

The Providence of God (Part 5)

A Scattered Church

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Given 13-Feb-99; Tape #380

I would first like to remind us of the premise that we began with in this series and that is that we should consider the events of our lives that we might normally look upon as being curses or a plague, as something that God has provided for our good. The scriptural foundation for this is in Romans 8:28 which clearly states that "all things work together for good". But, there were two qualifiers. The first one being that they work together for good for those who are *the* called. God is not saying that everything works together for good for everybody. It works together for good for the called and secondly, for those who love God.

We also saw that Job was totally mystified as to why those evil calamities were happening to him. He vigorously defended himself against his friends who were accusing him of hidden sins. But in this case, Job was indeed guiltless as God assures us right at the beginning of the book. The calamities that befell Job were instigated by God. That is a key to this. God brings calamities into people's lives and those calamities turn out to be for good for His people. So, they cannot be considered in the normal sense of being a kind of calamity that is intended to destroy us in anyway, but are actually intended for our good.

The calamities that befell Job were instigated by God through Satan with limitations as to how far Satan was permitted to go. The calamities were, in fact, tests of Job's loyalty to God and they served a double purpose of greatly increasing his understanding and ours as well, because we can learn from his experience. At the end, Job deeply repented of speaking of things which he formerly did not understand, but now understood, exclaiming that he had heard of God by the hearing of his ears, but now, as a result of his calamities, he saw clearly. Therein lies the benefit.

It is good to remember an Arabic proverb: "All sunshine makes a desert". It is also equally good to remember that suffering of and by itself is of no value either. It is only when understanding or wisdom or good qualities of character are produced through the suffering that it has positive value. We can suffer and it can be a total waste of time, an endless expending of energy, a tremendous building up of anxiety and stress and it produces no good. But I can guarantee you if God is involved in our lives, and we are one of *the* called and we love Him, regardless of the stress and anxiety He seemingly puts us through, it is going to produce something good in us. God is not in the torturing business. He is in the creating business and these calamities, these things we might consider to be plagues, are actually part of His creative process, if we permit it.

We must never let it get far from our thinking that from the time that He wills to call us and to bring us into His family that He is never out of our lives, *ever*. He is an ever-present reality. He is always mixed within the context of every event of our life. What He puts us through always has positive value in mind. He is aiming to create something that is part of His image in us.

We then spent the better part of two sermons on one incident that God provided in the life of

Jacob. Like the Job incident, it was of major importance to the outcome of Jacob's life and it serves a double purpose of giving us understanding for our time. God broke Jacob's contentious, manipulating, controlling will by providing him with, of all things, a wrestling match. It showed Jacob that in his deceitful, manipulating contentions with man to get what he wanted to get out of life that he was in reality wrestling against God's will for him. It is never God's will for us to self-centeredly get by breaking His commandments. His way is always accomplished through cooperatively serving.

God blessed Jacob by putting his hip out of joint as a constant, humbling, somewhat painful reminder so that, from that time forth, every step he made in his life served to remind him of a wrestling match that he lost. Then He further blessed him by changing his name to Israel which means 'God prevails or God rules.'

That incident marks the time when Jacob finally had his will broken because he much more thoroughly got the picture. I said in that sermon that sometimes we have the tendency to think that we might be weak-willed. But we can always remember that the carnal mind is enmity against God and our will is not weak in this regard.

Last week we went through Hosea 12 in a fair amount of detail showing that Jacob's descendants, Israel, those who have also made a covenant with God, were plagued by some of the same characteristics as a nation that Jacob had as a man. Now there is one more level of application, another parallel that I want to pick up on today. As a church, as well as an individual child of God, we have to look into this for instruction because we are Jacob's spiritual descendants as well as being the Israel of God.

There is one obvious difference between the church and Israel the nation. That is, with the church, things are happening much more rapidly than they did with Israel the nation. Time has been compressed. We are in the end. The return of Jesus Christ is not very far away. Herbert Armstrong said, "Get the church ready". We have to get ready.

Let us set the time element again in the book of Hosea. You might recall that I mentioned that Hosea was a younger contemporary of Amos. Amos prophesied two years before a great earthquake. Archeologists have dated that earthquake as occurring in 762 B.C. That was forty years (interesting) before Assyria conquered Israel and Israel was taken into captivity. It was almost like the earthquake was announcing the social and cultural destruction that was going to come just a little bit later.

Hosea prophesied shortly after Amos, but still within a couple of decades before Israel went into captivity at the hands of Assyria, and about 140 years before Judah went into captivity at the hands of Babylon.

