

PERSONAL FORGIVENESS AND PUBLIC JUSTICE.

A SERMON

PREACHED IN THE

Mercer Street Presbyterian Church,

NEW YORK, APRIL 23, 1865.

BY THE PASTOR,

ROBERT RUSSELL BOOTH, D. D.

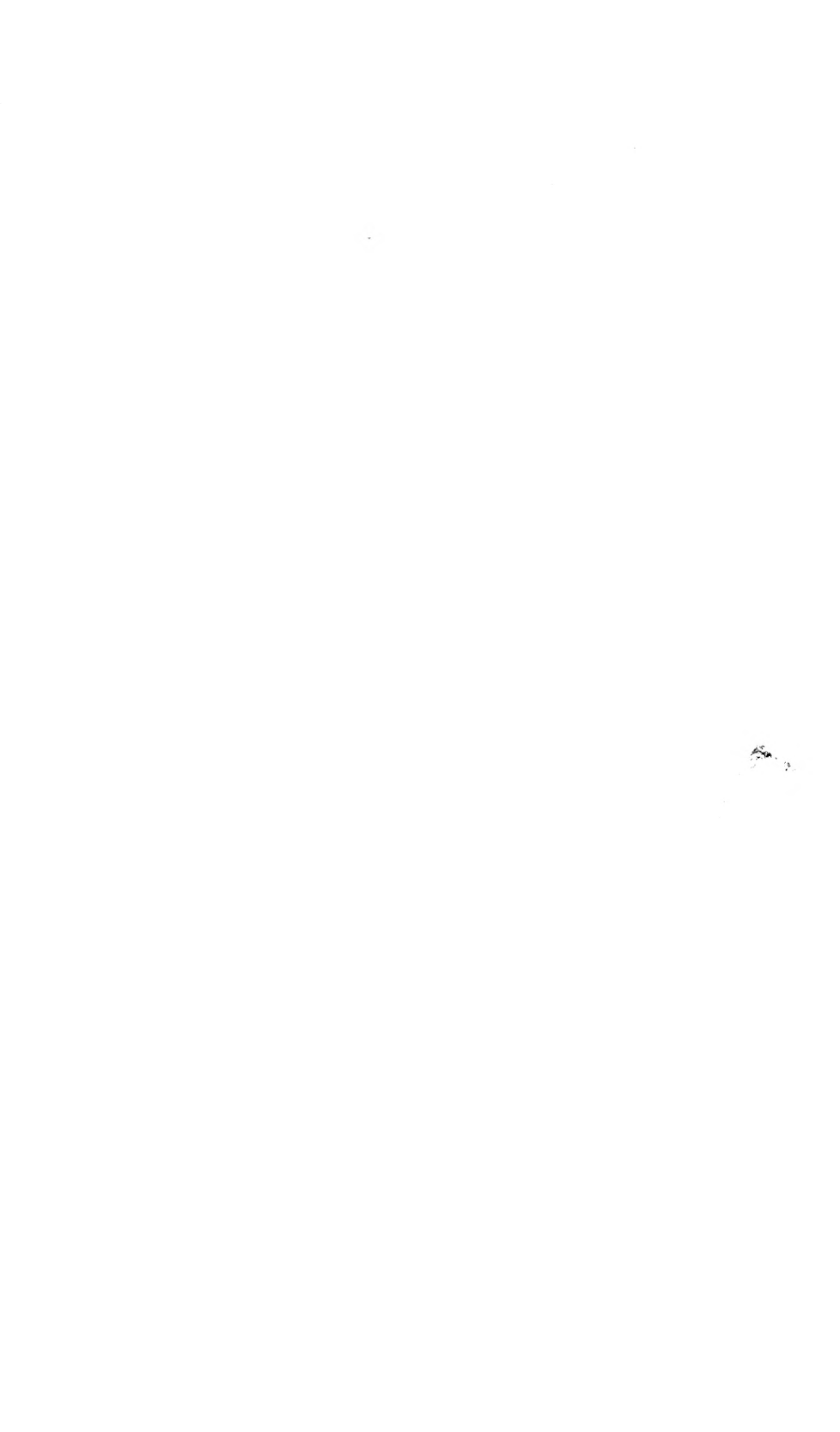
PUBLISHED BY REQUEST OF THE YOUNG MEN'S ASSOCIATION OF THE CHURCH.

