

Ebenezer Parkman's Sermons to Criminals

These fragments, which are among Ebenezer's Parkman's sermons, were delivered to two prisoners who faced execution. Although unnamed, the first (in chronological order), was John Hamilton (or, as he sometimes called himself, Hugh Henderson), who was executed for burglary, November 24, 1737. Jabez Green was executed for murder, October 21, 1742.

The extant portions of Parkman's diary for 1737 cover February 13-March 30 and September 20-November 24. On Saturday, September 24, Parkman received a request from Hamilton that he visit the prisoner. Accordingly, on Monday Parkman rode to Worcester and met with Hamilton at the jail: "Among other Questions, I asked him his true Name? He answered Hugh Henderson. He acquainted me with his Birth and Baptism etc. He was much concerned and distressed about his state, and ready to confess himself a great Sinner, etc. I prayed with him. He requested I would come and see him again."

Parkman's next visit was on October 12: "I went to Worcester to see Hugh Henderson, found him in much the same distressed state that I left him in, but I hope more knowing and acquainted with his Condition and with his Duty." Isaac Burr, the minister of Worcester, was with Parkman. Parkman prayed with Hamilton, "a multitude attending." Hamilton "earnestly desired me to see him again and wishes over and over that I would preach to him."

The phrase, "a multitude attending," suggests that Parkman's visit was, at least in part, quite public. And while we may think of the events leading up to and including the execution as a spectacle, Parkman's diary suggests another dimension. On October 17, he was visited by Joseph Wheeler, who was "distressed in Conscience for H. Henderson."

Parkman visited Henderson on October 21, stopping "at the Goal at the Grates to speak with the Prisoner and to put him in mind of the preparations needful for him to make in order to his keeping his *Last Sabbath*." Early the next morning Parkman "began to write my address to the Prisoner." He preached "A.M. on Eccl. 11.9,¹ a crowded assembly, poor Hugh Henderson present. P.M. on Job 3.36.² A very great congregation, it being in their apprehension the last Sabbath Sermon the poor Criminal is to hear." The fragment that appears below is all that survives from his sermons to Henderson.

Parkman returned that same evening to the jail: "I interrogated the Prisoner what was the occasion of his coming to this country -- whether he had discovered and acknowledged all that was fit and proper for him to reveal? Whether he had any confederates? A great number flocked in the Goal when at his Request I prayed with him. I left him between 8 and 9." Several

¹Eccl. 11:9, "Rejoice, O young man, in thy youth; and let thy heart cheer thee in the days of thy youth, and walk in the ways of thine heart, and in the sight of thine eyes: but know thou, that for all these things God will bring thee into judgment."

²The transcription by Harriette M. Forbes is in error, as there is no Job 3:36. Perhaps Parkman preached on Job 3:26, "I was not in safety, neither had I rest, neither was I quiet; yet trouble came."

days later Parkman learned that Governor Jonathan Belcher had “reprieved Hugh Henderson for a month.”³

Parkman returned to Worcester on November 21 and learned that Henderson had tried to escape by filing the jail door. The two men “talked more of other matters, and kept longer off from the main point of his case than heretofore. I'm more put to it to judge of his Frame” – that is, Parkman tried to assess whether Henderson was repentant. Isaac Burr asked Parkman to preach to Henderson on Wednesday: “Hugh desired it of me, and several of the people repeatedly and urgently insist and plead for it.” Henderson apparently complained about the jury that had convicted him, “not going by the laws of God and the Country in Condemning him, having but Circumstantial Evidence.” That said, “he added, that he was guilty and his many sins had provoked God to anger, etc.”

On Wednesday Parkman returned to preach to Henderson. There was such a crowd that they adjourned to the meetinghouse. Parkman preached on 1 Tim. 1.15,⁴ and when he later visited the prisoner, Henderson “spoke of having a solemn warning taken from his mouth, but chose to have it deferred to the morning, but prayed I would be early.”

The last (partial) extant entry in Parkman's diary for 1737 records his visit to Henderson on the day of his execution, with Parkman (assisted by Isaac Burr) “penning down what the Prisoner had to deliver by way of Confession and Warning to the World before his Execution.” Parkman noted that he “was as punctual and strict as I could be in inserting his own words as near as I could, and when any others were used.”

Henderson's “confession and dying warning” was appended to John Campbell's execution sermon, *After Souls by Death Are Separated from Their Bodies, They Come to Judgment*,⁵ as well as in a broadside, with Parkman attesting to the accuracy of Henderson's statement.

Parkman undoubtedly attended the execution. No record of his response survives.

There is virtually no information about Parkman's sermon to Jabez Green (December 31, 1741), as his diary for that year is not extant. Thirty-year-old Green of Brookfield killed Thomas McLuer at a husking in September 1741 and was jailed in Worcester until the next sitting of the court a year later. During Green's long incarceration, Parkman visited him on several occasions.

