

The Comfort of God's Providence

God the good Creator of all things, in his infinite power and wisdom, upholds, directs, arranges, and governs all creatures and things, from the greatest to the least, by his perfectly wise and holy providence, to the purpose for which they were created. He governs according to his infallible foreknowledge and the free and unchangeable counsel of his own will. His providence leads to the praise of the glory of his wisdom, power, justice, infinite goodness, and mercy. All things come to pass unchangeably and certainly in relation to the foreknowledge and decree of God, who is the first cause. Thus, nothing happens to anyone by chance or outside of God's providence. -1689 Baptist Confession

What is providence? It is God's unseen activity in the earth bringing about the fulfillment of His will, thereby bringing glory to God in all things.

.. it is God's overlooked, unobserved activity, which is often explained away as circumstance, accident, coincidence, and luck.

... God's providence is so seamlessly woven within the tapestry of our choices, decisions, and actions that (most of the time) it goes completely unnoticed and unacknowledged

... this is clearly illustrated in the life story of Joseph

... God's providence was overseeing everything that had happened to Joseph ... the sinful actions of his brothers, the anger of Potiphar and the lies of his wife ...

... God was at work in everything

There are 2 mistakes we often make regarding God's providence.

First, we tend to only attribute good positive things to God's providence and not the negative problematic things.

[Example. "In God's providence I found a better job." We don't say, "In God's providence I was diagnosed with cancer."]

Second, we think of God's providence as sporadic, intermittent acts rather than an ongoing, never ending, constant reality.

These two mistakes cause us to often miss the handiwork of God's **sanctifying power** in our lives.

The life of Joseph illustrates this well.

1. **God's Providence teaches us not only to wait on God but wait with a good spirit.**

In Genesis 40 Joseph meets two incoming prisoners—a cupbearer ... and a baker.

These two men had somehow offended Pharaoh and he had them thrown prison.

... This was how Joseph had met them.

After arriving in prison both of these men, on the same night, dreamed an odd dream and Joseph interpreted both of them.

- In the case of the **baker** his dream revealed that he was going to die by execution--and he did.
- In the case of the **cupbearer** his dream revealed he was soon going to be released and restored to his old job-- and he was.

The **cupbearer** was so grateful, for the interpretation of Joseph, that he promised he would tell pharaoh about Joseph as soon he was back in the palace

... but he forgot about Joseph for two whole years

... two years Joseph remained in prison

...until...

Now it happened at the end of two full years that Pharaoh had a dream, and behold, he was standing by the Nile. ² And lo, from the Nile there came up seven cows, sleek and fat; and they grazed in the marsh grass. ³ Then behold, seven other cows came up after them from the Nile, ugly and gaunt, and they stood by the other cows on the bank of the Nile. ⁴ The ugly and gaunt

cows ate up the seven sleek and fat cows. Then Pharaoh awoke. ⁵ He fell asleep and dreamed a second time; and behold, seven ears of grain came up on a single stalk, plump and good. ⁶ Then behold, seven ears, thin and scorched by the east wind, sprouted up after them. ⁷ The thin ears swallowed up the seven plump and full ears. Then Pharaoh awoke, and behold, it was a dream. ⁸ Now in the morning his spirit was troubled, so he sent and called for all the magicians of Egypt, and all its wise men. And Pharaoh told them his dreams, but there was no one who could interpret them to Pharaoh. (Gen 41:1-8)

To an unbeliever it might have seemed as though God, like the cupbearer, had forgotten Joseph

... abandoned him in his hour of need

...but that is not the case at all.

During those two additional years while Joseph remained in prison

... he patiently waited

... he just waited for the cupbearer to keep his promise and speak to Pharaoh,

... and while he waited (though he was entirely unaware of anything) ...

... God was hard at work preparing all the details of the circumstances for Joseph's rise to power.

Every one of us has those 'waiting room' experiences.

That time when **nothing changes, prayers are not answered, and situations remain unresolved.**

... Trusting God's providence often means waiting ... without encouragement

And at the right moment, although Joseph was unaware, God's providence shifted from **pause** to **private action**

... by **private action** I mean that God began to work behind the scenes to accomplish His eternal plan and purpose.

Notice...

⁹ Then the chief cupbearer spoke to Pharaoh, saying, "I would make mention today of my own offenses. ¹⁰ "Pharaoh was furious with his servants, and he put me in confinement in the house of the captain of the bodyguard, both me and the chief baker. ¹¹ "We had a dream on the same night, he and I; each of us dreamed according to the interpretation of his own dream. ¹² "Now a Hebrew youth was with us there, a servant of the captain of the bodyguard, and we related them to him, and he interpreted our dreams for us. To each one he interpreted according to his own dream. ¹³ "And just as he interpreted for us, so it happened; he restored me in my office, but he hanged him." (Gen 41:9-13)

Standing near Pharaoh's throne was the king's official cupbearer

... the cupbearer who had been silent for two year

... maybe he forgot, maybe he never could find the opportunity or the right moment

... but on the occasion of Pharaoh's dream for some strange reason suddenly, the cupbearer remembered Joseph...

