



1

The Sovereignty and Wisdom of God in Man's Affliction

*Consider the work of God: for who can make that straight
which he hath made crooked?*

Ecclesiastes 7:13

A just view of afflicting incidents is altogether necessary to a Christian deportment under them; and that view is to be obtained only by faith, not by sense; for, it is the light of the word alone that represents them justly, discovering in them the work of God, and, consequently, designs becoming the divine perfections. When these are perceived by the eye of faith, and duly considered, we have a just view of afflicting incidents, fitted to quell the turbulent motions of corrupt affections under dismal outward appearances.

It is under this view that Solomon, in the preceding part of this chapter, advances several paradoxes, which are surprising determinations in favour of certain things, that, to the eye of sense, looking gloomy and hideous, are therefore generally reputed grievous and shocking. He pronounces the day of one's death to be better than the day of his birth; namely, the day of the death of one, who having become the friend of God through faith, has led a life to the honour of God, and service of his generation, and thereby raised

17





THE CROOK IN THE LOT

himself the good and savoury name better than precious ointment (v. 1). In like manner, he pronounces the house of mourning to be preferable to the house of feasting, sorrow to laughter, and a wise man's rebuke to a fool's song; for that, howbeit the latter are indeed the more pleasant, yet the former are the more profitable (vv. 2-6). And observing with concern, how men are in hazard, not only from the world's frowns and ill-usage, oppression making a wise man mad, but also from its smiles and caresses, a gift destroying the heart; therefore, since whatever way it goes there is danger, he pronounces the end of every worldly thing better than the beginning thereof (vv. 7, 8). And from the whole, he justly infers, that it is better to be humble and patient, than proud and impatient, under afflicting dispensations; since, in the former case, we wisely submit to what is really best; in the latter, we fight against it (v. 8). And he dissuades from being angry with our lot, because of the adversity found therein (v. 9); cautions against making odious comparisons of former and present times, in that point insinuating undue reflections on the Providence of God (v. 10): and, against that querulous and fretful disposition, he first prescribes a general remedy, namely, holy wisdom, as that which enables us to make the best of every thing, and even gives life in killing circumstances (vv. 11, 12); and then a particular remedy, consisting in a due application of that wisdom, towards taking a just view of the case, 'Consider the work of God: for who can make that straight which he hath made crooked?'

In which words are proposed, 1. The remedy itself;
2. The suitableness thereof.

1. The remedy itself, is a wise eyeing [consideration] of the hand of God in all we find to bear hard upon us:

18



‘Consider the work (or, see thou the doing) of God’, namely, in the crooked, rough, and disagreeable parts of thy lot, the crosses thou find in it. You see very well the cross itself; yea, you turn it over and over in the mind, and leisurely view it on all sides: you look, withal, to this and the other second cause of it, and so you are in a foam and fret. But, [if] would you be quiet and satisfied in the matter, lift up your eyes towards heaven, see the doing of God in it, the operation of his hand. Look at that, and consider it well; eye [consider] the first cause of the crook in your lot; behold how it is the work of God, his doing.

2. This view of the crook in our lot is very suitable to still indecent risings of heart, and quiet us under it: ‘for who can (that is none can) make that straight which God hath made crooked?’ As to the crook in thy lot, God hath made it; and it must continue while he will have it so. Should you ply your utmost force to even it, or make it straight, your attempt will be vain: it will not alter for all thou canst do; only he who made it can mend it, or make it straight. This consideration, this view of the matter, is a proper means, at once, to silence and to satisfy men, and so to bring them unto a dutiful submission to their Maker and Governor, under the crook in their lot.

Now, we take up the purpose of the text in these three propositions.

I: Whatsoever crook there is in one’s lot, it is of God’s making.

II: What God sees meet to mar, no one shall be able to mend in his lot.

III: The considering of the crook in the lot as the work of God, or of his making, is a proper means to bring us to a Christian deportment under it.



THE CROOK IN THE LOT

Proposition I: Whatsoever crook there is in one's lot, it is of God's making.

Here, two things are to be considered, namely, the crook itself, and God's making of it.

1. As to the crook itself, the crook in the lot, for the better understanding thereof, these few things that follow are premised.

1. There is a certain train or course of events, by the Providence of God, falling to every one of us during our life in this world: and that is our lot, as being allotted to us by the sovereign God, our Creator and Governor, 'in whose hand our breath is, and whose are all our ways'. This train of events is widely different to different persons, according to the will and pleasure of the sovereign manager, who orders men's conditions in the world in a great variety, some moving in a higher, some in a lower sphere.

