

Voice of the Rod:

A

SERMON,

DELIVERED AT ALBANY, MAY 14, 1841,

THE DAY OF THE NATIONAL FAST,

OCCASIONED BY THE DEATH OF THE LATE

WILLIAM HENRY HARRISON,

PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES.

By WILLIAM B. SPRAGUE, D. D.

PASTOR OF THE SECOND PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH.

ALBANY:
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.....
1841.



TO THE REV. W. B. SPRAGUE, D. D.

Dear Sir—

The Trustees, as well in conformity with their own wishes, as the wishes of others of your congregation, respectfully request for publication a copy of the Sermon delivered by you on the morning of the 14th inst., the day recommended by the President of the United States for a National Fast.

We are very respectfully,
Your obed't serv'ts,

JOSEPH ALEXANDER,
A. M'INTYRE,
ERASTUS CORNING,
THOMAS W. OLCOTT,
E. P. PRENTICE,
JNO. I. BOYD,
JOHN TOWNSEND,
A. MARVIN.

Albany, May 15, 1841.

To the Board of Trustees of the Second Presbyterian Congregation
in Albany :

GENTLEMEN—

It has not been my custom to apologize for my own productions: on the contrary I have suffered even the most hasty of them to go to the publick for what they were worth; considering it a good general rule, that if a sermon is too poor to print without an apology, it is too poor to print at all. In consenting, however, to the publication of *this* discourse, as I am aware that it very imperfectly meets the expectation which the occasion might reasonably justify, it is due to myself to state that it was necessarily prepared in a few hours, when I had but partially recovered from the fatigue of a journey; to say nothing of the fact of which you are already apprized, that I had previously delivered two other discourses on the same subject, in the same place, and to some extent to the same congregation; so that for this there remained little else than the gathering up of the fragments. But for the mysterious disappearance from my study of the MSS. of the two former, one of *them*, would have been given to the publick instead of this, which is now somewhat hesitatingly yielded to your wishes.

I beg you will accept, Gentlemen, the assurance of my highest regard.

W. B. SPRAGUE.

May 25, 1841.

SERMON.

MICAH VI. 9.

Hear ye the rod, and who hath appointed it.

The occasion which has brought us into the house of God this morning, marks an era in the history of this nation. Not that this is the first time that the nation has been called to keep a day of humiliation and prayer; but the first time that it has been called to keep such a day for such a cause. Not that this is the first instance in which death has removed an individual whom we had elevated to the chair of supreme authority; but the first in which such an event has occurred at the commencement, or even in the course, of the Presidential career. I am sure you will agree with me that every sentiment of religion, every dictate of propriety, justifies this appointment. I count it an omen for good that our present Chief Magistrate, as one of the first of his official acts, has called upon his people to humble themselves beneath the rod

of God. Whatever his future communications to the nation may be, he has already given us one that will stand the test of time ; for it breathes the spirit of reverence for the Divine authority, of confidence in the Divine government. Whatever measures may characterize his course hereafter, he has adopted one in the beginning which may always be appealed to as worthy of imitation, so long as this nation exists. God grant that this disposition to acknowledge Him, and to call upon the country to acknowledge Him, may prove the harbinger of a happy administration—an administration through which blessings incalculable in their number and extent shall be conveyed not only to this nation but to the world.

If I were to meet one of you with your heart bleeding at the death-bed of a beloved friend, I know not what more appropriate counsel I could address to you, than “Hear ye the rod, and who hath appointed it.” Or if death had made a fearful inroad upon our congregation, removing some one who had shared in an unusual degree our affection and confidence, and in respect to whom, after he was gone, we should say that an armour-bearer had failed us—here again, I know not what better I could say to you, than “Hear ye

the rod, and who hath appointed it." And now that my country hath been smitten of God, and is bleeding under His righteous hand, what better can I say to *her*—what better can I say to *you*, my friends, who are assembled here this morning as part of this nation, than "Hear ye the rod, and who hath appointed it." The rod speaks: listen to the warning voice. Consider the hand that wields it: it is the hand of the Ruler of nations.

