
THE ASSASSINATION.



A SERMON,

DELIVERED IN THE

BAPTIST CHURCH, STONINGTON BOROUGH,

ON THE SABBATH EVENING FOLLOWING

THE ASSASSINATION

OF

ABRAHAM LINCOLN,

By A. G. PALMER, D. D.

PUBLISHED BY REQUEST.

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S E R M O N .

“We looked for light but behold obscurity.”—*Isaiah* 59: 9.

Under the deep gloom that to-night oppresses every heart, I fear I shall not be able to find words, or command an utterance, befitting the occasion.

Indeed, at a time like this, when the voice of God is heard “out of the thick darkness” saying: “Be still and know that I am God; I will be exalted in the earth,”—speech seems almost a sacrilege.

The nation is black with astonishment; terror-stricken and dumb at the ghastly tragedy of treason and crime in the Capital.

Our pulses freeze, our breath congeals, and our flesh grows damp and cold with an icy sweat as the frightful message breaks from the wires, “The President has been assassinated.” Fearful as we knew the crisis to be through which we were passing; depraved, reckless, desperate, and blood-thirsty as we knew the forces to be with which we were contending, still no one thought that in the nineteenth century, in a land of ripened civilization, and under the genial nurture of christian institutions, a crime like this was *possible*.

This is no time for recrimination—no time for words of bitterness, or for partisan impeachments—but under the deep shadow of this great sorrow, under the intense agony of the national heart, there is but one conviction, one verdict, the verdict of a profound and ominous silence. This national as-

sination—this attempted butchery of the Government! you *know* what it is. It is the murderous recoil of the slave power; the deadly thrust of treason at the nation's life; this it is—nothing less; nothing else; and when the nation shall speak, it will as with the voice of God pronounce accordingly, and decree the utter extermination of this “mystery of iniquity.”

Yes, it was treason, it was the Rebellion, it was the infernal wickedness of Slavery that sped the ball and plunged the dagger of assassins for the life of Abraham Lincoln and Wm. H. Seward. And for what? Because they had fiercely and stubbornly assailed Slavery? No; for their record neither charges them with this offence, nor accredits them with this virtue. But it was because these men were the embodied life of the nation, entrusted with its authority and power; set for its defence and charged with the employment of its forces for the suppression of insurrection and the punishment of “evil doers.”

Ah, friends, it was not Abraham Lincoln that Slavery assassinated, but the mighty constituency of freedom which he represented—the NATION—you and your children in all coming generations. Depend upon it, the same deadly hate of liberty that took the life of the President, would, with the same cold-blooded villainy, take the life of every loyal citizen in the land, and nothing but our military superiority, and the crushing power of our veteran legions has thus far prevented this exterminating vengeance from reaching your doors, and from pouring out your blood upon your very hearth-stones and altars. We shall at length learn—God grant not too late—that the price of liberty is always and everywhere eternal vigilance, and that every compromise with its antagonisms of every form—especially with Slavery, is sure to be followed by an avenging retribution of woe.

All along under the conservative policy of Mr. Seward and the guileless forgiving temper of the President, the Administration has dealt forbearingly with the rebellion; anticipating with an unseeing haste every favorable crisis, to pronounce terms of reconciliation, lenient in the extreme; seeking by

kindness, if possible, to win its victims back to loyalty and peace. But, as you know, every overture has been met with defiant contempt and scorn. And this is their reward—*assassination*.

The rebellion instead of being subdued by this kindly ruling of administrative clemency, becomes reckless and desperate, and culminates in a crime that has no parallel upon the pages of history.

Cæsar fell while enslaving the nations and while crushing out the liberties of Rome. Abraham Lincoln fell while undoing "heavy burdens"—while "proclaiming liberty to the captives" and while saying to the oppressed "go free."

What will the civilization of the world say to this? When the bloody deed crosses the Atlantic, Europe will put on sables and go into mourning.

