

Living in Light of God's Providence

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[0 : 00] Well, as mentioned earlier, I am not Matthew Capone.

I am Drew Arrington, and I am an ordained minister in the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church, serving as a chaplain here at Fort Carson. And Matthew and the CMP session have graciously given me the privilege and honor to explore with you today the topic of God's providence as we find it in the early years of Elijah's ministry in 1 Kings 17.

You know, it's times like these that I'm really thankful that we are part of a confessional church because you at least have some idea of what we're talking about when we say God's providence. There are many Christians that do not, but thankfully we are not among them because we already considered this morning question 11 in the Shorter Catechism. So you're not unfamiliar with the topic.

It's a topic that the 18th century English poet, William Cowper, was not unaccustomed to either. And he wrote a lot about God's providence in his hymn, *God Moves in a Mysterious Way*.

[1 : 22] And the first two stanzas of that hymn are there in your bulletin this morning. And you can take a look at those. And in that, he begins to explore an aspect of God's providence that's not covered in the catechism.

Mainly, Cooper explores the mysterious and unfathomable nature of God's providence. See, often in our experience or in the experience of people that we know, we like to take credit when things are going well.

And as soon as this switch flips, we quickly assail God when things aren't going well. And we hear that oftentimes in what seems like innocent ways.

Questions like, where is God? Is God really in charge? Why would God allow something like that to happen?

You see, when we experience the triumphs of life, we want to take credit for it. It was our skill. It was our hard work.

[2 : 42] It was our ingenuity. But then when tragedy strikes, we charge God with being uncaring or distant or weak.

When there's peace and our relationships, whether it's our marriages, whether it's international relationships, or anywhere in between, are peaceful and things are going well, we're like, yeah, this is great.

I got this. Look what we were able to accomplish. Oh, but let conflict enter in. Let a war start between our friends and our loved ones or between international parties.

And all of a sudden, the question is, well, why would God allow something like that to happen?

When we enjoy the favor of peers or a boss at work, we enjoy the favor of peers or a boss at work, and we get good write-ups, we enjoy great success, we get a promotion or a bump in pay, we're like, yeah, look what I have done, look what I've earned, look at all this hard work, it's finally paying off.

Oh, but have a moment where you don't enjoy that favor at work. where the opposite is true, and you find yourself in a position of disfavor with your boss and with your peers, and you don't get that promotion you thought you deserved.

[4 : 27] You don't get that bump in pay. You don't get that review that you were anticipating. And ho, how we want to charge God with being unfair.

But you know, there's a great thing about God's providence, and it is that it saves the Christian from the seesaw of emotion.

Because if we allow God's providence and the full effect of God's providence to seep into our hearts and into our souls, it will produce peace and stability in our lives.

In today's passage, we see three encounters with God's providence. Encounters that help the Christian understand the providence of God.

Understanding that the providence of God produces peace in perilous times and stability of faith and a world shattered by sin.

[5 : 35] And as we look at this passage, we're encouraged to ask the question, how do we live in light of God's providence? It's a very simple question.

How do we live in light of God's providence? And as we go through the passage, you'll see and we'll ask that question.

But my guess is that as we go through, you're going to identify another question. And it's going to be a nagging question that we'll address at the end.

And I want to see if you will catch it. And so with that in mind, let us pray and then turn our attention to the reading of 1 Kings 17. Join with me in prayer. God, I am thankful.

We are thankful. Lord, that you have given us your scripture. God, that you inspired men of old to write down the words that you would have for us today.

[6 : 40] God, that you through your Holy Spirit preserved the content and the character and the integrity of scripture so that what we have today are your words.

And we thank you that they are powerful today as they were when they were first written because you are the eternal and everlasting God and your word does not change.

Enable your Holy Spirit to drive these words deep into our heart. May they become an ointment for all that hurts and a salve of your healing grace.

In Christ's name we pray. Amen. Alright, so turn with me to 1 Kings. We're going to read the whole chapter and we're going to focus mostly on verses 8 and following.

Now Elijah the Tishbite of Tishbi and Gilead said to Ahab, As the Lord the God of Israel lives before whom I stand there shall be neither dew nor rain these years except by my word.

[7 : 52] And the word of the Lord came to him. Depart from here and turn eastward and hide yourself by the brook Cherith which is east of the Jordan. You shall drink from the brook and I have commanded the ravens to feed you there.

