

**DIVINE CONDUCT:**  
OR, THE  
***MYSTERY OF PROVIDENCE,***

Opened in a Treatise upon Psalm 57.2.

THE WHOLE  
**WORKS**  
OF THE  
**REV. MR. JOHN FLAVEL,**

LATE MINISTER OF THE GOSPEL AT DARTMOUTH, DEVON.

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## Publisher's Note

*Banner of Truth Trust (from the 1963 reprint of The Mystery of providence)*

On 13th February, 1688,<sup>1</sup> amidst the splendour of the Banqueting House at Whitehall an epoch-making event took place. Prince William and Princess Mary of Orange accepted the Crown from the estates of England. They were proclaimed as King and Queen; “Thus,” in the words of Lord Macaulay, “was consummated the English Revolution.” Throughout the land the following day was observed as a public thanksgiving for the deliverance of the nation from Papacy. Preaching at this celebration, one of the few surviving Puritan leaders, John Flavel, had occasion to observe a remarkable coincidence. In 1588 England had experienced a signal deliverance from Roman Catholicism. The mighty Armada of Spain, sent to dethrone the Protestant Elizabeth and restore her people to the “old faith”, had been blasted by the winds and waves. A hundred years had passed, Flavel reminded his hearers. “Yet behold another Eighty-eight crowned and enriched with mercies, no less admirable and glorious than the former.” Another attempt to subjugate England to the yoke of Rome had been thwarted by the providence of God.

The century spanned by the Spanish Armada and the “Glorious Revolution” was as decisive in the religious as in the political history of England. The religions of Rome and of the Reformation were locked in a struggle for national supremacy. 1662 saw the expulsion from the national Church of the Puritans, those who above all stood for the Reformation principle of the supremacy of Scripture in the Church. In 1688 the claim of Roman Catholicism to be the religion of England was, for generations to come, repudiated. This did not mean, however, the triumph of Puritanism. Indeed, it would be true to say that by 1688 the Puritan movement was virtually at an end. Its aims were to a large extent still unrealized. The history of Puritanism is quite remarkable. As a movement for thorough reform of the Church on the basis of the Word of God, it was indeed as old as the Reformation. But if the Reformation revived preaching, the Puritans came to stand for preaching of a particular kind. It has been the verdict of competent judges ever since that, for applying the Word of God to the conscience with power, thoroughness and unction, the Puritans stand alone. Yet it is difficult to define in detail how they differ from preachers of other ages. It is as difficult to explain how the movement arose, in a short time producing a host of outstanding preachers, and then, a hundred years or so later, how this supply dried up. If we take the view that the Puritan movement was nothing less than an outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the Church in England, then it is a signal instance of the principle of divine working enunciated by our Lord: “The wind blows where it lists, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from, and where it goes...”

This view of the Puritan movement as pre-eminently God-given is borne out by the absence of anything in the nature of a gradual decline in the caliber of the Puritans. One of the most noteworthy of the later Puritans, John Flavel of Dartmouth, will bear comparison as a practical writer with any of his predecessors, though by far the greater part of his ministry fell after the Great Ejection of 1662. His father, Richard Flavel, was minister at Bromsgrove in Worcestershire, and from all accounts a faithful servant of God. His ministry, like many others,

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<sup>1</sup> This date is sometimes given as 1689. Until 1751, 25th March was reckoned as the first day of the legal year; thereafter 1st January became the official date. Thus what Flavel and his contemporaries called 13th February, 1688, would, according to our modern style of reckoning, be classed as 1689.

was terminated by law in 1662 and he died prematurely of the plague in 1655, after being imprisoned in Newgate on a charge of sedition. John was the eldest son in a Puritan household and like many similarly placed, he was sent to university at what would now be considered an early age, entering University College, Oxford. The visitation of Oxford ordered by Parliament in 1647, after the first civil war, and the consequent reorganization of the university took place almost certainly while Flavel was there. Speaking of his time at Oxford, Flavel regretted that he had neglected the good of his own soul so much. None the less, in 1650 he was recommended as assistant to the minister of Diptford, Devon, and so commenced his life's work.

Mr. Walplate, the rector of Diptford, had sought help because of failing health. Consequently his young assistant was not starved of ministerial duties. Flavel was formally ordained to the ministry in October 1650. Hearing of an ordination service at Salisbury, he offered himself there for examination by the Presbytery and was duly recognized. Though he succeeded Walplate as rector of Diptford on the latter's death and was comparatively well-paid, Flavel accepted a call to another sphere of service in 1656. The seaport of Dartmouth in Devon could look back upon a long history. From an early period it was noted for its capacious harbour, and in 1190 had been the rendezvous of the Crusading Fleet. Coming down to the seventeenth century, it was an important post in the Civil War, captured for the king by Prince Maurice after a siege of four weeks in 1643 and retained by the Royalists until 1646, when it was taken by General Fairfax. In 1656, Anthony Hartford, minister of Dartmouth, died. Two churches were associated in the incumbency, Saint Saviour's and Townstall. To Saint Saviour's the inhabitants chose Allan Geare, son-in-law of the famous John Canne, pastor of the English church at Amsterdam. As Hartford's successor at Townstall church a young man was designated who had recently presided with distinction at a provincial synod of the Devonshire churches. That young man was John Flavel, and so commenced an association with Dartmouth which continued until his death.

Flavel's ministry at Dartmouth might well have been attended by great outward prosperity and success had it fallen in another era. In fact, like many others, including his own father, he was ejected by the Act of Uniformity in 1662. This enactment was successful in silencing some of the nonconforming ministers. Many, however, considered that their divine commission took precedence over any man-made laws. Thus Flavel continued to exercise his ministry in Dartmouth as he was able. Not satisfied with the ejection, the government of Charles II sought to destroy Dissent altogether. In 1665 the Oxford Act forbade nonconforming ministers to come within five miles of a town unless they took an oath, including a promise not to endeavour any alteration in church or state. Some of the nonconformists in Devon, notably John Howe, took the oath. Flavel, however, refused to do so, though this meant leaving his home and flock. Moving to Slapton, a village which was the prescribed distance from Dartmouth, he was resorted to by many of his old parishioners, to whom he preached on Sundays. A brief respite for the Puritans followed upon the Declaration of Indulgence issued by Charles II in 1672. The king, unknown to the nation and to Parliament, had entered into an engagement with Louis XIV of France to establish Roman Catholicism in England, and as a preliminary step, granted liberty of worship to dissenters, Protestant and Roman Catholic. Flavel took advantage of this liberty and was licensed as a Congregationalist. Even when, shortly afterwards, the Indulgence was withdrawn as a result of parliamentary pressure, he continued to preach in Dartmouth. He preached in private houses and woods and even held meetings at low water on a rock called Saltstone in Kingsbridge estuary.

As a leading and active Nonconformist, Flavel was often in danger and in 1682 was compelled to leave Dartmouth for London. In the city he met with other dissenting ministers, notably William Jenkyn. In September 1684, Jenkyn, Flavel and other friends were gathered for prayer when soldiers broke in upon them. Jenkyn was arrested and though Flavel managed to escape he was close enough to hear the soldiers' insolence to their captive. He returned to Devon soon after this experience, refusing an invitation to succeed Jenkyn, who died in prison in January 1685. Flavel lived to enjoy the liberty given to dissenters by the last Stuart king, James II, and rejoiced in the bloodless revolution of 1688-9, which made the English crown Protestant and gave lasting toleration to nonconformists. At this time measures were afoot to settle the differences between the Presbyterians and Congregationalists. This work was dear to Flavel's heart and he played a leading role in promoting the "Happy Union" in Devon. It was while engaged in this work that he died suddenly at Exeter in 1691. He was buried at Dartmouth, "being accompanied to his grave by many dissenters", says an unsympathetic witness. It is recorded that in 1709 his epitaph was removed. The vicar objected to it as being worthy of a bishop.

Even a brief glance at Flavel's history gives some indication of his outstanding character. Of his influence, Wood, the Royalist historian, observes that he had more disciples than either John Owen or Richard Baxter. The same writer accused him of plagiarism, sedition and faction. It seems, however, that to Wood his great crime was that he did not conform in 1662. One who was intimately acquainted with him, John Galpine of Totnes, draws attention in his memoir of Flavel to three characteristics, his diligence, his longing for the conversion of souls and his peaceable and healing spirit. In addition to the incidents recorded in his own writings, there are some remarkable examples of the effects of Flavel's ministry. Luke Short was a farmer in New England who attained his hundredth year in exceptional vigor though without having sought peace with God. One day as he sat in his fields reflecting upon his long life, he recalled a sermon he had heard in Dartmouth as a boy before he sailed to America. The horror of dying under the curse of God was impressed upon him as he meditated on the words he had heard so long ago and he was converted to Christ - eighty-five years after hearing John Flavel preach. Another remarkable convert was a London gentleman who tried to obtain some plays from a bookshop. The owner was a godly man and had none in stock but recommended Flavel's treatise *On Keeping the Heart*. The would-be reader scorned and threatened to burn the book but took it and returned in a month's time saying that God had used it to save his soul.

Flavel was a prolific writer and his works, separate and collected, have been republished many times since the author's lifetime. His complete works were republished in 1820 by W. Baynes & Son in London, making up six volumes. Although some of these writings are polemical, the author confessed that he found this kind of work disagreeable. His preference was for practical divinity, and it is here that his skill as a physician of souls shines most eminently. *Divine Conduct or the Mystery of providence Opened* was first published in 1678 and has passed through several editions, the most recent being that published by the Sovereign Grace Union in 1935. The present edition differs from the original in two respects. Slight alterations of vocabulary and punctuation have been made, not to change, but to make clear the original force and sense of Flavel's words. Moreover, the treatise has been freshly subdivided and given new chapter headings. These are divisions which arise naturally out of the author's treatment of his subject. Thus, for all practical purposes, the matter of Flavel's work is unchanged, while the style

of presentation has been altered slightly to help modern readers. This may have diminished the academic historical value of this edition, but it is hoped that it has greatly increased its spiritual usefulness to this generation.

Yet even granting the timeless spiritual value of John Flavel as a writer, some friends will deem it unwise to introduce him to the Christian public through his work on providence. Surely it would be better to let an old writer speak on a subject that is not peculiar to his own era! Why not see what Flavel had to say on personal evangelism, on guidance or on the way to achieve peace and victory in the Christian life? These, without doubt, are the themes which popular preachers in our own day chiefly dwell upon. These are the topics about which most Christians wish to read. Why should we not, then, find out whether the Puritans really can help us on the burning issues of the day? In answer to this, there is no doubt that Flavel and his colleagues gave advice in these matters. But their whole approach was in marked contrast to that to which we are accustomed. Our modern piety, when it deals with spiritual problems, tends to be self-centered and subjective: "How can I find peace? How can I be victorious and effective? How can I be guided?" If we know the answers to these questions, it is often felt, nothing more can be asked of us. Within the terms of such an outlook, little time and attention can be spared for the consideration of such an apparently theoretical subject as the providence of God. It may even provoke some impatience. In view of the demands of modern life, is it really necessary for us to spend time reading a lengthy treatment of what is not a priority?

Flavel's approach to the subject of providence cuts clean across our modern criticisms. He insists from the outset that it is the duty of believers to observe all the performances of God's providence for them, especially when they are in difficulties. Clearly, this conviction is not shared by the majority of evangelical Christians in the present day. It is not our custom nor is it regarded as a mark of spiritual keenness to seek to discover and meditate upon the work of providence in all that happens to us. Two reasons for this may be suggested. First and foremost, the Puritans had a lively sense of the sovereignty of God and it is just this that, speaking generally, we lack today. Many Christians reject it intellectually as repugnant to free will and their understanding of the love of God. When they suffer a setback in their personal affairs or in the work of the gospel, it is ascribed wholly to the Devil or to failure in themselves to "fulfill the conditions." They feel a sense of personal frustration and may even believe that God Himself has been frustrated. Their only hope of success is to intensify their spiritual exercises. Prayer on this basis is not so much a plea to Omnipotence as the throwing of one's weight into the scale on the side of God. Even those who profess to accept without question the truth of divine sovereignty are not infrequently guilty of practical unbelief. Glibly to assert that "all things work together for good to those who love God" is relatively easy, but to believe this when our circumstances are distasteful and appear likely to deteriorate is evidence of a spiritual apprehension of the sovereignty of God. Yet we cannot truly recognize and improve the workings of providence until we learn from the Scriptures that God performs all things for us.

A second reason may be suggested why we do not meditate on the providence of God; it is that we have a deep distaste for meditation. This is not a matter of temperament. The recluse or introvert has no advantage over the active, busy Christian. True meditation is a work to which we are all naturally indisposed, but it is one to which the Holy Spirit prompts those whom He



indwells, those who have trusted Christ. To the work of meditation upon providence, believers must apply themselves; but first they must recognize it as a duty and understand what it involves.

When John Flavel writes of the providence of God, he does not simply deliver a lecture. He writes in a thrilling way out of a full heart. He knows from Church history and from his own experience of the works of God on behalf of His people. Above all, he knows the Word of God intimately and he knows how to apply it. He shows how the hand of God may be discerned in our personal affairs, avoiding the extravagances of mysticism as well as the skepticism of unbelief. His treatise is calculated to abase man and exalt God, and yet to kindle faith and adoration in the heart of every child of God.

To learn of the providence of God under the tuition of John Flavel will bring Christian believers into a sphere they never reckoned with before. It will also, we are confident shed light on the great concerns of present-day evangelicals. How may we live a consecrated and victorious life? Let us first realize that everything does not depend on us. Let us see what God has done and is doing for our spiritual good. Then we may seek to work out what He is working in us. And what of guidance? Let us learn that, in an ultimate sense, we can never be “outside of the will of God” – Flavel would teach us that God’s will for us is our duty to be found in His Word. Moreover we should have a right attitude to all circumstances, even the most adverse. Finally, our Christian witness will not be crippled, as many fear, but quickened by a right apprehension of the sovereignty of God. What a great God is ours, greater than we ever thought when we first trusted Him for salvation! How futile for men and women to fight against Him! If Christians showed at all times by their demeanor that they had a living faith in the God of the Scriptures, they would be better placed to commend to an unbelieving world their God and His power to save.

Michael Boland

February, 1963

# DIVINE CONDUCT:

OR, THE

## *MYSTERY OF PROVIDENCE,*

Opened in a Treatise upon Psa 57.2.

### THE EPISTLE DEDICATORY.

To the Right Honourable WILLIAM, Duke of Bedford, Lord RUSSEL of Thornehaugh, and Knight of the Most Noble Order of the Garter.

My Lord,

IT was a weighty and savoury speech<sup>1</sup> which a pious pen once saved from your lordship's lips, that you accounted the prayers of God's ministers and people the best walls about your house. He that so accounts, doubtless understands that prayer engages providence, Isa. 45.11. And providence so engaged is the surest munition, Job 1.10.

Many great men enclose their dwelling with a high wall; but the foundation (as the wisest of men observes) is laid in their own conceits, Prov. 18.11. yes, in sin; and crying sin too, Hab.2.12. Of such walls we may say, as the *oracle* said to Phocas,<sup>2</sup> "If the building emulates the skies, yet sin being at the bottom, all will totter."

It is a fond vanity, to think of ensuring a destiny that can control the stars, and endure the assaults of fortune (as they love to speak) while providence is not engaged for them; no, not so much as by a bare acknowledgment.

*My Lord*, it is not the vast bulk of an estate, nor the best human security in the world, but the vigilant care of Divine providence, that guards both it and its owners from the stroke of ruin. It is the fear of God within us, and the providence of God round about us, which makes the firm and solid basis of all sanctified and durable prosperity. It is beyond debate that there is a providence of God always enfolding those in everlasting arms, that bear his image. The impress of that image upon you, and the embraces of those arms about you, will advance you higher, and secure you better than your noble birth or estate could ever do.

*My Lord*, providence has molded you, *e meliori luto*,<sup>3</sup> made you both the offspring and head of an illustrious family, planted you in a rich and pleasant soil, caused many noble branches to spring from you, drawn your life even to old age, through the delights and honours of this world. And now, that you have tried all those things that make the fairest pretensions to happiness, what

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<sup>1</sup> Mr. Isaac Ambrose, Epistle to his *Ultima*.

<sup>2</sup> [Flavius Phocas Augustus – Byzantine Emperor \(602 to 610\)](#).

<sup>3</sup> *Latin* (roughly) out of the best clay.

have you found in all these painted beauties and false glossing excellences, which have successively courted you? Which of them all can you pronounce desirable for yourself? Which can you call *objectum par amori*?<sup>1</sup> What is it to have the flesh indulged, the senses gratified, and the fancy tickled.? What have you found in foods and drinks, in stately houses and pleasant gardens, in gold and silver, in honour and applause, to match the appetite of your nobler soul? Surely, (*My Lord*) to turn from them all with a generous disdain, as one that knows where to find better entertainment, is much more noble than to wholly immerse and lose our spirits in those sensual fruitions as many do – alas! too many in our days!

We have fallen into the dregs of time; sensuality runs everywhere into atheism. *Providentia peperit divitias, sed filia devoravit matrem.*<sup>2</sup> The largesses of providence have so blinded, and perfectly stupefied the minds of some, that they acknowledge neither a providence, nor a God, as Plutarch replied to Colotes the Epicurean.<sup>3</sup>

But, blessed be God, there is a sincere part, both of the *nobles* and *commons* of England, which this gangrene has not yet touched, and, I hope, never shall.

*My Lord*, It is both your honour and interest to be the entire and devoted servant of providence. It was once the wish of a good man, *optarem id me esse Deo, quod est mihi manus mea.*<sup>4</sup> This is the most noble and divine life that can be: to live and act in this world upon eternal designs; to look upon ourselves and what we have as things devoted to God; not to be content to have providence serve us (for it serves even those who understand nothing of it), but to study how we may serve providence, and be instrumental in its hand for the good of many. This is to be truly honourable. *Quo magis quis Deo vivit, eo evadit nobilior clarior, divinius.*<sup>5</sup>

How much God has honoured you in this respect, the world will understand better, when your Lordship is gathered to your fathers, and you sleep in the dust; then he that praises cannot be suspected of flattery; nor he that is praised, be moved with vain glory: But the approbation of God is infinitely better than the most glorious name among men, before or after death.

And, just as it is most *honourable to serve*, so you will find it most comforting to *observe* the ways of God in his providence: to compose ourselves to think of the conduct of providence through all the *stages* of life we have passed. To note the results of its profound wisdom, the effects of its tender care, the distinguishing fruits of its special bounty: To mark how *providences* have gone along step by step with the *promises*, and both with us, until they have now brought us near to our everlasting rest. Oh! how delectable! how transporting are such meditations as these!

*My Lord*, It is the design of this *manual*, to assert the *being* and *efficacy* of providence against the atheism of the times, and to display the wisdom and care of the providence of God in all the concerns of that people who are really his. It is probable, if your lordship will stoop to such a vulgar composure, somewhat of a grateful relish may occur to your pious mind. I confess, it is

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<sup>1</sup> The object of your affections?

<sup>2</sup> providence brought wealth, but the daughter devoured the mother.

<sup>3</sup> *Adversus Colotem.*

<sup>4</sup> I could wish I were to God, what my own hand is to me.

<sup>5</sup> The more any live to God, the more noble, illustrious and divine they become.

not accommodated, either in exactness of method, or elegance of style, to gratify the curious; and yet it is not destitute of what may please and profit the truly graced.

Should I here recite the pleasures and advantages resulting from a humble and heedful eyeing of the methods of providence, it would look more like a *book* in an *epistle*, than an *epistle* in a *book*. One taste of spiritual sense will satisfy you better than all the accurate descriptions and high *encomiums*<sup>1</sup> that the most elegant pen can bestow upon it.

*My Lord*, It is not that eminent station that some persons retain (in civil respects) above the vulgar, that will enable them to penetrate the mysteries, and relish the sweetness of providence better than others (for, doubtless, many that live immediately upon providence for daily bread, thereby gain a nearer acquaintance with it, than those whose outward enjoyments flow to them in a more plentiful and stated course), but those that excel in grace and experience; those that walk and converse with God, in all his dispensations towards them – these are the persons who are most fully and immediately capable of these high pleasures of the Christian life. The daily flow and increase of which in your lordship’s noble person and family, is the hearty desire of,

*Your Lordship’s most*

*Humble Servant,*

JOHN FLAVEL.

From my Study,  
at Dartmouth,  
Aug. 10, 1677.

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<sup>1</sup> A formal expression of praise.

THE  
**EPISTLE TO THE READER.**

To the ingenuous Readers, those especially who are the heedful  
OBSERVERS OF THE WAYS OF PROVIDENCE.

Reader,

THERE are two ways by which the blessed God condescends to manifest himself to men, his *word*, and his *works*. Of the written word we must say, No words like these were ever written since the beginning of time, which can (as one speaks<sup>1</sup>) take life and root in the soul; indeed, it does this as really as the seed does in the ground; and they are fitted to be engrafted and naturalized there, so as no coalition in nature can be more real than this, James 1.21. This is the most transcendent and glorious medium of manifestation: “God has magnified his word above all his name,” Psal. 138.2.<sup>2</sup>

However, the manifestation of God by his works, whether of *creation* or *providence*, have their value and glory: But the prime glory and excellency of his *providential works* consist in this, that they are the very fulfillings and real accomplishments of his written word. By a wise and heedful attendance to this, we might learn that excellent art, which is (not unfitly called by some *scientia architectonica*) an art to clarify the mysterious occurrences of providence, by reducing them to the written word, and there lodge them as effects of their proper *causes*. And, doubtless, this is one of the rarest essays men could pursue against *atheism*: to show not only how providences concur in a most obvious tendency to confirm this great conclusion, *Your word is truth*; but how it sometimes also extorts the confession of a *God*, and the truth of his *word*, from those very tongues which have boldly denied it. AEschyles the Persian,<sup>3</sup> relating their discomfiture by the Grecian army, makes this notable observation:

“When the Grecian forces hotly pursued us (he says), and we must venture over the great water, Strymon, which was then frozen, but beginning to thaw, when a hundred to one we would all have died for it; with my eyes I then saw many of those gallants whom I had heard before so boldly maintain, there was no God, every one upon their knees, with eyes and hands lifted up, begging hard for help and mercy, and entreating that the ice might hold until they got over.”

providence has forced the very enemies of God to set many thousands of seals to his truth, which greatly tends to our confirmation in it; but especially to see how the *word* and *providences* of God enlighten each other; and how the scriptures contain all those events, both great and small, which are disposed by providence in their seasons: And how not only the promises of the word are, in general, faithfully fulfilled to the church in all her exigencies and distresses, but in particular, to every member of it. They are all furnished by providence with multitudes of experiences to this use and end. O how useful such observations are!

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<sup>1</sup> Mr. T. C. in his Isagogue.

<sup>2</sup> “For you have exalted above all things your name and your word.” (Psa 138:2 <sup>ESV</sup>)

<sup>3</sup> AEschyles in Tragoed.

And as the profit and use, so the delight and pleasure resulting from the observations of providences, are exceeding great. It will doubtless be a part of our entertainment in heaven to view with transporting delight how the designs and methods were laid to bring us here: And what will be a part of our blessedness in heaven may well be allowed to be a prime ingredient in our heaven upon earth. To search for pleasure among the due observations of providence is to search for water in the ocean: For providence not only ultimately designs to bring you to heaven, but (as intermediate to that) to bring (by this means) much of heaven into your souls on the way there.

How great a pleasure it is to discern how the most wise God is providentially steering all to the port of his own praise and his people's happiness, while the whole world is busily employed in managing the sails and tugging at the oars with a quite opposite design and purpose? To see how *promote* his design by *opposing* it, and *fulfill* his will by *resisting* it, *enlarge* his church by *scattering* it, and make their rest come more sweetly to their souls by making their condition so restless in the world. This is pleasant to observe in general: But to record and note its particular designs upon ourselves; with what profound wisdom, infinite tenderness, and incessant vigilance it has managed all that concerns us from first to last, is ravishing and transporting.

O what a history we might compile of our own experiences, while we trace with melting heart the footsteps of providence all along the way it has led us to this day: and set our remarks upon its more eminent performances for us in the several stages of our lives!

Here it *prevented*, and there it *delivered*. Here it *directed*, and there it *corrected*. In this it *grieved*, and in that it *relieved*. Here was the *poison*, and there the *antidote*. This providence *raised* a dismal cloud, and that providence *dispelled* it again. This *narrowed*, and that *widened*. Here a *want*, and there a *supply*. This relation *withered*, and that *sprung up* in its place. Words cannot express the high delights and gratifications that a graced heart<sup>1</sup> may find in such employment as this.

O what a world of rarities are to be found in providence! The blind, heedless world makes nothing of them: They cannot find *one sweet bit*, where a graced soul would make a *rich feast* of it. Plutarch relates very exactly, how Timoleon was miraculously delivered from the conspiracy of two murderers. They met a certain person in the nick of time who, to revenge the death of his father, killed one of them, just as the two were ready to give Timoleon the fatal blow – though he knew nothing of the business; and so Timoleon escaped the danger. And what do you think this wonderful work of providence yielded the person relating the story? Why, though he was one of the most learned and ingenious among the Heathen Sages, all he made of it was this: *The spectators (he says) wondered greatly at the artifice and contrivance which fortune uses*. This is all he could see in it. Had a spiritual and wise Christian done the dissecting and analyzing of such a work of providence, what glory it would have yielded to God! What comfort and encouragement to the soul! The bee makes a sweeter meal of one single flower, than the ox does of the whole meadow where thousands of them grow.

O reader! if your heart is spiritual and well-stocked with experience, if you have recorded the ways of providence towards you, and will but allow yourself time to reflect upon them; what a

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<sup>1</sup> Originally, a “gracious heart” – a person that has received God’s grace; “graced” has been substituted throughout this work so it is clear that this is a work of God, and not an inherent condition of the heart (Eze 11.19).

life of pleasure may you live! What a heaven upon earth this way leads you into! I will not here tell you what I have met with in this path, lest it seemed to savour of too much vanity; *non est religio ubi omnia patent*.<sup>1</sup> There are some delights and enjoyments in the Christian life, which are, and must be enclosed. But try it yourself, taste and see, and you will need no other inducement; your own experience will be the most powerful oratory to persuade you to the study and search of providence.

Histories are usually read with delight. Once the fancy is caught, a man does not know how to disengage himself from it. I am greatly mistaken if the history of our own lives, if it were well drawn up and distinctly perused, would not be the most pleasant history we ever read.

The ensuing treatise is an essay to that purpose, in which you will find some remarks set upon providence in its passage through the several stages of our lives. But, reader, only you are able to compile the history of providence for yourself, because the *memorials* that furnish it are only in your own hands. However, here you may find a pattern, and general rules to direct you in that great and difficult work which is the very end and design of this manual.

I have not had much regard for the dress and ornament into which this discourse is to go abroad, for I am debtor both to the strong and weak, the wise and foolish. And in all my observation, I have not found that God has ever made much use of labored periods, rhetorical flowers and elegances, to improve the power of religion in the world: Indeed, I have observed how providence has sometimes rebuked good men when they have overly affected those pedantic fooleries upon other subjects, in withdrawing from them its usual aids, and exposing them to shame. And much more may it do so when providence itself is the subject.

Reader, if your stomach is nice and squeasie, and nothing relishes you but what is spruced up and elegant, there are stores of such composures in the world upon which you may indulge your curious fancy. Meantime, some will be found that will bless God for what you despise, and make many a sweet meal of what you loathe.

I will add no more, but my hearty prayers that providence will direct this treatise to such hands in such seasons, and so bless and prosper its design, that God may have glory, you may have benefit, and I myself have comfort in the success of it, who am,

Yours and the church's servant.

In the hand of providence,

JOHN FLAVEL.

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<sup>1</sup> [It is not a religion, where all is apparent.](#)

## Author's Introduction

*I will cry unto God most high; unto God that performs all things for me (Psa 57:2)*

The greatness of God is a glorious and unsearchable mystery. "For the LORD most high is terrible; he is a great king over all the earth" (Psa 47:2). The condescension of the most high God to men is also a profound mystery. "Though the LORD is high, yet he regards the lowly" (Psa 138:6). But when these both meet together, as they do in this Scripture, they make up a matchless mystery. Here we find the most high God performing all things for a poor distressed creature.

It is the great support and solace of the saints in all the distresses that befall them here, that there is a wise Spirit sitting in all the wheels of motion, and governing the most eccentric creatures and their most pernicious designs to blessed and happy outcomes. Indeed, it would not be worthwhile to live in a world devoid of God and providence.

How deeply we are concerned in this matter will appear by that great instance which Psalm 57 presents us with. It was composed, as the title notes, by David when he hid himself from Saul in the cave. It is inscribed with a double title:<sup>1</sup> *Al-taschith, Michtam of David*. "Altaschith" refers to the *scope* and "Michtam" to the *dignity* of the subject-matter.

The former signifies "destroy not," or "let there be no slaughter." and it may either refer to Saul concerning whom he gave charge to his servants not to destroy him; or rather, it has reference to God, to whom in this great exigency David poured out his soul in this passionate ejaculation: "Altaschith," "destroy not."

The latter title "Michtam" signifies "a golden ornament," and so it is suited to the choice and excellent matter of the Psalm, which much more deserves such a title than do Pythagoras' Golden Verses.

Three things are remarkable in the former part of the Psalm: (1) his extreme danger; (2) his earnest address to God in that extremity; and (3) the arguments he pleads with God in that address.

1. His extreme danger is expressed in both the title and the body of the psalm. The title tells us this psalm was composed by him when he hid himself from Saul in the *cave*.<sup>2</sup> This cave was in the wilderness of Engedi among the broken rocks where the wild goats lived, an obscure and desolate hole; yet even there the envy of Saul pursued him (1Sam 24:1, 2). And now he that had been so long hunted like a partridge upon the mountains seems to be enclosed in the net. His

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<sup>1</sup> *Al taschith* signifies, do not destroy, referring, 1. Either to Saul, whom David kept his servants from destroying, though they would have had him to have cut him off. Or, 2. It may refer to David himself, destroy not (me), O God, *Gerius on the place*. *Michtam* signifies a golden ornament, or golden song, from a Hebrew word which signifies choice gold, to which this precious psalm may be compared. *Brug*.

<sup>2</sup> But when he saw the place where he was hiding himself surrounded with Saul's army, and that there seemed to be no way of escape, he now likewise flees to God for relief, which he had always done formerly in the like dangers. *Moh. on the place*,



enemies were outside the cave, from which there was no other outlet. Then Saul himself entered the mouth of this cave, in the sides and creeks of which David and his men lay hidden, and they actually saw him. Judge to how great an extremity and to what a desperate state things were now brought. Well might he say: “My soul is among lions, and I lie even among those who are set on fire” (verse 4). What hope now remained? What but immediate destruction could be expected?

2. Yet this does not frighten him out of his faith and duty, but between the jaws of death he prays, and earnestly addresses himself to God for mercy: “Be merciful unto me, O God, be merciful unto me” (verse 1). This excellent psalm was *composed* by him when there was enough to *discompose* the best man in the world. The repetition notes both the extremity of the danger and the ardency of the supplicant. Mercy, mercy, nothing but mercy, exerting itself in an extraordinary way, can now save him from ruin.

3. The arguments he pleads for obtaining mercy in this distress are considerable.

(1) He pleads his reliance upon God as an argument to move mercy. “Be merciful unto me O God, be merciful unto me, for my soul trusts in you; indeed, in the shadow of your wings I will make my refuge, until these calamities have passed by” (verse 1). His trust and dependence on God, though it is not an argument in respect to the dignity of the *act*, yet it is so in respect to the nature of the *object*, a compassionate God, who will not expose any who take shelter under His wings; also in respect to the promise by which protection is assured to those who fly to Him for sanctuary: “You will keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on you, because he trusts in you” (Isaiah 26:3). Thus he encourages himself from the consideration of that God in whom he trusts.

(2) He pleads former experiences of His help in past distresses as an argument encouraging hope under the present strait: “I will cry unto God most high, unto God who performs all things for me” (verse 2).

In these words I shall consider two things:

1. The duty resolved upon.
2. The encouragement to that resolution.

1. The duty resolved upon: “I will cry unto God.” Crying unto God is an expression that denotes not only prayer, but *intense* and *fervent* prayer. To *cry* is to pray in a holy passion; and such are usually speeding prayers (Psa 18:6; Heb 5:7).

2. The encouragements to this resolution are twofold:

- (1) objective – taken from the *sovereignty* of God and
- (2) subjective – taken from the experience he had of His *providence*.

(1). The sovereignty of God: “I will cry unto God most high.” Upon this he exercises his faith in extreme danger. Saul is high, but God is the most high, and without His permission he is assured Saul cannot touch him. He had none to help, and if he had, he knew God must first help the helpers, or they cannot help him. He had no means of defence or escape before him, but the Most High is not limited by means. This is a singular prop to faith (Psa 59:9).

(2). The previous experience of His providence: “Unto God that performs all things for me.” The word which we translate “performs” comes from a root that signifies both to *perfect*, and to *desist* or cease. For when a business is performed and perfected, the agent then ceases and desists from working. To such a happy outcome the Lord has brought all his doubtful and difficult matters before; and this gives him encouragement that He will still be gracious, and perfect that which concerns him now, as he speaks: “The LORD will perfect that which concerns me” (Psa 138:8).

The Septuagint renders Psalm 57:2, “The one who *profits* or *benefits* me.” And it is a certain truth that all the results and issues of providence are profitable and beneficial to the saints. But the supplement in our translation conveys well the sense of the text: “Who *performs all things*.” And it involves the most strict and proper notion of providence, which is nothing else but the performance of God’s gracious purposes and promises to His people. And therefore Vatabulus and Muis<sup>1</sup> supply and fill up the space left by the conciseness of the original with “which he has promised,” thus: “I will cry unto God most high; unto God that performs the things which he has promised.” Payment is the performance of promises. Grace makes the promise, and providence makes the payment.

Piscator<sup>2</sup> fills it thus: “unto God that performs his *kindness and mercy*.” But still it supposes the mercy performed is contained in the promise. Mercy is sweet in the promise, and much more so in the *providential performance* of it to us.

Castalio’s<sup>3</sup> supplement comes nearer to ours: “I will cry unto God most high, unto God, *the transactor of my affairs*.” But our English, making out the sense by a universal particle, is most agreeable to the scope of the text. For it can only be a great encouragement to his faith, that God had transacted *all things*, or performed *all things* for him. This providence that never failed him in any of the straits that ever he met with (and his life was a life of many straits) he might well hope would not fail him now, though this would be an extraordinary and matchless one.

Let us then bring our thoughts a little closer to this Scripture, and it will give us a fair and lovely prospect of providence, in its 1. universal, 2. effectual, 3. beneficial and 4. encouraging influence upon the affairs and concerns of the saints.

1. The expression imports the *universal* interest and influence of providence in and upon all the concerns and interests of the saints. It not only has its hand in this or that, but in all that concerns them. It has its eye upon everything that relates to them throughout their lives, from first to last. Not only the great and more important, but the most minute and ordinary affairs of our lives are

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<sup>1</sup> Biblical commentators. Vatabulus was a distinguished Professor of Hebrew at Paris during the Renaissance, for whom the Jews had a high regard.

<sup>2</sup> John Piscator, German theologian (1546-1626). He inclined toward Lutheranism at first, then Calvinism, and lastly embraced Arminian modifications of Calvinism (as Wesley did) regarding original sin, grace, and predestination.

<sup>3</sup> Sebastian Castalio, Latin, Greek, and Hebrew scholar (1515-1563). Calvin procured a regent’s place for him in the college of Geneva. He was forced to quit because of his peculiar opinions concerning Solomon’s song and Christ’s descent into hell. Calvin and Beza, in fact, disliked his translations. Castalio’s notes on Romans were condemned by the church of Basil because they opposed predestination and efficacious grace.

transacted and managed by it. It touches all things that touch us, whether more nearly or remotely.

2. The text displays the *efficacy of providential influences*. Providence not only undertakes, but perfects what concerns us. It goes through with its designs, and accomplishes what it begins. No difficulty so obstructs it, no cross accident falls in its way, that it does not carry its design through it. Its motions are irresistible and uncontrollable; He *performs* it for us.

3. And (which is sweet to consider) all its products and outcomes are exceedingly *beneficial* to the saints. It performs all things for them. It is true that we often prejudge its works, and unjustly censure its designs, and in many of our straits and troubles we say: “All these things are against us”; [Gen 42:36](#) but indeed providence neither does nor can do anything that is really against the true interest and good of the saints. For what are the works of *providence* but the execution of God’s decree and the fulfilling of His Word? And there can be no more in providence than is in them. Now, in God’s *purposes* and *promises*, there is nothing but *good* toward the *saints*; and therefore, whatever providence does concerning them, it must be (as the text says) “the performance of all things for them.”

4. And if so, then how *cheering, supporting and encouraging* the consideration of these things must be in a day of distress and trouble! What life and hope it will inspire our hearts and prayers with when great pressures lie upon us! It had such a cheering influence upon the Psalmist at this time, when his state of affairs was, to the eye of sense and reason, forlorn and desperate; there was but a hair’s breadth (as we say) between him and ruin.

A potent, enraged, and implacable enemy had driven him into the hole of a rock, and had come after him into that hole. Yet while his soul is now among lions, while he lies in a cranny of the rock, expecting every moment to be drawn out to death, the reflections he had upon the gracious performances of the Most High for him, from the beginning to that moment, support his soul and breathe hope and life into his prayers: “I will cry unto God most high, unto God that performs all things for me.”

What amounts from all you have is this doctrinal conclusion:

*It is the duty of the saints, especially in times of straits, to reflect upon the performances of providence for them in all the states and through all the stages of their lives.*

The Church, in all the works of mercy, owns the *hand of God*: “LORD, you also have worked all our works in (or for) us” (Isaiah 26:12). And still it has been the pious and constant practice of the saints in all generations to preserve the memory of the more famous and remarkable providences that have befallen them in their times as a precious treasure. “If you are a Christian indeed, I know you have, if not in your book, yet certainly in your heart, a great many precious favours on record; the very remembrance and recalling of them is sweet; how much more sweet was the actual enjoyment?”<sup>1</sup> Thus Moses, by divine direction, wrote a memorial of that victory obtained over Amalek as the fruit and effect of prayer; and he built there an altar with this inscription, *Jehovah-nissi* “The LORD my banner” (Exo 17:14, 15). Thus Mordecai and Esther

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<sup>1</sup> From Richard Baxter’s *Saints’ Everlasting Rest*, chap. 11, *Practical Works* (London, 1838), vol. 3, p. 323.

took all care to perpetuate the memory of that signal<sup>1</sup> deliverance from the plot of Haman, by ordaining the feast of Purim as an anniversary “throughout every generation, every family, every province, and every city; that these days of Purim should not fail from among the Jews, nor the memorial of them perish from their seed” (Esther 9:28). To this end you find the Psalm inscribed, “to bring to remembrance” (Psa 70, *title*). You find parents giving suitable names to their children, so that every time they looked at them they might refresh their memory of God’s mercies (1Sam 1:20). You find the very places where eminent providences have appeared, given a new name, for no other reason than to perpetuate the memorial of those sweet providences which so refreshed them there. Thus Bethel received its name (Gen 28:19). And that well of water where Hagar was seasonably refreshed by the angel in her distress, was called Beer-laharoi: “the well of him that lives and looks on me” (Gen 16:14). Indeed, the saints have given, and God has assumed for Himself, new titles for this very score and account; Abraham’s *Jehovah-jireh* <sup>Gen 22:13-14</sup> and Gideon’s *Jehovah-shalom* <sup>Jdg 6:24</sup> were ascribed to Him for this reason. And sometimes you find the Lord styles Himself “The God that brought Abraham from Ur of the Chaldees” <sup>Gen 15:7</sup> or “The LORD God that brought them out of Egypt” <sup>Jdg 6:8</sup> or again “The LORD that gathered them out of the north country”, <sup>Jer 31:8</sup> reminding them of the gracious providences which in all those places He had worked for them.

Now there is a twofold reflection upon the *providential works of God*.

1. One is entire and full, in its whole complex and perfect system. This blessed sight is reserved for the perfect state. It is in that mount of God where we shall see both the *wilderness* and Canaan, the glorious kingdom into which we are come, and the way through which we were led into it. There the saints shall have a ravishing view of it in its entirety, and every part shall be distinctly discerned, as it had its particular use, and as it was connected with the other parts, and how effectually and orderly they all worked to bring about that blessed design of their salvation, according to the promise: “And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to his purpose” (Rom 8:28). For it is certain that no ship at sea, keeps more exactly by the compass which directs its course, than providence keeps by that promise which is its *Cynosure*<sup>2</sup> and *Polestar*.<sup>3</sup>

2. The other sight is partial and imperfect which we have on the way to glory, during which we only view it in its single acts, or at most, in some branches and more observable series of actions.

Between these two is the same difference as between the sight of the disjointed wheels and scattered pins of a watch, and the sight of the whole united in one frame and working in one orderly motion; or between an ignorant spectator who views some more observable vessel or joint of a dissected body, and the accurate anatomist who discerns the course of all the veins and arteries of the body as he follows the various branches of them through the whole, and plainly sees the proper place, figure, and use of each, with their mutual relation to one another.

<sup>1</sup> *Signal*: notably out of the ordinary.

<sup>2</sup> That is, it is akin to keeping course at sea by the major stars. *Cynosure* (Ursa Minor) and *Polestar* (North Star).

<sup>3</sup> ‘When the records of eternity shall be exposed to view, all the counsels and results of that profound wisdom looked into; how will it transport when it shall be discerned: Behold, thus were the designs laid: here were the apt junctures and admirable dependencies of things, which, when acted upon the stage of time, seemed so perplexed and intricate.’ John Howe, *Blessedness of the Righteous*, chap. 5, *Whole Works* (London, 1822), John Hunt, ed., vol. 3, p. 64-65.

O how ravishing and delectable a sight it will be to behold in one view the whole design of providence, and the proper place and use of every single act, which we could not understand in this world! What Christ said to Peter is as applicable to some providences in which we are now concerned, as it was to that particular action: “What I do, you do not know now; but you will know hereafter” (John 13:7). All the dark, intricate, puzzling providences at which we were sometimes so offended, and sometimes amazed, which we could neither reconcile with the promise nor with each other, no, which we so unjustly censured and bitterly bewailed, as if they had fallen out quite against our happiness, we shall then see that they are to us as the difficult passage through the wilderness was to Israel, “the right way to a city of habitation” (Psa 107:7).

And though our present views and reflections upon providence are so short and imperfect in comparison to those in heaven, yet such as it is under all its present disadvantages, it has so much excellence and sweetness in it that I may call it a little heaven, or as Jacob called his Bethel, “the gate of heaven.” <sup>Gen 28:16-19</sup> It is certainly a highway of walking with God in this world; and a soul may enjoy as sweet communion with Him in His *providences* as in any of His *ordinances*.<sup>1</sup> How often have the hearts of its observers been melted into tears of joy at the beholding of its wise and unexpected productions! How often has it convinced them, upon a sober recollection of the events of their lives, that if the Lord had left them to their own counsels, they would as often have been their own tormenters, if not their own executioners! Into what and how many fatal mischiefs would they have precipitated themselves if providence had been as shortsighted as they were! They have given it their hearty thanks for considering their interest more than their importunity, and not allowing them to perish by their own desires.

The benefits of giving heed to the works of providence are manifold and unspeakable, as in its place we will show you. But not to entangle the thread of the discourse, I will cast it in this way:

*First*, I will prove that the concerns of the saints in this world are certainly conducted by the wisdom and care of special providence.

*Secondly*, I will show you in what particular concerns of theirs this providential care is evidently revealed.

*Thirdly*, that it is the duty of saints to give heed to, and heedfully observe these performances of providence for them in all their concerns.

*Fourthly*, in what manner this duty is to be performed by them.

*Fifthly*, what singular benefits result to them from such observations.

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<sup>1</sup> Luther was bold to prescribe to God, but at last said, Surely the Lord despised this arrogance of mine, and said, I am God, and not to be ruled by you.

## PART 1.

### Chapter 1 – The Work of providence for the Saints

*First*, I shall undertake the proof and defense of the great truth that the affairs of the saints in this world are certainly conducted by the wisdom and care of special providence. And in doing so, I address myself with cheerfulness to perform, as I am able, a service for that providence which has throughout my life “performed all things for me,” as the text says.

There is a twofold consideration of providence, according to its twofold object and manner of dispensation; the one is general, exercised about all creatures, rational and irrational, animate and inanimate; the other is special and unique. Christ has a universal empire over all things (Eph 1:22); He is the head of the whole world by way of dominion, but a head to the Church by way of union and special influence (John 17:2). He is “the Saviour of all men, specially of those that believe” (1Tim 4:10). The Church is His special care and charge. He rules the world for its good, as a head consulting the welfare of the body.

Heathens generally denied providence, and no wonder, since they denied a God; for the same arguments that prove one will prove the other. Aristotle, the prince of *heathen philosophers*, could not by the utmost search of reason find out how the world originated, and therefore he concludes it was from eternity. The Epicureans, in a way, acknowledged a God, but still denied a providence, and they wholly excluded Him from any interest or concern in the affairs of the world as being inconsistent with the felicity and tranquility of the divine Being, to be diverted and cumbered with the care and labour of government. This assertion is so repugnant to reason, that it is a wonder they did not blush at its absurdity; but I guess the reason, and one of them (according to Cicero) lays it out in broad language: *Itaque imposuistis cervicibus nostris sempiternum dominum, quem dies et noctes timeremus. Quis enim non timeat omnia providentem, et cogitantem, et animadvertentem, et omnia ad se pertinere putantem, curiosum et plenum negotii Deum?* (If this is so, you have yoked us to an eternal master, such as we would fear day and night. For who would not be frightened of a prying busybody of a God who provides, plans and observes everything and who considers that everything is his concern?) They foresaw that conceding there is a providence would impose an eternal yoke upon their necks, by making them accountable for all they did to a higher tribunal. They must necessarily “pass the time of their sojourning here in fear” (1Pet 1.17) while all their thoughts, words and ways were strictly noted and recorded, for the purpose of an account by an all-seeing and righteous God. They therefore laboured to persuade themselves that what they had no mind for, did not exist. But these atheistic and foolish conceits fall flat before the undeniable evidence of so great and clear a truth as this.

Now my business here is not so much to deal with professed atheists who deny the existence of God – and consequently deride all evidences brought from Scripture of the extraordinary events that fall out in favour of that people that are called His – but rather to convince those that professedly acknowledge all this, yet, never having tasted religion by experience, they suspect, at least, that all these things which we call special providences to the saints, are but natural events

or mere contingencies. Thus, while they profess to acknowledge a God and a providence (which profession is but the effect of their education), in the meantime they live like atheists, and both think and act as if there were no such things; and really, I fear this is the case with the greater part of the men of this generation.

But if it were indeed so, that the affairs of the world in general (and more especially those of the saints) were not conducted by divine providence, but as they would persuade us, they were conducted by the steady course of natural causes – that if we observe any event, it is merely casual and contingent, or it proceeds from some hidden and secret cause in nature – if this indeed were so, let those who are tempted to believe it give a rational answer to the following questions:

### ***First Challenge.***

*How does it come to pass that so many signal mercies and deliverances have befallen the people of God, above the power and against the course of natural causes, to make way for which there has been an obvious suspension and stop put to the course of nature?*

It is most evident that no natural effect can exceed the power of its natural cause. Nothing can give to another more than it has in itself; and it is just as clear that whatever acts naturally, acts necessarily. Fire burns to the uttermost of its power;<sup>1</sup> while waters overflow and drown all that they can. Lions and other rapacious and cruel beasts, especially when hungry, tear and devour their prey; and arbitrary and rational agents also act according to the principles and laws of their natures. A wicked man, when his heart is fully set in him, and his will stands in a full bent of resolve, will certainly give it vent, and perpetrate the wicked devices of his heart, if he has power in his hand and an opportunity to execute his conceived mischief. Having once conceived this mischief, and “travailing in pain with it,” <sup>Job 15.20</sup> according to the course of nature, he must “bring it forth” (Psa 7:14). But if any of these inanimate, brute, or rational agents have their power suspended – when there is no natural obstacle or hindrance, and when the effect is near its birth, and when the design is at the very point of execution, so that even though they *would* harm, yet they *cannot* – what do you think this is to be attributed to?

