

Chapter VIII

"Providence - Mysterious"

by

Bishop Jonathan Weaver

"Each particle of matter is an immensity, each leaf a world, each insect an inexplicable compendium." (Lavater)

"Sinful man saved in Christ always was, always will be, a mystery, a wonder." (T. Adams)

"Happy is the man who is content to traverse this ocean to the haven of rest without going into the wretched diving-bells of his own fancies. There are depths; but depths are for God." (Evans)

"I would fain know all that I need, and all that I may. I leave God's secrets to himself. It is happy for me that God makes me of his court, and not of his council." (Bishop Hall)

"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, says Yahweh. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts." (Isaiah 55:8,9)

"Who is among you that fears Yahweh, that obeys the voice of his servant, that walks in darkness and has no light? Let him trust in the name of Yahweh, and stay upon his God." (Isaiah 50:10)

"For now we see through a glass darkly." (1 Corinthians 13:11)

"It is the glory of God to conceal a thing." (Prov. 25:2)

"He has made everything beautiful in his time. Also he has set the world in their heart, so that no man can find out the work that God makes from the beginning to the end." (Ecclesiastes 3:11)

God governs and controls the affairs of this world after the counsel of his own will. Mysteries there are, deep and inexplicable mysteries in God's dealings with the children of men. It seldom, if ever, appears to any man that all things are working together for his good. There are crosses and losses, afflictions and disappointments about which the very best of men have been tried. There are strange, uneven paths into which good men are sometimes forced, for which at the time they can see no reason. What God has written even a fool may learn to read, but a wise man cannot read what God has not written. For

God moves in a mysterious way,
His wonders to perform;
He plants his footsteps in the sea,
And rides upon the storm.

Dr. McCosh has most beautifully, and I think very aptly, illustrated the inexplicability of divine

providence. And lest I should mar the illustration, I will give it entire. He says,

"The events of providence appear very much like the letters thrown in a post-bag, and then sent forth on their destination. The person who carries them,

Messenger of joy,
Perhaps to thousands, and of grief to some;
To him indifferent whether grief or joy.

"Onward he moves, quite unconcerned as to the nature of the communications he bears or the effect produced by them. And when he looks into the repository it may seem as if its contents were an inextricable confusion, and we wonder how the letters, parcels, money, periodicals, should ever reach their individual destination. But then every letter has its special address inscribed upon it. It has the name and residence of the party, and so it shall in due time fall into his hands and bring its proper intelligence.

"And what different purposes do these letters fulfill, what varied emotions do they excite! This declares that friends are in health and prospering; this other is the bearer of the news of wealth, of the wealth itself; this third tells of some crushing disappointment, and quenches long-cherished hopes by the tidings of the utter failure of deep-planned schemes; while this fourth, with sable symbols, announces to the wife that she is a widow, or to the parent that he is childless, or to the child fondly cherished by the mother that he is an orphan.

"It is a kind of picture of the movements of providence. What a crowd of events huddled together, and apparently confused, does it carry along with it! Very diverse are the objects bound up in that bundle; very varied are the emotions which they are to excite when opened up. Yet how coolly and systematically does the vehicle proceed on its way. Neither the joy nor the sorrow which it produces causes it to linger an instant in its course. But meanwhile every occurrence, or bundle of occurrences, is let out at its proper place. Each has a name inscribed upon it; each has a place to which it is addressed.

"Each too has a message to carry and a purpose to fulfill. Some inspire hope or joy, others raise only fear and sorrow. The events which are unfolded by the same course of things, and which fall out the same day, bring gladness to one and land another in deepest distress. On the occurrence of the same events you perceive one weeping and another rejoicing. Some of the dispensations are destined to propagate prosperity through a whole community. And those others, so black and dismal, and of which so many arrive at the same time, carry, as they are scattered, gloom into the abodes of thousands.

