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# SERMON

COMMEMORATIVE OF THE

## GREAT EXPLOSION

AT THE

ALLEGHENY ARSENAL,

AT LAWRENCEVILLE, PENN'A. ON SEPTEMBER 17TH, 1862.

PREACHED BY

REV. R. LEA,

PASTOR OF THE LAWRENCEVILLE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH,

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It has been the wish of many of the hearers of Rev. R. Lea to have his Sermon on the great disaster at the Allegheny Arsenal published, to which I have obtained his consent.

D. W. H. STOFIELD.

LAWRENCEVILLE, PA.

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GEORGE JE. 478

## SERMON.

“WATCH, THEREFORE, FOR YE KNOW NOT WHAT HOUR YOUR LORD DOETH COME.”  
Matthew 24 : 42.

THE uncertainty of human life was never more strikingly shown in this community than upon the memorable 17th day of September, 1862. The morning was calm and beautiful, and until noon nothing unusual occurred at the Allegheny Arsenal. It was pay day, and the noble Union girls, who had toiled all the month, were rejoicing over the reception of the fruit of their labor. The shop had been swept, and among the leavings, some loose powder was scattered over the stony road winding around the beautiful grounds. A wagon was passing, when either the iron of the wheel or horse's shoe struck fire. In an instant a terrific explosion was heard, shaking the earth, and inflicting injury upon the surrounding buildings. Amidst a dense column of smoke, and a bright sheet of flame, were seen fragments of the building, mixed with portions of the human frame, rising high into the atmosphere, and then falling in a horrid shower all around.

Some panic-stricken persons shouted: “The magazine is on fire!” Repeated explosions, and the wild confusion, seemed to confirm the awful report. In this dreadful stage some were thoughtful and calm—others prayed and wept, while many rushed, horror-stricken, they knew not whither. A few stopped not until they were miles from the scene of danger. Several were picked up insensible, and when consciousness returned, were unable to tell whither they were going or wherefore they had fled.

But amidst all this dismay and fearful consternation and apprehension of still worse to come, when the magazine should explode, there were many who entered the gates and climbed the walls, determined to aid, or die in the attempt.

The doors of the large building near the entrance to the park were closed, and the frantic girls, supposing themselves confined for certain burning, without hope of escape, pushed and trod upon each other, screaming and leaping from the windows, seeking avenues of escape, or sitting down in dumb despair. Strange that more were not mangled here; as it was, serious injuries were inflicted, and terror was added to the scene.

But the central terror was the burning laboratory. Here one hundred and fifty-six girls were ready to resume their labors, and were, almost without a moment's warning, wrapped in flames, or violently thrown from the building; a few ran, or were blown out into the yard, and escaped; some were rescued by the daring of friends, but the majority met death instantaneously—perhaps hardly knowing the cause of their death. The fire was so fierce, the sulphur so suffocating, that an instant was sufficient to extinguish all sensibility. Some were dragged from a mass of ruins who had died in each other's arms; some were rescued who would recover. A few escaped without assistance, who will die of their injuries. Some could merely mention their names, or call for a priest, or for water, or for prayer, but all upon the ground were naked, blackened with powder, roasted, somewhat bloody, and with many the resemblance to the human form was completely lost. Nothing but masses of flesh and charred bones remaining of what, such a short time before, was life and beauty. In most instances the skulls of those taken out dead were fearfully cracked. The victims lay about upon boards and shutters, amidst a horror-stricken crowd, the trees above holding fragments of female attire, mournfully waving to and fro over their former owners. It may be possible that a few were entirely consumed—not a distinguishable relic being left to testify respecting their untimely end. The building was utterly consumed, and the ashes were carefully raked for every vestige of its former occupants. The calamity was so sudden, so crushing, so wide-spread in its results, and the horrors so varied, that the large crowd which assembled seemed overwhelmed—the usual signs of sharp woe giving way to solemn remarks or the stillness of stupefaction.

