

THE DIVINE AGENCY IN WAR.

(Jeremiah 51:20)

George Lawson

War is one of the most frightful calamities which can overtake a nation: how dreadful then the misery and suffering entailed when *many* nations are involved therein. At such a time the belief of many in an over-ruling Providence is rudely shaken, for to them it appears that Satan, rather than the Lord God, is master of the situation and the author of their troubles. Even God's own people, unless they are firmly established in the Faith, find it difficult to stay their minds on the Ruler of the Universe, trusting implicitly in His wisdom and goodness. Questions will be raised that are not easily answered, doubts stirred up which cannot readily be stilled. It is therefore timely to ask, What is the relation of God to war? Is He but a far-distant Spectator, having no immediate connection? or is His agency directly involved? if so, to what extent? To speculate upon such a solemn matter would not only be useless, but impious—to the Word of Truth we must turn if we are to have right thoughts thereon, thoughts which honour and not dishonour the Most High.

We have been granted the loan of a small book published in 1810 which contains three sermons by George Lawson, minister of the Gospel, Selkirk, Scotland, in which he has most helpfully dealt with “The Divine Agency in War and Revolution.” They examine this subject in the light of Holy Writ and are the best treatment of the same which we have ever come across. We therefore propose to give our friends the benefit of these sermons. We shall not publish them at length, but summarize their contents, sticking close to their substance, and even language, yet here and there adding some comments of our own. Though preached nearly one hundred and fifty years ago they are most pertinent to our own times, for they were delivered in the midst of the Napoleon wars, when the greater part of Europe was then convulsed and plunged into wretchedness and woe, in fact, conditions which obtained then supply not a few analogies with those existing now.

Those who read the histories of nations find many proofs that men are often more cruel to their fellows than lions and tigers. These ferocious animals kill their prey only to satisfy their own hunger, but men destroy their fellows to fulfil the lusts of ambition and avarice which can never be satiated. Lions and tigers may have killed thousands of human beings in the course of the centuries, but millions have been destroyed in the span of a few years by the restless wickedness of men who cared not what their fellow men suffered if they obtained the gratification of their unreasonable desires, which, when they were satisfied, were found to add nothing to their happiness, but rather to increase their misery.

Who can sufficiently deplore that depravity of human nature which has made men beasts of prey, or rather devils to one another, seeking whom they may devour? He who has read the history of any nation must be sensible, if he uses his understanding, that the accounts given us in the Holy Scriptures of the corruption of mankind are well confirmed by experience. But let us not think, my readers, that the same corrupt nature is not in ourselves which shows itself in the ravagers and destroyers of mankind; or that it does not operate in us because it is not manifested in the same outrageous manner against our fellow men. There is none among men that is righteous, none that seeks after God. Self-love has taken the throne of the heart of man, and when it is not

under Divine restraint nor refused opportunities of discovering its horrible malignity, it spreads misery and ruin around it on every side.

But while we contemplate with grief and shame the works of men of the same corrupt natures with ourselves, we ought by no means to overlook the agency of Divine providence in all these occasions wherein they are actors. God is the supreme agent. All inferior agents are under His government and held by Him under such effectual control that they can do nothing without Him. In the most tremendous calamities which they inflict, they are the ministers of God's righteous providence. When kingdoms are destroyed, by whatsoever means, the agency of *God* is to be acknowledged in this work of judgment. This is plainly taught in, "Thou art *My battle-axe*, and weapons of war: for with thee will I break in pieces the nations, and with thee will I destroy kingdoms" (Jer. 51:20). This was the text for each of Mr. Lawson's sermons, but before considering it more closely let us call attention to one or two other Scriptures, equally definite and striking.

In Jeremiah 25:9 we find Jehovah referring to Nebuchadnezzar as "My servant," just as He spoke of "My servant Moses" (Num. 12:7) and "David My servant" (Psa. 89:3). The king of Babylon was just as truly an instrument of the Divine will as were the Patriarchs—the one in punishing and destroying, the other in delivering and building up. "Lo, I will bring a nation upon you from far, O house of Israel, saith the LORD . . . and they shall eat up thine harvest, and thy bread, which thy sons and thy daughters should eat: they shall eat up thy flocks and thine herds: they shall eat up thy vines and thy fig trees: they shall impoverish thy fenced cities, wherein thou trustedst, with the sword" (Jer. 5:15, 17). God brings judgment upon a nation as surely as He gives blessing, uproots as truly as He plants. "Lo, *I raise up* the Chaldeans, that bitter and hasty nation, which shall march through the breadth of the land, to possess the dwelling-places that are not theirs: they are terrible and dreadful" (Hab. 1:6, 7): how clearly do those words reveal that even heathen nations are under God's control and used by Him when it serves His purpose. None who are conversant with the contents of Holy Writ and who bow to its authority can doubt for a moment that God uses one nation as His instrument for chastening another, even though afterwards He destroys the instrument itself.

"Thou art *My battle-axe* and weapons of war: for with thee will I break in pieces the nations, and with thee will I destroy kingdoms" (Jer. 51:20). The reference here is to Cyrus, but what is said of *that* mighty conqueror is equally true of all conquerors that ever lived or shall live on the earth. Shall there be evil in any city or kingdom, and the Lord hath not done it? (Amos 3:6). Conquerors reckon themselves almost gods upon the earth, but the axes and saws with which men cut and cleave wood might, with far better reason, exalt themselves to the rank of human creatures. None of them can do anything but what God's counsel determined before to be done by their hand—and therefore it is our bounden duty to give God the glory for all the good that is done by them, and to adore His awful providence in all the miseries which they inflict upon guilty kingdoms.

When God is pleased to bring about changes and revolutions in kingdoms, He ordinarily makes use of *men* for His instruments. Cyrus and his army were His battle-axe and His weapons of war for the destruction of Babylon. Alexander the great was His battle-axe for the destruction of that empire of Persia which Cyrus had raised upon the ruins of Babylon. The Romans were God's battle-axe and weapons of war for the subversion of those kingdoms into which the em-

pire of Alexander was divided—as, we may add, they were His battle-axe in destroying Jerusalem: note well how in Matthew 22:7 it is expressly declared of the Romans, “He sent forth His armies and destroyed those murderers (of the Prophets and of His own Son) and burned their city.” Later, the Goths and Vandals were God’s battle-axe for the subversion of the western part of the Roman empire, as He employed the Saracens and Turks to destroy the eastern part of it.

1. Let us now consider on what account conquerors of nations are called “God’s battle-axes.” We read in Scripture of hail and snow laid up in His magazines which He has prepared for the day of war (Job 38:22, 23). By a like figure of speech these mighty men whom He employs in shaking nations and overturning kingdoms are compared to these terrible weapons which in ancient times were used for the destruction of mankind. God had *chosen* the instruments employed by Him for subverting kingdoms. Before the foundation of the world He decreed whatever has come to pass or *will* come to pass, and selected from the rest of His creatures the inferior agents by which all His counsels were to be accomplished. As Paul was separated from his mother’s womb to bear the name of Christ before the Gentiles and to raise up many churches, so Cyrus was chosen to be the utter destroyer of Babylon and the repairer of the desolations of Sion. God said of him long before he came into the world, “he is *My shepherd*, and shall perform all My pleasure” (Isa. 44:28).

2. All *the talents* possessed by conquerors are the gifts of God. When we read the exploits of the champions of Israel in the days of David, we see how abundantly God bestowed on His favoured people those accomplishments by which many of them acquired immortal honour. It was He who taught David’s hands to war (Psa. 18:33, 34), made his feet like hinds’ feet and set him upon His high places. It was He who girded David’s illustrious heroes with strength, so the bows of steel were broken by their arms; lion-like men were destroyed with as much ease as if they had been little children, and whole troops were put to flight by the steady valour of single champions.

But are those accomplishments *from God* which are used for the service of the devil? Certainly, for the devil cannot put wisdom into the inward parts: he cannot inspire the hearts of men with unshaken fortitude to battle; good gifts may be applied to very bad purposes. The accomplishments of the destroyers of mankind are the gifts of God to them, not for their own benefit, but for the chastisement of guilty nations. If the plowman cannot manage his business successfully unless God instruct him (Isa. 28: 26, 27), it is impossible for the warrior to lay his plans and execute them with determined bravery amidst a thousand dangers and obstructions without receiving from on High a large portion of those intellectual endowments which are the glory of men when they are directed by benevolence, and their disgrace when they are made subservient to a selfish ambition. When Cyrus is called “the anointed of the Lord” (Isa. 45:1), we are taught not only that he was chosen to accomplish great works for God, but that he was qualified by the Spirit of God for doing them. Not only that wisdom by which some are furnished for usefulness in the Church, but all those qualities of mind by which any of the sons of men render themselves illustrious, come from the Spirit who is the Author of rational life as truly as of spiritual (see Exo. 28:3; 31:2, 3; Job 32:8).

3. By the Divine providence conquerors are *placed in those circumstance* which give them opportunities for performing those great works for which they have been renowned. Multitudes are compelled by necessity all their days to live in obscurity, whatever talents they may possess.

If Cyrus had been the son of a peasant, all his great endowments might have been concealed from the world, or at least no mention made of them in history. Though the son of a petty king, he was the grandson and the nephew of mighty monarchs of the Medes, and matters were so arranged by Divine providence that, having received the excellent education which the Persians in that age bestowed upon their children he obtained that place in the armies and councils of his uncle Darius which furnished him with opportunities to exalt his country above the other nations, to destroy his enemies, and in destroying them to subvert that mighty empire of Babylon, by which the people of the Lord had been so cruelly oppressed.

But although men should be born in a low station, if God has great works to be performed by them, He knows how to raise them from obscurity and to extend their sphere of usefulness or of mischief. For many generations past the affairs of Europe have been managed with such a steady policy that there seemed to be no reason for dreading any very remarkable reverse in the fate of nations. But of late such changes have taken place that new and striking lessons have been given to all mankind of the instability of all things under the sun and of the inefficacy of human wisdom to secure the thrones of those who derive their pedigree from a long list of royal ancestors, or to prevent the children of the lowest of their subjects from rising up to seize their envied power. “The Lord casts down the mighty and raises the poor out of the dust that he may inherit the throne of glory.”

