

PUBLIC THANKSGIVING.

A SERMON,

PREACHED IN THE

SECOND PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ELIZABETH, N. J.

NOVEMBER 28TH, 1861,

BY DAVID MAGIE, D. D.

“I WILL SING OF MERCY AND JUDGMENT.” PSALM C. 1.

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ELIZABETH, *November 29, 1861.*

DEAR SIR :

Believing that the publication of your Sermon delivered yesterday, on Thanksgiving Day, will be the means of doing much good at the present time, we respectfully solicit, for ourselves and others, a copy for the press.

Very truly yours,

RICHARD T. HAINES,
DAVID H. PIERSON,
A. W. KINGSLEY,
WILLIAM F. DAY,
WILLIAM F. HALSEY.

Rev. DAVID MAGIE, D. D.

GENTLEMEN :

The Sermon was an off-hand one, only partly written out, but as it contains statements and principles believed to be of great importance at the present juncture, I yield to your request, and furnish a copy for publication very much as you heard it.

Your affectionate friend and pastor,

DAVID MAGIE.

MESSRS. HAINES, PIERSON, KINGSLEY, DAY, AND HALSEY.

PUBLIC THANKSGIVING.

O give thanks unto the Lord, for he is good : for his mercy endureth for ever.

PSALM CVII, 1.

To everything the wise man tells us, there is a season, and our sense of propriety adds everything is beautiful in its season.

We have recently been called to unite in public fasting, humiliation, and prayer, and everybody seemed to feel that the duty was appropriate and timely. The people presented themselves before the Lord, in confession and supplication, as one man. Seldom in the history of nations has such a day been observed with deeper and more solemn interest. Business of all kinds was suspended, and the silence of the Sabbath reigned, while every class of the community, young men and maidens, old men and children, joined in imploring the divine benediction. Every one seemed ready to admit, that we are suffering justly for our sins ; and the petitions offered, I trust were not offered in vain.

At length the annual season for Thanksgiving has arrived, and, though the hand of God is still heavy upon us, no one wishes that it should pass unobserved. Praise

is called for, in view of the many blessings still left us; and if presented with an humble and devout spirit, it may be no less acceptable than prayer. The severe trials, through which we are passing, should not lead us to close our eyes upon the innumerable blessings which we enjoy as individuals, and as a people.

For my own part, I pity the man who can see nothing but frowns and judgments in the present dealings of the Almighty with our beloved country. Looking at it from either a Christian or a patriotic standpoint, we see beams of light breaking through the surrounding darkness, and our severest afflictions becoming favors in disguise. There is still occasion for one to say to another, "O that men would praise the Lord, for he is good: for his mercy endureth for ever." The Psalmist felt like doing this himself, and calling upon his friends to unite with him; and though his lot was a chequered one, the pressing earnestness of his prayer in the day of trouble, never lessened the ardor of his thanksgiving. Duty never clashes with duty. Both these things belong to the experience of personal and national life; and neither should be suffered to interfere with the other.

Give me then your attention, while we review the grounds, on which it seems proper to keep a day of thanksgiving, in the midst of a great, unfinished war. In doing this, the discourse must of necessity take its character from the aspects of the times, as we now contemplate them.

1. There is good reason to hope that our afflictions as a people *are sent in mercy, and not in anger.*

It is but a trite remark to make, that the most useful lessons, which men ever receive, are the lessons of adversity, and yet it is a remark of great practical importance. You can hardly point to an instance, in which men singly, or in communities, have been benefitted by a long period of uninterrupted prosperity. A continuance of unbroken success in trade, agriculture, commerce, and the mechanic arts, such as this country had for years enjoyed, naturally begets pride, self-confidence, ambition, sectional bitterness, fraud, treachery, Sabbath desecration, and forgetfulness of God; nor is there any correction of these evils like some dire public calamity. Chastisement, under these circumstances, becomes a gracious necessity, adapted to awaken reflection, and lead to private and public reform.

