

Advantages of Meditating on Providence (part 3)

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[0:00] Well, we've had a huge break since the last time we studied the providence of God. There were several reports from the mission fields.! Brother Roger, a couple weeks on foundations of marriage, and Stan on mercy ministries at Grace Fellowship.

We thank God for these reports and lessons that we have. We wanted to return for a few lessons on providence before we're done with John Flavel's book, The Mystery of Providence, and move on to something else.

But if you remember, Flavel taught us what the providence of God is, his control and upholding of all his creatures and all their actions all the time.

And then he showed us the rich benefits, the advantages of meditating on the providence of God. It's not an easy thing to meditate, period.

To think hard, to tell our minds, you're not going to roam, you're going to go down this road and this channel, and we're going to think about this now. That's a discipline, and it's not easy.

[1:08] So we need to be encouraged, and that's what he's been seeking to do. He's holding out the carrot in front of us. What are some of the advantages of meditating on the providence of God, of spending some time every day thinking of God's providence with me today?

And so he's set three before us. The first was that in this way we maintain sweet and conscious communion with God day by day. That meditating on God's providence not only leads us to thoughts about God, but leads us into fellowship, communion with God.

So God speaks to us in providence, and we speak back to him with thanksgiving and petition. We interact with him, and that itself is eternal life, to know him, to fellowship with him.

Secondly, a great part of the pleasure and delight of the Christian life is made out of observing God's providence. How much of our joy and peace comes from observing, seeing his hand in our lives, seeing him make our worst things to work for our good, seeing his goodness and mercy following us each day of our lives.

Well, that is no small part of our joy and pleasure. And thirdly, considering providence as a means to overpower and suppress the natural atheism that is in your hearts, we saw that the last time we studied this theme, that the world sometimes seems like it's spinning out of control with no God at the helm, no judge, and right and wrong doesn't matter.

[2:48] The evildoers prosper and the righteous suffer. And so is there a God? Is there one who's policing his world?

And it can seem that the answer is no, and that's the temptation that the devil would bring to us, especially in our suffering. But as we observe providence, we see, yes, there is a judge.

And yes, even in this world, he steps in, and he enforces his law. He punishes the wrongdoer, just reminding us that, yes, there is a day of judgment coming, and every evil will be punished, and every good will be rewarded.

And so it helps us in fighting that inward atheism that would say in our hearts, there is no God. Now today, some further benefits on meditating on providence.

And the fourth one then is, it gives us strong support to our faith in times of emergency and great need. It supports our faith when we're thrust into a situation where suddenly we find ourselves in over our heads.

[3:57] So the teenager David went out to fight Goliath. What past providences of God fed his faith there in the Valley of Elah?

I've got a giant to face. Didn't know that when he woke up that morning, but suddenly he's thrust into this. What were the past providences? The bear and the lion.

That this hadn't been the first time David was in great danger and wrestling with a superior foe. The Lord who delivered me from the paw of the lion and the paw of the bear will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine.

And the Bible is full of that kind of lesson. There's an interesting series of dealings between Jesus and his disciples in Matthew 14, 15, and 16.

Matthew 14, Jesus feeds the 5,000 with just five loaves and two fishes and he gathers up 12 basketfuls afterwards. They gather up 12 basketfuls afterwards.

[5:05] Matthew 15, the next chapter, he feeds 4,000 men. Just with seven loaves and a few fishes and they gather, or with, what does it say?

Yes, seven loaves and a few small fishes and seven baskets of leftovers are gathered. The very next chapter, 16, the disciples cross the lake and they forget to take bread with them and they're worried about it.

And aware of this discussion, Jesus asks, you of little faith, why are you talking among yourselves about having no bread? Don't you remember the five loaves for the 5,000 and how many basketfuls you gathered?

Or the seven loaves for the 4,000 and how many basketfuls you gathered? You see, the point he's making, it's as if to ask, is this the first difficulty your faith has ever met with?

Weren't you ever in need of any bread before now? And if so, what happened? Remember it. And why are you worried now, O you of little faith?

[6:11] So past providences are meant to feed faith in our present trials. You don't have to think long to see this same lesson enforced in your own life.

And remembering the past providences of God is no small advantage to you in some new trouble.

When you're able to say, this isn't the first time, John, you've been in this situation.

And do you remember how you emerged out of it? The Lord brought you through. Do you remember the first time you swam in the deep end of the pool where your toes could no longer touch?

It was a scary thing. Second time wasn't near as frightful, was it? Because you had the first experience to draw upon. And that's something of the encouragement to faith that we have as we're thrust into situations that are over our head.

