

The Providence of God (Part 1)

God's Miracles

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God Himself is not much thought of in many areas of society except in terms of profanity. Among the more religious He is not much thought of except at times whenever there is a deep trial that people are going through. Then they begin to call on God during their stress.

I began thinking about this subject of providence before the Feast, possibly using it during the Feast as a sermon or a series of sermons that I would go through, but I put it aside because I got the idea about "The Fear of God." I put it aside, and then did not begin thinking on it seriously until after the Feast when I was mediating on the theme of John Bulharowski's split sermon that he gave during the Feast. The main theme of his sermon was that the experiences and events that appear on the surface to be curses, may actually be blessings in disguise. He used the experiences of Job, as recorded in the Book of Job, as his primary illustration.

I think the concept that he had is true, and it is not something generally understood, and it is even much more difficult to accept. But brethren, we have to come to know God. We know that He must be feared. We know that He must be loved. We know that He must be obeyed. We know that He must be glorified. This is not always easy to do, especially when our level of faith is low.

It is my hope in this series that it will give us greater understanding of Him as our Creator in the outworking of His purpose as a group, as individuals, and that our faith will increase, and that we will be humbled too, as a result of it. It is my hope that we can use these principles contained within this subject to give us a more complete perspective of what is happening in our lives, in the greater church of God in its scattering, and in a much more general, much broader sense, what is happening in the whole wide world during ~~all~~ of its existence. Most of us are so familiar with the children of Israel coming out of Egypt, that sometimes we do not think deeply about some of the things—the size, the scope, the gigantic proportions of what was involved in what happened there.

Perhaps some of you are on the Internet, and you are well connected with email addresses all over the place, and people are sending you things that they pick up off the Internet, knowing that you might be interested in them. Maybe what I am going to tell you, or at least give you a brief summary of, is something that has passed by your eyes. I want you to think of this in terms of the providence of God, because the author of this certainly had the providence of God and the children of Israel leaving Egypt and being out in the wilderness in mind when he did it.

This was offered by a man who, from what I was able to perceive (and I may be wrong here) is the headmaster of a Christian military-type academy. This military academy has a Christian philosophy that undergirds the operations of the way they think and the way they do things.

He estimated that the number of Israelites that were involved in this was somewhere between

three million and three and one-half million. We have generally been more conservative on that, saying usually two million, to maybe two and one-half million. His object was to give us some sort of an appreciation of God's providence.

For example, if there were three to three and one-half million Israelites, what concept comes to mind about the parting of the Red Sea? Is it something similar to maybe what you saw in the movie "The Ten Commandments," with Moses lifting up his staff, and the waters part, and it looked like maybe the pathway through there was about as wide as a boulevard that you would see in a major city street?

Well this man calculated with somewhere between three and three and one-half million people, if God parted the waters so that two abreast could walk side by side through that parting, that the line would have been 800 miles long. This would have been impossible for them to get through in the time constraints, because they only had one day to do it—the 7th day of the Days of Unleavened Bread.

So he calculated that in order for all of those people to get across within the time slot that God gave them, that God would have had to have parted the water wide enough for 5,000 people to walk abreast through the parting. They had very many cattle. They had wagons and carts besides of all the people to get through there, and they did not have a whole week to be able to do it. That is much more grandiose than Charlton Heston ever dreamed of while they were doing that.

The miracles do not end there, because we are talking about the food necessary to fill the stomachs of three to three and one-half million people—let us say even two meals, or maybe three meals a day—he calculated that it would take two train loads one mile long to feed that many people, and God did it every day for forty years.

When we throw in the water, only allowing two gallons of water a day per person, not even including the animals, it would also take a couple of trains one mile long to supply all the water those people needed. Again, God did that day after day, year after year. Every night when they camped, they needed a space one-half the size of the State of Rhode Island.

Brethren, this is normally the way that we think of God's providence, of Him pouring out His gifts, His blessings, so abundantly. Millions of people received the benefit of them. Maybe it will help you to get a little bit better picture of this if you think of the city that you live in.

Evelyn and I live in Charlotte, North Carolina. The metropolitan area of Charlotte is approaching one and one-half million people. Here we are in Saint Louis, and I would imagine that the population of Saint Louis is somewhere near that as well. I want you people to think of how many supermarkets you have in your city that people are going to every day to get food that God Himself has brought up from the ground. Think of how many trains and how many trucks are coming into your city every day to keep you in food.

