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SERMONS

PREACHED MARCH 23, A. D. 1828,

ON THE

COMPLETION OF THE FIFTIETH YEAR

OF THE

AUTHOR'S MINISTRY.

BY JOSEPH STRONG, D. D.

Pastor of the First Congregational Church in Norwich, Conn.

NORWICH:

PRINTED BY J. DUNHAM.

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SERMON I.

I. JOHN, II. XVII.

“The world passeth away,”

The salutation with which this chapter opens, is peculiarly tender and affectionate. It was a style of address repeatedly used by the benevolent Jesus, while on earth, and proceeded with great propriety from the pen of the apostle John. It was in accordance with his naturally tender and affectionate disposition, and was suited to the relation, in which he stood to those to whom it was addressed. An aged minister, writing to those, with whom he had travelled in birth, till Christ had become formed in their hearts, the hope of glory—his feelings and language could not be otherwise, than unusually affectionate. He must have felt the strongest interest in whatever concerned the members of his charge, and it must have been his most ardent desire, that they should, in all respects, adorn the doctrine of God, their Saviour. *“My little children, these*

things I write unto you, that ye sin not ; and if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, even Jesus Christ, the righteous ; and He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only, but, for those of the whole world.” And having thus directed the imperfect believer to that great source of gospel forgiveness, the Redeemer’s blood, the apostle next adverts to, and enlarges upon, brotherly affection among christians, as an evidence of true evangelical sincerity, more to be relied upon, than almost any other. When incumbered with doubts whether they are christians, on account of the many sins still chargeable upon them, if they can discover true brotherly affection to be the predominant principle of their hearts, they may dismiss their doubts and fears. The context then proceeds to an animated address to believers, counting upon their respective ages, whether advanced in years, at the period of youth, or that of childhood. “I write unto you fathers, because ye have known Him that is from the beginning ; I write unto you young men, because ye have overcome the wicked one ; I write unto you little children, because ye have known the Father.” But with different kinds of holy exercise, thus discoverable and more especially appropriate at the different seasons of the christian’s life, there is one branch of temper, which respects them all, and is required to be in constant and vigorous operation. “Love not the world,

neither the things that are in the world—if any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him—for all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eye, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world, and *the world passeth away.*”

This is the general connection, in which the words of our text stand with what precedes. Its immediate object is to enforce the avoidance of earthly attachments ; at the same time, leading the truly sanctified in this world, to direct the supreme affection of their souls to God and His blessed image. In the more particular application of the text at this time, two things will be attempted—an exemplification of the fact which it asserts, that the world passeth away, and the improvement which ought to be made of such a solemn truth.

Language very similar to that under review, will be found in all the different parts of the scriptures ; but it will be seen on examination, that its pointing is widely different. Thus, the Apostle Peter at one time wrote—“ But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night, in the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat. The earth also, and the things that are therein, shall be burnt up.—Seeing then that all these things shall be dissolved, what manner of persons ought ye to be, in all holy conversation and godliness.” The event thus re-

ferred to is, unquestionably, the final dissolution of this earth by fire, coincident with that most interesting result to our probationary world, the final judgment. The verse directly subsequent to that of the text, also speaks of its being the last times; obviously referring to the fast approaching and complete annihilation of the Jewish economy, in the overturn and entire erasure of Jerusalem; but this event cannot be the primary object of reference in the passage now under review.

We need not look forward to the last day of our world, nor backward to the destruction of the Jewish metropolis, to discover its true exposition—we may read it in every page of history, and see it in each occurrence which we from day to day witness.

Where are the people of former ages? They all sleep in the dust. Where are the mighty works which their enterprize and industry produced?—They have long since tumbled into ruins. Where is Babylon, the glory of the Chaldees' excellency—where is the populous No—where is Ninevah, that exceeding great city?—We cannot even ascertain where they were respectively situated.

