

THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD IN DETERMINING THE BOUNDARIES OF HUMAN LIFE.

A

S E R M O N,

PREACHED AT *BROOKFIELD*,

APRIL 1, 1784,

AT THE *FUNERAL* OF JOSIAH HOBBS, JUN.

AGED TWENTY-FOUR YEARS,

WHO WAS *KILLED BY LIGHTNING*,

ON TUESDAY MORNING THE THIRTIETH OF MARCH,

BY NATHAN FISKE, A. M.,

PASTOR OF A CHURCH IN *BROOKFIELD*.

THE GOD OF GLORY THUNDERETH—the voice of the LORD is powerful; the voice of the LORD is full of majesty. PSAL. XXIX. 3, 4.

THEREFORE BE YE ALSO READY; FOR IN SUCH AN HOUR AS YE THINK NOT, THE SON OF MAN COMETH. MAT. XXIV. 44.

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A FUNERAL SERMON.

JOB, XIV. v.

SEEING HIS DAYS ARE DETERMINED, THE NUMBER
OF HIS MONTHS ARE WITH THEE ; THOU HAST
APPOINTED HIS BOUNDS THAT HE CANNOT PASS.

HOW true soever it is that men must die, they need to be frequently reminded of it in order to their conceiving justly of life, and preparing seasonably for death. Frequent discourses therefore, upon the precariousness of human life, especially when there have been any late instances of sudden and surprizing death, are necessary, and, unless it be our own fault, may be attended with everlasting benefit.

HUMAN frailty and continual exposedness to death, is a theme often in the thoughts, and often on the tongue of afflicted *Job*. The chapter before us is almost wholly taken up with this melancholy, but important, subject. It begins with the mortality, short duration, and inseparable misery of all mankind,—

“ *Man that is born of a woman, is of few days and full of trouble.*” Every child that is born into the world, is to continue in it but a short interval of time ; and that short interval is to be filled up with inquietude and sorrow. To confirm and enforce this it is added in the next verse, “ *He cometh forth like a flower and is cut down, he fleeth also as a shadow and continueth not.*” He springeth up like a tender flower ; and like a tender flower springing up too early, or in an exposed place, is nipt by the frost, or trodden by the foot, and is seen no more. “ *As for Man his days are as grass ; as a flower of the field, so he flourisheth : For the wind passeth over it, and it is gone ; and the place thereof shall know it no more.*” Such, O LORD, is the greatest, the hardiest, and the healthiest man ! “ *And dost thou open thine eyes upon such an one, and bringest him into judgment with thee ?*” Dost thou, who art the fountain of life and blessedness, condescend to cast a look upon this frail and perishing thing, and to take so much notice of him as to bring him into judgment with thee ? He is constituted of brittle materials, and descended from mortal parents ; how is it possible then that he should be otherwise than a frail and mortal creature ? for, “ *Who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean ? Not one :*” Who can make corruption and mortality produce a perfect and immortal substance ? No finite power whatever. Then comes in our text— “ *Seeing his days are determined, the number of his months are with thee, thou hast appointed his bounds that he cannot pass.*” Seeing thou hast set boundaries to

his life, beyond which he cannot proceed a step, and hast given him a determinate number of days which he cannot exceed, why shouldest thou concern thyself any more about him ? Why dost thou not leave him to finish his short course, and fill up his appointed measure, without scattering thorns in his path, or throwing bitterness into his cup of life ? “ *Turn from him that he may rest, until he shall accomplish, as an hireling, his day.*”

THE phraseology of the text plainly points out the sovereignty of GOD in disposing of man, determining the number of his days and months upon earth, and fixing the period of life which none can go beyond. The doctrinal truth then, which it concerns us all practically to observe, is this, That by the appointment of Heaven every man has a particular time to continue in this world : The number of years, months, and days which we are to live upon earth, is known and prefixed by a sovereign GOD, whose kingdom ruleth over all.

