

Providence and Faith

Ex. 2; Acts 7; Heb. 11.

W. Kelly. (BT Vol. N2. p.376.)

The same principles which accompany the moral deadness of the unbeliever, may be found in the believer, weakening and hindering his simplicity in following Christ. "That which is born of the flesh is flesh." It is true, the believer is not in the flesh (Rom. 8: 8), and through grace he can please God; yet the flesh is in him, and, so far as it is unjudged, it will prove a sure and sad obstacle in the path of faith. Hence there is not an evil in the unregenerate heart of man which the regenerate can afford to despise. The tendency, nay, the root of all, is in his own heart, although, as a believer baptised unto Christ's death, he is entitled to say that he is crucified with Christ-the flesh crucified with its affections and lusts. This is his weapon. He has died, and he that thus died has been freed (or justified) from sin. And if dead, how shall we live any longer therein? But then, although in God's estimate this is a fact, for He has identified the believer with the death and resurrection of Christ, yet it is a fact which faith alone realises.

The experience of the believer is the constant, painful witness that the flesh is within, ever seeking to display its enmity to God; for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be. Practically he finds that the flesh is alive and actively energetic toward evil, and that struggling with it is not the way to gain the victory, because it is not God's remedy for it, and therefore not the resource of faith. Such is not the way in which the Spirit, by the apostle, instructs us to deal with sin. For, after having said, "reckon ye also yourselves to be dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God in Christ Jesus [our Lord]," he also adds, "let not sin, therefore, reign in your mortal body, that ye should obey it in the lusts thereof."

The faith that would reckon us dead to sin in Christ's death, wherein the sentence of God was executed upon it, is the weapon which gives us practically the victory over its efforts in each day's experience. But if the believer, ignorant of this sword of Goliath which the divine armoury supplies him, attempts to face the enemy with some puny instrument of his own, is it wonderful that he fails in the encounter? If, after being justified by faith, he puts himself under law as regards the daily train of Christian conversation, is it strange that the offence again abounds, that the perverseness of the flesh is afresh stirred into activity, that the law is once more proved to be a ministry of condemnation? No! it is the sense of grace, it is the sense of what God's grace has done in uniting us to One who is raised from the dead, far above the claims of law and the effects of sin, into His own holy and blessed acceptance in the presence of God; it is this, kept bright and fresh before and in our hearts by the Holy Ghost, which enables us to bring forth fruit unto God. "For sin," says the apostle, "shall not have dominion over you: for ye are not under law, but under grace."

The unconverted, if he thinks at all about God and his soul, naturally and necessarily puts himself under law, and proves it to be a ministry of death. The tendency of the converted man is to do the same as regards his walk, if not as regards his salvation; and so far as he slips aside into legalism, he is powerless for God, and certain to be immersed in worldliness. Let us then, dear brethren, hold fast grace, whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear : for our God is a consuming fire. Granted that the flesh would say, Let us continue in sin that grace may abound; still, the cure is not to throw away that which is the alone spring of holiness as well as of salvation. The grace of God not only brings us salvation, but teaches us that, "denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world" (Titus 2: 12).

But it is far more ensnaring to the believer when there is a partial recognition of God in His actings, which Satan turns to account by making him indifferent to the question of God's will. A familiar instance of this, and one that is corrected by the word of God, appears in the too prevalent habit, which some Christians would even justify, of looking to providences; in other words, walking by sight rather than by faith. But the believer is called to walk as seeing Him who is invisible. "We serve the Lord Christ." It is a comparatively easy thing to act as circumstances seem to prompt, and if these circumstances become a supposed divine rule of action to me, this is precisely to abandon the march of faith for providences. Alas! into how many ditches will this blind guide lead the unwary, or the unfaithful Christian? Even the wretched unbelieving world likes to talk of "Providence" in the abstract. It demands no faith; nay, it is a shutting outside of a present acting God, Who condescends to lead His children with His eye; of a God Whom we have known in Jesus — Who has brought Himself nigh to us, and us nigh to Himself. They prefer to have an abstraction of their minds to discuss, rather than to be brought so close to the living God. "Providence" is a familiar and palatable word, where "God manifest in the flesh" would sound strange and unwelcome. So, practically, it needs little spirituality to see the hand of God in circumstances; but it requires much power of the Spirit to understand their bearing, and to discern the path of Christ in their midst. What is unseen, not what is seen, ought alone to guide the faithful.