Yet this has often been seen where God’s interest has been immediately concerned in the danger and evil of the event. The sea divided itself in its own channel and made a wall of water on each side to give God’s distressed Israel a safe passage; and this was not done when the sea was calm, but when its waves roared<sup>2</sup> (Isaiah 51:15). The fire, when it was fanned into the most intense and vehement flame, had no power to singe one hair of God’s faithful witnesses, when at the same instant it had the power to destroy their intended executioners at a greater distance (Daniel 3:22). Indeed, we find it has sometimes been sufficient to consume but not to torment the body, as in that known instance of blessed Bainham, who told his enemies: “The flames were like a bed of roses to him.” The hungry lions put off their natural fierceness and became gentle and harmless when Daniel was thrown among them as prey.<sup>Dan 6.22</sup> A similar account is given of Polycarp, and

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<sup>1</sup> *ad ultimum sui posse.*

<sup>2</sup> How hard Porphyry was put to explain it when, instead of a better one, this pretence must serve the turn, that Moses, taking advantage of a lower water unknown to the Egyptians, passed the people over there. It was as if Moses, a stranger, were better acquainted with it than the Egyptian natives. *Acts and Mon. Vol. I. p. 55.* - [Porphyry of Tyre \(234–305 AD\) – Neoplatonic philosopher born in Tyre; pupil of Plotinus.](#)

Dionysius the Areopagite, whom the fire would not touch, but stood like a shipman's sail filled with the wind about them.

Are these things according to the course and law of nature? To what secret natural cause can they be ascribed? In a similar way, we find the vilest and fiercest of wicked men have been withheld by an invisible hand of restraint from injuring the Lord's people. By what secret cause in nature was Jeroboam's hand dried up and made inflexible at the same instant that it was stretched out against the man of God (1Kng 13:4)? No wild beasts rend and devour their prey more greedily than wicked men would destroy the people of God that dwell among them, were it not for this providential restraint upon them. So the Psalmist expresses his case in the words following my text: "My soul is among lions, and I lie among those that are set on fire." The disciples were sent forth "as sheep in the midst of *wolves*" (Matt 10:16). It will not avail in this case to object that those miraculous events depend only upon Scripture testimony, which the *atheist* is not convinced by. For, beside all that may be alleged for the authority of that testimony (which is needless to produce for men who acknowledge it), how is it less than what every eye sees or may see today? Do we not behold a weak, defenseless handful of men wonderfully and otherwise unaccountably preserved from ruin in the midst of potent, enraged, and turbulent enemies that willingly would, but cannot, destroy them – when no natural impediment can as yet be assigned to explain why they cannot?

And if this puzzles us, then what shall we say when we see events produced in the world for the good of God's chosen, by those very hands and means which were intentionally employed for their ruin? These things are as much beside the intentions of their enemies as they are above their own expectations; yet such things are no rarities in the world. Was not the envy of Joseph's brothers, the cursed plot of Haman, and the decree procured by the envy of the princes against Daniel, with many more of the same kind, all turned by a secret and strange hand of providence to their greater advancement and benefit? Their enemies lifted them up to all that honour and preferment they had.

### ***Second Challenge.***

*How is it, if the saints' concerns are not ordered by a special divine providence, that natural causes unite and associate themselves for their relief and benefit in so strange a manner as they are found to do?*

It is undeniably evident that there are marvelous coincidences of providence, confederating and agreeing, as it were, to meet and unite themselves to bring about the good of God's chosen. There is a similar face of things showing itself in several places at the same time, whenever any work for the good of the Church comes upon the stage of the world. As when the Messiah, the capital mercy, came to the temple, then Simeon and Anna were brought there by providence as witnesses to it. <sup>Luke 2:25-38</sup> So in Reformation work, when the images were pulled down in Holland, one and the same spirit of zeal possessed them in every city and town, so that the work was done in a night. He that carefully reads the history of Joseph's advancement to be the lord of Egypt may number in that story twelve remarkable acts or steps of providence by which he ascended to that honour and authority. If but one of them had failed, in all likelihood the event would have failed too; but every one occurred in its order, exactly keeping its own time and place. So in the Church's deliverance from the plot of Haman, we find no less than seven acts of providence



concurring strangely to produce it. It is as if they had all met by appointment and consent to break that snare for them, one thing so aptly suiting with and making way for another that every careful observer must conclude that this cannot be the result of accident but of wise counsel. Even as in viewing the accurate structure of the body of a man, the figure, position, and mutual relationships of the several members and vessels has convinced some, and is sufficient to convince all, that it is the work of divine wisdom and power. In a similar way, if the admirable adaptation of the means and instruments employed for mercy to the people of God are carefully considered, who would not admit that just as there are tools of all sorts and sizes in the shop of providence, so there is a most skillful hand that uses them – that they could no more produce such effects by themselves than the axe, saw, or chisel can cut or carve a rough log into a beautiful figure without the hand of a skillful artificer?

We find, by manifold instances, that there certainly are strong combinations and predispositions of persons and things to bring about some issue and design for the benefit of the Church, which they themselves never thought of. They hold no conference; they do not communicate their counsels to each other; and yet they meet together and work together as if they did. It is as if ten men were all to meet together at one place, and one hour, about one and the same business, and did so without any previous appointment between themselves. Can anyone question whether such a meeting of means and instruments is certainly, though secretly, ruled over by some wise invisible agent?

### ***Third Challenge.***

*If the concerns of God's people are not governed by a special providence, why is it that the most apt and powerful means that are employed to destroy them, are rendered ineffective; and weak, contemptible means that are employed for their defence and comfort, are crowned with success?*

This could never be if things were wholly swayed by the course of nature. If we judge by that rule, we must conclude that the more apt and powerful the means are, the more successful and prosperous they must be; and where they are inept, weak, and contemptible, nothing can be expected of them. Thus reason lays it according to the rules of nature. But providence crosses its hands, as Jacob did in blessing the sons of Joseph, and orders quite contrary issues and events. Such was the mighty power and deep policy used by Pharaoh to destroy God's Israel, so that to the eye of reason it was as impossible to survive it as for crackling thorns to remain unconsumed amidst devouring flames. Their miraculous preservation is expressed by this emblem: the bush was all aflame, but not consumed (Exo 3:2). The heathen Roman emperors who made the world tremble and subdued the nations under them, employed all their power and policy against the poor, naked, defenseless Church – to ruin it – yet could not accomplish it (Rev 12:3-4). O the seas of blood that heathen Rome shed in the ten persecutions! Yet the Church lives. And when “the dragon gave his power to the beast”, (Rev 13:2) that is, when the state of Rome became anti-Christian, O what slaughters were made by the beast in all his dominions, so that the Holy Ghost represents him as drunk with the blood of the saints (Rev 17:6). And yet all that will not do; the gates, that is, the powers and policies of hell, cannot prevail against it.<sup>Mat 16:18</sup> How manifest is the care and power of providence in this! Had half that power been employed against any other people, it would certainly have swallowed them up immediately, or worn them out in a

hundredth of the time.<sup>1</sup> How soon was the Persian monarchy swallowed up by the Grecian, and then again by the Roman! Diocletian and Maximinus, in the height of their persecutions, found themselves so baffled by providence that they both resigned the government and lived as private men. But in this wonderful preservation, God makes good that promise: “Though I make a full end of all nations, yet will I not make a full end of you” (Jer 30:11), and “No weapon formed against you shall prosper” (Isaiah 54:17).

On the contrary, weak and contemptible means have been made successful for the good of the Church! Thus the first planting of Christianity in the world was done by weak and improbable instruments! Christ did not choose the eloquent orators, or men of authority in the courts of kings and emperors, but twelve poor artisans and fishermen; and these were not sent together in a troop, but some to conquer one country, and some another. In appearance, it was the most ridiculous course for such a design as could be imagined; and yet in how short a time the Gospel was spread, and the Churches were planted by them, in the several kingdoms of the world! The Psalmist foresaw this by the Spirit of prophecy when he said: “Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings you have ordained strength, to still the enemy and the avenger” (Psa 8:2). At the sound of rams’ horns, Jericho is delivered into the hands of Israel (Joshua 6:20). By three hundred men, with their pitchers and lamps, the huge host of Midian is defeated (Judges 7:19). The Protestants besieged in Beziers in France are delivered by a drunken drummer who, going to his quarters at midnight, rang the alarm-bell of the town, not knowing what he did; and just then their enemies were making their assault. And as weak and improbable means have been blessed with success to the Church in general, so also to the preservation of its particular members. A spider by weaving her web over the mouth of an oven, shall hide a servant of Christ, Du Moulin, from his enemies, who took refuge there in that bloody Parisian massacre.<sup>2</sup> A hen shall sustain another many days at the same time by lodging her egg every day in the place where he had hid himself from the cut-throats. Examples might be easily multiplied, but the truth is too plain and obvious to the observation of all ages to need them. And can we help but acknowledge that a divine and special providence overrules these matters, when we see the most apt and potent means for the Church’s ruin frustrated, and the most silly and contemptible means granted success and prospered for its good?

### ***Fourth Challenge.***

*If all things are governed by the course of nature and force of natural causes, then how does it come to pass that men are turned (like a bowl by a rub) out of the way of evil, toward which they were driving at full speed?*

Good men have been going along the way to their own ruin, and did not know it; but providence has met them in the way, and preserved them by strange diversions, the meaning of which they did not understand till the event revealed it. When Paul lay bound at Caesarea, the high priest

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<sup>1</sup> Acts and Mon. Vol III. p. 974.

<sup>2</sup> Pierre Du Moulin (1568-1658); Huguenot minister in Paris. During the St. Bartholomew’s Day Massacre of 1572, Catholics killed 25,000 Huguenots in Paris alone. As the tale goes, Moulin, aged 4, crept into an oven over which a spider wove its web; when the enemies of the Protestants inspected the premises, they passed by the oven with the remark that no one could have been there for some days. *Cyclopedia of Moral and Religious Anecdotes* by Rev. K. Arvine, A.M. (Leavitt, Trow & Co., New York, 1848) p. 669. Other reports say he was preserved by his 7-year old sister who put her hand over his mouth, while their nurse banged pots and pans to distract the searchers.

and chief of the Jews request that Festus might have Paul brought bound to Jerusalem, having laid in waiting to kill him along the way. But Festus, though ignorant of the plot, utterly refuses to do it, and chooses rather to go with them to Caesarea and judge him there. By this diversion, their bloody design is frustrated (Acts 25:3-4).

Possidonius, in the life of Augustine,<sup>1</sup> tells us that the good father, going to teach the people of a certain town, took a guide with him to show him the way. The guide mistook the usual road and unwittingly took a by-path, by which means Augustine escaped ruin at the hands of the bloody Donatists who, knowing his intention, would have killed him on the road.

And as memorable and wonderful are those rubs and diversions wicked men have met with in the way of perpetrating the evils conceived and intended in their own hearts. Laban and Esau came against Jacob with mischievous purposes; but they no sooner come near him than the shackles of restraint were immediately clapped on them both, so that their hands could not perform their enterprises.<sup>Gen 31:29; 33:4.</sup> Balaam runs to curse Israel, greedy for a reward, but he meets with an unexpected check at his very outset; and though that did not stop him, he tried every way to do them mischief, yet he still finds himself fettered by an effectual bond of restraint that he can in no way shake off (Num 22:25, 38). Saul, the high priest's bloodhound, breathes out threats against the Church, and goes with a bloody commission towards Damascus to hale the poor flock of Christ to the slaughter; but when he comes near the place, he meets an unexpected stop on the way, by which the mischief is not only diverted, but he himself is converted to Christ (Acts 9:1-4). Who can fail to see the finger of God in these things?

### ***Fifth Challenge.***

*If there is not an over-ruling providence ordering all things for the good of God's people, how does it come to pass that the good and evil which is done to those in this world, is accordingly repaid into the hearts of those who are instrumental in it?*

How clear it is to every man's observation, that the kindnesses and benefits any have done to the Lord's people have been rewarded with full measure into their hearts! The Egyptian midwives refused to obey Pharaoh's inhuman command, and saved the male children of Israel; for this the Lord dealt well with them and built them houses (Exo 1:21). The Shunammite was hospitable and careful for Elisha, and God recompensed it with the desirable enjoyment of a son (2Kng 4:9, 17). Rahab hid the spies, and was exempted from the destruction of Jericho (Heb 11:31). Publius, the chief man of the island of Melita, courteously received and lodged Paul after his shipwreck; the Lord speedily repaid him for that kindness, and healed his father who lay sick at that time of a bloody discharge and fever (Acts 28:7, 8).

In the same way, we find the evils done to God's people have been repaid by a just retribution to their enemies.<sup>2</sup> Pharaoh and the Egyptians were cruel enemies to God's Israel, and designed the ruin of their poor innocent babes; God repaid it by striking down all the first-born of Egypt in one night (Exo 12:29). Haman erected a gallows fifty cubits high for good Mordecai, and God so ordered it that he himself and his ten sons were hanged on it. And indeed it was only fitting that

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<sup>1</sup> Possid. in vit. Aug, 7, cap, 15.

<sup>2</sup> If we examine the history of the world, from the beginning of it down to our times, we shall meet with remarkable instances of God's judgment upon sinners. *Alsted, Nat. Theol.* p. 196.

he should eat the fruit of that tree which he himself had planted (Esther 7:10). Ahithophel plots against David, and gives counsel like an oracle as to how to procure his fall; and that very counsel, like an overcharged gun, recoils upon himself and procures his ruin. Seeing his good counsel rejected (good politically, not morally), it was now easy for him to guess the outcome, and so his own fate (2Sam 17:23).

Charles the 9th most inhumanly made the very canals of Paris flow with Protestant blood, and soon after he died miserably, his blood flowing from all parts of his body. Stephen Gardiner, who burnt so many of God's dear servants to ashes, was himself so scorched by a terrible inflammation that his very tongue was black and hung out of his mouth; he ended his wretched days in dreadful torments. Maximinus, that cruel emperor who set forth his proclamation engraved in brass to utterly abolish the Christian religion, was speedily struck like Herod with a dreadful judgment, <sup>Acts 12:21-23</sup> swarms of lice preying upon his entrails, and causing such a stench that his physicians could not endure to come near him, and for refusing to do so, they were slain. Hundreds of similar instances might easily be produced to confirm this observation. And who cannot see by these things that "truly there is a God that judges in the earth!" <sup>Psalms 58:11</sup>

Indeed, the retributions of providence on the enemies of the Church have been so exact that not only the same persons, but the same members, that have been the instruments of mischief, have been made the subjects of wrath. The same arm which Jeroboam stretched out to strike the prophet, God strikes. <sup>1Kngs 13.1-4</sup> The emperor Aurelian, when he was ready to sign the edict for the persecution of the Christians, was suddenly so cramped in his knuckles that he could not write.<sup>1</sup> Greenhill, in his exposition on Ezekiel 11:13, tells his hearers that there was one then present in the congregation who was an eye-witness of a woman scoffing at another for walking in purity and holiness. The scoffer's tongue was immediately stricken with the palsy, and she died of it within two days. Henry the 2nd of France, in a great rage against a Protestant counselor, committed him into the hands of one of his nobles to be imprisoned. He did so with these words, that "he would see him burned with his own eyes." But, mark the righteous providence of God: within a few days, the same nobleman, with a lance put into his hands by the king at a jousting tournament, ran the lance into one of the king's eyes, from which the king died.<sup>2</sup>

Yes, providence has made the very place of sinning the place of punishment: "In the place where dogs licked the blood of Naboth, dogs will lick your blood" (1Kng 21:19); and it was exactly fulfilled (2Kng 9:26). Thus Tophet is made a burying-place for the Jews, till there was no room left to bury; and that was the place where they had offered up their sons to Moloch (Jer 7:31-32). The story of Nightingale is generally known, which Foxe relates, as to how Nightingale fell out of the pulpit and broke his neck while he was abusing the Scripture (1John 1:10). And thus the Scriptures are made good by providence. "Whoever digs a pit shall fall in it; and he that rolls a stone, it shall return upon him" (Prov 26:27), and "with the same measure you measure, it shall be measured to you again" (Mat 7:2).

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<sup>1</sup> Euseb, I. 7. cap. 29.

<sup>2</sup> In June 1559 a tournament lasting several days was held in Paris to celebrate a peace treaty between France and Spain. Henry participated and acquitted himself well until the young Count of Montgomery almost unseated him. Henry insisted on another contest with Montgomery. Montgomery's lance struck the king's helmet. A long splinter pierced Henry's eye and penetrated his brain, from which the king later died (July 10, 1559).

If anyone still says that these things may happen accidentally, and that many thousands of the Church's enemies have died in peace, and their end has been like other men, we answer with Augustine: "If no sin were punished here, no providence would be believed; and if every sin were punished here, no judgment would be expected." But, so that none may think these events are merely casual and accidental, we will inquire still further.

### ***Sixth Challenge.***

*If these things are merely accidental, how is it that they square and agree so exactly with the Scriptures in all particulars?*

We read: “Can two walk together unless they are agreed?” (Amos 3:3). If two men travel along one road, it is likely they are agreed to go to the same place. Providences and Scriptures go all one way, and if they seem at any time to go different or opposite ways, be sure they will meet at the journey’s end. There is an agreement between them to do so.

Does God miraculously suspend the power of natural causes? Why, this is no accidental thing; it harmonizes with the Word, “When you pass through the waters, I will be with you, and through the rivers, they shall not overflow you. When you walk through the fire, you shall not be burned, nor shall the flame kindle upon you” (Isaiah 43:2).

Do natural causes unite and associate themselves for the good of God’s people? Why, this is no more than what is contained in the promises, and the fulfilling of that Scripture: “All is yours, for you are Christ’s” (1Cor 3:22); that is, the use, benefit and service of all the creatures are for you, as your need requires.

Are the most apt and powerful means, which are employed for their ruin, frustrated? Who can help but see the Scriptures fulfilled in, and expounded by, such providences? (see Isaiah 8:8-10; Isaiah 54:15-17; expounded by 2Kng 18:17, etc.)

Do you see at any time a rub of providence diverting the course of good men from falling into evil, or wicked men from committing evil? How loudly do such providences proclaim the truth and certainty of the Scriptures, which tell us that “the way of man is not in himself, nor is it in him that walks to direct his steps” (Jer 10:23), and that “a man’s heart devises his way: but the LORD directs his steps” (Prov 16:9)!

Do you see adequate retributions made to those that injure or befriend the people of God? Why, when you see all the kindness and love they have shown the saints returned with interest into their hearts, how is it possible that you cannot see the accomplishment of these Scriptures in such providences? “But the liberal soul devises liberal things, and by liberal things he shall stand” (Isaiah 32:8; 2Cor 9:6).

And when you see the evils men have done, or intended to do to the Lord’s people, recoiling upon themselves, one is perfectly blind not to see the harmony which such providences bear with Scriptures such as Psalm 7:14-16; Psalm 9:16; and Psalm 140:11-12.

O what exact proportions providences and the Scriptures hold! Men take little notice of it. Why did Cyrus, contrary to all rules of state policy, freely dismiss the captives, unless it was to fulfill the Scripture (Isaiah 45:13)? It was well-observed by one that, “as God has stretched out the *expansum* or *firmament* over the natural world, so he has stretched out his Word over the rational world.” As the creatures on earth are influenced by those heavenly bodies, so are all the creatures in the world influenced by the Word, and infallibly fulfill it when they intend to thwart it.

## ***Seventh Challenge.***

*If these things are contingent, how is it that they fall out so remarkably in the nick and junctures of time, which makes them so greatly observable to all who consider them?*

We find a multitude of providences so timed to a minute, that had they occurred just a little sooner or later, they would have mattered little in comparison with what they do now. Certainly, it cannot be chance, but counsel, that so exactly works in time. Contingencies keep to no rules.<sup>1</sup>

How remarkable to this purpose were the tidings brought to Saul, that “the Philistines have invaded the land” (1Sam 23:27), just as he was ready to grasp the prey! The angel calls to Abraham, and shows him another sacrifice just when his hand was giving the fatal stroke to Isaac (Gen 22:10-11). A well of water is shown to Hagar just when she had left the child, not being able to watch its death (Gen 21:16, 19). Rabshakeh meets with a blasting providence, hears a rumour that frustrated his design, just when he was ready to make an assault upon Jerusalem (Isaiah 37:7, 8). So when Haman’s plot against the Jews was ripe, and all things were ready for execution, “on that night the king could not sleep” (Esther 6:1). When the horns are ready to gore Judah, immediately carpenters are prepared to fray them away (Zech 1:18-21).

How remarkable was the relief of La Rochelle by a shoal of fish that came into the harbour when they were ready to perish with famine, such as they never observed before, nor after that time!<sup>2</sup> Mr. Dod<sup>3</sup> could not go to bed one night, but has a strong impulse to visit, though unseasonably, a neighbour gentleman; and just as he came there he meets his neighbor at his door, with a halter in his pocket, just going to hang himself. Dr. Tate and his wife in the Irish rebellion,<sup>4</sup> were flying through the woods with a sucking-child, which was just ready to expire. The mother going to rest it upon a rock, puts her hand upon a bottle of warm milk, by which it was preserved. A good woman, from whose mouth I received it, being driven to great extremity, all supplies failing, was plunged into unbelieving doubts and fears, not seeing where supplies should come from – when, lo! in the nick of time, turning over some things in a chest, she unexpectedly lights upon a piece of gold, which supplied her present needs till God opened another door of supply. If these things fall out by accident, how is it they come in the very nick of time so exactly, that it has become proverbial in Scripture, “In the mount of the LORD it shall be seen” (Gen 22:14)?

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<sup>1</sup> Contingencies are to be estimated from their immediate, second, and particular causes, and not from the first and universal cause, in respect of whom nothing is contingent; but all things are necessary by the necessity of immutability, not of chance - *Wendel. Theol.* p. 15.

<sup>2</sup> Refers to *The Siege of La Rochelle*, a Huguenot stronghold immortalized in Dumas’ tales of the musketeers. Every attempt by Huguenot leaders to relieve the city was driven back. Thousands died of disease or starvation in addition to battle casualties. The city finally surrendered unconditionally on 28 October 1628.

<sup>3</sup> Dr. John Dod (c.1549–1645), known as “Decalogue Dod”, English non-conformist (Puritan), author of *A Plaine and Familiar Exposition of the Ten Commandments*, 1603.

<sup>4</sup> That is, the Irish Rebellion of 1641. Faithful Tate (c. 1626 - 1666) was a Protestant clergyman and poet from County Cavan, Ireland. His wife was Katherine Kenetie; their son, Nahum Tate, was a poet laureate 1692.

## ***Eighth Challenge.***

*Lastly, if these things were accidental and contingent, how can it be that they fall out so immediately upon and consonantly with the prayers of the saints? So that, in many providences, they are able to discern a very clear answer to their prayers, and are sure they have the petitions they asked of Him? (1John 5:15) <sup>1</sup>*

Thus the sea divided itself just at the time of Israel's cry to heaven (Exo 14:10). So signal a victory is given to Asa immediately at the time of that passionate cry to heaven: "Help us, O LORD our God" (2Chr 14:11, 12). Ahithophel goes and hangs himself, just at the time of that prayer of distressed David (2Sam 15:31). Haman falls and his plot is broken, just at the time of the fast kept by Mordecai and Esther (Esther 4:16). Our own Speed, in his *History of Britain*,<sup>2</sup> tells us that Richard the 1st besieged a castle with his army; they offered to surrender if he would save their lives; he refuses, and threatens to hang them all. Upon this an arbalester<sup>3</sup> charged his bow with a square arrow, first making his prayer to God that he would direct the shot and deliver the innocent from oppression; it struck the king himself, from which he died, and they were delivered. Abraham's servant prayed for success; and see how it was answered.

[Gen 24:45](#) "But before I had finished speaking in my heart, there was Rebekah, coming out with her pitcher on her shoulder;

Peter was thrown into prison and prayer was made for him by the Church, and see the event:

[Act 12:5-7, 12](#) – Peter was therefore kept in prison, but constant prayer was offered to God for him by the church. <sup>6</sup> And when Herod was about to bring him out, that night Peter was sleeping, bound with two chains between two soldiers; and the guards before the door were keeping the prison. <sup>7</sup> Now behold, an angel of the Lord stood by *him*, and a light shone in the prison; and he struck Peter on the side and raised him up, saying, "Arise quickly!" And his chains fell off *his* hands... <sup>12</sup> So, when he had considered *this*, he came to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose surname was Mark, where many were gathered together praying.

I could easily add to these the wonderful examples of the answer of prayers which was observed in Luther, and Dr. Winter in Ireland,<sup>4</sup> and many more; but I judge it needless because most Christians have a stock of experience of their own, and are well-assured that many of the providences that befall them are, and can be none other than the answer of their prayers.

And now who can be dissatisfied in this point that wisely considers these things? Must we not conclude that "he does not withdraw his eyes from the righteous" (Job 36:7) and that "The eyes of the LORD run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to show himself strong in behalf of those whose heart is perfect towards him" (2Chr 16:9)? His providences proclaim that He is a God who hears prayer.

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<sup>1</sup> And if we know that he hears us, whatever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we desired of him.

<sup>2</sup> John Speed, *History of Great Britain* (Printed by John Beale, London, 1611, 1623)

<sup>3</sup> Arbalester – a Bowman who uses a crossbow.

<sup>4</sup> Pastor of the independent and non-conformist St. Nicholas' church in Ireland, c. 1655.



## PART 2.

### Chapter 2 – Our Birth and Upbringing

Having proved that the affairs of the saints in this world are certainly conducted by the wisdom and care of a special providence, my next work is to show you in what affairs and concerns of theirs the providence of God more especially appears, or the most remarkable performances of providence for them, in this world.

Here I am not led directly by the text of Psalm 57 to speak of the most internal and spiritual performances of providence immediately relating to the souls of God’s people – though they all relate to their souls mediately<sup>1</sup> and eventually – but to speak of the more visible and external performances of providence for them. Do not suppose I will touch all of these – they are more than the sands. But what I aim to speak to you about are some of the more special and observable performances of providence for you. And we will begin at the beginning.

#### ***The first performance of providence – in the womb.***

I. *First*, let us consider how well providence has performed the first work that it ever did for us: *in our formation and protection in the womb*. Certainly this is a very glorious and admirable performance; it is what the Psalmist admires, saying: “My substance was not hidden from you when I was made in secret, and skillfully worked in the lowest parts of the earth” (Psa 139:15). The womb is so called for this reason: that just as skillful artists, when they have some choice piece in hand, perfect it in private, and then bring it into the light for all to gaze at; so it was here. Two things are admirable in this performance of providence for us.

1. The rare structure and excellent composition of the body. “I am wonderfully made”; [Psa 139:14](#) that word *ruchampiti* is very full. The vulgate renders it, “painted as with a needle,” i.e., richly embroidered with nerves and veins.<sup>2</sup> O, the skillful workmanship that is in that one part, the eye! How it has forced some to acknowledge a God upon the examination of it! providence, when it went about this work, had its model or pattern before it, according to which it molded every part. “In your book, all my members were written” (verse 16).

[Psalm 139:16 Your eyes saw my substance, being yet unformed. And in Your book they all were written, The days fashioned for me, When as yet there were none of them.](#)

Do you have an integral perfection and fullness in your members? It is because He wrote them all in His book, or painted your body according to that exact model which He drew of you in His own gracious purpose before you had a being. Had an eye, ear, hand, or foot been lacking in the plan, you would now have been sadly aware of the defect. This world had been but a dungeon to you without those windows, and you would have lived as an object of pity to others, as many do.

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<sup>1</sup> [Acting through or dependent on an intervening agency.](#)

<sup>2</sup> A metaphor from those who work in exquisite needle-work. The Lord has made all things in number, weight, and measure.

If you have low thoughts of this mercy, then ask the blind, deaf, lame, and dumb the value and worth of those mercies, and they will tell you. There is a world of cost bestowed upon your body.

You might have been cast in another mold, and been created as a worm or a toad. I remember Luther<sup>1</sup> tells us of two cardinals riding in great pomp to the Council of Constance; on the way, they heard a man in the fields bitterly weeping and wailing. When they came to him they found him intently viewing an ugly toad; and asking him why he wept so bitterly. He told them his heart was melted with this consideration: that God had not made him such a loathsome and deformed creature. “This is what I love to weep at,” he said. Upon hearing this, one of them cries out that the father said well, “The unlearned will rise and take heaven, and we with all our learning shall be thrown into hell.” No part of the common lump was so figured and polished as man is. Galen<sup>2</sup> gave Epicurus a hundred years to imagine a more commodious<sup>3</sup> situation, configuration, or composition of any one member of a human body. And if all the angels had studied to this day, they could not have cast the body of man into a better mold.

2. And yet all this is but the enameling of the case, or polishing the casket<sup>4</sup> in which the rare jewel lies. Providence has not only built the house, but brought the inhabitant (I mean the soul) into the possession of it. A glorious piece it is, that bears the very image of God upon it, being all in all, and all in every part.<sup>Eph 1.23</sup> How noble are its faculties and affections! How nimble, various and indefatigable are its motions! How comprehensive is its capacity! It is a companion for angels – no, it is capable of espousal to Christ and eternal communion with God. It is the wonder of earth, and the envy of hell.

Suppose now (and why should you not suppose what you so frequently behold in the world?) that providence had so permitted and ordered it, that your soul had entered into your body with one or two of its faculties wounded and defective. Suppose its understanding had been cracked. What a miserable life you would have lived in this world, being capable of neither *service* nor *comfort*. And truly, I have considered those works of providence in bringing into the world, in all countries and ages, some such spectacles of pity. Some are deprived of the use of reason; they differ from beasts in little more than shape and figure. Others, though sound in understanding, yet they are deformed or defective in their bodies, monstrous, misshapen and loathsome creatures. When I consider these things, I can resolve the design of this providence into nothing else but a demonstration of His sovereign power, unless such creatures are designed as foils to set off the beauty of other rare and exquisite pieces; unless they are intended to stand before your eyes as monitors of God’s mercy to you, so that your hearts, as often as you behold them, might be melted into thankfulness for distinguishing favour to you.

Look then (but not proudly) at your outside and inside,. See and admire what providence has done for you, and how well it has *performed* the first service that it ever did for you in this world.

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<sup>1</sup> Luther in *tertium precept*.

<sup>2</sup> There are some members that are *radical*, such as the liver, heart, and brain ; in these are placed the natural, vital, and animal spirits; these spirits are carried by the veins, arteries, and nerves. The veins carry the natural spirits from the liver, the arteries the vital spirits from the heart; the nerves the animal spirits from the brain. Other members are *official*, such as the hands and feet; the superior rule the inferior, and the inferior support the superior. *In wisdom you have made them all*.

<sup>3</sup> *Commodious*: accommodating; spacious and convenient; roomy and comfortable.

<sup>4</sup> *Casket*: Small and often ornate box for holding jewels or other valuables.

And yet, this was not all it did for you. Before you saw this world, it preserved you, as well as formed you in the womb, or else you would have been like those *embryos* Job speaks of “which never saw the light” (Job 3:16). *Abortives* go for nothing in the world, and there are multitudes of them. Some never had a reasonable soul breathed into them, but only the rudiments and rough draft of a body. These are not considered men, but perish as the beast does. Others die in, or shortly after they come out of the womb; and though their life was but a moment, yet that moment bestows an eternity upon them. Had this been your case, as it is the case of millions, then (supposing your salvation) you would have been utterly unserviceable to God in the world; none would have been the better for you, nor would you have been the better for anyone in the world. You would have been utterly incapable of all that good which throughout your life you have either done to others, or have received from others.

And if we consider the nature of that obscure life we lived in the womb, how small an accident (had it been permitted by providence) could have extinguished our life, like a bird in the shell? Therefore we cannot help but admire the tender care of providence over us, and say with the Psalmist: “You have covered me in my mother’s womb” (Psa 139:13); and not only so, “But you are the one that took me out of the womb” (Psa 22:9). He preserved you there to the fullness of time, and when that time had come, he brought you safely through manifold hazards into that place in the world which He prepared for you from eternity.

### ***The second performance of providence – place and time of birth.***

II. The second great performance of providence for the people of God respects *the place and time of their birth*. Truly, this is no small concern to every one of us, but of vast consequence, either to our good or evil, though it is little considered by most men. I am persuaded that the thoughts of few Christians penetrate deep enough into this providence, but slide too slightly and superficially over an abyss of great mercy, rich and manifold mercy, wrapped in this gracious performance of providence for them.

Ah friends! Can you think it is indifferent what part of the world the womb of nature has cast you out into? Does nothing depend upon what spot of the creation, or in what age of the world, your lot has fallen? It may be that you have not seriously thought about this matter. And because this point is so seldom touched, I will therefore dive a little more particularly and distinctly into it. I will endeavour to warm your affections with a representation of the many and rich benefits you owe to this one performance of *providence* for you.

We will consider it under a double respect or relation, with respect to your present comfort in this world, and as it relates to your eternal happiness in the world to come.

This performance of providence for you very much concerns your present comfort in this world. All the rooms in this great house are not alike; they are not all pleasant and commodious for its inhabitants. You read of “the dark places of the earth,” which “are full of the habitations of cruelty” (Psa 74:20). Many such dismal places are found in the habitable earth. What a vast tract of the world lies as a waste wilderness!

Suppose your mothers had given birth to you in America, among the savage Indians who herd together like brute beasts, scorched with heat, and starved with cold, being naked, destitute, and

defenseless. How poor, miserable, and without earthly comfort and accommodations, are many millions of the inhabitants of this world! What mercies do you enjoy in respect to the amenity, fertility, temperature, and civility of the place of your habitation? <sup>Acts 17:26</sup> What is it but a garden enclosed by a wilderness? I may without partiality or vanity say that God has, even by temporal accounts, provided you with one of the healthiest, pleasantest, and in all respects the best furnished room in all the great house of this world. Hear what our own chronicler<sup>1</sup> says of it: “It is the fortunate island, the paradise of pleasure, the garden of God; whose valleys are like Eden, whose hills are as Lebanon, whose springs are as Pisgah, whose rivers are as Jordan, whose wall is the ocean, and whose defense is the Lord Jehovah.”

You have been provided with necessary and comfortable accommodations here for your bodies, that a great part of the world is unacquainted with. It is not as bad for the poorest among us, as it is said to be for the poor Russians, whose poverty pinches and bites with such sharp teeth that their poor cry at the doors: “Give me and cut me! Give me and kill me!”

Do not say that the barbarous nations excel you because they possess the mines of silver and gold, which maybe you think is enough to make up for all the other inconveniences of their life. Alas, poor creatures! It would have been better for them if their country had brought forth briars and thorns, instead of gold, silver, and precious stones; for this has been the occasion of ruining all their other comforts in this world. This has invited their cruel avaricious enemies into their midst, under whose servitude they groan and die without mercy; thousands of them have chosen death rather than life on the terms they enjoyed it. And why might not your lot have fallen there as well as where it is? Are they not made of the same clay and endowed with as good a nature as yourselves? O what a distinction divine mercy has made, where nature has made none! Consider, ungrateful man, you might have fallen into some of those regions where a tainted air frequently feeds the jaws of death to excess, and where the inhabitants differ little from the beasts in the manner of their living. But God has provided for you, and given the poorest among us far better accommodations in life than are ordinarily provided to the greatest among them. O what providence has done for you!

But all that I have said is inconsiderable in comparison with the *spiritual mercies* and advantages you enjoy here for your souls. O this is such an advantageous cast of providence for you, that it obliges a you to a thankful acknowledgement of it to all eternity. For let us here make but a few suppositions in the case before us, and the glory of providence will shine like a sunbeam full in your faces.

(1) Suppose it had been your lot to have fallen in any of those vast continents possessed by pagans and heathens at this day, who bow down to the stock of a tree, and worship the host of heaven. This is the case of millions, and millions of millions. For pagan *idolaters* (as that searching scholar Mr. Berewood<sup>2</sup> informs us) not only fill the circumference of nine hundred miles in Europe, but almost one half of Africa, more than half of Asia, and almost the whole of America.

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<sup>1</sup> John Speed, *History of Great Britain (or Chronicles)*.

<sup>2</sup> Berewood's *Enquiries*, chap. 13. p. 118, 119.

O how deplorable your case would have been if a pagan idolatress had given you birth, and idolatry had been sucked in with your mother's milk! Then, in all probability, you would have been worshipping devils at this day, and racing full speed in the direct road to damnation, for these are the people of God's wrath: "Pour out your fury upon the heathen that do not know you, and upon the families that do not call upon your name" (Jer 10:25). How dreadful is that imprecation<sup>1</sup> against them, which takes hold of them and all that is theirs! "Confounded are all those who serve graven images, and boast of idols" (Psa 97:7).

(2) Or suppose your lot had fallen among Mahometans,<sup>2</sup> who next to pagans spread over the greatest tract of the earth. For though Arabia bred that unclean bird, yet that cage could not long contain him; for not only the Arabians, but the Persians, Turks, and Tartars, all bow their backs under that grand impostor. This poison has dispersed itself through the veins of Asia, over a great part of Africa, even the circumference of seven thousand miles. And it does not stop there, but has tainted a considerable part of Europe also.

O what unhappy men and women you would have been had your lot fallen here, notwithstanding the natural amenity and pleasantness of your native soil! You would then have adored a grand impostor, and died in a fool's paradise. Instead of God's living oracles, you would have been, as they now are, deceived to your eternal ruin with such fond, mad, and wild dreams. Whoever considers it would think the authors of it had a greater need for manacles and fetters than for arguments or sober answers.

(3) Or if neither of these had been your lot, suppose you had been emptied by the womb of nature into this little spot of the earth which is Christianized by profession; but nevertheless it is overrun for the most part by popish idolatry and anti-Christian delusions. What unhappy men and women you would have been had you sucked a Popish breast! For his people are to be the subjects of the vials of God's wrath to be poured out successively upon them (Rev 16). And the Scriptures in round and plain language tell us what their fate must be: "And for this cause, God shall send them strong delusion, so that they would believe a lie, that they all might be damned who did not believe the truth, but took pleasure in unrighteousness" (2Thes 2:11-12).

No, you might have fallen into the same land which you now inhabit, and yet have had no advantage by it as to gain salvation – if He that chose the bounds of your habitation had not also graciously "determined the times" for you (Acts 17:26).

(4) Suppose your lot had fallen where it is, during the pagan state of England, where for many hundreds of years there were gross and vile idolaters. Thick darkness spread over the people of this *island* and, as in other countries, the *devil* was worshipped, and his lying oracles were zealously believed.

The shaking of the top of Jupiter's oak in Dodona, the cauldron struck with the rod in the hand of Jupiter's image, the laurel and *fountain* in Daphne:<sup>3</sup> these were the ordinances on which the poor deluded wretches waited. So too in this nation they worshipped idols. The sun and moon were

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<sup>1</sup> *Imprecation*: The act of calling down a curse that invokes evil upon someone.

<sup>2</sup> Mohammedan; a follower of the Islamic prophet Muhammad (or Mahomet); a Muslim.

<sup>3</sup> Vide Verstegan's *British Antiquities*.

adored as gods, together with many abominable idols which our ancestors worshipped; their memorials to this day are not quite obliterated among us.

(5) Or suppose our lot had fallen in those later miserable days in which Queen Mary sent so many hundreds to heaven in a fiery chariot, when the poor Protestants skulked up and down in holes and woods to preserve themselves from popish *inquisitors* who, like bloodhounds, hunted up and down through all the cities, towns, and villages of the nation, to seek out the poor sheep of Christ as prey.

But such has been the special care of providence towards us, that our turn to be brought upon the stage of this world was graciously reserved for better days – so that if we had our own option, we could not have chosen better for ourselves than providence has chosen. We are not only furnished with the best room in this great house, but before we were put into it, it was swept with the broom of national Reformation from idolatry. Indeed, it was washed by the blood of martyrs from its popish filthiness, and adorned with Gospel lights, shining with as great a lustre in our days as they ever shone in the *apostles' days*. You might have been born in England for many ages, and not have found a *Christian* in it – indeed, since Christianity was acknowledged here, and not have met a *Protestant* in it. O what an obligation providence has laid on you by such a merciful performance as this for you!

If you objected: “All this indeed is true, but what has this to do with eternal salvation? Do not multitudes that enjoy these privileges eternally perish, notwithstanding them – indeed, do they not perish with their sin and misery aggravated beyond other sinners?”

True, they do, and it is very sad that it should be so. Yet we cannot deny that it is a very fine and singular mercy to be born in such a land, and at such a time. For let us consider what helps for their salvation men enjoy here, beyond what they could enjoy if their lot had fallen according to the suppositions mentioned before.

(1) Here we enjoy the ordinary means of salvation, which elsewhere men are denied and cut off from. So that if any among the heathen are saved and brought to Christ, it must be in some miraculous or extraordinary way. For “how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard, and how shall they hear without a preacher?” (Rom 10:14). Alas! If there were a desire awakened in any of their hearts for a Gospel-discovery of salvation, which ordinarily is not and cannot be rationally supposed, yet these poor creatures might travel from sea to sea to hear the Word, and yet not find it. Whereas *you* can hardly miss the opportunities of hearing the Gospel. Sermons confront you frequently, so that you can scarcely shun or avoid the ordinances and instruments of your salvation. And is this nothing? Christ even forces Himself upon us.

(2) Here, in this age of the world, the common prejudices against Christianity are removed by the advantage it has of a public profession among the people, and protection by the laws of the country. But if your habitation was among Jews, Mahometans, or heathen idolaters, you would find Christ and Christianity the common disgust of the country, everyone defying and deriding both name and thing. Such you yourselves would likely have been, if your birth and education had been among them. For you may observe that whatever is traditionally delivered down from father to son, everyone is fond of it, and zealous in its defense. The Jews, heathens and

Mahometans are at this day so tenacious about their errors that with spitting, hissing, and clapping of hands, and all other signs of indignation and abhorrence, they chase away all others from among them.

Is it not then a special mercy to you to be cast into such a country and age where, as a learned divine<sup>1</sup> observes, the true religion has the same advantages over every false one, as in other countries they have over it? Here you have the presence of precious means, and the absence of soul-destroying prejudices -- two signal mercies.

(3) Here, in this age of the world, Christianity confronts you as soon as you are capable of any sense or impression of religion; and so, by a happy anticipation, Christianity blocks the passages by which a false religion would otherwise certainly enter. Here you suck in the first notions and principles of Christianity with the mother's milk – and certainly such a prepossession is a choice advantage. *Quo semel est imbuta, recens servabit odorem testa diu.* (For many a day the pot will keep the scent of that which it first held when freshly baked.) “Train up a child in the way he should go; and when he is old, he will not depart from it” (Prov 22:6).

(4) Here you have, or may have, the help and assistance of Christians to direct your way, resolve your doubts, support your burdens, and help you through those difficulties that attend the new birth. Alas! If a poor soul had any beginnings or faint workings and stirrings after Christ and true religion in many other countries, the hand of every man would quickly be against him, and none would be found to relieve, assist, or encourage, as you may see in the example of Galeacius.<sup>2</sup> The nearest relations would, in that case, prove to be the greatest enemies; the country would quickly hoot at him as a monster and cry: “Away with the heretic, to the prison or stake.”

Whether these eventually prove blessings to your souls or not, I am certain that in themselves they are singular mercies and helps to salvation that are denied to millions besides you. Plato when he was near his death blessed God for three things: that he was a man and not a beast, that he was born in Greece, and that he was brought up in the time of Socrates. You have much more cause to admire providence: that you are men and not beasts; that you were born in England, and that you are brought up in Gospel days. This is a land that the Lord has spied out for you, as it is expressed in Eze 20:6; concerning this, you have abundant cause to say, as the Psalmist does, “The lines have fallen to me in pleasant places; indeed, I have a goodly heritage” (Psa 16:6).

### ***The third performance of providence – Heritage.***

III. Another performance of providence which must be carefully noticed and weighed is *the designation of the stock and family out of which we should spring and rise.* And truly this is of special consideration, both as to our temporal and eternal good. For whether the families in which we grew up were great or small in Israel, whether our parents were of the higher or lower class and rank among men, if they feared God and worked righteousness, if they took any care to educate you religiously and train you up “in the nurture and admonition of the Lord,”<sup>Eph 6.4</sup> then

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<sup>1</sup> Mr. Pinke.

<sup>2</sup> John Calvin gives a description of Galeacius Caracciolus in his commentary on Corinthians (p.11-14): Galeacius was the son of the Marquesse of Vico; a courtier to Charles the Fifth; related by marriage to a Duke; a nephew of the Pope; schooled in the superstition of Popery; and yet when at last he saw the truth, he embraced it.

you are bound to reckon it among your chief mercies, that you sprang from the loins of such parents; for from this spring, a double stream of mercy rises to you.

(1) Temporal and external mercies to your outward man. You cannot help but know that as godliness entails a blessing, so wickedness and unrighteousness entail a curse upon posterity. You have an instance of the former in Gen 17:18-20; and you have on the contrary, the warning in Zech 5:4. And you have both together in this passage, “The curse of the LORD is in the house of the wicked; but he blesses the habitation of the just” (Prov 3:33). It is true that both of these imply that the children tread in the steps of their parents (Eze 18). But how frequently it is seen that wicked men breed vain and wicked children – so that it is said of Abijam, “and he walked in all the sins of his father, which he had done before him” (1Kng 15:3). So the curse is entailed from generation to generation. To escape this curse is a choice providence.

(2) But especially take notice what a stream of spiritual blessings and mercies flows from this providence to the inner man. O, it is no common mercy to descend from pious parents. Some of us not only owe our natural life to them, as instruments of our beings, but our spiritual and eternal life also. It was no small mercy to Timothy to be descended from such progenitors (2Tim 1:5), nor to Augustine that he had such a mother as Monica, who planted in his mind the precepts of life with her words, watered them with her tears, and nourished them with her example. We will inspect this mercy a little more particularly, and in doing so we will find manifold mercies contained in it.

What a mercy it was to us to have parents that prayed for us before they had us, as well as in our infancy, when we could not pray for ourselves? Abraham did thus (Gen 15:2) and Hannah (1Sam 1:10-11), and probably some here are the fruits and effects of their parents’ prayers. This was that holy course they continued all their days for you, carrying all your concerns, especially your eternal ones, before the Lord with their own; and pouring out their souls to God so affectionately for you, when their eye-strings and heart-strings were breaking. O put a value upon such mercies, for they are precious. It is a greater mercy to descend from praying parents than from the loins of nobles. See Job’s pious practice (Job 1:5).

What a special mercy it was to us to have the excrescences of corruption nipped in the bud by their pious and careful discipline! We now understand what a critical and dangerous season youth is, the wonderful proclivity of that age to everything that is evil. Why else are they called youthful lusts (2Tim 2:22)? When David asks: “How shall a young man cleanse his way?” it is plainly enough implied in the very question that the way he takes lies through the pollutions of the world in his youth (Psa 119:9). When you find David praying that God would “not remember the sins of my youth” (Psa 25:7), and Job bitterly complaining that God “made me to possess the iniquities of my youth” (Job 13:26), surely you cannot help but reflect with a very thankful heart upon those happy means by which the corruption of your nature was happily prevented, or restrained in your youth.

