

The Providence of God 1 Samuel 24; Psalm 57 (text 57:2) by Rev. Tom Aicken

The subject we're taking up this evening is the providence of God. If we think of the Word of God as a treasure chest, this teaching on divine providence is surely one of its most precious gems. It's beautifully summarized in Lord's Day 10 of the Heidelberg Catechism, Question 27, "What do you mean by the providence of God?" Answer: "The almighty and everywhere present power of God; whereby, as it were by His hand, He upholds and governs heaven, earth, and all creatures; so that herbs and grass, rain and drought, fruitful and barren years, meat and drink, health and sickness, riches and poverty, yea, and all things come, not by chance, but by His fatherly hand."

Now there are certain things we should be careful to note about such providence at the outset. (1) Providence is a mystery. What I mean by that is that God's judgments are unsearchable and His ways past finding out. Can anyone look into the mind of God?

Can anyone determine beforehand what it is He is going to do next? We know that He's going to do everything He has promised to do, certainly, and we know that whatever He does in any and every circumstance is right. Yet, just as the wind blows, and we don't know its coming and going, so the Lord does as He pleases and we cannot predict the course that He's going to take.

Providence is a mystery, you see. It's not that we cannot know anything about this mystery, but, as with all the mysteries of God, we can know it only to the extent that He has chosen to reveal it to us. What He hasn't revealed belongs to His secret counsel, which is out of reach to us and well beyond our grasp.

Is it right to make plans? Indeed, we should make plans, but let's remember in doing so that, while in his heart a man plans his way, it's the Lord who directs his steps. We ought to say therefore, as James tells us, "If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that."

(2) Providence is a mystery, but it's always in the best interest of God's people, and we know that because God Himself has told us that in no uncertain terms. "Because you have made the Lord, even the Most High, your dwelling place, no evil shall befall you," says Psalm 91, "nor shall any plague come near

your dwelling.” Also Romans 8:28, “And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose.”

Does this mean that none of God’s people will ever get sick or experience any kind of affliction? No, but it does mean that our sickness (or whatever other trial it may be) is of God, that He brings such difficulties even upon His own people, the apple of His eye, and that these afflictions – as painful as they may be – are for our good. When we are chastened of the Lord, for instance, that, says Hebrews 12, is “for our profit, that we may be partakers of His holiness.” V. 11, “Now no chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but grievous; nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.”

(3) Providence covers everything that happens, is the almighty and everywhere present power of God whereby all things come not by chance but by His fatherly hand. As a matter of fact, providence must cover all that happens, or it covers nothing at all. That’s right. There can be no room for a spanner in the works; if God is not in control of everything, including the number of hairs on our head, He is ultimately not in control of anything. How can all things work together for our good? It’s only because of our God, says Ephesians 1:11, who “works all things according to the counsel of His will.” This includes all things in time, of course, but it also includes all things in eternity, as Romans 8:28-39 makes abundantly clear. We can be so impressed by this, beloved, and should be so overwhelmed by it, that we stand in awe of “the all-comprehending knowledge of God, that perfect knowledge” – as Charles Hodge once wrote – “which surveyed all the subjects of His work beforehand, all the necessities and circumstances of their being, all the means required for the accomplishment of the divine purpose, and all the results of those means from beginning to end.”

Stand in utter amazement of the Lord our God, believer, “for of Him and through Him and to Him are all things,” Romans 11:36 tells us, and what that means in the simplest terms is that God is the Source, the Means and the End of everything, that He couldn’t exercise greater control over absolutely everything than He already does!

