

"Wind & Weather" a Political Sermon, by the Rev. &
James Porter, who was hanged, the following year,
near the meeting-house where it was preached.
Belfast. 1797

Presbyterian Minister

1107

WIND AND WEATHER.

A SERMON

ON THE LATE PROVIDENTIAL

S T O R M

WHICH

DISPERSED THE FRENCH FLEET OFF
BANTRY BAY.

PREACHED TO

THE CONGREGATION OF GRAY-ABBEY,

ON

THURSDAY THE 16th FEBRUARY,

BEING

THE FAST DAY APPOINTED BY GOVERN-
MENT FOR THANKSGIVING.

BY THE REV. JAMES PORTER. ←

B E L F A S T.

1797.

F A S T S E R M O N.

EPHESIANS II. 2.

“Ye walked according to the Prince of the power of the Air.”

THE Almighty Governor of the Universe displayeth his power and his providence in regulating the concerns of this lower world by intermediate agents. Some of those agents are obvious—as that wind is the cause which raises the sea into waves and billows, and drives ships along its surface; that rain is the cause of moistening the earth, and producing lakes and rivers; and such like. Others are not discovered without some difficulty—as, how water is carried up to the clouds, and how the air is put in motion, so as to produce storms; and others are so involved in obscurity as to baffle every effort of human genius—such as the

growth and colour of vegetables, the operation of spirit upon body, the cause which preserves the planets in their orbits, and many more; yet we are as certain of the existence of these causes as we are of those which are of the objects of sense: among these hidden causes we may reckon the "*power of the prince of the air,*" mentioned in my text.

To what extent the devil holds dominion over the elements of this world, by the permission and appointment of God, no man can pretend to say. But his agency seems indisputable, not only from the words of Paul to the Ephesians, but from other parts of Scripture.—Our Saviour, rebuking the wind, as mentioned by St. Luke, shews that he did not consider it as coming immediately from the hand of God.—The writer of the book of Kings says, that *a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and brake in pieces the rocks—but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake—but the Lord was not in the earthquake.*

But the devil is not only permitted to exercise considerable agency in the natural, but in the moral world also: it is here he becomes the formidable foe of man.—The ancients taught that there were two beings

the good and the evil

who governed the universe—one the author of all the good, the other of all the evil which exists. A pious Protestant Bishop* held nearly the same opinion. His words are: “There are two principles that bear sway in the world, and have a more immediate influence upon the mind of man—the holy Spirit of God and the devil: the former of these is continually moving and inclining them to good, the latter swaying and inclining them to evil; and these two principles share mankind between them.”—I am not inclined to allow so much power to the enemy of mankind as the learned Prelate. Whatever he possesses, he holds it merely by delegation, and can extend it no further than the limits that are prescribed to him. He is able to do mischief enough in the world, without putting his power in any thing in competition with the deity.

In the late providential storm, which gave occasion to our meeting this day, we are not to suppose his influence very predominant, else we should not, perhaps, have such cause for gratitude and joy. To those who are tenacious of Satan’s power, and solicitous for the extent of his dominion, I am willing to

* Archbishop Tillotson.

allow a certain degree of agency in whatever concerns the misery of man, but none in whatever promotes his happiness; yet those who think "*all things work together for good,*" will give me little thanks for the concession.*

The instruments which the Governor of the World employs for chastisement or destruction, are as various as the crimes of which men are guilty.—When the tyrannical and hard-hearted Pharaoh forced a vast number of his subjects to fly from oppression, though not without signal vengeance being taken on their oppressors, he pursued them with a mighty host, and the water of the Red sea was employed for their overthrow. When the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah transgressed, fire and brimstone were the fatal messengers of destruction. Thunder and rain were sent from Heaven to punish the Israelites for their great wickedness in asking a king. Pestilence and famine were frequently sent to produce terror and repentance; and the Roman sword was thought the best instrument to overthrow

* Many prophane scoffers have said, that the Clergy have supported Satan's empire a little too far, because they found it *useful*. I am sure the Clergy are above any such narrow, selfish policy, and scorn to flatter or favour any being, beyond the bounds of truth and justice. But they must be allowed, as well as others, the use of that long established maxim—"*Give the devil his due.*"

the corrupt, voluptuous and persecuting hierarchy of Jerusalem.

In modern times we may trace the same irresistible hand of Providence guiding, regulating, overthrowing and raising up kingdoms, states and empires; changing their power, their principles and maxims of government; crumbling to dust thrones and sceptres; breaking asunder the most formidable and deep-laid combinations; baffling the wisdom of the wise, and defeating the strength of the strong; dispersing fleets and armies; confounding the councils, checking the ambition, and humbling the pride of man.

To this cause alone, can be attributed the mighty revolutions which have been obtained in the world, which have been so great, so numerous and unexpected, that they are sufficient to beget the expectation of many more yet to come.

Before I proceed to state the various reasons which we have this day for joy and thankfulness, it may be necessary to observe, that those days appointed by the wisdom and goodness of government called *fast* days, are not to be understood in the literal sense of that word, they might with more propriety be called *feast* days. It is the religious and de-

vout use to which they are appropriated that renders them important; nor in this view have they always the same meaning: sometimes they are appointed, for obtaining the approbation and assistance of Providence for our armaments in time of war—sometimes for deprecating his wrath, by reason of our great sins and wickedness—sometimes for returning him thanks, as on the present occasion, on account of a signal interposition of his power in our favour: they are wisely contrived to change their nature as circumstances require; and those who have the power of appointing the *time* of worshipping God, have the goodness to appoint the *manner* also.

Since the beginning of the American war, we have had opportunities of judging how useful those *fast days* are; perhaps their efficacy has not been so extensive as many of us could wish—yet that it has been very considerable in the eyes of administration, is evident from the solemn punctuality with which they are appointed on all great occasions. Common people cannot see far into the profound wisdom by which statesmen regulate the great interests of religion and policy; and should delusion and error appear ninety-nine times out of a hundred, you must know that your plain, unadulterated understandings is

a sufficient reason, as times go, why you should not trouble your heads about the business.

There have been different opinions among divines, in different ages of the church, respecting the propriety of uniting fasting and praying; but this is no more than what has happened to almost every precept of christianity. The pious care, however, with which the holy dignitaries of the church display the profusion of their tables, and the delicacy of their wines, proves that the practice of fasting is not very strictly enforced upon *themselves*. It was an easy and early learned maxim, by ecclesiastics, concerning which there has been little doubt or difference—"Not that which goeth into the mouth defileth a man." You are not to suppose that one particular time being appointed to the whole nation for the observance of this fast, arises from an opinion that the deity can be affected by much speaking; or, that he would grant more to ten thousand voices than to ten: No—he is the best judge of what is right, and we have no reason to believe that his decisions are easily changed.

But, by this mode, the unanimity of the nation is, as it were, rendered conspicuous;

the love which Administration have for order and unanimity of sentiment appears obvious; and the support which the state, on emergencies, can draw from the combined prayers of those who occupy the superb palaces, the extensive demesnes, and the splendid chariots, provided for the *meek* and *lowly* teachers of the religion of Christ, is evident, all of which would have been lost, had the different sects been allowed to choose their own mode, their own time, and their own places of worship.

But above all, a *general* fast cannot fail of impressing the great body of the people with an idea that Administration are friends to religion, that they are fond of their country, that they fear God, and walk before him alway, and that hypocrisy is to them a strange work. Should any man have a doubt of the truth of these advantages, it is as plain as any of the preceding causes, that he is actuated by sentiments of treason and infidelity.

Now we come to the storm.

Storms have generally been considered as messengers of God's wrath, from the dreadful devastations with which they have been accompanied in the different parts of the world. Sometimes they have been considered as a fortuitous jumble of the elements, the cause of

which has been sufficiently discovered.—Modern discoveries, however, and the advanced state of natural knowledge, teach us, that storms are often the benign messengers of mercy sent by the hand of Providence to purify the atmosphere, and to render it more fit for the support of vegetables and animals. When the air and water of the sea are put in motion, it prevents that stagnation which engenders corruption. They are often permitted to destroy the proudest monuments of industry and of art. Towards the middle regions of the earth their effects are much more direful than in the part which we inhabit; but they seldom visit any portion of the earth, without shewing to us how insignificant the power of man is, when compared to the power of God.

