

Providence in the Beginning of Life

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[0:00] Well, John Flavel began his study of the mystery of providence by showing the different proofs that he offers for why we believe that God is the one who is ordering all things in his creation.

It's not chance, it's not luck, it's not natural laws or natural causes that are operating independently of him, but that God indeed reigns over all things.

And for his believers, it's a gracious reign. He works all things together for their good. So he gave seven or eight proofs of that. Now, his aim throughout is to train our eyes so that we might see the providence of God.

He wants us to have a trained eye to spot his providence in our lives. Now, as our definition shows, everything in our life is providence.

So that shouldn't be hard. In other words, whatever we see going on in the world, in our lives, we're seeing providence. We're seeing God controlling, governing wisely, powerfully all his creatures.

[1:13] So in one sense, everything you see morning to night, you are seeing the providence of God. But it's another thing to have our eyes tuned to see it and to appreciate that this is God at work.

And that's what he's after. And so he's going to speak not of every providence, but he's, he's, that would be like the sands of the seashore. But he's going to speak of some of the more special and observable providence, works of providence in our lives.

So this morning, he begins with the first work of providence for us. The very first work of providence for us.

And that is our form, our, our birth and our upbringing. David says, surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life.

That's the providence of God in his goodness and mercy, following us, tracking us down all the days of our life. And what Flavel is wanting us to understand, that it, it goes right back to the very beginning of our lives.

[2:27] And so that's where we start this morning. Our formation and protection in the womb. Turn to Psalm 139. This is where the providence of God began toward you.

Psalm 139. And we're going to read verses 13 through 16.

David says, Psalm 139, 13, For you created my inmost being. You knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made.

Your works are wonderful. I know that full well. My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place. When I was woven together in the depths of the earth.

Your eyes saw my unformed body. Now this is poetry. And notice the two references to the womb in this reading.

[3:41] He speaks of the secret place. He speaks of the secret place and the depths of the earth. Those are references to the womb. You knit me together in my mother's womb.

And he goes on to speak of it as a secret place and the depths of the earth. When artists have a choice piece of artwork to create, they perform it in private.

It's in the study. It's in the drawing room. And then after it's perfected there in private, then they bring it out into the light of the public for all to gaze upon it.

And that's the picture that David here is using. When our maker was creating us, knitting us together, it was in our mother's womb. It was in that private hidden workshop.

And there his work of providence began on us. And Flavel wants us to appreciate two things about this early providence in forming us.

[4:49] The first is the wonders of the body. Notice David says, I am fearfully and wonderfully made. That means what God knit together in your mother's womb is a wonder to behold.

You may rarely think of yourself that way, but you need to. David says, I know it full well. I know it full well.

I am fearfully and wonderfully made. And he could say that without all the knowledge that we have today. Without all the medical advances in understanding the body.

David knew enough just by looking at his hand and saying, Wow, look what this thing can do. I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Just by observing eyes and ears and sense of smell and taste.

He was amazed at the way God had made him. So do you have two limbs? Do you have two eyes that see? Ears that hear?

[5:54] Legs that walk? If we think little of these merciful providences in our lives, all we need to do is to ask the blind, ask the deaf, ask the lame, ask the amputee of the value and worth of these mercies.

And they will tell you. Some of you have had eye problems. It seems like we've had a rash of surgeries on the eyes lately, haven't we?

And I trust as you go into the doctor's office and you see the charts and you look at the literature, you'll spend some time with it. And gaze at that. You know, it's not just nurses and doctors that are to study anatomy.

It's our bodies that God has fearfully and wonderfully made. And you ought to come away from that surgery, not just with better seeing eyes, but a better sense of how wonderfully and fearfully God has made you.

That was his providence with you, even before you were born, as he was knitting you together. There are wonders here to thrill us.

[7:09] We don't need to look far to find them. So God was knitting us together. What was the thread he was using? Well, he was using DNA.

He was using cells. Knitting together bones and muscles and organs and arteries and veins and nerves and skin. Weaving it together in such a way that it works in amazing interdependence upon one another.

One system affecting another system. All working together in fascinating unity. Now, we have a hard time getting a family of six or whatever working together in unity.

All on the same page. Think what God is doing with your body to keep it all working together. The average body has around 75 trillion cells.

