

Lesson 8

Seeing Providence in Your Life

Introduction

God is always working. Scripture inside both Testaments urges us to wait on the Lord:

The LORD is good to those who wait for him, to the person who seeks him. It is good to wait quietly for salvation from the LORD.

– Lamentations 3.25-26

Therefore, brothers and sisters, be patient until the Lord's coming. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth and is patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains.

– James 5.7

As we wait on the Lord, we move in absolute trust that He will work in such a way that brings Him glory as He sustains and provides for us.

Blessed be the LORD, for he has heard the sound of my pleading. The LORD is my strength and my shield; my heart trusts in him, and I am helped. Therefore my heart celebrates, and I give thanks to him with my song.

– Psalm 28.6-7

How good are you in putting these passages to practice? Many of us have a strong knowledge and comprehension of Biblical teaching. Many more of us have difficulty in applying it as effectively as we should. When life presses in, how adept are we in looking for God's providential care? Some may honestly answer, "not very much." It is easy to want control, take charge, and mainly depend on our own strength. If we do this, we may very well miss all the work God is doing behind the scenes to get us through.

What causes us to overlook or lose focus on the working of God?

A Poor Prayer Life

It would be very easy to say that many Christians today are running on fumes, physically and spiritually. You were not built to function this way. And you must not allow it to go on indefinitely. One of the most effective ways to fuel your spiritual life is through prayer. Romans 12.12c contains an imperative:

Be persistent in prayer.

Here Paul is teaching that we must persevere in prayer and be strongly devoted to it. In fact, one Bible dictionary defines *persistent* in this verse as "to attach oneself; to persist obstinately¹⁵; to keep on; or be firm toward." Could you say your present prayer life is currently in such a state that it is enriching your

¹⁵ Liddell, Henry George, Robert Scott, Henry Stuart Jones, and Roderick McKenzie. *A Greek-English Lexicon*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996, p. 1515.

relationship with God? Prayer is where we invite God into our life and ask for His helping hand. It is also a time where we realign our priorities to be congruent with God's priorities.

Prayer only in time of crisis, over a meal, or at inconsistent times and places falls well short of what is taught in Romans 12.12c.

Too Much Self-Reliance

We are not as big, powerful, or smart as we may think. We are finite, fragile creatures who dwell one step away from eternity. While we know this in our heart, human pride can win out. One passage that describes the self-reliant spirit we need to rid ourselves of is found in James:

Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will travel to such and such a city and spend a year there and do business and make a profit." Yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring—what your life will be! For you are like vapor that appears for a little while, then vanishes. Instead, you should say, "If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that." But as it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil.

– James 4.13-16

What do we learn here?

Don't live as if God doesn't exist

Look again at v. 13-14a. We must not run our life, ignoring God, disrespecting who He is. It is presumptuous to think that we are in control and call all the shots. Life is complex and uncontrollable. A person is a fool who thinks he or she can order life without regard for God.

Don't live as if you are invincible

James' words in v. 14b are truth. Your life is a vapor. It is here for a little time and then vanishes away. Everything in this life is temporary, brief, and short. It is foolish to plan as if you'll always be here.

Include God in all your plans

Now, look at v. 15: *Instead you should say, "If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that."* We must involve God at every step, in every turn, in every chapter of life, and through every change that comes. Think of the confidence you will gain by trusting God, who sees everything perfectly. Think of the peace that comes from believing in a God who is controlling all things for His purposes and wants to make us a part of them.

May we follow the admonition of Solomon:

Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not rely on your own understanding; in all your ways know him, and he will make your paths straight. Don't be wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD and turn away from evil.

– Proverbs 3.5-7

Improper Focus

In 2 Corinthians 4.8-12 Paul speaks of all the trouble he experienced as an apostle. He was afflicted, perplexed, persecuted, and struck down. He was constantly being given over to death. In fact, he says,

death was at work in him, 4.12. This was Paul's life as an apostle. It may be even impossible for us to adequately imagine what it was like.

Now, let's look at v. 16: *therefore we do not give up*. He says this despite all the physical difficulties, mental anguish, and emotional tolls he experienced. In fact, a close reading of 2 Corinthians 4.8-5.8 reveals how Paul framed his circumstances:

- Afflicted, but not crushed, 4.8a
- Perplexed, but not in despair, 4.8b
- Persecuted, but not abandoned, 4.9a
- Struck down, but not destroyed, 4.9b
- *We do not give up*, 4.16
- *We are always confident*, 5.6
- *We are confident*, 5.8

How did Paul do it? Notice what he says regarding his focus:

So we do not focus on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.

– 2 Corinthians 4.18

How can we do it?

