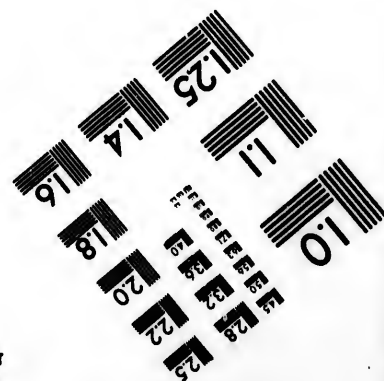
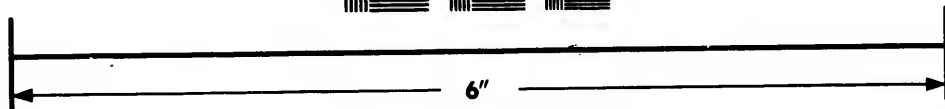
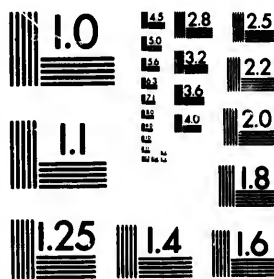


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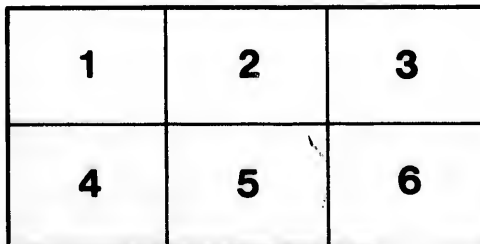
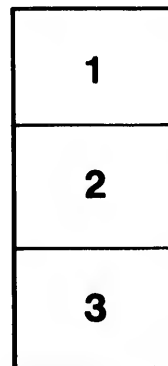
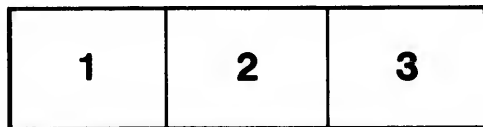
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# GOD'S PROVIDENCE

IN

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A Sermon

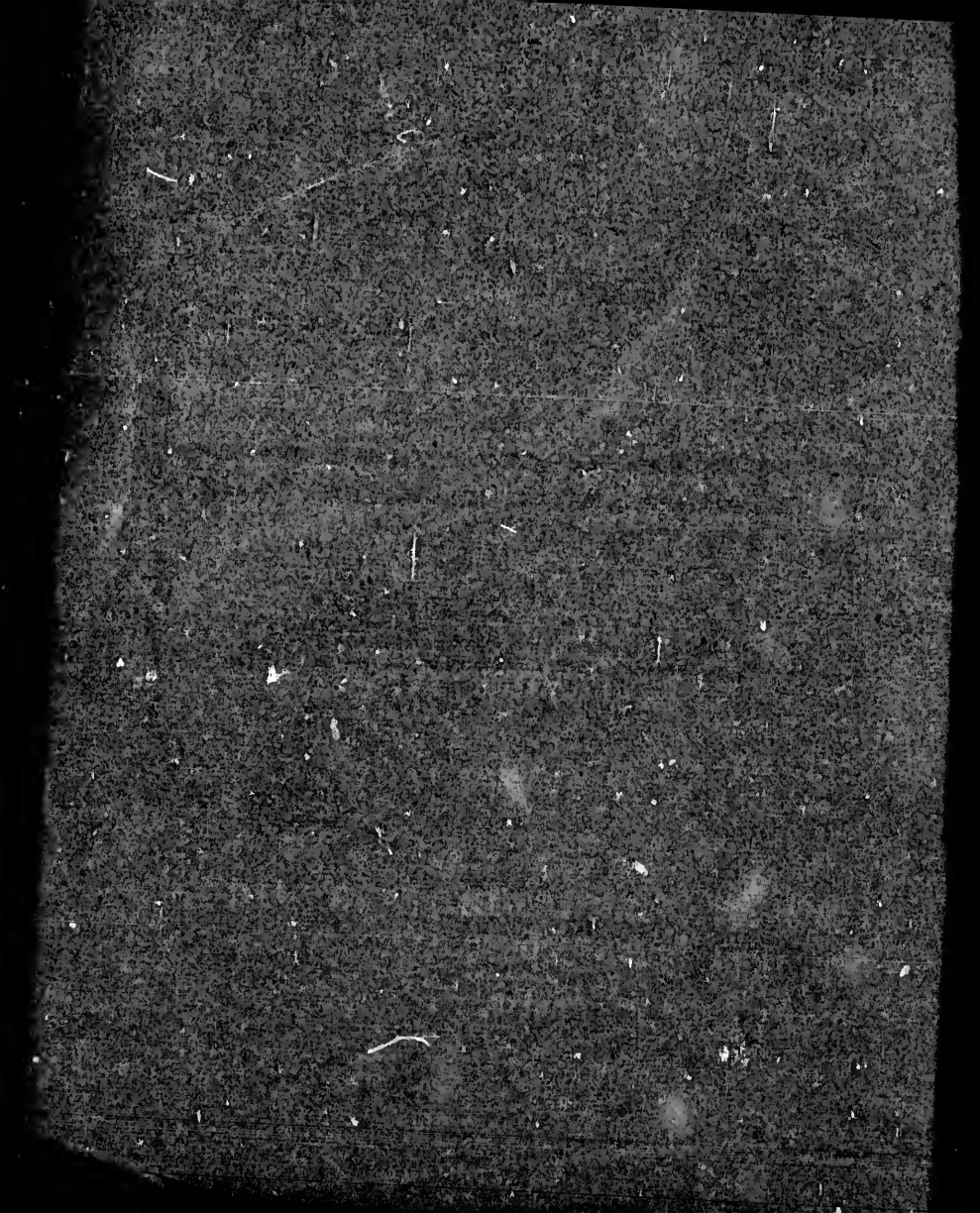
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# GOD'S PROVIDENCE

