

Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit.

BUT A STEP.

A Sermon

INTENDED FOR READING ON LORD'S-DAY, NOVEMBER 29TH, 1885,

DELIVERED BY

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"There is but a step between me and death."—1 Samuel xx. 3.

THIS was David's description of his own condition. King Saul was seeking to destroy him. The bitter malice of that king would not be satisfied with anything short of the blood of his rival. Jonathan did not know this. He could not believe so badly of his father as that he could wish to kill the champion of Israel, the brave, true-hearted young David; and so he assured David that it could not be so—that he had not heard of any plots against him. But David, who knew better, said, "It is certainly so. Your father seeks my blood, and there is but a step between me and death."

Now, it was by knowing his danger that David escaped. Had he remained as ignorant of his own peril as his friend Jonathan had been, he would have walked into the lion's mouth, and he would have fallen by the hand of Saul. But to be forewarned is to be forearmed; he was, therefore, able to save his life because he perceived his danger. It would have been a very unwise person who should have said, "Do not tell David about it. You see that he is very happy in Jonathan's company. Do not disturb him. It will only make him fret. Do not tell him about Saul's anger." But a true and wise friend would acquaint David of his danger, in order that he might seize the opportunity to escape. So also to-night somebody might say, "Many people now present are in great danger, and do not dare to think about death; do not mention the unpleasant subject to them." Well, sirs, if my object were to please you, if my desire were to seem as one who playeth a merry tune upon a goodly instrument, I certainly should not speak to you of death and danger. But, then, it would be infamous to allow men and women to stand in infinite jeopardy and not to warn them; and it is kindness to speak to those who are carelessly at ease and tell them salutary truth. It will not put them in danger; but it may, God blessing it, be the means of their escaping from eternal ruin. So, I pray you, while I talk

upon this theme, which may seem to be a sad one, ask God to make it a great blessing to those who hitherto have been sporting upon the brink of fate without thinking of the solemnities of eternity.

It is rather a notable state of things, is it not, for David to be conscious of danger, and to be telling his friend Jonathan that he is in danger? I do not often meet with the case now. If I am the Jonathan, I have to keep on warning David of his danger, and I find it very difficult to wake up my friend to a sense of that danger. I should like to live to see the day in which David would come to Jonathan—I mean in which men in danger would come to me—and say, “There is but a step between me and death.” We love to see care for the soul, and concern about a future state. Whenever God’s Holy Spirit is at work we do see it: sinners begin to be aware of their condition, and they come and tell us of their danger, and enquire for the way of escape. It is the simplest thing in the world to tell the awakened sinner how he may find peace; the difficulty lies in awakening the sinner. To cheer those who are alarmed is such good work that we would sit up all night at it. We can never have too much of it. To bind up the broken in heart when the Master gives us his gospel, is the most pleasant duty out of heaven. The worst of it is, that we cannot persuade them that they need to be broken in heart, or lead them to feel that they are in peril; but still shutting their eyes to all the truth they will go wildly on, determined not to know. Too many act as if it were folly to look a few days ahead, as if it were a work of supererogation to foresee the evil, a needless sorrow to think of eternity.

To-night I want to press the truth home, as far as it is truth, upon each person here present, that there is, or there may be, but a step between him and death.

First, *in some sense this is true of everybody*, “There is a step, and but a step, between me and death.” Secondly, *to some it is peculiarly true*. There are many persons—and some of them are here to-night—who might say with emphasis, “There is but a step between me and death.” When I have spoken upon those two things, I shall then say, “*Suppose that it is not so*”; and conclude by saying, “*Suppose that it is so.*”

I. First, then, there is a sense in which this text is no doubt literally TRUE OF EVERY MAN—“There is but a step between me and death”; for *life is so short* that it is no exaggeration to compare it to a step. Suppose that we should live to threescore years and ten, or even fourscore years, or to be, as some few of our friends are here to night, even past their fourscore years, yet life will occupy a very short time. Life is long to look forward to; but I appeal to every aged person whether it is not very short to look back upon. I confess to my own experience that a week is now a hardly appreciable space of time to me. There seems to be very little breathing room between one Sunday and another. One has scarcely preached before one has to prepare again some other word with which to address you. As we grow older time very sensibly quickens its pace. I know that this is an exceedingly trite observation, but I mention it all the more earnestly because the certainty of it should force it home with power upon our minds. You young people look to a month as being quite a period of time, but when you are getting forty, or fifty, or sixty, you will look upon a whole year as no more than a brief

