

ART. IV.—GOD'S PROVIDENCE FOR THE
INFINITELY SMALL.¹

“Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? and not one of them shall fall on the ground without your Father. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not therefore, ye are of more value than many sparrows.”—MATT. x. 29-31

YOU have come here, my brethren, to ask God for His blessing upon this Institute of Public Health on a Sunday which reminds us in a striking manner of our dependence upon Him. We are taught in the Collect to pray to God as to the Being “whose never-failing providence ordereth all things both in heaven and earth.” It goes on to remind us, moreover, that we are not to understand this merely in a general sense, as though we were to regard God simply as the Creator and General Governor of the Universe, but that we are to understand it in a particular sense as applying to everything that happens to us, good or bad. We are taught to beseech Him humbly “to put away from us all hurtful things, and to give us those things which be profitable for us.” So that whatever the harm or the hurt to which we may be exposed, we are taught to realize that God can keep it away from us if He will; and that, on the other hand, He is able to give us whatever will be profitable for us. This applies, moreover, to bodily things as well as to spiritual ones, for we address Him as ordering all things “both in heaven and earth”—not merely in heaven, but here in earth; not merely those spiritual interests which belong to heaven and to the spiritual life of our souls, but those temporal things which concern this earth and affect our bodily life. In all things that happen to us, whether in soul or body, we are to be alive to the immediate action and will of God; we are to be sure that He is governing all of them, and that nothing which occurs to us, whether for harm or for benefit, can occur without His express providence.

Now, this is really no more than what is indicated in the Lord's Prayer, in which we are taught to pray, not merely for the fulfilment of the will of God, for our forgiveness, and for our deliverance from spiritual evil, but for our daily bread; and are thus bidden to remember that we are dependent for the very bread we eat upon His love and His will. But our Lord more than once taught the same truth in a still more emphatic manner, and the text is a very remarkable expression of it. He points us to the little birds, two of which were worth no more than a farthing, and says explicitly that

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not one of them shall fall to the ground without our Father. "Fear not, therefore," He said; "ye are of more value than many sparrows." But He adds a still more remarkable statement: that "the very hairs of your head are all numbered." He could not have used an expression which would assert more strongly that even the slightest and most insignificant parts of our frame, the most trivial accidents which happen to us, are all under the control and providence of our Father in heaven. This statement is the most absolute contradiction to a feeling which men have often had, that God must be too great to attend to the trivial interests of small creatures like ourselves. Such a feeling, indeed, is so natural as to find expression by one of the psalmists, who exclaims: "When I consider Thy heavens, the work of Thy fingers, the moon and the stars which Thou hast ordained, what is man that Thou art mindful of him, and the son of man that Thou visitest him?" But our Lord declares that the mindfulness of God, and the visiting hand of God, extend not merely to the sons of men individually, but to the smallest accidents which can happen to them. There is another feeling, which has been very prevalent in our time, to which our Lord's words give a similarly direct contradiction. We have learned so much of the fixed character of the laws of Nature that many men have been disposed to think and to teach that all that happens in the world is the consequence of mere general laws, and that there is no room for the interposition of a special will in the course of Nature, even if it be the will of God. But when our Lord says that not a sparrow falls to the ground without our Father—that is, without His immediate concurrence and action—He teaches us in the most positive manner that the most common occurrences of Nature are dependent on His personal will. Neither our insignificance, nor the fact of our being subject to certain general laws, alike in our bodies and in our souls, must be allowed to obscure to us the great truth of the continual action of God's providence in every detail of life. We must be alive to Him, we must see His hand, we must recognise His personal will, in the fall of a sparrow or in the slightest accident of our own lives. We must not be content merely to look to laws of Nature: we must look to Him.

