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PREACHED IN HINGHAM AND QUINCY,

20th, AUGUST 1812,

THE DAY OF

THE NATIONAL FAST,

ON ACCOUNT OF

THE WAR WITH GREAT BRITAIN.

BY HENRY COLMAN,
MINISTER OF THE THIRD CHURCH IN HINGHAM.

BOSTON:

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1812.

THIS discourse is published by the advice of some intelligent friends, to whose judgment its author is accustomed to submit; who thought it might do good, in this season of distress and trembling anxiety, to press home the subject of which it treats, upon the mind of the christian publick.

THE
DIVINE PROVIDENCE ;

ROMANS, viii. 28.

WE KNOW THAT ALL THINGS WORK TOGETHER FOR GOOD
TO THEM THAT LOVE GOD.

I THINK, my brethren, I may venture to assert, that a more interesting passage than the text cannot be found in the whole compass of the scriptures: The inferences to be made from it are clear, satisfactory, and delightful. It teaches us, that every object and event is under the particular providence of God ; that whatever happens will be subservient to a wise and benevolent purpose ; and that, in every change of circumstances, the good man will be safe and happy.

These truths are highly practical. I doubt not, my brethren, that many of you feel and daily act under their influence. Infinitely happy would it be, if this were the case with all of us. These truths are exceedingly useful in seasons of difficulty, distress, and trial. I know not therefore, how I can better discharge the duty, which, on this occasion, devolves upon me, than by making them the subject of your reflections. They are indeed among the most familiar

truths of religion : and this is one of the distinguishing blessings of revelation, that it has diffused the knowledge of them among every class in society ; so that the humble and illiterate christian knows more of the divine character and providence, and possesses far higher principles of conduct, than the heathen philosopher. But, however familiar they may be, by serious and virtuous minds, they will ever be contemplated with fresh interest ; and they cannot be too frequently contemplated, to yield that peace to our hearts, which they are capable of affording, and that direction to our conduct, to which they are entitled by their importance.

I. We infer from the text the universal providence of God. This is one of the plainest truths of natural religion ; and it is inscribed in the brightest characters on the page of divine revelation. I will suggest a few of the arguments upon which the belief of this doctrine is grounded, with a view of furnishing topics for your private meditation, rather than of entering upon the discussion of so comprehensive a subject.

1. The least reflection must convince us, that this earth and the celestial system around us, whose appearances and revolutions we have reduced to minute calculation, are not the production of what we call chance or accident ; or what the ancients denominated fate. From the nature of matter, we know,

that it could not have produced itself; from many facts and observations, we learn, that it has not existed forever. It must therefore have had a creator. We have only then, in the next place, to think a moment of the extent and construction of the universe, as far as it appears to our naked observation, much more as viewed with the eye of philosophy, to be satisfied, that the Creator is possessed of wisdom and power, greater than we can possibly conceive, and to us consequently in every respect infinite.

From a similar survey of the works of nature, we may deduce an inference in favour of the goodness of the Creator. The world, in which we live, is certainly not the production of a malevolent being: for as we have seen, the power of the Creator was adequate to any effect; misery, in such case, would have undeniably predominated over the earth. There would have been neither fragrance, nor harmony, nor beauty in nature. Every sky had been dark; every field had been barren; the ocean had exhibited nothing but the fury and horrors of the storm; the wind had borne nothing but disease and death in its course; every exertion of the intellect had been agony; every sense had been but a channel of torture to the mind; above all, the bow of the divine mercy had never been seen in the heavens, and religion had never shed its peace and its hope upon the soul:

But the most that has been done, even by those persons, who think the worst of the world, is not to

prove, hardly to assert, that there is an excess of misery ; but only to question, whether happiness actually predominate in the earth. With me, however, there is not, with no one, should I think, there could be a question on this subject. When I consider the few instances of sickness, deformity, and misery, which appear in the world, compared with those of health, soundness, and enjoyment, and the compensation, which is provided in many of these cases ; when I consider the innumerable sources of felicity, with which man is furnished, his sensual, intellectual, moral, and religious capacities ; when I consider the myriads, in number and variety, of living existences, which people the earth, the air, the sea ; which inhabit every particle of our blood, which feast on every leaf, which riot on every breeze ; all, as far as we can learn from observation and analogy, possessing the capacity and the means of happiness, full of pleasure as they are full of activity ; I cannot for a moment doubt, that felicity predominates in nature ; and I cannot but acknowledge the unutterable and the unbounded goodness of the Deity.

