Thankfulness for Living Now

A SERMON

PREACHED IN

The First Church in Hartford

On Thanksgiving Day

NOVEMBER 27, 1890

BY GEO. LEON WALKER

HARTFORD, CONN.
Press of The Case, Lockwood & Brainard Company
1890

ECCLESIASTES VII. 10.

"Say not thou, What is the cause that former days were better than these? for thou dost not enquire wisely concerning this."

No habit of thought is more universal among men than the habit of depreciating the present in comparison with the past. It is seen alike in individual and collective humanity. How lingeringly age looks back to childhood! That was the happy time of life. The discomforts which then annoyed, all forgotten, those fleeting years of boyhood seem now to the world-worn man the happiest he has known. Time touches all it bears away with a golden radiance, as the day puts on its brightest colors just ere it vanishes from the evening skies.

Nations, too, have their legendary childhood. All old nations deem it to have been a golden age. Poets love to sing about it. Homer, Virgil, Spenser, Tennyson never touch the harp of song with so strong and exquisite hand as when they recount the childhood tales of Greece and their own fatherland. And though mankind are ever pressing forward toward an unknown but eagerly anticipated future, yet they look backward as they go. All before them is hope; all behind them is pensive regret. The present only is lightly esteemed. This is degenerate. Its

manners are fallen away from the old simplicity. Its principles have taken a taint of corruption; men have changed; life is not what it was; the former times were "better."

I am not called upon by my present purpose to attempt any very close analysis of this habit of thought. It has its causes, deep-rooted in human nature. It would be easy to point some of them out and to indicate some results of great practical value to which they lead.

But it is sufficient for the design I have in hand to note this tendency in the human mind to exalt the remote at the expense of the near; to depreciate the present in comparison with the past.

There is, of course, also, an opposite

mental principle in men. Man is a complex being. It is not the pinfold of one proposition, only, that will hold him. In his nature, as in the world around him, all things are, as the son of Sirach says, "double one against another." A love of novelty is characteristic of men, as well as a reverence for antiquity. Human nature is a radical innovator, as well as a miserly conservator. It gropes for the new with one eager hand, while with a miser's clutch it holds on to the old. Yet when it conceives for itself an ideal of happiness or perfectness, it perhaps oftener shrines it in the past than in the future. It never forgets Eden even if it hopes for Paradise. To prove that the past was better is seldom attempted. It is only taken for granted.

Even against proof, to minds of a certain make,

> "The past will always win
> A glory from its being far:
> And orb into the perfect star
> We saw not when we moved therein."

Against the undue influence of a tendency so common — but in a degree so useful — the wise man warns us: "Say not, What is the cause that former days were better than these? for thou dost not enquire wisely concerning this." Do not impatiently contemn the times in which you live, on the ground that former times were better. Before you enquire the cause it would be well to be sure of the fact.

Solomon cannot of course be understood as reprehending an honest investigation of the relative condition of past and present affairs. The balancing of these conditions one against another is an important branch of historic enquiry. Few investigations shed more light on human welfare. It is only the restless, querulous spirit of dissatisfaction with the present which he reproves. It is a blind and ignorant adherence to the old, to the neglect, and contempt of the divinely instituted new, which he deems foolish and weak.

The spirit of his injunction would counsel us to find the golden age for which men long in the present, where men live and labor, rather than the past, whose device and wisdom have ceased forever. Now, while with us it is to-day — here, at

this impinging point of two eternities — is the good for us, if we have any; this is our golden age, if any age is to be golden for us.

When, therefore, in accordance with a time-honored New England custom, now become national also, we set apart a day for public thankfulness, this injunction of the wise man becomes a fitting guide. It will be my aim, in unison with what I conceive to be the spirit of his teachings, to refresh in our hearts the sentiment of thankfulness for having our lot cast just in the time in which we live.

In doing this it will be hardly possible or desirable to keep separate from our thoughts of time the thoughts also of place. Both are subjects of divine disposal. "He hath determined the times before appointed and the bounds of our habitation." I shall ask your attention, therefore, to two or three out of our many occasions for thankfulness, that we live in this period of time and in this land of our home.

Note, therefore, as one cause for thankfulness, the fact that the era and country in which we live are characterized by a Wide Diffusion of Knowledge. The century of time in the last quarter of which we stand has a great many titles of renown. In quite a number of ways it suffers by comparison with no previous century of time. In some it surpasses all. The amount of acquired knowledge is one of these. In the sum total of accurately

ascertained facts—facts of nature, facts of science, facts of history—this century has removed itself by a very considerable gulf from any in the past. But this is not its highest claim when we speak of the relation between this period of time and the possession of knowledge. This higher claim I find in the fuller disclosure this century has made of the essentially popular and democratic character of knowledge.

