

The Providence of God—So Still It Must Be Said: The Judgments of the Lord Are True and Righteous Altogether

Focus: God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today.—Genesis 50:20

WHEREAS, In the Providence of God, a call from the F Street Presbyterian Church of Washington City, has been received by our beloved pastor, and he has felt it his duty to look at the subject very carefully, that he might know of a truth what the Great Head of the Church would have him do . . . **Resolved**, That it is only the kindest feelings of duty towards our beloved pastor, and of Christian submission to God's providence that lead us to acquiesce in his application to the Presbytery for the dissolution of the pastoral relation.—A resolution of First Presbyterian Church Dayton, Ohio, January 1854, upon the resignation of Pastor Phineas D. Gurley.

First Scripture Lesson

The passage I'm about to read is from the end of the Joseph story—not the Joseph of the New Testament betrothed to Mary, but the Joseph of the Old Testament—Joseph of the coat of many colors, or, in the words the 70's musical, of the Amazing Technicolor Dream Coat.

In the story, Joseph certainly has his ups and downs.

The favorite of his father Jacob, he's thrown down into a pit by his envious brothers and left for dead.

Only to be lifted up to safety by a passing caravan.

Only to be taken down to Egypt, where he is sold as a slave into the household of Potiphar.

Only to be lifted up, because of his ingenuity and honesty, to become chief of staff for all of Potiphar's estate.

Only to be cast down again into Pharaoh's dungeon when Potiphar's wife takes a certain liking to him, and the honest Joseph politely declines that sort of liking.

Only to be lifted up once again to become Pharaoh's chief of staff for all of Egypt, because, through his gift for dream-interpretation, he predicts the coming famine, and through his ingenious management, he prepares Egypt for it, putting aside stores of grain for seven years.

But when, in the grip of famine, Joseph's brothers come down to Egypt to procure much-needed grain, they certainly don't expect to find Joseph in that position. At first, they don't even recognize him—to them, he's been dead a long time.

Eventually, however, Joseph reveals himself, gives them the food they need and much more, thereby saving not only the Egyptian people but his own.

One remarkable feature of the story is that, throughout, God remains largely off-stage: God has no direct encounters, no conversations, with Joseph.

Not so in the other stories, with the other characters, in the book Genesis: God shows up all over the place in Genesis, providing shipbuilding instructions to Noah, making birth announcements to Abraham and Sarah, wrestling all night with Jacob, even appearing to the elderly Jacob, in the middle of the Joseph story, telling him it's OK to go down to Egypt.

But not so for Joseph—no direct encounters or conversations with God. We're told a couple of times that the Lord is with him, but there's no evidence for that, at least no direct evidence (the dreams are at best indirect), and if God is with Joseph, it sure doesn't prevent him from his having more than his share of downs.

And yet despite God's apparent absence, through all the ups and downs, Joseph remains faithful: he's like Dory in *Finding Nemo*, he just keeps swimming—indefatigable, cheerful, and trusting; brave, good, and faithful.

And the story have does a happy ending, not only does Joseph provide for his people, he has a tearful and joyous reunion with his father.

But then, after the reunion, when Jacob dies, Joseph's brothers get worried: "What's to stop Joseph from taking his revenge on us now?" So they concoct a story, about what Jacob supposedly said right before his death.

But it turns out that no such pretense is needed. Joseph not only forgives them, he tells that all of this has been God's doing, part of God's providential plan, through all the ups and downs, through all the twists and turns, God's hidden hand has been at work to save a numerous people.

Listen now for God's Word to us—Genesis Chapter 50 verses 15-21:

Realizing that their father was dead, Joseph's brothers said, "What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back in full for all the wrong that we did to him?"

So they approached Joseph, saying, "Your father gave this instruction before he died, 'Say to Joseph: I beg you, forgive the crime of your brothers and the wrong they did in harming you. 'Now therefore please forgive the crime of the servants of the God of your father.'"

Joseph wept when they spoke to him. Then his brothers also wept, fell down before him, and said, "We are here as your slaves."

But Joseph said to them, “Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing even today. So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones.” In this way he reassured them, speaking kindly to them.

