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LIKE AN AUTUMN LEAF

Lesson on the Shortness of Human Life—We All Do Fade as the Leaf.

Like the Life of a Leaf, Man's Cradle and Grave, Are Not Very Far Apart—Most Beautiful Time in Christian's Life is When the Autumnal Frosts of the Tomb Have Touched His Cheek.

Entered according to Act of Parliament of Canada, in the year 1904, by William Bully, of Toronto, at the Dep't of Agriculture, Ottawa.

Los Angeles, Cal., Nov. 6.—From the autumnal frosts, the stripping of forest verdure and the woods now carpeted with the falling leaves the preacher in this sermon draws a lesson on the shortness of human life. The text is Isaiah lxiv., 6, "We all do fade as a leaf."

Is there any time in all the year more delightful for a vacation in the country than the "Indian summer?" Of course to the lover of nature the valleys and the mountains have their fascinations at all seasons. Winter—cold, bleak, growling, freezing winter—has her months of glory. Then the trees, with their long, outstretched branches, are like the vestal virgins of old, robed in spotless white. Then the stars, through the keen, biting January nights, gleam brighter than any other time of the year. Then the country roads are echoing with the merrymakings of the sleigh-bells, and the lights from the farmhouses are the beacons to signal friends to enter the home where "Welcome" is written over every door.

Springtime in the country also has her months of glory. That is the time we hear the wooings of bird mating with bird. That is the time when the winds are tossing the white blossoms every whither. That is the time of the seed plantings and of the plowings, the time when the brooks are rippled with the trouts' fins, while summer has her glory of the haymakers and the harvestings and the vineyards and the orchards in which we all have reveled year by year when off for the August vacations. But, though winter, spring and summer may come to us, each with special forms of enjoyment, the most rapturous time of all the year in which to spend a few weeks in the country is during the autumn, for then the glory of October's pride is the fading leaf. Never in artist's studio were so many gorgeous colors mixed together as God pictures on his canvases of the autumn foliage.

Here the trees look like a mighty "river of blood," as though their arteries had been opened by the Mosaic rod which incarnadined the river of Egypt. The leaves have blushed a deep crimson, as did the water at the wedding feast at Cana when, at our Lord's word, it was borne as new made wine to the governor at the feast.

Oh, the beauty of the autumnal foliage! The fading leaves of the Indian summer fascinate the eye and woo plauditory exclamations from all lips. As we go forth to-day to catalogue some of them we find that there are big leaves and small leaves, long leaves and narrow leaves, rough leaves and smooth leaves, thick leaves and thin leaves. There are leaves that are yellow, and red, and brown, and crimson, and green, and saffron. There are leaves like those which the tired travelers twist into cups and dip into the cool waters and lift to their parched lips. There are leaves like the fresh emerald ones which the picnickers use for platters when the merrymakers are banqueting in the woods and leaves like those the field laborers wet when they place them in their straw hats to cool their aching brows. There are leaves which the little children gather and press straight between the school-book pages. There are leaves which the maidens collect to fill the jars and vases and to decorate the halls, parlors and bedrooms of the home. There are leaves which the florist cuts to give an added beauty to the flowers he is clustering together for assemblages of joy and also for assemblages of sorrow. There are leaves which have hidden the nests of the birds while they were rearing their young. Leaves upon the tree branches, leaves in the flower gardens, leaves which have been tossed by the winds into the dusty road, leaves overhead, leaves under foot. There are a hundred and forty and four thousand varieties of them and thousands upon thousands. Lo, this autumn day, there is a host of falling leaves which no man can number. They have lived their short lives, they have faded beautifully and at last have fallen off and fluttered silently to the ground. The ancient Hebrew prophet, watching them as they fell, sees in them a symbol of the failing of human lives. As the leaves fall and die, so man falls and dies. "We all do fade as the leaf" is the overwhelming and incontrovertible statement of my text.

Like the fading leaf, man's cradle and grave are not very far apart. Like the life of a leaf, our earthly existence springs into budding life, has its short season of glorious maturity, and then fades and falls with a rapidity that startles us. Though we may live our three-score years, and ten, or even four-score years, how soon those years slip away. As the months of the spring quickly change themselves into the months of the summer, and the months of the summer change into the frosts of the autumn, we can see our lives slipping away. We can see them go as the sands of an hour-glass run away before your eyes. God puts upon one side of the leaf the snow-bank and upon the other side of the leaf the iceberg of another winter. He then says to the embryo of the leaf: "You must not begin to sprout before the whistling winds of March have died away. You must, on the other hand, be ready to surrender your life before the December storms have trampled all the tapestries of the forests under foot, making the bare trees look like the dismantled and ruined palaces of a king." So God says to man: "Your earthly life is to be very short. You are to spend your earthly days as the life of a leaf. Therefore, what you are to do for me and for the world you must do quickly. Hear ye not in the sighing of the autumnal winds the forthcoming summons that you must soon fade away as the leaf, as the dying autumnal leaf?"

