

Practical Problems of Providence

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[0:00] Well, we're moving on then from our study of the mystery of providence. And though we're moving on from the study of providence, we know that we are not somehow leaving God's providence behind, are we?

We live and move and have our being in God's providence. So his providence will indeed follow us all the days of our life. I trust that Flavel's aim has been accomplished in our hearts.

His aim was that we would develop an eye for his providence in our lives. And we would be able to see that God indeed is active in the world today, in our lives, and acknowledge him to his praise.

So we come then at the end of the book to some practical problems in connection with providence. And he mentions three or four, and I need to be very selective here.

Where he has an opening treatment of the problem of what role does providence play in our discovering the will of God?

[1:04] Can we tell by looking at what God is doing in our circumstances, what the will of God is? What is the path that I should walk through life?

What should I do? Should I do this? Should I do that? Can I find any clues from God's providence? I trust that we don't need to spend much time here.

I think there's some sound wisdom in what Flavel says. Perhaps a summary is that providences in themselves are no staple rule of duty nor sufficient discovery of the will of God.

By themselves, observing the providence of God in circumstances does not tell us this is the way to go. No, we have something else for that.

What is it? It's the word of God. God has spoken to us. This defines our duty, what to believe and what to do. And it is a sufficient guide.

[2:10] Now, in addition to this, God is working in providence and he may give supporting encouragements in providence to you to observe what God is doing.

Is he opening a door here? Is he closing one here? But we need to be very careful about reading and interpreting providence, don't we? That's what our brother Roger reminded us last week as we concluded.

We don't read God's providence 2020. We can't always figure out what God is doing. And what does this mean in my life? Here's an open door. Does that mean God wants me to go through it? Flavel says not necessarily. He may just be testing you. To see whether you're really sold out to his will or not. Here's an opportunity. Don't conclude that just because opportunity comes knocking, it's the right thing.

Opportunity came for Eve, didn't it? And she went and took it. But it was not the will of God. She had a word from God that was sufficient to guide her.

[3:18] So be careful with providence. But there are those supports to the will of God in providence. When the circumstances open up and God seems to be smiling upon a track that we're taking, and it's already within the realm of what God's word teaches is right and is wise and the principles of scriptures, we may go forward in courage that we have a God who opens a door that no man can shut.

Well, the second practical problem is one that I want to spend more time on. And it's how do we deal with the delays of providence? The delays of providence.

How may a Christian be supported in waiting upon God while providence delays the performance of the mercies to him, which he's long prayed and waited for?

Flavel says there's two seasons for providence to perform the answer to our prayers and desires. Two different seasons for God's providence to act. There's God's time and there's our time.

And when God is not working according to our timetable, we can get frustrated and disappointed even to the point of losing heart and giving up. You remember that minister, Philip Brooks, who was nervously pacing his study floor, a man who was usually composed with the peace of God, ruling in his heart, and the friend came in and said, what's wrong, pastor?

[4:51] He says, I'm in a hurry and God isn't. And that can be frustrating, can't it? And that's the practical problem that Flabel's wanting to address.

Is there anything to help us? And when providence is delaying the performance of some answer to our prayer, some promise of God's word, well, he would start by bolstering our faith that there is nothing more sure than this.

that the precise time that God has established to perform his promise will most assuredly come no matter how many the obstacles and how long the wait.

When the time comes, it will be accomplished. God had a set time for the deliverance of Israel out of bondage in Egypt. In Exodus 12, verses 40 and 41, we read, Now the length of time the Israelite people lived in Egypt was 430 years.

At the end of the 430 years, to the very day, all the Lord's divisions left Egypt. Can you imagine how long 430 years is?

[6:13] To be down in Egypt that long? That's your history. That's more than the U.S. history. Nearly double our history. And all that time, we're slaves in Egypt.

We're in a country not our own. Oh, what a wait. But to know that on the timetable of God, there's a date circled to the very day.

And on that day, all of his troops came out of Egypt. That should support us while we're waiting to know that when God's time comes, it will happen.

Acts 7, 17, referring to this, says, As the time drew near for God to fulfill his promise to Abraham. You see, there was such a time on God's calendar.

God had promised his child, Abraham, that I'm going to bring them out. And nothing could stop it. Not even Pharaoh and his elite chariots.

[7:12] The whole world operates on God's timetable. Not man's. And then God had a set time for the incarnation of his son, the greatest redemption this world has ever seen.

