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# "The Salt of the Earth"



Address Delivered at the Fifty-Sixth Annual  
Commencement of the University of the State of  
Missouri, in Columbia, Missouri, June 1, 1898



By William Vincent Byars, of St. Louis

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## “THE SALT OF THE EARTH.”

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By WILLIAM VINCENT BYARS, of St. Louis.

Whether we are fallen angels as some think or risen apes as others believe, or both as it may be, certain facts of our nature have an eternal significance regardless of our theories. And of all these facts which existence thrusts upon us as laws of our being none is so full of stern menace on the one part, of promise of high hope on the other, as that there is going on in us momentarily, and in all the world around us, the struggle between the constructive and the destructive forces of the universe. They move in us as they move in all things, impelling us now to up-build, now to destroy. Taine calls us creatures of “headlong impulses and swarming imaginations,” “beings of fits, starts, shocks and transports, sometimes at long intervals in a state of partial equilibrium but with no permanent and distinct force inherent in us to secure truth to our intelligence and common sense to our conduct.”

If it be said that this is pessimism we are forced to remember that it is essentially the view of the greatest optimist who ever lived on earth—of Him who being born man with all human infirmities, thought it not robbery to make Himself equal with God through

the omnipotence of divine purposes. His message to the world is that it must be saved — saved from itself, from its old ignorance, its primal savagery, its barbaric atavism, its thirst for blood, its brutal appetites, its eternal tendency to react from the higher to the lower forms of existence. Had there been in us as animals and creatures of heredity a permanent and distinct force to secure truth to our intelligence and common sense to our conduct, could we have forced hemlock to the lips of the living Socrates or gall to those of the dying Christ?

But these things we have done from the beginning, and we do them still. It is a part of the chemistry by which we exist that we should do them until the higher forces of the universe take hold upon us and raise us above the power of the physical. Physically we live in a world of fire and corruption. "Day by day we ripe and rot." Day by day we oxydize and renew the carbon in us until at last fuel fails and we oxydize to death. Physically we are compounds of carbon, oxygen and hydrogen, mere visible manifestations of invisible gases, and our chemical combination is so unstable that the pain of maintaining it forces us to realize constantly how much at one we are with the universal process of combination and disintegration, of growth and putrescence; of decay and the renewal of life through decay which we see everywhere around us. The law of all forms of physical life in our world is that it must feed on the disintegration of precedent life. But for the decomposition of lower forms of life, animal and vegetable, we could not live at all. The rose which with its roots in decomposition filth expands to heaven the glory of its bloom, is the true type of the physical and of the spiritual in us. Physically the whole world is a world of corruption, out of

which by some divine, exterior, vitalizing impulse is brought the glory of the rose which lasts a day and the fragrant splendor of a great unselfish deed which lasts forever.

If this vitalizing impulse is inherent in matter, there is nothing in nature to show it. On the contrary, all nature shows that it must come from that which is above nature. Corruption, decomposition, disintegration, this is nature and the law of nature. Life in all its forms is supernatural, and never is it more supernatural than in its manifestation through those forms of vitalizing mind which save the world from decay. "You are the salt of the earth," is the message all nature sends to those in whom education, self-realization, self-mastery, unity with the supernatural purposes of the universe, have awakened the "quickenings spirit" which makes manhood itself no longer animal and physical but at last in its eternal significance, supernatural and a part of two heavenly forces proceeding from the throne of God Himself.

You are the salt of the earth, and it is only by such salt that the earth is saved daily now as it is ever to be saved hereafter from becoming putrid. But to do its perfect work, the salt must have its savor. And that savor is the vitalizing spirit of humanity, the devotion of self-sacrificing courage which gives the world its saviors.

And the world must have not one savior merely, but innumerable martyrs of the truth, moved by that divine spirit through which alone we cease to be brutes and escape the law of decay which governs all that is not in its essence divine.

The central truth of all history is this, that the human race needs such saviors—that it can not exist without them; that wherever in any country in any

time, men fail to find them, they become corrupt, putrid, rotten, retaining if civilized only the fair-seeming sepulcher of civilization, the whitened lie of Pharaseeism which hides dead men's bones and all uncleanness. This, let us repeat, is the central truth of all history — in all ages — of that we are making now, as well as of that made by long-forgotten generations whose physical bodies are now but the fine dust we tread under foot.

