

HOLY SPIRIT

Lesson III

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Notes for Holy Spirit, Lesson III – Providence

Slide 1

Many of us are familiar with God the Father and God the Son, but maybe we are not as familiar with the Holy Spirit. Why? It could be because we do not spend as much time studying about the Holy Spirit. If we will take the time to study there is much we can learn. But just like the Father and Son there is only so much we can learn about God because God is Spirit and we are flesh therefore we cannot fully comprehend the spiritual world. But God has given us what we need to know even if we still have a lot of questions.

In Lesson I we discussed the “characteristics” of the Holy Spirit and answered the question, “Is the Holy Spirit, God?” In Lesson II we discussed the Holy Spirit’s work in man’s salvation. Let’s briefly review lessons I and II before we begin our next lesson, the Holy Spirit and Providence....

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So, we see that the Holy Spirit is not just an influence but having the characteristics of a person, is in fact God. In lesson II we saw...

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As we have learned, the Holy Spirit has been working in the lives of mankind since creation and continues to work so that man may be saved.

We see that...

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We see then, that the Holy Spirit has worked and continues to work through the Word of God, the Gospel, to bring about man’s salvation. Then in lesson III we noticed...

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In our past two lessons we have been looking specifically at the nature of the Holy Spirit and His works in man's salvation. We learned that the Holy Spirit is God and that He has and continues to work to bring about our salvation. In lesson three we are going to be looking at the subject of providence as it applies to God's dealing with mankind. We will not be talking as much about the Holy Spirit specifically but about the Godhead. We will see that God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit all work together in the affairs of mankind to bring about the will of God. I believe that it is important that we understand how God has worked in the lives of mankind down through the ages. If we have an understanding of how God has worked in the affairs of mankind, without the use of miracles, we will better understand the use of miracles which we will be discussing in our next lesson. So, let's begin our study of the Providence of God...

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Providence is another one of those subjects that we don't often study but it is an interesting and important one because it gives us a better understanding of how God deals with His creation. God has always worked through two avenues...

Miracles – We read about God working through miracles in the Flood of Noah's time, the Plagues in Egypt, Jonah and the Great Fish, the healings and raising people from the dead in the time of Jesus. This is God working directly in the affairs of mankind.

Providence – Providence is not quite as amazing or awe inspiring as miracles but it is still a way in which God works to bring about His will. This is God working indirectly in the affairs of mankind. Through this lesson we will learn the meaning of providence, the difference between general providence and special providence and how God has worked through providence in the lives of mankind down through the ages and continues to work in our lives today.

In this lesson we will just scratch the surface concerning the "Providence of God." For further study I recommend the lectureship book from the Southaven church of Christ, "The Providence of God" Thomas Warren and Garland Elkins, editors.

Let's begin by asking the question, "What is providence?"....

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Before we can discuss providence we must be able to define what it is we are talking about. The New Century Dictionary defines providence this way....

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Vines Dictionary defines providence as.....

And the New Bible Dictionary defines providence as.....

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I believe this is a good description of what it means when we talk about the providence of God. There are some people that say God is not involved in His creation. They believe that after God created the world He just sits back and watches the events of the world unfold, but that is not true. As we will see, God has been and continues to be very active in His creation. Let's look at the Greek word translated providence...

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The word Providence (pronoia) carries with it the idea to "think before." It is interesting to note, that the Greek word "pronoia" is used only twice in the Bible and both times it is referring to the providence of man instead of the providence of God. First, we see it used in Acts 24:2...

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Tertullus was a lawyer who was bringing charges against Paul before the Roman Governor, Felix. Tertullus was speaking kindly to Felix by saying he had great foresight and because of that there was great peace and prosperity. Then again in Romans 13:14...

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You might ask, "How can we talk about the providence of God if the 'providence of God' is not even mentioned in the Bible?" Even though the phrase "providence of God" is not specifically mentioned, it is alluded to or implied throughout the Bible, from Genesis 1:1 to Revelation 22:21. For example, 'omnipresence' is a word we often use to describe God. It means that God's presence is everywhere at the same time, but even though the word 'omnipresence' is not used in the Bible the concept is there. The same with the 'providence of God', even though the word is not used to describe God the concept on God providing for His creation is there. So much so, that

when someone speaks of the providence of the Bible they assume that you are speaking about the 'providence of God.'

Although we, as Christians, believe in the providence of God, we can truthfully say we do not completely understand it. We do know that Divine providence involves all of God's creation, from the most humble person to the needs of the whole wide world. Nothing is left out of the providence of God!

