

PASTOR AND PEOPLE.

THE PASSING NATURE OF EARTHLY THINGS.

A SERMON FOR THE LAST SABBATH OF THE YEAR, 30TH DEC., 1877.

"The world passeth away and the lusts thereof, but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever."—1 John ii. 17.

The text is the second of the reasons given for the warning injunction contained in verse 15th. This injunction, if we are to judge from its position, the apostle must have regarded as of general application and of the utmost importance. It is preceded by a solemn address to various classes of believers in various stages of advancement in the Christian life. It is addressed to the "little children" those who have just entered on the new life—who are yet weak and inexperienced, but who have attained to the knowledge of the truth and rejoice in the forgiveness of sins. It is addressed to the "fathers"—those of riper years in Christian experience, and of greater maturity in spiritual life—who have long walked in communion with the Lord, who have known Him from the beginning. The "young men" are also addressed—those who in the fulness of youthful vigor are strong in faith and warm in love, who have passed through the conflict and come out victorious, and in whose heart the seed of the word abides. To all these—and if to these, surely we may say to us also and to believers in every age and condition—is the warning addressed, "Love not the world neither the things that are in the world."

After enumerating those to whom the warning is directed the apostle goes on to urge the grounds or reasons on which it is based. The first of these is the hostility of the world to God: "If any man love the world the love of the Father is not in him." To love both the world and God in the sense here meant is impossible—they are utterly incompatible with each other, for "All that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father but is of the world." Then follows the text which gives a second and additional reason why we should not love the world, drawn from its own character as insufficient for our immortal nature and so unworthy of our love. It is not steadfast nor enduring. "The world passeth away and the lusts (or pleasures) thereof." But there is also mentioned a more worthy course that leads to higher results. "He that doeth the will of God abideth for ever."

The term "world" is used in Scripture with various significations, but the special aspect in which it is presented in the text has respect to its transitory nature. In the previous verse it is represented as containing the principle of evil and opposed to God—here it is represented as changeable, fleeting, unstable,—it "passeth away."

Now this we may say is true of the world in whatever way we choose to look at it, though it is more strikingly true in some respects than in others. It is true for instance of the material world, which though it appears to us to be stable and permanent, on close observation is found to be slowly but surely undergoing changes that point to its final dissolution. But there is another respect in which the world is transitory and fleeting which though less imposing perhaps to contemplate than the dissolution of the present order of things, is of more present importance to us. It is the world of human society and human life that we are most interested in—the world that forms the cradle of our spiritual being and in which we find those motives and stimulants that excite and develop our spiritual nature—the world in which we form attachments and acquire possessions and enjoyments—the world that, while it ministers to our wants in so far as created things can do so, seeks to entwine itself around our hearts and bind us to itself. Of the world taken thus even in its highest and best sense, it may justly be said that it "passeth away." It is therefore not a sufficient portion for the soul that is fitted for an immortal life.

The figure that is implied in the words "passing away," has reference to the changing representations of the theatre, or at least may be illustrated by them. The changes of human life and human society may be compared to the moving scenes of a diorama as it passes across the stage. The apostle Paul evidently indulges in such a comparison when he says, (1 Cor. vii. 31) "The fashion (schema)—that is the form or appearance of this world passeth away." It is like

the theatrical representations so well known to the Corinthians, where scene followed scene in succession each in turn disappearing to make room for the next. How true a picture of the things of time—the world of human society in which we live! From first to last it is one grand series of changes—of dissolving views: now bright and beautiful, now dark and depressing; now freighted with joy, now laden with sorrow; at one time we pass through a period of happiness and repose, but soon again we are involved in turmoil and conflict—hurried on from scene to scene till the drama of life is complete, the curtain drops, and all is for us brought to a close.

Now, there are many respects in which this is true—many ways in which it is exemplified in the life experience of each of us, that we might meditate on for our spiritual improvement, and surely the present is a suitable time for such meditation. In every-day life we are so involved in the events that are occurring around us that we are borne along with them, and fail to mark our progress.

We take no note of time but from its loss:
To give it then a tongue is wise in man.

Let us then to-day—on the last Sabbath of another year—a day on which we are forcibly reminded of the changeable nature of this present life, give time a tongue, and it will call to us as with a voice from the eternity of the past whither it has fled, to "love not the world, nor the things of the world," to "set our affections on things above not on things'neath."

In asking you to contemplate such things as our text and present circumstances suggest, it is not possible for me to do more than indicate the line of thought that might be pursued. We might mention certain classes or groups of things that connect us with the present world and which exemplify its passing, changeable character. These of course cannot be offered as more than suggestions on which every one may enlarge from his own experience.

