

**DIVINE CONDUCT
OR THE MYSTERY
OF PROVIDENCE**

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Divine conduct or The mystery of Providence by John Flavel

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JOHN FLAVEL

**DIVINE CONDUCT
OR THE MYSTERY
OF PROVIDENCE**

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DIVINE CONDUCT

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MYSTERY OF PROVIDENCE:

WHEREIN

THE BEING AND EFFICACY OF PROVIDENCE ARE ASSERTED
AND VINDICATED; THE METHODS OF PROVIDENCE, AS
IT PASSES THROUGH THE SEVERAL STAGES OF OUR
LIVES OPENED; AND THE PROPER COURSE OF IMPROV-
ING ALL PROVIDENCES POINTED OUT.

BY THE

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A. D. 1677.

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DIVINE CONDUCT

OR

THE MYSTERY OF PROVIDENCE.

I will cry unto God Most High: unto God that performeth all things for me.—PSALM lvii. 2.

THE greatness of God is a glorious and unsearchable mystery. "The Lord most high is terrible; he is a great King over all the earth," Psal. xlvii. 2. The condescension of the most high God to men is also a profound mystery. "Though the Lord be high, yet hath he respect unto the lowly," Psal. cxxxviii. 6. But when both these meet together, as they do in this Scripture, they make up a matchless mystery. Here we find the most high God performing all things for a poor distressed creature. It is the great support and solace of the saints in all the distresses that befall them here, that there is a wise Spirit sitting in all the wheels of motion, and governing the most eccentric creatures, and their most pernicious designs, to blessed and happy issues. And, indeed, it were not worth while to live in a world devoid of God and providence.

How deeply we are concerned in this matter,

will appear by that great instance which this psalm presents us with.

It was composed, as the title notes, by David prayer-wise, when he hid himself from Saul in the cave; and is inscribed with a double title, *Al taschith Michtam* of David. *Al taschith* refers to the scope, and *Michtam* to the dignity of the subject-matter.

The former signifies "destroy not," or, let there be no slaughter, and may either refer to Saul, concerning whom he gave charge to his servants not to destroy him; or rather, it hath reference to God, to whom, in this great exigence, he poured out his soul in this pathetical ejaculation, "*Al taschith, Destroy not!*"

The latter title, *Michtam*, signifies a golden ornament, and so is suited to the choice and excellent matter of the psalm, which much more deserves such a title, than Pythagoras's golden verses did.

Three things are remarkable in the former part of the psalm, namely: 1. His extreme danger. 2. His earnest address to God in that extremity. 3. The arguments he pleads with God in that address.

1. His extreme danger, expressed both in the title and body of the psalm. The title tells us, this psalm was composed by him, when he hid himself from Saul, in the cave. This cave was in the wilderness of Engedi, among the broken rocks, where the wild-goats inhabited, an obscure and desolate hole; yet, even thither the envy of Saul pursued him, 1 Sam. xxiv. 1, 2. And now he, that had been so long hunted as a partridge upon the mountains, seems to be inclosed in the net; for the place was begirt with his enemies, and having, in this place, no outlet another way, and

Saul himself entering into the mouth of this cave, in the sides and creeks whereof he and his men lay hid, and saw him, judge to how great an extremity, and to what a desperate state things were now brought; well might he say, as it is, ver. 4. "My soul is among lions, and I lie even among them that are set on fire." What hope now remained? what but immediate destruction could be expected?

2. Yet this frights him not out of his faith and duty, but between the jaws of death he prays, and earnestly addresses himself to God for mercy: "Be merciful unto me, O God, be merciful unto me," ver. 1. This excellent psalm was composed by him when there was enough to discompose the best man in the world. The repetition denotes both the extremity of the danger, and the ardency of the supplicant. Mercy, mercy! nothing but mercy, and that exerting itself in an extraordinary way, can now save him from ruin.

3. The arguments he pleads for obtaining mercy, in this distress, are very considerable.

(1.) He pleads his reliance upon God as an argument to move mercy; "Be merciful unto me, O God, be merciful unto me; for my soul trusteth in thee; yea, in the shadow of thy wings will I make my refuge, until these calamities be overpast," ver. 1. This his trust and dependence on God, though it be not argumentative in respect of the dignity of the act, yet is so in respect both of the nature of the object, a compassionate God, who will not expose any that take shelter under his wings; and in respect of the promise, whereby protection is assured to them that fly to him for sanctuary; "Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on thee, because he trusteth

in thee," Isa. xxvi. 3. Thus he encourages himself from the consideration of that God to whom he betakes himself.

(2.) He pleads former experiences of his help, in past distresses, as an argument, encouraging hope under the present strait. "I will cry unto God most high: unto God that performeth all things for me," ver. 2. In which words, I shall consider two things, 1. The duty resolved upon. 2. The encouragement to that resolution. 1. The duty resolved upon: "I will cry unto God." Crying unto God is an expression that doth not only denote prayer, but intense and fervent prayer. To cry is to pray in a holy passion; and such are usually speeding prayers, Psal. xviii. 6, and Heb. v. 7. 2. The encouragements to this resolution; and these are two-fold. (1.) Objective, taken from the sovereignty of God. (2.) Subjective, taken from the experience he had of his providence. (1.) The sovereignty of God: "I will cry unto God most high." Upon this he acts his faith in extremity of danger. Saul is high, but God the most high; and, without his permission, he is assured Saul cannot touch him. He had none to help; and if he had, he knew God must first help the helpers, or they cannot help him. He had no means of defence or escape before him, but the Most High is not limited by means. This is a singular prop to faith, Psal. lix. 9. (2.) The experience of his providence hitherto: "Unto God that performeth all things for me." The word which we translate *performeth*, comes from a root, that signifies both to perfect, and to desist, or cease. For when a business is performed and perfected, the agent then ceases and desists from working; he puts to the last hand, when he finishes the

work. To such a happy issue the Lord hath brought all his doubtful and difficult matters before; and this gives him encouragement, that he will still be gracious, and perfect that which concerneth him now, as he speaks: "The Lord will perfect that which concerneth me," Psal. cxxxviii. 8. The Septuagint renders it, "who profiteth, or benefiteth me." And it is a certain truth, that all the results and issues of Providence are profitable and beneficial to the saints. But the supplement in our translation well receives the importance of the place, "who performeth all things," and involves the most strict and proper notion of Providence, which is nothing else but the performance of God's gracious purposes and promises to his people. And therefore Vatablus and Muis supply and fill up the room, which the conciseness of the original leaves, thus, "I will cry unto God most high: unto God that performeth the things which he hath promised." Payment is the performance of promises. Grace makes the promise, and providence the payment.

Piscator fills it with, "Unto God that performeth his kindness and mercy." But still it supposes the mercy performed to be contained in the promise. Mercy is sweet in the promise, and much more so in the providential performance of it to us.

Castalio's supplement comes nearer to ours: "I will cry unto God most high, unto God the transactor of my affairs."

But our English, making out the sense by a universal particle, is most fully agreeable to the scope of the text. For it cannot but be a great encouragement to his faith, that God hath transacted all things, or performed all things for him. This Providence, that never failed him in any of