

Plain Sermons by Contributors to 'Tracts for the Times'
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SERMON LXXVI.
SUDDEN DEATH.¹

ST. MATT. xxiv. 40—42.

“Then shall two be in the field; the one shall be taken, and the other left. Two women shall be grinding at the mill; the one shall be taken, and the other left. Watch therefore: for ye know not what hour your LORD doth come.”

DEATH is at all times awful: GOD has put in all His creatures a natural shrinking from it; all avoid what will bring it, shudder at its coming; it is in itself, whatever it bring with it, exceeding awful; it is contrary to the original purpose of our being; it is contrary to GOD, Who is Life; it is the penalty of sin, even in the animal world, who share in some mysterious way in our fall, for “by sin death entered into the world;” and so GOD has impressed even upon the animal creation a dislike of death, that therein HE might show to us that death was not in His order of things; that death and sin came into this world together; that death was by His law, as long as we remained subject to His law, a stranger to our world, as long as it was His world, and had not fallen, from HIM, and so become subject to him who is now the god of this world; and that now the creature is “made subject to vanity,” because it remained not subject to HIM, by Whom and for Whom it was created.

Still more awful is the death of man: what follows upon it immediately we know not; the spirit freed from the body dies not, sleeps not; it parts into a new state of things, hut how it is led thither, what its feelings are, by whom it is met, we know not; we are told that the good are by angels conducted into Abraham’s bosom; but whether all who are indeed carried thither know that they are so, and that by angels, or know that they are there, we know not; angels minister to us here, but we are unconscious of it; we know that to St. Paul “to die” was “to be with Christ;” we believe that HE graciously manifests Himself to the “just made perfect,” and gradually accustoms them to “see GOD;” but what

¹ The occasion of the following sermon was this: about ten days before, two miners had arrived at Sark, from Cornwall, in the same vessel; on a stormy day they had been employed for some time on works at the landing-place; one had left it, but seeing some of the works shake, went back to secure it; while waiting for a few minutes for a bolt, the same wave took both; the one nearest to the sea was held by some of the machinery, the other who had returned, was swept into it; though a strong swimmer, he sunk after a time within sight of his companion, the ropes thrown to him being carried away by the waves. He had already passed the largest portion of man’s life, had been brought through many perils of his dangerous employment, and his death was the more impressive on his companions, because out of the ordinary course of those perils, and his skill connected him with every work of difficulty in the new undertaking.

the first sight of HIM may be to the soul, as yet unacquitted at His judgment-seat, we know not; we know that to the Beloved Disciple while on earth, though “in the spirit,” the sight was so awful, that “When he saw HIM, he fell at His feet, as one dead;” how know we what it will be to us, who have loved HIM so frailly, disobeyed His loving commands so often, done oftentimes what in us lay to destroy ourselves for whom HE died, been so little conformed to HIM? Again, we hear of Satan’s “disputing with Michael the archangel about the body of Moses;” we may well believe that he will dispute to the last, that he appears in the presence of GOD as an “accuser of the brethren,” that he will not part with his prey, until “the LORD rebuke him.” Then also the passage is spoken of as fearful; fearful to be trod alone, and yet alone it must be trod; none may accompany us, no human friend avail us; not fearful at the last to those who tread it leaning upon GOD, yet awful even then. “Yea, *though* I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me; Thy rod and Thy staff they comfort me.” Supported by God’s past and present mercies, *even then* the Psalmist will not fear; not because it is not in itself very fearful, not because he would not by nature shrink from it, but because GOD would be with him, support him when trembling, and enlighten its gloom. Death has been oftentimes awful even to GOD’S saints; histories of the death-beds of the good tell us how they have shrunk from it; they have known better than ordinary persons how awful it is; they have known themselves, have felt the scars and spots of past sin; have prayed to see their sins, and have shrunk from appearing, such as they have been, before the Judgment-seat even of their merciful Judge and Saviour: Satan is busy at that hour, “having great wrath, because he knoweth that he hath but a short time;” and GOD permits him to torment with fear and strong terror many, that they may repent and loathe themselves, and confess that they deserve GOD’S wrath, that so HE may, for CHRIST’S sake, put it from HIM. Then also death is the decisive point of life; everything in life looks onward or tends to that hour; it makes all sure; it binds all fast; to all, the end of trial, the beginning of blessedness or woe; it is the last trial to be undergone; all repentance, faith, trust, love, prayer, devotion, are summed up by that hour; its trial over, and the faithful soul is delivered, is secure; the stream is passed, the shore won; but there is this one trial, and that the more awful because it is the last, because it winds up all, because there is no repenting of its imperfection, and so our Church teaches to pray during our lives, from our first prayer within her walls, that “in the hour of death” our “good LORD” would “deliver us;” teaches us to pray by the graves of our brethren, when their, last conflict is over, that “we may not at our last hour for any pains of death fall from GOD.” Then, too, are we at once to see, perhaps, the fruits of all our past lives, or to have some earnest of them; to see, if we escape, the narrowness, in many cases, of our escape, how nigh we were bringing ourselves to perdition, and how GOD’S merciful arm rescued us.

