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God in the Pestilence and the Fire

William Potts

Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, ir_pottsw@csl.edu

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GOD IN THE PESTILENCE AND THE FIRE:

A SERMON,

PREACHED IN THE

SECOND PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

OF SAINT LOUIS,

MAY, 20, 1849, THE SABBATH AFTER THE GREAT FIRE,

BY

WILLIAM S. POTTS, D. D.

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## S E R M O N .

D E U T . V I I I . 5 .

*Thou shalt also consider in thine heart, that, as a man chasteneth his son, so the Lord thy God chasteneth thee.*

Times of general calamity in a community, call for the performance of peculiar duties, over and above those that are of common and daily occurrence. Members of such communities, and christians in particular, are then bound to inquire after these duties. The responsibility of a teacher of morality cannot be discharged, without carefully looking into the moral bearing of such events, and directing the minds of the people to the hand of God as therein displayed.

God represents himself in the text as teaching by his providence as well as by his word. He directs Israel to look back forty years and mark his dealings. The tribes now stood upon the eastern shore of Jordan, and had the promised land in view, but there were important lessons in providence to be deeply considered and impressed upon their hearts, before crossing into their future possessions. He had given lessons to humble them and make them feel their dependence. He suffered them to hunger, and when no earthly help could avail, he fed them with manna from heaven. In a wilderness, where no supplies of raiment for such a multitude could be obtained, he provided miraculously that the garments they brought out of Egypt should not wear out. Marching, for so many years, beneath a burning sun, upon a barren, rocky land, he did not suffer their feet to swell. For their disobedience and rebellions he had also chastened them. He had sent upon them the plague; afflicted them with fiery serpents; made them to suffer hunger and thirst;

besides the more direct visitations, as in the case of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram, when the earth opened and swallowed them up. He, in the text, requires them to consider that, in so dealing with them, he had not acted as a man, who in anger slays his enemies, but as a father, who in sorrow chastens his son.

The same consideration of God's providences toward *us*, is always a duty. He speaks in the pestilence and in the devouring flame, as well as in his word, and it would manifest an indifference, ill-becoming his rational creatures, not to inquire concerning the meaning of the lesson he presents. In giving this consideration to our present circumstances we propose to show:

*I. Our present afflictions are chastenings from the Lord.* We have been visited by one of the most dreaded of epidemics. It is, emphatically, "the pestilence that walketh in darkness." Its cause is hidden from all the researches of science—its *modus* in sapping so rapidly the energies of life, still remains a mystery. It has entered all ranks and conditions of society. The strong man in the midst of his business; the mother at the head of her infant family; the young man, the maiden, and the prattling child, have equally been its victims. It stalks abroad in our streets by night and by day, observing no rules in its progress, governed by no principles known to science, and hence rendering safe-guards and preliminary arrangements of prudence, to a large extent, nugatory. It has already left desolation in our families; and the voice of grief and mourning is in our habitations. The cheek of the bravest has been blanched, and many held their breath in fear, and in daily anticipation that they might be the next victims. Yet, strange to say, alarm and terror seem to have been the only resulting exercises of the mind. No one seems to have felt his sins more deeply; or, if a momentary shudder passed over his mind in view of his condition, it was attended by no tenderness, no contrition, no repentance toward God. Self-preservation seemed the only idea present, and in devising means of greater security, God was forgotten.

The scourge of last Thursday night came upon the back, or rather, I should say, in the midst of all this. While friends were anxiously watching around the beds of the suffering, and



busied in offering relief, and the groans of the dying were heard, showing how frail was the tenure by which man holds his breath, the devouring flames were let loose upon our wealth. The vessels that crowded our landing, with their cargoes; warehouses filled with valuable commodities; buildings stored with the most costly fancy goods of Europe, or laden with plate, and jewelry, and merchandise of every description, together with numerous dwellings of the rich and of the poor; were in a few short hours swept away. The very heart of our growing and proud city lies this day in ruins. Three-fourths of our business houses consumed, and three millions of wealth annihilated. Many who, in comparative affluence, saw the sun go down on Thursday evening, beheld on the succeeding morning, the smouldering wreck of their possessions. The widow and the orphan have been driven from their peaceful shelter, which constituted their all in this world, to the street, and to dependence on the hand of charity. Thus we have had a striking lesson of the frailty of the tenure by which we hold all earthly estates.