The Bible and experience unite in teaching, with almost equal distinctness and emphasis, that trials are an indispensable part of man's allotment. It is by overturning, overturning, and overturning that the bad tendencies of a nation are checked, and its hidden strength developed. Look at the history of our own country, and mark how the terrible struggles of the early settlers with the savages of the wilderness rendered them bold, resolute, and intrepid, and thus qualified them the better to bear the brunt of the seven years' revolutionary war, which secured our national independence. The rough schooling of this long trial in its turn

prepared the people for the contest of eighteen hundred and twelve, by which we gained our reputation as a great naval power. Then came the more questionable war with Mexico, in eighteen hundred and forty-six, which nevertheless enlarged our coasts to the distant Pacific, and thus gave us dominion from sea to sea. How wonderful the onward progress of the nation in wealth, energy, and intelligence, and yet made in the midst of difficulties, and as the result of struggles. Our name and place among the nations of the earth have not been secured by ease and indulgence.

It is not the sluggish stream moving slowly along in its quiet bed, but the dashing, tumbling, foaming river, whose waters sparkle and are full of life and health. Storms purify the air and make it food for the lungs; and tempests shake the trees of the forest, that they may strike their roots deeper in the earth. Fulness of bread and abundance of idleness breed pride, self-sufficiency, and every evil temper and work.

Our past trials as a nation have evidently been sent in mercy, and why should we hesitate to believe that the present is also? Never, indeed, have we gone through such a contest as the one in which we are now engaged — a fratricidal contest; a contest with our own former friends; arraying not only section against section, and state against state, but father against son, and brother against brother — but the sorer the affliction, the greater, it is to be hoped, will be the benefit. This mighty internal struggle will severely test our national

unity, and the supremacy of our glorious Constitution but they are strong enough, there is good ground to believe, to bear the strain. Then, when success comes, and I certainly believe it will, we may regard the republic as standing on a firmer basis than ever.

We were proud of our extended territory, embracing almost all climes, and pouring into our laps the treasures of the most widely diversified lands; and now it is threatened with permanent dismemberment. We boasted of our free civil institutions, and now the question is agitated afresh, whether or not man is capable of self-government. We defied the combined power of the world, and now we are wrought up to a sort of phrensy, because every individual nation is not ready to declare itself on our side. All the sorrow and suffering which we are called upon to endure are but the penal consequences of our own misdoings, and especially of the theft, the fraud, and the perjury in which the rebellion was born, and by which it was inaugurated. For whatever, as a people, we deserved from God, the government deserved no such treatment at the hands of the seceded States. The tale of this causeless and wicked movement will tell sadly upon the characters of those who brought these evils upon the land. For the world, I would not be reckoned among the men who have raised the standard of revolt against the wise and beneficent government of these United States. "My soul, come not thou into their assembly, and mine honor, be not thou united." But dreadful as is the chapter of our

history now being written, it will prove, we may hope, the beginning of far better and brighter days. God is proving us by terrible things in righteousness; and yet it is the faithfulness of a father, and not the severity of a judge.

Let us only accept the punishment of our iniquities, and deliverance will come in due time. God, no doubt, has a controversy with individuals and classes of excited people at the north, for their self-righteous, indiscreet and teasing attacks upon the institutions of the south; and with the south, for its proud, arrogant and vindictive feelings towards the north; and with both, for a vast amount of pride, infidelity and oppression: and hence the fearful evils which are come upon us. But his mercy, we trust, is not clean gone forever, nor has he forgotten to be gracious. It is for correction, and not destruction, that his hand is uplifted over our heads, and we are visited by the rod of adversity.

