



Yours until He come

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→ **SERMONS** ←

PROVIDENCE INTERPRETED.

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What I do thou knowest not now, but thou shalt know hereafter.—JOHN xiii., 7.

JUST before the institution of the Holy Supper Christ washed the feet of His disciples. The design of this symbolical action was at first concealed, and Peter, grieved at the thought of his Master engaging in so menial a service, enquired with evident surprise, "Lord, dost Thou wash my feet?" Christ replied, "What I do thou knowest not now, but thou shalt know hereafter." For the interpretation of this seemingly inappropriate action the disciple must wait. It is his duty to submit to the Master's will, though it be contrary to his sense of propriety, and a seeming degradation of his Lord.

The reply of our Saviour has a wider application than was primarily apparent. It extends to the whole range of the providential economy, so far as it lies beyond our comprehension. It is not to be supposed that our limited intelligence shall be able to read the divine mind, or interpret all the events it controls. The very opposite is to be expected, and has been realized in every age.

It is true that the relations of sin and suffering may be apparent. As in the cases of Gehazi, Ananias, and Simon Magus, the punishment may tread on the heels of the offense, and although we may be unwilling to admit it to others, we know at what sin the rod points. But in many instances the footsteps of God, as they relate to ourselves, are not known.

We do not propose to argue the doctrine of a divine superintending providence. The perfections of God, the dependent nature of man, and the history of the world join with revelation in establishing this tenet of the Christian faith. And God's providence is not simply general as distinguished from a particular care and control. This view is opposed to reason and revelation alike. The whole must include the parts. And the great Teacher has explicitly declared that the providence of God is so minute that a sparrow falleth not to the ground without His notice, whilst all the hairs of our head are numbered. In the divine mind our distinctions of great and small do not exist. What we regard insignificant may be the pivot on which the destiny of a nation shall turn, or the salvation of souls. The humblest of all God's creatures may be a mightier agent in the execution of the divine purpose than the most conspicuous. "What I do thou knowest not now."

The text suggests two propositions for our meditation : the first, that the dispensations of Providence are often mysterious; and the second, that what is now unknown shall be revealed hereafter.

I. The dispensations of Providence are often mysterious.

1. This is true as respects the Church. The people of God are often led by ways that are dark, and the interpretation must be referred to that Sovereignty which embraces the long reach of ages. There are trials that seem to contravene the divine will. They arrest some work to which God had evidently called His servants, where the need was great, and the door widely opened. They involve defeat, suffering, persecution, death. We had not anticipated this. It is not at all as we would have ordered. Unbelief suggests that God is occupied with other interests and has forgotten ours. We limit the Holy One as to His presence and power.

The apostolic Church encountered the opposition of ungodly men, and the fires of persecution girdled them as they pressed their way westward. In the first three centuries three millions of Christians suffered martyrdom; were stoned, sawn asunder, burnt at the stake, torn in pieces by devouring dogs, drowned in the seas, and wrapped in combustible garments and burned like torches in the night.

Then, coming down to a later period, we are reminded of the massacres in the reign of Charles XII., when in the space of a few days seventy thousand Protestants were slain; and we recall the still greater and more protracted cruelties inflicted by Louis XIV., and the slaughter of the saints in Holland, England, Scotland and Ireland. Truly the Church has passed through fires and deep waters, and hard by the gates of hell, on her way to the present. Why was it thus?

Then we raise another question concerning the progress of the truth. Why have its conquests not been more general? Why has darkness followed in the wake of its advance? Why are great empires still enveloped in moral night? Why is error so prevalent, and opposition so strong, and wickedness so defiant in this age, when, for aught we know, the end is drawing nigh? Why does God permit men to trample on His Sabbaths, mutilate His Gospel,

obey unrighteousness, open floodgates of iniquity, the heavens meanwhile serene, as if vindictiveness slept and God had ceased to restrain the powers of evil? An answer is sent from His changeless throne, "What I do thou knowest not now." "Be still and know that I am God."

2. The providences of God are often obscure as they relate to individual believers.

You may think a certain line of action is in accordance with the divine will, and you enter prayerfully upon it. But suddenly some great barrier is thrown across your path, and conscientious effort ends in humiliating defeat. You devote yourself to some form of Christian service, prompted by sense of duty and love to the Master, and on the threshold of a work full of promise you lie down to die. You form relations in life which promise to be helpful, and your confidence is abused, your expectations disappointed, and your faith in men disappears like a dissolving cloud. Or you have prayerfully labored to bring your children to Christ and fit them for usefulness and honorable life. But they reject your instructions, resist your authority, disregard each appeal of parental love, persist in sin and go down under a cloud of shame. Or bereavements occur at what seems the most inopportune time; they come when you need a strong arm on which to lean; when by reason of other trials a loved presence seemed essential to your life; when the son or daughter of your hope promised surcease of sorrow, and the sepulchre is closed with a stone.