The world must have saviors to give it freedom, justice, knowledge, power. For all these things must come to it from without. It is neither free of itself, nor just, but from the beginning it has been an enslaved world, an unjust world, an ignorant world, an impotent world, except as it has been raised to freedom, justice, power and knowledge by the divine self-devotion of its martyrs, sacrificing themselves for the truth which alone can bring freedom, knowledge, power, to those whom ignorance and injustice make impotent. The truth shall make us free, but before we can be free with that freedom which enables us to save ourselves and others we must be brave, and it is of this supreme requisite of courage that I am here to speak to-day.

The fighting impulse is as natural in us and as much a part of our physical impulses as it is in wolves, but there is in the wolf nothing except the herd spirit. The most ferocious of all animals, the single wolf, is the most governed by the herd spirit; the most destitute of that individuality, without which escape from the laws governing the brutal and physical world is impossible. As we lack this individuality, as we are governed by the spirit of the pack; as we lack the courage to unify ourselves with the higher law and the higher purpose of things, we tend to become mere

brutes, mere wolves, mere egotists. And though the ferocity which makes the egotist is natural to us, the courage which makes the individualist is an acquired quality. How many of us, when the time comes for us to stand for the truth against the world, but would recant it with Cranmer, rather than bear ruin, and what we dread worse than ruin—the sneering contempt of those who have been our friends?

It is easy to die in hot blood, with cause or without. But to bear shame, degradation, execration, and then die in cold blood, first burning off the hand with which we have recanted truth as Cranmer did—before that is possible for us we must lose the old egotistical, cowardly fear of self-sacrifice which makes a Caesar or a Napoleon, and gain the courage which makes a Cranmer or a Christ. And that is individual courage. The ferocity of the pack, the egotism of a Genghis or a Timour will take the veriest coward to die at the cannon's mouth for hate of his fellows. But only the divine individualism which sent Christ to the cross will send a Winkelried to gather the spear points of oppression into the flesh of his own breast that he may make a way for liberty. That courage the world has needed in all ages, and in no age has it been worse needed than in this. It is essentially the courage of individual initiative. It can come only by the individualism God loves and works through as he hates and works against egotism.

When God needs a prophet for His gospel, or a craftsman for His work, He selects always one who has the courage of such initiative as Isaiah showed when to the question of who should be sent to proclaim to Israel the truth it hated and feared, he answered God: "Here am I, send me!" "In the year that King Uzziah died" he writes in one of the most wonderful

passages in all literature, "In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw also the Lord sitting upon a throne high and lifted up and his train filled the temple.

"Above it stood the Seraphim — each one had six wings; with twain he covered his face and with twain he covered his feet and with twain he did fly.

"And they cried unto another and said: Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God of Hosts. The whole earth is full of His glory.

"And the posts of the door moved at the voice of him that cried and the house was filled with smoke.

"Then said I, Woe is me for I am undone.

"I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips. For mine eyes have seen the King, the Lord of Hosts.

"Then flew one of the Seraphim unto me, having in his hands a live coal which he had taken with the tongs from off the altar.

"And he laid it upon my mouth and said 'Lo this hath touched thy lips. Thy iniquity is taken away and thy sin is purged.'

"Also I heard the voice of the Lord saying: 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?' Then said I, 'Here am I, send me.'"

This is the swift answer of the man who but a moment before had bowed himself and covered his face against some supreme revelation of the truth, crying out in the anguish of his conscious unworthiness. Yet with the fire of truth scorching his lips, he dared answer God himself "Here am I, send me!"

"Adsum!" — here! So must every savior of humanity dare answer in spite of his own unworthiness when heaven calls the roll of its forlorn hope for the storming of the "rampart breach of every day." So

answered the cartwright Louis Tournay, when feudalism manned the battlements of the Bastille, seeking to overawe with its musketry and its cannon the centuries of progress. Men stood there by thousands not afraid to die, not unaware of the supreme need of ridding the world of what the Bastille meant for it and not unwilling to give their blood as freely as men may for the cause which demands it of their consciences. Still they huddled backward from their duty, overawed by De Launay on the wall, grim, determined, desperate. So the Bastille would stand and all it stands for with it still, if out of the crowd had not pressed forward all at once, this peasant with his broadaxe to stand under the fire of feudalism by the grace of God unharmed until he had battered in two the chain of the drawbridge. So the courage of individual initiative triumphed where the courage of mere numbers had failed. So heaven found its man, answering "Here" to the call to take the desperate odds which heaven seemingly has always against it. But heaven always wins of necessity in spite of odds when God has found his man to smite as Tournay smote.

