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An Address delivered in the Mercer Street Church at the funeral of the Hon. Benjamin Franklin Butler

FUNERAL ADDRESS.

There is that in death, independently of character or circumstances, that stamps it with awful solemnity. You hear of its having found a new victim, and it impresses you as little as the changing of the wind; but when you come to resolve it into its distinctive elements, and see how comprehensive and yet how mysterious it is; when you think of its antecedents, its attendants, its consequences; when you take into view the premonitory pangs, the rending of the man in twain, the separation from earthly scenes, the disruption of tender ties, the closing of the period of trial, and the beginning of an illimitable retribution—when you take these things into the account, I say, and break away from the illusions of sense and of habit, as you contemplate them, you cannot but feel that this most common of all events is also the most momentous. Be it so that the world is making one of its very humblest contributions to the land of silence; that the death that

has occurred has set no human heart to throbbing, and has awakened no interest except that the remains should be buried out of sight—still, even there, death has done his perfect work, and the only reason why you view it with indifference is that you do not think of it at all.

But while death, considered in the most general view, is a momentous event,—an event with which none but the fool or the madman can trifle,—its aspect is essentially modified by the character of its subject; and where the character has been moulded by the Divine influence of Christianity, the work that death accomplishes is at best but a mock triumph. What he does seems indeed terrible enough; but you have only to take one step beyond the visible to find that, under the guise of a monster, he was performing the office of a good angel. Nothing dreadful appears on this side the vail, but has a glorious offset on the other. The dying Christian is taking leave of friends who are dear to his heart; but he is going into the embraces of other friends who have preceded him in the upward course, and is about to join a glorified community, to all of whom, through Christ, he will sustain a most endearing relation. He is closing his connection with all earthly objects and interests, but he is forming a connection with a new and glorious world, where there will be full scope for his exalted and

ever brightening faculties. He finds the death-struggle hard, and those who look on, turn away and weep; but wait a little, and that struggle is over, and with it all suffering, and then comes the exceeding and eternal weight of glory. The body is about to be dressed for the grave, and there it will moulder, and ultimately turn to common dust; but ere long an omnipotent word shall reconstruct it into a glorified body, and bring it up from its lowly resting-place, and animate it with the spirit which death had dislodged, and thus the entire man shall start forth on a fresh career of immortality. Make the Christian's death-bed seem as dark and revolting as you can, and we have only to hold up the blessed Gospel, and let that shine upon it, and it becomes illumined as with light from the third heavens.

But while death is essentially modified by character, the Christian's death is, to some extent, modified by circumstances; and one of these circumstances is worldly consideration and rank. To the dying Christian himself this indeed is nothing, except as his fidelity in the high stations he has occupied, must come up gratefully before him, as a witness to his Christian integrity, and a voucher for the genuineness of his hope. In all the essentials of death, especially in the great matter of going to appear before God, he is conscious of being on a

level with the humblest of the race. But to others his death takes on a peculiar type, from the fact that it closes a life of public service and honor. They have watched, perhaps admired, possibly envied, him, as they have seen the laurels accumulate upon his brow, have heard the congratulatory welcome by which he has been introduced to one lofty station after another, and have marked the impress of his high and honorable deeds upon the surrounding community,—perhaps upon the country at large. He has seemed to them to be walking through the world in glory; and possibly they have had no higher aspirations than to be in this respect like him. But now that the time of his departure has come, they follow him in their imaginations and their inquiries at least, to his death-bed, curious to know the history of his passage through the dark valley. And the grand revelation that is made to them there is, that there is nothing stable but religion. It is not the great man or the honorable man that appears now, but it is the humble Christian—the Christian in communion with the Conqueror of death, and becoming entranced with visions of immortality. To his view all earthly distinctions have faded into insignificance; while the one grand distinction of being an adopted child of the Lord Almighty, fills his eye and satisfies his soul. As he lies there panting his life away, he is preaching, oh, how impressively,

of the littleness of the world, and the majesty of religion. With a hand that death is palsying, he is holding up a balance, in the one side of which are the honors which the world has poured upon him, in the other, the salvation which Christ hath wrought in him; and he bids all take note that the former are outweighed by the latter, more than an atom is outweighed by a world.

I have made these few remarks, my friends, as illustrative of the spirit of the occasion that has convened us. The event, when viewed in its more general bearings, casts into the shade, in solemnity and impressiveness, all the most striking events in the history of our departed friend that had preceded it. When viewed in connection with the sanctifying power of Christianity, it takes on a cheering aspect, and bids the mourner not let his heart be troubled. When viewed as crowning a life of great worldly distinction, it becomes especially monitory to those who are sacrificing to the honors of earth the glories of heaven. The man who is addressing us from the silence of his coffin to-day, was another Joseph of Arimathea, "an honorable man and a counsellor, who also waited for the kingdom of God." He died full of honors, but full of faith and of the Holy Ghost. It is not my purpose to enter minutely into the details of either his life or character; but I should not feel that I had met the demands either

of the occasion, or of a long-cherished and affectionate personal friendship, if I were not to indicate briefly the manner in which his life has been spent, to point to some of the monuments of his public usefulness, and to hint at those fine intellectual, moral, and Christian traits with which his highest distinction was identified.