We view things through a spiritual lens. *Momentary light affliction is producing for us an absolutely incomparable eternal weight of glory*, 4.17. The problems, stressors, and difficulties of life are not without meaning and purpose. When Paul was facing these difficulties, he didn't rely upon himself. He trusted in God and he focused on the weight of glory he would experience after this life because he relied on the strength of God to get through.

We must:

Seek the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things.

– Colossians 3.1-2

Open Your Eyes

It's not about you, it's about God and what He is doing in your life. Remember Ephesians 1.11:

In him we have also received an inheritance, because we were predestined according to the plan of the one who works out everything in agreement with the purpose of his will,

God *works out everything in agreement with the purpose of His will*. What are some ways He is working now in your life?

Who are the people God has placed in your life?

Your spiritual development was never intended to happen by yourself. Through the years, God has placed certain people in your life to mentor and train you into the person you are today. Take a few

moments to make a list. Maybe it starts with your parents and their influence and provision in your life. And the list should go from there. It could be:

- Certain family members who invested their time with you during your formative years.
- Certain shepherds or ministers who have come along in your life.
- A co-worker or friend at church who you have bonded with.
- Your list could go on and on as you focus on how these people have enriched your life and helped you draw closer to God.

Where are the places God worked to help you know Him more?

Whether you have never roamed far from where you grew up, or if you presently live far away from “home,” God has been working through those circumstances to draw you closer to Him. At the present, He may be working in ways you can’t even realize in order to provide you with help and sustainment during a future crisis.

In 1997 my wife and our 18-month-old daughter moved to western South Dakota. We were in our early 20’s. I had been preaching full-time for around a year and a half. No one in our family lived anywhere nearby. Rapid City was 1100 miles from where we grew up in Arkansas and around 1300 miles from where my parents lived in Louisville, KY. During this time God worked to strengthen our marriage and family and increase our dependence upon Him and with our brothers and sisters in Christ. Within a year of moving there, we went through a major financial crisis after a deceptive church member swindled us out of thousands of dollars. He ran from justice for a number of years before being caught a few states away. In the meantime, we were left to sort out the issues with the bank . . . and with matters inside the local church. Let’s just say it was a very stressful time for a 24 year-old young and mostly inexperienced preacher.

Looking back now (almost 25 years later), I can see God’s providence working as He used that occasion to teach me to not be so rash & naïve in my decisions. He also used that season to teach me that it is OK to ask for help. I had no way to repay what I now owed to the bank and a congregation in the south who helped with our support came to our aid without hesitation. In the years before God in His providence moved the pieces of the puzzle together where my relationship with that congregation was warm and personal. Before I even knew it, He was preparing a way to get me through at a later time when I would need help. I would not have learned those lessons in the way I did had I not been in that place at that time.

Where are some of the places (job situations/career choices, etc.) God has providentially placed you so that you could grow and stretch yourself spiritually? How did He work while you were there? How different would your life be had you not moved there?

Can you see God’s providence at work by your being a part of the spiritual family where you presently live?

We live in a time where many are discounting the importance of the local church. We hear, *you don’t have to be a part of a church to be a Christian*. We also hear, *I don’t want to get too close to people who may*

hurt or be hypocritical to me. These attitudes arise for the cynicism that is so prevalent in our culture. May we come to resist them.

As a son or daughter of God, your heavenly Father has placed you inside a family who is there to support and encourage you. Christianity was never designed as a place to be alone. Congregational life is where we come together to love, build up, comfort, and help one another. How has God been working providentially through:

- Loving shepherds who care for your soul?
- Faithful preachers and teachers whose knowledge and insights have helped you grow?
- Fellow brothers and sisters who share similar life experiences and have been able to share their wisdom and experiences to help you along your journey?

Where would you be if God had not provided these things?

Conclusion

How adept are you in looking for God's providential care? God's presence is all around and His work on your behalf covers every aspect of your life. Take a personal inventory. It should not be hard to see God's hands at work.

LORD my God, you have done many things— your wondrous works and your plans for us; none can compare with you. If I were to report and speak of them, they are more than can be told.

– Psalm 40.5

The person who trusts in the LORD, whose confidence indeed is the LORD, is blessed.

– Jeremiah 17.7

For Thought and Reflection

1. What impedes the prayer life of many Christians? How strong is your prayer life presently?
2. In Romans 12.12c, what does *persistent* mean?
3. How does prayer and seeing God's providence go hand in hand?
4. How can self-reliance cloud your vision on seeing God's providence?

5. What blessings come from including God in your plans?
6. How did Paul get through his sufferings?
7. How can we come to view life through a spiritual lens?
8. Who are some of the people God has placed in your life to draw you closer to Him?
9. What are some of the places you've been (a place in the country; job; career; etc.) where God has blessed those circumstances in order to build your spiritual life?
10. How has God been working through your membership in the local church to encourage and build you up?