"But amid all this seeming confusion every separate event has its separate destination. If pestilence has only some one person devoted to it in a city or community, that person it will assuredly find out and execute the judgment of Heaven upon him. If there be a thousand persons allotted to it in a district, it will not allow one of the thousand to escape. If among the number who are dying there be one regarding whom it has no commission to seize upon him, that individual must remain untouched. *'A thousand shall fall at thy side, and ten thousand at thy right hand, but it shall not come nigh thee.'* It has a commission and will execute it; but then it cannot go beyond its commission. And in regard to every person to whom the events come, it has a special end to accomplish; and it bears a special message, if he will but read it and attend to it."

Beloved, there is a message in the post-bag for you, and it is being rapidly conveyed along. Whether it be a message of sorrow or of joy, none can tell. If it be of sorrow, the post will not linger. If it be of joy, he will not hasten. It may arrive today or perhaps tomorrow. Of the contents of this message you know nothing. The future is all wrapped in impenetrable mystery. We cannot tell where our next step will fall. It may be in death's cold waters, in sickness, in adversity, or it may be prosperity. We are advancing. The distance between us and the grave is continually growing less. The chances for life are rapidly narrowing down. Some are now brushing the dew from Jordan's banks. The living know that they must die; but of the trials, afflictions, disappointments, joys, and sorrows that await them they know nothing. For reasons that a wise and merciful Father saw to be sufficient, he was pleased to withhold from the knowledge of mortals the events and incidents of their future days. But this he says to everyone that will trust him: "I will guide you with my counsel, and afterward receive you to glory." This is enough.

But the future, dark and mysterious as it is, after all is but little more obscure and inexplicable than the past. Who in looking back over life is not compelled to confess that he has been led in a way that he had not known? Who has realized the hopes and expectations of his youth? Who has traveled the road he intended to travel? Who is this day what and where he intended to be ten or twenty years ago? Who is able to point out the precise cause that changed his course?

See that young man, full of hope and expectation as he looks into the future of life. He has had his youthful dreams and sees little else before him but the most beautiful flowers. Not a thorn or a brier appears to his warm imagination. He says within himself, "Now I shall have a most delightful journey. I see so many beautiful arbors where I shall sit down and rest, and be refreshed by the cooling waters and delicious fruits." But, alas! All at once, and without seeing any special cause for it, he is suddenly turned around and is compelled by the force of unseen and unlooked-for events to travel over a rough and rugged way until he is footsore and heartsore. In his bewilderment and perplexity he sits down, ready to find fault with everything and everybody.

Young man, there was a Father's eye upon you and a hand unseen that guided your steps. He saw pitfalls and snares in the way you intended to go that you did not see, into which you would have fallen if he had not turned your course. And now, instead of being what you are and where you are, you would be hopelessly ruined. When you have reached the end of your journey, rough and rugged as it may have been, and shall be permitted to review your life in the light of eternity, you will thank God most fervently that he thwarted your purposes and blighted the brightest dreams of your youth; yea, that he even blasted the tree from which you dreamed that you would eat such choice fruit in old age. You will then understand more fully the meaning of that scripture which affirms that *"a man's heart devises his way, but Yahweh directs his steps."*

Looking at the operations of divine providence, they are often confused and entangled because we are looking through a glass darkly. We see nothing clearly. We see the handwriting on the wall but cannot interpret it. We see the burning bush but know not its meaning. Dr. Fuller said,

I looked upon the wrong or backside of a piece of arras (tapestry); it seemed to me as a continued nonsense. There was neither head nor foot therein. Confusion itself had as much method in it,--a company of thrums [frayed ends] and threads, with many pieces and patches of several sorts, sizes, and colors; all of which signified nothing to my understanding. But then looking on the reverse, or right

side thereof, all put together did spell excellent proportions, and figures of men and cities; so that, indeed, it was a history, not wrote with a pen, but wrought with a needle. If men look upon some of God's providential dealings with a mere eye of reason, they will hardly find any sense therein, such is their muddle and disorder. But, alas! the wrong side is objected [made visible] to our eyes, while the right side is presented to the God of heaven, who knows that an admirable order does result out of this confusion; and what is presented to him at present may, hereafter, be so shown to us as to convince our judgment in the truth thereof.

