

God's Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse Study Guide

God's Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse by James Weldon Johnson

(c)2015 BookRags, Inc. All rights reserved.



Contents

God's Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Listen, Lord—A Prayer.....	3
The Creation.....	4
The Prodigal Son.....	5
Go Down Death—A Funeral Sermon.....	7
Noah Built the Ark.....	8
The Crucifixion.....	10
Let My People Go.....	11
The Judgment Day.....	13
Characters.....	15
Objects/Places.....	20
Themes.....	24
Style.....	26
Quotes.....	28
Topics for Discussion.....	30



Listen, Lord—A Prayer

Listen, Lord—A Prayer Summary

In the first stanza of this poem, the speaker tells God they are coming to Him in a powerless and humble position. The speaker asks God to help the congregation realize how insignificant they are compared to the bigness of God. He also requests that God listen to the people as they gather to worship Him. In the second stanza, the speaker asks for mercy, or compassion, for the sinners. He pleads that the Lord will ride past Hell on his horse and stop sinners from entering this place.

In the third stanza, the speaker asks for blessings upon the preacher, the man who is about to deliver the sermon. It is requested that this man be protected from the devil as well as being cleaned from all sin. The speaker also asks that the Lord give the preacher the wisdom and power to deliver the Word of God as it should be delivered. In the fourth and final stanza, the speaker requests a peaceful death, when that time comes.

Listen, Lord—A Prayer Analysis

This poem takes the form of a prayer, a sort of conversation with God. In this particular prayer, the speaker first asks the Lord to listen to his cries. A reader should notice the symbolism in this poem. For instance, in the first stanza, the people are referred to as empty pitchers waiting to be filled by God. In the ninth line of the third stanza of this poem the speaker asks the Lord to make the preacher's words, "sledge hammers of truth." It is also requested that the preacher's imagination be cleaned with turpentine and that he be allowed to see the "paper walls of time" through the "telescope of eternity." Notice that all of these symbols the speaker uses are things that the congregation would encounter in their everyday life and be very familiar with.



The Creation

The Creation Summary

The sermon "The Creation" tells the story of God's creation of the Earth. In the first stanza God is described as stepping into the empty space and deciding to create a world in order to end His loneliness. In the second stanza, the preacher describes that God can see only deep darkness all around Him. As God smiles in the third stanza, light is created. God is pleased with His creation of light.

In the fourth stanza, God is described as rolling this light in His hands to make the sun. The left over light from the sun is thrown into the sky and creates stars and the moon. Between the sun and the stars, God puts the world, another act with which He is pleased. In the fifth stanza, God walks on the face of the world He has just created. According to the sermon, it is His footsteps that create the mountains and valleys.

In the sixth stanza, God creates the seas, as well as thunder, lightning and rain. This rain causes grass, flowers, and trees to grow on the face of the earth in stanza seven. At the conclusion of this stanza, a rainbow appears in the sky after the rain has stopped. In stanza eight God creates the fish, animals and birds. In stanza nine, God realizes that even with all that He has created, He is still lonely.

In the tenth stanza God sits down on a hill to ponder His problem. He finally decides to make a man. In the eleventh stanza God uses clay from a river bank to form man in His own likeness. In the twelfth and final stanza, God blows breath into the man so that it can become a living person.

The Creation Analysis

Although all of these sermons are arranged in poem form, there are few rhyming patterns. The writer seems to be more concerned with the rhythm and the flow of the words and ideas. In this particular sermon, the stanzas are arranged so that each action of God is contained in one stanza. For instance, in stanza one, God decides to make the world; in stanza two, He recognizes the darkness; in stanza three, He creates light, and so forth until the final stanza where He creates the first human.

Notice that in this sermon, like the introductory prayer, the speaker uses images with which the people are familiar. For instance, in the second and third lines of stanza two the darkness is described as being "Blacker that a hundred midnights / Down in a cypress swamp." In the next to last stanza of this sermon, God is depicted as a mammy as He creates the first human. The use of the term mammy, brings to mind the image of God acting as a mother or one who cares for small children while he creates this human. This mother image also depicts God's feelings of love and empathy toward His creation.



The Prodigal Son

The Prodigal Son Summary

This sermon is based on the Biblical story of the prodigal, or reckless, son. Stanza one is a warning to all young men that they are not big enough or powerful enough to take on combat with God. In the second stanza the preacher introduces his subject. The preacher uses a parable that Jesus tells and is now recorded in the New Testament. The preacher contends that Jesus did not give the man or the sons in the parable names because the story refers to God and all of His sons, all of mankind that live on the earth. The preacher indicates that all people can be categorized as one of these two types of sons.

In the third stanza, the younger of the two sons asks his father for his part of his father's property. Although the father begs his son not to do what he has in mind, the boy insists and the father gives his son his portion of his property. With this money in hand, the boy sets off for far away lands. In stanza five, the preacher pauses from his story to mention that in every young man's life there is a time when he wants to go away from his father's house. In stanza six, the preacher returns to his story and points out that the young man compares his new life to his life with his father. The boy notes his life is now easy, not like the field work he was used to with his father.

Stanza seven serves as a warning to all young men who want to go away from their fathers that the road will at first seem easy. The preacher indicates that the road will be all downhill with no need to work at all. This downhill slide, however, will end at the gates of hell. In stanza eight the young man arrives at the city of Babylon. Even in the night time in Babylon people sing and dance and have a good time. The young man takes up with one of the crowds he meets in Babylon.

