

# Providence in Preserving Us From Evil

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[0:00] Well, this study of the mystery of providence by John Flavel has been trying to train our eye to see the hand of providence in our lives.

In fact, it's to help us to see God in everything, since indeed God is active in everything. Nothing happens but what God's plan has predestined it and God's hand of power has directed it and brought it about.

This is an amazing worldview to live with. It opens up a whole new world of seeing God where the world sees nothing. The world sees luck.

The world sees chance. We would be trained to see our God at work. Now, we've seen his, the last time we studied this subject, we saw his hand in our marriages, giving us the spouses we have and the children that we have.

Today, we see God's providence in preserving us, his people, from evil. The providence of God in preserving us from evil.

[1:13] Now, before we get started, we'll little appreciate this aspect of providence unless we have a sense of our danger and of the problem. Psalm 124 is an excellent psalm to teach us this.

It says, if the Lord had not been on our side, if the Lord had not been on our side when our enemies came against us and attacked us, well, we would have been swallowed up on the flood. But the Lord was on our side.

The Lord is on our side. And therefore, they have not been able to destroy us, to destroy us. Rather, we have escaped like a bird out of the snare of the trapper.

But the reality is, if the Lord wasn't on our side to preserve us from evil, we would be swallowed up with sin and temptation and evil.

Martin Luther put it this way. Did we in our own strength confide? All of our striving would be losing. We're not the right man on our side. The man of God's own choosing.

[2:17] So, because he is on our side, we are preserved from the machinations of the devil, the temptations, the allurements of the world, and our own flesh that still finds some delight in the ways of the world and the devil.

So, there are two ways that the power and success of temptation is broken in believers. Two ways that we're preserved from evil.

The first is the inward operation of the Holy Spirit sanctifying our hearts. Inside, he's more and more changing our minds as they think, our affections as they desire, our wills as they choose.

We're being transformed on the inside by the Holy Spirit. That's one way that we are being preserved from sin, from evil. The other way is outwardly.

The outward working of providence. So, by the one, God increasingly takes away the desire of sin on the inside, and by his outward work of providence, he takes away the opportunity to sin.

[3:32] So, those two things, desire and opportunity. Desire to sin and opportunity to sin. If those two ever meet up, we're in trouble.

We sin. The inward desire and the outward opportunity. We're spared when, though we have the outward opportunity to sin, we do not have the inward desire at that moment to sin.

So, there's no marriage, no sin that takes place outwardly, though we could argue the very desire inwardly is also counted sin. But we're spared from the further sin, the activity of sin.

And then we're spared when, though we have desire to sin in here, we don't have the opportunity to sin out there. But when desire and opportunity come together, sinful actions is the result.

So, one of the ways that God preserves us from evil is not letting the inward desire and the outward opportunity to sin come together. Now, the fact of the matter is that when we think about the providence of God, we are to understand that every aspect of our temptation comes under the

ruling, governing, controlling providence of God.

[4:59] Every aspect of the temptation to sin. The tempter, the temptress, the situation, it's all under the control and governing of God.

Remember the definition of sin. It's his all-wise and powerful upholding and controlling of all his creatures, even the tempter, even the devil.

And so, you say, where do we see that? Well, I say we could argue it from the prayer that Jesus taught us to pray in Matthew 6 and verse 13.

He taught us to say in our praying to God, lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. Now, you would never pray that prayer unless you believed that God has power over all of our temptations and power to deliver us from them.

And that is exactly what the rest of the Bible teaches us. God is indeed in control, and therefore it's right for us to come and to appeal to him, to not lead us into temptation.

[6:08] We know our weakness, but to deliver us from the evil one. There's also another verse in Scriptures that's very appointed. 1 Corinthians 10.13. Would you turn there with me?

And we see the providence of God over our temptations. A familiar passage. We won't spend a lot of time with it just to use it as the proof text that God's providence reigns over the whole tempting business of his people.

