The Chosen Fast.

A DISCOURSE

PREACHED AT

A UNITED SERVICE HELD AT THE BAPTIST CHURCH,

In Jamaica Plain,

ON

THE OCCASION OF THE STATE FAST,

Thursday, April 13th, 1865.

BY

A. J. GORDON, Pastor.

BOSTON:
N. P. KEMP, 40 CORNHILL.
1865.

Checked
May 1913
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1865.
Jamaica Plain, April 16, 1863.

REV. A. J. GORDON,

Dear Sir:

Having been much interested in the views presented in the Sermon delivered by you yesterday, before the members of the different Religious Societies of our Village, and desiring to aid in their diffusion, we beg to solicit the Sermon for publication.

With much respect,

Very truly yours,

E. T. FARRINGTON,  
SAMUEL W. SWETT,  
W. H. S. JORDAN,  
JOHN C. PRATT,

GEO. N. BLISS,  
H. T. HOGAN,  
M. R. WENDELL.

Jamaica Plain, April 24, 1866.

Gentlemen:

I am glad if any views contained in the Discourse delivered on Fast day meet with your approval, and if you think any good can be done by their dissemination, the Sermon is at your disposal for publication.

Very truly yours,

A. J. GORDON.

Messrs. E. T. FARRINGTON and Others.
DISCOURSE.

Isaiah 58:6.

"Is not this the fast that I have chosen? To loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke."

The day whose institution and solemn usages we owe to the devout and reverential spirit of our ancestors comes round again in circumstances that mark it as peculiar and unprecedented. Set apart as a day of fasting and humiliation, it becomes, by force of circumstances, a day of thanksgiving and exultation. Associated almost invariably, of late, with national calamities and military disasters, it comes to us today amid the most joyous auspices of victory and success. Appointed by a decree of the civil magistrate, and summoned by a proclamation which bears the seal of the Commonwealth, we recognize in its attendant circumstances the mightier decree of the Ruler of the Universe, and the seal and superscription of the eternal Providence.

There is nothing more sublimely interesting than to trace, in history, the fulfilment of Divine predictions, to hear passing events echoing back the voices of
prophecy, like deep calling unto deep, or thunder peal answering unto thunder peal from solitary mountain. From our present stand-point we are permitted to hear these voices and to interpret these responses as few in the generations of the world have ever been. The victory that pours its inspiration into our rejoicing to-day, coming to us as in triple peals of thunder from Savannah, from Charleston and from Richmond, is but a three-fold articulation of one and the same voice,—death to slavery,—and that voice, what is it but the echo of the words of the text, heard at last distinctly above the din of battle and the groans of dying patriots and the wail of suffering bondmen,—"Is not this the fast that I have chosen? to loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke!"

The Proclamation which sets a long, suffering race at liberty, is older than the Emancipation Edict of 1863. The splendid military combinations by which the power of the oppressor was broken, were mapped out long before Grant or Sherman took the field. The Fast on which the people meet together, to thank God for an emancipated nation, was appointed long before the day was set apart by our Chief Magistrate. It is the Fast that God has chosen; and all its accompanying circumstances of military triumph and national regeneration, are the result of that edict of Providence that antedates all human decrees and foreordains all human actions. And that must be a blind faith, indeed, which cannot recognize beneath the muffling drapery of events, the mighty and ever-moving arm of the Omnipotent Jehovah.
This, then, is the thought on which I wish, for a few moments, to dwell.—The Hand of God in our National Emancipation.

I. We may trace the movements of His hand, in the first place, in the influence of that Christianity to which, as a nation, we profess to hold.

I believe that the whole genius and teaching of Christianity is against slavery, and that by all its inherent energies and resources, it has been working for its downfall. Most strenuously has this been denied. Again and again has the Bible been arraigned before the slaveholders' inquisition, and its precepts put upon the rack, to force from them some testimony for oppression. For four years the Confederate nation, by fasts and humiliations, has been beseeching Christianity for a recognition, and with the same response which they have received to their other appeals for foreign recognition.