We have then, my brethren, discovered an author of nature, who is infinitely powerful, wise, and good. We have learnt, that this world is the production of his power, wisdom, and benevolence ; and consequently, we must believe, that his designs in the creation were worthy of his sublime and venerable attributes. Can we then suppose, that he has relinquished

all concern for the work of his hands?—that he remains an indifferent spectator of its condition and progress? Such inferences would be irrational and impious. We must then conclude, that the world ever has been, that it still is, and that it ever will remain, an object of his affectionate care.

2. Another argument for the providence of God, equally conclusive with that which has been offered, may be drawn from the moral character of the Deity. From the moral powers of man, we infer the moral character of the Creator. He that planted the ear shall he not hear? he that formed the eye shall he not see? The clear and immutable distinction between truth and falsehood, the faculty of conscience, the unalienable and great rewards of virtue, and the shame, ruin, and the miseries of vice, which are almost invariably consequent upon the practice of the one and the other, even in the present life, are circumstances, which, together with many others, show that man is under a moral government; and, taken in connexion with the probable presumption of a future state from the light of nature, hardly afford room for doubt, that under this constitution, virtue will terminate in the happiness, and vice in the degradation and misery of such as practise it. But every notion of the moral government of God implies his constant superintendence; implies, that he is ever present, to observe the characters and actions of men; to adjust the circum-

stances of their condition ; to secure to those, who perform his will, the rewards which, under such a government were to be expected ; and to bring upon the wicked those evils, which they have deserved, and the infliction of which, the purposes of such a government seem indispensably to demand.

Many other arguments might be adduced, but I think, that these two, drawn from the natural and moral attributes of the Deity, as they are discoverable by the light of nature, are sufficient to show, that the doctrine of a divine providence is reasonable and entitled to our belief. “ Nothing,” says his biographer, “ seemed to Sir Isaac Newton, the prince of philosophers, more unaccountable, than to exclude the Deity *only* out of the universe.” “ The philosopher,” says the same writer, “ who overlooks the traces of an all-governing Deity in nature, contenting himself with the appearances of the material universe only, and the mechanical laws of motion, neglects what is most excellent, and prefers what is imperfect to what is supremely perfect, finitude to infinity, what is narrow and weak to what is unlimited and almighty, and what is perishing to what endures forever.”*

3. But in whatever difficulties or obscurity, to the natural philosopher, the doctrine of a particular providence may seem involved ; to the christian philosopher, there is no deficiency of light, and no room for

* Maclaurin, quoted by Price. Diss. p. 52.

doubt. To him, the very fact of a revelation is sufficient proof of it ; still more, the successive interpositions of heaven in the concerns of mankind, of which the scriptures exhibit an affecting account. To his view are unfolded the different steps in a most interesting and intimate intercourse between God and man. To him, God is represented as over all, in all, and through all things.^b No part of creation is uninhabited by his presence ; no event is concealed from his knowledge ; no object is remote from his care. The minute and the vast, the weak and the powerful, the peasant and the monarch, the infant and the philosopher, the little insect of the day, sporting on the summer's sun-beam, and the seraph, who wings his way, through an eternal year, in the effulgence of God's presence, every earthly and every celestial existence, are equally the productions of his power, and the objects of his constant and paternal care. The thunder is his voice, the winds his chariot, and the terrific lightning but the " shining of his glittering spear."^c He is present as much in the fall of a sparrow as in the destruction of an empire, in the rolling of a pebble as in the revolutions of a planet. As in the army of heaven, so he rules among the inhabitants of the earth ;^d as in the natural, so in the moral world, are his presence and providence felt. Every nation, every family, every individual, is the object of his attention. Moral beings must be so in a pecu-

^bRom. xi. 36. Eph. iv. 6. ^cHabak. iii. 11. ^dDan. iv. 35.

liar sense, for vice is his abhorrence, and virtue is his delight. The circumstances then of our situation, and the moral influences, to which we are exposed, are ever observed by him ; the trials, the changes, the blessings and the calamities which befall us, befall us by his permission, and are ever under his direction. Such appear to be the explicit representations of the scriptures. They are interesting, and, like every thing which relates to the Deity, they are vast and sublime. I do not cite the numerous passages, which express them, because I am persuaded they are familiar to your minds. Such then is the great Being, under whose government we live ; under whose superintendency all things on earth, in heaven, and throughout the universe, proceed.

