

Dispensations Of Providence

James 5:13-20

A football coach friend of mine, once said to me that he viewed God's role in our daily lives as being similar to that of his own. He gave his best efforts to prepare the young players for the game, but as they went out onto that playing field, they were pretty much on their own. There, they were expected to exercise their "free will" to follow the things they had been taught.

I confess that I was very uncomfortable with his philosophy. But as I have observed myself, and other Christian brethren living out our many varied lifestyles over these years since, it seems that there are a vast number of Christian men and women who live by a very similar philosophy.

In these closing verses of James chapter 5 that I hope to focus our attention on today, and perhaps for the next two or so weeks, we find that God is once again urging us to consider what His role actually is, and should be, as we go through all the many circumstances taking place on our own "playing field", that of daily life, whether our circumstances be mundane and ordinary, or they be dramatic and life changing.

May we begin by stating simply that there truly are profound mysteries within this relationship that we have with God. One of the most profound mysteries is that those of us who proclaim ourselves to be "born again" believers, though we be small and weak in our stature before God, are given a unique capacity to live each of these days of our lives as if God isn't the Almighty God that He truly is. And we are able to "limit" and "quench" much of the intimate involvement that He desires to have with us.

Consider what I'm saying, the very "Body of Christ" that was put into place to receive and to accept the magnificence of God's presence and provision, can, because of our willfully chosen belief systems, limit and "quench" the precious and loving hand of God. That is truly a mystery.

I invite us today to allow our hearts and minds to "go below the surface" of these words of Scripture and to hear the voice of God as He speaks to us. Listen! James 5, beginning in verse 13,

13 Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise. 14 Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. 15 And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. 16 Therefore,

confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working. 17 Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. 18 Then he prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit. 19 My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, 20 let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins. (James 5:13-20 (ESV))

I have entitled this series of messages, "Dispensations of Providence", because I do want us to "go below the surface" of the many ordinary occurrences of daily life. And I want us to pursue after God's revelation of Himself within them.

So then, in view of these words of our text, may I ask a simple question, what is your personal understanding, your personal belief about God and about His personal involvement in these and all the other many ordinary matters and events that take place on the "playing field" of your daily life?

Is God perhaps "passive", as my coach friend and so many others seem to believe Him to be, simply "allowing" events and struggles and sufferings to unfold, in a "random" manner, and only involving Himself if we call on Him. Or, secondly, is God "up close" and "personal" and more directly involved in every circumstance. Or, thirdly, is God actually involved long before any of our circumstances ever arise?

Let me read some of these words again to remind us of what I am asking. Verse 13, 13 Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise. 14 Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. 15 And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. (James 5:13-15 (ESV))

In these words, God has presented us with a few of the ordinary circumstances that you and I might experience today. And again, the question that I want us to ask ourselves is "just how personally "involved" is God in these matters? Firstly, are these occurrences, the sickness, the suffering, the cheerfulness and happiness, in fact, just random events that just "happen" to people as they live out their daily lives, having not necessarily been caused by anyone, just things that "happen". Or perhaps, are they the result of your, or my, or someone else's random "free will" behavior that we just so happened to stumble into?

We sit at a traffic light and observe people driving through, so many of them talking on their cell phones or texting. Sometimes, one more thing takes place and we see a terrible accident unfold, people getting hurt or killed. What about those things we call accidents? Are they really accidents? Yes, they may perhaps be unintended, but are they all accidents?

As a teenager, I enjoyed going to the “Fun Fair” entertainment park and riding in the “bumper cars” and playing on the “pinball machines”. It seems so “random”, the way our bumper cars would bounce from one collision to another, or the pinball would bounce from one bumper to another. But do random occurrences really take place?

One of my favorite bible scholars, R. C. Sproul, asks, “is there such a thing as random, “maverick molecules” floating around in our world, “molecules” that are completely independent from the control or influence of anyone or anything outside of themselves?”

Or perhaps more on our human level, are there in existence in this world, people or other things, or conditions of life that are able to be completely independent of any other authority and power, and are they able to do exactly as they please, without any involvement or control or influence from any other person, being or authority whatsoever, even God?

Picture those thoughts for a moment, as it relates to this scripture text. Verse 13,
13 Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise. 14 Is anyone among you sick? (James 5:13-14)

Considering these words, are these conditions of sickness and suffering “uncontrolled random occurrences”, and do they, on their own, randomly descend upon us. And what about cheerfulness? Is cheerfulness able to suddenly and randomly descend upon us, prompting us to want to sing praises. And what about all of the many, many other occurrences that take place within our life each day. Are they all “random” and independent of outside control. Do they just happen? Or perhaps, is there something else taking place within all those many incidents?

Some, perhaps many, including myself, would strongly suggest that yes, the devil and his demons are always involved in some corrupt manner or another, especially to bring us those things of misery. And scripture bears that out.

