

LESSON EIGHT

CHAPTER VIII
THE SERMON ITSELF

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A. THE INTRODUCTION.

Every good and finished sermon or address divides itself into three parts: the Introduction, the Body or Argument, and the Conclusion.

It seems natural and fitting that a sermon or address should have an introduction. Just as our acquaintance with a friend is preceded by an introduction, so ought a sermon to be introduced. An introduction to a sermon is like a porch to a house—it would look unfinished without it. It is not without significance that every well written book has its preface, and every oratorio its prelude. Abrupt beginnings are to be avoided because they are unnatural.

There are, of course, exceptions to this rule, as, for instance, when all the allotted time is necessary for the development of the sermon proper, when it may be deemed best to plunge at once into the subject without any stated introduction. Again, an informal talk, such as a prayer-meeting address, may not require an introduction. As a general rule, however, it is best to introduce your subject.

I. THE PURPOSE OF AN INTRODUCTION.

Why do we need an introduction to a sermon? In answer to this question we reply:

1. To Awaken an Interest in the Theme.

It is not to be taken for granted that the people who listen to a sermon are, by virtue of that fact, interested in it. Audiences are by no means always interested. Some do not, others cannot, not a few will not manifest an interest in the theme presented. Yet, every public speaker knows that, if he is to impress the minds and hearts of his hearers with the truth of his message, he must, by all means, get them interested in what he is saying. If this interest is not secured at the outset, the probabilities are that it will not be secured at all throughout the sermon. To fail to secure the ear of your audience is to fail to secure its mind. If an interest is secured at the outset the probabilities are that it will be maintained, other things of course being equal, until the end.

A good introduction is intended to arouse such an interest. An audience will not be interested simply because the speaker says: "Now hear me," or "Give me your attention," or "Now listen." It is the business of the public speaker to present his matter so interestingly that the audience cannot help but listen and be interested. One of the purposes of an introduction, then, is to awaken the interest of the audience in your theme.

2. To Prepare the Audience for What is to Follow.

Remember, it is an introduction to your theme. We are introduced to our friends for the purpose of further acquaintance. Introductions are of value only as they lead to this end; they are not for the present moment only; they have a relation to something further on. In other words, an introduction is a means to an end.

This leads to a caution: Do not attempt to put all your sermon into the introduction. We have all, doubtless, at

some time or other, been introduced to some person who revealed his entire self in the first interview. Such people are not usually interesting. As a rule, we like to be kept anticipating for a while. Let us not make this mistake in preaching. The preacher who thrusts his sermon into his introduction is guilty of the same error. Remember then, that the introduction to a sermon or address stands in the same relation to that composition as the introduction to a friend does to further friendship—it prepares your audience for what is to follow.

II. THE SOURCES OF AN INTRODUCTION.

What are the sources of an introduction, and of what material may it be composed? We may speak of eight sources:

1. The Text.

Quite frequently the best material for an introduction will be found in the text itself.

a) *Its construction.*

If the text chosen is Ephesians 1:3-14, the theme of which is, "Thanksgiving for the Blessings of Redemption," a fitting introduction will be found in the construction of the text. Close observation will reveal the fact that this thanksgiving assumes the form of a hymn of praise to the Trinity—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. It will further be noticed that these verses divide themselves naturally into a hymn of three stanzas, one being associated with the person and work of each of the three persons of the Godhead, and each closing with the same doxology—"to the praise of His glory." The work of the Father is set forth in verses 3-6, ending with a doxology; the work of the Son, verses 7-12, ending with a similar doxology; and the work of the Spirit, verses 13, 14, also ending with the same doxology. It is thus

evident that an interesting introduction can be made from the construction of the text.

b) From the general familiarity with the text on theme.

If one desires to preach a sermon from Psalm 23:4: "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death," etc., he may recall to the minds of the audience how many death-beds have been lighted up with this text, and how many thousands of hearts have found divine comfort from its words in the hour of death. Thus the general familiarity with the words of the text will undoubtedly prove an interesting introduction.

c) From the fact that your text may be quite generally misunderstood.

This will afford you material for an introduction. A sermon preached not long ago having for its text, Matthew 5:48: "Be ye therefore perfect," etc., and for its theme, "Perfection in Love," was characterized by a splendid introduction based on the fact of the misunderstanding of the text. The preacher showed that instead of being a proof-text for the much abused doctrine of sinless perfection, these words had reference only—and if not exclusively, certainly primarily—to perfection in love as shown in our attitude towards our enemies. To such perfection we may all attain. This was proven by referring to the context, (vv. 43-47) which has special reference to the Christian's treatment of his enemies.

2. The Context.

Take Hebrews 7:25, "Wherefore he is able to save them to the uttermost," etc., as an example. A careful consideration of the context of this verse will reveal the fact that Christ's ability to save the greatest sinners is not the theme taught in this verse, but, on the contrary His power, by virtue of the eternity of His priesthood as

contrasted with limited life service of the Levitical priests, to finish and perfect the work already begun in the saints. Thus the context provides interesting as well as instructive material for an introduction. (See also p. 46.)

