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G O D ' S H A N D

IN

H U M A N E V E N T S .

A Sermon,

PREACHED IN THE BLEECKER STREET CHURCH ON
THE 14TH JULY, 1850.

IN REFERENCE TO THE DEATH OF

PRESIDENT TAYLOR.

BY

ERSKINE MASON, D.D.

NEW YORK:
R. CRAIGHEAD, PRINTER, 112 FULTON STREET
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GOD'S HAND IN HUMAN EVENTS.

“See now, that I, even I, am he, and there is no God with me; I kill, and I make alive: I wound and I heal: neither is there any that can deliver out of my hand.”

DEUT. xxxii. 39.

THE language, “whatever is, is right,” may, according to the sense in which it is used, express the essence of the most absolute fatalism, or the spirit of an intelligent scriptural faith. If it is designed, as is not infrequently the case, to convey the idea, that all events happen by a law of physical necessity, or irrespective of any intelligent agency, it is fatalism; or if the sentiment is designed to strip man of all responsibility, because his conduct cannot in any sense be different from what it is, then it is fatalism, which we cannot too strongly condemn, and of the falsehood of which we need no other, nor better proof, than is furnished by human consciousness. The sentiment is a false one, if we mean by it that everything is right, because in some way it will issue happily—since the morality of human conduct is to be determined from the end or motive of its author, and not from its results, which may be contrary to his wishes, and secured by influences over which he may have no control whatever. And yet the true spirit of intelligent faith and submission will say, “whatever is, is right,” for it sees the hand of God in everything. In its apprehension, not an event takes place in the world, irrespective of divine agency. There

is a providence presiding over and pervading all the circumstances and arrangements of human life, and all the departments of human industry,—a providence under which man moves in the prosecution of his own plans, with the consciousness of perfect freedom, while at the same time he is fulfilling the designs of the infinite and eternal God. Regarding mere events, then, *as such*, in the light of divine agency, and as having a specific reference to the divine purpose, it is true that “whatever is, is right,” for everything which God does, has respect to a right end, and is wisely adapted to accomplish that end. There are some circumstances in which every man can appreciate the sentiment thus explained, and fully admit its truth; other circumstances there are in which no spirit but one of implicit faith can admit the rectitude, or the wisdom, or the goodness of the divine arrangements, and yet the same God acts in both cases, and in both with the same wisdom and goodness and righteousness. Providential dispensations are dark and mysterious to us, because we cannot discover their end; or if the end is known, we perceive not their adaptation to produce it. Yet in the physical system, clouds and tempests, thunder and lightning, are beneficial, as well as calm and sunshine. No man can say that the former may be dispensed with; they may be necessary to bring about the good results of the latter; and if we pass into another department of God’s kingdom, analogy forbids us to look for scenes of unmingled prosperity. Their reverse, or scenes of darkness, adversity, and distress, may be as necessary to accomplish good in the moral world as storms and tempests are to a healthful state of the atmosphere. God’s hand, then, we are to see in everything. There is no actuating, controlling agent besides him; he kills and he makes alive, he wounds and he heals, he forms light and creates darkness, he makes peace and creates evil. “I the Lord do all these things,” is his language, and they must all be equally good; how can it be otherwise, when their character is to be determined from the end they contemplate, and the end in all cases is the same? In

view of these general remarks, I have two thoughts upon which I wish to dwell—God's agency in all the events of life—The great design of that agency. We have to look at these truths and at the duties they enforce.

I. I begin by remarking that one of the evidences of human apostasy, is seen in the efforts of man to shut God out of the world which he has made, or at least blind his mind to the proofs of his ever present, all pervading influence. It cannot be denied that there is a disposition in our fallen nature, if not to deny, at least to overlook, the agency of God, in the government of the things of earth. The mode in which God acts, is, moreover, such, that if we choose to do it, we can lose sight of him altogether, for out of those second causes which we see at work around us, and through which God's power is put forth, we can weave a veil, by which most effectually to hide him from our eyes. In those events which are aside from the ordinary or regular course of things, which are not to be explained upon any known principles, we are compelled to recognise a divine hand. Miraculous occurrences always bring God to view, because in them he acts immediately; and brought about as they are, if not in a way opposed to, at least diverse from his ordinary mode of operation, no satisfactory method of explanation is at hand. It is not so, however, in those events which take place in accordance with what we suppose to be the established law of cause and effect. Nature moves on with unfailing regularity. The laws of the physical system are fixed and unchanging. We speak of occurrences as perfectly natural, as brought about by the laws of nature, and we rest in their unchangeableness and in the steadfastness of those constant processes with which nothing appears to interfere. We thus deify nature, and put her supposed immutability in the place of God. It is so, not simply in the teachings of professed Atheism, but in the reasonings and feelings of every-day life, even of those with whom the being of God, and Providence in all its particularity and