II. That we are not able to comprehend the manner, in which this providence is exercised, cannot be an objection to the reception of a doctrine so plainly revealed, and which, from its very nature, must be infinitely beyond the grasp of the human understanding. Things are great or small by comparison. When we consider the arts, inventions and acquisitions, which are in possession of the human mind, we dwell with fond admiration upon the extent of our powers ; but when, on the other hand, we reflect, how little we know in comparison of what is to be known, we shall see sufficient reason to be humble, and perceive that the wisdom of man is folly in the

sight of God. When we attempt to penetrate the secrets of matter, or the complex operations of intellect, we are baffled at every step by the imbecility and deficiency of our powers. It is utterly beyond our capacity to comprehend the manner, in which an ear of corn, a blade of grass, or a leaf is produced; in which the growth of any part of our bodies is carried on; to understand the production and arrangement of our thoughts; the mysterious connexion of spirit and matter; or that invisible energy, by which the motions of the body are excited and controlled at the pleasure of the mind. How much less are we able to comprehend that all-pervading spirit, which first gave form to matter, and intelligence and activity to mind; which established and controls the laws and operations of universal nature. But, in whatever obscurity, the manner, in which a divine providence is carried on, may be involved, yet the doctrine is sufficiently explained for every practical purpose;—first, to guard us against an abuse to which it is otherwise liable; secondly, to give all that assistance and encouragement to the practice of virtue, which it is capable of yielding.

1. The abuse to which this doctrine is liable, and that, from which it has actually suffered, is, that we should suppose, that it deprives us of our moral agency; that, under such a providence, we are no longer free, consequently are no longer accountable, and

therefore, that there is neither vice nor virtue in the world, men become mere machines, and morality is not predicable of any of their actions. But we have a sufficient security against so hurtful an inference.

It is not indeed possible for us, with the foreknowledge of God, which his providence implies, to reconcile the freedom of man, or the contingency of human actions. This is a problem too difficult for us to solve. The authority of the great Locke should in this case be considered as decisive. "I freely own," says he, "the weakness of my understanding; that though it be unquestionable, that there is omnipotence and omniscience in God our maker, and I cannot have a clearer perception of any thing, than that I am free; yet I cannot make freedom in man consistent with omnipotence and omniscience in God, though I am as fully persuaded of both as of any truths I most firmly assent to. And therefore I have long since given off the consideration of that question, resolving all into this short conclusion, that, if it be possible for God to make a free agent, then man is free, though I see not the way of it."* But it is sufficient for us to know, that the doctrine of the foreknowledge and providence of God, and of freedom in man, stand upon the same authority; that they are both explicitly taught and recognised in the scriptures; are consequently both to be received; and we are no more at liberty to give up

* Works, fol. vol. iii. p. 509.

the one than the other. It is sufficient for us to be conscious that we are free; to be unable, whatever we think of ourselves, to regard the conduct of others as wholly unsusceptible of praise or blame; that we are not willing, when they have injured us, to take necessity as a satisfactory apology for their behaviour:—but, above all, it is sufficient for us to reflect, that those dispensations of providence, whose history is taught us, are all addressed to us as free beings; and that, throughout the scriptures, we are instructed, urged, intreated, and threatened in regard to our duty, which would be nothing short of insult and mockery to those, who were altogether necessary and involuntary agents. Particular and intimate then as the providence of God over the world may be, it must be perfectly compatible with the moral freedom of man. God is not therefore the author of sin: men are accountable for every sentiment which they nourish and every action which they perform, and shall be rewarded according to the deeds done in the body, whether they be good or evil.

2. In the next place, the doctrine of a divine providence, though it be not free from difficulties, is yet sufficiently explained, to afford every possible motive and aid to the practice of virtue.