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S E R M O N .

“Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath : for it is written, Vengeance is mine ; I will repay, saith the Lord.”—ROMANS xii. 19.

“Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers ; for there is no power but of God : the powers that be are ordained of God. Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God ; and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation.”—ROMANS xiii. 1, 2.

IN directing your attention to these two distinct sentiments of Holy Writ, a few preliminary statements will further the end we have in view, and will make their application more apparent.

In times like these, the public good demands that the light of God’s word shall be thrown clearly upon the amazing succession of events which commands the attention of men. We listen to the voices of those who stand in places of power ; we read the carefully-prepared editorials of the public journals, and to a large degree our opinions are moulded by the influences which these organs exert upon us. But whatever may be the tone and direction of these, it is perfectly evident that the pulpit has a duty to discharge in applying the truths of the Bible to the great events of the hour, and if this is

not faithfully done, then the pulpit is false to its trust.

We may not, indeed, claim for it the right—as, with but few exceptions, its ministers have not the inclination—to interfere in mere questions of policy; but whenever public affairs stand in the area of those sublime and eternal moral principles which God has affirmed, then the duty is plain—the truth must be uttered as it has pleased God to reveal it. This is the more imperative in a country like ours; under a form of government which rivets responsibility directly upon the people, and which reflects the integrity of their sentiments directly in the mirror of the public administration.

True as this is at all times, it is especially true in the presence of events such as these which now thrill our hearts. We must be blind, indeed, and wilful, if we do not realize that God is now speaking to us in solemn accents, and pointing out by His providence, the path of our duty and the dangers that beset us.

We have passed almost, if not altogether, through the Red Sea of rebellion and civil war; we have witnessed the utter discomfiture of our enemies and the overthrow of their unrighteous cause; we have raised our song of victory and of praise for so great a deliverance, and now each loyal heart thrills with

the consciousness that not only for ourselves, but for the whole human race and for far-distant ages, has our nationality been raised from the dust, cleared from the manifold embarrassments of the past, and established anew on a basis of union and liberty.

One shadow alone dims the grandeur and rapture of this hour of triumph. But that is so deep and sombre that it has drawn away all eyes from the constellation of beauty, which begins to shine again in the firmament, to fix them upon the pale form which that shadow covers.

The death of the President, in the midst of the national rejoicing—his murder at the very hour when he was bending the energies of his clear head and generous heart to the great work of healing the wounds of the nation and restoring the breaches made by the rebellion—compels us to pause, not only for lamentation and woe, but also to inquire what God has intended to teach us by His permissive providence.

Not without meaning, as I firmly believe, has this deep sense of injury been inflicted upon us. Not without a purpose of God has this last cruel blow been struck by those who were in sympathy with the cause of treason and slavery. If we cannot bring ourselves to think that God has ordained

it, at least we know that in permitting it He has had an end to accomplish, a lesson to teach. What this lesson is, it behooves us to consider.

Incidentally, it has taught us much about the frailty of man, and the vanity of all earthly greatness; and much about the wickedness which the lost human heart can conceive and accomplish. Incidentally, also, it has revealed, as never before, the strength of our Republican Government; receiving as it did this deadly wound full on the front, yet hardly reeling for a moment, but standing, ere the shock had passed, like the prophetic Church of God—"fair as the moon, clear as the sun, and terrible as an army with banners."

Yet, salutary and impressive as these lessons are, we cannot doubt that the Divine purpose disclosed in this event is of far more importance and points in a different direction. It reveals to us, and was intended to reveal, the depths of darkness which were concealed under the specious defenses of secession and slavery, and the utter impossibility of any national compromise with the crimes which they have committed.

This I take to be the great lesson to which God, by His providence, is now directing the attention of this stricken people.

