

“Donkeys Sought, Kingdom Found”

September 25, 2016

1 Samuel 9:1-10:1

SI: We’re studying the book of 1 Samuel which is the early history of Israel. But it’s not ordinary history, it’s redemptive history.

This is about God working in history to prepare a people out of whom would come the Savior of the world, Jesus Christ.

INTRO: A few weeks ago I was driving up St. Joseph and saw several goats had escaped from this pasture and were grazing right beside the road. I was afraid they might get hit, so I went to the house on the property to tell the owners, but nobody was home. Then I remembered a neighbor on Woodland St. is related to the people who own those pastures, so I told him about the goats. He thanked me and said he would call them and take care of it.

Escaping farm animals—it's happened time and again for thousands of years.

That's where the action of this story starts.

We're introduced to a man, Kish—given his genealogy—introduced to his son Saul, told he was a tall, impressive man—but the first action is that Kish's donkeys go missing.

That seems like a purely random event—farm animals getting loose.

Kish tells Saul and a servant to go look for the donkeys.

They looked and looked but couldn't find them.

So Saul said—We need to go back. We've been gone so long, my father will stop worrying about the donkeys and he'll start worrying about us.

But Saul's servant happened to be one of those people who doesn't like to give up.

Their search happened to take them close to the town where Samuel lived.

He said, Let's go ask for directions from the man of God.

For whatever reason, Saul was willing to listen to his servant.

If he hadn't, if he had said, No, that's a waste of time, would have gone home and found the donkeys were back and that would have been the end of story.

But he agreed. Then he realized they had a problem.

You were expected to give a seer something for his time.

Saul had nothing. But surprise, surprise, his servant had a 1/4 shekel of silver, about \$2. (You don't have to pay the preacher much.)

When they got to the town, they met some chatty girls and discovered Samuel had actually been away. If they had come the day before, would have missed him.

But they happened to come at exactly the right time—

not only was Samuel in town, but there was a sacrifice and feast planned.

And what do you know—as they entered the town, they met an elderly man and they asked him for directions to the seer's house.

“I am the seer,” says Samuel.

All of these minor events had, step by step, brought Saul to Samuel.

From Saul's perspective, it just felt like the happenstance events of life.

But what had the Lord told Samuel beforehand? Verse 16.

About this time tomorrow I will send you a man from the land of Benjamin.

Anoint him leader over my people Israel.

I will send you a man. That means the donkeys, the servant, the \$2, the girls, meeting Samuel on the street—all of that was the Lord sending Saul to Samuel.

It may seem like it was just chance that Kish's donkeys escaped, but, as the church father Basil the Great once said, luck and chance are pagan terms. And St. Augustine said that if everything is left to fortune, then the world is aimlessly whirling about.

There's no aimless whirling in this account.

The string of events were not luck, chance, or fortune—they were providence.

What is providence?

Christians used to use that word a lot, not so much anymore, sadly.

Our catechism defines providence as God's "most holy, wise, and powerful preserving and governing all his creatures and all their actions."

All his creatures and all their actions—even escaping donkeys.

You can see how if they had not escaped, then the next thing would not have happened, then something else would not have happened, and then something else, and then something else.

And Saul would not have come to Samuel and been anointed king of Israel.

God himself was in control of this seemingly accidental string of events, and he used them to bring to pass something very important.

Providence is a doctrine we need to know and know well.

It's a doctrine we've studied before—particularly years ago when we looked at

Joseph's life in Genesis and at the book of Esther, but always good to revisit.

So let's do so this morning with this text in mind.

What we're going to do is look at three effects the doctrine of providence often has on believers.

1. It fills us with a sense of awe
2. It raises perplexing questions
3. It gives us a deep confidence

MP#1 The doctrine of God's providence fills us with a sense of awe

Years ago I was talking to an elderly gentleman, a life-long bachelor, and he told me about a family matter, a problem of sorts that had never been solved. He raised this matter with a nephew of his who was leaving to work on the other side of the country. About five years later he got a fat envelope in the mail. It was from his nephew and it was filled with documentation that solved this family matter. What was amazing was that in the course of the work the nephew had ran across a thread of information that lead to the answer to this problem. This elderly gentleman—his name was Bob Thomas, he was the registrar at my seminary—got out the envelope and he said, let me read you my nephew's letter. And I'll never forget the first line of the letter.

Dear Uncle Bob,

Who but our Lord could have arranged . . .

that my work would answer the questions of our family matter?

I can't remember exactly what the second half of the sentence said,

but that first line has stuck with me all these years—

Who but our Lord could have arranged? Who indeed?

And when godly old Bob Thomas read me that, his voice was full of awe.

He was worshipping.

Who but our Lord could do that? Who but our Lord would do that?

According to the Bible, God is at work in every incident in our lives, big and small,

but most of the time what he is doing and how he is doing it is hidden from us.

But he is working out his purposes. He is weaving a tapestry—as the famous

metaphor goes—the backside usually looks like a jumble of threads,

but when you turn it over, you see a picture was being formed the whole time.

