

Practical Atheism, in Denying the Agency of Divine Providence, Exposed

by Samuel Davies

Samuel Davies exposes the dangers of practical atheism and calls for a recognition of divine providence in the affairs of men.

Scripture: 1 Samuel 16:7, Psalm 73:11, Psalm 94:6, Isaiah 10:13, Isaiah 45:5, Jeremiah 5:9, Ezekiel 28:2, Daniel 4:30, Zephaniah 1:12

Topics: "Divine Providence", "Repentance"

Description

Samuel Davies preaches about the prevalence of practical atheism in denying the agency of divine providence, exposing the consequences of settling on one's own understanding and neglecting God's sovereignty. He highlights the need for repentance, acknowledgment of God's providence in blessings and calamities, and the dangers of ingratitude and impenitence. Davies emphasizes the importance of prayer, reformation, and gratitude towards God, pointing out the wickedness, pride, and arrogance in denying God's rule over the world. He warns of the impending judgment for a country engulfed in atheism and calls for a return to humble acknowledgment of God's providential care.

Transcript

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Agency of Divine Providence, Exposed

by Samuel Davies, Hanover, Virginia; April 4, 1756

"And it shall come to pass at that time, that I will search Jerusalem with candles, and punish the men who are settled on their lees; who say in their heart--the Lord will not do good, neither will he do evil."
Zephaniah 1:12

"The LORD does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart." 1 Samuel 16:7

Whoever takes a review of the state of our country, for about two years past, or observes its present posture, must be sensible, that matters have gone very badly with us, and that they still bear a threatening aspect. If our country is entirely under the management of blind chance, according to the gloomy doctrines

of Atheists and Epicureans, alas! we have reason to be alarmed; for the wheel of fortune has begun to turn against us! If all our affairs are entirely dependent upon natural causes, and wholly subject to the power and pleasure of mortals, it is time for us to tremble; for the arm of flesh has been against us!

But if our land is a little province of Jehovah's empire; if all natural causes are actuated, directed, and overruled by his superintending providence; if all our affairs are under his sovereign management, and all our calamities, private and public, are the chastisements of his hand--if this is the case in fact, as every man believes and wishes--then it is high time for us to acknowledge it, and be deeply sensible of it, and solicitously to inquire how we have incurred the displeasure of our gracious and righteous Governor, that we may amend our conduct and labor to regain his favor.

And, after a very serious inquiry, I could discover nothing more likely to be the cause of our present calamities from the divine hand, than the general insensibility and practical disbelief of the Providence of God, which prevails among us. This, I apprehend, is the epidemic disease of the age, and is likely to prove fatal, without a timely remedy.

Secondary causes are advanced to the throne of God, and the administration of the world is put into their hands, in his stead! Feeble, precarious mortals set up for independency, and would manage their affairs themselves, without a proper subordination to that divine power by whom they live, move, and have their being. If blessings fall to their lot, they ascribe the honor to themselves. Or, if they meet with hindrances and calamities, some poor creature must bear the blame; and they will not realize the hand of divine Providence in such things.

I do not mean that the doctrine of divine providence is not an article of our public and professed faith; or that we avow it as our belief, that God has nothing to do with our affairs or the kingdoms of men. But I mean, the disposition and conduct of multitudes is equivalent to a professed disbelief of divine providence; or, in the words of my text, "they say," in their hearts, "the Lord will not do good, neither will he do evil;" that is, he does not concern himself, one way or other, with human affairs. This they say, "in their hearts;" this is the language of their disposition, though with their lips they profess quite the contrary.

This practical Atheism brought the judgments of God upon the Jews, which are so terribly denounced against them by the prophet Zephaniah; and were fully executed, a little time after, in the Babylonish captivity. To that period of national desolation my text refers.

"It shall come to pass at that time, that I will search Jerusalem with candles." That is, I will make the strictest search in every corner and apartment of the city, like people that search a room with lighted candles.

"And I will punish the men that are settled upon their lees;" such men will I find out, wherever they lurk; and not one shall escape. By their being settled on their lees, we may understand their riches; for wine grows rich by being kept on the lees. So, by a long scene of peace and prosperity, the inhabitants of Jerusalem were arrived to very great riches. Or it may signify a state of security; like wine settled on the lees, they have been undisturbed; they are not moved with the threatenings or judgments of God, which hang over them; and, therefore, they are easy, and sunk in security and luxury.

In both these senses, this metaphorical expression may be understood in Jeremiah, "Moab has been at ease from his youth; and he has settled on his lees;" Jeremiah 48:11. That is, the kingdom of Moab has enjoyed a long series of peace and prosperity, and this has advanced them to riches and pleasure; and

they are settled in ease and luxury. They had not experienced the calamities of war; or, as it is there added, "he has not been emptied from vessel to vessel, neither has he gone into captivity;" he has not been tossed from country to country--but enjoyed a peaceable settlement in his own land for a length of years.

