
MR. SPRAGUE'S DISCOURSE

On the Fifty-first Anniversary

OF AMERICAN INDEPENDENCE.

9720

Religious Celebration of Independence:

A

DISCOURSE

DELIVERED AT NORTHAMPTON,

ON THE

FOURTH OF JULY, 1827.

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HARTFORD:

PRINTED BY GOODWIN & CO.

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1827.

DISCOURSE.



EXODUS XIII. 3.

AND MOSES SAID UNTO THE PEOPLE, REMEMBER THIS DAY, IN WHICH YE
CAME OUT FROM EGYPT, OUT OF THE HOUSE OF BONDAGE.

THE descendants of Israel were in bondage to the Egyptians, about a hundred and fifty years. When the fulness of time had come, God raised up Moses, and poured upon him the spirit of wisdom and might, and sent him forth to effect the deliverance of his people. At the threshold of the enterprise, Moses had to encounter the power and wrath of one of the most hardened monsters whom the world has seen ; but Jehovah was with him, and by a miraculous and appalling agency, poured contempt upon all the efforts which were made to detain him and his people in bondage. The result was, that the Hebrew nation went out in triumph from the land of their oppressors ; and God ordained that

their deliverance should be commemorated by an annual religious festival. It was an event in which all succeeding generations would of course be deeply interested ; and hence the propriety of transmitting a knowledge of it to posterity, by some standing memorial.

Is there not some analogy, my friends, between that portion of the Jewish history to which I have adverted, and that part of the history of our own country, to which our attention is directed by the present occasion ? There was a time—and it is within the remembrance of many of you—when the nation from which we sprang, stretched over us the arm of oppression. It pleased God to interpose—not indeed by miraculous agency, but by wonderful means for our deliverance. The day which decided our national destiny, by producing the Declaration of our independence, has, ever since, in its annual returns, been greeted with a national enthusiasm. It has been a day, with many, at least, sacred to high and heroic associations. The spirit of rejoicing has gone abroad among us ; and we have seemed to breathe the fresh air of freedom. The congratulations of this great and free people have

poured into our ears ; while the heavens have appeared garnished with more exquisite beauty, and the earth clothed with deeper verdure, as we have contemplated, in the bright light of this day, the prospect of our country's glory.

But, it must be acknowledged that the celebration of this anniversary has not always ministered to the best interests of our nation. Not unfrequently, it has been perverted to purposes of political jangling ;—for brandishing, even in the sanctuary of God, the carnal weapons of party spirit ;—for stirring up the worst passions of human nature ;—for attempting, I had almost said, to pour mildew around that plant of freedom, which it *should* be the design of this occasion to cherish. And who does not know that *vice* has stalked abroad, on this day, with a more than commonly shameless front ; as if the freedom, which the day commemorates, were only the liberty of doing wrong. So extensive have been the evils of which I speak, that it has been the opinion of many wise and good men, that not only the cause of virtue, but the cause of patriotism, was bleeding in consequence of these annual celebrations ; and they have been ready

to say, 'Let this memorial of our nation's freedom be blotted out forever, rather than be perpetuated as the signal for hoisting the flood gates of iniquity.'

But, my friends, it is not needful, on the one hand, that the observance of this day should be abandoned, nor, on the other, that it should be prostituted to any thing criminal or unedifying. The circumstances in which you are assembled this morning, seem to say—'LET THE DAY BE OBSERVED, BUT LET IT BE OBSERVED RELIGIOUSLY;' and the same language is beginning to be heard from various parts of the christian community. This I suppose to be the right sentiment on this subject; and it is the design of the present discourse to illustrate and enforce it.