Under such a providence we cannot account for the existence or the permission of moral evil, which scatters desolation and wretchedness among the family of God; but, under such a providence, we cannot

doubt of the final security, felicity, and triumphs of virtue. The doctrine of the text is entirely satisfactory on this momentous subject. "We know that all things work together for good to them that love God." What else does this teach us, but that health and sickness, prosperity and adversity, are the beneficent messengers of a gracious parent to his obedient children? What else does it teach us, but that even the moral evils of which we complain, the folly, the corruption, and the vices of mankind, from which arise so much misery and distress in the earth, will, under the perfect government of the Deity, be rendered subservient to his benevolent purposes; and contribute, with events of a different description, to the improvement and felicity of his virtuous offspring? Though it be impossible for us to conceive how these effects may be produced, yet we know that the wisdom of the Deity is adequate to contrive, and his power to apply the means of their accomplishment. He can bring light out of darkness and good out of evil. Surely the wrath of man shall praise him;^f and, let it touch the pious heart with ecstasy, all things shall work together for good to them that love God.

Shall we then, my brethren, do evil that good may come? God forbid. Be not deceived; evil communications corrupt good principles.^g We must all

^f Ps. lxxvi. 10.

^g I. Cor. xv. 33.

stand before the judgment seat of Christ to receive the just recompence of our conduct,^b in that solemn hour, when the heart and character shall be stripped of every disguise ; when no plea shall be admitted in arrest of judgment but the plea of repentance ; no claim shall be allowed to the divine favour but the claim of virtue. The miseries and evils from which the wicked suffer in this life, and which, through their neglect, contribute in no respect to their amendment or reformation, will only aggravate their guilt and increase the tribulation, the horror, and the anguish of their future destiny. But it is not so with the righteous, for it shall be well with him.ⁱ Every evil and trial in which he is here involved, is but a step in his progress towards heaven, and shall contribute to augment his future felicity. He, who has God for his friend, must be safe. He, who has God for his friend, must be happy.

III. Let us be persuaded then, my brethren, by every thing that is dear and valuable in our existence, to flee from the wrath, which hangs over the vicious and impenitent, and seize, with trembling eagerness, the blessed assurance of divine protection and favour, which is held out to the righteous.

Our whole duty is comprehended in two directions ; to forsake our sins, and to practise virtue. Let us search and try our ways, and turn unto the

^b 2Cor. v. 10.

ⁱ Isa. iii. 10.

Lord.^k Let this day, which we devote to an awful and interesting service of religion, witness the ardour and sincerity of our repentance. We have come up hither to humble ourselves before God, because of the judgments, with which he is pleased to visit us ; let us truly repent of those sins, which have contributed to bring them upon us. Let us rigidly examine, and resolutely renounce the sins of our tempers, our hearts, and our conduct. While we stand here praying before God, let us look forward to the hour when we shall stand in the immediate presence of our judge ; when every guilty action, or sentiment, or thought, which is unrepented of, shall be exhibited to us and to the world in all its deformity, and rend with agony the hardest heart. Let this day constitute a new era in our lives ; a day, from which we date the subjugation of our evil passions to the dominion of reason and religion, and the anxious consecration of ourselves to the service of our Maker. Let us, in a word, become good men and good christians.

In these days of peculiar distress and trial, our country and the world, liberty, virtue, and religion have most powerful demands on us. Subduing therefore with anxious solicitude those lusts and passions from whence vice and misery spring, and rising superiour to all sordid and base sentiments, and to all the paltry interests of place or of party, let us conse-

^k Lam. iii. 40.

crate, with undeviating firmness and incessant activity, our time and talents to the prosperity and happiness of our country; constantly exerting ourselves to meet the crisis with the magnanimity, which it demands; remembering the example and copying the sublime virtues of that galaxy of christian patriots, whose names shall ever be music to the ear of the philanthropist; who led our country from oppression to independence and glory; who, amidst the tempest and uproar of war, stood unmoved, with hearts fixed upon God; and, while darkness covered the political heavens, and the thunders were bursting on every side, seized the vivid shafts, aimed at the liberties of their country, and conducted them harmless to the ground.

But while we are not unmindful of the claims of our native country, let us not forget that paramount to all others are the claims of God upon our service. Much as we may love the land which gave us birth, yet patriotism is in some degree a selfish passion. Though born for our country, we must not forget that we were born likewise for the world; though designed to be the benefactors of our nation, we were designed likewise, in a still higher sense, to be the servants of God. Nor are these interests incompatible with each other. They perfectly coalesce, and he, who is most devoted to God is the most effectual benefactor to mankind. Much then as we may desire the happiness and prosperity of our native

land, let this desire and the efforts which spring from it, be regulated by reason, justice, and piety.

