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Sermon preached by Mr. J. Delves at "Ebenezer" Clapham on
Wednesday evening 24.9.69.

Hymns: 395; 64; 63

Reading: Ecclesiastes 3

Text: Proverbs 16.33

"The lot is cast into the lap; but the whole disposing thereof
is of the Lord".

This Book of Proverbs has many wise sayings in short sentences that are full of meaning and of instruction to us whether young or old. Though we know that the main purpose and design and revelation of the Holy Scriptures relates to the eternal salvation of the Lord's people in and through the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ, yet they refer to divine providence and the concerns of this life:- our circumstances in life and the fact that all our circumstances in life are under a Divine control; we know nothing comes by chance or fortune, - luck, fortune and chance are the trinity of devils as I believe Huntington says; and though we know that millions of people live and die under an awful delusion, we believe that the Lord's people, by divine teaching, realise that their life here below, their birth, their death, all the circumstances of their life, and their eternal destiny, are in the hand of an Almighty God. How sweet it is when we can feel that all our matters and times are in a Father's hand, - a Father's hand, - all our providences, and that He deals with us as His own children over whom is a particular providence. A special providence appears to cover the life of every vessel of mercy, this can be confirmed in what we have read this evening that there is "a time to be born, and a time to die", an appointed time for all things that relate to our individual lives.

Now here the wise man refers to "the lot", that is cast into the lap". In the Scriptures we read quite a few times of the "lot", we may understand the expression in different aspects, as for instance we find it recorded in the book of Deuteronomy that "Jacob is the lot of his inheritance". We find also that when

the children of Israel were settled in their land that their inheritance, portion, or lot was divided to each of the tribes, and there were landmarks set up, which defined the boundary of the lot of each tribe, and that these were not to be removed. A curse was pronounced upon those who removed the ancient landmarks (Deuteronomy 27.17). Coming to the Psalms we find the author referring to the lot. "The Lord is the portion of mine inheritance and of my cup: thou maintainest my lot." (Psalm 16.5). How confirming this can be to the Lord's people when faith is in exercise, this may enable them to believe that the Lord will bring them safely through the days appointed them while they are here below, will provide for them and will not fail or forsake them. In the Book of Daniel we read about this, when Daniel was so distressed in his mind that he said, "I heard, but I understood not: then said I, O my Lord, what shall be the end of these things?", but the Lord spake very kindly to His servant Daniel saying, "Go thy way Daniel till the end be: for thou shalt rest, and stand in thy lot at the end of the days" (Daniel 12.8 and 13).

We read that it was an ancient custom to cast lots. The soldiers cast lots for Christ's vesture. (John 19.24); the Apostles cast lots to decide who should be appointed in the place of Judas; but what are we to understand by the lot that is mentioned here in the text? I would understand it to refer to the allotment of divine providence that relates to each individual person, and here we refer to the Lord's people in particular, although we know it can have a universal bearing; but it is not that universal providence of God over His creatures that I desire to apply myself to, but His special providence which is over His dear people and the lot that He has appointed unto them.

Now as we look back over our lives, and some of you it may be often do, can you not see the guiding hand of providence directing you here or moving you there? Have you not seen Him manage a matter for you when you were not able to manage that matter yourself? In this same chapter we find the good man saying, "A man's heart

deviseth his way: but the Lord directeth his steps".(verse 9). We may devise a certain course or way, but the Lord's purpose may be very, very different from that which we visualised or desired. The lot is in His hand - the lot - that is, every appointment of divine providence concerning us while we are here. I feel sure that we must conclude this because in the Holy Scriptures we clearly see divine providence marking the lives of different godly people. How clearly we see these appointments of divine providence in the life of Abraham, when he went out not knowing whither he went; obeying the divine command, he went out to that place that he should afterwards receive as an inheritance, and divine providence guided him. Have you not seen that in your life? I believe I have myself. I can remember when in my youthful days a very minute circumstance took place one night that affected the whole of my life, and I feel persuaded that it was of the Lord's appointing. Can you not look back upon some things and see where it may be that you were devising a way, but you had to prove it was the Lord that directed your steps.

