

*With the kind regards of
I. W. K. H.*

The terrible doings of God.

A SERMON

DELIVERED IN THE

COURT ST. BAPTIST CHURCH, PORTSMOUTH, VA.

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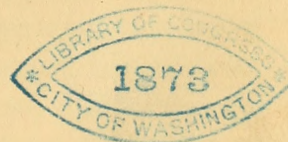
COMMEMORATIVE OF TWENTY-EIGHT MEMBERS OF OLD DOMINION LODGE, NO. V,
WHO DIED DURING THE LATE EPIDEMIC.

BY

William
ISAAC W. K. HANDY,

PASTOR OF THE FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, AND MEMBER OF THE ORDER.

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SERMON.

TEXT.—*Come and see the works of God:—He is terrible in His doing toward the children of men.*—Psalm Lxvi. 5.

—o—

There is something, even in the most familiar title of the Deity, calculated to inspire every human intelligence with awe. He is GOD—the God of Heaven and of Earth,—the infinite, eternal, incomprehensible GOD—God, the creator—God, the upholder—God, “in whose hand, is the soul of every living thing, and the breath of all mankind.” If men are not sensibly, and deeply impressed, even at the very mention of this the most common—the “every day” appellative of Jehovah, it is because they are inconsiderate, and have no apprehension of that august Being, who “slumbereth not, nor sleepeth,” and whose all-pervading eye is ever upon them, as well in the darkness, as in the light. There are those, however, who can never make mention of His name, without the deepest emotions of awe. Thus it was with that eminent scholar and philosopher, Sir Robert Boyle. It is said of that truly great man:—“He entertained so profound a veneration for the Deity, that the very *name* of God, was never mentioned by him, without a pause, and a visible stop, in his discourse.”—In this he was so exact, that an intimate acquaintance who had known him for forty years, could not remember, that he had failed in it, in a single instance.

God is the same, yesterday, to-day, and forever. Yet, immutable as He is, and ever presenting the same glorious array of perfections, which it is the bounden duty of all intelligencies to study, and as far as possible to know—nevertheless, the depths of His infinite mind have never yet been fathomed; and no being, on earth, or in Heaven, has ever been able wholly, to comprehend Him. Such knowledge is too wonderful, even for the most exalted ones:—“Canst thou by searching, find out *God*? Canst thou find out the Almighty, to perfection? It is as high as Heaven; what canst thou do?—deeper than Hell; what canst thou know?—The measure thereof is longer than the earth, and broader than the sea.”

Such then, is Jehovah. He is a God of *mystery*! “Clouds and dark-

ness are round about him"—He does not choose to be known. Just and righteous as He is, in all His ways, He nevertheless prefers to hide Himself from the scrutiny of men:—"Verily, thou art a God that hideth thyself."

His very *existence* is a mystery. He is uncreated and eternal. This great truth is admitted; but who can understand it? Not one!

So too, the *designs* of God are involved in mystery. We know, indeed, that, "for His own glory, all things are, and were created;" but who can understand the minute and intricate workings of His great plan? Occasionally, we may catch a glimpse of some separate movement of His hand, and by a careful and suitable watching of His peculiar providences, we may understand the bearings of individual events; but for the most part, we must confess our ignorance of what God intends. Clear enough, indeed, become the operations of His powerful hand, when any subordinate design has been matured; but who, I repeat it, can predict with accuracy, the connections and results of the world's progress, as they bear each day, even upon the revelations of inspired and unerring prophecy?—"For who hath known the mind of the Lord: or who hath been his counsellor?"

God is not less mysterious in His *works*, than He is as to His existence and designs. He "doeth great things and unsearchable; marvellous things without number." This testimony of Job is equally declarative of the *strangeness*, as of the *magnitude* of His works. His hand is a mighty hand, weighing the very mountains as in a balance; but even at this, we are not so much amazed, as we often are at those doings of His sovereignty, which so palpably contradict our finite notions of His justice and honor. How often are individuals startled, at results which can only be traced to the Divine interposition; and yet, which in their short-sightedness, would blot the fair escutcheon of Jehovah's purity! How often, indeed, are whole communities aroused, in terror, to realize some devastating woe, sent by His terrible Majesty, to overwhelm and destroy them! Are these the tender mercies of that benevolent God, to whom we sing:—

"O give to every human heart,
To taste and feel, how good thou art;
With grateful love, and holy fear
To know how blest thy children are?"—

It is even so!—"He is a mighty God, and terrible;"—"for the Lord Most High is terrible; He is a great king over all the earth." It is to this strange feature of the Divine character, that your attention is called

this day; and in order that the subject may be fairly before us, I would say to this congregation, in the language of the Psalmist, and of the text:—“*Come and see the works of God; He is terrible in His doing towards the children of men.*”

The DOCTRINE presented for your consideration, is this:—*The dispensations of God towards the children of men, are sometimes of the most AWFUL and TERRIFIC character.*

It is not always so. Ordinarily, the dealings of God with the race of man are exceedingly bland, and benignant. He is a bountiful benefactor, supplying all their wants. “He maketh His sun to shine, on the just, and on the unjust. He causeth grass to grow for the cattle, and herb for the service of man, that he may bring forth food out of the earth, and wine that maketh glad the heart of man, and oil to make his face to shine, and bread which strengtheneth man’s heart.” Amid the calamities of life, he is a true and constant friend, offering comfort to the distressed, and binding up the broken heart. He stands by the couch of the fevered sufferer; relieves his pain; strengthens his wasting frame; and redeems his life from destruction. Or, if, in the allotment of His watchful and unerring providence, an earthly career is about to terminate, He deserts not His faithful servant, in this the last trying hour; but encouraging him with that precious promise—“When thou passest through the waters I will be with thee; and through the rivers they shall not overflow thee,”—the dying saint is enabled, confidently, to recline upon the arm of his God, and without a regret or a tear, he calmly, but triumphantly exclaims: “O, death! where is thy sting? O, grave! where is thy victory?”

But the great Jehovah chooses sometimes to deviate from this His course of smiles and of love. Anon, He rouses Himself in his anger, and in the infinitude of His might, presents Himself before the astonished gaze of the world, as a God “*fearful* in praises doing wonders.”

