

Sunday, February 11, 2024 am

**COMMUNICATING WITH GOD (4)**  
**God and prayer (3)**  
**How God Answers Prayer Today**  
**(A brief study of God's Providence)**

As we continue our study of the subject of prayer, we have been addressing God's part where prayer is concern. He is the primary catalyst that makes prayer possible. We have noted about God that prayer is about communicating TO God. He has graciously (grace) granted us access to Him through Jesus. In our last lesson we noted that God is ABLE to answer our prayers. We noted that He is all knowing (even knowing what we need before we ask), all powerful (meaning there is nothing too hard for Him), and all seeing – we can pray to Him anywhere (because He is not far from us), qualities that enable Him to answer our prayers. But HOW does He answer our prayers today? That is the focus of this lesson.

First, we begin by noting that the question, "How does God answer prayers?" has two different directions. One deals with the various ways He can answer (which we will address in another lesson). The other addresses how does God work today in answering our prayers. That is the approach of this lesson.

**I. What is providence?**

- a. There are two ways God can work – supernaturally (miraculously) and providentially.
  - i. What is a miracle – it is an act that suspends natural laws. A genuine miracle is something that is IMPOSSIBLE naturally.
  - ii. What is providence – it is God acting to accomplish His will within natural laws. It is God answering our prayers through natural means.
- b. We are no longer under the age of miracles.
  - i. If someone were to ask me if I believe in miracles, I would answer, "Yes!" Because I believe the Bible is the word of God and is truth, I believe in miracles – that God has in times past worked miraculously – establishing His word, the church and our salvation. The Bible is filled with miracles, from the creation of the world, various miracles within the nation of Israel and the numerous miracles recorded during the life of Jesus and the infancy of the church. These were necessary as He established His will and brought His plan to its intended fullness.
  - ii. But do I believe miracles are still occurring today? To that I answer "No!".
    1. It is not that God cannot work miracles today. He is omnipotent, etc.
    2. But scripture teaches that the age of miracles is completed.
    3. A study of miracles in scripture shows that primarily they were designed to verify that one was a messenger of God. How could people tell whether someone actually had a message from God or if they were just someone seeking a following?
      - a. When Moses stood before Pharaoh and performed signs, Pharaoh knew that he was sent from God (even though he didn't listen – cf. Exodus 7:1-2, 11:3). Exodus 5-11 describes the plagues and various appearances of Moses. The crossing of the Red Sea caused the people to believe Moses as God's messenger (Exodus 14:31, *Thus Israel saw the great work which the Lord had done in Egypt; so the people feared the Lord, and believed the Lord and His servant Moses.*

- b. When Elijah called down fire from heaven to devour his sacrifice after the failed attempt of the 850 prophets of Baal and Asherah, the people turned to the LORD and believed Elijah as His messenger (1 Kings 18:39-40).
    - c. Jesus made spectacular claims, but He backed them up with miracles. Consider Matthew 9:6 as He forgives the sins of a paralytic and proves He could do so by healing him (9:1-8).
    - d. Hebrews 2:1-4 establishes this point.
  - 4. 1 Corinthians 13:8-12 clearly establishes a time would come when miracles would be done away with. “When that which is perfect is come...” This is a reference to “the perfect law of liberty” (James 1:25), AKA, His completed word.
  - 5. Furthermore, the absence of genuine Biblical type miracles today is further proof that we are living in a time when they have ceased.
  - 6. The bottom line is that we have the completed word of God and therefore we do not need God working miraculously today.
  - 7. BUT that does NOT mean that God cannot still work.
- c. What is providence? – God working within natural laws.
  - i. Providence is a word that means foresight, or to know something beforehand and take action to make it happen.
  - ii. Interestingly, the word is scarce in the Bible. The actual word is found once in the KJV, in Acts 24:2, where it is applied to a sinful king, Felix. There it is presented by an orator who wants to have Paul destroyed. He describes how Felix had brought peace and prosperity because of his “providence” (KJV, NASB). The NKJV uses the word “foresight”. The root word is used a few times to describe provisions (cf. Romans 13:14). While not used of God, the idea of His providence is seen throughout scripture.
  - iii. When we think of providence, we are addressing God working within the natural laws that He has set in order. NOTE: These natural laws themselves are a manifestation of God’s providence (e.g., Act 14:17 – He has given us rain and fruitful seasons filling our hearts with food and gladness; Matthew 6:30 – He clothes the grass of the field and beauty of flowers; Job 38:41 – God provides food for the raven; Psalm 66:7 declares that He rules the nations, Matthew 10:29 – even the smallest of details (hairs of your head, sparrows sold for a few coins, etc.)
    - i. An example of the difference: John 2:1-10 records the first miracle of Jesus in Cana. When Jesus turned water to wine, it was a miracle. When we plant a vineyard that yields grapes that creates grape juice – we find God’s continued handiwork (He makes the sun shine on all, etc.). This is an example of God’s providence.
    - ii. Scriptures that imply God works providentially.
      - 1. 1 Corinthians 10:13 – no temptation... way of escape. Cf. 2 Peter 2:9
      - 2. Matthew 6:25-33 – do not worry – God knows what you need.
      - 3. 2 Corinthians 9:8-11 – He is able to make all grace abound toward us and supply our fruits of righteousness.
      - 4. Hebrews 12:5-8 – the chastening of God to those He loves.
      - 5. These are passages that imply God is still working today. Without His working, such passages have little or no meaning to us.
- d. Esther – an example of God’s providence.

