

A

# HALF CENTURY SERMON,

PREACHED IN THE

Presbyterian Church,

IN ITHACA,

FEBRUARY 4, 1866,

BY REV. WM. WISNER, D. D.

NUMBERS, XXIII : 23.—*“What hath God wrought.”*

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The avails of this Discourse will be devoted to the cause of Foreign Missions.

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# S E R M O N .

NUMBERS, XXIII: 23. "What hath God wrought!"

Our text is a prophesy of Balaam telling Balak what the astonished nations would say in view of what God would do for Israel, and I have selected it as an appropriate *exclamation* for us in view of what God has done for Ithaca and the surrounding country.

History is too often read as a mere aggregation of events which have transpired in the past. When thus read, it derives all its interests from the exciting nature of the events recorded, and though less deleterious, is of little more benefit to the mind than the pages of a novel. But when truthful history is read, as it should be, as a development of the plans and purposes of the Almighty in the government of our world, and the events recorded are traced to their causes, and contemplated in connection with their influence upon the future, it is taken out of the category of amusing tales, and takes its place among the mediums through which the Creator makes himself known to his intelligent creatures. It is God in history which elevates it above those fictitious stories under which the press groans, and by which the precious *time of our youth is wasted, and their minds dwarfed* if not corrupted.

To the intelligent student of history, the past and the present form an interesting net-work of cause and effect, which, when the light of inspiration is permitted to shine upon it, is converted into an illuminated diagram, in which the hidden things of God are clearly seen, being understood by the things which he is causing to pass before us. This view of

history sometimes clothes a single incident, of no general interest in itself, with sufficient importance to cause the angels in heaven to rejoice. That thunder storm in Germany which struck Martin Luther and another law student to the ground and killed the latter, was an event of no general interest in itself, and yet it was one in a train of causes which was ordained of God to paralyze the arm of "the man of sin," break his iron yoke from the necks of millions of his vassals, and give an impulse to civil and religious liberty, and to evangelical religion, which seems destined, in the hands of God, to emancipate the world.

It is with such a view of history in its relation to the wisdom and goodness of God, and the temporal and eternal well-being of men, that I have prepared this discourse; and it is with such views that I desire all who hear me to listen to what God has done for our beautiful village for the last fifty years.

At the commencement of the present century, from the Delaware River to the Great Lakes, and from Oneida County to the Allegany Mountains, the sound of the church-going bell had never been heard, and the entire region of what was then called "Western New York," with a wide strip of country adjoining it in Pennsylvania, was a moral waste. The Lord's day was, as a general thing, a day of idleness and dissipation. In all that region which is now covered by five Synods, there were then but three Presbyterian ministers, and three or four temporary houses of worship.

In all the villages through this region it was then common for the most respectable inhabitants to spend the autumnal and winter evenings at each other's houses drinking and playing cards. Besides these evening meetings at private houses, there were frequent gatherings at some tavern, where the intoxicating beverage would be so freely used that the men would sometimes come to blows. The speaker has seen

at one of these gatherings, the High Sheriff of the county of Tioga and one of the members of the bar fighting till they were well sprinkled with blood.

Ithaca, the more immediate subject of this discourse, was taken possession of by three white families in 1789, but at the beginning of this century it had only five, and it had then no public conveyance to or from the place.

In 1806 it had seven framed houses and as many more made of logs, and the inhabitants feeling that their place deserved a name, called it after the supposed abode of Homer's favorite hero.

In 1807 a turnpike was laid out from Ithaca to Owego, and the place began to assume an importance as a commercial village.

But while it was rising in its prospects as a place of business, its moral character was deplorably low. A society called, by misnomer, a "Moral Society," but which soon took the more appropriate name of "The Chaotic Society," was the only police of the village. This Society made its own laws, and punished those who violated them in its own way, and its moral code was as novel as its punishments were peculiar. If a man became *too* drunk, and was noisy and abusive in the tavern, the police of the Society would throw a rope over him and drag him into the street and drench him with cold water, or draw him to the creek and there duck him, as the English Jurists used to duck their common scolds.

The Sabbath was so little regarded, that as late as 1815 a man from Owego made a bee to draw a Durham boat from our village to the Inlet on that day; and intemperance, licentiousness, and their concomitant vices marched, as usual, in the track of Sabbath desecration.

