

THE BELIEVER'S SECURITY AND CONFIDENCE.

by

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'Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.'—Ps. xxiii. 6.

THESE words contain a very strong expression of David's confidence in the grace and loving-kindness of God, and of his firm belief of his own interest in the everlasting state of happiness which God has prepared for His people. They call our attention very forcibly to the great doctrine of God's special providence over the affairs of men, and to the leading objects to the accomplishment of which that providence is directed.

The subject of Providence is one of great interest and importance among the doctrines of religion. It is one which ought to be viewed in connection with, and ought to derive illustration from, every event of our life. It is a subject on which it is hardly possible for any man who thinks at all, not to have some opinion or other; and from the very extensive practical application which the subject admits of, it is of great importance that our opinions upon it should be correct. Our text, however, does not lead us to consider directly the Nature and Evidences of a Special Providence; that is, it does not lead us to investigate the nature, character and extent of that superintendence—that influence and control—which God exercises over the affairs of men. It takes for granted the doctrine of God's Special Providence, and calls our attention only to the results which God in His providence designs to produce, and does actually effect, with reference especially to different persons or classes of persons.

But, independently altogether of the fact that David here speaks under the inspiration of the Spirit of Truth, in discoursing from these words we shall attempt, first, to explain and illustrate the Nature and Import of the statement which the text contains, and then consider in what Circumstances, and by what Persons, the statement may be fairly and justifiably made.

I. In the text, David expresses his steady confidence that all the events and circumstances of his life were proofs and displays of 'God's goodness and mercy' towards him; that they were intended and calculated to promote his happiness and welfare, and especially to lead to the glorious consummation of 'his living in the house of the Lord for ever;' and that consequently they were all—even the most severe and distressing—subjects not of discontent and repining, but of thankfulness and gratitude.

Some, on taking a view of the many evils and trials—of the griefs and the sufferings—of the anguish and the remorse—to which we are subject, may be disposed to doubt or to deny the truth of such a statement with regard to the life and history of any man upon earth; and when they survey the history and sufferings of David, and consider the severe trials which he was occasionally called to undergo, down almost to the end of his life, they may be disposed to admit the truth of the statement only under many limitations; or, if it be taken literally, to look upon it as groundless and presumptuous boasting. We are afraid that persons who are disposed to entertain such a sentiment are speaking from their own experience, and that they do not belong to that class of persons who, and who alone—as we propose afterwards to show—are entitled to use the language which David here employs. Such an opinion or suspicion as these persons entertain—and we are convinced there are not a few who have a feeling of this sort—must be founded either upon erroneous and defective views of the nature of God’s special providence, or on ignorance and misapprehension of the objects to which that providence is directed.

But this is a subject so closely connected with some of those high and mysterious inquiries, which, from their difficulty and liability to abuse, would require—if stated at all—to be stated at much greater length and with much greater caution and precision than our limits at present will permit, that it is better to avoid entering upon a formal discussion of the point; and it will be sufficient to remark in general, that God’s Special Providence implies, that He exercises a superintendence, a controlling influence, over all the actions of all His creatures; that all these actions are, in a certain sense and to a certain extent, determined by Him as being the necessary effects of man’s constitution, combined with the circumstances and situation in which he is placed: but which God has formed, appointed, and arranged; and that, therefore, without entering into the difficult and abstract inquiries as to God’s Providence concerning sinful actions, we may assert in general, that in some sense, the course of events, the series of actions, in the world is substantially what God would have it to be.

Now, if God exercises such a Special Providence over the affairs of the children of men as to contribute in some measure to the rendering of human actions what they actually are, this must be with a view to some object which He intends to effect. It is evident that the scheme of providence over the affairs of this world is but a system of means designed to accomplish an ulterior object or end. The means must have been adapted to the end; and therefore the exercise of a special providence with regard to the actions of individuals implies that a certain object is intended to be accomplished with reference to those individuals. If, therefore, there be any individual in the world, with reference to whom God’s ultimate object is to promote his happiness, then it will follow from what has been proved, that it is true of that individual, that ‘goodness and mercy will follow him all the days of his life,’ and that all the events of his life will tend directly or indirectly to promote his happiness and welfare.