2. In that train or course of events, some fall out cross to us, and against the grain; and these make the crook in our lot. While we are here, there will be cross events, as well as agreeable ones, in our lot and condition. Sometimes things are softly and agreeably gliding on; but, by and by, there is some incident which alters that course, grates us, and pains us, as when we have made a wrong step, we begin to halt.

3. Every body's lot in this world hath some crook in it. Complainers are apt to make odious comparisons: they look about, and taking a distant view of the condition of others, can discern nothing in it but what is straight, and just to one's wish; so they pronounce their neighbours' lot wholly straight. But that is a false verdict; there is no perfection here; no lot out of heaven without a crook. For, as to 'all the works that are done under the sun, behold all is vanity and vexation of spirit. That which is crooked cannot be made

20



straight' (Eccles. 1:14, 15). Who would not have thought that Haman's lot was very straight, while his family was in a flourishing condition, and he prospering in riches and honour, being prime minister of state in the Persian court, and standing high in the king's favour? Yet there was, at the same time, a crook in his lot, which so galled him, that 'all this availed him nothing' (Esther 5:13). Every one feels for himself, where he is pinched, though others perceive it not. Nobody's lot, in this world, is wholly crooked; there are always some straight and even parts in it. Indeed, when men's passions, having got up, have cast a mist over their minds, they are ready to say, all is wrong with them, nothing right; but, though in hell that tale is true, and ever will be so, yet it is never true in this world; for there, indeed, there is not a drop of comfort allowed (Luke 16:24, 25) but here it always holds good, that 'it is of the Lord's mercies we are not consumed' (Lam. 3:22).

4. The crook in the lot came into the world by sin: it is owing to the fall (Rom. 5:12). 'By one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin'; under which death, the crook in the lot is comprehended, as a state of comfort or prosperity is, in scripture style, expressed by living (1 Sam. 25:6; John 4:50, 51). Sin so bowed the hearts and minds of men, that they became crooked in respect of the holy law; and God justly so bowed their lot, that it became crooked too. And this crook in our lot inseparably follows our sinful condition, till, dropping this body of sin and death, we get within heaven's gates.

These being premised, a crook in the lot speaks in general, two things, (1) Adversity, (2) Continuance. Accordingly, it makes a day of adversity, opposed to the day of prosperity, in the verse immediately following the text.



THE CROOK IN THE LOT

The crook in the lot is, first, some one or other piece of adversity. The prosperous part of one's lot, which goes forward according to one's wish, is the straight and even part of it; the adverse part, going a contrary way, is the crooked part thereof. God hath intermixed these two in men's condition in this world; that, as there is some prosperity therein, making the straight line, so there is also some adversity, making the crooked: which mixture hath place, not only in the lot of saints, who are told, that 'in the world they shall have tribulation', but even in the lot of all, as already observed. Secondly, it is adversity of some continuance. We do not reckon it a crooked thing, which, though forcibly bended and bowed together, yet presently recovers its former straightness. There are twinges of the rod of adversity, which passing like a stitch in one's side, all is immediately set to rights again: one's lot may be suddenly overclouded, and the cloud vanish ere he is aware. But under the crook, one having leisure to find his smart, is in some concern to get the crook made even. So the crook in the lot is adversity, continued for a shorter or longer time.

Now, there is a threefold crook in the lot incident to the children of men.

1. One made by a cross dispensation, which, howsoever in itself passing, yet hath lasting effects. Such a crook did Herod's cruelty make in the lot of the mothers in Bethlehem, who by the murderers were left 'weeping for their slain children, and would not be comforted, because they were not' (Matt. 2:18). A slip of the foot may soon be made, which will make a man go halting long after. 'As the fishes are taken in an evil net: so are the sons of men snared in an evil time' (Eccles. 9:12). The thing may fall

22



out in a moment, under which the party shall go halting to the grave.

2. There is a crook made by a train of cross dispensations, whether of the same or different kinds, following hard one upon another, and leaving lasting effects behind them. Thus in the case of Job, while one messenger of evil tidings was yet speaking, another came (Job 1:16-18). Cross events coming one upon the neck of another, deep calling unto deep, make a sore crook. In that case, the party is like unto one, who, recovering his sliding foot from one shaky piece of ground, sets it on another equally shaky, which immediately gives way under him too. Or, like unto one, who, travelling in an unknown mountainous track, after having, with difficulty, made his way over one mountain, is expecting to see the plain country; but, instead thereof, there comes in view, time after time, a new mountain to be passed. This crook in Asaph's lot had like to have made him give up all his religion, until he went into the sanctuary, where this mystery of Providence was unfolded to him (Ps. 73:13-17). Solomon observes, 'That there be just men, unto whom it happeneth according to the work of the wicked' (Eccles. 8:14). Providence taking a run against them, as if they were to be run down for good and all. Whoever they be, whose life in no part thereof affords them experience of this, sure Joseph missed not of it in his young days, nor Jacob in his middle days, nor Peter in his old days, nor our Saviour all his days.

