

A

DISCOURSE

DELIVERED

AT THE

LAST

ANNUAL COMMENCEMENT

IN

OAKLAND COLLEGE,

BY THE

REV. S. M. MONTGOMERY, A. M.

VICKSBURG:

PRINTED BY MARMADUKE SHANNON.

1847.

OAKLAND COLLEGE, APRIL 1, 1847.

Rev. SAM'L. M. MONTGOMERY:

Dear Sir—The undersigned, appointed a Committee by the Board of Trustees of Oakland College, to request for publication a copy of the Annual Sermon delivered by you yesterday, would most respectfully request you to furnish them with the same for the purpose above stated, at your earliest convenience.

With sentiments of the highest respect,

We are,

Yours, truly,

JNO. MURDOCK,

JOHN SNODGRASS,

Committee.

OAKLAND COLLEGE, APRIL 1, 1847.

Messrs. JNO. MURDOCK, and

JNO. SNODGRASS:

Gentlemen—Your note requesting for publication the Discourse delivered by me on yesterday, is at hand. Yielding to your wishes, I herewith place the hastily written manuscript at your disposal.

With high respect,

Yours, truly,

S. M. MONTGOMERY.

DISCOURSE.

"Then Simon Peter answered him, Lord, to whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life." JOHN 6, 68.

CHRISTIANITY claims to be the only true religion on earth. It unhesitatingly condemns all other systems as false and ruinous in their tendency. Men are called upon to choose the religion of Christ, or renounce the hope of happiness in another life. If this be not true, it is vain to seek for truth any where else. The question is manifestly between the Gospel scheme and no other; for if we cannot rely upon such evidence as Christianity offers in its defence, then it is clear that no other system is worthy a moments attention, as none other can pretend to an equal amount of testimony in its support. Every one who professes to be governed in his belief by rational conviction, must admit that the Christian religion has a claim upon human credence of a more commanding character than can be adduced to establish the validity of any other religion which has been, or may now be extant among men. To the reflecting mind, Christianity on the one hand, and infidelity on the other, form the only alternative. If we cannot go to the Son of God for the words of eternal life, we must be content to live without hope, to die without comfort and enter our eternal state ignorant of what are to be our allotments, our joys or sorrows beyond the

bounds of time. Impelled, therefore, as we are, to receive and confide in the revelations of the Bible, or repudiate religion altogether, how very important is it, that the Gospel of Christ should be made a matter of serious and deep inquiry by all into whose hands a professedly inspired record has come, why not give to this subject the same patient and unyielding research which is customarily bestowed upon subjects and questions of far less moment?

The Gospel, which may very fitly be termed a sacred science, demands investigation, first, as to its truth—secondly, as to its bearings upon human well-being—thirdly, as to its developments of the character of Deity; and fourthly, as to its information respecting the awards of another life. It is proposed to notice each of these points in the order here stated.

The first query in regard to Christianity, has relation very naturally to its authenticity. And when we take into view that if it be indeed a system founded on verity, it involves the highest interest of man, nothing surely can be more desirable than a full and rational persuasion of its truth. It is truly a delightful reflection that a religion so precious in its hopes and promises, does not require faith without evidence. The contrary, we are aware, has been asserted by the enemies of the Cross; but with how much reason, any one may see who will be at the trouble of making the requisite inquiries.—That the Gospel has argument to sustain it to the full satisfaction of any sincere inquirer after truth, is the expressed and deliberate judgment of minds confessedly the most competent to pass decision upon the merits of any question, whether connected with natural science or revealed Theology. An individual who at this point

