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A Spurious Fear of God

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A DISCOURSE,

DELIVERED IN ST. ALBANS, VT., ON THE

NATIONAL FAST DAY,

JANUARY 4TH, 1861,

BY REV. J. E. RANKIN.

PUBLISHED BY REQUEST.

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DISCOURSE.

Second Kings, xvii: 33:—"They feared the Lord, and served their own gods."

The king of Assyria having carried away captive the ten tribes of Israel, had substituted for them colonists from his own dominions. But their idolatrous practices were so abominable to Jehovah, that He sent wild beasts from the wood to destroy them. Tidings of this having reached the king, he commissioned a Jewish priest to return to his native land and instruct them in the worship of the true God, lest they might experience further visitations of his vengeance.

This priest having taught them "the manner of the Lord of the land," they adopted certain outward forms of the Hebrew worship, while they still made gods of their own, and kept up their national idolatries. Or, in the words of the text, "They feared the Lord, and served their own gods." Nominally, their national religion was that of the Jews; really, it was still Pagan.

There is, then, a national fear of God, which is consistent with rejection of His authority, and disobedience to His laws. According to human estimate, a nation may be Christian while there is no fear of God before her eyes.
In discussing this subject, I shall take it for granted that nations, just as individuals, have their own character, responsibility, and destiny in the world. A nation rises up into magnitude, and stretches out her empire from sea to sea, because God opens for her a pathway to this power and glory. And when she declines—when her capital becomes deserted, and her great cities lie desolate—it is because she has incurred the wrath of the Almighty, and must drink the cup of her iniquities. In God’s dealings with nations, this is a state of retribution; and of this retribution, the Old World is full of abiding monuments. Why is it, that the Jew is an alien in the Holy City of David, and wanders, homeless, among the nations of the earth? Why is it, that marts of commerce and trade, once populous with living men, are now visited only by the traveler and the antiquarian? It is because nations accomplish their day and disappear, just as the men of which they are composed. The East is one vast mausoleum of departed kingdoms, where nations have played through their part, or are now dragging out a long decline.

But even if one deny that for nations in general there is a destiny and a retribution, he must admit that with regard to some nations, the arrangements of God’s providence are peculiar and individual. This is strikingly true of our own nation, and especially in the earlier periods of our history. A man who does not find evidences of a special oversight and purpose of God in the history of the Puritans, must everywhere seek for them in vain. To what people ever gave He such pure and noble men as defended, moulded, and
firmly established our civil institutions? What other people ever had a Washington? There were giants in those days. I know it is said that we have only to need such men and they will appear. They will appear, if God's purposes are still purposes of mercy—but if not, He will curse us through the imbecility and infatuation of our rulers. If exigences call forth great men, good men, why do nations ever decay?

The Father of his country, and all the great and wise counsellors, whose precious legacy of example we have inherited, have sought to impress us with the idea that our national existence is to be perpetuated till the end of time. This was the theme oftenest upon the lips of Webster, and he frequently expressed the devout wish that if the Union was to be sundered, it might never happen in his day. This desire God has fulfilled.

In itself considered, the preservation of this Union of States is a most desirable thing. Every patriotic sentiment of the heart, all the past, and as we are accustomed to think, everything in the future, would prompt us to make most strenuous exertions in this direction. But, how are we to determine that God can best accomplish His purposes through us, as a united nation? He may be driving us apart. And if He is, the breach is beyond human remedy. We may say that disunion and disintegration are impossible things, unlooked-for by our founders, and unreasonable in themselves. But, if two separate sovereignties are within the scope of God's plans, He will provide measures to secure them.

The unity and beauty of the history of God's ancient people were destroyed by the sundering of the
twelve tribes, which took place in punishment of Solomon's idolatry. And God would not permit the secessionists to be coerced to return. Who will undertake to say that He has not determined upon a similar crippling of our national pride, glory, and strength? We have for long years virtually rejected Him. The policy of our national government has been dictated by worldly expediency. And if, as a nation, we have ever thought of God, the thought has been wrung from us by alarm and apprehension.

