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NOT ONE FORGOTTEN.

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“Are not five sparrows sold for two farthings, and not one of them is forgotten before God?”—LUKE xii. 6.

THE thought of a particular providence, minute as to its details and special as to its ends, embracing all the creatures of God, however lowly, and all their actions, however insignificant, linking all in a single chain of divine prevision and control, is one of which men have never been able altogether to divest themselves, but to which they have been strangely reluctant to give full and hearty assent.

Of the causes that have operated to produce a latent and lingering skepticism in reference to a doctrine so consonant to reason and so comforting to the servant of God, there seem to be two particularly deserving of attention.

The first is the apparent insignificance of this world of ours when considered as a part of the measureless universe of God, and the consequent improbability that, amidst these vast myriads of worlds with their teeming millions of inhabitants, the Almighty Ruler should condescend to busy himself with the minute relations and infinitesimal concerns of all the creatures upon the earth.

The second is the apparent irregularity in the operation and enforcement of the moral law in the economy of nature, as contrasted with the invariable sequence of



those laws that are purely mechanical and physical; a state of things which we would by no means expect if the hand of the great moral Ruler is in all the events of time.

These two causes have operated in all ages to produce skepticism in reference to the overruling providence of God. Thus it was in the days of the patriarch Job. "Behold," says Eliphaz the Temanite (Job xxii. 12), "is not God in the height of heaven? and behold the height of the stars, how high they are! And thou sayest, How doth God know? Can he judge through the dark cloud? Thick clouds are a covering to him, that he seeth not; and he walketh in the circuit of heaven." And so, as to the second cause, Job says (chapter xxi. 7, etc.), "Wherefore do the wicked live, become old, yea, are mighty in power? Their seed is established in their sight with them, and their offspring before their eyes. Their houses are safe from fear, neither is the rod of God upon them. . . . One dieth in his full strength, being wholly at ease and quiet. . . . And another dieth in the bitterness of his soul, and never eateth with pleasure. They shall lie down alike in the dust, and the worms shall cover them."

And so, to make one further quotation, we have the same protest in the days of Solomon against the doctrine of a particular providence, the ground of protest being the chequered nature of human life, and the apparent inequality in the distribution of punishments and rewards. "All things" (Eccl. ix. 2) "come alike to all: there is one event to the righteous and to the wicked; to the good and to the clean and to the unclean; to him that sacrificeth and to him that sacrificeth not; as is the good, so is the sinner; and he that sweareth as he that feareth an oath."

Nor have these difficulties in the way of a firm faith in God's overruling providence at all diminished since the days of Job and of Solomon. On the contrary, as science has pressed her investigations and has extended her domain, we have gained conceptions of the magnitude of the universe and the comparative insignificance of our globe to which the men of Solomon's time were utter strangers. So, too, as the ages have advanced, the evil principles of the world have more and more developed in antagonism to the good. They have aggregated to themselves more and more power. Their votaries have become more and more skillful in the oppression of the right. In this day of vast moneyed corporations and consolidations of capital and labor, it is even more true than in former times, that "these are the ungodly that prosper in the world," and that "no man knoweth either love or hatred by all that is before him."

But, amidst all the confusion and disorder incident to a state of things like this, it is the great joy of the Christian heart to rest in the doctrine of the overruling providence of God, which is so clearly taught in his holy word; to think of the little sparrows, five of which brought less than a cent in the markets of the world in our Lord's day, and to remember that "not one of them is forgotten before God."

Let us, then, as we look out upon the unknown future—many of us with thoughtful solicitude; some of us, it may be, with anxious forebodings—bathe our spirits for a little while in the sweet thought of the text, "not one of them is forgotten before God."