It can hardly be denied that, as a nation, we

were in a position of danger before this calamity befell us, through a prevalent disposition to overlook the sanctions of law, and to treat the authors of our political woes as if their crimes deserved to be condoned rather than to be punished. The marvelous magnanimity of the Government seemed almost prepared to disregard the great principle of the Divine law, which requires the administration of justice, not only for the punishment of the guilty, but also for the defense of the innocent. In the brilliancy of our military success, the crime of rebellion against a free constitutional government was beginning to be lightly esteemed, and the restraints which must ever be the safeguard of liberty were in danger of being more seriously broken down in the hour of our triumph than even in the suspense of the conflict. Had these lenient sentiments been exercised without interruption, it would have been most unfortunate for the nation and for the world; the largest indulgence would have been given to the leaders of anarchy and misrule the world over, could they have been allowed to infer that the failure of their infamous schemes would involve only their subordinates in ruin, while they themselves might hope to get safely off in the haze of their more daring criminality.

In such a juncture our Government needed an

infusion of the Old Testament severity rather than of the New Testament tenderness, and it seems clear that God has intended, by this sudden and appalling calamity, to bring to our remembrance those truths of distributive justice which stand out so clearly in His dealings with Israel of old, and which do indeed underlie the whole framework of Gospel salvation.

There is a prevalent mistake concerning the bearing of that old dispensation upon the Divine government as now administered. It is regarded by many as entirely a thing of the past; abrogated when Christ came to achieve our deliverance. It is supposed that justice, as an attribute of God, has gone into abeyance, and that the only example which is now binding upon us as individuals, and as nations, is that of the gentle and forgiving Lamb of God. But can we forget that Christ came not to destroy the law, but to fulfill it? How can we miss the meaning of that great sacrifice on the altar of justice, by which God can be just and yet justify those who believe in Jesus? That Divine wrath against sin is not extinguished because sinners are pardoned. That stern word of the law, "the soul that sinneth it shall die," is as true in the light of the forgiveness conferred at the cross, as it is in the darkness when there is "weeping and wailing

and gnashing of teeth." God did not remit the sanctions of His holy law when He became reconciled to man through the blood of atonement. Nor have the Old Testament ethics lost their application, either to personal duty and destiny or to the guidance of nations. As God passes before us now in his goodness, we hear the same voice which Moses heard in the Mount, proclaiming, "the Lord, the Lord God, merciful and gracious, long-suffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression, and sin, and that will by no means clear the guilty; visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, and upon the children's children, unto the third and to the fourth generation." Here is Justice standing on guard at the door of His temple of grace, and vindicating His law to the letter, both to those whom He pardons and to those whom He punishes. We must thus understand the New Testament in the light of the Old, or we shall misunderstand it, and we must conform our opinions and practices, as individuals and as a nation, to these clear moral principles, or our morality will be extinguished in license and all social order will be wrecked on the insurgent passions of men.

In view of these truths, we urge, therefore, that the principle on which the Divine government is

administered, is strictly applicable to the welfare of nations. *Deliberate sin must be punished according to law, or forgiven only with the approval of justice.*

This is the process which is revealed to us, in the moral government of the world, through the incarnation and atonement of our Lord Jesus Christ. And this is the truth to which the hearts of this nation have been solemnly turned in this season of mourning.

There are *two distinct sentiments* which have been struggling together in our national councils, as the question of the final adjustment of our difficulties has come practically before us. The minds of Christian men have also been exercised mightily concerning the true mode of harmonizing the Divine law of forgiveness and goodwill to our enemies, and the Divine law of punishment in the interest of justice and for the welfare of society.

It is evident, when we place side by side two passages like those which I have read at the outset, that they are either in direct contradiction, or that there is a rule of personal conduct laid down in the Gospel which cannot be carried into strict operation in the administration of public affairs.

On the one hand, we meet those precepts of the Saviour and His apostles which direct us to the

most patient endurance of wrong, without a thought of revenge or an attempt to make ourselves the executioners of justice.

The first part of the text stands for an illustration of these: "Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord. Therefore, if thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink: for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head. Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good."

And following this directly we meet those mandates of public justice, which gleam before us in the 13th chapter of the same epistle; which represent the rulers of nations as ordained of God to be a terror to all evil-doers; revengers to execute wrath upon all who transgress their authority.

