

"A Particular Providence as Revealed in the Gospel"
Parochial and Plain Sermons vol. III sermon 9
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April 5, 1835

"Thou God seest me." Gen. xvi. 13.

1 WHEN Hagar fled into the wilderness from the face of her mistress, she was visited by
2 an Angel, who sent her back; but, together with this implied reproof of her impatience,
3 gave her a word of promise to encourage and console her. In the mixture of humbling
4 and cheerful thoughts thus wrought in her, she recognized the presence of her Maker
5 and Lord, who ever comes to his servants in a two-fold aspect, severe because He is
6 holy, yet soothing as abounding in mercy. In consequence, she called the name of the
7 Lord that spake unto her, "Thou God seest me."

8 Such was the condition of man before Christ came, favoured with some occasional
9 notices of God's regard for individuals, but, for the most part, instructed merely in His
10 general Providence, as seen in the course of human affairs. In this respect even the
11 Law was deficient, though it abounded in proofs that God was a living, all-seeing, all-
12 recompensing God. It was deficient, in comparison of the Gospel, in evidence of the
13 really-existing relation between each soul of man and its Maker, independently of
14 everything else in the world. Of Moses, indeed, it is said, that "the Lord spake unto
15 him *face to face*, as a man speaketh unto his friend." [Exod. xxxiii. 11.] But this was an
16 especial privilege vouchsafed to him only and some others, as to Hagar, who records it
17 in the text, not to all the people. But, under the New Covenant, this distinct regard,
18 vouchsafed by Almighty God to every one of us, is clearly revealed. It was foretold of
19 the Christian Church; "*All thy children shall be taught of the Lord; and great shall be the*
20 *peace of thy children.*" [Isa. liv. 13.] When the Eternal Son came on earth in our flesh,
21 men saw their invisible Maker and Judge. He showed Himself no longer through the
22 mere powers of nature, or the maze of human affairs, but in our own likeness to Him.
23 "God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to
24 give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ;" [2 Cor. iv.
25 6.] that is, in a sensible form, as a really existing individual being. And, at the same time,
26 He forthwith began to speak to *us* as individuals. He, on the one hand, addressed each
27 of us on the other. Thus it was in some sense a revelation face to face.

28 This is the subject on which I propose now to make a few remarks. And first, let me
29 observe, it is very difficult, in spite of the revelation made us in the Gospel, to master the
30 idea of this particular providence of God. If we allow ourselves to float down the current
31 of the world, living as other men, gathering up our notions of religion here and there, as
32 it may be, we have little or no true comprehension of a particular Providence. We
33 conceive that Almighty God works on a large plan; but we cannot realize the wonderful
34 truth that He sees and thinks of individuals. We cannot believe He is really present
35 everywhere, that He is wherever we are, though unseen. For instance, we can
36 understand, or think we understand, that He was present on Mount Sinai, or within the
37 Jewish Temple, or that He clave the ground under Dathan and Abiram. But we do not in

38 any sufficient sense believe that He is in like manner "about *our* path, and
39 about *our* bed, and spieth out all *our* ways." [Ps. cxxxix. 2.] We cannot bring ourselves
40 to get fast hold of the solemn fact, that He sees what is going on among ourselves at
41 this moment; that this man falls and that man is exalted, at His silent, invisible
42 appointment. We use, indeed, the prayers of the Church, and intercede, not only for all
43 conditions of men, but for the King and the Nobility, and the Court of Parliament, and so
44 on, down to individual sick people in our own parish; yet in spite of all this, we do not
45 bring home to us the truth of His omniscience. We know He is in heaven, and forget that
46 He is also on earth. This is the reason why the multitude of men are so profane. They
47 use light words; they scoff at religion; they allow themselves to be lukewarm and
48 indifferent; they take the part of wicked men; they push forward wicked measures; they
49 defend injustice, or cruelty, or sacrilege, or infidelity; because they have no grasp of a
50 truth, which nevertheless they have no intention to deny, that God sees them. There is,
51 indeed, a self-will, and self-deceit, which would sin on even in God's visible presence.
52 This was the sin of Balaam, who took part with the enemies of Israel for reward; and of
53 Zimri, the son of Salu, a prince of the Simeonites, on whom Phineas did judgment; and
54 such the sin of Saul, of Judas, of Ananias and Sapphira. Alas! doubtless such is the sin
55 of many a man now in England, unless human nature is other than it was aforetime;
56 alas! such a sin is in a measure our own from time to time, as any one may know for
57 certain who is used to self-examination. Yet, over and above this, certainly there is also
58 a great deal of profane sinning from our *forgetting*, not comprehending that we are in
59 God's presence; not comprehending, or (in other words) believing, that He sees and
60 hears and notes down everything we do.

