

# “The Providence of God.”

A SERMON,

PREACHED AT ST. GEORGE'S HALL, LANGHAM PLACE,

JANUARY 11TH, 1873, BY THE

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On Sunday (January 11,) at St. George's Hall, the Rev. C. Voysey took his text from Acts xv., 18, “Known unto God are all his works, from the beginning of the world.”

He said—I wish to set you thinking upon a subject that has occupied my own mind a great deal, but upon which I find it very difficult to come to a conclusion. It is the Providence of God. The question is often put, “Do you believe in Providence?” when more correctly it should be asked, “Do you believe in a special and peculiar Providence watching over yourself different to the general and universal order of Nature?” To the question put in this form, I confess myself ready to give a prompt denial. I in no way believe myself, or any other person, to be a favourite of Heaven, or the object of God's peculiar care.

It is much more congenial to think and speak in the spirit of those words of Jesus, “Not a sparrow falleth to the ground without the will of our Father.” One of the most striking changes we have witnessed in this age is the abandonment of those views which flatter individual vanity—of that mode of thought which cherishes personal conceit in dwelling upon our relation to God. We no longer take any pleasure in the thought that God's loving kindness is our peculiar inheritance; we should be loth to accept, even at the Divine hands, gifts and privileges which all our brethren might not share.

It would make us miserable to believe that God loved us more than others, or was preparing for us mansions in the sky from which any of our fellow-men were to be shut out. It has become

a cardinal assumption with us that it must be all or none. That whatever the favour of God may consist in, and whatever be the happiness of Heaven hereafter, they belong by right to all mankind or to none. If the differences in human lot, and in human culture, on earth, present any difficulty we soon waive it out of our path by remembering that *there* everyone will be made perfectly holy, perfectly happy; and that even now these differences are no tokens of the favour or disfavour of God, no measures of a varying love. Just as we are assured of God's love to ourselves whether we are, in prosperity or adversity, in health or in sickness; so we are assured of His love to all, whatever their lot may be. Hence we discard entirely the notion of Special Providence, in so far as it implies partiality or favouritism on God's part, or any special worthiness on our own.

But the difficulty still remains to determine what is Providence and what is not—to settle whether every minutest event in our lives is, as it were, ordained and regulated by a conscious determining will, or that the events of our life are for the most part fortuitous, or brought about by ourselves.

For some, it may be natural to say "Our lives are regulated in great measure by our own wills and by the native qualities we possess acted upon by the people and circumstances by which we are surrounded. We see no need for the interposition of Providence, things have taken their natural course, and we cannot admit the necessity for any theory of Providence, special or otherwise."

But for others it is quite as natural to say, "Our lives have been so eventful, so full of rare perils, of hair-breadth escapes; of trials in mind, body and estate so deep, and of deliverances so unexpected, so timely, so independent of ourselves, that it looks as though an eye of Love had been watching over us, and an unseen hand had been leading us and supplying our wants, forestalling our griefs and necessities. We do not say or dream that this protection has been peculiar to ourselves, but we believe that everyone is guarded and helped in the same way; but it has been brought home to us in such a manner that we should be blind and ungrateful not to acknowledge it. Moreover, we should feel the same to the end of our days, if instead of mercies and deliverances, the cause of

events should be reversed and bitter misfortunes be henceforward our lot."

This is no fancy picture, this is the real history of many and many a happy and unhappy life. It is the history of nations as well as of men. For the whole Jewish people whether in prosperity or adversity have persistently acknowledged the good providence of God through their chequered career. Of course they were wrong, like the Puritan Christians, and the Roman Catholics, in claiming the divine favour exclusively for themselves, but this narrowness has been to a great extent broken down. The point to observe, however, is that great numbers of men and women have been impressed with the idea that they were under the care and guidance of a most loving will, and have been forced to own it after their greatest sorrows had led them to doubt it.

The great question before us is then, are our lives over-ruled and ordered by a divine will, or not? If not, how can we account for certain events too manifestly the result of forethought to be attributed to chance? If there is no Providence, no will above us which controls and arranges the course of human lot, we are brought face to face with difficulties infinitely greater still, with footprints on the sands of time which must have made themselves, with marks of evident design and order which would have to be attributed to unreflecting, unreasoning, chance.