(3) And how great a mercy it was that we had parents who carefully instilled the good knowledge of God into our souls in our tender years? How diligent Abraham was in this duty (Gen 18:19), and David (1Chr 28:9)! Some of us had parents who might say to us, as the *apostle* did, “My little children of whom I travail in birth again until Christ is formed in you” (Gal 4:19).



As they longed for us before they had us, and rejoiced in us when they had us, so they could not endure to think that when they could have us no more, the devil would. As they thought no pains, care, or cost were too much to feed our bodies, clothe and heal them; so they thought no prayers, counsels, or tears, were too much for our souls, that they might be saved. They knew a parting time would come between them and us, and strived to make it as easy and comfortable for them as they could, by leaving us in Christ and within the blessed bond of His covenant.

They were not glad that we had health, and yet indifferent whether we had grace. They felt the miseries of our souls as much as of our bodies; and nothing was more desirable than they might say in the great day, “Lord, here I am, and the children which you have given me.” <sup>Heb 2.13</sup>

(4) And was it not a special favour to us to have parents that went before us as patterns of holiness, and beat the path to heaven for us by their examples? They could say to us: “do those things you have heard and seen in me” (Php 4:9); and “be followers of me, as I also am of Christ” (1Cor 11:1). The *parents’* life is the *child’s* copy.<sup>1</sup> O, it is no common mercy to have a fair copy set before us, especially in the molding age; we saw what they did, as well as heard what they said. It was Abraham’s commendation, “that he commanded his children and his household *after* him, to keep the way of the LORD.” <sup>Gen 18.19</sup> And some of us have had such mercies also.

Ah, my friends, let me beg you that you will take special notice of this providence which was so graciously worked for you; and that your hearts may be more thoroughly warmed in the sense of it; compare your condition with others, and seriously consider the following.

(1) How many children there are among us that are drawn headlong to hell by their cruel and ungodly parents, who teach them to curse and swear as soon as they can speak! There are many families in which little other language is heard but the dialect of hell. These, like old logs and small twigs, are preparing for the fire of hell where they must burn together. Of such children, that Scripture, Psa 49:19, will one day be verified, unless they repent: “He shall go to the generation of his fathers; they shall never see light”.

(2) And how many families there are, though not so profane, who still bring up their children vainly and sensually, as in Job 21:11; they take no care what becomes of their souls, so long as they provide for their bodies! If they can but teach them to carry their bodies, it makes no matter if the devil actuates their souls. If they can but leave them lands or monies, they think they have very fully discharged their duties. O, what language such parents and children will greet each other with at the judgment-seat, and in hell forever!

(3) And how many there are who are more sober, and yet hate the least appearances of godliness in their children. Instead of cherishing it, they do all they can to break bruised reeds and quench smoking flax, to stifle and strangle the first appearances and offers they make towards Christ! They would rather accompany them to their graves than to Christ, doing all that lies in them, Herod-like, to kill Christ in the cradle! <sup>Mat 2.16</sup> Ah, sirs, you little know what mercy you enjoy or have enjoyed in godly parents, and what a good lot providence cast for you in this affair of your bodies and souls.

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<sup>1</sup> 2Chr 20.32; Eph 5.1; Php 2.20, 22.

If any object that this was not their case, that they had little help heavenward from their parents, then to such I reply as follows.

(1) If you had little furtherance, yet own it as a special providence that you had no hindrance;  
or

(2) If you had opposition, yet admire the grace of God in plucking you out from among them by a wonderful distinguishing hand of mercy,<sup>Zec 3.2</sup> and keeping alive the languishing sparks of grace amidst the floods of opposition.

(3) And learn from this that, if God gives you a posterity of your own, be as strict and careful of your family duties, as you have acutely felt the lack of it in yourselves.

But seeing that such a train of blessings (both as to this life and that to come) follows upon a holy education of children, I will not dismiss the point till I have discharged my duty in exhorting parents and children to their duties.

And first, for you that are *parents*, or to whom the education of children is committed, I beseech you to mind the duty which lies on you. That I may effectually press it, consider these things:

(1) How near the relation is between you and your children, and therefore how much you are concerned in their happiness or misery. Consider but the Scripture account of the dearness of such relations expressed by longings for them (Gen 15:2; 30:1), by our joy when we have them as Christ expresses it (John 16:21), the high value set on them (Gen 42:38), the sympathy with them in all their troubles (Mark 9:22) and by our sorrow at parting from them (Gen 37:35). Now shall all this be to no purpose? For to what purpose do we desire them before we have them, rejoice in them when we have them, value them so highly, sympathize with them so tenderly, grieve for their death so excessively, if in the meantime no care is taken as to what shall become of them to eternity?

(2) How God has charged you with their souls, as well as their bodies. This appears by precepts that are directly laid upon you (Deut 6:6, 7; Eph 6:4) and by precepts that are laid on them to obey you (Eph 6:1) – which plainly implies *your* duty as well as expresses *theirs*.

(3) What will comfort you at the time of their parting, if they die through your neglect in a Christless condition? O this is the cutting consideration: My child is in hell, and I did nothing to prevent it! I helped him there. A duty that is discharged is the only root of comfort in that day.

(4) If you neglect to instruct them in the way of holiness, will the devil neglect to instruct them in the way of wickedness? No, no, if you will not teach them to pray, he will teach them to curse, swear, and lie. If the ground is uncultivated, weeds will spring up.

(5) If the season of their youth is neglected, how little probability is there of any good fruit afterwards? Youth is the molding age (Prov 22:6). How few are converted in old age? A twig is brought to any form, but grown limbs will not bend.

(6) You are instrumental causes of all their spiritual misery, and that comes by generation and imitation. They lie spiritually dead of the plague which you brought home among them: “Behold, I was shaped in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived [or warmed] me” (Psa 51:5)

(7) There is none in the world so likely as you to be instruments of their eternal good. You have peculiar advantages that no one else has; such as the interest you have in their affections; your opportunities to instill the knowledge of Christ into them, being with them daily (Deut 6:7); and your knowledge of their character. If therefore *you* neglect it, who shall help them?

(8) The consideration of the great day should move your emotions to pity them. O remember that text: “And I saw the dead small and great stand before God” (Rev 20:12). What a sad thing it will be to see your dear children at Christ’s left hand? O friends, do your utmost to prevent this misery. “Knowing the terror of the Lord, we persuade men.” <sup>2Cor 5.11</sup>

And you, children, especially you that sprang from religious parents. I beseech you, obey their counsels,<sup>1</sup> and tread in the steps of their pious examples.<sup>2</sup> To press this, I offer the following considerations:

(1) Your disobedience to them is a resisting of God’s authority: “Children, obey your parents in the Lord” (Eph 6:1). *There* is the command. Your rebellion therefore runs higher than you think. It is not man, but God that you disobey; and for your disobedience God will punish you. It may be that their tenderness will not allow them, or you have grown beyond their correction. All they can do is complain to God, and if so, He will handle you more severely than they could do.

(2) Your sin is greater than the sin of young heathens and infidels; and so your account will be also. O it would have been better, if you are a wicked child, that you were the offspring of savage Indians, no, of beasts, than of such parents. So many of your parent’s counsels that were disobeyed, so many hopes and prayers that were frustrated, will turn to sad aggravations.

(3) It is usual with God to retaliate in kind for men’s disobedience to their parents; commonly our own children will pay us back for it. I have read from a grave author, of a wicked wretch that dragged his father along the house. The father begged him not to drag him beyond such a place for, he said, I dragged my father no further. Oh, the sad, but just retributions of God!

And for you in whose hearts grace has been planted by the blessing of education, I beseech you to admire God’s goodness to you in this providence. O what a happy lot God has cast for you! How few children are partakers of your mercies!

See that you honour such parents; the tie is double upon you so to do. Be the joy of their hearts, and the comfort of their lives, if they are alive. If not, remember the mercy while you live, and tread in their pious path, that you and they may both rejoice together in the great day, and bless God for each other to all eternity.

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<sup>1</sup> Exo 20.12; Eph 6.1; Col 2.20; Prov 1.8; Prov 4.1-4.

<sup>2</sup> 2Chr 20.32; Php 2.20; 1Cor 4.15, 11.1; Heb 6.12; 2Th 3.9.

## Chapter 3 – The Work of Conversion

### ***The fourth performance of providence – Conversion.***

*The next remarkable performance of providence for the people of God, is with respect to its ordering the occasions, instruments, and means of their conversion.*

IV. Providence shines forth in nothing more gloriously in this world than in ordering the occasions, instruments and means of conversion of the people of God. However skillfully its hand had moulded your bodies, however tenderly it had preserved them, and however bountifully it had provided for them; if it had not also ordered some means or other for your conversion, then all the former favours and benefits it had done for you meant little. This, O this, is the most excellent benefit you ever received from its hand. You are more indebted to it for this, than for all your other mercies. And in explaining this performance of providence, I cannot help but think your hearts must be deeply affected. This is a subject which every graced heart loves to steep its thoughts in. It is certainly the sweetest history that they ever repeated; they love to think and talk of it. The places where, and instruments by whom, this work was wrought are exceedingly dear to them for the work's sake. Indeed, it is dear to that degree that, for many years after, their hearts have melted when they have but passed occasionally by those places or but seen the faces of those persons that were used as instruments in the hand of providence for their good. Just as no doubt Jacob's Bethel was ever after that night sweet to his thoughts (Gen 48:3), so other saints have had their Bethels as well. O blessed places, times, and instruments! O the deep, sweet impressions, never to be erased out of the memory or heart, that this providence has made upon those on whom it worked this blessed effect at the years of discretion,<sup>1</sup> and in a more perceptible way!

But lest any poor soul be discouraged by the display of this providence because he cannot remember the time, place, instruments, and manner when and by which conversion was worked in him, I will premise this necessary distinction, to prevent injury to some, while I design benefit to others.

Conversion, as to the subjects of it, may be considered two ways; either as it is more clearly worked in persons of riper years, who in their youthful days were more profane and vile; or upon persons in their tender years, into whose hearts grace was more imperceptibly and indiscernibly instilled by God's blessing upon pious education. In the former sort, the distinct acts of the Spirit in illuminating, convincing, humbling, drawing them to Christ, and sealing them, are more evident and discernible. In the latter, these are more obscure and confused. They can remember that God gave them an esteem and liking for godly persons, care for their duty, and conscience about sin; but as to the time, place, instruments and manner of the work, they can give only a slender account of them. However, if the work is savingly worked in them, there is no reason they should be troubled because the circumstances of it are not so evident to them as they are to others. Let the substance and reality of the work appear, and there is no reason to trouble yourselves because of the lack of evidence of such circumstances.

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<sup>1</sup> The age of judging right from wrong, typically 13 years of age. The Jews celebrate a *bar mitzvah* then.

But where the circumstances as well as substance are clear to a man, when we can recall the time, place, and instrument by whom that work was wrought, it must be exceedingly sweet, and they cannot help but yield a fresh delight to the soul every time they are reflected upon.

There are many of the following occasions which, it may be, we took for *stragglers* when they first happened to us, but they proved to be scouts sent out from the main body of providence, which they make way for.

Now there are various things in those providences regarding this work, which are exceedingly sweet and captivating, namely:

*1. The wonderful strangeness and unaccountableness of the work of providence in casting us into the way and ordering the occasions, indeed, the minutest circumstances about this work.* Thus you find that the Eunuch, at the very instant when he was reading the prophet Isaiah, had an interpreter, one among a thousand, who joins his chariot just as his mind was prepared by a fit occasion to receive the first light of the knowledge of Christ (Acts 8:26-30).

And how strange was that change (however far it went) for Naaman the Syrian, as recorded in 2Kng 5:1-4,<sup>1</sup> that the Syrians, in their incursion into Israel, would bring away this girl (likely her beauty was the inducement) and present her to Naaman's wife [as a servant]; and that she would relate to her [mistress] the power of God that accompanied the prophet – though you find in that particular case there had never been an instance [of such healing] before (Luke 4:27).<sup>2</sup> Doubtless this whole affair was guided by the signal direction of providence.

So too for the conversion of the Samaritans, it is observed that Christ *must* go that way (John 4:4) – it lay just on the road between Judea and Galilee – and at the sixth hour, i.e., high noon, he rests himself at Jacob's well, still seeming to have no other design but his own refreshment by sitting and drinking there. But O what a train of blessed providences follow this event which seemed to be only an accidental thing! First the woman of Samaria and then many more in that city are brought to believe in Christ, as you find in verses 29 and 41.

It is noted by Melchior Adams in the *Life of Junius*<sup>3</sup> how much of an atheist he was in his younger years; but in order to bring about his conversion to God, first a wonderful preservation of his life in a public tumult at Lyons in France must take place, which forces from him the acknowledgment of a Deity. Then his father sends for him to come home, and with much

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<sup>1</sup> **2 Kings 5:1** Now Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Syria, was a great and honorable man in the eyes of his master, because by him the LORD had given victory to Syria. He was also a mighty man of valor, *but* a leper. <sup>2</sup> And the Syrians had gone out on raids, and had brought back captive a young girl from the land of Israel. She waited on Naaman's wife. <sup>3</sup> Then she said to her mistress, "If only my master *were* with the prophet who *is* in Samaria! For he would heal him of his leprosy." <sup>4</sup> And Naaman went in and told his master, saying, "Thus and thus said the girl who *is* from the land of Israel."

<sup>2</sup> **Luk 4:27** "And there were many lepers in Israel in the time of Elisha the prophet; and none of them was cleansed, but only Naaman the Syrian."

<sup>3</sup> Melchior Adam's Vitae Theol. [*Lives of Modern Theologians*]. part 2. p. 194. **Melchior Adams** (1545-1604) Professor of Rhetoric at Heidelberg. **Franciscus Junius** (1545-1602) a famed Huguenot scholar and theologian who refuted Arminius' claim that predestination makes God the Author of Sin.

gentleness persuades him to read the Scriptures. He lights upon the first epistle of John, and with it he feels a divine supernatural majesty and power seizing his soul, which brought him to a complete conversion to Jesus Christ. Thus, as the woman of Tekoa told David, God devises means to bring back His banished (2Sam 14:14).

Lavater tells us that many Spanish soldiers going into the wars of Germany were converted to Christ there by going into the cities and towns where there were godly ministers and Christians.

Robert Bolton,<sup>1</sup> though an excellent scholar, was in his younger years a very irreligious person and a jeerer of holy men; but being cast into the company of godly Mr. Peacock, he was brought to repentance by him and proved a famous instrument in the Church of Christ.

A scrap of paper, accidentally coming into view, has been used as an occasion for conversion.<sup>2</sup> This was the case of a minister in Wales, who had two livings, but took little care of either one. Being at a fair, he bought something at a peddler's stall, and tore off a leaf of Mr. Perkins' Catechism to wrap it in; reading a line or two in it, God drove it home so that it did the work.

The marriage of a godly man into a carnal family has been ordered by providence for the conversion and salvation of many in that family. Thus we read in the life of that renowned English worthy, John Bruen,<sup>3</sup> that in his second marriage it was agreed that he should have one year's time in his mother-in-laws house. During his abode there that year the Lord was pleased by this means to graciously work upon her soul, and also upon his wife's sister and half-sister, and their brothers William and Thomas Fox, with one or two of the servants in that family.

The reading of a good book has been the means of bringing others to Christ. And thus we find many of the German divines converted by reading Luther's books; indeed, it is more strange that Sleyden, in his Commentary, tells us that Vergerius,<sup>4</sup> though he was an eye and ear witness to that doleful case of Spira,<sup>5</sup> which one would think should move a stone, yet he still continued so firm to the pope's interest that when he fell into some suspicion among the cardinals, he resolved to purge himself by writing a book against the German apostates. But as he read the Protestant books, out of no other design but to confute them, and was weighing the arguments, he was himself convinced and brought to Christ. Finding himself thus overcome by the truth, he imparts his conviction to his brother, also a zealous papist. This brother deplores the misery of his case and seeks to reclaim him; but Vergerius entreating him to weigh well the Protestant arguments, his brother also yields. And so both immediately gave themselves to preaching justification by the free grace of God through the blood of Christ.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Bolton (1572-1631), described as the greatest classical scholar of his time. Author of *The Practice of Piety*.

<sup>2</sup> Giles Firmin, *Real Christian* (Dorman Newman pub., London, 1670) p. 119. Puritan minister and physician (1614-1697); ousted from his pulpit in the Great Ejection of 1662; a deacon in First Church in Boston.

<sup>3</sup> John Bruen (1560 – 1625) English Puritan, celebrated for his piety. Bruen maintained a preacher at his own house, and later maintained one for the parish. Bruen's house became a gathering place of celebrated Puritans.

<sup>4</sup> Sleyden, *Comment.*, p. 479. Pier (also: Pietro) Paolo Vergerio (c. 1498 – 1565) Italian religious reformer.

<sup>5</sup> Perhaps the most widely-known example of despair in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries was the case of an Italian lawyer Francis Spira. In 1548, Spira converted to Lutheranism and began to spread the Lutheran message to others. Under pressure from the Catholic Church, however, he renounced his Protestant faith. He then became convinced that he was a reprobate, destined for hell. The story of Spira spread throughout Europe, surfacing in sermons and treatises dealing with despair. <http://history.hanover.edu/courses/excerpts/260spira.html>

Indeed, not only reading a book or hearing a minister, but which is most remarkable, the very mistake or forgetfulness of a minister has been improved by providence for this end and purpose. Once preaching to his congregation, Augustine forgot the argument which he first proposed,<sup>1</sup> and attacked the error of the Manicheans<sup>2</sup> beside his first intention. By this discourse, he converted his hearer, Firmus, who fell down at his feet weeping and confessing that he had lived as a Manichean for many years.

Another I knew who, going to preach, picked up a different Bible than he intended. He was put to some loss by it – not only missing his notes, but the chapter in which his text lay. But after a short pause he resolved to speak on any other Scripture that might be presented to him and accordingly read this text: “The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness” (2Pet 3:9). And though he had nothing prepared, the Lord helped him to speak both methodically and pertinently from it. By this discourse a gracious change was worked upon someone in the congregation who has since given good evidence of a sound conversion; and he acknowledged that this sermon was the first and only means of it.

The accompaniment of others in a neighbourly visit has been ruled over to the same end. Thus many of the Jews accompanied Mary to Bethany, intending only to show their civil respect, but there they met Christ, saw the things which He did, and believed on Him (John 11:45).

Firmin tells us<sup>3</sup> of one who lived many years in a town where Christ had been as clearly preached as in any town in England. This man, when he was about seventy-six years of age, went to visit a sick neighbor. “A Christian friend of mine,” says my author, “came to see him also. And finding this old man there, whom he judged to be someone who lived upon his own stock, civility, good works, etc., he purposely began a discourse to show how many persons lived upon their duties, but never came to Christ. The old man sitting by the bedside heard him; and God was pleased to convince him that *he* was such a person, who had lived upon himself without Christ to that day; and this man would say afterwards, ‘had I died before threescore and sixteen, I would have perished, for I did not know Christ.’”

Committing a godly man to prison has been the method of providence to save the soul of a poor prison guard. So Paul was made a *prisoner* to make his guard a spiritual freeman (Acts 16:27-34). Dr. Barnes in Queen Mary’s days had similar success; afterwards he celebrated the Lord’s Supper in prison with his converted keeper.

The scattering of *ministers* and *Christians* by persecution from cities and towns into the ignorant and barbarous parts of the country, has been the way of providence to find and bring home to Jesus Christ some lost sheep that were found there (Acts 8:1, 4). Similar signal events have since followed upon the scattering of godly ministers, of which there are many outstanding instances at this day.

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<sup>1</sup> Possidonium in vita Augustini, cap. 15.

<sup>2</sup> *Manichaeism: A religion founded by Manes in the third century; a synthesis of Zoroastrian dualism between light and dark, Babylonian folklore, Buddhist ethics, and superficial elements of Christianity.*

<sup>3</sup> Firmin, *ibid.* pp. 97-98.

A *servant* running away from his master (probably for no other reason than to live an idle life), falls into such places and company as providence orders (in a design unknown to him). He is thereby brought to become the servant of Christ. This was the very case of Onesimus. He ran away from his master Philemon to Rome where, by a strange providence (possibly out of mere curiosity to see the prisoners), he falls into Paul's hands, who brought him to Christ in his bonds (Phm 10-16).

Going to hear a sermon in jest has proved some men's conversion in earnest. The above named Mr. Firmin tells us of a notorious drunkard whom the drunkards called "father" that one day intended to hear what Wilson said,<sup>1</sup> out of no other design, it seems, but to scoff at that holy man. But in the prayer before the sermon his heart began to thaw. And when Wilson read his text, "Sin no more, lest a worse thing come to you" (John 5:14), he could not contain himself. In that sermon, the Lord changed his heart, though he was so bitter an enemy that the minister on lecture-days was afraid to go past his shop door to church. "Behold, these are parts of his ways, but how small a portion is known of him?" (Job 26:14).

Dropping some grave and weighty word accidentally in the presence of vain carnal persons, the death of a husband, wife, or child, a fit of sickness, or a thousand other similar occasions, have been improved by providence to the conversion of souls.

And no less remarkable and wonderful are the designs of providence in ordering the *removals* and governing the *movements* of ministers from place to place, for the conversion of souls. Thus it often carries them to places where they did not intend to go – God, unknown to them, having some elect vessels there who must be called by the Gospel.

Thus Paul and Timothy, a sweet and lovely pair, when they were traveling through Phrygia and Galatia, were forbidden to preach the Word in Asia, which their minds were inclined to do (Acts 16:6). And when "they attempted to go into Bithynia, the Spirit did not allow them" (verse 7). But a man of Macedonia, i.e., an angel in the shape or habit of a man of that country, appeared to Paul in a vision and asked him to, "Come over into Macedonia, and help us" (verse 9). And there God opened the heart of Lydia (Acts 16:14).

I knew a pious minister, now with God, who falling in his study upon a very rousing subject that was intended for his own congregation, was strongly moved when he finished to go to a rude, vile, profane people about five miles off and first preach it to them. After many wrestlings with himself, and not willing to quench any motion that might come from the Spirit of God, he obeyed and went to this people. They then had no minister of their own, and few dared to come among them. There, beyond all expectation, the Lord opened a door – several profane ones

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<sup>1</sup> Probably John Wilson (c.1591–1667), Puritan minister of the First Church of Boston (along with John Cotton) from its beginnings in Charlestown in 1630 until his death in 1667. He was an attending minister during the execution of Mary Dyer in 1660, a parishioner who preached Quakerism against the Puritan laws of the colony. Another Quaker parishioner, Anne Hutchinson, hosted large groups of followers in her home. She criticized Wilson's strict orthodoxy and denounced creeds and ordination. She highlighted every difference in teaching between Wilson and Cotton, her mentor. This led to a split in the church, and to the *Antinomian Controversy* (1636-1638). Hutchinson was eventually tried and banished from the colony along with her brother-in-law, John Wheelwright. Afterward, Wilson and Cotton worked together to heal the doctrinal and social rifts in the church which these two women had fomented.



received Christ in that place. They engaged this minister to give a weekly lecture among them, from which many souls were won to God.

This same holy man at another time, being on a journey, passed by a company of vain persons who were wrestling on a green near the road. Just as he came near the place, one of them threw his antagonist and stood triumphing in his own strength and activity. This good man rode up to them, and turning his speech to this person, told him: "Friend, I see that you are a strong man; but let not the strong man glory in his strength.<sup>Jer 9.23</sup> You must know that you are not to wrestle with flesh and blood, but with principalities and powers, and spiritual wickedness.<sup>Eph 6.12</sup> How sad it would be if Satan at last tripped the heels of your hope, and overthrew you eternally!" After about a quarter of an hour's serious discourse on this subject, he left them and went on his journey. But this discourse made such an impression, that the person had no rest till he confided his trouble to a godly minister, who wisely following the work upon this man's soul, saw at last the blessed issue of it in the gracious change of this person; afterwards the man gave the minister a joyful account of it. O how unsearchable the methods of providence are in this matter!

No, what is yet more wonderful is that the providence of God has sometimes ordered the very malice of Satan and the wickedness of men as occasions to do eternal good to their souls. I shall give the reader a very memorable example of this here, faithfully relating what, not many years past, occurred in my own observation in this place, to the astonishment of many spectators.

In the year 1673, there came into this port<sup>1</sup> a ship of Poole, on her return from Virginia. In this ship was someone from that place, a lusty young man of twenty-three years of age, who was surgeon in the ship. This person fell into a deep melancholy on the voyage, which the devil greatly improved to serve his own design for the ruin of this poor man. However, it pleased the Lord to restrain the man from any attempts upon his own life until he arrived here. But shortly after his arrival, on the Lord's day, early in the morning (being in bed with his brother), he took a knife prepared for that purpose and cut his own throat, and then leapt out of the bed. Though the wound was deep and large, but thinking it might not dispatch his wretched life soon enough, he desperately thrust the knife into his stomach; and so he lay wallowing in his own blood till his brother, awakening, made a cry for help. Immediately after, a physician and a surgeon coming in, found the wound in his throat mortal; all they could do at present was to stitch it and apply a plaster with the intent to enable him to speak for a little while, rather than expecting a cure; for before that, he breathed through the wound and his voice was inarticulate.

I found him in this condition that morning. Apprehending that he was within a few minutes of eternity, I laboured to work upon his heart the sense of his condition. I told him I had but little time to do anything for him, and therefore I desired him to let me know what his own apprehensions of his present condition were. He told me he hoped in God for eternal life. I replied that I feared his hopes were ill-grounded, for the Scripture tells us: "No murderer has eternal life abiding in him."<sup>1John 3:15</sup> But this was self-murder, the grossest of all murders. Insisting on the aggravation and heinousness of the fact, I perceived that his vain confidence began to fall, and some melting of his heart appeared. He then began to lament his sin and misery with many tears and asked me if there might yet be hope for one who had destroyed himself and shed his own blood. I replied, the sin indeed is great but not unpardonable, and if the Lord gave

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<sup>1</sup> Dartmouth.

him repentance unto life, and faith to apply to Jesus Christ, it would certainly be pardoned for him. Finding him unacquainted with these things, I explained to him the nature and necessity of faith and repentance, which he greedily sucked in; and with great vehemence he cried to God that He would work them upon his soul. He entreated me also to pray *with* him and *for* him, that it might be so. I prayed with him and the Lord exceedingly thawed his heart in that duty. He was loathe to part with me, but the duties of the day necessitated me leaving him. I briefly summed up what was most necessary in my parting counsel to him and took my leave, never expecting to see him more in this world. But beyond my own and all men's expectation, he continued all that day and panted most ardently after Jesus Christ. No discourses pleased him but *Christ* and *faith*, and I found him in this frame in the evening. He rejoiced greatly to see me again and entreated me to continue my discourses upon these subjects; and after all this he told me: "Sir, the Lord has given me repentance for this sin; <sup>Act 11.18</sup> indeed, and for every other sin. I see the evil of sin now, as I never saw it before. O, I loathe myself; <sup>Job 42.6</sup> I am a vile creature in my own eyes! I do also believe; *Lord, help my unbelief.* <sup>Mk 9.24</sup> I am heartily willing to take Christ upon His own terms. Only one thing troubles me. I doubt this bloody sin will be pardoned. Will Jesus Christ apply His blood to me that has shed my own blood?" I told him Christ shed His blood even for those who with wicked hands had shed the blood of Christ – and that was a sin of deeper guilt than his. "Well," he said, "I will throw myself upon Christ. Let him do by me what he will." And so I parted with him that night.

Next morning the wounds were to be opened, and then the opinion of the surgeons was that he would immediately expire. Accordingly, at his desire, I came that morning and found him in a most serious frame. I prayed with him; and then the wound in his stomach was opened. By this time the ventricle itself was swollen out of the *orifice* of the wound; it lay like a livid discoloured *tripe* upon his body and it was also cut through – so that all concluded it was impossible for him to live. However they stitched the wound in his stomach, enlarged the orifice and bathed it, and worked it back into his body. Stitching up the skin, they left him to the disposal of providence.

But so it was that both the deep wound in his throat and this wound in his stomach healed. And the more dangerous wound that sin had made upon his soul was, I trust, effectually healed also. I spent many hours with him in that sickness; and after his return home, I received this account from Mr. Samuel Hardy, a minister in that town, part of which I shall transcribe.

*Dear Sir,*

*I was much troubled at the sad providence in your town, but rejoiced much that he fell into such hands for his body and soul. You have taken great pains with him, and I hope to good purpose. I think if ever a great and thorough work were done in such a way, it is now; and if never the like was done, I am persuaded that now it is. Never grow weary of such good works. One such instance is, I think, enough to make you abound in the work of the Lord all your days...*

O how unsearchable the ways of providence in leading men to Christ! Let none be encouraged by this to sin so that grace may abound. <sup>Rom 6.1</sup> These are rare and singular instances of the mercy of God, and they are such that no presumptuous sinner can expect to find them. It is only recited here to the honour of providence, which works for the recovery of sinners in ways that we do not understand.

2. *Just as providence orders very strange occasions to awaken and arouse souls at first, so it works no less wonderfully in carrying on the work to perfection.* It does this in two ways.

*First*, by reviving dying convictions and concerns about sin. Souls, after their first awakening, are apt to lose the sense and impression of their first concerns about sin. But providence is vigilant to prevent it, and does *effectually* prevent it. Sometimes providence directs the minister to some discourse or passage that will fall as pat as if the case of such a person had been studied by him, and the discourse was designed to speak to it. How often have I found this in the cases of many souls who have professed they have stood amazed to hear the very thoughts of their hearts revealed by the preacher, who knew nothing about them! Sometimes providence directs them to some proper rousing Scripture that suits their present case, and sometimes it permits them to fall into some new sin which awakens all their former troubles again, and puts a new efficacy and activity into the conscience. The world is full of instances of all these cases. And because most Christians have experienced these things themselves, it is needless to recite them here. Search but a few years back, and you may remember that, according to this account (at least in some particulars), providence ordered the matter with you. Have you not found some rod or other prepared by providence to rouse you out of your security? Why, this is so common a thing with Christians that many times they presage an affliction coming from the frames in which they find their own hearts.

*Secondly*, providence gives great assistance to the work of the Spirit upon the soul by means of ordering, supporting, relieving, and cheering, to prop up and comfort the soul when it is overburdened and ready to sink in the depths of troubles. I remember Mr. Bolton gives us one instance which fits both these cases – the reviving of convictions, and seasonable supports in the depths of troubles. It is about a person who by convictions had been fetched from his wicked companions and entered into a reformed course of life. But after this, through the enticement of his old companions, the subtlety of Satan and the corruption of his own heart, he again relapsed into the ways of sin. Then he was providentially brought to view this Scripture,

Pro 1.24-26 Because I have called and you refused, I have stretched out my hand and no one regarded,<sup>25</sup> Because you disdained all my counsel, And would have none of my rebuke,<sup>26</sup> I also will laugh at your calamity; I will mock when your terror comes.

This renewed his trouble; indeed, it aggravated it to a greater height than ever – so much that he scarcely thought his sin could be pardoned, as the story was related. But in this condition, Luke 17:4,<sup>1</sup> was presented to him, which sweetly settled him into a sure and glorious peace.

Nor can we here forget that miraculous work of providence, in a time of great extremity, which was worked for that good gentlewoman Mrs. Honeywood. Under a deep and sad desertion, she refused and put off all comfort, seeming to utterly despair of the grace and mercy of God. A worthy minister was with her one day, and reasoning against her desperate conclusions, she took a Venice-glass from the table and said: “Sir, I am as sure to be damned as this glass is to be broken”, and threw it forcibly to the ground. But to the astonishment of both, the glass remained

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<sup>1</sup> **Luk 17.4** And if he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times in a day returns to you and says, ‘I repent,’ you shall forgive him.

whole and sound. The minister, taking up the glass with admiration, rebuked her presumption. He showed her what a wonder providence had worked for her satisfaction, and it greatly altered the attitude of her mind. "How unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out!" (Rom 11:33). "Behold, these are parts of his ways, but how little a portion is heard of him!" (Job 26:14).

And now let me expostulate a little with your soul, reader. Have you been duly aware of your obligation to providence for this inestimable favour? O what it has done for you! There are various kinds of mercies conveyed to men by the hand of providence, but none like this; in all the treasury of its benefits none is found like this. Did it throw you into the way of conversion, and order for you the means and occasions for it, when you little thought of any such thing? How dear and sweet the remembrance of it would be to your soul! I think it would astonish and melt you every time you reflected on it. Such mercies should never grow stale or look like common things to you, for seriously consider only the following particulars.

1. *How surprising* was the mercy which providence performed for you in that day! providence had a design on you for your eternal good, which you did not understand. The time of mercy had now fully come; the decree was now ready to bring forth that mercy with which it had grown big from eternity; and its gracious design must be executed by the hand of providence, so far as it concerned the external means and instruments of it. How aptly did it cause all things to fall in with that design, though you did not know the meaning of it? Look over all the before-mentioned examples, and you will see the blessed work of conversion begun upon those souls, when they minded it no more than Saul minded a kingdom that morning he went out "to seek his father's asses" (1Sam 9:3, 20). Providence might truly have said to you in that day, as Christ said to Peter: "What I do you do not know now, but you will know it afterward." (John 13:7). God's thoughts are not as our thoughts; but as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are His thoughts higher than ours, and His ways than our ways.<sup>Isa 55.9</sup> Little did Zacchaeus think, when he climbed up into the sycamore tree to see Christ as He passed that way, what a design of mercy Christ had upon him – who took this occasion to become both his Guest and Saviour (Luke 19:5-8). And as little did some of you think what the aim of providence was when you went (some out of habit, some out of curiosity, if not worse ends), to hear such a sermon. O how stupendous are the ways of God!

2. What a distinguishing and seasonable mercy was ushered in by providence in that day! It brought you to the means of salvation in a good hour, in the very nick of time. When the angel troubled the waters, you were brought to the pool (John 5:4). Now the accepted day had come;<sup>1</sup> the Spirit was in the ordinance or providence that converted you, and you were placed in its way. It may be that you had heard many hundreds of sermons before, but nothing would stick till now, because the hour had not come. The Lord, as it were, called in the word for such a man, or such a woman. And providence said: "Lord, here he is, I have brought him before you." There were many others under that sermon who received no such mercy. You yourselves had heard many before, but not to that advantage. As it is said: "And many lepers were in Israel in the time of Elisha the prophet; and none of them was cleansed, except Naaman the Syrian" (Luke 4:27). So there were many poor, unconverted souls beside you under the Word that day; and it may be that

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<sup>1</sup> **2Cor 6:2** "In an acceptable time I have heard you, And in the day of salvation I have helped you." Behold, now *is* the accepted time; behold, now *is* the day of salvation.

salvation was sent to none of them that day but you. O blessed providence that placed you in the way of mercy at that time!

What a weighty and important mercy was providentially directed to your souls that day. There are mercies of all sizes and kinds in the hands of providence to dispense to the sons of men. Its left hand is full of blessings as well as its right. It has health and riches, honours and pleasures, as well as Christ and salvation to dispense. The world is full of its left hand favours; but the blessings of its right hand are invaluablely precious, and there are few who receive them. It performs thousands of kind offices for men. But among them all, this is the chief one: to lead and direct them to Christ. For consider,

- (1) Of all mercies, this comes through the most and the greatest difficulties (Eph 1:19-20).
- (2) This is a spiritual mercy, excelling all others in the dignity of its nature – more than gold excels the dirt under your feet (Rev 3:18). One such gift is worth thousands of other mercies.
- (3) This is a mercy immediately flowing out of the fountain of God's electing love, a mercy that is never dropped into any but an elect vessel (1Thes 1:4-5).
- (4) This is a mercy that infallibly secures salvation; for as we may argue backward from conversion to election, so we may argue forward from conversion to salvation (Heb 6:9).
- (5) *Lastly*, this is an eternal mercy, one which will stick by you when father, mother, wife, children, estate, honours, health and life fail you (John 4:14).

O, therefore, set a special mark upon that providence that placed you in the way of this mercy. It has performed for you what all the ministers on earth and angels in heaven could never have performed. This is a mercy that puts weight and value into the smallest circumstance that relates to it.

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## Chapter 4 – Our Employment

### *The fifth performance of providence – Calling.*

V. Thus you have heard how instrumental providence has been in ordering the means and occasions of the greatest mercies for your souls. Let us now take into consideration another excellent performance of providence, respecting the good of both your bodies and souls. It concerns that employment and calling which providence has ordered for you in this world. It not only has an eye on your well-being in the world to come, but on your well-being in this world also; and that very much depends upon the station and vocation to which providence calls you.

Now the providence of God with respect to our civil callings may be displayed very takingly in the following particulars.

*1. In directing you to a calling in your youth, and not permitting you to live an idle, useless, and sinful life, as many do who are but burdens to the earth,<sup>1</sup> the cysts of the body politic, serving only to disfigure and drain it, to eat what others earn. Sin brought about sweat (Gen 3:19), but now, not to sweat increases sin. He that lives idly cannot live honestly, as it is plainly enough intimated in 1Thes 4:11-12:*

*Aspire to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business, and to work with your own hands, as we commanded you,<sup>12</sup> that you may walk properly toward those who are outside, and that you may lack nothing.*

But when God puts men into a lawful calling, in which the labour of their hands or heads is sufficient for them, it is a very valuable mercy; for in so doing they “eat their own bread” (2Thes 3:12). Many a sad temptation is happily prevented, and they are ordinarily furnished by it for works of mercy to others, and surely “it is more blessed to give than to receive.”<sup>Act 20.35</sup>

*2. In ordering you to such callings and employments in the world that are not only lawful in themselves but most suitable to you.* There are many persons employed in sinful trades and arts, merely to furnish other men’s lusts. They not only sin in their employments, but their very employments are sinful. They trade for hell, and are factors<sup>2</sup> for the devil. Demetrius and the craftsmen at Ephesus got their estates by making shrines for Diana (Acts 19:24-25), i.e., little cases or boxes with folding leaves, within which the image of that idol sat enshrined. These were carried about by the people in procession in honour of their idol. Even today, how many wicked arts and employments are invented, and multitudes of persons are maintained by them, merely to gratify the pride and wantonness of a debauched<sup>3</sup> age!

Now to have an honest and lawful employment, in which you do not dishonour God in benefiting yourselves, is no small mercy. But if it is not only lawful in itself, but suited to your genius and

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<sup>1</sup> *fruges consumere nati* – born to consume fruits.

<sup>2</sup> *Factor*: a businessman who buys or sells for another in exchange for a commission or personal gain.

<sup>3</sup> *Debauched*: unrestrained by convention or morality.

strength, there is a double mercy in it. Some poor creatures are engaged in callings that eat up their time and strength, and make their lives very uncomfortable for them. They not only have consuming and wasting employments in the world, but these allow them little or no time for their general calling; and yet all this labor merely keeps them and theirs alive. Therefore, if God has fitted you with an honest employment in which you have less toil than others, and more time for heavenly exercises, then ascribe this benefit to the special care of providence for you.

3. *In settling you in such an employment and calling in the world, to which possibly neither you nor your parents ever expected you would attain.* There are among us such persons who are signally obliged to divine providence on this account. God has put them into such a way as neither they nor their parents ever planned. For look how the needle in the compass turns now this way, then that way, and never ceases moving till it settles to the north point; it is just so in our settlement in the world. A child is now designed for this, then for that, but at last settles in that way of employment to which providence designed him. How strangely things are wheeled about by providence! Not what we or our parents designed, but what *God* designed shall take place. Amos was very meanly employed at first; but God designed him for a more honourable and comfortable calling (Amos 7:14-15). David followed the ewes, and probably never raised his thoughts to higher things in the days of his youth; but God made him the royal shepherd of a better flock (Psa 78:70-71). Peter and Andrew were employed as fishermen, but Christ called them from that to a higher calling, to be “fishers of men” (Mat 4:18-19). When Pareus<sup>1</sup> was fourteen years old, by the instigation of his stepmother he was placed with an apothecary;<sup>2</sup> but providence so worked that he was taken from that and fitted for the ministry, in which he became a fruitful and eminent instrument to the Church. James Andreas<sup>3</sup>, because of his father’s inability to keep him at school, was intended to be a carpenter. But afterwards, by the persuasion of friends and the assistance of the church-flock, he was sent to Stuttgart, and from there to the University. And so he attained a very eminent station of service to the Church. A master builder, Oecolampadius<sup>4</sup> was designed by his father to be a merchant; but his mother, by urgent entreaties, prevailed to keep him at school, and this man was a blessed instrument in the reformation of religion. I might easily cite multitudes of such persons, but a taste may suffice.

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<sup>1</sup> **David Pareus** (1548-1622) At age 14, David was sent to study in Hirschberg. His schoolmaster taught him that in the sacrament, one feeds on Jesus’ Body only *spiritually* by *faith*. The schoolmaster was banished from the city. David’s father disinherited him for adopting his schoolmaster’s position. His schoolmaster paid for him to study at Heidelberg under Ursinus and Zanchius, where he became Master of the College of Sapience. In 1594, the Lutherans accused the University professors of false doctrine. Pareus, spokesman for the professors, overcame the Lutheran arguments. His fame brought students from several countries to hear him. In 1618, Pareus was chosen to attend the Synod at Dort (but he had to excuse himself due to ill health).

<sup>2</sup> *Apothecary*: a pharmacist or druggist.

<sup>3</sup> **James Andreas** (1528–1590) In 1557 he went to the diet of Ratisbon with Christopher duke of Wirtemberg. He was appointed one of the secretaries at the conference at Worms between the papists and the divines of the Augustan confession. The same year he published his first work on the Lord’s Supper. In 1559 he was sent to Augsburg, where the diet of the empire was held. There he preached two sermons before all the princes of the Augustan confession, one on justification, the other on the Lord’s supper; both were printed at Tubingen, and very popular. – from *Chalmers’ Biography* 1812 [vol. 2, p. 196]

<sup>4</sup> **Johannes Oecolampadius** [Hussgen] (1482–1531) German religious reformer. In 1528 Oecolampadius and Zwingli took part in the disputation at Bern which led to the adoption of the new faith in that canton, and in the following year to the discontinuance of the Roman Catholic Mass at Basel.

4. *In securing your estates from ruin.* “Have you not made a hedge around him, and all that he has?” (Job 1:10). This is the enclosure of providence, which secures for us, by its favour, what we acquire by way of honest industry.

5. *In making your calling sufficient for you.* It was the prayer of Moses for the tribe of Judah: “Let his hands be sufficient for him” (Deut 33:7), and it is no small mercy if yours are sufficient for you. There are some that have work, but not the strength to go through with it; others have strength, but no employment for it. Some have hands and work for them, but it is not sufficient for them and theirs. If God blesses your labours, so as to give you and yours necessary support and comfort in the world by it, then it is a choice providence; and it is to be acknowledged with all thankfulness.

**Objection 1:** If any who fear God complain *that although they have a calling, it is a hard and laborious one which takes up too much of their time, and they would gladly be employed in other and better work,* I answer,

(1) that it is likely that the wisdom of providence foresaw that this is the most suitable and proper employment for you; and that if you had more ease and rest, you might have more temptations than you now have. The strength and time which is now taken up in your daily labours, in which you serve God, might otherwise have been spent upon such lusts in which you might have served the devil.

(2) Moreover, it may be that your health is better preserved by it, and natural refreshments are made sweeter to you. “The sleep of a labouring man is sweet, whether he eats little or much: but the abundance of the rich will not allow him to sleep” (Ecc 5:12).

(3) And as to the service of God, if your hearts are spiritual, then you may enjoy much communion with God in your employments, and you have some intervals and respites for that purpose. Do you not have more spare hours than you employ to that end?

**Objection 2:** “*But all my labours will scarcely suffice to procure me and mine the necessaries of life. I am kept short and low to what others are, and this is a sad affliction.*”

Though the wisdom of providence has ordered you a lower and poorer condition than others, consider how many there are that are lower than you in the world. You have but a little of the world, yet others have less. Read the description of those persons (Job 30:4, etc.). God has given you but a small portion of the world, yet if you are godly, He has promised never to forsake you (Heb 13:5). Providence has ordered that condition for you which is really best for your eternal good. If you had more of the world than you have, your heads and hearts might not be able to manage it to your advantage. A small boat must have but a narrow sail. You have not lacked the necessities of life up to now, and are commanded “having food and raiment (though none of the finest) to be therewith content.”<sup>1Tim 6:8</sup> “The little that a righteous man has is better than the riches of many wicked” (Psa 37:16): it is better in the acquisition, sweeter in the fruition, and more comfortable in the account.

Well then, if providence has so disposed all of you that you can eat your own bread, and has so advantageously directed some of you to employments that afford not only necessities for yourselves and your families, but a surplus for works of mercy to others, and all this was brought about for you in a way you did not plan, then let God be acknowledged and honoured in this providence. Will you not from now on call Him: “My Father, the guide of my youth” (Jer 3:4)?



Surely it was the Lord that guided you to settle as you did in those days of your youth. You reap at this day, and may to your last day, the fruits of those early providences in your youth.

Now see that you walk accountable to the obligations of providence in this particular. And see to it, in the fear of God, that you do not to His dishonor, abuse any of those things which He has worked for your comfort. To prevent this, I will drop a few necessary cautions here, and conclude this particular point.

*Caution 1:* Do not be slothful and idle in your vocations. It is said that Augustus built an Apragapolis, a city void of business; but I am sure God never erected any city, town, or family to that end. The command to Adam [to toil by the sweat of his brow] (Gen 3:19) no doubt reaches to all his posterity; and Gospel-commands bind it upon Christians.<sup>1</sup> If you are negligent, you cannot be innocent.

*Caution 2:* And yet do not be so intent upon your particular callings as to make them interfere with your general calling. Beware you do not lose your God in the crowd and hurry of earthly business. Mind that solemn warning: “But those that would be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and hurtful lusts, which drown men in destruction and perdition” (1Tim 6:9). The inhabitants of Ænoë, a dry island near Athens, laboured hard to draw water from a river to make the island fruitful. But when the sluices were opened, the waters flowed so abundantly that it overflowed the island and drowned the inhabitants. The application is obvious. It was an excellent saying of Seneca: “I do not *give* myself, but *lend* myself to business.”

*Caution 3:* Always remember that the success of your callings and earthly employments is by divine blessing, not human diligence alone. “But you shall remember the LORD your God; for it is he that gives you power to get wealth” (Deut 8:18). The devil himself was so orthodox as to acknowledge this: “Have you not made a hedge around him, and around his house, and around all that he has on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands” (Job 1:10). Therefore commend your affairs to God in prayer. “Delight yourself also in the LORD; and he shall give you the desires of your heart. Commit your way unto the LORD; trust also in him, and he shall bring it to pass” (Psa 37:4-5). And do not meddle with what you cannot commend to God in prayer for a blessing.

*Caution 4:* Be well-satisfied in that station and employment in which providence has placed you, and do not even wish you were in another. “Let every man abide in the same calling in which he was called” (1Cor 7:20). Providence is wiser than you, and you may be confident it has suited all things better to your eternal good than you could do if you had been left to your own option.

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<sup>1</sup> **Rom 12:11** “Not slothful in business; fervent in spirit; serving the Lord;” **1Thes 4:11**, “And that you learn to be quiet, and to do your own business, and to work with your own hands, as we commanded you.”

## Chapter 5 – Family Affairs

### *The sixth performance of providence – Marriage.*

VI. That providence has a special hand in our marriage is evident both from Scripture assertions and the acknowledgments of holy men, who in that great event of their lives have still owned and acknowledged the directing hand of providence. Take an instance of both. The Scripture plainly asserts the dominion of providence over this affair: “A prudent wife is from the LORD” (Prov 19:14). “Whoever finds a wife finds a good thing, and obtains favour from the LORD” (Prov 18:22). So for children: “Behold, children are a heritage of the LORD; and the fruit of the womb is his reward” (Psa 127:3).