I've been here before. The Lord met me here before. He brought me through. I can trust Him again.

Now, there are two things that unbelief stumbles at during times of deep water trials.

[7:23] It's God's power to help and God's willingness to help. Two things that our unbelief stumbles at in deep water trials. First, God's power to help. So the Israelites are in the wilderness.

There's obviously no shops to buy food along the way. And in Psalm 78, the scriptures say, they spoke against God saying, can God spread a table in the wilderness?

Is He able to spread a table in the wilderness? When He struck the rock, water gushed out and streams flowed abundantly. But can He also give us food?

Can He supply meat for His people? You see, they're doubting His power. Can He give us water?

I can trust Him now. Surely His hand is not shortened. His hand hasn't somehow shriveled up in weakness since the last time He helped me. He's still the God with the almighty arm to help.

[8:51] And so forgetfulness leads to unbelief. So the Lord, don't you remember? Don't you remember how many basketfuls you gathered up?

We need to go back and remember past providences that point to us the power of God to help us. But our unbelief is still stubborn, isn't it?

It still has a sticking point. It's okay, God can do anything. I don't doubt that. But I'm not sure He wants to. I'm really not sure He's wanting to help me. His willingness to help me.

And there we get hung up. But Flavel asks this. Dear Christian, is not your whole history one of God's past help time after time?

Is not your whole history, every day of your life, one of God's past help? Has He been reluctant to help us in the past?

[9:50] Then raise your Ebenezer by faith. Hitherto has the Lord helped us. He has proven Himself not only able to help, but willing to help me all the way through my life to this point.

And so I can believe that He's not only able to help, but He's willing to help. But unbelief still does not give up so easily, but says, well, you are so unworthy to have God do this for you.

Sure, He can do it, and perhaps He's willing, but you're unworthy, as if that would change His mind regarding you. And again, Flavel comes back, but your whole Christian experience has shown Him willing to act on your behalf, though you were unworthy.

His mercy first appeared to me when I was worse than I am now, when I was an enemy. So I can continue to expect His help, though I am still unworthy, because now I'm an unworthy friend, no longer an enemy.

Romans 5.10, we're going to get here in our memory pack. For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to Him through the death of His Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved, delivered through His life?

[11 : 11] So if He bestowed thousands of mercies upon me when I was His enemy, can I not believe, an unworthy enemy, can I not believe that now, as an unworthy friend, He will act on my behalf?

So it's useful. It's to our advantage to meditate on past providences in our times of need. So when you feel a rise in the blood pressure, what is it?

It's a cause, it's a call to meditate on providence. What has God been for you, done for you? How has He acted for you in the past?

A tremendous benefit in our new emergencies. Anybody want to testify to that reality in your life, or a question?

There. We have the Word of Scripture, where He promises to be our ever-present help, and then we have a whole scrapbook in our minds of times that He has been just that to us, and that strengthens us.

[12 : 23] You know that when I go away and speak, it's a big lump in the throat for me, and I've done it more than once, and yet I still struggle with speaking away from home.

And I would like to get to the place where it doesn't even, I don't even feel it. But I can say that I have been reminded over and over of past help, and have found that to be enough for me to hang my hope upon, that you who did not abandon me last year in this situation will not abandon me in this week, in these present opportunities.

Perhaps not to the place where I'm just not feeling that pit in my stomach anymore, but I am casting my hope upon the Lord, and I'm finding, yes, He will meet me.

He will meet me, and He did, and He has. So I too can say that the Lord is good as He's building this repertoire of past providences to give us more and more to feed upon in our present times of trial.

Any others? Yes, Rex. All right. Well, whether it's the mechanic office, or workshop, or your home, remember that the next time you're starting to feel your blood boiling.

[13 : 57] Think on providence. That's a benefit. Number five, it will endear Jesus Christ more and more to your souls. In other words, it will make Christ more precious to you as you think upon providence.

Now, how does that work? Well, this is the way that John Flavel puts it. Think of Christ as a channel, a funnel, okay?

And that's how He speaks of it. Christ is the channel of all grace and mercy that flows to us from God. So it all comes to us through Christ.

And then also think of Christ as the channel from which all of our praises rise back to God. Now, two verses for proving that from Scripture, and then we'll apply it.

Ephesians 1, 3. The channel of all graces and blessings. Praise be to the God and Father.

Ephesians 1, 3. Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.

[15 : 05] Every spiritual blessing comes to us in Christ. You have Christ, you have all these blessings. And not just the spiritual blessings, but it's true of the physical blessings as well.

They come to us through Jesus Christ. He's the great funnel. And then all of our thanksgivings, our return to God for His merciful providences flow back to Him through Christ.