3. There is a crook made by one cross dispensation, with lasting effects thereof coming in the room of another removed. Thus one crook straightened, there is another made in its place: and so there is still a crook. Want [lack] of children had long been the crook in Rachel's lot (Gen. 30:1).



THE CROOK IN THE LOT

That was at length made even to her mind; but then she got another in its stead, hard labour in travailing to bring forth (35:16). This world is a wilderness, in which we may indeed get our station changed; but the result will be out of one wilderness station [and] into another. When one part of the lot is made even, soon some other part thereof will be crooked.

More particularly, the crook in the lot hath in it four things of the nature of that which is crooked.

Disagreeableness

A crooked thing is wayward; and, being laid to a rule, answers it not, but declines from it. There is not, in any body's lot, any such thing as a crook, in respect of the will and purposes of God. Take the most harsh and dismal dispensation in one's lot, and lay it to the eternal decree, made in the depth of infinite wisdom, before the world began, and it will answer it exactly, without the least deviation, 'all things being wrought after the counsel of his will' (Eph. 1:11). Lay it to the providential will of God, in the government of the world, and there is a perfect harmony - if Paul is to be bound at Jerusalem, and 'delivered unto the hands of the Gentiles', it is 'the will of the Lord it should be so' (Acts 21:11, 14). Wherefore, the greatest crook of the lot on Earth, is straight in heaven: there is no disagreeableness in it there. But in every person's lot there is a crook in respect of their mind and natural inclination. The adverse dispensation lies cross to that rule, and will by no means answer it, nor harmonize with it. When Divine Providence lays one to the other, there is a manifest disagreeableness: the man's will goes one way, and the dispensation another way: the will bends upwards, and cross events press down:

24





The Sovereignty and Wisdom of God in Man's Affliction

so they are contrary. And there, and only there, lies the crook. It is this disagreeableness which makes the crook in the lot fit matter of trial and exercise to us, in this our state of probation: in which, if thou wouldst approve thyself to God, walking by faith, not by sight, thou must quiet thyself in the will and purpose of God, and not insist that it should be according to thy mind (Job 35:33).

Un sightliness

Crooked things are unpleasant to the eye: and no crook in the lot seems to be joyous, but grievous, making an unsightly appearance (Heb. 12:11). Therefore men need to beware of giving way to their thoughts, to dwell on the crook in their lot, and of keeping it too much in view. David shows a hurtful experience of his, in that kind, Psalm 39:3. 'While I was musing the fire burned.' Jacob acted a wiser part, called his youngest son Benjamin, the son of the right-hand, whom the dying mother had named Benoni, *the son of my sorrow*; by this means providing, that the crook in his lot should not be set afresh in his view, on every occasion of mentioning the name of his son. Indeed, a Christian may safely take a steady and leisurely view of the crook of his lot in the light of the holy word, which represents it as the discipline of the covenant. So faith will discover a hidden beauty in it, under a very unsightly outward appearance. Perceiving the suitableness thereof to the infinite goodness, love, and wisdom of God, and to the real and most valuable interests of the party; by which means one comes to take pleasure, and that a most refined pleasure, in distresses (2 Cor. 12:10). But whatever the crook in the lot be to the eye of faith, it is not at all pleasant to the eye of sense.





THE CROOK IN THE LOT

Unfitness for motion

Solomon observes the cause of the uneasy and ungraceful walking of the lame (Prov. 26:7). 'The legs of the lame are not equal.' This uneasiness they find, who are exercised about the crook in their lot: a high spirit and a low adverse lot, makes great difficulty in the Christian walk. There is nothing that gives temptation greater access, than the crook in the lot; nothing more apt to occasion out-of-the-way steps. Therefore, says the apostle (Heb. 12:13), 'Make straight paths for your feet, lest that which is lame be turned out of the way'. They who are labouring under it are to be pitied then, and not to be rigidly censured; though they are rare persons who learn this lesson, till taught by their own experience. It is long since Job made an observation in this case, which holds good unto this day (Job 12:5) 'He that is ready to slip with his feet is as a lamp despised in the thought of him that is at ease'.

