

**"NATIONAL PIETY:
THE CONDITION OF NATIONAL PROSPERITY"**

from

Plain Sermons
On Subjects
Practical and Prophetic

by Alexander McCaul

*“Hear, therefore, O Israel, and observe to do it, that it may be well with thee,
and that ye may increase mightily, as the Lord God of thy fathers hath promised thee,
in the land that floweth with milk and honey.”*
Deuteronomy 6:3

THE doctrine which these words were intended to impress upon the Israelites, was that their national prosperity or adversity was to depend upon their obedience or disobedience to the revealed will of God. Its vast importance to them as a nation appears not only from the important consequences involved, but from the frequency and earnestness with which it is presented to their attention. It is not only scattered up and down through the various precepts of the Mosaic law, but was thought worthy of having a whole book devoted to its solemn iteration. This book of Deuteronomy appears to have been written with no other object but to serve as a practical conclusion to the Mosaic legislation, and to engrave its sanctions indelibly upon the minds of the whole people. The historical books of the Old Testament repeat the same lesson, by detailing the particulars of its execution. They tell us that when Israel obeyed the law of God, it was well with them; and that when they rebelled and forsook this law, they were visited with punishment. The Psalmist, in pouring out his soul in praise and thanksgiving, continually recurs to the same subject; and even the Prophets, in their visions of the coming redemption, were still commanded to be earnest and frequent in their inculcation of this one great lesson concerning the conditions of national prosperity. If the importance of a doctrine is to be judged of by the prominence given to it in the word of God, this must be acknowledged to be in the highest degree important, as it forms the subject of the largest portion of the Old Testament Scriptures: and we must necessarily be led to inquire whether a doctrine which occupies so large a place in the small volume of Revelation was intended only for the Jews, and therefore only of transitory value, or whether it was intended for the instruction of all nations and ages. I shall therefore, by God's help, proceed to shew:

- I. That the principle here laid down is immutably applicable to all nations; and,
- II. Point out some conclusions which necessarily follow from this fact.

I. It is my intention to prove that the principle inculcated in the text is universal, that is, that the conditions of national prosperity or adversity are, not amongst the Jews only, or during the Mosaic dispensation alone, but every where, and at all times, national obedience or disobedience to the revealed will of God.

The first argument which I offer is the fact that the New Testament, both generally and in particular instances, refers to the principles of the Mosaic law as to eternal truth and of perpetual obligation. I do not mean that the particular enactments of that law, or the rites and ceremonies of its worship, are, or

ever were, binding upon any people but the Jews. The Apostles have unequivocally declared that Gentile believers have nothing to do with national Jewish observances; and that, as a dispensation for the Church of God, the Mosaic law is abrogated. That question therefore is settled for ever. My meaning is, that all these particular observances, ceremonies, and commands, though limited, fleeting, and transitory in their details, were the offspring of principles which are universally and eternally true, and therefore of perpetual obligation; and such is the doctrine of the New Testament.

In the first place, the Apostle tells us generally that the whole book of the Old Testament, and every part of it, (and therefore Israel's national law, and the history of Israel's national fortunes,) were written for the instruction and edification of the Christian Church. "Whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope" (Rom. xv. 4). And again, 1 Tim. iii. 15, "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness." There are two express and general assertions that every portion of the Old Testament (for it was of the Old Testament he was speaking—the New being not entirely written) is profitable for the instruction of Christians: what then is the instruction to be gathered from this oft repeated lesson of the conditions of Israel's national prosperity, and the history of God's dealings with the nation, from the minute enumeration of the political precepts, and the record of the instructions given to the kings of Israel in the law, and the special messages sent afterwards to individual princes by the Prophets? Was it for the edification of individual Christians only, or for the instruction of princes and nations? Was the law so constructed, the events of Israel's development so overruled, and the history of Israel so compiled, as to be profitable to private Christians, but liable to lead kings and nations astray?

