

THE PROVIDENCE OF GOD

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on October 30, 1966 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

Through the centuries there has been a running debate between those who believe that God is transcendent and those who believe that God is immanent. Those who think of him as transcendent conceive God to be infinitely powerful, and unbelievably majestic. He is aloof and unapproachable. He is more of a great force than he is a personality. They think of him as having brought the world into existence much as one winds up a clock and leaves it to run by itself. On the other hand those of us who think of God as immanent believe that he is intimately related to his creation. We believe that he is concerned about the needs of man, that he is approachable, and that he continues to operate the universe. We conceive of him as a personal being.

The scriptures teach us that this latter view is correct. Of course, we understand that God is powerful, majestic, and uniquely good, but he is also personally related to man, and deeply concerned about man's needs. This view makes possible our belief in prayer and our belief in divine providence.

In my early years of preaching I read with great interest two sermons by J. W. McGarvey. one was entitled "Divine Providence Concerning Joseph," while the other bore the title, "Divine Providence Concerning Esther." In the first of these two sermons McGarvey took the simple story of Joseph and pointed out that the events which seemingly just happened were actually the working out of God's plan for his people. He pointed to the prophecy in Gen. 15 where God had told Abraham that he would go to his fathers in a good old age, but that his descendents would go into another land and ultimately be bondservants there. With this thesis in mind, McGarvey then pointed out how everything that happened in the story, even though it seemed commonplace and ordinary, fitted together to accomplish the plan of God. Similarly, in his sermon concerning Esther, he pointed out that because of a certain situation all of the Hebrew race were condemned to die on a certain day of a certain month. Then, in what seems to have been a very ordinary manner young Esther came to be queen of the land, and grew in her influence over King Ahasuerus until the result was the saving of her people from annihilation. In both of these stories McGarvey demonstrated how God works in the affairs of men, directing events according to his will.

Still later I read the book, *Life, Letters and Sermons of T. B. Larrimore*, in which the theme of providence is given further emphasis. Brother Larimore confidently believed that God opened certain doors and closed others in his life. He believed that God supervises and controls the lives of Christians for their good.

There is yet another name that stands out among leading preachers of the past generation who have believed in divine providence. That name is the name of James A. Harding. I cannot mention this name here without being reminded that we are blessed by the presence of Brother Harding's daughter, Sister Charles Paine, as a fellow-member of this congregation. We also have the privilege of knowing his granddaughter, Sister Gertrude Deese, and even his great-grandchildren, Bill and Sue Ann. This family has a great heritage from Brother Harding, but they are not alone in this. All of us are the richer because of his great life and teaching concerning the providence of God. Brother Harding not only believed this through the prime of his life, pointing out situation after situation in which God had taken a hand in his affairs, but as he reached toward the end of life it became his constant emphasis. Although he might preach from many other themes of the scriptures, he always found some appropriate way to weave in his great conviction that God guides and blesses the lives of Christians. This is an emphasis needed in our day, an emphasis seldom presented in the full, understandable way that it was presented by these great men of the last generation.

Examples From the Bible

When one turns through the scriptures he immediately finds a host of examples of people in whose lives God had a very great significance. For example, in Genesis 4:24 we read, "And Enoch walked with God: and he was not; for God took him." The relationship between Enoch and God was so close that he was translated to heaven, not having the necessity of facing death. A chapter later we read concerning Noah, "But Noah found favor in the eyes of Jehovah ... Noah was a righteous man, and perfect in his generations: Noah walked with God." (Gen. 6:8-9). Living in a very wicked generation, Noah stood out because of his spiritual qualities, and was respected enough by God that he was allowed to survive the catastrophe which destroyed the rest of the human race.

Next, as we read the story of God's people in the book of Genesis, we find a large section, beginning with chapter 12 and continuing on through chapter 25, which describes the life and work of Abraham. Throughout this entire period he often talked with God and received directions from God. His whole life centered in this relationship with God, who caused him to move from his homeland, and blessed him as he led him to become the father of a great new nation of people. Similarly, as we read the book of Exodus we discover that Moses was guided by Jehovah through their constant association. He undoubtedly first learned of God from his mother during his early years, but it remained until the incident of the burning bush for him to talk with God directly. God used him as a deliverer of his people from Egyptian bondage, and as a law-giver through whom he announced the great Mosaic law to his people. God was very real in the life of Moses.

As we read on through the Old Testament we come to the story of David and notice how he was chosen by God, guided by God, and used by God to accomplish his purposes. David's closeness to God is shown throughout the Psalms as we read of his great dependence upon Jehovah. Still deeper in the Old Testament we read such stories as that of the three Hebrew young men who in the book of Daniel were preserved from the fiery furnace by the action of God. These are only a few of the characters throughout the Old Testament that indicate the intimate way in which they knew Jehovah, and the personal way that they were guided and sustained by him.

