

**A GOOD OLD AGE: A SERMON OCCASIONED
BY THE DEATH OF HON. JOHN DAVIS, LL.D.,
AND PREACHED IN THE FEDERAL
STREET MEETINGHOUSE IN BOSTON,
JANUARY 24, 1847; A MEMOIR OF HON.
JOHN DAVIS, LL.D.; THIRD SERIES, VOL. X**

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EZRA S. GANNETT & CONVERS FRANCIS

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A

S E R M O N

OCCASIONED BY THE DEATH
OF
HON. JOHN DAVIS, LL.D.,

AND PREACHED IN THE
FEDERAL STREET MEETINGHOUSE IN BOSTON,

JANUARY 24, 1847.

By EZRA S. GANNETT,
MINISTER OF THE FEDERAL STREET SOCIETY.

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S E R M O N .

GENESIS xv. 15.

THOU SHALT GO TO THY FATHERS IN PEACE; THOU SHALT BE BURIED IN
A GOOD OLD AGE.

EACH age in the life of man has a beauty of its own. Infancy is beautiful, in its unstained innocence, — the breathing work of a divine statuary. Childhood is beautiful, with its open brow, its bright eye, its glad spirit, and its trusting affection. Youth is beautiful, through its elastic motions, its hopeful confidence and its free energy. Manhood is beautiful, with its firm step, its strong heart, its earnest industry and its various power of accomplishment. The ripeness of declining life is beautiful, when the passions are held under a wise control, and the character has collected within itself the influences of reflection and the fruits of experience. And old age is beautiful, in its calm wisdom, its gentle repose, its venerable appearance, and its conscious preparation for the change which awaits it. We need not be anxious to determine which of these periods is most attractive, since they all present irresistible claims on

our admiration. For some observers the loveliness of early life has a charm which cannot be surpassed, while others receive from the dignity of mature years an impression that is more grateful to their feelings, and yet others find in the serene aspect of age an influence in which they especially delight.

Our thoughts are drawn this morning towards the old man. We are led to think and speak of "a good old age." What enters into such a description? A most weighty epithet is this, suggesting and comprehending more than any other which we could use. Who is there that, if he could look forward to a period extending beyond the threescore years and ten which ancient observation assigned as the limit of human life, would not desire for himself a *good* old age; and in that desire include all that he need ask, or friends need ask for him? A good old age, — this is our theme. What constitutes such an old age?

The first thing which occurs to every one as indicated by this description is intelligence. Old age must retain the clearness and vigor of the intellectual faculties. This is not always permitted by that Providence which has bound the physical and the spiritual natures in mysterious dependence upon each other. With the progress of years, infirmity encompasses the mind, obstructs the avenues of its communication with the outward world, impedes its exercises, dims its perceptions, beclouds the memory, impairs the judgment, embarrasses the conscience, and reduces

the thinking, reasoning, reflecting man to a condition of mental weakness, or even imbecility, which it is painful to contrast with the firmness and acuteness of former days. The old age of which we speak presents a different spectacle. The mind still distinguishes, compares, enjoys, as in the meridian of life. Memory can still use its past, and accumulate new, treasures. The decisions of the judgment are accepted by others with an increasing rather than diminishing confidence. Books are still a source of delight; conversation a means of instruction; and thought, less discursive or less intense than at earlier seasons, becomes more fruitful in solid wisdom. Such is one characteristic of a good old age.

But if the mind be clear and active, the heart must also preserve its freshness of feeling; the sympathies must maintain their free and generous exercise. The selfishness of old age is sometimes made a subject of remark. We cannot wonder, if the aged, retiring into the midst of recollections in which those around them may feel comparatively little interest, and oppressed by growing infirmities, acquire a habit of self-regard which may be a source of even greater annoyance to themselves than to others. This, however, is not a necessary condition of advanced life. The old man may show as warm affections, as quick sensibilities, as cordial a concern for those about him, as true an interest in the progress of human affairs, as if he were in the midst of the world's activity.

Though the companions of his youth may have been removed, they who have grown up beneath his eye fill their places in his regard. He leans gracefully and willingly on the children whom he once supported, he takes his grandchildren to his bosom with a father's love, he makes home the scene of endearments not less fond because they are touched by the sentiment of reverence, and, through the larger or narrower circle of social relations which he may fill, he becomes the object of a tender respect to those in whose feelings he participates with an ease as agreeable to himself as it is delightful to them. Beautiful is the sympathy with all that is true and good, which age tempers, but does not abate. Beautiful to see how it will win confidence, and find its own satisfaction in making others happy.

The consequence of such an exercise of the mental powers, and such an indulgence of the affections, is a serenity peculiar to this period of life. That gentle wisdom, that quiet play of the sensibilities, that inward repose as far removed from torpor as from violence, that silent growth of the soul, which we observe in the man who enjoys "a good old age," write their signatures on the countenance, and give it an

"Expression holy, deep, resigned,
The calm sublimity of mind."

We involuntarily compare this clear-sighted tranquillity with the mild aspects of nature, as the softness

of a summer's evening sky, or the majestic stillness of the ocean when no storms ruffle its surface, or with the progress of the bird that floats with outstretched and almost unmoved wing through the air; but all such comparisons poorly represent the beauty of a serene old age. Its mere presence subdues our impatience, and raises us above the fretful cares of life. We are ashamed to show irritation of feeling, or a morbid sensibility, before such an example of moral healthfulness. We are made stronger by the quiet strength which reveals itself through the very absence of effort, and learn that this anxious, struggling life of ours may yet acquire a character of repose that shall reach from its surface to its deepest foundations.

To the qualities which we have described, a good old age adds the yet higher excellence of a religious faith, which fills the breast with trust and devotion. The sympathies of earth, pleasant as they are felt to be, do not occupy all the thoughts nor detain all the affections. The mind has accepted truths which reveal a God, the object of its noblest contemplations and the inspirer of its best exercises. The heart has taken in a love that far exceeds all human love. The blessed instructions of Christ expand and animate the soul. Piety is the appropriate habit of old age, giving it an outward dignity, as well as an inward satisfaction. Who may feel the Divine presence and wait upon the Divine will in a meek but rejoicing faith, if

not he who has had large experience of the Divine goodness, who has cherished habits of prayer through the changes of many years, and has made his progress along the duties of an earthly life a continual approach towards heaven? The devoutness of a Christian old age is its crown and glory. As we look on him whom it invests with a celestial charm,

“ He seems a being
 . . . to sublimer worlds allied,
 One from all passions purified,
 E'en now half mingled with the sky,
 And all prepared, oh, not to die,
 But, like the prophet, to aspire,
 In heaven's triumphal car of fire.”

This preparation it is which adds the last grace to a good old age. The Christian's trust melts into the Christian's hope, as the sense of connection with this world gives place to a sense of more intimate connection with the world of spirits. He who has walked in his integrity and his piety here anticipates his departure for other scenes of service and enjoyment. Leaning on the word of the Lord, he treads the declining path of life with an equal step, neither dismayed nor elated at the thought that he is near its close. That thought becomes familiar, and it gives a depth to the serenity of which I have spoken, which it could derive from no other source. Prospects of eternity open themselves to the inward vision as the horizon of time is contracted, and the believer who has tasted many a cup of joy and of sorrow which