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Teaching Notes

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The Mystery of Providence

John Flavel

KJV Psalm 57:2 I will cry unto God most high; unto God that performeth all things for me.

“The greatness of God is a glorious, unsearchable mystery. ‘For the Lord most high is terrible; He is a great King over all the earth.’ (Psalm 47:2) The condescension of the most high God to men is also a profound mystery. ‘Though the Lord be high, yet He hath respect unto the lowly.’ (Psalm 138:6). But when both of these meet together, as they do in Psalm 57:2, they make a matchless mystery.”

I. God’s special care of his people

A. Stunning Supernatural Rescues

How is it that, so many times, the people of God have been saved from danger and evil by a power greater than the power of nature, and in a way which has often been against the course of nature? [these restatements of Flavel are taken from *God Willing*, Grace Publications Trust, 1997]

B. Strange Coincidences

How is it, if they are not ordered by a special providence, that natural causes work together in such strange ways for the benefit of the saints?

C. Powerful Attacks Fail, Weak Defenses Succeed

If the affairs of God’s people are not governed by a special providence, how is that the most clever and powerful means employed to destroy them have no effect, and the weak and feeble means employed for their safety are successful?

D. Saving Interruptions

If all things are governed by natural causes, how is it that men are turned from the evil way along which they were going at full speed?

E. Special Specific Judgments

If there is not an overruling providence ordering all things for the good of God’s people, how is it that the good or evil which is done to them in this world is repaid to those who bring good or evil upon them?

F. Events Line Up With Scriptures

If these things are merely accidental, how is it that they agree so exactly with the scriptures in all details?

G. Amazing Timings

If these things happen by chance, how is it that they occur exactly at the right time?

H. Specific Answers to Prayer

If these things are merely accidental, how is it that they happen in accordance with the prayers of the saints, who know they have received very clear answers to the particular requests they have made (I John 5:15)?

II. How God works providentially in our lives

A. Providence at our birth

1. How God directly knit us together in our mother's wombs
2. In keeping you from serious defects, but fully fitting you for His purposes in life
3. In giving you special abilities... both mental and physical of use in your mission

B. Providence in the time and place of our birth

1. Suppose you had been born in the wilds of America, surrounded by Indians
2. Suppose you had been born to pagan idol-worshiping parents in some wild continent
3. Suppose you had been born in a Muslim land
4. Suppose you had been born in Roman Catholic territory
5. Suppose you had been born in England centuries before, when it was pagan and idolatrous
6. Suppose you had been born in the days of Queen Mary, when Protestants were being burned

“Is it not then a special mercy to you to be cast into such a country and age, when the true religion has the same advantages over every false one...? Here you have the presence of precious means and the absence of soul-destroying prejudices—two signal mercies.”

7. Another mercy: the particular family into which you were born
 - a. to have pious parents who prayed for us before we were born

- b. to have our corruptions nipped in the bud by firm, godly discipline before they dominated us
- c. to have parents who trained us in the Scriptures, pouring the good knowledge of God into our hearts from youth
- d. to have parents who walked in a clear pattern of holiness as examples before our eyes
- e. to be free from ungodly parents... who neglected discipline, scorned religion, and opposed any motions on our part toward God

C. Providence at our new birth

“In nothing does providence shine forth more gloriously in this world than in ordering the occasions, instruments, and means of conversion of the people of God. However skillfully its hand had molded your bodies, however tenderly it had preserved them and however bountifully it had provided for them; if it had not also ordered some means or other for your conversion, all the former favors and benefits it had done for you had meant little.”

“This is a subject which every gracious heart loves to steep its thoughts in. It is certainly the sweetest history that ever they repeated; they love to think and talk of it. The places where and instruments by whom this work was wrought are exceedingly endeared to them...”

1. Conversion is usually wrought in two ways:
 - a. to people of riper age, already much steeped in the world
 - b. to people of younger age, raised in godly homes

“In the former sort, the distinct acts of the Spirit, illuminating, convincing, humbling, and drawing them to Christ and sealing them are more evident and discernible. In the latter, these are more obscure and confused.”

2. Note the wonderful strangeness of providence in casting us in the WAY and ordering the OCCASION and circumstances of conversion

Acts 8:26-30 Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Go south to the road-- the desert road-- that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." 27 So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians. This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, 28 and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the book of Isaiah the prophet. 29 The Spirit told Philip, "Go to that chariot and stay near it." 30 Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. "Do you understand what you are reading?" Philip asked.

Flavel also cited Naaman the Syrian (2 Kings 5:1-4), in that God used a stolen Israelite slave girl to save him; and Jesus at the well with the Samaritan woman:

“O what a train of blessed providences follow this which seemed but an accidental thing!”

3. Many “accidental” occurrences work together to get us saved!!
 - a. scrap of paper accidentally coming into view (a leaf of Perkin’s catechism covered something bought at a fair)
 - b. marriage of a godly man into an ungodly family
 - c. reading of a good book
 - d. even the mistakes or forgetfulness of pastors
 - e. committing of a godly man to prison
 - f. scattering of Christians by persecution
 - g. servant running away from his master (Onesimus in Philemon)
 - h. ungodly people going to hear a preacher for mockery’s sake
 - i. dropping of some grave and serious word at a timely moment
 - j. the movement (coming or going) of ministers of the gospel
 - k. even the most wicked acts of Satan in assaulting a sinner

Flavel told a story of a man who attempted suicide, and Flavel led him to Christ!!