I. LET THE ANNIVERSARY OF OUR COUNTRY'S INDEPENDENCE BE CELEBRATED :

1. Because *it is associated with the noblest efforts of intellect, and the most illustrious deeds of heroism.*

The noblest efforts of intellect. However it be accounted for, I suppose it has never been seriously questioned, that the men whose counsels projected and carried forward our revolution,

were men of no common intellectual stature ; that, whether they were born giants, in reference to the work they had to accomplish, or, whether they became such under the influence of propitious circumstances, they actually exhibited an energy of mind, which has never been exceeded by the greatest men of any country. In the circumstances of the case, the very *conception* of becoming a free people, was original : it was too bold a thought for many minds to admit ; it seemed to them more like the offspring of delirium, than the calculation of sober judgment. And the measures for carrying this purpose into effect, were as great, and bold, and original, as the purpose itself. Listen to the deliberations of that body in which the great question is agitated, and you shall hear eloquence, which neither Greece nor Rome, in the days of their glory, would have blushed to own ; you shall discover a depth of counsel, an almost intuitive perception of remote consequences, which will seem to you like the workings of the spirit of prophecy ; in a word, you shall see the human mind coming forth in a majesty and storm of thought, which completely cast into the shade

all its ordinary operations. Nor were the intellectual resources of our country lessened by this first effort towards independence ; but through a protracted scene of emergency and conflict, the whole course of our legislation bore marks of the same consummate wisdom. Indeed, it would almost seem as if much of the common talk of those days was more worthy to be recorded, as a monument of intellect, than many of the set speeches of statesmen in other times ; and even ordinary minds—minds which, in other circumstances, would have been contented to plod along in the beaten track, received an impulse which carried them off into new and unexplored regions of thought, and gave them the deserved reputation of greatness. It may reasonably be doubted whether there was ever a period in the history of any country, in which mind was more active—more capable of commanding its powers—more ready to mount up to lofty and difficult enterprises, than the period of our revolution.

But there was *heroism* as well as intellect ;—an invincible moral courage, which rose in proportion to the pressure it sustained ; a spirit of

resistance to tyranny, which mingled itself with the very life-blood of the body politic. It would have been to no purpose that this spirit had pervaded the hall of legislation, provided it had not gone forth into the dwellings of the land ; but it *did* go forth with a lightning-like energy ; causing the youth to forget his pleasures, the man of middle life, his cares, and the veteran of four score, his infirmities. I might tell you what many of you know better than I do, having seen and felt it—how this spirit operated to induce the peasant cheerfully to exchange the implements of husbandry for the implements of war ; how it brought the man of strong domestic attachments to turn his back, without a sigh, upon the blandishments of home, and march for the field of battle. I might tell you how, in those days, female character seemed to assume an unaccustomed strength ; how cheerfully the mother would part with her son, or the wife with her husband, to go and fight in his country's cause ; and how both mother and wife, who had been educated to habits of most delicate refinement, could even become the tillers of the ground. I might tell you how this spirit lived,

and waxed more and more vigorous, while our cities were on fire, and the blood of our kindred was flowing, and every wind that swept over our country seemed a presage of the storm of battle. In short, my friends, there was heroism enough in this community, to carry into effect the greatest measures of the greatest minds ; and this, combined with the intellectual energy of which I have spoken, may be regarded as the very corner stone in the temple of our national freedom.

Now, I ask whether there be nothing in all this which gives propriety to the observance of this day ? Is it any thing more than a just tribute to the memory of the *illustrious dead*, that we should commemorate an event which was connected with so much wisdom and valor, so much peril and blood ? Is it not due to *ourselves*, that we endeavor to become more deeply imbued with the spirit of patriotism, by accustoming ourselves to contemplate the bright example they have left of it ? Is it not due to our *young men*, that, on the annual return of this day, we should endeavor to hold up before them the illustrious models of the past, and to

impress them with the privilege and the responsibility of being citizens of such a country? And is it not due to *all future generations*, that we cherish the recollections which this celebration is fitted to awaken; and send them down as an accompaniment of the rich inheritance which we hope to transmit? Whether, then, we regard the dead, or the living, or those who are hereafter to live, it seems a dictate of reason, that we should celebrate the birth day of our country's liberty.

