No. 19.

Retropect & prospect of life.
Psalm XXXIX, 5. "Behold thou hast made my days as an hand breadth; and my age is as nothing before thee."

At Salem, Jan. 32, 1819, forenoon.
At home, Jan. 22, 1820, afternoon.
At Hingham (32 parish), Decem. 34th, 1820, afternoon.
Psalm xxxix. 5. "Behold thou hast made my days as an handbreadth, and mine age is as nothing before thee."

There are some truths of which it is not so important to produce the evidence, as it is to give them a permanent efficacious impression. Not unfrequently we need to be aroused & incited, more than to be convinced. The scenes of nature & the objects of the material world are daily met by the eye in the walks of business or of amusement, or even when the professed purpose is to observe & reflect. Nevertheless their power of fixing the attention, & are passed in neglect. In the same way some moral & religious truths are so common, that they are laid away among the unheeded notions of the mind.
So obvious, that they are either never considered, or are thought of as things of no interest. It is not difficult to forget what we should not presume to deny; but when besides the neglect and familiarity produces, though blessedness is confirmed by the vain pursuit of pleasure, or by the excitement of passion, it needs no common appeal to awaken moral sensibility from the slumber into which it has been suffered to fall.

Must we be invited to contemplate human frailty? Shall man, the being of a moment, be called upon to remember that he lives in a state of weakness and uncertainty? Was it not so common, it might indeed seem strange, that we should ever act as if we could arrest the fleeting forms of worldly goods, make them our own; as if we had a permanent interest in the vanities which crowd this existence. — If, some being, unacquainted with us, were introduced among us, we might acquaint

ed with the views and feelings of mankind, could we see the delusions of ambition, the struggle of the deep and difficult path of fame, never hesitating to serve his purpose by fraud or artifice, call that he may be gazed at by men like himself, were he to watch the miser brooding o'er his treasure, with an earnestness that speaks his whole soul engaged, every day adding something to the heap, or it is to rust in uselessness, should he meet the sensualist, Hughes his limbs in the chase of pleasures, always deceived, yet always grasping, tired of being deceived, by the vain phantoms that flit before him to false enjoyment; yet determined to pursue — discontented with the world, still unwilling to rise above or look beyond it: if he should see this, or all this, or more, he might (see, would be believe, that these things had ever supposed it possible for this present life to have an end? Could you conceive him that they ever dream of being dismissed from

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this world, how or when they know not, losing their interest in its objects of pursuit, so that they had ever heard of and create of existence to ask this scene of things meant to be introductory? No, he must think that such beings were already at their final home; that the race of glory is from we here would never be at an end; that appetite was to be indulged, desire gratified, without the hope or the fear of any change.

But we may not forget that this life constitutes though not the whole yet a very valuable part of our existence; that though it gives us not all the felicity for which we are made, yet it is a high and real blessing. We would not be among them who represent earth as a scene of misery, because it has not the glory of heaven. No, life affords enjoyments, and proclaim the parental goodness of Him from whose hands it came, of the state of discipline; but it is the discipline of God's mercy. Besides, life is the theatre of high and strenuous exertion. We may not presume upon finding an excuse for idleness, indifference, or carelessness, in the reflection that the world is vain of delusive. All is not vain of delusive. There is enough of life in the may sought to be interested to employ all our energy and strength. We are bound to each other by the charities of life, we have virtues to subdue, virtues to establish. Strengths may we have a God with whom we should reverence and obey, a Saviour whom we should have gratitude. To think of founding the hope of permanent happiness merely on the honours, the riches, or the pleasures of the world, would be indeed the vainest of dreams; it would be to build your house on the sand, where it must fall when the floods come and the winds blow, and beat upon it. If this be your only home, if you have provided no other refuge, how will you abide the fury of the storm without a shelter, without a resting place? — Yet life has other is better.
objects; it gives you the means of doing good.

The objects of this will not be limited to

earth; it affords you opportunities for con-

sidering and cultivating good dispositions; you

find abundant help and motives to virtue.