The means by which men raise themselves to stations of grandeur are often very bad. Justice and mercy are trampled under foot by men who aspire to stations to which they were not born. But without God these measures which are so greatly detested by Him would not be successful. It is the devil who prompts men to make use of them: but he is a liar when he says that he gives the kingdoms of the world to whomsoever he will. God never committed the disposal of kingdoms to His great adversary. But He sometimes shines upon the counsels of the wicked, to place them in a position to perform services to Himself, which they are better qualified to perform than His own faithful people. Agrippian, the mother of that monster Nero, procured the imperial crown for him by poisoning her husband Claudius, and Nero secured it to himself by the murder of his adopted brother, the son of Claudius. Yet concerning that prince, and those magistrates who held their place under him, it could be said with truth, “there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God” (Rom. 13:1).

4. God directs all *the enterprises* of the conquerors of the world. He presides in their councils; He regulates their decisions; He determines against what nations they shall lead forth their armies to war. It is, indeed, too high for us to understand *how* God regulates the councils of wicked men and how He bends their minds to a compliance with His decrees in those actions wherein the depravity of their hearts operates with a force that carries them beyond all bounds; but if it be wondrous in our eyes, should it be wondrous in the eyes of God also? Let us remember that our consolation and joy of faith depends on this truth, that no man can say and it comes to pass, when the Lord commands it not. If any man or devil were left to do one thing independently of the Divine providence, the foundation of our confidence in God would be subverted, and what could the righteous do? But Jehovah is the everlasting King—He fashions men’s hearts—and while they are executing their own wills they are effectually executing the will of God.

Could any counsels be more unjust and impious than those of him which boasted, "Shall I not as I have done to Samaria and her idols, so do to Jerusalem and her idols?" (Isa. 10:11). Yet he spoke the truth, although he meant to lie, when he said, "The Lord said to me, Go up against this land and destroy it" (2 Kings 18:25). Hear what God Himself says concerning him, "O Assyrian, the rod of Mine anger, and the staff in their hand is Mine indignation. I will *send him* against a hypocritical nation and against the people of My wrath will I give him a charge, to take the spoil and to take the prey, and to tread them down like the mire of the streets. *Howbeit he meaneth not so*, neither doth his heart think so" (Isa. 10:5-7).

When Nebuchadnezzar was ravaging the world, he held the nations in perpetual alarms. When he made an end of one conquest, it was the subject of anxious inquiry what nations should next be attacked by him. It was at one time a question whether he should lead his terrible armies against the children of Ammon or against Jerusalem. The oppressor of the nations was for some time himself undetermined and used divinations to decide the business. He made his arrows bright: he consulted with images: he looked in the liver. At his right hand were the divinations for Jerusalem, to appoint captains to open the mouths in the slaughter. But the matter had long before been determined in the counsels of *God*, who revealed His purpose through the Prophet: see Ezekiel 21:18-24.

5. All *the success* of conquerors is from God. We are often astonished at the rapidity of their progress. Some of them have achieved conquests in the space of a few weeks that which other famous leaders would have deemed it glorious to have achieved in a lifetime. Cyrus was justly accounted one of the most renowned leaders in the ancient world yet his victories are expressly attributed in Scripture to the providence of God. "He will do his pleasure on Babylon and his arm shall be on the Chaldeans. I, even I, have spoken, yea, I have called him: I have brought him, and he shall make his way prosperous" (Isa. 48:14, 15). When Nebuchadnezzar like a destroying lion laid the countries of the east desolate, the Lord put courage into the hearts of his soldiers, directed their operations and removed every obstacle out of their way—that He might accomplish His Word: see Ezekiel 30:22-26.

We have sometimes been astonished at the madness which seemed to possess the hearts of kings and their counselors when their dearest interests urgently demanded the exertion of all the wisdom that could be found within their kingdoms. But let it be solemnly remembered that it is often God's way to blind those whom He intends to destroy. "Shall I not in that day (of her calamity) even destroy the wise men out of Edom?" (Oba. 8)! So, too, we have been amazed at armies famous in battle who could maintain their ground and sometimes win notable victories, against more than double their number, yet a few years after turn back in battle when there are no such odds against them. God, to accomplish His purpose, weakened their courage and withered their strength: "Now have I brought it to pass that thou shouldest be to lay waste defenced cities into ruinous heaps. *Therefore* their inhabitants were of small power, they were *dismayed* and confounded" (Isa. 37:26, 27).

6. All *the events* brought about by conquerors are consequently works of Divine providence. Mighty changes are accomplished by those who subvert kingdoms and destroy nations. But no change can be produced, great or small, by any power on earth which is not to be ascribed to the Most High who rules in the cabinets of kings, the tumults of the people, the fury of battle, as truly as in the raging of the sea. The Lord speaks of four sore judgments by which He punishes

guilty nations: the sword, famine, pestilence, and beasts of the earth (Ezek. 14). He executes these judgments by different means but they are all equally the work of His hands. His agency ought to be acknowledged no less in what is done by wicked men than by what is accomplished by withholding rain. The wars by which the kings of Canaan were rooted out were as truly from God as the fire and brimstone which destroyed Sodom. The sword of Joshua was the sword of Jehovah (Josh. 10:42).—A.W.P.

Volume 20—Studies in the Scriptures—October, 1941**THE EIGHTH COMMANDMENT.**

“Thou shalt not steal” (Exo. 20:15). The root from which theft proceeds is *discontent* with the portion God has allotted, and therefrom a coveting of what He has withheld from us and bestowed upon others. With his usual accuracy Calvin hit the nail on the head when he pointed out, “This law is ordained for our hearts as much as for our hands, in order that men may study both to protect the property and to promote the interests of others.” Like the preceding one, this precept also respects the government of our affections, by the setting of due bounds to our desires after worldly things, that they may not exceed what the good providence of God has appointed us. Hence the suitability of that prayer, “Remove far from me vanity and lies: give me neither poverty nor riches, feed me with food convenient for me, lest I be full and deny Thee, and say Who is the LORD? or lest I be poor and steal, and take the name of my God in vain” (Prov. 30:8, 9).

“Thou shalt not steal.” The positive duty here enjoined is: you shall by all proper means preserve and further both your own and your neighbour’s estate. This Commandment requires proper diligence and industry so as to secure a competence for ourselves and families, that we may not through our own default expose ourselves and them to those straits which are the consequence of sloth and neglect. Thus we are to “Provide things honest in the sight of all men” (Rom. 12:17). But more: this Commandment is the law of love with respect to our neighbour’s estate. It requires honesty and uprightness in our dealings one with another, being founded upon that first practical principle of all human converse: “Whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them” (Matt. 7:12). Thus this Commandment places a sacred enclosure around property which none can lawfully enter without the proprietor’s consent.

The solemn and striking fact deserves pointing out that the first sin committed by the human species consisted of *theft*: when Eve took of (stole) the forbidden fruit. So, too, the first recorded sin against Israel after they entered the land of Canaan was that of theft: when Achan stole from among the spoils (Josh. 7:21). In like manner, the first sin which defiled the primitive Christian church was theft: when Ananias and Sapphira “kept back part of the price” (Acts 5:2). How often this is the first sin committed outwardly by children! and therefore this Divine precept should be taught them from earliest infancy.

Years ago we visited a home and our hostess related how she had that day secretly observed her daughter (about four years old) enter a room in which was a large bunch of grapes. The little tot eyed them longingly, went up to the table and then said, “Get thee hence Satan, It is written thou shalt not steal,” and rushed out of the room.

“Thou shalt not steal.” The highest form of this sin is where it is committed against *God*, which is sacrilege. Of old He charged Israel with this crime: “Will a man rob God? yet ye have robbed Me. But ye say, Wherein have we robbed Thee? In tithes and offerings. Ye are cursed with a curse: for ye have robbed Me, even this whole nation” (Mal. 3:8, 9). But there are other ways in which this wickedness may be committed besides that of refusing to financially support the maintenance of God’s cause on earth. God is robbed when we withhold from Him the glory which is His due, and we are spiritual thieves when we arrogate to ourselves the honour and praise which belong alone unto Him. Arminians are great offenders here, by ascribing to free

will what is produced by free grace. “Ye have not chosen Me,” said Christ, “but I have chosen you” (John 15:16). “Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us” (1 John 4:10).

Another way in which we rob God is by an unfaithful discharge of our stewardship. That which God has entrusted to us may be just as really outraged by our mismanagement as if we interfered with another’s trust or plundered our neighbour’s goods. This Commandment then requires from us that we administer our worldly estate, be it large or small, with such industry as to provide for ourselves and those dependent upon us.

Idleness is a species of theft: it is playing the part of the drone and compelling the rest of the hive to support us. So prodigality is also a form of theft: extravagance and wastefulness being a spending of that substance which God has given unto us, in “riotous living.” He who remains in secular employment which requires him to work on the Lord’s day is robbing God of the time which ought to be devoted to His worship. Ere passing on it should be pointed out that one who obtrudes himself into the Gospel ministry without being called of God, so as to obtain an easy and comfortable living, is “a thief and a robber” (John 10:1) .

God has appointed that men should earn their bread by the sweat of their brow, and with that portion which we thus honestly obtain, we must be satisfied. But some are slothful and refuse to labour, while others are covetous and crave a larger portion, and hence many are led to resort to the use of force or fraud in order to gain possession of that to which they have no right. Theft, in general, is an unjust taking or keeping for ourselves what is lawfully another’s. He is a thief who withholds what ought to be in his neighbour’s possession as much as he who takes from him his property. Hence this Commandment is grossly violated both by capital and labour. If in the past the poor have been wronged by inadequate wages—the scales have now turned in the opposite direction, by employees often demanding a wage which industry cannot afford to pay them. If on the one hand it is right that a fair day’s work should receive a fair day’s pay, it holds equally good that a fair day’s pay is entitled to a fair day’s work—but where loafing prevails it does not receive it.

“Thou shalt not steal.” Lying advertisements are a breach of this Commandment. Tradesmen are guilty when they adulterate or misrepresent their goods, and also when they deliberately give short weight or short change to their customers. Profiteering is another form of theft: “that no man go *beyond* and defraud his brother” (1 Thess. 4:6). The contracting of debts to support luxury and vanity is theft, as also is the failure to pay debts incurred in procuring necessities. A man is a thief in the sight of God who transfers property to his wife just before he becomes bankrupt, and so also is any bankrupt who later on prospers financially and then fails to pay his creditors to the full. That man or woman is a thief who borrows and returns not. This Commandment is broken by tenants who heedlessly damage the property and furniture of the owner. Evasion in paying taxes is another form of theft: Christ has set us a better example (Matt. 17:24). Gambling is still another form of theft, for by it men obtain money for which they have done no honest work.

