

THE LESSONS OF OUR NATIONAL SORROW.

A DISCOURSE

DELIVERED IN THE

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH,

OF FORT WAYNE, INDIANA,

ON THE SABBATH MORNING, APRIL 16th, 1865,

SUCCEEDING THE DEATH OF

ABRAHAM LINCOLN.

BY JOHN M. LOWRIE,

PASTOR OF THE CHURCH.

FORT WAYNE:

JENKINSON & HARTMAN, PRINTERS.

1865.



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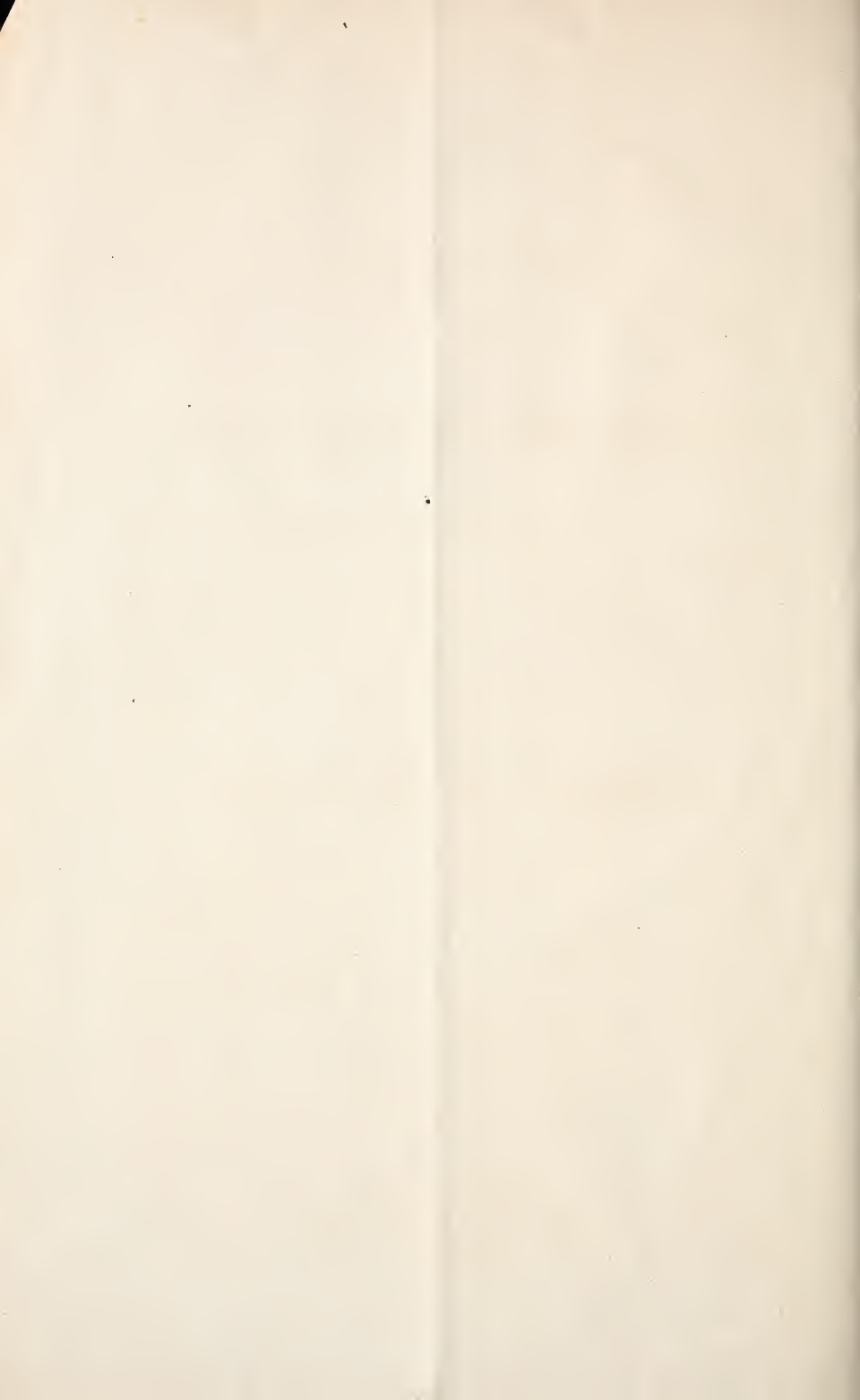
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REQUEST FOR PUBLICATION.

