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THE

PRESENCE OF GOD

A

PEOPLE'S PROSPERITY:

A SERMON

PREACHED ON SUNDAY MORNING, APRIL 11, 1841.

IN THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, AT CARLISLE, PA.

Being the first Sabbath after the Decease of

WILLIAM HENRY HARRISON,

LATE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES:

BY ALEXANDER T. MCGILL,

PASTOR OF THE CHURCH.

PHILADELPHIA:

WILLIAM S. MARTIEN.

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S E R M O N .

2 CHRONICLES XV. 2.

And he went out to meet Asa, and said unto him, Hear ye me, Asa, and all Judah and Benjamin; the Lord is with you, while ye be with him; and if ye seek him, he will be found of you; but if ye forsake him, he will forsake you.

MEN should exult cautiously. Nations should "rejoice with trembling," and remember Him, in whose hand they "are counted as the small dust of the balance." Asa, and the people of Judah, had just obtained a signal victory over a host of Ethiopians. As they were returning, flushed with triumph, Azariah, the son of Oded, met them with the words of the text. He saw how confident of long and increasing glory were the people and their rulers; how full of ardent purpose, and vainglorious project; how many a bold adventure, or profound stroke of policy they meditated; how intent they were on every object but that which was of the utmost importance, even to the successful prosecution of worldly ends, the approbation of God, his presence, and counsel, and upholding favour. Yet he was not wholly forgotten. Asa was a pious king, though he died of a disease in his feet; for, "in his disease he sought not to the Lord, but to the physicians." It is not total indifference to God only, that makes him jealous and angry. It is the secondary regard with which we rely on his favour; it is the cold deference with which we acknowledge his existence and supremacy, while we lean with main dependence on ourselves, for the accomplishment of what we implored him to bless. Without a particular explanation of the several members and phrases of the verse before us, we observe, the great lesson obviously taught is, that all our prosperity as a nation, depends on the presence of God with us,—a presence

which it is vain to expect without seeking him, and cleaving to him sincerely. The subject is thus divided into two parts:

FIRST, the benefit proposed, Divine presence with a people.
SECOND, the condition, or pre-requisite in them.

I. The Divine presence, promised here, is not the essential presence of God, the absolute immensity of being, according to which he is naturally and necessarily present with all his creatures. Nor is it the common presence of his Providence, by which he upholds, with immediate exertion of power and goodness, all his creatures, and all their actions. It is the presence of a special Providence for good, attended with peculiar and benign good-will to a nation as such, making every event, even visibly the most adverse, subserve the real and ultimate welfare of that people. It is distinguished also from what is called, "the covenanted presence of God," with his own people individually and collectively.

The presence here proposed is contingent, suspended, as you see, on a condition, or pre-requisite in the people themselves; but the presence of God in covenant with any people, or person, is absolute, resting on no contingency in them; resting on merit without them, above them infinitely, the atoning and interceding merit of our Lord Jesus Christ. According to the covenant of grace, the language is not "if ye forsake him, he will forsake you," but "I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee."

Again, the presence offered in the text, is offered to the whole body of the people, "Asa, and all Judah, and Benjamin," but we know they were not all Israel who were of Israel; the effectual grace of the covenant was not extended to thousands of that people. And besides, the presence here proposed is partial, for a particular purpose, that they should be prospered, as a nation, in all their pursuits at home, and conflicts abroad; but the presence of God in covenant grace and faithfulness is for universal purposes, for all spiritual blessings, as well as true temporal prosperity.

From all this distinction we conclude that, although the Divine presence, mentioned here, is inseparable from the administration of the covenant of grace, the objects of its benefit are

not precisely the same. Many of them may be utter strangers to the saving grace of the Divine presence. They are the citizens of a nation collectively. We, therefore, define the presence promised in the text to be, a special and gracious interposition of Divine Providence in behalf of a people at all times, so as to bless them, and do them good, though, as individuals, many of them, perhaps a majority, may be living and dying beneath his curse.

II. We now notice the second part of our subject, viz. the condition, or pre-requisite in the people. What is that abiding with God, that seeking, and not forsaking of him, which is here insisted on as the term of his benignant and prospering Providence with them.

