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A  
FUNERAL DISCOURSE

BY  
WILLIAM H. FURNESS.

MAY 4th, 1845.

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## DISCOURSE.

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JOB, IV, 15.

A SPIRIT PASSED BEFORE MY FACE.

ACCORDING to some, that, which constitutes us the moral and intellectual beings that we are, is simply the result of our physical organization. It begins, it grows, it suffers with that. And when that perishes, all our powers of thought, lofty as they may be, and all our affections, however strong and beautiful, vanish utterly and forever. This is what is called Materialism, the material philosophy.

I am not going to dwell upon it now. I would merely remark concerning it, that, while there are certain appearances which give it some colour of plausibility, it is a view of our nature which is very repulsive and melancholy. We can contemplate it with no degree of satisfaction. The mind absolutely refuses to be reconciled to it. The possibility of its truth when it occurs to us, especially in those seasons of bereavement, with which we are all at one time or another visited, envelopes us in the thickest darkness, and makes life seem to us a cruel cheat, a bitter mockery, and we loathe it. It seems to me that if we had nothing else to object to this view of our nature, it would be enough to satisfy us that it cannot be true, that we shrink from it so instinctively and so irreconcilably, that it is at war with our most exalted, our most generous affections,

that we can derive from it no possible comfort, no strength, no animation, but must inevitably, if we adopt it as truth, call back into our hearts and destroy and bury all our better powers and sympathies.

Thank heaven, there is another and directly opposite view of man, which, although it may be contradicted by certain alarming appearances, has at least this blessed argument in its favour, that it elevates and inspires us, that, when the world seems a chaos, it broods over it like the creating spirit, and when life is overcast with clouds, it bends over it the bow of hope and promise, and our sorrows are soothed and all our energies sustained and invigorated. The Spiritual philosophy, the christian idea of man,—let us turn to that, and consider how that authorizes us to represent our own nature.

Adopting this happier mode of thought, I look upon man, the thinking, conscious being, however intimately he may be connected with the body, and even though it may be impossible for us to conceive of him as existing independently of any material form, yet as a being entirely distinct from matter, of a different and indestructible essence, possessing innate and most exalted faculties. For want of a better word, and admitting the defectiveness of the term, I name him a spirit. I believe that the spirit of man, which alone is man himself, is antecedent to the body and superior to it. I say antecedent, and I mean that the spiritual principle, that in which resides the power of thought, of feeling, of consciousness, exists before the body, that it is not the effect, but, under God, the cause of the physical organization, that it is the spirit that gives form to the body and animates it, and that the spirit itself, so far from being the result of our material organization, is an emanation or offspring of God, and that the body is its dwelling place, its

instrument,—the faculty of vision, for instance, existing not in the eye, which is only an optical contrivance like the telescope, but in the mind, the spirit. I hold that it is the spirit which consciously or unconsciously gives life to the body, and keeps the heart beating and the blood flowing.

I believe also, that while the body with its various organs is a help and an instrument to the spirit, to the living soul, which is in some inscrutable way connected with it, it also limits the sphere and confines the inborn energies of the spirit. Let me explain my meaning by reference to a well known fact. You have all heard of the child in the Blind Institution at Boston, who is deaf, dumb and blind. Only one sense remains to her, the sense of touch. Her body, inasmuch as it possesses this sense in perfection, is the instrument of her mind, and helps the culture and growth of her mind. But in other respects her body is a prison to her, for no one doubts that she possesses the powers of sight, of hearing and of speech, and could exercise these powers, if their appropriate organs were only sound. So I conceive that the human spirit possesses powers, which the bodily senses, even when they exist in perfect soundness, furnish it with no means of exercising. It is placed in a material body, it is furnished with a limited number of organs, the five senses, for its culture and education, and all the power which it manifests is the development or unfolding of its own innate life, and education, (and all life, however spent, whether in schools or out of schools, is, in one way or another, an educating process,) is the bringing out into action the inborn power of the soul or spirit. It is not an adding to our nature something which it did not before possess, but it is the bringing forth of what is hidden, the waking up what is dormant, calling out the life that was slumbering in unconsciousness.

