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DISCOURSE,

DELIVERED BEFORE

THE WARREN ASSOCIATION,

MET AT WARREN,

ON

TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 8, 1812.



BY ASA MESSER, D. D. LL. D.

PRESIDENT OF BROWN UNIVERSITY.



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DISCOURSE.



I. PETER, V. 1. 2. 3. 4.

The elders which are among you I exhort, who am also an elder, and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that shall be revealed: 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 elder, in the literal sense, is a man advanced in life; and a man advanced in life, we are apt to hope, is a man advanced in wisdom, experience, and gravity. Hence, as there should be a correspondence between the literal and the figurative sense of words, an elder, signifying an officer in the church, should possess, if not age itself, at least some of these important appendages of age.—Peter, when he wrote our text, was about sixty years old. In the literal sense, therefore, he was then an elder. At that time he had been a disciple of Jesus about twenty years; and from this circumstance alone might we not infer that he had then had much experience in the religion of Jesus? If, indeed, the experience of even little children in the faith is sometimes such as will induce them to say that,

in one day, or one hour, it had given them more satisfaction than every thing else had ever given them, what must have been the experience of the Apostle Peter in twenty years?—On this subject, however, we have something better than conjecture. Peter had been *a witness of the sufferings of CHRIST*. For a long time, he had seen him, though *GOD manifest in the flesh, despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrow and acquainted with grief*. At length he had seen him, after “sweating as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground,” and almost sinking under the dreadful agony of Gethsemane, delivered by a traitor into the hands of his murderers. And, if he had not seen him nailed to the cross between two thieves, or heard him crying, *My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me*; he had seen at least some of the wonderful events attending his crucifixion; the quaking of the earth, the rending of the rocks, the darkening of the sun, the opening of the graves, the rising of the Saints. O what a piece of experience was this!—Peter had also been *a partaker of the glory that should be revealed*. In common with many others, he had felt “the joy unspeakable and full of glory,” which on earth is a foretaste and a pledge of heaven; and besides this, he had, on the mount of transfiguration, seen Moses and Elias, and become, we might say, a companion of these glorified inhabitants of heaven. Hence, in a special sense, he was partaker of the glory that shall be revealed; and hence, how rich must his experience have been in things of God!—Men, without any of this experience, are more ready to complain, than to rejoice; and to relate the sorrows they endure, than the favours they

enjoy. Religion will wholly change the scene. It will give them submission in adversity; and thankfulness in prosperity. It will teach them that "affliction cometh not forth of the dust; that it is directed by the finger of wisdom and goodness, and is, at most, light and momentary;" and it will turn them to the bright side of the Providence of God. It will induce them to act as Peter acted. He, though a great sufferer in the cause of the Redeemer, still acted as though forgetful of himself; as though only a spectator, only *a witness of the sufferings of Christ*. But how does he act when the honour and the pleasure of religion; when the foretaste which God had given him of the glory of heaven is the theme? He is now full of thankfulness and rejoicing; and he now acts, not as a spectator, or a witness, but as a *partaker* of the glory that shall be revealed; or, as the Syriac Version suggests, as a partaker of the glory of Christ.—Did Peter, however, because a partaker of the glory of heaven, or of the glory of Christ, seem inclined to place himself above his brethren, or on a level with Christ? Not light itself is more opposite to darkness, than is Peter's religion, to self-exaltation. In whatever degree he had imbibed the spirit of his religion, in the same degree was he inclined to humble himself, and to exalt his Redeemer. So low, indeed, was his opinion of himself, and so high his opinion of Jesus, that when, at the age of seventy-four, he was doomed to be crucified in the Via Ostia at Rome, he requested his executioners to nail him to the cross with his head downwards, lest, as Ambrose suggested, it should be thought that he affected the glory of Jesus Christ.

