

THE  
WISDOM AND GOODNESS OF GOD,  
IN OUR CALAMITIES,  
A  
DISCOURSE,

DELIVERED  
ON THANKSGIVING DAY, NOV. 24, 1842.

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# SERMON

HOSEA, XIV. 9.

“WHO IS WISE, AND HE SHALL UNDERSTAND THESE THINGS? PRUDENT, AND HE SHALL KNOW THEM? FOR THE WAYS OF THE LORD ARE RIGHT, AND THE JUST SHALL WALK IN THEM: BUT THE TRANSGRESSORS SHALL FALL THEREIN.”

I SELDOM dwell on secular topics except on those days which are recommended by the secular authority to be religiously observed. But when called upon by the civil magistrate to acknowledge publicly the blessings of Providence, or to humble ourselves on account of our sins, it seems proper that we should accurately survey our blessings, and that we should attentively consider the sins in which we are involved. The words of thankful acknowledgment or of humble confession cannot be acceptable to the Father of our spirits, unless they proceed from a clear and impressive conviction of the favors acknowledged and of the sins confessed. Hence the propriety, at such seasons especially, of seriously reflecting on the circumstances of our social and political condition.

There is another reason why a teacher of religion should occasionally direct the thoughts of his hear-

ers to their own pursuits and to the events which are occurring around them; these are constantly exerting, either directly or indirectly, an influence on their character. They impede or promote the progress of Christian principles. They work for evil or for good, both in the minds of professors and of non-professors of religion; and I fear that the evil which they produce, in regard to our spiritual interests, is far greater than the good. The stirring incidents of the age, the frequent recurrence of warmly-contested elections, enlisting the strife of the passions — the daily news from all parts of the world, of mobs, and murders, and hair-breadth escapes — of fortunes gained and of fortunes lost — the temptations there are to leave the calm retreat and the refreshing shades of domestic life, and to break away from the hours which should be devoted to the cultivation of the intellect and the heart, are unfavorable to the soul's prosperity and to a complete development of the Christian character. They fill the mind with thoughts of the world, and disincline even the conscientious Christian to the unostentatious and somewhat arduous duties of communing with his own heart, and of holding intercourse with the invisible God.

These worldly influences, drawing us away from the discipline of our minds and affections, and rendering self-communion and the exercises of piety irksome, may not, to inattentive observers, be palpable in their operation; yet they are not, on that account, less deleterious. Their insidious and hid-

den influence needs to be detected and exposed, and each one subjected to it should be put upon his guard.

Such were the practical instructions of Him who taught as never men taught. He looked around on the living world, he watched the pursuits of men, and, from their actual condition and the tendencies of their conduct, he drew his most graphic illustrations, cautions, and warnings.

The prophet Hosea, before the Saviour's appearance, had pursued the same course. He was sent with communications to a disappointed, impoverished, and suffering nation. To a people in such a condition it might, perhaps, be supposed that the language of sympathy and condolence would be most suitable. But no; they had brought ruin upon themselves by living above their means, by superfluity and show, by sensuality and other kindred practices. The natural consequences of their lavish expenditures were — unfairness in their business transactions, and oppression of the poor and helpless, who had none to undertake their cause. The prophet accused them of licentiousness, of intemperance, and irreligion. We are therefore not surprised to hear him say — "Ye have ploughed wickedness and reaped iniquity; ye have eaten the fruit of lies. He is a merchant, the balances of deceit are in his hand; he loveth to oppress." He boastingly said — "I am become rich." Now it was for these unjust doings, these vices of the people, that the nation was in adversity. Therefore,

the first object of the prophet was not to condole, but to reprove ; not to sympathize, but to censure ; that they might so consider their ways as to break off their sins by righteousness. Then would their prosperity return, and gladden them like the morning light, or as the sun at noon-day. He showed most clearly that their calamities were not misfortunes but chastisements — that they were not unlucky accidents but disasters, inevitably resulting from their own folly and wickedness. He illustrated their humiliating position by referring to their past history. He sketched their various fortunes, the pleasant and the painful vicissitudes which they had experienced ; now lifted up with prosperity and contemning the counsels of the Most High, and now brought down with labor. But in all these changes he taught them that the ways of the Lord were right, and that he had never dealt arbitrarily, nor unjustly, nor unequally with the people. He sought to convince them that when the nation had practised truth and justice and mercy, the Lord caused them to prosper ; and when they had acted otherwise, they suffered the bitter but natural consequences of their own folly. Strong in these views, the prophet urged an attentive consideration of the dealings of providence towards them.

