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Funeral sermon...at the inter-
ment of the Rev. Elisha
Mitchell, D.D.

Chapman

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THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

PHYSICS DEPARTMENT

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

1911

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ASHEVILLE, July 20, 1857.

REV. R. H. CHAPMAN, D. D : *Dear Sir*—The undersigned members of your congregation, in behalf of the numerous auditory present, beg leave to request for publication, a copy of your Sermon upon the occasion of the death of the Rev. Dr. Elisha Mitchell. They are induced to do so, that its lessons of solemn warning may be perpetuated, and that its consolations may be extended to the family and friends of the departed.

If it will not be trespassing too much upon your time, they desire you to prepare a brief introduction, to the Sermon, embodying some of the mournful circumstances, attending the death of Dr. Mitchell, to be published in connexion.

Very Respectfully,

Z. B. VANCE,
A. T. SUMMEY,
D. F. SUMMEY.

ASHEVILLE, July 21, 1857.

GENTLEMEN :—The sermon preached at the interment of the Rev. Dr. Mitchell was very hastily prepared, and I doubt not that you, and those you represent overrate its merits; still its lessons are Scriptural, and were most emphatically enforced, by the melancholy event that had convened us together. The notes I used on that occasion, accompanied by a brief introduction, and narrative, prepared at your request, I herewith enclose, and place at your disposal.

Truly and Faithfully yours,

ROBT. HETT CHAPMAN.

To Messrs. Z. B. VANCE, A. T. SUMMEY and D. F. SUMMEY.

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INTRODUCTION.

Funeral occasions, in this world of death, are too common to make much sensation, or to attract a marked notice, except they be attended with peculiar circumstances! The departed must have been one of gifted powers—of high endowments—of wide reputation and influence!—or death must have made his advances in manner marked, and under circumstances unusual, and peculiar! When both—and when all unite, society's great heart feels the shock to its centre—its sympathies are awakened, its affections are stirred,—its reflections are aroused, and made to pass from heart to heart, teaching us, that we are but shadows as regards the interests of time, and yet a great brotherhood in affection, sympathy and common destiny—dying, and yet clothed with immortality! The sad event and attending circumstances which gave rise to the hurried thoughts presented in the ensuing discourse have passed like an electric shock through the community and the State! The Rev. Elisha Mitchell, D. D., the man of science and Christian Teacher—the lover of nature, and searcher into its secret arcana,—marking, at every step, tokens of the goodness, proofs of the power, and wisdom of the great Creator,—died amid its solitudes—died near the spot where years ago he said, and penned the sentiment down, “it would be sweet to die”—died suddenly, and because his hour had come—died with the flush of health upon his cheek, and manly vigor nerving his arm—died in the fulness of his years, and strength, without disease, and with all of life's bounding impulses stirring within him! He went down under death's arm and power, as sometimes goes down the noble ship, her timbers all sound—her tapering spars trimmed and set, and all her canvass spread to the breeze! The suddenness of the event, and the startling incidents connected therewith, have awakened interest, and sent thrills of sympathy and grief through many hearts! Strong men as they contemplated his corpse calmly reposing, in its rock bound basin, and laved of its pure and crystal waters, were constrained

to tears! It was on the 27th of June, 2½ o'clock P. M. that Dr. Mitchell was last seen in life—at that hour, he parted with his son Mr. Charles A. Mitchell, intending to cross the mountains to the settlement on Cany River, there to spend the Sabbath, and on Monday to return. He went unattended—was impeded by fog, and a heavy shower—thus belated, twilight came on, and amid its obscurity, clambering around the precipice at whose base they found him, he lost his foothold, was precipitated from that fearful height, and died alone in the wilderness!

