

Dispensations Of Providence

Part 4

James 5:13-20

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.
(James 5:13-16 (ESV))

As we've continued our study through these words in James 5, we've mentioned that the title of this series of messages is "Dispensations of Providence"! "Dispensations of Providence"! And I know that those words are not commonly used expressions, and aren't always easy to relate to or define, especially considering, as we have been saying, all the many differing definitions that have developed over time in the various church doctrines.

So, may we begin today by recalling what we understand that these scriptures reveal to us about these "acts of God", these "Dispensations of Providence". And may I add, this definition of "Providence" is not just our own church doctrine, but is generally agreed upon by most all of the mainline church denominations, Baptist, Methodists, Presbyterian, Charismatic, and others.

As we've said in our earlier messages, "Divine Providence" is the manner in which God carries out His divine will. By His "Providence", God cares for and directs all of the things that take place in heaven and on earth. He is sovereign over the universe as a whole (Psalm 103:19), sovereign over the physical world (Matthew 5:45), sovereign over the affairs of nations (Psalm 66:7), sovereign over human destiny (Galatians 1:15), sovereign over human successes and failures (Luke 1:52), and sovereign over the protection of His people (Psalm 4:8).

The word "dispensation" truly is a seldom used word, most often only seen or heard in bible related conversations and sermons. And it has several connotations within its meaning, among those connotations are "periods of time", times within which God has prescribed a certain specific ordering of things. For example, some bible scholars speak about the "Old Testament Dispensation" with its laws and prophets, specifically, that a

system of commands and promises were given in those times to provide for and to regulate human affairs.

Another of those connotations within “dispensations” is the sense in which there is something that is being “given out”, specifically relating to a kind of “special exemption” from that which would normally take place. By that I mean, God is said to give a special “dispensation” when He intervenes and He causes things to differ from the “ordinary”. Those kinds of “exemptions” are what we hope for when we pray asking God to intervene and to change a seemingly impossible circumstance in a person’s life.

I realize that these definitions are lacking in clarity, but perhaps as we continue, the meanings will become clearer.

To put this understanding into “biblical perspective”, I’ll need to go all the way back to the beginning of creation, where “God’s Providence” is able to be clearly seen. By His providence, there at creation, God “spoke into being” all that exists, the earth and the whole universe. And He set upon the earth, all of creation and all of the systems by which everyone and everything could live and move and have their being. That includes people, and animals, and plants and trees, and the ecological systems with their climates and weather conditions.

According to the words of Genesis 1, everything everywhere was created and put into motion, each with its own system of sustaining its life and the future life of its kind. By that I mean, as God created man, He providentially put into place systems by which man could procreate and replenish his kind and his species. And God also providentially did that with each of the animals, each according to its kind. And it’s a system that works, because over the millennia, we have all multiplied and filled the earth, each with its own kind.

God also providentially provided a similar system for plant life and trees to reproduce. According to the words of Genesis 1, plants and trees were given seeds, each after their own kind, and they reseed the ground and sustain their ongoing existence.

And as part of the providential provision for man, God put into place a vast system of climate and weather patterns, providing the right measures of water and sunlight to cause plants and trees to grow and to flourish, providing food and nourishment for all of God’s creatures, but especially for the purpose of providing for the benefit of mankind, the “apple of God’s eye.”

And may I add with strong emphasis, that God did not just put people and these systems into being and into their order and then back away to let them run on their own each day. This is one of the points of misunderstanding where many, even very devout, Christians go astray of the scriptures, believing that people and weather systems and all the other many components of God's creation are free to run completely on their own.

That is simply not so! Not at all! God's loving providential hand remains intimately within every process that takes place during every moment of every day. We read about that in Hebrews 1. There, speaking about Jesus,

3 He is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of His nature, and upholds all things by the word of His power. (Hebrews 1:3)

And in Colossians 1, we read similar words. Speaking about Jesus, we read,

15 He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. 16 For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities, all things have been created through Him and for Him. 17 He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together. (Colossians 1:15-17 (NASB))

And listen to these words in Psalm 104,

13 From your lofty abode you water the mountains; the earth is satisfied with the fruit of your work. 14 You cause the grass to grow for the livestock and plants for man to cultivate, that he may bring forth food from the earth 15 and wine to gladden the heart of man, oil to make his face shine and bread to strengthen man's heart. (Psalm 104:13-15 (ESV))

God not only created the earth and put its people and its systems into a perfect order, He remains intimately within all those processes and systems, "upholding" and "sustaining" them, even at this moment, and at every moment of every day. If Jesus were ever to "lower His hand", even for one moment, all of the people and all of the systems of the world would immediately collapse.

May I say that again so that we will not forget it. If Jesus were ever to "lower His hand", even for one moment, all of the people and all of the systems of the world would immediately collapse.