... however, it's not strange at all if you believe in divine providence.

(In truth the miracle might have been as much in the cupbearer forgetting as it was in him remembering.)

... God's timing is certainly part of the miracle

So, this cupbearer hears Pharaoh speaking of his dreams.

... and he watched as the magicians entered with all their self-assurance

... and then he saw their ego deflate when they realized they could not interpret Pharaoh's dream

... and **suddenly/coincidentally/luckily**

... no, providentially the cupbearer remembered the young Hebrew slave in the prison who could interpret dreams.

If you'll remember from last week's we saw that Potiphar was over Pharaoh's prison—

... he was captain of the guard which meant he was often in close proximity to Pharaoh.

I wonder if Potiphar was in the palace when this cupbearer abruptly said, "*Pharaoh there is a young man in the prison, a Hebrew who was Potiphar's slave at one time...*

... he can interpret dreams."

This was a defining moment and the beginning of Joseph's exaltation.

2. God entrusts those who trust Him

God had prepared Pharaoh for this moment through giving him these dreams.

Joseph was ready because through 12 years of iron discipline his trust did not waver and he remained faithful

I hope you are able to see the mysterious handiwork of God's timetable in the sequence of these events.

Joseph is brought to Pharaoh because Pharaoh has come to a place of desperation.

... On any other day Joseph, the prisoner would have never been allowed to speak to Pharaoh

... but here he is, and the mighty Pharaoh can't wait to hear what this poor Hebrew slave prisoner has to say.

... Don't tell me that God isn't sovereign over everything

¹⁴ Then Pharaoh sent and called for Joseph, and they hurriedly brought him out of the dungeon; and when he had shaved himself and changed his clothes, he came to Pharaoh ¹⁵ Pharaoh said to Joseph, "I have had a dream, but no one can interpret it; and I have heard it said about you, that when you hear a dream you can interpret it." ¹⁶ Joseph then answered Pharaoh, saying, "It is not in me; God will give Pharaoh a favorable answer." (Gen 41:14-16)

Once Pharaoh was told of Joseph, things moved very quickly, and you can imagine the scene.

Here was Joseph in his filthy prison clothes going about his business in the prison.

... Suddenly echoing down stone barren walls someone calling Joseph's name

"Joseph, Pharaoh has sent for you."

... Joseph is cleaned up and hustled out of the prison, hurried along the streets, rushed into the palace and before Pharaoh.

There Joseph the little Hebrew prisoner stands before the most powerful political power in the world of that day.

- This was Pharaoh, **a god, the incarnation of Ra**—both political and religious ruler...
- ... and here was this little Joseph, weak, small, with neither power nor influence.
- ... and YET he stands before Pharaoh

Joseph is not filled with pride ...

... he does not say "**This is my time, I'm about to get what I deserve.**" ...

... Joseph displays the humility and the character of someone whose total dependency is upon God.

"My dreams, young man, can you interpret them?"

I love Joseph's answer: *"It is not in me; God will give Pharaoh a favorable answer."*

God's activity always results in bringing glory to God.

¹⁷ *So Pharaoh spoke to Joseph, "In my dream, behold, I was standing on the bank of the Nile;*

¹⁸ *and behold, seven cows, fat and sleek came up out of the Nile, and they grazed in the marsh*

grass. ¹⁹ "Lo, seven other cows came up after them, poor and very ugly and gaunt, such as I had never seen for ugliness in all the land of Egypt; ²⁰ and the lean and ugly cows ate up the first seven fat cows. ²¹ "Yet when they had devoured them, it could not be detected that they had devoured them, for they were just as ugly as before. Then I awoke. (Gen 41:17-21)

But you will remember this was the just the first dream.

Pharaoh had another similar dream about 7 full ears of grain and 7 withered ears of grain ... for the **sake of time** I will not read the second dream so, let's drop down.

Then I told it to the magicians, but there was no one who could explain it to me." ²⁵ Now Joseph said to Pharaoh, "Pharaoh's dreams are one and the same; God has told to Pharaoh what He is about to do. ²⁶ "The seven good cows are seven years; and the seven good ears are seven years; the dreams are one and the same. ²⁷ "The seven lean and ugly cows that came up after them are seven years, and the seven thin ears scorched by the east wind will be seven years of famine. (Gen 41:24-27)

Now remember this is a conversation occurring between a prisoner slave and the most powerful human on the earth at that time

... I believe that Joseph was very aware that the Lord is in this moment.

Joseph doesn't use the term 'providence' **but Joseph knew** that God was at work.

Joseph informs Pharaoh that God is telling him in these dreams that there is going to be 7 years of agricultural abundance followed by 7 years of severe famine—

... so severe that even the cattle will starve.

Again, Joseph knows God is in this moment ... Joseph this connects back to the dreams he told his brothers about many years before

... Joseph presses forward and advises Pharaoh about what to do in preparation.