4. Providence also carries the work on to completion
 - a. by quickening and reviving dying convictions
 - b. by relieving the soul when over-burdened by conviction

D. Providence in our daily work in this life

1. In directing you to a calling in your youth, and not permitting you to live idle sinful lives
2. In leading you to a calling perfectly suited to you
3. In settling you in a calling totally unexpected by your parents or you
4. In protecting you from financial ruin
5. In making your calling sufficient for your needs

KJV 1 Corinthians 7:20 Let every man abide in the same calling wherein he was called.

E. Providence in our family life

That providence has a special hand in our marriage is evident both from Scripture assertions and the acknowledgements of holy men, who in that great event of their lives have still owned and acknowledged the directing hand of providence.”

Proverbs 19:14 Houses and wealth are inherited from parents, but a prudent wife is from the LORD.

Matthew 19:6 Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate."

1. Providence is seen in appointing the parties for each other
2. In the harmony and agreeableness of temperaments and dispositions
3. In making one instrumental to the eternal good of the other
4. In children, the fruit of marriage
5. Note also after marriage: God sustains with seasonable provisions as His wisdom dictates
6. Warnings:
 - a. beware that you do not forget the care and kindness of providence
 - b. do not distrust providence in future trials
 - c. do not murmur and complain in new trials
 - d. do not show the least discontent at the lot and portion providence carves out for you
 - e. do not neglect prayer when trials befall you
 - f. do not worry your hearts with sinful cares, which deny the doctrine of providence

F. Providence keeping us from evil, sickness and danger

1. Sometimes by stirring up others to interpose with seasonable counsels

1 Samuel 25:23-33 When Abigail saw David, she quickly got off her donkey and bowed down before David with her face to the ground. 24 She fell at his feet and said: "My lord, let the blame be on me alone. Please let your servant speak to you; hear what your servant has to say. 25 May my lord pay no attention to that wicked man Nabal. He is just like his name-- his name is Fool, and folly goes with him. But as for me, your servant, I did not see the men my master sent. 26 "Now since the LORD has kept you, my master, from bloodshed and from avenging yourself with your own hands, as surely as the LORD lives and as you live, may your enemies and all who intend to harm my master be like Nabal. 27 And let this gift, which your servant has brought to my master, be given to the men who follow you. 28 Please forgive your servant's offense, for the LORD will certainly make a

lasting dynasty for my master, because he fights the LORD's battles. Let no wrongdoing be found in you as long as you live. 29 Even though someone is pursuing you to take your life, the life of my master will be bound securely in the bundle of the living by the LORD your God. But the lives of your enemies he will hurl away as from the pocket of a sling. 30 When the LORD has done for my master every good thing he promised concerning him and has appointed him leader over Israel, 31 my master will not have on his conscience the staggering burden of needless bloodshed or of having avenged himself. And when the LORD has brought my master success, remember your servant." 32 David said to Abigail, "Praise be to the LORD, the God of Israel, who has sent you today to meet me. 33 May you be blessed for your good judgment and for keeping me from bloodshed this day and from avenging myself with my own hands.

2. Sometimes by hindering the means and instruments

2 Chronicles 20:35 Later, Jehoshaphat king of Judah made an alliance with Ahaziah king of Israel, who was guilty of wickedness. 36 He agreed with him to construct a fleet of trading ships. After these were built at Ezion Geber, 37 Eliezer son of Dodavahu of Mareshah prophesied against Jehoshaphat, saying, "Because you have made an alliance with Ahaziah, the LORD will destroy what you have made." The ships were wrecked and were not able to set sail to trade.

3. Sometimes by laying some strong affliction on the body

4. Sometimes by better informing the saints of God's word

5. Sometimes removing them out of temptations by death

Isaiah 57:1 The righteous perish, and no one ponders it in his heart; devout men are taken away, and no one understands that the righteous are taken away to be spared from evil. 2 Those who walk uprightly enter into peace; they find rest as they lie in death.

1 Corinthians 11:30 That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep.

G. Providence helps us to become more holy

“Now there are two means or instruments employed in this work (of sanctification). The Spirit who effects it internally (Romans 8:13), and Providence, which assists it externally.”

“There is in all the regenerate a strong propensity and inclination to sin, and in that lies a principle part of the power of sin.”

“Notwithstanding this double fence of God's command and preventative afflictions, yet sin is still too hard for the best of men; their corruptions carry them through all to sin. And when it does so, not only does the Spirit work internally, but Providence works externally in order to subdue them. The ways of sin are not only made bitter to them by the remorse of conscience, but by those afflictive rods upon the outward man, with which God also follows it.”

Hebrews 12:5-7 "My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, 6 because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son." 7 Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father?

Psalm 119:67 Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I obey your word.