How long soever man would have lived on earth, had he continued innocent, we find by revelation, experience and observation, that since the wickedness of man became great, his life was naturally and judicially contracted to a short duration. Hence, says *Moses*, “ *The days of our years are threescore years and ten ; and if by reason of strength they be fourscore years, yet is their strength labour and sorrow ; for it is soon cut*

off and we fly away." Psalm xc. 10. Sin, which is the bane of the soul, has operated as a poison on the human body, introducing such infirmity and disorder, such liableness to diseases and accidents, as necessarily lead and hasten on its dissolution. Sin renders the body more vulnerable in every part, and arms every thing within and without it against its life. "*By one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned.*"

AND since GOD is the original cause of all things, and the prime agent in the kingdom of Providence, under whom all subordinate causes and instruments act, and by whom they are all supported, controuled, and directed, he may be said to have fixed the limits of every person's life, and to order the manner, time and circumstances of his death. GOD, the great author and governour of all things, has established the connexion between causes and effects. And whenever there is such a concurrence of causes as to bring about any person's death, either in a gradual or sudden manner, the will of divine providence is to be acknowledged therein; since those causes can by no means act independently on the first cause. This is agreeable to the doctrine taught us by our Saviour himself, that not so much as "*a sparrow falls to the ground without our heavenly Father; and even the very hairs of our heads are all numbered.*"

THAT it is appointed unto men once to die; and that every man is constrained to submit to this ap-

pointment, is a truth so evident to our senses, that none can deny it. We see that "*one generation passeth away, and another generation cometh :*" We see that wise men die, and the fool and brutish person perish : We see that death is the common lot of all, let their outward condition and distinctions be what they will. "*Our Fathers, where are they ?*" And as to any of the sons of men, "*Do they live forever ?*"

BUT though all mankind, without exception, are subjected to the law of mortality, yet there is a manifest difference with regard to the circumstances and manner of their death, and the length of their life. Though all must die, yet all do not die at the same age, nor in the same state of mind, nor the same kind of death. Though "*the living know they must die,*" yet they know not the time *when*, the place *where*, nor the manner *how*. Each of these circumstances is under the determination of him "*in whose hand our breath is, and whose are all our ways ;*" and who, when he pleases, "*takes away our breath, and then we die and return to the dust.*" "*In his hand is the soul of every living thing, and the breath of all mankind.*" And they enjoy life and breath just so long, and no longer, than he sees fit. "*He killeth, and he maketh alive ; he woundeth, and he healeth, neither is there any that can deliver out of his hand.*" Deut. xxxii. 39. He that gives life to the children of men, gives it to them only for such a determined time. Man's days, even "*the number of his months are with GOD,*" and limited by him ; the bounds to which he shall arrive,

and beyond which he shall never pass, are fixed by the unalterable decree of Heaven. "Death in every instance, and in every form," says one, "is God's providential act." And whenever he issues forth the dread command, and requires our souls of us, we must obey: Nor can we, by any means whatever, resist his will, escape the fatal stroke, or put off the execution of it to a longer period. "*There is no man that hath power over the spirit, to retain the spirit; neither hath he power in the day of death; and there is no discharge in that war.*" God does not, in this part of his administration, proceed by any fixed rules, discoverable by us, or that lie open to our view, whereby we can know beforehand the time, place or circumstances of another's death, or our own: This can be known and determined only by the event. Yet we have no reason, upon this or any other account, to doubt but that God always acts agreeably to his own fixed plan; and that every person's death, casual or sudden as it may seem, or by what means soever it is effected, takes place exactly in the time and manner which best suits with the scheme of his perfect and all-wise providence. In many instances indeed, God gives previous notice and admonition of approaching death by sickness and diseases: But oftentimes he surprises persons in a sudden and unexpected manner, and cuts them off unawares. So that "though nothing is more certain than death, yet scarce any thing is more uncertain as to us, than the time and manner of this change."—It is a fact of the highest evidence, that death and the grave are without any order. Men do