"Smite thou, Louis Tournay, cartwright of the Marais," writes Carlyle — "Smite at the outer drawbridge chain though the fiery hail whistles around thee! Never over nave or felloe did thy axe strike such a stroke. Down with it, man. Down with it to Orcus. Let the whole accursed edifice sink with it and tyranny be swallowed up forever! The chain breaks! The huge drawbridge slams down thundering. Glorious! And yet it is still but the outworks."

Still but the outworks! Yet if we have courage we shall get at the citadel finally. And there is in the world even a higher courage than that of its Tournays with their broadaxes. Not long ago another forlorn

hope was to be led against the same forces which had intrenched themselves in the Bastille. The call to lead it came to another man of the people—as plain and unpretentious a man as Paul the tent maker or as Peter the fisherman. “Come and lead us against the thrones, powers and dominions of the world,” a little band of men with only heaven’s one desperate chance called out to him. But he was dying. His whole life had been a long struggle against the forces of destruction and reaction. His last days he had expected to pass in peace. But it was not to be. God called and he answered Adsum. “It is likely to kill you,” his physician told him. “I can not die in a better way,” he answered. Holding to the railing of such a platform as we improvise for our hustings in great American cities, he looked down into thousands on thousands of upturned faces of men who looked up to him to save them from their old barbarism and misery, and thus exhausting his last strength, he spoke with dying breath what may yet change the history of America and the world. A few hours later they called him but he did not answer or awaken. God had called him and once more he had answered, “Here am I.” It was this man who wrote in unconscious prophecy of his own work and its heroic consummation: “Lo here now in our civilized society the old allegories yet have a meaning and the old myths are still true. Into the Valley of the Shadow of Death yet often leads the path of duty; through the streets of Vanity Fair walk Christian and Faithful, and on Greatheart’s armor ring the clanging blows. Ormuzd still fights with Ahriman,—the Prince of Light with the powers of Darkness. He who will hear, to him the clarions of the battle call. How they call and call and call till the heart swells that hears them. Strong

soul and high endeavor, the world needs them now. Beauty still lies imprisoned and the iron wheels go over the good and true and beautiful that might spring from human lives. And they who fight with Ormuzd, though they may not know each other, somewhere, sometime, will the muster roll be called!" And friends, may each of us answer then, "Here am I," as this witness for truth answered the call of duty, when the path of duty led indeed for him into the Valley of the Shadow of Death.

I knew once an American who was neither saint nor hero, but a commonplace man enough, standing by his friends and crowding those who crowded him as commonplace men are likely to do until the law of survival of the fittest has done its perfect work. That law had advanced him step by step from the lowest place to one of the highest in his profession. With his honors still fresh upon him, he looked into the future and saw unmistakably that the price to be demanded of him for his promotion would be the recantation of all for which he had contended during his life time. It happened that as he realized this, walking along the street of the city he stopped in front of the window of a picture store, and his eyes fell on an engraving of Vivia Perpetua refusing to offer sacrifice to the statue of Caesar. The courage of the frail young martyr had mastered the mind of the artist and with the slow pains of loving art, he had etched into the steel the anguished entreaties of her parents, the stern curiosity on the face of the Roman praetor, the expectancy of the crowd and on the face of the young girl herself, "the light that never shone on land or sea" as she sided for truth against Caesar, though to do so was to die.

Gazing long upon the picture, this commonplace American walked away at last with a new sense of the meaning of life. A week later he had stepped down into the ranks. "A week later" by the clock and the almanac, but he had really done it there in the forum of Carthage in the third century, choosing with Vivia truth rather than Caesar. "Space is as nothing to spirit" and it is thus that brave deeds are immortal — a part of God's own glorious eternity which will not let them be swallowed up in the abyss of time.

In the early days of the world when to some its supreme needs were clearer than they are to most now, it happened sometimes that the feeling of the necessity for saviors would so compel some sensitive soul to courage, that approaching the altar of the gods he would place on his own head the sacrificial salt cake which the priests reserved for the victims offered in expiation of the sins of the people. Such men giving themselves to die were called "devoted." In this spirit Leonidas combed his long hair and adorned himself for death at Thermopylae. With the same unconsciousness of self Crockett set his back against the wall of the Alamo and waited death. We can not think of the death of such devotees without a thrill. In their self-immolation we recognize the law of progress.

