

# Thanksgiving Sermon.

A DISCOURSE

DELIVERED BY  
REV. THOS. A. HOYT, of Louisville, Ky.,  
JANUARY 24, 1861.

Jonah iii: 9, 10.—Who can tell if God will turn and repent, and turn away from his fierce anger, that they perish not? And God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God repented of the evil that he said that he would do unto them; and he did not.

The observance of a day of Fasting, Humiliation and prayer is not an effort of despair, but of hope; it declares that confidence in man is lost, but that confidence in God is revived. Having exhausted every human device, and struggle in vain to release itself from the toils, a whole people learns the lesson so often taught the individual—that it is better to trust in the Lord than that to put confidence in man.

Fasting is the outward sign of the humiliation and penitence which we should feel and express this day; hence it is idle mockery unless we really repent and are humble.

Have we not enough to humble us? The foundations of our country are being broken up, the noblest temple of liberty in the world is being demolished; one column has fallen, and while I speak, the crash of another may smite upon our ears. It is a spectacle that might make angels weep, and should wring from us tears of blood. We are on the verge of civil war; passions are inflamed, violence is threatened, States are arming, and we are in hourly danger of collision; at any moment, brother's hands may reek with brother's blood. It is a time to proclaim a fast and a solemn convocation. Behung in mourning, ye heavens, and be clad in sackcloth, ye earth! The great lighthouse of the world, whose beacon sent its rays across the waters, guiding the wandering barks into the haven of liberty, is growing dim, and is rocking to its base. It is as though the Polar Star were suddenly to plunge from its steady resting place and begin to "wander darkling in the eternal space, rayless and pathless." It is a day of trouble, of rebuke, and of blasphemy—a day to be marked with black in the world's calendar.

But we feel that this, the Iliad of our woes, it is not an accident or a bare misfortune, but a punishment for our sins. The conscience as well as the heart is burdened, and a sense of ill-desert aggravates our sorrows. We intuitively recognize the connection between sin and punishment; we know not precisely what that connection is; we cannot say what sin or whose sins have brought the infliction, but punishment implies sin, and "the sin must be enormous where the punishment is so fearful." This vast, imperial Republic, bequeathed to us by a noble ancestry, consecrated by a noble history, the work of illustrious statesmen and patriots, is falling a prey to national degeneracy and corruption. In less than a century, we have spoiled the legacy of our fathers. A Christian people, with Christian institutions, the envy and admiration of the world, have not lived to the age of pagan Greece. Surely God has a controversy with us, and it becomes us to inquire with all solemnity into the cause of His fierce anger. Surely it is time to come to ourselves; to look our follies and wickedness in the face; time for every patriot to rend his garments, cover himself with sackcloth, and come into the house of the Lord. Let us deal faithfully this day; let us survey the sins of the land, not to accuse one another, but to humble ourselves under the mighty hand of God. Sins may be styled national sins, when either they are committed by the State in its organized capacity, or are so generally perpetrated as to become characteristic of the people. We have incurred national guilt in both these ways. As a people we have been guilty of vain-glory and boasting; as though by our own might and wisdom we had done all this, we have said, "Is not this great Babylon that I have built?" We have not acknowledged God, and He now leaves us to ourselves. Or if we have referred to him at all, it has been to intimate that He was bound to bless a country which was so manifestly indispensable to His plans.

In the next place we have deified "the people," regarding them as the fountain of all power and proclaiming the blasphemous adage, "vox populi, vox Dei;" as the last expression of political wisdom. Thus Jehovah has been dethroned and a hydra-headed monster set up in the stead, and never was a pagan idol worshipped with more abject and crawling devotion, than this their god, by the whole tribe of office-seekers. Two results have followed: In the first place our rulers have lost the sense of responsibility to God, and instead of endeavoring to do what was right, have sought only to propitiate their idol. The whole notion of a representative government has become perverted. It is regarded simply as a method of giving expression to the popular will, as a contrivance for finding out and doing what the people if assembled in mass would do. This doctrine is utterly false. "Representatives are appointed not to ascertain what the will of the people is, but what it ought to be," not to do what the people think is right. "The people are not permitted to legislate en masse because their passions and caprices are likely to prove stronger than reason and truth. To secure deliberation, to protect themselves from their

own prejudices and passions, and to cause the voice of reason to be heard, they retire from the scene, and leave the inquiry and decision of their duty to chosen men, in whose wisdom they have confidence. This is the true theory of parliamentary government." Had this idea been held, our representatives would have guided public opinion, instead of being swept along by it, they would be pillars of the State, and not mere weather-vanes to show the course of the popular breeze.

