

Correspondence.

For the Christian Messenger.

SPECIAL PROVIDENCE.

No man professes to understand all that he believes. There are many things forced upon the human mind for acceptance, which the rational powers fail to analyze and explain. Examples of the facts which are received in such a way may be adduced from the material world, from the revelations of Science, as well as from the Bible. Certain representations of the providential government of God, the Scriptures require us to accept, without such accompanying explanations as would make them plain to the understanding.

Specific results follow the operations of the natural world and the various exercises among men. The ends accomplished in these results, it is understood were foreseen by God, and were brought about by the exercise of his sovereign power and omniscience. The accomplishment of God's pleasure, in the administration of his laws in this world, is called his providential government. Besides the general purposes of the Almighty which are carried out in the government of this world, certain marked and specific ends are reached, instances of which are found in the Scriptures, and this is called the Special Providence of God.

By fore-knowledge and predetermination He brings about certain results, in some of which his approval of right, or his displeasure at sin is seen in a clear and unmistakable manner, and in others the divine intentions are entirely concealed. In the Scriptures there are only a few instances, compared with the events of the world, on which the light of the divine explanation is shed; and these are called examples of God's special providence. While in the government of this world certain general ends are unerringly reached, there can be but little doubt, that innumerable ends, more specific and minute are also secured. If it were possible for the human mind to know the frequency of such occurrences, and the countless number of such particular results which are secured by God in the administration of his government in this world, the ideas of special providence would be somewhat modified, and the fact of special providence would be immensely enlarged.

The tendency of the human mind to rush into extremes is seen in dealing with the subject of the special providence of God. "Thou shalt never wash my feet," and "not only my feet but my hands and my head" was not peculiar to Peter. It appears more or less distinctly in the history of every man. Like a pendulum the mind swings from one extreme to the other. In approaching the austere subject of special providence, minds separate into two divisions. One party says there is no such thing as special providence, but every thing which is brought about, is the effect of the operation of fixed and unchangeable law, and while the other part admits the fact, many persons fall into the error by attempting to explain the meaning of the events of life around them, thus making themselves the expositors of special providence. The attempts to interpret drive many to deny the fact. But both the denial of the fact and the attempted interpretation are grave errors.

It can be made clear, that in the denial of the fact of special providence, there is also a denial of the divine authority of the Sacred Scriptures. In confirmation of this statement it is only necessary to name the history of the patriarchs, the nation of the Jews, together with other persons who appear both in the Old and New Testament history. It is not only a rejection of revelation to deny the truth of special providence, but the mind is also inconsistent with itself. If consistency were enforced, the mind would be compelled to drop many of the plain facts of life which have never been questioned. The only grounds upon which the rejection of special providence is put, is that of antagonism with the scientific fact, that the elements of the moral and material world have been governed from the beginning by unchangeable laws which have never failed in their operations. Science teaches the one and the Scriptures teach the other. The two do not appear compatible, the one is rejected the other is received. But it can be shown, that between the teachings of revelation and science on this subject, there is no more of contradiction or impossibility than there is between some common facts which are universally received, and the natural laws across whose paths these facts are found. There is for instance plurality and unity in each sentient mortal, and in Deity. A withering but somewhat laughable rebuke was administered by a friend to an amateur philosopher for his inconsistency in dealing with this subject. The

scene occurred on a stage coach. To the young man who had propounded and sustained, as a law by which to be governed in matters of belief, that nothing should be accepted as true which could not be made to harmonize with right reason, the Quaker said, "Dost thou see those sheep and those geese feeding in the same pasture? and dost thou believe that the grass nourishes and sustains the bodies of both the birds and the animals?" "Yes" was the prompt reply of the infidel.

"Well" continued the Quaker "Canst thou explain to me how the grass is transformed, so as to produce wool on the backs of the sheep, and feathers on the backs of the geese?" The discussion ended!

It is evident that reason is a somewhat yielding in matters of this kind, and stands aside, while the mind receives, on full credit, a thousand things which are, in some of their aspects, inexplicable. The demand upon the rational faculties is no greater in the reception of what is taught in the Bible on the providence of God, than it is, in many facts which are received, without hesitation, from the works of God around us. Now, if from the things which God has made, the mind receives as articles of belief facts which cannot be explained, surely it ought to do no less in dealing with what God has said in Holy Scripture.

The more general error among readers of the Bible, is the second one which has been named i. e. the misapplication of the doctrines of Scripture on the special providences of God. With a view to correct this mistake, selections may be made from the Bible. These examples, taken from the Scriptures, as instances of the special providence of God which have been explained, may be used to guide the understanding in the enquiries for explanations of the events of life around us. If, in this matter, the Scriptures are taken for a guide, the mind will be saved from falling into grave errors in its attempts to ascertain the intentions of the Divine Being. The world, although enlightened by revelation, is slow to outlive the folly of the peers of the patriarch of Uz, who were reproved by Jehovah for their mistake. The same error was exposed by the Redeemer of the world, when He declared, that neither the sins of the parents of the blind man, nor of the man himself were the cause for which he was denied the blessing of sight.

