

Memorial Day

A reflection by Thomas Holmes Timmons¹

Loving Memorials: Beyond the Valley of the Shadows by T. H. Timmons, Pentecostal Publishing Company, Louisville, Kentucky, 1914, pp. 157-161.

Of what does it remind us?

First, it calls to remembrance the stormy period in which a stupendous problem was to be solved; a problem, the origin of which concerns equally the North and the South, and for the existence of which these two sections were responsible; a problem which could not be solved by the arguments of congressmen, nor by newspaper discussions, nor by writing novels, nor yet by men of Holy calling, preaching from the pulpits of the North and of the South.

The tactics of diplomacy had signally failed, prayers and tears no longer allayed agitation or soothed the passions of men. We had come to the "valley of decision,"² we had reached the acute point, and to "tie up" the storm was as impossible as it is to hush the thunders that quarrel in the heavens or to arrest the "lightnings as they leap from the angry depths of the storm-cloud."³ "To arms!! To arms!!" was the furious cry, and from Boston to Florida, from the Lakes to the Sea, from the stormy Atlantic to the dancing waves of the Pacific, men of all ages and of all callings were ready to respond to the sad and bitter command.

It is not easy for you who live in these times of peace to realize that beings who call themselves intelligent and who have so much forethought would lose sight of their obligation to love and aid each other, and would turn to putting an end to each other's existence as if Time himself did not do so with sufficient rapidity! We have come to look at "wars with the pain of death which society draws upon itself are organized barbarism, an inheritance of the savage state disguised and ornamented by an ingenious institution and false eloquence."⁴

As one who has been an active participant in a cruel and destructive campaign, I would advise the younger generation to cultivate sentiments of peace and good will to all men and to forever oppose the savage policy of resorting to war as a means of adjusting national or international debates.

Secondly, we call to remembrance the sad separation when fathers and husbands, brothers and sons, and lovers volunteered to defend their country and left their quiet homes for the field of danger and of death. No pen, however facile or skillful, can portray the affecting scenes that transpired when our bosoms were young and when, with all the hope and ardor of youth, we turned from the pale and weeping companions and loved ones and with sword and rifle we marched away to meet a deadly foe.

¹ The original had no footnotes. They were added to help modern readers understand the author's allusions.

² The valley of decision is a name given to the Valley of Jehoshaphat (873 – 849 BC) as "the vale of the sentence." According to Joel 3:2, it is in this valley that the God of Israel will gather all nations for judgment: "I will also gather all nations, and will bring them down into the valley of Jehoshaphat, and will plead with them there for my people and for my heritage Israel, whom they have scattered among the nations, and parted my land."

³ A quotation from a sermon by Rev. William A. ("Billy") Sunday, the most celebrated and influential American evangelist of the early 20th century. It was published in October 1913 under the title "Judgement Comes After Death" in the Best of Recent Sermons column in the Homeletics Department of the periodical *The Expositor and Current Anecdotes*, Vol XV, No. 2, pp. 124-126.

⁴ Attributed by Tryon Edwards, D.D. to Louis Napoleon in *A Dictionary of Thoughts, being a Cyclopedic of Laconic Quotations from the Best Authors of the World, both Ancient and Modern*. Detroit, Michigan: F. B. Dickerson, Co., 1908.

We had to turn from the pleasant fields so often traversed where we had “heard our own mountain-goats bleating aloft;” we had to turn from the “sweet strain of the corn-reapers”⁵ and follow the discordant sound of the drum; we had to turn from the persuading thrill of the Sabbath Hymn and obey imperious military orders and keep step to martial music.

Those were the days when heart-strings were broken; those were the days of anguish and self-sacrifice. Many had premonitions that they would never return to receive a mother’s kiss or a father’s blessing or ever again know the embrace of wife and children. Throughout this vast Republic these apprehensions were fulfilled and the tones in every household voice have grown more sad and deep and the mere mention of the name of some loved one “wakes a wish to turn away and weep.”⁶

In the third place, Memorial Day calls to remembrance “heroic deeds.” President Taft says that “If the war decided nothing else, it certainly decided the question of the valor of the men of the North and of the South.” It is not possible to recite the deeds of courage and devotion displayed by the soldiers on both sides of the debate.

The sufferings from hunger and thirst, the hardships on the march and in bivouac, the midnight vigils on the cold mountain, the dreams of home and mother, the pathetic letter from anxious wife and weeping children, the loneliness and uncertainty in the time of sickness; these were a small part of the tests of the soldier’s loyalty and devotion to the cause he had espoused. Then “every battle of the warrior is with confused noise, and garments rolled in blood.”⁷ Men did not count their lives dear unto themselves. The visage of death, the rush upon blazing battle lines, the clang of sabers, the rattle of musketry, the boom of cannon, and the scream of shells; these proved the valor and undaunted courage of the men whose memory we revere. Men go their length when they offer their lives upon the Altar of their country, beyond this there is no demand. Yes, Memorial Day recalls deeds of transcendent courage and unswerving devotion.

In the fourth place, we call to remembrance the tragic day when overpowered by superior numbers, with ammunition and provisions well nigh exhausted these heroic battalions were forced to accept terms of surrender, and return to a land and to homes that had been plowed and ravaged by both armies. There was desolation everywhere, and our beautiful Southland had the appearance of a magnificent temple in ruins.

A vast population of ignorant, thriftless, and helpless creatures with changed relations were to be taken up and cared for by those war-broken and tired men! The walls of our most valuable institutions and business enterprises were broken down or in ashes.

⁵ These phrases come from “The Soldier’s Dream” by Scottish poet Thomas Campbell (1777–1844). This poem was included in various songbooks of the 19th and early 20th century (e.g., *The Melodist*, London: H. Arliss, 1828.)

