

# UNDERSTANDING GOD'S PROVIDENCE

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Lamentations 3:22-26<sup>1</sup>

Is it too late in history for God to have men and women who stand loyally for what is right, all alone, in the face of opposition? The Bible tells of many such heroes: Noah, Abraham, Joseph, David hunted by King Saul like a wild beast, Jeremiah, and yes, Jesus Himself (“Have any of the rulers or of the Pharisees believed on Him?” John 7:48). Jeremiah was “shut up” in prison, silenced, tortured, despised by the kings of Judah; but he was right and they were dead wrong. In the final judgment day, which would you rather be? Lonely Jeremiah in his dungeon or King Jehoikim or King Zedekiah on his throne?

In a recent issue of *American History* there is the story of William Penn, a foppish, worldly young man of London who became converted to the most active, self-sacrificing Christlike group of Christians of that day. He published a tract criticizing the Church of England, so that the Bishop of London threw him into the Tower. But God's providence provided for him after his famous and wealthy father's death to “purchase” from the King of England the largest real estate deal then known: the entire tract of land in the New World that is known as Pennsylvania. And he went on to write a wonderful book entitled, NO CROSS, NO CROWN.

And he helped enormously to prepare the way for the establishment of the United States of America as a refuge for persecuted people where they could find religious liberty. In the final judgment, which would you rather be? William Penn, or the lordly Bishop of London?

You may today stand all alone for Christ and for His truth in your school, your office, your home, your neighborhood; but take courage. The dear Saviour has promised: “Whosoever therefore shall confess Me before men, him will I confess before My Father which is in heaven” (Mt. 10:32). No, it's not too late to stand alone for Him!

One of the most encouraging passages in the entire Bible is tucked away in a little Bible “closet” where most people miss it completely. The reason is that the “door,” the title of the book, seems very discouraging to even look at, like it says, “Don't read me! I'm nothing but bad news!” It's Jeremiah's second volume, “Lamentations of Jeremiah.” It makes one wonder why God let it get into the Bible. Who enjoys sad lamentations? It reads more painfully than trying to listen to Tschaikowsky's depressing Pathetique Symphony.

But wait! Right there in the middle of this biblical desert we come across this almost incredibly beautiful melody of truth: chapter 3, verses 22-36. “It is of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed, because His compassions fail not. They are new every morning: great is Thy faithfulness” (right there are the seed thoughts of two of the grandest hymns in the English language). We read further that most blessed is the person who has

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<sup>1</sup> “Praise Him” “He Leadeth Me.”

known disappointment and sorrow in his/her youth: “It is good that [a person] should both hope and quietly wait for the salvation of the Lord. It is good for [a person] that [he/she] bear the yoke in . . . youth.” Even being “lonely” turns out to have been a blessing (vss. 26-28). And almost incredibly, biting the dust when you’re young becomes a good experience (vs. 29).

Right there in the most humiliating depth of experience the minor key changes to major, and the clouds part as sunshine breaks through: “The Lord will not cast off forever: but though He cause grief, yet will He have compassion according to the multitude of His mercies. For He doth not afflict willingly nor grieve the children of men, . . . to turn aside the right of a [person] before the face of the most High, to subvert [one] in his cause, the Lord approveth not” (vss. 31-36).

Painful? Yes, but O the blessed fruit that such “chastening of the Lord” brings! It saves us from the pitiful arrogance and pride that “un-educated” people get in to. If you have been blessed with that disciplinary “education,” be VERY happy!

Have you ever been perplexed, distraught, confused—you didn’t know which way to go? You wish that the Lord would just simply tell you in so many words what to do, where to go.

Can a spell of sickness be a blessing? We can’t say that the Lord sends it, but He can make it to become a blessing; He can overrule it for good. Lying awake at night for hours can be a valuable opportunity for us to “listen” to some instruction from the Lord.

