

God's Voice, and the Lessons it Teaches.

A SERMON,

PREACHED ON THE OCCASION OF THE DEATH

OF

GENERAL TAYLOR,

LATE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES.

BY THE

REV. D. MAGIE, D. D.

DEDICATED TO HIS PEOPLE.

AT THE REQUEST OF SOME OF WHOM IT IS NOW PUBLISHED, SLIGHTLY CHANGED
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SERMON.

MICAH vi., 9.—'The Lord's voice crieth unto the city, and the man of wisdom shall see thy name; hear ye the rod, and who hath appointed it.

TRUE patriotism, scarcely less than sound piety, will lead us to mark the footsteps of the Almighty in great public events. We are not only servants of the Most High God, but citizens of a free and favored land; and as such are bound to take a lively interest in whatever concerns the common welfare. Any thing that stirs the sensibilities of the country, and plunges the nation into grief, may well be made the theme of pulpit inquiry and address.

We all feel that it would be criminal to suffer so instructive a calamity as that which has recently befallen us, to pass without notice. Our beloved Chief Magistrate, honored and revered even more for his noble personal qualities than for the high military and civil stations he held, has been suddenly cut off from the land of the living and laid low in the dust. While office was still new to him, and the laurel unfaded on his brow, the destroyer came to do his allotted work. The country is in tears, and the speaker but falls in with the sorrowful emotions of a whole bereaved people, when he seeks to turn the general lamentation into a useful channel. A subject is assigned us, and all we have to do is to illustrate and apply it as best we can.

God himself is speaking, and it becomes us all, high and low, rich and poor, to stand in awe, and keep silence before him. His voice cries to the metropolis of the land, and through that,

as a common centre, sends out its notes of warning and instruction to every city, town, and village, in our widely extended Union. And we shall be wanting to ourselves, as well as wanting in respect for the memory of a great man, if our ears are not open and our hearts attentive.

This is an event so serious in its nature, and so far-reaching in its influence, as deeply to impress every thoughtful mind. No one could be taken from a position so elevated—the incumbent of an office in comparison with which titles and crowns are but gewgaws—without making a breach; and, least of all, could such a man as Zachary Taylor. Well may we exclaim: How are the mighty fallen! and how is the glory of the land perished in its high places! It would argue a criminal disregard to the operation of God's hands, not to pause and reflect on so unlooked-for and portentous an event. We must not be so stunned and confounded by the blow, as to fail to inquire into the reasons for its having been inflicted.

The mere political aspects of this affecting providence will be left, as of right they should be, to other lips and other occasions. But there are two points which may well claim attention here: *Why is the late calamity to be regarded as the voice of the Lord? and what are some of the lessons it seems intended to enforce?* These topics fall within the legitimate scope of the preacher, and it will be his effort to treat them in a way befitting the place and the day.

I. *Why are we to regard the visitation, over which the land mourns, as the voice of the Lord?*

That the Almighty has been speaking, and speaking with unusual emphasis, no one has the hardihood to deny.—The event came like a clap of thunder in a cloudless sky; and as the tidings spread, with the speed of the lightning's flash, from one end of the country to the other, it seemed like the utterance of Deity himself. Senators rose in their place acknowledging the hand of God, and expressing the hope that we might still be borne onward and upward by the wings of his kind providence. The representatives of the people were for the moment awed into sobriety, and freely admitted

that God had taken from us him on whom our hearts were fixed in the hour of peril. Almost every press, secular as well as religious, responded to the general sentiment: surely, this is the finger of God.

Never before, since the organization of our government, except on a single occasion, had such an event befallen us. The brave and gentle Harrison, of whom the country entertained the most sanguine expectations, and whose elevation to the Presidency was hailed by a universal thrill of joy, was called to surrender the staff of office while it was still fresh in his hand. One short month was all that was allotted him for the occupancy of his high seat before he was cast down into the dust of death. Hardly had the sound of rejoicing ceased at his unparalleled success, ere news reached us which disappointed our fond hopes, and turned a nation's gladness into grief. This was then a novel event in the country's annals. But he who looketh upon the mountains and they melt, and who toucheth the hills and they smoke, has come forth again from his secret places to break the pride of our power. For the second time, since Washington occupied the great chair of state, has that chair been shrouded in the vesture of the tomb.

