

The Providence of God

The providence of God is wonderful study about how God provides for his creation. The word providence means to foresee, to perceive in advance, to note beforehand, to know or think in advance. So we could say, the providence of God is used to refer to what God does in foreseeing and making available to man those things, which he really does need. Simply put, the Providence of God means God provides. God is always looking out for mankind and providing us with what we need.

Psalm 23:1 The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. ² He makes me to lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside the still waters. ³ He restores my soul; He leads me in the paths of righteousness For His name's sake. ⁴ Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; For You *are* with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.

These verses describes God as a Shepard and a Shepard takes care of his flock providing them with what they need. He will lead us where we need to go and comfort us. He is very active in our lives and our world. He is not like the God of Baal in 1Kings 18. Do you remember how Elijah challenged the 450 prophets of Baal to a contest to see whose God was really the God? The challenge was to cut up a bull and put it on some wood without putting fire under it. They could call on their God and he would call on God almighty. Whoever's bull was consumed by fire would prove who had the one true God. Elijah observed these prophets all day long praying to their God and even cutting themselves trying to get their God to answer. Elijah mocks them, telling them maybe their God is meditating, or he is too busy, or maybe he is on journey or maybe he just sleeping.

Elijah cuts up his bull and places it on the alter along with twelve stones and digs a trench around it. He has them pour four pots of water on it three times, so that everything is soaked. When he calls on God almighty not only did the bull burn, but the fire was so hot that it consumed the water, wood and even the stones. This is the kind of God that we have in our corner, one that answers our prayers and continually looks out for us through his providence.

You can see Gods providence at work in just about every book in the Bible. In the story of Elijah we observe that God used a miracle to bring about the desired result. But, when you look at the Bible as a whole, you will find that this is the exception and not the rule. Generally, God uses natural law to bring about his desired result. This is how he works today because we no longer have miracles and signs today. Notice this is what 1Cor. 13: 8-10 teaches.

1 Corinthians 13:8 Love never fails. But whether *there are* prophecies, they will fail; whether *there are* tongues, they will cease; whether *there is* knowledge, it will vanish away. ⁹ For we know in part and we prophesy in part. ¹⁰ But when that which is perfect has come, then that which is in part will be done away.

Basically what Paul is saying here at that time they only knew in part and prophesied in part because the full message of God was revealed at this time. The primary purpose of their miraculous gifts were to prove what they were preaching was coming from God. Paul goes onto to say when they which is perfect or that which is complete has come then miraculous gifts would cease because we would have the fully revealed word of God. Some get confused on the word perfect and think this is referring to Jesus but again this word means that which is complete or that which is mature and is never used anywhere else in scripture in reference to Jesus or his return. Using this same word James tells us this,

James 1:25 But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues *in it*, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does.

Since we have the full revealed word today there is no more reason for miracles. This does not mean that God doesn't have the power to do miracles through humans today. It simply means it is not in God's will to do them today. However we rest assured that God does take care of us and he will answer our prayers through natural law.

We can break God's providence into two categories.

1. **General Providence**
2. **Special providence.**

General providence is that which benefits everyone in general. Jesus tells us,

Matthew 5:45 for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.

Both the righteous and the unrighteous benefit from God's providence. For instance Jesus assures us that God feeds and takes care of the birds (Mat. 6:26). The Book of Psalm talks about how God provides rain for the earth and food for the animals (Ps. 104:21; Ps. 147:7-9). It is very evident that everyone and every animal benefits from God's general providence.

Special providence is when God provides for his children, that are obedient to his word with what they need and not always with what they want. Special providence is something God does after a prayer that he might not have done if someone had not prayed.

James 4:2 You lust and do not have. You murder and covet and cannot obtain. You fight and war. Yet you do not have because you do not ask. ³ You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend *it* on your pleasures.

As Christians we have the wonderful avenue of prayer being able to ask the father in heaven for different things. Jesus tells us to ask and it will be given to us (Mat 7:7-11). God will hear the righteous and deliver us from our troubles (Ps. 34:15-17). Paul tells us God will supply us with all our needs according to his riches (Ph. 4:19). This should give us great comfort knowing God answer our prayers and is actively watching out for us. We must learn to put our faith and trust in God and his ability to take care of us.

Prov. 3: 5 Trust in the LORD with all your heart, And lean not on your own understanding; 6 In all your ways acknowledge Him, And He shall direct your paths. Jesus tells us that our father is so attentive that he even knows when a sparrow falls to the ground. He further states that we are greater than the sparrow and every hair on our head is numbered (Mat 10:29-31).

So, let's have great confidence that God does love and provides for us. People can sometimes look at event in their life and can say that God had a hand in it. We however should not be dogmatic about this, because God does work in mysterious ways and he does so in the background. Paul realized as he was talking about why Onesimus had ran away from his master in,

Philemon 1:15-16 ¹⁵ For perhaps he departed for a while for this *purpose*, that you might receive him forever, ¹⁶ no longer as a slave but more than a slave -- a beloved brother, especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.

