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OUR PROSPERITY, OUR INGRATITUDE, AND OUR DANGER.

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# A FAST-DAY SERMON,

THE NEW YORK  
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Preached in the f street Presbyterian Church,  
TILDEN FOUNDATION.

WASHINGTON, D. C., SEPTEMBER 26, 1855.

BY THE

REV. P. D. GURLEY, D. D.

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Washington:

HENRY POLKINHORN, PRINTER.

1855.

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## CORRESPONDENCE.

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WASHINGTON, OCTOBER 1, 1855.

DEAR SIR:—The undersigned having heard with great gratification, the sermon preached by you on the 26th ultimo, set apart by the city authorities as a day of fasting, humiliation and prayer, and believing that much good may result from its publication and circulation among those who had not the benefit of listening to its delivery, respectfully request that you will furnish a copy for publication.

With great respect and regard, your friends and servants,

JOSEPH HENRY,  
T. HARTLY CRAWFORD,  
WM. L. WALLER,  
O. MUNSON.  
CHARLES STOTT.  
J. C. DOBBIN.

Rev. P. D. GURLEY, D. D., Washington, D. C.

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WASHINGTON, OCTOBER 2, 1855.

GENTLEMEN:—In reply to your note of yesterday, I beg leave to thank you for the kind terms in which you have requested a copy of my sermon for publication; and to say, that in view of *your* conviction that "much good may result from its publication," I do not feel at liberty to withhold it, and shall therefore, as soon as it is prepared for the press, place it at your disposal.

Very respectfully, yours,

P. D. GURLEY.

To Messrs. HENRY, CRAWFORD, WALLER, and others.

# SERMON.

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"Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth : for the Lord hath spoken : I have nourished and brought up children, and they have rebelled against me."—ISAIAH 1 : 2.

They were highly favored ; they were strangely ungrateful and rebellious ; they were fearfully punished ; this is an epitomized history of the Jewish nation.

1. *They were highly favored.* How did God deliver, and lead, and enrich, and bless them ! When enslaved in Egypt, he compassionated their sufferings, and sent them out in triumph. He bade the waves of the sea roll back and leave them a passage, and return again to overwhelm their enemies. For forty years he miraculously clothed, and fed, and guided them in the wilderness. Then he divided Jordan and introduced them into the land of promise—"a land of corn and wine, a land of bread and vineyards, a land of oil-olive and honey." To give them room he "drove out the heathen with his hand." They had riches, and honors, and pleasures, and health. They had more. To them were committed the Oracles of God. He gave them his Word ; he called them his children ; he placed in their magnificent temple the symbol of his presence. When the ten tribes revolted from the house of David, still his eye and his mercy were upon Judah. For many years they sat under their vines and fig trees, and none made them afraid. They had wise kings, and faithful prophets, and a mild and happy government. Theirs was the temple, and the high priest, and the holy altar, and the daily sacrifice. They were exalted to heaven. They were a peculiar people. God nourished and brought them up as children : but

2. *They rebelled against Him.* In open contempt of all these great and wonderful mercies, they made them other gods, and bowed before images which their own hands had carved. A thousand high hills and a thousand waving groves in that very land which God had given them, were the scenes and the witnesses of their idolatry. They hardened their hearts,

imprisoned their prophets, profaned their temple, trampled upon the Divine testimonies, and said again and again by their conduct, if not in words, "Who is the Lord, that we should obey his voice?" He nourished and brought them up as children; but *they rebelled against Him*.

3. *Did their rebellion go unpunished?* Let the facts of history answer. The successive invasions of Nebuchadnezzar upon the kingdom of Judah; the violent death of Jehoiakim their king, whose corpse was left unburied, to rot in the sun or be devoured by vultures; the utter destruction of Jerusalem and its costly, splendid temple; the ruin of the Hebrew commonwealth; the seventy years captivity, and the heavy sorrows experienced by the captives as they sat down by the rivers of Babylon, and wept when they remembered Zion, as they hung their harps upon the willows amid the taunts of their enemies, and said, "How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?"—What were all these bitter ingredients in their cup but so many evidences that God will by no means clear the guilty, no matter how high may have been their exaltation? What were they but so many judgments poured out from Heaven upon a tenderly-nourished, but an ungrateful and a rebellious nation? If it be true that the descendants of Abraham were exalted above other nations; if it be true that their sins were peculiarly grievous and aggravated; is it not equally true that their punishment was peculiarly severe and crushing? What nation ever rose so high? or sinned so heinously? or suffered so much?