1 Samuel 9 and passages like it, with these minute, seemingly unimportant details,

are intended to teach us that our Lord is at work.

They are intended to fill us with awe at the wisdom and goodness and even

playfulness of our God (I mean that in a respectful way). He must enjoy this.

In the early 1900s there was a minister in Church of Ireland named TC Hammond.

Thomas Chatterton Hammond.

He would often preach in the streets, but Ireland, being mostly Catholic,

was not a place where Protestant street preachers were appreciated.

So TC Hammond was usually heckled.

One day while preaching on the streets of Cork and the crowd got ugly.

Young man ran up, snatched his Bible out of his hands and started to set it on fire.

As crowd pushing apart, Hammond, "That's the Word of God you are burning."

Just one incident among hundreds like it during Hammond's ministry. Years later, Hammond was in Dublin and he was approached by a man who worked in a Christian mission in city. The man's name John O'Keefe. Told Hammond doctor recommended move to warm, dry climate for his health. He had found out about a church mission in Australia.

Heard Hammond knew the minister in charge and wondered if Hammond would give him a letter of recommendation.

Well, Hammond said, I don't really know anything about you.

Tell me about your faith in Christ.

So John O'Keefe began to tell story about how years before on street in Cork, and tried to break up a meeting by burning the street preacher's book and how this preacher had said it was the Word of God he was burning. He couldn't forget that comment, so he had started reading the Bible for himself, and that led to his conversion.

Hammond put two and two together, realized had met this man before.

But the story didn't end there.

O'Keefe emigrated to Australia and he worked among the Irish emigrants who had come to Australia for the gold rush.

But his health was poor and he died soon after he got there.

Years later, TC Hammond visited Australia for the first time.

On visit preached in a church, after service struck up a conversation with a man. This man told him that he had been a prospector back during the gold rush.

He didn't find any gold and started drinking himself to death.

But a man from a church mission had come by his shack, prayed with him. Because of that prayer, he had become a Christian and his life was changed.

That man who led him to the Lord was John O'Keefe.

So an off the cuff comment shouted at a young man on a street in Cork, Ireland ended up, years later, saving a man on the other side of the world who was drinking himself to death in the Australian outback.

Who but our Lord could have arranged that? That's God's providence.

When you experience this, when you see the hand of God arranging things—in both big ways and small ways in your life—and you feel a sense of awe—let it out, worship him, praise him, tell people, tell your friends and family—look what the Lord did. Recount the details.

MP#2 The doctrine of God's providence raises perplexing questions

But for almost every Christian there come times when the doctrine of God's

providence bothers you, when it raises perplexing questions in your mind. This is the second effect this doctrine often has on believers. If our catechism is correct, that God's providence is his most holy, wise, and powerful preserving and governing all things—then that includes bad things. And not just bad things but even evil things, sinful things.

We'll see that play out in the book of 1 Samuel.

This man Lord brought to Samuel to be leader of Israel turns out to be a failure. Saul ends up causing all kinds of trouble for Israel. Think about that. All these amazing, providential details, God perfectly arranging to bring Saul to Samuel so he could be anointed leader of Israel—but in the end, as we will see, Saul was a failure as king. And we'll see how this bothered poor Samuel. How he grieved over Saul. Is that God's providence too? Troubles and evils?

There are two different ways this perplexes Christians.

I think they are just two sides of the same coin, but depending on your personality, you're probably bothered more by one or the other. There are some Christians with a philosophical bent of mind and once they start thinking about this, the thing that really bothers them is how God can be good and yet his providence includes bad and evil things. That seems to be a contradiction to them.

Seems like it can only be resolved in two ways—either God's not in control of those bad things, they happen completely apart from him—maybe they even surprise him like they surprise us. Or, God's not good like he says he is. He's a mixture of good and evil. How else can we account for bad things being part of his providence?

The Bible doesn't answer this conundrum by explaining it philosophically.

It answers it by asserting two truths. That answer in a nutshell is this: God is light and in him there is no darkness at all. He is all good, he hates evil. He holds all men accountable and one day will judge every evil deed. And, at the same time, God uses bad things to accomplish his good purposes, and he does so in such a way that he is completely untainted by those things. As one church father said, He uses sin sinlessly.

The Bible's doesn't explain how that works. It just says this is how it is. Think of Job. Raiders came and stole his livestock and murdered his servants. Tornado blew down house, killed children. Covered with boils. All of those bad things happened at Satan's instigation.

But what did Job say?

“The Lord gives, the Lord takes away, blessed be the name of the Lord.”
Didn’t say, “The Lord gives, Satan takes away.”

Didn’t say, “The Lord gives, The Lord allows things to be taken away.”
He said, “The Lord takes away.”

Jeremiah said:

“Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that both calamities and good things come?”
He was speaking to the people of Jerusalem who had suffered the devastating brutality of the siege and conquest of their city by the Babylonians.
Babylonians who the Lord said that he himself raised up to punish Israel.