Let us shift gears here a little bit. The Church has had its own spiritual earthquakes. Back in the 1970s there were several of them and they cumulated in the January, 1979, legal attack of the State of California. It took the church into the receivership to the state for a little while. You will recall that Herbert Armstrong, after that occurred, was calling upon us to get back on the track. After he died Joseph Tkach was trying to carry out (I think) what Herbert Armstrong had given him as a commission, at least for a short time. His trumpet song was "We Are Family". We were supposed to be unified and as a family, becoming unified toward the Kingdom of God.

I submit to you that they never succeeded. There was some measure of turning around while Herbert Armstrong was still alive. Some changes were made, but Herbert Armstrong died and it began to become evident (I feel in looking back on it, I did not realize it so sharply then, although I did have some ideas back in the 1980s) that God had judged that the changes had been merely on the surface. My evidence of God's judgment is that we are scattered. We did not hold together. If we really had made the changes, we would have not been scattered, because the love would have been there. I am talking about the love of God. His Spirit in us would have been strong and we would have held together, unified.

But the very fact that we were scattered according to Leviticus 26 is an indication that we were breaking the commandments of God. That is a punishment, one of the two worst that God has. The second one is the sword.

We are not only scattered, but the scattering is continuing. I think it should become increasingly obvious that God is not pleased with us as an assembly of His people. If you can remember in Hosea 12, He said, "I have a controversy with you." And I think the evidence is showing us that He has a controversy with us even as He had a controversy with Jacob and a controversy with Israel the nation.

Turn with me to Matthew 10. Jesus is the speaker.

Matthew 10:16-18, 22-23 Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves, be you therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves. But beware of men, for they will deliver you up to the councils, and they will scourge you in their synagogues; and you shall be brought before governors and kings for my sake, for a testimony against them and the Gentiles....And you shall be hated of all men for my name's sake, but he that endures to the end shall be saved. But when they persecute you in this city, flee you into another, for verily I say unto you, You shall not have gone over the cities of Israel, till the Son of man be come.

Holding that thought in mind, go to Acts 8.

Acts 8:1 And Saul was consenting unto his death [Stephen's death]. And at that time there was a great persecution against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.

None of the things that are mentioned in these verses are happening to us. We are not being chased from city to city, the sword is not out after us, the government is not throwing us into prison, we are not being persecuted by our neighbors. There is not an external persecution against the church that is scattering us all over the place, and yet we are scattered.

Now I submit to you that there is a source, which I will not go into in any detail, but just beginning in Leviticus 26, the 'blessings and cursings' chapter, scattering when you are not being scattered by persecution is something that is from God. He did it. He scattered us because He is displeased. Read it yourself. He has a controversy with us and scattering is a punishment that is intended to have a good end. It is intended to make us think and to analyze why am I in this position. Why is the church in this condition? What are solutions? Is it possible that I am a, or the, cause or part of it? Can I be part of the solution?

There are positive answers for those questions. We are having to flee for our spiritual lives, to preserve them. The message that is contained within Hosea 12, combined with a couple of references in Revelation, Jeremiah 3, and Genesis 28, I think shows what we need to do with this scattering and why it has occurred.

The principles contained within each of these passages that I am going to be using make a modern day application to us. I think you will see that I am not stretching things a bit when I do this. Let us first go back to the book of Genesis. It is here that the foundation begins. Again, it is a starting place for Jacob.

Genesis 28:13-15 And behold, the Lord stood above it [above the stairway that went from where Jacob was and went up into the heavens] 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; and your seed shall be as the dust of the earth and you shall spread abroad to the west, to the east, to the north and to the south; and in you and in your seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed. And behold, I am with you 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.

Here are the promises made to the fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and now to Jacob, that were later confirmed by Jesus Christ. We fit into these promises because we are heirs with them and I want to turn back to the book of Galatians so that you will see this clearly.

Galatians 3:16 Now to Abraham and his seed were the promises made. He says not, and to seeds, as of many, but as of one, and to your seed, which is Christ.

We are moving here to identify who the seed is so that we can see that what he said to Jacob applies to you and me.

Galatians 3:26-29 For you are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you be Christ's, then are you Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.

If we are in Christ, if we are the called, we have become one body with Him. He is the head, we are the body and the promise was made to that one institution, that unified institution. This is where the seed comes from that is back in Genesis 28. I mean the most serious aspect of the seed, because we are the spiritual seed of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Many of us, indeed, are also physical descendants of them.

While we are in the New Testament we are going to go to Romans 9 and pick up a couple of verses there. What I am going to show you here is that the seed of Abraham was broken by God into two distinct parts.

