

PERSONAL ACCOUNTABILITY.

A

S E R M O N

PREACHED TO THE

FIRST CHURCH AND SOCIETY

IN

MADISON, CONN.,

THE FIRST SABBATH OF THE YEAR 1857,

BY

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SERMON.

LUKE, 16 : 2.

GIVE AN ACCOUNT OF THY STEWARDSHIP.

OUR Savior designed, by the parable from which these words are taken, to illustrate human life;—he designed to enforce the truth that men are stewards of God—that all which they have they hold on trust, and that they must one day return it into the hands of its sovereign proprietor, and account with him for the manner in which they have used it.

And there is great need that this truth should be enforced upon the consciences of men. For there is a feeling often pervading their hearts, which makes them slow to admit that they are not their own. It is a feeling of independence—a spirit which spurns control; which would break away from all wholesome restraint, trample on human laws and on the laws of Heaven;—a spirit which grudges the reverence it owes to its Maker; and which, if it were able, would not rest, till it had oblit-

erated the worship of God and blotted out all sense of moral obligation. Hence, the proud inquiry, "Who shall be Lord over us"? "Let us break his bands asunder and cast away his cords from us".

But what does this boasting language accomplish? We may wish that we had no superior, and that we were held responsible to no tribunal. But our wishes cannot alter our nature, nor change our relations to our fellow-men or to our God. We may be impatient of restraint, and refuse to obey. But murmuring against authority, and struggling to resist its claims is not independence. Enter the ranks of disloyalty, and go the whole rounds of rebellion. And what then?—Can you wave your sceptre over the kingdoms of men? Can you seat yourself on the throne of the Eternal? After all your aspirations, and murmurings, and struggles, are you any thing more than a servant? Have you any more freedom, any more power than is given to a *steward of God*? Have you any thing which is absolutely yours? Have you a hold on any thing, a title to any thing, which you can protect and perpetuate? Will it be yours, a hundred years hence? Can you make it certain that it will be yours, a year hence, a week hence, or peradventure, on the morrow?

Did you create yourself? Did you organize this mysterious fabric, and bid the breath of heaven animate it? If not, then your *life* is not your own; but His, who waked you to life and immortality.

Did you kindle up in your soul the light of reason, and teach your mind to think and your spirit to adore?

If not, then your *thoughts* are not your own; but His, who made you but a little lower than the angels, and crowned you with glory and honor.

Did you arrange the tender fibres of your heart, and teach them to vibrate with the nicest sensibilities? If not, then your *affections* are not your own; but His, who claims your purest, your undivided love.

Did you nerve your arm with strength, and your heart with perseverance? If not, then your *actions* are not your own; but His, who saith, "Whether ye eat or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God".

Do you sustain yourself in life? Do you bid the bounding pulse move on, and the departing breath return? If not, then your *time* is not your own; but His, who has numbered your days and fixed the bounds of your habitation.

Does your own skill and foresight give success to your enterprises? If not, then your *wealth* is not your own; but His, whose is every beast of the field and the cattle upon a thousand hills.

Did you give intelligence and beauty to the countenances, or the strong cords of affection to the hearts of those who compose your family circle, and who make you feel, day by day, what a treasure you have in your own home? If not, then these *domestic endearments* are not your own; but His, whose workmanship all those loved ones are; who gave them to you, in his merciful kindness, and taught them to call you by the tenderest appellations—gave them to you, to be the companions of your pilgrimage, to rejoice in your joy, to wipe from your face

the falling tear, to bear you with burdened hearts to your last repose, and to sing with you, eternally, the high praises of Him, of whom the whole family in heaven and on earth is named.

What have you, then, vain man, what, that you can call your own? Your own *reason* thus teaches you, that you are only a *steward of God*.

And the Savior of men and the whole *volume of inspiration* teach you, that you are only a *steward of God*,—that you have nothing that is absolutely yours—that all you have is the property of another, loaned for your use, intrusted for a little season to your care. The kingdom of heaven *is* like unto a man travelling into a far country, who called his own servants and delivered unto them his goods; to one he gave five talents, to another two, and to another one, and straightway took his journey.