First, Saving faith among the people. There must be many citizens among them who are saints of the Most High God, who are righteous men evangelically, having made peace with God through Jesus Christ. It is clear as an axiom in the Bible, that God dispenses no blessing, either on a nation or an individual, which does not flow through Jesus Christ. Out of him, all his dealing with any commonwealth must be angry and vengeful. Who will say, that the outward prosperity of a heathen nation is indicative of God's real presence, with that kind of Providence we have just defined, a Providence making every event, adverse and prosperous, subserve their ultimate welfare? Who has not seen in the history of the past, that the most palmy condition of a people, who know not God and Jesus Christ whom he hath sent, is the condition of decay, the seed time of dissolution? The only season of health and vigour was one of war, and bloodshed, and horror, when conquerors through seas of blood, and tears of the widow and orphan, through countries laid waste, and cities in ashes, bore the banners of the nation to victory and glory—banners which are seen beneath the feet of those conquerors, as soon as sunny peace shone upon the people. When the Roman empire at length arrived at peace, and art, and science, and literature flourished with unparalleled prosperity, the liberties of Rome were gone, the constitution and the senate were an empty form beneath the despotic arm of Cæsar Augustus. Always have nations that are not truly Christian, been cursed both in pros-

perity and adversity. The one is ever deceitful, the other truly calamitous.

A nation is composed of individuals. No individual can have peace and prosperity with God, who is not interested in the Saviour by a justifying faith; therefore, no nation can have such prosperity, that does not embrace among her citizens many who are genuine believers. But how many? What proportion in numbers must believers bear to unbelievers, in order to season the lump, to be as salt to the commonwealth, or as pillars to bear up the land? We cannot tell, otherwise than by consulting the history of the past, and especially the dealing of God with one ancient nation, that seemed to have been chosen from others, not only as the visible Church, but as a political organization, to display in their annals the dispensation, according to which he will deal with bodies politic while the world endures. In the life of the great father of that nation, we learn that it requires few, very few "righteous men," to avert, for a time, the fiery judgments of heaven. The cities of the plain might have escaped a while longer, if but ten genuine saints, among all the thousands of Sodom, could have been found. But more faith, obviously, is required to conciliate the favour of God, than to procure his forbearance. A greater proportion of true believers is needed to secure for a nation, benign and all-prospering Providence, than to stay the avenging arm of Jehovah, and obtain for her a lengthened respite from the utmost execution of his wrath. Perhaps the following passage in Isaiah vi. 18, reveals more precisely than any other, this proportion: "But yet in it shall be a tenth, and it shall return, and shall be eaten: as a tail-tree, and as an oak, whose substance is in them when they cast their leaves, so the holy seed shall be the substance thereof." But it is not enough that this "tenth" in the land be believers in Jesus Christ, to be the holy seed and substance of a country. "If the salt have lost his savour, wherewith shall it be salted?" If they are not Christian citizens—if they do not exercise the religion of Christ in the choice of rulers, choosing men who fear God, and hate covetousness, if they are not engaged in praying for their rulers, and faithfully protesting at all times against the sins of the land, and loudest of all, against the sins of party, even their own favourite men and measures—if, in

short, they are Christians in every thing but politics, they are insipid salt, they are sleeping Jonahs in the ship, they are first and chief in bringing down the judgments of heaven on a devoted nation. "You only have I known of all the families of the earth, therefore will I punish you for all your iniquities."

It is a fearfully mischievous maxim of the present day, baneful alike to church and state, that "Religion has nothing to do with politics." Religion nothing to do with politics? That is, God in Christ has nothing to do with the destinies of the country! If the doctrine of Divine Providence is read in the Bible, or displayed at all in the destiny of nations hitherto, it is this, that all events, from the greatest to the least, from the death of our own illustrious President to that of the meanest felon in the land, are ordered with strict subserviency to the interests of the Christian religion. If Jesus Christ is head over all things to the church—if politics, on the grandest scale, are but scaffolding to his house, his kingdom, built up and thrown down, prospered and confounded, by the Almighty disposer of all things in fulfilling to his Son the promise, what kind of Christians are they who divorce their religion and their politics? The maxim in question, so pervading and popular among us, explodes the providence of Christianity, and disowns, in reality, all interposition of heaven in the affairs of men—between infidelity and atheism it vibrates. While Christians themselves are mad with this preposterous maxim—while the swearer, the gambler, the Sabbath-breaker, the drunkard, the debauchee, in short, any man is supported by the suffrages of Christians for any office, who happens to rally around him the favour of a party—while party is the despot, in whose iron grasp, liberty, conscience and religion wither, we see no hope for our country. If all true believers, nay, if all who are in the visible church throughout our land, were signalized by a mark upon their foreheads, because they sigh and cry for the abominations done in the midst of the land, a mark of infamy on earth, but discrimination to heaven, scarcely might we venture to hope, that the angry judgments of God would be averted from a people so long accustomed to cast his fear behind their back. But when God's own witnesses on earth are so treacherous in this great trust, so unmindful of allegiance to Jesus Christ, amid the rage of party politics, so basely blended,

so merely common and undistinguished, where they should be pre-eminently "a peculiar people," we tremble for the redemption of the country. We cannot, without speedy repentance, escape the curse of God, which will make us a by-word and a hissing among the nations of the earth.

