



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

The Theology of the Reformers

TRANSCRIPT

“Divine Providence, or Is History Out of Control?”

Our subject tonight is “Divine Providence, or Is History Out of Control?” And what we are seeking to do tonight in our study is to relate the doctrine of divine providence to the ongoing history of the human race. I would like to read several passages just as a place from which to begin our study tonight. And first is Psalm 66 and verse 7. Psalm 66 and verse 7. We read in Psalm 66:7,

“He rules by his might forever. His eyes keep watch on the nations. Let not the rebellious exalt themselves.”

Notice the second line, “His eyes keep watch on the nations.”

And then let’s turn on to Isaiah chapter 45 and read a few verses, beginning with the first verse of that important chapter. Isaiah chapter 45 verse 1 through verse 7. This is the chapter in which the Prophet Isaiah prophesies that he is going to accomplish a particular task by raising up a man by the name of Cyrus, one of the remarkable prophecies of Isaiah, and we read in the first verse of Isaiah 45,

“Thus says the Lord to Cyrus, his anointed, who I have taken by the right hand to subdue nations before him and to loose the loins of kings. To open doors before him so that gates will not be shut. I will go before you and make the rough places smooth. I will shatter their doors of bronze and cut through their iron bars. And I will give you the treasures of darkness and hidden wealth of secret places in order that you may know that it is I, the LORD God, the God of Israel who calls you by your name, for the sake of Jacob my servant and Israel my chosen one, I have called you by my name. I have given you a title of honor. Though you have not known me, I am the LORD and there is no other. Besides me there is no God. I will gird you though you have not known me, that men may know from the rising and the setting of the sun that there is no one besides me. I am the LORD and there is no other, the one forming light and creating darkness, causing well-being and creating calamity. I am the LORD who does all these.”

Now notice that he states here in this prophecy that he is going to direct the steps of Cyrus, even though Cyrus does not know him. So it is a very clear statement of the providence of God in the affairs of human history, and particularly in the nations themselves.

Let’s turn to the final passage in Acts chapter 17 and verse 26. Acts chapter 17 and verse 26. The Apostle Paul in his address to the Athenians in the 26th verse says,

“And he made from one every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation.”

Divine Providence, or Is History Out of Control? G.C. Berkauer, for many years Professor of Dogmatics at the Free University of Amsterdam, and thought by many to be the outstanding evangelical theologian of the 20th Century, if not necessary the soundest has said, “Scripture never offers an interpretation of facts apart from faith.” Let me read

that again, because I think it’s important in the study of providence and history.

“Scripture never offers an interpretation of facts apart from faith.” In other words, one must know God before he is able to recognize God’s finger in history.

I know you might be thinking, well, is there not illustration in the Old Testament of individuals who, though they did not know God, nevertheless recognized the hand of God in history? Well there are some passages in the Bible that might suggest that. Remember that when Moses was having his duel with the magicians of Egypt, when finally he performed one of his miracles which they could not duplicate they said, “This is the finger of God.” Now it would seem from that statement they were recognizing the fact that what Moses had done was really the work of God.

Now I’m going to suggest to you dogmatically, but I’m going to suggest with a little bit of tentativeness that when they said, this is the finger of God, they did not really think it was the finger of God. That that was their way of simply saying that we don’t understand how Moses has accomplished this. In other words, our intelligence cannot comprehend what has happened in the performance of this miracle by the man, Moses, and it was their way of saying they could not understand.

Now, I think the proof of this is the fact that Pharaoh, who was standing by and saw all of this and heard about it, hardened his heart. So, it’s evident that he himself did not really believe that it was the finger of God when Moses performed those miracles. So I suggest to you that Berkauer’s statement is probably correct. Scripture never offers an interpretation of facts apart from faith, and one must know God before he is able to recognize God’s finger in history.

Now we do have considerable speculation about history, however, and some quite professional. Lord Acton, who was one of the great historians, said that providence was simply progress, and progress was the race [indistinct] of history. So for him, providence simply meant that we are getting along better and better, and progress, that progress is really the principle, the reason for its existence of history itself.

Earlier, he thought, incidentally, that providence just moved over history creating good out of evil. So for him, providence was simply the working of certain principles that meant we were getting better and better as time went on.

