

Gods Providence

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Date: 01 January 2020

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[0 : 0 0] Would you turn with me please into the passage that we read in the book of Exodus, Exodus chapter 13, Exodus chapter 13 and reading again verses 17 down to 22, when Pharaoh led the people go, God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although that was near for God said, lest the people change their minds when they see war and return to Egypt, but God led the people around by the way of the wilderness toward the Red Sea, and the people of Israel went up out of the land of Egypt equipped for battle. Moses took the bones of Joseph with him, for Joseph had made the sons of Israel solemnly swear, saying, God will surely visit you, and you shall carry up my bones with you from here. And they moved on from Succoth and camped at Etham on the edge of the wilderness, and the Lord went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead them along the way, and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light that they might travel by day and by night. The pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night did not depart from before the people.

I love the book of Exodus, and I love the book of Exodus because it contains so much encouragement, not only for individual believers, but for congregations. And sometimes at the close of a year and at the beginning of a new year, the Lord's people as individuals need encouragement, but sometimes churches also need a bit of encouragement. And I want to look at this morning with you at three things that the Lord gives to his people, not only as individuals, but as a collective corporate body. We're going to look at the providence that he gives, then we're looking at the promises that he gives, and finally the presence that he gives. I said a few months ago that I follow in the footsteps of the Barbus minister, your interim moderator who loves his alliteration, and so you've got three points all beginning with letter P this morning. First we have the providence of God, verses 17 and 18. And here the author focuses on the providence that directs the Lord's people, the providence that directs the Lord's people. Now before proceeding into the text, let's remember the context. Exodus is a dramatic book that is focused on the Lord saving his people. In

Exodus 1 we find Israelites enslaved in the land of Egypt. In Exodus 2 and 3 we went to witness the birth and the calling of Moses, the Lord's appointed deliverer. In Exodus 4 down to 10 we watch on as Pharaoh and Moses enter into this confrontation with one another.

And then in Exodus 11 to 13 we read about the Passover and the eventual release from the land of Egypt. And now in Exodus 13 we find that Israelites beginning to leave the land of Egypt behind. And it's at this point that we come to the mystery of the Lord's providence. Look at verse 17. When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines. For God said, although the land of the Philistines was near, for God said, lest the people change their minds when they see war and return to Egypt. We're told here that Pharaoh let the people go. This is the powerful king of Egypt.

This is a man who is regarded as semi-divine, but he is a broken man. He is a defeated man. He is a man who has come second best in his conflict with Israel's God. And he now releases these 600,000 men besides women and children. And we're told that the Lord didn't lead the people by the way of the land of the Philistines. This was the quickest route. This was the most direct route. But for some reason the Lord is in no hurry to bring his people into the land of promise. The Lord had poured out all these plagues on the land of Egypt just to release his people. And then all of a sudden the Lord slows things right down. There is a mystery in the Lord's ways. There is a mystery in the Lord's providence. And in the latter part of verse 17 on into verse 18, we come to the mercy behind the mystery of the Lord's providence. We read, for God said, lest the people change their minds when they see war and return to Egypt. But God let the people round by the way of the wilderness toward the Red Sea. And the people of Israel went up out of the land of Egypt equipped for battle.

[4 : 51] We're now told why the Lord didn't take the people on the most direct route. This route was filled with Egyptian garrisons and Philistine warriors. And the Lord knows. He knows his people and he knows that they're unprepared to face such opposition. He knows that they may be inclined to turn back and go back to the land of Egypt if they face opposition.

You remember in Exodus 14, they're being pursued by the Egyptians and they say to themselves, it would have been better if we had never left Egypt. Or you remember in Exodus 16 and the people find themselves without food, without water in the land. And again, they say, well, it would have been better if we had never left Egypt. And then in Numbers chapter 14, just as they're on the cusp of the promised land, and they find out that there are these mighty warriors in the promised land. And yet again, they say, well, it would have been better if we had never left the land of Egypt. And so the Lord takes them on this route that would avoid unnecessary confrontation with those who could threaten them, oppose them, overwhelm them. What we see here is the mercy of God. He knows the physical terrain, knows the physical landscape, knows the geography, but he also knows the spiritual landscape, knows the geography of the hearts of his people, the geography of the souls of his people. He knows the fragility of their faith. And so he shelters them from what they're not yet ready to face. They may face it in due course, but the Lord says, not yet, they're not ready.

