

*Conversations with God, James Melvin Washington, editor*

O God, we thank thee, that thou didst condescend to listen to the cries of Africa's wretched sons, and that thou didst interfere in their behalf. At thy call humanity sprang forth, and espoused the cause of the oppressed: one hand she employed in drawing from their vitals the deadly arrows of injustice, and the other is holding a shield to defend them from fresh assaults; and at that illustrious moment, when the sons of '76 pronounced these United States free and independent; then the spirit of patriotism erected a temple sacred to liberty; when the inspired voice of America first uttered these noble sentiments, "we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; among which are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness"; and when the bleeding African, lifting his fetters, exclaimed, "am I not a man and a brother"; then with redoubled efforts, the angel of humanity strove to restore to the African race the inherent rights of man. (Peter Williams, Jr., 1808)

O! wilt thou crush the power that still holds thousands of our brethren in bondage, and let the sea of thy wisdom wash its very dust from off the face of the earth; let Liberty unfurl her banners, Freedom and Justice reign triumphant in the world, universally. (George Lawrence, 1813)

O Lord, bless my master. When he calls upon thee to damn his soul, do not hear him, do not hear him, but hear me—save him—make him know he is wicked, and he will pray to thee. I am afraid, O Lord, I have wished him bad wishes in my heart—keep me from wishing him bad—though he whips me and beats me sore, tell me of my sins, and make me pray more to thee—make me more glad for what thou hast done for me, a poor [N]egro. (Stephan Hayes, 1816)

O! save us, we pray thee, thou God of heaven and earth, from the devouring hands of white Christians!!/Oh! Thou Alpha and Omega!/The beginning and the end,/Enthroned thou art, in Heaven above,/Surrounded by angels there. From whence thou seest the miseries/To which we are subject;/The whites have murdered us, O God!/And keep us ignorant of thee. Not satisfied with this, my Lord!/They throw us in the seas:/Be pleased, we pray, for Jesus' sake,/To save us from their grasp. We believe that, for thy glory's sake,/Thou wilt deliver us;/But that thou mayest effect these things,/Thy glory must be sought. (David Walker, 1829)

We stopped at this boarding house. This was our first night's stop after leaving Wilmington [, Delaware]. The keeper of the boarding house tried to buy Fannie Woods' baby, but there was a disagreement regarding the price. About five the next morning we started on. When we had gone about half a mile a colored boy came running down the road with a message from his master, and we were halted until his master came bringing a colored woman with him, and he brought the baby out of Fannie Woods' arms. As the colored woman was ordered to take it away I heard Fannie Woods cry, "Oh God, I would rather hear the clods fall on the coffin of my little child than to hear its cries because it is taken away from me." She said, "good bye, child." We were ordered to move on, and could hear the crying of the child in the distance as it was borne away by the other woman, and I could hear the deep sobs of a broken-hearted mother. We could hear the groans of many as they prayed for God to have mercy upon us, and give us grace to endure the hard trials through which we must pass. (Fannie Woods, 1858?)

I well remember one occasion when I attended a Methodist class meeting. I went with a burdened spirit, and happened to sit next [to] 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 brothers and sisters of the church at the public whipping post, in jail or out of jail. He was ready to perform that Christian office anywhere 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 in 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. (Harriet A. Jacobs, 1861)

My God, sometimes I cannot pray,/Nor can I tell why I thus weep;/My words my heart has formed I cannot say,/ Behold me prostrate at Thy feet. Thou understandest all my woe;/Thou knowest the craving of my soul--/Thine eye beholdest wheresoever I go;/Thou can’st this wounded heart make whole. And oh! While prostrate here I lie,/And groan the words I fain would speak;/Unworthy though I be, pass not me by,/But let Thy love in showers break. And deluge all my thirsty soul,/And lay my proud ambition low;/So while time’s billows o’er me roll,/I shall be washed as white as snow. Thou wilt not quench the smoking flax,/Nor wilt thou break the bruised reed;/Like potter’s clay, or molten wax,/Mould me to suit Thy will indeed. (Josephine Delphine Heard, 1890)

O why was I born a man, of whom to make a brute! I am left in the hell of unending slavery. O God, save me! God, deliver me! Let me be free!—Is there any God? Why am I a slave? I will run away. I will not stand it. I had as well be killed running as die standing. Yes! God helping me, I will. It cannot be that I shall live and die a slave. (Frederick Douglass, 1893)

My master used to ask us children, “Do your folks pray at night?” We said, “No,” ‘cause our folks had told us what to say. But the Lord have mercy, there was plenty of that going on. They’d pray, “Lord, deliver us from under bondage.” (Benjamin Albert Brooks, 1945)

Oh, God, when the days were dark indeed,/When we were fast in Slavery’s chain,/Thou then our parents prayers did heed/And helped us freedom to obtain. And when adrift upon the world/A child race ‘mid the great and strong,/Thy banner o’er was unfurled/And gently were we led along. Help us to e’er remember Thee/And e’er to endless homage pay/For all the great prosperity/Enjoyed by our race today. (Katherine Chapman Tillman, 1902)

Precious Lord, take my hand,/Lead me on, let me stand,/I am tired, I am weak, I am worn;/ Through the storm, through the night,/Lead me on to the light,/Take my hand, precious Lord,/Lead me home. When my way grows drear, precious Lord, linger near,/When my life is almost gone,/Hear my cry, hear my call,/Hold my hand lest I fall/Take my hand, precious Lord,/Lead me home. When the darkness appears and the night draws near,/And the day is past and gone,/At the river I stand,/Guide my feet, hold my hand;/Take my hand, precious Lord,/Lead me home. (Thomas Andrew Dorsey, 1932)