

THE BREVITY OF LIFE. . . A CALL TO IMPROVE IT

Psalm xxxix, 5 - Behold, thou hast made my days as an handbreadth, and mine age is as nothing before thee; verily every man at his best state is altogether vanity. Selah.

It is a great point of Christianity for a man to examine himself. Surely it is an unpleasant exercise to accomplish a diligent search in that duty, so as to study it in such a way that we find no cause for boasting in ourselves, but much reason for lying in sackcloth and ashes. O how suitable and how convenient were it for all men to be keeping correspondence and fellowship with Him, with God, who is all-sufficient and self-sufficient! And, among the many things that a Christian should know, he should know this main and advantageous thing, the brevity of his life, and of his appointed time upon the earth. O study to know this more.

David, in the former verse of this psalm, was praying and sending up his supplication unto God, to know the brevity and shortness of his life. "Lord (says he), make me to know my end and the measure of my days, what it is, that I may know how frail I am." And here, in these words, he receives a return and answer to that prayer, and it is, "Behold thou hast made my days as an handbreadth." We conceive this handbreadth is the breadth of one of our hands; it is one of the measures we carry about with us;

it is the breadth of four fingers, which relates to these four times of man's life, his infancy, his youth, his mid-age, and his old age; or it may relate to these four times, his morning, fore-noon, mid-day, and his evening, all of which but amounts to one day. Eccl. i, 4, "One generation cometh, and another passeth; but the earth abideth for ever." And from that, David draws to this conclusion, that "every man, in his best estate" (whether in high degree, or low degree) "is altogether vanity," and that every man is more in appearance, than in reality; and this he asserts, and he puts a note of assertion to it, "Selah," that he may let us see how great a concerning business this is to us, to know the brevity and shortness of our times.

And ye would take this first observation from the words, and it is from the scope, viz., that David falls a studying the brevity of his life upon the earth; and the observation is this, that the distinct knowledge of our time that we have upon the earth is a strong encouragement to us for the bearing of the cross and afflicting dispensations that we meet with, with much patience and submission unto God. We must walk with Him, as it were, one hour, and have tribulation ten days, Rev. 11, 10; Heb. xiii, 14, 15. 'For here we have no continuing city, but we look for one to come. By, him, therefore, let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to his name.'

And there are these two reasons why the consideration

of the brevity of our life puts us to the patient bearing of the cross. And the

first reason is this, the consideration of the drawing near of our everlasting life and eternal happiness, when we shall remember that ere long we shall be admitted to sit down under the blessed shadow of the Tree of Life, where all that blessed company of holy angels are, and where all the redeemed of the Lord are, and shall be eternally. There we shall perfectly enjoy all manner of soul-comforting pleasures and satisfying delights. All delights shall be enjoyed there; certainly the hope of this will make the Christian sit down under his saddest afflictions and crosses, and bear them with exceeding great patience and soul-submission. He will comfort himself in his darkest night. O Christians, the day is coming, and the time is approaching, when all these fetters shall fall from your hands, and these chains of iniquity shall fall from your feet, and ye shall be set free and shall be bidden come and enjoy these soul-ravishing pleasures and delights that are above. There is this

second reason why the consideration of the brevity of our time is an help and encouragement to us to bear our crosses and afflictions with much patience. The distinct knowledge of the brevity of our time will encourage us to bear our crosses with patience, because a man that sees the shortness of his time, and the brevity of afflictions that he is now under, will look to that precious day when

his sun shall rise and shall never go down again, but shall evermore have a perpetual and everlasting day. And may not this encourage a Christian to bear his afflictions with much patience, seeing that he can look through them all to that blessed day, when he shall be afflicted no more, but shall rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory; and shall no more be under darkness at all, but shall dwell in light inaccessible? Then we would only say this unto you, be not impatient under your sad afflictions and cross dispensations; for believe it, and, O, if ye were also persuaded of it, the day is approaching, and at hand, when all your afflictions shall cease to be, and shall vanish and disappear. O what a day shall it be, when all these shadows shall be gone, and ye shall be admitted to see God as He is, face to face! When all your mourning and sorrowing for sin shall be no more heard; and instead of the voice of mourning, shall be heard the voice of joy and gladness. O Christians, prisoners of hope, and expectants of the crown, comfort yourselves under your saddest crosses and afflictions with the hope and expectation of the approaching and drawing near of that day, even of that blessed day, in which morning ye shall be far exalted above the reach of your unbelief, and all hypocrites shall be depressed low under the reach of their faith, and the natural man shall be depressed low beneath the reach of his presumptions. O, then let your desires be set upon, and longing for that day. O Christians, be persuaded of this, that though all your days should be spent in heaviness, and in the bitterness of your spirits, yet

there is a day coming that shall make up all our losses, and then there shall be a cup of everlasting joy and gladness presented to thee, and put in thy hand. And O, shall not that day be an excellent day! Certainly the joy of that day shall be unspeakable.