Ordinary occurrences, though equally under the control of Divine Providence, do not thus affect us. We can see the foliage of our shrubbery scattered over the ground, and the limbs of our fruit-trees twisted and broken, without any very deep impression of the force of the wind. But not so when the mighty oak, the giant of the forest, is uprooted from its hidden fastnesses, and lies prostrate on the earth. Here is something which tells us with what majestic power the tempest moves. Thus it is in the present instance. Calamities which are scarcely noticed, when confined to the humble and obscure, are found to arouse attention, and awaken solicitude, when they crush the hopes of a country.

It would seem as if God had resolved that men, willing or unwilling, should see and should acknowledge his uplifted hand. Death has of late been riding on his pale horse through the capital of the land; and I need not tell you how many

shining victims he has selected among our great men before he ventured to strike this last, this most fearful blow. No wonder that levity puts on an aspect of seriousness, and that semi-unbelievers are compelled to admit that this is the voice of the Lord. How could it be otherwise, when the reasons for thus thinking are so obvious and striking?

To be convinced of this, look at *the elevated position* of the man who has just been cut down as the grass, and withered as the green herb. That such an event, connected with exalted station and commanding influence, should affect us more deeply than a similar calamity in private life, is agreeable to the dictates both of reason and of Scripture. It is no symbol of unmanly adulation, nor cringing before honor and office, for the nation to bow its head and weep at a time like this. The catastrophe, stripped of its appendages, is indeed just such an one as is daily happening to multitudes of families in the land. It is no new thing for a husband to lie on the bed of death, with a fond wife kneeling in anguish at his side, or for a father to call his children in and give them his parting benediction. Scenes of this sort are familiar to the eye of afflicted humanity the world over.

We have all visited sick chambers, and seen dying couches, and walked in funeral processions. These are no strange things in a world into which sin early entered, and where death has been following in its train, from generation to generation. "The last of earth" is reached in cottages as well as mansions.

But in the more retired walks of life, these distressing incidents are confined to a small circle. If the grief be equally sincere and deep, it cannot be so general. The hopes of a family are crushed, and the happiness of a domestic group is destroyed, but no sensation is awakened through the land, no shock is given to the machinery of the social system. Surrounding waters soon fill the cavity made by the ploughing keel, and all is level and smooth again. But the case is different when death arrests one, on whom the eyes of twenty millions of freemen are fixed, and who exerts an influence for weal or for woe over half a continent. When such

a man falls, suddenly and unexpectedly, we can hardly help feeling, that in his fall we hear the voice of the Lord, powerful and full of majesty. I trust in God it may not be a prelude to thunderings and lightnings and tempests.

Again, reflect for a moment on the *rare personal qualities* of the individual who has thus disappeared from among men. It is not easy to give the character of General Taylor in a single sentence, but all who have had the privilege of access to him agree in the testimony, that he was emphatically one of nature's noblemen. There was nothing showy, nothing vapoury, nothing pretending about him. Plain in his manners, honest and earnest in his principles, and simple in the workings of his mind, his was very naturally the reputation of an actor rather than a talker. Only give him something to do; let difficult work be set before him; place him in trying circumstances, and he was sure to equal the greatest emergency. Never did he disappoint the hopes of his friends—never did he fail to overmatch the efforts of his enemies. Washington was not eloquent—Franklin never made a long speech.

This man is called a successful hero, and so he was. But what under God made him successful? It was just that combination of solid qualities, leading him to do more than he said, to perform more than he promised, which would have fitted him, and did actually fit him, for any position of difficulty and responsibility. Half his worth is not seen when we contemplate him as a star of hope on the battle-field. We are not permitted to pry into futurity, but time may yet decide that his counsels in the Cabinet embrace the great principles on which the questions now agitating the land, must be settled, if settled at all. I must say, the more I study his character the more I admire it. Others may excel him in individual traits, but take him as a whole, the tout ensemble of the man, the entire grouping of the parts, he stands second only to Washington himself.

How illy could such a man be spared in this frivolous, wordy, speech-making age? We needed, at the present crisis, just such a pilot at the helm, one who could keep quiet while

others made a noise, and whose silent, calm, and self-reliant course, should be a perpetual rebuke to the everlasting talkers of the day. Chosen to his high office for valuable, more than for shining qualities, he went steadfastly on to the very last. The crowning trait of his character was good common sense—not common because so many possess it, or because we see it so commonly exercised—but common because it applies to ordinary trials and duties. This he had, and it fitted him to run his noble race. This raised him above his compeers, and fixed his seat as chief among the mighty. That a man so gifted of God, and so qualified to be useful, should be thus smitten down with all his blushing honors thick upon him, is for a lamentation, and shall be for a lamentation. If there is no voice of the Lord here, he never speaks to men.

