No. 55.
On the justice of God's Providence.
Fast Day Sermon
1820.

April 6, 1820 +1
Ezek. xxviii. 29. - "O house of Israel, are not my ways equal? are not your ways unequal?"

This is the solemn & affecting question of Jehovah addressed to his murmuring & rebellious people. - The prophet describes his countrymen, the Jews, as uttering language inconsistent with the pure views of the divine justice. They seem to have supposed, that they suffered for the guilt of their fathers. - That on the children was inflicted the punishment due to the crimes of the parent, & that thus in the order of God's providence that portion of bitterness, which belonged to the sinner, was transferred to the innocent. - In this sense they were understood by the prophet; & he represents their complaint as, that in truth it is, a most injurious reflection on the equity of God's government. He expos-
tutates with them, reproves them in the name of God, vindicates in opposition to their charge the doctrine with a deep feeling of sensibility, & with the reproof. He assures them, that He, who can never moment swerve from the laws of justice, will not allow the innocent instead of the guilty, nor impute of parents to their posterity, but that he alone who sinneth shall suffer for the sin. He represents the folly of their complaint, “Yet saith the House of Israel, ‘Every man of the Lord is not equal.’” & then by a bold & transparent he introduces Jehovah himself addressing the people, “O house of Israel, are not my ways just, and are not my judgments equal?”

On this day of fasting, humiliation, & prayer, usually called to reflect on the justice of the government, & on our own perversity in those relations that government establishes between us, the Creator, the God, the Creator. To believe that the world, ourselves, & all our concerns, are under the moral a Being, who cannot err, is at the foundation of all principles of religious belief. It is the keystone of
Which supports our hopes, it cannot be shaken. Where, but in this enshrining faith, have the wise and the good in all ages, at least since the light of thy dawned in the void, ever sought a refuge? Where has misery found not powerful a relief as in this faith, what like this has shed its influence on the sinking heart, as to make it as he sends and rise to heaven? What, more than this, has revealed the arm of those who have labored in the cause of their kind, and in the cause of God? What but this has braced the soul of man to meet danger without despair, to struggle against the tempest without weariness? Take away from man the belief in the justice and providence of God, where will you leave him? How may he look creation round, and feel that there is a void which must be supplied; shadows and darkness gather around him, his heart in vain asks for that support on which it was created to rest, he feel that there was a peace beyond all earthly peace.

Yet such is the weakness of our mental vision, so often we are driven from our strong holds of faith, that at times scarce by the pious and the good can prevent their
minds from being darkened by distressing doubts about the justice of God’s providence. There are in the government of the world, as can only be seen by taking into view a longer space of time and a variety of circumstances, than our minds can embrace. We view events too near at hand, and narrow limits to judge properly of their characters. From an eminence we survey the far distant sea and the horizon, the whole seems smooth and even, but were placed in the midst of the same scenery, we discover many an interruption in its regularity. A deformity in what seemed to be beauty. The day designed to bring home to our thoughts our forefathers’ sins, it becomes us to remember, that if there is error, it is in ourselves,—that our ways are wrong, but that the ways of God are equal. “Can man be more just than God? can man be more than his Maker?”

But though most of our doubts and complaints be traced to the narrowness of our views and the narrowness of our hearts, as though of the whole way...
of the Almighty's government, as it includes all sorts of
origine, & all varieties of beings, it is but a small part,
tack our feeble powers can grasp; yet in the language of
agri-ure; God hath not left himself without wit-
ness: we can yet discover enough of the paths of the
High to be assured that they are the paths of
heavenly justice. We are not to suppose, however, that
justice of God operates frequently by immediate man-
ifest interpositions; usually it is rather administered by
the measures of good & evil in proportion to those
qualities of guilt, of virtue or vice. It is not often that,
here the dismagon king of Babylon, we can see the hand
ceiving of divine justice inscribed on the wall, before
the eyes; more commonly the hand of God operates un-
seen; but though invisible to us, its work is sure, & it
must be turned aside from its purpose.

