

Chapter V.

Of Providence

Section I.—God, the great Creator of all things, doth uphold, direct, dispose, and govern all creatures, actions, and things, from the greatest even to the least, by his most wise and holy providence, according to his infallible foreknowledge, and the free and immutable counsel of his own will, to the praise of the glory of his wisdom, power, justice, goodness, and mercy.

Exposition

In opposition to Fatalists and others, who maintain that, in the original constitution of the universe, God gave to the material creation physical, and to the intelligent creation moral laws, by which they are sustained and governed, independently of his continued influence; this section teaches that there is a providence, by which God, the great Creator of all things, upholds and governs them all; and that this providence extends to all creatures, actions, and things, from the greatest even to the least.

1. That there is a providence may be inferred from the nature and perfections of God; from the dependent nature of the creatures; from the continued order and harmony visible in all parts of the universe; from the remarkable judgments that have been inflicted on wicked men, and the signal deliverances that have been granted to the Church and people of God; and from the prediction of future events, and their exact fulfilment. In the Bible, the providence of God is everywhere asserted. "His kingdom ruleth over all," and he "worketh all things after the counsel of his own will."—Ps. ciii. 19; Eph. i. 11.

Two things are included in the notion of providence,—the preservation and the government of all things. God preserves all things by continuing or upholding them in existence. The Scripture explicitly asserts, that "he upholds all things by the word of his power," and that "by him all things consist."—Heb. i. 3; Col. i. 17. He preserves the different species of creatures, and sustains the several creatures in their individual beings; hence he is called "the Preserver of man and beast."—Job. vii. 20; Ps. xxxvi. 6. God governs all things by directing and disposing them to the end for which he designed them. "Our God is in the heavens, he hath done whatsoever he pleased."—Ps. cxv. 3. "He doeth according to his will in the army of heaven, and among the inhabitants of the earth: and none can stay his hand, or say unto him, What doest thou?"—Dan. iv. 36. The government of God may be considered in a twofold view,—natural and moral. This twofold view of his government arises from the two general classes of creatures which are the objects of it. The irrational

and inanimate creatures are the subjects of his natural government. The rational part of the creation, or those creatures who are the fit subjects of moral law, as angels and men, are the subjects of his moral government.

2. The providence of God extends to all creatures, actions, and things, from the greatest even to the least. "Some," says Dr Dick, "maintain only a general providence, which consists in upholding certain general laws, and exclaim against the idea of a particular providence, which takes a concern in individuals and their affairs. It is strange that the latter opinion should be adopted by any person who professes to bow to the authority of Scripture, - which declares that a sparrow does not fall to the ground without the knowledge of our heavenly Father, and that the hairs of our head are all numbered,—or by any man who has calmly listened to the dictates of reason. If God has certain designs to accomplish with respect to, or by means of, his intelligent creatures, I should wish to know how his intention can be fulfilled without particular attention to their circumstances, their movements, and all the events of their life? How can a whole be taken care of without taking care of its parts; or a species be preserved if the individuals are neglected?"

The providence of God extends to the inanimate creation. He who fixed the laws of nature, still continues or suspends their operation according to his pleasure; they are dependent on his continued influence, and subject to his control; and to assert the contrary would be to assign to the laws of nature that independence which belongs to God alone.—Ps. cxix. 91, civ. 14; Job xxxviii. 31-38. The providence of God likewise reaches to the whole animal creation. "The beasts of the forest are his, and the cattle upon a thousand hills." They are all his creatures, and the subjects of his providence.—Ps. civ. 27, 28. Angels, too, are the subjects of God's providence. The good angels are ever ready to obey his will, and are employed by him in ministering, in various ways, to the saints on earth.—Heb. i. 14. The evil angels are subject to his control, and can do no mischief without his permission.—Job. i. 12. The providence of God also extends to all human affairs; the affairs of nations are under his guidance and control. "He increaseth the nations, and destroyeth them: he enlargeth the nations, and straiteneth them again. He leadeth princes away spoiled, and overthroweth the mighty."—Job xii. 19, 23. This the humbled monarch of Babylon was taught by painful experience, and was constrained to acknowledge "that the Most High ruleth in the kingdom of men, and giveth it to whomsoever he will."—Dan. iv. 25. The providence of God is also to be recognised in the affairs of families. "God setteth the solitary in families,"—"he setteth the poor on high from affliction, and maketh him families like a flock; again they are minished and brought low, through oppression, affliction, and sorrow."—Ps. lxxviii. 6, cvii. 39, 41. The providence of God likewise extends to individuals, and to their minutest concerns. The birth of each individual, the length of his days, and all the events of his life, are regulated and superintended by the most wise and holy providence of God.—Acts xvii. 28; Job xiv. 5.