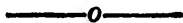
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## GOD'S PROVIDENCE IN CALAMITY.

LUKE XIII. 1-5.

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You have all doubtless heard of the fearful calamity that took place a short time ago in the city of Santiago, by which about two thousand persons perished. A few minutes before seven in the evening of Tuesday, the 8th December last, more than three thousand women, and a few men, knelt together in a very grand Roman Catholic church, with the view of paying their devotions to the Virgin. It seems that the church, the grandest in that part of the world, was lighted up to an extraordinary extent, with wax candles and

camphene lamps, and decorated in the highest style with images and festoons. Some of these were formed of pasteboard and other inflammatory materials. One very large image of the Virgin was placed upon the altar or stage, forming a conspicuous object, and lighted up in a splendid manner by the strong lights that were thrown upon it. More than twenty thousand lights in all were distributed over the building, many of them pendent from the roof, furnished with coloured globes, and rendering the position of the worshippers below very perilous in the case of fire. There was one main entrance to the church, and two side doors, very strait, and used chiefly for admission to the sacristy. Here there was a brilliant assembly, composed of the youth and beauty of the place, dressed out in

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their gayest and grandest attire. The church for several successive nights before had blazed with a sea of flame and fluttered with clouds of muslin and draperies, for it was a festive season, in which orchestral music and singing, and an immense profusion of lights, glittered and flared in every part of the building. But on this night an enthusiastic audience, greater and grander than any before, filled every nook, composed, as I have said, of about three thousand, mostly women, and many of them there contrary to the desire of their husbands. But the performance had scarcely begun when the gigantic figure referred to on the altar caught fire, and in a moment the flame shot across the roof, snapping the long, coloured globes, and dropping the camphene lamps among the gay assemblage below. In the panic all rushed to the

main door, which soon became choked up, and not more than a thousand of that brilliant assembly, made up of the flower and fashion of the place, escaped. It was a fearful sight to see women fainting, screaming, entangled in their long swelling dresses, seeking to escape, and holding out their jewelled hands for help, as the remorseless flames came on—to see mothers and sisters—tender and timid women—seized in the embrace of the flames, undergoing the awful transformation—first a dazzling blaze, then a writhing spectacle of agony; then a black calcined mass of dust and ashes—all the beauty gone save the jewels and gems which they loved to wear upon such occasions. In fifteen minutes all was over and the church was burned to the ground. The shrieks and groans of those two thousand sacrifices gave place