In stanza nine, a warning is given that one is never alone in a place like Babylon. One is always with a crowd. In this busy, crazy setting, there is no place to get alone with God and pray. In stanza ten the preacher describes the new lifestyle of the young man. He has bought himself new clothes and amuses himself by drinking and gambling. In this time, the young man also becomes associated with the women of Babylon. Although these women look and smell nice, and dress well, they are sinners who lure the young man into sin. Eventually, the young man wastes all of his inheritance on this type of wild living.

In stanza eleven the young man becomes a beggar in Babylon. He is reduced to feeding the pigs. The preacher indicates that even the pigs turned up their noses at the low state into which this young man had fallen. In stanza twelve the young man comes to his senses and realizes he would be treated better as a servant in his father's house. In stanza thirteen the young man's father sees his son coming from far away and runs to meet him. Instead of treating him like a servant, however, the father treats his son as an honored guest.



In stanza fourteen the preacher makes the point that while one is running with a sinning crowd in a place like Babylon, one forgets about God, and one laughs at death. Death, however, always comes to every person and always takes the person for whom it comes. In the final stanza the preacher begs the sinning young men of his congregation to leave the sinning ways of Babylon, get down on their knees and beg forgiveness from their heavenly father.

The Prodigal Son Analysis

This sermon is based on the story of prodigal son from the Bible. The pastor expands this Bible story about a father and his two sons so that the father represents not an earthly father, but the heavenly father. The prodigal son represents all of mankind, both male and female. The sermon tells the story of the sinner's repentance and reunion with God.

This sermon has a very rhythmic, almost song-like presentation. The preacher tells a portion of the parable, after each portion of parable, there is a section of sermon that summarizes or restates the point made in the prior section of sermon. These sections of parable and summary work together almost like the verses and chorus of a song. Also note the song-like way in which many lines in the sermon are repeated.

In this sermon, God is described as a father. By portraying God as a father instead of a domineering deity, it shows that the people saw God as a caring, loving person who welcomes His children regardless of how distant they have become from Him. The sermon also dictates that all people are eligible for forgiveness from the Father and that no matter how bad their sins might be, they will still be welcomed in heaven by God.



Go Down Death—A Funeral Sermon

Go Down Death—A Funeral Sermon Summary

This sermon opens with the comforting idea that the deceased is not dead, but only gone home to Jesus. In the second stanza, the preacher goes back in time to describe that on the day before yesterday God looked down on Sister Caroline and saw her pain. God pitied the woman in her pain and asked Death to be called to Him. In stanza four Death responds to God's call. In stanza five God commands Death to bring Sister Caroline to Him.

In stanzas six, seven and eight the preacher describes the action of Death going down to Georgia and finding Sister Caroline. He describes how Caroline recognizes Death, even though no one else in the room sees Death coming. Death takes Caroline up to God in heaven. In stanza nine the preacher describes the way in which Jesus takes Caroline up in His arms and comforts her. The preacher ends his sermon with the repeated message that Caroline is not dead, but resting with Jesus.

Go Down Death—A Funeral Sermon Analysis

The theme of God as a caring person as opposed to a domineering deity is very strong in this sermon. The sermon shows that God not only loves His children, but that He also has the ability to show pity and compassion for them. As He looks down from heaven, God recognizes the pain of Sister Caroline and calls Death to relieve her from her suffering. Once Caroline is in heaven with Jesus, He rocks her in His arms and wipes away her tears. This description brings to mind the image of a father comforting his small daughter.

It is also interesting in this section that death is personified. In this sermon Death is a person who is ordered by God to go and fetch His servants. Death is described as riding a bloodless, pale horse. Even though his arms are icy, Caroline recognizes that Death has come to take her home and does not feel Death's cold.



Noah Built the Ark

Noah Built the Ark Summary

In the opening stanza God walks through the Garden of Eden looking for Adam and Eve. The couple finally steps out from their hiding place and shows themselves to God. In the second stanza God recognizes at once that Adam has eaten from the forbidden tree of knowledge. Adam blames his actions on Eve. In stanza three the preacher describes how God created Eve for Adam. The preacher also tells his congregation that God had warned the couple not to eat from the tree of knowledge.

In the fourth stanza Satan approaches Eve. In the fifth stanza Satan questions Eve about the tree of knowledge. Eve believes that if she and Adam eat from this tree, they will die. In stanza six Satan convinces Eve that she will not die if she eats the fruit from the tree. In stanza seven both Eve and Adam eat fruit from this tree. The preacher explains in stanza eight that it was this action by Adam and Eve that bring the first sin into the world. This sin gets worse and worse as time goes by until the evil nature of people becomes completely corrupt. In his anger, God decides to destroy all mankind.

Noah, the only righteous man on earth, is introduced in stanza ten. God gives Noah plans to build an ark out of gopher wood in order to save himself and his family from the flood. In stanza eleven Noah begins to work on the ark even though those around him laugh at him. In the twelfth stanza the preacher explains how Noah would stop his work only to preach to the people watching him work on his boat. The thirteenth stanza describes the type of things Noah would say to the people. Noah would tell the people that they need to repent because God was going to destroy all the inhabitants of the earth. People thought that Noah was crazy, however, and did not listen to him.