And first of these let us think of the changes that have occurred in our family and social connections. Of all the ties that bind us to the present life none are purer or more precious than those that join together our family and social relationships. The family is an institution of God, inseparably connected with the welfare of our race. Surely, therefore, if any earthly unity might be expected to have permanence and stability it is this. The family group is not the creation of the evil one, and family influences are the most powerful we come under and the most beneficial when of the right kind. Yet even here the transient nature of human relations are painfully manifest. Few of us, if any, can look back on the past without perceiving changes here. There are few family circles not more or less broken into and, if there be any that are still whole, they will not always remain so. Where now are those who a year ago—or a few years ago—sat with us at the family board, or knelt beside us at the family altar? Some have removed to other parts in pursuit of the duties of life. Some have been taken away by the hand of death, leaving a blank in a parent's, brother's, or sister's heart that will not soon be filled up again. And in the various offshoots of the family—our social connections, how many happy circles have been dissolved, and we miss the cheerful voice, the happy smile, or the warm grasp of friendship to which we have been accustomed. Or taking a general view of these relationships—when we look at society do we not discern something like what we find in external nature. In passing through the woods, for example, one observes a variety of trees of different kinds and of various ages from the sapling of last season's growth to the venerable oak the product of centuries. It is easy to perceive that in these quiet haunts things are also different from what they were but a short time ago. Here are young trees destroyed at the very beginning of their life. There some tall healthy trunk has fallen in its prime before the woodman's axe, and its place is vacant. And there again are some that but a little while ago lifted up their heads proudly towards heaven, laid prostrate by the storm—seldom failing to injure others by their fall. Yonder as if no longer owning kinship with the trees of the wood stands the trunk of a hoary pine. It has passed through the fire and is bereft of foliage and branches, and is in its lone isolation, slowly wasting away. And is it not so also in human society? There we find the same variety of growths. We find the hand of death cutting down the young and also the strong and vigorous. We find some high in

social position and commercial influence prostrated by sudden misfortune—seldom falling to involve others in their fall. And now and then also do we meet with those who resemble the old pine trunk—some parent it may be, once surrounded with a happy family, but now they are all gone—scattered abroad over the face of the earth or perhaps the occupants of the narrow house prepared for all the living, and the parent is left with the infirmities of age upon him to finish his journey alone. Verily the world, even in its best and most valuable respects *passeth away*. God in his wisdom severs those cords that would most surely bind us to it, that our heart's affections, set free, may the more readily rise up to, and take hold of, Himself alone.

But there is another side of the subject at which we must also look. We have been considering the changeable nature of the world in regard to man. Now the same is true on the part of man with regard to the world: Not only does it pass away but also its "lusts," or pleasures. By "lusts" as the word is employed in our text and in many other parts of Scripture we are not necessarily to understand merely the grosser passions of our nature. The word has a wider significance—it includes pleasurable enjoyment in general, good as well as bad. There is on the one hand the power of the world to yield us pleasure and on the other the capacity on our part to receive it.

The wonderful adaptation of external nature to man has often been noticed as affording instances of God's wisdom and goodness. The way for example in which the elements of nature are adapted to our bodily organs—the air we breathe to the lungs, light to the eye, and sound to the ear; and how thus from the external world the mind is furnished with that which promotes its growth and ministers to its enjoyment. It may also be noticed that with all this beautiful and wondrous adaptation there is also as wondrous an incompatibility. There is a natural *unfitness* between us and the world as well as a natural fitness. However adapted to the wants of our nature, however necessary to our well-being, it is only to a limited extent—up to a certain point—that the things of sense can afford us pleasure. Full and true satisfaction they cannot give. The eye for example is adapted to light and "truly the light is sweet and it is a pleasant thing to behold the sun," yet the eye is not satisfied with seeing nor the ear filled with hearing. The pleasures of sense can never fill the soul, and therefore an epicurean philosophy must ever be inadequate to man's nature. Neither can any of the enjoyments that man may receive from the things of this world or of this life. Witness for example the constant restlessness of man with present acquisitions, or attainments. So much is this the case that change of scene, and change of pursuits are often considered necessary to preserve health and this desire for change seems to grow amongst the people as their mental activity increases. Hence the love of variety—which produces also a love of enterprise—and the perpetually recurring changes of fashion, and the desire, old as the Athenians, probably as the human race, to tell or to hear of some new thing. Is it not well then that the world is so transitory since it can furnish no true rest. If its power to give is limited, so also is man's power to enjoy its gifts.

The failure of the world to yield us true happiness may thus arise from two causes—singly or in combination. *First*—it cannot satisfy the soul that seeks higher fellowship with God; or *secondly*, the power of enjoyment itself may fail through nature's decay, and this we know does follow from repeated indulgence. True, the voice that gently urges the soul's deepest wants may be drowned by the noise and bustle of life or silenced by the wild clamour of sinful passion. But who would desire to approach a death-bed with no comforts but what the world can give—then at least the emptiness of earthly pleasures is seen and felt. Happy they who feeling its insufficiency in time, can say with the Psalmist, "As the hart panteth for the water brooks, so panteth my soul after Thee, oh God." "Whom have I in heaven but Thee, and there is none on earth I desire beside Thee." To such God will assuredly grant their heart's desire. But, alas! for those who have no longings and no hopes beyond the things of earth. For them when present things have passed away there remaineth naught but desolation and despair—the blackness of darkness forever.

We have thus far considered the fleeting nature of earthly things, of the world in its best and most valuable relations—the world of human society in which