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to the stillness of the grave. "O! what a sight" one writes, "the placid moon looked down upon! Close-packed crowds of calcined, distorted forms, wearing the fearful expression of the last pang—the ghastly phalanxes of black statues twisted in every variety of agony, stretching out their arms as if imploring mercy. And then of the heap that had choked up the door, multitudes were found with the lower parts untouched, and some a shapeless mass, but with one arm or foot unscathed."

Now in view of this calamity there will be many to say that it was a judgment because of great sin, just as in the case of those referred to in the text. And there will be others in that city—the city of Santiago, where the catastrophe took place—who escaped the fire, congratulating themselves upon their safety. They were

prevented from going by some untoward circumstance of which they thought hard at the time; or, having gone, they were rescued from the devouring flames in a wonderful manner—because of having been led to take a seat near the door—or because of strong help which they did not expect—or presence of mind, or in some way which they cannot explain. This melancholy event then has two aspects—destruction in the one case, preservation in the other. Why did so many perish and suffer such a death? Because they were greater sinners than others? Nay, says Christ, but unless ye repent ye shall all likewise perish. Those did not perish because of their sins exceeding their fellows but they perished that others might live—be benefited and instructed—that error might be exposed and God's truth revealed

## IN CALAMITY.

in a clearer light. "Master, who sinned?" said the disciples of old to the Saviour; "this man or his parents that he was born blind?" "Neither this man nor his parents, but that the works of God should be manifest in him?" Then, why were there any saved? how are we to account for the strange escapes and deliverances upon such occasions? We answer by the special providence of God—a providence not suspending or interfering with the laws of matter, but working above it and independent of it altogether.

First, then, with regard to those calamities and those that perish in this way. Why, under the providence of a merciful God, should the tower of Siloam fall to the destruction of eighteen persons at its base? Why should such a bloody tyrant as Pilate be permitted to slay a number of

deluded worshippers, and to mingle their blood with their sacrifices? Or why should those two thousand persons referred to perish in the flames and meet with such a death, in the very act of doing homage to the Virgin whom they had been taught from childhood to revere? The answer is, that such calamities are permitted, not so much on account of those that die as those that live. God has in view, not so much the sin of those that perish, as the good, the well-being, the very salvation of those upon whom the ends of the world will come. Such calamities are God's great lessons to men, which they can never forget—monuments to which they turn their eyes for ages and learn instruction. There *are* sins indeed which are visited with God's wrath, upon which the divine judgments come with sure and certain step—



such as intemperance, uncleanness, imprudence, falsehood, and folly in all its forms; so that just as sure as you find the penalty, you can predicate the foregoing sin. When you see the drunkard's pale-faced children walking barefoot through the snow, holding out their skinny hands for bread, or enter his house and see its sadness and desolation, you conclude at once with the ancient Jew that this man as well as his parents have sinned. Or if you see a man who once occupied a good position in the world, losing caste—his word lightly spoken of—his character freely canvassed—his company shunned by good men—you may be sure that there is a cause—that this is but the consequence of moral delinquency—that there has been a relaxing of high principle—a disregard to the claims of God—an indifference to his holy eye:

and he who governs the world in righteousness means that he should suffer, that he should come under the suspicions of his fellows, and be treated with the cold shoulder and the averted look, and the want of credit and confidence. There are sins and vices which are followed up invariably with God's righteous retribution, so that just as sure as you can see the suffering, you can pronounce upon the sin which has been its cause. But there are sorrows and sufferings that come upon men where you cannot so pronounce—where it would be wrong to say that there has been previous guilt. I refer to all such sufferings as are indicated in the text, and flowing from calamities which we cannot prevent, and over which we have no control. Great suffering has come upon the world in consequence of war, pestilence,

