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In Memoriam.

Good Men a Nation's Strength,

A SERMON

309
1854

PREACHED ON THE OCCASION OF THE DEATH OF

GEN. ROBERT E. LEE,

In Christ Church, Alexandria, Va.

OCTOBER 16, 1870.

BY THE RECTOR,

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SERMON.

"O my father, my father! the chariot of Israel and the horsemen thereof."—II *Kings*, xiii. 14.

THIS was the exclamation of Joash, the king of Israel, as he stood by the death-bed of Elisha, the prophet. Although he had not hearkened to the instructions and warnings of the man of God, nor done him honor during his life, yet, when the prophet fell sick, and was about to die, the king hastened to his side, and "wept over his face and said: "O my father, my father! the chariot of Israel and the horsemen thereof." Ungodly man though he was, he had discernment to perceive that Elisha, as a servant and prophet of Jehovah, was of the greatest service to him and his kingdom; that he was the bulwark and defence of Israel, and that *his* loss was of far more moment than the loss of an army.

My brethren, the death of a godly man is always a calamity. The lamentation of this king of Israel over Elisha, is, in a measure, appropriate at the death of *every* faithful servant of God. For good men are a nation's strength. They constitute the most effectual shield and safeguard to a state.

Show me a nation composed of good men, and I will show you a nation great, prosperous and happy.

There justice would be meted out with an even hand, and rulers would labor to promote the public good — not to accomplish their own selfish ends. There, oppression and tyranny would be unknown. There, legal processes would cease, since all men would scrupulously observe the laws, and no man seek to “go beyond or defraud his neighbor in any matter.” There, universal good-will and charity would render the people *one family* — a nation of brethren — the happiness of each, the interest of all. There, too, virtue would have, in large measure, banished disease and emancipated the mind from that bondage to the lusts and passions of the body which now degrades and debases so many lofty intellects. Thus, in such a nation, the mind would attain its full development — (no longer dwarfed by the degrading tyranny of the body) — and the mournful spectacle, now so often witnessed, of great intellectual powers bound to the car of Appetite, and dragged in the mire of debauchery and shame, would be impossible. On the contrary, the intellect, free from all enfeebling or debasing influences, would soar with a steady, upward flight, to sublime regions of thought now unattainable. And more than this, the fellowship and communion of the spirit with its Father-God, would ennoble and elevate the character more and more, and we should behold a nation of heroes!

Such is a feeble picture of the grand spectacle which would be presented by that nation whose people were all “sober, righteous and godly.” Behold, then, how “righteousness exalteth a nation!” Social harmony and happiness, political freedom and integrity, perfect

security of person and property, physical health, mental power, moral grandeur — *these* would be the characteristics of such a state!

Can this be denied, my brethren? Will any man hesitate to acknowledge that this is substantially a correct delineation of a *Christian state*? I venture to affirm that there is not one in this assembly who does not assent to the justice of this representation. *And if so*, then I point to the inference which inevitably flows from it. It is this: just so far as any state approximates to the model of a *Christian state*, to that extent will it approach the acme of prosperity and happiness. In other words, the more godly men any state contains, the greater will be its real progress towards the goal of perfection.

We are justified, therefore, in claiming that *good men are a nation's strength, its best defence, its highest glory*. Like that noble Roman matron, who, when asked to display her jewels, pointed to her *sons*; so that state which can boast of virtuous and godly citizens, may well count *them* her strength and pride; and while other states glory in their wealth or their military prowess, she may point to her *Christian sons* and say: "*These are my jewels!*"

Yes, we may challenge universal assent to the sentiment that the virtuous and the good are the shield and the glory of a commonwealth. Even though you believed the Christian Faith a delusion, and Christian people fanatics, you could not doubt that if the precepts of Christianity were faithfully practised in any community, that community would be truly prosperous and truly great. Whatever doubts you might

have about the inspiration of Scripture, you could not question the practical benefit which would result from the general practice of its moral precepts. But then, my hearers, no man ever *has* put them into practice, nor ever *can*, unless he have believed with all his heart in the Lord Jesus Christ. And, *therefore*, though I were addressing an assembly of skeptics and freethinkers, instead of a Christian congregation, I might still challenge assent to the sentiment, that *Christian men are the best safeguard and the most precious possession of a state.*