When God said to Abraham, "Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will show thee," it was all a mystery to him. Why it should be necessary for him to be separated from his kindred and native land and go out into a strange country he could not comprehend. Paul says that "when he was called to go out, immediately he obeyed, and went out, not knowing whether he went." He was compelled to walk in the shadow; but still he walked because God commanded him. Such was his faith in the goodness, wisdom, and benevolence of God, that he would go forward no matter how dark the way might seem.

Christians should learn from this, whether they comprehend the designs of God or not, whether the way is rough or smooth, light or dark, to go forward when God commands them to. There is nothing lost in obeying God. You can go anywhere in perfect safety if your Father says so.

Had I but served my God with half the zeal
I served my king, He would not, in mine age,
Have left me naked to mine enemies.

It is truly marvelous to note the numerous instrumentalities through which and by which God operates in the execution of his plans. Kings, princes, and civil magistrates, whether they be good or bad men, are not infrequently employed in the execution of his designs. Matter, whether animate or inanimate, is under his control and subject to his direction; he can use any or all of them as he pleases. And whatever comes to man through any of these agencies or instrumentalities should be understood as coming by the command or special permission of God. God is eternal, immutable, omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, just, and holy. He can, if he choose, devise and execute his plans in the sight of men and angels; and if he choose, he can employ them in the execution of his plans without their knowledge of it. God has not placed himself under any obligations to either men or angels to communicate to them his designs.

Trifling things are often made the hinges on which magnificent results turn. A boy enters a stable with a lighted lamp. It is accidentally turned over, and in a short time a great city (Chicago) lies in ruins. Millions of dollars worth of property is swept away, and a hundred thousand persons are sent out homeless. What the design of the Almighty was in suffering the great city to be burned we may not know. One thing is fixed as the eternal throne, that it will be overruled in such a way that greater good will result from it than could have been if the disaster had not befallen the city. How it will be brought about we may not be permitted to know. We know something of the history of that city up to the time of its burning, but what it would have been if no such calamity had befallen it, none can tell. God often interposes to prevent evil and to save a people from utter ruin.

God is his own interpreter,
And he will make it plain.

God said to Abraham, that in his seed all the nations of the earth should be blessed. In the fullness of time that son of promise was given. And when Isaac was grown up, God commanded Abraham to go to a certain mountain and offer him as a sacrifice. There is no reason to believe that Abraham knew anything about the purpose of the Almighty. To his mind it was all wrapped in profound mystery. God had given him the son according to promise, and in his (Isaac's) seed all the nations of the earth were to be blessed. But now to offer him as a sacrifice, while as yet he had no offspring, must have appeared very strange and mysterious. Nevertheless he went forward, and would have executed the command of God literally if there had been no interposition.

Abraham believed God, and his faith carried him above the dust and must of human reason. He "knew that God's promise would march right forward to fulfillment." Abraham's faith never shone more brightly than when he stood over his boy with his arm raised to execute the command of God.

Though round him numerous tribes,
Sworn foes to Heaven's dread rule, pitch their tents,
No wayward doubts or coward fears appall
The patriarch's soul. By the bright hope sustained,
That in his seed all nations should be blest;
Calm and unmoved the delegated seer
Submissive bends to the eternal will.

In the prophet's vision of the living creatures attached to a curious vehicle, to which reference was made in a previous chapter,¹ we have suggested the notion of mystery--the wheels, living creatures, fire, rainbow, whirlwind all compounded, moving forward and returning as lightning. When one went all went, notwithstanding the complication in the machinery. So in the operations of divine providence there often appears a strange complication, wheels turning this way and that way, some revolving backward and some forward, and yet the whole going straight forward. The wheels, which were full of eyes, were so bright that they were terrible to behold. So the plans of God are so vast that they reach from earth to heaven, from the beginning to the end of time, and stretching far out into eternity.

