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Bellows, Henry Whitney

The sovereignty and
fatherhood of God.



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THE
SOVEREIGNTY AND FATHERHOOD OF GOD;

A DISCOURSE,

PREACHED, DURING HIS VISIT TO ENGLAND,

BY THE

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PUBLISHED BY REQUEST.

347 256
3. 38

LONDON:

EDWARD T. WHITFIELD, 178, STRAND.

1868.

LONDON :
PRINTED BY C. GREEN AND SON, 178, STRAND.

DEDICATED
TO THE
CONGREGATIONS AND HOMES AND HEARTS
WHOSE HOSPITALITY
I HAVE ENJOYED IN ENGLAND.

HENRY W. BELLOWNS.



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A DISCOURSE.

LUKE xxii. 42 :

“NOT MY WILL, BUT THINE, BE DONE.”

IN the Lord's Prayer, the permanent liturgy of the Christian Church, no clause is more pregnant than that which says, “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” At first view, nothing could seem more superfluous than a prayer addressed to a supreme and irresistible Monarch, asking that His own will, which is certain to rule in His dominions, may be done. But when we look a little further, and consider how much is done in the world we occupy which we cannot piously ascribe to the will of a good and holy Being, we feel that, without supposing any infringement of the Divine attributes, we must recognize a permitted resistance to God's will, which constitutes the sin and causes the misery of human life. To permit is not to approve, and is

not necessarily to become a party to wrong. I see another man's child doing that which I know to be injurious to him, and which I have the physical strength to prevent; yet I do not consider myself responsible for his conduct, though I do not interfere with it. For I could not interfere, without endangering the rights which belong to the child's own parents. In like manner, God is not responsible for our sins, because He might prevent them, and does not; for He could not prevent them without invading the rights He has given us as free and responsible beings. God's will, His supreme and eternal will, was done in making us free. He chose that, with all its possible consequences, as His divinest will. But to make those consequences, which are dependent exclusively on our wills, the result of His will, is to confound matters which conscience and the Bible keep separate.

To understand this subject clearly, we must carefully distinguish between the rule of God as a Sovereign, and the design of God as a Father; in other words, between God's will considered as His decree, and considered as His desire. The will of God as a Sovereign is always done. It is His undeniable will, not merely that physical and meta-physical laws should be obeyed, but that the laws of human freedom and personal responsibility should

be rigidly carried out in all their consequences. Nor have we any reason to suppose that the perturbations and conflicts introduced into the moral world by the element of free will, can by the conditions of the case extend beyond a certain limit,—a limit corresponding in the moral world to the bounds of disorder fixed for the irregularities and disturbances which belong to the unmoral or material universe.

It is a commonplace of pulpit rhetoric, I know, to contrast the order of nature with the disorder of humanity; the perfection of the mechanism of the outward world with the imperfection of the workings of the inner world. But the truth is, they are counterparts of each other. There is the same conflict of laws, the same number of irregularities, mishaps and exceptions, in the natural as in the moral world; in the kingdom in which God rules without human resistance, as in the kingdom in which the human will is a permitted and an important element. The heavens are covered with the wreck of ancient systems of worlds; the earth is full of dislocations and scars which mighty internal convulsions have left. The strata of the world's crust are the sepulchres of perished orders of life, victims of sudden and violent changes in the course of nature. The tribes of animals and insects prey

upon each other's existence. There is not a vice in humanity which is not personated by a whole class of brute creatures; gluttony, lust, pride, cunning, ferocity, tyranny,—each having its characteristic representative in the animal kingdom, whose voices are all echoed by the elements of the inanimate world with still more tremendous syllables. The sea roars more fearfully than a den of lions; the winds are more pitiless than the vulture and tiger; the earthquake shakes, the volcano flames, the winter blasts, the sun smites, the pestilence smothers, the marsh poisons. Of the myriads of fish spawned on the shallows, not a millionth part reaches its growth in the sea. Of the innumerable blossoms of spring, how insignificant a proportion turn to the fruit they promised! There is an immense waste in nature; a perpetual defeat in details; a most obvious liability to what we call accident; a fearful struggle of forces ending in ruin to the weaker power, be it animate or inanimate. It is plain enough that the God of nature does not allow His creation to stop because the continuance of it causes pain and involves violence, risk, interference and conflict of parts. Were the will of the Creator that dainty will which bears with no imperfection, and allows nothing attended with noise or confusion—were God a workman who must make no chips—the outward universe would

necessarily be a very different thing from what we see it to be. Nor does it answer to say that the fall of man produced the discord and confusion of nature; for geology discloses the same disorder, billions of years before he was created, and the depths of space exhibit worlds that betray like imperfection where man's conduct was never felt.

