

# Some Common Pitfalls Regarding Divine Providence

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As I reflected upon the experience of the recent weeks in pastoral counseling, it seemed that again and again, I was turning to the Scriptures and opening up a basic theme in the Word of God with those who came and sought my counsel. And as I reflected upon this and prayerfully considered how best to use our time tonight, I came to the conviction that these who came to me seeking help and pastoral counsel were not exceptional people, that is, their needs and concerns were not so peculiar that to use them as an index for what I ought to preach would be irresponsible and unwise. But I believe just the opposite was true: that they represented a cross section of our people here and of Christians in general. And so with their concerns as a backdrop to selecting the subject, the subject I have chosen for tonight is, "Some Common Pitfalls in Connection with the Doctrine of Divine Providence". And as we take up this subject, we will begin first of all by taking a few minutes to define what we mean by the term "divine providence". I'm going to speak to you on pitfalls in connection with divine providence.

What is the thing concerning which we will examine with reference to some pitfalls? Well, I can do no better than turn to the old Shorter Catechism, section number 11, "What Is God's Providence?" And the answer is, "The works of God's providence are His most wise, holy, and powerful preserving and governing all His creatures and all their actions." And this definition of the confession is simply an attempt to bring together a truth taught from Genesis to Revelation, that God is in control of the world which He has made and everything and everybody in it. It is the truth expressed in such text as Daniel 4:35: "He doeth according to His will in the army of heaven, and among the inhabitants of the earth." Psalm 113:19: "Jehovah hath established His throne in the heavens; and His kingdom ruleth over all." We read in Nehemiah 6, after celebrating in that prayer, the doctrine of creation, the man of God goes on to say in verse 6, "Thou preserveth them all." All that God has created, He powerfully, wisely preserves. It's the truth that's brought into very tender expression in the words of our Lord Jesus in Matthew 10:29-30 in which He says that not a sparrow falls to the ground without your heavenly Father. The very hairs of our head are numbered. So the Biblical doctrine of the divine providence in a real sense is simply the truth that what comes to pass in time in every detail in every circumstance is but an exegesis of what God purposed in eternity. God's decrees are what God has planned in eternity. Providence is the unfolding, the exegesis, the opening up and the explanation in time of that which God has purposed in eternity, so that in Ephesians 1:11 the doctrine of divine decree and providence are brought into the closet conjunction where we read: "[He] worketh [providence] all things after the counsel of His will [decree]." What is decreed is worked out in providence.

Now for many of you, this is an old truth. And it is this truth which you find to be such a tremendous instrument of stability in the midst of a troubled world. Romans 8:28 can only be a source of comfort if this doctrine of divine providence is true. We can take comfort that all things are working together for good only because we believe God by His most holy, wise and powerful will is preserving and governing all men and all creatures and all their actions. It's because of the doctrine of providence that we can derive comfort from such a text as Romans 8:28.

However, this glorious, comforting doctrine becomes a dangerous doctrine when wrongly applied and used for things it was never intended to be used for. And now what I propose to do is simply to give you a public pastoral counseling session as I in the second place, having defined divine providence, describe and expose three common pitfalls in connection with this doctrine. Now I'm not saying these are the only pitfalls. Nor am I saying that I'm giving a comprehensive statement of the proper use of the doctrine of divine providence. My scope of concern is very limited. I am giving to you what I have proven in my own pastoral experience in dealing with the sheep of Christ three common pitfalls in connection with this doctrine.

Pitfall number one is the attempt to read the heart of God in terms of the providence of God. Many of God's people often err in their Christian pilgrimage when they attempt to read the heart of God by the providence of God. Now let me explain the error and then expose the error. In explaining the error, this is what I mean: if the providences which befall me are bright and sunny and favorable, making life joyful and relatively easy, then God must be showing His love to me. God's heart must be towards me with favor. And I read His unseen heart in His seen and tangible providences. So when the providences are bright and sunny resulting in a relatively easy and joyful existence, I seek to read in those "favorable providences" the heart of God. And I say from His providences His heart must be towards me in love and goodwill. However, if the providences before me are dark and cloudy and foreboding and mysterious making life miserable and difficult and uncertain, then God must be showing me that He hates me. Or if He doesn't hate me, He's upset with me, and He's irritated with me. And He's taking it out on me in His providence.