I think Paul puts it best in,

Rom 11:33 Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable *are* His judgments and His ways past finding out!

Now that we talked about how God is going to be there for us and how God works through his providence. Now I want to look at several examples of God providence in the last 6 chapters of the book of acts.

The last six chapters of Acts deal with the life of Paul after his third missionary journey. It is very interesting to see how God's providence plays out in the life of Paul. As we examine this, we will see how prayer was answered and how promises made to Paul by the Lord were accomplished providentially.

Before we begin, it's important for us to look at the background of why Paul went to Jerusalem in the first place. Luke gives us the answer.

Acts 19:21 When these things were accomplished, Paul purposed in the Spirit, when he had passed through Macedonia and Achaia, to go to Jerusalem, saying, "After I have been there, I must also see Rome."

The Holy Spirit was guiding Paul where he must go. It was the Holy Spirit who had sent Barnabas and Paul on their first missionary journey (Acts 13:2). It was the Holy Spirit who forbids Paul to go to Asia and to Bithynia (Acts 16:6-7). It was God's will for Paul to go to Jerusalem and then to Rome (Acts 23:11). Not only did he preach the Word of God at Jerusalem, he also delivered aid from the Gentile churches (1 Cor. 16:1-4). When Paul arrived at Jerusalem he had a warm welcome (Acts 21:17). He quickly found out the converted Jews at Jerusalem had heard a rumor that Paul was teaching to abstain from any traditions of the Law of Moses (Acts 21:21). James and the elders recommend that he be purified with four men so the Jews there could see first hand that the rumor wasn't true (Acts 21:23ff). Paul agrees to do this and he was in the temple minding his own business until some Jews saw him in the temple. They stirred up the crowd there telling them that Paul had brought a Greek into the temple. This was lie, but once a mob was formed it was out of control and they drug Paul outside the temple with the intension to beat him to death. Just in the nick of time the Roman soldiers saved Paul from the angry mob. Was this just a lucky break for Paul or was the providence of God at work here? I have no doubt that it was the providence of God and in fact it was an answered prayer.

Romans 15: ³⁰ Now I beg you, brethren, through the Lord Jesus Christ, and through the love of the Spirit, that you strive together with me in prayers to God for me, ³¹ that I may be delivered from those in Judea who do not believe, and that my service for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints, ³² that I may come to you with joy by the will of God, and may be refreshed together with you.

Later on when Paul was speaking before King Agrippa declared that the only reason he was still alive was because God had been helping him (Acts 26:22).

We can really see how God works in the background to bring about the desired result in the Bible. This not only applies to those in the first century, but to us as well. In Acts 22 Paul addressing the angry mob that wants him dead. He takes this opportunity to teach them about Christ. They listened to him until he said that the Lord had sent him to the Gentiles. Once again the mob wanted Paul dead. Paul was taken into the barracks for his safety and the commander was determined to find out why these Jews were so angry with Paul. He did not know what Paul had said to them because he spoke to them in Hebrew. The commander had planned to beat it out of Paul until he discovered he was a Roman citizen. The commander really wanted to know more about Paul situation so he released him from his restraints and called together the Sanhedrin Council (Acts 22:30). Paul addressed the crowd and it turned ugly again. Once again, the soldiers had to rescue Paul from the Jews (Acts 23:10). God was still taking care of Paul.

After this incident there were some Jews that took an oath not to eat or drink until they had killed Paul (Acts 23:12). These men went to the chief priest and elders and shared with them their vow they had taken. They wanted them to ask the commander to send Paul before them one more time for more questioning so they could ambush him and kill him. Even though this plan seemed bullet proof, they had not anticipated that God was on Paul side. We learn from Acts 23:16 that Paul's nephew just happened to be in the right place at the right time to hear this diabolic scheme. He goes straight to Paul and tells him of the Jews plot. Paul then sends him to the commander and he tells the plot to him. The commander didn't have to believe this boy, but he did. That same night the commander had it arranged to have Paul taken to Caesarea to the Governor Felix. The commander made sure Paul arrived there safely by sending him with 470 soldiers. Again I believe God had a hand in all of this providentially.

Now we find Paul giving his defense before Felix and he cant find anything against Paul worthy of death. As a favor to the Jews he leaves him locked up for period of two years. Felix kept talking with Paul during this time hoping that he would bribe him with money to let him go because he was a greedy man. Festus takes the place of Felix and the Jews thought they might convince the new governor to have Paul brought to Jerusalem. They wanted to ambush Paul so they could kill him. Festus foils their plans telling them that Paul will remain in Caesarea and if they want to lay charges against him they will have to go there. Once again Paul's life was spared.

Once again Paul gives his defense and Festus could not find anything against Paul deserving death. However, he thought he would do the Jews a favor and asked Paul if he would be willing to go to Jerusalem to be judged. Instead, Paul appealed to Caesar to be judged by him. This was his right as a Roman citizen. Festus had no choice now but to send Paul to Rome.