But I am *not* (thank God) addressing such an assembly. I am loath to believe that any of my hearers are avowed unbelievers. Nay, I cherish the hope that every one of you is ready to bow to the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. How much *more*, then, may I expect from *you* a hearty "Amen" to the sentiment I have expressed! *You* believe in the superintending providence of God, and therefore will not hesitate to acknowledge that the Almighty will bless that land where godliness prevails. *You* have learned from the Scriptures that many times in the history of the world, evil has been averted from a land for the sake of the godly men that were in it. *You* have been taught that the "Effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much." You have read many examples of it in Scripture, and perhaps have known many in your own experience; and, therefore, you will be ready to acknowledge that the prayers of the righteous ward off many calamities, and bring down many blessings.

In view of all these things, I may confidently anticipate that you will agree that godly men are "the

chariot of Israel and the horsemen thereof;" and that your hearts will echo the sentiment I have expressed, *that the death of a godly man is always a calamity and an occasion for public grief.*

How much *more* is this the case when death removes a man who is as great as he is good — who occupies the pinnacle of earthly fame, and therefore exerts an influence for good as wide as civilization — whose name and memory will be cherished with tender devotion in the hearts of millions of the present generation, and will shine with undying lustre on the page of history, affording to all future generations an example of manly virtue and Christian faith!

Such an occasion, my brethren, occurs but rarely in the history of the world. Seldom, alas! is earthly fame found in company with Christian faith. Seldom are those whose names have obtained a world-wide renown found bowing in submission to the cross of Christ! The men whom the world delights to honor are usually so well satisfied with earthly laurels that they have not labored for the amaranthine crown! And, while we admire their genius or their learning or their prowess, we cannot point to them as models of Christian virtue and bid our young men follow in their footsteps as they followed in the footsteps of the Redeemer of mankind.

But, my brethren, such an occasion as I have described has occurred to *us* during the past week. In the death of ROBERT EDWARD LEE has closed the career of a man who was indeed as good as he was great; whose life affords as bright an example of Christian faith as of military genius. And therefore

we deem it fit that even the house of God should wear the emblems of mourning — not because LEE was a great soldier, not because he was a pure and stainless patriot, not merely because he was a model of uprightness and morality. No! if he were only *these*, much as I might deplore his loss, I could not, as a minister of Christ, give my consent that the church of the living God should put on sackcloth and ashes for *him*! But because ROBERT LEE was as devout as a Christian as he was distinguished as a man — because he was as faithful as a soldier of the cross as he was illustrious as a soldier of what he believed to be the cause of right — because in him the cause of religion has lost one of its best and ablest supporters, and the Episcopal Church one of its brightest ornaments — for these reasons I have thought it well that this venerable church where the illustrious dead was wont to worship — where in the solemn rite of confirmation he renewed his baptismal vow “manfully to fight” under the banner of the cross and “to continue Christ’s faithful soldier and servant to his life’s end” — and where he often knelt to receive the memorials of his Redeemer’s death and passion; — I say I have thought it meet and right that *this* church, at least, should be draped with the emblems of mourning, as a fit expression of our sorrow that so bright a light has gone out in Israel, and as a means of emphasizing to this congregation those lessons of virtue and fortitude, of humility and faith which his life affords.

