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Our Pulpit.

Life's Incompleteness and Christian Faith.

SERMON PREACHED BY

REV. A. J. MOWATT

At the re-dedication of the Presbyterian Church, St. Stephen on Oct., 28th, 1888.

"These all died in faith, not having received the promises."—HEB. XI. 13.

The eleventh chapter of Hebrews is a prose-poem. We never tire of reading it, and every time we read it we are inspired with higher ideas and higher ideals of doing and living. It tells us of the trials and triumphs of the old-time worthies, the heroes of the church, the champions of the truth. It recounts their valorous deeds, their glorious achievements, their sacrifices and sufferings, the difficulties in the way of their life's work they had to overcome and did overcome, the battles they fought in the name of the Lord, and the more than mere human undertakings they successfully grappled with. We have here what they did, and how they made out to do what they did. It was not because they were in themselves so much more than we are. It was not because they were so much stronger and braver and better as men and women than we are. No; it was because they had faith. The secret of their piety and power, their grand doing and still grander dying, was their faith. It was Abel's faith that made him what he was, that did so much for him. It was Noah's faith that built the ark. It was Abraham's faith that exalted him to his proud position. And so with them all. And if we can have faith, we can do for God and truth what they did in their day.

Now, it is of life's incompleteness, its failures, and christian faith, I am to speak to-day. And we shall first speak of what Life promises. "These all died in faith, not having received the promises."

Life is full of promise. To some it may seem to promise more than it does to others, but to almost every one it holds out more or less of promise.

You go to a child, and let it prattle in your ear, and it talks, not so much of what it is and has, as of what it is to be and is to have. Go to the child again when it has grown to be a boy or girl of some account, and it still has much to say as to what there is to be for it. Go again still later, and life seems to promise so much to it. Before it stretches a future, and nothing is wanting in that future as looked forward to, to make it all that a future ought to be. And right up to old age we find the same tempting promises being held out to men, and they keep on believing and hoping, till their feet stumble into the depths of the grave.

Some of us have seen a good deal of life. We have got through the first half of it perhaps, the half of it that not a few would regard as the best half of it, but I am not disposed to admit that, and it ought not to be, else we have made but a poor use of that first half. Twenty or twenty-five years ago we learned our trade, and started out on our own account, with fair prospects, bright prospects perhaps, to work out for ourselves a future not unworthy of us. We saw, or thought we saw, that there was a best to be made, and we meant to make it, and so we went to work. Twenty years ago we took a farm, and there seemed to open up before us a future as pleasing and promising as a future could well be. We saw, or thought we saw, how we could do so much for ourselves with that farm, how we could do so much more than the farmers around had been doing with their farms; and so, filled full with the promise of life that seemed to beckon us on, we took hold of the plough-handles, and we ploughed away. Twenty years ago we went into business, and everything promised well. We saw, or thought we saw, how we could be rich and great, how our fortune could be made, and no mean fortune either, and so, with piles of gold glittering before our eyes, we laid hold and went to work. Twenty years ago we entered upon our professional career;—we preached our first sermon, we pleaded our first case in court, we administered to our first patient, we made our first political speech, and our hopes were high, our prospects bright. The papers of the day, in great swelling words, predicted a brilliant career for us, and made us feel that a future just as bright as a future could be lay before us. Twenty years ago we were married, and all our fortune was rainbowed with the bow of promise, and we felt so sure that the years, as they came and went, would bring us and leave us only joy. Twenty years ago we believed in Jesus, and joined the church, and with high hopes as to what the christian life would do for us, and with the sure promises of God to build on, we set out to do our duty, live our life, and realize all there is for the christian to realize.