'Aptness to catch hold and entangle, like hooks, fish-hooks'
(Amos 4:2).

The crook in the lot doth so very readily make impression, to the ruffling and fretting one's spirit, irritating corruption, that Satan fails not to make diligent use of it for these dangerous purposes; which point once gained by the tempter, the tempted, ere he is aware, finds himself entangled as in a thicket, out of which he knows not how to extricate himself. In that temptation it often proves like a crooked stick, troubling a standing pool, which not only raises up the mud all over, but brings up from the bottom some very ugly thing. Thus it brought up a spice of blasphemy and atheism in Asaph's case (Ps. 73:13), 'Verily I have cleansed my heart in vain, and washed my hands in innocence'. As

26



if he had said, 'There is nothing at all in religion, it is a vain and empty thing that profits nothing; I was a fool to have been in care about purity and holiness, whether of heart or life. Ah! Is this the pious Asaph? How is he turned so quite unlike himself!' But the crook in the lot is a handle, whereby the tempter makes surprising discoveries of latent corruption even in the best.

This is the nature of the crook in the lot; let us now observe what part of the lot it falls in. Three conclusions may be established upon this head.

It may fall in any part of the lot; there is no exempted one in the case: for, sin being found in every part, the crook may take place in any part. Being 'all as an unclean thing, we may all fade as a leaf' (Isa. 64:6). The main stream of sin, which the crook readily follows, runs in very different channels, in the case of different persons. And in regard of the various dispositions of the minds of men, that will prove a sinking weight unto one, which another would go very lightly under.

It may at once fall into many parts of the lot, the Lord calling, as in a solemn day, one's terrors round about (Lam. 2:22). Sometimes God makes one notable crook in a man's lot; but its name may be Gad, being but the forerunner of a troop which cometh. Then the crooks are multiplied, so that the party is made to halt on each side. While one stream, let in from one quarter, is running full against him, another is let in on him from another quarter, till in the end the waters break in on every hand.

It often falls in the tender part; I mean, that part of the lot wherein one is least able to bear it, or, at least thinks he is so. Psalm 4:12, 13: 'It was not an enemy that reproached me, then I could have borne it. But it was thou, a man,



THE CROOK IN THE LOT

mine equal, my guide, and mine acquaintance'. If there is any one part of the lot, which of all others one is disposed to nestle in, the thorn will readily be laid there, especially if he belongs to God; in that thing wherein he is least of all able to be touched, he will be sure to be pressed. There the trial will be taken of him; for there is the grand competition with Christ. 'I take from them the desires of their eyes, and that whereupon they set their minds' (Ezek. 24:25). Since the crook in the lot is the special trial appointed for every one, it is altogether reasonable, and becoming the wisdom of God, that it fall on that which of all things doth most rival him.

Afflictions common to mankind.

But more particularly, the crook may be observed to fall in these four parts of the lot.

In the natural part affecting persons considered as of the make allotted for them by the great God that formed all things. The parents of mankind, Adam and Eve, were formed altogether sound and entire, without the least blemish, whether in soul or body; but in the formation of their posterity, there often appears a notable variation from the original. Bodily defects, superfluities, deformities, infirmities, natural or accidental, make the crook in the lot of some: they have something unsightly or grievous about them. Crooks of this kind, more or less observable, are very common and ordinary; the best are not exempted from them; and it is purely owing to sovereign pleasure they are not more numerous. Tender eyes made the crook in the lot of Leah (Gen. 29:17). Rachel's beauty was balanced with barrenness, the crook in her lot (ch. 30:1). Paul, the great apostle of the Gentiles, was, it should seem, no personable

28



man, but of a mean outward appearance, for which fools were apt to condemn him (2 Cor. 10:10). Timothy was of a weak and sickly frame (1 Tim. 5:23). And there is a yet far more considerable crook in the lot of the lame, the blind, the deaf, and the dumb. Some are weak to a degree in their intellects; and it is the crook in the lot of several bright souls to be overcast with clouds, notably clouded and darkened, from the crazy bodies in which they are lodged. An eminent instance whereof we have in the grave, wise, and patient Job, 'going mourning without the sun; yea, standing up and crying in the congregation' (Job 30:28).

Reputation.

