

"This Year Also."

BY C. H. SPURGEON.

FROM THE SICK CHAMBER.

"This year also."—Luke 13: 8.

At the opening of another year, and at the commencement of another volume of sermons, we earnestly desire to utter the word of exhortation; but alas, at this present, the preacher is a prisoner, and must speak from his pillow instead of his pulpit. Let not the few words which we can put together come with diminished power from a sick man, for the musket fired by a wounded soldier sends forth the bullet with none the less force. Our desire is to speak with living words or not at all. He who enables us to sit up and compose these trembling sentences is entreated to clothe them with his Spirit, that they may be according to his own word.

The interceding vine-dresser pleaded for the fruitless fig-tree, "let it alone this year also," dating as it were a year from the time he spoke. Trees and fruit-bearing plants have a natural measurement for their lives: evidently a year came to its close when it was time to seek fruit on a fig tree, and another year commenced when the vine-dresser began his digging and pruning work. Men are such barren things that their fruitage marks no certain periods, and it becomes needful to make artificial divisions of time for them; there seems to be no set period for man's spiritual harvest or vintage, or if there be, the sheaves and the clusters come not in their season, and hence we have to say one to another—"This shall be the beginning of a new year." Be it so, then. Let us congratulate each other upon seeing the dawn of "this year also," and let us unitedly pray that we may enter upon it, continue in it, and come to its close under the unfailing blessing of the Lord to whom all years belong.

I. The beginning of a new year suggests a retrospect. Let us take it deliberately and honestly. "This year also," then there has been former years of grace. The dresser of the vineyard was not for the first time aware of the fig-tree's failure, neither had the owner come for the first time seeking figs in vain. God, who gives us "this year also," has given us others before it; his sparing mercy is no novelty, his patience has already been taxed by our provocations. First came our youthful years, when even a little fruit unto God is peculiarly sweet to him. How did we spend them? Did our strength run all into the wild wood and wanton branch? If so, we may well bewail that wasted vigor, that life mispent, that sin exceedingly multiplied. He who saw us misuse those golden moments of youth nevertheless affords us "this year also," and we should enter upon it with a holy jealousy, lest what of strength and ardor may be left to us should be allowed to run away into the same wasteful courses as aforesaid. Upon the heels of our youthful years come those of early manhood, when we began to muster a household, and to become as a tree fixed in its place; then also fruit would have been precious. Do you bear any? Did we present unto the Lord a basket of summer fruit? Did we offer him the firstlings of our strength? If we did so, we may well adore the grace which so early saved us; but if not, the past chides us, and, lifting an admonitory finger, it warns us not to let "this year also" follow the way of the rest of our lives. He who has wasted youth and the morning of manhood has surely had enough of fooling; the time past may well suffice him to have wrought the will of the flesh: it will be a superfluity of naughtiness to suffer "this year also" to be trodden down in the service of sin. Many of us are now in the prime of life, and our years already spent are not few. Have we still need to confess that our years are eaten up by the grasshopper and the canker-worm? Have we reached the half-way house, and still know not whither we are going? Are we fools at forty? Are we half a century old by the calendar and yet far off from years of discretion? Alas, great God, that there should be men past this age who are still without knowledge! Unsaved at sixty, unregenerate at seventy, unawakened at eighty, unrenowned at ninety! These are each and all startling. Yet, peradventure, they will each one fall upon ears which they should make to tingle, but they will hear them as though they heard them not. Continuance in evil breeds callousness of heart, and when the soul has long been sleeping in indifference it is hard to arouse it from the deadly slumber.

The sound of the words, "this year also," makes some of us remember years of great mercy, sparkling and flashing with delight. Were those years laid at the Lord's feet? They were comparable to the silver bells upon the horses—were they "holiness unto the Lord"? If not, how shall we answer for it if "this year also" should be musical with merry mercy and yet be spent in the ways of carelessness? The same words recall to some of us our years of sharp affliction when we were, indeed, digged about and dugged. How went those years? God was doing great things for us, exercising careful, expensive husbandry, caring for us with exceeding great and wise care—did we render according to the benefit received? Did we rise from the bed more patient

and gentle, weaned from the world, and welded to Christ? Did we bring forth clusters to reward the dresser of the vineyard? Let us not refuse these questions of self-examination, for it may be this is to be another of these years of captivity, another season of the furnace and the firing-pot. The Lord grant that the coming tribulation may take more chaff out of us than any of its predecessors, and leave the wheat cleaner and better.