And the fact, that you have intrusted to your hands the goods of another, implies that you are *accountable* to him who committed them to you, for the use you make of them. The fact that you are a steward, presupposes a *day of reckoning*, when you will be called to give account of your stewardship. The Lord of those servants returned and reckoned with them. And the great reckoning day of the living and the dead God hath appointed. He hath appointed a day in which he will judge the world in righteousness, by that man whom he hath ordained. We must all stand before the judgment seat of Christ. Every one of us must give account of himself to God. When

the judgment shall be set and the books opened, he that sitteth on the throne will say unto each one of us, "Give an account of thy stewardship".

To that judgment seat we are all hastening. Another year of the intervening space has fled. Its mercies and its trials are past; its transactions and its responsibilities sealed up for final investigation. We have one year more for which to give an account, and one year less in which to prepare it. It becomes us, as we leave the year behind us, to inquire how we have spent it. The blessings with which God in his goodness crowned it—its daily comforts, its faithful admonitions, its Sabbaths and seasons for communion with God, its opportunities for doing good to men and of preparation for a better life—how have we improved them? For all these, we must give account; nay, for every thought and feeling and purpose of our hearts, for every word that has fallen from our lips, and every action that has employed our hands;—for God will bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good or whether it be evil.

Let us try, then, to make preparation for that account, by calling ourselves to account here. Let conscience now take the place of the final Judge, and let your cause be examined.

Give an account of thy *time*. It was given thee of God, to be the morning star of thine eternity. Does it foretell a bright and glorious day?—or do darkness, storm and tempest hover round it? What have you

done with your time? How much of it has been given to God? How much of it has been employed in fulfilling, conscientiously and devoutly, the great end of your being? Has it, Oh! has it all run to waste? And are you no nearer heaven now, than when your days began?

Give an account of your *reason*. It was given you of God, that you might consider the heavens, the work of your Maker's fingers, the moon and the stars which he has ordained, and say, "What is man, that thou art mindful of him; or the son of man, that thou visitest him"? And how hast thou employed it? Has it taught thee to bow with reverence before thy Maker?—or hast thou cavilled with his purposes, and questioned the rightfulness of his dominion over thee? What has occupied the multitude of your thoughts within you? Have they taken hold, at mid-day and in the night watches, of the great things of God and immortality? Have they been such as God and conscience approve, and such as will bear the scrutiny of the final day?

Give an account of your *affections*. They were given you of God, that you might love him with all your heart and your neighbor as yourself. Have you loved him?—the former of your body and the Father of your spirit, who has given you day by day your daily bread—the Savior of your soul too, the chief among ten thousand, the one altogether lovely—have you loved him? Ah! where have these affections been placed? And what object does the eye which seeth in secret, now see that you love supremely? Is it God? Is it Christ? Or, is it some sordid, sensual object—some little pittance of created

good, which can give you no solid comfort while you idolize it, and which will, at last, eat your own flesh as it were fire?

Give an account of thy *friendships*. Endearing and delightful have they been to thee. Kindly and sweet were the influences which they threw around thee. They may have warned thee of temptation and peril, and sought to win thee to the path of life and the gate of heaven. Didst thou yield to their kind constraint? Some of them have been interrupted. The silver cord has been loosed—the golden bowl has been broken. Didst thou so improve them, was kindness so returned, and love so requited, that though thy heart is grieved, thy conscience doth not reproach thee?

Give an account of your *actions*. For what hast thou labored and toiled? Is it for glory and honor and immortality?—or for treasure laid up, where moth and rust corrupt and where thieves break through and steal? How stands the record of thine every deed in the book of God? and what is its bearing upon the kingdom of Christ and the souls he has purchased with his blood? Should that book now be opened, would the Judge of all the earth say unto thee, “Well done, good and faithful servant”?

Give an account of your *opportunities for doing good*. You have been so situated, that you could exert an influence upon some of those who have been journeying with you to the unseen world, which would increase their happiness in this life and in that which is to come. Have you done it? A fellow-creature’s pain,—hast thou relieved it?

His griefs,—hast thou assuaged them? His broken heart,—hast thou bound it up? Hast thou given thy bread to the needy? Hast thou pointed the wandering to the cross? In the bosom of thine own household, has the law of kindness been upon thy lips? Each day, hast thou done that for the comfort, the peace, the immortal well-being of its endeared inmates, which thou now wishest thou hadst done? In the Church of God, in the social circle, in thy business transactions, in all the spheres in which thou hast moved, has the power of thine example been as the loveliness of the morning, the brightness of noon-day, and the calmness of the setting sun—an irresistible persuasion, to all who have seen thee, to seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness? Or, have these opportunities passed by unimproved, and is it now too late to redeem them?