There is an old saying—“Whatever is gotten over the Devil’s back goes under the Devil’s belly.” Certain it is that God sends a curse upon what is obtained by force or fraud: it is put into a bag with holes and under Providence soon wastes away. God, by His righteous judgment, often makes one sin the punisher of another and what is gained by theft is lost by intemperance and a shortened life. Therefore it is written, “the robbery of the wicked shall destroy them” (Prov. 21:7). And again—“As the partridge sitteth on eggs and hatcheth them not; so he that getteth

riches, and not by right, shall leave them in the midst of his days, and at his end shall be a fool” (Jer. 17:11). Many times God raises up those who deal with them as they have dealt with others. The fearful increase of this crime in modern society is due to failure to impose adequate punishment. If the reader be conscious of having wronged others in the past, it is not sufficient to confess this sin unto God: at least a twofold restitution must be made (Luke 19:8 and cf. 2 Sam. 12:6)—if the owner be dead, then to his descendants, if he has none, then to some public charity.

Here are a few suggested helps and aids to the avoidance of the sins prohibited and to the performance of those duties inculcated by this Eighth Commandment. 1. Engage in honest labour, or if a person of means, in some honourable calling, seeking to promote the public good: it is idle people who are most tempted to mischief. 2. Strive against the spirit of selfishness by seeking the welfare of others. 3. Counter the lust of covetousness by giving liberally to those in need. 4. If your Saviour was crucified between two thieves that the gift of salvation might be yours, bring no reproach upon His name by any act of dishonesty. 5. Cultivate the grace of contentment. In order thereto, consider frequently the vanity of all things temporal, practice submission to Divine providence, meditate much on the Divine promises (such as Heb. 13:5, 6), be temperate in all things, set your affection on things above, remind yourself daily of the earthly lot of Christ.—A.W.P.

THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT.

19. *Anxiety Forbidden*: Matthew 6:33, 34.

“But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and His righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you” (v. 33). The heathen set their hearts upon material necessities and comforts: be not ye like unto them, says Christ—let a nobler, more essential and infinitely more satisfying object engage your attention and energies. If God is given His proper place in your hearts and lives you will not be the losers even in this world, yea, only thus will you be able to form a true estimate of the things of time and sense. Ah, my reader, it is failure to make Himself our portion which renders us troubled about many things. Where there is the blessed realization that God is for us, that He is all-sufficient, a spirit of contentment and rest floods the soul. Nothing but the love of God shed abroad in the heart by the Holy Spirit will cast out dark and dismal forebodings. Where faith is in exercise and there is conscious communion with God, anxiety cannot cast us down.

By the “kingdom of God” is here meant a state or condition of men in this life, a state whereby they enjoy through Christ the favour of God and a title to everlasting felicity and glory. It is thus designated because God rules in them as a king rules in his kingdom. The words “and His righteousness” are added by way of explanation, that we may know for ourselves when we have obtained this grand object: God’s kingdom stands in righteousness, as it is written, “The kingdom of God is not meat and drink (material things); but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Rom. 14:17). Now by “the righteousness of God” we are to understand two things: an imputed righteousness and an imparted righteousness, one which is placed to our account or credit and one which is communicated to our souls. The former or imputed righteousness is that perfect obedience which Christ rendered to the Law of God, which is legally reckoned to each one who believes in Him. As it is written, “Even the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe,” and again, “If by one man’s offense death reigned by one, much more they which receive abundance of grace and of the *gift of righteousness* shall reign in life by one, Jesus Christ” (Rom. 3:22; 5:17). Therefore may the Christian exclaim, “I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my soul shall be joyful in my God; for He hath clothed me with the garments of salvation, He hath covered me with the robe of righteousness” (Isa. 61:10).

And how is anyone to *know* when the perfect obedience of Christ has been made over to him, so that he stands justified before God, the Law no longer able to prefer a single charge against him? Answer: by that which ever accompanies it: imputed righteousness is made known by imparted righteousness, justification is never separated from sanctification, both arising out of regeneration. All who are justified by Christ’s obedience are sanctified by the Holy Spirit that henceforth they may walk in good works. “That ye put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness” (Eph. 4:24). The reference is to the new birth, whereby a new nature or principle is supernaturally communicated to the soul, a principle whose character and element is righteousness and true holiness, in contrast from the character and element of the corrupt principle of flesh which is sin and wickedness. This “new man” which is created (by God) in righteousness, believers are exhorted to “put on,” that is, make evident display before the world—let it appear you are the children of God by your character and conduct. Therefore do we read “everyone that doeth righteousness is born of Him” (1 John 2:29).

Now this kingdom and righteousness of God, Christ here calls upon men to “seek.” As we pointed out in the previous verse, the word is a very emphatic one, signifying to “set ourselves to seek” or “seek with all our might.” We all know how worldlings seek after the things of time and sense: not reluctantly but heartily, not perfunctorily but earnestly, not spasmodically but constantly, not carelessly but diligently. In such a manner and in such a spirit are the things pertaining to our eternal welfare to be sought. God has nowhere promised that those who seek Him indolently and indifferently shall find Him: rather has He declared, “Ye shall seek Me, and find Me, when ye shall search for Me with all your heart” (Jer. 29:13). So that there might be no misunderstanding of His meaning, Christ added, “seek ye first the kingdom of God and His righteousness,” by which He meant seek it chiefly, principally, above all other things in this world. Let your paramount concern be to enter into that estate whereby ye may enjoy God’s favour through Christ—justified by His obedience and sanctified by His Spirit.

From this command of Christ’s it is evident that by nature we are all of us *outside* of God’s kingdom and destitute of His favour, otherwise we should not be bidden to seek them. We were in fact, during our unregeneracy, under the power of Satan and in his kingdom of darkness. The devil is called “the Prince of this world” (John 12:31) and “the god of this world” (2 Cor. 4:4), because all the world are his vassals, yielding him homage in the works of sin, and therefore is he also designated “the Prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience” (Eph. 2:2). And how justly has this misery come upon men: seeing they refuse to yield submission to the sceptre of God they are righteously left to the power of the devil, to be made his slaves and drudges. That the unregenerate *are outside* the kingdom of God is very plain from the course of their lives, for to the Almighty they say, “Depart from us, we desire not the knowledge of Thy ways” (Job 21:14).

But now the important question arises, How shall those who are by nature outside of God’s kingdom and destitute of His righteousness seek an entrance into the one and an interest in the other? To this a threefold answer may be returned. First, we must go to the place where the kingdom of God is to be found. Second, we must then enter into it. Third, we must wait for the full possession of it. For the first: this kingdom of God is not to be found everywhere, but only where God is pleased to manifest and reveal the same unto the sons of men. It is made known in the Holy Scriptures, and therefore are they called “The Word of the Kingdom” (Matt. 13:19), and hence it is to the Volume of Inspiration we must turn, humbly seeking instruction from the Holy Spirit. But since it has pleased God to call and equip His own servants to expound His Word, we should frequent the assemblies of His saints (where such are to be found), for it is there (in normal times) the Evangel of His salvation is proclaimed, and that Evangel is termed “the Gospel of the Kingdom” (Matt. 4:23 and cf. Acts 28:31).

Second, when we have found this kingdom, that is, when it has been clearly revealed to us as set forth in the Word of Truth—whether through the instrumentality of preachers or not—we must seek *to enter into it*. It is not sufficient for us to be where it is or have it presented to our view, for Christ said to the Pharisees, “the kingdom of God is come unto you” (Luke 11:20), yet He declared of them, “ye neither go in yourselves, neither suffer ye them that are entering to go in” (Matt. 23:13). Now it is to be pointed out that none can enter God’s kingdom of themselves, without the special work of the Holy Spirit. This is plain from those words of Christ’s, “except ye be converted and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of Heaven”

(Matt. 18:3). Since conversion (a right-about-face, the heart and life being turned from the world unto God) is a fruit or consequence of regeneration, we must first be born of the Spirit. "Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God" (John 3:5). This is rarely insisted upon today, yea the very reverse is inculcated, for sinners are given to suppose that salvation lies wholly within their own power, that they can turn unto God whenever they are pleased to do so.

Now regeneration is a renewal of the soul, a rectifying of its facilities—a work of grace is then begun and continued throughout the whole process of sanctification, which is consummated in Glory. At conversion, which follows upon and may be termed the reflex action of regeneration, the image of Satan in sin and corruption was thrown down (not expelled, still less annihilated) and the image of God renewed in the soul, in knowledge, righteousness and true holiness. At conversion the proud heart of man is humbled, so that instead of continuing to conduct himself as a "God"—independent and self-sufficient—he becomes as "a little child"—tractable, teachable, meek and lowly. In conversion we renounce our own lordship and submit, voluntarily and gladly, to the rule of God, subjecting ourselves to His holy will. In conversion we repudiate the filthy rags of our own self-righteousness, and put our trust in the perfect obedience and blood of Christ. Thus, experimentally we enter into the favour and kingdom of God and an interest in His righteousness is obtained by repentance and faith, by forsaking sin and the world, taking upon us the yoke of Christ and learning of Him, endeavouring to follow the example He has left us.

Third, we must then wait for the full fruition or possession of it. **Last month** we pointed out the distinction which exists between the Divine kingdom of Providence and the kingdom of Grace: the former taking in the entire universe, the latter being internally received by the elect only, in whose hearts and lives God rules by His Spirit. We must now call attention to the difference between the kingdom of Grace and the kingdom of Glory, the latter consisting of two degrees. The kingdom of Grace is entered the moment a soul is born again, the kingdom of Glory is entered by the believer upon his removal to Heaven at the moment of death. It was to this aspect of it the Apostle referred when he said, "the Lord shall deliver me from every evil work, and will preserve me unto His Heavenly kingdom" (2 Tim. 4:18). Heaven is the upper compartment of the kingdom of Grace, for it is there Christ reigns supreme in the spirits of just men made perfect—perfectly freed from sin, and admitted into the clear and open vision of God, though their bodies remain in the grave awaiting their redemption.

