

The Providence Of God (Part Two)

God: Creator and Destroyer

John W. Ritenbaugh (1932-2023)

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In the first sermon of this series we began to see that the providence of God is a complex subject touching on virtually every aspect of the life of the converted. In good times and bad, our God is the God who is there.

We spent a little bit of time in Romans 8:28-30 and a couple of other verses besides. I want you to turn there as we begin again, so that we will be reminded of something here that is important to the theme of these sermons.

Romans 8:28 And we know that all things [The emphasis in these sermons is on "all" things.] work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to His purpose.

Remember, I said there are two modifiers or qualifiers here. The one is "that all things work together for good to them that love God," and "to them who are the called [the elect of God] according to His purpose."

Romans 8:29-30 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.

The last two verses are given to encourage us, I think, in regard to all things, because everything that we go through does not look like it is a blessing on the surface. Some of these things that we go through definitely look like curses, but verses 29 and 30 assure that God is going to carry through on His part as the conversion process proceeds in our lives.

In verse 35, the context is continuing as Paul encourages us that all things indeed do work for good.

Romans 8:35 Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? [Can any individual do that? No. We can allow individuals to do it, but nobody can really do it.] Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?

There are some of those things that we have never gone through, but some of us all have gone through to some degree. Maybe there is peril, there is tribulation—very difficult trials. Can those things separate us? No, not at all.

Romans 8:38-39 For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

I think that perhaps this key series of verses, along with the entire book of Job, is very helpful to understanding this subject, especially with the emphasis being on the word *all*. We must be sure. We must understand that God is not merely assuring us that He will be there with us in the good times only, but He will be there in the seeming bad times as well. This is another reflection on Isaiah 45:7. We want to put God right in the midst of this so that we understand that many of the things that occur may come directly from His hand.

Isaiah 45:7 I form the light, and create darkness. [Notice the contrast. You might say—"the good and the bad."] I make peace, and create evil.

Modern translations say "calamity." He is speaking to His people. In this case He is speaking to those who made the Old Covenant with Him. We cannot dismiss that, because He has made a covenant with us—the New Covenant—and we have to consider that as part of life. It is something that we deal with. It is the same God. He does not change, and so if calamity is going to do us good in the long run, He is going to create those things.

We saw in that last sermon that there is very strong biblical evidence to believe that what one would normally consider to be curses are in fact trials

designed and engineered by God to both build and to destroy. We are going to see more of that evidence today.

It is important to grasp what the Bible clearly presents, and that is, God is actively involved in His creation, because creation is still going on. He is not merely sitting around reacting, hoping to change lemons into lemonade. But rather God is creating. That is what He says in this verse. He creates evil.

Let us go now to John 5:17 and just pick up another piece of evidence here for us to deal with.

John 5:17 But Jesus answered them, My Father works hitherto, and I work.

Again, modern translations will say, "My Father is working, even until now, and I am working." God is building. God is creating. Now what is He doing? He is building what is good for the purposes of preparation so that it can be carried through into the Kingdom of God. He is destroying that which is of no value either for the here and now, or for the Kingdom of God when it is established on earth.

Job clearly saw that the very difficult trial that he was enduring was from the hand of God. He said, "The Lord gives, and the Lord takes. Blessed be the name of the Lord." But at the same time, even this very righteous man had great difficulty both accepting it and understanding why he was going through it.

Perhaps most significantly for both Job and us is that Job's repentance gave far greater understanding and brought blessings upon him, and blessings upon us. God recorded what Job went through, and we can grasp a great deal more thoroughly the things that are happening to us in our lives.

Job's experiences teach us that what on the surface might appear to be curses are not necessarily the result of our sins, but again are events designed and engineered by God for purposes that are far beyond our immediate lives.

Toward the close of the last sermon, I posed another aspect of this subject by referring to the Canaanites in Judges 4—5, David's unnamed enemies in

Psalm 18, and the Egyptians there in Psalm 77 who were victims when God marvelously and providentially blessed either Israel or David. The Canaanites were slaughtered by the Israelite army when their technological superiority, as represented by the iron chariots—900 of them—were nullified by a tremendous cloudburst and a flood that just rendered those things useless because they got stuck in the mud. The soldiers were trained in the use of this technological superiority, and were easy pickings by the Israelites, and there was a tremendous slaughter. Not one Canaanite lived through it. Sisera, the commander, was killed by Jael who drove a tent spike through his temple into his brain, and pinned him to the ground as he slept.