Now it's only the person who believes in providence who can ever be guilty of this sin. The person who thinks that all of life is just up for grabs, pure chance (time + space + chance operates everything), he doesn't have this problem. There's no meaning to favorable providences or to unfavorable providences because it's all up for grabs, and pure chance operates throughout the whole. But when you believe this doctrine that God by His wise and holy will is preserving and governing all of His creatures and all of their actions, then what happens to me personally in my little world of people and things does have significance. God has brought these things to me and upon me. And believing that, then many times Christians are tempted, and not only are tempted, but they fall prey to this pitfall of seeking to read from God's providences the disposition of God's heart. Now that's the error, a very common error.

Now let me expose it. And I will expose by beginning with a simple statement and then proving it from Scripture. The heart of God is revealed in the Word of God in terms of our spiritual, moral, and ethical relationship to God. The Scripture says in Psalm 146:8, "God loves the righteous." God's heart is towards a people of a certain moral and ethical and spiritual character. He loves the righteous. Yes, by grace He has made them righteous through the righteousness of His Son. By grace He has

made them righteous through the regenerating work of the Spirit and the implantation of a principle of obedience. By grace He is making them righteous through the power of the Spirit, enabling them to be conformed increasingly to Christ. But His love is in terms of the spiritual, moral, and ethical relationship that He sustains to them and they to Him. Conversely, Psalm 5:5 says that God is angry with or God hates all workers of iniquity. God's heart is against those who live in the practice and willful pathway of sin. John 3:36 says, "He that obeyeth not the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abideth on him." The heart of God towards men is to be understood not in terms of His providences, but in terms of what He has revealed in His Word on the basis of our spiritual, moral, and ethical relationship to Him.

God often brings dark and difficult, what we would call negative providences upon the righteous and ripens the wicked for judgment with continual favorable providences. Now that's clearly taught in the Word of God. It was the great problem of the psalmist in Psalm 73. As he looked out in terms of divine providence, this is what he saw: the providence of God was bringing to a righteous man what things? Verse 14: "All the day long have I been plagued, and chastened every morning." He saw himself in a constant string of difficult providences. On the other hand, when he looked at the wicked, he says in verse 3, "I was envious at the arrogant, when I saw the prosperity of the wicked." Providence was smiling upon them. They didn't have horrible, lingering deaths. "They are not in trouble as other men; neither are they plagued like other men...Their eyes stand out with fatness: they have more than heart could wish." When he looked at God's providence, this is what he saw: God is favorable and therefore loves the wicked; God is unfavorable and therefore has a controversy with the righteous. And it was not until he went into the sanctuary of God, considered their latter end and came to grips with the fact that their true state was to be understood in terms of their spiritual, moral, and ethical relationship to God that he got everything sorted out and saw things as he ought to see them.

But then, of course, we saw the book of Job. And this was precisely the problem with Job's so-called comforters. Job, according to God's estimation, not man's, was the holiest man upon the face of the earth in his generation. And this relationship to God in ethical, moral, and spiritual uprightness was the very basis that became the occasion of his trials. But looking upon him, you would say, "If ever God's heart is against a man it's against Job. Look at the providences that have come upon him." In a day he loses all of his possessions, his children, etc. And in a few more days he becomes one mass of putrefying sores, and it was difficult for sensitive people even to stand in his presence. The providences were dark and foreboding, and those dark providences lay upon him day after day, night after night, week after week. And all the while, others were basking under a clear blue sky of favorable providences.

Furthermore, the Scripture teaches us that these very dark providences, rather than being the indication that God doesn't love us, are the very validation of His love. Revelation 3:19: "As many as I love, I reprove and chasten." Hebrews 12:5-6: "My son, regard not lightly the chastening of the Lord, nor faint when thou art reprov'd of Him; for whom the Lord loveth He chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom He receiveth." And yet because we have subtly imbibed this false notion that favorable providences reveal the heart of God, the temptation in so many of God's children (and I've counseled not a few of them in this place) is when God brings a concentration of dark providences, you immediately begin to reason from your dark providences to something in the heart of God that is other than His love.