61 This, again, is often the state in which persons find themselves on falling into trouble.
62 The world fails them, and they despair, because they do not realize to themselves the
63 loving-kindness and the presence of God. They find no comfort in a truth which to them
64 is not a substance but an opinion. Therefore it was that Hagar, when visited in the
65 wilderness by the Angel, called the name of the Lord that spake unto her, "Thou God
66 seest me!" It came as a new truth to her that, amid her trouble and her waywardness,
67 the eye of God was upon her. The case is the same now. Men talk in a general way of
68 the goodness of God, His benevolence, compassion, and long-suffering; but they think
69 of it as of a flood pouring itself out all through the world, as the light of the sun, not as
70 the continually repeated action of an intelligent and living Mind, contemplating whom it
71 visits and intending what it effects. Accordingly, when they come into trouble, they can
72 but say, "It is all for the best—God is good," and the like; and this does but fall as cold
73 comfort upon them, and does not lessen their sorrow, because they have not
74 accustomed their minds to feel that He is a merciful God, regarding them individually,
75 and not a mere universal Providence acting by general laws. And then, perhaps, all of a
76 sudden the true notion breaks on them, as it did upon Hagar. Some especial
77 Providence, amid their infliction, runs right into their heart, and brings it close home to
78 them, in a way they never experienced before, that God sees them. And then, surprised
79 at this, which is a something quite new to them, they go into the other extreme, in
80 proportion to their former apathy, and are led to think that they are especial objects of
81 God's love, more than all other men. Instead of taking what has happened to them as
82 an evidence of His particular Providence over all, as revealed in Scripture, they still will

not believe a jot or tittle more than they see; and, while discovering He loves them individually, they do not advance one step, on that account, to the general truth, that He loves other men individually also. Now, had they been all along in the practice of studying Scripture, they would have been saved from both errors—their first, which was blindness to a particular Providence altogether—their second, which was a narrow-minded limiting of it to themselves, as if the world at large were rejected and reprobate; for Scripture represents this privilege as the portion of all men one by one.

I suppose it is scarcely necessary to prove to those who have allowed their minds to dwell on the Gospels, that the peculiar character of our Lord's goodness, as displayed therein, is its tenderness and its considerateness. These qualities are the very perfection of kindness between man and man; but, from the very extent and complication of the world's system, and from its Maker's being invisible, our imagination scarcely succeeds in attributing them to Him, even when our reason is convinced, and we wish to believe accordingly. His Providence manifests itself in general laws, it moves forward upon the lines of truth and justice; it has no respect of persons, rewarding the good and punishing the bad, not as individuals, but according to their character. How shall He who is Most Holy direct His love to this man or that for the sake of each, contemplating us one by one, without infringing on His own perfections? Or even were the Supreme Being a God of unmixed benevolence, how, even then, shall the thought of Him come home to our minds with that constraining power which the kindness of a human friend exerts over us? The greatest acknowledgment we can make of the kindness of a superior, is to say that he acts as if he were personally interested in us. The mass of benevolent men are kind and generous, because it is their way to be so, irrespectively of the person whom they benefit. Natural temper, a flow of spirits, or a turn of good fortune, opens the heart, which pours itself out profusely on friend and enemy. They scatter benefits as they move along. Now, at first sight, it is difficult to see how our idea of Almighty God can be divested of these earthly notions, either that His goodness is imperfect, or that it is fated and necessary; and wonderful indeed, and adorable is the condescension by which He has met our infirmity. He has met and aided it in that same Dispensation by which He redeemed our souls. In order that we may understand that in spite of His mysterious perfections He has a separate knowledge and regard for individuals, He has taken upon him the thoughts and feelings of our own nature, which we all understand *is* capable of such personal attachments. By becoming man, He has cut short the perplexities and the discussions of our reason on the subject, as if He would grant our objections for argument's sake, and supersede them by taking our own ground.

