

# Dispensations Of Providence

## Part 2

James 5:13-20

God's words are truly so very "rich" and filled with so much more meaning than our simple reading of them can reveal. So today, as we again study these words from James 5, may we allow our hearts and minds to "go below the surface" of the words and to hear the voice of the Holy Spirit 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.

(James 5:13-15 (ESV))

As we mentioned in the message last week, I have given this series of messages the title, "Dispensations of Providence". And last week, we began by asking, some simple questions about our personal understanding about God and about His personal involvement in these and all the other many ordinary matters and events that take place in our daily life?

We asked, is God "passive" in His involvement with us, as so many people seem to believe Him to be, always observing, yes, but then "allowing" events and struggles and sufferings to arise and to take place, and only involving Himself if we call on Him in prayer. Or, secondly, is God much more "up close" and "personal" and more directly involved in each circumstance. Or, thirdly, is God actually involved long before any of our circumstances ever arise?

The involvement that we are speaking about is most often expressed using two words, "Sovereignty" and "Providence". But what do those words mean?

As I've studied through bible commentaries and have read the explanations of bible teachers, it seems that most all of those writers obviously desire to know these truths about God, and also to convey these truths to others, with accuracy. But as they attempt their explanations, it seems that their rationalizations and meanings quickly diverge and divide into widely differing doctrinal stands.

And why does that take place? I can't know for sure, but it seems that each of them is much like you and me. We seem to explain God as being the kind of God we most "want" and "desire" Him to be. And so then, each word of explanation follows along those lines.

I do earnestly pray that I will not do that as I bring you these messages each week. I truly do want God to remain exactly who He is, and not just become some "made-up" version my mind would like Him to be.

So then, what has been the result of all the many efforts of all the many earnest and devout bible scholars. It has been to create several diverse doctrinal stands, the two most common of which are, "Reformed" doctrine and "Arminian" doctrine, which then have come to form the basis of most all of our mainline churches, Presbyterian, Baptist, Methodist and on and on.

The "Reformed" doctrine which our church holds too, believes that the concept of "sovereignty" means that God really is completely and absolutely in control over everything that takes place on the earth, and that "providence" is the manner in which He carries out His divine will. Expressed in the Westminster Confession of Faith with the words,

I. God, the great Creator of all things, doth uphold, direct dispose, and govern all creatures, actions, and things, from the greatest even to the least, by his most wise and holy providence, according to his infallible foreknowledge, and the free and immutable counsel of his own will, to the praise of the glory of his wisdom, power, justice, goodness, and mercy.

II. Although in relation to the foreknowledge and decree of God, the first cause, all things come to pass immutably and infallibly, yet, by the same providence, he ordereth them to fall out according to the nature of second causes, either necessarily, freely, or contingently.

III. God, in his ordinary providence, maketh use of means, yet is free to work without, above, and against them, at his pleasure.

Our Arminian brethren express a very similar belief in the "sovereignty" of God, but choose to accept that God's sovereignty is somewhat less controlling, more lenient, "allowing" men and women to freely follow the dictates of their "free will".

And also, in the matters of what the world calls, “nature”, “allowing” those “forces of nature”, climate, and weather events, and so on, to follow a course and pattern that was set into motion during creation.

May I read an example of what our Arminian brethren express as their beliefs about the Sovereign “Providence” of God. These words from “Got Questions.org”. Listen!

Divine providence is the governance of God by which He, with wisdom and love, cares for and directs all things in the universe. The doctrine of divine providence asserts that God is in complete control of all things. He is sovereign over the universe as a whole (Psalm 103:19), the physical world (Matthew 5:45), the affairs of nations (Psalm 66:7), human destiny (Galatians 1:15), human successes and failures (Luke 1:52), and the protection of His people (Psalm 4:8). This doctrine stands in direct opposition to the idea that the universe is governed by chance or fate.

May I pause here and say that, with this explanation thus far, this definition of the Sovereignty and Providence of God is almost identical to that of our “Reformed” doctrine. But then note in these next words how the meanings begin to diverge. This writer goes on to say,

To ensure that His purposes are fulfilled, God governs the affairs of men and works through the natural order of things. (Note those words “natural order”) The laws of nature are nothing more than God’s work in the universe. The laws of nature have no inherent power; rather, they are the principles that God set in place to govern how things normally work. They are only “laws” because God decreed them.

Note within those words, the implication that, during creation, God formed systems and processes that He now allows to govern most of the occurrences that take place each day. Some of those systems, men now call “nature”. And the implication is that once God designed those world systems, climate, weather events, etc. He stepped back to let those things take the course He has put into place, and He does not exercise immediate control over them minute by minute.

That kind of belief allows for the possibility that God does not directly “cause” bad things to happen with us, such as, diseases, abuse, mistreatment, even hurricanes, tornadoes, and such. He has simply put the world into motion, and allows it to run. And He does not closely control and direct all the many daily occurrences.

The writer goes on to ask,

How does divine providence relate to human volition, “free will”? We know that humans have a free will, but we also know that God is sovereign. How those two truths relate to each other is hard for us to understand, but we see examples of both truths in Scripture.

God hates sin and will judge sinners. God is not the author of sin, He does not tempt anyone to sin (James 1:13), and He does not condone sin. At the same time, God obviously allows a certain measure of sin. He must have a reason for allowing it, temporarily, even though He hates it.