If this great lesson concerning the conditions of national prosperity and adversity be not true in Christian times nor applicable to Christian nations, then undoubtedly the supposition that the Old Testament is likely to lead them into error is the true one. Men of pious minds, whether in a public or a private station, naturally turn to the word of God to direct them in their conduct; and the more difficult and complex the emergency, the more anxious they will be to have the direction of the divine word. The Christian prince and legislator will naturally seek for precedents in the conduct of the pious kings and governors of Israel; anxious to promote the welfare of their country, they will ask what it was that made Israel prosperous and happy, or that brought on its ruin; and finding that national obedience to the Divine will was the source of the one, and national disobedience the cause of the other, and, being accustomed to revere the Bible in all its instructions, they will endeavour to act upon this principle; that is, if the principle was not intended to be of universal and perpetual application, they will, by conforming their conduct to the Bible, be led into error; and the Popish conclusion will inevitably follow, that the Bible is an unsafe guide,—yea that the Bible does not contain all things necessary to salvation. To the salvation of kings and legislators it is necessary that they govern aright and conformably to the Divine will. But where is the Divine will respecting the principles of national law and government expressed, except in the precepts of the law and the history of the Old Testament—the New Testament containing but few allusions to the maxims of political economy?

The only example in the world of the Divine plan of national government, is that exhibited in the constitution of Israel. And if this be unavailing for the conduct of Christian governors and statesmen, whence is the man of God to be made perfect and thoroughly furnished unto the good work of national government? The only answer that has ever been attempted is as irrelevant and wide of the question. It is said that the enactments of the Mosaic law were only for a particular nation, temporary in their duration; and that, as having been long since abrogated, they are inapplicable in the Christian dispensation. But what is this to the purpose? In this all agree. No one attempts to impose Judaic rites upon Christians, or to assert the perpetuity of the Mosaic law as an institution for the Church of God. It has only been asserted, upon the authority of the New Testament, that the principles of the Mosaic law are eternally true and applicable, and this assertion the above answer does not touch. According to the

doctrine of the Apostles, the general principles of the Mosaic law are profitable for doctrine, instruction, and righteousness; and not only the general principles, but the reasons on which particular ceremonial precepts are founded, may be lawfully made the basis of an argument.

This is plain from the mode of the Apostle's reasoning, when he argues from the command not to muzzle the ox that treadeth out the corn to the Christian minister's right to a maintenance, and proves from the privileges of the Levitic priesthood, that they who preach the Gospel should live of the Gospel. Either the Apostle's arguments are invalid, or the principles of the Mosaic commandments are still valid. Granting, therefore, that the doctrine of the text was merely a doctrine of the Mosaic law, still it will follow that the principle is applicable to Christian nations. But the rule of the Divine conduct here expressed is by no means an exclusive peculiarity of the Jewish dispensation, but one which is broadly asserted, and upon which God has dealt towards other nations as well as the Jews. Nothing can be more general than the affirmation of the wise man when he says, "Righteousness exalteth a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people." Here the rule is applied to all people without exception; and sacred history proves, that upon this rule God has acted towards the heathen as well as the Jews. Before the giving of the law sin brought down supernatural destruction upon the guilty cities of the plain, and threatened the Amorites with political annihilation. When God said to Abraham, "The iniquity of the Amorites is not yet full," he explained the rule of his righteous dealings towards the nations. The reasons assigned for the total destruction of the Assyrian monarchy are similar. After describing the fate of the king the prophet adds, "Prepare slaughter for his children for the iniquity of their fathers, that they do not rise; nor possess the land, nor fill the face of the world with cities." (Isai. xiv. 21.) Ezekiel tells us that the national sins of Tyre brought on the national calamity, "Thou wast perfect," says he, (xxviii. 15, 16) "in thy ways from the day that thou wast created until iniquity was found in thee. By the multitude of thy merchandize they have filled the midst of thee with violence, and thou hast sinned: therefore I will cast thee as profane out of the mountain of God." Amos ascribes the destruction of Syria, Philistia, Tyre, Edom, Ammon, and Moab, as Nahum does that of Nineveh, to the multitude of their transgressions.

The principle therefore contained in the text is not a peculiarity of the Jewish economy, but the rule of God's dealings towards all nations without exception. It may however be said that all these examples are taken from the Old Testament, and therefore only prove that during the continuance of the old dispensation God dealt with the nations as he did with Israel. But to this it is easy to reply, that this is the principle asserted and acted upon in the New Testament also. The destruction of Jerusalem and the dispersion of the Jews followed their rejection of the Gospel; they were punished because they knew not the day of their visitation; and to this day their condition testifies, that national calamity is the result of national sin. In the Revelation of St. John the judgments, signified by the pouring out of the vials, are denounced against those nations who apostatize to Antichrist. (Rev. xvi.) The city on the seven hills is threatened with destruction, because of her idolatry and her effusion of innocent blood; and the kings and nations who dare to make war against the Lamb are forewarned of their total overthrow.

