

Providence in Sanctification

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[0:00] We're studying the mystery of providence by John Flavel, the 17th century writer, but he knew what was happening in the 21st century as well, didn't he?

He writes from the scriptural perspective. And what I want us to see this morning is that God has so designed things in this life that holiness and happiness go together.

Your holiness and your happiness are inextricably bound up together. So when God is pursuing your holiness, he is pursuing your happiness.

Now, God is in love with holiness. The depth of his commitment to our holiness can be seen in many ways. Think of this, that before the creation of the world, God chose us in Christ that we might be holy.

We might be holy. Think of this, that the Son of God died to make us holy. As Flavel himself says, that so in love is Christ with holiness that he will buy it for us with his blood.

[1:10] That he prays for our holiness. Sanctify them by your truth. Think of this, that the Holy Spirit indwells believers to change us and to make us what?

Holy, like Jesus, God-like, sanctified. So this is one of the great purposes for which God dwells in our hearts, to take the life of God and make it real and duplicate it in the soul of man.

The souls of man. Now, as we come to consider, then, the providence of God, it's helpful to remember this baseline commitment of God to our holiness, our sanctification.

Because we should expect to see this concern for holiness operative in his providences in our lives. And indeed, that's what we do see.

That he controls the events in our lives with an interest in our holiness. Indeed, that's the goal, the aim behind all of his providences in our lives.

[2:16] Remember Romans 8, 28 and 29. We know that in all things, God is working for what? For the good of those who love him and who have been called according to his purpose.

Well, what is that good that God is working us toward in all things, in all of his providences? What is the good? Well, he goes on in verse 29. For those he foreknew, he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son.

That's holiness. Holiness is the aim for which he is working all things in our life. That's the good that he aims at in our lives.

That Jesus Christ might be the firstborn among a whole family of brothers who are just like him. So in all things, God's working for our conformity to Christ, our sanctification.

And providence has a hand in this work. That's where we're at this morning. The work of providence in sanctifying the believer.

[3:23] That's our study. Two ways that God is working for our sanctification. Well, internally by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit. If you through the Spirit put to death the misdeeds of the body.

It's through the Spirit that we mortify sin. We grow in likeness to Christ. But then externally by providence. That God's outward providences with us work hand in hand with the Spirit's inward.

The Spirit doing his work inside. And the work of providence doing its work on the outside. And the two are working in concert together.

So that Flavel says a very great favor that providence brings to the believer. And one that he believes we do not appreciate as much as we ought.

Is the way that providence contributes to our sanctification. Now, last week we considered how God's providence is designed to keep his children from sin.

[4:24] Remember that? There's two things that meet together that create a new act of sin. What were they? Opportunity for sin on the outside.

What's on the inside? The desire to sin. So as long as desire to sin and opportunity to sin are kept apart. We'll be kept from further sin.

And part of providence is to maintain this space and this divorce between even our inward desires of the flesh to sin. Which is ever there.

We're never without those desires. Sin that dwells in us always desires to sin. But keeping us from opportunities for sin is one way that providence works.

You remember we saw how that this operates in the believer's life. Preventing sin by wise counsel interrupting our course.

[5 : 20] So David was seeking revenge. And God kept him from that opportunity of revenge upon Nabal by bringing in the wise counsel of Abigail. Preventing sin by setting our minds straight in the worship service.

Asaph is thinking of chucking the whole business of religion. Because of the way he's going through hardship and the wicked are prospering. But God interrupts him and prevents him from that sin of apostasy by bringing him into the sanctuary.

And there putting things straight in his mind. So he's thinking right again. Another way he does it is by removing the temptress or the tempters to sin.

The opportunities to sin are just taken away for a season. Sending some affliction to us. Paul is kept from pride.

How? By some affliction of the flesh. A thorn in the flesh. So in these ways we saw how God is working for our sanctification to keep us from sin.

[6 : 28] Now this week we see how providence works to cleanse us from sins that we've already fallen into. And both are true of Christian experience, aren't they?

We need to be kept from sin. But we also need some help in recovering when we have fallen. And providence is operative in both realms of Christian experience.