Once again we see the Providence of God in actions. We need to remember that Paul had hoped to go to Rome (Rom. 15:23). Jesus even told him he was going to Rome in,

Acts 23:11 But the following night the Lord stood by him and said, "Be of good cheer, Paul; for as you have testified for Me in Jerusalem, so you must also bear witness at Rome."

There was just one problem. Festus had to write formal charges against Paul, but he had nothing to write down. Festus was glad to See King Agrippa and his sister come visit him. He asked him for help on what to write about Paul. King Agrippa agreed to help and wanted to hear Paul speak. Once, again Paul gives his defense talking about Jesus. Earlier Jesus told Paul this,

Acts 9:15 But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel. ¹⁶ "For I will show him how many things he must suffer for My name's sake."

Jesus said this would happen to Paul and it did through God's providence.

Next, begins Paul journey to Rome as a prisoner. This real life adventure is a very exciting story full of drama and action. The story begins with Paul boarding the ship. Luke and Aristarchus were there with Paul. We don't know for sure if Luke was a prisoner here or perhaps serving as a doctor. A centurion name Julius was responsible for the prisoners. Its interesting that only two centurions are named in the Bible, Julius (Acts 27:1) and Cornelius (Acts 10:1). It didn't take long for Paul to find favor in the site of Julius as we see he allowed Paul off the ship to visit with his brothers and sister in Christ on more than one occasion (Acts 27:3; 28:14). When they make it to Myra and change ships.

This is when the winds on the sea start causing all kind of problems. In fact they got so bad they had to change their course and sail close to Crete and they just barely made to Fair Havens. They stayed there for a while, but this port really wasn't a good place to spend the winter. Paul warned them not to leave that place because he perceived that disaster would strike. I don't think Paul was prophesying here but speaking from his own experience (2 Cor. 11:25). They did not listen to Paul and they decided to try and make a run for Phoenix, because it was a good place to spend the winter. The winds died down and they decided to set sail. They didn't get very far when a strong head wind blasted them. They had not choice but to allow the wind to drive the ship. They caught a small break at the island Claudia and pulled there safety boat on board and they also wrapped cable on the undergird of the ship. This gives us an idea of how fast and hard this wind hit them, because they didn't even have time to secure their safety boat until now. They were back out to sea and they were being tossed around like a rag doll. They could not see the sky in the day or the night and they lightened the ship by throwing their tackle overboard. These men had lost all hope and feared death. **Acts 27:21 But after long abstinence from food, then Paul stood in the midst of them and said, "Men, you should have listened to me, and not have sailed from Crete and incurred this disaster and loss. ²² "And now I urge you to take heart, for there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship. ²³ "For there stood by me this night an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I serve, ²⁴ "saying, 'Do not be afraid, Paul; you must be brought before Caesar; and indeed God has granted you all those who sail with you.' ²⁵ "Therefore take heart, men, for I believe God that it will be just as it was told me. ²⁶ "However, we must run aground on a certain island."**

Again, we are going to see the providence of God at work in this journey. When you look at a map, the island Malta is like finding a needle in a haystack. Yet, the wind and the sea drove these men there just like the angel had promised. They crash there ship close to this island and the soldiers wanted to kill all the prisoners so they would not escape. But, Julius did not want to see Paul harmed, so he ordered them not to. Instead he told everyone to try and make it to the shore. Just as the angel had promised Paul and all the men made it to the shore alive.

These men had no idea what kind of people were on this island, but to their surprise these men treated Paul and his companions with unusually kindness (Acts 28:2). Paul was never one to just sit around, so he went and gathered some wood and put it on the fire. When he did a viper latched onto his hand and he shook it off. The natives recognized this a very venomous

snake because they watched to see if Paul would swell up or die. They thought Paul was truly a bad man because here he survived the sea only to be killed by a snake. When they observed Paul hadn't even swelled up, they decided he was a God instead. Paul later on heals a man with a fever and no doubts teaches these natives about Jesus. It was because of the providence of God that Paul made it to this island alive and was able to teach these men that might not of been taught otherwise. Paul took advantage of the opportunities he had to teach the Word of God and we should follow this same example in our lives today. After three months Paul and his companions find another ship that was harboring on the island and they continue their journey to Rome.

At Rome, Paul was under house arrest, but he was allowed to rent his own home (Acts 28:30). He was also allowed to have as many visitors as he desired. Even though he was bound in chains he was able to teach and preach the gospel to those in Rome. Paul saw that even though he was prisoner, the gospel was being furthered by it.

Philippians 1:12 But I want you to know, brethren, that the things *which happened to me* have actually turned out for the furtherance of the gospel, ¹³ so that it has become evident to the whole palace guard, and to all the rest, that my chains are in Christ; ¹⁴ and most of the brethren in the Lord, having become confident by my chains, are much more bold to speak the word without fear.

In this lesson we have seen the providence of God at work throughout the life of Paul. Let us never forget that God is always watching out for us as well. He answers our prayers and works in our lives everyday. I believe Paul summarizes this lesson best in,

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

