



## Thanksgiving sermon Benjamin Morgan Palmer (1860)

*White Presbyterian minister Benjamin Morgan Palmer, originally from South Carolina, was serving a church in New Orleans when he preached this sermon in late November 1860. The occasion was a thanksgiving day proclaimed by Louisiana's governor, but Palmer used his sermon to address the sense of political crisis that many white southerners felt due to Abraham Lincoln's victory in the US presidential election earlier that month. Palmer preached in support of secession, asserting that God had given the South a national mission to "preserve and transmit" slavery "wherever Providence and nature may carry it." The sermon was widely reported on and reprinted; the text as excerpted here was published in New York as a tract, under a cover that read Slavery a Divine Trust: The Duty of the South to Preserve and Perpetuate the Institution as It Now Exists. After secession, Palmer became a leader in the Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States of America.*

It is not to be concealed that we are in the most fearful and perilous crisis which has occurred in our history as a nation. The cords which, during four-fifths of a century, have bound together this growing republic are now strained to their utmost tension—they just need the touch of fire to part asunder forever. [...] Sectional divisions; the jealousy of rival interests; the lust of political power; a bastard ambition, which looks to personal aggrandizement rather than to the public weal; a reckless radicalism, which seeks for the subversion of all that is ancient and stable; and a furious fanaticism, which drives on its ill-considered conclusions with utter disregard of the evil it engenders—all these combine to create a portentous crisis, the like of which we have never known before and which puts to a crucifying test the virtue, the patriotism, and the piety of the country. [...]

In determining our duty in this emergency, it is necessary that we should first ascertain the nature of the trust providentially committed to us. A nation often has a character as well-defined and intense as that of the individual. [...T]his individuality of character alone makes any people truly historic, competent to work out its specific mission and to become a factor in the world's progress. The particular trust assigned to such a people becomes the pledge of divine protection, and their fidelity to it determines the fate by which it is finally overtaken. [...] If, then, the South is such a people, what, at this juncture, is their providential trust? I answer that it is *to conserve and to perpetuate the institution of domestic slavery as now existing*. [...W]e should at once lift ourselves, intelligently, to the highest moral ground and proclaim to all the world that we hold this trust from God, and in its occupancy we are prepared to stand or fall as God may appoint. If the critical moment has arrived at which the great issue is joined, let us say that, in the sight of all perils, we will stand by our trust—and God be with the right!

The argument which enforces the solemnity of this providential trust is simple and condensed. It is bound upon us, then, by the *principle of self-preservation*, that "first law" which is continually asserting its supremacy over others. Need I pause to show how this system of servitude underlies and supports our material interests? That our wealth consists in our lands and in the serfs who till them? That from the nature of our products, they can only be cultivated by labor which must be controlled in order to be certain? That any other than a tropical race must faint and wither beneath a tropical sun? Need I pause to show how this system is interwoven with our entire

social fabric? That these slaves form parts of our households, even as our children; and that, too, through a relationship recognized and sanctioned in the scriptures of God even as the other? Must I pause to show how it has fashioned our modes of life, and determined all our habits of thought and feeling, and molded the very type of our civilization? How, then, can the hand of violence be laid upon it without involving our existence? [...]

This duty is bound upon us again *as the constituted guardians of the slaves themselves*. Our lot is not more implicated in theirs than is their lot in ours; in our mutual relations, we survive or perish together. The worst foes of the black race are those who have intermeddled on their behalf. We know better than others that every attribute of their character fits them for dependence and servitude. By nature the most affectionate and loyal of all races beneath the sun, they are also the most helpless; and no calamity can befall them greater than the loss of that protection they enjoy under this patriarchal system. Indeed, the experiment has been grandly tried of precipitating them upon freedom, which they know not how to enjoy; and the dismal results are before us in statistics that astonish the world. With the fairest portions of the earth in their possession, and with the advantage of a long discipline as cultivators of the soil, their constitutional indolence has converted the most beautiful islands of the sea into a howling waste. [...] Freedom would be their doom; and equally from both they call upon us, their providential guardians, to be protected. I know this argument will be scoffed abroad as the hypocritical cover thrown over our own cupidity and selfishness; but every Southern master knows its truth and feels its power. My servant, whether born in my house or bought with my money, stands to me in the relation of a child. Though providentially owing me service, which, providentially, I am bound to exact, he is, nevertheless, my brother and my friend; and I am, to him, a guardian and a father. He leans upon me for protection, for counsel, and for blessing; and so long as the relation continues, no power but the power of almighty God shall come between him and me. Were there no argument but this, it binds upon us the providential duty of preserving the relation, that we may save him from a doom worse than death.

It is a duty which we owe, further, *to the civilized world*. It is a remarkable fact that during these thirty years of unceasing warfare against slavery, and while a lying spirit has inflamed the world against us, that world has grown more and more dependent upon it for sustenance and wealth. Every tyro knows that all branches of industry fall back upon the soil. We must come, every one of us, to the bosom of this great mother for nourishment. In the happy partnership which has grown up, in providence, between the tribes of this confederacy, our industry has been concentrated upon agriculture. To the North, we have cheerfully resigned all the profits arising from manufacture and commerce. These profits they have, for the most part, fairly earned, and we have never begrudged them. We have sent them our sugar and bought it back when refined; we have sent them our cotton and bought it back when spun into thread or woven into cloth. Almost every article we use, from the shoe-latchet to the most elaborate and costly article of luxury, they have made, and we have bought; and both sections have thriven by the partnership, as no people ever thrived before since the first shining of the sun. [...] Even beyond this, the enriching commerce which has built the splendid cities and marble palaces of England, as well as of America, has been largely established upon the products of our soil; and the blooms upon Southern fields, gathered by black hands, have fed the spindles and looms of Manchester and Birmingham not less than of Lawrence and Lowell. Strike now a blow at this system of labor,

and the world itself totters at the stroke. Shall we permit that blow to fall? Do we not owe it to civilized man to stand in the breach and stay the uplifted arm? [...]