Now, Acton was an Englishman, and the Germans also were also historians, and one of the greatest of the historians was a man by the name of Von Ranke. And Von Ranke called attention to subtle in history, “a final residual,” he said, “unexplained.” And he suggested that perhaps there was an occult force at work in history, because he could not seem to understand how history came to be what it really is.

We cannot arrive at an interpretation of human history by merely casting an eye over the course of the centuries. There are, of course, historians who think that this is all that we have to do, and those historians hold the chairs of history in our universities. Generally speaking, they think that we are able to interpret history by simply casting an eye over the centuries. But a man cannot find the eye in history without a previous assurance that God has been working in his own life, nor can he disprove another’s sight of the right hand of God in history. He cannot say that God is not working in history, nor can we say that God is working in history in the sense that we can prove it. He cannot prove it to an unbeliever. And at the same time, he cannot prove that God is not at work in history.

Ultimately, it is a matter of presuppositions. And if his presuppositions are the presuppositions of the historian who works according to his own principles of historiography, or if he should be a scientist according to what he may think are his principles reflected in the scientific method, he has certain presuppositions. Historians today, most of them who have thought, admit that they cannot be sure of anything in past history. You cannot prove historical facts.

So, in the final analysis, the Christian stands over here with his presupposition -- and everybody begins with presuppositions, incidentally. We all have our axioms. It’s impossible to think without certain presuppositions, so we all have our axioms, and here

are Christians over here with their axioms, and here are historians with their axioms, and the scientists with their axioms, and so on. And the question of course for us is, ultimately, what does our principium, our fundamental axiom, lead us to believe. And our fundamental axiom as a Christian is, the Bible is the word of God, that we have a divine revelation in the Scriptures.

Now, that means I say, that we cannot prove that God is working in history, nor can anyone else prove that he is not working in history. Our view of history, then, rests upon our view of our own most private experience in life. In fact, it’s merely an extension of it. Because we have come to know Jesus Christ as our personal Savior, and our own Holy Spirit has brought home to our hearts the conviction that he has died for us and that we have everlasting life as an extension of that. This great, sovereign God who has been able to save us, as an extension of it we know that he controls the affairs of human existence.

“Those who say that everything in history can be explained without bringing God into the argument,” someone has said, “Would be doing no more than walking around in a circle. Even if it were true that anything in history or even a blade of grass had been yet fully explained.” Isn’t it startling, really? No one even to this present day has fully explained a blade of grass. We are really ignorant.

After all of our studying down through the centuries, we do not really, ultimately, understand a blade of grass. We stand in this room and you sit in this room, and we see electric lights, and there isn’t a man living and breathing who understands, ultimately, electricity. Now we use it. We flip a switch off and on, and there are some men who understand a whole lot more about it than any of us in this room. But even they, if they’re honest, will say ultimately we do not understand.

A world of blind men might just as equally maintain that their universe was perfectly understandable to them without the introduction of any foreign concept such as light. But of course, we would think they don’t understand anything. So, likewise, the

unbeliever who thinks that he understands everything apart from Christian presuppositions – he’s just like a blind man. There has never entered into his existence, into his little world the concept of divine revelation as we know it from the word of God, and he thinks he understands things, but he really is just as blind as the blind man who has never seen.

Now, you know we are as Christians inclined to go the other way, occasionally. We’re inclined to think that because we are Christians and because our God who we know is the true God, and because he is a sovereign God, we’re inclined to think that the things that happen to us don’t happen to the world. And so we have some things that we have to learn through the sad experience of having to go through them.

Richard Baxter was a very fine Christian man. And Mr. Baxter commented on the fact that when the great plague came, he said, “When the Great Plague came,” he said at first, “So few of the Religious are sought.” What an interesting expression that is. So few of the Religious are – I’ve never heard of that adjective, but he made it up, anyway – “of the Religious are sought, taken away by the plague, that according to the mode of too many such, they began to be puffed up and boast of the great difference which God did make. But quickly after that, they all fell alike.” So, we need to remember that God’s Providence is the kind of thing that you have to prove by human reasoning.