In stanza fifteen God gives Noah the order to load his family and two of each animal into the ark. In stanza sixteen the rain begins and lasts for forty days. Although the sinners beg Noah to let them inside, the door to the ark has already been barred. After twelve months of covering the earth, the water finally begins to recede from the earth and the ark comes to rest on Mount Ararat. Noah and his family celebrate when they are finally able to leave the ark. In the final stanza God puts a rainbow in the sky as a sign that he will not destroy the earth with a flood ever again.

Noah Built the Ark Analysis

One of the most important things to consider about this sermon is the way in which God is portrayed. The sermon is based on the incident recorded in the Bible where God destroys the Earth. This action seems to be a very drastic action for a loving God to make. It appears from the sermon, however, that God simply became so fed up with the sin and corruptness of Earth that he no longer wanted sinful humans to exist. Even in this rash act of violence, however, God discovers there is one just man on Earth and



decides to save this man and his family. This action shows that, even in His anger, God still recognizes those who are true to Him. Also, after the flood is over and Noah and his family are on dry land again, God makes a promise never to destroy the Earth with a flood again. This promise is made evident by a rainbow that God puts in the sky. Rainbows, like this first one, still appear in the sky today.



The Crucifixion

The Crucifixion Summary

In this sermon, the preacher talks about the events surrounding the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Stanza one opens the sermon with Jesus and three of his disciples together in the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus asks the three to stay with Him during His time of sorrow. In stanzas two and three Jesus prays that if it is God's will the torture that He is about to go through will not happen. As He prays, His disciples fall asleep.

In stanza four Judas, Jesus' betrayer, leads those who want to crucify Jesus to Jesus as He prays in the garden. Judas betrays Jesus' identity with a kiss. In the fifth stanza Jesus is taken to stand judgment before the Roman Governor Pilate. Although Pilate tells the crowd that he can find no fault in Jesus, the crowd cries for Jesus to be crucified. Pilate washes his hands of the matter and turns Jesus over to the crowd.

In stanza six Jesus is beaten, and dressed in a royal robe with a crown of thorns as the crowd makes fun of Him. In stanza seven Jesus is unable to carry His cross up to Golgotha, so a man named Simon is commanded to carry it for Him. Stanzas eight and nine describe the actual events of the crucifixion as Jesus is nailed to the cross and has a spear plunged into His side.

In stanza ten, Mary, the mother of Jesus cries as she watches what the people are doing to her son. Jesus cries out from the cross in stanza eleven. He asks God why God has left Him, and then He dies. Stanza thirteen describes how the veil of the temple is torn in half and the sun stops shining at the time of Jesus death. In the final stanza, the preacher reminds his congregation that Jesus went through the agony of the cross for sinners.

The Crucifixion Analysis

The crucifixion sermon would have been one wrought with emotion for both the congregation and the preacher. One can almost imagine the preacher becoming overcome with emotion as he delivered this sermon. The intention of the sermon is to make the congregation realize what torment Jesus went through for His people. This intention, mixed with the emotion, would have brought the speaker's message through quite clearly to the people.

Notice in stanza five the symbolism of Pilate washing his hands of Jesus. Pilate intends to convey to the people that if they crucify Jesus as they wish, he is not to be held responsible. Notice also that the preacher makes a point to include in his sermon the idea that it was a black man who was called to carry Jesus cross after He was unable to go on.



Let My People Go

Let My People Go Summary

The Sermon "Let My People Go" opens with God calling Moses from a burning bush. In the second stanza God tells Moses from the bush that it is God who is speaking to him. Moses is commanded to take off his shoes because the ground there is holy. When God tells Moses again in stanza three that it is God himself who is speaking to Moses, Moses hides his face.

In stanza four God describes how He has been watching how badly the Hebrew people are treated by their Egyptian captors. God has decided to relieve the Hebrews of their suffering and lead them to the land of Canaan. He has chosen Moses to convince Pharaoh to let the Hebrews go free. In stanza five Moses tries to offer excuses why he is not equipped to do this job, but God convinces Moses that He will speak for him. In stanza six Moses does as God commands him.

In stanza seven Pharaoh basically laughs at Moses and his God. He tells Moses he will not let the people go free. In stanza eight the preacher delivering this sermon describes how unfortunate Pharaoh is that he never knew the true God. Although Pharaoh is the most powerful man in Egypt, the preacher states that this power is no match for the power of God. He indicates that Pharaoh does not stand a chance going up against the power of God.

In stanza nine Pharaoh responds to Moses' request by putting heavier burdens on the Hebrew people, making the Hebrews angry with Moses. In stanza ten God sends both Moses and Aaron to Pharaoh to work signs to try to convince Pharaoh to let the Hebrews go free. These signs do not impress Pharaoh since his own magic men are able to work the same signs. Since Pharaoh does not listen to Moses, in stanza eleven God sends plagues, or afflictions, in the form of pests and diseases upon the Egyptian people.

Even with all the destruction Pharaoh will still not free the Hebrews so God decides to kill the first-born child of each Egyptian family. God puts this plan into action in stanza thirteen. The Egyptians are so overcome with grief that Pharaoh commands the Hebrews to leave Egypt. The Hebrews are led out of the land of Egypt by God in stanza fourteen. In stanza fifteen, however, it is suggested that Pharaoh's wife complains to Pharaoh about the absence of the slaves. With these people gone, there is no one to do the Egyptians' work for them. Therefore in stanza sixteen Pharaoh gathers up his armies and goes after the Hebrews.