On this occasion it may be profitable to us to consider

the evidences of divine justice, with respect to com-

munities & to individuals.
With regard to communities. — The history of the
many are some of the or considered. as a history of the
ignorant of God with his creatures. — Sometimes we recognize
the Almighty in those miraculous interpositions, par
ticular purposes & objects called forth; but such
events are scattered with a sparing hand here or there,
the path of ages. — Yet perhaps the operation of the
cosmic principles, by which the wise arrangement of
deceit punishment is awarded to guilt & happiness
integrity & virtue, is usually more manifest & visible
the fates of nations, than in those of individuals,
large communities & strong passions of war.
actors are commonly at work. Numerous sources of
injustice, of virtue or vice, are ever spreading and
the poison of their healing influences. — There are
stains, whose sending their thousand streams into every
part of the body politic. There is constantly a strife & fric
tion among the elements which make up the moral char
of a people. Great effects are produced rapidly &
are wrought by powerful & striking means. — And
The sciences of the influences are more strikingly evident of the properties of communities than in those of individuals. These consequences are still to be regarded as the operation of the general moral laws, by which the Almighty administers his government and displays his justice. If virtue in all its purity and energy are cherished by means of the old enemy of mankind, the blessing of Heaven will rest upon them. As the beautiful language of Job, their fruits will be spread out by the waters, the dew will be visible. All right in their branches. But when once irreligion gains the ascendency in a nation, or walk abroad with reproach, then the work of decay is already before. The history of the Jews is a wonderful monument of the justice of Heaven. While they obeyed the law of Jehovah and adhered to his worship, God went with them as a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night, and furnished they went, they went in the strength of his blessing. And when they sinned and were punished, the ark of their safety, they in the fulness of their hearts forgetting Him, he had chosen them to be the knowledge of his truth among mankind, went on after the idols of their neighbors, then their Al-
mighty guardian gave them up to the consequences of their wickedness, if they were left to fear. dreadfully it was to be abandoned by Him who alone could afford them protection. And when at last they came to enjoy, crime upon crime, by wearied out the perseverance of the they were doomed to taste the bitterness of captivity.

King of Babylon placed his yoke upon their necks, were compelled to leave all that was splendid in their all that was holy in their temples, all that was engrossed by their homes, to enter a strange hand to till for a foreign master. In process of time they were swept into a stream of conquest, which brought almost the universal world under the Roman power, were exposed to the insolent tyranny of the rulers of that power.

And at last, their conquerors completed the work of destruction in Jerusalem. That noble city, which was once the of Indea, where the glory of God had dwelt in the holies, was humbled to the dust, and its grandeur, fell. God had withdrawn his favour from it. The whole of the world does not furnish a more signal instance of the judgment of the Almighty than in the last
that devoted city. Its walls were leveled with the ground by the bloody hand of the people of the town of the temple were torn up. But even now from the midst of its ruins comes a voice to reiterate that solemn warning, "be thou instructed, O Jerusalem, lest my soul depart from thee, & I make thee a curse." In the dispensations of the Almighty toward the nations, there was doubtless much that was miscarried, but their punishment is reward. He often interposed to forego an extraordinary & supernatural manner. Yet the manifestation of those general laws, by which the justice of the heaven is administered, is manifest in the history of exposed other nations. What was it that raised Rome to a height of glory, that the world bowed to her color of command? It was the virtue, the integrity, the justice of the people's citizens. And what was it that withered her in the day she wrought her downfall? That brought when her fierce host of fierce barbarians, who rushed when the hire, eager for their prey, divided the spoil, & that instance anything but the scattered ruins of her greatness on the last gin to mark the spot where her grandeur once reigned?
It was the vices of this people, which brought their destruction. It was their wickedness, their luxury, licentiousness, their irreverence, when enfeebled by their strength, that gave them to the imbalances of the Thou in their ruin was manifested the justice working not by miracles, but by the eternal law of his moral government. - The same influence traced in the history of the church of X. So long as Jesus, imitated the meek and peaceful spirit of the picture, it was blessed by God, and all the force of the picture of its enemies was spent in vain. Though persecution without, there was peace and rest within. But when the church became divided by such as they professed to be the followers of X, they sought to darken the word of God by metaphysical and idle disputes, than to ask for the way of salvation, walk in the steps of their Lord, when the discern him, who, when on earth had not where to lay his head, was rejected temporal power; mounted thrones, offered their brethren to enrich & gratify themselves.
right think of disorder, 

and every form of error filled the church. 

