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Edman Marston Esq
With the respects
William Plumer
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SERMON

ON THE DEATH OF HON. WILLIAM PLUMER.

PREACHED AT LEIPING SEPT. 21, 1851.

BY ANDREW P. PEABODY, D. D.

1851



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SERMON

PREACHED AT EPPING, N. H.

SEPTEMBER 21, 1854,

AT THE

FUNERAL OF HON. WILLIAM PLUMER.

BY

ANDREW P. PEABODY,

PASTOR OF THE SOUTH CHURCH, PORTSMOUTH, N. H.

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SERMON.

I SAMUEL, III : 18.

“It is the Lord, let him do what seemeth him good.”

THESE words are memorable, not alone for their own pious significance, but in connection with him who uttered them. He was an old man, who had grown old in honor and prosperity; and now he is suddenly overtaken by the prediction of a series of calamities, which will not only make him childless, but will bring him down to the grave with heavy and lasting reproach upon his name and family. His trial, in an earthly point of view, is as severe as it can be; it has no hopeful side, no consoling aspect. Yet there is not so much as a momentary visiting of distrust or doubt, but a spontaneous expression of confidence in the Divine wisdom and benignity.

There are two ways in which we may meet trials and afflictions. One way is to attempt to reason them out,—to account for them,—to determine the *why* with reference to their time, manner and circumstances,—to demonstrate point by point their consistency with the divine justice and mercy.

But this we can seldom do to our satisfaction, perhaps never with absolute truth. God's ways are higher than our ways, and God's thoughts than our thoughts. Were we wise enough to trace the reasons of his dealings with us, we should be wise enough to govern our own affairs without his aid. Because of the depth of his wisdom and the shallowness of ours, there must ever be clouds and darkness round about him. Often indeed we may see how calamity might have been worse. Often we may trace a certain timeliness in the visitation. Almost always we can discern kindly preparatives, palliatives and consolations. But even then comes the question, Why need this affliction have been sent in any form? or, deeper still, Why, under the government of a good God, need suffering ever take place? And there are griefs, which at the time seem to subserve no earthly use. How often is the very life taken, which to human view most needed to be spared, while the cumberers of the ground linger on, as if the death-angel had lost their names from his muster-roll! Yet more, the best influences of affliction can be developed only in the lapse of time, and can hardly be so much as anticipated in the fresh flow of sorrow. Job and his comforters attempted, each in his own way and each with manifold errors and misapprehensions, to reason out the case of the afflicted patriarch, and to justify the dealings of a mysterious Providence; but Jehovah, speaking out of the whirlwind, disallowed the reasonings of all alike, and propounded his own almightiness and mercy as furnishing the sole and ample basis for their faith and trust.

For us Christians there is a still higher ground of distrust in reasonings of this class. We think of ourselves and of our departed friends as immortal, and regard the entire discipline of this life as adjusted with reference to our future and eternal well-being. But the future life is to a great degree a sealed book to us; and the reasons for many of the divine dispensations may all lie beyond the grave. The friend that is taken from us may be called away, not because there was any earthly good to result from his removal, but to rescue him from certain evil which he must have encountered, or to transfer him to a more congenial school of education and sphere of duty, or to elevate him to some special service in the spiritual world, for which his discipline and character have peculiarly fitted him. The sorely afflicted among the living also may have their affliction sent for reasons which they can never recognize on earth,—to ward off temptations or dangers which they would have incurred, but in sight of which their altered course will never bring them,—or to preserve and perfect traits of character which would have been put in peril by continued prosperity,—or to fit them for a higher measure of happiness which they cannot anticipate till they awake in heaven to its fruition. For these reasons we are inadequate to sit in judgment on the course of Providence with us.

