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Teaching Notes

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The Mystery of Providence, Part 2

John Flavel

It is a Biblical and historical fact that God sovereignly rules over even the smallest details of life for His glory. That is what Flavel has proved in the first part of his book. Now he reflects on the need we have to respond properly to it.

III. The Duty of Meditation on Providence

Philippians 1:12-14 *Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel. As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. 14 Because of my chains, most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly.*

A. God Has Expressly Commanded Meditation on His Providence

Flavel: “God has called His people to make the most serious reflections upon His works, whether of mercy or of judgment.”

1. Examples Flavel cites:

a. of judgment, “Go to Shiloh...”

Jeremiah 7:12 *“Go now to the place in Shiloh where I first made a dwelling for my Name, and see what I did to it because of the wickedness of my people Israel.”*

Why should the people of Jerusalem make the trip to Shiloh? Because they were lightly trusting that the mere fact that the Temple of the Lord was in Jerusalem would spare them from judgments:

Jeremiah 7:13-14 *While you were doing all these things, declares the LORD, I spoke to you again and again, but you did not listen; I called you, but you did not answer. 14 Therefore, what I did to Shiloh I will now do to the house that bears my Name, the temple you trust in, the place I gave to you and your fathers.*

Psalms 46:8 *Come and see the works of the LORD, the desolations he has brought on the earth.*

Consideration is followed by application:

Psalm 46:10 "Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth."

b. of mercy, "Consider the birds of the air..."

Matthew 6:26 Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?

RSV Matthew 6:28 And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin;

Greek word translated "consider" implies a careful studying of the lilies, deep pondering of their nature

Procedure is scientific, meditation is spiritual, and application is psychological and practical: 1) study carefully the lilies with your eyes, look at all their features, and how marvelously they are adorned; 2) meditate by faith that it is the same God who cares for your physical life through His providential care; 3) therefore, do not worry, be distressed or concerned, and don't run after physical things as if they were the essence of your life

c. of history

Deuteronomy 32:7 Remember the days of old; consider the generations long past. Ask your father and he will tell you, your elders, and they will explain to you.

God intends His people to consider the lessons of history, of His dealings in the past with previous generations:

1 Corinthians 10:1-12 For I do not want you to be ignorant of the fact, brothers, that our forefathers were all under the cloud and that they all passed through the sea. 2 They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. 3 They all ate the same spiritual food 4 and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ. 5 Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them; their bodies were scattered over the desert.

6 Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did.

7 Do not be idolaters, as some of them were; as it is written: "The people sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in pagan revelry." 8 We should not commit sexual immorality, as some of them did-- and in one day twenty-three thousand of them died. 9 We should not test the Lord, as some of them did-- and were killed by snakes. 10 And do not grumble, as some of them did-- and were killed by the destroying angel.

11 These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come.

12 So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!

Much of Scripture is a recounting of history to stimulate our faith and to keep us from sin... neglect of meditation on these things is very dangerous to our souls

B. Neglect of This Meditation is Condemned as Sin in Scripture

Flavel: “To be careless and unobservant is very displeasing to God”

Isaiah 26:11 O LORD, your hand is lifted high, but they do not see it.

Psalms 28:4-5 Repay them for their deeds and for their evil work; repay them for what their hands have done and bring back upon them what they deserve. Since they show no regard for the works of the LORD and what his hands have done, he will tear them down and never build them up again.

Isaiah 5:12-13 They have harps and lyres at their banquets, tambourines and flutes and wine, but they have no regard for the deeds of the LORD, no respect for the work of his hands. Therefore my people will go into exile for lack of understanding; their men of rank will die of hunger and their masses will be parched with thirst.

C. The Word “Behold” in Narratives

[NASB] *Genesis 6:13 Then God said to Noah, "The end of all flesh has come before Me; for the earth is filled with violence because of them; and behold, I am about to destroy them with the earth.*

[NASB] *Exodus 7:17 'Thus says the LORD, "By this you shall know that I am the LORD: behold, I will strike the water that is in the Nile with the staff that is in my hand, and it will be turned to blood.*

[NASB] *1 Samuel 3:11 The LORD said to Samuel, "Behold, I am about to do a thing in Israel at which both ears of everyone who hears it will tingle.*

This word is in effect God saying “Sit up and take notice!!”

In the Book of Revelation, at the opening of every seal is the word “Behold!”