Now providence has to do with what we might simply define as being the protective care of God, or we might say the provision of God. I want you to think about this regardless of its nature, because that is what this series is going to focus on—the provision of God, regardless of its nature. The reason for this, as we are going to see, is that the providence of God also touches

on the pains and suffering of persecution. It touches on faith, and His sovereignty. It is involved in the sometimes violent and inexplicable deaths, such as we saw during the Feast, of men like Nadab and Abihu.

I believe that the providence of God is the overall subject of the book of Job. It is involved in the blessings of life and our every-day needs. It is deeply involved in our judgment of things that happened in both ours and other people's lives. It is involved in what might be called "the ordinary trials of life." It is involved in overcoming and in growth as a son of God, as well as peace and contentment, and our perspective on life—the way that we look at things. It is, brethren, a very complex subject.

I also want to confess to you right up front that I do not have very many clear-cut answers in specific circumstances. I too am looking through a glass darkly. I see a number of generalities, but not an equal number of specifics.

God's revelation of Himself and His purpose in the Bible is an evolving process. It is progressive. It begins in Genesis with Him creating and establishing Himself right at the very beginning as Creator. I will tell you, that is loaded with meaning. He is Creator. But bits and pieces of the knowledge of Himself, of His revelation of Himself and His purpose, come bit by bit. There is a little bit here, and a little bit there.

We have the episode with Abraham, establishing him as "the father of the faithful." We have Isaac, and then Jacob, and things having to do with their lives. And we have Moses, and all the things that he went through. We have Samuel and David, and little by little, bits and pieces of what He is and what He is doing come out. It has to be this way, because we do not learn everything all at once either. It is a natural process for us to learn "little by little." We go through the grades in elementary school. Then we go through the grades in high school, and we go through the different levels when we go on to college.

God's providence in the Old Testament is very clearly and distinctly tied to "obedience" and "disobedience." Perhaps the clearest statement on this is in Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28. "If you obey Me, I will bless you. If you disobey Me, I will curse you." We see this in many, many places all the way through the Old Testament, except in the book of Job. It is almost like it is an anomaly.

In the New Testament things are quite different, and God's providence is not tied very tightly to obedience/disobedience, but rather to the "new" creation. This is a big difference, which you and I are involved in. He is creating us in Christ Jesus, and providence has to be seen by us primarily within that perspective.

Despite the anomalies that we see in regard to providence, partly because our understanding of it may be limited, it is a very great benefit for us to deal with it. We are going to begin in Romans 8, because this is the subject that is the invisible thread that runs through it, and becomes very apparent as we get toward the end of the chapter.

Romans 8:18 For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us.

Suffering. Glory. Paul uses the word "suffering" as though it is a given. It is going to happen. Where is God while we suffer? Is suffering part and parcel of His providence? Is it really a blessing in disguise?

Romans 8:19-23a, 24-25 For the earnest expectation of the creation waits for the manifestation of the sons of God. [There is the aim.] For the creation was made subject to vanity [Futility. Is life sometimes seemingly futile? Is it wasting away at times?] not willingly, but by reason of him who has subjected the same in hope, Because the creation itself also shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and travails in pain together until now. And not only they, but ourselves also....For we are saved by hope; but hope that is seen is not hope: for what a mans sees, why does he yet hope for? But if we hope for that we see not, then do we with patience wait for it.

How can we have more patience? It is tied to this subject.

Romans 8:28-32 And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose. For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom he did predestinate, them he also called: and whom he called, them he also justified: and whom he justified, them he also glorified. What shall we then say to these things? If God be for us, who can be against us? He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things?

For this sermon, the emphasis needs to be on that little three-letter word "all." "We know that all things..." He will freely give us all things. Toward what end? It would have to be, brethren, toward the things that Paul has been stating right in this context—reaching glory. Do you see it in the context of pain, of suffering, of decay, of futility, of vanity? Is that part of God's providence? You are going to have to answer that to yourself, or it is quite possible that you are not going to be able to deal with life, or let us say even with what the church is going through at this time.

Was John Bulharowski correct, that things that seem to be curses might actually be blessings? That is what we are considering. So does that mean that everything is providential? There are two qualifiers here. They are both given in verse 28. "All things work together for good to them that love God [Qualifier No. 1], to them who are the called [Qualifier No. 2]." Paul is not saying that everything works toward the good of everybody, but it works toward the good of those that love God, and are also "the called." Those two qualifiers have to be met.