Now, he does this without getting his own fingers dirty with the temptation. God can tempt no man to sin, but he rules over the whole sphere of temptation such that no temptation can touch his people but what he has allowed.

That's what it says. No temptation has seized you. He's talking to the Christians at Corinth. Accept what is common to man. And God is faithful. He will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear.

Do you see in that statement how he's the God of sovereign providence over temptation? He will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear.

[7:20] So he knows the temptation. He weighs it. He knows your situation. And he won't let it happen unless you're able to bear it. That's the God of providence in our temptations.

But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it. This is not a God who's far off and that whenever we're being tempted, he has nothing to do, no relationship with his people.

He's rather a God very involved in our temptations so that when they come, he's measuring them, weighing them, not allowing certain things to come into your life. When he knows that your desire to sin is perhaps strong, he'll cut off the opportunity for sin.

He'll open up a way of escape so that you may be able to bear it. A wonderful teaching concerning the providence of God in our temptations.

Indeed, the malice of sin in the world against believers is such that we would be quickly destroyed if there was no hand of providence to protect us and to keep us from being tempted beyond what we are able to bear.

[8:31] Remember in Genesis 19, the Sodomites wanted to tear down the house of Lot to get to those two visitors. And the hand of providence interrupted and struck them with blindness, cutting off the evil that they intended to do.

Or that King Jeroboam, he didn't like the prophet's rebuking message, and he stretches out his hand to lay his hand and strike the prophet.

But providence intervened and shriveled his hand so they could not touch him. God intervenes and protects the righteous from the evil schemes against his people, thwarts their plans so that they have no success.

So there's still enough remaining sin in our hearts, believers, that if God did not set up roadblocks in our way, we would be sinning far more than we do.

So consider the several ways that providence does this. The roadblocks, the ways that he takes away the opportunity to sin or the desires to sin.

[9:40] Five ways Flavel puts before us in our lesson today. First of all, sometimes by stirring up others to interrupt our course with seasonable counsel.

So we are planning some sin and God interrupts our course by bringing someone in with counsel to do otherwise, to consider our ways.

And here it's 1 Samuel 25 that Flavel points us to. You remember Nabal, the wealthy man whose sheep were out in the plain, and David was running from Saul with those 600 men with him, and they were out in this same area, and they surrounded Nabal's sheep, and so they were like a wall of protection.

Nobody stole from him. Nobody came in and harmed his sheep during all that time that David's men were there. So at sheep shearing time, party time for Nabal and his sheep shearers and servants, David sends his servants to get some food for his men.

After all, they have, in a sense, worked for it. And you remember Nabal's response to David's servants was to humiliate them and send them packing.

[10:59] Who's this David? There's a lot of runaways these days, running away from their master. Why should I give him anything? And he insulted David and his men. And David's servants come back and tell him that.

What was David's response? Turn the other cheek? Strap on your swords, men. And that's what they did, and they headed out for Nabal's home.

Put on your swords. It's been useless. All my watching over this fellow's property in the desert so that nothing of his was missing. He's paid me back. Evil for good. May God deal with David, be it ever so severely, if by morning I leave one male of all who belong to him alive.

He swears an oath. To get revenge. He used words against me, I'll use swords against him. So, do you see how close David is to sinning?

He has a strong desire to sin, doesn't he? He is very close, ever so close, to paying back evil with evil.

[12:08] Avenging himself. His intention is clear. His desire is strong.

And he's just minutes away from having on his conscience the staggering burden of needless bloodshed from having avenged himself. So, there goes David with the desire for sin.

But just then, providence intervenes. Comes in between him and his end like a roadblock. And it's none other than Nabal's wife, Abigail.

Who hears what has happened and how her foolish husband has offended and insulted David. And in the nick of time, with her words, she dissuades David from going and taking revenge.