His trail bore marks of haste, as though passed by one in a hurry and behind time—the place from which he fell was marked for its displaced stones—a broken laurel at which he had doubtless grasped, and for the disturbed and ploughed up moss; these mute witnesses testify, as to the manner of his death; the time is settled by the watch on his person; jarred by the fall, or clogged by the waters that received him, it stopped at 20 minutes past eight; in those mountain glens, overshadowed by lofty evergreens, day light would be well nigh past at the hour of eight, and thus doubtless dim twilight, or darkness contributed to his danger, and brought on the catastrophe! Every effort in the power of man was sedulously, and patiently made, by the men of the mountains, for his rescue, while they were cheered by the hope of finding him alive; and when, as day after day slowly and painfully passed, this hope ceased, still they persisted that they might unravel the mystery of his death, and secure to his remains christian burial! On the second Tuesday night after the catastrophe occurred, or tenth day, his remains were found at the foot of the precipice floating in the waters cold and pure!—not a bone broken, not a feature disturbed, neither distortion nor disfiguration; but he lay as though he was calmly sleeping. His remains were brought to Asheville attended by a large concourse of people, and were there interred side by side with those of a friend and acquaintance of his early days—a class mate, as the writer understands, of Yale College, the Rev. John Dickson, M. D. Dr. Mitchell was connected with the University of the State near forty years—was born August 1793—graduated at Yale College 1815—married in 1819—was ordained to the Christian Ministry in 1821—and died June 1857.

It is purposed to remove his remains to the loftiest peak of the Black Mountain, and there lay them, to await the summons of the Arch-Angel!—He died amid those mountain wilds, far from human habitation, and there it is the will of his kindred and friends that his remains shall rest; there the balsam sends forth an unceasing fragrance; there the firs, and mountain pines and leaping waters, voices of nature, will chant for him a perpetual dirge!

SERMON.

MAN KNOWETH NOT HIS TIME : * * * THE SONS OF MEN ARE SNARED IN AN EVIL WHEN IT
FALLETH SUDDENLY UPON THEM.—Eecl. chap. 9, v. 12.

What words of truth are these? and how fearfully have they been realized in the incidents which have convened us here to-day! The doctrine of the Text is, that there is a dreadful uncertainty respecting things terrestrial—that trials, and changes, and death are our heritage here—that in our calmest, and even apparently in our safest hours, we are but short sighted and frail—all exposed and in peril; and know not what a day may bring forth!—Children of clay, and inhabiting a globe of graves, we are in peril every hour! It is true the Almighty upholds us, and we are in His hands! His Providence is over us, but whether it shall be afflictive, or benignant—whether of the issues of Life, or of Death we cannot tell! The future is all before us, but shadows, clouds, and darkness rest upon it! its issues, and its events are alone known to the Infinite! To the Christian, and in his conception, there are no accidents—nothing fortuitous—the hand of God is in it all; and so it is in point of fact *with us all*; whether we realize it, or not—God telleth off your days and mine, and those of the entire race!—as an hireling we shall each accomplish our day, and then pass on and up to the Judgment of the great God! Then should we not watch? ought we not to be ready? lest suddenly coming He find us sleeping!

Man knoweth not his time! but certain it is, that here, on earth, wherever found he is all incident to suffering—exposed to calamity and danger—the sure victim of coming dissolution, aye the certain trophy of Death! His leaden fingers shall be laid upon you and me, chilling the pulsations of life—His arm of power shall be by us felt, breaking the golden bowl at the foun

tain!—we shall all experience his wasting influence, changing the countenance, and bidding us pass from Earth to the Spirit Land! but when these trials shall reach us:—when we shall each in our lot go down before the puissant arm of him, who breaks the sword of valor, and takes the diadem from the brow of kings—when the veil shall part before your spirit's eye and mine, and the gales of eternity shall freshen upon our souls, God alone knows! Sometimes danger and death show themselves in the distance, and with slow and steady step gradually approach, letting us know, that they aim at us and ours, and that their office and work is with us; at other times they draw nigh with stealthy tread—noiseless, silent, unperceived they gather round; their presence is but recognized in their attack—in the marks of their desolation—in the affixing of an unchanging seal which cannot be mistaken, and which can neither be blotted out, or broken! all may be quiet without, and calm within; and there be no sense of danger, and no fear—but Death is there, and sudden destruction; the veil of Eternity sometimes parts, as in the twinkling of an eye—and the the soul without sign or token, or note of warning, is in the spirit land, summoned to the presence of God, its Infinite Judge! Ah, Friends! the text is true, “Man knoweth not his time”—the sons of men are oftentimes snared in sudden calamity; there is an awful, a fearful uncertainty as to what is before us—when we shall be called on to lay aside these vestments of mortality, and to stand before Jehovah God our Judge! Then is it not wise?—would it not be well to have our preparation work well and early done, that we may stand ready, and waiting for the coming of the Son of Man? “Man knoweth not his Time—as the fish are taken in a net, as the birds are caught in the snare, so are the sons of men snared in an evil when it falleth suddenly upon them.” My Text has been selected, and the train of thought just indulged in, suggested, by one of those fearful incidents of life which alike startle and appal! Tidings of them fall not listlessly on human ears, they fall not deeply, and painfully to affect human hearts! It is no ordinary death scene that we chronicle; nor is it the departure from the scenes of time of any ordinary man, that we have met in the Sanctuary to meditate upon! ELISHA MITCHELL! the loved and venerated—the astute and wise—the man of God and Christian Minister, lays low in death! He is no more of earth, for God hath taken him up to the scenes of the spiritual, and caused him to mingle in the realities of the eternal world! His family are bereft of their Head—no more shall he guide them by his counsels, nor at morning and evening lead their devotions;—the temple of Science has had extinguished in him one of its living lights, and taken down and removed is one of its stalwart pillars! the Church of God and its courts have in him lost an advocate—a judicious counsellor, and prized presbyter! His seat at the family