And it has ever been the practice of holy men to seek the Lord for direction and counsel when they have been changing their condition. There is no doubt that Abraham’s encouragement in that case was the fruit of prayer. His pious servant as well, who was employed in that affair, earnestly sought the counsel of God, and also thankfully acknowledged His gracious providence in guiding it (Gen 24:7, 12, 26, 27).

We may observe the same thing in children, the fruit of marriage (1Sam 1:20; Luke 1:13-14). Now the providence of God may be displayed in various ways to engage our hearts in love to the God of our mercies.

(1) Much of providence is seen *in appointing the parties for each other*. In this, the Lord often goes beyond our thoughts and plans. Indeed, He often hinders men’s desires and designs to their great advantage. It is not what they expect, but what His infinite wisdom judges best and most beneficial for them, that takes place. It is from this that probabilities are so often dashed, and things that are remote and utterly improbable are brought about in the very strange and unaccountable methods of providence.

(2) Much of providence is seen *in the harmony and agreeableness of temperaments and dispositions* from which a great part of the tranquility and comforts of our lives results. Or at least, even though natural temperament and education did not harmonize much before, yet they do after they come under the ordinance of God: “And they shall be one flesh” (Gen 2:24). They are one, not only in respect to God’s institution, but one in respect to love and affection; so that those who lately were mere strangers to each other so recently, are now endeared to a degree beyond the nearest relations in blood: “Therefore a man shall leave father and mother, and cleave to his wife, and they shall be one flesh.” (Gen 2.24)

(3) But providence is especially remarkable *in making one instrumental to the eternal good of the other*: “How do you know, O wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, O man, whether you will save your wife?” (1Cor 7:16). From this comes that grave exhortation to the wives of unbelieving husbands to win them by their behavior, which would be instead of an ordinance to them (1Pet 3:1).

Or if both husband and wife are graced, then what singular assistance and mutual help is gained by this, to further their eternal good while they live together “as heirs together of the grace of life” (1Pet 3:7). O blessed providence that directed them into so intimate a relation on earth, who shall inherit together the common salvation of heaven!

(4) How much of providence is seen *in children, the fruit of marriage!* To have any posterity in the earth, and not be left as a dry tree; to have comfort and joy in them is a special providence, importing a special mercy to us. To have family breaches repaired is a providence to be received with a thankful heart. When God says to a man, as he speaks in another case to the Church: “The number of children which you will have after you have lost the others, will echo in your ears: ‘The place is too small for me’” (Isaiah 49:20).

And these providences will appear more affectingly sweet and lovely to you if you only compare God’s allotments to you with what He has allotted to many others in the world. For just look around and you will find,

(1) Multitudes are unequally yoked, embittering their lives; their relations are obstructions and hindrances both in temporal things and spiritual. Indeed, we find an account in Scripture of graced persons, a great part of whose comfort in this world has been split upon this rock. Abigail was a discreet and virtuous woman, but unsuitably matched to a churlish Nabal (1Sam 25:25). What a temptation to neglect a known duty prevailed upon the renowned Moses by Zipporah his wife (Exo 4:24-25).<sup>1</sup> David had his scoffing Michal (2Sam 6:20). And patient Job had no small addition to all his other afflictions from the wife of his heart, who should have been a support to him in the day of his troubles (Job 2:9-10; 19:17).

No doubt God sanctifies such rods to His people’s good. If Socrates knew how to improve his affliction in Xanthippe in a way that increased his patience,<sup>2</sup> much more will those who converse with God under all providences, whether sweet or bitter. Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that this is a sad blow to any person; it maims their working hand by making them unfit for duty (1Pet 3:7); it also cuts off much of the comfort of life.

(2) Many never enjoy the comfortable fruits of marriage; they are denied the sight or at least the enjoyment of children! “Thus says the LORD: Write this man childless” (Jer 22:30). Or if they have children, yet cannot enjoy them: “Though they bring up their children, yet I will deprive them so that there shall not be a man left” (Hosea 9:12); they only bear children for the grave, and have their expectations raised for a greater affliction to themselves.

(3) And it is no rare or unusual thing to see children and near relations be the greatest instruments of affliction to their parents and friends. So that after all their other sorrows and troubles in the world, nearest relations bring up the rear of sorrows, and prove greater griefs than any other. O how many parents have complained with the tree in the fable, that their very hearts

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<sup>1</sup> **Exodus 4:24-25** And it came to pass on the way, at the encampment, that the LORD met [Moses] and sought to kill him. <sup>25</sup> Then Zipporah took a sharp stone and cut off the foreskin of her son and cast it at Moses’ feet, and said, “Surely you are a husband of blood to me!”

<sup>2</sup> Xenophon’s *Symposium* described her as, “the hardest to get along with of all the women there are.”

have been torn apart by those wedges that were cut out of their own bodies! What a grief Esau was to Isaac and Rebecca (Gen 26:34-35)! What scourges Absalom and Amnon were to David!

Well then, if God has set “the solitary in families” (Psa 68:6), built a house for the desolate, and given you comfortable relations which are springs of daily comfort and refreshment to you, then on many accounts you are engaged to walk according to these gracious providences. To help you understand what decorum and agreeable comportment these providences consist of, gather the sense of your duty in these brief hints:

(1) Ascribe to God the glory of all those providential works which yield you comfort. You see a wise, directing, governing providence, which has disposed and ordered all things beyond your own plans and designs: “The way of man is not in himself; it is not in man that walks, to direct his steps” (Jer 10:23). It is not what you planned, but what a higher counsel than yours has determined, that has come to pass. When God made good Jacob the father of a family, he admired God in the mercy of it. “For with my staff,” he said, “I passed over this Jordan, and now I have become two bands” (Gen 32:10). And how this mercy humbles and melts him! “I am not worthy of the least of all the mercies, and of all the truth which you have shown to your servant.”

(2) Be exact in discharging the duties of those relations which so gracious a providence has led you into. Do not abuse the effects of so much mercy and love toward you. The Lord expects praise wherever you have comfort. This aggravated David’s sin, that he would dare to abuse so great a love and mercy as God had shown him in his family relations (2Sam 12:7-9).

(3) Improve relations for the end that providence designed them. Walk together as co-heirs of the grace of life (1Pete 3.7); study to be mutual blessings to each other; so walk in your relations that the parting day may be sweet. Death will shortly break up the family; and then nothing but the sense of duty that was discharged, or the neglects that were pardoned, will give comfort.

### ***The seventh performance of providence - Family.***

VII. Another gracious performance of providence for us is seen in *making provision from time to time for us and our families*. I put these providences together here because I find the Scripture does so. “Yet he sets the poor on high, far from affliction, and makes *their* families like a flock” (Psa 107:41).

You know the promises God has made to His people: “The young lions lack and suffer hunger; but those that seek the LORD shall not lack any good thing” (Psa 34:10). Have you not also seen the constant performance of it? Can you not give the same answer, if the same question was put to you that was put to the disciples: “When I sent you without purse, and money, and shoes, did you lack anything? And they said, Nothing.” (Luke 22:35) Can you not with Jacob call him “the God which fed me all my life”? (Gen 48:15). Surely “he has given food to those that fear him; he will ever be mindful of his covenant” (Psa 111:5).

To display this providence, we will consider it in the following particulars:

(1) *The assiduity<sup>1</sup> and constancy of the care of providence for the saints.* His mercies “are new every morning” (Lam 3:23). It is not just the supply of one or two pressing needs, but all your wants as they grow from day to day through all your days. “The God which fed me all my life long” (Gen 48:15). The care of providence runs parallel with the line of life: “Listen to me, O house of Jacob, and all the remnant of the house of Israel which are borne by me from the belly, which are carried from the womb: even to your old age I am He, and even to hoary hairs I will carry you: I have made, and I will bear, even I will carry, and I will deliver you” (Isaiah 46:3-4). As God bid Israel to remember “from Shittim to Gilgal that you may know the righteousness of the LORD” (Micah 6:5), so would I persuade you, reader, to record the ways of providence from first to last throughout your life to this day, that you may see what a God He has been to you.

(2) *The timeliness and convenience of its provisions for them,* for so runs the promise: “When the poor and needy seek water, and there is none, and their tongue fails for thirst, I the LORD will hear them, I the God of Israel will not forsake them” (Isaiah 41:17); its performance has been so. This has sometimes been made good to distressed saints in a more *ordinary* way: God secretly blesses a little, and makes it sufficient for us and ours. Job tells us of “when the secret of God was upon my tent” (Job 29:4), i.e., his secret blessing was in their tents. It is for this reason that they subsist; but they do so in an unaccountable way. Sometimes it breaks forth for their supply in an *extraordinary* way. So you find the cruse and the barrel did not fail (1Kng 17:9-14).<sup>2</sup>

Mr. Samuel Clarke,<sup>3</sup> in the life of that painstaking and humble servant of Christ, John Foxe, records this memorable instance of providence. Towards the end of King Henry VIII’s reign, Foxe went to London, where he quickly spent what little his friends had given him, or that he had acquired by his own diligence; and he began to be in great need. One day he sat in Paul’s Church. He was spent with long fasting; his countenance thin and his eyes were hollow in the ghastly manner of dying men; every one shunned a spectacle of so much horror. Someone came to him whom he had never seen before. He thrust an untold sum of money into Foxe’s hand, bidding him to be of good cheer and accept that small gift in good part from his countryman; and that he should make much of himself; for in a few days new hopes would be at hand, and a more certain condition of livelihood. Three days after, the duchess of Richmond sent for him to live in her house and be tutor to the earl of Surrey’s children, who were then under her care.

Mr. Isaac Ambrose was a worthy divine whose labours made him acceptable to his generation. In his epistle to the Earl of Bedford, prefixed to his *Last Things*, he gives a pregnant instance in his own experience. His words are these: “For my part, however, the Lord has seen cause to give me only a poor pittance of outward things, for which I bless His name; yet in the income of it, I have many times observed so much of His peculiar providence, that they have been very sweetened thereby, and my heart has been raised to admire His grace. When of late, under a hard dispensation, which I do not judge fit to mention, in which I suffered conscientiously, all streams of my usual supplies stopped; the waters of relief for myself and my family ran low. I went to

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<sup>1</sup> *Assiduity: great and constant diligence and attention.*

<sup>2</sup> **1Kgs 17:13-14** And Elijah said to her, “Do not fear; go *and* do as you have said, but make me a small cake from it first, and bring *it* to me; and afterward make *some* for yourself and your son. For thus says the LORD God of Israel: ‘The bin of flour shall not be used up, nor shall the jar of oil run dry, until the day the LORD sends rain on the earth.’”

<sup>3</sup> Clark’s *Lives*, vol. 1. p. 342.

bed overwhelmed with doubts that the fountain would let itself out for our refreshing; but before I awoke in the morning, a letter was brought to my bedside which was signed by a good friend, Mr. Antony Ash. It reported some unexpected releases of God's goodness for my comfort." These are some of his lines: "Your God, who has given you a thankful heart to record your experiences of His goodness, recalls experiences for your encouragement. Now I will report one which will raise your spirit toward the God of your mercies." Upon which he sweetly concludes: "One morsel of God's provision, especially when it comes unexpectedly, and upon prayer, when wants are most, will be more sweet to a spiritual relish than all [our] former enjoyments were."

(3) *The wisdom of providence in our provisions.* And this is seen in proportioning the quantity in our provisions – not satisfying our extravagant wishes, but answering our real needs; conferring our wants, not our wantonness. "But my God shall supply all your needs." (Php 4:19); and this has exactly suited the wishes of the best and wisest men, who desired no more from His hand. So it was with Jacob (Gen 28:20) and Agur (Prov 30:8-9). Wise providence considers our condition as pilgrims and strangers, and so it allots the provision that is necessary for our passage home. It knows the mischievous influence of fullness and excess on most men, even though sanctified, and how apt it is to make them remiss and forgetful of God (Deut 6:12).<sup>1</sup> Their heart, like the moon, suffers an eclipse when it is full; and so providence suits and orders all things to their best advantage.

The wisdom of providence is also greatly revealed in the manner of dispensing our portion to us. Many times it allows our wants to pinch hard, and many fears to arise, with a design to magnify the care and love of God in the supply of them (Deut 8:3). Providence so orders the case that faith and prayer come between our wants and His supplies. The goodness of God may be more magnified in our eyes by it.

And now let me beg you to consider the good hand of providence that has provided for and suitably supplied you and yours all your days, and never failed you up to now. Labour to walk suitably to your experience of such mercies. That you may do this, let me press a few suitable cautions upon you.

1. Beware that you do not forget the care and kindness of providence which your eyes have seen in so many fruits and experiences. It was God's charge against Israel "that they soon forgot his works" (Psa 106:13). A bad heart and a slippery memory deprive men of the comfort of many mercies, and defraud God of the glory due for them.

2. Do not distrust providence in future exigencies<sup>2</sup> as they did: "Behold, he struck the rock so that the waters gushed out, and the streams overflowed; can he give bread also? Can he provide flesh for his people?" (Psa 78:20). How unreasonable and absurd these queries of unbelief are, especially after their eyes had seen the power of God in such extraordinary works.

3. Do not murmur and complain under new constraints. This is a vile temper, and yet how natural it is for us when wants press hard upon us! Ah, if only we rightly understood what the demerit of sin is, we would admire the bounty of God, rather than complain of the tight-handedness of

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<sup>1</sup> "Beware, lest you forget the LORD who brought you out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage."

<sup>2</sup> [A sudden unforeseen crisis.](#)

providence. And if we only considered that God is not obligated to grant justice or gratitude to reward any of our duties, it would cure our murmurs (Gen 32:10).

4. Do not show the least discontentment at the lot and portion providence carves out for you. O that you would be well-pleased and satisfied with all its appointments! Say: “The lines have fallen to me in pleasant places; indeed, I have a goodly heritage” (Psa 16:6). Surely that is best for you which providence has appointed; and one day you yourselves will judge it to be so.

5. Do not neglect prayer when constraints befall you. You see it is providence that dispenses everything; you live upon it. Therefore apply yourselves to God in times of need. This is evidently included in the promise (Isa 41:17)<sup>1</sup> as well as expressed in the command (Php 4:6).<sup>2</sup> Remember God, and He will not forget you.

6. Do not worry your hearts with sinful cares. “Behold the fowls of the air” (Mat 6:26), says Christ; not the fowls at the *door* that are fed daily by hand, but those of the *air* that do not know where the next meal is coming from; and yet God provides for them. Remember your relation to Christ, and His engagements by promise to you. By these things, work your hearts to be satisfied and content with all the allotments of providence.

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<sup>1</sup> **Isaiah 41:17** “The poor and needy seek water, but *there is* none, Their tongues fail for thirst. I, the LORD, will hear them; *I*, the God of Israel, will not forsake them.”

<sup>2</sup> **Philippians 4:6** Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God;

## Chapter 6 – Preservation of the Saints from Evil

### *The eighth performance of providence – Preventive Care*

VIII. The next great advantage and mercy the saints receive from the hand of providence is in *their preservation from the snares and temptations of sin, by its preventive care over them.* Providence wards off many a deadly stroke of temptation and many a mortal thrust which Satan makes at our souls. This is a truth as manifest as the light that shines. This is included in that promise: God “will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that you may be able to bear it” (1Cor 10:13). Providence gives an outlet for the soul’s escape when it is shut up in the dangerous straits of temptation. There are two eminent ways by which the force and efficacy of temptation is broken in believers. One is by the operation of internal grace. “The flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; so that you cannot do the things that you would” (Gal 5:17), i.e., sanctification gives sin a miscarrying womb after it has conceived in the soul. The other way is by the external working of providence; and I intend to speak of this here.

The providence of God is the great barrier and hindrance to a world of sin, which otherwise would break forth like an overflowing flood from our corrupt natures. It prevents the abundance of sin which otherwise wicked men would commit. The Sodomites were greedily pursuing their lusts; God providentially hinders it by striking them blind (Gen 19:11). Jeroboam intends to strike the prophet; providence interposed and withered his arm (1Kng 13:4). Thus you see, when wicked men have contrived and are ready to execute their wickedness, providence claps on its manacles “so that their hands cannot perform their enterprise” (Job 5:12).

And so much corruption remains in good men that they would certainly plunge themselves under much more guilt than they do if providence did not take greater care of them than they do of themselves. For though they make conscience of keeping themselves, and daily watch their hearts and ways, yet such is the deceitfulness of sin that if providence did not lay blocks in their way, it would entangle and defile them more frequently than it does. And it does this in several ways.

(1) *Sometimes by stirring up others to interpose with timely counsels,* which effectually dissuade them from prosecuting an evil design. Thus Abigail meets David in the nick of time to dissuade him from his evil purpose (1Sam 25:34).

And I find it recorded, as on another account was noted before, of that holy man Mr. Dod, that being late at night in his study, he was strongly moved, though at an unseasonable hour, to visit a gentleman of his acquaintance. Not knowing what might be the design of providence in this, he obeyed and went. When he came to the house, after a few knocks on the door, the gentleman himself came to him and asked him whether he had any business with him. Mr. Dod answered, No, but that he could not be quiet till he had seen him. O, Sir, replied the gentleman, you are sent by God at this hour for just now (and with that takes the halter out of his pocket). I was going to destroy myself. And thus was the mischief prevented.



(2) *Sometimes by hindering the means and instruments* by which the evil itself is prevented. Thus, when good Jehoshaphat had joined himself with that wicked King Ahaziah to build ships at Ezion-gaber to go to Tarshish, God prevents the design by breaking the ships with a storm (2Chr 20:35-37). We also find in the life of Mr. Bolton, written by Mr. Bagshaw, that while he was in Oxford he had a familiar acquaintance with Mr. Anderton, who was a good scholar, but a strong papist. Knowing Mr. Bolton's natural gifts, and perceiving he was in some outward need, Mr. Anderton took this advantage and used many arguments to persuade him to be reconciled to the Church of Rome, and to go over with him to the English seminary. He assured Mr. Bolton he would be furnished with all the necessities and have gold enough. Mr. Bolton accepted the invitation, being poor at that time in mind and purse. A day and place was appointed in Lancashire where they would meet and take shipping and be gone. But Mr. Anderton did not come, and so Mr. Bolton escaped the snare.

(3) *Sometimes by laying some strong affliction<sup>1</sup> upon the body*, to prevent a worse evil. This is the meaning of: "I will hedge up your way with thorns" (Hosea 2:6). Thus Basil<sup>2</sup> was exercised with a violent headache a long time, which he observed was used by providence to prevent lust. Paul had a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan sent to buffet him; and whatever this affliction was, it was ordained to prevent pride in him (2Cor 12:7).

(4) Sometimes sin is prevented in the saints *by the better information of their minds at the sacred oracles of God*. Thus, when sinful motions began to rise in Asaph's mind, from the prosperity of the wicked and his own afflicted state, and they grew to such a height that he began to think all he had done in the way of religion was little better than lost labour, he was set right again. The temptation dissolved by going into the sanctuary where God showed him how to take new measures of persons and things, to judge them by their ends and issues, not by their present appearances (Psa 73:12, 13, 17).

(5) And sometimes the providence of God prevents the sins of His people *by removing them out of the way of temptations by death*. We may understand that text in this sense: "The righteous is taken away from the evil to come" (Isaiah 57:1); the evil of sin as well as sufferings. When the Lord sees His people low-spirited and not able to grapple with strong trials and temptations which are drawing on, it is a merciful providence for them to be released by death and set out of harm's way.

Now consider and admire the providence of God, O you saints, who has had more care of your souls than you ever had of them. If the providence of God had not worked a way of prevention for you, it may be that you would have had so many *Magor Missabibs*<sup>3</sup> this day (Jer 20:3-4). How the heart of David was melted under that preventing providence mentioned before (1Sam 25:32-34). He blesses the Lord, the instrument and that counsel by which his soul was preserved from sin. Just think seriously of a few particulars about this case:

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<sup>1</sup> Some afflictions are punishments; Others are chastisements: and these are both trials of grace, and preservatives from sin.

<sup>2</sup> Basil of Caesarea 'The Great' (330-379 AD), one of the Cappodocian fathers of the eastern Orthodox church.

<sup>3</sup> *Magor Missabibs*: Terrors on Every Side (Jer 20:3)

(1) Think how your corrupt natures have often impetuously hurried you on towards sin, so that all the inherent grace you had could not withstand its force if providence had not prevented it in some such way as you have heard. “But every man is tempted when he is drawn away by his own lust, and enticed” (James 1:14). You found yourselves but feathers in the wind of temptation.

(2) How near you have been brought to the brink of sin, and yet been saved by a merciful hand of providence. May you not say with one, “I was almost in all evil” (Prov 5:14),<sup>1</sup> and “My feet were almost gone; my steps had nearly slipped” (Psa 73:2). O merciful providence that stepped in so opportunely to your relief!

(3) How many have been allowed to fall by the hand of temptations, to the reproach of religion and the wounding of their own consciences, so far that they have never recovered their former peace again, but lived in the world devoid of comfort to their dying day!

(4) How woeful your case would have been if the Lord had not mercifully saved you from many thousands of temptations that have assaulted you! I tell you, you cannot estimate the mercies you possess by means of such providences. Are your *names sweet*,<sup>2</sup> and your *consciences peaceful*, two mercies as dear to you as your two eyes? Why surely you owe them, if not wholly yet in great measure, to the aids and assistances providence that has given you all along the way you have passed through the dangerous tempting world to this day.

Walk therefore suitably to this obligation of providence also.

(1) See that you thankfully admit it. Do not impute your escapes from sin to accidents, or to your own watchfulness or wisdom.

(2) See also that you do not tempt providence on the other hand, by an irregular reliance upon its care over you, without taking all due care of yourselves. “Keep yourselves in the love of God” (Jude 21); “Keep your heart with all diligence” (Prov 4:23). Though providence keeps you, yet it is in the way of your duty.

### ***The ninth performance of providence – Preventing temptations***

IX. Thus you see what care providence has had over your souls in preventing the spiritual dangers and miseries that otherwise would have befallen you in the way of temptations.

In the next passage I will show you that it has been no less concerned about your bodies. With great tenderness it has carried them in its arms through innumerable hazards and dangers also.<sup>3</sup> “He that keeps Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep” (Psa 121:4); “He is the preserver of men” (Job 7:20). To display the glory of this providence before you, let us take into consideration the

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<sup>1</sup> **Pro 5:14** I was on the verge of total ruin... (NKJ)

<sup>2</sup> That is, your name or reputation remains untarnished.

<sup>3</sup> Providential preventions of bodily dangers, Psal. 17.8. You keep me as the apple of your eye.— The eye has five tunics to guard it against danger. (1.) *Aranea tunica*, like a spider’s web. (2.) *Retiformis*, like a net. (3.) *Uvea*, like a berry. (4.) *Cornea*, like an horn. (5.) *Adnata tunica*, the cover, or lid of the eye: Here is guard upon guard, resembling the various ways providence has to secure us from ruin.

perils into which the best of men sometimes fall, and the ways and means by which providence preserves them in those dangers.

There are many hazards into which we are often cast in this world. The Apostle Paul gives us a general account of his dangers (2Cor 11:26). How great a wonder is it that our life has not been extinguished in some of those dangers we have been in!

(1) Have not some of us fallen, and often, into very dangerous sicknesses and diseases, in which we have approached to the very brink of the grave (Job 33:18, 21, 28). Might we not have said with Hezekiah: “I said in the cutting off of my days, I shall go to the gates of the grave: I am deprived of the residue of my years” (Isaiah 38:10)? Have we not often had the sentence of death in ourselves? Our bodies at that time had been like a leaky ship in a storm, as one aptly describes it,<sup>1</sup> that has taken on water on every side till it was ready to sink? Yet God has preserved, repaired and launched us out again as well as ever. O what a wonder it is that such a crazy body<sup>2</sup> should be preserved so many years, and survive so many dangers! Surely it is not more wonderful to see a Venice-glass<sup>3</sup> pass from hand to hand in continual use for forty or fifty years, and still remain whole, notwithstanding the many knocks and falls it has had. If you enjoy health or recover from sicknesses, it is because he puts “none of these diseases upon you,” or because he is “the LORD that heals you” (Exo 15:26).

(2) How many deadly dangers has His hand rescued some of you from in those years of confusion and public calamity, when the sword was bathed in blood and made a horrid slaughter; when maybe your lives were made prey! David made a special remark about it: “O GOD the Lord, the strength of my salvation: you have covered my head in the day of battle” (Psa 140:7).

Beza was in France in the first Civil War, tossed up and down there for twenty-two months. He recorded six-hundred deliverances from dangers in that space of time, for which he solemnly gave God thanks in his last testament. If the sword did not destroy you, it was because God did not give it a commission to do so.

(3) Many of you have seen the wonders of salvation upon the deeps, where the hand of God has been signally stretched out for your rescue and deliverance. This is elegantly expressed in Psa 107:23-27, which I have expounded at large elsewhere.<sup>4</sup> You may say in a literal sense what the Psalmist says metaphorically: “If it had not been the LORD who was on our side, then the waters would have overwhelmed us, the stream would have gone over our soul” (Psa 124:1, 4). To see men that have spent so many years upon the seas<sup>5</sup> attain to your years, where your lives have continually hung in suspense before you, and when you could neither be reckoned among the living nor the dead – as seamen are not – O what cause you have to adore your great Preserver! Many thousands of your companions have gone down, and yet you are here to praise the Lord among the living. You have bordered nearer to eternity all your days than others, and you have

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Goodwin in his *Aggravation of Sin Against Mercy*, p.30

<sup>2</sup> The eye is but a small part of the body, yet physicians reckon no less than thirty diseases incident to it. The *leucoma, glaucoma, lippitudo, xerophthalmia, ficus, tithiasis, epiphora*; and in short, thirty of these kinds of diseases.

<sup>3</sup> A glass cup or goblet of rare purity and extreme sensitiveness.

<sup>4</sup> See *The Seaman's Companion*.

<sup>5</sup> A large portion of Flavel's congregation at Dartmouth would consist of seafaring people.

often been in eminent perils upon the seas. Surely these and so many salvations call aloud to you for most thankful acknowledgments.

(4) To conclude: what innumerable hazards and accidents, the least of which have cut off others, God has carried us all through! I think I may safely say your privative and positive mercies of this kind are more in number than the hairs on your heads. Many thousands of these dangers we never saw, nor were we made particularly aware of them; but though we did not see them, our God did, and He brought us out of danger before He brought us into fear. Some have been evident to us, and those were so remarkable that we cannot think or speak of them to this day, without our souls being freshly affected by those mercies.

It is recorded of our famous Jewel,<sup>1</sup> that about the beginning of Queen Mary's reign, the inquisition took hold of him in Oxford. He fled to London by night; but providentially losing the road, he escaped the inquisitors who pursued him. However, that night he fell into another imminent hazard of life; for wandering up and down in the snow, he fainted and lay starving in the way, panting and labouring for life. At this time Latimer's servant found and saved him.

It would be easy to multiply examples of this kind; histories abound with them. But I think there are few of us who are not abundantly furnished out of our own experience; so I choose to press home the sense of these providences upon you, in order that you may make a suitable response to the God of your mercies for them, rather than add more instances of this kind. To this purpose I desire you to seriously weigh the following particulars.

(1) *Consider what you owe to providence for your protection*, by which your life has been protracted to this day, with the usefulness and comfort of it. Look around in the world, and you may daily see some in every place who are objects of pity, bereaved by sad accidents of all the comforts of life, while in the meantime providence has tenderly preserved you.<sup>2</sup> "He keeps all his bones, not one of them is broken" (Psa 34:20). Is the elegant and handsome structure of your body unspoiled, your members not deformed or made the many seats of torment, are you not deprived of the usefulness of any part? Why, this is because providence never let go its hold of you since you came out of the womb, but with a watchful eye and tender hand has guarded you in every place, and kept you as its charge.

(2) *Consider how every member which has been so tenderly kept, has nevertheless been an instrument of sin against the Lord*; and that not only in the days of your unregeneracy, when you yielded "your members as instruments of unrighteousness unto sin" (Rom 6:13), but even since you gave them up in covenant to the Lord as dedicated instruments to His service; and yet how tender has providence been over them! You have often provoked Him to afflict you in every part, and lay penal evil upon every member that has been instrumental in moral evil. But O, how great His compassions have been towards you, and how wonderful His patience!

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<sup>1</sup> John Jewel, 1522-1571, Bishop of Salisbury and author of the famous *Apology of the Church of England*. This reference is from Clark's Lives, p. 262.

<sup>2</sup> The learned Alsted sets himself to enumerate the manifold hazards through which the life of man is carried on by the hand of providence, in *Theol. Catechet.* p. 191, 192, etc. and piously concludes in these words. "Lastly, that you are wonderfully delivered from numberless evils which continually threaten you from every creature. In all these, I say, which we know oftentimes fall out, and which are of such kind, as we may lay our account to meet with, we ought to acknowledge and ascribe to the providence of God solely."

(3) *Consider what the aim of providence is in all the tender care it has manifested for you. Why does it protect you so assiduously, and allow no evil to befall you? Is it not that you should employ your bodies for God, and cheerfully apply yourselves to that service He has called you to? Doubtless this is the end and goal of these mercies; or else to what purpose are they afforded you? Your bodies are a part of Christ's purchase, as well as your souls (1Cor 6:19). They are committed to the charge and tutelage of angels (Heb 1:14), who have performed many services for them. They are dedicated by you to the Lord, and that is on the highest account (Rom 12:1). They have already been the subjects of many mercies in this world (Psa 35:10), and they will partake of singular glory and happiness in the world to come (Php 3:21). And will they not then be employed, indeed, cheerfully worn out in His service? How reasonable it is they should be so! Why are they so tenderly preserved by God, if they must not be used for God?*

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## Chapter 7 – The Work of Sanctification

### *The tenth performance of providence – Mortification.*

X. There is an eminent favour providence bestows on the saints, which has not yet been considered; indeed it is minded too little by us. And that is the aid and assistance it gives the people of God in the great work of mortification.

Mortification of our sinful affections and passions is one half of our sanctification: “dead indeed to sin, but alive to God” (Rom 6:11). It is the great evidence of our interest in Christ (Rom 6:5-9; Gal 5:24). It is our safety in the hour of temptation. The corruptions in the world are through lust (2Pet 1:4). Our instrumental fitness for service depends much upon it (John 15:2; 2Tim 2:21). How great a service to our souls therefore must that be, by which this blessed work is carried on in them!

Now there are two means or instruments employed in this work. The Spirit, who effects it *internally* (Rom 8:13), and providence, which assists it *externally*. The Spirit indeed is the principal agent, upon whose operation the success of this work depends. And all the providences in the world can never effect it without Him. But they are secondary and subordinate means which, by the blessing of the Spirit upon them, have a great part in the work. I will now explain how they are so serviceable to this end and purpose.

Generally, the most wise God orders the dispensations of providence in a blessed subordination to the work of His Spirit. There is a sweet harmony between them in their distinct workings. They all meet in that one blessed issue to which God has directed them by the counsel of His will (Rom 8:28; Eph 1:11). Hence the Spirit is said to be in the wheels of providence, and to order its motions (Eze 1:20),<sup>1</sup> and so they move together by consent. Now one great part of the Spirit’s internal work is to destroy sin in the people of God. See how conformable external providences are to His design: they are steered and ordered in the following particulars.

(1) There is a strong propensity and inclination to sin in all the regenerate, and a principal part of the power of sin lies in that inclination. Paul sadly complains of this: “But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members, (Rom 7:23): and every believer daily finds it to his grief. O, it is hard to forbear those things that grieve God. God has made a hedge around us, and fenced us against sin by His laws; but there is a proneness in nature to break over the hedge, and that is against the very opposition of the Spirit of God in us. Now see in this case the concurrence and assistance of providence for the prevention of sin. As the Spirit internally resists those sinful inclinations, so providence externally lays bars and blocks in our way to hinder and prevent sin (Job 33:17-19; Hosea 2:6; 2Cor 12:7). Many a bodily ailment is inflicted on this very score, to be an obstruction to prevent sin. O bear them patiently upon this consideration. Basil was sorely grieved with an inveterate headache; he earnestly prayed that it might be removed; God removed

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<sup>1</sup> [Ezekiel 1:20](#) Wherever the spirit wanted to go, they went, *because there the spirit went; and the wheels were lifted together with them, for the spirit of the living creatures was in the wheels.*

it. No sooner was he freed from this obstruction, but he felt the inordinate motions of lust which made him pray for his headache again. So it might be with many of us, if our obstructions were removed.

A question may be asked here, *Whether it is the genius and property of a graced spirit to forbear sin because of the rod of affliction?* Surely he has higher motives and nobler principles than these. This is the attitude of a carnal and slavish spirit!

Indeed, this is so when this is the sole or principal restraint from sin, when a man does not abhor sin because of its intrinsic filth, but only because of its troublesome consequences and effects. But is this vastly different from the case of the saints under sanctified afflictions? For as they have higher motives and nobler principles, so they have lower and sensible ones too; and these are, in their kind and place, very useful to them.

Besides, you must know that afflictions work in another way upon graced hearts to restrain them from sin, or to warn them against sin, than they do upon other hearts. It is not so much the smart of the rod which they feel, as the token of God's displeasure, which frightens and scares them. "You renew your witnesses against me." (Job 10:17) And this is what principally affects them. "O LORD, rebuke me not in your anger, nor chasten me in your hot displeasure" (Psa 6:1). "O LORD, correct me, but with judgment; not in your anger, lest you bring me to nothing" (Jer 10:24): surely this is no low and common argument to make.

(2) Notwithstanding this double fence of God's command and preventive afflictions, sin is too hard for the best of men; their corruptions carry them through all to sin. And when it is so, not only does the Spirit work internally, but providence also works externally in order to subdue them. The ways of sin are not only made bitter to them by the remorse of conscience, but by those afflictive rods upon the outward man, with which God also follows it; and in both these respects I find that text expounded: "Whoever breaks a hedge, a serpent shall bite him" (Ecc 10:8). If as some expound it, the hedge is the law of God, then the serpent is the remorse of conscience, and the sharp teeth of affliction which he shall quickly feel if he belongs to God.

The design and aim of these afflictive providences is to purge and cleanse believers from that pollution into which temptations have plunged them. "By this, therefore, the iniquity of Jacob shall be purged, and this is all the fruit of removing his sin" (Isaiah 27:9). To the same purpose is that passage: "Before I was afflicted I went astray; but now have I kept your word" (Psa 119:67). These afflictions have the same use and end for our souls that frosty weather has on those clothes that are laid out to be bleached; they alter the hue and make them whiter, which seems to be the allusion in those words: "And some of those with understanding shall fall, so as to test them, and to purge them, and to make them white" (Daniel 11:35).

And here it may be asked, *Upon what account are afflictions said to purge away the iniquities of the saints? Is it not unwarrantable and very dishonourable to Christ, to attribute to affliction that which is the peculiar honour of His blood?*

It is confessed that the blood of Christ is the only fountain opened for sin. No afflictions, however many, or strong, or continual they are, can in themselves purge away the pollution of

sin. We see this in wicked men who are afflicted, and afflicted, and afflicted again, and yet are nevertheless sinful. And the torments of hell, however extreme, universal and continual they are, yet they shall never fetch out the stain of one sin.

But it is still true that a *sanctified* affliction may produce such blessed effects upon the soul by the efficacy and virtue of Christ's blood,. Though a cross without a Christ never did any man any good, yet thousands have been indebted to the cross as it has worked for their good by virtue of His death. And this is the case with those souls that this discourse is concerned about.

(3) We find the best hearts, if God bestows any comfortable enjoyment upon them, are too apt to be overheated in their affections towards it, and too much taken up with these outward comforts. This also shows the great power and strength of corruption in the people of God, and it must be mortified in them by some means or other.

This was the case of Hezekiah whose heart was set too much upon his treasures so that he could not hide a vainglorious disposition (Isaiah 39:2). Likewise, good David (Psa 30:7) thought his mountain, that is, his kingdom and the splendour and glory of his present estate, had stood so fast that it should never be moved.

How the same good man set his heart and affections upon his beautiful son Absalom appears by the doleful lamentation<sup>1</sup> David made at his death, prizing him above his own life, which was worth a thousand times more than Absalom.

When God raised up a gourd for Jonah to shelter him from the sun, how excessively he was taken with it, and how exceedingly glad he was of it! (John 4.6)

But will God allow things to lie this way? Shall the creature purloin and draw away our affections from Him? No, this is *our* corruption, and *God* will purge it. And to this end He sends providence to strike those creatures on which our affections are either inordinately or excessively set, or else He turns them into rods, and strikes us with them.

Is Hezekiah too puffed up with his full treasury? Why the same Babylonians to whom he boasted of it, will empty it and profit from it (Isaiah 39:6).

Is David hugging himself in a fond conceit of the stability of his earthly splendour? Lo! How soon God beclouds it all (Psa 30:7). Is Absalom doted on, and has he crept too far into his good father's heart? This shall be the son of his sorrow that will seek his father's life.

Is Jonah too carried away with his gourd? God will prepare a worm to strike it (Jonah 4:6-7).

How many husbands, wives and children has providence struck for this very reason! It might have spared them longer if they had been loved more regularly and moderately. This has blasted many an estate and hopeful project; and it is a merciful dispensation for our good.

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<sup>1</sup> 2Sam 18.33; 2Sam 19.4.



(4) The strength of our unmortified corruption shows itself in our pride and the swelling vanity of our hearts when we have a name and esteem among men. When we are applauded and honoured, when we are admired for any gift or excellence that is in us, this draws out the pride of the heart and shows the vanity that is in it. “As the refining pot is for silver, and the furnace is for gold; so is a man to his praise” (Prov 27:21); i.e., as the furnace reveals what dross is in the metal when it is melted, so will praise and commendations reveal what is pride in the heart of him that receives them. This made a good man say: “He that praises me, wounds me.” And, what is more strange, this corruption may be felt in the heart even when the last breath is ready to expire. It was the saying of one of the German divines, when those around him recounted for his encouragement the many services he had done for God, “Take away the fire, for there is still the chaff of pride in me.” To crucify this corruption, providence takes off the bridle of restraint from ungodly men, and sometimes permits them to malign the names of God’s servants, as Shimei did David’s name.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, they will fall into disesteem among their friends, as Paul did among the Corinthians. And all this is to keep down the swelling of their spirits at the realization of those excellences that are in them. The design of these providences is nothing else but to hide pride from man. Indeed, it deserves a special remark, that when some good men have been engaged in a public and eminent work, and perhaps have overly sought their own applause in it, God has withheld His usual assistance at such times from them, and caused them so to falter in their work. So they have come off with shame and pity at such times, however ready and prepared they have been at other times. It would be easy to give various remarkable examples to confirm this observation, but I will continue.

(5) The corruption of the heart shows itself in raising up great expectations for ourselves from the creature in us – planning an abundance of happiness and contentment from some promising and hopeful enjoyments we have in the world. This we find to have been the case of holy Job in the days of his prosperity: “Then I said, I shall die in my nest, and I shall multiply my days as the sand” (Job 29:18). But how soon were all these expectations dashed by a gloomy providence, that benighted him in the noontide of his prosperity.<sup>2</sup> And all this was for his good, to remove his heart more fully from creature expectations. We often find the best men over-reckon themselves in worldly things, and overact their confidences about them. Those that have great and well-grounded expectations from heaven, may have too great and ungrounded expectations from the earth. But when it is so, it is usual for providence to undermine their earthly hopes, and convince them by experience how vain they are. Thus, in Haggai 1:9, the people’s hearts were intently set upon prosperous providences, full harvests and great increase; while in the meantime no regard was given to the worship of God and the things of His house; therefore providence blasts their hopes and brings them to little.

(6) Corruption shows itself in our dependence on creature-comforts and tangible props. O how apt the best of men are to lean upon these things, and keep themselves on them! The Israelites fixed themselves on Egypt, as a feeble man would lean upon his staff; but God allowed it both to fail them and wound them (Eze 29:6-7). So for individuals, how apt they are to depend upon their tangible supports! Thus we lean on our relations, and the inward thoughts of our hearts are that they will be so many springs of comfort to us, to refresh us throughout our lives; but God will show us by His providence our mistake and the error in these things. Thus a husband is

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<sup>1</sup> 2Sam 16.5-12

<sup>2</sup> That is, the darkness of night overcame him at the height of his prosperity.

struck down, to draw the soul of a wife nearer to God in dependence on Him (1Tim 5:5). So for children, we are apt to say of this or that child, as Lamech said of Noah, “This same child will comfort us” (Gen 5:29); but the wind passes over these flowers and they are withered, to teach us that our happiness is not bound up in these enjoyments. So too for our estates, when the world smiles on us, and we have a warm nest, how we prophesy of rest and peace in those acquisitions, thinking, with good Baruch, great things for ourselves.<sup>1</sup> But providence overturns our plans by a particular or general calamity (Jer 45:4-5),<sup>2</sup> and all this is to turn our hearts from the creature to God, who is our only rest.

(7) Corruption shows its strength in good men by their adherence to things below, and their reluctance to go from here. This often proceeds from the engaging enjoyments and pleasant experiences we have here below. Providence mortifies this inclination in the saints (1) by killing those ensnaring comforts beforehand, making all or most of our pleasant things die before us. (2) Or it embitters this world to us by its troubles. (3) By making life undesirable through the pains and infirmities we feel in the body, thus loosening our root for an easier fall by the fatal stroke.

Before I pass from this, I cannot help but pause, and desire you to stand with me in holy amazement and wonder at the dealings of God with such poor worms as we are. Surely God deals familiarly with men; His condescensions to His own clay are astonishing. All that I will note at present about it will be under three heads. I find the matter of my present meditations summed up by the Psalmist: “LORD, what is man, that you acknowledge him, or the son of man that you are mindful of him!” (Psa 144:3).

*First*, in this Scripture are represented the immense and transcendent greatness of God, who is infinitely above us and above all our thoughts. “Can you search out the deep things of God? Can you find out the limits of the Almighty? <sup>8</sup> *They are* higher than heaven-- what can you do? Deeper than Sheol – what can you know? <sup>9</sup> Their measure *is* longer than the earth and broader than the sea.” (Job 11:7-9). “The heaven and heaven of heavens cannot contain him” (2Chr 2:6). He is “glorious in holiness, fearful in praises, doing wonders” (Exo 15:11). When the Scripture speaks of Him comparatively, see how it expresses His greatness: “Behold, the nations are as a drop in a bucket, and are counted as the small dust of the balance: behold, he takes up the isles as a very little thing. And Lebanon is not sufficient to burn, nor its beasts sufficient for a burnt offering. All nations before him are as nothing; and they are accounted to him less than nothing, and vanity” (Isaiah 40:15-17). When the holiest men have addressed Him, see with what humility and deep adoration they have spoken of Him, and to Him! “Woe is me! For I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts” (Isaiah 6:5). No, what respect the very angels of heaven have for that glorious Majesty: “Each one had six wings; with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one cried to another, and said: Holy, holy, holy, is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory” (verses 2-3).

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<sup>1</sup> Jer 32:12-15

<sup>2</sup> **Jer 45:4-5** “Thus you shall say to him, ‘Thus says the LORD: “Behold, what I have built I will break down, and what I have planted I will pluck up, that is, this whole land. <sup>5</sup> “And do you seek great things for yourself? Do not seek *them*; for behold, I will bring adversity on all flesh,”’ says the LORD.

*Secondly*, you have the baseness, vileness, and utter unworthiness of man. Indeed, the holiest and best of men before God: “Truly every man in his best state is altogether a vapor” (Psa 39:5). “Every man,” taken from wherever you will; and every man “in his best state,” or “standing in his freshest glory,” is not only “vapor,” but “altogether vapor,” literally “every man is but vapor.” For just consider the best of men in their *extraction*, in their *constitution*, and in their outward *condition*.

(1) Consider them in their *extraction*, “By nature the children of wrath even as others” (Eph 2:3). The blood that runs in our veins is as much tainted as theirs in hell.

(2) Consider them in their *constitution* and natural disposition, and it is no better; indeed, in many there is a worse disposition than in reprobates. And though grace deposes sin from its throne in them, yet, O what offensive and God-provoking corruptions daily break out of the best hearts.

(3) Consider them in their outward *condition*, and for the most part they are inferior to others. “I thank you, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and prudent, and have revealed them to babes” (Mat 11:25; cf. 1Cor 1:26-28).

And now let us consider and marvel that this great and blessed God should ever be so much concerned, as you have heard He is in all His providences, about such vile, despicable worms as we are! He does not need us, but is perfectly blessed and happy in Himself without us. We can add nothing to Him: “Can a man be profitable to God?” (Job 22:2). No, the holiest of men add nothing to Him; yet, see how great an account He makes of us.

1. For does not His eternal electing love show the dear account He made of us (Eph 1:4, 5)? How ancient, how free, and how astonishing is this act of grace! This is that design which all providences are in pursuit of, and will not rest till they have executed.

2. Does not the gift of His only Son out of His bosom show this, that God makes a great account of this vile thing, man? Never was man so magnified before. If David could say: “When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars which you have ordained; what is man?” (Psa 8:3-4), then how much more may we say, “When we consider your Son, that lay in your bosom, His infinite excellence and unspeakable dearness to You, Lord, what is man, that such a Christ should be delivered to death for him! For him, and not for fallen angels (Heb 2:16), for him when in a state of hostility with God” (Rom 5:8).

3. Does not the constant diligence of His providential care for us show His esteem of us? “Lest any hurt it, I will keep it night and day” (Isaiah 27:3). “He does not withdraw his eyes from the righteous” (Job. 36:7), not even a moment all their days; for if He did, a thousand mischiefs in that moment would rush in upon them and ruin them.

4. Does not the tenderness of His providence show His esteem of us? “As one whom his mother comforts, so I will comfort you” (Isaiah 66:13). He comforts His own by refreshing providences, as an indulgent mother comforts her tender child. “As birds flying” (Isaiah 31:5), viz., to their

nests when their young are in danger, so He defends His. No parental tenderness in the creature can shadow forth the tender affection of the Creator.

5. Does not the variety of the fruits of His providence show it? Our mercies are “new every morning” (cf. Psa 40:5; Lam 3:23). It is a fountain from which stream forth spiritual and temporal, ordinary and extraordinary, public and personal mercies – mercies without number.

6. Does not the ministry of angels in the providential kingdom show it? “Are they not all ministering spirits sent forth to minister for those who will be heirs of salvation?” (Heb 1:14).

7. Does not the providence which this day<sup>1</sup> calls us to celebrate the memory, show the great regard God has for His people? O if not, then why were we not given up “as prey to their teeth?” “If it had not been the LORD who was on our side,” then wicked men, compared to fire, water, and wild beasts, “would have swallowed us up quickly” (Psa 124). O blessed be God for that teeming providence that has already brought forth more than seventy years liberty and peace to the Church of God. I suggest that you remember this providence as the Jews remember their Purim (Esther 9:27-28), and rather more; because we now seem to be as near danger by the same enemy, as we ever have since that time. If such a mercy as this is forgotten, God may say: “I will deliver you no more” (Judges 10:13).

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<sup>1</sup> Preached November 5.

## PART 3.

### Chapter 8 – The Duty of Meditation on providence

Having proven that the affairs of the people of God are conducted by the care of special providence; and having given instances of what influence providence has on those interests and concerns of theirs; we come next to prove it is the duty of the people of God to meditate upon these performances of providence at all times; but especially in times of difficulty and trouble.