Thus, for some twenty years we have been hard in pursuit of the promises of life, and not without success, and we

are still in pursuit of them, and have no intention whatever perhaps of relinquishing the chase. Is it not a fact, that the most of us, after say twenty years of promise-seeking, feel that the promise of life was never so bright as at this moment, and so we press on with quickening pace and growing energy and earnestness after the flying shadow? You have heard men saying, as I have heard them saying, and you have smiled as you have heard them say it: "Our prospects were never so bright for the last twenty years as they are now." And on they press to win, and on, and on, till death ends for them the chase.

And this promise of life is no new thing, as we learn here. We find it in the olden time as well as now, in the days of the patriarchs as well as to-day. When Abraham and Sarah, with their future to make, set out from Ur of the Chaldees, at the call of God, to go to the land of Canaan, the prospect that seemed to lie before them was a most inviting one, a most promising one. They would not be much like what we are, if they did not buoy themselves up with the hope, that they were going to better their circumstances no little by the move they were making. And then God intimated to them in the call how much of good He was going to do for them. They were thus led to look for great things, and they did look for great things. They had their dreams of life, and they set out to realize them, and they were so sure of them, because they were in the way of duty, because they were obeying the call of God. They saw happy faces in their future home. They saw plenty on their board. There was no good on earth they did not interpret the promise of God to mean, and with that promise beckoning them forward, they set out to realize it. And through the long trying years, with their ups and downs, they held on after the promise, ever imagining that they were getting closer and closer to it, and that it would soon be in their hands.

And so with Isaac and Jacob and all of them as well as Abraham. The promise took on a somewhat different shape and appearance to different people and at different periods. Men seemed to have the happy faculty of making it out to be just the thing to suit them, the very good they needed. To one it was a home; to another, a kingdom; to a third, a great inheritance; to a fourth, wealth, influence, honor, power; to a fifth, happiness, hope, heaven, and every good. Thus, life has its promises.

Again: Life's incompleteness, its failures. "These all died," not having received the promises."

Life is so full of promise, and yet, tell me of any one who has come up to the fulness of the promise. You can recall, my hearer, with what an expectancy you set out to realize the promise that life promised you when you undertook to do for yourself. You had no doubt of your success. You promised yourself much, and you meant to make the promise yours in its completeness. And you have succeeded perhaps as few have succeeded. You are looked upon by those who started life with you as one of the few who have done almost better than could have been expected. You started life good, and now you are rich—almost as rich as money can make you. You started life without a name, without influence, without anything, and now you are honored, your name is a power, your influence is wide-reaching. And yet with all your success, there is more or less of disappointment with regard to your success. It is not what it seems. To be called a millionaire is one thing, a great thing, but to be a millionaire is not so much. There is about it a burdensomeness, a worry, a work, a responsibility, and so much else, that make you feel often that it would have been better for you in some respects if you had not succeeded. You feel that somehow the promise you were after has eluded your grasp. You have the gold, but not the promise, and the gold without the promise is a very empty thing. And so too with any other success as well as money-getting. You have reached a throne perhaps, and men call you great. Men would give a good deal to be where you are, and what you are. And yet up there, on your throne, with your titles, and waving plumes, and gold lace, you feel that you have not yet what you want to get at. You are disappointed, sick at heart, the promise still not yours.

And so it ever has been, and ever must be. When Abraham set out for the land of promise he hoped so much, but when he reached it, he found famine, he found a life of toil, he found so much that he did not expect to find. Still he hoped on and toiled on, and the promise kept inviting him on and promising on. But the promise was never his. He succeeded, grandly succeeded. He made himself a name. He attained a greatness that has been the wonder of all the ages. Still, there was an incompleteness in his life, a sort of failure in it after all. And by and by he woke up to the fact that the promise was not to be his, that he could not have all he hoped to have, and he was resigned.

And here let us understand that life is necessarily incomplete. It may be called the rudimentary stage of exist-

ence, a small part of one great whole, the humble portico of a grand palace. The portico without the palace is a most incomplete thing. You say: "What have we here?" and you ridicule the architect. But when you see the completed whole, you say: "What a magnificent palace!"