in the history of Christianity pleads a lack of evidence as an excuse for unbelief, is only asserting his ignorance of the testimony upon which it is based, or his want of inclination to examine its foundation. His objections may all be overthrown, by simply saying to him that he is behind the age in which he lives, and has not kept pace with the march of truth which for the last few centuries has been making such rapid strides in the world. We hazard nothing by the remark, when we affirm that no one in this our day is excusable for entertaining doubts in reference to the validity of the Christian revelation. Testimony, legitimate, conclusive testimony, is at hand. And the mental process by which truth is reached on this subject, is as simple and easy, and the same indeed as that by which we arrive at consistent conclusions in respect to other matters. To be thoroughly convinced that the Gospel has truth for its basis, nothing more is needful than that the mind be brought in contact with facts and arguments drawn from various sources which may be viewed in their relative as well as in their cumulative strength. And when we consider that of the countless subjects of human concern, none has so intimate a bearing upon all our interests, what higher irrationality can there be, than to leave its truth as a thing worthy only of neglect, and as undeserving a place among the varied objects of intellectual inquiry! No one in this age, can with justice lay claim to the character of high intelligence, who is not to some extent at least familiar with the arguments and methods of reasoning which lead to a realizing faith in the Christian system. A man may be highly versed in the principles of both natural and political science; but if he be a stranger to the merits of

Christianity, and unacquainted with the grounds upon which it rests, he wants the crowning perfection of a well balanced mind, for he has yet to acquaint himself with the highest and most dignified subject which can engage the powers of the human intellect, or awaken the sensibilities of the human heart.

Time, however, will not permit us to dwell on this point.

The next topic of remark, is the tendency of the Gospel to promote human happiness. And here it assumes an aspect which challenges the attention, not only of the Christian, but likewise of the patriot, the statesman, the philanthropist and scholar. Here it speaks to every mind and heart, by its manifest effects in meliorating the condition of man wheresoever brought within the circle of its influence. Where now is human society to be seen in its most refined, elevated and happy state? Where are order, law, and individual rights most respected, and civil and domestic felicity most highly appreciated and enjoyed? Where are letters and knowledge most assiduously cultivated, and the human intellect most enlightened and expanded? Is it not in those parts of the earth where Christian truth has gained a permanent hold upon the understandings and consciences of men, and is interwoven with their political and social economy? It cannot be denied that those nations which have been blessed with the light of the Gospel, are everywhere foremost in the race of improvement, and in the enjoyment of rational liberty. Their elevation above other tribes of their race has not resulted from any native superiority of genius which they possess, or from any peculiarity of climate or soil; but from the superior information which they have obtained

in relation to those principles which are necessary to control and guide men's minds in their civil and social connexions and duties. The Gospel inculcates those reciprocal obligations which should bind man to his fellow-man, and cause them to feel that they are allied to each other by such ties as call for mutual forbearance, love, and good will. Contrast society here with that which is to be found in many portions of the globe at the present time. Go to some savage shore where light divine has never penetrated the night of pagan ignorance, and see what society is there! How debased and brutal is the individual and social state of the heathen! How feeble is the spark of intellectuality which animates the bosom of the pagan, and gleams upon his pathway! How little more indeed than the mere form of man does he exhibit! How fierce and unrestrained and tiger-like are all the wild passions of savage nature. There the mutual relations resulting from kindred ties of flesh and blood, are not felt or observed. Human life is no more sacred or secure than the life of any other animal. They live but to fight, and to kill, and to devour each other. In form and feature wearing truly the lineaments of their high descent;—but in thought, in feeling and affection, in harmony only with creatures of an inferior nature. Kindly sympathy, genial friendship, intelligent hope, domestic tranquility, are names and joys unknown to these wild and untutored hearts. Now to what law of nature, or to what principle of ethics, shall we attribute the marked distinction between the condition of man here and man in a land of heathenism? Whence the wide dissimilitude, and to what is it most justly referable? Is it not to the one fact that the Gospel, like some potent charm, some mighty moral