interval. Indeed, I do not wonder that Jacob said his years were few. Because he was an old man he thought life short. If he had been a young man he would have said that his days were comparatively many, and would have tried to make himself feel that he had lived a long while; but when a man grows old his days seem fewer than they were, and the older he gets the shorter his life seems to have been. There are many ways of calculating time, and its length or brevity lies more in idea than in fact. I have sometimes noticed it—I dare say you have—that an hour has seemed to me very long indeed. In certain states of mind I have looked to the clock again and again, and I have thought that I never lived such a long hour. But often and often does it occur to me that I sit down to write, and that I go on writing, and when I lift up my head an hour has passed, and I think to myself, “It cannot be. There is a mistake. That clock has made a mistake somehow.” I have even referred to my watch, and I have found that it was even so; but where that hour went I do not know. When one is very busy the hours glide away, so that you say, “Time is, after all, only a dream.” Time may appear to be long while it is short, and it may be really short when according to human calculation it is long. But all men when they come to die confess that their life has been brief—that it was but a step. Yesterday I was born: to-day I live: to-morrow I must die. Ephemera are born and die in the space between the rising and the setting sun; their life is a fair picture of our own. We are shadows, and we come and go with the rising and the setting sun. Truly “there is but a step between me and death.” O my God, if my life be so short, prepare me for its end! Help me to stand ready for its close, so that I may give in my final account with joy.

But, in another sense, there is but a step between us and death, namely, that *life is so uncertain*. How unexpectedly it ends! Strong and hearty men, if I might make a judgment from observation, seem to be among the first to fall. How often have I seen the invalid, who might almost long for death, draw out a long existence of continuous pain; while the man who shook your hand with a powerful grip, and stood erect like a column of iron, is laid low of a sudden and is gone! No man can reckon upon the full term of life: not one among us can be sure of reaching threescore and ten. We cannot be sure that we shall see old age. A bubble is more solid than human life, and a spider’s web is as a cable compared with the thread of our existence. There is but a step between us and death.

And this is all the more true when we consider that *there are so many gates to the grave*. We can die anywhere, at any time, by any means. Not alone abroad are we in danger, but at home in security we are still in peril. I am in my pulpit now, but I am not secure in this citadel from all-besieging death. I remember a dear servant of God in a country town, on a certain Sabbath morning, stood up and repeated as the first hymn of the morning, the sacred song which I gave out just now:

“Father, I long, I faint to see
The place of thine abode:
I’d leave thine earthly courts and flee
Up to thy seat, my God”;

and he fell back and was gone. His wish was granted. He saw the place of God's abode, I do not doubt. There is no safety from death in the pulpit, nor in your own house. Dr. Gill, who was noted for always being in his study, said one day to a friend, "Well, at least, if a man is in his study he is safe." Some one had been killed in the street through a falling chimney-pot or tile, and this gave emphasis to the doctor's pleasantry. But it so happened that, soon after, the doctor went to visit a member of his church, and while he was away a stormy wind blew, and blew down a stack of chimneys into his study, into the very place where he would have been sitting if he had not been called away. So he said to his friend, "Verily, I see I must not boast of being safe in my study, for we are secure nowhere." In times of battle men may shelter behind trees or walls, and so escape rifle-shot: but where can you get to escape from the arrows of death? Wherever you be, not alone in the crowded, thronging streets, but up there in your own chamber, or on the edge of your bed, you may slip, you may fall, and suffer fatal injury. At your table you may eat and drink and die. Wherever you are, you may well feel, "There is but a step between me and death."

"Dangers stand thick through all our path
To push us to the tomb;
And fierce diseases wait around
To hurry mortals home."

Therefore, I would say, as I leave this point, let nobody here reckon upon life. Let him never postpone what ought to be done at once to some future time. I do not know whether any brother here recollects old Mr. Timothy East. I knew him well in his old age. He was a man of careful observation and retentive memory, and in his later days he was full of stories which had happened in his pastoral experience; and he used to tell this one:—A certain woman was very much attached to his ministry, but still a very foolish woman. She used to sit regularly on the pulpit stairs, and she did so for many years, while Timothy East preached the gospel. One thing seemed to shut her heart against all his appeals. She told a neighbour that if she had five minutes before she died, she so understood the way of salvation that she would get all right in that time. She told her minister that, and Timothy said to her, "Oh, that will never do. You may not have that five minutes in which to set things right. Be right at once." Singularly enough, one day, as Mr. East went down the street, a child came to him, and said, "Please, sir, come and see grandmother. Come and see grandmother." He turned in, and there was grandmother struck for death. She looked at him with an entreating glance, and said, "I am lost! I am lost!" She died there and then, ere Mr. East could say a word to her about her salvation. Dear friend, I do beseech you not to imitate her folly, but rather say to yourself, "There is but a step between me and death. Therefore, now, God help me, I will lay hold upon eternal life, and seek and find in Christ the salvation that shall fit me to live, and fit me to die, and fit me to rise again, and fit me for the judgment-day, and fit me for eternal glory. "There is but a step between me and death"; there shall not be a step between me and Christ.