Or this phrase, "the men that are settled on their lees," may be rendered, with little alteration, "the men that are curdled or corrupted on their lees;" and then it denotes their corrupt state; they were, as it were, settled and stagnated in their sins: these filthy dregs are mingled and incorporated with their nation; and they were become a mere mass of corruption; and they must be shaken and tossed with divine judgments, to purge out their filth.

Wars and calamities in the moral world--are as necessary as storms and tempests in the natural world to keep the sea and air from putrefying; and a constant calm would introduce a general corruption. The mire and dirt must be cast out; which cannot be done without casting the whole body into a violent ferment and commotion.

"I will punish," says Jehovah, "I will punish the men that are settled on their lees." Though I am not fond of a parade of learning in popular discourses--yet it may be worth while to make this point, that the word here rendered, "I will punish" is in the original Hebrew, the language in which the Old Testament was written, "I will visit." And this word is very often used to denote the punishments of the Divine hand; and sometimes it is so rendered, "Shall I not visit them for these things, says the Lord? Shall not my soul be avenged on such a nation as this?" Jeremiah 5:9.

And this word suggests to us, that sinners are apt to look upon God as far from them; they flatter themselves he will let them alone in their sinful security, and that his judgments will always keep at a distance from them; "But," says God, "I will pay them a visit! I will come upon them unexpectedly with the terrors of my displeasure, and let them know, to their surprise, that I am not so far off as they imagine!"

This sense is very pertinent in my text, where it is made one part of the character of these devoted Jews, "That they say in their hearts, the Lord will not do good, neither will he do evil." Men are often said in Scripture to say that in their hearts, which is their secret thought, or their inward disposition; that which is their governing principle, and which directs their practice; though they dare not express it in words, or though it be quite contrary to their outward profession, and the declaration of their lips.

To a heart-searching God, the disposition of the mind, and the principle of action, is a greater indicator of the man's true character--than the strongest declaration in words; and by this he judges of men, and not by the outward appearances and pretensions. To this purpose you read in Ezekiel, "Thus have you said, O house of Israel." But how is this? "Why," says God, "I knew the things that come into your mind--every one of them." Ezekiel 11:5. "You never may have said such a thing in words--but it has been in your thoughts; it has been in the disposition of your hearts; and that is what I regard; that language is very intelligible to me."

Hence, my friends, you see the charge here brought against the Jews amounts to this, that their disposition and practice were such as would not at all agree to the practical belief of a divine providence. They thought and acted, as if it were their real and professed belief, that the Lord would do neither good nor evil, nor meddle with human affairs. If one should judge of their creed by their conduct, he would be apt to conclude that it was an article of their faith, that Jehovah had abdicated the throne of the universe, and that the blessings and calamities of life were the mere effects of secondary causes--without the

influence, direction, or control of an all-ruling Providence.

This is often represented as the secret sentiment of wicked men, and a special cause of the judgments of God upon guilty nations.

You may see their reasoning dressed in all the pomp of language by Eliphaz, who censoriously charges Job with this atheistic notion: "You say, 'What does God know? Does he judge through such darkness? Thick clouds veil him, so he does not see us as he goes about in the vaulted heavens' at ease, without troubling himself with the affairs of mortals, Job 22:13, 14.

David also represents the preposterous ungodly as querying in this infidel strain, "Does God realize what is going on? Is the Most High even aware of what is happening?" Psalm 73:11.

"They slay the widow and the alien; they murder the fatherless. They say, The LORD does not see; the God of Jacob pays no heed!" Psalm 94:6-7.

An arrogant self-sufficiency, and a practical renunciation of divine providence, have brought the judgments of God upon many a powerful nation. Why was Egypt destroyed? It was for her pride in saying, "My river," the river Nile, (on which the land depended for its fruitfulness,) "my river is my own; and I have made it for myself." Ezekiel 29:3.

When God denounces his judgments against Tyre, that center of trade and riches, and mart of nations, it was because she had said in her heart, "I am a god! I sit on a divine throne in the heart of the sea!" I am independent, and owe no subjection to any superior power. "Therefore, this is what the Sovereign LORD says: Because you think you are as wise as a god, I will bring against you an enemy army, the terror of the nations. They will suddenly draw their swords against your marvelous wisdom and defile your splendor! They will bring you down to the pit, and you will die there on your island home in the heart of the sea, pierced with many wounds. Will you then boast, 'I am a god!' to those who kill you? To them you will be no god but merely a man!" Ezekiel 28:2, 6, 7, 9.