The other mode of meeting our afflictions is that suggested in our text,—“It is the Lord; let him do what seemeth him good.” We look away, we look up from our grief to him who has ordained it. We seek the reasons for it, not in our condition, but in his character. We presume not to open the

sealed book, but rejoice to trace the inscription on the seal,—“I will never leave, nor forsake thee.” God, the infinite, the unchangeable, is the soul’s chief need in the hour of grief. Our first feeling under severe affliction is that of utter insecurity. The ground seems heaving and quaking beneath us; the lights of heaven swim before our bewildered vision; the foundations are all shaken; every calculation is deranged, every prospect clouded, the whole earthly life unsettled. Well did the sacred writers draw their imagery for these appalling vicissitudes from the sea, and represent the grief-stricken soul as tempest-tossed, driven by the wind, buffeted by the billows. The first craving of the soul is for something firm,—immovable,—some ground of sure reliance,—some mooring or anchorage where wind and wave may lose their power. This we find only in the Rock of Ages,—the immutable Jehovah,—only when we can say in undoubting faith, “It is the Lord.”

“It is the Lord” omnipotent. The realm of nature lies beneath his fiat. No chance or fate has place in his universe. No disease plies its dread work by a blind necessity of its own. The floods may lift up their voice; but the Lord on high is mightier than they. The death-angel may brood with sable wing over our dwellings; but his arrows fall harmless except where God bids them strike. In his exhaustless resources, he can overrule the forces of nature,—can say to fever or pestilence, “Thus far shalt thou go, and no farther.” No power of harming can exceed its appointed limits and uses. The events that fill us with dread and agony are, in the lit-

eral and strict sense of the words, his doings, and when they seem inevitable, it is because he would not have them otherwise.

“It is the Lord” omniscient,—infinite in wisdom. Wanton or haphazard administration there cannot be in his universe. Purposeless events cannot take place. Disconnected, unaccountable, mysterious as the incidents of this mortal life often seem, they seem so because they are parts of a plan which comprehends all beings and all eternity. The reasons for them all lie open to the Supreme Intelligence. The same adaptation of means to ends, which presides in the structure alike of the sun and the field-flower, in the order of the firmament and the globing of the dew-drop, governs the seemingly troubled current of earthly affairs,—weaves with subtile skill the seemingly tangled web of human destiny. Of that web we now see only the reverse side, confused in shreds and colors, while to the inhabitants of heaven it presents only smoothness, symmetry and beauty.

“It is the Lord” gracious and merciful. We know him thus from the benignant order of nature, the affluent provision for happiness, the numberless objects whose only end is to be enjoyed. We know him thus from our own experience, in which we can count our calamities and number our griefs, but must acknowledge mercies more in number than the sands of the sea. We know him thus from the benign Redeemer, the “God with us,” the friend, protector, helper, healer, comforter, brother of man, who is presented to us as “the brightness of God’s glory and the express image of his

person." God loves us better than we can love ourselves. He loves those that have gone from us better than we can love them. He can inflict no real evil. He can send no sorrow that enfolds not the germs of blessedness. He can call no child of his out of the world but in the best time for him who goes and for those who stay. He can ordain no tears that may not be as the dew-drops of a brighter, happier morning. He can send no privation that may not lead to greater fullness and nobler joy. He can make no home desolate, except the better to fit its tenants for the home on high. He can plant thorns on our path through life, only that they may hedge in a safer way through temptation and by the pitfalls of evil to his heavenly presence. "He knoweth our frame." His will is our holiness and happiness. Here then we may, dismiss our care and drop our burden. Nor need we in the hour of grief cast distrustful glances into the future; for he who divided the sea and clave the rock for his covenant people in the days of old, can mark out our secure path through the billows of an afflictive Providence, can open for us springs of living water on the desert-passages of our pilgrimage, can fulfil every promise, and crown every hope, and lead us on through trial to attainment, through conflict to victory, through the gates of death to life incorruptible and eternal.

"It is the Lord." Our only comfort is in looking above all second causes to Him, the Arbiter of all events, the Father of all spirits. Did the voice come to us individually, so that we knew it to be his, "I am thy Father,—I will guide

thee by my counsel and afterward receive thee to glory,"—we should feel and fear no evil; but our hearts would be filled with gladness while we were passing through the darkest forms of trial and calamity. This has been uttered for us,—uttered from the parted heavens, though not within the hearing of the outward ear. It is said to us not only in revelation, but in the very idea of God, which clasps the zone of infinite love around the universe.

