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A DISCOURSE

ON THE OCCASION OF THE DEATH OF

President Lincoln;

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DELIVERED BY

Rev. J. G. Simonton,

at a special Divine service held May 21st 1865,

AND PUBLISHED AT THE REQUEST OF THE AMERICAN RESIDENTS IN
RIO DE JANEIRO.

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Rio de Janeiro,

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God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore will not we fear, though the earth be removed, and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea; though the waters thereof roar and be troubled, though the mountains shake with the swelling thereof. — PSALM 46; 1-3.

When the heart is stirred to its depths by any powerful emotion, whether of joy or sorrow, its real sympathies and attachments are revealed. All artificial ties or empty friendships are ignored, and the bonds of nature and real affinity are alone acknowledged. It is at such times that a man learns to know himself, and his true friends. If the sorrow or joy be private and personal, it will vent itself into the bosom of him who stands nearest to the one who is suffering or rejoicing. No unfeeling friend will be asked to share it. A heart powerfully exercised by deep emotion, is endowed with an instinct almost infallible in its search after unfeigned sympathy. The medium of language is scarcely needed to establish an interchange of thought and feeling, where all hearts are pervaded by one great emotion or interest. Where this real community of feeling is wanting, no skill of language can conceal the fact. If the sorrow or joy be national in its character, then will be felt the strong drawing of that singular tie, which binds into one nationality millions of individuals, of dissimilar character and tastes — a tie just as

real between men who truly love their country, as is parental or filial affection, in that family where love rules in the hearts of both parents and children.

My countrymen, as it seems to me, this is the true interpretation of our meeting to day. The feeling or instinct of nationality is stirred to its depths, and we meet to give expression to emotions common to us all. The selection of this place and hour, and the request that I speak to you from this desk, is a distinct recognition of the hand of God in what has happened to us as a nation; and an expression of our desire to seek in Him, all that we need as individuals, and as forming part of that nation. This in itself is an omen for good. No one who forms any proper conception of the importance attaching to events now transpiring in the United States, and who has observed how that often the greatest interests depend upon the agency of a single master will, can fail to see the gravity of the startling news that has reached us, and to recognise that nothing can be more appropriate than to seek to comfort and strengthen ourselves in God.

It is a proper time to be still, in recognition that God rules. Or if our voices make themselves heard, let it be in confession that He is the Lord, and that his judgments however mysterious are right — in thanksgiving for the faithfulness and goodness which ever accompany His sorest strokes, and in fervent supplications for our beloved country, still in peril — perhaps now, more than ever, needing the gracious interposition of the « Lord of Hosts » and the « God of Jacob ». By so doing, I believe we shall strike a chord in perfect unison with the purest and best expressions of national attachment, and most thoroughly identify ourselves with those interests, which God himself is really consulting, in all this long and fearful struggle.

It is related of Martin Luther, who of all men that have ever lived, had most often occasion to seek superhuman strength and consolation, that whenever news reached him unfavorable to the reformation, he was accustomed to say to those around him » let us sing the 46th Psalm. » Here lay the secret of his strength and of his whole life. Here his soul found anchorage, when for many days of storm and tempest, neither sun, moon, nor stars

once appeared. Here the great in all ages have found refuge and strength and help in time of trouble. If the sublime faith of this Psalm be ours, neither shall we fear, «though the earth be removed, and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea, though the waters thereof roar and be troubled, though the mountains shake with the swelling thereof.»

No one surely will hesitate to admit, that the times require such confidence. The strong and figurative language in which the author of this Psalm describes the dangers threatening himself; and the City of God, or Jerusalem, the capital of Judea, is not too bold, to be accomodated to the present circumstances of our country. The actual revolution in full progress, whether judged superficially by the roaring and swelling of struggling hosts, and excited millions of interested spectators; or by a profounder examination of the permanent traces which it will leave upon the whole face of society, aptly described by the shaking of mountains, and their being removed and cast into the midst of the sea, has about it a magnitude and importance that warrants such an accomodation. We have reached a crisis in our national history, when not only christian men, but all men capable of seeing the disparity between man's strength, and the tossings of the troubled sea of national affairs, must know and feel — though they may not so express themselves — that our only adequate security is in the presence with us of the «Lord of Hosts,» as our refuge and strength.