David's enemies are not named, but they perished in what appears to have been an earthquake accompanied by another great storm. God uses earthquakes. He used one there in the wilderness to get rid of Moses' enemies. The language there is typical poetical language—a lot of hyperbole—but it seems very clear that there was an earthquake that was accompanied by a tremendous downpour, and those people perished.

The same is true of the Egyptians who were pursuing Israel through the Red Sea. God broke the tension of whatever it was that was holding the water back, and those people were literally crushed as those waters swept in on them, and they drowned.

The point of all this was to ask a question that we would begin to think about. Were those events providence for them, too? This has to be considered, because they too are in the image of God, and the only basic difference between the Israelites and the Canaanites, and the Israelites and the Egyptians, and David and his enemies was what God did in the lives of the Israelites and David. What we see there is an aspect of this principle, I guess you can call it, is, "There, but for the grace of God, go I." That is sobering and is something that we need to think about. We will get back to this subject a little bit later in the sermon, but it is something to consider.

We are going to take a look at Jacob and Joseph together, because their stories involving their relationship with God and His providence and God's purpose, as well as their families, are very tightly linked. There is a great deal that we can learn in regard to this subject from both of them. So let us go back to Genesis 28.

Genesis 28:10-13 And Jacob went out from Beersheba, and went toward Haran. And he lighted upon a certain place, and tarried there all night, because the sun was set; and he took of the stones of that place, and put them for his pillows, and lay down in that place to sleep. And he dreamed, and behold a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven: and behold the angels of God ascending and descending on it. And, behold, the Lord stood above it, and said, I am the Lord God of Abraham your father, and the God of Isaac: the land whereon you lie, to you will I give it, and to your seed.

God had already selected Jacob even before the twins were born. What we see here is Jacob in the process of fleeing from his brother's anger after he connived to get both the blessing and the birthright away from Esau. This would have come to Jacob anyway. God would have devised some other plan to do it, but Jacob, using his free moral agency, and probably having been told (but I do not know for sure), that he was the one who was going to be the recipient of them, used his human nature to secure them for himself. So here he has a very mysterious encounter with God.

In this dream Jacob clearly saw God at the top of this ladder with angels going up and down it.

Genesis 28:16 And Jacob awaked out of his sleep, and he said, Surely the Lord is in this place; and I knew it not. ["I just stumbled across this, and here I am, and this significant thing occurred to me."]

And now back to verse 15. God gave the promise—basically the same promise that He gave to Abraham and Isaac—and He now promised it to Jacob.

Genesis 28:15 And, behold, I am with you [Jacob], and will keep you in all places where you go, and will bring you again into this land; for I will not leave you, until I have done that which I have spoken to you of.

This phrase, "I will not leave you. I will be with you wherever you go, and I will not leave you." is an Old Testament parallel of Hebrews 13:5 where the Lord says, "I will never, never, never, never, never leave you." There are five negatives in that sentence in the Greek. If it is translated properly into the English literally, it comes out to five negatives. "I will never leave you, nor forsake you." Once He has called, and once we become one of His children, this same promise that was given to Jacob also applies to us. That is why all things work together for good, because He never leaves us.

Now brethren, can we accept that as true, and live our lives with that on our minds? Let me tell you something. Jacob did not for much of his life. He had a much more arresting encounter with God than we have ever had, actually seeing God, and waking up in a terrible fright as to what his eyes had just beheld, even though it was a dream. And yet brethren, even though that should have bolstered Jacob's faith, his faith wavered considerably. And he, like us, though he was to live by faith because God was not going to be visible as He had been on this one occasion, lost his vision of God. He lost his confidence in the promises, and many times he lived by sight rather than by faith, especially when things in his life became unusually difficult.

I do not know about you, but just judging by the way I have lived, I am a son of Jacob, because I have lost my vision from time to time. I have walked by sight from time to time, and I have not lived up to the things that I should have lived, considering all the blessings that I have been given. I know that you fall within those categories as well, because we all, like Jacob, become overcomers eventually, and we prevail with God as he did. But God does not leave us, even as He did not leave Jacob. He brought Jacob to the point where he really got it before his life was over.

