

Providence

William S. Plumer, 1865

GOD'S PROVIDENCE OVER NATIONS

"All the peoples of the earth are regarded as nothing. He does as he pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth. No one can hold back his hand or say to him—What have you done?"
Daniel 4:35

In general men think far too little of God's providence over nations. In great perplexity, when evidently the power of man is wholly inadequate to remove or avert evils—then indeed the godly say—In God alone is our help. If divine interposition is required in anything, surely it is essential in the government of nations. The interests at stake are vast and momentous. Property, liberty, reputation and life, with all the rights and blessings connected with them—are powerfully protected or ruinously destroyed—by political institutions. An invasion of rights respecting any of these, has often called forth the greatest powers of argument and eloquence, even when but *one* man had committed or suffered an injustice. But in the government of nations the rights of thousands, generally of millions, are at stake. If conscious integrity under slander, violence or chains may, from its dark cells—lift up its supplicating eye to the Father of spirits, and hope that he will make bare his arm, and plead its cause, though the person of but one, and he a humble member of society, be involved; can we believe that the destinies of a mighty people associated in a whole country are forgotten before God? If the gentle shepherd, the distressed mariner, the dying prisoner, the orphan boy, or the defenseless widow—may venture to repose confidence in Jehovah; surely may a nation expect that their common and unspeakable interests will not be forgotten before God.

These thoughts derive great force, from the absolute incapacity of nations to protect themselves, or to preserve their own existence. There are but few men in the world possessed of any considerable wisdom in the management of political affairs. The eloquent, the brave, the learned are often wholly unfit for times of trial in the regulation of states and empires. We have the highest authority for saying, "Great men are not always wise." The affairs of nations are so complicated, the interests involved are so conflicting, the passions of men are so turbulent, and a proper passage through difficulties is often so narrow and so intricate, that learning gives no safe precedents, eloquence is powerless in the presence of fierce opposition, courage is as useless as it would be in attacking a tornado, and faithfulness and public services are forgotten, despised or envied.

In such times there is need of wisdom in all the departments of government—a wisdom too that has seldom been attained by mortals. The shrewdest men the world has ever seen, have often felt themselves stymied and sometimes confounded. Moreover, the really wise men in any nation, being a very small minority in fact, are often so in the adoption of measures. They see one after another of the only safe plans, which they recommend, rejected until they despair of success. Their foresight is called fancy; their prudence is esteemed timidity; their moderation is set down to the account of lukewarmness; and their timely courage is called rashness. Every people on earth, at least every *free* people, have at times been like a vessel dismasted, her rudder bands broken, herself driven before the winds, and at the mercy of the waves. **No pilot but One that has omniscience is adequate to stand at the helm and guide her safely through the storm.**

A pure despotism is the simplest form of government in the world. In it the will of one man decides everything. The moment men depart one step towards constitutional freedom, the government becomes complex. The more freedom, the more difficult it is to understand and adjust the balances of the Constitution and the laws under it. Hence the necessity of transcendent wisdom in rulers. **But if great men are not always wise—neither are wise men always honest, unselfish or loyal to their country.** Ahithophel was a traitor. Richelieu was bold, intriguing and fond of war. He destroyed Savoy, Pignerol and Casal. He sent Mary de Medicis, his great benefactress, to end her days in exile. He agitated all surrounding kingdoms with dissensions and insurrections. He had great abilities—but great selfish ambition—and very few virtues. Talleyrand's *wisdom* was the scourge of the nation which he ruled. Pitt was a great statesman—but his wars cost England millions, besides innumerable precious lives, and the loss of more private virtue than the glory of all the kingdoms of the world is worth.