Second Scripture Lesson

Our Second Scripture Lesson, from Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, also addresses the Providence of God. God’s plan is secret and hidden: no eye has seen, nor ear has heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him.

Yet on occasion, if only in retrospect, and then only partially, under the guidance of the Spirit, we can get a glimpse of God’s plan, just as Joseph did. Second Corinthians, Chapter 2, verses 6-12, listen now for God’s Word:

But we speak God’s wisdom, secret and hidden, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. But, as it is written,

“What no eye has seen, nor ear heard,
nor the human heart conceived,
what God has prepared for those who love him”—

these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. For what human being knows what is truly human except the human spirit that is within? So also no one comprehends what is truly God’s except the Spirit of God.

Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit that is from God, so that we may understand the gifts bestowed on us by God.

Sermon

*"Our own feelings rise up against it; we are **strongly** opposed to our pastor’s decision, And we do **truly** feel that he is mistaken, **strangely** mistaken . . . **yet** we will not lay any obstacle in his way, nor trouble him with unavailing arguments and entreaties, but we will continue to respect, honor, and love him, and will follow him with our sympathies, kindest wishes, and prayers, and say, ‘Go, and the Lord be with thee’ and thy family.”*

Those were the sentiments of the congregation. And their pastor didn’t like it any more than they did. Days earlier, he had written this to them:

"My Beloved People: One of the hardest duties of my life is now before me. May God help me to discharge it in his tear and for his glory. On last Sabbath morning I told you

that the question, “Shall I go to Washington to labor for Christ or shall I remain in Dayton?” had been to me the most serious and perplexing question of personal duty I had ever been called to consider.”

It had been a serious and perplexing question, but the pastor, much to his congregation’s relief and delight, had seemed to decide it: he announced to his congregation he would remain in Dayton.

But in making that announcement, and in writing his letter of refusal to the church in Washington, he had “secret misgivings”: “with the lapse of time, I became unhappy. ***I felt that perhaps I had refused to hear the voice and follow the leading of Providence.***”

And then he received further “unexpected communications” from the congregation in Washington urging him to accept the call. These communications were “so remarkable in their character, so strong in their arguments and appeals, ***and so significant as indications of the will of God***, that I felt it to be my solemn duty to reconsider the whole question—to look at it anew and very carefully, that I might know of a truth what the Great Head of the Church would have me to do.”

And so the pastor did look and pray at the question anew, and with anguish and a breaking heart, he heard the voice and followed the leading of Providence: he decided to go to Washington.

Which led the congregation to resolve this:

WHEREAS, In the Providence of God, a call from the F Street Presbyterian Church of Washington City, has been received by our beloved pastor, and he has felt it his duty to look at the subject very carefully, that he might know of a truth what the Great Head of the Church would have him do . . . Resolved, That it is only the kindest feelings of duty towards our beloved pastor, and of Christian submission to God's providence that lead us to acquiesce in his application

And so in January of 1854, with both pastor and congregation expressing the deepest mutual love and affection, but also sharing and expressing a still deeper trust and faith in God’s providence, Phineas D. Gurley leaves First Presbyterian Church in Dayton, Ohio to become pastor of F Street Presbyterian Church in Washington DC.

God’s providence. These days, we don’t talk about it much anymore. But there was a time when talk of God’s providence was like oxygen to Presbyterians—we couldn’t live without it. You can certainly hear that it in the correspondence between Phineas D. Gurley and the people of First Presbyterian.

Now, obviously the idea of Providence is not uniquely Presbyterian: it goes all the way back to the story of Joseph, in fact farther back than that. But this explicit emphasis on (you could even say, “this preoccupation with”) Providence, well . . . that is distinctively

Presbyterian. Or at least it was. For a long time. But these days, we don't talk about it much anymore.

“Religious ideas have the fate of melodies, which, once set afloat in the world, are taken up by all sorts of instruments, some of them woefully coarse, feeble, or out of tune, until people are in danger of crying out that the melody itself is detestable.” (George Eliot, *Janet's Repentance*)

Just so God's Providence. It's a beautiful idea, a beautiful melody, but when whistled incessantly through tuneless lips . . . it can become not only tiresome but downright detestable.