The rule of national judgment is therefore one and the same, both in the Old Testament and the New; and necessarily so, because the reasons on which this course of action is founded are themselves immutable. Nations must ever be responsible as well as individuals, and God must ever be the righteous Judge of all the earth. To suppose that the holy and righteous God hates and punishes sin in individuals, but is indifferent to and regardless of the sins of aggregate bodies; or that, noticing, he deals with them according to any other rule than the fixed and immutable standard of right and wrong, is to suppose that He can deny himself, that he has ceased to be the moral Governor of the universe, and has given up the course of the world's destinies to fate or chance. The rise and fall of empires must depend upon some law, and be the result of some determinate principles. Science will not permit us to ascribe it to chance; piety forbids us to account for it on the principles of fatalism. It must therefore be

admitted that the destinies of empires are regulated by the will of God; or as the prophet Daniel says, "That the Most High ruleth in the kingdom of men, and giveth it to whomsoever he will; and doeth according to his will in the army of heaven, and among the inhabitants of the earth;" and, if so, it is equally certain that that will is determined by the dictates of wisdom and justice as revealed in his word; that is, that the prosperity and adversity of nations depends upon their obedience or disobedience to the Divine law.

The fact that wicked and even idolatrous nations prosper for a time, and attain an eminent degree of power and wealth, is no disproof of what has been asserted. Such prosperity is temporary, and is at first acquired by fidelity to the light which they possess. Temperance, industry, charity, and justice have been practised by the heathen nations of antiquity, and, as long as they were ignorant of God's revealed will, had their reward. But as soon as these nations came in contact with the Jewish people, and through them with true religion, their destruction soon followed their obstinate continuance in idolatry. In this respect there is a vast difference between individuals and nations. Wicked individuals may often live and die in prosperity; as the Psalmist says, "There are no bands in their death, but their strength is firm: they are not in trouble as other men," (Ps. lxxiii. 4, 5); for their existence does not terminate with this life; but national existence begins and terminates in this world, and therefore here must be the recompence of national well-doing, or the punishment of national iniquity; and hence it is that temporal prosperity and adversity are the sanctions of the law of Moses. Not, as many mistakenly suppose, that God dealt with them on a peculiar principle to be applied to none others; but because, as being a national law, it could not promise national prosperity or adversity in eternity, but was necessarily restricted to a retribution in this present world. If nations be responsible for their actions—and their responsibility cannot be denied without at the same time denying God's moral government of the world—they must be rewarded or punished in time; and as this award, as pronounced by God, must be in conformity with the eternal principles of right and wrong, it necessarily follows that the prosperity or adversity of nations depends upon their obedience or dis-obedience to the will of God. Thus whether we consider the general statements of the New Testament respecting the use of the Old Testament,—the application which it makes of the principles involved in particular precepts,—the history of God's dealings with the nations of antiquity,—the express denunciations of the New Testament against the Jews and other nations who resist the Gospel,—or the eternal principles of right and wrong, we must come to the conclusion, that the lesson taught in the text is not peculiar, but universally true and applicable; that is, that when Moses promised prosperity and increase to Israel's national obedience, he announced to all nations the conditions of their weal or their woe.

II. But from this principle several important conclusions necessarily result, to which we must now direct our attention. If nations are punished and rewarded according to the manner in which they observe or violate the law of God, it follows, in the first place, that those nations which possess his revealed will are bound to make it the rule of their national conduct.

The principle, the truth of which we have just established, shews that nations as well as individuals have a duty towards God as well as to their neighbours. If they had not, they would not be punished for its non-performance; and if they have, the only way in which it can be efficiently performed is to make God's word the rule of their action. They must, in the first place, acknowledge the authority of the Divine law, and make the principles of God's revealed will the basis of their legislation as of their conduct, that is, they must make the true religion the law of the land.

Secret belief of the truth is not sufficient for individual safety; for as the Apostle says, "With the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation." And, on the same principle, confession is as necessary for nations as individuals. The nation cannot conform itself to a rule, until it knows the rule; it cannot know it, until it is openly declared and held up to universal view: this declaration is the national confession. To attain therefore to national prosperity, and to

continue in it when attained, it is necessary for those nations which know God, publicly and solemnly to confess him. This confession can be made only by an authoritative enactment declaring God's will the national law, and by the national homage given to God in public acts of national adoration. That is, in fact, nations as well as individuals must possess the true religion in their hearts: profess it with their lips, and practise it in their conduct.

It follows, secondly, that there is a necessity for making national provision for the instruction of the people in this law, upon which the national welfare depends. Not only is the national iniquity made up of the aggregate of individual transgression; but the national will and character, and its expression, depend upon the combined will and character of individuals; and this, again, depends upon careful instruction in the revealed will of God. The people cannot conform their conduct to this will until they know it; and they cannot know it until they are taught it. It is therefore amongst the primary duties of those to whom God hath committed the reins of government, to provide for the universal instruction of the people in true religion; because, if they remain ignorant, they cannot but transgress, and thus impede the public prosperity, not only by their individual transgression, but by their contribution to the general amount of national character. Religious error or ignorance may not be regarded as unimportant to the interests of the state; there is no room for the growing opinion that the state should take no cognizance of the religious opinions of individuals; that it should give no preference to one form of religion more than another; or that it should support the teachers of all indiscriminately. It must look upon error as dangerous to the public weal, and withhold from it all encouragement and support: it must beware of defying the King of kings by sending forth the ministers of falsehood to stir up rebellion against the Majesty of heaven. It is equally the duty of the rulers, and the interest of the nation, that teachers of the truth should be provided, and the truth made known to the utmost limits of the land. Upon obedience to the truth depends prosperity, and upon knowledge of the truth depends obedience.

The first question to be asked, therefore, is, What is the truth of God: the second, How it can best be promulgated.

In so serious a matter as the happiness or misery of a whole people, it is obvious that this is not to be left to the carelessness, the caprice, the ignorance, or the sloth of individuals. It would justly be deemed the height of madness thus to provide for the exigences of the state, or to leave the care of the nation's defence to individual exertion, or wisdom, or liberality; and yet neither fleets nor armies are so essential to the national welfare and security, as the knowledge of God and the practice of his will. "There is no king saved by the multitude of an host; a mighty man is not delivered by much strength. A horse is a vain thing for safety; neither shall he deliver any by his great strength. Behold the eye of the Lord is upon them that fear him, upon them that hope in his mercy: to deliver their soul from death, and to keep them alive in famine. Our soul waiteth upon the Lord; he is our help and our shield." (Ps. xxxiii. 16.) The nation's first care, therefore, must be to provide for the instruction of the people in the knowledge of Him; and of course in making this provision, it will be their duty to select those whom God himself hath ordained and set apart for the purpose.

It follows, thirdly, that those must not be called to the exercise of public office, or invested with public power, whose disaffection or hatred to the Divine will is known. It cannot be expected that those who reject God's law will be zealous to maintain it; or that they who hate it, will make it the rule either of their private or their public conduct. Whatever, therefore, their other qualifications, their good will, or their acknowledged abilities, it is impossible for them to contribute to their country's happiness or welfare: for this the first requirement is a hearty desire to seek God's glory, and to keep his commandments. If the safety of the state depended upon the wisdom and energy of man, the greatness of his understanding, or the stoutness of his heart, it would follow that search should be made for the wisest and the bravest; and that such should be selected for office without any reference to their religious

principles. But the text tells us that the wit and the valour of man can do nothing without God's blessing; and that national welfare depends not upon power or upon might, but the blessed influences of religion; that the attempt to distinguish between politics and religion is vain: and the doctrine that an open enemy to religion may yet be a good and useful friend to his country, is false. Whoever tries to uphold or advance religious falsehood, or to depress and discourage religious truth, does just so much to bring down destruction upon his country by rendering it obnoxious to the wrath of God, and by averting that blessing upon which its prosperity depends. "For by the blessing of the upright, the city is exalted; but it is overthrown by the mouth of the wicked." (Prov. xi. 11.) And of course the higher their station, the more extensive their power and influence, and the more public their character, the more sure the mischief which they effect and the punishment which they call down.

But it is not merely to teach us the true condition of public welfare or calamity, or our duty as members of the commonwealth, that Moses says, "Hear therefore, O Israel, and observe to do it, that it may be well with thee, and that ye may increase mightily in the land that floweth with milk and honey." He spoke not only to the people of Israel as a body, but to every individual of which that people was composed; and tells them that their own private happiness also depends upon their conformity to the revealed will of God: and though we live under a different dispensation, the lesson will apply equally to us. It is true that our Lord teaches his disciples to look for trouble; and the Apostle says, "All that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution." Yet that same Lord says, "There is no man that hath left house, or parents, or brethren, or wife, or children, for the kingdom of God's sake, who shall not receive manifold more in this present time, and in the world to come life everlasting;" and that same Apostle, that "Godliness is profitable for all things, having promise of the life that now is, and of that which is to come." (1 Tim. iv. 8.)

If we desire, then, that it should be well with us even here, let us hear, and observe to do, all that the Lord has revealed for our instruction. God watches over the destinies of the most humble of his servants with the same care that he superintends the fates of the mightiest empires; and upon his blessing our private happiness in time, as well as our soul's salvation, equally depends. "The Lord maketh poor, and maketh rich: he bringeth low, and lifteth up;" and that blessing is to be obtained by humbly waiting upon him in faith, and by continuing, through his grace, in the faithful discharge of our duty in that station of life to which He hath called us. It may be that our heavenly Father, in his wisdom, sees that trouble or poverty is needful for our eternal welfare: but in the midst of all earthly suffering He knows how to fill the heart with joy unspeakable and full of glory, and to bestow that peace which passeth all understanding: which the world can neither give nor take away.

Yes, brethren, if we desire to be happy and to prosper even in this world, let us hear, and observe to do; but especially if we desire our soul's salvation. The exhortation in the text is not at all inconsistent with the declaration of the Gospel, that we are to be saved by grace through faith. It is certain that by the deeds of the law no flesh can be justified; but it is equally certain that faith cannot exist without bringing forth its legitimate fruit of obedience to the known will of God. In that chapter (Heb. xi.) in which the Apostle illustrates the nature of faith, and points to many of the most illustrious examples of its exercise, you will observe in almost every instance, that the faith there spoken of is followed by some act of obedience, by which its existence and its genuineness are proved. Thus Noah's faith led him obediently to build the ark; Abraham's enabled to him forsake his country and to offer up Isaac; Moses' faith helped him to suffer affliction with the people of God, and to keep the passover. And it is the same wherever it exists; it makes its possessor anxious to hear, and careful to observe, God's commands. Any other sort of faith is spurious; it deceives us now, and will disappoint us bitterly hereafter. Many are anxious to know whether they possess true faith, here is a test liable to no mistake. Knowledge of religious truths, assent to mysterious doctrines, religious sensibility, or continual discourse about religion, are all unsatisfactory evidences of the nature of our faith. "Whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world: and this is the victory that overcometh the world, even

our faith.” This then let us apply to our consciences; let us inquire whether our faith works by love, enables us to live soberly, righteously, and godly in this present world, to cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of flesh and spirit, and to perfect holiness in the fear of God? If so then, it is a faith of which Christ will not be ashamed in the last day.

The text implies one other proof of faith and obedience to which I must especially refer this day, and that is our willingness to do what we can to provide spiritual instruction for the people of the land. If we really believe that national happiness and individual salvation depend upon faith and obedience, we shall desire that all may have an opportunity of hearing that word which is the rule of obedience and the warrant of faith. Indifference to the spiritual wants of the population is the child of infidelity—opposition to a national supply of these necessities, the offspring of an unhappy hatred to that branch of Christ’s catholic Church which has hitherto ministered to the poor in this kingdom; and these causes combined have crippled the Church’s energy, left multitudes of the people without a temple wherein to worship, and scattered them as sheep without a shepherd. Private zeal and liberality must therefore compensate for the lack of national faith, and on these grounds I would call upon you now to contribute to the maintenance of Divine worship in this chapel. If you deem it important that all classes of our population should hear the word of God, and be taught to observe to do it, contribute to the extension of our Church’s domains, not only because it is the Church of Christ—a motive in itself all powerful—but because it is the only faithful instructor of the people in divine truth. Our Church alone prescribes the regular reading of the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament, and alone proclaims the whole counsel of God by teaching the people to reverence apostolic order as well as to receive apostolic truth. She alone, in her lessons, articles, and liturgy, is the faithful, continual, and Scriptural protester against the corruptions of Popery, and the sole depository of the doctrines of our Reformers, and therefore against her is directed the whole tide of hostile fury. If then you desire the prosperity of the country, the salvation of the people, the maintenance of the truth, the honour of God; if you love him who proclaims the word of life, contribute to the upholding of His services, and the stretching forth of the curtain of her habitations throughout the land. “Every man, according as he purposeth in his heart, so let him give; not grudgingly, or of necessity, for God loveth a cheerful giver.” May then that God, who is able, make all grace abound to you; that ye always having sufficiency in all things, and may abound to every good work.