FORT WAYNE, April 17, 1865.


REV. J. M. LOWRIE, D. D.,

Rev. and Dear Sir: Having listened, with deep interest, to your able and instructive discourse on the death of our lamented President, we respectfully solicit the same for publication, believing that the lessons it so earnestly and forcibly inculcates, will be productive of great good, if allowed to be brought before the public in a more permanent form.

Respectfully yours,

JUDSON McCOMB,
H. N. PUTNAM,
J. E. HILL,
W. C. SHOAFF,
S. H. SHOAFF,
E. P. WILLIAMS.
JOHN REED,
A. D. BRANDRIFF,
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SAMUEL HANNA,
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DISCOURSE.

‘Cease ye from man, whose breath is in his nostrils; for wherein is he to be accounted of.’—Isaiah ii: 22.

Within the past few hours this great nation has exchanged the voice of thanksgiving and rejoicing for the bitter cry of anguish and lamentation. The long struggle to maintain the national integrity, against such perfidy and barbarity as might belong to the world’s darkest ages, seemed drawing to a close: the chief strongholds of rebellion had been subdued, the chief armies defeated and surrendered, and the chief traitor had betaken himself to ignoble flight: our military authorities had already issued orders to stay the recruiting of our forces, and even to lessen the numbers of those already in the service; and everything seemed to give token of the speedy return of peace. But, though no change has occurred in the position of our victorious hosts, how suddenly has gloom and night fallen upon these scenes of light and gladness. Your ears have already heard the tingling tidings, and I have no need to dwell upon the particulars. The man who seemed to be for the times, so recently honored by the voice of the people in a second call to the high station he had filled with distinguished ability in a most difficult and trying period, so recently crowned with the honors of military success—the President of the United States—has fallen by the hand of an assassin! “Death is come up unto our windows and is entered into our palaces.”—Jer. ix: 21. “The beauty of Israel is slain upon the high places. How are the mighty fallen.”—2 Sam. ii: 19.

We cannot do less, my brethren, in the sanctuary of God, than to hear His voice speaking, not to us alone, not to our people alone, but to all the nations and to long succeeding time, in this distressing bereavement. But whatever interest may belong to this event in the narrations of history; whatever new light may be thrown upon it in the future overrulings of Divine Providence, it becomes us to sit as at-

tentive disciples at His feet: for we have an interest in the lessons, which now we can scarcely but hear. For no one can doubt that the Teacher of this nation to-day is not man but God: that the lessons now pressed upon our attention have a force that human words may direct, but are in danger of weakening; and that they urge us all to the spontaneous utterance of the prophetic wisdom, that declares human weakness in his presence—"Cease ye from man, whose breath is in his nostrils; for wherein is he to be accounted of." We know the Teacher, because we know that the Most High rules among the children of men, that there is no evil in the city that the Lord has not done, and that He is wont to impress the great lessons which a people must thoroughly learn, by impressive and startling events which we must see and feel. Perhaps the actual lessons we may now be able to gather are less striking in the communication truthful sentiments than in preparing our minds to look away from human strength to divine working; in bidding us ever keep in mind how short-sighted is earthly wisdom, how fading human honors, how brief man's mortal life; and thus in fitting us to meet the strangest events of the future, since our confidence is in One whose strength cannot fail, whose wisdom cannot be thwarted, whose mercy endures even when clouds and darkness are about him. So, without attempting to forecast the changes that may be wrought by this event in the course of our nation at this momentous crisis; putting away from us all anxious forebodings, as though the life of any one man, no matter how exalted, was necessary to the prosperity of this land; not presuming to explain why Providence has allowed the wickedness of man thus to fill our country with mourning; we may learn a new dependence upon God, to support us now and to strengthen us for many days to come.

