

Rev. J. P. Boyce.

GOD'S PROVIDENTIAL GOVERNMENT.

THE SUBSTANCE

OF AN

dup.

INTRODUCTORY SERMON

PREACHED BEFORE THE

GEORGIA BAPTIST ASSOCIATION,

OCTOBER 12th, 1866.

BY P. H. MELL.

PUBLISHED BY REQUEST OF THE ASSOCIATION.

ATLANTA, GA.

FRANKLIN PRINTING HOUSE—J. J. TOON, PROPRIETOR.
1866.



GOD'S PROVIDENTIAL GOVERNMENT.

THE SUBSTANCE

OF AN

INTRODUCTORY SERMON

PREACHED BEFORE THE

GEORGIA BAPTIST ASSOCIATION,

OCTOBER 12th, 1866.

BY P. H. MELL.

PUBLISHED BY REQUEST OF THE ASSOCIATION.

ATLANTA, GA.

FRANKLIN PRINTING HOUSE—J. J. TOON, PROPRIETOR.
1866.

1871
1872
1873
1874
1875
1876
1877
1878
1879
1880
1881
1882
1883
1884
1885
1886
1887
1888
1889
1890
1891
1892
1893
1894
1895
1896
1897
1898
1899
1900

1901

1902

1903

1904

GOD'S PROVIDENTIAL GOVERNMENT.

"This matter is by the decree of the watchers, and the demand by the word of the holy ones: to the intent that the living may know that the Most High ruleth in the kingdom of men, and giveth it to whomsoever he will, and setteth up over it the basest of men."—David iv: 17.

THE inequalities in earth's history have anxiously exercised thinking minds throughout all ages. Governed by human maxims, one would suppose that if an infinitely wise, benevolent and holy mind presided over, and an almighty hand controlled, all things, the right would be uniformly sustained, and the wrong always and peremptorily put down—that the just, the holy and the upright would bask in the sunshine of favor, and the wrong-doer, thwarted, would forever cower beneath the frown of the Supreme. How different though the fact! The earth is full of the habitations of cruelty; and wrong, oppression and rapine seem to be gifted with impunity and license. While worth pines in obscurity and want, depravity rolls in wealth, and flourishes like a green bay tree. While a righteous cause is driven to the wall, or is trampled in the dust, oppression, panoplied in power, marches triumphantly over all opposition. Staggered, bewildered and distressed, where shall we apply for a solution and support? Are the events in this world under the dominion of chance? If not, are earthly incidents left to the control alone of the human mind with all its ignorance, depravity and caprice? Has God made this a theater in which good shall struggle unaided against the corruptions of earth and the malice of hell? Has he withdrawn away from the work of his hands, not knowing what will be the details of its history, and not

caring what will be its final issue? Has he any purpose at all to subserve by earth's transactions; and if so, is that purpose attained only by such transactions as are morally good? Are the wrongs and outrages of this world beneath his notice, or above his control? Is there a God of providence as well as of nature and grace? If there is, what is the extent of his jurisdiction and agency, and upon what principle does he conduct his administration? Does he always defend the right, and bring to speedy overthrow and ruin the wrong? Are his providential disposals significant of his conceptions of character and conduct; and, under his administration, are the good and the right always prosperous and successful, and the evil and the wrong always curbed and thwarted and punished? Or, is it true that evil subserves his purposes as well as good—that he ordains, for reasons infinitely wise, to permit the prosperity of the wicked and the adversity of the righteous? In short, are the inequalities in earth in accordance with his plan, and will he make even the wrath of man to praise him?

The answers to these questions are of great practical importance to you and to me. If there is a sovereign God in earth as well as in heaven; if his permissive or efficient hand is to be seen in all things and events, great and small, good and bad, material and mental; if he doeth as he pleaseth among the inhabitants of the earth, and worketh all things after the counsel of his own will; if he rules with undisputed sway in the world of mind as well as in the world of matter, and all things that happen are ordained by him and subserve his purposes; if it is his will that the righteous at times should suffer and the wicked should prosper; if he controls evil volitions and actions as well as

good, and his hand guides all influences that expend their force on us; then, in afflictions, disasters, calamities and desolations, we can have strong ground on which to stand. Convinced that the Judge of all the earth must do right, in bereavement, we can say with Job, "The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord." When pressed down by our own follies, or by the crimes and wickedness of others, perceiving God's permissive hand, we can adopt the language of Eli, "It is the Lord; let him do what seemeth him good;" and in any disappointment and disquietude, with pious resignation we can say, "The will of the Lord be done."

On this intricate and mysterious subject of divine providence, we are not left to unaided reason. God's word, in its teachings, direct or indirect, solves every doubt, and sets every question at rest. Let us submit ourselves implicitly to its guidance, and follow boldly where it leads; rejecting nothing because of our preconceptions, and not hesitating to plant our feet with confidence on the extreme verge of the territory illuminated by it.

The text is a part of Nebuchadnezzar's dream. In it the Triune God, under the titles of "the watchers" and the "holy ones," warns him of impending judgment, and informs him that it is so ordered and will be so executed, "that the living may know that the Most High ruleth in the kingdom of men, and giveth it to whomsoever he will." In this, providential agency is distinctly asserted. What is the extent of it?

I. GOD'S PROVIDENCE RULETH OVER ALL.

First. It controls all the circumstances and changes in the inanimate and brute creation.