I. And first let me say that this is the view of the providence of God presented all through the Scriptures; not simply that of a general superintendence under vague and indefinite laws of nature, but a minute and detailed

personal supervision, a particular and definite personal control, extending to the least as well as to the greatest works of his hand. Many persons are willing to admit that the hand of God is in the great events of nature and of human history. When the pestilence is on the air and thousands are falling victims, when some great earthquake has engulfed cities, or some furious tempest at sea has carried down strong ships with their hardy seamen and their terror-stricken passengers, there are few who believe in a God at all who do not recognize his hand, and say, "Surely God is here." But that the God who kindled the blaze of the sun supplies also the glow-worm's lamp; that he who "rides upon the stormy wind" fans also the cheek of the invalid with the gentle zephyr's breath; that he who upholds the stars in their courses guides also the sparrow in its flight; these are the things reckoned incapable of belief. And yet the Scriptures do not more clearly teach the one than the other. Its language on this point cannot be mistaken. Turn to whatever part you will, and you will find this truth everywhere expressed, believed, acted upon, that the hand of God is as truly in the least as in the greatest; nothing so obscure as to escape his notice, nothing so trivial as to lie outside the schemes of his providence; and the purposes of his will.

Let us hear the testimony of Elihu (Job xxxvi. 27, etc.): "He maketh small the drops of water: which the clouds do drop upon man abundantly." "With clouds he covereth the light; and commandeth it not to shine." "God thundereth marvelously with his voice." "He saith to the snow, Be thou on the earth; likewise to the small rain, and to the great rain of his strength." "By the breath of God frost is given; and the breadth of the waters is straitened." "He scattereth his bright cloud,

and it is turned round about by his counsels, that they may do whatsoever he commandeth." He causeth "it to rain on the earth where no man is, to satisfy the desolate and waste ground; and to cause the bud of the tender herb to spring forth." He "sendeth lightnings, that they may go and say unto him, Here we are." He "stayeth the bottles of the heaven when the dust groweth into hardness and the clods cleave fast together." He "hunteth the prey for the lion, and provideth for the raven his food."

Let us hear what the Psalmist says (Psalm lxxv. 9, etc.): "Thou visitest the earth, and waterest it: thou greatly enrichest it," etc. Psalm civ. 14, etc.: "He causeth the grass to grow for the cattle, and herb for the service of man." "Thou makest darkness, and it is night: wherein all the beasts of the forest do creep forth. The young lions roar after their prey, and seek their meat from God." "These wait all upon thee." "That thou givest them they gather: thou openest thine hand; they are filled with good." But why multiply passages. The Old Testament is filled with these statements of the universality and the minuteness of the providence of God.

Let us turn for a moment to the declarations of our Lord: "Behold" (Matt. vi. 26, etc.) "the fowls of the air: for they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns, yet your heavenly Father feedeth them." "Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin: and yet I say unto you, That even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. Wherefore, if God so clothe the grass of the field, which to-day is, and to-morrow is cast into the oven, shall he not much more clothe you, O ye of little faith?" And so in the passage before us: "Are not five sparrows sold for two farthings, and not one of them is

forgotten before God." Or, as Matthew has it, "One of them shall not fall on the ground without your Father; for even the very hairs of your head are all numbered."

It is evident, then, that if the plain meaning of these passages be taken, we must believe that the providence of God is in the little things as well as in the great. And when we consider how precious and comforting such a doctrine is, does it not seem strange that men should endeavor to persuade themselves to believe that when our Saviour says, "not one of them is forgotten before God," he really does not mean it? and that when he says, "the hairs of your head are all numbered," he is speaking in hyperbole?

II. But this skepticism in reference to the minuteness of God's providence rests upon two assumptions, each of which is altogether untenable. The first is, that objects and events sustain to each other in the mind of God the same relative dignity and importance that they do in ours; so that what are great and important in our eyes are so in his, and what are puny and insignificant in our view are so in the view of God. We are prone to forget that nothing finite can in itself appear great or important in the sight of God. There is such an infinite disproportion in the scale on which his being is projected and that which appertains to all created things, that the distinctions of great and small do not apply. As one who climbs some lofty mountain and looks down on the plain beneath sees not the inequalities of the surface, but looks upon it as upon a map with even face lying before him, so from the height of God's infinite perfection he looks down and there is nothing in itself great in his sight. All things take their relative magnitude and importance from their relations to him, to the fulfilment of his purposes, and the manifestation of his glory. The

things, therefore, which seem least to us may seem greatest to him. There is an element of power that enters into our conception of the sublime, so that things are grand and impressive in our view as they reveal a power that overawes us by its superiority to our own. The roar of Niagara, the thunder of the ocean in a storm, the wild sweep of the tornado, and the sullen moan of the earthquake, seem great to us by comparison with our own impotency, but they are not so to God. The overthrow of a kingdom, the crumbling of a throne, the conflagration of a world, are, in his view and in comparison with his power, but as the falling of a leaf or the withering of the grass under the summer's sun.