So we're going to try to get 75 trillion things working together for good. That's the challenge of the human body. These tiny cells are continually replacing themselves.

[8:19] Some sooner than others. All my cells are replaced within a 10-year period. So it's a new John you see every 10 years. New bones, new blood, new muscles or lack thereof.

But only the nerve cells and the brain cells are never replaced. So don't waste them. But there's this wonder of our cells are remaking themselves.

And stored within the nucleus of every one of these 75 trillion cells is your DNA.

Now, that's the genetic blueprint for your entire body. And these DNA strands are in the shape of a spiral staircase. Or for some of you, it's like Arby's french fries.

They're in a spiral. That's this little strand of DNA in the center of the nucleus of every one of your 75 trillion cells.

[9:25] And they carry the entire instruction manual for how to build your body. The information contained within each one of these DNA strands, if written out, could fill a thousand books.

And not little paperback books, but a thousand six hundred page books. It would line the walls of our library solid from top to bottom with information.

That's how much is contained on just one little DNA strand that's found in every one of your cells.

Now, a nerve cell may operate according to the instructions from volume 10 on the shelf.

Whereas a kidney cell may use volume, what, 863 or whatever. But both cells carry the whole library for how your body is made.

The whole body. So every one of our cells has this genetic blueprint in them. The DNA strand in each cell is so thin that all 75 trillion of them could be packed in the size of one little ice cube.

[10:40] That's how thin they are. How small they are. Yet, if those same DNA strands were unraveled and stretched to their lengths and then connected one to another, how far do you think they would reach?

Just the DNA strands in your body. Not all of our bodies. Just your body. Well, it would get to the sun and back. That's 93 million miles to the sun and then another 93 million miles back. And you would just be getting warmed up. It would do that 400 times. Now, all of that's packed into your body as you sit there this morning.

David, I don't think, knew that. So I think we need to say with an exclamation point how fearfully and wonderfully we are made with the knowledge that we have that even David did not possess.

What complexity and precision and harmony of all the working parts. The wonder is not that we get sick. The wonder is not that there are days when we're not feeling our best.

[11:55] The wonder is that these things ever work together. 75 trillion things working together. It happens. And it happens most of our days.

Some of you are rarely sick. And so the wonder is that we're alive. And that we live so long. And that we enjoy such health.

And that's why when we're sick we can call out to God for help. Because this is not some realm that operates independent of God. No. He formed this body.

He knows it through and through. He put the DNA strips together and wrote on them the information. And he's the one who in his providence is over this area of his creation as well.

And then to the body is added the soul. We're still talking about the wonder of God forming us in the womb.

[12:57] He formed our bodies. But he also made us a body-soul creature. We have two parts to us. The immaterial part. What is a soul?

Just to start with. This is a mysterious thing. That spiritual part of us. That makes us different from animals. That makes us capable of having a relationship with our creator.

Amazing. The soul. The spirit. The capacities. The faculties of this soul. It includes the mind as it thinks.

It includes the desires. The will. The conscience. All of this. In the soul of man. The soul. And so God made us.

Mysterious. Body and soul creatures. And how does he hold the two together? Because when the two separate. That's death. There is so much mystery in it.

[13:59] And so it's meant to lead us to say. I'm fearfully and wonderfully made. When you see mentally and physically severely handicapped people.

Should we not humbly thank God for the kind providence. In creating us sound and whole beings. First Corinthians 4.7.

Who makes you to differ from another? This is a good question to ask yourself often. Who makes you to differ from another? So when you see the handicapped person.

Whose mind is not working. Whose body is not working. Like yours is. Ask this. Who makes you to differ from another? Or what do you have that you did not receive?

And if you did receive it. Why do you boast as though you did not? So see and admire God's providence. And what he's done for you. And the way that he formed you in the womb.

[14:59] But there's a second half to this first point. It's not only our formation in the womb. It's our protection in the womb. God not only formed you in the womb.

But he then preserved you in the womb. Apart from this we could have been like one of those.

Whom Job describes as quote. A stillborn child who never saw the light of day.

Chapter 3 and verse 16. Now that happens more than we may realize. But not to you. Because God not only formed you in the womb.

But he preserved you in the womb. And added to that are the millions of abortions that are caused by evil acts of mankind upon them.

Attacking the infant in its own protective home. In the womb. In the womb. In the womb. But it was a kind providence of God that protected you in the womb.