minuteness, are articles of avowed belief; where we do not theoretically, we do practically shut God out of his own world and put nature in its place, making divine efficiency nothing but a name for the working of nature's laws. This mode of thinking, and feeling, and speaking, with which we are now concerned, is well nigh universal; our daily experience in all circumstances is familiar with it. It is peculiar to us, not simply in view of what are called strictly the works and processes of nature, but in view of everything else; we talk in the same way of all the scenes in our private history; we thus explain all the occurrences which are taking place around us, and the results we are constantly developing. If prosperity attends us in our earthly relations and plannings, we think a great deal of our own wisdom, sagacity, prudence, energy. The social system has its laws; human industry has its laws. There is no part of God's kingdom, in the world of matter, or of mind, which is not under some established, fixed laws; and when we have well studied these laws, and arranged our plans accordingly, and reached a happy issue, we are very proud of our own judgment, and take to ourselves the praise of all our successes. It is not different, in other and opposite circumstances; reverses come, and we are severely tried, as our plans are failed, our relations broken up, and our most sanguine hopes blasted. The loss of health is attributed to some false step or some imprudent exposure; if death comes up into our windows, and takes away one of our household, we can understand the event, as we see how something has been done which ought not to have been done, or something omitted which ought to have been done. In the midst of our failures, our disasters, our misfortunes, we look no further for an explanation, than to the stratagems of our foes, the treachery of friends, misplaced confidence, or injury from those from whom we expected nothing but favor and protection.

Now we do not intend to brand as atheistic or wicked a scrupulous attention to the laws of nature, or the laws of industry, or any of the laws in accordance with which events

are brought about in any department of God's kingdom. Far be it from me to say that a man should overlook or be unconcerned about secondary causes and instrumentalities. An intelligent faith in the divine purpose and agency is the parent of that circumspection, and care, and pains-taking which save us from errors, and give us energy for right action. But there is an agency behind all these instrumental causes, and upon which they are dependent, and I condemn only that disposition which leads us to rest in nature, or in any second causes whatever, and to lose sight of God.

The fact which I wish to be distinctly recognised is, that the laws of nature are but the rules in accordance with which a divine agency is exerted, and instrumentalities are but the channels through which it is put forth, or the means by which it executes its purposes. In all the events which are happening around us, of whatever character, God is acting as truly as though there were no secondary agencies whatever. God first lighted up the sun to shine upon our pathway, and ever since he has kept it bright and beaming; and when the shades of evening come on, he curtains us with darkness to give us a fit season for repose. So, if prosperity attends us, it is God who opens his hand bountifully over us, and throws his protecting arm around us. If we labor under afflictions, or trials of any kind, they are from God likewise; as truly so, as though he had come down in a visible form, and by an immediate act had taken away a friend, or defeated our plans, or robbed us of our substance; for all the intermediate agencies or influences which are concerned in any of these results, are but his ministers or servants, which act no further, nor otherwise than as he permits or directs them. I do not know, my brethren, anything more terrible to the human mind than the supposition that God may be absent from anything which takes place in the world. The Atheist and the Sceptic as to Divine Providence, do not know what their theories involve or whither they lead, or they would be startled by their own dreadful conception.

My reason will not allow me to think, no man's unperverted reason will allow him to think, that there may be anything independent of God's agency. Here alone is the thought upon which the human mind can stay itself. When the thunder comes forth from its sleeping-place, it is God who wakes it, and arms it with its power; he gives wings to the wind and fury to the tempest. The excitements and convulsions in society are under his direction and control; changes occur as he wills them, prosperity attends us at his order, and disaster overtakes us at his bidding. So human reason declares, and so the Bible teaches, "I form light and create darkness; I make peace and create evil; I the Lord do all these things." "Come, behold the works of the Lord, what desolation he hath made in the earth; he breaketh the bow and cutteth the spear in sunder; he burneth the chariot in the fire. Be still, and know that I am God." So fully and distinctly does inspiration set God before us, as concerned in all the events of whatever kind which are taking place around us.