Men who might understand what ought to be done for a nation's good are often vain, cruel and sordidly selfish. When wisdom degenerates into cunning, and political acts are cautiously constructed to secure the elevation of their authors—their very gifts are a curse. Their long and loud professions of love of country deceive none but the unwary. When anyone dares to oppose their nefarious schemes, they cry out, "Are you he that troubles Israel?" They often pander to the sins of the nation. Their appeals are to the worst passions of the human bosom. Their practice is never better than their principles. Sometimes they are drunkards; sometimes they are lewd and profane; sometimes, gamblers or violent. They deride God's name; they despise his Sabbaths; they scorn his worship; they reject his word.

Some have thought that, because in the United States, Christianity has outlived the ten thousand malignant blows aimed at her sacred standard and her standard bearers, by the army of infidels that arose just after the French Revolution, therefore pure religion is here in no

danger. But is this not a mistake? In the eyes of a majority of this nation, it is no longer a reproach to be a professed Christian. For years some great men have been courting various religious denominations in order to secure their votes. Hence new dangers threaten both the country and the church of God. Already hypocrisy and phariseism are by some deemed advantageous in political contests. The world is not without a solemn lesson on this subject. It may not be resolved by any legislature, as once it was by Parliament, that "no person shall be employed but such as the House is satisfied of his real godliness." Yet oftentimes public opinion is more powerful than any statute.

Let ambitious men be once persuaded that an assumption of the Christian's name and garb will advance their interests, and we shall find them flattering the vanity of the silly or superstitious, and desecrating the high functions of their stations to sectarian fanaticism, and putting their hands upon the holy things of a religion, which hurls its most awful anathemas against a *vain show of piety*—and says imperatively to each one, "My son, give me your *heart*."

Surely then there is need for the insteppings of Jehovah to guide and govern nations; nations generally—and each nation in particular. Truly God is their only hope. If he withdraws his arm—they sink. If he removes his protecting shield—they fall before their enemies. If he take his strong and quieting hand off the hearts of the people—their passions heated as in a furnace burst forth, and *freedom* perishes like stubble before the consuming fire!

It is therefore no less the part of wisdom than of piety, to acknowledge the absolute dependence of every nation upon the all-wise governance and nurturing care of Jehovah for the perpetuity of its blessings. Sober men in every age and country have publicly and privately confessed how the Lord alone did make, and save, and keep them a people. Many a time does the peace of every land hang by a thread—while faction, or violence, or treachery stand ready with their weapons to cut it! Without God's good providence also—nations would soon perish from famine or pestilence.

Very easily can God arm even a *feeble folk* to set at defiance for years together—the skill of the most powerful governments. At one time in this century four of the mightiest nations on earth for years found their arms and prowess held at bay by comparatively contemptible tribes; Russia by the Circassians; England by the Afghans; France by the Algerines; and America by the Seminoles. Each of these powerful states expended millions of money and wasted many precious lives, while God was teaching them that "fastest runner doesn't always win the race, and the strongest warrior doesn't always win the battle. The wise are often poor, and the skillful are not necessarily wealthy. And those who are educated don't always lead successful lives strong." God is Judge of all.

These views are fully sustained by Scripture. If the weakness and wickedness of men show that nations cannot be preserved by human power and wisdom—Scriptural revelation teaches the same. It is not convenient to present all the passages of Holy Writ which establish this truth. The following are some of them. God claims to be the Father and Founder of nations. To Ishmael he said, "I will make of you a nation." To Abraham he said, "I will make of you a strong nation." Very often in the Scriptures does he claim to have founded and preserved the Jewish nation. Again it is said, "He shall judge among the nations," and "The Lord is governor among the nations." God is often said himself—to have scattered nations, to have cast out nations, to have divided to the nations their inheritance, to increase nations, to enlarge them, and to subdue them. Nor is Jehovah burdened with this mighty charge; for all nations are before him as nothing and vanity, a drop of the bucket and the dust of the balance. "When he gives quietness, who then can make trouble? and when he hides his face, who then can behold it? whether it be done against a nation, or against a man only." God has often threatened to punish nations, to be avenged on them, yes, to cast into hell the nations which forget God. These are but a small part of the solemn texts of Scripture on this subject. They are enough to show that **God's providence over nations is universal and particular!**

They also show that there is cause of fear for every nation on earth. The Lord is their governor and they have rebelled against him. They have been exceedingly ungrateful. What prosperous nation has not waxed fat and kicked against the Lord? How do pride, and vanity, and covetousness, and evil speaking, and profaneness, and drunkenness, and hatred, and contempt of authority, and violence, and blood shedding stain the escutcheon of every nation! How is the permanency of every good government endangered by office seekers!

