

# Providence *Is* Remarkable

Matthew 10:30

© by Phil Johnson

[www.thegracelifepulpit.com](http://www.thegracelifepulpit.com)

One of the underlying presuppositions of the Charismatic world is that if God is not actively intervening in creation through miracles and signs and wonders and things like that, then you've got an absentee God. If we don't take the Charismatic position, they say, your God isn't really there. Charismatics frequently lob this charge at non-Charismatics, that, you know, if you believe the miraculous Charismatic gifts have ceased, they say, then your view is a close cousin of deism, which is virtually a denial that God is present and at work in this world's affairs. If you doubt whether today's Charismatics are truly speaking in tongues, and getting direct revelation from God, they will tell you that your skepticism is tantamount to materialistic rationalism. It's essentially a form of rank unbelief. That's because the only way the typical Charismatic can envision God as active and personal is as if He is constantly displaying His presence in creation by miraculous means, you know, through constant, direct extra-biblical revelation or with supernatural signs and wonders in the heavens. And they think if He's not doing that, then He's not there.

That way of thinking comes dangerously close to the Gnostic notion that that's how God is. He stands outside His creation and therefore if He acts at all, it must be from outside the cosmos by overturning the natural order of things. And if you think I exaggerate, let me quote some fairly typical sources.

Here's one from a blog post written by Dave Miller who is senior pastor of a Southern Baptist church in Sioux City, Iowa. He actually edits fairly heavily blog known as SBC Voices, and he is a former cessationist and he wrote this article titled, "God told me that the Bible does not teach cessationism." I think he's being...I think he's trying to be humorous there, I don't think he really means God sent him a private message on that. Maybe he does.

He cites some of the standard Charismatic arguments and then in a summary at the end of his article, he writes this, quote: "I think that some in the cessationist movement have adopted what I call biblical deism. Deism believed in an impersonal God, one who created the world and then stood back and let it operate according to certain principles. Biblical deism creates a somewhat impersonal God today. He does not walk with me and talk with me," unquote. And he sort of gratuitously tacks on a throwaway line in his closing paragraph saying that his criticism of cessationists was intended, these are his words, "was intended playfully, not in a belittling way." But it's clear that he's seriously equating cessationism with the underlying principles of deism and we don't really have a God, these are his words again, "A God who is personal, who speaks and listens and enters in to relationship with us," unquote.

Now here's another item from someone who describes himself as open but cautious. This is Darren Sumner, he's an adjunct professor in systematic theology at Fuller Seminary and also Seattle Pacific. And he has an earned Ph.D. from the University of Aberdeen. And he says this, quote: "I don't believe that I have the gift of tongues or prophecy or healing. Indeed, he says, I have little or no direct personal experience with such giftings and little basis on which to judge them," unquote. So he's actually, basically, sounds like he's saying he's never actually had any personal encounter with Charismatic gifts, but then he says, he rejects cessationism because in his opinion, quote: "Pure cessationism ultimately denies that God is active in the world. This view—he says—has more in common with deism than historic orthodox Christianity," unquote.

And his article on the subject is titled, "Can Cessationism be Christian?" And his argument is basically not, that cessationism has built into it underlying principles that are anti-Christian, deistic. Notice this is a constant refrain. Deism is brought up all the time.

Adrian Warnock who I know personally, and I would count him as a friend. He's a British medical doctor whose blog has been one of the most widely read Christian blogs in the UK for at least a decade and he identifies with Reformed Charismatics on both sides of the Atlantic. And he disagrees very strongly with me on the Charismatic issue. In 2006 he responded to an article that I had written pointing out some of the famous Charismatic prophecies that have clearly proven false and in his published reply to me, he didn't actually refute the arguments that so many high profile Charismatic prophets are clearly and patently false prophets, but he wrote this, quote: "What I want to know about Phil is not whether he speaks in tongues but rather does he have an intimate experience of the Spirit," unquote. And he went on to suggest that cessationism portrays God as, quote: "A passive and absent figure who has left us only an intellectual relationship with the Bible," unquote.

And no less than Mark Driscoll, famously linked cessationism with both deism and atheism, he said, quote: "Cessationism is worldliness." And then in a stunning piece of historical revisionism, he claimed that cessationism is a product of quote: "The modernistic and enlightenment project, individualism and rationalism. It's rooted in sheer skepticism," Driscoll said, and here's a direct quote, after talking about the modernistic rejection of supernaturalism, in modern philosophy, he says this, quote: "There is a vestige of modernism that tries to accommodate the spiritual aspect and it becomes deism where there's a God but this God is not involved in our world. He doesn't break in and violate natural law. The supernatural is not possible," Driscoll says. "This is Thomas Jefferson who sits down in the White House with a set of scissors and cuts all the miracles out of the Bible and publishes something called the philosophy of Jesus Christ. This includes Unitarians, this includes very liberal mainline so-called Christian denominations who are basically deists. There is a God, He's far away. He doesn't have anything to do with us and the miracles can all be explained away. They are primitive, superstition, myths and understanding," he says. "And so again," still quoting from Driscoll, "So it goes to atheism, deism, and cessationism."

