

Solemn Feasts Solemn Vows.

A SERMON,

PREACHED TO

ESSEX STREET CHURCH AND SOCIETY,

IN BOYLSTON HALL, BOSTON,

ON THANKSGIVING DAY.

DECEMBER 5, 1822.

BY JAMES SABINE,

PASTOR OF SAID CHURCH AND SOCIETY.

When thou shalt vow a vow unto the Lord thy God, thou shalt not
slack to pay it: for the Lord thy God will surely require it of thee.
DEUT XXIII. 21.

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ADVERTISEMENT.

THE reader must be apprized that the following Sermon was composed with no view to publication, so far from it, the author was under persuasion that it would never be repeated after the day, for the services of which it was designed. It was therefore but briefly written, much was left for extemporaneous impression. What now appears in print must be considered as the substance and the sentiment of the sermon, not the exact expression as when delivered. This is said, not to apologize for defects or faults that may appear in the discourse itself, but to account, to such as heard it, for the matter being a little different in print from what it was in the pulpit.

Solemn Feasts Solemn Vows.

A SERMON, &c.

NAHUM I. 15.

O JUDAH, KEEP THY SOLEMN FEASTS, PERFORM THY VOWS.

A NATION professing the Christian religion can hardly administer the rights and privileges of civil and political justice, without frequent appeals to the rites and ordinances of the gospel. Every citizen elected to any office of honour or of trust is pledged upon the volume of Divine Truth, or the God of Heaven is called, with up-lifted hand, to witness the important transaction. Upon the election and sitting of the Legislature, it is quite parliamentary to assemble first in the church and hear the word of God, and to join in the solemn acts of prayer and adoration. The government calls to fasting and humiliation in times of calamity, and to thanksgiving and praise in times of prosperity and peace. The government, under which we have the happiness

to live, has regularly for many years appointed its annual **FAST** and **FEAST**. To-day is our "**Solemn Feast Day**," and to assist in the public duties of it, we have selected the words of the prophet Nahum, calling upon Judah to remember his engagement with Jehovah, and to fulfil the conditions of his covenant. "O Judah keep thy solemn feasts, perform thy vows!" Nahum prophesied at the time Sennacherib invaded Judah. The miraculous destruction of the Assyrian army he considers as a type of the certain destruction of Nineveh, which destruction had been suspended upon their repentance at the preaching of Jonah 70 years before. The triumphs of Rabshakeh, and his threats, are evidently alluded to by the prophet. Upon this invasion of Jerusalem the children of Judah were scattered, and the ordinances of the temple neglected, "few came to her solemn feasts;" but upon the defeat of this tremendous army, messengers are sent to the surrounding country, with the tidings of peace, calling the people again to the Holy City, and to the performance of covenanted duties. "Behold (says the prophet) upon the mountains the feet of him that bringeth good tidings, that publisheth peace! O Judah, keep thy solemn feasts, perform thy vows: for the wicked shall no more pass through thee, he is utterly cut off."

The use we intend to make of the text as applicable to the present occasion is this, **SOLEMN FEASTS ARE SOLEMN VOWS**. Brethren, if we take this matter up aright, it must be thus taken up: this feast is a **RELIGIOUS FEAST**, it is appointed by the Legislature, but it is on no political occasion, on no case of

party, it is an ordinance for the whole commonwealth, in which all are equally interested, the magistrates and the people: The common bounty and blessings of Heaven are to pass in review, our gratitude is to appear in our conversation and lives, we vow to the **LORD** that we will be a **Holy People**, and this vow we must perform, or we are solemnly mocking God, and offering the sacrifice of fools. As to the order and serious observance of this single day I shall say but little about it. The proclamation requires that you "abstain from all labour and recreation incompatible with the religious services of the day," and I hope and believe you will do so: but your obligations are not discharged in the solemn observance of one whole day, you must keep every day holy by attending to those duties which each and every day offers: on Sabbath days you must be spiritual and fervent in devotion, observant of ordinances, and obedient to the word, making a sabbath day's journey towards heaven. On other days you must attend to your worldly concerns with fervency of spirit, still serving the Lord, and on every day let the glory of God be the great pursuit, whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.

I have only to premise farther, that on such an occasion as this, I shall not address you so much individually or congregationally, as nationally and politically; what I say therefore will be considered as applying to you as a part of the nation, and you in your national character are to receive the admonition and solemnly perform your vows.