The loss of such a man, my brethren, may well be lamented by every friend of religion as well as by every patron of virtue. And as yesterday men of all

parties, north and south, east and west, bowed in reverent sadness at his grave, uniting in one spontaneous outburst of sorrow for a man whose greatness was without reproach — so to-day the Christian church everywhere may fitly join in mourning his loss, while from every heart goes up the lamentation of the king of Israel:—“*O my father, my father! the chariot of Israel and the horsemen thereof!*”

I am not here, my brethren, to pronounce his eulogy. That honorable task I leave to other and abler hands. Mine is an humbler, but perhaps a more important task; it is as a minister of religion, to hold up his noble example as a hero of the faith for the imitation and emulation of those who survive him. It is not my object to contribute to *his* glory — no, my brethren, the pulpit is not the place for that — but through his life and character to show forth the glory of the Redeemer whom he served so faithfully.

1. With this view I point to him first of all as an example of *filial piety*. There is more than one old dwelling in Alexandria which could testify to ROBERT LEE'S dutiful obedience to his mother and his ever watchful and tender devotion to her in her declining years. There are traditions floating in this community which show how he, the youngest son, was the stay and support of his mother.

In these days when filial respect and obedience are so rare, and their opposites so alarmingly common, it is well that the example of the departed hero on this point should be carefully pondered: by *parents*, that they may ask themselves whether they are faithful in requiring obedience to the fifth commandment; by

children and youth, that *they* may inquire whether they are careful to *keep* this commandment. I will only add that both at school and at West Point, LEE was a model of diligence and good conduct. *He did not find it necessary to assert his manliness by idleness, misconduct or dissipation.* Young men! lay this to heart.

2. I point to ROBERT LEE, secondly, as an example of *temperance and virtue*. All through life he exercised an habitual self-restraint. He "kept his body under and brought it into subjection." He did not allow *appetite* to be his master. He was not in bondage to his *passions*.

Who ever saw *him* frequent the bar-room or the gaming table? Who ever heard violent or abusive or profane or unchaste language from *his* lips? Who ever heard a whisper against his virtue or his integrity? Oh! if the young men of our land would but learn at his grave to emulate his virtuous and temperate life — we should have a blessed consolation in his death!

3. I point you next to his *unaffected modesty and genuine humility*. Of these virtues he afforded a most illustrious example—one indeed which no *public* man, perhaps, ever equalled. Who ever passed so entirely unscathed through such an ordeal in this respect? Wondrously perfect in form and feature; courtly and elegant in his manners; possessed of splendid abilities and extensive attainments; from his earliest manhood the object of admiration and adulation; if *any* young man might be excused for indulging a vain self-esteem, surely it was ROBERT LEE. But his mind was too well balanced to yield to *vanity*. He was not tenacious of his privileges or jealous of his reputation.

He was not ambitious for preferment or eager for popular applause; but ever ready to take any post, however humble, which might be assigned him. In the meridian of his glory when success crowned his arms, and a grateful people was almost ready to worship his name, his modesty and humility shone conspicuous, and he continued the quiet, unassuming Christian gentleman he had ever been. It may truly be said of him that he

„Hath borne his faculties so meek, hath been
So clear in his great Office, that his virtues
Will plead like Angels, trumpet-tongued.”

Now these are peculiarly *Christian* virtues; and the fact that he possessed *these*, in so eminent a degree, is evidence of unusual attainments in the Christian life. I cannot refrain from remarking how painful a contrast is observable, as a general rule, among men who are possessed of fine abilities, or who occupy high places before the world!

4. Once more I point to this illustrious man as an example of *patience, fortitude, and resignation*. He was himself a bright illustration of that immortal sentiment to which he gave utterance in the darkest hour of his life—“*Human virtue should be equal to human calamity.*” By divine grace *his* virtue rose to the full measure of his calamity. As prosperity could not unduly elate him, adversity could not utterly cast him down. As glory could not intoxicate him, humiliation and defeat could not crush him. His mind rose superior to misfortune, and he proved to the world that he was as invincible in endurance as he was mighty in action. Never was he so great as in the

hour of adversity. Never did he win so magnificent a victory as when he conquered himself and bowed with dignified submission under the strokes of misfortune. Yes, brethren, but for those very misfortunes, we should never have known how great a man he was.