The pastor of the little Presbyterian Church which was formed here in 1804, and was the only religious organization in the place, was so discouraged by the wickedness of the

people, that he pronounced the pulpit vacant and left the place without being dismissed.

On the first week in February, 1816, the speaker, at the solicitation of some of the leading men of the village, removed here and took charge of the little Church, and as soon as suitable arrangements could be made, was installed over it as its pastor.

The Church then consisted of eight male and twelve female members living within six miles of the village. Of these we were under the painful necessity of excommunicating four of the males and two of the females, and another of the males died soon after the speaker came here.

Under these discouraging circumstances the speaker commenced his labors in this place.

As soon as the ground was sufficiently settled in the spring, a number of the members of his congregation were engaged in a horse race on the Sabbath, in time of divine service, in sight of the place where he was preaching.

Seeing the ravages which intemperance was making, he procured the statistics of the liquor traffic, and ascertaining that there were fifty thousand gallons of intoxicating liquors sold here in a year, he preached a sermon from the text, "Woe unto him who giveth his neighbor drink, who putteth his bottle to him to make him drunk."

This enraged the rum-sellers and drinkers so much that they took down a tavern sign that night and nailed it up before his door.

Soon after this the school-house in which we worshiped was torn down by a mob, and we had to fit up an old barn, on the lot which the pastor occupied, for divine service.

This was followed by shearing the mane and tail of the pastor's horse, and when he exchanged it for another, attempting to cut its throat, carrying off his carriage wheels and hiding them in the woods, &c., &c.

Without taking notice of these annoyances, or indulging in any unkind feelings towards the authors of them, the word of God was plainly and statedly preached, not in the enticing words of man's wisdom, but in the unadorned and simple language in which it is revealed to us, and Christ crucified, which was to the Jew a stumbling block and to the Greek foolishness, was, in answer to the prayers of a little band of christians, made the power of God and the wisdom of God unto salvation.

The first communion season after I came here we had seventeen added to our little Church, and cases of hopeful conversion were frequently rejoicing our hearts.

When the weather became too cold for us in the old barn, we hired such a building as Christ was born in—the loft of an old stable—and fitted it up with a stove, and worshiped there till the first church that was ever built in Ithaca could be finished.

At the first communion in the loft of the old stable, two notorious horse racers and gamblers, with forty others, were received into the Church.

In the spring of 1818, John C. Haight and Abner Backus were elected and ordained as ruling Elders, and the following resolutions were passed by the Session:

1. *Resolved*, That the best interests of men, for both time and eternity, require that a speedy check should be put to the alarming sin of intemperance.

2. *Resolved*, That no great progress in a reformation can be reasonably expected, so long as the mass of professors of religion are in the habit of making, selling, buying or using intoxicating drinks.

3. *Resolved*, That we will neither use them ourselves, suffer them to be used in our families, nor furnish them to persons in our employ, except for medicinal or mechanical purposes.

4. *Resolved*, That we recommend the course which we hereby resolve to adopt, to the Church under our care.

This stand of the Session not only brought the Church, virtually, under the total abstinence pledge, but produced a decided reform in the habits of the community.

In 1819 the pastor moved to adopt the same resolutions in the Synod of Geneva, and after considerable opposition the motion prevailed in the Synod, and total abstinence was recommended to all the ministers and churches under the care of that body.

On the first day of January, in this year, the pastor was called to assist the Trumansburg Church in a revival of religion, that Church being without a pastor. He preached on Saturday, examined a number of candidates for church communion, and attended a prayer meeting in the evening. On the Sabbath he preached in the morning, received a number into the Church, and administered the Lord's Supper.

On Monday he was brought home on his bed sick of a fever.

When he came home he was informed that fourteen of the impenitent members of his congregation were so displeased with the doctrines preached, that they had withdrawn their names from the subscription for his support. This his Session thought would prevent their being able to raise the sum they were then giving him. His salary was, nominally, eight hundred dollars, of which he had regularly remitted two hundred every year, and the balance was so badly paid that he had three times, on a settlement with the trustees, thrown off from one to two hundred dollars more, to prevent the society from getting in debt. Under these circumstances he advised the Church to unite with him in a request to the Presbytery to dissolve the pastoral relation.

In accordance with this advice the request was laid before the Presbytery the next week ; but as the recovery of the

pastor was very doubtful, the Presbytery declined to act on the application, and laid it over to the next session, but told the Elder from the Church that if the pastor should recover, and other things remain as they were, the relation would then be dissolved.

