

# SERMONS,

PREACHED IN

THE PARISH CHURCH OF GLASBURY,

BRECKNOCKSHIRE,

AND

ST. JAMES'S CHAPEL, CLAPHAM,

SURREY.

BY

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## SERMON I.

THE END OF MAN'S EARTHLY HISTORY.

ECCLESIASTES XII. 7.—“Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was, and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it.”

THUS, brethren, does old age end; and not old age only—thus will soon end the history of us all. The former part of this chapter may be applicable to very few of us. It exhibits a picture of man in his latter days. It describes him as gradually sinking under the weight of years, and the infirmities of dissolving nature. These we may never experience; for we may die before the “evil days” come, which bring them. But die when we may, this will be the close, the winding up, of our earthly history, “The dust shall return to the earth as it was, and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it.”

We have here for our consideration, first, the two parts of which we are all composed, and, secondly, their different destinations when they are separated.

I. What is man? Have you ever asked yourselves this question? If you have seriously done so, it has perplexed and bewildered you. We know not what we are. All that we can learn about ourselves, is no more than the simple fact with which every child is acquainted, that we are made up of a body and a soul; that we are composed of two very different parts, which became connected we know not when, and affect one another we know not how. They are called in the text “the dust” and “the spirit.” These two united form that common, but mysterious piece of workmanship, which we call man.

1. By *the dust* we are undoubtedly to understand the body, that part of us which may be seen and felt. And it is called by this humiliating name partly on account of *its origin*. “Of the dust of the ground” did the Lord God form man. He could have formed him without this dust, without any materials whatsoever; but to keep him low, to mortify the pride of his vain descendants,

he took the meanest substance that the earth could furnish, and moulded that into the shape of man. Hence we are said to dwell “in houses of clay;” the habitation of our spirit is called an “earthly house;” its “foundation is in the dust,” and of dust are its walls composed.

This expression may refer also to *the perishable nature* of our bodies. They are not formed of materials that are strong and lasting, of brass, or iron, or stone. Then we might have defied the hand of violence and of time. But we are dust, one of the lightest and most unstable of all substances. One moment it lies before us in our path; the next, a breath of wind removes it and scatters it at its will.

And what are we, but creatures born to perish? so liable to frailty and change, that we are said to be “made subject” to vanity? Vanity has a dominion over us, and we are every moment feeling its power. Nay, we are vanity itself, and that not in our worst condition only, amidst the ravages of disease and the weakness of age, in our “best estate” we are “altogether vanity.” A wind passes over us, and we are gone. Hence Job connects our frailty with our earthly origin. No sooner has he spoken of our “houses of clay,” than he says of us, “They are crushed before the moth. They are destroyed from morning to evening. They perish for ever without any regarding it.”

But there is one idea more comprehended under this term —*meanness*, worthlessness. Nothing is of less value than dust. It is rudely trodden on by every foot. It is sometimes removed as a nuisance out of our path.

And what is the worth of these bodies of ours, which we pamper and adorn with so much care? True, they are the workmanship of God, monuments of the omnipotence which could build such wondrous fabrics from materials so vile; but they still are dust, composed of the same elements as the body of the meanest reptile, or a blade of grass. They are of importance to us now, because they are the tabernacles of the immortal soul; but separate them from that soul, take them when the spirit has forsaken them—what is their value then? Our friends will tell—they will bury us out of their sight. In the very houses which we now call our own, we shall be denied a lodging. Loved or hated, a grave will be dug for us, and we shall be left in it in darkness and alone, valued only by the worm which takes us for its prey.

2. But man is not all dust. “There is a spirit in man.’ And it is his own spirit; it forms a part of him.

And what is *the spirit*? None but the living God can tell. It is that strange something within us, which no human eye has ever seen, but without which we can do nothing and are nothing, at least no more than a clod or a stone. It dwells in the body, animates and rules it; but is not confined to it. Spurning the limits of time and space, it roves among the ages that are gone, as though it had lived in them. By the wings of its powerful imagination, it flies to the remotest parts of the earth, it ranges through the orbs of the sky; nay, it soars

beyond them; it rises to the great God himself, penetrates into that invisible eternity which he inhabits, and elevates, and expands, and transforms itself, by contemplating those glories which are at his right hand.

In its nature, it is altogether different from the other part of us. We know not how it was made, but we know that nothing on the earth was employed in the creation of it. It was altogether heavenly in its origin, brought into existence by the immediate act of God. If formed of any materials, they are such as lie far beyond the reach of man's discovery or conception; they are such perhaps as angels cannot comprehend.

