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# NATURAL LAW AND DIVINE PROVIDENCE.

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“Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? and one of them shall not fall on the ground without your Father.”—MATTHEW x. 29.

TWO theories of the universe contend for the mastery in the world to-day, the mechanical and the paternal.

Modern science has demonstrated by an ever-widening induction the universal reign of law. The silent movements of the heavenly host; the revolutions of the earth as it turns on its axis or swings in its orbit round the sun, causing the alternations of day and night and the ever-changing panorama of the seasons; the rise and fall of the tides, the shifting of the fickle wind, the circulation of moisture as it ascends in vapor, condenses in cloud, descends in rain, and flows in rill and torrent and river back to ocean again; the springing of the germ in the earth, the growth of blade and flower and fruit, till the earth is clothed with beauty, and waving harvests and ripening fruit provide food for man and beast; all have been shown to come under the operation and dominion of regular and unchanging laws, inexorably working out fixed results. Every element has its fixed laws of combination with every other element; every force its regular play of action upon every other force;



every form of life its changeless conditions for development, retrogression or destruction; even sentient beings have their prescribed modes of action; the flight of the lark, the song of the nightingale, the roar of the lion, the spring of the tiger, are as much in obedience to law as the fall of an apple or the flash of a thunderbolt. Man himself is born, grows, labors and dies, the subject of natural law. The very configuration of the earth we inhabit is the result of the operation of law. Law-abiding waters sifted its elements and built up its rock-ribbed frame. Law-abiding earthquakes heaved up the solid mass of the mountains; and waters descending in obedience to law carved them into hills and valleys.

From these known facts of science, men have leaped to the conclusion that this mighty mechanism of nature is *only* a machine; that whether originally caused by some being who has left it to work out its own results, or whether itself uncaused, and evolving all its laws out of its own inherent forces, it is now a mere machine, blind to results and regardless of consequences.

Such a universe must be *purposeless*. If there is no intelligence there can be no will. The sun shines because it must, and not to clothe a world with beauty or to ripen the harvests for the food of man. The rains descend from necessity, and not to water the earth that it may give seed to the sower and bread to the eater. The rivers flow because water runs downhill, and not to fill the valleys with corn, and to girdle the hills with joy.

Such a universe must be *heartless*. It is nothing to the mill whether it grinds the corn to feed the hungry, or whether it mangles the limbs of a helpless child. So nature is as indifferent to the sorrows of her children as to their joys. The wind cares not whether it sinks the

laden ships or wafts them to their desired haven. The sea will sport with a child upon the beach, and then engulf it in its treacherous embrace.

Such a universe must be *conscienceless*. It has no concern for the righteous or the wicked. It may pour its plenty into the lap of the wicked, and heap its sorrows upon the head of the righteous; and there is no court of appeals where wrongs can be righted, sin punished and virtue rewarded.

In such a universe worship is an absurdity, prayer a mockery and religion a delusion. Let us eat and drink, for to-morrow we die.

Over against this mechanical, soulless theory of the universe we place the paternal theory as it is found in the words of the text and in all the teachings of our Lord. Not that he announced it as a *theory*. Nothing was theory in his teachings. A theory is a supposition that gives a reasonable explanation of known facts; but with him the explanation is announced as known as clearly as the facts. He taught as one having authority. "We speak that we do know, and testify that we have seen." But to the world, before it accepts the teachings and authority of Christ, his revelation of the Father, and the Father's care for his children must be considered as one of the theories on which we seek to account for the facts of the universe.

According, then, to the teachings of Jesus Christ, God, the Creator of heaven and earth, exercises a fatherly care over all his creatures. He singles out one of the least by way of example. Their little bodies could be seen any day hanging in the market in long strings. A trifling copper coin could purchase two of them for a meagre meal. Yet, says our Lord, no winter's blast is keen enough, no bird of prey is swift enough, no

archer's aim is sure enough, no fowler's snare is cunning enough to bring to the ground one of the least of these creatures until God's time has come to still the beatings of the little fluttering heart, and fold forever the wings that bore it in happy flight. They have neither store-house nor barn, they sow not, neither do they reap; yet the Father feedeth them. It is he who clothes the very grass of the field with fabrics of richer lustre than the royal robes of Solomon, in all their glory of Tyrian dye and gold of Ophir. All of beauty, all of sustenance, all of protecting care our heavenly Father gives to the earth and its creatures. Then what of his children? "Are ye not much better than they?" "Fear not," says the Master to them, "ye are of more value than many sparrows." So tender is the Father's care of them that the very hairs of their head are all numbered.

