

The Preparation of the Sermon

people of the fleeting nature of life. We all tend to forget this; you can be so interested in great theological and intellectual and philosophical problems that you tend to forget that you are going to die. And the people, immersed in business and pleasure and the family, and 'the affairs of this life' are equally forgetful.

Here, then, is an opportunity made for you, presented to you, to bring home to all the fleeting character of life in this world, and to remind them that none can afford to sit back as spectators or as critics of preachers and preaching. You can remind them that they are involved in all this, and that you are not addressing them on some theoretical subject, but dealing with the most vital matter of all, and that, whether they like it or not, they are moving on to an inevitable and unavoidable end, and that the Final Judgment is coming. A preacher who does not take advantage of these things is a fool, and is not fit to be in a pulpit.

I shall never forget my sense of disappointment a few years back when I had the following experience. Being somewhat over-tired I took a rest at the change of the year and went to a service conducted by a young minister on the first Sunday morning of a New Year. To my utter astonishment he began his sermon by saying, 'Well, you remember that last Sunday we were dealing with such and such a verse; this Sunday we go on to the next verse.' He made no reference whatsoever to the New Year or to any of these matters at all. I felt sorry for him, sorry that he was capable of missing such an opportunity. Apart from anything else these special occasions help to make our work easier—they are opportunities made for the preacher.

Anything that happens in the world, anything striking, any phenomenon, is something we should always take advantage of. I remember reading of an incident in the life of John Fletcher of Madeley, that great and saintly man who lived two hundred years ago. He was a vicar in Madeley in Staffordshire, in England. Suddenly there was a terrible disaster on the River Severn. The Severn Bore that year was bigger than usual with the result that large numbers of people were drowned as the result of the flood. This catastrophe led John Fletcher

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to preach a remarkable sermon in which he made frequent references to that tragic happening and which led to tremendous consequences. I also remember reading how at just about the same time, incidentally, a number of those great preachers of that eighteenth century made use of the earthquake that took place in Lisbon, in Portugal, in 1751. They all took advantage of such events. They did not preach on the earthquake as such but they used it to bring home to the people the fleeting nature of life, and to enforce their call to repentance. An earthquake makes people think, as does a tornado, or hurricane; and so they give the preacher an opportunity. 'Because thine heart was tender' is the favourable comment on King Josiah in the Old Testament; and we remember the lines of the hymn, 'Saviour while my heart is tender, I would yield my heart to Thee'. There are times when our hearts are tender, and we are more likely to respond. It is the essence of wisdom, it is indeed but common sense, that we should take advantage of all these things. Though you may have planned out the greatest series of sermons the world has ever known, break into it if there is an earthquake! If you cannot be shaken out of a mechanical routine by an earthquake you are beyond hope!

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Those are my sentiments concerning the question of whether to preach on odd texts or to take a series. With regard to preaching on odd texts I have already referred to this when dealing with the preparation of the preacher. I warned against the bad habit of reading the Scriptures 'for' texts, and emphasised that we should always read them for our own good and edification. I pointed out how in doing so you would find that certain statements would hit you and strike you; and I told you what to do about that. Anyone who follows that practice will find that he will never be short of texts; he will have accumulated a pile of skeletons which he has prepared while reading the Scriptures for his own edification.

But in addition to that you will find that sermons are as it were given to you. They come to you directly, and you have very little to do