

GOD CAN AND GOD WILL

A sermon delivered by Batsell Baxter Barrett on June 15, 1969 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

Many years ago delegates from all of the thirteen colonies assembled in Philadelphia in the Continental Congress for the purpose of working out some kind of plan to establish a strong federal Union. The problems were immense and the success of the enterprise was often in doubt. In one of these early meetings Benjamin Franklin, the noted statesman, addressed General George Washington who was presiding, and said, "I have lived, Sir, a long time and the longer I live the more convincing proof I see of this truth: that God governs in the affairs of men. If a sparrow cannot fall without his notice, is it possible that an empire can rise without his aid?"

At other times, during the stormy sessions when the conflicting interests of the various colonies threatened to destroy the Congress and the possibilities of the union, this same Benjamin Franklin would rise and call for a season of prayer. According to the historian's record of these important sessions, after the prayer, the delegates would go back to their discussions "with more light and less heat." It is heartening to know that our nation began in an atmosphere of faith in God, and with constant petitions for God's help. It is good to know, in view of the drift of our own age away from God, that our founding fathers believed in the providence of God.

I, too, believe in the providence of God. I believe that God supervises and controls the events of our lives and the events of our world. I believe that he causes these events to occur in such a way as to be a blessing to his children. I do not believe that God is responsible for every act of man, for there are many acts which are contrary to his will, acts which result from man's rebellion and sin. However, I do believe that God overrules, guides and superintends the events of our world in such a way that the final outcome is in accordance with his divine plan. I believe in divine providence, which is defined in *The New Century Dictionary* as "the foreseeing care and guardianship of God over his creatures."

During the lifetime of Jesus a man came to ask the Lord to heal his son. He phrased his request, "If you can do anything, please take pity on us and help us." (Mark 9:22, Phillips Translation). At another time a leper came saying, "If you want to, Lord, you can make me clean." (Matt. 8:2, Phillips Translation). In the King James Version the first of these requests is phrased, "If thou canst ..." The second, "If thou wilt ..." The first man questioned the power of God; the other, the love of God. Divine providence depends upon two things: God's power to do and God's willingness to do.

The Proof That God Can And Will

If one will take time to examine the evidence, it is quite clear that God has both the power and the love that are necessary for him to care for man's needs. The creation of the universe certainly proves God's power. It also proves his love for man. Our universe provides ample opportunity for man to secure food, clothing, shelter and the other necessities of life. God has provided limitless air, water, and the other elemental factors of life. In addition, he has provided beauty and aesthetic values to bless man. Of course, he also gave man life itself. We are reminded of the statement in James 1:17, "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom can be no variation, neither shadow that is cast by turning." In addition to the evidence of God's power and love as seen in the creation, we also see the same elements clearly demonstrated in God's sustaining of the universe. After all these centuries the sun still shines and the earth brings forth its fruit.

The history of God's dealings with his people is also an evidence of both his power and his love. As one reads the Old Testament he discovers how that God has led the Israelites from their Egyptian bondage, how he nurtured them in the wilderness, and how he provided for them the land of Canaan. Throughout the history of the Old Testament it is apparent that when man is willing to heed God's directions he is blessed. When man turns away from God in rebellion he curses himself.

We also see evidence of God's providence in the lives of such individuals as Joseph, Esther, Daniel, and the three Hebrew captives. One of the most inspiring sentences in the Old Testament is that found in Daniel 3:17, where these young Hebrews, facing threatened death in the fiery furnace, said, "If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us ..."

In the New Testament we find further evidence of God's plan for the lives of men. One of the clearest examples is that of Saul of Tarsus. Even though he had been a vigorous persecutor of Christians, God saw possibilities within him, and called him to be a disciple. After the Lord appeared to him on the Damascus road, the preacher Ananias was directed to go to him and to tell him what to do to become a Christian. Ananias, knowing his reputation as an enemy of Christ, hesitated to go.

At that point the Lord said, "Go thy way: for he is a chosen vessel unto me, to bear my name before the Gentiles and kings, and the children of Israel: for I will show him how many things he must suffer for my name's sake." (Acts 9:15-16). The book of Revelation is a further area of evidence, showing that God intends for his people to triumph in the end. These are only a few of the evidences in both the Old and the New Testaments that God does guide and direct the lives of his children, when they are willing to let him guide them. Blessings always follow man's acceptance of God's direction.