Secondly, It is necessary on our part, as a nation abiding with God, so as to have his benignant Providence abiding with us, that some open acknowledgment of Him be made in a national way; and it need scarcely be added, he is never acknowledged, so as to obtain his favour, when Christ is not acknowledged, for "the government shall be upon his shoulders." He will have all men, individuals and nations, honour the Son, even as they honour the Father. To "kings" and "judges of the earth," it is the solemn injunction, "Kiss the Son, lest he be angry," &c. There is a fearful lack of such acknowledgment in the constitution of our country; we lament its silence, so much like cold negation of all that is vital to a nation's welfare. The cause of religious liberty did not need that this young and mighty republic should be irreligious in her letter, and lift a brow of infidelity among the nations of the earth. It was refreshing to the Christian to hear the explicit homage paid the Christian religion, in the Inaugural Address of him whose sudden decease the nation mourns. It gave a ray of hope that a constitution, dead and soulless in its letter towards the religion of Jesus, would have some warmth imparted from the heart of the Executive; and we yet indulge the hope that, in future times, men of God will be elevated to that high seat, who will not only carry out the pure principles of liberty which that instrument embodies, but shed the light of Heaven on its features, by asking counsel for the nation of that God whose name it does not mention. This national acknowledgment of God, in the only way he will be acknowledged, a *Christian way*, may be made acceptably by a government, if not a constitution. And it may be that "a tenth in the land," duly awake to Christian responsibility, and concerned to imbue their politics with their religion, may secure the presence of God, offered in the text, even if rulers and constitution be alike indifferent; but we have no examples. All history is against it. There is not a solitary instance of the real prospering providence of God given to a people, whose administration

of power was confided to irreligious hands. Always have nations been blessed or cursed, visited or forsaken of God, as their chief rulers were friends or foes at heart to the true religion. Even when the wicked ruler has been commissioned by Heaven for a special purpose of avenging Providence, as Jeroboam and Jehu, he has hardly fulfilled the errand, till he becomes, in turn, the source of more grievous calamities to the country than ever.

Thirdly, National acknowledgment of the Christian religion in any way would be but mockery, unless the institutions of Christianity be honoured by the State. While the Sabbath is profaned by law, and usage; while its desecration streams through every vein and artery of the body politic—while railroads and canals, and thoroughfares of every description, are open by law, and the mail transported on the Sabbath, so that, even civil and religious liberty is trampled, in the disfranchisement which conscientious citizens endure, when they must abandon the authority of God, or forego many an office of trust and profit; surely, we cannot have this benign and prospering presence of God with the nation. There is enough on the statute book to bring down his fury on us much more, to forfeit his benignant presence, though every constitution, and every ruler in the land, proclaimed the most devout acknowledgment of Him and his revelation.

Fourthly, To enjoy this peculiar and prospering presence of God with a people, we must not only have a tenth in the land, diffusing the savour of Christianity as citizens—and an open acknowledgment of God in Christ, either by the constitution, or the ruler, or both—and an abiding reverence for all divine institutions in the laws, and operations of the government, but a special repose on Him for protection, when dangers and difficulties betide. Such a trust Asa and the people reposed on Him when invaded by the Ethiopians. And many examples of national confidence in God might be quoted, from the history of other princes, whose hearts were perfect towards him. This act of public piety, consists in humble encouragement and patient waiting on God, hoping that he will interpose for our help, when all refuge fails us, and will bring to a favourable issue present distresses, even when human resources of wealth and wisdom are all exhausted. We cannot be “with him,” either

as individuals, or a nation, without clinging to him in the darkness and the storm. We never "seek him so that he will be found of us," unless engaged in seeking him "against hope," against all near and visible probabilities of relief. "O trust in the Lord at all times ye people, trust in the Lord for ever, for in the Lord Jehovah there is everlasting strength."