Luxury, disorder, and error chased the glory of the sanctuary. Men ranked themselves and their false leaders, forget that one was that 

under earthly leaders. 

Thus God displayed his justice to 

so long as a 

church; and thus in different ways 

it hath ever been displayed. - The Almighty 

faith as it 

his hands all the means of executing his judgments 

of them where he pleases. He wielded at will the rage of 

convulsive elements, and guides the operation of those 

of his hands with all he has endured the several 

of the material system; and he controls those yet 

of the passions of men, and compels them 

purposes of his wisdom and justice. Yet in the 

of the earth, we should bear in mind, that God hath 

for forgotten to be gracious. His justice appears in his 

may not less than in his judgments; 

attention on the more fearful parts of the administra-
than of this government, we should not forget to that silent flow of blessings, which hath ever from the world. While we look at the foaming torrent likewise observe the calm, deep, and noiseless stream. We combine these two considerations, we shall be taught that with respect to communities the God are equal, but that the ways of man are wise "that righteousness exalteth a nation, but sin proach of any people."

2. We are to consider the justice of God in the government of the world, so far as it concerns individuals. And there are many appearances, as present difficulties can be solved only by a reference to that future existence, of which God has disclosed. The perfection of a wise government seems to require, not only that in general should become more or less happy in proportion to their practice of virtue or vice, but that every man should be rewarded in exact proportion to his actions. That God should extend his justice to every action equally, yet at all times. But this distribution, we know, does not take place in the
vice is often triumphant & prosperous; vice languishes in disgrace, it is tired by its own torrent. How frequently do the wicked flourish & gain great success, while the good are left to bear the burden of the world, to stand unheeded & unappreciated. On the view of these things, we are at first disposed to complain that the ways of God are not l, & to require that his justice should be executed in the gate immediate & publick reward of virtue & punish- 

ament of vice. But let us pause a moment, & reflect, difficult the own our ways be not unequal, whether our com- future or to be not hastily, & whether we have act with too

spect of temerity rushed into judgment on the ways of 
y that that is wise to. It is true indeed that there is 

ly in part a want of what we deem a perfect are be-

t every other the conduct of men. But the 

in the question is met, whether guilt sometimes triumphs, while 

fence suffers, whether the good are sometimes oppress-

But they toil under the heavy burden of adversity, while 

 tense in the wicked are flourishing in prosperity & are proudly cla-
tested with success: but whether on the other hand, the greater number of instances virtue be not the happiness, or vice: the sure forerunner of misery in the world. Look around you for a moment & ask yourself: happy man, who is he, whose lot you would have to share? Is it that of the man, who is hurryingAeadlong care by his corrupt passions & impulses? Is it this, who walks the round of his duty? Is it this, who serves God: & serves man. Is it an office to teach a kind of good heart can powerless there can be no difficulty in selecting of the character which has the best prospect of success in life. Our hearts are compelled to yield to virtue; we cannot but acknowledge that once is less happy, as there is more or less in the world. That if this be not true in every instance, yet that generally such is the case, that at least it is the tendency of ours condition better is happier in this world. The tendency is not a limited one: it is not con-
hate, you expect this general effect into any other case. 
the point of in providence of God, governing the world by 
universal law or constitution, this perfectly right? 
as I am thus resolved, have we not a most mani-
proof of the justice of God? These surely cannot be 
worded demonstration of the disposition, as to speak of 
unrighteous, as a plain indication of the cause he employs. 
ity with 
making mankind more happy or more miserable in 
active relation to the degree of virtue or vice, as actually pre-
posing them, be met an actual distribution of 
justice in this world, what? Ask, can we mean 
justice of God? If it be said, that this general 
it is owing to the nature of mankind is to the cen-
tal mani-
apt mani-
world, this is concealing the point at issue, 
spots, or in the whole just and right; of what is this 
of wisdom and justice, but the scheme's intention of the wisdom of 
god? - It is surely unreasonable to lay a great 
ervation of particular instances, to neglect what is in truth 
a general state of the case; - to complain that God has
forgotten to be just, because sometimes the wicked prosperously in their wickedness, \& in the middle must to pass by those cases, so much more numerous with happiness follows with an unerring step, as the plant on virtue. Besides, let it be supposed that are many inequalities in the moral governments Almighty during this probationary scene of evil still while we confine our views to this world, see a single link of that vast chain, with which the universe is the throne of God. We are apt to forget that there is a future life, where the order will be rectified, & where all rough places be made smooth. In this world the rewards, recompense are incomplete, but in the future they will go on to perfection. In this life, the virtue, like that of our Lord, may be a circle, but in the better life, it will be a crown of glory. Here the servants of the Most High must taste the bitter portion of suffering, but there will become "pillars in the temple of the Lord," from which they will never more go out. Now the
the wicked & stormy? - but then it will be one eternal morn,
the mists thro' of the just made perfect will rejoice in the
were numeine of Jehovah's presence. - Thus we see the justice of
step, as it begins in this world, but is not fully displayed
posed it in the world to come. - Its footsteps are mearth
asments mighty march is only in Heaven, - through the
scene of elders in the patriarch's dream, it be planted here in the
his world of us, yea we see not all its glory, till we trave
it mountena upward to the throne of God's