As I just said, the providence of God is not specifically mentioned, so let's look at some verses where the providence of God is alluded to or implied...

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In the beginning God spoke and the world came into existence. Today He keeps things in order, or all together, through His word. Do I understand all that is involved in doing that? Of course not! So what does the phrase mean, "upholding all things by the word of His power?" I would like to read to you what Robert Milligan has to say about this phrase in his commentary on the book of Hebrews...

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So the answer to the previous questions on the previous slide (may want to go back and read and answer the questions) is YES! The phrase, "upholding all things by the word of His power" simply means that "God is in control." God created the whole universe with the power of His Word and continues to uphold everything by the power of His Word. Now, let's look at Col. 1:16-17...

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As we have just seen, God created all things and He is in charge of all things, maintains all things and through Him all things consist. Then we read in Romans 13:1...

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Here we find that even the governments of the world have been appointed by God and are under His control. We can see this clearly in the Old Testament. God rose up a nation, Israel, and He was their God and He provided for them and protected them as long as they obeyed Him. When Israel quit obeying Him, God would use another nation to take Israel captive and punish them. Then, when they turned back to God, God would set them free. (Though we will not take the time to read them, there are many examples of God using

nation against nation to do His will. For example, read Isaiah 10:5-7 and Habakkuk 1:5-11) Nothing in this universe is outside the power of God. One of the things that we need to realize, in talking about the providence of God, is that no matter what God does in His dealings with mankind; God never overrides man's freedom of choice...

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When God created mankind He gave us the power, or ability, to make our own decisions. We are free moral agents, meaning we can make our own decisions, whether right or wrong. As we read the next few passages, listen carefully to what God's word says about man's freedom of choice...

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Here we see God commanding the Israelites to obey Him and worship Him. But, He goes on to say that they are the ones that have to make the choice between good and evil. God wants them to choose to obey Him and therefore be blessed and enjoy the Land of Promise, but He is not going to make them. It is each individual person's choice. In Joshua we read....

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Joshua is telling us that we have the freedom of choice. Each one of us must make the decision to obey God or Satan. Jesus spoke about the city of Jerusalem refusing to come to Him...

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Then in John 5:39-40 we read....

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And Hebrews 11:24-26...

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All of these verses show that each one of us has the responsibility to choose whom we will serve. Will we serve God or Satan? God tells us that He wants us to choose to follow Him, but He will never make that decision for us. It is up to us to make our own decisions and reap the rewards or punishments based upon those decisions.

Another thing we need to know about the providence of God is that God can use us to do His will whether we obey Him or not....

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What is interesting is that even if we turn our backs on God, He can still use us in His plans. Throughout Scriptures we see God not only using His faithful servants to carry out His will but He also uses those who refuse to obey Him to help carry out His plans. For example, we see God using Pharaoh even when he refused to obey God...

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Here we see that Pharaoh refuses to obey God and let the children of Israel go. But does that stop God from carrying out His will? Notice Exodus 7:4-5...

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God told Moses to tell Pharaoh to let His people go, but Pharaoh refused to obey the commands God. So God said I will use him to show the Egyptians that "I Am The Lord!" God was going to take the children of Israel out of the land of Egypt with or without the consent of Pharaoh. But, now God uses this as an opportunity to show the people of Egypt that He is the one True God and more powerful than any of their gods.

Another example we want to notice is that of Judas. Judas was one of the twelve Apostles that traveled with Jesus for about three years, hearing Him teach, seeing Jesus perform miracles and even knowing that He was the Son of God choose to betray Him. In Matthew 26, when Jesus is celebrating the Passover Feast with the disciples, Jesus tells Judas that he is going to betray Him...

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Then in Matthew 26:46-49 we see Judas did, in fact, do exactly as Jesus said he would do....

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A question that we need to ask ourselves is, "Did Judas have a choice in the matter of betraying Jesus?" or "Was he just used by God to betray Jesus with no choice in the matter?" The answer to the first question is, Yes! He had a choice! Judas had in his heart to do evil. God knowing all things knows the hearts of men, He just was able to use the bad choice of Judas to carry out His will, to have Jesus crucified on the cross to shed His blood so that all of mankind would have the opportunity to be saved. It is the same thing with Pharaoh that we just talked about, God knew that Pharaoh would refuse to

let the children of Israel go so He used the disobedience of Pharaoh to show the world His Power! But what about Judas, notice what he did after he betrayed Jesus, he hung himself. Matthew 27:3-5 tells us....