not go off the stage in a regular succession ; but one is singled out here, and another there ; one of this age or sex, another of that ; sometimes the head of a family, and sometimes the branch ; and all according to his determination, who hath “ *appointed our bounds that we cannot pass.*” And as the length of life, so the means by which life is brought to an end, are under the cognizance and management of him who executes his pleasure in the armies of Heaven, and amongst the inhabitants of this earth. Some are hurried out of the world in the flames of a fever ; others depart gradually by a lingering consumption. Some die by the hand of violence ; some by sudden accidents, and others as by a stroke from Heaven.—And as to the periods to which different persons live, they are as different as the manner of their death. Some just open their eyes upon the light of the sun, and then bid a final adieu to that and every thing beneath it. Others are permitted to live just long enough to rivet themselves in the fond affections of their parents, and then are torn from their embraces, and covered with the clods of the valley. Others arrive to compleat manhood, and die in their full strength : And here and there one continues on the stage of life until the day-light and the sun, the amusements and employments of the world, grow painful to them ; or until “ *the sun, and the light, and the stars are darkened.*” But yet each one lives his appointed time. As it is certain we are not to live here always, so it is certain we are to live here such a particular term ; which term neither the craft nor power of created beings can either increase or dimi-

nish. There is a period affixed in the divine prescience to each one of our durations ; and when we have got to that, we have no further to go : And as nothing can hinder us from arriving at it, so nothing can force us beyond it. There is a moment marked in the calendar of futurity which is to be the bound of *my* life ; another which is to limit *his*, and so on through the whole species. If God foreknows future events, he can tell the exact instant wherein each of us must expire. He knows who of us have almost filled up our measure ; and who have many more years to spend upon earth. “ *But of that day and hour*” which is to terminate his life, “ *knoweth no man.*”—But this point, though so highly interesting to every one, needs not any more time to be spend in illustrating and confirming it, being so plain and obvious to the meanest capacity. It will be more profitable to bring it home to ourselves and make the best improvement of it. Wherefore then,

“ *SEEING man's days are determined, and the number of his months are with GOD, and he hath appointed his bounds that he cannot pass,*” it behoves us to inquire what will become of us when this period shall have arrived ; and to make this inquiry with the utmost seriousness and concern, as persons who desire to be resolved, and who are determined to regulate their inward temper and outward conduct according as the result of this inquiry shall be.

WHAT then will become of us when we have arrived at those bounds of life beyond which we cannot

pass? When our days on earth are finished, and the "number of our months" is come to an end, *where* shall we be—*what* shall we be—or shall we be *at all*? Is there another state besides this, and have we souls that shall exist in this other state, when the body is laid in the dust; or shall we not perish like the beasts, and die *wholly* when we cease to breathe? Most certainly, if we consult reason, or scripture, or our own feelings, we must be convinced that there is a state of existence after this; that we have souls which cannot die with our bodies, but will live forever, either happy or miserable, according to their temper and disposition when they leave the present probationary state. For since the number of our months are with God to be multiplied or diminished as he sees fit; and since the longest life is bounded by the space of a few years, it is a pretty natural and just conclusion that we were originally designed for a more perfect and durable state. "For is it reasonably to be imagined that the infinitely wise and good author of our beings hath made such creatures as we are, endowed with such capacities and desires as all worldly things and enjoyments cannot fully satisfy; or that he should place us in such a short, frail and dying world as this which is so full of vexation and trouble, and where no perfect rest and happiness is to be expected, without providing some better things for us to come? The perceptions, reflections and enjoyments of the soul, the superiour part of our frame, are some of them such as clearly indicate its distinction from, its superiority to, and its independence on, the

body ; and that it may exist separate from and independent on the body. The capacities and desires, the hopes and fears of the soul strongly argue not only its spirituality, but its immortality too ; and that there is a future state in which the soul shall exist, and God, the moral governour, shall more fully administer judgment to every one according to his deeds, than it appears he does in this world." Thus far we may go upon the principles of natural reason. Divine revelation carries us much further, even to the assurance of a future judgment, when all shall be tried and sentenced according to their works ; and of a future state of retribution, in which "*every one shall receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad ;*" and that the "*wicked shall go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into life eternal.*" Nothing, therefore, can be plainer, and nothing can be of greater moment to us all, than this truth, that though our bodies are mortal and perishing ; our souls are immortal and undecaying ; and that when our bodies return to dust, as they were, our spirits return to God who gave them, to receive sentence of absolution or condemnation, and welcomed to the realms of bliss, or doomed to the regions of woe, according as we are prepared and attempered by a life of holiness, or a life of sin, for the one or the other.

