

The Providence of God

- Genesis 45:4-8, Acts 2:22-24
- It was the summer of 1986 and Cindy and I were in Haiti with the New Directions, a ministry JL Williams started in 1968 and featured a racially diverse group of young people who traveled and proclaimed the Gospel through song and through the Word. There are several in this church who were part of that ministry, and 1986 was the last summer for the singing group. I was grateful for the two years Cindy and I had been able to travel with the smaller group, Damascus Road, and it was during those two years I had found a passion for preaching. I saw a hunger for the Word in many churches we visited, and I also discovered that being a traveling evangelist was not what I ultimately wanted to do. I remember preaching in a church in Ohio where I was told the pastor, who did not attend the services we held in his church that week, mostly talked to the congregation on Sundays about his belief in the power of crystals. They were starving for biblical preaching. God was stirring in my heart a desire to be in one place with a community of believers where we could grow up together in our faith and love the watching world by proclaiming the truth of the Gospel in word and deed. Hmm, where could I possibly do something like that? Of course, God was calling me again, as he had done when I was 15 and as he had when I was running from him in college, to be a pastor. And the exciting thing for me in the summer of 1986 was that I had been told by the pastor of the church I served as an elder that he wanted to bring me on as an associate pastor when we returned from Haiti and our ministry with the New Directions was done. But when we got back from Haiti, I learned that the elders had met while I was gone and decided that instead of hiring me as an associate pastor, they would begin the process of building a church. We were meeting in the New Directions building at the time. I was hurt and not a little bit frustrated over what I believed to be a broken promise. My thoughts were ten times more on what men were doing to me than they were on what God was doing. God had another plan for me, but all I could see at the time was that people I called brothers had done me wrong.
- I have heard it said we live our life forward, but it only makes sense when we look back. God had other plans for me in his divine providence, and that's what I want to talk to you about this morning. The providence of God.
- We are obviously skipping ahead to look at these few verses in Genesis 45 today, but no worries, we will still cover this passage on April 30, when it is on the schedule. But since we are in the season of the cross, I wanted for all of us to be reminded of the powerful providence of God in all things. We have seen that already in the life of Joseph and we see that in the life and death of Jesus. John Calvin wrote, "Ignorance of providence is the ultimate of all miseries; the highest blessedness lies in the knowledge of it." Let's look at these passages today under two main points: God's providence and Our Response.
- **God's Providence**
- John Piper has written extensively about God's providence and I will use some of his notes here. The word "providence" comes from the Latin word for "provide" which has two parts: "*pro*" ("forward or on behalf of") and "*vide*" ("to see"). So you might think that "provide" would mean: "to see forward" or "to foresee." But it doesn't. It means "to supply what is needed; to give sustenance or support." And so the noun "providence" has come to mean the act of "providing for or sustaining and governing the universe by God." We say in English: "I'll see to that," meaning, "I will provide for that, or I will make sure that is taken care of." We do that on a small scale when our wife mentions the trash being full and we say, "I'll see to it. I'll take care of it." God does it on a much larger scale. He says, "The universe has needs. I'll see to it."
- We have already seen this in the book of Genesis. Remember the story of Abraham sacrificing Isaac his son? Before they went up the mountain, Isaac said to his father, "Where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" (Genesis 22:7) Abraham answered, "God *will provide* for Himself the lamb for the burnt

offering, my son." And when God had shown Abraham a ram caught in the thorns, (Gen. 22:14) says, "Abraham called the name of that place *The Lord Will Provide*." Abraham saw the providence of God.

- Joseph also understood God's providence when all that his brothers could see was their sin. He says twice that *they* sold him. "You sold me here." He does not sugarcoat that or dismiss it. *You did this*. But listen to what is most important. Joseph says, "God sent me here." You sold me, but God sent me. You exercised agency in this, and you are responsible for what you did, but God is ultimately responsible. He says in verse 5, "God sent me before you to preserve life." Providence. God saw to it. It is the same with Jesus' death. Peter told the crowd on the day of Pentecost that Jesus was "delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God." God saw to it. But Peter also says to the Jews, "you crucified and killed (Jesus) by the hands of lawless men." They were guilty of Jesus' death, as are we all, but his death was the perfect plan and providence of God.
- John Piper again, says, "God never simply *sees* without *acting*. He is God. He is not a passive participant in a world that exists without his sustaining it. Wherever God is looking, God is acting. If God perceives, he performs. If he inspects, he effects. In other words there is a profound theological reason why "providence" does not merely mean "foreknowledge," but rather "the active sustenance and governance of the universe." When God "sees," he "sees to." His *seeing* is always with a view to *doing*." I love that because it gives peace when we have no peace. It brings clarity to our thinking when all we can see is everything going wrong. It also gives hope and strength for our obedience.
- Paul gives us the clearest biblical expression of this dynamic in Philippians 2:12-13. "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure." Notice: Our work does not *follow* God's work. Rather, our work is the *simultaneous effect* of God's work. Or as John Piper writes, "What Paul makes plain here is how fully our own effort is called into action. We do not wait for the miracle; we act the miracle" (*Providence*, 652). That leads us to...

