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Stillman, Samuel, 1738-1807.

A Sermon, Preached at Boston, April 25, 1799.

Boston, Manning & Loring, 1799. 23 pp.

AAS copy.



DR. *STILLMAN'S*

F A S T S E R M O N,

APRIL 25, 1799



A
S E R M O N,

PREACHED AT BOSTON,

APRIL 25, 1799;

THE DAY RECOMMENDED BY THE

President of the United States

FOR A

National Fast.

—♦♦♦♦♦—
By SAMUEL STILLMAN, D. D.

Pastor of the First Baptist Church in Boston.

—♦♦♦♦♦—
Published by Request.



BOSTON:

PRINTED BY MANNING & LORING, SPRING-LANE.

1799.



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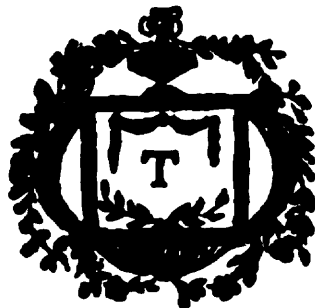
S E R M O N.

JOEL ii. 15—17.

Blow the trumpet in Zion, sanctify a fast, call a solemn assembly :

Gather the people, sanctify the congregation, assemble the elders, gather the children, and those who suck the breasts : let the bridegroom go forth of his chamber, and the bride out of her closet.

Let the priests, the ministers of the Lord, weep between the porch and the altar, and let them say, Spare thy people, O Lord, and give not thine heritage to reproach, that the heathen should rule over them : Wherefore should they say among the people, Where is their God ?



HE passage before us presents to our view a nation threatened with the judgments of Heaven, and the manner in which it became them to conduct themselves, in order to avert the impending evils.

THESE judgments were drought and famine. Jehovah threatened to withhold the necessary rains, and thus to reduce "a fruitful land to barrenness, for the wickedness of those who dwelt therein;" and to complete the calamity, to send a variety of devouring insects, which should march through the land like an army, and spread universal destruction. "That which the palmer-worm hath left, hath the locust eaten; and that which the locust hath left, hath the canker-worm eaten; and that which the canker-worm hath left, hath the caterpillar eaten. The seed is rotten under the clods, the garners are laid desolate, the barns are broken down, for the corn is withered. How do the beasts groan! The herds of cattle are perplexed, because they have no pasture; the flocks of sheep are made desolate."

THE Prophet having thus faithfully represented to the people the approaching distresses of their country, reminds them of their duty, and urges them to the immediate discharge of it in the most pathetic manner. "Rend your heart, and not your garments, and turn unto the Lord your God: for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and of great kindness, and repenteth him of the evil. Who knoweth if he will return and repent, and leave a blessing behind him.— Blow the trumpet in Zion, sanctify a fast, call a solemn assembly," &c. &c.

IN order to accommodate this sacred passage to ourselves, it may be proper,

I. To consider the particular circumstances of our common country, which render the religious observance of this day an important duty.

II. THAT the ministers of religion are called to take a distinguished part on these occasions.

I. We are to consider the particular circumstances of the United States of America, which render the religious observance of this day an important duty.

I. THE first thing I mention, and lament every day of my life, is the unhappy *disunion* there is among my friends and countrymen, and the rancour and ill will with which it is maintained; whereby friends and families are made unhappy, and the best interests of our country endangered. "Every kingdom divided against itself," says our Lord, "is brought to desolation."

WITH such a Constitution of general government as ours, and rulers wholly elective, or in the hands of the people, we might, if ever, have expected a union of the citizens. But such are the interests, the passions and prejudices of men, that in no state of civil society is there an exemption from this kind of contention. Some of the most useful and exalted characters, the very men whom God himself raised up to serve

their country, in times the most distressing and dangerous, have been defamed—a WASHINGTON himself not excepted.

