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S E R M O N,

DELIVERED AT PETERVILLE CHURCH,

On Thursday, August 20, 1812:

BEING THE DAY APPOINTED BY THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES FOR PUBLIC HUMILIATION AND PRAYER, ON ACCOUNT OF THE WAR WITH ENGLAND.

BY CONRAD SPEECE.

My soul shall sigh in secret, and lament
A nation scourg'd, yet tardy to repent.

COWPER.

R I C H M O N D :

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TO THE REV. JOHN H. RICE,

This Sermon is inscribed, as a token of friendship,

by

THE AUTHOR.

A SERMON.

PROVERBS 21. 31.

The Horse is prepared against the day of Battle, but safety is of the Lord.

The great question of Peace or War, which has so long occupied our minds and agitated our national councils, is at last decided. War against England is become the law of the land.

The wise and benevolent part of mankind have always accounted war a very serious thing. When the situation of a people is such, that they must either basely yield their rights to the iron grasp of oppression, or take up arms to vindicate them, war is doubtless both just and necessary. Still it is an awful alternative. War, even in its mildest forms, brings with it so many privations, and demands so many sacrifices, that it must ever be esteemed one of the most trying events which can befall a nation. In the war in which we are engaged, it behooves us to keep our avowed object constantly and sacredly in view; namely to obtain by our exertions, under the blessing of Heaven, “a speedy, a just, and an honorable Peace.”

As to the provision of means, the method of conducting the war, the time and the terms of making peace; I leave these things most respectfully to those who are in Authority. The reflections and admonitions which I design to offer you upon this occasion are of a nature entirely religious.

The war being declared, and its operations commenced, we are called to present ourselves this day before God, the Sovereign of the Universe, in fervent supplication for his favor. And whose voice is it that has summoned us to public humiliation and prayer? Is it that of the ministers of Jesus Christ, whom haughty infidels choose to denominate an ignorant and superstitious priest-hood? Is it that of a defeated political party, who, it might be insinuated, after laboring in vain to prevent the war, were endeavoring to infuse their painful apprehension of its

consequences into the minds of others? No. The voice which calls us to the solemn exercises of this day, is that of the legislature & chief magistrate of the United States. The resolution for this purpose passed both houses of Congress with scarcely the slightest opposition. And the President in his proclamation has not confined himself to a mere echo of the resolution; but has enlarged upon it in a strain of the most impressive eloquence. Will any man say that all this is no more than empty form? Will the President and Congress be charged with such vile hypocrisy, such mockery of religion? I hope not. For my part, I have no doubt of their sincerity. The time is a time of calamity and war. It must awaken in all thinking minds, even those which are not under the supreme influence of piety, the remembrance that there is a righteous God who orders the affairs of men by his providence; and that it is of inexpressible importance, in the arduous struggle which may await us, to have him on our side. Wise men will reverentially adopt the sentiment of my text: the instruments of war are prepared against the day of battle; but safety, victory, and final success are from the Lord.

The doctrine of divine providence is confessedly mysterious. In this great deep we are not able to trace the footsteps of the Almighty. By what we call the laws of nature, which are the appointments of God, we see that virtue leads to happiness and vice to misery: a truth well deserving the attention of nations as well as of individuals. But the idea of providence includes something more. It implies that God has not abandoned second causes to their own operations; that he continually upholds, directs and governs his creatures and their actions for the accomplishment of his wise and holy purposes. For instance, the word of God teaches us, (and it consoles me to see these great truths recognised, among others, in the proclamation of the chief magistrate,) that the transgressions of a people may provoke the manifestation of the divine displeasure; that statesmen need the guidance of God; that armies need his blessing; and that he has all human hearts in his hand, to turn and dispose them according to his will. The modes in which his providential agency is exerted it is not necessary for us to comprehend. It is sufficient for us to know that as we cannot reasonably expect success in any case while we neglect proper & practicable means, so after the best provision of means we are

only authorised to look for success by virtue of the care and benediction of the Almighty.