In the vast and various events and circumstances of this world, the ends to be accomplished and the details of the divine purpose are hidden from the eyes of man.

While administering his providential government, God envelopes himself in impenetrable darkness and fulfils his word, which declares that "it is the glory of God to conceal a thing." But, as an exception to the general rule, in the government of this world, God has interpreted some of the events of life along the line of Scripture history. Some examples, taken from these records, may serve to guide the mind in dealing with the events of God's providence, which are continually occurring. Providence like prophecy admits of a general interpretation—an interpretation favourable to the cause of truth and righteousness and the ultimate success of the kingdom of God; but, as in the one so in the other, when man attempts to descend into details he is sure to fall into error.

An instance of explained providence may be found in the history of the royal family of the kingdom of Israel.

A certain King fell from his house, and received such physical injuries, as made it necessary for him to take to his bed. There is no indication that there was anything miraculous or uncommon in the accident. It would appear that he was on the flat roof of the royal palace, and probably leaning on the balustrade, by which the roof was surrounded, when it gave way, and hence the fall and the injuries. Under the influence of superstition, he sent to consult at the shrine of an idol god, with reference to the issue of his sickness. The messengers met a prophet of the Lord, who at length visited the king, and told him that he would die of his wounds, because he had gone to the god of Ekron, instead of going to Jehovah. See 2 Kings i.

There is another instance in which God has partially explained his purpose in dealing with an individual. The man had unexampled fame, influence, and wealth. His religious character was irreproachable. But armed plunderers were permitted to steal his oxen and put the ploughmen to death; the camels and their drivers shared a similar fate. The lightnings slew his sheep and shepherds, and a terrible wind leveled a house to the ground, and the mangled corpses of all his sons and daughters were buried beneath its ruins. A loathsome disease smote the man's body—his wife and the community turned

against him, and he was treated for a time like a dog. All this was not because he was wicked, but being righteous, he was chosen to prove in his affliction the fact before the empire of darkness, that good men served God from principle, and not from expediency. See the book of Job.

At a later period, and in the history of the Jews, a mother found that her infant had come into the world without sight. The babe grew to manhood—fell in with the Saviour, who graciously opened his eyes. It is not the restoration of the sight, but the being born blind which we would hold up, to serve the purpose contemplated in making these references to the Scripture. Those who saw the miracle, and judged that the blindness was a judgment upon either the parents or the blind man himself for sins which had been committed, were told that the divine intention, in this ordinary affliction, was altogether apart from their assumptions—it had been ordained to provide an occasion for God to manifest his benevolence in a miracle, and, by the miracle, to establish the mission of the Son of God.

Here are three men who were heavily afflicted, and in each case the purpose of God, or the special providence was different. In the case of King Abuziah, it was divine displeasure against sin—in the case of Job it was a defence of religion in the face of fallen spirits, and in the case of the blind man in the gospel, it was the means prepared beforehand, to display the divine benevolence, and to place an additional pillar under the system of revealed religion.

Guided by these divine intentions, made known in these three examples, what would an intelligent christian say about any calamity that might befall himself or his fellows? How would he interpret any thing which might occur connected with the moral government of this world? Say for instance, the destruction of life and property along our shores, by a recent flood? If he took the case of the King, by which to interpret every affliction, he would say it was directly for the sins of the people: but if he should take the case of Job, and explain the divine intention in the light of the principle involved in it, he would say it was for a defence of religion, and for a trial of faith. The case of the blind man would compel him to give another interpretation. But is a man warranted in explaining events which occur now by either of these or by any other instance, in which God, in his word, has made known his intentions? We think not. Any calamity may be the visitation of divine displeasure for particular sins, a calamity may be for the trial of faith, or the glory of God, in in some other way, or an exhibition of his mercy; or it may be something unlike any example in either the Old or the New Testaments.

Doubtless, special designs, great and minute, are accomplished by the unnumbered circumstances and events of this life. But for unlocking them and reading their hidden contents, God has given no mortal the key. To acknowledge God in providence, and to enquire prayerfully his will, is certainly a duty; but to interpret his providences, is an impossibility. The Bible gives no rule for solving the problem of the special intentions of God, in the details of the occurrences of this world.