Let the people he loved so well prove themselves worthy of him by learning from his example, *patience* under misfortune, *fortitude* in the hour of adversity, and in all things *resignation* to the will of the Almighty Disposer of events. But let them remember that as *he* acquired them only through divine grace, so also *they* must seek them by the same means.

5. Lastly, my brethren, I point to the great ROBERT EDWARD LEE as an example of *Christian faith and conduct*. He was great in counsel, yet he made the Word of God "the man of *his* counsel." He was a man of uncommon wisdom, yet he continually sought wisdom from "the only wise God," "the Father of Lights." He was a great Captain, yet he bowed in humble contrition at the feet of Jesus and owned Him as "the Captain of his salvation." His name and fame filled the world, yet he "gloried" in nothing "save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ!" Few men ever lived a more scrupulously moral and upright life than he, yet (give heed, O ye who would substitute morality for religion!) he did not hesitate to acknowledge himself an unworthy sinner before God: he felt that *mere* morality would not suffice; he owned that Christ's atoning merits constituted his only hope of pardon and eternal life. In harmony with his *views* on this point was his *conduct*. Witness the fact that his first project after being called to preside over

Washington College, was the erection of a chapel, where professors and students might daily meet to worship the Almighty. And one of the last public acts of his life was to appeal to the young men of the College to attend the daily services in that chapel.

Yes, my brethren, ROBERT LEE was a good soldier of the Cross. He was not ashamed of the Gospel of Christ. Nay, he gloried in it as "the power of God unto salvation." His life was an illustration of its precepts, and when his last foe came upon him, the great captain was not taken by surprise; nor did he shrink from the conflict; but, clad in the panoply of God and confident in Christ, his Redeemer, he met the King of Terrors with a smile of triumphant hope on his brow; he gave forth the Christian soldier's defiant challenge, "O death! where is thy sting? O grave! where is thy victory?" And when he grappled with the foe he "came off conqueror and more than conqueror through Him that loved him!"

So true is the saying of the beloved Disciple, "This is the victory which overcometh the world, even *our faith*." It is this feature, my brethren, in the character of LEE which above all others should be studied in order to a correct understanding of his life, and a just estimate of his services to the world. This is the key to his whole career; this is the secret of his transcendent greatness — *he was a sincere and devout Christian*. He might have been a great soldier, he might have been a self-sacrificing patriot, but he could not have been the ROBERT LEE at whose grave to-day all good men drop a tear, had he not sat at the feet of Jesus and learned of Him who is "meek and lowly in heart."

The same is true in reference to his *services to the world*. The cause to which he consecrated his genius proved a *failure*, and all his brilliant victories and heroic struggles ended at last in *defeat* — *but his life was not a defeat or a failure*. He has won *moral victories*, whose lustre will never grow dim, whose fruits will never perish! He has left behind him a record which will be pointed to as long as time shall endure, as a rare illustration of Christian faith and heroism! He has taught the world that the Christian religion can turn defeat into victory, and failure into success. And by so doing he has rendered services to the cause of religion which can only be measured by the extent and immortality of his fame! This, then, brethren, is the supreme reason that we bewail his loss! This is why we mourn for him as the sons of Jacob mourned for their father, “with a great and very sore lamentation!” This is why, as we cast a last sad look at his noble form wrapped in the cold mantle of death, we cannot restrain our tears, crying, “O my father, my father! the chariot of Israel and the horsemen thereof!”