Behold **FIRST**, how frail and weak is man in his best estate!

This is a lesson often given us before; but not often does the Almighty so soften our hearts to receive it. We are usually disposed to look up to men who hold dignified positions in society, as not only honored, but as possessed of superior sources of happiness. It becomes us to remember to-day that man's highest honors fall as the fading flower. There is no position among men more truly honorable than that recently held by Abraham Lincoln. The birth of a child in a particular family, without regard to his qualifications or his ability to bless his people, usually fills the throne of an import-

ant nation; but it is not so with us. Make all due allowances for apparent accidents that among us throw a man forward in public life; still, no earthly honor is higher than that a man should hold the Chief Magistracy of this land. And the honor upon this man was marked. To be chosen by the free suffrages of his people; more than this, after a generation had refused to repeat the choice of the same man in any instance, to be re-chosen; and this triumphantly; and this after a term of service whose labors, perplexities and responsibilities were of the severest nature; to have conducted the affairs of the nation so ably in times so difficult: are all honors so distinguished that no earthly potentate deserves comparison with what he so lately was.

It becomes the American people to honor the memory of Abraham Lincoln. Let the calm voice of history hereafter tell his deeds, comment upon his sentiments, and trace his influence. But even now let the zeal of the partizan stand rebuked in the stern presence of death; and let the thoughts of a grateful nation be uttered to say that, apart from the iniquity of the crime that has occurred, the loss of no ordinary man has fallen upon us. Men have cavilled because his early training had no special adaptation to his later eminence, because he knew not the rules of polished society, because the profound learning, for which a dignified statesman may find full use, belonged not to him; yet he had other qualifications for the times in which he lived and for the particular sphere in which he was called to act; qualifications far more difficult to secure and far more important when secured, than the dazzling acquirements that shallow men covet, or even the solid learning that is not always wisely used; and we may admire the orderings of Providence that brought forward such a man as this, in the time of national peril. No man can question that, in the most serious and earnest spirit he addressed himself to his public duties. The words he uttered, four years ago, on leaving his home for the Capital, were words of touching simplicity and profound wisdom. "A duty devolves upon me which is perhaps greater than that which has devolved upon any other man since the days of Washington. He never would have succeeded except for the aid of Divine Providence, upon which at all times he relied. I feel that I cannot succeed without the same Divine aid which sustained him, and in the same Almighty Being I place my reliance for support. I hope you, my friends, will all pray that I may receive that Divine as-

sistance without which I cannot succeed, but with which success is certain." In this spirit he entered upon his responsible duties. The religious character of Mr. Lincoln, I presume not to delineate. He never made a public profession of religion in connection with the church of Christ; he may not have risen to the standard of consistency at which intelligent believers should ever aim; it greatly increases my personal grief in this calamity, that he met the death blow in a theatre, whose immoralities no christian man should ever sanction by his presence. Yet in the discharge of his public duties there was a remarkable conscientiousness, a manifest recognition of the weakness of man and of the efficient rulings of God's Holy Providence, a sense of personal responsibility, and a willingness to make an open avowal of high religious teachings, such as perhaps have not been exceeded by any Ruler of modern times: certainly his state papers, in this sense, are in marked contrast with many that have issued from the Capitol of this nation: and we have had no Ruler during this century toward whom the hearts of religious men might turn with truer sympathy than towards him. Would to God we had more public men with as many virtues as he had!

He assumed the helm of government at a momentous time, when armed rebellion was just about to strike at the nation's life, and calmly faced the mad malcontents to say that upon their responsibility—not upon his—rested the momentous issues of civil war. From that day forward his course has been as upright and consistent and firm, as it has been mild and prudent. Let no eulogist declare that no mistakes have been made; that success could not have been better achieved; that corruptions could not have been more thoroughly suppressed. But with so heavy burdens upon him, in scenes so untried and perplexing, distracted by so multiplied counsels of ill-judging friends, we do not wonder at his errors; we rather marvel that they are so few; and we certainly believe that his virtues, which made him think too favorably of others, betrayed him into his chief mistakes. There was an honesty of purpose in this man, that even his foes should admit; there was a shrewdness of discernment, a sterling weight of common sense, altogether remarkable and invaluable to the times in which he lived and the position he held; there was a shrinking from stern measures, that does honor to his heart, perhaps at the expense of his wiser judgment: even the genial temper that sometimes seemed to de-