³This was “at the request of Mr. Burr and Mr. Prentice.” Isaac Burr was minister of Worcester; Prentice was either John Prentice of Lancaster or Solomon Prentice of Grafton.

⁴1 Tim. 1:15, “This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am the chief.”

⁵John Campbell, *After Souls by Death Are Separated from Their Bodies, They Come to Judgment. Asserted in a Sermon Deliver'd at Worcester, November 24th, 1737. Being the Day of the Execution of John Hamilton, Alias Hugh Henderson. (With His Confession and Dying Warning.)* (Boston: Printed & Sold by S. Kneeland & T. Green, in Queen-Street over against the Prison, 1738), 34-36. The confession and dying warning appeared separately with “A Poem Occasioned by the Untimely Death of Hugh Henderson”; see Hugh Henderson, *The Confession and Dying Warning* (Boston, [1737], Evans 4144).

The first recorded visit was in January 1742, when Parkman found Green "penitent, diligently on enquiry, Reading, Waiting on Jesus, respectfull to Ministers, and very gratefull to me for my pains with him" (Jan. 29, 1742). In May Parkman intended to visit Green, to whom he had "lately writ to on occasion of his turning Quaker" (May 19, 1742), but he was unable to go. Twelve days later Parkman went to see Green, first meeting alone with him: "I perceived he was turned over to the principles of Quakerism." When two other ministers and a number of others came in, Green "grew very bold and Said he had the Spirit and that they that have the Spirit have the holy anointing and need not that any one should teach them for they know all Things." When Parkman sought to make a "distinction between the Jewish Ordinances and the Insitutions of Christ," Green insulted him "in an ungrateful manner with telling me I would Defend what got me a good living." Parkman thought that Green's "frett" might have arisen from the sheriff's recent refusal to allow several Quakers to visit him (June 1, 1742).

Parkman's last attempt to see Green was on September 16, but when the prisoner learned that Parkman was there, he refused to see him, and Parkman "would not force my self upon him." A week later Parkman attended the trial, and although Green's "Confidence was very extraordinary," the evidence was "very strong against him," and two days later Parkman learned that Green "was condemned yesterday" (Sept. 25, 1742). Parkman sent a letter to Green on October 20 and noted the next day that Green was executed. "Mr. Aldridge the Quaker having preached at the Jail and Mr. Burr at the Meeting House. No prayer at the Gallows -- nor much Warning given, as I was informed (for I went not to *Worcester*) but by Mr. Aldridge some sort of Exhortation was given. The Prisoner dyed declaring he was not guilty of Murder, to the Surprize of the Spectators" (Oct. 21, 1742).

Worcester Dec.: 23. 1741

To poor unhappy Jabez Green.

Miserable Man,

What a vile Race have you run, and what a woful Stop are you come to! How Exposed are all sinful Men to the wrath of God but how dreadfully exposed are you! Alas! What have you done! O wretched, Ruined Man! How Sad is your Lot here in this doleful Jail – deprived of Common Comforts of Life, and chained down from free Converse with Mankind! But ah ~~several words crossed out~~ how loaded with Guilt more than with Irons! And in hazzard of infinitely greater Sufferings than all you undergoe here. This doleful Prison is a Palace to that

place of Torment to which (Undone Creature) you are hastening unless you vigorously bestir yourself. But Blessed be God you are not there yet; that you are a Prisoner of Hope. This Comfort dawns upon you in this gloominess.

You cry out in your Anguish, it may be, that your Guilt is of the heaviest Sort.

~~<several words crossed out>~~ Let this be granted yet the Blood of Jesus Cleanses from all Sin.

Some one objects the words of St. ~~John~~ Christ in Rev. 21.8 that Murderers Shall have their Part in the Lake which burns etc. And St. John says, 1 J. 3.15, ye know that no Murderer hath Eternal Life abiding in him. A. True, but he is not excluded from Repentance: and if he repents he shall be Saved. For the Scripture shews us great Examples of Such. David and Manasseh, ~~<several words crossed out>~~ are on Record on purpose to evidence

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this! And the Persistent Thief is another. Blessed be God for Grace abounding to the Chief of Sinners, if they wilt but Repent!

You have Reason also to praise God in granting you this Space, that you was not Slain at the same Time in your Contest with your Fellow, and that God has So ordered Maters, (in Mercy, no doubt, to your poor soul) that ~~<word crossed out>~~ you have So long a Time before your Trial. But

You have need of Strong Advice and Caution not to misimprove these Tokens of Favour, for then your Case will be made seven fold more grievous.

O therefore at the Same Time that you excite your Soul to praise and magnifie God herefor, implore earnestly the Special Grace of God both to guard you against Abuse of his Mercy and to Guide in the best Improvement thereof.

