

An Excerpt from:
 DIVINE CONDUCT:
 OR, THE
 MYSTERY OF PROVIDENCE,
 Opened in a Treatise upon Psalm 57.2.
 THE WHOLE
 WORKS
 OF THE
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The Third Case – Is it from the love of God?

How may a Christian discern when a providence is sanctified, and if it comes to him from the love of God?

There are two sorts or kinds of providences which come to men in this world. Their issue and events are vastly different, and indeed, contrary to each other.

First, some think that all providences are overruled and ordered for their good, according to that blessed promise in Rom 8:28, “And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to *His* purpose.” Not only things that are *good* in themselves, such as ordinances, graces, duties and mercies, but things that are *evil* in themselves, such as temptations, afflictions, and even their own sins and corruptions, will turn out to their advantage and benefit. For though sin is so intrinsically and formally evil in its own nature, that in itself it is not capable of sanctification, yet out of this worst of evils God can work good to His people. And though He never makes sin the instrument of our good, yet His providence may make it the occasion of doing good to His people – so that spiritual benefits may be occasioned by providence’s wise overruling of sin.

And so afflictions of all kinds, the greatest and sorest of them, under the influence of providence, may bring a great deal of good to the saints. And that applies not only to the occasions of it, but to the instruments and means of it. “By this, therefore, the iniquity of Jacob shall be purged” (Isaiah 27:9); that is, by the instrumentality of this sanctified affliction.

Secondly, to others nothing is sanctified, either as an instrument or as an occasion of any spiritual good; but just as the worst things are ordered to the saints’ benefit, so the best things that wicked men enjoy may do them no good. Their prayers are turned into sin (Psa 109:7), the ordinances are the savor of death (2Cor 2:16), the grace of God is turned into wantonness (Jude 4), Christ Himself is a rock of offense (1Pet 2:8), their table is a snare (Psa 69:22), their prosperity is their ruin (Prov 1:32). Just as *persons* do, so *things* work for good or evil. “To the pure all things are pure; but to those who are defiled and unbelieving, nothing is pure” (Titus 1:15).

Therefore, seeing that the events of providence fall out so opposite to each other on the godly and ungodly, everything furthering the eternal good of the one, and the ruin of the other, can it not be acknowledged as a most important case, one in which every soul is deeply concerned, whether the providences are sanctified to him or not? ¹

To understand this, I will premise two necessary considerations, and then give the rules which will be useful to resolve the question.

¹ That is, whether they come to him from the love of God or not.

Consideration 1. The matter may not indicate God’s intentions.

First, let it be considered that we cannot know from the matter of the things before us, whether they are sanctified or unsanctified to us; for “no man knows either love or hatred by all the things that are before him; all things come alike to all” (Ecc 9:1-2). We cannot understand the mind and heart of God by the things He dispenses with His hand. If prosperous providences befall us, we cannot say this is a sure sign that God loves us – for who have more of those providences than the people of His wrath? “They have more than heart could wish” (Psa 73:7). Surely it must be a weak evidence for heaven, for it accompanies a great part of the world to hell. We may testify of our love for God by these things, but we cannot get any solid assurance of His love for us from ten thousand such enjoyments.

And we cannot know His hatred from adverse, afflictive providences. If afflictions, great afflictions, many afflictions, long-continued afflictions, were to mark God’s hatred for the persons on whom these afflictions fall, then where will we find God’s people in the world? We must then seek out the proud, vain, sensual wantons of the world, who spend their days in pleasure [and suffer no affliction], and say that these are the men whom God loves.

Outward things are indiscriminately dispensed; no man’s spiritual state is discernible by viewing his temporal state. When God draws the sword, it may “cut off the righteous as well as the wicked” (Eze 21:3).

Consideration 2. There may be no immediate evidence of God’s love.

Secondly, though the providences of God, materially considered, afford no evidence of God’s love for us, yet the manner in which they befall us, and the effects and fruits they produce in us, do distinguish them very manifestly; we may discern by them whether or not they are sanctified providences and fruits of the love of God. Yet these effects and fruits of providences by which we discern their nature do not always appear immediately; time must be allowed to exercise the soul under them. “Now no chastening seems joyous for the present, but grievous. Nevertheless, afterwards it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness for those who are exercised by it” (Heb 12:11).

The benefit of a providence is discerned just as the benefit of a medicine is discerned. For the present it gripes, and makes the stomach sick and loathing; but afterwards we find the benefit of it in our recovery of health and cheerfulness. Now some of the providences of God are comfortable, and others are sad and grievous to our nature. The way to discern their sanctification and blessing is by the manner in which they come, and their operations upon our spirits. I will consider the case as it respects both sorts of providences, and show you which effects of our troubles or of our comforts will show them to be sanctified and blessed to us.

Sad and Afflictive providences

And first, for sad and afflictive providences, in whatever kind or

degree they befall us, we have warrant to conclude they are blessings to us, and come from the love of God:

1. When they come in a proper season, when we need them, either to prevent some sin we are falling into, or to recover us out of a remiss, supine, and careless frame of spirit into which we have already fallen. "If necessary, you have been grieved" (1Pet 1:6). Certainly, it is a good sign that God plans your good by those troubles which are so fitted and wisely ordered to meet the need. If you see the husbandman pruning a tree in the proper season, it argues that he aims to make it fruitful and to flourish; but to do the same thing at midsummer shows no regard for that, but his plan is to destroy it.

2. When our troubles are fitted in both quality and degree to properly work on our most dominant corruptions, then they look like sanctified strokes. The wisdom of God is greatly seen in the choice of His rods. Not any kind of trouble will work on and purge every sin; but when God chooses such afflictions for us that, like medicine, are suited to the disease which the soul labors under, this speaks of divine care and love. Thus we may observe that it is usual with God to strike us in those very comforts which stole away too much of the love and delight of our souls from God; and He crosses us in those things from which we raised too great an expectation of comfort. These providences show the jealousy of God over us, and His care to prevent far worse evils by these sad but necessary strokes. As for the degrees of our troubles, sanctified strokes are ordinarily fitted by the wisdom of God to the strength and ability of our inherent grace. "In measure, when it shoots out, you will debate with it. He stays His rough wind in the day of the east wind" (Isaiah 27:8). It is an allusion to a physician who exactly weighs and measures all the ingredients which he mingles in a potion for his sick patient, so that it may be in proportion to his strength, and no more. And the next words intimate as much: "By this therefore shall the iniquity of Jacob be purged" (verse 9).

3. When they turn our hearts against sin, and not against God, it is a good sign that our troubles are sanctified to us. There are few great afflictions which befall men, that don't make them quarrelsome and discontented. Wicked men quarrel with God, and are filled with discontent against Him. So the Scripture describes them: "And men were scorched with great heat, and blasphemed the name of God, which has power over these plagues" (Rev 16:9). But godly men, to whom afflictions are sanctified, justify God and fall out with sin; they condemn themselves and give glory to God. "O Lord, righteousness belongs to you, but to us shame of face" (Daniel 9:7); and "Why does a living man complain, a man for the punishment of his sins?" (Lam 3:39). Happy afflictions make the soul fall out and quarrel only with sin.

4. When they purge the heart from sin, and leave both heart and life more pure, heavenly, mortified, and humble than they found them, it is a sure sign that afflicting providences are sanctified. Sanctified afflictions are cleansers; they pull down the pride, refine earthliness, and purge out the vanity of the spirit. So you read in Daniel 11:35 that it purifies and makes their souls white. Hence it is compared to a furnace which separates the

dross from the pure metal: "Behold I have refined you but not with silver: I have tested you in the furnace of affliction" (Isaiah 48:10). But for wicked men, however long in the furnace, they lose no dross (Eze 24:6). How many Christians can bear witness to this truth! After some sharp affliction has been upon them, how is the earthliness of their hearts is purged! They see no beauty, taste no more relish in the world than in the white of an egg. O how serious, humble and heavenly they are, till the impressions made upon them by afflictions are worn off, and their deceitful lusts have again entangled them! And this is the reason why we are so often under the discipline of the rod. Let a Christian, says a late writer, be but two or three years without an affliction, and he is almost good for nothing. He cannot pray, meditate, or discourse at the rate he used to; but when a new affliction comes, now he can find his tongue, and come to his knees again, and live at another rate.

5. When we draw near to God under them and "turn to the One that strikes us," it is a good sign that afflictive providences are sanctified to us. A wicked man under affliction "revolts more and more" (Isaiah 1:5), and "does not turn to the One that strikes him" (Isaiah 9:13), but grows worse than before; formality is turned into stupidity and indolence.

But if God afflicts His own people with a sanctified rod, it awakens them to a more earnest seeking of God, it makes them pray more frequently, spiritually, and fervently than ever. When Paul was buffeted by Satan he "sought the Lord three times" (2Cor 12:8).

6. When they do not alienate our hearts from God, but inflame our love towards Him, we may conclude that our afflictions are sanctified, and come from the love of God towards us. This is a sure rule: whatever ends in the increase of our love to God proceeds from the love of God to us. A wicked man finds his heart rising against God when He strikes him; but a graced heart cleaves closer to Him; he can love as well as justify an afflicting God. "All this has come upon us: yet we have not forgotten you, nor have we dealt falsely in your covenant. Our heart is not turned back, nor have our steps declined from your way: though you have sorely broken us in the place of dragons, and covered us with the shadow of death" (Psa 44:17-19). Here you have a true account of the attitude and frame of a graced soul under the greatest afflictions. To be "broken in the place of dragons, and covered with the shadow of death", imports the most dismal state of affliction; yet even then a graced heart does not turn back; that is, for all this it does not abate one dram of love to God. God is as good and dear to him in afflictions as ever.

7. Lastly, when divine teachings accompany them to our souls, we may call our afflictions sanctified. "Blessed is the man whom you chasten, O LORD, and teach him from your law" (Psa 94:12). Sanctified afflictions are *eye-salves*²; when the Spirit accompanies them, they teach us sensibly and effectually the evil of sin, the vanity of the creature, and the necessity of securing things that cannot be shaken. A Christian never takes a truer

² Rev 3:18

measure both of his corruptions and his graces, than under the rod. Then a man sees that filthiness which has long been contracting in his prosperity, and what interests the creature in the heart. How little faith, patience, resignation and self-denial we can find when God calls us to exercise them. O it is a blessed sign that trouble is sanctified, when a man thus turns in upon his own heart, searches it, and humbles himself before the Lord for its evils!

Comfortable and Pleasant providences.

Next, let us take into consideration the other branch of providences, which are comfortable and pleasant. Sometimes it smiles upon us in successes, prosperity, and the gratification of the desires of our hearts. Here the question will be, How may the sanctification of these providences be known by us? To resolve this matter, and for the sake of clarity, I will lay down two sorts of rules: one *negative*, the other *positive*.

Negatively.

1. It is a sign that comfort is not sanctified to us, when it does not ordinarily come by means of prayer. "For the wicked boasts of his heart's desire, and blesses the covetous whom the LORD abhors. The wicked through the pride of his countenance will not seek after God; God is not in all his thoughts" (Psa 10:3-4). Here you see that providence may give men "their hearts' desire," and yet they never once open their desires to God in prayer about it. But then those gifts of providence are only such as are bestowed on the worst of men, and are not the fruits of love.

2. Whatever success, prosperity or comfort men acquire by sinful means and indirect courses are not sanctified mercies to them. This is not the method by which those mercies are bestowed. "Better is a little with righteousness, than great revenues without it" (Prov 16:8); it is better on this account: that it comes in God's way and with His blessing, which never follows the way of sin. God has cursed the ways of sin, and so no blessing can follow those ways.

3. Whatever prosperity and success makes men forget God, and cast off their care of duty, is not sanctified to them. It is unsanctified prosperity which lulls men asleep into a deep oblivion of God. "He made him ride on the high places of the earth, that he might eat the increase of the fields; and he made him to suck honey out of the rock, and oil out of the flinty rock; butter of kine, and milk of sheep, with fat of lambs, and rams of the breed of Bashan, and goats, with the fat of kidneys of wheat; and you drank the pure blood of the grape. But Jeshurun waxed fat, and kicked; you have grown fat, you have grown thick, you are covered with fatness; then he forsook God who made him, and lightly esteemed the Rock of his salvation" (Deut 32:13-15). "You are unmindful of the Rock that begat you, and have forgotten God who formed you" (verse 18). *Rarè fumant felicitibus aræ* (there is little smoke of sacrifice on the altars of the rich).

4. When prosperity is abused toward sensuality, and merely serves as fuel to maintain fleshly lusts, it is not sanctified. "They send forth their little ones like a flock, and their children dance. They take the timbrel and harp, and rejoice at the sound of the organ. They spend their days in wealth, and in a moment go

down to the grave" (Job 21:11-13).

5. When it swells the heart with pride and self-conceitedness, it is a sign that prosperity is not sanctified to men. "At the end of twelve months he walked in the palace of the kingdom of Babylon. The king spoke and said, Is this not the great Babylon that I have built for the house of the kingdom, by the might of my power and for the honour of my majesty?" (Daniel 4:29-30).

6. That success is not sanctified to men which takes them away from their duty, and makes them wholly negligent or greatly indisposed to it. "O generation, see the Word of the LORD. Have I been a wilderness to Israel, a land of darkness? Why do my people say, We are lords; we will come to you no more?" (Jer 2:31).

7. Nor can we think prosperity is sanctified if it wholly swallows up the souls of men in their own enjoyments, and makes them disregard public miseries or sins. "They lie upon beds of ivory, and stretch themselves upon their couches, and eat the lambs out of the flock, and the calves out of the midst of the stall; they chant to the sound of the viol, and invent for themselves instruments of music like David. They drink wine in bowls, and anoint themselves with the chief ointments; but they are not grieved for the afflictions of Joseph" (Amos 6:6).

Positively.

1. Those mercies and comforts are undoubtedly sanctified to men who humble their souls kindly before God, sensing their own vileness and unworthiness. "And Jacob said, 'I am not worthy of the least of all your mercies, and of all the truth which you have shown to your servant'" (Gen32:9-10).

2. Sanctified mercies are commonly turned into cautions against sin (Ezra 9:13). They make so many bands of restraint upon the souls who have them, as to make them shun sin.

3. They will engage a man's heart in love to the God of His mercies (Psa 18:1, cf. title).

4. They never satisfy a man as his portion, nor will the soul accept all the prosperity in the world on that score. "He considered the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt; for he looked to the reward" (Heb 11:26).

5. Nor do they make men disregard public sins or miseries; (Nehemiah 2:1-3 and Acts 7:23).

Nehemiah 2:1 And it came to pass in the month of Nisan, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, *when wine was before him*, that I took the wine and gave it to the king. Now I had never been sad in his presence before. ² Therefore the king said to me, "Why is your face sad, since you *are* not sick? This is nothing but sorrow of heart." So I became dreadfully afraid, ³ and said to the king, "May the king live forever! Why should my face not be sad, when the city, the place of my fathers' tombs, *lies waste*, and its gates are burned with fire?"

Act 7:22-24 And Moses was learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and was mighty in words and deeds. ²³ Now when he was forty years old, it came into his heart to visit his brethren,

the children of Israel. ²⁴ "And seeing one of *them* suffer wrong, he defended and avenged him who was oppressed, and struck down the Egyptian.

6. It is a sure sign that mercies are sanctified when they make the soul readier and more enlarged in its duty to God. "Therefore the LORD established the kingdom in his hand; and all Judah brought presents to Jehoshaphat, and he had riches and honor in abundance. And his heart was lifted up in the ways of the LORD" (2Chr 17:5-6).

7. To conclude, what is obtained by prayer and returned to God again in due praise, carries its own testimonials with it, that it came from the love of God, and that it is a sanctified mercy to the soul.

And so much for this third case.

The Fourth Case – Remaining steadfast.

How may we attain an evenness and steadiness of spirit under the changes and contrary aspects of providence upon us?

Three things are supposed in this case: (1) that providence has various and contrary aspects upon the people of God; (2) that it is a common thing for them to experience great disorders of spirit under those changes of providence; (3) that these disorders may, in great measure, be prevented by the due use and application of those rules and helps that God has given us in such cases.

Providence has various effects on the People of God

1. That providence has various, indeed, contrary aspects upon the people of God, is a case so plain that it needs no more than a mention to commend it to all our understandings. Which of all the people of God have not felt this truth? Providence rings the changes all over the world. "He increases the nations, and destroys them; he enlarges the nations, and straitens them again" (Job 12:23). Providence does the same with persons: "You have lifted me up, and cast me down" (Psa 102:10). See what a sad alteration providence made on the Church: "How the city sits solitary that once was full of people! How she has become like a widow, she that was great among the nations, and princess among the provinces! How she has become a tributary!" (Lam 1:1). "Is it nothing to you, all you that pass by? Behold, and see if there is any sorrow like my sorrow, which has been brought upon me, which the LORD has inflicted in the day of his fierce anger" (verse 12). And how great an example was Job of this truth? (compare Job 29 and 30). How many thousands have complained with Naomi, whose condition was so strangely altered, that others have said, as the people of Bethlehem said of her, "Is this Naomi?" (Ruth 1:19).³

³ **Ruth 1.20-21** But she said to them, "Do not call me Naomi [*my delight*]; call me Mara [*bitterness*], for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. ²¹ "I went out full, and the LORD has brought me home again empty. Why do you call me Naomi, since the LORD has testified against me, and the Almighty has afflicted me?"

Providence commonly causes great disorder in our spirit

2. These vicissitudes⁴ of providence commonly cause great disorders of spirit in the best men. Just as intense heat and cold try the strength and soundness of the constitution of our bodies, so the alterations providence makes upon our conditions try the strength of our graces; and too often they reveal the weakness and corruption of holy men. Hezekiah was a good man, yet his weakness and corruption was betrayed by the alterations providence made upon his conditions. When sickness and pains summoned him to the grave, what bitter complaints and despondencies are recorded in Isaiah 38!⁴ And when providence lifted him up again into a prosperous condition, what ostentation and vainglory he showed (Isaiah 39:2)!⁵ David had more than a common supply of inherent grace, yet not enough to temper his spirit under great changes in providence. "In my prosperity I said, I shall never be moved," [and yet] "you hid your face and I was troubled" (Psa 30:6-7). It is not every man that can say with Paul, "I know both how to be abased, and I know how to abound; everywhere and in all things I am instructed, both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer deprivation" (Php 4:12). He is truly rich in grace whose riches or poverty neither hinders the acting nor impoverishes the stock of his graces.

Disorders of heart may be prevented in large measure

3. Though the best of men are subject to such disorders of heart under the changes of providence, these disorders may be prevented in great measure by the due application of such rules and helps as God has given us in such cases.

Now, these helps are suited to three aspects of a change in providence on us: (1) comfortable, (2) calamitous, and (3) doubtful. I will speak particularly and briefly to each of these.

When a change in providence is comfortable:

1. How may we attain an even and steady heart under the comfortable aspects of providence on us?

Under providences of this kind, the great danger is that the heart may be lifted up with pride and vanity, and fall into a drowsy and remiss condition. To prevent this, we need to urge humbling and awakening considerations on our own hearts, such as the following:

(1) These gifts of providence are common to the worst of men,

⁴ **Isa 38.12-13** My life span is gone, Taken from me like a shepherd's tent; I have cut off my life like a weaver. He cuts me off from the loom; From day until night You make an end of me.

¹³ I have considered until morning – Like a lion, So He breaks all my bones; From day until night You make an end of me.

⁵ **Isa 39:2** And Hezekiah was pleased with them, and showed them the house of his treasures –the silver and gold, the spices and precious ointment, and all his armory– all that was found among his treasures. There was nothing in his house or in all his dominion that Hezekiah did not show them.

and are not special distinguishing fruits of God's love. The vilest of men have been satiated with these things. "Their eyes stand out with fatness: they have more than heart could wish" (Psa 73:7).

(2) Think how unstable and changeable all these things are. What you glory in today may be none of yours tomorrow. "For riches certainly make themselves wings; they fly away as an eagle towards heaven" (Prov 23:5). As the wings of a fowl grow out of the substance of its body, so the cause of the creature's transitory nature is found in itself. It is subjected to vanity, and that vanity, like wings, carries it away; they are but fading flowers (James 1:10).

(3) The change of providences is never nearer to the people of God than when their hearts are lifted up, or have grown secure by prosperity. Does Hezekiah glory in his treasures? The next news he hears is that an impoverishing providence at hand (Isaiah 39:2-7). Others may be left to perish in unsanctified prosperity, but you shall not.

(4) This is a great revelation of the carnality and corruption that is in your heart. It argues for a heart that is little set upon God, little mortified to the world, and little acquainted with the vanity and ensnaring nature of these things. O you do not know what kind of hearts you have till such providences try them! And is not such discovery a matter of deep humiliation?

(5) Was it not better with you in a lowly condition than it is now? Reflect, and compare state with state, and time with time. How has the frame of your heart altered with the alteration of your condition? So God complains of Israel: "I knew you in the wilderness, in the land of great drought. According to their pasture, so were they filled: they were filled, and their heart was exalted; *therefore* they have forgotten me" (Hosea 13:5-6); as if to say, "You and I were better acquainted formerly when you were in a lowly condition; prosperity has estranged you and altered the case." How sad that God's mercies would occasion our estrangement from Him!

When a change in providence is calamitous

2. How may our hearts be established and kept steady in calamitous and adverse providences?

Here we are in equal danger of the other extreme, namely, despondency and sinking under the frowns and strokes of contrary providences. Now, to support and establish the heart in this case, consider the following:

(1) Afflictive providences are of great use to the people of God; they cannot live without them. The earth does not need more chastening frosts and mellowing snows than our hearts need nippy providences. Let the best Christian be only a few years without them, and he will be aware of his need for them; he will find that all his graces are sadly remiss and declining.

(2) No stroke of calamity upon the people of God can separate them from Christ. "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation?" (Rom 8:35). There was a time when Job could call nothing in this world his own, except trouble. He could not

say, My estate, my honor, my health, my children, for all these were gone; yet *then* he could say: "My Redeemer" (19:25). Well then, there is no cause to sink while interest in Christ remains sure to us.

(3) All your calamities will have an end shortly. The longest day of the saints' troubles has an end; and then no more troubles forever. The troubles of the wicked will be to eternity, but you "shall suffer only a while" (1Pet 5:10). If a thousand troubles are appointed for you, they will come to *one* at last, and after that no more. Indeed, and though "our light afflictions are only for a moment," yet they work "for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory" (2Cor 4:17). Let that support your hearts under all your sufferings.

When a change in providence causes doubt

3. Lastly, let us consider what may be useful to support and quiet our hearts under doubtful providences, when our dear concerns hang in a doubtful suspense before us, and we do not know which way the providence of God will cast and determine them.

Now the best hearts are apt to grow concerned and pensive, distracted with anxiety about the event and outcome. To relieve and settle us in this case, the following considerations are very useful: (1) Let us consider the vanity and uselessness of such anxiety. "Which of you by taking thought can add one cubit to his stature?" (Mat 6:27). We may break our peace and waste our spirits, but not alter the case. We cannot turn God out of His way. "He is in one mind" (Job 23:13).⁶ We may increase by struggling against God, but we cannot avoid or lighten our troubles.

(2) How often do we afflict and torment ourselves by our own restless thoughts, when there is no real cause or ground for doing so? "You have feared continually every day because of the fury of the oppressor, when he was ready to destroy; and where is the fury of the oppressor?" (Isaiah 51:13). O what abundance of disquiet and trouble we might prevent by waiting quietly till we see the results of providence, and not bringing (as we do) the evils of tomorrow into today? (Mat 6:34)

(3) How great a ground of quietness it is that the whole disposal and management of all our affairs and concerns is in the hand of our own God and Father. No creature can touch us without His commission or permission. "Jesus answered, you would have no power at all against me, unless it were given to you from above" (John 19:11). Neither men nor devils can do anything without God's leave; and be sure that He will sign no order to your prejudice.

(4) How great a satisfaction it must be to all who believe the divine authority of the Scripture that the faithfulness of God stands engaged for every line and syllable found in it! How many blessed lines in the Bible may we mark that respect even our outward concerns and the happy results of them all! On these two grounds – namely, that our outward concerns with their steady

⁶ Geneva Bible: Job 23:13 Yet he is in one mind, and who can turn him? Indeed, he does what his mind desires."

direction to a blessed end is *found in the Word*; and that *this Word is of divine authority* – the faithfulness and honor of God stands good for every tittle that is found there. I say that these are grounds of such stability, that our minds may repose with the greatest security and confidence in them, even on the cloudiest day of trouble. Not only your eternal salvation, but your temporal interests are secured there. Be still, therefore, in the confidence of a blessed outcome.

(5) How great and sure a means the saints have ever found, to their own peace, to commit all doubtful outcomes of providence to the Lord, and to devolve⁷ all their cares upon Him! “Commit your works to the LORD, and your thoughts will be established” (Prov 16:3). By *works* he means any doubtful, intricate, perplexing business, about which our thoughts are racked and tortured. Roll all these upon the Lord by faith – leave them with Him – and the present immediate benefit you will have by it, besides comfort in the result, will be tranquility and peace in your thoughts. Who is there of any standing or experience in religion that has not found it so?

The Fifth Case – Being resolved in adversity

How may a Christian resign his heart to the will of God, when sad providences approach him, and forebode great troubles and afflictions coming towards him?

To rightly state and resolve this important case, it will be necessary to show what is *not* included and intended in the question; what it *does* suppose and include in it; and what help and directions are necessary for the due performance of this great and difficult duty.

First, negatively

As to the first, it must be premised that the question does not suppose the heart or will of a Christian to be at his own command and disposal in this matter. We cannot resign it and subject it to the will of God whenever we desire to do so. The duty indeed is ours, but the power by which alone we perform it, is God’s; we act as we are acted upon by the Spirit. It is with our hearts as with meteors hanging in the air by the influence of the sun: while that continues, they abide above; but when it fails, they fall to the earth. We can do this and all other things, however difficult, through Christ that strengthens us (Php 4:13). But without Him we can do nothing (John 15:5). He does not say, “Without me you can only do a little,” or “without me you can do nothing except with great difficulty,” or “without me you can do nothing perfectly,” but “without me you can do nothing” at all. And every Christian has a witness in his own breast to attest to this truth. For there are cases frequently occurring in the methods of providence in which, notwithstanding all their prayers and desires, all their reasonings and strivings, they cannot fully quiet their hearts in the disposal and will of God; on the contrary, they find all their endeavors in this matter are like rolling a returning stone up the hill – till God says to the heart, ‘Be still,’ and to the will, ‘Give up, nothing can be done.’

⁷ *Devolve*: to pass on or delegate to another; “cast all your cares upon Him.”

Secondly, affirmatively

Next, let us consider what this case *does* suppose and include in it, and we shall find that,

1. It supposes that the people of God foresee troubles and distresses approaching and drawing near to them. I confess it is not always so, for many of our afflictions, as well as comforts, come upon us by way of surprise; but often we are forewarned of troubles, both public and personal, before we feel them. The weather may be discerned by the face of the sky. When we see a morning sky that is red and lowering, this is a natural sign of a foul and rainy day (Mat 16:3). In the same way, there are just as certain signs of the times by which we may discern when trouble is near, even at our door. And these forewarnings are given by the Lord to awaken us to our duties, by which they may either be prevented (Zeph 2:1-2), or be sanctified and sweetened to us when they come. These signs and notices of approaching troubles are gathered *partly* from the observation and collation of parallel Scripture cases and examples – God generally holds one tenor and steady course in the administrations of His providences in all ages (1Cor 10:6) – and *partly* from the reflections Christians make upon the attitude and disposition of their own hearts, which greatly need awakening, humbling and purging providences. For let a Christian be but a few years or months without a rod, and how formal, earthly, dead and vain his heart will grow!

And such a disposition presages⁸ affliction to those who are beloved by the Lord, as really as the sweating of stones presages rain. *Lastly*, ordering and disposing the next causes into a posture and preparation for trouble, plainly warns us that trouble is at the door. Thus when the symptoms of sickness begin to appear on our own bodies, or on the wife of our heart, or our children, who are like our own souls, providence (in these symptoms) awakens our expectations of death and doleful separations. So too, when our enemies join together and plot the ruin of our liberties, estates, or lives, and God seems to loose the bridle of restraint on their neck, we cannot help but be alarmed with the near approach of troubles – especially when at the same time, our conscience reflects on the abuse and non-improvement of our comforts.

2. The case before us supposes that these premonitions and forerunners of affliction usually disturb the order very much, and break the peace of our souls; they put the mind under great discomposure, the thoughts under much distraction, and the affections into tumults and rebellion.

Ah, how unwilling we are to surrender to the Lord the loan which He made to us, disquieted by troubles when we are at ease in our enjoyments! How unwelcome are the messengers of affliction to the best of men! We are ready to say to them as the widow said to Elijah: “What have I to do with you, O man of God; have you come to me to call my sin to remembrance, and to slay my son?” (1Kng 17:18). And this arises partly from the remains of corruption in the best souls. For though every sanctified person has come by his own consent into the kingdom,

⁸ *Presage*: to signify something yet to come; to foretell or indicate something.

and under the government and scepter of Christ, and although every thought of his heart by right must be subjected to Him (2Cor 10:5), yet in fact the conquest and power of grace is incomplete and partial. Natural corruption, like Jeroboam with his vain men, rises up against grace and causes many mutinies in the soul.¹⁰ While grace, like young Abijah, is weak-handed and cannot resist them; partly from the advantage Satan takes at the time to provoke and assist our corruptions. He knows that what is already in motion is more easily moved onward. In this confusion and hurry of thoughts, Satan slips in his temptations unnoticed: sometimes aggravating the evils which we fear, with all the sinking and overwhelming circumstances imaginable; sometimes divining and forecasting such events and evils that never happen; sometimes repining at the disposals of God as more severe to us than to others; and sometimes reflecting with very unbelieving and unworthy thoughts about the promises of God and His faithfulness in them. By all of this, the affliction is made to sink deep into the soul before it actually comes. The thoughts are so disordered that duty cannot be duly performed. And the soul is really weakened and disabled from bearing its trial when it finally comes. It is just as if a man kept waking and was restless all night with thoughts of his hard journey which he must travel tomorrow; and so when tomorrow comes, he faints midway on his journey for lack of rest.

3. It is supposed to be the Christian's great duty here, under the apprehensions of approaching troubles, to resign his will to God's and quietly commit the events and their outcome to Him, whatever they may prove to be. David did this in a similar case and circumstance: "And the king said to Zadok, Carry back the ark of God into the city; if I find favor in the eyes of the LORD, he will bring me back again, and show me both it and his habitation. But if he says, I have no delight in you: behold here am I, let him do to me as seems good to him" (2Sam 15:25-26). O lovely and truly Christian attitude! It is as if to say, Go Zadok, return with the ark to its place; though I do not have the symbol, yet I hope I will have the real presence of God with me in this sad journey. How He will dispose the events of this sad and doubtful providence, I do not know. Either I will return again to Jerusalem or I will not. If I do, then I will see it again, and enjoy the Lord in His ordinances there. If I do not, then I will go to that place where there is no need or use of those things. Either way, it will be well for me. I am content to refer all things to the divine pleasure, and commit the outcome, whatever it may be, to the Lord.

Till our hearts come to the same resolve, we can have no peace within. "Commit your works to the LORD, and your thoughts shall be established" (Prov 16:3). By *works* he means not only every enterprise and business we undertake, but every puzzling, intricate, and doubtful event we fear. Once these are committed by an act of faith, and our wills are resigned to His, besides the comfort we will have in the outcome, we will have the present advantage of a well-composed and peaceful spirit.

But this resignation is the difficulty. There is no doubt of peace, if we could just bring our hearts to that. And therefore,

4. I will give such helps and directions as may, through God's blessing and in the faithful use of them, assist and facilitate this

great and difficult work.

First Help

First, *Labor to work into your hearts a deep and fixed sense of the infinite wisdom of God and of your own folly and ignorance.* This will make resignation easy to you. Whatever the Lord does is by counsel (Eph 1:11), His understanding is infinite (Psa 147:5), His thoughts are very deep (Psa 92:5). But as for man, indeed, the wisest among men, how little does his understanding penetrate the works and designs of providence! And how often we are forced to retract our rash opinions and confess our mistakes, and acknowledge that if providence had not seen with better eyes than ours, and looked farther than we did, we would have precipitated ourselves into a thousand mischiefs which, by its wisdom and care, we have escaped. It is well for us that the "seven eyes of providence" (Rev. 5.6) are ever awake and looking out for our good. Now if one creature can and ought to be guided and governed by another that is more wise and skillful than himself, as the client is guided by his learned counsel, or the patient is guided by his skillful physician, much more would every one surrender his weak reasoning and shallow understanding to the infinite and omniscient God.

It is nothing but our pride and arrogance, over-valuing our own understandings, that makes resigning ourselves to God's will so hard.⁹ To itself, carnal reason seems a wise disputant about the concerns of the flesh; but how often providence has baffled it! *The more humility we have, the more resignation we have.*

How few of our mercies and comforts have been foreseen by us! Our own projects have come to nothing; we never thought of or contrived what has actually taken place. It was not our choice of the ground, or our skill in weighing and delivering the *bowl*,¹⁰ but some unforeseen providence, like a rub in the *green*, that decided the toss.

Second Help

Deeply consider the sinfulness and the vanity of torturing your own thoughts about the issues of doubtful providences.

There is much sin in doing so, for what are all our anxious and agitated emotions other than the immediate outcome and fruits of pride and unbelief? There is not a greater display of pride in the world than in the contests of our wills with the will of God. It is a presumptuous invasion of God's prerogative to dictate to His providence, and prescribe to His wisdom.

There is a great deal of vanity in it. All the thoughtfulness in the world will not make one hair white or black. All our discontents will not prevail with God to take back, or as the word may be rendered, *make void* His Word (Isaiah 31:2). He is in one mind (Job 23:13). The thoughts of His mind are from everlasting (Psa 33:11).

⁹ O what a wise logician human arrogance seems to itself; especially when it is afraid to lose any of its delights! Tert. De Spectaculis (The Shows), chap. 2.

¹⁰ Reference to lawn bowls, where a player tries to knock down pins standing on the lawn by rolling a ball into them.

Third Help

Set before you those choice Scripture patterns of submission to the Lord's will in as deep, indeed much deeper points of self-denial than this one before you, and shame yourselves out of this quarreling attitude with providence.

You know what a close trial providence was to Abraham, that called him from his native country and father's house to go he knew not where; and yet it is said that he came to God's foot, as readily obeying his call as a servant when his master knocks for him with his foot (Isaiah 41:2).

Paul's voyage to Jerusalem had a dismal aspect for him. He could expect nothing but bonds and prisons, as he tells us (Acts 20:23). And it was a great trial to the saints, who could not tell how to give up such a minister; yet Paul resigns his will to God's (20:22), and so do they: "The will of the Lord be done" (21:14).

But far beyond these, and all other patterns, what an example our dear Lord Jesus has set before us in the deepest point of self-denial that was ever in the world! When the Father gave the cup of sufferings into his hands in the garden, a cup of wrath, the wrath of the great and terrible God, and that without mixture, the very taste of which put nature into agony and astonishment, sore amazement, a bloody sweat, and forced from him that vehement and sad cry: "Abba, Father, all things are possible to you; take away this cup from me"; yet still with submission, "nevertheless not what I will, but what you will" (Mark 14:36). O blessed pattern of obedience and resignation to the pleasure of God! What is your case in comparison to this?

Fourth Help

Study the singular benefits and advantages of a will resigned and melted into the will of God.

Such a spirit has a continual Sabbath within itself. The thoughts are established (Prov 16:3). And truly, till a man comes to this, he too much resembles the devil, who is a restless spirit seeking rest but finding none. It was an excellent expression of Luther, to someone who was greatly perplexed in his spirit about the doubtful events of some affairs that were then pending: *Dominus tua omnia faciat, et tu nihil facias, sed sis sabbatum Christi*, i.e. "The Lord shall do all for you, and you shall do nothing but be the Sabbath of Christ." It is by this means that the Lord "gives his beloved sleep" (Psa 127:2); he does not mean the sleep of the body, but of the spirit. As one has said on this verse: "Though believers live in the midst of many troubles here, yet with quiet and composed minds they keep themselves in the silence of faith, as though they were asleep." Besides, it fits a man's spirit for communion with God in all his afflictions; and this alleviates and sweetens those afflictions beyond anything in the world. And surely a man is never nearer the mercy he desires, or the deliverance he expects, as one truly observes, than when his soul is brought into a submissive attitude. David was never nearer the kingdom than when he became like a weaned child. ^{Psa 131:2}

Fifth Help

Lastly, think how repugnant an unsubmissive attitude is both to your prayers and professions.

You pray that the will of God may be done on earth as it is in heaven, and yet when it seems contrary to your will or interest, you struggle or fret against it. You profess to have committed your souls to His keeping, and to leave your eternal concerns in His hands, and yet you cannot commit things infinitely less valuable to Him. How contradictory these things are!

You profess as Christians to be led by the Spirit, but this practice shows you follow the perverse counsels of your own spirits. O then, regret no more, dispute no more, but lie down meekly at your Father's feet, and say in all cases and at all times, "The will of the Lord be done." (Acts 21:14)

And thus I have, through the aid of providence, performed what I intended to say from this Scripture. I acknowledge that my performances have been accompanied with much weakness; yet I have endeavored to say about providence the things that are right. Blessed be the Lord who has thus far assisted and protected me in this work.

How providence will dispose of my life, liberty, and labors for the time to come, I do not know; but I cheerfully commit all to Him who has up to now performed all things for me (Psa 57:2).