It may fall in the honorary part. There is an honour due to all men, the small as well as the great (1 Pet. 2:17), and that upon the ground of the original constitution of human nature, as it was framed in the image of God. But, in the sovereign disposal of holy Providence, the crook in the lot of some falls here; they are neglected and slighted; their credit is still kept low; they go through the world under a cloud, being put into an ill name, their reputation sunk. This sometimes is the natural consequence of their own foolish and sinful conduct; as in the case of Dinah, who, by her gadding abroad [idle wandering] to satisfy her youthful curiosity, regardless of, and therefore not waiting for a providential call, brought a lasting stain on her honour (Gen. 34). But, where the Lord intends a crook of this kind in one's lot, innocence will not be able to ward it off in an ill-natured world; neither will true merit be able to make head against it, to make one's lot stand straight in that part. Thus David represents his case, Psalm 31:11-13: 'They that did see me without, fled from me: I am forgotten as a dead



THE CROOK IN THE LOT

man out of mind: I am like a broken vessel. For I have heard the slander of many.'

Thirdly, It may fall in the vocational part. Whatever is a man's calling or station in the world, be it sacred or civil, the crook in their lot may take its place therein. Isaiah was an eminent prophet, but most unsuccessful (Isa. 53:1). Jeremiah met with such a train of discouragements and ill usage in the exercise of his sacred function, that he was very near giving it up, saying, 'I will not make mention of him, nor speak any more in his name' (Jer. 20:9). The Psalmist observes this crook often to be made in the lot of some men very industrious in their civil business who sow in the fields - and at times 'God blesseth them - and suffereth not their cattle to decrease: but again, they are minished, and brought low, through oppression, affliction and sorrow' (Ps. 107:37-39). Such a crook was made in Job's lot after he had long stood even. Some manage their employments with all care and diligence; the husbandman carefully working his ground; the sheep-master 'diligent to know the state of his flocks, and looking well to his herds'; the tradesman, early and late at his business; the merchant, diligently plying his, watching and falling in with the most fair and promising opportunities; but there is such a crook in that part of their lot, as all they are able to do can by no means make even. For why? The most proper means used for compassing an end are insignificant without a word of divine appointment commanding their success. 'Who is he that saith, and it cometh to pass, when the Lord commandeth it not?' (Lam. 3:37). People ply their business with skill and industry, but the wind turns in their face. Providence crosses their enterprises, disconcerts their measures, frustrates their hopes and expectations, renders

30





The Sovereignty and Wisdom of God in Man's Affliction

their endeavours unsuccessful, and so puts and keeps them still in straitened circumstances. 'So the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise' (Eccles.9:11). Providence interposing, crooks the measures which human prudence and industry had laid straight towards the respective ends; so the swift lose the race, and the strong the battle, and the wise miss of bread; while, in the mean time, some one or other providential incident, supplying the defect of human wisdom, conduct, and ability, the slow gain the race and carry the prize; the weak win the battle and enrich themselves with the spoil; and bread falls into the lap of the fool.

Relationships.

It may fall in the relational part. Relations are the joints of society; and there the crook in the lot may take place, one's smartest pain being often felt in these joints. They are in their nature the springs of man's comfort; yet, they often turn the greatest bitterness to him. Sometimes this crook is occasioned by the loss of relations. Thus a crook was made in the lot of Jacob, by means of the death of Rachel, his beloved wife, and the loss of Joseph, his son and darling, which had like to have made him go halting to the grave. Job laments this crook in his lot, 'Thou hast made desolate all my company' (Job 16:7). Meaning his dear children, every one of whom he had laid in the grave, not so much as one son or daughter left him. Again, sometimes it is made through the afflicting hand of God lying heavy on them: which, in virtue of their relation, recoils on the party, as is feelingly expressed by that believing woman (Matt. 15:22), 'Have mercy on me, O Lord; my daughter is grievously vexed'. Ephraim felt the smart of family afflictions, 'when





THE CROOK IN THE LOT

he called his son's name Beriah, because it went evil with his house' (1 Chron. 7:23). Since all is not only vanity, but vexation of spirit, it can hardly miss, but the more of these springs of comfort are opened to a man, he must, at one time or other, find he has but the more sources of sorrows to gush out and spring in upon him; the sorrow always proportioned to the comfort found in them, or expected from them. And, finally, the crook is sometimes made here by their proving uncomfortable through the disagreeableness of their temper and disposition. There was a crook in Job's lot, by means of an undutiful, ill-natured wife (Job 19:17). In Abigail's, by means of a surly, ill-tempered husband (1 Sam. 25:25). In Eli's, through the perverseness and obstinacy of his children (2:25). In Jonathan's, through the furious temper of his father (20:30-33). So do men oftentimes find their greatest cross, where they expected their greatest comfort. Sin hath unhinged the whole creation, and made every relation susceptible of the crook. In the family are found masters hard and unjust, servants froward and unfaithful; in a neighbourhood, men selfish and uneasy; in the church, unedifying ministers offensive in their walk, and people contemptuous and disorderly, a burden to the spirits of ministers. In the state, oppressive magistrates, opposers of that which is good, and subjects turbulent and seditious; all these cause crooks in the lot of their relatives. And thus far of the [type of] crook itself.