In particular, an appeal to Providence can serve as the cover for indifference to the suffering of others: “Oh, you're beat up and lying over there in the ditch, dying—well, I'm sure it's all part of God's providential plan—see ya later!” And even a cover for selfishness: “Well,, of course, *I* got the parking space, the job, the promotion, the good health and all the wealth—it's all God's providential plan. God will provide—for me!”

In fact, these days, in seminary pastoral care classes, they teach you never to appeal to God's providence, and never, ever, to quote, at a funeral, Romans 8: 23—“We know that all things work together for good for those who love God”—precisely because it can sound so out of tune so indifferent, so selfish, in the face of loss, suffering, and grief.

True enough. But that's not the true melody. The true melody of Providence is beautiful, like this:

*God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes.
Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more.*

The true melody of Providence is beautiful, like this:

The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty for those enslaved, and to comfort all who mourn.

That's the true melody of God's Providence.

In the year 1859, F Street Presbyterian Church merges with Second Presbyterian Church to become New York Avenue Presbyterian Church, which, in 1861, becomes the church of Abraham and Mary Todd Lincoln; and so Phineas D. Gurley, formerly of First Presbyterian Church in Dayton Ohio, becomes their pastor, and by all accounts, also becomes the close, personal friend of the family and especially of Lincoln himself.

Throughout 1861 and 1862, things do not go well for the Lincolns or for our country. General George McLellan, commanding the Union Army with superior numbers and

firepower, nonetheless hesitates, delays, obfuscates—simply will not move the troops—despite Lincoln’s orders. And when he doesn’t move—and even when does—the Union loses, battle after battle.

There is unrest in the northern cities and it’s an open question, and a matter of ongoing concern, whether the government can continue to fund, much less win, the war.

Lincoln himself is widely regarded—by McClellan, by members of his own party, by his own cabinet, by much of the Washington establishment and the national press—with skepticism, if not outright disdain. Most observers believe that, were Lincoln to run again in 1864, he would certainly lose. Lincoln himself fears as much.

And then in February of 1862, the Lincolns’ beloved eleven-year old son, Willie, dies of Typhoid fever. “My boy is gone, he is actually gone,” Lincoln cries. And he begins to sob. His secretary remembered it this way: “He buried his head in his hands, and his tall frame was convulsed with emotion. ‘This is the hardest trial of my life. Why is it? Oh, why is it?’”

A few days later, Phineas D Gurney preaches Willie’s funeral, and saying this:

It is well for us, and very comforting, on such an occasion as this, to get a clear and a scriptural view of the providence of God.

***His** kingdom ruleth over all. All those events which in anywise affect our condition and happiness are in **his** hands, and at his disposal. Disease and death are **his** messengers; they go forth at **his** bidding, Not a sparrow falls to the ground without **His** direction; much less any one of the human family . . . We may be sure, -- therefore, bereaved parents, and all the children of sorrow may be sure, -- that their affliction is the well-ordered procedure of their Father and their God. A mysterious dealing they may consider it, but still it is His dealing.*

Yes, he actually said that. At Willie’s funeral. That Willie’s death was part of God’s providential plan, the “well-ordered procedure of God, His dealing.” Our pastoral care professors would recoil in horror.

But, I swear to you, if you read the whole sermon (and you can find it on line), it’s anything but indifferent or selfish. In every word of it, in every phrase of it, you can hear, you can feel, Gurley suffering with the Lincolns, and suffering for them. You can hear and feel his love for them and for Willie. One observer described the scene this way:

Senators, and ambassadors, and soldiers—all [alike] struggl[ed]with their tears; great hearts sorrowing with the president as a stricken man and a brother. Even General McClellan bowed his head in prayer with a moist eye.

To comfort all who mourn. To wipe every tear from their eyes. God's providence—it is a beautiful melody.