It is immortal. The body is of short duration. It soon arrives at its perfection, and soon decays; it may speedily be worn out. But the soul never dies. It may change; it may be enfeebled, or polluted, or degraded; but it cannot be destroyed. Even sin, which has withered its beauty, cannot put an end to its existence. Corruption and the worm cannot touch it. Amidst all the generations of time, all the ravages of death, all the vicissitudes of human things, it lives and acts. The wreck of a world can no more injure it, than the fall of a leaf in a distant forest can wound the eagle that is soaring in the skies.

Is not man then a mysterious being? Look at his body. How "fearfully and wonderfully" is it made! Composed of dust, and yet so contrived and framed, that the wisest of the sons of men cannot perfectly learn its structure! He owns himself baffled as he studies it; and the more he studies it, the more is he lost in admiration at the number and variety of its parts. Every limb, every vessel, every movement within it, is an amazing proof, we might almost say, an amazing effort, of almighty power and skill.

But this is nothing when compared with the spirit. The one excites our admiration as we think of it; the other will not let us think of it. It is out of our reach. It mocks our efforts.

And then the union that exists between this moulded dust and the immortal spirit—how close is it! To affect the one is, in some degree, to affect the other. And this union is as strange as it is close. What is the tie which connects these two parts of us? They are held together by the breath which is every moment passing to and fro from our nostrils; at least, when that breath ceases to pass, their union ends.

We need not then look around us for wonders. We ourselves are wonders. The youngest child within these walls is enough to confound and humble an enquiring world.

II. But the two parts of which we are composed, though closely united, are not inseparable. A trifle can at any time sever them. Sooner or later, they must be parted. If disease or violence do not rend them asunder, as though weary of their union, they will separate of themselves. Let us then go on to consider *their different destinations* when separated.

We must not enter on this consideration, without remembering that we have now before us the most important enquiry which can possibly engage our thoughts. Be we in what state we may, it is certain that we cannot long continue in it. It must soon come to an end. We must undergo a change. And if the question, What will this change be? does not interest us, where is the question that ought to affect us?

1. We are reminded of the change which *our bodies* are destined to undergo. "Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was;" that is, the body shall become just what it was before the hand of God modelled, and the living soul animated it. It was dust, and it shall turn to dust again. A humiliating and loathsome process shall mingle it with the clods of the valley, and give it to the winds of heaven.

And must it really come to this? Must the forms that move around us, must the frames of our children and friends, that seem so firm, thus perish? They must. They may be very dear to us; as we look on them, they may appear so lovely and strong, that we can hardly deem it true that death can harm them; but they will soon be gone, gone as a dream of the night or a shadow of the morning. We ourselves shall follow them. We may go before them. Ere we are aware, weariness and pain may be exchanged for rottenness and dust. Our "time is appointed," our "months are numbered," even our "days are determined;" and when they are spent, we shall all lie cold at the root of the rocks, at the foot of the mountains.

But why is this? Why must the body, so curiously and exquisitely wrought, so much loved and cherished, be thus broken in pieces? We say, because it is mortal; but how came it mortal? Though but dust, yet it is not therefore of necessity perishable dust. The same Being who wrought it into the shape of man, could as easily preserve it in that shape, as he now destroys it. The power which gave it life, is surely able to sustain it in never fading vigour.

We often err in this matter. We talk of death as coming in what we call "the order of nature," and seem to regard it as a thing of course, as a part of the original portion and destination of our race. Thus we endeavour to conceal our shame. But as long as man continued sinless, death had no more power to touch his body, than it has now to destroy his soul. He became mortal when he became sinful. Dust he was; but it was not till he became rebellious dust, that he heard a voice saying to him, "Unto dust shalt thou return."

When therefore we see the shrouded corpse and the opened grave, it is vain, it is worse than vain, it is deceptive, to say, "See there the work of nature." Nature abhors the charge. That havoc is the work of sin. Yes, brethren, the pride, the sensuality, the worldly-mindedness, the self-will, the forgetfulness of God, which we make so light of—these are the things which

laid our fathers in the grave, and will soon lay us there. Their vileness, their guilt, their destructive power, are written in the ashes of all the dead, and will soon be written in our own. Such is the account scripture gives us of the matter; “By one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned.”

It is in vain that we object to this statement, that we charge this dispensation with severity; the stubborn fact remains—all that ever lived, have died; and we, in the midst of our objections and cavils, are hastening to the tomb. There is only one conclusion to which a rational enquirer can come; it is this—Sin is a greater evil in the sight of God, than it is in mine. I have yet to learn its malignity. No heart can conceive aright of its terrors.