God's Sovereignty in all Affliction.

II. Having seen the crook itself, we are in the next place, to consider of God's making it.

And here [it] is to be shown A. It is of God's making. B. How it is of his making. C. Why he makes it.

32

A. That the crook in the lot, whatever it is, is of God's making appears from these three considerations.

It cannot be questioned, but the crook in the lot, considered as a crook, is a penal evil, whatever it is for the matter thereof; that is, whether the thing in itself, its immediate cause and occasion, be sinful or not, it is certainly a punishment or affliction. Now, as it may be, as such, holily and justly brought on us, by our Sovereign Lord and Judge, so he expressly claims the doing or making of it, Amos 3:6: 'Shall there be evil in a city, and the Lord has not done it?' Wherefore, since there can be no penal evil, but of God's making, and the crook in the lot is such an evil, it is necessarily concluded to be of God's making.

It is evident, from the scripture doctrine of divine Providence, that God brings about every man's lot, and all the parts thereof. He sits at the helm of human affairs, and turns them about whithersoever he listeth. 'Whatsoever the Lord pleased, that did he in heaven and in earth, in the seas and all deep places' (Ps. 135:6). There is not any thing whatsoever befalls us, without his overruling hand. The same Providence that brought us out of the womb, brings us to, and fixes us in the condition and place allotted for us, by him who 'hath determined the times, and the bounds of our habitation' (Acts 17:26). It overrules the smallest and most casual things about us, such as 'hairs of our head falling on the ground' (Matt. 10:29, 30); 'A lot cast into the lap' (Prov. 16:33). Yea the free acts of our will, whereby we choose for ourselves, for even 'the king's heart is in the hand of the Lord, as the rivers of water' (Prov. 21:1). And the whole steps we make, and which others make in reference to us; for 'the way of man is not in himself; it is not man that walketh to direct his steps' (Jer. 10:23). And this, whether these steps causing the



THE CROOK IN THE LOT

crook be deliberate and sinful ones, such as Joseph's brethren selling him into Egypt; or whether they be undesigned, such as manslaughter purely casual, as when one hewing wood, kills his neighbour with 'the head of the axe slipping from the helve' (Deut. 19:5). For there is a holy and wise Providence that governs the sinful and the heedless actions of men, as a rider doth a lame horse, of whose halting, not he, but the horse's lameness, is the true and proper cause; wherefore in the former of these cases, God is said to have sent Joseph into Egypt (Gen. 45:7), and in the latter, to deliver one into his neighbour's hand (Exod. 21:13).

God has, by an eternal decree, immoveable as mountains of brass (Zech. 6:1), appointed the whole of every one's lot, the crooked parts thereof, as well as the straight. By the same eternal decree, whereby the high and low parts of the earth, the mountains and the valleys, were appointed, are the heights and the depths, the prosperity and adversity, in the lot of the inhabitants thereof determined, and they are brought about, in time, in a perfect agreeableness thereto.

The mystery of Providence, in the government of the world, is, in all the parts thereof, the building reared up of God, in exact conformity to the plan in his decree, 'who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will' (Eph. 1:11). So that there is never a crook in one's lot, but may be run up to this original. Hereof Job piously sets us an example in his own case, 'He is in one mind, and who can turn him? and what his soul desireth, even that he doth. For he performeth the thing that is appointed for me; and many such things are with him' (Job 18:13, 14).

How God Afflicts.

That we may see how the crook in the lot is of God's making, we must distinguish between pure sinless crooks, and impure sinful ones.