The next evil result of the undue exaltation of the people, is the unlimited doctrine that the majority should govern; whereas the authority of God is supreme, the authority of written constitutions next, and the authority of the people last in the series. This error is sufficiently injurious when applied to the legislation of a single State, but is utterly ruinous when forced into Federal affairs, the conduct of which should depend not on the popular will of the whole country, but on the individual utterances of the several States. According to this monstrous notion, the weaker holds its rights and liberties by the bare sufferance of the stronger.

Now, God will not give His glory to another, and as France atoned in bitterness and blood for its impious apotheosis of reason in the guise of lust and in garb of a harlot, so we are reaping the rewards of our idolatry of ourselves.

Our Federal Government, so complex and so nicely balanced, required for its administration the sternest virtue and the highest wisdom; but, alas! it has too often been the tool of party, the instrument of sections, and the engine of corruption. Its highest offices are no longer regarded as serene and lofty positions into which the wisest and best of her citizens are placed to guide the destinies of a great country; but in accordance with the vile battle-cry, "To the victors belong the spoils," they are sought for the benefit of the leaves and fishes. As a consequence of this, the government is corrupt, votes are bought and sold, and in the struggle of factions, the interests of the country are overlooked. The great Federal Parliament appointed by the States to be the minister of justice and protection, has been perverted from its high ends, and has become a fountain of corruption, or a source of alarm.

The States united in a holy bond, sealed by blood, instead of loving each as themselves, and discharging the common offices of respect and good-fellowship, have rushed eagerly into the error against which Washington so emphatically warned them, and stand arrayed in the desperate struggle of sectional animosity.

That portion of them which has been constantly growing relatively weaker, instead of firmly uniting, not for aggression, but for self-protection, has all along been divided upon questions of mere party and personal politics.

Now, I mention these things not as mere slips and blunders in the conduct of our affairs, but distinctly in the light of sins against God, who laid us, by His Providence, under the most solemn obligations to preserve our free institutions and our prosperous commonwealths, and to transmit them to future generations.

Let us add to all this the other manifold grievous sins which afflict our country—the profanity, the Sabbath-breaking, the fraud and the violence, and we have an array of guilt that may well startle us and arouse God. O, our offense is rank; it smells to Heaven.

But, in this day when the land mourns, we are called upon not only thus collectively to confess our national sins, but also to mourn, every family apart, and every man in the secrecy of his own heart. We must not excuse ourselves with the plea that we are obscure, and our sins but as a drop in the ocean; remember that a single Archon brought discomfiture on the armies of Israel. God says: "I, the Lord, search the heart and try the reins of the children of men," and it is only by each man's confessing and forsaking his own sins that this great act of national humiliation will be rightly done this day. If, as God looks from His throne on the spectacle of a nation sitting in sackcloth and ashes, He sees that genuine penitence fills every heart, He will say, I repent me of the evil, I will not do it. I exhort you, therefore, as you would not fail your country in this her time of need, that each one of you really humble himself before God, and repent of your sins. This will be true, in whatever light you view this dispensation, whether as an infliction of wrath or as a stroke of mercy. It must proceed on one of these two principles; God either regards us as His enemies, and is about to destroy us, or He looks upon us as His people, and is chastising us in mercy, according to the sacred dictum, "whom the Lord loveth, He chasteneth." In either case we may hope for hearing and for pardon. As to the former, the case of Nineveh, as related in the text, shows that even heathen may escape judgments by timely repentance. As to the latter, the history of Israel is full of instruction. When the army of Sennacherib at the gates of Jerusalem, Hezekiah "rent his clothes, covered himself with sackcloth, and went into the House of the Lord," and the Lord delivered him. If God promised Abraham to spare Sodom for the sake of ten righteous, will He not spare this guilty land because of His people that dwell in it? And can His people look upon it in any other light than as the smit-

ing of a Father's hand?