The rejection of special providence, and the interpretation of special providence, are both errors, into which the mind of man is not unfrequently led. It is not however common to find a man falling into both these errors at the same time. A writer in the *Christian Messenger* has made himself an exception to the general rule, in his attempts to proclaim something new in christian philosophy. The old tragedy is again made to pass before our eyes, and men of straw set up that his wild fancies and bad logic may have easy victims. He first puts an interpretation on a certain event, which is assumed to be the explanation, warranted by the Scriptures and then he proceeds to overthrow it by different methods and lines of argument. The whole is built either upon the assumption that the Scriptures do not teach the doctrine of special providences, or that the Scriptures are not of divine origin; but there is no attempt to prove either of these data. If this writer denies the Bible the first task that lies before him is, to go over the large accumulation of evidences which have gathered around the Bible and destroy their value; but if he denies that the Bible teaches the doctrine of special providence, then he must begin with the creation of man, and pass down the line of sacred history, and explain away everything that bears upon this important subject.

His attempt to put the Divine Being on the horns of a dilemma is a piece of "learned nonsense"—rather, speculative nonsense which language fails to characterize. It is the case of

two men living, the one on the top, and the other at the base of a mountain. The one high up prays for rain, but rain, a blessing to him, will be a calamity to his neighbor at the bottom of the mountain, for his lands are already sufficiently moist.

But suppose the Creator should undertake to get out of the difficulty by sending rain on the mountain top, and that so gently, that it would not form torrents to injure his neighbor's moist fields? Would it be possible for Him to succeed? How would He succeed in escaping from this corner, in case He blessed the one at the top of the mountain with rain, and afflicted the one below for the trial of his faith?

But this writer, after his attempts to overthrow the truth of special providence, makes an attack on prayer. He delivers himself in this language—"Shall the Creator be influenced at all in this matter by the numerous selfish, conflicting desires of mortals?" Here again this writer betrays ignorance and error. He knows not the nature of prayer. The hearts of God's people, exercised by divine longings, prompted by the Holy Spirit within them, and poured out in prayers of faith, are, to the eyes of this writer, filled with "numerous selfish, conflicting desires." Such emotions, this writer ought to know, are not produced by the Holy Spirit in the hearts of the righteous. The explanation of the nature of prayer, and the interpretation of special providence are both of a piece, and are in the eyes of intelligent Christians painfully absurd.

There can nothing be found in the production of this writer that is harmonious and consistent, unless it is a series of absurdities which runs through the whole. On the hypothesis of special providence, he proceeds to interrogate "Why does God not displace sin with good?" but after discussing the same subject the apostle, Paul said "Oh the depths of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God, how unsearchable are his judgments and his ways past finding out."

"Blind unbelief is sure to err,
And scan his work in vain
God is his own interpreter,
And He will make it plain."

EDWARD MANNING.

Missionary Intelligence.

MISSION TO AFRICA.

LETTER FROM MR. J. T. RICHARDSON.

Natives Baptized. Monrovia, Aug. 9, 1869. —Saturday, the 31st of July, I left Monrovia, accompanied by Mr. Chavers, for Virginia, for the purpose of hearing the experience of three Congoes who live in the vicinity of Jacktown; and Sabbath, the 1st inst. I met them early in the morning in the church in Virginia, to witness what had been done for them by the operation of the Holy Spirit upon their hearts. It would have given the readers of the Magazine great satisfaction to have been present, to hear for themselves in broken English, the wonderful power manifested to them in the pardon of their sins. It would have encouraged Christians in America to perseverance and unwearied diligence in this great and glorious work.

I stated in my last letter that there were indications at no distant period that we would have a powerful ingathering of precious souls into the ark of safety. Now the prospect for winning souls to Jesus is bright and cheering. These native stations, at no distant day, from the signs of the times, will become the garden spot of the Lord.

Four were hopefully converted from the error of their ways and are sitting at the feet of Jesus clothed and in their right minds—two Congo woman, a Congo man, and an American-Liberian woman. At 11 o'clock, a. m., I preached from Matt. 28: 18-20, to a large gathering, both natives, Congoes, and Americans. We had the presence of the Lord during the exercises, and the occasion was one that will be long remembered by all who were present.

An Encouraging Work. I am much encouraged in this work, more particularly when I am called to witness such wonderful results from a work so recently begun. The signs are so cheering to me that I am at a loss for words to express my thanks to the Almighty God for having moved upon the hearts of my dear brethren to aid us in Africa in preaching the Gospel of the Son of God, to the perishing heathen of this land.

The light of the Gospel is spreading, and the darkness of idolatry and superstition is fast receding. The glory of the Lord is being revealed. The Sabbath-schools at each station are growing daily in interest. The set time for God to visit the heathen world, particularly poor, bleeding Africa, draweth nigh. God is raising up friends in various parts of the world, and this country is sure to be saved. She has long been shrouded in moral night, and her sons abroad have had to pass through a fiery ordeal, crying unto God to deliver them and their heathen brethren of this land. And it seems that Providence says their many prayers are being answered, and they shall be redeemed, despite the ragings of men and devils.

After preaching in the morning, I had the extreme pleasure of baptizing those received, in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. In the afternoon I administered the Lord's Supper to the church; so ended those holy exercises.