It becomes then an enquiry of the utmost interest, how we may secure the favor of God in the present crisis? Do you rely upon the justice of our cause? It is certainly a great comfort and a great advantage to know that our cause is just; but we may at the same time be exposed by our sins to the frowns of Heaven. Do you talk of our resources for carrying on the war? Let them be as ample as the most sanguine estimate represents them. Do you refer to the bravery of the American people? No man rates the bravery of my beloved countrymen higher than I do. And do you, moreover calculate upon an early termination of hostilities? God grant the pleasing conjecture may be realized. Still the solemn question recurs, how shall we obtain the effectual blessing of God upon our labors?

While I endeavor to answer this question, I beseech you to hear me with patient and serious attention.

The first thing to be done is the humble unreserved acknowledgment of our transgressions against Almighty God. Have we been, and are we still a sinful people? If so, it is most fit that we confess the fact with all sincerity and contrition. It becomes us to own that, however many and strong grounds we have to complain of the injustice of foreign nations, the calamities which we have suffered, or may yet suffer, are perfectly just as they come from the hand of God.

Let every one of us then lay the sacred volume to his conscience. Let us diligently examine our hearts and lives by that pure standard, and deplore the sins of thought, word and deed, by which we have provoked our God to anger.

It is proper upon an occasion like this to bring into view somewhat particularly those sins which have an extensive prevalence, and which mark the moral character of our country. Would to God that any man could convict me of colouring too darkly the picture which I feel myself compelled to draw.

And here we at once perceive a general and very alarming spirit of irreligion. Serious observers of every denomination see it, and mourn at the sight. It may be true, as some have asserted, that avowed infidelity is more rare, that attempts to undermine our holy religion by argument are less frequent, than they were some years ago. But while we profess a sort of vague belief in the truth of christianity, it is too evident that very few

even pretend to regulate their tempers and their lives by its precepts. One who had lived in a country truly deserving to be styled Christian, would be astonished to contemplate the ignorance of religious truth, the forgetfulness and disregard of divine authority, the gross practical infidelity, which pervade the mass of society amongst us. We all boast of our freedom from human establishments of religion, and compulsory attendance on its ordinances. Is it because we love to worship and serve God with a generous devotion, unshackled by the commandments of men? Or is it because we pride ourselves in a full license to neglect and contemn the very forms of religious service? Let facts speak for themselves. Look at the condition of our churches; some of them mouldering into ruin for want of repairs; many reared with so niggardly a hand, and remaining so wretchedly unfinished, that during one half of the year they can scarcely be used. Look at the many neighborhoods, not destitute of wealth, where there exists no such building as a house of God. Look at the numerous districts where the people live in contented destitution of all public worship and preaching; where a sermon is quite a rare and accidental occurrence. And even where the gospel is regularly, though it is in very few places weekly administered, observe how vast a proportion of the people neglect a constant attendance at church; and of those who do attend more or less frequently, how few do it with the appearance of religious solemnity.

What indications of general religious feeling does our social intercourse exhibit? We have as much splendour of furniture and of dress, as much luxury of the table, as we can procure. In conversation, we have a little of science, a little of literature; something of agriculture, of mechanic arts, and of commerce; something of heedless and perhaps mischievous talebearing about our neighbours; a great deal of politics and of news; and not a little of downright trifling; but of religion, of the things which are infinitely more important to us than all that the world contains, we have in most instances, nothing. That heavenly subject, which ought to lie nearest to every heart, is of all subjects the least fashionable and the least relished.