In stanzas seventeen and eighteen the Hebrew people are worried when they hear Pharaoh's chariots pursuing them. They cry to Moses that they should have stayed in Egypt. In stanza nineteen Moses tries to convince the people that God will protect them from Pharaoh and his army. In stanza twenty God parts the Red Sea so that the



Hebrews can pass through and escape from Pharaoh. In stanza twenty-one the Egyptian armies are drowned as they try to follow the Hebrews through the sea. The Hebrew people celebrate their freedom and release from Egypt.

Let My People Go Analysis

In this sermon God is portrayed as a powerful God who is able to perform miracles and work through people on Earth to achieve His goals. These miracles include the parting of the Red Sea and the simultaneous deaths of all the first-born Egyptian children. Note that in each circumstance Pharaoh is able to make his own decisions as to how he responds to what God is doing to him and his country. Although God appears to have the power to manipulate nature, he does not interfere with human free will. God uses his signs to convince Pharaoh to set the people free, but never forces any decision or proposition on him.

Notice also the nature of the Hebrew children. They have known nothing but slavery their entire lives. Even with Moses' promise to lead them to freedom, they are afraid to leave the Egyptians. At each hint of trouble, such as when the Egyptian armies come after them, they cry to Moses and tell him it would have been better for them to stay in Egypt. They do not appear to understand what a great gift they are being given as Moses leads them to freedom.



The Judgment Day

The Judgment Day Summary

In the first stanza the preacher describes the Judgment Day as a great day when God will appear in the sky to judge both the living and the dead. Stanza two indicates that on this day God will call for the angel Gabriel to blow his silver trumpet. Stanza three states that Gabriel will ask God how loud he should sound the trumpet. In stanza four the preacher states that God will tell Gabriel to first blow the instrument gently to warn those who are living that the day of judgments has arrived. In stanza five the preacher states that God will then tell Gabriel to blow his trumpet to wake those that are dead. The preacher tells his congregation in stanza six that this time Gabriel will be commanded to blow his trumpet loudly enough to shake the foundations of hell. The preacher describes in stanza seven that the dead will come out of the grave and be caught up in the air with the living.

In stanza nine the preacher questions his congregation about where they believe they will stand in the sight of God on Judgment Day. In stanza ten the preacher describes how God will divide the sheep from the goats. The sheep will be invited into God's kingdom where they will be dressed in white with crowns on their heads. In stanza ten the description of heaven is continued with the preacher telling how the saints will sing songs, talk with the angels and enjoy feasts in heaven.

The goats, on the other hand, will be sent into hell. Stanza eleven indicates the way these sinners will fall for seven days before they even reach hell. After this fall, they will be tormented with burning heat and smoke. Although they cry for God, God will stop His ears against their cries. In stanza thirteen God says that at this point, it is too late for sinners to repent. In stanza fourteen the preacher remarks that at this point time will be no more and the Earth as it is now known will be destroyed. In the final stanza the preacher asks his congregation to consider where they will stand on this great Judgment Day.

The Judgment Day Analysis

This sermon presents what could be considered a disturbing portrait of the final days of the Earth. It indicates that just as God created the Earth, one day He will return, take those with Him who have professed faith in Him and doom sinners to hell. After these judgments are finished, God will destroy the Earth.

Notice that in the sermon the minister indicates that God will divide the people into sheep on His right and goats on His left. The sheep represent the pure and those forgiven by God while the goats are those who are less desirable. Notice also that in this sermon God is presented as a God of power and strength. He has the power to

command the trumpet sound which will bring forth the dead from the graves. He also has the power to bring an end to the world.

Like "The Crucifixion Sermon," this sermon would have been delivered in a very emotional manner. These emotions would be used by the minister to try to get his congregation to repent of their sins and get right with God. Note that he not only tells of the beauty of heaven and the happiness of the people there, but also the pain and unhappiness of hell. Once a sinner is in hell, they are beyond the help of God. He will no longer hear their cries.



Characters

Lord appears in Various Sermons

In these various sermons, the Lord is referred to by several different titles. For instance, He is called the Lord, Lord God, God, Jesus, Mary's Baby, and the Lamb. According to the New Testament, Jesus was born on earth as a baby. His mother, Mary, was a virgin impregnated by the power of God. Jesus lived 33 years on earth. During this time he preached to the general public and taught in more detail to a small band of disciples. Jesus was crucified as a result of his claim that he was the Son of God. According to the Bible, it is this death on the cross that allows the entirety of mankind to have the opportunity to receive salvation.

The prayer "Listen Lord—A Prayer" evokes the Lord to listen to His people. In this prayer God is portrayed as a loving, but powerful and awe-inspiring God. The sermon "The Creation" depicts God as a mother, creating and caring for His children. This sermon also shows God's pleasure in His ability to create a pleasing world. The sermon "The Prodigal Son" makes the point that God is a loving father who welcomes His children back; no matter how far they have wandered from Him. In "Go Down Death—A Funeral Sermon" God's ability to feel pity and compassion for His people is showcased. Although God is distant from His people, he watches as Sister Caroline suffers on Earth. It is His decision to have Death bring Caroline to Him in heaven where Jesus comforts her in His own arms.