But the believer's entrance into Heaven at the moment of death—blessed unspeakably blessed moment!—is but the kingdom of Glory begun. It is not the ideal and ultimate state, for not only does he lack his glorified *body*, but the Church is not yet complete—Christ is still waiting until His enemies be made His footstool—waiting to see of the full travail of His soul. When the morning of the resurrection breaks, that "morning without clouds," the last enemy shall be destroyed, mortality shall be swallowed up of life, and Christ shall "change our vile body, that it may be fashioned like unto His glorious body, according to the working whereby He is able to subdue all things unto Himself" (Phil. 3:21). Then shall the Redeemer say unto all His redeemed, "Come, ye blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world" (Matt. 25:34). It is to this final phase of the Kingdom that the following refers: "give diligence to make your calling and election sure: for if ye do these things, ye shall never fall: for

so an entrance shall be ministered unto you abundantly into the Everlasting Kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ" (2 Peter 1:10, 11).

In the meantime, he who has entered the kingdom of grace is left in this world, that he may be a monument of God's sovereign mercy, that he may give evidence of the transforming power of Divine grace, that he may bring forth the fruits of regeneration. He is still left in the Enemy's country, surrounded by those who seek his destruction and carrying a traitor within his own breast. He needs therefore to walk with the utmost caution and circumspection, availing himself of all appointed means of grace. He must spare no pains to keep faith and a good conscience, walking in righteousness and true holiness before God, and in the practice of love, uprightness and mercy toward his fellows. When the question is asked, "Lord, who shall abide in Thy tabernacle? who shall dwell in Thy Holy Hill?" that is, who shall enter Heaven—the inspired answer is, "He that walketh uprightly, and worketh righteousness, and speaketh the truth in his heart" (Psa. 15:2). Herein we testify that we have entered the kingdom of Grace, which stands in "righteousness," and are on our way to the kingdom of Glory.

It now remains for us to say a few words on "seek ye first the kingdom of God and His righteousness." This means let the things of God and your own eternal interests have the *chief place* in your thoughts and desires, making the glory of God and your own spiritual blessing your paramount concern. It is not that we are required to seek them solely and exclusively to the neglect of temporal duties and responsibilities, but that we must put first things first, and not suffer them to be crowded out by matters of far less importance. Seek them first in time, for the Divine promise is, "those that seek Me early shall find Me" (Prov. 8:17). Seek them first each day, for only as holy happiness be our quest are we fitted to bear bodily trials and afflictions. And after you have, by repentance and faith, by complete surrender to the authority of God, entered His kingdom of grace and righteousness, continue to seek for the evidence of your regeneration, endeavour after closer conformity to the image of Christ and the example He has left us, and strive after more fruitfulness. Seek after an enlargement of His kingdom, by praying for God's blessing on His Word, that He will raise up and thrust forth more labourers into His vineyard, and seek to encourage and help your fellow-citizens in that kingdom.

We turn now to look at the reason by which Christ enforces this command: "and all these things shall be added unto you." Here is a grand and glorious promise! In the previous verses our Lord had used one argument after another to show the needlessness and folly of worrying, calling attention to a variety of facts and drawing from them irrefutable conclusions to evidence the sin of distrusting God. But here He makes a plain and positive declaration, assuring us that if we are truly concerned about God's interests He will take care of ours—that if the Divine glory is our principal aim we shall not be the losers temporarily. If God is leading us to Heaven, He certainly will not deny us such things as bodily sustenance and raiment. "For the LORD God is a sun and shield: the LORD will give grace and glory: no good thing will He withhold from them that walk uprightly" (Psa. 84:11): where He gives "grace and glory" He will not withhold the good things of this life. "Godliness is profitable unto all things, having promise of the life that *now* is, *and* of that which is to come" (1 Tim. 4:8).

"And all these things shall be added unto you" (Matt. 6:33). This phrase is very significant in the original. It is taken from a custom which obtained between buyers and sellers when things were sold by measure: the seller adding an extra quantity or overage so as to ensure good weight

and please his customer. Even so the Lord promises to those who truly seek His kingdom and righteousness that besides the happy fruition thereof, He will (as it were) throw in for nothing, add for good measure, *all* the material things needful to this life. We read that, "the ark of the LORD continued in the house of Obededom the Gittite three months: and the LORD blessed Obededom and all his household" (2 Sam. 6:11): how much more will He bless those who receive His Spirit to rule in their hearts! Should it be asked, Why then are any of God's children reduced to destitution? Sometimes to correct them for their sins; sometimes to exercise their faith in the trial of patience. All promises of temporal blessings must always be understood with this qualification: so far as God sees that such bestowments will be for His glory and our highest good.

But let it not be forgotten that the above guarantee is given only to those who meet its stipulation. Which, then, are *we* seeking first: earthly or heavenly things, the things of self or of God, making good in this world, or making sure of an entrance into Heaven? "It is startling to see the tide of worldliness rising fast among Christians almost everywhere, with a corresponding ebb in the desire for spiritual prosperity; on all hands there are abounding symptoms of spiritual decay, which it is to be feared will be followed by increasing ambition for fleshly advantage. Our Master's question may well ring in our ears and consciences today: 'What do ye more than others?' Not what *know* ye more than others? We may pride ourselves on knowing the things of God, which the poor worldling cannot possibly perceive. But as we spend all our energies, crowd our minds, engage our affections, and tax our wits for present worldly advantage, do not the men of this world the same? If we content ourselves with just the Lord's Day observances and meetings, do not religious worldlings the same? If we do not bring forth the fruit of the Spirit in a godly walk, in faithful testimony, and devoted service, what do we more than others? The most convincing book to the worldling is our manner of living, but if, withal, we are as hard in our dealing, as keen for selfish gains, as inconsiderate for others' rights in our bargains, as shrewd and tricky in running our business as the most wide-awake worldling, he will not believe the book, for its author is a living contradiction" (E. Venn, 1901).

In view of what Christ said in Matthew 6:33 we may perceive the mad course which is followed by the vast majority of our fellow-men, for they either utterly neglect or only half-heartedly set their affection on the things of God, principally addicting themselves to the things of this life. They take little or no serious thought for the eternal state of their souls, but spend their time and strength in providing for their bodies, which is to grasp at the shadow and ignore the substance. That verse also teaches the Christian with what mind or spirit he should seek *temporal blessings*, namely, with the same honesty and prayerfulness wherewith he seeks the kingdom of God, for they are but attractions thereunto and depend upon it, and therefore with an upright heart we must only use lawful means moderately for the getting of them. So also this verse instructs us in the right end whereunto we must use *temporal mercies*, namely for the furtherance of ourselves and others towards the kingdom of God. Since temporal blessings are dependent on God's kingdom, we must learn contentment in all *temporal losses*: God's favour remains though worldly goods be gone.

"Take therefore no thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof" (Matt. 6:34). By "tomorrow" is here meant the future. In the second half of this verse Christ answers a question which might be evoked by

His prohibition in the first: If we must not look forward anxiously, how will it fare with us in the time to come? First, you may be wasting your last hours on earth in fretting over a morrow you may never see! But second, if you are preserved unto the morrow it will bring with it tomorrow's God, and He has promised—1 Corinthians 10:13! Third, what good can your worrying do? It does not empty tomorrow of its trials, but it empties today of its strength and comfort; it does not enable you to escape future trouble, but it unfits you to cope with it when it does come. Fourth, instead of anticipating future evil, discharge present duty—in the spirit of Philippians 4:6, 7. Cross not your bridges before you come to them, but cheerfully shoulder the burden of today and trustfully leave the future to God.—A.W.P.

THE LIFE OF ELIJAH.

22. *Welcome Rain*

“And Elijah went up to the top of Carmel: and he cast himself down upon the earth, and put his face between his knees” (1 Kings 18:42). We closed last month by pointing out that this verse sets forth some important lessons which ministers of the Gospel will do well to take to heart, the principal of which is the importance and need of their retiring from the scene of their ministry that they may commune with their Lord. When public work is over they need to betake themselves to private work with God. Ministers must not only preach, but pray; not only before and while preparing their sermons, but afterwards. They must not only attend to the souls of their flock, but look after their own souls also, particularly that they may be purged from pride or resting on their own endeavours. Sin enters into and defiles the best of our performances. The faithful servant, no matter how honoured of God with success in his work, is conscious of his defects and sees reason for debasing himself before his Master. Moreover he knows that God alone can give the increase to the Seed he has sown, and for that he needs supplicate the Throne of Grace.

In the passage which is now before us there is most blessed and important instruction not only for ministers of the Gospel but also for the people of God in general. Once again it has pleased the Spirit to here let us into the secrets of prevailing prayer, for it was in that holy exercise the Prophet was now engaged. It may be objected that it is not expressly stated in 1 Kings 18:42-46 that Elijah did any *praying* on this occasion. True, and here is where we discover afresh the vital importance of comparing Scripture with Scripture. In James 5 we are told, “Elijah was a man subject to like passions as we are, and he prayed earnestly that it might not rain: and it rained not on the earth by the space of three years and six months. And he prayed *again*, and the Heaven gave rain” (vv. 17, 18). The latter verses clearly have reference to the incident we are now considering: as truly as the heavens were closed in response to Elijah’s prayer, so were they now opened in answer to his supplication. Thus we have before us again the conditions which must be met if our intercessions are to be effectual.

Once more we emphasize the fact that what is recorded in these Old Testament passages is written both for our instruction and consolation (Rom. 15:4), affording as they do invaluable illustrations, typifications and exemplifications of what is stated in the New Testament in the form of doctrine or precept. It might be thought that after so recently devoting almost the whole of two articles in this series on the life of Elijah to showing the secrets of prevailing intercession there was the less need for us to take up the same subject again. But it is a *different aspect* of it which is now in view: in 1 Kings 18:36, 37 we learn how Elijah prayed in *public*, here we behold how he prevailed in *private* prayer, and if we are to really profit from what is said in verses 42-46 we must not skim them hurriedly, but study them closely. Is the reader anxious to conduct his secret devotions in a manner that will be acceptable to God and which will produce answers of peace? Then let him attend diligently to the details which follow.