This theory of a divine providence, universal and special, wide as creation and particular as the hairs of our heads, governing the stars in their courses, and the sparrows in their flight and fall, is what we all as Christians profess to believe. And yet there are few of us, perhaps, who have not sometimes been troubled as to just how to reconcile such a providence with the known facts of natural law. What place is there for providence, faith, and prayer, in a universe governed by unchanging and inexorable law?

In answer to this question, I would suggest, first, that if this universe is a machine, it is a machine of God's planning. Science has nothing to say against that. When men make a machine they make it to do a certain work, but it may do other things for which it was never intended. We make a locomotive to pull our trains; it may crush the life out of its own maker. But God's

planning is complete and perfect. "Known unto God are all his works, from the beginning of the world." In planning his universe, the least as well as the greatest events enter into his plan, and often the greatest events turn upon those that seem the most trivial. God is too great for anything to appear insignificant in his eyes, and if the sparrow cannot fall to the ground without your Father, it is because the sparrow, with all the forces and circumstances that govern its life, is a part of God's great plan.

Some of you have seen at the World's Fair, or other recent expositions, those beautiful machines for weaving pictures in silk. If you examined them closely you must have noticed that folds of stiff paper, perforated with many holes, were regularly fed to the machine from above. That was the pattern. The position of those holes governed the shifting threads of the warp and directed the motions of the many-colored shuttles as they flew in and out. A defect in the pattern, or a failure in any part of the machine to respond to the pattern, would have marred the perfect picture. So God has ordained all causes as well as all effects, and we need not fear even to pray to our Father according to his word, for if he has made this universe to run by prayer, the prayer is as essential to the working out of his plan as the force of gravitation to the movements of the spheres.

But if we look only at this aspect of the subject, we may fall into a fatalistic conception of God and his universe. Our prayers, if we pray, may become perfunctory and formal, and we will not pray and trust as those who are coming to the sympathetic heart of a living Father. Let us remember, then, that God's universe is not a machine which he has planned and wound up, and

then withdrawn himself from all interest in its working. We must picture him as rejoicing in the work of his hands; as watching with sympathetic interest and pleasure the development of all his plans. If, in the working out of his gracious purposes, his creatures, or, yet more, his children, suffer, his heart is responsive to their cry, even while he is too wise and too really tender to turn aside from the beneficent ends that he has in view; and when he sends deliverance, it is just as truly he that sends it, and it comes as fresh from his fatherly heart, as if both the sorrow and the respite had not been a part of his purpose from before the foundation of the world. Thus tenderly he loves the sparrows, thus tenderly he marks their fall. Are ye not much better than they?

But God's present relation to his universe is not confined to his loving and sympathetic interest in the development of his purposes. I do not believe that science has reached the ultimate source of power when it has discovered a law of nature. There is no inherent power in a natural law. It is only an observed order of action. In itself it explains nothing. Take, for instance, one of the most universal of all these laws, the law of gravitation. We know that if we let go an object from our hands it will fall to the earth. We know that the same force swings the earth in its orbit round the sun, and binds together all systems by invisible chains. But why has matter this attraction for other matter? Who can tell? One of the most brilliant of American astronomers has said that the more he has studied it the more has he come to the conclusion that the only explanation which can be given is just that God wills it so. To this source at last we must trace all energy. Natural laws are but the modes in which God's power expresses itself. Hence, all energy and life in the universe are but manifestations

of the life and power of the living God. He upholds all things by the word of his power. In him we live, and move, and have our being. He is the God in whose hand our breath is, and whose are all our ways. If for one moment he withdrew the sustaining power of his will, all things would return to chaos, or vanish into nothingness. But he is faithful to his creatures. Seed-time and harvest, and cold and heat, and summer and winter, shall not fail. Thus, it is God that feeds the ravens and clothes the lilies. And we, too, may come with trusting hearts and pray, "Give us this day our daily bread."

And is this all? Is God's providence confined to the sustaining of natural laws and his sympathetic interest in the working out of his eternal purpose? Those who argue thus strangely forget the domain of the action of the human will. All things in the world are not the unaided and unmodified result of natural law. Whatever is true of other beings, men are endowed with the power of *interference*. Man can play law against law, so as to bring out results just the opposite of unaided natural law. It is the nature of water to run downhill. Man confines it, and makes that very law force it upward into his dwellings. Gravity draws objects to the earth. But by that very law man lifts himself to the clouds by attaching himself to a bag inflated with some gas lighter than the surrounding air. Whether or not Elisha by a miracle made the iron to swim in ancient days, men, without any miracle, are in these days sailing the seas in iron ships, and fighting each other with massive cannon from floating fortresses. Every product of art and manufacture, every achievement of invention and discovery, is the interference of human will with the natural working of nature's laws. Even the harvests that

spring from earth's bosom are the cultivation of man, and the breeds of cattle that walk the earth are improved by art and man's device. Even where the naked savage roams the forest, we can trace him by his handiwork. Life, the supreme gift of nature, may be destroyed by his wrath, or prolonged by his skill and care. He may strike down the sparrow on his nest, or his fellow-man in his bed; or he may drive away the destroyer from his victim; or his own heart may relent when his hand is raised for the blow.