Not only a time to redeem Israel out of Egypt, but he had a time to send his redeemer in Galatians 4, 4. But when the time had fully come, in the fullness of time, when the time was fully ripe, God sent his son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under law.

And God had a set time for the death of his son, didn't he? And it would not happen a day before or a day after that set time.

Do you remember as you read through the Gospels, I think it's especially John's Gospel, there are times when men were seeking to kill Jesus. And maybe they would chase him up to the brow of a hill to push him off.

And then he would just disappear into their midst, strangely. You wonder, what did that look like? How did he escape that one? And all we're given to satisfy our curiosity is that his time had not yet come.

[8:25] His time had not yet come, repeatedly. They took up stones to stone him, and you think, this is it. But no, his time had not yet come.

John 7, 30. John 8, 20. But then at last it did come, didn't it? John 13, 1. It was just before the Passover feast.

Jesus knew that the time had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father, even though it was not the time chosen by his enemies who gathered together and were seeking to come up with some sly way to kill him.

But, they said, not during the feast, not during Passover, or there may be a riot among the people. Well, as you know, that was God's time during Passover.

And so, Jesus, our Passover lamb, was slain. And then there was a time set for the preaching of the gospel of Christ to the Gentiles by the Apostle Paul.

[9:35] Titus 1, 2 and 3. It speaks of the hope of eternal life, which God, who does not lie, promised before the beginning of time and at his appointed season, he brought his word to light through the preaching entrusted to me by the command of God our Savior.

A time for the gospel to run out to the ends of the earth. And it happened. At the appointed time, God saves a preacher, Saul of Tarsus, the most unlikely preacher of the gospel.

And he thrusts him out into the world because it's time. It's my time. So, Flavel says, promises are like pregnant women. They must wait their appointed time.

And when it comes, providence is the midwife that brings the promise into the world. And none of his promises miscarry. Now, that should help us as we're being made to wait.

God has also appointed a time for the second coming of Christ, hasn't he? A time that no man knows, not even the Son of Man, but the Father only. And in 2 Peter 3.9, speaking of the second coming of Christ, Peter says, the Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness.

[10:57] No, he's patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. So, there's another appointed time, the day Jesus is to come back to this world.

What a day that will be. But it won't happen a day before or a day after God's appointed time. And as we wait and wait, and people start saying, where is this coming he promised?

Everything goes on as it has from the beginning of the world. And we're tempted to lose heart.

Remember that God is not slow in keeping his promise.

As soon as his appointed time comes, it will happen quickly. It will speedily come. No, his waiting, his slowness as we understand it, his delays of providence are really his patience.

He's being patient with sinners. How many of you would have been saved if he had come 10 years ago? 30, 40, 50 years ago?

[12:01] Oh, we appreciate the patience of God behind his timing. And when it is time, his son will come. You remember Israel was down in Babylon for a long time.

How long was she to be there in discipline for her sin? 70 years. God even told his prophet that. And he told him that he would have compassion on his afflicted ones.

He would bring them out again. But the promised mercy was so long in coming that they began to lose heart. 70 years is no small time when you think of a lifetime.

That could eat up the better part of your life. A life spent waiting in captivity. And so, what happened to the people of Israel? Years passed.

Decades passed. And still no deliverance. And so, Isaiah 49, 14. Zion says, The Lord has forsaken me. The Lord has forgotten me.

[13:06] He doesn't care. He doesn't regard me. That's the temptation when providence delays.

To somehow think, God doesn't care. David was promised the throne, wasn't he?

He was even anointed with the holy anointing oil of Samuel. You're going to be the next king. And that was followed by some 10 to 12 years of running for his life from King Saul.

Where's this promise of kingship? And during those 10 years, there were narrow escapes. There were times when it was just that that meant the difference between a spear going through him and a spear going into the wall.

behind him. There were times when he was that close to death and it all became wearying. Think of 10 to 12 years.

What have you been doing the last 10 years, 12 years of your life? What if you were just constantly running from an enemy? There was no normalcy to your life. This was David.

[14:11] And it got to him. And he came to the point in 1 Samuel 27, 1 where David thought to himself, one of these days, I will be destroyed by the hand of Saul.

How can he say that? He's got the holy anointing oil upon him. He's got the promise of God. Well, the delay of providence to fulfill the promise is so long that it can make the promise seem like it's impotent.

It won't happen. But this frustration arises from God working in his providence according to his time and not ours.

Now, that's to say nothing of Abraham's 25-year wait for a promised son and his even longer wait for a promised land. But we see this theme in the scriptures that when we're made to wait, it's a real trial of faith.