Where are the evidences of that gratitude which we are bound to feel towards God for his wonderful blessings to us as a people? At present let us look back only to the history of our revolution. It presents a multitude of facts which call for per-

petual thankfulness and praise to our Almighty Benefactor.— We see the hand of his gracious providence in the very courage with which our fathers, in the existing circumstances of this country, nobly dared to resist the the oppression of Britain, and defy her power; to raise the standard of independence, & support it through a long and trying war. We see the same providence bestowing upon us a *Washington* to command our armies; to be the the bulwark of our cause, the father of his country: a man whose character will be loved and revered by the good and wise of every nation while the earth endures. When shall America look upon his like again? And in the course of the war we frequently meet with events so strange, so strikingly in our favour, occurring at moments when they were so peculiarly necessary, as to prove beyond all reasonable doubt that God was indeed on our side. Since the close of that memorable contest, we have enjoyed thirty years of union, liberty, peace and unexampled prosperity. Where then is our gratitude to the Giver of all these mercies? We assemble to rejoice, and it is right that we should rejoice, upon the anniversary of our independence.— But do we express our joy in the manner becoming christians? I appeal to those who are better acquainted with these assemblies by actual observation than I am; are they not commonly mere scenes of feasting and levity, from which every serious thought of God is banished? Are they not sometimes still worse? The harp and the viol, the tabret and pipe, and wine, are in our feasts; but we regard not the work of the Lord, neither consider the operation of his hands,

Where are the families which daily worship the God of Heaven? Where are the parents who diligently bring up their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord; more solicitous that they may be his servants, and inherit a place in paradise, than that they may be accomplished, rich and great in the present world? I know there are some such parents, some such families; but their numbers are mournfully small. Our fire-sides are generally strangers to prayer. Our youth are growing up in vanity; not restrained by discipline, nor instructed in the fear of God which is the beginning of wisdom.

In short, with the Bible in our hands, let us look within us and around us, and ask, where are the Christians indeed? Where are they who have received the gospel as the glad tidings of great joy; who have made their peace with the Al-

mighty by genuine repentance towards God, and faith towards our Lord Jesus Christ ; who are clothed with humility, glorying only in the cross of Christ ; who worship God in spirit and in truth, hungering and thirsting after righteousness ; whose hearts are ruled by love to God and love to man ; who walk as strangers and pilgrims upon the earth, and make it their supreme concern to become prepared, by lives of piety and beneficence, for the blissful society of saints and angels in heaven ? I challenge contradiction when I say that this is the religion which alone can make us the children of God, and enable us to stand before him at the day of judgment with acceptance. And if it be so, how few amongst us, how exceedingly few, can be deemed truly religious. Utterly regardless of the matter, or deceiving themselves with vain presumptuous hopes, and sporting with the forbearance of God, the vast majority are crowding the broad road which leads to destruction.

Even of those whose conduct is decent, whom we willingly respect for their uprightness and kindness in social life, the generality are notoriously destitute of religion, and would be ashamed to build their virtues upon the humbling doctrines of the gospel.

Professing christians too have deep cause for humiliation before God this day. They are appointed to be the salt of the earth, and to shine as lights amidst the general darkness. Yet from every quarter we hear melancholy accounts of their lukewarmness in piety, their sinful conformity to the customs of the world, and their deficiency of zeal for the extension of the Redeemers Kingdom. We see and lament their alienation from each other on account of different names, and their bigotry to little peculiarities of opinion and practice. Our hearts should bleed to mark their mutual, rooted animosities ; as if each sect were in reality serving a different master, building up a different interest, and felt itself bound to labor at the extermination of every other sect as the very first of its duties.

But we are guilty, as a people, not only of want of religion, but of many positive and grievous transgressions of the laws of God. I must limit myself to a selection of instances.