And this is one reason why the operations of Providence are often so mysterious to us. We see only in part--mere fragments of his operations--and cannot tell how this or that movement of the wheels may be connected with other movements. And then, too, there is the appearance of a wheel in a wheel, which only increases the complexity. As we look upon this vehicle and see it moving with lightning speed, rolling as it were in fire,--and when the living creatures are lifted up the wheels are lifted up, while the spirit of the living creatures is in the wheels, all moving and returning as the spirit wishes, we are ready to exclaim, "Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God. How unsearchable are his judgments and his ways past finding out."

Afflictions and disappointments are sometimes just as necessary as health and prosperity, although we may not at the time be able to give any reason for it. God is watching all the time. He sees the way before us as distinctly as the way over which we have gone. If there are snares and pitfalls in advance of us, our heavenly Father sees them, and may send afflictions or

1 See the entry for June 30 in our Daily Devotions from the Classics.

disappointments as messengers to turn us aside. We are weak and forgetful, and if God did not sometimes remind us of our frailty, we would seldom if ever think of it. The tired, worn travelers that appeared before Abraham's tent door were angels in disguise.

"Sickness takes us aside and sets us alone with God. We are taken into his private chamber and there he converses with us face to face. The world is afar off, our relish for it is gone, and we are alone with God. Many are the words of grace and truth which he then speaks to us. All our former props are struck away, and now we must lean on God alone. The things of earth are felt to be vanity; man's help is useless. Man's sympathy deserts us; we are cast wholly upon God that we may learn that his praise and sympathy are enough. If it were not so, I should spend less time with God. If I had not been kept awake with pain, I should have lost the sweetest experiences I ever had in my life. The disorder of my body is the very help I want from God. If it does its work before it lays me in the dust, it will raise me to heaven."

Blessings often come to us in disguise. They are angels unawares. But if properly entertained they will either hasten us out of the way of destruction or leave lasting blessing behind. "Why should I murmur?" said Henry Martyn in his last sickness. "Weakness, peril, and pain are but the ministering angels, whose office it is to conduct me to glory." Arrowsmith said, "Adversity, like winter weather, is of use to kill those vermin which the summer of prosperity is apt to produce and nourish." Rutherford said, "The wise Lord loves to feed us with hunger, and make us fat with wants and desertions." Moses Brown said, "A great deal of rust requires a rough file." Thus by ways and means, not our own choosing, the Lord manages to help us.

Frederick the Great one day rang his bell several times and no one came. He opened the door and found his page fast asleep. Approaching, intending to wake him, he saw the corner of a note hanging out of his pocket. He took the paper from his pocket, and upon reading its contents found it to be a letter from his mother. She was poor, and concluded the letter by assuring him that the Lord would bless him for his good conduct and for sending home part of his pay. He returned the letter to the youth's pocket and put with it a purse full of ducats. He then returned to his room and rang his bell so loud that the page awoke and went in. "You have slept well," said the king. The youth wished to excuse himself, and in the excitement of the moment thrust his hand into his pocket and felt the purse. He drew it out and, looking at the king, commenced to weep. "What is the matter?" asked the king. "O sire," said the page, "they wish to ruin me. I do not know how this money came into my pocket." "Why friend," said the king, "God often sends us blessings while we are asleep. Send that to your mother. Salute her for me and say that I will take care of you."

Misfortunes are often wrongly interpreted. They are most generally set down as accidental, or sent as a punishment for some particular offense. A man, for instance, suddenly loses his property, or is disappointed in some important end he had hoped to gain. He sits down to grieve over it, never once thinking that it was all intended for his good. He does not see or believe that the hand of God was in it, that it was a link in the chain of events that would end in his highest good.

