

SPECIAL DIVINE PROVIDENCE

"Thou shalt guide me with thy counsel, and afterward receive me to glory." – Psa. 73:24.

ON the subject of divine providence there are many widely diverging views. Even among Christians some are quite skeptical with reference to it, while others view it in a light so extreme as to destroy in their minds the idea of human free-agency and accountability. But, to rightly understand the subject, we must carefully observe the Scripturally marked metes and bounds within the limits of which divine providence can be and is exercised. First, we observe that, since God is good, all his providences must be with a view to wise and benevolent ends, either near or remote: Secondly, that since he made man in his own image – morally free – and with the alternatives of good and evil before him, it would be contrary to his purpose, thus manifested, to so hedge him about with his providences as to interfere with his moral free-agency, which is the crowning glory of humanity, and the right exercise of which gives to virtue all its worth: Thirdly, we see that, since God is working all things after the counsel of his own will according to a plan of the ages, which he purposed in himself before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:9-11; 3:11), and since he changes not (Mal. 3:6), but all his purposes shall be accomplished (Isa. 55:11), it is manifest that he cannot exercise his providence in any way which would be detrimental to the ultimate ends of his perfect plan.

If these three principles – viz., the divine goodness, the inviolability of human free-agency, and the necessary consistency of the divine providences with the divine purposes – be always borne in mind, they will save, both from skepticism

on the one hand, and from fanaticism on the other, as well as greatly assist the believer to a clearer understanding and fuller appreciation of God's dealings, both in general and in particular.

The Psalmist says, "The Lord is good to all, and his tender mercies are over *all* his works." (Psa. 145:9.) This sweeping statement takes in the utmost bounds of the material universe and also the humblest, as well as the most exalted, sentient being. The whole creation is his care. Jehovah, our God, is the great Emperor of the whole universe, and his wisdom, power, goodness and benevolence are abundantly equal to all the responsibilities of so exalted an office. The human mind staggers in its efforts to comprehend the mental resources of a being who is able to assume and to bear such responsibility. Think for a moment of the memory that never fails; of the judgment that never errs; of the wisdom that plans for eternity without the possibility of failure, and that times that plan with unerring precision for the ages to come; of the power and skill which can harness even every opposing element, animate or inanimate, and make them all work together for the accomplishment of his grand designs; of the tireless vigilance that never ceases, nor seeks relief from the pressing cares of universal dominion – whose eye never sleeps, whose ear is ever open, and who is ever cognizant of all the necessities, and **[R1560 : page 228]** active in all the interests, of his broad domains.

Well has the Psalmist said, in consideration of the immensity and the minutiae of God's providence over all his works – "Such knowledge is too wonderful for me: it is high, I cannot attain unto it." (Psa. 139:6.) No, we cannot; but Oh, what a thrilling sense of mingled reverence, love and adoration fills the heart, when thus we catch a glimpse of the intellectual and moral glory and majesty of our God! As we thus contemplate him, all nature becomes eloquent with his praise: the heavens

truly declare his glory, and the firmament showeth his handiwork: day unto day uttereth speech and night unto night showeth knowledge. (Psa. 19:1,2.) They tell of the order and harmony of the circling spheres, and the benevolent purpose of their great Creator and Controller, as the changing seasons and the alternating days and nights fill up the copious horn of plenty and refresh and invigorate the animate creation.

Since we are distinctly told that his tender mercies – his kind providences – are over all his works, that all his wise purposes shall be accomplished, and that the ultimate design in all his works is the firm establishment of universal harmony and peace, and the eternal happiness of all his subjects (Psa. 145:9; Isa. 55:8-13; 1 Cor. 15:24,25), whatever inharmonies we now see in nature must be viewed as incidental to the preparations for the perfection of all things, which is not due until "the dispensation of the fulness of times," following the Millennial reign of Christ. (1 Cor. 15:24,25; Eph. 1:10; 3:11,15.) And since we are enlightened by a knowledge of the divine plan of the ages, we see, further, in the introduction of the human race upon the earth before the physical perfection of nature has been attained, a wonderful display of wisdom. This measure has furnished the necessary condition for the experience and trial of the human family, and has made use of the labor of the race, while under condemnation, to urge forward the work of preparing the earth for its final glorious condition, as prefigured in Eden, by the time the race will be fully recovered from the fall and established in righteousness.