In illustrating this doctrine, it is important to notice—

I. THE FACT. We should contemplate things as they are.—However interesting it may be, to dwell upon those attributes and works of the Deity, which so evidently present Him before an admiring world, as a God of consummate love; it will not do to shut our eyes to that other aspect of his character, which is calculated to inspire us, with emotions of awe, and by which we are brought, to realize our own insignificance, and to regard this earth itself, “as the small dust of the balance.”

It is not my purpose, at present, to refer to those varied calamities, oc-

curing in every age of the world; under any circumstances of life; and signaling individuals of the race. The ten thousand ills, to which flesh is heir, are all, doubtless, under the control of Providence; and the permission, or designation of these, may afford a suitable theme for meditation and enquiry; but such we pass. The text invites us, to contemplate those strange exhibitions of His tremendous power, by which, not simply isolated individuals, but whole families, communities, and nations are involved in desolation; or swept away, as by the besom of ruin.

1. Look, for example, at the destructive *innundation*!—Thriving, and industrious neighborhoods are pursuing the arts of life. A thousand beautiful farms open along the fertile shores of some gay stream of the West. A genial sun, and growing showers, bring joy and gladness to the heart of the husbandman. The bluff, and luxuriant crops, wave gracefully, before the passing breeze. The prospect speaks of abundance and comfort. But, what a change may come over this scene, in a few short hours! Suddenly, that rippling stream begins to rise—inch by inch, it moves upward, and along the crumbling banks. The swollen and turbid waters dash furiously onward. The work of destruction has commenced. Every sluice experiences the effect of the tide. The back-water has gone, far up the ravines. The moving surges sweep the drift wood from the bottoms. The axe-man rushes, to the scene of his toil—he would save his carefully piled cords; but already they have tumbled; and away they glide, into the rolling deep.—And now, those inexorable waters strike the fond hopes of the husbandman. His enclosures are tottering—thousands of logs float, irrecoverably, amid the drift, and lost fuel. The waving corn is seen no more; for the flood sweeps far above its highest tops. But, will this scene of destruction continue? Alas! it is but the beginning of sorrows. All is dismay. The very animals of the field, and of the stall, are alarmed; and rushing wildly, to the neighboring summits, bleat forth their cries of distress. The swelling tide, now, rolls into every crevice of the settler's cabin. Peradventure, he may yet escape, with his wife and babes. But it may be, that the fearful "rise" has occurred in the night; and then, how terrible the ruin!—The very cabin is lifted from its foundations. Perchance, it may float buoyantly along, until it reaches some place of safe deposit. But, not unfrequently, timbers have been separated; females have been borne upon their beds, on the bosom of the waters; infants have been carried away in their cradles; parents and chil-

children have been sundered, in the general wreck; many valuable lives have been lost; and long after the devastating flood has ceased its wasting plunder, thousands have been left to suffer, and to starve.

Such is but a faint picture, of what has often occurred, in the valley of the Mississippi. There have been frequent inundations of that great river, and its tributaries; resulting, at times, in the destruction of millions of property, and of numerous lives.

In other parts of the world, there have been floods occurring, at distant intervals, of the most appalling and terrific character.

In April, 1446, the sea rolled back upon the land, at Dort, in consequence of a rupture of the dykes; and formed, what is now known, as the Zuyder sea. By this calamity, ten thousand persons in the territory of Dordrecht, were overwhelmed, and perished; and the same direful results befel more than one hundred thousand persons about Dullart, in Friesland, and in Zealand. In the last two provinces, more than three hundred villages were submerged; and for centuries afterwards, the tops of towers, and steeples could be seen rising out of the water.

On the 26th and 27th November, 1703, a storm raged in Great Britain, which alarmed the entire kingdom. The stately buildings of the great city of London were shaken; and many of them tumbled to the ground. The water rose to a great height in Westminster Hall; and London bridge was choked up with wrecks. Fourteen ships of war were lost; and fifteen hundred Seamen perished. The damage done to the city was estimated at one million of pounds sterling.

In February, 1830, the dwellings of fifty thousand inhabitants of Vienna, were laid under water.

In consequence of long continued rains, an inundation was occasioned at Canton, in China, which deluged and ruined ten thousand houses;—and ten thousand persons were drowned, or otherwise perished. In the same month, and year, October, 1833, equal or greater calamity, was produced by the same cause in other parts of China.

In May, 1849, the citizens of New Orleans, and its vicinity, were filled with consternation, in consequence of the sudden influx of the waters of the Mississippi, occasioned by a crevasse in the levee above the city. The scene is represented as being truly awful. One hundred and forty feet of the bank, had in one place been washed away; and the heavy; rapid river, rolled irresistably through the opening, though a thousand active hands were endeavoring to stop its ingress; and the roar of the dashing waters could be heard for miles. Many hundred acres

were completely submerged—numerous houses stood deep in the flood—many of the people fled, willingly leaving their property to its fate, whilst others remained in the upper stories of their dwellings, sick and in horror. The condition of the poor was deplorable in the extreme.

2. Another of those ways in which the Great Jehovah speaks terribly to the children of men, is, *by cutting off the accustomed supply of food*. No calamity can possibly equal this. To be without food is to die—slowly, and in agony to die. “He who dies of hunger wrestles alone, day after day, with his grim and unrelenting enemy. The blood recedes; the flesh deserts; the muscles relax, and the sinews grow powerless. At last, the mind, which, at first, had bravely nerved itself for the contest, gives way, under the mysterious influences, which govern its union with the body. Then he begins to doubt the existence of an overruling Providence; he hates his fellow men, and glares upon them with the longing of a cannibal; and, it may be, he dies blaspheming!”*—Let the raging surges dash upon my dwelling—let my frightened soul quiver in expectation of a watery grave—let me go down into the vasty deep, smothered, drowned; but let me not die of *famine!*

It is remarkable, with what regularity and abundance, God usually supplies the millions of earth. Ordinarily, man, in his rudest state, has enough and to spare; but especially, is it true, in the history of those countries, where even the simplest rules of agriculture are observed, and habits of industry prevail; that the blessing of God is realized, and his benevolent promise, “he that tilleth his land, shall have plenty of bread,”—I was about to say—unfailingly verified. Nevertheless, there are times, when men have no bread; when from the failure of crops, or other providential causes, whole communities and countries, are brought to the direst extremity; and their very extermination is threatened. What scenes of woe have been witnessed! Hunger, rapacious hunger, is preying upon the vitals. The most loathsome, revolting substances are eagerly sought for food. The objects that once interested the soul, are now of little worth. Gay equipage—elegant attire—magnificent halls—luxury—titles—thrones—all, all are valueless—insignificant. Those kind emotions that usually bind man to his fellow; those tender sympathies that spring up in the breast of friends; those natural ties that cement the hearts of parents and children; of husbands and wives; these are all broken—forgotten; and poor, wretched humanity is a spectacle to the Universe, of selfishness and disgust.

