

Doctrine for everyday life: God's Providence

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- [0 : 0 0] So, tonight our doctrine is the providence of God. And I want to begin with a Christmas card.
- I often start with a Christmas card, especially don't often start in, what month are we in? March, with a Christmas card. But this week on Wednesday, I decided that was the day to clear my drawer.
- Admin is not my strong point. So, since lockdown, I hadn't actually gone to the drawer. And so, I cleared out all of the letters that had been piling up. And I found this Christmas card from December 2020. God's timing is wonderful. And you'll see why I say God's timing is wonderful when we're thinking about God's providence. Let me read just some of this. It's a letter or a card from a lady called Angela. It begins, to Reverend James. It's a good title. It's a good start.
- Where do I begin? I walked into your parish one day, bewildered and upset. I'd seen one of your parishioners guiding the children in their spiritual journey. The same lovely man guided me into your church. And the story goes on of her coming in, feeling very low spiritually, emotionally, struggling to care for herself. And she came in, and she was welcomed. And we prayed for her.
- We gave her some money. We directed her towards Bethany. And that was the beginning for her of spiritual recovery. And not just of spiritual recovery. She is now training to be a lawyer.
- [1 : 4 7] And things have really changed. And she wrote this at the end. Where is it? I was amazed on that fateful day, as your church doors were not usually open on that day.
- That was the time when we were having early morning services to accommodate all the restrictions. And so there's a wonderful Christmas card to reflect on, thinking about the providence of God.
- It's a wonderful doctrine that God, our God, is able to take up thousands of events and decisions and conversations, which can seem utterly random to us, but in God's hands can often achieve saving purposes and always achieving his purposes. It's a doctrine that's been cherished and loved all through church history. Charles Spurgeon often has great quotes. He says this of providence, the providence of God is the great protector of our life and usefulness, and under the divine care, we are perfectly safe from danger. So it's recognized as one of those bedrock doctrines that's good news. But I wonder, how do we view life actually? Because not everybody cherishes, values, providence. We hear a lot of talk about luck and chance and karma, coincidence.
- Not everybody speaks about providence. How do we see the small and great moments of our lives? Those chance meetings and conversations, the flat tire and the broken technology, the medical reports, the daily Bible passage that speaks to our need directly. How do we think about climate crisis or pandemic or the war in Ukraine? Who or what is in control? Now for many people, that's not a question they ever think about. Or perhaps they think nobody is in control. It's the laws of the universe.

We make our own luck. Or what goes around comes around. Now others would say, well, God's in charge. Sort of. Some people would have the idea that if there is a creator, well, perhaps he, as it were, wound the earth up at the beginning and now it just kind of runs its own course and God doesn't get involved. Others within the Christian community imagine that God has limits. So there's a school of theology called open theism that says when it comes to the future, God doesn't always know what's about to happen. That's an attempt to, as it were, get God off the hook when it comes to suffering. Well, God didn't know our God was absent. What does the Bible have to say about the small and large moments of life? And we're told over and over and over again that God is the God of all providence.

[4 : 59] Psalm 115 verse 3, our God is in heaven. He does whatever pleases him. Proverbs chapter 16 is a chapter full of providence. Verse 9, in their hearts humans plan their course, but the Lord establishes their steps. So the end of chapter 16 verse 33, it says even when someone casts the lot, the decision lies with God. So our aim tonight is to see the truth of providence as we find it in the Bible, that we would trust the God of providence, that we would draw comfort from this doctrine, indeed that it would give us a sense of joy. It's a vital doctrine. I was learning this week from two different Johns. First from John Calvin. He has a lot of helpful material in his institutes. He has the image of God holding the helm of the world. God is the captain. He is in complete control. Calvin says he's not a momentary creator.