II. My second thought upon this subject is, that the agency of God in everything is an intelligent agency; he never acts without a reason; none of his procedures are what we understand by *arbitrary acts*. I am aware that God is a sovereign, and in sovereignty he "setteth up one, and pulleth down another;" but if we mean by sovereignty anything more than this, that he does not make known the reasons of many of his procedures; if we mean that he ever acts from caprice, or that he has not for every one of his doings reasons, which, were they made known, would satisfy every mind of the propriety of his most severe dispensations, we libel his character. God is a sovereign, but his is a sovereignty of wisdom, and truth, and goodness; for everything he has a reason, infinitely wise and kind, a reason every way worthy of himself. If this were not so, who, under the conviction of the being and government of God, who could feel himself safe one moment; where

should there be room for trust, for peace, for happiness? I am aware that there are difficulties which meet us here. I do not say that it is easy to exercise an unwavering faith in the wisdom of God, or his goodness, at all times. It is not easy, and that simply because we do not perceive the reasons of his conduct.

What shall we say of trying dispensations? They look like marks of displeasure—are they so? Is it the way of God uniformly to reward our virtues with prosperity, and to punish us for our sins by sending upon us adversity? Such a doctrine makes a man's outward circumstances the criterion by which to judge of God's feelings towards him; and the ungodly who prosper in the world are higher in his favors than his own people, to whom the waters of a full cup of affliction are often wrung out. It is evident, as well from Scripture as from observation, that we cannot in this way uniformly explain divine dispensation. There are cases, however, it must be acknowledged, in which there is nothing mysterious or inexplicable about divine procedures. There are cases in which specific evils are seen to be the result of specific sins, where suffering comes as the natural result of our conduct, when it is of such a character that it might have been expected, in accordance with the established order of things, the fixed laws which God has impressed on our animal, mental, or social economy. So in the moral world, suffering oftentimes is exactly correspondent with the sin committed. The man of dissipation, the violator of any of nature's laws, does not need an angel from heaven to explain to him the diseases which rack his frame, or consign him to an early grave. There is, moreover, no mystery about God's dealings, which send upon a man the very evils he was preparing for another. We do not think that there was any darkness about that dispensation of divine providence, which put Haman upon the gallows he had prepared for Mordecai, and oftentimes retribution has followed so speedily and appropriately upon crime, as to force home the conviction

upon every mind, that there is a "God who judgeth in the earth."

For the most part, however, in this world of probation, providential dispensations are *disciplinary*, designed to reprove, to instruct, to reform rather than to destroy; and thus, to fulfil purposes of love, by securing right feeling and right action upon the part of their subjects. God has claims upon us as his creatures; and when we open his word, we find that the duties he therein enforces, are exactly appropriate to our circumstances and relations. He claims of us, as his dependent creatures, that we recognise him in everything, that we put our confidence in him, that we give him our affections, and his commandments our respect and obedience. Our highest good, present and prospective, is inseparable from this confidence, this love, and this service. And I apprehend that God, in his providence, is but enforcing the claims which he has written in his word; he sometimes sends prosperity to win our hearts, and inspire us with gratitude which may lead to obedience; and when adversity comes, whether it be in the shape of a social national evil, or private personal suffering, he usually touches us at a point where our sensibilities are the keenest; he wounds the pride which prevented us from feeling and acknowledging our dependence; he weakens the strength, or exhausts the resources, or baffles the wisdom, or paralyses the energies in the possession of which we did not feel the necessity of confiding in a higher and stronger than an arm of flesh; or he removes from us an idol which we had enthroned upon our affections, and which shut him out of the soul. In such circumstances it is idle to talk of mystery, or to say that God "hideth himself," for we are suffering in accordance with the established laws of the moral world; we can see an exact correspondence between our trials and the spirit they are designed to correct and rebuke. It is true they may be painful, but only because our feelings are wrong. There are in the mental and social, as in the animal systems, some diseases which render the

only appropriate remedies exceedingly severe ; and the wisdom and goodness of God, in carrying out his purposes, is as much to be admired as the firmness of the operator which renders him insensible to the cries of his patients whose life he would save.