LAWs passed with great deliberation by the majority of the rulers, who had the best means of information, and a common interest therein with every class of citizens, besides being under the solemn obligations of an oath of office, to do the best they could for their country, have been opposed; which opposition has arisen, in some instances, to open violence, and brought on anarchy and bloodshed. Witness the insurrection in Massachusetts a few years since, and in the western part of *Pennsylvania*.

IF I can do no more, as a minister of peace, I will, in private and in public, bewail this distressing circumstance, and cry from my inmost soul, *Spare thy people, O Lord*.

2. OUR situation with respect to France is truly alarming. Hostilities daily take place between the two nations; yet there is no declaration of war. Matters hang doubtful. What the event will be, we cannot say. We have reason most certainly to deprecate a war, which is the greatest judgment that can befall a nation. It is not a single evil, but carries in its train the destruction of morals, of interest, of lives, and happiness. Its desolations are awful. We hope, to borrow the words of our worthy President, “that God will preserve our country from the

desolating sword." At the same time, we cheerfully commit the management of this important business to the constituted authorities, in whom the power of making peace and war, is vested by our Constitution of government. But of all kinds of war, we ought, most of all, to deprecate what is called a civil war; *i. e.* a war of fellow-citizens.

LOOK into the countries in Europe, in which this scourge of mankind hath prevailed for years, and what horrid scenes of desolation and carnage present themselves to view. The finest countries laid waste—thousands of families ruined—and unnumbered multitudes have fallen on the field of battle. "Every battle of the warrior is with confused noise, and garments rolled in blood."

WE pray God, that sad necessity may not drive us into this awful condition as a nation. But should we, contrary to our wishes, be involved in a war with France, we shall have this consolation, that the Executive of the United States has done every thing in his power to prevent it. Repeated attempts have been made to settle our dispute with that nation by negotiation, but in vain. Our ambassadors were not even admitted to a hearing. And that nothing may be wanting on our part, the President hath made a third appointment of three persons, who stand high in the opinion of their countrymen, to embrace

the first favourable opening to accommodate our unhappy dispute with that nation. Should these repeated attempts fail, our Chief Magistrate ought to stand approved by the whole world; emphatically so by every American.

3. It becomes us on this day, with the greatest seriousness, to take a view of the *moral condition of our country*. One melancholy circumstance attending this inquiry, is, that we are not properly affected with it. Rather there is an evident disposition among the people to forget it; or when mentioned, to *lessen* the moral evils that abound among us; or to turn off the charge from our own nation to the nations of *Europe*. Indeed, my hearers, it is, to a sober mind, an affecting consideration, that infidelity of the most absolute and awful kind, is there encouraged. There have been some persons, in different ages, who have gone so far as to deny the very being of a God. But never, till very lately, did we hear or read of the rulers of a whole nation espousing the cause of Atheism. This sentiment, as far as it is believed, destroys the foundations of moral obligation, and of all civilized life; and has already spread its horrid and destructive influence among thousands of unhappy people; and opened the way, in its progress, for those uncommon crimes which have marked the revolution of that nation.

WE see other nations overwhelmed in ignorance and superstition ; and even among those who once were distinguished for their attachment to Christianity, there is a lamentable increase of Deism.

BUT it becomes us to attend more particularly to the moral condition of our own country.

THE principles of Deism have been gradually increasing among us for some years past, which have become apparent, among other things, in a kind of *political religion*, adjusted merely to the state of civil society ; which at best will be found to be no more than natural religion, sanctified by the name of *Christianity* ; but which a Deist has no objection to, because it is clear to him, that the State must have some kind of religion, in order to preserve the peace of society, and the obligation of an oath.

FROM this system the distinguishing doctrines of the gospel are excluded. You are to say nothing about total depravity of man—regeneration—necessity of divine influence to change his heart—Deity of Christ—atonement by his blood, &c.—but to inculcate merely the necessity of a good life, without any regard to a man's opinions. This is consistent with Deism.