Such is the destination of the body, and such the cause of it.

2. Let us look now at *the destination of the soul*, “The spirit shall return unto God who gave it.”

Here we are again baffled. Where is God? How does the spirit find him? By what strange means does it ascend to his abode? We may ask these questions, but none can answer them. Probably the spirit itself could not, even after it has travelled this mysterious journey. It is certain that we, on this side of the grave, know nothing of the matter. We may think and talk about it, we may amuse ourselves and perplex others; but as for comprehending it, we might as easily scale the heavens. We must end where we began—this is the extent of our knowledge—“The spirit shall return to God.”

The Lord Jehovah always claims the spirit as his own. “All souls,” he says, “are mine.” If they are in a limited sense ours, they are so only because he has given them to us. He was at first “the Father of our spirits,” for they came from his hand; and he is still their Lord. Hence when our bodies are about to turn to corruption, he recalls them to himself. He might still confine them in their wretched habitations; force them to linger among their mouldering ruins, and to witness their desolation; imprison them in a dead, as well as in a living frame: but he spares even the guilty this degradation. The body goes to the dust alone. The liberated spirit spurns the dust. Death beats down its prison walls, and then, like a captive exile, it hastens to be free, and a moment takes it to its native skies.

For mark—the return of the spirit to God is represented here as immediate. It takes place at the very instant when the “silver cord” is loosed, and “the wheel” of life stopped. Superstition, or vanity, or affection, may for a long time keep the body, or at least a part of it, from its destined home; but nothing can detain or delay the soul. God says, “Return;” and ere the word has gone forth from his mouth, he sees it naked before his throne. This truth should correct an error into which many of us are very prone to fall. We often look on the realities of eternity as very distant from us. We think that between us and the awful scenes we have heard of, many hundred years of

insensibility and nothingness will intervene; that our souls will sleep in some unknown land, till the close of all things. But where have we learned this notion? Not from the Bible. There is not a single declaration in that sacred book, which can sanction it. On the contrary, there are many passages which go directly against it. "This day shalt thou be with me in paradise," said our Lord to the malefactor who was dying at his side; and in what state there? Senseless and lifeless? No; alive to its glories, transported with its blessedness. And when Paul thought of being absent from the body," what did he connect with this absence? What did he look on as its immediate and necessary consequence? He knew that he should be "present with the Lord."

O what a solemn thought is this! Who has not been thrilled by it, as he has heard the breath go forth from some fellow-worm? And who can resist its power, when he applies it to himself? Brethren, you are living just as near to eternity as you are to the grave. The hour of your entering into heaven or being cast into hell, is not one moment farther off than the hour of your own death. If you die today, where will tomorrow find your spirit? Not hovering over its deserted clay; not mingling unseen with your children and friends, to soothe itself with their sorrow for your loss. No: it will be among eternal joys or eternal sorrows; far from all the abodes of men; in the midst of the pardoned and glorified, or among the condemned and lost. It will be one of these inhabitants of eternity; taking its share either in their wailings or in their triumphant songs.

Hence we may observe that it is no light or trifling purpose, for which "the spirit returns to the God who gave it." It goes to him to give an account of all it has thought, and felt, and done, while in the flesh; of the use it has made of its own powers, and of the powers of that body over which it has ruled. He sent it here that it might know, and love, and serve him; he sends for it again at death, to enquire whether it has fulfilled its work. It goes to him therefore to be judged, to appear at his bar and receive its sentence; and then to enter on its final home. If found in Christ, clothed in his righteousness and purified by his Spirit, it will dwell in a world where it shall sorrow no more, fear no more, be unsatisfied no more. If found out of Christ, rising from its earthly tenement with the stains of sin polluting it, and the guilt of unpardoned sin testifying against it, it will be "driven away in its wickedness," far from the "presence of the Lord and the glory of his power."

We see then that each part of us goes to its own place when we die; each "returns," is restored, to its original source. The earth opens its bosom to receive its due, and it does receive it; earth is given to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust. The great God claims the spirit; it goes to him; he takes it, and disposes of it as he will. And in the destination of both, he magnifies his own great name. The body, as it perishes, declares his holiness in one world, while the soul, if lost, reveals it in another. If saved, it is saved "to the praise of the

glory of his grace.” It shines forth in the heavens, the brightest monument there of his unsearchable love.