Our bugles sang truce, for the night-cloud had lower’d / And the sentinel stars set their watch in the sky;
And thousands had sunk on the ground overpower’d; / The weary to sleep, and the wounded to die.
When reposing that night on my pallet of straw / By the wolf-scaring faggot that guarded the slain,
At the dead of the night a sweet Vision I saw; / And thrice ere the morning I dreamt it again.
Methought from the battle-field’s dreadful array / Far, far, I had roam’d on a desolate track:
’Twas Autumn,—and sunshine arose on the way / To the home of my fathers, that welcomed me back.
I flew to the pleasant fields traversed so oft / In life’s morning march, when my bosom was young;
I heard my own mountain-goats bleating aloft, / And knew the sweet strain that the corn-reapers sung.
Then pledged we the wine-cup, and fondly I swore / From my home and my weeping friends never to part;
My little ones kiss’d me a thousand times o’er, / And my wife sobb’d aloud in her fulness of heart.
“Stay—stay with us!—rest!—thou art weary and worn!” — / And fain was their war-broken soldier to stay;—
But sorrow return’d with the dawning of morn, / And the voice in my dreaming ear melted away.

⁶ From “The Spirit’s Teachings” by Julia C.R. Dorr. *Columbian Magazine*, December 1848.

⁷ “From Isaiah 9:5, immediately preceding the Messiah prophesy of 9:6: “For every battle of the warrior is with confused noise, and garments rolled in blood; but this shall be with burning and fuel of fire. For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, the mighty God, the everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace.”

Lastly, we are reminded of the invincible spirit and undiminished courage of the men who had passed through the debilitating ordeal of this period of defeat and desolation. They did not murmur or repine;⁸ but, gathering together the resources at command, they entered with zeal and hope upon the work of rebuilding the wrecked fortunes of their country. The same spirit of self-reliance and self-respect and heroism that had marked them in their war career still lived and burned within them. Men of this mold deserve and command the admiration and reverence of their country-men everywhere. The men who displayed such courage in war and who knew how to accept defeat, who knew how to gather up the scattered fragments of fortune's wreck, the men who have been the leaders in agriculture, in the school-room, in the Halls of Congress and your State Legislatures, the men who have been foremost in the reestablishment of your great publishing and literary plants, the men who have rebuilt State and Church, deserve the kindly consideration and confidence of those who have eyes to see and hearts to venerate.

There is but a small remnant of the men who wore the "Gray," and the same may be said of the men who wore the "Blue." They are rapidly passing away, and soon not one of them will be left to tell the story of the period which is now distant and dim. Will Memorial Day be perpetuated? I believe it will. The principle for which these lordly men have stood, the high ideals which had their genesis in the Southland, the sentiments of honor and purity for which you have ever been distinguished, will not vanish with the fast-fading ranks of the Southern heroes. These high and holy principles have been transmitted to our descendents and they will not be allowed to die, but will live on and flourish as the palm tree and grow like a cedar in Lebanon.

Future generations will perpetuate these patriotic memorials. The North will cherish and honor the memory of the men who fought to preserve the Union; the South will celebrate the heroic deeds of the men who wore the "gray" and who believed in Constitutional Liberty and who loved God and Home and Purity and whose sympathies extend to all men.

You will meet and scatter flowers, and eloquent words will be spoken; you will sing patriotic songs long after the last Southern hero has passed into the Land of Leal⁹ to rest under the shade of celestial trees and be refreshed with the fragrance from Amaranthine bowers.¹⁰

⁸ Repine: To feel or express dejection or discontent. —*Merriam-Webster Dictionary*.

⁹ Leal is a Scottish word meaning loyal, faithful, and honest. "The Land o' the Leal" refers to a hypothetical land of happiness, loyalty, and virtue conjured up in a ballad of the same name written by Carolina Oliphant, Lady Nairne (1766-1845). It was especially popular among the Jacobites who sought the restoration of the Stuart kings to the thrones of Scotland and Ireland.

¹⁰ Literally, an Amaranthine bower is a garden arbor made of amaranth, a dense annual plant with deep reddish purple flowers. According to Methodism's founder John Wesley (in a note in his *Large HymnBook*), John Milton uses Amaranth as a metaphor for everlasting, ever-blooming, not subject to decay:

With solemn adoration down they cast / Thir Crowns inwove with Amaranth and Gold,
Immortal Amaranth, a Flour which once / In Paradise, fast by the Tree of Life
Began to bloom, but soon for mans offence / To Heav'n remov'd where first it grew, there grows,
And flour aloft shading the Fount of Life, / And where the river of Bliss through midst of Heav'n
Rowls o're ElisianFlours her Amber stream; ...

—*Paradise Lost* (Book 3, Lines 350-360)

Subsequently, in 1707 Alexander Pope repeated this image in his Ode on St. Cecilia's Day:

By the fragrant winds that blow / O'er th' Elysian flow'rs,
By those happy souls who dwell / In yellow meads of Asphodel, / Or Amaranthine bow'rs,

Prompted by a small earthquake that shook London in 1750, Charles Wesley, John's younger brother, uses the same image to contrast the insecurity of earthly dwellings with the permanence of heaven:

Those amaranthine bowers, (Unalienably ours), / Bloom, our infinite reward—
Rise, our permanent abode, From the founded world prepar'd, / Purchas'd by the blood of God!

In the middle of the 18th century Charles and John Wesley toured the British colony of Georgia, sowing the seeds of Methodism. Undoubtedly, Thomas Timmons would have been very familiar with their writing.