David says, “I will bless the Lord, who hath given me counsel: my reins also instruct me in the night seasons” (Ps. 16:7). That word “reins” is interesting. It’s something deep within us. “God trieth the hearts and reins” (7:9). Wakefulness at night can be a welcome opportunity to face the Judgment ahead of time, while we can still learn and can still repent. David asks the Lord to give him that pre-judgment ministry: “Prove me: try my reins and my heart” (26:2).

Oh, so much better to be “tried” ahead of time, as Paul says about sins that are “open beforehand, going before, to judgment” (1 Tim. 5:24), than to wait until judgment comes too late to do anything.

The season of sickness when you toss and turn and can’t sleep may be a wonderful opportunity to be “instructed” of the Lord. Some thoughtful people have seen the “reins” as that unconscious function of the mind (the heart), to understand truths about ourselves that in our giddy thoughtlessness we overlook. To be pulled up short and given time to think more deeply can be an opportunity for much good.

But heart-searching must not be an exercise in self-absorption. “I will bless the Lord,” says David, when “my reins instruct me in the night seasons.” As He hung on His cross, Jesus’ human nature would have loved to just go to sleep, become unconscious; but He dared not let Himself go. But what He did do was to review His own life experience since His birth in the cowshed in Bethlehem (Ps. 22:9, 10). He wanted the Father to “instruct” Him. In your case, review those great

blessings in your life. See your own life in the light of God's providences. You will emerge from these "night seasons" disciplined, refreshed, encouraged. "If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all [men and women] liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him" (James 1:5). Good News!

Young people often feel this way when they graduate from high school or even college. Sometimes pastors have more than one invitation to come and be a church worker here or there, and they don't know which "call" to accept.

And there is the problem of whom to marry? You wish the dear Lord would bring Rebekeh to you as He brought her to Isaac long ago (Genesis 24). (Or bring Isaac to you!)

If the Lord were to run a question and answer service in the newspapers, we would all become mere robots, never learning to think for ourselves, and so we would miss one of the divine attributes the Lord wants to impart to us.

We are not machines to be run by a battery; we are sons and daughters of the living God, learning to become like Him in character. For this purpose we need freedom of will, and that requires clear thinking.

There are clear-cut principles we can rely on: (a) Just praying by itself is not good enough; we must learn how to understand the answers to prayer that the Lord gives us. (b) He always answers; He will give you a distinct conviction of what you ought to do. (c) But how can you know if the conviction is true? (d) Of the choices before you, which one is

most pleasing to self, and most inclined to be running away from duty the Lord lays on you? You can be quite sure He would lead you in a path of service. (e) Friends who know you and know the Lord can give you wise counsel.

Jonah was pondering a choice of careers: go to Tarshish, or go to Nineveh? He turned from the path of duty under God. Here's a very fine prayer to pray for guidance: "Shew me Thy ways, O Lord; teach me Thy paths. Lead me in Thy truth, and teach me for Thou art the God of my salvation; on Thee do I wait all the day" (Psalm 25:4, 5). But if you want an answer, it helps to become committed. And if you want to learn how to be committed, it helps to "behold" Christ's path of duty that led Him to His cross.

The Bible tells how to accept defeat graciously. It's a precious achievement! Joseph lost his "election" when his ten brothers sold him as a slave into Egypt. Thoroughly humiliated, brought to near despair by this "providence," he endured with fidelity and honor, and was eventually "reimbursed" by "providence."

David was forced to endure not four years of "political" exile, but ten long years of being hunted as a wild beast by King Saul. He too was eventually "reimbursed" by providence.

Jeremiah's humiliation was lifelong. He never was granted any kind of "reimbursement," and had to die in humiliating exile, his entire life apparently a total failure. His bitter cup to drink was never sweetened.