And so he's essentially categorizing cessationism with deism and atheism. Now I want you to notice, every source I just quoted making that charge about deism is a Reformed Charismatic or someone

who would describe himself as open but cautious. These are not the obvious charlatans and people who are on the far-out fringe whose theological perspective would be faulty from the get-go...these then, in fact there are, you know, millions of Charismatics who are totally unorthodox across the board in their doctrine. But that's not whose these guys are. These men whom I have quoted are generally perceived as sound and reliable teachers, mild Charismatics, who most of them would be welcome speakers in several, if not most of the mainstream Reformed and evangelical conferences. All of them have positioned themselves as role models for the young restless and reformed, and yet the charge they are making betrays an appalling ignorance of the historic reformed emphasis on the doctrine of divine providence. Their accusation against non-Charismatics is rooted in their own failure to appreciate what Scripture teaches about the imminence of God, that God personally and constantly and permanently and exhaustively pervades and sustains and governs every aspect of His creation. God is personally present and meticulously at work in everything that happens, even when He is not manifesting His presence by miracles.

That's what I believe. I am not a skeptic who refuses to see God's hand at work in Christians lives. I just want to preserve a biblical sense of sanity in the claims we make about how God works and what it means when He does. And that's the doctrine of providence. And I want to explore this subject with you in this session, starting in Matthew 10...Matthew 10. Here's some context as you turn there.

Matthew 10, the early Galilean ministry of Jesus is drawing to a close and before Jesus moves on to the next phase of His earthly ministry, He commissions the Twelve and He sends them out into Galilee in twos. This is a perilous mission. Jesus Himself says in verse 16, "Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves." He knows they're going to encounter hardship and harassment and hostility of the worst kind, verse 11. They will deliver you to courts and flog you in their synagogues. Verses 21 and 22, "Brother will deliver brother over to death and the father his child, and children will rise up against parents and have them put to death and you will be hated by all men for My namesake." And He further tells them, they're going to face direct demonic opposition and relentless persecution from worldly people. So the Twelve are being sent out into a very difficult situation. It was a national...during a national epidemic of unbelief. So as Jesus commissions them, He says, verse 1, it says in verse 1, "He gave them authority over unclean spirits to cast them out and to heal every disease and every affliction." Notice every disease and every affliction. Jesus gave them power to do this, to cast out demons and to heal the sick.

These were uniquely apostolic gifts. These are miraculous powers that belong to Christ by divine right, and the Twelve, this is just the Twelve here, are being sent as His special envoys and His trusted representatives. So Jesus delegates to them supernatural abilities to enable them and empower them to do precisely what He had done. Their ministry would be to demonstrate Jesus' authority over every kind of demon or disease. And, in effect, they were showing the world that their Master is Lord over both the spiritual and the physical worlds. And the miracles they did, also, validated these Twelve as authoritative heralds of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

But, notice this, the message they proclaimed was not about the miracles. It was the same gospel Jesus preached, the parallel passage in Mark 6 verses 12 and 13 actually sums up their ministry this way, **Mark 6:12 and 13** says, "They went out and proclaimed that people should repent." That was the message. And here's what validated the authority of that call to repentance. They cast out many demons and anointed with oil many who were sick and healed them. So Mark makes the point very clear, they did not preach about health and wealth and prosperity, or seed faith, or holy laughter, or how to be clairvoyant or positive confession, or any of the typical Charismatic themes. Their message was about repentance for the remission of sins just like Jesus. They were delivering the message of their Lord with authority, specifically delegated from Him for that purpose. And what you actually see here in Matthew 10 is the very beginning of the process that is described in Hebrews 2, verses 3 and 4. Which tells us that the gospel was at first declared by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard while God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to His will. And these uniquely miraculous gifts are referred to in **2 Corinthians 12:12** as the signs of a true Apostle, signs and wonders and mighty works.

So Paul is saying in 1 Corinthians 12 that the very essence of what made the Apostles unique was their ability to speak infallibly with God's own authority and then to validate that message with signs and wonders and mighty works. That was an apostolic gift and an apostolic duty. Jesus did not bestow this authority on the multitudes who followed Him. He did it here for the Twelve. And then later during the Judean ministry of Christ, at a much later point in His ministry, Luke 10 describes how He commissioned 70 other disciples for a similar apostolic mission. And this time Jesus commissions the 70, as He tells them what to do, He doesn't mention demons or disease, but they come back from that mission amazed because they said, **Luke 10:17**, "Lord, even the demons are subject to us in Your name." And Jesus responds to that this way, Luke 19 verses 19 and 20, "I have given you authority to tread on serpents and scorpions and over all the power of the enemy and nothing shall hurt you. Nevertheless do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven."

So Jesus gives them supernatural powers for their protection on this mission. But whatever sense of joy and pride and, you know, wonder, they derived from having that power, that feeling of power and empowerment should not eclipse the gladness and the gratitude that stemmed from the assurance of their eternal salvation, that their names were written in heaven.

In other words, Jesus is pointing them back to the gospel again. He's telling them, "Don't let an obsessions with spiritual gifts divert you from what I actually came to do to seek and to save the lost."