All death is awful to hear of; know we a person ever so little, or have we only heard of him, it is awful to hear of his death: be it but one whom we saw long ago, or who has been spoken of in the world, or whose friends we know, if anything bring him individually before our eyes, so that we can think of him as a distinct human being, it is

awful to hear that he is gone; we realize in him, what takes place in every death, that a soul is past from this world to judgment; people shrink, if but for a moment, for him and for themselves; and the passing feeling of pain and sympathy, and the half-framed wish that he may find mercy, is a confession that death is awful, and the way to life narrower than we are wont to think of.

Still more awful is *sudden* death; for as death is the fruit of sin and the token of GOD'S displeasure, and contrary to His natural ordinances, so and still more is sudden death, Not that we are to judge of those upon whom it falls; GOD forbid! our SAVIOUR, in the example of those "upon whom the tower of Siloam fell," has warned us in all such events to judge ourselves, not others; still, though not necessarily to them, it is a mark of GOD'S displeasure in and on the world; it startles us always; we feel that there is something awful in it; like the lightning, or the earthquake, or the pestilence, it bespeaks GOD'S wrath, and His judgments; it would not be, but for His wrath; we feel that if it is not more than awful to any upon whom it has fallen, it is a great mercy of GOD; we should shrink from it ourselves; we should wish for the most part to have notice of our death, to wind up our repentances, to be disciplined by its approach, to receive the comforts of our holy Faith, to be prayed by and for, to have the blessing, and to be commended to GOD by those whom HE has appointed to bless in His name; once more to receive the tokens of our SAVIOUR'S mercy, and to be united with HIM, and in that union, to wrestle with the last enemy, and in His strength to trample on him. These natural feelings are true. Job, though he "knew" that his "REDEEMER lived," prayed for some while of rest, that he might "take comfort a little before he went whence he should not return, to the land of darkness and the shadow of death; a land of darkness, as darkness itself; the shadow of death without any order, and where the light is as darkness;" the very words wherein he speaks thereof, show the awe which GOD hath impressed thereon. HE, too, hath marked upon the language of His book, that untimely death, or sudden death, are contrary to what HE speaks of as the happiest lot. Although HE hath shortened our days to "threescore years and ten," and they too be "labour and vanity, so soon pass they away and are gone," yet doth HE speak of it as a blessing to fulfil this our course, "to come to our grave in a full age, like as a shock of corn cometh in his season;" "length of days are in the right hand of wisdom;" "the fear of the Lord prolongeth days; hut the years of the wicked shall he shortened." "O my GOD, take me not away in the midst of my days," is the Psalmist's prayer. "The days of his youth hast thou shortened, and covered him with dishonour" is the Psalmist's complaint. One need not prove this, one need only remind you of it; nor is it repealed now: GOD may now, as of old, perfect in a little space those whom HE wills: "he being made perfect in a short time, fulfilled a long time; for his soul pleased the LORD: therefore hastened HE to take him away from among the wicked;" but still the law is unrepealed; the promise of the fifth commandment is spoken of in the New Testament; shortness of life and untimely death are still frequently annexed to sin. God is a GOD of order; and the happiest lot (except in the case of martyrs) is that of serving HIM faithfully in a man's generation, during the whole of life's

appointed course; that the sun should not “go down while it is yet day.”

We speak of continuance in this life, of restoration from sickness, as being “a mercy,” though to the perfected “to die” is to “be with CHRIST;” yea, the Apostle says of one who “was sick nigh unto death,” that ‘GOD had mercy on him;’ and so sanctions our way of speaking, and teaches us not to be overconfident, but to take thankfully the lengthening of our life, if so we may be the better prepared to yield up our account.