So, how does God's providence work toward cleansing us and turning us from sins we've fallen into? Well, Flavel's going to look at the way that he selects afflictions to accomplish this work.

He selects particular afflictions to accompany this work. Afflictions like thorns, prickly things, things that are hurt, things that are not pleasant to us.

To speed our recovery. Now we need to remember what Lamentations 3.33 says. That God does not willingly bring affliction or grief to the children of men.

[7 : 36] And God is not some sadist that just enjoys afflicting people or even his children for that matter. He does not have that kind of a heart. Rather, he has the kind of a heart of a father.

Whose child has disobeyed. And he knows that though it pains him to pain his son, he must do it for his son's good.

And that's the heart with which God selects a providence. And sends it our way, a painful, afflictive providence. In our wandering from the path.

That we might, Hebrews 12, share in his holiness. That's why he disciplines us. That we might share in his holiness. See, this aim for holiness in our lives is that baseline commitment that affects God's providence.

And sending us afflictions when we stray. And so he does it that we might share in his holiness.

Hebrews 10, 12, 10. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful.

[8 : 39] Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it. So, we wander from the path and we go into sin.

And God afflicts us with pain inwardly and outwardly. Flavel says inwardly by an accusing conscience.

And we studied that. When we sin, he sends his spirit to accuse us. And our conscience is stirred up and we say, oh, that was wrong. I displease my father in heaven. But he also does it by afflictions without.

He sends us afflictions. And the design of God's providence in these painful afflictions is to cleanse us from sins we've fallen into. Now, David had many such sanctifying afflictions in his life.

I mean, we could just say, who was more tried by affliction and distress than David in the Old Testament? At least, who do we know more than him? We have all of his psalms and so many of his writings that we say, yes, David was an afflicted man.

[9 : 45] I want us to turn to Psalm 119 and show you how David viewed these afflictions, these afflictive providences in his life.

Unless you think that this was always his response to those afflictions, I just want to say, if you've read the Psalms, you know that that's not the case. Sometimes he's just crying out with no light. It's all darkness. And he's lost. And it seems like God doesn't love him anymore. And he's forsaken him. And he's wrestling with these afflictions that God has sent. But here's David in his better state. Maybe David after he's gone into the sanctuary and he's got his mind set right. And this is David's reflection upon these afflictions in his life. Psalm 119 and verse 67.

Before I was afflicted, I went astray.

[10:56] But now I obey your word. You see the intended design of God in the affliction sent to David? He's straying.

He's out of the way. God sends an affliction. Now he's back in the way of obedience. Before I was afflicted, I went astray. Now, having been afflicted, I've returned to walk in your way.

Look at verse 68. You are good and what you do is good. Teach me your decrees. We sometimes just lift that verse out. And perhaps its application is broader. But let's see it in its context.

You are good and what you do is good. David said, you know when you had Saul chasing me all over hither and yon. That was good. And you were good to do that to me. And when you sent me bereavement by Amnon and Absalom and Tamar, all these children problems of mine.

You were good and all you did was good. David is praising the goodness of God in afflicting him. We see it again in verse 71. It was good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn your decrees.

[12:07] So, it's God's good providence or his providence in our lives in bringing us affliction to work this good in us.

And it does work inestimable good in our lives to have a father who afflicts us when we stray from him. Blessed is the man who heeds the rod and him who appointed it.

Rather than those who act like a rebellious child that has no sense of appreciation for the good of discipline from a father or mother who loved them. Now, you can turn in your Bible if you want or in your mind to the book of Jonah.

Because Jonah is full of God's providential corrections and afflictions. It's full of God's providence in many ways. But some of those providences are afflictions, aren't they?

Why didn't Jonah want to go to Nineveh? Somebody refresh us. Raj? He didn't think the Ninevites deserved God's grace and blessing.

[13:12] All right. And what would have helped him to have such a view of the Ninevites? Who were these Ninevites in relation to Israel? What did the Babylonians go to the Babylonians? Well, they were not the Babylonians, but they were the enemy.

Well, I think they were Australians. But they, yeah, that's maybe part of the old Babylonian kingdom. But the point is they were enemies of God and his people, weren't they? So, as a good Israelite, I want them dead.