The new year also reminds us of opportunities for usefulness, which have come and gone and of unfulfilled resolutions which have blossomed only to fade; shall "this year also" be as those which have gone before? May we not hope for grace to advance upon grace already gained, and should we not seek for power to turn our poor sickly promises into robust action?

Looking back on the past we lament the follies by which we would not willingly be held captive "this year also," and we adore the forgiving mercy, the preserving providence, the boundless liberality, the divine love, of which we hope to be partakers "this year also."

II. If the preacher could think freely he could wherry the text at his pleasure in many directions, but he is feeble, and so must let it drive with the current which bears it on to a second consideration; the text mentions a mercy. It was in great goodness that the tree which cumbered the soil was allowed to stand for another year, and prolonged life should always be regarded as a boon of mercy. We must view "this year also" as a grant from infinite grace. It is wrong to speak as if we cared nothing for life, and looked upon our being here as an evil or a punishment; we are here "this year also" as the result of love's pleadings, and in pursuance of love's designs.

The wicked man should count that the Lord's long-suffering points to his salvation, and he should permit the cords of love to draw him to it. O that the Holy Spirit would make the blasphemer, the Sabbath-breaker and the openly vicious to feel what a wonder it is that their lives are prolonged "this year also!" Are they spared to curse, and riot, and defy their Maker? Shall this be the only fruit of patient mercy? The procrastinator who has put off the messenger of heaven with his delays and half promises, ought he not to wonder that he is allowed to see "this year also?" How is it that the Lord has borne with him and put up with his vacillations and hesitations! Is this year of grace to be spent in the same manner? Transient impressions, hasty resolves, and speedy apostasies—are these to be the weary story over and over again? The startled conscience, the tyrant passion, the smothered emotion! Are these to be the tokens of yet another year? May God forbid that any of us should hesitate and delay through "this year also." Infinite pity holds back the axe of justice, shall it be insulted by the repetition of the sins which caused the uplifting of the instrument of wrath? What can be more tantalizing to the heart of goodness than indecision? Well might the Lord's prophet become impatient and cry, "How long halt ye between two opinions?" Well may God himself push for a decision and demand an immediate reply. O undecided soul, wilt thou swing much longer between heaven and hell, and act as if it were hard to choose between the slavery of Satan and the liberty of the Great Father's home of love? "This year also" wilt thou sport in defiance of justice, and pervert the generosity of mercy into a license for still further rebellion? "This year also" must divine love be made an occasion for continued sin? O do not act so basely, so contrary to every noble instinct, so injurious to thine own best interests.

The believer is kept out of heaven "this year also" in love, and not in anger. There are some for whose sake it is needful he should abide in the flesh, some to be helped by him on their heavenward way, and others to be led to the Redeemer's feet by his instruction. The heaven of many saints is not yet prepared for them because their nearest companions have not yet arrived, and their spiritual children have not yet gathered in glory in sufficient number to give them a thoroughly heavenly welcome: they must wait "this year also" that their rest may be the more glorious, and that the sheaves which they will bring with them may afford them greater joy. Surely, for the sake of souls, for the delight of glorifying our Lord, and for the increase of the jewels of our crown, we may be glad to wait below "this year also." This is a wide field, but we may not linger in it, for our space is little, and our strength is even less.

III. One last feeble utterance shall remind you that the expression, "This year also" implies a limit. The vine-dresser asked no longer a reprieve than one year. If his digging and manuring should not then prove successful he would plead no more, but the tree should fall. Even when Jesus is the pleader, the request of mercy has its bounds and times. It is not for ever that we shall be let alone and allowed to cumber the ground: if we will not repent we must perish, if we will not be benefited by the spade we must fall by the axe.