Additionally awful is it when, under the same outward circumstances, as our SAVIOUR speaketh, “the one is taken and the other left;” for then we cannot but see GOD’S hand therein. Why HE did so, we cannot presume to judge; but that of two HE should select the one and leave the other; that two should be parted, the one for life, the other for death, must have some meaning: it may have very many, it may be, quite separate from any thing in the persons themselves, to show how HE doth as HE wills; how all things are in His hands, and not in man’s. “The LORD killeth and maketh alive; HE bringeth down to the grave and bringeth up.” We all readily acknowledge that such is the case, and most in act and deed as strongly deny it; confess with the mouth that “the earth is the LORD’S,” and in act do as if all depended upon man. We are obliged many times to act as if things depended upon ourselves; yea, things seem in great measure entrusted to ourselves, and so it is the more an act of faith to believe in truth and in heart that they do depend upon the LORD and upon HIM only. And so it is often seen in the beginning of undertakings² how GOD interposeth in some way, by some unawaited cross or check, in order to teach us in act that GOD but alloweth them to go on: that as HE hath done thus much, so HE can and will do more; that HE hath His eyes upon us, and that ours must be turned to HIM; that what we do, we must do in submission to His will, and in dependence upon HIM, and with a fear of Him, lest HE hinder it altogether, and destroy both us and it. 2. Then also we see how little we know of His ways, though yet His choice, and His alone, is wise and good. Of these two, we trust, different as has been their lots, the one was in mercy taken, the other in mercy spared; and yet after-life and future diligence and patience in well-doing can alone show whether this present mercy be indeed a blessing to him who was spared. A great mercy it was in GOD’S purpose; may HE grant that it may accomplish the purpose for which it was sent, in more earnest, stedfast love of HIM, and keeping of His commandments. So have we also been chosen, chosen while others have been left, chosen to the blessings and gifts of the Gospel; yet may it appear that it had been better for a man to have been left, than, having been made a sharer of all these things, not to have been faithful. 3. Then it has an awful meaning as the image of the Day of Judgment: to that our LORD’S words in the text refer, and of that we have had a picture before our eyes; different from what it now is, when to both we trust there was mercy, but when some shall be “taken to meet their LORD in the air,” others “left,” left by GOD, left finally, left as refuse to be burnt up, left out of the care, and protection, and notice of GOD, left to the Devil and his angels, to be with him

² The congregation, of whom one had been suddenly removed, had been engaged about ten months on a mine then discovered.

tormented for ever and ever. He who hath now been delivered is set before you as a sign and a token of that which shall be, that you may be reminded of the Day of Judgment and of your own accounts therein.

The more that one reflects upon the history of this our brother, the more awfully strange it seems, as you yourselves have said and felt. To have passed a life in all manner of dangers, to have approached the term of natural dissolution, yet in full strength, and then to die, not by such dangers as might have been apprehended, but by a danger which might, humanly speaking, have been avoided; to be carried off just at the moment before he would have left the place of danger, after he had been some time there without apparent danger; and when carried off, to perish, when it might seem as if he could yet have been preserved, this surely is the very "finger of GOD" pointing out somewhat to us, as if GOD had thus lately brought him hither, only to be a sign and an example to us; that in all your works wherewith he was in your minds connected, he, thus dead, might preach to you, "in the midst of life we are in death," might repeat to you your LORD'S words, "Watch, for ye know not at what hour your LORD doth come."

But to what end are we to use this? To talk for a while of the uncertainty of life, of the awfulness of God's visitations, that "in the midst of life we are in death," of the wonderfulness of His deliverances, and then, after a few solemn thoughts or commonplace expressions, to pass on to other subjects, and do, and act, and think, laugh and be merry, just as before? God forbid! We feel within us an instinctive repugnance to turn from these visitations to other thoughts or words, and this implanted dislike is a proof the more that we should not do so. Yet this is continually the way in which men use, or rather neglect, these visitations of God. It is not solemn thoughts, when we again see the spot, or when the howling of the wind or strife of waters bring back to us the thought, that yesterday they swept him to his account: they are not *passing* solemn thoughts, which GOD'S awful dealings should at any time produce, but a continued impression of them, a living under them, an acting in consequence of them. He doth not these terrible things to produce certain feelings and thoughts, or that we should for a time talk, though it be edifyingly, of His ways, but to scare men from any thing of evil in them, to teach them to "set their own houses in order," because "they" too "must die," to awe them, and to make them live under that awe. They should be goads to us to spring forward, to do something which perhaps we had before been hesitating about, but which ought to be done; to be more earnest about our salvation, to disencumber ourselves of some evil habit, to repent more earnestly past sins, to press onward. They are so many warnings to us, and we shall have to give account of them to GOD, how we have used them; and it is not the right use of them to think solemnly only, and not to do. It is not simply that we may expect the like: we may indeed; and of those who in this island have heard of it, it is very likely that some will, though not perhaps in the like way, die