Peter, then, must have had the experience, and hence also the gravity, and the wisdom, which, in the figurative sense, belong to an elder; and of course it was quite in character for him to give advice and instruction to his brethren, and to say, *The elders which are among you I exhort*. But why did he say, “The elders which are among you?” If these elders had not lived among their brethren, would he have made use of these words? If they had lived, one in Rome, another in Madrid, another in Lisbon, another in Paris, and another in London, while their brethren were scattered abroad at a distance from them, and from one another, in the different parts of Italy, Spain, Portugal, France, and England, would he have called them, “The elders which are among you?” These elders actually lived among their brethren; and it is only in this view that the Apostle could consistently say, “The elders which are among you I exhort, who also am an elder.” Did a pope, or cardinal, or archbishop, or bishop in modern times, ever address his clergy in language like this? Did he ever give to them the same name he gave to himself? Did he ever call them *elders*, and himself also an *elder*? or, as in the original, a *co-elder*, a *fellow-elder*? The advocates of St. Peter’s supremacy, and of the consequent hierarchy in the church, give of him a much higher account, than he gives of himself. By calling himself an elder, a co-elder, a fellow-elder, he places himself on a level with the other elders; and in this unassuming attitude he gives them this exhortation. *Feed the flock of God which is among you.*—The flock of God is the church of God. In confirmation of this, the Apostle Paul, addressing the elders of the church of

Ephesus, says, “Take heed, therefore, unto yourselves and to all the *flock* over the which the Holy Ghost has made you overseers, to feed the *church* of God, which he has purchased with his own blood!” The sheep of this flock, then, are the disciples of Jesus Christ; and hence they are those who, according to St. John, *are born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God*; or who, according to St. Paul, *are justified by faith; are sanctified in Christ Jesus; are renewed in the spirit of their minds, and are made meet to be partakers of the inheritance of the Saints in light*; or who, according to St. Peter, “*are elect according to the fore-knowledge of God the Father through sanctification of the spirit unto obedience, and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ; and who, believing in God, who raised up Jesus from the dead, and having purified their souls in obeying the truth through the spirit unto unfeigned love of the brethren, are born, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God which liveth and abideth forever.*” The disciples of Jesus Christ are, therefore, different from other men. Other men are “dead in trespasses and sins; are enemies in their minds by wicked works; are aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world.” The difference, therefore, between friends and foes, right and wrong, black and white, is not more striking than is the difference between the characteristics of other men, and of the disciples of Jesus Christ. Is it not likely, then, that there is a similar difference between the food which is proper for the one, and the food which is proper for the other? It is not conceivable that the same food is

proper both for "the dead and the living;" both for those who are "darkness" and for those who are "light in the Lord." What is the food, what is the truth, then, which is proper for other men? Shall they be told that their condition is safe? that their characters are good? that they are the friends of God! that He loves them, and will keep them? Shall they be told that they need fear no evil? that their strength shall be equal to their day? that their afflictions shall be sanctified, and that all things shall work together for their good? This is not true. Their condition is not safe. The most awful calamities hang over them. They are not the friends of God. They are the enemies of God; and he has threatened to pour out on them the vials of his wrath. Remaining as they are, they should tremble for the prospect before them. It is a horrible tempest: it is the blackness of darkness: it is tribulation and anguish: it is weeping, wailing, and gnashing of teeth: it is everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power. The food which would nourish the disciples of Jesus Christ, might poison other men. The truth which, to the one, would be "a savour of life unto life," would, to the other, be "a savour of death unto death." Those exceeding great and precious promises of God, which are given to the one, and are fitted to render them the "partakers of the divine nature," would, if given to the other, swell them up with fallacious hopes, and render them more than ever "the vessels of wrath fitted for destruction." For these other men, remaining as they are, "dead in trespasses and sins," there is no consolation provided in the gospel. Unless they repent, and become "lively stones in the

building of God," they must inevitably dwell where "the worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched." To them, therefore, the first direction is, *Repent ye, and believe the gospel*; and, *Except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish*.

