

## **Providence**

### **By David Feddes**

Have you ever stumbled into a situation where you felt confused and out of place and then it turned out that you were in exactly the right place at the right time? Have you ever been mistreated or felt that everything was going wrong, only to have it all turn out for the best? It's great when that happens, isn't it? Something clicks inside you, a light goes on, and it all starts to make sense. You tell yourself, "That didn't just happen. It wasn't just a coincidence. It was meant to be." And that's right. It wasn't just a coincidence. In fact, there's no such thing as a coincidence. Everything that happens is part of a plan. This is true of those moments when things click in a special way, and it's true at every other moment as well.

Everything that happens, happens for a purpose. Christians have a word for this. The word is providence. Here's how one historic statement of faith, the Heidelberg Catechism, describes providence. "Providence is the almighty and ever present power of God by which he upholds, as with his hand, heaven and earth and all creatures, and so rules them that leaf and blade, rain and drought, fruitful years and lean years, food and drink, health and sickness, prosperity and poverty—all things, in fact, come to us not by chance but from his fatherly hand." There is no such thing as coincidence—only providence. There is no such thing as luck or chance--only God's plan.

The Bible speaks of "the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will" (Ephesians 1:11). According to Jesus, a tiny bird can't fall to the ground apart from the will of God (Matthew 10:29). The Lord's plan includes absolutely everything. Often the workings of God's plan are secret, and we can't figure out exactly how everything fits together. But even if the details are a secret, the outcome of the plan is no secret. The outcome is the ultimate good of God's people. How do we know that? Because God says so. In Romans 8:28 the Bible says, "We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."

Do you love God? Have you heard his call in Jesus Christ? Have you discovered his purpose for you as a child of God? If so, you can be sure that he works all things together for your good. You can rejoice in special moments when everything falls into place, and even when you can't make sense of events, you can still draw strength from knowing about God's providence. The Lord's plan is often perplexing, but it is always perfect. All things (even things you don't understand) come to you, not by chance, but from God's fatherly hand.

### **A Perplexing Plan**

It's important to know this basic biblical teaching. When the teaching seemed abstract or hard to accept, it's helpful to see God's providence in the lives of real people. Let's look at the true story of a person who was hated by his brothers, fired by his boss and thrown into prison for something he didn't do. It seemed awful. It made no sense. But though it looked like a meaningless mess of bad luck, everything was going according to God's plan. And this person, though he felt burdened and hurt, never gave up. He found strength in believing that his life was not his own but was in God's hands.

In the book of Genesis, the Bible tells the story of Joseph. (Don't confuse this Joseph with the adopted father of Jesus, Saint Joseph, who lived centuries later.) Joseph started life as a privileged, pampered child. His father, Jacob, loved Joseph more than any of his other sons. He didn't try to hide his favoritism either. He gave Joseph a splendid robe. Joseph's brothers hated their spoiled brat of a brother. It was bad parenting--to spoil one child and provoke the hatred of the others--yet Jacob's bad parenting was somehow a part of God's good plan.

Young Joseph had a special sense of destiny from an early age. One night he had a dream in which the other members of his family were bowing to him. Instead of keeping his dream to himself, Joseph told the dream to his brothers, and--surprise, surprise--his brothers hated him all the more. Joseph was foolish to tell the dream to his brothers, and Joseph's brothers were wrong to hate him, yet, somehow, Joseph's foolishness and his brothers' hatred were part of God's wise and good plan.

One day Jacob sent Joseph to check up on his brothers, who were some distance from home. When the brothers saw him coming, they said, "Here comes that dreamer! Come now, let's kill him and throw him into one of these cisterns and say that a ferocious animal devoured him. Then we'll see what comes of his dreams."