No, you find sufficient that is not

fear, or transient to engage all your args

of all your time. It is not with reference

to such objects that the Bible tells you

that "man walketh in a vain show," from

such it never exhorts you to turn away;

on such you cannot dwell too frequently

or too long. "In that measure of the

seating vanities of life," with the promises

encouragements of religion, in which constitute

objects of our discipline, there is a distinc-
tion forced upon us by every day's experience.

Some favorite project is defeated; some

fondly cherished hope, or looked not be-
gond this world is imperfect; but have its

principles of virtue vanished—have her

consolations failed? No, she asks not support

from earth, she gives you support, when

every thing earthly deserts you. When we

draw the heart, see, as we sometimes may, in

almost all that belongs solely here made

the short of failure or more. By our own

imprudence, all that is connected with

hereafter remaining strong, triumphant, im-

mortal, when we look forward to the future.

If listen to the gloomy forebodings of ex-

perience may dictate concerning our best and

by hopes, or reflect how soon death may sep-

are us from all interest in them, yet find

that our sentiments of virtue and religion

shrink not from the prospect, but, still be

animated, serene, and shall we not con-

fess that while the world has innum-

erable disappointments for us, so much

that is unsatisfactory, it has something

worth living for, some happy oppor-

tunities, the right improvement of which may

have much influence in making our elec-

tional inheritance to be an inconceivable bliss?
We would, then, cherish these visions of life, and feelingly convince us, that it is a precious gift, yet a gift which we hold but too briefly. There are times when these visions, with peculiar propriety demand our attention, and, in some instances, their issues are the present occasion.

Another year has rolled away; another year is closed upon us, of its pleasures and pains, its hopes and fears, its trials and successes, but the remembrance remains. Moments not to be redeemed are gone from us, and with them the records of what we have been, and what we have done. We are brought nearer to that day on which all must meet, when no light but that which shines beyond the grave, can cheer or console us. Of nearer to that place where man with all his hopes and all his fears, must at last confess, "more the miseries from troubling, where the weary are at rest." It becomes us, then, seriously to pause amidst the agitations of the hurry of life, to examine, reflect, enquire, and resolve. These divisions of time, constitute, as it were, the little eminences from which we look back on the past, and to the future. Both from the retrospect of the prospect we may derive much that will aid us to virtue and justify the pure principles. - We, too, should we look back on life? - We should look back on life to consider what we have experienced, and what we have done.

1. What we have experienced. - The life of almost every one is more or less eventful. When we cast the eye back on the track of days that are gone, we find it marked with incidents, or, if unimportant to others, are important to ourselves. We have ever been under the discipline of circumstances, at every step in the progress of the review, we renew our acquaintance with events in which, perhaps, all our energy of interest were once engaged. Life is seldom a stagnant pool; it is commonly a stream wandering through sunshine and shade.