There is this second observation that ye would take notice of from the words, that there is such a thing attainable by a Christian while here, as the knowledge of the brevity of his Life. This is clear in David here, and it is likewise clear from Moses' practice, Psalm xc, 3, 6, "Thou turnest man to destruction," and what is he? "He is as the grass of the field, which in the morning flourisheth, and at even is cut down and withereth." It is likewise clear from Jacob's practice, Gen. xlvii, 9. But perhaps some will say, what need is there to press that so much? For who does not know that their days upon the earth are short? Yet I say, Oh, if the thoughts of it were deeply engraven on our hearts, as with a pen of iron, and the point of a diamond, that they might rise with us in the morning, and lie down with us at night, and be continually with us; for, if we had the thoughts of the brevity of our time engraven on our hearts, no doubt, it would be a spur in our side, putting us to the working out of that work that is of our everlasting and soul-concernment.

But we shall shortly propose to you these advantages that come to a Christian by the carrying about with him the thoughts of the brevity of his life.

The first advantage is this, it would provoke and stir up the Christian to a heavenly-mindedness, minding those things that are above. It is clear, Heb. xiii, 14, 15, says the apostle, ‘We have here no continuing city’; and what is the effect that that wrought? “Therefore let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, giving thanks to his name.” And certainly the consideration of the brevity of our life were good for this very same respect, if there were no other consideration to mind us of eternity; it were more than sufficient to prove that the thoughts of the brevity and shortness of our time were good. And, therefore, since it is so, we should be longing and setting our affections and desires on these things that are above, and to be setting our whole hearts upon that glorious and precious pearl of our crown that shines so bright; as in 1 Thess., iv., 17, “When we shall meet Christ in the air, and so shall we ever be with the Lord.” O long for that day, and let your hearts covet more these excellent things that are above in heaven.

There is this second advantage that comes to one by bearing about with him the thoughts of the brevity and shortness of his time, and it is this - it will cause exceeding much sobriety and moderation in his pursuit after the worldly pleasures and delights of this present life. This is clear from that command given, 1 Thess. v, 8, “But let us who are of the day be sober, putting on the breast-plate of faith and love; and for an helmet, the hope of salva-

tion.” If the thoughts of the brevity of our life were engraven upon our hearts, why then should we vex ourselves with the torturing cares of this life, that does not at all profit us? O why do we weary ourselves in the fire, which is but vexation of spirit and surely vanity? O Christians, let now your moderation in the pursuit of the things in this world be made known to all men; for behold! the Lord is at hand, to take vengeance and revenge on the wicked, with furious rebukes of flaming fire, and eternal excommunication from the righteous Judge.

There is this third advantage that comes to a Christian by having the distinct thoughts and apprehensions of the brevity of his life; it provokes him to much seriousness and diligence in going about duties; it makes him to be diligent and watchful in his going towards that blessed rest that is prepared for all the redeemed of the Lord. It was the argument of our blessed Lord Jesus, John ix, 4, “I must work the works of him that sent me, while it is day; the night cometh, when no man can work.” Then, O Christians, while it is called today, stir up yourselves for the working out of the work of your salvation. We do not know how suddenly the shadows of that everlasting evening may be stretched out over us, and we receive that summons from God, to remove hence and be gone. And, oh, are ye not afraid lest ye be banished? Lest the night approach before your work be perfected? Yea, I am afraid that many shall have that great work of their soul’s

salvation to begin when death shall summon them to appear before God's terrible tribunal and judgment-seat. And, O be afraid, and stand in awe, lest the night be hard by and at hand. Then, "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we shall die," say the Epicures, who make use of this argument to stir up their delights after their lusts; but let us be watchful and diligent, for we know not but tomorrow we must die.

