

The Providence of God

Reading: Psalm 37:28a “....The Lord.....does not forsake His saints....”

Introduction:

“*In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.*” (**Genesis 1:1**). As we continue to read through **Genesis 1**, we learn how God created all the living species that exist on this planet. But the end of the creation process was not the end of God’s involvement with all things on this Earth. He continued, and still continues, to take an active role in His creation;

- He continues to provide for physical life - **Psalm 136:25a; 145:9; 147:9; Matthew 5:45; 6:26.**
- He provides for spiritual life – **Ephesians 1:3-14; 2 Peter 1:3-4.**
- He has been involved in the course of history – **Genesis 7-8; 12:1-3; Joshua 6; 2 Kings 17:5-18; 18:9-19:36; Ezra 1:1f.f.; John 3:16.**
- And He continues to “....*work things for good to those who love Him...*” - **Romans 8:28.**

In fact, He “...*upholds all things by the word of His power...*” (**Hebrews 1:3**), and “...*in Him, all things consist..*” (**Colossians 1:17**). Without Him, all this would fall apart.

One of the things that we learn about God from the scriptures is that He is a providential God. Things happened throughout Biblical history where the people involved at the time may not have fully understood what was going on, or why it was happening. But we can see that God was working things out in the background. For example;

- in **Genesis 45:5-8; 50:20**, we can see the reason why God allowed Joseph to be sold off into slavery in Egypt,
- and in the book of **Esther**, we can see the turn of events that prevented the evil Haman from hanging the innocent Mordecai, and how the Jews were spared from annihilation.

In this lesson, I want us to have a look at another example of God’s providence that may not be as well known as the above, and draw some application from it.

LESSON

1) The Shunammite woman

The time-frame was around 850 BC. The Israelite nation had been split into the two kingdoms of Judah and Israel about 120 years earlier (**1 Kings 12:1-24**). Jehoram¹, the son of King Ahab², was on the throne in the northern kingdom, Israel (**2 Kings 3:1**).

Elisha was the main prophet in Israel at the time. In due time, God had told Elijah to anoint Elisha to be his successor (**1 Kings 19:16b-21**), and Elisha served Elijah until the latter was taken up to Heaven (**2 Kings 2:1-12**).

¹ Also known as Joram – **2 Kings 8:16a**. He was King of Israel for the period (approx.) 852-841 BC. He is not to be confused with another Jehoram, King of Judah, during a similar time period. The Jehoram of Judah was Ahab’s son-in-law – **2 Kings 8:16b-18**.

² King Ahab was married to Jezebel – **1 Kings 16:29-31**.

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On one of his travels, Elisha came to the town of Shunem, a town in upper Israel, midway between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea - about 25 to 30 km south west of the Sea of Galilee. It is here that we are introduced to the main character³ of this lesson – a married⁴ woman, but we don't know her name. She is described as being a “*notable woman*”, implying that she was a woman who people should take note of because of her generosity. She was someone who had qualities that made her stand out from the average person. When Elisha arrived at the town, she persuaded him to eat some food (**2 Kings 4:8**). He no doubt accepted, and thereafter, every time that he passed through the town, he would stop off at her place to eat.

But her generosity didn't end there. She persuaded her husband that they add an extension to the house by building a small, furnished room up on the wall (**2 Kings 4:10-11**). And so now, whenever Elisha and his servant Gehazi (**4:12**) were in town, they had a place to stay.

Now Elisha was very grateful for what the woman had done for him, and he wanted to do something for her in return (**2 Kings 4:13**). But again, we see the admirable qualities of this woman in that she was not doing these things in order to get something in return. She was not looking for any favours or special treatment (**2 Kings 4:13b**).

However, Elisha's servant, Gehazi, noticed that she did not have a son. And so Elisha prophesied to the woman, telling her that she will have a son in about a year's time (**2 Kings 4:14-16**). A year later, she bore a son⁵.

2) God's Providence at work

We hear no more about this woman until chapter **8**. A famine was about to hit the country (**2 Kings 8:1**) – possibly the same famine that is mentioned in **2 Kings 4:38**⁶.

Elisha warned the woman of the famine, telling her how long it will last (7 years), and that she should take her household and go and live where-ever she can. The woman did so, and lived with her household in the land of the Philistines (on the Mediterranean coast) for the seven years.

After the seven years had passed, the woman returned to her homeland. However, it appeared that during her absence, someone had taken over her house and property. Therefore, she went to see the King in order to make an appeal to get her house and land back (**2 Kings 8:3**)⁷.

³ The main character other than God.

⁴ **2 Kings 4:9** – she has a husband.

⁵ **2 Kings 4:18-37** gives the account of how, several years later, the son became sick and died, but was restored to life by the Lord through Elisha.

⁶ There is a suggestion that the events of **2 Kings 8:1-6** take place at the end of chap. **4**. One reason to support this is the fact that in chapter **5**, Gehazi is struck with a serious case of leprosy because of his greed – see **5:20-27**. It is difficult to imagine that Gehazi, suffering from leprosy, would be allowed to hold audience with the King.

