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S E R M O N,

PREACHED AT THE ANNUAL

T H A N K S G I V I N G,

NOVEMBER 16th, 1797.

BY NATHAN STRONG,

Minister of the North Presbyterian Church in Hartford.

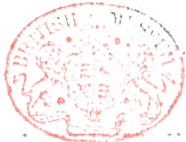
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THANKSGIVING SERMON.

PSALM CVII. 8.

*Oh that men would praise the Lord for his goodness,
and for his wonderful works to the children of
men!*

THE goodness of God is an exhaustless subject. Tho' we often call it up in meditation, we never can reach the height, nor the depth, nor the breadth of its extension. The praises of God's goodness will be commensurate with eternity; and as creatures can never comprehend that which is infinite, they will never fully know the subject of their praise, nor speak of all his love as it exists in his most blessed nature.

CREATION, providence and a revelation of redeeming grace, are the means by which we know our most glorious creator; and each of these are like a new book, which we have only begun to peruse, and every new turned leaf displays a glory brighter than the last. As the seals are loosed, God's character comes more into the sight of his creatures, and the growing illustration of his nature and glory, is but the illustration of his goodness. How vast the display of divine goodness in creation!—We know but little part of it, as it is exhibited in our own world; and how small may we suppose this whole world to be, compared with

the whole extent of created existence. We know that God hath made his creatures with natures, with bodies and minds capable of pain and distress, and that they often experience them; still this is no evidence of any want of goodness in God, for the pain is a consequence of their own voluntary sin, and God by his infinite wisdom makes it the means of greater good, than could have been without it. It is the prerogative and the glory of the God whom we adore, that he can bring good out of evil, light out of darkness, and a kingdom of the greatest glory and blessedness, composed of subjects who were totally depraved.

How wonderful beyond all thought and description is the goodness of God in his providence, in the government of the things he hath made!—how many blessings are given—mercies of every kind—for the body and for the soul—for time and for eternity—personal, family, and national blessings—civil and religious blessings. How many evils do we daily escape, into which we must necessarily fall, if God were not a good preserver in his providence. Tho' there be a certain and fixed manner of divine acting, in and by the things he hath created, which we call the established laws of nature; there is, notwithstanding this, infinite room left for the direction of a good providence. In the first place, it is the constant, preserving power of God, which upholds and gives energy to the laws of nature; and in the next place, there is a guiding of things, silent and unperceived by us, which is necessary to preserve, and the mercies of God in his providence, given in these ways, are so many they cannot be counted up by us. A considerate mind must be sensible of this, and feel a deep obligation to praise the Lord for his wonderful works of goodness to the children of men in his providence.

STILL more of this goodness is seen in the revelation of redeeming grace, by which guilty sinners are saved from their sins, and brought to glory. The great work of redemption, and the manner in which it is effected, are designed by God as the most rich display of his goodness, to which the works of creation and providence are all made subservient. The wonderful extent of this goodness, may be learned from many considerations.

FROM the evil nature of sin, and its unspeakable guilt—from the dishonor done to God—from the goodness and holiness of the law, which men have violated—from the astonishing means used to effect it, no less than the incarnation, obedience and sufferings of the son of God—from the multitude of sins which are forgiven to those who repent—from God's long forbearance with them, while sinning against the warnings of justice and the calls of love—and finally, from that weight of glory, reserved for such as fear God and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ.

THIS glory is called in the scriptures, a weight of glory. There is great energy in the expression, and it communicates to us an idea, that it exceeds all present description. And can it be justly called any thing less than a weight of glory, when we consider that it is to enjoy a blessedness, that eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither hath entered into the imagination of man to conceive—that it is to come near to God himself, and enjoy him eternally.

THE principal value of the blessings of this life, is derived from the relation they bear to the gospel redemption. They are parts in that great work of grace to the repenting children of men, by which the goodness of God will be forever displayed. The glory of God in redemption will

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crown his glory, in all the works of creation and providence.

I AM not disposed to detract from the blessings of providence as they relate to this world only, nor from the goodness of God in giving them. The man who does it cannot be prepared truly to rejoice, and praise eternal goodness. There is little reason to suppose, that the man who cannot see goodness in the streams, will behold it in the fountain; still it remains a truth, that the principal value of present blessings arises from an eternal exercise of goodness in God. Our minds are never fitly prepared to keep a day of praise, until we are so far freed from the power of sense, and animal lusts and appetites, that we can look forward and see the connection between present and future things. It is in the light of eternity, that time and the world and our present existence show their true value. Therefore in our present review of God's goodness to the children of men in this world by the multitude of mercies we are receiving, let us bear on our hearts, the relation these mercies have to an endless, an eternal life.