You know, he doesn't make the world and then kind of wash his hands off it. No, he's acting and directing in the actions of all of his creatures. And again, that's not in a vague and limited way. That's not, you know, God controls weather patterns or perhaps those things like that. Rather, he superintends the sparrows. So God holds the helm of the world. And then John Piper has written a massive book on providence, and he describes providence as God's purposeful sovereignty. That's very helpful. So that's a reminder that God is the sovereign king. He sustains and controls all of creation towards his intended purpose. And that purpose is for his glory and for our joy. Providence is a huge topic within the Bible. We are going to have a narrow focus, hopefully to give us a flavor of just how extensive it is.

So we're going to go to Psalm 104 in just a moment to see God's providence over the natural world. And then we'll go to the book of Genesis, to the story of Joseph, to see God's providence over human actions and even over human sin. We need to think about that. So that in everyday life we would trust him, we would worship him, and that it would help us to pray to him as well. So turn with me in your Bibles to Psalm 104. We're going to read together from verse 19 to verse 35. So this is the second half of this psalm. And there we read, he made the moon to mark the seasons and the sun knows when to go down.

You bring darkness, it becomes night, and all the beasts of the forest prowl. The lions roar for their prey and seek their food from God. The sun rises and they steal away. They return and lie down in their dens. Then people go out to their work, to their labor until evening. How many are your works, Lord?

In wisdom you made them all. The earth is full of your creatures. There is the sea, vast and spacious, teeming with creatures beyond number, living things both large and small. There the ships go to and fro, and Leviathan, which you formed to frolic there. All creatures look to you to give them their food at the proper time. When you give it to them, they gather it up. When you open your hand, they are satisfied with good things. When you hide your face, they are terrified. When you take away their breath, they die and return to the dust. When you send your spirit, they are created, and you renew the face of the ground. May the glory of the Lord endure forever. May the Lord rejoice in his works. He who looks at the earth and it trembles, who touches the mountains and they smoke. I will sing to the Lord all my life.

[9 : 02] I will sing praise to my God as long as I live. May my meditation be pleasing to him as I rejoice in the Lord. But may sinners vanish from the earth and the wicked be no more. Praise the Lord, my soul. Praise the Lord. So Psalm 104 is all about God's providence over the natural world. So the first nine verses, we began with those, we began with those, God is creator. Verses 10 to 18, we sang those, God is provider and sustainer, not in a passive way, but in an active way. And then we just read verses 19 to 23, where it speaks about God being over the rhythms of nature. So the moon comes out and the lions come out and they go to work, they go hunting their prey, but then the moon goes down, the sun comes up, the lions go to bed and the lions go to bed and the people go out and they begin their work. There's rhythms in nature and God is over those. And then verse 27 to 30, there is that a very clear picture that God brings life, God sustains life and God ends life. Animals, people, everything.

And so the impact of this Psalm is that we're invited to see in the natural world, God's providence up close and personal. It's unavoidable if we have eyes to see it. That we're invited to see past the laws of nature. So often that's where people are inclined to stop. We see beyond those to see the God who sets those laws and who works through the laws of nature. We're invited to walk around in a beautiful spring day and to see God's providence on display in the beauty, the diversity, the wonders of nature. The buds and the trees, the birds who feed, the weather that we enjoy, all the life cycles come from God.

Volcanoes, tsunamis under the providence of God too. God's providence governs and creates. Psalm 104 is also really helpful because it speaks to the purpose behind God's providence.

Verse 31, may the glory of the Lord endure forever. May the Lord rejoice in his works. God's providence is a demonstration of God's glory. His wisdom, his goodness, his power are on full display to the world. As Manley Hopkins, the poet, said, creation is charged with the grandeur of God.

And a day like today, we see it in full view, don't we? So God's purpose in providence over the natural world is that his glory would be on display and that he would have joy in his works. There's a reminder that from the beginning, God said creation was good and creation is still good. Yes, there is brokenness, but yes, there is beauty in God's eyes. And there's another purpose as well. Verse 33 and 34, I will sing to the Lord all my life. I will sing praise to my God as long as I live. As we see the glory of God in providence, it's intended to bring us joy and to draw out praise. The natural world, as Alistair McGrath says, is a gateway to praise. Our five senses are all opportunities for us to praise the God of providence, whether that's a glorious sunset or a glorious meal.