Give an account of your *religious privileges*. How have you received the *word* of God? Have you believed its declarations? Have you obeyed its mandates? Have you accepted its invitations? Or, must the Bible be a witness against you? How have you kept the *day* of God? Have you remembered it, and kept it holy? Have you employed it, in taking care of your soul, and in fitting it for the worship of the skies? Where have you been on these holy Sabbaths? Who have been your companions? What books have you read? What have been the topics of your discourse?—what the themes of your meditation? What report has another year of Sabbaths borne to Heaven?—and with what feelings will you review them, at the judgment bar? With what

sensations will you look back, from that solemn tribunal into this house of prayer? What emotions will the recollection of the sermons, which were here addressed to you, awaken in your bosom? You have often been called upon to repent. Have you repented? Or, are you yet in the gall of bitterness and the bond of iniquity? You have often been pointed to the bleeding Lamb of God. Have you been washed in his atoning blood?—or does the wrath of God and the Lamb still abide on you?

Give an account of your *present purposes*. By the grace of God, you stand upon the threshold of another year, delivered out of all the dangers of the past—a monument of the compassion, the forbearance, the tender mercy of the Infinite One. What are your plans for the year you have thus been spared to see? Do you intend to live for Him, who has smiled so graciously upon you, whose favor is life, whose loving-kindness is better than life?—Or, forgetful of all his benefits and regardless of all his claims, do you intend to live for your own personal gratification? If conscious that you are yet unreconciled to God, is it any part of your present purpose to make your peace with him? If so, when do you propose to begin? Or, have you formed your purposes on every other subject, and left this, the most momentous of all subjects, unsettled? If you are hoping in his mercy, is it the purpose of your soul,—never to be recalled, never to be forgotten,—to do all you can do, if you shall be spared this year also, for the everlasting well-being of your fellow travellers to eternity and for the glory and honor of your Redeemer? Or, have you no purposes,—living, or dying,—of well-doing formed?

For all these things, will God bring you into judgment. The day of your account is a day of awful grandeur, of overwhelming solemnity. And the questions, which will be propounded to you, are questions of the most serious and thrilling import.

This is a subject, too, which you cannot well put by. There is too much of soul-stirring interest in it, to admit of its being easily dismissed. You cannot dwell upon it, at this landmark of time, without emotion. But, Oh ! how changed the scene, when time is ended, and the dead are raised, and the earth is on fire, and the wicked are going away into everlasting punishment and the righteous into life eternal !

Remember, that there will be no preparing your account for that august tribunal, when the day of your probation is past. And you know not how soon it will end. This year, thou mayest die. Death has been upon your right hand and upon your left, as the days and weeks and months of the last year have rolled away. He has been doing his relentless work, in the dwellings of your neighbors ; it may be, in your own. The tenderest ties have been severed ; the most valued relations broken up. The endearing appellations of son, daughter, brother, sister, father, mother, pastor, friend, could not hold back from the grave those whom we most loved. The hoary head has been laid upon its clayey pillow. The healthful and vigorous man has been smitten to the dust. The blooming youth has withered, like a short-lived flower. And the smiling infant has resigned the sleep of the cradle, for the quieter sleep of the grave,—has been

translated, from the arms of its weeping mother, to the arms of that Savior, who loves little children with a stronger than mother's love.

Thirty-six, from among this people, have died the last year—a larger number than in any one year, since the desolating pestilence of 1751,—a period of more than one hundred years. Nine of them were members of this Church ; and one of them was its beloved and honored Pastor. One of them, also, was the only remaining member received into the Church, during the ministry of its second Pastor, Rev. Mr. TODD.