We shall fall in, I trust, with the design of the occasion, if we consider this national bereavement as having a bearing both upon the past and the future; as administering rebuke on the one hand, and conveying instruction and expostulation on the other. In the prosecution of this object,

I. I remark, in the first place, that this dispensation rebukes our national *ingratitude*, and calls upon us to form a higher estimate of our obligations to the Divine goodness.

I do not say that, as a nation, we have been *insensible* of our superior privileges; or that we have been backward on certain occasions and in certain ways, to speak of them; but I appeal to you, whether it has not been chiefly in a manner that has discovered more of a boasting than of a grateful spirit. When we have congratulated ourselves on

the freedom and the supposed stability of our institutions, has not the secret feeling of our heart been, rather a feeling of complacency in consideration of our possessing these privileges, than a feeling of gratitude towards the bestower of them? And even when we have professed to recognize them as the fruit of the Divine goodness; when we have said with our lips that it is God who hath made us to differ from other nations, and that He hath not dealt so with *any* nation as with *us*; nay, when we have been assembled professedly to recount the tokens of His favour, and offer to Him the sacrifice of thanksgiving; has not our recognition of His goodness been, to a great extent, a mere matter of form;—have we not been too much like those of old who sang His praise, and then forgot His works? Yes, Brethren, as a nation, we are deeply chargeable with the sin of ingratitude; and I repeat—this dispensation administers a rebuke for it.

For suppose you had lost an earthly friend—say a parent—whose watchful kindness had been the channel through which, from the first hour of your existence, there had been conveyed to you an uninterrupted stream of blessings; and you had been accustomed always to receive these blessings merely

as a matter of course, without lifting your eye to that Almighty Father who gave you your earthly parent and constituted the endearing relation that he sustained to you; I ask whether his removal from the world would not come as a rebuke to your ingratitude;—whether it would not set you to thinking of blessings innumerable which had been forgotten in unthankfulness; and not merely of those which had come to you through the medium of parental kindness, but of others which may have come more directly from the hand of your Heavenly Father? And why should not the same principle operate in respect to the nation bereaved of its Head? The President of this nation sustains to it, in an important sense, the relation of a father. The President who has lately died, though not the choice of the whole nation, was the choice of the majority; and I may safely say in view of the mourning which his death has brought over the land, had the respect and good will of the country at large. I suppose that none of us doubt that he was a man of integrity and wisdom; and there is much reason to believe that, if he had lived, he would have ruled the nation in the fear of God. Of course, the loss of such a man from such a place, irrespective of all party considerations, is to be

regarded as a publick calamity. We must suppose that a great blessing—certainly that which the majority of the nation accounted so—has been withdrawn from us in his death; and why should not this remind us of other blessings which we have enjoyed and still enjoy, and rouse us from a habit of thankless indifference in respect to them? We have had other men distinguished for their patriotism and talents and usefulness to rule over us; and instead of being cut off at the commencement of their career, they have lived to complete the term of service which their country had allotted to them. We have seen our nation going forward in a course of unexampled prosperity; enlarging the bounds of her habitation on the right hand and on the left; and when clouds have lowered in our horizon, they have soon disappeared; or if a tempest has passed over the land, it has lasted but for an hour, and has left a purer atmosphere and a brighter sky. You who have travelled in other countries, especially on the continent of Europe, know better than others how to value the liberal spirit that characterizes our institutions. You may have seen much abroad to gratify your curiosity and excite your astonishment; but you come back after all, rejoicing that your home is on this side of the ocean.

You welcome the sight of your own vine and fig tree, beneath which you can sit without any to molest or make you afraid. Now I say, the effect of this national bereavement should be to remind us of these forgotten and neglected mercies; to lead us to recount them, not with a view to minister to our self-complacency, but to quicken our impulses of gratitude for the Divine bounty. It will be a beautiful offering to the memory of your departed President, to make his death the occasion of a grateful recollection of your distinguished blessings.

II. This dispensation rebukes our national *self-confidence*, and charges us to cease from man and put our trust in the Lord.