Or, not to direct your thoughts thus back to the ages of remote antiquity, but to limit the research within the recollection of numbers, who are now hearing me,—what vast overthrow, what mighty changes, have the last fifty years produced upon the earth. Thrones have been supplanted; empires

have vanished, and the aspect of a large portion of the civilized world, has been entirely changed.—The thick crowd of events, during this comparatively limited period, has brought within the observation of the modern liver, more changes and disasters than have usually been comprized in centuries. The child will hardly believe, and certainly he cannot realize, those wonderful statements, the results of his father's own individual observation.

Nothing is now in the state in which it formerly was, nor will it continue the same in future, as it is at present. The face of nature is constantly varying. The fruitful field is converted into a wilderness, and in turn, the wilderness is made to blossom as the rose. Manners are as variable as the wind that blows. The honors and riches of time are constantly changing, from hand to hand. The affluent and respected to-day, are poor and despised to-morrow. And with still deeper interest, we see youth succeeding childhood—and manhood youth; while old age and the grave close the scene. How affectingly just was the preacher's statement—"One generation passeth away and another cometh; the sun also riseth, and the sun goeth down and hasteth to his place whence he arose. The wind goeth toward the south, and turneth about unto the north; it whirleth about continually, and the wind returneth according to his circuits. There is no remembrance of former things,

neither shall there be any remembrance of things that are to come with those that shall come after. I have seen all the works that are done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity, and vexation of spirit.” *And the world passeth away.*

I shall now proceed to the improvement of this most interesting truth. And first—in view of what has been said, we are led to contemplate the immutability of every thing, which more immediately respects God. His word is everlasting truth, nothing being to be added to, or taken from it. His counsel will stand, and He will do all His pleasure; while, for His existence and character, they pass not away, being the same yesterday, to-day, and forever. Hence the unusually fervent and grateful prayer, recorded in the 102d Psalm: “I said, O! my God, take me not away in the midst of my days. Thy years are through all generations—of old hast thou laid the foundations of the earth, and the heavens are the work of thy hands. They shall perish, but thou shalt endure; yea, all of them shall wax old like a garment, as a vesture shalt thou change them, and they shall be changed; but thou art the same, and thy years shall have no end.”

Were not God unchangeable—did any thing belong to Him which distantly savoured of passing away, far less eligible would be the good man’s prospects than they are at present. Those multiplied scripture promises, which are now the firm

resting place of faith, would then be swept away. Indeed, in separation from the idea of divine immutability, faith would instantly change to a word without meaning; and even with regard to the Christian's hope, it would degenerate far below that hope, which the Apostle to the Hebrews so feelingly and forcibly describes: "Wherein God, willing more abundantly to show unto the heirs of promise, the immutability of His counsel, confirmed it with an oath; that by two immutable things, in which it was impossible for God to lie, we might have a strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold upon the hope set before us; which hope we have as an anchor to the soul, both sure and steadfast, and which entereth into that within the veil."

Indeed, the abiding nature of the divine character, speaks favorably to the whole of mankind. Its beneficial influence is not confined to the godly, but extends to the ungodly likewise, and that in no small degree. Hence the words of God, by His servant Malachi, to the men of that peculiarly degenerate age—"and I will come near to you in judgment, and I will be a swift witness against the socerer, and against false swearers, and against those who oppress the hireling in his wages, the widow and the fatherless, and that turn aside the stranger from his right, and fear not Me, saith the Lord of Hosts. For I am the Lord; I change not; therefore, ye sons of Jacob are not consumed."

Secondly. The passing, variable character of every thing earthly, bespeaks the wisdom and beneficence of the divine government. For a perfect being, or a perfect state of things, to be unchangeable, is a great recommendation ; but with respect to an imperfect being, or an imperfect state of things, the direct reverse is true. No thought could be more painful, than that the character and circumstances of the imperfect beings of which this world is composed, should remain fixed and unalterable.—Changeable themselves, and surrounded on every side by decay, the whole often conduces to increased improvement and stability.