As we lie here at the feet of the Almighty, the question presses itself upon us, "Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?" If any man lack wisdom, let him ask of God who giveth liberally and upbraideth not. What shall we think of this great struggle, and what is the path of duty for us? Speaking in His name, I will endeavor to answer so far as I have God's authority for what I say:

And, first, we should settle in our minds that great principles underlie this whole matter; we should avoid superficial views, and strive to see the mighty issues that are pending. This is no temporary though acute disorder of the body politic, but a chronic distemper, now breaking out afresh and throwing the patient into convulsions. This young giant would not writhe and perish under a mere functional derangement, an organic disease prays on the vitals. The different portions of our country could not come into such hostile and deadly collision upon the ordinary questions of public policy.

One section of this country believes that its dearest rights are injured—the right of self-government, the right to constitutional liberty, the right to equality in the common Government and domain; she believes that along with these rights is implicated the truth, the truth of God, the revealed truth of God; and believing that these priceless treasures are gliding from her grasp, she is struggling to regain them. If all this be true, if our liberties and our religion are in danger, what have we to do but to stand up boldly for our rights, rights that we inherit as Englishmen and as Americans, rights that began to be secured to us when the Barons wrested Magna Charta from the nerveless grasp of King John; rights that sought revenge for their violation in the royal blood of Charles I; rights, the vindication of which, hurled James II from the throne; rights, that rising to still grander proportions in this new world, found a champion in Washington, and embodiment in the institutions of our country.

God gave us these rights; they are singular marks of His goodness, and we cannot with impunity throw them away; they are the inheritance of our children, which we are not at liberty to define or waste.

Questions of great magnitude and difficulty arise as to the time and mode, the when and the how of discharging our duties in this matter.

But these are purely political questions, and as such can not properly be discussed in the pulpit. As a man and citizen, I have my own opinions which are well known by you; for without obtruding my sentiments on any one, and while pursuing steadily the duties of my high and arduous vocation, I have not hesitated to utter my thoughts when called upon to do so. Born on the soil of South Carolina, and educated in her views, I have not abjured the convictions of a life time and professed to have received a new revelation, but I have been true to the instincts of nature, and have cherished the lessons that I drank in with my mother's milk. But what I may think as a man, is of no consequence to you on this occasion and in this place; you only wish to know the message of the Lord at my mouth. The terms of my commission are limited—I am commanded to teach religion and am allowed to touch on other topics only so far as they touch on religion. Were it otherwise, were I allowed full scope, my natural feelings would spring forward with alacrity to discuss this whole matter. But I dare not do it; my commission forbids it. Like an officer placed with his regiment at a particular place in the field, though he may frequently think that he could do great service by leaving his post and engaging in the battle, yet he dare not do it without orders from his commander. In so far ministers of the Gospel have disobeyed "marching orders," confusion has been the result. I shall not imitate an example fraught with so much sin and mischief. For these reasons I cannot take up those questions—they are civil and not at all religious.

But there are other aspects of the matter which rightfully fall within the scope of this day's discourse—aspects which are so strenuously urged by every dictate of humanity and religion, and which so exactly tally with the precepts of the Gospel of peace, that I feel bound to press them upon your attention. The question that lifts its solemn presence amongst us this day is, "shall we have peace or war?" The responsibility of its answer rests upon you as a citizen of Kentucky, and as a portion of the middle Slaveholding States, it is for them to say whether blood shall be shed. They may have delayed their answer too long, but I trust not. These great States should rise up from their knees this day and hough the horses of war. They should say to the North, you shall not attempt force towards the seceding States—they must be allowed peaceably to go out, if they choose.

