

ciful fathers and yourselves on our fathers and on us—men who have never given your fathers or you the least provocation!!!!!!

Hear your language further!

But when a long train of abuses and usurpation, pursuing invariably the same object, evinces a design to reduce them under absolute despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such government, and to provide new guards for their future security.

Now, Americans! I ask you candidly, was your sufferings under Great Britain, one hundredth part as cruel and tyrannical as you have rendered ours under you? Some of you, no doubt, believe that we will never throw off your murderous government and “provide new guards for our future security.” If Satan has made you believe it, will he not deceive you? Do the whites say, I being a black man, ought to be humble, which I readily admit? I ask them, ought they not to be as humble as I? or do they think that they can measure arms with Jehovah? Will not the Lord yet humble them? or will not these very colored people whom they now treat worse than brutes, yet under God, humble them low down enough? Some of the whites are ignorant enough to tell us, that we ought to be submissive to them, that they may keep their feet on our throats. And if we do not submit to be beaten to death by them, we are bad creatures and of course must be damned, etc.

If any man wishes to hear this doctrine openly preached to us by the American preachers, let him go into the Southern and Western sections of this country—I do not speak from hear say—what I have written, is what I have seen and heard myself. No man may think that my book is made up of conjecture—I have traveled and observed nearly the whole of those things myself, and what little I did not get by my own observation, I received from those among the whites and blacks, in whom the greatest confidence may be placed.

The Americans may be as vigilant as they please, but they cannot be vigilant enough for the Lord, neither can they hide themselves, where he will not find and bring them out.

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In this selection from *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, first published in 1861 under the pseudonym Linda Brent, Harriet Jacobs explores the relationship between the church and slavery, observing how the teaching “If you disobey your earthly master, you offend your heavenly Master” was used in an attempt to prevent slave rebellion. Religion may have, at times, provided a momentary relief, but in this passage, Jacobs questions whether it could bring a meaningful release from the ills of slavery.

Harriet A. Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself* (1861)²

After the alarm caused by Nat Turner’s insurrection had subsided, the slaveholders came to the conclusion that it would be well to give the slaves enough of religious instruction to keep them from murdering their masters. The Episcopal clergyman offered to hold a separate service on Sundays for their benefit. His colored members were very few, and also very respectable—a fact which I presume had some weight with him. The difficulty was to decide on a suitable place for them to worship. The Methodist and Baptist churches admitted them in the afternoon, but their carpets and cushions were not so costly as those at the Episcopal church. It was at last decided that they should meet at the house of a free colored man, who was a member.

I was invited to attend, because I could read. Sunday evening came, and, trusting to the cover of night, I ventured out. I rarely ventured out by daylight, for I always went with fear, expecting at every turn to encounter Dr. Flint [James Norcom], who was sure to turn me back, or order me to his office to inquire where I got my bonnet, or some other article of dress. When the Rev. Mr. Pike [John Avery] came, there were some twenty persons present. The reverend gentleman knelt in prayer, then seated himself, and requested all present, who could read, to open their books, while he gave out the portions he wished them to repeat or respond to.

His text was, “Servants, be obedient to them that are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in singleness of your heart, as unto Christ.”

Pious Mr. Pike brushed up his hair till it stood upright, and, in deep, solemn tones, began: “Hearken, ye servants! Give strict heed unto my words. You are rebellious sinners. Your hearts are filled with all manner of evil. ’Tis the devil who tempts you. God is angry with you, and will surely punish you, if you don’t forsake your wicked ways. You that live in town are eye-servants behind your master’s back. Instead of serving your masters faithfully, which is pleasing in the sight of your heavenly Master, you are idle, and shirk your work. God sees you. You tell lies. God hears you. Instead of being engaged in worshipping him, you are hidden away somewhere, feasting on your master’s substance; tossing coffee-grounds with some wicked fortuneteller, or cutting cards with another old hag. Your masters may not find you out, but God sees you, and will punish you. O, the depravity of your hearts! When your master’s work is done, are you quietly together, thinking of the goodness of God to such sinful creatures? No; you are quarrelling, and tying up little bags of roots to bury under the door-steps to poison each other with. God sees you. You men steal away to every grog shop to sell your master’s corn, that you may buy rum to drink. God sees you. You sneak into the back