The real fact is, that it is an attempt to bring into harmony and cooperation two things which are absolutely and irreconcilably hostile. From the day when the great apostle declared from Mars Hill that God "hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth," until now, the religion of Christ has been the sworn and uncompromising foe to every form of oppression.

Hardly had Christianity begun its conquering march, when it came front to front with Roman slavery. Did it turn aside for it, or did it give way to it? Neither! Neander declares that as it spread abroad, it gradually wrought such a total change in the views and feelings of humanity, that a dissolution of the whole system
became inevitable, from the very force of men's convictions. It called neither war nor legislation to its aid. But upon that barbarism and ignorance which formed the foundation stone of the whole superstructure, it so poured the fire and force of its teachings, that they crumbled and dissolved, and the whole edifice fell to the ground as a consequence.

Later it met the same thing in English civilization. In the stern oppression of the Saxon by the Norman, and in English slavery proper, the old evil re-appeared. But in both cases it was vanquished, and in both cases Macaulay freely ascribes the result to the benign spirit of Christianity, working in the hearts of men and undermining their prejudices. So in the abolition of Russian serfdom; so in the gradual weakening of the caste distinctions of the East; Christianity can be recognized as the prime and almost sole cause.

What will those who have labored so zealously to sustain American slavery from the New Testament, say to these historic facts? That Christianity is hostile to its own declared principles—that, in its practical workings, it repudiates its own written teachings? Surely not! As for ourselves we are persuaded that both precept and practice are here at one, and that what we have referred to, is history chiming in with Christianity and civilization, marching to the music and measure of the gospel.

Now it is this Christianity working in our national life, shaping our national purposes, and helping us by its visible and invisible agencies, I believe, which has brought about the great results over which we to-day rejoice. We cannot wonder if skeptics and infidels have had no faith in the success of our struggle. A
man looking, for the first time, upon one of our line-
steamers moving out of port, might have no confidence
in her power to cross the ocean, till he had gone down
into her interior and seen the huge boilers and the
glowing fires that supply her motion. So, if those su-
perficial critics, that faithless and perverse generation
of politicians, who, when the first impulse was given to
Emancipation, mocked at it as idle and abortive, could
have gone down into the interior religious life of our
republic, and could have seen the burning prayers, the
kindling faith, the quenchless supplications that glowed
in myriads of closets and churches and Christian homes,
it would seem that even they must not have been
wholly unbelieving. Here is the motive power that
was to impel the mighty car of Emancipation. Here
is the force that was to drive the ponderous enginery of
war. Here is the power that was to nerve the thou-
sand uplifted arms of sons and brothers for the conflict,
and pour strength into the muscle and sinew of our
nation in her giant wrestlings with the foe. Christi-
nity, the living energy of the living Christ, dwelling in
the hearts of his followers, and influencing the whole
vast machinery of Providential agencies,—this it is, to
which, first of all, we owe our great triumph.

True, it is not an element that entered into the com-
putation of our national resources. These we reckon-
ed in guns and forts and navies and arsenals. Politicians
little thought of the prayers of the pious bondman,
stretching out scarred and fettered hands to God and
crying, "Oh, Lord, how long, how long!" as having
any preponderating influence in our strife. Dema-
gogues little imagined, as the nation's destiny hung
trembling in the scale, after the whole weight of our statesmanship and diplomacy had been cast in against rebellion, that, after all, the supplications of a Christian nation might have something to do with tipping the beam. They talked only of “taxing the ultimate resources of statesmanship,” of employing the shrewdest genius for finance and strategy, and of finding the leader who could organize victory and forestall disaster. But could these imponderable moral agencies have been weighed, and these invisible powers been seen and measured, how different would have been the basis of their confidence.

It was a belief of ancient mythology, that when a battle raged, the gods came down to help their favorite warriors, and, hovering above the field, strove to turn the tide of conflict in their favor. Does not this fiction illustrate what has been a sublime reality in our national strife? Have not thousands of prayers wrestled above every gory field? Have not hundreds of supplications battled for every struggling warrior? In every church and in every community, there have been those who have been constantly sending out these spiritual helps and reinforcements. The air has been full of these celestial allies. Above the thunder of every cannonade, the voiceless artillery of prayer and supplication has been besieging the throne of grace for the triumph of the right, and in all the marchings and countermarchings of our armies, have moved the airy battalions of Christian intercession and entreaty.