It is not my wont to introduce topics of the day into the pulpit, nor to devote any part of time sacred to God's worship, to the discussion of measures, even of vital national interest. I have no lights to guide me in forming a judgment upon such subjects any more likely to be correct, than the judgment of any other person, equally well informed: and the pulpit is no place for the discussion of doubtful questions, which cannot be subjected to the authority of the written word. Yet on this occasion it would only be affectation, not to speak plainly of our national sorrow and loss. It is the burden of every heart and we come here to roll it upon Him who has said, «Cast thy burden upon the Lord, and He shall sustain thee.»

A few days ago each one of us was startled and shocked

by the rumour that President Lincoln was dead, having fallen by the hand of an assassin. It was such a rumour as one refuses to believe. Our horror at the thought of such a crime, and instinctive shrinking from the possible consequences to the country, of so sudden a removal of him who for four eventful years has been the leader of the people — him whom they trusted when distrust had reached almost every one else — presented to every one's mind such forms of terror, that we tried to discredit the horrible rumour.

But it was not possible long to doubt. It is verified beyond any reasonable doubt, that on the night of the 14th of April — a day of all others most deeply stained by secret conspiracy against our national life — President Lincoln received a mortal wound from an assassin, from the effects of which he is believed to have died the next day. It is at least certain that the wound received was such, that only direct divine interposition could prevent its mortal effect. A similar attempt was made upon the life of Secretary Seward, who was at that time confined to his bed by sickness. Though severely wounded, it is hoped that none of his wounds will prove mortal, and that the nation will be spared this double bereavement. This is the news that is deeply stirring every American heart, and has drawn us together to day.

What is its meaning? What are the lessons God would teach us, by means of this great calamity? We know that nothing happens in vain in the course of His providence. Especially are we assured that an event of such national importance, is intended either to discipline, or punish us, as a nation. We ought not to be stupid under such a visitation. Even the acknowledged difficulty of interpreting the acts of a wonder working God, should not dissuade us from reverently seeking, to learn and improve the lessons He would teach us. In this very thing, lies an important part of the discipline, to which He subjects us in this life. He speaks to us in His word with all plainness, of the true way of life through his Son Jesus Christ. He sends his Spirit to all humble and devout students of the word, to seal upon their inmost hearts its saving truths. These truths are the constant theme of the pulpit. They come with

authority, challenging the belief of all men in the name of Him, who is the Way, the Truth and the Life. He who has ears to hear, is commanded to hear, and live. He who will not hear nor believe, gives a melancholy proof that the truth is not in him.

But besides the voice of the written word, plain and infallible in its teachings, God speaks to us almost daily, by His providence towards us as individuals, and as associated with each other in forming part of a community, or of a great nation. The voice of God heard in His providential acts is much like that same voice speaking in the prophetic portion of the written word. The meaning is often obscure, and purposely obscure. Yet there is always deep and important meaning, which God himself will in due time make plain. God oftentimes will be His own sole interpreter making plain by the event, what man's feeble sense had pronounced inextricably confused. He will teach us by the discipline of patient waiting. He will impress upon us the wholesome lesson, that St. Augustin would teach when he says « Let us grant that God can do some things that we cannot understand. »

Yet it is still true, that God speaks to us in His Providence, and that He designs to be heard. This is taught by individual christian experience. No Christian who walks by faith has any doubt upon this subject: while at the same time few are so enthusiastic, as to claim infallibility for their interpretations of God's providential purposes. The safe course and the course actually pursued by every christian duly conscious both of God's nearness to him, and of the mystery of His doings, avoids on the one hand all indifference to the events of God's providence — for such indifference is simply practical atheism — and on the other hand the dangerous error of foolish enthusiasts who would be as wise as God himself. If in this spirit we seek to profit by the teachings of God's providence in our present distress, our errors will prove harmless, and our hearts will be comforted by the consolations of God's word, which are neither few nor small.