The flock of God are the sons of God; and they should be fed with "the sincere milk of the word;" with food which will nourish the living; with truth which will comfort, strengthen, and gratify friends, sons. They should be told that they are not their own; that they are "bought with a price;" and that He who bought them is able to keep them, and "to present them faultless with exceeding joy before the presence of the glory of God;" that "God commendeth his love towards them in that, while they were yet sinners, Christ died for them;" that "if, when enemies, they were reconciled to God by the death of his son, much more being reconciled, they "shall be saved by his life;" that the love of God shed abroad in their hearts is an everlasting love, and that no floods of wickedness can drown it; that, though required to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly, they still "are saved, not by their works of righteousness, but by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost;" that, though God has chosen them in the furnace of affliction, he is able to make the very flames of this furnace as delicious as the Rose of Sharon, and the Lily of the Valley; that, since God has given his well beloved Son, the express image of his own person, to die for them, he will with him freely give them all things; that, as they are the sons of God, he will not neglect them as bastards, but will chasten and discipline them, that he may make

them the partakers of his holiness; that, though they are beset by numerous and powerful enemies, they who are with them are more than they who are against them; that God himself is with them, and will be with them in all their straits; that He will enable them to triumph over all their enemies, even over their last enemy, and finally to enter the mansions of glory, which their elder brother, their advocate, their high-priest, the captain of their salvation, has gone to prepare for them. O my brethren, how nutritious is food like this to the precious lambs in the flock of God! How consoling, and yet how astonishing are truths like these to the weary, mourning, cast-out pilgrim! How fitted are they to drive the clouds from his sky, and to give him the effulgence of the meridian sun! And hence how fitted are they to induce him to rejoice in hope of the glory of God, and to say, *though he slay me, I will trust in him; and I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in Us; and come Lord Jesus, come quickly.*

Food like this, however, truths like these are especially fitted for the edification of *individuals*; and it is possible that individuals may be edified who belong either to no church at all, or to churches built on a sandy foundation. But the direction, *Feed the flock of God*, is applicable to the church collectively, not less than to the individuals composing it. With what food, or truth, then, shall the church collectively be fed? Will the food, or truth proper for the world be better here than in the other case? Shall the elder say, that the world and the church need not be separated by any definite boundary? Shall he say, that the door of the

church shall be flung wide open, and that all, without discrimination, may enter it? Shall he say, that a claim to admission shall wholly rest on external character? or that, in opposition to this, it may, as in the social compact, descend from father to son? How little would a plan like this be fitted to exhibit *a glorious church, without spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing!*—The conditions of admission will commonly show the character of a church. If you wish to have it spiritual, admit none but spiritual members. If you wish to have it a flock of sheep, place such a watch at the door of it as goats and wolves will not be willing to approach. If you wish to have it the church of God, make the conditions of admission such as can be met neither by birth, nor wealth, nor talents, nor knowledge, nor usefulness, nor respectability, nor any thing else less than the testimony that a man has been “washed, and justified, and sanctified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the spirit of our God.”—It is, however, true that, in this respect, the wisest precautions will sometimes be defeated. Wolves, notwithstanding them all, will sometimes be found among the sheep. Will the faithful shepherd willingly allow them to remain there? He will rather strive to banish them from the flock; and he will also strive so to feed and to treat the tender lambs and the sickly sheep, as to render them strong, healthy and flourishing.—To preach the word, and to baptize believers, and admit them into the church, is only a part of the duty of an elder. He must also attend to the discipline of the church. He must “warn them that are unruly:” he must “comfort the feeble-minded:” he must “support the weak:” he must be

“patient toward all.” He must “watch for the souls of men as one who must give account.” Instant in season and out of season, he must “reprove them, rebuke them, and exhort them with all long-suffering and doctrine.”

But will not a course like this expose him to the charge of officiousness, or impertinence? Will it not expose him to the questions, who made you a ruler over Us? Who gave you a right of watching Us, of warning Us, of exhorting Us, of reprovng Us, of rebuking Us? Our text will give him the answer. It will enable him to say, that the duty of feeding the flock is blended with the duty of taking the oversight of it; that necessity is laid upon him in the case; that the Apostle, moved by the Holy Ghost, has directed him to do this very thing; that an elder is clothed with authority, and entitled to double honour; and that, while feeding the flock of God, he is bound, as the original suggests, to act in it as an overseer, or a bishop.— But will the text enable *any* elder with any character, with any intentions, with any motives, to say all this of himself? It will not enable the man to say it, who, *against* his will, has been constrained, or driven into the office of an elder, either by the frowns of fortune, or by the threats of friends; nor the man, who, *with* his will, has been inveigled, or allured into this office by the love of filthy lucre, or the hope of obtaining more here than any where else; nor the man who, in the case, is governed by a desire of domination, or is addicted to a profligate, unsanctified life. The Apostle directs the elders to discharge their duty, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind; not

