

Introduction to the Mystery of Providence

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[0:00] The Mystery of Providence is the name of the book we'll be using as our study guide written by a Puritan John Flavel back in the 17th century.

If you'd like to have your own copy to read from, there's a sign-up sheet on the little table in the foyer, \$6.50. We'll get you a copy.

You need to do so today, and we'll order a few extras from whatever is signed up so we can get those in, hopefully, next week.

Anybody remember another book by John Flavel that we studied in our adult Sunday school class? Well, that's right. I don't hold you accountable. It was over probably 10, 15 years ago.

Keeping the heart. Proverbs 4.23. Above all else, keep the heart, for out of it are the issues of life. We studied that book and saw how vital it is to keep a guard over our hearts.

[1:03] Well, it's the same John Flavel. And it's helpful for us as we begin our study of providence to remember the simple definition we tried to preach through last Sunday from the pulpit.

Providence of God is God's most holy, wise, and powerful upholding and controlling of all His creatures in all their actions all of the time.

So it's God's governance of all that He has created. That's the subject of this book. Now, John Flavel was no stranger to difficult providences in his life.

As a minister of the gospel in Dartmouth, England, his ministry might have known great outward success if he had lived in another era. But it wasn't to be.

In 1662, at the age of 35, the act of uniformity was passed in England that tried to squeeze all ministers into the same mold and control what they taught and how they performed worship in their churches.

[2:17] It was conform or be ejected from the church. That was your choice. Well, Flavel and 2,000 others, most of whom were Puritans, were ejected as nonconformists.

And he continued to preach in private for three years until the Five Mile Act was passed and drove him out of town. You might wonder why was it referred to as the Five Mile Act.

Well, it forbade nonconforming ministers to come within five miles of a town unless they took an oath promising not to try to change the church or the state.

Well, Flavel was all about seeking to reform the church according to the Word of God. And so he refused to make such an oath.

And so he was driven out of the town of Dartmouth. He lived five miles away, as close as he could to his people. And many of his parishioners would travel the five miles to hear him minister the Word of God on the Lord's Day.

[3:22] Now, that's nothing to you to drive five miles, but believe me, it was a different thing in the 17th century. And it speaks highly of the pastoral ministry of this man to his suffering flock in days of persecution.

Well, later when pressures were applied to make the churches in England bow to the doctrine and practices of the Roman Catholic Church, Flavel turned to preaching in houses, in woods, and even on a huge rock at low tide.

His life was often in danger because of his nonconformist convictions, once narrowly escaping arrest from soldiers who caught one of his friends as they were meeting together.

He lived through the plague of 1665 that took the life of his father and minister at a premature age. He suffered the loss of three wives in death.

He enjoyed two years of religious freedom at the end of his life that was established in 1689, the year of our confession of faith. But then he died suddenly at age 64.

[4 : 32] So I say Flavel knew difficult providences in his life. Things weren't smooth, and he doesn't write to us from his easy chair about these mysterious providences of God that come upon us.

He's preaching to you what he surely must have preached to himself first. So let me just whet your appetite from the back cover of the book. Do we believe that everything in the world and in our own lives, down to the minutest details, is ordered by the providence of God?

Do you believe that? Do we ever take time to observe and meditate on the workings of providence? If not, are we missing much? It should be a delight and pleasure to us to discern how God works all things in the world for his own glory and his people's good.

But it should be an even greater pleasure to observe the particular designs of providence in our own lives. Oh, what a world of rarities, says John Flavel, are to be found in providence.

With what profound wisdom, infinite tenderness, and incessant vigilance, it has managed all that concerns us from first to last. And it was to persuade Christians of the excellency of observing and meditating upon this that Flavel first published his book, *The Mystery of Providence*, in 1678.

[5 : 53] Well, John Flavel was a keen observer of God's providence, and he wants you to be the same. Hopefully, by reading him and letting him lead us through Scripture and through illustrations in church history and in his own life, we too will develop an eye for the providence of God in our own lives.

And we'll begin to see his providence everywhere, since it is everywhere. Seeing God at work in big and small, extraordinary and ordinary, in both joy and trial.

So the providence of God is kind of like a pair of glasses that changes the way that we see the world. Without the providence of God, we see a world in chaos.

With the providence of God, yes, it's chaos, but we see that God is the one at the controls, and that, in fact, it is not out of control. It's not chaotic.