Is there then a manifest contradiction in these two Divine orders, or are we to understand that there is a law of public justice, which must transcend altogether the dictates of personal and private forgiveness? Undoubtedly the latter is the only tenable view, and it can be justified and made perfectly plain, as soon as we consider what human government really is, and how the sanctions of just human laws are essential to the well-being of man.

In the first place, God meets us in the Gospel as members of a lost race, individually guilty and individually condemned. As He offers forgiveness for the sake of His Son, He bids us purge our hearts from the old leaven of malice and selfishness and unrighteous enmity, and to possess the Spirit of Christ, who died for us, "leaving us an example, that we should follow His steps: who did no sin, neither was guile found in His mouth: who, when he was reviled, reviled not again; when He suffered, He threatened not; but committed himself to Him that judgeth righteously." This is always *our personal rule*; love to our enemies, forgiveness of injuries, kindness of reproofing their faults, generosity in rewarding them with good for their evil.

We are to take this golden rule and practice it, just as far as God has applied, that is, in all personal relations. But it is evident that it needs to be limited in certain respects. For, if it stood alone or without limitation, it would be quite impossible to justify war, or to engage in it without sin, no matter how righteous the cause for which it was waged. Nay, more; if this golden rule stood alone, we should find it impossible to sustain the integrity of the social condition of man, or to arrest and punish malefactors and criminals. So far as the Christian might be concerned, under this

law alone, society would be dissolved into a chaos of impunity in the commission of crime, and of suffering on the part of the purest and best.

But God has set the limitation at the right place. While the individual is bound by these gentle precepts, governments are organized on a different plan altogether. The State represents the Divine sovereignty over the earthly conduct and interests of associated individuals. Law is its basis, justice is its animating principle, security is its end, punishment is its prerogative.

Therefore, in the second place, we are not authorized to bring these personal sentiments, which we cherish as individuals, into the administration of public affairs; but must stand by the letter of God's word as it applies to them, and must recognize Governments as divinely commissioned to administer justice, in rewarding the good and in punishing the evil.

This principle runs clearly through the Old Testament history, and is reaffirmed in the New. Just in proportion as this is lost sight of does the State weaken, and the tendencies to misrule and corruption increase.

It is not indeed requisite that the strict letter of law should always be observed in meting out punishment. Extenuating circumstances continually modify its application. But unless the ruling pur-

pose is to honor the law and to administer government in the interest of justice, the State is always in peril, and anarchy lies in wait at the door.

If we carry over these principles to the questions which all men are pondering now, their bearing is plain :

WE HAVE NO RIGHT AS INDIVIDUALS TO BE VINDICTIVE, BUT AS A NATION WE MUST BE JUST. The sentiments and conduct which we could not exercise, if we had been injured in our personal welfare, become needful and proper, when we act in behalf of the State, whose majesty has been defied, whose laws have been broken, whose very life has been put in peril. We may obey the voice of the holy Apostle, in the first of these passages, while we insist that the State shall obey his precepts in the second.

Personally, every one of us has suffered irreparable wrongs by this rebellion. Who or what can compensate for the loss of treasure, for the fearful solitudes, for the nights of agonizing suspense, for the contemplation of those things which have passed before us, in the sad years gone by. Many present have suffered also in far deeper anguish. I have seen here the venerable old man, tortured with ceaseless anxiety for his sons away in the war. I have seen the widow bowing in heart-broken anguish for her only son slain on the field. Fathers, too, have been mourning here like David for his

lost Absalom. Twice have we gathered in our place of worship to bury two of the noblest of our American youth. Nay, more than this; who of us all is not in his own heart a mourner to-day? As we stand awe-struck and tearful at the cruel fate of our Martyr-President, it seems as though each family circle had lost its head; and from every heart goes up a cry like that of Elisha: "My father, my father! the chariot of Israel, and the horsemen thereof."

And yet for us all, in this manifold experience of personal injury, the Gospel law of forgiveness is emphatic and clear. Let the mourners weep, but curse not, for, "Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord." He that cometh from Edom, with dyed garments from Bozrah, all glorious in His apparel, is now travelling among us in the greatness of His strength; and they that fear the Lord can leave their cause in His care, as He moves through the land proclaiming by His providence, "the day of vengeance is in mine heart, and the year of my redeemed is come."