I want them in hell. That's how Jonah was interpreting the situation. So, you're sending me to our enemies, our arch enemies, to preach repentance to them?

And he goes down and finds a ship going the other way. And so the question is, how did God's providence pursue Jonah with affliction?

What did it come in the shape of? Pardon? Something before the whale. A storm. And what whipped up the storm? Wind.

[14:16] Wind. Verse 4 of chapter 1. The Lord sent a great wind on the sea, a violent storm. What is this affliction?

It is God pursuing the sanctification of his runaway prophet. That's how we're to see it. So, the sailors are convinced they must throw Jonah overboard to satisfy this God who created the heavens and the sea and was stirring it up.

And so they throw him in. And what was the next kind of providence, Jim? All right. A three-day cruise on a submarine. But what the Bible says about that fish is that the Lord provided a great fish to swallow Jonah.

Again, we're seeing this is providence. This is God controlling all of his creatures and all their actions all the time. You whale, go swallow my runaway prophet. Right now. You see him, he's going down, he's about stuck in the seaweed at the bottom.

Go get him. And he swallows him up. What's the next providence? Well, he lives in the whale. He lives there for three days and three nights to think about what he's done.

[15:27] To think about the grace of God to him. And be melted in his heart with grace toward others. And it's in the belly of a fish that Jonah prays. Praise.

And he cried out to God even as he was sinking. In chapter 2, you see it. What's the next providence of God? What's the word we use for that?

He vomited Jonah up. Didn't he? That it wasn't more than three days in the belly of a fish. It wasn't his grave. But the Lord, again, commanded the fish and it vomited Jonah onto dry ground.

So again, he says to Jonah, now go to Nineveh and preach my word there to them. This time, he goes. Before I was afflicted, I went astray. But now, I obey your commands.

You see it operative in the life of Jonah. Well, like us, Jonah has more than one sin to be dealt with. And that comes out next in the book.

[16:31] Because God blesses his preaching to Nineveh and sends revival. And the whole city repents. The king down to the animals are in ashes and rent clothes.

And what's Jonah's reaction? Pardon? Pardon? I told you so.

This is why I didn't want to go to Nineveh. I was afraid you'd show compassion on them. What else was his action? Or his attitude? He was angry. He was nail spitting mad at God.

I told you this is what you do. And sure enough, this is what you've done. You've shown kindness to them. And so we find that Jonah had another way that he was going astray.

And God says, I have an affliction for that too. And God continues to deal with Jonah in his providence. God is in completely unasked for and undeserved kindness.

[17:40] God, well, Jonah has gone out of the city, east of the city. And he's perched there watching to see what God's going to do. Will fire come from heaven and consume them?

I doubt it. God is too compassionate for that. But he's sitting there waiting. And he's pouting. And it says, verse 6 of chapter 4, So God shows him kindness.

Undeserved kindness again. In his providence. A vine with large leaves to shade his head. And he's very happy about this.

Rejoicing in the providence of God. But what's the next providence of affliction for Jonah? The worm in the vine. Some of you have grown zucchini. And you know it doesn't take very long for a worm to hit a vine.

And for it just to wilt. And what used to give shade no longer gives shade. That's what happened. But it didn't just happen. And it was a worm commanded by God.

[18:52] As much as the whale was commanded by God. The Lord God. At the dawn of the next day. God provided a worm which chewed the vine. So that it withered.

And that exposed his head to the blazing sun. And together with a scorching east wind. Made him faint. And angry enough to want to die. And he thinks he's got a right to be angry with God.

God asks him. And he says yes I have a right to be angry with you. And then the Lord comes with a rebuke. Now again. God speaks in providence. But he also speaks in his word.

And in those days he was speaking directly to his prophets. God is still speaking in his providence. He is not speaking directly to you.

As he spoke to Jonah. That's not the point of the lesson. But he did speak to Jonah. And this is what he said. You have been concerned about this vine. Though you did not tend it or make it grow.

[19:52] It sprang up overnight and died overnight. Without any of your help or concern. But Nineveh has more than 120,000 people. Cannot tell their right hand from their left. And many cattle as well.