I honour and venerate my country; but I am sure I do not charge her unjustly, when I say that she has been most criminally given to leaning upon an arm of flesh. She has gloried in the wisdom of man, as if man had no occasion to take counsel of any wisdom above his own. She has seen ruin waiting on one set of measures, and safety and glory on another, without remembering that *no* measures can render her interests secure, unless they are attended with God's blessing; that her destinies are in the hands of him who putteth down one and setteth up another. In all this she has

dishonoured the Ruler of nations. She has acted as if she would take the sceptre of supreme authority into her own hands. She has practically bid the Most High stand aside, and without dreaming of the vanity or the madness of her pretensions, has attempted, in the spirit of the ancient builders of Babel, to make to herself a name whose glory should fill the earth.

But it is not easy to conceive how a more effectual rebuke could have been given to this spirit, than has been in the death of our Chief Magistrate. In his administration were bound up the hopes of a majority of the nation. His election had been the result of a struggle, which had well nigh convulsed the country; and those who had placed him in that lofty station, thought they saw in the measures to which he was pledged, all they could ask to ensure the country's prosperity. But come, ye self-confident politicians, to your President's grave, and tell us what ye think now of the wisdom of trusting to an arm of flesh. Nerveless as a clod is the hand which but the other day received the staff of office. The eye that looked out upon that brilliant and imposing pageant, sees not: the ear upon which fell the deafening plaudits of the multitude, hears not: the voice that uttered itself with

freedom and energy from the highest place in the nation, speaks not : the senses are all locked up in the slumber of the sepulchre. And death hath removed to another sphere, though by no means blotted out of being, that well-balanced and well-directed mind, in which were already treasured up thoughts and plans for the development and execution of which you were anxiously waiting. That beautiful fabrick which your imagination had framed, and to which your heart was so strongly attracted, God has only touched; and lo, it has passed away, like the morning vapour before the sun! Transfer your confidence, then, from the creature to the Creator. Remember that if our national interests are safe, they are so only because God's protecting hand is upon them. Remember that if we in our folly refuse to put our trust in *Him*, we have no right to expect, either from His word or His providence, but that He in judgment will withhold His blessing from *us*. If we confide in Him unreservedly and implicitly, we may be sure of His favour; and with that we need not fear, though enemies should encircle us, and convulsions should agitate us, and our very mountains should be carried into the midst of the sea.

III. This dispensation of providence rebukes our national *idolatry of our rulers*, and teaches us to remember that they are but men.

Far be it from me to intimate that we have had too much of that sober and rational regard for those in authority, to which their station justly entitles them: what I would here reprobate is that idolatrous homage, that fanatical praise, which they are perpetually receiving from that part of the nation that approves and sustains their measures. I refer not to any particular administration as distinguished in this respect above others; but if I mistake not, you will find in looking through our whole national history, that just in proportion to the prevalence of party spirit, this evil of which I am now speaking has prevailed: the majority of the people have spoken, and written, and acted, concerning our rulers, as if every thing they did was right, merely because they did it. Now it is to be borne in mind that rulers are constituted with the same flesh and blood, the same susceptibilities and infirmities, with other men; and if other men cannot safely be subjected to such an influence, neither can they. Admitting that they are good men, and disposed to rule with an equal hand; admitting too that they are discerning men, and more capable

than most of discriminating between truth and falsehood; yet, after all, if their ears are continually trained to the sound of their own praise, it is hardly possible but that their hearts will beat too vigorously to the idea of their own merit; and as a consequence, that they will commit mistakes and errors which they would otherwise have avoided. Many a ruler, I doubt not, has adopted measures adverse to the publick good, which he never would have adopted, had he not been kept in countenance by the unceasing flatteries of a party. The nation that deals thus with its rulers, need not wonder if it should first ruin *them*, and then render them instrumental of bringing ruin upon *itself*.