I want you to fast forward to the time when Jacob's sons, the brothers of Joseph, because they were jealous of him because he was Jacob's favorite, conspired against Joseph. They sold him into slavery, and then hypocritically deceived Jacob into believing that Joseph had been killed by a lion. Think of this as we begin to go through it in terms of "I will never leave you." Think of this in terms of "All things work together for good," and you can begin to see where people like the apostle Paul extrapolated those principles from the examples.

I think we can understand that as Jacob himself went through these things, that if you were put into the same position as he was when he thought Joseph was dead, he was virtually inconsolable. There is a fairly long, several-verse section there of how his sons hypocritically tried to console him. It says that his daughters (probably his daughters-in-law) at least did maybe have some success in giving him some consolation. But when push came to shove, right then Jacob's faith was pretty thin. I wonder, given the record, whether he even thought of God's involvement.

Now was this, on the surface, a providential occurrence to Jacob, or did it give him every impression that he was dealing with a curse? Jacob could very easily have thought, "Where was God's providence?" as these things began to unfold.

Many years later, in fact more than a decade (and most of the scholars feel that about thirteen years elapsed from the time that this thing began to unfold until Joseph was made prime minister of Egypt), a very severe famine came upon the entire area. That was bad news. It compounded the curse that Jacob surely still felt in his life. But the good news was that Egypt had grain to sell, and so rather than starve, Jacob sent his sons to Egypt to buy grain.

I do not know what the normal business practices were at that time. Apparently because they were foreigners, the brothers had to present themselves for clearance before Egyptian authorities before they could buy and sell or anything like that. They were recognized by Joseph, who was running this operation. The brothers did not recognize him in his official garb. The last time they saw him, he was not looking so good in his face. He was a mere boy, and now here he was, an exalted prince of Egypt, with all the finery which that office must have held, and all the authority besides.

When Joseph recognized them, this set off another series of events by means of which Joseph was able to make his brothers seriously reflect upon what they had done to him. It was actually a little bit of gentle revenge. Yet at the same time I think that I can honestly say that he did it in a godly way, and the revenge was extracted emotionally and mentally rather than the physical dealing that they had done to him. I mean, he threw them into consternation, as we are going to see in just a little bit. It was a simple plan, but it allowed them a great deal of time for meditation on their treachery, because it took

quite a while for this plan of Joseph's to unfold. He did all of this without them ever catching on to who he really was. At the same time, although I do not know that Joseph was really aware of this, he also put his father Jacob through the wringer as well.

Genesis 42:21-23 And they said one to another, We are verily guilty concerning our brother, in that we saw the anguish of his soul, when he besought us, and we would not hear; therefore is this distress come upon us. And Reuben answered them, saying, spake I not unto you, saying, Do not sin against the child; and you would not hear? Therefore, behold, also his blood is required. And they knew not that Joseph understood them; for he spake unto them by an interpreter.

Joseph was put through the wringer emotionally, too. Is being put through the wringer good? Is it a blessing? Is it a curse? So the brothers, especially Reuben, somehow connected their present calamity to what they had committed against Joseph and Jacob. It was almost as if they could feel the noose tightening around their necks. They were correct in assuming the connection, and were also correct in assuming that God was somehow involved. They saw the calamity beginning to fall upon them, but they also failed to see the grace that was involved in this issue, too. I think that is because their understanding of the providence of God was not very well developed, and also because they had guilty consciences, and they could think that "we do not deserve anything good."

Now a little bit later, as the plan began to unfold, the following occurred.

Genesis 42:35 And it came to pass as they emptied their sacks, that behold, every man's bundle of money was in his sack: and when both they and their father saw the bundles of money, they were afraid.

Now they could be accused of thievery! I will tell you, their emotions and their minds were bouncing around, and thinking, "How are we going to get out of this?"

Genesis 42:36 And Jacob their father said unto them, Me have you bereaved of my children: Joseph is not, and Simeon is not, and you will take Benjamin away: all these things are against me.