Should I not be concerned about that great city? So Jonah. You are all concerned about this vine. You did not do anything to create and cause to flourish.

And give you comfort. I have invested a lot in these at Nineveh. I created them. I created them in my own image. To bear my likeness.

To bring glory to me. I have fed them. And nourished them. And cared for them. Sustaining their life. Every day. For many, many years.

And you are angry at me. For my concern. For them. You see how out of touch. Our affections can be with God's. God's concern for the world.

[20:51] God is showing us a picture. Into his heart. Even before the new covenant. When the gospel would go out to the nations. Like Nineveh. But even in this old covenant passage.

We have a foretelling of that heart of God. We see that in the heart of God. There is concern. Not just for the descendants of Abraham. There is a concern for pagan Ninevites.

Who are enemies of Israel. When Jesus comes. We see that concern. Fleshed out so much more clearly. And so because our hearts are out of touch.

With God's affections. We find affliction. And coming into our lives. Along with the rebuke. Of God. That we are caring more for a vine. Than for people. And so we see God's providence. Bringing affliction.

[21 : 50] When we are excessively taken up. With things of this world. Even God's gifts and blessings. Like that vine that brought shade. Upon his head. But to be excessively.

Happy about that. When we are not. Concerned about the things that are on God's hearts. And we have our minds and hearts set upon those things.

Instead of God and his things. Jonah was very happy about the vine. He cared nothing about the people that God cared about. So. So. It's right for us to enjoy those things.

That God richly provides for our enjoyment. But it's wrong to set our hearts on them. It's wrong to have our happiness bound up. In the enjoyment. Of those things and people.

And providence may correct our joy. If it's. Out of place. If it's overdone. And it may show us how misplaced it is.

[22 : 49] How fleeting it is. How easily taken from us. It is like a. A vine that. With one worm. Is gone. What then. Of that.

Joy. How foolish to build on such sand. There was David. David. And it wasn't a vine that he delighted in. But it was his son. Absalom. And he doted on his son.

Son meant too much to him. He was out of place. He was. He was in a place in his heart. That he didn't. Shouldn't have been. And so God's providence. Takes that son Absalom away.

From David. And breaks the heart of David. By that very son. First by his rebellion. And second by his death. Flavel says.

How many husbands. Wives and children. Has providence smitten. For this very reason. It might have spared them longer. If they had been loved more regularly. And moderately. But this was done for our good.

[23 : 51] To correct our hearts. From inordinate affections. And so the Lord. Deals with his servant David. It was good for me. To be afflicted. He says. That I might learn.

Your decrees. And so. It is with our pride. God's providence. Not only. Corrects us. When our hearts. Are set on.

Things. And. But also. To come. When. Our hearts. Have stumbled. Into pride. He uses.

Providences. To afflict us. In a way. That will humble us. And humble us. In the very area. Where we were. Very proud. King Hezekiah.

What is. What was he proud of? His wealth. So when the envoy. From Babylon. Showed up. He took them by the hand. He led them into. Every room. Of storehouses.

[24 : 48] Look at this. Oh. Their eyes got big. So he took them to the next room. Look at this. And he's proud. And his heart was lifted up. For all that he had. So what was the afflictive. Providence of God.

Upon his pride. In his wealth. All that stuff. Will be hauled away. By those very Babylonians. You see how God. Matches the providential.

Affliction. To the very area. Of pride. Makes it a means. To recover. His servant. From pride.

And we can be proud. Of our possessions. Our gifts. Our graces. Our talents. Our performances. Remember what Proverbs 27. 21 says. The crucible for silver.

And the furnace for gold. But a man is tested. By the. Praise he receives. So there are impurities. In silver and gold. And if you want to get them out.

[25 : 42] You put them in a furnace. Or on the fire. Impurities. Or skimmed off. Well if there's pride. In the heart. What's the fire.

What's the furnace. God puts that heart in. To show us. Our pride. What's. Praise. Go praise him. For. What he just did.

Go praise her. For the good job. She did. We're in the furnace. At that moment. Proverbs says. We're. We're being tested. And it's one of the afflictions.

That God sends us. To correct this. He puts us in the furnace. Of praise. And it brings our pride out. That which we thought.

