

THE PROBLEM OF DIVINE PROTECTION.

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In asserting *The Truth of Divine Protection*, we must be careful to avoid the extreme position taken up by some good Christian people, who would have us believe that the reward of trusting in God is absolute immunity from danger and disaster. There is an absoluteness about certain verses of the ninety-first Psalm, for instance, which must not be taken too literally, or applied too universally. We have to recognize its limitations as a product of Old Testament thought. The facts of life and of religious experience do not warrant the assertion that the man of faith will never be called upon to suffer calamity. The ninety-first Psalm was written at a time when there was a very widespread opinion in Israel that immunity from suffering was the reward of virtue and of faith. If a man trusted in God he would always have plenty of children, plenty of cattle, and a happy life. So that the rich were obviously the good people, the poor and unfortunate were evidently sinful. We may smile at so crude a view,* but I am not sure that rich folk to-day don't try hard to preserve the delusion. It is still a favorite habit of thought to suspect the poor of being peculiarly sinful and deserving of their lot. But the facts of life are against such a doctrine, and you see the revolt against it springing up in Israel in certain Psalms, like the seventy-third, and in the Book of Job, where the suffering of the righteous is found to be a hard and pressing problem. We have to admit that men of faith are often overtaken by calamity. Think of General Gordon, that magnificent soldier of Christ. Over a long stretch of years he bore a charmed life, and for a long time the ninety-first Psalm was literally fulfilled in his experience, but had he ceased to trust

*The Editor regards this as at best a too limited interpretation of the Psalms in question. The view is too crude for sensible men ever to have held.

and serve God when he was shot down in Khartoum? Surely not. But we need not go far afield for illustrations. Was it not a common saying in the war, that the "best" were taken? What of the brave dear lads we have known—men of shining faith and perfect trust and loyalty to God—who have succumbed to the perils of the battlefield? What of those two dear old souls at Stoke Newington who were bombed to death whilst kneeling by their bedside?

What did Jesus promise His disciples? Immunity? Listen! "In the world ye shall have tribulation." We need to beware of this doctrine of immunity. It can be wrested to the destruction of the soul, as in the case recorded by Mark Rutherford of the man—a pillar of the Calvinistic Church—who was saved from death by lightning whilst out driving, because, as he said, "*Providentially* the lightning struck the box seat and killed the coachman." For sheer callous selfishness that would be hard to beat.

But because this is so we must not, as others do, rush to the other extreme and deny Divine Providence altogether. This is done, of course, by the sceptic and atheist, who do not believe in God at all, but it is also done by a certain type of religious thought, and upon a plea of some nobility. They assert that God—as H. G. Wells puts it—is not going to play nursery-governess to men, as though they were a lot of children. He holds them strictly responsible for their actions, and everything they sow they must reap. God is not going to interfere in human affairs or with natural laws for anybody's benefit, and the sooner we realize it the better. We must help ourselves, for God mustn't help us—it would spoil His purpose. There is a stern stoic courage about this attitude that is very noble, but we have to ask, does it square with facts. And here, again, the theory breaks upon the rock of facts—another and opposite set of facts—every whit as numerous and as impressive. *Men are delivered.*

Escapes are often quite unaccountable, and justly termed miraculous. Religion does confer immunity of an unique kind in hosts of instances. Read the life of Mary Slessor, and see that weak woman moving with perfect safety amid blood-thirsty savages. To stop their mouths and prevent their evil passions was a greater miracle than saving Daniel from the lion's den. Read the testimony of David Livingstone, or H. M. Stanley, who declares that often spears were brandished within a few inches of his face, yet he felt no fear, confident that God would protect him—and protected he was. A friend of mine has gathered into a little volume, called "The Arm of God", a very large number of these records of deliverance, all carefully verified and quite trustworthy. During an air raid on a town in England, an officer of one of the Free Churches, whose way to church lies through a certain grove, and who usually traverses the south side of it at the same hour on a Sunday evening, on that particular Sunday *crossed the road* under a sudden impulse, just before the bombs fell upon the very spot he would have passed and he escaped in safety. Was that mere coincidence?

But now ought we not in this problem to take a larger survey of life than is afforded by isolated incidents either of calamity or deliverance? And when we do so, are we not compelled to admit that Divine protection is the great *fact* of human life, and violent death and disaster are but minor facts, exceptions to a marvelous rule of life preserved? Take the story of the race, its sufferings have been great, but how much more wonderful its survival and progress? The great marvel of the human story is not that men have been consumed with evil passions of lust and cruelty, but that *they have not* succeeded in behaving like the Kilkenny cats, which fought till only their tails were left. Somehow, there has been a restraining, healing, reconciling, protecting force at work, whose laws of operation we may only imperfectly understand, but

whose spirit of good-will is obvious to all. But, further, what of the comparative immunity we have individually enjoyed? What of the accidents that have never happened to you and me—the calamities that have never befallen us, the life preserved amid innumerable possibilities of harm? How many million consumption bacilli do you swallow every time you open your mouth? How much bigger a risk you run every time you enter a tram or 'bus in London than by living in a period of air raids, yet nothing has yet come your way! Is it mere coincidence, mere blind chance, that you have been preserved?