Interesting. "All these things are against me." Jacob poured out his grief on them, because as far as he was concerned, Joseph was dead. And as for Simeon, who had been held hostage by Joseph—as far as Jacob could see—he might also be dead. And now here was this power down in Egypt asking that they deliver the apple of Jacob's eye to him.

Can you feel why he might have thought "All these things are against me"?

Genesis 42:38 And he said, My son shall not go down with you; for his brother is dead, and he is left alone: if mischief befall him by the way in the which you go, then shall you bring down my gray hairs with sorrow to the grave.

He is saying, "This would be too much. I would die of a broken heart."

Were Jacob's conclusions reasonable? We know the end of the story, but look at it from Jacob's point of view, and they were reasonable if one leaves the providence of God out of the picture—and Jacob was. Part of the lesson of this story is that Jacob indeed was judging by sight. The truth of the matter is that Joseph indeed was alive, and that Simeon was never in safer hands in his entire life, and not a flea could even attack Benjamin on the way down to Egypt, because God was involved in this.

You see, Jacob concluded that "all these things are against me." How many times have you gone through deep trials and felt exactly the same way? Maybe you did not utter those words, but you felt that everything was against you. Where was God? Where is my Friend? Where is my Companion? Where is my Father when I need Him? We have all felt that way, so we ought to be able to be empathetic to Jacob as he goes through this trial.

Genesis 43:8-10 And Judah said unto Israel his father, Send the lad with me, and we will arise and go; that we may live, and not die,

both we, and you, and also our little ones. I will be surety for him; of my hand shall you require him: if I bring him not unto you, and set him before you, then let me bear the blame forever: For except we had lingered, surely now we had returned this second time.

Time had gone by. The famine continued. Food was getting in short supply once again. You can see the noose beginning to tighten around Jacob's mind. He is being maneuvered into a position we understand now, by God, to where he is going to make a decision in the affirmative. I think in many sermons I have mentioned to you that God has ways to bring about the right decision so that we can exercise our free moral agency, and yet He engineers circumstances so that we are virtually forced to make the right decision. That is where principles like this come from. They come from these examples that God has written in His Word.

Genesis 43:11-14 And their father Israel said unto them, If it must be so now, do this; take of the best fruits in the land in your vessels, and carry down the man a present, a little balm, and a little honey, spices, and myrrh, nuts, and almonds: And take double money in your hand; and the money that was brought again in the mouth of your sacks, carry it again in your hand; peradventure it was an oversight: Take also your brother, and arise, go again unto the man: And God almighty give you mercy before the man, that he may send away your other brother, and Benjamin. If I be bereaved of my children, I am bereaved.

And so Judah, along with the circumstances, persuaded Jacob, and Jacob decided to take one last chance. Was it an act of faith? I think possibly. It is not stated very strongly, but I think that we have to give Jacob also the benefit of the doubt here. He acknowledged the possibility of failure, and that there was a risk that Benjamin too would be lost. But this time it ended in success.

Genesis 45:27-28 And they told him all the words of Joseph, which he had said unto them: and when he saw the wagons which Joseph had sent to carry him, the spirit of Jacob their father revived: And Israel said, It is enough; Joseph my son is yet alive: I will go and see him before I die.

"It is enough."

I am sure that Jacob did not see the whole picture. I think that some of that had to be supplied by Joseph when Jacob got there into Egypt. He did not see the whole picture, but he was at least comforted. He was consoled. There was encouragement that came into his life.

A little bit earlier in this same chapter, Joseph talked to his brothers.

Genesis 45:4 And Joseph said unto his brethren, Come near to me, I pray you. And they came near

I am sure that by this time they were relieved. But yet on the other hand I am sure that they were a still a bit apprehensive, because they were standing off from him yet in recognition of his power and authority. Also it was now revealed to them that they indeed had been part and parcel of sending him down there, and they were exposed. You know, when you do something wrong involving Mom and Dad, you kind of want to skirt around things. That is what they are doing. They are kind of staying away from the authority, so he had to call upon them to come near.

Genesis 45:4-7 And he said, I am Joseph your brother, whom you sold into Egypt. Now therefore be not grieved, nor angry with yourselves, that you sold me hither: for God did send me before you to preserve life. For these two years has the famine been in the land: and yet there are five years in the which there shall neither be earing nor harvest. And God sent me before you to preserve you a posterity in the earth, and to save your lives by a great deliverance.