But the question to which we wish specially to call your attention is this:—*Is there any parallelism, any striking and deeply significant, not to say sadly ominous, resemblance between the history of the Jewish nation and the history of our own nation?*

There certainly is a very remarkable resemblance in two respects: first, *we, like them, have been favored of God beyond any other people on the earth*; and secondly, *we, like them, have been deeply ungrateful and rebellious*. Shall this resemblance be extended a little further and made complete?—is a question of startling import. As we are partakers of their pros-

perity, and of their rebellion, shall we also share in their punishment? Why not? God is the same now that he was when he fed Israel with the bread of tears, and gave them tears to drink in great measure; his government is the same; his justice is the same; sin trampling upon Divine authority is, in his view, the same. If then Israel's exaltation is ours, and Israel's rebellion is ours, why should not Israel's punishment, Israel's overthrow, Israel's sufferings, be ours also?

Can there be any doubt that God has blest this nation beyond any other nation now existing in the world? Let us look a moment at our condition and our history. What a goodly land the Lord our God has given us!

Speak we of *fertility*? Our valleys wave with corn; our hills are white with harvests; and our very mountains, to their highest cliffs, are clothed with vegetation. As long as Heaven favors us with showers and sunshine, we need never be dependent for our bread or clothing on any other nation. We have a territory of such vast extent, and possessing such a rich variety of soil, that what one region does not produce may be found abundantly in some other.

Speak we of *beauty*? Ours is all that exuberant diversity of scenery which can charm the eye and fill the heart with emotions of delight. We have towering and majestic forests; extensive plains and prairies; beautiful hills and valleys; lofty mountains and mountain ranges; gently meandering rivulets; lakes unparalleled in number and extent; rivers vying with the noblest in the world; and as to cataracts—let Niagara speak for itself; it has spoken; the dwellers in distant lands have heard the fame thereof, and crossed mighty oceans to gaze upon its thundering torrent, and feel that God is there. What was once said of England is more true of America: "It is a paradise of pleasure, the garden of God. Our vales are like Eden, our hills as Lebanon, our springs as Pisgah, our rivers as Jordan, our walls the ocean, and our defence the Lord Jehovah."

Speak we of *healthfulness*? Ours is the pleasant and salubrious climate of the temperate zone. From the rigors of

the tempestuous North we are well removed, and also from the fervors of the parched and sultry South. Our diseases, for the most part, give warning of their approach, and, in their incipient stages, are easy of control. The pestilence that walketh in darkness, defying the remedial power of medicine and numbering its daily victims by scores and fifties in the same community, is of rare occurrence. The cities scourged by its *annual* visitations are comparatively few in number. The great majority of our people have only heard of it in the distance. Marks evincing the eminent salubrity of the land in which we dwell are numerous and unmistakable. The monuments which record the longevity of our ancestors; the heads of thousands of our citizens blossoming with the locks of age; the ruddy complexions of our children; and the numbers whose regular engagement from day to day in their various spheres of business or of pleasure, tells that no sick and dying beds are spread in their houses; all testify that the lines have fallen to us in healthful as well as pleasant places, and, for this reason especially, we have a goodly heritage. The land flowing with milk and honey was not a better land than ours. It implies no small responsibility to live in such a land. Where much is given much will be required. Jehovah will not demand less of us than he did of ancient Israel. The fields waving with plentiful harvests, the springs gushing from our mountains, the sheep and cattle in our valleys and on our hills, the mines that pour their rich products into our treasuries, the breezes that promote our health—everything, everything that constitutes an element in the sum total of our prosperity, is charged in Heaven's registry to our account—it is noted down as a loan to us from God to be returned to him again with interest.

