

Amos iv. 11, 12. In a land so full of sin, so often threatened with desolating strokes, and so often delivered, but nothing bettered by deliverances, this stroke looks rather like the beginning than the end of sorrows, rather like an earnest than the round sum, that might clear the accounts betwixt God and a sinful nation.

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THE SERMON IN THE AFTERNOON.

WE are again met this day to humble ourselves under the hand of God, gone out against the congregation and country-side, in great sickness and mortality, and to deprecate the Lord's anger. I know no such expedient in our case, nor any thing that will bid so fair for the removal of the stroke, as our coming up to the standard of proficiency in the lesson in our text, which falls now to be spoken of, and which I shall cast into this doctrine.

Doct. 'The right and necessary improvement of a time of bodily sickness and mortality, is to become wise for our souls.'

The Lord is putting particular persons and families among us, yea, all of us, to the school of affliction, since the hand of God gone out against some concerns all; and it is necessary we learn our lesson aright, and become wise thereby.

In discoursing from this doctrine, I shall,

I. Shew what is that *wisdom* we must learn thereby.

II. Condescend on some particulars of *wisdom* which such a time calls us to apply our hearts to.

I. I am to shew, what is that *wisdom* we are to learn by a time of bodily sickness and mortality. It is serious godliness, or true religion. When one becomes seriously godly, leaving the way of sin, and entering on the way of faith and holiness, then he has learned the lesson that God is teaching us this day, Job xxviii. ult. 'Unto man he said, Behold the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom; and to depart from evil, is understanding.' This is the only true wisdom; and they continue arrant fools who do not arrive at it, whatever other wisdom they be masters of. This is the wisdom taught at God's school of affliction, Heb. xii. 10. The voice of the rod is, Be wise for your souls. That this is the true wisdom, appears in that,

1. It is practical wisdom, wisdom for regulating a man's life in the way to happiness, Hos. xiv. ult. How many are there accounted wise, who betray their folly in quite shooting by the mark, in the way of life they chuse, Jer. xxii. 13,—16. Surely that is wisdom which sets men in the true way to happiness, which is faith and ho-

liness, Mark xvi. 16. Heb. xii. 14. What avail carnal worldly wit, the profound speculations of natural men in the learned sciences, and the dry and sapless notions of religion in formal professors? All these are but laborious trifling, and making a noise, doing nothing, while they never make them better men, though more knowing.

2. It is wisdom for one's self, Prov. ix. 12. There is a set of men, whose wisdom is noted to be for others, but not for themselves, resembled by boatmen, who ferry others over, but, during the whole time of their rowing, have their eyes fixed on the place whence they came, and, immediately after landing their passengers, return to where they set out. Such is the wisdom of all ungodly men: their wisdom may profit other men's souls or bodies; but, alas! it profits not themselves, 1 Cor. ix. ult. Matth. vi. 19, 20. But this is the excellency of real godliness, that 'it giveth life to them that have it,' Eccl. vii. 12. It casts the soul into the mould of truth, sanctifies the heart and life in conformity to the divine nature and will; and so perfects human nature, raising up a glorious fabric out of the ruins in which it was laid by the fall.

3. It is wisdom for one's latter end, Deut. xxxii. 29. The fool in the gospel had wit enough to provide for many years' life. But here lay his folly, he had nothing provided for his latter end, for a dying hour, Luke xii. 20. Many such fools are among us. It was one of the dying expressions of a learned man of the last age (Grotius), *Ah! vitam perdidit, operose nihil agendo.*

4. It is wisdom for the better part, Luke x. 41, 42. The wisdom of the world is but for the baser part of man, the body; it makes him useful in business and civil conversation. But this reaches only the outworks, while in the mean time the soul's concerns lie by neglected. But this wisdom advanceth the life and interests of the soul, insures one's title to heaven, and sets him on the way to eternal happiness, Prov. viii. 35.

5. *Lastly*, It is wisdom for the better world, Heb. xi. 14, 16. Our projects for this world, as to ourselves, must die with ourselves, Psal. cxlvi. 4. but they who are wise for that better world, by being religious indeed, will find their measures wisely laid in time, to take and have their effect happily in eternity, Rev. xiv. 13. What they now sow, they shall then joyfully reap.