But let me not be misunderstood. Let no one suppose that it has been the design of the preceding remarks, to confound intellectual greatness, or heroism, or love of country, with religion. You surely need not be told that a man may be a very giant in intellect, and so devoted to his country as to be willing to face the cannon's mouth in her defence, who yet may even be a reviler of the cross. It is only when the character comes under the presiding influence of religion, that any trait can be considered a christian virtue; yet we do not exalt the qualities of which I have spoken, too highly, when we say that they are praiseworthy and of good report;

and though they will never furnish any one a passport to heaven, yet they may have a useful operation in the present life, and may be made, in the providence of God, to minister even to the cause of religion.

2. Let the anniversary of our country's independence be celebrated, because *it commemorates an event, which is a signal monument of divine interposition.*

I know that a spirit of atheism lurks in the human heart ; and though God is speaking to us by a thousand voices every moment, yet, because he holds back the face of his throne, and is seen and heard only in the regular march of his administration, we overlook, in a great measure, his agency, and limit our views to second causes. But the history of our revolution furnishes a rebuke to this spirit. In every part of it, we behold the footsteps of an All wise and Almighty God. It may emphatically be said of us, as of Israel, *if it had not been the Lord who was on our side when men rose up against us, then they had swallowed us up quick, when their wrath was kindled against us.*

For a people situated as we were, to cast off the yoke of political thralldom, was a mighty event. The very announcement of the purpose drew the eyes of the world upon us ; and every one, both at home and abroad, felt that it was an enterprise of appalling magnitude. Between the conception of the purpose and its accomplishment, there were mountains of difficulty ; but before the hand of Omnipotence, they were destined to become a plain. There were indeed, as we have seen, much human wisdom and human valor enlisted in this enterprise ; but if He who sitteth in the heavens had not put forth a directing and controlling agency, the counsels of the wise would have come to nought, and the earth would have drank the blood of the brave to no purpose. It was Jehovah, the King of nations, who arranged the whole system of measures, that produced this stupendous result.

Do you inquire for particulars, in respect to which the special providence of God was manifest, in procuring our independence ? It was manifest in all that previous train of events, which awakened in our countrymen the purpose

of becoming a free people. It was manifest in bringing a set of men upon the stage, at that very time, who were eminently qualified to conduct such an enterprise ;—one man in particular, who, like Moses, was emphatically the leader of his people. It was manifest in the general harmony that pervaded our counsels ; in the union of feeling and purpose which existed among our citizens ; in the high beating of the public pulse towards a state of political freedom. It was manifest in bringing us foreign aid, when our condition was most necessitous ; especially, in sending to these shores a brave young man, with a rich offering both of treasure and of service, to the cause of freedom ; a man who became a powerful coadjutor with the Father of his country, and who, in these latter days, has returned to survey the inheritance which his very blood helped to purchase. And we might descend to many events still more minute ; and show you how the providence of God was manifest in exposing and defeating the designs of our enemies ; in deciding the fate of battles ; in removing obstacles, by an agency which seemed almost miraculous, when our path was hedged

up. Yes, I repeat, though in all this there was the stirring of a brave and patriotic spirit ;— though wisdom, and courage, and burning zeal, were exhibited in almost every movement, yet a higher than human agency was here : it was the agency of Him, who orders all things according to the counsel of his own will.

Here, again, my friends, I ask you whether you do not find an argument for the celebration of this anniversary ? If it is right that the day should be observed, because it is commemorative of that noble *human* agency, by which our country's cause was sustained, in the days of her peril, much more should it be observed, as a memorial of *God's* power and goodness in our behalf. Let the celebration of this day, then, be perpetuated ; and when our children's children, or those of more remote posterity, shall inquire, '*what mean ye by this service ?*' let them be told that it commemorates the deliverance of their fathers from bondage, by the strong hand and the outstretched arm of Jehovah.