Now, a flavor opens up. What are some of the causes of our hearts sinking as we wait for providence to act? As we wait for God to fulfill his promise, to answer our prayers?

[15:23] What are some of the causes of our hearts growing weary and thinking God has forsaken and forgotten us? The first thing he says is unbelief. Not depending upon the word that deserves our full confidence.

It's the word of the God who cannot lie and he has committed himself to us. He's put it down in writing. He says, you can hold me to it.

My promises will all be fulfilled. And so, joy and peace comes from believing it. Frustration, disappointment, discouragement, losing heart results from unbelief.

And that was Israel. They did not believe in God or trust in his deliverance as they came to the promised land and turned away.

And even as God had revealed his faithfulness to them, they did not believe. And a later generation that finally settled in the promised land, Psalm 78, 57, says, like their fathers, they were disloyal and faithless.

[16 : 34] Unbelief is at the bottom of losing heart as we wait on providence. Faith must cling to the promise and to the promiser if we're not to lose heart.

And that's ultimately, Paul says, why Abraham did not grow weary. Why Abraham, who against hope, believed in hope.

You see, didn't cave in to unbelief. He believed in hope even though outwardly there was no reason to hope. He had a promise. And so, against hope, he believed in hope.

He did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised.

So, waiting is the hard business of faith. Watch for unbelief, brothers and sisters, in those areas where we're being made to wait. The Apostle Paul says, I would have lost heart had it not been for faith.

[17 : 44] Outwardly, he was wasting away. Yet the reason, he says, we do not lose heart is because inwardly we are being renewed day by day for our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.

So, we fix our eyes, the eyes of faith, not on what is seen but on what is unseen because what is seen is temporary but what is unseen is eternal. I would have lost heart if all I did was fix my eyes on what I see, my body persecuted, beaten, battered, wasting away.

but I fix my eyes on what can't be seen, the God who lives in heaven, the God who's promised me certain things, even eternal life and so he kept from losing heart.

So, that's the first cause of losing heart as we wait for providence, unbelief. The second, I think, is just the flip side and we've just seen it. It's evaluating things merely by our senses and we come into a situation and we're being made to wait and the longer we wait the more impossible the fulfillment of the promise seems and so we say, I can't see any way for God to save her.

It seems that all the ways and means have been tried and I can't see any way for this situation or that situation to change.

[19 : 13] I don't see any way deliverance could come. I don't see any way this could happen and Proverbs 3, 5 and 6 are admonishing us.

Don't trust in your own understanding. Don't lean on your own understanding, what you can see. Trust in the Lord, not in your own understanding. In all your ways, acknowledge him and he will direct your paths.

Judge not the Lord by feeble sight, Cowper says, by feeble sense, but trust him for his grace. Behind a frowning providence, he hides a smiling face.

And if you just judge the situation by what you see, all you'll see is the clouds and you'll fail to see the God of promise smiling upon you, waiting to burst upon you when the time comes for him to act. Remember Elisha's servant as Elisha and his servant were surrounded surrounded by the enemy armies. 2 Kings 6, and in the morning they go out and the servant sees the enemy army with their horses and chariots circling the city and he thinks we're toast.

[20 : 26] And he says to Elisha, or Elisha says to him, don't be afraid. Those who are with us are more than those who are with them. And Elisha's servant must have started counting.

There's you and me. And there's them. And Elisha says, Lord, open his eyes that he might see the way it really is.

And he looked and he saw chariots of fire, the angels of God surrounding the city, protecting his servant, Elisha.

If we just judge by what we see, we'll misjudge every time and we'll grow weary and we'll lose heart. Now, keep your eyes fixed on the power and faithfulness of the one who promised.

Don't judge the matter by what often happens or what you fear might happen. Factor God in. Who he is, what he said.

[21 : 32] And there's another cause for our growing weary in these long waits. And the label says, don't forget the devil's schemes against us in the waiting game.

He's there. He's there suggesting hard thoughts about God. He has forgotten you. He doesn't know. He doesn't care. Remember the disciples on the sea about to go under?

Lord, don't you care that we perish? Where'd that come from? The devil is always there to whisper into your ear in the time of waiting.

Flavel calls Satan the great mischief maker between God and the saints. And he exploits the difficulties and the fears in our way and he works to discourage our hearts in waiting upon God. He would paralyze and weaken our efforts for the kingdom of God. And his suggestions gain more traction with us because they seem to be confirmed by everything that we see around us and everything we feel within.