God is ordering all of it for his purposes, for himself and for his church, his people. Now, we heard testimony Wednesday night of the difference it makes in the ordinary flat tires of life.

[7 : 13] If you haven't applied the providence of God to your flat tire, you haven't learned the providence of God. It affects the way you look at everything, and we saw that in the word of testimony.

We saw the difference it makes in our prayer life. There are many ways that this truth will affect our lives. So today, we dig into the introduction.

It's Flavel's own introduction to the mystery of providence. Turn to Psalm 57 and verse 2. Psalm 57 and verse 2.

One of the hallmarks of Puritan preaching and writing is that they root their subject in the exposition of some text from the Word of God.

Psalm 57 and verse 2 is Flavel's foundation for this whole book. For all that he's going to tell us. He starts it out on this foundation. He first explains it to us, and then from it, he will draw out a doctrine.

[8 : 21] Now, that's very Puritan-esque. To take a text of Scripture, explain it, and say, now from this text, we can learn this doctrine. And he summarizes the doctrine.

He's going to summarize the doctrine of providence from this verse. So it's not a sermon looking for a text. It's a sermon that's growing out of the Scripture text itself.

So Psalm 57, 2. I cry out to God Most High, to God who fulfills His purpose for me. Now notice two things here. First, God is great beyond our wildest imagining.

He is God Most High. High and lifted up. Exalted over all. His name is majestic in all the earth. His glory is above the heavens.

That's the first thing. God Most High. And then the second thing is there's me. You see me in the text?

[9 : 22] Little, lowly, poor, and sinful, distressed and needy, me. And these two stand so far apart in nature and condition.

The Most High God and me. And yet the wonder of wonders is that the Most High God fulfills His purpose for little and lowly me.

Though He is Lord on high, He looks upon the lowly. And He fulfills His purpose for me. Now that's the wonder.

The mystery of God's providence as Flavel entitles his book. The condescension of the Most High God to men.

That He is personally involved in all that happens to us. Governing and ensuring that it all works together to serve the good of His people and the glory of His name. That these two should ever be married together is indeed a great mystery.

[10 : 25] So Flavel would have us first be worshippers before the providence of God. It's not a doctrine first to argue or to even apply to your practical life.

It's first a doctrine to worship God for. And that's why it's found in this book of Psalms.

The Psalms are for the worshipping saints of God's people. It's the Old Testament worship book.

Book of order or worship, you might say. Song book. And so this God of providence is to be worshipped for His great works of providence in which He reveals His glory and greatness.

Now this is a great comfort and support of the saints in all of our trials and distresses that there's one sitting at the controls who's all wise and almighty and therefore more than capable of turning all the actions of all His creatures to a happy ending for us and that He promises to do just that for us. Flavel concludes, and indeed, it were not worthwhile to live in a world devoid of God and providence. And yet, brothers and sisters, most of the world lives without these glasses.

[11 : 42] Without God. Without a sense of providence. hopeless. Hopeless. Bless the Lord that you walk in the light.

The light of God and His providence. Make use of this great comforting doctrine. That's not a throwaway sentence.

It's not worthwhile to live in a world devoid of God and providence. It shows us the value of this truth. Life isn't worth living if God is not in control. But He is in control.

And therefore, we worship. So, Psalm 57. I don't have time to read the entire psalm, but let me read a good portion of it. Have mercy on me, O God.

Have mercy on me, for in You my soul takes refuge. I will take refuge in the shadow of Your wings until the disaster has passed. I cry out to God Most High, to God who fulfills His purpose for me.

[12 : 42] He sends from heaven and saves me, rebuking those who hotly pursue me. God sends His love and His faithfulness. I'm in the midst of lions. I lie among ravenous beasts, men whose teeth are spears and arrows, whose tongues are sharp swords.

Be exalted, O God, above the heavens. Let Your glory be over the earth. They spread a net for my feet. I was bowed down in distress. They dug a pit in my path, but they have fallen into it themselves.

Flavel doesn't want us to miss three things about this psalm, and especially the first part of it here. And number one is David's extreme danger. What do you see in verse one that points to the fact that David is in trouble?

Some danger. Go ahead. He's asking for mercy. Anything else? He needs refuge.

He needs a shelter, a place to hide. Disaster. So all these words, there's disaster that's passing by, and you need a place to hide when disaster comes.

