

GOD'S PROVIDENCE OVER ALL

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"We cannot be robbed of God's providence." This was one of the sayings current in the household of Thomas Carlyle, apparently much on the lips of that brilliant woman, Jane Welsh Carlyle. In it, the plummet is let down to the bottom of the Christian's confidence and hope. It is because we cannot be robbed of God's providence that we know, amid whatever encircling gloom, that all things shall work together for good to those that love him. It is because we cannot be robbed of God's providence that we know that nothing can separate us from the love of Christ -- not tribulation, nor anguish, nor persecution, nor famine, nor nakedness, nor peril, nor sword.

For over us there curves the infinite
Blue heaven as a shield, and at the end
We shall find One who loveth to befriend
E'en those who faint for shame within his sight.

Were not God's providence over all, could trouble come without his sending, were Christians the possible prey of this or the other fiendish enemy, when perchance God was musing, or gone aside, or on a journey, or sleeping, what certainty of hope could be ours? "Does God send trouble?" Surely, surely. He and he only. To the sinner in punishment, to his children in chastisement. To suggest that it does not always come from his hands is to take away all our comfort. Even the Unitarian poet knew better than that:

These severe afflictions
Not from the ground arise:
But oftentimes celestial benedictions
Assume this dark disguise.

The world may be black to us; there may no longer be hope in man; anguish and trouble may be our daily portion; but there is this light that shines through all the darkness: "We cannot be robbed of God's providence." So long as the soul keeps firm hold of this great truth it will be able to breast all storms.

A firm faith in the universal providence of God is the solution of all earthly troubles. It is almost equally true that a clear and full apprehension of the universal providence of God is the solution of most theological problems. Most of the religious difficulties with which men disturb their minds, rest on the subtle intrusion into our thinking of what we may call Deistic postulates, and would vanish could but the full meaning of God's universal providence enter and condition all our thinking. It is because we forget this great truth that we vex and puzzle ourselves over difficulties which seem to be insoluble,

but which cease to be difficulties at all so soon as we remember that God's providence extends over all. Let us illustrate this by one or two instances, from regions which seem at first sight sufficiently remote from the influence of the doctrine of providence.

Here is the difficulty about the divine origin and the divine trustworthiness of the Bible. What is the root of it? Men have had their attention strongly directed to the human element in the Bible, and to the human factor in its origin. They are saying to themselves that the human element is real, and that it is much greater than they once thought it was. Their hearts sink within them as they then infer that the divine element is, therefore, less great, less pervasive, less determinative than they had thought. They feel driven to the conclusion that we can no longer say that the Bible is a divine book, but can only say that it is a mixed divine and human book. They perceive that much of it is Paul's or John's or Peter's; and they do not know how to say, therefore, that all of it is God's. They have, however, only forgotten God's providence that is over all. For what is the conception which they are forming for themselves as to the way in which the Bible originated? Is it not something like this? They imagine that the divine and human factors have approached each other from opposite poles, as it were, and united on some common intermediate ground in the formation of a joint product, the Bible. So that so far as the Bible is divine it is not human; and so far as it is human it is not divine. The divine and human are conceived as contradictory forces infringing upon one another, and the Bible is the resultant of the two.

But are the divine and human factors which unite to form our Bible thus contradictory and independent forces pushing in opposite directions? Not if God's providence is over all. Whence came even the human factor but from God himself, preparing by his providence for the production of his Book? We are not to conceive the matter as if God had simply found the Chronicler, say, with his historical bias; or the Psalmist with his emotional nature already hardened in a purely earthly mould; or Paul with his habits of thought already developed and fixed: and has been compelled, by the pure force of his inspirational impact, to force his word with difficulty through their resisting tissues. Were this so, it might well be that God's Word would come out stained and discolored by the "personal equations" of the human authors, and would no longer be the pure Word of God, but, at best, only the mixed word of God and man. But there was, in fact, no Chronicler save as God had himself made him by the providence which is over all. If he had a bias, it was a bias which God in his providence had given him; and had given him for the specific purpose that he might view the history of Israel thus and not otherwise; and so write it down for the instruction of the ages. There was no David, save the David whom God had moulded and prepared for the specific purpose of composing precisely these Psalms. The tones in which he sang were the tones to which his heart had been attuned by the overruling providence of God. There was no Paul save the Paul whom God had separated from his mother's womb, and trained as he would have him trained -- that in the fulness of time, he might declare as he would have him declare, all the words of his truth. It is thus not merely what we call the divine element of the Bible that is from God. What we call the human element in it, too, is equally from God. The real contrast is not between the divine and human in the Bible; but between the inspirational and the

providential factors which have entered into the divine making of the Bible. It is all from God.