[22 : 38] So we must be watchful while providence is making us wait. They're dangerous times. Give care to maintaining your faith and your hope with the word of God, the God of the word, meditating upon his providence.

Flavel closes with some further helps when waiting for providence to act. Just practical wisdom of a mind that's steeped in the word of God.

Number one, are you waiting for something? Number one, don't get upset waiting for things God has not promised you as if he were being unfaithful.

Don't get upset waiting for things God has not promised you and being all upset as if he were being unfaithful to his promise.

I've been waiting for 20 years for my ship to come in and I'm getting tired of waiting. He hasn't promised you health and wealth and prosperity and creature comforts.

[23 : 50] Rather, he's told us we must expect troubles in this world through great many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God. He's promised you his presence and help in the troubles but he's not promised you that trouble-free life that your heart and my heart desires.

So don't start growing bitter against God for things he's not promised you. Look again at the things you're being made to wait for and ask is it something that God has promised or is it just my desire maybe a good desire but don't project it as a promise of God if it's not a promise of God.

That's especially important when you're reading the book of Proverbs they are a book of Proverbs not a book of promises. promises and I think many a parent has gone to the book of Proverbs looking for promises surefire promises from God that he'll save my child and I must just honestly tell you I don't find that in Proverbs I find Proverbs in Proverbs I find that God says you bring up a child in the way he should go and when he's old he will not depart from it that's the way it goes in this world watch see if that's not the case it's an observation on life it's a proverb on life birds of a feather flock together that's a proverb it's not a promise without any exceptions you sometimes find a cardinal standing side by side with a bluebird but generally speaking birds of a feather flock together and people find friends that are like them and so on they're Proverbs so be careful of growing bitter against God when you're thinking he's not fulfilling a promise when wait a minute has he really promised that thing that you're bitter against

God for not giving secondly God wants God wants your will resigned to his as you wait wonder how aware we are of that what's the agenda of God in making me wait so long well very high on his agendas he wants to see me resign my will to his and just say Lord what I want is what you want indeed if I had the foresight to see into heaven like you do I wouldn't want anything but what you want and so I gladly resign my will to you that's what he's looking for in our trials in our waits he's waiting he's looking to see us resign our will to his much of the difficulty in waiting is gone once we've resigned our will to God's and we say I only want what you want your will be done it's a big thing with God and it's often the very thing for which he's making us wait to learn to be content in whatever state we're in

Paul had to learn that I've learned I've learned and I think he would tell us I'm still learning hadn't perfected but I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances whether in plenty or in want to be content David said but I have stilled and quieted my soul like a weaned child with its mother like a weaned child is my soul within him baby that's not weaned try taking him away from his mother there's no peace in the house that's the way we are as long as God is saying wait and we have not submitted resigned our will to his it's not a pretty sight and David says I have come to still

my heart like a weaned child I'm now satisfied not to have mother's milk anymore and there's the child sitting in peace sitting in quietness and that's the Christian who has come to resign their will to God's they are now able to still their soul and quiet it like a weaned child so King

[28:33] David is being driven out of Jerusalem by his own son's rebellion Absalom he doesn't know how long he'll be on the run or if he'll ever return to Jerusalem and there's Zadok the priest and he's ready to come along with him and bring the Ark of the Covenant this is what David said then the king said to Zadok take the Ark of God back into the city if I find favor in the Lord's eyes he will bring me back and let me see it again and his dwelling place the temple but if he says I'm not pleased with you then I am ready let him do to me whatever seems good to him you see the resigned will of David to his father in heaven whatever seems good to him let him do it then he had the peace of a still of a weaned child so Abraham Joseph

Joseph waits 22 years for the fulfillment of that dream David Paul Jesus they all had to wait and to learn in their circumstances to be content with their wills resigned to God's and why should God exempt me from waiting no God means for the wait to do me good not only are the mercies meant to do me good that I'm waiting for but the wait is meant to do me good by teaching me submission resignation of will to the will of God oh that's the sweeter the higher blessing and sometimes it's the most valuable lesson in the whole waiting process and it could be that that's what God is waiting for in your situation waiting to see you resigned and then providence may very well act he's wanting to bring us to pray your kingdom come your will be done here on earth in my life as it is in heaven third help in waiting you must you will not lose anything by having to wait for God's mercies rather you gain a double advantage by waiting number one you gain the strengthening of your graces of faith and hope because we know that our suffering and the waiting produces perseverance and perseverance character character hope so we're gaining the strengthening of our graces and the virtues that are in