We of the North have been guilty of a long, blinded, slowly-perceived, slowly-forsaken complicity with one of the most heaven-daring and outrageous iniquities in the whole world. We have made concessions and compromises in answer to its insatiate demands. We have been willing to lay everything dear and noble upon its altar. Our great statesmen have been demoralized by it, and fallen before it. For it, we have sought pretexts of war with neighboring nations, and wrested from them their own rightful domain, that we might blight it with our national stigma and curse; we have enacted and enforced laws repugnant to God and man; and we have tyrannized over freemen in their territorial weakness and minority. But, the spell is now broken. This moral eclipse is passing off. Yet, who shall say that it is not too late to avert the penalty which we have deserved?

And if we turn to the South, we find that their devotion to this system and all its concomitants, is just as decided and conscientious as our aversion. They are ready to found new empires upon it, as their corner-stone. They heed not the testimony of God's
Word and the whole civilized world, against this age of barbarism which they would newly inaugurate. They are just as ready to spill their blood for the liberty to hold their fellow-men in bondage, as were their fathers to resist the claim of the British crown to the right of taxation. They are prepared to make a solemn appeal to God for the rectitude of their intentions and to seek His blessing upon their revolutionary and treasonable designs.

The conceptions which an individual or a nation entertains of God, will be determined less by Revelation than by his or her character and pursuits. Men need a God to worship. And they must have one with whom they can live upon good terms, and yet be undisturbed in their sinful habits of life. There was a time, when one of our Southern statesmen was constrained to say, that in a contest between the oppressed and the oppressor, every attribute of Jehovah must lead Him to take the part of the oppressed. And this is the view of the subject given us in the Bible. And yet for how many years it has been our national policy to foster this very system, against which every attribute of God is in array? But, we have done this only by accustoming ourselves to new conceptions of God’s character, and the principles of his government. In the new exigences in which we have found ourselves, we have said, “Make us a god to go before us! Make us a god who will smile upon the violation of ancient compacts, upon the removal of the old landmarks, upon new compromises between right and wrong!” And our brethren of the South are just as fully persuaded to-day, that the God they worship ap-
proves their pro-slavery views, as are we that He con-
demns them, and must, from His very nature, condemn
them.

And the difference between us is precisely here. The
practice of the system of oppression is consistent
with their position, education, and present interest.
We are persuaded that it is inconsistent with ours.
Their God, their Bible, approves of the system; our
God, our Bible, does not. It is not because we love the
black man any better than they do; it is because we
have not their temptations to oppress him. Go from
Republican Conventions where candidates are nomi-
nated and resolutions passed, to negro huts and negro
funerals, and you can estimate the amount of real sym-
pathy for degraded humanity, which there is in the
dominant political movement of the day. This reform
needs to be baptized into the spirit of the Lord Jesus
Christ. If we would show that we are the sincere
friends of the black man, we must humble ourselves to
 teach him, to comfort him, to attend him to his last
resting-place. It is impossible to elevate a degraded
race, except by stooping to them and showing them
the works of sympathy and love.

Human nature is just the same, North and South;
only, the type of ungodliness which it assumes in New
England is unlike that in South Carolina. If men
make up their minds to pursue a certain course, they
will not endure rebuke or obstacle. Ministers of the
Gospel have been sent away from South Carolina for
holding anti-slavery sentiments. They have been sent
away from Vermont, for preaching against intemper-
ance, and even against the culture of hops for the use
of the brewery. The time may come when they will lose their places for rebuking in the churches of New England, the cultivation, the manufacture, the sale and use of tobacco. Our fellow-citizens of the South are not an abnormal development of the depravity of the race. "They fear the Lord, and serve their own gods." There are directions in which they are devout and exemplary. But, they have made to themselves a god who does not interfere with their peculiar institutions; who smiles complacently upon household bondage, and is not unwilling that its limits be extended.

But, I should do great injustice to my views if I should imply that all the sins, for which we, as a nation, should seek God's forgiveness, were connected with the subject of human slavery. There is a national sin more radical than this: It is the love of money. Slavery would have been long ago undergoing a process of gradual abolition, had it not remained profitable. We are a nation of money-lovers and money-makers. And this love of money, is the thing which God teaches us is most hostile to the love of Himself. Many of the great fortunes that are made, are made at the expense of the soul. Men run to and fro; they rise early and toil late; they exchange self-respect, love of home, love of God, everything, for the prospect of accumulation. They live homeless, prayerless, and Godless lives; they die hopeless deaths, because, with all their gettings they will get riches. They have the same objects of pursuit in the forests of Maine, the cotton-fields of the South, the prairies of the West, and the thronging cities of the seaboard. Whether
they violate the laws of God, or the laws of man, it is for the sake of money.