Why was Nebuchadnezzar struck with a melancholy madness, and transformed into a brute? It was because he had presumed to speak in this uncreature-like language, "Is not this great Babylon, that I have built by the might of MY power for the honor of MY majesty?" Daniel 4:30. Observe what stress he lays upon the little, proud monosyllables I and MY. Daniel, that honest courtier, who had not learned to flatter even kings and monarchs, assigns this as the reason of the destruction of Babylon, and the haughty Belshazzar. "You have not humbled your heart; but you have lifted up your heart against the Lord of heaven; and the God who holds in his hand--your life and all your ways;" that is, the God on whom you are wholly dependent. Daniel 5:22, 23.

But this atheistical insolence appears nowhere with more pride and self-sufficiency, and is nowhere more signally mortified than in the haughty Assyrian monarch, of whom you read in the tenth chapter of Isaiah. Hear the language of his arrogance: "He boasts--By my own power and wisdom I have won these wars. By my own strength I have captured many lands, destroyed their kings, and carried off their treasures." Isaiah 10:13. And was he, indeed, that Godlike, independent, self-sufficient being he took himself to be? Does the God of heaven pronounce him such, and confirm his claim? No! What contempt does he pour upon him! "Woe to the Assyrian, the rod of my anger, in whose hand is the club of my wrath!" Verse 5. He is but a poor passive instrument in my hand, to chastise and punish guilty nations. And "Does the ax raise itself above him who swings it, or the saw boast against him who uses it? As if a rod were to wield him

who lifts it up, or a club brandish him who is not wood!" Isaiah 10:15.

What mortifying images are these, to represent this haughty conqueror! "After the Lord has used the king of Assyria to accomplish his purposes in Jerusalem, he will turn against the king of Assyria and punish him--for he is proud and arrogant!" Isaiah 10:12.

In short, my friends, this atheistical affectation of independency, and secret or practical renunciation of divine providence, is the fatal thing that generally overturned the empires, and impoverished, enslaved, and ruined the nations of the earth. This prevailed even among the Jews, the peculiar people of God, and brought his vengeance upon them, even they had learned to speak in this atheistical strain, "The LORD doesn't see it! The LORD has forsaken the land!" Ezekiel 9:9.

And, I am afraid, it is for this, that Virginia now totters. This is the source of those numerous filthy streams of vice and impiety, which are likely to overwhelm us, and open the flood-gates of divine vengeance! Jehovah, who hears and understands the significant language of the heart and practice, no doubt hears this blasphemy whispered in every corner of our country, "We have nothing to do with Him. The sun, and clouds, and earth conspire to produce food for us; but what hand has God in all this? Many parts of our country are languishing under the effects of a severe drought; and the French and Indians are invading our territories, and murdering our countrymen; but what has God to do in all this? We will fight it out with them ourselves, flesh with flesh; and let Him look on as an idle spectator." Horrid language, indeed! and, perhaps, the most audacious sinner among us would not venture to express it with his lips! But, what does the inward temper say--what does the practice of our countrymen say? This shall be our present inquiry; and for this purpose, I shall,

First, Offer a few arguments to establish the doctrine of a divine providence over the affairs of men, and particularly in national blessings and calamities. I will,

Secondly, Point out some things in the disposition and conduct of our countrymen, which argue a secret and practical disbelief of this doctrine. And,

Thirdly, Expose the aggravated wickedness of such a disbelief.

My design, in the whole, is not so much to convince your understanding, as to impress your hearts with a sense of the divine government over the world. You already speculatively believe it; but the grand defect lies in the efficacy of this belief on your hearts and lives! And this I would willingly supply. It is but a little that one, in so narrow a sphere, can do, to reform the country in general, in this particular; and truly this is a painful reflection to him, that, in an agony of zeal, would sometimes wish for a voice to reach every corner of the land, and address all the inhabitants upon this point. But since the extensive benevolence of my soul, in this particular, cannot be gratified, I would at least exert all my little influence among you, my dear people--to banish this atheistic spirit from among you, and prevent your concurring to the destruction of your country, by indulging in it. Therefore attend, while, in the first place,

I offer a few arguments, to establish the doctrine of a divine providence over the affairs of men, and particularly in national and public blessings and calamities.

For the proof of this, I am more at a loss what arguments to select out of a great number, than how to find them.

We may argue from the perfections of God, and his relations to us. Can we imagine, that a God of infinite knowledge, power, wisdom, and goodness, would sit idle on the throne of his universe, and be an unconcerned, inactive spectator of his own creatures? Would he make such a world as this, and then cast it off his hand, as an abandoned orphan, and never more look after it? Had he no wise and good designs in the production of this vast and amazing frame of things? And will he leave these designs to be accomplished or blasted by chance, or the whims or caprice of mortals?

We may argue from the natural dependence of creatures upon the supreme Creator, that he did not invest them with the incommunicable attribute of self-sufficiency; but they must depend in acting on Him, on whom they depend for existence.

We may argue from our confessed obligations to true religion, and the worship of God: if there should be such a thing as true religion, there must be a Providence; for it is plain, that if God has nothing to do with us, we have nothing to do with him. Where there is no dependence, there would be no acknowledgment; where there is no beneficence, there would be no gratitude. This is so evident, that Cicero, a heathen, expresses it in the strongest terms. I shall give you a translation of his words. "If," said he, "the gods neither can nor will assist us, nor take any care of us; if they take no notice what we do, and nothing can proceed from them which affects the life of man--why should we pay them worship and honor? why should we pray to them?"

If I would go about formally to prove this doctrine by particular quotations from Scripture, it would be to insult you, as entirely ignorant of your Bibles. How often do you there find the supreme dominion of divine Providence over the world, asserted in the strongest terms? How often are personal and national blessings and calamities ascribed to divine agency?

Rain and fruitful seasons, drought and famine, sickness and health, peace and war, poverty and riches, promotion and abasement, all such events are uniformly represented as at the disposal of the great Lord of the universe! Nay, his Providence is expressly said to be extended to the hairs of our heads, to young ravens and sparrows, to the lily and grass of the field. And can we then suppose--that he takes no care of men, or of kingdoms and nations? In short, this doctrine is true--or our Bibles are good for nothing! For there is nothing they more frequently and strongly assert.

The testimony of Scripture is so plain, and I have insisted upon it so much, in your hearing, that I shall say no more upon it at present; but I shall produce a class of new and unexpected witnesses to this truth; I mean the heathens, who generally had nothing but the light of nature for their teacher. Their evidence may be attended with sundry advantages. It will be new to most of you who have not opportunity of perusing their writings: and therefore may make deeper impressions on your minds. It will show you, that the substance of this truth is so evident, that even the light of nature could discover it, without the special help of Scriptural Revelation--and it may put you, who call yourselves Christians, to the blush--to find even heathens exceed you in a full persuasion of this truth, and perhaps a practical regard to it.

I shall begin with such heathen witnesses as are recorded in sacred history, sundry of whom have some glimmering light from Revelation, or from their conversation with the Jews.

Let us first hear the extorted confession of that proud--but mortified monarch, Nebuchadnezzar: "I praised the Most High; I honored and glorified him who lives forever. His dominion is an eternal dominion; his kingdom endures from generation to generation. All the peoples of the earth are regarded as nothing. He does as he pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth. No one can hold back his

hand or say to him: "What have you done?" And those who walk in pride--he is able to humble!" Daniel 4:34-37.

God complains of that mighty conqueror Cyrus, who was the executioner of his justice upon the powerful Babylonian empire, and many other nations, "I have girded you, though you have not known me." Isaiah 45:5. Yet we find even this heathen monarch, at least once, ascribing all his victories to the God of heaven, in his edict for the dismissal of the Jews, and the rebuilding of the temple. Ezra 1:2. "Thus says Cyrus, King of Persia, the Lord God of heaven has given me all the kingdoms of the earth!" I acknowledge my universal empire is his gift.

Hear also Nebuzaradan upon this head, the general of the King of Babylon. "The Lord your God (says he to Jeremiah) has pronounced this evil upon this place. Now the Lord has brought it, and done according as he has said: because you have sinned against the Lord, and have not obeyed his voice: therefore this thing has come upon you." You see, my friends, a heathen could instruct many of our countrymen who are professed Christians, that their sin is the cause of their national calamities.

But let us next hear heathens speak their own minds in their own language and writings. Plato, a Greek philosopher, above two thousand years ago, teaches us, "that all things are disposed by him, who takes care of the whole universe for the safety and advantage of the whole; the force and efficacy of whose providence does diffuse itself through all parts of the universe, according to their nature." "Shall we not affirm," says he, "with our ancestors, that mind and a certain disposing wisdom, does govern? The Divine mind disposes all things in the best order, and is the cause of all things; and disposes all things in that manner which is best." He also asserts, that it was the doctrine of Ulysses and Socrates as well as his own, "that we cannot so much as move without God." Thus, you see, Plato's evidence is full to the purpose.

The next I shall introduce, is Horace, a Roman poet; and though an epicurean in other things, he very expressly acknowledges a Providence over the kingdoms of the earth and human affairs. "Kings," says he, "have authority over their proper subjects; but Jove (that is the heathen name for Supreme Being) has authority over the kings themselves." He asserts, that he alone exercises an equal government over earth and sea, over the regions of the dead, over men and angels. Nay, he expressly tells the Romans, who then ruled the world, that they had the superiority among men, because they behaved themselves inferior to the divine Being; and that the reason of the calamities their country groaned under, was, their neglect of God.

The following passage deserves the attention of even an advanced Christian. "Who is there so mad," says he, "that when he takes a view of the heavens, does not perceive that there is a God, and that should think those things which are made with so much wisdom, that human are can hardly attain the knowledge of their order and revolutions, were made by chance: or that having discovered that there is a God, does not also discover, that it is by his providence that this whole empire was founded, increased, and preserved? We may love ourselves," says he to the Roman senate, "as much as we will: but we must own, that we have not conquered the Spaniards by our number, nor the Gauls by our strength, nor the Carthaginians by our policy, nor the Greeks by our learning, nor the natives of this country, Italy: but we have conquered them only by our piety and religion; and by this wisdom only, namely, that we have discovered and acknowledged, that all things are governed by the providence of God; by this wisdom only, have we overcome all nations."

What a humble, creature-like declaration is this! and how may we be surprised to hear it from the mouth of a heathen--when we hear so little of this language in a Christian country!

The Roman commonwealth was in great danger by the conspiracy of Catiline; and Cicero had been successfully active in detecting and suppressing it; and he promises the Romans that he would put an end to it. "But I do not promise this," says he, "trusting in my own prudence, or in human councils; but in God--and you ought to pray, that he who has made your city so beautiful, so flourishing, and powerful, would defend it, and subdue its enemies by sea and land."

And when the conspiracy was happily suppressed by his vigilance, he gratefully acknowledges a divine Providence in it. "What is there," says he, "O Romans, so averse from truth, so presumptuous, so bereft of his senses, as to deny, that all these things which we see, and especially this city, are managed by the power and providence of God! If I should say that it was I who defeated the conspirators, I would take too much upon me, and my arrogance would be insufferable. It was the Supreme God, it was he, it was he who defeated them, it was his will to preserve our capitol--his will to preserve this city, and these temples--his will that you should be all safe. It was under the conduct of the immortal God, that I formed this judgment and determination, and made such a discovery of the plot."

In this manner, my friends, does one of the greatest men that ever Rome was adorned with, acknowledge the hand of Providence in all his successes; and though vanity was remarkably his foible, he was ashamed to arrogate the glory to himself.

When shall our newspapers and political writings be so far reformed, as to speak the language of heathens? Alas! they are stuffed with such empty boasts and bravadoes about our powerful fleet, our brave officers, and so forth--as would have been judged impious and intolerably insolent, in heathen Rome! To acknowledge the divine hand in our victories and defeats, to profess a dependence upon him for success, and acknowledge the utter insufficiency of all our forces without him--this is unpolite and unfashionable; this, to be sure, must be the canting language of an enthusiast, whereas one would think it would be the natural language of every creature. Christians! if you will not learn the doctrine of an all-ruling Providence from your Bibles, learn it, at least, from Plato and Cicero! Can you shut your eyes against the light of nature and of Revelation too, when they mingle their beams, and pour upon you in a flood of day?

Were it necessary to enlarge upon this head, I might add a great many more quotations from sundry of the ancient poets and philosophers; and I might also show you that this was the belief, not only of the learned men in the heathen world--but of the vulgar or common people in general. This appeared from their anxious consultations of oracles, their prayers and sacrifices, before they entered into war; and their religious festivals and thank-offerings after victory. And you can hardly meet with one of their authors--but what is full of such accounts. And will not Rome and Greece rise up in judgment against the men of our country, who cast off a practical regard to God in their expeditions, and seem desirous that the arm of flesh alone should fight it out, without the interposition of a superior cause? From this I naturally proceed,

Secondly, To point out some things in the disposition and conduct of our countrymen, which argue a secret and practical disbelief of the doctrine of divine Providence. And these, alas! are easily discovered.

First, Do you think there would be so little prayer among us, if we were generally affected with this truth? If we looked upon the agency of Providence of any importance, would we not think it worth while to pray for it, with our most importunate cries? We look to our government to make provision; we try to enlist men; we regard their number, courage, and conduct; their arms and ammunition; but who is there in our land that

looks to the Lord? Where are the Abrahams among us, to intercede for our Sodom? Where our Moseses to hold up the hands of prayer, while our forces are engaged? There are, I doubt not, a few people, and perhaps a few families, here and there--that thus show their friendship for their country; and there are multitudes that seem to join in those forms of prayer for the public, which are used in the places where they respectively attend. But it is most evident, there is but very little of a spirit of prayer in our land. Alas! how many private people live in the habitual neglect of secret devotion--how many families live and die together, without any appearances of family-religion?

