

Cover

DISCOURSE

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BEING TWENTY YEARS

FROM THE AUTHOR'S SETTLEMENT

IN THE CHRISTIAN MINISTRY IN THAT PLACE.

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DISCOURSE.

GENESIS, XXXI. 38.

THIS TWENTY YEARS HAVE I BEEN WITH THEE.

IT is probably recollected by many, that twenty years are this day completed, since the ministerial office was committed to me, in the solemn rites of ordination. You therefore perceive the reason for which the words that have been read are selected as our text. These words are part of the address of Jacob to Laban, in whose service he had continued twenty years.

In one respect the text in its connexion will not apply to the present occasion. Jacob endured a cruel service in the employment of Laban. "Thus I was," said he; "in the day the drought consumed me, and the frost by night; and my sleep departed from mine eyes; and thou hast changed my wages ten times. Except the God of Abraham, and the Fear of Isaac had been with me, surely thou hadst sent me away now empty. God hath seen my affliction, and the labour of mine hands." Jacob was treated injuriously. It has not been so with me. I have cause gratefully to acknowledge, the constant affection and kindness, which I have experienced from you.*

But there are some particulars relative to our connexion as pastor and people, in which the text is applicable to the present occasion.

I. It is applicable with respect to the term of time, to which the text refers.

II. It is applicable with respect to the patriarch's employment, which was that of a shepherd.

I. ~~The text is applicable to the present occasion, with respect to the term of time to which it refers.~~

This twenty years have I been with you. In our connexion as minister and people, such a portion of time with me, and with those of you who are twenty years old and upward, has now expired. It becomes us to review this period, which has gone forever.

In this time, there have been great changes in our vicinity, and in this town.

In the circle including Hampton, Hamptonfalls, Seabrook, Kensington, Kingston, Epping, Brentwood, Exeter, Stratham, Newmarket, Durham, Dover, Newington, Greenland, Portsmouth, and Rye, there were, when I was ordained, seventeen settled ministers; of whom only three remain pastors of the same churches, to which they then ministered. Several of them continue in the ministry, and some have been resettled. But a number have finished their work, and gone to give an account of their stewardship. Several, whom you have often heard preach in this

* It appears from the whole history of this people that they have been uniformly attentive and kind to their ministers. Three ministers have been dismissed from this place, but not in consequence of any ill treatment or disaffection on the part of the people.

desk, in the course of twenty years, have not been suffered to continue by reason of death. We shall meet them in the great day. Their instructions, as well as the stated preaching you have heard, will come into the account, which must then be given to Christ.

In the course of thirty four years, including the decease of the Rev. Mr. Cookin, and the dismissal of my immediate predecessor, four ministers have departed from this town, though but one of them was called hence by death. With respect to the three first we know they are now in eternity, and we have reason to believe this is the case with the fourth.

Of those who officiated in the public religious services by which I was set apart to the work of the ministry, three venerable pastors have rested from their labours. The revered Dr. Buckminster, who gave me the solemn charge to be faithful to God, to your souls and to my own; the excellent Dr. Tappan, in whose family I had resided, whose instructions I had enjoyed, and who by prayer with the laying on of hands, consecrated me to the service of the Lord, and of your souls; and also my own honoured and beloved father, who preached to you, and to me, on that interesting occasion. We shall behold them no more till we meet them at the great resurrection. All the exercises of that occasion, as well as every religious opportunity we have since enjoyed, will make a part of the account, which you and I must give, when we shall appear in the presence of Christ.

Our fathers, where are they? And the prophets, do they live forever? Neither the sacredness of office, nor the usefulness of those whom Christ commissioned to preach his word, nor the desire of the churches, can stay the arrest of death, when God is pleased to call his servants from their work on earth. But, as "one generation passeth away, another generation cometh." God is raising up a succession of labourers in the gospel vineyard. Many places around us, which became vacant by deaths or removals, have been filled with worthy successors, who appear to be devoted to the service of Christ, and engaged in seeking the advancement of his kingdom, and the salvation of souls.