And though it came from Abigail, David saw the hand of providence in sending Abigail to him. And this is what he says after Abigail comes and convinces him not to go and to slaughter all the men in her master's house.

[13:18] Notice how he traces it from Abigail to the hand of providence. David said to Abigail, Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, who has sent you today to meet me.

May you be blessed for your good judgment and for keeping me from bloodshed this day. And from avenging myself with my own hands. Otherwise, as surely as the Lord, the God of Israel lives, who has kept me from harming you.

If you had not come quickly to meet me, not one male belonging to Nabal would have been alive by daybreak. So David's opportunity to sin was reaching out.

The opportunity was at hand, but God intervened with godly counsel to turn him aside. And so God provided a way of escape, a way out from the temptation. Maybe you've been planning some evil. And someone's words stopped you in your tracks and gave you godly counsel and caused you to reconsider. Consider. And you turned your course.

[14:25] It shows us the importance of walking in the counsel of the godly, doesn't it? But it also traces it back to the source that God's providence is the one who sends us these timely counsels in the midst of our lives, sometimes using it to actually turn us out of the way of sinful, the sinful course we were intending.

A second way God does this. Sometimes sin is prevented by the mind being set straight in the worship of God. Here we found David's mind and heart set straight by the counsel of this woman, a godly woman.

Now Flavel is speaking about the mind being set straight in the worship of God. And he takes us to Psalm 73. And Asaph, that godly man, who tells us how sinful ideas began to form in his mind that almost caused him to abandon the faith.

That's the end to which sin and temptation would bring us. All the way to abandoning the faith, to death. Separation from God. And you remember the issue because he was righteous.

He was trying hard to live a holy life. Yet he was suffering great affliction. While the wicked had no care for God and his commands, and they were living it up and having a good old time.

[15 : 52] Prospering. And Asaph not only envied them, he actually entertained the notion of giving up all his efforts to live a godly life as worthless and just giving in to his feelings and to his desires.

That was the temptation. That was the mindset. That was the thing that was beginning to rule his thoughts and his heart. And then it was in the worship of God.

It was in the sanctuary that Asaph had his mind sorted out and set right again. He found he was judging with the wrong measuring stick. He was judging a man's blessedness by what he enjoyed in this life of God's good things.

He was using as a measuring stick. Something that had nothing to do with God as being his greatest portion. To have God in this life lead him.

And then and afterwards receiving him into glory. And he came to see that. I've been looking at this whole thing all wrong. And when he comes out of the sanctuary, he comes out with a whole different mindset.

[17 : 00] Now he regards God and having God near him as the greatest blessing of life. What do I have? Who do I have on earth besides him?

This is the most important thing. Having God with me in my troubles, in my trials, even if it should be death. To have God near me in time and for eternity.

Whereas the wicked will be cut off into everlasting misery. So where did that happen? And he gained this perspective in the sanctuary. He was about to fall into the temptation and the sin.

And God brings him into the sanctuary and puts him right. You see the hand of providence intervening in it. I wonder how many times the hand of providence has brought us back into the sanctuary.

And it's been here that your minds week by week have been put right by the word of God. And maybe you were considering some evil, some wrong, some evil desire.

[18 : 04] Some wrong thought was beginning to take root in your mind. Maybe even like Asaph. What's the use? Why do I work so hard to not sin against God?

And it was in the sanctuary. God brought the corrective word. And you went out a different person than what you came in. You went out with a different view of God and of life and of things and of yourself.

Have you thought that was the providence of God interrupting me for my good? Intervening in my life to keep me and to turn me away from the way of sin.

Have you thought of the worship services as God's providential way of keeping you from sinning against him? Is there not in that then further weight behind the word in Hebrews 10, 25, as to why we are not to forsake the assembling of ourselves together as some are in the habit of doing?

Because it's in the assembly of the saints that truth is brought to our hearts, whether from the pulpit or whether from mouth to mouth, brother to brother, sister to sister, truth comes and God uses it to turn us aside from sin, to set our hearts and minds right.