So highly of ourselves. Rises. To the top. So what do we do with praise. Do we suck it in.

[26 : 39] Or do we deflect it out. To the one. To whom it's truly. Deserving of. If we secretly. Delight in men's praises. God has been known. To raise up instruments.

To criticize. And slander us. To humble us again. Have we lived. For the praises of men. And when we get them. Does it. Just. Cause our hearts. To rise.

Well then he sends. Some to. Slander. To. Criticize us. And. So.

To. Bring us down. Again. Or he may leave us. To ourselves. If we're proud of our performance. Instead of giving his assisting hand. As he did in the past. That. That made our performance. What it was.

Now he withholds it. Just to show us afresh. How far we'll get. Without his assistance. Upon our gifts. Our talents. And we come up wanting.

[27 : 33] Think of Peter. He thought his love for Christ. Was strong enough. That though everyone else denied him. He wouldn't. And all God did. Was just removed his assisting hand. That had kept him. For those three years.

From denying the Savior. What happened? It wasn't. It wasn't. But a few hours. Before three times. With oaths. Peter denies that he even knows him.

And the affliction. Had its intended use. Which was what? Peter's holiness. Corrected him. He's going astray. He's thinking too highly of himself. And the affliction. Brought him low in repentance. Didn't it? Again. The providence of God. Pursuing the sanctification. Of his people. God has no shortage of ways. To deal with our pride.

When we have fallen into that pit. It's a humbled. It's a chastened. King Nebuchadnezzar. Who reminds us. That God is able. To humble those.

[28 : 29] Who walk in pride. Well. The same is true. Of misplaced trust. And hope. Not only misplaced affections. That we have for certain things.

Or people. Misplaced. Praise. That we put upon ourselves. And in our pride. But also misplaced trust. And hope. Where we expect too much.

From creatures. Instead of God. First Timothy 6. 17. A word to those who are rich. And I would just say. Don't write yourself.

Out of the verse. Because you don't think you're rich. I think if Paul were here. He'd say. I had every single one of you. All in mind here. You're rich.

You're rich. You're rich in the present things of this world. Compared to the world that we live in.

And so there's a word for us. Command those who are rich in this present world. Not to be arrogant. There's the pride.

[29 : 25] And what we have. Nor to put their hope in wealth. There's the other danger. To expect that. Because of what I have. I can get certain things. And it will ever bail me out.

Nor to put their hope in wealth. Which is so uncertain. But to put their hope in God. Who richly provides us with everything. For our enjoyment. So the challenge is to find rightful enjoyment. In these things. But not to put our hope. For enjoyment. In them. Providence lets us. Be disappointed.

If our expectations. Are in. The things that we possess. He may. Let our wealth. Sprout wings. And fly away.

Just to teach us the fleeting nature. Of what it was. That we expected. So much happiness from.

And he does us good. By doing so. He's meaning to bring us back.

[30 : 21] To trusting in him. Not. In his gifts. Or if we're trusting in ourselves. Or in others. Or our plans. And our abilities. He has. He has. Providences of affliction.

To teach us. How futile it is. To build on such. Sinking. Sand. And to turn our hearts back. To trusting in God. The one who gives us all these things. The one. Who alone can.

Uphold. And help. So. This is the. The lesson. Of the morning. There are men. These are some of the ways. That God's providence. Has sent affliction.

In conjunction. With the Holy Spirit. For our. Sanctification. All to turn us. From the creature. To God himself. He's just wanting. To remain.

The ultimate love. And trust. And happiness. Of our hearts. That's why he sends. These afflictions. You're going astray. Your heart's off of me. And onto this. He wants us to come back.

[31 : 18] Where we delight. In the Lord himself. As our portion. Whatever else. We may. Or may not. Have. And it should bring.

From us. This morning. The confession. If we would. Think for a moment. Of our afflictions. That God is used. To that end. It was good for me. To be afflicted. That I might learn. Your ways. That I might obey. Your word. So have you. Developed an eye. For God's providence. In your afflictions. This is another.

Field. In which to find. The providences of God. Have you seen. What he's after. In these. Certain afflictions. Not all of them. Are meant to recover us. From sin. But some of them are. Have you seen.