By the lot then in the first place here we may understand the dispositions of God's providence in our lives in our sojourn here below. We move on from day to day, even from hour to hour, and yet we know not what an hour may bring forth. We are in the Lord's hands, unseen providences arise sometimes that were never anticipated or even thought of; the Lord guides His people in that way that He will have them to go; and have you not been favoured to prove that His guiding hand has brought you hitherto. It is recorded by the Lord in the Scriptures, "I will bring the blind by a way that they knew not: I will lead them in paths that they have not known: I will make darkness light before them, and crooked things straight. These things will I do unto them, and not forsake them". (Isaiah 42.16). Sometimes it can be confirming to look back upon a few things, and see how the Lord's guiding hand has brought us thus far.

"The lot is cast into the lap". This may also be particularised in several different aspects, as for instance

not only may we take it in a general sense as referring to the appointments or allotments of God's providence to us, but by the lot we may understand the blessings of God's providence; this is incorporated in the lot that is appointed us and granted us, and how great they have been, have they not? Has He not been a God of providence unto us to supply our needs, to spread our table and to provide that which is necessary for the comforts of this life? There are the blessings of His providence, and does it not behove us to acknowledge the good hand of the Lord in these? Does not the Apostle Paul say, "My God shall supply all your need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus?". Is it not wholesome for us to watch the hand of the Lord in the blessings of His providence? If we had but what we deserve we should have His judgments in our everlasting condemnation; but may we not say with the Psalmist, "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want"; "Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over"? Sometimes you may feel like this, although not always possibly; but have there not been just those spots and places of which we could say, and when you did say, "Bless the Lord O my soul and forget not all His benefits". The blessings of providence then are a feature of the lot that is cast into the lap.

But not only are there the blessings of His providence, there is also the mystery of His providence; and truly there are things in our lives, in the providence of God, that are a mystery, and I feel that it is not intended that we should be able to fathom them. The mystery of divine providence in our lives, things which may not be clear to us, it is better to leave in the Lord's hands; we may be disposed to enquire into certain things unwisely, as the wise man says, "Say not thou, What is the cause that the former days were better than these? for thou dost not inquire wisely concerning this". There are matters concerning which it is best for us to leave in the hands

of Him Who is too wise to err, and too good to be unkind; and when you really feel that, you can leave them in His hands, however mysterious they may be to you as is the case sometimes. We find the hymnwriter saying,

"God moves in a mysterious way
His wonders to perform;
He plants His footsteps in the sea,
And rides upon the storm."

He makes no mistake, but He does at times show His people hard things, He gives them to drink of the wine of astonishment, but even so the hymnwriter says:

"Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,
But trust Him for His grace,
Behind a frowning providence
He hides a smiling face".

Then again there are the afflictions of His providence that are appointed unto us. It is said in the prophecy, "I will also leave in the midst of thee an afflicted and poor people, and they shall trust in the name of the Lord". Many are the afflictions of the righteous. The Lord Jesus Himself said, "In the world ye shall have tribulation", and so we shall.

"Poor and afflicted Lord are thine,
Among the great unfit to shine;
But, though the world may think it strange,
They would not with the world exchange".

Neither would they, when the Lord is with them in the furnace. Have not these times of affliction been some of your sweetest times? Has not the Lord come to you, and walked with you, when you have been in this valley of trouble; has He not made the valley of Achor to be a door of hope to you? Has not this been at times in your life? There must be these afflictions and they do not come by chance, do they? Are they not as much a divine appointment as the provision of His providence? "While the earth remaineth, seed time and harvest, and cold and heat, and summer and winter,

and day and night shall not cease". Has He not appointed every detail in our lives, as we have been singing this evening in hymn 64. There is then the lot in these afflictions of the Lord's appointing. These are made particular to the Lord's people; does not His Word say, "In all their affliction he was afflicted, and the angel of his presence saved them". Whatever afflictions may come to these bodies of ours, or however they may come, we would not say that it is chance work in any instance, but rather that there is a voice in them to us.

Again, under this particular heading are there not the designs of providence? To everything there is a purpose. The Lord does not do things without an end in view. What is the design of providence in the dealings of the Lord with His people in their providences? I believe it is as the Scripture says, "We know that all things shall work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to His purpose". Is not this the design of providence? I believe it is; and does not this incorporate the hard things, the painful things, the bitter things in our path? It incorporates everything in our lives. He has designed them for a wise eternal purpose. How true this is friends, of those records we have in the Holy Scriptures, in such cases as Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, David, Job, Daniel and many others beside these. How quieting it can be when we can feel in a right way that,

"A Father's hand prepares the cup
And what He wills is best".