Look too at our national *origin* and our *history*. Our forefathers were natives of other realms, realms now perhaps under the iron rod of oppression, or desolated by famine and the sword. They felt the galling chains of civil and religious despotism, and to escape those chains they fled to these shores, then the lonely haunt of savages. In the beautiful language

of another,—“Our whole history, from the first landing of our forefathers is but one continued affecting account of God’s care of them and us. When that first ship brought that little band of persecuted Christians, and landed them, in the midst of winter, on Plymouth’s bleak, inhospitable coast, when they there kindled their first fire, amidst howling beasts and yelling savages—when they there fell on their knees, and to heaven raised their eyes streaming with tears—when they covered their little babes with the leaves blown from the trees of autumn, and stationed a sentinel to watch the foe; how could it be doubted but they would be driven from the land they had reached? Who could have predicted, or would have dared to hope, that God would soon give them peaceable possession of all this extensive country? And afterward, when the savage band conspired to destroy that little company of strangers—when the scalping knife was raised over the slumbers of the cradle—when the savage yell disturbed the midnight dream, and the angry flames were consuming the little thatched hovels where our mothers slept, who could have thought that God intended so soon to give the word, and bid those savages retire to the western forests? Who could have believed, or dreamed, that those miserable hovels would in a few years be exchanged for these beautiful mansions which now adorn our land? And when, afterward, the merciless Frenchmen bore down upon us from the north, and in the west hired against us the bloody tomahawk, when their ships of war covered our lakes and spread destruction along our Atlantic shores, and the savage band broke in upon our frontiers, each pressed on by infernal fury; who could have thought that heaven designed by this war, to prepare us for future conflicts, and raise us up an immortal Washington to be the future savior of our country? And when, at length, the very land that gave us birth became hostile—when her floating purgatories thundered on our coast, and burned our cities, and her hard-hearted veterans were ravaging our country, stripping our fathers of their flocks and herds, and our mothers of their well-earned food, and of the couch on which

they dared not rest, and could not sleep; when at length we were forced to make an appeal to the sword, and our little companies of undisciplined troops were rallying round their General; when our fathers began to fall in the high places of the field, and our mothers, with infants in their arms, fled from the foe, and saw him burn their dwellings; when at length the temples of the living God were converted into barracks profaned with the soldier's oath, and dissipated night with their blazing spires; when the meek ambassador of the cross must die for loving his country, and for wishing to be free; and when all hearts began to ache and to bleed, and heaven had not yet begun to give us the victory—in this trying hour, who would have thought that God intended so soon to deliver us from the oppressive yoke of our parent country, and make us an independent and happy republic." Surely we may well say of ourselves as the Psalmist said of Israel, God "hath not dealt so with any nation." What a rapid growth has been ours! To what amazing greatness and prosperity have we attained! In the language of inspiration, the little one has become a thousand, and the small one a strong nation. That little band of pilgrims who something more than two centuries ago struck the rock of Plymouth, has swelled to more than twenty millions of people, and the banner of civil and religious liberty which they planted in feebleness upon that bleak but memorable coast, now waves its ample folds from the Atlantic to the Pacific, and from 54° 40'—I had almost said—on the North, to the Mexican Gulf on the South. What hath God wrought! What protection, enlargement, and glory has he given to this nation! He never led Israel more wonderfully than he has led us. Verily he has nourished and brought us up as children. And it is equally clear that

*We have rebelled against him.* Time would fail us to enumerate our sins. I mean the sins which may properly be called *national*. I would call your attention very briefly to the following:—

1. *There is a fearful want of family religion in our land.*—With reference to this subject we may truly be called a *de-*

*generate* people. It is said and written of our forefathers, that among them there was no family without a domestic altar, no children without a father's or a mother's prayers.

As they gathered around their family-boards spread with the bounties of Providence, they partook not till they had blest the Giver. And then every morning and evening the venerated Bible was opened and read aloud in the hearing of the household, and earnest supplications were offered up to him who is nigh to all that call upon him, to all that call upon him in truth. Could those praying men of God return to us, what would they think of the crying neglect of family worship and family religion that would meet them on every hand? Would they not blush and tremble at the impiety of their offspring? What proportion of the present living descendants of the Puritans, heads of families, do you suppose have an altar in their houses? How many of the families of this nation do you think, gathered this morning, gather every morning, around their domestic hearth-stones for prayer? To speak within bounds, probably not one in fifty the land over. As we have increased in numbers, how fearfully have we increased in the neglect of domestic piety; and if God threatens to pour out his fury upon the families that call not upon his name, what can we expect but judgment?

