

Chapter 5

We shall next advert to the moral and religious state of the college at the time he assumed the charge of it. In both these respects it was far from being happy. Infidelity at that period had become extensively prevalent both in Europe and in the American States. It had extended its baneful influence even within the walls of Yale College, and no student was in fashion with the times who was not a professed infidel; and some of them were even called by the names of the great master spirits and champions of infidelity.

At this period also the college church among the students was almost extinct; and, at length, it dwindled to a single person. The influence of infidelity was ascendant, and from the circumstance that questions which involved the inspiration of the scriptures were, through a mistaken policy, not allowed to be discussed by the Senior class in their public disputes, the students had come to believe that their instructors were afraid to meet the question fairly.

The appointment of such a man as Dr. Dwight to the presidency, in relation to this important subject, was singularly fortunate. No man better understood the evidence upon which the inspiration of the scriptures rested. It was a question which he was ever ready to meet, whoever was enlisted against it.

At an early period of his presidency a division of the Senior class, among other questions, proposed for discussion the following: "Are the scriptures of the Old and New Testament the word of God?" To their surprise the president selected this for discussion and requested those who should take the negative side to bring forward all the facts and arguments which they were able to produce.

The occasion was a deeply interesting one. Most appeared as the abettors of infidelity and laid out all their strength to fortify the position which they had taken. The president listened with candor and with calmness to the discussion. At length it came to him to examine the several grounds which had been taken and to weigh the evidence for and against the divine authority of the scriptures. He entered upon this duty like a man fully acquainted with the several parts of the field into which they entered, and conscious of the justice of the cause which he had espoused.

It is almost needless to add the issue of that day's contest. He not only exposed the fallacy of the arguments which had been brought forward and the irrelevancy of the facts adduced, but shed such a flood of light upon the subject that none could resist it. From this time, infidelity found scarcely a lurking place within the walls of the college.

It would give us pleasure to follow this great and good man, and to speak with some minuteness of the faithful and conscientious manner in which he discharged his duty in relation to the college over which he presided. Of the extent and diversity of his labors,

few unacquainted with them can form a proper estimate. He regularly discharged the duties of President, Professor of Divinity, Professor of Rhetoric, Professor of Logic, Metaphysics and Ethics; and in all these several departments he did not merely discharge his duty, but in each one so acquitted himself that everything was done which the case admitted of. The truth is, he was laborious beyond what most men are willing to be.

He delighted to advance the interests of religion and science, and in such a cause he was willing to spend and be spent. Few men in our country wrote for publication as much as he did. None perhaps have ever contributed by their writings more to the instruction of our countrymen than he.

At the same time important objects abroad engaged a large share of his attention. "He was largely consulted," says Professor Silliman,

in cases of ecclesiastical, personal, and other difficulties, and freely gave his time, his advice, and his influence as a peacemaker. He was, also, the common parent of young ministers, and of other young men, who resorted to him with filial familiarity for counsel and direction, and for his name and influence to assist them in setting forward in life. Parishes without ministers, schools without instructors, colleges without heads, freely applied to him and always with advantage. The numerous benevolent and religious institutions by which this age and country are adorned, whether regarding charity to the poor, the education and establishment of ministers, the instruction and conversion of the heathen, or the translation and dissemination of the scriptures, always claimed and obtained his active assistance. He was eminently serviceable in devising and arranging the plans of some of the more recent academic and theological institutions of our country. Numerous correspondents, visits from an extensive circle of friends and acquaintance, and calls from many respectable strangers, made large demands on his time--demands which were met with kindness and appropriate attention.

From the laborious life of President Dwight, we should naturally expect that his constitution would have early shown marks of decay and infirmity. The reverse, however, was singularly the fact. At the age of sixty-five he was as active and energetic as most men are at forty. His powers, neither of body nor of mind, appeared in any degree to have been impaired. The same vigor of understanding, the same lively and fertile imagination, the same untiring and efficient exertion pertained to him as in any former period of his life, all giving promise that his useful life might be continued for many years longer.

The will of God, however, was otherwise. In February, 1816, he was suddenly seized with that disease which ultimately brought him to the grave. The first attack made fearful ravages on a constitution which was now remarkably firm, and proved well nigh fatal. Under bodily pain, which often amounted to agony, he evinced the greatest patience and resignation to the will of God. Not a murmur escaped him. His conversation was the conversation of a Christian, not only free from complaint but at times cheerful and

animated. His prayers were fervent, but full of humility, submission, and hope.