[19 : 30] Well, that's another way the providence of God intervenes to help us to not sin, to interrupt our temptation, the preached word, the fellowshiped word, the sanctuary.

A third way, sometimes God's providence blocks our path to sin by hindering the means or the instruments of sin. 2 Chronicles chapter 20, you have godly Jehoshaphat, the king of Judah.

And he's thinking and has this alluring temptation to form an alliance with the ungodly king of Israel named Ahaziah, a wicked man, to form an alliance with him in business.

And we'll develop a trading business. We'll have a whole fleet of ships and we'll send them off and make all kinds of money at doing this. And so they constructed a fleet of trading ships to send to Tarshish.

But the Lord intervened with a storm that wrecked the ships so that they were not able to set sail for Tarsus. God just brought that plan to a screeching halt and in that way kept him from this entangling alliance with a wicked king.

[20 : 50] Flavel cites an English Puritan named Robert Bolton and an incident in his life. When Bolton was studying at Oxford in England, he was impressed by a good scholar, Mr. Anderton.

But Anderton was a strong Roman Catholic who denied that salvation was by grace alone and rather believed that salvation was due to all the rituals of the church and one's own good works. So Bolton was tempted by this scholar's wisdom and mental acumen.

And Bolton was financially poor. And that entered into the temptation in a tremendous way. Bolton's wondering, how am I going to supply for the needs of myself and a family someday on the meager income of an English Puritan Protestant?

Well, this other Roman Catholic scholar says, well, listen, Rome takes care of their own. You'll have plenty. Just come with me and let's go over to this seminary in Flanders.

[22 : 13] And we'll have all that we need and more. Now, it was his poverty that made this temptation so attractive. And so now Bolton is beginning to desire to sell the truth for the sake of money.

And so Mr. Anderton set a certain date when he was to come down to the seashore and meet him. And together they would set sail for Flanders. Bolton shows up.

He's being led by the temptation that's overcome him for the moment. But Mr. Anderton doesn't show up. History doesn't tell us why. But again, Flavel sees the hand of God.

When the desire of sin was there, God cut off the opportunity for sin. And it never happened. And he turned out to be a profitable servant of the Lord.

Because God sometimes hinders the instruments of temptation and sin in order to block us from our path to sin.

[23 : 17] That's the third thing. And then there's a fourth way. Sometimes he prevents us from sin by giving us some strong physical sickness or affliction.

We don't know for sure what Paul's thorn in the flesh was in 2 Corinthians chapter 12. But if the flesh means the body and there was some affliction, painful affliction like a thorn is.

And it had to do with his body, something with regard to his flesh, his body. Then that's what we have here. What was the sin that Paul, the apostle, was tempted to sin?

What was the sin he was tempted to? Pride. Pride. Being lifted up with arrogance because of all the revelations that had been given him. As being the apostle and receiving all this encouragement from heaven, it has the effect of puffing up a man and making his head big.

And Paul was no exception to that rule. In fact, that was so much the case that God knew if he didn't intervene for Paul, Paul would get proud. And so he does intervene in grace.

[24 : 31] And he sends him a thorn in the flesh. A messenger of Satan. Satan comes and he does something to Paul that causes him pain and suffering and seems to hinder his ministry.

And yet it was from the Lord, sent from the hand of providence, through the devil's instrumentality, all for the saving end of keeping Paul humble under such blessings.

Sometimes God prevents us from sin by giving us some strong physical sickness. We may not be aware of the wisdom of God behind these physical afflictions.

We may not always know when they have been sent to deliver us from some sin, but there's enough in Scripture to teach us that that is sometimes the thing that God is doing.

It would be wrong for us to put that template upon anybody that's sick and say, oh, there's some great sin that you're considering. That's wrong. That's a wrong use of the Scriptures. But a right use of Scripture is not to throw out the baby with the bathwater.