And so we're told where the Lord led the people, note the emphasis on the word led. We read in verse 17 that God did not lead the people. Then verse 18, we read, but God led the people throughout the Psalms, especially Psalm 23 that we sung together. We see that the Lord is the one who leads his people, guides his people, directs his people. And we're told here that the Lord led his people, guided his people, directed his people toward the Red Sea. And that will be a key marker in their wilderness journey. It will live long in their memory. It'll be the place where the Lord will miraculously lead the people on dry land to the other side. It'll be the place where the Lord will bring his waters and waves and breakers upon Pharaoh and his chariots. It'll be the place where Moses will sing that great song in Exodus 15. The Lord, he is my strength. He is my song. He has, he has become my salvation. Who among you, O Lord, is there among all the gods? And the author tells us that the people then went out of Egypt toward the Red Sea, equipped for battle. Now they don't have any swords. They don't have any shields. They don't have any weapons of warfare. But what they have is the God of Providence. And I forgot who said it, but you remember what that old worthy said. One man with God is always in the majority.

So throughout these verses, we're being reminded that we have a God who guides his people, leads his people, directs his people. We have a God who takes his people along the paths of his choosing. We, we have a God of Providence. And there is a mystery in the Lord's Providence.

Sometimes the Lord leads his people on paths that are slow, paths that are strange, paths that are sore, paths that are disappointing, paths that are difficult. Sometimes the Lord brings us to the place of crying out as individuals. What in the world is the Lord doing in my life? Or maybe the Lord brings you to the place as a congregation where you say, what in the world is the Lord doing with us as a congregation? Why has he left us vacant?

[8 : 58] What is he doing with us? Why has he not led us to a man of his choosing? We don't understand his ways. We don't see what he's doing. We, there is a mystery in his Providence, but there is also a mercy behind the mystery of his Providence. The Lord assures us in his word that he is working all things, not, not a few things, not some things, not even most things. He is working all things together for the good of those who love him. If you were the captain of your soul friend, you would make a shipwreck of your life. If you or I were head of the church, it wouldn't survive. I said to our own congregation not so long ago that if I was head of the high free church, it wouldn't last the night. And whoever you get as minister of this congregation, if he was head of the church, it would not last the night. But God's word tells us that we have a Lord who is a wise shepherd, he is a good shepherd and behind every single Providence he hides a smiling face. As the old poem puts it, not till the moon is silent and the shackles cease to fly, will God unroll the canvas and explain the reason why the dark threads are as needful in the weaver's skillful hand as the threads of golden silver in the pattern he has planned. Friends, as we move into a new year, as we move into a new decade, as we move into 2020, can I encourage you to do so, rely on the God of Providence. You know, we summums have events in the congregation in the town hall and I don't know if you've ever noticed that that shield above the stage in the town hall, Scott the mortal, God's Providence, our inheritance. And I wonder how many people in Lewis believe that God's Providence is our inheritance. I wonder even how many people in the church believe that God's Providence is our inheritance. But those passages saying go forward, rely on the God of Providence. This brings us second thought to the promise of God. Look at verse 19. And here the author focuses on the promises that fuel the Lord's people, the promises that fuel the Lord's people. At the beginning of verse 19, we see Moses taking the bones of Joseph on the journey to the promised land.

We read Moses took the bones of Joseph with him. In Exodus 12, we see that the people took many things out of the land of Egypt. They took gold, they took silver, they took jewelry, they took clothing. We read that the Lord gave them favor among the Egyptians.