I’ve often said that it’s a very healthy thing to be a member of Believers Chapel, and the reason being that you would be surprised how few people relatively speaking have died in Believers Chapel. You would be amazed. But I don’t want to brag about that [loud, sustained laughter] in the light of what Mr. Baxter has said here. I said to a lot of my friends, it’s a healthy thing to be a member of Believers Chapel [laughter]. But, we need to remember that when we talk about the providence of God, we are really talking about something that we cannot prove to an unbeliever, but he cannot prove that it does not exist as well.

Now let’s turn to the subject of providence in history, and first of all, I want to look at some views of history. We’ll go rather rapidly over this. If you’re interested in this topic, I suggest that you do some study yourself regarding these questions. But first of all, views of history, and I want to review just briefly some of the common views of history.

The view of the communists is mentioned only because it is so widespread at the present day. Simply stated, the goal of history, according to a communist is optimum production, and the determining factors of life are economic, and the means of the accomplishment is class struggle. So that history is the unfolding of certain movements of history that ultimately will lead to the day in which the state of the economy will be such that the communists will be satisfied and those who have will no longer have.

The views of other Pagans are many. There are many schools of historical theory. Some are pessimistic like Plato’s deterioration cycles. He believed that history went in cycles, and that these cycles evidenced a continuing degeneration in history. Now, these theories are based to some extent on empiricistic viewpoints. But that was Plato’s idea. It’s not simply an ancient idea, but Spengler, in the 20th Century has revived a view of history that is cyclical.

Then there are some that are optimistic like Hegel and Darwin, and there are some that are a combination. Some of them believe that God’s purposes will be realized but not in history, so that there is a pessimistic as well as an optimistic view of historical matters.

C. The Views of Christians. Evangelicals do not think that history is circular. They do not think that history is spiral. They do not think that history is mechanistic. They do not think that history is evolutionary. History, according to Christians, has a purpose. It has a beginning. It has a control. It has a climax. And in the New Testament we notice that there is a period of time in which you could say there is continuum in

which things are happening. There is an ultimate culmination, and finally, there is a state in which there will be an eternal realization of fellowship with God.

Now, to go back and just go over some of those things, most of us know that history has a purpose, because we read in the Bible – because Christians who accept the Bible as their presupposition – they look in the Scriptures and they learn that the Bible itself says that there is a purpose in history: of Him, through Him, for Him are all things, to put it as broadly as possible. And ultimately, it is the glorification of God through all of his work in human history; that is the goal of that history.

History has a beginning in the creation. There is a controlling principle by which history is carried on to its culmination, and that controlling principle is the sovereignty of God in the affairs of men. The climax of human history is reached in the first coming of our Lord Jesus, when he offered the sacrifice by which sinners are redeemed on Calvary’s cross.

In the present age, he is accomplishing his work between the two comings, and this age shall conclude with the second coming of the Lord Jesus which is a kind of culmination of human history. We believe – at least I believe – that there will be a millennial kingdom following that in which the redemptive purpose of God will be seen in human history, and it has a particular purpose. And finally, we believe that the eternal state will ensue after that period of time and throughout all the ages of eternity God will be glorified through the activities of those whom he has redeemed.

Roman II. The Views of Providence. Many men have had providential views of history. For example, Von Ranke, I quoted him because he did seem to say that while one may have some questions about human history, he did seem to suggest that there was something in history that indicated that there was a providence of a kind at work. Christians have generally seen these features in the doctrine of providence.

There is a general providence. And what is meant by general providence is simply this, that God’s sovereignty includes all things and all creatures. In other words,

God’s sovereignty includes the whole of the universe, the whole of his creation and the universes beyond this universe. That is what theologians have called general providence. I think that is expressed in passages like Psalm 103:19 and Psalm 104:14. And we look at that; just for the sake of time I will not do it.

They also believe that there is a special providence. A special providence embraces all men. In other words, it is personal in character. It’s true God controls all things. But he also directs special attention to men in the all things. And he not only controls those who are believers, but he also sustains and governs those who are unbelievers.

We saw that in the passage that we read about Cyrus. Cyrus was an unbeliever. It’s specifically stated, “Though you do not know me, nevertheless, I am going to use you in a certain way.” We know that God used the Chaldeans to bring discipline upon the children of Israel, and it’s very conceivable to us at least as we study history to see other times when God has used unbelieving peoples or unbelieving nations to be the means of discipline of his professing, believing people. And I think we all have had the experience of being chastised by the Lord through the use of unbelieving people in our own lives. So his special providence has to do with all men.