If we keep this thought in mind, and do not lose sight of the ultimate purpose of God, and of the fact that the present is only a preparatory state, progressing toward final completeness, we need never be skeptical about an overruling providence which now permits a cyclone, a tornado, an earthquake, a volcanic eruption, or any other of nature's throes and distresses. They are

all means working toward the grand ends of eternal peace and glory and beauty. Even that widespread calamity of Noah's day, which deluged the world and wiped out the whole mongrel race with which sin had peopled the earth (Jude 6; 2 Pet. 2:5), sparing only righteous Noah (who "was perfect in his generation" – Gen. 6:8,9 – and not of the mixed or hybrid race), and his family, was probably part of the natural process of preparation of the earth also for the new dispensation which began, with Noah and his family, after the flood.

But while God's tender mercies are over all his works, and the whole creation is his care, we must not overlook the fact that man, by sin, has forfeited all claims upon the divine providence. As a son of God, Adam had a son's claim upon his heavenly Father's benevolent providence; but when God condemned him to death on account of sin he thereby rightfully repudiated all human claims upon his fatherhood. The creature was thenceforth unworthy of life, and of the divine providence which alone could sustain it. Therefore the condemned world has no right to question why God permits one calamity after another to overtake them and to sweep them into oblivion. They have no right to expect anything else; and if calamities do not hurry them off, they are perishing just as surely by more gradual processes, in consequence of the curse pronounced on account of sin.

The condemned world is thus left to its fate – to reach the tomb by gradual or by hurried processes. Sometimes the death-penalty is executed by the disturbances of the elements of nature incident to its yet imperfect condition; – such, for instance, as tempests, cyclones, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, lightning shocks, etc.; – sometimes by the aggravated results of **[R1560 : page 229]** sin entailed by inheritance; sometimes by the sinful war of angry human passions, resulting in wars and in private and domestic feuds and revenges; and sometimes through lack

of good judgment in discerning and avoiding danger, such as fires, railway and ocean disasters, etc. All of these are the executioners of the just penalty for sin, pronounced against the whole race.

Then why should any expect God to interfere and interrupt the course of justice? – especially in the case of those who still continue unrepentant and utterly regardless of his holy law, and who have no desire to return to his favor and control? True he might, and sometimes does, temporarily interfere with the present course of evil in order to facilitate his own wise plans; but man has no right to expect such interference in his behalf, nor would it be an evidence of divine favor toward the sinner. Sometimes, but not always, sudden calamities are the servants of some *special* purpose of God – as, for instance, the deluge, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, the fall of the tower of Siloam (Luke 13:4), etc.; but usually they are only serving his general purpose as executors of the death-penalty upon the condemned.

While the condemned world of mankind is thus left to its fate, men are permitted largely to pursue their own course in the management of their affairs. They may take such advantage as they can of the elements of nature, or of their own medical and surgical skill and ingenuity, to prolong their days and to ameliorate their condition under the curse; they may control their evil passions for their advantage, or give them loose rein, to their individual and mutual detriment; they may institute and maintain such forms of civil jurisprudence as they can agree upon, subject to the secret and cunning intrigue of the wily and powerful, but unrecognized, prince of this world, Satan. But their course is *their own course*, and God is not in it. Hence God has no responsibility with reference to it; nor can he in any sense be held [R1561 : page 229] accountable for the misery that men bring upon themselves and each other in pursuance of their own

godless and evil way. Yet God could, and undoubtedly would, put a sudden end to the sin and misery that is in the world, were it not that his far-seeing judgment counsels its temporary permission for a benevolent ultimate purpose, toward which even the wrath of men is unconsciously ministering.

But the case is quite different with those who have renounced their own way and turned to the Lord, who have accepted of his forgiveness through Christ, and who have thus been restored to their original standing (as in Adam before sin) as sons of God. All so recognized of God are again the heirs of his favor through Christ – "If a son, then an heir." (Gal. 4:7.) And it is to such, and such only, that the promise of divine guidance, referred to in our text, belongs: – "Thou shalt guide me with thy counsel, and afterward receive me to glory."