Under these circumstances as soon as the pastor's health would permit him to think of his temporal affairs, he sold his house, and as soon as the physician thought it safe, he was laid on a bed in a covered sleigh, and with his wife and five small children, was carried to his father's, in Elmira.

On the first Tuesday of May he had so far recovered that he was able to ride to Ithaca to meet the Presbytery, expecting then to be dismissed. But his Church had in the mean time reconsidered the step they had taken, and withdrew their consent to the dissolution. Under these altered circumstances the Presbytery refused to dismiss him, and to accommodate himself to this unexpected situation, he hired his board in the village and left his family with his father till the November following, when he brought them back and took up his abode, with eight other families, in a house called the Columbian Inn,

About this time the first Methodist Church was erected in this village, by the efforts of one David Ayres.

In the course of this year a branch of the Newburg Bank was established here, which was afterwards merged in the Bank of Ithaca.

In 1821 the village was incorporated, and Ithaca erected into a town.

Dancing had always been a favorite amusement among the impenitent, and was of such frequent occurrence that it was a sore trial to the pastor. He always considered it antagonistic to pure religion, and his feelings were so strong that the day—on the night of which there was to be a dancing party—was kept by him as a day of fasting and prayer.

Some time in 1823 there was a great ball in the place, and the pastor, in alluding to it on the following Sabbath, gave so much offence to the Cashier of the Bank, that he set himself about the establishment of an Episcopal Church, and in 1824 a building for that purpose was erected. I do not mention this circumstance to give the impression that the Episcopal church approve of dancing, for so far as my information extends, their clergy disapprove of that amusement; but I mention it as a mere historical fact in relation to the establishment of that Church in this place.

In 1826 the Presbyterian Church had become so large that they were obliged to add twenty feet to the north end of their house.

The same year, when arrangements were making for the celebration of the anniversary of the Declaration of American Independence, a few christians felt that they could not unite in celebrating that day in the usual manner. They felt that if the day was celebrated at all, it should be as a day of thanksgiving to God, and not as a day of noise, intemperance and dissipation.

Arrangements were accordingly made for the religious observance of the day at the Presbyterian Church, in which the Baptists and Methodists cordially united. Though there was much opposition to this innovation upon long established usages, and some bitter things said of the movers of the measure, yet when the time arrived, though the other celebration was appointed for the same hour, the house was filled to its utmost capacity.

The pastor of the Presbyterian Church preached from the xiv: 14 of Exodus, "This day shall be unto you for a memorial; you shall keep it as a feast unto the Lord through your generations."

From this day there was more feeling upon the subject of religion than usual. The impenitent felt that if christians

thought enough of their religion to have it control them in their national festivities, it was time for others to consider whether they were safe without it. Christians, too, were more engaged and felt more deeply for the impenitent around them who were hourly exposed to the wrath of God.

A female prayer-meeting, which had been suspended, was revived, the stated meetings for prayer were better attended, and a deep religious seriousness soon became general in the Church, and daily prayer-meetings were kept up for several weeks.

On the last day of September, in one of our prayer-meetings, a young lady indulged a hope that she had passed from death unto life, and was full of joy and peace.

This was the commencement of a glorious revival which resulted in the hopeful conversion of more than four hundred souls. Two hundred and twenty of these united with this Church, of which number eighty were heads of families, and the rest an interesting class of youth.

This work was deep and solemn, but quiet and orderly. The evening meetings were always dismissed by nine o'clock, and no disorder or unnecessary noise prevailed in them. Though individuals were sometimes so deeply convicted of their sins under the preaching of the Gospel that they were unable to walk home without assistance, yet during divine service there would be nothing heard more than a suppressed sigh or groan.

Those who were the subjects of this work were taught by their own experience that, "The carnal mind is enmity against God, is not subject to his law, neither indeed can be," and were thus prepared to feel, "That except they were born again they could not see the kingdom of God." This experience prepared them to receive the atonement made by Christ and justification by faith, with all the kindred doctrines of the Gospel, as belonging to those good tidings of

great joy which were brought by the angels to the shepherds of Bethlehem.

The speaker has never seen or read of a revival in which there was less of human machinery and more of the power of the Holy Spirit, since the days of the Apostles.

The pastor had very little help from abroad, but what he lacked in foreign aid was more than made up to him by the untiring, cheerful, and judicious efforts of the officers and private members of his Church. His people, like Aaron and Hur of old, held up his hands and encouraged his heart, and by their ardent and believing prayers, "MOVED THE ARM THAT MOVES THE WORLD."