streets, or among the bushes, to pitch coppers. Although your masters may not find you out, God sees you; and he will punish you. You must forsake your sinful ways, and be faithful servants. Obey your old master and your young master—your old mistress and your young mistress. If you disobey your earthly master, you offend your heavenly Master. You must obey God's commandments. When you go from here, don't stop at the corners of the streets to talk, but go directly home, and let your master and mistress see that you have come."

The benediction was pronounced. We went home, highly amused at brother Pike's gospel teaching, and we determined to hear him again. I went the next Sabbath evening, and heard pretty much a repetition of the last discourse. At the close of the meeting, Mr. Pike informed us that he found it very inconvenient to meet at the friend's house, and he should be glad to see us, every Sunday evening, at his own kitchen.

I went home with the feeling that I had heard the Reverend Mr. Pike for the last time. Some of his members repaired to his house, and found that the kitchen sported two tallow candles; the first time, I am sure, since its present occupant owned it, for the servants never had any thing but pine knots. It was so long before the reverend gentleman descended from his comfortable parlor that the slaves left, and went to enjoy a Methodist shout. They never seem so happy as when shouting and singing at religious meetings. Many of them are sincere, and nearer to the gate of heaven than sanctimonious Mr. Pike, and other long-faced Christians, who see wounded Samaritans, and pass by on the other side.

The slaves generally compose their own songs and hymns, and they do not trouble their heads much about the measure. They often sing the following verses:

Old Satan is one busy ole man;
He rolls dem blocks all in my way;
But Jesus is my bosom friend;
He rolls dem blocks away.

If I had died when I was young,
Den how my stam'ring tongue would have sung;
But I am ole, and now I stand
A narrow chance for to tread dat heavenly land.

I well remember one occasion when I attended a Methodist class meeting. I went with a burdened spirit, and happened to sit next a poor, bereaved mother, whose heart was still heavier than mine. The class leader was the town constable—a man who bought and sold slaves, who whipped his brethren and sisters of the church at the public whipping post, in jail or out of jail. He was ready to perform that

Christian office any where for fifty cents. This white-faced, black-hearted brother came near us, and said to the stricken woman, "Sister, can't you tell us how the Lord deals with your soul? Do you love him as you did formerly?"

She rose to her feet, and said, in piteous tones, "My Lord and Master, help me! My load is more than I can bear. God has hid himself from me, and I am left in darkness and misery." Then, striking her breast, she continued, "I can't tell you what is in here! They've got all my children. Last week they took the last one. God only knows where they've sold her. They let me have her sixteen years, and then—O! O! Pray for her brothers and sisters!

I've got nothing to live for now. God make my time short!"

She sat down, quivering in every limb. I saw that constable class leader become crimson in the face with suppressed laughter, while he held up his handkerchief, that those who were weeping for the poor woman's calamity might not see his merriment. Then, with assumed gravity, he said to the bereaved mother, "Sister, pray to the Lord that every dispensation of his divine will may be sanctified to the good of your poor needy soul!"

The congregation struck up a hymn, and sung as though they were as free as the birds that warbled round us,—

Ole Satan thought he had a mighty aim;
He missed my soul, and caught my sins.
Cry Amen, cry Amen, cry Amen to God!

He took my sins upon his back;
Went muttering and grumbling down to hell.
Cry Amen, cry Amen, cry Amen to God!

Ole Satan's church is here below.
Up to God's free church I hope to go.
Cry Amen, cry Amen, cry Amen to God!

Precious are such moments to the poor slaves. If you were to hear them at such times, you might think they were happy. But can that hour of singing and shouting sustain them through the dreary week, toiling without wages, under constant dread of the lash?

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This classified ad, placed by the slave master of Harriet Jacobs, was typical of the newspaper advertisements seeking the return of slaves fleeing their oppression.