2. Sad as is our state as a people, it is far more *encouraging and hopeful than it was a year ago.*

No one, it seems to me, can look back from the position we now occupy, and not see that we were then drifting rapidly to ruin. There was a burning volcano beneath our feet; and if we felt secure, it was because we refused to open our eyes upon the perils by which we were environed. The noble old ship of state was just entering upon fearful breakers along a rocky coast; while the helm was in the hands of a man, not himself treacherous, it is hoped and believed, but irresolute, and

strongly under the influence of a set of bold and reckless conspirators, who had won his confidence only the better to accomplish their own nefarious purposes. Every one wishes the retired President well; but the thought will come up, how easy it would have been to shape events differently. A little firmness, a little decision on the part of the executive, at that particular juncture, would have wrought wonders. Had he said and acted up to the declaration, like one of his illustrious predecessors, "*The Union must and shall be preserved,*" the peril might have been escaped, and his grey hairs would have gone down to the grave in honor as well as peace. This is what his best friends, it is what the nation, it is what the world had a right to expect; but instead of it, all we got was, secession is wrong, but there is no authority to put it down.

Still I rejoice to think that Mr. Buchanan was more sinned against, than sinning. His subsequently declared sentiments in favor now of overthrowing disloyalty by the strong arm of the government, ought to satisfy us that he never knowingly lent his influence to the cause of traitors. For them no apology can be made. Harsh language is seldom expedient, but it cannot be wrong to say that the men, who could turn all the advantages of high, civil, and military position against the country which had honored and trusted them, and in violation of the most solemn oaths of allegiance, have earned a reputation for deep and damning infamy, only less heinous than that of him who raised the standard of

revolt in heaven. The memory of these high-handed conspirators must be covered with everlasting obloquy. No ocean has water enough to wash out the black spots which stain their character. It is not necessary to repeat the foul names; but thus much is certain, when our children and children's children read the history of the United States, as it will be fairly and truthfully written, there are others, besides Benedict Arnold, whom they will speak of with a shudder of detestation. There is a righteous Providence, and it is ordained that the memory of the wicked shall perish.

Now, however, the scene is changed, and we begin to feel as if we had a nationality, and a government still. With an honest, upright man at the head of affairs, an able, patriotic cabinet, and a corps of competent, faithful officers in command of our troops by land and by sea, every loyal citizen is ready to take courage for time to come. The capital is not in the hands of the confederates, according to their threats. Philadelphia has not been sacked. Nor are New York and Boston supplying winter quarters for embittered foes. On the contrary, blessed be the God of our fathers, the country is sustained to-day by twenty millions of brave men, all ready to pledge themselves to submit to sacrifices, and meet death on field or flood, sooner than witness the dishonor of her glorious old flag. Not a hostile foot has as yet trodden one of the free states. It is not in the loyal part of the land that houses are burned, crops destroyed, and women and children driven from their

homes at dead of night. We sit under our own vines and fig trees as aforetime, with none to disturb us, or make us afraid. Instead of a bastard standard floating before us, as an emblem of shame and dishonor, the stars and stripes still throw their folds abroad upon the breeze, and we feel as if we had a government worth living for, and dying for.

What a spectacle for the kingdoms of Europe to contemplate is furnished by the gathering of our multiplied hosts! There is a moral sublimity in it which often makes my heart throb. Above a half a million of men are now standing with armor buckled on, ready to move at the sound of bugle blast; and marvellous to say not a single individual in the long and serried ranks is a conscript, or occupies his place by compulsion. Every soldier and every sailor is a volunteer. This is a new page in the history of nations. It took Great Britain, with all her pride of name and high military renown, a half year to furnish sixty thousand men for the Crimean war; while here, in the compass of a few months, nearly ten times that number have left the plough, the loom, the shop, and the counter, to enrol themselves as defenders of the constitution of the land. What a meaning is there in this spontaneous movement! The country is not forsaken of her sons.