You see how this dangerous and deceiving spirit is rebuked by this providence. Rulers are not only, like others, accountable for their conduct at the bar of Heaven, but their responsibility is increased in proportion to the amount of authority which is committed to them. When they die, they enter upon their retribution, receiving good or evil in another world, according to the amount of good or evil which they have done in this. Say, then, whether the grave of our departed President does not charge us to beware how we throw stumbling blocks in their way? It lifts up the voice of

intercession in their behalf, and pleads with us to remember that they have temptations enough to encounter, without being subjected to the ordeal of national flattery. It admonishes us that such a course, more than almost any other, puts in jeopardy the best interests of our country. And finally, it proposes to us the solemn interrogation, how we can meet our rulers in the judgment, if by our inordinate and unceasing flatteries, we have contributed to nourish their pride, to benumb their moral sensibility, and thus to accumulate for them the materials of an aggravated condemnation. But on the other hand,

IV. This providence rebukes no less effectually our growing *contempt of authority*, and calls upon us to render honour to whom honour is due. I am not sure but that I may have introduced this thought in the discourse which you heard on the Sabbath morning after the President's death; but if I did, it is too important, and too apposite to the present occasion, not to be introduced here, even though it be at the expense of repetition.

It is the fashion in this country for the party not in power to be exceedingly restless, and to oppose the administration under which they live, with at least an equal degree of zeal with that with which

its advocates sustain it. It is the fashion to level against rulers the arrows of detraction; to watch for every occasion for calling in question either their integrity or their ability, and to *find* occasion often where there is none; to impute selfish and abominable motives, where nothing can be said against the external act; and sometimes even to talk loudly of revolt and rebellion. And I must add, it has become the fashion in many parts of our land, to trample upon the laws with mob-like violence; the consequence of which is, that sometimes an innocent man is maimed, or mangled, or torn to pieces, where the laws ought to have protected him; and in other cases the criminal is prematurely and unjustly punished, because the operation of the laws is too tardy for the taste of the people. If I mistake not, this desperate spirit constitutes one of the worst features of our times. In every instance in which it is manifested, there is not only an outrage committed against the laws of God, but an act of rebellion against the laws of the country, and an act of insult against the rulers of the country.

Here again, listen, and you shall hear your President's grave still speaking forth the language of rebuke and exhortation. He had indeed but

just entered upon his office ; but he had held it long enough to know that it was any thing else than a bed of roses ; and some have imagined that he actually fell a victim to the fatigue and anxiety by which his introduction to it was attended. His language to the nation now is, “ Your rulers have care and responsibility enough to overwhelm them, apart from all those burdens which ye have been accustomed needlessly and voluntarily to impose. Let the clamours of party then be hushed. Let the voice of crimination and insult be heard no more. Remember that your President is a man, that your rulers are all men, and that you have as little reason to expect perfection in them as they have in you. Be lenient, then, towards their infirmities, and be not too strict to mark even their errors against them. Remember that they are God’s ministers for good, and as such claim your homage and obedience. And if you will see their administration most fruitful in blessings, study to alleviate rather than increase their burdens ; submit cheerfully to the laws which it is their duty to enforce, and co-operate with them to suppress the spirit of insubordination, and thus promote the best interests of our common country. Render unto Cæsar the things that are Cæsar’s. It is due to

humanity ; it is due to justice ; it is due to honour ; it is due to patriotism.”

V. This affecting providence rebukes our national *inconsideration of death*, and calls upon us to awake to a sense of our mortality.

Look through any circle you please, no matter how limited, no matter how extensive, and you find a general inattention to the concerns of eternity. You may travel through the length of the land, and then through the breadth of it, and it is only here and there one that you will meet, who is not living as if this world were his final home. The merchant is busy in accumulating wealth, and in proportion to his success, is ever grasping for more ; but he forgets that he must die and leave it. The politician is eager to make his voice heard through the nation ; but he forgets that his voice must soon be hushed in death. The aspiring statesman has his eye upon some lofty place of honour, and labours day and night to lift himself into it ; but he forgets that there is a pathway ever kept open even from the throne to the sepulchre. The creature of habitual thoughtlessness is buzzing about in pursuit of pleasure, like a butterfly in the sun ; but it never occurs to him that death may put an end to all his pleasures to-morrow. Yes, the great

mass of the nation are utterly absorbed in *this* world; and neither their vision nor their aspirations extend to a coming one.