Benjamin Franklin Butler was, on the paternal side of Irish, on the maternal of Puritan, extraction. He was born in the part of Kinderhook that is now Stuyvesant, on the Hudson River, December 14, 1795. His father, who was an intelligent, enterprising, and influential man, took a deep interest in the cause of education, and gave to this son the best early advantages within his reach; and the son showed his appreciation of them by improving them most diligently, and thus developing at once the strongest aspirations for knowledge and a remarkable facility at acquiring it. Having served as an assistant to his father in different occupations, and completed a brief course of preparatory study, he became a student at Law under the direction and patronage of Mr. (now Ex-President) Van Buren, with whom he was afterwards most intimately associated in his professional and public life, and for whom he always cherished an affection scarcely less than filial. In 1817 he was admitted to the Bar; Mr. Van and Buren, then Attorney General of the

State, and a resident of Albany, received him as a partner in business, and this connection continued, with the exception of a few months in 1819, till December 1821, when the senior partner was appointed to the Senate of the United States. Mr. Butler's first appearance in the higher courts of the State is said to have attracted much attention, and to have drawn from some distinguished jurists the highest testimony to his ability and the most confident predictions of his future eminence. In February, 1821, he was appointed the District Attorney of the city and county of Albany,—an office which often brought him in conflict with some of the ablest members of the profession, but the duties of which he discharged with signal diligence and success. In November, 1824, he was appointed, together with two other eminent lawyers, to take charge of the revision of the laws of the State of New York; an appointment which, considering his youth, nothing but extraordinary intellectual and moral qualities could have justified, but which, in the marked ability and fidelity with which it was discharged, showed the wisdom that dictated it. In 1827 he was chosen member of the Assembly from Albany, with a special view to his explaining and vindicating the new code which was then offered for the sanction of the Legislature; and here, as in his other public relations, he neither sought nor

ters for his companions, he embarked for Havre in the steamer Arago, with every prospect that his health would be confirmed, and expecting no doubt ere long a happy reunion to the circle of friends who parted with him so reluctantly, and who followed him with their blessings and prayers. But, little as he suspected it, he was going away only to die!

He reached the destined port in safety, and still there was nothing to cast a shadow upon his path. With an almost boundless but well-directed curiosity, he looked out upon those scenes of antique grandeur with which he was surrounded, and was gathering rich material for both the imagination and the intellect to work upon; and his family had already begun to reap the fruits of his foreign tour in the fascinating reports of his daily observation which he was sending them. He has arrived in the capital of France, and still, for aught that he knows, all is well. But scarcely has the splendor of that great city begun to open upon him, before he becomes convinced, as if God had written it upon the wall, or an angel had whispered it in his ear, that he has reached the spot where he must die. Sad thoughts about the loved and the loving on both sides of the ocean no doubt obtrude themselves; but living faith is mighty to tranquillize and to elevate: it does not indeed make him forget the objects of

his tenderest affection, but it makes him strong to endure the pang of separation,—strong to commit them to God's gracious care. And there that stranger in a strange land, baptized by the Holy Ghost for the emergency, meets his final summons, not only with quiet submission but with holy triumph. He rests on his Saviour's arm all the way through the dark valley. When he has nearly reached the connecting point between earth and Heaven, he sends back a joyful testimony to his Redeemer's all-sustaining power and grace. He has died far away from home, and friends, and country, but what matters it, so long as he has died in the faith of Jesus, and the Heavenly mansions are just as accessible from one point of the globe as another.

In turning my thoughts to Mr. Butler's character, I find myself disposed rather to dwell upon its general beauty, and harmony, and efficiency, than to resolve it into its distinctive elements; rather to look at that admirable combination of qualities to which are to be referred, under God, the great results of his life, than to contemplate the intellectual and the moral, and the distinct attributes of each, as so many constituent parts of an admirable whole. It was the perfect symmetry that pervaded the entire man, body, mind and heart, that made him an object of such rare attraction while living, and