Nothing wrong with philosophy, and trying to come up with a way to explain how these things work together. But you don’t have to get God off the hook.
He says: I’m all good, I’m all holy. I hate evil. I’m untainted by it.
And everything, even evil things are part of my grand providential plan.
Sometimes you have lay your questions at his feet and bow in submission.

I said there are two different ways this perplexes Christians.

The first way is these philosophical questions. The second way is experiential.

Why is God doing this to me? How could he do this to me?

We never complain about God’s providence when he appoints good things for us—
when the connected dots lead us to prosperity, health, and happiness.

We never complain when we hear stories like TC Hammond’s and John O’Keefe’s.

Those stories are encouraging and amazing.

But we often struggle mightily when the dots lead to trouble and sorrow and evil.

It’s when a particularly painful or dark providence comes into our lives.

I knew a Christian woman once with a chronic illness who could not come to terms with her illness being God’s providence. It angered her when believers said so.

Deep down was furious with God but couldn’t see that.

So she dealt with it by saying God had nothing at all to do with her illness—
but that didn’t bring her much comfort either.

How do you deal with the perplexing thought that this or that bad thing in your life is God’s providence? Brings to the last effect . . .

MP#3 The doctrine of God’s providence gives us deep confidence

Or I could say that it gives us profound comfort.

That confidence and comfort comes from believing that God is working out his perfect will in the providential circumstances of your life—in all things.

He has a good end in mind which is his glory and our happiness.

We cannot see the big picture of God's providence while in the middle of it. Samuel got a special revelation from God and was expecting certain things.

But even Samuel didn't know extent of God's providence.

We go through life with one event after another, and we know God is in those— but we rarely see how he is connecting the dots.

So how do we know he is connecting the dots?

Because he tells us so. And because he shows us how he has done it in the past.

Remember Joseph. His own brothers sold him into slavery.

Genesis says he pleaded with them, but they would not listen to him.

Was that evil done to him really God's providence?

Twenty-two years later, when his brothers were standing before him remember what Joseph said?

It wasn't you who sent me to Egypt it was God who sent me here.

He sent me here to save your lives.

You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good.

Yes, Joseph affirms, your selling me into slavery was God's providence too.

And Joseph didn't know a fraction of what we do, how God continued to preserve his people from that day until the coming of Jesus Christ.

John Chrysostom, the greatest preacher of early Christianity put it this way:

“Imagine someone without the least notion of agriculture observing a farmer collecting grain and shutting it in a barn to protect it from damp. Then he sees the same farmer take the same grain and cast it to the winds, spreading it on the ground, maybe even in the mud, without worrying anymore about the dampness. Surely he will think that the farmer has ruined the grain, and rebuke him.”

You can imagine that, can't you. Someone who doesn't understand farming seeing how much care is taken to keep the grain dry, to keep it out of the elements.

Then this same farmer takes it on a wet, muddy day and throws it out in a field.

The person ignorant of farming says: You're ruining it.

Here's how Chrysostom finishes the illustration.

“The reproof comes from ignorance and impatience; by only waiting until the end of the summer, he would see the farmer harvest that grain, and be astonished at how it has multiplied.”

That's actually the experience most believers will have in this life.

That's the experience most of us will have.

God may be at work in every incident great and small in your life, but most of the time what he is doing, and how, and why is beyond your understanding.

Lord, why are you throwing the grain in the wet and the weather?

It's going to be ruined. Lord, why this illness? Why this untimely grief?

Why this sorrow or sadness or pain in my life? It makes no sense.

The farmer knows what he's doing. You have to wait in faith till end of summer.

The most famous English hymn about providence was written by William Cowper,

God Moves In A Mysterious Way. Every stanza is good, let me read two.

Judge not the Lord by feeble sense, But trust Him for His grace;

Behind a frowning providence He hides a smiling face.

God's providence may feel he's frowning at you.

But that bad thing is not his face, it's hiding his face.

His face is smiling. It's a smile of tenderness and concern and love.

And it's a smile that knows one day the good he has planned will wipe all away.

His purposes will ripen fast, Unfolding every hour;

The bud may have a bitter taste But sweet will be the flower.

I love that image of painful promises as a bitter but that eventually blossoms

into these sweet plan of God. And it happens fast in God's timing. Lives brief.

Those words were written by a man who suffered, if know Cowper's life—

suffered relationally, suffered mentally in horrible ways.

Words a testimony to power of doctrine to give courage and comfort if you let it.

Nothing is more useful when suffering in some way than the knowledge that

this too is from God and that he has ordered our lives this way.

Love hold the reigns of God's providence.

He controls the existence of little sparrows, and as Jesus said, you are more

important to him than sparrows.

And speaking of Jesus. If you know that the person who is at the tiller of your life

is someone of infinite power and goodness and who loves you so much that he

sent his only and beloved son to die for you when you were still his enemy—

then you can relax.

However high the waves you can trust him. You might get seasick—and it's no fun

to be seasick—but you are heading exactly where he wants you to go.