God's ability to be displeased with His people is seen in the sermon "Noah Built the Ark." God becomes so unhappy with his people, in fact, that he decides to destroy all of them, with the exception of Noah and his family, in a great flood. The most personable portrait of the Lord is shown in the sermon "The Crucifixion." In this sermon, Jesus is in great torment as he prays in the Garden of Gethsemane. Although He knows His fate and asks His disciples to stay awake and pray with Him, they cannot stay awake to provide Him with comfort and companionship. Although He is God, Jesus suffers through his crucifixion just like any regular human being.

God's compassion for his people is also displayed in the sermon "Let My People Go." In this sermon, God sees the pain of His people as they work as slaves for the Egyptians. God chooses Moses to convince Pharaoh to let the Hebrews go free. The portrayal of God in "The Judgment Day" is the most powerful portrayal of His personality of any of the sermons included in this book. In this sermon God calls for Judgment Day, the day when the sinners will be separated from the children of God. According to God's judgment, each person will receive their just punishment, either eternity in heaven with God or an eternity of suffering in Hell.



Sinners appears in Various Sermons

According to "Listen, Lord—A Prayer" sinners are people who are on their way to death and hell because they live a lifestyle that takes them away from God. In this section the speaker prays for God to have mercy on these sinners. The sinners in "The Prodigal Son" are the people of Babylon. It is described that when one is living among sinning people, it is very difficult for one to be alone with God. In the sermon "Noah Built the Ark," it is shown how much God dislikes the sin and disgraceful ways of sinners. In this sermon, sin has become so rampant upon the Earth that God decides to destroy all living things on the Earth with a great flood. The sinners in this sermon will not listen to the advice of a godly man when he tells them they must repent. These sinners wait until it is too late to save themselves before they realize the seriousness of their life without God.

Although God destroyed sinners in Noah's flood, they have repopulated the world. In the sermon "The Crucifixion" it is these sinners that cause Jesus to be put to death for crimes that he did not commit. It is also noted in this sermon that Jesus dies to save these sinners from their sins. In the sermon "The Judgment Day" the sinners are divided out from the sheep, or children of God, and referred to as "goats." It is noted in this sermon that at the point in time when Judgment Day comes, it will be too late for sinners to rectify their lives.

The Prodigal Son appears in The Prodigal Son

The prodigal son represents all those who have strayed away from God during their lives. In the parable that Jesus tells, the prodigal son is the one who asks his father for his portion of his father's riches before it is time for him to receive them. Instead of spending this money wisely, the prodigal son wastes his money on drinking, gambling and wild living. He eventually winds up a poor beggar and decides to go back to his father. Instead of treating his son badly, however, the father welcomes his son home and restores his self-respect.

Women of Babylon appears in The Prodigal Son

The women of Babylon appear to be the equivalent of prostitutes. They wear brightly colored clothes and a great deal of jewelry. Although they smell sweet and appear desirable, they are not as they appear. These women have the ability to lead young men, such as the one in "The Prodigal Son" astray. They eventually leave the young man in the sermon naked and poor.



Sister Caroline appears in Go Down Death--A Funeral Sermon

Sister Caroline is the deceased woman for whom this particular funeral sermon is written. Caroline lives in Savannah, Georgia, and has been in pain for awhile. God recognizes Caroline's pain and sends Death to bring her home to Him and out of her misery. Caroline is not afraid of Death even when she sees him coming for her. Caroline is carried by Death up to heaven where she is comforted by Jesus Himself.

Death appears in Go Down Death--A Funeral Sermon

Death is personified as an icy cold man who rides a pale, bloodless horse. He is commanded by God to go and bring Sister Caroline home to heaven. According to the sermon, Death waits with his pale horses in a shadowy part of heaven. He comes only when summoned by God. As Death rides his horses on the gold streets of heaven, the hooves make sparks, but no noise.

Adam appears in Noah Built the Ark

Adam is the first man created by God. Adam and his wife, Eve, live in perfect joy in the Garden of Eden. However, when Eve offers Adam fruit from the forbidden tree, he finds he cannot refuse her offer.

Eve appears in Noah Built the Ark

Eve is the wife of Adam, the first man made by God. God made Eve by removing a rib from Adam's rib cage. Eve lives with her husband in the Garden of Eden. One day Satan approaches Eve to try to get her to sin. Satan convinces Eve to eat fruit from a tree that has been forbidden from the couple by God. Eve, in turn, convinces Adam to also eat fruit from the same tree. It is this act by Eve that brought sin into the world.

Judas appears in The Crucifixion

Judas is the one who leads the Romans to Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. Judas' sign of recognition of Jesus and thereby his betrayal of him is the kiss that he places on Jesus' cheek.

Pilate appears in The Crucifixion

Pilate is the Roman governor before whom Jesus is presented for a judgment of guilt or innocence. Although Pilate states to the people that he can find no guilt in Jesus'



actions, the people insist that Jesus be crucified. Pilate washes his hands, symbolizing that he is not involved in the peoples' decision.

Mary appears in The Crucifixion

Mary is the mother of Jesus. In the sermon "The Crucifixion," Mary cries as she watches her son killed by the Romans.

Moses appears in Let My People Go

It is to Moses whom the Lord speaks from the burning bush. Moses is told by the Lord to go to the Pharaoh of Egypt and convince him to let the Hebrew slaves go free. Moses is at first doubtful of his abilities, but does as he is commanded. At the conclusion of this sermon Moses is depicted as singing as the Hebrew people escape from the Egyptians through the Red Sea. God has parted this sea for the Hebrews to pass through. As soon as Moses and the Hebrews pass through, the waters go back together and the Egyptian armies are drowned.