Then consider, too, that Taylor has died at the very juncture when *his presence and the power of his fair name seem to be most needed*. It is no business of mine, be assured, to sound an unnecessary alarm in the ears of the people, and the man who does it for selfish and sectional purposes, ought to be regarded as traitorous to his country's welfare. Still it is impossible to shut our eyes upon the fact, that we have arrived at a critical point in the history of the nation. Never have the clouds gathered over our heads more portentously, and never have the hearts of the people been more fearfully agitated. In such a day who can say how much the prestige of the well-earned laurels of the brave General might have stood us in stead, as well as the cool sagacity and clear-sighted perceptions of the beloved man? We all felt that while one so honest, so upright, and so fearless, was at the head of affairs, threats of disunion were very likely to prove as idle tales. His very name was a tower of strength. His strong hand would have struck down any party flag.

The principle of rewarding military exploits with civil and political honors, is perhaps never a sound, or a safe one. Yet cases may occur in which courage and good generalship on the battle-field, shall turn the attention of the nation to a man who possesses every requisite for high station in the Government, and whose strong qualities, matured and de-

veloped in a former line of things, shall now be turned to a still more exalted purpose. What the keen eye and firm arm of such a one might be worth, none can tell.

Alas, that it should have pleased the Ruler of the Universe to select such a moment for the striking of such a stroke! We needed now more than ever before the tried integrity, the immovable self-possession, and the unshaken resolve of just this man to steady the ship of state, and guide her into quiet waters. And to see the staff on which we leaned thus suddenly broken, is surely adapted to open our ears to the voice of the Lord. Happy, thrice happy, will it be if, in the loss of human help and confidence, we are only the more led to make the Most High our refuge and strength. Thus improved, the recent dispensation—though not joyous for the present, but grievous—will be sure to work out for us the peaceable fruits of righteousness. This opens the way to inquire,

II. *What special lessons this voice of the Lord was intended to give and enforce?*

That there is a deep meaning in the event, just happened, there can be no doubt. I pretend not to predict its influence on the adjustment of those questions, which have now for months been shaking the nation, like the leaves of the forest. On a point like this, it hardly belongs to the speaker to hazard a conjecture. It will be allowed him, however, to express the hope, which has never entirely deserted his bosom, that by the blessing of God, all will come out right at last. This land, I fondly trust, is destined to be a beacon-light to a bestormed and bewildered world, for ages to come.

It is encouraging to turn to one delightful fact, which serves to show how deeply the love of our institutions is imbedded in the hearts of the American people. In an hour of intense political agitation, the President dies, and the news sounds out into all the land, that the chair of State is vacant; but there is no commotion, no rising to obstruct the wheels of government, no note of treason to the working of the Constitution. Business goes on as before. Stocks maintain their price. If any thing can attach us to

the land in which our lot is cast, and inspire us with a feeling of security, under the ægis of liberty here spread out, it is a sublime spectacle like this. Where besides could power change hands so quietly, and with so little excitement?

The language of my heart, I must say, is,—My country, with all thy faults, I love thee still. Not only as an American citizen, but as a philanthropist and a Christian, I will seek thy good. For my brethren and my companions' sakes, I will yet say, peace be within thee. If I forget thee, O land of my fathers' sepulchres, let my right hand forget her cunning, and let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth, if I prefer not thy welfare to my chief joy. Still the late Providence is full of admonitory lessons.

We ought to regard it, it strikes me, *as a timely and severe rebuke on the party spirit of the country*. It might have been supposed, that such a man as Taylor, coming into office by the unsolicited favor of the people, and carrying himself so quietly and unoffendingly, would have been permitted to pass along untouched of scandal. But knowing what we do of poor human nature—this was too much to expect. The bloody Moloch must have victims, and the nobler the better. No purity of private character, no splendor of public service, no urbanity of social intercourse, and no wisdom of general measures, could shield the head of the venerable man, and save him from the pang of bitter opposition. It was not enough that he had no enemies to punish, and no friends to reward. He must drink his share of the same bitter cup, which is put to the lips of all who prefer public usefulness to private ease.