[13 : 53] So he's in big trouble over his head. His life is at stake. Now what kind of trouble is he in? Can you tell from the rest of the verses that we read?

From verse three. What do you see? What is this trouble? Alright. He's in the midst of lions and ravenous beasts.

That's poetic language. We're not to think that he's in the jungle and that there are lions chewing on his heels. What's he talking about there? Men. Men whose tongues are as sharp as swords and whose teeth are like ravenous lions and wild beasts.

What else do we see that would tell us the kind of danger that he's in? Three, four, five, six, any of those verses. He's being pursued hotly.

Okay, what else? What else? He's spread a net and he's dug a pit. Okay. There's a net spread for him that as he walks by, he'll step into it and be caught.

[14 : 59] Or another place they've dug a pit and covered it over so that when he steps on that ground, he'll be snared and fall into it. Again, he's being hunted down like a partridge in the mountains.

And it all leaves David bowed down in distress. What do we learn from the title of this psalm that spells out David's extreme danger? What is this danger he's under?

Persecution. Who is the chief persecutor? King Saul. So, we need to put this psalm and this talk about these ruthless men who are pursuing him into the historical situation that the introduction to the psalm tells us when he had fled from Saul into the cave.

So, David has spent years doing little else than fleeing for his life. And now he resorts to one of the most uninhabitable places, the wilderness of En Gedi.

And amid the rocky crags where the wild goats lived, he finds a cave, a hole in the rock, and he hides himself in it. But even there, in that uninhabitable place in En Gedi, Saul tracks him down.

[16:23] So great is his malice toward David. And one day, while hiding there in that hole in the rock, the unthinkable happens. Saul and his men are approaching. And they keep coming nearer and nearer.

And David and his men go deeper into the cave. And then Saul himself actually enters the cave. And with no back door entrance, or exit, we should say, disaster seems imminent.

What hope is there now? He is in extreme danger. That's no stretch of the language. So what do you do when you are in danger? You pray.

And that's what David does. He prays in a cave. In a hole in the ground. And that's the second thing that Flavel wants us to see. Not just his extreme danger, his earnest prayer.

Flavel says, between the jaws of death, he prays. His earnestness in his prayer is seen in that he cries.

[17:35] And he repeats his cry. First, he says in verse 2, I cry out to God Most High. To cry out is a strong expression. It speaks of intense, fervent prayer.

Of an emotional, holy passion in prayer. It's what you do when you're in great trouble. And your life is at stake. You just cry out for help. With all your heart.

And then, notice the repetition. Have mercy on me, O God. Have mercy on me. Again, that shows something of the emotion and fervency of his prayer.

He's in trouble. And nothing but God's mercy acting in an extraordinary way can now save him from ruin. That's the second thing we're not to miss. His earnest prayer. But thirdly, Flavel wants us to not miss the argument he pleads before God for his intervention.

The argument that he's pleading in prayer to God for God to intervene on his behalf. First of all, his reliance upon God. Have mercy on me, O God, for in you my soul takes refuge.

[18:40] I will take refuge in the shadow of your wings until the disaster is past. Why is that calculated to move God to show mercy?

Anybody? Pardon? He's trusting in God, but why should that make God any more eager to protect David?

He acts as if it does. He cites it as a reason to move God. Yes. He's appealing to his fatherly compassion.

Okay, so God's character fatherly, is on the line, his name. This is one of my children. And he's come and he's taken refuge in me.

Am I going to ignore such a one? David knows his God to be of such tender compassion that he will not just brush off someone who comes and throws themselves upon the lap of their heavenly father, hides under the shelter of his wing.

[19:50] So that's something to move God to show mercy upon God. The name of the Lord is a strong tower.

The righteous run to it and are safe. So his reliance on God is something he pleads for God to intervene. But secondly, is the providence of God. And that's where we come to our text.

I cry out to God most high to God who fulfills his purpose for me. Saul is high. He's king of the land. He controls the whole army.

But God is most high. You see? He's got a high enemy but he's got a most high God. And that most high God is involved in his life to fulfill his purpose for him.

It's the sovereign God in action swaying his scepter, governing his universe and everything in it in a way that fulfills his purpose for me. That's the providence of God.

[20:52] And it's one of the things that encourages David to pray in his danger and to pray with hope and with comfort that this great God controls all things and he has plans for me.