But the oldest brother, Reuben, said, "Let's not kill him. Let's just dump him into this cistern here in the desert." Reuben planned to come back later and rescue Joseph. The brothers went along with Reuben and stripped off Joseph's fancy coat and threw him into the dry well. A bit later, Reuben was off somewhere and the other brothers were sitting down to a meal, when they saw a caravan of merchants. One of the brothers, Judah, got an idea. "Why kill the boy?" he said. "After all, he is our brother. Let's just sell him as a slave to this caravan. That way we'll make a profit, and we won't have his blood on our hands." So that's what they did. When Reuben returned to the cistern and found that Joseph was gone, he was horrified. His plan to rescue Joseph had failed. But as Reuben's plan failed, God's plan kept moving.

A lot of things seemed to "just happen." The caravan just happened to pass by while Reuben was gone. The brothers just happened to think it would be a good idea to sell Joseph. The caravan just happened to be headed for Egypt. In Egypt a man named Potiphar just happened to be in the market for a slave. And this Potiphar just happened to be a high official of Pharaoh, the ruler of Egypt.

In Potiphar's household, God blessed Joseph, and Joseph was so successful in everything he did that before long he was managing all of Potiphar's business. About then, if you were Joseph, you might have thought that things were finally falling into place. But that's when everything fell apart.

Potiphar's wife noticed that Joseph was a mighty handsome young man. She tried to seduce him, but Joseph told her, "My master has withheld nothing from me except you, because you are his wife. How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?" What did Joseph get for resisting temptation and obeying God? He got thrown into prison, that's what he got! Mrs. Potiphar said Joseph had tried to rape her, and Potiphar believed her. He flew into a rage, fired Joseph, and threw him into prison. Mrs. Potiphar lusted and lied, and she was responsible for sinning; yet even her lust and lies were part of God's plan.

While Joseph was in prison, says the Bible, the Lord was with him and showed him kindness. Joseph's ability and character impressed the prison warden, and soon Joseph held a position of high responsibility among the prisoners.

Then, one day, Joseph met up with two prisoners who told him about some strange dreams. They had a strong feeling that these dreams meant something important, but they couldn't figure out the meaning. God gave Joseph the ability to tell them what their dreams meant. One man's dream foreshadowed his death, but the other man's dream showed happier things. This man was Pharaoh's cupbearer. He was in prison because he had somehow angered Pharaoh, but Joseph told him he'd soon be back in Pharaoh's favor and get his job back. Then Joseph said, "When all goes well with you, remember me and show me kindness; mention me to Pharaoh... I have done nothing to deserve being put in a dungeon."

Well, no sooner was the cupbearer out of prison and back in Pharaoh's favor, then he forgot all about Joseph. So Joseph spent another two years in prison. Just put yourself in Joseph's shoes! This was the thanks he got for doing a favor. And yet, though the cupbearer was wrong to forget Joseph, God planned it this way.

### **A Perfect Plan**

Two years later, Pharaoh had a strange and troubling dream. When Pharaoh mentioned the dream to others, the cupbearer at long last remembered Joseph. He told Pharaoh how Joseph had told him the meaning of the dream and how things turned out exactly as Joseph had said. Pharaoh ordered that Joseph be brought to him. With God's help, Joseph told Pharaoh what his dream meant. There would be seven years of enormous harvests with far more food than necessary, followed by seven dry years with meager harvests. Joseph urged Pharaoh to store up extra food during the good years so that there would be food for the bad years.

Pharaoh believed what Joseph said, and he thought Joseph would be the right man to run the whole food program. Joseph's prediction of future crop production came true: there were seven years of fantastic crops, followed by seven years of widespread famine. Far away in another land, Joseph's hungry brothers found out that there was food for sale in Egypt. They traveled there and ended up dealing with Joseph himself.

They didn't recognize Joseph, now that he was older, with the hairstyle and clothing of an Egyptian leader. Joseph recognized his brothers right away but didn't tell them who he was. His heart melted inside him with love and longing, and it was hard for him to control his emotions when he was with them. On several occasions he had to excuse himself and go into another room and cry. But he didn't give his brothers even a hint of who he was or how he felt. Instead, he talked harshly to them and put them through some trying experiences to see if they were still as cruel and hardhearted as before. Joseph could see they had changed, however, when Judah, the brother who'd come up with the idea to sell Joseph, volunteered to be a slave himself in order to save his brother Benjamin. At that point, Joseph couldn't keep the secret any longer. He broke down in tears and said,

"I am Joseph! Is my father still living?" But his brothers were not able to answer him because they were terrified at his presence.

Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Come close to me." When they had done so, he said, "I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt! And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you... God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance.

So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God... God has made me lord of all Egypt... I will provide for you."

Then he threw his arms around his brother Benjamin and wept, and Benjamin embraced him, weeping. And he kissed all his brothers and wept over them (Genesis 45:3-15).

What a scene! Brothers crying and kissing, filled with grief at past wrongs, but seeing how even those wrongs had been part of God's secret plan for them.

Isn't God's plan amazing? The dreams of a young boy were part of God's plan, and so were the dreams of Pharaoh, the most powerful ruler on earth. Joseph's coat was part of God's plan, and huge weather patterns were also part of the plan--the good weather, as well as the bad. The timing of a meal and a passing caravan, the timing of a memory that slipped away and then popped up at just the right moment--no detail is too small for God's plan, and no ruler or force of nature is too big.

### **Our Evil, God's Good**

Amazing as all this is, the most amazing and mysterious part is that even the evil deeds of sinful people are part of God's plan and providence. Don't misunderstand. God doesn't cause the evil. God is holy. It is impossible for him to sin. When people sin, it's their own fault. They do the evil, not God. Yet, in a way we can't explain or understand, God uses even evil deeds to accomplish his good purposes.

In the story of Joseph, God didn't force anybody to sin. God didn't force Joseph's father, Jacob, to pamper his son. That was Jacob's fault. God didn't force Joseph's brothers to envy and hate Joseph. They were to blame for that. God didn't drive Mrs. Potiphar to lust after Joseph and then accuse him falsely and railroad him to prison. She did that herself. God didn't make the cupbearer ungrateful and forgetful. That was the cupbearer's own fault. Although God didn't directly cause these wrongs, he somehow made them part of his plan and arranged them to suit his own purpose. All the sins against Joseph ended up working together for the good of God's people and for God's glory.

Joseph summarized it all when he told his brothers, "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives" (50:20).

Joseph is proof that God can use evil behavior and unjust suffering to bring about something good. And Jesus is even greater proof. There was never a sin more horrible than the crucifixion of the innocent Son of God, never any suffering more ghastly than what Jesus had to endure. But although wicked people intended to harm Jesus, God intended it for good, to accomplish what is now all being done, the saving of many lives through faith in the sacrifice of Jesus.

The people who had a hand in killing Jesus were responsible for their actions, but in spite of their evil intentions, they were carrying out God's good plan. Seven weeks after Jesus' death and resurrection, the apostle Peter preached on Pentecost to a crowd that included many people who had called for Jesus to be killed. Peter told them, "[Jesus] was handed over to you *by God's set purpose and foreknowledge*, and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death" (Acts 2:23). It was their fault, yet it was also God's plan. And just as Joseph's brothers repented and were forgiven for what they had done, so a large number of people who had called for Jesus' death repented and were forgiven after hearing Peter preach about the risen and reigning Christ.

In some ways Joseph was a hint, a foreshadowing, of Jesus. There are striking parallels between Joseph and Jesus. Joseph's brothers thought he had delusions of grandeur when he dreamed of being a ruler. Jesus' brothers thought he was crazy when he went around acting like he was the Son of God. Joseph was brought low before God lifted him up. Jesus was brought low--to hell and the grave--before God lifted him up. Joseph forgave his brothers; Jesus forgave his tormentors. God led Joseph down a path of sorrows in order to save many people from starvation. God led Jesus down a path of sorrows to save many people from damnation. Joseph's brothers had to turn to Joseph for food in order to live through the famine. You and I must turn to Jesus, the bread of life, in order to live forever.