[25 : 43] We're just to say, you know, we saw that in Paul, the holy apostle, that he sometimes was being led into sin, that God interrupted an affliction to keep him from that sin.

We would be foolish to say that doesn't happen with us. We're better than the apostle Paul. We wouldn't need that happening in our lives. And the affliction may not be a physical sickness.

We could bring the principle out to all sorts of problems, problems in our family, problems with our finances, problems in the economy and jobs and all sorts of afflictions.

God is having dealings often with his people to sanctify us, to keep us from sin. And the fifth and final way that the providence of God sometimes prevents the sins of his people, he does it by removing them out of the way of temptation by death.

By death. There's the way of temptation. And sometimes God says, I'm going to save you from that temptation. You're coming to live with me.

[27 : 04] There's no temptation up here. There's no devil up here. There's nothing unclean. And Flavel cites Isaiah chapter 57 and verse 1.

The righteous perish. The righteous perish. No one ponders it in his heart. Devout men are taken away. And no one understands that the righteous are taken away to be spared from evil.

For those who walk uprightly enter into peace and they find rest as they lie in death. So sometimes God removes his children from the tempter and temptation by taking them to heaven.

Eventually, that's how he does for all of us, isn't it? It's a whole different way to look at death. And that's what Isaiah, the word of the Lord is saying through Isaiah. The righteous die and no one considers that.

No one thinks about that. God has just spared that person from all sorts of evil. He's taken them right into a place where there is no evil. So God is active in preserving his people from the power, the opportunity, the desires for temptation.

[28 : 22] And many times that has proven to be the thing that kept us from falling. How many times we were totally unaware, perhaps, of the way that God was working to keep us from temptation and sin.

To keep the temptation from being more powerful. We don't even know probably a hundredths of the times that God has come and so intervened in our lives.

We see a picture of that in the book of Job. Job was totally unaware of what was going on between God and the devil. And the devil wanted to do all sorts of things to Job.

Only so far as God allowed. God was dealing with his servant Job in that temptation. Though Job could not see his hand. Could not see anything.

It was all dark. And yet God was sweetly, lovingly caring for his child in the midst of his temptations. Well, apart from that intervention, involvement of God's providence in our lives, we would have shipwrecked the faith long ago.

[29 : 35] So thank God for it. That's the first application. Admire this providential care of God for you. Sin is what happens when inward desire and outward opportunity meet.

And there is enough sinward desire left in every one of us to drag us away and entice us. If God does not in some way prevent us.

Flavel puts it this way. Left to ourselves were feathers in the wind of temptation. I covered my tomato plants yesterday because I heard there was cold weather coming.

And I put some gallon ice cream. Empty, obviously. Empty, obviously. Jars over the tops of them and stuffed them with leaves.

And I had them all pillowed down for the night. About five o'clock, God says, And this wind comes up and my ice cream buckets are in the neighbor's yard and the straw is nowhere to be found.

[30 : 35] Feathers before the wind. Feathers before the wind is what we are. Before the temptation. If God did not intervene.

If God simply left us to ourselves were feathers in the wind of temptation. How many times we have to say with Asaph, my feet had almost slipped.

I had nearly lost my foothold. I was falling. But by a merciful providence, God stopped me. Flavel says, Two things should be as dear to you as your two eyes.

That gets my attention. My eyes are dear. I've only got two of them. Two things that should be as dear to you as your two eyes. A good name.

And a peaceful conscience. That you should have both in this tempting world is no small in no small amount due to God's providence and preserving you from sin.

[31 : 39] Do you still have a good name? God has preserved you from sin that would have shattered that reputation. A good name is something valuable as the book of Ecclesiastes taught us.

And as for your conscience. As well. So we're taught to admire and give thanks to God for his involvement in our lives to keep us from temptation's power.

Don't credit yourself for chance for your escapes from sin. So that's the first thing. Admire it. But secondly, he says, on the other hand, don't tempt providence. Oh, you mean God's watching over me?