Here is no mean part of the military pageant. And though in the records of the chroniclers we shall read only of the vastness of armies, of the prowess of the
soldiery, of the skill and valor of generalship and of
the splendid results of enginery and tactics, there is
an unwritten history which contains another and larger
muster-roll of the forces engaged, and another and
truer estimate of the causes of success. And when all
the awards of honor shall have been made, there will
yet remain numbers who never bore the sword or the
musket, who shall be brevetted by the God of battles
for the sublime, yet invisible part, which they bore in
determining the conflict.

And not only do we recognize the influence which
these agencies have exerted in fixing the result of our
strife, but, also, in forcing that strife upon us in the
beginning. It has become clear to most minds that
civil war was sent to us to cut that Gordian knot
of negro slavery, which all the devices of the states-
men had failed to untie. But some, not discerning
this, thought, and still think, that bloodshed might
have been prevented. When the little cloud of war,
no bigger than a man's hand, was seen hanging on the
Southern horizon, there were those who believed that
a single effort of conciliatory statesmanship might dis-
sipate it. They little knew that that cloud drew its
moisture from the tears of millions of oppressed and
crying bondmen,—tears shed with the prayers and
pleadings of weary years of wrong, and which all that
is sacred in Christ's religion is pledged to avenge.
And when that cloud, black and tempestuous, had
filled our whole national sky, they little thought that
that blackness was the wrath of God prepared to avenge
his own elect, that had cried day and night to him for
succor. But so it was. And when the first peal was
heard at Sumter, it was not a mere explosion of gunpowder. It was the lightning leaping from clouds surcharged with divine vengeance,—that vengeance which is eternally and indissolubly connected with wrong doing. It was the discharge of those myriad prayers for deliverance, which for long years the Christian slaves had been pouring into God's retributive Providence, till, like a galvanic battery, it was completely charged, only needing the touch of the rebellion to communicate the awful shock to the whole offending nation. Here is the secret of the "irrepressible conflict;" not merely in the culmination of public sentiment; not merely in the ripeness of sectional antagonisms; not merely in the clashing of political ideas and prejudices, but in that full maturity of Divine judgments which the unavenged wrongs and the unanswered prayers of years had been slowly, but surely, bringing on.

Those great agencies of Christianity, the church and the pulpit, have also borne a noble part. The church at home has been supplying the moral ammunition for the field. She has fought that battle of public opinion which must always be waged in the rear of the grand army. She has kept alive the spiritual forces which were needed to guide and restrain the physical. There has been no need that our churches should be turned into hospitals, as Mr. Emerson so coolly advises. They have been, for the most part, hospitals—hospitals where lame loyalty and sickly patriotism have been tended and cured; where the sharp medicine of the law and gospel has been administered to political disease and corruption; where the old, festering sores of
party prejudice and sin have been probed by the surgery of truth and righteousness.

True, some pulpits have been dumb in the hour of the nation's agony and trial. Declaring that they are commissioned to preach only "Christ, and him crucified," they seem to have forgotten that an inseparable part of such a commission is to preach against anti-Christ in every form of his manifestation. And when did ever anti-Christ appear more visible in any revolution of the world's history than in this?

Eighteen hundred years ago, that Christ who is the living embodiment of love and justice and mercy, placed himself as the corner-stone, not only of the church, but of all Christian civilization, and his great Apostle solemnly declared, "other foundation can no man lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ." Four years ago, Alexander Stephens, amid the shoutings of his confederates, brought forth slavery,—the living embodiment of oppression, lust and murder, and defiantly declared, "This stone, which was rejected by the first builders, is become the chief stone of the corner in our new edifice."

