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A DISCOURSE

ON THE DEATH OF

GEN. ZACHARY TAYLOR

DELIVERED IN THE

SECOND PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH,  
LOUISVILLE, SATURDAY, JULY 13, 1850.

BY EDWARD P. HUMPHREY,  
MINISTER OF THE CONGREGATION.

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NOTE.—This Discourse is printed in compliance with the following request:

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LOUISVILLE, July 15, 1850.

REV. E. P. HUMPHREY,

DEAR SIR:—The undersigned, members of your church and congregation, offering their grateful acknowledgments for your Discourse on Saturday last, respectfully request a copy thereof for publication.

Your Obedient Servants,

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## D I S C O U R S E .

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“ For behold the Lord, the Lord of Hosts, doth take away \* \* \* \*  
the mighty man, and the man of war ; the judge and the prudent, and the  
ancient, the captain of fifty, and the honorable man, and the counsellor,  
and the cunning artificer, and the eloquent orator.”—ISAIAH iii. 1-3.

It is incumbent on us both to study the word of God and to observe the course of his providence. There are in his word many things which are surprising ; these are often verified by his providence. There are, too, in his providence many dispensations which are inscrutable ; these are often explained by his word. He who compares them, interpreting the one by the other, will not only understand much that were otherwise unintelligible in each, but will perceive the admirable harmony subsisting between them, and recognize the God of providence as the author of the eternal word.

Those Scriptures which describe the vanity of man as mortal, derive the highest emphasis from the actual infliction of the blow by which the hopes of man are disappointed and his body is laid in the grave. We realize the fact that man’s “breath is in his nostrils” when we stand over the dust of one who has laid himself down in his oaken strength to die. The well known description of the wasting pestilence, contained in the Bible, makes but a languid impression upon our minds until we are surrounded by the wailing and terror of the calamity itself. Such an

event—an event which at once confounds man's purposes and illustrates God's word—has brought us here to-day. Death has gone up to the high places of the land, and the Chief Magistrate is no more. While I speak these words the feet of them who are to bury him stand at the door of the Executive mansion. If it were the intention of the Divine Being, in a manner most unexpected and appalling, to arrest the thoughts of millions and to fix them on death, judgment and eternity—to impress on mankind the uncertainty of life, the vanity of man in his best estate, and the emptiness of military glory, of popular idolatry, and of the highest civic honors—we are at a loss to conceive what dispensation of God's providence were more suitable than this to such a purpose.

It is most becoming in us to spend this hour in the house of God. While our countrymen at the Capital, are committing the remains of the President to the dust, it is most proper that all the people should, in this form, concur in the mournful office. It is peculiarly incumbent on us, in this city, to wait on these solemnities. This vicinity was the home of his youth and early manhood. His surviving early associates are here. They bring us to the site of his humble school house; to the fields where he pursued his boyish sports, and where his brow was moistened by his first manly toil; to the log dwelling which he raised, and to all the places where he girded himself for the battle of life. Here are the graves of his honored parents and kindred; and here, it were most appropriate that his remains should find their final resting place. It belongs to us, therefore, to hold this hour sacred to his memory.

There is but one line of remark suggested by the place and the occasion. I do not propose to advert to the bearing of this event upon the political interests of the country. I have not the ability nor is it within my province to discuss any other than

the religious aspects of this providence. These are so profoundly interesting, that I desire to occupy myself wholly with them, leaving to other men the task of investigating the effects which the occurrence is likely to produce on our public affairs. Let us turn at once to the word of God, and gather its interpretations of this dispensation of his providence.

I. *Earthly glory fades suddenly away.* Our text witnesses that God takes away the mighty. So also witnesses this sudden calamity. It is but recently that our lamented President entered on his great renown. On the brilliant victories which crowned his march from the Rio Grande to Buena Vista, his fame as a military commander principally rests. To these, and to the qualities which these brought into notice, he owed his elevation to the Presidency. His journey from New Orleans to Washington was one perpetual ovation. The merry chimes of bells, the festive cannonade, the "spirit stirring drum," and the shouts of the people articulated the general joy. Cities and States contended with each other for the honor of his presence; the young gazed upon him with special wonder, and the aged arose to do him reverence. His feet soon stood on the steps of the Capitol, and he was hailed as the Chief Magistrate of this great Republic.