The great changes with respect the ministry remind me, that I am in a changing, dying world; that time, as it rolls along, brings many solemn and unexpected events; and that it becomes me to be constantly faithful and watchful, since I know neither the day, nor the hour, in which the son of man cometh, to conclude my ministry. These changes also remind you, of the uncertainty of the continuance of the interesting connexion, which now subsists between you and me, and admonish us both, to be sincerely and earnestly engaged in all our duties to each other, and to Christ, while our opportunity shall continue.

The changes in this place have been great. We can imagine what an assembly, in a town as small as this, would be formed by two hundred and twenty-four persons collected together. In the course of twenty years, that number have been called from among us, to the congregation of the dead. This is but little short of a third part of the average number of the inhabitants of this town, as stated in the enumerations for

twenty years. Fifty-six male heads of families; fifty-five wives or widows; and beside other persons of various ages, ninety-five who were under twenty-five years, have gone into eternity. Should not these events lead parents and children, husbands and wives, and those of every age and condition to serious consideration?

We may remark,

II. That our text is applicable to the present occasion with respect to the patriarch's employment, which was that of a shepherd.

This employment is often used in the scriptures to represent and illustrate the office, duty, and accountability of a minister of Christ. The Lord Jesus calls himself a shepherd, and all who believe in him, his flock. The same similitudes are applied to the ministers, and churches, of Christ. "Take heed unto yourselves, and unto all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood." "Feed the flock of God, which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind. Neither as being lords over God's heritage, but being ensamples to the flock. And when the chief Shepherd shall appear, ye shall receive a crown of glory, that fadeth not away."

An office more solemn than that of the gospel ministry, and one from which result more important consequences, cannot be committed to man. The ministers of Christ must feed his sheep, and his lambs. They must declare, defend, illustrate and enforce, the doctrines and duties of the gospel; and so administer its ordinances, that the flock of Christ may be edified, instructed, and nourished, to eternal life. They must also expose and reprove the hypocrisy, formality, and carnal mindedness, of unconverted professors, who have a form of godliness, but deny its power; who call Christ Lord, but do not love his sacred truths, and holy precepts. They must warn them, and all other impenitent persons, of their danger; declare the nature of God's holy law; point out its requisitions, and prohibitions; proclaim its terrors; declare its sentence; and shew the future eternal punishment of transgressors. They must also proclaim the gospel message, and invite, urge, entreat, and require, sinners to come to Christ, and be saved; to come with penitent hearts, hating sin; with believing hearts, hungering and thirsting after righteousness; with hearts determined to serve the Lord, and walk obediently in all his commandments and ordinances, and to be faithful unto death. Taking the example of the prophets and apostles, and above all, the example of the Lord Jesus as their pattern, and the word of God as their rule; relying on the Holy Spirit to enlighten, sanctify, direct, and succeed them, they must make full proof of their ministry. They must not sit down at ease, but be awake to their great duty, intent upon it, and earnestly engaged in it, while there are any faints to be quickened, instructed, and comforted; any inquirers to be guided into the way of peace; and any unconcerned sinners to be awakened and converted. In this work they must not yield to weariness; but be fervent in spirit.

erving the Lord; wearing out in this service; not counting even their own lives dear to them, in comparison of the great object of winning souls to Christ, and promoting his glory.

When the accountableness of the ministers of Christ is considered, how do the solemnity and greatness of their work rise upon our view. If but a lamb were torn or lost, Laban required it at Jacob's hand. How much more awful the responsibility of a minister of Christ. He is set to watch for souls, as one who must give an account. The Lord will require it, if the blood of souls be found in his skirts. The woe pronounced upon the idle shepherd; the curse on him, who shall preach any other gospel than that which God has revealed; the denunciation that God will require the blood of them, who die in their iniquities, at the hand of him who giveth them no warning; are so awful, that the responsibility of every minister of Christ is great beyond expression. He must meet face to face before Christ, every one to whom he has ministered. From the book of everlasting remembrance, will be brought forth every particular in his conversation, example, and preaching, and in their consequent conduct. With all this, his and their eternal condition is connected. How amazingly great also are the duty and accountableness of those, who do, or might hear the gospel. May I then take heed to myself, and to my ministry, lest when I have preached to others, I myself should be a "cast away;" and may you consider how you have received, and heard, and enquire seriously into the state of your immortal souls.