We see, therefore, that there is very far from being anything like improbability in the statement of the text, but that, on the contrary, the general principle involved in it is a necessary consequence of God having decreed the ultimate happiness of any individual, and it is true in fact of all those whose happiness has been so deemed. But this position will receive additional confirmation and illustration from an examination of the Means themselves, in which we will find that those events in the life of any individual which might seem to be the result of other attributes of God than 'goodness and mercy,' are in their own nature, as means, fitted to lead to the individual's happiness. All men are in this life subject to trials and privations, to sins and transgressions. Now it is not asserted that these Physical and Moral evils are in their own nature necessary to the ultimate happiness of Moral agents; nor is it meant that they are proper or reasonable objects of desire, but simply that, in the present condition of things, these events, when they do occur, are fitted in their own nature as means, and ought to be applied, to the promotion of the happiness of those whom they befall.

Before we proceed to illustrate the truth of this assertion, it will be necessary to settle what Happiness consists in; or at least what is the test of its existence and degree. And this may easily be done: for we know that, in the constitution of things, the decree of God has established an immutable connection between happiness and holiness; that the happiness of every intelligent moral agent is in exact proportion to his holiness, and that consequently the degree of holiness furnishes a certain test of the degree of happiness. The happiness may to some not appear so palpably as the holiness, nor may it follow from the holiness as an immediate consequence,—that is, immediate in point of time; but we are assured from the eternal and immutable Constitution of the moral universe, that every increase in Holiness will, in the ultimate result of things, be followed by an increase in Happiness, and that every decay in Holiness will be followed by a proportionate diminution of Happiness.

It will be quite sufficient, then, if we can show, in the first place, how the trials and calamities of life, and the occasional sins and transgressions into which men fall, are calculated to increase their holiness. Man's nature is in itself most unholy, entirely alienated from God, and devoted to sense and sin. There cannot be a more striking proof of the ungodliness of man's nature, and of his aversion to spiritual things, than the fact that many are as little affected or influenced by the most certain and important religious truths, to the reality of which they assent, as if they did not believe them at all. There are no truths more universally admitted than the existence and moral government of God, the certainty of death and of a future state of rewards and punishments; yet how many do we see around us, whose whole conduct, sentiments, and character scarcely afford one single exhibition or circumstance from which it could be collected or discovered that they really believed these truths! The serious and important nature of the truths themselves has failed to rouse them to anything like a realization to their own minds of the objects which these truths bring before them. How, then, are they to be roused from this lethargy, and really impressed with these truths? We know that this is never

effected save by a Divine agency—by the power of the Holy Ghost. But what are the Circumstances which are fitted in their own nature, as means, to produce this effect? Nothing surely can be better fitted for rousing the attention of men to these great and fundamental truths than Calamities and Misfortunes. These trials, breaking in upon the ordinary tenor of our thoughts and enjoyments, have the strongest natural tendency to withdraw our desires from worldly cares, and to fix them upon a more enduring substance. They call to us, as with a voice of thunder, that we are sinful creatures, that we are entirely dependent upon a supreme and absolute power for all our happiness and all our comforts; that ‘there is indeed a God that judgeth in the earth.’ These things the natural man is apt to forget or to overlook while the tenor of his life and fortunes flows on in an uninterrupted and prosperous channel, but ‘in the day of adversity he is brought to consider.’ And as the Misfortunes and Calamities of life are well fitted to bring home forcibly to the mind the idea of a supreme Moral Governor of the world, and of the unsatisfactory and transitory nature of all earthly enjoyments, so Disease and Sickness are equally well fitted to impress a man forcibly with the very trite but oft-neglected truth, that he must die, and that he knows not how soon; ‘that it is not only appointed to all men once to die, but that after death cometh judgment.’ There is nothing which is more fitted to show a man his own weakness and dependence upon a higher power, and to lead him seriously to reflect upon his future prospects, than to find himself, a few short hours after he had been discharging all his duties in health and rigour, and exercising without restraint or control all the powers both of his body and of his mind, stretched upon a bed of sickness, racked it may be with pain, and as unable to do anything for his own comfort and relief as a new-born infant. In such circumstances he must feel ‘that it is not in man that walketh to direct his steps,’ and he can hardly fail to realize to his mind the consideration ‘that this night his soul may be required of him.’