⁷ The woman's son is mentioned in **8:5b**, but there is no mention of her husband in chapter **8** – he may have died.

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Meanwhile, Gehazi had been involved in a discussion with the King, telling him about the things that Elisha had done. As he was telling the King about how Elisha had restored the woman's son back to life (see **2 Kings 4:18-37**), the woman turned up on the scene wanting to appeal to the King. She was spotted by Gehazi, who told the King, "...*this is the woman, and this is her son whom Elisha restored to life*" - **2 Kings 8:5**.

- based on what happens next, it is fairly safe to assume that during the conversation that Gehazi had with the King regarding this woman and her son, he had also mentioned the generosity that she had shown to Elisha.

When the King heard the woman's petition, he commanded that her house be restored to her, and that any proceeds made from the land during her absence also be restored to her (**2 Kings 8:6**).

Some may say that this is all just a co-incidence. But consider how this all came together;

- The King was the best person to go to in order to have your house and land restored, because he was the highest authority in the land to command it.
- Gehazi was the best person (other than Elisha himself) to tell the King about the generosity that the woman had shown towards Elisha⁸.
- The King's disposition towards the woman would have been favourable after hearing the things that Gehazi had spoken of her.
- Both the mother and son, both of whom were the topic of the specific conversation at the time, turn up on the scene.
- The timing and the location of the conversation between the King and Gehazi coincided with the woman's return after spending seven years in a foreign country (the land of the Philistines – **8:2**).
i.e. the woman's generosity towards Elisha had taken place at least seven years earlier (before the 7-year famine), but it is only just now, as the woman turns up on his doorstep, that the King got to hear about it.

Surely the providence of God was involved here.

Application:

In the introduction to this lesson, I quoted some passages that show that God is still involved in His creation;

- He continues to send the sun and the rain on the just and the un-just (**Matthew 5:45**).
- He continues to provide the things we need – both physical and spiritual (**Matthew 6:32-33; Philippians 4:19; Ephesians 1:3**)
- He continues to work His Will through His people (**Philippians 2:13**).

⁸ Given that she is described in **2 Kings 4:8** as a "*notable woman*", Elisha wasn't the only person to benefit from her generosity – she already had a reputation for good works.

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God has not left us alone in this world to fend for ourselves. In **Hebrews 13:5b** we have a quote from **Deuteronomy 31:6, 8** (and **Joshua 1:5**) that reminds us that God has promised that He will not forsake His people. Although we can't physically see Him, He knows everything about us and what is happening in our lives (**Psalm 139:1-4; Matthew 10:29-30**) – nothing is hidden from His sight (**Job 24:1a; 1 Corinthians 4:5**).

- if you are struggling with sin or a specific problem in your life at the moment, He already knows about it.
- if you have a need in your life at the moment, He knows already about it.
- if there are good things happening in your life at the moment, He knows about them as well.

But even though He already knows about these things, He still wants you to pray to Him about them (**Philippians 4:6; 1 Thessalonians 5:17-18; James 5:13**). We should not think that we just have to sit back, do nothing, and God will sort everything out – “...*you do not have because you do not ask...*” – **James 4:2b**.

The account of the Shunammite woman is one where we see God's providence helping a generous woman to have her home and property restored to her after it was taken during her absence. We can see that God can and does work things out to help His people.

But we should be careful not think that God will automatically fix everything that we perceive to be a problem.

From **Romans 8:28** “...*we know that all things work together for good to those who love God...*”, but sometimes our interpretation of what is good and what is bad may not be the same as God's interpretation (**Isaiah 55:8-9**). For example, the apostle Paul may have felt that his being in chains for a while was not a good thing as far as advancing the gospel. But in hindsight, he could see that there were benefits from God's perspective – his guards got to hear the gospel message, and others were more bold to spread the Word (**Philippians 1:12-14**). These were good things.

When we go through a “rough patch”, we may pray to God for help and relief, but it may seem at times that nothing changes – we still have the problems. Well, it may be a case of God wanting us to learn something. In **1 Peter 1:6**, we read of brethren suffering various trials, but in verse **7**, we see that suffering can achieve something positive for us – the strengthening and refining our faith. In other words, when we are confronted with difficulties and problems, it may be that God is allowing these things to happen so that we can learn something and grow as His children (**Hebrews 12:11**). This, too, could be part of God's (spiritual) providence towards us.

In one of my previous lessons, I mentioned that our God is a just God (**Revelation 15:3**), a compassionate God (**Psalm 111:4**), a caring God (**1 Peter 5:7**), a merciful God (**Ephesians 2:4**), and a forgiving God (**1 John 1:9**). Our God is also a providential God. He can do far more than we can even think or ask (**Ephesians 3:20**). And He will always do what is best for us (**Hebrews 12:10**).