There occur to us many illustrations of providences that are uninterpreted as yet, or were once unknown. The first of our race to depart out of life, entering the mysterious beyond along an untravelled passage, was one who feared God and walked trustfully with Him. And yet he fell by the hand of a murderer, and that murderer his own brother. So soon was the throne of empire enveloped in clouds and darkness. And that early martyr had many successors all along the generations, until Stephen was stoned on the margin of a new dispensation. Still later James and Paul were beheaded, and Peter was crucified. Polycarp suffered martyrdom after a long and exceptionally devoted life, and sleeps to-day under a lone cypress tree. These are representatives of a noble army of martyrs.

Take another class of providences. Luther was confined in the Wartburg, and Latimer in the old London Tower. Harriet Newell departed for the heathen world with the benedictions of weeping parents on her head, and died, ere her voyage was completed, on the Isle of France. Sarah Mateer suddenly fell in the furrow when with joyfulness she anticipated an abundant harvest of souls. Walter Lowrie consecrated the ardor of youth to like service, and, slain by pirates, went to an uneasy grave full many a fathom deep.

There are other experiences darker and sadder than these. The sons of pious Eli defiled themselves, and the news of their sudden taking off proved the father's death. David mourned the filial impiety and wickedness of his son, whose possibilities of honor were great, and in his death, without hope, quite forgot the grave of his own and Bathsheba's child. Why all these

forms of suffering? Why do the people of God, especially beloved, God's in covenant, objects of that gentleness that knows our feeble frame, meet these sore trials on their way home? We may find it difficult at times to reconcile all this with our conceptions of the divine character, especially with that love which is its outstanding feature. Desolate homes, buried hopes, broken hearts, the past wrapped in sadness, the future darkened with clouds—what means all this? Is God on our side or is He against us? If He is our Father, though Abraham be ignorant of us, why this long controversy with us? “Joseph is not and Simeon is not, and ye will take Benjamin away; all these things are against us.” Ah, let the believer look up and he shall see the outstretched hand of vigilant love beyond the rim of the cloud, and he shall hear a kind voice saying, “What I do thou knowest not now, but thou shalt know hereafter.”

Observe, first: Our view of divine providence is necessarily limited. We are finite; God is infinite. We see the little segment of time through which we are passing; God's view embraces eternity. Our thought is engaged with a present event, and we do not see its relations to the future. A given experience seems to terminate on itself, as a completed circle, and to stand motionless, whilst in fact, it is a significant and onward step in history's imperial march. Yonder star by which our Pilgrim Fathers directed their passage across the unknown sea, appears to occupy the very same place in the heavens it occupied then. But there are no fixed stars. The whole universe is moving on, and will never call a halt, and each revolution of our earth is necessary to the measured step and harmony of the whole. So it is in the moral government of God. How little of this we comprehend. We cannot see afar off. And since we do not discern how this experience is to influence another, and to give shape to all the future, we are unable to pass intelligent judgment upon it. “Thou knowest not now.”

We are much like those creations of God which live but a single day. How little they know about the world in which they spend a joyous existence whilst the sun is up, and then die with its setting. If they were endowed with intelligence they would conclude as the night gathered, that there would never be another day. They would know nothing about the great stretch of earth. They would not know how the chilly rains of April were related to the future harvests and the autumn fruits. They would not understand that by exchange of products the cold North enjoys the wealth of the Southland, and the people along the equatorial line realize the benefits of rigorous climes. Just as true is it that man, although the inspiration of God has given him understanding, cannot measure infinity, or traverse existences out of sight. “Thou knowest not now.”

Second: We do not know what is real and desirable good. We often crave what it would be an injury to us to possess. We are troubled by its denial. We long to secure wealth, and perchance we pledge ourselves to a faithful stewardship. But instead of riches we are remanded to poverty. We pray for physical strength, and propose to consecrate it to the Master's

service. But instead of health we live on in protracted invalidism. Unable to do, we simply endure. God has something better in store for us. The thorn in the flesh will yet prove our crown. Imprisonment in the Bedford jail was to John Bunyan a blessing in disguise. It gave to the world the "Pilgrim's Progress," and to the Bedford tinker a name that shall never die. When Luther was hastened across the moat and the iron door of the old castle closed behind him, it seemed that his life-work was done. But on that secluded height in the Thuringian forest he found time to translate the Bible into the tongue of a great empire, and the banner of the cross still floats above the sombre pines, a prophecy of the latter-day glory of the Church. Thus our defeats are our triumphs, and evil is good.