Now notice, nothing in this context or anywhere else in Scripture suggests that the prerogatives that are given to the Twelve here, or to the 70 on those apostolic missions would ever be the common possession of all Christians for all time. The working of signs and wonders was never meant to be part of the ongoing missionary strategy of the church. Scripture never portrays evangelistic work that way. The Great Commission doesn't call for that approach to evangelism, as if a great cosmic display of miracles might somehow convince unbelievers to repent who otherwise would just reject the gospel message. That's how a lot of Charismatics think...Charismatics today think. It's even

what they say. If we don't accompany the message with signs and wonders and mighty works, we undermine the message. It's not powerful enough on its own. Jesus Himself repudiated that whole idea, **Luke 16:31**, He said, "If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead."

The miraculous powers operated in and around the Apostles and they functioned at the start to establish the apostolic office and to validate the authority of those men and their cohorts, and to verify the message, but even in the biblical record of the earliest days of the church, the working of signs and wonders very quickly recedes into the background. Tom Pennington talked about this yesterday, and so I won't belabor it completely. But I want to review some of this for you and remind you that even before the canon of Scripture is completed, the miraculous aspect of apostolic work begins to disappear and really ultimately disappears before the canon is complete so that in 2 Timothy 4 verse 20, Paul leaves Trophimus at Miletus sick...he doesn't heal him. He tells Timothy to take a little wine for his frequent digestive infirmities. He doesn't organize the laying on of hands. In the trajectory of apostolic ministry as we see it in the New Testaments, miracles and signs and wonders play a diminishing role as the embryonic church grows and spreads...which is not, it certainly not what we would expect to see if we bought the continuationists argument.

The proper role and the reason for miraculous gifts is very clear in microcosm right here in Matthew 10 as Jesus gifts the Apostles for the first time and He sends them out and His commission reveals that he has a deep pastoral concern for them because he's sending them out into dangerous territory in the midst of opposition and what he talks about mostly as he commissions them is the abuse and the oppositions that they would suffer, not the miracles that they would do. And I'm intrigued by Jesus' instruction with how to deal with hostility, verse 14. "If anyone will not receive you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet when you leave that house or that town." Really? Why not put on a convincing display of miracle power? Why not take your staff and cast it down before Pharaoh that it might become a serpent? Why not call down fire from heaven? Remember James and John wanted to do that. Why not take off your coat and wave it at them, to slay them in the Spirit, or the Todd Bentley approach, dropkick them in the stomach and command the devil to come out?

Yes, Jesus gave the Apostles power to heal and to cast out demons. But for what purpose? Why wasn't that the centerpiece of His strategy for overcoming unbelief? Why wasn't that put to use to silence opposition? Certainly would have been a more powerful and persuasive response to persecution than just shaking off the dust from your feet and moving on to the next town. And yet Jesus is clearly not thinking like a Charismatic here.

What I want you to notice is where Jesus does direct the Apostles attention, as He tells them all these bad things that are likely to happen to them out there. He points them in the direction of divine providence and He reminds them, verse 30, even the hairs of your head are numbered. He's telling them there is nothing so insignificant that God is unaware of it or uninvolved in it, and that includes even the precise number of hairs on your balding pate.

Verse 29, "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground, apart from your Father." That doesn't merely mean that God watches and observes that. It means without His expressed decree and permission, even a sparrow doesn't die. But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. "Fear not, therefore, you are of more value than many sparrows. Really He gives them miraculous power and He tells them, "I'm sending you out in the midst of wolves, you're going to be attacked," and instead of saying use that power to silence your opposition, He says, "Just bear in mind God's there and He's involved with you."

I cannot stress this enough. When the Lord wants to reassure the Apostles that Almighty God is directly and personally and lovingly involved in their experience, and not only in their triumphs and successes, but also in their trials and sufferings. Jesus doesn't point them to the miracles. He doesn't talk about dreams and visions, or other mystical phenomena. He doesn't tell them to listen for a still small voice inside their own heads, and He certainly doesn't tell them that their words have creative power, so, you know, when you encounter opposition, just go ahead and make a positive confession.

Instead, Jesus teaches them a truth we know as the doctrine of providence. He stresses the fact that God is intimately involved in all the details of our lives, even when we can't consciously sense His presence, even when we don't understand what He's doing or why He's doing it.

Now, as believers, we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love Him, right? How could we be certain that God is working all things together for good unless we're also certain that He is indeed working in all things? Right? Have you ever thought about that? That one promise is sufficient to prove the truth of God's sovereign providence. He will accomplish good. He will put His own glory on display. And He will ultimately employ everything in creation to that end, that's the ultimate purpose for everything and God will accomplish it. And ordinarily He accomplishes His purposes not through miraculous means, but by the mystery of ordinary providence. At times, key times in redemptive history, God has intervened with miracles. And it's always His prerogative to do that. But nothing in Scripture teaches us to expect or to believe that miracles should be the normal experience of all Christians. That is not the case even in the biblical record. Miracles, as Tom showed us yesterday, miracles are extremely rare, they're extraordinary. They're not common everyday experiences and that is true by definition. In fact, here's a proper definition. A miracle is an extraordinary work of God that transcends or contravenes the ordinary laws of nature. It's a particular kind of sign. It's an unmistakable display of supernatural power that is calculated to confront unbelief and provoke awe with the purpose of authenticating some agent of divine revelation, or the revelation itself. True miracles are not merely arbitrary displays of God's power. They are manifestly supernatural and they are themselves a form of revelation. This is God unveiling Himself in a way that cannot be denied, that's what a miracle is. So that when someone born blind receives sight, that's a bonafide miracle. When the sea parts for Moses, or the sun stands still for Joshua, or Jonah is eaten by a big fish, those are actual miracles. Those are true signs and wonders.