To illustrate. A merchant in the city of New York failed in business. He gathered what was left and went to California. There he purchased land and built large mills. When all was completed and he seemed to be just ready to regain his lost property, a heavy freshet [flood] swept everything away. Looking at the sad work, he was almost overcome with disappointment. [However], the water had carried away the earth down to the rock, and uncovered a rich vein of

gold. What he and all the rest had thought to be a great misfortune turned out to his advantage. Thus in a thousand ways we misunderstand and wrongly interpret the operations of divine providence. Ordinarily "our worst misfortunes are those that never befall us."

If friendless in a vale of tears I stray,
Where briers wound, and thorns perplex my way,
Still let my steady soul thy goodness see,
And with strong confidence lay hold on thee;
With equal eye my various lot receive;
Resigned to die, or resolute to live;
Prepared to kiss the scepter or the rod,
While God is seen in all, and all in God.

From what we are permitted to know of the Divine perfections, it is very evident that however dark and mysterious God's ways may appear to us, they are intended for our highest good. Ten thousand events are transpiring every day about which we know little or nothing. Sometimes we see, or think we see, with considerable distinctness. Then the whole scene changes and we are lost in wonder and astonishment. "That mysterious suffering is not accidental--it is from God; but why and wherefore, and to what end we know not. That severe stroke that swept from your eye the near, the dear, the beloved, is all wrapped in mystery. That storm that burst upon you like a thunderbolt and washed away the accumulation of the honest industry of many years, you see through a glass darkly. We know not what it is, nor whereto it tends. This only we know, that our God awakened the storm, our Father commissioned the cloud, and that what we do not see now we shall see hereafter, when we see no more through a glass darkly, but as face to face."

If this "time haze" were to last forever, if the future had no bright tomorrow, we might well become sad and sorrowful. But this smoked medium through which we are for the present compelled to look will by and by pass away. The clouds will be scattered, the storms will have subsided, the trials and misfortunes of many long weary years will have ended. And from amid the brightness and glory of that everlasting day we may look back over life's stormy voyage and say, *Father, thou hast done all things well.*

Because the ways of providence are often dark and mysterious to us, we are not therefore to conclude that we are left to ourselves. God often leads his beloved by dark and intricate ways; not because he delights in afflicting and disappointing his children, but because he sees it is for their highest good. I doubt if anything save the immediate attraction of the cross of Jesus will appear more excellent to the saints in light than the glory and wisdom of God's providences. The glorified saint, as he looks back over life's stormy way, will see how many times and for what purpose his course was unexpectedly changed. There at that place he will see how near he was to a horrible pit, and at that other place he was on the very brink of ruin. But the finger of God was there, and just in the nick of time caused his course to be changed. "Ah!" the redeemed will say, "If my Father had not watched me all the time I should have been lost." They will realize more fully than ever before that he is all, in all things; that he was ever present, continually doing something for their good.

Life is a state of discipline; and unless we could see and know what in every respect would assist in preparing us for a higher and holier state, and unless also we could see the end from the beginning, we are not in a condition to dictate to Infinite Wisdom what would be best for us. If Lot had been left to his own notions, he would doubtless have remained in Sodom. Two thoughts

should be well impressed upon our minds. First, God is seeking to prepare us for himself, and whatever he does with us and by us points to that glorious end. Second, He seeks to accomplish by us and through us the greatest possible amount of good. Christians are not always compelled to walk in darkness and suffer on their own account. It was not for Abraham's sake alone that God commanded him to leave his native country. Others were to be benefited as well as himself. Jeremiah could have wept himself away for the sake of others.

"In the pilgrimage of this world, we know not where we are going. The pillar of cloud which guides us is absolutely independent of our disposal. We must expect God's signals, and those indications which are properly called the leadings of his providences." It is folly for us to attempt to force a way in spite of providence, or attempt to throw off the yoke that is laid upon us. Jonah tried that experiment. We are so deplorably ignorant and short-sighted that we cannot tell what would be best for us, and we only exhibit our folly and weakness when we attempt to select our own way. We cannot see how closely we are hedged in, nor how many threads there are in the loom of providence.