We read Psalm 66:7. We could look at Daniel chapter 2 verse 21, and then Daniel chapter 4 and verse 25 – these texts say essentially the same things. You needn’t look up the Daniel passage. I’ll read it for you since I’m already looking at it. But Daniel chapter 4 and verse 25 says that “You’ll be driven away from mankind and your dwelling place be with the beasts of the field, and you’ll be given grass to eat like cattle and be drenched with the dew of heaven, and seven periods of time will pass over you until you recognize that the Most High is ruler over the realm of mankind and bestows it on whomever he wishes.”

There was a well-known professor of history whose books I read when I was going through college, J.B. Bury. He was a very famous professor of history, and I know

in Charleston when I was studying history, we had to read various books that Professor Bury had written. And he once said that he believed that the course of history was changed by the shape of Cleopatra’s nose. [Laughter] And what he went on to say in connection with it was that it is just little things like this that do determine the significant facts in human history. History is so subtle a texture, made up of individuals and their thoughts and actions, that it’s the very inconsequential thing that is often the essential thing.

When I was going through college, one of the courses I took was Europe since 1870. Now that may seem to you like too large of a period to cover, but you must remember that when I took it, it was not [loud laughter]. Now one of things that impressed me, and we spent a great deal of time in the second semester of this course in World War I [more laughter]. And one of the things that impressed me was that that whole great conflict which was really the first world war was caused because of, so far as the historians could put their finger on it at that time, by the assassination of an archduke who didn’t have much significance at all it might have seemed. But just a chance shot, and that great conflagration which touched the whole of the Western world and even the United States of America.

History is so subtle a texture that just a few microbes in Washington might mean that we are suddenly plunged into some worldwide conflagration and all of us lose our lives. So, it’s great to know that God is in control of history. So there is a special providence at work.

Now the Bible also speaks, some theologians say, of the very special providence. And what they mean by that is that his providence not only governs the whole of the world and all of this universe, and it not only commands men, but it also is directed toward believers, his providence toward us.

Now, that is clearly taught in the Bible, and we have been studying on Sunday morning the Gospel of Matthew, and one of the clearest texts that teaches that is in the

tenth chapter of the Gospel of Matthew where we read in verse 29 of that tenth chapter, “Are not two sparrows sold for a cent, and yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Therefore, do not fear, you are of more value than many sparrows.” So in other words, the care that God gives to the sparrows and the knowledge that he has of every little hop that they take upon the ground is only in small measure parallel with the kind of care that he exercises with reference to his saints. You are of far greater value to God than the sparrows.

Now when we think of God’s providence, there is one thing as Christians that I believe we need to reminded of. And that is that God’s providence is not to be identified with prosperity. So often, that is the basic feeling that Christians have concerning the providence of God. If his providence is overshadowing us, then we are sure to be prosperous. It is this foolish idea, this unscriptural idea that we hear over the radio so often when we turn and listen to Christian radio programs. And some of them even have the gall to say it’s God’s will that all of his servants be rich and prosperous. And if you’ll send me two dollars [laughter] I’ll send you a book that will tell you exactly how you can be rich and prosperous.

Now you know that system like that will result in the riches and prosperity of one man [laughter] and of no one else. And Christians fall for that. They send in money by the thousands to men who broadcast over the radio. That’s one of the reasons in Believers Chapel we do not ask for any money over our program and go out of our way to say this program is paid for by the Christians in Dallas. They’ve taken us at word; they don’t send in any money, of course. [Loud, sustained laughter] We’re not unhappy about that. At least I’m not unhappy about it; I’m not speaking for the elders on this [more laughter], but I’m not unhappy about this.

I think that if you give out the word of God that it ought to be free, as that is the way it has come to us. So, when we think about God’s special providence, don’t mistake

that for prosperity. Someone said, “Prosperity was the blessing of the Old Testament; adversity was the blessing of the New.” I think it was Bishop Leighton who said that. That’s not totally true, but down through history, there’s been a lot of fulfillment of the suggestion he has made.