In cottage and palace, in work-shop and counting-room, but especially in the dwellings of the poor, tears will be freely shed for his untimely end. From the frozen Russias to the sunny plains of Italy; from the Alps to the rugged hills of Wales and Scotland will be heard one deep wail of sorrow, one lengthened sob of sympathy with us in our great woe. Mr. Lincoln was honored and loved by *the people* in Europe scarcely less than at home. He is the world's martyr of freedom, and history will canonize him as such. And history will also write that this darkest crime in the annals of the world, was committed in the capital of the United States; that the Chief Magistrate of the nation—the generous, forbearing, and noble Abraham Lincoln—was brutally murdered at the instigation and under the cognizance of the Confederacy, and at the very moment too when, in the flush of victory, he was meditating only clemency and good will to his enemies.

His last inaugural! How sweet and gentle and christian its spirit! What fairness and integrity, blended with what forgiving tenderness and love! It breathes the fragrance of saintship, and seems, as we now read it almost like a pensive prophecy of his impending doom. Had he known it was to be his farewell address to the American people it could scarcely have been more befitting: so child-like, so simple, so pure in

thought, so chaste in diction and spirit; the whitest marble will not be white enough for its tablet, nor the purest gold fine enough for its lettering! It will go out to the world and go down to history as a witness of the damning guilt of a treason that could seek the blood of so good, so just a man.

But, thanks to God, though the executive strength and glory of the nation has fallen, yet the nation lives and will live; and will live to visit speedily the extreme penalty of justice upon all the complicities and accessories of this crime. The Nation will now arise and gird itself to fulfill the retributive ends of Providence.

Henceforth the pass-words along all our lines will be—"No more dalliance with slavery"—"no lenient leaning towards traitors"—"no easy paroles for assassains"—but "justice, stern stern justice"

If the blood of righteous Abel "cried to Heaven for vengeance," how much more the blood of honest Abraham Lincoln. And the cry of his blood will be heard and answered. A Nemesis more certain than that which brooded over Egypt, and a destruction more terrible than that which overwhelmed Pharaoh and his hosts in the sea, will sweep this brutal slave power from the earth.

But the great lesson of this Providence—for in its permission it is providential—is one of profound penitence and humiliation. It says to us, as a people, "Humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that in due time He may exalt you, casting all your care upon Him, for he careth for you."

Yes, my friends, God *has* cared for us; cares for us *now*, and will, I trust care for us to the end.

Not more immediately or faithfully did He lead Israel in the wilderness than He has lead us in this terrible conflict.

All our reverses and failures, as well as victories and successes, have been timed and graduated to our moral discipline.

The mission of Israel was the unsparing extermination of the Canaanites "root and branch" from the land. Not because God delighted in judgment, but because of their abominable wickedness.

They had filled the land with their idolatry and pollutions" till it was ready to "vomit them out." "The cup of their iniquity was full." They were only fit to be destroyed. But when Israel began to be lenient and sparing, whether from interest or a false sympathy, then the divine judgments fell upon them. Saul, for sparing Agag, a royal monster, whom God commanded to be destroyed, lost his throne.

I fear this nation has never yet humbled itself "under the mighty hand of God." We have been forced into this conflict at every step, and have been ready to draw back just as soon as the murderous clutch of Slavery relaxed from our throat, and our life was felt to be released from absolute jeopardy. The war in its earlier dates had, I fear, little of moral principle. It was a simple struggle of the national authority against disintegration—that was all.

Even Mr. Lincoln said "he would save the Union with Slavery if he might; without Slavery if he must; but at all events the Union."

Was this his sin for which he was only permitted to see the "Union saved without slavery," but forbidden to remain to enjoy it? But God soon gave us to understand that the Union could *not* be saved with Slavery. He gave us no indications of final success, till we made right and truth and justice supreme; and as we have fought "on this line" we have been successful, and as we have declined from it we have failed.

Every attempt to engross a premature peace, has been followed by some corresponding blight and judgment, and will be to the end. "*We must finish the work we are in.*" We must destroy Slavery or God will destroy us.

Is it said that we have sins at the North as well as at the South? Doubtless. But the great sin of the North has been and *is* its persistent and almost invincible complicity with Slavery, clinging to us like idolatry; or the "sin of Jeroboam the son of Nebat wherewith he caused" the seceding tribes of "Israel to sin."

All along, the rebellion has drawn its life, its ability to endure, its purpose and hope of final success from partizan sym-

pathy in the North, rather than from the exhausted resources and waning vitality of the South.