First, Life itself—this rational existence—this intelligent capacity of knowing, and of receiving happiness. There is a blessedness in existing, unless destroyed by our own chosen sin and its consequences. The animal and sensual pleasures, of which our present natures are capable, is the lowest degree of happiness, and those who thro' a corruption of heart can taste no other, do not yet know the great blessing of existence. There is a natural pleasure in knowing; and what is still infinitely greater, there is a moral happiness in loving the excellent truths and objects that are known.

It is of the Lord's goodness that we were not stocks and stones, or left never to exist, never to see, to adore, to love; never to behold the works of God and follow them up to the glorious fountain.

FROM the continuation of our being, we are apt to feel, as tho' it were independently our own; but this is wholly an erroneous feeling, for there is a constant power of God in upholding this animal and intelligent life. And how great a blessing is this existence, when we consider it as the beginning of eternal consciousness—eternal knowledge—eternal love, and growing beatitude in the presence of our maker. What a gloom would it cast over the good man's existence, if he were soon to sleep and wake no more; but when he considers a resurrection; when he feels the greatest longings of heart to come near to God, to know him more and serve him better; when he considers his present life as introductory to a future, and his present knowledge and experience as a foundation on which the superstructure of everlasting felicity will be built, how doth it enlarge his sense of God's goodness to the children of men. And tho' in this world there be many personal pains of body and mind, afflictions, sorrows and trials, his faith rises above them—on the wings of faith and love he ascends over the curtain that hangs between this and the world to come, and blesses God for an intelligent, holy and eternal being; he can even bless God that there are trials on this side the grave, which in the hand of the holy spirit are made the means of preparing guilty creatures for a pure heaven, where all who approach shall be like God, and serve him in the beauties of perfect holiness.—In this connection with another world, all present blessings become a very real ground of praise, and we shall feel this truth, if our hearts are prepared to receive and improve them in a right manner. I may therefore,

Secondly, Mention as cause of praise, that God hath preserved us another year, and given us the common provisions of his providence in a very

bountiful measure. We have had, not only such a share of happiness as time and the world are in their nature calculated to give; but we have had another year as an opportunity to seek the perfect redemption of the world to come. It is a serious inquiry, what our present state would have been, if God had called our bodies to the grave and our souls before his tribunal, within the year to which our present anniversary hath respect. Let us therefore keep in view, that the chief value of life, and all temporal mercies is derived from their relation to futurity. The health, which hath prevailed to an uncommon degree, in this place and through all the northern states, hath given us opportunity to devote the whole vigor of understanding to serve God and seek his favor. A plentiful supply of common bounties hath taught us that God is good and worthy to be sought. The continuance of life hath been a lengthened time of probation, and if we have not repented, there is still room and opportunity to turn to God. The blessings received by ourselves, our families, our neighbours, and our country, lead to repentance. They afford a rational motive to adore and love God, and show the fountain of good there is in him, all of which may be enjoyed by us if we are obedient. This is the right way of estimating temporal blessings, for if we value them only as they relate to time, the joy will be short; for the time of this world will soon end, and before the time of this world ends, we must go from it and be known here no more.

In this place, it is fit we should pause a moment from pursuing the general subject, and seriously ask our own consciences, whether we have most cause to rejoice in God's blessings, or mourn over ourselves for our own improper use of them? If we have lived only for this world— If we have rejoiced in life, only as a time of tem-

poral and sensual pleasure—If we have forgotten the giver in seeking and idolizing the gift—If health and the bounties of providence, have by our misimprovement ministered only to a forgetful disobedience of Jehovah, we have great cause for regret ; and while we acknowledge the goodness of God in giving, have reason enough to mourn over our own misuse and ingratitude.

Thirdly, I may this day call upon you to praise God for the blessing of a well regulated Civil Government, and the multitude of benefits which flow from this source.—A government, built on an excellent civil constitution, which guards you on the one hand against the tyranny of rulers ; and on the other from the more awful tyranny of the multitude—of the people themselves under no control—of military despots—of unprincipled men, raised to power by opportunity and the confusion of the times, who with equal indifference spill human blood, violate all rights of humanity and justice, and trample on civil constitutions, which are made sacred before God and men, by the vows of millions. It is very difficult justly to appreciate the blessings of a good civil government.—Nothing but the want of it, or very clearly seeing the misery of those who are deprived of it, can sufficiently raise the energy of mens imagination to realize how great the blessing is—Without it we can neither act, nor speak, or sleep in safety ; or enjoy a single blessing given by a bountiful providence. The places which are deprived of it, are constantly filled with events, which make the eye, the ear and all the social feelings, inlets of misery. All is mutual distrust, mutual injury and common woe. The heart cannot open to friendship without going into the way of death. The tear of humanity often becomes a crime of the blackest die. And very frequently, to worship God according

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to the dictates of conscience, that sacred right of all men, is construed into the worst of crimes. These are only a few of the mildest features in the face of tyranny, and of anarchy the worst kind of tyranny. Let us therefore praise God for a good civil constitution—a government of our own choice and administered by men of our own choice—a government which freely indulges all personal, social and religious rights. The constitution of the land is the banner of civil and religious liberty, and those who attempt to injure it are bringing misery on millions.

