

Advantages of Meditating on Providence (part 2)

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[0:00] Membership has privileges. So the advertisement runs. Well, this chapter of John Flavel on Providence! is kind of like a mailer that you get in your mailbox! that's trying to get you to join up, to become a member of this or that.

ARP or something else if you're old enough. But he's wanting us to join and become a member of the club of those who meditate on God's providence.

And this membership has privileges. It has advantages. It has benefits. And he's starting to unpack all the benefits of those who will become meditators on providence.

The first advantage we saw last week was that in this way we maintain sweet and conscious communion with God. On a day-to-day basis, we have this communion.

Remember, communion means two parts. There's God revealing to us, and there's man responding. If God is just revealing and man is not responding, then there's no communion.

[1:18] communion. It takes two to commune. And so, how does God commune with us? Well, he communes with us. He talks to us.

He reveals himself to us in the Scriptures. But Flavel is making the point that he also makes himself known to us and teaches us about himself and speaks to us in his providence, in the actions and the things that he does, the discipline in our life.

And we're told to heed the rod. In the same way that we need to heed his word, we need to heed his rod. So, his providences speak to us. And not just corrective providences, but all of them are God revealing himself.

And I trust that we're learning to respond, not only to his word, but to his providence in our lives. So, that's the first benefit, to have that communion with God day by day.

Now, the second benefit that we come to is a great part of the pleasure and delight of the Christian life is made out of observations of providence.

[2:31] Many of the joys and delights of the Christian life come to us through the observations of providence in our life.

The psalmist says in Psalm 111 in verse 2, Great are the works of the Lord. They are pondered by all who delight in them. So, there's a people who delight in pondering the works of the Lord, the providence of the Lord, what he's doing in their lives.

It's their delight. It's their pleasure. And so, he unpacks this in several ways. First of all, what is the pleasure to observe the resurrection of our dead hopes? Can you look back and think of, you know, I once had a hope for something and it died.

But then God resurrected it and brought it back. And there's pleasure in thinking and observing how God has resurrected dead hopes in our lives.

Jacob thought he would never again see his son Joseph alive. He thought he would go down to his grave in sorrow. But through a strange and unexpected providence, his hope was revived.

[3:46] You can read about it in Genesis 46. Jacob said to his son Joseph when he saw him again, Now I am ready to die since I have seen for myself that you're still alive.

A hope dead, revived. To look back and to see in our lives hopes that were dead, revived. It gives us great enjoyment of God.

The two disciples on the Emmaus Road, remember, we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel. Oh, we had hoped.

We had seen his miracles. We had heard his teaching. And we thought for sure he was the Messiah who would redeem Israel. But he has been crucified. The hope was dashed. And then think of the delight and joy they had when they finally recognized that it was him that they were talking to on the road.

Dead hopes, revived. Job was not only lost his family, his possessions, and his health, but at one point he also lost his hope.

[4:51] You can read about that in different places, but especially Job 6 and verse 11. But he did live to see his situation changed, didn't he?

He did live to see the loving kindness of the Lord to him, that the Lord is full of compassion and mercy, as James says. For in Job 42:12 it says, The Lord blessed the latter part of Job's life more than the first.

His health was restored. He had greater wealth than before. He had ten more children. And he had long life to enjoy them. But best of all, he had a greater knowledge of God than he had before, which was the greatest delight of all.

Remember when he says at the end of Job, he says, My ears had heard of you, but now my eyes have seen you. That's phrases that you find throughout the scriptures.

And I found one again in Psalm 48 this week. The same thing. My ears had heard of you, but now my eyes have seen you. Is it not true that when we hear about someone, we get to know them a bit or we know something about them?

[6:00] But when we see them, our knowledge of them grows. And that's what Job is saying. My experience through this whole series of providences in my life has had this effect.

that my knowledge of God has gone from the level of just hearing to seeing. And so it is with these hopes revived.

We get to learn something more of the heart of our God. We see deeper into God and his ways. And that gives us deeper joy. So that's one way our delight is increased by meditating on providence.

Can you look back and see hopes that were dashed, that God revived? And that should encourage you, if you're living in a period where hopes are now dashed, to trust in this God of providence.

Well, secondly, what delight is there to see? This is all under the delight and pleasures that we have. What delight is there to see providence bringing us much good from those very things we feared would be our ruin or misery.

