

“Interpreting God’s Providence”
Acts 27:21-24, 31; 28:1-6
(Preached at Trinity, February 11, 2009)

I’m supplying these notes for the benefit of busy pastors who may be engaged in bi-vocational work, feeling the pressure of preparing to preach twice on the Lord’s Day while trying to balance full-time secular work as well as caring for their families. While the notes of another man are no substitute for personal study, I pray that these may aid in the process of preparing to preach.

Disclaimer: These are the actual notes I bring with me to the pulpit, which I follow loosely. They are not designed for publication. While I try to make every effort to give proper credit to my sources from the pulpit, adequate citations will sometimes be absent from my notes. If anyone feels their intellectual material has been used without adequate citation, please contact me and I’ll make immediate correction giving credit.

1. After standing before Governor Festus and King Agrippa Paul was loaded onto a ship to set sail for Rome.
After a few days at sea they were faced with a terrible storm that raged day after day. All seemed hopeless, yet Paul continued to hold faith in God.
Acts 27:22-25 – “And now I exhort you to be of good cheer: for there shall be no loss of *any man’s* life among you, but of the ship. ²³ For there stood by me this night the angel of God, whose I am, and whom I serve, ²⁴ Saying, Fear not, Paul; thou must be brought before Caesar: and, lo, God hath given thee all them that sail with thee. ²⁵ Wherefore, sirs, be of good cheer: for I believe God, that it shall be even as it was told me.”
2. Finally the ship ran aground on the island of Malta. All 276 people on board made it to shore shivering in the cold and were immediately received by the inhabitants of the island.
3. As I’ve stated before, the last chapters of the Book of Acts are a narrative of Paul’s experiences from Caesarea to Rome. As with many of the narratives of the Bible these passages are not theological discourses but still often contain rich truths for consideration.
I’ve been setting before you various observations as we’ve been making our way to the end of the book.
4. Tonight I want to combine a small section in the previous chapter with these early verses of **Chapter 28**. These verses are a rich testimony to the Providence of God as He rules the events of our life. God has made it clear to Paul that He is in absolute control. Everything is unfolding according to God’s eternal purpose and decree.
5. God’s Providence is one of the ways He has revealed His existence to humanity. It isn’t a perfect revelation. For a perfect revelation we have to turn to Scripture.
We read in Chapter 1 of the 1689 London Baptist Confession:
“The Holy Scripture is the only sufficient, certain, and infallible rule of all saving knowledge, faith and obedience. Although the light of nature, and the works of creation and providence do so far manifest the goodness, wisdom, and power of God, as to leave men inexcusable; yet are they not sufficient to give that knowledge of God and his will which is necessary unto salvation.”
6. Providence is not a perfect indication of God’s will or purposes. Men have often grossly misinterpreted God’s Providence. Tonight I want to go back and take another look at this passage as it applies to understanding God’s providence.

I. The first thing we have to understand about God's providence is God is free to work with or without the use of means – but He normally works through the use of means. God is sovereign over “second causes.”

A. How do we reconcile **Verses 22 & 31 of Chapter 27?**

1. If God told Paul that not one life would be lost why did Paul then declare that if anyone left the ship they could not be saved?
2. Are God's decrees dependent upon the actions of men?
3. This has been used as an argument against the doctrine of predestination. They argue, if God's counsels are absolutely fixed they should come to pass no matter what the circumstance.
4. This reveals a total misunderstanding of God's use of means.
5. John Dick, Scottish pastor of the 19th Century wrote:
“When God decreed an event, he, at the same time decreed that it should take place in consequence of a train of other events, or as the result of certain previous circumstances. Thus, he did not propose to save Paul and his companions unconditionally, by means of the seamen remaining on board to manage the ship, till it should be driven on the coast of Melita. In the same manner, he has not determined to save sinners, let them live as they will; but he has chosen them to salvation, ‘through sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth.’”

B. Although God is sovereign over all of His creation working all things according to His good pleasure He most often works through the use of means or second causes.

1. God is also sovereign over the second causes
2. For example, God ordained that Christ would die on the cross as a substitutionary sacrifice for sinners. He also ordained the actions of Judas Iscariot in betraying Christ. He also ordained the actions of Caiaphas and the counsel as well as the actions of Pontius Pilate. All of these were the means God used in carrying out His purpose

C. God can work with or without the use of means

London Confession, Chapter 5 – of Divine Providence

“. . .there is not anything befalls any by chance, or without His providence; yet by the same providence He ordereth them to fall out according to the nature of second causes, either necessarily, freely, or contingently. God in His ordinary providence maketh use of means, yet is free to work without, above, and against them at His pleasure.”

Some examples:

1. All healing comes from God. He can heal supernaturally, yet God usually uses the means of the body's natural defenses, as well as medicines and other medical care.
2. God provides our daily bread. He caused manna to fall from heaven. He multiplied the loaves and fishes. The normal means of God providing for us, however, is by blessing our labors.
3. God decreed judgment against Israel and then used the Assyrians as His instrument of judgment.
4. God used the heathen king, Cyrus to deliver Israel from Babylon
Isaiah 44:28 – “That saith of Cyrus, *He is my shepherd, and shall perform all my pleasure: even saying to Jerusalem, Thou shalt be built; and to the temple, Thy foundation shall be laid.*”