[13 : 20] And that's absolutely in line with Jesus teaching on providence in nature in the Gospels. Matthew chapter 6, Jesus told his disciples, don't worry, God provides for the birds, God clothes the flowers, and how much more will he feed and clothe you. As God's people, we trust in a God who controls and who cares about the little things, the little things in nature. But that also reminds us that God cares about the little things in our lives because he's our father. And then by extension, God's people, we are to be a thankful people. Thankful for the thousands of ways in which he feeds, clothes, cares, provides for us. That Jesus is clear that God has a special care for his children, for his church.

Perhaps that changes our focus when it comes to God's providence or when we think about God's sovereignty. Often attention is drawn to God's control when things go wrong. And maybe in a questioning way, when the crash happens, when the hunger hits, when the storm blows through the town.

But how often do we miss God's everyday, and we could call it his hidden providence, the thousands and millions of times he protects and provides and gives safety. As God's people, we're invited to walk through this world, seeing his control and being thankful for his care.

So there's God's providence over the natural world, very briefly. Now we're going to move to the book of Genesis and to the story of Joseph. But before we do that, we're just going to pause momentarily because we need to recognize whenever we're thinking about any of the doctrines of God, that there is an element of mystery involved. There is mystery connected to God's providence, and so we need to approach it with humility. Perhaps one way to think about it is to think about the relationship between parents and children. Children will often have lots of questions, lots of requests. Why can't I have sweets for breakfast? Why can't I have unlimited screen time? Why is it a bad idea to ride my bike with my eyes closed? And many, many others. That's what children do. But what should parents have? Parents should have, should have, always, but we should have more wisdom, more understanding, a broader perspective on the world. So we understand why certain things are bad, and certain things are good and better. Certain things are safe, and certain things are dangerous.

And so children are then invited to trust their parents who have a greater knowledge of how the world works. Sounds very ideal, doesn't it? Well, that's how it's supposed to work. And mystery, providence and mystery, many questions are prompted when we think about God's providence.

[16 : 36] If God controls actions and decisions, does that make me just a robot? If God controls actions and decisions, well, how can I be held accountable? Or how can God be holy and sinless, and have providence over sinful actions? But how can God not be the author who's responsible for that sin? So there's some really big and deep and complex questions associated with the doctrine of providence. And it requires us to come towards it with humility and with faith, to be able to hear the the clear teaching of the Bible, but with a readiness to live with the tensions that we sometimes are going to discover, and to be able to trust the character of God and the character of his word. So we'll see a little of that together now as we think about the story of Joseph. So we're going to begin thinking about how the story of Joseph demonstrates God's providence over human actions and human decisions. Now the story of

Joseph is a great place to go for thinking about God's providence. We see God at work in so many different ways, directing lives and decisions and actions and circumstances towards his saving purposes for his covenant family. For the family of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, we see God at work. Now we're going to be in Genesis 39 together for a few moments, which in a sense takes us to the middle of Joseph's story.

So his brothers by this stage have sold him as a slave to traders. He's ended up in Egypt where he's been sold to this man called Potiphar. And so Genesis 39, let's read verses 2 to 5 and watch out for our key word, which is the word favor. Actually we'll read verse 1 to 5, won't we? Yes. Now Joseph had been taken down to Egypt. Potiphar, an Egyptian who was one of Pharaoh's officials, the captain of the guard, bought him from the Ishmaelites who had taken him there. The Lord was with Joseph so that he prospered and he lived in the house of his Egyptian master. When his master saw that the Lord was with him and that the Lord gave him success in everything he did, Joseph found favor, there's our word, in his eyes and became his attendant. Potiphar put him in charge of his household and he entrusted to his care everything he owned. From the time he put him in charge of his household and of all that he owned, the Lord blessed the household of the Egyptian because of Joseph. The blessing of the Lord was on everything

Potiphar had, both in the house and in the field. Favor. What does that mean in this context? It means that God is acting on the heart and the will and the mind of this Egyptian wealthy man called Potiphar so that Joseph the slave becomes head of the household. Now we're familiar with the story perhaps and maybe that doesn't surprise us because we already know the direction it's going. But isn't that remarkable that you would buy someone as a slave and very quickly elevate him to be just below yourself in prominence?