[15:58] And there for nine months and then brought you forth from the womb. Psalm 22.9 says, Yet you brought me out of the womb. So he formed you in the womb.

He protected you in the womb. And then he brought you out of the womb. All of that is God wisely and powerfully governing all of his creatures.

You're one of them. And this is his kind providence to you. Before we even saw the light of day. All of this kind providence. We were going to start with a hymn this morning.

When all thy mercies, oh my God, my wondering soul surveys. Transported in the view I'm lost with wonder, love and praise. I can't remember the entire verse.

But there's a verse then that says, Unnumbered comforts to my soul. Thy tender care bestowed. [16 : 59] Before my infant heart conceived. From whom those comforts flowed. That's what we're talking about. Days and days of comfort and mercy were flowing into us while we were still in the womb.

Before we even knew from whom those comforts were coming. God was showing kindness in his providence to us. Well, that's the first wonder of providence.

Our formation and protection in the womb. The second is the place and time of your birth. Turn to Acts chapter 17. Flavel is convinced that many believers live with little appreciation of the vast benefits that we have received simply because of the time and place in which God has had us to be born.

Acts 17 and verse 27. Here's a field that many walk right past and little appreciation.

They miss the providence of God here. From one man. Who is that? Adam. Adam. He made every nation of men that they should inhabit the whole earth.

[18 : 22] And he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. He determined the times and the exact places where they should live.

Now, this is being spoken of the nations. But it's nations of men. It's nations of individuals. So if it goes for the nation, it goes for the individuals within those nations.

Your birth in its timing and in its placement was determined by God and brought forth by his providence.

Now, consider how this affects, number one, your present comforts in this world. Your present comforts in this world.

Would you agree that not all hotels are nice places to stay? Yeah? You've been in those? We've found ourselves in those. Would you not also agree that not all places on the earth are nice places to live?

[19 : 26] But you're not there. You're here. How'd that happen? Did you put in to be born in northern Indiana?

Did you put in that request? God determined the times and the exact places where we should live. And that has brought us a host of external, physical, outward comforts that we enjoy in this world, in this life.

We just returned from the Philippines and Manila. And we saw pollution and poverty and overpopulation and all the problems that go along with it.

So much of the misery of people in the world has to do with the places where they were born. The lack of freedom.

They didn't ask to be born in North Korea, but there they are. They were born there. They don't have freedom like we have. The lack of comforts, of safe drinking water, fertile ground, clean air, available health care.

[20 : 37] A lot of that is owing to the place where you live, the place where you were born. You say, well, why don't they just move?

Well, it's not that easy, is it? It's not that easy. So God determined the place of your birth and when he did, he heaped all kinds of blessings upon you.

As great as these physical mercies are, they're nothing like the spiritual mercies and advantages that you have because of the time and place of your birth. Think how differently things would be if you'd been born in Iran or Iraq or Saudi Arabia or in the Sudan.

Where Christianity is outlawed. Where Islam labors to persecute Christians.

Places where they've worshipped their ancestors for centuries. They've never known anything else.

Where people are born, live and die without ever meeting a Christian.

[21 : 53] Without ever seeing a Bible. Without ever hearing the only way of salvation. Through a substitutionary curse bearer. Jesus Christ.

They were born there. They live there. They die there. What blessings have come to us by being born here?

Gospel blessings. But then it's not just the places we were born into. It's also the times. He determines the times set for them. What if you'd been born in this place but at a different time?

What would you be doing today if you were born in this place 500 years ago? Come on you history buffs. What would you have been doing? Pardon?

Making a teepee. Alright. We're on the trail. We're on the trail. Alright. What else would you be doing? Okay. Working in the garden. What would you be doing in way of worship?

[23:02] Pardon? Yeah. Worshiping all sorts of things. Attaching the spirits. More than one God.

Thinking that these spirits dwell in animals. Listening to a shaman. Beating his drum.

Telling you. Giving you counsel on how to live. And why you're sick. And how you can get better.

But what you wouldn't be doing is worshiping a risen Christ who died for your sins.

You wouldn't. It didn't have that message. So you could have been born here. But at a different time. And you'd have been the loser.

But God had you wait till now to be born. So that you do know the gospel. And how it is that men can be right with God.