(4) There is one more point about God’s providence we must

consider if we would grasp what it really is, if we would begin to appreciate its hold on us, and it's this, that it has far-reaching ramifications for each and every one of us. If indeed God is in control of everything, how can that not be so? Let me give you, briefly and without explanation, three such ramifications.

a) If God controls everything, so that not even a sparrow falls to the ground without Him, then the outcome of His electing love and uncompromising righteousness must certainly stand, that He has mercy on whom He wills, and whom He wills He hardens – that is, despite His freely and sincerely offering them the gospel, He hands them over to their own vile affections when their cup of iniquity has been filled in order for them to go their own way.

b) If God controls everything, and does so in the best interest of His people, then we who know and love the Lord needn't be afraid of anything. Psalm 27:1, "The Lord is my light and my salvation. Whom shall I fear? The Lord is the strength of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?" Psalm 121:7,8, "The Lord shall preserve you from all evil... (He) shall preserve your going out and your coming in from this time forth, even for evermore."

c) If everything comes, not by chance but by His fatherly hand – if He has determined our times beforehand and the boundaries of our habitation – then everything He gives us places us in debt to Him, and we can do no better than to commit everything we are and have to Him, to glorify Him and enjoy Him forever.

There were different times when David had to flee from Saul, and then hid himself in a cave. In 1 Samuel 22 he fled as well from Achish, the King of Gath, and on that occasion he hid in the cave of Adullam. In chapter 24 he is hiding in a cave somewhere in En-gedi. At such times, humanly speaking, his situation looked pretty grim. How often would he have to take flight like this? What dire circumstances would he yet have to endure? To whom could he turn for help? We don't know the precise occasion of his writing Psalm 57, whether at Adullam or at En-gedi, but he writes of this experience and, more particularly, of his confidence at this very trying time in his life. Psalm 57:2, "I will cry out to God Most High, to God who performs all things for me."

Notice, David turns to the Lord. He focuses on – and, in his time of trouble, he takes comfort from – the providence of God. David is a man well acquainted with the providence of God, with the points we've already reviewed this evening, and his

encounter with the giant Goliath was an experience that would remain fresh in his mind for the rest of his life. Indeed, he had experienced both personally and repeatedly that the Lord is a very present help in trouble. He trusts that the Lord is working all things together for his good – all things, even the most horrendous trials – whether he sees immediately what the Lord is doing in them or has to wait for the evidence to become clear. He believes that, if God is for him, no man can stand against him, no army of men can thwart the purpose of God or snatch him from the care and keeping of His fatherly hand.

Oh, what a glorious thing to know, believer – not to presume from wishful thinking, but to know with certainty from the promise and character of God – that the Lord who is our God forever, and our Guide even unto death, performs all things for us, and that nothing which really is in our best interest will He withhold from us. Are you like David? Do you have such confidence in the Lord, and is it still an unshakeable confidence even in the midst of imminent danger? Do you really believe that everything which happens throughout creation, and in your own life particularly, is ordered by the providence of God, and do you therefore accept that, both in sorrow and in joy, you have cause to thank and praise the Lord?

I'm convinced that this is one of the greatest weaknesses, one of the most crippling frailties, to be found among the people of God in our day. We believe, and yet we don't believe. The spirit is willing, perhaps, but the flesh is weak; we want to walk by faith, to trust the Lord to look after us – and we may know that we should – but fears and anxious thoughts weigh us down, and in that moment of weakness we prefer to walk by sight. If trouble knocks on the door, or even if we see it coming down the path still some distance away, what do we do? We panic. The thought that God may not help us, that we may have brought this trouble upon ourselves and will therefore have to get ourselves out of it or suffer the consequences, is too often crippling us, and so, at that critical time, we don't believe that God works all things for us.

Oh, how important it is for us to know, dear Christian – and to keep this ever before us so that we won't forget – Proverbs 3:5,6, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct your paths"! Beloved of the Lord, though

we are but creatures of the dust, the fallen offspring of Adam who can of ourselves lay no claim to divine favour, God Himself has looked upon us with pitying eye – we are His workmanship in Christ Jesus, a people He is remaking in His image – and every day, even moment by moment, He who causes the stars to shine in the night (who calls them all by name, and not one of them is missing) is upholding us as well. Indeed, He governs the stars and all the heavenly host for our benefit! Did you know that? By His providential mercies He turns all evil away from us, or He turns it to our advantage – something we may not understand right then perhaps, something we may come to learn only later – and He does this in time as part of our sanctification that we might live to serve Him now and to praise Him for all eternity. In the words of Fanny Crosby,

“All the way my Saviour leads me. What have I to ask beside?