When the fire was utterly subdued, the noise, the turmoil of the scene was over, then came the terrible, orderly process of identification and burial. A hand was identified outside the grounds by a ring upon the finger, a leg by a shoe upon the foot; but in neither case was the former owner of the fragments found. A parent would bend over some blackened corpse, examining minutely form, hair, any relic of dress, and then drop down silently if nothing was discovered, or shriek wildly if something certainly proved that these changed bodies were really the remains of their loved ones. Parts of two days these affecting scenes were constantly witnessed, but after all the efforts of deeply interested friends and spectators, about forty were unrecognized. There they lay, subject to the minutest scrutiny, yet neither sister nor mother could tell which of these they had watched over from infancy, and had so lately parted from, with the farewell kiss, for the day, they supposed; but alas! it was a final adieu. The immense throng of people was a distinctive feature of the scene. Cars and all kinds of vehicles, loaded to their utmost capacity, and the sidewalks, crowded with passers to and fro, led by every imaginable impulse, irresistibly drawn to the gates within which such a fearful tragedy had been acted. The crowd was immense on Wednesday and Thursday, and for days continued lessening gradually, as though unwilling or unable altogether to escape at once from the terrible fascination of the place.

The Government provided plain black coffins for the undistinguished remains. The Allegheny Cemetery donated a lot suitable for the interment. The bodies were gradually removed to their place of repose, and about three o'clock on the 18th, the mighty mass of human beings moved, accompanying the last body from the Arsenal to the grave. The mayors of both cities were there; the council and clergy of Lawrenceville; a number of carriages, and a countless multitude of all ages and classes walked in mournful order to the place.

It was a large, deep pit—unlike, in its vastness, any other grave; planks were laid across it, and from these, coffin after coffin was lowered to men below, who placed *thirty-nine* coffins side by side, filled by those whom no one could recognize, but whom the whole community adopted and honored as sisters

and brethren who fell at the post of duty. After the last coffin had been lowered, the friends of the deceased were invited to the front rank, upon the margin of the grave, opposite the officiating clergy. Bro. Millar, of the Methodist Church, offered a prayer; Dr. Gracey read a portion of the book of Job; Rev. Andrews, pastor of the U. Presbyterian Church, prayed; Rev. Lea, pastor of the L. Presbyterian Church, made an address, and Rev. Edmonds, of the Episcopal Church, pronounced the benediction. Father Gibbs, of the Catholic Church, signified his intention of being present, but was officiating at the same time over the remains of other victims in St. Mary's Cemetery, immediately adjoining. The dust was committed to dust until the morning of the resurrection, and a committee has been appointed to procure funds to erect a suitable monument to their memory.

Among these unrecognized remains were some dear to their own churches for their piety and virtues. They will be missed from the house of God. Three were members of this church—two by baptism and one by profession. Mr. David Gilleland lately came among us—a man of warm, modest piety, who loved the house of God—who was almost always at the prayer meeting, and who loved to be a spectator, even when not teaching in the Sunday School. He will never lead our singing again, but we trust that ere now his voice has been heard among those who sing around the Throne. Agnes Davidson told me, the last time I saw her, that she was for the Union—and that she would no longer be a secessionist from the government of God, and would testify her love to Jesus and the Church at our next communion. Mary Davidson, a younger sister, left her home that morning, singing a beautiful hymn. Both were dutiful at home; both were loved at the Sabbath School, and both would probably have soon been fellow communicants. We hope all three are now with the blessed.

There are other things which are not so painful to look upon. This dark cloud has a silver lining.

1. Heroic courage was displayed. Men dashed into the midst of the burning to save, as dauntless as ever soldiers stormed a battery. The walls were scaled, burning fragments scattered, shrieking victims carried out, with bravery never

surpassed, showing that peace and mercy have their heroes, without drum and fife, without the word of command or the presence of an insulting foe. One poor girl, who barely escaped with life, could hardly be prevented from rushing back to find her companion, and when hindered, wended her way slowly home, wailing, even upon a bed of pain, that her friend was lost.

2. The firemen of the cities were out with their engines, with a promptness truly praiseworthy. Fearing not the proximity of the magazine, regardless of the repeated explosions of the shells and cartridges, they poured their streams upon the burning mass as steadily as on a parade, or a common conflagration.

