

NATURE BUT GOD'S MACHINERY

It is recorded of Paul and Silas that in the course of their apostolic journey they entered into the synagogue in Pisidia, where they received an invitation from the rulers of the synagogue, after the reading of the Law and the Prophets, to address the assembly, if they were so disposed. This was in the right order—to bring human comment under the heading of the divine Oracles. It illustrates the contrast between ancient and modern practice. The writing of God should be the basis of all that man has to say; as Peter says,

“If any man speak, let him speak as the Oracles of God.”

This is the true communion of Spirit. Man has no Spirit in himself, except his physical power of subsistence. He has not the Spirit in that relation that would connect him with the divine intelligence as the children of God will be connected in the perfect state. He must, therefore, attach himself to the only channel in which in our age the Spirit flows. The ideas of the Spirit of God are for us at present in the Bible and nowhere else. There was a day when they flashed and sparkled by inspiration direct from the Spirit of God to the prophets and apostles; but, in our day, that refreshing operation is in abeyance, as foretold. In this respect our position is less privileged than the position of the saints in the apostolic age. All the more reason why we should avail ourselves to the utmost of the privilege which is ours in possessing the written Oracles of Yahweh's Truth.

In the reading of them, we may think ourselves as the men who sometimes tap the wires of the electric telegraph, as in a time of war. You know what happens. A party of men provided with suitable apparatus go out into the open country, where perhaps the telegraph crosses a solitary wilderness. As you look at the suspended wires, and the whitened posts, you see nothing to tell you of the current of intelligent communication that is passing along, and you hear nothing unless it be the musical vibrations of the wind as it blows past in the neighbourhood of the posts. You attach your apparatus, and you are able to read on your own indicator the messages which are being transmitted from a long distance off.

As we sit at our reading of *“the Law and the Prophets,”* we receive the messages transmitted ages ago to distant times. By those messages we are brought into touch with many things that were living realities in their day, and that arch over our head to another day, when they will be greater realities still. This morning, this is one of the echoes we catch of one of these long past and soon coming realities. We hear a voice saying,

“I am from above; ye are from beneath; I came down from heaven, not to do mine own will, but the will of Him that sent me.”

Taken by itself, this seems a strange voice, and seems to justify the comment which we hear from the wires almost immediately after,

“He hath a demon and is mad, why hear ye him?”

But as we ponder all the other changes that come along the wire, the aspect of the matter changes, and we incline to that other verdict, which we hear from the same source,

“These are not the words of him that hath a demon; can a demon open the eyes of the blind?”

It will be perceived that this lays direct hold on the purpose for which we have met this morning. We have not met to commemorate a madman; but one whose whole recorded case,

however silent he is to us at the present time, is a complete guarantee of the perfect truth and wisdom and greatness of his claims to be the Son of God and the saviour of the world.

So, too, as we listen again, and hear the exultant adjurations of David's enthusiastic mind, to—

“Praise the Lord for His goodness, and for His wonderful works to the children of men.”

We hear a voice, with which the modern strain is in little and less accord. David attributes everything to God; human wisdom of the nineteenth century—nothing. Let us consider this for a moment. To a first look it would seem as if modern wisdom were in the right. David attributes to the voice of God things with which in our day we should be tempted to say God had nothing to do.

“The voice of the Lord is upon the waters, the God of glory thundereth, the voice of the Lord shaketh the wilderness, the voice of the Lord maketh the hinds to calve, and discovereth the forests.”

All these are what we call the operations of Nature, and totally independent of any divine procedure. How are we to understand this apparent collision between the impressions of sense and the portrayal of Scripture? The reconciliation will be found in a view that makes the modern philosopher the shallower and the Bible the deeper and truer. The modern philosophy is correct so far as it goes; but it is embraced in a higher philosophy that contains the whole truth. God has established the institutions of Nature with a certain automatic action. The question is, whether it be not more correct to attribute the action of the ordinances to Him who established them, than to the ordinances themselves.

The idea might be simplified and helped by supposing the case of a machine, introduced into a household by a father for the exercise and benefit and entertainment of his children. Let it be a number of these “penny-in-the-slot machines,” one for giving oranges, and another for giving toys, another sweetmeats, and so on. The father could give the oranges and sweetmeats direct; but thinks it is better for the children to earn the pence which procure for them by their own actions the things they desire, and therefore he sets up these machines all about the house, and the children go to work and enjoy the process of getting out of them, with their pence, what they fancy. The question might arise, was it the father or the machines that supplied the various articles? Less intelligent children would say that the father had nothing to do with it—that it was the machines and the pennies that brought them what they wanted. To a certain extent, these children would be right; but their truth would only be a half-truth. The eldest of the children having understanding of matters, would be righter still, who should say that it was all from their father—that although the machines did it, father had put the machines there, and could take them away again. The children who should deny the father's relation to the matter would be the ignorant children, while he who should recognise the father in the case would be the intelligent child.

