

Class 5 Pastoral Counsel concerning Providence

Tonight, we will consider the following plan for our consideration:

1. Review of the main concepts in biblical providence
2. General comments concerning Providence from a pastoral perspective
3. Further comments about human responsibility
4. Suggestions for sharing biblical providence concepts with others
5. Final thoughts on how biblical providence helps us

REVIEW OF SOME MAIN IDEAS IN BIBLICAL DIVINE PROVIDENCE

1. *We must be absolutely certain and assured that God's providence is the perfect extension of His sovereign and perfect decrees, and God's providence extends to all aspects of life.*
2. *We must understand that divine providence is secretive to us, known only to God.*
3. *God's sympathy with His elect people includes the knowledge of and compassion concerning our misunderstanding or ignorance concerning divine providence.*
4. *God gives hurting Christians freedom to pray and seek His face and will in all aspects of life, and divine providence means that God answers our prayers in perfect keeping with His will in all categories of our life experience.*
5. *A belief in divine providence does not negate the necessity or importance of human responsibility and diligent obedience to God's Word.*
6. *After we have done our best, we must wait upon the Lord.*
7. *We must learn not to criticize God in cross providences, but to wait patiently, quietly, and submissively to God's will.*
8. *We must never doubt God's love for us, no matter what happens in this life.*
9. *We must always understand that God works for our good, and the good He accomplishes is that good, which is essential, holy, and eternal.*
10. *At the heart of every temptation is an attack on God's nature and goodness; thus, we must fight against darkness and discouragement with God's truth about Himself and His promises to us in Christ.*

GENERAL COMMENTS

1. In order to make biblical providence easily accessible to your mind and heart, seek to write in your own words a biblically true statement that covers the heart of divine providence. In this way, you can call it back to mind quickly. Review the statement often and learn it well. It is especially important to say and review this statement in times of anxiety, disappointment, and hurt.

Example: Providence is God's sovereign and good control over my life and all things that happen to me, so that I can live in trust and peace that no matter what happens, I am certainly and unendingly in the loving and wise hands of God, resulting in my good and His glory in my life.

2. Select your favorite Bible verses on Providence and memorize them. Quote them to yourself until you are well familiar with them. Learn them well and treat them as your friends. When you hurt and turn to these verses to soak in their truth, you will find that as your friends these verses will bring comforting truth to you. You will need these verses when your heart hurts and your mind is troubled. You will better draw fresh help from these verses of Scripture if you already know them well BEFORE the problem arises.
3. During times of hardship and difficulty, (1) be stubbornly strict and (2) understandably gentle with yourself. You will need to wisely apply both of these to yourself in proper proportion for your soul's good.
4. During such painful times, soak in seasons of prayer and fellowship with Jesus. You will get to know Jesus much better during these times, especially if you are knowledgeable with biblical teaching and truths. In your heart embrace Jesus, hold onto Jesus, trust in Jesus, and lean on Jesus until your anxieties subside. Sing to Jesus, praise the heavenly Father for His love and goodness, and yield yourself to the Lord's care and wise leadership. As frightening as it may seem at the time, it is vital that you yield yourself to the Lord's will and choice for you. This is a battle for your peace and God's glory in your life.
5. Even though it is understandable and common to be frustrated and feel negative feelings during trouble, put a harness on the explosive aspects of these things; do not give oxygen to anger and bitterness, for if you do, these horrible things will only grow in your life and eventually take over, leaving you sour and perpetually angry.
6. Never lie to yourself or to God! Only the truth heals and helps, no matter how painful it may feel at the time.
7. Do not focus on your pain; rather, focus on God, His promises, and your eternal heavenly joy. We become what we focus our minds and hearts on. Revel in God's love for you in Christ; think much about what He has said in the Scriptures and apply appropriately every truth to your life.

FURTHER COMMENTS CONCERNING HUMAN RESPONSIBILITY

A major aspect of having difficulty with divine providence is the trouble we have with other people, what they do and say that hurt us. We need to give a bit more time to considering how we are to understand human responsibility and divine Providence. How do these relate to each other as experienced in life?