So he went and did according to the word of the Lord. He went and lived by the brook Cherith that is east of the Jordan. And the ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning and bread and meat in the evening and he drank from the brook.

And after a while the brook dried up because there was no rain in the land. Then the word of the Lord came to him arise go to Zarephath which belongs to Sidon and dwell there.

Behold I have commanded a widow there to feed you. So he arose and went to Zarephath and when he came to the gate of the city behold a widow was there gathering sticks and he called to her and said bring me a little water and a vessel that I may drink.

And as she was going to bring it he called to her and said bring me a morsel of bread in your hand. And she said as the Lord your God lives I have nothing baked only a handful of flour in a jar and a little oil in a jug and now I am gathering a couple of sticks that I may go in and prepare it for myself and my son that we may eat it and die.

[9 : 39] And Elijah said to her do not fear go and do as you have said but first make me a little cake of it and bring it to me and afterward make something for yourself and your son for thus says the Lord the God of Israel the jar of flour shall not be spent and the jug of oil shall not be empty until the day that the Lord sends rain upon the earth.

And she went and did as Elijah said and she and her household ate for many days the jar of flour was not spent neither did the jug of oil become empty according to the word of the Lord that he spoke by Elijah.

After this the son of the woman the mistress of the house became ill and his illness was so severe that there was no breath left in him and she said to Elijah what have you against me oh man of God you have come to bring to me bring to my you have come to me to bring my sin to remembrance and to cause the death of my son and he said to her give me your son and he took him from her arms and carried him up into the upper chamber where he lodged and laid him on his own bed and he cried to the Lord oh Lord my God have you brought calamity even upon the widow with whom I sojourn by killing her son then he stretched himself upon the child three times and cried to the Lord oh Lord my God let this child's life come into him again and the Lord listened to the voice of Elijah and the life of the child came into him again and he revived and Elijah took the child and brought

him down from the upper chamber into the house and delivered him to his mother and Elijah said see your son lives and the woman said to Elijah now I know that you are a man of God and that the word of the Lord in your mouth is truth the reading of God's word for this morning well we see here the first evidence or encounter with God's providence is we see that God's providence in a hostile environment

God's providence in a hostile environment now seems strange a very strange providence here that God tells Elijah after the water has run out at the brook to go to Zarephath and it's a strange providence because God is sending him not to the people of Israel he's sending him very much into the heart and home of Jezebel so if you know anything Jezebel is the wife of Ahab the king of Israel and Jezebel was perhaps one of the most single evil influences in Israel at that time and so he's saying hey go into the very heart and home of that evil queen Jezebel and I'm going to provide for you there oh and not only is it the heart and home of Jezebel it's also the heart and home of Baal the God who is trying the people who are trying to make this a rival God to Yahweh and if you know anything about the ancient near east it was believed that gods were limited to a geographic area and that those gods were the gods within those that bounds and they were the ones responsible for health wealth well being but they didn't really have much power outside of their borders and so we see here God is calling Elijah to go into a hostile environment and there he will provide for the prophet you can imagine some of the things that Elijah might be thinking God are you sure are you sure you want to do this after all you are sending me into the home of

[14 : 30] Baal worship the home of Jezebel who's seeking my head in many regards why can't you let me find hospitality among my own people why can't you make water still come from this brook just like you did for Moses and the people of Israel when they were coming out of Egypt you can do it I've heard about it but God has a purpose in sending young Elijah into enemy territory and it is to let him know that God's providence is not limited by geographical borders God's saying to Elijah look I can provide for you here by this brook and I can command ravens to come and feed you with bread and meat morning and evening

I can do the same in the land of your enemy and I am going to show you that I am God not just in Israel but over all creation and this is important it's important for Elijah to know this because if we know anything Elijah is going to be called to be more confrontational with Ahab and Jezebel and the prophets of Baal he's going to need to know that God indeed is sovereign and that God's providence exists even in hostile environments so how are we to live in light of God's providence how are we to live in light of God's providence in hostile environments we trust based on this incident we trust that God has shown himself throughout history throughout the Bible to be a God who is not limited to the borders of Israel that he indeed is the God of all creation that heaven and earth bow before him and that nothing is not under his purview and his power that God's providence extends into the very hostile environments in which we find ourselves hostile environments due to cultural shifts where Christianity has moved from preferred in some cases to being a pariah God is still sovereign whether we find ourselves in a country like ours that still does have some semblance of religious freedom or we find ourselves in a country where there is no such constitutional guarantee