No, my brethren, while we cannot believe God to be the Author of confusion in the material world —seeing that harmony and perfection are the rule; but disorder and imperfection the exception—we perceive that the disorder and imperfection incidental to His plan do not deter Him from carrying it out; and we see, still further, that this disorder and imperfection have their providential limits which they can never exceed. The stability of the physical universe is constantly threatened by the perturbations which the heavenly bodies cause in each other's orbits; but modern astronomy has discovered that these disturbances can proceed only to a certain extent, when they are corrected by other laws. Disorder has its laws and limitations precisely as order has. Thus the various species of animals and plants may within certain limits mingle together and modify each other's types; but they come against an impassable wall of law in a few removes, and lose the power of reproduction. The

wonder in nature is that, with so much violence, disruption and accident, there should be such grand stability; and that amid carnage, waste and storm, there should be such overruling affluence, economy and peace. No two springs, no two summers or autumns, are alike; but seed-time and harvest do not fail. Mildew, hail, wind and heat, may blast the corn in a thousand fields; but wheat survives every accident, and bread is almost equally plentiful at all seasons. Indeed, a very slight difference in the total annual yield of corn makes all the contrast between what we name scarcity and what we name abundance. In short, vivid as the features of change, uncertainty and reckless force are in outward nature, the vividness is like the changing expression of a beautiful countenance in a transport of momentary suffering. The face of nature continues mild, kind and generous, as its permanent and characteristic expression.

God wills order, and permits disorder, in the outward universe. The disorder comes of the limitations of matter, as the painter's ideal is hindered by the stubbornness of his pigments and his handling, or the musician's song by the imperfections of his instrument. I am not so bold as to say that disorder, excess and defeat in nature may not have final causes, which would shew them to be in perfect harmony

with a law grander than any we can now fathom. They may be designed to illustrate moral disorders ; just as the absurd or hateful habits of animals may be intended to hold a mirror up to human vices. But all we can now clearly see is, that nature, over which God reigns supreme, like humanity, over which He is not supposed to reign without the mediation of free will, has exceptions, failures, frictions and flaws, in her constitution.

If we turn now to the moral world, we see that there too, notwithstanding the freedom of the human will, which produces the sins and miseries we deplore, God's will is substantially done ; that He has not created a being whose powers of mischief are unlimited ; nor failed to frame a balance-wheel of moral order out of the very conflict of free wills. Every man's freedom of action is limited by the freedom of all other men. Moreover, though the will of man is free, he is a bondman to his nature. He cannot but be hungry ; he cannot but love or hate, hope and fear, look forward and backward, perceive according to the laws of his intelligence, feel according to the laws of his affections, judge according to the laws of his conscience. His domain of freedom, most important as it is, is hedged in by law on every side. In the end there is so much more force of law than of freedom, that the destiny of races,

nations and humanity, is far more determined by divine compulsion than effected by human caprice. The progress of the world, the growth of civilization, the triumph of right and truth, are provided for by law, the law of God's good providence in our nature and circumstances. What each individual man shall do or be, is a matter left, to a very considerable and most responsible extent, to his own will. He cannot transcend the limits of his constitution, overleap his own faculties, or escape the influences of his birth, education and lot; but within these limits he is his own master, responsible for the use of his talents, the improvement of his opportunities, and the command of his nature. His will is free, though his nature and lot are not. He is free to do well or ill with his nature and lot, to use or abuse them, to make the most and the best of himself and his circumstances, or the least and the worst. This freedom, existing to the same degree in all other men, so far neutralizes itself in a wide generalization, as to leave the fate of society very little at the mercy of any human will. Society advances according to the laws of human nature, which embody God's purpose; not according to the caprices of human wills, which by a providential arrangement in the long run essentially counteract and balance each other.