The sacred Scriptures record several instances of direful famine.

* S. S. Prentice.

The most remarkable one was the seven years famine in Egypt, whilst Joseph was the president of the country. It was distinguished for continuance, extent, and severity; and it is the more remarkable as having occurred in a country distinguished for fertility, and the abundance of its natural productions.

In the year 262, there was a famine in England, of so grievous a character, that the people were obliged to feed upon the bark of trees.

Another occurred A. D. 310, in the same country, when forty thousand human beings starved to death.

In the year 450 a famine prevailed in Italy, when parents murdered and fed upon their own children.

A dreadful famine occurred in England, A. D. 1315, occasioned by perpetual rains, and cold weather, which entirely cut off the harvest and destroyed thousands of cattle. The extremity became so great, that the people eagerly devoured the flesh of horses, dogs, cats and vermin.

During the siege of Londonderry, in Ireland, a famine resulted of the most distressing character. This famine is not referred to, however, so much to illustrate the peculiar doctrine of the text, as to exhibit the great extremity to which men are sometimes subjected when deprived of their usual supplies. It is stated in Walker's diary, that on the 27th July, 1689—"Horse flesh sold for one shilling and eight pence per pound; a quarter of a dog, four shillings and six pence; a dog's head two shillings and sixpence; a cat four shillings and sixpence; a rat one shilling; a mouse sixpence; a pound of tallow four shillings; a pound of salted hides one shilling; a quart of horse blood one shilling; a horse pudding sixpence; a quart of meal, when found, one shilling; a small fluke, a little fish taken in the river, could not be purchased for money, and could only be got in exchange for meal."

Few countries have suffered more from famine than Ireland. Even within our own times; and as late as 1845 and 1846, the accounts which came to us, from that devoted island, were distressing beyond measure. Said the eloquent Prentice, when pleading in behalf of this wretched people—"Within Erin's borders is an enemy more cruel than the Turk, more tyrannical than the Russian. Bread is the only weapon that can conquer him. Let us, then, load ships with this glorious munition, and, in the name of our common humanity, wage war against this despot Famine."

3. And now, what shall I say of the *devouring pestilence*. This is another of those agents, commissioned by the Almighty, to execute His

sovereign will amongst the children of men. Many of the diseases, to which the race is liable, are evidently the results of negligence, imprudence, or presumption, on the part of those who are the subjects of them; and it is not to be wondered, that they who are indifferent to natural laws, should suffer the recompense due to their folly. But there are maladies incident to the human race—resulting, it is true, like all other diseases, from natural causes—and yet, the afflicted subjects of these complaints, have had no agency whatever, in their superinduction; and they can only be accounted for in the sovereignty of Jehovah. I must not, however, in this remark, be understood to intimate, that man is an innocent sufferer. Of this, I shall speak presently. I wish now, simply to suggest, that those stupendous calamities, which sometimes befall mankind are to be regarded, as what indeed they are, *visitations*; permitted, overruled, or imposed, by God Himself, and without any direct agency on the part of those who suffer.

Epidemics not unfrequently occur in country places; but they have usually infested the larger towns and cities. Here among congregated thousands, their ravages are appalling; and scenes of human wretchedness are brought out, in their most woful relations. It is at such times that God proves himself a *terrible* God. The stoutest hearts quail before Him. The brave mariner, who has tossed upon the mountain wave, and who, without a shudder, has encountered the perils of rude and fearful storms—the veteran soldier, who has faced the cannon's mouth; and whose very soul has been gladdened amid the din, and clash, and smoke of ten thousand arms—the calm philosopher, whose sober reason has consoled him amid the strangest ills—the morose and rigid stoic, who submits to whatever is, because Fate has so decreed, and who is reconciled to his own approaching dissolution as a debt due to Nature—all these forget their accustomed assurances, and beholding the steady tread of the Destroyer, as he moves, inexorably through the lanes and alleys, bringing death and ruin into every house; and watching, still, his onward progress as now he stalks boldly up the stately avenue, knocking with iron hand at every door, and chilling the life-blood of the easy, and the great—these, all—the mariner, the soldier, the philosopher, the stoic—are stricken with horror, even as others, and with countenances full of nervous fright they meditate plans of escape; and by the first train, that leaves the doomed city, they speed themselves, with the rushing multitude, far from the scenes of woe.

There are brief notices extant, of plagues that have wasted the earth at

almost every period of its history. One of the earliest which has come to our knowledge, is that mentioned by Baronius; and which raged at Carthage, some five hundred years before the Christian era. So terrible was it, that the people sacrificed their children, hoping thus to appease the Gods. But the first great plague, of which we have any special account, is that so particularly described by Thucidides; and which visited the city of Athens, A. D. 430. The physicians are said to have been entirely ignorant of the disease; and all human art appeared to be utterly unavailing. So general was the slaughter, that the dead were frequently found lying together in heaps. They tumbled over one another in the public streets; and many expired at the fountain, whither they had crept to quench their immoderate thirst. The mortality attending this visitation, has been so largely computed, as to be scarcely credible. This plague was succeeded at various intervals by others, which cut off millions of the human family.

Pliny mentions a pestilence which raged B. C. 188, in the Greek islands, Egypt and Syria, and which hurried ten thousand persons into eternity every day.

We have an account of a most awful pestilence, which visited the city of Rome, A. D. 78, when the number of deaths actually reached ten thousand a day.

According to the historian, Gibbon, a plague devastated the Roman empire for fifty-two years; commencing in the reign of Jostinian, A. D. 527; and the entire mortality, during this period, he supposes to have been not less than two millions.

In 1517, the sweating sickness, a disease that produced death in three hours, raged in England. Half of the people in most of the capital towns are said to have died; and the city of Oxford was depopulated.

A general mortality prevailed in France, A. D. 1632, and sixty thousand persons perished, in the city of Lyons, alone.