[24:07] Well what if you'd been born in Babylon under Nebuchadnezzar? What if you'd been born in Assyria under Sennacherib? Times and places.

There were times and places when Christians were hunted like animals. The book of Hebrews talks about them. They were stoned. They were sawed in two.

They were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins. Destitute.

Persecuted. Mistreated. They wandered in deserts and mountains.

And in caves. And in holes in the ground. Where do you live? This hole in the ground. Why?

Because they're seeking our very lives. You say to yourself sometimes. Wouldn't it be a. Wouldn't it have been great to have lived during the time of the English Puritans?

[25:12] John Owen. Flavel. To sit in his church and heard him preach. The 17th century.

Wouldn't it have been great to have been born in that time frame?

Jim Renahan's lecture on the time period of the 17th century England quickly cured me of this dream. Baths were seldom taken.

The medical opinion was that the exposure to hot water could open up the pores in the skin and let the plague or other diseases in. So dirt clogged pores keep the diseases out.

So good for you if you've got dirty skin. So people wore lots of perfume. Not just to smell better but so they couldn't smell the other person either.

Lots of perfume. Medicines included live worms, fox lungs for asthma, spider webs, swallows nest and skulls of executed criminals were called for a high price.

[26:22] For medicine. Fevers were thought to be the result of too much blood in the body so doctors cut veins or use leeches to release this bad blood. No dental care.

Very crude conditions in which they lived. That's just to mention a few things. Again, the times that we live in. Diane was just sharing how amazed she was that she could go in and have eye problems and 10, 15 minutes later come out and she's seeing clearly.

You wouldn't have had that, sister, back in the 17th century. But because God placed you in this time, oh, the comforts that come to us. Central air conditioning, the heating, the microwave.

We never knew how much we used our microwave until it went on the blink. And we're constantly going to that spot. And oh, yeah, it's gone right now. These things that we just use without thinking.

Well, I think Flavel is right when he says, and he's writing from the 17th century now, okay? He's writing from that nasty period that we've just talked about.

[27:31] And yet he says that we have been born in a time and place when if we were given the choice, we could not have chosen better than what God's providence has ordered for us.

Could have you done better? Where would you pick if you could have been born at any time, at any place? Well, maybe Eden before the fall would be the only better place.

We can say with David, the boundary lines have fallen to me in pleasant places. I have a goodly heritage. What a wonderful thing to have what God has given us in his providence.

If Plato, when he was near his death, could bless God for three things. Number one, that he was born a man and not a beast. Number two, that he was born in Greece. And number three, that he was brought up in the time of Socrates.

And how much more cause have you to admire God's providence? Number one, that you were born a man and not a beast. And that you were born in America and that you were brought up in gospel days.

[28 : 39] So, we've seen the providence of God in our formation and protection in the womb. And then, in the place and time of our birth. And last, the family you were born into.

The precise family you were born into. Whatever your parents' financial and social status. If they had any concern to bring you up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

This must be counted as one of God's kindest providences to you. It's a fountain of many blessings. Yes, outward physical blessings.

But especially spiritual blessings that flowed from such parents. How many of you, if I could just see a show of hand, were born into homes where you had one or both parents were believers in the Lord Jesus?

Alright? That's a fairly good number of us that enjoyed that kind providence of God. You didn't ask to be born into a Christian home.

[29 : 45] That was God's choice and providence that brought it about for you. Think how different it would be if you'd been born into a family that's deceived by one of the cults.

You're born into a Jehovah Witness family. Jesus is not God. And that's what you hear drummed into you from infancy. Or you're born as a Mormon.

You're born in oneness Pentecostals where they deny the Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

There is a power of tradition to not depart from what has been passed down to you.

And so, very important, isn't it? What is passed down to you. How often sons follow in the ways of their fathers.

You can read it in the kings. First and second kings have just one king after another. And it just gives a summary statement of their reign. And then it tells you more of the details.

[30 : 50] And so, it's said of Abijah, king of Judah. He committed all the sins his father had done before him. Now, he had his own will.

He could have refused to go in the ways of his father. But he didn't. He committed all the sins. He repeated all the evils that his father had done.

Ahaziah was the son of Ahab. And he did evil in the eyes of the Lord because he walked in the ways of his father and mother. To have Ahab as your father and Jezebel as your mother is not an easy path to cut through life.

