

EXCERPT FROM SPEECH BY FREDERICK DOUGLASS IN RESPONSE TO THE DRED SCOTT DECISION

“This last settlement must be called the Taney settlement. We now are told, in tones of lofty exultation, that the day is lost, all lost, and that we might as well give up the struggle. The highest authority has spoken. The voice of the Supreme Court has gone out over the troubled waves of the National Conscience, saying peace, be still.

“This infamous decision of the slaveholding wing of the Supreme Court maintains that slaves are within the contemplation of the Constitution of the United States, property; that slaves are property in the same sense that horses, sheep, and swine are property; that the old doctrine that slavery is a creature of local law is false; that the right of the slaveholder to his slave does not depend upon the local law, but is secured wherever the Constitution of the United States extends; that Congress has no right to prohibit slavery anywhere; that slavery may go in safety anywhere under the star-spangled banner; that colored persons of African descent have no rights that white men are bound to respect; that colored men of African descent are not and cannot be citizens of the United States.

“You will readily ask me how I am affected by this devilish decision — this judicial incarnation of wolfishness? My answer is, and no thanks to the slaveholding wing of the Supreme Court, my hopes were never brighter than now.

“I have no fear that the National Conscience will be put to sleep by such an open, glaring, and scandalous tissue of lies as that decision is, and has been, over and over, shown to be.

“The Supreme Court of the United States is not the only power in this world. It is very great, but the Supreme Court of the Almighty is greater. Judge Taney can do many things, but he cannot perform impossibilities. He cannot bale out the ocean, annihilate the firm old earth, or pluck the silvery star of liberty from our Northern sky. He may decide, and decide again; but he cannot reverse the decision of the Most High. He cannot change the essential nature of things — making evil good, and good evil.

“Happily for the whole human family, their rights have been defined, declared, and decided in a court higher than the Supreme Court. ‘There is a law,’ says Brougham,

‘above all the enactments of human codes, and by that law, unchangeable and eternal, man cannot hold property in man.’

“Your fathers have said that man’s right to liberty is self-evident. There is no need of argument to make it clear. The voices of nature, of conscience, of reason, and of revelation, proclaim it as the right of all rights, the foundation of all trust, and of all responsibility. Man was born with it. It was his before he comprehended it. The deed conveying it to him is written in the center of his soul, and is recorded in Heaven. The sun in the sky is not more palpable to the sight than man’s right to liberty is to the moral vision. To decide against this right in the person of Dred Scott, or the humblest and most whip-scarred bondman in the land, is to decide against God. It is an open rebellion against God’s government. It is an attempt to undo what God has done, to blot out the broad distinction instituted by the All wise between men and things, and to change the image and superscription of the ever living God into a speechless piece of merchandise.

“Such a decision cannot stand. God will be true though every man be a liar. We can appeal from this hell-black judgment of the Supreme Court, to the court of common sense and common humanity. We can appeal from man to God. If there is no justice on earth, there is yet justice in heaven. You may close your Supreme Court against the black man’s cry for justice, but you cannot, thank God, close against him the ear of a sympathizing world, nor shut up the Court of Heaven. All that is merciful and just, on earth and in Heaven, will execrate and despise this edict of Taney.

"If it were at all likely that the people of these free States would tamely submit to this demoniacal judgment, I might feel gloomy and sad over it, and possibly it might be necessary for my people to look for a home in some other country. But as the case stands, we have nothing to fear.

In one point of view, we, the abolitionists and colored people, should meet this decision, unlooked for and monstrous as it appears, in a cheerful spirit. This very attempt to blot out forever the hopes of an enslaved people may be one necessary link in the chain of events preparatory to the downfall and complete overthrow of the whole slave system."

Discussion Questions:

Why does Douglass say, "my hopes were never brighter than now" concerning the Dred Scott case?

What were the major Supreme Court decisions in the Scott case according to Douglass?

What are Douglass' opinions on the decisions of the court?

Explain three ways Douglass compares the Taney Supreme Court with the "Supreme Court of the Almighty"?

Explain how Douglass beautifully compares the self-evident right of liberty stated by the founding fathers of the United States to the treatment of Dred Scott as being against God.

How does Douglass explain that the Scott decision could actually mean the downfall of slavery?

What chain of historical events would lead to the downfall of slavery? Create a chain of events, a rough copy, that will be used in a project on these events.

Have the students create rough copies of what they perceive as the most important chain of ten events leading to the downfall of slavery. Use textbooks, Internet sites, and books from the library for in-class research.