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Wise words from 100 years ago

Rev Stephen Hamilton sent me the link and the quote from the sermon reproduced below. I am most grateful to brother Stephen for finding this 'treasure'!

I am not familiar with all that Rev Grimke may have said or written so I cannot endorse him without reservation but on this topic he spoke the truth and it is good to have his witness from over 100 years ago.

Please read the sermon and see that things have not changed to any great degree, especially the foolish 'grumbings' of some!

"Another thing that has impressed me, in connection with this epidemic, is the fact that conditions may arise in a community which justify the extraordinary exercise of powers that would not be tolerated under ordinary circumstances. This extraordinary exercise of power was resorted to by the Commissioners in closing up the theaters, schools, and churches, in forbidding all gatherings of any considerable number of people indoors and outdoors, and in restricting the numbers who should be present even at funerals. The ground of the exercise of this extraordinary power was found in the imperative duty of the officials to safeguard, as far as possible, the health of the community by preventing the spread of the disease from which we were suffering. There has been considerable grumbling, I know, on the part of some, particularly in regard to the closing of the churches. It seems to me, however, in a matter like this it is always wise to submit to such restrictions for the time being. If, as a matter of fact, it was dangerous to meet in theaters and in the schools, it certainly was no less dangerous to meet in churches..."

Here is the link to the whole sermon which I have reproduced below.

Some Reflections Growing Out Of The Recent Epidemic Of Influenza That Afflicted Our City

The following sermon was delivered by Francis J. Grimke on Sunday, November 3, 1918 at the Fifteenth Street Presbyterian Church in Washington, D. C. after the outbreak of the 1918 Spanish Flu epidemic.

2 Samuel 24:15-16: "So Jehovah sent a pestilence upon Israel from the morning even unto the time appointed; and there died of the people from Dan even unto Beersheba seventy thousand men. And when the angel stretched forth his hand toward Jerusalem to destroy it, Jehovah repented him of the evil, and said to the angel that destroyed the people, It is enough; now stay thy hand."

We know now, perhaps, as we have never known before the meaning of the terms pestilence, plague, epidemic, since we have been passing through this terrible scourge of Spanish influenza, with its enormous death rate and its consequent wretchedness and misery. Every part of the land has felt its deadly touch—North, South, East, and West—in the Army, in the Navy, among civilians, among all classes and conditions, rich and poor, high and low, white and black. Over the whole land it has thrown a gloom, and has stricken down such large numbers that it has been difficult to care for them properly, overcrowding all of our hospitals—and it has proven fatal in so many causes that it has been difficult at times to get coffins enough in which to place the dead, and men enough to dig graves fast enough in which to bury them. Our own beautiful city has suffered terribly from it, making it necessary, as a precautionary measure, to close the schools, theaters, churches, and to forbid all public gathering within doors as well as outdoors. At last, however, the scourge has been stayed, and we are permitted again to resume the public worship of God, and to open again the schools of our city.

Now that the worst is over, I have been thinking, as doubtless you have all been, of these calamitous weeks through which we have been passing—thinking of the large numbers that have been sick—the large numbers that have died, the many, many homes that have been made desolate—the many, many bleeding, sorrowing hearts that have been left behind, and I have been asking myself the question, what is the meaning



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of it all? What ought it to mean to us? Is it to come and go and we be no wiser, or better for it? Surely God had a purpose in it, and it is our duty to find out, as far as we may, what that purpose is, and try to profit by it.