[7:12] So they were frowning providences, as the hymn writer says, that were hiding a smiling face. Or, as the hymn goes on, they were the clouds that we so much dreaded, but when they broke, they broke with blessings on our head.

And what a joy and delight it is to look back and see those things that we were afraid of as they approached us, that they left behind such a blessing in our hearts.

Buds that had a bitter taste were found to be sweet in the flower of them. So Joseph's time in prison, oh, that first day in prison, it must have seemed like a bitter providence.

But it turned out to be just another step on the way to the throne and the palace of Egypt. And so, looking back, he can see that what he feared actually became a source of great blessing.

The disciples found the death of Christ to be the thing that they feared would be the end of all their joy. How can we live without Jesus? Thomas is ready to go and die with him.

[8:25] Better to die with Jesus than to live without him. He can't imagine life without Jesus. Either can Peter. Lord, to whom would we go? We're beside ourselves to not have you with us.

And so when they see their Savior die, it seems like the end of all joy. But actually, it becomes, that very death becomes the reason for their deepest joy.

To know that Christ has died for them and has thereby saved them unto eternal joys. What a difference we have seen in our afflictions when first meeting them and when parting from them, the label says.

At the first meeting, they brought fears and tears. At parting, parting, they left behind joy and delight and gladness. And so David is able to say it.

It was good for me to be afflicted that I might learn your decrees. That's looking back upon the providence. What delights to see God's providence is turning our mourning into laughter and our sorrows into joys.

[9:33] And the last providence that we will all experience will do just that, the return of Christ. And when we experience that providence, then sorrow and sadness will flee away and gladness and joy will overtake us forever.

And so from observing providence, we find delight in the good that God does us from the things we feared would do us harm.

But next, there are pleasures in observing providence because by observing providence, you may see goodness and mercy following you all the days of your life. As Psalm 23 says.

All the days of your life. Every day. Not only those pleasant days of feasting in green pastures beside quiet waters. but goodness and mercy following you during your days of confusion of not knowing which way to go, what to do, and to look back and to see that He was leading me in paths of righteousness for His name's sake.

And even in those days that go and take you through the valley of the shadow of death, you look back and you see in the darkness He was with me. He was with me then doing me good.

[10 : 58] Even those days when you were straying from your shepherd. Who's writing this song? David. And for nine months at least, he strayed with a cold heart from God.

And he's able to look back and say, oh, my God is a God who's ever pursuing me. Every day with goodness and mercy.

Every day of that nine month slide back into myself, my sin. Goodness and mercy. Your rod and your staff were there.

They are my comfort. And even days when you're surrounded by your enemies, how God has prepared a table before you in the presence of your enemies, provisions, overflowing cup.

Observing providence gives you delight as you look back and see that surely goodness and mercy has followed me all the days of my life and the promise is that it will follow me and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

[12 : 03] So sheep of Christ, can you see the privilege to have him as our shepherd and we get to think about how he has shepherded us as we look back and meditate upon providence.

The world pursues goodness, doesn't it? And can never overtake it. But goodness and mercy follow us such that we can't escape it.

And that notwithstanding, Flavel says, the poor returns we make of those former mercies that we've received, yet he still pursues us with goodness and mercy. When vengeance and wrath pursue others who are as good as I am, who am I that I should have goodness and mercy pursuing me?

And so the thought of God's providence brings us to light in our God. What pleasures to know then that however contrary the winds of providence, they're all made to move me on toward heaven and holiness.

That our worst things are working for our best things, they're promoting our salvation, that whatever causes us tears now will bring us unspeakable joy then, that he's only wanting thy dross to consume and thy gold to refine, your joy to refine.

[13 : 28] So, have you found pleasure and delight in tracing out the hand of God's providence in your life? That's another benefit that membership in this club has.

Maybe someone has a testimony or a question or a word of comment on this first or this second advantage. It's no small part of our joy to look back and see God's hand of providence in our lives. Anybody? Yeah, there. There. Promise lets you look forward to providence with expectation and joy and peace.

Good. Alright? Third benefit for those who will give themselves to this meditation on providence, it's a means to overpower and suppress the natural atheism that's in your hearts.

