

# THE LESSON OF PRESIDENT LINCOLN'S DEATH :

## A SPEECH OF WENDELL PHILLIPS,

*At the Tremont Temple, on Sunday Evening, April 23, 1865.*

THESE are sober days. The judgments of God have found us out. Years gone by chastised us with whips; these chastise us with scorpions. Thirty years ago, how strong our mountain stood, laughing prosperity on all its sides! None heeded the fire and gloom which slumbered below. It was nothing that a giant sin gagged our pulpits; that its mobs ruled our streets, burnt men at the stake for their opinions, and hunted them like wild beasts for their humanity. It was nothing, that, in the lonely quiet of the plantation, there fell on the unpitied person of the slave every torture which hellish ingenuity could devise. It was nothing that as husband and father, mother and child, the negro drained to its dregs all the bitterness that could be pressed into his cup; that, torn with whip and dogs, starved, hunted, tortured, racked, he cried, "How long! O Lord, how long!" In vain did a thousand witnesses crowd our highways, telling to the world the horrors of this prison-house. None stopped to consider, none believed. Trade turned away its deaf ear; the Church gazed on them with stony brow; Letters passed by with mocking tongue. But what the world would not look at, God has set to-day in a light so ghastly bright, that it almost dazzles us blind. What the world refused to believe, God has written all over the face of the continent, with the sword's point, in the blood of our best and most beloved. We believe the agony of the slave's hovel, the mother, and the husband, when it takes its seat at our board. We realize the barbarism that crushed him in the sickening and brutal use of the relics of Bull Run, in the torture and starvation of Libby Prison, where idiocy was mercy, and death was God's best blessing; and now, still more bitterly, we realize it in the coward spite which strikes an unarmed man, unwarned, behind his back; in the assassin fingers which dabble with bloody knite at the throats of old men on sick pillows. O, God! let this lesson be enough! Spare us any more such costly teaching!

This deed is but the result, and fair representative, of the system in whose defence it was done. No matter whether it was previously approved at Richmond, or whether the assassin, if he reaches the confederates, be re-

ceived with all honor, as the wretch Brooks was, and as this bloodier wretch will surely be, wherever rebels are not dumb with fear of our cannon. No matter for all this. God shows this terrible act to teach the nation, in unmistakable terms, the terrible foe with which it has to deal. But for this fiendish spirit, North and South, which holds up the rebellion, the assassin had never either wished or dared such a deed. This lurid flash only shows us how black and wide the cloud from which it sprung.

And what of him in whose precious blood this momentous lesson is writ? He sleeps in the blessings of the poor, whose fetters God commissioned him to break. Give prayers and tears to the desolate widow and the fatherless; but count him blessed far above the crowd of his fellow-men. [Fervent cries of "Amen!"] He was permitted himself to deal the last staggering blow which sent rebellion reeling to its grave; and then, holding his darling boy by the hand, to walk the streets of its surrendered capital, while his ears drank in praise and thanksgiving which bore his name to the throne of God in every form piety and gratitude could invent; and finally, to seal the sure triumph of the cause he loved with his own blood. He caught the first notes of the coming jubilee, and heard his own name in every one. Who among living men may not envy him? Suppose that, when a boy, as he floated on the slow current of the Mississippi, idly gazing at the slave upon its banks, some angel had lifted the curtain, and shown him, that, in the prime of his manhood, he should see this proud empire rocked to its foundation in the effort to break those chains; should himself marshal the hosts of the Almighty in the grandest and holiest war that Christendom ever knew, and deal, with half-reluctant hand, that thunderbolt of justice which would smite the foul system to the dust; then die, leaving a name immortal in the sturdy pride of our race and the undying gratitude of another,—would any credulity, however sanguine, any enthusiasm, however fervid, have enabled him to believe it? Fortunate man! He has lived to do it! [Applause.] God has graciously withheld him from any fatal misstep in the great advance, and withdrawn him at the moment when his star touched its

zenith, and the nation needed a sterner hand for the work God gives it to do.