Nothing can be more opposed to the truth of things, or to a becoming sense of God's sovereignty, than the idea that the Divine will is ever successfully thwarted or withheld. Chaos is not lawless in His sight. God's will is done, in the material universe, by comets that seem to dash madly from their spheres as well as by planets that roll steadily in their orbits ; and, in the moral universe, by sinners as truly as by saints. He makes the winds and the lightnings his messengers, rides on the whirlwind, and directs the storm ; causes the wrath of man to praise Him, and out of moral evil still educes good. It is as much His will that fire shall burn, as that water shall quench ; that frost shall blight, as sunshine ripen ; that sickness shall weaken, as that health shall strengthen ; that hatred shall sour, as that love shall sweeten the soul ; that misery shall follow disobedience, as that happiness shall succeed dutifulness. The law of God is vindicated and upheld in the fate of the wicked, as much as in the fortune of the good. Hell itself is as much under law as Heaven. It is in this sense, and in this sense only, that “whatever is, is right.”

Here, then, comes into view the grand, the all-important distinction between God's sovereignty and His paternity. God's will is often done, when God's wish is thoroughly disappointed. The mo-

narch who administers his kingdom with impartial and irresistible justice, rewarding the faithful and punishing the treacherous, though his royalty be as perfectly maintained in the pangs of the guilty as in the prosperity of the obedient, yet cannot be supposed indifferent to everything but the mere maintenance of his kingly will. If he be a good sovereign, he desires the reformation, and not simply the correction, of the disloyal. He longs to see the happiness of all his subjects; and their conformity to the conditions on which happiness depends, is nearer to his heart than their mere subordination to his crown. So, God's sovereign law is less than His fatherly love. His decree is, and always must be, perfectly executed. That decree enacts that law, equitable, penal law, shall reign throughout the universe; and it does so reign, in hell as in heaven. His desire is, however, that His subjects may also be His children, obedient because loving to obey; and certainly, in this higher sense, the will of God is not done on earth as it is in heaven.

The best tribute of our obedience cannot be forced; it owes all its value to its spontaneousness, to the amount of heart there is in it. An earthly father is also, to some extent, a ruler and a judge in his family. He may compel his children, by his authority, to obey him; can he compel them to love

him, by anything less than the outpouring of his affections towards them? He can use only a moral compulsion which leaves its subjects perfectly free. Our Lord's prayer, "Thy will be done," is a prayer, not to God as Sovereign of the universe, but to "Our Father which art in heaven." The fulfilment of this our Father's will, is by its very nature dependent on our consent; it waits on our choice; it is crossed and hindered by our perversity. For our Father's will is, that we shall freely and from the heart love what He loves, do what He does, make His will our own, and so become one with Him, in conduct and affection.

There is, then, a province within which Divine compulsion, sovereignty, necessity, cannot enter. It is true, the limits of this province from which God jealously excludes His arbitrary rule, are small, and no revolt within it can in the least endanger His government. But, however small to Him, it is the moral universe to us. And to God himself it has that near and relative importance, which the monarch's domestic interests bear to his public concerns. Let a ruler's throne be ever so firm, his foreign relations ever so satisfactory, his subjects ever so loyal; but let his own children be ungrateful and careless of his love; and not the undimmed

glory of his crown will save him from the misery which sobs,

“ How sharper than a serpent’s tooth it is,
To have a thankless child !”

Let your son be ill, or your wife be false, and what are your argosies and dividends, your commercial position and social repute, as you sit broken-hearted at your desolate hearth ?

God, my brethren, is a moral Being ; a holy, a righteous, a loving Father, as well as an eternal and irresistible Sovereign. To understand Him, or our relations to Him, we must know Him in both His characters ; and while we obey Him as Law-giver and Ruler, we must love Him as Father and Friend. It is for our comfort and our humility, as well as for His honour and glory, to recognize the unassailable might of His sovereignty. We must not permit disorders in the physical or moral universe to hide from us the completeness and perfection of His sway. “ Thus far, and no further,” he says to the stormy waves of the sea, and to the tumults of the people. The bounds of disorder are strictly prescribed in the realm of matter and in the rational world. His ark rides safely on the deluge of water and of sin, and Ararat appears above the waves. Yet while to all eternity His throne is steadfast, His

paternal heart may be wrung, and our filial affections squandered, perverted and spoiled, because we fail to know, to obey and to love God in His most personal, holy and lovely relation to us as the Father of our spirits.

