

## OUR SECULAR PROSPERITY

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IS not this the first occasion within the memory of man when the temporal prosperity of the people was so great and general that even complaining politicians were compelled to admit it? Agriculture, the basis of all prosperity, is successful; harvests are abundant, and markets unusually good. Commerce is expansive and progressive. Money is plenty. The general standard of comfort in living is constantly improving; and among the higher classes the standard of luxury is rising with what we cannot call a rapid improvement, but at least with a rapid increase. Meanwhile, our modern Ophir continues to pour in its steady stream of gold. Perhaps such a spectacle of national plenty and increase was never seen before.

Christians are enjoying their full share in these blessings, if blessings they are. They are in the foremost rank of every lawful business and of every material comfort and luxury, and are gathering a full part even of the golden harvest of California. Besides this, the church is free among us in a sense in which it never enjoyed freedom before. Not only has it the fullest religious liberty secured by law, but it enjoys the apparent respect of the press, of the government, and of the masses. Surely "religion walks in her silver slippers." Such a combination of secular advantages was never possessed before by Christians.

Now, we have pointed out these facts to lead the minds of ministers and private Christians to the inquiry: Is this a spiritually safe state? Has the church ever been able to stand such temporal prosperity without being poisoned by it? Let us get the answer to this question from history and from human nature. The past answers that there has not been a single instance in which the spiritual health of the church has survived a season of high temporal prosperity. She has survived the sword and the fire. Like the burning bush, persecutions have not consumed her. The power of kings and commonwealths and the

gates of hell have not been able to prevail against her; but never, in a single case, has she failed to succumb before the miasm of temporal ease and plenty. When, under Joshua, God "made Israel ride on the high places of the earth that he might eat the increase of the fields, and he made him to suck honey out of the rock and oil out of the flinty rock, butter of kine and milk of sheep, with the fat of lambs, and rams of the breed of Bashan, and goats, with the fat of kidneys of wheat, and he did drink the pure blood of the grape," what was the result? "*Jeshurun waxed fat and kicked.*" And again, when the talents and virtues of David and of David's less noble son had raised the theocracy to the crisis of its prosperity, so that "Judah and Israel were many as the sand which is by the sea in multitude, eating and drinking and making merry," when the nation became so rich that "silver was nothing accounted of in the days of Solomon," how long was it before the apostasy of Jeroboam, and the idolatry, of the calves, in Bethel and Dan, yea, and Solomon's own backsliding, followed? So, under the Christian dispensation, as long as the primitive church was oppressed and reviled, it remained tolerably pure and active; but from the very date of its establishment by Constantine, when it received external respect, ease, revenues, and honors, began those corruptions which, in three hundred years, wrought out the monster of popery. Thenceforward the only communions which had purity or vitality were down-trodden churches like those of the Waldenses. The pure and active churches of the Reformation were born and grew strong amidst reproach, danger, and strife. As soon as they had become safely established, and providence had given them rest on every side, their decline began. And where is now the glory of Geneva, of Wittenberg, of Leyden? Set in the dark night of Rationalism or Socinianism. Compare the pure zeal, the fraternal charity, the humility of the Church of England as it emerged from the fires of bloody Queen Mary, with its subsequent arrogance, Arminianism, popery, and worldliness. See what has been the effect of outward prosperity and power on the Established Church of Scotland, or Puritanism in New England, *and on ourselves.* Yes, let us count the feeble and retrograding beat of our own spiritual pulse, and note how much weaker is our spiritual vitality than in the days of Davies, Tennent, and Blair.

Looking to man's nature, we shall see some of the reasons of this. It ought not to be true, but it is true, that it is man's mean-spirited disposition to feel less gratitude as the favors he receives are multiplied. Try it, my brother, with any neighbor you have. Send him a quarter of mutton as a present this week and he will return you his hearty thanks; but send him one every week for three months and then omit two weeks, and he will feel as if, on those two weeks, you had robbed him of a right! It will be well if he does not tell you so. Now, we treat God in the same thankless way. The frequency and the multiplication of mercies necessarily make the reception of them a habit; and habitual incidents make less and less impression the longer the habit is maintained. So that the multitude of our blessings, instead of begetting proportionate gratitude, deadens our sense of obligation. Here, then, we have this result, that sluggish, thankless indifference to God's love and benevolence will naturally grow out of continued prosperity.