regeneration has come upon us with its softening, enlightening and all-pervading influences? From this source and no other, have we derived these great conceptions of truth, justice, love and humanity, which regulate and preserve the social compact. These guiding impulses are imbibed in the cradle, and people here grow up to manhood with a full recognition of consanguineous relationships, and of the duties of friendship, love, and charity, which they owe to each other. And it is only where such principles are observed and imbodyed in the domestic and governmental regulations of any country, that man can ever arise to a scale of being corresponding with his primitive dignity of character, or experience a happiness in any degree akin to the joys of a once unfallen nature. And had the Gospel now, possession of all hearts as it will one day have, what a delightful transformation would our world present! Contention and discord, malice and revenge, ambition and envy, would have ceased their reign. In the expressive language of prophecy, swords would be beaten into ploughshares, and spears into pruning-hooks.— Nation would no more lift up sword against nation, neither would they learn war any more. The clangor of arms, the groans of the slain, the horrors of the battle field, would no longer stain and darken the page of human history. International affairs would be adjusted without bloodshed or slaughter. The question with all nations would be, not how we may most extensively enlarge our empire, and advance our national renown, but how may we most effectually secure our own, as well as promote the happiness of sister states and empires. One feeling of unity and fraternal interest should pervade the earth, converting it into a Paradise, an a-

bode of bliss, in striking approximation to that which reigns in heaven, and links celestial spirits as with a golden chain to the throne of eternal love.

How manifest then is it that the Gospel is of incalculable benefit to the human family, when viewed simply in reference to the life that now is. Without it, at least without the recognition of its great leading principles, well organized society and social order could not exist. It is the charter of all that we hold most dear in time, and the only preservative of all that is most precious in our earthly lot. But let the Infidel rob us of this charter, let its light depart, and its comforts forsake the human heart, and how dismal is the picture of woe which at once arises before the imagination! The hand that would destroy the religion of Jesus, would pull down with terrible insanity the pillars upon which both our civil and social fabric are erected; would rend in pieces the frame-work of society; blot out the family circle, with all that is tender and endearing in human relationships; convert man into a fiend, earth into a pandemonium, and smile with dread delight o'er its scenes of desolation, convulsion and blood! Hope affrighted, would bid all hearts adieu. Intellect benumbed, bewildered, and besotted, would cease its sway. Joy, crushed and bleeding, would hang her tuneless harp upon the willow to sigh over the calamities, and utter in mournful accents the woes of a race once happy, but now despairing, hopeless, and sinking to the chambers of eternal night! Who that loves the welfare of his species, or has a heart of pity for human distress, but will say in the fulness of that heart's philanthropy, hail, blessed Gospel, bright herald of peace and hope, live thou forever to rejoice the earth, and control the destiny of man!

We come next to speak of the Gospel in its developments of the divine character. The study of Theology is without doubt the highest exercise of the human faculties, befitting not only him who expects to become a public instructor in sacred things, but every one equally, who has intelligence to discern the perfections of his Creator. What is more natural than that man should desire to find out all that can be known relative to the source of his being? If there be any subject which ought to elicit patient thought and mature investigation, this is certainly that one. Now there are only two methods which God has chosen whereby to manifest himself to the human mind—the one an unwritten, the other a written and verbal communication—the one commonly termed the Book of Nature, the other the Book of Revelation. And it requires only a moments thought to decide which of these Books should receive the greater amount of human attention. The one bears to the other scarcely the proportion of the feeblest star of night to the splendours of the mid-day sun. Nature, although wide in her range and endlessly diversified, gives but a dim and uncertain portraiture of the unseen Jehovah. And he who looks only through nature to discover nature's architect, is as one vainly striving to behold the orb of day by the flickering twilight left behind after having passed the horizon at eve. The longer the power of vision exerted the more obscure does the whole prospect become, the more bewildering is the darkness which enshrouds the soul. Creation speaks distinctly and conclusively, when she asserts as her Author an omnipotent and designing intelligence—"The heavens declare his glory, the firmament sheweth his handy work." But creation does not tell us clearly

who this intelligence is, or whether he be the sole and rightful proprietor of the Universe. She gives no cheering insight into his moral character, and no satisfactory clue to his heart, to the affection or the hate which he entertains towards us, or as to the final disposition which he intends making of his creature man.

