

Providence

Discussion Guide for Luke 1

In the past week, we celebrated an annual event known as Thanksgiving. The idea of giving thanks for blessings in life is rooted in the core Christian doctrine of Providence. The Westminster Catechism explains this doctrine in this way:

What are God's works of providence?

God's works of providence are his most holy, wise, and powerful preserving and governing all his creatures; ordering them, and all their actions, to his own glory.

We don't hear about providence in life as much today as our Puritan forefathers did. The very thought that God has more control over the details of our lives than we do is offensive to the modern idea of human autonomy. In our pride, we want to believe that we have the ultimate control over our own destiny.

The evidence of Scripture, however, is that God is the autonomous One and we are to live at His bidding. He does what He wants, when He wants, how He wants, and He doesn't need our strength or wisdom to accomplish what He intends to accomplish!

Notice that the Catechism does not contend that creatures are devoid of wills and actions of their own. We make choices every day of our lives. But God takes our choices and orders them in such a way that when we look at the grand scope of history, His glory and His purposes are not thwarted by ours.

Young people today often say "everything happens for a reason," but they fail to look much deeper at what those reasons might be. We often think of providence in looking back at how God orders events of our lives in such a way as to provide an outcome that brings us joy, health, or prosperity.

In the beginning of the Gospel of Luke, the greatest example of God's providence is in the way He chose to bring salvation to a human race that was utterly incapable of saving itself.

One pithy explanation of the Old versus New Testament is "Promises Made and Promises Kept." Keeping this simple explanation in mind can be of enormous help in making sense of the Old Testament.

The first chapters in each Gospel go to great lengths to demonstrate that they did not arrive out of nowhere. The coming of Jesus to the earth was the continuation and fulfillment of thousands of years of prophecy. God was fulfilling promises He made throughout the Old Testament Scriptures.

Many of the Old Testament quotations in Luke come directly from the prophets. God had

revealed his plan over many centuries prior to Jesus and used the intervening generations to set up a grand narrative of redemption.

If you have a good reference Bible, you will learn a lot about the Bible by simply looking up each one of the OT Scripture references that are either in the footnotes or the notes between the columns of your Bible in Luke 1.

The story of John the Baptist is rightly overshadowed by the story of Jesus. John, after all, had been prophesied in Isaiah 40 as one “who would prepare the way of the Lord.” (See Luke 3).

But the birth of John the Baptist in and of itself was big news in its day. John would a prophet who carried the banner of the great man, Elijah.

It is difficult to imagine the double surprise of an old barren couple getting news that they will have a son, and that he will be the first (and last) prophet in four hundred years.

Personally, I would be overjoyed at the prospect of having a son, but I would be very disturbed by the prospect of my son being a prophet. I would much rather my son be a doctor, a lawyer, an athlete, or a scientist. Those professions are honorable and carry success.

Prophets, on the other hand, are very seldom heeded; they make a lot of people angry; They usually end up murdered, incarcerated, or exiled. But Zechariah doesn't feel that his son is cursed.

You can tell that Zechariah has a keen understanding of God, sin and faith (even though he falters in faith when faced with the choice to believe that God can actually provide him a son.) Zechariah sees the message of repentance as vitally necessary to God's plan to save. He rejoices that he and his family have front-row seats to the miraculous plan of God in redeeming His people.

Much had happened in the life of the nation of Israel between the exile to Babylon and the announcement of John's birth.

The temple had been rebuilt twice and a serious priesthood had been reestablished to serve in the task of connecting the people to Yahweh.

God over many generations had miraculously delivered his faithful worshippers from the external threats posed by pagan overlords.

Even with a king of questionable repute on the throne (Herod) and paying tribute to an oppressive emperor in Rome (Caesar), the self-conscious distinctiveness of the Jewish people as belonging to Yahweh had grown through generations of poverty and persecution. This is evident in the quiet, reverent lives led by Zechariah and Elizabeth.

God had orchestrated the events of history to breed the type of character in his people that

would herald the message the of the Gospel of Jesus in the world!

Beginning with Zechariah and Elizabeth, we see a pattern of God using people who think they are forgotten, who think they are cursed, who think they are “nobodies from nowhere”, and who lack extraordinary talents. He makes them central characters in the unfolding of His plan of salvation.

Discussion Questions

- What are the echoes of the story of Abraham and Sarah (Genesis) and Hannah (1 Samuel) in the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth?
- How would you feel if you were in the shoes of Zechariah or Elizabeth?
- Do you think Zechariah and Elizabeth felt more joy for themselves or for the salvation of their people?
- What do Zechariah and Elizabeth teach us about faith?
- Have you come to a point in life where you feel that God controls more than you do?
- How does our understanding of providence help or hinder our faith?
- Can you look back at times in your own life where God ordered events to bring about His purposes for your life, but you couldn't see God working in the middle of it?
- How much greater is your joy looking backward today than it was in the midst of that time when you experienced providence?
- How does providence relate to salvation?