Mistake me not. I do not lose sight of the fact that, “the price of liberty is eternal vigilance.” Every man, even the humblest in the land, has a perfect right to scan the measures of the Administration, and to utter his objections, if he has any, in clear and distinct tones; but never is he to forget that government is of God, and that those who conduct it are God's ministers. To oppose the chief magistrate, simply because he was not the man of our choice, and to wage relentless war against him for no better reason than that

we should have preferred another, is baseness itself. An American citizen ought to blush at such a course. And yet, who does not know that the efforts of multitudes, both in Congress and out of it, to clog the wheels of Government, and harass the Executive of the nation, have their origin in no better motive than this?

No wonder that crowns of earthly glory, so generally prove to be crowns of thorns.

This, if I misjudge not, is the giant sin of the land, and God is here rebuking it in tones of thunder. Oh, it were easier, a thousand times easier, for a man of brave heart, and firm resolve, to stand unmoved on the battle-plains of Mexico, than be surrounded with the brightest civic honors, and at the same time find his measures opposed, and his best efforts to uphold the Constitution of the country, set at naught. One is the severe pelting of an hour's storm—the other, the drizzling of a tedious day.

How impressively, too, does this event exhibit *the folly of trusting in man, and making flesh our arm?* A voice issues from that spacious East room, now hung in mourning, and filled with weepers; crying in the ears of the nation—"Cease ye from man, whose breath is in his nostrils, for wherein is he to be accounted of." There stands the hero of many a well fought field, bending over his old companion in arms, and thinking of an enemy who triumphs over all military prowess, and laughs at the edge of the sword. Great men and honorable men are there; sage counsellors, and eloquent orators, officers of State, and ambassadors from other lands, all gathered to witness the triumphs of the destroyer, and to testify their respect by silence and sorrow. The coffin, the shroud, and the funeral pall, affix the mark of vanity to human distinctions every where, but they do it with a sort of emphasis, in the dwelling of the chief magistrate of a mighty nation. While we looked for good, behold evil came down, even unto the gates of Jerusalem.

Shall we ever again hang the glory and safety of our beloved country, upon the frail arm of man? We learn from the black lines, which separate the columns of every news-

paper—the tolling bells of every town and village, and the traces of thought and solicitude drawn on every individual countenance, that a great man has fallen. How suddenly are mansions of joy turned into abodes of sadness, and halls of mirth filled with lamentation! This was death's demonstration of human impotence, made by stalking in triumph over the pride and confidence of an afflicted nation. Scenes like these give force to the declarations of Holy Writ. Happy is he that hath the God of Jacob for his help, and whose hope is in the Lord his God, that made heaven and earth, and by his strength setteth fast the mountains, being girded with power. It is better to trust in the Lord than to put confidence in man, yea, it is better to trust in the Lord than to put confidence in princes.

The successful military chieftain and the high civil functionary, are akin to ourselves in all the sensibilities of a common nature, and all the frailty of a common inheritance. Where is the waving plume now, and the prancing steed, and the stern word of command? Where now is the patronage of power, and the petition of the office-seeker, and the reception of foreign embassies? Death has passed along, and with a single touch of his mighty hand has turned the brightness of all this glory into the gloom of the grave.

We have then only to say farther—how loudly does this event proclaim *the folly of human ambition*. In five short days we see a man who had attained the very summit of earthly renown, with a fame as wide as the civilized world, and the fair prospect of years to come, reduced to the weakness of an infant and brought down to the shades of death. Ah—where is all that which we call grandeur, and power, and glory, now? We look about us, as the immense crowd moves slowly on; but instead of shouts of joy, we listen to the funeral dirge; and in place of merriment and gayety, we behold the bier and the urn. Is this all that is left of the honor which cometh from man only? Must the brave Taylor sicken and die; and his wife be made a widow; and his children fatherless, like the humblest and poorest of us all?

I must say, that nothing has seemed to me to pour such

contempt on the brightest visions of earthly glory, as to read of these bitter tears, and this heartfelt sorrow, in the palace of the nation. The soul, true to its native instincts, quails and trembles in mansions as well as in cottages. Conventional forms must now give place to life's stern realities; and high official men be beckoned from the bedside to make room for the weeping wife, and let the children in to get their father's blessing. This gives it the character of an ordinary domestic visitation. We return from the contemplation of such a scene, more deeply convinced than ever, that the brightest honors of this world are as nothing, when compared with that glory which a man can carry with him into eternity.

