

The Work of Providence For The Good of His People

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[0:00] So section one of the book that we're studying is entitled The Evidence of Providence. The Evidence or Proof of God's Providence.

! You then begin to see them everywhere.

Is that right? I have to take it by hearsay. I have never seen a batch of mushrooms for all the hunting I've done. But I'm told that once you see them, you have an eye for them and you then see them other places.

And that's the way the providence of God is. And Flava wants us to help us develop an eye for it. So he's going to show us some of the providences of God in our lives that we might develop that eye for his providence.

Where can we see the providence of God in our lives? Well, in these first seven chapters, Flava walks us through different fields where he'll show us God's control of all things for our good.

[1:18] He'll take us through the fields of our upbringing, our conversion, our work, our family. And he's training our eyes to see the invisible hand of providence behind the things that have happened to us.

So, chapter one, the work of providence for the saints. He's talking about not just his rule over all things, God's rule over all things, but his rule over all things for the good of the saints.

The Romans 8, 28 verse, the ending of that verse. He works all things together for good to those who love God and are called according to his purpose.

And so he starts by saying, I'm talking now about God's providence for the good of his people. And he talks about providence can be looked at two ways then.

If you look open to Ephesians 1 and verse 22, you'll see these two ways that the Bible speaks of God's providence, his reign.

[2:29] He exercises what we might call a universal rule and a gracious rule. Ephesians 1 and talking about God's power in raising Christ from the dead and seating him at his right hand in the heavenly realms.

Verse 21, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion and every title that can be given, not only in the present age, but also in the one to come.

And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.

So what does God rule over in this passage? What does Christ exercise rule over in this passage? All things, everything, all authority, powers.

And so he's saying that God's rule is literally over everything. That's his universal rule. But there is a gracious rule in which he rules over all things for the church.

[3:40] You see that. After talking about God placing all things under his feet and appointing him to be head over everything, saying it's for, that's a word of advantage, of benefit, for the benefit, for the advantage of his people, the church.

So as we think about the providence of God, his ruling, we're to recognize, yes, he rules over all, but he rules for the good of his people.

Now that's what he's out to prove then in this first chapter of his book. He's giving a defense, if you will, of the reality that there is a providence of God, that God reigns over all his creatures and all their actions all of the time.

And he's offering proofs of this, that he does it for the good of his people. Because there are some who hear us talking about the providence of God, and look what God did, and they say, oh, no, he

didn't.

All of those things you're talking about could just be explained by natural causes. We don't need God to explain what you've just said.

[4:58] It wasn't God acting. It can all be explained by the laws of nature. And so things are attributed to natural causes or laws of nature rather than to God.

And it's that position that Flavel is unloading his guns on. Those who would say to us, no, it's not God acting.

It's rather the laws of nature, natural causes. Now, they speak then of the laws of nature and natural causes as if they operate independently somehow, all on their own, apart from God's power and influence.

So we're thinking, for instance, of the law of gravity. And they would think, well, that's just a natural cause. And it's a law that's operative in the world. But God doesn't need to be a million miles.

He could be a million miles away and the law of gravity still goes on. You don't even need a God.

There's this law of gravity in our universe. It exists outside of God's rule.

[6:03] Or the rain, the whole water cycle. This is a natural cause. This law of how rain and water comes upon the planet.

Well, they speak of these things then as if they're somehow divorced from God. But the Bible won't let them get away with that. These so-called laws of nature are simply men's way of explaining what God does and does so consistently that they recognize it as if it were a law.

It's that consistent. The sun comes up every day and it's so consistent that they just say, well, that just happens by nature. No, it doesn't.

God's the one who causes his sun to shine, the Bible says. The rain doesn't just fall. God is the one who causes the rain to fall. That's precisely what God says in Psalm 135.

It's celebrating God's greatness and his control, his providence. And the fact that the Lord does whatever pleases him in the heavens, on the earth, the sea, and all their depths.

[7:15] And the very first example given in Psalm 135.7 is he makes clouds rise from the ends of the earth and he sends lightnings with the rain. So the providence of God is that he sends rain and he mixes some lightning in with it.

That's not just a cycle of water going on outside of God's control. Psalm 147.8, he covers the sky with clouds. He supplies the earth with rain and makes grass grow on the hills.

Jesus' view of these things was the same. In Matthew 5.45, he speaks of his Father in heaven. He causes his Son to rise on the evil and the good and he sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.

So the water cycle, the law of gravity, all these things that men call natural causes are just consistent ways that God works in his universe.

And he has established that these are the normal ways that I will work. But he's not limited to working in those ways. And he can work with those laws or contrary to them, without them.

[8:26] And in doing so, he shows that he is the one who is in control of all these things. So Flavel is answering those who deny the works of providence for God's people and instead would attribute them to natural causes.