Well now let’s turn to the views of history and providence. Even Christians, of course, have conflicting views of what history and providence really are in relation to one another, and I want to mention the German Christians first, because, this, I think, was the outstanding illustration, Christians, professing Christians can go astray.

Now we remember World War II, and we remember the rise of Adolph Hitler. And when we read the history books today, generally Adolph Hitler is presented as a demon, and that in my opinion was a fairly good description of what he was. He was something like that.

But most of us don’t remember – and I don’t even remember – what the German Christians, the evangelical, professing Christians – incidentally, the professing church in Germany, which is Lutheran, is called The Evangelical Church. That’s its name. Evangelical. They have the name, just as Presbyterian or Baptist in this country. The Evangelical Church is the Lutheran church which has its great traditions from Martin Luther when it truly was evangelical.

But The Evangelical Church, when Hitler arose in Germany, the great mass of the Evangelical Christians thought that Hitler was a gift of the providence of God. Listen to what they said in 1934. A group of theologians at Wurtemberg issued this statement – theologians in The Evangelical Church, “We offer full thanks to God that he as Lord of history, has given us Adolph Hitler, our leader and savior from our difficult lot. We acknowledge that we with body and soul are bound and dedicated to the German state and to its Fuhrer. This bondage and duty contains for us as Evangelical Christians its deepest and most holy significance in its obedience to the command of God.” Now this

was the view of professing Christians concerning the providence of God in raising up Adolph Hitler.

He was “a world of redemption” to them; “the Lord of history was speaking clearly to them in the rise of Hitler.” It was in this situation that Karl Barth protested and finally had to leave Germany – he was a Swiss, but he was teaching in Germany – he had to leave Germany because of his objection to this interpretation of history by the German Christians.

Now Augustine’s view concerning history was rather interesting, too. Augustine wrote one of his greatest works when he wrote *The City of God. De Civitate Dei* – “Concerning the City of God.”

Now, the thing that Augustine was concerned about when he wrote *The City of God* was the explanation of the fall of the Roman Empire. [Indistinct], another interpreter had said, “God had revealed his will in the death of those who fought the church.” But Augustine said, “The fall of Rome was not due to the forsaking of the ancient gods” which the Romans said was the cause of the fall of Rome. They said the reason that Rome had fallen was because so many had run after these Christian gods; if we had stayed with our ancient, tribal gods, the kinds of gods we had from the beginning, we wouldn’t have fallen. So Augustine wrote his “Concerning the City of God” to counter that, and he said, “No, the reason that Rome fell was because of the moral impotence of Paganism.” That was his interpretation.

Then another man shortly after Augustine said that the reason that Rome has fallen is because of the unrighteousness of Christian believers in the church and in the society. Now all of this illustrates of course that when you look at history and seek to interpret it apart from the divine revelation of the word of God, we don’t have any certainty that we are understanding history correctly. In other words, one Christian may say one thing, another may say another thing. In the final analysis, we cannot be certain about our interpretations about the providence of God in history.

Now mind you, I’m not questioning at all the fact that God providentially sustains and governs all beings including his believers in history. There’s no question about that. What we’re talking about is the interpretation of the providence of God. You know how Christians often say, that was the will of God; I often want to say, how do you know? They don’t really know. They cannot really know. They haven’t received any vision. There’s nothing in the word of God that says that. That’s what they think it the word of God. It might be, but it might not be.

Now the evidence of the fact is that there are so many Christians who disagree over what is the word of God. That’s why it’s so wrong for us another Christian to seek to be Holy Spirit for our friends and say, Well, you got out of the will of God. You cannot know that. Now of course, if there is disobedience of a specific commandment of the word of God admitted by all, in that case, you can. But I cannot tell you that some action which is indifferent so far as its moral nature is concerned, I could not possibly tell you that’s wrong, and you cannot tell me that one of my actions is wrong. You might say, Well, look what happened to you! But prosperity is not the sign of the will of God, necessarily.

Let’s devote a little bit of time now to what I’ve called, incidentally, the biblical view. And I understand this is my interpretation of what the biblical view is. There are many events in history that we can understand because they’re explained in the Bible. Now we don’t have any problems about certain things in Scripture because God tells us the meaning of those historical events.