Here then is what we may understand as the lot, that particular appointment of God's providence unto us in our lives, whatever that may incorporate. It says here that, "The lot is cast into the lap". What are we to understand by such an expression as that? We know that the lap is a loose piece of one's garment resting upon the knees; that is commonly called the lap; that is

where all of us have been nursed by our parents and that is where many a fidgety, restless child has been quietened and subdued. In the text the lap appears to me to indicate the Lord's providential care over His people Who has them in His hand. In a spiritual sense it is said to be cast into the "lap" by the Father by which we may understand the kingdom of providence that is put in the hand of Christ. This is the lot. Does not the Lord Jesus Christ say, "All things are delivered unto me of my Father", and "The Father loveth the Son, and hath given all things into His hand"? And do we not read in the Epistles that the Father has made Him to be head over all things? Does not that mean providence as well as grace? I feel persuaded it does; and moreover do we not read this of the Lord Jesus Christ that the government is upon His shoulders. This is the all wise government and control of all things as put into the hand of Christ. May not this be beautifully true? We read of this in the prophecy of Zechariah, "Who hath despised the day of small things? for they shall rejoice, and shall see the plummet in the hand of Zerubbabel with those seven"; they are the eyes of the Lord, which run to and fro through the whole earth". We may say then, that the disposings of providence are put into the hand, in the text the "lap" of Christ Who has power to appoint and to control them. Did He not say, before He went up into heaven, "All power is given unto Me in heaven and in earth"; that means not only all power in relation to redemption, but over the circumstances of our lives, they are all in His hand or lap. All power is in His hand, all providences are under His control. What a quieting thought this can be to a restless child and how confirming it can be to one who may be walking in a dark pathway, as many do, yet here we can see infinite wisdom in all matters, leading, supporting and upholding in the path of trial and affliction, and unto this end to bring us to feelingly say, "He hath done all things well". It can be an experience of yours sometimes to see your lot cast into the lap of Christ, or we may say put into the hand of Christ. All is under His control Who is too wise to err and too good to be unkind.

This is not blind fortune, it is not a matter of casting lots to see what the issue may be; all is settled, the lot that pertains to you, and the lot that pertains to me, is cast into the lap. O what a mercy this is. Although sometimes providences may seem so confusing and our lives may seem like the intricate pieces of a watch all scattered in a state of confusion. The lot is cast into the lap. But you say it is a dark and difficult path, I do not know what to do, I feel like Daniel, "O my Lord, what shall be the end of these things", yes but the lot is cast into the lap. O poor murmuring one, poor fainting one, one whose way is hard, whose path is difficult, those who find it to be a path of much tribulation, remember for your comfort and consolation "the lot is cast into the lap".

Then there is a third point and that is "the whole disposing thereof is of the Lord". How confirming is this, the whole disposing. It does not merely say the disposing thereof is of the Lord, which is true, but the whole disposing is of the Lord. What are we to understand by the disposing then? I would understand it to refer to the bringing to pass in the Lord's appointed time those things that are appointed unto us. Every providence comes to pass when the Lord disposes it shall and not before or after. The disposing thereof is of the Lord. So it is friends, as we have come along this or that way, your path, my path, as we look back over the past we see the unfolding of His providence to this present time. We could not see it before-hand.

"His providence unfolds the book,
And makes His counsels shine;
Each opening leaf, and every stroke,
Fulfils some deep design".

O what a mercy this is for you and me that the lot is cast into the lap. It is in such good hands, such safe hands, pure, wise hands. It is all cast into the lap, and some of you as you look back may say, yes, I can see now how true this is, how that divine Providence has brought me along step by step, day by day, here and there, all cast into the lap, all under the wise government

of the Lord Jesus Christ in the Kingdom of His Providence. The whole disposing thereof.

There is another point about this, "the whole disposing thereof". That is that every disposition of providence must be disposed of before we die. The Lord has appointed our days, our time, our birth, our death, and our decease will not come to pass until the whole disposing thereof has been brought to pass and all that the Lord has designed and purposed to us in our sojourn here below. I hope this may be a comforting thought to all of us, "The Lot is cast into the lap; but the whole disposing thereof is of the Lord". What would you say about this? Would you say, I wish it was in my hands and not in His? Why, if you have Christ in your heart, though sometimes there may be some hard thoughts, yet, when we view things rightly I believe we shall say, "Thy kingdom come Thy will be done". Amen.