Aaron appears in Let My People Go

Aaron is Moses' brother. When Moses goes to Pharaoh a second time, God commands him to take Aaron with him. Together Moses and Aaron perform miraculous signs to try to convince the Pharaoh to let the Hebrews go free.

Old Pharaoh appears in Let My People Go

Pharaoh is the Egyptian leader who holds the Hebrews as slaves. Moses is commanded by God to go to Pharaoh and tell him that God has said to release the Hebrew people from their captivity. The preacher pities Pharaoh for trying to go against God. It is because Pharaoh will not free the Egyptians that God causes plagues to come upon the country of Egypt. Even after Pharaoh decides to free the people, he is convinced by his wife to go after the slaves and bring them back. Pharaoh and all of his army are drowned in the Red Sea when they try to follow and recapture the Hebrews.

Miriam appears in Let My People Go

As Moses sang at the Hebrews' escape from the Egyptians, Miriam danced. According to the Bible, Miriam is Moses' sister.



Gabriel appears in The Judgment Day

Gabriel is described as a tall, silver angel whom God will command to blow a silver trumpet to announce that Judgment Day has come.



Objects/Places

Empty Pitchers appears in Listen, Lord--A Prayer

Those waiting to hear the preacher's sermon are described as empty pitchers wanting to be filled by the Lord.

Heaven appears in Listen, Lord--A Prayer

Heaven is the place of reward where all Christians hope to spend eternity with God after their death.

Milk-white Horse appears in Listen, Lord--A Prayer

The Lord is depicted as riding a milk-white horse.

Hell appears in Listen, Lord--A Prayer

Hell is the place where those who do not profess a belief in Christ will spend their eternity after death in pain and sorrow.

Bread of Life appears in Listen, Lord--A Prayer

The Word of God, or the truths discussed in the Christian Bible, is often referred to in Christian terminology as the bread of life.

Hell's Iron Gate appears in The Prodigal Son

Hell's iron gate is the fixture that the prodigal son will eventually slide into if he stays on his track down the smooth and easy road.

Babylon appears in The Prodigal Son

Babylon was an ancient city that still exists in present day Iraq. Babylon is the sinning city in which the prodigal son loses his fortune.

Wine of Babylon appears in The Prodigal Son

The prodigal son is warned to stay away from the wine of Babylon.



Great White Throne appears in Go Down Death--A Funeral Sermon

In heaven God sits upon this great white throne.

Savannah, Georgia appears in Go Down Death--A Funeral Sermon

Savannah, Georgia is the city where the deceased Sister Caroline lived.

Garden of Eden appears in Noah Built the Ark

The Garden of Eden is where Adam and Eve, the first couple, live.

The Tree of Knowledge appears in Noah Built the Ark

Adam and Eve are told by God not to eat the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge.

Looking-glass appears in Noah Built the Ark

The preacher suspects that Satan may have given Eve a looking-glass as a gift.

Gopher Wood appears in Noah Built the Ark

According to the sermon, Noah built his ark out of gopher wood.

Mount Ararat appears in Noah Built the Ark

Mount Ararat is the mountain where the ark come to rest when the flood waters begin to recede.

Dove appears in Noah Built the Ark

Noah releases a dove from the ark to determine if the land is dry.

Olive Leaf appears in Noah Built the Ark

Noah knows he and his family can disembark from the ark when the dove returns to him with an olive leaf in its mouth.



Rainbow appears in Noah Built the Ark

God puts the rainbow in the sky as a promise that he will never destroy the earth again with water.

Garden of Gethsemane appears in The Crucifixion

It is in the Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus prays while His disciples sleep.

Crown of Thorns appears in The Crucifixion

Before His crucifixion a crown of thorns is pressed down on Christ's head.

Golgotha appears in The Crucifixion

Golgotha is known as the place of the skull. It is the location of Christ's crucifixion.

Calvary appears in The Crucifixion

Calvary is another name given for the place where Christ is crucified.

Jerusalem appears in The Crucifixion

Jerusalem is the name of the city in which Christ is tried and later crucified.

Roman Spear appears in The Crucifixion

A Roman Spear is plunged into Jesus' side during the crucifixion.

Veil of the Temple appears in The Crucifixion

This temple veil is torn in two after Jesus dies on the cross.

Burning Bush appears in Let My People Go

It is from a burning bush that God speaks to Moses.

Egypt appears in Let My People Go

Egypt is the land where the Hebrews are being held in captivity.



Canaan appears in Let My People Go

God promises to lead his people to the land of Canaan.

Pillar of Cloud/Pillar of Fire appears in Let My People Go

God appears to the Hebrews as a pillar of cloud and fire to lead them to the land He has promised them.

Silver Trumpet appears in The Judgment Day

God will instruct Gabriel to blow this instrument at the beginning of Judgment Day.



Themes

God as a Person

In most cases when one considers the idea of a god, they bring to mind an all-powerful being who keeps his distance from the people who serve him. Although his worshipers may pray to him and offer sacrifices, this being never becomes involved in the lives of his followers or shows any love or affection for them. In these sermons, however, God is portrayed as a person as well as a god who is all-powerful but still cares for and helps his worshipers.