So the Egyptians let them have whatever they wanted. And now the people take the bones of Joseph with them. Joseph was the favorite son of Jacob, the grandson of Isaac, the great grandson of Abraham. His jealous brothers had sold him into slavery in the land of Egypt and in a remarkable series of provinces. Joseph eventually becomes Egypt's Prime Minister, second in command to Pharaoh. And yet Joseph dies in Egypt. He never returned to the land of his fathers. And now the people embark on their journey, as they embark on a journey that will take the best part of four decades, 40 years, they take the bones of Joseph with them. The second half of verse 19 tells us why Moses took the bones of Joseph. From Joseph had made the sons of Israel solemnly swear saying, God will surely visit you and you shall carry up my bones with you from here. Now this draws our attention back to

Genesis 50. In Genesis 50 we find Joseph dying. And he knows he's dying. And his brothers have gathered around the bed to hear his last words, his last testimony. And he says to them, I am about to die, but God will visit you and God will bring you up to this, out of this land to the land that he swore to Abram, Isaac and Jacob. God will surely visit you and you shall carry my bones. You must carry my bones. You've got to carry my bones.

Swear to God that you will carry my bones when you enter into that promised land. Now to understand this request, we need to understand some Old Testament history. In Genesis 12 the Lord appears to Abram and makes these covenant promises to him. He says, I will make you a great nation. He says in you all the families of the earth will be blessed.

[13 : 55] He says, I will bless those who bless you and I will curse those who curse you. And then finally he says, and I will give this land to you and your offspring forever. The land was so important. It was part of the Lord's covenant promise to his people. And so in Genesis 25 and 35 we find Abram and then Isaac being buried in the land of promise.

In Genesis 49 we find Jacob being buried in the land of promise and as Joseph dies, he too wanted his bones to be buried in the land of promise. As far as Joseph was concerned, he may have had a great position in Egypt, but Egypt wasn't home. Egypt's never home.

And he says to his brothers, God will bring us up out of this land and when he does, you're to take my bones with you back to the land of promise. And so now come back to Exodus.

And we find the people and their slaves in Egypt and their slaves for hundreds of years and yet they would see these bones of Joseph that shouted to them, the Lord will bring you home. Or then as they cross the Red Sea, just imagine them crossing the Red Sea, that very first step that they take and they wonder, will we actually make it across? And yet they're carrying the bones of Joseph that shout, God will bring you home. And then think of them wandering through the wilderness all these years and they're thinking, will we ever enter the land of promise and yet there's the bones the Lord will bring you home.

The bones of Joseph declared the promise of the Lord to his covenant people and that is why it's so important that when we come to Joshua, the very end of the Exodus journey and we come to Joshua 24, we read that the bones of Joseph were buried in the land of Shechem. It is a declaration the Lord has kept his promise. It is a ringing endorsement, the ringing proclamation, the word of the Lord hasn't failed.

[16 : 14] A number of years ago, a book was written called The Purpose Driven Life. It became a best seller in many Christian bookshops. But the reality friends is the Christian life isn't a purpose driven life. It is a promise driven life. That is what it kept Israel going in their wilderness pilgrimage, the promises of the Lord. And that is what fuels the church.

The promises of the Lord, the Lord has given his church wonderful promises, glorious promises. He has promised his church that she will do greater works than him. Look at John 14.

Jesus says, you will do greater works than me. He has promised his church that, and it's my favorite verse perhaps in the New Testament, he has said, I will build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail against her. No matter what the secular governments do, no matter what might happen to a church, the Lord is building it and the gates of hell will not prevail against it. He has promised his church that he is going to have the victory.

He will come again on that white horse with the name faithful and true, and he will take his bride safely home to the place that he has prepared for her. Friends, I want to ask, do we believe in and are we fueled by the Lord's promises as a congregation? What a great tragedy it is when churches settle for mediocrity, when they settle for half-heartedness, when they settle for lukewarmness, when they settle for low expectations, when they settle for going through the motions, when they settle for just holding on to traditions, when they settle for increasing negativity and criticism concerning the Lord's work. Why? Because they have lost sight of the Lord's promises. Do you, friend, believe in and are you fueled by the promises of the Lord? But the Lord's promises also fuel every individual Christian.