Nor is our tale of sufferings yet told. Had we only to contemplate the destruction of property in the ruin of that sad night, the affliction would not be so great; but to this must be added the sudden destruction of human life, to an extent impossible at present to ascertain, and under circumstances the most horrid. The groaning victim of the plague fled, as he best could, from his bed of pain, to save the residue of life, only to breathe his spirit out under some temporary shelter which compassion provided; others were crushed beneath falling buildings, or their limbs torn from each other by explosions; and the dying shrieks of others were lost amidst the roar of the flames that devoured them. But it is painful to dwell upon these scenes, and needless to particularize, when those addressed were the actual participants and sufferers. It was a night of horrors, when the minds of the most firm became at times bewildered in the excess of calamity, and strong men wept from very sympathy.

Now, the first of the practical duties arising out of these calamitous circumstances, is *so to consider* as to recognize the hand of the Lord in all we have suffered and are still suffering.

There is a general apprehension of the truth that God in some way overrules and governs the affairs of men, but when we descend to particular calamitous events, men often fail to see in them the special interposition of his hand. But if in the afflictions of this life God is to be regarded as a Father chastening his children, then we must not only recognize the rod as held by him, but his mind as contemplating our faults, and applying the correction in direct reference to our particular departures from him. The idea that God merely *permits* these afflictions to come upon us, is not sufficient so satisfy either the demands of reason, or the claims of absolute sovereignty which he sets up in his word. The management of great events in our world is only secured by controlling the causes leading thereto, and these are often remote and in themselves insignificant. Hence we are told that the divine mind, in its care of the human family, is cognizant of the smallest affairs, even the falling of a sparrow, though two of them are worth but a farthing, and that the very hairs of our heads are all numbered. To what end is this information imparted, but that we may understand that in the most minute affairs of life the same wisdom and power directs; not barely *permits*, but designs, ordains, and governs, to an end. Indeed, the prophet Amos, in reasoning with the people of Israel upon this very subject of their chastisements, plainly declares this doctrine,—“Shall there be evil in the city and the Lord hath not done it?”—*Ch.* III, 6.

The difficulty in this subject, however, is principally felt where the actions of free, accountable beings are concerned. Most men apprehend with sufficient distinctness, that, as no human agency is concerned in the control of the mighty elements that encompass us, we must, at least, attribute the entire government of them to the will and power of God. Hence, in our peculiar calamities, there will be the less difficulty in recognizing the immediate hand of the Creator.

The pestilence that now rages in our midst, seems to be as little dependent upon any human agency as any visitation could well be. If, as most theories seem to agree, it is owing to some deleterious influence in the atmosphere, which moves in currents, governed by laws of which science as yet is ignorant, then the hand of God distinctly marks this scourge. The com-

ponent parts of our atmosphere were adjusted, and the chemical laws by which their combination is continued, were imposed, by the Creator. No power short of his can alter this combination, or infuse into it a new element destructive to animal life. The whirlwind and the storm are, consequently, not more directly servants that do his bidding than the Asiatic Cholera.

Whatever we may say of the carelessness of men, of their lack of presence of mind, and of the multitude of things we can devise, which, had they been done, would have averted the calamity of the recent fire—and thus we are prone to talk after every afflictive event—still we have to admit, that God continued all the while to control those mighty agents, the elements, around us. Had the wind shifted a few points after the fire commenced, it is plain the destruction would have been very limited. On the other hand, had the wind increased instead of diminishing during the progress of the fire, half our city must have been consumed; and had it changed a few points in the wrong direction and slightly freshened, scarce a vestige of our city would have been left. The progress of the fire was arrested where no one could have anticipated it would stop. Without water, or any means to contend effectually against it, we were completely at the mercy of the causes that controlled it. Having reached, southwardly, a most combustible portion of the city, and with nothing along its western line less combustible than that already preyed upon, without any apparent cause adequate to its arrest, it ceased. It had performed its mission, and God said, “it is enough.”

It is impossible, then, to resist the conclusion that these scourges have fallen upon us independent of mere human agency, or carelessness, or malevolence. Now, we are at liberty to adopt any one of three following conclusions: Either, that, according to the oft-repeated declarations of God’s word, he, in the exercise of his sovereign power, governed by the infinite wisdom and goodness inseparable from his character, has inflicted this scourge for our chastisement; or, that there exists some fate, or malevolent being, whose power God is unable to resist, and hence his benevolence toward us becomes unavailing in certain cases; or, lastly, to fall into rank Atheism, with all its absurdities, and commit all our destinies to a blind chance. †



will not insult the understanding of this audience, by attempting to show which of the alternatives in such a dilemma it is most reasonable to take.

Then, as the first lesson from our affliction, in the language of the text, "consider in thine heart," that the Lord is chastening us as children. Let us ponder this well, and we shall be prepared for a second profitable step.

*II. We have needed chastisement.*

That God does not willingly afflict the children of men, is a truth often presented in his word, and inferable from every view he gives us of his character. Then the very fact that he has laid afflictions upon us, is proof that we needed them. The circumstance that in many cases these providences are dark, and we cannot see the reason for our afflictions, is no evidence that they are not necessary, and are not directed by the same infinite wisdom and goodness that has ordinarily sent us prosperity. The inability of the child to comprehend the reason for his father's not gratifying the whims and desires that arise out of his inexperience and short-sightedness; or of the peasant to understand the reasons of state that influence the cabinet ministers, charged with the destinies of the country, in their decisions and acts; we do not regard as any evidence that the action of either was not characterized by wisdom, and indispensably necessary to the governed. And since the distance between man and his creator and ruler is so much greater, surely our inability to comprehend all the reasons of infinite wisdom, in his government of our affairs, can be no evidence that his acts toward us, however afflictive for the present, are not necessary, and are not for our ultimate good. On the contrary, reason dictates that under such a government, the universe being subject, and embracing in its train of causes and effects, antecedents and sequences, two eternities, it will necessarily follow, that the spectator, situated on one little speck of creation, his mental vision bounded on every side by immensity, and his life but a few revolving suns, is in no condition to exercise a judgment respecting the things which, in that government, transpire around him.

Still, while to set ourselves up as judges in such a case, and to arraign the decisions of the eternal mind, would be an act of the most egregious arrogance and folly, it does not follow that

nothing can be known and no profitable lessons gathered. With revelation in our hands, and our minds fixed on these developments of providence toward us; with the knowledge we possess of our own hearts and lives, and of the views of God in reference to sin, as exhibited in his law; we shall rarely find that afflictive providences are not full of meaning. Having gathered out what we can understand, it becomes us to listen to the counsel given by Elihu to the patriarch of Uz: "That which I see not teach thou me: if I have done iniquity, I will do no more."—*Job. xxxiv., 32.*

In the chapter from which our text is taken, Israel is admonished to "beware," in coming into the land to which the Lord was leading them, "Lest, when thou hast eaten and art full, and hast built goodly houses, and dwelt therein; and when thy herds and thy flocks multiply, and thy silver and thy gold is multiplied, and all that thou hast is multiplied; then thine heart be lifted up, and thou forget the Lord thy God, which brought thee forth out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage;"—"and thou say in thine heart, my power, and the might of mine hand hath gotten me this wealth. But thou shalt remember the Lord thy God: for it is he that giveth thee power to get wealth, that he may establish his covenant which he sware unto thy fathers, as it is this day. And it shall be if thou do at all forget the Lord thy God, and walk after other gods, and serve them, and worship them, I testify against you this day, that ye shall surely perish." The sin here pointed out as calculated to bring down trouble and final destruction, is, *growing proud under prosperity*. The afflictions with which *we* have been visited, seem aimed at vain confidence in our own strength, and false security as to the length of our days; and more especially, at forgetfulness of God, resulting from increase of wealth and general prosperity. These are the sins which have been most prominent in our community.

God has bestowed for years upon our city the temporal blessings under which Israel grew proud. Business of every description was constantly increasing. Property continually advanced in value; capital yielded a large profit in almost every species of investment; every kind of labor was largely rewarded. Many grew rich and forgot God; and others had visions of



wealth so distinctly and constantly present to their minds, that the sense of obligation to him who alone gives power to get wealth, was forgotten.

The good man saw the openings for gain so many and so great, that he could not find time to search the word of life, and examine his own heart, and pray, as he should have done, and as a consequence he indistinctly felt the responsibility of God's work as it pressed its claims upon him. He thought he mourned that the world was occupying so much of his time and attention, and was alienating his heart from spiritual things, yet his business was so profitable that he could not think of contracting it in order to serve his Maker. The rule he professed to be governed by was, "Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness;" but the practical working with him was, *self first, and the kingdom of God and his righteousness, if there is any time left.* Surely, God's children needed the rod.

Men reared under christian influences, consecrated to God in infancy, and upon whose heads the covenant blessings of the God of Abraham had been daily invoked at the family altar; who in their quiet paternal homes had felt that their first duty and first aim should be to become the followers of the Saviour; were themselves astonished to find how far they had wandered, how utterly cold and hard were their hearts in the sanctuary, how indifferent to the word of life. The arguments and appeals in the word of God which once went to their consciences, were no longer felt. Their early instructions were forgotten. Their former resolutions came no more into remembrance. They sat musing, or absorbed with business speculations in the house of God, and under the most earnest warnings from the sacred desk. They jested with holy things, and could even scoff at the solemn retributions of eternity. They built houses and dwelt in them, their silver and gold was multiplied, and their hearts were lifted up, and they forgot God. These children of the covenant and of many prayers needed the rod.

Thousands of our citizens who had not enjoyed these early religious privileges, yet who had knowledge and experience enough of God's goodness to have lived very differently, were thankless and rebellious in the midst of blessings. Prospered

in every undertaking until surrounded with affluence; blessed in their business, in their families, and in their friends; God had caused their cups to overflow with the evidences of his goodness. Yet they were thankless! The ox knoweth his owner, and the ass his master's crib; they recognize the source whence their wants are supplied; but from the hearts of these men escaped no recognition of the real source from whence their mercies flowed. They said "my power, and the might of mine hand hath gotten me this wealth." Or, if at times thoughts of God, as the governor of all things, were present to their minds, they found the sense of obligation to one whose name they profaned, and whose commands they daily violated, too painful to be long entertained, and their hearts being fully set in them to make this world the object of their love, they soon dispelled the unwelcome reflection. They lived in ingratitude and rebellion. Elevated by God to a position in society where one cheering word could throw hope around an enterprise for good, and one sentence of opposition cover it with at least a temporary gloom, they used this elevation for other purposes than God's glory. Did not these need chastisement? Would not the wonder have been greater if no reverse had come, than that God has visited and impaired the fortunes of such?

But there were other things, in our *municipal character*, directly calling for the interposition of the arm of a righteous governor. We were fast becoming a city of Sabbath-breakers. Along our landing, that present scene of desolation, there was no Sabbath. Vessels were seen discharging and receiving cargoes; warehouses open delivering and receiving freight; groceries and pedlers' shops more busy than on ordinary days; passengers arriving, and others crowding upon the puffing steamers to depart upon their journeys of business or pleasure. In various directions, as the city was traversed, men could be found in their shops plying their usual business, stores open, and merchandise displayed. The stranger coming upon the borders of our city on the afternoon of the Sabbath, and hearing the music, the dancing, and the drunken revelry of the refreshment gardens that encompass it, and seeing the omnibuses and pleasure carriages that at all hours rattled from the centre to the circumference in all directions, filled with passengers seek-



ing these resorts of vice and pleasure, must have supposed that he had fallen upon some pagan land, where God's laws were unknown, or, at least, some papal city of Europe, where traditions of a corrupt church had usurped the place of the law of the Most High. That good men, and the men of influence from their elevated place in society, were grieved and often pained at these things is no doubt true; and when the subject was called up in conversation they expressed their regret; but it was no one man's business more than another's to make himself active and excite odium, and each man was so fully occupied with his private affairs, that there was no time to take much interest in this. Thus, the plague was permitted to extend. The proprietors of our daily journals, even the most respectable, began to avail themselves of this deadness of virtuous public sentiment, and, one after another, abolished the Sabbath, and commenced issuing their papers on this as on all other days; thus secularizing at once the entire public mind on the day consecrated to sacred thoughts; and this new outrage upon the laws of a holy God, instead of awakening the indignation of the friends of the Bible, was tacitly acquiesced in by them. Influential citizens, and even members of churches, became the patrons and sustainers of these Sabbath papers, thus becoming partakers in the desecration of an institution which God has made the very cement, by which order and piety are to be perpetuated in society. Surely there was a necessity that God should speak, if we were not to be given up.

Crime has been fearfully on the increase in our city. Murder, robbery, theft, gambling, drunkenness, lewdness, and every vice that stains the catalogue in human society, were advancing with giant strides, far more rapidly than the increase of our population. No sooner did a steamer touch our landing, than it was invaded by thieves; no property was secure at night, but in proportion to the strength of the guard, armed to the teeth, that watched over it; while, by day, our streets were swarming with younger vagabonds, male and female, who, under pretence of soliciting charity, or selling vicious pamphlets, fruit, or other articles, were training for the work-house or the brothel. That which in other cities, not equally engrossed with the one idea of money-making, claims the time, attention,