2. The retrospect of time tells us that we have been the deputies of God's bounty.
in the light of evening, when the
minds of heaven have visited us
peace, health on their wings; if the
treasures of her fertility to give us sustenance
pleasure; if praised be God, the light of the
Gospel has shone on our path. There are the
common bounties of Him, who has made man for
the enjoyment of. But each of us has besides,
his catalogue of private blessings to swell his
enlistment of gratitude. There are spots which are
brighter to one eye, than to any other. We have
been blessed, perhaps, in the relations of life. The
affections of friends have multiplied and strengthened
around us. Domestic attachments, the en-
goyments of home have cheered and gladdened us.
No doubt, perhaps, has fallen in our hopes of pros-
sperity of felicity; our enterprises & plans of impor-
tment have been free from the embarrassment of
plethora of mischance. We have engaged in serious
advantages for intellectual, moral & spiritual en-
coments; our faculties have been shaped, formed
by culture; our affections have been diversified,
wholesome discipline. If we have been where the
messages of grace & the voice of the Gospel have fall
on our ears with efficacy & power. Small this go
has appeared to us in the oracals of his providence;
our recollections of life are animated & shall
because they are recollections of that goodness,
which is unlimited, as undeserved, & it is our
sacred purpose that we should cherish & guard
them. But on the other hand, perhaps, is the
retrospect of the year; that is gone, presents us
with other scenes. The march of God's provi-
dence, in the concerns of man, is sometimes high
of mysterious; not infrequently it crosses the
paths of we had marked out for ourselves.
trisbles the most favorite purposed. Is tracing
the history of the past, it may be, we may with
Job: I will speak in the bitterness of my soul.
Our happiness may have been assailed by circum-
stances not under the control of man. Our hap-
sity, perhaps, has been the sport of minor moves?
the elements have been to us ministers of misery.
Our friends have gone down to the land of dark
place, I'm looking round our domestic circle, whose
life & health, happiness once gladdened all, now
in the present, even more than pleasure. There are difficulties for us to apprehend the whole extent of this state of life. We have not even in the hope, more of enjoyment than of suffering. One of the circumstances by which we are deceived is, that in looking back on life, we see it stripped of one of its principal ornaments, hope. Customarily, it is not in this destitute state that it was given us. nor that we have enjoyed it. It has lost in the retrospect that engendered spring of animation which excited and supported our feelings during its progress. We are exposed to the same deception on a larger scale when we view the transactions of past ages. History records little but the crimes and misfortunes of mankind: if you were to listen to the voice only, you might suppose that you had given up this fair world to be desolated by the few faults that he had let loose to light. But the historian has not told — from the nature of the case he could not tell us — how peace, health, vigour, good affections were prevailing, blessing the various classes of society, even in the times which appear
in his grace in darkest colours). Let us at
pierced like to cherish murmurings against the
Most High; but remember that it is the
same God who gives us enjoyment & tried the
same God who appears in the calm sunshine &
in the tempests of the storm.
2. In looking back on life the question occurs,
what have we done?—It is a solemn question.
What have we been?—It is a solemn question.
Sone ask ourselves solemnly bound to answer.
Then has life been spent? What memorial
of us has time borne away?—We should know
life that we may watch the formation of charac-
ter, observe the change of our opinions. Sone
notice what we have affected & what we have
acquired, what we know now that we once
knew not. We have much to do, we have
more work to do, we are made by the influences through which we
have passed.—We should, if possible, outline
the path we have trodden. Sone give back to
each circumstance, time, exactly the oppon-
ent it had in forming our minds & affections.
Sone might then see the elements of the mo-
ral man lying along the track, & observe how
our characters have grown up in the midst of these
modifications & acquisitions. What have we
been doing in life? how far has God's design
in placing us here been answered? What have
we considered as the object for which we wish to
live? Has our life passed in heedlessness sin-
ful, harmless, how is it our highest pleasure
that our character is sustained by the acknow-
egaged crime?—Remember the Iowan figure that
the stem of solemn question "whyumbered at
the ground?"—Does the review of life
blessed us with the remembrance that we
have done much to serve God & man? Have the
cherished & strengthened good principles,
revered been planted by the heart, by
bent & fixed them.
for the inspection of the God of holiness?
Have the warmth of our feelings & the at-
dence of our affections been engage in objects
which cannot sustain & which belong to
immortality?—Then, indeed, we may look
back with gladness on our path, for it is
the bright path that leads to heaven. But has
the review of life a more mournful scene to
present? Does it tell us of time wasted, of opportunities abused, of mercy despised? Does conscience array before us the dark forms of guilt, & tell us that with these we have but alliance? Let the tears of penitence have their course, for they are salutary & purifying too. Let us remember that the prodigal found mercy when he returned & confessed in the tear of heart. "Father, I have sinned against heaven & before thee," but let us remember too that this mercy is for those who do more than meekly, for those who reform; I bid farewell to what has outraged in science & offended God. So, such my thoughts are, the views on which meets us in the retrospect of life; with such feelings, it becomes us seriously to pause, & let imagination weave out stories in the clay of self that our souls to God, & then ask ourselves what would be the sentence of that tribunal from which there is no appeal. II. We would enquire how we should look forward to the future. He has lived to little purpose, who has not learned from the past to live better for the time to come. The future is the subject of counsel & resolution, the object of our desires, our hopes, & our fear. It has been the frequent complaint of moralists, that the mind of man is never satisfied, & is always hurrying away from the present moment to lose itself in schemes of future felicity. So that we forget the hope at use of time now in our power to provide for the enjoyment of that which may never be granted us. But a desire so natural in man is surely not without its uses. It serves the aim of execution & gives animation to existence. It seems indeed necessary to a being, whose motions are gradual, & whose life is progressive, for he must always desire what he performs last. It must always discover new motives of action, new excitements of fear, & allurements of desire. What we have once gained is converted into a
the means of gaining something else & the natural flight of the human mind is not from pleasure to pleasure, but from hope to hope. But this propensity to place the future with forms of our own creation, has its dangers, for nothing but a mind disciplined by reason & religion can secure us. Hope may charm with her promises, sensuality with the beauty of her pleasure grounds, the elegance of her mansions, but has she not too often vanished from the eye that gave in them, beneath darkness in their place? Is there a hope which never fadeth, which mounts higher & grows brighter as the world retreats from our vision. This is our strong hold & on this, if we would value it, we might be shamed the eye be fixed. From what has been we cannot always, indeed, judge what will be: yet commonly experience of the past holds out the best light by which to estimate the future. Does the review of life present us with disappointed hopes & fears?