There will come a last year to each one of us; therefore let each one of us say to himself—"Is this my last?" If it should be the last with the preacher, he would gird up his loins to deliver the Lord's message

with all his soul, and bid his fellow-men be reconciled to God. Dear friend, is "this year also" to be your last? Are you ready to see the curtain rise upon eternity? Are you now prepared to hear the mid night cry, and to enter into the marriage supper? The judgment and all that will follow upon it are most surely the heritage of every living man. Blessed are they who by faith in Jesus are able to face the bar of God without a thought of terror.

If we live to be counted among the oldest inhabitants, we must depart at last: there must be an end, and the voice must be heard—"Thus saith the Lord, this year shalt thou die." So many have gone before us, and are going every hour, that no man should need any other *memento mori*, and yet man is so eager to forget his own mortality, and thereby to forfeit his hopes of bliss, that we cannot too often bring it before the mind's eye. O mortal man, bethink thee! Prepare to meet thy God; for thou must meet him. Seek the Saviour, yea, seek him ere another sun sinks to his rest.

Once more, "this year also," and it may be for this year only, the cross is uplifted as the *pharo* of the world, the one light to which no eye can look in vain. Oh that millions would look that way and live. Soon the Lord Jesus will come a second time, and then the blaze of his throne will supplant the mild radiance of his cross; the Judge will be seen rather than the Redeemer. Now he saves, but then he will destroy. Let us hear his voice at this moment. He hath limited a day, let us believe in Jesus this day, seeing it may be our last. These are the pleadings of one who now falls back on his pillow in very weakness. Hear them for your soul's sake and live.—Ex.

Timid Disciples Frightened.

When the waves dashed high on the Sea of Galilee and the little boat which carried the disciples and their Master was filled with water the danger was very great. It was no small danger that frightened those hardy men. Some of them were fishermen of long experience, perfectly at home on the water and familiar with the Sea of Galilee. When they left their oars and aroused their Lord, saying, "Master, Master, carest thou not that we perish?" the peril must have been imminent.

We cannot blame them for being frightened. If we had been there we should have been frightened also; Jesus rebuked them, but he did so very kindly. He understood their infirmities. It was not because they trembled and realized the danger that he rebuked them. It was because of their lack of faith. They could not quite rest in the Lord in so severe a storm. They were not sure that the ship that carries Jesus may not go to the bottom.

It is well for us to take note of the dangers which surround us. We, too, are out on an ocean sailing. Dangers quite as real, and far more to be dreaded, are before us also. It may be that while we are dreaming of peace and safety sudden destruction is hanging over our heads. How shall we behave when trouble arises? What Christian has not asked himself how we would feel and act if he were exposed to the affliction which have overtaken some of the saints? If he were called, as Abraham was, to give up his only son, what would he do? If he were brought to the hour when he must give up his life or give up his Saviour, what would he do? Would he not be alarmed? Would he not tremble and shrink back?

Is it not wise to close our eyes and fold our hands and say, "There is no danger. We shall never be tried in this way." In the time of the prophet there were many who cried, "Peace, peace, when there was no peace." Every one should look the danger squarely in the face and prepare for it. Let him not imagine that he is safe because he is a disciple of Christ. The men who rowed the fishing boat on the Sea of Galilee on that memorable night were disciples of Christ. He had chosen them; called them, ordained them, and even then he was training them for great service. They were rowing the boat at his command when the storm broke over them. They had Jesus in the boat with them when the sore trial came. It is so still. Those whom he has chosen and adorned and sent out are often overtaken by tempests of temptation and affliction. Those who are in the way of his commandments are often sorely tried.

The storm was part of their discipline. They were in training for service, and it was well for them to be used to hardship and storm. Wilder storms than ever broke over Galilee awaited them. The fierce tempests of human wrath and fiery persecution were in store for them. They were all the better prepared for tribulation by the experiences of this awful night. Let not the Christian think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try him, as though some strange thing happened unto him. It is all needful in the way of discipline. It may be that God has some great service preparing for that man who is called to pass through the severest storms. He is preparing him for what he has prepared for him. If he falls in the trial he may never know what honors were awaiting him.

The disciples needed a strong faith. This was one way