Within a few months Congress assembles. Their deliberations are upon the highest issues of the constitution. Questions are agitated which go to the very vitals of our institutions. The ripest experience, the most profound statesmanship, the purest patriotism, and the most persuasive eloquence are tasked to their utmost powers of thought and utterance upon the great problem of the day. The trumpet tones of the eloquent orator are mingled with the husky voice of the dying senator in that great strife of debate. Months pass away and still the issue lingers.

The bewildering conflict of opinion and passion is suddenly arrested by the message that death stands at the door of the Executive Mansion. All voices are hushed. The anxieties of men are instantly transferred from the hall of debate to the chamber of wasting disease. Physicians, friends, secretaries, and high officers of state, are there. They speak in whispers and walk softly around the bed of the sufferer. At midnight the cry is made—"Man dieth and wasteth away; yea, man giveth up the ghost!" With the return of the morning, the authorities of the nation assemble and with prudent haste, and a few solemn words, install the lawful successor of the dead. And now, while I speak, a sad procession is moving along the great avenue of the capital city. The prostrate form of the brave warrior and the venerable President is carried to the burial. Where now is the pageantry in which only a few months since the living man was borne along that avenue? Where the enthusiasm, the revelry, the shouts of the people? Where is the welcome to the conquering hero—where is the hero himself? Alas! "thy pomp is brought to the grave, the worm is spread under thee, and the worms cover thee!"

II. This event, as interpreted by our text, instructs us that the *death of the President was the act of God*. "Behold *the Lord taketh away the mighty man*." A practical atheism infests the minds of men as to the whole matter involved in this remark, the doctrine of a particular providence. In respect to death the vague impression is, that diseases are controlled by certain fixed laws under which they attack the human frame, remit, subside or prove fatal, as the case may be. These laws, it is further thought, are wholly independent of the divine being, and work out, by a sort of inherent energy, their final results.

Now, we pronounce this a most inhuman philosophy. To exclude the Providence of God from the chamber of death, is the

most cruel as well as the most impious form of atheism. The hour and the act of death are to the sufferer the hour and the act in which, if ever once in the whole compass of his being, he needs the presence of his God. To tell him then, on his dying bed, that the great God, our Father, has no share in that awful transaction, and no care for him in that awful hour, is to express contempt at once for mortal man in the extremity of his helplessness, and for the Almighty in the day of his sovereign power. And let the page of God, luminous with the truth as to this precise point, rebuke this atheistic folly. Job inquires: "Is there not an appointed time to man on the earth? Are not man's days like the days of a hireling? Seeing his days are determined, the number of his months are with thee, thou hast appointed his bounds that he cannot pass." God himself witnesses, in the book of Deuteronomy—"See now that I, even I am he, and there is no God with me; I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; neither is there any that can deliver out of my hands." Again God declares: "The Lord killeth and maketh alive; he bringeth down to the grave and bringeth up." Nor let us forget the beautiful illustration suggested by our Saviour. God watches over the death even of the sparrow, the value of which is but half a farthing. How much more doth he watch over the death of a man, who is of more value than many sparrows; nay, God so values the very hairs of his head as to number them all.

The death of the President was, therefore, the act of God. He had survived the run of many years, and the visitation of many dangers. He was subject, for the space of forty years, to all the ordinary perils of life, and to those which are incident to the camp, the wilderness, and the field of battle. He fought unscathed amidst the flames of Ft. Harrison; the poisoned arrows of the Black Hawk warriors flew harmless around him;

his life stood proof against the pestilential swamps of Florida, and the desperate onset of Okee Chobee; he cut his way back to Fort Brown, and stormed the walls of Monterey, without a wound; he stood to his post at the bloody pass of Buena Vista, winning the fearful odds of the day, untouched by shot or by steel. His time to die had not come, and he was immortal. But he who survived all these perils, is dead! He died in a time of peace, amid the quiet scenes of life, in the bosom of his family, in the capital of the Republic, in the midst of the public councils. Neither tears nor prayers, nor professional skill, nor the clasping arms of affection, could shield him when the inevitable hour was come. God appointed the bounds of his habitation, and he could not pass them.

I repeat the remark—his death was the act of God. “Shall there be evil in the city, and the Lord hath not done it?” I speak in the presence of some, perhaps, who deem this event an immeasurable, unmitigated calamity. But let such know, of a truth, that it is the hand of God. Let them not, therefore, doubt His wisdom, or question His right to do what He wills.