True there are rebukes to this spirit of inconsideration, every day, and on every side:—every death-bed scene, every funeral procession, every open grave, rebukes it. But in ordinary cases the providence of God speaks to a comparatively small circle: here it speaks to every individual in the nation; for if the death of the father of a family be an admonition to that family to prepare to die, not less is the death of the Head of a nation an admonition to that entire nation to consider their latter end. But a little while since, my countrymen, your President spoke to you as a living man, and he told you concerning the projected measures of his administration: to day he speaks to you from the silence and corruption of the tomb, and I trust I may add, in view of all the cheering evidence of his Christian character which has come to us,—from that world where the dignity of earthly distinction is forgotten amidst the splendours of a blood-bought crown; but he speaks on another and more momentous subject—your relations to God and eternity. If you were disposed to heed the voice of the living, turn not a deaf ear to the voice of the dead. Men of

every class and every character throughout this nation, not God's ministers, but the grave, is preaching to you to-day ; and the doctrine is everywhere the same—that you must all die ; and the exhortation is everywhere the same—that you should prepare to die.

Hitherto I have dwelt upon those national sins which are more directly and especially rebuked by this affecting dispensation ; but I must now add in the

VI. Last place, that God has here sent us a rebuke for *all* our national transgressions, and is calling us to repentance and reformation in view of them.

Nothing is so well adapted to set an individual to reflecting upon his sins, as the chastisements of the Divine hand. Thus, you remember, when Jacob's sons were brought into circumstances of difficulty and peril in Egypt, they began immediately to commune with themselves and with one another, in respect to their cruel and murderous treatment of their brother ; and the reason was that conscience did its office, and recognized the doctrine of a retribution. And the same principle applies to communities as to individuals. When the rod of God is laid upon a nation as it has been now

upon *us*, it is adapted to excite the inquiry, wherefore is it that He has thus come out in judgment? What are the sins of which we have been guilty, that we are thus subjected to the chastisements of Heaven? I can only hint at those which have not been already mentioned.

Let me say, then, that we are chargeable with *having shut our ears against the voice of God*, when he has spoken to us in former judgments. It is but a few years since the *pestilence* passed through this land, like fire through a forest. We had heard of it indeed as the scourge of other lands; but we had looked at the ocean as an effectual barrier against its approach to *us*. Presently, however, that barrier was passed; and we read in our own newspapers, under the head of domestick intelligence, as fearful tales of desolation as any which had come to us from across the ocean. It was not here and there only, but every where; and the graves were multiplying every day by thousands and thousands; and even the most thoughtless were compelled to feel that they lived on the threshold of eternity. But at length the pestilence passed off, and our anxiety passed off with it; and there is reason to believe that instead of melting the nation into penitence, it rendered it

more obdurate in transgression. At a more recent period, the country has been subjected to unprecedented *commercial distress*. Rich men have seen their fortunes vanishing like chaff before the whirlwind; and poverty and bankruptcy and ruin have become as household words, where for years nothing but affluence and independence had been dreamed of. But the nation has remained unhumbled still. We have been loud enough and busy enough in referring the evil to second causes; but where have been the evidences of our recognition of the Divine hand;—of our repentance and reformation in view of the Divine rebuke? And finally, the *elements* have been commissioned as ministers of God's displeasure toward us. The conflagration has swept over no inconsiderable portion of the metropolis of the land, blotting out the productions of art, frustrating the labours of industry, and arresting temporarily the current of expectation and enterprise. Our vessels have been abroad upon our waters, freighted with youth and beauty, with intelligence and virtue; but the midnight tempest has opened for these multitudes a common grave in the deep; or the terrific explosion has announced their entrance into eternity; or else the flames around and the waters

beneath have contended in the work of death, till there have been only enough left to record the horrors of the scene. These events occurring in fearfully rapid succession, have for the time, spread consternation and agony through the land; and it has seemed as if God's warning voice were raised to a note so loud and terrible, that the most thoughtless *must* be forced to consideration; but here again, scarcely have the tidings died away upon our ears, before we have regained our accustomed insensibility, and virtually said to God that if he would melt or humble us, it must be done by some yet more appalling visitation.