Could any minister who was loyal to Jesus Christ see that infamous stone laid in its place, cemented by the gore of thousands of freemen, and consecrated only by the wail of a doomed and despairing race, without protesting, in the name of all that is holy and blessed in the Christian religion, against such an outrage upon humanity and such blasphemy against God? Could any minister of Christ be true to his calling, who refused to do all in his power, by his prayers and his preaching, to sustain that army that was seeking
to pound this stone in pieces and to annihilate it forever from the nation? Thank God, the vast majority of Northern clergymen said no! and acted accordingly. And they who kept silent lost such an opportunity as occurs only once in an age, of battling anti-Christ, and bruising the head of that old serpent, which is the devil.

But what a power has the loyal and outspoken pulpit exerted in our conflict! They have held up the moral aspects of the war; they have sought to show men that politics cannot be divorced from religion; that interwoven with their every act, as citizens, wound about every vote they cast and running into their whole political conduct, is one distinct, inseparable thread of individual accountability, which binds every act to the throne of judgment. They have cast the leaven of the gospel into public opinion. They have sought to bring up the people from low and narrow partisan views, to the higher standpoint and the broader range of vision furnished by religion.

Thus has Christianity, by its pervasive and revolutionizing influence, by its own peculiar instruments and appliances, been one of the most potent of agencies by which God has been determining the issue of our civil war.

II. Again we recognize God’s hand in our strife in the manifest evidences of an overruling Providence which appear in it. Time will, of course, bring these out into much clearer and bolder relief. But even now they appear most striking and wonderful.

We have seen how the mind of one leader can
shape and guide a whole campaign, and that, too, with such unity and precision, that it almost seems as though the army were one single body, of which the commanding general was the brain. But a thoughtful man must be still more profoundly impressed with the conviction, that one Supreme mind has moved and directed our whole war, with all its civil and military combinations.

Most wonderfully do we see this in the manner in which our leaders have been brought upon the stage. Never, by the wisest general, was there such an equitable system of promotions and degradations, as Providence has been carrying on for us. When it has been impossible for human insight to discriminate, God, by the marvellous election of events, has chosen for us the man for the place and for the hour. Seeing the battle from afar, before any human eye could see it; hearing the rattling of the chariots and the prancing of the horses before any human ear could hear them, he has brought forward the leader whom he had been training for the crisis, and put him in his place.

There is a profounder wisdom than many might suppose in the words of that rude, uncultured negro preacher, who said, "God Almighty created Abraham Lincoln, and hid him away just as he did the first Moses, till he wanted him, and then he brought him forth to lead his people out of Egypt." How marvellously God did hide him away in the purposes of his Providence; disciplining him by that rough frontier life, to bear the heavy burdens of state; hardening his hands by rugged labor; furrowing his brow by the sweat of manly toil, so that when he came forth, the
common people seeing these marks, might recognize him as one of their number. And when his hour came, and he stood forth, honest, true, spontaneous, girded for his toil, how soon we learned that he was no ordinary man, and that it was no mere accident that placed him at the head of state. What other shoulders could have borne up such Herculean loads? What other hands could have struck such mighty and such telling blows at oppression,—blows aimed with such a discriminating forecast, and dealt with such effect, that we are compelled to believe that God was behind the man, pushing him forward and telling him when and where to strike? Was it not Jehovah that picked him out for us, and wove our whole national crisis about him as its central and guiding spirit?

And so of our military leaders. By what a wondrous ballot of Providence have they been selected for us! In the winnowings and siftings of war, the names whom we thought were to be the illustrious, have dropped out and disappeared, and we have many times trembled lest no leader should be found equal to the emergency. But the man has not been wanting at the crisis. When the tide of disaster was sweeping towards us from the Shenandoah, there was a Sheridan to come up and roll it back by the inspiration of his presence. When the hour struck for the fall of Charleston,—that “Babylon the great” of rebellion,—there was a Sherman, to stand a hundred miles away, and cast it down by a single motion of his sword. When that strong man of treason must be driven from his home in Richmond, there was a Grant,—a stronger than he, to thrust him out.