The Sovereignty and Wisdom of God in Man's Affliction

First, There are pure and sinless crooks; which are mere afflictions, cleanly crosses, grievous indeed, but not defiling. Such was Lazarus's poverty, Rachel's barrenness, Leah's tender eyes, the blindness of the man who had been so from his birth (John 9:1). Now, the crooks of this kind are of God's making, by the efficacy of his power directly bringing them to pass, and causing them to be. He is the maker of the poor, Proverbs 17:5: 'Whoso mocketh the poor, reproacheth his Maker'; that is, reproaches God who made him poor, according to that, 1 Samuel 2:7: 'The Lord maketh poor'. It is he that hath the key of the womb, and as he sees fit, shuts it (1 Sam. 1:5) or opens it (Gen. 29:31). And it is 'he that formeth the eyes' (Ps. 94:9). And the man was 'born blind, that the works of God should be made manifest in him' (John 9:3). Therefore he saith to Moses, Exodus 4:11: 'Who maketh the dumb, or deaf, or the seeing, or the blind? Have not I, the Lord?' Such crooks in the lot are of God's making, in the most ample sense, and in their full comprehension, being the direct effects of his agency, as well as the heavens and the earth.

There are impure sinful crooks, which, in their own nature, are sins as well as afflictions, defiling as well as grievous. Such was the crook made in David's lot, through his family disorders, the defiling of Tamar, the murder of Amnon, the rebellion of Absalom, all of them unnatural. Of the same kind was that made in Job's lot by the Sabeans and Chaldeans, taking away his substance and slaying his servants. As these were the afflictions of David and Job respectively, so they were the sins of the actors, the unhappy instruments thereof. Thus one and the same thing may be, to one a heinous sin, defiling and laying him under guilt, and to another an affliction, laying him under



THE CROOK IN THE LOT

suffering only. Now, the crooks of this kind are not of God's making, in the same latitude as those of the former: for he neither puts evil in the heart of any, nor stirreth up to it: 'He cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth he any man' (James 1:13). But they are of his making, by his holy permission of them, powerful bounding of them, and wise overruling of them to some good end.

He holily permits them, suffering men 'to walk in their own ways' (Acts 14:16). Though he is not the author of those sinful crooks, causing them to be, by the efficacy of his power: yet, if he did not permit them, willing not to hinder them, they could not be at all: for 'he shutteth and no man openeth' (Rev. 3:7). But he justly withholdeth his grace which the sinner does not desire, takes off the restraint under which he is uneasy, and since the sinner will be gone, lays the reins on his neck, and leaves him to the swing of his lust, 'Ephraim is joined to idols; let him alone' (Hosea 4:17). 'Israel would none of me: so I gave them up to their own heart's lusts' (Ps. 81:11, 12). In which unhappy situation the sinful crook doth, from the sinner's own proper motion, naturally and infallibly follow; even as water runs down a hill, wherever there is a gap left open before it. So in these circumstances, 'Israel walked in their own counsels' (v. 12). And thus this kind of crook is of God's making, as a just judge, punishing the sufferer by it. This view of the matter silenced David under Shimei's cursings, 2 Samuel 16:10, 11: 'Let him alone, and let him curse, for the Lord hath bidden him'.

He powerfully bounds them, Psalm 76:10: 'The remainder of wrath' (that is, the creature's wrath) 'thou shalt restrain'. Did not God bound these crooks, howsoever sore they are in any one's case, they would be yet sorer. But he



says to the sinful instrument, as he said to the sea, 'Hitherto shalt thou come, but no farther; and here shall thy proud waves be stayed'. He lays a restraining band on him, that he cannot go one step farther, in the way his impetuous lust drives, than he sees meet to permit. Hence it comes to pass, that the crook of this kind is neither more nor less, but just as great as he by his powerful bounding makes it to be. An eminent instance hereof we have in the case of Job, whose lot was crooked through a peculiar agency of the devil; but even to that grand sinner, God set a bound in the case: 'The Lord said unto Satan, "Behold all that he hath is in thy power, only upon himself put not forth thy hand"' (Job 1:12). Now Satan went the full length of the bound, leaving nothing within the compass thereof untouched, which he saw could make for his purpose (vv. 18, 19). But he could by no means move one step beyond it, to carry his point, which he could not gain within it. And therefore, to make the trial greater, and the crook sorer, nothing remained but that the bound set should be removed, and the sphere of his agency enlarged; for which cause he says, 'But touch his bone and his flesh, and he will curse thee to thy face' (ch. 2:5). And it being removed accordingly, but withal a new one set (v. 6): 'Behold he is in thine hand, but save his life'; the crook was carried to the utmost that the new bound would permit, in a consistency with his design of bringing Job to blaspheme. 'Satan smote him with sore boils, from the sole of his foot unto the crown of his head' (v. 7). And had it not been for this bound, securing Job's life, he, after finding this attempt unsuccessful too, had doubtless despatched him at once.