We are

And now, think, let us suppose we hear Jehovah
high place himself addressing us, as he addressed his people of

renabled are my ways equal? are not your ways unequal.
the future powerful is the reproof contained in these words,
is life, it should it calm our troubled & silence our rebel-
be endowment. Shall man bring to the bar of this living
self the wings of his Maker? - As well might
High mists of a summer's day pretend to discover deception
- but marauders of creation. - Could we take the wings of the
of the church spirit, & pervade all the parts of nature yea
New revelations of existence, - could we survey the infinite
connections & dependences, as God has established among the works of his hand, could we rise & go onward, until we reached the place, where "angels tremble, as we gaze," could we pass to the confines of creation, with a view to survey all that has been, is, or shall be, then we claim to judge justly of the ways of omnipotence, would our path be ever amidst the glories of the throne of the objects around us would be devoutly in praises his eternal justice. But we see little beyond the precincts of our own habitations, of that little we is often questioning & indistinct. Our passions bring darkness over our judgments, & we are easily deceived the thousand forms, she assumes to beguile us. And is it fit we then, to pronounce that the works of God are unequal? Is it fit we to measure by our own span the views of omniscience, is the purposes omnipotence?

We have thus, my friends, considered the justice of God, it affects nations, & individuals. It is a subject of this day of humiliation & prayer, we ought particularly bring home to our minds. It becomes us indeed at
Let us humble ourselves before our Heav'nan Faith, in the view of our numerous and repeated transgressions. But more especially on this day, we ought seriously and honestly to ask ourselves whether our ways are not unequal. Have we not, in vain, wasted much time, to repent of, and much to be forgiven? We are now looking forward to the approaching season, uncertain as to what may be in reserve for us, but anxiously desiring that God may grant us health in our habitations, peace in our borders, that he would bless the labors of our hands, that under the smile of his providence the earth may yield us richly its bountiful fruits, that the year may be crowned with his favor. And while we look up to our Father, for these and for other blessings, while we feel that without his blessing life would be but a waste and a desert, it becomes us to remember how unworthy we are of his favor, to strive that we may for the future be more fit subjects for his mercy. So long as we cherish our sins, we cherish that soil which readily draws up on us the judgments of Heaven, in some form or other. Let us, then, in the language of the prophet, "Fear the Lord, that giveth rain, both the former and"
the latter in his season, — 

While on this we profess to abase ourselves before the Most High, as listen to the voice in which he spoke to his people of old; y' consider it as spoken to ourselves. — last away all your transgressions, whereby ye have transgressed, — make a new heart and a new spirit. — for why will ye die, O house of Israel? — For I have no pleasure in the death of him that dieth, saith the L. Y. therefore turn yourselves to me.
At home, April 6th, 1820 (fast day). Farewell.
At Waltham, April 5th, 1821 (fast day) afternoon.