

Dispensations Of Providence

Part 5

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. 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))

Over the past few weeks, as we have read and studied these words that describe some of the ordinary conditions of daily life, we have pondered the question of just how much God's Hand is involved as these things take place. Are such matters of daily life as these, the suffering, the sickness, even very serious illnesses, just part of being alive in this fallen world, bought on by uncontrolled random events, random accidents, or uncontrolled "acts of nature"?

With this message, we will conclude our study into all these mysterious matters and also this Book of James. But before we leave it, may we go back and give one last consideration of these questions, especially the mysterious interaction that takes place between the "sovereignty of God" and the "free will of men". And please bear with me as I bring back to mind some to the many things we have been studying.

Firstly, as Christians, most all of us who profess faith in God believe that He truly is "sovereign", that He is all-knowing, all-powerful, omnipresent, and that He is fully able to be involved in everything that takes place. But questions still remain as to the actual extent of His participation in all of the many things of our day?

In earlier messages, we have pondered the question, "is God passive in His involvement, only "watching us" and our activities "from a distance?" Or is He much more up-close and involved, even long before our situations and circumstances begin?

Are our daily circumstances actually a part of a sovereign plan that God laid out for us, even before the foundations of the earth, a plan that is now unfolding each day with Him leading and directing us through the steps of that plan.

The question that adds confusion into all of these matters is, “How does man’s “free will” fit into the mysterious equation of God’s sovereign plans?” Most people seem to believe that “free will”, rather than God’s sovereignty, is the main cause of most everything that takes place. At least we talk as if that were true.

And yes, it’s clear to see that men and women do have a strong “free will”. And that free will is obviously a powerful force that is interacting with most all these many daily matters of life. But again, what is really taking place beneath the surface of it all?

In the Westminster Confession of Faith, the church scholars have concluded that God truly is “sovereign” and that He is the “first cause”, the initiator, of all that takes place on the earth. And further, that man’s responses and man’s behaviors are “second causes”. And that whenever man’s free will “second causes” come into opposition with God’s “perfect will”, God will often not intervene and “do violence” to stop man’s “free will behaviors”, allowing us to suffer the consequences of our behavior.

But though all of these assumptions about man and his “free will” seem to be true, this Bible assures us that God’s sovereignty is ever and always in place and always the unwavering standard, never waning nor varying. Even in the face of the strongest of striving from man’s free will, God’s sovereign plan will eventually prevail.

One passage that speaks specifically about God’s plans and purposes is given in Act 17. Turn there with me to Acts 17 and let’s read this passage together. Here in verse 25, God tells us that He

25 . . . is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. 26 From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. 27 God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. 28 'For in him we live and move and have our being.' (Acts 17:25-28 (NIV))

Take a moment and consider these words with me. In verse 25 of Acts 17, God tells us that He is not dependent upon us for anything, but that instead, we are dependent upon Him for everything, even the very breath that we breathe. And then He goes on to tell us that from one man, Adam, He then made all men and women, you and me. (This by

the way, is God, once again, validating the account of His sovereignty in the “creation” of man. We did not evolve from some primordial ooze. We all descended from this one man, Adam.)

And then in verse 26, God is very specific, saying that He set exact times and exact places when and where each of us would live on this earth, the very day we would be born and the very day we will die. (read about that also in Psalm 139)

These words here in Acts 17 are clearly saying to you and to me that God put you and me on this earth at this exact time. And He has put you and me right where we are now, in our homes, in our towns, in rural Mississippi. And then He tells us why He did this exact thing. In verses 27 and 28, we read,

27 God did this so that men (you and me) would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. 28 'For in him we live and move and have our being.' (Acts 17:27-28 (NIV))

Folks, these simple words give a very clear and exact answer as to why you are sitting in your pew right at this moment. And the question for you is, how will you exercise your “free will” today to join God in what He is doing in your life? Will you do as He is here telling you to do? Will you “seek Him and perhaps reach out for Him and find Him, because He is not far from each of us, so close that we can touch Him.

These words are plain and they are simple and they require a response from our souls. Will we obey the sovereign God who is giving us every opportunity to have Him as our Savior and our Lord, or will we ignore Him, even reject Him?

May I stop and repeat what God has just said in these words. Here, God has told you that He has birthed you into being at this exact moment in time. And He has set you in an exact place, in this church, in your pew, listening to these words. Now, what will you do with your free will? Will you “seek Him and perhaps reach out for Him and find Him, because He is not far from you”? Or will you reject this opportunity?

You may be thinking, but I am already a Christian! But here, God is saying something far deeper than your initial salvation. Yes, if you are not truly saved, reach for Him. But if you are already saved, you must still reach for Him, every moment of this day, and every other day. Why? Because it is in Him that we “live and move and have our being”.