1. The movements of the heavenly orbs, and the

seasons attendant on them, are secured by him. "He appointed the moon for seasons; the sun knoweth his going down. Thou makest darkness, and it is night."¹

2. The *elements* are ruled by him. "Who covereth the heavens with clouds, who prepareth rain for the earth. He giveth snow like wool: he scattereth the hoar frost like ashes. He casteth forth his ice like morsels: who can stand before his cold? He sendeth out his word and melteth them. He causeth his wind to blow, and the waters flow."² "He maketh the sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust."³

3. *Vegetation*. "If God so clothe the grass of the field which to-day is and to-morrow is cast into the oven."⁴ He causeth the grass and the herb and the tree to grow.⁵

4. *Animals*. "Behold the fowls of the air: for they sow not, neither do they reap nor gather into barns, yet your heavenly Father feedeth them."⁶ "He causeth the grass to grow for the cattle, and herb for the service of man: that he may bring forth fruit out of the earth; and wine that maketh glad the heart of man, and oil to make his face to shine, and bread which strengtheneth man's heart."⁷ "The eyes of all wait upon thee, and thou givest them meat in due season."⁸ "That thou givest them they gather; thou openest thine hand, they are filled with good. Thou hidest thy face, they are troubled: thou takest away their breath, they die, and return to their dust."⁹ "Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? and one of them shall not fall to the ground without your Father."⁹ The Savior is speaking here not of God's

1. Ps. 104: 19, 20.

4. Mat. 6: 30.

7. Ps. 145: 15.

2. Ps. 107: 8, 16-20.

5. Ps. 104: 14, 16.

8. Ps. 104: 23, 29.

3. Mat. 5: 45.

6. Mat. 6: 26.

9. Mat. 10: 29.

prescience, but of his providence. He does not assert that God knows when a sparrow will fall, but that he ordains it, and at the proper time secures it by withdrawing from it his sustaining hand.

Second. God's providence controls men as individuals.

1. It determines who they shall be, when and where born, and of what parents.

It decides to which of the great races they shall severally belong, and what shall be their physical type—complete in development or deformed; with their senses all perfect or more or less defective; with health robust or feeble; personal appearance attractive or repulsive; intellect keen or dull, bright or clouded, sound or idiotic. It decides who shall be their parents, whether intelligent and refined or ignorant and rude, rich or poor, bond or free, Christians or pagans. It decides where they shall be born—in a free country or under a despotism; in a Christian or a heathen land. It decides of what sex they shall be, and what peculiar types of countenance they shall have to fix their visible identity.

If there were no other evidence of the control of providence in the case of individuals, it would be found in the equality of the sexes, and in the fact that a peculiar countenance and physical conformation mark each one's visible identity. It can not be by chance that, though many millions of human beings are born every year, the equality of the sexes is preserved throughout all ages; and that, of one thousand millions of human beings, no two should look exactly alike. There must be a presiding mind that keeps the count, and preserves the equality; and an almighty hand that stamps with cunning skill upon each countenance the lines and expressions that constitute its identity.

2. Providence decides for men what shall be the character of their occupations, their degree of success and failure, and their position in society.

In our fallen condition, and in this sin-cursed world, diversity of circumstances is necessary. The Savior tells us, "The poor ye have always with you;" and he intimates that their presence is a blessing to us. Want and suffering are not unmitigated evils. God means that this earth shall not be abandoned to selfishness and obduracy; and therefore he sends these objects of compassion on a mission of mercy to touch human sympathies, and to cultivate human disinterestedness and benevolence. As he permitted moral evil to enter his system to furnish occasion for the display of his perfections, so he ordains that physical evil shall always exist in this fallen world, that the passive virtues may be cultivated and displayed. Without want and suffering there would be no patience, and resignation, and submission, and endurance, and humility, and meekness.

Inequalities in pecuniary condition are indispensable, not only for material interests, but for intellectual advancement, and progressive civilization. Without poverty and riches, there would be no employer and employed, no division of labor, and consequently each would have only that which he could produce for himself. There would be no progress in knowledge; for each man's time would be taken up with the effort to procure subsistence. For the same reason, there could be no increase of wealth—indeed, there could be no wealth at all; for that is only a relative term. Universal poverty would reign with undisputed sway. Were inexorable and unchangeable equality of pecuniary condition ordained for men by the fiat of Omnipotence, the race would not only degenerate to barbarism, but

speedily die out. This inequality inspires all activity, and lies at the foundation of all earth's great achievements.

Different positions in society are necessary—from the very existence of *society*, and that public affairs may proceed at all. These inequalities of position are a blessing to the world. They encourage enterprise and culture; they prompt men to seek public approbation by upright conduct and by efforts to become public benefactors. When society raise by their suffrage, however expressed, a great and pure man to an elevated position of respectability and influence, they not only honor and reward him but confer a favor on themselves. Society are benefited by having one competent to guide their opinions, to enforce their decisions, and to be a model for their imitation. It is no objection to this to say that sometimes bad and incompetent men are promoted; for this is a perversion of a good principle, and it always tends to work its own cure. When bad and incompetent men are promoted, it is because society itself is corrupted, or otherwise in an abnormal condition; and providence uses their base idols as he did king Saul, to chastise and correct.

Now, this want and suffering must be endured, this poverty or wealth must be experienced, and these several positions must be occupied; and whatever efficiency may be justly ascribed to prudence, sagacity, energy and perseverance, and their opposites, as proximate causes, their ultimate cause is God's sovereign allotment. "There are many devices in a man's heart; but the counsel of the Lord—that will stand. A man's heart deviseth his way; but the Lord directeth his steps."¹ "Go to, now, ye that say, To-day or to-

1. Prov. 16: 9.

morrow we will go into such a city, and continue there a year, and buy and sell, and get gain; for that ye ought to say, If the Lord will, we shall live, and do this or that."¹ "For promotion cometh neither from the east, nor from the west, nor from the south; but God is the judge; he putteth down one and setteth up another."² "Both riches and honor come of thee, and thou reignest over all; and in thine hand is power and might; and in thine hand it is to make great, and to give strength unto all."³ "The Lord maketh poor and maketh rich; he bringeth low and lifteth up. He raiseth up the poor out of the dust, and lifteth up the beggar from the dunghill, to set them among princes and to make them inherit the throne of glory."⁴