When you've. Slipped away. From your heart. Being set upon God. As your. Happiness. Your ultimate. Joy. And happiness. And trust. And riches.

[32:13] Oh. God. Thank you. For sending me. That afflicted. That affliction. Before we close. We need to appreciate. Just how amazing.

It is. That this infinite. God. Is that. Intimately involved. In our lives. I mean. Who are we? He's the most high. He has to stoop.

Just to look. Upon the heavens. And the earth. Just to look. Upon this universe. That he's made. He's got to stoop. Down. To look upon it. Like you would stoop. Down to look upon. The universe. Of an anthill. God has to stoop. Just to look. At the whole universe. But he stoops. Even lower. He stoops down.

To look into. To look into. Our lives. And into our very hearts. And to see. Where we are strained. Where we. Our feet are off the path. Where our heart is off. The path.

[33:05] And then he. He crafts a providence. Of affliction. He sends it to us. Like that wind. Upon our sea. Like that.

Worm. Upon our. Mind. And together with the Holy Spirit. He uses it. To bring us. Back. To himself. To sanctify us. To make us. Holy. This is something that. David. This one who receives. So many afflictions. Stands in awe.

In Psalm 113. He says. Who is like. The Lord. Our God. The one who sits. Enthroned on high. Who stoops down. To look on the heavens. And the earth. Psalm 114.

He finds. This is cause. Or 144. He says. This is cause. For worship. And wonder. In David's heart. Oh Lord. What is man. That you care for him. What is. The son of man.

[34:03] That you even. Think of him. Man is but a breath. His days are like. A fleeting shadow. And who are we. That you would care for us. That you would think of us. What are we.

We're just a speck. Upon. A planet. That is just a speck. In the whole universe. That God has created. Which he must stoop down. Just to look upon.

And it caused. Wonder in David. That you should come. And rescue me. From my enemies. That you should deliver me. From my problems. My sins. That you should.

Give peace. And success. To me. That you should. Bless. Our sons. And daughters. And our barns. That you should spare us.

From disaster. And so on. And it's all building up. To this grand conclusion. Of Psalm 144. And it's this. The last verse. Blessed. Happy are the people.

[34:57] Of whom this is true. Blessed are the people. Whose God. Is the Lord. Whose God. Is the Lord. Of providence. Who does all these.

Things in our lives. Though he's so high. Above us. What is man. That you're. Mindful of him. That you even notice him. What is man. That you care for him.

And living in the gospel age. We can say. What is man. That you would send. Your only son. To die for him. What is man. That you would send. Your own holy son. Spirit. To live in him. What is man. That you would. Order. Our afflictions. For our good. For our sanctification. Our being made like Christ. Let me close with. A familiar.

Poem. By John Newton. But it's worth. The reread. If you've heard it. Before. And it refers. To a gourd. And I believe. He's referring to. The vine. In Jonah. When we speak.

[35:55] Of blasting. My gourds. Think of Jonah's vine. These inward trials. John Newton says. I ask the Lord. That I might grow. This has to do. With sanctification. In our holiness.

I ask the Lord. That I might grow. In faith. And love. In every grace. Might more. Of his salvation. Know. And seek more. Earnestly. His face. I hope. That in some favored hour.

At once. He'd answer my request. And by his love's. Constraining power. Subdue my sins. And give me rest. Instead of this. He made me feel. The hidden evils.

Of my heart. And he let the angry. Powers of hell. Assault my soul. In every part. Yea more. With his own hand. He seemed. Intent. To aggravate.
My woe. Crossed all the fair designs. I schemed. Blasted my gourds. And laid me low. Lord.
[36 : 49] Why is this? I trembling cried. Wilt thou pursue. Thy worm to death? Tis in this way. The Lord replied. I answer prayer. For grace. And faith. These inward trials.
I employ. From self. And pride. To set thee free. And break thy schemes. Of earthly joy. That thou may seek. Thy all.
In me. The heart of God. Seeking. Our hearts. To find our all. In him. Let the providence of God. Enter into your worship today.
As we. Worship this God. For his intimate dealings. With us. In his providence. And his afflictions. We're dismissed. Thank you.