There have always been wise men. But they have generally been comparatively isolated. They have had comparatively few to whom to appeal in vindication of their claims. It would have been hard for Lord Bacon to have counted in his life-time a dozen disciples of his philosophy. Galileo, who promulgated the doctrine of the rotation of the earth, had even less; and of these, his cotemporary Bacon, the foremost of then living philosophers, was not one. These men sat, nearly solitary, on the pinnacle-top of individual speculation. The reason was there was no adequate channel for the conveyance of knowledge from the higher to the lower intellect; from the philosopher to the mass. And for want of that vehicle the mass was unqualified to receive it. Knowledge, like thistle-down, has a native fitness to scatter and reproduce itself. But the thistle-down needs the wind to bear it and a certain preparedness of the soil. And knowledge requires a channel of communication from one mind to another and a certain measure of fitness for its reception.

Both of these conditions have been slowly ripening for some centuries. Under the influence of the press the intellect of the race has been gradually quickening The hunger for truth has become general It is not now the sign of the solitary philosophic mind. It is the appetite of all. Hence one of the most marked features of our age is an insatiate craving for facts. Men cannot await the slow issue of the authorized volume recording the transactions of the learned society. The daily press must convey the daily doings to ten thousand eyes, and when the volume appears it has gone by. The boldest or profoundest speculator now finds a public prepared and eager for his abstrusest or his wildest thought. There is a great world to whom he can appeal. His claims are adjudicated in his life-time. The spectacle of a man bequeathing his scientific enquiries to the "next ages" as Francis Bacon did will hardly be seen again. Already men have lived to see great reputations grow in their own life-time, and die too. And this because there has been educated a widely-extended body of men of letters — not original investigators themselves — but able to pass intelligent judgment on theories presented to them. The difference between the amounts of knowledge in intelligent minds lessens from year to year. Men approximate to one standard.

A distinguished surgeon died a few months ago in New York. The *Medical Record* commenting on the event — I do not

pretend at all to say with how much truthfulness — remarked, "His death leaves the city without a surgeon of such acknowledged pre-eminence as to be entitled to be considered the leading man in his profession." This means probably only that the very best surgeons are more numerous than they used to be. Certainly neither Bergmann or McKenzie has a monopoly of knowledge of cancer, as all the world were rather vociferously called on, only a few months ago, to notice. But the claims of both are just now in a state of eclipse. A few weeks only have beheld the rising of a new luminary; and the crowds of professional and non-professional inquirers into Professor Koch's alleged discoveries, both in Berlin and other medical centers, testify to the immediate appeal in our time to an eager and wide constituency of any asseverated truth of the scientific world.

This tendency to popularize knowledge, professional and non-professional, is universal in our day. It is, by reason of various obvious considerations, peculiarly characteristic of our land. All the influences which work toward this result work here with accelerated power. The consequence has been to produce a state of society, especially in our older and New England regions, marked perhaps above any other in the world by equality of culture. Men of great Teutonic learning are rare; but the mass of men are generally more intelligent than perhaps anywhere else in the world. And this approximation of

men to a common standard, the non-professional toward the professional mind, the man of business to the man of letters, affords an indication of curious significance that intelligence tends to the same doctrine of human equality that is in this land recognized as the basis of political rights.

Now it has been precisely in connection with this popularization of intelligence, and partly as the result of it, that some of the most brilliant advances of knowledge have been made. The management of electricity as a mechanic power is a department of knowledge which has been born into existence within the memory of even the younger part of this assembly. But the prince of its practical administrators, the man who solved the problem of the subdivision of electric light — a problem which a committee of scientific experts, only a few years ago, declared before the commission of the English Parliament never could be solved — was not a long while since a newspaper boy on a Detroit line of railway. The man who stretched the span of steel across the turbulent waters at St. Louis, and who built the jetties which force the Father of Waters to dig his own channel deeper and deeper to the sea, was no West Point engineer, but a son of the soil. The inventor of that process of vulcanization of rubber, whose uses are so innumerable in household life, in the mechanic arts, on the fields of peace and on the fields of war, though New Haven born

was no Yale College graduate, but a man whose diploma was from the hand of nature and the common school. And the man of our own Hartford town, who conferred perhaps the greatest boon on a suffering race, which by the effort of one man medicine ever conveyed, did it in connection, not with a learned academy, but an occupation by which he gained his daily bread.