God is still sovereign whether we find ourselves lauded for holding on to our religious convictions or derided for holding on to those convictions we know that God is sovereign whether we are here at home enjoying the relative comfort and peace of the United States or whether we find ourselves in a hostile nation deployed in armed combat we know that God is sovereign and so from this encounter we learn that God's providence extends over any and all hostile environments in which we may find ourselves and in the next encounter we will discover that God's providence is at work in great times of need we see this beginning in verse 10 going through verse 16 that God's providence exists even in times of great need and we see here

Elijah is entering into this enemy territory where God is going to prove that his providence still exists even there and he's to go find a Gentile widow who's going to provide him sustenance and support in his time of great need but it's quite interesting that even in the midst of enemy territory God's calling him to a woman first of all Jewish society men and women don't interact unless you're related to one another so not only is there that going into enemy territory there's being supported by a female and then not only a female that he has to engage with this is a widow if you know anything about the ancient near east and in society today the most vulnerable people group or some of the most vulnerable people in our society are widows we understand that most likely this is a fairly

young widow because she's out gathering sticks and you may think well how do we know that she's young well because she has a son and if the son were of any age he would be the one out picking up sticks not mom so we know that this is likely a young widow with a young child who's not even old enough to go out and pick up sticks to make a fire and what we also notice here is that this widow is in great need what she doesn't need is another mouth to feed but that is exactly what God does

[21 : 05] God brings Elijah and this widow to meet right as Elijah is entering the city and Elijah asks her bring me water bring me bread she says I don't have it she says yes sure to the water she's gonna go get that but when the bread is added she turns and says I don't have anything all I've got is a little bit of flour and a little bit of oil and I'm gathering up these little itty bitty sticks to go make a little itty bitty fire so that I can bake a little bit of bread that my son and I can eat it and then we're gonna die and audacity in some regards or faithfulness of Elijah to say bake me a little bit and bring it to me then go fix your final meal but the widow is willing the widow is willing to take what little bit of what little bit of bread she has and bring it to Elijah and God is faithful to his promises to that widow and the flour never runs out and the oil doesn't go empty until the day that God brings rain upon the earth about two and a half years later oh so we see that

God's providence here is important for Elijah the widow and the son because he shows that he can satisfy them in times of great need not with an abundance but with daily bread providing what they need day by day and it's a provision that makes the difference between life and death life and death in the balance and God providing so how are we to live in light of God's providence when we face times of great need we understand that God does satisfy our need he satisfies it through obedience like Elijah heading out going into hostile enemy territory and having the courage to ask a widow to provide for him

God does meet our needs when we obey and then also as the widow willingly trusted what the prophet promised she willingly took the last bit of wheat and oil and God blessed her for that and we see that too in our obedience and willingness to trust when we come to the Lord's table when we take communion it is just a little bit of bread and a little bit of wine but it is a great reminder that Jesus Christ the bread of life satisfies our greatest need that he through the power of the Holy Spirit sustains and nourishes us even in our times of great need well through this second encounter with God's providence in 1st Kings 17 we're reminded that God does in fact satisfy our greatest need not with bread made of flour and oil but with the bread of life Jesus Christ in our final encounter here with God's providence we discover that even in the depths of human despair God's providence still reigns and that's in the ballots 17 through 24 we see God's providence in the depths of despair God sovereignly ruling even over sin and death and so we encounter here the widow's despair right here God has miraculously continued to multiply the flour and the oil and then her son gets sick and it seems to be a very rapid sickness and decline because she is thrown into the depths of despair and she brings the child's breathless body to Elijah and says

Elijah what have you done have you come here to remind me of my sin and to bring down God's judgment on me because I was a Baal worshiper look at this so she's confronted by her sin but she's also confused your God provided flour and oil but my son we sense her anger and frustration and the prophet perhaps confused and perplexed almost as much as he has says give me your son he runs upstairs puts the child on his bed and he says God what are you doing

[27 : 26] I don't understand it he says God please heal this boy and bring life back to him so he stretches his body over the child that that seems weird it is weird but you know God answers Elijah's prayer and God breathes life back into the child and Elijah comes down the stairs and says here is your son and he's alive and oh this encounter with God's providence is so important obviously it's important for the son because he received his life back but it's important for Elijah because he is once again confirmed by God in his calling to be a prophet God says to