But what about God? What is His involvement? Many people seem reluctant to ask that question, especially as their sickness and suffering comes upon them? Is God

“passively” observing from out there somewhere in the heavens, simply watching all the seemingly random occurrences taking place on the earth. Or is He intimately engaged within those happenings.

May I say to us that most people, even you and I, often live as if we believe that all we see taking place in front of us truly is random, much like those bumper cars bouncing randomly towards other bumper cars or those pinballs bouncing randomly wherever they may. And no, as Christians we don't want to think that way, but unfortunately, our responses reveal that we do!

The question again, is life just a collection of random events, or, is God much more involved, “up close” and interacting within those events, even involved long before any of those events and circumstances ever begin to take place, even inserting His hand and initiating many of those events and circumstances?

As I've mentioned on other occasions, I regularly attend some small-group bible studies. And for the most part, those groups are made up of devout believers, coming from a wide mixture of doctrinal persuasions, mostly Baptists, but with some Methodists and Presbyterians, and a few Charismatics sprinkled in. And each of those bible studies has a free flow of open discussion within them.

As we engage with each other about a scripture text, I find a very familiar theme being voiced among these brethren, one that expresses the thought that God “allows” most all of the events that take place on the earth, their words implying that God's hand is “secondary” within all those circumstances, and especially almost never initiating or causing events to take place, especially sickness and suffering, but only taking part in those matters after they have fully developed.

And also, along with those thoughts, the well-used verse of Romans 8:28 is often quoted, implying that, after we have tried and then made a mess of a matter, and only if we ask, God, our “coach”, calls a “time out” and comes to our aid to help clean up our mess, as He works all things together for our good.

And most all those things are true and biblically based. God does “allow” us to have “free will”. And He “allows” our “free will” to interact with the “free will” of other people, sometimes colliding with them, causing suffering and misery for each other.

But as I hear those familiar themes being spoken, my own heart cries out within me that their answers are missing out on some of the other profound mysteries of God, that the problems and the suffering they are talking about just may not have been as a result of

some random “free will” acts and behaviors, but may be coming directly from the “hand of God”.

And I do often interject those thoughts into the conversation. But unfortunately, I find that so many of these dear fellow believers, though seasoned in their faith, resist and can only accept their “always free-will” beliefs. And they have closed their minds to the possibilities that God might really be “sovereign”, and at the forefront of those sufferings, that He may be purposefully bringing suffering to them in order to bring them into a deeper relationship with Him.

May I say to us that I am fully convinced, from these scriptures, that such is often, if not most always the case, that God is not just sitting out there on His throne in the heavens, waiting for us to call on Him, “available if we need Him”. But rather, that His hand was and is involved in our circumstances long before the trouble, difficulty and suffering ever arises.

But again, this is so hard for many, otherwise solid believers to accept, that God may want, and may actually bring sickness and suffering to His beloved children. It just doesn’t seem to be “loving”, and we always want God to show love in the ways that we perceive love ought to be shown!

But think for a moment! We well know that just because we have received Christ as our Savior, our salvation does not shield us from all the troubles of this world. And must we always attribute our suffering as coming from the devil, or from our neighbor, or even worse, from some “random molecule” that just so happened to have bumped into us.

Recall from the words of Ecclesiastes 3 that God tells us that there is a time and season for everything under the sun, and that includes suffering as well as peaceful, happy days. He has ordained that all those things will take place.

And in Psalm 34, He reminds us that “many are the afflictions of the righteous”. And though as we turn to Him, the Lord will often deliver us out of those afflictions, we still do suffer.

But again, in my listening to my brethren in those bible studies, I detect a need within their belief system to always protect the reputation of God from any thought that He might actually initiate some of our suffering, sickness, afflictions and difficulties, perhaps believing that if they allow themselves to think that God initiates suffering, then that would make God evil.

But such just simply is not at all true, and neither is such thinking biblical. We have only to read the Book of Job to see clearly that God Himself initiated all of Job's suffering, as well as bringing Job His relief.

And we have only to read the simple words in Acts 9, to see that Paul's "free will" was not very involved in the future pathway that God had chosen for him, saying of Paul, "I will show him how much he must suffer for my name's sake".

Folks, simply put, yes, man's "free will" is ever and always at work. And the devil is always doing his evil part. But yes also, God does insert His hand into the many matter of our daily lives, and He can use any instrument available to initiate any circumstance, whether it be sufferings and difficulties or it be pleasantries and cheerfulness.

And we must clearly understand that just because God initiates some of our suffering, that does not make Him evil or wrong. God is ever and always good. And you and I must never "judge" God for His plans and His behaviors, even especially when He does things that don't exactly fit our idea of who He ought to be.

So then, with these thoughts as our foundation, next week, the Lord willing, we will continue to examine this consideration that is implied within the title of this message, God's "dispensation of providences".

Let's pray!