tract from the dignity of the President, contributed not a little to sustain him, and even to cheer the nation, in many hours of national darkness; and there was a wisdom, which posterity can better vindicate than we, in seizing firmly upon the exact state of things in the nation: neither going too far in advance of a wholesome public sentiment, to meet with failure; nor allowing himself to be drawn on, as though he was merely borne forward by a current of irresistible opinion. We wonder not that able foreign editors have looked upon his late inaugural as one of the ablest and most remarkable state papers of our times; and indeed we can scarcely better sum up his whole course than in his own words: "With malice towards none, with charity towards all, with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right."

But his promise of usefulness to come is suddenly cut off. A nation's honors could not save him from the approach of death: a nation's tears cannot recall him to life: the chaplet has faded from his brow: "surely every man in his best estate is altogether vanity." We may repeat here the lamentation of David over Abner, "Know ye not that there is a Prince and a great man fallen this day in Israel? As a man falleth before wicked men, so fellest thou! The Lord shall reward the doer of evil according to his wickedness."

The SECOND lesson taught us in this afflictive stroke is the deep depravity of man.

For it is not hard to recognize in this assassin a fit representative of the cause in whose behalf this blow was struck. As a man he may be comparatively insignificant; but as exhibiting the temper of this rebellion, no conduct can be more characteristic. A few years ago our happy people could read the cruel records of other lands and times, and if not incredulous of the barbarity that history records, yet with congratulations of the ameliorating influences of our civilization.—Yet can the annals of man present a more humiliating spectacle of human depravity than belongs to this great rebellion? It is a great comfort to feel that the National Government has been the aggressor in no single thing, pertaining to this struggle; that it has always stood prepared to end this strife with the submission of armed traitors; that the extreme of mildness, rather than of severity, has marked our counsels; and that to maintain institutions of unexampled excellence has been our sole endeavor. But the cause of treason has been all the reverse of these things. Can the world show more remarkable examples of perjury, perfidy and cruelty than have marked this southern rebellion? Men who had

been educated at the expense of this government; who had been placed in offices of power and trust; who had solemnly sworn to support the United States Constitution as supreme over every State law; have been guilty of fraud and falsehood and perjury of the most stupendous magnitude: and the bitter spirit which the leading men of the south have entertained and cherished for so many years, and have diligently instilled into their people, not only led naturally to plots of assassination touching this very man at his first inauguration, and to the earlier events of the war, when food and fountains were poisoned, and railroad trains thrown from the track to meet disaster, and ghastly trophies gathered from the fields of battle; but led on also to the appalling cruelties that have rendered infamous the names of Libby Prison, Andersonville and Fort Pillow; that produced the slaughter at Lawrence and the burning of Chambersburg; that attempted the destruction of their own cities, Charleston, Columbia and Richmond, when they could no longer hold them; and that have culminated at last in the long cherished, deliberate, avowed scheme for the base assassination of the President. These things are not the impulse of passion in individual men; they are not incidents of warfare; they are characteristics of southern feeling. It is in this sense they have their importance; they seriously warn us against supposing that the defeat of the rebel armies is our sufficient triumph, or that the rebel leaders especially, can safely be allowed to remain upon our soil.

There was danger that in our anxiety to settle these strifes without further bloodshed, we should forget the enormous wickedness of these men, and call those but political crimes that have causelessly drenched this land in blood. And no prominent public man more than Mr. Lincoln was disposed to lenient measures. It may prove that wickedness has overshoot its mark for the better furthering of righteous ends and the better security of the nation. Let us harbor no feeling of revenge; let us counsel no vindictive measures; yet let us mark the proofs of depravity that should stamp with infamy the entire cause from which these cruelties from the first have been inseparable. And let us understand that the safety of our institutions for generations to come is far beyond the additional cost that shall secure a wise and righteous settlement for these national difficulties.

