

The Long Time

By Horatius Bonar

IT IS the Lord Jesus Himself who has given us these words in one of His parables. He says: "After a long time the Lord of those servants cometh, and reckoneth with them" (Matt 25:19). Thus, while in one place He speaks of "the little while," in another He speaks of "the long time." Little, yet great; short, yet long; both are true; and it is this double expression that makes up the full character of man's condition here, as preparing for the great day of the Lord. From the day when the Master left the earth and went up to the Father, to the day when He shall come again in His glory to sit on the awful throne before which all nations shall be gathered, is, in one sense, a long time, as men reckon years and ages. But in another sense, it is but a little while, if we reckon time as God reckons it, and compare it with the vast eternity in which it is to be swallowed up.

Life is a vapor, and that is little; life is a journey, and that is long. Life is a hand-breadth, and that is little; life is a period made of many days, and weeks, and months, and years, and that is long. Life is a post, and that is swift; life is a pilgrimage, and that is slow. Life is like the eagle hastening to his prey; life is a time of sojourning. Life is a weaver's shuttle; life is fourscore years, and once it was well nigh a thousand.

For some purposes a day is a short time, while for others it is a long time. In some circumstances a year is a short time, while in others it is a very long time. Much depends upon what is to be done in that period, and our ideas of long and short, in such cases, are influenced by the amount of work to be done. "It seemed an age," said a traveller among the Alps, who lay bruised by a fall into a deep cleft of ice, "ere my guides returned from the village, bringing the ropes to pull me up." Yet it was only two hours. But he had measured the time, not by moments or minutes, but by his sufferings and his danger.

Of an old German peasant the following story is told by a lady who visited him. He had a little garden in which were a few apple trees which were covered with fruit. He amused himself daily with walking through his garden and picking up the apples which dropped. The lady met him one day when he was thus engaged.

"Don't you weary, my friend," said she, "stooping so often?"

"No, no," said he, smiling, and offering a handful of ripe fruit.

"I don't weary," he added: "I'm just waiting, waiting. I think I'm getting ripe now, and I must soon be dropping; and then the Lord will pick me up. "Oh," said he, speaking earnestly to the lady, "you are young yet—just in blossom; turn well round to the Sun of Righteousness, that you may ripen well."

Here was the "long time" of growing and of ripening; not long in one sense, but long in another; long enough to ripen and ripen. It is of a "long time" like this that the Lord speaks to us in this parable of the servants.

The Italian poet, imprisoned cruelly in a dark cell, is represented as uttering these mournful words: "Long years, long years." For so they seemed to him in his solitude. And in a like sense we often use the words, "all day long," and "all night long," and also "the whole long year;" and thus the word "long" has acquired a peculiar meaning, expressing not only the real amount of time, but the number of events that have been crowded into the space: as if the trials passed had lengthened out the time.

It is to this solemn sense of the expression, "After a long time," that we now turn the reader's thoughts. We wish to make him feel the responsibility which is laid upon every man by the "long time" given to us by God to prepare for the coming eternity.

God will take not one by surprise. He is too just and too pitiful to do so. He warns before He strikes; nay, He gives a thousand warnings, even during the shortest life. Each day is made up of warnings, too plain to be mistaken, too loud to be unheard. No one, in the great day of reckoning, shall be able to say, "I was not told of what was coming; I was hurried off to the judgment-seat, without notice given, or time allowed to make ready." A pilot that runs his vessel upon the rocks at noonday, with his eyes open to see the cliffs, and his ears open to hear the breakers, is without excuse. At St. Abb's Head, on the east coast of Scotland, many a vessel in former years was ship-wrecked when the strong east wind of the German Ocean drove it upon the treacherous lee shore. Some years ago a lighthouse was built and a curious "fog-horn" set up, which in mist, whether by day or night, makes its warning voice to be heard for miles around. No pilot now, who wrecks

his vessel on these terrible rocks, can say, "I got no warning that they were so near;" for in the clear night the beacon-light shines out to tell him of danger, and in the thick gray mist the "fog-horn" sounds out its hoarse note to say, "Beware!"

Thus the light and the voice from heaven are perpetually warning the sons of men, and saying, "Prepare to meet thy God." The warnings of one day or one week, how many! the warnings of a year, how many more! the warnings of a lifetime, how innumerable! No man shall be able to say that he perished unwarned, or that God took him by surprise. The "fog-horn" pealing throughout the haze sounds dismally, and seems like the voice of one crying in the wilderness, "Flee from the wrath to come;" "Repent, repent;" "Turn ye, turn ye; for why will ye die?" And thus it is that God is each day calling aloud to us, and pointing us from the rocks to the haven of safety in Jesus Christ our Lord,—the one haven which no storm can reach.