From this attack he gradually so far recovered [so] as, in the month of June, to deliver to his pupils a sermon composed for the occasion during his sickness. The text selected was Psalm 94:17,18,19: "Unless the LORD had been my help, my soul had almost dwelt in silence. When I said, my foot slips, thy mercy, O LORD, held me up. In the multitude of my thoughts within me, thy comforts delight my soul." The occasion was deeply interesting and solemn. He had been down, as it were, to the shadows of death; he had lost sight of the world and was now, therefore, eminently qualified to speak impressively on the true character of worldly good.

In the introduction to this discourse he touchingly alluded to his sickness and sufferings, and the dangerous situation in which he had recently been placed; and he could now assure his young friends that the value of this world on a dying bed was poor indeed. It could not relieve from pain, it could not restore to health, it could not prolong life, it could promise no good in the life to come.

In conclusion, he addressed his pupils in the following impressive and affectionate manner, as the advice which he would import to them, speaking to them as it were from a dying bed:

"Let me exhort you, my young friends," said he,

now engaged in the ardent pursuit of worldly enjoyments, to believe that you will one day see them in the very light in which they have been seen by me. The attachment to them, which you so strongly feel, is unfounded, vain, full of danger, and fraught with ruin. You will one day view them from a dying bed. There, should you retain your reason, they will appear as they really are. They will then be seen to have two totally opposite faces. Of these, you have hitherto seen but one. That [one]--gay, beautiful, and alluring as it now appears--will then be hidden from your sight; and another [one], which you have not seen--deformed, odious, and dreadful--will stare you in the face and fill you with amazement and bitterness. No longer pretended friends and real flatterers, they will unmask themselves and appear only as tempters, deceivers, and enemies who stood between you and heaven, persuaded you to forsake your God, and cheated you out of eternal life.

But no acts of obedience will then appear to you to have merited, in any sense, acceptance with God. In this view, those acts of my life concerning which I entertained the best hopes which I was permitted to entertain, those which to me appeared the least exceptionable, were nothing and less than nothing. The mercy of God, as exercised towards our lost race through the all-sufficient and glorious righteousness of the Redeemer, yielded me the only foundation of hope for good beyond the grave. During the long continuation of my disease, as I was always (except when in paroxysms of suffering) in circumstances entirely fitted for solemn

contemplation, I had ample opportunity to survey this most interesting of all subjects on every side. As the result of all my investigations, let me assure you--and that from the neighborhood of the eternal world--*confidence in the righteousness of Christ* is the only foundation furnished by earth or heaven upon which, when you are about to leave this world, you can safely or willingly rest the everlasting life of your souls. To trust upon anything else will be *to feed upon the wind, and sup up the east wind*. You will then be at the door of eternity, will be hastening to the presence of your Judge, will be just ready to give up your account of the *deeds done in the body*, will be preparing to hear the final sentence of acquittal or condemnation, and will stand at the gate of heaven or hell. In these amazing circumstances you will infinitely need--let me persuade you to believe and to feel that you will infinitely need--a firm foundation on which you may stand and from which you will never be removed. There is no other such foundation but *the Rock of Ages*. Then you will believe, then you will feel that there is no other. The world, stable as it now seems, will then be sliding away from under your feet. All earthly things on which you have so confidently reposed will recede and vanish. To what will you then betake yourselves for safety?

Such was the strong and emphatic testimony which he bore to the vanity of hopes resting upon an earthly basis. And he was now more than ever qualified to speak of their unsubstantial character. He had been placed in circumstances to test their value. He had been conducted to the very gates of death. He had stood upon the borders of the grave, with death and judgment and eternity in open prospect. Here standing, he had calmly inquired whether as a sinner he could venture into the presence of a righteous God, trusting to merits growing out of a life eminently devoted to good in the world.

What was the answer to his inquiries on this momentous subject? In the language of a ruined sinner, he could only say in respect to himself, "unclean, unclean, God be merciful to me a sinner!" To repeat his own language, he could perceive no foundation upon which safely to rest but the ROCK OF AGES. The *righteousness of a crucified Redeemer* presented the only sure hope. But he found that a hope based upon that righteousness was like an anchor sure and steadfast.

And now that death has closed his earthly career, now that he looks down from his habitation of glory, what would he say to the generation which inhabits that seminary over which he once presided? What would he say to those whom he instructed in that favored spot? What would he say? What he *did* say while tabernacling in the flesh:

This little life, my pupils! say,
What is it? A departing day,
An April morn with frost behind,
A bubble bursting on the wind,
A dew exhaled beneath the sun,
A tale rehearsed, a vision gone.