Let me ask you to turn to one of them, for example. Turn to Acts chapter 12, verse 21 through verse 23. Acts chapter 12 verse 21 through 23. We read,

“And on an appointed day Herod, having put on his royal apparel, took his seat on the rostrum and began delivering an address to them. And the people kept crying out,

‘The voice of a god and not of a man!’ And immediately an angel of the Lord struck him because he did not give God the glory, and he was eaten by worms and died.”

Well, we don’t have to ask, why did Herod die? We have an explanation here. He was a man who was the occasion for the people of God – he was a wicked man, of course – but he was the occasion by which the people kept crying out sinfully, the voice of God and not of man, and they were glorifying Herod other than glorifying God, and so he was struck dead because he did not give God the glory. We don’t have any doubt about that; the Bible says so.

Now let’s turn to another place. Well, just for the sake of time, let me remind you of the Exodus. Now we know what the significance of the Exodus was because the Bible many times explains that the Exodus was the occasion for the redemption of the Children of Israel from Egypt.

Or to take the cross. We know the significance of the cross of Jesus Christ because it is significantly revealed in the word of God.

Now we of course have to know that because it would be possible for us to interpret the cross in different ways. I think several times I’ve made reference to this. But if you were standing around the cross and you were wanting to know what was the meaning of this event, and if you had come to one of the Romans and had said, Sir, what’s the meaning of this? The Roman soldier might well have said, Well, a seditious man is being put to death.

Of if you had come to one of the Jewish leaders, one of the scribes or Pharisees, and you would have said to them, Now what is happening here? He would have replied, A blasphemer is being put to death. And then if you had spoken to one of the women who were around the cross of our Lord, they might have said, Well, a good and gentle man who had not harmed anyone was put to death today. But if you had asked one of the disciples, or asked John, before he fled, or perhaps if he returned and said, what’s

happening here, he might well have said, The Son of God is offering an atonement for sinners.

You see, it is by divine revelation that we know what is happening. We could never know, otherwise. So, history left outside the Bible is unexplained, except for that which is the fulfillment of prophecy, but that is explained.

Well how shall we understand it? Now we remember, we don’t question that all history is, well as the expositors have said, “All history is His story;” that is, if you climb high enough to see. We don’t question that all history is in the hand of God. Someone has said, quite a bit different from “her story,” too, we know that history is providentially controlled by God. We’re not questioning that. We are talking about the interpretation of history. That’s something different.

Now let’s consider these things. First, the place of facts. Now, put that in quotes because, facts are not always what people think they are. Now we need to beware of drawing rash conclusions from facts. Now let me give you an illustration of this from the Bible. Will you turn to Luke chapter 13? Luke chapter 13. And let me read verses 1 through 5.

“Now on the same occasion there were some present who reported to Him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. And Jesus said to them, ‘Do you suppose that these Galileans were greater sinners than all other Galileans because they suffered this fate? (Now evidently that was their interpretation. They had said that these Galileans are greater sinners than other Galileans because their blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices, and so they interpreted this event as being a revelation of the fact that they were greater sinners than the other Galileans. Now listen to our Lord’s answer,) I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.”

So he corrected the common view; that was their common interpretation of their historical event. But they didn’t have any word of God about it; they were just reasoning from human reason. After all, it was a despicable death to die, and so the clearer understanding of it is they must have been greater sinners than other Galileans. You notice how Christians, they see somebody has an accident, Hmm, they must have committed sin unto death some where. You often do that. Some of you are looking at me like you’ve never thought of that in your life. It’s not true. It’s not true.

Will you turn over to John chapter 9? John chapter 9. John chapter 9 and verse 1 we read,

“And as he passed by, he saw a man blind from birth. And his disciples asked him, saying, ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents that he should be born blind?’ (See? They’re thinking that it’s because of something that the man or his parents had done that caused him to have this unusual defect that he should be born blind.) Jesus answered it was neither that this man sinned nor his parents, but it was in order that the works of God might be displayed in him.”

In other words, he again corrected the common idea and said, No, it’s this.

Now, we are not the Lord, so we cannot correct a person’s viewpoint and say, Well, you’ve got the wrong interpretation of that, it’s really this. You cannot do that. You see, facts are not facts until we know God’s interpretation of them. And if it is not in the word in the God, if it is not explained there, there is no way for us to know the meaning of these facts, so-called facts of history.