3. Let the anniversary of our independence be celebrated, because *it has been followed by consequences of most deep, extensive, and perma-*

ment interest. This is true both in respect to *our own country*, and *the world*.

In respect to *our own country*—this event has led to the establishment of a government, which is already beginning to be regarded by the civilized world, as an improvement upon the best models, whether of ancient or modern times ;—a government, which, while it knows nothing of hereditary thrones and privileged orders, on the one hand, is yet equally remote from the strife and tumult of a pure democracy, on the other. It would seem, indeed, as if those who framed our national constitution, had incorporated into it whatever was great and noble in all previous political systems ; while they left out all those materials which, in other governments, have constituted the elements of disorder and decay. But, without attempting what would better become other hands—to analyze our political system, and thus show its *tendency* to promote public happiness, I will only refer you to the *fact*, that our government actually *has* exerted a more benign influence on all the great interests of our country, than was ever exerted by any other government, of human

origin, on any country below the sun. Compare the progress of the American people, during the last half century, in numbers, in wealth, in learning, in political importance, with their progress, during any preceding period, and after you have given due weight to the operation of other causes, you will find that there is a vast amount of improvement that remains to be set down to the account of our government. Or you may arrive at the same result, by comparing the condition of our country during the same period, with that of any of the present tributaries of Great Britain. Or you may even search through the annals of nations; and, if I mistake not, the result will be a full conviction that our country, during the period to which I have referred, stands completely unrivalled in the march of improvement. It is fair then to conclude—for it is in view of actual experiment—that our government is pre-eminently adapted to foster the highest interests of our country.

But, the event which we commemorate, was too great to be confined in its effects to a single people: its influence has extended over *the world*. To say nothing of the direct influence which

was exerted upon other nations by our *revolution*, it admits of no question, that the influence of our *government* is felt, at this hour, in a greater or less degree, by every civilized people. It is a little leaven gradually pervading the whole lump. Time was, when it was laughed at abroad as a visionary experiment; even now, there are those who will have it, that it contains within itself, the principle of its destruction: but every thing indicates the contrary; nay, every thing seems to say that it is probably destined, in its general features, to be the model of the best governments, in the best days of the world.

I have spoken chiefly of what *has been*; but I must not forget to add, that this great event *is probably yet to exert its greatest influence*. We know—for God has told us—that there is a period of universal moral renovation approaching; and there is much in the aspect of Providence, which seems to indicate that our country is to have a prominent—may I not say—a principal instrumentality in the introduction of that period. And this instrumentality is no doubt to be exerted, in a great degree, through those institutions which are more or less nearly con-

nected with our government. We look back to the event which we commemorate ; and its influence, originally, appears no more than a rill ; but already it has expanded into a majestic river, and will hereafter, as we believe, swell into an immense ocean, whose waters shall be for the refreshment and health of the world.

And what say you, my friends, in view of *this* consideration, as to the propriety of celebrating this day ? Is there a day, upon which God has not left the special impress of his authority, in the annals of any country, that better deserves it ? If the event which it commemorates has been followed by *such* consequences, both to our own country and the world, and if its benign influence is to be felt by all future generations, will not every heart and tongue exclaim, ‘ let the public observance of the day be perpetuated.’

II. But if the day is to be celebrated, the inquiry naturally suggests itself, IN WHAT MANNER IS IT TO BE CELEBRATED ? I have already said that it should be celebrated RELIGIOUSLY :

But, more particularly,

1. *By a devout acknowledgment of the providence of God, in procuring our independence.*