The first evidence of this care is that God create the Earth and humans at all. According to the sermon "The Creation" God created humans because He was lonely and wanted companionship with the people He created. Next, in the funeral sermon "Go Down Death" God recognizes the suffering of his people. This sermon states that God saw and recognized the pain that Sister Caroline was in and sent Death to relieve her of her pain. Once she was in heaven with Him, God (Jesus) held Caroline in His arms and comforted her.

God's affection for his people is also shown by His willingness to free the Hebrew people from the Egyptian captors. Although other gods have never been recognized for becoming involved in the lives of their people, this God spoke to Moses from a bush and told Moses of His plan to free the people. Even though the people whined and cried to Moses about the difficulty of the process of their freedom, God still continued to work with them and with Pharaoh until His goal was met; He did not give up on them. Finally, Jesus, God's son, was killed on a cross in the sermon "The Crucifixion." Few, if any, gods have ever died for their people. This sacrifice is the ultimate show of compassion, an emotion which is uniquely human.

Familiar Terminology

One of the more interesting aspects of these sermons is the preacher's use of terminology in his sermons with which the people would have been very familiar. Take, for example, the section "Listen Lord—A Prayer." The speaker first compares the people to empty pitchers waiting to be filled by the Lord. When praying for the preacher the speaker asks the man of God to be kept safe from the devil's gunshot. Although it is doubtful that the devil actually has a gun, the people listening to this prayer were well aware the damage and death that a bullet could bring about.

Another example of this use of familiar terminology is the speaker's cry for the Lord to use turpentine to clean the imagination of the preacher. Turpentine was a medicinal liquid used to clean infection from wounds and rid the body of parasites. This liquid medicine was commonly found in the homes of the people listening to this prayer and was commonly used by them.



A final example of this familiar terminology used by the preacher giving these sermons can be found in the sermon "The Creation." At the end of this sermon God is described as a mammy, or mother, leaning over to care for her baby. The idea of the mammy would have been very familiar to these people as they often watched the mothers of their own families caring for their children. In addition, black women also often cared for the children in other people's families and were referred to as being a "mammy" to those children.

Salvation and Eternity

It is understood that the intention of these sermons was to bring the members of a congregation to a belief in and relationship with God. For this reason the ideas of salvation and eternity often recur throughout the sermons. The sermon with the strongest call to salvation is "The Prodigal Son." In this sermon the preacher talks about a son who wanders far away from his earthly father and squanders all of his possessions. The boy returns home hoping to be a servant in his father's house but instead is welcomed home as a son and has his full rights re-established. This story illustrates God ability and willingness to welcome home even those who have wandered far from His will.

The idea of eternity is depicted in the sermon "The Judgment Day." In this sermon the preacher describes both heaven and hell to his parishioners. He tells them that one day all people will be judged by God either doomed to hell or welcomed into heaven. The intention of this sermon is to convince the congregation to get their lives right with God before it is too late to do anything about their eternal fate.



Style

Point of View

These sermons are written in the first person point of view. Both the singular and plural voices are used. For instance, the plural voice is used in "Listen Lord—A Prayer" because the prayer is prayed on behalf of the congregation. Although there is only one speaker, this one person is speaking on behalf of an entire congregation of people. In the seven other sections, the pastor is speaking to the people about God. Therefore, he uses the first person point of view. The preacher is also speaking on knowledge that he has received through his own experience as well as Biblical knowledge.

These sermons are presented in the form of monologues. With the exception of the introductory prayer, the preacher is the only one speaking in any of these sermons. There is no dialogue. The prayer is a monologue given by an individual person other than the preacher. It is known that it is not the preacher speaking in the prayer because the speaker prays for the preacher, something the preacher would not have done for himself in this manner.

Setting

There are various settings incorporated into the text of these sermons. Heaven and hell are two places that are mentioned in almost every sermon. Heaven is the place where God supposedly lives. It is also the place where those who believe in God will go after they die. Hell, on the other hand, is the devil's abode. Hell is the place where all sinners and those who do not profess faith in Jesus Christ will go when they die. In the sermon "The Creation" God abides in a void of space that is the only thing that existed before he created the Earth. The sermon "The Creation" takes place in the Garden of Eden. The Garden of Eden was a garden of perfection where Adam and his wife Eve lived before they sinned by eating fruit from the forbidden tree.

Another setting used in these sermons is the city of Babylon. It is this sinful city that the prodigal son finds himself in after he leaves his father's house. Babylon is full of gambling, drinking and prostitution. Jerusalem and Golgotha are both settings included in the sermon "The Crucifixion." Jerusalem is the city where Jesus was condemned to die on the cross. Golgotha, meanwhile, was the location outside of Jerusalem where crucifixions typically took place. Egypt is the main setting for the sermon "Let My People Go." Finally, Mount Ararat is the location where the ark landed on dry ground in the sermon "Noah Built the Ark."

Language and Meaning

The language used in these sermons is very important to their success because the sermons would be accepted or rejected based on how well the people could understand



and relate to the material presented in the sermons. Therefore, the preacher presents his sermons in the speech pattern that is familiar to the Negro people of the time. He also uses descriptions and terminology to illustrate his points with which the people would be familiar. By using these familiar terms and familiar descriptions, the preacher was ensured that his congregation would understand the point he was trying to make.

