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The Sermons of John Wesley - Sermon 67

On Divine Providence

"Even the very hairs of your head are all numbered." Luke 12:7.

1. The doctrine of divine providence has been received by wise men in all ages. It was believed by many of the eminent Heathens, not only philosophers, but orators and poets. Innumerable are the testimonies concerning it which are scattered up and down in their writings; agreeable to that well-knowing saying in Cicero, *Deorum moderamine cuncta geri*: "That all things, all events in this world, are under the management of God." We might bring a cloud of witnesses to confirm this, were any so hardy as to deny it.

2. The same truth is acknowledged at this day in most parts of the world; yea, even by those nations which are so barbarous as not to know the use of letters. So when Paustoobee, an Indian Chief, of the Chicasaw nation in North America, was asked, "Why do you think the Beloved Ones (so they term God) take care of you" he answered, without any hesitation, "I was in the battle with the French; and the bullet went on this side; and this man died, and that man died; but I am alive still; and by this I know that the beloved Ones take care of me.

3. But although the ancient as well as modern Heathens had some conception of a divine providence, yet the conceptions which most of them entertained concerning it were dark, confused, and imperfect; Yea, the accounts which the most enlightened among them gave, were usually contradictory to each other. Add to this, that they were by no means assured of the truth of those very accounts: They hardly dared to affirm anything, but spoke with the utmost caution and diffidence; insomuch that what Cicero himself, the author of that noble declaration, ventures to affirm in cool blood, at the end of his long dispute upon the subject, amounts to no more than this lame and impotent conclusion: *Mihi verisimilior videbatur Cotta oratin*: "What Cotta said," (the person that argued in the defence of the being and providence of God,) "seemed to me more probable than what his opponent had advanced to the contrary."

4. And it is no wonder: For only God himself can give a clear, consistent, perfect account (that is, as perfect as our weak understanding can receive, in this our infant state of existence; or, at least, as is consistent with the designs of his government) of his manner of governing the world. And this he hath done in his written word: All the oracles of God, all the Scriptures, both of the Old Testament and the New, describe so many scenes of divine providence. It is the beautiful remark of a fine writer, "Those who object to the Old Testament in particular, that it is not a connected history of nations, but only a congeries of broken, unconnected events, do not observe the nature and design of these writings. They do not see, that Scripture is the history of God." Those who bear this upon their minds will easily perceive that the inspired writers never lose sight of it, but preserve one unbroken, connected chain from the beginning to the end. All over that wonderful book, as "life and immortality"(immortal life) is gradually "brought to light," so is Immanuel, God with us, and his kingdom ruling over all.

5. In the verses preceding the text, our Lord had been arming his disciples against the fear of man: "Be not afraid," says he, (verse 4,) "of them that can kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do." He guards them against this fear, first, by reminding them of what was infinitely more terrible than anything which man could inflict: "Fear Him, who after he hath killed hath power to cast into hell." He guards them farther against it, by the consideration of an over-ruling providence: "Are not five sparrows sold for two farthings, and not one of them is forgotten before God" Or, as the words are

repeated by St. Matthew, with a very inconsiderable variation, (10:29, 30) "Not one of them shall fall on the ground without you Father. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered."

6. We must indeed observe, that this strong expression, through repeated by both the Evangelists, need not imply,(though if any one thinks it does, he may think so very innocently,) that God does literally number as the hairs that are on the heads of all his creatures: But it is a proverbial expression, implying, that nothing is so small or insignificant in the sight of men as not to be an object of the care and providence of God, before whom nothing is small that concerns the happiness of any of his creatures.

7. There is scarce any doctrine in the whole compass of revelation, which is of deeper importance than this. And ,at the same time, there is scarce any that is so little regarded, and perhaps so little understood. Let us endeavor then, with the assistance of God, to examine it to the bottom; to see upon what foundation it stands, and what it properly implies.

8. The eternal, almighty, all-wise, all-gracious God is the Creator of heaven and earth. He called out of nothing, by his all-powerful word, the whole universe, all that is. "Thus the heavens an the earth were created, and all the hosts of them." And after he had set all things else in array, the plants after their kinds, fish and fowl, beasts and reptiles, after their kinds, "He created man after his own image." And the Lord saw that every distinct part of the universe was good. But when he saw everything he had made, all in connection with each other, "behold, it was very good."

9. And as this all-wise, all-gracious Being created all things,so he sustains all things. He is the Preserver as well as the Creator of everything that exists. "He up holdeth all things by the word of his power;" that is, by his powerful word. Now it must be that he knows everything he has made, and everything he preserves, from moment to moment; otherwise, he could not preserve it, he could not continue to it the going which he has given it. And it is nothing strange that He who is omnipresent, who "filleth heaven and earth," who is intimately present. If the eye of man discerns things at a small distance; the eye of an eagle, what is at a greater; the eye of an angle, what is at a thousand times greater distance; (perhaps taking in the surface of the earth at one view;) how shall no the eye of God see everything, through the whole extent of creation Especially considering, that nothing is distant from Him in whom we all "live, and move, and have our being."

10. It is true, our narrow understandings but imperfectly comprehend this. But whether we comprehend it or no, we are certain that so it is. As certain as it is, that he created all things, and that he still sustains all that is created; so certain it is, that he is present, at all times, in all places; that he is above, beneath; that he "besets us behind and before," and, as it were, "lays his hand upon us." We allow, "such knowledge is too high" and wonderful for us; we "cannot attain unto it." The manner of his presence no man can explain, nor, probably, any angel in heaven. Perhaps what the ancient philosopher speaks of the soul, in regard to its residence in the body, that it is tota in toto, et, tota in qualibet parte, might, in some sense, be spoken of the omnipresent Spirit, in regard to the universe: That he is not only "All in the whole," but "All in every part." Be this as it may, it cannot be doubted but He sees every atom of his creation, and that a thousand times more clearly than we see the things that are close to us: Even of these we see only the surface, while He sees the inmost essence of every thing.

11. The omnipresent God sees and knows all the properties of the beings that he hath made. He knows all the connections, dependencies, and relations, and all the ways wherein one of them can affect

another. In particular, he sees all the inanimate parts of the creation, whether in heaven above, or in the earth beneath. He knows how the stars, comets, or planets above influence the inhabitants of the earth beneath; what influence the lower heavens, with their magazines of fire, hail, snow, and vapors, winds, and storms, have on our planet; and what effects may be produced in the bowels of the earth by fire, air, or water; what exhalations may be raised therefrom, and what changes wrought thereby; what effects every numeral or vegetable may have upon the children of men: All these lie naked and open to the eye of the Creator and Preserver of the universe.

12. He knows all the animals of the lower world, whether beasts, birds, fishes, reptiles, or insects: He knows all the qualities and powers he hath given them, from the highest to the lowest: He knows every good angel and every evil angel in every part of his dominions; and looks from heaven upon the children of men over the whole face of the earth. He knows all the hearts of the sons of men, and understands all their thoughts: He sees what any angel, any devil, any man, either thinks, or speaks, or does; yea, and all they feel. He sees all their sufferings, with every circumstance of them.

13. And is the Creator and Preserver of the world unconcerned for what he sees therein Does he look upon these things either with a malignant or heedless eye Is he an Epicurean god Does he sit at ease in the heaven, without regarding the poor inhabitants of earth It cannot be. He hath made us, not we ourselves, and he cannot despise the work of his own hands. We are his children: And can a mother forget the children of her womb Yea, she may forget; yet will not God forget us! On the contrary, he hath expressly declared, that as his "eyes are over all the earth,"so he "is loving to every man, and his mercy is over all his works." Consequently, he is concerned every moment for what befalls every creature upon earth; and more especially for everything that befalls any of he children of men. It is hard, indeed, to comprehend this; nay, it is hard to believe it, considering the complicated wickedness, and the complicated misery, which we see on every side. But believe it we must, unless we will make God a liar; although it is sure, no man can comprehend it. It behoves us, then, to humble ourselves before God, and to acknowledge our ignorance. Indeed, how can we expect hat a man should be able to comprehend a worm How much less can it be supposed, that a man can comprehend God!

For how can finite measure infinite

14. He is infinite in wisdom as well as in power: And all his wisdom is continually employed in managing all the affairs of his creation for the good of all his creatures. For his wisdom and goodness go hand in hand: They are inseparably united, and continually act in concert with Almighty power, for the real good of all his creatures. His power being equal to his wisdom and goodness, continually co-operates with them. And to him all things are possible: He doeth whatsoever pleaseth him, in heaven and earth, and in the sea, and all deep places: And we cannot doubt of his exerting all his power, as in sustaining, so in governing, all that he has made.

15. Only he that can do all things else cannot deny himself: He cannot counteract himself, or oppose his own work. Were it not for this, he would destroy all sin, with its attendant pain in a moment. He would abolish wickedness out of his whole creation, and suffer not trace of it remain. But in so doing he would counteract himself; he would altogether overturn his own work, and undo all that he has been doing since he created man upon the earth. For he created man in his own image: A spirit like himself; a spirit endued with understanding, with will or affections, and liberty; without which, neither his understanding nor his affections could have been of any use, neither would he have been capable either of vice or virtue. He could not be a moral agent, any more than a tree or a stone. If, therefore, God were thus to exert his power, there would certainly be no more vice; but it is equally certain,

neither could there be any virtue in the world. Were human liberty taken away, men would be as incapable of virtue as stones. Therefore, (with reverence be it spoken,) the Almighty himself cannot do this thing. He cannot thus contradict himself, or undo what he has done. He cannot destroy out of the soul of man that image of himself wherein he made him: And without doing this, he cannot abolish sin and pain out of the world. But were it to be done, it would imply no wisdom at all; but barely a stroke of omnipotence. Whereas all the manifold wisdom of God (as well as all his power and goodness) is displayed in governing man as man; not as a stock or stone, but as an intelligent and free spirit, capable of choosing either good or evil. Herein appears the depth of the wisdom of God, in his adorable providence; in governing men, so as not to destroy either their understanding, will, or liberty. He commands all things, both in heaven and earth, to assist man in attaining the end of his being, in working out his won salvation, so far as it can be done without compulsion, without over-ruling his liberty. An attentive inquirer may easily discern, the whole frame of divine providence is so constituted as to afford man every possible help, in order to his doing good and eschewing evil, which can be done without turning man into a machine; without making him incapable of virtue or vice, reward or punishment.

16. Meantime, it has been remarked by a pious writer, that here is, as he expresses it, a three-fold circle of divine providence, over and above that which presides over the whole universe. We do not now speak of that over-ruling hand which governs the inanimate creation, which sustains the sun, moon, and stars in their stations, and guides their motions; we do not refer to his care of the animal creation, every part of which we know is under His government, "who giveth food unto the cattle, and feedeth the young ravens that call upon him;" but we here speak of that superintending providence which regards the children of men. each of these is easily distinguished from the other, by those who accurately observe the ways of God. The outermost circle includes the whole race of mankind, all the descendants of Adam, all the human creatures that are dispersed over the face of the earth. This comprises not only the Christian world, those that name the name of Christ, but the Mahometans also, who considerably out-number even the nominal Christians; yea, and the Heathens likewise, who very far out-number the Mahometans and Christians put together. "Is he the God of the Jews," says the Apostle, "and not of the Gentiles also" And so we may say, Is he the God of the Christians, and not of the Mahometans and Heathens Yea, doubtless of the Mahometans and Heathens also. His love is not confined: "The Lord is loving unto every man, and his mercy is over all his works." He careth for the very outcasts of men: It may truly be said,

Free as the air thy bounty streams O'er all thy works: Thy mercies' beams Diffusive as they sun's arise.

17. Yet it may be admitted, that He takes more immediate care of those that are comprised in the second, the smaller circle; which includes all that are called Christians, all that profess to believe in Christ. We may reasonably think that these, in some degree, honor him, at least more than the Heathens do: God does, likewise, in some measure, honor them, and has a nearer concern for them. By many instances it appears, that the prince of this world has not so full power over these as over the Heathens. The God whom they even profess to serve, does, in some measure, maintain his own cause; so that the spirits of darkness do not reign so uncontrolled over them as they do over the heathen world.

18. Within the third, the innermost circle, are contained only the real Christians; those that worship God, not in form only, but in spirit and in truth. Herein are comprised all that love God, or, at least, truly fear God and work righteousness; all in whom is the mind which was in Christ, and who walk as

Christ also walked. The words of our Lord aboverecited peculiarly refer to these. It is to these in particular that he says, "Even the very hairs of your head are all numbered." He sees their souls and their bodies; he takes particular notice of all their tempers, desires, and thoughts, all their words and actions. He marks all their sufferings, inward and outward, and the source whence they arise; so that we may well say,

Thou know'st thy pains thy servants feel, Thou hear'st thy children's cry; And their best wishes to fulfil,
Thy grace is ever nigh.

Nothing relative to these is too great, nothing too little, for His attention. He has his eye continually, as upon every individual person that is a member of this his family, so upon every circumstance that relates either to their souls or bodies; either to their inward or outward state; wherein either their present or eternal happiness in is any degree concerned.

19. But what say the wise men of the world to this They answer, with all readiness, "Who doubts of this We are not Atheists. We all acknowledge a providence: That is, a general providence; for, indeed the particular providence, of which some talk, we know not what to make of: Surely the little affairs of men are far beneath the regard of the great Creator and Governor or the universe! Accordingly,

"He sees with equal eyes, as Lord of all,

A hero perish, or a sparrow fall." Does he indeed I cannot think it; because (whatever that fine poet did, or his patron, whom he so deeply despised, and yet grossly flattered) I believe the Bible; wherein the Creator and Governor of the world himself tells me quite the contrary. That he has a tender regard for the brute creatures, I know: He does, in a measure, "take care for oxen:" He "provideth food for the cattle," as well as "herbs for the use of men." "The lions roaring after their prey, do seek their meat from God." "He openeth his hand, and filleth all things living with plenteousness."

The various troops of sea and land In sense of common want agree; All wait on thy dispensing hand, And have their daily alms from Thee. They gather what thy stores disperse, Without their trouble to provide: Thou ope'st thy hand; the universe,

The craving world, is all supplied. Our heavenly Father feedeth the fowls of the air: But mark! "Are no ye much better than they" Shall he not then "much more feed you," who are pre-eminent by so much odds He does not, in that sense, look upon you and them "with equal eyes;" set you on a level with them; least of all, does he set you on a level with brutes, in respect of life and death: "Right precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints." Do you really think the death of a sparrow is equally precious in his sight He tells us, indeed, that "not a sparrow falleth on the ground without our Father;" but he asks. at the same time, "Are ye not of more value than many sparrows

20. But, in support of a general, in contradiction to a particular providence, the same elegant poet lays it down as an unquestionable maxim,

The Universal Cause Acts not by partial, but by general laws:

Plainly meaning, that he never deviates from those general laws in favor of any particular person. This is a common supposition; but which is altogether inconsistent with the whole tenor of Scripture: For if God never deviates from these general laws, then there never was a miracle in the world; seeing every

miracle is a deviation from the general laws of nature. Did the Almighty confine himself to these general laws, when he divided the Red Sea when he commanded the waters to stand on a heap, and make a way for his redeemed to pass over Did he act by general laws, when he caused the sun to stand still for the space of a whole day No; nor in any of the miracles which are recorded either in the Old or New Testament.

21. But it is on supposition that the Governor of the world never deviates from those general laws, that Mr. Pope adds those beautiful lines in full triumph, as having now clearly gained the point: --

Shall burning Etna, if a sage requires, Forget to thunder, and recall her fires
On air or sea new motions be imprest, O blameless Bethel! to relieve thy breast!
When the loose mountain trembles from on high, Shall gravitation cease, if you go by
Or some old temple, nodding to its fall,

For Chartres' head reserve the hanging wall We answer, If it please God to continue the life of any of his servants, he will suspend that or any other law of nature: The stone shall not fall; the fire shall not burn; the foods shall not flow; or, he will give his angels charge, and in their hands shall they bear him up, through and above all dangers!

22. Admitting then, that, in the common course of nature, God does act by general laws, he has never precluded himself from making exceptions to them, whensoever he pleases; either by suspending that law in favor of those that love him, or by employing his mighty angels: By either of which means he can deliver out of all danger them that trust in him.

"What! You expect miracles then" Certainly I do, if I believe the Bible: For the Bible teaches me, that God hears and answers prayer: But every answer to prayer is, properly, a miracle. For if natural causes take their course, if things go on in their natural way, it is no answer at all. Gravitation therefore shall cease, that is, cease to operate, whenever the Author of it pleases. Cannot the men of the world understand these things That is no wonder: It was observed long ago, "An unwise man doth not consider this, and a fool doth not understand these things That is no wonder: It was observed long ago, "An unwise man doth not consider this, and a fool doth not understand it."

23. But I have not done with this same general providence yet. By the grace of God, I will sift it to the bottom: And I hope to show it is such stark-staring nonsense, as every man of sense ought to be utterly ashamed of.

You say, "You allow a general providence, but deny a particular one." And what is a general, of whatever kind it be, that includes no particulars Is not every general necessarily made up of its several particulars Can you instance in any general that is not Tell me any genus, if you can, that contains no species What is it that constitutes a genus, but so many species added together What, I pray, is a whole that contains no parts Mere nonsense and contradiction! Every whole must, in the nature of things, be made up of its several parts; insomuch that if there be no parts, there can be no whole.

24. As this is a point of the utmost importance, we may consider it a little farther. What do you mean by a general providence, contradistinguished from a particle Do you mean a providence which superintends only the larger parts of the universe Suppose the sun, moon, and stars. Does it not regard the earth too You allow it does. But does it not likewise regard the inhabitants of it Else what doth the earth, an inanimate lump of matter, signify Is not one spirit, one heir of immortality, of more value than all the earth yea, though you add to it the sun, moon, and stars nay, and the whole inanimate

creation Might we no say, "These shall perish; but" this "remaineth: These all shall wax old as doth a garment;" but this (it may be said in a lower sense, even of the creature) is "the same, and his "years shall not fail"

25. Or do you mean, when you assert a general providence, distinct from a particle one, that God regards only some parts of the world, and does not regard others What parts of it does he regard Those without, or those within, the solar system Or does he regard some parts of the earth, and not others Which parts Only those within the temperate zones What parts then are under the care of his providence Where will you lay the line Do you exclude from it those that live in the torrid zone or those that dwell within the arctic circles Nay, rather say, "The Lord is loving to every man," and his care "is over all His works."

26. Do you mean (for we would fain find out your meaning, if you have any meaning at all) that the providence of God does indeed extend to all parts of the earth, with regard to great and singular events, such as the rise and fall of empires; but that the little concerns of this or that man are beneath the notice of the Almighty Then you do not consider that great and little are merely relative terms, which have place only with respect to men. With regard to the Most High, man and all the concerns of men are nothing, less than nothing, before Him. And nothing is small in his sight that in any degree affects the welfare of any that fear God and work righteousness. What becomes, then, of your general providence, exclusive of a particle Let it be for ever rejected by all rational men, as absurd, self-contradictory nonsense. We may then sum up the whole scriptural doctrine of providence in that fine saying of St. Austin, *Ita praesidet singulis sicut universis, et universis sicut singulis!*

Father, how wide thy glories shine, Lord of the universe-and mine! Thy goodness watches o'er the whole, As all the world were but one soul; Yet keeps my every sacred hair, As I remain'd thy single care!

27. We may learn from this short view of the providence of God, First, to put our whole trust in Him who hath never failed them that seek him. Our blessed Lord himself makes the very use of the great truth now before us. "Fear not, therefore:" If you truly fear God, you need fear none beside. He will be a strong tower to all that trust in him from the face of you enemies. What is there either in heaven or in earth that can harm you, while you are under the care of the Creator and Governor of heaven and earth! Let all earth and all hell combine against you; yea, the whole animate and inanimate creation; they cannot harm while God is on your side: His favorable kindness covers you as a shield.

28. Nearly allied to this confidence in God is the thankfulness we owe for his kind protection. Let those give thanks whom the Lord thus delivers from the hand of all their enemies. What an unspeakable blessing it is to be the peculiar care of Him that has all power in heaven and earth! How can we sufficiently praise him, while we are under his wings, and his faithfulness and truth are our shield and buckler!

29. But meantime we should take the utmost care to walk humbly and closely with our God. Walk humbly: For if you in anywise rob God of his honor, of you ascribe anything to yourself, the things which should have been for you wealth will prove to you an "occasion of falling." And walk closely: See that you have a conscience void of offence toward God and toward man. It is so long as you so this that you are the peculiar care of your Father which is in heaven. But let not the consciousness of his caring for you make you careless, indolent, or slothful: On the contrary, while you are penetrated with that deep truth, "The help that is done upon earth, He doeth it himself," be as earnest and diligent in

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