3. God raises up men for a particular purpose which his providence will see that they fulfill. Each man is not a detached and solitary individual, but a link in a chain. If the chain is ordained, so is every link in it. God knew before he created him what each one's character and career would be; and he created him notwithstanding. Now, if he was under no necessity to give him being, it is evident that he created him permissively to fulfill that destiny foreknown. "For I have created him for my glory. I have formed him; yea, I have made him."⁵ "The Lord hath made all things for himself; yea, even the wicked for the day of evil."⁶ "For of him, and through him, and to him are all things; to whom be glory forever. Amen."⁷ "For the scripture saith unto Pharaoh, Even for this purpose have I raised thee up, that I might show my power in thee, and that my name might be declared throughout all the earth."⁸ As he raised up Pha-

1. Ja. 4: 13, 15.
4. 1 Sam. 2: 7.
7. Rom. 11: 36.

2. Ps. 75: 6, 7.
5. Is. 43: 7.
8. Rom. 9: 17.

3. 1 Chr. 29: 52.
6. Prov. 16: 4.

raoh, for this purpose, so his providence endowed him with all those things that were necessary for the attainment of this purpose. He gave him the kingdom of Egypt; and that it might possess adequate power, he "raised up" also all the individuals that constituted its population, bringing each individual upon the stage precisely at that time, and so endowing, and disposing, and combining them as to qualify them to be Pharaoh's instruments and coadjutors. He raised up Cyrus to subdue Babylon and to restore the Jews to their own land. To qualify him for this, it was necessary to secure adequate population in Media and Persia to furnish armies, and to support them while in the field. The Medes and Persians, contemporary with him, were as certainly raised up and commissioned by God for the work to be done as was Cyrus. "That saith of Cyrus, He is my shepherd, and shall perform all my pleasure."¹ "Thus saith the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have holden to subdue nations before him; and I will loose the loins of kings, to open before him the two-leaved gates; and the gates shall not be shut."²

4. God ordains for men all their voluntary as well as their involuntary actions, and his providence sees that the ordination is carried into effect. "A man's heart deviseth his way; but the Lord directeth his steps."³ "The king's heart is in the hand of the Lord; he turneth it whithersoever he will."⁴

There is no doubt, or difference of opinion, in regard to good volitions and actions. All agree that God "works in men to will and to do of his good pleasure." It is only when the wicked are in question that men hesitate or disagree. And unfortunately these consti-

1. Is. 44: 28.

2. Is. 55: 1.

3. Prov. 16: 9.

4. Prov. 21: 1.

tute by far the greater part of the grand aggregate of volitions and actions in this world.

Let us approach this difficult subject with candor and modesty—aware of the profound depths into which it will lead us, and conscious of the limited nature of our faculties. But let us not hesitate to go wherever the word of God leads the way.

It may help us, if not to arrive at unanimity, at least to ascertain what is the true difficulty, and to contract into as small a compass as possible the disputed territory, for us to work ourselves *gradually* into the subject. By removing one after another the layers nearer to the surface, and therefore more exposed to apprehension, we may at least together see what the core is; even though you may in despair consider it to be a substance too impenetrable to be dissected and appropriated. Perhaps, then, it will not be difficult to admit that

1st. God *permits* wicked volitions and actions. “But my people would not hearken to my voice; and Israel would none of me. So, I gave them up unto their own hearts’ lust; and they walked in their own counsel.”¹

2d. God *restrains* them. “The remainder of wrath he restrains.”

3d. He *overrules them for good*. “He makes the wrath of man praise him.”

So far, we will readily admit that God may be connected with sinful actions, without any consequences resulting from which we would instinctively shrink. But can it be true that God ordains sinful volitions and actions; and does his providence, in any sense, procure their existence? If we say, No, then the large majority of the events in this world are outside of his control, and in no sense directly subject to his will. If we say,

1. Ps. 81: 11, 12.

Yes, then dreadful consequences obtrude themselves upon us which our souls utterly abhor. For it will be no relief to us to content ourselves with saying, God merely *permits* sin: since, if he permits it, he decreed from eternity to permit it; and that is but another way of saying he ordained that it should exist. Can the scriptures give us any light and afford us any relief on this subject? Do they contain any assertions and have they any facts to illustrate those assertions?

Confining our attention to a few of the many instances of wicked actions ordained by him and accomplished by his providence, we find that, in a sense, his providence designed that Jacob should fraudulently rob Esau of his birthright; for before the children were born he had foretold that the elder should serve the younger. It was the intention of his providence that Joseph's brethren should sell him into Egypt; for while they "thought evil" against him, "God meant it for good," "to save much people alive." In a sense, it was his will that Pharaoh should disobey his command to let the people go; and he hardened Pharaoh's heart. He bid Shimei curse David. In a sense, he brought it about that Absalom listened to the deceitful counsel of Hushai, rather than to that of Ahithophel; "for the Lord had appointed to defeat the good counsel of Ahithophel, to the intent that the Lord might bring evil upon Absalom."¹ It was the intention of his providence that the Jews should crucify Christ; for he was "delivered" to them by God's "determinate counsel and foreknowledge." "For of a truth against thy holy child Jesus, whom thou hast anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the people of Israel, were gathered together, for to do whatsoever

1. II Sam. 17: 14.

thy hand and thy counsel determined before to be done."¹ Here God's "counsel" not only "determined" that Herod and Pontius Pilate with the Gentiles and the people of Israel should be gathered together to wickedly crucify Christ, but the "hand" of his power in his providence brought it about as "determined." How shall we escape the dreadful consequence that God is the author of sin?

We shall not do so by sheltering ourselves in Arminianism; for that admits that God permits sin, and that he foresaw he would permit it. Let Arminianism grant that God possesses infinite foreknowledge, and that to any extent his providence takes cognizance of human affairs, as it does admit, and the same difficulties to which our system is liable press upon it with others that are greater superadded. If he permits sin, and foresaw from eternity that he would do so, then he considered the subject in eternity, and resolved on such permission. Now, as he was placed under no necessity either to create or permit, as he was driven by no compulsion, but acted according to his own sovereign pleasure, it is hard to see how Arminianism more effectually than the contrary system shields God from the charge of being the author of sin. But more: if God permits sin, why does he do so? If Arminianism gives *any* reason honorable to God's character, it abandons its own ground, and in principle comes over to ours; if it declines to answer, it not only exposes God as much as we do to the charge of being the author of sin, but makes him so expose himself without any ulterior object in view, and for no reason at all.