1. This is our duty *because God has expressly commanded it*, and called His people to make the most serious reflections upon His works, whether of mercy or judgment. So when that most dreadful of all judgments was executed upon His professing people for their apostasy from God, and God had removed the symbols of His presence from among them, the rest are bid to go, that is, by their meditations, to send at least their thoughts to Shiloh, and see what God did to it (Jer 7:12). So for mercies, God calls us to consider and review them. “O my people, remember how Balak king of Moab consulted with Balaam, and what Balaam the son of Beor answered him from Shittim to Gilgal; so that you may know the righteousness of the LORD” (Micah 6:5) – as if to say, if you do not reflect upon that signal providence, then my righteousness will be covered, and your unrighteousness will be uncovered. So we are called to consider God’s works of providence concerning the creatures, that we may prop up our faith by those considerations for our own supplies (Mat 6:28).

2. It is plain that this is our duty *because neglecting it is condemned everywhere in Scripture as a sin*. To be careless and unobservant is very displeasing to God, and so much appears by that Scripture: “LORD, when your hand is lifted up they will not see” (Isaiah 26:11). No, it is a sin which God threatens and denounces woe against in His Word (Psa 28:4, 5; Isaiah 5:12-13). God not only threatens, but He strikes men with visible judgments for this sin (Job 34:26-27).

3. *And for this end and purpose, the Holy Ghost has attached notes of attention, such as “behold,” to the narratives of the works of providence in Scripture.* All these invite and call men to a due and deep observation of them. For example, in that great and celebrated work of providence in delivering Israel out of Egyptian bondage, you find a note of attention attached to it twice:

Exo 3:2 And the Angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire from the midst of a bush. So he looked, and *behold*, the bush was burning with fire, but the bush *was* not consumed...

<sup>9</sup> “Now therefore, *behold*, the cry of the children of Israel has come to Me, and I have also seen the oppression with which the Egyptians oppress them.”

Again, when that daring enemy Rabshakeh that put Hezekiah and all the people into such consternation was defeated by providence, there is a note of attention prefixed to that providence, “Behold, I will send a blast upon<sup>1</sup> him” (2Kng 19:7). When God glorifies His wisdom and power in delivering His people from their enemies, and ensnaring the latter in the works of their

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<sup>1</sup> “Blast upon” is from the Geneva Bible; the other translations use “spirit in him.” The LXX has *pneuma*.

own hands, a double note of attention is attached to that double work of providence: “*Higgaion selah*” (Psa 9:16).<sup>1</sup> Also at the opening of every seal which contains a remarkable series or branch of providence, attention is particularly commanded to every one of them: “Come and see, come and see” (Rev 6:1-7). All these are useless and superfluous additions in Scripture if no such duty lies upon us (see Psa 66:5).

4. *Without due observation of the works of providence no praise can be rendered to God for any of them.* Praise and thanksgiving for mercies depend on this act of observing them, and cannot be performed without it. Psalm 107 is spent in narrating God’s providential care of men: to His people in difficulties (verses 4-6); to prisoners in their bonds (verses 10-12); to men languishing on their sickbeds (verses 17-19); to seamen on the stormy ocean (verse 23); to men in times of famine (verses 33-34). Indeed, His providence is displayed in all those changes that occur in the world, debasing the high, and exalting the low (verses 40-41) – and at every paragraph, men are called upon to praise God for each of these providences. Verse 43 shows you what a necessary ingredient observation is to that duty: “Whoever is wise, and observes these things, even they will understand the lovingkindness of the LORD.” So that of necessity God must be defrauded of His praise if this duty is neglected.

5. *Without this we lose the usefulness and benefit of all the works of God for us or others,* which would be an unspeakable loss to us indeed. This is the food our faith lives on in days of distress: “You broke the heads of leviathan in pieces, and gave him as food to the people inhabiting the wilderness” (Psa 74:14), i.e., food for their faith. From providences past, saints argue for fresh and new providences to come. So David argued: “The LORD that delivered me out of the paw of the lion, and the paw of the bear, will deliver me out of the hand of this Philistine” (1Sam 17:37). So Paul: “Who *has* delivered, and in whom also we trust that he will *yet* deliver” (2Cor 1:10). If these are forgotten or not considered, the hands of faith hang down. “How is it that you do not remember, nor consider?” (Mat 16:9). This is a topic from which the saints have often drawn their arguments in prayer for new mercies. As when Moses prays for continued or new pardons for the people, he argues from what was past: “As you have forgiven them from Egypt until now” (Num 14:19); so the Church argues for new providences upon the same ground that Moses pleaded for new pardons (Isaiah 51:9-10).

6. *It is a vile slighting of God not to observe what He manifests of Himself in His providences.* For in all providences, especially in some, He comes near to us. He does so in His judgments: “I will come near to you in judgment” (Malachi 3:5). He comes near in mercies also: “The LORD is near to all those that call upon him” (Psa 145:18). Indeed, He is said to visit us by His providence when He corrects us (Hosea 9:7), and when He saves and delivers us (Psa 106:4). These visitations of God preserve our spirits (Job 10:12). And it is a wonderful condescension in the great God to visit us so often, “every morning and...every moment” (Job 7:18). But not to notice it is a vile and brutish contempt for God (Isaiah 1:3; Zeph 3:2). You would not do so to a man for whom you have any respect. It is the character of the wicked not to regard God’s favours (Isaiah 26:10), or His frowns (Jer 5:3).

7. In a word, *men can never order their addresses to God in prayer, suitable to their conditions, without duly observing His providences.* Your prayers are to be suitable to your conditions.

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<sup>1</sup> *Higgaion* means “meditation”, and *selah* is a pause to lift up or exalt, which is a meditation.

Sometimes we are called to praise, sometimes to humiliation. You are to wait for Him in the way of His judgments (Isaiah 26:8), to prepare to meet him (Zeph 2:1, 2; Amos 4:12). Sometimes your business is to turn away His anger which you see approaching; and sometimes you are called to praise Him for the mercies you have received (Isaiah 12:1-2); but then, you must first *observe* them.

Thus you find the matter of David's psalms still varied, according to the providences that befell him. But one who is unobservant and careless, can never do it. And thus you have the grounds for the duty that has been briefly presented.

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## PART 4.

### Chapter 9 – How to Meditate on the providence of God

Next we proceed to show in what manner we are to reflect on the performances of providence for us. And certainly, it is not every slight and transient glance, nor every cold, historical, and unaffected recollection or recognition of His providences towards you that passes with God as discharging this great duty. No, no, it is another kind of work than what most men understand it to be. O that we were but acquainted with this heavenly spiritual exercise, how sweet it would make our lives; how light it would make our burdens! Ah, sirs, you live estranged from the pleasure of the Christian life while you live in the ignorance or neglect of this duty. Now to lead you up to this heavenly, sweet, and profitable exercise, I will beg your attention to the following directions:

#### ***The First Direction.***

*Labour to get as full and thorough a recognition as you are able of the providences of God concerning you, from first to last.*

O fill your hearts with thoughts of Him and His ways. If a single act of providence is so ravishing and transporting, what would many such acts be, if they were presented together to the view of the soul! If one star is so beautiful to behold, how beautiful is a constellation! Therefore let your reflections on the acts and workings of providence for you be full, both *extensively* and *intensively*.

(1) Let them be as *extensively* full as may be. Search backward into all the performances of providence throughout your lives. Asaph did so: “I will remember the works of the LORD: surely I will remember your wonders of old. I will meditate also on all your work, and talk of your doings” (Psa 77:11-12). He laboured to recover and revive the ancient providences of God’s mercies many years past, and to suck a fresh sweetness out of them by new reviews of them. Ah, sirs, let me tell you, there is not such a pleasant history for you to read in all the world as the history of your own lives, if you would but sit down and record from the beginning up to now what God has been to you, and done for you; what signal manifestations and outbreaks of His mercy, faithfulness, and love there have been in all the conditions you have passed through. If your hearts do not melt before you have gone halfway through that history, they are hard hearts indeed. “My Father, you are the guide of my youth” (Jer 3:4).

(2) Let your meditation be as *intensively* full as may be. Do not let your thoughts swim like feathers on the surface of the waters, but sink like lead to the bottom. “The works of the LORD are great, sought out by those who take pleasure in them” (Psa 111:2). Not that I think it feasible to sound the depth of providence by our short line: “Your way is in the sea, and your path in the great waters, and your footsteps are not known” (Psa 77:19). But it is our duty to dive as far as we can; and to admire the depth when we cannot touch the bottom. It is in our viewing providences as it was with Elijah’s servant when he looked out for rain (1Kng 18:44); he went out once and viewed the heavens, and saw nothing, but the prophet bids him go again and again,



and look upon the face of heaven seven times; and when he had done so, what now, says the prophet? “O now”, he says: “I see a cloud rising like a man’s hand”; and then, keeping his eye intently upon it, he sees the whole face of heaven covered with clouds. So you may look upon some providences once and again, and see little or nothing in them; but look “seven times”, that is, meditate often upon them, and you will see their increasing glory, like that increasing cloud.

There are various things to be distinctly pondered and valued in one single providence, before you can judge the amount and worth of it.

*First*, the *seasonableness* of mercy may give it a very great value. Being timed so opportunely and occurring just when needed, makes it a thousandfold more considerable to you than the same mercy would have been at another time. Thus when our needs are permitted to grow to an extreme, and all visible hopes fail, *then* to have relief given, wonderfully enhances the price of such a mercy (Isaiah 41:17-18).

*Second*, the *peculiar care* and kindness of providence to us is a consideration which exceedingly heightens the mercy in itself, and endears it to us. So when, in general calamities upon the world, we are exempted by the favour of providence, covered under its wings; when God calls to us in evil days, “Come, my people, enter into your chambers” (Isaiah 26:20); when such promises are fulfilled to us in times of want or famine (Psa 33:18-19); when others are abandoned and exposed to misery who have every bit as much, and perhaps more, visible security against it, and yet they are delivered up and we are saved, O how endearing are such providences!(Psa 91:7-8).

*Third*, what a providence *introduces* is of special regard and consideration, and by no means should it be neglected. There are leading providences which, however slight and trivial they may seem in themselves, yet because they usher in a multitude of other mercies, and draw a blessed train of happy consequences after them, in this respect they justly challenge the first rank among providential favours to us. Such a providence was that of Jesse’s sending David with provisions to his brothers that lay encamped in the army (1Sam 17:17). And thus every Christian may furnish himself out of his own stock of experience, if he will but reflect and consider the place where he is, the relations that he has, and the way by which he was led into them.

*Fourth*, the *instruments* employed by providence for you are of special consideration; the finger of God is clearly seen by us when we pursue that meditation. For sometimes great mercies are conveyed to us by very improbable means, and more probable ones are laid aside. A stranger is stirred up to do for you what your near relations in nature had no power or will to do for you. Jonathan, a mere stranger to David, clung closer to him, and was more friendly and useful to him than his own brothers, who despised and slighted him. Ministers have found more kindness and respect from strangers than from their own people that are more obliged to them. “A prophet,” said Christ, “is not without honour, except in his own country, and among his own kin, and in his own house” (Mark 6:4).

Sometimes help has come from the hands of enemies, as well as strangers: “The earth helped the woman” (Rev 12:16). God has bowed the hearts of many wicked men to show great kindness to His people (Acts 28:2).

Sometimes God makes use of instruments for good to His people, who intended nothing but evil and mischief to them. Thus Joseph's brothers were instrumental to his advancement in that very thing in which they intended his ruin (Gen 50:20).

*Fifth*, the *design* and *scope* of providence must not escape our thorough consideration – what the aim and goal of providence is. And truly this, of all others, is the most warming and melting consideration. You have the general account of the aim of all providences: “And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose” (Rom 8:28). A thousand friendly hands are at work for them, to promote and bring about their happiness. O this is enough to sweeten the bitterest providence to us, that we know it will turn to our salvation (Php 1:19).

*Sixth*, the *respect* and *relation* providence bears to our prayers is of singular consideration, and a most taking and sweet meditation. Prayer honours providence, and providence honours prayer. Great notice is taken of this in Scripture (Gen 24:45; Daniel 9:20; Acts 12:12). You have had the very petitions you asked of God. Providences have borne the very signatures of your prayers upon them. O how affectingly sweet are such mercies!

### ***The Second Direction.***

*In all your observations of providence have special respect to that Word of God which is fulfilled and made good to you by them.*

This is a clear truth that all providences are related to the written Word. Thus Solomon in his prayer acknowledges that the promises and providences of God went along step by step with his father David all his days; and that His hand (put there for his providence) had fulfilled whatever His mouth had spoken (1Kng 8:24). So Joshua in like manner acknowledges that “not one good thing has failed of all the good things of which the LORD had spoken” (Joshua 23:14). He had carefully observed what relation the works of God had to His Word. He compared them, and found an exact harmony. And so may you too, if you will compare them as he did.

I will insist on this all the more because some interpreters suppose it to be the very scope of the text. For (as noted in the explanation) they supply and fill the sense with “the things which He has promised;” and so they read the text this way: “I will cry to God most high; to God that performs the things He has promised for me” (Psa 57:2).

Now, though I see no reason to limit the sense so narrowly; yet it cannot be denied that this is a special part of its meaning. Let us therefore, in all our reviews of providence, consider what from the Word of God, whether threat, caution, counsel or promise, is at any time made good to us by His providences.

(1) Doing this will greatly confirm to us the truth of the Scripture, when we see its truth so manifest in the events. Had Scripture no other seal or attestation, this alone would be an unanswerable argument of its divinity when men find in all ages that the works of God are worked so exactly according to this model that we may say: “As we have read or heard, so have we seen.” O how great a confirmation is here before our eyes!

(2) Again, doing this will abundantly direct and instruct us in our present duties under all providences. We shall know what we have to do, and how to behave under all changes of conditions. You can learn the voice and errand of the rod only from the Word (Psa 94:12) which interprets the works of God. Providences in themselves are not a perfect guide. They often puzzle and entangle our thoughts; but bring them to the Word, and your duty will be quickly manifested. “When I thought *how* to understand this, it *was* too painful for me – until I went into the sanctuary of God; *then* I understood their end” (Psa 73:17). And not only their end, but his own duty to be quiet in his afflicted condition, and not envy their prosperity.

Well then, bring those providences you have passed through (or are now under) to the Word, and you will find yourselves surrounded with a marvelous light, and you will see the verification of the Scriptures in them. I will therefore appeal here to your consciences, whether you have not found these events of providence occurring agreeably in all respects with the Word.

1. The Word tells you that it is your wisdom and interest to keep close to its rules and the duties it prescribes. It tells that the way of holiness and obedience, is the wisest way. “This is your wisdom” (Deut 4:5-6).

Now, let the events of providence say whether this is true or not. Certainly it will appear to be so, whether we regard our *present comfort* or our *future happiness*, both of which we may daily see exposed by departure from duty, and secured by keeping close to it. Let the question be asked of the *drunkard*, *adulterer* or profane *swearer*, when they have ruined body, soul, estate and name by sin, whether it is their wisdom to walk in those forbidden paths after their own lusts; whether they would not have better consulted their own interest and comfort in keeping within the bounds and limits of God’s commands? They can only confess that “their way is their folly.” (Psa 49:13) “What fruit,” says the Apostle, “did you have in those things of which you are now ashamed? For the end of those things is death” (Rom 6:21). Does not the providence of God verify for them those warnings written in the experience of all ages? (Job 31:12; Prov 5:9-10; Prov 23:21, 29) Those who walk in God’s statutes escape all of those woes and miseries. Look at the ruined estates and bodies you may see everywhere, and behold that the truth of Scripture is evidently made good in those sad providences.

2. The Word tells you that your departure from the way of integrity and simplicity, to make use of sinful policies, will never profit you (1Sam 12:21; Prov 3:5).

Let the events of providence speak regarding this also. Ask your own experience, and you will have a full confirmation of this truth. Did you ever leave the way of simplicity and integrity, and use sinful shifts<sup>1</sup> to bring about your own designs, and to prosper in that way? Certainly God has cursed all the ways of sin; whoever may find they can thrive with them, God’s people *cannot*. Israel would not rely upon the Lord, but would trust in the shadow of Egypt; and what advantage did they have by this sinful policy? (Isaiah 30:1-5) David used a great deal of sinful policy to cover his wicked deed, but did it prosper? (2Sam 12:12) It is an excellent observation of Livy, *Consilia callida, prima specie loeta tractata dura, eventu tristia*. “Sinful policies in their first appearances are pleasant and promising, in their management difficult, in their event sad.” Some

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<sup>1</sup> A woman’s slip; here, a flimsy excuse or cover for wrong-doing.

have obtained wealth by sinful ways, but that Scripture has been verified in their experience, “Treasures of wickedness profit nothing” (Prov 10:2). Either God has blown a secret curse on it so that it has done them no good, or else He has given them such disquietude in their consciences that they have been forced to vomit it up before they could find peace (Job 11:13-15).

What David gave as a charge to Solomon has been found experientially true by thousands: that the true way to prosperity is to keep close to the rule of the Word (1Chr 22:12-13);<sup>1</sup> and the true reason why men cannot prosper is that they have forsaken that rule (2Chr 24:20).<sup>2</sup>

It is true, if God has a purpose to destroy a man, he may for a time permit him to succeed and prosper in his sin for his greater hardening (Job 12:6). But it is not so with those whom the Lord loves. Their sinful shifts shall never thrive with them.

3. The Word prohibits your trust and confidence in the creature, even the greatest and most powerful among creatures (Psa 146:3). It tells us that it is better to trust in the LORD than in them (Psa 118:8). It forbids our confidence in those creatures that are most nearly allied and related in the bonds of nature to us (Micah 7:5). It curses the man that gives to the creature that reliance which is due God (Jer 17:5).

Consult the events of providence in this case, and see whether the Word is not verified in it. Did you ever lean upon an Egyptian reed, and not have it break under you and pierce you as well as deceive you? O, how often has this been evident in our experience! Whatever we have overloved, idolized, and leaned upon, God has broken it from time to time, and made us see the vanity of it; so that we find the readiest course in order to be rid of our comforts, is to set our hearts inordinately or immoderately upon them. For our God is a jealous God, and will not part with His glory to another. The world is full of examples of persons deprived of their comforts, husbands, wives, children, and estates *for this reason*, and *by this means*. If Jonah is overjoyed in his gourd, a worm is at once prepared to strike it. This is why so many graves are opened, to bury of our idols out of our sight. If David says: “My mountain shall stand strong, I shall not be moved,” the next news he will hear is of darkness and trouble (Psa 30:6-7). O how true and faithful we find these sayings of God to be! Who cannot put his seal to this and say: “Your Word is truth” (John 17:17)?

4. The Word assures us that sin is the cause and inlet of affliction and sorrow, and that there is an inseparable connection between them. “Be sure your sin will find you out” (Num 32:23); that is, the sad effects and afflictions that follow it will find you out. “If his children forsake my law and do not walk in my judgments: if they break my statutes and do not keep my commandments: then will I visit their transgression with the rod, and their iniquities with stripes” (Psa 89:30-32).

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<sup>1</sup> **1Chr 22:12** “Only may the LORD give you wisdom and understanding, and give you charge concerning Israel, that you may keep the law of the LORD your God. <sup>13</sup> Then you will prosper, if you take care to fulfill the statutes and judgments with which the LORD charged Moses concerning Israel. Be strong and of good courage; do not fear nor be dismayed.”

<sup>2</sup> **2Chr 24:20** Thus says God: “Why do you transgress the commandments of the LORD, so that you cannot prosper? Because you have forsaken the LORD, He also has forsaken you.”

Enquire now at the mouth of providence whether this is indeed so, according to the reports of the Word. Just ask your own experience and you will find that providence has ordered it just so, all along your way. When did you grow into a secure, vain, carnal frame of mind without finding some rousing, startling providence had been sent to awaken you? When did you wound your consciences with guilt, and God did not wound you for it in one or another of your beloved enjoyments? No, this is so ordinary with God, that from the observations of their own frames and ways, many Christians have foreboded and presaged troubles at hand.

I do not say that God never afflicts His people except for their sin; for He may do it for their trial (1Pet 4:12). Nor do I say that God follows every sin with a rod; for who then could stand before Him (Psa 130:3)? But I do say that it is God's usual way to visit the sins of His people with rods of affliction, and this is done in mercy to their souls. For this reason the rod of God was upon David in a long succession of troubles upon his kingdom and family, after that great prevarication of his (2Sam 12:10). And if we carefully searched out the seeds and principles of those miseries under which we or ours groan, we would find they are our own turnings aside from the Lord (Jer 2:19; 4:18). Have all these cautions and warnings of the Word not been exactly fulfilled by providence in your own experience? Who can help but see the infallible truth of God in all that he has threatened! And the truth of the promises is no less evident to all that observe how providence makes them good every day to us.

5. For consider what great security God has given to His people in the promises, that no man will lose anything by self-denial for His sake. He has told us, "Truly, I say to you: There is no man that has left house, or brothers, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for my sake and the gospel's, that will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses, and brothers, and sisters, and mothers, and children, and lands, along with persecutions, and in the world to come, eternal life" (Mark 10:29-30).

Though that vile apostate Julian<sup>1</sup> derided this promise, yet thousands and tens of thousands have experienced it, and to this day they stand ready to set their seal to it. God has made it good to His people, not only in spiritual things, inward joy and peace, but even in temporal things also. Instead of natural relations who took care of them before, hundreds of Christians shall stand ready to assist and help them; so that though they have left all for Christ, yet they may say with the apostle: "As having nothing, and yet possessing all things" (2Cor 6:10). O the admirable care and tenderness of providence over those that have left all for conscience' sake and cast themselves upon its immediate care! Are there not at this day to be found many so provided for, even to the envy of their enemies and their own admiration? Who does not see the faithfulness of God in the promises, that has but a heart to trust God in them!

6. The Word of promise assures us that whatever wants or straits the saints fall into, their God will never leave them nor forsake them (Heb 13:5), that He "will be with them in trouble" (Psa 91:15).

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<sup>1</sup> *Flavius Claudius Julianus Augustus* (331-363); last non-Christian emperor of Rome. His rejection of Christianity in favour of Neoplatonic paganism led to the church calling him *Julian the Apostate*.

Consult the various providences of your life in this point, and I do not doubt you will find the truth of these promises is as often confirmed as you have been in trouble.<sup>1</sup> Ask your own hearts, where or when was it that your God forsook you, and left you to sink and perish under your burdens? I do not doubt that most of you have been at one time or other plunged in difficulties, difficulties out of which you could see no way of escape by the eye of reason; indeed, such as maybe staggered your faith in the promise, as David's faith was staggered when he said, "I shall now perish one day by the hand of Saul" (1Sam 27:1). "All men are liars" (Psa 116:11), even Samuel himself! And yet notwithstanding all that, we see him emerge out of that sea of trouble, and the promises were made good in every tittle to him. Doubtless, you may observe the same in your own case. Ask your own souls the question, and they will satisfy it. Did God abandon and cast you off in the day of trouble? Certainly you must belie your own experience if you were to say so. It is true, there have been some plunges and difficulties you have met with, in which (1) you could see no way of escape, but concluded you must perish in them. (2) There have been difficulties that have staggered your faith in the promises, and made you doubt whether the fountain of all-sufficiency would let itself out for your relief; (3) Indeed, such difficulties that they provoked you to murmuring and impatience, and thereby provoked the Lord to forsake you in your trouble; yet you see that He did not. He has either strengthened your back to bear it, or lightened your burden, or else opened an unexpected door of escape according to promise (1Cor 10:13) – so that the evil which you feared did not come upon you.

7. You read that the Word of God is the only support and relief to a graced soul in the dark day of affliction (Psa 119:50, 92; 2Sam 23:5), and that it was written for this purpose (Rom 15:4). No rules of moral prudence, no natural remedies can perform for us what the Word can do.

And is this not a sealed truth attested to by a thousand undeniable experiences? From this source the saints have fetched their cordials when fainting under the rod. One word of God can do more than ten thousand words of men to relieve a distressed soul. If providence has at any time directed you to such promises either to assure you that the Lord will be with you in trouble (Psa 91:15), or to encourage you from inward peace to cheerfully bear outward burdens (John 16:33), or to satisfy you of God's tenderness and moderation in His dealings with you (Isaiah 27:8), or to inform you that you will reap blessed fruits from them (Rom 8:28), or to make clear your interest in God and His love under your afflictions (2Sam 7:14) – then O what ease and relief ensues and how light is your burden compared with what it was before!

8. The Word tells us that there is no better way to improve our estates than to lay them out with a cheerful liberality for God; and that it will not be to our advantage to withhold our hands when God and duty call us to distribute:

Pro 11:24-25: There is *one* who scatters, yet increases more; And there is *one* who withholds more than is right, But it *leads* to poverty. <sup>25</sup>The generous soul will be made rich, And he who waters will also be watered himself.

Pro 19:17: He who has pity on the poor lends to the LORD, And He will pay back what he has given.

Isa 32:8 But a generous man devises generous things, And by generosity he shall stand.

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<sup>1</sup> In short, all good things, in every condition of life, are afforded us by God; it will be our duty and interest to support ourselves in times of distress with the consideration of his providence. *Alsted. Theol. Catechet.* p. 192.

Consult providence now, and you will find that, in all respects, it is according to the report of the Word. O how true is the Scripture testimony in this respect! Many thousands of witnesses now living can set their seals to both parts of this proposition. What men save (as they count saving) with one hand, providence scatters by another hand; and what they scatter abroad with a liberal hand and single eye for God, is surely repaid to them or theirs. No man ever lost by distributing for God. He that lends to the poor lends to the LORD (Act 1.25), or as some expound that text, puts his money to interest to the LORD. Some have observed how providence has doubled all they have laid out for God, in ways they did not expect.

9. The Word assures us that the best expedient for a man to settle his own interest in the consciences and affections of men is to direct his ways so as to please the Lord (Prov 16:7), and does providence not confirm it? The three Jews found this by experience (Daniel 3:28-29) and so did Daniel (6:20-22). This kept up John's reputation in the conscience of Herod (Mark 6:20). So it proved when Constantius made that exploratory decree; those that were conscientious were preferred, and those that changed their religion were expelled.<sup>1</sup> No man ever loses in the end by his fidelity.

10. The written Word tells us that the best way to gain inward peace and tranquillity of mind under puzzling and disturbing troubles is to commit ourselves and our case to the Lord (Psa 37:5-7; Prov 16:3).

As you have read in the Word, so you have found it in your own experience. O what a burden is off your shoulders when you have resigned the case to God! Then providence concludes your affairs comfortably for you. The difficulty is soon over when the heart is brought to this.

Thus you see how Scriptures are fulfilled by providence in these few instances I have given. Compare them in all other cases and you will find the same; for all the lines of providence lead from the Scripture, and return there again, and most visibly begin and end there.

### ***The Fourth Direction<sup>2</sup>***

*In all your reviews and observations of providence, be sure that you eye God as the author or orderer of them all (Prov 3:6).*

1. In all the comfortable providences of your lives, eye God as their author or donor. Remember, He is "the Father of mercies" that begets every mercy for you, "The God of all comfort" (2Cor 1:3). Without His order, no mercy or comfort can come to your hands. And do not think it

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<sup>1</sup> Emperor Constantius was the father of Constantine. Caryl relates that Constantius' exploratory decree proclaimed that "all they who would not forsake the worship of the true God should be banished from the court, and should have heavy penalties and fines laid upon them. Presently upon this... all that were base, and came to serve him only for ends, went away, forsook the true God, and worshipped idols. By this means he found out who were the true servants of God, and whom he meant to make his own: such as he found faithful to God, he thought would prove faithful to him." Rev. W. Morley Punshon, *The New Handbook of Illustration*, London, 1874, p. 8.

<sup>2</sup> The *Third Direction* is missing in the original text, or perhaps it was mis-numbered by the publisher or editor.

enough to acknowledge Him in a general way. Rather, when you receive mercies, take special notice of the following particulars:

(1) Eye the *care* of God for you. “He cares for you” (1Pet 5:7). Your heavenly Father knows that you have need of these things (Mat 6:32). You have but to acquaint Him what you need, and your needs are supplied. Be anxious about nothing. (Php 4:6); do not torture yourselves about it; you have a Father that cares for you.

(2) Eye the *wisdom* of God in the way of dispensing His mercies to you – how suitably they are ordered to your condition, and how seasonably. When one comfort is cut off and removed, another is raised up in its place. Thus Isaac was comforted by Rebecca after his mother’s death (Gen 24:67).

(3) Eye the free *grace* of God in them; indeed, see riches of grace in every bequest of comfort to so vile and unworthy creatures as you are. See yourselves surpassed by the least of all your mercies: “I am not worthy of the least,” said Jacob (Gen 32:10).

(4) Eye the *condescension* of God to your requests for those mercies (Psa 34:6). This is the sweetest bit in any enjoyment, in which a man can consciously relish the effect and answer of his prayers; and it greatly inflames the soul’s love toward God (Psa 116:1).

(5) Eye the *design* and *end* of God in all your comforts. Know that it is not sent to satisfy the cravings of your sensual appetite, but to quicken and enable a more cheerful discharge of your duty (Deut 28:47).

(6) Eye the *way* and *method* in which your mercies are conveyed to you. They all flow to you through the blood of Christ and the covenant of grace (1Cor 3:22-23). Mercies derive their sweetness from the channel through which they run to us.

(7) Eye the distinguishing *goodness* of God in all the comfortable enjoyments of your lives. How many thousands better than you are denied these comforts (Heb 11:37)!

(8) Eye them all as comforts appointed to *refresh* you in your way to far better and greater mercies than themselves. The best mercies are reserved till last, and all these introduce even better mercies.

2. In all the sad and afflictive providences that befall you, eye God as the author and orderer of them also. So He represents Himself to us: “Behold, I create evil, and devise a device against you” (Jer 18:11). “Is there evil in the city, and the LORD has not done it?” (Amos 3:6).

(1) Set before you the *sovereignty* of God. Eye Him as a Being infinitely superior to you, at whose pleasure you and all you have subsist (Psa 115:3); this is the most conclusive reason and argument for submission (Psa 46:10). For if we, and all we have, proceeded from His will, then how right it is that we be resigned to it! It is not many years ago since we were not, and when it pleased Him to bring us upon the stage of action. We had no liberty to contract with Him on the terms by which we would come into the world, or refuse to be, unless we might have our being



on such terms as we desired. His sovereignty is gloriously displayed in His eternal decrees and temporal providences. He might have put you into whatever rank of creatures He pleased. He might have made you the most despicable creatures, worms or toads: or, if men, the most vile, abject, and miserable among men. And when you had run through all the miseries of this life, He might have damned you to eternity, made you miserable forever, and all this without any wrong to you. And shall not this quiet us under the common afflictions of this life?

(2) Set the *grace* and *goodness* of God before you in all afflicting providences. O see Him passing by you on a cloudy and dark day, proclaiming His name, “The LORD, The LORD God, merciful and gracious” (Exo 34:6). There are two sorts of mercies that are seldom eclipsed by the darkest affliction that befalls the saints in their temporal concerns: that is, *sparing* mercy in this world, and *saving* mercy in that to come. It is not so bad now as it might be, and we deserved that it should be bad; and it will be better hereafter. The Church observed this, and reasoned herself quiet by it.

[Lam 3:22 Through the LORD’S mercies we are not consumed, because His compassions fail not.](#)

Has He taken some? He might have taken all. Are we afflicted? It is a mercy that we are not destroyed. O, if we consider what temporal mercies are yet spared, and what spiritual mercies are bestowed and still continued for us, we shall find cause to admire mercy, rather than complain of severity.

(3) Eye the *wisdom* of God in all your afflictions. See His wisdom in the kind of affliction – to suffer this kind and not another; see the time – it is now and not at another season; see the degree – it is to this extent only, and not to a greater extent; see the supports that are offered you under it – you are not left altogether helpless; see the outcome to which it is ruled over – it is to your good, and not your ruin. *Look at these*, and then ask your heart that question God asked of Jonah, “Are you right to be angry?”(4:9). Surely, when you consider all - your need for these rods, that your corruptions require all this, and maybe much more, to mortify them; that without the perishing of these things, you might have perished forever – *then* you will see great reason to be quiet and well-satisfied under the hand of God.

(4) Set the *faithfulness* of the Lord before you under the saddest providences. David did so (Psa 119:75). This is according to His covenant faithfulness (Psa 89:32). For this reason the Lord will not withhold a rod when need requires it (1Pet 1:6). Nor will He forsake His people under the rod when He inflicts it (2Cor 4:9).

O what quietness this will breed! I see my God will not lose my heart, if a rod can prevent it. He would rather hear me groan here than howl hereafter. His love is judicious, not fond. He consults my good rather than my ease.

(5) Eye the *all-sufficiency* of God in the day of affliction. See enough in Him still, whatever is gone. Here is the fountain still as full as ever, though this or that pipe is cut off which usually conveyed something from the fountain to me. O Christians, can you not make up any loss this way? Can you not see more in God than in any or all the creature-comforts you have lost? With what eyes, then, do you look upon God?

(6) *Lastly*, eye the *immutability* of God. Look at Him as the Rock of ages, “The Father of lights, with whom there is no variableness, nor shadow of turning” (James 1:17). Eye Jesus Christ as “the same yesterday, today, and forever” (Heb 13:8). O how quietly will you then behave yourselves under the changes of providence! It may be, two or three days have made a sad change in your condition. The death of a dear relation has turned all things upside down; that place is empty where recently he was to be found, as it is: “nor shall his place know him any more” (Job 7:10). Well, God is *what* He was, and *where* He was; time will make no change upon Him. “The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God shall stand for ever” (Isaiah 40:6-8). O how composing those views of God are to our spirits under dark providences!

### ***The Fifth Direction***

*Lastly, work up your hearts to those frames, and exercise those affections, which the particular providences of God that concern you, call for* (Ecc 7:14).

Just as there are various *affections* planted in your souls, so there are various *graces* planted in those affections, and various providences appointed to draw forth and exercise these graces.

1. When the providences of God are sad and afflictive, either upon the Church in general, or upon your families and persons in particular, then it is time for you to *exercise godly sorrow and humility of spirit*. For in that day, and by those providences, God calls for it:

Isa 22:12 And in that day the Lord GOD of hosts called for weeping and for mourning, For baldness and for girding with sackcloth.

Mic 7:9 I will bear the indignation of the LORD, Because I have sinned against Him.

Now, sensual pleasure and natural joy is out of season: “Should we then make mirth?” (Eze 21:10). If there is a filial<sup>1</sup> spirit in us, we cannot be light and vain when our Father is angry. If there is any real sense of the evil of sin which provokes God’s anger, we must be heavy-hearted when God strikes us for it. If there is any sense and compassion for the miseries that sin brings upon the world, it will make us say with David: “I beheld the transgressors, and was grieved” (Psa 119:158). It is sad to consider the miseries that they pull down upon themselves in this world, and in the world to come. If there is any care in us to prevent utter ruin, and to stop God in the way of His anger, we know that [godly sorrow and humility] are the means to do it:

Amo 4:11-12 “I overthrew *some* of you, As God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah, And you were like a firebrand plucked from the burning; Yet you have not returned to Me,” Says the LORD. <sup>12</sup> “Therefore thus will I do to you, O Israel; Because I *will* do this to you, Prepare to meet your God, O Israel!”

2. However sad and dismal the face of providence is, *maintain your spiritual joy and comfort in God* under all of it. “Though the fig tree may not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines; though the labour of the olive may fail, and the fields yield no food; though the flock may be cut off from the fold, and no herd be in the stalls – yet I will rejoice in the LORD; I will joy in the God of my salvation” (Hab 3:17-18).

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<sup>1</sup> *Filial* – family tie; characteristic of a child.

There are two sorts of comforts: those which are *natural* and *sensual*, and those which are *divine* and *spiritual*. There is a time when it becomes Christians to exercise both (Esther 9:22). And there is a time when the former is to be suspended and laid aside (Psa 137:2). But there is no season in which spiritual joy and comfort in God is unseasonable (1Thes 5:16; Php 4:4). This spiritual joy or comfort is nothing but the cheerfulness of our heart in God, and the sense of our interest in Him and in His promises. And it is sure that no providence can render this joy unseasonable to a Christian.

(1) Let us suppose a Christian is in the most afflicted and calamitous state possible; yet why should sad providences make him lay aside his comforts in God, when that state is but for a moment, and these comforts are eternal (2Cor 4:17)?

(2) Why should we give up our joy in God on account of sad external providences, when at the very worst and lowest ebb, the saints have infinitely more cause to rejoice than to be cast down? There is more in one of their mercies to comfort them, than there is in all their troubles to deject them. All your losses are like the loss of a farthing<sup>1</sup> to a prince (Rom 8:18).

(3) Why should they be sad, as long as their God is with them in all their troubles? As Christ said: “Can the children of the bride-chamber mourn, as long as the bridegroom is with them?” (Mat 9:15). So say I: Can the soul be sad while God is with it? O I think that one promise, “I will be with him in trouble” (Psa 91:15) should bear you up under *all* burdens. Let those who have no God to turn to in trouble, be the ones that are cast down.

(4) Why should we be sad as long as no outward dispensation of providence, however sad, can be interpreted as a mark or a sign of God’s hatred or enmity? “One event happens to both the righteous and wicked” (Ecc 9:2-3). Indeed, if it was a sign of the Lord’s wrath against a man, then it would justify our dejection. But this cannot be so. The Lord’s heart is full of love, even while the face of providence is full of frowns.

(5) Why should we be cast down under sad providences while we have so great a security that, even by the hands of these providences, God will do us good? All these things shall turn to our salvation (Rom 8:28). By these God is only killing your lusts, weaning your hearts from a vain world, preventing temptations, and exciting your desires after heaven. This is all the hurt they will do you, and will that sadden us?

(6) Why should we give up our joy in God, when the change of our condition is so near? It is but a little while, and sorrows shall flee away. You shall never suffer again: “God will wipe away all tears” (Rev 7:17).

Well then, you can see that there is no reason to give up your joy and comfort in God on account of providence. But if you would maintain your joy under all providences, then be careful,

(1) To make sure of your interest in, and title to God. *Faith* may be separated from comfort, but assurance cannot.

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<sup>1</sup> A former British bronze coin worth a quarter of a penny.

(2) Mortify your inordinate affections for earthly things. This is what makes providences that deprive us, and cross us so heavily. Mortify your opinion and affection, and you will lighten your affliction. It is strong affection that makes for strong affliction (2Sam 18:33).

(3) Dwell on the meditation of the Lord's near approach; and then all these things will seem but trifles to you. "Let your moderation be known to all men. The Lord is at hand" (Php 4:5).

3. *Exercise heavenly-mindedness and keep your hearts on eternal things* under all the providences with which the Lord exercises you in this world. "Noah walked with God" (Gen 6:9), yet he met with providences as sad in his day as any man that ever lived since his time. But alas! We find most providences *stop us*, rather than *step us*, in our walk with God. If we are under comfortable providences, our hearts grow sensual, wanton, and worldly! And if sad providences befall us, we are cast down or disturbed! And this comes to pass partly through the *narrowness*, but mostly through the *deceitfulness* of our spirits. Our hearts are narrow, and do not know how to manage two businesses of such different natures as earthly and heavenly matters are, without detriment to one of them. But certainly a frame of spirit that enables us to continue in an even and steady course with God is attainable, whatever may befall us. Others have attained it; why not us? Prosperous providences, for the most part, are a dangerous state to the soul. The moon never eclipses unless it is full; yet Jehoshaphat's grace suffered no eclipse from the fullness of his outward condition; he "had riches and honour in abundance. And his heart was lifted up in the ways of the LORD" (2Chr 17:5-6). David's life was as full of cares, turmoils, and burdens as most men we read of; yet how spiritual the attitude of his heart was, as that excellent Book of Psalms reveals; it was mostly composed in the midst of those turmoils. The apostles were thrown into as great necessities, and suffered things as hard as any men ever did; yet how raised and heavenly their spirits were in the midst of it all! And certainly, if it were not possible to maintain heavenly-mindedness in such a state and posture of affairs, God would never exercise any of His people with such providences. He would never give you so much of the world to lose your hearts in the love of it, or so little to distract you with the care of it. If therefore we were more deeply sanctified, and the tendencies of our hearts toward heaven were more ardent and vigorous, and if we were more mortified to earthly things and could just keep our due distance from them, then our outward conditions would not draw forth and exercise our inward corruptions at this rate; nor would we hazard the loss of so sweet an enjoyment as our fellowship with God, for the sake of any concern our bodies may have on earth.

4. Under all providences, maintain a contented heart with what the Lord allots you, whether it is more or less of the things of this world. This grace must run parallel with all providences. Learn how to be full, and how to suffer want, and how to be content in every state (Php 4:11-12).

All men are concerned in this duty at all times and in every state; not only the people of God, but even the unregenerate also. I will therefore address some considerations that are proper to both.

*First as to the unregenerate*, to stop their mouths from complaining and foolishly charging God when providence crosses them. Let them seriously consider these four things:

(1) That hell and eternal damnation are their portion, their cup according to the tenor of law and Gospel warnings. Whatever therefore is short of this, is to be admired as the fruit of God's stupendous patience and forbearance toward them. Ah, poor souls! Do you not know that you are men and women condemned to wrath by the plain sentence of the Law? (Mark 16:16; John 3:36; 2Thes 1:6, 7) And if so, then surely there are other matters to exercise your thoughts, desires, fears, and cares than these. Alas! If you cannot bear a frown from providence, a slight cross in these things, how will you bear the everlasting burnings? A man that is to lose his head tomorrow is not very concerned about what bed he lies on, or how his table is furnished the night before.

(2) Consider that although you are condemned persons, and have no promise to entitle you to any mercy, yet there are very many mercies in your possession this day. Be your condition as afflictive as it will, is life nothing? Especially consider where you must sink to when that thread is cut. Are the necessary supports of life nothing? Does not providence minister these things to you, even though daily you disoblige it and provoke God to send you to your own place? (Act 1.25) But above all, are the Gospel and precious means of salvation nothing to you, by which you still have the capacity to escape the damnation of hell? O what would the damned say if they were put into your condition once more! What! And yet you fret against God because everything else does not suit your desires?

(3) Consider, that if you are ever to be rescued out of that miserable condition you are in, such cross providences as these of which you complain are the most probable means to rescue you. Alas! Prosperity and success are not the way to save, but only to destroy you (Prov 1:32). You must be bound in fetters, and held in cords of affliction, if your ear is ever to be opened to instruction (Job 36:8-10). Woe to you if you go on smoothly in the way in which you are going, and meet with *no* crosses.

(4) *Lastly*, consider that all your troubles under which you complain, are pulled down upon your heads by your own sins. You turn God's mercies into sin, and then fret against God because He turns your sins into sorrow. Your ways and your doings procure these things for you. Therefore lay your hand upon your mouth and say, "Why does a living man complain about the punishment of his sins?" (Lam 3:39).

But *now I must turn to the Lord's people*, who have the least pretenses of all to be dissatisfied with any of God's providences; and yet they are only too frequently found in that attitude. To them I will offer the following considerations:

(1) Consider your spiritual mercies and privileges with which the Lord Jesus has invested you, and complain at your providential lot if you can. One of these mercies alone has enough in it to sweeten all your troubles in this world. When the apostle considered them, his heart was so overwhelmed with astonishment, that he could not, in the midst of all his outward troubles, keep from crying out, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with all spiritual blessings" (Eph 1:3). Oh who, seeing such an inheritance settled upon him in Christ, can ever open his mouth again to complain at his providential lot!

(2) Consider your sins, and that will make you contented with your lot. Indeed, consider two things in sin: what it deserves from God, and what it requires to mortify and purge it in you. It deserves eternal ruin from God. The merit of hell is in the least vain thought. Every sin forfeits all the mercies you have; and if so, wonder that your mercies are so many, rather than wondering that you have no more. Besides, you cannot doubt but that your corruptions require all the crosses, wants, and troubles that are upon you (and maybe a great deal more) to mortify and subdue them. Do you not find, after all the rods that have been laid upon you, that you still have a proud heart, a vain and earthly heart? O how many bitter potions are necessary to purge out this tough and malignant disease!

(3) Consider how near you are to the change of your condition. Have but a little patience, and all will be as well with you as your hearts can desire. It is no small comfort to the saints that this world is the worst place that they shall ever be in; things will get better every day with them. If the traveler has spent all his money, yet it does not trouble him much if he knows he is within a few miles of his own home. If there are no candles in the house, we do not much trouble over it when we are sure it is almost break of day; for then there will be no need for them. This is the case with us; “for now our salvation is nearer than when we *first* believed” (Rom 13:11).

I am done with the directive part of this discourse. But before I proceed further, I judge that it is necessary to leave a few cautions, to prevent the abuse of providence.

### ***First Caution***

*If providence delays the performance of any mercy to you that you have long waited and prayed for, see that you do not despond, or grow weary of waiting upon God for that reason.*

Often it pleases the Lord to try and exercise His people this way, and make them cry: “How long, LORD, how long?” (Psa 13:1-2). These delays, for both spiritual and temporal reasons, are frequent; and when they befall us, we are too apt to interpret them as denials, and fall into a sinful despondency of mind, even though there is no cause for it at all:

[Psa 31:12](#) I am forgotten like a dead man, out of mind; I am like a broken vessel.

[Lam 3:8, 44](#) Even when I cry and shout, He shuts out my prayer... <sup>44</sup> You have covered Yourself with a cloud, that prayer should not pass through.

It is not always that the effects of prayer are dispatched to us in the same hour they are asked of God; yet sometimes it happens so (Isaiah 65:24; Daniel 9:23). But though the Lord means to perform for us the mercies we desire, He will ordinarily exercise our patience to wait for them, and for these reasons:

(1) One reason is that it is not the proper time for us to receive our mercies. Now, the timing of a mercy is a very great circumstance that adds much to the value of it. God does not judge as we do; we are all in a hurry and would have it now (Num 12:13). “For the LORD is a God of judgment: blessed are all those that wait for him” (Isaiah 30:18).

(2) Another reason is that afflictive providences have not accomplished the design upon our hearts that they were sent for, when we are so earnest and impatient for a change in them; and till then, the rod must not be taken off.

Isa 10:12 When the Lord has accomplished all his work upon Mount Zion and Jerusalem, *he will punish the fruit of the proud heart of the King of Assyria, and his glorious and proud looks.*

(3) Again, the more prayers and searchings of heart that come between our needs and supplies, between our afflictions and reliefs, the sweeter our reliefs and supplies are made to us thereby. “Behold, this is our God; we have waited for him, and he will save us: this is the LORD, we have waited for him; we will rejoice and be glad in his salvation” (Isaiah 25:9). This recompenses the delay, and it pays us for all the expenses of our patience.

But though there are such weighty reasons for the stop and delay of refreshing comfortable providences, yet we cannot bear it; our hands hang down and we faint. “I am weary of my crying: my throat is dried: my eyes fail while I wait for my God” (Psa 69:3). For alas! we judge by sense and appearance, and we do not consider that God’s heart may be *for* us while the hand of His providence seems to be *against* us. If things continue as they are, we think our prayers are lost and our hopes have perished from the LORD (Lam 3.18). When things grow worse and worse, and our darkness and trouble increase, as they usually do just before the break of day and the change of our condition, then we conclude that God is angry with our prayers. See Gideon’s reply:

Judges 6:13 Gideon said to Him, “O my lord, if the LORD is with us, why then has all this happened to us? And where *are* all His miracles which our fathers told us about, saying, ‘Did not the LORD bring us up from Egypt?’ But now the LORD has forsaken us and delivered us into the hands of the Midianites.”

This even staggered Moses’ faith:

Exodus 5:22 So Moses returned to the LORD and said, “Lord, why have You brought trouble on this people? Why *is* it You have sent me? <sup>23</sup> For since I came to Pharaoh to speak in Your name, he has done evil to this people; nor have You delivered Your people at all.”

O what groundless jealousies and suspicions about God are found at such times in the hearts of His own children!