Some aspects of God's plan are still a secret, but it is no secret that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and the Savior of the world. It is no secret that the way to live forever is to repent of your sins and trust in Jesus' sacrifice on the cross to pay for your sins and to depend on his resurrection power to give you eternal life. It is no secret that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. Once you belong to Jesus, you live each day by faith in the providence of God, knowing that all things "come to us, not by chance, but from his fatherly hand."

### **More Strength, Not Less Emotion**

Some folks think that if we believe everything is in God's plan, we will become passive and unemotional. But is that what happened with Joseph? Hardly.

Joseph's trust in God's providence didn't make him passive. He didn't say to himself, "If God is directing everything, why should I put forth any effort? It's all up to God." Joseph's faith in God's plan didn't make him sit back and do nothing. It gave him the strength, desire, and confidence to keep doing his best. Even when everything seemed to be going wrong for him, he was energized by faith in God's plan and blessing.

As for emotions, did Joseph's faith in God's plan make him cold and mechanical and unemotional? Quite the opposite. When God's plan finally became clear, Joseph didn't calmly say, "All the pieces are now in place." No, he wept and wept and wept some more. At least eight different times the Bible tells of Joseph weeping: tears of pain at the hurts he'd endured, and tears of joy at what God had accomplished through those hurts.

You see, God's providence isn't a machine where God pushes buttons and gears and pistons begin pounding. Providence isn't a program designed by a computer and carried out by robots. It's a drama that's planned by a personal God and directed by his

fatherly hand, a drama that's lived out in the lives of flesh and blood persons. Trusting in God's plan doesn't stifle deep emotions or heartfelt tears.

But it does have a stabilizing effect on you. Faith in providence doesn't decrease your emotions, but it does increase your strength. Faith in providence helps you to be patient in bad times, thankful in good times, and confident at all times.

Look again at Joseph. His faith in God's plan helped him to be patient when things went against him. His own brothers hated him and sold him as a slave. He was thrown in prison after doing the right thing. He was forgotten by someone he had helped, who could have gotten him out of prison. This all weighed heavily on Joseph, but did he sink into self-pity or bitterness? No, he kept counting on God. When he finally had a chance to get back at those who hurt him, what did he do? He forgave them. And he was helped to forgive by the knowledge that God used even the evils of those who had hurt him to bring about something good.

Maybe something rotten has happened to you, or somebody has hurt you terribly. You don't have to like it. You may weep about it. But don't give up when times are bad, and don't seek revenge when people are bad. God has a secret plan to bring good even out of the bad. Faith in his plan can make you a more patient and forgiving person.

Faith in God's plan can also help you to have a healthy attitude when things go well for you. When Joseph finally made it to the top, did he brag about his own achievements? No, he gave God the credit. He said, "*God* has made me lord of all Egypt." Trust in God's providence makes you thankful and humble, instead of letting success go to your head.

Whatever your situation, whether pleasant or difficult, you can always be confident about the future. No matter what you face, don't give up. Never, never, never give up on God. Joseph endured all kinds of trouble, but he never gave up. Why not? Because he remembered the dream of greatness God had given him, and he knew that somehow God's plan would bring him to that great destiny. God has also given us a dream, a dream even greater than Joseph's dream: not ruling over our family or over a country but ruling with Christ over the universe, with authority even over the angels. That is God's plan for each of his people in Christ. Nothing can separate us from his love, and nothing can keep us from that destiny.

So believe the truth about God's providence. Trust his secret plan. Relate everything in your life to God and give him all the glory for what he accomplishes through you. When Joseph talked to his brothers about everything that happened, he kept talking again and again about God. "*God* sent me ahead of you... *God* sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance... So then, it was not you who sent me here, but *God*... *God* has made me lord of all Egypt ... You intended to harm me, but *God* intended it for good." That's what happens when you believe in God's providence. You look at your life, with its ups and downs, and what it all comes down to is, "God ... God ... God ... God!"

*Originally prepared by David Feddes for Back to God Ministries International. Used with permission.*