What? It's a means to overpower and suppress the natural atheism that's in your hearts. What do you think Flavel means by the natural atheism that's in your hearts?

[14 : 40] Our doubt. That this God who claims to be one thing in the Bible, we don't think that there is such a God that can do what he says.

That's atheism. Natural atheism means it arises out of our hearts. Remember what Jesus said?

Where do all these things come from? Evil thoughts, adultery, sexual immorality, greed, on goes out from within, out of men's hearts come these evil thoughts and so on.

All these evils come from inside and make a man unclean. So Flavel is saying that there's a natural seed of atheism in the best hearts.

All sins have their seeds in our depraved nature that still remain in us. And it's the conquering grace of God that keeps those seeds from arising out and expressing themselves.

But even the seed of atheistic thoughts is in our hearts. So one of the benefits of providence we're being told is that it will help you suppress and overcome that natural atheism in your hearts.

[15 : 56] Now we might think that this is one temptation that we don't have to deal with. This is for the guy sitting beside me. It's not for me. And then one day you're going along and it hits you full

force in the face.

And you say where did that come from? Never been tempted in that way before. Never had such thoughts about God. It hit me the moment after my mother's death.

And we'd been sitting there and standing around her singing and praying and as soon as she took her last breath. Is it all true John?

Is there a heaven? Is there life after death? I wasn't expecting that. Least of all then. But it was an atheistical thought that there is no such thing as God in heaven and life after death and the glories that, no, thankfully it didn't last long, but there it was.

Atheistical thoughts. And Flavel is saying we can find help in providence over them. A man I knew, or I should say a man I know had never had such thoughts.

[17:16] come to him. And then one day they came and they didn't go away and they harassed him for a year. And he found it tough, intense fighting for the better part of the year.

John Bunyan found himself plagued by such thoughts. So in Pilgrim's Progress, his immortal allegory, we find Bunyan's Pilgrim beset with such thoughts in the valley of the shadow of death. Bunyan writes, I must not forget to record one thing. When Christian came near to the burning pit, he became so confused that he did not know his own voice. Just as he was passing by the pit, a demon stole up behind him and whispered insulting blasphemies against God in his ears, which blasphemies Christian thought had proceeded from his own mind.

This troubled him very much, more than any wrong he had done thus far on the way, because the wicked thoughts and words were so bitter and so utterly unjust against the one he loved the most, the one who had done the most for him.

Yet it seemed that he could not help thinking these words and whispering them to himself. But he did not know where the evil words came from, nor how to stop his ears from hearing them.

[18:41] Other holy men have written of their struggles with atheistical thoughts, so do not dismiss this as something for someone else other than you.

As Flavel says, there's a natural seed of atheism in the best hearts, even yours. And Flavel goes on to say, an undiscerning glance at providence might nurture that seed to sprout as it did in godly Asaph.

Now, you can turn up Isaiah 73 if you like, you're familiar with it, you don't need to, but just a quick glance at providence by this godly man Asaph.

And what does he see with a quick glance in Psalm 73? He sees the wicked prospering. That's what he sees when he looks out there and when he takes a glance at his own life, what does he see the righteous doing?

Suffering. So a quick glance at providence has the wicked prospering and the righteous suffering. And what did he conclude from this quick glance at providence?

[19:58] And what might we conclude if that's all the further we look at providence? Well, that there really is no moral governor on the throne of the universe and it really doesn't matter whether you do right or do wrong and all of these efforts to live a holy life it's just a futile exercise.

We might as well join them and just give in to our self and our evil desires. That's where Asaph was, wasn't he?

His feet were slipping. He's ready to chuck the whole thing and just go with the world and go with his urges and do whatever his heart would suggest to him. But a closer attention to God's providence might rescue us from such atheism.

As we see God's judgments even in this life carried out against the wicked. And all of these temporal judgments are reminders of the great and last judgment.

All the temporal the ways that God judges the wicked in this life are all calls the last judgment is coming. And so if we would appreciate no there is a God in the universe who is righteous and does reward the righteous and does punish the wicked we need to see in providence in his workings here and now in this world that he has indeed punished the wicked and rewarded the righteous and that a day is coming when he will repay all men according to what they have done.

