

ADDRESS

DELIVERED IN THE UNITARIAN CHAPEL

FRENCHAY,

February 16th 1850,

AT THE FUNERAL OF

ISABELLA LOUISA HOWSE.

BY THE

REV. WILLIAM JAMES,

OF LEWIN'S MEAD CHAPEL

BRISTOL.



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1850.

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Dear Mr. and Mrs. Howse,

As you have requested me to allow you to print the following Address, under the impression that it may be useful, among those especially in whose welfare you are so deeply interested, and for whose improvement you so incessantly labour, I cannot hesitate to send it to you for this purpose, sincerely hoping that your expectations may be realized. It was written in great haste, but I am glad to find that it was thought by you appropriate to the occasion, and that it afforded you consolation in that hour so trying to the feelings, when the mortal remains of one whom we have tenderly loved are about to be committed to the dust. Just before I wrote this Address, I had been perusing an interesting discourse by the Rev. A. P. Peabody, of America, on "*Consoling views on death*," and it is probable that, in referring to the period of the removal of friends, I may be found to have expressed very much what he has said on this subject. They are views which I believe are true and scriptural, and certainly are calculated to impart comfort to the mind under bereavement.

With great respect and sincere sympathy,

Believe me, faithfully yours,

WILLIAM JAMES.

Bristol. March 9, 1850.

THE FAITH OF THE WOMAN OF SHUNEM

UNDER THE LOSS OF HER CHILD.

2 KINGS IV. 26.

“Is it well with the child? And she answered, *It is well!*”

“IT IS WELL!” Such was the declaration of the Shunamite woman, full of humble trust, and pious submission to the Divine Will, under the painful circumstances in which she was placed. What these circumstances *were*, we are informed in the simple and affecting narrative in the book before us. According to the promise of the prophet Elisha, a son had been given to her in her declining years. And around this son, as was natural, her warmest affections had gathered, and his welfare was the object of her deepest earthly concern. The infant had brought to the dwelling of his parents, light and joy at a period of life when they had no longer any expectation that their home would have been brightened by the presence of childhood. And as the son of their *age* they felt *in* him and *for* him a very tender interest. And when he was grown, he went out, we read, to his father to the reapers, and whilst in the harvest field,

the hot rays of the sun fell too fiercely upon his young head, and he was attacked with sudden and fatal illness. His father, not probably aware of the child's real condition, directed that he should be taken to his mother. But not even *maternal* love could cool his fevered brain, or remove the agony under which he suffered; and in a few hours he died.

Now, then, the woman of Shunem and her husband are again childless. The boy, in whom so many hopes were centred, was taken from them. The desire of their eyes had been removed by a stroke. Their home was sad and desolate. By a severe and painful lesson they were taught how vain are human calculations and wishes.

But the Shunamite was evidently a woman of *energy* as well as of *piety*. She suffers not her grief to deprive her of the power of thought and action. The body of her dead son she laid carefully upon the bed of Elisha, in the chamber which was hospitably set apart for his use in her house, and then at once hastened to seek the prophet at Mount Carmel. What were her precise views and intentions in this journey we are not informed. It may be that she hoped for the Prophet's intercession with God that her child might be given back to her again. Or, perhaps, she was only intent upon communicating to him the calamity which had befallen her and her husband, and asking his counsel, his sympathy, his prayers, in her distress. But whatever was the motive by which she was actuated, the man of God observes her afar off, and sends his servant to meet her,

and to inquire how it was with her and her family. And Gehazi said, "Is it well with thee? Is it well with thy husband? Is it well with thy child? And she answered, *It is well.*"