You're not the only one who's done it. Old Jacob did it. You remember when God was through His providences, dark and bitter providences, working out His own redemptive purposes, raising Joseph to that place of great influence in Egypt in order to preserve the Godly seed that would come and settle in Egypt in a period of famine, God is inexorably and marvelously carrying out His ancient promise that He would bruise the head of the serpent. And yet when one dark providence after another comes upon the old patriarch, he cries out in Genesis 42:36, "Me have ye bereaved of my children: Joseph is not, and Simeon is not, and ye will take Benjamin away: all these things are against me." No they weren't. All those things were for him. All of those dark providences were the revelation of God's love and His commitment to His covenant promises. And old Jacob fell prey to this pitfall of trying to read the heart of God in the providence of God, and it's losing business.

Now I'm fully aware that there are times when dark providences may be the revelation of God's anger toward His children. 1 Corinthians 11:30: "For this cause many among you are weak and sickly, and not a few sleep." I am not ruling out the fact that a dark providence can be God's spanking for evil done in one of His children. But what I am addressing is the notion that a dark providence or a combination of dark providences necessarily reveal that God's heart is against me. And child of God, you must resist that temptation. God's heart is not to be read in His providences; it's to be read in His Word in terms of your relationship to Him. If you're a man or woman of faith, then you are in the orbit of God's covenant love. If you are walking uprightly in the light of His Word with a blameless conscience, a conscience void of offense, then God may in His own inscrutable wisdom plunge you into a series of the darkest of providences. But His heart towards you has not changed. And you are to hold on to your way, and you are to hold on to the integrity of your conscience. You are to be able to look up into a sky that is so thick with dark clouds of dark and dismal and foreboding promises and say, "God, I believe your heart is toward me in love and pity and compassion as much as if I were looking into a cloudless sky."

God is committed to something more than to keeping you comfortable. He's committed to making you holy. And He's going to beat up on you a little bit in the process. He's more concerned about your conformity to Christ than your physical, material, psychological, and social comfort. Furthermore, He's more concerned about the issues of eternity than time (2 Corinthians 4:18). He's more concerned about the inner man than the outward. The outward man is decaying; the inner is being renewed. He's not indifferent to the outward, but He's more concerned about the inner than the outward. So when Paul has an outward affliction, he says, "I simply cannot go on in the work of God with this impediment to my physical strength." And He cries to God to remove it. God says, "No." There's an inward malady that's worse. The outer won't cripple you, but the inner will. "And lest you be exalted above measure because of all of your privileges, Paul, I'm allowing this outward pressure to be the instrument of keeping you consciously weak and therefore consciously humble because I can use a physically weak man, but I will not use a strong and proud man."

Dear child of God, this can be revolutionary for some of you because God is not going to take us to heaven, in the language of A. W. Tozer, all wrapped up in a Christmas package with a nice little neat bow on it. If we get there, we're going to get there beat up a bit, scarred and bruised, some of the edges knocked off and splintered. So there are going to be dark providences. Now don't go around and say, "Well, God must not love me because everything's not going well." There are

Christians like that. They hear a message like this and they'll flip it right around and say, "Well, if dark providences are the indication of God's love, then God must not love me." And they're going around looking for trouble. No, no, don't go looking for trouble. Don't try to help God chasten you with dark providences. What I'm saying is, whether the sky is blue or dark and foreboding, read the heart of God in the Word of God and in terms of your ethical, moral, and spiritual relationship to God. And stop trying to read the transcript of His heart in His providences. That's the great pitfall.

Pitfall number two with regard to the doctrine of providence is the attempt to understand the specific and the full purpose of God in any given set of providential circumstances. Now we'll approach it the same way. We'll explain the pitfalls and then expose them. If a set of providences has come which for me and respect for my routine is large or small, then immediately I'm tempted to say, "I've got to find out what God is saying to me in this providence." For example, you're going to work tomorrow morning and on your way to work you get a flat tire. A sensitive Christian will almost immediately say, "Well, Lord, what's your purpose in this?" And his wheels will begin to move to try to find and discover some specific purpose for this specific providential circumstance that is out of the ordinary. It becomes more intense if a man loses a job where he felt he had real security. Suddenly he's called in and given the spiel and the pink slip, and his whole life, as it were, is numb with the shock of this unexpected hiatus in his career. The loss of a loved one, ongoing discipline of singleness, widowhood--these ongoing trials, the combination of dark providences, or the combination of favorable providences. Often as God's people, we attempt to understand the specific and the full purpose of God in any set of providential circumstances. What is God saying to me in this providence or in these providences?