2. Another common sin equally evincive of our degeneracy, is *the neglect of family government*. If well authenticated history is worthy of credence, there was not this neglect among our early ancestors in this land. In their day every family was a Bethel where pious parents bent every effort to make their children intelligent and devout, quiet and unobtrusive, docile and obedient. The child was never allowed to make a declaration of independence in his boyhood; if he did, his ardor was quickly abated by an application of the rod, and if the symptoms returned the medicine was repeated. Till twenty one years of age he was under parental care, direction, and discipline; and then he left his father's house with a modest, unassuming demeanor, as though there were many lessons for him yet to learn, and many dangers to be carefully avoided,

and many faithful labors to be performed in his calling, before he could earn a reputation that should *entitle* him to stations of commanding influence and high responsibility. But alas! The times are changed. In many families, perhaps a majority of the whole, there is no wholesome moral and religious influence, no wisely formative and restraining discipline, no vigorous, decided, and successful government. The children never feel restraint, and so they never learn obedience. As soon as they burst their swaddling bands, and leave their cradles, they begin to put on the airs, and assert the prerogatives of manhood. In a little while they become their own masters, and treat every form and semblance of domestic authority with steady neglect, if not with open and avowed contempt. They learn to contradict and oppose, and then to despise their parents, and break their *hearts*, if not their *heads*. They grow up in habits of indolence, lawlessness, and vice, which utterly disqualify them for the duties of good citizenship. They prove scourges to society. The world is a loser by their existence. They live only to cumber the ground and bring God's judgments down upon themselves and upon their country. You may call it cant, Puritanism, or what you please, the truth still remains the same, and deserves to be earnestly promulgated from the pulpit and from the press, that the neglect of family government is so general all over the land, that it deserves to be called a national sin, and calls for national judgments.

3. Again,—I submit whether it may not truly be said of us as of Palestine in the days of Jeremiah, "*Because of swearing the land mourneth.*" I have heard it suggested by those who have traveled extensively in other lands that we are unquestionably the profanest nation in the world, with one exception. Perhaps this is a slander or, at least, an exaggeration. But we all know that we need not travel very far in any direction to hear the name of God profaned in a manner deeply painful to the ear of piety. Indeed this is a sin of which you can hardly go amiss. It meets you in the stage-coach, in the steamboat, and in the railroad car; in the country and in the

city ; in the hovels of the poor and in the palaces of the rich ; in the lowest resorts of vice and in the gilded saloons of fashion ; among the learned and the ignorant, the honored and the despised. Men filling the highest civil and military offices in the land are often quite as distinguished for their profanity as for any other moral quality. One would think, on being in the company of some of them a few hours, that the gift of swearing fluently and without any apparent compunction, is, under a republican government, among the most important qualifications for office. Nor is the sin of taking the name of God in vain confined to advanced youth and manhood. Infancy often learns to lisp the language of profanity before it knows the letters of the alphabet ; and, coming *home* to the very state of things in which *we ourselves* are living, I will say, the profanest oaths I have ever heard in this city have fallen from the lips of boys under twelve years of age. Nor do I suppose that we of Washington are sinners, in this respect, above all other places. Profanity among the young, the middle-aged, and the old, is a crying sin, and has been for years, throughout the length and breadth of the land. O, if we could know how often, and how extensively, in a single day, the name of God is profaned in our beloved country, as he knows, we should not wonder that the pestilence is among us ; we should rather wonder that its visits are so infrequent and its ravages so limited.

4. Again—*Excessive party virulence is among our national sins.* The manner in which political parties, and political candidates, and political editors, often treat each other when important elections are pending, is iniquitous and shameful in the extreme. Each accuses the other of unmixed and execrable baseness, of undermining the constitution and plotting the ruin of his country—of being vile, and false, and unscrupulous, and only anxious for the spoils of office. One of the most serious results of this bitterness is a corruption of the press that is fearfully flagitious and demoralizing. In times of high political excitement it is almost impossible to gain reliable information from the public party gazettes. By party prejudice and rage facts are de-

nied or discolored, truth is distorted or ignored, the fair and hard earned reputations of men are covered with obloquy, and no means, however unworthy, are spared, if they will serve a favorite purpose and elect a favorite candidate. An honest man dares not confide in what he reads. As if the tongue, that "world of iniquity," could not circulate deceptive and scandalous assertions with adequate celerity, "men have taught the paper and ink to lie,"—by an abuse of most unparalleled atrocity, they have made that powerful engine, the press, a vehicle of falsehood. And yet, despite of all they say and print to the contrary, there is not the slightest evidence to prove that there may not be among all political parties, and even among the leaders, some good men and true, who honestly aim at their country's welfare,—some with pure intentions, and right principles, and a sterling patriotism,—while there are, doubtless, others—alas! too many of them—with bad intentions, and "seven principles," as John Randolph said, viz: "five loaves and two fishes."