THIRDLY, the chief lesson of this afflicting Providence is to bid the whole nation depend less on human thoughts and human strength, and recognize that God rules among the affairs of men.

There are peculiar circumstances that make this national bereavement one of special distress at this exact juncture.—Our institutions have been passing through the most searching ordeals. This man had gained the confidence of the people in his uprightness and sagacity; his untried successor has given occasion for the most serious misgivings by an act of public folly: while doubtless the need of wisdom is quite as great to close the war safely as to carry it on successfully.—But let us not reason upon all these things as they now appear to us in this day of darkness. It is by no means certain that the traitors of this land have any cause for congratulation, because this deed has been successfully accomplished, and the man they have hated is shrouded for the tomb. It is not for us to judge that in the final consequences of this event a great national calamity has fallen upon us, because our streets to-day are filled with mourners. Let us not, on the one hand, at all undervalue the late President; let us not, on the other, attempt to forecast the changes that may be wrought in the public policy by this sudden change of rulers. Simply let us say: that a nation is of more value than a man; that national affairs have a dignity and importance so great that they must move on, let who will be laid aside; and that a Supreme Ruler exercises an authority in human affairs, that cannot be thwarted by any act of human madness; that indeed can cause even human iniquity to work out his high purposes; and that is wont to make the very iniquities of violent men the means of their own more complete overthrow.

It is utterly impossible for any intelligent man to shut his eyes to the signs of our times, or to refuse the evidence that God is apparently about to work great things among the sons of men. Perhaps we should remark that underlying this very phase—the Signs of the Times—is the just recognition of God's efficient rule in Providence. The events of to-day cannot be the signs of to-morrow if their connection is only casual; in their highest sense they are parts of One Plan in which *this* precedes *that* in due order. The fig tree puts forth its leaves because the summer approaches. But God is the Ruler, not only of our community, not only of our nation, but of this world. And long as has been the lifetime of the race there has been no more remarkable age, no time when more manifest traces of the Divine finger appear in earthly events, than in the very century in which we live. We may look back over the troubled pathway of our guilty family; we may wonder at the long periods of Divine forbearance and human apathy; we may note the slow progress of civili-

zation and of the gospel that is designed to conquer the earth; and it is easy to decide that ours are remarkable times, and that this nation seems intended in the orderings of His will to subserve the grandest purposes of human history.

Far be it from us, especially in an hour of national distress, to lay claim to such a character as may allow man to boast in the presence of his God. What the Divine word declared to Israel may we take to ourselves. "Not for your sakes do I this, be it known unto you." We have been a sinful and a proud people, and the black catalogue of our crimes can scarcely find anything darker than itself, save the aggravations that belong to our superior knowledge. But it makes the apparent destiny of this Republic yet more grand, that our remarkable history seems inseparably linked with the well-being of man. We should not shut our eyes to the apparent purposes of the Supreme Ruler as we think we can gather these from the workings of his hand. Why should so long a train of remarkable Providences and of so various character, belong to this Republic, bearing all upon the establishing and strengthening and purifying of a nation on these wide territories, that should be possessed with the very blessings the whole world needs; especially that should hold in its hands the great gospel that He has promised to make successful, unless, more than commensurate with all these preparations, ours must be a useful influence upon all the tribes of earth? This continent was long hidden from the eastern world behind an impassable waste of waters: these eastern states were settled with the noblest men of the times in which they lived; these wide spread dominions where we now stand were conquered for us by English arms before we had strength for such a conflict; twenty years later we acquired a name among the nations of the earth by a struggle where God was our strength, where leaders and soldiers and allies came by his Providence, and where the victory perched upon our banners through His blessing. When the foundations of our government were established, we had a Continent to settle. How could we have done all this, but for the aidings of Providence in a thousand wonderful co-operations which no human thought could devise or anticipate, in the awakening of the minds of men to discovery and invention in innumerable ways? Long ago an inspired prophet predicted that in the latter times many should run to and fro and knowledge should be increased. We see the fulfilment of this. Can any man imagine how these forests could have fallen, these roads have been made, these thriving States settled