table—in the hall of Science, and within the sanctuary of God, have alike been vacated by the sad event which has convened us, and which we are endeavoring spiritually to improve! His agency as father, friend, instructor, and Christian Minister has ceased; and no more shall we enjoy his converse, weigh his counsels, or go with him up to the House of God! Ye reckon it in days since some of you enjoyed his sunny smile and kind hearted converse, and communion! When last with him, aye when last seen of mortal vision, he was as full of life—as buoyant with hope, and had as bright promise of future years and usefulness, as had any of you, or your race! but he is not—His summons was sudden—fearfully sudden! Yours may be as sudden, and not as safe! He died emphatically alone! Neither wife or brother or son or friend or man was near! Amid mountain fastnesses, under laurel shades, and with the unceasing sound of moaning pines and rushing waters, furnishing an appropriate requiem, he alone and without human aid or sympathy, breathed out his life. Except for efforts the most patient and untiring on the part of the community, his death as to its place, and means, and time would have remained a mystery; his grave would have been unknown and his body unseparated. There is something, at once grand and fearful in such a Death! Far from human habitation—amid the solitude of nature—her works there on the grandest scale—it brings up those mounts of God mentioned in the Scripture, Pisgah and Nebo, and suggests the death scene of the “Ruler of His people” as connected therewith—Angels performed the dying offices of the one, nor is it vain speculation to suppose that in needful form and sympathy they were present with the other; this sure word of God informs us that they minister to the heirs of Salvation!

I have said Dr. Mitchell was alone in his Death—I speak of earth and of man—I except angelic influences, and the presence of his covenant God and Savior! He who stamped grandeur on those mountains, and marked out a channel for those pure and crystal waters did not in that hour desert His servant but was near him and around him! Do I say too much? what says the Scripture? “as the mountains are round about Jerusalem, so Jehovah is round about them that fear Him”—What says God himself? “Fear not! I am with thee, be not dismayed! I will never leave thee nor forsake thee!” Tell me not of accidents! Speak not to me of second causes! God’s hand was in this startling event, as it is in all events. He designs that we should feel it, and lay it to heart, and wisely improve it. From that mountain side and seething pool where they found him, there cometh a voice deep, thrilling and loud, addressing itself to you, and me, to all! its language is “prepare to meet thy God!” Who can fail to realize, if he will throw around the scene one lingering thought, that amid those frowning precipices and impervious shades and wildly dashing waters, and with death

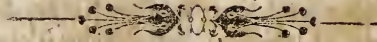
at hand, it was far more important to have been the humble child of God, the devoted follower of Christ, than to have been the man of gold, or of distinction and fame, or even a sceptered king, with destitution of this Grace! Ah! the well earned fame, the distinctions, of our departed friend and brother, have here no power in imparting joy and comfort to those who loved him in life, and to whom he is doubly dear in death!—their hope, and joy, and strong consolation is based in the simple fact that Dr. Mitchell laid all his honors, and loved to lay them, at the feet of Christ and around His Cross!—that there he hung his hopes of Heaven—that there he planted his expectations of Life Everlasting! He was an humble child of God, and a Christian! in that fact there is comfort, joy, strong consolation! When father, or mother, or child or brother, or friend passes from earth, let me know they are in Heaven, and among the blood-bought and ransomed, and I cannot unduly grieve! Who would call them back from their rapt scenes of angelic joy, and again attach the chains of sense, and affix the stains of sin to their freed and pure spirits? Earth is fleeting and mingled are its scenes—its joys are at best but transient! there is no treasure worth securing, save that which is laid up in Heaven! Moral victories are alone worthy the effort, and the energy of the deathless spirit of man!