About this time the Baptist Church was organized and their house of worship erected, which was subsequently consumed by fire, and replaced by their present edifice.

In the fall of 1828 a portion of the Church were again much revived, and we hoped for another outpouring of the Spirit, but some of our members had become fond of large parties, in which the spirit of prayer gave place to the voice of mirth, and these became disaffected because their pastor and brethren were entreating them to exchange these resorts of pleasure for the conference and the prayer-meeting, and instead of seeking to amuse themselves, to labor and pray for the salvation of dying souls. These discordant feelings among the members of the Church caused the withdrawing of the Spirit's influence, and the hopeful appearances were succeeded by the ordinary gayeties of the season.

In April, 1830, thirty-one of our members were dismissed from our communion to form the present Dutch Church, and their house of worship was erected in that and the following year.

In the fall of this year the Spirit was again poured out upon our place. The work commenced in a meeting established by a few of our members on South hill for the reli-

gious instruction of children. But it spread with such rapidity that the village and surrounding neighborhoods soon felt its blessed influence, and on the first Sabbath of January following, one hundred and forty-four hopeful converts were received into the Church, and the joy of the occasion was such that, at the request of the people, the communion was repeated the next Lord's day and fifty more were added to the Church. The Sacrament was administered again on the third Sabbath, and thirty more were received. This gave the Presbyterian Church eight hundred members, all united together in the bonds of christian love, besides numerous additions to the Dutch, Baptist and Methodist denominations, and extended a purifying influence upon the entire community. There were but eighteen or twenty adults in the Presbyterian congregation who were not indulging a hope in Christ.

This state of things induced the pastor to feel that he might be more useful by going to cultivate some harder field than this then was, and receiving a call to the Brick Church in Rochester, he was, at his own request, dismissed from his beloved charge. This was a sore trial to him and his entire flock, but as he thought it was his duty to make the change, both parties submitted to the sacrifice.

The Brick Church to which he was going was at that time a feeble one. It was fourteen thousand dollars in debt, and its building much out of repair, but they took hold of the promise, "He who watereth shall be watered," and going immediately to work to fulfill the conditions of that promise, the Lord poured out his Spirit upon them, and made them prosperous and happy. In four years they paid off their great debt, put their house in complete repair, and contributed for Missionary and other benevolent objects twelve thousand dollars, and are now second to no Church in that city for prosperity, influence, or usefulness.

At the end of four years the pastor was so affected with a bronchial affection that he was advised by his physician to try a more southern climate, and receiving a call from the first Church in St. Louis, he was dismissed from his charge and removed to that city; but at the end of two years, though relieved from his bronchial difficulty, the climate had so impaired his health in other respects, that he was obliged to leave that place, and on returning to Ithaca, finding his old Church vacant, he supplied them as his health would permit, and on the 10th day of July, 1839, he was re-installed over them.

From this period Ithaca continued prosperous in its religious and secular interests, till the disastrous speculations of '35 and '36, when by making haste to be rich some of our respectable citizens were ruined, and others deeply embarrassed, and the moral tone of society was greatly impaired, and a love for money and a spirit of reckless adventure excited, from which this village and the country at large have never fully recovered.

From his return to them in 1837 to his re-installment, though his health was quite feeble, the Lord was pleased to bless his own Truth and give us two seasons of refreshing from his presence.

From 1839 to 1848 the Church was prosperous and happy, but in the spring of that year our village was sorely afflicted by an epidemic which carried off a number of our valuable citizens, and the pastors of two of our churches being absent, it threw so much labor upon the speaker in attending to the sick and dying in three churches, that he was obliged to suspend his labors, and on the 10th of December, by the advice of his Elders and trustees, he for the second time resigned his pastoral charge. This was the final close of a pastorate of about thirty years, which had been blessed of God to the salvation of more than twelve hundred souls.

As the residue of the history of our village is known to those who hear me, what remains of this discourse will be to inquire for the causes of the great and important changes which have taken place among us and around us for the last fifty years, and thus make the history of the past a lesson from which the present generation may learn wisdom. And,

1. Let us inquire for the cause of that fearfully low state of morals which prevailed in this region of country in the early part of the present century.

This was owing to the infidelity of its inhabitants.

