

WAYS WE EXPERIENCE GOD...

HOLY WORK: THE POWER AND PROVIDENCE OF GOD

Romans 8:28
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"It was God's plan." "It was God's will." "God led me here." These are phrases I hear all the time in my ministry. My seminary training taught me to be skeptical of such phrases. After all, how can people know? Additionally, once you study the history of atrocities and prejudicial acts (like suicide cults and Crusades), all committed in the name of the Divine plan, such talk feels presumptuous at best and self-serving at worst! Especially the crass statements people make to parents about car accidents and birth defects being God's will.

And so, for a time in my life, I dismissed the idea of Providence. Not so much because I didn't believe in it, but because trying to pull apart the threads of God's will and human apathy and evil was simply too complicated and too susceptible to our infinite capacity to rationalize.

And yet, despite the accuracy of such challenges, I still have found a persistent, clear, and deep sense from people all over the country that God is very much in control. People from many educational, economic, and racial backgrounds persistently see God intimately working in their personal lives and the world.

And I realize I can no longer justify backing off from this doctrine. It is too deeply intertwined with the hallmark of Reformed thought; it is too pervasive in scripture and, in a way, too easy for me. And if there is one thing the Bible teaches us about faith...it is never easy!

Providence is rooted in the great doctrine of the Sovereignty of God,
a sovereignty and control so powerful and so pervasive,
that you must say it with all capitals,
with a low thunderous voice,
that suggests its potency in the speaking of it,
THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD!

In other words, God is in control...of everything! "God", says John Calvin, "is keeper of the keys and therefore governs all events." God is in control, not only of the course of history and the grand contours of time, but of your life and mine. And when it comes to benevolent intent for humanity, it is referred to as the Providence of God.

This leads us to the next of the seven ways in which we experience God that we have been exploring these past several weeks:

Holy Work: The Power & Providence of God: An experience of God at work in the world. God's providential power and God's holy timing.

In Paul's letter to the Romans he lays all on the line,

All things work together for good, for those who love God... (Romans 8:28).

Today we shall see how God's hand guides the course of our lives from the profound, to the mundane, to even the most irksome of moments.

The very design behind the universe discloses God's providential care for us. Jesus tells his disciples not to be anxious, because as God provides for the birds of the air, which neither toil nor spin, so too does God's beneficent hand work to provide our needs – but out of even greater love and care. God designed this world so that we would have food to eat, air to breathe, and water to drink. Every apple you crunch, every breath you take, and every sip of water is literally a gift from God.

When God provided the Ram at the last minute to spare Isaac from sacrifice, a new name for God was born, Jehovah Jireh, God the provider. The ancient Hebrews had a keen understanding that everything from nature that sustained their lives was a direct blessing from God.

But God knows,
(God always knows!)

our infinite capacity
to turn anything and everything
into an idol
to treat things
as God.

So amazingly God's providence...God's love for us...God's actions in history even uses the absence of these blessings for our own good. This means as wonderful as God's providence is at times, it is most tiresome. I am sure that Abraham would have preferred that God's providence would have never led him up that mountain with Isaac to begin with. But that is not how God works. God shoves the whole Israelite nation into the wilderness...to train them into trust.

Deuteronomy tells us,
He humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor your ancestors were acquainted, in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.

(Deuteronomy 8:3)

It is such spiritual training from God that gave Paul the strength to write these words,

'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.' So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.

Paul was a freak,
an aberration, an anomaly!
When I am weak I am strong!?
Who talks like that?
Content with calamities!
Insults! persecutions!
(Are you kidding me!)
When I feel weak...I feel weak!!!!
The opposite of strong!
How! How did Paul do it?

Love.

"All things work together for good for those who LOVE God."

Providence doesn't work without loving trust.

If we don't turn to God in times of hardship – with loving trust – then trials will simply be miserable moments that break us down. That is why it's called faith. Because we must believe where we have not seen. We must trust no matter where life takes us.

One person I interviewed shared God's delightfully dastardly and devious sense of humor. She encountered God's providence when she was actively trying to avoid it. She changed churches and, when she did, she was determined not to get involved because she had gotten too busy at her previous one:

I have been Presbyterian for only 5 years, and I thought to myself, "I am going to do nothing in this church..." But it does not let you do that; you have all these wonderful friends; they are very sneaky...God is so at work in this church; He puts the right people in your path; and I know He put them there, and all my plans were in the garbage can!"

The garbage can might just be the best place for them! For there is one word in Romans that has always bothered me. It is the very first word and I hate it!

"All!" That simple word – "All". "All things," Paul tells us, "All things work together for good!" Now that doesn't mean that God creates things, but rather that God can go into your kitchen cupboard with those stale spices, that out-of-date bread, that soup that's been there too long and, somehow, God can bring it all together and mix up the most scrumptious and nourishing meal that you could possibly imagine.

All things?
Can God's sovereign power
possibly be that strong,
that wise,
that pervasive?

Having to preach on providence makes me feel like the doctor who must go under the knife and discovers how scary and painful surgery and recovery can be!

This faith is hard work.

Some of you might see under the misguided notion that pastors enter the ministry because they are more faithful and trusting of the Lord – because we know more than you do about what it is to be a follower of Christ – and that is why we are called to ministry. But I'll let you in on a little secret, it is the exact opposite reason we are called to the ministry. It is because we need the focus, to constantly remind ourselves of God's providential love!

And so in the end, I realize, if I submit to any of it, I must submit to all of it. Which means, that in some way, beyond my knowing, my understanding, and my perception that those two double bogeys on the back nine the other day is, by some inscrutable means (utterly opaque to me!) part of God's good and beneficent plan!

But, all kidding aside, it really is about trusting – especially in those hard moments. Those moments in which life, and the details of it, are gnawing at your insides.

One woman told me about an experience like that. It was through her mother's agonizing death. And she was angry at God. She was angry at God as she watched her mother die with a terribly degrading disease. And she said, "If there ever was a godly woman, she was it."

She was so angry and the only thing she could think about was that Romans verse, "All works together." And she said, "You may not understand the disease, but you have to believe there is good that come out of it."

And she went on to say that seeing her mother's unswerving faith, in the midst of agony, showed her that God's love is even there, and it shines through. She finished by saying that if her mother believed it, that was all she needed to convince her.

Victor Hugo said it very well,

...You can believe in Providence in either of two ways, either as thirst believes in the orange, or as the ass believes in the whip.

We would love for Providence to be endless oranges – juicy, sweet, and sublime. But God loves you and me too much! Thanks be to God!

Amen.