First, this man of God *withdrew* from the crowds and “went up to the top of Carmel.” If we would hold audience with the Majesty on High; if we would avail ourselves of that “new and living way” which the Redeemer has consecrated for His people and “enter into the holiest” (Heb. 10:19, 20), then we must retire from the mad and distracting world around us and get alone with God. This was the great lesson laid down in our Lord’s first word on the subject before us: “But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy

Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly” (Matt. 6:6). Separation from the godless and the shutting out of all sights and sounds which take the mind off God is absolutely indispensable. But the entering of the closet and shutting its door denotes more than physical isolation: it also signifies the calming of our spirit, the quieting of our feverish flesh, the gathering in of all wondering thoughts, that we may be in a fit frame to draw nigh unto and address the Holy One. “*Be still*, and know that I am God” is His unchanging requirement. How often the *failure* of this “shut door” renders our praying ineffectual! The atmosphere of the world is fatal to the spirit of devotion and we must get alone if communion with God is to be enjoyed.

Second, observe well the *posture* in which we now behold this man of God: “And he cast himself down upon the earth, and put his face between his knees” (1 Kings 18:42). Very, very striking is this. As one has put it: “We scarcely recognize him, he seems to have lost his identity. A few hours before he stood erect as an oak of Bashan: now he is bowed as a bulrush.” As he confronted the assembled multitude, Ahab and the hundreds of false prophets, he carried himself with majestic mien and becoming dignity; but now as he draws nigh unto the King of kings the utmost humility and reverence marks his demeanour. There as God’s ambassador he had pleaded with Israel, here as Israel’s intercessor he is to plead with the Almighty. Facing the forces of Baal he was as bold as a lion—alone with God most high he hides his face and by his actions owns his nothingness. It has ever been thus with those most favoured of Heaven: Abraham declared, “Behold now I have taken upon me to speak unto the Lord, which am dust and ashes” (Gen. 18:27). When Daniel beheld an anticipation of God incarnate, he declared, “my comeliness was turned in me into corruption” (10:8). The seraphim veil their faces in His presence (Isa. 6:2).

That to which we are now directing attention is greatly needed by this most irreverent and blatant generation. Though so highly favoured of God and granted such power in prayer, this did not cause Elijah to take liberties with Him or approach Him with indecent familiarity. No, he bowed his knee before the Most High and placed his head between his knees, betokening his most profound veneration for that infinitely glorious Being whose messenger he was. And if our hearts are right, the more we are favoured of God the more shall we be humbled by a sense of our unworthiness and insignificance, and we shall deem no posture too lowly to express our respect for the Divine Majesty. We must not forget that though God is our Father He is also our Sovereign and that while we are His children we are likewise His subjects. If it is an act of infinite condescension on His part for the Almighty to so much as “*behold* the things which are in Heaven and in the earth” (Psa. 113:6), then we cannot sufficiently abase ourselves before Him.

How grievously have those words been perverted, “Let us therefore come *boldly* to the Throne of grace” (Heb. 4:16): to suppose they give license for us to address the Lord God as though we were His equals, is to put darkness for light and evil for good. If we are to obtain the ear of God then we must take our proper place before Him, and that is, in the dust. “Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time,” *comes before*, “Casting all your care upon Him, for He careth for you” (1 Peter 5:6, 7). We must abase ourselves from a sense of our meanness. If Moses was required to remove his shoes ere he approached the burning bush in which the Shekinah glory appeared, we, too, must conduct ourselves in prayer befitting the majesty and might of the great God. It is true that the Christian is a redeemed man and accepted in the Beloved, yet in himself he is still a *sinner*. As another has

pointed out, “the most tender love which casts out the fear that hath torment, begets a fear that is as delicate and sensitive as that of John’s, who though he had lain his head on the bosom of Christ, scrupled too hastily to intrude upon the grave where He had slept.”

Third, note very particularly that this prayer of Elijah’s was *based upon a Divine promise*. When commanding his servant to appear again before Ahab the Lord had expressly declared, “And I will send rain upon the earth” (1 Kings 18:1). Why, then, should he now be found earnestly begging Him for rain? To natural reason, a Divine assurance of anything seems to render asking for it *unnecessary*: would not God make good His word and send the rain irrespective of further prayer? Not so did Elijah reason—nor should we. So far from God’s promises being designed to exempt us from making application to the Throne of Grace for the blessings guaranteed, they are designed to instruct us what things to ask for, and to encourage us to ask for them believingly, that we may have their fulfillment *to ourselves*. God’s thoughts and ways are ever the opposite of ours—and infinitely superior thereto. In Ezekiel 36:24-36 is found a whole string of promises, yet in immediate connection therewith we read, “I will yet for this *be inquired of* by the house of Israel, *to do it for them*” (v. 37).

By asking for those thing which God has promised, we declare Him as the Giver and are taught our dependence upon Him: faith is called into exercise and we appreciate His mercies all the more when they are received. God will do what He undertakes, but He requires us to sue for all which we would have Him do for us. Even to His own beloved Son God says, “*Ask of Me*, and I shall give Thee the heathen for Thine inheritance” (Psa. 2:8): His reward must be claimed. Even though Elijah heard (by faith), “a sound of abundance of rain,” nevertheless he must pray for it (Zech. 10:1). God has appointed that if we would receive, we must ask; that if we would find, we must seek; that if we would have the door of blessing opened, we must knock; and if we fail so to do we shall prove the truth of those words, “ye have not, because ye ask not” (James 4:2). God’s promises then are given us to incite prayer, to become the mold in which our petitions should be cast, to intimate the extent to which we may expect an answer.

Fourth, his prayer was *definite* or to the point. Scripture says, “ask ye of the Lord rain” (Zech. 10:1) and for that very thing the Prophet asked: he did not generalize but particularized. It is just here that so many fail. Their petitions are so vague they would scarcely recognize an answer if it were given: their requests are so lacking in precision that the next day the petitioner himself finds it difficult to remember what he asked for. No wonder such praying is so profitless to the soul, and brings so little to pass. Letters which require no answer contain little or nothing in them of any value or importance. Let the reader turn to the four Gospels with this thought before him and observe how very definite in his requests and detailed in describing his case was each one who came to Christ and obtained healing, and remember they are recorded for our learning. When His disciples asked the Lord to teach them to pray, He said, “which of you shall have a friend and shall go to him at midnight and say unto him, Friend, lend me three loaves” (Luke 11:5)—not simply “food,” but specifically “*three loaves*”!

Fifth, his prayer was *fervent*: “he prayed earnestly” (James 5:17). It is not necessary for a man to shout and scream in order to prove he is earnest, yet on the other hand, cold and formal petitions must not expect to meet with any response. God grants our requests only for Christ’s sake, nevertheless unless we supplicate Him with warmth and reality, with intensity of spirit and vehemence of entreaty, we shall not obtain the blessing desired. This blessing is constantly in-

culcated in Scripture, where prayer is likened unto seeking, knocking, crying, striving. Remember how Jacob wrestled with the Lord, and how David panted and poured out his soul; how unlike them is the listless and languid petitioning of most of our moderns. Of our blessed Redeemer it is written that He, “offered up prayers and supplications with strong crying and tears” (Heb. 5:7). It is not the half-hearted and mechanical asking which secures an answer, but “the effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man (that) availeth much” (James 5:16).

Sixth, note well Elijah’s *watchfulness* in prayer: “And said to his servant, Go up now, look toward the sea” (1 Kings 18:43). While we are constant in prayer and waiting for an answer, we must be on the look out to see if there be any token for good. Said the Psalmist, “I wait for the LORD, my soul doth wait, and in His Word do I hope. My soul waiteth for the LORD more than they that watch for the morning: I say, more than they that watch for the morning” (Psa. 130:5, 6). The allusion is to those who were stationed on the watch tower gazing eastwards for the first signs of the break of day, that the tidings might be signaled (trumpeted) to the temple, so that the morning sacrifice might be offered right on time. In like manner the suppliant soul is to be on the alert for any sign of the approach of the blessing for which he is praying. “Continue in prayer, *and watch* in the same with thanksgiving” (Col. 4:2). Alas, how often we fail at this very point, because hope does not hold up the head of our holy desires. We pray, yet do not look out expectantly for the favours we seek. Far different was it with Elijah.

Seventh, Elijah’s *perseverance* in his supplication. This is the most noticeable feature about the whole transaction and it is one which we need particularly to heed, for it is at this very point most of us fail the most. “And he said to his servant, Go up now, look toward the sea. And he went up, and looked, and said, There is nothing.” “Nothing”—nothing in the sky, nothing arising out of the sea to intimate the approach of rain. Does not both writer and reader know the meaning of this from personal experience? We have sought unto the Lord, and then hopefully looked for His intervention but instead of any token from Him that He has heard us—there is “nothing”! And what has been our response? Have we petulantly and unbelievably said, “Just as I thought,” and ceased praying about it? If so, that was a wrong attitude to take. First, make sure your petition is grounded upon Divine promise, and then believingly wait on God’s time to fulfill it. If you have no definite promise, commit your case into God’s hands and seek to be reconciled to His will as to the outcome.

“And he went up, and looked, and said, There is nothing.” Even Elijah was not always answered *immediately*, and who are we to demand a prompt answer to our first asking? The Prophet did not consider that because he had prayed once and there was no response, that therefore he need not continue to pray; rather did he persevere in pressing his suit until he received. Such was the persistency of the Patriarch Jacob, “I will not let Thee go except Thou bless me” (Gen. 32:26). Such was the Psalmist’s mode of praying: “I waited patiently for the LORD; and He inclined unto me, and heard my cry” (40:1). “And he said, Go again seven times” (1 Kings 18:43) was the Prophet’s command to his servant. He was convinced that sooner or later God would grant his request, yet he was persuaded he should “give Him no rest” (Isa. 62:7). Seven times the servant returned with his report that there was no portent of rain, yet the Prophet relaxed not his supplication. And let *us* not be faint-hearted when no immediate success attends our praying, but be importunate, exercising faith and patience until the blessing comes.

To ask, once, twice, thrice, nay six times, and then be denied, was no slight test of Elijah's endurance, but grace was *granted* him to bear the trial. "Therefore will the LORD wait that He may be gracious unto you" (Isa. 30:18). Why? To teach us that we are not heard for our fervour or urgency, or because of the justness of our cause: we can claim nothing from God—all is *of grace*, and we must wait *His* time. The Lord waits not because He is tyrannical but "that He may be gracious." It is for our good that He waits: that our graces may be developed, that submission to His holy will may be wrought in us, then He lovingly turns to us and says, "Great is thy faith, be it unto thee as thou wilt." "This is the confidence that we have in Him, that, if we ask anything according to His will He heareth us: and if we know that He hear us, whatsoever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we desired of Him" (1 John 5:14, 15). God cannot break His own Word, but we must abide His time and, refusing to be discouraged, continue supplicating Him until He appears on our behalf.