No matter now, that, unable to lead and form the nation, he was contented to be only its representative and mouthpiece; no matter, that, with prejudices hanging about him, he groped his way very slowly and sometimes reluctantly forward; let us remember how patient he was of contradiction, how little obstinate in opinion, how willing, like Lord Bacon, "to light his torch at every man's candle." With the least possible personal hatred; with too little sectional bitterness, often forgetting justice in mercy; and tender-hearted to any misery his own eyes saw; and in any deed which needed his actual sanction, if his sympathy had limits, recollect he was human, and that he welcomed light more than most men, was more honest than his fellows, and with a truth to his own convictions such as few politicians achieve. With all his shortcomings, we point proudly to him as the natural growth of democratic institutions. [Applause.] Coming time will put him in that galaxy of Americans which makes our history the day-star of the nations, — Washington, Hamilton, Franklin, Jefferson and Jay. History will add his name to the bright list, with a more loving claim on our gratitude than either of them. No one of those was called to die for his cause. For him, when the nation needed to be raised to its last dread duty, we were prepared for it by the baptism of his blood.

What shall we say as to the punishment of rebels? The air is thick with threats of vengeance. I admire the motive which prompts these; but let us remember, no cause, however infamous, was ever crushed by punishing its advocates and abettors. All history proves this. There is no class of men base and coward enough, no matter what their views and purpose, to make the policy of vengeance successful. In bad causes, as well as good, it is still true that "the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church." We cannot prevail against this principle of human nature. And, again, with regard to the dozen chief rebels, it will never be a practical question whether we shall hang them. Those not now in Europe will soon be there. Indeed, after paroling the bloodiest and guiltiest of all, Robert Lee [loud applause], there would be little fitness in hanging any lesser wretch.

The only punishment which ever crushes a cause is that which its leaders necessarily suffer in consequence of the new order of things made necessary to prevent the recurrence of their sin. It was not the blood of two peers and thirty commoners, which England shed after the rebellion of 1715, or that of five peers and twenty commoners, after the rising of 1745, which crushed the House of Stuart. Though the fight had lasted only a few months, those blocks and gibbets gave Charles his only chance to recover. But the confiscated lands of his adherents, and the new political arrangement of the Highlands, — just, and recognized as such, be-

cause necessary, — these quenched his star forever.

Our Rebellion has lasted four years. Government has exchanged prisoners and acknowledged its belligerent rights. After that, gibbets are out of the question. A thousand men rule the Rebellion, — are the Rebellion. A thousand men! We cannot hang them all. We cannot hang men in regiments. What, cover the continent with gibbets! We cannot sicken the nineteenth century with such a sight. It would sink our civilization to the level of Southern barbarism. It would forfeit our very right to supersede the Southern system, which right is based on ours being better than theirs. To make its corner-stone the gibbet would degrade us to the level of Davis and Lee. The structure of Government which bore the earthquake shock of 1861 with hardly a jar, and which now bears the assassination of its Chief Magistrate, in this crisis of civil war, with even less disturbance, needs, for its safety, no such policy of vengeance; its serene strength needs to use only so much severity as will fully guarantee security for the future.

Banish every one of these thousand rebel leaders, — every one of them, on pain of death if they ever return! [Loud applause.] Confiscate every dollar and acre they own. [Applause.] These steps the world and their followers will see are necessary to kill the seeds of *caste*, dangerous State rights and secession. [Applause.] Banish Lee with the rest. [Applause.] No Government should ask of the South which he has wasted and the North which he has murdered such superabundant Christian patience as to tolerate in our streets the presence of a wretch whose hand upheld Libby Prison and Andersonville, and whose soul is black with sixty-four thousand deaths of prisoners by starvation and torture.