Say, what plans did God have for David that David knew about at this point in his life? How did he know that? Samuel was not the hope.

The anointing oil of God had already splashed upon his head. I will find a king after my own heart. And the anointing oil has fallen upon David to be the next king of Israel.

That's one of God's purposes for this man. Is God just going to allow him to be snuffed out? He can't. Because God is the God who fulfills his purpose for me.

His kingship is yet future. And God, you're not the kind of a God to let your purposes fall to the ground unfulfilled. So, it's God's character, his reputation.

[22:01] It's who God is. A God who fulfills his purpose for me. He had seen it in the past. What had David already seen of God's protecting providence of him in his life up to this point?

And if it happens afterwards, don't be afraid. What are some of the protecting providences that David has already experienced? From Goliath as a teenager.

A lion that was trying to steal one of his daddy's sheep. and also a bear doing the same. What else? Saul's spears and he was able to evade them. All the machinations and plotting of Saul up to this point.

They were going to kill him on his bed. His own wife, Saul's daughter, was going to let them in. I mean, there were all kinds of plans to put him out in the front ranks to fight the Philistines and they'll take care of him.

[23:08] All these things. And God has been a God who has protected him. Mark? Alright? There again, we see the providence of God making Jonathan a friend of David and sometimes used him to tip David off to his danger.

In so many ways, David had already experienced the loving protection of God's providence upon him. There's one time in chapter 23, just the end before David hides in the cave, when Saul and his men were closing in on David to capture him and he's saved by the Philistines.

Because Saul learns that the Philistines have attacked another part of his country. So he calls off the pursuit just when they're about to get him. And they go off to fight the Philistines.

And then David goes and hides in the cave. So again, God had provided him. All this was like a rich journal of God's providential care of him.

And David's remembering it. He's meditating on it. He draws comfort from it. He thinks of the Most High God as a God who's directly, personally involved in performing his purpose for me.

[24:32] And so, that's the God he cries to. He sends from heaven and saves me. He rebukes those who hotly pursue me. He sends his love and faithfulness.

Verse 3, they dug a pit in my path but they have fallen into it themselves. So this God of providence has never failed me up to this point and I'll cry to him. If Levo wants us to see four things about God's providence, I must just mention them and move on.

It's universal influence. It is overall. It's efficacy. It's effectiveness. He not only undertakes to work out his purposes for us, he fulfills his purposes for us.

He not only tries to work them out, he accomplishes them and no one can hold back his hand. It's benefit. The exercise of God's providence is always for the benefit of his saints.

Romans 8, 28. It may feel like everything is against me but it is always working together for me. And then lastly, it's cheer and encouragement.

[25:41] What life and hope it inspires in our hearts and prayers when we're under pressure. David found it to be so here. Even when there was but a hair's breadth between him and death.

That hair's breadth was controlled by the God of providence. So, providence is universal, it's efficacious, it's beneficial to the saints and it cheers and encourages.

Flavel then says, from the text then you have this doctrine. This is very Puritan-esque as I said. And he summarizes under this doctrine. It is the duty of the saints, especially in times of difficulty, to reflect upon the performances of providence for them in all the states and through all the stages of their lives.

That's the duty then that derives from the text. It is our duty of the saints, especially in times of difficulty, to reflect, to remember all the ways that God's providence has worked for me throughout all stages of my life.

In other words, if God has gone to the trouble of performing many great things on your behalf, then it's not only your comfort, but it's your duty to remember them, to reflect upon them.

[27:06] And that's what Flavel is going to do with us throughout the whole of his book. He's going to have a short chapter where he teaches us how to reflect upon the providence of God.

But first, he's going to walk us through all the different fields. Not all of them, but the several chapters of fields where we can see his providence. And he's teaching us how it is that we can spot the providence of God.

It's a duty. Psalm 111, to great are the works of the Lord. They are pondered by all who delight in them. God's providential works are great. And those who delight in them ponder them.

They think upon them. He's caused his wonders to be remembered. And so, that's the duty. Now, there's two different ways to reflect upon the providential works of God.

One way is in their entirety and in their fullness. This is to reflect upon providence from the perspective of heaven. When you get to heaven, Flavel is saying, you will have the joy of looking on the providence of God in your life in fullness and entirety.

[28:16] He's working every day in our lives. He's very active in our lives every day. Mostly in ways that we are not aware of at all.