as Lords over God's heritage, but as ensamples to the flock. The authority which he gives to the elders he gives to such only as discharge their duty on principles like these; and to such only he declares that, *when the chief shepherd shall appear, ye shall receive a crown of glory that fadeth not away.*—What an honour is here suggested for the elders in the church of God! They are pastors, shepherds; and it is here suggested that Jesus Christ himself is also a pastor, a shepherd, the chief shepherd. They, therefore, are workers together with him; feeding the same flock which He feeds; building the same house which He builds; teaching the same church which He teaches; and which He too *has purchased with his own blood, and will render a glorious church, without spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing.*—What a reward is here also suggested for these elders! A crown of glory is prepared for them; and, when the chief shepherd shall appear, he will put it on their heads, and they shall wear it forever. “They shall shine as the brightness of the firmament, and as the stars forever, and ever.”

Though many practical reflections will readily flow from this subject, I shall now suggest only the following.

1. The name *elder* is very proper for a preacher of the gospel. St. Peter gives this name both to himself, and to other preachers; and there is, besides, something very significant in the name itself. An elder in the church is a man of God advanced, at least, in wisdom, experience, and gravity. Is not this a character very proper and necessary for a preacher of Jesus? for a man who is “set as the defence of the gospel?” as a leader of the saints on the earth? as a “pillar and ground

of the truth” of the most high God? Unless willing, indeed, to commit to a novice the important duties of such a man; or to abandon the high authority of the Apostle Peter himself, we should never be ashamed to give the name *elder* to our preachers of the gospel. Hence,

2. It is very absurd, as well as very wicked, to place in the office of an elder those who are but children in the church of God. It is allowed that the primary and most essential qualifications for this office are spiritual. These, not any other can supersede. No talents, or learning, or eloquence, or character, can give to a man, not born of the spirit, a right to stand in the place of an elder. He, who has this right, must be *renewed in the inner man*; and he must, besides, *be called of God as was Aaron*. He must feel a “necessity laid upon him to preach the gospel;” and “a wo denounced against him, if he should not preach the gospel.”—It is also allowed that this necessity may be laid both on young men, and on men lately admitted into the household of faith. In spiritual not less than in carnal things, some will learn more in a day, than others will learn in a year. And Timothy, at the head of many others, may show that even a youth may be “an example of the believers in word, in conversation, in charity, in spirit, in faith, in purity.”—The children in the church here intended, then, are not those who are children in years, or in profession; but those who are children in wisdom, experience, and gravity. Is it not absurd to place such in the office of an elder? It is just as absurd as it is to place children at the head of a family, of a school, of an army, of a nation. It is just as absurd as it is to call a babe, a man, a child, an old man.

3. Great responsibility is attached to the office of an elder. He is a pillar of the house of God; and will not the house fall when the pillars are rotten? He is a shepherd of the flock of God; and will not the sheep wander, or perish, when the shepherd is an hireling? He is an overseer, a bishop, a ruler of the house of God; and will not the house become a reproach, when the overseer neglects it? or the ruler governs it either not at all, or with a rod of iron? He is an example of the flock; and will not the flock run to ruin, when left to follow the example of a wolf? He is a watchman on the walls of Zion; and what will the citizens do, when the watchmen become cowards, or traitors? when they refuse to lift up their voice against the enemy, or to give the trumpet the sound for the battle?—My fellow-elders, what important, what everlasting consequences are connected with the duties of our office? and how criminal shall we be, if we neglect to discharge them? If we are rotten pillars in the house of God; if we are blind leaders of the blind; if we are poisoning rather than edifying the flock of God; if, by our example, we are leading our brethren to destruction; or, by our manner of sounding the trumpet, are singing them to sleep, or inviting the enemy to come in upon them like a flood, what a solemn, awful account must we finally give? and what a solemn, awful censure must we finally receive?