This was not really the end of this, because when Jacob died the brothers still were apprehensive because they felt that perhaps Joseph allowed them to be alive only because Jacob was alive, and out of deference to their father he did not hurt the family. They were as guilty as sin, and many years after, their consciences were still smiting them, because Joseph was there on the throne, and even though he did not say anything, he was condemning them simply by the fact that he was there. Their consciences were smitten. They felt they needed to be reassured once again.

Genesis 50:14-21 And Joseph returned into Egypt, he, and his brethren, and all that went up with him to bury his father, after he had buried his father. And when Joseph's brethren saw that their father was dead, they said, Joseph will peradventure hate us, and will certainly requite us all the evil which we did unto him. And they sent a messenger unto Joseph, saying, Your father did command before he died, saying, So shall you say unto Joseph, Forgive, I pray you now, the trespass of your brethren, and their sin; for they did unto you evil: and now, we pray you, forgive the trespass of the servants of the God of your father. And Joseph wept when they spoke unto him. And his brethren also went and fell down before his face; and they said, Behold, we be your servants. And Joseph said unto them, Fear not: for am I in the place of God? But as for you, you thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive. Now therefore, fear you not: I will nourish you, and your little ones. And he comforted them, and spake kindly unto them.

Let us consider Joseph before we move on. Everything that happened to him from the time of going out to give his brothers a message and some food from their father looked on the surface as though it was a curse. Actually brethren, the providence of God was operating. God was merely using him and the things that He put Joseph through—slavery, prison, accusations of immorality, back to prison—to prepare Joseph for the Kingdom of God as well as for the deliverance of Jacob and his family. At the same time it also set the stage for Israel being in Egypt, falling into slavery, and consequently being delivered, but it also led to the plagues on Egypt. It led to the crossing of the Red Sea, and it led to the killing of the Egyptians in the sea.

Is there something that we can grasp from this that might help us to live our lives maybe a great deal more free from the dread that might be coming upon us because we are going through a deep trial?

Here is a principle that we need to understand if we are going to understand God's providence, and if we are going to understand that clear statement that He gives us in Romans 8:28, "that all things work together for good to those who love God, and for those who are the called according to His purpose."

We have to understand that nothing takes place in a vacuum for those who are the called. How broad the ramifications, or how narrow, or how short, or how long lasting the reverberations of our individual acts are, I do not know. But I do see the principle, and I do see that the apostle Paul used those principles in the New Testament. A lot of this principle runs through I Corinthians 12 where it shows that we are all part of a body.

We have responsibilities that we have to carry out always with the church of God in mind. We must understand that these things that we are going through are not for our benefit only, but that we are part of a great grand cause and creation. Therefore, each part of the body—each individual member—has a responsibility to the whole to make it stronger by improving his own relationship with God regardless of the circumstance that he finds himself in. We have a responsibility to the body, as well as to God Himself, to grow and to learn to live our lives by faith in those promises that Jacob apparently forgot about—at least they slipped into the recesses of his mind. By faith we have to always be aware that there is a much larger and longer, in terms of time, creative process going on of which our eyes can only behold a very small portion.

I want us to think of Job's words that we read and expounded upon in the last sermon in this series in light of what the rest of the book of Job reveals, "The Lord gives, and the Lord takes." That is in chapter 1 and 2 of the book of Job, and said right where they were, Job gave the impression that he understood. But the rest of the book shows that his acceptance of his condition was far more difficult, especially under the pressure of the arguments of his three friends.

The same is true of Jacob. The pressure of the situation caused his focus to be on himself rather than on God's promise that He would never leave him. If God is near, how can anything help but work out right to our good, to the good of the body, and for good of all concerned?

I am not trying to give you the impression that I live life perfectly in faith. Not that at all, because I have to go through these things too, but I can at least understand the principle that we are dealing with, and help us understand as well. We find this in the lives of a number of these people that

are written of in the Old Testament. I want us to think of this, because our acceptance of the circumstances of life may be critical to our relationship with God. Have we ever stopped to think that whenever we receive a blessing, that in the larger picture, someone might have had to pay for it?