FIRST. Call to remembrance those vows you made in days of old, and which you have so often renewed. To trace out the origin of nations is one of the most difficult things in history, the circumstances which gave them birth; the distinct family in which they rose; the compact and constitution, civil or religious, upon which they established, together with many other important things, are totally buried in oblivion. But these observations apply to this nation with less truth than to any other now under heaven: and if it be considered in regard to New-England they can hardly apply at all. You can trace the origin of this section of the nation, as a distinct people, up to the very identical men who were really the fathers of this new stock. You have their names and their number, the places which gave them birth, the names and the number of children of the first generation: the causes and the occasions of their coming to these shores: the design with which they sat down, and the constitution of civil and moral government upon which they resolved, by common suffrage, to act and to perpetuate their state and polity. And here rises to our view at once, and it appears in distinct features, the SOLEMN Vow upon which they pledged themselves upon coming here. Your Fathers were men of God, religious men; it was religion, the fear of God, and this only, that brought them to this land. They could not exercise themselves unto all godliness, and maintain a conscience void of offence in their native isle; the established religion there, they deemed a grievance, and too much of a superstition: so deep were their convictions of this, that they

counted the loss of native land, and a good land too, and native rights, but a small thing, might they have liberty to worship God as their judgments dictated. They first tried a neighbouring country where liberty of conscience was granted; and here they tried to settle, but they had pledged themselves to God to be holy, and their houses to be holy. Holland they found was not the place for them in which they might expect to realize their hopes; they saw, whatever might be their own power to withstand temptation, all would be lost in the next generation; they resolved, therefore, to abandon every earthly thing, and seek a better, that is, a more spiritual establishment. New England presented, they thought, an asylum, and to New England they came. And what was the stipulation? was it not pretty much like that code of terms laid down by Jacob when he, in his way to Padan-aram, came to a certain place in which he had hardly where to lay his head? Jacob vowed a vow, saying, "If God will be with me, and keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and raiment to put on, then shall the LORD be my God, and of all that thou shalt give me I will surely give the tenth unto thee." So the pilgrims, if God would only give them bread, and make their water sure, they would consecrate themselves and families to God. THIS WAS YOUR FATHERS' VOW. And your continuance as a people is a proof that God has fulfilled his part in the covenant, of which you are witnesses. This vow and covenant your Fathers never abjured; they often ratified it and made its obligations more strong. The early succeeding generations continued, by a series of ordinances, to keep in mind

and to increase the sanction of this covenant. Whatever may have been the changes in political affairs from that period to the present, I am not informed of any revocation of this solemn vow : the children have ever since boasted of such a parentage ; they do to the present day absolutely pride themselves in the godly deeds of their pious progenitors.

I do not mean, my brethren, to say that your Fathers have been borne out by their posterity in all their plans and resolves ; in every punctilio of doctrine or law, of ordinance, or discipline : no, could they have lived to more modern times they would themselves in some things have shaped a little different course. But I am speaking of their grand moral principle ; a determination to be “ a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a peculiar people.” If you have never nationally abjured this vow and obligation, if you have never attempted to relieve yourselves from this covenant, then it is all upon you ; and I call upon you in the words of the text to be faithful : O Judah, this day, keep thy solemn feast, perform thy vows.

SECONDLY. Afresh review your obligations, and see whether there is not an increasing injunction binding to a more solemn performance of your vows. Turn and look back upon what your Fathers had to encourage and spur them on in the performance of their vows ; I should rather have said, look at their disappointments, their afflictions and trials : their *trials* were TRIALS even to *tribulation*, GREAT TRIBULATION. Not to repeat the dangers of their voyages and travels prior to their settlement ; look at the memoir of the first year ! half their

whole number died, some of whom were their principal men, through fatigue, sickness, want of necessities, medicine, attendance, comforts. Every day and night in fear of their lives from a threatening savage horde, jealous, cruel lords of the soil. One half of their labours were vainly spent in experiments, owing to their ignorance of soil and climate, and they had to accommodate themselves continually to a series of contingencies, as must needs be in a New World. For years they had to carry on a war of defence, if not of attack, and like Nehemiah's men to hold in one hand the instruments of labour, in the other the weapons of war. In their very best condition, for a length of time, their prosperity was what in their native land would have been called misery and distress. Down to times nearer our own, the pilgrim colonies were called to endure hardness ; the parent government oppressed them, and at length made war upon them to reduce them to servitude. Their cities were burnt, their country in many parts wasted, their sons slaughtered, their fields, fields of blood. But still your Fathers held to their covenant, they performed their vows.

Now return and look upon your own state and condition. What dangers have you recently passed through ! When fell a hundredth part, much less a second, of your population, by sickness, and when experienced you hunger, want, neglect ! Your markets teem with every abundance, with every luxury ! There is no yell of the savage, no terror by night, nor arrows that flieth by day ; no pestilence that walketh in darkness, nor destruction wasting at noon-day. Your cities flourish ; your land hath

rest ; your governments is equal and benign ; the oppressor is far removed ; Thou hast peace in thy borders, and he filleth thee with the finest of the wheat. What encouragement then have you to ratify your vows and to fulfil them too. O Judah PERFORM thy VOWS.

I shall leave the subject, thus far considered, with some reflections suitable to the duties and privileges of the day.

1. Vows are generally made in times of *trouble*. It was affliction that brought your Fathers to this land. And to escape persecution they braved and endured all the trials their history records. It was under these afflictions that they entered into solemn covenant. In after generations these vows were repeated and ratified in times of calamity. I wish you would read the history of your own people more than you do, and impress your minds with the righteous resolutions entered into by them from time to time in seasons of calamity. It is so with yourselves, in times of trouble ; you call upon God and vow your vows unto the Most High.

2. As vows are made in a season of *affliction*, so they are to be paid in a season of *prosperity*. This nation has been wonderfully prospered ; your national character, your independence, your incomparable constitution of civil polity, your enlightened and enlightening population, your extended trade, your progress in the arts, your agricultural improvements, your literati, your universities, your religious freedom and increase in the knowledge of Christ : you speak of these things with delight and ardour ; you compare your state and character with that of all

other nations ; you not only vie with your parent country, but outstrip the old mother in many of the works of genius and of art. Well, now is the time for the payment of vows, now you are able, but have you so done ; as you are the most happy people on the earth, you are pledged to be the most holy people on the earth. And from my own observations I do conclude, that you have the means and the opportunity of being the happiest people on the face of the globe : there is nothing to prevent it in the course of Providence, at least nothing that appears at present. Your government is of your own framing ; your princes are of yourselves ; the public revenue is raised and expended as the contributors to it dictate ; men in office and in trust are placed or displaced at the will of their constituents ; you are lords of the soil you cultivate ; you can enter into no war unless you declare it yourselves ; and you are, in Providence, so far removed from the cabals of princes, that you can hardly have any inducement to draw the sword ; you have no inquisition, no tiara, no lord bishops, nor any priest-craft, nor church-craft, unless you choose it ; every man may sit under his own vine and under his own fig tree, none daring to make him afraid. If you have chains they must be of your own forging. And I am willing to confess that if I must be bound I should wish to make my own fetters and choose the manner of my own bondage : but I had rather be free, I would not be a slave though I might choose my slavery ; I had rather be a free man, as free as God made me. And this is your privileges ! What

then can hinder you from being the happiest people on the earth! And if you have these means, you ought to avail yourselves of them, and to enjoy the boon so richly bestowed. And it follows too, THAT YOU OUGHT TO BE THE HOLIEST PEOPLE ON THE EARTH, for all this prosperity is granted by the God of Heaven to enable you to pay him your vows. Nor do I see any thing to hinder you from being the holiest people on earth; indeed, if you make a right use of your mercies and privileges you must be so; you have not the same temptations to sin as other nations. Riches are a great snare, they that are full deny the Lord and say, "Are not our tongues our own, and who shall rule over us." Your riches are in your labour and industry, not in heaps of gold and silver. The pride of family and of blood, so enflaming in the Old World, is not known among you. Poverty too, a source of no small evil in most countries, is in great measure prevented by encouragements to diligence and to duty, so that the diligent soul is fat, and a man's character is worth preserving; not so poor as to be tempted to steal, nor so mean as to abandon the tongue to profaneness and to cursing. The plainness and humility of your Father's habits, their distance from the pomp and vain show of courts, their aversion to dissipation and to dissipating pleasures are calculated to inspire you with simplicity and humbleness of mind; you cannot want the artificial morality of the stage, nor the real immorality of the mask and wanton dance. The tricks, the swindling, the defraud of the Jockey Club, the turf and the gambling table can have no charms for you;

some of these vices you have never seen, and you never hear of them but to detest them.* When I turn and look down the long vista of your history I am reminded of the famous prophecy upon the family of Jeshurun, "How goodly are thy tents, O Jacob, and thy tabernacles, O Israel! As the vallies are they spread forth, as gardens by the river's side, as the trees of lign-aloes which the LORD hath planted, and as cedar-trees beside the waters. God brought him forth out of Egypt, he hath as it were the strength of an unicorn: he shall eat up the nations his enemies, and break their bones, and

*If vows made in trouble are to be paid in a season of deliverance and prosperity, as they are expected to be, then much watchfulness and a devotional spirit will be necessary. JESHURUN was delivered from trouble and grew fat, but instead of paying vows, there was wantonness and a wallowing in pleasure. Who would have thought of Israel, not yet out of the wilderness, forming an alliance and dallying with the Midianites, but it was so. And the good people of these States are in great danger from the flood of pleasure rolling in upon them. The generation rising up are in an Elysium of snares; bad books, the drama, profane music, &c. &c. lower the tone of morals and give a distaste for religion. These temptations so powerful, can hardly fail of producing some bad effect: and then there is at once a great drawback upon the blessed and efficient consequences of Revivals of Religion. If professors of religion do not pay their vows, and come to the moral standard of their Fathers, Revivals of Religion, so called, will be easily effected. The line between the church and the world, between him that believeth and an infidel, is so narrowed that it is but a little way from the broad road of destruction to the strait path leading to life: a profession of religion is not difficult to make; it is no warfare, no cross, and such a profession is not difficult to maintain. Professors of religion need constantly to be revived and to be kept alive. "Awake thou that sleepest, arise from the dead and Christ shall give thee life."

pierce them through with his arrows. Blessed is he that blesseth thee, and cursed is he that curseth thee." Yes, on this way by which the LORD hath led thee I can see on either side an altar here, and an Ebenezer there; at one place you met Jehovah-jireh,* at another Jehovah-nissi,† and in every place you could say Jehovah-shammah.‡ I could with pleasure enlarge on this article; but I fear that there may be a consciousness on your part, that you have not so appreciated your privileges, as to excel in every point, as might have been expected, and then you would think that either your preacher is flattering your vanity or ironizing your deficiencies. I wish to do neither, and therefore proceed to observe,

3. That if you have forgotten your vows, God has not. He will hold you to them. You may have forgotten them, or have neglected to keep them so strictly as God demands, and as God has been led to expect. But nothing can release you from solemn vows: forgetfulness of them or remissness in discharging them cannot. It is no uncommon thing for solemn impressions, made in seasons of distress to wear off. Israel when just delivered from distress sang God's praises and said, "All that the LORD commandeth us we will do. But they soon forgot his works and the wonders which he had shown them; they rebelled and vexed his Holy Spirit and murmured in their tents." But Israel paid for all this; there was no being off from the

* The LORD will provide, or Jehovah Providence.

† The LORD my banner.

‡ The LORD is there.

covenant; God had sworn, and Jacob had sworn; God would fulfil his word, and he would make Jacob fulfil his. Now I have no hesitancy in saying that this nation is pledged, by solemn vows, to be a people most holy to the LORD, and if so God will make them so. They may deal falsely in the covenant, but they will be chastised and brought to it again. The obligations of this nation are of a higher mark than those of other nations; other nations will be corrected and reduced to obedience, and he that knoweth his master's will best and doeth it not shall be beaten with many stripes. Other nations will be chastised with whips, but this with scorpions. Brethren, I am now reasoning, not prophesying; I am supposing that you have been, or shall be treacherous; I do not say that it is, or will be so; this I wish you to consider; and it is for you to consider it, and that now. The official document before me (the Proclamation) calls to repentance for all past follies and transgressions: and here we learn our duty, *our own* duty, whatever may be the state or temper of the nation at large: we can only confess our own sins; we cannot confess the sins of others; and this is sufficient for us, and it may work for the good of the whole. Suppose we, a few families, a single congregation, set about performing our vows, and are enabled so to do, then the Spirit of God will be with us; and it must, if it remain in the nation, remain some where. Or if we repent and bewail our past follies, then the reformation begins with us; and it must begin with some, perhaps with a few first.

Every individual of us is capable of rendering religion a personal thing : and we who have families can domesticate it, which will be going a great way. As soon as religion is predominant in every family it is become national. Let us then turn to the acknowledgment of this vow, and from this day say with Joshua, "As for me and my house we will serve the LORD." "Arise and go unto Bethel and dwell there ; and build an altar unto God who answered you in the day of your distress, and was with you and helped you in the way in which you went. OFFER UNTO GOD THANKSGIVING ; AND PAY THY VOWS UNTO THE MOST HIGH.