I begin with that dreadfully common sin, the profanation of the name of God. The divine law prohibiting it appears with a peculiar emphasis, being the only one in the decalogue which has a threatening expressly annexed. Thou shalt not take the

name of the Lord thy God in vain, for the Lord will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain. Most reasonable is the injunction upon us to fear this glorious and fearful name, the Lord our God, and never to speak it but with sacred veneration. Yet the impious and hateful practice of profanity; this sin without temptation and without profit; this crime which wantonly insults the King of Heaven, and tortures the feelings of those who love him; which strikes at the dearest interests of society by diminishing the reverence of judicial oaths; this very sin seems to prevail more than any other throughout our country. It is committed daily and hourly; in passion, in levity, and very often, if we believe the wretched excuse offered by the guilty, even without thought of what they are doing. So inveterate is the habit. A serious stranger can scarcely go into promiscuous company without having his ears assailed and his soul wounded by profane cursing and swearing. This wickedness is forbidden by our law as a dangerous immorality; but the law is despised and lies unexecuted. Men esteem the practice a trivial fault, or no fault at all. But God is greatly provoked by it, and the land mourns under the effects of his displeasure.

How do we regard the sabbath of the Lord, the day which he has given us as a rest from worldly cares and labours; the day which he has set apart for himself above all other days, and commanded us to remember that we keep it holy? Do we feel the importance of this institution for preserving a sense of religion amongst mankind? Do we cheerfully and strictly dedicate the day to the duties of holiness, including works of necessity and mercy? No. We waste it in superfluous sleep; we spend it in unnecessary journies, in the settlement of petty business, in frivolous reading, or in idle conversation. We make it a day of visiting and feasting; so that the sabbath is often to ourselves and our domestic servants the most laborious and fatiguing day of the whole week. Thus are thousands employed, while the ways of Zion mourn, and the gospel of salvation is addressed almost to empty benches. Surely, could angels weep, they must weep at such a spectacle.

The thirst of wealth, the vile idolatry of gold, must be mentioned as one of the extensive sins of our country. Our opportunities of acquisition for many years past have been far great

er than in former times, and we have seized them with greediness. We seem to have taken up the notion that all happiness was included in being rich ; and the rage of accumulation has spread its baneful infection into almost every heart. To this cause must be imputed the discontent which is felt in moderate circumstances of life ; the restless pursuit of the world, which leaves as little time as inclination for attending to the duties of religion ; the solicitude with which parents labour to provide large fortunes for their children, to the detriment, very often, of their peace and usefulness through life. To the same source we must ascribe gaming in its pernicious variety of forms, and a number of unjust maxims and practices in buying and selling, too common to be branded with the censure of men, but condemned by the golden rule of doing to others as we would have them do unto us.

Time would fail us to dwell particularly on the selfishness, pride, envy and vindictive passions ; the excessive and growing use of inebriating liquors, productive of such a host of evils ; the lewdness and grovelling debauchery ; which add so many gloomy features to the moral aspect of our country.

But I cannot close this survey, mortifying as it already is, without noticing one more striking proof of our obduracy in sin ; I mean the manner in which we carry ourselves under the afflictive dispensations of divine providence. That God Almighty, who is jealous for his glory, has a controversy with us, is evinced by many awful indications. By the burning of the Richmond Theatre last winter about four score precious lives were lost, with circumstances of horror too mighty for words to describe. No wise man could consider it a judgment sent upon the sufferers exclusively ; nor conclude that they were sinners above all other men because they suffered such things. No. But it was a solemn warning to the city, to the state, and to the whole nation, to consider and amend our ways. Our public bodies put on the badges of sorrow. We felt sympathy, and we uttered the expressions of it abundantly. But as to the permanent moral effect upon the community, it is, so far as I can see or hear, almost nothing. About the same period it pleased God to shake the earth repeatedly and terribly beneath our feet ; mingling, however, with these alarms that forbearance towards us which was denied to many thousands who perished by earth-

quakes in South America. We conversed about these events in articles of news ; tried perhaps to account for them by our philosophy ; and then, as to any lasting religious impression, we forgot them. At this moment we are in a season most justly termed a calamitous one. War surrounds us on every side, upon the ocean and upon the land. The necessity of this war however urgent, our resources however great, our spirit however resolute, will not disprove the fact that war is a calamitous and trying event. And how are we impressed by it as an affliction sent from above ? Is it exciting us generally to repent and betake ourselves to divine mercy ? Where is the evidence ? With a strange apathy, we seem to think and feel very little about the matter. We talk of the war as if it were an amusement, or at most a trifling inconvenience. We rest upon our means and our devices, as if divine protection and aid in the conflict were things of small consequence. We behave towards God like a child, hardy in perverseness, who despises the rod lifted by his father to chastise him, and even under the stroke dares to mock him to his face.