Now, so with life. Here is a sweet young life, so full of promise, so radiant with hope. But just when it is ready to be of some use in the world, the grave closes over it, and you say: "Life is a cruel mockery, an awful blunder, a lie." You look up into the face of God, and you feel as if His life-making is an abuse of power on His part, a cruel sort of by-play with human loves and hopes, and you are full of anger and bitter rebellion. But when we open this Blessed Book, and find that the life began here goes on forever, we learn that it is only incompleteness we are to look for here. The rounded whole is not here. The finished palace is not here—only broken pillars, a mean portico, a corner that no use can be made of.

If then the Here is incomplete without the Hereafter, this short uncertain life without the life to come, we must not expect to be able to work out fully the grand missions of life. All we can hope to do, all we have time to do, is to do a little of the good there is to be done.

There are two kinds of work that men do. One kind is just for this life; the other is specially for the life that is to come. All you work for perhaps, my hearer, is for the uncertain present. You want to get together some money; or, you want to make yourself a position; or, you want to have a little swanescent glory. You never look beyond the now with its mean selfish interests. And so when death comes unexpectedly, and breaks in upon your plans, all is gone utterly. The bubble of your life is burst. There is nothing for some one to come after you, and take up what you left undone, and carry forward to still grander results of world-good.

It is really astonishing how little some men of considerable pretensions live quite a long life for. When you come behind them to gather up what there is to be gathered up, how little there is. Here are some old clothes. Here is a pipe and some tobacco. Here is a card-case and a cane. Here are a few books. Here is a watch and some money. That is about all. O the emptiness of a life lived for the Now!

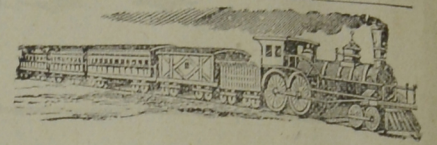
But, on the other hand, let a man realize that life is but the childhood of the eternal life to come; let him come to know that he is to live forever, that what he tries to do of good, however little and imperfect, is a part of the great good that the good and true in all the ages have been doing; then it will inspire him to do something that will live after him when he is gone. He will live for the Hereafter as well as the Here, the Forever as well as the Now.

But again, this leads me to speak of Christian Faith. "These all died in faith, not having received the promises."

The promises made to Abraham were of the most inviting character. I do not wonder he pressed on after them with all the might of his earnest soul. But he could never lay his hand on them and call them his. They seemed to keep out of his reach. One reason for that was this, that Abraham lived and labored for the long results of life. He did not live and labor for his own little day, his own insignificant individual interests, but for the centuries, the broad ages, the time to come. What he was called to undertake was too large an undertaking for his own little day. He was inaugurating a new era in the world's history, a new national and spiritual life, a large world-good that it would take, and did take, long centuries to work out. What he did himself therefore towards the realization of the promise was but an insignificant part, and necessarily so. It was a mere beginning, and in itself it was not much, it was a failure, a most unsatisfactory and incomplete thing. And he felt it to be so. He felt that after all he had tried to be and do, there was not much to show in the shape of results.

And another thing, he did not himself know what he was doing. He was groping in the dark. His duty was made plain enough to him; the call was clear, emphatic. He had no doubt as to the call. But he could not see, after he was called, why he was called. He could not understand what it all meant. But after years of faithfulness it began to dawn on him that he was working for the long future, and he was satisfied. He had faith to see that the promise made to him would be fulfilled in all its grandeur, and so what he could not have as an actual possession, by faith he could have it, and to have it thus was a real having it.

We may look at it this way. You give yourself to what you have come to regard as a great world-boon, perhaps it is some great reform-movement, perhaps it is a public institution, perhaps it is a great railroad, or bridge, or tunnel, or some other giant public work. It is such a great undertaking, that you can see, it cannot be accomplished in your



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9.25 A. M.—From Fredericton Junction St. John and all points East.

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