What advantages, then, should be looked for in the cases of these sons of God, who have separated themselves from the world and its spirit? By natural inference, we should expect the return of God's favor to restore again the blessings lost by the fall – the blessings of lasting life, health, peace, prosperity and happiness. Yet what do we see? We see these justified ones suffer and die just like other men. Evils befall them; disease lays hold of them; poverty hampers them; friends desert them; and death overtakes them, as well as other men; and, the whole course of the present evil world being against them, their pursuit of righteousness is attended with great difficulty and privation. Wherein, then, are they profited?

The world cannot see that they are profited at all; for the profit is discerned only by the eye of faith in the counsel of God's Word. That counsel, all the sons of God take for their guidance. It describes the present life as a preparatory state, which, if rightly used, prepares for the truly glorious condition designed for sons of God hereafter. It is in view of this

instruction of the Word of God, that the Psalmist, in the words of our text, expresses his confident realization of present guidance and of the eternal glory to follow. The present life, being preparatory, is a time for the schooling and discipline of the sons of God; and their subjection to the present ills, [R1561 : page 230] while it is often painful, is recognized by them as necessary, in the providence of God, to work out for them an exceeding and eternal weight of glory. (2 Cor. 4:17.) In this confident realization they have peace, and even joy, in the midst of present tribulation. And this present peace and joy in a realization of the divine forgiveness and favor, and the privilege of present experience, discipline and instruction under the divine tutorship, is the *present* advantage of the sons of God, while an eternal weight of glory is in store for all who prove faithful under it.

The providence of God over these, his sons, is a very particular providence: – All their steps are ordered of the Lord (Psa. 37:23); and the very hairs of their head are all numbered (Luke 12:7.) His eyes are ever upon the righteous, and his ears are open to their prayers. (1 Pet. 3:12.) All the angels are ministering spirits sent forth to minister to these heirs of salvation. (Heb. 1:14.) All things are made to work together for good to these, who love God and are called according to his purpose (Rom. 8:28); and no good thing is withheld from them. (Psa. 84:11.) How wonderful and particular is this care; and they have the promise of it to the end of their trial state. God is indeed a Father to all that put their trust in him; but there is a wide difference between those who are his sons, and those who remain aliens, and even enemies.

While we thus view the present providence of God and his opposite attitude toward the world and toward those who are now recognized as his sons, we may rise to a still higher altitude. Here we observe the breadth and scope of the divine plan, and

see that even now, while God does not and cannot treat the world as sons and grant them his fatherly grace and blessing, he is nevertheless preparing to bless them with his favor as soon as they come to the proper attitude of sons.

He has devised, and already partly executed, a plan for the redemption and restitution of all who will by and by repent fully and submit themselves to his righteous requirements; and, in their present alien and outcast condition, he is giving them such experiences as will in time bring them to realize their own helplessness and to desire and seek the favor of God. In the working out of his grand general plan, which has for its ultimate end the blessing of all the families of the earth, all the bitterness of sin and evil that men have experienced have had a part. To this end God has also been *over*-ruling the affairs of men for the past six thousand years. That is, while he has been permitting men to rule themselves according to their own ideas, he has been, unknown to them, so *over*-ruling as to make even their blind and evil course bring to pass circumstances and events which they did not foresee nor contemplate, but which in the long run of his plan ministers to his purpose. Thus, for instance, the world's present blind and wrong course is bringing about a great time of trouble, which God foresaw and will permit, whose final outcome under the overruling of God, will be the overthrow of human governments and the establishment of the divine. In the past men have had their affairs their own way to the extent that they could agree among themselves, to the extent that the unseen prince of this world, Satan, did not interfere and overpower them, and to the extent that their plans were not interfering with the purpose and plan of God.

Thus, though men have not been aware of it, and have conducted their affairs regardless of both God and Satan, God has all the while been overruling both man's and Satan's designs in the affairs and destinies of nations, so as to give to men the

largest possible experience with sin and its consequences, thus to prepare them eventually for willing submission to the righteous reign of the Prince of peace. They have had experience with every shade and form of government; and now, as the end of Gentile times approaches, the world is preparing to express its complete dissatisfaction with all, in general and world-wide anarchy. The crisis is fast approaching and the end is nearing when the wayward, prodigal world will come to its last extremity. But man's extremity will be God's opportunity; and to this extremity he is *therefore* permitting them blindly to drift. But when, with broken and contrite hearts, they turn to the Lord, they will [R1561 : page 231] prove the joys of his forgiving love, and mark how, even before they called upon him, he was preparing to answer (Isa. 65:24) – first, in the redemption provided; and secondly, in the necessary, hard experiences which shall have brought them to repentance and to a full realization of their need of God's fatherly providence, and to humble, grateful dependence.