Why is it that our prohibitory laws are a nullity? Why is it that men of position connive at their violation, while drinking and drunkenness are making fresh inroads upon our young men every day? Nothing has been more clearly demonstrated, than that this vice ruins both soul and body. This is the awful declaration of God's Word: "Nor drunkard, shall inherit the kingdom of God!" Nothing is more clearly stated, than that God holds the vender, the tempter, responsible for the ruin which he works. And yet what multitudes are, either openly or secretly, under this pretence or another, engaged in this traffic; and all, because of the love of money.

Why is it, that slave-traders are fitted out in Northern ports, and by Northern capital, to prosecute the nefarious work of plundering men from their native country and their families, and bringing them to this land of chains and sighs and tears? Why is it, that what the whole civilized world pronounces piracy, has fascination for some of our Northern capitalists and speculators? It is because these cargoes bring in rich returns for the money invested.

And here we are called upon to notice a kindred sin. It is wealth-worshiping! A man may be brainless and characterless, and yet if he have a certain amount of money, he is regarded as worthy of peculiar consideration. We may deny this; we may be ashamed of it; but, it is a national characteristic. And the property once obtained, we never ask how it was obtained. This state of society inspires men to make most stren-
uous exertions to get within the pale of those that are
independent. Honestly, if they can; dishonestly, if
they must. If but the infamy of being a vender of
poisons, of taking advantage of a poor, weak brother’s
passions to fill one’s purse—if this always attached to
the riches acquired by the sale of liquors, men would
not be so willing to implicate themselves in this
horrible traffic. But, when once the wealth is ac­
quired, all the past is forgiven and forgotten. In the
world’s exchange, money is money; and however ob­
tained, it must have its due of courting and seeking
and homage. Now, both of these characteristics, cov­
etousness and respect of persons, are strictly forbidden
by God. They are hostile to the principles of His
kingdom. They are peculiar to that kingdom which
the Saviour came to destroy—and which He will
destroy.

The Assyrians “feared the Lord, and served their
own gods.” They wished to retain a nominal claim to
the title of worshipers of the true God, but, particular­
ly, they wished to avoid the penalty for idolatry, which
they had so lately experienced. In this fear, there
was something radically defective. The God that
men really worship, is the God that they serve. And
the sacred writer, in making this record of the As­
syrians, means to intimate this latent truth. Men
love to obey the God whom they really fear. They
do not fear the God whom they do not serve.

We cannot serve God by repenting of other men’s
sins—by being censorious in our strictures upon them
—by going up to the temple in the spirit of the Phar­
isee, and thanking Him that we are not unjust, extor-
tioners, adulterers, or even as our fellow-worshiper, this despised publican. So far as we are involved in the sin of others—so far as we are called upon to lift up our testimony against it, and have failed to do so, so far we must certainly go in our works of repentance. But, there is a degree, at which our professed fasting becomes Pharisaism and self-delusion.

The Lord our God is one Lord. His law is one law. And if we are His sincere children, breaches of this law ought to be just as distressing to us in one department of life as in another—in one latitude as in another. Let me call your attention to several particulars in which, it seems to me, anti-slavery reformers are in danger. I do not say of hypocrisy, but of self-deception: First, When they make their peculiar views, their religion—when, so far as the blacks are concerned, they do, indeed, do justice and love mercy—but, so far as God is concerned, they do not walk humbly with Him; when all their study of God's Word, instead of being employed for their own growth in grace, is only employed to intensify their hatred of the sins of others. When God gave us the power of discerning between good and evil, He gave it to us chiefly for our own sakes; to preserve us from falling into temptation, and not to qualify us to sit in judgment upon others. This is not our prerogative. We are warned against undertaking its exercise. And when we are constantly meditating upon the great sins of other men, we have neither leisure nor disposition to deal with those that are our own. Hence it is, that those who are the most censorious of others, are frequently the most self-indulgent with respect to themselves.
Now, in this great national evil of slavery, we find an object upon which we are tempted to expend all our righteous indignation. It costs us no self-sacrifice to do this. It does not depreciate our property. It is the popular phraseology of the day. We may well beware, lest our self-exaltation prove our destruction—lest we find that even though slaveholders be many of them lost, our severe censures of them have had no tendency to prepare us for the kingdom of Heaven.