If we are going to judge God at all, do let us be fair. If it is a count of instances, who can deny the miracle of His protection? Shall I set the one day of death and disaster against all the years of uneventful life, the one night of pain against the thousand and one nights of delight and peaceful repose? If we are to judge God by what happens, then protection is the glaring fact of life, and disaster the exception.

There is a good story told of Archbishop Whateley, that he was once in a company of people where one man was boasting in a rather unseemly way about how the Lord had delivered him when the vessel in which he travelled from New York to Liverpool had caught fire. So many had perished, yet he was saved! When he had finished his story, Whateley turned to him and said, "A wonderful occurrence! A great and signal mercy, indeed! But I think I can surpass the wonder of it with an incident from my own experience"! Everybody pricked up their ears and listened for the passage in the Archbishop's life more wonderful than this man's escape from the burning ship. Whateley went on: "Not three months ago I sailed in the packet from Holyhead to Kingston"—a pause while the Archbishop took a copious pinch of snuff, and his hearers were on the tip-toe of expectation—"and by God's mercy, *the vessel never caught fire at all!* Think of that, my friends".

Surely Whateley was right.

“There is a Divinity that shapes our ends,
Rough-hew them how we will.”

There is a Divine protection, sleepless and ever operative, that prolongs to us all, over great stretches of time, the great gift of life.

Do you never look at that little boy of yours, the little demon who climbs everywhere, and is forever taking the most appalling risks, and wonder at his immunity amid all his mad escapades! Are you not reminded of the old picture which shows two children wandering in their play near the edge of a terrible precipice, from which they are protected by an angel-form, invisible to themselves, but none the less their guardian in the hour of peril. Why does that picture lay such hold upon our hearts? Is it not because of our conviction that it tells the truth? “The Lord is mindful of His own.” “It is not the will of your Father in Heaven that one of these little ones should perish.”

When, further, we turn from the facts of experience to the probabilities of the situation, we find that the balance of reason is all on the side of believing in the personal protection of God over every life. The teaching of Jesus as to God’s care of the individual soul is upon reflection seen to be the simplest common sense. Opponents of that teaching, or those faint-hearted in the faith, sometimes pretend that they can believe in God’s purpose and design for the race as a whole, but not in His care for the individual. How they manage such a monstrosity of thought I don’t know. Consider what it means. They admit that God has a purpose in the whole of things. They must admit it, we all must, it is simply inconceivable that this vast mechanism and glory of being that we call the universe is without a purpose, grinding out through the ages nothing but dust, achieving only its own destruction. You cannot believe anything so foolish as that. So, then, they say, you can believe there is a pur-

pose for the whole, and there is no attention to the parts. As Dr. Fosdick reminds us, it is as though an architect came to you with the plan of a house, very beautiful and captivating, but the moment you ask him about the doors, or the stairs, or a particular room, he says, "Oh! I've paid no attention to that. I haven't troubled about such details. What would his plan be worth?"

God can have no plan for all, without a care for each. The doings and the experiences of each living soul in His universe must matter to Him moment by moment. He cannot and does not, wish to move to His goal over our heads. His way lies through our hearts, and He carries each life with Him into His great scheme.

I know it is not easy for us to grasp this fact of His personal attention to each separate life, yet, as a recent writer has pointed out, the greater one's knowledge is, the more is its capacity for dealing with a multitude of detail. It is indeed a characteristic of knowledge. For example, you go into a large library, and the books therein are just a vague undifferentiated mass of literature to you, but not so to the librarian whose knowledge is greater; to him they are not a mass, but he knows every one of them by name, and each has its peculiar character for him. It is his knowledge that makes the difference. You look at a pile of rocks, that is all they are to you; not so, however, to the geologist, to whom each part of the different strata stands out distinctly from the mass, bearing its testimony of bygone days. You jump on to a railway engine, it is just a confused mass of machinery to you, but to the engineer with his special knowledge, each part stands out clearly with its due purpose fully perceived, and he knows that the tiniest part in disorder may wreck the whole.

So it is with humanity. We, with our limited understanding and undeveloped sympathy, look upon it, and speak of "the masses", but God in the perfection of knowledge, "calletH His sheep by name", and not even a sparrow falleth to the ground without Him.

