thoughts, than all earthly objects have? Do I know what is meant by that deep humility and self-renunciation, that renewal of the heart, that simple trust in the cross, that deadness to the world, that dedication of the whole man to God, which my Bible tells me must be found in me, before I can be prepared to die? If I know nothing of these things, what is my state? what are my prospects? My life is vanity; what will be my eternity?

A few such simple questions as these, pressed home to our consciences in the secrecy of retirement, would make us all confess, that a thoughtless sinner in such a world as this, is a wonder in the universe. To see the daily ravages of death around us, to be standing on the brink of the grave, to have our feet on the borders of eternity, and yet to be unconcerned about the never ending realities of that world which stretches itself before us, and to be absorbed in the wretched vanities of that little spot of earth which lies behind us—where is the being, not a partaker of our thoughtless nature, who does not wonder at our folly and mourn over our wretchedness?

The subject we have been considering reminds us, secondly, of *the great evil of sin*.

Transgression and death both came into the world together; the one is only the appointed wages of the other. “Thou hast made my days,” says David, “as an hand-breadth.” He tells us here that it was not mere chance which made our years so few, and our life so full of vanity. He traces up the shortness of our days to the anger of an offended God.

That holy Being who “inhabiteth eternity,” will not suffer creatures such as we, to violate with impunity his sacred law. No sooner had man sinned against him, than he made a solemn display of his infinite justice by passing a sentence of mortality on our race. It is sin, which has lodged the seeds of death in our frame, and corrupted our nature. It is sin, which fills our graves, and lays generation after generation in the dust. O how inconceivable must be the magnitude of that evil which could make a God, so rich in mercy, display such fearful vengeance! Let us then ever connect our sin with our mortality and nothingness. Let every pain that we feel in our mortal bodies, let every sick bed that *we* visit, let every corpse we see, and every knell we hear, remind us of the malignant nature of this evil, and teach us to regard it as the great enemy of man.

Another serious thought follows closely upon this—if sin is so dreadful a thing in this world of mercy, what will be its terrors in a world of unmingled justice? If it has brought disease and pain, corruption and death, into my body here, what will it bring into my soul there? Brethren, lay this thought to heart, and may it lead you, this very hour, to that long heard of and long despised fountain of a Saviour’s blood, which only can cleanse your soul from sin. This great evil requires a great remedy; and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ has provided one of never failing and boundless efficacy. “He hath sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins;” and this mournful providence is a call to us from his throne to hasten to the Saviour, whom his love has provided. O may the Holy Spirit incline our hearts to listen to the call! May none of us despise this great salvation!

We may infer also from the words before us, *the necessity of a simple, undivided trust in God.*

We all feel that we need a helper, and we are prone to look to one another for the help we need; but how unwise is it for an immortal being to place his dependence on a creature who is so near the grave, and who, “in his best state, is altogether vanity!” We go to a broken cistern, when we need a fountain. We place our arm on a feeble reed, when we need the support of an everlasting rock. The natural consequences of this conduct are obvious; we are daily experiencing them. Our lives are filled with disappointment and vexation. Either our prop is knocked from under us, or it sorely pierces the hand which leans on it. But no man ever yet trusted in God and was disappointed. There is no weakness, no vanity, no death, in him.

How loudly is the Almighty now calling us off from every earthly ground of dependence, by that solemn dispensation which has assembled us here today! He has laid in the dust one who seemed destined to be a blessing to our land. He appeared to have formed the instrument with peculiar care, and yet we have seen him dash it to pieces in an hour. The language of this

afflictive stroke is plain. It calls upon us to “cease from man, whose breath is in his nostrils.” It says to us, “Put not your trust in princes, or in the son of man, in whom there is no help. His breath goeth forth; he returneth to his earth; in that very day his thoughts perish. Happy is he that hath the God of Jacob for his help, whose hope is in the Lord his God.”

It is true indeed that the man who has the strongest trust in the Almighty, cannot fathom this mysterious act of his providence; but then it is enough for him to know that Jesus, his Saviour, sits on the throne of the universe, and makes “all things work together for good” to his beloved church. Though he cannot see his God, he can trust him. If we are partakers of this spirit, if we have attained this simple dependence upon God, the blow which our country has sustained, however grievous, will not disquiet us. The kingdoms of the world are as much under the care of God, as the sheep of his own little flock; yea, as his own eternal heavens. They are not outcast orphans, discarded by their heavenly Father, but provinces of his immense empire; and he constantly watches over and manages all their affairs. Our own England is the object of his tenderest care. He has “graven her upon the palms of his hands; her walls are continually before him.” “God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved. God shall help her, and that right early.” True, we have lost an arm of flesh; but the everlasting arms of Omnipotence are still underneath us. Let it be our concern to be the reconciled children of Jehovah in Christ Jesus, and amidst all the changes and chances of this mortal life, we shall be safe. “God will be our refuge and strength;” and this shall be our song; “The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.”

The subject we have been considering reminds us, lastly, of *the folly and danger of indecision*.

The period of life is too short, and the work we have to do in it is too great, to allow us to hope for anything from half measures. The case calls for the most prompt and unqualified decision. It tells us that to defer is to be in danger; that to hesitate is to be undone. How then shall we bring our worldly hearts to this entire devotedness to God, to this earnestness in religion? Experience tells us that no resolutions of ours can effect the work. It bids us trust to no resolutions; but to lie low, as weak, helpless, and guilty sinners, before the Saviour’s cross. There is the source, not of pardon only, but of everlasting strength. There may be found victory over the world, temptation, and sin; a life of happiness; a death of peace; and an eternity of joy.