II. But, dear friends, I now turn to further remark that TO SOME THIS IS SPECIALLY TRUE. Will you bear with me when I remark that to persons who have reached a ripe old age this is most certainly true: "There is but a step between me and death"? It is inevitable in the order of nature that you should not live long. Now, do not object to think about it and talk about it. It is only foolish persons who will not mention death. If you are all right with God, it can be no trouble to you to remember that as your years multiply, there must be so many the fewer in which you are to abide here below. Those also have but a step between them and death who are touched with some incurable disorder. Some are warned that they have a heart complaint. If that be the case I may fairly say, "There is but a step between you and death." If you are consumptive, and are gradually melting away, you are in like case. What a blessing it is that this form of death gives us notice of its approach, and does not impair the mind, so that a person may calmly seek and find eternal life if that disease has marked him for its own! But there is only a step between the consumptive and death. Those who follow dangerous trades are in a similar condition. The traveller across the deep, the fisherman, the soldier, the miner, and others are frequently at death's door. I need not go into the details of all those various processes by which men earn their bread, which have so much danger about them that there is but a step between those who follow them and death.

Besides this, there are some—and probably some in this congregation—who, whether it be by disease or not, will die in the course of a few weeks. The probabilities, if they are calculated, will show that out of six or seven thousand persons gathered here, there are certainly some, beyond all guesswork, who will not see the month of November, who certainly will never pass into the next year. There is but a step between such and death.

I should like you to be able to think about death. If you do not like to think about it at all, my dear friends, I think that there is something wrong in you, and you ought to take warning from your own dislike. He that is afraid of solemn things has probably solemn reason to be afraid of them. It is greatly wise to talk with our last hours. A man who is going to a certain place should think about the place to which he is going, and make some preparation for it. If he be a wise man he will do so. I should like you to attain to such a state that you could feel as Dr. Watts did. He said to a friend when he was an old man, "I go to my bed each night with perfect indifference as to whether I shall wake up in this world or the next." That is a beautiful state of mind to be in. Or, as the old Scotch minister said when some one asked him, "Is this disease of yours fatal"? and he replied, "I do not know, and I do not wish to know, for I do not think that it can make much difference to me; for if I go to heaven I shall be with God, and if I stop here God will be with me." Oh! is not that a sweet way of putting it? There is not so much difference, after all, between being with God and God's being with us. Old George the Third, who, whatever the faults of his early days, was undoubtedly a godly man in his old age, would have a mausoleum prepared for himself and family; and when Mr. Wyatt, the architect, went to see

him by his own order he did not know how to speak to the old king about his grave; but George said, "Friend Wyatt, do not mind speaking about my tomb. I can talk as freely to you about the preparation of a place for me to be buried in, as I could about a drawing-room for me to hold my court in; for I thank God that I am prepared to do my duty if I live, and to sleep in Jesus if I die." There are but few, I think, of his rank who could talk so; but every wise man ought to see to it that, as he must die, he is ready for it—ready for the bar of God. "Ready, ay, ready," says the sailor as he grinds his cutlass; and let the Christian say the same. Ready, ay, ready, to live to an extreme old age patiently waiting, or to depart out of the world unto the Father, which is far better; in any case finding it heaven enough to do the will of God, and to trust in Jesus Christ, whom he hath sent.

Thus I have mentioned the cases of those of whom it may specially be said, "There is but a step between me and death." "Oh," said some one, "you are the wrong side of sixty, Mr. Jones." "No," answered Jones, "I am on the right side of sixty, for I am the heaven side of it"; and that is the way to look at our age. We say,

"Nearer, my God, to thee,"

and then we do not like to grow old: that is absurd. Nay, let us rather rejoice that we are getting nearer the desired haven, nearer our everlasting rest.