God need not shake the mountains in order to change our course; a very little thing may do it. And out of a small matter God may bring the most stupendous results. There was nothing very remarkable in Joseph's going to see his brethren at Shechem; yet that was one thread in the web of events that made him governor of Egypt. There was nothing extraordinary in the fact that the asses of Kish, the Benjaminite, should have strayed; yet that gave Israel a king. [There was] nothing out of the ordinary course of things that David should visit his brethren at the camp in Elah; yet Goliath lost his head by it. In later times it was but a small matter that a Dutchman should cut a few letters on the bark of a tree and then transfer an impression of them on paper. It was done for the amusement of children. But to this little event we trace the art of printing. That was a tiny vessel of only a hundred and eighty tons burden--a mere speck tossed on the angry waves of the Atlantic. But in the hearts of the men that were on board that little nut-shell (the May Flower) was wrapped up the germ of all our free institutions, and a pure, evangelical and free Christianity.

Thus with individuals as well as nations, events are almost continually transpiring of which but little notice is taken at the time. And yet these are the pivots upon which the future destiny of men and nations turns.

O all-preparing Providence divine,
In thy large book, what secrets are enrolled,
What sundry help doth thy great power assign,
To prop the course which thou intend'st to hold!
What mortal sense is able to define
Thy mysteries, thy counsels manifold!
It is thy wisdom strangely that extends
Obscure proceedings to apparent ends.

It will often strengthen our hearts and give us courage to trust in God if we remember that while his providences are often mysterious, they are also universal--extending to everything no matter how insignificant they may appear to us. Nothing in the universe, from the revolution of the planets to the delicate coloring of the lone flower in the wilderness, is left to the caprice of chance or the iron rule of fate. God is everywhere, and everywhere at work. "We are in a labyrinth indeed, but the clue is in the hand of infinite wisdom and infinite love."

The New Testament is full of paradoxes. Loss is gain; defeat is victory; sorrow is joy; weakness is strength; death is life; to go down is to go up. Thus in the mysterious leadings of providence, while we think we are going down we are going up, and when we are losing we are gaining. Often when pressed on every side by inexplicable mysteries we do not know what to do nor which way to turn our steps. Driven by unforeseen events over which we can exercise no control, first to the right and then to the left, we exclaim in our perplexity and bewilderment that "all these things are against me."

How forcibly the language of Scripture comes to the mind under such strange circumstances. *"Clouds and darkness surround Him; righteousness and justice are the foundation of His throne."* But thanks be to God that from out of the thick clouds and darkness which hang around the throne, words of cheer and comfort are spoken: *"Yahweh will guide you continually, and satisfy your soul in drought, and strengthen your bones; you shall be like a watered garden, and like a spring of water, whose waters do not fail."* *"Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, yes, I will help you, I will uphold you with My righteous right hand."* *"I will never leave you, nor forsake you."* *"When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow you. When you walk through the fire, you shall not be burned, nor shall the flame scorch you."*

So, Christian! though gloomy and sad be thy days,
And the tempest of sorrow encompass thee black;
Though no sunshine of promise or hope shed its rays
To illumine and cheer thy life's desolate track;
Though thy soul writhes in anguish and bitter tears flow,
O'er the wreck of fond joys, from thy bleeding heart riven,
Check thy murmuring sorrows, thou lone one, and know
That the chastened on earth are the purest in heaven;
And remember, though gloomy thy present may be,
That the Master is coming, and coming to thee.

This is Chapter VIII in *Divine Providence* by Bishop Jonathan Weaver (Dayton, Ohio: United Brethren Publishing House, 1891). **Note:** The text has not been modified, except that punctuation and KJV-era pronouns and verb forms have been modernized and long paragraphs have been divided.