SOME persons have discovered their friendship for infidelity, by the books they keep in their houses, and which they read with a relish ; while the sacred Scriptures are wholly neglected.

THE same principles and disposition lead them to neglect public worship ; to which they pay no more attention than is sufficient to save appearances. To the same cause we may ascribe the almost universal neglect of family government and religion. From this, as one source, has arisen the general profaneness of the rising generation. The children and youth, when unobserved, as they think, make use of such language as I dare not repeat ; by which God is affronted, and the pious ear distressed. The Lord's days are profaned by rambling into the country, when the season will admit it. And even at the doors of our churches, or round them, you will often see persons trifling away that time that ought to be employed in devotion ; who, by their noise without, interrupt those who wish to worship God within.

HENCE also arises the general spirit of luxury and dissipation that prevail among us. For all principles that tend to remove from the mind a sense of a future reckoning, or judgment to come, or to lessen the evil of sin, open a door for the gratification of the vicious passions.

WE may depend upon it, that the principles of infidelity increase the general thirst for pleasure, and public and expensive amusements ; and on the other hand, that those amusements increase the people's spirit for dissipation, and

make them more unfriendly to Christianity, because it is so holy in its principles, and so strict in its morals.

“PEOPLE of fashion and quality (says one) have great advantage above the common people. Their condition and education give them a liveliness and brightness of parts, from whence one might justly expect a more exalted virtue. How comes it then, that we see as ill morals, as little religious wisdom, and as great disorders among them, as among the most rude, uneducated part of the world? It is because the politeness of their lives, their course of diversions and amusements, and their way of spending their time, as much extinguish the wisdom and light of religion, as the grossness and ignorance of the dullest part of the world. Any way of life that darkens our minds, that misemploys our understandings, that fills us with a trifling spirit, that disorders our passions, that separates us from the Spirit of God, is the same certain road to destruction, whether it arises from stupid sensuality, rude ignorance, or polite pleasures. Had any one, therefore, the power of an apostle, and the tongue of an angel, it would be well employed in exposing and dissuading from those ways of life, which wealth, corruption, and politeness have brought among us. We, indeed, call them diversions; but they do the whole work of idol-

atry and infidelity, and fill people with so much blindness and hardness of heart, that they neither live by wisdom, nor feel the want of it; but are content to *play* away their lives, with scarce any attention to the approaching scenes of death, judgment, and eternity."*

SUCH, my brethren, is our moral condition. Iniquity abounds, and the love of many waxeth cold. Let us then beseech the Father of mercies, to spare us as a nation, and to revive his own work among us, that there may be a universal reformation in our country.

4. I WISH to call your attention to another very alarming circumstance of the United States, I mean the *fore judgment*, with which we have been repeatedly visited. The pestilence hath lately spread fear and death around us. Nor has it been confined, but hath visited several of the principal cities of the Union. Concerning this dreadful calamity, you will permit me to make the following observations :

1st. IT is a *new* dispensation of Providence. That our country has, at different periods, and in different places, been in years past visited with this fever in a degree, is allowed; but never, till within a few years, has it become so general, fatal and alarming. "Is there not a cause?"

“ Is there evil in the city, and the Lord hath not done it ?”

2dly. You will remember also, that it hath been *repeated* in the same places ; so that we know not when we are safe. We are in danger of another attack. We have no more reason to expect an exemption from it this season, than the last. It is, however, our duty to try to discover its natural causes, and by every method in our power to prevent its return.* Yet, if we consider the abounding of vice among us, we most certainly have every thing to fear.

3dly. I remark, the *sea-ports* have been marked out as the special objects of this calamity. In them the people enjoy great advantages of obtaining information and wealth. To them much is given ; of them much will be required. The inhabitants of the cities take the lead : From them, our friends in the country, in common, copy their vices and their manners. THEY are the first in guilt, and the first in punishment.

4thly. We may also observe, on this occasion, the many distressing effects of this calamity.

