

Prayer & Providence or Production? (Part 2)

Today we continue our study in the Providence of God. There are so many passages. Last week we looked at David's life, and it challenged us. We could go on with perplexing passages in David's life alone. One example I brought up was David's numbering Israel after being incited by God/Satan. Even that account alone has another perplexing moment. After David angers God by numbering Israel, the Lord gives him three options for punishment: 3 years of famine, 3 months of fleeing from enemies, or 3 days of pestilence from the Lord. David chose to be punished by the Lord because he believed in His mercy. After God killed 70,000 Israelites, God sent an angel to Jerusalem to destroy it. However, as He watched, He relented from the calamity and said to the angel, "It is enough; now stay your hand." Did God not fully know what He would do? Why does that seem so "in the moment?" Perhaps because it was.

Or what about when the King of Judah and Israel agreed to battle the Syrians together. They asked the prophets if their campaign would succeed, and all prophesied they would. However, they knew of one prophet, Micaiah, who would tell the truth no matter what. Once Micaiah was before the kings, he said this: **1 Kings 22:17-23**. Yes, God uses evil agents to accomplish His purposes. Kind of like He did when He used men to crucify Jesus.

Do you know who wrote most about God's providence in the New Testament? Hands down, it was Paul, and I'd like to dig into His calling and ministry to help us understand the "big picture" regarding God's providence. I hope we'll leave here today with encouraged hearts and refreshed minds. Let's begin with Paul's conversion and go from there:

Saul Life:

- **Acts 9:3-16**. Paul's is such a perplexing story. It's nerve-racking to approach because I've not always been sure what to make of it. I don't know if I do now, though I have my own thoughts.
- **Acts 26:9-11**. Paul thought he was doing the right thing, and God did not restrain him for a good while. Yet, God showered him with mercy and grace. He had a ministry for Paul.
- **Galatians 1:13-16**. The road to Damascus wasn't when it all began. God can have foreknowledge of Judas, but He can't, Paul?
- **1 Timothy 1:12-17**. I believe this gives us insight into the reason why God used Paul. **He was ignorant**. It wasn't due to a hard heart, brethren.

Let me share a few passages that fulfill what Jesus said would happen to Paul. Indeed, as Jesus said, Paul would suffer throughout his life. However, it was an interesting road. Sometimes the Spirit would open doors, but other times He closed them. Sometimes Satan hindered him. There were times when Paul wouldn't take advantage of an open door, and there were many times when he didn't know what would happen. At other times, he knew exactly what was to come, but it was difficult for others to accept at first:

- **Acts 14:27** And when they arrived (at Antioch - SB) and gathered the church together, they declared all that God had done with them, and how **He had opened a door of faith** to the Gentiles.
- **1 Corinthians 16:5-9** I will visit you after passing through Macedonia, for I intend to pass through Macedonia, and perhaps I will stay with you or even spend the winter, so that you may help me on

my journey, wherever I go. For I do not want to see you now just in passing. I hope to spend some time with you, **if the Lord permits**. But I will stay in Ephesus until Pentecost, for **a wide door for effective work has opened to me**, and there are many adversaries.

- **2 Corinthians 2:12–14** When I came to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ, **even though a door was opened for me in the Lord, my spirit was not at rest** because I did not find my brother Titus there. So I took leave of them and went on to Macedonia. But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere.
- **Colossians 4:2-4** "Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving. At the same time, pray also for us, **that God may open to us a door for the word**, to declare the mystery of Christ, on account of which I am in prison— that I may make it clear, which is how I ought to speak."
- **Acts 16:6–7** And they went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, **having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia**. And when they had come up to Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them.
- **Acts 21:10–14** While we were staying (at Caesarea - SB) for many days, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. And coming to us, he took Paul's belt and bound his own feet and hands and said, "**Thus says the Holy Spirit**, 'This is how the Jews at Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.'" When we heard this, we and the people there urged him not to go up to Jerusalem. Then Paul answered, "What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be imprisoned but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus." And since he would not be persuaded, we ceased and said, "Let the will of the Lord be done."
- **1 Thessalonians 2:17–18** "But since we were torn away from you, brothers, for a short time, in person not in heart, we endeavored the more eagerly and with great desire to see you face to face, because we wanted to come to you - I, Paul, again and again - **but Satan hindered us**."

So, there's no doubt that God was with Paul, but what was Paul's primary goal? What was it all about to him? Can I share what I believe the "big picture" was to Paul?

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

- What is the good that Paul speaks of in this passage?
- Remember, this is the same Paul who wrote this:
 - **1 Timothy 6:6–8** But godliness with contentment is great gain, for we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world. But if we have food and clothing, with these we will be content.
 - **Philippians 4:10–13** "I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at length you have revived your concern for me. You were indeed concerned for me, but you had no opportunity. Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through Him who strengthens me."
- **Romans 8:29-30** For those whom He foreknew He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, in order that He might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom He

predestined He also called, and those whom He called he also justified, and those whom He justified He also glorified.

- Brethren, now we're getting somewhere. This is what Paul was always most concerned about. It was the bread and butter of his ministry. It's what's behind one of the most famous passages in all his writings: **Ephesians 1:3-10**

Brethren, consider **Luke 12:22-34**.

Last week we discussed the providence of God. Is God involved in our lives, or does the Law of Nature rule this world? My hope is I was able to argue God's involvement. He is very involved, though we will not know how and when. He has also taught us to live responsibly. Yes, we should rely on Him and reach out through prayer (and what's the point of prayer if He's hands off). Yet, we are to live based on His counsel (the word), help from wise counselors) and sound observations. Do I, for example, think God had predetermined that Jordan would be my wife? No, I don't believe that. However, could God have played a part in our meeting one another? I have no issue with that, either. I thank God for her either way. Likewise, I don't believe God made David sneak into Saul's camp to make a point, but I see how God helped his plan to succeed by causing a deep sleep to fall on Saul and His men. As we discussed last week, we are responsible for making truth-based decisions. Just because you have the ability or opportunity doesn't mean you should. Sometimes your choice may be sinful or unwise. It may lead you away from God. Also, God may shut the door and open another. That's the beauty of having several talents. We can give glory to God in many ways.

Now, having said all of that: what do you think is most important? That God shows up for you physically or spiritually? What do you think is most important to God? What does the New Testament focus on more than anything? What are you taking away from the passage we just read? There's no doubt that Jesus taught about God's physical blessings. God sends His rain on the just and unjust, etc.. Isn't Jesus clearly stating that physical needs are not what we need to focus on? Did He not say that God's Kingdom (and His righteousness) should be our primary concern? Is that sufficient?

Finally, I leave you with **Luke 22:31-34** "Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers." Peter said to Him, "Lord, I am ready to go with You both to prison and to death." Jesus said, "I tell you, Peter, the rooster will not crow this day, until you deny three times that you know Me."

- This passage pulls my attention in too many directions.
 - Jesus prayed for Peter's faith not to fail, yet He knew it would. Why?
 - Satan requested Peter. That's terrifying, and I'm not sure what all that implies.
 - Jesus told Peter what would happen, which included his betrayal of Jesus. Can you imagine hearing that from Jesus?
 - How much of this translates into my life? Does Jesus know what I'll do in life? Is He "fighting" for me? Has Satan ever requested me? Does Jesus knowing what will happen change what I'll do?
 - Here's what I know: praying for one another's spiritual well-being is good. This is the goal. It's good to be restored. Great news - Peter turned again and was encouraged by Jesus.