Let me expose the error of this pitfall. The truth is, dear brothers and sisters, that only an omnipotent God who sees the whole fabric of His plan knows the full significance of any part of that plan as it comes to light in your life and mine. And I'm going to try to illustrate it. This block represents your present set of circumstances. And you see some threads (that's my red line) going this way and some threads this way (the warp and woof of the fabric). And you've got a question mark: what is God saying in this and this and this? And altogether combine these present strands of God's providence: what is He saying to me now in the light of what I see of His providences? Well, the problem with that is this: that in your present set of providences (there are these little strands), all you and I can see is one little part of the threads going this way and the threads going this way. But you know what God sees? He looks, if I may use the facial imagery, down upon us, and He sees the present in terms of every single thread (the warp and woof of the whole fabric) that constitutes the now. But He sees more than that. He sees how each thread goes all the way back into His eternal counsel and where each thread is going in the confirmation in His purposes. Furthermore, He sees how each thread is being used in my life to prepare me for heaven, how it's impinging on the lives of others for eternity with Him and being woven into the fabric of His purposes with regard to manifesting His justice upon the ungodly.

Now do you see how stupid it is for us to try to figure out what any given factor means when an omniscient eye alone sees the whole thread at any given point, and sees the roots of the thread and the ultimate destination of the thread. So child of God, stop trying to play God. And when you're in a given set of providences that trouble you and upset your normal routine, don't go before God asking God to be like

Him and to give you the ability to see all that He has purposed in this particular set of providences. It is losing business.

Now there are two qualifications: it is perfectly proper to pray, "Lord, if you're seeking to expose some sin in my life, if you're seeking to nudge me in the direction of a new dimension of Your purpose for me by these providences, help me to understand as I study Your Word what principles apply to the providence." I am not saying that the providence cannot be God's means to get our attention to some principles of His Word. I'm not saying that at all. Nor am I saying that providence cannot be the instrument by which God reveals sin to us. But for us to demand that we be able to understand why we got the flat tire is sheer impudence. Just take care to safely repair the tire, change the tire in a way that is responsible and doesn't tempt God. And don't while you're getting out the lug nuts try to figure out: "O, what's God saying to me?" That seems very spiritual, but you may get your head knocked off with an oncoming car when you're preoccupied with trying to interpret the providence when you ought to be occupied with finding a safe place to change your tire. Now that doesn't sound very spiritual, but that's your duty because the Scripture says, "Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God." And all you need to know is that all things including your flat tire work together for your good. But God doesn't say you'll know precisely the good at any given point.

Now sometimes God mercifully lets us live long enough to see our providences interpreted partly. For example, Genesis 50. When Joseph was thrown down into the pit, sold as a slave, and ended up in the house of Potiphar, I would imagine that that strange and dark and horrible providences meant very little to him. But later on, some years had passed, and he's able to see that there was both rhyme and reason for all of these dark providences. At the end of that moving scene when he disclosed himself to his brethren, he could say, "As for you, ye meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive" (Genesis 50:20). He says,

"Now I can see the purpose of that strange combination of dark providences. Out of a motive of jealousy and ill-will, you sold me to be a slave. There was no love loss between us. You meant evil, but God who governs all men and all their actions in all realms, He was providentially guiding even the channels cut by your malicious attitude in order that this day the whole clan might be spared down here in Egypt."

But that was only part of God's providence. And Joseph only saw part of it, and he was content to rest until God unfolded even that part. But there was another part: a preacher in 1985 was going to need a vivid illustration of this pastoral problem. That's right. And when God let Joseph be sold and speak these words, part of His purpose was to give me the fuel to give you pastoral counseling. God knew all of that. I didn't; Joseph didn't, but God did. And only the omniscient eye of God can see all the threads in the whole tapestry. And to be men and women of faith is to say, "God, all I see is a little piece of the thread, and it doesn't even look like it belongs in the fabric. But you put it there, and you know why you put it there. And someday when I sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom, and down sit down with my Lord, I'll have Him exegete every strand. And then He'll show me how it all was wisely woven together. So child of God, remember the hymn we often sing:

Blind unbelief is sure to err and stand his work in vain.  
God is His own interpreter, and He will make it plain.