The plague brought from Sardinia to Naples, raged with such violence A. D. 1656, as to carry off four hundred thousand of the inhabitants in six months.

Defoe has given us a vivid description of the terrible plague which raged in the city of London in 1664 and 1665. This awful pestilence has usually been styled "The Great Plague," perhaps from a prevailing opinion that no other pestilence has exceeded it, either in virulence or destructiveness. This is an error; but those years must ever be memorable as years of woe. The population of the city, is estimated by Mac-

quely, to have been, at that time, about half a million; but before the middle of summer '65, at least two hundred thousand persons had hurried to places of safety. According to the official accounts, notwithstanding this great reduction of the population, there had died in twelve months, counting from Dec. 20th, to Dec. 19th following, 68,596; but according to Defoe, not less than 100,000. The mortality reached its height in the month of September. During the third week of that month, there were 7165 deaths. About this time, "the citizens were in a frenzy; they thought that God had determined to make an end of the city. Whole families, and indeed, whole streets of families were swept away together; insomuch, that it was frequent for neighbors to call for the bellman, to go to such and such houses, and carry out the people, for that they were all dead!"

The most fearful plagues, which of late years have scourged the world, are Cholera and Yellow Fever. The first of these, in the very onset of its progress, made great ravages in the north, east, and south of Europe, and in the countries of Asia, where, alone, it carried off 900,000, within two years. In our own country, both of these alarming diseases have been epidemic, in most of the larger cities. They have laid waste the fairest portions of our land; and again, and again, they have snatched from our embrace, the loved objects of our hearts.

I shall not detain you, my hearers, with any farther illustrations. A vast amount of statistics might be adduced, exhibiting the stupendous power of the Almighty. I might refer you to the storm, and to the earthquake; it might also, be illustrative of my subject, to speak of the devouring fire, and of the devastations of war, which—though man himself, may have a criminal agency in producing them—must after all be admitted, to occur, *only*, when God chooses to allow; and which, in all their destructiveness are overruled, and directed for his own glory. But enough has been said, to impress us with the conviction, that the God of the Bible, is a *terrible* God. "*Come and see the works of God; He is terrible in His doing towards the children of men.*"

II. We shall now notice why it is, that God chooses, sometimes, to deal so *terribly* with the children of men.

We have already remarked, that the doings of God, are often deeply mysterious. It is certain, however, that God does not act from whim, or without a motive. He is a God of wisdom; and for all He does, He has a reason. Our finite minds may not be able to comprehend the *fulness* of His designs; but in so far as we are capable of knowledge, it is

our duty to be informed. One of those things which we shall never in this world, be able fully to comprehend, is the fact, that a Being, of mercy and of love, can willingly afflict His intelligent creatures: sending into their midst the messenger of ruin, and consigning them in multitudes to untimely graves. And the difficulty is greatly increased, when we find Him, addressing Himself alike to the indifferent and the useful, the scoffer and the believer, the disobedient and the truly pious—and all of them, without apparent discrimination or distinction, being swept away by the impartial scourge. It is wise, however, at once, and under all circumstances, to admit the excellence and infallibility of our great Creator; and if our minds are darkened, in relation to these awful doings of His hand, it becomes us, rather, to attribute this darkness, to our own finite intelligence; and not to any imperfection, on the part of that infinite mind, that seeth the end from the beginning, and whose throne is justice and mercy, though clouds and darkness are round about Him.

—————“Mysterious these,
Not that Jehovah to conceal them wished;
Mysterious these—because, too large for eye
Of man—too long, for human arm to mete.”

It contemplating a subject, so much involved in difficulty, it becomes us to beware lest we impute to our Maker, a spirit of *malevolence*. The very thought is abhorrent. God cannot rejoice in evil. He is happy himself; and it is His benevolent will, that his creatures should be happy also. He made them, indeed, as well to this end, as for His own glory.

“Heaven is all love; all joy in giving joy;
It never had created, but to bless.”

It is characteristic only, of corrupt, and fallen ones, to exult in the sufferings of others. God is incapable of such low, and fiendish delight. Besides,—to conceive of such feelings, on the part of a sovereign and independent God, involves an absurdity. What has He to fear, from the most powerful beings, whom His own hand has formed? Who can oppose Him with success?—An Angel?—Where now is proud Lucifer?—

“Fall, how profound! ———

* * * * *
From where proud hope, built her pavilion high,
The Gods among; hurled, headlong hurled, at once
To night.”———

But he does not rejoice, even, in the fall of his own wicked enemies.—No:—Justice may require their destruction—the well-being of the Universe, may be involved in their very torments; but He can never inflict

a pang, even, upon the vilest, simply to gratify a revengeful and malignant spite. To do this, would imply weakness. To all this may be added, that, in the exercise of such feelings, He must cease to be a God of infinite purity; and would at once be chargeable with all the frailty and passions of imperfect humanity. He is a God of vengeance, I admit; but vengeance implies justice. He is the author of His own laws; and He has a right, as an uncreated and absolute sovereign, to require obedience of whom He will, and of all—emanating as do those laws, from His own infinite and holy mind. To punish is His right; and not only His right; but it is suitable, and to be expected, that the immaculate Jehovah would execute His just wrath—but not His vindictiveness—against every daring and impious offender.

Ignorant as we may be, in the main, of the reasons, which influence the Divine mind, in those extraordinary calamities, which sometimes befall the family of man; we may, nevertheless, obtain some idea of what God intends. What then, we may now enquire, does God mean, by those wholesale destructions of the children of men; and by all that terror, and desolation with which He visits the devoted and dreaming masses?—With all the darkness, that surrounds the subject, there are a few thoughts so important, that as an expounder of truth, we should greatly err in not enforcing them.

1. That a suitable impression may be preserved, among the inhabitants of earth, of His *continued existence, and sovereignty*. This, of itself, is an important and sufficient reason; for it is a singular fact that men do not remember God. Occupied as they are, with business and pleasure, they find little time to think of the invisible Supreme. Other objects are at hand—tangible and available. These so strongly appeal to the senses, and afford so much present and material comfort; that any good, out of sight—though that good be God, Himself—is either wholly forgotten, or confusedly contemplated, as among the questionable things of a misty and uncertain future. “The fool, (the unregenerate man) has said in his heart, there is no God.” He has not, perhaps, admitted it with his lips; but he has lived and acted, as though there were no God; and it may be that in the secrecy of his heart, he doubts the immortality of the soul; and renouncing thus his accountability, he has really disclaimed the sovereign Judge of all the earth. Thus it has always been with the children of men, that, when “they have eaten, and are full, and have built goodly houses, and dwelt therein; and when their herds and their flocks have multiplied, and their silver and their

gold have multiplied, and all that they have has multiplied, their hearts have been lifted up, and they have forgotten the Lord their God."

