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SERMON CCXXIV.

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THE ADMONITORY SEASON, OR LESSONS FROM AUTUMN:

ISAIAH lxiv. 6. *And we all do fade as a leaf.*

EVERY circumstance calculated to better the heart should be noticed and improved. Even those things which tend to beget sadness should not be avoided, inasmuch as they harmonize with the actual state of human existence. "Man is born to trouble as the sparks fly upward;" yet his great aim seems to be to defeat this repulsive decree, and whatsoever savors of it, or whatsoever seems to remind him of it, is generally an unwelcome topic of conversation. But this avoidance of every thing sombre in its aspect is not a politic measure; for, when evil comes—as come it must upon all—it falls upon us with the more overwhelming shock. It seems to be with many, a main object to drive away from the mind all consideration of the certainty and circumstances of their mortality. They cannot endure a book that paints its moral by a reference to such subjects. Even the gathering gloom of autumn is to such minds often disagreeable, and would if possible be avoided. But, happily, the Creator has so arranged the vicissitudes of the seasons, as to convey through the eye a salutary lesson upon the heart. From this none can escape. It addresses its wholesome instruction to the dark and skeptical mind, and to the careless votary of the world. They, who would scorn to be moved to seriousness by the plain admonition of a gospel minister, are awe-struck and sedate, as they witness the departing glories of the year, and see a funeral-pall silently spreading itself over the face of nature. Can they fail to recur to their own dissolution? Such was the effect upon the pious and poetical mind of the prophet, when he witnessed the autumnal leaf fading and falling, to be swept away by the blasts of winter. He thought at once of the mortality of man. He saw in this leaf a striking emblem of our frailty, and he exclaimed, "We all do fade as a leaf, and our iniquities like the wind have taken us away."

The subject is appropriate for two reasons. It is the season when
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our thoughts should be seriously impressed by the lesson which our Creator is reading to us from his works. It seems but yesterday, that the surrounding hills and valleys were clad in verdant beauty. Every thing was fresh and full of promise. The eye, and the ear, and all the senses were cheered and regaled. But how great a change has now passed upon them! The autumnal frosts have invaded their glories, and after a transient flush—like the hectic of death—they begin to decay and depart forever. Soon the fierce blasts of winter will come and sigh through the naked branches, and whirl in eddies these fallen leaves of the forest.

My hearers, is there not an admonitory voice in all this? You must surely admit a striking analogy between this and the desolating stroke of death, which will send us all to the tomb like the leaves of the forest, and bury us in as deep an oblivion.

But there is *another* reason why this subject is appropriate. It is not the leaves *ONLY* that are falling in this season of general decay. There seems to be a fall also of vigorous manhood and of youthful beauty, and the grave is gathering in its harvest from among the fairest and firmest of our community.* God is thus giving us a two-fold lesson. Most impressively does he speak to us, and say, "All flesh is grass, and the glory of man is as the flower of grass."

The text presents us with the idea of a progressive decay, preparatory to the actual fall. It declares, that as the leaf withers and then dies, so man fades away and is gone. The places that knew him shall know him no more forever.

The comparison is as beautiful as it is solemn, and I shall call your attention to several particulars showing its appropriateness.

First; *As to our corporeal powers, we fade like the leaf.*

Our bodies are of such make and material, that their continuance should be more a matter of surprise than of expectation. The pliant flesh, the brittle bones, the countless channels of the blood, the delicate nerves issuing from the brain; the heart, with rapid action, making the whole physical machinery fearfully to vibrate; the lungs, in contact often with unwholesome air—all these, amid the innumerable casualties of life, make the continuance of our bodies for a term of years a sort of standing miracle.

But whilst these powers are in play, it is evident there must be some waste of the vital principle—some wear and tear of the mortal framework. And this is admitted to be the case.

In infancy and youth—which is the forming state—the body expands and acquires tone rapidly. But soon it arrives at its acme. It reaches with wonderful rapidity its full development. Then it seems, for a brief moment, to wave like the well expanded leaf in all its matured glories; and then it shows evidences of decay.

I am sure, my hearers, you must have been struck with the rapid transition from childhood to maturity, and from maturity to speedy decline. You have seen the face that yesterday wore no trace of care, coupled with a form from which a statuary might have framed his designs—where all was youth, and health and serenity—sink, as it were,

* Several interesting youth in the congregation had been suddenly called away by death.

of a sudden, into incipient decay, and reveal the melancholy fact, that "all flesh is as the grass that withereth."