When the providence of God afflicts communities *as such*, on account of social misdoings, it must be admitted that the personally innocent suffer in common with the personally guilty ; and so, when God blesses a community, the undeserving share in his favors. The sun rises upon the evil and the good, the rain descends upon the unthankful and the unjust. The physical system is governed by general laws, so is the social system. We are so interlinked with each other in society, the lines of sympathy are so numerous and so interwoven, that evil cannot touch one part of the system without affecting all the rest. The whole framework of the body sympathizes in the injury of a particular member. It must be so, organized as we now are ; and though there may be evil connected with this arrangement, it is better that it should be so, than that every part, limb, and fibre of our animal organism should be endowed with a separate consciousness. So with human society, it is better that even the personally innocent should partake of common evils and the wicked of common mercies, than that men should be mere individuals, isolated beings, without any mutual dependence or sympathy.

I bring out, then, distinctly the following principles—there is no chance work in this world ; God's hand is in everything good, as well as evil ; every event which takes place has its object, it constitutes part of that discipline, which God, as the governor of men and nations, is constantly exercising over us in accordance with the principles he has given us in his holy word. Consequently,

III. My third remark has reference to the state of mind appropriate to us in view of these general truths. I apprehend

it is with God, speaking in his providence, as it is with God speaking in his word ; every event in the former, as every truth in the latter, conveys its own appropriate lesson. Of some dispensations, we can very easily perceive the lesson, however slow we may be to learn and practise it; when mercies are shed down upon us, and our lives are crowned with loving kindness, we cannot deny the obligation of gratitude and obedience to their authors. Yet in these circumstances we are very apt to forget God, and forget our dependence and trust to ourselves. Pride and prosperity are generally found in companionship ; and when God undertakes in his providence to reprove us for our ingratitude and forgetfulness of him, we are quite as slow to learn the lesson he would teach us. Under the discipline of God's hand, we are apt to run to one of two extremes. Sometimes we think with Jonah, that we "do well to be angry," we become sullen, and feast upon our sorrows, and look upon everything through the medium of our trials ; we can think of nothing and regard nothing but the simple suffering which tries us, and this which we are prone to call keen sensibility, this weakness, this wickedness, defeats the whole design of God's procedure.

Such a state of mind, though in appearance, is not in reality better, certainly is no more favorable to a recognition of God, and a profitable study of the lessons he teaches us, than is a forced insensibility to his dealing which is the opposite extreme. Some men make up their minds to brave everything, to remain unmoved in any circumstances. There is a kind of stoical philosophy which teaches them to look with a dispassionate eye upon everything, and not to suffer any of the changes which are taking place round them to disturb their equanimity ; for why should we afflict ourselves with that which we cannot avoid, why mourn over that from which our tears will not effect deliverance ! and they have no higher idea of virtue than one which resolves it into this apathy of a speculation or practical atheism. Thus, by a mere exhaustion of animal

feeling, or by a forced insensibility, we are very apt to defeat the entire design of providential dispensations.

God, my brethren, means that we shall feel when he tries us; he cannot accomplish his purpose otherwise than by exciting feeling, but if we suffer feeling to blind us to His presence and agency, the result is the same as though we should wrap ourselves in the mantle of stoical insensibility. Our duty and our safety is to recognise God's hand, and to hear his voice in everything he does, and to learn and practise the lessons he is teaching us. He speaks to us in his word; we are not in a right state of mind unless we hear what he says, learn what he teaches, and do what he commands. He speaks to us in his providence, as truly as he does in his word, sometimes in accents more, sometimes less, startling and distinct; and our state is not right, unless we listen to him, inquire into the lesson he would teach us, and when learned practise it. Happy the man who can thus regard the work of the Lord, and consider the operations of his hand! Happy the man with whom providential dealings have the effect of bringing him to recognise the hand of him who ruleth over all, to place his confidence in him, who alone is worthy of human trust, and to serve him who alone is worthy of human obedience! Such a lesson, if well learned, is worth all its cost. No one has ever yet learned it who did not confess that it amply repaid him for all the discipline by which he has been instructed, and acknowledge that God's ways were wise even when he walked in darkness, and good though his path has been through the deep waters.