When we look upon man in this light, as an imperishable spiritual existence, dwelling in a tenement of flesh, which, while it manifests his power to us, does at the same time, hide him from us, so that we catch only partial glimpses of him,—when, I say, we adopt this view, we enjoy one great advantage. We are not compelled to interpret the outward appearances of weakness, decay and dissolution, as sure signs of the weakness and decay of the individual being. The body may be frail and languishing, such may be, from inscrutable causes, the imperfection of its organization, or in one way or another, it may be so impaired that the indwelling spirit may be unable to manifest its powers, and yet those powers may be of an angelic order. The poor idiot, for instance, who is unable to put two thoughts together, whose look is so vacant of all intelligence, and whose simplest movements are so uncertain, and who seems to be animated with only a dull animal life—in this apparent wreck of humanity, we may believe that powers, which would glorify a seraph, exist hidden, veiled, and although destined never to be unfolded in this life, yet hereafter, when freed from the clogs and obstructions of the body, to put forth the power and grace of an angel. Here the spirit-wings of thought are fastened down. They cannot expand. But when its present physical abode shall be broken up, then the imprisoned soul shall pass into another and happier condition of being, and soar upward in celestial strength and freedom. The infant, that dies in the very hour of its birth, that never opens its eyes upon the light of this world, we may regard, not as a mere passing breath of animal life. In that little form, so exquisitely fashioned, an immortal soul hath been busy, a being charged with the divinest power. It tarries not that we may become acquainted with its heavenly features. The angel flits by us, and we only

catch a glimpse of its vanishing form. So also when in the dear circle of our kindred, one is suddenly smitten, and the lustre of the intelligent and loving eye is dimmed, and the active form is prostrate, we are not forced to regard these outward changes from strength to weakness, from life to death, painful as they may be, we are not forced to look upon them as signs of the decay and extinction of the friend that we loved. These physical events are only veils, curtains, dropping down between us and the departing one. The invisible spirit that dwelt with us in sweet communion, and which made its presence and its virtues and its affection known to us, by the eye and the hand, and the lips, and the outward form, is not perishing—it is being gradually withdrawn from us. What is the new condition of its existence we cannot tell, we do not know. It may be falling into a slumber in the arms of God, from which it shall sooner or later awake to a deeper and nobler life.

It is manifestly the arrangement of Infinite wisdom that we should pass through a series of physical changes. It is necessary to the continuance and growth of our being that one-third of our time on earth should be passed in the unconscious condition of sleep. First comes the feeble state of infancy, and the infirmity of age is, I believe, essential, in like manner, to the welfare of our spiritual being. At all events, with the experience that we have, we are not compelled to infer from the weakness and decay of the body, that the spirit, the thinking being, the invisible soul is growing weak and decaying also. Nay, we may believe that the death of the body ministers in some unknown way to the life of the spirit, and that as the body falls into a ruin, the spirit is set free and catches glimpses of a new and better state.

You will observe, my friends, that it is not my purpose to prove that this is the case. I have not been arguing—I have only endeavoured to state briefly the spiritual view of man. There is high authority for this representation; but I have referred to only one consideration in its favour, its elevating and cheering character. It is good for us to look upon man in this light at all times. The meanest and the lowest become sacred in our eyes when every man is regarded as a glorious spirit, possessing godlike faculties, and an undying being. But most soothing and inspiring is this view of our nature in the hour of affliction, when tender ties have been broken, and those have vanished from our circles, who were to us as parts of ourselves. We need the comfort of such view on such occasions; whether it is the young that depart or the old. We need to have deeply impressed upon us a conviction of our spiritual and immortal nature, that when our friends vanish, as they are vanishing, we may not feel that they were nothing but shadows, and that we gave our hearts to mere phantoms.