The real value of our opposition to slavery, and sensitiveness with regard to the purity of the Church, may be estimated by the purity of our own lives—the purity of our own churches. God is just as really dishonored, Jesus Christ is wounded, and His cause injured just as really by covetousness as by slavery—by drunkenness, as by slavery—by Sabbath-breaking, as by slavery. When the subject of oppression is under discussion, the zeal of God's house seems to eat us up. When some of these other evils which, perhaps, lie at our own doors, and may involve our own salvation, are touched upon, we deprecate it and consider it inexpedient to disturb the peace and harmony of the churches. This proves that if we were involved in slavery, the same policy would be adopted by us. We should be opposed to free discussion. We should wish the Gospel to be preached according to the system of human bondage, and not applied to our sins in its directness, simplicity and power.

And here, as it seems to me, is a source of great danger to the Northern portion of this confederacy. Though it be the most gigantic one, slavery is not the only evil in our land. There are great moral and social
iniquities in our great cities, in our larger villages, in every considerable hamlet in our land. And if we devote all our sympathies and energies to the overthrow of this single iniquity, while those in our immediate vicinity are left to have their own fatal increase, our folly will soon be manifest. If we are so anxious for the righteousness of this nation, shall we not seek to promote individual righteousness, the righteousness of communities, of churches?

"Whoso keepeth the whole law, and yet offendeth in one point, is guilty of all." What authority have we for saying that one transgression is any the less abominable in the sight of God, than another? Why need we be so much exercised about the sins of our brethren in South Carolina, when our own sins are considered so little worthy of serious attention? Ah! my hearers, our error is not that we would abolish slavery, but that we are not just as anxious to put away from us every evil. And God estimates our character not by what we profess with regard to distant evils, but by what we do respecting present ones.

Another danger of the anti-slavery movement, is, that because its fundamental basis is a correct one, men will come to attach a kind of religious character to its men and its measures. The great sin of this nation has been to substitute men and parties, for God and principles. Men are only God's agents; parties are only His instruments. And there is no safe political text-book, but the Bible. In the history of a people, only what is right is expedient. The politician is likely to forget that he is a christian, and that his duty to Christ must never be esteemed second to his
duty to his party. When a man persuades himself that because a measure is a party one, it must have his support, he has already disposed, not only of his manhood, but also of his religion. Each man must stand or fall to his own master. The great shield of his party will not cover him. He must give account of himself to God.

When a great moral enterprise passes into a political question, it is subject to the tender mercies of political men; and, with them, party success is of far more consequence than what is "right in the sight of God." In general, they may "fear the Lord, but they will serve their own gods." The individual must keep his conscience unspotted from party pollution; and the same conscience that he carries to the table of his Lord and Master, he must carry to the polls.

I have thus endeavored to indicate how a nation might have a nominal relation to the true God, and yet by its average life, reject His authority and disobey his commandments. Who will venture to say that our relation to God is more than nominal? What tenure is that by which we hold upon the arm of His mercy? On what ground can we call upon Him for deliverance? This day of fasting and prayer is but a testimony to our national fear. Our Executive has come to his wits' end. Men have deserted and betrayed him; and now he would have the people call upon God. We may well do this; not on the score of desert; not on the score of faithfulness, but as humble supplicants for his mercy. With Him the nations are but as the small dust of the balance. They rise and fall without interfering with His infinite purposes.
There is no reason why other empires should be rent and sundered, while ours, unbelieving and ungodly as we are, remains united and prosperous. God has, indeed, hitherto wonderfully preserved and blessed us. But, have we not long ago forfeited all peculiar claims to His forbearance? Have we not drifted away from those pure and simple principles upon which our fathers first established the nation? As sure as God is true, only as we return to these, can we hope for prosperity. We may patch together compromises and compacts to-day, but unless God approves them, they will be like putting new pieces into an old garment; the rent will only be made worse.

There is hope for us in prayer—in true prayer—prayer, not that this nation may be saved at any rate; but, that if consistent with God’s will and His glory—with the ultimate prevalence of pure and undefiled religion, and the triumph of the Redeemer’s kingdom, we may be kept a united people. Union is not half so precious a thing as righteousness, as the approbation of God. May God, who knows how best to promote them both, direct in these our troubled affairs—making the wrath of man to praise Him, and restraining the remainder. Amen.