But God must not be forgotten. He will not suffer himself to be lost in nothingness amid the numerous and wonderful objects of his own creation. He must be known and recognized. A sensible impression of His existence and majesty should be constantly felt. Without this, there can be no suitable adoration; no devout and zealous obedience.—But the world is too hasty to turn aside to Him. The thousands of earth pass gayly on, filled with vain imaginations, and devising foolish inventions. This current must be turned. Jehovah must be regarded—accountability acknowledged—His holy laws respected; and the great end of life appreciated. How are these important results to be accomplished? Ah! if God cannot be heard in His still, small voice—if the gentle persuasions of His spirit continue to be disregarded; He has yet, another voice; and there are other means at His disposal, by which He can, and will break their infatuation, and bring them to the acknowledgement of His infinite might—though on account of their long and obstinate persistence in evil, He may afterwards leave them to impenitence and hardness of heart. He can send a "terror by night," or a "destruction that shall waste at noon day;" and as the Angel of Death spreads his dark wing, over the devoted city, the business hum shall cease; the gay and the thoughtless shall no more be seen, upon her once thronged and bustling pavements; a gloomy silence shall pervade her thorough-fares; a general appalement shall prevail; and the voice of God—that *other* voice shall be heard. Yes; He shall send His swift arrow into a thousand hearts; and as dear ones drop, one after another, into their solitary graves, the infidel himself, shall be astonished; and with blanched and trembling lip, he shall say—*it is God!*

2. It is doubtless, the design of the Almighty, in all His extraordinary visitations, to impress both those who experience, and those who witness His judgments, with a *just and peculiar sense of dependence* upon Him. Such, should be the influence of all afflictions, however common; but the sufferings of an individual can have little effect, in arousing a community; although, that individual be a person of eminence, and even, one in whom extensive circles may be deeply interested. To move the mass, it is necessary that they should be addressed, in some manner affecting them as a mass; and yet the appeal must also have an individual and personal bearing. God, is every day speaking to whole communities, and nations, in the wonderful, and beautiful objects of His

creation, as they abundantly appear in the natural world; and His voice is echoing forth its thunder tones, in the many revolutions and convulsions occurring among states and empires. Interesting, however, as are these aspects; and as deeply involved as is the world in all these events, very few are aroused to their proper consideration; and the *providence* of God, so minutely concerned in them all, remains wholly unnoticed, by the great body of mankind. Thus unobservant, of that watchful care, which God exercises over all His creatures, they become vain of themselves; and move on as if wholly independent of their Maker. Often “becoming rich, and increased with goods, they imagine themselves to have need of nothing; and know not, that they are wretched, and poor, and blind, and naked.” Hence, it becomes necessary for God to make some personal appeal—an appeal, which while it addresses itself to *individuals*, shall be of so general a character, as to arouse the entire masses to reflection.

There is no way, perhaps, in which this can be, so readily accomplished, as by those fearful instrumentalities, which threaten entire communities with destruction. However careless, the people may heretofore have been; now it is impossible, but, that they should feel. Finding themselves, utterly unable to accomplish any thing for their own relief—turning in vain to the most constant friends for assistance—with the impotence of the most powerful human agencies apparent—now in their extremity, they no longer exclaim: “Who is the Almighty, that we should serve Him: and what profit should we have, if we pray unto Him?”—but in apprehension of sudden dissolution; and with “a certain fearful looking for of Judgment,” they lift their glaring eyes to Heaven; and with that poor cowardly infidel, Paine,—when in danger of being lost at sea—they cry, “Lord have mercy on us!”

Such were the very words, inscribed, upon the doors of infected, houses, during the “Great Plague” in London.—What must have been the feelings, of the solitary passenger, as he pushed hastily on, midway the deserted street; noticing upon either side of him, and emblazoned, upon almost every door, the huge red cross; and written close beneath by the finger of the magistrate, those fearful words, “*Lord have mercy on us!*” But those very words were the evidence of that wisdom, which could only be learned by the terrible lesson of the plague—they were the extorted acknowledgement of human dependence; and their history, as studied by us, this day, teach us that, “Man’s extremity is God’s opportunity.”

“Kings are not rescued, by the force
Of armies from the grave ;
Nor speed, nor courage of a horse,
Can the bold rider save.

Vain is the strength, of beast or men,
To hope for safety thence ;
But holy souls, from God obtain
A strong, a sure defence.

God is their fear and God their trust,
When plagues, or famine spread ;
His watchful eye secures the just,
Among ten thousand dead.”

3. Another important result, accruing, in a very special manner, from the terrible dispensations of God, is the *development of human character*. It is difficult to know what man is. We have very little knowledge of our neighbor ; and—I was about to say—quite as little concerning ourselves ; and when all is smooth and pleasant—when there are no difficulties to be encountered ; no sufferings to be endured ; it is comparatively easy to present a passable exterior ; but, as fire tries the gold, and proves what it is—so afflictions test the character of men, and prove, as in a furnace, all that is acceptable to God ; and not only so—when the day of trial comes, the principles of the ungodly, too, are found to be worthless dross : fit only, like it, to be thrown away, and trampled under foot. Such is the effect of trials in all cases ; but the difficulties of individuals, can affect, only, individuals ; or must be confined in their influence to very limited circles. It is necessary, that communities should be tried ; for the very reason, that by a more extended test, of human character, the world may receive a vivid impression, of what is virtuous, as well as what is vile, in man. Any wide spread desolation is calculated to afford such a test. Fever, or famine, or flood—any, or, all of these will tell us more in a single day, than can be learned by an intimacy of years.

If the predominant characteristic is *selfishness* ; that feature will develop itself in its meanest forms. Such a man will desert the wife of his bosom ; leaving her friendless and alone amid scenes of horror. To secure his base retreat, he would rob her of the last farthing, that might bring a comfort in the dying hour ; and if he imagines, that by a speedy flight, he can save his own worthless life ; he will leave her to die in hireling hands ; and with breath but just extinct, to be hurried unattended, to her half-dug, and careless grave.