[NASB] *Revelation 6:2 I looked, and behold, a white horse, and he who sat on it had a bow; and a crown was given to him, and he went out conquering and to conquer.*

Note: the NIV regularly ignores “Behold” as though it’s not even there! 495 times the Hebrew word and 194 times the Greek word for “Behold” appears and is ignored by the NIV

D. If Not, God Will Not Be Praised Adequately

Another good example is found in Psalm 107... a systematic reciting of God’s providential deliverance for 1) people wandering lost in a desert; 2) prisoners sitting in chains in a prison because of sin; 3) people afflicted with grave illness because of their sin; 4) sailors out in ships about to sink because of a terrible storm. In each case, they cried out to the Lord, and the Lord heard their cries and providentially delivered them. Each category of people is urged to reflect on what God has done and to give thanks to Him:

Psalms 107:8, 15, 21, 31 Let them give thanks to the LORD for his unfailing love and his wonderful deeds for men

The Psalm ends with a general call to us all:

Psalm 107:43 Whoever is wise, let him heed these things and consider the great love of the LORD.

Reflecting on God's providence in these deliverances is a mark of wisdom, and is clearly commanded by God!

E. If Not, We Miss the Benefits of God's Works

Flavel: "This (meditation on God's providence) is the food our faith lives upon in days of distress.... From providences past saints argue to fresh and new ones to come."

God's past faithfulness to Israel is memorialized with stones to urge future faith and obedience for Israel:

Joshua 4:4-7 So Joshua called together the twelve men he had appointed from the Israelites, one from each tribe, 5 and said to them, "Go over before the ark of the LORD your God into the middle of the Jordan. Each of you is to take up a stone on his shoulder, according to the number of the tribes of the Israelites, 6 to serve as a sign among you. In the future, when your children ask you, 'What do these stones mean?' 7 tell them that the flow of the Jordan was cut off before the ark of the covenant of the LORD. When it crossed the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off. These stones are to be a memorial to the people of Israel forever."

God's past faithfulness to David gave him ground for courage against Goliath:

[David] ***1 Samuel 17:37 "The LORD who delivered me from the paw of the lion and the paw of the bear will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine."***

God's faithfulness in delivering Paul from perils was ground for his present and future confidence:

[Paul] ***2 Corinthians 1:10 He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us***

Christ's past miracle (feeding the 5000) was to give the apostles freedom from concern over food:

Matthew 16:9 Do you still not understand? Don't you remember the five loaves for the five thousand, and how many basketfuls you gathered?

F. If Not, We Dishonor God

God comes near to us every day in constant providential blessings

To fail to meditate on them and to fail to thank God is a great dishonor to Him

G. Proper Observation of Providence is Essential to a Healthy Prayer Life

A healthy prayer life is one which energetically engages God at the level of His providence

It gives thanks for recent providential answers to prayer

It also trusts God for new ones

Therefore healthy prayer depends much on meditation on the providential acts of God

IV. How to Meditate on the Providence of God

A. Work at it!! Think as deeply as you can and for as long as you can about the providences of God

Flavel: "O fill your hearts with the thoughts of Him and His ways. If a single act of Providence is so ravishing and transporting, what would many such be, if they were presented together to the view of the soul."

1. Search backwards and trace out God's providence in your lives

Luke 1:49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me-- holy is his name.

2. Let your thoughts be full and heavy with significance

Flavel: "Do not let your thoughts swim like feathers upon the surface of the waters, but sink like lead to the bottom."

3. Consider details such as: the timing of God's special care, the special tenderness and kindness seemingly tailored to our particular needs, the human instruments God used to bless us

B. Think how the Word of God is fulfilled in providence

1. All providences are in some sense supported by Scripture's promises

Joshua 23:14 "Now I am about to go the way of all the earth. You know with all your heart and soul that not one of all the good promises the LORD your God gave you has failed. Every promise has been fulfilled; not one has failed.

2 Peter 1:3-4 His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. 4 Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.

2. Try to connect God's providence to you to specific texts of Scripture

3. This is especially true when God providentially disciplines us... it is the word that tells us what to change, what to do

Psalm 94:12 Blessed is the man you discipline, O LORD, the man you teach from your law

4. WARNING: Without Scripture's guidance, it is very easy to misinterpret acts of providence

5. The Word also sustains you during adverse providences, exhorting you to patience

C. Be sure that you see God as the one who causes and orders all the events of providence

Proverbs 3:6 in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.