III. This event is, it may be, *God’s judgment on our guilty land!* The text clearly suggests this thought. God was angry against the Jews for their sins. He threatened them with a two-fold token of his displeasure. First, he would afflict them with famine; he would take away “the whole stay of bread and the whole stay of water.” Next, He would remove their eminent men—He would take away “the mighty man and the man of war.” All this He would do to punish the guilty people.

Now, it cannot be denied, that God visits national vices and crimes by national calamities. Nor can it be doubted, that these judgments assume various forms. They come in the terrors of famine, in the breathings of the pestilence, in the ravages of war, in the flood, the fire and the earthquake, in the

outbursts of popular wickedness and fury, and in the removal of the great and the good. It is undeniable, again, that, as a people, we have provoked the displeasure of the Almighty. How do our sins, as a people, cry out against us! The desecration of the Sabbath—the spirit of avarice and luxury—the lust of war and of gold and of aggrandisement—party spirit, sectional animosities, political bitterness, proceeding even in the halls of Congress—yea, in the Senate Chamber—from heated debate to personal invective, to the giving of the lie, and to the instant drawing of murderous weapons, if not to the deliberate challenge and the field of blood; now, when we consider all these things, and remember with what intense abhorrence a holy God regards them, and then interpret the course of His providence by his word, we may not think it strange if God take away from us, as he did from Judah, the stay and the staff—the stay of bread and the staff of our eminent men. I would not rashly affirm, but I dare not deny this day, that the event we deplore is a judgment of God as well as an act of God.

IV. Our text, still further interpreting this visitation of Providence, admonishes us *trust not in man but in God*. When God takes away from a people their illustrious men, this is unquestionably one of the lessons of the calamity. Our fathers were distinguished for pious confidence in the arm of the Almighty. In every success and in every disaster they recognised His hand. From the first settlement of the country to the revolution, and from the revolution to the adoption of the Federal Constitution, they made Him their strength and their refuge. They saw the shadow of His wing at Plymouth and Jamestown, they followed His guiding hand when they marched up to the fatal trenches of Bunker Hill, when they stained with their bleeding feet the snows of Valley Forge, and when they won

the victories of Saratoga and Yorktown. In the darkest hours of their colonial affairs, and their revolutionary struggle, they were not dismayed. When God took away from them their mighty men and their venerable counsellors they were not in terror, because their reliance was not in the arm which turns to dust, but in that which is Almighty. As we have declined, in this respect, from the ways of our fathers, it becomes us to gather, from the present calamity, lessons of humility and dependence. If any here, forgetful of God, have looked to the departed President to carry the country safely through its present dangers, if you have relied on the accidents of his position; or on the qualities of the man, his firmness, courage, and commanding will; or on his military renown and his unrivaled popularity, if you have relied on these, and on him as possessing these, to carry us safely through our perils, what a rebuke is God this day administering to your idolatrous faith, your confidence in the creature rather than in the Creator. He, in whom you trusted, has died in the moment of expectation and solicitude; in the very crisis of affairs; in the very stress of battle. And, now, let us give heed to the word of God expounding this visitation: "Put not your trust in princes, nor in the son of man in whom there is no help. His breath goeth forth, he returneth to his earth, in that very day" [the day in which we lean upon him] "his thoughts perish."

Nor is this the only admonition we have received. Within our last ten years our great men have gone down in crowds to the grave. In 1841 Harrison died in the first month of his Presidency. Within three years thereafter, three Cabinet Ministers—Legare by sudden disease, and on the fatal deck of the Princeton, Upshur and Gilmer—laid down the seals of office. Then afterwards, Jackson, Adams and Polk died, two of them in retirement and the other smitten down speechless in the capitol.

Meanwhile the hearse has rolled by the doors of the Senate Chamber and borne away the dust of Southard, Wright, Calhoun, and Elmore. Death has gone up to our highest judicial tribunal and summoned to a higher bar the spirits of Story, Baldwin, Barbour, and Thompson. It has followed the army in its campaigns and bidden three of the General officers, Gaines, Worth, and Kearney to lay aside their armour and put on the winding sheet. It has chased the ship of war along the seas and paled the cheeks of Hull, Ridgely, Dallas and many more of our brave commanders. Indeed, fulfilling on us every word of the text, God has taken away the "mighty man, the man of war, the judge and the prophet, and the prudent, and the ancient, the captain of fifty, and the honorable man, and the counsellor, and the cunning artificer, and the eloquent orator."