Providence Association With Prayer

Throughout the Bible the idea of God's providence is closely associated with prayer. Always, God's children are taught to pray. For example, Christ taught, "Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you: for everyone that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened." (Matt. 7:7-8). In the Hebrew letter, we read, "Let us therefore draw near with boldness unto the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy, and may find grace to help us in time of need." (Heb. 4:16). In I Thess, 5:17 is the familiar passage, "Pray without ceasing." A chief element in prayer is that God will do something for his children that he would not otherwise do. The normal events of life are modified as a result of God's response to man's appeal in prayer.

Sometimes God answers prayers with a "yes." Sometimes with a no." And sometimes with a "wait, my child." Man's prayers are not always heard because man sometimes has separated himself from God by his sins. Isaiah 59:1-2 reads, "Behold, Jehovah's hand is not shortened, that it cannot save; neither his ear heavy, that he cannot hear: but your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid his face from you, so that he will not hear." In James 4:3 we read, "Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss."

Impossible To Prove

It is hardly possible to prove that God has answered any particular prayer, nor is it possible to prove God's providence in any particular event in one's life. However, it is possible to establish the fact that God has promised to answer prayer and to intervene in our lives. It is further possible to show that God has often done this in the lives of the men and women described in the Bible. Since God is no respecter of persons, and since his promises are for all ages of time, it is reasonable to believe that prayers are answered and events are changed for the Christian's good.

Many years ago T. B. Larimore planned a trip from Southern California where he was living to Denver, Colorado. He wrote to friends, and told them the date of his departure and the date of his arrival. As that day approached, for no reason that he could explain, he decided to go one day early. His trip was uneventful. Had he waited, however, until the following day on which he had intended to travel his train would have been caught at the bottom of the Royal Gorge by a flash flood and, he would have been among the scores of people who were drowned. Was this mere chance? Or, was God directing affairs in the life of one of his most useful servants? Brother Larimore was one of God's most faithful servants and most useful tools for the propagation of the gospel. In view of the promises of the scriptures and the Biblical examples which we read, is it not likely that God protected his servant from harm?

But what about it in your life and mine? Over the years I, like many of you, have often ridden in airplanes. Because of the apparent danger, most of us spend a few moments in prayer before take off. Does God hear these prayers? All we know for sure is that the flights have been safe. There have been moments of concern, like the take off from Tokyo some years ago with a full load of passengers and Christmas mail, when the plane lost an engine. After a struggle the plane did regain altitude, went out to sea, jettisoned 4,000 gallons of aviation fuel, and then returned safely to the Tokyo airport. Are we to believe that these events, seen occasionally in your life and mine, are the result of expertly made American aircraft, careful overhaul procedures by the airline crew, and skillful techniques on the part of the pilots? Yes, certainly. But is it possible there is yet another element: the providence of God? Yes, certainly.

And we know ... "

Perhaps the most meaningful single promise concerning God's providence for his children is that found in Rom. 8:28, "And we know that to them that love God all, things work together for good, even to them that are called according to his purpose." This does not say, of course, that all things are good, but that God will superintend and regulate all of the events of our lives so that good comes for his children.

One writer has put it this way, "When I read, 'All things work together for good, even to them that are called according to his purpose,' the only way I can understand this in my own case is after the analogy of a ship. There are parts of a ship which taken by themselves would sink. The engine would sink. The propeller would sink. But when the parts of a ship are built together they float. So with the events of my life. Some have been tragic. Some have been happy. But when they are all built together, they form a craft that floats. Aye, more, one that I believe is going someplace. And I am comforted."

When we look back over our lives we can often see that events, which at the time seemed tragic, have proved to be blessings. Sometimes our disappointments and heartaches bring us close to God and lift us to higher levels of spiritual strength. Serious illness, loss of possessions, a personal failure may be used by God to accomplish a good purpose. In this life we may be subjected to many trials, tribulations, and afflictions, but no final or absolute or ultimate evil will overtake us if we are Christians.

Conclusions

Ours is a precarious, dangerous world. There are many things that can harm man. Most of these have come as a result of man's own disregarding of God's directions. Nevertheless, Christians and others alike are subject to danger. However, the Christian has the promise, "And we know that to them that love God all things work together for good, even to them that are called according to his purpose." We also know from Christ's statement in John 14:15, that, "If Ye love me ye will keep my commandments." The evidence of our loving God and of our being his children is found in our keeping his commandments. If we are living our lives in such a way as to make certain that we are among those that love God, then we need have no fear of any ultimate tragedy. Our only real need for concern is to be sure that we belong to the Lord. He will take care of his children.