Infidelity is another crying sin with which we are chargeable—yes, infidelity in every form and degree; from the dark insinuation against Christianity that is only whispered in a corner, down to the open rejection of all religion, and the blasphemies of the blackest atheism. The state of the country in reference to this subject at this moment would, I doubt not, if it could be laid open to us, furnish matter of most appalling interest to every one who regards his country's welfare. We should see that there is no place so high, but that infidelity has been able to reach it; no place so low but that she has been willing to creep into it; and I

fear, no place so sacred, but that she is suffered to profane and pollute it. From every part of this land, and especially from our great cities, there is a voice going up to Heaven, calling for still heavier judgments to descend upon us, because we are so rapidly becoming an infidel people.

And there is the sin of *slavery*—yes, silent as we may be in respect to it, because fanaticism on the one hand, and prejudice and selfishness on the other, are lifting up together their discordant voices to seal our lips and palsy our efforts—the sin of *slavery* is, at this moment, bearing testimony against us before the Ruler of nations, as loudly as any other. True, indeed, the fact that this mighty burden of guilt rests upon us is no reason why we should act precipitately, and thus defeat our own efforts in endeavouring to throw it off; but it is a reason why we should not remain inactive; and if we are contented to remain so, what else will other nations say of us, what else will our own consciences say of us, what else will God the righteous Judge write in *His* book concerning us, but that with all our eulogies of freedom, and all our pretended abhorrence of slavery, we are, after all, willing that this sin should lie at our door?

The spirit of *violence* and *bloodshed* too is abroad in the land, and in some parts of it to a degree, to which you will scarcely find a parallel even in the most barbarous country. The good and useful citizen is decoyed away from his habitation to be murdered at noon-day; and the murderer with a view to escape detection, turns his own dwelling into a sepulchre. The magistrate, while engaged in the discharge of his appropriate functions, falls dead from his seat, a victim to ruthless violence. The neighbourhood echoes at midnight to the alarm of fire; but it turns out that amidst those flames there is blood; and the fire has been kindled only to hide the assassin's hand. And in some instances the perpetrators of these deeds are suffered to go at large, while justice stands like a statue at her post, as if her eyes were put out, or her hands were palsied, or her life blood were frozen. My country, thou hast a fearful account to settle for these bloody outrages; especially for such as are voluntarily, deliberately, left unpunished!

I had intended to add to this list of our national sins, the extensive desecration of the Sabbath; the neglect of the ordinances of religion; the profanation of God's holy name, as well as the sin of intemperance, which is still in no small degree

prevalent, notwithstanding all that Christian benevolence and Christian enterprise have done to arrest it; but instead of pursuing this train of thought, I will only in conclusion urge you in a single word, to fulfil the great purpose for which the solemnities of this day have been ordained—that of repentance and reformation. The repentance of the nation must be that of the individuals of which the nation is composed; and as you are among its component parts, I call upon you this day, every one, to break off your iniquities by turning to the Lord, as a debt which you owe to your country. Repent of your own personal transgressions—of the sins of your heart and of your life, and supplicate grace to enable you to live a righteous, sober and godly life, to the glory of God's holy name. Humble yourselves in view of our national sins, and resolve that the full amount of your influence shall be consecrated to the cause of national reformation. And then go forth and act in the spirit of this day's solemnities, in the spirit of the resolutions you have here formed, and it will be good for you, it will be good for our common country, that you have engaged in this exercise.

It is at once a sublime and affecting thought that this great nation is professedly humbling itself

to-day around the tomb of its departed Head. If I had a voice that could be heard from one end of the land to the other, I would say, My countrymen, take heed that ye do not hereafter prove this day's solemnities to have been a farce. Ye are professing now to be humble for your sins, and to ask that God's judgments may not be lost upon you: show your sincerity then by forsaking the sins for which you mourn; by laying duly to heart the chastisement which you profess to recognize. But if you rise from your knees only to commit the sins which you have confessed; if you go forth from your chambers of fasting to open your bosoms to the influence of party strife, and criminal worldliness, and forgetfulness of God, then remember that you have played the hypocrite amidst the solemnities of an occasion which has had it not more of a fast than of a funeral; and to say nothing of other testimony, the grave of your lamented President will be a witness against you until it shall give up its dead at the great resurrection day.