We are going to tie this one about "the called" a little bit more tightly, because in verse 29 it says, "For whom He [God the Father] did foreknow." Because it is tied to the called, and those who are going to be glorified, we know then that the ones He foreknew are "the called." They are called in verse 33 "the elect." So foreknow then, by definition right within the context, does not mean those with whom God is merely acquainted, but rather it means that God has drawn

certain people into a very intimate relationship with Him, as in "Adam knew his wife Eve." That is the kind of relationship that he is talking about.

The ones that meet these qualifiers are the ones that God foreknew, drew into a relationship with Him. They are the ones that He predestinated to be conformed to the image of His Son, that they might be born brothers and sisters of the Firstborn, Jesus Christ. All things work together for good.

Do you see how the ripples are expanding out, so that whatever happens in your life—if you love God, and you are one of the called, if you are one of the elect—then everything that happens in your life has good within its context?

Now just to make sure that we get the point, Paul goes on in verse 33.

Romans 8:33-35 Who shall lay anything to the charge of God's elect? It is God that justifies. [He is the One that is overseeing everything that is going on.] Who is he that condemns? It is Christ that died, yes rather, that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, [curse or blessing], or distress [curse or blessing], or persecution [curse or blessing], or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword [death]?

This is a subject that really hits home, and if the Great God is dealing with us, then we can expect things like this are going to occur, and that He expects us to understand this and make the mental adjustment to the situation that we find ourselves in. Can we do that? That is one of the great challenges of our calling, as to whether we can make that kind of an adjustment to what is going on in our lives. This is why I said earlier it has very much to do with our judgment concerning what is going on in our lives, as well as other people's lives.

Let us go to Job 13 so that we get a little bit of flavor of the context. My Bible has at the very top of this paragraph: Job Defends His Integrity.

Job 13:1-3, 13-15 Lo, mine eye has seen all this, mine ear has heard and understood it [the argument his friend has put before him]. What you know, the same do I know as I am not inferior unto you. Surely I would speak to the Almighty, and I desire to reason with God....Hold your peace, let me alone, that I may speak, and let come on me what will. [What was he going through? It was a terrible trial. "Let come on me what will."] Wherefore do I take my flesh in my teeth, and put my life in my hand? [In effect, he was saying: God, do with me what You want.] Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him: but I will maintain my own ways before him.

Verse 15 is undoubtedly an expression of unquenchable faith. The second phrase there says: "But I will maintain." Maintain in more modern English means defend. He is saying that he will defend his own position in the arguments that were going back and forth between his three friends and himself. The reason Job said this is not that he necessarily considered himself a really great person. Not at all. His three friends jumped to the conclusion that sin was

responsible for Job's problem. But it was not. The very first chapter of Job makes it very clear that God Himself judged Job as being "upright, blameless, and one that shunned evil." Job knew what kind of life that he was living. He feared God. He honestly did, and he had a very strong conviction that he was not living a life of sin. But (and this is a big but and this is where the big lesson comes in for the book of Job), he still had a very difficult time accepting what he was going through, because he could not understand why this was happening.

Remember I mentioned to you earlier that the book of Job is an anomaly here in the Old Testament, because the providence of God, His blessings, are tied to obedience. And Job knew that he was obedient. He did not know that there was anything wrong with him. God even admitted that Job was an obedient person, shunning evil. Job could not put his finger on why he was going through all this horrible pain that he had as a result of the sickness, why his family was wiped out, and why all his prosperity was gone. Should the kinds of things that Job went through be considered as part of "the all" of Romans 8: 28?

We used to preach that Job was guilty of self-righteousness. But brethren, that is not the issue either. A very strong indication comes when Job repented. Turn to chapter 42 and let us read what Job himself said.

Job 42:1-2 Then Job answered the LORD, and said, I know that you can do everything [anything You want to] and that no thought can be withheld from you.

Modern translations will say: "No purpose of Yours can be withheld. No man can resist the will of God. I know that you know everything, God, and no purpose of Yours can be held back."

Job 42:3 Who is he that hides counsel without knowledge? [Job is talking about himself here.] Therefore have I uttered that I understood not; things too wonderful for me, which I knew not.

He is confessing his lack of understanding. What did he not understand? First, he did not understand that God can do anything He wants (verse 2), and God can do anything He wants to anybody. He can put that person through any circumstance.

Job 42:4-5 Hear, I beseech you, and I will speak: I will demand of you, and declare you unto me. I have heard of you by the hearing of the ear: but now my eye sees you. [Now I get it.]