When Sarah conceived a child in her old age, decades after menopause, that was a miracle. When a couple today in their thirties with no verifiable physical obstacle struggle and pray through years of frustrating efforts to conceive and they finally bear a child, that's not a miracle, it is an answer to prayer. In fact, was it God who answered those prayers and granted the blessing of conception? Absolutely. That's true anytime anyone gets pregnant. Psalm 127 verse 3, "Children are a heritage from the Lord, the fruit of the womb is a reward." God's always in it when a child is conceived.

But even though we often use language broadly and say, "Conception is a miracle," it's not a true sign and wonder miracle. It's a work of divine providence, in perfect harmony with the ordinary operation of nature as God Himself designed and decreed. Yes He's in it. Does it exclude God to say the conception of a child is actually a miracle...is not actually a miracle? Does that exclude God? Not at all if you understand what providence means. And likewise, it's not technically a miracle when you pray that some need will be met and you get an unexpected check in the mail at exactly the right amount. That's not a miracle. It's not a miracle when the supermarket check-out lines are long but the manager opens one up just when you get to the front. It wasn't a miracle in January 2009 when that airliner crash-landed in the Hudson River and everyone aboard survived. That wasn't a miracle. Was it God who preserved the lives of those people? Absolutely. God is the unseen provider behind an unexpected check too, as well as every other penny that comes your way, even the money you earn and expect. Scripture says it is God who gives you the power to earn wealth...all of it. God's in all of that. And I personally thank God and give Him the glory, and I hope you do too, for every mundane convenience and the everyday blessings of life, including something as mundane as when the only empty seat on the airplane is the one next to me. I thank God for that. But that's not a miracle in the biblical sense, and it cheapens the biblical idea of signs and wonders to pretend that those things are miracles. They're not. They're providence...that's evidence of God's providence, it's the proof of God's providence. It's not a miracle. Miracles are rare even in Scripture. Most of the miracles in the Bible, as Tom said yesterday, are grouped into three distinct time periods. You have that wave of miracles connected with Moses and Joshua, a second outpouring of miracles connected with Elijah and Elisha, and before and after and in between there were no more than 15 or 20 individual miracles. You know, you do have some scattered miracles that don't fit in those eras...things like the confusion of languages at Babel, Jonah in the belly of the fish. You have Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the burning, fiery furnace. And I think Gideon's fleece because of the circumstances there was a bonafide miracle. And Samson's strength was certainly miraculous. That was, I would consider that a singular miracle that was manifested repeatedly. In the days of Hezekiah, the shadow of the sun moved ten degrees backwards and **2 Kings 19:35** says an angel of the Lord in that same era smote the army of Sennacherib so that 185 thousand men died in a single night. And Scripture says, "When people arose in the morning, behold, these were all dead bodies," 185 thousand, can you imagine that? I'd classify that as a miracle, although some might say that the means by which the angel smote that army might have been some deadly virus. Let's just grant that that was a miracle.

And then, from the time of Hezekiah, seven centuries before Christ until the virgin birth, Scripture doesn't record a single miracle. John the Baptist never did a miracle. The Scripture makes an important point out of that. And Jesus said he was the greatest ever, right? So if miracles are what

make a great man of God great, we've got a problem reconciling what Jesus said about John the Baptist.

But then you have that third and greatest of all biblical wave of miracles with Christ and the disciples. So you've got Moses and Joshua, Elijah and Elisha, then Christ and the disciples, and that final wave of miracles was the greatest single outpouring of true miracles the world has ever seen. But even so, the frequency of recorded miracles declines dramatically after the resurrection. You have a cluster of miracles soon after Pentecost, all associated with Peter and the Twelve. Then in Acts 19 Paul is in Corinth and Luke records in a vague sort of way, God was doing extraordinary miracles by the hand of Paul so that even handkerchiefs or aprons that had touched His skin were carried away by the sick, and all their diseases left them and the evil spirits came out of them. But then miracles totally disappear from the biblical record after Acts 20 when Paul restores Eutychus to life and the final eight chapters of Acts record no miracles at all except for two incidences in Malta, one where Paul, you know, shakes off, casually shakes off a poisonous viper, and then he heals the father of Publius, for the rest of the New Testament, excluding the book of Revelation which is a case all its own, you have no specific miracles described. Which is not to suggest that there were no apostolic miracles, other than the ones expressly recorded. We can be confident there were because in **2 Corinthians 12:12**, Paul says that his own apostleship was confirmed with signs and wonders and mighty works. And he mentions in that context his own vision of heaven which notice, had occurred 14 years before he even talked about it. And in **Galatians 3:5** he says, "Some miracles had previously been done in Galatia. But other than those two places in all the epistles of Paul, he never even mentions the miracles he did. He deals with the miraculous gifts in 1 Corinthians because those gifts were being abused by the Charismatics in that fellowship. And his point there is summed up in **2 Corinthians 12:31** that there is a still more excellent way of ministry. And other than that, and all throughout all the other Pauline epistles, Paul gives no prominence to supernatural phenomena or miraculous gifts in the life of the church, even in the pastoral epistles where that's the very thing he's writing about, the life of the church, he doesn't mention miracles. And, in fact, after the gospels and the book of Acts, no other New Testament writer gives miraculous phenomena any significant mention whatsoever. Paul's the only one.