“It is the Lord; let him do what seemeth him good.” For what know we of good? Even as the child spurns the healing draught, and cries for the glittering, but murderous blade, so might we choose the seeming good that would be our bane and curse, and reject the seeming evil that is fraught with unspeakable blessedness. We know less of our needs and fitnesses for the mansion prepared for us in the house on high, than does the child of the needs and fitnesses of the earthly career just opening all unseen before him. Our true place is as children before God, owning our ignorance and his benignant wisdom in our behalf, and committing our way to him who doeth all things well. Let affliction lift our thoughts to him. Though we may not know all its appointed uses, this at least is second to no other,—the recalling to him of our divided thoughts, our distracted affections, our alienated loyalty,—the drawing forth from our hearts of the melodies of trust and praise,—the raising of our souls into a serener atmosphere of contemplation, love and duty.

And now there comes to my ear, through the word of prophecy, a voice of sublime consolation for the deeply

afflicted who turn to God in their sorrow. The seer of Patmos beholds a glorious company, white-robed, palm-bearing, with every token of ecstatic joy. It is asked, "Who are these which are arrayed in white robes, and whence came they?" And the voice that asks replies, "These are they which came out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore," through the ministry of sorrow, "are they before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple; and he that sitteth on the throne shall dwell among them." Who can tell how large a part of their felicity may be due to the contrast with earthly trial and grief,—how emphatic a reference there may be to the calamities of their mortal estate, when it is added,—"They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more?" Who can say of how inestimable worth their tears may seem, how unutterably thankful they may be for every dark passage of their earthly pilgrimage, when "God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes?"

Never could there have been more need of thoughts like those which I have set before you, than in the event which has now called us together. Dark and mysterious indeed is this visitation of Providence; this judgment is past our finding out. Our friend has been summoned from a life which he enjoyed and adorned,—from a home where his presence was a perpetual benediction,—from numerous friends whom his wisdom has enlightened and his kindness cheered,—from a community which has been blessed by his judicious and pacific counsels, his example of integrity and purity, his in-

fluence flowing through a thousand channels of substantial usefulness. His sun has gone down while it was yet day. The clouds that threatened to eclipse it had been dispelled, a new lease of life and of vigorous health seemed to have been bestowed, and now, at an hour when we thought not, in the midst of unfinished plans and of hopes that might well have reached out to lengthened years, "God changeth his countenance, and sendeth him away."

Our friend's external history has been marked by few striking incidents,—by fewer than would have attended it, had his ambition for public trusts been commensurate with his fitness for them. Early imbued with liberal tastes and studious habits by the precept and example of his revered father, he passed his university course with honor as an industrious and successful scholar, and as a youth of high principle and noble promise, and formed with the brightest and best of his classmates and coevals friendships which death alone has suspended. He entered the legal profession under auspices that would have ensured his eminence at the bar, had not his career been interrupted at the outset and ultimately cut short by public office. For several years he represented his fellow-citizens in the Legislature of New-Hampshire. For six years he sat in Congress as the Representative of this District. During that period occurred the first momentous struggle between freedom and the encroaching power of slavery, and by speech and vote he stood firm on the side of liberty,—faithful when older statesmen were false to their trust, and when motives which would have been irresistible to one less

conscientiously upright were heaped into the opposite scale. For almost thirty years he has led, near his native home, a life of dignified retirement and incessant literary industry. Yet during these years he has manifested neither the spirit nor the habits of a recluse. His kind and helpful relations with society have never been suspended. He has been the sound adviser, the sympathizing and faithful friend, of a very numerous circle both here and elsewhere. While he has not sought, he has not shunned such public trusts as he could sustain consistently with his plans and habits of intellectual labor. He was a prominent and diligent member of the late Constitutional Convention, and as President of the Board of Trustees of the Insane Asylum he has bestowed the most assiduous and humane care upon a class of our fellow-beings, for whom his services have been those of the purest philanthropy, such as have their "witness in heaven and record on high."