SINCE then we have such convincing evidence that there is a Heaven for the righteous, and a strange punishment for the workers of iniquity, what can de-

mand our inquiry more than what is our true character, and what is like to become of us after death? Should our souls be dispatched into eternity without previous warning, what would be like to be our portion? Could we hope, with such habits, such inclinations, such a temper of soul as we are now possessed of, to be welcomed into the joy of our LORD; or must we not be "*cast into outer darkness, where is weeping and wailing, and gnashing of teeth.*" We know that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of GOD. Now what is our proper character? Have we those habits of grace and virtue which constitute us righteous in the sight of GOD? Have we that faith in GOD and CHRIST, which worketh by love, purifies the heart, excites to obedience, and overcometh the world? Do we believe in, trust and rely upon the LORD JESUS CHRIST, as our only Saviour, and live to him who died for us? Have we exercised an unfeigned repentance of all our sins, such a repentance as is unto salvation, not to be repented of? And do we live in all good conscience towards GOD, and towards man, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the LORD blameless? Is the temper of CHRIST formed in our souls, and do we regulate both the inward and the outward man by his example and word? Is it our greatest care to please GOD, and our greatest fear lest we should offend him? Are our sensual and worldly dispositions mortified within us, and do we cultivate a heavenly frame and temper of mind? Does the love of GOD and of our neighbour prevail in our hearts,

and influence us to all the duties of piety and virtue ? If such is our temper and conduct ; if we find in our souls an increasing love to GOD, and holiness; and Heaven, there is then a good foundation laid for peace in death, and for happiness after it. Then may we die safely, though we should happen to die suddenly. The unexpected arrival of death would not separate us from the love of GOD, which is in CHRIST JESUS our LORD ; but only usher us into his beatifick presence, where is fulness of joy and pleasures for evermore.

BUT if this is not our character ; if we are in a state of unregeneracy and impenitence ; if we allow any sin to have dominion over us ; if the world or the flesh engross our affections and pursuits ; if we are unsanctified to GOD, or unjust and uncharitable to men ; in short, if we have not made our peace with our Maker, by faith and repentance, we are in no sense prepared for death, how long, how active, or how mortified soever our life has been. And should we die in such a state, good were it for us if we had never been born. And if, upon examination, we have reason to fear that our souls are not in readiness for their summons to judgment ; that there are many sins charged to our account, of which we have not repented ; many important requirements with which we have not complied ; and that our spirits are no ways attempered to the refined and exquisite entertainments of the Heavenly World, Oh, how should we shudder at our danger ! Our breath is in our nostrils, which a thousand accidents may suddenly stop, and then we plunge into the bottomless pit.

WHAT we have heard exposes and sets in a striking light the astonishing stupidity and folly of secure sinners, who care not how they live, nor make the least preparation for death! That rational creatures who live in a dying world, should conduct from day to day, and from year to year as if their days on earth were not determined; as if the number of their months was not with God, but with themselves, and as if God had not appointed their bounds that they cannot pass, is really amazing. But alas, how many are there thus careless and stupid! "How many are there that see one and another of their fellow-creatures following by the dart of death, and some times in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, and know that they themselves must die in a short time, and perhaps by an unforeseen, instantaneous stroke, and yet make not the least preparation for a peaceful and happy death!" How foolish is it to suffer our concern, and our preparations, to terminate on this side the grave! What must be the consequence of such a conduct, but unutterable disappointment and confusion of face. What an unwelcome, what a dreadful messenger will death be to the thoughtless sinner, who has said to his soul, "*Tbou hast goods laid up for many years, take thine ease, eat, drink and be merry,*" when God shall say unto him, "*Tbou fool, this night shall thy soul be required of thee!*" What a dismal prospect will such an one have in the near view of eternity, if he be permitted to take a view of it before he finds himself in it! What horror must seize such guilty wretches, when they find themselves just stepping into the presence of an angry God, with the guilt of all their sins

lying on their consciences ! How surprizing must it be to them to be pushed off the precipice of life into that horrible pit which now yawns for them ! Most certainly then, they are guilty of the greatest absurdity, and run a dreadful risk who live in this world as if they had not, and never should have, any connexion with another, and were never to be called to an account for their behaviour here.