The late storm was a phenomenon in this country, from its duration and effects; from the force and steadiness with which the wind blew; and from the vast tract of our globe over which it must have passed. It blew with undiminished fury for seventy-two hours, without any sensible variation from the S. S. E. It must have moved with a velocity of fifty miles an hour; and it was not less than six hundred miles in breadth. It was accompanied, almost during its continuance, with a fall of sleet and snow.—Let us now enquire into the

advantages which we have derived from this storm, that we may know with more certainty the foundation of our gratitude and joy.

For nearly three months preceding our storm, we had scarcely a motion of the air that deserved the name of a breeze. A pestilential disease made its appearance in our neighbourhood—medical skill was of no avail in stopping its progress—and every day added to our alarm; whilst the yellow fever advanced to our very doors. Had the terror and mortality increased upon us to the present day, what a dreadful state must we have been in! But the Father of the Universe had compassion upon us. A vast volume of air is put in motion—it sweeps every noxious particle from the country—and after traversing four thousand miles, brings to our relief the pure air of Africa, enriched with the vivifying quality obtained from the luxuriant vegetation of the torrid zone; while ours is driven to discharge its noxious contents amidst the frozen regions of the North.

Behold the wisdom and goodness of Providence. What would have baffled all the medical knowledge in the world, was prepared for us in the forests of Africa—wafted to us on the wings of the wind, which, “breathed

into our nostrils the breath of life."—This is one advantage arising from the late storm, which we who inhabit this part of the country should never forget, and for which we cannot be too thankful. Since that time we hear of neither sickness nor death amongst us—fear has fled—every countenance looks blithe—and every heart pants with joy.

The next cause of gratitude for the storm which I shall mention, is the dispersion of the French fleet, whereby the invasion of this country hath been providentially prevented. I should mention to you that we very often deceive ourselves and others for want of fixing precise ideas to words: this observation has been made by the wisest men, and cannot be remedied without using such means as cannot be introduced here. I shall give you an instance from our present subject. The word country is used in different senses; sometimes it means the land which we cultivate for our support; sometimes it means the people, and sometimes the government. When we say the country is delightful in harvest, we mean the first; when we say the country is improving in knowledge, we mean the second; and when we say the country is at war, we mean the third. Now let us see how the different orders of society will understand the invasion,

when applied to the word country. The labourer who subsisted by cultivating the ground, and whose only support depends upon his daily wages, will imagine, should the country be seized by foreigners, that the land will be occupied by strangers, that he will get no employment, and that he will be starved for want of his daily supply. Though this idea has been inculcated in certain writings, its absurdity can only be surpassed by that idiotism which suggested that the French would carry away our land in their ships. It would be a more rational opinion, should the people embrace it, that they were all either to be put to death, or carried prisoners into a foreign land. This is what they would say, when they say, the country is lost; because this is the meaning which they affix to the word. But should those who think themselves at war with the French say, that the country was threatened with an invasion, it is easy to see that they would mean by the word country, the government. But in which of the above senses the French themselves would understand the word country, when they intended to invade it, I cannot pretend to say with certainty; those who are better acquainted with their views than I am, can tell.

We know that government has ordered us to be thankful for the storm which dispersed them; and we are not ignorant that nine tenths of the people of Ireland, neither wished for the commencement nor continuance of the war with France.

It has been called a just and necessary war. God only knows the intentions of the men who applied those epithets to a war at which humanity shudders; but if we judge by the success which has attended it, we can easily perceive to what extent his approbation and assistance was afforded.

Were you to ask me, Why we were involved in the American war, and in the present one, although the people were almost unanimous in their detestation of both? I answer, it was in consequence of our connexion with England—Some people call this connexion, subjection.

It is needless to be too scrupulous to find a word that will express our political situation with respect to England; one thing is certain, if England quarrel with a neighbouring power, we must quarrel also—if she enter upon a long, bloody and expensive war, we must enter upon a long, bloody and expensive war also—if she embark in the iniquitous

scheme of dictating law and constitution to another nation, we must embark in the iniquitous scheme of dictating law and constitution to that other nation also—finally, should England exhaust herself of men, money and reputation, and permit her minister to plunge her into an abyss of ruin, we must exhaust ourselves of men, money and reputation, and permit her minister to plunge us into an abyss of ruin also.