When I was settled in the ministry, this church consisted of about an hundred members. A number of them had removed to other towns, but had not transferred their relation to other churches. Some have since been recommended to other churches, and a few have withdrawn or been excluded. Of the whole number, fifty have deceased, but some of them after they had removed from us. Thirty-six, of those who were members twenty years ago, are now living, and retain their relation to us. In the course of my ministry eighty-eight have here professed to be the friends and followers of Christ, and four have been received on recommendation from other churches. Of those who have been received during my ministry, eleven have deceased, and the relation of one has been transferred to another church, on our recommendation. The present number of members is an hundred and sixteen. But how few have professed religion, compared with the many now alive, together with those, who have been passing hence to eternity, the past twenty years! I would only repeat here, what I have often declared, that if any of you have hopefully experienced a new birth, and found Christ to be precious to you, and do not profess it, you are guilty of sinful neglect in not honouring Christ before men, and coming to his table. And those who are impenitent, and therefore have no right to the Lord's supper, are the enemies of Christ. And I entreat those of you, who have made a profession to examine yourselves. If any of you are really unconverted, rest not in your guilty and dangerous state. Should you rest in such a state, the thin

veil of your profession will be soon torn away, and where will you then stand? Where will your portion then be appointed? Become, without delay, the friends of Christ.

In the past twenty years there have been about two hundred baptisms in this society. But there are not a few, who remain unbaptized. If Christ had not considered baptism very important, he would not have appointed it. It is a solemn consecration. It represents the necessity of an interest in the blood of atonement, of the renewing of the Holy Ghost, and of the mercy of God; and is a seal of the covenant of grace. To observe it only as a formality is sinful, and the more I have viewed the subject, the more evident it has appeared to me, that it is improper for parents to present their children to receive this ordinance, when they do not give themselves to God; inconsistent to claim for their children the seal of a covenant, to which they do not agree in their own souls. How can they in this way give up their children in faith? I entreat you, who neglect the baptism of your children, no longer to delay giving your own hearts to God. If you desire covenant mercies, come to God for them, and all gospel privileges will be open to you and yours. "If thou believest with all thine heart thou mayest." If it is safe to rest securely when in awful danger, then rest in your present neglect, and unpreparedness for special ordinances; but if not, then awake to a sense of your condition and your duty.

As minister and people, let us, with contrite hearts, lament all our sinful neglects, and pray that God would give us repentance unto life, that we may obtain mercy in the day of the Lord Jesus.

REFLECTIONS.

On reviewing the changes in the ministry, in the towns in this vicinity, which have been named, if we calculate according to the events of the past twenty years, how small the probability of my remaining the pastor of this church twenty years to come. On this calculation, the probability that this may be the case is only in the small proportion of three to seventeen. The ministry of Mr. Thurston in this place was about fifteen years; that of Mr. Macclure between nine and ten; that of Mr. Hastings between seven and eight; and that of Mr. Gookin about twenty-seven. And I ought seriously to reflect, with respect to the first excellent pastor of this church, who remained here the longest, and died in the service of this people, that I am now but about ten years younger than he was when he finished his labours; and that the present time of my ministry is but seven years short of the whole of his.*

Should not you and I then consider, how small the prospect of the continuance of our connexion, for another such period as we have already sustained this interesting relation. Should we not, by the greatest attention to our duties, and the greatest devotedness to Christ, and the most serious attention to the concerns of our souls, prepare to part.

* Rev. Nathaniel Gookin was ordained Oct. 31, 1739, and died Oct. 23, 1766, aged 53 years.

The idea of being soon called away from this world, is a very solemn, but not a gloomy reflection, to those who have good hope in Christ. The expectation of soon parting from beloved friends, and leaving those who are dear in this sinful and perilous world, is indeed attended with trial. But however needful, with respect to those who shall remain, it may seem to abide in the flesh, yet to those, who endeavour to live in daily communion with God, and in faith and hope in the Lord Jesus, it does appear better to depart and be with Christ, than to be here. And no one ought to consider himself and his own life and labours so important, as not to reflect that God is able to raise up others, who may do more and better.