God is not the author of sin; for he is not the actor of it. He does not authorize it; because he forbids it,

1. Ac. 4: 27, 28.

and threatens to punish it, and does punish it. Yet he permits it; and it must be from choice, and with some wise purpose. In regard to some great things we can see the purpose. For instance, the crucifixion of Christ. Looked at from the stand-point of duty and obligation, and viewed merely as the result of the Jews' hatred to Christ, it is the most atrocious and inexcusable crime in earth's annals. It fills the mind with horror to contemplate it. God ought to have forbidden it; and to have held to an awful retribution the ferocious and cruel perpetrators of it. Seen from the stand-point of God's benevolence, and in the light of the gracious intentions of it, the crucifixion of Christ becomes the most glorious event in earth's history. Both earth and heaven may rejoice that it occurred; and an inexhaustible revenue of praise does rightly accrue to God for ordaining it. How shocking was the cruelty and how daring the wickedness which pierced the Savior's sensitive person with nail and spear. But we may ever rejoice in the fact that he *was* nailed to the cross, and that the soldier's spear *did* enter into his side; because thereby he hung for us upon the accursed tree, and bore our sins in his own body there; and thereby his blood flowed for our healing and cleansing. Now, why may not *God's will of precept*, regarding simply the act, and having reference merely to the duty of the Jews, not only forbid the crucifixion of Christ, but require that they should love him and obey him? And why may not *his will of purpose*, looking merely at the display of his own glory, and the welfare of humanity, ordain that the Jews should wickedly despise, reject and crucify him, and by his providence effectively secure its occurrence? And what is true of this case may be true of the enslaving of Joseph, and

of every other crime or sin that exists under the administration of providence. God's revealed will, or *his will of precept*, fixing its attention only upon the right and the duty, may have prescribed that which his secret will, or *will of purpose*, looking exclusively to ulterior ends, ordains shall not be accomplished.

But though this may be received as far as it goes, it does not remove the difficulty. The question is, How can God ordain a sinful volition and action, and by his providence secure their existence, and not be responsible for the wickedness as well as for the ulterior good of which it is the occasion? Here is one of the deep things that the human mind can not fathom; one of the high things it can not reach. That men are free in their volitions and actions, and that God's sovereignty presides over those volitions and actions, must both be received as truths, whether we can harmonize them or not. We know that we are free agents, because we are conscious of it, and because God deals with us on that principle, promising to reward us if we do right, and threatening to punish us if we do wrong. And both scripture and reason enlightened by it, teach us that God as a sovereign rules in all of earth's transactions, and accomplishes all his will. He ordains wicked actions, and in his providence, permissively accomplishes them; but in this he does not make men machines, nor in any way destroy their freedom—least of all does he work in them by an efficient agency to will and to do that which he has forbidden. But yet he "hardened Pharaoh's heart." How? In this case a plausible solution can be suggested. It was not necessary that any efficient agency should be applied to his heart. It was sufficient only that an occasion should be afforded for the development, the encouragement and the

manifestation of what was in there already ; and for which he was alone responsible. God sent a message to Pharaoh in the name of the "God of the Hebrews," a divinity whom he did not recognize. He made a requirement of him very much against his interest. He sent as his messengers obscure men of whom he had never heard before—ambassadors accredited by an unknown sovereignty. He suffered the magicians to duplicate some of the miracles performed, and left Pharaoh reason to suspect that those not duplicated were performed by those only a little more adroit than his own wise men. He permitted his plagues to be of short continuance ; and thus Pharaoh was encouraged to persevere. The last plague aroused his fears so that he was induced to hasten the people away ; but it was of such a character as to rouse his resentment. And when God moved his people off, he conducted them by such a route as to hem them in by the sea in front and the mountains on each side, so as to allow Pharaoh to hope that by pursuit he could wreak vengeance for all his sufferings and losses. If this affords a plausible solution of the difficulty in the case of Pharaoh's perversity, and shows how God could ordain a wicked course, and, in his providence, bring it about, and yet Pharaoh preserve his freedom of action, and his responsibility for his wickedness—it suggests that, if we can not reconcile and harmonize all other cases, it is not because of their irreconcilable character, but because our faculties are limited.

4th. God's providence controls the time and circumstances of men's death. "The days of men are determined, the number of his months is with thee : thou hast appointed his bounds that he can not pass. All the days of my appointed time will I wait till my change

come. Thou prevailedst forever against him, and he passeth; thou changest his countenance and sendest him away."¹ God foretold that king Ahab should die in battle; and he accomplished it by an arrow shot at a venture.² "See now that I, even I, am he, and there is no God with me. I kill and make alive; I wound and heal; neither is there any that can deliver out of my hand."³

Third. God's providence controls the destiny of nations.

1. He raises up nations, and brings them to decay and ruin.

God gives to Daniel the history of the world from his time to the end. Under the images of fierce beasts rising from a tempestuous sea—a lion with the wings of an eagle—a bear—a leopard with four wings of a bird—and another terrible beast with teeth of iron and nails of brass—he symbolizes the Chaldean, the Medo-Persian, the Grecian, and the Roman empires, which his providence would cause to rise—each as it should rise subduing its predecessor, and holding the dominion of the whole civilized world. He informs him that, in his providence, the Roman empire would be divided into ten kingdoms; and that among them would arise a little horn, symbolizing Popery, which would subvert three of the kingdoms, and hold irresistible sway over the rest; that the kingdoms of the beast would give their power to the Papacy, until they should be all paralyzed together; and then the kingdom of the Messiah would be established in unobstructed supremacy. The same facts, under different representation, were presented in Nebuchadnezzar's image, with its head of gold, its breast and arms of silver, its belly and its

1. Job 14: 5, 14, 20.

2. I Ki. 22: 34.

3. Deut. 32: 39.

thighs of brass, its legs of iron, and its feet part iron and part clay; and the stone cut out without hands, which was to smite the feet of iron and clay, and to become a mountain, and fill the whole earth.