If we attribute everything to Nature, and spell it with a capital "N," admitting skill, or wisdom, or any quality of mind to be manifest in any of its operations, we simply give up the contest; and "Nature" so regarded becomes so far synonymous with God or Providence. But call it what we will, we cannot deny that the intelligent action of *something* underlies certain indisputable facts of human life.

I am as far as possible from assuming the airs of a philosopher, or wishing to tread the unfamiliar ground of metaphysics; but from the stand-point of common-sense, I am led to believe in the sequence of cause and effect. We are what we are through an inconceivably long chain of antecedents, which, if followed out far enough, would lead us to trace our origin to the sun, or what was once the sun when it occupied the whole space now bounded by the orbit of the

most distant planet. I am forced to admit that this is at least true of everything within the solar system which is visible, or which can be apprehended by chemical, electrical and kindred science. I do not know what my mind is or how it originated, but it must be quite safe to say that the mind, like the body, is the product of something else, the effect of some preceding causes. We are, therefore, entirely the results of causation, and we in turn must affect the condition of posterity; nay, they and their entire lives must be only and completely what they will be, in consequence of what we are.

But of one thing I am yet doubtful. What is the extent of the disturbing element called man's free will? We know for certain that there is some measure of choice allotted to each individual; but we are equally certain that the limits within which choice can be exercised are very narrow. A bird must have a bird's will, and not the will of a beast; the beast cannot have the will of the insect or the will of the fish. In like manner man can only have the will belonging to his nature. That is the first and most obvious limit to freedom of choice. And when we come to individuals, we find the will again limited by the personal characteristics, the inherited tendencies, the surrounding influences of circumstance and association. So easy does it seem for us to choose that we quite forget that our choice is almost forced upon us, and that we have little left of freedom of will but the empty name. Still if we have any freedom at all, it is enough to become what I called a disturbing element in the course of events. And this is exhibited in action when we find to our surprise some one turning out in character or in conduct the direct opposite to what we should have expected from the ordinary rule of nature. We do, now and then, take each other by surprise and present striking exceptions to universal law.

The effect of these considerations has been to make me not merely question, but entirely deny, the interference of God by what is often called "Providence" in the course of human or any other destiny. (1.) Because it is manifestly unnecessary. (2.) Because it would be an admission on His part that His forethought had been deficient, or His materials inadequate.

(3.) Because it would have a disastrous effect upon men's minds to imagine that God would so interfere; for they would claim that interference in every difficulty instead of putting their own shoulders to the wheel, and those who had no such favour might reasonably accuse God of partiality, and therefore of injustice.

If then by "Providence" be understood in the least degree, a patching up, or mending, or supplementing a defect in, any part of the universe by an act of divine interference, then, I for one, declare my utter disbelief in it, as unnecessary, derogatory to our idea of God, and injurious to mankind.

But just as we discarded the old conception of God, because we had found and embraced one inconceivably more exalted, so we discard the common action of Providence for an idea infinitely higher. Taking as a motto, "Known unto Him are all things from the beginning," we conceive of Providence as the action of an intelligent and loving Being who, whether or not he be the cause of the universe. is one for whom it exists, and by whom all its issues are controlled.

Not like a great mechanic making an engine for use, nor a giant carpenter fitting pieces of clumsy material together, nor a builder fashioning a house, nor an artificer inventing a toy. We know nothing whatever of God's relation to the visible world, and would not venture on the folly of even speculating as to how it was originated, or whether it was ever originated at all. But we are guided by our intuitions, and permitted by our reason, to attribute the course of the universe to some intelligent and beneficent guide, who, having cognisance of all that would happen in it, or be evolved out of it; having cognisance of, and special regard to, the various natures of the living creatures which would occupy it, was responsible for—not their mere pleasure—but their welfare, their truest and most lasting good.

Is not Providence—to use a figure of speech—the fiat of such a Being. The word once spoken, "Let all things be very good?" And they are good. Is not Providence simply the eternal and unchangeable will of Him who "is loving unto every man, and whose tender mercy is over all His works?" Is it not our

guarantee that nothing shall ever happen by chance, or without the prevision of His far-seeing wisdom and love ?