Many of the departed were called away in an unexpected moment ; and it shall be an admonition to you, frail men, to have your loins girt about you and your lamp trimmed and burning. Many of them commenced the year, with as fair a prospect of long life as you commence another ; and now, the places that knew them, know them no more. The year, just closed, was their last ; and the opening year may be yours. You may be endeared to many friends ; your dependencies, your happiness may be so intertwined with theirs, that they and you may feel that you, above all, cannot be spared from that loved circle. But death has no sympathy. You may be young ; but thousands, as young as you, will fall like grass before the mower's scythe. You may be healthful and strong ; but the pale hectic may survive you. You may be full of business, and projecting schemes which it would be the work of years to execute ; but, with thine every purpose unaccomplished, thy soul may be required of thee. You may be unprepared to die ; but when the

summons comes, you must go. You may be unwilling to admit the thought of dying ; but the destroying angel will not be intimidated, because you shrink affrighted from his approach. You may be a pillar in the Church of God, a burning and shining light in the candlestick where the Master has placed you ; and yet, it may be sadly impressed upon our hearts, that God can accomplish all his merciful designs to the children of men, without detaining you longer from your heavenly mansion.

It is certain, then, that you must give an account of your stewardship ; and certain that you have no period, not even the briefest, guaranteed you for the purpose of preparation. When your Master calls, your account must be rendered. You cannot put him off, a moment. Now, you may dismiss the thought of your accountability ; you may stifle the reproofs of conscience ; you may quench the influences of the Spirit ; you may turn away your feet from the sanctuary, and your ear from the voice of mercy ; you may walk in the ways of your heart and in the sight of your eyes. But, shortly, you will be accused unto your Lord of having wasted his goods ; and then, he will say unto thee, "Give an account of thy stewardship". That voice you must hear. That summons you must obey. With what overwhelming power will the conviction of your accountability rush upon you then ! The subject which you most of all dreaded, you can no longer dismiss. Your account, which you have neglected to set in order, must then be presented, imperfect as it is.

And remember, if found *unfaithful* you will be

steward no more. The decree will go forth, "Take from him the neglected, dishonored talent, and give it unto him that hath ten talents ;—for unto every one that hath shall be given ; but from him that hath not, shall be taken away even that which he hath."

Ah ! how *can* you be *steward any more*? When your body has been consecrated, through life, as a synagogue of Satan, shall it ever again be fitted up, as a meet temple for the residence of the Holy Ghost? When your reason has been perverted, until you are wandering as a bewildered maniac upon the mountains of death, will it ever lead you again through the garden of Gethsemane and up to the reeking cross of Christ? When the precious moments of this fleeting life have passed away, will there dawn upon you, from the everlasting hills, another state of probation? When the glorious Gospel of the blessed God shall have been preached to you and neglected, until its sweet accents shall reach your ears no more, will there be preached to you, in the world of spirits, some other Gospel? When the Bible shall be set at nought, till its pages are sealed for ever from your vision, will there come to you some other book of God, to tell you of redeeming love? When you have trampled upon the blood of the compassionate Redeemer till the very last moments of your being, trifled with his sufferings, and hardened your heart against the tender entreaties of his love, will there die for you another Savior? When the Holy Ghost shall have been grieved away until he take his everlasting flight, will there ever hover round you another Heavenly Dove, to win you back to holiness and to God? When the sun

of your last Sabbath shall have sunk behind the mountains ; when the voice of the ministry shall die away on your ear ; when the entreaties of beloved friends and the prayers of the pious shall reach you no more, will there arise other Sabbaths, other ministers of mercy, other anxious friends, other praying souls, and unite their influence to bring you to the gate of life ?—No ! No ! If found *unfaithful* you will be *steward no more !*

And this is not all. The unprofitable servant was cast into outer darkness, where is wailing and gnashing of teeth. After you have given an account of your stewardship before the Judge of the quick and the dead, and all that you hold dear shall be taken from you, then must be rendered unto you the recompense of your unfaithfulness. You have but one season of trial ; and when that is over, your destiny will be as immutable as the counsels of Heaven. And it will not only be immutable ; but, if you have wasted your Lord's money, it will be insufferable—*an eternity in outer darkness !* Not a gleam of hope, not a ray of consolation will ever more reach your benighted soul. The faithless steward, about to be cast out of his stewardship, could make to himself friends of the mammon of unrighteousness ; but you, if you are cast out of yours, cannot make to yourself a friend, in the universe of God. You will be absolutely friendless, eternally forlorn. No Lazarus will ever be permitted to bring even a drop of water for your momentary alleviation.