In short, there is but little prayer to be heard in our country on any account; but few that earnestly cry to God for themselves. And how few then, O my neglected country! how few appear as your advocates at the throne of grace! How few prayers are offered up for you! Now, when men will not so much as earnestly ask the help of divine Providence, is it not plain that they have very slight thoughts of it, and do not seriously believe it? O sirs! it will never be well with our country, until we learn to bow the knees; until poor strangers to the throne of grace begin to frequent it, and until the voice of prayer is heard from every corner of our land. Let others do as they will; but as for us, my friends--let us become a little congregation of praying souls; and we may do more real service to our country, than an equal number of armed men!

Secondly, Is not the general indulgence of vice, and neglect of true religion--a plain evidence of the general disbelief of a divine Providence over our country? That wickedness is almost universally triumphant, and practical religion and the concerns of eternity are generally neglected--is too evident to require a formal proof. Take a journey through our country, mingle in company, enter into families, observe the conduct of men in their retirements; and you will soon meet with the disagreeable conviction.

If there is much religion in our country, I am sure it is not the religion of our Bibles--it is not the religion of Jesus! It is a religion that consists in swearing, drinking, quarreling, carousing, luxury, and pleasure--in fraud, covetousness, and the grossest vices and impieties--it is a cold, careless, immoral, prayerless religion! Or, at best, it is a religion made up of a few lukewarm, insipid, Sunday formalities of devotion, without life, without spirit, without earnestness!

And would it be thus, do you think, if men were deeply sensible that God exercises a providence over the kingdoms of the earth--to punish them for their sins? Would they dare to affront him thus, if they firmly believed that he would resent it in earnest? Or would they be so careless about securing his favor by a conscientious obedience? No! they would be solicitous, above all things, to keep upon good terms with their Supreme Ruler; and they would no more dare to provoke him, than they would set a barrel of gun-powder under the foundations of their houses, to blow them up. But now they act as if it were their belief, that the Lord has forsaken the earth, and takes no notice of the conduct of the inhabitants; as if they had nothing to hope and nothing to fear from him; and therefore they may do what they please, and shift for themselves as they can.

Thirdly, Is not the general impenitence, notwithstanding the many public calamities under which our country has groaned--a melancholy evidence of this practical atheism? Judgments have crowded thick and heavy upon our land, these twelve months past. Our general has been most ingloriously defeated, and all our high hopes from that expedition disappointed. Our northern forces, from which we had still higher expectations, returned, without carrying their designs into execution. The Indian savages, under French instigation, have laid a great part of our country desolate, and murdered many hundreds of our fellow countrymen, in one part or other; and they still continue their depredations and barbarities, and that generally with impunity. To all this I must add, that our promising expedition against the Shawneese, is

coming to nothing; an expedition on which the country has spent about six thousand pounds, and which seemed the best expedient to put an end to the inroads of the savages upon our ravished frontier.

We were not without fears of disappointment from various causes: we were apprehensive that they might have heard of the design, and either deserted their towns, or so fortified themselves with the assistance of the French, as to be an over-match for our forces: these were plausible suppositions. But who would ever have suspected that the expedition should fail for lack of provisions! that men, leaving a plentiful country, and about to march through a tedious and unknown wilderness, should not take a sufficient supply with them? Who would have thought that men in their senses would have been so stupid and improvident? To me, I must own, it looks like a judicial infatuation.

Last summer, our men were killed by one another, in the ever-melancholy engagement on the banks of the Monongahela, and now a provoked God has let us see once more, that he needs not the instrumentality of enemies and arms to blast the expedition of a guilty people. By their own mismanagement, they defeat themselves, and disconcert their own schemes!

In truth, my friends, if there is a divine providence, I think it dreadfully evident that it is against us. All our most promising undertakings issue in disappointments; and nothing that we take in hand prospers.

But to return--we have not only suffered by the calamities of war--but a great part of our country is languishing under the effects of a very severe drought, which we, in this neighborhood, are so happy as to know but little of by experience. Now, if there is a providence, these calamities are inflicted upon us by a divine hand: they are not the random strokes of chance, or the effects of blind fate; but the chastisements or judgments of an angry God! And if he is the inflictor of them--then it is certain he inflicts them for the sins of the land.

It is sin, it is sin alone, that can bring down punishments on the subjects of a just government. But is this generally believed? If it were, would it not strip impenitent sinners of their presumptuous airs, and bring them to the knee--as humble, broken-hearted penitents, at the feet of their injured Sovereign? If every one believed that his sins have had a share in bringing down the vengeance of God upon his country--would he not smite upon his breast, and say, Alas! what have I done? God be merciful to me a sinner! Would he not immediately attempt a reformation, which is the principal constituent of true repentance?

But alas! have these calamities been thus improved by our countrymen? Produce me one instance of conversion, if you can, by all the terrors of war, and by all the alarming apprehensions of famine! Alas! in vain has the blood of our soldiers and countrymen been shed! In vain has nature languished around us, and the earth denied its fruitfulness! In vain has the rod of divine indignation chastised us, if not one soul be brought to repentance by all these means!