The most winning property of our Saviour's mercy (if it is right so to speak of it), is its dependence on time and place, person and circumstance; in other words, its tender discrimination. It regards and consults for each individual as he comes before it. It is called forth by some as it is not by others, it cannot (if I may say so) manifest itself to every object alike; it has its particular shade and mode of feeling for each; and on some men it so bestows itself, as if He depended for His own happiness on their well-being. This might be illustrated, as is often done, by our Lord's tender behaviour towards Lazarus and his sisters, or His tears over Jerusalem; or by His conduct towards St.

127 Peter, before and after his denial of him, or towards St. Thomas when he doubted, or by
128 His love of His mother, or of St. John. But I will direct your attention rather to His
129 treatment of the traitor Judas; both because it is not so commonly referred to, and, also,
130 because if there was a being in the whole world whom one might suppose to be cast out
131 of His presence as hateful and reprobate, it was he who He foresaw would betray Him.
132 Yet we shall find that even this wretched man was followed and encompassed by His
133 serene though solemn regard till the very hour he betrayed Him.

134 Judas was in darkness and hated the light, and "went to his own place;" yet he found it,
135 not by the mere force of certain natural principles working out their inevitable results—
136 by some unfeeling fate, which sentences the wicked to hell—but by a Judge who
137 surveys him from head to foot, who searches him through and through, to see if there is
138 any ray of hope, any latent spark of faith; who pleads with him again and again, and, at
139 length abandoning him, mourns over him the while with the wounded affection of a
140 friend rather than the severity of the Judge of the whole earth. For instance, first a
141 startling warning a year before his trial. "Have not I chosen you twelve, and one of you
142 is a devil?" Then, when the time was come, the lowest act of abasement towards one
143 who was soon to betray Him, and to suffer the unquenchable fire. "He riseth from
144 supper, and ... poureth water into a bason, and began to wash the disciples' feet," [John
145 vi. 70; xiii. 4, 5.] and Judas in the number. Then a second warning at the same time, or
146 rather a sorrowful lament spoken as if to Himself, "Ye are not all clean." Then openly,
147 "Verily, verily, I say unto you, that one of you shall betray Me." "The Son of man goeth
148 as it is written of Him; but woe unto that man by whom the Son of man is betrayed! it
149 had been good for that man if he had not been born. Then Judas, which betrayed Him,
150 answered and said, Master, is it I? He said unto him, Thou hast said it." Lastly, when He
151 was actually betrayed by him, "Friend, wherefore art thou come?" "Judas" (He
152 addresses him by name), "betrayest thou the Son of man with a kiss?" [Matt. xxvi. 24,
153 25, 50. Luke xxii. 48.] I am not attempting to reconcile His divine foreknowledge with this
154 special and prolonged anxiety, this personal feeling towards Judas; but wish you only to
155 dwell upon the latter, in order to observe what is given us by the revelation of Almighty
156 God in the Gospels, viz., an acquaintance with His providential regard for *individuals*,
157 making His sun to rise on the evil as well as on the good. And, in like manner doubtless,
158 at the last day, the wicked and impenitent shall be condemned, not in a mass, but one
159 by one—one by one, appearing each in his own turn before the righteous Judge,
160 standing under the full glory of His countenance, carefully weighed in the balance and
161 found wanting, dealt with, not indeed with a weak and wavering purpose, where God's
162 justice claims satisfaction, yet, at the same time, with all the circumstantial solicitude
163 and awful care of one who would fain make, if He could, the fruit of His passion more
164 numerous than it is.