2. God's providence gives success to some nations in wars, and disasters to others. "The race is not to the swift nor the battle to the strong."¹ "There is no king saved by the multitude of an host; a mighty man is not delivered by much strength."² When Judah and its king had by their sins exhausted God's patience, he suffered them to be conquered by Nebuchadnezzar, and many of the people to be carried captive to Babylon. "And Zedekiah, king of Judah, and his princes will I give into the hand of their enemies, and into the hand of them that seek their life, and into the hand of the king of Babylon's army, which are gone up from you."³ "For, lo! I raise up the Chaldeans, that bitter and hasty nation, which shall march through the breadth of the land to possess the dwelling places that are not theirs."⁴ When the Chaldeans had fulfilled their mission, and the time had come for the restoration of the Jews, God gave success to Cyrus in his war with Belshazzar. In his providence he "opened before him the two leaved gates" which gave him easy access into Babylon; and thus made him military master of the city and the empire. "Behold, I will stir up the Medes against them which shall not regard silver, and as for gold they shall not delight in it."⁵ "Make bright the arrows, gather the shields: the Lord hath raised up the spirit of the kings of the Medes; for his device is against Babylon to destroy it."⁶ "Thus saith the Lord to Cyrus, whose right hand I have holden, to

1. Ec. 9: 11.
4. Hab. 1: 6.

2. Ps. 38: 16.
5. Is. 13: 17.

3. Jer. 34: 21.
6. Jer. 51: 11.

subdue nations before him; and I will loose the loins of kings to open before him the two leaved gates, and the gates shall not be shut."¹

God commissioned Sennacherib to ruin Samaria and to vex Judah, and called him, heathen as he was, his "rod," his "staff," his "axe," and his "saw;"² and after he had accomplished his whole work upon Jerusalem, and taken the cities given into his hands, God threatens that he would punish the stout heart of Sennacherib; that he would put his hook into his nose and bridle in his lips, and turn him back by the way by which he came.³

If there is no error in the argument, God's providence controls all things great and small, good and bad, in the world of matter and in the world of mind.

II. ON WHAT PRINCIPLE IS PROVIDENCE ADMINISTERED?

1st. In regard to men, not on the ground of moral character, nor to indicate comparative merit or demerit.

First. Consider it in the case of individuals.

1. Prosperous providence does not mark the subjects of it as necessarily worthy, and deserving of reward. The wicked frequently flourish like a green bay tree. Long lines of wicked kings have been elevated by God's providence to power. The defrauder, Jacob, prospers in his way, and becomes a favored child of providence. A rich man, who subsequently for his sins lifts up his eyes in hell, being in torment, while on earth was clad in purple and fine linen, and fared sumptuously every day. "Behold, these are the ungodly, who prosper in the world; they increase in riches."⁴

2. Nor does adverse providence indicate that those affected by it are unworthy, and the subjects of God's

1. Is. 45: 1.

2. Is. 10: 5-12.

3. Is. 37: 26-29.

4. Ps. 73: 12.

penal administration. "Were those Galileans, whose blood Pilate mingled with their sacrifices, sinners above all the Galileans because they suffered such things? Or those eighteen, upon whom the tower of Siloam fell and slew them, think ye that they were sinners above all men that dwelt in Jerusalem? I tell you, nay."¹ Job, a subject of the most unexampled adversity, was a "man perfect and upright, one that feared God, and eschewed evil." Joseph, one of the most spotless and lovely characters in scripture story, is sold as a slave and cast into prison. "The archers shot sore at him, yet his bow abode in strength." Lazarus, who was subsequently carried by angels to Abraham's bosom, lay a beggar, covered with sores, at the rich man's gate. And most signal of all, the Son of Man, holy, harmless, undefiled and separate from sinners, was despised and rejected of men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. The foxes had holes, the birds of the air had nests, but he had not where to lay his head.

It appears, then, that in apportioning the evils of life, no distinction is made between the righteous and the wicked, in favor of the former. But let us not be misunderstood.

1st. While this is true of the general principles of God's providential government, we do not mean to assert that for daring crimes he does not sometimes send fearful and signal judgments. Numbers of such examples are recorded in the scriptures; and we have no reason to believe that God's judgments are confined to ancient times. Nadab and Abihu, for offering strange fire before the Lord, were devoured by fire that went out from the Lord. Annanias and Sapphira, for lying to

1. Lu. 13: 1-5.

the Holy Ghost, were stricken down suddenly by death. Herod assumed to himself the character and property of God, and an angel smote him, and he was eaten of worms and died. And upon Sodom and Gomorrah the Lord rained fire and brimstone from the Lord out of heaven.

2d. We do not mean to assert that the providence of God does not ordain and secure that, as a general rule, men's excesses and wrong doings bring upon them appropriate penalties, and right actions, appropriate rewards. As a general truth, vicious actions lead speedily or remotely to punishment, by involving in disgrace; sometimes by reducing to poverty, by inducing bodily disease, and by bringing to untimely death. Virtuous actions are sources of internal peace; lead to respect—generally to success in business, and to health and long life. But while this is the general rule in God's providence, sometimes virtuous actions lead to unpopularity; and the best laid plans, and most strenuous exertions end in failure in earthly enterprises. It may be admitted, without detriment to the doctrine, that our sins will be sure to find us out; and that the way of the transgressor is hard. This is forcibly illustrated by the case of Jacob. Though in a remarkable degree a child of providence, there is no conclusive evidence that he was a child of grace until he wrestled with the angel at Peniel. In consequence of his crime against his brother, he had to leave his father's house and live for a long time in exile. He was the victim of a like fraud in his marriage; and thus what measure he meted was measured to him again. He returned to his own country in personal peril from the resentment of his brother, after he had been compelled to fly clandestinely from the face of Laban. He suffered from like rivalry

and dissensions among his own children, and from their disobedience. Jacob learned by experience that the way of the transgressor is hard; and he was conscious that his sin had found him out. But though the providence of God took care that he was punished for fraudulently taking the birthright of his brother, that same providence ordained and secured that he should thus take it.