The second pitfall is attempting to understand the specific and the full purpose of God in any given set of providential circumstances. That is none of your business. Yours is to bow in faith and confess God's ways to be right and just and good, even if you never live long enough to make any sense out of what He's done.

Then there's pitfall number three. And this one is a very difficult one to speak upon in a balanced way, but I'm going to make an attempt to do it because it needs to be said. Pitfall number three is the attempt to make the providence of God the indicator (the finger pointing in the direction) of the will of God. Now let me explain the error. Someone is not sure whether he ought to take this job or that job or the other. And he says, "Now Lord, I trust Your providence. If You want me to take that job in such and such a place, You open the door. If You don't, You close it." And if the door opens, he comes to his pastor and says, "I've been praying about a job opportunity in three places; a door has opened in such and such a place. I believe God has opened that door. Providence is pointing the way." And so he moves forth dead certain it's the will of God because there was an open door. Three years later, you see the man; he's lost all his joy, all his vibrancy, all his spiritual vigor. And when you begin to talk with him, you find out what his problem is. He's found no decent ministry. The job has consumed so much of his time and energy his marriage is coming apart at the seams; he's lost all contact with his children. Everything is coming down around him in a shamble. And he says, "I realize now that open door was not an indication of the will of God. I should have considered other factors rooted in the Word of God. Someone's praying about whether they ought to marry a certain man or woman, and so they say, "Lord, I commit it to Your providence. If You create in them an affinity to me, and they like me and are attracted to me and I to them, then I'll take this as from You." Ten years later, in the bitterness and the horrible, horrible locked in misery of a mystic marriage, the person looks with bitterness upon the day they used providence as an indicator of the will of God. That's what I mean about this pitfall. Using an open door, someone's favorable disposition, something in providence to indicate the will of God.

Now let me expose that error. The will of God with which we have to do is the will of His precepts and not His providence. Providence exegetes God's decrees. My business is to walk in the light of His precepts, walk in the confidence that in His providence He is guiding me. But my mind and my rational faculties are not to be taken up with looking at what seem to me to be the indicators of providence. But I'm to be taken up with the precepts and principles of the Word of God and responsibly applying them to my circumstances in dependence upon the Holy Spirit.

Psalms 1 describes the blessed person in what language? "Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the wicked, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of scoffers: [but his delight is in contemplating the providence of God, and upon His providence He meditates day and night]." No. "But his delight is in the law of Jehovah; and on His law doth he meditate day and night." He fills his mind with God's precepts. Psalm 119:105. David does not say, "Thy providence is a lamp unto my feet, and light unto my path." He says, "Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and light unto my path." Jesus said in John 14:21, "He that hath My commandments, and keepeth them, he it is that loveth Me: and he that loveth Me shall be loved of My Father, and I will love him, and will manifest Myself unto him."

Now, I'll qualify in a moment. Hang in with me while we establish this. Let's look at some examples in Scripture where people erred by thinking providence was an index of God's will.

Look at Jonah. God had spoken His Word: "Go to that wicked city Nineveh and cry out against it for its sin." But he went in the opposite direction to flee from the presence of God, Scripture says. And when he came down to the seashore, what did he find? He found a set of unusually favorable providences. A ship going to the place he wanted to go to was there; the winds were favorable. They had a seat for him; they had a berth for him. He had the amount of money needed. Everything in providence seemed to smile upon Jonah. An old Scottish preacher who has a powerful sermon on this matter of taking the will of God from providence and not from Scripture draws this out beautifully. Had I the time, I probably would have brought excerpts of it and read it to you. It's a most moving thing. He begins to enter into dialog with Jonah who thought he could determine the will of God from providence. And he begins to ask him when the waves begin to crash upon the ship and everything is turned into a frenzy because of Jonah: "Where is His favorable providence now?"