* I am happy to say, that our Board of Health are indefatigable in their endeavours, to answer the end of their appointment.

FEARFUL apprehensions, which destroy all peace of mind and domestic enjoyment, prevail. These fears drive many persons from their homes, to seek security in the adjacent country. The consequence of which is, business is neglected, and expenses incurred, which will embarrass many families for years to come. The pleasures of society are suspended; and some families have been totally cut off. The mourners at this day are going about the streets. To which I add, *the interruption of our commerce.* Boston suffered much, but New-York and Philadelphia much more. May we not, my brethen, in these awful events of Providence, read our crime in the punishment? We grew rich too fast for our virtue, by commerce; that wealth we too generally employed in promoting luxury and dissipation; and Heaven hath given it a check by this melancholy and fatal fever. It becomes us to learn righteousness, while the judgments of the Lord are abroad in our land.

II. I PASS to the second thing in the method, which is, That the ministers of religion are called to take a distinguished part on these occasions.

THIS observation is founded on the passage before us. To sum up the matter, they were, by their office under the former dispensation,

to lead in the public services of religion. Thus it is under the dispensation of the gospel also, by the choice or appointment of their religious brethren. Their duty is plainly taught us in the text—"Blow the trumpet in Zion, sanctify a fast, call a solemn assembly :—Let the priests, the ministers of the Lord, weep between the porch and the altar ; and let them say, Spare thy people, O Lord," &c. Here we have the two important duties for such a day as this—*Repentance* and *Prayer*. The first is, *repentance*. Let them weep not alone, but with the whole congregation, who ought to have but one voice on so solemn an occasion as this. God grant that such may be the disposition of this assembly to day, and of all the people throughout the United States.

FROM the short account that has been given of the alarming circumstances of our country, it appears that we ought to weep between the porch and the altar, over those sins which are our reproach, and under those judgments which we have already felt, and again anticipate.

AND to repentance let us add, as a religious assembly, the solemn and importunate prayer of the text, *Spare thy people, O Lord*. In the pertinent and comprehensive language of our worthy President, let us with one heart pray—

“ That God would interpose to arreſt the prog-
 reſs of that impiety and licentiouſneſs, in princi-
 ple and practice, ſo offenſive to himſelf, and ſo
 ruinous to mankind : That he would make us
 deeply ſenſible, that righteouſneſs exalteth a
 nation, but that ſin is a reproach of any people ;
 That he would turn us from our tranſgreſſions,
 and turn his diſpleaſure from us : That he
 would withhold us from unreaſonable diſcon-
 tent,—from diſunion, faction, ſedition, and in-
 ſurrection : That he would preſerve our coun-
 try from the deſolating ſword : That he would
 ſave our cities and towns from a repetition of
 thoſe awful peſtilential viſitations, under which
 they have ſuffered ſo ſeverely, and that the
 health of our inhabitants generally may be pre-
 cious in his ſight : That he would favour us
 with fruitful ſeaſons, and ſo bleſs the labours of
 the huſbandman, as that there may be food in
 abundance for man and beaſt : That he would
 proſper our commerce, manufactures, and fiſh-
 eries, and give ſucceſs to the people in all their
 lawful induſtry and enterprize : That he would
 ſmile on our colleges, academies, ſchools, and ſem-
 inaries of learning, and make them nurseries of
 ſound ſcience, morals, and religion : That he
 would bleſs all magiſtrates, from the higheſt to
 the loweſt, give them the true ſpirit of their ſta-
 tion, make them a terror to evil doers, and a

praise to them who do well : That he would preside over the councils of the nation at this critical period, enlighten them to a just discernment of the public interests, and save them from mistake, division, and discord : That he would succeed our preparations for defence, and bless our armaments, by land and sea : That he would put an end to the effusion of human blood, and the accumulation of human misery, among the contending nations of the earth, by disposing them to justice, to equity, to benevolence, and to peace : And that he would extend the blessings of knowledge, of true liberty, and of pure and undefiled religion, throughout the world."