As we come to the New Testament we find another very stirring example in Saul of Tarsus. After reading of his seeing the great light on the Damascus road we are impressed by the words of the Lord as he stated to Ananias concerning the future of this talented young Jew who had so earnestly persecuted Christians. The Lord said, "Go thy way: for he is a chosen vessel to 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). Notice carefully that there are four parts to this plan which God has in mind: (1) Paul was to bear the Lord's name before Gentiles, (2) and kings, and (3) the children of Israel, and (4) he must suffer many things. As we follow the story of Paul's life we find that each one of these was fulfilled to the letter. He became the great apostle to the Gentiles. He preached to kings and governors and even to the emperor at Rome. He also carried the word of the Lord to his own people, the Jews. Finally, throughout all this period he suffered persecutions such as few other men ever suffered. Surely his life was the fulfillment of the plan which God had announced concerning him.

Christ's Testimony

Turning now to the life and teaching of our Lord, we find that he also placed great emphasis upon the personal nearness of God to man. Although Gen. 1:27 had told us that man was made in God's image, it was Christ who first referred to God as "our heavenly Father." This suggests the warm, personal relationship between those who are Christians and their Father in heaven. Jesus used the expression in passages such as that found in Matt. 6:26-32, where he preached, "Behold the birds of the heaven, that they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns; and your heavenly Father feedeth them. Are not ye of much more value than they? And which of you by being anxious can add one cubit unto the measure of his life? And why are ye anxious concerning raiment? Consider the lilies of the field how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin: yet I say unto you, that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God doth so clothe the grass of the field, which today is, and tomorrow is cast into the oven, shall he not much more clothe you, O ye of little faith? Be not therefore anxious, saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, Wherewithall shall we be clothed? For after all these things do the Gentiles seek: for your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things."

Only a few pages later do we find this additional emphasis, "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? and not one of them shall fall on the ground without your Father: for the very hairs of your head are all numbered." (Matt. 10:29-30). Here, Christ is telling us that God knows us more fully even than we know ourselves.

Promises of God's Continual Love and Care

Throughout the New Testament we find indications that God wishes for us to call upon him in our times of trouble. We are taught to pray, with the confident expectation that he will hear and answer our prayers. For example, Christ said, "Ask, and it shall be given unto 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 John 15:7, we further read, "If ye abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatsoever ye will, and it shall be done unto you." In James 5:16, there are these additional words, "The effective fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much in its workings."

In writing to the Philippians the apostle Paul said, "In nothing be anxious. but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God. And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall guard your hearts and your thoughts in Christ Jesus." (Phil. 4:6-7). Still later in that same chapter the apostle Paul indicated the great strength which he felt from the nearness of God. He wrote, "And my God shall supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus." (Phil. 4:19).

From an entirely different point of view we further learn God's continual presence with us and his continual concern for our good. In I Cor. 10:13 Paul wrote, "There hath no temptation taken you but such as man can bear: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation make also the way of escape, that ye may be able to endure it." God is aware and concerned when we are tempted and provides a way for our escape.

When the subject of God's providence is mentioned we ordinarily think first of the passage in Romans 8:28, which reads, "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 is truly one of the great passages on this subject, but it is by no means the only one that indicates that God is concerned for us and for our good. Later in that same chapter we read, "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? shall tribulation, or anguish, or persecution or famine or nakedness or I peril, or sword? Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us." (Rom.

8:35-37). There is no crisis or emergency in life which can separate us from the concern which God has for us. The final words of our Lord while here on the earth, as recorded in Matt. 28:20, were these, "And lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world."

Conclusion

As we have studied the examples of both Old and New Testaments, we have seen the intimate way that God was related to his people and how they were blessed and strengthened by their association with him. As we have read the testimony of Christ we have felt even more keenly the intimate interest which God has in us and our great blessing of being children of God, with God as our heavenly Father. As we have read the promises of the New Testament which indicate God's continual willingness to help us in times of trouble and need, we have had even greater confidence in his presence. Let us, then, realize God's concern for us. Let us realize his availability to us. Then, let us love close to him. He will never force us to allow him a place in our lives, but he is available and ready to be the greatest blessing that man can have.

This suggests the need for one to become a Christian. Only when we are in covenant relationship with God through our having accepted his proffered love by obedience to his commands can we expect the blessings that come through this close relationship to God. It is a great day when we stand up to be counted, confess our faith in Christ, repent of our sins, and then are buried with our Lord in baptism. After this great "new birth" we live a life in which we take strength daily from our association with our heavenly Father, as members of his eternal family. The providence of God is one of the greatest themes of the scriptures and one of the greatest blessings of our lives.