It is very obvious that the indulgence and the rewarding of worldly desires will cultivate those desires. *Diva auri fames ipsa pecunia crescit.* (Pardon us the Latin, for Horace's words are more expressive than any we can put together.) The more money men have it in their power to make, the more will they love to make money. Gain will stimulate the desire of gain. Continued success will weaken the sense of dependence on providence, and the too-prosperous Christian will "sacrifice to his drag and burn incense to his net." And when the money is made, how shall it be spent? Why, of course, in living, dressing, building more expensively. Thus comes in luxury, with its enervation, its self-indulgence, its pride, its impatience of wholesome toil, its sensual desires, and spirituality dies as surely as the lamp goes out in the mephitic air of the cavern.

But here is the most fatal consideration of all: that the danger arising from temporal ease and plenty is one which leads the Christian away from his fountain of strength, the mercy-seat, just in degree as the danger becomes more imminent. The spiritual life of a Christian or a church is like the roots of the sturdy oak, which grow more tough by the storm, because then they grasp more tightly the crevices of the rock. It is like the refined gold, which must be purified from its dross in the furnace of fire. It is like the strength and hardihood of the sol-

dier, which are formed by exposure and battle. Let the Christian be persecuted, troubled, or afflicted, and his trial, by casting down his heart, brings it to the foot-stool of grace in humble prayer, and there he finds a strength which rises elastic and indomitable under every oppression, because it is the strength of divine omnipotence. Hence it is that the Christian only grows by reproach and affliction, and that the fire of persecution has often been the most prosperous element for the church. That which crushes down, at the same time brings into contact with the source of might and life. But alas! when the forgetful Christian is most endangered by pride, fulness of bread, worldliness, and sensuality, then he is farthest from prayer. Let us borrow an illustration from classic mythology. When Hercules wrestled with the giant, Antæus, son of the earth, he was baffled by finding that his antagonist rose from every fall with renewed strength, so that the more he was subdued, the more unconquerable he became. But at last Hercules perceived that it was because Antæus, as often as he fell upon the bosom of his mother, received new vigor from the contact; and then the god of strength, lifting him up in his mighty arms, so that he could no longer touch his mother earth, crushed him to death in his embrace. So wrestles this mighty and insidious prosperity. So wrestles Satan now with the church, which he has found by other means unconquerable. Since the church has risen with immortal vigor, as often as she has been pressed down upon the bosom of her Saviour, and driven out of her pride and self-dependence by affliction, he now lifts her aloft into carnal abundance, security, and haughtiness, in order that, having separated her from the spring of her strength, he may choke her to death in his treacherous embrace.

In a word, the whole is made up of its parts; the spirituality of the church consists of the spirituality of its individual members. But let any Christian view his own life, and see how nearly his whole spiritual progress has been made in the seasons of trial. It is by their private afflictions chiefly that individuals grow in grace. Is it not on the sick bed, in the chamber of bereavement, by the dying beds, and beside the fresh graves of those they love, that their steps heavenwards are chiefly taken?