Among other sordid emotions, which so abundantly develop themselves, during seasons of extensive suffering, is the principle of *avarice*.

C

Men will do anything for money. They will not only manifest a conduct, which shall clearly indicate, what are their hopes, and expectations from the general distress; but they will lay their plans, and throw themselves in the way of some probable result, that may increase their fortunes. Some men have permitted themselves, to be so carried away, with the lust of gain, as to risk life, when there was evidently no call of duty; and losing sight of every other consideration, they have devoted themselves, to the single object of accumulation, taking advantage whenever they could, of the sufferings of others; and by a course of exaction, and over-reaching, they have cruelly enhanced the ills of many whose only hope, was in their sense of justice, and love of mercy.

It would extend this discourse, beyond all proper limits, to speak particularly of the different shades of character, likely to be brought out under the circumstances to which we now allude. It will be sufficient for the farther illustration of this point, to say, that they are not only the darker features of humanity, which are so conspicuously developed at such times. Depraved, and wicked, as is the natural complexion of the human heart, it is nevertheless true, that God has endowed the race, with many amiable and lovely instincts; and at no time, do these show themselves, with more striking beauty, than in the hour of danger, and of sorrow. The affection of the doting wife, now proves itself, in all its purity, and strength. Duty binds her fond husband to the scene of suffering. She will not interpose between him and his conscience. But that noble woman need not tarry in the city of the dead. Gathering her babes about her, she may hurry away and be safe. No:—her heart is “*too big*,” for that. Fondly, embracing the dear partner of her life; with the lovely Jewess of old, she says: “Entreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God, my God: where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried: the Lord do so to me, and more also, if aught but death part thee and me.”

But every lovely characteristic of the natural heart, however beautifully displayed, during these moments of trial, is thrown far in the shade, by the noble heroism of the disciple of Jesus. He is not influenced, solely, by *natural* impulse. His every movement is based on principle. He has a work to perform; and he piously asks: “Lord what wilt thou have me to do?”—Censured he may be, by those who have not learned, in the school of Christ; and his steady unshrinking intercourse with the distressed, and the dying may be deemed inconsiderate. Continuing to throw himself, into the most dangerous positions, he may be scorned as a fool. But God is with him; and he is not afraid. Unlike the ambitious man, who may, also, in his blindness, be willing to expose himself to danger, for the sake of applause—this man, with probabilities against him—with scarce a hope of present safety—*this* man has made the Lord his refuge, and his fortress; and in Him does he trust.—That same God has given His angels charge concerning him; and he shall be “delivered, and honoured.” Such christians, we have seen in this community. No sectarianism shall exclusively claim them. They

are *God's* people; and their noble fidelity shall bring lasting renown to the church Catholic, without distinction of party or name.

Such then are the developments of character, which result from the terrible dispensations of God, towards the children of men. Under these trying and appalling circumstances, we learn more of ourselves, and of our fellow men. We find, that, after all, the scriptures have not given too dark a picture of the depraved heart—but to our joy also, it becomes apparent, that to poor, fallen man, there are yet left some noble and generous impulses; and more important than all, the delightful truth becomes clearly demonstrated, that, “the Christian”—the true and faithful Christian—“is the highest style of man.”

4. But there is another aspect, in which, it becomes us to view this subject, before closing our remarks. These terrible doings of our God are, doubtless, intended to be regarded as *the evidence of His displeasure at sin*. He hates sin with a perfect hatred; and He has determined, that it shall ever be punished, as a vile and abominable thing. This world, it is true, cannot be regarded as the theatre, upon which He shall display Himself in the *fullness* of His wrath. The present is, for the most part, a season of probation. In *eternity*, He will make His power known. “It is appointed to man, once to die; and *after that*, the judgment. Nevertheless, even in this world, God often follows the sinner, with a deserved, but limited punishment. Sin, indeed, is always accompanied with a sting; and sometimes, the connection between the offence and the reward, becomes signally apparent. But, we are not, in all cases, to decide, that *they* are greater sinners than others, who are the subjects of special sufferings. Our Saviour has instructed us, in relation to this matter, in the allusion which He makes, to the Gallileans, whose blood Pilate had mingled with the sacrifices, and to those upon whom the tower of Siloam fell, and slew them. He speaks plainly, upon the subject, and assures us, that these persons had not been distinguished as transgressors. But, we are not to infer from these teachings of the Savior, that sin is never punished in this world. That would be entirely contrary to the teachings of His word in other places. In the old testament scriptures, we have abundant testimony to this point; and we are assured that “though hand join in hand, the sinner shall not go unpunished.” God may, indeed, bear with him for a time—He may permit him to flourish as the “green bay tree;” but sooner or later, he shall have evidence, that, although “sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily;” he has only been “filling up the measure of his iniquity,” and that presently he “shall fall by his own wickedness.” These remarks bear with the same truth, upon the history of communities, as upon that of individuals. Neighborhoods, cities, nations, all sin; and sinning in their collective capacities, they deserve punishment in the same. The histories of Babylon, and Nineveh, and Tyre, and Egypt, and even of his once favored people, the Jews, remain as evidence, of what he can do, when any people, however great, have long continued to “dwell carelessly;” and “through the pride of their countenance,” choose not to “seek after” Him.

In the ninety-first Psalm, we have a special intimation, that one of

the modes, in which the Almighty manifests His displeasure at sin, is by sending "the pestilence that walketh in darkness, and the destruction that wasteth at noonday." These are emphatically denominated "the reward of the wicked." We may speculate in regard to their origin; and after a full investigation of the subject, we may arrive at some sage conclusion: based, it may be, upon natural principles, or upon some adventitious combinations, which must necessarily have produced the result. We may attribute their existence, if we will, to second causes; but I tell you my friends—or rather God tells you, that they are "the reward of the wicked." Let us seriously ponder those awful words in the twenty-sixth chapter of Leviticus. "If ye will not hearken unto me, but walk contrary unto me; then I will walk contrary unto you, also in fury; and I, even I, will chastise you seven times for your sins." And again: "If ye will not yet for all this hearken unto me, then I will punish you seven times more for your sins. And I will break the pride of your power; and I will make your heaven as iron, and your earth as brass. And if ye walk contrary unto me—I will bring seven times more plagues upon you, according to your sins."