famine, fire, and shipwreck. Such calamities take place in every land and in every age, whether we will or no, and involve in misery the innocent and the guilty, the parent and the child. One event happeneth to all—the wise and the foolish apparently without any discrimination. The Christian soldier falls as readily upon the battle-field as the profane wretch that neither fears God nor regards man; the licentious villain that is hastening across the sea to escape the hand of justice is perhaps one of the few that are saved in the wreck, while youth and beauty and innocence perish in the depths below; the devout worshipper is overtaken in his devotions and wrapped in flames; the pious miner is among the number that are choked with the fire-damp, while not a few have been rescued from destruction that are in-

grained both in body and in soul with pollution. You can infer nothing from such calamities as to the moral character of those who suffer. They are lessons for the living rather than judgments upon the dead; for although all suffering is preceded by sin either in the race or in the individual, yet the suffering may not be penal but paternal, and become a vehicle of precious blessings to the world. It is important that we should keep this distinction in view, or we will run into the ancient error of concluding, whenever we see great sorrow or a great misfortune, that there must necessarily have been great antecedent sin. On the contrary, the great suffering which a man has to endure may only be the means of making him more precious in the sight of God, and not only so, but a greater blessing to his fellow-

men. The greatest sufferer this world ever saw was its greatest benefactor, because suffering not for himself, but for those that should believe in his great name. And in a lower sphere we see the same principle of vicariousness in the works and ways of God. A thousand disasters and shipwrecks have taken place around our shores, and ten thousand precious lives have been sacrificed thereon; but these shores are the safer now because of those disasters, and the beacon lights of Cape Race and St. Paul's, together with all the other precautions and improvements, are the fruit of all those calamities. The battle-field is strewn with the wounded and the dead, and the sad news are followed with many a widow's wail and many an orphan's tear, but the fruit of that victory is liberty to the slave, and the opening of the prison

doors to those that are bound. Ten thousand perish upon the field, but they form a sort of bridge upon which those that come after will be able to pass over in safety. The martyr goes forward to the stake, or bares his neck upon the scaffold, in order that the gleaming axe may do its work, and all this because of some invisible truth which the world will not and cannot receive; but on that night, when men go to their homes and speak of the patience of the sufferer that died before their eyes looking up to heaven—the holiness of his life—the blessedness of his death—the truth for which he died receives a prominence which it never did before, and the scaffold becomes a pulpit which preaches louder than ten thousand ordinary lives could do, and sends forth light and truth over all the land. And so in the case be-

fore us—the conflagration of the chapel of Santiago, in which two thousand persons perished in a night. Here, however, it was not the witnessing to a truth but an error, that was the occasion of the calamity. But an error is just the wrong side of a truth; and when an error is demolished you have done a great deal towards the establishing the counterpart truth. And I venture to say that the superstitions connected with Mariolatry—superstitions that have taken a wonderful hold of the human mind, both in this and other lands,—will relax their grasp, and that ever as the 8th of December comes round, which with the seven preceding days, was wont to be the celebration of the Immaculate Conception, it will come with missionary power in behalf of the gospel, and serve as a battering ram to destroy the walls of error, the claims

of Mary and every other name that can be named, except the name of Jesus.

It is through a baptism of blood that the human race is to reach the perfection of their powers—to dominion over the elements—to the attainment of truth whether natural or revealed. It is through a baptism of blood that errors are to be dissipated and truths established, and that we are to make our pathway to glory and honour and immortality. The history of the world shows this and gives a deep meaning to the words of the Lord Jesus, when he said, "Others have laboured, and ye have entered into their labours." And again, "Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone; but if it die it bringeth forth much fruit." His sufferings indeed stand apart from all other sufferings—His death from all other