And so when he talks about natural causes, he's using the term as the world uses it. He doesn't believe there are such things as natural causes somehow independent of God.

But that's the way the world thinks of it. And so he's using it in that fashion. And I could only say that if 350 years ago, Flavel was dealing with people who are singing the praises of natural causes, what would he say to our generation who just say, we don't need God to explain anything.

We have science and the laws of nature. And so very much a similar scene in which we live today.

So the proofs of providence. And he does this by putting several questions. I think seven or eight. We're only going to see two of them this morning.

[9:36] He puts questions to these doubters by way of challenging them. And here's the first question that he comes at them with. How has it happened that so many great mercies and deliverances have come to the people of God by working against the course of natural causes?

If this is all just natural causes that you're claiming, that when we see good coming to God's people, how is it that so many great mercies and deliverances have come to the people of God by working against the course of natural causes?

So what does water naturally do? What is the natural way with water? It seeks the lowest, what was it?

The lowest level. Isn't that right? By nature, it doesn't seek higher levels and stand up in walls, does it? And yet that's what water did for the Israelites to pass through.

Well, if it's all just laws of nature, how was it that good came to the Israelites by water acting contrary to the way that it usually does?

[10:57] Someone tried to explain to a young Sunday school class that this was really no miracle at all at the Red Sea. It was just a shallow place that was just shin deep or so.

And the little boy said to his misleading teacher, then that was an even greater miracle to make Pharaoh and all his army to drown in such shallow water. You see, you can't have it both ways. Either the water was standing up in a miraculous fashion and letting the Israelites through and then closed up on the enemies or else what are you left with?

You're left with nonsense. How did they all perish in ankle-deep water? So, again, the point is, water did something that it usually doesn't do.

How did that happen if everything is just natural causes? Coincidence? Luck? No. Providence is what Flavel is arguing for.

[12:02] What does fire naturally do? Consumes things that are consumable. All right?

Any time it hasn't acted naturally? The burning bush. It was burning, but it didn't consume. Another time?

The fiery furnace. The furnace. It usually consumes the clothing. It usually consumes the hair.

But when those three Hebrews came out, there was no smell of smoke on their clothing and there was not even a hair scorched or singed by the fire.

So someone says, well, it really wasn't that hot. Well, how come all the servants who threw them in died then because of the blazing heat? Again, God made fire do something and act in a way or did something that was against nature.

[13:08] So not everything in our world is just falling out by natural causes. What do lions and other ferocious beasts usually do? Didn't I just see on the news last night of a beast out in, a lion in Los Angeles that killed someone that was in the pen when the door, certain door was open that shouldn't have been.

Well, they usually devour their prey. Any time when lions have not acted according to nature, we think of Daniel. And again, we cannot say, well, they weren't hungry.

Why can't we say that? What happened to the fellows that falsely accused Daniel and their families?

The king threw them down and before they even hit the bottom of the pen, they were devoured. So God is causing lions and these ferocious beasts to act in a way that is contrary to nature.

This can't be ascribed to natural laws. What do wicked men with hatred against the righteous do to the righteous? Well, they persecute them.

[14:27] They harm them. And 1 Kings 13 and verse 4, remember King Jeroboam had a prophet come and pronounce a judgment against him and he lifted up his hand to reach out and to grab him and to harm him.

And immediately, his arm became shriveled and rigid. That naturally happens sometimes, doesn't it?

People's arms become shriveled and withered. Sometimes it happens over a long period of time.

But the timing of this event argues for another explanation than just natural causes.

It was at the very instant that God's prophet was in danger that it happened. And so, the text that we started out with last week, Psalm 57, remember David was talking about Saul and those men chasing him in terms of beasts.

He said, I'm in the midst of lions, ravenous beasts, men whose teeth are like spears and arrows, tongues that are sharp swords. Well, what do men like that naturally do?

[15:44] Well, they naturally devour. Yet God's providential hand restrained them and kept Saul and his troops from devouring David.

Jesus said to his disciples in Matthew 10, I send you forth as sheep among wolves. What do wolves usually do to sheep? They usually devour them. The fact that Jesus has any disciples on this earth is a sign that he is causing people to act contrary to their nature.

He is restraining some of their natural behavior for the protection of his sheep-like people. Well, God's providence at times acts contrary to natural, ordinary ways to show that it really is his hand that is involved and that is active.

And it's not just active when the fire doesn't burn. It's also active when the fire does burn. It's not just active when rain falls on the righteous.

It's also active when rain falls on the wicked. And so, God's providence in these extraordinary ways against nature proves that he is the one who is in control of all of his creatures all the time.