165 This solemn reflection may be further enforced by considering our Lord's behaviour
166 towards strangers who came to Him. Judas was His friend; but we have never seen Him.
167 How will He look, and how does He look upon us? Let His manner in the Gospels
168 towards the multitude of men assure us. All-holy, Almighty as He is, and has shown
169 Himself to be, yet in the midst of His Divine Majesty, He could display a tender interest
170 in all who approached Him; as if He could not cast His eyes on any of his creatures

171 without the overflowing affection of a parent for his child, regarding it with a full
172 satisfaction, and simply desiring its happiness and highest good. Thus, when the rich
173 young man came to him, it is said, "And Jesus beholding him, *loved him*, and said unto
174 him, One thing thou lackest." When the Pharisees asked a sign, "He sighed deeply in
175 His spirit." At another time, "He looked round about on them"—as if on every one, to see
176 if here or there perchance there might be an exception to the general unbelief, and to
177 condemn, one by one, those who were guilty [Mark x. 21; viii. 12; iii. 5.]—"He looked
178 round about on them with anger, being grieved for the hardness of their hearts." Again,
179 when a leper came to Him, He did not simply heal him, but, "moved with compassion,
180 He put forth his hand." [Note]

181 How gracious is this revelation of God's particular providence to those who seek Him!
182 how gracious to those who have discovered that this world is but vanity, and who are
183 solitary and isolated in themselves, whatever shadows of power and happiness
184 surround them! The multitude, indeed, go on without these thoughts, either from
185 insensibility, as not understanding their own wants, or changing from one idol to
186 another, as each successively fails. But men of keener hearts would be overpowered by
187 despondency, and would even loathe existence, did they suppose themselves under the
188 mere operation of fixed laws, powerless to excite the pity or the attention of Him who
189 has appointed them. What should they do especially, who are cast among persons
190 unable to enter into their feelings, and thus strangers to them, though by long custom
191 ever so much friends! or who have perplexities of mind they cannot explain to
192 themselves, much less remove, and no one to help them; or who have affections and
193 aspirations pent up within them, because they have not met with objects to which to
194 devote them; or who are misunderstood by those around them, and find they have no
195 words to set themselves right with them, or no principles in common by way of appeal;
196 or who seem to themselves to be without place or purpose in the world, or to be in the
197 way of others; or who have to follow their own sense of duty without advisers or
198 supporters, nay, to resist the wishes and solicitations of superiors or relatives; or who
199 have the burden of some painful secret, or of some incommunicable solitary grief! In all
200 such cases the Gospel narrative supplies our very need, not simply presenting to us an
201 unchangeable Creator to rely upon, but a compassionate Guardian, a discriminating
202 Judge and Helper.

203 God beholds thee individually, whoever thou art. He "calls thee by thy name." He sees
204 thee, and understands thee, as He made thee. He knows what is in thee, all thy own
205 peculiar feelings and thoughts, thy dispositions and likings, thy strength and thy
206 weakness. He views thee in thy day of rejoicing, and thy day of sorrow. He sympathises
207 in thy hopes and thy temptations. He interests Himself in all thy anxieties and
208 remembrances, all the risings and fallings of thy spirit. He has numbered the very hairs
209 of thy head and the cubits of thy stature. He compasses thee round and bears thee in
210 his arms; He takes thee up and sets thee down. He notes thy very countenance,
211 whether smiling or in tears, whether healthful or sickly. He looks tenderly upon thy
212 hands and thy feet; He hears thy voice, the beating of thy heart, and thy very breathing.
213 Thou dost not love thyself better than He loves thee. Thou canst not shrink from pain
214 more than He dislikes thy bearing it; and if He puts it on thee, it is as thou would put it

