

*David Watkinson  
to Rev. William Ward*

**MR. STRONG'S**

**SERMON,**

**PREACHED MARCH 10, 1811.**

THE MUTABILITY OF HUMAN LIFE.

A

SERMON,

PREACHED MARCH 10, 1811.

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BY NATHAN STRONG,

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## SERMON.

JAMES i. 11.

*And the grace of the fashion of it perisheth.*

THESE words were originally written to describe the vanity of pride in riches ; but as our observation of mankind gives no conviction that riches are more calculated to excite human vanity and produce an immoral character, than the other allurements of the world, I shall at this time consider the subject generally, with relation to all worldly things, which men may possess, to the great pleasure of the human heart. Of all these things we may say “The grace of the fashion of them perisheth ;”—“ As the flower of the grass so these things shall pass away ; For the sun is no sooner risen with a burning heat, but it withereth the grass and the flower thereof falleth ; so also shall these things fade away.” It is true, my hearers, that we very often meditate on created frailty, in our own persons, in our families, in our properties and the great variety of objects which men grasp to possess ; but still we have not meditated on them so frequently as to produce a general appearance of weanedness from the world, and diligence in laying up for ourselves treasures in heaven : we have not meditated on them so often as to become spiritualized in our temper and practice.

Further, it is well known that this kind of meditation is generally disagreeable to men, so that the teacher who makes popularity the pole star of his address, would rarely hazard himself on this ground; but there have not yet been so many monitions of them either from the pulpit or in the actual dealings of a most wise providence, that the face of society appears to be spiritualized; or that an impartial spectator in the prospect, would say what a beautiful world of christians is this! where all appear to be travelling to heaven in a holy and happy manner.— Would not such a spectator rather say, these professors for heaven are like blind men half recovered to sight. They see the truth, and they feel the obligations of duty with the same indistinctness as a man half recovered to eye sight would see men like trees walking. There is still in the world so much spiritual blindness and sin, that we all need the continual strokes of providence, the constant stings of conscience, and the perpetual warnings of the ministers of religion to keep alive a little sense that all things here are “Vanity of vanities and vexation of spirit.” And, my hearers, unless we add the meditations of our own closets, and our prayer for the aids of the Holy Spirit, these means will be of no avail. Although we were to speak with a trump from Heaven, “the grace of the fashion of it perisheth;” still dying men will be worldly unless the grace of God prevent.

I propose at this time to take a new manner of bringing before you the transitory nature of the world, in order to draw your hearts off from the vanity of its charms. Altho, in the method I shall now use, some degree of prediction may be necessary, yet do not think from this that the speaker pretends to be a prophet! To enforce the probability of his predictions he will only appeal to those laws of nature, which have been from the first, and will continue to the last to be in operation.

Probability is not certainty, but when speaking on many subjects, this is a sufficient warrant for a moral exhortation. That those are already dead are gone from us to their long home is certain. That those who are now alive will die is probable; But it is a probability of that imposing kind, which none but a madman can reject in his religious improvement.

1. To impress our own minds deeply on the subject of human frailty, we have commonly looked back, and said one to another, Where are the fathers, the husbands, and the brothers who once sat in these seats; and to whom belonged, a few years since, the properties we now enjoy? This ought to give a deep conviction of human frailty, but we often find it does not. Men are apt to say concerning the dead; and concerning lost properties, they are dead and they are lost forever. They do not take any pains to make a moral improvement of that which they know to be irretrievable; they cling to that which is yet possessed and use it more idolatrously than ever.

Let us therefore, by way of prediction, invert the view from those who are now living to those who will soon be dead; from properties now in our hands, to their state and condition in the hands of others with whom we are now connected. This must convince us that the grace of the fashion of the world passeth away. We are now, my brethren, to turn our consideration from those who have died to those who will die: from properties, now in possession and from expectancies to the irretrievable loss of them. Can you meet a prospect of the future with the same apathy that you look back on the past?— I imagine not; I conceive that all men would tremble under a true sense of what will be, while they stupidly disregard what hath been, though it is in

fact equally alarming. But we will now proceed to specificate the matter of our conjecture.

1. Within twenty years from this time, not only the speaker, but the greatest part of those who hear him must be in the grave : their bodies will be converted into dust ; their spirits will have passed the all-determining trial before God ; their souls will be under that sentence which can never be reversed either in its tenor or execution. Some hearer, perhaps, may begin to enquire, Is this possible ? I answer, if thou art affrighted move not the question for thy own relief. For on the laws of physical probability, the term is too long ; deduct from it one quarter, and on the laws of natural frailty and of past experience, half these bodies will be in the grave, and half these spirits in the eternal world. Shall half of us be in the eternal world in so short a period ? shall our business here be done, our lot finished, and our names be forgotten ? On the principles of a frail nature, the fashion of which is passing away, this is true.

2dly, Although my future specifications of the truth are really implied in the first, yet I will proceed to some division of facts, thereby to gain a stronger hold of human feeling, on this important subject.

Within the period before mentioned, the relations of parents and children, husbands and wives, masters and servants, as they exist now will be principally changed. Those of us who are parents shall be asleep. O that we may sleep in Jesus ! And the present children will say, my father and my mother died on such a day of such a year. Those who are now children, before this period, will be parents, and have suffered the loss of much fair offspring which is yet unborn. Of numerous circles of brethren and sisters now in health, perhaps all will be in the

grave ; or at most, one or two left to mournful remembrance of what the family one was. Whole neighbourhoods and streets, without a single exception, will be gone.—The face of society in its numbers and efficient influence will all be changed, so as to make it in effect appear like a new world. With the change of inhabitants, there will be as great a change of customs, manners and opinions, in some instances, we may hope for the better, but in others doubtless for the worse. How true it is that the grace of the fashion of the world perisheth.

3dly, Within the period mentioned there will be almost a total change in the possession of worldly property. We all know of what great moment riches and poverty, with their respective effects, are viewed by men. The greater part of their conditions will be changed. Houses and lands, and the immense mass of floating property will be in other hands. Some part, in this change, will be in the hands of other branches of the same family ; but the greater part will have passed away from all the claims of blood or affinity. Many who are now poor, will then be rich ; and such as are now rich will in themselves or in their offspring be poor. These things will either happen from death, or some other powerful causes, which are in constant operation to produce changes in property. Truly riches make themselves wings and fly away !

4thly, Within the period which hath been named, those who are most influential both in the state and in the church, will be changed. Those intelligent fathers, those pious matrons who taught and prayed with us will be gathered to their fathers. The ministers of religion in the churches will be men of new names. Those who execute influential town offices will be in the dust. The important legislative, judicial and executive offices of the State will

be filled by other men, and if any wish to know the character and the merits of those who now act, they must resort for information to their tombstones, their funeral eulogiums or the traditionary report of a few aged people. The whole will be a new world with respect to influence! How many nations which yet have some power, will be wholly sunk! How many tyrants risen into power by their loss! And how many people, who think by political ties to call themselves brethren, will be irretrievably separated from each other, with the torch of war flaming between them. The grace of the fashion of the world passeth away. And for the truth of the description now given, you are not referred to enthusiastic impressions, but to a faithful recollection and history of a similar period past. If we can make these reflections with fidelity to ourselves it may be useful in our future conduct. If we will not be influenced by what we have seen God do to others, let us fear him for what he will do to ourselves within a very short time.

Thus rapidly doth time fly, and the wheels of providence roll into execution the schemes of eternal counsel, that sin may be punished and holiness comforted.

And is this the world, in which you and I are contenting ourselves, and forming a warm nest for our posterity? Is this the world, which we call our home, from which it is so hard to wean our hearts, where we say we will lay our foundations broad, we will build our walls strong, so that our houses may stand forever. Indeed the preceeding is a true character of the state of things which we ambitiously court, and should be ready, if the grace of God did not prevent us, to take for an eternal heritage. There is a serious improvement, which as religious people we ought to make of the descriptions which have



been given in this discourse. Shall we despair of happiness here, and give ourselves up to gloom because there is no stability in the things of the world? By no means. We do not describe to you human frailty to render you unhappy, but to animate you to the obtainment of that christian holiness worthy of an immortal mind and of eternity.

We do not say these things to insinuate that the infinitely good being is sparing in the bestowment of his blessings, but in the end to convince you that he is infinitely good. Why is this life so short? why are the generations so transient? why are properties changed, and do honors and riches make themselves wings and fly away? Is it because God is unkind? No! It is because these things are worth retaining only in the beginning, in the infancy of our existence. The Lord our God created man in his own image; he prepared, for the scene of his industry, a situation in which painful labour was not required. But our parents fell, so that an earthly paradise could no longer be a proper habitation for them.