Man knoweth not his time and the sons of men are snared in an evil when it cometh suddenly upon them! This is Truth, and it teaches us that evil oftentimes comes upon us in an hour when we least expect its approach!—The future is all before us, and we must meet it—but its scenes are with the Deity—an impenetrable veil covers it from your vision and mine—we tread at best but a darkened path, and know not our time of trial! it may occur in our happiest hours, and amid scenes of gushing joy! the cloud may gather and loom up, and burst within an hour! What reverses have been witnessed in this changing world between the rising of the sun, and the lengthening of its shadows! What, as in the present instance between the going down of that orb of light, and the breaking of the day! Death often steals on dying men unheralded—no note of warning precedes his approach! Some whilst pressed with care, engrossed with business, and all unprepared, are hurried away—others engaged in the pursuit of pleasure, and with no sense of danger, suddenly feel his touch, stilling the pulsations of life, and bidding them up to the Judgment! Some in life's morning and in the hey day of their being, and as they fondly fancy, with the world all before them! Others with hoary locks, and shortened steps! some prepared, and with armor on—with loins girt about, and their lamps trimmed and burning! Others amid their course of folly—the love of sin unslain, and depravity burning its deep and corroding brand within the soul! Ah! it is the suddenness of scenes like these—it is their unexpectedness to the

individual, which makes them so awful and so fearful! Prepared for death—girded for the judgment, and clad in those robes of righteousness, which alone can bear its living light; a sudden death is not to be deprecated—with the love of God within the soul, and the living everlasting Savior at hand, a solitary death is not to be deplored! but unprovisioned for eternity how fearful! unprepared for the solemn interview with God, which must then ensue, how tremendously awful is a sudden death! Who would appear before his Maker with the love of sin uppermost in his soul—who would thus appear, even though united to Christ, with the world clustering around, and clasping the affections of the heart? Not so! Oh, not so, would he that is wise die! How lightly, friends, should we esteem the things of time, and what priceless value should we attach to the interests of the deathless soul! And yet poor man! in his blindness and sin reverses all this! God stoops, and invites us to his arms, and to his heavenly home! but too many busied with the vanities of earth, and eager in its pursuits, slight those rich treasures and everlasting joys—turn away from these offers of life, and seek an heritage for time!

Other thoughts, friends, crowd upon me, but I must hasten! I trust you see and feel the teachings of the text, enforced as they are by the fearful incident which hath convened us together. We are but pilgrims on the shores of time! Sojourners on the earth as were our Fathers!—Here we have no abiding place—passengers at best, we walk in darkness, under perils and in great suspense—the future is all hidden—we know not what a day may bring forth! Do you esteem the picture dark and gloomy? and ask what can be done? I answer trust in the Lord and do good! thus may you fill up your lives with acts of usefulness, and deck them with deeds of Christian Honor! Thus passing away piety shall give you the tribute of tears; and the bosom of virtue shall send forth sighs at your decease! Do you still ask, as to what can be done? I answer make Jehovah God in Christ your refuge, and trust, and then it shall be well with you, well with your soul! “He that dwelleth in the secret place of the Most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty.” It is your privilege so to live, and so to bind the hopes of the gospel of Jesus Christ to the heart; that you may dread the grave as little as your bed! Here is the Bible of God—the great moral light which teaches Jehovah’s will—presents the provisions of His mercy; with its truths received—with its remedies embraced—with its Savior believed in, and trusted on, you have a stay which shall avail amid the conflicts of time—more! it shall cheer you as you go down under the power of Death’s arm—lighting up the grave and dispelling forever all its fearful shadows! Earth is changing! but Heaven is stable and sure! Fix your affections there! and now from that solitary place in the wilderness where my Brother breathed!

cut his life, and passed from earth; aye from that bier on which now lay his mortal remains, there cometh a voice addressed to you, to me, to all present—and yet it singles us out and addresses us each, and its language is, “Be ye also ready for the coming of the son of man! prepare to meet God!” obey this voice, and your death scene shall be peaceful as are angelic slumbers, and your eternity shall be passing happy, and supremely blissful as of the riches of Jehovah’s grace! Thus prepared and panoplied, when you come to walk through the valley of the shadow of Death you shall have the rod and the staff, the presence of Him, who is the Ressurrection, and the Life.



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