- **Our Response**

- There are two common responses we find in Christians when they hear about the providence of God, and they line up with the parable of the talents Jesus told in Matthew 25. When the master in Jesus's parable gave talents to his servants and went away, two got busy multiplying their master's money, and one hid his talent in the dirt.
- Scott Hubbard writes, "Few doctrines have inflamed more holy ambition in the hearts of God's people. When some hear that God rules over galaxies and governments, over winds and waves, and over every detail in our little lives, they get busy doing good. Christians gripped by providence have built hospitals, ended slave trades, founded orphanages, launched reformations, and pierced the darkness of unreached peoples." These are two and five talent people.
- But the providence of God has also been used to excuse passivity, sloth, and the status quo. When some hear that God reigns over all, they reach for the remote, kick up their feet, take sin a little less seriously, and bury their talents six feet under. They may do good when the opportunity arises, when the schedule allows, but they will rarely *search* for good to do.
- Hubbard told the story of when William Carey, the pioneering missionary to India, first proposed the idea of sending Christians to unreached places, an older pastor reportedly protested, "Sit down, young man, sit down and be still. When God wants to convert the heathen, he will do it without consulting either you or me." If that is our view of God's providence, then our posture will most likely be to just sit and wait idly for God to do something. One thing Christians often say is that they will act only when they see an "open door."
- Paul prayed for open doors, but he also looked for them and turned handles whenever he could to see if they would open. In 1 Corinthians 16 he writes about his ministry in Ephesus, "I will stay in Ephesus until Pentecost, for a wide door for effective ministry has opened to me, and there are many adversaries." Hmmm. How did that door open, Paul? Did you get an invitation to come to Ephesus? No. We find his answer in Acts 19. He was passing through Greece and came to Ephesus and "There he

found some disciples.” They only knew about John’s preaching, so Paul told them about the Messiah whom John the Baptist was pointing to, and when they heard about Jesus, they were baptized in the Holy Spirit. They became believers. Paul may have said after that, “Hey guys, let’s go to the synagogue.” We don’t know, but with or without those 12 men, Paul went to the synagogue and for three months proclaimed the kingdom of God to the Jews in Ephesus. When there was resistance to his preaching, he took the disciples and went to the hall of Tyrannus in Ephesus and stayed there for two years so that (catch this), “all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks.” (Acts 19:20) Paul didn’t sit and wait until the divine hand of God opened a door and pushed him through it. He turned the handle and if it opened, he walked in. He trusted in God’s providence.

- Scott Hubbard writes, “Too often, by saying, ‘There was no open door,’ we mean that there was no obvious, divine orchestration of events that made our path unmistakable. (Someone might say) ‘I didn’t share the gospel because no one seemed interested.’ Or, ‘I didn’t have that hard conversation because we just never ran into each other.’ Or, ‘I didn’t confess that sin because there didn’t seem to be a good time.’ Providence, if distorted, can excuse us from all manner of uncomfortable duties.”
- When William Carey gazed toward India, he did not see what we might call an open door: fifty million Muslims and Hindus living half a world and two oceans away. That’s possibly all the older pastor saw. Yet Carey went anyway, believing that God, in his providence, could make a way where there seemed to be no way. And India is still bearing fruit from his faith.
- Nothing about your life or mine is an accident. Let’s pray daily that God would open our eyes to see the good in what he is doing in and through us, as Joseph did, instead of fixating on the bad that others do to us or have done to us. Let’s learn to rejoice in who we are and what we are by God’s providence and learn day by day to put away the unrighteous thoughts that flood our minds and tell us we are not worthy of God’s love and not able to be used by God.
- Let’s stand and read together this part of the Heidelberg Catechism. I will ask the questions and then we will read the answers together. Question 27: What do you understand by the providence of God?
- **Providence is the almighty and ever present power of God by which he upholds, as with his hand, heaven and earth and all creatures, and so rules them that leaf and blade, rain and drought, fruitful and lean years, food and drink, health and sickness, prosperity and poverty—all things, in fact, come to us not by chance but from his fatherly hand.**
- Question 28: How does the knowledge of God’s creation and providence help us?
- **We can be patient in adversity, thankful in prosperity, and for the future we can have good confidence in our faithful God and Father that no creature shall separate us from his love. For all creatures are so completely in his hand that without his will they can neither move nor be moved.**
- Prayer/Greet One Another