What do these verses say to you about Job's repentance? Job repented of his lack of understanding. He repented of his not really knowing God. He repented of saying a lot of things that he wished he had not. He repented of his murmuring failure to patiently accept his condition with understanding. He did not see it as part of God's creative activity. Now he did.

One of the events of my responsibility as a minister that I have always dreaded since the very first one that I had to perform many, many years ago, was the funeral of a young child. It does not matter whether it is a baby, a five-year old, or a teenager. Second to that is the death of a young mother. They are very difficult because so little is understood of the circumstance, but the reality of death is there, and there is no escaping it. A young life so full of promise and hope

is gone, and there are all kinds of whys, all kinds of loose ends, and there are not any satisfying answers.

We have to be aware of these things, because that is the kind of thing that Job was going through, only his was major, major, major trouble. His whole family, except his wife, was gone. He stated, "That which I feared has surely come upon me." You can tell that what he feared in his life was the loss of his family. He feared the loss of his prosperity, his money, and his own health being wiped away. They were all wiped away in a matter of a very short period of time.

I can remember when I worked in the steel mill a young fellow said to me one time, "Do you know what the most fearsome verse in the Bible is?" I said, "No." I think he quoted Job 3: 25: "For the thing which I greatly feared is come upon me." So his comment to me was, "Don't be afraid, or it will happen." But it happened to Job, and it may happen to us.

Go now to I Corinthians 10 as we continue to lay the foundation for this subject.

I Corinthians 10:13 There has no temptation [no test, no trial] taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer [allow] you to be tempted above that you are able: but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that you may be able to bear it.

There is no escaping the reality of the principle that Paul is talking about here. Tragic things, crises, tests, temptings, trials, and curses happen to Christians too. But in very many respects, they are the very same things that people in the world are going through. They happen to us since we qualify as being among those who love God, those who are the called. I am sure that God wants to learn from us what we have learned from our relationship with Him.

It is sort of like Job had to learn. God got Job to analyze what he had learned from the relationship with Him. Basically, what Job did in his arguments was to ask this question: "Where is God in all of this?" We do that, I am sure. We can ask: "If He is all-powerful, and He loves me, why does He allow these things to happen? How can this horrible trial that I am going through be considered as providential?"

David went through something here that we can see in II Samuel 11 and 12. He brought this upon himself.

II Samuel 11:27 And when the mourning [for Uriah] was past, David sent and fetched her [Bathsheba] to his house, and she became his wife, and bare him a son. But the thing that David had done displeased the LORD.

We know the story. David lusted after this woman, committed adultery with her, and then deceitfully plotted the death of her husband as the way out of his difficulty.

II Samuel 12:7-11 And Nathan said to David, You are the man! Thus says the LORD God of Israel, I anointed you king over Israel, and I delivered you out of the hand of Saul; And I gave you your master's house, and your master's wives into your bosom, and gave you the house of Israel and of Judah; and if that had been too little, I would moreover have given unto you such and such things. Wherefore

have you despised the commandment of the LORD, to do evil in his sight? You have killed Uriah the Hittite with the sword, and have taken his wife to be your wife, and have slain him with the sword of the children of Ammon. Now therefore the sword shall never depart from your house: because you have despised me, and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife. Thus says the LORD, Behold, I will raise up evil against you out of your own house, and I will take your wives before your eyes, and give them unto your neighbor, and he shall lie with your wives in the sight of this sun.

I want you to see that God's indictment of David makes it clear that all these blessings came on him as a result of God's providence: "I raised you up to be king." "I gave you your master's house." "I gave you the wives," and on and on. So God did this, and God did that.

We know that God gave David forgiveness, but He also gave him a painful temporal judgment as well. But even in that judgment we also see mercy, because God could have struck David dead. He had every right to do so, but He did not, even though David had committed two capital crimes before God. The scripture in verse 10 also clearly says that the sword would never depart from his house, and in verse 15 it says that God struck the child.

We readily claim the things that appear on the surface to be pleasing and favorable to us as blessings from God. "Hey! We got a pay raise." "Oh! We got time off." "Hey! We got good neighbors now." "Hey! Things are reconciled within our family." We could go on and on with those type of things, but what about the circumstances and events that are painful and anxiety producing?

Since we set the stage there, let us add something else to the mix here.

I saiah 45:5 I am the LORD, and there is none else, there is no God beside me: I girded you.

This is a statement which shows God says: "I gave you what you needed for life." God gave life and breath, clothing, food, protection, whatever. He is speaking generally to Jacob, meaning Israel.

