



Sermon in the House of Representatives Henry Highland Garnet (1865)

Henry Garnet was born into slavery in Maryland, but while he was a child, his family escaped to New York. He grew up to become a Presbyterian minister, toured Europe as an abolitionist orator, and lived for a time in Jamaica as a missionary. In 1865, while Garnet was pastoring a black Presbyterian congregation in Washington DC, he was invited by the chaplain of the US House of Representatives to deliver a Sunday sermon in the House chamber. The occasion for this invitation was Congress's having recently voted in favor of the Thirteenth Amendment (which still, however, had to be ratified by the states). Garnet's sermon, delivered before a multiracial audience, was the first address given in the US Capitol by an African American.

For they bind heavy burdens, and grievous to be borne, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers.

Matthew 23:4

In this chapter, of which my text is a sentence, the Lord Jesus addressed his disciples and the multitude that hung spellbound upon the words that fell from his lips. He admonished them to beware of the religion of the scribes and Pharisees [...] They were learned in the law of Moses and in the traditions of their fathers, but the principles of righteousness failed to affect their hearts. [...] They demanded that others should be just, merciful, pure, peaceable, and righteous. But they were unjust, impure, unmerciful—they hated and wronged a portion of their fellowmen and waged continual war against the government of God. On other men's shoulders, they bound heavy and grievous burdens of duties and obligations. The people groaned beneath the loads which were imposed upon them and, in bitterness of spirit, cried out and filled the land with lamentations. But with their eyes closed and their hearts hardened, they heeded not, neither did they care. [...] With loud voice and proud and defiant mien, they said, "These burdens are for them and not for us. Behold how patiently they bear them. Their shoulders are broad and adapted to the condition to which we have doomed them. But as for us, it is irksome even to adjust their burdens, though we see them stagger beneath them." [...]

We have modern scribes and Pharisees, who are faithful to their prototypes of ancient times. [...] Allow me to describe them. They are intelligent and well informed and can never say, either before an earthly tribunal or at the bar of God, "We knew not of ourselves what was right." [...] They acknowledge that there is a just and impartial God and are not altogether unacquainted with the law of Christian love and kindness. They claim for themselves the broadest freedom. Boastfully they tell us that they have received, from the court of heaven, the Magna Carta of human rights that was handed down through the clouds and amid the lightnings of Sinai, and given again by the Son of God on the Mount of Beatitudes while the glory of the Father shone around him. They tell us that from the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, they have obtained a guaranty of their political freedom; and from the Bible, they derive their claim to all the blessings of religious liberty. With just pride, they tell us that they are descended from the Pilgrims, who threw themselves upon the bosom of the treacherous sea and braved storms and tempests, that they might find, in a strange land and among savages, free homes where they might build their altars that should blaze with acceptable service unto God. [...]

But others, their fellowmen—equal before the Almighty, and made by him of the same blood, and glowing with immortality—they doom to lifelong servitude and chains. Yes, they stand in the most sacred places on earth and beneath the gaze of the piercing eye of Jehovah, the universal Father of all men, and declare “that the best possible condition of the negro is slavery.”^a [...] In the name of the Triune God, I denounce the sentiment as unrighteous beyond measure, and the holy and the just of the whole earth say in regard to it: *Anathema maranatha*.

What is slavery? [...] Let us view this demon, which the people have worshiped as a god. Come forth, thou grim monster, that thou mayest be critically examined! There he stands. Behold him, one and all. Its work is to chattelize man, to hold property in human beings. Great God! I would as soon attempt to enslave Gabriel or Michael as to enslave a man made in the image of God and for whom Christ died. Slavery is snatching man from the high place to which he was lifted by the hand of God and dragging him down to the level of the brute creation, where he is made to be the companion of the horse and the fellow of the ox. It tears the crown of glory from his head and, as far as possible, obliterates the image of God that is in him. [...S]lavery attempts to make man a brute. It treats him as a beast. Its terrible work is not finished until the ruined victim of its lusts, and pride, and avarice, and hatred is reduced so low that, with tearful eyes and feeble voice, he faintly cries, “I am happy and contented—I love this condition.” [...]