And, of course, we don't want to make an awkward comparison, but we can't help but think of

the Master Loser of all time and eternity, the One who suffered the final humiliation of being rejected by His own nation (not 50/50), who had to hear them shout “Crucify Him!” and who had to die with that cry of hatred ringing in His ears. Not a trace of “reimbursement” was His, except a reawakened faith in His own dying heart—that pierced the total darkness of His despair. For many who wrestle with personal problems, your tension may seem more than a mere month (as our nation has experienced). Yours may seem lifelong. Find comfort and encouragement in God’s Word where help for losers is abundant.

Let us humble our hearts and join the class again where our “instructor,” the repentant thief on the cross, is teaching us. He is “qualified,” because we know for sure that he was truly converted and will be “with” Christ in His kingdom. (Not all preachers are so qualified. The thief will have a place of high honor “with Christ”!).

This man has literally seen “Christ and Him crucified,” but the physical sight didn’t convert any of the chief priests and rabbis (the only spectator we know was converted was the Roman centurion). The thief saw “Christ crucified” by the eye of faith. And that “vision” is what converted him.

We know that then he stood before God as though he had never sinned (we all do). In other words, God’s forgiveness extended all the way back to his birth. That is the meaning of “justification by faith.” The thief had gotten into crime because he had not known God’s forgiveness, but God’s justifying grace had extended back to his birth, before he had

known it or believed it. His heart had been alienated from God all this time—hence his bitterness, resentments, alienation, and then, life of crime. But now, on his cross, his heart is reconciled to God and to the apparent disasters of his life.

That means he is reconciled to God all the way back to his birth! The mysterious providences of his life are unraveled; what he thought were just causes for resentment against God and everybody else, were seen in a new light. All the while that he was nursing his bitterness, he was a “partaker of Christ’s sufferings” (1 Pet. 4:13) but did not know it. Not only now in this hour spent with Jesus in crucifixion is his heart reconciled to God, but throughout his whole life he is now reconciled.

Let’s learn our lesson: all that we have thought has been “against us” has actually been “for us” (Rom. 8:31-33). Yes, let that load roll off your heart! Thank you, Brother Thief.

(a) “The angel . . . from the east” has told “the four angels . . . holding the four winds” of final strife to “hold” them (Rev. 7:1-3). Let the world thank God for these many years of deliverance from nuclear bombs! But in general people don’t realize this. If a few hate-filled maniacs were free to do what they want, terror could overwhelm us worse than that of 9/11.

(b) Your very life today is also “only through divine providence.” All we enjoy, our material possessions and prosperity, our daily bread, even our next breath, is a GIFT given us through the grace of the One who is “the Savior of the world.” Every loaf of bread is stamped with His cross. It’s time for us to

say “Thank You,” which is what real faith is. Heart thanks for a GIFT, not a merely provisional OFFER.

The Lord permits all of us at some time or other to suffer the pain of being wounded physically. It’s frequent in our childhoods; and all of us surely have known what a broken bone is, or a wounded knee, or whatever.

But when we are wounded in our spirit, in our heart, the bitterness is deeper than with any broken bone or lacerated flesh. David was a king, “a man after God’s own heart,” yet he was permitted to know the sorrow of a spiritual laceration: “I am poor and needy, and my heart is wounded within me. . . . Help me, O Lord my God. . . . [He] shall stand at the right hand of the poor, to save him from those who condemn him” (Psalm 109:22-31).

Is it really true that anyone who has suffered a “wounded spirit” can find healing? The answer has to be yes, if he/she will call unto the Lord as David did. A prayer puts God on the spot! He responds.

Solomon describes how serious the wound in a heart can be: “The spirit of a man will sustain him in sickness, but who can heal a broken spirit?” (Prov. 18:14). Peterson captures what’s there in the Hebrew: “A healthy spirit conquers adversity, but what can you do when the spirit is crushed?”

That’s the question! What can you do when the wound is deeper than a physical one?