And now, to-day, a voice comes to our ears from all these graves—where the great have been gathered in clusters, like grapes from the vine—and its message is, "Cease ye from man, whose breath is in his nostrils," and trust in him who "only hath immortality."

V. The *importance of public virtue and intelligence* is forcibly suggested both by the occasion and by our Scripture. Righteousness, more than illustrious men, exalts a nation. The prevalence of knowledge and Christian principle among the people is the only sure basis of free institutions. Great names and great men have their uses, but public virtue has far higher uses. A State pervaded by religious spirit has but little occasion for what the world styles greatness. It rarely requires great generals, for it makes and provokes no war: it needs few great diplomatists, for its policy is strictly just; it needs no skilful compromisers for it is harrassed by no bitter feuds. Those are evil times which commit the safety of the Republic to a few

distinguished statesmen. These times of peril grow out of public crimes or follies; they mark the progress of corruption; they show that the people can no longer govern themselves. If our sole dependence and hopes be in a few statesmen, what shall be the issue when these prove false, or when they suddenly die? But if the Constitution be upheld by a virtuous and intelligent population, what earthly power can destroy it? Men die, but principles abide. The great may prove false to their trusts; an intelligent christian people are ever true and faithful. The Commonwealth of the times of Cromwell perished, because it was the work of one great man who died in his season. The republic of the days of Washington stood fast, because it was the republic, not of Washington who also died in his season, but of a free and virtuous people.

In the midst of such community the truly great are nurtured. If any emergency rise, any peril to liberty or to the constitution, men superior to emergency start forth full armed and instant. In an army which springs from the bosom of such a people, every man is prompt to obey and fitted to command. Every member in the public councils is ready to honor the humblest station, and qualified to occupy the highest post. Death makes no fatal breach in the body of such an army, or in the cabinet of such a government. The ranks supply the chiefs, and the people supply the ranks, in perpetual succession. The seals of office falling from the hands of the dying, are taken up by the living; age bequeaths to age an unwasted inheritance of national blessings.

Let us this day remember, let us never forget, that our institutions are to be maintained not by our great men, but by the spread of true religion. The Sabbath, the house of God, the Bible, the Sunday school, the family altar, these fit men for heaven; these also, more than the wisest diplomacy, the

most profound statesmanship, the purest judiciary, more than all wisdom and prudence, and courage, more than fleets and armies, more than all mighty and ancient and eloquent men, will uphold the Constitution and Union and Liberty of the country.

VI. The occasion, and the Word of God, on which we are reflecting, convey to us another admonition: *they bid us make preparation for death.* This is the most serious lesson of the day. Let us give heed to it. The highest and broadest relation sustained by any human being is his relation to God. The chief dignity with which he can be invested, is that of immortality. His most intense sollicitudes and labors are due to the work of salvation. The only treasure which cannot be consumed is that laid up in heaven. The most solemn and appropriate thought suggested by the death of an illustrious person, is that a MAN has gone into the presence of God. His attributes, as immortal, exceed in dignity every earthly honor, station and glory. In the eye of God, the redemption of the soul alone is precious; compared with this, all things else—power, achievements, fame, popular applause—are nothing worth.

Preparation for death implies something more than the discharge of duty to our friends and our country. We are sinners. Guilt is not washed away, nor is the heart of man renewed by the purest patriotism or the most exalted services in the field or in the Cabinet. There is but one atonement; this is by the blood of Christ. There is but one salvation; this is through faith in His name. There is but one heaven; that is for them, only, who are clothed in His righteousness. This is the truth of God; it is published to us from the Bible, it is written on our hearts by the monitions of the eternal Spirit, and it is the message of God's providence to-day.

Never before has a nation witnessed such a spectacle as this. A former President died in office, but the intelligence was slowly conveyed from post to post. But the tidings of this calamity flew upon wings swifter than light, and startled simultaneously the hearts of millions. The time appointed for the burial has also been published to all these millions, and now, at this hour, while the President is descending to the tomb, we and thousands more, though separated by the breadth of half the continent from the obsequies, are in sympathy with the scene. God is this day lifting up the ensigns of his power over all the land. He has hushed the strife of debate in the capitol and the hum of industry in all our cities. He bids us be still and know that he is God. He opens our eyes on that long procession which is now bearing forth the dust of our fallen chief, and bids us to remember that this is the last of earth, but that beyond the earth and beyond the grave there is another life and another death. That life is for those who believe in his Son, and that death is the portion of those who refuse him that speaketh from heaven.