

## DIVINE PROVIDENCE

"The eyes of the Lord are upon the righteous, and his ears are open unto their cry. The face of the Lord is against them that do evil, to cut off the remembrance of them from the earth" (Psalm 34:15-16).

By divine providence we mean the preservation, care, control, and direction of all things which God has created, that they may accomplish the purpose for which they were created. This definition turns our attention to the past that we might examine the supreme plan which God had in the beginning; and to the future, in which this plan will come to final maturity. Between eternity past and eternity future, we are to interpret the wide variety of the present movements of God with respect both to their original purpose and to their final consummation. God has cared for His people, He cares for them, and He will care for them in the future.

In dealing with the subject of divine providence, or the government of God, several observations are to be made.

### I. God Has A Purpose.

God's purpose embraces the past, the present, and the future; this world and the world to come; all created things, the earth, as well as man. "For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure" (Philippians 2:13). "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them" (Ephesians 2:10).

God is not like a flitting butterfly, touching life only at certain places and at irregular intervals; nor is He like a sparrow twittering aimlessly in the eaves of his own creation; nor like a fowl bewildered by the lights of His own universe. But God is a sovereign Being Who in the councils of eternity formed a coherent and altogether righteous plan for this world and for all that is in it.

Before the artist touches the canvas with his brush, the picture is painted on the delicate walls of his imagination. Before the poet pens his inspiring lines, the thought is conceived in the sanctuary of his soul. Before the music is set in sharps and flats, the musician hears the song in the deepest depths of his spirit. Before the sculptor lifts his mallet and chisel on the shapeless marble, the statue rises sweet and lovely in his illumined mind. Before the earth was formed in beauty and symmetry, it was planned in the councils of eternity. Likewise, before the insensate clay was breathed upon by the breath of life, man lay as a golden dream in the heart of God. Yes, "there's a divinity that shapes our ends."

### II. God's Purpose Is Redemptive.

God's purpose has a righteous goal. "And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28). It is not claimed that all things work together for our comfort, our ease, our health, or our wealth. The "good" referred to here is not primarily social, intellectual, financial, or temporal. While these aspects are not excluded and also come under the purview of God, the supreme "good," as judged by heaven's standards, is spiritual; that is, that we may be conformed to the image of Christ, that we may become like Christ, "who gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify unto himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works" (Titus 2:14).

Furthermore, this "good" is not independent of our individual response. Whether or not all things work together for good is conditioned on two things: first, our love for God; and, second, whether or not we are living according to His purpose for us, which is that we may become like Christ. So we see that the first and final purpose of God is not temporal, physical, or material, but is the development of Christian character, bringing us to His likeness.

### III. God's Purpose Never Changes.

God's methods may change, and often do, but His purpose never changes. His methods include physical forces of all kinds, spiritual impressions, daily experiences, and the freedom of the will. They embrace disappointment, pain, persecution, joys, and sorrows. His methods may allow poverty instead of wealth, sickness instead of health, failure instead of success, and even war instead of peace. The guided life is not always the gilded life; nor is the protected life always free from pain. However, this does not mean that God is ignorant or impotent.

In Malachi 3:3 we read, "And he shall sit as a refiner and purifier of silver." According to ancient custom, the refiner took the silver ore and placed it in the crucible, beneath which he lighted a fire. As the ore would melt and the dross would come to the top, he would dip it off and throw it away, then increase the intensity of the heat from the fire. Ever and anon the process was repeated, until, when he was able to see his own image reflected in the silver, the fire was extinguished, for the silver was then pure. So, often it is that in bringing us to Christ's likeness, we must undergo purifying experiences. But in all of them God's holy and righteous purpose remains unchanged.

"For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom he did predestinate, them he also called; and whom he called, them he also glorified" (Romans 8:29-30). There is not anything without its significance.

It would seem as if God's purpose had been frustrated when His great minister, Paul, was cast into prison. But in that very prison experience he saw and penned immortal truth which is incorporated in the New Testament. Likewise, when Roger Williams was banished from Massachusetts, it would have appeared as if there were not remaining a voice to proclaim the message of religious liberty in the new and rough frontier of America. But his very banishment led to the foundation of a state dedicated to the principles of freedom, and ultimately to the incorporation of these principles in the Constitution of the United States. And so it may be said that for the child of God, all experiences may have their spiritual implications.