The second false assumption is, that there may be such dissociation of the great things and the small things that the former may be directed and controlled without attention to the latter. No great event has ever yet occurred to which a number of minute and apparently insignificant events have not stood in such relation of cause and condition that the great event could only be brought about by close attention to these apparently trivial ones. The little things are the pivots upon which the great ones turn. As the whole machinery of a watch will come to a standstill if one of the almost-invisible jewels be dislodged, or if a grain of dust adhere to one of the thousand tiny cogs in its various attachments, so, if one of these minute events should go awry, the whole order and course of providence would be arrested or disturbed. I stood, not a great while ago, looking at a splendid locomotive about to be put upon its trial-trip. The engineer, proud of his beautiful engine, at a signal from the conductor, placed his hand upon the lever and applied the steam. But, though there was a quiver, as if every nerve of the iron horse were strung to its utmost

tension, there was no motion of the great wheels. A second time the lever was applied, but with the same result. Then the quick eye of the engineer detected the cause. A single thumb-screw had been insufficiently turned. There was but the light touch of the fingers upon it, and again the steam was applied, and the train moved gracefully away. These little things which men think beneath our heavenly Father's notice, what are they but the valve-screws of the great engine? What but the cogs and jewels of that secret mechanism which causes the hands of all human destiny to move upon the dial-plate of time?

But it is time to assume that of which I am happily persuaded, namely, that whatever others may think of the doctrine of a particular providence, you, to whom I am now speaking, find delight in its belief, and will not have it wrested from you by all the specious arguments and haughty cavils which its enemies may employ. Let me, then, as we look forward to-day to the life that lies before us, as we seek to gird ourselves for its duties and responsibilities, as we take each his staff in his hand and go forth to its unknown vicissitudes and trials, draw for you some practical lessons of instruction and comfort from the words of the text, "not one of them is forgotten before God."

And, *first*, let me remind you what a sanctity it gives to the little things of life that God's eye is upon them, and that we can have fellowship with him in them. So much of our life is taken up with little things—things that do not seem to tell upon the great issues and interests of Christ's kingdom in the world—that we are likely to feel as if the time spent in them is lost from the service of God. The mother with her little brood about her, the housewife with her busy cares, the merchant with all

the inventory of his active brain, the teacher with the tedious routine of the class-room—one and all with the daily throng of little duties, little vexations, little cares—let us remember that not one of all these is forgotten before God. There is a sanctity and a blessedness given to life when we can see God's hand in everything—in leaf and flower, in pebble and stone—and the dull monotony of the most humdrum life may be relieved by this thought of the ever-presence and sympathy of our heavenly Father.

Again, let me remind you that if not one of the least of these dumb creatures is forgotten before God, they should not fail of all due consideration and kindness from us. How much wanton cruelty, how much thoughtless neglect would be avoided, did we always keep before us the consideration that "not one of them is forgotten before God." How this thought of our heavenly Father's watchful oversight and tender care binds us, as with a band of gold, not only to the humblest and poorest of our kind, but to all that vaster family whom his loving arms enfold, and who rest upon the bosom of his care.

Thirdly, and lastly, while we know not what the changes or trials of coming life may be, there is one thing we do know, and that is, that not one of us in any of them shall be forgotten. However dark the pathway, God's eye will be upon us as we walk it; his infinite arm will be about us to protect us; his wing of love will overshadow us, and he will make good to us his precious promise, that "as our days so shall our strength be." And if at this hour there be in the sanctuary some child of adversity or bereavement, whose cup seems to be full to overflowing with sorrow, let me say there is comfort for you here. Thou, O child of affliction, art not for-

gotten. Forgotten before man thou mayest be, forsaken of kindred, deserted of friends, but not forgotten before God. His eye of love is upon thee. His pitying arms enfold thee. He will be with thee in all the way thou goest. "Fear not," is his message, "I will help thee." Say, O timid one, "I will trust and not be afraid"; for "the eternal God is thy refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms."