



**BETHEL**  
PRESBYTERIAN

## **MINISTRY OF THE WORD**

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### The Providential Dealings of God

Most of you will recall that after the Exodus, Mount Sinai and the giving of the Ten Commandments, and the forty-year Wilderness Wandering, God brought His people to the east side of the river Jordan. For the time had come for His people to take the Promised Land!

Now as wonderful as this announcement was, God's people weren't naïve. They knew this meant war! This meant that soon wives would be widowed, children would be fatherless, and parents would outlive their sons! And so, while this was an epochal time in Redemptive

History, it nevertheless was accompanied by a whole lot of questions and concern on the part of the people of God. As a result, God spoke to His people through Moses.

Deuteronomy 29:29a, “The secret things belong to the Lord our God, BUT the things revealed belong to us and to our sons forever...”

What were “the things revealed” which “belonged to God’s people”? God’s word! What were “the secret things” that “belong only to the Lord”? The questions and concerns that God’s people had as it pertained to their future.

It has been roughly 3,500 years since that time, and while we may NOT be facing as dramatic a future as the people of God did at the time of the conquest, we ARE facing a future that is just as uncertain!

- Will COVID continue to be a thing in 2021?
- How about our nation? What is going to happen under Biden?
- According to Fortune magazine, over 100,000 small businesses have shut down on account of our country’s response to COVID. So, what is going to happen with the economy? (Lambert, 2020)
- What about our freedom to assemble as a church? If COVID has revealed anything, it has revealed that the US is no friend to Christianity! It would rather have its citizens assemble at strip joints or violent protests than gather for the worship of God!
- Then there are our individual worries like our family, marriages, children, relatives, and friends... what is going to happen with these concerns?

For many of us, it has been a really hard year. *So, God, what about next year?* God’s answer to this is found in the Deuteronomy.

Deuteronomy 29:29, “The secret things [re. the future] belong to the Lord our God, BUT the things revealed [God’s word] belong to us...”

So truly our focus as we head into a new year must NOT be on what is going to happen, BUT on what God has given us in His Word! 2021 must be a year in which we strive to be people of the word of God!

That being said, does God’s word have anything to say about the Providential dealings God has planned for us this next year? We know ultimately what will occur “belongs to the Lord our God”, but does the Bible have anything more to say on this topic?

God's word gives us three truths about the Providential dealings of God which, if lived in light of, will make this coming year an easier pill to swallow- regardless of what it holds! The first is that God's providential dealings are beyond us.

Romans 11:33-36, "Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who became His counselor? Or who has first given to Him that it might be paid back to him again? For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him *be* the glory forever. Amen."

Notice the expression in v. 33, "how... unfathomable His ways." The word for "unfathomable" literally means "unsearchable," "unable to be traced." The root refers to a "footstep" or a "track." Thus, to be "unfathomable" is to be un-trackable or unable to be traced. Its only other New Testament occurrence is found in Ephesians.

Ephesians 3:8, "To me, the very least of all saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ."

Notice that while the "riches of Christ" are "unfathomable" (un-trackable), that does NOT mean that they are completely unknowable! For example, we are told in God's word that in Christ we have been salvifically blessed with:

- "His kindness, forbearance, and patience," Romans 2:4.
- His mercy and great love, Ephesians 2:4.
- His "glory," Ephesians 3:16.
- Assurance, Colossians 2:2.
- "Every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places," Ephesians 1:3.
- "Everything pertaining to life and godliness," 2 Peter 1:3.

Thus, to refer to the "unfathomable riches of Christ" is to refer to a track that is visible enough to be noticed at times, and yet ultimately — in this life — un-trackable/unable to be fully known!

That is the idea behind "unfathomable." It is NOT that we are NOT able to comprehend the providential dealings of God. RATHER, it is that their temporal/eternal significance are unable to be *fully* understood by us on this side of the grave.

From this I hope you see that on this side of the grave we are NOT in a position to judge what God does and doesn't do in our lives. RATHER, we are left to trust the power and character of the Lord as He leads us- that is the message God gave His people in Moses' day, "...the secret

things belong to the LORD [the sovereign one] OUR God [the one who loves us; the one with whom we have a love-relationship]”!

## The Tangled Web

It reminds me of the story of the elderly minister who marked his Bible with a bookmark made of silk threads which was woven into a motto. The backside was a tangled web of crossed threads that seemed to be without reason or purpose. And yet, the front proclaimed a profound truth. When at a home where there had been a recent tragedy, at some point he would hand the bookmark to the bereaved, presenting the side the unintelligible tangle. When the individual/family looked at it for a time clearly finding nothing but a mess, the minister then would ask them to turn the marker over. And against the white silk background there was this statement, “God is love.”

