

Text: Various

Title: "Providence; the Pilgrim's Doctrine"

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Introduction: Boston, MA was named after that rocky coastal town in England where a seventh-century missionary named Botolph planted a church that today is famous for its 272-foot steeple, which the locals call "The Stump." The settlement got the name "Botolph's Stone," and this was later shortened to Boston. (So Bostonians name themselves ultimately after a church planter!)

Boston, England is on the east of the island facing the Netherlands. It is the site from which the persecuted Separatists we remember today as the Pilgrims, who came to America in search of religious freedom, first endeavored to escape the persecution of their homeland by setting sail for Holland. The desire to worship underlies a desire for freedom. When a nation's desire to worship dies, so will its appreciation for freedom over comfort and convenience.

The Pilgrims, after having secretly sold and given away all that they could not take with them, made their way to Boston, England in 1607, paid the captain of their ship his expensive fee, boarded the boat in the dark of night, and then were immediately arrested by the king's officials who were lying in wait for them. The captain had taken their money and had betrayed them. The officers ruined their belongings with a search and roughly frisked their persons, both men and women. The goal was to rob the Pilgrims of any valuables they may have been carrying. They were paraded into town before a gazing crowd, delivered to the magistrates, and imprisoned for a month in cold and cramped quarters.

The next year, the Pilgrims tried again from the port of Hull, England further north. They longed to be free to worship according to the dictates of their consciences. William Bradford describes their step of faith as follows in his *Plymouth Plantation*:

“Being thus constrained to leave their native soil and country, their lands and livings, and all their friends and familiar acquaintance, it was much; and thought marvelous by many. But to go into a country they knew not but by hearsay, where they must learn a new language and get their livings they knew not how, it being a dear place and subject to the miseries of war, it was by many thought an adventure almost desperate; a case intolerable and a misery worse than death. Especially seeing they were not acquainted with trades nor traffic (by which that country doth subsist) but had only been used to a plain country life and the innocent trade of husbandry. But these things did not dismay them, though they did sometimes trouble them; for their desires were set on the ways of God and to enjoy His ordinances; but they rested on His providence, and knew Whom they had believed.” [see David Beale, *The Mayflower Pilgrims*, Greenville: Ambassador-Emerald, 2000), 53-54.]

What is this doctrine called *providence* that gave the Pilgrims such rest? That generation knew this work of God well, and it was at the foundation of what caused them to risk everything to be faithful to Him. This Thanksgiving Day time is a wonderful season to remind ourselves of the meaning of “Providence: The Pilgrim’s Doctrine.” We will organize our study around two important questions this morning: “What is providence?” and “How does providence affect God’s people?”.

I. What is providence? (Gen. 22:8, 14).

Application: The word *providence* comes from the passage we read this morning about Abraham's faithful and obedient willingness to offer his son Isaac as a sacrifice. His faith was expressed in verse 8 with a reference to God's providence when Abraham answered his dear son's question about the missing ram with the assurance, "The Lord will provide for Himself the lamb for a burnt offering." This the Lord did, of course. He provided a lamb to substitute for Isaac, picturing the way the Lamb of God, the Lord Jesus Christ, took our place on the cross before God's holy wrath against our sin. When it was all done, Abraham named the place *Jehovah-Jirah* or *The Lord Will Provide* (v. 14). This same conviction, no doubt, was shared by those who named the capital of Rhode Island. Notice with me two things God accomplishes with His work of providence.

A. Providence is God's faithful provision for His creatures (Note the word *provide* in *providence*).

Illustration: When considering the cost of buying an automobile, one needs to take into account not only the purchase price, but also the maintenance costs. I was tempted once to buy a used Peugeot at a fairly reasonable price. A mechanic friend of ours named Phil, a long-time and faithful deacon at the Baptist Church of Danbury now home with the Lord, looked it over and saw that the backend had been entirely redone. The cost to maintain the vehicle became uncertain and was a major consideration in deciding against buying the car.

God's work of creation tells us where the universe came from; God's work of providence tells us that He has the power and wisdom to maintain what He has created. God not only made all things with His work of creation; He maintains all things with His work of providence.

1. God (Jesus) maintains the orderly laws of nature (Col. 1:13-17, Heb. 1:3 [*con – together + sistere – to stand*])). The law and order of nature did not develop from original chaos over time; they are the provision of God for His creatures.

Illustration: In his book, *There Is a God: How the World's Most Notorious Atheist Changed His Mind*, Antony Flew includes some chapters about things that changed his mind and convinced him that God exists. One of those chapters is titled, "Did the Universe Know We Were Coming?" He begins the chapter this way:

"Imagine entering a hotel room on your next vacation. The CD player on the bedside table is softly playing a track from your favorite recording. The framed print over the bed is identical to the image that hangs over the fireplace at home. The room is scented with your favorite fragrance. You shake your head in amazement and drop your bags on the floor.

"You're suddenly very alert. You step over to the minibar, open the door, and stare in wonder at the contents. Your favorite beverages. Your favorite cookies and candy. Even the brand of bottled water you prefer.

"You turn from the minibar, then, and gaze around the room. You notice the book on the desk: it's the latest volume by your favorite author. You glance into the bathroom, where personal care and grooming products are lined up on the counter, each one as if it was chosen specifically for you. You switch on the television; it is tuned to your favorite channel.