But with that being said, the thing that is still confusing to so many people is that within God's very involved providential care, He also allows people to make a lot of "free will" choices, choices that often are not in keeping with His righteous plan. And God allows those free will choices until a time comes when, through those choices, people and their

circumstances have drifted too far off-course. Then He intervenes. That's because God knows that if people are left to follow that wrong course, the consequences to them will be too destructive, even eternally so. God knows that over on that wrong course, He has put other laws into place, laws that wandering souls will be subject to, laws like the one that assures us that "whatsoever we sow, that shall we also reap". And if we sow seeds of sinful behavior, we will surely suffer the consequences of that sinful behavior.

Thankfully, thankfully, that is when, with great mercy and love, God inserts His providential hand into our circumstances and makes changes that will help us. That is when "dispensations of providence" take place!

And again, such times and circumstances seem most always to be brought about by the "free will" behaviors of men. Why do I say that? It is because man is the only creature who has the intellect and emotional capacity to cause the kinds of difficulties to arise that would require God to intervene and bring about a correction. And that is when God will choose to appoint a "dispensation of time and of circumstances" to deal with those people and those behaviors and those conditions.

And yes, whenever sinful free will behaviors of men are causing problems, the devil is most always also involved, bringing misery into an otherwise tranquil existence. And God does deal with satan in those matters. But the focus of God's "dispensations of providence" is for man and for his benefit.

And no, I have not yet been able to understand the mind of God, especially considering that with Him being sovereign, why He would allow the free will choices of men to cause the problems we cause to begin with, when He could easily reach in and stop the bad behavior before it starts.

It's as the Westminster Confession of Faith tells us, God will not "do violence" to man's free will choices. Very often, He will allow us go ahead and do wrong things and suffer some of the consequences, so that we can gain from the experience.

But again, and thankfully so, when He in His wisdom determines that it is time for Him to intervene and insert His Providential Hand into our circumstances, He does. And He brings us a "dispensation" of remedial teaching and training, which yes, usually involves suffering, so that we will get back onto the path where we are supposed to be.

And a quick reminder about the verses we quoted a moment ago from Colossians 1. There, God tells us clearly that all of creation was created by Him and for Him . . . for

God and for God alone, for His delight, for His purposes, and for His glory. And folks, if we begin to get off-course from the reasons and the purposes for which we were created, then God will have no choice but to bring in one of His “Dispensations of Providence” and make a change.

And some of those changes can come about in small corrections, but unfortunately, they can also come about in very big events, sometimes severe and painful to us. And being sovereign, as He is, God is able to use every other part of creation to intervene and to carry out His providences. He can use people with kindness, or He can use people with hurtful behaviors. He can use the weather, good and pleasant and helpful weather, or He can use catastrophic weather, such as, hurricanes and tornadoes. And He can use terrorists, as on 9-11, or an earthquake, as took place recently in Mexico.

God is not limited in the options that He has within His hands to bring about His “Dispensations of Providence”. But though some will surely be difficult and painful, all of His providences will bless us! Remember the words in Isaiah 45, where God declares to us,

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 is why we need to continually keep all of the things taking place in our daily lives in “biblical perspective”, trusting that God’s Hand is always at work, and that He truly will work all things together for our good. Our part within it all is to always love and trust Him and to remain called according to His purposes. As a drowning swimmer must stop struggling and yield his life over to the lifeguard, so must we yield our life over into the Lord’s providential hands.

That is the intent of these words in our scripture text. Here, God is telling us that no matter what kind of circumstance we find ourselves in on any given day, we are to always turn our hearts to Him for guidance and relief. Listen!

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))

Here, God asks “is anyone suffering”? The ordinary providence of God can be assumed to be that we would not suffer, that we would have pleasant days. But instead, we are suffering. It might be coming from something we did or something that

we didn't do, but should have. Or our suffering may be coming from emotional matters in our relationships, family members and such. Whatever the suffering, God has invited us to call on His providential intervention, and He will be our help in our time of need.

And may I remind us here, that many of our struggles and suffering are likely coming from some other providence that God has inserted into our circumstances. In my imagination, I can see God perceiving a need to intervene in one of my children's circumstances. And as our children suffer, my wife and I suffer with them, leading us to join in with God in prayer.

Simply put, God has a very big world to manage every moment of every day. And often, our struggles and our sufferings will overlap because of His providential handling of other people's needs. Does that make what happens to us "collateral damage". No! Not at all! God is not that frivolous. If we suffer, it is because we are a very integral part of God's providence.

I'll need to stop here and close for today. But may I remind us again of something that has been said over and over again in this study. Things and difficulties and circumstances do not "just randomly happen" to us. God's sovereign hand is always, always, always involved. So then,

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.

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