Because it is OUR GOD who is in control of all things, we are called today to live by faith in His character and plan and so willingly follow as He leads us!

Psalms 119:75-76, “I know, O Lord, that Thy judgments are righteous, and that in faithfulness Thou hast afflicted me. O may Thy lovingkindness comfort me, according to Thy word to Thy servant.”

Listen to the testimony of Paul.

2 Corinthians 12:7-9a, “And because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to buffet me- to keep me from exalting myself! Concerning this I entreated the Lord three times that it might depart from me. And He has said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.’”

While Paul may have known in a limited way why he had the thorn, note that God’s response to his continued requests for its removal was NOT a promise that all would be better, OR that it would only be for a short time. NOR did God provide a full explanation of the “why?” RATHER, God’s response was to remind Paul of His all-sufficient grace, “Paul, I Love You and I Am going to take care of you!”

And that is why, though the duration and magnitude of his “thorn” remained a mystery, nevertheless Paul REJOICED, “...Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may dwell in me” (v. 9b)!

And so it must be with us! Though our path today may seem to be a twisted, tangled mess, we must know that it is the overflow of a God who loves us- which raises a helpful question I use when God's providential dealings don't make sense to me.

- Instead of asking the question we CANNOT know the answer to in this life, "Why?" (I do my best to avoid this)
- We must train ourselves to ask the question we CAN answer, "Why not?"... as we look at Scripture, we can answer this!
  - It is NOT because God is NOT good.
  - It is NOT because God has retracted His love from us.
  - It is NOT because God is NOT in charge OR weak.

I don't know why God does what He does, BUT it is NOT because of these things!

### God's Providential Dealings are Perfect

Psalms 145:17, "The Lord is righteous in all His ways, and kind in all His deeds."- most associate the word "righteous" with the idea of moral perfection. Yet this is NOT quite accurate. The word lit. means, "in accordance with right."

From this I want you to see that "righteous" is NOT a self-defining term; it does NOT speak of absolute perfection. It requires a context. For example, from the biblical perspective. The murderer in prison, provided he obeys the rules of the prison, would be considered as righteous. The man accused of a crime but then exonerated is considered to be righteous as it pertains to the crime he was accused of.

Accordingly, when we read that "God is righteous in all His ways," that means that God's dealings do NOT violate THE standard of right which ultimately governs this world (a standard which God instilled at creation by virtue of His character). That means God's workings are in perfect agreement with His character and Kingdom! And so, though many today may accuse God of wrong-doing, nevertheless on the Last Day, God will be vindicated as everyone bows before Him and confesses NOT ONLY that Christ is Lord (Philippians 2:9-11), BUT that He also is righteous/just! Yet, we need NOT wait until that day. Listen to the exhortation of Paul.

Romans 3:3-4, "What then? If some did not believe, their unbelief will not nullify the faithfulness of God, will it? May it never be! Rather, let God be found true [righteous], though every man be found a liar, as it is written, 'That Thou mightest be justified in Thy words, and mightest prevail when Thou art judged.'"

Truly, God's ways are righteous. If we could see them from the perspective of eternity- and someday we will- we would confess that they truly are perfect and are driven NOT by an evil or malicious motive, BUT by kindness, love, and grace! As you've read at the bottom of my emails, "If we had God's power, we would change everything. If we had His wisdom, we would change nothing." (Scott Richardson)

From all of this I hope you see that God's providential dealings are perfect!

### The Spanish Escorial

Just outside of Madrid, in the ancient monastery of the Augustinians, there is the famed Escorial. The architect who built the structure made an arch so flat that it frightened the king of Spain. As a result, the king ordered the architect to add a column to support the middle of the arch. The architect argued that it was not necessary, and yet the king insisted and so the column was built.

Years later after the king died, the architect revealed that the column was 1/4 of an inch short of the arch and that the arch had never sagged in the slightest. Today, tour guides pass a small sheet of wood between the arch and the column as a testimony of the skill and perfection of the architect. (Barnhouse, 1994, pp. 245-246)

Of this truth we must become convinced — God's providence is perfect! See, in the face of difficulty or trial — when we are convinced that the arch holding up our lives is going to collapse — we tend to build little columns of support. We

- Pad the checking account.
- Seek the 5th and 6th opinion.
- Educate ourselves.
- Build a network of support on which to rely.

And yet, while there is nothing wrong with these actions in themselves, God has a way of making them fall short, so that in the end it will be demonstrated that God's way is perfect!

Christian! Hold on to this truth... for so often this is the difference between hope and despair in times of difficulty.

### God's Providential Dealings are Good

In a chapter devoted to discussing the benefits that come from Christ, Paul states an eighth benefit.

Romans 8:28, “And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.”