When we reflect on the changes in the churches and societies in this vicinity, you are reminded that the time is coming, when this church and people will be destitute of a pastor. Here allow me to entreat those who may be active in the concerns of life, when such an occasion shall arrive, to be determined not to remain destitute. The public worship of God and other institutions of religion are of immense importance to the temporal and eternal welfare of a people. May there be here, in all future periods, a faithful minister of Christ, who shall feel the deep solemnity of his charge; and as if he desired to spend and be spent in his proper work, persuading men to be reconciled to God; and who shall faithfully preach in season, and out of season, the plain, close, heart-searching truths, which Christ and his apostles preached, whether men will hear, or whether they will forbear.

The changes in this town, if we calculate what will probably take place from what has past, call us to very solemn and interesting reflections.

Is a number nearly equal to a third part of the present inhabitants of this town to go hence to eternity, in twenty years from this time? Are more than an hundred heads of families, male or female, and are nearly an hundred children and young persons to be taken from the families in this place into eternity, in that short time? With what awakened feelings should each one cry, in the language of Christ's first disciples, "Lord is it I?" But the question will not be now definitively answered. With many a one it may be answered in an unexpected time. To all, the present reply is, Watch, and prepare to meet your God.

Another, and a most serious reflection, which arises from our review of the number of this people who have gone into eternity, is, that while some, as we have reason to believe, will forever rejoice in heaven, others will forever groan in the misery of hell. It is not for us to select and designate individuals. This belongs to the Judge of all. But as we have reason to believe that some died in their sins, and others died in the Lord, and as Christ has said concerning the two classes, "These shall go away into everlasting punishment; but the righteous into life eternal," so, however it may affect our feelings, we must either despise the word of eternal truth, or we must believe that all, who did not in their day of probation repent and become converted, will endure forever the

dreadful doom of the damned; and that all, who really embraced Christ as their Lord, are with him in paradise. How dreadful must it be if any have perished or should hereafter be lost through my own unfaithfulness, or that of parents or other connexions ?

And is it probable that more than two hundred souls will, in twenty years from this time, go from this small town to an eternal abode in heaven or in hell ? O how should we now seek to know our true spiritual condition, and consider and apply the word of God by his prophet Isajah, "Hear, ye that are afar off, what I have done, and, ye that are near, acknowledge my might. The sinners in Zion are afraid; fearfulness hath surprised the hypocrites. Who among us shall dwell with the devouring fire ? Who among us shall dwell with everlasting burnings ?" O that all, being warned, may "flee from the wrath to come, and lay hold on eternal life." The aged know, however little it is realized by many, that they shall soon depart. The young do not consider. They are accustomed to look at death as distant. But the great proportion of deaths for twenty years, which has been found among those under the age of twenty-five, admonishes you, my youthful hearers, to ponder the paths of your feet, and consider the slippery places on which you stand.

In the twenty years that I have been with you, our connexion has been intimate and affecting, as well as solemn and momentous. Various have been the tender scenes, both merciful and afflictive, in which our sympathies and sorrows have been mingled; and through the whole of my ministry, I have felt that you have treated me with attention and kindness far beyond my desert, and have been ready to cast the mantle of friendship and forgiveness over my faults.

Such kindness, on your part, should not, and I hope will not prevent my preaching the most solemn and piercing truths of God's word, even if by some of you these truths should not be felt. I do not however apprehend that any of you have become mine enemies, because I have told you the truth. I am not authorized, and do not wish to preach any other doctrines, than those which God has required should be preached. These I desire to preach plainly, as the truths by which the Holy Spirit converts souls, prepares them for heaven, and glorifies God.

The fallen and lost state of mankind, the entire depravity of the human heart, its natural opposition to God and holiness, the sovereignty of God, who will have mercy on whom he will have mercy, and who justly leaves sinners to hardness of heart and blindness of mind; the doctrines of election and of the free agency of man; the necessity of a real change of heart, and of the influences of the Holy Spirit to effect it; the duty and necessity of repentance, faith in Christ, and justification through the free grace of God, by the redemption which Christ has purchased with his atoning blood; the necessity of true godliness, actual holiness of life; the future eternal glory of penitent believers, and the eternal misery of the impenitent and unbelieving;—these truths, and those connected with them, I have endeavoured to preach, because I find them plainly declared in the

word of God. They come to us with a declaration, which admits no doubt, "Thus saith the Lord."