And our great danger at this moment, as the military power of the South is broken under the tread of our victorious legions, is, that we shall have, under the parole policy, an invasion of assassins at our very shrines and hearth stones.

In vain do we cry "Peace, peace, when there is no peace." More than once, or twice, or thrice, has this soft policy of allowing crime to go unwhipped of justice, well nigh ruined us. We have borne with treason in high places; shirked the "ministry of vengeance" in the "punishment of evil doers," till villany assumed, not without reason, that we "held the sword in vain," and that crime might be committed with impunity.

Indeed, for years past, in all judicial and governmental relations, we have practically ignored the Divine authority and a retributive Providence. With an almost atheistical license we have set aside right and truth and equity, and have said, "How doth God know, and is there knowledge with the most High?" We have gloried in our liberty and free institutions, as if they were the purchase of our own valor and strength, while at the same time bartering them away under the rulings of a servile expediency and sordid avarice, presuming that we could keep our goodly heritage by partizan frauds and alliance with iniquity. But the voice of this Providence is, "Verily there is a God in the Earth that judgeth righteously." "By terrible things in righteousness, wilt Thou answer us, O God of our salvation."

Let us, under this dark cloud, bow down with unfeigned humility before the Almighty. We are to-day a stricken nation; a bereaved people. God grant that we may be a truly humbled people. If this does not bring us into the dust and renew our faith Godward, I know not what the end will be. But I trust it will. The very severity of the discipline indicates a gracious purpose, and we may hope soon to hear God say to us "For a small moment have I forsaken thee, but with everlasting mercies will I gather thee." I believe God will bring us safely out of this conflict, and settle us upon our

old foundations, and that this baptism of blood will consecrate us to that higher civilization of christian principle and universal justice which Providence seems about inaugurating for the world.

Indeed, the death of Mr. Lincoln seems like an "expiation"—like a propitiatory "offering," to stay some brooding vengeance for our guilt—like a fulfillment of some necessity "that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation perish not."

Ah! how little did he think when he said "if it be needful that for every drop of blood drawn by the lash, one should be returned by the sword," that his own blood would be required to fill up the full measure of restitution.

Nor, had he known it, would he with any less of religious reverence have said "The judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether?"

His last will and testament, of which his poor dumb wounds are the seal, was his proclamation of emancipation—the bequeathment of freedom to four millions of slaves. It was his dying trust to the nation; and the American people, without distinction of party, will gather around his bier and by his scarcely staunchéd blood swear they will see it executed. It has taken a long and painful discipline to strengthen and nerve the national heart for this work. Again and again we have faltered and sought to be excused.

But the spell is broken. This bloody act comes with the authority of "a voice out of Heaven" saying, "Come out of her, my people, that ye be not partakers of her sins, and that ye receive not of her plagues. For her sins have reached unto God, and God hath rewarded her iniquities. Reward her even as she rewarded you, and double unto her double according to her works. In the cup which she hath filled, fill to her double. How much she hath glorified herself and lived deliciously, so much torment and sorrow give her. For she saith in her heart, I sit a queen and shall see no sorrow. Therefore shall her plagues come in one day—*Death, Mourning, and Famine*, and she shall be utterly consumed, for strong is the

Lord God that judgeth her. Rejoice over her thou Heaven and ye holy Apostles and Prophets, for God hath avenged you on her. For in her was found the blood of Prophets and Saints and the souls of men."

How literally the word of the Lord has been fulfilled in the destruction of this Antichrist of the South—the Slave power in arms against God and humanity, the sudden downfall of the Rebellion will show.

Like Babylon of old, when the time of her judgment had come, in one short week this stupendous treason has perished.

Its proud and defiant armies have been routed and scattered; its haughty captains led as captives, and the arch-traitor himself, with his bloody hands clutching millions of gold wrenched by extortion from the rich, or wrung from the sufferings of the poor, is a fugitive and vagabond upon the Earth.

Who will not, in the language of the Psalmist pray, "So let thine enemies perish, O Lord."