And that is also what God is explaining to us in these words of James 5. He is saying to us that whatever the circumstance of our daily life is taking place on this day and every other day, we are to “reach for Him and find Him”. James 5,

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)

Most likely, you and I are experiencing at least one, if not all, of these symptoms of daily life right at this very moment. Each of us has some form of suffering taking place within us most every day, sometimes it’s physical, sometimes it’s spiritual, sometimes it’s emotional, sometimes it’s all of those things. And God is declaring to you and me that every time we experience such things, we are to immediately “reach for Him and find Him, because He is not far away, right within reach”.

And He tells us also that when we are cheerful, when things are going well for us, our family, our workplace, our health, our finances, all are doing reasonably well, then we should remember who it was who put us right where we are, right at this moment, and we should praise and worship Him for it.

And then, here in verse 14, God tells us about those times when our health is undergoing some serious problems, and we are in need of help. He asks,

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 5:14-15)

Unfortunately, you and I don’t often do this. A few days ago, instead of following these words, I did what I usually do. I was feeling pain and I immediately went to see a doctor. Is that a wrong thing to do? When is it right to go to the doctor, and when is it right to go to the Elders of the church? Folks, I confess to you that I really don’t know the answer to that question. I have done both, and both have helped me.

Often, when I go to the doctor, I question whether I should be doing that. Am I denying God and rejecting Him and rejecting this specific instruction? And yes, I realize that some who hear me say these words will think my thoughts to be extreme. And they will say that God has given us doctors and other medical care as a “common grace” provision.

And I agree with that to be true. But are these “common graces” intended to be our “primary care”, our first choice. Or is God supposed to be our “primary care physician”?

When is it right to go to the Elders of the church, and when is it right to go to the doctor? Are these verses 14 and 15 to be exercised for every sickness, or only for really serious sicknesses? Some people complain as though they are seriously ill most all of the time. And we who are getting older in age often like to talk about how much we are suffering.

And as a practical matter, if we brought every illness to the Elders of the church, the Elders would be required to be on duty and on call every moment, night and day. And they would be so busy that they would have little time left for the preaching and teaching of God’s word.

As you can imagine from just these few questions, this is not an easy matter to have a ready answer for. And again, I don’t know, I wish I did.

A few years ago, I kneeled here in our church while the Elders anointed me with oil and prayed over me for God to heal three ruptured vertebrae in my neck. I have not experienced a problem since. And I am fully persuaded that God healed me.

But last year, my arthritic knee had deteriorated to the point of needing some serious repair. For some reason, I did not feel led of the Lord to call the Elders, but instead to go to the surgeons. And through the “common grace” of medical care, my knee was healed.

Again, I confess to you that I do not know the answer to this perplexing question. Are these words here in this passage “absolute” and to be followed in every circumstance, or does God give us further instruction and unction for each occasion? I don’t know, but I do know that we should seek His guidance and direction for each time a question arises.

Here also, God speaks about how “sin” is often a part of our sicknesses and illnesses. And unfortunately, we do often bring on our own suffering through our “free will” sinful behavior. But thanks be to God, as 1 John 1:9 tells us, when we humbly confess our sins to Him, He not only heals us of our physical problems, He also forgives us of the sins that led to our illness.

And here also, the Lord speaks of the value of our confessing our sins to each other and before the church. That, as you know, is a very hard thing for most people to do. Our “pride” is a strong stumbling block. But here, God is obviously requiring a great

measure of “humility” from us, something that is always to be a part of our character. As we know from Matthew 11:28-30 humility is one of the basic attributes of the character of Christ. So, no less “humility” should be required of us.

May we close with this comforting urging from the Lord in verse 16, which tells us that the “effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man (or woman) will avail much”. As I have considered this verse over the years, I have questioned if I am a “righteous man”. But here, God reassures us that Elijah was a common man, just like you and me. And as a “common man”, he prayed and God answered His prayers.

You and I are common men and women, and God will do the same for us. The only requirement of us is that we surrender our hearts fully to Christ. When we do that, His shed blood, and the indwelling Holy Spirit will make us to be that “righteous man or woman” who can pray and have our prayers avail much, sometimes bringing about comfort, sometimes healing, and sometimes bringing a wandering soul back to Christ from his rebellious ways. Praise the Lord!

As we close our study of this Book of James, may we give unending thanks to God that He truly is “sovereign”, and that through His sovereignty, He does, each day show mercy and grace to our “free will” sinful souls. And as we surrender our hearts to Him, He gives us life and breath to sustain us through every circumstance that we encounter. Listen as we close!

26 From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. 27 God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. 28 'For in him we live and move and have our being.' (Acts 17:25-28 (NIV))