Look at Judas. It says that he was continually seeking a convenient set of circumstances to betray the Lord Jesus. And John 18 tells us that when he came out that night with a band of soldiers and the chief priests and their cohorts, he was able to know where He was in the garden because he said, "Jesus oft-times resorted thither with his disciples." The providence of God was favorable to Judas' most dastardly deeds. Are we going to say, then, that was the will of God's precepts. No, God had said, "Thou shalt do no murder." God had said to Jonah that he was to go to Nineveh.

No let's look at the flip side in the life of a man of God, such as Paul. He said in Romans 1 that many times he had purposed and apparently even made plans to go to Rome. Romans 1:13: "I would not have you ignorant, brethren, that oftentimes I purposed to come unto you (and was hindered hitherto)." Every time he made plans to go, the door got slammed in his face. So what did Paul say? "Well, God must be showing me in His providence I've have no business going to Rome; I'll give up the idea." Not on your life. Going to Rome was a matter of obedience to the revealed will of God. So he was prepared to keep knocking and knocking and knocking until the door was opened.

Many Christians, the first time they meet a closed door in any area say, "O, God is closing the door in providence." And they run away. How do you know that God closed it to tell you to go away? How do you know He didn't close the door to develop some calluses on your banger, to develop some spiritual muscles to pray and bang the doors down in the name of the Lord? If that door stands before you in the path of duty, it's not there to say go another direction. It's there to make a man or woman of courage out of you, a man or woman of faith, a man or woman of holy persistence.

Dabny, the great Southern theologian and preacher and writer, in his masterful treatise on the call to the ministry, he goes after men who have all of the indications that God's hand may be upon them for the ministry, but there's some negative and dark providence standing in the way. And he says, "Who are you to pontificate as to what the purpose of that hindrance is?" You say, "Well, I can't. I have this hindrance or that hindrance." He says,

"Who are you to say why God put the hindrance there? The hindrance is there in divine providence, but the purpose of that hindrance--who are you to exegete it as though you were God? Could it be that God put that hindrance there for the very purpose of making you more a man of God to press clean through that hindrance by holy diligence and by the use of spiritual weapons"

Demosthenes the great Greek orator could have concluded even as a pagan that he was never to be an orator. He had an impediment in his speech. And you know the famous proverbial story of how he would go down by the seashore and fill his mouth with stones and learn how to speak above the roar of the ocean until he could be heard distinctly. What did he do? He didn't take the providential factor of a speech impediment and lay over and play dead. That element is too much for us. We need to be done with that and keep our noses to the Book of God and determine our duty from Scripture.

Let's go back to the two illustrations and show how it works in practical experience. Take this fellow with the job. Instead of saying, "Lord, there are three places, three opportunities; whatever one opens up, that's Your will." No, no, he should have sat down with His Bible and said, "Now God, as a man on the threshold of my career as a workman, a husband, a provider, a Christian man, what are my priorities as dictated by the Book of God?" If he did that, he would have found that he should seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all other things would be added. So he writes down, "Priority number one: wherever I pursue my career, I must be in a setting where I can seek first the kingdom of God." He goes to his Bible and learns that the church is the pillar and ground of the truth. So he says, "I must go where there is a church that is committed to the Word of God." Furthermore, he reads in his Bible, "Fathers, nurture your children." "Whatever career I pursue in whatever circumstances, I must not sell my children to the corporation. I won't do it. I'd sooner dig ditches than be a vice president or a general at the expense of the souls of my children." He gets his priorities out of the Book. That's where he gets them--all of them. Then he goes to the company and sits down: "What's your job description?" "Here it is; here are my qualifications." "What are your terms of work?" "Here they are." Then he investigates: "Is there a church within reasonable distance?" He asks some probing questions about what will be expected of him. He does not allow a lovely open door to settle all the issues. He thinks the issues through with hammered out Biblical priorities. And the widest door with the most promise, if he's got to stumble over a precept, he says, "Uh-uh, I'm not going to take it." Now it may mean that one of our brethren highly qualified in a specific professional field in this congregation may have to drive a cab in New York for a year--that's right--with a graduate degree, drive a cab in New York. Why? Because you've got principles from the Word. O dear men, will God give us men like that in this generation? I pray He will. Men of that stuff who will be the life and blessing for another generation.