And this has taken place where there was no violent assault, no racking pains, nor intemperate indulgences, to hasten on a premature fall. It is simply that natural decline and waste of the corporeal powers, which indicates the speedy dissolution of the body.

It would be a most impressive scene, if the passage of a whole generation to the tomb, were as simultaneous and sudden as the fall and dissolution of the vegetable world—if some invisible cause, like the unseen blight of autumn, were to come suddenly upon us, paralyzing our strength, and spreading over us all a paleness premonitory of our fall. If a whole generation were thus to have affixed upon them the signet of death, and then, as by one fearful blast, be swept into the grave, how solemn and impressive would be the scene! Who then could look forward to the autumn of their existence, and not tremble? But, my hearers, is it less solemn as a personal consideration, that we drop away singly and silently into eternity? To *me*, it is even more so; for I have been accustomed to suppose, that when men die in company, as in a general sickness, or on the field of battle, there is less intimidation and dread. Even in a calamity so awful as death, the social principle operates to disrobe it of some of its horrors.

But the body is, like a plant or leaf, never stationary. There is not a moment when either is so. They are in progress to maturity, or they are on the decline. We have scarcely time to admire their opening beauties, before they have sensibly parted with some of their freshness and bloom, and then, but a short interval occurs, and they have gone into the sere and yellow leaf. God has put the stamp of vanity on every bright and beautiful object of earth. He means to make us feel, that here we have no abiding habitation, that we are pilgrims and strangers, and must not build our hopes on so shifting a soil.

Secondly; *How soon do our intellectual powers become enfeebled.*

So intimate is the connection between the body and the mind, when the former suffers, the latter, in most instances, suffers by sympathy along with it. But the powers of the mind do not generally indicate weakness so soon as the body shows symptoms of decay. It seems to be gathering strength sometimes when the corporeal powers are declining. But, even this nobler part feels indirectly the shock which falls on the clay tenement. The bodily functions connecting it with the external world, are the instruments which it uses in enlarging its sphere of knowledge; consequently, when they are enfeebled, the mind loses those auxiliaries without which it cannot efficiently improve. It hence often sinks into supineness—evincing no longer its wonted vigor and sprightliness. It is obliged to wait until death knocks off these rusty chains, ere it can again spread its wings and soar unfettered in its flight. When the eye grows dim, the inlet to external nature is obscured. The page of knowledge cannot be traced with the same satisfaction as formerly, and the effort to acquire being greater, whilst the physical capacity is becoming less, there is a sensible diminution of mental interest and activity. When the ear is deaf, and sounds are either not perceived or have become indistinct, another source of mental improvement is gone; and the disappointed soul must content herself, in a great

measure, with her own solitary musings. These great inlets to knowledge being obstructed, it is natural to suppose the mind will be weakened, or whatever be its *real*, its *apparent* vigor is evidently not the same.

And how soon is this the case! It takes but a few revolutions of the sun to dim the eye, and dull the hearing, and line the features with the marks of a countenance as inexpressive as if it had lost its interest in the passing scenes of earth. All must come to this. Even a Newton or a Locke, whose Herculean intellects seemed stamped with eternal durability, must sink away under the gathering infirmities of age, and then, as with an autumnal blight, go down to the shades of death. This is the natural course of things. But some are visited prematurely, as it would appear, with intellectual weakness. Like the oak in its great strength and its leafy pride, riven by a stroke of lightning and soon loosing all its verdure, some giant intellects have been suddenly overcast, and a settled melancholy or raving madness has succeeded.

So common is it for age to debilitate the mind, that exceptions are noticed and spoken of as something extraordinary. Yet, be it remembered, these exceptions are very important, as they evince the fallacy of that reasoning which the materialist employs to prove that mind and matter decay together. This cannot be true; and the fact that they *seem* in many cases simultaneously to decline, is to be accounted for on the grounds mentioned—viz. that the corporeal functions are the media through which the mind acts. These being obstructed, the mind will, of course, be affected by their loss.