We may learn from this portion of scripture that it is the part of wisdom to review and endeavor to understand past and passing events. And that he who performs this duty wisely will be thoroughly convinced that the ways of God are equitable and just.

I. It is, my friends, the part of wisdom to review and endeavor to understand past and passing events. We can scarcely be more profitably occupied than in reviewing the changes which have occurred within a few past years. No period since our independence has been so crowded with events of deeply-painful and universal interest.

Six years ago we were, as we supposed, on the full tide of prosperity ; now we are left on the flats of adversity. Then, all were buoyant with brilliant hopes ; since that time, the whole nation has been terror-struck. Then, all was bustle and business ; almost every one was grasping after this world's wealth — now, there is a general stagnation — trade and commerce are embarrassed ; the movements of the loom, the plying of the needle, and the sound of the axe and the hammer have comparatively ceased. Then, the government had a treasury of overflowing millions — now, it is compelled to resort to paper credit. Then, each one carelessly trusted his neighbor — now, public confidence is destroyed ; even state debts have been repudiated, and few dare trust others without bonds and mortgages.

Let us to-day be wise, and observe these things. Let us inquire how they occurred, what is the remedy, and what should be our future course. How have these events occurred ? The general and true answer is — they had their origin in the universal prevalence of a selfish and worldly spirit — in an aversion to honest labor — in a greediness of gain, and in a making haste to become suddenly rich.

The honors, and pleasures, and possessions of this world were considered as the chief good ; but prudence, economy, truth, equity, and fairness, which were once familiar as household words, had ceased to be venerated.

Should this representation be deemed too general and indefinite, I will endeavor to be more particular. The unhappy state to which the country has been reduced may, to a considerable degree, be traced to the too numerous and easy facilities for credit. Our banking institutions, which were originally intended for public convenience, were used too extensively for purposes of individual aggrandizement — the hope of large profits tempted to large issues, and to injudicious and unsafe loans. And these very accommodations, instead of being beneficial, only served to tempt persons to engage in quixotic speculations, and to participate in complicated business transactions, of which they had no knowledge, and for which they had no capacity. With scarcely any property of their own, even the young and the inexperienced, by the simple aid of credit, trafficked to an enormous amount. Success was clear gain. Disappointment was not so much their loss as others'. As they knew not the value of money by having previously earned it, they became rash in adventure, and prodigal in their personal and domestic expenditures. This I take it is a sober representation of the course of thousands. They were not worse than other men ; but they were tempted beyond what they had firmness to withstand. Thus institutions, which, under wise

and equitable regulations, might have been extremely serviceable in a young and growing country like ours, have tempted many from the sphere for which they were evidently designed by providence, and induced them to engage in enterprises which have ended, as might have been expected, in bitter disappointment.

By the same unjustifiable system of loans, a factitious prosperity was created. Many felt rich on others' credit. The day of payment being distant was forgotten. Economy was disregarded, and habits of profusion engendered. We need no surer proof of the thoughtless prodigality which prevailed, than the appalling fact, that during the year eighteen hundred and thirty-six, the *imports* to this country amounted to sixty millions of dollars more than our exports. And in two or three of the years preceding, the *excess* of what was received above what was sent out of the country, averaged about thirty millions annually. It is a fact that may well excite both surprise and regret, that during the year eighteen hundred and thirty-six, the amount of twenty millions of the imports were in silks. But the greatest evil connected with an injudicious credit system, has been a gradual degeneracy from those honorable and upright principles, which formerly distinguished business transactions. In all our cities there have been, indeed, many delightful exceptions. There have been men of generous minds and lofty principles, who would scorn to commit any act of meanness for the sake of gain. But, alas ! how many have sprung up, who have acted on the prin-

ciple, that “every thing is fair in trade;” and who, having enriched themselves by cunning, duplicity and fraud, have even boasted of their successful impositions.