But with this sentiment of personal forgiveness, it will never do to confound the obligations which belong to us as members of a commonwealth, or rather of a nation which has been set on the high places of the earth, by God himself, to maintain the

interests of public justice, humanity and truth. At this point our responsibility is drawn, not from the 12th but from the 13th chapter of the Epistle to the Romans. It is drawn not from the gentle impulses of personal piety, but from the stern mandate of the eternal law of God. As members of a community, founded upon law, it is imperative upon us to demand the administration of justice according to law.

Nothing more vigorous or more comprehensive can be said on this point than the utterance of President Johnson to the Illinois delegation a few days ago: "The American people must be taught, if they do not already feel, that treason is a crime, and must be punished; that the Government will not always bear with its enemies; that it is strong, not only to protect, but also to punish. When we turn to the criminal code and examine the catalogue of crimes, we find there arson laid down as a crime, with its appropriate penalty; we find there theft and robbery and murder given as crimes, and there, too, we find the last and highest of crimes—treason. With other and inferior offenses our people are familiar, but in our peaceful history, treason has been almost unknown. The people must understand that it is the blackest of crimes, and will surely be punished."

These are brave words, and the nation is stronger to-day than ever before, because they were uttered with the clear emphasis of one in authority.

Let no man forget that equity is the true, the Divine basis of government, and that leniency to crime, in defiance of law, is an open door into the treasury where the regalia of nations are lying. It was for justice that the elder Brutus gave his two sons to the lictors of Rome, and sat unmoved on his judgment-seat when they laid their guilty heads on the block. It was for justice that George Washington signed the death-warrant of the unhappy André, though his tender pity made the tears run down his cheeks. It is the claim of justice that the authors of this tremendous crime of rebellion against the liberties of America, and of the enormous misery which has followed it, should be condemned and punished, and the people must rise to the stern virtue which will accept the claim, and cry "Amen" to its fulfillment.

This is essential, as much in the interest of private security as of public justice. Unrestrained mercy to criminals is always cruelty to the innocent. It is necessary for us to make rebellion perilous and odious for all time to come. We cannot afford, as a people, to invite by our leniency a new assault upon our union and liberty.

It is well said by Samuel Rogers, in his "Sketches in Italy," that whenever justice is ill-administered, the injured will redress themselves. Robbery provokes to robbery, murder to assassination. Resentments become hereditary, and what began in disorder ends as if all hell had broke loose. Laws create a habit of self-restraint, not only by the influence of fear, but by regulating in its exercise the passion of revenge. If they overawe the bad by a prospect of punishment, certain and well-defined, they console the injured by the infliction of that punishment; and as the infliction is a public act, it excites and entails no enmity. The laws are offended, and the community, for its own sake, pursues and overtakes the offender, often without the concurrence of the sufferer, sometimes against his wishes.*

And now from this ground we are prepared to meet the final inquiry to which all these principles converge.

Who, then, are properly amenable to this claim which comes before us in the second portion of our text?

I answer, first, *the institutions* in the interest of which the rebellion has been organized, and this last direful crime has been wrought; secession and slavery, the twin horrors which have sought to

* "Italy," Part II., Sect. 5.

rule or to ruin this land—criminal in every aspect—barbarous, ruthless, ruinous to the bodies and the souls of men. To sustain and to perpetuate them, woes unutterable have been wrought among us. For these, 300,000 men or more are lying cold beneath the sod to-day, or bleaching under a southern sky. For these, as many more have been brought home to live among us, maimed, mutilated and suffering. For these, widows are weeping, children are defenseless, and the world is filled with wonder for our shame. Secession and slavery have done this work. Let them perish! In the grave of our murdered President, let the last vestige of them be buried, and let their memory rot, never to be spoken of with approval hereafter by a true patriot or Christian man. Let the axe be laid to the roots of these deadly trees, and as they fall for ever, heaven and earth will raise new hallelujahs to the throne of the Most High.