[21:44] So there's godly and poor Naboth and he's got a family inheritance from the Lord and he's got it planted up in grapes and it's a lovely vineyard and the king happens to set his lustful eye upon it and actually comes and offers him money for it or land for it and he's not wanting to let go of his inheritance from the Lord and so Ahab counsels with his wicked wife Jezebel and you remember they falsely accuse him in court and they murdered him and took his vineyard and it

seems like there's no justice in this world the wicked thriving and prospering the righteous suffering and dying and so a glance at providence may conclude that there is no God judging at the helm of his universe and the prophet Elijah pays a visit to the king and told him that in the place where dogs licked up Naboth's blood dogs will lick up your blood yes yours and dogs will devour your wife

Jezebel by the wall of Jezreel and every male descendant of yours will also be cut off but months followed weeks and nothing happened there's no God at the helm of the universe and Ahab and Jezebel are in good health and in lavish wealth and the righteous persecuted and suffering it's a temptation to atheistical thoughts of God and Flavel's saying time out not so fast let's look closer at providence let's meditate a bit on this this issue in the world his God's wheels of justice sometimes grind slowly but they grind exceedingly fine someone said years later Ahab is found out isn't he he thinks he's going to escape he's going into battle but he's in disguise so they won't know it's me and they won't be firing for me

Jehoshaphat king of Judah you come with me and you dress up like a king and I'm going in as disguise they'll shoot at you and not at me as their armies proceed against the enemy but God guides with a laser precision that arrows just shot at the enemy from the their enemy and directs it right to the chink in Ahab's armor and it mortally wounds him and he's there in his chariot and he says to his driver get me out of here I'm wounded and they drive to a safe place from which he can watch the battle while his blood is oozing out his life onto the floor of the chariot and so we read so the king died and was brought to Samaria and they buried him there now that's just a glancing look at providence probably a pompous funeral mighty king Ahab is dead but a closer look at providence says they washed the chariot at a pool in Samaria where the prostitutes bathed and the dogs licked up his blood as the word of the lord had declared now why in the world are such things in the bible well in part because godly people like Asaph going through tough times are sometimes harassed with atheistical thoughts that it really doesn't matter whether I live holy righteous life and shun evil or whether I just give in to my flesh and live like a worldly and we need to be reminded it does matter there is a god his word is ruling in this universe he has prepared a day of judgment and he will pay back every man according to what he has done well that's helpful to me then that that's a way to suppress and overcome these doubtful thoughts that come such texts prove there is a god who reigns and holiness and righteousness really does matter a footnote though it was many years later wicked

Jezebel too you remember was made dog food as they devoured her by the wall of Jezreel eating everything but her skull her feet and her hands one commentator says because that mind had thought of such wicked things and those hands had done such evil things and those feet had gone in her wicked errands that even the dogs wouldn't touch them at any rate the word of the Lord came true the judge of the universe proves to be on his throne so turn to Psalm 9 these are stories that again passages that we're familiar with that we don't need to turn up but perhaps Psalm 9 is not as well known to you but it ought to be at least in this matter that we're discussing Psalm 9 and verse 16 the Lord is known by his justice he's known by the judgments that he executes you see there is in providence evidence of his existence when he judges it testifies that he he is real he's known by his justice and in

Psalm 58 you have the wicked the mighty wicked who seem to sin and destroy others with impunity and when the providence of God finally catches up with them and destroys them it greatly proves the reality of God against all atheistical thoughts in Psalm 58 and verse 11 the psalm ends then men will say surely the righteous still are rewarded surely there is a God who judges the earth so a closer look at providence and seeing his judgments upon the wicked in this earth will help us to see he does exist he still does reward the righteous and so to put down our atheistical thoughts but not only to look at his judgments of the wicked but what about the sufferings of the righteous yeah we see the wicked prospering well we need to look closer and see how the wicked are also judged now when we come closer to home and we see but the righteous are suffering and nothing seems to be changing for me well on this side observe by observing providence closely it can be seen that there is a

[29:02] God of wisdom power love and faithfulness who supports delivers and preserves his people and not only does he judge the wicked but he takes care of his righteousness his righteous ones and so in these providences he makes himself known to his people one of the recurring phrases that we find in the prophets and especially in Ezekiel look for it if you're reading in Ezekiel and your Bible reading is that God promises he's going to do something whether it's punishing the

wicked or blessing his people he says that he will do it so that you might know that I am the Lord that you might know that I am the Lord that you might know that I am the Lord that's precisely what we're talking about not only when we punish we see him punishing the wicked but when we see him blessing the righteous we're meant to draw the conclusion he is