This then is the view which this text affords us of our approaching destination. It warrants us in coming to this conclusion—*There are events about to take place in our history of far greater importance to us, than any we have yet experienced.* I speak not of the success or failure of our earthly schemes, of changes in our worldly condition or circumstances, of sudden riches or sudden poverty, of the loss of children, or parents, or kindred. I speak of what this text foretells, of the falling into dust of the very bodies which are here assembled, of the departure of your soul and my soul into the presence of its Judge.

And who can tell us what this presence is? As we think of it, the sinking of the body into dust is forgotten. To appear before the great and hitherto unseen Jehovah—to see him eye to eye and face to face, who formed the worlds and all that dwell in them—to stand before infinite majesty, and purity, and justice—to be in a world of spirits, and we ourselves also to be spirits—to hear a voice consigning us, and that for ever, to happiness we have never yet been able to conceive of, or to misery that even guilty man, in his wretchedness here, has never known—who is not bewildered at the thought? And yet this very appearance before God we must experience; this bewildering, overwhelming thought we must realize. There is no prospect, no possibility, of our escaping it. We shall as surely face our Judge in eternity, as we now behold one another here. And we may be called on to face him in an instant. Our soul is kept from returning to him—by what? by a little dust; by a body so frail, so easily dissolved, and liable to so many dangers, that they who know its structure best, wonder the most that it holds together for an hour.

Brethren, what think you of these things? these certain, and important, and probably near events which are coming on you? Are you prepared for them? Have they occupied your attention, and interested your feelings, and influenced your conduct? Have they made the gospel most welcome to you, the Saviour most precious, the world a thing of nought? If not, what can we say to you? What does conscience say? “Thou fool!”

There is something awful in the prospect of eternity even to the man who has been all his life long preparing to enter it, and who knows that, in any world or in any state, he is safe in Christ. This very day, as he has thought of it, he has prayed, if not trembled. And yet you, unprepared, unready, are at ease. There is something far more appalling in this unconcern, than in any scene which an open grave could show. That is the triumph of sin over a heap of dust; this is its triumph over an immortal spirit. And if this victory be so dreadful here, in a world of mercy, judge for yourselves, what will it be in a

world of wrath? O that we may seek of the living God a heart to fear its terrors!

But what is the language of this text to *the faithful servants of Christ*? It says to them, Be serious, be sober, be in earnest. Sit loose to the world. Think much of death. Look for it. Be every hour prepared to meet your God. “Let your loins be girded about, and your lights burning, and ye yourselves like unto men that wait for their Lord.”

But this is not all. Though it does not speak expressly the language of consolation, yet it reminds us of many things that ought to cheer us.

True, the dust must “return to the earth as it was and we may be content to let it go there. Our Bibles tell us that “it is a vile body,” a body of humiliation; and such we have found it. Its weakness and disease have often chilled, and fettered, and clogged, our souls; and what have its lusts and vile affections done? They have forced us to hate ourselves; they have made us weep and groan. And shall we repine at the prospect of escaping from such a body as this? O no, not if we were never to see it again. But we shall see it again, and dwell in it again. To the earth it must go, and lie there for a time in dishonour and ruin; but what says the scripture? “This corruptible shall put on incorruption, this mortal shall put on immortality.” In some mysterious manner, these frames of ours, which death shall break down, and worms destroy, and winds scatter—these very bodies shall be raised; they shall live again, as really and as vigorously as they are living now. The overthrown and polluted tenement shall be rebuilt; but no more an earthly tabernacle. No dust shall form it. It shall rise a pure and spiritual mansion, fashioned after the similitude of that glorious temple, in which the Son of man himself dwells and reigns.

As for your spirit, it will “return unto God who gave it.” Before your body is in its grave, your soul shall be in the bosom of its Lord, in the heaven of his glory. This shall be its end. And this end is near at hand. There are no revolutions of tedious centuries between it and you. A few mouths, at the most, a few years, will put you in possession of all that the God of heaven has promised, and exceeding abundantly above all that your most towering hopes have desired.

Repine then no more under bodily infirmities. Regard them, if you will, as tokens of your dissolution, and as preludes to the shroud; they are so; but what are they besides? The tokens of coming glory; the preludes of an approaching deliverance from all pollution and all sorrow; the forerunners of a meeting between you, and whom? Patriarchs, and prophets, and apostles? Friends whom you have loved and lost? Yes; and One greater and more beloved than all these. You shall see that Jesus who is all your “salvation and all your desire,” whose name is the hope of all the ends of the earth, and whose presence is the glory of heaven, the fulness of its joy.