Thirdly. Does the world pass away,—we are thus forcibly admonished not to be greatly elevated, or over-much depressed, by whatever now happens to us. We should regard the admonition given by the Apostle to the Corinthians : “ But this I say brethren, the time is short ; it remaineth that both they that have wives, be as though they had none ; and they that weep, as though they wept not ; and they that rejoice, as though they rejoiced not ; and they that buy, as though they possessed not ; and they that use this world, as not abusing it ; for the fashion of this world passeth away.” Did we universally feel, as the Apostle did, when he pronounced these words, much less would the world trouble us, than it does at present. Considering that its pleasures and pains, its smiles and frowns, its profits and

losses, its honors and disgrace were only transitory diversifications of the scene, we should be less concerned in view of what happens,—less restive and envious, and less liable to be moved,—so that we might finish our course with joy.

Fourthly. A realizing sense of the unestablished and passing character of this world, is happily adapted to make us feel and live as dying creatures ought to do. Feeling that we are constantly amidst the scenes of a varying, departing world, we can hardly fail to realize, that we ourselves are transient like all around us, and must shortly share the common fate. As was observed in the former part of the discourse, with States and Empires passing into oblivion, the most costly and magnificent works of art already mouldering in the dust, and even the productions of nature every year withering and perishing before our eyes—how can we forget that the places which now know us, must soon know us no more. Hence the Prophet's exclamation—"we all do fade as the leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, have taken us away"—and at another time by the same one—"and the voice said cry; and he said what shall I cry? All flesh is grass, and all the goodness thereof is as the flower of the field—the grass withereth, the flower fadeth, because the spirit of the Lord bloweth upon it; surely the people is grass. The grass withereth, the flower fadeth, but the word of our God shall stand forever."

Lastly. Does the world, and all that is in it, pass away—in what a most commanding point of light, does it present heaven to our view. *There*, all shall be stability and uninterrupted rest. It was in contemplation of this truly animating thought, that the apostle wrote thus to the Corinthians :—“ While we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen ; for the things which are seen, are temporal, but the things which are not seen, are eternal ; for we know, that if our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved, we have a building of God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For in this we groan, earnestly deserving to be clothed upon with our house which is from heaven ; if so be, that being clothed we shall not be found naked. We are confident I say, and willing rather to be absent from the body, and to be present with the Lord. Wherefore we labor, that whether present or absent, we may be accepted of Him.”

After having overcome and once entered the New Jerusalem, the believer will then be made a pillar in the temple of God, and he shall go no more out. The only change which he shall experience, will be from glory to glory, as by the spirit of the Lord.

While indulging in such a train of reflection, the rightly disposed mind will be satisfied to have the world pass away. The number of tears shed over

its misfortunes, will be sensibly diminished, and the farewell moment, in the place of being dreaded, will be anticipated with no small pleasure.

Every thing conspires to prove that here is not our home. Every pain which we endure, or change for the worse which we experience, proclaims the admonition aloud in our hearing—*arise, and depart, for this is not your rest.* May a gracious God grant that we do all in fact thus arise, in the most important sense of the word. Provided the present painful effects of sin are made instrumental in hereafter raising us above its power, Jehovah will be adored and blessed for ever and ever—the rod which has smitten, will be kissed with fervour—the mighty hand which has overturned and overturned, will be relied upon with increased confidence, and the retrospect, to a troubled and constantly changing world, will add to the measure of unceasing glory.

SERMON II.

ZACHARIAH I. V.

“Your Fathers, where are they—and the Prophets, do they live forever.”

The pleasures of anticipation are usually much greater, than those of actual experience. The human mind loves to penetrate into the future ; and its scenes command a greater interest, than those through which we have actually passed. In the one case, full scope is given to imagination ; while in the other, painful recollection may dictate the feelings.

But thus less pleasant to look backward, than forward ; it by no means follows, that the latter is the preferable employment. In point of moral effect, the recollection of a departed, or the sight of a departing world, is, without fail, much more beneficial, than the contemplation of one permanently established and marked with progressive improvement.