Favor. We see favor again at the end of the chapter so things turn in a different direction in Potiphar's house. He's falsely accused by Potiphar's wife and is thrown into prison and let's now turn our attention towards the end of the chapter. Verse 20 to 22. It says where he's in the king's prison.

[20 : 53] But while Joseph was there in the prison, the Lord was with him. He showed him kindness and granted him favor. There's a word again. In the eyes of the prison warder. So the warder put Joseph in charge of all those held in charge of the prison. He was held in charge of the prison. He was held in charge of the prison.

And he was made responsible for all that was done there. The warden paid no attention to anything under Joseph's care because the Lord was with Joseph and gave him success in whatever he did.

So there's that word favor again. Potiphar has wrongly treated Joseph, but the Lord was with Joseph. And again, the Lord is bringing his favor to bear so that this prison guard acts in the same way as Potiphar. And again, doesn't it strike us as surprising that a prisoner becomes in charge of the prison? That a prisoner would be entrusted with that level of responsibility? It's the favor of God in display because God is with Joseph. Now we're not done with seeing this idea of God's favor in Joseph's life. He is in the prison. A couple of people who work for the Pharaoh come into the prison.

They have some dreams. One gets promoted back to his job again. And Joseph says, remember me when you get your job again, and instead he gets forgotten. So he's there in prison for two more years. Then Pharaoh has a dream and Joseph is summoned. And at the end of that chapter, chapter 41, verse 41 to 43, we read, So Pharaoh said to Joseph, I hereby put you in charge of the whole land of Egypt. Then Pharaoh took a signet ring from his finger and put it on Joseph's finger. He dressed him in robes of fine linen and put a gold chain around his neck. He made him ride in a chariot as his second in command. And people shouted before him, make way. Thus he put him in charge of the whole land of Egypt. How do we explain that kind of turnaround? Well, again, to help us, we can think about how Stephen in Acts chapter 7 thought about this turnaround. Stephen said, God rescued him out of all his afflictions and gave him favor and wisdom before Pharaoh, king of Egypt, who made him ruler over Egypt and over all his household. God is turning the hearts and the minds and the hearts and the minds and the wills of an Egyptian rich man, an Egyptian prison officer, and the Egyptian king Pharaoh, so that his purposes come to pass. Now each of them, they are acting, they are deciding, but God is fully decisive. His are the plans that come to pass.

God rules over the thoughts, the directions, the actions of not just of his people, but of all people.

[24 : 24] Because remember, these are Egyptians. Three responses as we consider God's providence over human actions. The first is that of humility.

From this we go to, for this we go to James chapter 4 verse 15. So James is talking about people making their plans in their business and not to boast and project forward about how things are going to go in the future. James says, you ought to say, if it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that.

We are not to boast. We are not to hold tightly to our plans, thinking so long as our plan is made sufficiently robustly enough, it's bound to happen. As the people of God, we are encouraged and invited to see God over our family, our work, our future plans, and to have the necessary humility that comes with that, that comes with our planning. That's one response. Another response is that we're invited to have courage. For here we can go to Romans 8 and verse 31, where Paul says, if God is for us, who can be against us? And within that wonderful chapter of Romans 8, what's the source of our trust is the people of God? It's in the all-powerful God of providence who is for his people. It's this God who says nothing can separate us from the love of God that's in Christ Jesus. And so we're invited to take heart and to have courage, even if it means suffering for our faith, even if it means being persecuted for our faith. If God is for us, who can be against us? And this reality should also provoke us towards worship as well. As we see it being worked out in the gospel, so in Acts chapter 2, Peter, as he preaches at Pentecost, verse 23, Jesus was handed over to you by God's deliberate plan and foreknowledge.