Among the things which stand out in my own mind, as I have been thinking the whole matter over, are these:

1. I have been impressed with the ease with which large portions of the population may be wiped out in spite of the skill of man, of all the resources of science. Suddenly this epidemic came upon our city and country, and though every physician has been employed and every available nurse has been at work day and night, thousands have died, the awful death toll continued. Through all history we find populations thinned out in this way, not in ordinary, but in extraordinary ways. One night in Egypt death found its way into every Egyptian home. In Numbers 16:49, we read of a plague that broke out among the people in which 14,700 perished. In 2 Samuel 24:15, we also read of another plague that broke out in the reign of David in which, during three days, 70,000 perished. Thousands also have perished suddenly as the result of volcanic eruptions or earthquake shocks. How easy it would be for God to wipe out the whole human race, in this way, if he wanted to; for these terrible epidemics, plagues, the mighty forces of nature, all are at his command, all are his agents. At any moment, if he willed it, in this way, vast populations or portions of populations could be destroyed.

2. I have had also this question come into my mind, why of those who took the disease some recovered and others did not? The reason may be found, in one sense, in purely natural causes— some were physically better prepared to resist the disease, were stronger in vital power, and so pulled through. Others, not having sufficient vitality, went down under the strain; but I believe there is also another reason, and is to be found in the will of God. For some, the time of their departure had come, the limit of their earthly existence had been reached, and this was God's way of removing them out of this world into the next. Some day we have all got to go, but how, or when, or where, we do not know; that is with God alone. In Job 12:10, we read:

In whose hand is the soul of every living thing, and the breath of all mankind.

And in Psalms 104:29: Thou takest their breath, they die.

And elsewhere we are told, "not a sparrow falls to the ground without his notice," i.e., without his consent or approval. We speak of accidental deaths, at times, but there are no accidents with God. All things are within the scope of his providence. Some did not recover because it was not the will of God that they should.

3. Another question similar to the above kept also constantly going through my mind, why are some taken with the disease and others not? As I went up and down these streets, and as I saw people and came in contact with them, I felt that at any moment any one of us might be attacked. It was like an army going into battle, no one knew who would be hit. The point to which I am calling attention is that some were not hit—some did not get the disease, and the question that I am asking is, why not? As I was thinking of this question the ninety-first Psalm came into my mind, which perhaps you will recall, and which seems to have just such distressing circumstances in view as those through which we have been passing:

*He that dwelleth in the secret place of the Most High
Shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty.
I will sing of Jehovah, He is my refuge and my fortress;
My God, in whom I trust.
For He will deliver thee from the snare of the fowler,
And from the deadly pestilence.
He will cover thee with His pinions,*



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*And under His wings shalt thou take refuge:
His truth is a shield and a buckler.
Thou shalt not be afraid for the terror by night,
Nor for the arrow that flieth by day;
Nor the pestilence that walketh in darkness,
Nor for the destruction that wasteth at noonday.
A thousand shall fall at thy side,
And ten thousand at thy right hand;
But it shall not come nigh thee.*

Here there seems to be the promise of immunity in the midst of plagues and pestilences. What this means I do not know. How far we may expect immunity under such circumstances, I do not know. These words cannot mean that all good people will escape, and that only the bad will be smitten: for, as a matter of fact, we know that during every epidemic some very good people are smitten, and some, not very good people, escape. And, therefore, I say, I do not know what is meant by the promise contained in this ninety-first Psalm. It refers to those who "dwell in the secret place of the Most High." But who are they? How shall we know them? How shall we discriminate between them and all others? It won't do to say, all who are smitten are excluded, or that all who escape are included, because we know that such is not the case. It is one of those inscrutable things that we cannot explain; we know the fact and that is all. The ultimate explanation must be found in the sovereign will of God. It must be because He wills it.

4. Another thing that has impressed me, in connection with this epidemic, is the fact that conditions may arise in a community which justify the extraordinary exercise of powers that would not be tolerated under ordinary circumstances. This extraordinary exercise of power was resorted to by the Commissioners in closing up the theaters, schools, churches, in forbidding all gatherings of any considerable number of people indoors and outdoors, and in restricting the numbers who should be present even at funerals. The ground of the exercise of this extraordinary power was found in the imperative duty of the officials to safeguard, as far as possible, the health of the community by preventing the spread of the disease from which we were suffering.