It was under the strong influence of this impression, that the subject of the morning's discourse was selected. It comprised a general view of the fading character of every thing earthly, with the religious

improvement which should be made of so solemn and interesting a fact. The words chosen for a directory to our remarks this evening, though of the same general pointing, will give to them a much more restricted character.—*The Fathers, where are they; and the Prophets, do they live forever.*

The aged penman of these words, is here presented to our view, in a state closely approximating to that of astonishment, at the recollection of the fact, that his ancestors, whether by nature or in office, were all gone to the grave, and that he himself stood a long storm-beaten tree, which some near approaching blast should soon level with the dust. Feeling a most sensible interest in the Prophet's exclamation, I shall crave your indulgence, while I give to my remarks, this evening, a social, and indeed to many of them, a personal character. It is not a whole world, but a diminished speck upon that world, to which it is proposed our eye should be now directed. A sketch of this particular ecclesiastical society, is the whole which I shall now attempt. However uninteresting to others, the proposed detail may not be without benefit to ourselves. Most of the incidents which will be alluded to, are either those of your own observation, or of not far distant recollection.

The original settlement of Norwich partakes of a colonial character. Different from most of the towns in New-England, its original settlers were not a few

adventurous individuals or families, but an associated body, all of whose measures were the result of previous, well matured calculation. Saybrook was the place from which your fathers thus originally emigrated. Under the influence of imperious circumstances, the Rev. JAMES FITCH, who had been for a number of years the pastor of the Church in that place, removed here with the greater part of his church and congregation in the year 1660. By such a combined effort, only a few weeks were required, in order to witness a well established community, both on civil and ecclesiastical accounts. We learn from tradition, that Mr. Fitch was a man of unusual discretion, and that he commanded a high place in the affections of a large portion of his congregation. He was born in England, and came to this country when about fourteen years of age. After completing both his scholastic and theological education under those eminent fathers of the New-England church, Hooker and Stone of Hartford, he took upon himself the charge of the church in Saybrook, in the year 1646. The period of his active ministry there and in this place, must have been about half a century: though I have not been able to ascertain with precision how long he continued to perform the duties of his office. All at present known is, that his pastoral connection with this people was never dissolved; but owing to his advanced age, and accumulated bodily infirmities,

(being unable to perform ministerial labors) he removed to Lebanon, and there resided with his children till his death in the year 1702.

After Mr. Fitch became unable to preach, the church and congregation remained without the active services of a pastor for a number of years.—Repeated efforts were made for the re-settlement of the gospel ministry, which proved unavailing; until at length, Mr. JOHN WOODWARD, of Dedham, in the face of a very considerable opposition, accepted an invitation to settle, and was ordained in the year 1700. The same spirit of controversy, which had operated so unfavorably for a number of years previous to Mr. Woodward's settlement, continued to render his connexion with the people extremely unpleasant; and in 1716, he was dismissed. Soon after this he removed to New-Haven, where he spent the residue of his days in private life.

Within a few weeks after Mr. Woodward's dismission, the Rev. BENJAMIN LORD, a native of Saybrook, came here, and proved the happy instrument, in God's hand, of extinguishing the embers of former animosity. He received the charge of the Church and Congregation on the 20th of November 1717.

During a life of almost ninety years, and a ministry of nearly sixty-six, he served his Lord and Master with great respectability and extended usefulness. It is true that about the middle period of his prolonged ministration, extensive separations

sprung up ; but they were to be ascribed principally to the spirit of the times, and to local causes.—The last days of that venerable man of God, were, by way of eminence, his best days. He was able to minister at the altar until within six weeks of his death. About three year previous to this, his eye sight failed him, so that he was obliged to relinquish his former habit of reading his discourses, and to adopt the practice of delivering them from memory. He retained his powers both of mind and memory to a remarkable degree ; and at no period, was his preaching more correct or more acceptable, than while trembling over the grave, he affectionately addressed his people and instructed them in those truths, so deeply impressed upon his heart. As he lived, so he died—with the blessing of many ready to perish, resting upon him.

When Dr. Lord was eighty-four years old, your present pastor was united with him in the sacerdotal charge. It is one of the most pleasing recollections of my past life, that I was permitted to serve with him in the gospel, *as a son with a father*, almost six years. During that term the most entire cordiality subsisted between us ; and when he died, the language of my soul was that of the young prophet of old—“ My father, my father, the chariot of Israel and the horseman thereof.”