Now the Gospel comes to supply these deficiencies in the volume of nature, and relieve the human spirit of its strugglings and its bewilderments in search of its God. And thus if we wish to learn who God is, in what light he regards us, and what are our relations and duties to him, we must look to these exhibitions of his character which he has given in the revelation of his Son. We shall see him here not by twilight glimmerings, not by partial glimpses of one or more of his glorious excellencies, but in the full orb'd resplendence and associated grandeur of all his infinite and eternal characteristics. And shall we be satisfied with vague and superficial conceptions of Him from whom we have emanated, when especially he has vouchsafed so bright a manifestation of himself? Should we not study diligently, thoroughly, yea joyfully, the character of our Maker, who has imparted to us wisdom to understand and admire the perfections of his being? Shall we scrutinize with care the foot-prints of his existence as scattered through and over the visible works of his hand, but neglect to notice the more lucid displays of the infinite one as brought to light in the work of redemption? Shall we delight to contemplate the skill of the great Artificer of nature as exhibited in the exquisite collocations and beautiful proportions of matter, in the rich garniture of the globe, in the delicate tints and varied hues of each opening bud or full blown

flower, but see nothing to engage our admiration in that still nobler demonstration of wisdom, the wisdom of the Gospel? Shall we stand with mingled astonishment and awe, and gaze upon the sublime of Deity as seen in the mountain height, the craggy steep, the firmament bedecked with moving worlds, earth's foaming cataracts and rolling rivers, oceans' wide expanse and towering wave, as seen in the lightning's glare and heard in the thunder's roar—and yet turn away the eye from those infinitely higher sublimities which crowd around the Cross and envelope the scene of Calvary?

Shall we dwell with pleasing emotion on those traces of benevolence which are visible in the diverse adaptation of the world to the wants and the happiness of its many grades of sensitive inhabitants, and still feel no elevation of soul in beholding the surpassing glory of that benevolence which hath suffered and expired for man's adaptation to heaven, and heaven's adaptation to man? Shall we mark the foot-steps of justice as exemplified in the dispensations of divine providence, but fail to observe her sterner features and the inexorability of her sanctions, when rather than relax her claim upon the rebel with glittering sword unsheathed, she pierced the heart of everlasting innocence? Is it indeed at all reasonable that we should devote so much of our time and energies in searching for those manifestations of a God discernable in his natural works, and in the order of events, to the disparagement of the great moral work of Redeeming love, which reflects light and glory on all his other works, and brings his entire image so perspicuously to view? Such a disposition of time, and such an exercise of the capacities with which we are endowed, argues not only a high want of

respect for the infinite Creator, but a very culpable deficiency of interest also in the noblest and most majestic of all subjects. For what was man blest with reason and reflection? Was it not that he might understand and appreciate, love and adore, rejoice in and imitate the revealed excellencies of the great intelligence of all? But how can he do this—how can he answer the end of his being if he do not familiarize his understanding with those lineaments of the God-head which are developed through the medium of the Gospel? Where else within the wide domain of thought are the features of the invisible and eternal mind so legibly and brightly drawn? Verisimilitudes may indeed be traced on the unlettered and voiceless platform of the visible universe; but no endearing glimpse of the eternal face can be caught through a perspective so opaque;—clouds and darkness will surround the holy one, and spread an impenetrable veil o'er all his burning glories.

Moreover, to be truly wise and really good, it is indispensable that man should be a student of the Gospel. Would he learn wisdom, he must go to this fountain-head; he must see God in the loftiest exercise of his wisdom. Would he be pure, he must direct his steps to the same exhaustless source; he must see God in the ineffable holiness of his nature. Would he be benevolent, he must linger still about the Cross; he must see God in the matchless sympathies of dying love. Would he be just, he must look again at the sin-atonement victim; he must see God in the sublimest exhibition of his righteousness, sacrificing even his own Son to appease the requisitions of justice. In a word, whoever would be eminently wise, great and good, must know God—must grow familiar as it were with the King eternal,

who only is possessed of all wisdom, greatness, and goodness.

But let us turn now to another theme of remark—the Gospel in its developments of a future life. And here a new field of interest opens to view, in comparison with which, all other interests fade away and become as nothing.