deaths, and yet it harmonizes with others in a lower sphere, for the principle of vicariousness runs through all the works and ways of God, and only culminates in its full glory upon the cross. Not one drop of blood which he shed was shed in vain; not one of his words fell to the ground, and the same may be said in a restricted sense of all the sufferings and labours of men, and especially of Christian men. But while all such sufferings and disasters as I have referred to have a bright side—while they are all redemptive in their nature, and fitted to work out good results under the providence of God to those that shall come after, they have a dark side also. They have a voice of warning to those that remain in their sins. They are the premonitory drops that come on before the storm—the forecastings and foreshadow-

ings of that doom which awaits the finally impenitent. "For if these things be done in the green tree, what shall be done in the dry?" If the comparatively innocent, becoming victims of error, fall sacrifices for others, what shall become of those who, better enlightened and more frequently warned, refuse instruction and cleave to their sins? "Think ye those Galileans were sinners above all the Galileans, because they suffered such things? I tell you, Nay: but, except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish."

Second aspect of this case—*the providence of God in preservation*. Scarcely any great disaster takes place, attended with the loss of life, without remarkable rescues and deliverances. This was the case in the great calamity referred to.

Upwards of a thousand made their escape, and some of them in a wonderful manner—not to speak of those who, by strange hindrances thrown in the way, were prevented from going to the festival. Here is another aspect of the case equally worthy of our regard. What are we to understand by the providence of God in calamity? Is it that God suspends the operation of natural law, thus providing a way of escape? Is it that he restrains the fire from its action, or calms the storm, or turns aside the fatal shaft? Not at all. We must look back of these things if we would seek an intelligent account of the providence of God in calamity. The tower of Siloam fell doubtless according to the law of gravitation; the Sunday sailing party perished according to the law of storms, or from want of skill to manage

their craft; and the church of Santiago was burnt according to the law of combustion. Providence does not interfere in the operation of these laws or any other law; but notwithstanding the inflexible action of natural law—the constant and invariable procedure of cause and effect—there is room for the higher operation of the divine hand.

There are two ways in which God can deliver me in time of calamity. He can avert the blow or the flying fragment so that it will not strike me; or he can, in his own mysterious way, move me from the point of danger, and in either case I shall be safe. Now, it is not the former but the latter of these methods that he adopts. God does not arrest the thunderbolt, or turn aside the arrow of death, but he touches a mental chord, inducing the man

whom he would save for the present to take another seat in the doomed train—to occupy another position in the building which proves a place of safety in the crash; or he may throw hindrances in your way so that you may be too late for the ill-fated vessel, or the splendid festival that is to end in flames. The thin column of soldiers, sent out as a forlorn hope to storm the breach, are thinned down still farther with

“ Cannon to the right of them,  
Cannon to the left of them;”

and the wonder is that any escape. But He whose eye is upon every beating heart, and upon every fatal shaft, can find a pathway of safety amidst the arrows of death for the man that He would save.— By turnings and windings—by reverses and restraints and ways past finding out,

he makes his way in safety and returns in triumph. A thousand has fallen at his side and ten thousand at his right hand, but death did not come nigh unto him.—Such are said to be saved as by a miracle, and the impression is that God interposes in the working of natural laws, and so saves them. Now there is nothing miraculous in the case,—understanding by that term the suspension of cause and effect—but there is something far more precious. There is a providence over men, nearer and more spiritual than this. There is a hand unseen by mortal eye, but which touches every man's inner life, leading you and guiding you in all your outgoings and incomings. This brings God far nearer to us than the miraculous view. That brings him to the walls of the building, this into contact with the

heart. That would prevent the flame from kindling upon you, but this would carry you away in spirit to a place of safety. Here, then, back of all peradventures, and calamities and casualties lies the special protecting providence of God. Not in interpositions, or marvels, or miracles, but in the hearts and lives of men does God work. Here, deep down in the hidden springs of action, is the finger of God, unseen by mortal eye, but not unfelt or unrecognised by his children, effecting special providences; and here there is room for filial trust and believing prayer, for the Lord is thy keeper O Christian, He will not suffer thy foot to be moved. He that keepeth thee will not slumber. Behold He that keepeth Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep.