These overrulings of God among the nations are not to be regarded as providences over, and favors to, sinners, but rather as measures preparatory to the blessing of future repentant and obedient sons, who will profit by contrasting the coming good with the present evil; and also as measures necessary for the present welfare of those who are now his sons.

With these thoughts in mind, mark the stately steppings of our God along the aisles of history – how even the wrath of man has been made to further the interests of the divine plan. The rise and fall of empires and the wars and revolutions that have unsettled and disturbed the world, while they were great evils in themselves, nevertheless saved men from sinking lower and lower in lethargy and vice: they roused ambitions; they kept the human mind awake, and set men to thinking and planning to improve their conditions. They brought men of different tribes

and nations together, sharpened intellectuality, stimulated ambition, led to discoveries and inventions, and thus helped to keep the race above the level of the brute creation. Even the infamous slave trade, which brought thousands of black men from Africa to this favored land, was, as viewed in the light of God's overruling providence, a blessing in disguise; for the black man in America has enjoyed advantages of civilization here that he would never have known in his native land. And similar providences we can also mark in the great persecutions and distresses of the old world, which drove the lovers of liberty to our shores, here to establish a free government and conditions of society specially favorable to the consummation of God's great purpose to gather a people for his name. The subject is too large for extended discourse here, but with this brief suggestion the reader will mark thousands of instances where God's overruling providence can be seen in history working together to the predetermined end; and yet in it all the world is still pursuing its own wilful and wayward course, and will continue to do so until the judgments of the Lord overtake and subdue them.

No nation on the face of the earth can now be said to have God's special fatherly providence over it; for there is no nation even claiming to be the sons of God. Consequently, no nation can claim his care and protection. All are alike exposed to the fortunes or misfortunes of the course they pursue; and God will not interfere, except in so far as to shape the end toward the final accomplishment of his great work; and that shaping, we are informed, will soon require the overthrow of all the thrones of earth and a great time of unprecedented trouble. – Jer. 25:15,16,26,27; Dan. 2:44; 12:1; Hag. 2:21,22; Heb. 12:26,27; Rev. 11:15.

But let the surges of trouble rise: God's people – his sons and daughters – can still claim the precious promises of

guidance with his **[R1562 : page 231]** counsel. They are his "peculiar people," "a holy nation," unrecognized by the world, as yet, but soon to be manifested in power and great glory. Previous to the Gospel age the Lord had a special holy nation, and his special providence over that nation was illustrative of a similar providence over the antitype, the Gospel Church. But let us not overlook the fact that the providences of God over typical Israel were of a disciplinary character, as are those of the Church, the spiritual Israel, now. They were led, instructed, chastened and encouraged according to the necessities for their development and perfecting as children of God. And those of that age who meekly submitted to the Lord's providential care and leading, walking by faith as we do now, though they received not the reward of their faithfulness then (Acts 7:5; Heb. 11:39,40), were laid away to rest until God's set time to recall them, and were marked by him as the precious heirs of his loving favor to be granted in due time.

A similar course has been pursued all through the Gospel age, wherein consecrated believers **[R1562 : page 232]** have experienced the favor of God's providential leading, teaching, chastening and encouragement; and, having received the seal of sonship, they too have one by one been laid away to rest until the day of his appearing and kingdom – and "Precious in the sight of the Lord has been the death of his saints." (Psa. 116:15.) They have been guided by his counsel, and shall in due time be received into glory – those of the Jewish age into the glory of the earthly phase of his kingdom; and those of the Gospel age into the glory of its heavenly phase. (See MILLENNIAL DAWN, Vol. I., Chap. xiv.) In our treatment of the S.S. Lesson for July 2nd, attention is further called to the special providences of God in the general direction and course of the work of the Gospel Church, which on that account we omit here.