Elijah I will hear you when you call out to me and that will be really important for him when he's standing on Mount Carmel asking God to consume the sacrifice that he's prepared in the face of the Baal the prophets of Baal oh but in this passage it's also important for the widow so I don't know if you caught it but really this instance of where she turns her son over to the prophet leads to the confirmation of her faith verse 11 she says back at the very beginning hey you know as the Lord your God lives she's saying okay yeah sure if your God says it sure I'll believe it maybe it'll work out okay great she's not really convinced it's almost as if she's saying hey what have I got to lose

I got a little bit of flour got a little bit of oil it's only going to make one little bitty cake of bread what have I got to lose sure if your God says he's going to do it here you go and God is faithful but but then in the depths of despair having received her son back look at verse 24 this is what she says now I know that you are a man of God and that the word of the Lord in your mouth is truth it's as if she says look I kind of in desperation was giving you bread previously but now I know that God is God and that what you say about him is true it's as if she has come to the point where she says oh let's forget about

Baal and I am going to cling to the God who demonstrates his providence even in the depths of my despair so what about us how are we to live in light of God's providence when we find ourselves in the depths of despair well we understand looking back at this passage that God's providence extends over sickness that God's providence extends over sin and that God's providence extends over death itself and what that means is that God can use those things for his glory and for our good that is great news for us because if God can raise the widow's son if God can breathe life back into a child who was plagued by the curse of sin and if

God can raise Christ who was sinless and perfect to eternal life then we have great hope hope we have great hope and the promise that God will fulfill what he has said that God will too ensure that we do not experience the eternal corruption of sin death and the grave that we will not experience corruption but that we will experience eternal life well in our final encounter with God's providence we walked through we felt the depth of the widow's despair and we realize that neither God nor the author abandons us or the widow in those depths but that like the widow we too are elevated to the heights of God's providence seeing that he is the one who is in charge of even sin and death itself and that he does that through the incarnation life death resurrection and ascension of Jesus

[33 : 08] Christ well that's all three of the encounters with God's providence and I want to ask you do you have that nagging question that's left with this passage that nagging question is the one that the widow indirectly asks Elijah when she brings her breathless son to him it's the same question that haunts us many of our brothers and sisters in Christ and those who are reluctant to embrace Christ as their savior here it's a nagging question that's something a bit like this how are we to live when we don't see and experience the visible miraculous outpouring of God's providential purposes when we are in the depths of despair and we don't see life being breathed into a loved one who is on their sickbed how are we to persevere in those hostile environments when we don't see

God's providential provision when we don't get the report that we think we were going to get when God doesn't save the battle buddy on our right what are we to do when God doesn't providentially provide in times of great need when that bill goes unpaid when it goes into default when I have to eat rice and beans for the fifth meal of the week what is our recourse when in the depths of despair we feel distant from God's providence what if our experience is more like that of Job what if it's like Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane what if crying and pleading for relief from the cross and that relief doesn't come what if our experience is closer to that of our savior when he's hanging on the cross and he cries out father father why have you forsaken me how are we to live in light of God's providence when there is no miraculous provision when God in his providence removes our comforts reverses his miracles reclaims his mercies or simply allow sin and death to work unchecked William Cooper knew that he called it God's frowning providence and we can draw comfort from believers like William Cooper who in the midst of a great depression that would eventually take his life penned the words that you can read there in your bulletin both on the back and in the middle where we can read about a man who doggedly holds to God's hidden mercy blessings grace and goodness even in the midst of God's frowning providence additionally and probably more importantly than looking to a hymn that somebody else wrote we take comfort in today's passage and we look back at it and other scripture for hope and encouragement when we don't see the miraculous outworking of God's providence we can look back and we can see God's faithfulness in the life of those in the Bible we can look back to our own encounters with God's faithfulness in the past and receive that comfort and encouragement to continue to trust God's providence and when we do that we partner with the Holy Spirit as he reminds us not only of these stories but of our own encounters with God's smiling providence and in this cooperation we are not overcome by doubts but rather we learn to lean into and to trust his providence we learn to trust a God who preserves and governs his creation and his creatures for their good and for his glory and it is to this God that we give both the glory the honor and the power now and forever more let us pray