Last of all, in this great struggle, *we defend the cause of God and religion*. The abolition spirit is undeniably atheistic. The demon which erected its throne upon the guillotine in the days of Robespierre and Marat, which abolished the Sabbath and worshipped reason in the person of a harlot, yet survives to work other horrors, of which those of the French revolution are but the type. Among a people so generally religious as the American, a disguise must be worn; but it is the same old threadbare disguise of the advocacy of human rights. From a thousand Jacobin clubs here, as in France, the decree has gone forth which strikes at God by striking at all subordination and law. [...T]hese self-constituted reformers [...] trample upon obligations sacred as any which can bind the conscience. [...T]hese fierce zealots who undertake to drive the chariot of the sun [...] dash athwart the spheres, utterly disregarding the delicate mechanism of Providence, which moves on, wheels within wheels, with pivots and balances and springs, which the great designer alone can control. This spirit of atheism, which knows [...] no Bible which sanctions law [...], has selected us for its victims and slavery for its issue. Its banner cry rings out already upon the air—"Liberty, equality, fraternity," which, simply interpreted, mean bondage, confiscation, and massacre. With its tricolor waving in the breeze, it waits to inaugurate its reign of terror. To the South, the highest position is assigned: of defending, before all nations, the cause of all religion and of all truth. In this trust, we are resisting the power which wars against constitutions and laws and compacts, against Sabbaths and sanctuaries, against the family, the state, and the church; which blasphemously invades the prerogatives of God and rebukes the Most High for the errors of his administration; which, if it cannot snatch the reins of empire from his grasp, will lay the universe in ruins at his feet. Is it possible that we shall decline the onset?

This argument, then, which sweeps over the entire circle of our relations, touches the four cardinal points of duty *to ourselves, to our slaves, to the world, and to almighty God*. It establishes the nature and solemnity of our present trust *to preserve and transmit our existing system of domestic servitude, with the right, unchallenged by man, to go and root itself wherever Providence and nature may carry it*. This trust we will discharge in the face of the worst possible peril. Though war be the aggregation of all evils, yet should the madness of the hour appeal to the arbitration of the sword, we will not shrink even from the baptism of fire. [...]

The position of the South is, at this moment, sublime. If she has grace given her to know her hour, she will save herself, the country, and the world. It will involve, indeed, temporary prostration and distress [...] But [...] if she will arise in her majesty and speak now as with the voice of one man, she will roll back for all time the curse that is upon her. If she succumbs now, she transmits that curse as an heirloom to posterity. [...T]he institutions of your soil will be overthrown; and within five and twenty years, the history of St. Domingo will be the record of Louisiana. [...]

I have done my duty under as deep a sense of responsibility to God and man as I have ever felt. Under a full conviction that the salvation of the whole country is depending upon the action of the South, I am impelled to deepen the sentiment of resistance in the Southern mind and to strengthen the current now flowing toward a union of the South in defense of her chartered rights. [...] It only remains to say that whatever be the fortunes of the South, I accept them for my

own. Born upon her soil of a father thus born before me—from an ancestry that occupied it while yet it was a part of England's possessions—she is, in every sense, my mother. I shall die upon her bosom; she shall know no peril but it is my peril, no conflict but it is my conflict, and no abyss of ruin into which I shall not share her fall. May the Lord God cover her head in this, her day of battle!

**Source:** B. M. Palmer, *Thanksgiving Sermon, Delivered at the First Presbyterian Church, New Orleans, on Thursday, December 29, 1860* (New York: George F. Nesbitt & Co., 1861), 4-13, 19-20, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/loc.ark:/13960/t5h99788p>. Public domain.

The sermon was first published as B. M. Palmer, “Thanksgiving Sermon, Delivered at the First Presbyterian Church, New Orleans, on Thursday, Nov. 29,” *Daily True Delta* (New Orleans), November 30, 1860, supplement, 1. A digital scan, unreadable in some spots, available via Readex: America’s Historical Newspapers. Note that the sermon was delivered on November 29—not, as the Nesbitt edition misstates, on December 29.

Excerpts edited by John-Charles Duffy. Spelling and punctuation emended in line with modern American conventions. The use of italics replicates the source publication; so too the use of grammatical fragments in rhetorical questions. For the sake of modernization, some terms capitalized in the source have been converted here to lowercase: *abolition*, *republic*, *state*, *church*, and *divine*. The source already favored lowercase for divine pronouns, as well as for *almighty*, *scripture*, and *French revolution*. The use of lowercase for the racial label *black* follows the source publication, as does the capitalizing of the regional labels *South*, *Southern*, and *North*. The word *providence* is variously capitalized or lowercase here as per the source.

These edited excerpts from Palmer’s sermon are intended for **teaching** purposes only. For **research** purposes, you should consult, quote, and cite the source publication listed above.



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