III. I am to close by saying first, SUPPOSE IT IS NOT SO. Young friends, you that are here, suppose it is not true that there is only a step between you and death. Suppose it is not so. There may be some here that will live to a very great age. I may be addressing some persons who will rival Sir Moses Montefiore. Possibly you may. Well, what then? If so, I should recommend you to follow the Scriptural advice, "Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness." The first things should come first: the best things should have the best of our thoughts. A prince who had been warned of assassination, gaily exclaimed, "Serious things to-morrow"; but before to-morrow he was slain. Yet had he not been slain, his speech would have been an unwise one; for, however long we live, we ought not to push serious matters into a corner. If we are to live, let us live to noble purpose. It would be a great pity to lose a single year, much less a long life. If you are going to live a hundred years, begin them with God. If you are going to have long life, why not spend it for him? There was a storm at sea once, and there was a young man on board who was not used to storms, and he fell into a great state of mind. He was not of much use on board the ship through his fears. He crept into a corner and knelt down to pray; but the captain, on coming along, could not stand that. He shouted, "Get up, you coward, *say your prayers in fine weather.*" He did get up, saying to himself, "I only hope that I shall see fine weather to say my prayers in." When he landed, the words the captain said remained in his mind. He said, "That is quite correct, I will say my prayers in fine weather." I would say to you who hope to live a hundred years, *say your prayers in fine weather.* The young man was so impressed with those words that he went to hear the gospel, was converted, and became a minister of Christ.

One Sunday morning, while he was preaching in one of the most notable pulpits in New York, that captain came into the chapel, and the preacher looked him in the face and said, "Say your prayers in fine weather." The captain was astonished, as he perceived that the very man whom he had addressed as a coward was now preaching from the pulpit, and giving out at the commencement of his sermon the advice which he had given him. I trust the captain took his own medicine. I want to give that advice to all who do not think that they are going to die yet. *Say your prayers in fine weather.* Begin with God now. Oh, come and give my Lord Jesus the prime of your youth, the best of your days. I came to Christ when I was fifteen. I was a minister of the gospel when I was sixteen years of age. I have gone on preaching Christ ever since. I wish that I could have begun sixteen years before. I do not repent of coming to him too early; but I urge upon you, young friends, while yet the marrow is in your bones, and your brain is clear, and your eye is true; ere yet you have dishonoured yourself, and weakened your body by sin, come and yield yourselves up to Jesus Christ, that you may spend a whole life in that blessed service which is joy and peace. May the Holy Spirit of his great love make it so with many here present!

Suppose that it is not true that there is but a step between you and death; nevertheless, while death is at a distance, health and strength furnish the best time for coming to Christ. Do not imagine that when you are ill and near to die, it will be the best time to turn. I remember the striking words of Philip Henry, the father of the famous Matthew Henry. When he was dying, his friends stood round about his bed, and he said, "What a blessing it is, Matthew, that I have not to make my peace with God now! My body is full of pain, and my mind is greatly disturbed by reason of it. Oh!" said he, "if that were undone and had now to be done, how could it be done?" What a mercy when that great transaction is complete! Now, come pain or weakness, come long sleep, come broken-down spirit, what does it matter? It is all well; it is all well. That having *to make our peace with God* when we die is a poor business. I do not like the expression. I like far better the language of a poor bricklayer who fell from a scaffold, and was so injured that he was ready to die. The clergyman of the parish came, and said, "My dear man, I am afraid you will die. You had better make your peace with God." To the joy of the clergyman the man said, "Make my peace with God, sir? That was made for me upon Calvary's cross eighteen hundred years ago; and I know it." Ah! that is it—to have a peace that was made by the blood of Christ all those years ago—a peace that never can be broken. Then, come life, come death, ay, or come a lengthened life, and ripe old age, the best preparation for a lengthened life is to know the Lord. The best encouragement and comfort for the decrepitude of extreme old age is to have a good hope through Christ. There is nothing like it. Why, some old folks that I have known, so far from being unhappy, have been the very happiest people that I have ever met with, and though they have lived long, they have come, not to court long life, but they have been willing to depart. Dr. Dwight, the famous tutor, had a mother who lived to be over a hundred years of age; and one day, when the son heard the bell

toll for a neighbour, the old lady said with tears in her eyes, "Won't it soon toll for me? Will they not soon toll for me?" Dear Mr. Rowland Hill used merrily to say, when he got old, that he hoped that they had not forgotten him. That is how he came to look at death; and he would go to some old woman if he could, and sit down and say, "Now, dear sister, if you go before I go, mind that you give my love to John Bunyan and the other Johns. Tell them that Rowley is stopping behind a little while, but he is coming on as fast as he can." Oh! it is a sweet thing gradually to melt away and have the tenement gently taken down, and yet not to feel any trouble about it, but to know that you are in the great Father's hands, and you shall wake up where old age and infirmities will all have passed away, and where, in everlasting youth, you shall behold the face of him you love.