Here, then, as you stand by the grave of another year, and cast your tearful eye back over all the way in which

a kind Providence has led you, and turn your face with inexpressible concern to the untried and impenetrable future, here, I entreat you, look over your account, and see how you stand with your Lord and Master. Settle your account with God. Balance your account with God. Do it, I beseech you, ere you give sleep to your eyes or slumber to your eyelids. Nay, do it, here, in this place of prayer. That account is too solemn, that judgment-bar is too fearful, the soul is too precious, the joys of heaven are too intense, the anguish of the lost is too excruciating, eternity is too long, the uncertainty which hangs over all the future is too appalling, to admit of delay. Do it, here, in this place of prayer.—Thy God is here, waiting to be gracious. He will hear thine entreaty. He will accept thy broken and contrite heart. Though thy sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though red like crimson, they shall be as wool. The door of mercy is yet open. The Savior is knocking at the door of thy heart. How he pleads! How the spirit strives! *Now, now*, is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation! But,

“Soon, borne on time’s most rapid wing,
 Shall death command you to the grave,
 Before God’s bar your spirit bring,
 And none be found to hear or save.
 In that lone land of deep despair,
 No Sabbath’s heavenly light shall rise,
 No God regard your bitter prayer,
 No Savior call you to the skies”.

I have a special admonition to plead with you with all earnestness to-day, as you have to hear that your souls

may live. The voice that has addressed you, at each opening year, for the life time of a generation, is silent in the grave.* Sudden, as at midnight, the summons came. Not a warning, not an entreaty, not a prayer could the endeared dying Pastor utter more. Oh! could you have gathered round him, and heard him speak to you of the Jordan of death, at the instant he was buffeting its waves; could he have told you of Jesus and the resurrection, at the moment his faith in them was giving him the victory, and the everlasting doors were unfolding to make his ransomed spirit way, with what emphasis would he have addressed you! Pleasant would it have been—a privilege we cannot estimate—to have received his dying counsels, to have given him the parting hand, and seen the sweet angelic smile play upon his countenance, as the convoy of happy spirits approached him to bear him to his heavenly home. But this was denied you. *He was not, for God took him.* “Even so, Father, for so it seemed good in thy sight”.

What things he spake unto you, however, while he was yet with you, are fresh in your memories to-day. How he reasoned with you of righteousness and a judgment to come; how he told you of a Savior's mediation, and besought you to take refuge in his love; how he sympathized with you in your sorrows, and comforted you in your bereavements; what a heart he carried with him to the funerals of your dead; how he sought to impress those mournful scenes on all the living; how, with each

* Rev. SAMUEL N. SHEPARD was ordained Pastor of the Church, Nov. 2, 1825; and died, Sept. 30th, 1856, in the *thirty first* year of his ministry.

returning Sabbath, and especially at each communion season, and at each New Year's greeting, he yearned for your salvation, surely you cannot soon forget.

In more than ordinary measure, was he the minister of his own people ; and in more than ordinary measure, was he permitted to rejoice in the fruits of his fidelity. The precious seasons of revival which you experienced under his ministry, especially those of '27, '31, '37, and '43,—when so many of your names were written in heaven ; how grateful the recollection of them to-day ; and how grateful will be the review of them, where their fruits shall all be made manifest, and where the beloved Pastor shall present the spiritual children, which God gave him, before his presence with exceeding joy ! How many of you were baptised by his hand. *Five hundred and eighty three*, in all, did he consecrate to God in this holy ordinance. To how many of you did he first present the emblems of a Savior's crucifixion. *Five hundred and two*, in all, did he admit to the fellowship of this Church. And *six hundred and twenty four*—what a congregation !—did he follow to the house appointed for all the living. At the time of his settlement, this Church consisted of *two hundred and thirty four* members. *One hundred and fifty one* of these are dead ; *twenty two* have united with other churches ; and *sixty one* remain to this present. Of those added to the Church during his ministry, *ninety six* are dead ; *one hundred and twenty five* have removed to other places ; and *two hundred and eighty one* are yet with you.