Hence the necessity of an undivided heart, of a single eye. Only thus is the body full of light. If the circumstances fill my eye, instead of Christ, I am sure to go astray. It is not that one would deny the providential dealings of God, or that a Christian can overlook them without loss. What is affirmed is, that no circumstances can rightly be the guide for Christian action, and that all circumstances ought to be judged in the light of the perfect word of God. Nay, I believe that while God, on the one hand, frequently overrules circumstances in default of our faith, on the other, He often orders circumstances so as to be a test of fidelity or of its absence. In other words, a Christian may find himself in a position not of his own seeking, but of God's superintendence, which nevertheless faith has to relinquish, and not to abide in, though divine providence may have placed one there. Of this the scriptural history of Moses furnishes a striking example. I do not speak now of the faith which marked the parents of Moses, for faith it was, and not parental affection merely, which led them for three months to hide their child; "they were not afraid of the king's commandment" (Heb. 11: 23).

Nor do I allude to the overruling hand of God, Who met their faith, and so arranged events as to accomplish His future purposes respecting Moses and His people. It is the conduct of Moses himself, which is so full of instruction to the man of God who would learn the true place of faith in relation to providential circumstances.

"By faith Moses, when he was come to years, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter; choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season; esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt: for he had respect unto the recompence of the reward."

Now, here we learn that as surely as providence carried him into the house of Pharaoh, faith led him out. Never was a providential dealing more strongly imprinted with the finger of God than the one before us. In spite of the royal ordinance Pharaoh's daughter took up the outcast Moses and nourished him for her own son. The providence of God had placed him in an illustrious position, unsought, unexpected. Educated too as became it, he was "learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and was mighty in words and in deeds. Why not use his ability and his wisdom — why not use the influence which his exalted rank gave him, and his nearness to the most princely personages in the realm—why not wisely and thankfully turn such evident gifts of providence to the service of God's people? What a

blessing it would be to see Pharaoh the tyrant transformed into Pharaoh the patron of Israel! And what enterprise more worthy of one who, without a wish or effort of his own, had been so strangely brought into the circle of the throne of this world? What return would he make to that august person who had lavished such kindness upon him? And for what end had God wrought so wonderfully, if not that Moses should employ Egypt's sceptre for the emancipation and advancement of God's people? But, no! faith at once disposes of all such reasonings founded on providences. "By faith Moses when he was come to years, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter." The simple question to him was, Will it please God? Where are God's affections? Are they not with His people?

The people may be suffering, wretched, and discreditable. They may little understand and ill requite the love and faith that could renounce all. They might greatly prefer the patronage of the son of Pharaoh's daughter to a self-sacrificing Moses, who refused such a place, choosing rather to suffer with them; but it was enough for Moses that the poor captives were God's people. It was not enough that his heart was with them and himself far away in the splendid court of Egypt. His single eye judged all that Pharaoh's daughter could offer to be the pleasures of sin. He deliberately resigned the glittering honours and the worldly influence which providence had strewn around him, esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt. With whom was God identified? With Pharaoh's palace, or with Israel in the iron furnace? Had he followed providences, he would have sought to succour and relieve, and perhaps ultimately to deliver Israel, through the advantages which his position furnished; but it was faith which led him to estrange himself from the world and identify himself with the people of God. The world hates God's people, and may be permitted to enslave them; but can the world bless God's people? Surely not. Moses would have shrunk, as a man of faith, from the thought of yielding to the world such a place. It would be to assert that the world is greater; for, beyond all question, the less is blessed of the greater. Therefore it was that Moses gives all up, and rests only upon God. His desire was not to save himself loss, suffering, reproach: he chose it rather, because God was there; and Moses desired to be where God was, and with those whom God loved. How the actings of his faith only reflected the feelings of God for His people may be gathered by reading Exodus 3: 7, 8, 9.

Thus, we see that providence may place in a position which God would have us not use but leave. It may seem the most fair occasion possible in outward things; but faith judges the contrary, because faith looks not to our honour but to God's; not to our ease, but to His deliverance. Faith rests on the promises of God to His people, and has respect to the recompence of the reward.