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Even though Judas had sinned by betraying the Son of God, he still had the opportunity to repent and turn back to God, but, instead, he chose to hang himself. Judas wasn't the only one to turn his back on Jesus, Peter would also deny Jesus as we read in Matthew 26:34...

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Here we see Jesus telling Peter he would deny Him three times before the rooster crows. But Peter flat out denies that he will betray Jesus. So, who was right? Let's read down a few verses to Matthew 26:69-75...

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Here we see that Peter did deny Jesus three times before the rooster crowed. Peter, like Judas, chooses to betray Jesus. Yet, each one handled it in a completely different manner. Judas, after giving back the 30 pieces of silver went out and hung himself. Peter went out and wept bitterly. As we know, Peter went back to be with Jesus and became a great Apostle, in fact, he preached the Gospel for the first time. (Acts 2)

There are other examples that we could give concerning the free will that God has given to each one of us. Saul, who later became known as the Apostle Paul, was persecuting the church and having Christians put to death. Yet, when he was confronted by Jesus on the road to Damascus, and then told what to do to be saved by Ananias, Saul chose to follow Jesus and became a great Apostle for the Lord. Through these examples we can see that each one of them had the choice to serve God or not. It is the same with each one of us, we have to make our own decision to obey God's will or not. God does not make decisions for us but He can use our decision, whether right or wrong to carry out His will. We need to remember, no matter what our decision, whether good or bad, God's way will be done!

But even though God gives us the ability to make our own decisions, He wants us to choose to follow and obey Him. God's plan is for everyone to be saved...

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And we read in Ephesians 1:3-5....

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As we have just seen, man is a free moral agent. That means that God has given us the freedom to make our own decisions whether right or wrong. Each one of us must make our own decision to obey God or not obey God. But here in Ephesians we read that God has “predestined” some to be His children. So, how do we reconcile the fact that we have freedom of choice, yet, at the same time it says that God has already predestined some to be saved?....

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Is this saying that God has already chosen some that will be saved and the others not chosen will be lost? The answer is.....NO!
God has not predestined individual persons to be saved or not be saved; He has predestined a “plan” or a “place” where salvation can be received. It is up to each individual person by using their freedom of choice to obey the plan and be in the place of salvation. All of us are familiar with Noah and the Ark. The world was a wicked place and God had decided to destroy the world. But there was one man and his family who chose to obey God so God had a plan to save Noah and his family. God told Noah to build an ark. Then, before the rains came to destroy the world and everyone in it, God told Noah and his family to come into the ark, and they did. Eight souls who had made the decision to obey God were saved from the punishment of God. Only those who chose to follow God’s predestined (predetermined) plan was saved. Could others have chosen to obey God and be saved? Yes, but they didn’t. The predestination of God....

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The predestination of God was not that he chose which individuals would be saved but the predestination was in the “plan” and the “place.”

The same applies to us today. God does not want anyone to be lost. That is why He sent (predestined) His Son, Jesus Christ to come into the world and die on the cross so that everyone would have the opportunity for salvation. God has “predestined” a “plan” of salvation (the Gospel) and a “place” of salvation (the church). It is up to each individual person, by using their own free will, to choose to obey God’s plan of salvation and be added to His church. So we see that God predestined the means by which man can be

saved, He did not predestine the individuals that would or would not be saved.

God has done His part in bringing about our salvation, now it is up to us to do our part, by obeying the Gospel and being added to the church of Christ. Another thing we need to understand is the difference between providence and miracles...

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This is the area of providence that causes people the most problems. Many people do not understand the difference between providence and miracles and often use the terms interchangeably. But as we will see they are not the same. There are also some people that believe that if God can not work through miracles today, we are limiting God and that there is no need to pray. Is that true! Well, let's take a closer look and see if we can gain a better understanding of the difference between providence and miracles.

Providence is...

Miracles is...

God has ruled in the affairs of men down through the ages by the means of providence, and with exceptions that we call miracles. There have been times in the past that God has used miracles to carry out His will, but He does not use miracles today. Let's briefly note three reasons why miracles do not exist today....

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I do not want to go into detail about the ceasing of miracles since we will be discussing this in greater detail in our next lesson when we will be studying the Holy Spirit and miracles. For now let's just agree that miracles have ceased and God no longer uses them to carry out His will. So, some will ask, "If God does not work through miracles today how can He answer pray?"

The answer is, He works through providence! To help us better understand what we are talking about let's look at a couple of examples...

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Get out your Bibles and turn to Matthew 1:18-25. Now, let me ask you a question, "Did the conception of Jesus come about through providence or a miracle?"... Miracle! Why? Because Mary "knew" no man.