And hearing it changed Lincoln forever. The artist Alban Jasper Conant said that after Willie's death, there was "something different" about President Lincoln: *"ever after there was a new quality in his demeanor—something approaching awe. I sat in the fifth pew behind him every Sunday in Dr. Gurley's church, and I saw him on many occasions, marking the change in him."*

A change, something different: it is then, for the first time, that the idea of Providence emerges in Lincoln's thought and writing.

Later in 1862, Lincoln begins to say aloud that that the purpose of the war is not only to preserve the union but to free those who are enslaved—that this is God's will. And so to the shock of both his cabinet and even the radical abolitionists, he begins to promulgate and promote the Emancipation Proclamation:

*That on the first day of January, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty-three, all persons held as slaves within any State, shall be then, thenceforward, **and forever** free . . . And upon this act, sincerely believed to be an act of justice, warranted by the Constitution, upon military necessity, I, Abraham Lincoln, invoke the considerate judgment of mankind, and the gracious favor of Almighty God.*

To bring good news to the oppressed, to proclaim liberty for those enslaved—God's providence: it's a beautiful melody.

Lincoln's reliance on God's providence finds further expression in The Gettysburg Address and then attains full flower in the Second Inaugural Address:

*The Almighty has His own purposes. "Woe unto the world because of offences! If we shall suppose that American Slavery is one of those offences which, **in the providence of God**, had to come, but which, having continued through His appointed time, He now wills to remove, and that He gives to both North and South, this terrible war, as the woe due to those by whom the offence came, shall we discern therein any departure from those divine attributes which the believers in a Living God always ascribe to Him? as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said "the judgments of the Lord, are true and righteous altogether."*

The judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether. God's providence; it's a beautiful melody.

And that melody is tried again, six weeks later, at Lincoln's funeral, when Phineas D. Gurley preaches, saying about Lincoln:

We admired and loved him on many accounts—for strong and various reasons . . . his character and life [bore] the unmistakable impress of greatness. But more sublime than

any or all of these, more holy and influential, more beautiful, and strong, and sustaining, was his abiding confidence in God and in the final triumph of truth and righteousness through Him and for His sake. This was his noblest virtue, his grandest principle, the secret alike of his strength, his patience, and his success.

It was Lincoln's faith in God's Providence more than anything else that, according to Gurley, made him great. And because of that faith, Lincoln, even now felled by the assassin's bullet, still speaks. Gurley continued:

He is dead but he still speaketh . . . by his steady enduring confidence in God, and in the complete ultimate success of the cause of God, which is the cause of humanity, more than by any other way, does he now speak to us and to the nation he loved and served so well.

So Phineas D. Gurley in April 1864.

But ten years earlier, back in January of 1854, how could either Gurley or his congregation here in Dayton know, how could they even begin to imagine, any of this? In 1854, neither New York Avenue Presbyterian Church, nor its building even existed. And Abraham Lincoln, was a backwoods, circuit-riding lawyer, known if at all—which mostly he was not—for his ability to tell stories and and lose elections.

But in 1854, Phineas D. Gurney took with him to Washington not only his faith, but also the sympathies, kindest wishes, and prayers of his congregation, And even more that, he took took the love—God's love—that they shared here, at First Presbyterian Church in Dayton Ohio.

And so a numerous people was preserved. God's providence—it's a beautiful melody.

We **are** First Presbyterian Church in Dayton Ohio. I know: we're now called "Westminster," and that's because of a reunion between First Presbyterian and Third Avenue Presbyterian Church in the year 1919 (our present church building was dedicated in 1926), which reunion was both a blessing and an act of God's reconciling love. But we **are** the First Presbyterian Church in Dayton, Ohio, the first and oldest church in this city, dating back to the year 1799. (If I boast, may I boast in the Lord.)

And to honor the love that has been given to us here—by those who have gone before us here those who were brave and good and faithful—we too must have faith in God's Providence. We cannot know, we cannot even begin to imagine, what things will be like ten years from now—if nothing else, the events of the past few years should have taught us that.

But we know that God is good—that the judgments of the Lord, are true and righteous altogether. And so we must have faith: an abiding confidence in God and in the final

triumph of truth and righteousness through Him and for His sake in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing even today.

Thanks be to God. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.