BUT our subject not only speaks terrour to careless sinners, but consolation and joy to the sincere, persevering and prepared Christian. The consideration that our times are in GOD's hands, and that he appoints the time and manner in which we and ours must make our exit, will reconcile the good man, not only to the sudden and surprizing bereavements which GOD is pleased to exercise him with, but even to his own dissolution, let it come when, and in what manner it will. What room is there for the least repining thought, or the least excess of grief, when any dear friend is snatched from us, since "*his days were determined, and the number of his months were with GOD,*" and since he reached those "*bounds which GOD had set him, and which he could not pass ?*"—And if we have indeed made our peace with GOD, and set our souls in order, by heartily complying with the terms of salvation in the Gospel, the thought that there is an appointed time to man upon earth, should afford us satisfaction, in as much as this world is a vale of tears, a state of temptation and sin, and in which there are no enjoyments suited to the dignity and duration of our immortal souls ; and in as much as in

the world to which we are hastening, we shall be free from sin as well as from sorrow, and serve and enjoy God without interruption, and without cessation for ever and ever.

I WOULD now address myself more particularly to our distressed friends, the mourning relatives of the young man so suddenly struck out of the list of the living, whose funeral obsequies we are now attending : And in the first place, to the sorrowful parents bowed down with this heavy and unlooked for affliction. God hath indeed broken forth upon you in a most sudden and awful manner. The stroke of his hand is as painful and severe, as it was unexpected and surprising. The burden he lays upon you, presses you sore ; and is almost too heavy for nature, unassisted by grace, to bear. By a blast from Heaven, God hath not only rent your dwelling, but filled it with "*lamentations, and mourning, and woe.*" By an instantaneous stroke he hath dispatched a promising son, in the bloom of life, and vigour of manhood, into eternity ! Whatever pleasing expectations, and fond hopes you entertained concerning him in this world, they are now blasted and torn up by the roots—yet amidst this pungent distress, I trust you do not forget, but endeavour to realize that the stroke was not a random one, but directed by the hand of your heavenly father ; and therefore that you can say with the Psalmist, "*I was dumb, I opened not my mouth, because thou didst it :*" And with Job, "*The LORD gave, the LORD hath taken away ; blessed be the name of the LORD :*"—However nature may stagger and faint under this pressure, or reluct against it, yet I trust

reason and grace will strengthen and support you—enable you to bear it with christian composure and patience, and dispose you to consider how you may behave under it in a manner the most honourable and profitable to yourselves, and so as to glorify God, honour your christian profession, and edify others.—May you experience the benefit, as well as feel the smart of affliction.—May the God of comfort be with and support you.—May the spirit of grace revive and cheer you with those consolations which are neither few nor small—and may your cup of bitterness be abundantly sweetened by a sense of your interest in those promises, which engage that “*those chastisements which, though for the present, are not joyous, but grievous, yet in the end shall yield the peaceful fruits of righteousness to them that are exercised thereby:*” And that “*all things shall work together for good to them that love God.*”

To the BROTHERS and SISTERS.

HOW suddenly and awfully is your number diminished, and you struck into consternation and grief at the instantaneous death of a beloved Brother!—When one of the family was to be suddenly arrested by the grim tyrant—his body laid breathless on the ground, and his soul dispatched into the presence of his judge, the lot fell upon *Josiah*, and you have escaped!—Be affected both with the “*goodness, and the severity of God!*” Towards him that fell, *severity*; but towards you, *goodness*.—May his goodness lead you to repentance, and engage you to a life of gratitude, usefulness, and growing piety!—This sudden summons of your Brother, in the prime of life, and in the strength and

security of youth and health, is a lesson full of instruction and warning. O be of a teachable and obedient disposition. Harken to the loud call—set your souls in order—secure an interest in the favour of God by repentance, faith, and a holy life.—“*Take heed, watch and pray, for ye know not when the time is,*”—Give diligence that you may be found of your judge in peace—seek comfort in the ways of religion—seek comfort of God ; and beseech him to comfort your parents. Redouble your pains to soothe and relieve them—especially let them have the heart-felt comfort of seeing each of you walking in the truth—living soberly, righteously and godly in the world ; that whether they should live to bury *you*, or you should live to bury them, the parting may be softened and sweetened with joyful hopes and prospects on both sides.