would he have accepted any dispensation from the most intense labor. In 1829 he was appointed a Regent of the University, but he resigned the place in 1832. In 1833 he acted as Commissioner on the part of the State of New York, to settle a long-agitated controversy between that State and New Jersey; and the negotiation proved successful. In November of the same year he accepted the office of Attorney General of the United States, under General JACKSON's administration, and by his urgent request; and to this office he brought not only the energies of his vigorous and comprehensive mind, but his ever wakeful and discriminating sense of moral obligation, and that diligent and patient research, that untiring assiduity, that never faltered at the sight of obstacles which it was possible to overcome. In this high station, he earned for himself, by the manner in which he discharged its duties, proportionally high honor, and the amount of labor which he performed, and well performed, during this period, is said to have been almost incredible. From October, 1836 to March, 1837, a period of about five months, he consented, by the special request of the President, to perform the duties of Secretary of War; and here also he showed himself alike capable and faithful. It had been his purpose to retire from the office of Attorney General at the close of President JACKSON's term; but he

was persuaded to retain the place for a single year under the administration of his successor. His labors in this department were not finally terminated until September, 1838. After this, he was, at two different periods, United States District Attorney for the Southern District of New York; and at the commencement of Mr. POLK's administration he declined an earnest request to return to Washington in the capacity of Secretary of War. During several of his last years he was withdrawn entirely from public office, and was assiduously devoted to his professional duties. So heavy and incessant were the drafts that were made upon him, that his physical constitution, naturally vigorous, began at length to yield. There is reason to fear that the warnings which nature often gives of approaching evil from the neglect or violation of her laws, were not in his case heeded soon enough. Scarcely had he begun to give himself to relaxation before he rested from all his earthly labors.

It is only a short time since our honored friend determined to break away from all professional cares, and avail himself of the invigorating influence of a voyage across the ocean and a temporary sojourn in foreign countries, by means of which also he might gratify his intellectual tastes, and enlarge the stores of his knowledge. Accordingly, on the 16th of October, with two of his beloved daugh-

that now renders his memory so fragrant and beautiful.

As, however, the occasion would seem to require that I should speak of his character somewhat more in detail, I may say that his intellectual endowments were originally of a very high order. There was a graceful ease and freedom in all his mental operations. He perceived clearly; he judged cautiously, but correctly; and his memory was so exact and retentive as to be a safe depository for almost every thing that it had ever received. Indeed, so minute and perfect was his recollection of all the details of almost any event which had come within his knowledge, that in any relation which he might make, you felt as sure that you were hearing the exact truth as if he were reading it to you from a record which he had made when the event occurred. His faculties were all subjected to careful and constant culture; and the amount of knowledge which he acquired, not only in his own profession but in the various departments of learning and practical life, at once rendered him at home in any circle, and qualified him for almost any field of usefulness.

In his moral constitution also Mr. Butler was eminently favored; though in speaking of him in this respect it is impossible to ignore the aid which he derived from Christianity. He had a simplicity and directness of aim that forbade the thought of

any thing dark or sinuous in his views or conduct. He had much of that prudence that sets a watch at the door of the lips, that they do not needlessly offend. He had that benevolence that delights in the welfare of others, and is willing to make sacrifices to promote it. He had that melting compassion that not only feels but weeps for another's wo,—upon which bleeding and broken hearts act as an irresistible attraction. He had that modesty, which is rather the ornament than the veil of true greatness, and yet that self-possession and dignity which would have done honor to the Court. He combined an almost womanly gentleness with a manly firmness; and while he would never needlessly wound the feelings or assail the prejudices of any, yet where any great question of duty was concerned, and his convictions in relation to it were thoroughly established, he had a will of iron. He was forbearing and forgiving towards those who injured him; in rendering evil for evil I am confident he never took the first lesson. He was a cheerful and thankful recipient of the Divine favors; and when trouble came, he bowed in reverent submission and blessed the hand that sent it. I have seen him rejoicing in an exuberance of domestic comforts, and other temporal blessings; but I never saw him when the spirit of gratitude towards his Heavenly Benefactor even seemed to wane. I have seen him when

the deep waters came over his soul, but I never saw him when he betrayed by a word or a look the least sign of unwillingness that God's will should be done concerning him. However some of these qualities may exist in a humbler form as a natural growth, yet no one could witness their development in him, without feeling assured that they rose to the higher character of graces of the Spirit.

You perceive that I have said little of Mr. Butler's high professional distinction or of the success that marked his public career. These are themes which I would rather treat, if I were to treat them at all, at a greater distance from his coffin. It is his character as a *Christian*,—an earnest, active, consistent, uncompromising Christian, upon which it seems most fitting, as it is to me most delightful, here to dwell. I may say, without the fear of contradiction, that religion with him was an all-pervading principle. You could not persuade yourself that it was something put on; you felt that it was a mighty inward power, directing all his purposes and actions, and moulding his whole character into a form of rare loveliness and beauty. He was not afraid to stand forth a witness for Christ in any circumstances; and although never unduly forward in his religious demonstrations, it was as clear as the light that he was ready to follow the Master whithersoever He might lead. In his family he was a model