Now turn to I Samuel 1:1-20. "Did the conception of Samuel come about through providence or a miracle?"... Providence! Why? Because she conceived through the natural means of procreation.

Let me ask you this, “Did God play a part in both of these conceptions? Yes! Yes! Yes! God brought about one pregnancy through the use of a miracle and the other through providence or natural means, the result was the same. Was God limited in any way? No! Now let’s look at two different storms...

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Read Matthew 8:23-37. “Was the storm calmed by a miracle or providence?”... Miracle! Why? Jesus used no natural laws to calm the storm He just spoke! **Read** I Kings 17:1, 18:1-2, 41-45. “Was the storm created by a miracle or through providence?”... Providence! Why? Because it formed through natural laws! The storm starts with a small cloud that builds into big dark clouds of rain. Again, let me ask you, “Did God play a part in both of these storms? Yes! Yes! Yes! Jesus calmed the storm through a miracle and God caused the other storm to form through His natural laws or providence. Was God limited in any way? No! Some say...

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We need to remember....

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There are a lot of things that happens to us everyday that we can not explain but just because we can not explain it does not make it a miracle. There are many things that we do not understand and we are learning new things all the time. In times past things like an eclipse was something unexplainable and thought to be magical, but today we understand it as being part of the natural laws of nature. Being able to fly through the air was not possible until a little over 100 years ago. Not because the natural law of flight was not around but because we did not know or understand how it worked! When Brother Guy N. Woods was asked the question... He said the following;

“I hold in my hand a book. It rests suspended between my hand and the floor. Were I to release my hold on it the book would fall to the floor- the pull of gravity would draw it inward toward the center of the earth. But, it does not fall! Why not? Because I am securely holding it in my hand. I am applying a greater force than that of gravity. Am I, by this action, violating the law of gravity? No! I have simply suspended, for the time being, the law of gravity. If man, by causing one law to operate, may suspend another, surely God can; and the assumption that any

change in the operations of the universe is impossible on the grounds that this would be in conflict with the uniform operation of nature's law, is false and fallacious – a manifestation of unbelief and the rejection of God and the divine powers in the operations of the universe.”

What Brother Woods is saying, is if I can manipulate or suspend natural laws to accomplish what I set out to do, don't you think that God can do the same? He made the laws and is greater and more knowledgeable than us and can use those laws in ways we haven't even thought of. God is just as powerful today as He ever was and when we pray to Him, God works to answer those prayers, and He does this through what we call General Providence and Special Providence...

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First let's look at general providence...

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Here we see that God blesses both Christian and sinner....

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God sends the sunshine and the rain on both the just and the unjust. We also see God providing for the animals...

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And then in Matthew 6 we read....

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As we can see, God takes care of all of His creation. He provides for all of mankind, the animals and birds through His general providence. But God also takes care of His children, Christians, through His special providence....

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One of the most familiar passages talking about God providing for His children is found in Romans 8...

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Brother Andrew Connally said, "It is doubtful that there are any other words in the Bible that says more about the providence of God than those found in Romans 8:28"

We can feel great comfort from the phrase, “All things work together for good to those who love God.” But at the same time we often wonder, “How can every situation in life work out for good?” What about suffering? Pain? Persecution? Failure? Even death? How can these be for our good?

We may not understand how “bad” things can be for our good, but we must have enough faith in God that all things will work out for our good even if we can not see the “good” at the time. We must remember, that what we call good and what God calls good may be two different things. God’s main purpose in providing for His Children through His special providence is to make sure we get to heaven.

Take a look at what Paul said in Philippians 1...

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Do you think Paul wanted to be in prison? Do you think he wanted to be persecuted, beaten and stoned to the point that he was left for dead? Of course not! I can imagine Paul crying out to God saying, “Why are you doing this to me? I thought you said “that all things work together for good to those that love God!” But, as we notice, it all did work out for good. Paul says it all happened “for the furtherance of the gospel.”

Remember, that even Jesus, had to suffer pain, beatings, rejection and death on the cross even though He had never done anything wrong! But it was “good” because that was the only way mankind could be redeemed.

God takes care of His creation through general providence and then takes care of those who become His children through His special providence. We must remember that God...

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God also supplies all of our needs....

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So we see that God is able to do “abundantly above all that we ask or think” and able to “supply all of our needs.” But all of this is contingent upon us putting God first....

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Yes, God loves us and wants to provide for us in a special way, yet He will not do that without us obeying His commands and putting Him first in our lives. Now, let’s take a look at providence and a Divine interpreter....