Miracles in Scripture are always associated with new revelation, and they generally go hand in hand with major acts of judgment, or other significant shifts in the course of redemptive history. And so, if you drew a timeline covering the entire biblical record, and marked every miracle recorded in Scripture with a little pin, you'll have those three major clusters of miracles associated with Moses and Joshua, Elijah and Elisha, Jesus and the Apostles with a very sparse handful of pins here and there scattered in between. And aside from the ministry of Christ, never in the history of the world have miracles become routine or common place, which if they did, of course, that would nullify the whole point of miracles. They're extraordinary.

Notice...notice this too, the vast majority of biblical miracles are the kinds of events so that anyone who saw them, even the most determined unbeliever or skeptic could never write them off as bogus or feigned or merely coincidental or parlor tricks or anything other than true miracles. These are undeniable miracles. Sarah gives birth to a child at age 90-plus. The Red Sea parts for Israel, but



drowns the Egyptians. Elisha makes an axe head float. A man born blind receives his sight after Jesus puts mud in his eyes. Jesus rises from the dead after a brutal crucifixion and is seen and talked to and handled by more than 500 witnesses. This is not sleight of hand. These are not the kinds of questionable curiosities and invisible healings that are typically featured on religious television. Modern Charismatic lore is full of unverified claims and urban myths about, you know, people raised from the dead, or people walking on water. You've got, I think somebody may have mentioned this, but up there in Bethel Church in Redding, there's a guy who directs a firestorm ministry there says the kids in his son's youth group were able to walk on water and walk through walls.

Now think about that. These are young people, teenagers, in the era of cell phones. Do you really think if one of them had walked on water there wouldn't be a You Tube video somewhere? Really, that's true across the board. If people were genuinely being healed of congenital blindness, if teenagers really could walk on water or pass through walls, those claims would be easy to prove in this era of ubiquitous video and cell phones. That's what you'd be seeing on TV instead of people, you know, finding relief from migraines or sore knees, and people, these adoring crowds being slain in the Spirit by a wave of Benny Hinn's jacket. I've always wondered what that jacket must smell like to make people fall over like that.

Now, does God answer prayers for relief from our migraines? When we pray for a dear saint suffering from severe cancer and that person goes in to remission, can we confidently praise God for answering that prayer? Of course. You know what? Even when you take an aspirin and get rid of a headache, you can thank God, you should thank God for the relief. He is at work as truly and as personally in the cure you get from an aspirin, as He was in the raising of Lazarus. That's God who does that. If you really believe the doctrine of providence, you should know that. The difference is, one is a miracle, the other is an ordinary providence. And God normally uses, normally works through ordinary providences.

There are unusual providences as well. The Puritans used to refer to them as extraordinary providences, or remarkable providences, or my favorite, illustrative providences. These are startling coincidences, amazing and timely events that rescue people from destruction, or sometimes sweep them into disaster, natural phenomena that seemed to have cosmic significance. These aren't miracles and we need to be cautious about what kind of significance we read into them. You remember, Jesus said that tower that fell in Siloam and killed 18 people didn't mean those people were more wicked than anybody else. You can't always read the meaning of providence. But we can certainly affirm with Scripture that the hand of God is behind every blessing, every disaster, and every ordinary event. And none of it is without meaning. We just don't necessarily always know infallibly what the meaning is. I think we'll know all of that in heaven, but not necessarily now.

Interesting thing about this, just a little anecdote. In 2009, the evangelical Lutheran church of America held their national convention in the Minneapolis Convention Center and on Wednesday of that week, during a plenary session in the convention, key leaders in that denomination put forth a resolution arguing that practicing homosexuals should be permitted to serve in pastoral ministry.

And while that discussion was taking place, during that very hour, a freak tornado blew through Minneapolis and it severely damaged that convention center where this denominational meeting was taking place. And even more ominously than that, the storm tore the steeple off Central Lutheran Church which is THE most prominent ELCA church in Minneapolis, just...it's one of the tallest steeples in Minneapolis, too, broke it in half, left it hanging there. And then without causing any more harm, that storm lifted and the clouds moved on. That, my friends, is a remarkable providence. In fact, look it up. There are pictures of the broken steeple on the web and John Piper famously got into a bit of trouble with the gay lobby for using that opportunity to point out that Scripture condemns homosexuality as a sin and Piper said the tornado was a general call for repentance. And he even carefully used the proper terminology referring to this as an act of providence...not a miracle, or a cosmic act of judgment. He was very careful. Providence in my view is exactly the right term. And the workings of divine providence are always remarkable.

But sometimes providence is more remarkable than others. And this is our answer to the Charismatic charge that cessationists picture God as remote and uninvolved and impersonal. God always governs by His providence in everything that happens. And all His care for us, all of it, is personal and loving with intimate attention to every miniscule detail of our lives. And furthermore, think about this. The faith that sees the hand of God in the daily outworking of divine providence is not a lesser faith than the kind of belief that can only see God at work when He intervenes in some spectacular or supernatural or miraculous way. Which is the greater faith?