of conjugal and parental tenderness and fidelity; and the very last time I saw him, he told me out of a full heart, and in a tone of inexpressible thankfulness, that God's covenant faithfulness had been manifest towards him by bringing every one of his dear children to the Cross. In the Sabbath School (for in one school at least I know he was not only a teacher but a superintendent) he drew the children towards him with cords of love, and labored for their best interests with as much singleness of mind and heart as if that had been his only vocation. At the weekly prayer meetings of the church he considered it a privilege to be present as often as his manifold engagements would allow; and never shall I forget the last meeting of this kind which he attended under my own ministry, in which with more than a brother's tenderness he bade us farewell. He was earnest in his prayers and efforts for the advancement of Christ's cause; while yet he was jealous for the preservation of the order of God's house, and looked with little indulgence upon any thing which he thought involved a departure from the simplicity of the Gospel. Those who saw him in his daily walk, saw that he was living under the influence of the powers of the world to come; but those only who knew him in the most familiar and sacred communings of Christian affection, could form any adequate idea of the vigor of

his inner life. And if I may judge from my own intercourse with him, I may say that his spiritual growth became more strongly marked in his later years. It is only within a few months that he made me a hasty call in a brief interval of leisure during his professional engagements at Albany; and I found that his principal errand was to rejoice with me over the hopeful conversion of one of our mutual friends.

Far be it from me to say that my lamented friend was without imperfections; his uniformly subdued and lowly spirit is the evidence that he would have been the first to repudiate such a suggestion; but I will venture to leave it to those who have fewer imperfections than he, to show what they were. I know that he was prominent in some political conflicts,—a position which no man can occupy without having his motives arraigned, not to say his character assailed. It is not for me to pronounce upon either his general course or his particular acts; but that whatever he did, was done not from the wild dictates of caprice or passion, but from the honest dictates of conscience, I always felt a perfect assurance. When I have heard of him doing his part manfully in the battle and storm of political life, I may have been tempted to wish that he was breathing an atmosphere more congenial with his gentle and peaceful spirit; but I never

doubted that he was acting from the high convictions of duty any more than when I have seen him dispensing his charities to the poor, or bowing at the altars of God.

I look upon this dispensation as specially monitory in its public and national bearings. I cast my eye over this assembly, I look abroad upon this great nation, and I see everywhere men in the exercise of civil authority, and thus, in a humbler or higher degree, giving direction to the destinies of our country. All these I would solemnly invoke, first by a regard to their own best interests, and next by their love for the land in which they dwell, to heed the lesson that is going forth from this coffin, in respect to the paramount importance of personal religion. I would admonish them that though they are wise men and counsellors, legislators, and rulers, still they are immortal men, and will soon reach the point which our friend has already passed, where there will come a mighty exigency, which nothing but living Christianity can meet. I would remind them also that religion is the very soul of patriotism; and that as they would render their country the highest service, they must come reverently and humbly to the Fountain of all Wisdom. And if I could, for a moment, command the *nation's* ear, I would bid her take heed how she enthrones infidelity and profligacy in her high

places. I would read to her a terrible chapter from the history of other nations, showing that impiety and tyranny are twin demons, and that madness is in the heart of those who would think to yield to the one and escape the other. And I would venture to tell my country, that her interests will never be seriously imperilled even by the honest mistakes of her rulers, provided only that to the proper measure of intelligence they add that spirit which disposes them always to keep a conscience void of offence.

Oh, that the gracious Comforter might now follow in the track of death, to minister consolation to the multitude of stricken hearts! Here is a Church mourning that one of its pillars has fallen; here are Christian brethren calling up scenes of goodly fellowship, in which the voice now hushed in death bore a welcome part; here are young disciples whom the same voice has counselled and encouraged, and who are sad because their friend and helper is laid low. Here are pastors who have successively broken to this Israelite indeed the bread of life, and have found their burdens lightened by his intelligent and zealous co-operation. Here are some of the friends of his early years, who have loved him from their youth, and whom he has loved in return, and who are now oppressed by the reflection that they shall see his face no more. Here are those

whose parents were also his parents; who were nurtured with him under the same roof and trained under the same hallowed influences, and who have found their pulsations becoming quicker and more tender as they have remembered that he was their brother. And finally, here are the children who have come thus far on life's journey under his paternal guidance; who have been used to repose alike in his wisdom and his love; who have never feared darkness as long as the sunshine of his presence was within their reach; but upon whom the reflection now falls, as a cold shadow, that his countenance has beamed upon them its last loving smile. Verily, I am standing in the presence of a bereaved assemblage! Come, ever blessed Christianity, and display thy gracious, healing triumphs here! May each mourner receive the baptism that brings light out of the cloud, and lifts the soul towards its eternal rest!