It would seem that if any thing can teach us the greatness of our privileges and our favored situation, it must be looking across the Atlantic, and observing the situation of the old States. I am sensible that some effects of their commotions have reached to us, and that peaceful America has been injured, and is now suffering by the most unjustifiable depredations, and as impolitic in the nations who encourage them as they be unjust; but these are injuries which come on a few, compared with the whole body of our community. The great body of the community are happy, in peace and under a good government. If we may go through the period of peril now commenced, in which the cup of the Lord's vengeance is put into the hands of the nations to drink, to punish them for their sins and prove his own holiness, without still greater evils than we have yet suffered, we shall be comparatively happy indeed. The evils which our ears have heard are but in their beginning. I venture to predict and do it boldly, that the most bitter part and the dregs of this cup are yet to be poured out and swallowed by mankind. Those prophecies which must be fulfilled, teach us this: And there is a natural preparation in the state of the nations; in the derangement of their systems of

policy with respect to one another; in the unprincipled measures of many governments, which must destroy all foreign and domestic confidence; and in the luxurious and avaricious character of individuals, to carry the unchanging predictions of God's word into most dreadful execution. Even if peace were established between the contending nations, it could only be the peace of a few days unless God interpose by his own spirit. Oh Lord shorten these days, that thy creatures may bless thee; give them to see thy hand, that they may turn from their sins, and turn thine anger from them.

FROM what is now taking place in Europe, we ought to learn the following things.

1. THE natural tendency of all systems of civil and religious oppression.—That such systems have been erected, almost over the whole world, men of every party are now ready to agree, and they have been carried to a great degree of excess. Systems of civil and religious oppression heap up danger, and the most extreme sorrow for the countries where they have been introduced. Measures of oppression may be introduced wantonly by the great; they may be accepted incautiously by the people; but they must be parted with by pain and blood, by events which show the madness of an injured people, and cause the posterity of the great to curse the folly of their ancestors. A time must come through the progress of knowledge, or from some event more accidental to human foresight than this, when the most vigorous exertions will be made to overturn the foundation of oppression. The misery of such a revolution is often greater than all antecedent miseries. Such a scene opens a door for the passions and sins of the enraged multitude, who have much fair zeal, but little knowledge and no responsibility. Honest and

peaceful men are disposed to retire into the shade, and it leads unprincipled men to the helm of state—and a daring spirit of enterprize calculated to flourish only in forlorn days and by wicked measures comes into the place of true greatness and true virtue. A considerable number of such tyrants in the state makes the most complete tyranny. Those who introduce either civil or religious oppression into their country, are laying a foundation for their posterity of many generations to be wretched. What can such persons think? They are either extremely ignorant of the natural operation of things, or their passion for sin hath made them willing to curse the offspring of their own bowels.

2. THE present events of Europe teach us that God will fulfil his own word—that he will accomplish his own prophecies, though men may say all things remain as they were.—For several ages past, many have been ready to say, it is impossible those events should take place, and that those evils should come on the great powers of the world which are plainly predicted. Infidelity hath built much on this; but let such look on the world now. The clusters of the vine of a wicked professing church are ripe. The time of the wrath of the Lamb is come.—The seeds of revolution are widely sown, they have sprung, and are beginning to ripen. The harvest of woe is commenced, and the bundles bow over the sickle. Now it is much more difficult to see when and where it will end, than it once was to know when and where it would begin. The Lord who governs the world, knew the truth of what he foretold; and unless we see God in these things, we do not behold them right.—Unless we fear him in these things, there is reason to apprehend, we shall have a deeper share in them than hath been already felt.—

May the Lord make us wise to see the signs of the times and the seasons.

3. FROM the present events of Europe, we may see the folly of endeavouring to support good government and a system of rational and equal liberty without the aid of religion.—Even the false schemes of religion among the heathen, were absolutely necessary for their civil government. I know that religion hath often been profaned to promote oppression; but this is no evidence that a rational religion is not necessary for good government and rational liberty, which is the only true liberty, or that which is a blessing to men. The vilest tyrants in the world have known the connection between national religion and national stability, and dare not trust all their own means without this aid. For this reason, they have first called in, and then corrupted religion to assist their oppression. The church wishes the favor of the state and thanks those pious rulers who say to her *God speed thee*; but she can stand without them; because she hath an Almighty King who rules in the midst of the nations, and in the midst of his enemies and has promised his protection. But the state cannot stand without religion, because religion contains those moral obligations, and that holy temper and practice, without which men cannot dwell together in peace.—We may talk as much as we please of reason—of its great attainments and influence in these new days—of light—of civility—civilization—and other names complimentary to human nature, where there is no fear of God; but reason and all these alone, never yet bore down the human passions and the selfish vices of men. There must be a fear and love of God, and such evangelical obedience as the gospel requires, before there will be a fear of the sin which oppresses men. A fear of God never can stand