God he is God this God of the Bible does reign that's why he does these things that we might know that he is Yahweh the God the only living God now it may be you feel find yourselves assaulted with atheistical thoughts and are tempted to think that God has left everything just kind of like the view of the deists that they just God wound up the earth and they just left it and walked away and the world is just left to all things below to the course and the sway of nature that our prayers really do not reach him that he does not regard what evil befalls us but Flavel says but tell me saints have you not enough in providence to stop the mouths of all such temptations reflect upon your past providences have you never seen the all sufficiency of God in the provisions he has made for you and for yours along your journey have you not seen and tasted that the

Lord is good reflect on it have you not plainly discerned the care of God in preserving you from so many dangers as you have escaped and been carried through how is it that you have survived so many mortal dangers and sicknesses and accidents and designs of the enemy to ruin you by his care alone you've been preserved that you're still on the way to heaven though all hell resists you amazing is his God not been actively working on your behalf have you not discerned in your providences that there is a living God who hears and answers prayers so clearly that you know this is in answer to my prayer the very thing I was asking for he has done for me Psalm 34 David says I sought the Lord and he answered me he knew that he knew that what he was experiencing was in answer to the Lord to his prayer I sought the Lord and he answered me and he delivered me from all my fears those who look to him are radiant their faces are never covered with shame this poor man called and the

Lord heard him and he saved him out of all his troubles the label says thousands of Christians know that they have the petitions that they have asked of him so obvious when it happens that we cannot miss it this is the very mercy which I pleaded at the throne now that's David but I ask you don't you have such a prayer list don't you have such a record a history with this God and at the throne of grace that I called and he answered and in seeing that we see that God does care for the righteous yes we're laid low yes we suffer in this life but even in this life God has given us abundant evidence if we will look and if we will meditate we'll see his hand guiding directing keeping caring loving upon you and it all shows that there is a living God and his people are exceedingly dear to him so that's the third advantage any questions as we come to the end of that third the idea of atheistical thoughts that the

God of the Bible the God that describes himself here isn't really in existence those thoughts come to us in one way or another and seeing God's judgment of the wicked and God's blessing of the righteous in this life is meant to help us to fight against him I'd just like to make a comment on Psalm 73 when Asaph's eyes was opened to see what happened to the wicked I love how he ended that Psalm but as for me it is good to be near God I made the sovereign Lord my refuge I will tell of all your deeds so it wasn't just the end of the wicked that he saw that yes God will judge the wicked but he also saw God's care of him and the blessings that he has that I'm ever with you you hold me by my right hand and afterwards you take me into glory and to be near

[34:46] God I don't have anything in heaven and earth better than that God is blessing me just to have him near me so you see he's observing I will declare all your deeds are his last words he's looking back and saying look at the deeds of the Lord and the goodness of God to me so yes it's a wonderful testimony of a man who came to doubt God's existence as he is in the Bible and through observing providence and seeing that he is righteous and he does bless his people he was able to conquer good alright yes Carol yeah if if we have that view of God then we just well we throw up our hands why pray that's where his self was why continue in this why should I wear myself out to live the Christian life I find it's toilsome I find it's hard why should I do that why should I pray if I don't think there is a

God to answer the devil has reasons why he's putting these thoughts in us he's he's wanting us to quit praying for one thing he's wanting us to quit striving for holiness without which no man will see the Lord so to understand the schemes of the devil and what he's after in our lives and to be able to fight against him no small blessing in the Christian life thank you Carol let's pray and ask the Lord's help Lord we live in your world we confess together this morning that you reign over all you're

working out everything in conformity with the purpose of your will you will punish the wicked everlastingly and you will reward the righteous everlastingly and oh help us then as we live in a world that's beset with sin and where things seem to be upside down that you would help us to look at your word to look at providence and to fight off these thoughts that are directed to pull you down in our minds oh please use even this day together in worship and in fellowship to lift your name high in our minds to fill us with your greatness your goodness your holiness we ask in Jesus name amen