I speak of these but as examples of an advance which knowledge has made in these days, and made largely by means of the wider diffusion of knowledge itself. Like illustrations are plentiful on every hand. But I have no space for more.

I wish to note, however, in this connection, the striking fact that, as one consequence of the wide diffusion of knowledge, we see the immediate application of it to service. Important discoveries have sometimes been made in the past which have been permitted long to "fust unused." To know a thing may be enough for a philosopher, but it is not enough for the mass. The people are impatient of theories till they have feet and hands and can go alone. Hence ours is not merely an era of knowledge, but of knowledge applied to practice. Have mechanic arts made great advances in our day? Let Stephenson poise an iron tube of miles long reach across the spring-time floods which roll from all our great northern lakes to the sea, and through that tube let there thunder the roar of a railway traffic which drowns the roar of the grinding ice beneath, and yet not a joint quiver or a rivet strain, and we will believe that mechanism is a living art. Is the magnetic telegraph a real invention? Prove it, demands the insatiate popular will. Prove it, by laying by the breakfast plate of every citizen of our land on the morning of November fifth, the verdict uttered by the majority from Canada to the Gulf, at sunset of November fourth.

These are tokens and results of diffusing knowledge. The land is full of them. To set forth with any fullness the facts and consequences belonging to this branch of our rejoicing that we live in this land and age, is a task for days instead of the fraction of an hour. This hint must answer.

And it is enough at least to show that the popularization of knowledge is one of the great and beneficent characteristics of our land and time.

Notice as another reason for thankfulness that ours is a time and land of Largely Diffused Happiness. Glance at a few of the more physical elements of well-being. Begin at the very lowest of them, the matter of food. Had you lived in merry England two hundred and fifty years ago, and been even in the wealthier ranks of society, you would have seen little or no fresh meat on your table from January till past mid-summer. Wheat was used by the higher classes only. Oats and rye and barley were the staple diet of the many. Tea and coffee were just beginning to be imported by the Venetians and the Dutch; not yet could you have found them in London. Salt, had you been only moderately rich, you would rarely have used, or using that from the salt-pits, would have brought on you, as on thousands, various scorbutic and pulmonic diseases.

Rise a step higher. Compare the house in which you live with the one which sheltered your ancestors in this country two hundred years ago. Reset in your windows the glass through which your great-grandfather looked. Read your evening paper by the light of the tallow-dip by which your venerable progenitor spelt out his chapters in the Gospels, or his copy of the Westminster Assembly's Church-platform. When you are tired sit down in the chair or upon the settle which were to his ancient spouse the pride of luxury. They are fashionable articles of furniture now, but not certainly for their comfortableness. Sleep on the bed where your great-grandmother battled with her last sickness, and, worn out with it — and the bed she laid on — died. Look round the apartment — kitchen ofttimes at once and parlor — for the upholstery, the mirrors, the pictures, the nameless multitude of little furnishings which make beautiful and attractive your homes. If a pleasant home, if equable shelter from the cold, if an easy couch for an invalid wife or child, be any portion of happiness, complete the contrast at your leisure.

Rise a step higher still. Intercourse with the inhabitants of different regions is one of the great items of modern happiness, and one of the great powers in civilization and culture. Transmission of intelligence with regular and rapid certainty over wide-spread regions is well nigh the highest expression of well-ordered society. Go back a hundred and seven years. See the authorities of Massachusetts thanking the courier who brought tidings from Washington in the "marvellously short space" — so runs the resolve — of "fourteen days." You live at Hartford or Boston. Your son has gone to try his fortunes in the new regions of Vermont or New Hampshire. He dies in haying time. When the train of farmers comes down after snow-fall, bringing their pork and buying groceries for themselves or their neighbors, you will probably hear of his death. He would have given the last two days of his life could he have sent you the scrap of paper which could have told you, even in a month's time, "I am dying." Remember this the next time your morning paper — in which you are anxious to find the quotation of flour at Liverpool, or tea at Hong Kong, the afternoon before — happens to be five minutes late.