[17:11] Now, turn to 1 Samuel chapter 5 and 6. I was just reading this recently in my own devotional reading and I could not escape the powerful lessons it has for the providence of God working against nature.

1 Samuel 5 and 6. As often was the case, Israel and the Philistines were fighting it out and Israel was far from God.

That's why God allowed her enemies to come and fight against her. And so, on day one, Israel was defeated. They were superstitious that, oh, we didn't bring the ark into the camp. So, let's send for the ark of the covenant and if we bring the box with God in it, then we'll get victory.

So, they send for Hophni and Phinehas and the box, the ark. They fight against the Philistines and they lose again, this time even worse.

The ark itself is captured by the Philistines and Phinehas and Hophni, the two priests, were killed. Well, where did the Philistines put the ark of the covenant?

[18:25] Remember? They took it home with them and where'd they put it? In the temple to Dagon, their God. And why did they put it in there? What would that say?

Our God is bigger than your God. Our God is stronger than your God. We conquered you, our God conquered your God. And so, they bring the ark of the covenant, what they see is, again, some symbol of this God of Israel and they set it there before their God, Dagon.

The next morning when they woke up, what happened? It fell down. Do things fall down naturally? Yeah, sure they do. So, they just brushed him off and set him back up.

The next morning, he fell down again. Now, he's falling down before the ark of the covenant. So, the whole thing is a wonderful picture, isn't it? Our God's bigger than your God.

Well, then why is your God bowing down to ours as he falls down? And this time, he falls and his head and his hands fall off. Things fall down? Yeah. Naturally?

[19:39] Yeah. Is that what we have here? Well, there are things in the story that would make us say, no, you can't attribute this to coincidence.

It's rather the hand of God. Well, this is in Ashdod, the place where their temple to Dagon is and the people of Ashdod break out with tumors and death ensues.

Perhaps a bubonic plague carried by rats. We're not sure what exactly the precise plague was that God afflicted them with. Was it just chance that the plague arrived when the ark of the covenant arrived in Ashdod?

The sacred writer detects providence in verse 6. He says, the Lord's hand was heavy on the people of Ashdod and its vicinity and brought devastation on them and afflicted them with tumors and so on.

And even the people of Ashdod recognized God's hand behind it all. They say, the ark of the God of Israel must not stay here with us because his hand is heavy upon us and upon Dagon our God.

[20:53] So they called together all the rulers of the Philistines and said, what shall we do with it? They said, we'll move it to Gath. So they moved the ark of the covenant to Gath and the Lord's hand was against that city and the tumors and the great panic and the death of people young and old.

They sent it on to Ekron and as it's entering Ekron the people there cried out, they've brought the ark of the God of Israel around to us to kill us and our people. They didn't want anything to do with it.

They couldn't get rid of his spoils of victory soon enough and so they said, send it back to its own place. They first gathered together the rulers of the Philistines and told them, send it back to its own place or it will kill us and all of our people for death has filled the city with panic and God's hand was very heavy upon it and those who did not die were afflicted with tumors.

So the ark has been in the territory of the Philistines for seven months wreaking havoc and now they ask their priests and diviners, tell us how we should send it back to its place.

Well, they say send a guilt offering if you want to be cured from your tumors. Five gold tumors and five gold rats and so their artists get busy and form those objects.

[22:17] Five, according to the Philistine rulers, pay honor to Israel's God, perhaps he'll lift his hand from you and your gods and your land and then they rebuke the rulers. Why do you harden your hearts like Egypt and Pharaoh?

Boy, the news travels, doesn't it? What God did to Pharaoh, hard-hearted Pharaoh. These people know, they've heard and they're rebuking their Philistine leaders. Why are you being like them? Remember what happened? They had ten plagues. Let's not do what they did. So they got a new cart ready with two cows that had calved or they were told by these wise diviners to get a new cart ready with two cows that have calved and have never been yoked.

Hitch the cows to the cart but take their calves away and pin them up. Put the Ark of the Lord on the cart and a chest with gold objects as guilt offerings.

Send it on its way but keep watching it. So this is a test. This is a test being done and what we're out to decide is is God's hand really the cause of all the havoc that's been wreaked by the presence of this Ark or is it just coincidence?

[23:31] So here's the test. If this cart pulled by two cows that have calved and never been yoked, if it goes up to its own territory back toward Beth Shemesh of Israel then the Lord has brought this great disaster on us.

There is such a thing as the providence of God and he's been wreaking havoc on us. But if it doesn't go back home the cart pulled by the cows then we will know that it was not his hand that struck us and that it just happened to us by chance.

Now there's the test. Is it providence or is it chance? And I think there's a lot of men today that would need such a test. Well, some still must have been holding out to the thought that maybe all of this has just happened by chance.