We waited long for the coming of these heroes upon
the stage. But they came not a moment too late to take their parts in the august drama. Promptly, as the plot has thickened, have the actors appeared, each from his necessary training and rehearsal. As each new peril has advanced and receded, it has brought and carried with it its man of destiny.

How distinctly also do we see the hand of Providence in the concurrence of marked events. Who was it that timed the "Monitor" in her course, so that at just the moment when her iron ribs were needed between our navy and the Merrimack, she steamed in sight? Who was it that brought victories again and again at just that time of danger when the pulse of Northern courage was beating faintly and every thing depended on its being quickened by tidings of success? And who was it, on the other hand, that restrained our armies from plucking unripe successes and from grasping premature triumphs, giving so often, instead of the coveted victory,—

"An overthrow,
Worth many victories?"

And when our national election came round,—that time of unprecedented peril,—who marshalled events so wondrously for our succor? Nothing could seem more fortuitous than the falling of thousands of ballots from the hands of voters at the polls. Looking over the whole scene, there would appear to be as little plan or prearrangement in it all as in the descent of the myriad fleecy snowflakes from the sky. But as these same snowflakes, piled and drifted on the mountains, sometimes form an avalanche that falls with terrific power, sweeping trees and rocks and earth in its course, so these ballots, descending all day long, be-
heard at Sumter, it was not a mere explosion of gun-
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came an avalanche which overwhelmed in an hour all
the hopes of the disloyal and buried in ruin the men
that were false to their country. And when men saw
the result they recognized the Power that did it. Fan-
euill Hall resounded with the Doxology, and Cooper
Institute answered back. For the people believed that
even the ballot had been guided by God’s hand, and
that the vast army of voters had been marching by the
order of the Eternal.

So can we hear in almost every step of our conflict
the footfall of the Almighty. So can we read on almost
every page of our crowded four years’ history the
inscription, “Lo, God was here.” So can we discern,
following almost every throw of the shuttle of destiny,
that golden thread of Providence which has run through
all the combinations of our civil conflict, worked into
all its varied and complex adjustments, and determined
the type and texture of that new civilization which
God has been weaving for us. Ignoring this Provid-
ence, our revolution becomes the merest chaos of
events,—a confused and aimless quarrel of conflicting
ideas and passions, a succession of brilliant occurrences—
brilliant like the shifting pictures and gorgeous mosaics
of the kaleidoscope, but without intelligible plan or con-
tinuity. Acknowledging this Providence, we can dis-
cern in all our varied history of success and failure, a
steady and unaltering march of the nation towards
freedom and equality, and can trace, above all the
smoke and haze of battle, the clear outlines and fair
proportions of an emancipated and redeemed republic.

Recognizing thus the movements of Christ and of Pro-
vidence in our national affairs, we cannot but be grate-
ful and exultant in view of what God has done for us.
The thought of sons and brothers fallen in the strife may pain us with a momentary sadness. But the thought of the Liberty which they have purchased; of the priceless boon of Freedom which they have won for the oppressed, and of the truth which they have vindicated for God and for humanity, will swallow up all other thoughts in its sublimer glory.

A correspondent writing, a few days since, from the old Bull Run battle field, says, "I saw pretty, pure, delicate flowers growing out of the empty ammunition boxes; and a wild rose thrusting up its graceful head through the top of a broken drum, which, doubtless, sounded its last charge in that battle; and a cunning scarlet verbena peeping out of a fragment of a bursted shell, in which strange pot it was planted." Is not here an emblem of what God shall bring forth from our terrible strife? The flowers of beneficence and blessing shall spring up in the scathed and blackened track of war. The tree of Liberty, drawing richness from the graves of martyred patriots, shall bloom the fuller and spread the wider its protecting branches over the field of the slain. The wilderness of servitude shall rejoice and blossom as the rose. Instead of the thorn of slavery, shall come up the fir tree of Liberty. Instead of the brier of oppression, shall come up the myrtle tree of Freedom. The groans of the bondmen shall be swallowed up in their jubilant song of thanksgiving. "For they shall go out with joy, and be led forth with peace; the mountains and the hills shall break forth before them into singing, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands."