

THE

Drift of Divine Providence

Thanksgiving Sermon :

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❖SERMON❖

Ps. 107: 31-43

IN old times men believed in the existence of God, and many were simple-minded enough to believe that God had much to do with this world and with the affairs of men; that he controlled elements, gave rain, food and gladness; that he blessed fields and smiled upon vinyards; gave fatness and health; that he multiplied the people and increased the joy; that he sent sorrow and appointed affliction; turned rivers into a wilderness; watersprings into dry ground and fruitful land into barrenness; poured contempt upon Princes and

set the poor on high, put down even Kings and set up others in their places; that he fed the hunger-bitten and gave the wanderers and homeless a city to dwell in. The drift of thought in those ancient times was toward a wise and powerful Providence. God ruled the world; was in nature, history, grace, in all events, changes, turned the hearts of men, guided their purposes, limited their action, set forward their work, restrained their evil and made even the wrath of man to praise him. A good time then, for men believed; the righteous saw it and rejoiced; the wicked saw it and felt it, and iniquity stopped her mouth. The wise-hearted observed these things, studied the providences of God, watched the Divine administration, waited for God, and so came to "understand the loving-kindness of the Lord." The

world is still going on, and swift changes are passing over it. There are times and seasons, generations come and go, history is quickly made, and all things seem to drift toward some grand consummation for good or ill.

There is a ceaseless ongoing in the world, a steady trend, nothing abides in one stay, one event presses upon another, one generation crowds another off the stage. Providences are quick, startling, wondrously significant; but *in what direction do we drift?* There are swift rivers in the sea, do they set with the tide towards rocks and shoals and inhospitable coasts, or toward the desired haven? Is the world sweeping on to better conditions, and human life steadily rising to higher enjoyment, or are we driving with acceler-

ated speed to disaster, wreck and hopeless ruin!
Is the world growing *better or worse?*

In our country, once in each year at least, we stop and take breath, sometimes take an observation, recount the past, forecast the future, and give thanks to God! This is the day of the year our Chief Magistrate and his Excellency the Governor of our State have called us to devote to a public acknowledgment of our mercies, and to give thanks to God for his continued goodness and special favor to our land and our people. They recite causes for gratitude, tranquility at home, peace with the nations, abundant harvests, productive mines, reviving industries, expanding commerce, general health, and continued safety and power of the institutions of liberty and justice which our fathers established, and which God has

so signally blessed; and while we do this it is a fitting time to give thought to God's dealings with men, and take some observations of his providences in the earth! We must study events, times, men, work, principles, results, the outlook! Let us glance at the

I. Religious Tendencies in our World.

It is quite impossible to give a history of religious thought, or recite the changes that have passed upon the world, even in the last hundred years, but we may catch some glimpses, as of a distant army on the march, enough to show the way they go and the power with which they move; or of a mighty river, which way its current sweeps on! A century ago spiritual Christianity had small place and rude lodgings in our world:

Scepticism ruled the thoughts of men, and both language and literature denied God. Philosophy of the time had no place for Jesus: Bible faith was scouted in high places of the earth, and humble piety driven to mountain strongholds or hidden in some distant cloister far from the sight and knowledge of men. Protestantism in England if it dared appear in public, stood with hat in hand and could only apologize for being Protestantism at all. It had no power against the wide-spread indifference and deeper scorn of its enemies. A little handful of Moravians in Prussia, and a few Wesleyans in England were the only bright spots in the universal darkness.

In this country French infidelity was widespread, and French vices infected all communities, nowhere on the earth was there an aggressive

church. The Reformation had lost its power, and Protestantism could do little more than keep its feet. We sweep aside a hundred years! short space in the history of a world, or of a race, and what now; we find that the most powerful language of the earth charged with Christian thought, mighty in spiritual strength, rules the world; Christian civilization has possessed vast portions of the globe; Christian education, the most powerful appliance for training the mind and shaping the thought of our race, holds the foremost place. Christianity itself, as expressed in life, walk, conversation, books, charities, government, is the dominant power in the world!

Within this period the whole work of modern missions has been inaugurated, and its marvellous victories won, of families, tribes, nations. Every

evangelical denomination in christendom has its organized missions, its force of laborers at home and abroad, and the aggregate of money devoted to the spread of a pure and undefiled religion is enormous, millions in every year. The self-sacrificing workers are counted by tens of thousands, and converts, as the drops of the morning. Every nation, and every prominent tribe of people, has in some form and to some extent heard the gospel of Christ, and in the great majority of languages and dialects, read in their own tongue the wonderful works of God. There is a quick pulse and thoughtful earnestness in all truly Christian churches and communities. Not eight months passed after Stanley's letter was published, in London, urging a mission to Central Africa, before seven picked missionaries were in

the field at Victoria Nyanza, and now two other missions, one at Niassa and another at Tanganika.

Chiefs, and chiefs' sons, are hearing the gospel and attending the schools. On the gold coast three hundred converts were brought in last year. In Southern Africa a single society has forty-two stations, and eight thousand converts. In the Basuta country, further inland among the mountains, twenty-one thousand attend the churches and four thousand are communicants. In Tinnevely, Southern India, there were sixteen thousand conversions last year, and six thousand in Arcot. More than five thousand Telooagoos were baptized in a few days, and nearly fifteen thousand more are waiting to come in.

In Japan, Buddhism is losing its hold. Education has quickened thought, and opened wide:

doors into this strange Empire. China is waking from the long dream. Mexico and South America are casting off the power that has throttled all freedom of thought and bound the millions in ignorance and superstition for hundreds of years. South Seas have been redeemed from Cannibalism; among ten thousand Fijians there is not a household where there is not family worship. These are mere glimpses which simply show the tendency of the times, the which way the current sets.

II. Political Drifts in these latter Times.

One hundred years ago the Declaration of Independence of America proclaimed freedom of human conscience and rights of man in the face of the world, a bold but a grand step. Constitutional government, suffrage, popular legislation, educa-

tion of the people followed. Star-chambers disappeared. Political espionage and arbitrary powers, used to oppress or destroy, became impossible. Pompadours could no more rule kings, and *salons* no longer dictate to nations. License settled into liberty, and government became the guide and defence of the people. No longer possible for King or Kaiser to say, "I am the State." The State became the ordinance of God, and God made civil government and rulers of all classes, not only responsible to Him, but responsible to the meanest and lowest of their subjects. Every State and every power began to learn that there is no legitimate right to reign that is not founded in the natural and inalienable rights of man and that does not find its authority in God, and enforce its power in accord with moral law! Right was

embodied in statutes and guarded by justice; and with these foundations laid, the politics of the world began to change. What transitions, enlargement, drift from despotism to humanity, honored and enfranchised, in this last hundred years. From Louis XIV. to the Republic of to-day. There has been an ever-growing tendency to separate Church and State, and to hold imperialism to strict account. Monarchy must be limited, and monarchs must walk among the people. The invisible ruler of Japan must come out of his hiding-place, and live in presence of his subjects. Kings may become targets for assassins, but every attempt to take the life of a sovereign rouses popular enthusiasm to the defence of legitimate power and the exercise of rigid justice. We have not to say that the political events of the last hundred years have

been free from great wrongs, or that the politics of our time run in clear and uncontaminated streams; but that the drift has been toward self-government and institutions sprung from, and based in the intelligence and fidelity of the people. Every revolution has shattered down some hoary wrong, and set forward the world toward larger personal liberty, freedom of conscience and thought. Slavery has been abolished in civilized lands, and the slave-trade hunted to its last strongholds among savage tribes. The strongest governments of the world are set to break every yoke. Piracies upon the high seas and plunder by raids of armed men upon the land are no longer possible. A *moral sense* has grown up among the nations that quickly takes alarm at gross political abuses. Portugal cannot imprison a man for con-

science sake, or send thousands of her people into exile, without shocking the world. If Spain sends a family to prison for reading the Scriptures, the whole Christian world is aroused, and Cabinets are stirred as if some fearful war was threatened. In all Christian countries there is now, as never before, at the bottom of all things, a conscience. In all these the tendency has been and still is to the wider and higher. The flow has been seaward—steadily toward the simplest forms of government, the largest degree of liberty, the wisest administration of justice, and the highest good of humanity!

III. *The Drift of Human Knowledge and Attainment.*

Nearly all the languages spoken by tribes and people have been mastered and reduced to

writing and printing, and larger parts of them are spoken by living men, who belong to Christian peoples, and in which living men can preach Christ and Him crucified.

There have been marvels in scientific discovery. Science now rules in art, agriculture, locomotion, every department of human knowledge, and every form of human labor and life. It would be a hopeless task to recite even the discoveries, inventions and appliances from the first Yankee washing-machine to Edison's last electric light or most perfect microphone.

The drift in these directions is so rapid that we lose breath, and only the most thoughtful and swift-footed can keep pace at all; but the drift is always toward wider knowledge, and more exact and effective appliance. Every footstep is

toward the unseen and unknown, and every cast of the lead is to the more profound. Mistakes are made; guesses given for truth, and hypothesis for fact; it does not matter; in the wide, and earnest, and swift search, this must be; but the search goes on; the drill sinks deeper; the glass sweeps over a wider field; the chemist becomes more patient and more exact; fallacies are disproved, and fancies dissipated; but the trend is still toward the solid and the true.