Second. Consider God's providential government in the case of nations.

1. Prosperity is no index of God's approbation of a nation. The Chaldeans, the Medo-Persians, the Grecians and the Romans were the beneficiaries of providence; yet they had no knowledge of Jehovah. Their gods were deified vices; their worship, superstition and uncleanness; their public and private morals degraded; and their policy selfish and cruel. Yet providence showered upon them material and national prosperity with a lavish hand. Nor is success in war any evidence that the victorious nation is more worthy than the vanquished; nor that the cause defeated is less righteous than the one triumphant. The Jews were God's peculiar people. They had the lively oracles and the temple worship, and consequently the knowledge of the true God; and, notwithstanding their frequent forgetfulness of God and lapsing into idolatry, there never was a time when there were not some who refused to bow the knee to idols, and maintained the worship of the God of providence. Now, the Assyrians, time and again, overran their territory, and brought them to great straits. The Chaldeans reduced them, and carried the flower of their population captive to Babylon. The Romans subverted their independence, and permanently destroyed their liberties and their nationality.

In morals and religion, were the Assyrians, the Chaldeans, and the Romans superior to the ancient Jews? In the providence of God, the papal power has been able for many centuries, by force of arms, to suppress the religion of Jesus over a large part of continental Europe, and to drive its votaries into mountain fastnesses or into exile. Has God meant to intimate that papists were more worthy than the Waldenses and Albigenses and other witnesses for Jesus, and that the cause of the Pope was more righteous than the cause of Christ?

2. Adverse providence is not administered for fatherly correction, and for the good of the subjects of it. It is admitted that this is true, at times, of the people of God; but they constitute but a small part of the subjects of adverse providence. Was Esau deprived of his birthright that he might be corrected and purified? Did the handwriting on the wall indicate to Belshazzar that God was seeking his personal good? And when his rival gained providential access through the two leaved gates, and not only wrested his kingdom from him, but put him to death, did that crushing providence work any good for him either in this world or in the next? Have any of the prophetic nations, whose power has been broken, whose independence has been subverted, and whose nationality has been destroyed, discovered that these disasters were but a rod in the hand of a kind father, who chastises that he might reform and bless?

If God's providence is not designed to indicate merit and demerit, to reward visibly and signally the righteous, and to curb and punish contemporaneously the vicious—if it is not meant, when adverse, always for fatherly correction and reformation, on what principle does it proceed?

3. It is administered on mysterious principles, above human comprehension for the time ; for the accomplishment of God's vast designs.

That the events of providence must be mysterious, is manifest, not only from the finite nature of the human mind, but because those events, however minute, are designed to operate in their influence throughout the whole of earth's history. The infinite mind has all time in view ; and the almighty agent operates not for temporary or local effect, but as a protracted means to an ultimate end, and that end the aggregate whole. How mysterious is it that God permitted the Romish apostasy to exist, and ordained that it should prosper and persecute for twelve hundred and sixty prophetic days ! And yet who can say that when all results are attained, it will not appear that it was infinitely wise in him to ordain and permit its existence ? Twelve hundred and sixty years is a long period for the earth to be stifled by the despotism of the man of sin ; but what are these years to the unnumbered centuries of time, and the endless ages of eternity ? God takes the whole history in view ; and his operations are designed to affect the aggregate whole. They must, therefore, be mysterious to finite minds and to creatures of a day. Again, providence must be mysterious, because it can not be dissevered from the other departments of God's domain. Nature, Providence and Grace constitute one system, not many—one vast complicated machine, every part of which, however minute, is essential to the whole. Let one pound of matter be added to or taken from this earth, and inevitable confusion would result in all the jarring worlds in the universe. The life or death of an individual, his prosperity or adversity, his holiness or sin,

whatever influence is exerted on him, stops not with himself, but extends through the entire system of which he is a minute part. Suppose an Alexander, a Cæsar, a Napoleon, or other great men, warriors philosophers or statesmen, had never lived, or had died in infancy—how different would have been the history of this planet, and, consequently, of the universe! Suppose Paul and all others, whom God has, through the lapse of the centuries, called into the ministry, had never lived, or had died in infancy—how different would have been the condition and the history of heaven—that culmination and glorious result of all God's complicated operations! Suppose the innumerable infants who died in infancy had been spared, or the vast multitude of adults who, as lively stones, have been polished by grace and by the attritions of providence, had been prematurely removed—how different would have been the walls of that glorious temple in heaven that through all the centuries has been rising in symmetry and beauty, under God's direction, to the praise and glory of his name! How affected the symphony of the heavenly choir, if one infant voice were extracted! How changed the perspective, and altered the variegated landscape in God's Garden of Eden above, if all the infantile plants transplanted to that more congenial soil were removed! God's dominion on earth consists of nature, providence, and grace; and his operations, in their nature, combinations and results, are too vast for us.

The history of Job is recorded to teach us the mystery of providence. God makes a just man, eminent for his integrity, a subject of the deepest affliction. From the loftiest heights of prosperity he is suddenly plunged into the lowest depths of adversity. He is

stripped of all his property ; his children are all swept away by a violent death ; and he himself prostrated by a loathsome and incurable disease. In these circumstances three friends call upon him to console him. Misconceiving the principles of providence, they assume that he had been secretly a great transgressor, whom God had exposed by these afflictions ; and they call upon him to confess and repent. In the discussion, Job silences them by proving that providence is no index of moral character. But he himself, while he expresses faith in God, is confounded at his apparently indiscriminate dealings, and looks for rectification and compensation only to another world. At this stage another, Elihu, appears. To him afflictions are fatherly corrections—to become disastrous judgments only when the sufferers fail to improve them. Nor is he better able to sustain his position. In all this discussion, Job, though he exhibits wonderful patience, speaks the language of a tortured and bewildered man. Now God appears on the scene, in the storm. He does not explain the principles of his administration, and does not hint at rectification and compensation in a future world. But by a sublime reference to the magnitude of creation, which Job could not grasp—to the wonderful operations in the laboratory of nature, which he could not understand, and to the untamed and ferocious monsters which he could not control—he chided his presumption in striving to fathom with his finite mind the mysteries of providence ; and extorted from him the confession : “ I have uttered that I understood not ; things too wonderful for me, which I knew not.”