And besides these institutions, who are properly amenable to the claims of justice? I answer, second, *those leading men*, whether of Northern or of Southern birth, who have contrived and consummated all this crime and misery; those who enjoyed the benignant nurture of the Government only to aim their murderous hands straight to its throat; those who, to gratify a personal ambition, rent the land

asunder, and strode through tears and blood to transient years of power; those who have fanned the flames of hatred between the people who were once peacefully united; who have murdered helpless prisoners by thousands; who have wrought outrages upon the loyal men of their own section, beside which the horrors of the Sepoy mutiny seem like the work of children; those who, through these four bitter years, have known no end but to annihilate the union of our fathers, and who have consummated all their foul misdeeds by laying low our gentle, generous chief. Let them have justice, be they who they may, statesmen or soldiers, editors, artizans or planters, open foes or treacherous friends—let them have justice! This land is broad but it is not broad enough for them and us. Henceforth, let them have no name, nor right, nor memorial in Israel. “O my soul, come not thou into their secret; unto their assembly, mine honor, be not thou united: cursed be their anger, for it was fierce; and their wrath, for it was cruel; I will divide them in Jacob, and scatter them in Israel.”

And are there others still, to whom this law of justice appertains? Yes, but with another application of it altogether. There is a nobler conquest yet before us at the South—the conquest of light, and love, and generosity, and pity, over all those who

have been misled by ignorance or maddened by lying words, or drawn by force into the mad rush of battle. The helpless people, angry, stubborn, willful though they may be still; they have a claim upon us now, a claim of justice—the claim which the weak have always on the strong, and the miserable on the prosperous. As solemnly as we are called to punish deliberate transgressors, are we called upon to shelter and protect the ignorant transgressor. It is ours as a nation to bid these dry bones live, to build up these waste places, to purge corrupted institutions, to upheave the roots of bitterness and sow upon the track of desolation the seeds of liberty and Christian love. And this also will we do, if God assist us by His grace, until ere long brighter harvests shall be waving on that sunny soil than ever yet were planted there; until a nationality is builded there which is bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh; with one temple for the people, consecrated to law and justice and true religion; with one loyal and fraternal impulse ruling the hearts of all who have come forth from this great tribulation, and who will stand before the world in brighter years to come, to proclaim the honors and to defend the rights of constitutional freedom in America.

This work of justice toward the people, which

the providence of God now lays upon us, is brought the more impressively before us now, as we stand on the threshold of that civic pageant which is to honor the memory of that great and good man whose life was consecrated to the union of these States, and whose death has sealed his glorious record.

It will be ours, as a community, to receive tomorrow the sacred dust, which comes to touch our hearts once more with pity, and to speak to us, through those sealed lips, more solemnly than any voice of eloquence or power could speak.

Amid the tolling bells, the beat of muffled drums, the mournful music, and the steady tramping of these long funereal procession, the mortal part of Abraham Lincoln will be brought hither, and will pass forth from us to his last resting-place beneath the prairies of the West.

Amid all the thrilling lessons of this heroic time, amid all the strong incentives to patriotic self-devotion, and to humble trust in God, which have been urged upon us, perhaps the most impressive lesson, and the loftiest impulse will be connected with these funereal honors to our martyred President; who, though dead, yet speaketh, and evermore will speak, for the Union which he saved, for the liberty he guarded, and for the oppressed millions whom he raised to freedom.

And if it is given unto those who have passed within the veil which hides the eternal world from us to look back upon these scenes, and to survey the progress of the work which fell unfinished from their hands; if spirits of the blessed know the progress and triumph of those interests for which they labored, who shall say that our last martyr has not already had a recompense for all his patient toil, and for his bitter death?

Yes, from the everlasting hills surveying a nation reunited, round the pale form which journeys through the land he loved so well, doubtless he understands it all; and bowing before the Saviour, to whom he gave his weary heart, among the graves of Gettysburg, he joins with cheerful voice the song of those who have gotten the victory over the beast, and over his image, and over his mark, saying, as they stand on the sea of glass, having harps of gold, "Great and marvelous are thy works, Lord God Almighty; just and true are thy ways, thou King of saints!"

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