This wide sphere of freedom is left to man, as our own observation and experience teach us. And has the creature a power the exercise of which is denied to the Creator? Let us see.

Of the action of the divine will upon the human will science is silent. Whatever takes place in that realm is back of human consciousness, and so does not offer itself to investigation. But for that very reason science opposes no objection to the revelations of Scripture. "The king's heart is in the hand of the Lord; as the rivers of water, he turneth it whithersoever he will." "It is God that worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure." We cannot open the door to the action of the human soul upon the material universe without at the same time opening the door to the action of the divine Spirit through its influence upon the human soul. And when we consider the almost infinite possibilities for our weal or woe that are lodged in the hands of our fellow-men, and how at every turn our life may be blessed or blasted by their actions, it is no small part of the comfort of our faith in divine Providence that he holds the hearts of men in the hollow of his hand, and guides, directs, suggests, controls their thoughts and words and actions, to bring about his purposes of grace to the

meanest of his creatures and to the least of his children. If he stays the hand or mars the aim that seeks the sparrow's life; if he sends the hand that scatters seed or crumbs when winter's snows have covered the ground, need we fear for protection and sustenance? We are of more value than many sparrows.

But if man, without violating nature's laws, can interfere with and modify their actions, what shall we say of those more highly-endowed beings whose existence is revealed to us in the Scriptures? "Are they not all ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation?" So the Scriptures teach, but what has science to say? Nothing, except this, that it finds no trace of their action. Is that conclusive against their agency and ministry? Not at all. The beast that treads the earth leaves his footprints behind by which we can trace his path. But who can follow the track of the fish that parts the mobile waters, or the bird that cleaves the yielding air? We see the marks of the tool upon the stone rough-hewn from the quarry, but not upon the polished slab or the finished statue. It is the perfection of the work that obliterates the traces of the workman. So this angel ministry may be all about us, guiding and controlling the forces of nature, and yet their footfalls make no sound and leave no trace, and the marks of their handiwork remain, like themselves, unseen. However that may be, it is surely preposterous to say that God may not thus work through nature's laws, albeit with an unseen hand. We watch the musician as his fingers pass over the keys of the organ, and we understand why the key goes down and the note sounds, because we see the touch of his finger. But couple the lower to the upper bank of keys, and when he plays on the lower the corresponding keys of the upper bank go

down as though touched by unseen fingers. And it would be easy to connect both key-boards with another key-board out of sight, played by an unseen musician, while the visible keys responded to the touch of an invisible hand. Such a mechanism would seem to the uninitiated to be automatic. So with God's interference in nature. Nature's laws are but the keys and levers that connect his will with the results achieved. We hear the sound, we even see the movements of the keys and levers, but we see not the hand; yet God's controlling hand is on every key, and at his touch the great organ sings and throbs with the eternal harmonies of his will.

It is idle to say that the facts of nature are *sufficiently* accounted for without supposing the immediate action of God. The sphere of our ignorance is still too vast for us to say there is no need for God's intervention. When the Son of God was on earth the winds and the waves obeyed him, and at his word or touch disease fled away. In the wide domain of the elements in their ceaseless play, in the recondite laws of life and health and their constant warfare against disease and danger, we never know when the modifying touch of the divine hand produces results that nature unaided could never have achieved. God is still the Lord of nature. He is still the great Physician. And not a sparrow falleth to the ground without your Father.

This world, then, is still our Father's house. The universe is still subject to our Father's will. It is a universe, then, with a *heart* in it, and it is no idle thing for us to draw near to God in spirit, and say, "Our Father which art in heaven." Prayer is not a mere spiritual exercise. It reaches the heart of God, and sways the hand that rules the universe.

This is, likewise, a place for *righteousness*. "Say ye to

the righteous, It shall be well with him," is a living voice to-day. "Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness" is no obsolete command, and it is no meaningless promise that "all these things"—food, clothing, protection—"shall be added unto you." A life of trust is still the true and only life for happiness and peace, since it is our Father that is making "all things work together for good to them that love him."

And in this, our Father's house, there is a place for pardon, for redemption, for salvation. The birds, which know only his providential care, may sing in unconscious innocence a Father's praise. But we, his children, may sing a new and nobler song, a song of pardoning, redeeming love: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life."