Christ that's no small blessing Flavel says it's more excellent to act grace than to enjoy comfort to be rich in things and poor in soul is a sad case indeed so that's one of the blessings of waiting we don't lose by waiting we gain the exercise of our graces and secondly whenever the desired mercy finally comes it will be so much the sweeter because you have prayed and waited long for it so do not faint are not the mercies you're waiting for worth waiting for and all God asks from you you don't have to pay for them you don't have to deserve them he just asks you to wait what a gracious father he does us good by the wait number four this impatience and weariness to waiting any longer is a great evil in itself because we're commanded to wait on the Lord Psalm 27 14 wait for the Lord be strong and take heart and wait for the

Lord when we're not waiting on the Lord there's much sin involved there's doubting of God's goodness doubting of his faithfulness and our fretful waiting and worrying could be that very impatient attitude is the thing holding up the desired mercy Flavel says you might have your mercy sooner if your spirits were quieter and more submissive to the Lord and his timing there's much pride he says in our fretful waiting it implies that we know better than God so consider the infinite wisdom of God and your own folly and ignorance consider he is all knowing consider his thoughts are very deep they're higher than our thoughts as heavens are above the earth his understanding no one can fathom he needs no counselor or advisors he sees the end from the beginning consider that about God's wisdom and then consider your own even the wisest of men how little do we know how often are we mistaken we thought this was the king and we've had to eat our words and we've had to backtrack

I thought that but now I see it's this and as we see God's wisdom and ours will be helped against this pride of lifting up our wisdom and judging God's wisdom by ours if I had God's power we would vainly say I would change this and I would change that but if I had God's wisdom I wouldn't change a thing the foolishness of man is wiser than man's wisdom 1st Corinthians 1 25 if you have little knowledge of computers when things go wrong what do you do you submit yourself to somebody who knows something about it don't you you own your ignorance in the subject and you put yourself under someone else you've got a medical problem and you don't know a thing about anatomy and you put yourself into the care of somebody who does and that's the Christian what do we know born yesterday here's the eternal God all wisdom will put yourself into the care of the all wise God rather than fighting against his timing number five how long has God waited for you to comply with his commandments to live up to your duties and promises how long did he have to wait until you repented until you believed in his son you see the force of

[34:43] Flavel's argument you mean you've kept God waiting you said not now to God not this not that it's you fought against him and and you've caused him to wait does that not make it easier if you have made God wait can you not wait now upon him number six consider how many promises are made in the word to waiting souls Isaiah 30 and verse 18 blessed are all who wait for him happy a happy condition indeed for all who wait for him Psalm 25 3 none who wait for you will ever be put to shame no one will ever say I was stupid for having waited on God wish I'd never done that no one none who wait on you will ever be put to shame you will always say oh what a fool I was to think that a day sooner a day later to ever question

God's timing in my life they that wait upon the Lord will renew their strength so let's not give up waiting with much and such promises to those who do wait so there's the last lesson what are you being made to keep embracing the goodness of God the faithfulness of God to his word the exact timing of providence working for you David said in Psalm 1830 as he looked back upon God's way in providence with him again he's looking back now he's got 20 20 vision he didn't always feel this way but now looking back this is what he says after God has rescued him from Saul and all of as for God his way is perfect it's perfect Jim Elliot writes in his diary on this verse I am particularly conscious of the

Christian's right to expect events to be exactly timed for good what right do you have Christian to expect the events of providence in your life to be exactly timed for good because as for God the God of providence his way is perfect let's pray oh lord it was our first stupid act to seek independence from you and to go our own way when you had spoken truth and light to us clear back in the garden we've repeated Eve's sin hundreds of times oh forgive us for our foolish pride rather teach us how blessed we are to be dependent upon such a faithful and loving father in heaven that our

God in heaven is not only loving but he is strong and he is the God of providence who orders all things for my good how blessed to know him how happy we are to be the Lord's people oh teach us then to honor you by waiting you know each heart here this morning you know what we're waiting for oh help us to wait with resigned will help us to reject every hard thought that's whispered in our ear about our God help us to justify you help us to condemn every wrong thought and oh so sweet in our heart with your promises that we would wait with patience and that when people see us waiting it would speak well of you our God we're not waiting for someone who's unfaithful we're not waiting for someone who's iffy we're waiting on a great and good

God of providence and so may we have opportunity to speak of the hope that we have within us strengthen your servants we ask strengthen our faith even may our worship today our fellowship today serve this end we ask in Jesus name amen