The Christian has this great promise of the resurrection where we're told that death has been swallowed up in Christ's victory. The grave has lost its sting in Christ. In John chapter 6, Jesus makes that wonderful promise. He says none of his people will be lost. And then he goes further and says that every person, every individual who sees his son and believes on him has eternal life and will be raised, not might be raised, not hopefully be raised, but will be raised at the last day. And this promise of the resurrection, this promise of the Lord bringing us home, makes all the difference. I was reading about Robert Bailey, not so long ago he was a Presbyterian minister in the 17th century and he was condemned to be hung, drawn and quartered for his faith. His head and his hands would then be nailed to a local bridge and when he received the sentence he said, they may hack and hew my body as they please. But I know assuredly that nothing will be lost, that all these my members of my body will be wonderfully gathered together again and made like Christ's glorious body. Fueled by the promises. Today friend I want to ask every person here in this room, do have you heard the promises? Have you? Are you believing on the one who has made the promises? I'm not asking do you believe the promises, the devil believes the promises. I'm asking do you believe on the one who has made the promises? And are they fueling you? Is that what's going to take you out to the prayer meeting when it's a cold dark night? The promises of the Lord? Is that what's going to keep you coming to church when you've maybe had a falling out with someone who sits not too far from you?

[20 : 35] The promises of the Lord? Is that what's going to get you still trying to reach out to the community with the Gospel when the community seems to be so hard, so ambivalent, so apathetic?

The promises of the Lord? As we enter into a new year and a new decade friends, let's do so taking hold of the Lord and His promises. This brings us though third and finally to the presence of God. Look verses 20 to 22. And here the author focuses on the presence that comforts the Lord's people. The presence that comforts the Lord's people. This passage is focused and fixated on the Lord's presence. Weed and they moved on from Succos and encamped at Etham on the edge of the wilderness and the Lord went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead them along the way and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light that they might travel by day and by night. The pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night did not depart from before the people. We're told verse 20 that the journey continued. The people leave Succos and encamped at Etham. These are really the last known cities before the people enter into the unknown. A bit like for those of us who come from the storm away direction and we go along the Pentland Road and it's just the unknown. What on earth lies beyond Marybank and Maryhill and all these other places. Just the unknown. While here we see that the people go forward. They go into the unknown with nothing but the providence of the Lord. Nothing but the promises of the Lord and nothing but the presence of the Lord.

We're told that the Lord went before them, went before them in a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. The pillar of fire and the pillar of cloud are clear manifestations of the Lord's presence and its glory. You remember in Lamentations we read that the Lord covers himself in a thick cloud. You remember in Exodus 3 and Exodus 19 and Exodus 24 that fire is the clear manifestation of the presence of the Lord, the holy presence of the Lord among his people and we're told that the Lord didn't depart from before the people. He is Israel's covenant king and he is the king who unremittently and unrelentingly sees to the needs of the nation whom he has redeemed, purchased as his own people, his own possession. He is with them. But this passage isn't simply focused and fixated on the presence of the Lord. The whole of Exodus is focused and fixated on the presence of the Lord. The presence of the Lord is the highlight and climax of this book. Exodus isn't really about the birth and preservation of Moses. It's not really about the plagues in Egypt. Neither is it really about the giving of the Lord's law and sign of these are wonderful events but the key theme in Exodus is the presence of the Lord among his people. What we see is he can't get close enough to his people. In Exodus 25 he says let them make me a sanctuary, a tabernacle that I might dwell with them. Dale Ralph Davis tells about when he was a young man and he was working on a farm and he would leave the farm on Sunday morning to go and see the woman whom he was engaged to and he would go to church with her, spend all day Sunday with her and eventually leave her at about two in the morning dry throughout the night, come back to the farm, quickly take off his Sunday clothes, put on his working clothes and begin work. And it seemed so ridiculous to be losing all that sleep and spending all that time with her but he just had to be with her. He couldn't get close enough to her. And that is how the Lord is with his people in Exodus. He goes on ahead of them but he also dwells among them. He cannot get close enough to his people.

He cannot get close enough to his bride and when his people push him away through their rebellion, through their sin, through their spiritual amnesia and forgetfulness he keeps making provision for them to be with him. You know sometimes I don't know about you but we read these Middle Chapters in Exodus all about the construction of the tabernacle and everything that was involved in the construction of the tabernacle and we think this is boring.