In the case of the Israelites in Judges 4 and 5, the Canaanites paid a terrible price, as did the Egyptians when Israel went through the Red Sea.

At the very least brethren, that ought to be a very humbling reminder, "There ain't no free lunch." (Pardon my English.) Somebody pays. Maybe I can modify that and say "Somebody *may* pay." But this thing I am sure of, and that is that blessings received by God are nothing to gloat over, to have a sense of well-being about it, to be gratified because it is given. We also should be humbled by it as well.

On the other hand, when we go through a difficult trial, like Job, it may very well be that what seems to be a curse for us will result in somebody else's blessing, and it is going to be used by God toward that end.

Look how we have been blessed by what God put Job through. If that record was not there, our understanding of the reason for going through trials would be much shallower to say the least. One of the things that studying into this subject has convinced me, especially because of the strength of these statements like in Romans 8:28 and the way God dealt with many of these people whose lives we are going to go through, is that for God's children there is no "time and chance" factor. Our God is there, creating, and we have to learn to live by that. This ought to be very comforting. For the world, yes, there is the "time and chance" factor. We will continue to go on in that subject.

The key word in all of this is God. We must never allow the fact that God is an active Sovereign Creator get far from our minds. Please also do not misunderstand that I am promoting "fatalism," because free moral agency and our choices very much affect what happens. I am going to give you an example of this. Let us go to II Samuel and look again into this thing with David. I want you to see David's reaction to a decision of Almighty God.

II Samuel 12:16-23 David therefore besought God for the child; and David fasted, and went in, and lay all night upon the earth. And the elders of his house arose, and went to him, to raise him up from the earth: but he would not, neither did he eat bread with them. And it came to pass on the seventh day that the child died. And the servants of David feared to tell him that the child was dead: for they said, "Behold, while the child was yet alive, we spoke unto him, and he would not hearken unto our voice: how will he then vex himself, if we tell him that the child is dead?" But when David saw that his servants whispered, David perceived that the child was dead: therefore David said unto his servants, "Is the child dead?" And they said, "He is dead." Then David arose from the earth, and washed, and anointed himself, and changed his apparel, and came into the house of the Lord, and worshipped: then he came to his own house; and when he required, they set bread before him, and he did eat. Then said his servants unto him, "What thing is this that you have done? You did fast and weep for the child while it was alive; but when the child was dead, you did rise and eat bread." And he said, "While the child was yet alive, I fasted and wept: for I said, 'Who can tell whether God will be gracious to me that the child may live?' But now he is dead, wherefore should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he shall not return to me."

What I am interested in here is David's perspective as these events unfold, especially at the end of this particular one. His perspective was very much the same as Job's, "The Lord gives, and the Lord takes," but his acceptance of them was different. It was more positive, and we might speculate that perhaps it was because he had the advantage of knowing what Job went through. It might also perhaps have been because of the nature of what he was going through.

I want you to see David's reaction. For seven days David wrestled with God, fasting and pleading the baby's case before Him. When God said "no" through the baby's death, David immediately went to God's house to worship and show his acceptance—a thing of the heart. God compliments David on

his heart. David accepted whatever God dealt to him in life. He bowed before God's judgment to let God be God and exercise His sovereignty over David's life without resisting or without pouting from David once the decision was clear.

I want you to notice that David did not just fatalistically accept this and wring his hands in abject self-pity and do nothing. I am sure that he knew that God's threat regarding the baby was not idle, but he appealed, knowing that in times past God relented from His judgment when his people repented. But when God did not, David quickly submitted, trusting his, Bathsheba's and the baby's futures to God.

This is an outstanding example of the acceptance of God's will, because David saw God working in his life, in Israel's history, and even I am sure as God of the entire world and universe, and that was a part of David's thinking. But do you see the exercise of his free moral agency there? He was not fatalistic in his approach to the situation that he was going through. He tried to do something about it. He tried to do something positive about it. He tried to do something that he knew would be within the will of God, to attempt to do, to change God's mind.

This understanding of providence is vital to all who would worship God, because David's worship was an act of faith rooted in trust. David realized that he had not heard the rest of the story, and that there was really no sound alternative but to willingly trust God. And he did it—not grudgingly. When he heard that the baby was dead, I get the impression that he just bounded up off the floor, and said, "That's it. Let's get on with life, and go on." He did it without reservations. That is a hard act to follow, and many of us would find that very difficult to do. But he did it, and you know that David was a man of very deep emotions. I am sure that they were very sorely tried during that period of time. But he accepted God's will as His providence, whatever it was.