Thus left to serve alone, the duties of office were felt to be doubly weighty ; but thanks be to God, hith-

erto He has helped me. The last week completed fifty years since my ordination.

The lives of all your ministers have been unusually prolonged.—Only four in number, the joint term of their services has been more than one hundred and sixty years, and that of the two last more than one hundred and fifteen. Even during the period of *my* residence among you, the changes as to God's ministering servants in this vicinity, have been numerous and great. *The Fathers, where are they; and the Prophets, do they live forever.* Among the pastors of the neighbouring parishes, only one survives, who is my senior; while several of the referred to parishes have their fourth minister.

And to return within our parochial limits, the ravages of age and of death, are not less perceptible. Since my residence among you, the deaths have been more than fourteen hundred and fifty, averaging about twenty-nine annually. The greatest number in any one year, was sixty three, and the least, sixteen. In later years, the deaths during the period of childhood and youth, have not been as numerous as formerly; being however, proportionably increased among those more advanced in life. The nature of prevailing diseases, has also surprisingly changed. Pulmonary complaints, especially, which thirty or forty years ago formed an awful besom of destruction, are now much more rarely known. When I was ordained

there were within the limits of the society, about eighty individuals, who had passed the allotted age of man ; while now, there are not much more than half that number. This statement is the result of actual calculation, and not a deception arising from the fact, that the preacher has himself grown old.—There are but two families, which were in family state fifty years ago, both of whose heads now survive.

I have lived to follow most of your parents to the grave ; and scarcely a house do I pass in your streets, where I have not been repeatedly called to mingle my griefs with those of mourning relatives. I feel myself to be now standing in the midst of a new generation—a generation whom I should esteem and love, if for no other reason, for the friendship and kindness which I experienced from their fathers. Your fathers were my friends—they bore with the infirmities or greater faults of my youth—they ministered to my comfortable support—they listened to my well meant advice and admonition, and they rendered me happy by their dying blessing.

It is a fact known to some of you, that when I first came to reside here, there were two seceding congregations, considerably numerous, and regular in their meetings for social worship. Both of these have been, for many years, extinct ; and a very considerable proportion of their members, after return-

ing back to us, proved some of the most respectable and useful members of the church. They forgot the past, and manifested but one heart to do all the good they could to our common Zion. At the present time, those who attach themselves to the other religious denominations, are not numerous ; nor is there any thing existing between us and them, which savours of bitter envying and strife.

But while gratified with the thought of that increased harmony as to religious sentiment and practice which subsists among us, I cannot but acknowledge the great unhappiness I feel, in having so long labored among you, with no greater success. Too much reason have I to adopt the prophet's complaint, and say, "I have labored in vain and spent my strength for nought, for Israel is not gathered." But though I am thus compelled to lament that my labors have not been more blessed among you, sensible of the infirmity which has attended them, I would humbly trust that I do not deserve your censure for negligence in the performance of my official duty. Between the duties of the study, and the calls of more active ministerial service, my past life has not been one of indolence. It might have been more grateful to you, and certainly it would have been a pleasure to me, to have spent more time in parochial visits ; but the candid mind can need no apology from me, but to be reminded of the wide extent of this parochial field of

labor. In regard to my public ministrations in the sanctuary, I trust I stand equally excusable in your view; and, what is a vastly more momentous concern, as I would humbly hope, in the view of my infinite employer. I have endeavored at all times to reprove, rebuke and exhort with all long suffering and doctrine. I have studied to feed you with the pure milk of the word, that you might grow thereby—to open full to your view the wounds of our awfully depraved nature—to direct you to Jesus, who is truly God, and the only physician of souls—to convince you that nothing short of the divine and irresistible spirit, is competent to break up the fallow ground of the heart, and that to the same spirit you must be indebted, for growth in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. This has been my unvarying line of address; and though I fear, that not a few of my hearers have failed to be savingly benefitted by it, yet I would fain persuade myself, that it has been made the power of God for the salvation of some souls.