We do not say that the feelings which we have described as the natural and necessary result of misfortune and disease are religion. They are not in themselves religion, and they may disappear with the circumstances that called them forth; but they are well fitted as Means to produce religious feelings: they are well calculated to rouse men from the lethargy in which their minds are steeped, even with regard to the truths which constitute the very foundation of religion. They are well fitted to make the truths of the Existence and Moral Government of God and a Future state of rewards and punishments really effective truths to draw them from the obscurity of the background where they commonly lie disregarded and forgotten—and to bring them to bear upon the mind as real motives to action, and practical principles of character. Religious feeling can only be produced by religious truths; but the feelings which misfortunes and sickness excite are well fitted for enabling religious truths to attain their proper and legitimate influence upon the mind.

Not only, however, are Misfortunes and Diseases fitted in their own nature as means to lead men to a more serious impression of the great doctrines of religion, to remove the lethargy in which they are sunk with regard to these truths; but we

know in fact, both from Scripture and from experience, that they are often actually employed by the Spirit of God, as the means of leading to serious and impressive views of divine things. We are repeatedly taught in Scripture that God sends misfortune and calamities upon men with the same view, and for the same object, as a kind but also wise father chastises the children of his love—for their own improvement and welfare. David was not the only one who had good grounds, on reviewing his life, for declaring ‘that it was good for him that he had been afflicted.’ There have been many, in every age of the world, who can and who do trace their first serious impression of divine truths to some event or circumstance in their history which was a source of great pain to them, and which they regarded at the time as a great misery, but for which they have often since thanked God from the bottom of their heart. There are many who, with feelings of deep humility and gratitude, are ready to acknowledge that they never had any real practical belief, or at least any serious and adequate impression of the Existence and Moral Government of God, until ‘the day of adversity made them consider; until they were stripped of their dearest possessions, and wounded in their tenderest affections, and were thus made practically to feel that this world contained nothing which could confer permanent enjoyment. There are many who will confess, that notwithstanding the unquestioned certainty of the truth itself, and the many striking illustrations of it which they must have witnessed around them, they never fully realized to their own mind the simple and yet fearful truth that they must die, and must stand at God’s judgment-seat, until some one who was dear to them as their own soul, with whom they were closely connected or united by the ties of affection, has been, notwithstanding all the exertions of human power and human skill; suddenly summoned to give in his account, leaving at the same time behind him the conviction that the call, though inevitable, was one which he was ill prepared to obey; or until they themselves, by the violence of disease, were to all human appearance brought to the gates of death and to the borders of eternity—until they were brought face to face, as it were, with ‘the King of terrors,’ and forced really to contemplate death and judgment as not only certain, but as near and approaching events.

It is indeed true that misfortunes and disease have been brought to bear upon many men without effect, without leading permanently to any sanctifying or practical purpose, or to the contemplation of the objects of an unseen world; that there have been many who, after a transient, though it may have been violent, impression has passed away, have been just as immersed in worldliness and sin as before, and as regardless of the great doctrines of religion as if they did not believe them in any sense; who, in short, have ‘returned like the dog to his vomit, or the sow that was washed to her wallowing in the mire.’ But the fact that these men have had such powerful influences brought to bear upon them, in order to lead them to a serious impression of divine truths, only aggravates their condemnation; while the fact that these influences have often proved unsuccessful, does not at all show either that misfortunes and calamities are not in their own nature fitted, as means or steps, for leading men to serious impressions of divine things, or that

they are not actually intended and made use of by the Spirit of God for that purpose.