3. Physicians were there, unfeared, uncalled, with the appliances of skill, to save or alleviate suffering. Clergymen were there, amidst smoke and fire, to point the dying to the Lamb of God.

4. Women were there, with lint and bandage, with oil and wine, with ready hands to soothe and words to encourage.

All classes were there, to sympathize, to do anything, mastering their own feelings as they attempted to console the sufferers. O! it was grand to see the heart of this community stirred to its inmost depths. The cloud had a silver lining; the sable pall was fringed with gold. Upon the deep back ground of this woe was painted a picture of heroism and love upon which angels might gaze with admiration.

“Ye know not what hour your Lord may come.” Who could have known in the morning that the day would end so sadly? How could those dear girls know that by the grinding of a wheel or the dropping of a shell, such dire calamity would be instantly brought upon themselves. The opening of a bale of strange merchandise let out the “great plague” of London: the careless management of a little fire in a small yard started the “great fire” of Pittsburgh. We are so linked together; our lives or deaths depend so much upon others, over whom we have no control, that we should be always ready. A carelessly prepared prescription, a drunken captain or conductor, may work harm. Who could foretell what the firing of the first gun at Fort Sumter would bring about? It brought about

*remotely*, the catastrophe of Wednesday. And who can tell what more it may bring?

Not only are we ignorant of the coming of these events, the causes of which we think we can see, but who does not know that plagues and cholera are brought upon us when the most scientific cannot tell what change the atmosphere has undergone, or whether it be in the atmosphere at all.

The late Dr. Addison said "that man never made such a fool of himself as when he undertook to tell the *cause* of a thing." A thinking man may perhaps see the link which precedes an event, and faith may know that it is the Lord that "cometh," as the first cause. But there may be millions of unseen links and influences affecting and connecting the result with God, so that we cannot tell when or how the Lord cometh.

But there is something better than the knowledge of future events, *i. e.*, for a man to be prepared to meet all events, howsoever or whensoever they may happen. A true Christian only is prepared for fire or flood, battle or consumption. He may be surprised and terrified when it comes, but no matter, above him unseen angels wait to bear him away. A smiling Saviour says, Well done! God watches his sleeping dust through all its changes; his resurrection is sure; his eternal life certain. Oh! be Christians, and when the earth, being on fire, is dissolving, and the elements are melting with fervent heat, you may rejoice and look upward. To the Christian, it matters little whether a fearful explosion or Elijah's car of fire bears him to glory.

In conversing with so many dying persons in so short a space of time, their final words would naturally leave a deep impression. One as soon as rescued, exclaimed, "Tell me truly, will I die?" You will. "Then cover me and take me out of the crowd." Several cried frantically, "Send for a priest." One declared that her only hope was in the Mother of God. Another said, "I die, but Jesus died for me; I am safe." One from a distant town cried almost unceasingly, "God have mercy on my poor wicked soul." One murmured indistinctly, what sounded like "Glory! glory!" "My poor mother!" "My poor children!" were exclamations upon the lips of many. One



“had done no harm, and hoped that her suffering would atone for her sins.” A mother said, “I have worked for a living for my children, but, sir, if I live I will set them a better example. I will take them to your church. I have them baptized, but I should have done my duty better. God spare me to my children.” These remarks show the feelings of persons of different creeds. When near to eternity, we must in deep agony lean upon something, either upon the Almighty God, through Jesus Christ our Lord, or upon a poor reed. One poor girl who escaped with fearful injury, seemed to forget herself entirely, and exclaimed continually to herself, or others, “My poor companion! she perished in the flames: I tried to save her, but could not,” In the very midst of the awful scene, an intelligent physician said, “I heard glorious news just as I left the city, but can hardly tell it here; M’Clellan has defeated the rebels in Maryland, and will, without doubt, kill or capture them all.” Patriotism for a moment lit the countenances of the bystanders with joy; but the smile was like a sudden gleam of sunshine across ruins. There was the terror from which such tidings as this could not divert the mind. Another physician exclaimed, “I was all along the Chickahominy during the battles, but was not affected as I am here—so unexpected—so terrible—and the sufferers, poor girls—the impossibility of even relieving them,” pointing to some dozen blackened, quivering remains. Those who saw the sight can never forget it.