It’s interesting to note that the Hebrew word translated “wounded” in both of these texts is the same one that Isaiah uses when he describes the suffering of Jesus: “He was wounded for our transgressions” (53:5). The word (*ehalal* in Strong)

means: to “break, defile, prostitute, slay, stain, wound.” Whatever God’s providence calls upon you to endure is part of what Christ endured.

Physical healings take time to be complete. And when one is old, they take longer. So with the heart; but healing is sure. Why? Because the Lord has promised it!

Now, our task is to believe His promise!

We have our choice: we can live under the old covenant (the still popular way as for millennia), or under the new. And if we choose to live under the new covenant, all will go well with us; right?

If we are driving, all the lights will change to green for us; the boss will give us a raise; our spouse will smile sweetly at us; our investments will prosper. Right?

Jesus surely lived under the new covenant, but He also died under it; from His boyhood He met constant opposition and turmoil that led Him eventually to the cross. No, new covenant living is not a picnic.

As a student in the “school of Christ” you are under serious, loving discipline (Heb. 12:5-10). Some setbacks and disappointments may be good for you in the long run. But the Lord tempers our trials, giving each of us the benefit of infinite wisdom. To each of us is given the “measure of faith” that makes life where His providence has placed us a thing of quiet, steady joy.

Even Jesus in His incarnation endured discipline. We read that “He . . . learned obedience by the things which He suffered” (Heb. 5:8). You will someday thank the Lord Jesus for permitting certain

disappointments to come to you; your present happiness can be greatly enhanced by anticipating this through your confidence in His faithfulness. The joy of the future can become yours in the present through faith.

The first message Jesus gave to the assembled disciples after His resurrection was, "Peace be unto you (John 20:19). This is no vain compliment; peace of heart is what you long for and He gives it to you today. "My peace I give to you, and that is in the midst of tribulation. The peace comes with your believing the new covenant promises, all seven of them in Genesis 12:2, 3.

You may have to pray the prayer of Mark 9:24: "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief." A wise writer assures us that we can never perish while we pray that prayer. Every little prayer you pray, making that choice, makes you stronger in the Lord.

When your lives have been turned upside down by a sudden tragic accident, your thoughts turn to Psalm 118: "Thou hast thrust sore at me that I might fall: but the Lord helped me" (vs. 13). That "thou" can't be the Lord Himself, for the Lord is in opposition to the one who "thrust . . . me."

Whoever it was who "thrust at [us] sore," he wanted to kill us, and the Lord saved us from that fate. So, we thank Him, and a new courage takes over our hearts at this realization. If somebody evil wants us out of the way, it's comforting to know that the Lord wants us to remain. Romans 6:13 comes into focus here and we sense the exuberance of those "that be alive from the dead." But we are reminded again that this was permitted by the Lord:

"The Lord has chastened me sore: but He hath not given me over unto death" (Ps. 118:18). Wycliffe when called upon to recant his faith, who was a man much wiser and better than I, took comfort from this during personal tragedy, and declared to his enemies, "I shall not die, but live, and declare the works of the Lord" (Ps. 118:17; see *Great Controversy*, 88).

Then comes the fascinating story of "the stone which the builders refused" when they were building Solomon's temple. It was the most important of all the stones, yet the "builders" despised it and left it lying out in the bushes in the heat of summer and freeze of winter vs. 22, 23. Jesus applied this story to Himself (Mt. 21:42), but the principle applies to the "most precious message" of Christ's righteousness which "the builders" in the Advent Movement "refused," which is yet to become the "headstone of the corner". That is, "the message of Christ's righteousness," which alone can lighten the earth with glory (Rev. 18:1-4). This message alone is a "perfect fit" to meet the needs of the world church today, and it will be "marvelous" when all at last realize, "This is the Lord's doing." The time is near; and Ps. 118 has reassured us with new confidence.

