

Ordinary Providence

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on April 29, 2018.

Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, 'Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.' And he rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed to Egypt and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, 'Out of Egypt I called my son.' Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah: 'A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be comforted, because they are no more.' But when Herod died, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, saying, 'Rise, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the child's life are dead.' And he rose and took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there, and being warned in a dream he withdrew to the district of Galilee. And he went and lived in a city called Nazareth, so that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled, that he would be called a Nazarene (Matt. 2:13–23).

Wise men from the east came to worship Christ, the newborn King. In the providence of God, they found the child in Bethlehem. They fell down before Him in worship, and offered tangible treasures of adoration. Having worshiped the King, they departed by another way, intentionally avoiding King Herod. Hell hath no fury, as they say, like a spurned regent, and the young life of the King of kings was in danger. In the providence of God, the young family fled to Egypt, where a colony of Jewish exiles likely lived. In the providence of God, the family returned to Israel not to Bethlehem or Jerusalem but to the unlikeliest of places, the Galilee district in a city named Nazareth.

Of course this historical account includes supernatural revelation in Joseph's dreams, but the twists and turns of this story are also an example of the ordinary providence of God. By providence, I mean God's "most holy, wise, and powerful preserving and governing all his creatures, and all their actions" (WSC Q.11). In verses 13 through 15, we see providential direction. In verses 16 through 18, we see providential protection. In verses 19 through 23, we see providential location.

Providential Direction

As had occurred before (Matthew 1:20), an angel appeared to Joseph in a dream with specific instructions: "Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." Consider these instructions: Joseph is to take his family from the Promised Land of Israel to a

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foreign land, the land of pagan gods, a land of Israel's historic slavery, the land of God's wrath. If he does not go, however, the child will be killed.

Some may be confounded by this occurrence and instruction. Why would an angel from heaven provide travel instructions to an ordinary man to save the life of the Son of God? Couldn't the angel provide supernatural transport? Could Herod really harm Christ before His appointed time of death? In other words, it is presumed that divine intervention will circumvent ordinary providence.

While these are fair questions, they ignore the fact of Jesus' humanity and God's preserving and governing according to His providence. Thomas Chalmers explained it this way: "We say that it is rain which makes the grass to grow: It is God, in fact, who makes the grass to grow; and he does it by the instrumentality of rain." God has established rules of order to creation, and He orchestrates all things according to His sovereign will... including the ordinary providence of fleeing to Egypt to avoid the vengeful wrath of an angry king. There was no chariot of fire to whisk them away. They traveled a long, hard journey according to God's providential direction. And in this direction, they experienced providential protection.

Providential Protection

Following their escape to Egypt, Herod unleashed his fury upon the children of Bethlehem. Every child under two years old was murdered based only on the sex of the child. The slaughter of little boys, Herod hoped, would eliminate any rival to his throne. Could Joseph and Mary have seen such an event coming? Wise men had come and worshiped Him. Would not others follow? As the rejoicers departed, the destroyer descended. In the providence of God, the child escaped the Bethlehem massacre. While Mary rejoiced, Rachel would weep.

Some may ask, "If God powerfully preserves and governs all his creatures, and all their actions, why were all those children slaughtered?" In other words, doesn't the providence of God negate evil? While we know that nothing evil comes from God, we also know that God allows evil to occur. Such are the mysteries of God. "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts" (Is. 55:8-9).

There are times of rejoicing in the providence of God, and there are also dark providences and times of weeping. The secret things do indeed belong to the Lord (Deut. 29:29). Joseph and Mary had witnessed the providential direction of the Lord as well as His providential protection, and then the unexpectedness of providential location.

Providential Location

In the providence of God, Joseph was directed to take His family to Egypt. We do not know where in Egypt, but scholars speculate that they lived in the Hebrew-inhabited city of Alexandria. Matthew draws our attention to Hosea's prophecy, "Out of Egypt I called my son." Hosea's words originally referred to Israel's captivity and the exodus from Egypt. Matthew takes these words and applies them to the true Israel, the Son of God.

Out of Egypt and back to Israel, in the providence of God, Joseph was directed to a new location, not Judea but Galilee, and specifically Nazareth. Matthew adds to this description a prophetic description and an idiomatic expression. While there is no prophetic quote describing the Christ as a Nazarene, a point the Pharisees would use against Jesus as the Christ, the use of the phrase "called a Nazarene" is likely an idiomatic expression meaning "unsophisticated" at best and "despised" at worst. And, indeed, "He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteem him not" (Isa. 53:3). From Bethlehem to Egypt, from Egypt to Nazareth, even the family's location was according to the providence of God.

Providential Redemption

So, we see the providential direction, protection, and location of Christ, but we also see a providential story of redemption. In the time of Israel's Egyptian captivity, Pharaoh ordered, "Every son that is born to the Hebrews you shall cast into the Nile, but you shall let every daughter live" (Ex. 1:22). In the providence of God, Moses' parents hid him from the wicked king, and he was saved and raised as a son of Egypt. His mother rejoiced, yet many mothers wept as their sons were murdered.

Recalling this massacre, the prophet Jeremiah wrote, "A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be comforted, because they are no more." In a series of providential events, Moses was called by God to redeem Israel from slavery and to lead them to the Promised Land.

Matthew draws this correlation to show us the gospel fulfilled in One greater than Moses, Christ Jesus our Lord. Just as Israel was a slave in Egypt, so also we were "slaves of sin" (Rom. 6:20), and the wages of our sin "is death" (Rom. 6:23). Just as Moses led Israel out of Egyptian slavery, so Christ led us out of slavery to sin and death by His life, death, and resurrection. Just as through Moses Israel was redeemed to be a people of God's possession, so also Christ "gave Himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works" (Titus 2:14). And, all of this according to the providence of God.

It is easy to read an historical account and read past the details and miss the hand of God. We are to pause and reflect not only on the big picture of redemption but how God works in the smallest of details. Benjamin Franklin wrote,

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For the want of a nail the shoe was lost,
For the want of a shoe the horse was lost,
For the want of a horse the rider was lost,
For the want of a battle the kingdom was lost,
And all for the want of a horseshoe-nail.

But for fleeing Bethlehem, but for hiding in Egypt, but for living in Nazareth, but for the ordinary providence of God, no substitutionary death, no victorious resurrection, no everlasting life. God works in the minutest of life's details, down to a crown of thorns and a rooster's crow. Perhaps you have mistakenly believed that the sovereign God of the universe is too busy to care about the intricacies of your life. Perhaps you have grown weary of crying out to God over a list of seemingly unanswered prayers. Perhaps you think God's sovereign plan of redemption does not include the ordinary details of your life.

Consider how you came to faith. Consider your sanctification. "And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. (Rom. 8:28–29).

Yes, in the ordinary providence of God, He is using all things (let me repeat: all things) to conform us to Christ, and that indeed is good! Or, if I may offer (with apologies to Ben Franklin):

In the providence of God the family fled,
In Herod's wrath the children were dead,
From Egyptian hiding the family was led,
For regal protection a Nazarene stead,
For the life of His people our Savior bled,
And all in the providence of God.