The Gospel furnishes the only assurance that can be relied upon in regard to another state of existence. Unaided by revelation, the human mind could never have demonstrated with any degree of certainty the immortality of the soul. Of this we have ample proof in the history of the most enlightened nations of antiquity. Am I to exist in another world, was a problem which employed the most exalted intellects of those times.—Great talents were brought to bear upon the solution of a question so important, and much labor spent to no purpose. We need but allude here to the dreamy speculations, and wild conflict of thought and opinion, among the wisest of the Ancient Sages, in reference to futurity. Theory after theory was built up, many singular and absurd fancies indulged as to the nature of the soul and its modes of existence after death; but the reality of a hereafter remained a difficulty wholly unsolved. Some of the heathen Philosophers believed that man would inhabit another world, but their faith rested upon no valid foundation. It had no surer basis than the wild and extravagant deductions of their own fruitful imaginations. Annihilation was a thought intolerable even to a pagan mind. Hence it was that the most learned of the Greeks and Romans sought so industriously for some clue to the soul's immortality. Hence it was that they clung with so much tenacity to an imag-

ined futurity, and feasted their minds with so much delight upon the airy creations of their own fancy. Whether they should exist beyond the tomb, what was to be their condition, their joys or woes, were reflections calculated to fill a heathen mind with alternate hopes and fears, but as to the certainty of which no definite, no satisfactory conclusions could be reached. The Book of nature is as deficient here as in other particulars. It throws no light beyond the grave. It hints obscurely, but says nothing positively. It may corroborate by certain intimations the teaching of revelation, as the GREAT BUTLER has shown, but teaches nothing clearly of itself as to the future destiny of any soul.

Creation, in all her varied departments, has no voice that speaks palpably and indubitably of immortality. The firmament with its unnumbered orbs of light gives no distinct utterance on this subject. There is nought in the sun or the moon, or the twinkling stars, that proclaims Eternity to mankind. In like manner, earth replete as she is with manifold lessons of instruction, no where says to man, thou art immortal!

This short sentence can be read neither upon the tablet of the soul itself, nor is it interwoven with the physical structure of the exquisitely wrought tenement in which it dwells. It is no where seen intermingled with the sublimities of nature's scenery, nor cheering the eye among the milder varieties of her many painted landscapes. It is never whispered in the gentle zephyr that steals softly upon the ear, nor is it heard in the tempest's sigh or the ocean's roar. Under circumstances such as these, how glorious is the published Gospel! She comes as a messenger of pity, with news from an unknown and distant clime. Hark! every

mortal ear give audience. What is her note of information? Hail, man immortal, hail! Up, ye heralds of joy, speed on, on wing of love, and carry the glad tidings around the struggling, darkened globe. This, this is that "sure word of Prophecy to which we do well to give heed, as unto a light which shineth in a dark place:"—for dark indeed would this world have been had not life and immortality come to light by the Gospel. The dreams of antiquity, the mystic deductions and dusky hopes of heathenish philosophy, have all been more than realized in the clearer manifestations of Christianity. We now know that our spirits are destined to another world of being, and that the present is but the first step preparatory to a more extended and bright theater of existence. And is not this thrilling intelligence to a world, the occupants of which are every day closing the eye forever upon all its scenes, a world of broken and bleeding hearts, weeping in unavailing sorrow o'er the graves of loved ones departed no more to return? O! does it not come upon the soul with all the reviving power of the morning light upon the wayworn, benighted and bewildered traveller?—Man is on a journey to the tomb, and dreary would be his way did not the sun of righteousness shed its bright beams around him to gladden his bosom and illumine his transit across that interval of mysterious darkness which separates time from the home of the spirit.

But the Gospel does something more than simply to open the portals of immortal life. While it assures mankind of their future existence, and that to be one of ceaseless joy or wo, it likewise informs us how we are to secure the one and avoid the other of these widely differing conditions of eternal being. And what a well