After 2000+ years, how much progress have "we" made as God's people? Think of them back *then*, the ancient Israelite church: expecting their Messiah to come "almost any time" just as we are expecting the same Messiah to return "almost any time now." At least, "soon." They knew 2000 years ago, just as we know now, that there must come "a great

reformatory movement among God's people" in order to be ready for the Messiah.<sup>2</sup> There was an atmosphere of expectancy among God's people then, as there is now. And uppermost in their minds was a question that, frankly speaking, is in ours today: "What shall we do, that we might work the works of God?" (John 6:28; don't say that those who asked that question were not the people of God; they were—at that time!).

Today there are seminars and sermons presented in the churches that are variations of that question. "What program, what duty, what plan, shall we DO that we might have that 'great reformatory movement' of revival in preparation for the return of our Messiah?"

There is diligent study in the Bible and inspired writings that yield a multitude of quotations about duties to "do"—about health reform, diet, good works, tithes, offerings, witnessing, devotionals—almost ad infinitum. And some sincere people are brilliant and have re-phrased the question, so it reads: "What shall we NOT DO, to work the works of God?" "What worldly habit must we give up, in order to have that 'great reformation'?"

And each teacher ("guru") has a new program that this time will "work," if only we will "do" it, or give up doing this or that which is "worldly." There MUST be

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<sup>2</sup> "In visions of the night, representations passed before me of a great reformatory movement among God's people. Many were praising God. The sick were healed, and other miracles were wrought. A spirit of intercession was seen, even as was manifested before the great Day of Pentecost."—9T 126 (1909).

something we can "do" (or not do) to cure the worldwide disease of lukewarmness that everybody agrees afflicts the church. We long for some program, some new idea, some committee plan from some fertile minds.

Could it be that Jesus had the solution, 2000 years ago? "This is the work of God, that ye believe on Him whom [God] hath sent" (vs. 29). The solution is not DOING something but SEEING something. If we have a tomorrow, let's "look," do some "beholding" of something to "see."

Really good people keep asking the same question the Pharisees asked long ago, "What shall we DO that we might work the works of God?" (Jn. 6:28). Israel were obsessed with that idea for they promised God, "All that the Lord hath spoken, we will DO" (Ex. 19:8). That promise at Mt. Sinai was the "old covenant," and it bound Israel to legalism through most of their history until finally they crucified their Messiah.

But God has always had a better way—the "new covenant," which is not the promise of the people but the one-sided promise of God, not a contract, or a "bargain" He makes with us. He promises to write His law in our hearts, and our part is to believe His promise. But the old covenant/new covenant tension still exists today, and the inherent legalism in the immensely popular old covenant discourages and perplexes multitudes, both in and out of the church.

Instead of our concentrating on what we must DO, God asks us to look and see what He has done and is doing. He taught this lesson to the people in the

wilderness—“when he [the one bitten by a serpent] beheld the serpent of brass, he was healed” (Num. 21:9).

Jesus said that “serpent” represented Himself (exactly backward, we would think!), and our continual “perishing” will come to an end if we “behold” Him as a “serpent lifted up” (Jn. 3:14, 15)—a Savior “made to be sin for us” (2 Cor. 5:21). “Look unto Me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth,” He says (Isa. 45:22). John the Baptist agrees, “Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world” (Jn. 1:29). Jesus says, “If I be lifted up [for all people to see Me] . . . I will draw all unto Me” (12:32). Paul saw his mission, to turn people’s ears into eyes and “to make all men see what is the fellowship of the mystery” (Eph. 3:9). John says, “Behold what manner of *agape*” (1 Jn. 3:1—that’s a refreshing sight to see!).

Even Pontius Pilate preaches one unforgettable sermon: “Behold the man!” (Jn. 19:5). Here’s Good News: “a great reformatory movement” is coming, for God “will pour upon [His people and leaders] . . . the spirit of grace and supplication, and they shall look upon Me whom they have pierced” (Zech. 12:10). Behold that sight and you can never be the same lukewarm person!