Job 9:16-17 If I called and He answered me, I would not believe that He was listening to my voice. <sup>17</sup> For He crushes me with a tempest, and multiplies my wounds without cause.

Psa 77:7 Will the Lord cast off forever? And will He be favorable no more? <sup>8</sup> Has His mercy ceased forever? Has *His* promise failed forevermore? <sup>9</sup> Has God forgotten to be gracious? Has He in anger shut up His tender mercies?

But this is *our* great evil; and to prevent it in future trials, I offer a few proper considerations in the case.

*First*, the delay of your mercies is really for your advantage. You read, “and therefore will the LORD wait that he may be gracious” (Isaiah 30:18). What is that? Why, it is nothing else but the time of His preparation of mercies for you, and the preparation of your hearts for mercy, so that you may have it with the greatest advantage of comfort. The foolish child would pluck the apple while it is green; but when it is ripe, it drops of its own accord and it is more pleasant and wholesome.

*Secondly*, it is a greater mercy to have a heart willing to refer everything to God, and to be at His disposal, than to immediately enjoy the mercy we are most eager and impatient for. In *that*, God pleases you; but in *this*, you please God. A mercy may be given to you as the fruit of common providence; but such an attitude of heart is the fruit of special grace. The extent to which glorifying God is better than the satisfaction and pleasure of the creature, is the extent to which this frame of heart is better than such a fruition.

*Thirdly*, expected mercies are never nearer than when the hearts and hopes of God's people are lowest. It was so in their deliverance out of Egypt and Babylon (Eze 37:11). And so we have found it in our own personal concerns: "At evening time it shall be light" (Zech 14:7). When we look for increasing darkness, light arises.

*Fourthly*, our unfitness for mercies is the reason why they are delayed so long. We block the way of mercies and then complain that they are not hastened to us. "Behold, the LORD's hand is not so shortened that it cannot save: nor is his ear so dull that it cannot hear: but your iniquities have separated you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear" (Isaiah 59:1-2).

*Fifthly*, consider that the mercies you wait for are the fruits of pure grace. You do not deserve them, nor can you claim them upon any title of deserving; and therefore you have reason to wait for them in a patient and thankful frame.

*Lastly*, consider how many millions of men, as good as you by nature, are cut off from all hope and expectation of mercy forever, and there remains for them nothing but "a fearful expectation of wrath." This might have been *your* case; and therefore do not have an impatient spirit under the expectations of mercy.

### ***Second Caution***

*Do not pry too curiously into the secrets of providence, nor allow your shallow reason to arrogantly judge and censure its designs.*

There are hard texts in the *works* as well as in the *Word* of God. It becomes us to modestly and humbly reverence them,<sup>1</sup> but not to dogmatize too boldly and positively upon them. A man may easily get a strain by over-reaching. "When I thought to know this," said Asaph, "it was too painful for me" (Psa 73:16). "I thought to know this" - there was the arrogant attempt of reason, there he pried into the secrets of providence - "but it was too wonderful for me," it was "useless labour," as Calvin expounds it. He pried so far into that puzzling mystery of the afflictions of the righteous, and the prosperity of the wicked, that it produced envy towards them and despondency in himself (Psa 73:3, 13); and this was all he got by summoning providence to the bar of reason. Holy Job was guilty of this evil, and he was frankly ashamed of it (Job 42:3).

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<sup>1</sup> Here the scripture has set bounds to our curiosity, which no man can, or ought to transgress; neither is it for man to call God to account (or judge of God). Hence it is that God's judgments are called unsearchable, that the human mind may not weary and toil itself in vain, and not without the greatest danger, in searching out God. *Cameron's Proelect.* p. 112.



I know there is nothing in the Word or in the works of God that is repugnant to sound reason; but there are some things in both, which are *opposite* to carnal reason as well as *above* right reason. And therefore our reason never shows itself more *unreasonable* than in summoning those things to its bar which transcend its sphere and capacity. Many are the mischiefs which ensue upon this practice:

1. By this we are drawn into an unworthy suspicion and distrust of the faithfulness of God in the promises. Sarah laughed at the tidings of the son of promise, because reason contradicted and told her it was naturally impossible (Gen 18:13-14).

2. From this comes despondency of mind and faintness of heart under afflictive providences. Reason can discern no good fruits in them, nor deliverance from them; and so our hands hang down in a sinful discouragement, saying that all these things are against us (1Sam 27:1).

3. From this flow temptations to deliver ourselves by indirect and sinful means (Isaiah 30:15-16). When our own reason fills us with a distrust of providence, it naturally prompts us to sinful expedients, and there it leaves us entangled in the snares of our own making.

Beware, therefore, that you do not lean too much on your own reasonings and understandings. Nothing is more plausible, nothing more dangerous.

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## PART 5.

### Chapter 10 – The Advantages of Meditating on Providence

Having given direction for the due management of this great and important duty, what remains now is to set our hearts to it, and make it the constant work of every day throughout our lives. O what peace, what pleasure, what stability, what holy courage and confidence would result from such an observation of providence as has been recommended! But alas, we may say with reference to the voices of divine providence, as it is written: “For God speaks once, even twice, yet man does not perceive it” (Job 33:14). Many a time providence has spoken instruction in duty, conviction for iniquity, encouragement under despondency, but we do not regard it. How greatly are we all lacking in our duty and comfort by this neglect! It will be necessary therefore to spread before you the loveliness and excellence of walking with God in a due and daily observation of His providences, so that our souls may be fully engaged to it.

#### *First Motive*

First let me offer this as a moving argument to all graced souls that *by this means you may maintain sweet and conscious communion with God from day to day*. And what is there in this world more desirable than that! “For you, LORD, have made me glad through your work: I will triumph in the works of your hands” (Psa 92:4). Your hearts may be as sweetly refreshed by the works of God’s hands as by the words of his mouth. Psalm 104 is all spent in the consideration of the works of providence which so filled the Psalmist’s heart that, by way of ejaculation, he expresses the effect of it: “My meditation of him shall be sweet” (verse 34).

Communion with God, properly and strictly taken, consists in two things: God’s manifestation of Himself to the soul, and the soul’s responses to God. This is that *koinonia* (fellowship) we have here with God. Now God manifests Himself to His people by providences as well as ordinances; nor is there any grace in a sanctified soul hidden from the gracious influences of His providential manifestations. Sometimes the Lord manifests His displeasure and anger against the sins of His people in correcting and rebuking providences. His rods have a chiding voice: “Hear the rod, and who has appointed it” (Micah 6:9). This manifestation of God’s anger kindly melts and thaws a graced soul, and produces a double-sweet effect upon it, namely, repentance for sins past, and due caution against future sins.

It thaws and melts the heart for sins committed. Thus David’s heart was melted for his sin when the hand of God was heavy upon him in affliction (Psa 32.4-5).

**Psalm 32:4-5** For day and night Your hand was heavy upon me; My vitality was turned into the drought of summer. Selah <sup>5</sup> I acknowledged my sin to You, And my iniquity I have not hidden. I said, “I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,” And You forgave the iniquity of my sin.

Thus the captive Church, on which fell the saddest and most dismal providence that ever befell any of God’s people in any age of the world, see how their hearts are broken for sin under this severe rebuke.

**Lam 2:17-19** The LORD has done what He purposed; He has fulfilled His word Which He commanded in days of old. He has thrown down and has not pitied, And He has caused an enemy to rejoice over you; He has exalted the horn of your adversaries.<sup>18</sup> Their heart cried out to the Lord, “O wall of the daughter of Zion, Let tears run down like a river day and night; Give yourself no relief; Give your eyes no rest.”<sup>19</sup> “Arise, cry out in the night, At the beginning of the watches; Pour out your heart like water before the face of the Lord. Lift your hands toward Him For the life of your young children, Who faint from hunger at the head of every street.”

And then it produces caution against sin for the time to come. It is plain that the rebukes of providence leave this effect upon graced hearts.

**Ezra 9:13-14** “And after all that has come upon us for our evil deeds and for our great guilt, since You our God have punished us less than our iniquities *deserve*, and have given us *such* deliverance as this,<sup>14</sup> “should we again break Your commandments, and join in marriage with the people *committing* these abominations? Would You not be angry with us until You had consumed *us*, so that *there would be* no remnant or survivor?”

**Psalms 85:8** I will hear what God the LORD will speak, For He will speak peace To His people and to His saints; But let them not turn back to folly.

Sometimes God cheers and comforts the hearts of His people with smiling and reviving providences, both public and personal. There are times of lifting up as well as casting down<sup>1</sup> by the hand of providence. The scene changes and the aspects of providence are very cheerful and encouraging; their winter seems to be over. They put off their garments of mourning and then, ah, what sweet responses are made to heaven by graced souls! (Psalm 30:11-12) Does God lift them up by prosperity? Then they will also lift up their God by praises:

**Psalms 18 verses:1-3** <To the Chief Musician. A *Psalm* of David the servant of the LORD, who spoke to the LORD the words of this song on the day that the LORD delivered him from the hand of all his enemies and from the hand of Saul. And he said:><sup>1</sup> I will love You, O LORD, my strength.<sup>2</sup> The LORD is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer; My God, my strength, in whom I will trust; My shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold.<sup>3</sup> I will call upon the LORD, *who is worthy* to be praised; So shall I be saved from my enemies.

Moses and the people with him, when God had delivered them from Pharaoh (Exo 15), exalted Him in a song of thanksgiving which, for the elegance and spirituality of it, is an emblem of the doxologies given to God in glory by the saints.

**Revelation 15:3** They sing the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb, saying: “Great and marvelous *are* Your works, Lord God Almighty! Just and true *are* Your ways, O King of the saints!”

On the whole, in our communion with God in any of His *ordinances*, whatever effect is produced in our hearts, we may observe that those same effects will follow when conversing with Him in His *providences*.

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<sup>1</sup> 1Sam 2.7.

1. It is usually the experience of all the saints that in whatever ordinance or duty they have any conscious communion with God, it naturally produces in their spirits a deep abasement and humiliation from the sense of divine condescension to such vile poor worms as we are. Thus Abraham said, “I am but dust and ashes” (Gen 18:27). The same effect follows our converse with God in His providences. Thus when God had prospered Jacob in the way of His providence, how he lays himself at the feet of God, as a man overwhelmed with the sense of mercy! (Gen 32:10)

“I am not worthy of the least of all the mercies, and of all the truth which you have shown your servant; for with my staff I passed over this Jordan, and now I have become two bands.”

It was also this way with David (2Sam 7:18):

“Who am I, O Lord GOD, and what is my house, that you have brought me to here?”

And I do not doubt that some of you have found the same frame of heart upon you, that these holy men expressed here. Can you not remember when God lifted you up by providence, how you cast down yourselves before Him<sup>1</sup> and have been more vile in your own eyes than ever! Why, all graced hearts do this. What am I, that the Lord should do thus and thus for me! O that ever so great and holy a God should thus be concerned for so vile and sinful a worm!

2. Does communion with God in His *ordinances* melt the heart into love to God (Song 2:3-5)? Why, so does the observation of His *providences*. No man ever conversed with God’s works of providence rightly, who did not find that his heart sometimes melted into love to the God of his mercies. When God had delivered David from the hand of Saul and all his enemies, David said, “I will love you, O LORD my strength” (Psa 18:1 compared with the title).<sup>2</sup> Every man loves the *mercies of God*, but a saint loves *the God of his mercies*. The mercies of God, as they are the fuel of a wicked man’s lusts, so they are fuel to maintain a good man’s love to God; not that their love for God is grounded upon these external benefits. “Not yours, but you, O Lord,”<sup>3</sup> is the motto of a graced soul. Yet these things serve to blow on the flame of love to God in their hearts, and they find it so.

3. Does communion with God set the keenest edge upon the soul against sin? You see it does, and you have a great instance of it in Moses, when he had been with God in the mount for forty days and enjoyed communion with Him there. When he came down and saw the calf the people had made, see what a holy paroxysm of zeal and anger it threw his soul into (Exo 32:19-20). Why, you may discern the same effect follows the saints’ converse with God in His providences. What pierced the heart of David with such a deep sense of the evil of his sin which is so abundantly manifested in Psalm 51? Why, if you look at the title, you shall find it was the effect of what Nathan had laid before him; and if you consult 2Sam 12:7-10, you will find it was the goodness of God manifested to him in the several endearing providences of his life which, in this sin, he had so evilly requited the Lord for. It was the realization of this that broke his heart to pieces. And I do not doubt that some of us have sometimes found similar effects by comparing God’s ways with our own.

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<sup>1</sup> Luk 5.8

<sup>2</sup> **Psalm 18:1** *title*: To the Chief Musician. A *Psalm* of David the servant of the LORD, who spoke to the LORD the words of this song on the day that the LORD delivered him from the hand of all his enemies and from the hand of Saul. And he said: “I will love you, O LORD my strength”

<sup>3</sup> 2Cor 12.14 *applied to God*.

4. Does communion with the Lord enlarge the heart for obedience and service? Surely it is like oil applied to the wheels which makes them run freely and nimbly in their course. Thus when Isaiah had obtained a special manifestation of God, and the Lord asked: “Whom shall I send?” he presents a ready soul for employment: “Here am I; send me” (Isaiah 6:8). Why, the very same effect follows sanctified providences, as you may see in Jehoshaphat (2Chr 17:5-6)<sup>1</sup> and in David (Psa 116:12).<sup>2</sup> O when a soul considers what God has done for him, he cannot help but say, “What shall I answer? How shall I respond to these engagements?”

And thus you see what sweet communion a soul may have with God in the way of His providences. O that you would walk this way with Him! How much of heaven might be found on earth this way! And certainly the Lord will never regret that He has done you good, when His mercies produce such effects upon your hearts. He will say of every favour thus improved, “It was well-bestowed, and I will rejoice over you to do you good for ever” (Deut 28.63).

### ***Second Motive***

*A great part of the pleasure and delight of the Christian life is made out of the observations of providence.* “The works of the LORD are great, pondered by all those who take pleasure in them” (Psa 111:2). That is, the study of providence is so sweet and pleasant that it invites and allures the soul to search and dive into it. How pleasant is it to a well-tempered soul to behold and observe.

1. Observe the sweet harmony and consent of divine attributes in the issues of providence! They may seem sometimes to jar and clash, to part with each other and go contrary ways; but they only *seem* so to do; for they always wind up meeting and embracing each other. “Mercy and truth are met together: righteousness and peace have kissed each other” (Psa 85:10). This is spoken with an immediate reference to that signal providence of Israel’s deliverance out of the Babylonian captivity, and the sweet effects of it. The truth and righteousness of God in the promises, as it were, kissed and embraced the mercy and peace that was contained in their performance, after they had seemed for seventy years to be at a great distance from each other. It is an allusion to the usual demonstration of joy and gladness that two dear friends usually give and receive after a long absence and separation from each other; they no sooner meet than they smile, embrace and kiss each other. It is that way here. The Hebrew word may be rendered “have met us,”<sup>3</sup> and that is also true; for whenever these blessed promises and performances meet and kiss each other, they are also joyfully embraced and kissed by believing souls. I have no doubt this is an indirect reference in this Scripture to the Messiah also, and to our redemption by Him. It is in Him that these divine attributes, which before seemed to clash and contradict one another in the business of our salvation, have a sweet agreement and accomplishment. Truth and righteousness in Him meet with mercy and peace in a blessed agreement. What a lovely sight this is, and how pleasant to behold! O, if we would only stand upon our watchtower (Hab 2:3) to take due observations of providence, what rare prospects we might have! Luther understands it

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<sup>1</sup> **2Chr 17:5** Therefore the LORD established the kingdom in his hand; and all Judah gave presents to Jehoshaphat, and he had riches and honor in abundance. <sup>6</sup> And his heart took delight in the ways of the LORD; moreover he removed the high places and wooden images from Judah.

<sup>2</sup> **Psalm 116:12** What shall I render to the LORD *For* all His benefits toward me?

<sup>3</sup> *Occurrunt nobis*, Syriac.

of the Word of God, as much as to say, I will look into the Word, and observe there how God accomplishes all things, and brings them to pass, and how His works are the fulfilling of His Word. Others, such as Calvin, understand it of a man's own retired thoughts and meditations, in which a man carefully observes what purposes and designs God has upon the world in general, or upon himself in particular; and how the truth and righteousness of God in the Word work themselves through all difficulties and impediments, and meet in the mercy, peace and happiness of the saints at last. Every believer, in whichever sense he takes it, has his watchtower as Habakkuk did; and let me say that it is an angelic employment to stand and behold the consent of God's attributes, the accomplishment of His ends and our own happiness, in the works of His providence. For this is the joy of the angels and saints in heaven to see God's ends worked out and His attributes glorified, in the mercy and peace of the Church (Rev 14:1-3, 8).<sup>1</sup>

2. And just as it is a pleasant sight to see the harmony of God's attributes, so it is exceedingly pleasant to behold the resurrection of our own prayers and hopes, as if from the dead. Why, you may see this often if you duly observe the works of providence towards you. We hope and pray for such and such mercies to the Church, or to ourselves; but God delays the accomplishment of our hopes, suspends the answer to our prayers and seems to speak to us saying: "For the vision is yet for an appointed time, but at the end it shall speak and not lie: though it tarries, wait for it: because it will surely come, it will not tarry" (Hab 2:3). But we have no patience to await the time of the promise; our hopes languish and die in the interim, and we say with the despondent Church, "My hope has perished from the LORD" (Lam 3:18). But how sweet and comforting it is to see these prayers fulfilled after we have given up all expectation of them! May we not say of them, that it is like "life from the dead." This was David's case (Psa 31:22); he gave up his hopes and prayers as lost, and yet he lived to see the comfortable and unexpected responses to them. And this was the case of Job (6:11); he had given up all expectation of better days, and yet this man lived to see a resurrection of all his lost comforts with advantage.<sup>2</sup> Think how that change, and unexpected turn of providence, affected his soul. It is with our hopes and prayers as it is with our charity: "Cast your bread upon the waters: for you shall find it after many days" (Ecc 11:1). Or as it was with Jacob, who had given up all hopes of ever seeing his beloved Joseph again. But when a strange and unexpected providence had restored that hopeless mercy to him again, O how ravishing and transporting it was! (Gen 46:29-30).<sup>3</sup>

3. What a transporting pleasure it is to behold great blessings and advantages to us that are worked by providence out of those very things that seemed to threaten our ruin or misery! And yet by duly observing the ways of providence, you may find it so, to your singular comfort. Little did Joseph think his transportation into Egypt had been for his advancement there; yet he lived

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<sup>1</sup> **Rev 14:1-3** Then I looked, and behold, a Lamb standing on Mount Zion, and with Him one hundred *and* forty-four thousand, having His Father's name written on their foreheads. <sup>2</sup> And I heard a voice from heaven, like the voice of many waters, and like the voice of loud thunder. And I heard the sound of harpists playing their harps. <sup>3</sup> They sang as it were a new song before the throne, before the four living creatures, and the elders; and no one could learn that song except the hundred *and* forty-four thousand who were redeemed from the earth...<sup>8</sup> And another angel followed, saying, "Babylon is fallen, is fallen, that great city, because she has made all nations drink of the wine of the wrath of her fornication."

<sup>2</sup> *With advantage: that is, with interest, or dividends. More was returned to him than he lost in the first place.*

<sup>3</sup> **Gen 46:29-30** So Joseph made ready his chariot and went up to Goshen to meet his father Israel; and he presented himself to him, and fell on his neck and wept on his neck a good while. <sup>30</sup> And Israel said to Joseph, "Now let me die, since I have seen your face, because you *are* still alive."

with joy to see it, and with a thankful heart to acknowledge it (Gen 45:5). Wait and observe, and you will assuredly find that promise (Rom 8:28)<sup>1</sup> working its way out through all providences. How many times have you been made to say as David did, “It is good for me that I have been afflicted” (Psa 119:71). O what a difference we have seen between our first meeting with afflictions, and our parting from them! We have entertained them with sighs and tears, but parted from them with joy, blessing God for them, as the happy instruments of our good. Thus our fears and sorrows are turned into praises and songs of thanksgiving.

4. What unspeakable comfort it is for a poor soul that sees nothing but sin and vileness in itself, at the same time to see what a high esteem and value the great God has for him! This may be discerned by a due attendance to providence; for there a man sees goodness and mercy following him through all his days (Psa 23:6). Other men pursue good, and it flies from them; they can never overtake it. But goodness and mercy follow the people of God, and they cannot avoid or escape it. It gives them chase day by day, and finds them out<sup>2</sup> even when they sometimes put themselves out of the way of it by sin. In all the providences that befall them, goodness and mercy pursue them. O with what a melting heart they sometimes reflect upon these things! “And will not the goodness of God be discouraged from following me, notwithstanding all my vile affronts and abuses of it in former mercies? Lord, what am I, that mercy should thus pursue me, when vengeance and wrath pursue others as good as I am by nature?” It certainly argues the great esteem God has of a man, when He follows him in this way with sanctified providences for his good, whether comforts or crosses. And so much is plain from “What is man that you should visit him every morning, and try him every moment!” (Job 7:17-18). Certainly, God’s people are His treasure; and by this it appears that they are: that He does not take his eye from them (Job 36:7). I do not say that God’s favour and respect toward a man may be concluded solely from His providences – but sanctified providences may make it very clear to us. And when it does, it can only be matter of exceeding great joy.

5. To conclude, what is there in all this world that can give a soul such joy and comfort, as to find that everything sets him on and furthers his way to heaven! And yet this may be discerned by a careful attendance to the effects and issues of providences. However contrary the winds and tides of providence at any time seem to us, yet nothing is more certain than that they all conspire to hasten sanctified souls to God and fit them for glory.

Saint Paul knew that both his bonds and the afflictions that were added to them would turn to or, as the word implies, finally result in his salvation. Not that in themselves they serve to any such purpose; but as they are overruled and determined to such an end, “through your prayer and the supply of the Spirit of Jesus Christ” (Php 1:19). When prayer, which is the external means, and the Spirit, which is the internal means, are joined with them, then afflictions themselves become excellent means to promote salvation. Have we not observed with joy how those very things that sense and reason tell us are opposite to our happiness, have been the most blessed instruments to promote it! Observe how God has blessed crosses to mortify corruption, deprivation to kill our wantonness, and disappointments to wean us from the world! O, how little we think those things, which are so burdensome to our present sense, will comfort us in retrospect!

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<sup>1</sup> **Rom 8:28** And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to *His* purpose.

<sup>2</sup> Deut 28.2

### ***Third Motive.***

*I beseech you to consider what an effectual means the due observation of providence will be to overpower and suppress the natural atheism that is in your hearts.*

There is a natural seed of atheism in the best hearts, and this is greatly nourished by passing a rash and false judgment upon the works of providence. When we see wicked ones prospering in the world, and godly men crushed and destroyed in the way of righteousness and integrity, it may tempt us to think that there is no advantage by religion, and that all our self-denial and holiness is little better than lost labour. This was the case with good Asaph: “Behold, these are the ungodly, who prosper in the world; they increase in riches” (Psa 73:12). And what does the flesh infer from this? Why, no less than the unprofitableness of the ways of holiness: “Truly I have cleansed my heart in vain, and washed my hands in innocence” (verse 13). Carnal reason was ready to draw this irreligious inference from the dispensations of outward prosperity to wicked men; but now, if we would carefully observe either the signal retributions of providence to many of them in this world, or to all of them in the world to come, O what a full confirmation this is to our faith! “The LORD is known by the judgments which he executes”(Psa 9:16). Psalm 58 contains the characters of the most prodigious sinners, whose wickedness is aggravated by the deliberation with which it is committed (verse 2), by their habit and custom in it (verse 3), and by their incorrigibleness and persistence in it (verses 4 and 5). And the providence of God is thereby invited to destroy their power (verse 6); and that is done either by a gradual and unperceived consumption of them (verses 7 and 8) or by a sudden and unexpected stroke (verse 9).

And what will the effects of such providence be for the righteous? Why, it will be a matter of joy (verse 10) and of great confirmation to their faith in God: “Truly there is a God that judges in the earth” (verse 11).

How convincingly clear those providences are that demonstrate the being, wisdom, power, love, and faithfulness of God in supporting, preserving and delivering the righteous in all their dangers, fears, and difficulties! In these things, the Lord shows Himself to His people (Psa 94:1). Indeed, He shows Himself to spiritual eyes in the providences, as clearly as the sun manifests itself by its own beams of light. “And his brightness was as the light; he had rays coming out of his hand; and there He veiled his power” (Hab 3:4). It was spoken of the Lord’s going forth for His people in their deliverance from their enemies. Then He had rays and beams of power and mercy coming out of His hands. By His hands are meant His providential administrations and dispensations, and the rays that came out of them are nothing but the glorious display of His attributes in those providences. How did God make Himself known to His people in that signal deliverance of them out of Egypt? (Exo 6:3). He was known to them then by His name *Jehovah*, in giving being, by His providences, to the mercies that He promised.

Thus when Christ gives His people the last and greatest deliverance from Antichrist, He will show Himself to His people “in a vesture dipped in blood; and his name shall be called, *The Word of God*” ([Rev 19:13](#)). His name was the Word of God before; but *then* He was the Word revealing and manifesting the promises and truths of God; *now* He is accomplishing and fulfilling them. “For your wondrous works declare that your name is near.” (Psa 75:1).



But more particularly, let us bring it home to our own experience. It may be that we find ourselves sometimes assaulted with atheistic thoughts. We are tempted to think God has left all things below to the course and sway of nature, and our prayers do not reach Him (Lam 3:44) – that He does not regard what evils befall us. But tell me saints, do you not have enough at hand to stop the mouths of all such temptations? O just reflect upon your own experiences, and solemnly ask your own hearts the following questions:

(1) Have you never seen the all-sufficient God in the provisions He has made for you and yours, throughout all the ways that you have gone? Who was it that supplied you whatever was needed in all your straits? Was it not the Lord? “He has given food to those who fear him; he will ever be mindful of his covenant” (Psa 111:5). O just consider the constancy, timeliness and the extraordinariness of these provisions at times, and how they have been given in answer to prayer. Shut your eyes, if you can, against the convincing evidence of that great truth: “He does not withdraw his eyes from the righteous” (Job 36:7).

(2) Have you not plainly discerned the care of God in your preservation from so many great dangers as you have escaped and been carried through up to now? How is it that you have survived so many mortal dangers, sicknesses, accidents, and designs of enemies to ruin you? It is, I presume, beyond question for you that the very finger of God has been in these things, and that it is by His care alone that you have been preserved. When God had so signally delivered David from a dangerous disease and from the plots of enemies against him, “By this,” he says, “I know you favour me, because my enemy does not triumph over me” (Psa 41:11). He concluded from those gracious protections, the care that God had over him.

(3) Have you not plainly discerned the hand of God in the effects and accomplishments of your prayers? Nothing can be more evident than this to observant men. “I sought the LORD, and he heard me, and delivered me from all my fears. They looked to him and were lightened, and their faces were not ashamed. This poor man cried, and the LORD heard him, and saved him out of all his troubles” (Psa 34:6). Parallel to this runs the experience of thousands and tens of thousands of Christians this day; they know that they have the petitions they asked of Him.<sup>1</sup> The mercy carries the very impress and stamp of the duty upon it, so that we can say, “This is the mercy, the very mercy that I so often sought God about.” O how satisfying and convincing these things are!

(4) Have you not evidently discerned the Lord’s hand in the guiding and directing of your paths to your unforeseen advantage? Things that you never planned for yourselves have been brought about beyond all your thoughts. Many such things are with God. Which of all the saints has not found that word, “The way of man is not in himself” (Jer 10:23) verified by clear and undeniable experience? I presume, if you will but look over the mercies that you possess this day, you will find three to one, it may be ten to one, that have thus been worked for you by the Lord. And how satisfying these experiences are, beyond all the arguments in the world, to show there is a God to whom His people are exceedingly dear – a God that performs all things for them (Psa 57:2)!

(5) Is it not fully convincing that there is a God who takes care of you, inasmuch as you have found, in all the temptations and difficulties of your lives, that His promises were still fulfilled and faithfully performed in all those conditions? I appeal to you, whether you have not seen

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<sup>1</sup> 1Joh 5.15

these promise made good: “I will be with him in trouble” (Psa 91:15) and, “God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted above what you are able: but will with the temptation also make a way of escape, that you may be able to bear it” (1Cor 10:13). Have these not been as clearly made out by providence before your eyes, as the noonday sun? What room then is left for atheistic suggestions in your breasts?

### ***Fourth Motive.***

*Remembering and recording the performances of providence will be a singular support to faith in future exigencies.*<sup>1</sup> This excellent use of it lies full in the very eye of the text. There never befell David in all his troubles, a greater strait and distress than [with Goliath]; and doubtless his faith would have staggered if the consideration of former providences had not come to its relief. Faith argues very strongly and conclusively from this consideration. So did David’s faith in many exigencies. When he was to encounter the champion of the Philistines, it was from former providences that he encouraged himself (1Sam 17:37).<sup>2</sup> And the apostle Paul uses his own experiences to the same purpose (2Cor 1:9-10).<sup>3</sup> Indeed the whole Scripture is full of it. What Christian does not understand the exceeding usefulness of those experiences he has had, to relieve and enliven him? I will not satisfy myself with trite and common assertions from the lips of professors.<sup>4</sup> Instead, I will labour to show you what the great usefulness of our recorded experiences consists of, to encourage a faith that is labouring under difficulties. To this purpose, I desire the reader to ponder seriously these following particulars:

1. Consider how much advantage those things have upon our souls which we have already felt and tasted – beyond those which we never relished by any former experience? What is experience but bringing down the objects of our faith to the adjudication and testing of spiritual sense? Now once anything has been tasted, felt, and judged by a former experience, it is much more easily believed and received when it occurs again. It is much easier for faith to travel in a path that is well-known to it, having formerly trodden it, than to beat out a new path which it has never trod, and cannot see one step in front of it. This is why, though there is a difficulty in all acts of faith, there is hardly any like the first venture it makes upon Christ. And the reason lies here: because in each subsequent act, it has all its former experiences to aid and encourage it; but in the first venture, it has none at all of its own – it takes a path which it never knew before.

To trust God without any trial or experience is a more noble act of faith; but to trust Him after we have often tried Him is known to be easier. O it is no small advantage to a soul in a new plunge and distress to be able to say, “This is not the first time I have been in these deeps, and yet emerged out of them.” Hence it was that Christ stirred up His disciples’ memories with what providence had formerly worked for them in a day of need. “O you of little faith, why do you reason among yourselves – because you have brought no bread? Do you not yet understand, or

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<sup>1</sup> We should ponder diligently things that are past as well as present, that we may be prepared and ready for future trials. Faith uses to argue from the past to the present; and from both to the future. *Alsted.*

<sup>2</sup> **1Samuel 17:37** Moreover David said, “The LORD, who delivered me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear, He will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine.”

<sup>3</sup> **2Corinthians 1:9** Yes, we had the sentence of death in ourselves, that we should not trust in ourselves but in God who raises the dead, <sup>10</sup> who delivered us from so great a death, and does deliver us; in whom we trust that He will still deliver us...

<sup>4</sup> [That is, someone who professes faith in Christ.](#)

remember?" (Mat 16:8-11). It is as if to say, "Have you never needed bread before now? Is this the first difficulty your faith has ever met with? No, no, you have been in straits before, and you have experienced the power and care of God in supplying them before now. And therefore I cannot help but call you men of 'little faith'; for a very ordinary and small measure of faith, assisted by as much experience as you have had, would enable you to trust God." There is as much difference between believing before and after our experience, as there is between swimming with floats, and our first venture into deep waters without them.

What a singular encouragement our former experiences yield to faith, by answering all the pleas and objections of unbelief that are drawn from the object of our faith! Now there are two things that unbelief stumbles at in God: His *power* and His *willingness* to help.

(1) Unbelief maintains the impossibility of relief in deep distresses. "Can God furnish a table in the wilderness? ...Can he give bread also? Can he provide meat for his people?" (Psa 78:19-20). O vile and unworthy thoughts of God which proceed from our measuring the immense and boundless power of God by our own line and measure! Because we do not see which way relief should come, we conclude none is to be expected. But all these reasonings of unbelief are vanquished by a serious reflection upon our own experiences. God *has* helped, therefore He *can* help. "His hand is not shortened" (Isaiah 59:1). He has as much power and ability as before.

(2) Unbelief questions the will of God, and questions whether He will now be gracious, though He has been so formerly. But after so many experiences of His readiness to help, what room for doubt remains? Thus Paul reasoned from the experience of what He had done to what He could do (2Cor 1:10); and so did David (1Sam 17:37). Indeed, if a man had never experienced the goodness of God toward him, it would not be so heinous a sin to question His willingness to do him good; but what place is left after such frequent trials of it?

2. It gives great encouragement to faith to answer the objections of unbelief drawn from the object of our faith. Now these objections are also of two sorts.

(1) *Those drawn from our great unworthiness.* How, says unbelief, can so sinful and vile a creature ever expect that God would do this or that for me? It is true, we find that He did great things for Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, etc., but these were men of eminent holiness, men that obeyed God and denied themselves for Him, and lived more in a day to His glory than I ever did in all my days!

Well, what signifies all this to a soul that under all its felt vileness and unworthiness has tasted the goodness of God as well as they? As unworthy as I am, God has yet been good to me. His mercy appeared first to me when I was worse than I am now, both in condition and disposition; and therefore I will still expect the continuance of His goodness to me, though I do not deserve it. "For if when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, being reconciled, we shall be saved by his life" (Rom 5:10).

(2) *Those drawn from the extremity of our present condition.* If troubles or dangers grow to such a height, and we see nothing but ruin and misery in the eye of reason before us, that is when

unbelief becomes importunate and troublesome to the soul. Now where are your prayers, your hopes, indeed, “where now is your God?” (Psa 42:10)

But all this is easily put aside and avoided by consulting our experiences in former cases. This is not the first time I have been in these straits, nor the first time I have had the same doubts and despondencies; and yet God has carried me through all of it (Psa 77:7-9). This is what prevents a Christian from losing all his hopes in an hour of temptation. O how useful these things are to the people of God!

### ***Fifth Motive.***

*The remembrance of former providences will minister to your souls as a continual matter of praise and thanksgiving.* This is the very employment of the angels in heaven, and the sweetest part of our lives on earth.

If God will prepare mercy and truth for David, then he will prepare praises for his God, and do that daily. Psa 71:6: “I have been held up by you from birth; you are the one that took me out of my mother’s womb”; mercies from the beginning are recognized there. “My praise shall be continually of you”; there the natural result of those recognitions is expressed.

There are five things belonging to the praise of God, and all of them relate to His providences exercised about us:

(1) *A careful observation of the mercies we receive from Him.* This is fundamental to all praise. God cannot be glorified for the mercies we never noted.

**Isaiah 41:17-20** "The poor and needy seek water, but *there is none*, Their tongues fail for thirst. I, the LORD, will hear them; *I*, the God of Israel, will not forsake them. <sup>18</sup> I will open rivers in desolate heights, And fountains in the midst of the valleys; I will make the wilderness a pool of water, And the dry land springs of water. <sup>19</sup> I will plant in the wilderness the cedar and the acacia tree, The myrtle and the oil tree; I will set in the desert the cypress tree *and* the pine And the box tree together, <sup>20</sup> That they may see and know, And consider and understand together, That the hand of the LORD has done this, And the Holy One of Israel has created it.

(2) *A faithful remembrance of the favours received.* “Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits” (Psa 103:2). Hence the Lord brands the ingratitude of His people, “They soon forgot his works” (Psa 106:13).

(3) *A due appreciation and valuation of every providence that does us good.*

**1Samuel 12:24** "Only fear the LORD, and serve Him in truth with all your heart; for consider what great things He has done for you.

The providence that fed them in the wilderness with manna was a most remarkable providence to His people; but since they did not value its worth, God did not have the praise He expected for it.

**Numbers 11:6** “but now our whole being *is* dried up; *there is nothing* at all except this manna *before* our eyes!”

(4) *Stirring up all the faculties and powers of the soul in acknowledgment of these mercies to us.* Thus David said: “Bless the LORD, O my soul; and all that is within me bless his holy name” (Psa 103:1). Soul-praise is the very soul of praise: this is the very fat and marrow of that thank-offering.

(5) *A suitable recompense for the mercies received.* David was careful about this.

**Psalm 116:1** I love the LORD, because He has heard My voice *and* my supplications.

And the Lord taxes good Hezekiah for the neglect of it.

**2 Chronicles 32:24** In those days Hezekiah was sick and near death, and he prayed to the LORD; and He spoke to him and gave him a sign.<sup>25</sup> But Hezekiah did not repay according to the favor *shown* him, for his heart was lifted up; therefore wrath was looming over him and over Judah and Jerusalem.

This consists in a full and hearty resignation to Him of all that we have received by providence from Him, and in our willingness to actually part with all for Him when He requires it.

Thus you see how all the ingredients of praise have a respect toward providences. But more particularly I will show you that, just as all the ingredients of praise have a respect toward providences, so all the motives and arguments which oblige and engage souls to praise are also found in it. To this end, consider how the mercy and goodness of God is exhibited by providence to excite our thankfulness.

1. The goodness and mercy of God to His people is seen in His providences concerning them. This is the very root of praise. It is not so much the possession that providence gives us of particular comforts, as it is the goodness and kindness of God in dispensing them that engages a graced soul to praise Him. “Because your lovingkindness is better than life, my lips shall praise you” (Psa 63:3). To give, maintain and preserve our life are choice acts of providence; but to do all this in a way of grace and lovingkindness – this is far better than the gifts themselves. Life is but the shadow of death without it. This is the mercy that crowns all other mercies (Psa 103:4). A sanctified soul desires that God would manifest this in every providence concerning him.

**Psalm 17:7** Show Your marvelous lovingkindness by Your right hand, O You who save those who trust *in You* From those who rise up *against them*.

What is praising God but showing that lovingkindness which He shows to us in His providences?

**Psalm 92:1-2** *It is good to give thanks to the LORD, And to sing praises to Your name, O Most High;*<sup>2</sup> *To declare Your lovingkindness in the morning, And Your faithfulness every night...*

2. Just as the lovingkindness of God manifested in providence is a motive to praise, so the free and undeserved favours of God, dispensed by the hand of providence, oblige the soul to praise. This was the consideration that melted David’s heart into a thankful praising frame: the consideration of the free and undeserved favours cast upon him by providence. “Who am I, O Lord GOD, and what is my house, that you have brought me up to now?” (2Sam 7:18); that is, that you have raised me by providence from a mean condition to all this dignity; from following the ewes, to feeding Jacob His people (Psa 78:70-71). This is what engages thankfulness!

**Genesis 32:10** “I am not worthy of the least of all the mercies and of all the truth which You have shown Your servant; for I crossed over this Jordan with my staff, and now I have become two companies.”

3. Just as the freeness of mercies dispensed by providence engages our praise, so the multitudes of mercies heaped upon us this way strongly oblige the soul to thankfulness. Thus David comes before the Lord encompassed with a multitude of mercies to praise Him (Psa 5:7). We have our loads of mercies, every day (Psa 68:19). O what a rich heap one day’s mercies will make when laid together!

4. As the multitudes of mercies dispensed by providence oblige us to praise, so the tenderness of God’s mercy, manifested in His providence, leaves the soul under a strong obligation to thankfulness. We see what tender regard the Lord has for all our needs, difficulties and burdens. “Like a father pities his children, so the LORD pities those who fear him” (Psa 103:13). He is “full of compassion” as that word in James 5:11 signifies. Indeed, there are not only ‘bowels of compassion’ in our God, but the tenderness of bowels, like those of a mother toward her suckling child (Isaiah 49:15). He feels all our pains as if the apple of His eye were touched (Zech 2:8), and all this is shown to His people in the way of His providences with them (Psa 111:2-4).

**Psa 111:2-4** The works of the LORD *are* great, Studied by all who have pleasure in them. <sup>3</sup> His work *is* honorable and glorious, And His righteousness endures forever. <sup>4</sup> He has made His wonderful works to be remembered; The LORD *is* gracious and full of compassion.

Who of all the children of God has not often found this in His providences? And who can see it, and not be filled with thankfulness? All these are so many bands clapped by providence upon the soul, to oblige it to a life of praise. This is why the prayers of the saints are so full of thanksgiving on these accounts. It is sweet to recount them to the Lord in prayer, to lie at His feet in a holy astonishment at His gracious condescension to poor worms.

### ***Sixth Motive***

*The due observation of providence will endear Jesus Christ to your souls every day, more and more.* Christ is the channel of grace and mercy. Through Him are all the streams of mercy that flow from God to us, and all the returns of praise from us to God (1Cor 3:21-22). All things are ours upon no other title than our belonging to Him.

Now there are six things in providence which exceedingly endear the Lord Jesus Christ to His people, and these are the sweetest and most delightful parts of all our enjoyments.

1. The purchase of all those mercies which providence conveys to us, is by His own blood; for not only spiritual and eternal mercies, but even all our temporal ones, are the acquisition of His blood.<sup>1</sup> Just as sin forfeited all, so Christ restored all these mercies to us again by His death. Sin had so shut up the womb of mercy that, if Christ had not made an atonement by his death, then it could never have brought forth one mercy to all eternity for us. It is with Him that God freely gives us all things (Rom 8:32), including heaven itself, and all things necessary to bring us there,

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<sup>1</sup> That is, their covenant title to them, and the sanctified use of them. *Editor.*

among which, principally, is included the tutelage and aid of divine providence.<sup>1</sup> So that whatever good we receive from the hand of providence, we must put it upon the score of Christ's blood. And when we receive it, we may say that it is the price of blood; it is a mercy rising up out of the death of Christ. It cost Him dearly, even though it comes to me freely; it is sweet in the possession but costly in the acquisition. Now this is a most endearing consideration. Did Christ die so that these mercies might live? Did He pay His invaluable blood to purchase these comforts that I possess? O what transcendent, matchless love was the love of Christ! You have known parents that have laid out all their stock of money to purchase estates for their children; but when did you hear of any that spent the whole stock and treasure of their blood to make a purchase for them? If the life of Christ had not been so painful and sad for Him, ours could not have been so sweet and comfortable for us. It is through His poverty that we are enriched (2Cor 8:9).<sup>2</sup> These sweet mercies, that are born of providence every day, are the fruits of "the travail of his soul" (Isaiah 53:11).

2. The sanctification of all those mercies which providence conveys to us is by our union with Christ. It is by virtue of our union with His person that we enjoy the sanctified gifts and blessings of providence. All these are mercies in addition to that great mercy, Christ (Mat 6:33). They are given with Him (Rom 8:32). This is the tenure by which we hold them (1Cor 3:21-23). What we lost in Adam is restored again, with advantage, in Christ. Immediately upon the fall, that curse (Gen 2:17) seized all the miserable posterity of Adam and all their comforts, outward as well as inward; and this still lies heavy upon them. All that providence does for those who are Christless is but to feed so many poor condemned wretches till the sentence they are under is executed. It is indeed bountiful and open-handed to many of them, and it fills them with earthly comforts; but not one special *sanctified* mercy is to be found among all their enjoyments. These gifts of providence only deceive, defile, and destroy them through their own corruptions, and for lack of union with Christ. "The prosperity of fools shall destroy them" (Prov 1:32). But once a man is in Christ, then all providences are sanctified and sweet. "To the pure, all things are pure" (Tit 1:15). "A little that a righteous man has is better than the treasures of many wicked" (Psa 37:16). Now Christ becomes a head of influence as well as dominion; and in all things He consults the good of His own members (Eph 1:22).<sup>3</sup>

3. The dispensation of all our comforts and mercies is by His direction and appointment. It is true, the angels are employed in the kingdom of providence. They move the wheels; that is, they are instrumental in all the revolutions in this lower world; but they still receive directions and orders from Christ, as you may see in that admirable scheme of providences (Eze 1:25-26).<sup>4</sup> Now what an endearing meditation this is! Whatever creature is instrumental for any good to you, it is your Lord Jesus Christ that gave the orders and commands to that creature to do it; and without it, they could have done nothing for you. It is your Head in heaven that consults your peace and comfort on earth; these are the fruits of His care for you. So in the prevention and restraints of evil, it is He that bridles the wrath of devils and men; He holds the reins in His own

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<sup>1</sup> *Poli Synopsis in loc.*

<sup>2</sup> **2Corinthians 8:9** For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich.

<sup>3</sup> **Ephesians 1:22** And He put all *things* under His feet, and gave Him *to be* head over all *things* to the church...

<sup>4</sup> **Ezekiel 1:25-26** A voice came from above the firmament that *was* over their heads; whenever they stood, they let down their wings. <sup>26</sup> And above the firmament over their heads *was* the likeness of a throne, in appearance like a sapphire stone; on the likeness of the throne *was* a likeness with the appearance of a man high above it.

hands (Rev 2:10). It was the care of Christ over His poor sheep at Damascus that stopped the raging adversary who was on the way, intending to destroy them (Acts 9).

4. The continuation of all your mercies and comforts, outward as well as inward, is the fruit of His intercession in heaven for you. Just as the offering up of the Lamb of God as a sacrifice for sin opened the door of mercy at first, so His appearing before God as a Lamb that had been slain still keeps that door of mercy open (Rev 5:6; Heb 9:24).<sup>1</sup> By His intercession, our peace and comforts are prolonged for us (Zech 1:12-13).<sup>2</sup> Every sin we commit would put an end to the mercies we possess if it were not for that plea which is put in for us by his intercession. “And if any man sins, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous: and he is the propitiation for our sins” (1John 2:1-2). This stops all accusations, and procures new pardons for new sins. This why “he saves to the utter most” (Heb 7:25), to the last completing act. New sins do not void our former pardons, nor cut off our privileges that have settled upon us in Christ.

5. The effects and answers of all your prayers and cries to heaven, to remove your afflictions or supply your needs, are all procured and obtained for you by Jesus Christ. He is the master of your requests; if God did not regard Him, He would never regard your cries to Him, nor return an answer of peace to you, however great your distresses might be (Rev 8:3-4). It is His name that gives our prayers their acceptance (John 15:16), because the Father can deny Him nothing; therefore your prayers are not denied. Does God condescend to hear you in the day of trouble? Does He convince you by your own experience that your prayers have power with God and prevail? O see how much you owe to your dear Lord Jesus Christ for this high and glorious privilege!

6. The Covenant of Grace, in which all your comfortable enjoyments are comprised, and by which they are secured, sanctified, and sweetened to you, is made in Christ, and ratified by Him between God and you. Your mercies are all comprised in this covenant, even your daily bread (Psa 111:5), as well as your justification and other spiritual mercies.

It is your covenant interest that secures for you whatever it comprises; this is why they are called “the sure mercies of David” (Isaiah 55:3). No, this is what sanctifies them and gives them the nature of special and peculiar mercies. One such mercy is worth a thousand common mercies. And being sanctified and special mercies, they must be exceedingly sweet beyond all other mercies. For these reasons, David rejoiced in his covenant interest, even though he was laden with many afflictions (2Sam 23:5). But now, all this hangs entirely upon Christ. The New Testament is in His blood (1Cor 11:25); and whatever mercies you reap from that covenant, you must thank the Lord Jesus Christ for them. Put all this together, and then think how such considerations will endear Christ to your souls!

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<sup>1</sup> **Revelation 5:6** And I looked, and behold, in the midst of the throne and of the four living creatures, and in the midst of the elders, stood a Lamb as though it had been slain, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven Spirits of God sent out into all the earth. **Hebrews 9:24** For Christ has not entered the holy places made with hands, *which are* copies of the true, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us;

<sup>2</sup> **Zechariah 1:12** Then the Angel of the LORD answered and said, “O LORD of hosts, how long will You not have mercy on Jerusalem and on the cities of Judah, against which You were angry these seventy years?”<sup>13</sup> And the LORD answered the angel who talked to me, *with good and* comforting words.