And he walked in all the ways of father and mother as the king. He said of Ammon. He did evil in the eyes of the Lord as his father Manasseh had done.

He walked in all the ways of his father. He worshipped the idols his father had worshipped. Well, of course, we say. As a boy, he was used to bowing down to those idols.

[31 : 57] When he's sick, he goes and prays to the idol. When he needs prosperity in some project, he goes to the idol. So when he becomes king, what does he do? He goes to the idol. He worshipped just as his father had taught him to do.

And so many idols and sinful ways are passed down from father to son. Almost automatic. Almost natural. Men just do things without even thinking. Is there any other way?

Many of them have never heard of any other way to worship God than the way in which they were brought up. And it speaks to the powerful shaping influence of fathers.

And especially in this context of ungodly fathers. And to escape this curse is a choice providence itself. But you know, it can also work for the good, where God adds his gracious influence.

Jehoshaphat, king of Judah. It says, in everything, he walked in the ways of his father Asa and did not stray from them, but did what was right in the eyes of the Lord.

[33 : 06] A good father. And he walked in his good father's ways. And it works not only like that for fathers and sons, but Ezekiel 16, 44 says, like mother, like daughter.

The proverb holds true for both generally. So it's a most kind providence to have been born into a home with true believing parents.

It was no small thing for Timothy to grow up in a home where he had a godly mother and grandmother. No small providence for Augustine to have a mother who prayed for his salvation for years and years.

Flavel says, it's a greater privilege to descend from praying parents than to descend from royalty.

Places where I've gone to give, to preach, and I've been asked to give my testimony, I've often said that most of God's mercies to me for the life that I've spent in this earth have got my parents' fingerprints on them.

God's goodness, but through the channel of a father and mother that sought to raise us up and according to the scriptures to discipline us, to make the way of rebellion painful.

[34 : 35] Those were great blessings. And I'm still reaping those blessings. I didn't ask to be born in Robert Heaney's family. But God was kind and put me there.

So that when I had concerns about my soul, it was natural for me to turn to my father and mother. And it was very natural for them to point me to Christ.

And how different things would have been had I had a parent point me to some superstitious religion, some idol, some human works that we do, some other lie of the devil.

Well, few children have been given what you folks have been given who held your hands up. I want you to appreciate that.

Flavel wants you to appreciate that. That you've been given a rare providence from God. Thank him for it. Treasure that providence of God for what it is. If believing parents were not the providence of God for you, Flavel has another way to admire God's providence, and that is that he saved you anyway.

[36 : 00] That he so worked in your life that there were other influences that he used to bring you to the Lord Jesus Christ. Amazing providence.

That he worked even without parental godliness. So admire that providence. Admire the fact that your parents did not oppose you, as some parents do.

Or if they did oppose you, that they opposed you no more than what they did. But in any case, God is to be praised for his providence. Well, there's another side to this coin of this providence, of having been given the family that we were born into.

And it's to think, if you're now married and have children, it's to think, oh, God has just given my children this glorious privilege of being born into a Christian home.

And so Flavel ends with a challenge to us. What are we doing to pass on that privilege that we received? Or if you didn't receive it, what are you doing to establish a different pattern than what your forebears have given to you?

[37 : 16] It's a kind providence that God has given your children to grow up in your house. Are you making the most of that privilege for them? Flavel asks, if you neglect to instruct them in the way of holiness, will the devil neglect to instruct them in the way of wickedness?

So may the Lord help us to lay hold of the opportunities that are ours who have children. He says, how few are converted in old age.

Well, that's the providence of God, the earliest providences, forming, protecting us in the womb, the time and place of our birth, and the very families into which he's put us.

Works of providence are meant to be shared. I had a brother share one of the providences of God that happened to him last week, and it blessed my soul. You see, they're part of God's works, and they're not meant to be covered up, but they're meant to be brought out into the open for his praise. So let me encourage you to be sharing with each other on the Lord's Day, when we get together, what are God's kind providences to me in this week? What has he done that we might admire that providence of God together?

[38 : 26] And then I've got an assignment for next week. We're going to, Flavel's going to talk about the providence of God in our conversion. I want you to think back about your pre-Christ days.

What were some of the providences that God used, the ways he worked to bring you to faith in Jesus Christ? All right?

Well, we're dismissed.