It is manifestly proper that we should, on this day, enter the courts of the Most High, with our offering of thanksgiving; that we should bow before Him who sitteth King among the nations; that we should celebrate His most worthy praise in view of the deliverance which He has wrought for us. We should endeavor to gain a deeper impression of *His* agency in this wonderful event, that our reverence and gratitude towards Him may be proportionably increased. We should devoutly recognise our dependance on God for the *continuance* of our freedom, and all our national blessings; should commit our country, anew, with all its interests, to His special protection. We should look to Him as the author of all just counsels, to endue our rulers with the spirit of wisdom and the fear of the Lord, that they may devise the best measures for the promotion of our public prosperity. We should humble ourselves in view of our national sins, for which we so justly deserve the frown of the Almighty. And with these acts of religious worship we should mingle a deep sense of our personal responsibility;—our responsibility as citizens of a country, whose freedom has been

purchased with blood ; which has hitherto been the object of Heaven's special care ; which furnishes such rich advantages both for improvement and enjoyment ; and which is to exert such a powerful influence on the destinies of the world. Let these be the purposes for which we come, on occasions like this, to the sanctuary of God, and not we only, but our country, will have occasion to say, that '*it was good for us to be here.*'

2. Let the anniversary of our independence be celebrated, *by religiously noticing the passing dispensations of Providence towards our country.*

There are seasons when it is peculiarly proper for *individuals* to make the dealings of God towards them a subject of serious reflection ; and there is no period, perhaps, which is more favorable to such recollections, or to which they would seem better fitted, than a birth day. And what is true, in this respect, of individuals, is true of nations also ; especially, when the commencement of their existence is, like ours, strongly marked. Yes, my friends, it is right that, on this day, we should devoutly trace the dealings of God towards us, as a people, ever

since we had a distinct existence ; especially, that we should call up events of recent occurrence, whether prosperous or adverse, and let them have their legitimate influence upon our feelings and conduct. Nations, as well as individuals, are subject to a providential discipline ; and to the former as well as the latter, may the inspired declaration be applied—*He that being often reprov'd, hardeneth his neck, shall suddenly be destroyed, and that without remedy.*

I pause here, my hearers, for a moment, to direct your attention to that act of God's providence, which has excited the astonishment of the world, during the past year, but which I fear has been contemplated with more of wonder than profit—in removing, on our national jubilee, two of the most illustrious of our revolutionary patriots. I do not introduce the subject for the sake of eulogy ;—for of that, however well deserved, it must be acknowledged that there has already been an overwhelming surplusage : but I introduce it simply to remind you that there are religious reflections suggested by this event, which, as a people, we are bound to cherish. It preaches to us most eloquently

concerning the vanity of human distinctions. It tells us that, however great man may be in the present life, he carries none of his greatness to the tomb. It tells us that, in the affair of our salvation, those splendid achievements which most attract the eyes of the world, are lighter than air ;—that the statesman and the hero, if they enter the kingdom of God, must go through the same straight and narrow way of faith and holiness, which is trod by the obscurest christian. I would leave to the Searcher of hearts the province of judging the characters of my fellow men ; but, as a Christian minister, I would protest against that faithless dealing in respect to the dead—even the most illustrious dead—which substitutes heroism for piety ; which enthrones a man in heaven, not because he has repented of his sins, and believed in Christ, but because he has guided the counsels, or bled in the battles of his country.

3. Let the anniversary of our independence be celebrated, *by special efforts for the benefit of our nation.*

It were well that there should be a public feeling in favor of devoting this day to objects of

national importance ; that it should be a day sacred to the projection or accomplishment of great and good enterprises. It were well if every person would associate with the dawn of this anniversary a strong impression that, however he may work for himself on other days, on this day he must labor for his country. If he has a mind capable of projecting some great plan for the intellectual or moral improvement of his countrymen—some project that will tell on the destinies of future generations, let that be *his* work for this anniversary. Or, if there be institutions already in existence which demand his aid, let him cheerfully put forth his hand for *their* support. Or, if his be a less gifted mind, and adapted to a humbler sphere, let him do what he can with the powers which God hath given him ; and let him remember, for his encouragement, that the most splendid deeds are not always the most useful. If he goes out into his neighborhood to try to persuade the drunkard to cast away his poison, he is laboring for his country ; for intemperance, more than almost any other vice, threatens to entail upon it the curse of God. If he goes into his closet

to intercede with the God of nations, still he is laboring for his country ; and, no doubt, far more successfully, than many a blustering orator, who talks loudly of patriotism, and boasts much of national glory, without seeming to remember that there is a God or a Providence. In short, I would say, let every man labor on this day, for the benefit of his country, according to his several ability. Choose the sphere in which you can do most, and do best, and there let the spirit of patriotism have its perfect work.