Colossians 3, 17. And whatever you do, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him. So you see how providence brings Christ before us.

We can't deal with providence without thinking of Christ, if we're thinking properly, because we're thinking of Christ as the funnel. Pouring all that blessing upon us.

And Christ is the one through whom we now return thanks. So, as we're noting God's kind providences in our lives and thanking Him for them, this will endear Christ to us when we realize that His blood has purchased for us all these kind providences.

[16 : 17] By sin, I have forfeited every good thing. Every good thing. And I only have them back through the merits of Christ. That makes Christ precious to me as I think on these providences.

That Christ would be damned that I might enjoy His blessings. Cursed that I might be blessed. He became poor to make me rich. And so, these daily mercies, these daily providences are dipped in the blood of Jesus.

So don't think of those blessings apart from Christ. Now, you say, don't those outside of Christ enjoy many of the same physical blessings?

And Flavel answers this. They do enjoy many good gifts from God, but not like us, His children. For though these are given, these blessings are given to them, they do them no spiritual good apart from Christ.

They simply take the blessings and ignore the giver. And they even turn to worshiping the gift, the created thing, rather than the giver who is forever blessed, Romans chapter 1.

[17 : 34] And so, they make idols out of the gifts that God gives. And all these blessings that God gives only work to their greater guilt and condemnation.

Oh, but in Christ, all that He gives us is sanctified to us so that these gifts actually do us good and not harm. And the continuation of all His merciful providences is the fruit of His intercession in heaven for you.

All that you have, your justification down to your daily bread, comes to you because Jesus ever lives to make intercession for you. And so, He is able to turn every good gift into a true blessing to our spirits, to our hearts.

All the answers to our prayers, all the cries for help that have come to us through Jesus Christ, the answers have come through Him. Had God not respect to Him, we never would have been heard nor answered.

And so, we pray in the name of Christ. It's through Christ we make our appeal. Look on Him and pardon me. Look on Him and answer this request for Jesus' sake.

[18 : 53] So, Christ becomes dear to us as we meditate upon providence and see them as funneled to us through the Savior.

A sixth advantage of meditation on providence is that it will thaw our hearts, thaw our hearts, and meld it into sweet submission to God. I don't know a Christian who doesn't struggle with heart disease, cooling heart.

We find that we must cry with the songwriter, this icy coldness end. That our hearts tend toward coldness rather than warmth.

It's only grace that warms our hearts and grace that ends that icy coldness. Well, one of the means to end that icy coldness is to think upon the providence of God.

It's one thing just to pray, God, warm my heart. God, end this icy coldness. It's another thing for us to take up the very instruments that God has designed to end that cold heart.

[20 : 04] And one of them is to think upon his many kind providences to you. So think of the earliest providences, Christian. Your Christian upbringing, if you had that.

Think of how kind God was to catch you in those formative years and to bring his gospel with power to you and to save you from all kinds of sins that have ruined the lives of others.

And thinking of these things will melt the heart before God into sweet submission. He says, consider God's distinguishing mercies to you that others have not had.

Compare God's dealings in providence to you. Perhaps your own brothers and sisters have not had such kind providences and God's kindness in their hearts and lives.

Friends that you grew up with, people in the same class, maybe people on the same ball team, whatever. Flavel says, I knew a Christian who after many years separation was visited by his own brother, the very sight of whom wrought upon him so much as the sight of Benjamin did upon Joseph so that he could not refrain to fall upon his neck and weep for joy.

[21 : 23] You remember when Joseph in Egypt met his brother Benjamin. And that's what happened when these two brothers first saw each other after being so long apart.

But he says, after a few hours spent together, finding the spirit of his brother, not only estranged from all that is spiritual and serious, but also very vain and profane, he hastened to his chamber,

shut the door, threw himself down at the feet of God, and with flowing eyes and a melting heart, admired the distinguishing grace of God, saying, was not Esau Jacob's brother?

Oh, grace, grace, astonishing grace. He was struck that just as Esau was Jacob's brother and grace made a difference between Jacob and Esau, so in getting to see his brother and seeing he had no heart for God, he saw how much grace God had given and it melted his heart.

That's what this advantage is. Thinking on God's kindnesses to us that are distinguishing mercies, thaw the heart, melt the heart into sweet submission to God.

Compare the treatment of God's providence not only towards you against others, but towards you with your own treatment of God. Compare how God has treated you in providence and how you have treated God in sin.

[22 : 52] That's a good one. Is it not enough to melt the heart to find so many mercies received where so much sin has been committed? What relationship do we have that we've not abused by sin?