And if reformation is found impracticable, what must follow but destruction? God may bear long with a guilty people; and, indeed, he has done so with us: but he will take them in hand at length: and when he does take them in hand--he will make thorough work with them. If chastisement will not amend, then vengeance shall destroy!

And I am bold to pronounce, that you have no other alternative--but Repent or Perish! I will not presume to determine the time, the degree, or the circumstances; but I am bold to renew my declaration, that misery and ruin await our country--if we still continue incorrigibly impenitent. Men and money; arms, ammunition, and fortifications, courage, conduct, and skill--are all necessary for the defense of our land; but there is an

unthought-of something as necessary as any, or all these, and that is Reformation--a general, public reformation: and without this, all other means will be to no purpose in the outcome.

I do not now take upon me to prophesy: I only draw a natural consequence from known premises; and infer, what will be--from what has always been. Thus God has always dealt with the kingdoms of the earth, these have always been the maxims of his providential government. The ruins of Egypt, Babylon, Rome, and many a flourishing city, country, and empire--proclaim this truth. And if we disregard it, it is well if it is not written in the ruins of our country before long.

My friends I must speak to you without reserve: the general impenitence of our inhabitants, under all the providences of God to bring them to repentance, is by far the most discouraging symptom to me; much more so than our divided counsels, our routed armies, and our blasted schemes: indeed, I look upon it as the cause of all these. May I then hope to be heard, at least in the little circle of my own congregation, when, as an advocate for your country, I call you to repentance.

O Sirs, you have carried the matter far enough; you have trifled with your God, and delayed your reformation long enough; therefore, from this moment commence to be humble penitents, and let your country and your souls suffer no more by your willful wickedness. Whenever you recollect our past calamities, or whenever you meet with the like in time to come, immediately prostrate yourselves before the Lord; plead guilty! guilty! Bewail your own sins--and bewail and mourn over the sins of the land. If even all this congregation should be enabled, by divine grace, to take this method, they might, in the sight of God, obtain the glorious character of deliverers of their country. Who knows but our Sodom might be spared, for the sake of a few such righteous people?

Fourthly, Is not the general ingratitude a plain evidence of the general disbelief of a providential government over the world? My friends, our blessings, in this country, have been distinguishing: the blessings of a good soil, and a healthy and temperate climate--the blessings of liberty, plenty, and a long peace--the blessings of a well-constituted government, and a gentle administration--the invaluable but despised blessings of the gospel of Christ; blessings public and private, personal and relative, spiritual and temporal. In short, it is hard to find a spot upon our globe more rich in blessings--all things considered. But how little gratitude to God for all these blessings? How little is his hand acknowledged in them? Men bless their own good fortune, their industry, or good management--but how few sincerely, and with their whole souls, bless their divine benefactor? Now if his agency were thoroughly believed, would they, could they be so stupidly ungrateful under the reception of so many blessings from him? No! their hearts must glow with love, and their lips must speak his praise!

Fifthly, How little serious and humble acknowledgment of the providence of God in our disappointments and mortifications, is to be found among us! Men murmur and fret in a sort of sullen stupidity; or they cast all the blame upon their fellow-creatures. Those who know nothing of politics or war, will severely censure the men in power, for imprudent regulations, or negligence --military officers for their bad conduct, or soldiers for their cowardice. But who is it that sees and reveres the hand of an angry God in all this? Alas, the generality seem to think that the world is left to men--to manage as they please; and that God has nothing to do with it. They say in their hearts, "the Lord will not do good, neither will he do evil."

These things may suffice to prove the fact, that this practical atheism is very common and prevalent in our country! and now it is proper I should show the aggravations of it. I therefore proceed,

Thirdly, to expose the horrid wickedness of this atheistical disposition and conduct.

And here, had I words gloomy enough to represent the most diabolical dispositions in the infernal regions--they would not be too black for my purpose. I shall throw sundry things together promiscuously upon this head, without any formal order.

To deny the agency of Providence, is the most daring rebellion against the King of heaven: it is to abjure his government in his own territories, in his own world, which he has made! It is to draw away his subjects from their allegiance; and to represent him as a mere name; for what is his character as the ruler of the universe but an idle title, if he does not actually exercise a providence over it--but leaves his creatures to themselves, to worry and destroy one another, as they please? If he does not punish the kingdoms of the earth, for their sin; and if the blessings they enjoy, are not the gifts of his hand--then it is not worth while to acknowledge his government! For of what benefit is that government which neither rewards nor punishes its subjects?

But if God is indeed the author of these things, then it must be the most unnatural rebellion, the blackest treason--to deny his agency. To be rejected in his own world by his own creatures; for the great Parent and support of nature--to be renounced by the creatures, whom he supports in existence every moment; that all his chastisements, and all his blessings--should not be able to bring his own offspring to acknowledge him--what can be more shocking or provoking!

This is also a most ungrateful wickedness. Alas! shall God so richly bless us from year to year; shall he so gently chastise us--and yet be forgotten, disregarded, unacknowledged! It is hard, indeed, if such a country full of blessings cannot bring us so much as dutifully and thankfully to acknowledge him. Alas! shall poor subordinate, dependent creatures run away with all the glory, and set themselves up as God's rivals--or rather, entirely exclude him? What unnatural ingratitude is this!

It is likewise intolerable pride and arrogance. You poor, precarious beings, who were nothing a little while ago, and who would relapse into nothing this moment, without the support of the divine hand; alas! will you set up for independency and self-sufficiency? Are you capable of managing the world, and shifting for yourselves? And is the God, in whom you live, and move, and have your being--become a mere trifle to you? Can you carry on war, can you defend your country, and provide for yourselves--without him? Will you usurp his throne! "In the pride of your heart you say--I am a god; I sit on the throne of a god!" Ezekiel 28:2. Alas! the pinnacle is too high for you. "Will you then say, 'I am a god,' in the presence of those who kill you?" Ezekiel 28:9. What impiety and insolence; what arrogance and blasphemy is this?

Will you substitute natural causes for your God, and ascribe all the events you meet with, to their independent agency, when they are but the mere instruments of divine Providence? Can Jehovah bear with such a sacrilegious attempt upon the royalties of his crown?

Again, this atheistical spirit is the source of all vice and impiety. If men had an affecting belief, that "truly there is a reward for the righteous, truly there is a God who judges in the earth," Psalm 58:11; would they neglect him as they do, or would they so audaciously provoke him, and bid him defiance by their sins? No! a conviction of this would bring the sinner to his knee; it would restrain him from everything that would displease God, and prompt him to every holy duty. But if the Lord has forsaken the earth--then every man may consult his pleasure, and do what is good in his own eyes, without any consequences.

This, my friends, as I observed, is the source of that torrent of wickedness, which has overwhelmed our country: mankind say in their hearts, that God will overlook their sinful conduct, or that he takes no notice of it--and hence their presumptuous sin and impenitence.

Which leads me to add, that such a spirit prevents the improvement and good effect of all the providences of God towards us and our country.

Calamities may make us miserable, fretful, and impatient; but they can never bring us to reformation, and a genuine repentance for our sins against God--unless we are sensible that it is a provoked God who lays them upon us.

The bounties of Providence may make us happy, wanton, proud, and self-confident; but they can never fire our hearts with gratitude, nor allure us to obedience--unless we receive them as from his gracious hand.

It is the lack of this, my friends, which has rendered all the providence of God so useless to our land! Hence it is, they have produced so few, if any, instances, of true conversion. And thus it will be, we shall but abuse God's mercy, and we never shall learn the art of extracting good out of evil, and profit by our afflictions--until we learn this lesson.

And now, sirs, upon the whole, must you not shudder to think what a load of guilt lies upon our country, on account of this spirit of atheism which has spread over it? When the generality of the subjects turn rebels, and promise themselves that they can sin with impunity--is it not time for their Sovereign to come forth against them and make them sensible of his power and authority, to their cost? Is it not time for a neglected, disregarded, forgotten Deity--to take our country in hand, and extort from practical atheists a confession of his government--by the pressure of their miseries?

Will he always allow himself to be denied and renounced in his own dominions! I say his own dominions; for, assume what airs you will, Virginia is a little province of his universal empire; and all the world shall know it, either by the terrors of his justice, or by our voluntary confession and cheerful subjection. If gentler measures will not do, he may employ French tyranny and Indian barbarity to bring down our haughty spirits, and cause us to own his government, and our dependence and subjection.

Are not some of us guilty of this epidemic, fashionable infidelity? Have you not lived in this world until this moment, without being sensible of that all-ruling divine Power, by which it is governed? Then you are to be ranked among the destroyers of your country. Alas! such people are its worst enemies! Prepare, you infidels, prepare for his judgments to teach you a more creature-like disposition! Or if you escape his judgments in this life, prepare for those more dreadful punishments of the world to come--which will oblige the most rebellious spirit in hell to acknowledge that the Lord reigns!

Finally, amid all the tumults of this restless world-- amid all the terror of war, and, in short, amid all the events of life of every kind--let us labor to impress our hearts with this truth--that all things are under the management of a wise and good God, who will always do what is best, upon the whole. This will be a source of obedience; this will teach us to turn the greatest miseries into blessings, and to derive good from evil; and this will be a sweet support, and afford us an agreeable calm, amid all the pressures and tossings of this boisterous world--until we arrive at the harbor of eternal rest!

Source:

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