1. Do not forget God's overall commitment to do you good all the days of your life
2. God's overall plans for you are good, therefore each part of the plan is good as well
3. Keep each of the following in mind

Eye the care of God for you

Eye the wisdom of God in dispensing His mercies to you, each one perfectly suited to your condition

Eye the free grace of God in not giving us what we truly deserve

Eye the way the Lord condescends to our low state in mercy

Eye the design and plan of God in all your comforts and times of ease: to enable you to serve Him better, not to meet your sensual cravings

Deuteronomy 28:47-48 Because you did not serve the LORD your God joyfully and gladly in the time of prosperity therefore in hunger and thirst, in nakedness and dire poverty, you will serve the enemies the LORD sends against you. He will put an iron yoke on your neck until he has destroyed you.

Eye the way and method in which God's mercies are conveyed to you... through the blood of Christ ALONE

Eye the sovereignty of God again and again... a wise King who will never fail to rule His universe... keep your proper place as His subject

Psalms 115:3 Our God is in heaven; he does whatever pleases him.

Set the grace and goodness of God before you constantly, especially in "all afflictive providences"

Eye the wisdom of God in dispensing His afflictions to you, each one perfectly suited to your condition

Flavel: "O what quietness will this breed! I see my God will not lose my heart if a rod can prevent it. He would rather hear me groan here than howl hereafter. His love is judicious, not fond. He consults my good rather than my ease."

Eye the all-sufficiency of God during afflictions... He is still the source, the fountain for all your deepest needs and wants

Eye the immutability of God... the “Father who does not change like shifting shadows.” (James 1:17)

D. Stir up your hearts to understand the different ways of the various providences of God (Ecclesiastes 7:14)

Ecclesiastes 7:14 When times are good, be happy; but when times are bad, consider: God has made the one as well as the other. Therefore, a man cannot discover anything about his future.

1. Why should such troubles make us forget our comfort in God, when they are only for a moment and our happiness in God is eternal?

2 Corinthians 4:17 For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.

2. Why should we be sad, so long as our God is with us in all our troubles? That one promise, “I will be with him in trouble” (Psalm 91:15), should support us under all our burdens.
3. Why should we who are Christian believers be sad, so long as we can be sure that no act of providence, however bad it appears, is a sign of God’s hatred? God’s heart is full of love for his children even if the face of providence is full of frowns.
4. Why should we be depressed when we’re sure that, even by means of these providences, God will do us good? (Romans 8:28).
5. Why shouldn’t we think of our joy in God, when the time is so near when sorrows will vanish, and we’ll suffer no more? “God shall wipe away all tears” (Revelation 7:17).
6. Consider also your sin during times of afflictions: two key questions

First: what your sin truly deserves from God

Second: what it will take for God to mortify and purge your sin from you

E. If providence delays any blessing you have waited and prayed for, do not grow weary of praying to God

1. It pleases the Lord often to try and exercise the patience of His people

Psalm 6:3 My soul is in anguish. How long, O LORD, how long?

2. Delays are NOT denials

3. Also realize that delays may mean the trials have not yet accomplished the work they were sent to do
4. Delays may also mean that God is simply more perfectly preparing the ultimate blessing for you, and it is not fully ready yet
5. The development of a heart that humbly, quietly rests on God and waits for Him is of infinitely higher value than any earthly blessing we're waiting for!!
6. Keep reminding yourself that you do not deserve the blessing you're waiting for
7. Realize that teeming millions of people who were as good as you by nature (that is, not good at all!!) are completely without hope and without God in the world, but that you have eternal salvation!

F. Do not question or make judgments about ways of providence

Flavel: "Do not pry too curiously into the secrets of Providence, nor allow your shallow reason arrogantly to judge and censure its designs."

1. There are "hard texts" of Providence as much as there are "hard texts" of Scripture

Psalm 73:16 When I tried to understand all this, it was oppressive to me

2. When our own reason fills us with a mistrust of Providence, great temptations to sin surely follow

Flavel: "Beware therefore you do not lean too much to your reasonings and understandings. Nothing is more plausible, nothing more dangerous."

V. The pleasure and profit obtained from looking at what God does in providence

- A. By this means you may enjoy close fellowship with God from day to day.
- B. A great part of the pleasure of the Christian life comes from looking at what God does in providence. "The works of the Lord are great, sought out by all those who have pleasure in them" (Psalm 111:2).
- C. Studying what God does in providence will correct the natural unbelief in your hearts.
- D. Keeping a record of what providence has done, will be a real support to faith in future difficult times.
- E. Remembering past providences will be a continual source of praise and thanksgiving, which is the employment of the angels in heaven, and the most enjoyable part of our lives on earth.