I ADD, once more, That it is the duty of the ministers of religion, to "blow the trumpet in Zion, and to found an alarm," when their country is in danger from domestic or foreign enemies. The reason of this part of their duty is plainly this—They are *citizens*, members of *civil* society ; have civil rights as well as other men. They have interest, families, liberties, as dear to them as to any other citizens. Shall they see all these in danger, and be silent ? Because they are Christians and ministers of religion, shall they see ruin coming on themselves, their families, and their country, and say nothing ? This cannot be their duty. But why should *they* be

silent, more than their Christian brethren ? Whether they move in public or in private life, they believe the same truths, and profess to be governed by the same laws, as Christians. They have like interests, and like duties.

THE Prophet Ezekiel represents them as *watchmen*, and declares, that if they “ see the sword coming, and blow not the trumpet, and the people be not warned, if the sword come and take any person from among them, he is taken away in his iniquity, but his blood will I require, saith the Lord, at the watchman’s hands.”

HATH not Jesus Christ, as our great Lord and Master, taught us to “ give to Cesar the things that are Cesar’s—honour to whom honour.” To whom ought we to give honour, if not to the men whom the majority of the American people have delighted to honour ?—rulers chosen from among ourselves, and whom we can displace constitutionally, if guilty of mal-conduct.

THE Constitution of our general government, and the men who administer it, are of our own choice ; who frequently return to the class of private citizens, to feel the injury themselves, of any oppressive laws they may have enacted during their administration. What greater check can there be to the abuse of power than this ? How ought this circumstance,

with many others of a like nature, which I have not time to mention, to silence those mistaken citizens, who are continually endeavouring to clog the wheels of the general government, by censuring men and measures.

SHALL the ministers of religion be censured, for endeavouring, like Paul, to support government?—the government of their own choice? Is it not their duty to use their influence to promote the peace, the order, and safety of society? Most certainly it is.

DURING the American revolution, they were generally commended for their exertions in behalf of their oppressed country, and by some of the very men who now condemn them. Yet they are acting the same part. Now, as then, they espouse the cause of their own country, and wish its peace and prosperity, as well as happiness to the whole family of man.

BUT the objection does not lie so much against their “*preaching* politics,” as against the “*politics* they preach.” Should they take the opposite side of the question, those who now censure would applaud their conduct. Of the truth of this observation we have abundant proof.

BUT though I vindicate the right, I hope I shall never abuse it, either in public or in private. Nor do I ever wish to introduce any

thing of this kind into the pulpit, unless when the alarming condition of my country renders it my duty, which I believe to be emphatically so at this day. It is the desire of my heart, to possess a spirit of real devotion myself, and to encourage it in my friends. And if you, my brethren, have the same alarming views of our present situation that I have, and the same anticipations, you will feel serious, and be disposed ardently to pray, *Spare thy people, O Lord, and give not thine heritage, our common country, to reproach.*

I HAVE only to add—The custom of God's ancient people in a day of calamity, and the critical situation of our country at this time, render this day of national humiliation and prayer, highly proper and important. The Lord reigns. The events of empire are under his control. To Him let us approach with the deepest repentance, and most fervent prayer, that he will preserve us as a nation from the evils with which we are threatened, and which we justly deserve for our sins against him.

PERMIT me, in an especial manner, to remind you of the very important and trying situation of our beloved President. How great and numerous are his cares of office ! How many anxious nights and days does he pass on account of his country ! to which he has always manifested a most uniform and sincere attachment :

To promote the interest of which, he has devoted a great part of his life at home and abroad, and has rendered her the most essential services. Brethren, pray for him, that God will graciously sustain him, and inspire him with that wisdom that is profitable to direct : also, that the councils of our nation may be under the divine direction ; and that the happy period may soon arrive, when that kingdom which is righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost, shall be universally established, and all men dwell together in friendship and in love. And let all the people say,

A M E N.