Yet on this little life depend
Blessings and woes which cannot end.
The only paths before you spread,
And long the way your feet must tread.
This, straight and rough and narrow lies
The course direct to wonder skies.
Full wide the *other* path extends,
And round and round serpentine bends;
While peace resigns to blank despair
And light is changed to darkness there.

During the summer his disease was so far relaxed that he was able to attend to his usual routine of duty. Yet scarcely a day passed in which he did not suffer from the disease which still lingered about him; and often his pain was excruciating. Still, his mind appears to have been clear and vigorous, and as in former years, to have been ardently bent on the accomplishment of good. Even within four weeks of his death he wrote several numbers of an original periodical paper, by way of experiment, to ascertain whether he could write two in a week without injuring his health. Finding, as he imagined, that he could, he proposed to continue it under the title of the "Friend," a title under which he had written thirty years before.

With the commencement of the term, which closed his earthly course, he began to hear the senior class, and persevered, though often with extreme inconvenience, for three or four weeks. During this period he would often come into the recitation room languid and scarcely able to support himself; and yet, forgetting his feebleness, he would discourse with all the eloquence and interest which had marked his lectures in the days of health and strength. On the day before the thanksgiving, he met the senior class for the last time. On that day he caught cold, was worse, and did not appear abroad again.

Still, however, he continued to hear the theological class, until within a week of his death, at his house. The last occasion of their assembly was rendered peculiarly interesting from the manner in which his lofty mind triumphed over a paroxysm of his disease, which at this time came upon him and by reason of which his sufferings amounted almost to agony. The object of that day's discussion was the doctrine of the Trinity. Upon this sublime and difficult subject he reasoned in a manner marked by peculiar eloquence and peculiar force. This was the last effort which he was to make after a course of about forty years instruction.

Four days before his decease and the very evening before the attack upon his brain (which proved the immediate prelude to his death), he completed a work upon the divine origin of the scriptures, as derived from the writings of Paul. At twilight on the evening of that day (Tuesday), he stitched with his own hand the cover upon the manuscript, and also a cover upon an original poem of fifteen hundred lines, which also he had recently completed. Although it was almost dark, he declined having a candle and said he believed

he could finish. He did so, and added emphatically (although it is not supposed with any presentiment how prophetic his words would prove), "*there, I have done.*"

And he had done--done all that his Maker had for him to do on this side of the grave.

The disease which terminated the life of President Dwight was an internal cancer. But for this, which was at first a local complaint, it appeared probable that he might have been continued even to old age. His system was literally undermined and worn out with intense pain.

On the morning of the eighth of January (Wednesday), he rose from his bed, but soon after was seized with a violent nervous agitation to which fever succeeded, accompanied by a fullness of the blood vessels of the head and a degree of stupor which proved to be the final triumph of his internal enemy. On Thursday evening he attempted family prayer as usual, but a paroxysm of pain prevented his utterance, and he desisted. This was the last attempt that he made to lead his family in prayer to God.

On the following morning it was apparent that life was rapidly hastening to its termination. His approaching dissolution was now announced to him, and the intelligence was received by him with a calm and fortified spirit. On that day, at intervals, he conversed on the great objects of his labors, his desires, and his prayers through life.

In the evening he requested that the eighth chapter of the epistle to the Romans might be read to him. To this he listened with great attention, and at the close of it he exclaimed, "O, what glorious truths!" "Now," said he, "read the 17th of John." Having listened with eager attention to the whole, and having interspersed a number of appropriate observations, he exclaimed again, "O what triumphant truths!" "Go back," said he, "and read the 14th." This being read, "Read," said he, "the 15th." Having heard this, "Read the 16th." While this was reading, his mind evidently wandered. He said little more. After a night of pain and apparent intensity of devotion, he fell asleep in Jesus in the 22nd year of his Presidency and the 65th of his age.

Thus closed the useful life of a distinguished man, and, as we believe, of a Christian ripe for immortality. The death of such a man could not but be extensively felt and deeply deplored. It was a public loss as well as a private calamity. On Tuesday, the 14th of January, his mortal remains were consigned to the tomb, accompanied with such services as were appropriate to the solemn and lamented occasion. In other places, also, public meetings were held, especially by those who had received their education within the walls of the college over which he presided; and strongly and appropriately did they express the sorrow which they felt at the departure of one whom they had justly loved, and who had so eminently contributed to their personal influence and respectability, and to the interests of science, morality, and religion in all the land.