There is, too, in all this a happy unanimity of feeling which cannot but awaken gratitude to God. Old party grudges are so laid aside, that were you to call the roll of officers and men now composing our vast army, or

ask for the bankers or rich citizens who furnish the sinews of war, or look at the nimble fingers employed for the soldier's comfort, in health and sickness, you would learn that all have one country to love and labor for. The treachery of seceding States has bound the United States more closely together. As to the putting down of this rebellion there is no dissent. Southern disruptionists do not find, as they firmly believed they would, sympathizers and abettors at the North.

3. In the midst of the troubles of the land, there are *most signal alleviating circumstances.*

The States faithful to the constitution and laws of the country are full of food, for man and beast. Never, in the memory of man, have the last two crops of wheat, corn, hay, and indeed of everything necessary to carry on a mighty and protracted conflict, been exceeded. The vast prairies of the west have brought forth by handfuls. Notwithstanding the immense supplies required for an army such as this continent never before witnessed, and such, indeed, as the frequently blood-stained plains of the old world have but seldom seen, there is no lack of sustenance of the very best kind, easily procured.

Nor is this all. In the kind overruling providence of God, as I must regard it, the only two nations on earth from which we have anything to fear, and which have been strongly tempted to lend a helping hand to the Confederate States, are bound to keep the peace, by their deeply felt dependence on us for bread. This looks like a special divine interposition on our behalf. What

would have been the case, had they lacked cotton only, and not bread, no one can tell. At all events, it is safe to say, that we owe much to the short crops of England and France for the present bright prospect of continued peace with those lands. The fact, however deeply and lastingly damaging to them it must prove, is, that the grain fields of our western States will have no small share in the amicable settlement of such international questions, as that now growing out of the recent capture of two arch rebels on the way to work further mischief. High prices of provisions abroad will wonderfully assist diplomacy in smoothing over matters which might otherwise breed disturbance. It is hard reasoning against hunger. The people must have bread, and without it neither the great personal popularity of Queen Victoria, nor the far-reaching policy of the taciturn Napoleon, can secure a continuance of tranquility.

We have a dreadful war on our hands, and war always brings its burdens; yet it is wonderful how prosperous we still are. Besides harvests bountiful to a degree never surpassed, our internal trade, occasioned by the transfer of millions of bushels of wheat to the sea-board, was never so prosperous, and railroads and steamboats are doing an amount of business almost beyond the power of computation. Every ship that leaves our ports sails so heavily laden with the products of the country as to keep the balance of trade greatly in our favor; thus giving stability and confidence to our large monied institutions, and enabling them to stand firm in

the hour of trial. In the absence of cotton, which once did much to regulate exchange, other articles of export perform the same good offices. This, together with the habits of economy rapidly gaining strength among the people, and thus lessening the amount of imports, puts it in the power of the banks to open their well-filled vaults, and become lenders to the government to an almost incredible amount. In this way the remarkable fact is accounted for, that we have now at least eighty millions of specie in the country; more than we had on the first day of January last. What must the astute financiers of the old world say to our helping ourselves in this way, and showing that we can get along without foreign aid? Our vast grain crop, at such a time of expenditure amongst ourselves, and such circumstances of want elsewhere, must be regarded as a perfect godsend.

Then, too, in the midst of contagious defection, what illustrious examples have we had of unswerving fidelity! At an hour when no one knew whom to trust, and when especially every man of Southern birth and fellowship seemed in danger of disloyalty, one full of years, and no less full of honors, stood up to breast the beating storm, and use all the influence of his high name and position, to turn the counsels of the conspirators into foolishness. It is to him, under God, that we owe the defence of the Federal City, and the peaceful inauguration of Abraham Lincoln. Yes, and after these years of agitation shall have passed away, and some faithful historian shall tell the story of the great cotton

rebellion, no name will be mentioned with higher respect, or greeted with more cordial applause, than that of Winfield Scott! Thrice honored man! The nation loves him! May he live to see his well conceived plans eventuate in restored peace and prosperity, and the same flag, which he has so long and so bravely defended, float over the land without a rival!