It is not necessary that you should admit the right of secession. You may regard it as a revolution, but as a revolution accomplished. You may say, if you choose, that we do not admit that our Constitution contemplated secession, and that we do not think the Cotton States warranted in what they have done; but as they have done it, we will not permit them to be assailed. And is it not a revolution accom-

plished? Does a revolution ever go backwards? Can force compel South Carolina to return? No! the whole power of the Federal Government is inadequate to the task. She may be overrun by invading armies—her cities may be demolished, and her churches may be deserted to the moles and the bats; her classic halls may echo the hoot of the midnight owl; her sons may perish on an hundred battle-fields; her women and children and her old men may fly from their burning dwellings—but she can never be conquered—never! never!! The same mountains that protected her soldiers in the Revolution, still lift their majestic heads and stretch out their giant arms; the same trackless swamps that sheltered Marion (the swamp Fox) and his men, still invite her brave defenders in the hour of defeat to seek their friendly and secure hiding places. Four hundred thousand people, with the spirit of '76 burning in their breasts, and believing themselves to be fighting for God's truth and human rights, are invincible by any force that may be sent against them. The race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong.

But should she fall like Leonidas and his Spartans, a second Thermopylae will rival the glories of the first.

But she will not fight her battles alone. Her sons scattered through other lands will fly to her stricken bosom like clouds, and like doves to their windows; her sister Southern States will rally to the rescue.

As then force cannot stay the revolution, why should it be attempted? Is war so pleasant a pastime that we can afford to make the experiment? Is the spectacle of these States striving to destroy each other not enough to appal you?

You wish to preserve the Union—that is the passionate desire of most of my hearers this day. I cannot tell whether any means will preserve it; I do not know that God intends it to be preserved. He may see that it will be best for us to separate, and may have so ordained.

But one thing is certain, the only possible method of preserving or rather of reconstructing the Union will be by avoiding bloodshed. If the States that secede are allowed quietly to go out—then when the passions of the hour have cooled, and reaction has taken place at the North, it may be possible to reconstruct the Union upon a surer and more lasting basis. But war will forever render this hopeless; the attempt on the part of the Government to coerce a seceding State will unite the South in a solid column; it will become a war of sections—fifteen slaveholding against eighteen birling States; a great gulf will be fixed between them, across which they can never pass. Let all those that love the Union strive for peace.

The providential attitude of this and the other middle States is very remarkable; they occupy the central portions of the country; they are washed by the Beautiful River and by the Father of Waters; they are great and powerful Commonwealths; they are slaveholding, but in the course of late political events have been estranged from their natural allies; they are inspired with a profound love of the Union; they have carefully abstained from threats of resistance, and from everything which could irritate the Northern States; and now were they to rise up in their majesty and say to the Federal Government and to the North, no force shall be employed; if dissolution must come, let it be peaceable; were Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee, and Missouri to do this, it would at once arrest the danger or at least it would clear their skirts of the responsibility. "And who knoweth whether thou art come to the Kingdom for such a time as this?" It may be that God has been preparing you by his mysterious workings for this very task.

"Think not within thyself that thou shalt escape in the King's house, more than all the Jews." Should war commence you will be among the greatest sufferers; the battle will rage along the borders; the Ohio will run red with blood; your fair city may become a heap of ruins, and yonder blue grass fields may again become the dark and bloody ground. If you would save yourselves, pray for peace.

And after having done all this, after having fasted and prayed, humbled yourselves, and repented of your sins, what remains but that we "stand in our lot and look the future fully in the face," that we prepare to endure with patience and fortitude whatever God may send upon us. Let us if need be, bare our backs to the rod, and uncover our heads for a baptism of blood! Let us not do this with social indifference, but let us "endure as seeing Him that is invisible!"

And finally, as we leave this place and say, one to another, "Who can tell if God will turn and repent, and turn away from his fierce anger, that we perish not?" may we not hope that it will be again recorded that "God saw their works, that they turned from their evil ways, and God repented of the evil that He had said He would do unto them, and he did it not?"

A man in love has very little need of victuals. So if your landlady doesn't give you enough to eat, fall in love with her daughter.

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