Newspapers also commonly ran announcements of auctions of slaves, including young children separated from their parents.

James Norcom's Runaway Slave Newspaper Advertisement for Harriet Jacobs (June 30, 1835)³

\$100 REWARD

Will be given for the apprehension and delivery of my Servant Girl HARRIET. She is a light mulatto, 21 years of age, about 5 feet 4 inches high, of a thick and corpulent habit, having on her head a thick covering of black hair that curls naturally, but which can be easily combed straight. She speaks easily and fluently, and has an agreeable carriage and address. Being a good seamstress, she has been accustomed to dress well, has a variety of very fine clothes, made in the prevailing fashion, and will probably appear, if abroad, tricked out in gay and fashionable finery. As this girl absconded from the plantation of my son without any known cause or provocation, it is probable she designs to transport herself to the North.

The above reward, with all reasonable charges, will be given for apprehending her, or securing her in any prison or jail within the U[nited] States.

All persons are hereby forewarned against harboring or entertaining her, or being in any way instrumental in her escape, under the most rigorous penalties of the law.

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James R. Bradley, a slave in the Arkansas Territory who worked until he was able to buy his way into freedom, wrote this damning account of his experience of slavery to Lydia Maria Child, the abolitionist author and editor of an antislavery journal, *The Oasis*.

James R. Bradley, Letter to Lydia Maria Child (June 3, 1834)⁴

Dear Madam:

I am now going to try to write a little account of my life as nearly as I can remember. It makes me sorrowful to think of my past days. They have been very dark and full of tears. I always longed and prayed for liberty. I sometimes hoped I should get it and then I would think and pray and study out some way to earn money enough to buy myself by working nights, and then something would fall

out and all my hopes would die and it seemed as though I must live and die a slave without anyone to pity me. But I will begin as far back as I can remember. When I was between two and three years old the soul destroyers tore me from my tender mothe[r's] arms somewhere in Africa far back from the sea. They carried me along [a long] distance to the ships. I looked back and wept all the way. The ship was full of men and women loaded down with chains. As I was so small they let me run about on deck. After many long days they brought me to Charlestown [South Carolina]. Then a slave holder bought me and took me up into Pendleton county. I suppose that I stayed with him about six months. Then he sold me to a man whose name was Bradley. Ever since then I have been called by that name. This man was called a wonderfully kind master and he was more kind than most masters. He gave me enough to eat and did not beat me so much as masters g[enera]lly do. But all that was nothing to me. I spent many sleepless nights and bathed my face in tears because I was a slave. I . . . groaned for liberty. . . .

I have said a good deal about my desire for liberty. How strange it is that any body should believe that a human being could be a slave and feel contented. I don't believe there ever was a slave who did not long for liberty. I know very well that slaveholders take a great deal of pain to make the people of free states believe that this class are happy and contented—and I kn[o]w too that I never knew a slave—no matter how well he was treated—that did not long to be free. There is one thing about this that people of free states don't understand. When they talk with slaves and ask them if they don't want their liberty and if they wouldn't like to be free like the white men—they say no—and very likely they will go on and say that they wouldn't leave their master for the world, when at the same time they have [been] along time laying plans to get free and desire liberty more than anything else in the world. The truth is and every slave knows it—if he should say he wanted to be free and should show any weariness and discontent because he is a slave he is sure to be treated harsher and worked harder for it. So they are always very careful not to show any weariness and particularly when they are asked questions about freedom by white men. When the slaves are together by themselves alone, they are always talking about liberty, liberty is the great thought and feeling that fills the mind full all the time. I could say a great many things more but as you requested in your letter to my dear friend Mr. [Theodore] Weld that I would write a "short account" of my life I am afraid I have written too much already and will say but a few words more. My heart is full and flows over when I hear what is doing for the poor broken hearted slave and free man of color. God will help those who take the part of the oppressed. Yes blessed be his name he will s[u]rely do it. Dear Madam I do not know you personally but I have seen your book on slavery and have read much about you, and I do hope to meet you at the resurrection of the Just. I thank God he has given to the poor bleeding slave and to