Is it, then, an exaggerated statement, that a time like the pre-

sent is one of more danger than the time of oppression and persecution? We verily believe that, splendid as is the grace which carries the martyr to the stake, and sustains him in his baptism of fire, glorious as is the display of Divine power, in a church down-trodden but indomitable, persecuted but not consumed; the grace which would carry a church through such a season of continued prosperity and carnal ease as we are now experiencing, without a decay of spirituality, would be still more mighty. The church has often enjoyed the former grace; she has not yet attained unto the latter. It seems as if this is a height of spiritual attainment, which is reserved for those better days which are to introduce the millennial reign. But the rule is, that grace is bestowed in answer to prayer. And while seasons of persecution are seasons of abounding prayer, this is a time of prayerlessness. By how much is the danger more imminent! If, then, the approach of oppression or persecution, or the prospect of the loss of our religious liberties, would awake the voices of the watchmen on our Zion trumpet loud, what should be the course now of those "who have understanding of the times, to know what Israel ought to do"? Should not the teachers and rulers of the church lift their voices in warning more loudly even than when Knox called upon his countrymen to stand for their lives and liberties against pope and tyrants? And should not every Christian gird himself against the danger, with a spirit more earnest, cautious and prayerful than if he were counting the cost for a final warfare with persecution? True, ours is a danger which comes with no clamor, "no distress of nations and perplexity," or roaring of the seas of popular commotion. But if it is a danger, the wise man will therefore proclaim it with a voice only the more urgent and startling. The household which should be awakened at the cold midnight with the news that an absent member was freezing to death somewhere on the highway, would start from their beds into intense alarm and exertion. But that frost which is now fast freezing their brother's or father's blood into an inexorable sleep is a thing most quiet, most noiseless; as quiet as the genial dew! And so, "the pestilence that walketh in darkness," with no outward sign or voice but the stillness and desertion of the streets, and the muffled roll of the hearse, will thrill the heart of a people with as sharp an alarm as the clamorous

voice of war. And rightly. We utter a most deliberate and sorrowful conviction when we say, that in our opinion, unless we bestir ourselves with a wise alarm and diligence, utterly unlike our present conduct, and entirely above any to which any previous church has ever been able to attain in the like case, this present ease will be our ruin, and future history will date "the decline and fall" of American Christianity from our generation. And, alas! where is the voice loud enough to pierce the ear benumbed with this worldly abundance, and to rouse the sleepy, self-indulgent soul of the church, lapped in the folds of this intoxicating ease, to more than the awakened energy and hardihood and prayerfulness of a martyr communion? Can we flatter ourselves that we shall be an exception to all previous history? We fear not. Humanly speaking, our history must be this; either to sink deeper and deeper into formalism, worldliness, heresy and immorality, with partial and temporary resuscitations, till our light shall go out in a night which shall have no morning, like that of the seven churches of Asia; or else, to be lashed back to the throne of grace and to spirituality by the loss of our abused abundance and religious liberties, by social calamities and political oppressions, till we are purified and restored, and fitted to take our place as one of the millennial churches. And if God, in his grace, shall deliver us from both these destinies, if he shall sustain and restore our spiritual life, while he leaves us our present outward prosperity, then will that display of divine power be more truly new and wonderful than anything which the church has ever yet experienced.

What then is the remedy? By what means is this rescue, so difficult, so unusual that it is scarcely to be hoped for, to be found? We shall find the answer of this question in asking another. What was God's benevolent *design* in giving this prosperity? Not to be a trap and a curse to us, surely. This is the secondary use to which his righteous and wise retribution will convert it, if it is abused by us. But surely, he gave it primarily, that we might find our safe and innocent enjoyment in it, by using it for his glory. Here, then, is our escape from its benumbing effects. We must be unlike all the outwardly prosperous churches which have ever gone before us, in the *use* which we make of our prosperity. We must be as distinguished for our large-hearted liberality and our expanded plans of beneficence as we are for

riches and temporal privileges. We must burst forth on every side into a magnificence of missionary enterprise, as marvellous as the growth of our commerce, arts, agriculture, and general prosperity. We must cast the antiquated measures and standards of Christian liberality to the winds. Our prosperity has utterly outgrown them, and calls upon us to adopt new and larger ones. This is our only safety valve for our expanding wealth. Thus alone shall we be able to consecrate it, and render it harmless. Hence, it is one of the prime duties of the ministry to inculcate new principles of Christian beneficence. And hence it is the time for the church to go forward with gigantic strides, and give tenfold expansion to all those means for glorifying God which his temporal bounties can sustain.