When we receive tokens of a watchful Providence—such as I alluded to just now—tokens which seem to bring God down into our very homes and families, and remind us that “in Him we live and move, and have our being,” and “The very hairs of our head are numbered,” which is the grander thought? That He, watching over us like an anxious parent, was attracted by our distress, and busied himself to find means for our deliverance, while next door to us, perhaps, distress worse than our own was being left to remedy itself, or work its bitter way through the aching hearts of our neighbours; or, to think of Him as one to whom every possible contingency that might arise in the life of every creature in all time was well known, its effects for pain or pleasure all carefully measured, every possible consequence provided for—only not by calculation and skilful arrangement which are our only conceptions of forethought—but by stamping on the whole from the beginning the one eternal law, that “all things should work together for good,” that the universe should be so evolved that nothing really evil should abide therein, and for every passing sorrow there should be everlasting joy ?

Such a view of God’s providence, however, does greater things than these. In our childish state we were wont to look only upon God’s deliverances as marks of His love, and our misfortunes as due only to the course of nature. Now we take the clouds and storm, as well as the blessed sunshine, as the gifts of His bounty; the night not less the day bears witness of His regard. Our tears and sorrows, and sad partings—all, all are His precious memorial<sup>s</sup> of a loving care quite as much as the joys and pleasures and blessed meetings which make life so glad.

In that kind of Providence, let me ever believe, then no sorrow can overwhelm my soul, no joy or deliverance can make me forget my God.

But what, if after all, this has a tendency to a kind of fatalism which in all ages has been found detrimental to virtue, and paralysing to the moral powers? Here is uncertainty again. If all has been planned from the beginning, every event in life known and

provided for, an unworthy soul might say "let things take their course we will just do what we must, it is sure to come right." There would be danger in this, indeed, were it not for one element which no theories can destroy. Still we feel our responsibility, still we have our undying sense of duty, still we hear our brothers' cry for help and pity, and the heart of man as God has made it, is by nature neither base nor ungrateful. We shall not love God the less for knowing His good purposes towards us; we shall not be less kind to one another when we know their glorious destiny; we shall not be less diligent in duty when we perceive that the very ends which God has in view can only be accomplished with the consent of our free will. To make earth all that is fair and lovely, and pure, and happy, each moral denizen thereof must first become so. To make eternal bliss in heaven, each soul must first be made eternally holy.

There is no more miracle, no more special providence, no more Divine interference. We have been launched on the wide ocean of human lot, and we must bring our bark safe to land. The breezes may blow, now for us, now against us, and angry waves may rise and threaten us with their foaming jaws; but over the billows we must rise and conquer even adverse winds, keeping our eye steadfastly on the compass at our feet, or on the stars above our heads, bound for that haven which God has promised to the brave and the true.

If indeed it be true that

"A Providence doth shape our ends  
Rough hew them how we will."

it only means that we have not absolute control over the small or even the great, events of life; but it never was written to discourage manly independent action of an honest heart aiming only at what is right and good. Depend upon it, until we work out our path into holy life and liberty God will not interfere to help us to find it, or give us one moment's rest until it is found.

The Providence which has made man the author of his own destinies—every one of which destinies is to be eternally good—will not abandon such a glorious scheme of salvation, or defraud

one human being of the painful and costly honour of being his own Saviour.

Finally, as we cannot be always in the clouds of the orizing and controversy about fate and freewill, let us give free play to our religious emotions, and day by day learn better to recognize the Providence of God as it is working before us in every event of life. If we begin by lifting grateful hearts to God for every thing we deem a joy and a blessing, we shall soon learn to welcome with a calm and reasonable thankfulness those events which under another light, or in the darkness of unbelief, we deem to be evils and curses.

Let each one of us sing in the words of the poet,

“May I remember that to Thee  
Whate'er I have I owe  
And back in gratitude from me  
May all thy bounties flow.

And though thy wisdom takes away  
Shall I arraign thy will?  
No ! let me bless thy name and say  
The Lord is gracious still.”