But the thoughts to which I have sought to give expression have a peculiar interest to my mind in connexion with the recent departure of a venerable member of this flock, who was largely connected in this church. It pleased Heaven to visit her with severe bodily infirmity. A stroke of paralysis deprived her, the last twelve years of her life, of all power of utterance. The loss at first fell very heavily upon her, and she felt it sorely. But it was not long before she obtained perfect self-possession, and the light of a cheerful spirit shone from her features, and she became a very image of patience and serenity. When I saw her occasionally, I felt that it was with her, as I have said, that the spirit was not perishing with the body, that the

infirmities which afflicted the latter could not reach the former, that her invisible being was partially withdrawn from communion with visible things, that a veil had fallen between her and the world, and behind that veil, I could not doubt, the all-ministering Spirit of Truth and Love communed with her continually, imparting peace, and hope and faith.

Through a good Providence the nearest and dearest, the friend and companion of half a century, her kindred, her children and her children's children were all around her, and through all those long years she sate among them, voiceless indeed, but with a look of peace, silent as a family portrait, but with an eloquence in her whole appearance passing that of words, mutely appealing to their best affections, and affording them an opportunity of repaying that debt of love which they incurred, when they were watched over by her maternal heart, and they too wanted the power to speak their wants. And when on the fifty-second anniversary of a conjugal connexion which Heaven had most bountifully blest, she breathed her last, they found comfort in her release, they were glad for her that she was set free. At the same time her departure must have revived in them with new freshness, a thousand memories of her maternal love. A stranger perhaps might ask why, being so helpless and infirm, she was continued so long, but her husband and children can ask no such question. I trust they know that it was good for them that she was here. Must not that long deep silence have pleaded touchingly with their hearts? Was not that most excellent affection, filial love, kept in constant activity? Was not that venerable form, so mute and motionless, a centre where all their domestic ties were gathered? Alas for them if it has not been a means of grace

to their souls, that they have been called for so long a period to cherish a suffering mother!

A mother! What on earth has God made so mighty and so sacred as a mother's heart, mighty in the self-devotion which it prompts, and in the tenderness which it commands! There never was a heart so frivolous and selfish that the maternal sentiment, once awakened in it, could not penetrate and open to the most generous self-sacrifice. There never was a wretch so hardened that 'the pale image of his mother' could not move to penitence and tears. In the most polluted soul, the memory of a mother's love will keep one spot pure. The deathless flower of affection which a mother's hand hath planted, will keep fresh and fragrant when all that inner world is covered with the poisonous growth of sin. This it is, more than any other affection of our nature, which, more mighty than imperial sceptres, or myriads of armed men, keeps the world in peace, humanizing mankind and preventing them from rending and tearing one another like wild beasts. And it is as sacred as it is mighty, sacred in this, that it is the very first and fullest revelation of the Infinite Love. Without this revelation, all other revelations, although attested by signs and wonders from heaven, would be as seed thrown to the winds. They could not reach our hearts. We could not receive them. But now through the mother's heart we look into the immeasurable deeps of the Divine Love. He that formed the eye shall he not see? He that hath formed the ear, shall he not hear? And so with like triumphant confidence we may ask, 'He that made the mother's heart, shall he not love?' O ye children, those mothers bending over you, watching over you with sleepless solicitude day and night, ready at any time to die for you, or if you die,

to lay their bleeding and broken hearts upon your graves, those nearest and tenderest of friends, who live but in your honour and suffer worse than the agony of death in your shame—they are the representatives of the Infinite God to your souls. As you are touched by their love, you are touched by the very spirit of God. Through that dear relation which binds you to the mothers that bore you, you are brought into communion with God.

Such being the worth and sacredness of the tie which binds the child to its mother's heart, how can it be else than a ministration of grace to the soul of the child, when a mother's infirmities call for all tender thoughts and filial offices from her children. For their sakes it is well that she suffers, and if here or hereafter it is given unto her to see how her sufferings have had a gracious influence upon those dear ones for whom she was always ready to die, how will her mother's heart rejoice and sing for joy, breathing a richer harmony into the music of heaven, since she has been privileged to suffer for their sakes. If her pains and infirmities have no present good for herself personally now and here on earth, they will speed her on her upward way hereafter, and give a new inspiration to her spirit when she looks back upon them and finds that all unconsciously they were offices of love, and means of grace to her offspring.