And first, let us lament over this great national bereavement, for we all feel that it has these proportions. I can in all sincerity accomodate to our present circumstances, the lamenta-

tion of king David, over the body of Abner, murdered just when the war between Israel and Judah had been brought to a close by their reunion under their anointed and rightful king. Know ye not, said king David unto his servants, that « there is a prince and a great man fallen this day in Israel. As a man falleth before wicked men, so did he fall. » The history adds « the king lifted up his voice, and wept at the grave of Abner, and all the people wept. » A nation's tears are now being shed, for President Lincoln. If the watering of tears can keep green the sod that now covers his resting place, greenness will long be its garment, even though that spot be like the mountains of Gilboa where Saul and Jonathan fell — without the watering of the dews and rains of heaven. It is no prophecy to say that that spot wherever it may be, will become a place of pilgrimage; and that there, as at Mount Vernon every one will receive a fuller inspiration of unselfish patriotism, and resolve anew, never to let go his faith in God, nor betray the Republic.

Others will treat of the life, and character of Abraham Lincoln. It is unnecessary for me to do so. I believe he is understood already, by all who wish to understand him. His imperfections especially are known to the whole world. His virtues are known to the great mass of those for whom he has toiled and died. The lapse of time, I am confident, will bring no reversal of the popular verdict, for the people have always understood President Lincoln and trusted him. The people will mourn his loss, for they have always felt that he understood them, and regarded himself as holding in trust for them, and their posterity, the liberties, immunities, and blessings, of citizens of the United States of North America. No one can say that he betrayed his trust, up to the fatal hour when he was struck down by the hand of an assassin. And America will never lose the high position she has gained among the nations, so long as men of Abraham Lincoln's temper are to be found clearing her forests and tilling her broad fields, satisfied with the simple pleasures of domestic life, yet ready at their country's call to take any position of honorable service, and dare any thing to guard the sacred deposit of the Nation's life and liberties. Here lies our true national strength and glory. It lies not as so many have

foolishly imagined, in the boasted perfections of our Government, and Constitution. No such perfection belongs to our Institutions and Form of Government, and if national virtue and morality be undermined by a process long unhappily at work — the propagation of corruption from a class of our public men who are without principle, through individuals to the great mass of the nation — the national strength will be gone and the Republic will become effete, without a single blot or erasure upon her Constitution. If this process be not checked — if politics become a synonym for dishonesty and trickery, and national morality be offered up as a holocaust to the ambition and greed of those who aspire to office — then may God give us the wisdom and grace to submit to some arm and will strong enough to tear the Constitution into a thousand shreds, for it was made for a people fit to be free. Its authors never designed it to outlive the virtues of the nation. The dream of the ancients which ascribed this world, so full of beauty, order, and adaptations infinite, to a fortuitous concourse of atoms revolving in space, is not more baseless, than any dream of liberty, order, and well-being in the Republic of the United-States, when intelligence integrity, and morality, have ceased to characterise the mass of her people. In such case the very material resources of the nation, will so aggravate the mischief of her example and influence, that soon some power will be raised up by God to abate the monstrous nuisance; and to establish a government of physical force, upon the ruins of the Republic of Washington. It is to be hoped that the career of Abraham Lincoln, and the memory of his moral purity and political integrity will rebuke the degeneracy and corruption of the times, and warn the people never to put public trust in men who keep no private faith.

One lesson we have been learning by the many painful experiences of the past four years, and now enforced upon us by the intelligence just received, is the value of individual men to the public welfare. It now seems probable, that the individual will and judgment of a comparatively few men, have given direction and character to a struggle of unexampled magnitude, in which the combatants have been millions. History teaches the same lesson. The world's history is but the biogra-

phy of a comparatively few individuals. All great events and revolutions, naturally group themselves around a few historic names. Yet in times of quiet and peace, this is forgotten or ignored. The people of the United States needed to be taught this lesson. Great men, and great statesmen seemed to abound. It was difficult to find fit offices for all who were fit to fill them, without a blind system of rotation in office, that deposed alike good and bad, usually to elevate bad and worse. Statesmanship was becoming rapidly impossible by the stupidity of the people in allowing faithful and able public servants, to be displaced by men unfit for trust. Forwardness in courting popular favor passed for merit, and was nearly sure, sooner or later, to be rewarded. Talents of high order made their possessor the common enemy of mediocre men, and their united and persistent opposition seldom failed to blast his prospects of high preferment.