suddenly.³ Sudden deaths are frequent enough to make any one think that he *may* die suddenly; but it is not simply this, for many men do not die suddenly, and so men often dismiss the thought, and call these visitations awful when they do come, but still think that they do not very much concern them, and thus take occasion of GOD'S warnings to harden their hearts. The uncertainty of life is almost a proverb, and so people use it like a proverb, think it enough to acknowledge the truth of it, and then pass on as if it concerned them not, as if it were not of their *own* lives, of their own being called to account, of their *own* being *suddenly* brought to judgment, of which they were speaking. GOD'S mercies and GOD'S judgments alike hardened Pharaoh's heart; and whoso reflects a little, acts for a while, and then goes on as before, is the very likeness of Pharaoh, and preparing for himself Pharaoh's end. Who is not lastingly softened by GOD'S callings is hardened by them.

But it is not simply that we may have a death *in like way* sudden; it is not only untimely, or violent, or unforeseen death, which is sudden. All unprepared death is sudden death; yea, in the true sense, it is the only sudden death, for it is the only death which comes unexpected. The true Christian has long been on the watch for it; he has acted with a view to it, thought on it, looked for it, prepared to receive it. It comes to him hut as the evening of the day to the labouring man; he has known that now is the time when he must work, that "the night cometh when no man can work;" and so when the night cometh, it but finisheth his appointed labour: it is but his summons to "rest from his labours, and his works do follow him." He hath looked for it "as a servant earnestly desireth the shadow, and as an hireling looketh for the reward of his work." And now it is come; whether at the evening of his days, or at midnight, or at the cockcrowing, or in the morning, his LORD, though He come suddenly, findeth him not sleeping. It is but the summons which he has long been waiting; it is but the voice of his own LORD. But unprepared death (come when it will) is sudden; be it the slowest that ever was sent as GOD'S messenger, it is sudden; the work unfinished, perhaps scarce begun, and now no time to do it; trials wasted, and now no more to be recovered; occasions of doing the will of GOD, resisting Satan, doing GOD'S commandments, lost and not to be recalled; what can one say, or how can one think of the manifold guilt and misery of such a life and such a death? and yet whosoever is not watching, is living, more or less, such a life, and preparing for himself such a death.

For this is the very teaching which our LORD Himself draws from these very dealings of GOD, "Watch *therefore*, for ye know not at what hour your LORD doth come." "Watch therefore, lest coming suddenly, He find you sleeping; and what I say unto you, I say unto *all*, Watch." It is not then a warning to the careless only, to them who are asleep in sin; it is a warning to all; to those who are not watching, to watch; to those who are watching, to watch more diligently. It was said to Apostles; shall we think we need it not?

³ Within a year, the seigneur of the island was, with two others, swallowed up in the same sea; the boat in which he was, "sank" in a moment, "like lead in the mighty waters," in sight of those on shore; happily, in the midst of plans of good for the Church and islanders.

We should only show that we know not what to “watch” is.

For what is to watch for His coming, or for our own death? 1. It would be, always to have our death before us, as HE, our pattern, ever had His before HIM. We are the disciples of the CRUCIFIED, Who had the Cross ever before HIM, and such as HE was, must we seek to be. Yet see how HE had it ever before His eyes; (I would speak reverently, yet as a pattern to us, HE lets us see that it was so), how when His Disciples were thinking of grandeur, HE ever spoke of His own Cross; how it was the hour for which HE came “into the world;” the Baptism which HE was “straitened till it was accomplished.” As was the MASTER, such must the Disciples be; our MASTER had death and the Cross ever before HIM, and so must we. And so, of old time, holy men took means continually to remind themselves of death, what after death their bodies would be; their life was a daily meditation of death, and so a daily preparation for eternity, an unlearning of this our living death or dying life, a practice of immortality. The very way in which many would turn away from this, proves the need of it. It would, they say, damp the spirits, disable them from doing anything, cast a gloom over things, destroy the enjoyment of life. It would of a truth change the whole of *their* life. But what is saying this, other than to say that they are *not* watching, not habitually looking for it; that things to which they now give themselves, would be spoiled and lose their relish; that the things on which their minds now continually dwell in their journey, have nothing in common with the close of their lives; that they wish to forget that they are on a pilgrimage; that they would fain have their home here, where the children of GOD are strangers and foreigners; that their lives have nothing to do with the end of life? They witness against themselves; yes, that act, thought, or word is wrong, which a man would not do, think, or speak, with the thoughts of Death and Judgment in his mind. And if any think the constant thoughts of death would change much of his life, it may be a sure witness to him that much should be changed.