I WOULD now address myself to the YOUNG PEOPLE here present ; more especially to those who were the particular acquaintance and associates of the deceased.

O YOUNG PEOPLE, what think you of the awful providence which hath called you together at this time ? And what ought to be your reflections and resolutions now you are making your last visit to your fellow youth and companion, to pay the last offices to his blasted remains, and to bear them to the grave, the house appointed for all the living ? Look upon your young friend, now a stiffened corpse, and learn wisdom. It was but the day before yesterday that he was healthy and well, sprightly and vigourous, active and

secure from danger, to all appearance, as any of you ; and had as much reason to promise himself long life, and a worldly happiness, as any of you have at the present moment. But lo ! as quick as lightning ; yea, by a flash of that ethereal flame, his breath is absorbed—the springs of life are stopt—he is stretched out a livid corpse, and his soul is let loose into the world of spirits.—Death gives him no warning ; but “ Sends the dreadful tidings in the blow.” He had not time to say, “ LORD JESUS receive my spirit ;” nor even, *the LORD have mercy on me.* On the contrary, he is one moment in the concerns of time—the next in eternity.—We hope he had before committed his soul into the hands of his Redeemer, and formed resolutions to forsake sin, and live in all good conscience towards God and man—that he was in a good degree sanctified and made meet for glory. If so, how happy was he, to be waisted so quick from Earth to Heaven, though in a chariot of fire ! How happy, to be entirely excused and freed, by so sudden a stroke, from all the fears and pains of dissolving nature !—But whatever the state of his soul was when the summons came, it is now unalterable ;—and we must leave him in the hands of a just and merciful God, and consider what *our* condition would now have been, had the lightning, on that fatal morning, been commissioned to dispatch *us* instead of *him* ! Where, my young friends, would your souls now have been, had you been the devoted victims of the hot thunderbolt ?—O bless God that you are spared a little longer—that you have a space given you for repentance—an opportunity for

securing your eternal salvation. O despise not, neglect not, this repeated, this most awful warning.—What solemn calls, what reiterated admonitions, have young people, and others, had in this neighbourhood? How often of late have we been convened to houses of mourning, where we see the end of all men? O that the living, especially young people, would lay it to heart!—GOD is calling you by the voice of his word—by the voice of his spirit—by the voice of conscience—by the voice of his providence—and now he is calling upon you by the voice of thunder in the death of this young man: And this is the interpretation, “*Be ye also ready; for in such an hour as ye think not, the son of man cometh.*” O that you had ears to hear, and hearts to understand and improve the warning! “*O that you were wise, that you understood this, that you would consider your latter end!*”—Here you see how absolutely necessary it is that you be prepared; and how infinitely hazardous to defer your repentance and amendment of life. Consider how dangerous it is to live one moment longer estranged from GOD—in the commission of any sin, or omission of any duty.—Can you now put far away the evil day, and lay schemes for a sensual or worldly happiness, to the neglect of GOD and of Heaven? Will you now continue to walk in the way of your heart, and in the sight of your eyes, not considering that for all these things GOD may suddenly bring you into judgment?—O give not sleep to your eyes, nor slumber to your eye-lids, until you have fled for refuge, and laid hold on eternal life. “*Acquaint now yourselves with GOD, and be at peace;*

thereby good shall come unto you." Commit your souls, by an act of faith, and in well doing, to your Creator and Saviour; and then you need not be anxious about the time or manner of your death: Come when it will, your souls will be safe and happy.

AND now, may the efficacious influences of the blessed spirit, in concurrence with the admonitions of divine providence, and directions of the word, compel us to think on our ways, and turn our feet unto God's testimonies; to make haste and not delay to keep his commandments. And "*the LORD grant unto us all that we may find mercy of the LORD in that day.*"

A M E N.

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