adjusted system of means does it present for the full accomplishment of all that pertains to the soul's everlasting fruition! And here let us mark for a moment the mightiest effort of wisdom unsearchable. Man could not be restored to forfeited bliss by any other method than that of justice the most exact. And how could this be carried out so that law should retain all its inflexibility, and the perfection of a righteous government be secured? God only was competent to give solution to this question, and he has done so. Man's ill desert and all his liabilities to violated and unbending law, were transferred to another fully able to stand in his place, and meet the largest demand, as well as the minutest claim of justice. And that which is most remarkable in this great transaction, is the fact that the most tremendous penalty that ever fell upon a sentient nature, fell upon sentient innocence. Unblemished, eternal purity was sacrificed, suffered and atoned, that guilt most foul, guilt unspeakable, might be pardoned and taken to heaven. Through this arrangement the sceptre of peace has come down to earth, and God in Christ Jesus is stooping benignantly from his throne, reconciling a world of rebels to himself, not imputing their trespasses. No violence is done to the divine character or law, for God by the Cross can be just, while he is the Justifier of the ungodly. Justice has had her due, and mercy full and free is spreading gladness and triumph o'er a fallen and dying world. "O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! how unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out!" "For who hath known the mind of the Lord? or who hath been his counsellor?" Who but this One of understanding infinite, could have laid a

plan so well adapted to secure the end in view, and illustrating with so much beauty and brightness, the benevolence of the great law-giver and the wisdom of his administration!

We shall conclude this discourse with some practical remarks. And first in the light of this subject, how vain are the attainments of science unless influenced and directed to their proper ends by the spirit of the Gospel! All the acquirements of human knowledge unsanctified, can add nothing to individual usefulness. A little learning may be a dangerous thing, but much learning with a depraved heart is still more so. Impure intelligence is more to be dreaded in its operation than graceless ignorance, is more disastrous in its influence whether general or social. Give enlightened intellect to a man who is not governed by the moral precepts of Christianity, and it is like placing murderous weapons in the hands of a madman. You furnish him with the instrument not only of self-ruin, but impart to him the power also of dealing death on all around him. The principles of iniquity inherent in the human heart, are stimulated to the highest point of opposition to all that is virtuous and excellent, and their possessor will be able the more readily, and the more surely, to spread a pestilential and soul-killing atmosphere through the community in which he moves. The poison of the Upas envelopes the pathway of the depraved and virtue-hating intellectual, the inhalation of which is first to paralyze and then to destroy. How important then that the youthful mind in the process of its developement should be made to understand and appreciate the saving power of the Gospel; to see and feel that learning otherwise employed than for pure and noble, and glorious purposes, must

inevitably wield an influence destructive not only to the soul of its possessor, but reaching likewise by its evil effects the souls of others, and carrying them in fearful numbers to the abodes of despair and death. The Gospel when studied and understood, must elevate the tone of moral feeling, must give healthful exercise and legitimate direction to the intellectual faculties, must quicken and enlarge our conceptions of duty, and prepare the mind for a ready and cheerful compliance with those relations which we sustain to each other, and especially to Him who has given us our moral being, and holds us responsible for our acts. No other science has such power to adorn and dignify the human soul, and restore to man that character and station which he once held in the rank of God's moral intelligences.

But we remark again, that no degree of intellectual attainment can render its holder truly happy. The most highly cultivated mind, if unguided by moral principle, will be the most highly susceptible of that misery which is the unfailing accompaniment of depravity. Ignorance is blinded, does not see, does not anticipate impending danger, is not so liable to the lash of conscience. But it is not thus with unsanctified intelligence. The enlightened sinner must reflect, must hear the voice of conscience, must tremble with guilty fears, must dread the hour of death, and still more the face of God. Hence Education alone can bring no real or permanent happiness to an unholy mind. It may secure distinction, may exalt with pride, may inflate with vanity, but will never whisper peace to the heart conscious of its own guilt and unworthiness. It is the Gospel of Christ understood and cordially embraced which only can still the troublous waves of the human

bosom, and silence the guilty commotions of an awakened and avenging conscience. The highest of all knowledge then is to be assured of the fact that we are in possession of that peace that flows from the fountain of Gospel truth, and which passeth understanding. This and this only can make the heart serene. He who has it, has the "Pearl of price unknown." Heaven can impart no richer gift to man, no higher boon to Angels. He who has it, has bliss that earth can never give or take away. Seek it then every one whilst it may be found. Life has no sweet, death can have no consolation without it. It will pour tranquility through the soul in time, exult o'er the terrors of the grave, and link the last pang of expiring nature with the first rapture of endless day.