Shall we then hold all the Southern people responsible for this crime? By no means. I doubt not there will be tears of as sincere sorrow shed at the South as at the North, and, if permitted, multitudes would mingle their tears with ours around the remains of a President than whom none ever loved them more, or more earnestly sought their good. Against the innocent deluded people of the South we disavow all vindictive feeling and purpose. Our spirit towards them is that breathed in the prayer of the dying Saviour— "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." But for treason and for Slavery, out of which treason with all its kindred villanies has grown, we have no feeling but that of the most intense hatred, and no words but those of uncompromising and eternal execration.

But in the midst of our deep sorrow, it is sweet to know that this sudden call to martyrdom did not find Abraham Lincoln unprepared. While making no ostentatious profession of piety, it is well known that he was in the daily practice of its devotional duties—the reading of the Scriptures and secret prayer, and that latterly his character had acquired

additional strength and beauty from the refining charities and virtues of the christian faith and experience. Like Abraham of old, he walked with God, and as he was the true friend of man, so I doubt not he was a true friend of God—a humble disciple of Him who was “meek and lowly,” and who gave his life for the world.

But it is difficult to feel that Mr. Lincoln is dead; that he is no longer among us and of us; that his benevolent, hopeful, and trusting soul will no longer smile upon us; that his voice of fatherly counsel will no longer guide us; that his eyes of thoughtful saddened humor, themselves a prophecy of his truthful life and tragic death, are closed forever. When we think of Washington, of the White House, of the Cabinet, it seems that he must still be there presiding, watching, counseling, restraining, guiding all. It is almost impossible to avoid the illusion, that his hand is still on the helm, guiding the Republic as she dashes on amid the billows of rebellion and civil strife.

Indeed, the intense excitement of yesterday and to-day; the deep darkness brooding over the land; the sorrow stamped on every face; the mingled grief and consternation almost chiseled into every brow; and the wild throbbings of our hearts as the hard stony fact has every where faced us, that the President has been assassinated—murdered under the very shadow of the Capitol—all this seems like a fevered dream; like the frightful shadings of some disturbed vision of the night.

But it is no dream; no fiction; no drama; *it is history*—a history more terrible than dream, or fiction, or drama—the history of treason, conspiracy, and blood.

His body lies cold in its wounds at the Capitol, but his spirit mingles with the noble army of freedom’s “confessors and martyrs,” and with the sainted heroes of our country gone before to the “better land.”

May God sanctify the nation by this additional “trial of its faith,” What the future has for us none can tell; verily we know not what a day may bring forth.

But God reigns. He can make the wrath of man to praise,

and the remainder of wrath He can restrain. He can bring light out of darkness ; life out of death, and freedom even out of the bloody conspiracies of Slavery.

God grant that the blood of Abraham Lincoln may cement the loyalty of the Nation, North and South, in one strong league and brotherhood to maintain the national authority ; to vindicate the national honor ; to restore peace and to mete out to murderers, assassins, and traitors such punishment as the protection of life and the safety of the Republic demand.

Let us in this hour of national sorrow abstain from all partisan animosities and ungenerous personal reflections.

And now, in the words of our beloved President, "with charity for all, and with malice for none," putting away our tears and crushing back the swelling emotions of our hearts, let us go forth "to finish the work we are in."

"And may God think upon us for good," and "His good hand be upon us to give us an unexpected end" in restoring to us speedily national unity and a righteous enduring peace.

AMEN.

THE OATH OF FREEDOM.

The beauty of our Israel,
The nation's strength! the nation's tower!
Twice chosen Chief! loved, O how well!
Hath fallen 'neath the assassin's power.

Foul treason writhing in its shame,
And Slavery ravenous of blood,
Struck down, with murderous hate and aim,
LINCOLN—THE FRIEND OF MAN AND GOD.

Now, by his flowing wounds we swear,
Since Slavery hath broke the chain,
That bound us long, we'll never wear
That bond of infamy again.

We swear the Nation's holy soil,
Baptized to Freedom in his blood,
Shall no more claim the bondman's toil,
And only be by Freemen trod.

Help us. O God, this oath to keep:
We pledge it in thy sacred name;
And when in death we are called to sleep,
We'll swear our children to the same.

A. G. P.

1864