³³ "Now let Pharaoh look for a man discerning and wise and set him over the land of Egypt. ³⁴ "Let Pharaoh take action to appoint overseers in charge of the land and let him exact a fifth of the produce of the land of Egypt in the seven years of abundance. ³⁵ "Then let them gather all

the food of these good years that are coming and store up the grain for food in the cities under Pharaoh's authority and let them guard it. ³⁶ "Let the food become as a reserve for the land for the seven years of famine which will occur in the land of Egypt, so that the land will not perish during the famine." (Gen 41:33-36)

Joseph's plan is very ingenious!

First, he recommends that Pharaoh find a wise man to oversee the project.

Second, he recommends gathering 20% of all the food produced during the seven years of agricultural abundance and

Third, he recommends storing up that food for the purpose of using it to feed the population and cattle during the seven years of famine.

Look at Pharaoh's response...

³⁷ Now the proposal seemed good to Pharaoh and to all his servants. ³⁸ Then Pharaoh said to his servants, "Can we find a man like this, in whom is a divine spirit?" ³⁹ So Pharaoh said to Joseph, "Since God has informed you of all this, there is no one so discerning and wise as you are. ⁴⁰ "You shall be over my house, and according to your command all my people shall do homage; only in the throne I will be greater than you." ⁴¹ Pharaoh said to Joseph, "See, I have set you over all the land of Egypt." ⁴² Then Pharaoh took off his signet ring from his hand and put it on Joseph's hand and clothed him in garments of fine linen and put the gold necklace around his neck. ⁴³ He had him ride in his second chariot; and they proclaimed before him, "Bow the knee!" And he set him over all the land of Egypt. ⁴⁴ Moreover, Pharaoh said to Joseph, "Though I am Pharaoh, yet without your permission no one shall raise his hand or foot in all the land of Egypt." (Gen 41:37-44)

Pharaoh agrees with this plan and recognizing Joseph's wisdom chooses him to be person to administer this plan—

In that moment Joseph went from being a slave prisoner to being second most powerful man in all the world

... only Pharaoh was above him.

When no one was looking God prepared and executed a glorious plan and all those dreams that Joseph had had has a young boy suddenly became a reality.

Joseph and God entrusted him with the welfare of the known world.

This is none other than the providential hand our sovereign God working for the good of his people and for His own glory.

... In this moment God is vindicating Joseph before Pharaoh, Potiphar, and ultimately Potiphar's wife...

... can you imagine the conversation around the dinner table in Potiphar's house that night when he said, "Hey honey guess what? I got a new boss today.

...you'll never believe who it is."

3. Trusting in God's Providence Increases Wisdom in Faithfulness

In the life of Joseph, we see both the doctrine and theology of mankind's salvation.

In Joseph's **experience with Potiphar's wife**, we were given an example of what selflessness and integrity looks like.

During Joseph's **long tenure in prison**, we are given the example of faith and trust – Jesus prayed "Father, not my will but thine be done."

And today we are given the example of **wisdom in faithfulness**.

³⁸ Then Pharaoh said to his servants, "Can we find a man like this, in whom is a divine spirit?"

³⁹ So Pharaoh said to Joseph, "Since God has informed you of all this, there is no one so discerning and wise as you are. (Gen. 41:38-39)

Joseph's trust in God's providence kept him from making excuses and giving in to the temptations of Potiphar's wife.

His trust in God's providence put him in the right place, with the right heart and attitude to interpret the dreams of the cupbearer and baker.

His trust in God's providence produced a life of integrity and consistency that 2 years later (when the cupbearer finally remembered)

... two years of hearing nothing Joseph could still be found still faithfully walking with the Lord.

Edmund Clowney, in his book **The Unfolding Mystery** says:

“Joseph was God’s righteous servant, suffering because of his faithfulness to God; yet the path of suffering led to a throne and to the fulfillment of the word of God given by the revelation of his dreams. God had made the life of Joseph a sign of the way in which his blessing would come. By the word of God and the servant of God, the mercy of God would be made known to the nations.”

That my friends is the gospel.

God’s servant (as Isaiah calls Jesus Christ) has made known the mercy and grace of God to the nations.

How did he do it?

He did it through suffering ... a suffering that led to exaltation and glory.

There are no spectacular observable miracles in Joseph’s life ...

The Word of a God says *“faith is the substance of things hoped for and the evidence of things not seen.”*

Living by faith is saying,

"I'm in a mess and it looks like God isn't doing anything.... but I know God and He is doing everything necessary for His will to be fully realized in my life

... I may not see it but God is at work.

I am saying this to you today because there is too much distress, discouragement, and doubt among us.

“Nathan, I’m expecting a miracle and it still hasn't come. God isn’t answering my prayers. God has abandoned me.”

That's simply not the truth.

All throughout your life God is working miracles of providence.

... not sporadically or occasionally

... God's providential work in your life is an ongoing, never ending, constant reality.

You are living right in the middle of the miracle of God providence, but it will take the eyes of faith to see it.