And yet, nevertheless, God's providence has maintained that relationship for our blessing. Maybe it's your wife, your husband, father, son, daughter.

We've abused these relationships and yet God maintains them. That's how he responds to our abuse, by maintaining them for our blessing. How many privileges that we have have been squandered and opportunities unimproved, but nevertheless, God's providence has continued them for our comfort.

And so, Flavel says, how many neverthelesses are there in your life that even though you have sinned, nevertheless, God's providence is the way that grace responds to us.

That should melt our hearts to consider. Compare your dangers to the deliverances that the Lord has provided, the doors of escape that he's opened to you in temptation and trial.

[24 : 07] As the psalmist says, this poor man called and the Lord heard him. He saved him out of all of his troubles. All my troubles, the Lord delivered me.

And so, Flavel says, oh, is your life such a continued throng, such a mad hurry, that there's no time to sit alone and think on these things and press the marvelous manifestations of God and his providences upon your own heart?

Surely, if these things did but lie upon our hearts, talk with our thoughts by day and lodge with us at night, they would even force their message down to our very reins, right down to our wills and how we live.

We would find sweet submission to God's will. Well, that was the 17th century that he was writing about. I wonder what he would say about our century.

Is your life such a continued throng, such a mad hurry that there's no time to sit alone and think, boy, think how much more we're a mad race today than what they must have been in the 17th century as they headed out with their ox to plow another two acres for the day or whatever.

[25 : 27] We're now in this rat race. Is there not time to carve out, to think during the day, to let these thoughts lodge with us at night that God's providence is to us?

It would give us this sweet advantage of melting our hearts toward our God. And then the last one for this morning. Another advantage, it guards our inward tranquility in the midst of the storms and turmoil of life.

Thinking upon providence will guard our inward peace. Psalm 4 and verse 8 is his text. I will lie down and sleep in peace for you alone, O Lord, make me dwell in safety.

I will, he says. I will lie down and sleep in peace. This is a man who's just falling into bed and he's doing so with a resolution.

He might have a lot on his mind and on his plate, but he resolves as he goes to bed, I will lie down and sleep in peace. He resolves that the sinful fear of events will not rob him of his inward quiet or of one night's sleep.

[26 : 39] And the reason he cites for such peace is found in God's providential protection. For you alone, O Lord, make me to dwell in safety. You are my refuge.

You are my fortress. I'm going to bed in you tonight. And so I will lie down and sleep in peace. So what is it that destroys inward peace and tranquility?

What is it that keeps you awake at night? Is it not fearing some future loss, some disappointment? David resolves that the evils of tomorrow will not ruin the sleep of tonight.

And he'll do so by knowing whose hand he is in. The Lord controls all that concerns me.

That's a pillow that we can sleep in. I will lie down and sleep in peace because you alone, O Lord, make me dwell in safety. And I want nothing more than what you want.

[27:42] I want nothing more than you will. And as I lie in your hand, I can rest. Resign to his will. And Flavel would remind us who it is that stands guard over us as we pillow our heads at night.

His sovereignty. Think of the one who keeps you. He reigns over everything, all my tomorrows and everything in them. Nothing can enter my life, nothing can get through him except what can be used in some way to do me good.

If it doesn't serve that purpose, he won't let it through. Indeed, everything must fit his purpose for my salvation. Are we any better off the next day minus a day, a night's rest because we worried all night?

As Jesus says, who by worrying can add a single cubit to his life? Did it help you? No, we say, no, it didn't help me. It took from me.

Well, here's the rich benefit then. To keep us from sleepless nights, those things that worry us, that would deny our sleep. Meditate on the providence of God.

[28:51] So, Flavel has taken us through some of the blessings of this work of meditation. Any other testimonies, questions, comments then before we close this morning?

Well, we know he was because of verses one and two.

Because there he's talking about pardon for sin, peace that endureth, thine own dear presence. He's enjoyed all these things so he's able to come to that.

Let's sing that third verse. Is it pardon for sin? That's how it begins. Let's sing it together. Father, we who once were your enemies have now been by grace through faith and through Christ made your own children and made to taste that amazing grace and that unfailing love that is better than life. Would you help us then to see your hand in our lives? Would you help us in our difficult trials to think upon what you have been for us?

[30:14] How in the past you have met all of our needs and brought us out of every danger and brought us through every trial and kept us from falling and restored us when we did fall?

How kind and how faithful you've been. And please work it upon our hearts that we might enter into each new day with a sense of your goodness reigning over us.

Do us good then in our time of fellowship and our time of worship today that it might heighten our love for the Savior and our love and appreciation for your kind providence in our lives.

We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.