215 on thyself, if thou art wise, for a greater good afterwards. Thou art not only His creature
216 (though for the very sparrows He has a care, and pitied the "much cattle" of Nineveh),
217 thou art man redeemed and sanctified, His adopted son, favoured with a portion of that
218 glory and blessedness which flows from Him everlastingly unto the Only-begotten. Thou
219 art chosen to be His, even above thy fellows who dwell in the East and South. Thou
220 wast one of those for whom Christ offered up His last prayer, and sealed it with His
221 precious blood. What a thought is this, a thought almost too great for our faith! Scarce
222 can we refrain from acting Sarah's part, when we bring it before us, so as to "laugh"
223 from amazement and perplexity. What is man, what are we, what am I, that the Son of
224 God should be so mindful of me? What am I, that He should have raised me from
225 almost a devil's nature to that of an Angel's? that He should have changed my soul's
226 original constitution, new-made me, who from my youth up have been a transgressor,
227 and should Himself dwell personally in this very heart of mine, making me His temple?
228 What am I, that God the Holy Ghost should enter into me, and draw up my thoughts
229 heavenward "with plaints unutterable?"

230 These are the meditations which come upon the Christian to console him, while he is
231 with Christ upon the holy mount. And, when he descends to his daily duties, they are
232 still his inward strength, though he is not allowed to tell the vision to those around him.
233 They make his countenance to shine, make him cheerful, collected, serene, and firm in
234 the midst of all temptation, persecution, or bereavement. And with such thoughts before
235 us, how base and miserable does the world appear in all its pursuits and doctrines! How
236 truly miserable does it seem to seek good from the creature; to covet station, wealth, or
237 credit; to choose for ourselves, in fancy, this or that mode of life; to affect the manners
238 and fashions of the great; to spend our time in follies; to be discontented, quarrelsome,
239 jealous or envious, censorious or resentful; fond of unprofitable talk, and eager for the
240 news of the day; busy about public matters which concern us not; hot in the cause of
241 this or that interest or party; or set upon gain; or devoted to the increase of barren
242 knowledge! And at the end of our days, when flesh and heart fail, what will be our
243 consolation, though we have made ourselves rich, or have served an office, or been the
244 first man among our equals, or have depressed a rival, or managed things our own way,
245 or have settled splendidly, or have been intimate with the great, or have fared
246 sumptuously, or have gained a name! Say, even if we obtain that which lasts longest, a
247 place in history, yet, after all, what ashes shall we have eaten for bread! And, in that
248 awful hour, when death is in sight, will He, whose eye is now so loving towards us, and
249 whose hand falls on us so gently, will He acknowledge us any more? or, if He still
250 speaks, will His voice have any power to stir us? rather will it not repel us, as it did
251 Judas, by the very tenderness with which it would invite us to Him?

252 Let us then endeavour, by His grace, rightly to understand where we stand, and what
253 He is towards us; most tender and pitiful, yet, for all His pity, not passing by the breadth
254 of a single hair the eternal lines of truth, holiness, and justice; He who can condemn to
255 the woe everlasting, though He weeps and laments beforehand, and who, when once
256 the sentence of condemnation has gone forth, will wipe out altogether the remembrance
257 of us, "and know us not." The tares were "bound in bundles" for the burning,

258 indiscriminately, promiscuously, contemptuously. "Let us then fear, lest a promise being
259 left us of entering into His rest, any of us should seem to come short of it."

260 [Note](#)

261 Vide also Matt. xix. 26. Luke xxii. 61. Mark iii. 34; i. 41.