Romans 9:6 Not as though the word of God has taken none effect. For they are not all Israel which are of Israel [kind of a mysterious verse]. Neither, because they are the seed of Abraham, are they all children.

Let us put Galatians 3 with that. Who are the children? The real children are those who are in Christ and now he is saying that just because you are a physical descendant of Abraham does not mean that you are part of the true seed.

Romans 9:7-8 Neither, because they are the seed of Abraham, are they all children; but in Isaac shall your seed be called. [Isaac was the son Abraham had of promise. We are the children of promise.] That is, [this is about as plain a statement as you are going to see in regards to this subject] they which are the children of the flesh, these are not the children of God.

I do not know how God could make it any plainer. The seed He is talking about in Genesis 28 is the church. The children of promise are counted for the seed and the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob have been divided into two distinct groups. The natural, still called the nation of Israel. The other one called here the children of promise. At other places called the elect. In another place called the very elect. At other places called the church and by Paul himself in Galatians 6:16, the Israel of God.

There are two distinct Israels: the physical nation and the spiritual nation. There is one Israel that God divorced and no longer belongs to Him. She was His wife, but once He divorced her she no longer belongs to Him. But there is an Israel that does belong to Him, the Israel of God. The word 'of' shows possession. The Israel that belongs to God is the church.

So, back to Genesis 28 and I am going to read it again. Notice the promise here.

Genesis 28:15 And behold, I am with you 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 was first spoken directly to Jacob at Bethel and following this Jacob made a vow. He entered into a covenant with God. Not the Old Covenant, but nonetheless he entered into a covenant with God.

Now when God said this to Jacob it was not merely intended to be a matter of encouraging comfort to him. Much more importantly it was intended to show Jacob that God would be guiding, preserving, instructing, and correcting him wherever he went in order that God's purpose for him would be completed.

Let us go to Hebrews 13 and I want you to see a New Testament take on this same principle of "I will be with you wherever you go." Jesus says to the New Testament Church in verse 5:

Hebrews 13:5-6 Let your conversation [or your conduct] be without covetousness; and be content with such things as you have, for he has said, I will never leave you nor forsake you. So that we can boldly say, The Lord is my helper and I will not fear what man shall do unto me.

I would like you to hang on to that thought because it impacts very greatly on what happened to Jacob as well. We are going to see today where the real flaw in Jacob's character laid.

Let us go to Deuteronomy 31 and we are just going to pick up a couple of scriptures here that again contains a principle. This is actually in a section that has to do with Israel going into the

land and taking over the land of Canaan.

Deuteronomy 31:5 And the Lord shall give them up before your face . . .

These are instructions to the Israelites. Whenever you see or hear the word Israelites it is a good idea to think me or I. I am an Israelite. I am a child of God.

Deuteronomy 31:6, 8 Be strong and of a good courage, fear not, nor be afraid of them [heb 13:6 I shall not fear what man shall do to me because the Lord is with me]; for the LORD your God, he it is that does go with you; he will not fail you nor forsake you....And the Lord, he it is that does go before you; he will be with you, he will not fail you, neither forsake you; fear not, neither be dismayed.

Now back to the New Testament and this time in Philippians 1:6, which is a very familiar, very encouraging scripture where Paul said to those people:

Philippians 1:6 Being confident of this very thing, that he which has begun a good work in you will perform [complete] it until the day of Jesus Christ.

Let us recap just a little bit.

Genesis 28:15 I will be with you wherever you go and I will bring you back into this land.

The seed spoken of there is you and me. He said it to Jacob. "Jacob, I will be with you wherever you go." Jesus Christ says it to you and me. "I will be with you wherever you go." However, there is a requirement that we have to be in the midst of these calamities that He sometimes creates for our benefit and He says, "Don't be afraid! Fear not! I am with you."

Now what was Jacob's problem? Despite being a man who was physically strong and very gifted by God, he was afraid to live by faith. He set himself to live according to his will to get what he wanted, even though it meant breaking the commandments to do it. It was ~~was~~ *fear* that was driving him. He was afraid. He was competitive. He was afraid that people would get ahead of him. He was afraid that people would take advantage of him. He was afraid that Esau would get more than he would get. He was afraid that the scheming Laban would get things that he would not be able to get. And so he hid his own accomplishments in selective breeding. He hid them from Laban so that Laban could not share in those things with him, things which God undoubtedly revealed to Jacob so that he could take advantage of things.

God, in effect, was telling Jacob back there in Genesis 28:15, "I am going to complete making My image in you. Regardless of where you go, I am going to bring you back here and you're going to be a finished man." Very comforting, really, but it might be scary from time to time.

I think that we are finding out that just because God is with us does not mean that we cannot get confused, or scared, or have anxiety building up within us and have stress levels that might put the thermometer out the top. But in Hosea I am going to draw your attention to something that I did last week.

Hosea 12:4 Yes, he had power over the Angel and prevailed; he wept and made supplication unto him; he found him in Bethel and there he spoke with us.

Let us look at those pronouns again. First pronoun "he." That is Jacob. Second line "he wept." That is Jacob who wept. "He found him in Bethel." That "he" is also Jacob. Who did he find in Bethel? God, because God revealed Himself to him there. The next "he" is God and there He, not Jacob (Jacob did not speak to us) spoke with us. That is really interesting. Why did He say "us"? Remember, Hosea was speaking this just a decade or two before Israel went into captivity. The "us," when Hosea originally said it, were the physical Israelites to whom he was speaking. He said it that way because he wanted to make sure that what had been written previously by Moses in the book of Genesis was intended for the Israelites in his day.

Now what I have just done is update it to the 20th century A.D. We are the real seed there in Genesis 28, the seed of Jacob. God is speaking to you and me.

Notice that God spoke at Bethel. The site of the first part of that verse is not Bethel, but Mahanaim, which I believe is in the land of Manasseh. The wrestling match took place in Mahanaim. But that quickly Hosea switched from the wrestling match to when God revealed Himself to Jacob. He applied that speaking to Jacob, to the Israelites of his day and to you and me. We have to do it that way. Otherwise we can excuse any part of the Bible we want as not applying to us.

Hosea 12 is written to the church. Any time the church finds itself in a position that parallels any portion of the Bible, we are to gather the instruction from that which God has recorded to our situation so that we can first find the causes and then find the solutions. Once you have the causes, then the solutions, hard as they are, are not as hard as they would be if we did not know what the causes are.

We are to live by every Word of God. That is the only way we can. That is written to us. We are the seed.

This is spoken to any descendant of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob whenever they happen to be living. Whether it is in the 1st century A.D. or in the 20th century A.D., we find ourselves in a condition where God obviously has a controversy with us. Because of His faithfulness to His promise, "I will never leave you nor forsake you, I will lead you, I will guide you, I will correct you, I will do whatever has to be done in order to bring you into the Promised Land, the Kingdom of God." Because of His faithfulness to His promise, He is moving to correct us even as He moved to correct Jacob and Israel.

Jacob took it. He repented. He wept and made supplication. It means that he repented, that he pleaded with God to forgive him. But, unfortunately, Israel did not do that and they went into captivity.

We are having a major, major wrestling match with God right now. All of us are to a lesser or greater degree. The object is to make sure that our relationship with Him is what it should be. Not what organization I am in, but, what is my relationship with God like? What is its quality?

That is what happened in that wrestling match with God and Jacob. Jacob got his relationship with God straightened out. But God really had to take him down a peg or two, because, honestly, he was quite a man.

Jeremiah 3:8-10 And I saw, when for all the causes whereby backsliding Israel

committed adultery I had put her away, and given her a bill of divorce; yet her treacherous sister Judah feared not, but went and played the harlot also. [It was 120 years later, but it nonetheless came to pass.] And it came to pass through the lightness of her whoredom, that she defiled the land, and committed adultery with stones and with stocks. [Verse 9 is still addressed to Israel. Verse 10 switches to Judah.] And yet for all this her treacherous sister Judah has not turned unto me with her whole heart, but feignedly, says the Lord.

I want to pay attention to three things here. The first is the mention of the particular sin of Israel—adultery with stones and stocks. This is spiritual adultery with foreign gods because Israel was married to God through the covenant. In reality, it is actually idolatry in the form of worldliness, but adultery is used as the image because of the marriage relationship between the two. The actual sin is idolatry. Israel had an irresistible urge to produce synchronistic religions, to always be looking into how the pagans worshipped their gods and then make it into their worship of the true God. Just like the golden calf. They took something from Egypt and then proclaimed a feast to the Eternal. Israel could never seem to get this out of their mind. Now we have Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism, all these Eastern religions. In fact I read an article that had to do with how foreign religions are watering down Protestantism and Catholicism.

That is the first one though, Israel's sin. The second and the third things are specific words. The word 'likeness' in verse 9 and the word 'feignedly' in verse 10. Both of these are attitudes that impacted upon their manner of obedience. Modern translations replaced likeness with casualness. *The Revised English Bible* renders that "casual prostitution." *The Amplified Version* says "unseemly frivolity." It is a matter of saying that sin was no big deal. Like we have heard so frequently with the trial that the United States has gone through, "It's just a family affair."

Let me give you some possible other words for this word casual or likeness. All you have to do is look it up in a good dictionary. Indifferent, nonchalant, off-hand, blasé, blithe, unconcerned, cool, dispassionate, apathetic, relaxed (boy do we like to be informal), unbothered, thoughtless, indiscriminate, lackadaisical.

I wonder if any of them struck a cord in your mind with Revelation 3:16? Israel's sin was taking God for granted. Casual, off-hand.

What about feignedly, Judah's sin? It is replaced in the *Revised English Bible* and the *New International Version* with 'in pretense'. *The Living Bible* is very plain. It says, "Her sorrow was only faked". *The Amplified Bible* says, "Judah did not return to Me in sincerity and with her whole heart, but in sheer hypocrisy." To feign means to simulate or pretend.

I think that it is pretty easily seen at this point and time that just before Judah fell to the Babylonians, that the sins of these two nations fall into two broad categories that are actually, in many respects, quite similar.

Israel's was dominated by an attitude of casual indifference that produced a synchronistic religion that was, in reality, nothing more than out-and-out idolatry as far as God was concerned. But all the while they seemingly prospered and were deceived into thinking that somehow God approved. That is very important when we try to make an application to the Worldwide Church of God. In the late 1970s and early 1980s the income of the Worldwide

Church of God was reaching \$200 million a year. The church was seemingly prospered which makes it very easy for people to think since they were part of producing that prosperity and their lives were going along seemingly smooth, that somehow or another God approved. No, He did not approve. A person's economic state is not the equivalent of being in the same state spiritually. Maybe it is, maybe it is not. Money is a neutral.

Judah, by a hypocritical, insincerity that was nothing more than a deceit that would allow them to pretty much continue living as they always had, gave the appearance of really being 'with it' as we might say. This one is really interesting because at the time that Judah was exhibiting these characteristics to God they had as their king possibly the best king, outside of David, Judah or Israel ever had. His name was Josiah. God allowed him to be killed at the very height of his power. Apparently, when he was in high spirituality, in a pretty good relationship with God, because he did something dumb and stupid God took him out of the way and the nation's hypocrisy was exposed. They were hiding behind Josiah's spirituality.

Is it possible that we can replace the name of Josiah with Herbert W. Armstrong? "The temple, the temple, the temple of the Lord is here and I'm in the church." And all the while the relationship with God is deteriorating through a self-deception and a casual attitude.

The church is, I believe to a greater or lesser degree, afflicted with both of these problems and all of us need to evaluate ourselves in light of this as we move toward Passover. They both reveal a greater or lesser degree of loss of devotion to God and His purpose.

Our problem is partly doctrinal. But it is mostly attitude. There is not a great deal of difference between United, Global, Living, Church of the Great God, or Philadelphia in terms of doctrine. But I can tell you from my experience that there are some attitudinal differences. I think that this is the big problem between us and God. We love Him in terms of keeping His commandments, but we do not love Him *with all our heart!* It is the devotion that has waned. And God is not too sure about us as to where we stand in terms of our devotion.

Let us go back to Revelation 2 and we are going to look at two of the churches. I want to tell you right up front that I am approaching this from the premise that since all seven churches existed at the same time in the first century, there is absolutely no reason why all seven churches cannot exist at the same time in the 20th century. Almost every one of these involves attitude problems. We are only going to look at two of them because they are the most obvious.

Revelation 2:1 Unto the angel of the church of Ephesus write; These things say he that holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks; [Incidentally, verses 2 and 3 are quite complimentary.]

Revelation 2:4 Nevertheless I have somewhat against you, because you have left your first love.

I want you to see that. It does not say you have lost the love. The love is still there, but it is not being exercised is what He means. We are not following through in expressing that love to Him. Would you want to marry someone that could take you or leave you? Someone who treated you with casualness, who was indifferent and lackadaisical toward you? I do not think so. The problem with Ephesus is that they have left it. The love is still there, but they have left it.

Revelation 2:5 Remember therefore from whence you are fallen and repent and do the first works; or else I will come unto you quickly, and will remove your candlestick out of his place, except you repent.

I will tell you, that is the threat of somebody who is upset. That is a pretty stringent warning. I do not know that He does it to any of the others, that is, the threat to remove the candlestick. If He was a man we would say that God's feelings are hurt. After all He has done, after all the love He has shown us, we treat Him casually.

Revelation 3:15-17 I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot; I would that you were cold or hot. So then, because you are lukewarm and neither cold nor hot, I will spew you out of my mouth. Because you say, I am rich and increased with goods