And now, are we not a sinful people, laden with iniquity ?— Whatever distress befalls us is not God righteous in his judgments ? Say not, other nations are still more sinful than we, and therefore we have little to apprehend. Beware how you lay that flattering unction to your souls. It would be difficult perhaps, to prove the fact, considering the pure dispensation of religion, and manifold other blessings, which we have enjoyed, and which we have abused. But admitting that other nations are more sinful, remember that those nations have long been and are still drinking the cup of divine indignation for their iniquities. The time of our severe visitation may be just at hand : for providence often uses one guilty nation as a scourge to inflict punishment upon another. But blessed be God, there is still room for supplication to avert the weight of his displeasure from our heads. Let us then repair to his throne of grace, to confess before him, with humble and contrite hearts, our own sins and the sins of our country.

If I have laboured to impress you and myself with a deep sense of our national guilt, it is that we may cry the more earnestly to God for pardon. This is obviously the next thing requisite for obtaining his favour. The moral government of

God over nations is similar to that over individuals; with the single exception, that nations are rewarded and punished in this world only, individuals chiefly in the world to come. In our national as well as our individual capacity, we must be forgiven or we must suffer. Every man being a sinner in the sight of God is bound to revere his holiness, and to seek remission of sins by fervent petitions for mercy. A sinful nation should do the same. And in both cases, our eyes must be directed to the Lord Jesus Christ, with cordial faith in his merits, as our only effectual plea with God. The mediation of Christ is the channel of all favourable communication from God to man. Whether we ask a temporal or an eternal salvation, the alleviation and removal of calamities from our country, or deliverance from the wrath which shall overwhelm the wicked beyond the grave, let us remember that there is none other name under heaven given among men whereby we must be saved, but only the name of Jesus Christ the Redeemer.

Precious Gospel! How glorious are its provisions! How sweetly does it reconcile the awful justice and the tender compassions of God towards his offending creatures! How consolatory, how cheering the light which it brings into this miserable world! May millions of worshippers unite this day in all the energies of prayer to the God of heaven, that for his Son's sake he would extend forgiveness to our beloved country.

I must urge, in the next place, the necessity of active repentance and amendment of life. Our fastings, our postures of humiliation, our confessions, and our prayers, will be nothing else than a solemn mockery of God and religion, unless they are attended with genuine reformation. Can we impose upon the Searcher of hearts by hypocritical pretences? Dare we to hope that he will be successfully flattered by empty forms of homage and supplication? Be assured, our sins must be renounced as well as acknowledged; or they will separate us still farther from the smiles of the Almighty. His language to us by his word and by his providences this day is, as it was to Israel of old, repent, & turn yourselves from all your transgressions; so iniquity shall not be your ruin. And immediately he repeats the warning: cast away from you all your transgressions whereby ye have transgressed; and make you a new heart and a new spirit; for why will ye die? Let us then, I pray you, show that we are

in earnest, by bringing forth the fruits of repentance. Let us reflect with sorrow upon our evil courses. On the blessed principles of the gospel, let us deliberately resolve that if we have done iniquity, we will do no more. Denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, let us learn to live soberly, righteously and godly in the world. And let our future obedience to God equal, and if possible exceed our past rebellion against him.

In making this most necessary resolution, it is indispensable that we feel our moral weakness and insufficiency, and that we implore the gracious assistance of God. How are we, by our own strength, to eradicate our habits of vice and irreligion? How are we to become a people fearing God and working universal righteousness, without the exertions of almighty grace upon our souls? It cannot be. Let us then cast ourselves upon the mercy of God in this respect also, asking continually the influences of his holy spirit, that our feeble endeavours to serve and honour him may be rendered victorious over all opposition.

Finally, let me remind you of our duty not only to pray this day, but to continue in prayer to God for his blessing upon our country. These are critical times indeed. The world is in a state of unusual commotion. European power has become accumulated in a few hands to a degree unknown to modern ages. The calculations of the wise, and the efforts of the mighty, are often in our day marked with disappointment. As to ourselves, I see the kindling ardour of my countrymen to vindicate the rights and the honour of the nation. I see the horse prepared, and the sword made bright, for the battle. It is impossible I should mean to undervalue our resources and our preparations when I repeat to you that they are still no more than instruments in the hand of divine providence, and that safety and victory must come from the Lord. The voice of our country, therefore, calls us to fervent and persevering prayer for her success. When Jehoshaphat and the people of Judah were in peril from hosts of enemies far too mighty for them, they devoutly spread their distress before the Lord their God, & by doing so moved his infinite power into exercise for their rescue. What may be our perils from the existing war, I pretend not to foresee. It will be prudent not to estimate them so slightly beforehand. But God has not abandoned the earth to chance: and we have reason to believe, that a righteous and praying people can

not be destroyed, cannot be subdued, by any hostile force whatever. Let us then daily present our supplications before God, that it may please him to take us under his peculiar care and protection ; to inspire us with wisdom and pure love of our country ; to grant a blessing on our military operations ; to prepare for eternal felicity those who may die in battle, and so to dispose our enemies to justice as to hasten a restoration of the blessings of peace.

I know that in this vaunted age of reason there are some who treat the doctrine of divine providence with contempt, though it is a doctrine taught by natural religion as well as revealed. Could a serious admonition reach their minds, I would warn them to reflect that even by the natural course of things righteousness exalts a nation, while vice is the reproach, and must prove the ruin of any people. Upon the virtues of the people are our republican institutions and liberties essentially founded. In vain does the licentious man, who daily spreads moral corruption around him, boast the venerable title of patriot. He may have talents, he may have courage ; but his pernicious principles and example are poisoning the fountains of his country's welfare.

What mingled emotions of hope and apprehension swell the bosom of the aged American patriot, while he directs the eye of conjecture forward to the future destinies of his country ! Methinks I hear him giving utterance to his anxious musings in language like this : Dear land of my birth ! Scene of all my youthful joys ! Abode of my fathers in years past ; inheritance of my children and their decendants in years to come ! Upon the boisterous ocean of human affairs, to what port dost thou tend ? Shall the blessing of indulgent Heaven and the virtues of thy people preserve thee, through the long tract of ages, the asylum of religion, science, and rational liberty ? Art thou ordained to be the glory of all lands, for every thing that dignifies man in society, and prepares him for the skies ? Or must thou follow the fate of all other nations ? Must impiety and vice render thee incapable of enjoying liberty, and bring down the judgments of an incensed God upon thee ? Must the mad passions of party rend the bonds of thy union asunder ? Must ruthless ambition drench thy lovely plains with the blood of thy inhabitants ? Must the fair fabric of thy republican freedom be

crumbled into dust ; and thy debased and wretched children seek refuge from the horrors of anarchy in the gloomy and chilling shade of despotism ? Frightful images ! May the God of mercy forever preserve my country from sinking into this abyss of ruin.

Let us conclude my friends, with the recollection of our immortality. The world and its concerns are passing swiftly away. When republics, and empires, and all the works of man, and time itself, shall be no more, every one of us must appear before God in judgment. From his dread tribunal we must go to take our everlasting stations in heaven or in hell. Would you escape the wrath to come ? Would you share the glory of the Saints on high ? Behold, now is the accepted time ; behold, now is the day of salvation ! May we all become the children of God by a cordial acceptance of his gospel ; and may he conduct us to the regions of perfect and eternal joy, for the sake of Jesus Christ our Saviour. *Amen.*