He wisely overrules them to some good purpose, becoming the divine perfections. While the sinful



THE CROOK IN THE LOT

instrument hath an ill design in the crook caused by him, God directs it to a holy and good end. In the disorders of David's family, Amnon's design was to gratify a brutish lust; Absalom's, to glut himself with revenge, and to satisfy his pride and ambition; but God meant thereby to punish David for his sin in the matter of Uriah. In the crook made in Job's lot, by Satan, and the Sabeans and Chaldeans, his instruments, Satan's design was to cause Job to blaspheme, and theirs to gratify their covetousness: but God had another design therein becoming himself, namely, to manifest Job's sincerity and uprightness. Did not he wisely and powerfully overrule these crooks made in men's lot, no good could come out of them; but he always overrules them so as to fulfil his own holy purposes thereby: (howbeit the sinner meaneth not so) for his designs cannot miscarry, his 'counsel shall stand' (Isa. 46:10). So the sinful crook is, by the overruling hand of God, turned about to his own glory, and his people's good in the end; according to the word, 'The Lord hath made all things for himself' (Prov. 16:4). 'All things work together for good to them that love God' (Rom. 8:28). Thus Haman's plot for the destruction of the Jews, 'was turned to the contrary' (Esther 9:1). And the crook made in Joseph's lot, by his own brethren selling him into Egypt, though it was on their part most sinful, and of a most mischievous design. Yet, as it was of God's making, by his holy permission, powerful bounding, and wisely overruling it, had an issue well becoming the divine wisdom and goodness: both of which Joseph notices to them, 'As for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive' (Gen. 50:20).

38



God's Wisdom in Afflicting Man.

It remains to inquire, why God makes a crook in one's lot? And this is to be cleared by discovering the design of that dispensation: a matter that concerns everyone to know, and carefully to notice, in order to [gain] a Christian improvement of the crook in the lot. The design thereof seems to be chiefly, sevenfold.

A Test of True Faith.

The trial of one's state, whether one is in the state of grace or not? Whether a sincere Christian, or a hypocrite? Though every affliction is trying, yet here I conceive lies the main providential trial a man is brought into, with reference to his state; forasmuch as the crook in the lot, being a matter of a continued course, one has occasion to open and show himself again and again in the same thing; whence it comes to pass, that it ministers ground for a decision in that momentous point. It was plainly on this foundation that the trial of Job's state was put. The question was, whether Job was an upright and sincere servant of God, as God himself testified of him; or but a mercenary one, a hypocrite, as Satan alleged against him? And the trial hereof was put upon the crook to be made in his lot (Job 1:8-12; 2:3-6). Accordingly, that which all his friends, save Elihu, the last speaker, did, in their reasoning with him under his trial, aim at, was to prove him a hypocrite; Satan thus making use of these good men for gaining his point. As God made trial of Israel in the wilderness, for the land of Canaan, by a train of afflicting dispensations, which Caleb and Joshua bearing strenuously, were declared meet to enter the promised land, as having followed the Lord fully; while others being tired out with them, their carcasses fell in the wilderness; so he makes trial



THE CROOK IN THE LOT

of men for heaven, by the crook in their lot. If one can stand that test, he is manifested to be a saint, a sincere servant of God, as Job was proved to be; if not, he is but a hypocrite: he cannot stand the test of the crook in his lot, but goes away like dross in God's furnace. A melancholy instance of which we have in that man of honour and wealth, who, with high pretences of religion, arising from a principle of moral seriousness, addressed himself to our Saviour, to know 'what he should do that he might inherit eternal life' (Mark 10:17-22). Our Saviour, to discover the man to himself, makes a crook in his lot, where all along before it had stood even, obliging him, by a probatory command, to sell and give away all that he had, and follow him (v. 21), 'Sell whatsoever thou hast and give to the poor, and come take up the cross and follow me'. Hereby he was, that moment, in the court of conscience, stripped of his great possessions; so that thenceforth he could no longer keep them, with a good conscience, as he might have done before. The man instantly felt the smart of this crook made in his lot: 'he was sad at that saying' (v. 22), that is, immediately upon the hearing of it, being struck with pain, disorder, and confusion of mind, his countenance changed, became cloudy and lowering, as the same word is used (Matt. 16:3). He could not stand the test of that crook; he could by no means submit his lot to God in that point, but behaved to have it, at any rate, according to his own mind. So he 'went away grieved, for he had great possessions'. He went away from Christ back to his plentiful estate, and though with a pained and sorrowful heart, sat him down again on it a violent possessor before the Lord, thwarting the divine order. And there was no appearance that ever this order was revoked, or that ever he came to a better temper in reference thereunto.

40