And he draws attention to the crowds that you had your wicked designs in wanting to kill Jesus, but God has had his eternal purposes, and those purposes came to fulfillment. God controlled the events of the gospel so that Jesus could be your savior and mine. God was over human acting and deciding so that in the fullness of God's time, Jesus would die on the cross to take our sin to bring us to God.

Now, we need to move towards God's providence over sinful human actions. And here is where we need to take, I think, the greatest care. We will see it in Scripture, but we need to be careful in how we handle it.

[27 : 46] I came across a very helpful, well, for me anyway, it was a helpful illustration from John Piper again. He was talking about how scientists have found a way to handle radioactive uranium.

And they can handle that uranium so as to create useful energy without themselves being contaminated by the radiation.

And Piper says if people can figure that out, then we begin to understand how much more we can see it here in the Joseph story.

Now, how is that brought out in the story of Joseph? So let's go back to the beginning of Joseph's story. And what do we find? We find multiple sin there, don't we? We find favoritism from his father.

That's wrong. We find the sin of hatred among his brothers. We find the sin of jealousy of the brothers. We find them plotting murder and then in their greed plotting to sell Joseph as a slave.

[29 : 11] All of those are sinful actions. Even when he gets himself to, when he is taken to Egypt, we find that he has lied about, he's sinned against, he has forgotten, promises are broken.

After 13 years, slave and prisoner, from the beginning of the story into Egypt until he takes power, and then the brothers come to Egypt for food.

Remember, there's the global famine, people coming from all over to Egypt because Joseph has been given wisdom to know how to handle the famine. And so his brothers come. And in chapter 45, we find when Joseph finally reveals himself to his brothers.

And the section that we want to look at here is chapter 45 from verse 4 to verse 8 to see Joseph's understanding of what was going on.

Then Joseph said to his brothers, come close to me. When they had done so, he said, I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt, and now do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you.

[30 : 42] For two years now, there has been famine in the land and for the next five years, there will be no plowing and reaping. But God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverer, by a great deliverance.

So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God. He made me father to Pharaoh, lord of his entire household and ruler of Egypt.

Now, did you notice three times Joseph declares, God sent me. He says to the brothers, you sold me, but God sent me.

And what's he saying in that? He's saying that above their evil, sinful plans stood the Lord God. And with them, they were motivated by hatred and greed, but God had his purposes of salvation and love.

God is able to work even through those sinful human actions in order to bring about his great deliverance. It's an idea that's repeated in a sense the key verse towards the end of the Joseph story.

[32 : 08] We can read Genesis 50, we'll read verse 19 and then verse 20. Again, so this is after their father Jacob dies and the brothers are scared, they're thinking, well now, Joseph's going to take his revenge.

But Joseph said to them, don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.

Joseph says to his brothers, you, you meant evil against me, but God, God meant your evil for good. God meant your evil for the saving of many lives, for the keeping of his promises, for continuing the plan of salvation.

And so the story of Joseph is reminding us of the extent of God's providence, that God has these eternal purposes that will not change when it comes to salvation, and those purposes can take in billions of factors, including the sinful actions of human beings like us as he works out his salvation.

And remember, that does not make him the author of sin, does not make him accountable for sin, but it says he is wise enough to work through that sinful action.

[33 : 36] Again, we hear this from the apostles as they begin to share the gospel in the book of Acts.

Again, this is Peter, Acts chapter 4, verses 10 to 12. It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified. Now, there's an evil, sinful action, enemies of Jesus plotted to crucify him.

By the name of Jesus of Nazareth, whom you crucified, but whom God raised from the dead, their saving good, that this man stands before you healed. Jesus is the stone you builders rejected.

It's a wicked thing to reject God's Savior. But that Jesus who they rejected has become the cornerstone. He is the foundation of God's kingdom.