And then again, if we cannot count

upon God's interfering in our behalf in the midst of calamity, except in the way I have stated, neither are we to presume upon his preservation in the way of neglect or carelessness. If you are going to make a journey you must attend to the conditions of safety. Prayers alone will not do. The axle will snap as readily with the prayerful conductor as the profane conductor. And the fire will burn as furiously in the timbers of the house of the saint as the sinner. It is not enough that the company pray fervently before they embark upon their voyage. They must see that the vessel is in every respect seaworthy,—the commander competent and possessing the proper qualities and reputation. Piety will not release you from such precautions. It does not supersede the working of natural law. Such a



thing would lead to all manner of neglects and carelessnesses and confusions; but these conditions being attended to, as far as you can attend to them, and your eye heavenward, how safe is your path by night and day! True, the righteous man often falls a sacrifice to the evils of life, but it is only in his outward and material estate, not in his spiritual and higher interests. Over all these is the protecting hand of Jehovah, preserving him from evil, preserving his soul from this time henceforth and even forever. There are no joints in the harness of his spiritual equipment, through which the arrow of the enemy may find its way. There is no vulnerable point from head to heel, over which the baptism of grace has not been poured. Read in this light how precious and how true that ancient psalm which

the voice of Inspiration uttered in reference to God's care over His beloved Son and all His children in Him! "He that dwelleth in the secret place of the most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty," Psalm xci. 1. Blessed are they who come under the wings of the Almighty and who have entered into an everlasting covenant with Him. At no time will God's blessed care be withheld from them. At no time will they be greatly moved. There is an atonement to which they can look in their darkest hours—there is a righteousness in which they can stand before God with songs of joy upon their head. There is a shield of faith to protect them from the fiery darts of the wicked one. There is a Saviour with them always, even to the end of the world. You are exposed to danger, O

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christian, but you are safe in the danger because of your union to Him that has entered as your Forerunner into glory; nay, through Him you will be more than a conqueror. God's promise of safety runs along the whole line of that glorious eternity that lies before you—in the hour of temptation—in the time of trial—in the passage through the dark valley—in that day when Christ shall descend from heaven with great power and glory, and when the dead, small and great, shall be gathered for the judgment. God's protecting care is from this time forth even forever; at no time will it be withdrawn. Let imagination take wing and soar away to the altitudes of the blessed life that lies before you, still above its highest reaches and noblest crowns will this truth be seen written as with a sunbeam. Let the pilgrim travel

forward in spirit to far distant ages in the world of light and love to which he aspires, and wander upon the banks of the river of life, amid the shining multitude that sing the song of Moses and the Lamb with undimmed eye and unstained soul, still, he will find himself under the protective shadow of God, and will say of the Lord, He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in Him will I trust. He shall cover me with His feathers and under His wings shall I trust. His truth shall be my shield and buckler.

I have thus spoken of the two aspects which a calamity presents, destruction on the one hand and preservation on the other. There is another truth conveyed in the text—namely the necessity of repentance—which I must reserve for another occasion; but in conclusion let me

observe that while protection is certain to the righteous—protection in their highest interests—there is none for him that refuseth instruction—that stands at a distance from God—unrenewed in the spirit of his mind. God indeed preserves all men for temporary and probationary purposes—even the wicked until the day of His power. Without his watchful eye and guiding hand the blasphemer would drop down while uttering his oath, and the right hand of the wicked would lose its cunning in its first act of violence; but the everlasting protection of which we have been speaking is that which God extends to His own dear children. And you, O sinner, are not His child. You are a lonely wanderer, cut off from heaven and holiness, and life and love, and God and the spirits of just men. You are a wan-

dering star, broken loose from the sweet influences of heaven and to such is reserved the blackness of darkness forever. You are lonely, for it is the nature of sin to isolate and separate from all that is precious. Soon every tie that now binds you to earth will be broken,—every hope you now cherish will be quenched—every relationship you now value will be blasted—every possession which you now hold will be taken from you, and you will indeed be poor and miserable and wretched and blind and naked. Take heed to the words of the Lord Jesus, “Except ye repent ye shall all likewise perish.”

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