I saiah 45:5b I girded you, though you have not known me.

"I provided you even though you were enemy to Me." (Matthew 5.42,43 - "Love your enemies.") God does that.

I saiah 45:6-7 That they may know from the rising of the sun, and from the west, that there is none beside me, I am the LORD, and there is none else. I form the light, [symbolically, good], and create darkness [the bad]: I make peace [the good], and create evil [the bad]: I the LORD do all these things.

This is very interesting. God creates calamity. As far as we have gone in the sermon, did God create calamity for Job, His servant who was upright, blameless, feared God, and shunned evil? Job was an obedient man. God created calamity. God creates confusing, frightening, painful

events. Is God involved in disease and death too? Is that within the scope of creating calamity?

Christianity is not a dualistic religion. In a dualistic system, God and Satan are equal and opposing forces destined to fight an eternal struggle. God never wins. Everything ends in a tie.

Christianity is not dualistic like those religions that believe that kind of thing. The Bible presents God as Sovereign over His creation, and that includes the subordinate domain of Satan, or God is not sovereign. It is either one or the other. If He is not sovereign, and if the dualists are right, brethren, we are all lost.

Can we accept what the Bible presents about God, that He is sovereign over His creation, that He creates both good and calamity, and that He creates blessings as well as those things we will call cursings? We can come to only one conclusion, if we are going to believe what the Bible says, that God is the Lord of pain, disease, and death, as well as life, blessings, and prosperity.

When I said to you at the beginning that this is a very complex subject, I meant it. It is a mind-bender once we begin to try to put the pieces together on this. I think that we can honestly say that our God majors in suffering. Does not the scripture say of our Savior in Isaiah 53: 9 that our God never sinned? Jesus Christ never sinned, and yet He was a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief (verse 3.) Everything did not come up roses for Him. He says in the book of Revelation in the letters to the churches, "I overcame." It says in Hebrews 5: 8, "He learned by the things which He suffered."

Do you see what I mean when I say that in the Old Testament God's providence is generally tied to obedience/disobed-ience? You obey God, you are blessed. You disobey God, and you are cursed. In the New Testament there is a twist there, so that we understand that His providence is tied to His creation. His creation is that He is creating Himself in us, and if it takes suffering to make us like Him, He will make us suffer. A question: Is not the end result worth it? The suffering is therefore a blessing, and not a curse at all.

Now Jesus could say, "Not being a sinner, why should I suffer?" But unlike Job, He perfectly accepted His Father's will. Even at the end, where we might think there is a little bit of wavering. He said He did not want to do it, but He went through the agony of that kind of a shameful death. "Nevertheless, not My will, but Yours be done."

If we think of Christianity in a simplistic "righteousness always produces blessings and sin produces curses," then we are going to be left with some unsatisfying answers in other areas of life. Why do the good suffer, and the evil are blessed? That is a question that Solomon, in all of his wisdom, had trouble with. You see, at the time Solomon lived, parts of God's revelation were not yet revealed. He wrote things on a very high level, but there were things that still escaped his understanding, so he said such things were vanity. He could not find an answer. You can be very happy that God is sovereign over His creation. He is love, and He is good, and God rules. If it were not this way, we would be condemned to live eternally in chaos with both our Father's and our hands eternally bound. We would live always subject to the fickleness of chance, because good and evil are not equal and opposing forces. Because God is what He is, good always triumphs.

I remember hearing Mr. Armstrong say a couple of different times that almost every prayer,

right near near the beginning, he said that he thanked God that He was God, because despite the way things look, they are going to work out right. He used to joke, "I read the end of the story and we win!" But in the meanwhile, we have to go through these things.

We have got a couple of questions now up to this point. One I already asked, but I will repeat it. Are God's judgments also providence? Are God's judgments also part of His protective care?

We will go back to the book of Job again, because Job seemed to have the right idea in regard to this.

Job 1:20-22 Then Job arose, and rent his mantle, and shaved his head, and fell down upon the ground, and worshipped, and said, Naked came I out of my mother's womb, and naked shall I return thither: the LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD. In all this Job sinned not, nor charged God foolishly.

Job 2:10 But he said unto her [his wife], You speak as one of the foolish women speaks. What? Shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil? In all this did not Job sin with his lips.

In effect, Job said that we should be willing to accept calamity as being from God, as well as the things we readily see as being blessings.

In the state of Arkansas a kind of interesting thing happened in regard to this. The state legislature passed a law regarding insurance claims that occurred as a result of "act