O, when shall we learn that there are better and more enduring blessings, than can be won by valor, or purchased by talent? There are moments common to us all, when we are forced to admit, that the Gospel and the Christian's hope are the only possessions of permanent value. The wants of the stricken bosom cannot be met, even in the high places of the land, without bringing in the Bible and calling for the ministers of religion, and listening to the words of eternal life. Rich and poor come together here as possessors of a common nature, and subject to a common destiny. The most powerful ruler that ever swayed a sceptre, needs to hear of Jesus and the resurrection, on the bed of death, just as much as does the humblest individual in his empire. All are involved alike in the effects of the apostasy, and all must participate alike in the benefits of redemption.

But I forbear. We have been listening to that voice which breaketh the cedars of Lebanon and shaketh the wilderness of Kadish, and find that it inculcates upon us, as individuals and as a nation, lessons of the deepest interest. If any man have ears to hear, let him hear.

Every thing, as it respects the obsequies of the illustrious dead, has been wisely and considerately done. Distinguished men, both in Congress and out of it, have vied with each other in depicting his high character; and the nation at large has been prompt to pay the proper homage to his memory. So far all is well. But what we should desire, above every

thing besides, is that the death of our beloved President may be followed with an increase of harmony in our national councils, and an increase of dispatch in our public business. If this shall be the happy result, the boon is not purchased at too dear a rate. The life of no man in the land is for a moment to be compared with the prosperity and perpetuity of our glorious Union, indivisible and for ever. Let it be our earnest prayer, that this event may tend to close the opening chasm, and smooth our way onward.

We could afford to part with the honest and venerated Taylor, highly as we prized him, and dear as he was to the hearts of thousands, were his death to be made the means of hushing the elements of political discord, and bringing the North and South—as in the younger days of the republic—to feel that they are brethren. Alas, here is our chief danger. I shall hardly be accused of any such speaking evil of dignities, as the Bible condemns, if I say that what we want now, is a certain largeness of heart, which would lead our public men to forget neighborhood, and section, and party, and legislate for the entire land. Our history hitherto has been one of compromise and concession. So it must continue, if we would not have its latter pages written in blood. That man will live in the remembrance of a grateful nation, who is willing, at the present crisis, to risk his reputation, and grieve his friends, and go against his party, and lose his place—if he may but consolidate the union of these happy States.

How will such a name stand on the historic page when contrasted with that of the reckless disunionist? O, if come the sad hour ever must, when this glorious confederacy shall be broken into atoms, and this lone star of the world's hope shall be shrouded in darkness, we will hold to a fearful accountability one single man who dares to perpetrate the suicidal deed. Posterity will call that man a second Arnold, and will affix to him an ignominious memorial.

But I hope better things, though I thus speak. When I think of the early providential settlement of this country—when I trace the numerous tokens of God's favor to us in an

infant state—when I consider the elevated position which it has been given to this land to hold in the great benevolent movements of the age—and especially when I advert to the fact that there are so many Noahs, Jobs, and Daniels, scattered through these valleys and over these hills, I cannot but hope that God has rich mercies in store for us yet. We may be chastised for our sins, but we shall not be cut off for ever.

Christian citizens! much depends on you. Give no countenance to the suspicion that your place in the house of God, and your hopes for the world to come, are operating to render you indifferent to your country's welfare. Show, by your active efforts to elevate good men and true, and by your cheerful submission to the powers that be, that you love the land of your fathers' sepulchres. Above all, daily carry the prosperity of these United States with you to the mercy-seat, and intercede for blessings on their behalf which shall reach to the utmost bounds of the everlasting hills.

I suggest only one thing more. Taylor is gone, and his place is filled by a man who comes into it by the providence of God, rather than by the direct act of the people. On this account he all the more needs your sympathy and your aid. Rally round him from the very first, and give to every sound measure he proposes a cheerful and warm-hearted support. Raised up himself from the humbler walks of life, and rocked in his early days in a rough cradle, he comes before us emphatically as a man of the people. Let him have a fair trial.

We cannot better close than by adopting, with slight variations, the language of a great and good man, on a somewhat similar occasion. Though under the mournful remembrance of our departed President, we cannot but feel, at this season of many tears, as if a volley of lightning had been shot at the pillar of our Republic, yet if we strengthen its foundation in the principles and character of the people, the pillar will stand on the deep and steady basis of a country's virtue, and can never be overthrown. Thus an enduring memorial of the lamented man will be embalmed in the hearts of the people, and permanent good will emerge out of this dark and bitter dispensation.