Other men, too, have been raised up for the emergency, whom the country should never, and will never overlook. There is Joseph Holt, faithful among the faithless, striving almost single-handed to crush the viper in its egg; and ever since, by his eloquent defences of right and denunciations of wrong, endeavoring to turn back the tide of rebellion. There, too, is Dr. Robert Breckenridge, the uncle of a traitor nephew, rousing Kentucky, as with warrior's trumpet, to pursue every internal and external foe, to use his own burning language to his utmost den. Yes, and there is Parson Brownlow crying out in the ears of craven Tennesseans, "You may imprison me, you may shoot me, you may hang me, but never shall you hear me say anything but that this is a wicked and causeless rebellion." The time would fail me to tell of Dickinson and Dix of New York, Sprague of Rhode Island, and Butler of Massachusetts, men who can rise above party spirit when their country's honor is assailed. Blessed be God for such leaders when they are so much needed, and can do so much good. It is easy for us to be outspoken for the country and its laws in the quiet of a loyal home;

but not so with multitudes in the face of threats and perils.

4. Notwithstanding the gloom of the present, there are reasons to hope *for a bright and cheering future.*

“Because the Lord has been our help, therefore in the shadow of his wings will we rejoice.” This is reasoning from the past to the future, and why is it not legitimate? No one, it seems to me, can reflect upon the great things which God has done for us, in connection with our character and position in the world, and then conclude that the mission of this young and vigorous nation is fulfilled. Are the toils, and tears, and prayers of the Puritans of New England, the Huguenots of the Southern States, and the Scotch Irish of Pennsylvania, to have no further end? Do Plymouth, and Jamestown, and Lexington, and Monmouth, and Yorktown, with all the sore trials and immense sacrifices which their historic names imply, mean nothing more and nothing greater than what has been witnessed? Had God no ulterior designs to accomplish in sifting three nations to sow the virgin soil of this freshly opened country with the finest of wheat? Are a free church and a universal Bible, and schoolmasters everywhere, and missionary enterprises, and precious revivals of religion, under the wisest civil government ever framed, to fail here, and now? For one, I cannot believe it.

True, we are a sinful generation, and have provoked the Lord to anger by our pride and abuse of divine

mercy; but my faith is strong that there is a glorious part for us yet to act on the theatre of the world. In all the cities, towns, and villages of our beloved country, north, south, east, and west, may be found hundreds of thousands of good, true Christian men, whose prayers are daily ascending to God like the morning sacrifice; and if ten righteous men would have saved Sodom, may we not trust that we shall still live and prosper? The work assigned us, in the holy providence of God, is not yet accomplished. We have something before us which requires multitudes of men, and millions of wealth; and this is not the time for secession and disintegration. Hence it is with sacred joy that we hail the sure signs of returning vitality in every department of national existence. On every side we are met with a grand outburst of mingled piety and patriotism, such as fell from the Hebrew hero and seer: “If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning; and if I do not remember thee, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth.” We just begin to know how rich a blessing it is to have a government able to defend itself, and throw its protecting wings over all its subjects.

How the question is to be adjusted, which lies at the root of all our troubles, I frankly confess my inability to say. Two methods present themselves: one is to cut the gordian knot by a stroke, and proclaim universal emancipation at the cannon's mouth; the other is to wait a little longer yet for the solution of the perplexing problem. To the first my mind would turn at

once, could I see how either the black man or the white man could be benefitted by such a measure. But is it not evident that no paper declaration could break the iron manacles? and if it could it would inaugurate a scene of terror, lust, and blood, to which that of St. Domingo is no parallel. If God brings it about, suddenly and at once, let it come; but are we prepared to snap the cord? What then remains for us but to adopt the other plan, and wait, with all the patience of which we are masters, for those movements of Divine Providence which, though they fetch a large compass, never fail in the end? God can do, quietly and silently, what is impossible to us with all our heat and haste, and this is his way of working.