So, doubtless, it will continue to be. Have we seen our visions of happiness, like the colors of fleeting day, vanish as they shine? Let us remember, that those our day in the future may be equally transient. Have we made ourselves miserable by unessential fears, is the event been brighter or happier than our anxiety foreboded? Why, the end we suffer distress & gloom to darken the prospect of what is yet to come. Who do we not say with the king of Israel is struck in the misery of his present evil? You have tasted the sweetness of the honey, will you again hesitate to make infinite goodness your refuge? Like eves has been a varied & uneven scene & ever will be so, & it is a school of discipline. There is no paradise on earth, but that on the good man finds in his own mind, if we lean with the firmness of faith on the providence of Him who rolls the planets in their courses & watches the fall of the sparrow, we shall look forward...
to these days that are to come with no trembling anxiety, no fearful despondence, for you are one with us; what need we more? 

Such, my dear Sir, are some of the reflections suggested by the retrospect, and the prospect of life. Our duties with regard to the past are gratitude and penitence; with regard to the future, trust and reformation. In these I am, in this occasion, reminded of the value of time, and the inestimable importance of our holy religion. It has been finely observed, 'that God gives us not time, as nature gives us waters, in large streams, but drop by drop, minute after minute, so that we never have two minutes together, but He takes away one when He gives us another.' This should teach us to value our time, since God so values it; and, by his so small distribution of it, tells us it is the most precious thing we have.' If we have a life or a fear that things to fruition, if we in earnest believe this life to be but the threshold of being, the first step in the march of eternity, shall we sleep away our state of probation, or waste it in fruitless acts of indecision, or shall we hereafter think any thing more than earthly can give?—the something that claims a happiness that accident cannot interrupt, that time cannot destroy. Let us never attempt to evade the force of our obligation by dilatory occupation, for surely the time will come when we shall wish we had been otherwise employed. Let us remember that the true estimate of life is to be taken from action, not from age. A man, as he manages his moral power, may die old at thirty, or a child at four or five years. An heap of vices is as long as an heap of virtues; but we shall hereafter learn how different is the recompense they bear at the
The first Sabbath in a new year is a time for most serious and impressive thought. Another year has gone from us—another, our solemn task to increase the life of man. It is an angle stand to the tomb, no more, to step back at all the more. From the days that are gone, there comes a loud voice of admonishing warning—During the year that has just rolled away, over the little child these have been numbered with the dead. It is no uncommon mortality, but it is surely enough to make us pause and think what shadows we are. We have seen the infant in the tender years of blissful life, the man in the half strength of middle age, the head covered with grey hairs already descending to the grave;—Yes, we are still here, but how long we shall be given is astonishing. Think in whose hand is our breath, who are all our ways, etc. Have we postponed our great work for heaven, then we were before. Have not our hearts felt little, alas too little, of the sanctifying, sanctifying influences of the Spirit? Has the volume of nature been unsealed, have the doors of the sanctuary been opened, the pages of Scripture read, the invitations of mercy sent to us? Have we still that...
If our hearts sink at the approach of danger, or our feet stumble on the dark mountains, let us remember that G. is our guide and comforter, that His protection will afford us a covert from the storm, a shadow from the heat, and that He will be to us, as to the ancient Israelites, a pillar of cloud by day, and a pillar of fire by night.