Thirdly; *Our social powers soon decline, they "fade as a leaf."*

In youth the imagination is lively, the passions strong, and the love of society often intense. It is the season of frank and confiding friendship. Soon, however, selfish aims begin to narrow the circle, and the competition of the world renders man suspicious of his fellow-man. The pleasures that are purely social are then very few. But as old age comes on, the circle still diminishes. Death has thinned the ranks of contemporaries, and a new generation has but few sympathies with the past. The old man begins to feel himself alone in the world. Topics of interest to him, he finds uninteresting to others, and he is soon driven back upon himself for enjoyment; whilst the busy mass are moving on, in their plans, and purposes, and pleasures.

It is astonishing how soon this solitude of old age is upon us; and if any appeal, founded on merely selfish considerations, could weigh with us to seek God in our youth, this, it appears to me, ought to have weight. What can an old man expect from this bustling age! So soon as he is unable to struggle personally in the general direction, he will inevitably be thrown aside. Men will not stop to attend to his social wants. If he has depended on the world alone, he will find himself deserted by it. But let him choose God for his portion, and he has a resting-place. His staff then cannot be broken. He is independent of the cold-hearted throng. He has resources which will make the winter of life serene and happy.

Lastly; *How soon does a man's influence decline.*

A grand object with man is to acquire influence. This is sought by all; and few are so weak, or so insignificant, as not, in some degree, to succeed. But only here and there one attains to great influence.

Nor is this accomplished but by slow gradations and severe toil. Men will not generally concede influence to a youth, however promising his talents. He must, to distinguished talents, add untiring exertion and the wisdom of years; so that influence is late in coming and must soon depart. There is but a brief period in human life when a man's influence may be considered great. For, as the hand of time begins to scatter the marks of old age upon him, others have arisen who contend for pre-eminence; and, having on their side the vigor of maturity—the muscle necessary for the strife—the old man retires before the hardy competitor, and is soon quoted only as a by-gone chronicle. You need but glance over the surface of society at any time to see the truth of these remarks.

Thus, my hearers, are our bodies in a state of decay, and hastening rapidly to dissolution. Our minds, too, are soon to be crippled by a sympathetic connection with them. Our social powers and propensities are waning; and our influence will soon be gone. Others are rising around us impatient to fill our places; whilst they, in turn, must wither and decay, like ourselves. Are you not reminded of what the Apostle James has declared, in reply to that startling question, "What is your life?" "It is," says he, "even a *vapor*, which appeareth for a little time and then vanisheth away."—What an impressive analogy! Have you noticed a wreath of mist formed by some atmospheric change? It is born in a night, and lies cradled at early dawn on the surface of the lake or river. But ere you can well fix your attention upon it, it is in motion; and a second look sees it rolling off and disappearing in the sunbeam. Behold, oh man, a picture of thy vain life! It is, indeed, a melancholy picture. "We *all*," says the prophet, "do fade as a leaf." There is no exception. There are no favored few who can arrest the desolating march of time, or escape his wide-sweeping sythe.—The rich and the great—those who build marble palaces, as if the durability of the material were proof against his attacks—they and their habitations must crumble and fall. They are building for others to inhabit, planning for others to execute, and planting for others to reap and gather in. The king upon his throne is but as the autumn leaf. The crown which he wears will soon adorn another's brow—whilst *his* will be bound with the fillets of the grave. The rich have, in this respect, no advantage over the poor, nor patrician dignity over the most vulgar of earth.

One may be like a proud and stately tree, whose tall shaft seems to pierce the sky, and whose leafy honors expand and wave in the breeze; another may be like the lowly shrub that creeps, as if conscious of its inferiority, under its shade. But the overshadowing tree may fade as soon as the humble bush. It may put off its glories as suddenly, and strew the earth with its gorgeous livery; and when it falls, it *may* make more noise in proportion to its elevation, but it will lie as low as the lowest in death.

Our importance is soon gone, even if we live. How certainly is it gone, when we die! How soon do we pass away, and how soon are we forgotten! Yes, the most towering head must come down to the dust. The loftiest crest must fall. The hour is close at hand when the frosts of death will be upon us. All will wither Digitized by Google

I will close, with two or three considerations of a practical nature.