And we would give you this direction, be more in consideration of the things that are before you, than of these things that are behind already, and by your hand. Think more on what is before, than what is past, "and press forward toward the mark, for the prize of the high-calling of God, in Christ Jesus,"

There is this fourth advantage that comes to one by the consideration of the brevity of his life; he comes to the knowledge of that state wherein man was once created. Surely he was created after a most glorious image, and noble pattern and copy, even according to the most blessed and glorious image of God; but man having a woeful and cursed design to be as God, and like to Him, fell from that blessed estate, and all his posterity in him, and he made us and himself subject to God's wrath and eternal indignation for evermore. But blessed be He eternally, that has found out that new and living way, how we may escape that curse that has lain upon all mankind for sin.

There is this fifth advantage that comes to the person that has the thoughts of the brevity of his life engraven upon his heart. It is a great help to mortify these three great idols that we are so much under the power of:

(1) It is an excellent help to mortify that great idol of faith.

(2) It will help you to mortify that idol of love that rules in you.

(3) It is a help to mortify the idol of fear. The idol of faith is, when we trust in anything more than in God; Psalm cxlvi, 3, "Put not your trust in princes, nor in the son of man, in whom there is no stay," in whom there is no help. And the idol of love is, when we love anything more than God; Isa. ii, 22, "Cease ye from man, whose breath is in his nostrils." And the idol of fear is, when we fear anything more than God; Isa. li, 12, "Who art thou that thou shouldest be afraid of a man that shall die and of the son of man which shall be made as grass?"

Now the thoughts of the brevity of our life and appointed time would mortify these great idols.

There is this sixth advantage that attends one who has thoughts of the brevity of his time engraven upon his heart. He may win a holy admiration and divine astonishment at the condescending love of Jesus Christ; Job xiv, 1, "Man that is born of a woman, is of few days, and

full of trouble.” O what a wonder is it to see God delighting Himself in the dust of His feet, and making them the object of His love, who dwell in the dust! Surely this is a mystery which we cannot comprehend nor take up.

The seventh advantage that flows to a person from the bearing about with him the thoughts of the brevity of his life is this, that God makes use of this argument to provoke him to have compassion and mercy upon the person. Surely this is God’s way, and we must rather wonder at it, than inquire and debate why it is so. This is clear from Psalm lxxviii, 39, compared with, “But being full of compassion, he forgave their iniquities, and turned away his anger; for he remembered that they were but flesh, a wind that passeth away, and cometh not again.”

There is this third observation that ye would take notice of from these words, and it is this, that the brevity and shortness of our days and appointed time are surely determined from God, so that we cannot at all go beyond our time that is appointed for us. This is clear, Job xiv, 14, compared with verse 16. “All the days of my appointed time will I wait till my change come. For thou numberest my steps, dost thou not watch over my sin?” and this says, that the brevity of our time is a great advantage unto us; for who can charge their Maker with folly? For surely He does all things well, and to purpose. And though this dispensation be questioned now by us, yet believe it, the day is coming when we shall subscribe

this to them all “He has done all things well.” O long for that day, when that shall come to pass. Certainly there are now none at all before His throne but they desire to justify Him, and acknowledge that He has done all things well. And, O, that we could learn to be silent and acquiesce ourselves in the performance of all His dispensations. O that we could learn to put our mouths in the dust, whatsoever God doth to us; for we may be persuaded of this, “that all things work together for good, to them that love God,” and delight themselves in Him.

Secondly, the brevity and shortness of our life speaks the great love and matchless delight that God has to sinners. He is longing for the day when all the redeemed of the Lord shall be with Him, there to remain for ever and ever to enjoy all delights, and all manner of soul-pleasures. O when shall that day come, when we shall be brought out from this earthly tabernacle of clay, and shall enter our possessions in that blessed tabernacle not made with hands? O long for that day, And yet we should be submissive unto God’s dispensation and good pleasure, and we should not challenge Him for the brevity and shortness of our lifetime here. Many of us may say, that we have not received a short life-time from the Lord, but that we have made a short life unto ourselves; for it is said that, “wicked men shall not live half their days.” And certainly these may think their life and appointed time short, whose heaven and joy is ended when their life is ended. But believe it, those who have made use of their

life for this end and use, to entertain communion and fellowship with God, surely these shall rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory.

Now, we shall desire to have our eyes failing with looking up, till that day shall come, when our blessed Lord Jesus shall come in the clouds. O remember the excellency of the exercise of that precious and blessed day, when we shall be exalted above all our infirmities, where there shall be no misbelief following us. And let the thoughts of that precious and blessed day comfort your hearts under all your afflictions, and wait with patience for your eternal redemption. Amen.