Now then up and be doing for the Life of thy Precious Soul – (your Body to the [Contrary?] -) ~~<two words crossed out>~~ Remember God is the holy Revenger – Flee, Flee for Refuge to Jesus Christ the Hope Set before us – the Strong Tower, into which all that run are Safe – Cease not to mourn and lament and aggravate and acknowledge your sins, all your many iniquitys, before the Lord and lift up a loud and bitter Cry to Him, which may pierce Heaven itself – that you may be forgiven.

And patiently wait upon God in the Diligent use of all the Means of Grace allowed you.

Examining your Self and watching against the many Temptations by which you will now be assaulted.

Give not over – there is at least a peradventure, an who knows but the Lord may be

Conclu: gracious: ~~<word crossed out>~~ and God grant that as you have grievously provoked His glorious Majesty by your enormous sins and given us piercing Grief and Sorrow for YOU in your woful Circumstance, you may glorify Him by your Repentance and cause Joy in Heaven over such a returning prodigal.

(1.) Worcester Oct. 23. 1737.

But I will fasten my Eye chiefly upon your Case, O Unhappy, Miserable Man, And I will suppose you to be earnestly Enquiring whether such an One as you are considering all your Circumstances may be Saved, and whether you may encourage any firm Hope that you may

notwithstanding the Many Discouragements which you must in all Reason be thought to be Under?

A. Why, Let us go over some of the principal Articles of your Condition (And verily I must confess them to be very black and dolefull, and such as may well fill thy Soul with the deepest Concern imaginable). But let us see, if your Mind is apprehensive you will Say that your Life has been full of Sin, and besides the Common sins which men are ordinarily guilty of, you have been guilty of very heinous Sins, which have been the more aggravated because often repeated and long persisted in, and Some of them peculiarly Circumstanced, So that you are ~~<no less?>~~ loaded with Guilt much more than with Irons; you have long forsaken God and emboldened your Self in wickedness; You have long resisted the Means of Grace, and ~~<word crossed out>~~ the precious offers of Salvation have been disregarded; the loud warnings and Threatnings of Gods Word could have no Effect nor the various Judgments of his Providence; but you have Cast off Fear and set your Face against Heaven. You have met with one [Choice?] after another, in your Course of Enormous Sin, which Should have brought you to Sober Consideration and to some Serious resolution to reform; but you have emboldened your Self in Iniquity and committed it more and more; till God has thought it time to put an Effectual Stop, Since nothing else has been able to; - And now to come to the unhappiest part of your Case, Since your Condemnation and Sentence of Death, you have not made, it may be, such a carefull, faithfull and fruitfull improvement of your great Advantages which you have had to make your peace with God

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and work out your Salvation as you ought and might have done: and altho you have had a great deal of trouble and sorrow in your Mind at times and have Lamented that you have done what

should bring you to this miserable End, yet it may be greatly feared whether the present Extremity only has not forced out this, and whether the Root of sin within has been ever really struck at as it ought to have been – and notwithstanding all your Crys and Prayers and Tears, whether your Heart doth not remain very much hardened Still, and whether you have not a strong Love and Affection to the ways of sin yet, altho it may at present keep out of sight from you, and you may be prone to think otherwise of your Self. Instead of humbling yourself under the mighty hand of God and setting your Self to get a thorow knowledge of your State and ~~<word crossed out>~~ with an anxious Sollicitude of Soul Enquiring what you must do to be saved, have you not bent your mind a great deal to plot and Contrive how you shall be saved out of this Confinement has not much of your precious Time been Spent in this, not Considering how much faster you have been ~~<word crossed out>~~ held by the Cords of your sins and kept in Slavery to wickedness than chained to the Goal? And in a particular Manner since your Reprieve and a new Space has been granted you for your Repentance thro the very tender Compassions of your concerned Ministers and the Mercifull Lenity of the Chief Ruler in this Province, have you so much the more devoted your Self to the

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great work before you, or have you not rather given your Self encouraging Hope that by Some means or other you should be able to make your Escape? Could it be clearly found that, as it is written in Lev. 26,41, if then their uncircumcised Hearts be humbled, and they then accept of the punishment of their Iniquity; So you have meekly and penitently Submitted your Self to the Punishment which you acknowledge both God and Man justly lay upon you? Instead of this have you not increased your Crime by your presumptuous attempt, whereby the Lives and

Estates of man were greatly endangered, yea and your own Life also: This was certainly a very great and aggravated wickedness and an ungratefull Return for the singular kindness of the Ministers and the Governour in sparing you. By all this we have the more Reason to fear whether your Humiliation and Repentance have been so Sincere as it ought to have been; and if So then your Heart has been still hardening after all. And now you are come to the very last whole Day that you must see in this World, there is but a [step?] between you and Death, nay between you and Eternal [Death?] unless you find Mercy with the Infinite God. But O the inexpressible Woes and Torments which you must be thrown into and remain in for ever and ever if you miss of these! You may justly look upon your Self as being among the Chief of Sinners, and your State and Condition is extremely Hazardous – thy soul may well tremble and Shudder at the Thought of it – Nevertheless,

[Manuscript ends here.]