I shall be met here with an objection, somewhat plausible. It will be asked: Do not the righteous suffer even as do the wicked?—and we shall be pointed to the devoted servant of God—perhaps to that honored ambassador of Jesus*—faithful and true—the friend of our order, and one of us—who fell at his post; leaving a testimony that none can dispute; and who now wears in glory the martyr's crown. Perhaps, I say, we may be pointed to such a man; and the enquiry may be sneeringly urged:—"And are these terrible dispensations the reward of the wicked?"—Sainted brother!—what is thy response?—Hear that voice from Heaven!—"Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord; they rest from their labors, and their works do follow them." 'Tis even so. Yes, minister of Jesus—thy work was done!—No idler wast thou in the vineyard of thy Lord. Thou didst faithfully bear the heat and burden of the day; and now thou hast thy reward!—"Let me die the death of the righteous, and let my last end be like his!"

But the caviler is not satisfied with this. It is not enough, for him to be informed, that death is no calamity to the Christian. He understands not that song, which the saint so joyously sings; and which is the echo of his full and pious soul:

"Who, who would live always, away from his God;
Away from yon Heaven, that blissful abode;
Where rivers of pleasure flow o'er the bright plains,
And the noon-tide of glory eternally reigns?"

How, then, shall we meet the objection of the infidel?—I answer: The death of the Christian is not only a happy release to *himself*, from the cares, and sorrows of this miserable life;—it is also, a chastisement to the *sinner*, whom he leaves behind. The world is better that *he* lives. It is by *his* efforts, and through the influence of *his* holy example, that virtue is perpetuated on earth. Let the righteous be removed to their reward—let the pious be no more found amongst men; and then, what shall this world be?—Ah!—there is evil enough here now. After all

*Rev. Vernon Eskridge, late Chaplain in the U. S. N.

the prayers, and tears, and efforts of good men, we still find it a heap of ruins—a wretched charnel house. But, if there were no virtue on earth—if there were no Christian principle, to light up those gloomy shades—then, O, then, how much more dismal, must become the abodes of men! Let it be remembered, that Christians are “the salt of the earth.” It is for them, that the world is kept in being. Some such men have lately been called from this community—we feel their loss; and *long* shall we feel it. Citizens of Portsmouth! “Hear ye the rod, and who hath appointed it!”—“Help, Lord; for the godly man ceaseth; for the faithful fail from among the children of men!”

APPLICATION.

And now, my brethren, it becomes us to make a suitable application of this discussion. It has been our lot to experience the terrible judgments of the Almighty. In His inscrutable Providence, He saw fit, during the last summer, to send into our midst a pestilence so malignant and irremediable, that it must be noted, hereafter, as an era in the history of this land. It was a sorrowful day for the cities of Portsmouth and Norfolk, when the steamer “Ben Franklin,” was moored to the wharf at Gosport. She came freighted with ruin!—When her hatches were removed; and she belched forth her pestiferous breath upon the filthy suburb, the whole atmosphere, in that vicinity at once became infected. The disease was not *endemic*. It did not originate there. At that point, it is true, its fatal progress commenced; but it was not a spontaneous ignition. The stubble was there, ready, at any moment to be consumed; but had no match been applied, the fire had not yet been seen. The opening of that hold, was the application of the spark; and though the fire burnt slowly, and secretly for a time; so combustible, were the materials upon which it played, it presently spread far and wide, with a devouring flame.

The ship arrived at Gosport, on the 19th of June; where she remained for repairs. This she would not have been allowed to do, had not her history been scrupulously concealed, and the health officer deceived. On the 30th of June, three persons were sick near Page’s wharf,* with what some supposed to be *Yellow Fever*; but it was not until the 5th of July, that any case occurred to awaken public attention. On that day, a man, who had opened up the hold of the Ben Franklin, was taken sick; and in three days, he died with the *black vomit*. This created some alarm; and a connection being traced between the disease, and the ill-fated vessel, she was at once, (on the 8th,) sent to Quarantine. It was hoped—and by most persons believed—that the number of cases would be few, and they confined to Gosport: many, however, were of a different opinion; and those of them, who could conveniently do so, immediately fled.

The reports, from day to day, showed a gradual increase in the number of deaths; and the disease creeping slowly, but steadily, at length reached the very heart of the city. By this time, hundreds of our citizens had sought safety in flight; and the population, continuing thus rapidly to decline, by the first week in September, there were probably

*The wharf at which the “Ben Franklin” was anchored.

not more than 3000* persons in the place, numbering both whites and negroes. This was the week of the heaviest mortality; during which, it is supposed, that one hundred and fifty persons were swept off by the prevailing epidemic.—On the 2d day of Sept. which was the Sabbath, thirty-six persons died during the twenty-four hours ending that morning.

But, from this time, onward, the Fever seemed gradually to abate: filling every heart with hope. No one however, could feel safe, until God in His mercy, should be pleased to send another messenger, the *Frost*: which all believed would be more powerful than the Scourge.—The first *hard* frost† occurred on the 26th of October; and greatly to the comfort and rejoicing of all, that first palpable frost banished the pestilence from our midst. “Blessed be the Most High God who hath delivered us from the power of this dreadful enemy.”

Let us sum up this work of the Almighty—this terrible work, which He hath wrought in Portsmouth!—How shall we estimate it? Come with me to yonder grave-yard,—behold it!—what a spectacle!—A few months ago, the number of burials in Portlock’s cemetery, had been comparatively few. It was only in a few spots, that the fresh turned earth indicated a recent interment. A large portion, of that broad enclosure, is now covered with graves. Side by side, they range in scores. The whole surface seems to have been disturbed, by some strange commotion. There it is—a marred and broken field—its history written upon its own bosom, and a tale of woe coming up from every rough, and unmarked mound!!

The number of deaths, officially reported, as occurring in the town of Portsmouth, during the prevalence of the epidemic, is *one thousand and eighty*. It is probable, however, that this estimate falls much below the truth; as it is generally supposed that many deaths occurred of which there was no report. It will doubtless, be safe to say, that at least TWELVE HUNDRED persons, belonging to this place,‡ died of the yellow fever, during the four months of its continuance. Of this number, one hundred and twenty were heads of families; and in forty-six families, both father and mother were taken away. The number of children who have thus suddenly become orphans is not definitely known. As far as can be ascertained, it is not less than *two hundred*; and there is reason to believe that it may considerably exceed that number.

What scenes of distress, do these statistics present to our minds!—How many parents’ breasts have been wrung with anguish! How many females have been left in widowhood, to bemoan the lost object of their affections; and it may be, to drag out a life of poverty, and neglect!—How many smiling children, have been left in orphanage: no more to experience a father’s care—no more to know a mother’s love!—Truly, “The blind have been brought by a way they know not; they have been led in paths, that they had not known!” But thanks be to God, He is

*Of this number, perhaps, not 200 escaped sickness.

†A slight frost occurred on the 8th October, which had a sensible influence in abating the Fever. A few new cases existed after the 26th; but they can all be traced to exposure and imprudence prior to that date.

‡Several died in Baltimore, Richmond, and other places.—Bob Butt, the mulato sexton, affirms that he dug, during the Fever, with the assistance of ten hands, eleven hundred and fifty-nine graves. It is known, also, that graves were dug by others.

able to "make darkness light before them; and the crooked ways straight."

We have assembled this day, my bretheren, in memory of some who belonged to our order; and to receive the lessons of wisdom, which God, in His Providence, is addressing to us, with whom they were once associated, in the bonds of *Friendship, Love, and Truth*. Twenty-eight members "of Old Dominion Lodge, No. 5," are among the victims of the Fever. They were once as active, and as buoyant as any of us. They were our friends—we knew them well; and we loved them. As citizens, they were good men and true; engaged with zeal, in the avocations of life; and endeavoring to illustrate the principles, of our noble Institution. They were useful men in the community; and their loss will long be felt in this town. But they have heard the call of the GRAND MASTER on High; and we shall see them no more on earth.—And, who are they that have left us?

Isaac Anderton,	Vernon Eskridge,	John T. Nash,
Robert Ballentine,	Harrison Ferrebee,	Robert Nelums,
Samuel Brewer,	James H. Finch,	Robert T. Scott,
Wm. P. Brittingham,	John W. Forrest,	Wm. T. Snead,
Nathaniel Brittingham,	Robert A. Graves,	John W. H. Trugien,
John D. Cooper,	James Hanrahan,	Jesse N. Veale,
George Chambers,	George Hope,	Wilson W. Williams,
Charles Cassell,	William Jones,	Richard Williams,
D. P. Daughtrey,	James Mayo,	Richard C. M. Young.

What a work of destruction!—O, the terrible doings of God!—
"Who would not fear thee, O, King of Nations, for unto thee doth it appertain?"

These twenty-eight brethren, have left eighteen widows, and thirty-seven orphans, incapable of taking care of themselves. All of those widows and orphans are now, in a measure, committed to *our* charge. We are bound, by the principles of our Order, to look after and to care for them. It becomes us, to be true to our trust—and shall we not be? Yes, our hearts, at this moment, yearn towards them; and with the blessing of Jehovah, they shall not want.*

"Our offering is a willing mind
To comfort the distressed;
In *others'* good, our own to find—
In *others'* blessings blest."

And now my bretheren, I have only to add—God did not send this fearful pestilence to be disregarded. In His infinite wisdom, He has scourged us—but He has designed our good:

"Behind a frowning providence,
He hides a smiling face."

*Old Dominion Lodge, No. 5, has paid since the commencement of the epidemic, with the assistance of sister Lodges.

For widows' benefit	\$4,500
" Funeral benefits of brethren,	660
" " " wives of do.	160
" Sick, benefits	660
Total,	\$5,980

Shall we not, then, be improved? I believe, that happy results have already accrued from this dire calamity. Christian hearts have been drawn closer together; and party distinctions have been forgotten—benevolent sympathies have been brought out—the energies of good men have been aroused; and methinks some thoughtless ones have been made to realize, as they never have done before, the vanity and shortness of life. But there have been other results, far *less* interesting. Many, it is to be feared, have become settled in their indifference; and are now more hardened in sin than before the Fever. “Because sentence against their evil works has not been executed speedily, their hearts are fully set in them to do evil.” God grant, that they may, even yet, be arrested in their mad career.

Let us, who are of this noble Order, “fear God; for that is wisdom.” Let us not be satisfied, with that commendable charity, which induces us this day, to care for the helpless and the destitute. “Pure religion and undefiled, before God and the Father is” not only “To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction,” but also “to keep ourselves unspotted from the world.” But who can keep himself unspotted from the world, without the fear of God before his eyes?—Our duty is *first* to HIM who made us, and *then* to our fellow man.—“Jesus said unto him”—that is to the lawyer who tempting Him, asked, “Master, which is the great commandment in the law?—Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the *first* and *great* commandment. And the second is like unto it. Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. On *these two* commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

We are now, my bretheren, at the close of the year—at the close of this year of chastisement and trial. Yes,

The year
Has gone, and *with* it, many a glorious throng
Of happy dreams. Its work—is on each brow,
Its shadow—in each heart. In its swift course,
It waved its sceptre o'er the beautiful—
And they are not. It laid its palid hand
Upon the strong man—and the haughty form—
Is fallen, and the flashing eye—is dim.
It trod the hall of revelry, where thronged
The bright and joyous—and the tearful wail—
Of stricken ones—is heard, where erst the song,
And reckless shout—resounded.

It came,
And faded like a wreath of mist at eve;
Yet, ere it melted in the viewless air,
It heralded its millions—to their home.

Brethren—*we*, too, must die. “To that great event we must come at last; and we know not how soon!—The honors of the world, the applause of men, birth, wealth, fame, all end with us, in that ‘narrow house.’” And that ‘narrow house’ shall introduce us to the *Judgment*. Who, of us, shall be welcomed as “good and faithful servants” into the joys and glories of Heaven?—“*He that overcometh shall inherit all things.*”

The terrible doings of God.

A SERMON

DELIVERED IN THE

COURT ST. BAPTIST CHURCH, PORTSMOUTH, VA.

ON

SABBATH MORNING, DEC. 30, 1855,

COMMEMORATIVE OF TWENTY-EIGHT MEMBERS OF OLD DOMINION LODGE, NO. V,
WHO DIED DURING THE LATE EPIDEMIC.

BY

ISAAC W. K. HANDY,

PASTOR OF THE FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, AND MEMBER OF THE ORDER.

Published by Request of the Lodge.

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