Our Father's will, my brethren, is to be honoured in two ways ; it is to be done, and it is to be suffered. Filial duty lies in submission and in obedience ; in passive acquiescence and in active fulfilment. Our different natures will furnish each of us with our peculiar difficulties ; some finding submission, and some obedience, the severer cross. Our first care, in every case, must be to know what the will of the Father is. In a general way, that may be learned by contemplating the universal ongoing of nature and life as the grand expression of God's will, and so bowing ourselves down in awe and wonder and praise before the great God of nature, and of rational and moral existence. To be reconciled to the universe as God's world, and to existence as His gift, independently of our special lot and relations, is our first step, not indeed practically, but logically ; for practically it is often our last step. More directly, the will of God is revealed to us in our moral nature ; in that Reason which includes the conscience, and is the image and transcript of the Divine will. That Reason, my brethren, we call ours ; but it is

not ours; it belongs to no man, but to all men; and to all men only as they are contained in or partakers of the Divine nature. That pure and holy light is impersonal. It has none of the errors of passion and inclination. When it is obscure, it is only that we fail to see, not that it fails to shine. When it flickers, it is only that we tremble, not that it flares. That Divine presence in our souls, God in us, is the authorized, infallible teacher of the Divine will. We indeed, as mere rational and moral persons, are fallible. But Reason is infallible. Like the unrusting gold of an ancient coin, on which the dust of ages has been heaped,—its die as clear, its motto as legible, as the day it fell from the mint,—Reason, the dimless, changeless mind of God, lies at the bottom of the human soul. To clear away the obstructions which unawakened powers of consciousness, habits of inattention, undisciplined moral senses, have interposed between ourselves and our inmost souls, our selfish personality and our impersonal nature, is the true business of moral education. Nay, this is the very office which Christ came to perform. Reason, the Eternal Word, the Logos, always buried in our nature, once incarnate in Christ; God sent to teach us by an external manifestation of it what humanity is when restored to itself. To find ourselves is the ultimate cause of coming to Christ.

When we come to him, he refers us back to "the light which lighteth every man that cometh into the world," to Reason, to God in us; and by his precepts, his example, his spirit, helps us to disentomb and revive, and set in the glory of a resurrection, our own God-given, God-inspired consciences.

Now, when we have found the Divine law and will, we find another law in our members, warring against the law of our mind. It is not merely the law of our animal nature as opposed to our intellectual, but our self-will, as antagonistic to the impersonal will, the will of God. In this wilfulness, as distinguished from a will submitted and conformed to the Divine will, lies the virus, the malignity, the peril of an irreligious and unchristian soul. Sin is not merely the violation of a law; it is the spirit of rebellion, of self-assertion. If we could make God's will our own, and then declare our independence of God, though we did thereafter precisely what He would have us do, yet, doing it with a heart of self-will, we should carry the worst poison of disobedience into our very virtues.

Have you not seen that hateful pride in natures too grand and generous to stoop to vice or folly? Have you not known otherwise blameless and faultless souls, in which you felt that the very essence of goodness and piety was still wanting? How

many a rigid moralist, how many a character of untarnished honour, has, in the middle of life, found that the battle it supposed won (and it was won, over the flesh and the world) had to be fought again, with a deadlier strife; fought with itself, its own deep egotism, its rebellious will, its self-reliant temper! We talk of the pride of reason. It is the pride of self-assertion we mean. Reason has no pride; she is the humble daughter of God. But we may well talk of, and fear and disown, the pride of self; for it is the ruin of a fearful portion of those few who might not vainly boast in their understandings. To bow the understanding, the heart, the will, before God, and do what He bids, because He bids it, not because we choose it; to bear what He sends, because He sends it, not because we cannot escape it,—this is the spirit and essence of Christian duty and submission.

Remember that this is not the spirit of fear, or the spirit of servility; for there is nothing arbitrary and nothing arrogant in the Divine will. We cannot help revering the will of God, whether we do it or not. But we cannot truly make the will of God our own, without deliberately striking that pirate flag of spiritual independence which we are so prone to carry; or, if we have not carried that but merely sailed our ship uncoloured, without solemnly raising

the flag of allegiance to God. You may try to evade this great act of self-surrender, this solemn service of homage to your Maker; you may substitute for it a good life, a virtuous habit, a sound creed, a philanthropic career. These are all fitting and glorious things, but they will not take the place of a God-subdued will. The one critical thing in a religious life lies just here; the one great point unmade; the one sin, in committing which we are guilty of all. Rebellion—smothered, disguised, latent, it may be, but real, and therefore deadly—is our great spiritual offence.