The fading autumnal leaf, the symbol of the passing away of the human generations! Can you not see it? Can you not feel it? To me it is the most startling symbol of earth, for, as I go out in the autumn and look off upon the hillsides and see the vineyards with their dying leaves, the most overwhelming fact that forces itself upon me is the rapidity with which generations go. Aye, the members of the generation which preceded us as well as many members of our own generation seem to have disappeared as the mists at the sunrising, as the dewdrops are kissed off the lips of the leaves, as the tears on the cheek of a little child are wiped away by a sympathetic mother.

But though the span of life may be very short as a whole, yet, after all, when death comes to most of us it will come as to the leaf, gradually. Death, as a rule, does not spring out upon his victims suddenly. Like a loved friend traveling abroad, he sends message after message that he is coming. He sends notice after notice. He sends word to you just the same as the soldiers fighting in the United States army during the Civil war sent messages to their children at home. At night the mother used to read those letters to her babies. Then she would say: "Papa is coming. Yes, some day papa is going to come." Then when the surrender at Appomattox came the mother sang a new song. "Now, children," said she, "papa will soon be here." Then came the preparation for meeting the train. Then came the expected parent. Death comes to most not as a thief in the night. As a rule, death comes to us as he comes to a leaf, gradually, very gradually.

Did I say death is coming to you gradually? Oh, yes, he has sent message after message to notify you of his early arrival. The first message came to you when you were about twenty years of age. You had a fearful attack of pneumonia. For days and days they thought you could not get well. You recovered partially, but your lungs since then have never been strong. Every winter you catch a cold. Each year the cough is harder to get rid of. Or years ago when a child you had an attack of dreaded diphtheria. The nurse let you sit up too soon, and the strain was too great upon the heart. It left it weak. For years you did not mind, but now the old trouble has come back. Or the message came to you that death was on his way to your home in failing eyesight. You have to put on glasses now when you read the Bible or the evening paper. Or you can hear his footsteps in your dulled hearing. You find out that people do not talk as loud as they used to do. You keep asking them the irritating question, "Why do you not speak more distinctly than you do?" Or it came to you last week in a startling way. You had your picture taken to please the children. When the photograph came home you were shocked. Why when you placed that picture alongside of the last photograph of your father or mother you found that you looked just as old as they were when they died. Yes, like the leaf, an average man dies gradually. He begins to die first at the extremities. His hair whitens. His skin wrinkles. His hand trembles. The once steady beat of the heart becomes unsteady. The windows of his eyesight are bedimmed. He has pain at the base of the brain because the circulation is poor. God gives to almost every man thousands of warnings instead of one warning that he is fading away as the leaf, as the autumnal leaf.

Is not the figure of the leaf dying gradually the symbol of the average man's death? Of course some leaves do meet a violent and a quick death, as nearly all wild beasts in their native haunts end their lives by a sudden tragedy. A mischievous squirrel may climb a tree and jerk a leaf from its moorings and toss it to the ground. The tall antlers of the deer may be the pruning hook to lay bare a branch. The sullen blizzard, sulking behind an Arctic iceberg, may decide to make a spring journey back to the place where it had tried in vain to batter down the doors of a summer cottage during the past winter months, and in one night destroy all the sprouting leaves. A forest fire may allow the flames to feed upon the tender foliage which has been exposed by nature for a few weeks to be colored by the light of the sun. some men in their youth or in strong middle age in full health may be struck down by some accident or contagious disease as quickly as a soldier upon a battlefield may have a bullet pierce his heart and instantly drop dead. And some men may instantly exterminate their lives by the evil effects of sin.

But, after all, most leaves do not die a sudden death. They live on through the summer. They live until the cold of oncoming winter makes dormant the wonderful forces which give life to the tree. They die as gradually as the summer days slip into the fall days; as gradually as the ebbing tide, each wave of which is a little lower down the beach than the preceding wave; as gradually as the twilight slowly grows dimmer; as gradually as the echoes in the mountain ravine become softer and softer. Man dies as the leaf, gradually. It is sickness after sickness. It is fewer walks, less work, less physical energy. It is a gradual benumbment of the mental and physical faculties. You know you are not as strong as you used to be. What is the matter? We are all fading away as the leaf, as the autumnal leaf.