Now, if anyone should be disposed to think that there is some exaggeration of expression in these statements respecting the sparrow that falls to the ground and the numbering of the hairs of our head, if anyone should find it difficult to realize that such slight and insignificant things as these receive the immediate care of God, he may find some assistance if he will take into consideration the undoubted facts, the remarkable

and momentous discoveries which have given occasion for the establishment of such an organization as this Institute, and which are engaging its attention at this moment. You are occupied with the operation on the human frame of the very smallest organisms known even to microscopical investigation. Take as an example the disease scientifically called tuberculosis, of which one of the most common forms is the too familiar malady of consumption. What has been the central point from which all such discussions start? It is the fact, which has been discovered within the last few years, that this terrible disease, which has been and still is destructive to such vast numbers of the human race, is all due to a little creature, so small as to be quite invisible to the naked eye, and only to be discerned by powerful microscopes. Almost incalculable numbers of these little creatures may be present in the space of a postage stamp or of a teaspoon. Yet they have their direct organization and constitution; and there are different kinds of them, each of which may be the cause of a distinct disease. One kind of these little creatures, or *bacilli*, as they are called, will produce the disease of consumption, another kind of them will produce malaria or other specific fevers, and so on. It is upon these infinitely small creatures, and not upon things which we are disposed to consider great, not upon things which we see with our eyes and which impress us by their magnitude, that the health of mankind depends. Sometimes, in former days, whole countries were desolated, and a large proportion of their inhabitants swept away, by a plague or a fever. And what was the cause of this terrible destruction? We now know that it was simply to the action of these infinitely little creatures that such tremendous results were due. Our bodies themselves, in fact, are built up out of indescribably little atoms; and all the great things we see in the world—the trees, the mountains, the sea, the very heaven itself with its light and warmth and electricity—are made up of these infinitely little things. It is upon the structure of the little things, of the very smallest things we can imagine, that the welfare and the very existence of the greatest things depends. In fact, it is by the marvellous wisdom of God in creating and maintaining these infinitely small things that the great things have been created; and if we wish to see and to realize His creative and sustaining work in its origin and its application, we must look at the very smallest and slightest of all His creatures. It may indeed be said that if He did not attend to the very smallest things, there would be no great things for His providence to attend to.

The science of the present day has taught us, therefore, that we could not make a greater mistake than to suppose

that because things are little they are not governed by the providence of God. But many people, perhaps, will feel more difficulty with respect to the other consideration I mentioned to you—namely, that, as we know that all things are governed by general laws, it is not reasonable to suppose that God interferes, as the Collect teaches us, in the details of our lives, putting away hurtful things from us and giving us things which are profitable to us. But it seems a sufficient answer to this difficulty to remember that we ourselves, with our own feeble wills, are perpetually interposing to put away from one another and from ourselves things which seem hurtful. With our own children, we do not say that they are subject to general laws, and that therefore we cannot keep harm from them or do them good. In spite of all the laws of Nature by which a little child is surrounded, he is dependent to a infinite extent upon the will of his father and mother, and upon their providence for him. But if our little wills can play this momentous part in Nature, is it reasonable to doubt that the will of God can do so to an infinitely greater extent? The simple truth seems to be that the laws of Nature show us the ways and the methods by which the will of God acts, but they do not show us what that will is; and He, by His infinite power, wisdom, and goodness, is able to guide and direct the action of those laws of Nature, so as to carry out His will in any particular which He may determine. Take, for instance, the journey of St. Paul to Rome, which had such momentous consequences. The vessel in which St. Paul was being conveyed to Italy was caught in a violent tempest, and seemed at the mercy of the natural action of the winds and waves. But, nevertheless, God's particular providence was controlling its course; St. Paul was able to promise the crew that not a hair of their heads should perish, and they were all brought safe to land.