At least they were wanting to put the matter to rest once for all to know was it chance or was it the God of Israel. And so the odds are stacked against the God of Israel.

They're going to give him opportunity an opportunity to prove that he's the God of Providence. But they're making it as hard as they can on him, aren't they? And so they took the two cows and penned up their nursing calves and put the ark on the cart with the chest and then the cows went straight up toward Beth Shemesh keeping on the road and lowing all the way.

[24:56] They did not turn to the right or to the left. What was there in the behavior of the cows that went against nature? Some of you farm girls help us city slickers out.

What was against nature? All right. All right. So here are the suckling calves. They're locked up in the barn and their mothers go off without them.

Lowing all the way but still going away from them back to Israel. Is there anything else? So?

Okay. I remember Earl Yerian telling us about working a yoke of horses and training them to go in a straight line.

These had never been yoked before and lo and behold they cut a straight line all the way back to Beth Shemesh not turning to the right the left staying right on the path. This behavior was not due to natural causes or by chance that's what they learned and neither was the disaster that had followed the ark wherever it went.

[26:21] It was the hand of an offended God of Israel for he still reigns and will bring low the proudest foe that him disdains. They put the idol in their temple and disdained God.

They treated God with contempt and God brought them low. It was a message to the Philistines a message to tell them who really reigns and who really is God.

And Dale Ralph Davis says he was speaking it was cow revelation he says. But God made the point plain to them.

His voice was low he says but it was clear as they went lowing all the way. Clear message the God of Israel reigns and has his way with disease and death and destruction.

They could not gainsay the reality that this had not happened by chance. So Flavel is seeing all of these kinds of things that happen some in biblical history some in church history some in his own experience and he's saying when you see God bringing deliverance and help to his people and working against nature to do so it disarms this argument that the works of providence are really not God at all they're just second chances.

[28:14] Now do you have any questions about that first question or comments anything at this point at that first proof of providence when God acts against nature anyone what?

How on modern today a person who doesn't believe the Bible stories what do you do then? Yeah. Well he's going to give seven more maybe that one just won't move them and in the end Flavel likens it to those who don't believe that there is a God and he's saying that the same proofs for God's existence are also the same proofs for his providence but if you deny you know you may deny that God doesn't exist and obviously then providence doesn't exist and in the end natural proofs are not going to convince the blind heart the fool that has said in his heart there is no God that's not to say proofs are irrelevant that proofs are not beneficial and they're especially beneficial I think to the people of God if not to those that we would like to see convinced because sometimes the world and the atmosphere that we live in bombards us with this stuff and well is it just natural causes is it this and we need to be armed and we who know that the scriptures are true can come to these passages and say no we see very clearly God operates against nature so it may not convince the unbeliever but I think it's part of that system of proof to help us in our own faith and dealing with doubts and thoughts of unbelief there yeah anybody like to respond to the question or another point Jackie yeah that's a good point to remember that we'll be seeing some of the other in some of the other proofs but we've already seen it even in this one when you see so often what happened as the

Ark of the Covenant went into the temple of Dagon and that's when Dagon falls down and it's when it comes into Ashdod that's when the plague hits and when it goes to Gath and Ekron the timing is so great that which is the greater faith to believe that there is a God who judges over the affairs of men and controls all things or to believe that all of this was just by chance and yeah that's a hard pill to swallow that's a bigger pill to swallow the fact of even with creation did all of this just happen by chance when we see order and design and so with the providence of God alright I think rather than trying to cover question two we're going to end any other examples that come to your mind in scripture where God caused things to happen for the good of his people against nature against the ordinary ways

Mickey okay yeah okay there were there were some of the plagues were yeah yeah we don't read of that but there were specific plagues that there was darkness here but light there there was a difference and God was making that point that's one of the points he was making that he made a difference between his people and those who were not his people so again there you see that distinction Dan Gideon and the fleece what happened there so I don't remember the order but one time water was on the ground but not the fleece and again the doubting mind of Gideon says well maybe that was just natural causes maybe that just happened Lord would you stoop to my unbelief and reverse the miracle and he did so now the fleece is wet and the ground is dry and so yes there's that working against the normal way that do operates for the benefit of one of his doubting children good

[33:20] Roger so men set their timetable for killing Jesus not during the feast of Passover might cause a riot and what do they end up doing the very thing against their own nature they didn't want to kill him during Passover they end up killing him during Passover you see God is in control and all of this is meant to strengthen our faith this is our God he reigns and so you're to see yourself under this God and all your enemies and all the things that seem to be against you to know that God is able to well that's just the first of seven the others we won't take so much time I just thought that that example from 1st Samuel demonstrated so patently how it is that God works against nature to fulfill his purposes for his people we're dismissed