That the present struggle must tell, deeply and lastingly, upon the so-called relations of master and slave, every one seems ready to admit. Only a fortnight ago, Lord Palmerston, in a reply to a speech of our ambassador, Mr. Adams, at the banquet of the mayor of London remarked in substance, "Your war will do us good inasmuch as it will lead us to look elsewhere for cotton, than to the fields of the southern states of America." This is the prophecy, and the people of Great Britain are straining every nerve to secure its accomplishment: India is already yielding a partial supply; and poor Africa is searched, from end to end, to see what its valleys can do to make up the deficiency. Let this be secured, and cotton is dethroned for ever; and with its fall slavery must expire. Yes, and it is the beauty of

the procedure, that the very products of the land of Ham will thus become an instrument by which the hapless children of Ham shall find their galling chains broken. My soul exults at the prospect. I can scarcely think of it, without exclaiming, "The Lord is true and righteous altogether."

This question, however, and many others growing out of this wicked rebellion, we must submit to the disposal of Him, who is wonderful in counsel, and excellent in working. His plans are vast, and it sometimes takes centuries to fulfil them; but in the end, not a word will be found to have fallen to the ground. On one point, however, my mind is fully made up. If worse comes to worst, and the controversy is narrowed down to a single alternative, Shall slavery be abolished throughout the length and breadth of the land, or the government be overthrown? there is, there must be, but one answer. This is right in the sight of both God and man; and here let us stand.

In conclusion. There is *a work for us to do*, and do it we should *with all our heart and strength*.

The war is not one of our own choosing, nor have we entered upon it in any spirit but that of self-defence. It was forced upon us by a set of disappointed and ambitious politicians, as one of their own number has fully admitted; and nothing remains for us, but either to stand by and see the government overthrown, and its flag trailed in the dust, or to rise up in resistance, and determine that death itself is better than submission.

That any patriot, that any parent who has children to live when he is dead, and especially, that any Christian can hesitate is, to me, passing strange. I should never have the courage to lift up my head again, if I did not love the land of my father's sepulchres, and was not ready to defend her blessed institutions till my latest breath. Heavy burdens will be laid upon our shoulders, but let us bear them cheerfully. Others suffer far more severely than we do. To say nothing of the union men in some of the seceded states, whom I pity from my inmost heart, what a bitter cup have proud Virginia, and deluded North Carolina, with Tennessee and Missouri, been putting to their own lips? But things seem to be taking a happy turn, and recent events encourage the hope that regions now in revolt will, by and by, be brought to their senses. In the meantime, let some well-meaning, but weak-minded, people say what they please, it is right for those especially who were first in rebellion, to be beleaguered and throttled until they sue for mercy.

At the same time I charge you, as you would secure the Divine approbation, indulge no revengeful or vindictive feelings. Leave it to those who have arrayed themselves in mortal combat against the mildest and best government under heaven, to use opprobrious epithets, and perform acts of wanton cruelty, but be it your aim to march steadily and calmly forward until this unnatural rebellion is crushed, root and branch. The result is in the hands of God, and we confidently

commit it to him to do as seemeth good in his sight. It is not for us to uplift the ~~evil~~ of futurity, but I cannot divest myself of the belief that our American Eagle is now pluming his wings for a loftier and grander flight than he has ever before reached, and that our sun has not yet risen to his meridian splendor. Two things, however, never forget. One is, that we are in arms, as has been well and truly said, for the Constitution, and for the Constitution as it is, without change or emendation. If this is overlooked our mighty combination against a desperate foe will break to pieces forever. The other is, that we must feel our dependence on the Lord of Hosts. Let our motto be, "Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we will remember the name of the Lord our God."

Then, my dear friends, I only futher say, be decided Christians as well as good citizens; love Christ while you labor for your country's prosperity; be as cordial on the side of God as you are on the side of the government, and all good for both worlds will be yours.