if it had not been for the invention of the steam engine? And the impetus given to every branch of business, the influences exerted by the very activities that now are possible, the discovery of new modes of travel and new channels of intelligence, the revelation of new stores of unbounded wealth—as the iron and coal of Pennsylvania, and the gold of California, and the oil of the Ohio valley; each also in a most opportune time—these words are but hints to remind us that these seem like the breaking up of the Lord's way in an unexamined manner, that preparations like these have not been made for a sudden abandonment: to bid us believe that some grand designs of Providence are yet to be wrought, through the agency of the nation so wonderfully planted and nourished upon this continent.

When we speak of the settlement of a continent it is not an easy thing to realize the dignity of our words. Lift up your thoughts to contemplate the immense territories that belong to this Republic; reckon, if you are able, the swarming millions that within a century must people these vast regions from Maine to California; extend your contemplations to the generations that are to be our successors in so grand a heritage: fill your soul with weighty reflections touching the intelligence, the public and private virtues, that must keep all these vast interests in equipoise for the well being of the whole: think of this people as the stewards of rich treasures for the benefit of the world at large: and you may gain some glimpse of the value of our national interests. Evidently the material resources of such a people are the smallest part of our wealth. Now remember, that every element of wrong in this nation is an element of weakness, whose tendency is to grow worse in itself and to expose us more certainly to Divine judgments. Remember, that if the Supreme Ruler over men is Holy and Just, our good, not less than his own perfections, demand his displeasure upon wickedness. It may be that no brief time of instruction belongs to a nation's discipline; that no light strokes belong to persistent iniquity in any people; that He must smite until the people he would correct are thoroughly aroused and with such strokes as they must acknowledge; and that we have nothing to gain either by hardening ourselves against his hand, or by refusing to discern that his dealings are in righteousness rather than in wrath; to awaken penitence rather than to drive us to despair.

The war through which we have been passing is no exception to the proof that God watches over this nation for good. It becomes us to judge that Divine Providence is a holy rule:

and though we are often at a loss to understand his forbearance with the sins of men, we should never wonder to see his judgments upon man's guilt. When this nation took its place among Sovereign States, the evil of slavery was already engrafted upon our Institutions. It is not for the wisest man to look a century in advance of his own times, and see the working of plans that approve themselves to his maturest judgment. We do not wonder at the course adopted by our fathers touching the subject of slavery. They were ready to acknowledge the viciousness of the system; politically, as at war with the genius of a free people; financially, as retarding, rather than advancing the good of states: and morally, "as a gross violation of the most precious and sacred rights of human nature." Let us not make them responsible, as if they entertained any thought of that great change in Southern sentiment that has culminated in the advocacy of Slavery, as even of Divine sanction. We may not take time to trace the causes, that combined to produce this change. Suffice it to say that the dominant temper of Slavery became insufferable: defeated, first in the national conventions of every party, and then at the polls, the mad spirit of southern fanaticism appealed to arms. And so has Providence solved the question as to the continuance of this cruel and abominable system. Five years ago, thousands of christian consciences were ensnared and perplexed, because a system, with which they had no sympathy, whose atrocities they hardly dared contemplate, whose bad influence upon social prosperity they knew, yet seemed placed wholly beyond their reach. The safety of slavery lay with slaveholders: and within their power were guaranties of its permanence that would still more have degraded this nation and drawn down upon us the just judgments of God. Terrible as this war has been, our tendency has been at every step to stop short of that great result, without which this land can never know a lasting peace.