Let’s turn back to Luke chapter 24. Now the disciples were on the Emmaus Road, and they were very downcast and disheartened, because they had anticipated that the Lord Jesus would be the king, and the crucifixion of our Lord had apparently shattered them all. The disciples had gone off in hiding like wounded animals, and these disciples

here, even though they had heard that the women had come back and had found the tomb empty, that still did not deliver them from their depression. And they were making their way down towards Emmaus, and the Lord Jesus drew up alongside of them, you’ll remember, and began to engage them in conversation.

And in the midst of the conversation, we read these words, verse 18,

“And one of them named Cleopas answered and said to them, are the only one visiting Jerusalem and unaware of the things which have happened here in these days? And he said to them, What things? (As if he didn’t know.) And they said to him, the things about Jesus of Nazareth who was a prophet mighty in deed and word in the sight of God and all the people, and how the Chief Priests and our rulers delivered him up to death and crucified him. But we were hoping that it was he who was going to redeem Israel. Indeed, besides all this, it is the third day since these things have happened.”

Notice the interpretation they placed on these events. Everything’s shattered. All hope is gone. That’s their interpretation, when the fact are that the resurrection has taken place, and the resurrected Lord is standing by them at the very moment. Christians interpreting history. They’re not very reliable in doing that, you know.

You see, facts, so called, can only be understood if we have a divine interpretation of them. So, when somebody tells you what God’s will is for your life, about a certain thing not spoken of in the Bible, just remember it’s an opinion, even if it comes from a preacher, even from me, it’s an opinion, that’s all.

Now secondly, the place of faith. It’s faith that makes the providence of God, his general and special providence real. Now we were studying in one of our expository studies this past summer, the Book of Amos. I learned a great deal through the study of Amos.

There’s one thing that I see now in a little different light, not that I passed by it without any comments on it when we gave the exposition then, but I want you to turn with me to Amos chapter 9, and let me read a verse that was in the next to last study that we had in the Book of Amos. And you know, Amos wrote a book in which he sought to bring the Children of Israel back into a relationship of fellowship with God, and we read in the 7th verse of the 9th chapter these words,

“Are you not as the sons of Ethiopia to me, O sons of Israel? Declares the Lord. Have I not brought up Israel from the land of Egypt? (Oh yes, that’s right; that’s why we’re special, that’s why we’re special) And the Philistines from Caphtor? And the Syrians from Kir?”

Did you notice that? Now you read the Old Testament through and you’ll find God often appeals, and the prophets and the writers of the Old Testament often appeal to that great experience that they had when they came out of Egypt by the mighty delivering power of God. Over and over again he says, do you remember what I did for you when I brought you out of Egypt? It’s like saying to us today, do you remember what I’ve done for you in that I have given the Lord Jesus Christ as the Redeemer and brought him again from the dead? Do you remember?

But listen, if you do not really have faith in the God, true, living, vital, saving faith, then what he says is Israel is just like the Philistines. Israel is just like the Syrians. That’s why he says that. Have not I brought up Israel from the land of Egypt and the Philistines from Caphtor, and the Syrians from Kir, and if there’s no response to the revealing activity of God, the mighty works of God, then the people for whom he did that are just like the heathen and the pagans. It’s a magnificent statement. And it stresses very strongly the Exodus has no real significance as a naked historical fact if the children of Israel do not

respond in faith to what God is doing, and the cross has no significance as an historical fact for us if we do not respond to what accomplished there for us.

Finally, the place of hope. Now the word of God points to a glorious consummation of history in the providence of God. Now we know this not because we’re guessing with regard to the future, but we know because over and over in the Bible we are told by divine revelation that a time is coming when the Lord Jesus shall return, he shall establish his kingdom upon the earth. He shall enter into his office of King of kings and Lord of lords in the full manifestation of it. There shall be a mighty unfolding of God, and history will reach it’s culmination in that event.

We are told in the Book of Matthew and Mark and Luke and in other places to observe the signs of the times because he is working in history to accomplish his purposes. But that we know by divine revelation.