Now God is free, of course, to work through ordinary means or extraordinary means, or supernatural means. But never is God uninvolved and shame on anyone for thinking that. Just because God's not doing miracles does not mean that He's remote or uninvolved. And furthermore, as we see in Scripture, miracles have a distinct purpose and by God's design they are extremely rare. It's not necessary to invent a miraculous explanation for every extraordinary turn of events in order to give God due credit for accomplishing His will in human affairs. He's always doing that. Miracles or no. And, in fact, it's a corruption of the whole point of faith to imagine that someone with a craving for miracles is somehow more spiritual than the believer who is content to trust providence. There's nothing about the Charismatic quest for miracles that is super-sanctified. It's the opposite. The whole message of Hebrews 11 is that faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. They endured as seeing Him who is invisible. And even the way He works is deliberately invisible, normally. Based on the description of faith in Hebrews 11, it ought to be clear that an obsessive itching after miraculous phenomena is hardly the epitome of true faith. And it furthermore downgrades the biblical concept of miracles to imagine that everything unusual qualifies as a miracle. Worst of all, that kind of thinking fosters superstition. And when we examine the Charismatic Movement as a whole, looking at the entire worldwide phenomena, it is impossible to resist the conclusion that Charismatics often mistake superstition for faith.

I hope you picked that up from Conrad this morning. That was really his whole point. Superstition...here's a definition, another one...superstition is an irrational awe or fear of the unknown, resulting in credulity regarding the supernatural. It's an irrational, unjustifiable, callow sort of naivety regarding claims that are made about mysterious religious teachings or supernatural

phenomena...superstition. In short, it's a kind of spiritual gullibility, a devotion to a religious notion that lacks any sound biblical or rational basis. And while I'm giving definitions, here's a more or less technical definition of providence. Providence is God's continuous involvement with His creation whereby He preserves and governs all His creations from the greatest to the least so that in accord with His perfect will and design, He sovereignly orders everything He has made to accomplish everything He intends for His own glory.

Now think this through. I just gave you that very straightforward definition which is really no more or less than what we mean when we speak of the sovereignty of God. That's what **Ephesians 1:11** means when it says, "God works all things according to the counsel of His own will." And I want to stress this. Regardless of what it may sound like, the doctrine of providence is not held only by Calvinists. In fact, one of the most interesting discussions of providence I know, is from an Arminian theologian named W.B. Pope, he was a nineteenth century Methodist from Manchester, England and he wrote a three-volume work that he titled, *Compendium of Christian Theology* and it's Wesleyan Arminianism, I don't recommend it or anything. But it's interesting that on the last page of his first volume, at the end of a long chapter on the subject of divine providence, he said this, quote; "Providence is the most comprehensive term in the language of theology. It is the background of all the several departments of religious truth. It penetrates and fills the whole compass of relations of man with His maker. It connects the unseen God with the visible creation. And the visible creation with the work of redemption, and redemption with personal salvation, and personal salvation with the end of all things."

It's a great statement. And I love how he stresses the personal aspect of God's providence. He also said this, quote: "As the Creator makes the universe an instrument for the accomplishment of His purpose, He watches its operation and is intimately present to all its processes and developments."

Now, this is an Arminian theologian, but he is acknowledging the biblical truth that God not only sovereignly oversees everything that happens in His creation, but He is personally involved at the most intimate level in every development and every process that occurs in the outworking of history. There's nothing that God's not involved in. And nothing that He doesn't control and govern and oversee. And furthermore, providence means that God always overrules the evil intentions of every fallen creation. Not one human sinner or demonic power will ever succeed in his rebellion against God. And God will triumph completely regardless of what it looks like at any moment. God's purposes will not be thwarted. His plan cannot be derailed. And everything God has decreed will come to pass to the letter, no more, no less, His will will be done on earth as it is in heaven. That's not some high Calvinist notion of divine sovereignty. That is basic Christian doctrine. And if you believe less than that, your view of God is sub-Christian.

The word "providence" is one of those words like Trinity. It's a useful and important theological shorthand expression that describes what Scripture emphatically teaches but the term itself is not used at all in the King James Bible. You will find the word "providence" once or twice in select modern English translations. The NIV, for example, uses it only once in Job chapter 10 chapter 12 where Job prays to God, "You gave me life and showed me kindness, and in Your providence You

watched over my spirit.” That’s the proper sense of the word. It speaks of God’s constant care and loving kindness. And, in fact, in every other modern, English, Hebrew word, it’s translated in that text “care.” Your care has preserved my spirit. And that’s a good synonym for providence. It’s the intimate care of God for His creation, everything He has created.

The doctrine of divine providence is stressed, for example, in [James 4:15](#), I preached on this last week where James tells us, “You ought to pray. If the Lord wills we will live and do this or that,” and the clear implication there is that God governs the success or the failure of our plans and He does that by the exercise of His own free will. If God wills, we’ll do this. James said you should say that all the time. And here in Matthew 10, we have the doctrine of divine providence from the lips of Jesus, verses 29 and 30. “Not one sparrow will fall to the ground apart from Your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all numbered.”