We have already anticipated the second affirmation of our text, that

II. What is now mysterious in providence will eventually be made plain. "Thou shalt know hereafter."

i. The interpretation may be given in the present world. The generation following may receive it, or it may be granted to ourselves. It may be reserved to the world to come. There was much in old Hebrew history that was not understood until the substance displaced the shadow. Typical men were an enigma until the Christ whom they adumbrated came. The offering of Isaac was a mystery until God's only Son hung on the tree. The hiding of the child in the wicker basket by the water's edge was a mystery, but the anxious parents understood it better when Moses entered Pharaoh's palace, or led Israel through the Red Sea. The same is true of later history. The father of Pericles reproved his boy for wasting his time over an old classic, but Athens reaped the fruitage of that study when the Olympian orator thundered from the Bema, and reared magnificent temples. John Newton could not conjecture why, when a wicked sailor boy, a rough hand cut down his hammock and transferred him to another vessel; but when years had passed by he understood it all as he saw Jesus coming across the troubled waters. If men who study the heavens need years of observation to enable them to compute so much as the curve of a planet's orbit, we need not wonder if our intelligence fails to forecast the results of a present joy or sorrow. We do not know the real trend of things. In the expressive language of the Scriptures, we know not how to go to the city. Time will declare it.

Age may interpret the unknown experiences of youth. The old man may see how his early years of permitted sin have magnified the grace of God and made him at last a mighty helper to the outcast and enslaved; or how some domestic sorrow that darkened the morning of life, fitted him to sympathize with other sufferers, and pushed far out the boundary line of useful service. Thus the memory of the sins of youth casts its shadow over all the ministry of the converted Paul, but it made him a more effective preacher of righteousness than he would otherwise have been, and he led the chief of sinners to Christ, who, in their low estate had a feeling of spiritual kinship with Saul of Tarsus. And when he was afterwards persecuted for Christ's sake, defamed,

stoned and imprisoned; when he raised psalms of praise with his feet in the stocks, and repeated the sweet evangel when in Rome a chain bound him and the axe gleamed above him, he wrote to Christians in old Corinth, and did it joyfully: "Whether we be afflicted, it is for your consolation and salvation, which is effectual in the enduring of the same sufferings which we also suffer: or whether we be comforted, it is for your consolation and salvation."

When Jacob saw Joseph's wagons, sent to carry him down to Egypt, and learned of the honor which crowned the son he thought dead, he understood for the first time the dreamings and sufferings of his favorite boy, and unravelled the tangled skein of providence which had confounded the long, sad years. By that early sorrow many souls were saved alive, and the sunset of the patriarch's life was without a cloud. Like illustrations might be gathered from all the years. We have found them in our own day. The blood of martyrs has been the seed of the Church. When Harriet Newell died; when Walter Lowrie was drowned; when the Sepoy insurrection startled the world, a multitude arose to fill the vacancies and increase the ranks of the sacramental host. Thus God makes the wrath of man to praise Him, and our eyes may see it ere we depart.

In like manner our personal experiences of sorrow may be interpreted before we go to the better life. Some severe affliction may almost immediately bear the peaceable fruits of righteousness. It may bring increased fitness for the Master's service, an enlargement of our spiritual vision, or sweeter communion with Christ than ever before enjoyed. We are like some plants which the more they are trodden upon the more they grow. In the deep valley, like that near to Chamouni, we see stars by day. So we may obtain new and precious views of Jesus from the low places of human suffering. Well did the holy Rutherford know this, and he was accustomed to say, "Welcome, welcome, Jesus! in whatsoever way Thou comest, if we can but get a glimpse of Thee."

So, too, conversions may quickly succeed some form of suffering. Often-times the rough knock of God's hammer has opened the gate of Mercy, and the natural death of one member of the home has brought spiritual life to another. "Before I was afflicted I went astray; but now I have kept Thy word." The hereafter often lies on this side eternity. But if not, then