But this autumn day, as the leaves are everywhere falling from the trees, I know God has a purpose in their death as well as in their life. One reason why God every fall strips the trees of their leaves is that the next year the forests may be robed with another covering of green. And one reason why God makes one generation of human beings pass away from earth is that another generation might be born and live and have the opportunity to do the work which is necessary for them to do and then pass on to the eternal life beyond the grave, as past generations have done and as we must do.

Did you ever stop to consider from an earthly standpoint the blessings of death as well as the blessings of life? Every year in order to make the fruit trees and vineyards bear well the farmer with his pruning hook has to go among them and ruthlessly destroy hundreds of buds in order that the other buds might have enough nourishment to grow and do their work. In order that the human race might be strong and physically well God has to keep his pruning hook busy or else this old earth would soon be over-populated, and there would not be room for man to live by the side of man. "So great are the possibilities of growth," said the old sage, Benjamin Franklin, "that the productiveness of the vegetable and animal life is inconceivable and almost without limit."

The span of human life on earth is very short, yet like that of the leaf God does not permit man's life, short as it is, to end until his work has been fully accomplished. The Bible tells us that man's earthly "days are as grass, as the flower of the field, so he flourisheth. For the wind passeth over it and it is gone and the place thereof shall know it no more." But though the life of the grass or the leaf may be short as that of an insect, yet its life is absolutely vital to this country. Once destroy the vegetation of a land and you turn that land into a Sahara. Leaves suck in the moisture. They are reservoirs for water. They decide whether a country is to be fertile or not. Once destroy the forest with its leaves and the orchards with their leaves and you change the whole atmosphoric condition of the country as parts of Spain and Portugal have been robbed of all moisture by the destruction of the leaves. Thus each generation's spiritual life is absolutely necessary to be matured and developed for the spiritual life of the generation which is to follow. Your spiritual life decides what is to be the spiritual life of your children and your children's children.

Would that our spiritual life might not only be a saving gospel for ourselves, but also for those who are to come after us. There is a beautiful story told of Ulysses, the most famous of all Homeric heroes, who won his greatest victory when he overcame the fiendish power of the sorceress by the influence of a few leaves. Circe lived in a beautiful palace upon a certain island. There as a beautiful enchantress, surrounded by her maidens, she welcomed the travelers who landed upon her shores. She banquetted and feted them. At end of the feast, however, she would arise, wave over the assemblage her magic wand, and her guests would be changed into repulsive four footed beasts, who would be driven by the attendant out to the swine troughs. After Ulysses' fellow voyagers had been thus metamorphosed the hero went to their rescue. In his hand he held the fabulous herb which was given to him by the god Hermes. Never for an instant did he let those leaves drop from his hand. By their power he was able to break the fatal spell of the destroyer and make her beg for mercy and restore to him his helpless and suffering companions.

This was a heathen poet's idea of the power of evil being overcome by the mighty and supernal power of a few leaves given to his hero by a heathen god. Cannot we use to-day our lives as the symbol of healing leaves? Cannot we feel that we by the grace of God can absorb into ourselves the healing power of the gospel? Then cannot we further believe that the healing and saving power of the gospel which we have received from Christ we can impart to those dear ones who draw their earthly life from our life? As we have been saved by the blood of Christ, cannot we offer that atoning blood to those who love us and who are dependent upon us for temporal as well as spiritual life?

And is there a time in all his earthly career when a Christian's life is so beautiful as after the autumnal frosts of the tomb have touched his cheek? Then the physical force of the life may be gone. He may not have the strength he once had, but in his eye there will come a softer look, in the touch of his hand there will come a gentler sympathy, in the sound of voice there will be a holier prayer, in the movement of his heart there will be a gentler yearning. Thus the aged Christian, like the last leaf left upon the tree branch, may seem to be alone as all the leaves of his generation have fallen, yet people will love him for his noble life, mellowed by many a stinging frost. They will love him for what he has been, for what he is, and for what he is to be. Oh, my dear friends, by the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, as a Christian, your last days on earth may become your best days. Would you not have them a foretaste of the best of all days, which shall come to all of Christ's dear ones in heaven?

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