The nation had suffered much in its religious character by the war of the Revolution, and as France had assisted us in our struggle for independence, we were prepared to sympathize with her in her revolutionary struggles, and in this way prepared to look with too much favor upon their infidel sentiments. The influence of this moral malaria brought a blight upon the religious feelings and moral character of the nation at large, which was increased by the loose sentiments of our second President, and prepared us to choose for our third a man who had published to the world, in his notes on Virginia, that it was "No matter whether a man believed in twenty God's or in one."

This letting down of the religious feeling in the older settlements, peopled the west with men who, if not tinctured with some modification of infidelity, were under but little restraint from their religious belief, and coming with these low sentiments where they were generally deprived of the stated means of grace, had nothing to check them in their downward course.

2. Let us now inquire for the cause of that upward tendency which made Ithaca, and the region around, what they were in 1835.

This was the stated preaching of the Gospel, with the believing prayers and corresponding labor of God's people.

When the Gospel began to be stately preached in any place, the few christians who lay buried up among the wicked, were disintegrated from them, and began to cry unto God, and to exert themselves for the salvation of those around them. A sense of their weakness and danger led them to lay hold on the hope set before them, *and he who has never said to his people, "Seek ye me in vain,"* sent his Holy Spirit to accompany his Word, and give efficacy to the feeble means which were used for the salvation of dying souls.

In 1816 the Spirit began to be poured out upon Ithaca, and in ten or twelve years the entire region of what was then called "Western New York," was awakened, and christians began to feel their responsibility, and "*The walls of the spiritual Jerusalem were built up, because the people had a mind to work.*"

This is the philosophy of that moral renovation which pervaded, not only Ithaca and Western New York, but our whole land, from the early part of the present century to nearly its middle, and this is the philosophy of all genuine revivals of religion, and of all reliable reforms. CHRIST CRUCIFIED, is the power of God and the wisdom of God unto salvation. But, *as he could not, consistently, do many mighty works when he was here in the flesh, where his people were unbelieving,* so it has never been consistent for him to save sinners except through the agency of a believing, praying, and working church. *That pure river of water of life which flows out from the throne of God and the Lamb,* must run through the church to reach a dying world, and woe unto those professing christians who shall, by their worldliness or unbelief, obstruct it in its course. This truth is illustrated in the history of the world, but of no place more strikingly than in that of our village.

In conclusion, let me ask my hearers to contemplate the

responsibility which the facts here presented roll upon the children of God.

If the glorious out-pourings of His SPIRIT, which prevailed here and around us from 1816 to 1835, had continued to this day, how much sin and misery in this world, and weeping and wailing in the world to come, would have been prevented? And why were they not continued? The Bible informs us that it was not because "*God's arm is shortened that he could not save, nor his ear heavy that he could not hear, but it was our sins which hid his face from us.*" God himself assures us that he has no pleasure in the death of sinners, but that they should turn and live, and that when Zion travails she shall bring forth.

Now if these things are so, let us all seriously inquire how much of sin and suffering in this world, and of hopeless misery in the world to come, may have resulted, and may yet result, from what we have done or neglected to do.

In the glorious days to which I have alluded, christians lived as if they believed that "the chief end of man was to glorify God and enjoy him forever." Do you live so now? Christians then spent much of their time in persuading sinners to become reconciled to God. Do they do so now? Then the highest and sweetest enjoyment of God's people, in their social gatherings, was to converse about religion, and tell each other of their experience, and unite in praising God for his loving kindness and tender mercy to a dying world. Is it so with us now? Christians then loved to hear their pastors preach the distinguishing doctrines of the Gospel, and urge the performance of the self-denying duties which that Gospel enjoins. Do we love such preaching now?

Has not the love of money, which is the root of all evil, to a fearful extent rooted out our love for these things, and the love of souls for whom Jesus died? Are not many who pro-

fess religion now, the advocates for a little moderate drinking, and a little playing at cards or dice, and a little dancing?

My dear hearers, though I have long since ceased to be your pastor, I have not ceased to love you ; and standing, as I do, on the brink of this world, and waiting for the coming of the messenger to bring me home, my heart bleeds at the thought that when I meet you on the other side of Jordan, I may see some of you, with your faces pale and hopeless, standing on the left hand of the Redeemer.

Let me, then, once more, and not improbably for the last time, "AS THOUGH GOD DID BESEECH YOU BY ME, TO PRAY YOU IN CHRIST'S STEAD TO BE RECONCILED TO GOD."