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Because God tells us through His Word, the Bible.

The only way that we can truly know that God is or has worked specifically in our lives is by God telling us directly. And since He does not speak to us directly, today, we can not know for sure the why, how or when concerning God's providence. Without God telling us when He acts providentially there is no other way for us to know for sure if God is working behind the scenes. We might have an idea or think that it is God doing this or that, but without God revealing the facts to us there is no way to know for sure.

What about us? Does God work providentially in our lives today?....

Yes He does! We have shown that God not only works in the lives of mankind through His general providence by providing sunshine and rain to everyone, but that He also provides for His Children through His special providence.

But, do we know for sure when God is working providentially in our lives?.... NO! But let me qualify that answer. We may think that God had a hand in something that has happened to us but since God does not speak directly to us we can not know for sure. That is not to say that when "good" things happen to us we shouldn't thank God for it, because we should. We are told that we should go to God in prayer and thank Him for all the things in our lives. But what we need to be aware of is that sometimes the "bad" things that happen to us may have been sent to us by God, like Paul being put in prison or beaten. It may be hard for us to think that God would allow us to suffer but sometimes that is the case.

In fact, we are told in II Timothy 3:12....

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We can know that God does work in our lives, but what we may not know for certain are the how and when. As long as we are living faithful Christian lives we just need to trust in God and be content in whatever comes our way. Just like the Apostle Paul when he said....

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This is the attitude that we must have. No matter what happens to us we must put our complete faith and trust in God knowing that through Christ I can do all things. Paul had the attitude of "Here I am Lord, use me!" What a great encouragement Paul is to all of us. Now, that we hopefully, have a better understanding of the providence of God let's look at a few examples of God's providence as it is revealed in God's Word. Sometimes it was obvious and sometimes it was not as obvious that God was working behind

the scenes. For example notice what the Apostle Paul says concerning the runaway slave of Philemon...

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Even the Apostle Paul was not sure that Philemon's slave had run away and encountered Paul and became a Christian by the providence of God, but Paul was pretty sure that is what happened. We are in the same situation as Paul, things may happen in our lives that we are sure has God's providence all over it, but without God telling us directly, we can not be 100% sure. Still, we give God the thanks and glory because we do know that God works in our lives even though we do not always know the when and how. We also see this happening in the live of Esther...

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In the book of Esther we can see the providence of God at work. But, as we stated earlier, if God had not told us directly we could not say for certain that God had a direct hand in the events that transpired. But after reading the book of Esther there is no doubt that God was working providentially to save the Jews and make things come out the way that He wanted them to. (go through each one of the statements) Mordecai approached her with a question....

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Mordecai is saying that possibly God is using you to providentially deliver His people. And because God has told us, we can clearly see that is exactly what God was doing! Because of Esther's faith she accepts Mordecai's advice and God provides for the deliverance of His people. And now let's take a quick look at the life of Joseph....

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So everything that Joseph went through God ended up providently using it to carry out His will. Did God cause Joseph's brothers to sell him into slavery? No, but He was able to use that evil deed to end up taking care of Jacob and his family during a great famine. Let us take comfort in the verse we read earlier....

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This verse is not saying that ‘all things are good’ it is saying that all things ‘work together for good’. If you could ask Joseph if all the things that happened to him were good I am sure he would say, no! Being sold into slavery by his brothers was not good, serving time in prison even though innocent was not good or missing out on being with his family for many years was not good.

But looking back on his life, Joseph, could say to his brothers, **“But as for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as it is this day, to save many people alive.” (Genesis 50:20)**

We do not know what God has planned during our lifetime or even after we are dead and gone. We do not know the mind of God and we are not able to see the “big picture” of all the events that will take place during the existence of this world or in the world to come. When Jesus was washing the Apostles feet Peter confronted Jesus, but Jesus said, **“What I am doing you do not understand now, but you will know after this.” (John 13:7)**

We are in the same situation, we may not understand the reason why certain things happen to us or the ‘how’s’ or ‘why’s’ of Gods providence but we must have complete faith and trust in God that He does work through providence to carry out His will.

One of Jesus’ last statements while here on earth was, **“Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:20)**

Do we truly believe that statement?

I hope this lesson has helped us in our understanding of the providence of God. Though we will not always completely understand the specifics of how or when God is working in our lives or in answering our prayers we can know that God does not have to rely of miracles to do His will. Let us take comfort in knowing that God providentially takes care of all of His creation, including you and me!

So we ask the question....

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Are you ready to let God providentially work in your life?