Hitherto we have spoken only of the natural tendency of Physical Evils in leading to Holiness, and consequently to Happiness; but we must now briefly show that even Moral Evils or sins may be made instrumental in the promotion of the same great objects. Of course we do not mean in any measure to palliate or excuse Moral offences on the ground of the good account to which they may be turned; for this would be to act on the principle of 'the end sanctifying the means,'—a principle which, on the authority of the apostle, we are entitled to call 'damnable.' We wish merely to state and illustrate the fact, that when a man, in consequence of the inherent corruption and depravity of his nature, and the force of temptation, has actually committed a sinful action, that action may very possibly be made instrumental in improving his moral character, and in leading him both to more correct views, and to more salutary impressions of divine things.

The principle or manner in which a Moral offence may be made instrumental in the improvement of the character, depends on the moral state and character of the particular individual. We must therefore be permitted here to take for granted what we may probably afterwards illustrate, that there are, in fact, just two Moral characters in the world; that, amid the endless diversity of aspects which the Moral character of different men assumes, all the individuals of the human race possess, in God's sight, one or other of two different Moral characters, essentially distinguished from each other in their fundamental characteristic principles.

The two classes who are possessed of these two fundamentally different characters are the Converted and the Unconverted, the Regenerate and the Unregenerate; or, to use a distinction which in its proper sense is identical with these, the Christian and the Unbeliever. The lines of demarcation between these classes is, in professedly Christian countries, extremely apt to be overlooked, or to be very much misplaced; but it is not on that account the less real or the less definite.

Now, with regard to the useful application that may be made of moral offences by these different classes of persons, it may be remarked, in the first place, that a great proportion of the Physical Evils which befall a man—his misfortunes and diseases—are traceable directly to his Moral Offences; and thus Moral offences have indirectly the good effect which it has been shown may be made to result from Physical evils.

But, in the second place, with regard to the directly favourable use that may be made of them, it may be observed that man, in his unconverted state, is generally insensible in a great measure to the corruption and depravity of his character; and if he is possessed of a considerable degree of worldly respectability, and free from gross moral offences, he is very apt to delude himself into the notion that he has done all that is incumbent upon him,—that the law of God has no further demands upon him. He has no adequate conception of the purity and spirituality and extent

of the requirements of the divine Law; his Conscience is at rest, and troubles him with no ‘compunctious visiting.’ Now it is morally impossible that such a man can ever attain to correct views of divine truth unless he be brought to see his own character in all its sinfulness of principle and practice. This, indeed, can only be done by the Holy Spirit, whose office it is ‘to convince us of sin.’ But the Holy Spirit works by Means—naturally fitted as means—to produce the effects intended. And if a man whose ordinary conduct is respectable has, through the force of hidden corruption, been led into any open and unquestionable violation of morality, it may, by the blessing of God, be made the means of producing a useful and salutary result, by rousing into action natural Conscience, which formerly slumbered; by inspiring suspicion and alarm with regard to the goodness of his Character, in which formerly he securely trusted; and by leading him to the serious conviction—which is commonly the first step towards Conversion—that, in place of being so excellent a character as he had fancied himself, he is in God’s sight ‘poor, and wretched, and miserable, and blind, and naked.’ When a man is really convinced that in one instance he has been guilty of an unquestionable violation of God’s Law, he may naturally be led to suspect that he has been guilty of other violations of the Law, and may be induced to examine accurately into the true nature and character of its requisitions.