upon a system of infidelity and that vague, uncharacterized Deity, whom loose men call nature—or upon the mighty abilities of reason in those who possess it—or a total abolition of God's Sabbaths, his ordinances and those institutions, by which the things of Jehovah are impressed on the minds of mankind in this selfish and sensual state of being.

For the instruction of mankind, God is now permitting within the limits of Old Christendom, an experiment which no heathen empire of any great extent, was ever wild enough to attempt; to support a good and safe government, on reason without religion.—Ye men of either world, whether the old or new, who are attempting this, know that you are building a Babel, and that the Lord of all the earth will come down and confound your language, and your tongues shall become piercing swords to one another. And what doth this teach us, my christian friends? It teacheth us, as we love our peace to fear God and keep his commandments. As we value the peace of our posterity, let us bring them up in the fear of the Lord—to regard his laws—to honor his Sabbaths—to seek his protection—and to fear his judgments.

4. THE present state of Europe teaches us to reverence our own civil constitutions.—We have equal cause to bless God for freedom; and for an efficient government, which can punish crimes justly, distinguish between the innocent and the guilty, and protect the citizen in his just rights. It is the way of men to move from one extreme to another; and in their passion against a few great usurpers, to open the door for a million of lesser ones.—The power of a single despot, and the licentiousness of anarchy are at an equal remove from true freedom, peace and safety. Other countries may need a revolution;

but is this any evidence that one is needed in the United States?—Shall we burn our own house, because burning is the fashion a thousand leagues from us?—Because other nations are tearing down the fabrick of oppression, in which they and their fathers have been long afflicted; shall we spoil our own temple of freedom, which was bought by the blood of our brethren, and has been reared by the wisdom of deliberation and experience?—Disorganizers, in a land of constituted freedom, must be unwise men; for they seek trouble without a possibility of final advantage to themselves, to the present community, or to posterity. I believe that some of this character feel honest to themselves; but the more evidence we have of their integrity, the less there is of their knowledge; and it appears that they do not distinguish between the different situations and blessings of nations.

THE party spirit which hath, in some degree, obtained in our country is a stain to our wisdom. One says, I am a friend of this contending nation, and another of that. I think this is not being good politicians, and am certain it is not being good christians. The christian politician will pity the calamities of all nations—he will seek to be good and be just to all—he will pray for all, and not make himself the instrument of any.—Therefore, if we mean to be a free, happy and good people, let us reverence our own government which is the ordinance of God, and suffer no party spirit towards distant people.

Fourthly, I shall conclude this discourse, with mentioning to you the highest ground of rejoicing in the goodness of God—The gospel which gives peace, forgiveness, eternal holiness and rest in the kingdom of God. Though there be many mercies; there are also many miseries in this world, arising from the sins of men.—Who can rationally wish to live here always?—Our ex-

peccations of perfect happiness from the world must wear out, as we become perfectly acquainted with it; and we ourselves must wear out, and soon be gone, if these expectations do not.—Were it not for a gospel of peace and forgiveness, how could we with any confidence, think of appearing in that world to which we must soon come.—The more we see of the miseries flowing from sin in this world; the more we must be convinced, there will be misery in every state where it exists; and the more we must rejoice in a gospel, which prepares men to be happy by making them holy—which sanctifies human reason—which destroys selfishness, and gives a benevolent love. If we had not this gospel, though we might vainly hope the best, we could not assure ourselves of being forgiven—of the protection of God in the valley of death—of his smiles when standing before his tribunal—of the perfect cleansing of our own hearts—of a society above, where true love and order shall reign—nor of a freedom from the calamities, with which sin hath filled this world. Therefore in all your rejoicings, rejoice greatly for the gospel of Jesus Christ.—In your thanks before the throne of God, thank him most fervently, most devoutly, most humbly for this.—Thank him that you need not live always in a world, where so much misery comes from human transgression;—where reason is so little sanctified, and the want of a perfect, holy love, makes as many parties as there are actors in the scene.—Thank him that our sins may be washed away by the blood of Jesus, and that there is a spirit to enlighten and sanctify.—Thank him that there is a light to irradiate the valley of death, and a sweet, small voice from the invisible world, whispering into the hearts of his repenting children, come and be ye ever with the Lord.—May we all hear this voice. AMEN.

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