As for the guy who says, "She likes me and I like her, then God must be in it." No, no, my friend, the devil can very easily stir up the hormones and the chemistry of mutual interest. What he does is he goes to his Bible and says, "Lord, if I'm thinking as a man of God, what am I to look for in a woman?" Above all else, she must be a woman who is in the state who manifests the grace of God in life and character. She must be a woman who has a Biblical concept of marriage and of the home, or who at least is willing to be taught those concepts. And he hammers out of Scripture what he's to look for. He may have very little positive chemistry the first time he dates a woman who seems to have those qualities. That doesn't turn him aside. He's willing

to stay with her long enough until her true virtue that may not hang out in her measurements is seen.

Some of you men are too worldly in what you're looking for in a wife. Maybe if God blinded you for five years, it would be the best thing that happened to you. You'd get a Godly wife in the meantime. And when He gave your sight back, she'd be awfully beautiful because you would have lived with the glory and beauty of Godliness. And it even affects what your eyeballs see. But some of you are altogether too worldly. Some of you girls, that's your problem too. You're too worldly in what you're looking for in a man. I know one of our women here confessed this. God had to knock her on the head hard. She had it all figured out. Ah yes, she wanted a man of God for her husband, but she figured out the height and weight and everything else. And God had to work her over pretty good to humble her. I'm not going to say publicly who it is. But I know she would be willing to tell you how she thanks God that He opened her eyes to her folly.

You see what we're talking about now? This pitfall of trying to interpret the will of God by the providence of God in major decisions of work, career, husband, wife, all of these things. No, we're to go to Scripture and be regulated by Scripture. And then as we prayerfully commit ourselves to implement the path marked out by Scripture, this is where the doctrine of providence is our comfort. I can proceed in the path of Biblical obedience in dependence upon God and in the strength of His Spirit, confident that because He by His most wise, holy and powerful will is governing and preserving all His creatures and all their actions. This God can bring any force to bear, any influence to bear upon my path that is for my good and His glory. And I go forth not looking for providence to mark the way. I look to the Word to mark the way. But I'm confident that divine providence will guide me in that way. And then when I stop and look back (this is where Flavel's book *The Mystery of Providence* is so helpful), and even here with my limited sight seeing through a glass darkly, I can see some of the marvelous ways that God providentially hedged me up, overruling my stubbornness and my folly and my short-sightedness and my wrong motives, to deal so graciously with me. So look back at providence and admire; look up at providence and trust. But don't look into providence and try to come up with a full interpretation of what God is doing. Don't look at providence and read from providence into the heart of God. And don't try to see the path of God's will marked out by providence. Child of God, don't abuse the precious doctrine of divine providence by falling into any one of those three pitfalls. And I would be very surprised if there are not many of us who would acknowledge tonight, if we would grasp what I've tried to convey, that we've been guilty on all three counts many times. I have many times.

Let me say in closing, this is one of the reasons I abominate all of the mystical, subjective elements of the Deeper Life teaching and much of the Charismatic teaching because it lends itself to this very thing. And it becomes tyranny because with your puny little mind, you're constantly on that vicious treadmill of trying to figure out what God is saying in this and saying in that and saying in the other. And you can so easily, if you're of a sensitive temperament, misinterpret what God is doing, bring false guilt upon yourself, and talk about having God's 2nd best, 3rd best, 4th best, and 17th best. If I had to live by that rule, I probably got His 178th best somewhere down the line on the bottom of the heap. But it's a wonderful thing to be able to stand where we stand today and say, "I am here by the kind and gracious providence of a wise and a loving God."

Now if you're not a Christian, much of this you've sat here and said, "What in the world is the big deal?" My friend, if that's been your disposition of your mind, it's because you don't know the God of the Bible and you've never come to love Him. Because once you come to know and love Him, then pleasing Him is the thing that matters more than anything else. And that's why it's only these funny folk called Christians that have these problems. But it's only these funny folks called Christians that are going to be with Him forever in joy and peace and the glory of His presence. And we're going to be there not for anything we've done. But we're going to be there because of what His beloved Son did, who in God's time was sent to be the Savior of sinners who don't know how to live, who can't face death with confidence, dark and blind, rebel sinners. And my dear non-Christian friend, that Christ and His salvation is offered freely to you in the Gospel that through that Savior, you might come to know this God and know the joy of walking with Him and being with Him forever when He returns in the person of His Son.

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