The writer goes on to say,

An example of divine providence in Scripture is found in the story of Joseph. God allowed Joseph’s brothers to kidnap Joseph, sell him as a slave, and then lie to their father for years about his fate. This was wicked, and God was displeased. Yet, at the same time, all of their sin worked toward a greater good: Joseph ended up in Egypt, where he was made the prime minister.

Take careful note in those words that God does not seem to plan or cause any of these things to take place, but simply “allows” people to do the things their “free will” dictates.

I question such thinking, because all through these scriptures we see clearly that God does not put Himself in the position of being dependent upon the “free will” actions and behaviors of men to carry out His plans. But He instead makes plans and then directs men’s behavior in order to carry out those plans through to completion. How God is able to do that without becoming the “author of sin”, is a great mystery. But He does!

His providence is especially exemplified in the actions and behaviors of Judas in his betrayal of Jesus. But listen to how this writer describes it! The writer says,

Another clear case of divine providence overriding sin is the story of Judas Iscariot. God allowed Judas to lie, deceive, cheat, steal, and finally betray the Lord Jesus into the hands of His enemies. All of this was a great wickedness, and God was displeased. Yet, at the same time, all of Judas’s plotting and scheming led to a greater good: the salvation of mankind. Jesus had to die at the hands of the Romans in order to become the sacrifice for sin. If Jesus had not been crucified, we would still be in our sins. How did God get Christ to the cross? God providentially allowed Judas the freedom to perform a series of wicked acts.

Here again, this more lenient approach to the understanding of God’s sovereignty prevails, requiring that the greatest single event that would ever take place in the history of mankind, Jesus’ death on the cross to provide salvation for our souls, to become

dependent upon the random free will actions and behaviors of Judas. And folks, that just does not seem at all to be the way God governs the world. Man's unguided random "free will" could have taken everything in a whole different direction.

In Luke 22:22, Jesus said, "The Son of Man (Jesus) will go as it has been decreed!"

Here, we are told that God "decreed" all that was to take place in the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus. A decree by a King is always absolute and does not allow for the subservient ones to have options of "free will" behavior. Simply put, there could not have been much "free will" taking place in the actions and behaviors of men in the "Gospel Story", the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus. For all those things to have turned out as perfectly as they had been prophesied hundreds of years earlier, the day of Jesus' crucifixion, the manner of His beating, His death, and on and on, God had to have planned it all, step by step, and then kept His hand in it, carrying forward every step through to its completion. And Praise be to God, He did!

So then, as we read the words of our scripture text here in James 5, what are we to believe is taking place with us? Are these simply the free will behaviors of men and women like you and me. Or, does God also have His hand intimately integrated into each occurrence that takes place in our daily lives. Listen! 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)

What is God's role in all the things that take place with us each day? May I give us a passage from the Book of Isaiah to consider. In Isaiah 45, verse 5, God says to us,

5 I am the LORD, and there is no other, besides me there is no God; I equip you, though you do not know me, 6 that people may know, from the rising of the sun and from the west, that there is none besides me; I am the LORD, and there is no other. 7 I form light and create darkness, I make well-being and create calamity, I am the LORD, who does all these things. (Isaiah 45:5-7 (ESV))

This folks is total and complete "sovereignty". And it is all the many verses like this one that assures us that God is intimately involved in every detail of life, of every activity, event and behavior that takes place. Yes, we have "free will", and mine gets me into all sorts of difficulties every day. But thanks be to God, His Holy Spirit is always intimately intertwined within my spirit, doing as Philipians 2 reveals. Listen!

12 . . . work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, 13 for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.  
(Philippians 2:12-13 (ESV))

No, we are not robotic automatons, simply walking around each day doing exactly as God directs and controls. If that were so, we would never sin. But neither are we “autonomous”, completely free to do as our “free will” dictates, whether that be good or evil.

God’s good and perfect will seems to fall within the center of these two diverse doctrines. Yes, as Philippians 2 tells us, we are to “work out”, with our free will, all the many practical involvements of the daily life of salvation, but it is also and absolutely with God working within us, within our free will, to bring about His perfect will. It is as simple as this verse demands. We are to work out all the matters of our day, guided and directed by God’s Spirit within us. So then, verse 13,

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A closing question, one that I asked earlier, “how do we get to these conditions of suffering and sickness and cheerfulness in our lives?” Are they random occurrences that just “happen” to us? If we believe that our God really is “sovereign”, then we must accept that events, such as these, are never random, but are being guided by God’s omniscient and omnipotent hand. And yes, our free will behavior is most always also involved, especially in bringing about some of our own suffering.

But above all else, it is the mystery that we might never fully understand that is most at work, and that is, the interaction between both of these forces, God’s sovereignty and our free will.

I’ll close with these two sets of verses that I gave to us a moment ago. Philippians 2,  
12 . . . work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, 13 for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.  
(Philippians 2:12-13 (ESV))

And Isaiah 45, verse 5, where God says to us,  
5 I am the LORD, and there is no other, besides me there is no God; I equip you, though you do not know me, 6 that people may know, from the rising of the sun

and from the west, that there is none besides me; I am the LORD, and there is no other. 7 I form light and create darkness, I make well-being and create calamity, I am the LORD, who does all these things. (Isaiah 45:5-7 (ESV))