

THE POWER OF GOD'S PROVIDENCE

Introduction:

1. Opening question. How has God achieved His purposes through the ages? Two means can be seen in the Biblical account - miraculous activity and providential action.
2. Miracles. These are occurrences brought about by the action of God which is above or contrary to the laws of nature.
3. Providence. This is usually used to describe God's operations within these laws.
 - Providence (*pronia*). The term "God's providence" does not occur in the Bible. However *pronia* is found in Ac 24:2 where Tertullus employs it to describe the governorship of Felix, implying that this had been careful and thoughtful.
 - "Providence (*pronia*)". Literally means foresight but is generally used to denote God's preserving and governing all things by means of second causes" (Eastern's Dictionary).
4. When we teach, as the Bible teaches, that God does not work through the performance of miracles today it is said that we are limiting the power of God. What I want to demonstrate in this address is the tremendous power of God's providential care and to show that the channelling of His actions through the laws of nature by no means restricts His ability to fulfil His purposes.

I. From Greece To Caesarea

A. Background.

1. Making His defence before Agrippa, Paul stated: "Therefore, having obtained help from God to this day I stand..." (Ac 26:22). To what help did he refer and from what had he been preserved? We need to go back in time.
2. Commencing his return journey to Jerusalem on his third missionary tour, he anticipated trouble from the Jews.
 - a. He prayed for deliverance and besought the prayers of the Roman brethren (Rom 15:30-31).
 - b. This concern was not unjustified. The Spirit testified in "every city" that "bonds and affliction" awaited him (Ac 20:23). See also 21:4; 21:10-14.
3. Arriving in the capital, he was threatened by dangers from the onset.

B. Events in Jerusalem.

1. The enraged mob (21:27-36).
 - a. The threat, they intended to kill him (30-31).
 - b. How was Paul saved? By the actions of the chief captain, Claudius Lysias (32; cf. 23:26).
 - c. What was at work, miraculous intervention or God's providence?
2. Examination by scourging (Ac 22:23-30).
 - a. The threat (23-24).
 - b. What was the means of deliverance (25-26)? The protection afforded to citizens under Roman law.
 - c. What was at work, miraculous action or God's providence?
3. The pact of the forty plus (23:12-35).
 - a. The threat (12-15).
 - b. How was Paul saved?
 - 1) The discovery of the plot by his nephew (16).

- 2) Its revelation to the chief captain (17-21).
- 3) The secret removal of Paul by night under the protection of a large Roman contingent (22-24).
- c. Was this miraculous action or God's providence at work?
4. Paul's 2-year imprisonment in Caesarea (23:34-24:27).
 - a. The first threat (24:22-27).
 - 1) The charges laid by the High Priest, certain elders and Tertullus (5-6).
 - 2) Any immediate ruling was put off as a consequence of the governor's character defects. He was indecisive, and corrupt (24-26). This opened up the prospect of indefinite confinement.
 - b. How was Paul extricated? By the recall of Festus to answer accusations in Rome (27).
 - c. Was this miraculous intervention or God's providence at work?
5. Imprisonment under Festus (chs. 25-26).
 - a. The threats:
 - 1) Another Jewish assassination plot foiled by the preferences of Festus (25:1-5).
 - 2) The weakness of Festus (9) which led to Paul's appeal to be judged by Caesar (11).
 - b. How was Paul saved? By virtue of his rights under Roman Law.
 - c. Was this miraculous intervention or God's providence at work?

C. Summary.

There are an astonishing variety of factors and circumstances which God overruled to achieve His purpose. These would include the manipulations and plots of the Jews which were overcome by Claudius Lysias and the Roman cohorts, the corruption and appeasing of Festus which was countered by government re-organisation, the indecision of Festus, and threat of scourging blocked by the privileges of Roman citizenship. Being a Roman Paul was able to appeal to Caesar and force the hand of Festus!

II. From Caesarea To Rome

- A. What had sustained Paul's faith? He had been assured by The Lord that he would testify in Rome (Ac 23:11).
- B. Dangers surmounted on the sea voyage (Ac 27).
 1. Leading up to the storm (1-13).
 - a. Embarkation and initial difficulties (1-8).
 - 1) Once it had been decided that Paul should go to Rome, he was delivered into the custody of a centurion named Julius. They began their journey from Caesarea Maritima (1-2). Note that there were several "Caesareas" at that time
 - 2) Having changed ships at Myra in the region of Lydia in modern Turkey (4-5), they set sail again and met some contrary winds along the coast of Crete and with difficulty came to a place called Fair Haven (6-8).
 - b. Paul's advice (9-10). Stay moored because of the danger of sailing in the Med. at that time of the year.
 - c. The decision of the centurion (11-14). He gave greater weight to the counsel of the captain and ship owner.
 2. The storm (14-44).
 - a. The gathering of the storm (14-20).

- 1) The "Euroclydon" was a hurricane-like wind which rapidly changed its direction (See Barnes).
 - 2) Drastic actions to no avail: Took the small boat on to the ship; fastened cables under the hull; lowered the sails to be driven by the wind; abandoned freight and tackle.
 - 3) Their desperate plight: "All hope that we would be saved was finally given up" (20).
- b. God's message (21-26; note 24).
 - c. The ship nears land (27-29).
 - d. The conspiracy of the sailors (30-32).
 - e. The breaking-up of the boat and preservation of all lives (38-44; note the counsel of the soldiers and the response of the centurion 42-43).

C. God's promise fulfilled.

1. So where there were people in charge who would not listen to good advice, where there were tempestuous seas which drove the boat this way and that out of human control, mutinous sailors who sought to abandon the boat to preserve their own lives and soldiers who counselled the killing of all prisoners for their own interests - in the midst of all these factors and circumstances God's will prevailed.
2. But how did God achieve his purpose?
 - a. It was not by miracles! There is not a supernatural event detailed here.
 - b. It was God's providence at work throughout. All the twists and turns in the events which led Paul from Corinth to Jerusalem and then on to Rome are accounted for by normal human behaviour or the conformity of the natural world to the laws which God put into place.

III. Lessons And Applications

- A. God's ability to perform is not curtailed by His method of action. When we teach, as the Bible teaches, that God does not work through miracles today, this is not a limitation of God's power. God can achieve marvellously whether through miracles or His providence. It is those who assert that God is limited if He does not work through miracles, who restrict God and we need to be ready to point that out.
- B. Prayer is of no avail if we do not believe in the power of God's providence. This is how God works today by:
 1. The natural world conforming to the laws that were set in place when the world was first created.
 2. The workings of local and national government.
 3. The laws of the land.
 4. The interaction of people as they go about their business.

Conclusion:

1. These considerations should give extra meaning to the words of Paul as he wrote his letter to the Ephesians after receiving God's help which brought him not only to Jerusalem but also to Rome (Eph 3:20:21).
2. What God was able to achieve for Paul through His providential care He can do for us today. We need to be aware of that and believe it.