There has been considerable grumbling, I know, on the part of some, particularly in regard to the closing of the churches. It seems to me, however, in a matter like this it is always wise to submit to such restrictions for the time being. If, as a matter of fact, it was dangerous to meet in theaters and in the schools, it certainly was no less dangerous to meet in churches. The fact that the churches were places of religious gathering, and the others not, would not affect in the least the health question involved. If avoiding crowds lessens the danger of being infected, it was wise to take the precaution and not needlessly run in danger, and expect God to protect us.

And so, anxious as I have been to resume work, I have waited patiently until the order was lifted. I started to worry at first, as it seemed to upset all of our plans for the fall work; but I soon recovered my composure. I said to myself, why worry? God knows what He is doing. His work is not going to suffer. It will rather be a help to it in the end. Out of it, I believe, great good is coming. All the churches, as well as the community at large, are going to be the stronger and better for this season of distress through which we have been passing.

5. Another thing that has impressed me in connection with this epidemic is how completely it has shattered the theory, so dear to the heart of the white man in this country, that a white skin entitles its possessor to better treatment than one who possesses a dark skin. I once heard Mr. Tillman from the floor of the Senate say, He believed that God made the white man, and that means the meanest, the lowest, the most ignorant and degraded white man, out of a little better clay than he made the black man. Poor fool! He knows differently now. Death knocked the scales from his eyes. He found himself, the moment the breath left his body, in the presence of a Being with whom the color of his skin counted for



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nothing. He lived, unfortunately, under that delusion; and it is the delusion under which the white man in all this broad land is living today. But during this epidemic scourge, if he gave any thought to the matter, if a particle of sense remained in him, he must have seen the folly of counting upon a white skin. Did the whiteness of his skin protect him? Did the epidemic pause to see whether his skin was white or black before smiting him? Of what value has a white skin been during these weeks of suffering and death? What possible advantage has accrued to any one because of the whiteness of his skin?

During these terrible weeks, while the epidemic raged, God has been trying in a very pronouncedly conspicuous and vigorous way, to beat a little sense into the white man's head; has been trying to show him the folly of the empty conceit of his vaunted race superiority, by dealing with him just as he dealt with the peoples of darker hue. For once a white skin counted for nothing in the way of securing better treatment—in the way of obtaining for its possessor considerations denied to those of darker hue. And, not only in epidemics, in scourges, but also in the great convulsions of nature— in earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, tidal waves, in disasters on sea and land, the same great lesson is taught. Under such circumstances of what avail is the color of a man's skin, or his race identity? What does the lightning, the thunderbolt, the burning lava, the sea, care about color or race? White and black alike are dealt with indiscriminately; the one is smitten as readily as the other; the one is swallowed up as readily as the other. And that is the lesson which God is teaching everywhere through the operation of natural laws. And it is the great lesson which He also teaches in His inspired word; and which Jesus Christ, who said, "I am the light of the world. He that followeth after Me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life," sought constantly to emphasize both by precept and example.

In this terrible epidemic, which has afflicted not only this city but the whole country, there is a great lesson for the white man to learn. It is the folly of his stupid color prejudice. It calls attention to the fact that he is acting on a principle that God utterly repudiates, as he has shown during this epidemic scourge, and, as he will show him when He comes to deal with him in the judgment of the great day of solemn account. The lesson taught is clear and distinct, but will he learn it, will he lay it to heart, will he profit by it and seek to mend his evil ways? He may, but I have grave doubts as to whether he will or not. The probabilities are that he will still go on in his evil ways—will still go on believing that a white skin entitles its possessor to better treatment than a dark skin; will still go on practicing his infamous discriminations against colored people, in departments of the general government, and all over the country. One thing he may be sure of, however—he may continue to live under that delusion, but there will be a rude awakening some day— it may be when it is too late. The dark skin which he despises and seeks in every possible way to belittle, to depreciate, may be the millstone about his neck that will sink him to perdition. For this awful race prejudice, this colorphobia, out of which so much that is evil has come, so much suffering, so much heart-burnings to those who are the victims of it, but which is regarded so lightly by the white man—so lightly that it never brings him any compunction of conscience—so lightly that even in revivals of religion it is never included by him among the sins to be repented of—is not the little thing that he thinks it is, for it is an offense against the great law of Love—against the great law of human Brotherhood, as well as against the great law of Righteousness, of Justice.