Whenever in time, wherever in the space of the universe one man is found who has such courage as this, he sways the universe as God would have it swayed. But no man can do such deeds in his own strength. It is true that the people must have saviors, but it is also true that they by the power of God must create them out of their own popular life. Demi-gods have never yet existed with strength above the strength of the race which produced them. The great-

est saviors of humanity are its most representative men:

“Titans live not but in fable  
 And throughout our whole life’s length.  
 ’Tis our weakness makes us able  
 To give weaker souls our strength.”

The Hebrew poet and prophet hearing the call of truth to duty as if he were in the visible presence of God, cries out because of his own uncleanness, and in the tenets of Christianity nothing involves a deeper law of human nature than the insistence of all the evangelists that God himself, in order to be able to save man, was obliged to assume all the weaknesses of human flesh. No man on earth, no archangel in heaven can help me except through sympathy with my infirmities. And out of this law of sympathy has grown liberty for the world. The sympathy of the divine with the human is that which makes possible for us what Taine says we have not by nature—a permanent and distinct force to secure reason to our intellect and common sense to our conduct. All those who have helped the world have helped it through their own weaknesses, bringing down to it a higher power than theirs—that which streams into universal humanity from God. For in spite of our headlong impulses and swarming imaginations, of our fits, starts, shocks and transports, we hear always, as long as God Himself can hope to help us, the still small voice of the eternal truth, beseeching, entreating us to righteousness, and to the high wisdom of that courage through which the truth makes us free. The man who refuses to be representative; who attempts in his own strength and in his own right of fancied superiority to set himself above his fellows, can not be a savior or a liberator for the world, but in the nature of things must be a despot — one of those whose existence

on earth assures us of the truth which a great seer and prophet saw written over the gate of hell!

“*Giustizia mosse il mio alto fattore.*”

“Justice, justice moved my sublime creator.”

Into the hell where justice keeps alive an eternal and consuming flame for despotism in all its forms of fraud and violence will finally be driven every enemy of that liberty through which alone the world can grow away from its old barbarism and misery into the ineffable splendor of the life which awaits it. And with the assurance of that future in their hearts, the noble army of martyrs of all ages, the poets, the prophets, the high priests, the van leaders of humanity, have dared so to live and die that we, seeing the splendor of their deeds, may uncover to heaven and with bowed heads pray as for the supreme blessing.

“O may we join the choir invisible,  
Of those immortal dead who live again  
In minds made better by their presence — live  
In pulses stirred to generosity, in scorn  
Of miserable aims that end with self;  
In thoughts sublime that pierce the night like stars  
And with their mild persistence urge men’s minds  
To vaster issues! So to live is heaven,  
To make undying music in the world  
Breathing a beauteous order that controls  
With growing sway the growing life of man.”

The high courage of such lives as these, taking hold on us, compels us to trample under foot that quality which God seems to hate more than all other vices in us — the quality of spiritual cowardice, which makes it impossible for Him to help us or others through us. If when we have denied his truth and the cock crows for us — as most surely it will — we have not the saving grace to weep bitterly and the saving courage to follow truth to its crucifixion, then we are lost and it is beyond the power of God Himself

to help us. So it must be that of all our sins heaven must hate worst this of cowardice. And when in the history of the world did heaven have more cause to hate it than now, when God calls with such persistence of entreaty for brave men to save to humanity the fruits of the unspeakable suffering of all the past. That for which Socrates drank the hemlock; for which Leonidas died at Thermopylae; for which Christ agonized upon the cross; for which Paul fought with beasts at Ephesus; for which Vivian bled in the amphitheater at Carthage; for which Cranmer burned off the hand that had denied the truth; for which Winkelried gave his bare breast to the sharp points of Austrian spears — that truth which alone can make men free, that liberty which alone can make them true — is at stake now and always, as it has been of old and always. Always the silent heaven calls the brave to head its forlorn hopes. Always the question is asked of each of us: “Who will come up to the help of the Lord against the mighty.” Always the struggle goes on. “And he who will hear to him the clarions of the battle call! How they call and call and call till the heart swells to hear them. Strong soul and high endeavor, the world needs them now!”











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