I have not supposed that the heart-searching and humbling doctrines of God's word are agreeable to you all. They are never heartily received by any, till they experience their power and efficacy on their own hearts. Till the experience of the heart, through the operation of the Holy Spirit convinces of the truth, some of these doctrines appear to be foolishness, neither are they known, because they are known only by being spiritually discerned.

But shall my personal affection to you, or your's to me, prevent a declaration of what God has revealed, and commanded me to preach? How dreadful it would be, if in the judgment day Jesus should look me in the face, and then point to some to whom I had preached, and say, 'I plainly declared, except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God; but you through fear of displeasing those who heard you; concealed this truth, or explained it away, and thus quieted them in a state of sin, and destroyed their souls.' What if he should point to others and say, 'I proclaimed, and commanded you to preach, that the impenitent shall go away into everlasting punishment, but because some could not bear to believe this, you kept it back, and thus they flattered themselves that they were safe in their refuges of lies, and destroyed their souls.' What if Jesus should then point to others and say, 'These loved to indulge their appetites and lusts and evil tempers, and you feared to offend them; you neglected to preach to them the terrors of my law; thus they are shut out from the kingdom of God; and have their part with liars, whoremongers, unjust, profane, sabbath-breakers, and drunkards.' What if the Lord Jesus should then point to others, saying, 'These stumbled at the sins of such as named my name. They stumbled on these dark mountains and fell, because you feared to offend some members of your church, and neglected to reprove, rebuke and exhort, with all long-suffering and doctrine, unconverted professors, and slumbering believers.'— And, Oh! what if the great Judge of the world should then point to a company of youths and say, 'These were lovers of pleasure more than lovers of God; they would not seek me early: they would not give me their hearts; they would not forsake their vain pleasures, and take up the cross and follow me; they loved to chant to the sound of the viol, and to cheer their hearts with mirth and wine; and lest you should disturb their earthly pleasures, or incur their dislike, you would not sound the alarm, you would not declare to them in my name, "Rejoice, O young man, in thy youth, and let thy heart cheer thee in the days of thy youth, and walk in the ways of thine heart, and the sight of thine eyes: but know thou that for all these things God will bring thee into judgment." Thus is their dancing turned into mourning, their laughter into sorrow, and their mirth into eternal heaviness.'

O, my friends, the judgment day will be a serious day. We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ. The record of every part of my ministry will be there. It will be dreadful for me, and for you, if we take a course now, which will not bear the trial then.

Numerous as my sinful neglects have been, for which I desire forgiveness from you, and from Him, who placed me in this ministry, I can truly say, that twenty years have not in the least abated my desire to preach the word of God with all plainness, and to be faithful unto death to your souls. The more I have considered the duties and responsibilities of my ministry, and the solemn scenes of eternity, the more have my impressions, of the vast importance of the truths of the gospel, and of declaring them plainly, been deepened; and the more have my desires increased, that they to whom I minister, and whom I have so much cause to regard and love, should be converted to God, escape the damnation of hell, and glorify the great Redeemer, in the enjoyment of eternal salvation.

In reviewing the past period, how sad must be the reflections of every one of us, when we consider our sins and unprofitableness. How thankful should we be for God's forbearance, and all his mercies, and how determined to "walk" henceforth "circumspectly, not as fools, but as wise, redeeming the time."

In concluding this discourse, I would again express the feelings of affection and gratitude for your constant friendship; and numerous kindnesses. But there is one gratification, which above all others I desire to enjoy among you. It is to see those, who really love Christ, more engaged in the great things, which pertain to his kingdom, letting their light shine, and living more to their own spiritual comfort, the good of others, and the glory of God; and to see all who are impatient mourning for sin, and flying to Christ.

God forbid that while I live I should cease to pray for you. And let me hope, you will daily pray for me, that I may be faithful, and that God would by his Spirit make the gospel and its privileges effectual to your salvation.

And one particular request I would now make of every one of you, who is the head of a family. I beseech you do not deny me this request. It is, that you will daily, and with your families, pray for me, and for saving blessings to accompany my ministrations.—AMEN.