These remarks may be considered more appropriate to a day of fasting and prayer than to a day of Thanksgiving; but their propriety will appear, as I shall proceed to show.

II. That our past history and present condition, even in their darkest aspects, supply us with proofs of the forbearance and goodness of God.

1. A calm and wise observer of these things, cannot fail to see in the disasters which have come upon us, that “the ways of the Lord are right,” and have been arranged in infinite kindness.

They have saved us from national ruin. Had we been permitted to go on in our headlong career, under the peculiar temptations of our condition, we should have become still more generally depraved in character; and overwhelming and irremediable ruin might have been the consequence. We are indeed ashore, and have suffered serious injury; but the damage may be repaired. A high spring-tide may take us off again, and we may resume our voyage in safety; whereas, had we kept on our former course, we should have run upon the rocks and foundered. Stranded as we are, or rather perhaps moored up in ordinary as we are, I cannot but believe that we are in a safer and better condition, than when our gay colors were floating in the breeze, and our canvas was all set, and we were rapidly nearing a most dangerous coast.

2. He who wisely considers our difficulties and the salutary lessons which they convey to our minds, cannot fail to perceive that they were permitted and have been overruled for divinely benevolent purposes. The whole nation has been taught by losses, disappointments, and sudden, overwhelming adversity, that the laws of social justice, — truth and probity, — cannot be violated with impunity; and that a supreme and exclusive aim at personal aggrandizement, disregarding the rights and interests of others, is a narrow and selfish policy and cannot prosper. It is true, the Lord had taught these truths in his word, but they were overlooked, disbelieved and set at naught. There are many wholesome truths which few, alas! will learn except by experience. They must feel in their own persons or families, and that most keenly, the effects of their folly and injustice, before they will be convinced that it is never either wise or safe to engage in rash and hazardous enterprises. Hence many who would not hear God in his written word, have been taught by the immutable laws of his providence, in the action and re-action of causes and effects, the folly of discontentment, rapacity and sensuality.

No lectures could ever have sent instruction so powerfully to the heart, and have fixed it there in letters never to be erased, as the lectures which God's providences have addressed to us. Human preachers were unheeded, and the Lord himself has become a preacher of righteousness. He has in recent painful events made us feel, that there is

something else worthy of man's thoughts besides the perishing interests of the body. He has taught us in the unwelcome voice of adversity, that we must not merely cater for the senses, but should seek the interests of our nobler natures, — our immortal spirits. In all this he has acted the part of a Father towards us. "He has not afflicted us willingly, for his own pleasure, but for our profit, that we might be partakers of his holiness."

3. The direct tendency which these wide-spreading disappointments have had, to check unbounded aspirations after wealth, and to give men more sober expectations, and more correct business habits, is proof that God's providential dealings have been right and good. These are the benevolent purposes, for which we have been visited with so many serious disasters. It is that we may learn righteousness. It is that we may feel the folly of an all-absorbing pursuit of wealth. It is that we may let our moderation be known unto all men. It is that we may learn to be contented with our lot, and to practise the virtue of self-denial. And it is, to convince us, that a man's happiness "consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth."

These are the lessons which providence has been teaching us, in the failure of banking institutions, in the diminished value of real estate, in the stagnation of trade, and the general feeling of poverty which has come over the people. "No affliction," indeed, "for the present is joyous, but rather grievous, — yet afterwards it yieldeth the peace-

able fruits of righteousness to them that are exercised thereby." Such have been its effects in every age. Its fruit is to take away sin. And I cannot but hope, that such have been its effects among us. Men act with more forethought and judgment. They look more to the end than the beginning of a thing. They weigh consequences more carefully, and consider whether their means are suited to their aims and objects. And many, I trust, who have seen their riches take wing and fly away like an eagle towards heaven, have sought durable riches and righteousness. One thing is very certain, that the sad changes which have come over the prospects of our country within the past few years, have been adapted to exert a salutary influence on our character and pursuits.