God gives us time enough to turn and live. When a teacher sets a task of a few pages to his scholar, and says, "I give you a week to do it in," he allows him a "long time," for the task is one which might be done in an hour. So, when God says, "Seek ye Me, and ye shall live," or "Acquaint thyself now with God, and be at peace," and gives us a lifetime for this, He is giving us "a long time." We delay, and linger, and loiter: so that year after year passes by, and we are no nearer God than at first. But our delays do not change the long time. We make it a short one by our folly; but it was really long for the thing that was to be done—the single step that was to bring us to Christ and place us beneath the shadow of His cross. For that, there was time enough, even in the shortest life; so that no one can say at last, "I had no time given me to prepare for eternity, and I was hurried to the grave without time to seek the Lord." "I gave her space to repent" (Rev 2:21), are the warning words addressed to the sinners of Thyatira; and He speaks the same words to us. Space to repent is the message still! Repent is the burden of exhortation, and this He follows up with, "I give you space to repent!"

This long time is a time of longsuffering. "The Lord is very pitiful, and of tender mercy" (James 5:11). He spares to the uttermost; He yearns over the sinner; He beseeches him, with all the earnestness and sincerity of God, to be reconciled to Himself. He bears refusals, insults, and provocation, hatred, and scorn, and coldness,—not smiting the rejector of His love, nor taking vengeance on His enemies. He is "not easily provoked," but "beareth all things, endureth all things," "not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). He renews each day His offer of pardon, with a longsuffering that seems to know no limit, and with a profound sincerity that is fitted to win the most obdurate and suspicious of the sons of men. "Account that the longsuffering of the Lord is salvation"; for to nothing less than salvation does this longsuffering point! "Why will ye die?" is the urgent question of God to the heedless sinner. Have I not given you time enough to seek and find eternal life? Am I not in earnest in beseeching you to be reconciled to Myself?

This long time is man's opportunity. Is pardon to be found? Now is the time! Is eternal life to be obtained? Now is the time! Is heaven to be won? Now is the time! Is the strait gate to be pursued? Now is the time! Is the chain to be broken, the prison to be fled from, the darkness to be exchanged for light, and the everlasting woe to be shunned? Now is the time! This is thy opportunity, O man! Seize it, use it, ere it pass away for ever! There is danger all around; hell is laying its snares; the storm is gathering; but still there is time. All heaven is shining yonder, full in view; the door is as wide open as the love of God can throw it; the Son of God entreats you; angels beckon you in; the earthly ambassadors beseech you; now is your opportunity;—will you let it slip? Is it such a trifle to lose heaven, to lose your soul, to lose eternal gladness? O man, delay not!

This long time will end at last. The Master will return, and call His servants to account for the way in which they have spent the time, and used the gifts. The acceptable year of the Lord will end in the day of vengeance: and that vengeance will be real, for it is the vengeance of God. The "long time" allowed us here, to prepare for the great reckoning, will be nothing to the far longer time of the unending eternity,—an eternity of ever brightening glory.

All this makes us speak more earnestly, knowing how quickly the "long time" is passing away. Time is closing, life is ending, the Judge is coming; the long time will melt into the "little while"; the "little while" will vanish away, and the everlasting ages will begin. Prepare to meet thy God. Lately, when making alterations in an English church, an old pulpit was found, that had been hidden for long years. It was

beautifully carved, and round its upper part these words were cut in the wood, still distinctly legible,—“Lift up thy voice like a trumpet, cry aloud.” It is this that we are now doing, that every one to whom this may come may know the danger which lies in front of him, if he be still unreconciled to God.

There is reconciliation! This is our message, as we stand beneath the cross, and speak to a dying world.

There is reconciliation through the blood of the sacrifice! There is peace at the altar where God is standing to receive the sinner. The Son of God has done the mighty work on which reconciliation rests, and by means of which the eternal friendship of God is offered to the oldest and most stubborn of earth's rebels. That word supersedes all others. It is enough! Do not attempt to add to it, or to take from it. Take it for what it is; take it for what God declares it to be, and enter into the purchased peace. It is a righteous peace, built upon the finished work of the Substitute. It tells of that God who “justifies the ungodly,” and it tells of that peace-offering by means of which it has become a righteous thing that the ungodly should be justified. It says to each rebel,—All this peace, this friendship, this pardon becomes the certain and present property of everyone who relinquishes his own standing by nature before God in himself, and consents to stand before Him on the footing of another's work, another's sufferings,—the work and the sufferings of the Word made flesh; of Him who, though He was rich, yet for our sakes became poor, that we through His poverty might be rich (2 Cor 8:9).