This seems to be substantially what is implied in the description which Paul gives us of his own experience in regard to the operation of the Law (Rom. vii. 9): ‘For I was alive without the law once,’ that is, having no sense of the spirituality and extent of the requirements of the divine Law: he lived once in perfect security and self-satisfaction, and entertained no doubt of the excellency of his own character; but ‘when the commandment came, sin revived, and I died;’ that is, when he came to feel the true spiritual import of the commandment, when it was brought home with convincing force to his conscience, he felt that he was a sinner, and he became subject to fears and alarms, which terminated, however, in that peace of conscience and joy in the Holy Ghost which are peculiar to true Christians.

So much for the good use to which even Moral transgressions may be turned, and which they are fitted in their own nature to serve, in the case of Unregenerate men. But with regard to the other class of persons into which Men may be divided—namely, true Christians, or those ‘who have been turned from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to the living God,’—the good moral effect which the remains of inherent corruption, or it may be, occasional transgression, are fitted to produce, and do frequently by God’s blessing actually produce, cannot be better or more safely stated, than in the words of our Confession of Faith, c. v. sec. 5: ‘The most wise, righteous, and gracious God doth sometimes leave for a season His own children to manifold temptation and the corruption of their own hearts, to chastise them for their former sins, or to discover unto them the hidden strength of corruption, and the deceitfulness of their hearts, that they may be humbled, and to raise them to a more close and constant dependence for their support upon Himself, and to make them more watchful against all future occasions of sin, and for serving other just and holy ends.’

We must again repeat, that in thus explaining the good account to which Moral transgressions, whenever committed, may be turned, the good results which they are naturally fitted as means to produce, we must not be at all understood as in any way palliating or excusing sin. The good that may be deduced from moral evils cannot possibly operate by a reflex process upon the action: that must always stand and be judged of upon its own independent ground, as a violation of the eternal Law of rectitude, and can derive nothing whatever of apology from anything that may subsequently result from it, whether in the way of natural consequence, or as an instrument in the hand of the Spirit of God, of impressing or influencing the mind of man. It is no justification or palliation of ‘the wrath of man,’ that God makes it to ‘praise Him.’ It was no palliation of the crime of the sons of Jacob in selling their brother Joseph into Egypt, that it was true, according to Joseph’s apologetic statement, ‘that God had sent him before them to preserve their life.’ It was no apology for Peter’s denying his Master, that his denial was made the means of making him more cautious and humble, and less self sufficient than before. Neither is it any apology for a sin, nor will it exempt it from deserved punishment, that it has been made the means of improving the moral state and character, and increasing the Holiness, of the individual who committed it.

We have thus attempted to prove and illustrate the position implied in the statement of our text,—namely, that all the events which befall men in this life, even the most severe and distressing, are not only fitted in their own nature as means to produce, but that they are, not infrequently, in actual fact made instrumental in producing a reformation in their moral character, and an increase of their holiness, and consequently of their ultimate happiness, and in making them meet for ‘the inheritance of the saints in light.’ We need not therefore wonder at the declaration which David here makes, or be disposed to think unfavourably of the composure with which he expressed his conviction, that ‘goodness and mercy would follow him all the days of his life, and that he would dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.’

II. We come now, in the second place, to consider in what circumstances or by what Persons this statement may be properly made, this conviction may be reasonably entertained.

Nothing is more common than to hear men, who never seem to think of God’s Providence in reference to themselves upon any other occasion, when overtaken by misfortunes and calamities, talk—although, to be sure, in a somewhat vague and indefinite sort of way—of submitting to God’s dispensation with resignation, because He does everything for the best. Now this statement is very true; but it is nothing at all to the purpose, unless they can indeed realize it, and apply it to themselves specifically. God’s doing everything for the best most assuredly does not imply that He does what will certainly, and as a matter of course, be best for each individual of the human race. It has indeed been shown, that both Physical and Moral evils have a natural tendency to produce reformation of moral charac-

ter, and increase in holiness; that therefore they may be, and in fact sometimes are, applied to this purpose; but it by no means follows that this is the only tendency which they possess, or that this tendency will take effect as a matter of course by its intrinsic force, without being directed to the object in question.