IV. *Look at the Drift of Commerce and Trade.*

Seas have been dried up, or crossed as if ferries; national barriers broken down; Scot and Pict, and Angle and Saxon, mingled into one. Peoples have been brought together; migrations and intermarriages have made the world akin,

and all the families of the earth neighbors. Products of every clime, and commodities from every people are interchanged, and this interchange has increased comfort and wealth of the world. Discoveries of gold and silver, coal and iron, all useful metals, and knowledge gained that can turn all products and all elements to account, furnish incalculable wealth, and the countless millions of our world are used for practical and working interests! Romans, Greeks, Assyrians and Phœnicians buried their money; the world could never use it. Wealth now is active in all forms of service for man, and wealth multiplies wealth! Roadways opened into a country will extend in many directions, reach newer fields, unfold larger resources, gather vaster wealth.

The depression of our times has not destroyed

wealth, only retired it; it has changed values, which at the best were fictitious; but the wealth of the world is still secure, and will find channels for its going and tools with which to work on and work out earth's great problems.

Now, in all this drift; with the unmistakable trend of human works and improvements; with wealth unparalleled in the history of the world; with capabilities which no former age possessed; and experience of all ages pressed into our own; with steady advance in human knowledge; with higher arts and more skilful manufactures; with universal desire for improvement, and a steady increase of population and daily advance of migration and settlement; with religion pressing toward the most distant peoples, and knocking at the gates of the mightiest empires; with great revivals

in Japan, India, Britain, America and the Islands of the Sea; with an almost universal impulse in all Christian countries to a more spiritual faith, and in all true Christian hearts to a more personal conformity to God, *what are we to conclude?* Are these the muffled drum-beats of a dead-march? The silent tread of the nations toward a doom that cannot be averted, or a death from which there is no resurrection? Has the travail of the ages been only to bring forth destruction and death? Has the world put on her adornments, and man made his home more beautiful and blessed, only for swift disasters and universal wreck? Or are these glorious developments the prophecies and earnestings of a more glorious future for earth and men? Are we to sorrow over them as an untimely birth, or a child sinking into con-

sumption, and hastening to decay, or to feel that these are pulses of a mighty and on-going life? that humanity, in its strength, has sent its throbs through the world to quicken its life, and speed on its victories? that God, in his wisdom and love, is using his people to carry forward his plans of redemption, and win the world for Christ?

I. Let Us Give Thanks to God For All.

I hear the trumpet call, not sounding a halt, but to quicker time in the march. I joy to know that God is in the world, and working among the nations; that He makes the desert blossom and the wilderness glad. My heart responds to every call for praise, as new provinces are won, and new souls are born into the kingdom. It is a time of gladness in all the earth, and the signs of promise

come from every quarter of the globe, and these are the times of refreshing from the presence of the Lord the baptisms of the Spirit! The Lord has given the word, and great is the company of them that published it, and greater shall be the multitudes of them that hear and believe it. We will not now sorrow that so little has been done in the world, but praise God for so much. The *way* has been prepared, foundations laid, experience gained, work done.

II. Let Us Work on with Better Heart.

We do not want now ascension robes, but girdles for the loins. Our post is not on Olivet, that we may gaze into Heaven, but in the fields, where the battle is sorest; in the highways, where men come and go. The times and seasons

of God's government and plan for the redemption of the world are not written in our calendar, nor can they be revealed to the nearest companionship, or tenderest love. They are with the Father. Christ is with us now, by His Holy Spirit, and will be with his people till the work for this world is done. Whatever may be true of Christ's coming soon, or waiting until the Spirit has wrought His work upon men and nations, it is the time for us to work for God. Hard work is yet to be done in this world, and Christians to take the foremost part, bear the heaviest burdens. They are to preach the Gospel to every creature, and disciple the nations, tell the story in every language, and teach men the knowledge of God. This is not child's play, but sturdy work, which will demand sacrifice, suffering, devotion unto death.

It is cowardice to shrink from duty, and false witness to say that the world will be no better until Christ comes in person to destroy the wicked, and reign over the handful of righteous that will remain. God has given him the heathen, and he will gather them as a hen gathers her chickens under her wings! given him the heathen not to destroy them, but to save them; an inheritance of ransomed souls, the nations of the saved. Nations will be born at once. Many shall run to and fro, and knowledge shall be increased; pervade all lands, cover the earth as the waters cover the sea! *"for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord."* The light of the moon shall be as the light of the sun, and the light of the sun shall be seven-fold. "When the enemy shall come in like a flood, the Spirit of the Lord shall lift up a standard

against him, and the Redeemer shall come to Zion and to them that turn from transgression in Jacob, saith the Lord." So shall they fear the name of the Lord—from the West, and his glory from the rising of the sun. "He shall have dominion also from sea to sea, and from the river to the ends of the earth." The time shall come when it shall be proclaimed aloud: "The kingdoms of this world *are* become the kingdoms of our Lord and his Christ, and he shall reign (not for a thousand years), but *forever and ever.*"