Lurking in the background here are some maybe mystifying questions. How deeply involved is God even in what we might consider the ordinary every day events of life-our lives? Is God micro-managing His creation? Where does free moral agency fit into this picture? Well, that free moral agency is a part of the picture I think is beyond doubt. I think this is clearly shown right

from the very beginning in Genesis 3 with Adam and Eve's experience in the garden. But the question we need to ask is: How far does free moral agency go? Is God micro-managing His plan, especially for His children, so that free moral agency is in reality somewhat limited, and maybe we are not as free as we think we are?

Proverbs 29:15 The rod and reproof give wisdom: but a child left to himself brings his mother to shame.

Here we have something on childrearing. Are you a child of God? Is God rearing you? Is He preparing you for something that He has in mind?

We of course all believe that eventually we are going to be in the Kingdom of God. But what are we going to be in the Kingdom of God? I John 3:1-3 says, "It does not yet appear what we shall be; but we know that, when He shall appear, we shall be like Him; for we shall see Him as He is." So we know in general that we are going to be like Him, but as for a specific position in the Kingdom of God, a specific part of the body that is going to rule over the earth, that does not yet appear, and we look through a glass darkly.

What is important for this sermon: Is God providing for us so that we will be what He has in mind by the time we get to that point? If He is training us, His children, is He then acting the part of a very concerned Father? I think that you know that the answer to that is "yes." If the answer to that is "yes," then we also have to understand that God is applying what this verse says. "The rod and reproof give wisdom." Does He want wise sons and daughters in His family? "The rod and reproof give wisdom: but a child left to himself brings his mother to shame."

There are two different methods of discipline in that first phrase. The one is corporal punishment. "That hurts." On the other hand, there is verbal admonition, where we might shrink before a tongue-lashing.

The second part of that sentence is kind of interesting, because one of the translations rendered it this way. It says here in the King James: "But a child left to himself brings his mother to shame." Another is translated: "A lad left to himself to run wild and unchecked, brings his mother to shame." Let us

think of that. Does God allow His children to run wild and unchecked? I hardly think so. In fact, I do not think so at all, because He would be guilty of not following His own advice. This is an admonition to all who are parents not let their children do whatever they want to do, because children are awfully foolish, and they might get hurt. Beyond that, they are going to make you wish you had done something when they were younger.

Let us look at another verse in Proverbs 13:24 and connect it to this. This verse amplifies this a bit.

Proverbs 13:24 He that spares his rod hates his son: but he that loves him chastens him betimes [or from time to time].

Let me give you an alternate translation. "He that spares his rod does not love his child. So he seeks him with discipline, not overlooking his faults so as to eradicate them."

Since God is creating within us His own image in terms of character, in terms of attitude, in terms of perspective—the way we look at life so that we will reflect Him in all of His character eventually—are we going to stand or sit and say that God will not take steps, that He is going to spare the rod, that He is not going to seek out the flaws within His children and do something to eradicate them? Well, He most certainly is.

Back to the original question. Does this mean then that He is going to have to restrict free moral agency? Absolutely He is going to restrict free moral agency for the same reason that a wise parent will restrict free moral agency, because He has hopes, He has dreams, He has visions, He loves us, and He wants us to be just like Him. You restrict your children's free moral agency because you want that child to bring glory to you. You want that child to not be hurt by his foolishness.

Proverbs 3:11-12 My son, despise not the chastening of the LORD; neither be weary of his correction: For whom the Lord loves he corrects, even as a father the son in whom he delights.

Our Father in heaven is the world's best child-rearer. Every act that He does is providential. Every circumstance that He creates, every circumstance that

He permits, is providential regardless of how it looks to our eyes. It may be a curse, as far as our eyes can see. And physically, on the surface, we may worry about our sins, and certainly we should evaluate ourselves in light of what we are going through because there may be sin involved. But then again, as the book of Job shows us, it is not sin. It is simply something that God is putting us through in order to create something far better, or to take away things that He does not like.