If some one, in the mantle of Azariah the son of Oded, could have stood on some high place at Washington, on the last 4th of March, to proclaim the words of this text in the hearing of a mighty, and honoured chieftain, and in the hearing of the patriotic throng around him, it would have been a more suitable salutation for the ruler and the people by far, than all the guns, and trumpets, and dances, which crowned the rejoicing of that day. As a congregation of Christians, it becomes us to feel with deep humiliation, the unprecedented stroke of afflictive Providence on this whole nation, in the death of our Chief Magistrate. No matter to what party we belong—no matter whether we aided, or opposed the elevation of that patriot to his high place, the actual investment with power gave him, by the ordinance of God, a claim on our respect, obedience, affection, prayers, and now on the tribute of mourning for his death.

We cannot but see, that, the Lord's hand is lifted up. It is a judgment on the nation, and it becomes us to inquire, "Is there not a cause?" "Wherefore hath the Lord done thus unto this land, what meaneth the heat of this great anger?" Let us not forget that it is only in the way of searching for the "need be," and mourning for the stroke, we can have any hope of escaping more grievous calamities. "For all this, his anger is not turned away, but his hand is stretched out still."

We have repeatedly dwelt upon the great sin, for which Divine Providence has filled our country with embarrassment and confusion—the sin of covetousness. "For the iniquity of his covetousness was I wroth, and smote him." We might dwell now on a long catalogue of national iniquities, at which the very sun would darken, as he looks down on a land so fair, so favoured. "By swearing, and lying, and killing, and stealing, and committing adultery, they break out, and blood toucheth blood." But there are some special and peculiar provocations, on which we should reflect with humiliation, in view of the nation's bereavement at this time. In the first place, there

was too much dependence placed by his friends on the agency of this "arm of flesh" to help the nation out of her troubles and perplexities. Instead of being humbled before God for the sins that plunged us into unexampled embarrassment of finance, and loss of confidence between man and man, an enthusiastic people looked to one old man for the redemption of the country. And however trustworthy he was, however competent to guide the helm in troublous times, God in jealousy for his own honour, as Governor of nations, has taken the idol of undue dependence and expectation away. Nor is it any less a rebuke to those who preferred other rulers, that this one is taken. The object of undue and intemperate abuse is now in the grave. If his friends were extravagant to idolatry, in praising and leaning on him, his enemies were excessive to wickedness, in disparaging his merits, and traducing his character. Both are scourged. The one party are disappointed—the other may realize more adverse consequences from his death, than they ever apprehended from his elevation to power.

Another proximate cause of this great affliction is the ungodly cheer, with which this venerable man was greeted, in the testimonials of a people's joy. Balls, routs, fashionable assemblies in every variety of that gay, and dissolute amusement, against which evangelical Christians every where lift up the voice of condemnation, were offered to honour and salute the ordinance of God, the elevation of a ruler to his post! Many a Christian heart ached at this irreligious demonstration of joy, and foreboded some melancholy sequel. Many a patriotic follower of the meek and lowly Jesus sighed, while the gala and the dance, the roll of giddy and ungodly pleasure greeted the nation's chieftain. "O foolish people, and unwise, thus to requite the Lord," thus to insult his religion, and trample on the tender consciences of his people, and degrade the worthy object, whom they sought to honour with a flow of revelry! The dance is turned to mourning. Is it not seen that the prayer of the most obscure, and neglected saint from Maine to Florida, is better for the country, better for her rulers, better for the heart of loyal friendship, than all the music, and song, and festival rejoicing, with which the land was ringing?

The nation mourns.—A soldier, a patriot, her own Chief Magistrate, at a crisis so important to the destiny of the nation

is fallen. Let us honour his memory. But let us see whence cometh the stroke. We need not exclaim, "mysterious providence." If there be aught mysterious in such dealing, the mystery is, that all our high places are not desolate, that "the speech of the trusty, and the understanding of the aged," are not removed, in wrath, from every helm and department of government, and a people, so wicked, and ungrateful, left without even human ability to manage their affairs. There is no mystery in his dispensations towards us, but the riches of his goodness and forbearance. Let us return to him that smiteth. Let every family apart, and every individual apart, mourn for their share of the sin that brings judgment on the whole people. Let each individual, and especially each "fellow citizen with the saints" feel greater responsibility for the welfare of his country, and do more to diffuse the fear of God among the people, and restrain the provocations which call down His fiery indignation, and make conscience of praying for our beloved country, in the family, and the closet, that God may turn from the fierceness of his anger, and avert deserved judgments yet impending, and vouchsafe his abiding presence and favour, and repair and sanctify the sad calamity we mourn.

THE END.

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