What may we expect of a Holy God but his Providential smile upon the right? Shall we argue the immoralities of slavery? Nay rather, in his words whose lips are now forever silent, "If slavery is not wrong, nothing is." Shall we arraign his wisdom who has put this people to so great a cost, that this great national sin may be blotted out forever? There is quite another way of looking at this whole matter. All these events are but minor and introductory—His grand preparation for events in which this nation is to take a leading part. Let us feel that we are living in grand times indeed: that years can now accomplish more than centuries have been

wont to do; and yet that the most prominent actors may suddenly disappear from our most busy scenes, and leave the movement complete still in all its parts; allow that the same great end to be steadily kept in view; keep still in motion the vigorous and wholesome working of our National institutions, and stay not even for one moment the onward march of events where Divine wisdom guides and Divine power controls. Even more than safe, are the interests of humanity and the stability of this government in this day of national grief. The grand object of these scenes of time, as it looms up to the religious mind, is the conversion of the globe to christianity. If this nation, as we firmly believe, is to be an important instrument in the Divine hand for blessing the world, then every calamity may purify and guide, but cannot destroy: then these frequent changes from joy to grief bid us mark our constant dependence on God: then our chief aim should be to work out His purposes and to secure His smile.

We may fail to point out the design of Providence in permitting this event, but we may believe that treason will be put to more speedy and more complete confusion, and that right shall have a more illustrious triumph. The prayers of this nation have never been more continually or more fervently offered for any ruler than for Abraham Lincoln: the madness of this crime will make even political opponents ashamed of sympathy for such a cause: the time is past when any strength can be added to the rebellion by cruel deeds that excite only horror and exasperation: and perhaps a sterner rule than he would have exercised, falls in more with the purposes of Divine judgment, though indeed we should grieve in any prospect of yet coming calamities. In all these things "the Almighty has his own purposes." He who notices the falling sparrow has not allowed our Chief Magistrate to fall without a purpose. He who knew best how to awaken and direct the public mind, bids us specially note his finger, as in the past, so from this time forward. He who alone deserves the name of Ruler, teaches us to esteem our fellow men but as the instruments by which he works, forbids us to trust to human sagacity, and allows us to take refuge in Him when we fear for the failings of human infirmity.

The lessons of this time are not in vain, nor too costly, if they lead this nation to a more complete dependence upon God and to a more careful obedience to his will. One of our historians says of William, Prince of Orange, who was assassinated in this same grand struggle between despotism and the spirit of human liberty, nearly three hundred years ago, that "he was

entombed amid the tears of a whole nation. Never was a more extensive, unaffected and legitimate sorrow felt at the death of any human being." Let us water with our tears the grave of our Chief Magistrate. Never did so many people in one day hear such tidings: we are this day a stricken people: yet this is our chief consolation, the Lord reigns.

FINALLY, what a lesson are we taught to-day to bid every man consider his personal interests and to remind us that our most important plans may be suddenly broken off, and our engagements in life brought to a speedy close.

The elevations of office, the momentous importance of pressing duties, the wishes of a nation, the vigor of personal health, could avail nothing to stay the footsteps of that messenger who has so many avenues of approach to all our persons, and who may knock as suddenly at your door or mine. I confess I feel not a little concerned as I look over this congregation from time to time, to see how careful and busy you all are, while you too much neglect matters of higher interest. Many of you, who have gathered enough around you to give less attention to business, who are old enough to remember that your earthly time is short, and who profess principles that should draw you toward better things, seem scarcely to have time for duties which yet you cannot innocently neglect: and many among you have always been so engrossed in things you must soon leave, that you are wholly unprepared for the scenes that may lie but a step beyond you. Can we fail to reflect to-day that our chief personal interests lie in the life to come? We may give our earnest thoughts to private business, but Providence esteems not this our chief concern, else would he give us time to finish the works our hands begin. We may be devoted to the interests of our country; but no matter how exalted our place or how important our duties, we may drop away from these, and the nation's interests will move on, almost as though we never had been. But we can not neglect the interests of our own undying souls without exposing ourselves to perils the most tremendous.

Let us look into the tomb to-day to remember that there we must shortly lie. God is our Teacher: let us stand before his eye; let us think of the serious account we must render for all we are and have been: let us learn that we have nothing to gain by delaying our repentance, or by flattering our souls with hopes which the rude hand of death may suddenly sweep away. For this is the solemn warning from the Master's lips, "Be ye also ready: for in such an hour that ye think not the Son of Man cometh."