His literary culture was of a superior order. Thoroughly grounded in that classical learning which is the foundation of all other erudition, familiar with the best English authors, deeply read in the history of all nations and especially of his own, he could hardly touch a subject which he did not illumine and adorn. Seldom have I been conversant with a mind so rich and full, so accurate in fact, so sound in opinion, so weighty in inference, so suggestive and instructive to one of kindred tastes and congenial pursuits. While as a writer he has not pandered to the morbid craving for excitement and extravagance, his productions both in prose and verse have

been as “apples of gold in pictures of silver,”—pure and lofty sentiments set in chaste imagery, in an easy, compact, vigorous style, sure to meet the highest appreciation with those whose praise is of the highest worth. He had in successful progress literary labors which, had his life been longer spared, would have associated his name with important, but previously unwritten portions of the history of his native state, and of the legislation and earlier political crises of the country.

In private life you know his worth. Simplicity, uprightness, hospitality and kindness, while they had given to his youth the ripeness of age, embalmed for his age the freshness of youth. A heart that could not grow old made us who loved him insensible of the lapse of time with him,—unaware that he was passing into those latter years, in which the frame can make so feeble a stand against disease or infirmity. With his powers in full vigor, with no touch of the frosts of age upon his affections, we felt that he occupied a place, not among the vanguard, but midway, in the great procession to the grave. Over the nearer relations of life, we may not withdraw the veil. Remembrances which time cannot make less vivid, grief which only the healing hand of Divine love can render less poignant, will attest how truly he was the light and joy of his home,—how desolate that home has become in consequence of his removal. As a neighbor and a citizen, he has constantly studied the things that make for peace, and has been the steadfast friend of improvement and progress, a helper in every good work, a consistent and judicious advocate of whatever could render those around him

happier and better. Many already know that they have lost one of their most reliable friends. Many more will learn by his loss of what unspeakable worth to the order and well-being of society are the presence and influence of such a man in the community around him.

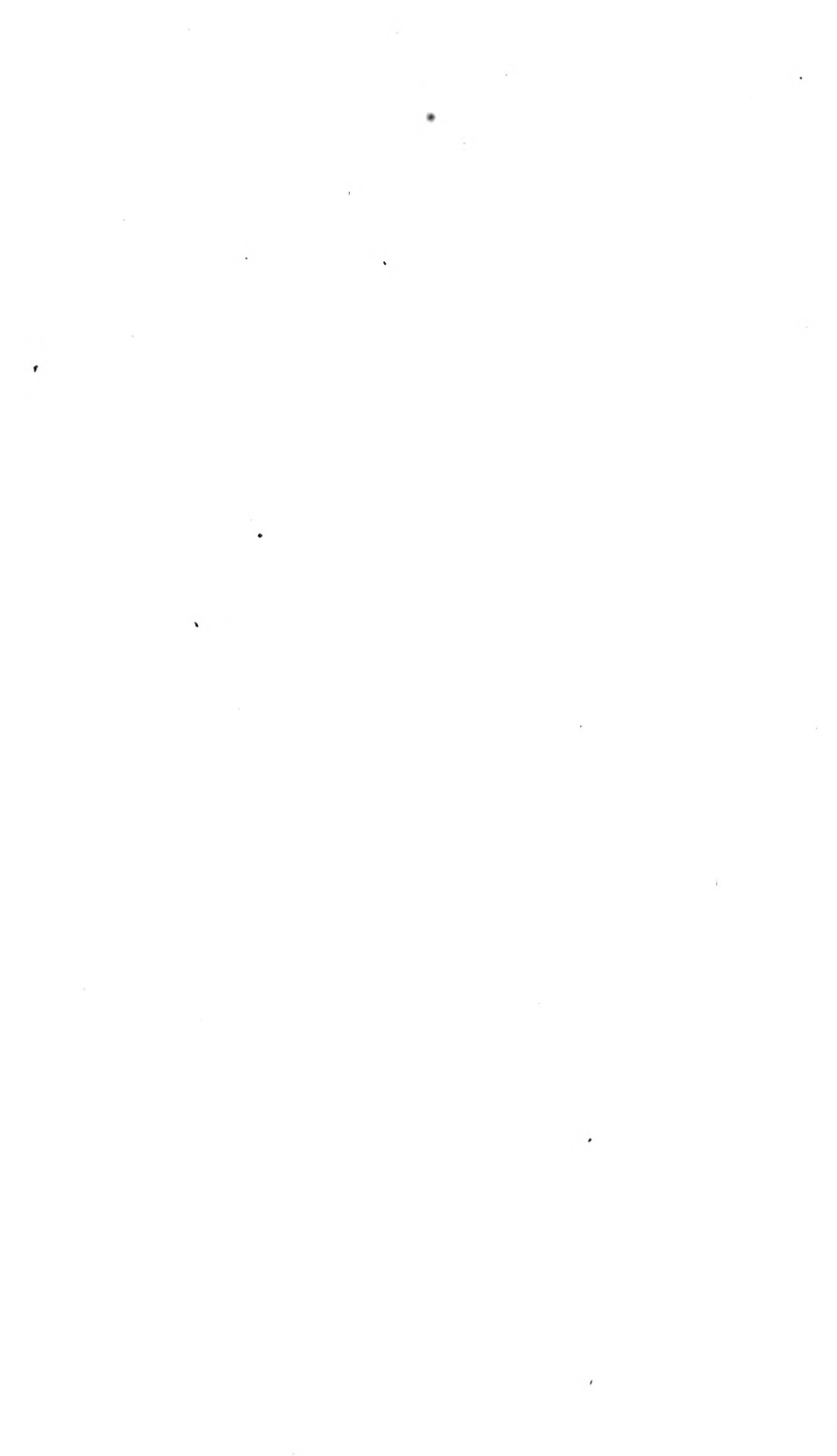
But, when we think of his passage hence, and of the solemn scenes of eternity on which he has entered, we are most of all interested to know how his mind and his heart were affected as regards that religion, which alone can render the life truly beautiful, and can breathe into the soul of the dying the hope of immortality. The public profession of religion in the usual form of the communion-service was indeed wanting, perhaps in part from an instinctive dread of publicity as to the concerns of the soul with its God, probably still more from his remoteness from a body of communicants, to whose creed he could assent, or with whom he could sympathize in their views of Christian doctrine. But from repeated and prolonged conversations with him, I know that his faith was firmly established in the great truths of revelation, as attested by prophecy and miracle, and embodied in the person, teachings and mediation of the Divine Redeemer. He loved the Bible, and had made it the subject of his diligent and profound study. He found no poetry, no philosophy, no morality, that could bear comparison with its inspired utterances. Many of his choicest poetical productions are on themes suggested by holy writ, or versifications of the sublime strains of prophet or psalmist. His life, in its close