Slavery commenced its dreadful work in kidnapping unoffending men in a foreign and distant land and in piracy on the seas. The plunderers were not the followers of Mahomet, nor the devotees of Hindooism, nor benighted pagans, nor idolaters, but people called Christians; and thus the ruthless traders in the souls and bodies of men fastened upon Christianity a crime and stain, at the sight of which it shudders and shrieks. [...] This commerce in human beings [...] is the highly concentrated essence of all conceivable wickedness: theft, robbery, pollution, unbridled passion, incest, cruelty, cold-blooded murder, blasphemy, and defiance of the laws of God. [...] It feeds and pampers its hateful handmaid, prejudice. It has divided our national councils. It has engendered deadly strife between brethren. It has wasted the treasure of the commonwealth and the lives of thousands of brave men, and driven troops of helpless women and children into yawning tombs. It has caused the bloodiest civil war recorded in the book of time. It has shorn this nation of its locks of strength, that was rising as a young lion in the Western world. It has offered us as a sacrifice to the jealousy and cupidity of tyrants, despots, and adventurers of foreign countries. It has opened a door through which a usurper, a perjured but a powerful prince, might stealthily enter and build an empire on the golden borders of our

^a *An inexact quotation of white politician Fernando Wood, who represented New York in the US House of Representatives in 1864, when the House was debating what became the Thirteenth Amendment. As part of a floor speech opposing the proposed amendment, Wood said: “The sentiment of opposition to slavery is so powerful that I could hardly expect to offer any reason which could awaken sympathy in behalf of its continuance, even if I showed that it was the best possible condition to insure the happiness of the negro race [...]” During the next day’s floor debate, Pennsylvania representative M. Russell Thayer paraphrased Wood as having said that “slavery is the best possible condition of the negro race.” Thayer called Wood’s assertion “monstrous” and “barbarous”—to which Wood immediately retorted, “I reaffirm it.” Garnet is rebuking Wood in the same chamber where Wood made those remarks.*

Sens. Wood and Thayer, Congressional Globe, 38th Cong., 1st sess. (June 14-15, 1864), 2942, 2980, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/osu.32437011508880>.

southwestern frontier, and which is but a stepping-stone to further and unlimited conquests on this continent. It has desolated the fairest portions of our land, “until the wolf, long since driven back by the march of civilization, returns after the lapse of a hundred years and howls amidst its ruins.”^b It seals up the Bible and mutilates its sacred truths, and flies into the face of the Almighty and impiously asks, “Who art thou that I should obey thee?” Such are the outlines of this fearful national sin [...]

It is often asked: When and where will the demands of the reformers of this and coming ages end? It is a fair question, and I will answer: When all unjust and heavy burdens shall be removed from every man in the land. When all invidious and proscriptive distinctions shall be blotted out from our laws, whether they be constitutional, statute, or municipal laws. When emancipation shall be followed by enfranchisement, and all men holding allegiance to the government shall enjoy every right of American citizenship. When our brave and gallant soldiers shall have justice done unto them. When the men who endure the sufferings and perils of the battlefield in the defense of their country, and in order to keep our rulers in their places, shall enjoy the well-earned privilege of voting for them. When in the army and navy, and in every legitimate and honorable occupation, promotion shall smile upon merit without the slightest regard to the complexion of a man’s face. When there shall be no more class legislation and no more trouble concerning the black man than there is in regard to other American citizens. When, in every respect, he shall be equal before the law and shall be left to make his own way in the social walks of life. [...]

Great sacrifices have been made by the people, yet greater still are demanded ere atonement can be made for our national sins. Eternal justice holds heavy mortgages against us and will require the payment of the last farthing. [...] We have paid some of the fearful installments, but there are other heavy obligations to be met. [...]

^b Another inexact quotation. The original source is a speech delivered in 1828 at a meeting of the American Colonization Society (ACS) by George Washington Parke Custis, a white Virginian and grandson of former first lady Martha Washington. Although a lifelong slaveholder himself, Custis argued in his speech to the ACS that slavery was producing economic decline and depopulation in southern states: “See the wide-spreading ruin which the avarice of our ancestral government has produced in the South, as witnessed in a sparse population of freemen, deserted habitations, fields without culture, and, strange to tell, even the wolf, which, driven back long since by the approach of man, now returns, after the lapse of an hundred years, to howl o’er the desolations of slavery.”