I do not recollect a single year of my ministry without some hopeful instances of awakening and conversion. “In the shaking of the olive tree, two or three berries have been found in the top of the uppermost bow; four or five, in the outmost fruitful branches thereof.” At three seasons, more especially, sanguine hopes were excited that the Lord

was about to work wonders on our behalf. But though painful disappointment, to a degree, formed out the result, still it will be remembered with gratitude in regard to each of them, that it proved the occasion of very considerable increase to the church. In thus mentioning the increase of the church as an evidence of God's mighty working, I would not be understood to intimate that it is a sure and certain criterion, in any instance, and more especially in this place. Probably, we have those, who occasionally crowd themselves within the limits of the fold, who have no right to be there; yet with regard to this congregation, I have always apprehended that a greater number have forborne to profess Christ before men, who have been prepared by divine grace to eat and drink worthily at the sacramental feast. Various causes have conspired to produce this result; not the least of which, has been a belief firmly entertained by a number of venerable fathers in our church, long since in their graves, and from them handed down and impressed upon their descendants and others, that the hope which casteth out fear, is indispensable to the christian profession; in the place of that more diffident hope, which is not less subservient to piety and a holy conversation. The fact cannot be questioned, that the number of our communicants is very disproportionate to the size of the congregation. Comparatively few show a practical regard to either of the sacra-

ments of the New Testament. Our Zion sits solitary, that ought to be full of people. Since my residence among you, not far from four hundred have publicly professed Christ; and the number of baptisms has been somewhat rising seven hundred and thirty. The church now, is not more numerous than it was a century past; and of males, the proportion is less than it then was. Should it occur to any of you, that there are now eight regularly constituted societies within the same limits, where there was then but one, the charge of present criminal neglect will not be thus satisfactorily obviated. Probably the population of this single society, is at present nearly or quite equal to what that of the whole town then was. The more correct mode of accounting in the matter, is, that the love of many is waxen cold—that we possess less of the vital energy of religion, than what belonged to our fathers. Surely I need not spend time to convince you, what heartfelt satisfaction it would give me, in the decline of life and rapid approach to the close of my ministry, to see religion revived, and the church increased; “her stakes being strengthened and her cords enlarged.”

I am now in my seventy-fifth year; and owing to such my age and growing infirmities, you must not expect that I should actively serve you much longer. Every year, I more and more sensibly feel my inability to encounter and go through with the numer-

ous labors and fatigues of office, which your numbers render indispensable. There are but two of my brethren in the ministry, in the State, older than myself, who stately serve at the altar. I have spent about double the usual average of a minister's life in your service. But incompetent as I may be, to serve you much longer, you will never cease to have my best wishes, and most fervent prayers for your greatest good, both temporal and eternal.—The deep interest which I feel in the welfare of you all, is more easily conceived than described.

I feel for the rising generation, and am disposed to make every proper allowance for the levity of their disposition, and the gayety of their manners—Still it is my bounden duty to tell them, that all is vanity—that in this passing world, events will soon convince them, that the whole is but a dream when one awaketh—that it is a matter of infinite moment, that they fail not to remember their Creator in the days of their youth.

I feel likewise for the middle aged, busy in the career of life and but too forgetful of death. To them my solemn message is, that they are in a rapidly passing world—that they will soon be old—that ere long, and much sooner than they now realize, grey hairs will be here and there upon them, and they will find themselves in increased degrees incompetent to the performance of every important

work, and more especially, that infinitely important one of making their calling and election sure.

And surely it must be in a great measure unnecessary to inform my aged brethren, that I feel for them. For many years we have been fellow travellers. Prolonged has been the period during which we have walked together, in much love and good agreement. But let it not be forgotten by us, that our race is nearly run. More than in a passing world—the nature of things ordains that we must soon pass from it. To the grave must be our speedy remove ; and may the merciful Father grant, for Jesus' sake, that while our bodies are thus sleeping in the dust, our souls may be triumphing in glory above. *Amen.*