In this reasonable and Scriptural view of divine providence, the humble and believing children of God will realize that, while they may not be able at all times to understand the Lord's ways in all his dealings, they can know of his wisdom, love and care, and that they can therefore trust him where they cannot trace him. We should not expect to be able always to comprehend the divine wisdom, which is so much beyond our own; yet we can often see it afterward. Sometimes his discipline may be severe, and by no means easy to bear, yet "afterwards, it yields the peaceable fruits of righteousness." After the bitter comes the sweet; so let us take the bitter patiently, and rejoice in hope of the sure fulfilment of all the exceeding great and precious promises to be realized in due time by those who patiently continue in well doing – in submitting without reserve to the providence of God, to the guidance with his counsel.

The Psalmist represents a large class of the immature, inexperienced and only partially instructed children of God, when he says (Psa. 73:2-12), "But as for me, my feet were almost gone; my steps had well nigh slipped: for I was envious at the foolish, when I saw the prosperity of the wicked....Their eyes stand out with fatness, they have more than heart could wish. They are corrupt and they speak in the wickedness of oppression. From on high [from the chief places of power and control] they speak. They set their mouth against the heavens, and their tongue walketh [their influence hath free course] through the earth. Therefore do his [God's] people turn away hither [into the wilderness condition of separation from the world] and waters of a full cup [of affliction and persecution] are wrung out to them. And they [the ungodly] say, 'How doth God know? and is there knowledge in the Most High?' Behold, these are the ungodly, who prosper in the world; they increase in riches."

The picture is a true one of the present reign of evil. (See also Mal. 3:15.) It is those who selfishly seek their own present aggrandizement, regardless of the interests of others, that are most prosperous now, and that occupy the chief places of control – political, financial, and even religious; while the godly, who despise oppression and love righteousness, and who, therefore, live contrary to the course of the present evil world, become the subjects of oppression.

Taking a narrow or merely human view of the matter, we might well question why God permits the wicked so to triumph at the expense of the righteous. The Psalmist says (verses 16,17), again speaking for the same class of God's children, that the problem was too difficult for him to solve until he went into the sanctuary of God (into the Holy Place of entire consecration to God, typified in "the holy" of the Tabernacle. See *Tabernacle Shadows of Better Sacrifices*.) There, being specially taught of God through his Word and his providences, we are made to understand the reason for the present perverse order of things – that for a wise purpose it is permitted for a time; but that by and by there will be a great change, when the righteous, now being tested and tried under the reign of oppression, will come forth to honor and glory and power.

It is indeed impossible to understand this – to rightly appreciate the deep philosophy of God's plan of the ages and our *privilege* of trial and discipline under the present reign of evil – until we come into the sanctuary condition of entire consecration to the will of God, [R1562 : page 233] where the meat of the Word and the light of the holy Spirit are granted to us. Then, like the Psalmist (verse 22), we see how ignorant and foolish we were in being envious of the prosperous wicked. And though, in our former ignorance and foolishness, our feet were almost gone, and our steps had well nigh slipped, we have reason to thank God that he held us by the right hand and did

not suffer us to fall. And in view of such care in the past, we joyfully and confidently trust him, not only in the midst of the present trial state, but also for the future outworking of his plan with reference to ourselves and all mankind. The Psalmist has well expressed the present confidence thus acquired, and the grateful adoration of all the consecrated or sanctuary class, saying, (verses 24-26), "Thou shalt guide me with thy counsel, and afterward receive me to glory. Whom have I in heaven but thee? and there is none upon earth that I desire besides thee. My flesh and my heart faileth [the flesh is too weak and the heart too faint to pursue the course marked out for the righteous in this present evil day, except as strengthened and upheld by power from on high]; but God is the strength of my heart, and my portion forever.

When God's wonderful plan of the ages is understood, every thing in nature and in experience bears testimony to the overruling of his providence. The heavens declare the glory of God and the earth showeth his handiwork; all speak of an intelligent Designer, wisely adapting means to good and benevolent ends, and ministering to the necessities of his intelligent creatures. Every leaf and every sunbeam bears a loving message of divine providence to the thoughtful. And every inharmony of nature, when viewed in the light of God's plan, is seen to be but a part of that great process whereby God is preparing for the perfect order of things which shall continue forever, when sin and its entailments shall have been banished under the successful reign of Christ; and even the long permitted wrath of man and Satan will eventually be to God's praise.