1. People think and act in keeping with who they are and what they are. Each person is responsible for the choices they make and how they act.
 - Those who are doing what is wrong often will seek to justify themselves by a variety of ways, none of which are really accurate. We are responsible for what we do. We are always responsible to God, and sometimes this responsibility relates to human law and societal standards. This in and of itself is an entire course of study. The main point for us to consider today is to realize that PROVIDENCE DOES NOT ERADICATE HUMAN WILL AND HUMAN RESPONSIBILITY.

2. God is not responsible for the sins and wrong choices and doings of people, nor is He absent and disconnected with the same. Biblical Providence gives us a correct way of thinking about both human responsible agency (HRA) and divine providence. We think of these things relating together in primary and secondary causes. We must learn to see a difference between cause and function. Cause is behind things, function is what we see in things. God is always behind all things working for our good, no matter how dark the day may seem.
3. We must always remember that the Bible teaches that living life in this fallen world by necessity of sin includes pain, sorrow, suffering, and heartache; one cannot live here in this sinful and fallen world without these things. But, the Bible also teaches (and it is very important for Christians to remember this) that (1) God gives grace to His people when we endure and experience tough things in life, and (2) God is working through all human experiences (even the hard ones) to bring about our eternal good and His glory.
4. It is important to remember that God is the JUDGE! God will judge all evil-doers and wickedness of humans. God sees and knows all things, and He will judge sinful deeds and make all things right one day.
5. In certain appropriate matters, human government (generically speaking) is given the role by God to apply justice in temporal matters that fall into categories that are meant to be given to the government for societal order and peace. In this way the government is meant by God to be an instrument of God for temporal justice.

SHARING THE TRUTH OF BIBLICAL PROVIDENCE WITH OTHERS

When we learn biblical truth, it is often the case that we have opportunity to share this truth with others. It is especially important to share biblical Providence with others. This is part of what the Bible says in 2 Corinthians 1 where we are told to comfort others with the comfort we have received. But we must be careful and wise in this matter; how are we to share (especially with hurting people) these important but complicated truths?

1. Never share any truth as if you are the expert on this truth. Confess your weakness and limited scope of understanding.
2. Anchor all truths in the Bible, the Lordship of Jesus Christ, and the sovereign and good nature of God.
3. Teaching Providence to others must follow a biblical sequence of ideas and concepts. We must begin with the deep foundational truth about the person of God and His relationship with and sovereignty over creation and the human race.
4. It is important to keep the goodness of God always in view; His redemptive love and hope give us a greater clarity and perspective on Providence in life's troubling experiences. Without God's person and redemptive love and hope, many people degenerate into thinking about Providence in mechanistic terms where God is seen only as the manager of a thoughtless and heartless process.
5. People often have damaged emotions. Damaged emotions are those emotions that have not sufficiently healed to consider an objective and truthful view of those experiences that caused their damaged emotions. Until these emotions have enough healing, there will be an inability to

reasonably, rationally, and biblically think on Providence. An unhealed emotionally damaged person will often make rash statements about God, life, and the pain they feel, and they make such statements as to indicate they are unopen and unwilling to listen to the truth. In such cases, it is best to proceed in the following manner:

- 1) Share about truth as far as they seem to allow you to.
- 2) Share concern, compassion, and kindness to them.
- 3) Point them to Jesus.
- 4) Leave the door open for further discussion.
- 5) Pray with them.
- 6) When they seem to be more teachable, establish the theological base and point to the love of Jesus; encourage them to have faith and submit to Christ.

FINAL THOUGHTS:

How does belief in the providence of God help us?

Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 28

Q. How does the knowledge of God's creation and providence help us?

A. We can be patient when things go against us, thankful when things go well and for the future we can have good confidence in our faithful God and Father that nothing in creation will separate us from his love. For all creatures are so completely in God's hand that without his will they can neither move nor be moved.

Reminder: Why God Grants Dark Providences:

In chapter three of Murray's booklet, a chapter entitled, "God's Designs in Dark Providences," Murray explores some of God's purposes and reasons for allowing dark providence or affliction in the lives of His people.

1. Sufferings are to try us and prove the genuineness of our faith.
Murray quotes Thomas Boston ("The Crook in the Lot") as saying, "The crook in the lot is the great engine of providence for making men appear in their true colors." We are reminded of Jesus' parable of the sower and the seed. Some false seed was not shown until the afflictions and persecutions of this world came. Murray quotes Andrew Fuller as having said, "Afflictions refine some, but they consume others."