Christian, if you “love God” and have been “called according to His purpose” (which is true of you if you are a child of God), then based on this passage you must understand that everything that is occurring in your life this day is for your “GOOD”. Now what does this mean?

In the Bible, “good” (ἀγαθός (*agathos*]) describes that which, being good in its essence, is beneficial in its effect. For example, the word is used in Romans.

Romans 7:12-13, “So then, the Law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good. Therefore did that which is good [of good effect] become a cause of death for me? May it never be! [by definition, something ‘good’ can NOT have a negative result] Rather it was sin...”

Paul called the Thessalonian believers to “...follow after that which is good” (1 Thessalonians 5:15) that which has a beneficial result.

Thus, something “working for GOOD” in our lives as Christians is something whose effect both pleases God AND enables us to serve, love, and know Him better. Now notice, Paul says this in the context of all things: this is utterly comprehensive, having no qualifications or limits. Thus, it is NOT that God prevents His children from experiencing things that can harm them. RATHER, it is that God takes ALL things that occur in our lives and turns them ultimately into eternal blessing- no matter what they may be:

- Suffering.
- Persecution.
- Failure.
- Pain.
- Lack of faith.
- Defeat.
- Weariness.
- Ill health.
- Loneliness.
- Sorrow.
- Sickness.
- Disease.

God is working to produce His and OUR ultimate victory and blessing. Consider God's providence as it related to His Son, Jesus Christ! God took the *greatest evil* that Satan could devise and turned it into *the greatest conceivable blessing* He could give to His people — eternal salvation from sin! And thus, we read this:

1 Peter 2:24, "...by His wounds you were healed."

1 Corinthians 15:57, through Christ we have been given, "the victory."

Hebrews 2:15: in Christ's death, deliverance has been made for those who, "through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives."

1 Corinthians 8:9, on account of the sacrifice of Christ, "we have become rich."

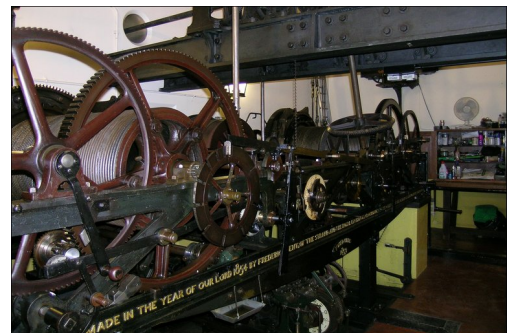
Listen, if God could take the greatest defeat — the death of His Son- and use it unto the eternal blessing of His people, He can and certainly will take whatever difficulty you face this coming year and use it to produce victory and ultimate blessing in our life!

And so, though God's providential dealings are mysterious and perfect, they nevertheless are good!

- They mold and shape us into a holy people, Psalms 119:71.
- They testify to our salvation, 1 Timothy 4:13.
- They serve as a vehicle for God's kingdom and glory, Acts 4.
- They endear us to Christ, 2 Corinthians 12:9.
- They purify us, 1 Peter 1:7.
- They produce in us an "Eternal Weight of glory far beyond all comparison," 2 Corinthians 4:16-18.

And so, though we find ourselves in difficult circumstances, we must assure ourselves that what is occurring in our lives is for the glory of God and OUR best as His child!

It's like the workings of Big Ben, the huge clock in London. There are large-toothed wheels connected to one another. As one moves forward, the other moves backwards. Because of the different shapes and sizes of these wheels, many move at different speeds — some faster, some very slow! And yet together, these wheels work in perfect harmony such that the clock keeps amazingly accurate time!





This beautifully captures the character of God’s providence. As children of God, there are times in our lives when, like the large wheels in Big Ben, events move forward, granting satisfaction at their progress. And yet, there are other times when events seem to move backward — leaving us struggling with questions. There are matters in our lives that move smoothly and rapidly, and we rejoice at their action. But then other things seem to lag, and at times go nowhere. And yet, just like the inner workings of Big Ben, we must see that EVERYTHING in our lives work together to produce a finished product that one day will be fully seen and so delighted in by us! Samuel Rutherford described it this way:

...when ye are come to the other side of the water, and have set down your foot on the shore of glorious eternity, and look back again to the waters and to your wearisome journey, and shall see, in that clear glass of endless glory, nearer to the bottom of God’s wisdom, ye shall then be forced to say, ‘If God had done otherwise with me than He hath done, I had never come to the enjoying of this crown of glory.’ (Rutherford, 1997, pp. 52, Letter XI)

Truly, while God’s providential dealings may seem confusing and, in the short run, even harmful, we must recognize, through the eyes of faith, that if it weren’t for the triumphs as well as the difficulties, we would never come to enjoy the crown of glory that awaits us!

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