Now let me conclude by saying, first of all, let me repeat Berkauer’s words, “Scripture never offers an interpretation of fact apart from faith.” Now there is such a thing as general providence. Daniel, I think, expresses it so beautifully I’ll find the text quickly and just read it to you. It’s the 4th chapter and the 35th verse. He says, “And all the inhabitants of the earth are counted as nothing, but he does according to his will in the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of earth.” Isn’t that magnificent? “He does according to his will in the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of earth, and no one can stay or warrant off his hand or say to him, What hast Thou done?” We cannot advance providence; we cannot slow it down.

One of the greatest of the Germans. Bismarck was a religious man. He discussed national policy. He said, “The statesman cannot create the stream time; he can only navigate upon it.” That’s very good. He said, “We can advance the clock, but time itself does not move any more quickly.” Even in 1869, the year before Germany was unified – I studied that; Europe since 1870. We began with a lecture or two on the details of

history up to that point. He said, “An arbitrary and merely willful interference with the course of history has always resulted only in beating off fruits that were not ripe.”

We cannot advance the providence of God. We cannot slow it down. He is working according to his own purposes. Now, there is a special providence, too. God says he works all things according to the counsel of his own will. He says all things work together for good to those that love God, to those that are the called according to his purpose. All things. Whether we read that God works all things together for good, or all things work together for good – I think the Authorized Text is correct at that point. All things work together for God, because it is God who is working them towards the accomplishment of his purposes.

We may not fully know it now, and we don’t know how to fully interpret what is happening with certainty, but we know that that is taking place, and whether it’s adversity or whether it’s prosperity, that’s in the hands of God.

Now we have a lovely person who is one of our ladies who works in the tape ministry on Monday mornings when we have a little prayer meeting from 9:30 to 10. We had an interesting conversation this week. She said she was afraid that termites had been discovered in a part of their house. And she regarded it as a form of divine chastisement, perhaps. And we were saying, Oh no, it’s not that. You cannot be sure of that. But she said, “But termites! How could that be anything but chastisement?” [Laughter]

Now I want to tell you that I have a great admiration for termites. A great respect for those little beasts, and I don’t want them anywhere near my house [laughter], but still they may come not because God is chastising us, but because he want to educate us a little bit.

There is a great deal of difference between chastisement and education. Things happen to us that are very bad, we think, but it’s not necessarily because he wants to chastise us. It may be because he wants us to grow through this experience. And if we do not have a sure sense in our own spirits that we have disobeyed him, we shouldn’t

look at it as God’s chastisement. We should look at it as an opportunity for growth, an opportunity for spiritual education.

May I close with reading an account? We might say one of our great students of history has said, we might say this human story is like a piece of orchestral music that we are playing over for the first time. In our presumption, we may act as though we were the composer of the piece or try to bring out our own particular part as the leading one. But in reality, I personally only see the part of, shall we say, the second clarinet, and of course outside the limits of that I never know what is coming after the page that now lies before me. None of us can know what the whole score amounts to except as far as we have already played it over together. And even the meaning of the passage may not be clear all at once, just as the events of 1914 only begin to be seen in perspective in the 1940s.

If I am sure that B-flat is the next note I have to play, I can never feel certain that it will not come with surprising implications until I have heard what the other people are going to play at the same moment. And no single person in the orchestra can have any single idea when or where this piece of music is going to end. That’s like divine providence, and except for those parts of God’s program where he has interpreted history, we cannot dogmatically say, history means this or that. We know because of our presuppositions he is guiding history, and he is carrying it forward to a certain conclusion. And we know he cares for us.

But we do not know specifically what may happen to us. And the sooner that we realize that, and the less we seek to advise others about what is happening to them, the better off we will be. Let’s close with a word of prayer.

[Prayer] Father we are grateful to Thee for the revelation of the word of God, that Thou art in control of the affairs of our lives. Truly, Lord, we do need divine guidance. Enable us, Lord, to learn how to respond to the guidance that Thou art giving us, and deliver us from opinions concerning others that are not edifying to the whole of the body

“Divine Providence, or Is History Out of Control?” by S. Lewis Johnson
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of Christ. Enable us, Lord, to play our own musical instrument and the part in the score that we are to play, in order that the whole composition may bring the greatest glory to Thy name.

We pray in Jesus’ name and for his sake. Amen.