



JOHN BROWN

Aftermath of the Raid on Harpers Ferry: Final Speech and Prison Communications (1859)

John Brown's September 1859 raid on the federal armory in Harpers Ferry, Virginia, polarized North and South at the end of a tumultuous decade of contention over the future of slavery. Brown (1800–1859), a native of Connecticut and lifelong abolitionist, intended to seize weapons that he would then distribute to local slaves. Brown and his small army then planned to retreat into the surrounding mountains and wage guerilla warfare against slavery. The incursion into Harpers Ferry resulted in military calamity, however, as almost all of his force of twenty-two men were killed or taken prisoner by federal soldiers.

Brown himself was taken alive and soon tried in a Virginia court for treason, murder, and inciting slave insurrection. Upon being convicted and sentenced to hang, Brown made a last address to the court on November 2. His remarks profoundly affected many readers who read them in the northern press. The documents that follow are the text of that speech, a final letter written to his family, and a note he handed to a jailer just before he departed for the gallows. As you read them, consider how they would have influenced northern and southern readers (Brown's prison correspondence was aimed at a wide public audience) and why John Brown's Raid thereby became one of the key events that led to civil war.

From F. B. Sanborn, ed., *The Life and Letters of John Brown* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1891), 584–585, 613–615, 620.

FINAL SPEECH

I have, may it please the Court, a few words to say.
“In the first place, I deny everything but what I have all along admitted,—the design on my part to free the slaves. I intended certainly to have made a clean thing of that matter, as I did last winter, when I went into Missouri and there took slaves without the snapping of a gun on either side, moved them through the

country, and finally left them in Canada.¹ I designed to have done the same thing again, on a larger scale. That was all I intended. I never did intend murder, or treason, or the destruction of property, or to excite or incite slaves to rebellion, or to make insurrection.

"I have another objection: and that is, it is unjust that I should suffer such a penalty. Had I interfered in the manner which I admit, and which I admit has been fairly proved (for I admire the truthfulness and candor of the greater portion of the witnesses who have testified in this case),—had I so interfered in behalf of the rich, the powerful, the intelligent, the so-called great, or in behalf of any of their friends,—either father, mother, brother, sister, wife, or children, or any of that class,—and suffered and sacrificed what I have in this interference, it would have been all right; and every man in this court would have deemed it an act worthy of reward rather than punishment.

"This court acknowledges, as I suppose, the validity of the law of God. I see a book kissed here which I suppose to be the Bible, or at least the New Testament. That teaches me that all things whatsoever I would that men should do to me, I should do even so to them. It teaches me, further, to 'remember them that are in bonds, as bound with them.' I endeavored to act up to that instruction. I say, I am yet too young to understand that God is any respecter of persons. I believe that to have interfered as I have done—as I have always freely admitted I have done—in behalf of His despised poor, was not wrong, but right. Now, if it is deemed necessary that I should forfeit my life for the furtherance of the ends of justice, and mingle my blood further with the blood of my children² and with the blood of millions in this slave country whose rights are disregarded by wicked, cruel, and unjust enactments,—I submit; so let it be done!

"Let me say one word further.

"I feel entirely satisfied with the treatment I have received on my trial. Considering all the circumstances, it has been more generous than I expected. But I feel no consciousness of guilt. I have stated from the first what was my intention, and what was not. I never had any design against the life of any person, nor any disposition to commit treason, or excite slaves to rebel, or make any general insurrection. I never encouraged any man to do so, but always discouraged any idea of that kind.

"Let me say, also, a word in regard to the statements made by some of those connected with me. I hear it has been stated by some of them that I have induced them to join me. But the contrary is true. I do not say this to injure them, but as regretting their weakness. There is not one of them but joined me of his own accord, and the greater part of them at their own expense. A number of them I never saw, and

1. In December 1858, Brown led a raiding party of twenty men into Missouri, where he took eleven slaves from their plantations and accompanied them to freedom in Canada. Contrary to what Brown says, one slaveowner was shot and killed in the process.

2. Brown's sons Watson and Oliver were killed in the raid on Harpers Ferry. Brown had already lost his son Frederick during a battle with pro-slavery men at Osawatomie, Kansas in August 1856.

never had a word of conversation with, till the day they came to me; and that was for the purpose I have stated.
"Now I have done."

LAST LETTERS

*Charlestown Prison, Jefferson County, Va.,
Nov. 30, 1859.*

MY DEARLY BELOVED WIFE, SONS, AND DAUGHTERS, EVERY ONE,—As I now begin probably what is the last letter I shall ever write to any of you, I conclude to write to all at the same time. I will mention some little matters particularly applicable to little property concerns in another place.

I recently received a letter from my wife, from near Philadelphia, dated November 22, by which it would seem that she was about giving up the idea of seeing me again. I had written her to come on if she felt equal to the undertaking, but I do not know that she will get my letter in time. It was on her own account, chiefly, that I asked her to stay back. At first I had a most strong desire to see her again, but there appeared to be very serious objections; and should we never meet in this life, I trust that she will in the end be satisfied it was for the best at least, if not most for her comfort.

I am waiting the hour of my public murder with great composure of mind and cheerfulness; feeling the strong assurance that in no other possible way could I be used to so much advantage to the cause of God and of humanity, and that nothing that either I or all my family have sacrificed or suffered will be lost. The reflection that a wise and merciful as well as just and holy God rules not only the affairs of this world but of all worlds, is a rock to set our feet upon under all circumstances,—even those more severely trying ones in which our own feelings and wrongs have placed us. I have now no doubt but that our seeming disaster will ultimately result in the most glorious success. So, my dear shattered and broken family, be of good cheer, and believe and trust in God with all your heart and with all your soul; for He doeth all things well. Do not feel ashamed on my account, nor for one moment despair of the cause or grow weary of well-doing. I bless God I never felt stronger confidence in the certain and near approach of a bright morning and glorious day than I have felt, and do now feel, since my confinement here. I am endeavoring to return, like a poor prodigal as I am, to my Father, against whom I have always sinned, in the hope that he may kindly and forgivingly meet me, though a very great way off.

Oh, my dear wife and children, would to God you could know how I have been travailing in birth for you all, that no one of you may fail of the grace of God through Jesus Christ; that no one of you may be blind to the truth and glorious light of his Word, in which life and immortality are brought to light. I beseech you, every one, to make the Bible your daily and nightly study, with a child-like, honest, candid, teachable spirit of love and respect for your husband and father. And I beseech the God of my fathers to open all your eyes to the discovery of the truth. You cannot imagine how much you may soon need the consolations of the Christian religion.

* * *

I mention this as a reason for endeavoring to leave a valuable copy of the Bible, to be carefully preserved in remembrance of me, to so many of my posterity, instead of some other book at equal cost.

I beseech you all to live in habitual contentment with moderate circumstances and gains of worldly store, and earnestly to teach this to your children and children's children after you, by example as well as precept. Be determined to know by experience, as soon as may be, whether Bible instruction is of divine origin or not. Be sure to owe no man anything, but to love one another. John Rogers³ wrote to his children: "Abhor that arrant whore of Rome." John Brown writes to his children to abhor, with undying hatred also, that sum of all villanies,—slavery. Remember, "he that is slow to anger is better than the mighty," and "he that ruleth his spirit than he that taketh a city." Remember also that "they being wise shall shine, and they that turn many to righteousness, as the stars for ever and ever."

And now, dearly beloved family, to God and the work of his grace I commend you all.

*Your affectionate husband and father,
John Brown.*

3. English clergyman (c. 1500–55), translator of the Bible into English and first English martyr for Protestantism during the reign of Mary I.