4. The crown of glory in the text is fitted to encourage the elders to discharge their duty with diligence and cheerfulness. While viewing, indeed, their great imperfections, and high responsibility, they will, we may well suppose, be sometimes almost ready to fall into despondency, and to cry, “who is sufficient for these things?” But what

can be more consoling than the blessed promise, “My grace shall be sufficient for you?” and “a crown of glory is laid up for you?” Here, my brethren, is a spring of consolation adequate to all our necessities; and, while we have the privilege of approaching it, can we faint, or give out? will not a crown of glory give us vigour and courage? and will it not induce us to “fight the good fight,” to keep the faith, to feed the flock?

5. As the church by the death of its members is ever diminishing, it must, unless replenished by additions from without, become entirely extinct. To promote these additions, then, is to promote the fundamental welfare of the church. Is there any way of promoting them better than by the preaching of the word? “How,” the Prophet asks, “can they hear without a preacher?” What, then, is the character of that preaching, which is fitted to produce this effect? to “add lively stones to the building of God?” In one view, this effect, indeed, lies beyond the power of man. “It is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that sheweth mercy.” Not any thing but the power of God can bring sinners to repentance. To them all the preaching, however learned, or eloquent, which the spirit of God will not apply, is nothing better than “a sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbol.” And is it not certain that the spirit of God, which is the spirit of truth, will not apply the doctrine of falsehood? The preacher, who desires the aid of this holy spirit, must ever be careful to preach the truth. He must ever be careful to exhibit men as the truth exhibits them, fallen, helpless, perishing sinners; and he also must ever be careful to let them know what the truth will let them know, that not any thing but the mercy of God can save them; but that, at the same time, this mercy is

rich, and free, and equal to the salvation of the very chief of sinners. As truth like this is fitted to awaken them, and to constrain them to cry, “God be merciful to us sinners;” so, when they cry in this way, it is fitted to excite the hope that God will hear them, and give them “a joy in believing, unspeakable and full of glory.” Hence the truth, which the elder is bound to explain and enforce, will at once suggest reformations, revivals of religion; such blessed effects as, since this association last assembled in this place, have been seen in Warren; such as, for the last several months, have been seen in Harwich, in Barnstable, and in Providence; and such as, at this very time, and in a wonderful manner, may be seen in Bristol.

6. The duty of an elder is very nearly connected with the duty of the church. Without urging what the scriptures suggest, “that the labourer is worthy of his hire;” and that “he who feeds others with spiritual things should himself be fed with carnal things;” or what common sense suggests, that it is impossible for a man to devote himself wholly to the work of an elder, who is obliged to devote himself mostly, or partly to the care of his family, we might inquire, how the elder can feed the flock which will not be fed? how he can teach the brethren who will not be taught? how, against their inclinations, he can make them follow his examples? Or how, without their co-operation, he can support the necessary discipline of the church?—Ye messengers of the churches in particular, and ye saints of the most High God in general, I would then say, that the text suggests important duties for you. It exhorts you to support and to comfort your elders; to hold them in reputation; to give them your prayers and your friendship; to follow them as they follow Christ.

and to enable them, so far as you can, to stand “as pillars in the house of God,” and to build up “a glorious church without spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing.” These important duties I exhort you all to discharge; and I assure you that, on all who shall discharge them, the chief shepherd will eventually confer a crown of glory which fadeth not away.—What a difference between this crown of glory, and a lake of fire! between eternal life, and eternal death! between the mansions of joy, and the dungeons of wo! between the songs of the ransomed of the Lord, and weeping, wailing and gnashing of teeth! And yet this is the difference between the prospect of the disciples of Christ, and of other men; of him who serveth God, and of him who serveth him not.

Before I sit down, you will permit me to add, that, forty-five years ago, this association was founded in this town. What man, not inspired, could, at that time, have thought that a body then so small, should by now become so large? But where are the venerable founders of it? Where are GANO, MANNING, STILLMAN, SMITH, BACCHUS, and many other worthies who were present on that occasion? They are not here. They are not on the earth. They are in heaven, we hope; and are now wearing *the crown of glory which fadeth not away.*