I was not long since besought by a deeply thoughtful and greatly gifted man of the world to tell him, in the fewest words, wherein the essence of Religion consisted. “Strip it,” said he, “of all its accidents; pare away its superfluities; condense it; reduce it to its last term; give its inmost essence; let there not be a syllable in the definition that could be spared.” I paused; considered; questioned heaven and earth, my own soul, the souls I had known and revered, the word of God, the mind of Christ—all in a rapid survey, as when a drowning man reviews his life in the few seconds of his swift-fading consciousness,—and then answered, “Thy will, not mine, be done!” He listened reverently; pondered, and slowly said—“There are two super-

fluous words in that summary. Say, ‘Thy will be done,’ and then I accept it gladly as the fundamental creed, the last analysis of religious faith.” “Not for the world,” I rejoined, “can I leave out the words which you declare add nothing to the sense; they are the very essence and marrow of the statement!”

Science, as she surveys the glorious ways of the Creator, feeling the irresistible wealth of His power, exclaims, in her consciousness of the futility of all opposition, and in the pardonable pride of one who reads the thoughts of the Creator in His works, “Thy will be done!” Philosophy, as she sits apart and contemplates the movements of the universe, finding that she needs God, the primum mobile, the intelligent mainspring of the half conscious machine, serenely says, “Thy will be done!” Poetry, as she soars above the dust and clamour of this work-day world, from her calm height beholding the insignificance of human concerns—how little the dust we raise clogs the wheels of destiny, or the noise we make untunes the spheres—exclaims in ecstasy, “Thy will be done!” History, as she tells over the rise and fall of empires, the flux and reflux of civilization, the ebb and flow of the great tidal passions of humanity—with a face solemn and remorseless as the Sphinx looking across the deserts where Thebes

and Alexandria once were, pronounces, “Thy will be done!”

“Thy will be done!” A will that shall be done, that must be done; done in spite of and in scorn of human wishes; done in the ruin of mortal hopes and the wreck of social systems; done by brute force; done by the sands and sirocco of the desert, and the tooth of pitiless time; done alike in the microscopic world of infusorial life, and in the vast gulfs of nebulous Orion! What have we to do with such a Will, except to stand and wonder at it? What matters it, whether we oppose or obey it? What more can our service do for it, than our resistance can do against it? What cares such a Will for us, less than the small dust of the balance as we are? Science, Philosophy, Poetry, History, may say for ever, “Thy will be done,” and not one impulse of duty, one consolation for sorrow, one hint for self-discipline, one ray of Christian sentiment, break from the stony fatalism of that grand, icy creed. But when religion, the religion of the Gospel, amends them thus—“Thy will, not mine, be done,” it is as when light broke upon the weltering chaos of creation, as when Adam woke in Eden and made it a Paradise by occupying it with a human soul!

“Thy will, not mine, be done!” What a glorious dignity for us, when our wills are placed over

against the Divine will, as being deeply significant and important to God! "Thy will, not mine, be done!" What an explosion of fatalism, when God's will thus waits on ours! How personal, direct, affecting, the relation of the individual soul to its Father, when it has leave to choose between its own will and God's will, and is besought freely to surrender its own to the Father's wisdom! How disciplinary, pregnant with moral life, full of spiritual humility and deliverance, are the words which, in praying that God's will may be done, devoutly abjure, sacrifice and surrender, all the wishes, thoughts and yearnings which conflict with the Divine purpose! There is, there can be, no full experience of religion in the soul that feels not the difference, wide as that twixt heaven and earth, between the words, "Thy will be done," and these other words, "Thy will, not mine, be done."

Brethren, fix your attention on this difference. Ponder it; ask yourselves if you perceive it. Suspect your religious state if you do not. Rejoice in your inmost hearts if you do. It will help you to bring your doubts and difficulties to a speedy resolution; and may God give you all grace to see how your spiritual destiny hangs upon this hinge—"Not my will, but thine, O God, be done!"



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The sovereignty and fatherhood of God.

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