It far transcends my poor abilities to point out the benefits Ireland gets for all this: but one thing we have got; we have got, it is to be feared, the invasion.* Had we not been at war with the Republic of France, she would no more have invaded us than have invaded Denmark or Sweden. To console us for the perilous situation into which we are brought, we are ordered to pray—and after praying, we are solicited to fight—and after fighting, should we survive, we will again have the felicity of displaying our loyalty, by swelling the armies, manning the fleets, and filling the coffers of the next British minister who shall wage another just and necessary war. And should a powerful and daring foe e'er^s again insult our coasts, and threaten an invasion, we must not forget our obligations to the weather.

Another cause of joy derived from the saving storm, is, the confidence it begets in that All-ruling Power, who watches over us when we sleep, and when we wake, who is more attentive to our wants than we are ourselves. Let our calamities be ever so heavy, he can avert them; let our arrogance be ever so extravagant, he can humble it; let our wants be ever so great, he can provide for them; let our danger be ever so great, he can protect us; let our friends be ever so false, he can befriend us.

War is the severest scourge a nation can feel. Though there can be little doubt of the causes which provoked the hostile armament of the French against this country: yet we are still more certain of the cause which prevented them from landing, and retaliating upon us horrors and calamities, similar to those which we assisted in bringing upon them.

The storm was the instrument in the hand of Providence which afforded us safety and secured us peace. Wise and grateful must the Administration be which directs our thankfulness, and praise to their proper object, which regulates our religion, animates our devotion, and forces us to sing together for joy.

But let us not, in our extacy, forget that extremes are to be avoided. We are desired to "rejoice with trembling." And the wisest

of men hath said, that “ folly is joy to him that is destitute of wisdom.”—That we may steer the middle path, and therefore the sure one, suffer me to temper your present exultation with a few remarks, which I trust will appear “ the words of truth and soberness.”

The storm was great, but it was not great enough. Though it dispersed, it did not destroy: though it scattered, it did not annihilate. Instead of shivering their ships upon our rocks, and burying their warriors in the bottom of the sea, it softened into mildness, favoured their escape, and suffered them all, with one exception, to return in safety to their native shore. The proud commander escapes the perils of the ocean, arrives in safety in the metropolis of the Republic, and there forms new plans of enterprize and revenge.

If they have gone home to augment their strength, to mature their designs, to consolidate their power, and to meditate on success, we would do well to moderate any extravagant effusions of intemperate joy.—Those whose business it is to know, have not concealed their apprehensions of the views of the enemy; nor have they failed to impress the public with an idea that another invasion is preparing more formidable and dangerous than the last.

It would be rather superstitious to suppose that the more fervently our devotions are per-

formed on this occasion, the greater probability there will be of similar protection on a future day. Let us not, however, despair, for should the British fleet be so unfortunate as not to meet the enemy, or prove unsuccessful when met, we can trust in Him, who can of the air form wooden walls for our protection.

Again. We should moderate our joy, by reflecting, that the messenger who carried off the pestilential disease, uncovered our habitations, and without distinction of persons, exposed us to the inclemency of wind, rain and snow.

From the same cause were numerous vessels wrecked upon our coasts; the lives and properties of foreigners and natives were promiscuously destroyed by the noisy guardian of our peace.

Another cause for moderating our joy, is, that the British fleet, to whom we look as a political, if not a natural safeguard, were not suffered to escape the rage of this timely tempest. One division is blown into the Atlantic ocean, and receives such damages as oblige it to fly into port for repairs; while another is locked up in Torbay, without daring to join our unexpected friend and fickle ally. Whence this apparent inconsistency in the mercies of Providence? We must have resource to my text. "Ye walked according to the Prince of the Power of

the Air." It is equally safe and reasonable to suppose, that Satan had the command of this division of the winds, else we would have been visited with more favour, and had more reason to celebrate this day with unmixed delight. But we have no cause of complaint, when we have received the lesser evil with the greater good. This principle supported the pious and patient Job under afflictions greater than any we have yet suffered.

I shall beg your attention to a few observations connected with those I have already made.