But the day of trial came. The storm beat over the ship of state, and nearly swept her clean of her public men. Few proved both honest and capable to the full extent of the national requirements; and to-day if I mistake not, all who truly love their country feel for those who have been faithful and capable, an affection never before felt for our public men. We have none to spare. This feeling of apprehended danger to the country, it was that so startled every one when it was first whispered, that both President Lincoln and his chief Secretary had been assassinated. The national loss, more even than horror at so horrible a crime, paled men's faces. If it be possible that such a deed has given pleasure to any man, it is because the hope is nourished, that upon the lives of these two men, the salvation of the Union depends. Would that the whole nation may learn to value true merit, to sustain the reputation of our public men, to reward their services with honorable independence while they live, and when they die to pay to their memories that tribute of gratitude and affection, which in the minds of all ingenuous youth, is the most powerful and noble incentive to great deeds in the service of their country. I have heard so much invective against public men, such wholesale defamation of character, that it is a grateful task even to share in the nation's tears over the grave of a dead patriot, as we are called to do to-day. God grant

that this sense of loss felt by the nation, when a single man is suddenly removed, may have a lasting and salutary effect upon all our countrymen.

Yet the principal truth that we need to learn, that which both nations and individuals are so prone to forget, is that God is the «refuge and strength» of nations as well as of individuals. His best gifts may not be too long possessed and enjoyed lest we forget the giver, in our satisfaction with the gift. Pride is perhaps our greatest national sin. It is as deeply seated as the marrow in our bones. Solomon has said: «Though thou shouldst bray a fool in a mortar among wheat with a pestle, yet will not his foolishness depart from him.» Self esteem in an inordinate degree is our folly in the sight of God. Has He not truly brayed us in a mortar with pestle for four long years, yet who will say that our folly has departed from us. Perhaps at the very hour when this stroke came, the nation was dizzy with self elation and self glorification. Now, if God has a controversy with us in this respect — if He is to be exalted by us as a people, this sin and folly must be confessed and repented of. If our national life and hopes beat high this day, it is because He has been our help, and strength in our time of trouble. How often were we not made to feel our dependence upon Him when bitter defeats came thick upon us! When this danger is nearly past, another appears, and by it we are admonished that some vulnerable part is always exposed — that whether in peace or war, God alone is our strength and our shield. His purpose shall stand fast, and the only security for human interests, is found in identifying them with the higher interests of Christ's Kingdom. These and these alone, are secured by a pledge beyond recall. Our nation and our present institutions will stand, so long as they are in harmony with, and tributary to, the interests of the Kingdom of Christ, which alone is pledged to stand forever.

So long as Biblical and inspired history runs parallel with profane history, we are distinctly informed, that the fortunes of empires were determined by their relation to God's chosen people. Since the day of the Apostles, the key has been lost by which to interpret, without danger of error, God's purpose respecting His people and the world. Yet it is as true of modern Em-

pires and Republics — that their fate is to be determined by their relation to the interests of the true Church of Christ — as it ever was of the old Empires now in ruins. No sincere believer in revelation can doubt this. Nothing is certain and stable, that is not of God's appointment, and that He does not himself uphold. No nation or form of government has any such pledge of permanence. It is the sole glory of the true Church of Christ. It is with respect to the spiritual Kingdom of which Christ is Head, that God has said Jer: 33:20-21: «If ye can break my covenant of the day, and my covenant of the night; that there should not be day and night in their season, then may also my covenant be broken with David my servant, that he should not have a son to reign upon his throne.» It is only in reference to the conquests of Christ's kingdom, that God has sworn by himself, saying: «the word is gone out of my mouth in righteousness, and shall not return — That unto me every knee shall bow and every tongue shall swear.» The same thought is set forth in this Psalm. The glory of Jerusalem was that God was in the midst of her. So long as this was the case, though the heathen raged, and the kingdoms were moved, yet the author of this Psalm was sustained by sublime confidence, that God would keep Jerusalem, his city and his throne among men.