While Experience and History furnish not a few examples of men whose misfortunes and calamities have led them to give heed to 'the things that belong to their peace,' and which produced a thorough reformation of character, they furnish perhaps a still greater number of cases where these influences have been brought to bear upon the minds of individuals in no ordinary degree, without producing any permanently beneficial effect. It is therefore not true in fact of every individual, that 'goodness and mercy follow him all the days of his life;' but we are afraid that many apply to themselves the consolation and comfort which David's persuasion is fitted to convey, who have no right whatever to make of it any such application.

No man can have any ground to expect that 'goodness and mercy will follow him all the days of his life, and that he will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever,' except in virtue of a promise or declaration of God addressed to him either as an individual or as a member of a class. Now, in the present day, God makes no such promises to men individually; neither has He made any such promise or declaration to the Human Race in general. It is a fearful doctrine, but clearly stated in Scripture with regard to many individuals of the human race, that, so far from 'Goodness and Mercy following them all the days of their life,' everything that He gives them seems only the more to estrange them from God and goodness; so that, at the termination of their mortal career, it is to be observed, they are, in respect of moral and religious character, proper subjects for the righteous sentence which will be pronounced against them: 'Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels.' This is just a statement of a fact; and if such persons believe that the dispensations of God's Providence with reference to them are intended to cause 'goodness and mercy to follow them all the days of their life,' or that they will in fact do so, they are labouring under a fatal delusion. It is indeed true that these dispensations, even the most affecting, retain in reference to all men the tendency of which we have shown them to be possessed; and therefore there is an imperative obligation upon all to whom they are sent, to employ them for their own Moral improvement, and for deepening their impressions of divine things; and a consequent aggravation of guilt is incurred by their continuing obstinate and regardless even under the influence of means the best fitted in their own nature to melt and impress them.

But though God never promises in Scripture that 'goodness and mercy will follow all men all the days of their life,' and though it is certain in fact from clear Scripture doctrine that there are not a few of whom this statement is not true, and who have therefore no right to use the language of David, yet it is equally certain that God does make promises to this effect to a certain Class of persons, with a peculiar discriminating character. It is said in Scripture, that 'God will withhold no

good thing from them that love Him;’ ‘that all things work together for good to them that love God, and are the called according to His purpose.’ Now in these passages the promise is positively limited,—limited to persons of a certain peculiar Character, and in a certain special State,—namely, those ‘who love God,’ and are ‘the called according to His purpose;’ and there is no ground whatever from Scripture, or from any information derived from experience, for believing the promise to be fulfilled in any but those who are possessed of this discriminating property.

No one, therefore, has any right to use the language of David in our text, ‘that goodness and mercy will follow him all the days of his life, and that he will dwell in the house of the Lord,’ unless he has previously convinced himself, upon good and sufficient evidence, that he belongs to that Class of persons. who are discriminated by the very essential circumstance of their ‘loving God.’ It is clearly implied indeed in the text, that ‘goodness and mercy following us all the days of our life, and our living in the house of the Lord for ever; are parts of one great economy, and that both are equally applicable to, and equally discriminative of, a certain Class of persons. ‘Goodness and mercy following us all the days of our life,’ is the means—the natural and indeed necessary result and termination of which is just our ‘dwelling in the house of the Lord for ever.’ A man, therefore, has just as good a reason for believing, and indeed the very same reason, ‘that he will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever,’ as he has for believing’ that goodness and mercy will follow him all the days of his life;’ and when a man, on reviewing his life, has reason to think that the general effect and result of all the different dispensations of God’s Providence towards him has been to promote his progress in holiness and love to God, he may safely delight himself with the prospect of ‘dwelling in the house of the Lord for ever.’ Of whomsoever it is true ‘that goodness and mercy will follow him all the days of his life,’ it is also true that ‘he will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever;’ and of whomsoever it is true that ‘he will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever; it is also true that ‘goodness and mercy will follow him all the days of his life.’