## ***Seventh Motive.***

*Due observations of providence have a marvelous efficacy to melt the heart, and make it thaw and submit before the Lord.*

How can a sanctified heart do less than melt into tears while it considers God's dealings with it from time to time, or while it compares the mercies received with the sins committed, or the different administrations of providence towards itself and others!

Let a man but set himself to think deliberately and closely of the ways of providence towards him, let him but follow the leading of providence as it has led him all along the way that he has gone – and if there is any principle of gracious tenderness in him, he will encounter a variety of occasions to excite and draw it out.

(1) Go back and seriously think about the beginning of God's ways with you, the mercies that broke out early in your youth, even the first-born mercies from the womb of providence; and you will say, What need is there to go further? Here is enough, not only to move, but to overwhelm my heart. "Will you not from this time cry to me, my Father, that you are the guide of my youth?" (Jer 3:4). What a critical time is the time of youth! It is the molding age; and, ordinarily, according to the course of those leading providences after-providences steer their course. What levity, rashness, ignorance and strong propensities to sin and ruin accompanied that age! How many being left then to the sway of their own lusts run themselves into those sins and miseries which they never recover from to their dying day! These, like the errors of the first concoction, are rarely rectified afterwards. Did the Lord guide you by His providence when you were but a child? Did He then preserve you from those follies and misdemeanors which blast the very blossom and nip the bud, so that no good fruit can be expected afterwards? Did He then put you into such families, or among such company and acquaintances, as molded and formed your spirit into a better disposition? Did He then direct you into that way of employment in which you have seen so large a train of happy consequences following you ever since? And will you not from then on say: "My Father, you are the guide of my youth"? (Jer 3:4)

(2) Let us but bring our thoughts close to the providences of after-times, and consider how the several changes and removals of our lives have been ordered for us. Things we never foresaw or designed, but which were much better for us than what we did design, have been ordered for us all along. The way of man is not in himself. God's thoughts have not been our thoughts, nor His ways our ways (Isaiah 55:8). Among the eminent mercies of your life, reader, how many of them have been mere surprises to you? Your own projects have been thrust aside to make way for better things designed for you by providence.

(3) No, just observe the springs and autumns of providence, in what order they have flourished and faded with you, and you will find yourself overpowered with the sense of divine wisdom and goodness. When necessity required, such a friend was stirred up to help you; such a place opened to receive you; such a relation raised up or continued to refresh you. And no sooner does providence deprive you of any of them, but either your need of them ceases, or some other way is opened to you. O the depth of God's wisdom and goodness! O the matchless tenderness of God for His people!

(4) Compare how providence has dealt with you and others, indeed, with others that sprang up with you in the same generation; or it may be in the same families and from the same parents; it may be in families greater and more flourishing in the world than yours – and see the difference on many great accounts, that it has made between you and them. I knew a Christian who, after many years' separation, was visited by his own brother. The very sight of him worked on him much as the sight of Benjamin worked on Joseph, so that he could not refrain from falling upon his neck and weeping for joy. But after a few hours spent together, he found the spirit of his brother was not only estranged from all that is spiritual and serious, but also very vain and profane. He hastened to his chamber, shut the door on him, and threw himself down at the feet of God. With flowing eyes and a melting heart, he admired the distinguishing grace of God, saying, "Was not Esau Jacob's brother?" (Malachi 1:2). O grace, grace, astonishing grace!

(5) Compare the behavior of providence towards you, with your own behavior towards the Lord. It must melt your hearts to find so much mercy bestowed where so much sin has been committed. Where did you ever live that you cannot remember great provocations that you committed, and notwithstanding that, manifold mercies were received? O with how many *notwithstandings* and *neverthelesses* has the Lord done you good in every place! What relationship has not been abused by sin? And yet it was both raised up and continued by providence for your comfort! In every place, God has left the marks of His goodness and the remembrances of your sinfulness. Give yourselves but leave to think of these things, and it will be strange if your hearts do not melt at the remembrance of them.

(6) Or lastly, just compare your dangers with your fears, and compare both with the strange outlets and doors of escape that providence has opened; it cannot do less than overpower you with a full sense of divine care and goodness. There have been dark clouds seen to rise over you, judgment even at your door, sometimes threatening your life, sometimes your liberty, sometimes your estates, and sometimes your dearest relatives, in whom, it may be, your life was bound up. Remember in that day what faintness of spirit seized you, what charges of guilt stirring up fears of the issue within you. You turned to the Lord in that distress, and has He not made a way to escape, and delivered you from all your fears? (Psa 34:4)

Is life such a continued throng, such a mad hurry, that there is no time for Christians to sit alone and think upon these things, and press these marvelous manifestations of God in His providences upon their own hearts? Surely, if these things but lay upon our hearts, or talked with our thoughts by day, and lodged with us at night, they would force their passage down even to our very core.

### ***Eighth Motive.***

*Due observation of providence will produce and secure inward tranquility in your minds, amidst the vicissitudes and revolutions of things in this unstable and vain world.*

"I will both lay me down in peace, and sleep; for you only, LORD, make me dwell in safety" (Psa 4:8). He resolves that the sinful fear of events will not rob him of his inward quiet, nor torture his thoughts with anxious forebodings. He will commit all his concerns into that faithful fatherly hand that up to now had worked all things for him. He does not mean to lose the comfort of one night's rest, nor bring the evil of tomorrow upon today; rather, knowing in whose hand he was held, he wisely enjoys the sweet felicity of a resigned will.

Now this tranquility of our minds is as much produced and preserved by a due consideration of providence, as by anything else. Hence our Lord Jesus Christ, when He would cure the disciples' anxious and distracting care about a livelihood, bid them to consider the care that providence has over the birds of the air and the lilies of the field – how providence feeds the one and clothes the other, without their anxious care. He had them consider those providences well, and then reason themselves into a calm and sweet composure of spirit from those considerations (Mat 6:27-34).

Two things destroy the peace and tranquility of our lives: bewailing our past disappointments, or fearing our future ones. We should just once learn that prevision and provision are *divine* prerogatives. We should note how often providence baffles those who pretend to make their own provision – that is, who believe they can cause good to come into their hand, and foresee it according to their conjectures. But instead, they see good baulk at coming to them, fleeing from their grasp; or they see the evil they thought they were sufficiently secured from, invade them. I say, if we would consider how providence daily baffles such pretensions of men, and asserts its own dominion, it would greatly contribute to the tranquility of our lives.

This is a great truth, that there is no face of adversity so formidable, when viewed from this perspective, that it would not become amicable. Now there are several things in the consideration of providence that naturally and kindly compose the mind of a Christian toward peace, and bring it to a sweet rest, even while events hang in a doubtful suspense.

1. First, the supremacy of providence and its uncontrollable power in working. This is often seen in the good that it brings us in a way that is above the thoughts and cares of our minds, or the labour of our hands. “I had not thought,” Jacob said, “to see your face; and behold, God has also shown me your offspring” (Gen 48:11). There is a frequent coincidence of providences, in a surprising way, which from no appearance, or the remotest tendency of outward causes, could be foreseen. But rather, such coincidences fall visibly contrary to the present scheme and state of our affairs. Nothing tends to convince us of the vanity and folly of our own anxieties and fears more than this does.

2. Second, the profound wisdom of providence in all that it performs for the people of God. The wheels are full of eyes<sup>1</sup> (Eze 1:18), that is, there is an intelligent and wise Spirit that sits upon and governs the affairs of this world. This wisdom shines out to us in the unexpected, indeed, in the contrary events of things. How often we court some beautiful appearance that invites our senses; or with trembling we shun the formidable face of other things – notwithstanding, the issues of providence have convinced us that our danger lies in what we courted, and our good lies in what we so studiously declined! This also is a sweet principle of peace and quiet to the Christian's mind: that he does not know whether his good may be intended in what seemed to threaten his ruin. Many were the distresses and straits of Israel in the wilderness; but all of it was “to humble them,” so that God “might do them good in the end” (Deut 8:16). Sad and dismal was the face of that providence which sent them out of their own land into the land of the Chaldeans; yet even this was a project to do them good (Jer 24:5).<sup>2</sup> How often have we retracted our rash

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<sup>1</sup> *Non coeco impetu voluntur rotoe.*—The wheels of providence revolve not by a blind fatality.

<sup>2</sup> **Jer 24:5** “Like these good figs, so I will acknowledge those who are carried away captive from Judah, whom I have sent out of this place for *their own* good, into the land of the Chaldeans.”

and headlong censures of things upon experiencing this truth, and been taught to bless our afflictions and disappointments in the name of the Lord! Many a time we have kissed those troubles at parting, which we met with trembling. And what can promote peace under doubtful providences more effectually than this?

3. The experiences we have had throughout our lives, of the faithfulness and constancy of providence, are excellent to allay and quiet our hearts in any trouble that befalls us. “Up to now the LORD has helped us” (1Sam 7:12). We never found Him lacking in any case up to now. This is not the first strait we have been in, nor the first time that our hearts and hopes have been low. Surely He is the same God now as He has been up to now. His hand is not shortened, nor does His faithfulness fail.<sup>1</sup> O recount how, in great extremities, former experience has taught you not to despair!

4. Christians may conjecture about the way of providence towards them now, from what its methods have been towards them before; this is exceedingly quieting and comforting. It is usual for Christians to compare times with times, and to guess what the results of one providence may be by another. The saints know what course providence usually holds, and accordingly, with great probability, they infer what they may expect from what they formerly observed in similar cases. Christian, examine your own heart and its former observations, and you will find (as in Psa 89:30-32) that it is usually God’s way to prepare some painful rods to correct you when either your heart has secretly revolted from God and has grown vain, careless, and sensual; or when your steps have declined, and you have turned aside to commit iniquity. And then, when those rods have been sanctified to humble, reduce, and purge your heart, it is usually observed that those sad providences are about to change. The Lord changes the voice of His providence towards you. “Go and proclaim these words towards the north and say, Return you backsliding Israel, says the LORD; and I will not cause my anger to fall upon you: for I am merciful, says the LORD, and I will not stay angry forever. Only acknowledge your iniquity” (Jer 3:12-13).

Therefore, if I find the blessed *effects* of the rod are upon me, that it has done its work to break the hard heart, and pull down the proud heart, and awaken the drowsy heart, and quicken the slothful, negligent, lazy heart – then with great probability I may now conjecture that a more comfortable aspect of providence will quickly appear; the refreshing and reviving time is near.

5. It is usual for Christians to convince themselves of fresh reviving hopes, when the state of things is most forlorn; this is done by comparing the providences of God one with another.

(1) It is a mighty and composing meditation when we compare the providences of God towards inanimate and irrational creatures, with His providences towards us. Does He take care for the very fowls of the air for whom no man provides, as well as those at the door which we daily feed? Does He so clothe the very grass of the field, and hear the young ravens when they cry for food, that it can be supposed He would forget His own people, who are of much more value than these? (Mat 6:26, 30).

(2) Or if we compare the bounty and care that providence has expressed toward the enemies of God – how it feeds, clothes, and protects them even while they are fighting against Him – with

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<sup>1</sup> Isa 59.1; Psa 89.33.

His own mercies, then it can only quiet and satisfy us that surely He will not be lacking in mercy toward that people on whom He has set His love, to whom He has given His Son, and for whom He has designed heaven itself.

(3) Lastly, it must quiet us when we consider what the Lord did for us in the way of His providence, when we ourselves were in the state of nature and enmity against God. Did He not then look after us when we did not know Him, provide for us when we did not own Him in any of His mercies, bestow thousands of mercies upon us when we had no title to Christ or any one promise? And will He now do less for us since we are reconciled and have become His children?

Surely, such considerations as these can only fill the soul with peace, and preserve the tranquility of it under the most disturbing providences.

### ***Ninth Motive.***

*Due observations of the ways of God in His providences towards us have an excellent usefulness and aptitude to advance and improve holiness in our hearts and lives.*

1. The holiness of God is manifested to us in all His works of providence. “The LORD is righteous in all his ways, and holy in all his works” (Psa 145:17). The instruments used by providence may be very sinful and wicked; they may aim at base ends and make use of wicked means to attain them; but it is certain that God’s designs are most pure, and all His workings are too. Though He permits, limits, orders and overrules many unholy persons and actions, yet in all things He works like Himself. His holiness is no more defiled and stained by their impurity than the sunbeams are by the noxious exhalations of a dunghill. “He is the rock, his work is perfect; for all his ways are justice; a God of truth and without iniquity, just and right is he” (Deut 32:4). So that, in all His providences, He sets before us a perfect pattern of holiness, that we might be holy in all our ways, as our Father is holy in all His ways (Lev 11.45). But this is not all.

2. His providences, if duly observed, promote holiness by blocking our way to sin. O if men would only note the designs of God in His preventive providences, how useful it would be to keep them upright and holy in their ways! For why is it that the Lord so often hedges our way with thorns, as in Hosea 2:6, unless it is to keep us from discovering paths to sin? Why does He obstruct us, unless it is to prevent us from straying from Him? “Lest I be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, the messenger of Satan to buffet me” (2Cor 12:7). O it is good to attend to these works of God, and study the meaning of them. Sometimes providence ruins a hopeful thriving project to better our condition, and frustrates all our labours and plans; why is this, unless to hide pride from man?<sup>1</sup> Should you prosper in the world, that prosperity might be your snare, and make you a proud, sensual, vain soul. The Lord Jesus sees this, and therefore withdraws the food and fuel from your corruptions.

It may be you have a diseased, weak body, you labour under many infirmities. The wisdom and care of God over your soul is manifested in this; for if you were not so obstructed, how probable it is that much more guilt might he contracted! Your poverty only obstructs your pride;

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<sup>1</sup> Job 33.17

reproaches obstruct your ambition; want prevents wantonness; sickness of the body helps to prevent many inward gripes of conscience, and groans under guilt.

3. The providences of God may be observed to promote our holiness, not only by preventing sin so that we may not fall into it; but also by purging our sins when we have fallen into them.<sup>1</sup> “Therefore the iniquity of Jacob shall be purged by this; and this is all the fruit to take away his sin” (Isaiah 27:9). They have the same use that fire and water have for purging and cleansing (Daniel 11:33-35). It is not that they can purge us from sin in their own virtue and power, for if that were so, then those that have most afflictions would have the most grace as well; but it is in the virtue of Christ’s blood, and God’s blessing upon afflictive providences, that they purge us from sin. A cross without a Christ never did any man good. Now, in God’s afflictive providences for sin, there are many things that tend to purge that sin. For,

1. Such rebukes of providence reveal the displeasure of God against us. The Lord frowns upon us in those providences. Our Father is angry, and these are the tokens of it; nothing works more to melt a graced heart than this. Must not the heart of a child melt and break while the father is angry? O this is more bitter to our spirits than all the sting and anguish of the affliction can be to our flesh. “O LORD, do not rebuke me in your wrath; nor chasten me in your hot displeasure: For your arrows stick fast in me; and your hand presses me sorely. There is no soundness in my flesh because of your anger: nor is there any rest in my bones because of my sin” (Psa 38:1-3).

2. By these *rebukes* of sin, the *evil* of sin is revealed and made more apparent to us. We are made to see more clearly the evil of it in these glasses of affliction, which providence sets before us at such times, than we ever saw before. “Your own wickedness shall correct you, and your backslidings shall reprove you: know therefore and see that it is an evil thing and bitter, that you have forsaken the LORD your God, and that my fear is not in you, says the Lord GOD of hosts” (Jer 2:19). O the gall and wormwood that we taste in it under God’s rebukes for it! (Lam 3:19)

3. Providence blasts and frustrates all sinful projects for the people of God. Whoever else thrives by them, they shall not (Isaiah 30:1-5).<sup>2</sup> This also convinces them of the folly that is in sin, and it makes them cling to the way of simplicity and integrity.

4. Holiness is promoted in the soul by cautioning and warning the soul against sin for a time to come. “I have borne chastisement; I will not offend any more” (Job 34:31). O happy providences, however stinging, that make the soul forever afraid of sin! Surely such rods are well-bestowed. This gives God His end; and if we ever sorrowed after a godly sort, in the day of our troubles it will work this carefulness. “For behold this very thing, that you sorrowed in a godly manner; what carefulness it worked in you” (2Cor 7:11). O if ever a man has been under a sanctified rod, which has shown him the evil of sin and kindly humbled him for it,

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<sup>1</sup> God would not allow instruments to rub so hard, if it were not to fetch out the dirt that is ingrained in our natures: He loves purity so well, that he would rather see a hole than a spot in his child’s garment. Gurnall’s *Christian Armour*, part 2, p. 221.

<sup>2</sup> **Isaiah 30:1** “Woe to the rebellious children,” says the LORD, “Who take counsel, but not of Me, And who devise plans, but not of My Spirit, That they may add sin to sin;”

and if ever a temptation should again solicit him to commit the same evil, then he thinks, what madness it would be for me to buy repentance at so dear a rate. Have I not stung enough already? You may as well ask me if I would run into the fire again after I have been scorched in it already.

5. *To conclude* - providences greatly improve and promote holiness by drawing the soul into the presence of God, and giving it the opportunity and occasion to have much communion with Him. Comfortable providences will do this; they will melt a man's heart in love to the God of his mercies, and they will so pain his innermost being that he will not be quiet till he has found a place to pour out his soul in thankfulness to the Lord (2Sam 7:18).

Afflictive providences will drive us to the feet of God, and there they will make us judge and condemn ourselves. All this has an excellent use to destroy sin, and promote holiness in the soul.

### ***Tenth Motive.***

*Finally, the consideration and study of providence will be of singular use to us in a dying hour.* By this we treasure up what will singularly sweeten our death to us, and greatly assist our faith in the last encounter. You find when Jacob died, what reflections he had upon the dealings of God with him in the various providences of his life (Gen 48:3, 7, 15, 16). In the same way, you find Joshua recording the providences of God when he is at the brink of the grave; they were the subject of his dying discourse (Joshua 24.). And I can only think it is a sweet close to the life of any Christian. It must sweeten a deathbed to recount there the several remarkable passages of God's care and love to us from our beginning to that day, to reflect upon the mercies that went along with us all the way, when we have come to the end of it. O Christians, treasure up these instances for such a time as that is, so that you may go out of the world blessing God for "all the goodness and truth" he has performed for you all your life long. Now the meditations of these things must be of great use in that day, if you consider the following particulars:

1. The time of death is the time when souls are usually most violently assaulted by Satan with horrid temptations and black suggestions. We may say of that figure, as it is said of the natural serpent, "he never exerts his utmost rage till the last encounter." And then his great design is to persuade the saints that God does not love them, has no care nor regard for them nor their cries; though they pray for ease and cry for sparing mercy, they see that none comes. He handles them with as much roughness and severity as other men; indeed, many of the vilest and most dissolute wretches endure less torments, and are more gently handled, than they are. "There are no bands in their death" (Psa 73:4), whereas *you* must go through a long lane of sickness to the grave, and so endure many deaths in one!

But what credit can these plausible tales of Satan obtain with a Christian who has, all his life, been treasuring up the memorials of God's tender regard both to his needs and his prayers; and who has carefully marked the evident effects of his prayers and the gracious condescensions of God to him from his beginning to that moment? In this case, his faith is mightily assisted by thousands of experiences which back and encourage it, and will not let the soul give up so easily a truth which he has so often felt and tasted. I am sure, he says, God has had a tender fatherly care of me ever since I became His. He never failed me yet in any former difficulty; and I cannot believe He will do so now. I know His love is like Himself, unchangeable. "Having loved his

own which were in the world, he loved them to the end” (John 13:1). “For *this* God is *our* God for ever and ever; he will be our guide even unto death” (Psa 48:14). Did He love me in my youth, and will He cast me off in my decrepit age? “O God,” said David, “You have taught me from my youth; and from then till now I have declared your wondrous works. Now also when I am old and gray-headed, O God, do not forsake me” (Psa 71:17-18).

2. At death, the saints are engaged in the last and one of the most eminent works of faith, which is committing themselves into the hands of God when they are launching forth into that vast eternity, and entering into that new state which will make so great a change to us in a moment. In this, Christ sets us a pattern: “Father, into your hands I commend my Spirit; and having said this, he gave up the ghost” (Luke 23:46). So Stephen said at his death, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit” (Acts 7:59); and immediately he fell asleep.

There are two signal and remarkable acts of faith, both exceedingly difficult – namely, its first act and its last. The first is a great venture that it makes upon Christ by itself; and the last is a great venture too: to cast itself into the ocean of eternity upon the belief of a promise. Yet I know the first venture of the soul upon Christ is much more difficult than the last venture upon death; and that which makes it so difficult is in great measure the manifold recorded experiences that the soul has been gathering up from the day of its espousals to Christ to its dying, which is, in a sense, its marriage day. O with what encouragement a soul may throw himself into the arms of that God with whom he has so long conversed and walked in this world; whose visits have been sweet and frequent; with whom the soul has contracted so intimate an acquaintance in this world; to whom it has committed all its affairs formerly, and still found Him a faithful God; and now has no reason to doubt that it shall find Him faithful in this last distress and exigency also.

3. At death, the people of God receive the last mercies that they will ever receive in this world by the hand of providence. They are to immediately account to God for all the mercies that they ever received from His hand. What can be more suitable, therefore, to a dying person than to recount with himself the mercies of his whole life, the manifold receipts of favour for which he is to reckon with God speedily. And how shall this be done without a due and serious observation and recording of them *now*? I know there are thousands of mercies forgotten by the best of Christians: a memory of brass cannot contain them. And I know also that Jesus Christ must make up the account for us, or it will never pass with God. Yet it is our duty to keep the accounts of our own mercies, and how they have been used by us; for we are stewards, and then we are to give an account of our stewardship.

4. At death we owe an account also to men. We stand obliged, if there is opportunity for it, to make known to those who survive us what we have seen and found of God in this world, so that we may leave a testimony for God with men, and bring up a good report upon His ways. Thus dying Jacob, when Joseph had come to take his last farewell of him in this world, strengthened himself and sat up on the bed, and related to Joseph the eminent appearances of God to him, and the places where it happened (Gen 48:2-3); he also related an account of his afflictions (verse 7). So Joshua, in his last speech to the people, makes it his business to vindicate and demonstrate the truth of the promises by recounting to them how the providence of God had fulfilled the promises to a tittle in his day. “And behold,” he said, “this day I am going the way of all the earth: and you know in all your hearts, and in all your souls, that not one thing has failed of all



the good things which the LORD your God spoke concerning you; *all* have come to pass for you, and not one thing has failed” (Joshua 23:14).

And certainly it is of great importance to the world to understand the judgments and hear of the experiences of dying men. Of all men, they are presumed to be most wise and most serious. Besides, this is the last opportunity that we shall ever have in this world to speak for God. O then what a sweet thing it would be to close our lives with an honourable account of the ways of God! To go out of the world blessing Him for all the mercies and truth which He has performed for us here! How this would encourage weak Christians and convince the atheistic world that truly there is a reality, and an excellence, in the ways and people of God!

5. At death we begin the angelic life of praise and thanksgiving. We then enter upon that everlasting sweet employment. As I do not doubt that the providences in which we were concerned in this world will be a part of that song which we shall sing in heaven, so certainly it would become us to tune our hearts and tongue for it while we are here; and especially when we are ready to enter upon that blessed state. O therefore let it be your daily meditation; study what God has been to you and done for you from the beginning of His way up to now.

And thus I have spread before you some encouragements to this blessed work. O that you would be persuaded to take up this lovely and in every way beneficial practice. This I dare presume to say, that whoever finds a careful and a thankful heart to record and treasure up the daily experiences of God’s mercy to him, shall never lack new mercies to record to his dying day. It was said of Claudian that he lacked matter suitable for the excellence of his powers; but where is the head or heart that is suitable for this matter? “Who can utter the mighty acts of the LORD? Who can show forth all his praise?” (Psa 106:2).

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## Chapter 11 – Practical Implications for the Saints

Thus, through the aid of providence, I have dispatched the main design I aimed at in the choice of this subject. All that remains will now be speedily finished in a few corollaries to be briefly noted upon the whole, and three or four practical cases to be stated. You have heard how providence performs all things for you. Learn the following from this.

### ***First Corollary.***

*If God performs all things for you, as we have seen, then God is to be owned by you in all that befalls you in this world, whether in a way of success and comfort, or of trouble and affliction. O it is your duty to observe His hand and disposal. When God gives you comforts, it is your great evil not to observe His hand in them. Hence it was charged against Israel: “For she did not know that I gave her corn and wine and oil, and multiplied her silver and gold” (Hosea 2:8); that is, she did not actually and affectionately consider my care over her and goodness to her in these mercies. Also for afflictions, it is a great wickedness, when God’s hand is lifted up, not to see it (Isaiah 26:11). “The ox knows his owner, and the ass his master’s crib” (Isaiah 1:3); the most dull and stupid creatures know their benefactors. O look to the hand of God in all; and know that neither your comforts nor your afflictions arise out of the dust, or spring up out of the ground.*

### ***Second Corollary***

*If God performs all things for you, then how great is His condescension toward and care over His people! “What is man, that you should magnify him, and that you should set your heart upon him? And that you should visit him every morning, and try him every moment?” (Job 7:17-18). Such is His tender care over you that He does not withdraw His eye from you (Job 36:7). Lest anyone hurt you, He Himself will guard and keep you day and night (Isaiah 27:3). Should He withdraw His eye or hand one moment from you, that moment would be your ruin. Ten thousand evils watch for such an opportunity to rush in upon you and destroy you and all your comforts. You are too dear to Him to be trusted in any hand but His own. “All his saints are in your hand” (Deut 33:3).*

### ***Third Corollary***

*If God performs all things for you, see how obliged you are to perform all duties and services for God. It was the wish of a good man, “O that I could be to God what my hand is to me” that is, a serviceable useful instrument. Shall God do all things for you, and will you do nothing for God? Is providence at work for you every moment, and will you be idle? To what purpose then is all that God has done for you? Is it not the aim and design of all, to make you a fruitful people? If God plants and fences and waters you by providence, then surely He expects you to bring forth fruit (Isaiah 5:1-4). O that in return for all the benefits of providence, you would say to God, as grateful Elisha said to the Shunammite, “Behold, you have been careful for us with all this care. What is to be done for you?” (2Kng 4:13); and with David, “What shall I render to the LORD for all his benefits towards me?” (Psa 116:12). He is ever doing you good; always be abounding in His work. His providence stands by you in your greatest distresses and dangers; do not then flinch from God when His service and your duty are surrounded with difficulties. O be active for that God who is active for you every moment.*

### **Fourth Corollary**

*Does God perform all things for his people? Do not distrust Him then when new or great difficulties arise.* Why should you think that the one who has done so many things for you, will now do no more? Surely, “the LORD’s hand is not so shortened that it cannot save; nor his ear so dull that it cannot hear” (Isaiah 59:1); if anything puts a stop to His mercy, it is your iniquities, your distrust and infidelity. “How long will it be before you believe him?” <sup>Num 14:11</sup> If a thousand and ten thousand trials and experiences of His tender care, faithfulness, and love will cure this unbelief in you, then you have them at hand to do it. If the frequent confutations of your distrust by the unexpected outbreaks of mercy for you, under similar discouragements, will cure it, then look back and you may see them. Certainly you have often been forced by providence, with shame and repentance, to retract your rash censures of His care –and yet would you fall into the same unbelieving state again? O that you would once learn this great truth: that no man ever lacked that mercy for which he did not lack a heart to trust and wait quietly upon God. You never yet sought God in vain, except when you sought Him vainly.

### **Fifth Corollary**

*Does God perform all things for you? Then seek God for all by prayer, and never undertake any plan without Him.*<sup>1</sup> Certainly, if He does not perform it for you, you can never have what you desire and labour for; and though He has designed to perform this or that mercy for you, yet He must be enquired of for these things, so that He may do it for you (Eze 36:37; [Joh 14:14](#)).<sup>2</sup> I reckon that business is as good as done, that mercy is as good as if it were in hand, that trouble is as good as over, for the doing, enjoying, or removing of which we have engaged God by prayer. It is our folly to engage this instrument and that for us, to attempt this way and that to achieve our end, and all the while forget Him upon whose pleasure all instruments and means entirely depend. That which does not begin with prayer, seldom ends with comfort. “The way of man is not in himself” (Jer 10:23); if it were, prayer might then be reckoned a lost labour. O let Him that performs all, be owned and acknowledged in all.

### **Sixth Corollary**

*If God performs all things for us, then it is our great interest and concern in all things, to study to please the One upon whom we depend for all things.*

It is a grave and weighty observation of Chrysostom<sup>3</sup> that nothing should be grievous and bitter to a Christian but to provoke the displeasure of God. Avoid that, and no affliction or trouble whatever can depress such a prudent soul; just as a spark is easily extinguished in the sea, so the favour of God will extinguish those troubles. It is with such a soul, he says, as it is with the heavens; we think the heavens suffer when they are overspread with clouds, and the sun suffers when it is eclipsed; but there is no such thing; they do not suffer when they seem to suffer. Everything is well and shall be well, when all is well between us and God. The great consolation of the saints lies in this, that all that concerns them is in the hands of their Father. Luther said, “I

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<sup>1</sup> We are not to ask counsel of, and put up prayers to God for this end, that his decree may be changed by this means, or that the course of providence may be stopped; but that, by obeying God’s law, and observing the usual course of providence, our own consciences may be composed, and filled with joyful hope.

<sup>2</sup> **Ezek 36:37** Thus says the Lord GOD: “I will also let the house of Israel inquire of Me to do this for them: I will increase their men like a flock.” **Joh 14:14** “If you ask anything in My name, I will do it.”

<sup>3</sup> Chrysost. Hom, in 2Cor. 7.

would utterly have despaired if Christ had not been head of the Church.” When the One that performs all things is our God, even our God who delights in our prosperity, that rejoices over us to do us good, then what ample security is here in the greatest confusions and dangers! When someone told Borromeus that there were some who laid wait for his life, his answer was: “What! is God in the world for nothing?” And as notable was the reply of Silentiarius in a similar case: “If God takes no care of me, how do I live? How have I subsisted up to now?” Though it seems a romance to many (says a grave author<sup>1</sup>), yet we must either quit the Scripture, or give credit to this: that the most infallible rules for one to raise his fortune and ensure a destiny that can control the stars, are given in the Scriptures. *Sapiens dominabitur astris & quomodo unusquisque faber potest esse fortunae suae.*<sup>2</sup> A good man may even be his own carver. O that we would but steer our course according to those rare politics of the Bible, those divine maxims of wisdom! Fear nothing but sin. Study nothing so much as how to please God. Do not turn from your integrity under any temptation. Trust God in the way of your duty. These are sure rules to secure yourselves and your interest in all the vicissitudes of this life.

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<sup>1</sup> Author of the *Fulfilling of Scripture*, part 2. p. 223.

<sup>2</sup> The scriptures show how a truly wise man may govern the stars, and be the architect of his own fortune.

## Chapter 12 – Practical Problems in Connection with providence

My last task will be to state three or four practical cases about this subject, and so I will close this discourse about providence.

### ***First Case – Discovering the Will of God.***

*How may a Christian discover the will of God and his own duty under dark and doubtful providences?*

In order to answer this question we must consider what is meant by the will of God, and what is meant by those doubtful providences that make the discovery of His will difficult, and what rules are to be observed to ascertain God's will for us under such difficult and puzzling providences.

As to the will of God, it falls under a twofold consideration of His *secret* will and His *revealed* will. This distinction is found in this Scripture: "The secret things belong to the LORD our God; but those things which are revealed belong to us" (Deut 29:29). The first is the rule of His own actions; the latter is the rule of ours; only His *revealed* will is concerned in the question.

This revealed will of God is either manifested to us in His *Word* or in His *works*. His *Word* is His commanding will. His *works* are His effecting or permitting will; the one concerns good, the other evil. In these ways, God manifests His will to men, yet with great variety and difference, both as to the things that are revealed, the persons to whom He reveals them, and the degrees of clarity in which they are revealed.

1. As to the things revealed, there is a great difference. The great and necessary duties of religion are revealed to us in the *Word* with the greatest perspicuity and evidence; there can be no hesitation about these. But things of a lower nature and lesser concern are bit more obscure.

2. As to the persons to whom God reveals His will, there is a great difference. Some are strong men, others are babes (1Cor 3:1). Some have their senses exercised, others are of weak and dull understanding; and we know everything is received according to the ability and measure of the person receiving it. Hence it is that one man's way is very plain before him – he knows what he ought to do; the other is ever and quickly at a loss, dubious and uncertain what to do.

3. The manner of God's revealing His will to men is also varied. Some have special, personal, and peculiar revelations of it made to them. Samuel had this about the choice of the person whom he should anoint king (1Sam 9:15-16). And David had it; for you find upon his asking God (probably by the Urim and Thummim), that God told him what his duty was as to that expedition, and what would be its outcome (1Sam 23:2, 4, 9-12).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> **1Sa 23:2, 4; 9-12** Therefore David inquired of the LORD, saying, "Shall I go and attack these Philistines?" And the LORD said to David, "Go and attack the Philistines, and save Keilah." ...<sup>4</sup> Then David inquired of the LORD once again. And the LORD answered him and said, "Arise, go down to Keilah. For I will deliver the Philistines into your hand." ...<sup>9</sup> When David knew that Saul plotted evil against him, he said to Abiathar the priest, "Bring the ephod here." <sup>10</sup> Then David said, "O LORD God of Israel, Your servant has certainly heard that Saul seeks to come to Keilah to destroy the city for my sake. <sup>11</sup> Will the men of Keilah deliver me into his hand? Will Saul come down, as Your servant has heard? O LORD God of Israel, I pray, tell Your servant." And the LORD said, "He will come down."

But now, all are tied to the ordinary standing rule of the written word, and must not expect any such extraordinary revelations from God. The way we now have to know the will of God concerning us in difficult cases, is to search and study the Scriptures. And where we find no particular rule to guide us in this or that particular case, we are to apply general rules and govern ourselves according to the analogy and proportion they bear towards each other.

Now it often happens in such doubtful cases, that we are entangled in our own thoughts, and are at a loss what course to take. We pray with David that God would make His way straight before us (Psa 5:8). We are afraid of displeasing God, and yet fearful we may do so, whether we resolve this way or that. And this comes to pass not only through the difficulty of the case, but from our own ignorance and carelessness. Frequently from those providences that lie before us, in which God seems to *hint* His mind to us this way or that, it is doubtful to us whether we may safely guide ourselves by those intimations of providence.

It cannot be doubted that God does give men secret hints and intimations of His will by His providence; yet providences in themselves are not a staple rule of duty, nor are they a sufficient revelation of the will of God. We may say of them: "Behold, I go forward, but he is not there: and backward, but I cannot perceive him. When he works on the left hand, I cannot behold him. When he turns to the right hand, I cannot see him" (Job 23:8-9).

If providence in itself is allowed to be a sufficient means of knowing God's will for us, then we shall often be forced to justify and condemn the same cause or person, for one event happens to all; as it falls out to the good, so it falls out to the wicked (Ecc 9:2). Besides, if providence alone were the rule by which to judge any action or plan, then a wicked undertaking would cease to be wicked if it succeeded; but sin is still sin and duty is still duty whatever the events and outcomes.

The safest way therefore to make use of providences in such cases, is to consider them as they follow the commands or promises of the Word, not singly and separately in themselves. If you search the Scriptures with an impartial and unbiased spirit, in a doubtful case, pray for counsel and direction from the Lord; attend to the dictates of conscience. When you have done all, you will find the providences of God falling out agreeably to the dictates of your own conscience, and to the best light you can find in the Word. You may in such cases make use of it as an encouragement to you in the way of your duty. But the most signal demonstrations of providence are not to be accepted against a rule of Scripture. No smiles or successes of providence may encourage us to proceed in this; and on the other side, no frowns or discouragements of providence should discourage us in the way of our duty, however many we should encounter. Holy Job could not find the meaning of God in His works, yet he would not depart from the commandments of His lips (Job 23:12). You find the same resolution in David to proceed in his duty and to cleave to the Word, however many stumbling-blocks providence permitted to be laid in his way. "For I have become," he says, "like a bottle in the smoke," not only black, but withered up by troubles; "yet I do not forget your statutes" (Psa 119:83); and "They had almost consumed me upon earth: but I did not forsake your precepts" (verse 87).

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<sup>12</sup> Then David said, "Will the men of Keilah deliver me and my men into the hand of Saul?" And the LORD said, "They will deliver you."  
(1Sa 23:9-12 NKJ)

Paul, by the direction of the Spirit, was engaged to go to Jerusalem (Acts 20:22). After a clear revelation of the mind of God to him in that matter, many difficult and discouraging providences befell him on his way! The disciples at Tyre said to him “through the Spirit” (though they followed their own spirits in it) “that he should not go to Jerusalem” (Acts 21:4).

Then at Caesarea he met Agabus a prophet, who told him what would befall him when he arrived there (Acts 21:10-11), but all this would not dissuade him. And after all this, how passionately the brothers beseeched him to decline that journey (verses 12 and 13)! Yet knowing his rule, and resolving to be faithful to it, he puts all this aside and proceeds on his journey.

Well then, providence in concurrence with the Word may give some encouragement to us on our way; but no testimony of providence is to be accepted against the Word. If Scripture and conscience tell you such a way is sinful, then you may not venture upon it, however many opportunities and encouragements providence may permit to offer themselves to you – for they are permitted only for your *trial*, not your *encouragement*. Take this therefore as a sure rule, that no providence can legitimize or justify any moral evil. Nor will it be a valid defense before God for any man to say, “The providence of God gave me encouragement to do it, though the Word gave me none.” If therefore in doubtful cases you want to discover God’s will, govern yourselves in your search for it by the following rules:

(1) Get the true fear of God upon your hearts. Be really afraid of offending Him. God will not hide His mind from such a soul. “The secret of the LORD is with those who fear him; and he will reveal his covenant to them” (Psa 25:14).

(2) Study the Word more, and the concerns and interests of the world less. The Word is a light to your feet (Psa 119:105), that is, it useful to discover and direct all duties to be done and dangers to be avoided. It is the great oracle at which you are to inquire. Treasure up its rules in your hearts, and you will walk safely. “I have hidden Your Word in my heart that I might not sin against you” (Psa 119:11).

(3) Reduce what you know into practice, and you will know what your duty is to practice. “If any man would do His will, he will learn about the doctrine” (John 7:17). “All those who do his commandments have a good understanding.” (Psa 111:10).

(4) Pray for illumination and direction in the way that you should go. Beg the Lord to guide you in straits, and not permit you to fall into sin. This was the holy practice of Ezra: “Then I proclaimed a fast there at the river of Ahava, that we might humble ourselves before our God, to seek from Him the right way for us and our little ones and all our possessions” (Ezra 8:21).

(5) And this being done, follow providence as far as it agrees with the Word and no further. No use is to be made of providence *against* the Word, but only in *subservience* to it. And there are two excellent uses of providence in subservience to the Word.

1. Providences, as they follow promises and prayer, are evidences of God’s faithfulness in their accomplishment. When David languished under a disease, and his enemies began to triumph in hopes of his downfall, he prays that God would be merciful to him and raise him

up (Psa 41:10); and by that, he says, he knew the Lord favored him, because his enemy did *not* triumph over him (verse 11). He looked at this providence as a token for good, as he calls it elsewhere (Psa 86:17).

2. Providences also give us loud calls to those duties which the command lays upon us; and they tell us when we are actually and presently under the obligation to perform them. Thus when sad providences befall the Church or ourselves, they call us to humiliation; and they let us know that the command to humble ourselves at the feet of God is *then* in force upon us. “The LORD’s voice cries to the city, and the man of wisdom will see your name: ‘Hear the rod! And who has appointed it?’” (Micah 6:9). The rod has a voice, and what does it speak? Why, *now* is the time to humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God. This is the day of trouble, in which God has bid you to call upon Him. And on the contrary, when comfortable providences refresh us, it now informs us that this is the time to rejoice in God, according to the rule: “In the day of prosperity be joyful” (Ecc 7:14). These precepts always bind, but not for *always*.<sup>1</sup> It is our duty therefore, and our wisdom, to distinguish seasons and to know the proper duties of every season; and providence is an index that points them out to us. Thus the first case ends.

### ***Second Case – Waiting Upon God.***

*How may a Christian be supported in waiting on God, while providence delays the performance of the mercies for which he has long prayed and waited?*

1. It is supposed in this case that providence may linger and delay the performance of those mercies to us which we have long waited and prayed for; and that during that delay and suspense, our hearts and hopes may be very low and ready to fail.

Providence truly may long delay the performance of those mercies which we have prayed and waited upon God for. For the right understanding of this, know that there is a twofold term or season fixed for the performance of mercy to us: one is fixed by the Lord our God, in whose hand are the times and seasons (Acts 1:7); another is fixed by ourselves who raise up our own expectations of mercies – sometimes merely through the eagerness of our desires for them, and sometimes through uncertain conjectural grounds, and the appearances of encouragement that lie before us.

Now nothing can be more precise, certain, and punctual than the performance of mercy at the time and season which God has appointed – however long it is, or however many obstacles lie in the way of it. There was a time prefixed by God Himself for the performance of that promise of Israel’s deliverance out of Egypt. It is said: “And it came to pass at the end of the four hundred and thirty years, the self-same day it came to pass, that all the hosts of the LORD went out of the land of Egypt” (Exo 12:41). Compare this with Acts 7:17, and there you have the ground and reason why their deliverance was not, and could not be delayed one day longer: because “the time for the promise had now come.” Promises, like a pregnant woman, must accomplish their appointed months; and when they have so done, providence will midwife the mercies which go big into the world, and not one of them shall miscarry.

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<sup>1</sup> *Praecepta affirmativa obligant semper, non ad semper.* Affirmative precepts always bind, but always in proper circumstances.



But for the seasons which are of our *own* fixing and appointment, as God is not tied to them; so His providences are not governed by them; and here are our disappointments. “We looked for peace, but no good came; and for a time of health, and behold trouble” (Jer 8:15). And this is why we fret at the delays of providence, and doubt the faithfulness of God in their performance; but His thoughts are not our thoughts (Isaiah 55:8). “The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness” (2Pet 3:9). It is slackness if you reckon by your own rule and measure; but it is not slack if you reckon and count by God’s. The Lord does not compute and reckon His seasons of working by our arithmetic. You have compared both these rules, and the ground of our mistake is detected in this Scripture: “For the vision is yet for an appointed time; but at the end, it shall speak and not lie: though it tarries, wait for it: because it will surely come; it will not tarry” (Hab 2:3). God appoints the time; when that appointed time has come, the expected mercies will not fail. But in the meantime, “though it tarries,” says the prophet, “wait for it, for it will not tarry.” Tarry, and not tarry; how will this be reconciled? The meaning is that it may tarry much beyond your expectation, but not a moment beyond God’s appointment.

2. During this delay of providence, the hearts and hopes of the people of God may be very low and much discouraged. This is too plain from what the Scriptures have recorded of others, and what every one of us may find in our own experiences. We have an instance of this in Isaiah, where you have God’s faithful promise that He will comfort His people, “and will have mercy upon his afflicted” (Isa 49:13). This is enough, one would think, to raise and comfort their hearts. But the mercy promised was long in coming. They waited year after year, and still the burden pressed them and was not removed. Therefore “Zion said, the LORD has forsaken me, and my Lord has forgotten me” (Isa 49.14). Look for such a mercy in vain. God has no regard for us; we are out of His heart and mind. He neither cares for us, nor does He mind what becomes of us.

So it was with David. After God had made him such a promise, and in due time so faithfully performed it, no mercy was better secured to any man, for they are called, “the sure mercies of David” (Isaiah 55:3). Yet providence delayed the accomplishment of them so long, and permitted such difficulties to intervene, that he despaired of seeing their accomplishment. He even concludes God had forgotten him as well, “How long will you forget me, O LORD? Forever?” (Psa 13:1). And what he questions here, he elsewhere turns into a positive conclusion: “All men are liars” (Psa 116:11), “I shall one day perish by the hand of Saul.” (1Sam 27.1) The causes of these despondencies and sinkings of heart are partly from ourselves and partly from Satan.

1. If we duly examine our own hearts about it, we will find that these sinkings of heart are the immediate effects of unbelief. We do not depend and rely upon the Word with that full trust and confidence that is due to the infallible Word of a faithful and unchangeable God. You may see the ground of this faintness here: “I would have fainted unless I had believed” (Psa 27:13).<sup>1</sup> Faith is the only cordial<sup>2</sup> that relieves the heart against these faintings and despondencies. Where faith is lacking or weak, it is no wonder that our hearts sink when discouragements lie before us.

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<sup>1</sup> **Psalm 27:13** *I would have lost heart, unless I had believed that I would see the goodness of the LORD In the land of the living. (NKJ)*

<sup>2</sup> *Cordial: a strong highly flavored sweet liquor, usually drunk after a meal; intended for medicinal purposes.*

2. Judging and measuring things by the rules of sense is a great cause of our discouragements. We conclude according to the appearance of things, what their results will be. If Abraham had done so in that great trial of his faith, he would certainly have lost his footing; but “against hope”, that is, against natural probability, he “believed in hope... giving glory to God” (Rom 4:18, 20). If Paul had done so, he would have fainted under his trials. We do not faint, he said, while we do not look at the things that are seen (2Cor 4:16, 18). This is as if to say, what keeps up our spirits is looking away from present and visible things, and measuring everything by another rule, namely, the power and fidelity of God firmly engaged in the promises.

3. In all these things Satan schemes against us. Hence he takes opportunities to suggest to us hard thoughts about God, and to drive our souls away from all confidence in Him, and expectations from Him. Satan is the great mischief-maker between God and the saints. He reports and exploits the difficulties and fears that are in our way; and he labours to weaken our hands and discourage our hearts in waiting upon God. And these suggestions gain more credit with us, because they are confirmed and attested by our sense and feeling.

But here is a desperate plan against our souls, carrying on under very plausible pretenses. It concerns us to be watchful now, and to maintain our faith and hope in God. Now blessed is he that can resign everything to God, and quietly wait for His salvation (Lam 3:26). To assist the soul in this difficulty, I will offer some further help in the following considerations:

### **First Consideration.**

Even though providence does not yet perform the mercies you are waiting for, yet you have no ground to entertain hard thoughts about God – for it is possible that God never gave you any ground to expect these things from Him.

It may be that you have no promise to build your hope upon. If that is so, then why would God be suspected and dishonored by you in a case in which His truth and faithfulness was never engaged to you? If we are thwarted in our outward concerns, and if we see our expectations of prosperity dashed, if we see such and such an outward comfort removed – from which we promised ourselves much – why must God be blamed for this? You promised these things to yourselves, but where did God promise you prosperity and the continuance of those comfortable things? Produce His promise, and show where He has broken it. It is not enough for you to say there are general promises in the Scripture, that God will withhold no good thing, and these are the good things which providence withholds from you. For that promise (Psa 84:11)<sup>1</sup> has its limitations; it is expressly limited to those who “walk uprightly.” It concerns you to examine whether you have done so, before you quarrel with providence for not performing that promise. Ah, friend, search your own heart; reflect upon your own ways. Do you not see so many flaws in your integrity, so many turnings aside from God, both in heart and life, that may justify God, not only in withholding what you look for, but in removing all that you enjoy? And besides this limitation as to the object, it is limited (as are all other promises relating to externals) in the matter or things premised by the wisdom and will of God. This is the only rule by which they are measured out to men in this world; that is, such mercies are measured out in such proportions as

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<sup>1</sup> **Psalm 84:11** For the LORD God *is* a sun and shield; The LORD will give grace and glory; No good *thing* will He withhold From those who walk uprightly.

He sees necessary and are most conducive to your good; and these are given out at such times and in such seasons by His own appointment, not yours.