- F. The careful observation of providence will make Jesus Christ more and more precious to your souls.
- G. The careful consideration of providence has a wonderful power to make the heart full of thankfulness.
- H. The careful observation of providence will bring an inward peace to your minds.
- I. The careful consideration of the ways of God in His providences towards us helps to increase holiness in our lives. “The Lord is righteous in all His ways and hold in all His works” (Psalm 145:17).
- J. Finally, the consideration of providence will be of the greatest use to us when we come to die.

VI. The consequences of the previous chapters

- A. It is your duty to believe that God is in all that happens to you. If He gives comforts, it is a great evil not to see His hand in them. If He sends troubles, you should know that they do not arise out of the ground, but from the hand of God.
- B. Since God does all things for you, how great is His care for His people! His tender care is so great that He does not take His eye off you (Job 36:7). In case anyone should hurt you, He himself will guard and keep you day and night (Isaiah 27:3). You are too dear to Him to be trusted to any hand but His own. “All His saints are in your hand” (Deuteronomy 33:3).
- C. Since God does all things for you, are you not obliged to live for God? Our desire should be, as someone has said: “O that I could be to God as useful as my hands are to me.” The purpose of all that God has done for you is to make you a blessing to other people. “What shall I give to the Lord for all His benefits to me?” said the psalmist (Psalm 116:12). God is always doing you good, so you should be active for Him. He is acting every moment for you!
- D. Since God does all these things for His people, do not distrust Him when new difficulties arise. You have often failed to trust Him in the past. Don’t fall into distrust again. Learn this great truth. If you trust in God and wait quietly on Him to save you out of trouble, He cannot and will not fail you!
- E. Since God does all things for you, pray to Him about everything. You will certainly never have what you desire or work for, unless God works for you. Even though He may have purposed to do what you desire, He still expects you to ask Him for it. Then when you have prayed whatever you ask is yours already.
- F. Since God does all things for you, then it should be your chief concern to please Him in all things. No troubles can harm a Christian whose one desire is to please God. As a spark of fire is easily put out in the sea, so the favor of God will cause troubles to have no ill effects. Since it is God who does all things and who rejoices over us to do us only good, we are safe even in the greatest of troubles and dangers. Let us be guided by the divine wisdom of the Bible. Fear nothing but sin.

Make it your chief concern to please God and to trust Him in all you do. These are sure rules for you safety and blessing in all the uncertainties of this life.

VI. Practical problems

- A. How can a Christian discover the will of God in difficult and puzzling circumstances?
- B. How can a Christian be helped to wait on God while providence delays the answer to his prayers?
- C. How can a Christian know when a providence is working for his highest good, and comes from the love the God?
- D. How can we keep steady and calm in spirit when providence brings so many changes into our lives?
- E. Finally, how can a Christian bring work his heart into resignation to the will of God when he sees that great trouble and sorrow are coming towards him?

Flavel: "The question does not suppose the heart or will of a Christian to be at his own command and disposal in the matter. We cannot resign it, and subject it to the will of God whenever we desire so to do. The duty indeed is ours, but the power by which alone we perform it is God's; we act as we are acted upon by the Spirit."

Yet it is still our duty to labor on our hearts to be totally and cheerfully submitted to God's will... as David was

2 Samuel 15:25-26 Then the king said to Zadok, "Take the ark of God back into the city. If I find favor in the LORD's eyes, He will bring me back and let me see it and his dwelling place again. But if He says, 'I am not pleased with you,' then I am ready; let Him do to me whatever seems good to Him."

So, labor on your hearts (i.e. through prayer, fasting, meditation, worship and simply preaching to yourself) to develop a deep and fixed sense of the infinite wisdom of God and your own deep folly and ignorance. This will make resignation easy for you.

Flavel: "It is nothing but our pride and arrogance over-valuing our own understandings that makes resignation so hard."

Especially set Scriptural examples of glad submission before you (e.g. Paul's joy in prison)... better than all of these is the example of Christ Himself, gladly submitting to His Father.

Flavel: "Study the singular benefits and advantages of a will resigned up and melted into the will of God. Such a spirit has a continual Sabbath within itself."

Final Advice: Keep a Journal of God's Providence

Flavel: In consideration of the great and manifold advantages resulting from a humble and careful consideration of Providence, I cannot but judge it the concern of Christians that have time and ability for such a work, to keep written memorials or journals of Providence by them.... Some say the art of medicine was

acquired and perfected thus. When anyone had met with some rare medicinal herb, and accidentally discovered the virtues of it, he would post it up in some public place; and so a physician attained his skill by a collection of those posted experiments and recipes.