This, then, is the first part of watching, daily to set death before us, and to labour to act as those who are to give account, and who know not when the account may be called for; daily to see to our state, to leave nothing to be done till to-morrow, to look to our daily task of duty, repentance, prayer, petition of forgiveness, to lay down in our beds as in our graves, resigning our souls to GOD. And this will be a great means of a more particular sort of watchfulness, viz. being on our guard, not on the whole only, but in our several actions; being on the look out (so to speak), watching in our doings one by one, wherein the enemy assails us, where our greatest danger is, wherein we are most likely to fail; and then applying to the means given us; watching that we may pray, and praying that we may watch; watching beforehand the temptation as it is coming, praying- against it, and in it; cutting off all occasions that we can to it; but watching also in all our actions, for as there are some sins which most beset us, so there is scarcely any action, wherein sin may not surprise us; scarcely any sin into which a man, if he watch not, may not fall. “Behold, I come as a thief, saith our LORD, Blessed is he that watcheth, and keepeth his garments, lest he walk naked and they see his shame,” i. e. Blessed is he who by

continual watching keepeth that robe of white, wherewith CHRIST has clothed him, and defileth it not, lest it be taken from him, and he, being separated from CHRIST by his sins, be exposed naked and defenceless to our enemy, and “awake to shame and everlasting contempt.”

My brethren, they are moments such as these, in which new efforts are to be made, new diligence to be used; you speak of that which has happened as awful, let it awe you; dispensations of this sort are frequent, but do not very often come so closely under our eyes as did this, nor so solemnly warning us, that it is not of our foresight or wisdom, that one is taken and the other left, but that HE doeth, spareth, taketh, killeth and maketh alive, not as we should think, but at His own will: one of this small congregation, one of this small island, who had lately come in health and strength hither: the narrower the circle out of which he is taken, the more GOD warns those who are around him, nay, he seems by GOD’S dealings to have been brought hither, only to furnish this example of the suddenness of his final calling. GOD does not this for nought; HE showeth not His power for nought; HE, the Father of the fatherless and God of the widow, does not, for nought, make suddenly young children fatherless and a wife a widow. And yet it is as though for nought, unless they take heed who see it; they “make the counsel of GOD” to themselves “of none effect,” if they only talk for a while solemnly about it, have some impressions of awe, and then turn to do everything as they did before: yea, it were worse than of nought, for he that profiteth not by GOD’S warnings, maketh them to himself judgments. Seize, then, the present moment; GOD has so ordered it, that the day which followed thereon, should be this His own day of rest, and so gives you the more time to consider how you ought to act, while the sight of the dying man, struggling in the waves, is yet before your eyes; think what you would have wished to have undone, what to have done, had it been thou who in these few minutes wert to be brought before thy Judge, and do it. GOD’S judgments, even when they impress men for a time, fade away more rapidly than they would think who are most awed by them, unless they be used instantly; yea, they will fade away over-soon unless they be fixed by acting upon them; let them not pass away in feelings, but act: do something; seek to amend at once whatever thou seest or thinkest maybe amiss in thyself; “seek ye the LORD while HE may be found, call ye upon HIM while HE is near; let the wicked forsake his way and the unrighteous man his thoughts, and let him return unto the LORD, and HE will have mercy upon him, and to our GOD, and HE will abundantly pardon him.” Do something which thou otherwise wouldst not have done; and may HE Who sent this warning, “teach us so to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto” the only true “wisdom,” how we may be saved in that Great Day; and that whether in this life we live out the full measure of our years, or come early to our graves, we may ever be found watching, may be “taken” to dwell with HIM, and not be “left,” may receive His blessing; “Blessed is that servant, whom his LORD when HE cometh shall find so doing; yea, I say unto you, Blessed is that servant.”