Jesus said, "The first and great commandment is, 'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength.' And the second is like unto it, 'Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.' Upon these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." Race prejudice, colorphobia, runs directly counter to both of these great commandments. And, therefore, never mind what the white man may think of it. We see clearly what God thinks of it, and it is the estimate that he puts upon it that is to determine its character.

Let us hope, therefore, not only for the sake of people of color, but also for the sake of the white people themselves that the great lesson as to the folly of race prejudice—of assuming that a white skin entitles one to better treatment than a dark skin, which this epidemic has so strikingly taught, may not be lost upon them. It is a lesson which for their own sake it is well for them to learn. It will be better for them here, and it will be better for them hereafter, if they learn it, and learn it well. And, of course, it will be better for us



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as a race in this country. It will remove out of the way some very serious obstacles to our progress, and will relieve us of many of the disagreeable things that we are at present forced to endure, though not without protest.

6. Another thing has impressed me during this epidemic. It has brought out in a way that is very gratifying, the high estimation in which the Christian church is held in the community—the large place which it really occupies in the thought of the people. The fact that for several weeks we have been shut out from the privileges of the sanctuary has brought home to us as never before what the church has really meant to us. We hadn't thought, perhaps, very much of the privilege while it lasted, but the moment it was taken away we saw at once how much it meant to us.

One of the gratifying things to me, during this scourge, has been the sincere regrets that I have heard expressed all over the city by numbers of people at the closing of the churches. The theater goers, of course, have regretted the closing of the theaters. I do not know whether the children or the teachers have regretted the closing of the schools or not; I have heard no regrets expressed, but I do know that large numbers of people have regretted the closing of the churches. I hope that now that they are opened again, that we will all show our appreciation of their value by attending regularly upon their services. It would be a great calamity to any community to be without the public ministrations of the sanctuary. There is no single influence in a community that counts for more than the Christian church. It is one of the institutions, particularly, that ought to be strongly supported; that ought to be largely attended, and that ought to have the hearty endorsement and well-wishes of every right-thinking man and woman within it. It is a great mistake for anyone to stand aloof from the Christian church. Everybody in the community ought to have a church home, and ought to be found in that church home Sabbath after Sabbath.

7. There is another thing connected with this epidemic that is also worthy of note. While it lasted, it kept the thought of death and of eternity constantly before the people. As the papers came out, day after day, among the first things that everyone looked for, or asked about, was as to the number of deaths. And so the thought of death was never allowed to stay very long out of the consciousness of the living. And with the thought of death, the great thought also of eternity, for it is through death that the gates of eternity swing open. We don't as a general thing think very much about either death or eternity. They are not pleasant things to think about, and so we avoid thinking of them as much as possible. It is only when we are forced to that we give them any consideration, and even then only for the moment. They are both subjects of vital importance, however, involving the most momentous consequences. For after death is always the judgment. The grim messenger is God's summons to us to render up our account. That there is an account to be rendered up we are inclined to lose sight of, to forget; but it is to be rendered all the same. The books are to be opened, and we are to be judged out of the books. During the weeks of this epidemic—in the long list of deaths, in the large number of new-made graves, in the unusual number of funeral processions along our streets, God has been reminding us of this account which we must soon render up; He has been projecting before us in a way to startle us, the thought of eternity.