We think this isn't like the plagues, this isn't like the giving of the law, this isn't like Moses floating down the Nile in the little basket made of bull rushes, this is just about curtains, this is just about dye, this is just about precious metals and yet these passages are saying this is the length and the breadth and the height and the depth and the width of the Lord's love for his people that he's going through all of this, all these sacrifices that they might be with him and enjoy his presence. That's what distinguishes Israel, they enjoy the presence of the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth. Now as we consider this same of the presence of the Lord I'm sure there's times when we might think to ourselves while I would love to know the Lord's presence like this and the New Testament tells us that we have something far better. That's the message of the New Testament, something better.

[26 : 25] David's strain writes, the presence of God that preceded the Israelites in the wilderness was at best a dim shadow of the full reality we now enjoy. It dawned on that day when the wind and the fire descended to rest upon the church at Pentecost and not merely to go before them or to be in the midst of them but to dwell within them forever the spirit of God inhabiting the hearts of the people of God. That's Pentecost, it's not about tongues, it's about God dwelling in his church. The church, the Lord's covenant people enjoy his presence and Matthew 18 Jesus says that where two or three are gathered in his name he will be in the midst of them even in cases of discipline. In 1 Corinthians 3 Paul tells the Corinthian church that really messy church that they are the temple of God's own Holy Spirit. The greatest blessing that the church can enjoy and the greatest need that the church can possibly have is the presence of God. As Martin Lloyd-Jones said there is nothing which is so serious as to be without the presence of God. You can have successes over your enemies, you can have outward prosperity and affluence. The church may seem to be doing remarkably well, good finances, good figures, conversions, enemies defeated, the newspapers reporting it, everything is marvellous but is God in the midst? Is he really among us? Are we aware of his glorious presence and so today friends I want to encourage you to pray that you would know the Lord's presence as a congregation. That you would know his presence in your worship services and prayer meetings that there would almost be a sense that you would come out of the services and I mean with this with the best will in the world exhausted at one level because you have encountered something of that incredible weight of glory pressing in on you. That you would know his presence in your outreach and your evangelism and you wouldn't go reaching out to the community like Samson did saying I'll go out as I did before not realising that the Lord had left him. That you would know his presence in your church sessions and deacons courts because they come under attack and there is nothing the devil loves more than to have a little infighting among elders and among deacons and among ministers. That you would know his presence in your vacancy. That you would know his leading, that you would know his guidance. The greatest blessing friends that the church cannot have and the greatest need that the church has is the presence of the Lord. Do you know what a tragedy it would be if this congregation got a minister in the next few months and people were flocking in and everybody was talking about it and the mission board generation were talking about it and the Presbyter was talking about it and yet the Lord wasn't there and he'd written Nicobod the glory has departed over this church. Think about it friend. Do you want everything without the Lord? But it's not simply the church that knows the Lord's presence. The Christian also knows and enjoys the Lord's presence in his or her life and John 14 Jesus told his followers he wouldn't leave him as orphans but rather would send him his spirit who dwells in them. In 1 Corinthians 6 Paul tells the Corinthians that each of their bodies is a temple of God's spirit. It's a remarkable thing. In 1 Corinthians 3 Paul says you Corinthian church you are the temple of God's spirit and then he begins to look at individuals in the congregation and he says and you are the temple of God's spirit. You dole are the temple of God's spirit. You kneel are the temple of God's spirit. You yin are the temple of God's spirit. You tixie are the temple of God's spirit. It's an amazing thought. You're never alone when you're a child of God. He is with you on every dark path with you in every rocky valley, every wound, every trial, every loss.

He is never going to leave, never going to forsake you if you are His. Perhaps you've come here today friend and you've been holding back from the Lord because you don't think He'd want anything to do with you. Or perhaps you've come here and you've drifted from the Lord. You've back slidden and nobody here knows about it. The elders don't know about it. Intermoderator doesn't know about it. Your family don't know about it but you know about it and you think the Lord's not going to want anything to do with me now. This passage tells us the Lord cannot get close enough to His people. And He's done everything necessary through Calvary's cross. That ultimate sacrifice, that final sacrifice, that sacrifice of everything in the Tabernacle simply pointed forward to and foreshadowed. He has done everything necessary to secure your access into His glorious presence. Done everything necessary that He might dwell with you. And so as we leave another year and enter into a new year of things, let's do so resting on the Lord's providence, clinging to His promises but also seeking and praying that we might know His presence as individuals and as a congregation of His own covenant people.