Good purpose from their sinful actions. Salvation is found in no one else, for there's no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved.

[34 : 43] The greatest good in all human history, the salvation of sinners, is achieved through the greatest evil in all history, the killing of the innocent, righteous son of God.

God's and that comes to pass by God's providence. As we conclude our thoughts, four ways to live under the providence of God.

The first, and we've already said it, is it calls us to live with humility, to remember, Psalm 31, verse 15, our times are in God's hands.

Humility acknowledges his right to govern as he chooses, acknowledges that his plans are the ones that will come to pass. trust. We're also invited to live with trust when we think about the providence of God because this is our father.

This is our father's world that we are thinking of and that we are living in. God has a special care for his church and for his children and we need to take comfort in that.

[36 : 04] When all we can see is chaos and confusion, God still sees with clarity. He knows what he is doing. He is still on the throne.

And there is a freedom in accepting our limits and learning to trust God's character when we can't understand or see in the moment what he is doing.

And I think when we think about the providence of God we're also invited to live with praise, to live with our eyes open to the reality that at every moment, every conversation, every turn in our lives is being directed and governed by God.

Our lives are being sustained by God. It's a source for worship. And there's also a source of thankfulness as we recognize that in God's wise providence our failures are not final.

our God is wise enough to work good even out of our sinful actions. Not that he would ever encourage us to sin because God is holy and he hates sin but he's so wise that he's able to take up our sinful actions to achieve ultimate and lasting good.

[37 : 31] And too, when you think about the providence of God it's an encouragement for us to pray. In our community groups we'll be thinking along these lines.

The God of providence, the God who governs everything, chooses to work through his people's prayers. In his wisdom our prayers are instruments achieving God's purposes.

That's a motivation to pray. God in his providence has placed you in the family that you're in, in the friendship group that you're in, in the community that you live in, in the workplace that you find yourself in, by his design so that we can pray.

So that we can pray for others. Knowing that God works through the prayers of his people. Praying his saving good, his blessing would flow in the lives of many.

Back to my 2020 Christmas card. This lady Angela, she didn't know, walking the streets of Edinburgh that morning, that that would become, in God's providence, the pathway to hope for her.

[38 : 55] But praise God, he did. the person who welcomed Angela didn't know her story, had no idea what a simple welcome would do, but God did.

We couldn't know that the simple act of praying for someone who was in distress and giving a little bit of money and pointing someone to a source of help would lead to recovery, but God did.

We couldn't know that a snowball of God's mercy would begin from this place, but God did, because we have a God of providence who plans and who directs our steps, our lives, our stories.

The providence of God isn't something to philosophize over, it's something that should lead us to praise. We'll finish with a quote from B.B.

Warfield, a firm faith in the universal providence of God is the solution to all earthly troubles.

[40 : 06] Let's pray together. Lords, our God, we thank you that you are the God with universal providence, that you are controlling, governing, ruling, sustaining, not just partially, but totally, not just some of our lives, but all of our lives.

We thank you for the hope that we can find when we recognize your character, that you are good and that you are trustworthy. Lord, we ask that for those of us who are Christians, that we would rest in your fatherly care over us, to be glad that we are in your hands and not in our own, that we be glad that we're not suffering to the winds of fate and chance, but our steps are being planned.

Lord, for any tonight who aren't Christians, may you show them your goodness, even in bringing them here this evening, to consider your control and your controlling all history so that in your right time, Jesus would come as the Savior we all need.

Lord, may you cause each one of us to be looking to him with faith. And we ask too that you'd help us to pray as we realize that you have deliberately chosen to place us exactly where we are, that we would want to be instruments of your blessing to the people around us.

Help us, we pray, in Jesus' name. Amen. So we will sing a hymn to close, Christ is mine forevermore, and then, if you can, stick around for 10 or 15 minutes, and we'll have our discussion groups.

[42 : 11] So let's stand together and sing. Let's stand together and sing. Let's stand together and sing.