Still one step more. The highest boon which civilization bestows on man is the aids for intellectual improvement afforded in literature. It is bringing the wise of all ages to be one's fireside companions. It

is the opening of all the manifold pages of scientific lore under your eye as you sit by your evening lamp. It is making history reënact itself before you and all the dead centuries live anew, as you look into the recorded story of the past. It is pondering deep problems of existence with Shakespere, or tracing the marvels of animal life with Lubbock and Darwin, or tracking the pathway of exploration with Kane and Livingston and Stanley, or following out the lines of artistic thought with Furgusson or Arnold or Taine. And of all this which offers itself to you on every hand, which in book, periodical, and daily newspaper urges itself on your notice, what share fell to your ancestor in this New England home a hundred years ago? A family Bible lay on the chest of drawers, his good wife's pride. By it the Westminster Catechism, and here in Connecticut the Saybrook Platform. An almanac, a primer, some books of psalmody, an odd volume or two of sermons, Pilgrim's Progress, perhaps Flavel's Method of Grace, possibly Josephus, Baxter's Rest, and Doddridge's Call. He was a learned man who had more than these. Hundreds of godly families not so many. In 1774 there was not a circulating library in all old England. If there was one in America it was because the brain of Benjamin Franklin had begotten a thought never conceived of before among Saxon men.

Contrast now with this the advantages for contact with the accumulated litera-

ture of mankind — with the wisdom of the dead and the strivings of the living — possessed among us by the humblest child, and bless God to-day for the change.

If now we add to the contrasts already presented the contrasts between the degree of civil and religious liberty which we possess, and that degree of both found in our fatherland when our fathers were driven forth from it, and with the degree of both characteristic of most European lands long since their day, and even now in our own time in many of them, and we may possibly have some faint idea of an occasion for thankfulness for conditions of general happiness unmatched by any former age.

I suggest as the third and last occasion for thankfulness which is now to be mentioned, the fact that the present is an age and ours is a land of Great Events and Great Problems. There is a strange fascination always about what may be called important epochs of history. Men turn wearily away from the dead-level periods of mere material welfare, and with ever-renewing interest re-live those times when questions vitally affecting humanity's larger welfare were met and solved. They may have been times of trouble; times which it makes the heart almost bleed to recount. And yet the heart loves to bleed over them. In the clash of such mighty issues the great soul of human kind finds music, inspiration, strength.

Such was Luther's time. How humanity reverts to it! How every man appropriates and repeats its events! That upheaval of the personal soul against the bondage of the church — he feels it in himself. He forgets the centuries and is in a manner an actor in the scene he looks upon.

So of the age of conflict between popular rights and kingly prerogative under the Stuarts. The long stagnant periods of Queen Anne and the first two Georges may rot out of history, but not one day of that era of kingly aggression and popular resistance, from James First to William Third, can be permitted to die.

And yet it may be doubted if the real actors in these events, with here and there an exception, knew the magnitude of the issues at stake or the memorableness of the time. Proximity blinds more than distance. An event needs to retreat somewhat into the past, before its true greatness and real outline can be fully seen. So that we are seldom fully conscious that the present has its problems as interesting as almost any in the past, and that our daily lives are cast in the midst of questions of exceeding moment to those who come after us.

For example, we are trying the experiment of popular sovereignty. On a scale never before attempted, with an amount of liberty never before possessed, and with a heterogeneity of materials never before gathered in one national life, the people of this land are solving the problem whether

it is possible for the people of a great continental-embracing nation to attain such a wide, equable self-control, that its government can be wisely and safely entrusted tc the will of the governed.

The experiment has been progressing with more or less distinct limitations here and there, a portion or all the time —as color or property qualifications in some of the States, and town prescriptive rights in others, or the like—for a little over a hundred years. But a hundred years is not a great while in a nation's life, and the question cannot yet be put away as a dried specimen, concluded and settled in the cabinet of history. On the contrary, it is a very live question, and is in the very thick of trial. European nations, hundreds of years older than we, are looking on to see how the experiment works. South American republics, following after our example, are watching the outcome of our larger venture. Posterity will look back upon this problem of political life as one of the very grandest ever proposed to a people to solve. They will count it a privilege granted to us now on the stage to have lived when a question of such moment to universal humanity was committed to men. But this question of determining the capacity of a nation for self-government, is the question proposed in a manner to every individual in the land, and in the solution of which he has for himself and his posterity a personal share. It ought to be the matin-song of thankfulness

to every American citizen that he lives when this question is under trial. It ought to be his evening prayer that his part in the decision shall be such as his posterity shall not be ashamed to remember.

Closely connected with this great general problem of national capacity of government by the governed, are important and closely-related subordinate questions which are committed in great degree to us, on the present stage of history, to decide.