"Unnumbered suppliants crowd preferment's gate,
Athirst for wealth, and burning to be great;
Delusive fortune hears the incessant call,
They mount, they shine, evaporate and fall.
On every stage the *foes of peace* attend,
Hate dogs their flight, and insult marks their end."

When God afflicts any nation let its inhabitants reverently bow before him and humbly submit to his chastisements.

Let godly men pray and trust in the providence of God. He can deliver them and their nation out of all their troubles. It is his memorial in every generation, that he hears prayer.

Let men praise Jehovah for all his wonderful acts towards their respective nations in days that are past. We have many model Psalms on this subject. It is the Lord who gives salvation unto kings and delivers his servants from the hurtful sword. It is he who makes our sons as plants, grown up in their youth, and our daughters as

corner-stones, polished after the similitude of a palace. It is he who makes our garners to be full, affording all manner of store. It is he who makes our sheep bring forth thousands, and ten thousands in our streets. It is he who makes our oxen strong to labor, that gives peace which none can disturb, so that there is no breaking in, nor going out, and no complaining in our streets.

We should guard against becoming violent partisans in political causes. Where the real interests of a country are at stake let godly men risk all except a good conscience in their defense. But let not godly men associate with lewd fellows of the baser sort in their howlings against law and order. "Beware of dogs."

Let God's people be very careful how they participate in a revolution. This may not be done when grievances are few or light, or when there is any milder method of redress, or when it is the favorite measure merely of the lawless and profligate portion of society, or when the good to be gained bears no proportion to the evil to be removed. In such cases it seems to be the duty of the suffering—patiently to submit, humbly using such remonstrance, memorial or petition as is generally permitted. Should these be forbidden, let the pious man carry his case to God. Thus did God's people in Babylon. Daniel, once in great authority there, although a captive, was, under Belshazzar, driven from court. The most venerable man in the kingdom, he was still slighted and forgotten. Wickedness reigned and raged over all the land. The sorrows of the faithful were multiplied. By the prophecies Daniel knew that this state of things could not last long. Yet for the time cruelty triumphed, and he gave himself to fasting and prayer. He and his countrymen seem to have been denied even the right of worship, until the iniquity of the government was full. Then the arm of Omnipotence was made bare. In one night Belshazzar was slain; Cyrus became master of Babylon; the revolution was completed; God's people were bidden to rebuild their city; and Israel were as those who dreamed—so marvelous was their deliverance. The character of the political agitator is anti-christian. A citizen seeking by just means the general welfare and the public good—is eminently commendable.

Let not godly men be overmuch distressed by the false charge of being seditious and disturbers of the public peace. This slander is old and has often been repeated. Ahab brought the charge against Elijah, 1 Kings 18:17. Haman repeated it against all the Jews, whose only offence was that one man among them, venerable for age, piety and patriotism, would not truckle to a tyrant. Good Jeremiah too, the weeping prophet, the lover of Israel, was charged with treason. One high in authority said, "You are deserting to the Babylonians!" Jer. 37:13. The humble, godly prophet Amos was foully charged with a conspiracy against the king. Amos 7:10. In the days of our Lord, the Jews greatly hated Caesar. Yet when our Savior reproved their abominable secret sins, they said to Pilate, "If you let this man go, you are not Caesar's friend—whoever makes himself a king speaks against Caesar." Of the apostles it was said, "those who have turned

the world upside down have come hither also." "These all do contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, one Jesus."