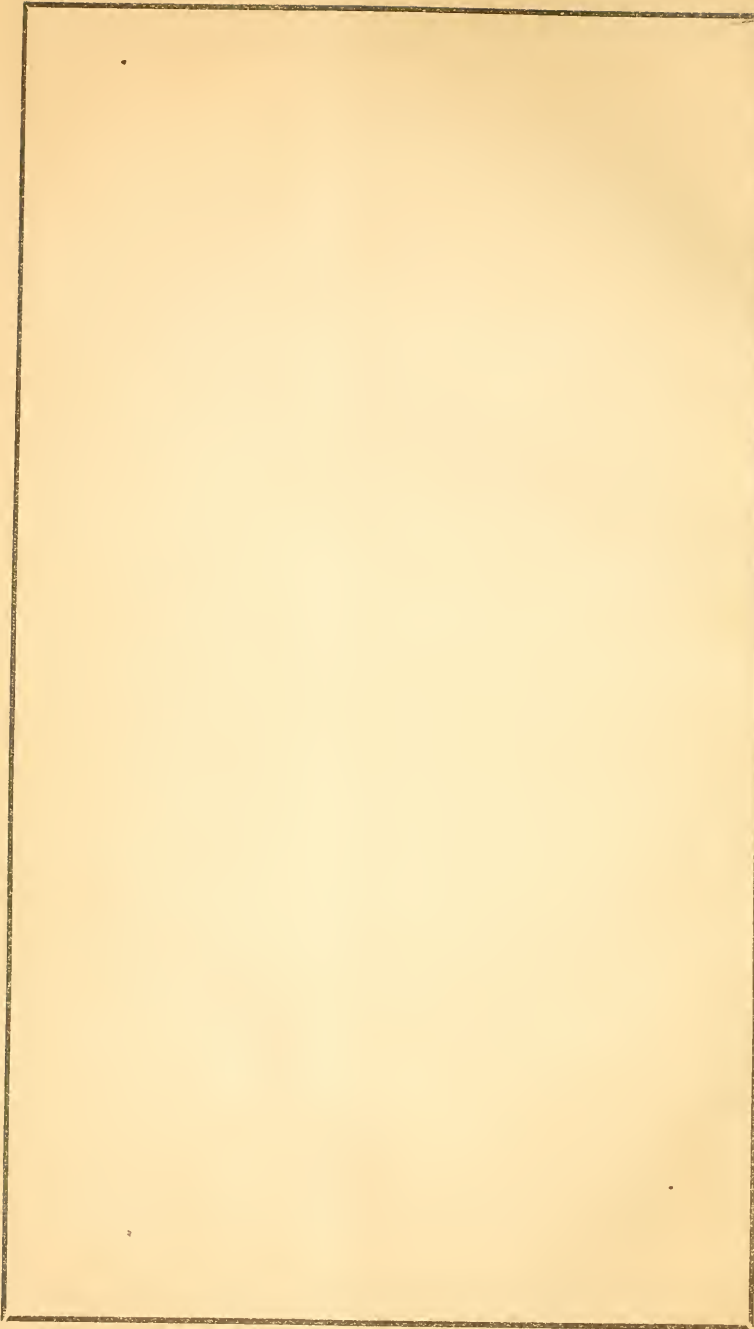
It is a sacred *privilege* which we claim, and which none would surely deny us, to weep over our departed hero. But we may not, we *must* not, forget that his death imposes upon us no less sacred a *duty* — *it is to repair his loss, as far as we may, by following in his footsteps, and striving to be, each in his sphere, a hero of the Faith.*

Christian brethren, “a burning and shining light” has been extinguished in the Church: see, therefore, that ye “let *your* light shine before men” all the

more brightly, if, by any means, ye may repair the loss of his bright example. Emulate his modesty, his humility, his patience, his fortitude, his resignation, his unswerving faith, his devout and holy life.

Young men, when you are tempted to listen to the syren song of Skepticism, remember ROBERT LEE. *He* did not deem it credulity to believe in the inspiration of the Scriptures. *He* did not deem it weakness to bow to the holy teachings of Jesus Christ and His Apostles. *He* was not ashamed to confess himself a guilty sinner before God, and to own that all his hopes rested on a Crucified Redeemer.

To those whom I may call *his fellow-soldiers*, I address the eloquent words of Bossuet, on the occasion of the death of the Prince of Condé: "Approach and bewail your great commander. I can almost persuade myself that I hear you saying: Is he then no more — our intrepid chief, who, through the rugged paths of danger, led us on to victory? His name, the only part of him that remains, is all-sufficient to excite to future exertion; his departed spirit now whispers to our souls the sacred admonition that if we hope to obtain at death the reward of our labors, we must serve our God in Heaven, and not be satisfied with serving our [country] on earth."

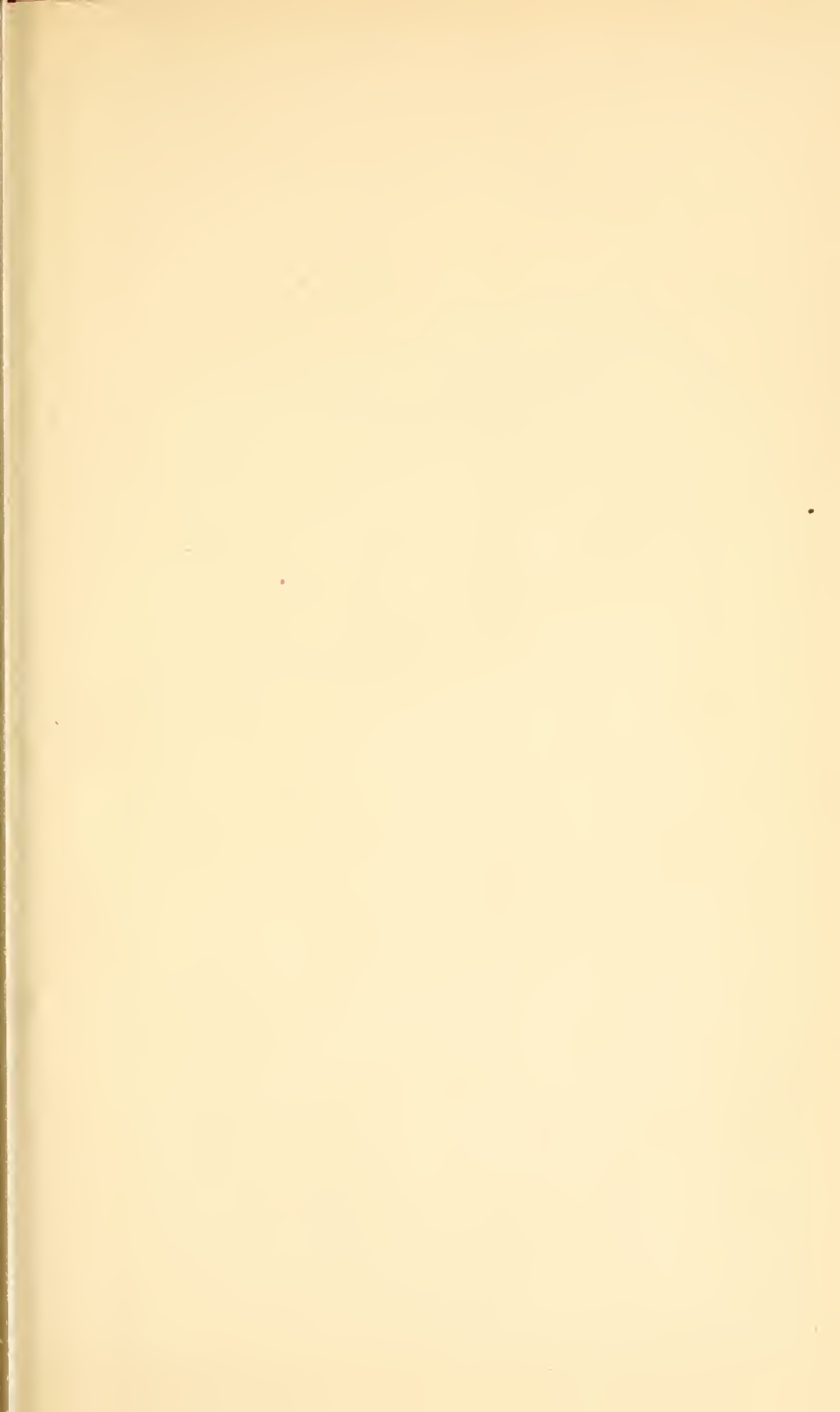


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