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THE CAUSE OF THE SLAVE
BECAME MY OWN

Sarah M. Douglass

 *Sarah Mapps Douglass (1806–1882) was an active participant in the antislavery movement and was among the organizers of the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society and the Female Literary Society of Philadelphia. She wrote political essays for the Liberator and the*

Anglo-African Magazine and was a frequent lecturer. She opened and directed her own high school for African American women and later served as an instructor in physiology and hygiene at the Institute for Colored Youth.

Douglass was a Quaker, attending the Arch Street Friends Meeting-house in Philadelphia. Despite the Friends' staunch commitment to abolitionism, Douglass and other African Americans found themselves seated on segregated "Negro pews" when they attended Quaker meetings. Her explanation was characteristically direct: "I believe they despise us for our color." As with Maria Stewart, Douglass believed that social activism must be grounded in religious faith, and her speeches are replete with religious references. "We can do nothing for ourselves," she insisted, urging her listeners to place their "whole dependence on God."

Born to an affluent family and speaking to an audience composed primarily of Philadelphia's black elite, Douglass emphasized the need for the fortunate to look beyond their own lives to the misery of others. As she acknowledged, it was the experience of seeing the oppressor "lurking on the border of my own peaceful home" that induced her empathy, probably referring to recent initiatives in the Pennsylvania legislature to return fugitive slaves and restrict the rights of free blacks.

The following address was delivered to the recently formed Female Literary Society of Philadelphia in late June 1832. It appears in volume 3 of C. Peter Ripley, ed., *The Black Abolitionist Papers* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 116–17.

MY FRIENDS—MY SISTERS: How important is the occasion for which we have assembled ourselves together this evening, to hold a feast, to feed our never-dying minds, to excite each other to deeds of mercy, words of peace; to stir up in the bosom of each, gratitude to God for his increasing goodness, and feeling of deep sympathy for our brethren and sisters, who are in this land of christian light and liberty held in bondage the most cruel and degrading—to make their cause our own!

An English writer has said, "We must feel deeply before we can act rightly; for that absorbing, heart-rendering compassion for ourselves springs a deeper sympathy for others, and from a sense of our weakness and our own upbraidings arises a disposition to be indulgent, to forbear, to forgive." This is my experience. One short year ago, how different were my feelings on the subject of slavery! It is true, the wail of the captive sometimes came to my ear in the midst of my happiness, and caused my heart to bleed for his wrongs; but, alas! the impression was as evanescent as the early cloud and morning dew. I had formed a little world of my own, and cared not to move beyond its precincts. But how was the scene changed when I beheld the oppressor lurking on the border of my own peaceful home! I saw his iron hand stretched forth to seize me as his prey, and the cause of the slave became my own. I started up, and with one mighty effort threw from me the lethargy which had covered me as a mantle for years; and determined, by the help of

the Almighty, to use every exertion in my power to elevate the character of my wronged and neglected race. One year ago, I detested the slaveholder; now I can pity and pray for him. Has not this been your experience, my sisters? Have you not felt as I have felt upon this thrilling subject? My heart assures me some of you have.

And now, my sisters, I would earnestly and affectionately press upon you the necessity of placing your whole dependence on God; poor, weak, finite creatures as we are, we can do nothing for ourselves. He is all powerful; He is waiting to be gracious to us as a people. Do you feel your inability to do good? Come to Him who giveth liberally and upbraideth not; bring your wrongs and fears to Him, as you would to a tender parent—He will sympathize with you. I know from blessed, heart-cheering experience the excellency of having a God to trust to in seasons of trial and conflict. What but this can support us should the pestilence which has devastated Asia be born to us by the summer breezes? What but this can uphold our fainting footsteps in the swellings of Jordan? It is the only thing worth living for—the only thing that can disarm death of his sting. I am earnestly solicitous that each of us may adopt this language:

*“I have no hope in man, but much in God—
Much in the rock of ages”*

In conclusion, I would respectfully recommend that our mental feast should commence by reading a portion of the Holy Scriptures. A pause should proceed the reading for supplication. It is my wish that the reading and conversation should be altogether directed to the subject of slavery. The refreshment which may be offered to you for the body, will be of the most simple kind, that you may feel for those who have nothing to refresh body and mind.■