But though to contemporaries the events of providence must be mysterious, further developments may make plain, if not to them at least to those who suc-

ceed them, the intention, in results as far as they transpire. Some of these developments have been made, and are on record in sacred and profane history. Israel was to be sent into Egypt preparatory to the discipline to fit him for the occupancy of the promised land. Then Joseph must be sold; then seven years of plenty in Egypt must precede seven years of famine there and elsewhere. To Jacob and his contemporaries the dreadful famine of those seven dreary years was a strange and mysterious providence: to us the mystery has been solved. The surplus of the seven years of plenty must be saved and stored; then Joseph must be cast into prison to interpret the dream of the chief butler; and he must pine there longer, through the strange forgetfulness of that officer, that he may be available for Pharaoh when he himself should dream. How inscrutable to Joseph was the dispensation that cast him into prison for an act that deserved not punishment but reward! How clear to us was the design of providence which thus afflicted him! Christ must be crucified for the salvation of men; then the Jews must be given up to apostasy, that they might be in a condition prepared to despise, reject, and crucify him.

The world must be prepared for the rapid and permanent transmission of the news of salvation; then the Greeks must have existed, with their civilization and culture—with their flexible language, known by the educated throughout the earth, to be the repository and the vehicle of the truth. Then the Roman nation must have existed, with all its ambition and terrible energy, and become master, of the whole world, to facilitate the safe and rapid transmission of the news.

The case of Job shows the mystery of providence. The answer of the Savior asserts that its intention is

to accomplish God's vast designs. "And his disciples asked him, saying, Master, who did sin, this man or his parents, that he was born blind? Jesus answered, Neither hath this man sinned, nor his parents; but that the works of God should be made manifest in him."¹

III. HOW SHOULD WE RECEIVE GOD'S PROVIDENCES?

Prosperous providences with gratitude and self-distrust; adverse, with submission, resignation, and acquiescence; because,

1. Our faith in God should make us satisfied that he can do nothing wrong. His wisdom is sufficient for him to know what is right; his rectitude to incline him, and his power to enable him to do what is right. When he informed the prophet Habakkuk of his intention to bring upon the Jews the Chaldeans, "that bitter and hasty nation," to chastise them for their sins, and to carry them captive to Babylon, though for a moment the prophet was staggered, because he could not see why he should deliver them into the power of a nation more wicked than they, he rallied under the inspiration of his faith, and gave utterance to that sublime declaration: "Although the figtree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines; the labor of the olive shall fail, and the fields shall yield no meat; the flock shall be cut off from the fold, and there shall be no herd in the stalls; yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will joy in the God of my salvation."²

2. Consciousness of sin should assure us that we deserve all God may send upon us. How numerous are the individual, the social and the national sins of any people! So far from finding just grounds to complain at God's adverse dispensations, whatever they may be,

1. John 9: 2, 3.

2. Hab. 3: 17, 18.

the only marvel is that his judgments are not continually falling upon us.

3. Desire for God's glory should make us willing to be sufferers, if we can thus be the occasion of its advancement. How inspiring ought to be the thought that we are suffering according to the will of God; that our afflictions, like our Master's, are ordained by him and subserve his purpose. If we had the spirit of the Savior and the early martyrs, we should rejoice that we are counted meet to suffer for his name.

4. Consciousness of our own short-sightedness and ignorance should make us feel that we are not competent to interpret providence.

(1.) What is present affliction and distress may be but preliminary to future advancement and happiness. Joseph is sold as a slave; but it is that he might become the future ruler of Egypt, and the benefactor of his generation. Jacob is afflicted in the temporary loss of Judah and Benjamin; but it is that he might recover permanently his long-lost Joseph. He is distressed by relentless famine; but it is that he might be removed to the plenty at the disposal of his own exalted son. Israel, as a people, are held in bondage and temporarily degraded; but it is that they may undergo a discipline to prepare them for their future glory as God's peculiar and favored nation.

(2.) What is present distress may be but the occasion in God's providence for the development and exhibition of traits of character which will bring in a revenue of honor more valuable to the noble nature than all other earthly treasures.

Trials make men, and trials show men. Job lost every thing; but he was furnished an occasion to gain a reputation as lasting as eternity. Courage, then,

thou faithful man, whom God's providence seems to have abandoned to thine enemies. Have no misgivings about thy fair name because the mob hoot around thee, and because thou hast lost prosperity and, perhaps, power and place. The very extremity of thy reputation may be God's opportunity to promote it.

Perhaps God designs to honor you by making you a martyr to some great principle, temporarily eclipsed. "Truth, crushed to earth, will rise again; the immortal years of God are hers." It may be God's will to link your name forever with some great truth, resurrected, re-established, and shining in immortal glory. It may be his design to hold you up to the gaze of the present and all succeeding generations as one loyal to truth through good report and through evil report; with a character self-poised—patient under contumely—forgiving and praying for your oppressors; with a fortitude from which no torture can extort a groan, and a spirit quailing before no terrors, and succumbing beneath no load of indignities. What though you may be immured, a solitary captive, in some sea-washed fortress? The very waves, wild and free, that break against it, as they recede will bear your name and your fame to the remotest shores. While possessing prosperity and power, men may have admired and revered you; but now, a lonely sufferer, their hearts are touched with a warmer and softer feeling. As if, in symbol, you would furnish a sublime example of good returned for evil, your very prison-house—meant to be your living tomb—will acquire immortality from connection with you, and by your presence be transformed into a shrine to which pilgrims of all lands will resort.