But from heaven's perspective, we'll see the whole thing. And we'll see how this event was connected to this. and because it was connected to that, it affected this.

And we'll see this wondrous display of God's wisdom and power in our lives. And indeed, that's one of the joys that will contribute to our worship and praise in heaven as our sense of God's greatness will be infinitely stretched for all eternity.

And we'll see that indeed, God did all things well. That as for God, His way is perfect. His way is perfect. And we will look back as Jeff Johnson said and said, I wouldn't change a thing.

That's heaven's perspective. But we have to die and go to heaven to see the providence of God in its entirety and fullness. For the rest of us, the second way that we view providence is partial and imperfect.

[29:29] We view it from the bottom side. We view it from the runway. We're not up on the control tower looking down. We're right on the runway and we can't see the whole scheme of things.

We only see bits and pieces here and there. And we don't see it all clearly. No, the difference between these two ways of viewing providence is the difference between seeing an old watch with all of its parts scattered on the table.

That's how you see providence below. Oh, there's these things in my life. But I really can't see how they all work together. That's the partial and incomplete way that we view providence.

But heaven's view is like seeing the back side of the watch ticking. And you see all these gears interconnected and you see how they go working together with the spring and the hands in it and you watch in its entirety.

So, we're looking at the unconnected parts and we don't see the whole. There are dark and puzzling providences that leave us confused, that we cannot reconcile with many of God's promises, that we bitterly bewail thinking God must be in fact against us.

[30:51] But we'll one day see how they contributed. Those very things that we said were against us contributed to our good. So, the response is not to say, well, I see what you mean.

I'm going to wait to heaven to view the providence of God. Well, that's cheating God out of His glory and it's cheating you out of the comforts that come from viewing His providence here and now.

And when I say viewing His providence, I don't mean that you can necessarily see everything, but you see it by faith. Charlie didn't see God's hand aligning that nail to hit his tire, but by faith he saw that and it gave him comfort.

And so what we need to do from the bottom side and in our partial and imperfect view of God's providence is not say, well, I'll just wait until heaven to see this, but to be alert to God's providence, to have our eyes open to it so that we might indeed see how intimately involved God is in our life.

So let's return to our homes this week with the aim of developing an eye for God's providence.

Again, Flavel will show us different fields in which to see His eye, but let's ask God to develop our eye guided by the Word of God.

[32:20] What we see here to see God's hand working. It's like somebody else who has their eye developed very keenly for something. Maybe it's I couldn't think of an illustration very good.

Maybe you can think of a better one. But some people have their eye trained to birds. And they see birds. And they're not just big birds and little birds.

They know their names and they know their habits and they know their flight patterns and they know what they eat. And they're able to enjoy birds and they see birds everywhere where you just drive right on by and don't even see them.

Well, that's the way it can be with providence. If we're not developing an eye to it, well, it's always there, but we're missing it. So we want to develop an eye for it so that we're thinking about it.

God is involved in my life today. Lord, help me to see Your hand. Help me to trust Your hand even when I can't see it, but to at least see by faith the fact that Your hand is behind all that happens in my life.

[33 : 25] It's just like God's glory. You know, the glory of God fills the whole earth. That's what Isaiah 6 says. His glory fills the earth. Well, there's a lot of people who have no eyes to see God's glory.

You look at a flower and you're seeing something of the glory of God. A lot of people don't see the glory of God in it. They see scientific details and this and that. They miss the glory of God.

There's glory in the stars, the heavens. It's everywhere, but people don't have an eye for it. So with God's providence, it is everywhere. Let's seek to develop an eye for God's providence that appreciates His work in all things in our lives.

Well, our time is gone and I've lost my final page. Pardon? In the providence of God, we're finished. You were spared from another page. That's what you were spared. If I find that happening all the time, I'm going to suspect my wife. Well, let's pray.

[34 : 56] God Most High, when we see something of Your greatness, we wonder, what is man that You're mindful of him? What is man that You would care for us?

You would become man for us and become sin for us and die for us. You would live for us and that You would fulfill all Your purposes for us.

Teach us the wonder of it. Make us worshipers before You, the God of providence in our lives. And please give us not only the outward eye, but that inner eye of faith to be looking and relying upon Your providence in our lives.

To Your glory and praise and to our comfort, we ask. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.