5. God has chosen to use people in the sending forth of the Gospel message.
2 Corinthians 4:7 – “But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us.”
 6. God didn’t have to use the sailors to save all the people on the ship but they were God’s means of deliverance.
God could have calmed the seas or another other means He chose to use.
- D. It also reminds us of our responsibility in the face of God’s providence
1. God is sovereign over our salvation and over our sanctification but we still read:
Philippians 2:12 – “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.”
 2. God has elected men unto salvation, but will they be saved if we don’t bring them the Gospel?
 3. We believe in God’s sovereignty over our life but it is foolish not to take care of our bodies. We should try to eat healthy foods, take vitamins, go for regular physical exams.
If we have a lifestyle of fatty foods and inactivity should we be surprised when the doctor tells us we have a blockage.
 4. God told Paul that they would be saved. But doesn’t He have the right to demand certain responsibility from those on board?
- II. We must be careful in interpreting every calamity as God’s judgment
- A. Shortly after arriving on the island Paul was bitten by a poisonous snake
1. Some have presumed that it wasn’t really a poisonous snake
 - a. The natives of the island would have been familiar with the snakes of the region.
 - b. They would have seen people bitten before and knew what to expect.
 - c. It’s unlikely that Luke, a physician would have mistaken the bite of a poisonous snake from a harmless one.
 - d. Within a short while Paul should have experienced severe swelling followed by death
Acts 28:6 – “Howbeit they looked when he should have swollen, or fallen down dead suddenly”
 2. The Maltese people immediately concluded that Paul must be a horrible sinner under the judgment of God.
Acts 28:4 – “And when the barbarians saw the *venomous* beast hang on his hand, they said among themselves, No doubt this man is a murderer, whom, though he hath escaped the sea, yet vengeance suffereth not to live.”
- B. God sends trials and suffering upon our lives for various reasons
1. He sends affliction to prove our faith genuine
1 Peter 1:6-7 – “Wherein ye greatly rejoice, though now for a season, if need be, ye are in heaviness through manifold temptations: ⁷ That the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ:

2. Sometimes God sends suffering to strengthen us
 - a. Suffering causes us to look more to Christ and looking more to Christ is the source of Christian strength
 - b. As we draw closer to God Satan loses his ability to attack us
James 4:6-8 – “But he giveth more grace. Wherefore he saith, God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble. ⁷ Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. ⁸ Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you. Cleanse *your* hands, ye sinners; and purify *your* hearts, ye double minded.”
 - c. God is drawing us ever nearer to Himself. He is conforming us more and more to the likeness of His Son. He is making us holy
Romans 8:29 – “For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate *to be* conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren.”
 3. Sometimes suffering is the result of God’s chastening
 - a. Samuel Bolton – “God’s house of correction is His school of instruction. When an affliction comes upon us, then we are ready to listen to the indictments of sin, the checks of conscience, and the reproofs of god, and become ready to abase ourselves and humble ourselves under them.”
 - b. God chastens His own children
Hebrews 12:6 – “For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth.”
 - c. God chastens His own as an expression of His love for us
 Because He loves us - “For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth”
Revelation 3:19 – “As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten: be zealous therefore, and repent.”
- C. We must resist making declarations of God’s judgment upon others when they are going through trials of adversity
1. This was the error of Job’s three friends.
 2. I’ve often heard people pronouncing God’s judgment upon others.
 - a. It may well be God’s chastening hand
 - b. He may choose to use you to teach your brother as he goes through a trial but you must never presume or make declarations you know nothing about.

III. God is able to work above the natural order in order to accomplish His purpose

- A. Paul should have died
 1. It was a poisonous snake. Paul received a bite from the snake but he did not die. His hand didn’t even swell.
 2. Paul was miraculously preserved by God. This was a fulfillment of Mark’s Gospel.
Mark 16:17-18 – “And these signs shall follow them that believe; In my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues; ¹⁸ They shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover.”

3. God had purposed that Paul would go to Rome. Nothing would hinder God's purpose.

Isaiah 46:9-10 – “Remember the former things of old: for I *am* God, and *there is* none else; I *am* God, and *there is* none like me, ¹⁰ Declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times *the things* that are not yet done, saying, My counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure:”

- B. We must never presume upon God's miraculous works of Providence
 1. There have been groups that have taken the Mark passage and this passage and developed a doctrine of snake handling as evidence of true faith.
 2. There have been some who have refused medical care claiming to trust God for healing.
 3. Others have placed themselves in needless danger while claiming to trust God.

Matthew 4:6-7 – “And saith unto him, If thou be the Son of God, cast thyself down: for it is written, He shall give his angels charge concerning thee: and in *their* hands they shall bear thee up, lest at any time thou dash thy foot against a stone. ⁷ Jesus said unto him, It is written again, Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God.”
- C. We must never doubt that God is able to provide using whatever means He chooses.
 1. We can pray with confidence for those who are sick or dying
 2. We can pray with confidence when we are facing severe opposition

Psalms 18:2-7 – “The LORD *is* my rock, and my fortress, and my deliverer; my God, my strength, in whom I will trust; my buckler, and the horn of my salvation, *and* my high tower. ³ I will call upon the LORD, *who is worthy* to be praised: so shall I be saved from mine enemies.”

Conclusion: - final implications

1. We must understand that God is working His purpose upon the earth. Sometimes He works through the actions of men but in doing so He is still fulfilling that which He decreed from eternity – He has decreed second causes.
2. We must not assume that every calamity experienced by our brother is the chastening of God. Not all suffering is the result of God's rebuke.
3. We must never look upon God's providence in a superstitious manner trying to find some mystical reason for things that happen.
We shouldn't pretend to always know the mind of God.
4. We must look to God with confidence that He is accomplishing His purpose and we should seek to love His providence.