God was never under an absolute and unlimited tie to provide outward comforts to any of us. If we are disappointed, we can blame no one but ourselves. Who told us to expect rest, ease, delight, and other such things in this world? He has never told us we will be rich, healthy, and at ease in our habitations. On the contrary, He has often told us we must expect troubles in the world (John 16:33), and that “we must through much tribulation enter the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22). All that He stands bound to us for by promise, is to be with us in trouble (Psa 91:15), to supply our real and absolute needs: “When the poor and needy seek water, and there is none, and their tongue fails for thirst, I the LORD will hear them, I the God of Israel will not forsake them” (Isaiah 41:17); and to sanctify all these providences to our good in the end. “And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to his purpose” (Rom 8:28). As to all *these* things, not one tittle ever did or shall fail.

### **Second Consideration**

But if you say that you have long waited upon God for spiritual mercies to your souls according to the promise, and those mercies are still deferred, and your eyes fail while you look for them, I would desire that you seriously consider what kind of spiritual mercies you have waited so long for from God.

Spiritual mercies are of two sorts: those which belong to the *essence*, the very being of the new creature, without which it must *fail*; and those which belong to its *well-being* and the comfort of the inner man, without which you cannot live so *cheerfully* as you would like. The mercies of the former kind are absolutely necessary, and therefore they are put into absolute promises, as you see here: “And I will make an everlasting covenant with them, that I will not turn away from them to do them good; but I will put my fear in their hearts, that they shall not depart from me” (Jer 32:40). But for the rest, they are dispensed to us in such measures and at such seasons as the Lord sees fit; and many of His own people live for a long time without them. The donation and continuation of the Spirit to quicken, sanctify, and unite us with Christ, is *necessary*. But His joys and comforts are not so necessary. A child of light may walk “in darkness” (Isaiah 50:10). He lives by *faith*, and not by *feeling*.

### **Third Consideration.**

You complain that providence delays performing for you the mercies for which you have prayed and waited, but do you have the right ends in your desires for these mercies? It may be that this is the reason you ask and do not receive (James 4:3). The lack of a good aim is the reason why we lack good success in our prayers. It may be that we pray for prosperity, but our aim is to please the flesh. We look no higher than the pleasure and accommodation of the flesh. We beg and wait for deliverance from such a trouble and affliction, not that we might be more ready and prepared to obey, but that we might be freed of what grieves us, and destroys our pleasure in the world.

Certainly, if it is so, you have more need to judge and condemn yourselves, than to censure and suspect the care of God.

#### **Fourth Consideration.**

You wait for good, and it does not come. But has your will been brought to a due submission to the will of God about it? Certainly, God will have you come to this submission before you enjoy your desires. Enjoying your desires will please you, but resigning your wills is what pleases God. If your hearts cannot come to this, mercies cannot come to you. David was made to wait long for the mercy promised him, indeed, and to be content without it before he actually enjoyed it. He was brought to be “like a weaned child” (Psa 131:2); and so must you.

#### **Fifth Consideration.**

Your betters have waited long upon God for mercy; why should you not? David waited till his “eyes failed” (Psa 69:3). The Church waited for Him in the way of His judgments (Isaiah 26:8).<sup>1</sup> Are you better than all the saints that have gone before you? Is God more obliged to you than He is to all His other people? They have quietly waited, and why should you not?

#### **Sixth Consideration.**

Will you lose anything by patient waiting upon God for mercies? Certainly not! Indeed, it will turn to a double advantage to you to continue in a quiet, submissive, waiting posture upon God. For though you do not yet enjoy the good you wait for, yet all this while you are exercising your grace; it is more excellent to *act grace* than to *enjoy comfort*. All this time the Lord is training you up in the exercise of faith and patience, and bending your wills in submission to Himself; what do you lose by that? Indeed, whenever the desired mercy comes, it will be so much sweeter to you. For look how much faith and prayer has been employed to produce it, and how many wrestlings you have had with God for it; that is how much greater the sweetness will be for you when it comes. O therefore do not faint, however long God delays you.

#### **Seventh Consideration.**

Are not those mercies which you expect from God worth waiting for? If not, then it is your folly to be troubled by the lack of them. If they are, then why do you not continue waiting? Is that not all that God expects from you for the mercies He bestows upon you, that you wait upon Him for them? You know you have not deserved the least of them from His hands. You do not expect them as a recompense, but as a free favour. And if that is so, then certainly the least you can do is wait upon His pleasure for them.

#### **Eighth Consideration.**

Consider how many promises are made in the Word to waiting souls. One Scripture declares, “Blessed are all those that wait for him” (Isaiah 30:18). Another tells us that none who wait for him will be ashamed (Psa 25:3), that is, they will not be finally disappointed, but they will at last be made partakers of their hopes. A third Scripture tells us, “Those that wait upon the LORD will renew their strength” (Isaiah 40:31). This is a promise that you need to make great use of in such a time of fainting, with many more promises of a similar nature. Shall we faint at this rate in the midst of so many cordials that are prepared to revive us in these promises?

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<sup>1</sup> **Isaiah 26:8** Yes, in the way of Your judgments, O LORD, we have waited for You; The desire of *our* soul *is* for Your name And for the remembrance of You.

### **Ninth Consideration.**

How long has God waited for you to comply with His commands, to live up to your engagements and promises? You have made God wait long for your reformation and obedience; and therefore you have no reason to think it too much if God makes you wait long for your consolation. We have our “how longs,” and does God not have His? We cry: “But you, O LORD, how long?” (Psa 6:3). “How long will you forget me, O LORD? Forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long will I take counsel in my soul, having sorrow in my heart daily? How long will my enemy be exalted over me?” (Psa 13:1-2). But surely we should not think these things are long, when we consider how long the Lord has exercised His patience towards us. We have made Him say, How long, how long? Our unbelief has made Him cry, “How long will it be before they believe me?” (Num 14:11). Our corrupt hearts have made Him cry, “How long will your vain thoughts lodge within you?” (Jer 4:14). Our impure natures and ways have made Him cry, “How long will they be incapable of innocence?” (Hosea 8:5). If God waits for you with so much patience for your duties, then well may you wait upon Him for His mercies.

### **Tenth Consideration.**

This impatience and infidelity of yours, expressed in your weariness to wait any longer, is a great evil in itself. Very probably, that is the evil which obstructs the way of your expected mercies. You might have had your mercies sooner if your spirits were quieter and more submissive. And so much for the second case.

### ***The Third Case – Is it from the love of God?***

*How may a Christian discern when a providence is sanctified, and if it comes to him from the love of God?*

There are two sorts or kinds of providences which come to men in this world. Their issue and events are vastly different, and indeed, contrary to each other.

*First*, some think that all providences are overruled and ordered for their good, according to that blessed promise in Rom 8:28, “And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to *His* purpose.” Not only things that are *good* in themselves, such as ordinances, graces, duties and mercies, but things that are *evil* in themselves, such as temptations, afflictions, and even their own sins and corruptions, will turn out to their advantage and benefit. For though sin is so intrinsically and formally evil in its own nature, that in itself it is not capable of sanctification, yet out of this worst of evils God can work good to His people. And though He never makes sin the instrument of our good, yet His providence may make it the occasion of doing good to His people – so that spiritual benefits may be occasioned by providence’s wise overruling of sin.

And so afflictions of all kinds, the greatest and sorest of them, under the influence of providence, may bring a great deal of good to the saints. And that applies not only to the occasions of it, but to the instruments and means of it. “By this, therefore, the iniquity of Jacob shall be purged” (Isaiah 27:9); that is, by the instrumentality of this sanctified affliction.

*Secondly*, to others nothing is sanctified, either as an instrument or as an occasion of any spiritual good; but just as the worst things are ordered to the saints’ benefit, so the best things that wicked

men enjoy may do them no good. Their prayers are turned into sin (Psa 109:7), the ordinances are the savour of death (2Cor 2:16), the grace of God is turned into wantonness (Jude 4), Christ Himself is a rock of offense (1Pet 2:8), their table is a snare (Psa 69:22), their prosperity is their ruin (Prov 1:32). Just as *persons* do, so *things* work for good or evil. “To the pure all things are pure; but to those who are defiled and unbelieving, nothing is pure” (Titus 1:15).

Therefore, seeing that the events of providence fall out so opposite to each other on the godly and ungodly, everything furthering the eternal good of the one, and the ruin of the other, can it not be acknowledged as a most important case, one in which every soul is deeply concerned, whether the providences are sanctified to him or not? <sup>1</sup>

To understand this, I will premise two necessary considerations, and then give the rules which will be useful to resolve the question.

### **Consideration 1. The matter may not indicate God’s intentions.**

*First*, let it be considered that we cannot know from the matter of the things before us, whether they are sanctified or unsanctified to us; for “no man knows either love or hatred by all the things that are before him; all things come alike to all” (Ecc 9:1-2). We cannot understand the mind and heart of God by the things He dispenses with His hand. If prosperous providences befall us, we cannot say this is a sure sign that God loves us – for who have more of those providences than the people of His wrath? “They have more than heart could wish” (Psa 73:7). Surely it must be a weak evidence for heaven, for it accompanies a great part of the world to hell. We may testify of our love for God by these things, but we cannot get any solid assurance of His love for us from ten thousand such enjoyments.

And we cannot know His hatred from adverse, afflictive providences. If afflictions, great afflictions, many afflictions, long-continued afflictions, were to mark God’s hatred for the persons on whom these afflictions fall, then where will we find God’s people in the world? We must then seek out the proud, vain, sensual wantons of the world, who spend their days in pleasure [and suffer no affliction], and say that these are the men whom God loves.

Outward things are indiscriminately dispensed; no man’s spiritual state is discernible by viewing his temporal state. When God draws the sword, it may “cut off the righteous as well as the wicked” (Eze 21:3).

### **Consideration 2. There may be no immediate evidence of God’s love.**

*Secondly*, though the providences of God, materially considered, afford no evidence of God’s love for us, yet the manner in which they befall us, and the effects and fruits they produce in us, do distinguish them very manifestly; we may discern by them whether or not they are sanctified providences and fruits of the love of God. Yet these effects and fruits of providences by which we discern their nature do not always appear immediately; time must be allowed to exercise the soul under them. “Now no chastening seems joyous for the present, but grievous. Nevertheless, afterwards it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness for those who are exercised by it” (Heb 12:11).

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<sup>1</sup> That is, whether they come to him from the love of God or not.

The benefit of a providence is discerned just as the benefit of a medicine is discerned. For the present it gripes, and makes the stomach sick and loathing; but afterwards we find the benefit of it in our recovery of health and cheerfulness. Now some of the providences of God are comfortable, and others are sad and grievous to our nature. The way to discern their sanctification and blessing is by the manner in which they come, and their operations upon our spirits. I will consider the case as it respects both sorts of providences, and show you which effects of our troubles or of our comforts will show them to be sanctified and blessed to us.

### **Sad and Afflictive providences**

And first, for sad and afflictive providences, in whatever kind or degree they befall us, we have warrant to conclude they are blessings to us, and come from the love of God:

1. When they come in a proper season, when we need them, either to prevent some sin we are falling into, or to recover us out of a remiss, supine, and careless frame of spirit into which we have already fallen. “If necessary, you have been grieved” (1Pet 1:6). Certainly, it is a good sign that God plans your good by those troubles which are so fitted and wisely ordered to meet the need. If you see the husbandman pruning a tree in the proper season, it argues that he aims to make it fruitful and to flourish; but to do the same thing at midsummer shows no regard for that, but his plan is to destroy it.

2. When our troubles are fitted in both quality and degree to properly work on our most dominant corruptions, then they look like sanctified strokes. The wisdom of God is greatly seen in the choice of His rods. Not any kind of trouble will work on and purge every sin; but when God chooses such afflictions for us that, like medicine, are suited to the disease which the soul labours under, this speaks of divine care and love. Thus we may observe that it is usual with God to strike us in those very comforts which stole away too much of the love and delight of our souls from God; and He crosses us in those things from which we raised too great an expectation of comfort. These providences show the jealousy of God over us, and His care to prevent far worse evils by these sad but necessary strokes. As for the degrees of our troubles, sanctified strokes are ordinarily fitted by the wisdom of God to the strength and ability of our inherent grace. “In measure, when it shoots out, you will debate with it. He stays His rough wind in the day of the east wind” (Isaiah 27:8). It is an allusion to a physician who exactly weighs and measures all the ingredients which he mingles in a potion for his sick patient, so that it may be in proportion to his strength, and no more. And the next words intimate as much: “By this therefore shall the iniquity of Jacob be purged” (verse 9).

3. When they turn our hearts against sin, and not against God, it is a good sign that our troubles are sanctified to us. There are few great afflictions which befall men, that don't make them quarrelsome and discontented. Wicked men quarrel with God, and are filled with discontent against Him. So the Scripture describes them: “And men were scorched with great heat, and blasphemed the name of God, which has power over these plagues” (Rev 16:9). But godly men, to whom afflictions are sanctified, justify God and fall out with sin; they condemn themselves and give glory to God. “O Lord, righteousness belongs to you, but to us shame of face” (Daniel 9:7); and “Why does a living man complain, a man for the punishment of his sins?” (Lam 3:39). Happy afflictions make the soul fall out and quarrel only with sin.

4. When they purge the heart from sin, and leave both heart and life more pure, heavenly, mortified, and humble than they found them, it is a sure sign that afflicting providences are sanctified. Sanctified afflictions are cleansers; they pull down the pride, refine earthliness, and purge out the vanity of the spirit. So you read in Daniel 11:35 that it purifies and makes their souls white. Hence it is compared to a furnace which separates the dross from the pure metal: “Behold I have refined you but not with silver: I have tested you in the furnace of affliction” (Isaiah 48:10). But for wicked men, however long in the furnace, they lose no dross (Eze 24:6). How many Christians can bear witness to this truth! After some sharp affliction has been upon them, how is the earthliness of their hearts is purged! They see no beauty, taste no more relish in the world than in the white of an egg. O how serious, humble and heavenly they are, till the impressions made upon them by afflictions are worn off, and their deceitful lusts have again entangled them! And this is the reason why we are so often under the discipline of the rod. Let a Christian, says a late writer, be but two or three years without an affliction, and he is almost good for nothing. He cannot pray, meditate, or discourse at the rate he used to; but when a new affliction comes, now he can find his tongue, and come to his knees again, and live at another rate.

5. When we draw near to God under them and “turn to the One that strikes us,” it is a good sign that afflictive providences are sanctified to us. A wicked man under affliction “revolts more and more” (Isaiah 1:5), and “does not turn to the One that strikes him” (Isaiah 9:13), but grows worse than before; formality is turned into stupidity and indolence.

But if God afflicts His own people with a sanctified rod, it awakens them to a more earnest seeking of God, it makes them pray more frequently, spiritually, and fervently than ever. When Paul was buffeted by Satan he “sought the Lord three times” (2Cor 12:8).

6. When they do not alienate our hearts from God, but inflame our love towards Him, we may conclude that our afflictions are sanctified, and come from the love of God towards us. This is a sure rule: whatever ends in the increase of our love to God proceeds from the love of God to us. A wicked man finds his heart rising against God when He strikes him; but a graced heart cleaves closer to Him; he can love as well as justify an afflicting God. “All this has come upon us: yet we have not forgotten you, nor have we dealt falsely in your covenant. Our heart is not turned back, nor have our steps declined from your way: though you have sorely broken us in the place of dragons, and covered us with the shadow of death” (Psa 44:17-19). Here you have a true account of the attitude and frame of a graced soul under the greatest afflictions. To be “broken in the place of dragons, and covered with the shadow of death”, imports the most dismal state of affliction; yet even then a graced heart does not turn back; that is, for all this it does not abate one dram of love to God. God is as good and dear to him in afflictions as ever.

7. Lastly, when divine teachings accompany them to our souls, we may call our afflictions sanctified. “Blessed is the man whom you chasten, O LORD, and teach him from your law” (Psa 94:12). Sanctified afflictions are *eye-salves*;<sup>1</sup> when the Spirit accompanies them, they teach us sensibly and effectually the evil of sin, the vanity of the creature, and the necessity of securing things that cannot be shaken. A Christian never takes a truer measure both of his corruptions and

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<sup>1</sup> Rev 3.18.



his graces, than under the rod. Then a man sees that filthiness which has long been contracting in his prosperity, and what interests the creature in the heart. How little faith, patience, resignation and self-denial we can find when God calls us to exercise them. O it is a blessed sign that trouble is sanctified, when a man thus turns in upon his own heart, searches it, and humbles himself before the Lord for its evils!

### **Comfortable and Pleasant providences.**

*Next*, let us take into consideration the other branch of providences, which are comfortable and pleasant. Sometimes it smiles upon us in successes, prosperity, and the gratification of the desires of our hearts. Here the question will be, How may the sanctification of these providences be known by us? To resolve this matter, and for the sake of clarity, I will lay down two sorts of rules: one *negative*, the other *positive*.

#### *Negatively.*

1. It is a sign that comfort is not sanctified to us, when it does not ordinarily come by means of prayer. “For the wicked boasts of his heart’s desire, and blesses the covetous whom the LORD abhors. The wicked through the pride of his countenance will not seek after God; God is not in all his thoughts” (Psa 10:3-4). Here you see that providence may give men “their hearts’ desire,” and yet they never once open their desires to God in prayer about it. But then those gifts of providence are only such as are bestowed on the worst of men, and are not the fruits of love.

2. Whatever success, prosperity or comfort men acquire by sinful means and indirect courses are not sanctified mercies to them. This is not the method by which those mercies are bestowed. “Better is a little with righteousness, than great revenues without it” (Prov 16:8); it is better on this account: that it comes in God’s way and with His blessing, which never follows the way of sin. God has cursed the ways of sin, and so no blessing can follow those ways.

3. Whatever prosperity and success makes men forget God, and cast off their care of duty, is not sanctified to them. It is unsanctified prosperity which lulls men asleep into a deep oblivion of God. “He made him ride on the high places of the earth, that he might eat the increase of the fields; and he made him to suck honey out of the rock, and oil out of the flinty rock; butter of kine, and milk of sheep, with fat of lambs, and rams of the breed of Bashan, and goats, with the fat of kidneys of wheat; and you drank the pure blood of the grape. But Jeshurun waxed fat, and kicked; you have grown fat, you have grown thick, you are covered with fatness; then he forsook God who made him, and lightly esteemed the Rock of his salvation” (Deut 32:13-15). “You are unmindful of the Rock that begat you, and have forgotten God who formed you” (verse 18). *Rare fumant felicibus aræ* (there is little smoke of sacrifice on the altars of the rich).

4. When prosperity is abused toward sensuality, and merely serves as fuel to maintain fleshly lusts, it is not sanctified. “They send forth their little ones like a flock, and their children dance. They take the timbrel and harp, and rejoice at the sound of the organ. They spend their days in wealth, and in a moment go down to the grave” (Job 21:11-13).

5. When it swells the heart with pride and self-conceitedness, it is a sign that prosperity is not sanctified to men. “At the end of twelve months he walked in the palace of the kingdom of

Babylon. The king spoke and said, Is this not the great Babylon that I have built for the house of the kingdom, by the might of my power and for the honour of my majesty?" (Daniel 4:29-30).

6. That success is not sanctified to men which takes them away from their duty, and makes them wholly negligent or greatly indisposed to it. "O generation, see the Word of the LORD. Have I been a wilderness to Israel, a land of darkness? Why do my people say, We are lords; we will come to you no more?" (Jer 2:31).

7. Nor can we think prosperity is sanctified if it wholly swallows up the souls of men in their own enjoyments, and makes them disregard public miseries or sins. "They lie upon beds of ivory, and stretch themselves upon their couches, and eat the lambs out of the flock, and the calves out of the midst of the stall; they chant to the sound of the viol, and invent for themselves instruments of music like David. They drink wine in bowls, and anoint themselves with the chief ointments; but they are not grieved for the afflictions of Joseph" (Amos 6:6).

### *Positively.*

1. Those mercies and comforts are undoubtedly sanctified to men who humble their souls kindly before God, sensing their own vileness and unworthiness. "And Jacob said, "I am not worthy of the least of all your mercies, and of all the truth which you have shown to your servant" (Gen 32:9-10).

2. Sanctified mercies are commonly turned into cautions against sin (Ezra 9:13). They make so many bands of restraint upon the souls who have them, as to make them shun sin.

3. They will engage a man's heart in love to the God of His mercies (Psa 18:1, cf. title).

4. They never satisfy a man as his portion, nor will the soul accept all the prosperity in the world on that score. "He considered the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt; for he looked to the reward" (Heb 11:26).

5. Nor do they make men disregard public sins or miseries; (Nehemiah 2:1-3 and Acts 7:23).

**Nehemiah 2:1** And it came to pass in the month of Nisan, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, *when wine was before him*, that I took the wine and gave it to the king. Now I had never been sad in his presence before. <sup>2</sup> Therefore the king said to me, "Why *is* your face sad, since you *are* not sick? This *is* nothing but sorrow of heart." So I became dreadfully afraid, <sup>3</sup> and said to the king, "May the king live forever! Why should my face not be sad, when the city, the place of my fathers' tombs, *lies* waste, and its gates are burned with fire?"

**Act 7:22-24** And Moses was learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and was mighty in words and deeds. <sup>23</sup> Now when he was forty years old, it came into his heart to visit his brethren, the children of Israel. <sup>24</sup> "And seeing one of *them* suffer wrong, he defended and avenged him who was oppressed, and struck down the Egyptian.

6. It is a sure sign that mercies are sanctified when they make the soul readier and more enlarged in its duty to God. "Therefore the LORD established the kingdom in his hand: and all Judah brought presents to Jehoshaphat, and he had riches and honour in abundance. And his heart was lifted up in the ways of the LORD" (2Chr 17:5-6).

7. To conclude, what is obtained by prayer and returned to God again in due praise, carries its own testimonials with it, that it came from the love of God, and that it is a sanctified mercy to the soul.

And so much for this third case.

### ***The Fourth Case – Remaining steadfast.***

*How may we attain an evenness and steadiness of spirit under the changes and contrary aspects of providence upon us?*

Three things are supposed in this case: (1) that providence has various and contrary aspects upon the people of God; (2) that it is a common thing for them to experience great disorders of spirit under those changes of providence; (3) that these disorders may, in great measure, be prevented by the due use and application of those rules and helps that God has given us in such cases.

#### **Providence has various effects on the People of God**

1. That providence has various, indeed, contrary aspects upon the people of God, is a case so plain that it needs no more than a mention to commend it to all our understandings. Which of all the people of God have not felt this truth? Providence rings the changes all over the world. “He increases the nations, and destroys them; he enlarges the nations, and straitens them again” (Job 12:23). Providence does the same with persons: “You have lifted me up, and cast me down” (Psa 102:10). See what a sad alteration providence made on the Church: “How the city sits solitary that once was full of people! How she has become like a widow, she that was great among the nations, and princess among the provinces! How she has become a tributary!” (Lam 1:1). “Is it nothing to you, all you that pass by? Behold, and see if there is any sorrow like my sorrow, which has been brought upon me, which the LORD has inflicted in the day of his fierce anger” (verse 12). And how great an example was Job of this truth? (compare Job 29 and 30). How many thousands have complained with Naomi, whose condition was so strangely altered, that others have said, as the people of Bethlehem said of her, “Is this Naomi?” (Ruth 1:19).<sup>1</sup>

#### **Providence commonly causes great disorder in our spirit**

2. These vicissitudes<sup>2</sup> of providence commonly cause great disorders of spirit in the best men. Just as intense heat and cold try the strength and soundness of the constitution of our bodies, so the alterations providence makes upon our conditions try the strength of our graces; and too often they reveal the weakness and corruption of holy men. Hezekiah was a good man, yet his weakness and corruption was betrayed by the alterations providence made upon his conditions. When sickness and pains summoned him to the grave, what bitter complaints and despondencies are recorded in Isaiah 38!<sup>3</sup> And when providence lifted him up again into a prosperous condition,

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<sup>1</sup> **Ruth 1.20-21** But she said to them, “Do not call me Naomi [*my delight*]; call me Mara [*bitterness*], for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. <sup>21</sup> “I went out full, and the LORD has brought me home again empty. Why do you call me Naomi, since the LORD has testified against me, and the Almighty has afflicted me?”

<sup>2</sup> *Vicissitudes: A variation in circumstances or fortune at different times in your life.*

<sup>3</sup> **Isaiah 38.12-13** My life span is gone, Taken from me like a shepherd's tent; I have cut off my life like a weaver. He cuts me off from the loom; From day until night You make an end of me. <sup>13</sup> I have considered until morning – Like a lion, So He breaks all my bones; From day until night You make an end of me.

what ostentation<sup>1</sup> and vainglory<sup>2</sup> he showed (Isaiah 39:2)!<sup>3</sup> David had more than a common supply of inherent grace, yet not enough to temper his spirit under great changes in providence. “In my prosperity I said, I shall never be moved,” [and yet] “you hid your face and I was troubled” (Psa 30:6-7). It is not every man that can say with Paul, “I know both how to be abased, and I know how to abound; everywhere and in all things I am instructed, both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer deprivation” (Php 4:12). He is truly rich in grace whose riches or poverty neither hinders the acting nor impoverishes the stock of his graces.

### **Disorders of heart may be prevented in large measure**

3. Though the best of men are subject to such disorders of heart under the changes of providence, these disorders may be prevented in great measure by the due application of such rules and helps as God has given us in such cases.

Now, these helps are suited to three aspects of a change in providence on us: (1) comfortable, (2) calamitous, and (3) doubtful. I will speak particularly and briefly to each of these.

#### *When a change in providence is **comfortable***

*1. How may we attain an even and steady heart under the comfortable aspects of providence on us?*

Under providences of this kind, the great danger is that the heart may be lifted up with pride and vanity, and fall into a drowsy and remiss condition. To prevent this, we need to urge humbling and awakening considerations on our own hearts, such as the following:

(1) These gifts of providence are common to the worst of men, and are not special distinguishing fruits of God’s love. The vilest of men have been satiated with these things. “Their eyes stand out with fatness: they have more than heart could wish” (Psa 73:7).

(2) Think how unstable and changeable all these things are. What you glory in today may be none of yours tomorrow. “For riches certainly make themselves wings; they fly away as an eagle towards heaven” (Prov 23:5). As the wings of a fowl grow out of the substance of its body, so the cause of the creature’s transitory nature is found in itself. It is subjected to vanity, and that vanity, like wings, carries it away; they are but fading flowers (James 1:10).

(3) The change of providences is never nearer to the people of God than when their hearts are lifted up, or have grown secure by prosperity. Does Hezekiah glory in his treasures? The next news he hears is that an impoverishing providence at hand (Isaiah 39:2-7). Others may be left to perish in unsanctified prosperity, but you shall not.

(4) This is a great revelation of the carnality and corruption that is in your heart. It argues for a heart that is little set upon God, little mortified to the world, and little acquainted with the vanity

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<sup>1</sup> *Ostentation*: A flashy and prideful display of wealth, beauty, power, etc.

<sup>2</sup> *Vainglory*: Outspoken conceit.

<sup>3</sup> **Isa 39:2** And Hezekiah was pleased with them, and showed them the house of his treasures –the silver and gold, the spices and precious ointment, and all his armory– all that was found among his treasures. There was nothing in his house or in all his dominion that Hezekiah did not show them.

and ensnaring nature of these things. O you do not know what kind of hearts you have till such providences try them! And is not such discovery a matter of deep humiliation?

(5) Was it not better with you in a lowly condition than it is now? Reflect, and compare state with state, and time with time. How has the frame of your heart altered with the alteration of your condition? So God complains of Israel: “I knew you in the wilderness, in the land of great drought. According to their pasture, so were they filled: they were filled, and their heart was exalted; *therefore* they have forgotten me” (Hosea 13:5-6); as if to say, “You and I were better acquainted formerly when you were in a lowly condition; prosperity has estranged you and altered the case.” How sad that God’s mercies would occasion our estrangement from Him!

*When a change in providence is **calamitous***

2. *How may our hearts be established and kept steady in calamitous and adverse providences?*

Here we are in equal danger of the other extreme, namely, despondency and sinking under the frowns and strokes of contrary providences. Now, to support and establish the heart in this case, consider the following:

(1) Afflictive providences are of great use to the people of God; they cannot live without them. The earth does not need more chastening frosts and mellowing snows than our hearts need nippy providences. Let the best Christian be only a few years without them, and he will be aware of his need for them; he will find that all his graces are sadly remiss and declining.

(2) No stroke of calamity upon the people of God can separate them from Christ. “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation?” (Rom 8:35). There was a time when Job could call nothing in this world his own, except trouble. He could not say, My estate, my honour, my health, my children, for all these were gone; yet *then* he could say: “My Redeemer” (19:25). Well then, there is no cause to sink while interest in Christ remains sure to us.

(3) All your calamities will have an end shortly. The longest day of the saints’ troubles has an end; and then no more troubles forever. The troubles of the wicked will be to eternity, but you “shall suffer only a while” (1Pet 5:10). If a thousand troubles are appointed for you, they will come to *one* at last, and after that no more. Indeed, and though “our light afflictions are only for a moment,” yet they work “for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory”(2Cor 4:17). Let that support your hearts under all your sufferings.

*When a change in providence causes **doubt***

3. *Lastly, let us consider what may be useful to support and quiet our hearts under doubtful providences, when our dear concerns hang in a doubtful suspense before us, and we do not know which way the providence of God will cast and determine them.*

Now the best hearts are apt to grow concerned and pensive, distracted with anxiety about the event and outcome. To relieve and settle us in this case, the following considerations are very useful:

(1) Let us consider the vanity and uselessness of such anxiety. “Which of you by taking thought can add one cubit to his stature?” (Mat 6:27). We may break our peace and waste our spirits, but not alter the case. We cannot turn God out of His way. “He is in one mind” (Job 23:13).<sup>1</sup> We may increase by struggling against God, but we cannot avoid or lighten our troubles.

(2) How often do we afflict and torment ourselves by our own restless thoughts, when there is no real cause or ground for doing so? “You have feared continually every day because of the fury of the oppressor, when he was ready to destroy; and where is the fury of the oppressor?” (Isaiah 51:13). O what abundance of disquiet and trouble we might prevent by waiting quietly till we see the results of providence, and not bringing (as we do) the evils of tomorrow into today?<sup>2</sup>

(3) How great a ground of quietness it is that the whole disposal and management of all our affairs and concerns is in the hand of our own God and Father. No creature can touch us without His commission or permission. “Jesus answered, you would have no power at all against me, unless it were given to you from above” (John 19:11). Neither men nor devils can do anything without God’s leave; and be sure that He will sign no order to your prejudice.

(4) How great a satisfaction it must be to all who believe the divine authority of the Scripture that the faithfulness of God stands engaged for every line and syllable found in it! How many blessed lines in the Bible may we mark that respect even our outward concerns and the happy results of them all! On these two grounds – namely, that our outward concerns with their steady direction to a blessed end is *found in the Word*; and that *this Word is of divine authority* – the faithfulness and honour of God stands good for every tittle that is found there. I say that these are grounds of such stability, that our minds may repose with the greatest security and confidence in them, even on the cloudiest day of trouble. Not only your eternal salvation, but your temporal interests are secured there. Be still, therefore, in the confidence of a blessed outcome.

(5) How great and sure a means the saints have ever found, to their own peace, to commit all doubtful outcomes of providence to the Lord, and to devolve<sup>3</sup> all their cares upon Him! “Commit your works to the LORD, and your thoughts will be established” (Prov 16:3). By *works* he means any doubtful, intricate, perplexing business, about which our thoughts are racked and tortured. Roll all these upon the Lord by faith – leave them with Him – and the present immediate benefit you will have by it, besides comfort in the result, will be tranquillity and peace in your thoughts. Who is there of any standing or experience in religion that has not found it so?

### ***The Fifth Case – Being resolved in adversity***

*How may a Christian resign his heart to the will of God, when sad providences approach him, and forebode great troubles and afflictions coming towards him?*

To rightly state and resolve this important case, it will be necessary to show what is *not* included and intended in the question; what it *does* suppose and include in it; and what help and directions are necessary for the due performance of this great and difficult duty.

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<sup>1</sup> Geneva Bible: Job 23:13 Yet he is in one mind, and who can turn him? Indeed, he does what his mind desires.”

<sup>2</sup> Mat 6.34.

<sup>3</sup> *Devolve*: to pass on or delegate to another; “cast all your cares upon Him.”

## First, negatively

As to the first, it must be premised that the question does not suppose the heart or will of a Christian to be at his own command and disposal in this matter. We cannot resign it and subject it to the will of God whenever we desire to do so. The duty indeed is ours, but the power by which alone we perform it, is God's; we act as we are acted upon by the Spirit. It is with our hearts as with meteors hanging in the air by the influence of the sun: while that continues, they abide above; but when it fails, they fall to the earth. We can do this and all other things, however difficult, through Christ that strengthens us (Php 4:13). But without Him we can do nothing (John 15:5). He does not say, "Without me you can only do a little," or "without me you can do nothing except with great difficulty," or "without me you can do nothing perfectly," but "without me you can do nothing" at all. And every Christian has a witness in his own breast to attest to this truth. For there are cases frequently occurring in the methods of providence in which, notwithstanding all their prayers and desires, all their reasonings and strivings, they cannot fully quiet their hearts in the disposal and will of God; on the contrary, they find all their endeavours in this matter are like rolling a returning stone up the hill – till God says to the heart, 'Be still,' and to the will, 'Give up, nothing can be done.'

## Secondly, affirmatively

Next, let us consider what this case *does* suppose and include in it, and we shall find that,

1. It supposes that the people of God foresee troubles and distresses approaching and drawing near to them. I confess it is not always so, for many of our afflictions, as well as comforts, come upon us by way of surprise; but often we are forewarned of troubles, both public and personal, before we feel them. The weather may be discerned by the face of the sky. When we see a morning sky that is red and lowering, this is a natural sign of a foul and rainy day (Mat 16:3). In the same way, there are just as certain signs of the times by which we may discern when trouble is near, even at our door. And these forewarnings are given by the Lord to awaken us to our duties, by which they may either be prevented (Zeph 2:1-2), or be sanctified and sweetened to us when they come. These signs and notices of approaching troubles are gathered *partly* from the observation and collation of parallel Scripture cases and examples – God generally holds one tenor and steady course in the administrations of His providences in all ages (1Cor 10:6) – and *partly* from the reflections Christians make upon the attitude and disposition of their own hearts, which greatly need awakening, humbling and purging providences. For let a Christian be but a few years or months without a rod, and how formal, earthly, dead and vain his heart will grow! And such a disposition presages<sup>1</sup> affliction to those who are beloved by the Lord, as really as the sweating of stones presages rain. *Lastly*, ordering and disposing the next causes into a posture and preparation for trouble, plainly warns us that trouble is at the door. Thus when the symptoms of sickness begin to appear on our own bodies, or on the wife of our heart, or our children, who are like our own souls, providence (in these symptoms) awakens our expectations of death and doleful separations. So too, when our enemies join together and plot the ruin of our liberties, estates, or lives, and God seems to loose the bridle of restraint on their neck, we cannot help but be alarmed with the near approach of troubles – especially when at the same time, our conscience reflects on the abuse and non-improvement of our comforts.

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<sup>1</sup> *Presage*: to signify something yet to come; to foretell or indicate something.

2. The case before us supposes that these premonitions and forerunners of affliction usually disturb the order very much, and break the peace of our souls; they put the mind under great discomposure, the thoughts under much distraction, and the affections into tumults and rebellion.

Ah, how unwilling we are to surrender to the Lord the loan which He made to us, disquieted by troubles when we are at ease in our enjoyments! How unwelcome are the messengers of affliction to the best of men! We are ready to say to them as the widow said to Elijah: “What have I to do with you, O man of God; have you come to me to call my sin to remembrance, and to slay my son?” (1Kng 17:18). And this arises partly from the remains of corruption in the best souls. For though every sanctified person has come by his own consent into the kingdom, and under the government and sceptre of Christ, and although every thought of his heart by right must be subjected to Him (2Cor 10:5), yet in fact the conquest and power of grace is incomplete and partial. Natural corruption, like Jeroboam with his vain men, rises up against grace and causes many mutinies in the soul.<sup>1</sup> While grace, like young Abijah, is weak-handed and cannot resist them; partly from the advantage Satan takes at the time to provoke and assist our corruptions. He knows that what is already in motion is more easily moved onward. In this confusion and hurry of thoughts, Satan slips in his temptations unnoticed: sometimes aggravating the evils which we fear, with all the sinking and overwhelming circumstances imaginable; sometimes divining and forecasting such events and evils that never happen; sometimes repining at the disposals of God as more severe to us than to others; and sometimes reflecting with very unbelieving and unworthy thoughts about the promises of God and His faithfulness in them. By all of this, the affliction is made to sink deep into the soul before it actually comes. The thoughts are so disordered that duty cannot be duly performed. And the soul is really weakened and disabled from bearing its trial when it finally comes. It is just as if a man kept waking and was restless all night with thoughts of his hard journey which he must travel tomorrow; and so when tomorrow comes, he faints midway on his journey for lack of rest.

3. It is supposed to be the Christian’s great duty here, under the apprehensions of approaching troubles, to resign his will to God’s and quietly commit the events and their outcome to Him, whatever they may prove to be. David did this in a similar case and circumstance: “And the king said to Zadok, Carry back the ark of God into the city; if I find favour in the eyes of the LORD, he will bring me back again, and show me both it and his habitation. But if he says, I have no delight in you: behold here am I, let him do to me as seems good to him” (2Sam 15:25-26). O lovely and truly Christian attitude! It is as if to say, Go Zadok, return with the ark to its place; though I do not have the symbol, yet I hope I will have the real presence of God with me in this sad journey. How He will dispose the events of this sad and doubtful providence, I do not know. Either I will return again to Jerusalem or I will not. If I do, then I will see it again, and enjoy the Lord in His ordinances there. If I do not, then I will go to that place where there is no need or use of those things. Either way, it will be well for me. I am content to refer all things to the divine pleasure, and commit the outcome, whatever it may be, to the Lord.

Till our hearts come to the same resolve, we can have no peace within. “Commit your works to the LORD, and your thoughts shall be established” (Prov 16:3). By *works* he means not only every enterprise and business we undertake, but every puzzling, intricate, and doubtful event we

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<sup>1</sup> Referring to the battle between Israel (led by Jeroboam) and Judah (led by Abijah) in 2Chronicles chapter 13.



fear. Once these are committed by an act of faith, and our wills are resigned to His, besides the comfort we will have in the outcome, we will have the present advantage of a well-composed and peaceful spirit.

But this resignation is the difficulty. There is no doubt of peace, if we could just bring our hearts to that. And therefore,

4. I will give such helps and directions as may, through God's blessing and in the faithful use of them, assist and facilitate this great and difficult work.

### **First Help**

First, *Labour to work into your hearts a deep and fixed sense of the infinite wisdom of God and of your own folly and ignorance.* This will make resignation easy to you. Whatever the Lord does is by counsel (Eph 1:11), His understanding is infinite (Psa 147:5), His thoughts are very deep (Psa 92:5). But as for man, indeed, the wisest among men, how little does his understanding penetrate the works and designs of providence! And how often we are forced to retract our rash opinions and confess our mistakes, and acknowledge that if providence had not seen with better eyes than ours, and looked farther than we did, we would have precipitated ourselves into a thousand mischiefs which, by its wisdom and care, we have escaped. It is well for us that the "seven eyes of providence" (Rev. 5.6) are ever awake and looking out for our good. Now if one creature can and ought to be guided and governed by another that is more wise and skillful than himself, as the client is guided by his learned counsel, or the patient is guided by his skillful physician, much more would every one surrender his weak reasoning and shallow understanding to the infinite and omniscient God.

It is nothing but our pride and arrogance, over-valuing our own understandings, that makes resigning ourselves to God's will so hard.<sup>1</sup> To itself, carnal reason seems a wise disputant about the concerns of the flesh; but how often providence has baffled it! *The more humility we have, the more resignation we have.*

How few of our mercies and comforts have been foreseen by us! Our own projects have come to nothing; we never thought of or contrived what has actually taken place. It was not our choice of the ground, or our skill in weighing and delivering the *bowl*,<sup>2</sup> but some unforeseen providence, like a rub in the *green*, that decided the toss.

### **Second Help**

*Deeply consider the sinfulness and the vanity of torturing your own thoughts about the issues of doubtful providences.*

There is much sin in doing so, for what are all our anxious and agitated emotions other than the immediate outcome and fruits of pride and unbelief? There is not a greater display of pride in the world than in the contests of our wills with the will of God. It is a presumptuous invasion of God's prerogative to dictate to His providence, and prescribe to His wisdom.

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<sup>1</sup> O what a wise logician human arrogance seems to itself; especially when it is afraid to lose any of its delights!  
Tert. *De Spectaculis (The Shows)*, chap. 2.

<sup>2</sup> Reference to *lawn bowls*, where a player tries to knock down pins standing on the lawn by rolling a ball into them.

There is a great deal of vanity in it. All the thoughtfulness in the world will not make one hair white or black. All our discontents will not prevail with God to take back, or as the word may be rendered, *make void* His Word (Isaiah 31:2). He is in one mind (Job 23:13). The thoughts of His mind are from everlasting (Psa 33:11).

### **Third Help**

*Set before you those choice Scripture patterns of submission to the Lord's will in as deep, indeed much deeper points of self-denial than this one before you, and shame yourselves out of this quarreling attitude with providence.*

You know what a close trial providence was to Abraham, that called him from his native country and father's house to go he knew not where; and yet it is said that he came to God's foot, as readily obeying his call as a servant when his master knocks for him with his foot (Isaiah 41:2).

Paul's voyage to Jerusalem had a dismal aspect for him. He could expect nothing but bonds and prisons, as he tells us (Acts 20:23). And it was a great trial to the saints, who could not tell how to give up such a minister; yet Paul resigns his will to God's (20:22), and so do they: "The will of the Lord be done" (21:14).

But far beyond these, and all other patterns, what an example our dear Lord Jesus has set before us in the deepest point of self-denial that was ever in the world! When the Father gave the cup of sufferings into his hands in the garden, a cup of wrath, the wrath of the great and terrible God, and that without mixture, the very taste of which put nature into agony and astonishment, sore amazement, a bloody sweat, and forced from him that vehement and sad cry: "Abba, Father, all things are possible to you; take away this cup from me"; yet still with submission, "nevertheless not what I will, but what you will" (Mark 14:36). O blessed pattern of obedience and resignation to the pleasure of God! What is your case in comparison to this?

### **Fourth Help**

*Study the singular benefits and advantages of a will resigned and melted into the will of God.*

Such a spirit has a continual Sabbath within itself. The thoughts are established (Prov 16:3). And truly, till a man comes to this, he too much resembles the devil, who is a restless spirit seeking rest but finding none. It was an excellent expression of Luther, to someone who was greatly perplexed in his spirit about the doubtful events of some affairs that were then pending: *Dominus tua omnia faciat, et tu nihil facias, sed sis sabbatum Christi*, i.e. "The Lord shall do all for you, and you shall do nothing but be the Sabbath of Christ." It is by this means that the Lord "gives his beloved sleep" (Psa 127:2); he does not mean the sleep of the body, but of the spirit. As one has said on this verse: "Though believers live in the midst of many troubles here, yet with quiet and composed minds they keep themselves in the silence of faith, as though they were asleep." Besides, it fits a man's spirit for communion with God in all his afflictions; and this alleviates and sweetens those afflictions beyond anything in the world.

And surely a man is never nearer the mercy he desires, or the deliverance he expects, as one truly observes, than when his soul is brought into a submissive attitude. David was never nearer the kingdom than when he became like a weaned child. <sup>Psa 131.2</sup>

### **Fifth Help**

*Lastly, think how repugnant an unsubmitive attitude is both to your prayers and professions.*

You pray that the will of God may be done on earth as it is in heaven, and yet when it seems contrary to your will or interest, you struggle or fret against it. You profess to have committed your souls to His keeping, and to leave your eternal concerns in His hands, and yet you cannot commit things infinitely less valuable to Him. How contradictory these things are!

You profess as Christians to be led by the Spirit, but this practice shows you follow the perverse counsels of your own spirits. O then, regret no more, dispute no more, but lie down meekly at your Father's feet, and say in all cases and at all times, "The will of the Lord be done." <sup>Act 21.14</sup>

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And thus I have, through the aid of providence, performed what I intended to say from this Scripture. I acknowledge that my performances have been accompanied with much weakness; yet I have endeavored to say about providence the things that are right. Blessed be the Lord who has thus far assisted and protected me in this work.

How providence will dispose of my life, liberty, and labours for the time to come, I do not know; but I cheerfully commit all to Him who has up to now performed all things for me (Psa 57:2).

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## Chapter 13 – The Advantages of Recording our Experiences of providence

### *POSTSCRIPT*

Considering the great and manifold advantages resulting from a humble and careful observation of providence, I can only judge that it is the concern of Christians who have the time and ability for such a work, to keep written memorials or journals of providence for their own and others' use and benefit. Not collecting and communicating such observations, greatly impoverishes not only ourselves, but the Church of God.

Some say the art of medicine was acquired and perfected this way. When anyone met with some rare medicinal herb, and accidentally discovered the virtues of it, he would post it up in some public place; and so the physician attained his skill by collecting those posted experiments and recipes.

I am not for posting all that a Christian knows or meets with in his experience, for as I have said before, religion does not lay open all things. Yet there is a prudent, humble, and seasonable communication of our experiences and observations of providence, which exceedingly benefits both ourselves and our brothers.

If Christians, in reading the Scriptures, would judiciously collect and record the providences they meet with there, and (if they are destitute of other helps) add only those that have fallen out in their own time and experience, O what a precious treasure these would make! What an antidote it would be to their souls against the spreading atheism of these days; and it would satisfy them beyond what many other arguments can do, that “The LORD he is the God; the LORD he is the God” (1Kng 18:39).

While this work was under my hand, I was both delighted and assisted by a pious and useful essay of an unknown author, who has used to very good purpose many Scriptural passages of providence which seem to lie outside the road of common observation. I have noted some passages out of it which have been sweet to me. O that Christians everywhere would set themselves to such a work! Providence carries our lives, liberties, and concerns in its hand every moment. Your bread is in its cupboard; your money in its purse; your safety in its enfolding arms. Surely it is the least you owe to providence, to record the favours you receive at its hands.

1. Do not trust your slippery memories with such a multitude of remarkable passages of providence as you now have, and will meet with on your way to heaven. It is true, things that greatly affect us are not easily forgotten by us; and yet, how ordinary is it for new impressions to erase former ones? It was a saying of that worthy man, Dr. Harris: “My memory never failed me in all my life; for indeed, I never dared trust it.” Written memorials secure us against that hazard, and besides that, they make them useful to others when we are gone, so that you do not carry away all your treasure to heaven with you, but leave these choice legacies to your surviving friends. Certainly it would not be so great a loss to lose your silver, your goods and chattels, as it is to lose your experiences which God has this way given you in this world.

2. Take heed not to lock up those rich treasures in a book, and think it is enough to have noted them there. Instead, refer to them frequently, as often as new needs, fears, or difficulties arise and assault you. It is now seasonable to consider and reflect, 'Was I never so distressed before?' Is this the first plunge that ever occurred to me? Let me consider the days of old, the years of ancient times, as Asaph did (Psa 77:5).

3. Beware of slighting former straits and dangers by comparing them to present ones. What is next to us always appears greatest to us; and as time removes us further and further from our former mercies or dangers, so they grow less in our eyes, just as the land recedes from those who sail. Know that your dangers have been as great, and your fears have been no less, formerly than they are now. Make it as much your business to preserve the sense and value of your former providences, as the memory of them, and the fruit will be sweet to you.

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