Are we justified in indulging this hope and confidence, with respect to our country, that «God is in the midst of her» and that He will be our refuge and strength? Let us not be presumptuous, yet let us weigh some facts of our history. America was planted and peopled by men of whom Europe was not worthy. They were men who rather chose to worship God in a solitude, than to shine in the courts of kings. Scotland, Holland, France and England sent their sturdiest sons to the New-World, and they took possession of it in the name of God and liberty of conscience to worship Him according to His word. Most of our institutions were founded by profoundly religious men, and have been chiefly fostered by such men to this day. So jealously watched are all our religious interests that no interference of government is permitted. The interests of religion and education, are entrusted to the people. Of all the novelties of the government of the United States, the absolute separation

of Church and State, is the most striking. It may now be affirmed, that the people can be safely entrusted with these precious interests. The building of Churches and Colleges and Schools has kept pace with the growth of the country, though this growth has exceeded all human calculation. Nearly all our institutions of learning are decidedly religious in their influence. The Gospel is preached with freedom and power in the vast majority of the pulpits of the land. Church purity and discipline are maintained, for no fiat of Civil power, can interfere with liberty of Church action. And to day when scarcely a nation of Europe is not disquieted by constantly recurring conflicts between the action of the Church, and of the civil power, with us, each of these powers acts freely in its prescribed orbit, and without danger of conflict. It is probably owing to this freedom of Church action, that the Church of America has always been full of life, and energy, and warmth. The American Church has happily not come into the cold embrace of the state, and has never ceased to rejoice with the joy and gladness of her first espousals. Precious revivals of religion are almost continually occurring. And notwithstanding the vast tide of immigration — now alas! infidel and immoral in its character and influence, and the vast extent of new territory within her own bounds to be occupied year by year, the Church of America has her Missionaries all over the world. The pressure of the times has not, so far as I am aware, recalled any of them, while a number of reinforcements have been sent out. There is much in these considerations, that warrants a favorable interpretation of God's purposes towards our country; and the confident belief that for His own name's sake, He will preserve us. There is nothing in late events, which contradicts this view. Surely no man who has not confounded material wealth, extension of territory, and physical power, with true progress in substantial prosperity, can have failed to see that of late this progress and prosperity were hollow and false. I will not enter into any particulars. Let every one for himself review the past, and mark the direction in which everything was tending, and he will find little difficulty in interpreting all that has happened to us, as a chastisement for our reformation, instead of a

judgment for our destruction. The evil was so gigantic that a powerful remedy was necessary. Perhaps even yet new trials and difficulties, may await the nation. No one can venture to affirm, that they are not needed as a discipline, and to develop those solid virtues, which are the only basis of true prosperity. Experience is the only school in which real national virtues are developed, and chastisements from God are always blessings in disguise.

As individuals our duty is plain. Though in a foreign land and owing obedience to its laws, our allegiance is still due to the land of our birth. While at this distance we watch with intense interest the course of national affairs, we can identify ourselves with our countrymen at home, by sustaining their honor and interests abroad, by bowing with them before God in fervent supplications for a blessing upon our country, our rulers, and our institutions, and in lamenting with them the untimely death of a Chief Magistrate, who in times that tried men's souls was faithful to the trust deposited in him by the people, and as he himself undoubtedly believed, by the God of nations. On taking leave of his townsmen and neighbours in Springfield, to assume the responsibilities of his office, he asked them to pray for him, that he might receive grace and strength from on high to do his duty. He has at all times, in public and in private, acknowledged the hand of God in our affairs and sought His guidance. His last public message expresses the same faith. No one who is not full of invincible prejudice will suspect President Lincoln of insincerity or hypocrisy. And now that he is gone to his rest and reward; let us invoke the same protection and guidance for those who assume his great responsibilities. Let us be strong in the sublime faith of this inspired Psalm. Let us be assured that God is our refuge and strength. Let us be still under the doings of His providence whose mystery baffles our interpretation, and learn that God is the Lord, and all His acts, good and right.