Nor is this true alone of individuals. God's adverse providence affords nations and peoples also an occasion

for honor and glory, even in humiliation and defeat—an honor that prosperity and success could never have secured. Here is a harmless, inoffensive people, enjoying the sunshine of prosperity. Envy and malice have maligned their character; and the world have been taught to believe them ruffians and imbeciles. Power and fanaticism are preparing an organized invasion to overthrow their liberties, to subvert their institutions, and to destroy their form of civilization. Perceiving the danger, and properly estimating the value of the interests in peril—convinced that there is no other effective resort, though conscious of their comparatively limited resources—in self-defense, they accept the appeal to the God of Battles. This people providence suffers to be overwhelmed, and to lie, stripped and bleeding, at the feet of the conqueror. Is there no compensation here? Providence may at least in them have shown a people in manhood, if not in resources, equal to the occasion. It may have furnished them an opportunity to exhibit a devotion to principle so entire as to make them willing to stake all—property, liberty, life—in its defense; a self-denial that shrinks from no sacrifice; an endurance that braves all hardships; a valor that is daunted by no danger, and quails before no odds; an intellect, a science and an energy that out of nothing create materials and resources as if by magic; an indomitable will that perseveres, though it has to resist a world in arms; a reputation stained by no excesses, and blackened by no atrocities; a moderation intoxicated by no successes, however brilliant, and depressed by no failures, however disastrous; and a frankness that, after they have done all they can, unreservedly confesses and accepts defeat.

Had providence granted them success, it had left

their full character undeveloped and undisplayed. Disaster and utter ruin were necessary to complete the picture, and exhibit them in their true nobility. How else could have been shown to the world their resignation, that submits without a murmur to the will of God; their integrity, that faithfully abides by the terms imposed and accepted, however hard; their public virtue, that maintains general order, though all government has been subverted; their dignity, that calmly and proudly holds up its head in the midst of humiliation and desolation, giving utterance to no unmanly querulousness, and disdaining to fawn upon and lick the hand of power; and their bravery, that, not yielding to despair, energetically addresses itself to strengthen the things that remain? Let it not be said that providence has deserted such a people. On the contrary, he has furnished them an occasion to refute the calumnies of their traducers, and to write for themselves a history that the world will sedulously guard forever.

(3.) Besides, prosperity may be only in appearance, and may be sent ultimately to plague. Thieves may successfully filch from the unwary their possessions, and confederated robbers by force deprive the defenseless of their property and their liberty; but, when the time comes to dispose of their captives and to divide the spoils, dissensions may arise which, in the hands of a retributive providence, may make them mutually inflict upon themselves the punishment their crimes deserve. A community, in their unprovoked aggression on a weaker neighbor, may have, apparently, God's blessing on their arms, and may exultingly carry measures with a high hand. But in destroying the liberties of others they may have lost their own; and in changing their neighbor into a military province, they

may have unconsciously transformed themselves into a military despotism. In making themselves masters of those who resist them in vain, they become the slaves of an irresponsible master at home. The principles and the agencies which they establish to the detriment of their neighbors, may return to plague themselves; to disturb their tranquillity; to endanger individual safety; to dry up the sources of their prosperity; and to overturn the cherished institutions of their fathers. God may have cursed them by giving them an opportunity not only to cultivate, but to exhibit to the world, their infamous character, which nothing can so well minister to and display as prosperity and success; their vanity, puffed up with conceit of their own character and performances; their cowardly ferocity, that rises in proportion to its impunity; their rapacity, unsatiated so long as there is any plunder to be seized, and which by a transparent fiction makes property a crime that it may be confiscated for their use; their unscrupulousness, that, knowing no principle, is restrained only by the want of opportunity; their hypocrisy, that uses patriotism and religion as a cloak in the vain attempt to conceal their envy, their malice and their love of greed; their faithlessness, keeping no engagements, and abiding by no pledges that interfere with their interests or their whims; their dishonesty, that, in practice, violates and tramples under foot every principle they profess in theory; and their meanness, a stranger to every generous feeling, to every magnanimous action, and to every noble impulse. Has success worked such results as these for any people? Are these the fruits of their prosperity? Then has it not blessed them, but cursed them. It has not placed them upon a lofty pedestal, the admiration and the envy of mankind;

rather has it erected for them a pillory in which they will stand forever the objects of the world's scorn and detestation.

A general may providentially take a populous city, and—after an occupancy signalized by a brutal tyranny over the defenseless, and a grasping avarice, apparent even through the thin expedients to veil it, and not concealed, though the thefts be dignified by the name of confiscation—he may not retire, like a brave and magnanimous conqueror covered with glory, but sneak away, stamped all over with the records of his infamy.

God's providence may clothe unworthy men in purple and fine linen, and make them fare sumptuously every day; he may give them uninterrupted prosperity, not to bless but to harden them, that they may lay up to themselves wrath against the day of wrath, and that they may ultimately lift up their eyes in hell, being in torments.

5. However it may be with others, the Christian may acquiesce in God's adverse dispensations; for he subordinates all earthly to spiritual things; and he has the assurance that all things work together for his good. What though he be deprived of health, and reputation, and friends? What though he be robbed of property, and freedom, and country? He knows that the God of providence is his father and his friend, who has promised that all these things shall subserve his good. With property swept away, reputation under a cloud, and himself in the hands of unscrupulous power, with domestic afflictions, and bereavements, and famine staring him in the face from fields that refuse to yield their accustomed plenty, he can, without folly or presumption, use the language of the prophet: "Although the fig-tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the

vines; the labor of the olive shall fail, and the fields shall yield no meat; the flocks shall be cut off from the folds, and there shall be no herd in the stalls; yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will joy in the God of my salvation."