- i. There are several great examples of providence in scripture – Joseph (Genesis 50:20), the book of Philemon (vs. 15) and Esther. Each of these shows God accomplishing His will using natural means.
- ii. The book of Esther has a powerful observation – God is not mentioned by name anywhere in the book. BUT you cannot read its pages without seeing the hand of God clearly at work. And there are no miracles recorded in the book but you find the story of the Jew’s deliverance from certain destruction.
- iii. The events of Esther occur around 479-474 BC. Ahasuerus (aka, Xerxes 1) was king of the Persian empire. Judah was under the rule of the Persians, but their temple had been rebuilt and completed about 35 years earlier (~516 BC).
- iv. Consider the story of Esther. King Ahasuerus, in the third year of his reign has a great feast and decides to parade his wife, Vashti, before the crowd. She refuses. As a result, He had her removed as queen. As the king is mourning (and likely regretting his decision), a search was made for beautiful virgins throughout his empire to brought before him. The number is not recorded, but after the process, he chose Esther, who was a Jew and the niece of Mordecai (also a faithful Jew). He was well pleased with her and loved her. She had not revealed her Jewish heritage to the king. Next (2L19-23) we read that Mordecai discovers a plot against the king. He reports it and the men are executed and Mordecai’s deeds were documented. Following this, Haman, a chief advisor to the king, despises the Jews and convinces the king to issue a decree that on a certain day, all Jews in the empire were to be destroyed. Mordecai tells Esther of the plot and encourages her to go tell the king (This itself was dangerous as the king could have executed anyone whom he did not want to appear before him). As Esther hesitates, Mordecai encourages her – NOTE Esther 4:13-14 – a key text to our point. Esther decides to appear before King Ahasuerus and when she does, the king extends her a warm welcome. She then declares her Jewish heritage and exposes the plot of Haman and he is executed. Following this, an emergency decree is issued permitting the Jews to do whatever they needed to do to defend themselves on the appointed day that they were to be destroyed. As a result, not only did the Jews perish, but they were able to subdue many of their enemies and thus establish their heritage within the empire. Chapter 9 explains that this is the reason behind an annual feast called Purim. Finally, Mordecai was advanced to a great position in the Persian Empire (which likely was helpful when Nehemiah arrives on the scene about 30 years later).
- v. The POINT of telling this account is to understand that there were a number of events that unfolded, EACH of them in a specific order and all WITHOUT miraculous intervention, that resulted in God’s people being delivered from a declared destruction and even ADVANCED to a position of prominence that would help them in God fulfilling His ultimate plan of bringing Jesus, as our Savior, to this earth. As noted at the beginning, you CANNOT read Esther and fail to see God’s hand at work, even though He is not mentioned by name in the entire letter. THAT is providence. And it is my belief that God can and still DOES work providentially today.

## II. **Providence and our prayers**

- a. God CAN answer our prayers
  - i. The fact that God can work providentially gives us reason to pray to Him. Recall 1 Peter 3:12, James 5:16, 1 John 5:14-15, Philippians 4:6. If God answers our prayers (and He does), then He can work providentially.

- ii. All things work together for good – Romans 8:28. Properly, God is accomplishing His will.
  - iii. Spiritually – Ephesians 1:3 tells us He has provided for us “every spiritual blessing.” Salvation is made possible through His providence – Hebrews 7:25.
  - iv. James 1:5 – if anyone lacks wisdom, let him ask of God... If God can grant us wisdom, does it have to be miraculous? There are ways that He can help us obtain wisdom WITHIN natural means.
  - v. Pray, “If the Lord wills” – James 4:13-17 – as we make plans, do not leave God out of your plans. Implied in that is that we can trust God for what is best.
  - vi. Matthew 6:11 – “give us this day our daily bread...”
  - vii. 2 Thessalonians 3:1-2 – Paul requested prayers “that the word of the Lord may run swiftly and be glorified, just as it is in you and that we may be delivered from unreasonable and wicked men...”
  - viii. 1 Timothy 2:1-2 – we pray for all men including our leaders, “*that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence.*”
  - ix. He can cause circumstances to develop so that what is best happens (without miraculous intervention). NOTE: I am a believer that if someone is genuinely searching for the truth, they will be presented it by someone somewhere. What they do with that is up to them.
  - x. These are a few of the passages that come to mind when I consider God’s providence and my prayers.
- b. Some observations we need to consider.
- i. IF God answers our prayers providentially, it is still His powerful workings as if He were working miraculously.
  - ii. God’s providential care does not alleviate us of our responsibility. Nor does His working remove your free-will. You pray for wisdom, you need to study your Bible (2 Timothy 2:15); You thank Him and pray for daily bread, you need to get to work (2 Thessalonians 3:10, Ephesians 4:28); You pray for open doors to share His word, are you willing to look? (Colossians 4:3); You pray for God to be with sick – you must consider good healthy habits, medications and doctors doing their work, etc. (cf. James 5:13-14 – the “oil” could have medicinal qualities); You ask God to forgive you of your sins, you need to be walking in the light (1 John 1:7-9); etc.
  - iii. Do not lose heart (Luke 18:1) – don’t give up as you pray. Learn to trust God as we pray (this is what faith is about) – cf. James 1:6-7
  - iv. A characteristic of God’s providence is that we do not know whether or not He was acting. God does not micromanage our lives – we have free-will. Recall Esther 4:14, “Who knows...?” Philemon 15, “For perhaps...”, etc.
  - v. 1 Thessalonians 5:18 – in everything give thanks. Whether God moved to answer our prayers or not (in a given circumstance), give Him the glory.
  - vi. Don’t tempt God. Recall Jesus before Satan – Matthew 4:5-7. Do not ask Him for that which is contrary to His will. AND don’t expect Him to perform a miracle today. Don’t ask Him to set aside His natural laws just for you.

We have seen in this lesson that God CAN answer our prayers today. Even though we are no longer in the age of miracles, God can and does still work. Are we willing to put our trust in Him as we pray? Think about it!