

**A DISCOURSE ON
SLAVERY IN THE UNITED
STATES: DELIVERED IN
BROOKLYN, JULY 3, 1831**

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A Discourse on Slavery in the United States: Delivered in Brooklyn, July 3, 1831 by Samuel J. May

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SAMUEL J. MAY

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DISCOURSE

SLAVERY IN THE UNITED STATES,

DELIVERED IN BROOKLYN, JULY 3, 1831.

BY SAMUEL J. MAY,
Pastor of the First Church in Brooklyn, Connecticut.

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A part of the following Discourse was first delivered in Boston on the evening of the 29th of May. It was re-written and preached to my own people, July 3d. Since then, it has been delivered in three different towns. Several persons have expressed a desire that it should be published. I have therefore amended and enlarged it; and now respectfully offer it to the perusal of my fellow citizens of New-England.

THE AUTHOR.

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DISCOURSE.

EZEKIEL xxii. 28.

The people of the land have used oppression, and exercised robbery, and have vexed the poor and needy.

To-morrow is our nation's Jubilee ! Millions will hail it with exultation ! Again will the history of our Independence be rehearsed—the deeds of our Fathers again recounted. We shall hear how firm they were in their resolves, how devoted in the fight, and how successful ; and more than all, how magnanimously they suppressed every selfish wish, and, when they had redeemed it, gave up this goodly heritage to the people. The story has been often told, but it will bear repeating ; and will be listened to by thousands with unabated delight.

The orators of the day will, no doubt, as usual, enumerate the many and great blessings which have been vouchsafed unto us—political and religious freedom—the general diffusion of knowledge—and the unexampled success of the labors and enterprises of our citizens. They will eulogize, in no measured terms perhaps, our civil Constitution ; and indulge, as their predecessors have done, in high if not extravagant anticipations of our future greatness and glory.

My hearers, I hope I am not wanting in patriotism, if I may be unable to join in the approaching celebration, without some feeling of deep shame for my country. I am not insensible to the many favors we have received, the peculiar advantages we enjoy, and the intellectual and moral progress which we have made. But on the other hand, I cannot shut my eyes from the great sins we have committed, from the foul stains which are yet fresh upon our national character. In view of these, methinks it would become us to lower the tone of our rejoicing.

Undue self-gratulation will be as delusive to a nation as to a man. It is as unsafe for a people as for individuals to 'think of themselves more highly than they ought to think.' This mistake, however, we have committed egregiously, especially in the celebration of our national anniversaries. While year after year, we have filled the ethereal concave with the loud-swelling notes of self-applause, sins have accumulated among us to a frightful enormity, sins that have brought home to us from abroad the bitterest reproaches, and have challenged the displeasure of Heaven. Well nigh had we become (what we were called in derision) 'a nation of drunkards.' Thanks be to God, our eyes were opened to our alarming situation before it was too late, though our danger from Intemperance is not yet overpast. So, too, while we have been exulting in our peculiar privileges, party and sectarian spirit has diffused its baneful influences throughout our land. The harsh notes of political discord, sectional and local animosities, (to say nothing of polemic strife,) are resounding every where. Still farther, the unexampled facilities for trade, which were presented to us by the circumstances of Europe soon after our Independence, generated among us a lust of wealth, which has plunged many of our citizens into reckless if not unprincipled speculations, and the arts of dishonest traffic.

But worse, far worse than all, while we have been vaunting our free institutions, claiming for them the admiration of the world, and calling our land the birth-place of liberty, the asylum of the oppressed, we have been holding *two millions* of our fellow men in the most abject servitude. We still hold them thus, seemingly unconscious that we are outraging, in view of the world, the fundamental doctrine of our Constitution, and in sight of Heaven, the first principles of our Holy Religion! We have little claim, therefore, to the honorable titles we assume. There is not a nation on the earth, which is guilty of a grosser violation of the dearest rights of man than we are. We are trampling upon *two millions* of our race, denying them all the prerogatives of humanity, treating them as but a higher order of

brutes. I say *we* are doing this. I say so, because our national government permits slavery; not only permits, but upholds it; upholds it, not merely by the sanction which it gives to the laws of the southern States, but by its own enactments of the laws for those districts over which itself presides.

The words of Ezekiel to God's favored nation of old, may be repeated as justly applicable to us, 'The people of this land have used oppression, and exercised robbery, and have vexed the poor and needy.' Would that this allegation might be uttered to every assembly that may be gathered to-morrow throughout our country, and some fearless prophet send home the truth to every heart! Would that the future anniversaries of our Independence might be days of unfeigned humiliation, until the yoke of the oppressed millions be broken, and slavery be banished from among us!