Can I doubt His tender mercy who through life has been my guide?”

Knowing that the Lord our God, by His providential care, upholds and governs all that He has created, and knowing, too, that He does this always in the best interest of His people, is a matter for which every Christian may begin to appreciate how filled and overflowing he is with countless practical benefits. A few of these are summarized in Question 28 of the catechism, “What advantage is it to us to know that God has created, and by His providence still upholds, all things?” Answer: “That we may be patient in adversity; thankful in prosperity; and that in all things, which may hereafter befall us, we place our firm trust in our faithful God and Father, that nothing shall separate us from His love, since all creatures are so in His hand that without His will they cannot so much as move.”

Our time together doesn't permit us to cover all that might be said on this subject, but, in closing, let's consider these three benefits. (1) A personal knowledge and intimate experience of God's providence gives the believer patience in adversity. It's much easier in times of trouble, isn't it, if we first know in our minds and are fully persuaded in our hearts that God is in charge of those troubles, that they come from Him and are meant for our good. The Lord has not abandoned us, has He? He has not laid upon us more than what we with His help can handle.

These troubles, after all, are temporary – and, if we face them in the fear of the Lord, we will see them for what they really are,

for what the Word of God has labelled them to be, namely, “a light and momentary affliction working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory.” “Weeping may endure for a night,” said the psalmist, “but joy comes in the morning.”

Romans 8:18, “I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us.”

(2) Such knowledge and experience of God’s providence makes the believer thankful in prosperity. Contrary to what we may think, the times that people are usually the least thankful are in periods of extended health and prosperity. This can be true also for Christians. But if in those times we reflect on the Lord’s providential mercies, on how He feeds us and clothes us, on how He refreshes us with the cooling rain and cheers us with the company of good friends who stand by us in affliction, this is when it happens, in spite of the stifling prosperity, that we’re constrained to acknowledge the Lord. Is that not so? We no longer take His good gifts, or His blessing on those gifts, for granted. Instead, we feel compelled to rejoice always, to pray without ceasing and to give thanks in all things, knowing these two things, that God has given us every reason to do so, and also that this is His will in Christ Jesus for us.

(3) Knowing these things, that the Lord our God who offered up His only begotten Son on the cross for us is working all things together for our good, strengthens the believer’s faith in Him, expands his hope and anticipation of glory, and deepens his love for the Lord, for His Word and all His ways. If anything had been left to chance, what hope could we possibly have that we would ever make it to heaven? If anything had been left to blind determinism, if the future were controlled by some computerized robot which cannot be shut down or redirected, then we would have no hope at all, but would find ourselves lost in fear of a never-ending expanse of utter hopelessness. That’s all speculation, of course, because that’s not the way it is for any of us. There is a hell for all the wicked and unbelieving, and there is also a heaven for all God’s blood-bought people. The destination for each is certain. Since we know, as believers, that we are kept by the power of God through faith in Christ Jesus, we may be assured that we will get to heaven, beloved, and that what the Lord has both promised and prepared for us is better than what any of us might ever imagine.

There are people in our day who will pay a psychic to learn what

the future holds. Psychics are people who cannot possibly predict the future, and, even if they could, what good would it do to know what the future holds if they couldn't reshape it or turn it in a better direction? Is it not better, rather – is this not the ransomed soul's comfort and hope – not knowing what the future holds, but knowing Him who holds the future, knowing the Lord Himself in whom he has believed and is persuaded is able to keep him, to keep him and all that he has committed to Him, until the second coming of Christ at the end of the world?

Have you ever wondered, dear Christian, why the Bible tells us so little of what life is going to be like in the new heavens, and in the new earth where righteousness is to dwell? One reason, surely, is that the Lord who delights in mercy, who always does what is right and constantly demonstrates to us His faithfulness, would have us, like Abraham, simply to believe Him, to trust Him both for this life and for the life to come. Psalm 18:30, "As for God, His way is perfect; the word of the Lord is proven; He is a shield to all who trust in Him."