“As the doctrine of a particular providence is agreeable both to Scripture and to reason, so it is recommended by its obvious tendency to promote the piety and the consolation of mankind. To a God who governed the world solely by general laws, we might have looked up with reverence, but not with the confidence, and gratitude, and hope, which arise from the belief that he superintends its minutest affairs. The thought that he ‘compasses our paths and is acquainted with all our ways;’ that he watches our steps, and orders all the events in our lot; guides and protects us, and supplies our wants, as it were, with his own hand; this thought awakens a train of sentiments and feelings highly favourable to devotion, and sheds a cheering light upon the path of life. We consider him as our Guardian and our Father; and, reposing upon his care, we are assured that, if we trust in him, no evil shall befall us, and no real blessing shall be withheld.”

Section II.— Although in relation to the foreknowledge and decree of God, the first cause, all things come to pass immutably and infallibly, yet, by the same providence, he ordereth them to fall out according to the nature of second causes, either necessarily, freely, or contingently.

Exposition

Since all things were known to God from the beginning of the world, and come to pass according to the immutable counsel of his will, it necessarily follows that, in respect of the foreknowledge and decree of God, all things come to pass infallibly. But, by his providence, he orders them to fall out according to the nature of second causes. Every part of the material world has an immediate dependence on the will and power of God, in respect of every motion and operation, as well as in respect of continued existence; but he governs the material world by certain physical laws,—commonly called the laws of nature, and in Scripture the ordinances of Heaven,—and agreeably to these laws, so far as relates to second causes, certain effects uniformly and necessarily follow certain causes. The providence of God is also concerned about the volitions and actions of intelligent creatures; but his providential influence is not destructive of their rational liberty, for they are under no compulsion, but act freely; and all the liberty which can belong to rational creatures is that of acting according to their inclinations. Though there is no event contingent with respect to God, “who declareth the end from the beginning, and from ancient times the things which are not yet done, saying, My counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure;” yet many events are contingent or accidental with regard to us, and also with respect to second causes.

Section III.— God, in his ordinary providence, maketh use of means, yet is free to work without, above, and against them, at his pleasure.

Exposition

The providence of God is either ordinary or miraculous. In his ordinary providence God works by means, and according to the general laws established by his own wisdom: we are, therefore, bound to use the means which he has appointed, and if we neglect these, we cannot expect to obtain the end. But though God generally acts according to established laws, yet he may suspend or modify these laws at pleasure. And when, by his immediate agency, an effect is produced above or beside the ordinary course of nature, this we denominate a miracle. The possibility of miracles will be denied by none but Atheists. To maintain that the laws of nature are so absolutely fixed, that they can in no case be deviated from, would be to exclude God from the government of the world, —to represent the universe as a vast machine, whose movements are regulated by certain laws which even the great Architect cannot control.

Section IV.— The almighty power, unsearchable wisdom, and infinite goodness of God, so far manifest themselves in his providence, that it extendeth itself even to the first fall, and all other sins of angels and men, and that not by a bare permission, but such as hath joined with it a most wise and powerful bounding, and otherwise ordering and governing of them, in a manifold dispensation, to his own holy ends; yet so, as the sinfulness thereof proceedeth only from the creature, and not from God; who being most holy and righteous, neither is nor can be the author or approver of sin.