Before, then, any person is entitled to assert, with a reference to his own afflictions, that God does everything for the best, and to apply this as a ground of comfort and consolation to himself, he must not only love God, but know and be convinced that God loves him. Love to God, indeed, embraces, in Scripture language, the whole of what it is incumbent upon us to feel in reference to Him, the whole duty we owe to Him. Love to God, therefore, is that with which all our prospects, not only of future, but even of temporal happiness, are connected—on which, in a certain sense, it depends. It is, therefore, a matter of most imperative obligation upon every one to whom the Scriptures are addressed, to consider with the utmost intensity of mind, and the utmost seriousness of thought, and with the help of all the information he possesses upon the subject, whether or not he loves God,—whether or not he belongs to that class of persons with reference to whom the promises are made,—and whether, consequently, he is entitled to derive encouragement and consolation from the declaration, that ‘all things work together for

good to them that love God; and warranted to use the language of David, ‘Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.’

It is really astonishing to see how very seldom, in a professing Christian country, this question is seriously entertained, and on what slight and trivial grounds men are contented to take it for granted that all is safe with them. No one loves God but a true Christian, because nothing will produce love to God but the belief of the Gospel; and of course it is the belief of the Gospel that makes a man a Christian. Faith and love, therefore, mutually imply each other, because they stand related to each other as cause and effect. No man loves God but a Christian, that is, a converted and regenerate man; and every Christian, in the proper sense of the word, loves God. But it is greatly to be feared that, in a professedly Christian country, there are many who, without even examining the subject with an attention and seriousness proportioned to its importance, believe upon very insufficient grounds that they are good Christians, and entitled to all the privileges and promises of the Gospel, and who have no hesitation in applying to themselves the promise of ‘all things working together for their good,’ though probably they have no very distinct conception of what this properly means, and still less of how or in what way it is to be accomplished.

We would seriously exhort such persons to ‘examine themselves whether they be in the faith,’ to use their utmost endeavours to ascertain from Scripture what it is that constitutes a Christian, and what are the marks and evidences of love to God, and to compare, with the utmost seriousness and impartiality, their own character and conduct with Christian principles and Christian conduct, as delineated in the Word of God. We would exhort them, as they regard their own soul’s salvation, not rashly to believe that they are Christians, because they have been baptized into a Christian church, profess the Christian religion, and bear a respectable character in society. We would exhort them to give neither sleep to their eyes, nor slumber to their eyelids, until they have come to a clear and satisfactory judgment with regard to their character and state in God’s sight—until they have really good reason to think that ‘they have believed in the Lord Jesus Christ to the saving of their souls;’ ‘that they love Him who first loved them;’ and that ‘the love of Christ now habitually constrains them to live no longer unto themselves, but unto Him that died for them and rose again.’

If they have indeed good grounds, on a comparison of Scripture statements with their own character, for believing that they have been brought to a belief of ‘the truth as it is in Jesus,’ ‘that they love God, who first loved them,’—they are not only entitled, but bound, to apply to themselves the promises of God in Scripture, that He ‘will withhold no good thing from them,’—and ‘that all things will work together for their good,’—that ‘goodness and mercy will follow them all the days of their life, and that they will dwell in the house of the Lord.’

It is expressly asserted in Scripture, that ‘whosoever believes in Christ shall be saved.’ If, therefore, any man who, after a due examination of the case, is convinced, upon scriptural principles, that he believes in Christ, does not believe that he ‘will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever; and that, as a preparation for this consummation, ‘goodness and mercy will follow him all the days of his life,’ he disbelieves the promises of Jehovah, ‘and makes God a liar.’