The Bible contains few more touching scenes than this. It is a beautiful and most striking example of trust and resignation which is here exhibited. We must remember that the child of the woman of Shunem, her only child, had just ceased to breathe in her arms. She enters into no explanations with the prophet's messenger, as to the reasons which had brought her to Carmel. She makes no complaint as to the loss which she had sustained. With firm and collected mind, she expresses her conviction that no real evil had come upon her, and though bereaved, her heart assures her all is well. How strong must have been her confidence in God! Deeply must she have felt the painful situation in which she was placed. She had no *knowledge* of a future life,—for no direct revelation on this important subject had then been made. Whatever *hopes* she might have cherished, she was without those *assurances* respecting death and the world beyond the grave which a *Christian Parent* is privileged to enjoy. But she was a believer in the Providential government of the Almighty. She knew that her child had been given in a remarkable manner. And now that he had been suddenly taken, she felt that some wise and good purpose must be contemplated by infinite love, and trustfully committed herself, and her husband, and her child to the keeping of Him who cannot err.

“ Faith in the Prophet’s God, Most High,
 Upheld her hope, relieved her sigh;
 And while the tear maternal fell,
 She calmly answered ‘ Yes, ’tis well.’ ”

Happy are they who can thus repose in God under affliction! His ways are often to us inscrutable. This is a chequered scene. It is a place of discipline, and it can neither be ‘ the Eden of an untried joy, nor the paradise of a changeless rest.’ No heart liveth without occasional visitings of grief. And amidst the dark and mournful path which we are sometimes called to tread, there can be no peace for the soul except we can cast our care upon God, believing that, however we may suffer, his dispensations are all ordered in mercy, that our times are in his hands, and that life and death are alike under his direction. Let this faith be to us a *reality*, a practical operative principle, and we shall then be able even to rejoice in tribulation, and to say with the woman of Shunem, amidst our tears,—“ *It is well!* ”

There are few things, perhaps, in connexion with religious thought, which have occasioned more perplexity to reflecting minds than the death of the young. When the aged die, we feel that their work here being finished, and their power of deriving enjoyment from earthly objects and pursuits gone, it is fitting that they should be removed to some other mansion in the Father’s house. But when death comes in earliest infancy, or when it smites those who with joyous heart and bounding feet are ready to enter upon a course of active life, it is like a blight which falls upon the buds

and blossoms of Spring, and it is an event which we are apt to call untimely. The course of nature seems broken by some alien hand. It appears not so much an appointment of God, as an interruption of his appointments. The mystery wears a surpassing strangeness. It affects us painfully, and we feel that a strong religious trust is necessary for our support. But even for this trial of our faith, the consolations and promises of the Gospel are adequate. Whether of an early death or a protracted life, Christianity teaches us "*It is well!*" It is well with the *infant* who is summoned. It is well with the youth who is called. They would not be removed if it were not best for their individual souls. Some ministry in the unseen world may be more suited to their particular needs. They are doubtless borne to more genial spheres, like those who go upon earth to the more healthful influences of balmy climes. The good shepherd takes them to his own green pastures, and by the still waters of his paradise they will find all they crave. Many are taken from the evil to come,—from trials which would have been too severe for them, from burdens which would have weighed heavily upon their souls. Temptations more than they could have borne, might have thickened round them. Worldly, selfish aims might have dimmed the beauty of their early promise. Hard as it often is, when children and friends are taken from us, to say, 'Father! thy will be done', we cannot doubt that in the character and condition of every one thus taken, whether in infancy, youth, or age, there is something

in the particular time when it occurs which renders it the *best* time, and that either a longer or a shorter life would have been attended with less happy results. "*It is well,*" whatever happens to us in the course of the Divine ordination. Love and hope may weep over the grave. But affection has a better promise than a few years of mortal discipline; and hope, Christian hope, will not linger about the tomb, and perish with the decaying dust, for she can look forward to a heavenly inheritance. We should not think of those whom death removes from our sight, and who were ready to go, as confined to the grave, but as in the place of bliss assigned them near the throne of God,—as in that blessed home on high, where every holy wish is met, and every pure desire fulfilled, where suffering and sorrow are no more, and life is clothed in eternal youth and beauty. The infant who came and cheered us with his presence for a little while, and then returned to God, is far safer and happier than he could have been had he remained with us; and the parent shall meet the child again,—so saith the sacred word,—where death has no more power.