And as he sees me meandering out toward my sin, he's going to just come in and cut off the opportunity. Then I don't need to watch. I've got someone watching over me. That would be to tempt the providence of God.

That would be tempting God. And you, if you do that, will find out with Peter that those who do not watch and pray do fall into temptation. And thereby God teaches his people further lessons about sin and temptation.

[32 : 51] Though providence keeps you, Christian, you are still told to keep yourself in the love of God. Jude 21.

Though providence guards you, you are still told yourself to guard your heart with all diligence.

Proverbs 4:23. The subject of another book of John Flavel.

So God's providence keeping us from sin is never meant to lighten us from keeping ourselves from sin. That is to twist the truth of God to our own destruction.

When we take God's preserving kindness and we use this as an excuse for not ourselves pursuing holiness.

Without which no man see the Lord. We must never rip out of context our own being kept from our own watching and praying.

[33 : 55] Read the book of Hebrews and see how the next time you read through that book. See how the two are woven together. How they're always kept together. God preserving his people is always promised in the context of his people pursuing holiness.

Persevering in holiness. God preserving his people persevering. And those two are found together in scripture. So God's providence is the cause for preventing spiritual dangers and miseries that otherwise would have plagued us in the way of temptation.

Any thoughts or examples that come to your mind or questions that arise from the lesson today then? That we have a God of providence who's very involved in all of our temptation.

Jim. It's the reason these things are written in scripture. That through them we might have the encouragement of the scriptures. Yes, dear.

We live by faith. Not by our feelings. Faith in what God's word says is true. Amen. Comfort. Yeah, Rick.

[35 : 12] Hmm. Thank you for sharing that. You know, we don't always know for sure what God is doing. Hindsight is 20, we say.

Often from the end of the situation we look back and we can see. Oh, now I see why this sickness, why this move, why this job change. And I can see God's hand of providence was in it for my good as his child.

But the beauty of scriptures is to not have to wait till the end of the event to know that. To know that even as they said, while I'm in the dark and under the trial and the affliction and the temptation, though I don't know what God is doing, I know that his hand is with me, his child, working all things together for my good.

So, that's a wonderful thing if God gives us a ray of light and says, look at this goodness. Look at this possibility. Enough to encourage us that God's providence is always with us, whether we see it or don't see it.

Thank you. Chuck. Amen. Chuck was saying just his own private devotional reading of scripture. How many times he's experienced that God met him there with a particular word for his particular need for that day.

[36 : 38] Can we all not say amen to that? Amen. We're reading our Bibles regularly. We find it speaks to life. This God knows us. He knows our world.

He knows what's happening. And he speaks truth. It helps and saves us from ourselves. Roger. Well, it is a wonderful thing.

It's God for us. Let's pray and thank him, shall we? Lord, don't let us live with our heads in the sand as to the dangers of sin and temptation.

Help us to see that Satan and sin desires not only our entanglement, but it desires our damnation. And so to treasure the fact that you would be a watchman over Israel that never slumbers or sleeps. And that you would send us your word to warn us, to point out the encouraging truths, to correct us and to point us back to you and back to your son.

[37 : 42] What he's done for us. Thank you, God, thank you, God, thank you for the fact that you would be a savior who has shed his blood that we might be forgiven and pardoned in full. Bring us back to him.

Bring us back to him for pardon and for power. Thank you that there is the reality of your Holy Spirit who pricks our consciences and does lead us to put to death the misdeeds of the body.

Thank you for all your involvement in our temptations. And we do confess that had you not been on our side, we would have been swallowed up long ago. Help your people who are in great affliction right now, who don't see what you're doing.

Give them help, Lord, to keep trusting you and not to fear and not to be tempted to take a different course. Keep them walking near you.

So we give you thanks for being our father through our Lord Jesus Christ as we pray in his name.  
Amen. We're dismissed.