It is almost needless for me to say, my brethren, that the general train of thought in which we have been indulging, has been suggested by an event which has taken place since last we were assembled in this sanctuary, and which has produced a deep impression upon the mind of this nation, as an event of more than ordinary moment, and as calculated to lead to results, the nature of which we are not yet able to anticipate. The President of these United States has been suddenly removed by

death. All the circumstances of the case—the place he occupied in public estimation; the general confidence, aside from all political views, reposed in his integrity, his purity, his patriotism as a man, his uprightness and firmness as a civil officer; the peculiar state of the national affairs; and the questions which are now agitated, affecting vital interests, and even the permanency of our institutions; conspire to invest his death with more than ordinary interest. Whatever may be men's views of national policy, on whichever side of the line which divides this nation into two great parties, men may range themselves, all feel that there is a solemnity in the event because consequences of amazing moment must flow from it. The aspect of our national affairs will, in all probability, undergo a material change; whether for the better or worse, time will determine. I do not stand here to-day to speak of this event in a political but in a moral point of view; I look at it now not with the eye of a politician, but with the eye of a minister of Jesus Christ, and would desire to shed upon it the light of the subject we have been considering.

I look upon it as a marked Providence. It was not a fortuity, the death of our chief magistrate. I see in it the hand of God, who "setteth up one and putteth down another;" I hear in it the voice of God speaking to the heart of this nation. You may make as much as you please of second causes, but the death-blow had not fallen upon the capital of our country, except as God directed it; it has fallen as to the person, the time, the circumstances in exact accordance with divine arrangements, and with a distinct reference to some specific purpose. We do not pretend to any acquaintance with the secrecies of the divine counsels; we cannot tell what God means to do, or what God means to prevent by this dispensation of his Providence; we are confident only of this, that he has an object, and one every way worthy of himself, and which, when accomplished, shall fully justify his procedure. If God has an object to accomplish which this event is designed to further, he has likewise some lessons, which in this way he designs to teach to this nation.

What they all are, we can hardly pretend to say ; the shock has been so great and so sudden, that the mind has not sufficiently recovered from it, to enable it calmly to look upon the event and study out its true interpretation. I make no pretensions to the spirit of one who, Daniel-like, can "make known visions and declare the interpretation thereof," and yet it strikes me, that there are some things which, in view of this event, are deserving of our notice.

We have been passing through a season of great political excitement ; sectional interests have been arrayed in conflict with each other, and passions more than judgment have been swaying the minds of men. It is not uncharitable to suppose, nay, we must be blind to many very marked indications not to believe, that in some cases personal feeling and personal ambition have added fierceness to the strife in which we have been engaged. There must have been other influences than those of love of country, of pure, simple-minded patriotism at work to describe the scenes which have been enacted ; they seem to evince a strife for sectional or personal ascendancy, rather than a desire to advance our country's welfare. Now in the midst of these stirring scenes, in the midst of these excitements and conflicts of the passions, God speaks, and speaks in a way which compels attention ; he removes in a moment the man upon whom all eyes are fixed, and whose every movement is watched. He breaks up human plannings ; he speaks to human passions, and says "be still." He compels a pause of thought, and forces upon men an opportunity for passion to subside, and judgment to assume the supremacy, and places them in circumstances which, as they bring before them God, who holds all men in his hands, force them to think calmly.

And then see what a lesson God reads to the subjects of mere personal ambition ; see what is the end of such ambition, what the worth of all "the pomp of heraldry and pride of power ;" you grasp it, and it is a shadow ; you seize it, and hold it but for a moment ; you may gain your object, and the result

of your ambition and toil will be at last the privilege of dying crowned with earthly honors, having a splendid burial, and reposing under a sculptured monument. Would that our men of place and power might rightly interpret this dispensation, and learn *what* they are, and *whose* they are! They are not their own, but God's; he raises them up for his own purposes, and when they have answered his ends, he removes them. Personal honor, personal greatness, are of very little moment in God's estimation; he uses men for the public good, and when he has done with them he sets them aside. And if the dispensation over which we mourn shall have but the effect of stilling human passions and bringing men to think and act, in reference to the conflicting interests which are to be reconciled, under a sense of their responsibility to God—if it shall teach our men of place and influence of how little worth they are personally, that they are but instruments in God's hand, and to govern themselves accordingly, the result will be worth all its cost, and he upon whom so many eyes have been fixed, shall have, under God, accomplished more by his death than he could have effected even by a long and useful life.