It depends, however, under providence, on ourselves, whether as a people we become wiser by the past. It is for us to hear or to reject the *loud* but paternal voice of God's providences. He *invites*, but he does not *force* us to return, by these plain intimations of his will. It is our duty, therefore, as it is our interest, "wisely to observe these things." We should give to them a just and faithful interpretation. When the Jewish nation were in a most calamitous condition, the prophet Jeremiah asked; "Who is the wise man, that may understand this? and who is he to whom the mouth of the Lord hath spoken, that he may declare it, for what the land perisheth and is burned up like a wilderness, that none passeth through? And the Lord saith, because they have forsaken

my law which I set before them, and have not obeyed my voice, neither have walked therein. Take ye heed every one of his neighbor, and trust ye not in any brother : for every brother will utterly supplant, and every neighbor will walk with slanders. They will deceive every one his neighbor ; they have taught their tongue to speak lies, and weary themselves to commit iniquity.” \* These iniquitous practices, and not some unavoidable misfortunes, were the causes of the desolations which befel the Jews. So it has been with us. Our adversity cannot with truth be attributed to accident or misfortune, but to the operation of immutable principles. There has been a general disregard of those maxims of prudence, equity and fairness, without which no nation ever yet long prospered. How important then that all of us should consider our ways, and endeavor to ascertain how much we have contributed to the national sins which have brought upon us national calamities. We ought never to forget that the nation is composed of individuals ; and that to avert national evils, each and every individual should make all possible amendment for his errors, and return to those laws which will prevent their recurrence, and bring prosperity.

We may lay our calamities at the door of the administration, and attribute our disasters to its policy. How much of truth or of misapprehension there may be in these charges, perhaps it does not

\* Jer. ix. 12, 13.

become me to say ; but as a teacher of great moral truths I may say, that no administration, however wise or just its measures, can ever save a people from the ruinous consequences of overtrading, of wild speculations, and of incorporated and practically irresponsible and soulless monopolies. And on the other hand, no administration in our country can ever ruin the people, so long as they are distinguished for contentment, moderation, industry, economy and equity. It is righteousness that exalteth a nation, and it is only unrighteousness that can debase it. And then, as we have an elective government, we cannot and ought not to lose sight of the fact, that if the people are intelligent, moral and religious, the measures of the government will be wise, just and impartial. But if the people be generally corrupt, we shall have a corrupt government. In this country we shall always have an illustration of the maxim, “like people like administration.”

And in speaking of calamities, I would have no one suppose that they consist in the inequalities of man's condition. There have always been the rich and the poor — the highly gifted and the illiterate, they whose names have been held in respect and admiration, and the many who were not distinguished in the crowd of human beings. Nor can it be otherwise. No acts of human legislation, and no efforts however well intended, can ever make the wide surface of society even. So long as there are inequalities in the structure of the mind, in physical organization, in the capacity and inclina-



tion for effort, — and in the position and relations in which human beings stand to each other, — so long their circumstances will be unequal. Nor is this to be regretted. It is no doubt a wise and beneficent arrangement of providence. Were all rich, industry would cease, and men would become indolent and pampered animals. And were all poor, there would not be the means or prospect of reward to encourage labor. It must, I think, be obvious to every one that a difference of condition is not only unavoidable, but is best for man's moral nature. It gives an opportunity for calling into action the finest sensibilities and the best feelings of the heart. It is by no means discreditable to be poor.

"Honor and shame from no condition rise,  
Act well your part 'tis there the honor lies."

And whilst it is not discreditable to be poor, it affords an opportunity for a calmness of resignation, a contentedness with the allotments of divine providence, and a patience under trials which are not so likely to be cultivated by the rich. And as to wealth it is a mere accident. It is as often possessed by the worthless as the worthy. Its acquisition, therefore, affords no indubitable evidence of personal excellence. The proof of the latter depends on the manner in which wealth has been acquired, and the purposes to which it is devoted. Nevertheless, it gives the ability to be charitable to the poor. And when the rich are truly liberal, and the poor are truly grateful, a link is formed which binds both classes together; and

sympathies are cherished more favorable to the elevation of the human character than if all men as to their temporal condition, were on the same level.