Whatever accidental distinctions may take place among men, arising from situation, language, habits, or character, they are equally our brethren, the children of the same parent, the heirs of the same immortality. Though in case of favour or aid, our efforts must have a definite object, and a choice must be made of those, to whom our influence may be most effectually extended, yet we cannot be justified, for the slightest violation towards any, of the great law of christian equity and love. Let our conduct therefore be always governed by the laws of God. Let us not indeed expel from our hearts the tender and interesting sentiments of natural affection, friendship and patriotism ; but let us cherish and increase them, and let them animate and invigorate our exertions. At the same time, let them ever be subordinate to the great duty of general benevolence ; and let us act with a supreme reference to the advancement of truth, righteousness, and peace, of rational liberty, of sound virtue, and of genuine religion.

Every individual, whatever be his situation in life, has talents, which may contribute in some degree to these ends. Let him call them into exercise, and let them be discreetly and constantly applied. Let a man first reform and improve himself ; let him apply his efforts next to the reformation and virtue of his children, his family, and his neighbourhood ; let him

encourage and strengthen the patriotick, benevolent, and pious efforts of others by every means in his power; and exerting himself thus, in the sphere in which his influence is felt, his labours will not be without success, nor without reward.

Individual repentance, reformation, and virtue are thus necessary to constitute national repentance, reformation, and virtue. It is absurd to talk of the latter without the former. Let the former be effected and the latter will follow of course. This, under the blessing of a divine providence, will contribute to deliver us from the calamities and distresses, which we suffer, and to avert the still greater evils, which threaten us. But, if we are not able to accomplish their removal, if we must drain this bitter cup, yet if we become good men and good christians, we have nothing to fear; our record is on high¹ and our interests are safe. Virtue will give a new complexion to the dark scenes of human life; it will convert vice and misery into the instruments of improvement and felicity.

The good man, while he looks abroad into society, beholds wickedness triumphant. He hears the noise of the trumpet, and the clangour of arms. He sees angry and guilty nations, rising in their might and rushing into violent and awful collision. He witnesses all the fury and horrors of vice, bursting forth like a torrent, overwhelming the abodes of do-

¹ Job. xvi. 19.

mestick peace, the monuments of art, the cottage, the palace and the temple, and burying, in undistinguished ruin, the supports of human grandeur, glory, and happiness.

.....For with a frown
 Revenge impatient rose :
 He threw his blood-stained sword in thunder down
 And, with a withering look,
 The war-denouncing trumpet took,
 And blew a blast so loud and dread,
 Were ne'er prophetick sounds so full of woe ;
 And ever and anon he beat
 The doubling drum, with furious heat,
 And though sometimes, each dreary pause between,
 Dejected pity at his side,
 Her soul subduing voice applied,
 Yet still he kept his wild unaltered mien,
 While each strained ball of sight seem'd bursting from his head.*

But let not the good man be dismayed. He shall stand, like some mighty cliff, which lifts its head above the sea ; the angry waves may lash its base, and the tempest roll down its sides, but “ an eternal sunshine settles on its head.”† He has nothing to fear ; he beholds an almighty arm moving and directing the vast and complicated operations of universal nature ; and when the final storm rushes on, when the earth shall burst asunder, when in the figurative and prophetick language of the apostle, the heavens shall pass away with a great noise,

* Collins.

† As some tall cliff that lifts its awful form, &c.—*Goldsmith*.

the elements melt with fervent heat,^m and the world is sinking beneath him, the hand of providence shall seize him, and convey him to the realms of peace, of light, and of glory.

Let us cling therefore, my brethren, to this transporting doctrine. By lives of virtue and piety, for nothing else can effect it, let us assure ourselves in every condition of the protection and favour of that infinite and adorable Being, with whom there is not the shadow of change,ⁿ at whose disposal are empires and worlds,^o who inhabits eternity,^p and who is over all, in all, and through all things, blessed forever.^q

^m 2 Pet. iii. 10.

^p Isaiah lvii. 15.

ⁿ Jas. i. 17.

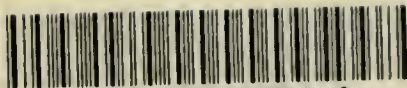
^q Rom. ix. 5.

^o Job xii. 23.

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