Thus, it is only when we forget that God's providence is over all that we can fancy that the human factor may introduce into the Bible aught that would mar its designed perfection as the Word of God. So soon as we remember the reach of his providence, we find that the discovery of a human element in the Bible only enriches our conception of the ways in which God was active in producing this Divine Book. We perceive him preparing the matter to be written, in the age-long development of his self-revelation to men; in the divine direction of the course of history in general, and of the history of his chosen people in particular; in the production of occasions by which men's hearts were wrung, and they were made to feel deeply the greatness, the glory, or the goodness of God. We perceive him preparing the men to write, raising them up in just the circumstance in which their special powers would be developed; granting them just the ancestry, the gifts, the environment, the training which would prepare them best to write just the portions of Scripture to be committed to them; and then bringing them in contact with just the surroundings which would produce the precise bias, or call out the precise mode of expression, which was expected of them. We perceive him adding from time to time the open visions and the direct revelations which were needed to illuminate human darkness and to make known his gracious purposes. Then we perceive him compacting all these processes into the making of a book, superintended by his direct inspiration in every item of its preparation. And we no longer doubt that this Book, though human through and through, is the very word of God, and is clothed with all the qualities that belong to it as such. We take another example: this time from the distribution of God's saving grace. How many of us are opposed in spirit as we think of the heathen in their darkness. It is a black problem, we say. The Scriptures clearly teach that there is no salvation for adult men and women save through faith in Jesus Christ. And "How shall they believe in him whom they have not heard? and how shall they hear him without a preacher? and how shall they preach, except they be sent?" But can we really credit that men and women, beyond the possible reach of the gospel message, perish without hope, because of the mere accident that the gospel has not been carried to them? Our souls faint at the thought. But we are only forgetting the universal reach of God's providence again. There are no accidents from the point of view of providence. Not even a sparrow falls to the ground without our Father; and the very hairs of our head are all numbered. Probe the state of mind which such trains of thought represent, and what do we find? In the last analysis probably this: A half-formed, or perhaps even less than half-formed, feeling that there is no other way for such heathen to be saved but by an exception to God's ordinary methods of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. And does such a fancy rest on anything else than lack of faith in God's providence? For God surely needs no exceptions. It can never be true that he must break through his announced methods of salvation or else renounce his purpose to save. Is it not easy for him to convey the gospel to the remotest isle? And may we not be perfectly certain that no man was ever lost for lack of power on God's part to convey to him the gospel? His providence is over all; and by his providence he both can and will always present the means where his grace has determined on the end.

Many appear almost to fancy that God dispenses his grace with one hand and his providence with the other, and does not let his right hand know what his left hand does. Providence and grace seem almost to be thought of as independent forces, working sometimes harmoniously, but liable to get out of gear and clog and embarrass one another. Perhaps it would be even true to say that at bottom some men practically have two gods a good god of grace, and a severe god of providence. There is, however, but one God; and he is the God both of providence and of grace. The two can never be separated, nor can one suffer for lack of the support of the other. It is not necessary, therefore, for us to suppose, and it is not reverential for us to suggest, that God needs to save men by exception. His providence is adequate to all his gracious purposes, let them be as broad and as great as they may; and he will assuredly send his gospel in his providence to whomsoever his grace has set upon to save.

But, it may be asked, may not the Church fail in her duty of extending the knowledge of the gospel? May she not withhold the gospel from the world, and thus bring down the blood of the perishing on her head? Undoubtedly she may: unhappily she has done, and is doing, just this. But our faithlessness shall never make of none effect the faithfulness of God. Let us hearken to the philosophy of Mordecai: "For if thou altogether holdest thy peace at this time, then shall relief and deliverance arise from another place, but thou and thy father's house shall perish." God has not committed his honor to another. Neither has he committed the Souls of men to their fellows' keeping. He has laid responsibilities upon us, and we shall stand or fall before him according to our fulfilment of them. But we must bear our own punishment; it will not be inflicted on others. His purposes of mercy will never fail because of our unfaithfulness, for his providence is over all. And there are none of us -- not the neediest, not the meanest, not the most remote who can be robbed of God's providence.

It is only, then, when we forget that God's providence is over all that we are tempted to fancy that need may arise for him to save his people by some exceptional method, outside or beyond his announced method of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. So soon as we remember the reach of his providence, we find his announced method of salvation adequate for the needs of the world; and our conceptions of the saving operations of God are enriched, as we perceive all his providential working harnessed to its service. Thus we can better understand what he means when he declares that all power and authority have been committed to Christ, and that he has been made head over all things for his Church. Jesus Christ, the Redeemer of men, is now the God of providence, and all providence is administered, now, for the interests of his saving work. That work, therefore, cannot fail in a single particular for lack of providential co-operation.