Christian friends and mourners! These views are not *new* to you, but they are appropriate to this solemn season, and their consideration will, I trust, soothe and tranquilize your minds. A young and precious life has been withdrawn from your happy family circle, where it was greatly cherished, and where you would have gladly retained it had it been in your power. But what has been done is the work of the Lord, the Lord

God merciful and gracious, and "*It is well!*" It is well with the child, for she is gone to be with her Father and Saviour in Heaven. God had need of her, and he has taken her to himself. She came as an angel to your dwelling, and now she has passed on to some higher society and companionship. "*It is well with the child!*" She is not lost, but only removed from your care, and you will be re-united to her, if you are faithful, in the kingdom of God. "*It is well with the child!*" And it is *well* also with you! The trial has a mission from Him who sent it in love, and it will issue in *good*,—good to your own souls, and to those who are yet spared to you. May the consolation which is in Christ fill your hearts at this hour! May the God of all comfort guide and sustain you in all your efforts to do good, whether in your own family or among others! May He preserve and keep your children who continue at your side! And when at last you and yours shall appear before him in the great and final gathering of souls, may you all be found a happy family, meet for the Master's approval,—not one missing, not a wanderer lost.

My dear children, I wish before we place the coffin which is now before us in the place prepared for it, to say a word or two especially to you. Some of you were very nearly related to the little one who is gone, and whose face you will see no more upon earth. You have seen her sicken and die. You have observed the eye closed, which was wont to look upon you all with love, and the tongue silent, that was accustomed to

amuse you with its prattle, and the hands cold and stiff, that were accustomed lovingly to embrace you. I hope you will think of her often. It will do you good. But do not suppose that she is in the tomb where her body will sleep. She may be still near you, though you cannot perceive her, and is perhaps watching over you and observing your ways. Think, if you are tempted to do wrong, that you may grieve her by being naughty, disobedient, and wicked, and that if you do not strive to be good children, you will be unfit to be with her again in her heavenly Father's house above, to which she is taken.

Many of you are Sunday Scholars, and you should now remember that you are not too young to die. You are taught, from week to week, much that will be useful to you in the business of life,—how you may pass through the world respectably and happily, and how you may be prepared for that better world which is to come. Gather now all the knowledge you can, for the more you know, if you are good and virtuous, the more will you be valued, and the greater will be your opportunities of improving your outward circumstances, and of increasing your sources of rational enjoyment.

But, as I said, you are *Sunday Scholars!* And as such you are taught the importance and necessity of reverencing God, loving Christ, and leading a life of religion and piety. The good Sunday Scholar will bear in mind that the eye of God is ever upon him, and that he must answer to this great Being for all

he thinks, and says, and does,—for *all his conduct*. He will be dutiful to his parents, and gentle, modest, and kind to all! He will shun the company, language, and habits of the wicked! He will every night and every morning, pray to God, through Jesus Christ, to bless and keep him! He will be thankful for his friends, and teachers, and home! He will be truthful, honest, and sincere! He will think often of Heaven, where, the Bible tells him, virtuous children go after death that they may live with God and Christ, and all good people for ever! *Are you such Sunday Scholars?* I know not. But *God* knows. And I wish you now to ask yourselves whether you are at all like what I have described the good Sunday Scholar to be! You are all of you old enough to do this. Let what you have heard and seen this afternoon not be forgotten. I do not want you to be sad and gloomy, but to remember your Creator in the days of your youth, that you may be more cheerful and happy. God loves you, and would desire you to be his children. Obey his voice. Do something every day which you know will please him, and make you grow in wisdom and goodness. And then, whether long life or early death be appointed for you, it will be *well* with you,—well in time, and well in eternity.



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