5. Again—*Worldliness* deserves to be reckoned among our national sins. There is throughout the land an absorbing, driving, headlong passion to be rich—an inordinate desire to accumulate property—a desire to accumulate, not for the sake of doing good by dispersing abroad, but for the mere sake of being rich, the mere sake of owning so much land or coffering so much silver. *With this sole object in view*, tens of thousands of our people are busy at their various plans and employments, honest and dishonest, from year to year. With the same view, other thousands have left their homes and families, and rushed to the gold mines. Indeed the California fever is nothing more nor less than the local development of a disease which pervades the whole country. Sad to relate, it is not confined to the world. It extends into the church. It is an evident and a humiliating truth that the danger of many a professing christian lies just here—in covetousness—which, gloss it over and excuse it as we may, is, in God's estimation, idolatry. Many a man, in the church and out of it, who would be greatly shocked at the idea of bowing down morning and evening before a senseless image of wood or stone, may be, and doubtless is, as really an idolater

as though he practised such a prostration. Riches may be his idol; covetousness his idolatry. And if the Jewish nation were punished for idolatry, for divorcing themselves from God, and worshiping the creature more than the Creator, can we hope to escape?

6. The last national sin to which I shall call your attention, is *Sabbath-breaking*. The importance which God has always attached to the sabbath-day is very remarkable. In the beginning he stamped it, as it were, upon the creative order of the universe that it might be associated with every commemoration of that Almighty power which spake, and it was done; which commanded, and it stood fast. How much importance did he attach to the Sabbath when he himself rested on the seventh day from all his work, thus, *by his own example*, enforcing its observance upon man: while, at the same time, he set it apart for the holy purposes of religion, and connected with *it*, in distinction from other days, a peculiar blessing. How much importance did he attach to it in the wilderness, giving a double portion of manna on the sixth day, *that there might be no gathering on the seventh*. How much importance did he attach to it at Sinai, when, amid the thunderings and darkness of the quaking mount, he wrote the fourth commandment upon the tables of stone in language more earnest, more explicit, more full and detailed, than that which announces any other precept of the decalogue, and put it, be it remembered, into the very centre of the moral code, as though, like the heart in the human body, it were designed to give animation and vigor to all surrounding parts of the system. What importance did he attach to it in the days of ritual splendor, associating it with other moral laws, punishing its violation with death, and directing Moses at the close of life to repeat the law of the Sabbath in the hearing of Israel, amplifying and enforcing it with *new motives*—which was not done in the case of any other command of the decalogue. And in later ages, the days of Isaiah and Ezekiel, what importance did God still attach to the sabbath. He directed his servants who spake in his name to make it one of the principal burdens of their discourse,—to class its desecration with idolatry, and denounce against it the

heaviest judgments of heaven. And in accordance with these denunciations, what fearful calamities fell upon the Jewish nation. Behold the devastation of their beautiful country by the armies of a foreign invader; the destruction of their temple and city; their long and afflicting captivity in Babylon. Whence came these things? What was the procuring cause of these heavy and unrivaled sufferings? Let their own prophets answer, or rather God by them. "They polluted my sabbaths, and their heart went after their idols." Sabbath-breaking and idolatry, kindred sins, twin sisters, which are wont to go hand in hand, these were the procuring causes of their ruin; and hence we need not wonder, that, after the return from Babylon, good Nehemiah took decided measures to secure a proper sanctification of God's holy day. The great reformation effected through his instrumentality closes the Old Testament history of the sabbath; and it is an interesting truth that that history leaves the day rescued from profanation, in full force and vigor upon the threshold of a new and more glorious dispensation, into which it afterwards entered under the sanctioning example of Him, who, though He was Lord of the sabbath, kept the sabbath, and, by declaring it "made for man," proclaimed it universally and perpetually binding down to the end of time.