Now, in the time we have left, and we do have time left here, I want to focus specifically on the topic of prophecy because I think among mild Charismatics and Reformed Charismatics and these open but cautious continuationists, this topic is a breeding ground for more confusion than any other. I’m convinced by all the clear commands and the best examples of Scripture, that God would have us seek understanding and guidance by looking in the more sure Word of Scripture, than listening to the declarations of some uncredentialed prophet who frankly would admit if he’s honest, that he’s often mistaking his own imagination for revelation from God. That’s why they’re wrong all the time.

So what does this have to do with providence? I’m glad you asked. I am willing to acknowledge that God has sometimes employed my intuitive hunches, or spontaneous notions, or subliminal logic, or unconscious thoughts, or whatever, to order my steps providentially. That does happen some times. I emphatically deny that that is a form of prophetic revelation because it’s notoriously fallible. And following your sense of intuition is a bad way to determine what to do. It will often get you into trouble. It will get you into trouble at least as often as it works out well. To regard your sense of intuition as a gift of prophecy, or to claim that it’s a kind of special revelation that God is leading you by, to do that is really no different, really no better than what pagan fortune tellers do and these occult clairvoyants on the 900 numbers you can call in and get guidance from. You might as well do that.

But precisely that kind of prophecy has become a staple in the Charismatic Movement, even in the best districts of the Charismatic Movement. You know, as I said yesterday, it used to be that speaking in tongues was the quintessential Charismatic gift. If you didn’t speak in tongues, you just weren’t Spirit-filled, and quite possibly weren’t saved at all if you didn’t speak in tongues. That idea, that way of thinking has more or less given way and modern prophecy has superseded tongues in that role, especially among so-called Reformed Charismatics. But that is as far from the principle, the Reformation principle of *sola scriptura* as it is possible to get. And virtually all of the best known modern Charismatic prophets have left catastrophe in their wake. I said yesterday, I think Wayne Grudem is the main one responsible for giving the modern prophets its credibility. He wrote his doctoral dissertation and from that wrote an influential book on the subject, he baptized human intuition and labeled it divine prophecy. And Grudem himself is not unaware of the abuses he has

unleashed. In fact, he pleads with Charismatics to stop referring to their Sibylline launches as a word from the Lord. But it's hard for me to see that as anything more than a semantic dodge. How is it less confusing to call a clairvoyant idea a prophecy than it is to say it's a word from God? If it's a prophecy, it is a word from God. In fact, it's actually worse to call it a prophecy because you could paraphrase in your own words something you thought God told you. But if you say it's a prophecy, according to the biblical usage of that term, you are essentially claiming that God put the very words in your mouth. To claim that an intuition or some sense of extra-sensory perception is a prophecy, to do that is to claim that God has revealed something He has not revealed. And make no mistake, this happens all the time. There is probably no more out-spoken advocate of modern prophecy today than Mike Bickle. I mentioned him yesterday. He was the pastor to the Kansas City Prophets when they were at the peak of their fame in the 1990's before it came to light that some of the Kansas City Prophets were guilty of gross sexual sins and other secret indiscretions. But today, Mike Bickle heads the International House of Prayer in Kansas City, Missouri. I think John or somebody yesterday said, "That's in Kansas," and some Kansans came to me and said, "Please straighten that out. It's on the Missouri side of Kansas City. Yeah, thank you...you're welcome.

But today, he's the pastor of IHOP, the International House of Prayer. This is a highly influential but notoriously wreckless sect or denomination, or band of teachers. I don't know what to call them. I don't think they even call themselves a church. They function that way sometimes. There's a branch of this group in Pasadena. Their fame, as I said, is tied to their prophetic gifts. You can go to this group in Pasadena and get a prophetic reading that frankly is no more valuable and no more accurate than the reading you might get from Miss Cleo and the psychic hotline. How do I know they're so inaccurate? Because Mike Bickle admits it. There's a video of him on line. I referred to this obliquely yesterday. Let me describe it for you. A video of him on line in which he acknowledges based on 40-plus years of his own experience in the Charismatic Movement that at least 80 percent of all Charismatic signs and wonders are simply fake. If you want to look it up, it's a two-part video titled, "Manifestations of the Spirit: Real or Fake." And it comes in parts 1 and 2. Just look it up.

Bickle says he's been in thousands of Charismatic meetings and he is convinced that by a very large margin, most of the phenomena that is touted as the Holy Spirit working is simply fake. Those are his exact words. Six minutes and ten seconds in to part 1 he says this, and I quote, "Most of it is fake. The majority of manifestations are not caused by the Holy Spirit," unquote. But he says, he goes on to say, "He's nevertheless willing to allow what's fake for the sake of what is real." How much does he think is fake? Well six seconds in to part 2 he says, quote: "In the last 20 years, I have conducted in manifestations meetings," these are meetings, by the way, he has conducted, he's not sitting in on somebody else's meeting, "I have conducted...lost my place here...Oh, I have concluded in manifestation meetings all over the world," and again he says I've been to several thousand of them, a couple thousand at least 80 percent of them are not real," unquote.

That's a cynical view of the Holy Spirit's gifts, isn't it? He goes on to say that even the supposedly accurate prophecies frequently get misinterpreted, doesn't give a percentage on that, but even a generous figure of 50 percent precision means that their prophecies are wrong at least nine times out of ten. That's actually a higher degree of accuracy than they typically can claim even for

themselves. And, frankly, it's a worse batting average than even my intuition. It's no better and no more helpful than the newspaper horoscope. There is no way this practice should be canonized and attributed to the Holy Spirit. But what about those rare occasions when our intuition proves correct? How do we explain that? Something we dreamed about corresponds to something in real life. Or a sense of foreboding motivates us to change our plans. And it turns out to be a good thing.