You who are not Christians, who have not yet repented of your sins, who have not yet surrendered yourselves to the guidance of Jesus Christ, if you allow these repeated warnings that you have had, day by day, week by week, to go unheeded—if you still go on in your sins, should God suddenly cut you off in your sins, you will have no one to blame but yourselves. It won't be God's fault if you are lost, if eternity finds you unprepared. God has opened the way for your salvation, through the gift of His only begotten Son, who died that you might have the opportunity of making your peace with God—the opportunity of having your sins forgiven, and of laying hold of life, spiritual and eternal; and he has notified you not only of the consequences of sin, but of what provision he has graciously made for your escape, if you desire to escape. This is all he can do; this is all that he is going to do. Your fate is in your own hands. If you choose life, it will be life; if you choose death, it will be death. My earnest appeal to you is, let it be life and not death; and let the choice be made at once. Before you go out of this house make up your minds to do the right thing—the wise thing—the only sensible thing. You have come out of this epidemic alive, while thousands have perished. Are you going to spend the rest of your days in the service of sin and Satan, or in the service of God? You know



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what you ought to do; you know what you will do, if you consult your best interest—if you do the right thing.

8. There is only one other thought that has come to me in connection with this epidemic; it is of the blessedness of religion, of the sense of security which a true, living, working faith in the Lord Jesus Christ gives one in the midst of life's perils. I felt, as doubtless you all felt, who are Christians, the blessedness of a firm grip upon Jesus Christ—the blessedness of a realizing sense of being anchored in God and in His precious promises. While the plague was raging, while thousands were dying, what a comfort it was to feel that we were in the hands of a loving Father who was looking out for us, who had given us the great assurance that all things should work together for our good. And, therefore, that come what would—whether we were smitten with the epidemic or not, or whether being smitten, we survived or perished, we knew it would be well with us, that there was no reason to be alarmed. Even if death came, we knew it was all right. The apostle says, “it is gain for me to die.” Death had no terrors for him. He says, “the hour of my departure is at hand: I have fought the good fight; I have finished my course; I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of glory which the Lord the righteous judge shall give at that day. And not to me only but to all them that loveth his appearing.” And it was this same apostle who flung in the face of death the defiance, “O death, where is thy sting? O grave where is thy victory?” The sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law; but thanks be unto God who giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

In the presence of such a faith, in the realization of God's love, as revealed in Jesus Christ, in the consciousness of fellowship with him, what are epidemics, what are scourges, what are all of life's trials, sufferings, disappointments? They only tend to work out for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory. But, of course, if faith is to help us; if it is to put its great strong arms under us; if we are to feel its sustaining power under such distressing circumstances, it must be a real, living faith in God—it must be the genuine article—a faith that works, that works by love, and that purifies the heart. Any other faith is of absolutely no value to us in the midst of the great crises of life. And I said to myself while the epidemic was on, and while I was examining my own heart to see how far my religion was helping me to be calm, self-possessed. It is a good time for those of us who are Christians to examine ourselves to see exactly how it is with us, whether the foundation upon which we are building is a rock foundation—whether our faith is really resting upon Christ, the solid Rock, or not. And I still feel that one important function of this epidemic will be lost if it fails to have that effect upon us, if it does not lead to careful heart-searching on our part.

If, as the result of such examination, we find that we did not get out of our religion very much help, in bracing us up under the strain through which we have been passing, then we know that there is something wrong either we have no faith at all, or it is very weak, and therefore that we need to give a little more attention to our spiritual condition than we have been giving. It shows that we are running down spiritually. Or, if we find that we were helped, that our fears were allayed as we thought of our relations to God and to his Son Jesus Christ, then we have an additional reason why we should cling all the closer to him, and why we should be all the more earnest in our efforts to serve him. We ought to come put of this epidemic more determined than ever to run with patience the race that is set before us; more determined than ever to make heaven our home. And this I trust is the purpose, the determination of us all.

Let us all draw near to God in simple faith. Let us re-consecrate ourselves, all of us, to him; let us all make up our minds to be better Christians.