Exposition

That the providence of God is concerned about the sinful actions of creatures must be admitted. Joseph's brethren committed a most wicked and unnatural action in selling him to the Midianites; but Joseph thus addressed his brethren: "Be not grieved, nor angry with yourselves, that ye sold me hither: for God sent me before you to preserve life."—Gen. xiv. 6. The most atrocious crime ever perpetrated by human hands was the crucifixion of the Lord of glory; yet it is expressly affirmed that God delivered him into those wicked hands which were imbrued in his sacred blood: "Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain."—Acts ii. 23. At the same time, it is indisputable that God cannot be the author nor approver of sin. To solve the difficulty

connected with this point, theologians distinguish between an action and its quality. The action, abstractly considered, is from God, for no action can be performed without the concurrence of Providence; but the sinfulness of the action proceeds entirely from the creature. As to the manner in which the providence of God is concerned about the sinful actions of creatures, it is usually stated, that God permit them, that he limits them, and that he overrules them for the accomplishment of his own holy ends. But the full elucidation of this abstruse subject, so as to remove every difficulty, surpasses the human faculties. We are certain that God is concerned in all the actions of his creatures; we are equally certain that God cannot be the author of sin; and here we ought to rest.

Section V.— The most wise, righteous, and gracious God, doth oftentimes leave for a season his own children to manifold temptations 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 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 sundry other just and holy ends.

Section VI.— As for those wicked and ungodly men whom God, as a righteous judge, for former sins, doth blind and harden; from them he not only withholdeth his grace, whereby they might have been enlightened in their understandings, and wrought upon their hearts; but sometimes also withdraweth the gifts which they had; and exposeth them to such objects as their corruption makes occasion of sin; and withal, gives them over to their own lusts, the temptations of the world, and the power of Satan; whereby it comes to pass that they harden themselves, even under those means which God useth for the softening of others.

Exposition

God cannot possibly solicit or seduce any man to sin; for this is inconsistent with the purity of his nature. - James i. 13,14. But, in righteous judgment, God sometimes permits persons to fall into one sin for the punishment of another. He deals in this way even with his own dear, but undutiful, children. Sometimes he leaves them for a season to temptations, and to the lusts of their own hearts, for their trial, or to discover to themselves the latent corruptions of their hearts, to humble them, and to excite them to more fervent prayer and unremitting watchfulness. Thus, God left Hezekiah to try him, that he

might know, or make known, all that was in his heart.—2 Chron. xxxii. 31. Sometimes God deals in this manner with his own children to chastise them for their former sins. Thus, "The anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, and he moved David against them to say, Go number Israel and Judah." - 2 Sam. xxiv. 1. In Scripture, God is frequently said to harden wicked men for their former sins. This he does, not by infusing any wickedness into their hearts, or by any direct and positive influence on their souls in rendering them obdurate, but by withholding his grace, which is necessary to soften their hearts, and which he is free to give or withhold as he pleases; by giving them over to their own hearts' lusts, to the temptations of the world, and the power of Satan; and by providentially placing them in each circumstances, or presenting such objects before them, as their corruption makes an occasion of hardening themselves.

Section VII. – As the providence of God doth, in general, reach to all creatures, so, after a most special manner, it taketh care of his Church, and disposeth all things to the good thereof.

Exposition

The providence of God may be considered as general and as special. His general providence is exercised about all his creatures; his special providence is exercised, in a particular manner, about his Church and people. "The eyes of the Lord run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to show himself strong in behalf of them whose heart is perfect towards him."—2 Chron. xvi. 9. God has the interests of his own people ever in view; he knows what is most conducive to their happiness; and he will make all things, whether prosperous or adverse, to co-operate in promoting their good, - Rom. viii. 28. In all past ages, God has watched over his Church with peculiar and unremitting care; he has sometimes permitted her to be reduced to a very low condition, but he has also wrought surprising deliverances in her behalf. The very means which her enemies intended for her destruction and ruin have, by an overruling Providence, been rendered subservient to her edification and enlargement.—Acts viii. 4. The preservation of the Church, in spite of the craft and malice of hell, and of all the pernicious errors and bloody persecutions which have threatened her ruin, is no less wonderful than the spectacle which Moses beheld,—a bush burning but not consumed. And let us still confide and rejoice in the promise of Christ, that the gates of hell shall never prevail against his Church.