1. *You see the importance of considering your latter end and preparing for it.*

The subject forces upon you the fact that you are soon to fade like the autumn leaf. Will you, my hearers, think of this? Will you give your meditations this solemn direction? Is it not as certain that you are falling off now in all your physical powers as it is that the summer glories have gone to decay? Yes, and how soon must you lie low in death! Are you prepared for this tremendous change? Have you set your house in order? Do you stand like a shock of corn fully ripe in its season, bending your lowly head and burdened with fruit, until the great Husbandman shall come to gather you to his garner? Or are you like the useless tares, or the barren fig tree, cumbering the ground, and destined, by an insulted and indignant Creator, to a fiery doom? You are ripening, depend upon it, for heaven or for hell. I again ask, have you made the requisite preparation for your fall? Should a blast from the grave pass over you to-day, and separate you like a leaf from the earth, where would you be borne? Your body, I know, would go to the grave; but where would the soul go? Can you hope, on good grounds, that it would be wafted to heaven? Dying hearers, you must think of these things.—Be not so absorbed in the world as to neglect your preparation for eternity. If you are impenitent, I charge you, by your hastening doom, to repent—if without faith in Christ, I warn you in the words of Jesus himself, “he that believeth not shall be damned.” If the world is your idol, death will come to tear that idol away, and send you shivering to God’s judgment bar to answer for your idolatry.

2. *The vanity of the world is strikingly seen in view of this subject.*

All on earth is tending to decay. Dissolution and ruin are written on every thing below the sun. The proudest structures of art, though laid in brass or marble, with a view to disappoint the destroyer—see how a few generations will undermine and level with the dust! What can we *moderns* do, after the colossal efforts of Egypt and of Babylon? The next wave of time will sweep away these fragile mounds which, in our pride, we are rearing; and how soon will the icy touch of death stop the blood in our veins, and launch our spirits, prepared or unprepared, into eternity! And can we be so in love with these earthly toys? Can we, as reasonable men, give ourselves up to the pursuit of these fleeting shadows? Select the fairest specimen of coveted earthly good, and I will prove to you that it is a phantom. It cannot last; nor can it meet those enlarged expectations which stir the soul up in the pursuit. Oh, it is this vanity which mocks the mind, and makes the sigh of dissatisfaction so often come from the heart, even when its desires are realized! No, my hearers, it is not in earth to supply the immortal mind with satisfying good. Let us, therefore,

Finally, *Seek an interest in those things which are satisfying and permanent.*

There is a substantial good. Yes, there is one portion which can never fail, one scene which will never fade. It lieth not here within this earthly horizon. You must *elevate* your view, Digitized by Google Yonder, in that

pure world, it is, far above this murky atmosphere, shining in resplendent brightness, and inviting our pursuit by its imperishable glories. Do you complain that every thing of earth is so short lived—that it fades under the touch—that, ere you begin to enjoy it, it is gone—that summer glories are no more—that friends fall like autumn leaves around you—that you, yourself, are losing the keen relish for enjoyment which you once had—that one opening grave seems ready for all? Well, be it so. God has said, “all is vanity,” and he will make us *feel* it too. But it is to send your thoughts out after a better portion. ABOVE, all is permanent and glorious. Nothing there fades; nothing grows old; nothing satiates; nothing disappoints. The “inheritance there is incorruptible, and undefiled, and fadeth not away.”

Christian, you have no reason to complain at the transitory nature of earthly good. *This* is not your home. These dying things are not your portion. In invading them by death, God is not depriving you of your chief good. He is only preparing the way for you to take possession of it. “Set your affections on things above.” “Love not the world.” Love God, and “love his appearing;” and let your heart and your treasure be on high.

Worldlyminded hearer, look at your portion. Calculate its real value. Is it so great, that by a supreme pursuit of it you are warranted in placing the soul in peril of an eternal hell! I am not saying that your pursuits are unlawful; but are they absorbing? Do they exclude from the soul God and his gospel? Is the heart supremely bent upon them? What says conscience to these inquiries? What will it say, when, like a faded leaf, you lie gasping in death, and hear the rush of an eternal storm that is to send you from that death-bed to the tribunal of God? How will these things seem then? But ah! consideration may then come too late. The awful hour is then at hand; and you must die.

SERMON CCXXV.

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THE INFLUENCE OF CHRIST'S COMING UPON HUMAN DESTINY.

LUKE ii. 34. 35. *And Simeon blessed them, and said unto Mary his mother, “Behold this child is set for the fall and rising again of many in Israel; and for a sign which shall be spoken against; (yea a sword shall pierce through thine own soul also,) that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed.”*

SIMEON was a good old man, who had long been waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Ghost was upon him. And it was