III. I proceed to condescend on some particulars of wisdom which such a time calls us to apply our hearts to.

1. To inquire seriously into the causes of the Lord's controversy with us, Job x. 2. When God's hand is stretched out, it will be our wisdom to search wherefore it is so, Lam. iii. 39. Surely there is a cause; he does not smite without good reason: and unless our eyes see it, our hearts cannot rue it.

God has a controversy with the congregation and country-side ; it were good we could lay it to heart. Two things seem to have the main hand in it.

(1.) Abuse and misimprovement of spiritual mercies and privileges. Thus the Lord threatened the Old-Testament church, Deut. xxviii. 58, 59. 'If thou wilt not observe to do all the words of this law, that are written in this book, that thou mayest fear this glorious and fearful name, THE LORD THY GOD ; then the Lord will make thy plagues wonderful, and the plagues of thy seed, even great plagues, and of long continuance and sore sicknesses, and of long continuance.' This brought a sore sickness upon the church of Corinth, 1 Cor. xi. 30. The noted divisions, and deserting of ordinances, in the country, are the judgment and the sin of the corner, whereby contempt is poured on precious gospel-ordinances, the success of the gospel marred by so many hinderances laid in the way of souls getting good of it ; and thus gnats are strained at, and camels swallowed down, in respect of the deep-dyed guilt in what it does to hinder the spiritual good of perishing souls. Men will not see it, but they shall see. And alas ! how evident is our unfruitfulness under means of grace ? How few are bettered now by a preached gospel ? God's word is slighted, and ineffectual for our reformation, his holy name is profaned, his Sabbaths are violated, sacraments are neglected by some, and profaned by others with their unholy and untender lives. What wonder that for this cause 'many are weak and sickly among us, and many sleep ?' 1 Cor. xi. 30. Warnings and reproofs prevail not, conviction is rare, and conversion is more rare. Many have not a form of godliness left them ; and few have any thing but a form of it. Many are crying out against the sins of others, while the visible blots in their own lives do not make them smite on their own breasts and say 'What have I done !' God grant that the contempt and abuse of gospel-privileges bring not a removal of the kingdom of God from us.

(3.) Abuse and misimprovement of temporal mercies. It is observable, that with the promise of plenty to the church, using their plenty in a holy becoming manner, the promise of the taking away of sickness is joined, Exod. xxiii. 25. Deut. vii. 12,—14. This says that God punisheth abuse of plenty with sickness. God has given the country plenteous years ; and what has been the issue of it, but contempt of God and the rules of righteousness, increase of pride and vanity, and drunkenness, with an unordinary abuse of that fiery liquor, never ordained for ordinary drinking ; masters breaking the yoke, undermining and undergoing one another through the country ; servants bursting all bonds, and turned quite unmanageable and un-

dutiful? The last year, a little before this time, I gave warning from the Lord's word against these things particularly\*: but I think there was never more of them in my time, than followed upon the back of it. No wonder then, that God has shapen us out another piece of work this year.

Let these things be weighed in an even balance, as in the sight of God, by us all. And let particular persons and families, especially those who have been or are under the rod, inquire into the causes of God's quarrel with them, that they may see why the Lord contendeth.

2. To be humbled under the causes of the Lord's anger, and to turn to a smiting God in Christ. This would be our wisdom, Lev. xxvi. 41, 42. Micah vi. 9. It is not time to stand in the way of sinners, when God is risen up to plead; it is high time to fall down before him in humiliation, and to fall off from God-provoking courses by reformation. Hear the voice of the rod. It is crying two things loudly this day.

(1.) Improve a season of the gospel. Some sermons have of late been the last to them that heard them. Some heard the sermon on the Lord's day in health, that were in eternity ere the next Sabbath. This says, Hear ye every day as if it were to be your last.

(2.) Improve temporal mercies, lest God be provoked to take them from you. Health and strength, and other temporal conveniences, are to be wisely managed, for you see we have no tack of them, Eccl. ix. 10.

3. To be upon your guard, and make sure for eternity, while you live. Remember the parable of the wise and foolish builder, and how apt ye are to play the fool in these matters, while health and strength last.

(1.) Beware ye be not cheated out of your most valuable interests, by a deceitful heart, a treacherous world, and a wily devil. Satan goes about many a poor simple one, till they are tricked of their souls, their part of Christ and heaven, and all the happiness of another world, Matth. xvi. 26. And wherefore do they part with them, but for the gratifying of a lust, which is a practice more foolish than if one should part with an estate for a childish toy. So did Esau. Wherefore be wise in time.