Every true Christian is warranted and required to believe that every dispensation that befalls him, however severe and distressing it may be, and even though it may be deserved punishment for sin, is intended to promote his best interests, his everlasting welfare, and will as certainly contribute to that end as every decree of God is followed by its proper accomplishment. They ought, then, to endeavour by all scriptural means to strengthen their belief in the promise, not only as a most abundant source of joy and consolation, but as the most effectual means of enabling them to derive from all God’s dispensations the full measure of advantage of growth in grace, increase in holiness, and progressive meetness for heaven, which it is calculated and intended to produce.

It may be thought, perhaps, that there is little occasion for exhorting men to entertain such an opinion, since they are sufficiently apt to think that they are the special favourites of Heaven, even when they have no ground to think so. And this is true in one sense, but not in a sense at all inconsistent with the propriety of the preceding exhortation. We have shown that many entertain such obscure and erroneous views with regard to God’s special providence, and the object which it is intended to accomplish, as to suppose that all equally are entitled to draw consolation from the consideration of the principle that God does everything for the best; but the opinion of such persons on the subject is generally only a very vague and indefinite notion, floating in their heads, and hardly producing any real practical effect. For although there are men who, from defective and erroneous views of the nature and effects of God’s special providence, or from fanatical principles, apply to themselves all the promise made in Scripture to Believers, upon very untenable grounds, still we hold it to be a certain and an important truth, that true Christians—those who are quite entitled to apply to themselves all the promises of the gospel—have frequently less faith, less confidence in the truth of these promises: and especially in the one to which our text bears a reference, than they ought to have, and in that way deprive themselves not only of a large portion of the direct joy and consolation which it was their privilege to have possessed, but retard and limit very much the growth of their graces, their progressive conformity to God’s image, and ‘their meetness for the inheritance of the saints in light.’

That this is not at all an improbable thing among Christians, is strongly implied in a statement in the Epistle to the Hebrews; for hear the very striking and emphatic language of the apostle: ‘God, willing more abundantly to show to the heirs of the promise the immutability of His counsel, confirmed it by an oath, that by two immutable things, in which it was impossible for God to lie, we might have strong consolation who have fled for refuge to the hope set before us in the Gospel,’—a

statement which clearly evinces, if I may use the language, God's apprehension that even the heirs of promise would be slow of heart to believe the promises on which their own everlasting consolation was to be founded; and because He could swear by no greater, He swore by Himself, in order that the heirs of promise might have strong consolation.

But not only are all true Christians entitled to believe that every dispensation which befalls them is intended to promote their happiness, and will assuredly have that effect; they are also entitled and warranted to view the subject in a certain peculiar aspect, which, though it does not alter the substantial nature of the truth on which their encouragement and consolation are founded, yet presents it to their mind in the light best fitted for producing encouragement and consolation in the very highest degree. Christians are warranted to consider all the circumstances of their lot as arranged and appointed by Jesus Christ, their living Head and Elder Brother: they know and believe that that 'same Jesus, who once died for their sins, and rose again for their justification,' is now 'exalted at God's right hand;' that He is seated upon the throne of the universe, 'King of kings, Lord of lords;' that He has been made 'Head over all things for His church;' that 'all power has been committed to Him in heaven and earth;' and that He is constantly employed in directing and controlling every event, for the purpose of promoting the same great object for which He became Incarnate, and Suffered, and Died,—namely, the conversion, sanctification, and everlasting salvation of all those whom 'the Father has given Him.' How much more interesting and impressive is the truth of 'all things working together for good to them who love God' rendered to the contemplation of the Christian, when he views all the dispensations of providence as proceeding immediately from Him who has already done and suffered so much for the salvation of His people, and who even now entertains the same feeling and promotes the same objects, with reference to them, as He did while He tabernacled upon earth,—affording the most convincing demonstration ever given of pure and disinterested and unrequitable affection,—and even dying that we might live! Surely, if those who have fled for refuge to the hope set before them in the Gospel have not strong consolation and good hope through grace, it is merely owing to their own evil heart of unbelief.