It is also one of the marvels of divine providence that even our sins, when we truly repent of them, may be overruled by the Lord God in such a way as to be unto His praise and to our good. Once Ruskin saw a young woman in great distress because, by accident, she had spilled some ink on a most beautiful silk handkerchief, and it seemed to be ruined forever. Artist that he was, as well as poet, Ruskin smilingly took the stained handkerchief from her, went to his study, and set to work upon the blot. He began drawing figures on the handkerchief, using the blot as a center for a design. With delicate skill he painted a beautiful picture and then returned the handkerchief to her.

"Oh," she said, "this is not my handkerchief!"

"Yes," he replied, "it is yours. I simply took the ugly blot and transformed it into a picture."

Blessed be God! He is able to do just that for us when we forsake our sins and yield to His Spirit.

Moreover, God has a way of selecting whom He will and what He will to carry out His purposes. "For ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, nor many noble, are called: But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty; And base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are: That no flesh should glory in his presence" (I Corinthians 1:26-29).

Infinite in variety are the methods of God, but His will and purposes are unchanged.

#### IV. God's Providence Is Not To Be Interpreted By Isolated Experiences.

The editor of a country newspaper once received a letter from a farmer somewhat as follows:

"Dear Mr. Editor:

I plowed my ground on Sunday; I worked my crop on Sunday; and in October I gathered an abundant harvest on Sunday. In fact, all through the season Sunday meant no more to me than any other day. My neighbor across the road would never work his crop on Sunday, but always went to church, and he got a very poor harvest. How do you account for all this?"

The editor published the letter, and made this significant comment in reply:

"My Dear Sir:

God does not make full settlement in October."

In other words, the editor was simply saying what I am now saying, that nothing is finished until God gets through with it. The present must be interpreted in the light of the future and the ultimate, or we will get the wrong answer. Joseph's brethren meant it as evil when they sold him into slavery, but the story was not concluded with that installment. It was true then, as it is now, that God always has the last word. "But as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive" (Genesis 50:20).

Joseph might have emphasized the wrong his brothers had done to him, but he had a better and the right attitude toward his trials and tribulations. He saw in them not the meanness of men but the purpose and providence of God. If vengeance were to be taken, God, to Whom all vengeance belongeth, would take care of that.

We must not cease to believe in the goodness of God because we cannot see at any given time how what is happening to us is going to be for our ultimate good. It may take time to grasp the divine purpose. It does not always appear on the surface or at once. Joseph had to wait for years before God's meaning was made clear to him. When the meaning became clear, Joseph said: "God meant it for good." God is always master of the situation. God is always good and whatever happens He always means good.

Paul went so far as to say: "But I would that ye should understand, brethren, that the things which have happened unto me have fallen out rather unto the furtherance of the gospel" (Philippians 1:12). In that statement he was speaking of his bitter prison experiences. Paul also said: "Now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then I shall know even as also I am known" (I Corinthians 13:12). And our blessed Lord said: "What I do thou knowest not now; but thou shalt know hereafter" (John 13:7).

God moves in a mysterious way  
His wonders to perform;  
He plants His footsteps in the sea,  
And rides upon the storm.

Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take,  
The clouds ye so much dread  
Are big with mercy, and shall break  
In blessings on your head.

Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,  
But trust him for his grace;  
Behind a frowning providence  
He hides a smiling face.

Blind unbelief is sure to err,  
And scan his work in vain;  
God is his own interpreter,  
And he will make it plain.

—William Cowper

When Toni Jo Henry, convicted of murder, was in the prison death cell at Lake Charles, Louisiana, awaiting execution for her crime, she was interviewed by a newspaper reporter. She said to him: "I am scared because I don't know where I will be in September. I always knew there was a God running the show, but I thought maybe I could steal just one little act."

Yes, God is "running the show." The providence of God is as alarming to His enemies as it is consoling to His friends. "The Lord reigneth." Therefore, the wicked and the ungodly should tremble. "The wicked shall be turned into hell, and all the nations that forget God" (Psalm 9:17).

"The Lord reigneth." Therefore, the righteous should rejoice. God is our shield and buckler; our rearguard and vanguard; our creator, defender, and unfailing benefactor. "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? shall tribulation,

or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us. For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:36, 37-39).

God's providence, therefore, is an encouragement to faith. Indeed, it is the very foundation of faith. In the midst of our disturbed and distraught world, the child of God may confidently affirm that the Lord is working out His purposes, and, in the end, what we now say by faith, we shall be able to say by sight, "He hath done all things well."