And it came to pass at the seventh time that he said, Behold, there ariseth a little cloud out of the sea, like a man's hand" (1 Kings 18:44). The Prophet's perseverance in prayer had not been in vain, for here was a token from God that he was heard. God does not often give a full answer to prayer all at once, but a little at first and then gradually more and more as He sees what is good for us. What the believer has now is nothing to what he shall yet have if he continues constant in believing and earnest prayer. Though God was pleased to keep the Prophet waiting for a time, He did not disappoint his expectation, nor will He fail us if we continue in prayer and watch in the same with thanksgiving. Then let us be ready to receive with cheerfulness and gratitude the least indication of an answer to our petitions, accepting it as a token for good and an encouragement to persevere in our requests till there be the full accomplishment of those desires which are grounded upon the Word. Small beginnings often produce wonderful effects, as the parable of the grain of mustard seed clearly teaches (Matt. 13:31-32). The feeble efforts of the Apostles met with remarkable success as God owned and blessed them. We regard the words "like a man's hand" as possessing a symbolic meaning: a man's hand had been raised in supplication and had, as it were, left its shadow on the heavens!

"And he said, Go up, say unto Ahab, Prepare thy chariot and get thee down, that the rain stop thee not" (1 Kings 18:44). Elijah did not disdain the significant omen, little though it was, but promptly took encouragement from the same. So convinced was he that the windows of Heaven were about to be opened and plentiful showers given that he sent his lad with an urgent message to Ahab, that he should get away at once ere the storm burst and the brook Kishon be so swollen that the king would be prevented from making his journey homeward. What holy confidence in a prayer-hearing God did that display! Faith recognized the Almighty behind that "little cloud." A "handful of meal" had been sufficient under God to sustain a household for many months, and a cloud "like a man's hand" could be counted upon to multiply and furnish an abundant downpour. "And it came to pass in the meanwhile that the Heaven was black with clouds and wind, and there was a great rain" (v. 45). Should not this speak loudly to us? O sorely-tried believer, take heart from what is here recorded: the answer to your prayers may be much nearer than you think.

"And Ahab rode, and went to Jezreel" (v. 45). The king had responded promptly to the Prophet's message. How much sooner are the ministers of the Lord attended to when giving temporal advice than they are when offering spiritual counsel! Ahab had no doubt now that the rain was about to fall. He was satisfied that He who answered Elijah with fire was on the point of an-

answering him with water; nevertheless, his heart remained as steeled against God as ever. O how solemn is the picture here presented: Ahab was convinced but not *converted*. How many like him there are in the churches today, who have religion in the head but not in the heart: convinced that the Gospel is true, yet *rejecting* it; assured that Christ is mighty to save yet not surrendering to Him.—A.W.P.

THE DOCTRINE OF MAN'S IMPOTENCY.

8. *Its Elucidation.*

A further word needs to be added to the brief statement last month upon the error of affirming that fallen man possesses a natural "ability" to obey God. Most of the writers who so affirm take the ground that all the natural man lacks in order to perform that which is pleasing to God is a *willingness* so to do, that since his mental and moral endowments are admirably suited to the substance of the Divine commandments, that since man is still possessed of every faculty which is required for the discharge of his duty, he *could* obey God if he *would*. But this is far from being the case: the condition of fallen man is much worse than that. He not only *will not*, but he *cannot* please God. Such is the emphatic and unequivocal teaching of Holy Writ, and it must be held fast by us at all costs, no matter what difficulties it may seem to involve. Yet we are fully convinced that this *cannot*, does not in the least measure, annul man's responsibility or render him any less blameworthy than was sinless Adam in committing his first offense.

"Unto them that are defiled and unbelieving is nothing pure: but even their mind and conscience is defiled" (Titus 1:15). In the unregenerate the mind and conscience are under an inherent and universal incapacity to form a right judgment or come to a right decision in regard to things pertaining to God, and as pertaining to Him. It is not merely that they are in the condition of one with a thick veil before his eyes, while the visive organs themselves are sound and whole, but rather are they like one whose eyes are *diseased*—weakened, decayed in their very internal organism. A diseased physical eye may be able to receive some glimmerings of light (through darkened glasses) yet be incapable of giving safe direction. But the eyes of fallen man's heart and understanding are so seriously affected that they cannot receive or even tolerate any spiritual light at all, until the great Physician heals them.

The solemn and terrible fact is that the brighter and more glorious is the Divine light shed upon the unregenerate, the more offensive and unbearable it is to them. The eyes of our understanding are radically diseased, and it is the understanding—under false views and erroneous estimates of things—which misleads the affections and the will. How, then, can we with the slightest propriety affirm that man still possesses a "natural ability" to receive God's Truth to the saving of his soul? In man as created there *was* a perfect adaptation of faculties and capability of receiving the Divine testimony. But in man fallen, though there be a suitableness in the essential nature of his faculties to receive the testimony of God—so that his case is far superior to that of the brute beast—yet his ability to use those faculties and actually to receive God's testimony unto suitable ends, is completely deranged and destroyed.

The entrance of sin into man has done far more than upset his poise and disorder his affections: it has corrupted and deranged his whole being. His intellectual faculties are so impaired and debased that his understanding is quite incapable of discerning spiritual things in a spiritual manner. His heart (including the will), which is the practical principle of operation, is "desperately wicked" and in a state of "blindness" (Eph. 4:18). Fallen man is not only negatively ignorant, but positively *opposed* to light and convictions. To say that the natural man could please God if he would is false: his impotency is insurmountable to will good, for he lacks the nature or disposition to will well. Therefore many men have greatly erred in supposing that the faculties of man are as capable now of receiving the testimony of God as they were before the Fall.

Unwillingness is not *all* which the Scriptures predicate of fallen man: they declare sin has so corrupted his being that he is rendered completely incapable of holy perceptions and that it has utterly disabled him to perform spiritual acts. "Ye have seen all that the Lord did before your eyes, in the land of Egypt unto Pharaoh and unto all his servants, and unto all his land: the great temptations which thine eyes have seen, the signs and those great miracles. Yet the LORD hath not given you *a heart to perceive*, and eyes to see, and ears to hear unto this day" (Deut. 29:2-4)—the faculties were there, but they had not obtained power from God to perceive. "And the LORD heard the voice of your words when ye spake unto me; and the LORD said unto me, I have heard the voice of the words of this people, which they have spoken unto thee: they have well said all that they have spoken. O that there were such a *heart* in them that they *would* fear Me, and keep all My commandments always, that it might be well with them and with their children forever" (Deut. 5:28, 29)—the faculties were there, but they lacked the spiritual power to use them. The unregenerate is utterly disabled by indwelling sin in all the faculties of his spirit and soul and body from thinking, feeling, or acting *any* spiritual good toward God.

Yet the facts pointed out above do not to the slightest degree destroy or even lessen man's responsibility to glorify his Maker. This will the more fully appear as we now consider what man's impotency actually consists of. First, it is a *voluntary* inability. It was so originally: Adam acted freely when he ate of the forbidden fruit, in consequence whereof he lost his native holiness and became in bondage to evil. Nor can his descendants justly murmur at their inheriting the depravity of their first parents and being made answerable for their inability to will or do good, as part of the forfeiture penalty due the first transgression, because their moral impotency consists of their own voluntary continuation of Adam's offense. The entire history of sin lies in inclination and self-determination. It must not be supposed for a moment that after the first sin of Adam all self-determination ceased.

"Original sin, as corruption of nature in each individual, is only the *continuation* of the first inclining away from God. The self-determination of the human will from God to the creature, as an ultimate end, did not stop short with the act in Eden, but goes right onward to every individual of Adam's posterity, until regeneration reverses it. As progressive sanctification is the continuation of that holy self-determination of the human will which begins in its regeneration by the Holy Spirit, so the progressive depravation of the natural man is the continuation of that sinful self-determination of the human will which began in Adam's transgression" (W. G. Shedd).

Thus the very origin and nature of man's inability unto good demonstrates that it cannot annul his responsibility; it was *self-induced* and is now *self-perpetuated*. So far from human depravity being a calamity for which we are to be pitied, it is a crime for which we are righteously to be blamed. So far from sin being a weakness or innocent infirmity arising from some defect of creation, it is a hostile power, a vicious enmity against God. The endowments of the creature placed him under lasting obligation to his Creator, and that obligation cannot be cancelled by any subsequent action of the creature. If Man has deliberately destroyed his power, he has not destroyed his obligation. God does man no wrong in requiring from him what he cannot now perform, for by his own deliberate act of disobedience man deprived himself and his posterity of that power, and his posterity's consent to Adam's act of disobedience by deliberately choosing and following a similar course of wickedness.

But how can man be said to act voluntarily when he is *impelled* unto evil by his own lusts? Because he *freely* chooses the evil. This calls for a closer definition of freedom or voluntariness of action. A free agent is one who is at liberty to act according to his own choice, without compulsion or restraint from without. And have not fallen men this liberty? Does he, in any instance, break God's Law by compulsion—against his inclinations? If it were true that the effect of human depravity was to destroy free agency and accountability, then it would necessarily follow that the more depraved or vicious a man becomes, the less capable he is of sinning, and that the most depraved of all would commit the least sin of any—which is too absurd to need refutation.

Though on the one hand it is a fact that fallen man is the slave of sin and the captive of the devil, yet on the other it is equally true that he is still a voluntary and accountable agent. Man has not lost the essential power or choice, or he would cease to be man. Though in one sense he is impelled Hellwards by the downward trend of his depravity, yet he elects to sin, himself consenting thereto. Though the rectitude of our will is lost, nevertheless we still act spontaneously. "The soul of the wicked *desireth* evil" (Prov. 21:10), and for that he is to be blamed. If a man picked your pocket and when arrested said, "I could not help myself: I have a thievish disposition, I am obliged to act according to my nature," his judge would reply, All the more reason you should be in prison.

Because fallen man possesses the power of choice and is a rational creature, he is obligated to make a wise and good choice. The fault lies entirely at his own door that he does not do so, for he deliberately chooses the evil. "They have *chosen* their own ways, and their soul *delighteth* in their abominations. I also will choose their delusions, and will bring their fears upon them: because when I call, none did answer: when I spake, they did not hear: but they did evil before Mine eyes, and chose that in which I delighted not" (Isa. 66:3, 4). The bondage of the will to sinful inclinations neither destroys voluntariness nor our responsibility, for the enslaved will is still a self-determining faculty, and therefore under inescapable obligations to choose what man knows to be right. That very bondage is culpable, for it proceeds from self and not from God. Though man is the slave of sin it is a voluntary servitude, and therefore is it inexcusable.

The will is biased by the disposition of the heart: as the heart is, so the will acts. A holy will has a holy bias and therefore is under a moral necessity of exerting holy volitions: "a good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit." But a sinful will has a sinful bias because it has an evil disposition and therefore is it under a moral necessity of exerting sinful volitions. But let it be pointed out once more that the evil disposition of man's will is not the effect of some original defect in the creature, for God made man "upright." No, his very sinful disposition is the abiding self-determination of the human will. Its origin is due to the misuse Adam made of his freedom, and its continuation results from the unceasing, self-determination of everyone of his posterity. Each man perpetuates and prolongs the evil started by his first parents.

Because man *must* act according to the state of his heart, does this destroy his freedom? Certainly not, for "acting according to his heart" is simply another way of saying that he does as he pleases. And doing as we please is the very thing in which all free agency consists. The pulse can beat and the limbs can act in bodily disorders, whether we will them to or not. We should, with good reason, consider ourselves harshly dealt with if we were blamed for such actions; nor does God hold us accountable for them. A good man's pulse may beat as irregularly in sickness as the worst villain's in the world, or his hands may strike convulsively those who seek to hold him

still. For such actions as these we are not accountable because they have no moral value: no evil inclination of ours, or the lack of a good one, *is necessary* in order to them—they are independent of *us*.

If all our actions were involuntary and out of our power, no ways necessarily connected with our disposition, our temper of mind, our choice, then we should not be accountable creatures or the subjects of moral government. If a good tree could bring forth evil fruit and a corrupt tree good fruit, if a good man out of the good treasure of his heart could bring forth evil things, and an evil man out of his evil treasure good things, the tree could never be known by its fruits. In such a case all moral distinctions would be at an end, moral government would cease to be, for men could no longer be dealt with according to their works—rewarded for the good and punished for the evil. The only man who is justly held accountable for reward or punishment is one whose actions are properly his own, dictated by himself, and which could not take place without his consent.

Here, then, is the answer to the objection that if fallen man is *obliged* to act according to the evil bias of his heart, he cannot rightly be termed a free agent: that necessity and choice are incompatible. Any inability to act otherwise than agreeably to our own minds would be an inability to act other than as free agents. But that necessity which arises from, or rather consists in, the temper and choice of the agent himself, is the very opposite of acting against his nature and freedom. The sinner acts freely because he consents, even when irresistibly influenced by his evil lusts. Of Christ we read, “the Spirit *driveth* Him into the wilderness” (Mark 1:12), which indicates a forcible motion and powerful influence: yet of this same action of the Saviour’s we are also told, “Then was Jesus *led up* of the Spirit in the wilderness” (Matt. 4:1), which plainly signifies His freedom of action. So, too, the Christian is both “drawn” and “taught” of God (John 6:44, 45): liberty of his will yet the victorious efficacy of Divine grace are united together.

Second, fallen man’s inability is a *moral*, and not a physical or constitutional one. Unless this be clearly perceived we shall be inclined to turn our impotency into an excuse or ground of self-extenuation. Men will be ready to say: Even though I possess the requisite faculties for the discharge of my duty, yet if I am *powerless* then I cannot be blamed for not doing it. A person who is paralyzed possesses all the members of his body, but he lacks the physical power to use them and no one condemns him for his helplessness. It needs, then, to be made plain that when the sinner is said to be morally and spiritually “without strength,” his case is entirely different from that of one who is paralyzed physically. The normal or ordinary natural man is not without either mental or physical strength to use his talents: what he lacks is *a good heart*, a disposition to love and serve God, a desire to please Him, and for *that* lack he is justly blamable.

The mental and moral faculties with which man are endowed, despite their impaired condition, lay him under moral obligation to love and serve his Creator. The illustrious character and perfections of God make it unmistakably manifest that He is infinitely worthy of being loved and served and therefore we are bound to love Him, which is what a good heart essentially consists of. There is no way of evading the plain teaching of Christ in the parable of the talents on this subject: “thou *oughtest* therefore to have put My money to the exchangers, and at My coming I should have received Mine own with usury” (Matt. 25:27), which, in the light of the immediate context, clearly means that man *ought* to have had an heart to have improved to the best advantage (used aright) the talents which were committed to him.

The inability of the natural man to meet the holy and just requirements of God consists in the opposition of his heart to Him, and this because of the presence and prevalency of a vicious and corrupt disposition. Men know that God does not require from them a selfish and wicked heart, and they also know that He has the right to require from them a good and obedient heart. To deny that God has the right to require a holy and good heart from fallen man would be tantamount to saying He had no right to require anything from them, and then it would follow that they were incapable of sinning against Him. For if God had no right to require anything from man, man would not be guilty of disobedience against God. If God has no right to require a good heart from man, then He has no right to require him to do anything which man is *unwilling* to do, which would render him completely innocent.

A child has no right to complain of a parent for requiring him to do what he has faculties to perform, but for which he has no heart. A servant has no right to complain of a master for reasonably requiring him to do what his endowments fit him to perform, but for which he is unwilling. A subject has no right to complain for a ruler requiring him to perform that which the good of his country demands, and which he is capacitated to render, merely because he lacks the disposition to do it. All human authority supposes a right to require that of men which they are qualified to perform, but have no heart unto. How much less reason, then, have those who are the subjects of Divine authority to complain of being required to do what their faculties fit them for but which their hearts hate. God has the same supreme right to command a cordial and universal obedience from Adam's posterity as He has from the holy angels in Heaven.—A.W.P.

THE DIVINE AGENCY IN WAR.

(Jeremiah 51:20)

George Lawson

Before passing on to the next branch of our subject, let us offer some practical reflections on what has been before us last month. 1. We ought to form just notions of the universal extent of the Divine Providence, particularly remembering that the actions of men are as truly and fully under the control of the Divine government as the motions of the heavenly bodies. Think not that the Divine power rules only those creatures which lack life and reason: His kingdom rules over men and devils as well as over fire and wing and stormy vapours. Job lost as much by Sabeans and Chaldean spoilers as he did by “the fire of God” and the “great wind,” yet he perceived the hand of God in the one as much as in the other, saying, “The LORD gave and the LORD (not the Sabeans) hath taken away: blessed be the name of the LORD” (Job 1:21).

2. We must give unto God the glory of His works, even of those which he performs by the hands of His creatures. He is to be revered and adored in all the works of His hands. He is glorious in His works of Providence as well as in His works of creation. He made all things “good” when he made the world, and He does all things “well” in the government of it. He is glorious in what He does by the hands of wicked men as well as what He does by the hands of His saints. In His acts of vengeance as well as in His works of grace He is glorious. The work of the Lord is always glorious and honourable, even when He makes use of instruments for accomplishing them that are vile and accursed. “O LORD, Thou art my God; I will exalt Thee, I will praise Thy name; for Thou hast done wonderful things; Thy counsels of old are faithfulness and truth. For *Thou* hast made of a city an heap; of a defenced city a ruin: a palace of strangers to be no city; it shall never be built. *Therefore* shall the strong people *glorify Thee*, the city of the terrible nations shall fear Thee” (Isa. 25:1-3).

How glorious is that power which keeps the devils of Hell, and those fierce tyrants who are their visible images on earth, under such powerful restraint that they can do nothing less or more than He pleases, and are still accomplishing His holy purpose when they think they are only performing what *they* please and what appears to them most conducive to the fulfillment of their own ambitions! How wonderful is that God in counsels who makes the wrath of men to praise Him: who brings glory to His name and happiness to them that love Him out of those evils which threatened destruction to His kingdom on earth—who combines events of the most contrary tendency as means for effectuating the same gracious end! When God’s people were carried to Babylon, they were commanded to pray for the peace of that city, for in her peace they were to have peace: yet when that city was destroyed, they found peace and joy in her ruins.

The people of God are often unable to see the glory of that work which He performs by the hands of those men whom He employs as instruments of His wrath. They are tempted to think that the Lord has utterly forgotten Zion, or that He has forsaken the earth, and leaves it to be turned upside down by the caprice of those mighty oppressors whom He suffers to do according to their will. But let it not be forgotten we must walk by faith and not by sight. It is but a little portion of the ways of God that we can understand. Those events which appear to us most dark and gloomy are essential parts of a plan of conduct which will appear glorious and excellent when it is developed in its full extent. Let us also remember that when clouds and darkness are about the Lord God, righteousness and judgment are still the habitation of His throne.

3. Herein we see in what estimation those heroes are to be held who have triumphed by the use of force and been accorded the chief places of honour in history. They are furnished with brilliant talents by the great Dispenser of gifts to men. They have nothing but what they have received, and nothing but what is always under the control of the Giver. Their knowledge, their valour, their enterprising spirit, their presence of mind in danger and death, their dexterity in finding resources in emergencies, which have sunk other men into despondency, may deserve high admiration. Let their endowments and exploits have their share of praise, but let us not lose sight of the Giver and Director of those endowments. It was justly observed even by a heathen philosopher that such men as Alexander the Great deserve only such admiration as we would bestow on a destructive tempest or earthquake.

We are too ready to give some portion of that honour and fear to great men which ought to be reserved sacred to the Most High. Give fear to whom fear, honour to whom honour is due—but give them not that honour and fear which belongs only to the King of kings. Nebuchadnezzar once thought that there was not a God that could deliver out of his hand: that he could kill or save alive whom he pleased, without control from any higher power. But bitter experience forced him to confess that every man at his best estate was altogether vanity, and that all the inhabitants of the earth were but like grasshoppers before Him who does according to His will in the armies of Heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth.

Shall we say, then, that the actions of men are not their own, that they are no more than machines in the hands of a superior agent? Far be it from us to deny that men are rational agents, and that they are entitled to praise or blame for what they do. God has given different natures to different creatures, but He has not put it into the power of any of them to do any thing without Himself. Consider what God said to the proud Assyrian monarch who boasted of his uncontrollable power over the nations to rob and plunder and destroy at his pleasure. God heard with indignation and contempt his insolent boasts, and let him know that he was no more in the hands of his Maker than an axe or saw was in the hand of a carpenter. See Isaiah 10:13-15.

The guilt of any sin is not in the least degree lessened by the agency of the Divine Providence in directing and overruling it to serve the purpose of the Divine wisdom. Those who crucified the Lord of Glory did nothing but what God had foretold by the mouth of His holy Prophets, nothing but what God saw expedient to be done for the accomplishment of our salvation. The murderers of Jesus Christ had no intention to execute the will of God; they rejected His counsel against themselves. They were under no compulsion but fulfilled the desires of their own hearts, Yet they did nothing but what God's hand and counsel determined before to be done: and by doing it, they justly brought upon themselves the most fearful curses denounced against the enemies of God in the volume of inspiration.

4. The consideration of this truth should teach us how to regulate our thoughts and affections under all the awful events that take place in the world. The men who bring them to pass are the instruments of that Providence to which all reverence and praise is ever due, and they have done nothing which will not be overruled by Him to the accomplishment of His own purposes. We repeat that it is indeed true that the guilt of wicked men is not in any degree lessened by the use which God makes of them, and therefore are they the just objects of abhorrence. It is likewise true that the changes wrought by them may be attended with great misery to nations, to our nation perhaps, and to ourselves, amongst others who are affected by them. But the Lord is right-

eous in all the evil things that come upon us and upon our fellow men. We are sinners, as well as those by whom God takes vengeance of our sins.

Why then should we indulge our angry passions without restraint? Ought we not rather to humble ourselves under the mighty hand of God, to learn righteousness from the Divine judgments? Whatever loss we sustain in our accommodations and comforts, if we behave dutifully to God and with a right temper towards the men who are the instruments of our correction, the advantage derived from the most awful events will greatly counterbalance the loss. Give no place to desponding fears, either on your own account or on account of the interests of Christ's Church. Let the children of God remember that He is their heavenly Father who loves them, whose tender mercies infinitely exceed the compassions of any earthly parents toward their children, and that His power is equal to His grace. The mightiest of your enemies are in His hand, and they can do you no more harm than He sees necessary for your good. When God sent the Assyrians against the Jews, fearfulness justly surprised the hypocrites of Zion; but remember what He said to the faithful remnant of that day: see Isaiah 10:24, 25.

If bad men have all their power from God, and all their movements are directed and overruled to the accomplishment of His pleasure, they shall do no permanent injury to any who are under His protection. "Behold, I have created the smith that bloweth the coals in the fire, and that bringeth forth an instrument for his work, and I have created the waster to destroy. No weapon that is formed against thee shall prosper: and every tongue that shall rise against thee in judgment thou shalt condemn. This is the heritage of the servants of the Lord, and their righteousness is of Me, saith the LORD" (Isa. 54:16, 17). He will not suffer any of those for whom Christ died to perish by the hand of those instruments whom He employs to execute His displeasure on a generation of His wrath. They may suffer a while, but their sufferings will be salutary to their souls. It may be they shall be hid in the day of the Lord's anger. Most certainly they shall be safe from the worst of evils: see Romans 8:28.

When a pestilence rages in a country, what value would be set on a medicine found to be an effectual antidote against infection! A still higher value would be put on a medicine which was found to be not only an effectual preservative of life, but also a sure means of rendering the distemper so beneficial to the body of the patient that he would never again be exposed to danger from any contagious disease. Vital godliness and personal piety is a medicine of such virtue to the soul. All evil things are turned by it into good by their consequences. Unto the upright there arises light out of darkness, and sorrow is turned into joy through their faith, and through the supplies of the Spirit of Jesus Christ.

Let us read with the text (Jer. 51:20) the words that go before it. "The portion of Jacob is not like them (the idols of the nations); for He is the Former of all things, and Israel is the rod of His inheritance: the LORD of hosts is His name." He it is who says to the conqueror of our text, "thou art My battle-axe and My weapons of war." Nor let it be forgotten by us that unto Him who loved us and gave Himself for us is "committed all judgment." The keys of the invisible world and of death are in our Saviour's hands, and He will not suffer any of the enemies of mankind to live any longer than He pleases. They cannot move an arm without Him. They cannot, without Him, form a single thought, for "the government (of the universe) is upon *His* shoulder." He is not only the Head of the body which is His church, but he is given to be the Head over all things *to* the Church.

Having spoken of conquerors in war as God's battle-axes, let us now consider *the use* which He makes of them. With them He "breaks in pieces the nations, and with them He destroys kingdoms." In these words we are taught: 1. That nations and kingdoms are liable to destruction as well as individuals. We are, too, ready to think that the nations and kingdoms to which we belong must abide as long as the earth. But what has become of the most ancient kingdoms, which were once the terror of the mighty? The beginning of the kingdom of Nimrod, that mighty hunter before the Lord, was Babel; but not only was his kingdom more than once brought low, but it has since been utterly destroyed. "For I will rise up against them, saith the LORD of hosts, and cut off from Babylon the name and remnant, and son and nephew, saith the LORD. I will also make it a possession for the bittern, and pools of water: and I will sweep it with the besom of destruction, saith the LORD of hosts. The LORD of hosts hath sworn, saying, Surely as I have thought, so shall it come to pass" (Isa. 14:22-24).

We are disposed to think if a kingdom has long continued in its strength, that it must be eternal in its duration. Egypt was a famous kingdom in ancient times, but it is now one of the least of kingdoms. Ezekiel puts them in mind (chap. 32) of many famous nations who had once been the terror of the mighty, but had gone down to the sides of the pit, with all their multitudes. And what reason have we to think that kingdoms and nations are now more secure? Great discoveries have indeed been made in modern times for the benefit of mankind, but not until physicians find an antidote against death that men may never see corruption, shall we have any hope that politicians (the physicians of the State) will discover some preventative of that perpetual tendency to dissolution, by which empires like individuals are brought to their final period.

It is melancholy to consider that not only our own bodies are mortal, but the nation to which we belong is liable to destruction. But melancholy considerations are often useful. When we consider the frailty of our own bodies, we see the necessity of avoiding everything that may hasten an event which we wish to have retarded. And when we consider the vicissitudes incident to nations, we see powerful reasons to avoid everything that may bring upon us the guilt of hastening the ruin of our country. Righteousness exalts a nation but sin is the reproach of any people. The righteous therefore are the strength and glory of a land. Sinners, especially those who will not be reclaimed by the admonitions of the Word and Providence of God, and most of all those who by their example and influence make many others to sin with them, are its worst enemies.

2. Whatever be the means of the destruction of a nation, God is fit Author of it. Since no man can die till the day appointed by the counsels of God, no nation can be destroyed or revolutionized without Him. However mighty our enemies may be, however well laid their plans for our ruin, and however ably those plans are executed, we are safe IF our ways please the Lord. But we entertain false notions of God if we think that because He delights in mercy He will not punish guilty nations as well as sinning individuals. It is the height of absurdity to suppose that any kingdom can perish or meet with any calamity in opposition to the Divine counsels concerning them. It would be the destruction of all our comfort, of all our hope in God, if there could be evil in a city which the Lord has not done. If any creature has power to act independently of God, we are not safe under His protection.

But can a merciful and gracious God take pleasure in pulling down, in plucking up and destroying? Is it good to Him that He should oppress, that He should destroy nations at once, that He should give success to the counsels of those savages who delight in slaughter? It is vain for

us to shut our eyes against plain facts. It is certain that many kingdoms have been overthrown; and it is equally certain that such tremendous events could not take place in the world without the agency of Divine Providence—unless that blasphemous doctrine were true that the Lord has forsaken the earth, that He sits on His throne a careless spectator of the miseries of His poor creatures—and that he will suffer His well-laid plans for the welfare of mankind to be frustrated by the fury of destroyers.

Dreadful as the convulsions of nations and the overturning of thrones are, God knows how to make them subservient to His purpose. The Lord is the King of nations, and He governs in wisdom and righteousness. The supreme magistrate of a nation would but ill perform his duty if he did not cause his laws to be respected by the punishment of evil-doers, and it well becomes Him who reigns over *all kings and their kingdoms* to show forth His displeasure against guilty nations, especially when they refuse to be reclaimed, by inflicting deserved punishment upon them. There are some who will not allow that God punishes nations in any other way than by leaving them to suffer the natural and unavoidable consequences of their own behaviour. But have not the natural consequences of virtue and vice been annexed to them by the same Providence that has established the ordinances of Heaven and earth? The wrath of God is seen in those who indulge licentious passions when their flesh is consumed and their names abhorred.

Yet it is plain that the vices of a nation are not the sole cause of its ruin. It may long exist in an enfeebled state under the universal prevalence of vice, although its glory is departed, if no foreign enemies precipitate its destruction—but when one nation brings misery and ruin upon another, the righteousness of God is to be acknowledged in the awful event. We ought indeed to be very cautious in assigning reasons why God brings destruction either upon individuals or nations. We must not be wise above what is written; but it is plainly revealed in Scripture that God inflicts His judgments upon nations on account of *their sins*. Read through Ezekiel 23, where the people of Judah are viewed under the emblem of the harlot Aholibah, and note especially verses 30, 31. Note, too, how in Jeremiah 18:7, 8 sentence of destruction may be averted by true national repentance: as was the case with Nineveh.—George Lawson.

N.B. The careful reader will observe how wisely and well Mr. Lawson preserved the *balance* between God's sovereignty and God's righteousness. The Most High does as He pleases, always as He pleases, and gives no account of His matters unto us. Nevertheless, He does not act capriciously, without good reason. While He goes not outside of Himself for the *motives* of His actions, working all things after the pleasure of His own imperial will, yet this does not mean He takes no knowledge of human actions or does not *justly* apportion both rewards and punishments to individuals and nations alike. When His judgments fall upon us, whatever form they take, it is because our sins have called loudly for Him to vindicate His honour and enforce the penalty of His Law. Had we heeded His warnings, responded to His exhortations, and altered our evil ways, His wrath had been *averted*—"O that thou hadst hearkened to My commandments, then had thy peace been as a river, and thy righteousness as the waves of the sea" (Isa. 48:18). Even when God's judgments are upon us, it is not too late to seek a moderation of them. See Psalm 81:13, 14. But if His people refuse, then the nation must drain the cup of His anger.—A.W.P.