All these charges were grossly calumnious; but they are repeated against godly people from age to age. The world never understands Christian character. With it gospel humility is baseness, faith in the word of God is fanaticism, firmness is dogged stubbornness. When Pliny the younger, as governor of a distant province, wrote to the Emperor Trajan an account of the Christians, he said, "I asked them if they were Christians; if they confessed, I asked them again, threatening punishment. If they persisted, I commanded them to be executed—for I did not at all doubt but, whatever their confession was, their stubbornness and inflexible obstinacy ought to be punished."

Many refuse to draw any distinction between the ravings of fanaticism, and the purest and most humble piety. There is a great difference between the enlightened, humble, unswerving piety of a true Christian—and the wild, lawless radicalism, which sometimes rises up—not from true piety—but from the bottomless pit, and assumes the garb of piety to screen or to sanctify its abominations! The natural enmity of the human heart against holiness, the envy of wicked men against the righteous, whose brighter lives and higher hopes cast a pall of sadness over their character and destiny, and the solemn testimony which godly men in every age feel compelled to bear against the reigning vices and darling sins of men—sufficiently account for the uniformity and bitterness with which the charge of sedition, conspiracy and disloyalty are made against the best men of every age.

Indeed it is astonishing how true piety has always secured good conduct in subjects and citizens, and made them blessings to the land they inhabited. It was so in Babylon, where the church of God was in cruel bondage. It was so in the Roman empire during those three hundred years when

Persecution walked
The earth, from age to age, and drank the blood
Of saints, with horrid relish drank the blood
Of God's peculiar children—and was drunk;
And in her drunkenness dreamed of doing good.
The supplicating hand of innocence,
That made the tiger mild, and in his wrath
The lion pause—the groans of suffering most
Severe, were taught to her—she laughed at groans—
No music pleased her more; and no repast
So sweet to her as blood of men redeemed
By blood of Christ.

For centuries, had the Christians chosen to retire from the empire, their very absence, as Tertullian says, would have been terrible

vengeance to their persecutors. How long and patiently too did the Vaudois and their pious neighbors bless the very lands that persecuted them! So too in England and Scotland the voice of railing and slander poured its utmost cruelty on the heads of the pious Puritans and Covenanters, men of whom the world was not worthy. The greatest historian of England and the greatest novelist of Scotland have laid out their strength to bring into disrepute these godly men, whose memory is blessed. Hume is obliged to confess that these men were preeminent in the cardinal virtues, and that the principles of liberty inwoven in the British Constitution were mainly through their agency and sufferings. And after all Sir Walter Scott's sneers, one cannot but feel that those whom he ridicules will by God be adjudged to have filled their place in church and state far better than the men who caricature their conduct. An eminent writer, a zealous minister of the church of England, says, "Many, no doubt, who obtained an undue ascendancy among the Puritans in the turbulent days of Charles the First, and even before that time, were factious, ambitious hypocrites. But I must think that the tree of liberty, sober and legitimate liberty, *civil* and *religious*, under the shadow of which, we, in the establishment as well as others, repose in peace, and the fruit of which we gather—was planted by the Puritans, and watered, if not by their blood, at least by their tears and sorrows. *Yet it is the modern fashion to feed delightfully on the fruit, and then revile, if not curse, those who planted and watered it!*"

How often have the the godliest men been cast out of church establishments, and then charged with the sin of schism. How often have they been fined, imprisoned, hunted like partridges on the mountains, or pursued like beasts in the wilderness, and yet have been complained of as troublesome. They have been driven from home to dwell in caves, they have suffered hunger, and shame, and nakedness, and perils by wild beasts and savage men; and yet when their patience has been worn out, and they have availed themselves of the power given them by providence for their protection and defense; they have been accused and condemned for not loving a government, which gave them no protection, secured to them no immunities—but poured the vials of its wrath with a terrible indiscriminateness on the gray head of ninety years, and on the infant of days; yes, even butchered the unborn babe and crushed existence in embryo!

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