Few pastors have extended their labors, with one

people, over so long a period, as the one who has so recently been taken from you. Of the *twelve ministers* and *eight delegates*, who composed the Council at his Ordination, but *three* ministers and *two* delegates survived him. Few churches have been more prosperous, in all things, the last thirty years, than this—have known less of dissensions within, or sectarian strifes without—have remained, amidst excitements and divisions which have embarrassed and enfeebled other churches, more essentially *one people*. Few churches embrace in their communion a greater proportion of the population around them; and few even, out of our principal cities and villages, a larger membership. In but few places, are the appropriate influences of a preached Gospel more apparent, upon all the interests of the living, than here; and in but few places, do the dead sleep, with more assured hope of a blessed immortality, than in the cemeteries, where, with mournful steps and aching hearts, you have consigned to their last repose those dearer to you than your life's blood.

To have enjoyed such privileges—the labors of a Pastor, so able and faithful, through a period so eventful in the world's history—to have been visited with such signal tokens of divine favor and quickened to such a measure of fidelity in your Master's service, involves no common responsibility. Surely, it should be well considered, as you are meditating here, to-day, on the account you are to give of your stewardship.

But it is not the ministry just now closed, that is alone

interwoven, inseparably, with your high privileges and your solemn account. You have been blessed, as have but few churches in the land, with a *succession* of able, learned, pious and faithful ministers. Brief have been the intervals, since this Church was gathered *—the fraction of a year in each of two instances, and less than three years in another—when there have not been ministering at these altars devout men, whose praise was in all the churches, and whose record is on high. The labors of HART, and TODD, and ELLIOTT, and SHEPARD, together, extended over nearly a century and a half—the life time of five generations of men. A parallel case is seldom to be found. Your fathers and your fathers' fathers appreciated such privileges. They were well instructed in the great things of the kingdom. You have an intelligent, godly, honored ancestry—an inheritance, with which none other beneath the sun is, for a moment, to be compared. The family altar, the baptismal seal, the life of faith, the song of triumph over death and the grave, have here been handed down from generation to generation, with the affectionate and solemn injunction, that their heaven-born mission cease not, till the second coming of the Son of Man.

And here you are, to-day, with the responsibility of all these high privileges upon you,—the responsibility so

* The First Church in Madison was organized, in November, 1707.

Rev. JOHN HART, its first Pastor, was ordained, at the time of the organization; and died, March 4th, 1731, in the *twenty fourth* year of his ministry.

Rev. JONATHAN TODD was ordained, Oct. 24th, 1733; and died, Feb. 24th, 1791, in the *fifty eighth* year of his ministry.

Rev. JOHN ELLIOTT, D. D., was ordained, Nov. 2d, 1791; and died, Dec. 17, 1824, in the *thirty fourth* year of his ministry.

to improve them that you may yourselves have treasure in heaven, and so to perpetuate them that generations yet unborn may not upbraid you—may rise up in the judgment and call you blessed. And the time is short. The day and the hour knoweth no man. The midnight cry will soon be heard ;—and the precious dust which you garnered with tears, and your own which sorrowing hearts may have laid carefully by its side, will wake to life and immortality. The fathers, the mothers, the brothers, and sisters, and children dear will all be there. What a retinue, bound together by the tenderest ties, will go up, from this favored spot, to their last account! Your Pastors have all died with you, and they will all rise with you; and Oh! shall it be their blessedness and yours, that they present you all, *all* to your Redeemer, as the crowns of their rejoicing? What a joyful meeting! What a happy home! What a blessed eternity!

O, be looking for and hastening, then, unto the coming of that day. Quit you, like men. Be strong. Do with your might, whatsoever your hands find to do, that your calling and election may be sure, and that the rich blessings which you have inherited and which are laid up for you in heaven, may descend, without measure, upon all who shall people these dwellings, and tread these streets, and worship at these altars, till time shall be no more. So, shall you give account of your stewardship, with joy unspeakable and full of glory!

I commend you to God and to the word of his grace. I wish you all a *happy New Year*,—many, many happy

New Years;—happy in your endeared relations, and your high privileges; happy in your benevolent activities, your christian consolations, your immortal hopes. And,

“When rolling years shall cease to move”;

when the lights in the firmament of heaven, which were ordained for signs, and for seasons, and for days, and for years, shall all be extinguished; may you have a joyful greeting, where there is no night and no sorrow, where they need no candle neither light of the sun, for the Lord God giveth them light, and they shall reign for ever and ever.

18.