God's Providence is working on behalf of every living soul. Divine protection is the most reasonable of beliefs.

What then of the so-called Exceptions?

I say *so-called* for a very good reason. We ought not to expect the Providence of God in its individual working to operate uniformly in every life. Individual providence means meeting the actual need of the individual in the very best way for that individual. Knowing, then, how different we are one from another, ought it to surprise us that for some the Providence of God means death instead of life, or that for the same individual it means life to-day, and death a few days hence?

So long as we can believe, and this is the essential Christian doctrine of Providence, that only the best is allowed in any given situation, to happen for the soul, does it matter whether it takes the form of life or of death?

Beyond this obvious truth we may point out other reasons why exceptions might occur to that form of Divine Providence which preserves one in life and health and happiness.

1. *The necessity for respecting human freedom.* It is a primary necessity of God's moral government of the world to hold men responsible for their decisions, choices and actions. Men learn the nature of their ideas and choices by the results that accrue to their expression. Therefore a certain amount of freedom, not merely in action, but in the experience of the consequences, would seem to be essential to the race's education in virtue. The terrible degree of human suffering permitted is an indication of the sternness of God's love-purpose, and the intensity of His respect for human responsibility. And in our hearts we know He is right, and would not have it otherwise.

No true man would hesitate a moment if asked to choose between security and freedom. It is in freedom that our real being lies—without it we are puppets and slaves, and the life of the pampered lap-dog, however

safe, will never be preferred by man to the life of the free moral being bearing the burden of his own choice.

In our best moments we feel with Longfellow—

“Not enjoyment and not sorrow
Is our destined end or way,
But to act, that each to-morrow
Find us farther than to-day.”

We have a goal to reach—the goal of a true and perfect choice of the “Good and True and Beautiful”, and it is better for us to stumble thither with many a fall, than never to arrive at the shining goal at all.

2. *The need for testing human virtue.*

Will men hold to goodness, purity, truth, liberty, humanity, at all costs? Will they *prove* their faith in the Divine program for human life in such a way as to put it beyond all doubt for God and mankind and themselves? This is the supreme question of human life, and all heaven, earth and hell wait upon the answer. No test can suffice save the absolute test of death and wounds and agony—the test of repeated Calvaries. Only thus are God’s sons and daughters truly manifested to all the world. Is this a matter for lament and for railing against God? Nay! Out of their blood springs the seed of a yet Diviner humanity, and all their suffering turns to the praise of God. The witness of their glorious faith kindles anew the Divine fire in the hearts of men, and lights the way back to heaven for the furthest wanderer. For it is given unto us not only to believe in Him but also to suffer for *His* sake”.

3. *Many of the “exceptions” are unnecessary and untimely.* We must never so interpret the Providence of God that it overrides the freedom of men. Men can by their own folly and sin launch themselves out of this life before their time, and apart from the will and call of God. No man’s suicide is predestined. You can put your number up as well as God.

God’s Providence is constantly appealing for our co-operation. God is a Spirit, and He works through our

own mind and will, and seeks to guide and control us from the seat and centre of our own being. If we ignore Him and make no room for His Spirit in our heart and life we must necessarily hamper Him in His beneficent designs. It is true He is indifferent to no life, and He girds every one of us with His power, though we know it not, but such Providence is as nothing to what He might do for us were we but to yield ourselves entirely into His hand. It may well be that at any given time in our life our continued existence amid the innumerable perils of this earthly experience may depend upon the degree in which our souls are open to Divine suggestion and leading. If we shut our life to Him, if we cherish the selfish spirit, if we give place and power to the devil of war, we cannot lay our suffering at His door. But if we give our heart to Him, if we yield our energy loyally and in perfect trust to His service, then His Providence must be able to do for us more than we have *ever dreamed of*.

It is my solemn conviction that if I have put my soul in God's keeping, if I am honestly striving to serve Him, then "my times are in His hand", though an enemy try to slay me, and the sword is even drawn to end my life, if it does not fit God's purpose then I cannot be killed. I am immortal till He chooses, and what He chooses is always good.

So, then, trust thou in God. If you are right with Him, and are continuing loyally in the path of duty, you may confidently claim God's protection. "He will give His angels charge concerning thee", and whether His gift be life or death, immunity or disaster, you will know that His will holds nothing but the very best for you, and permits only such trial as is absolutely needful. So shall there be at your heart a great peace, an unruffled calm, a sense of God stronger than fear, calamity, sin or death, an inward sure deliverance which is the earnest of the final deliverance yet to come, when sorrow and sighing shall flee away, and death shall be no more. "Fear not, even the very hairs of your head are all numbered."