A promise was given of the Saviour, "The seed of the woman shall bruise the serpent's head."—A different state was now appointed to man, as he was in a state of probation. "In the sweat of thy face shalt thou procure and eat thy bread," was descriptive of the change. From hence comes all human frailty. But this is no reason that we should despair of divine goodness. The grace of the fashion of the world passeth away to afford us higher and renewed evidence that there is life for those who are faithful and obedient. Let us all therefore be faithful in the duties of repentance towards God, faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, and obedience in newness of life. Let us remember that this life must be short, that it must be unsatisfactory, that the objects of the world must flee from us, and we must pass from them. But

still under the impression that the grace of the fashion of the world passeth away, let us not think that God is unkind. He hath made this a life of correction, that he might shew his grace therein, and that it might appear, he is a God of mercy and not of undistinguished vengeance. The goodness of God, and his offered mercy appear in the grace of the fashion of the world passing away.

Having given a caution to those who may be disposed to dispond from seeing present frailty, I pass to a second use of improvement.

This subject teaches us that we should not attempt to lay up for ourselves treasures on earth. Do we not naturally, my brethren, look to the things of the world as our portion? are we not disposed to lay up our treasures here rather than above? Is there one present, who hath observed the course of the world, who can deny that it natural to man to chuse that very grace of the fashion of the world which is so apt to pass away and perish. I will not attempt to distinguish between my hearers. Can they not judge themselves, by the exercise of an honest conscience. Are there not some, I would trust they are few, who have given themselves up to the blasting expectations and indulgencies of sensual pleasures? And have not all these failed, and left them in pain, disappointment and woe?

I am certain the sensualist will acknowledge, this after he hath run his course, and looked back upon it with a recollection of what he hath experienced. But what have been our expectations from the riches of the world? Mammon hath always been a principal god of this depraved world. From the conditions of the people among whom I speak, it may without censoriousness be supposed that an accumulation of property hath been a chief object of some

who hear me. But I pray you to consider a little concerning the obtainment of property. And first, a certain quantity of property is a great blessing. Agurs prayer will always be an admirable one; Give me neither poverty nor riches—"give me not poverty, lest this be a temptation to me to steal the property of others;—give me not riches, lest I through an apprehension of my own worldly fulness should forget my dependance, and deny the worship I owe thee as my God and provider."

Still, notwithstanding this example of moderate desires, which has received a warrant in the word of our Lord; notwithstanding all the monitions we have had from personal experience, from observing the fate of others, as well as from the divine word: how many may we suppose there are in this collection of worshippers, who are endeavoring to call in Mammon as a God subsidiary to religion for the blessedness of themselves and their families. There we see a youth who hath drank in the false idea; If I could be rich, I shall experience all I want. Perhaps it is not very strange, that a mere youth, after the little he hath seen should think so: experience hath not chastened his opinions.

Near him I see the fond parents of a young family, treading in the same delusive path. Says the father to the mother, and the mother whispers a tender assent, could we gain this for the son or the daughter it would be sufficient. We could with care and prudence take care of the others as they succeed. The plan is formed; when lo! disease places the parents of the children to the account of death. The family is gone. If it be the parents they are forgotten, and we hope the children fall into the hands of more humble industry, and the path of more probable virtue. Let not imagination itself attempt a description of all such disap-

pointments as these. They are diversified to the full extent of what infinite wisdom can permit.

Further—Another class are panting for honor—their prospects are fair; they have had a good education; their genius is superior, as their friends say; many offices will soon wait for their acceptance: But alas! as it was at the pool of Bethesda, others step into the water before them; for the waters of human life are troubled by bad as well as by good angels, and the bad will be propitious to their votaries in this world. But *perhaps*, and on the word a solemn accent ought to be placed, *perhaps* death has intervened; the burial of many such youth we have seen whose genius and prospects were entombed together. I will go on no longer, in telling you the frailty of the grace of the fashion of the world. So far as we have proceeded, it teaches us the vanity of depending on any present things; that humility, perseverance in christian virtue, weanedness from the world, and preparation for a speedy death ought to be our main business.

May every hearer have that experimental faith in God and Christ, which is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen, and the best preservative against an idolatrous love of the world.

AMEN.