I have said that God in this event has spoken to the heart of the nation, and in it I think he is teaching us as a people, a lesson which we ought, but are very slow to learn. We are apt as a people, if I do not greatly mistake our characteristics, to place our confidence in men, and in some peculiar measures with which certain men are identified, rather than in those great principles of national righteousness which God has revealed in his holy word. The evil of which we now speak is not peculiar to one or to another, but to all classes of society, and all political divisions. In reference to measures of policy I know there is a line of division running through the community, and I do not to-day put myself upon either side of that line. I speak of a feeling belonging to all, and which I apprehend God in this providence has signally rebuked. The language of his dealings is plainly this, "Cease ye from man whose breath is in

his nostrils." The peace, the security, the happiness of this nation does not depend ultimately upon any one man, nor upon any set of men, upon any measure or set of measures. You must go back of all these to look for our national securities, you must find them in national righteousness. Sin will degrade, and righteousness will exalt a people, whatever may be their policy and whoever may be their rulers. If we recognise God, and our obligations; if we have a constant regard to the eternal laws of right as laid down in His statute book; if the influence of God's Bible is diffused through society, regulating the relations which subsist between man and man; if they find their way into our council chambers and halls of legislation, so that right and truth, rather than expediency and policy, shall control our national measures—then we are safe, then shall we be happy and prosperous, whoever may administer our affairs. But if otherwise, no wisdom, no energy, no power can save us; we shall dig the grave of our political greatness, and others shall point to us hereafter, as an illustration of the truth of God, "the nation that will not serve thee shall perish."

History informs us that the palmy days of ancient kingdoms and republics were those when their subjects were marked by a devout and punctual observance of their religious ceremonies, and when they reverently bowed before their altars. But when the scene was changed, when in the insolence of power and pride of royalty, their rulers inquired "who is lord over us," when sensual indulgence, fostered by increasing wealth, led men to forget their God and forsake their altars, their corruption spread, and judgment commenced and hurried on to its dreadful consummation.

My hearers will not understand me, in this illustration, as saying that there were in any of the superstitious ceremonials of a heathen world, in themselves considered, the elements of national prosperity. Far from it; but I mean to convey the idea, that the recognition of a higher power, involving a sense

of accountability, and the anticipations of a future state of rewards and punishments, is the great conservative influence of national uprightness, and of course of national prosperity. God grant that we may understand, and instead of putting our confidence in man whose breath departs, we may put it in that righteousness which exalteth a people. You will indulge me in one more remark before I close, more of a personal character, yet suggested by the event of which we have been speaking.

A nation's throes tell how melancholy death is in certain circumstances. The relations of the person whose departure we lament, explain the deep feeling which pervades the entire community. If this is so, my brethren, let us remember that each one of us carries within him a spirit sustaining relations far more interesting and enduring because immortal, than those which belonged to the head of this nation as such; and if his death, because of his connexions, has produced such a deep sensation, how, my brethren—you will allow the question—how ought we to feel at the obsequies of a lost soul? Where shall we find tears to weep over such an event? Could we appreciate such a calamity to its full extent, what signs of sorrow should be equal to the occasion? The sun might hide his light and the moon her brightness, but that would not equal the occasion; nothing of the kind would correspond with the magnitude of the loss involved in the death of a human soul. If the whole frame of nature should become animated and vocal, it could not utter a groan too deep or a cry too piercing to express the extent and dreadfulness of such a catastrophe.

My hearer, you have a soul of such relations and this inconceivable worth. If you are not at peace with God, and do not become one with Jesus Christ, its obsequies are coming; and when its dirge shall be sung, amid the voices which shall chant its requiem and utter the deep and bitter lamentation, yours will be the loudest.

And now we can but pray that the providence of which we

have been speaking to-day, may be sanctified to our beloved country ; that he whose hand we recognise, would sustain our interests, and bring good out of evil ; and to each one of ourselves, leading us to "prepare to meet our God."