Ever since the fatal day, persons have visited the Arsenal, either to inquire about the whole occurrence, or in the faint hope of learning something of their lost ones. Sometimes deeply affecting scenes are witnessed. The guard, as in duty bound, parades backward and forward at the gate, but at the approach of a female in black he stands still. True, it is not his business, as a soldier—but he is a man. There he stands in military array, his bayonet glittering in the sun. He will answer that women dozens of questions. He will stand as long as she questions. If he moves away when she ceases, he will stop again and again, at her slightest beck. Duty! He instinctively feels that it is his duty to tell her all he can, whether ordered or not. In a car, one day, sat a woman in

deep mourning, her presence quieted loud discussion; no one knew her—she was evidently poor, but all felt that she was entitled to respect. The bell rang—the car stopped. Another woman in black entered; with a wild shriek they rushed into each other's arms; they spoke not, but all knew that they were bereaved mothers—going to the Arsenal. One took out a large daguerreotype. "There is my once happy group, all are burned but that one." Every hand was extended for it in turn. One lady wept more than either of the sufferers, though she knew neither of them. The conductor looked into, the driver looked back upon the scene—so feelingly every one asked the ages of the martyrs. God bless a community which can so sympathize with sorrow. Said a father: "Ask the superintendent of the Sunday School, if money will be taken in lieu of the books they received? I wish to retain them. Every thing which they last touched is sacred—we must keep it till we join them in heaven." "What hymn," asked the mother, "did you sing last Sunday, it so pleased my girls. They promised to bring their books home next Sunday and show it me. But poor things—they little thought"———here she filled up.

But here is the Hymn 677:

“High in yonder realms of light,  
Dwell the raptured saints above;  
Far beyond our feeble sight,  
Happy in Immanuel's love.

Pilgrims in this vale of tears,  
Once they knew, like us below,  
Gloomy doubts, distressing fears,  
Torturing pain, and heavy woe.

Oft the big unbidden tear,  
Stealing down the furrowed cheek,  
Told, in eloquence sincere,  
Tales of woe they could not speak.

But these days of weeping o'er,  
Past this scene of toil and pain,  
They shall feel distress no more,  
Never, never, weep again.

Mid the chorus of the skies,  
Mid the angelic choirs above,  
Hark! their songs melodious rise,  
Songs of praise to Jesus' love.

Happy spirits! ye are fled,  
Where no grief can entrance find;  
Lulled to rest the aching head,  
Soothed the anguish of the mind.

All is tranquil, and serene,  
Calm and undisturbed repose;  
There no cloud can intervene,  
There no angry tempest blows.

Every tear is wiped away,  
Sighs no more shall heave the breast;  
Night is lost in endless day,  
Sorrow in eternal rest."

This hymn will be sung to the praise of God at the close of the services, its selection being a tribute to the memory of David Gilleland, Agnes and Mary Davidson—who all united with us in singing it the Sabbath before they were called to the choir above.

As soon as the community recovered somewhat from the stunning blow, arose the questions, How did it happen? Is any one to blame? Might it have been prevented? The efforts to answer these questions were unparalleled in the history of this region. Public meetings and private investigations—discussions by the press—a coroner's jury, with amazing perseverance and research—all combined, calling for light. From the fact that no one shrank from investigation, we most certainly believe that no one *willfully committed the deed*. But the road before the building was stony. Powder was hauled in great quantities in wagons. Even powder barrels may be leaky. The shop was swept out—sometimes loose powder among the dust. Familiarity breeds contempt of danger. All these are facts. So it is also true, that visitors have been long excluded from the shops—that the laboratory was guarded by stringent rules. Respecting the living—agents and employees—we say not one word, except that from the highest to





the lowest, we believe every one of them utterly incapable of doing the deed *purposely*. The rigid examination will discover what amount of carelessness, or want of forethought, there existed, and determine the innocence or culpability of those in charge.

“Watch, therefore, for ye know not what hour your Lord doth come.” So live, that whether your call shall come suddenly or find you waiting, you may hear the welcome plaudit, “Well done, good and faithful servant, enter into the joy of thy Lord.”