That is, suppose that it is not so.

IV. But now SUPPOSE THAT IT IS SO. Suppose that it is so, and suppose, as yet, that you have no good hope. Dear friend, there is a word that I would like to drop into your ear. If there is but a step between you and death, yet there is only a step between you and Jesus. There is only a step between you and salvation. God help you to take that step to-night. You know the description of the way to heaven: "Take the first on the right by the cross, and keep straight on." May you take that step to-night! It is not a step even; it is only a look.

"There is life in a look at the Crucified One."

Why delay it? Since faith in Christ will put you beyond danger, and will put you beyond the dominion of sin, so that you will live a godly life which shall continue to the end, why not believe in Jesus now? Why not cast yourself upon him now? For suppose it is so? suppose that it is written in the book, "Thou shalt die, and not live"; then is it not your wisdom that you should at once close in with Christ and find eternal salvation in him?

Suppose that it is so, that you are soon to die; then set your house in order. Get everything ready with regard to your temporal affairs. Mind that. A world of sorrow comes through people not having made their wills. Have everything in order. Trim the ship when a storm is expected. Be ready, for you are about to die. Now sit loose by all earthly things. You must assuredly part with them soon; do not hold them tightly. "Set not your affection upon things on earth," or you will weep when you lose your idols. If you harbour any anger in your heart, turn it out directly, for you are going to die. If there is any quarrel between you and anybody else, go home and settle it. Whether you are going to live or die, I advise you to do that. Hold no ill-will to any one, for you are so soon to die. I remember well the story of a husband who had grieved his wife. I do not know what had happened, —some little awkward word or deed. He went out of the house. He had to fell timber that day, and he turned back and said, "Wife, I am very sorry. Let us part good friends. Give me a kiss." Alas, she turned away! All day long she sorrowed, for she loved him well, and she grieved to think that he was gone without that kiss of love. He never came back again alive. Four men brought him home a corpse. She

would have given a thousand worlds if they had not parted so. Now, do not part with anybody that you love with any kind of tiffs or quarrellings. End all that, for death is near. If there is but a step between you and death—if the Judge is at the door—go and wind up your little difficulties. You that have family quarrels, wipe them out. You that have got any malice in your heart, turn it out.

Oh, if it is only a step between us and death, then you that are unprepared, it is only a step between you and hell! Escape, I pray you, by the living God. As you love your souls, flee for your lives, and lay hold on Christ.

But if you are in Christ, it is only a step between you and heaven. You may well desire that you might take that step right speedily. I shall never forget one summer afternoon, when I was preaching in a village chapel about the joys of heaven, that an elderly lady sitting on my right kept looking to me with intense delight. Some people's eyes greatly help the preacher. A telegraph goes on between us. She seemed to say to me, "Bless God for that. How I am enjoying it!" She kept drinking in the truth, and I poured out more and more precious things about the eternal kingdom and the sight of the Well-beloved, till I saw what I thought was a strange light pass over her face. I went on, and those eyes were still fixed on me. She sat still as a marble figure; and I stopped and said, "Friends, I think that your sister over there is dead." They said that it was even so, and they bore her away. She had gone. While I was telling of heaven, she had gone there; and I remember saying that I wished that it had been my case as well as hers. It was better not, perhaps, for many reasons; but oh, I did envy her! I am always looking for the day when I shall see her again. I shall know those eyes, I am sure I shall. I shall recollect that face, if in heaven she is anything like what she was here, or bears any marks of identification. I shall not forget that inward fellowship which existed between a soul that stood with wings outspread for glory, and the poor preacher who was trying to talk of that which he knew but little of compared with her. Well, well, it will soon be my turn. Good night, poor world! It will soon be your turn, and then you shall say, "Good night." Let us meet in glory. Let us meet in glory, for Jesus Christ's sake. Amen.

PORTION OF SCRIPTURE READ BEFORE SERMON—Psalm xc.

HYMNS FROM OUR "OWN HYMN BOOK"—853, 854, 846.