The intention of these sermons was to evoke an emotional response in the congregation. The preacher wanted his congregation to come to a saving relationship with Jesus Christ. In order for the people to want to profess faith in Jesus, they had to feel that He both existed and that He cared for them. One way for the pastor to do this was by demonstrating how important his relationship with Jesus was and how much this relationship meant to him. For this reason the preacher often used emotional language and descriptions to evoke a desired emotional response in his people.

Structure

This short book is divided into eight sections. The first section is a prayer that may have preceded the presentation of a sermon. The remaining seven sections are the texts of sermons. The series of sermons begins with the story of the creation in "The Creation" and ends with a sermon about the last days of the Earth. This sermon is entitled "The Judgment Day."

Although these are sermons and the editor of the book could just as easily have presented the text of the sermons in paragraph form, he chose to present them as the form of poems. Unlike most poems, however, there is no set rhyme scheme or even a set number of lines in each stanza. These poems are written in a very free form. This could be because the editor is attempting to mimic the way the preacher may have presented his sermons to his congregation. The line and stanza breaks may represent natural breaks in the pastor's rhetoric. These breaks may indicate his use of dramatic pauses to make his sermon and its presentation more effective and more powerful to his listeners.

In fact, the rhythm of these poems is more like the rhythm of a song than that of a poem. In some of the sermons, such as "The Prodigal Son" one can almost separate out the repetitive lines as being like the refrain of a song. In this example, the other parts of the sermon would be the verses of the song with each verse giving a little bit of the action of the sermon.



Quotes

"O Lord - this morning - / Bow our hearts beneath our knees, / And our knees in some lonesome valley." Listen, Lord - A Prayer, pg. 13, lines 4-6.

"And now, O Lord, this man of God, / Who breaks the bread of life this morning - / Shadow him in the hollow of thy hand, / And keep him out of the gunshot of the devil." Listen, Lord - A Prayer, pg. 14, lines 22-25.

"And God stepped out on space, / And he looked around and said: / I'm lonely - / I'll make me a world." The Creation, pg. 17, lines 1-4.

"Young man - / Young man - / Your arm's too short to box with God." The Prodigal Son, pg. 21, lines 1-3.

"Jesus didn't give this man a name, / But his name is God Almighty. / And Jesus didn't call these sons by name, / But ev'ry young man, / Ev'rywhere, / Is one of these two sons." The Prodigal Son, pg. 21, lines 6-11.

"Leave the dancing and gambling of Babylon, / The wine and whiskey of Babylon, / The hot-mouthed women of Babylon; / Fall down on your knees, / And say in your heart: / I will arise and go to my Father." The Prodigal Son, pg. 25, lines 117-122.

"Weep not, weep not, / She is not dead; / She's resting in the bosom of Jesus. / Heart-broken husband - weep no more; / Grief-stricken son - weep no more; / Left-lonesome daughter - weep no more; / She's only just got home." Go Down Death - A Funeral Sermon, pg. 27, lines 1-7.

"And that's how sin got into this world. / And man, as he multiplied on the earth, / Increased in wickedness and sin. / He went on down from sin to sin, / From wickedness to wickedness, / Murder and lust and violence, / All kinds of fornications, / Till the earth was corrupt and rotten with flesh, / An abomination in God's sight." Noah Built the Ark, pg. 33, lines 66-74.

"And the voice in the bush said: Moses, / Draw not nigh, take off your shoes, / For you're standing on holy ground." Let My People Go, pg. 45, lines 7-9.

"And Moses lifted up his rod / Over the Red Sea; / And God with a blast of his nostrils / Blew the waters apart, / And the waves rolled back and stood up in a pile, / And left a path through the middle of the sea / Dry as the sands of the desert. / And the children of Israel all crossed over / On to the other side." Let My People Go, pg. 52, lines 181-89.

"In that great day, / People, in that great day, / God's a-going to rain down fire. / God's a-going to sit in the middle of the air / To judge the quick and the dead." The Judgment Day, pg. 53, lines 1-5.



"Sinner, oh, sinner, / Where will you stand / In that great day when God's a-going to rain down fire?" The Judgment Day, pg. 56, lines 95-97.

Topics for Discussion

Consider the significance of the title of this book of sermons. What does it indicate about the race of people giving and listening to these sermons?

Describe the way God is portrayed in these sermons. What does this portrayal say about the preacher and his congregation's relationship with God?

Choose one sermon based on a story from the Bible, such as "The Prodigal Son," "The Creation," or "The Crucifixion." Compare and contrast the details in the sermon with those listed in the actual biblical story.

Every culture has its own stories or folklore about the beginnings of the Earth, the end of time, etc. that are passed from generation to generation. Some consider these biblically based stories a form of folklore. Do you believe the stories told in these sermons actually occurred? For instance, do you believe God created the world? Was there really a flood that destroyed all mankind? Defend your answers.

Consider the language used in these sermons. Choose a few examples where the preacher illustrated his sermons with terminology familiar to his congregation to help them to better understand the points he was making. Explain why these examples were so meaningful to the people to whom he preached.

Consider the sermon "Noah Built the Ark." Why do you think Noah believed God was going to send a flood when others did not? Why do you think Noah was unable to convince others that God had the power to destroy all of mankind?

How do you believe the preacher intended for his congregations to respond to each of these sermons? Based on the content of each sermon as presented in this book, do you believe the preacher would have achieved his intentions for each sermon? Why or why not?