Who of you, my hearers, have read of the cruel bondage suffered by the Israelites in Egypt, without feeling an abhorrence of their oppressors? I trust not one. Who of you have read of the slavery enforced upon their captives by the Greeks and Romans, and not cried shame upon the conquerors? Not one. Why then, I ask with high astonishment, are you so unmoved in view of similar enormities in our own land, in this enlightened age? How can you and your fellow citizens generally sing so complacently the praises of Columbia, while there are at least *two millions* here, to whom this country is no better than Egypt was to the children of Israel?

Perhaps you have not brought yourselves to realize that such is the fact. Still less may you be aware how much we are implicated in the guilt of their oppression. Most of the people of New-England have never seen the slaves, nor heard their cries. The sight and the sound of their sufferings are lost in the distance. Like that mighty river, which drains the waters of half our North America, so does this vast accumulation of physical, mental and moral misery flow on from year to year, increasing through our southern and western states, and the people here regard it not, or regard it as an ordinance of nature, over which they can have no control.

But are the people of New-England thus inattentive to human suffering elsewhere? No. We do not so withhold our sympathies from injured man in climes the farthest off. We are quick to hear the cry of the oppressed from the *ends* of the earth. And we denounce oppressors, be they who they may. We stop not to ask the character, much less the complexion of the sufferers. 'T is enough for us to know that they are men, and that they claim their birthright. How heartily did we sympathise with the South American Republicans in their struggles for liberty; not surely because we knew them to be enlightened, qualified to use aright and enjoy what they sought, but because, and only because, we recognized at once *their perfect right to freedom*.

The call for succor, which came to us from Greece, was heard and promptly answered in almost all our towns. And why? Because the Greeks were a more virtuous, intelligent people than their enemies? No. We had little reason to think them much better than the Turks. But they were the injured party, and therefore we roused ourselves to aid them. However our orators and poets may have gathered up the hallowed associations, which cluster over that classic land, these all were but the decorations, not the point of their appeal. It was the story of their wrongs which found the way to our hearts, and opened them for their relief.

Coming to us from any other land, the cry for freedom sends through us a thrilling emotion. We stop not to inquire, who they are that would be free. If they are men, we know they have a right to liberty. No matter how the yoke was fastened on them, whether by conquest or inheritance, we feel it should be broken. And though to break it, the whole social fabric of their oppressors must be overturned—still we say, let the yoke be broken! With what intense eagerness are we now listening to every day's report from Poland; and how do we exult when we hear the Poles are victorious! Yet we know little or nothing about them. Nor have they any other claim to our more kind regard than the Russians, excepting one, this one, they have been injured, subjugated, cruelly oppressed.

Thus we reason—thus we quickly feel in all cases but one ; the one in which we are implicated with the oppressors. But is there any apology for our inaction and insensibility in this case, that will avail us at the bar of Heaven ? Indeed, is there any which covers, even from the observation of the world, our egregious inconsistency ? No—no. A stinging reproach is often sent home to us from abroad, and we have no shield to break its point or turn its edge.

Let me, however, examine with you the apologies which are generally made for the inactivity of New-England respecting Slavery—the reasons still urged by many for our persisting in this inaction.

The most common reason which I hear is, that Slavery is confined to the southern and western States, and we have properly no concern with it. Our brethren of those States, it is said, should be left to reform among themselves the defects of their own institutions.

But is it true, my hearers, that the institution of Slavery is thus confined and local ? Some of my foregoing remarks implied that it is not. How can it be so considered ? In the first place, we consent to live under a general government which assumes that some of its constituent States may hold colored men in bondage, and is pledged to sustain them in doing so. Again, in the formation of new States which occupy territories recovered from the wilderness long since the Union was established, our government has explicitly permitted the introduction of this odious system. Nor is this all. There are several portions of the land still under the direct control of Congress, in which the institution is upheld. Yes. In the very District of Columbia, where Congress assembles, and which is under its immediate supervision, slavery exists in all its abomination. In Washington, our capital city, there is a market for the sale and purchase of human beings. There too is a depot for those, who are engaged in the domestic slave-trade, an infernal traffic which is carried on in the United States to a great extent. My own eyes have seen, within a few miles of our Capitol, a drove of colored