What, for example, is going to be done with that great body of our fellow-citizens who were but lately accounted as so many cattle? — the near six millions of men, women, and children of African birth whom the war and the fourteenth amendment to the Constitution made civilly the equals of us all? A terrible price was paid for their ransom. The grave-yard of every village holds a record of a part of the purchase cost. You pay something of it with every spool of thread you buy. But what is to be the outcome of the purchase? How are these vast and increasing multitudes to become a harmonious element in our civil and social life, and not an element of discord and confusion, of party bickering and bidding and strife? These people are here, and they are not going away. They must in some way be provided for, incorporated with. and made healthful to our body politic, or there will be the eternal throe and convulsion of the

epileptic boy in the Scripture story over again.

Or what shall we do with that other problem, just at this moment sharply thrust into notice by the war-dances of the wild red men which fill with terror the long frontier borders of our Dakota and Montana and Wyoming settlements? What is to be done with the Indian? We have fought him, cajoled him, lied to him, cheated him out of one good home after another; have experimented in keeping him a kind of State pauper in indolence, with rations of rifles and whisky; and we have not, wonderful to say, made him either eminently industrious or eminently Christian. What a parody on our Christian treatment of him is this latest phase of his excitement — his borrowing from us the idea of a Messiah, an Indian Messiah, who is to wipe out the lying race of white men — government agents first of all — and bring back the buffalo and the happy old days of game and of land without railroads!

Something here, again, is to be done, humanely, Christianly, and in the interest of enlightened statesmanship, or we shall go on adding to our already long and infamous story of Indian wrongs, with which the past has seemed powerless to deal; and shall send other races, like the Pequots and Narragansetts of old, to the judgment seat before us, to testify with what small wisdom Anglo-Saxons apply the Gospel, or heal the wounds of the body politic, in the case of any but themselves.

Or what shall we do with the common-school question — the question of that fair, undenominational, honest, simple, practical education which is so essential to our common welfare, and whose existence hitherto has been so great a glory to our land? Are we to give it up because a whole body of polemic divinity is not included in it? Is it a "godless system," as some people are pleased to call it, because it is not accompanied by the perfunctory reading of a few texts of Scripture and a prayer, uttered perhaps — as in German governmental schools is very often the case — by a man who has no belief in a God or immortality? Does the rule-of-three without the accompaniment of a chapter in Scripture, or a lesson in grammar without the

Heidelberg or Westminster catechism, debauch the moral nature? Do we want to see the plain, simple, unsectarian system of town schools in which we and our fathers were bred, broken up for the parochial schools of the Papal hierarchy, or the still feebler sometimes proposed schools of a Congregational or Methodist or Baptist parish church? Do we desire the reproduction in Connecticut and New York of the alliance which Wisconsin has just witnessed between Romanists and Lutherans, in the name of piety, in an assault on the public-school system, whose real motive, on the Lutheran part certainly, was simply unwillingness to have their children educationally Americanized? Are we ready for any sentimentalism, however garbed in

seeming piety, to surrender that grand inheritance of our land — the education of childhood in the essential elements of knowledge which pertain to citizenship at an unsectarian public cost?

O, yes, there are questions enough on hand to make this anything but a time of slumber. Questions like these involve whatever is dear to patriot or to Christian, to citizen or moralist. All that touches individual welfare or national honor is involved in their decision. Hence they are taken out of the merely secular part of life, if, indeed, to a rightly-considering man anything is merely secular. And it is a thing daily to thank God for that if such questions must arise for determination, we live in a time and at a place when and where they are to be decided.

If we might conceive of a noble and courageous soul permitted to choose the spot and the hour of its entrance on existence, methinks few eras of time, few places of earth, could well draw more attention and desire than ours. Now and here when knowledge is the so widely diffused inheritance of men; now and here when human comfort and the means of social and intellectual happiness are the portion of the multitude, not the share of the few; now and here when questions of the vastest moment touching human welfare to remotest posterity, are laid for solution at the doorway of every man's conscience, it seems to me a true man would find existence a boon for such thankfulness as few times or places before us could prompt.

If all happiness lie not in stagnancy and ease; if any cause of rejoicing is to be found in action, hope, conflict for righteousness and victory for humanity, then say never again, wherefore were the former days better than these? but thank God to-day and every day, that your span of existence was allotted to you now, and the place where your life's work was to be done is this land of sacred memories, of prophetic hopes, and — let us humbly pray that it may be — of a joyous, united, righteous, and Christian future.