But for God's truly saved people, afflictions in providence show that we are truly Christian. 1 Peter 1 says that fiery trials prove our faith.

"When through fiery trials thy pathway shall lie,
My grace all-sufficient shall be thy supply;
The flame shall not hurt thee; I only design
Thy dross to consume, and thy gold to refine."

2. Sufferings expose our sins.
This may be outward sin or inward sin. It may be sin of character and motive. But the Lord uses the fire of suffering and hardship to cleanse us from fault and spiritual impurities.

3. Sufferings are to build character.

James 1:2-4 talks about how trials build the Christian's character. We must in the words of James 4 and 1 Peter 5 humble ourselves before the Lord. We must be teachable and pliable to the Lord. This requires that we be humble before the Lord, to fight against selfishness. Martyn Lloyd-Jones used to say, "We are on too good of terms with ourselves."

Sometimes during trials in life, we feel as though we will not be able to survive the ordeal. We will feel despair and hopelessness. John Newton was aware of this when he wrote this hymn ("Prayer Answered by Crosses"):

"I asked the Lord that I might grow
In faith and love and every grace,
Might more of His salvation know,
And seek more earnestly His face.

Twas He who taught me thus to pray;
And He, I trust, has answered prayer;
But it has been in such a way
As almost drove me to despair.

I hoped that, in some favored hour,
At once He'd answer my request,
And by His love's constraining power
Subdue my sins, and give me rest.

Instead of this, He made me feel
The hidden evils of my heart,
And let the angry powers of hell
Assault my soul in every part."

4. Sufferings bring us to know God better.

This is the prayer of Paul in Philippians 3:10, to know Christ!

Job is a good example of dark providence bringing him to know himself and God better.

"I walked a mile with pleasure,
She chatted all the way,
But left me none the wiser
For all she had to say.

I walked a mile with sorrow
And ne'er a word said she,
But oh the things I learned from her,
When sorrow walked with me."

5. Sufferings produce fruit in our lives and prepare us for usefulness.

A good text for this point is John 15.

Spurgeon said, "God gets His best soldiers out of the highlands of affliction."

Thomas Boston remarked, "It is the usual way of providence with me that blessing comes through several iron gates."

6. Sufferings lead us to make God our all and to prepare us for glory.

Again from Newton's hymn, "Prayer Answered by Crosses"

"Yea, more, with His own hand He seemed
Intent to aggravate my woe,
Crossed all the fair designs I schemed,
Blasted my gourds, and laid me low.

Lord, why is this? I trembling cried;
Will thou pursue this worm to death?
This is the way, the Lord replied
I answer prayer for grace and faith.

These inward trials I now employ
From self and pride to set thee free,
And break thy schemes of earthly joy,
That thou may'st seek all in me."

In Psalm 73 Asaph struggles with God concerning his life problems and the blessings that seem to be abundant with the wicked. Then he comes finally to see the truth: the wicked are destined for judgment, and he is destined for heavenly joy. Through his earthly trials, he comes to see how much he needs God. In 73:25 the text says, "Whom have I in heaven but thee? And there is none upon earth that I desire beside Thee."

We in this life in this sinful world will always live with some form of pain, disappointment, and need. The complexities of Divine Providence and our human limitations are such that we will not be able to figure out in our journey all that God is doing at any one point in time in all of life's experiences. We must, however, know and remember that God is with us, He is working for our good in all things, and all of our lives are in His sovereign and good hands. Always, in all things, God is working for us, in us, and through us for His kingdom cause and purpose in this world. And one day, through God's redemptive work in Christ's Lordship applied in Christ's second coming and in eternity, all will be well. And because ALL WILL BE WELL, THEN ALL IS WELL NOW. In all of life, we must seek to obey the Lord, honor the Lord, follow the Lord, and be of service to the Lord. This is the meaning of life: to glorify Him and enjoy Him forever.

Those who refuse to be comforted in this way (biblical Providence) are resistant to God and His truth in the Scripture. They do this, because there is a spiritual problem in their souls. This problem ALWAYS deals with a wrong relationship with and connection with God Himself. Everything in our lives, as it pertains to our reactions, always stems from your relationship with and perception of God Himself. This type of problem leads to anger and bitterness. The only solution is the application of the operation of God's great grace.