(2.) Beware the best bargain slip not through your fingers, while ye are pursuing vanities, Prov. xvii. 16. Alas! there are not a few, who, being busied with vanities of this world, which pass away with

\* In a discourse preached March 19, 1719, from Josh. ix. 14. which is printed in a collection of ten sermons of the author's published in 1772. It is the ninth in that collection, and deserves a serious perusal.

the using, miss the opportunity of making the treasure hid in the field of the gospel their own. Therefore be wise.

(3.) Beware of feeding yourselves with dreams and fancies, wherein there is no reality. There are many foolish virgins with lamps without oil, and foolish builders on the sand. There are many whose life is but one continued dream, wherein they judge aright of nothing, neither God, heaven, hell, nor the world. So that their awakening cannot be but terrible. But be ye wise.

4. To prepare timeously for death and judgment, Matth. xxiv. 44. It is certain that naturally we are quite out of case for that great change: and, alas! we are naturally unwilling to think of it, or provide for it. But necessity has no law. We must die; and we must either be provided for death, or we are ruined: and if we be not timely provided, our candle may be put out ere our work be done.

(1.) Get habitual preparation for death, in a gracious state, Rom. viii. 1. Be sure to get out of the state of nature into the state of grace. And then come death when it will, it will but transport you into the state of glory. And there are two things here to be secured.

[1.] Get your title to heaven fixed. None will get thither but those who have a right to it, Mat. xxv. 34. 2 Cor. v. 1. To others the door will be cast in their face. But, ye may say, how may we get a title to heaven? *Ans.* Marry the Heir, and heaven will be your dowry. The everlasting covenant is offered to you in the gospel, God to be your God in Christ, and Christ to be yours in all his offices. Therefore make a solemn deliberate transaction with God this night, embracing Christ in the covenant, and consenting to it, with an eye to death and eternity.

[2.] Get a fitness for heaven wrought in you, Col. i. 12. For ye cannot be meet for it, till your nature be changed. How may we get that fitness? may ye say. *Ans.* Believe and embrace Jesus Christ, for his spirit of sanctification, 1 Cor. i. 30. There is a fullness of the Spirit in him to be communicated, and faith must eye Christ for his sanctifying Spirit. Put off the old man, and put on the new man: be new creatures, and let old things pass away, and all things become new. In vain do men pretend to faith without this, 2 Cor. v. 17. and in vain will men look for heaven without it, John iii. 3.

This is habitual preparation, which whoso have, if they should be struck dead in a moment, or immediately seized with diliriousness, and die raving, yet they are safe; 'for there is no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus,' Rom. viii. 1.

(2.) Get actual preparation for death, in a gracious frame for dying, that ye may die comfortably.

[1.] Make speed with the work given you to do. Whatever piece of work is put into your hand, for God's honour, dispatch it with all expedition, Matth. xxiv. 46. for if ye delay it, ye may lose the opportunity for ever.

[2.] Be habitually tender in your life, Acts xxiv. 16. And beware of any standing controversy betwixt God and you : for if there be any such, it will readily stare you in a dying hour.

[3.] Be weaned from the world, and hold a loose grip of all you have in it, that it might drop like Joseph's mantle.

(4.) Keep waking and watchful, Luke xii. 36. Be much in the thoughts of death, and the life to come, that ye be not surprised\*.

[5.] *Lastly*, To prepare for more public and general trials and calamities. This is a piece of wisdom to be learned from such a dispensation. For lesser strokes are usually the forerunners of greater ones. Sodom and Gomorrah were tried with a lesser stroke, ere they were destroyed by fire from heaven, Gen. xiv. 10. And our Lord told the Jews, that unless they repented, they should perish, Luke xiii. 5.; which threatening was accomplished in the destruction of Jerusalem. The day may yet come, wherein men shall praise the dead, that are already dead; and they may miss this stroke, who are reserved for a worse, and shall meet with it ere all be done. In a time when the cup of God's anger is going through a land, they that drink first usually fare best. How are we to prepare? may ye say. *Ans.* Keep your garments clean from the sins and snares of the day, and place where ye live, and take up your lodging in the sure and unalterable covenant of grace, and then no evil shall befall you.

\* See these directions amplified and illustrated in the Fourfold State, state 4. head 2. title, Directions how to prepare for death.