The application of this to the matter before us must be obvious. Nature has been constructed to act automatically; but she possesses this power by reason of the initial force or power constructing her. She did not construct herself. She could not. The modern scientific doctrine of the conservation of energy is strong on this point. Nothing ever happens in nature without an antecedent energy equal to it. All nature is on the evolve. Trace the process backwards, and you must come to the first cause. In this must exist the potentiality of possibleness of all that comes after. What is this? God. There is no other ultimate conclusion. God has made heaven and earth, with all their wonderful ways.

“God commanded, forth they came.”

“He spake and it was done, He commanded and it stood fast. He commanded and they were created, He hath established them for ever and ever, he hath made a decree which shall not pass.”

It is therefore the language of intelligence to attribute the phenomena of nature to God, as David does. Nature is automatic; but God made the automatism. He is not in bondage, however, to the work of His hands. The father who puts machines in his house for his children has absolutely sovereign authority over them. He may appear on the scene, if they go wrong, and put them right, or he may remove them altogether when he thinks they have served their purpose. So, God, in the invisible background of creation, reserves to Himself the prerogative of interference when and how He sees fit. His non-interference does not mean nature is not His work, or that its wonderful operations are not His doing. God is present by His invisible energy, as much in one part of the universe as another, but it is only at *“sundry times and divers manners”* that He makes His presence known. In the high heaven of His habitation, He is doubtless always manifest in the movements of His nucleated being. Jesus said the angels of his people do always behold the face of his Father who is in heaven. To this altitude we may also hope to rise, if we are permitted a place in the final glory, when—

“The throne of God and the Lamb shall be in it, and His servants shall serve Him, and they shall see His face, and His name shall be in their foreheads.”

But, meanwhile, we have to seek after Him, in those efforts of spiritual discernment which the study of Revelation inspires. In the putting forth of this effort, we are enabled to see the relation of nature to God, and yet His separateness from all its machinery. The universe of heaven and earth may be said to be a vast machine, which He has constructed on the penny-in-the-slot system, and has made it capable of yielding the highest beneficence in response to the efforts of which He has made its rational denizens capable but He stands by, as it were, to supplement the efforts of His children, and to repair the machine where it goes wrong. The machine has gone all wrong, so far as our earth is concerned. How it may be in other worlds we have no means of knowing; but here, through disobedience, there is curse, and pain, and futility, and abortion and death. He knows it all and, indeed, has contrived it so under the circumstances, but He purposes the healing of all in His own way and time. Jesus says, *“I am the way,”* which we may apply without reservation in the understanding of the problem. We surround his Table this morning with this full conviction, that since by Adam came death, by Christ came also the resurrection of the dead. The world may smile at our faith, and our own blind feelings may at times offer a passing rebellion; but the fact remains indelible in human history that such is the meaning and issue of the problem of human life. Israel under Moses for a thousand years is both the shadow and monument of the fact. Christ as the end of the Mosaic world, crucified and raised, is its blinding enunciation to all mankind. The history of papal tyranny, of 1,260 years, is its illustration and confirmation on the negative side of things. What is left for us therefore, as reasonable men, but to hold fast the confidence, and rejoicing of the hope, steadfast unto the end. It is not as if nature offered any alternative or contradiction; nature plus Christ is not less nature still, but nature minus Christ is nature without interest or glory. Nature promises nothing, gives us nothing, and explains nothing, apart from God, who made heaven and earth, and gave us Christ, His Son. The gospel promises everything, explains everything, and without detracting an atom from the interest of science, or the glory of the universe. Nay, Christ is for us the essential counterpart of nature; for with him all is secured—earth, sun, moon and stars, and eternity. As Paul has it:

“All things are yours, whether the world, or life, or death, or things present, or things to come, all are yours, and ye are Christ’s and Christ is God’s.”

Without him, nothing is ours. We are portionless orphans, flitting across a transitory scene, to die and disappear, and be no more known for ever. The highest title will not avert it. The most substantial possession will not stave it off. The most resplendent honours will not avail for a moment to give us place in the permanent house of God. Only in Christ can men have this hope. He is gone to prepare a place for them. He will come again and receive them to himself.

What course then, but one, is wise, and that is, to hold on amid all delays. To be patient under all affliction. Faithful against all unbelief. Obedient under all trial. True to Christ under every difficulty, knowing that the longest probation will come to an end, the keenest suffering will be forgotten at last, and that the longest watch, faithfully maintained—even amidst painfulness and weariness, fastings oft and tribulation—will dissolve at last in the dewdrops of joyful tears, when we step from the dismal shades of the night into the brightness of everlasting day, in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ, with all his saints.

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