At the same time there is an important truth to be borne in mind as to the operation of those general laws of Nature, which is of equal consequence with respect to our bodies and to our souls. That truth is that men and women are expected to learn those laws, and to obey them, and to accommodate themselves to them to the best of their powers; and that God does to a large extent, and perhaps for the most part, leave us subject to the action of such laws, only interposing as He may see fit, according to the beautiful old proverb, to "temper the wind to the shorn lamb." Look first of all at God's moral laws. There are certain laws of right and wrong in human conduct laid down, for instance, in the Ten Commandments; and according as men obey those laws or violate them, they must expect for the most part to suffer the natural

consequences. If men and women live in disregard of God, without due respect to their parents, if they indulge in violence, impurity, and dishonesty, they will, in the ordinary course of things, suffer the punishment which, in the system of God's government of the world, are attached to the violation of His moral laws. But at the same time our whole future hope as Christians depends on the assurance, which has been given us by our Lord, that, for His sake, our violations of these laws will not be strictly visited upon us hereafter, that He has made atonement for them, and that if we trust Him, and submit to Him, the terrible consequences which in strict justice are attached to them will be averted from us. Even in this world, what Christian man is there who, in looking back on his own experience, does not thankfully recognise many cases in which, by some merciful guidance of God's providence, the evil which he had deserved by his violation of those laws has been averted from him? I am sure that in proportion to a man's spiritual experience he will realize that again and again the hand of God, perhaps acting through some human, or it may be through some angelic, influence, has interposed to check him in some fatal course, and to warn him of his danger. Many of us must be sensible of similar experiences in our bodily life, when some strange accident—as we deemed it at the time—has suddenly occurred to save our lives or to protect us from some physical disaster; but we are none the less subject in the main, and in ordinary circumstances, to the general operation of physical laws; and if, for instance, we neglect the discoveries which have been laid before us by physicians and biologists as to the means by which consumption and similar diseases are spread, we must expect to suffer the consequences in the continuance of those diseases, and in the ravages which they commit among us. It is, in fact, only by the maintenance of these general laws in strict and, as it may often seem, in stern operation, that they become known to us. It is by their regular enforcement, often in apparent disregard of the consequences to individuals, that God reveals them to us, and thus enables us to adopt the preventive measures by which their terrible consequences are averted. Those general laws, which seem sometimes so merciless, are thus, in His merciful and marvellous wisdom, made to avert their own natural operation, and to open the eyes of men to the means of protecting themselves and their fellows from the physical evils to which they are liable. There is no more gracious way in which His providence puts away from us hurtful things than by that physical order of Nature which enables us by the exercise of our own will to put them away from ourselves. An Institute

like this is rendering a great service to society and to mankind at large by urging on the attention of the people in various districts of the country the general laws of health which have thus been discovered, and so arousing the attention of the public to the physical dangers to which they are exposed, and to the means in their own hands of averting them.

Only let it be the comfort of every individual Christian to remember our Lord's teaching in this text, and to be assured that in every case it is by the express and deliberate permission of God if any disease or harm actually attacks us. It has come upon us, perhaps, in the general course of Nature, according to the ordinary operation of natural laws; but it has come by His permission, because He did not see fit to interpose to ward off some danger to which we had been exposed. It is under the laws which He maintains that it has come upon us; and yet, as it could not have actually come upon us without His permission, it is due, not to Nature or to chance, but to His will and His providence. As the minister is instructed to say, in the beautiful words of the Service for the Visitation of the Sick: "Dearly beloved, know this, that Almighty God is the Lord of life and death, and of all things to them pertaining, as youth, strength, health, age, weakness, and sickness. Wherefore, whatsoever your sickness is, know you certainly that it is God's visitation." If, indeed, this assurance is to be of full comfort to us, we must have our hearts right with Him, and thus have reason to feel assured that He is dealing with us in love and mercy, and not in wrath. But if we are striving to live with Him in Christ, if we are daily looking up to Him as His forgiven children, endeavouring to fulfil His injunction, "If ye love Me, keep My commandments," we may then confidently take to ourselves the assurance of His Apostle, that "all things work together for good to them that love God"; we may be assured, at least, that He will dispose the way of His servants towards the attainment of everlasting salvation, and that "amidst all the changes and chances of this mortal life" we shall ever be defended by His most gracious and ready help.