This passage from Custis’s speech was quoted by white abolitionist Lydia Maria Child in an 1836 publication. After that, the quotation circulated through the speeches and writings of other anti-slavery activists, sometimes misattributed to a “Mr. Curtis” (not Custis) and sometimes erroneously identified as coming from a speech to the Virginia state legislature. (In reality, Custis delivered his speech in the chamber of the US House of Representatives, where the ACS had been permitted to meet. That wasn’t the same location, though, where Garnet spoke, since by 1865 the House had moved to a new chamber.)

“Annual Meeting of the American Colonization Society (Concluded),” *African Repository and Colonial Journal* 3, no. 12 (February 1828), 357, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/ia.ark:/13960/t0ns4cz7m>. To clarify the syntax, a comma omitted by John-Charles Duffy. See also Lydia Maria Child, *The Evils of Slavery and the Cure of Slavery* (Newburyport [MA]: Charles Whipple, 1836), 12, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/njp.32101037454467>.

Honorable Senators and Representatives! Illustrious rulers of this great nation! I cannot refrain this day from invoking upon you, in God’s name, the blessings of millions who were ready to perish, but to whom a new and better life has been opened by your humanity, justice, and patriotism. You have said, “Let the Constitution of the country be so amended that slavery and involuntary servitude shall no longer exist in the United States, except in punishment for crime.” Surely an act so sublime could not escape divine notice, and doubtless the deed has been recorded in the archives of heaven. [...] The nation has begun its exodus from worse than Egyptian bondage, and I beseech you that you say to the people “that they go forward.” With the assurance of God’s favor in all things done in obedience to his righteous will, and guided by day and by night by the pillars of cloud and fire, let us not pause until we have reached the other and safe side of the stormy and crimson sea. Let freemen and patriots mete out complete and equal justice to all men, and thus prove to mankind the superiority of our democratic, republican government.

Favored men and honored of God as his instruments, speedily finish the work which he has given you to do. *Emancipate, enfranchise, educate, and give the blessings of the gospel to every American citizen.* [...] Then before us a path of prosperity will open, and upon us will descend the mercies and favors of God. Then shall the people of other countries, who are standing tiptoe on the shores of every ocean, earnestly looking to see the end of this amazing conflict, behold a republic that is sufficiently strong to outlive the ruin and desolations of civil war, having the magnanimity to do justice to the poorest and weakest of her citizens. Thus shall we give to the world the form of a model republic, founded on the principles of justice and humanity and Christianity, in which the burdens of war and the blessings of peace are equally borne and enjoyed by all.

Source: Henry Highland Garnet, *A Memorial Discourse [...] Delivered in the Hall of the House of Representatives* [...] (Philadelphia: Joseph M. Wilson, 1865), 69-91, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/nyp.33433082367966>. Public domain, Google-digitized.

Excerpts edited and annotated by John-Charles Duffy. A footnote citation omitted from the source publication, replaced with a longer explanatory footnote by Duffy. Some paragraph breaks in the source omitted for a more compact presentation of the text. Spelling, capitalization, punctuation, typography (italics, small caps), and the formatting of a biblical epigraph and citation emended in line with modern conventions, except that the archaic spellings *Mahomet* and *Hindooism* have been retained to illustrate 19th-century usage. *Anathema* and *maranatha*, which appear in roman type in the text, are italicized here as foreign words; but otherwise italics are used less frequently here than in the source.

The use of lowercase for *negro* reproduces the usage of the source publication. Some words capitalized in the source have been downcased here for the sake of modernization or readability: the verbs *enfranchise* and *educate*, capitalized in the source to emphasize alliteration; the word *divine* and the word *god*, the latter referring to slavery as a false deity; and the political terms *commonwealth*, *government*, *republic(an)*, and *democratic*.

These edited excerpts from Garnet’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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