"Chances are, with each new discovery about your hospitable new environment, you would be less inclined to think it was all a mere coincidence, right? You might wonder how

the hotel managers acquired such detailed information about you. You might marvel at their meticulous preparation. You might even double-check what all this is going to cost you. But you would certainly be inclined to believe that someone knew you were coming” (vv. 113-114).

Application: Flew came to understand through the discovery of the orderly laws of nature that sustain our natural existence that the Creator God knew that we were coming and that He continues to sustain the conditions that allow us to continue to be here. His maintenance of the orderly laws of nature is a work of His providence. This is part of His faithful providential provision for His creation.

2. God’s work of providence includes His gift of life and all good things (James 1:17, Acts 17:22-26, 28).

Illustration: Flew’s next chapter is titled, “How Did We Go Live?” He concludes that evolutionary origin-of-life theories have failed to provide an answer: “The philosophical question that has not been answered in origin-of-life studies is this: How can a universe of mindless matter produce beings with intrinsic ends, self-replication capabilities, and coded chemistry?”

Application: The Bible’s answer to the question “How did we go live?” is that God created man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living soul. It’s answer to “How do we stay alive?” is “He giveth to all life, and breath, and all things.”

The Athenians could not celebrate Thanksgiving Day because the One who needed to be thanked, the God of providence that gave them life and breath and all things, was in Athens the Unknown God (v. 23). Do you know who to

thank this Thanksgiving? Do you know the God of providence, who faithfully provides for you as His creature?

B. Providence is God's sovereign plan for His creatures (When Abraham told Isaac his son, "The Lord will provide a lamb," he literally said, "The Lord will see a lamb"; like the Hebrew, the Latin underpinnings of our English word *provide* have to do with the ability to see: *pro - before, video - to see = to see before*). God is the provider who sees to everything His creatures need and the planner who sees before anything happens to them.

Application: The most important part of God's plan, of course, is the determination to give His own Son as a sacrificial lamb to take our place on the cross and bear the judgment we deserve (Acts 2:23). It is a plan to seek and to save those who are lost. It is a plan that promises that whosoever believeth on Him shall not perish but have everlasting life. And it is a plan that guarantees that all His enemies shall be made a footstool for His feet. Is God's plan for your salvation your plan? Are you saved by the blood of the Lamb?

II. How does providence affect God's people?

Illustration: Remember what Bradford said about the Pilgrim's faith in the God of providence? "But these things did not dismay them, though they did sometimes trouble them; for their desires were set on the ways of God and to enjoy His ordinances; but they rested on His providence, and knew Whom they had believed."

Application: That is a great answer to our question. How does providence affect God's people? It does so by giving them promises to rest on. These promises are the difference between trouble and dismay. We must learn to rest on the

promise that God provides for His creatures, especially for us who are in Christ; and we must learn to rest on the promise that God has a plan for us that is for our good.

A. The God of providence promises His people perfect provision (Matt. 6:25-34).

That God's people will be provided for according to God's will is as sure a work of God as is the fact that He created the worlds and revealed Himself to man in the Scripture. What is not guaranteed by God's work of providence in the same sense is that God's people would seek first the kingdom of God. A big part of resting in the providence of God is living the truth that no man can serve two masters (v. 24), and so we must serve the Lord and His kingdom and not money or other idols. If we put God and His kingdom first, He will provide everything we need. Are we seeking first the God of providence that way this morning?

B. The God of providence promises His people a perfect plan (Rom. 8:28).

Illustration: My favorite part of the Thanksgiving Day meal is the pie desert. Many of the ingredients that go into making a wonderful pie taste absolutely horrible by themselves: white flour, shortening, salt, even raw pumpkin. But when the baker works these together, the outcome is wonderful.

Application: God wrote the recipe for our sanctification into the perfect image of His dear Son. He has all the ingredients needed on that recipe, and He knows when and how to introduce those as needed. This is not only a perfect plan, it is a perfecting plan. Job understood the bitterness of some of life's ingredients. Yet as one who loved God, and as one who recognized that he was called according to

God's providential purpose, he came through all those terrible trials with strong faith. Hear his testimony as we close this morning: "Behold, I go forward but He is not there, and backward, but I cannot perceive Him; when He acts on the left, I cannot behold Him; He turns on the right, I cannot see Him. But he knows the way I take; When He has tried me, I shall come forth as gold. My foot has held fast to His path; I have kept His way and not turned aside. I have not departed from the command of His lips; I have treasured the words of His mouth more than my necessary food." Job believed in the providence of God over his life. Will we?

Conclusion: Our Pilgrim forefathers did so. Let's remember Bradford's words one more time: "But these things did not dismay them, though they did sometimes trouble them; for their desires were set on the ways of God and to enjoy His ordinances; but they rested on His providence, and knew Whom they had believed." Trouble? Yes. Dismay? No!

"A man came—I think it was actually in Philadelphia—on one occasion to the great George Whitefield and asked if he might print his sermons. Whitefield gave this reply; he said, 'Well, I have no inherent objection, if you like, but you will never be able to put on the printed page the lightning and the thunder.' That is the distinction—the sermon, and the 'lightning and the thunder.' To Whitefield this was of very great importance, and it should be of very great importance to all preachers, as I hope to show. You can put the sermon into print, but not the lightning and the thunder. That comes into the act of preaching and cannot be conveyed by cold print. Indeed it almost baffles the descriptive powers of the best reporters."

—David Martin Lloyd-Jones,

*Preachers and Preaching*