It is the will of an all-wise and gracious Providence that our liberality and compassion, our patience and contentedness, shall be exercised; and to secure the performance of these duties, the Creator has placed us in widely different circumstances, and has made the rich and the poor, the prosperous and the unprosperous dependent on each other. We are not left to speculate on these duties. We are impelled by circumstances to act. And acting as well as suffering is a part of Heaven's discipline, by which we are trained to the stature of perfect men in Christ Jesus. Let no one, therefore, consider an humble condition a calamitous one. It may be the very means of preparing him for arduous and eminent services, and for honorable stations. All past history confirms the adage, that "Great men are born in adversity."

Notwithstanding all that I have said, I congratulate you, my hearers, on the prospect of better times. We have not passed through our fiery trials in vain. He whose ways are right has sat as a refiner; he has watched the process, and has seen the crust and dross of a worldly spirit separated from the precious metal of truth and goodness; and many have come out of the furnace of affliction, as gold that has been purified. I know there are some who have learned lessons never to be forgotten. Unfettered by the clogs which once weighed them down to the earth, they are aspiring

after the joys of a better life. O! may it be so with us all.

What cause for thankfulness have we to-day, that our condition is no worse. With diminished resources from trade, the earth has teemed with the bounties of heaven. The harvest has everywhere, throughout the length and breadth of the land, been abundant. The Lord has filled our garners with wheat, and our store-houses with corn. There is no monopoly with him. He opens his hand and satisfies the desires of every living thing. It is only man who, in the coldness and selfishness of his heart, monopolizes and keeps back that which the Creator has provided for all.

And in alluding to the causes we have for thankfulness, I should do injustice to my own feelings, and probably disappoint your expectations, were I not to speak of the treaty which has been made and ratified between this country and Great Britain. Although I hold it as an indisputable truth, that we can never be conquered by any nation; yet we might by war be reduced to bankruptcy and distress; and terror and devastation might extend their awful sway along our unprotected coast. Nor would these be the worst consequences. Malignant and deadly passions would be engendered. Feelings of animosity and hatred would be kindled that would not in fifty years be extinguished. Moreover, the morals of the nation would become corrupt beyond what we can express; while our commerce would be cut off; and other means of comfortable subsistence would be greatly diminished.

I rejoice, therefore, that war with its legion of evils has been avoided; and that a treaty tending to amity and peace has been ratified by both powers. I see in this the progress of society,—the progress of an enlarged, enlightened self-interest. I see that the great mass of the people in both nations have such a discernment of their own rights and interests, and have so much influence over their respective governments, that the latter dare not, were they disposed, involve their respective countries in war, unless there should be such encroachments on their rights, that the universal people should rise up and demand it.

In the circumstances connected with the formation of the late treaty; and as being ominous of permanent peace and friendship between the two nations, I see much that is cause for Thanksgiving. A conciliatory spirit was strikingly manifested by Great Britain in the choice of a Minister Plenipotentiary; his predilections growing out of a residence in the United States; his marriage of an American lady; his honorable, candid, and liberal principles, were so many pledges that England sought no occasion to be at war, and that he would make every proper concession to prevent an evil so much to be deprecated. And it would be unjust and ungrateful not to admit the consummate abilities, the fidelity and patriotism of our own great statesman, who was honored with that negotiation. Nothing has gratified me more than that neither the passion, nor the strife, nor the unreasonableness into which party spirit is apt to degenerate, has

vented itself in any general expression of real or pretended dissatisfaction, with the manner in which the Secretary of State successfully discharged a most difficult and important duty.

Let us then, while observing the dispensations of providence, in the joyousness of our spirits, give utterance to the language of Thanksgiving. Let us call upon our souls and all that is within us to bless his holy name. Let us especially at this season, look on the bright side of our condition, and bear in mind that

“To enjoy is to obey.”

The Father of goodness beholds with delight the happiness of intelligent and social beings, who are gratefully and temperately participating in the gifts of his providence, cherishing towards each other pure and kind affections, and lifting up their hearts in thankfulness to him as the source of their present enjoyments and eternal hopes through our Lord Jesus Christ. May these pleasures to-day be ours; may these sentiments inspire our hearts, and guide our actions. Then shall we know that his loving kindness is better than life, and then shall we be prepared by the painful discipline of this world's changes, for the glory of that world, in which there will be no changes but “from good to better, and to better still, until we lose ourselves in Him — in light ineffable.”