adherence to the precepts of his Divine Master, was of itself the best profession of allegiance to him,—that without which mere outward forms would have been empty and worthless. He had clear and happy views of the future life, and though the suddenness of his departure left him little scope for that so-called preparation for death which is no preparation, death was a theme familiar to his thoughts long before its shadow gathered over him. We yield his body to its last slumber, in the trust that what is our loss is for him unspeakable gain.

Untimely as his removal seems to us who remain, we cannot doubt that he has been taken away in good time. In good time, because it was God's time. And from how much has he been spared, from which we can see the hand of mercy in sparing him! He has been taken, before the darkest clouds and the fiercest storms of life had gathered about him,—before the evil days came and the pleasureless years drew nigh. He has known little of the bitterness of sorrow. He has escaped such grief as will bow in agony over his grave. He has not had to endure the sundering one by one of the bonds of sympathy and affection. He has been spared the sad consciousness of waning powers and diminished usefulness,—the experience of protracted suffering and chronic infirmity. The volume of his life has been fairly written through, with no melancholy appendix of decline and decay. In his career of unintermitted mental and moral activity there has been no pause, but only, as we trust, a continuance, a living on under brighter auspices, where infinite

truth and love, combined, exalt every power and fill every affection, and have already merged for him the night of death in the perfect day of heaven.

May the peace of God sink into the hearts of the stricken household. May the Lord Jesus speak to their souls of reunion above, and the mansions in the Father's house on high. And may we all, whom the Providence of God has called to mourning, mourn the dead by living as, could he speak to us from the world of spirits, he would bid us live. Let the shadow of death and the dawn of an eternal day blend their influences on our spirits, that we may live as the dying ought with reference to things that are seen and temporal, and may seek, as the undying should, with mind and heart, with soul and strength, the things that are unseen and eternal.



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