Most of us have had experiences like that. Everyone has unexplained thoughts that seem to leap from nowhere into our minds. Most people likewise have hunches and instincts. Sometimes you just feel like you know a thing is true, but you can't give an account at how you arrived at knowledge like that rationally. I have the same sense of intuition even before I was a Christian so I don't think it's a spiritual gift. It may seem like you have ESP, or ESPN 2, or whatever. It's like *déjà vu*, this feeling, only backwards. I happen to think that that sense of intuition is probably more rational than we can explain because there are thoughts in our head that aren't necessarily at the forefront of our consciousness. Things we know, the things we've heard, things we learned long ago that leap back to our minds at exactly the right time. It's not a revelation. It's not a supernatural gift from God because, as I said, it has such a poor track record and I had the same ability before I was saved. When my sense of intuition is right, I can tell you, it is very impressive. I've had moments of intuition that I could have parleyed into a fortune if I were the type of charlatan who is willing to claim he has a prophetic gift even if he knows he really doesn't. I certainly don't have that gift. For the most part, my intuition is grossly fallible, and ordinarily it's wrong. I don't trust it at all, even though my experiences probably a lot like yours, there are times when I feel compelled to follow my intuition.

And that happens, by the way, only when I don't have a rational, or sensible, or biblical idea of what to do. Maturity has taught me to hold off trusting my intuition and try to understand facts and reasons and the potential results of my actions before I act. And, in fact, I would say that's what maturity is about to a very large degree.

But how do we understand that inner sense, especially when God seems to use it to prompt us to pray, or to witness, or to duck and run at exactly the right moment? Because, let's be honest, that kind of thing does happen to most of us from time to time. Here's the point. I do believe that God might providentially use a spontaneous thought in my head to accomplish something wonderful. But that's what it is, and nothing more. It is a remarkable providence, not a prophecy. As I've been saying, God ultimately controls and uses everything providentially. And here's the problem. That is as true of my sins as it is of the thoughts in my head. God can and does use them all for His good purposes. The fact that He uses an idea in my mind to achieve some good purpose doesn't make the idea itself inspired. It also doesn't make a bad idea good just because God uses it for good.

Now think this through with me. Since intuition is fallible, and almost everyone agrees that our intuition is actually far more wrong than it is right, we shouldn't make much of it. And furthermore, since intuition is fallible, it cannot be considered revelation, even when it happens to be uncannily right in an instant or two. If one or two of your guesses happens to prove accurate alongside a gaggle of dozens of failed prognostications, you should still be wary of granting your premonitions the

status of some supernatural spiritual gift. Or even ordering your life by them. Don't do that. That's foolish. People who think moments of intuition are God speaking with a private message, people like that invariably become superstitious. They foolishly order their lives by their feelings. They commit the sin of trusting too much in their own hearts and they diminish the more sure word of prophecy. No one who knows church history, no one who truly understands the concept of spiritual maturity can deny that Christians who follow the voice in their heads often fall into error and embarrassment and disappointment all the time, and it can be, and it often is, spiritually disastrous. **Proverbs 28:26** says, "He who trusts his own heart is a fool." By the way, we don't have time to go into it, but seriously I urge you to look this subject up in church history. Pay attention when you read Christian biographies. There have been some great Christians who thinking God was somehow giving them private messages through this sense of intuition or feeling, utterly embarrass themselves, or in some cases made shipwreck of their lives.

Back to Matthew 10, and I'll wrap this up quickly. Think about this. If we really believe that not one sparrow falls to the ground apart from God's watchful eye and all-wise plan, and every hair on each head is specifically known by Him, then we don't need to invent phony miracles, or manufacture supernatural phenomena, or imagine that God is speaking fallible words of revelation into our minds in order to justify the conviction that He is personally involved with each one of us. If phony miracles and false prophecies or fabricated signs and wonders somehow make you feel more confident that God is imminent and personally involved in your life, then you are hanging your confidence on a false premise and you need to delve into the study of divine providence. It's a simple basic elementary Christian truth.

Paul taught it to the pagan philosophers on Mars Hill. He is not far from each one of us, for in Him we live, and move, and exist. And even some of the pagan poets have said, "We're also His children." Start your study with Psalm 139 where David celebrates God's intimate personal knowledge of him and his unbroken involvement in his life without any reference to any miracle or Charismatic phenomena whatsoever. **Jeremiah 23:23**, "Am I a God who is near, declares the Lord? And not a God far off?" Indeed, He is always nearer than most Charismatics dream and He is certainly more intimately and faithfully involved in every detail of our lives than the standard Charismatic teaching encourages its followers to believe. Let's pray.

Lord, as the Psalmist says, you are intimately acquainted with all our ways. You hem us in behind and before, You lay Your hand upon us. You're there even when we are insensible to Your presence. Where could we go from Your Spirit? Where could we ever flee from Your presence? We know from Your Word that we couldn't. You're never remote, even when our feelings may suggest otherwise. Give us faith, true faith, and grace to believe that to order our lives accordingly. We pray in Christ's name. Amen.