But notwithstanding all this, how is the sabbath desecrated in this nation in high places and in low. I speak not now of that great, systematic violation of the day prosecuted from year to year by our general government, about which, some time ago, so much was said and written; I rather refer to ten thousand violations in ten thousand other forms, which are perpetrated every sabbath in the year in every city and neighborhood through this entire republic. O, if with such a view before us as I have hinted at, of the importance and sanctity which Jehovah attaches to the day, we could, for one sabbath only, stand on some lofty eminence and command a view of *all* the sabbath desecration that takes place in this land; mail coaches on their routes under governmental sanction; steamboats ploughing our lakes and rivers; multitudes rushing to a thousand wharves to witness their arrival and departure; sailors beginning their voyages,

travelers pursuing their journeys, young men their pleasures, and children their sports; and if, in addition to all this, we could look into the numberless retreats where merchants are casting their accounts, and gamblers are throwing their cards, and tipplers are carousing over their cups, and sensualists are gratifying their lusts, and worldlings are contriving to be rich, and political candidates are preparing their speeches, and statesmen are canvassing matters of government and political economy; and if, to crown all, we could look into our national capitol, yonder capitol, and see our national congress, the representatives of our whole people, winding up their session upon a sabbath morning, with as much profane and godless unconcern, as though it were no where written in heaven's statute-book, "Remember the sabbath day to keep it holy—in it thou shalt do no work;" I say, if we could see all this as God sees it for a single day, we should not wonder that he has sent us fires and floods to destroy our property, and the pestilence to take the lives of our citizens; but we should rather wonder that these judgments have not fallen more heavily upon us, and multiplied their desolations a thousand fold beyond anything that we have hitherto experienced.

In view of what has been said, does there not seem to be a very great propriety in the appointment made by our City Authorities, which we are this day observing? God has nourished and brought us up as children; we have returned him ingratitude—we have rebelled against him; and, as a punishment for our sins, his hand is lifted up against us. How can that hand be stayed? How can impending judgments be escaped, and those already upon us be averted? The parallelism, the striking and ominous parallelism, between us and the Jewish nation, extending already to two points, exaltation and rebellion—how can we prevent it from being carried out and completed in more fearful desolations? Laying my hand upon the Bible for authority, I answer, this object so vitally connected with all our loved and cherished interests, perhaps I should say with the highest hopes and destinies of humanity, must be accomplished, if accomplished at all, by the people of God. They that fear the Lord, and that think upon his name, must avert from our

beloved country the inflictions and the ruin we have deserved. And they must do this *by fasting—by humiliation—by repentance—and by prayer*. Many are the examples recorded in the Word of God of both public and private fasts. Did time permit, we should like to show, by an enumeration of these examples, the scriptural sanction of national fasts at particular seasons of danger and calamity. It must suffice, however, to say in general terms with regard to all the fasts of which mention is made in the Bible, that, when any one of them occurred, there was something in the circumstances of the individual who observed it, or of the church, community, or nation, as the case might be, that called for special heart-searching, humiliation, repentance, and prayer; and whenever these duties were faithfully discharged, a blessing was connected with the occasion, and threatened calamities were almost uniformly averted. God is the same; his government is the same; his regard for the cries of his children is the same; and, therefore, we hope and believe that we and the cities in our vicinity which have been so sorely afflicted, will by-and-by sing of mercy and deliverance as the fruit of this day's observance. What has the Holy One of Israel seen to-day as he looked down from his high and holy habitation? Hundreds and thousands of his people bowing at his feet with repentance and fasting, acknowledging their sins, but pleading in the name of Jesus, for exemption from deserved judgments—pleading for themselves, for their families, for their fellow-citizens, and for the land they have loved so well. Will all this be to no purpose? Has God said unto the seed of Jacob, Seek ye me in vain? The infidel laughs as we ask the question, laughs in profane derision; but the children of the Highest having fasted, and humbled themselves, and laid their petitions at the footstool of mercy, will wait for an answer in the confidence that the Hearer of prayer will remove from us the wasting pestilence, giving us “beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, and the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness.”