We have reason to fear that the French Republic, undismayed by their late disappointment, and unawed by our partial armaments, will resume their enterprize and invade our Island. In that case we should have more to depend on, than the protection of the British fleet, or the fury of a storm; we should have an armed people, who would rise with one heart and one arm to crush the most insulting and presumptuous foe. But instead of that general spirit of patriotism and mutual confidence, what do we see? Here and there a few are chosen under peculiar distinctions, and exclusively instructed with the means of protecting our constitution and our country, while the great mass of the people, unarmed, in dismay and fear, stand alarmed at invasion from without, and are filled with jealousy at their protectors within.

It has been said, that the intention of the French to invade this country, does not originate in that system of retaliation so natural to man; nor from that policy which directs nations to carry the war into the enemy's country; but merely from some treasonable invitation given by certain individuals of this country. Man is at all times solicitous of discovering the causes of effects. Let us for a moment consider what probability there is, that the above assertion is founded in fact. Four years have elapsed since the French denounced, to use their own phrase, the British empire as their most formidable and inveterate foe; they repeatedly threatened the invasion of these countries, and nothing but peace or their want of power, it was thought, could prevent them. Their power has increased, and peace is vanished; what was naturally and confidently expected, is come, or about to come at last. For some years back many men in Great Britain and Ireland, of distinguished rank and talents, endeavoured to obtain a reform in the legislature of both countries, as the only means of saving the constitution and the country; but all their endeavours were in vain—in vain did they urge the justice, the policy, the necessity of the measure. They were treated with neglect and scorn, some of them were transported to

the opposite side of the globe; some were tried and acquitted; some banished to America, and many immured in dungeons, without prospect of trial or relief.

To crown their misfortunes, these are the men who are said to have encouraged the impending invasion. Let us hear the reason for this imputation. Not unto us, say the contrivers and abettors of the war—Not unto us be the shame and odium of this disgraceful war—Not unto us be the exhausted treasury, the discontented people, the stagnation of commerce, and the approaching ruin of the country—Not unto us be the exciting of the enemy's armaments by sea and land, the provoking a powerful and desperate invasion, the bringing carnage and war upon our native land.

Be it unto you, ye reformers—ye who opposed the war at its commencement, who opposed it in its progress, who asked for a reform both before and after, and who still have expectation of obtaining your object.

As for us, should the flame which we have kindled in Europe, spread to the British empire, should it involve our country, our king our constitution and ourselves, we will cheerfully perish in the conflagration, provided the blame be laid upon those who attempted to prevent us from kindling it, or to

extinguish it when kindled. Such are the sentiments of many; and if they be founded in truth and reason, I would be glad to know where I can find nonsense and falshood.

But lest one reason for an invasion should not be sufficient, we hear it asserted with pertinacious flippancy, That the French Republic having more soldiers than they know how to maintain or employ, are sending them here for the purpose of having them destroyed; or, in the language of professional energy, *killed off*. Whatever opinion the asserters of this reason may have, of the capacity and disposition of the Irish, for 'slaying thousands of foreign troops to serve the ends of a foreign government, I know not; but if there be nothing in it too boyish or ridiculous for serious animadversion, I would observe, that it places the Irish nation in a curious dilemma. The French government wish them destroyed—The English government wish them destroyed. Can we serve two masters so inimical to each other? Does our duty consist in obeying the Directory? Certainly no!

But shall we refuse to comply with their wishes, and suffer their army to land and live? Certainly no! if we wish to obey the English government. At all events, little can be feared

from an army, when two such powerful governments have planned their destruction.

Perhaps, after all, it is only one of those miserable sophisms which weak minds resort to, when bewildered in a maze of unsuccessful, crooked and deceitful policy. Some have gone so far, as to assert that the late attempt to invade this country was a fortunate circumstance, in so much as it proved the loyalty of Ireland: It may be so—ingenious men have always ingenious resources at hand; but few men, who are fond of their king and country, would wish to encourage such means of ascertaining loyalty. Were it any way admissable, the French is surely the last nation, they would wish to make the experiment.

One word more at this awful period, and I have done.

Let your behaviour be peaceable, sober and submissive to the laws. Cultivate brotherly-love one towards another. Put not your trust in storms, fleets or armies—remembering that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong; but put your trust in the Lord your God, and be ye followers of that which is good.

F I N I S.