3. The Historical Setting.

An interesting introduction may be made for the theme: "The Vision of Isaiah," (Isaiah 6), by referring to the moral and political conditions of the time in which the prophet Isaiah lived (2 Chronicles 26). The principal events may be recalled: King Uzziah's wonderful reign; Isaiah's danger of attributing Israel's prosperity to the power of the king rather than to Jehovah; the pride and sin of the king; the death of the king—Isaiah's idol, and then the prophet's vision, in which he saw *also* the Lord, another and greater King, the King of Glory as supreme.

4. The Geography of the Bible.

A description of the mountain, plain, sea, or city in which the words were spoken or the event transpired forms a good introduction. Such material is helpful for sermons on such topics as the transfiguration, the temptation and death of Christ.

5. The Customs and Antiquities of the Bible.

An audience is always interested in the habits and customs of the peoples of other countries. The mode of dress, manner of living, customs of trade, habits of society, oriental marriages and funerals—these topics furnish instructive as well as interesting material for an introduction.

6. The Circumstances Peculiar to the Writer and Those Addressed.

A recent sermon on "Glimpses of Paul's Inner Life,"

based on the letter to Philemon, had as its introduction a statement of the apostle's relation to Philemon, his friend, and a slave owner. One of Philemon's slaves, Onesimus by name, had run away from his master, had heard Paul preach in Rome, was converted, and, desiring to return to his master, requested of the apostle a letter of introduction to his Christian master and Paul's friend. Thus arose the occasion of the Epistle to Philemon.

7. The Occasion.

A sermon preached at Easter could have no better introduction than one which referred to the universal commemoration of the resurrection of Christ. The same is true of Passion Week, and Christmas, or indeed any special occasion. The subject at a cottage prayer-meeting may be introduced by mention of the fact that some of the greatest spiritual movements of history had their origin in a home prayer-meeting. The value of education, or present-day advantages along educational lines would furnish fitting material for an introduction to a baccalaureate address. If addressing an open-air gathering reference may be made to the fact that Christ did most of His preaching in the open air, and presumably, secured most of His disciples through open-air preaching.

8. The Subject.

a) *Its pertinency to the times.*

Mention of financial panics through which the country has passed, or may now be passing through will form a good introduction to a sermon on the text: "Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth." A great sermon on the "Instability of Earthly Things" was preached some time ago having for its introduction reference to an earthquake that had taken place in Sicily a few days

before. So recent a catastrophe made the introduction to the sermon very effective.

b) *The disadvantages which come from lack of familiarity with the subject.*

Some time ago the newspapers recorded a very sad accident that occurred to a boy. The little fellow was visiting his grandparents in a small city near to Chicago, through which the electric railway passed. The boy, coming from a rural district, and having more than once amused himself by walking along the rails of the railroad tracks, thought he would like to see how far he could walk on the third rail of the electric road. Unfortunately he was ignorant of the danger hidden in the third rail. He stepped on the rail, and the result was instant death. So ignorance of your subject, you may state, may be attended with even worse results.

c) *The advantages which come from familiarity with the text—the converse truth—will furnish material for a fitting introduction.*

d) *The utility of the subject.*

The usefulness of Ephesians 6:5-9: the relation of masters to servants, as setting forth a solution of the problems between capital and labor, may be utilized as introductory material.

III. THE PROPERTIES OF A GOOD INTRODUCTION.

NEGATIVE QUALITIES:

1. It Does Not Boast Too Much.

Some preachers promise a good deal more in the introduction to the sermon than they are able to fulfill in the sermon proper. It is not right to arouse expectations at the beginning which one is unable, in the development of the sermon, to fulfill. It is that they may not be guilty

of this fault that many preachers leave the preparation of the introduction until after the sermon proper is finished, —a suggestion that young preachers may well heed and follow.

2. It Must Not Be Too Loud, Sensational, or Emotional.

Do not begin in a loud tone of voice, or in a sensational manner. It is too soon to make an appeal to the emotions or to attempt to touch the sympathetic chord. Begin by speaking slowly and in a low tone of voice; and warm up to your subject gradually; then work up to a climax.

3. It Must Not Be Too Long.

When, on opening a book, one is confronted with a preface covering some twenty or thirty pages, he is likely to become discouraged and lay the book down. Said an old Scotch woman, whose pastor was guilty of consuming too much time in the introductions to his sermons: "The good old man takes so long a time setting the table and getting things ready that I lose my appetite by the time the meal comes." A lengthy introduction tires the people. Do not keep the people waiting too long on the porch; let them into the house as soon as you can to see its furniture and enjoy its comforts. An introduction lasting five minutes is long enough for a forty-minute sermon.

POSITIVE QUALITIES:

- 1. It Should Have a Vital Relation to the Theme.**
- 2. It Should Contain But One Theme.**
- 3. There Should Be a Natural Transition.**

The transition from the introduction to the body of the sermon should be a natural one. It must not be forced, abrupt, or strained.

4. It Should Be Prepared Carefully.

It should not be left to the spur of the moment, or to the inspiration of the occasion. It is well to write it out fully. First impressions are the more lasting; therefore prepare your introduction well. It is not sufficient to write the word "Introduction" at the head of your sermon, and do nothing further by way of preparation.