2. The world to come will reveal what is now hidden.

There our range of vision will be greatly enlarged. From the summits of the heavenly estate we shall survey the earthly life, as from a mountain-top the traveller traces all the windings of the way thither. Much that was inexplicable here will be made plain there. The wisdom and goodness of God will appear written on every passage that was painful, and shall shine in every experience that was dark. We shall see how the varied and oft-recurring trials of life were necessary to keep us humble, to mellow our character, to increase our knowledge of ourselves and of Christ, to enlarge our usefulness, to deliver us from threatening evil, and shut us up to the narrow way. Then our misunderstanding of many events shall be corrected. What we

called a *tremolante*, which seemed to sob itself out through the cadences of earth, shall only prove our ears defective, and those very notes prolonged above shall complete the song of the redeemed. Then the wheels of providence that seemed to oppose each other will be viewed in their far-reaching relations, and the perfect harmony of the parts shall awaken grateful praise. Then it shall appear that the trembling descent into the trough of the sea was necessary to the ascent to the crest of the wave, whence we caught our helpful view of the world to come; and that the tacking to the right and to the left, our progress never directly onward, was the only possible means of reaching our desired port. We shall learn how the mystery of providence was necessary to the cultivation of faith, and each experience of trial was fitting us for a higher place in Heaven than we could have attained without it. Then, too, our fears shall, for the first time, be declared wholly groundless, and

“ Out of our stony griefs,
Bethel we'll raise.”

Let us note briefly some of the lessons this subject suggests.

1st. A lesson of trust. We are slow to understand that God intends this life shall be a life of faith. We cannot walk by sight. Much we would like to know is for our good concealed. Only thus can we be shut up to God. And only when we hide ourselves in Him can we put on His beauty, and be prepared for heavenly visions. Faith, and that only, bridges over the gulf that separates worlds, and “all its horrors hides.” Hence that discipline which teaches us to trust; that turns our weakness into strength by constraining us to take hold on omnipotence itself; that puts our hands in the hand that is infinitely wise and knows the way to the kingdom, is a discipline we should welcome. This was the lesson the Psalmist learned, though his poor memory sometimes dropped it by the way. “What time I am afraid I will trust in Thee.” The pious Cowper, tossed with tempest, the equilibrium of his cultured thought often lost, yet sang himself back to faith when troubles came, and patiently waited for the interpretation which only God could give. In the same spirit Toplady wrote that sweet stanza we should often raise in this house of our pilgrimage:

“ When we in darkness walk,
Nor feel the heavenly flame,
Then is the time to trust our Lord,
And rest upon His name.”

The Highlander travelling southward for the first time, when he approached a long, forbidding tunnel, did not leap from the train, but exercised trust in the conveyance that had brought him hither, then calmly plunged into the darkness. Only thus could he enter the historic Edinburg, and join the friend who had gone before him in the home overshadowed by the ancient castle. The trust he exercised along the way brought him to his journey's end. David's hand would not have been bold to contend with the Philistine if he had not trusted God when he fought with the lion and the bear, and slew

them. Beloved, let us accept the discipline by which God would cultivate the grace that opens Heaven, and turns earth's discords to undying harmonies on high.

2d. The second is a lesson of patience.

This is a grace which honors God. It rests upon His word. It trusts His power. It believes that all things are working for good, and that Heaven will more than requite him for all the trials on the way. The connection of the Apostle is suggestive when he couples "rejoicing in hope" with "patience in tribulation." Hope anticipates the sorrowless life, the ever-abounding joy, and Patience says, "I will quietly wait the breaking of the eternal day." So far from seeking to break open its prison doors, Patience watches at the window for the Christ to pass by, assured that He will give release at the appointed time, and wing the soul for its heavenward flight. Surely with such an issue out of all our troubles we should bear them patiently through "the little while" that they stay, then exchange the "light affliction which is but for a moment" for the "far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory." May God help each of us to patiently wait, and no matter what the cross, to say,

" I will bear it
With all the tender suffrance of a friend,
As calmly as the wounded patient bears
The artist's hand that ministers his cure."

3d. Finally, a lesson of thankfulness.

There never comes an hour to the believer, though every earthly light goes out, that he has not reason for thanksgiving. He should sing songs in prison, and join his hallelujahs with the wailings of the storm. He should be thankful that tribulation worketh patience, and patience experience, and experience hope; that the chisel which is often upon him is fitting him to be a pillar in God's temple; that the weariness by the way is preparing him for a richer enjoyment of the rest that remaineth; that the path of suffering is the path the Saviour trod, and that, with the sweet privilege of putting his feet where Christ's have been, he is going to the Heaven where the King has established His throne, and waits for his coming.

Dearly beloved let us trust the Heavenly Friend, and with our hands in the Father's hand, whatever the mystery of life, and the painfulness of the road, may we patiently wait the revelations of the life to come; the life just beyond the western hills—assured that Christ will keep His royal word: "Thou shalt know hereafter."

" God is His own interpreter
And He will make it plain,"

PROVIDENCE.—Providence is a wind which never whirls about. The breath of God's Spirit and the strength of God's purpose are steadily wafting our world and all the worlds in one mighty convoy towards God's appointed haven in the distant future.—*Dr. J. Hamilton.*