4. Once more : Let the anniversary of our independence be celebrated, *by expressions of sympathy towards the oppressed.*

We are strongly reminded by this occasion of the days in which we were ourselves an oppressed people ; and of the succour which was extended to us from abroad, when our own resources were exhausted or cut off. And now, in the midst of peace, and plenty, and rejoicing, when our independence is gained, and we have grown up to political manhood ;—now, especially, that we have come together to commemorate the birth of our country's freedom, is it not a dictate of reason—of humanity—of religion,

that we should remember those who are yet in bondage? Does not the finger of Providence seem to point us, now to what has been done in other days for ourselves, and now to what remains to be done for others, while a voice from heaven—the voice of Him who does not overlook the cup of cold water given to a disciple—proclaims, ‘*Whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them.*’

It is just cause for grief and humiliation that, in looking round for an object upon which to exercise our charity to day, we should find one of such appalling interest, as actually presents itself among ourselves;—that here in the very lap of freedom slavery should have found a resting place;—that while we are chanting the praises of national liberty, there are more than two millions among us, who are groaning under the most abject bondage. But thanks to God, the long and guilty slumber of our country, on this subject, seems to be disturbed. The formation of the American Colonization Society, in whose behalf I now solicit your aid, marks an era in the history of American slavery. That society proposes to establish colonies of free

blacks and emancipated slaves, with their own consent, on the coast of Africa. Of the practicability of this object, the success which has already attended their efforts, furnishes ample proof. After encountering the most formidable obstacles, they have planted a colony of five hundred souls, in which are to be found learning, liberty, religion, and which is already as a light shining in a dark place. This colony has a mild but efficient government, a flourishing commerce, schools in which more than two hundred children are in the course of education, and the constant enjoyment of Christian institutions. So much has this society already effected: to enable it to extend its operations, it solicits your aid.

And now, my friends, shall not the aid which this society asks, be most cheerfully rendered? I appeal to you in behalf of a *degraded* population, who have hitherto been groping in intellectual and moral darkness, who yet have minds susceptible of cultivation as your own, and many of them capable of being moulded to any station of influence or honor. I appeal to you in behalf of a *suffering* population, who are

doomed to one of the hardest lots of humanity ; in behalf of mothers, whose children are torn from them at the will of a cruel master ; of the sick and the aged, who are often left to go down to the grave, without any of the comforts of this life, or any hope of another. I appeal to you in behalf of an *injured* population ; whom the ruthless hand of prowling man—more prowling than wild beasts, has separated from all the delights of kindred and home, and consigned to cruel bondage in a land of strangers. I appeal to you in behalf of many humane and good men, upon whom, in the providence of God, the curse of holding slaves has been permitted to be entailed ; and who stand ready to co-operate in all prudent measures for their emancipation. I appeal to you in behalf of our own national character ; the glory of which is obscured by this foul stain, which makes us a by-word among the nations. I appeal to you in behalf of the future destinies of our country ; for it is no dream of imagination that, if nothing be done in behalf of these wretched beings, they may ere long rise in the collected strength of an injured people, and deluge some parts of our land with blood. And finally, I

appeal to you in behalf of the cause of Christianity itself—that blessed religion which *proclaims liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound* ; and as you desire to extend its redeeming influences, I ask you to lend your aid to the object for which I am pleading. May God give to each of us the spirit and the blessing of the charitable, for the sake of Jesus Christ our Lord !