"O welcome, though with care and pain,  
The power to glad a parent's heart,  
To bid a parent's joys remain,  
And life's approaching ills depart!"

But we may not doubt that all sufferings, however protracted, that all human infirmities, however they may seem to darken and crush the spirit on which they are laid, have a direct

beneficial influence upon the sufferer. We are unable to trace the method and process by which they act upon the soul. But it should be enough, abundantly enough for us that a love is watching over all souls, of which, as I have said, a mother's love gives us but an imperfect hint. Never breathe a doubt that the pains which a Providence infinitely wise and good appoints to the tender and the innocent and the aged are, in some hidden way, instruments of unspeakable good to them. Idle is it for us to expect to comprehend all the methods of the Allwise. His ways would not be infinite in wisdom, if our finite minds could understand them. Faith is more inspiring than knowledge. Let us have faith then, confidence. We have reasons enough to confide with filial trust in the great overruling power before whom, not a sparrow, not an atom of dust is forgotten. I have referred to one ample reason for the most entire faith, in the existence, the creation of that tender and holy thing, the affection of a mother. But there are other and abounding grounds for the same sentiment of fearless trust.

Amidst the awful manifestations of greatness, the tremendous forces that surround us, making us feel how insignificant we are, causing us to tremble lest such diminutive beings as we should be crushed and ground to powder by the mighty agencies everywhere at work—in this great, and crowded universe, where we seem but as dust, we discern here and there traces of an indescribable benignity, of an unspeakable tenderness, and we cannot but believe that as there is here Wisdom incomprehensible and Almighty Power, so is there Infinite Love. The first being that the child knows, its mother, what is she but a very symbol of all that is tender. The child awakes to the mystery of life on the maternal heart. This is to me a proof of the Creator's love more touching than I can

describe, the exquisite care which is lavished upon the newborn child. How is every thing provided beforehand for its comfort and protection! Affections stand ready at the entrance of life like mighty angels of God to receive it with open arms, to nourish and to guard it. And I cannot doubt—I must believe that the love that watches over it when it is first brought hither, continues to watch over it while it stays, and when it departs whether it departs at morning, at mid-day or at evening.

Again, what thoughts of goodness are suggested, what confidence in the Invisible Power steals into our hearts at this lovely season of the year, when Nature puts on her garments of beauty and gladdens the heart of man with her balmy breath! The unutterable goodness of the Unseen is written now on the bright blue sky and on every green leaf. It whispers among the graceful trees and sounds in the songs of birds. It comes upon us in the heavenly music of human sympathies and affections, in the love of friends, in the smiles with which they greet us, in the tears which they shed with us when our hearts are bleeding; we behold the love of God in every flower of the field, in every bird that flies through the air, in every insect arrayed in more than royal magnificence, aye, and in the thousand unexpected alleviations which we find in the day of our calamity. It beams upon us from the countenances of the living, and from the marble features of the dead, which are so often irradiated with an expression of perfect peace, like the evening twilight which comes from a sun that has set to break upon other lands with a morning splendor.

But the grandest revelation of the Infinite Love is in him, that bright and holy child of God, as whose friends we gather in this place. Amidst the darkness of our mortal condition, he is to us the angel in the sun. Through his eyes streaming with

tears the Infinite looks down upon us with celestial pity. Through his words the voice of God is heard. He took little children in his arms and blessed them, and now his blessing rests forever like the radiance of Heaven upon the head of childhood, and every child, whether living or dead, is transfigured thereby. He bore the burthen of human sufferings and has pronounced his blessing also upon the afflicted, teaching us to endure pain as the discipline of Paternal Love, and inspiring us with immortal hopes. He leads us to the bosom of the Everlasting Father, where we and all that we love, whether we sleep or wake, whether we live or die, may repose in peace and without fear. The trials of life are many, its temptations to unbelief and recklessness and sin are cunning and strong, its mysteries stagger and bewilder us, and we are well nigh borne down in the stern conflict, but thanks be unto God who holds forth to us the crown of victory by the hands of that godlike Conqueror of the world! Look unto him and be comforted. Look unto him and be strengthened and saved, all ye ends of the earth!