What of our new President? His whole life is a pledge that he knows and hates thoroughly that *caste* which is the Gibraltar of secession. *Caste*, mailed in State rights, seized slavery as its weapon to smite down the Union. Said Jackson, in 1833; "Slavery will be the next pretext for rebellion." PRETEXT! That pretext and weapon we wrench from the rebel hands the moment we pass the anti-slavery amendment to the Constitution. Now kill *caste*, the foe who wields it. Andy Johnson is our natural leader for this. His life has been pledged to it. He put on his spurs with this vow of knight-hood. He sees that confiscation, land placed in the hands of the *masses*, is the means to kill this foe.

Land and the ballot are the true foundations of all Governments. Intrust them wherever loyalty exists, to all those, black and white, who have upheld the flag. [Applause.] Reconstruct no State without giving to every loyal man in it the ballot. I scout all limitations of knowledge, property or race. [Applause.] Universal suffrage for me. That was the Revolutionary model. Every freeman

voted, black or white, whether he could read or not. My rule is, any citizen liable to be hanged for crime is entitled to vote for rulers. The ballot insures the school.

Mr. Johnson has not yet uttered a word which shows that he sees the need of negro suffrage to guarantee the Union. The best thing he has said on this point, showing a mind open to light, is thus reported by one of the most intelligent men in the country, the Baltimore correspondent of the *Boston Commonwealth* : —

“The Vice-President was holding forth very eloquently in front of Admiral Lee’s dwelling, just in front of the War-Office in Washington. He said he was willing to send every negro in the country to Africa to save the Union. Nay, he was willing to cut Africa loose from Asia, and sink the whole black race ten thousand fathoms deep to effect this object. A loud voice sang out in the crowd, ‘Let the negro stay where he is, governor, and give him the ballot, and the Union will be safe forever!’ ‘And I am ready to do that, too!’ [loud applause] shouted the governor, with intense energy, whereat he got three times three for the noble sentiment. I witnessed this scene, and was pleased to hear our Vice-President take this high ground, for up to this point must the nation quickly advance, or there will be no peace, no rest, no prosperity, no blessing, for our suffering and distracted country.”

The need of giving the negro a ballot is what we must press on the President’s attention. Beware the mistake which fastened McClellan on us, running too fast to indorse a man while untried, determined to manufacture a hero and leader at any rate. The President tells us that he waits to announce his policy till events call for it, — a wise, timely, and statesman-like course. Let us imitate it. Assure him in return that the government shall have our support like good citizens. But remind

him that we will tell him what we think of his policy when we learn what it is. He says, “Wait: I shall punish; I shall confiscate. What more I shall do, you will know when I do it.”

Let us reply: “Good! So far, good! Banish the rebels. See to it that, beyond all mistake, you strip them of all possibility of doing harm. But see to it also that before you admit a single State to the Union, you oblige it to give every loyal man in it the ballot, — the ballot, which secures education; the ballot, which begets character where it lodges responsibility; the ballot, having which, no class need fear injustice or contempt; the ballot, which puts the helm of the Union into the hands of those who love and have upheld it. Land, — where every man’s title-deed, based on confiscation, is the bond which ties his interest to the Union; ballot, — the weapon which enables him to defend his property and the Union. These are the motives for the white man: the negro needs no motive but his instinct and heart. Give him the bullet and ballot, he needs them; and while he holds them the Union is safe. To reconstruct now without giving the negro the ballot would be a greater blunder, and, considering our better light, a greater sin than our fathers committed in 1789; and we should have no right to expect from it any less disastrous results.”

This is the lesson God teaches us in the blood of Lincoln. Like Egypt, we are made to read our lesson in the blood of our first-born, and the seats of our princes left empty. We bury all false magnanimity in this fresh grave, writing over it the maxim of the coming four years: “Treason is the greatest of crimes, and not a mere difference of opinion.” That is the motto of our leader to-day, — that the warning this atrocious crime sounds throughout the land. Let us heed it, and need no more such costly teaching. [Loud applause.]