

Providence: Not Just Coincidences!

A Sermon by Rev. Joel Christian Glenn

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Children's Talk: Is Anyone in Control of Things?

In the time when the Word took place they used something called lots to make certain choices. The way lots worked is basically random: they might put a few names on sticks or stones, and then pull a name out of a bag. We sometimes use the same method today, when we have to choose a person to do something and don't want to be favouring one person over another. By using names out of a bag, it is completely random: no one controls which name comes out.

Another place we see randomness is in dice. I have a few dice here, and there are even games you might have played that use the randomness of dice. Let's say I want to get two sixes. So I roll all the dice, and it looks like I didn't get what I wanted. Now I could keep rolling and eventually I would get it, but I can't actually control what happens. Unless I cheat it is random what the dice roll to. Since no one is in control, it seems like a bizarre way of making really important choices. But that is exactly what the Children of Israel did. Here is one example of how they used lots, or random selection:

Then Jehovah spoke to Moses, saying: "To these the land shall be divided as an inheritance, according to the number of names. To a large tribe you shall give a larger inheritance, and to a small tribe you shall give a smaller inheritance. Each shall be given its inheritance according to those who were numbered of them. But the land shall be divided by lot; they shall inherit according to the names of the tribes of their fathers. According to the lot their inheritance shall be divided between the larger and the smaller." (Numbers 26:52-56)

Which tribe got which land was chosen by lot. That is huge: these tribes had been wandering in the Wilderness looking forward to having this land for decades. And once it was given it could never be taken away, even after hundreds of years had passed. Why would they leave that up to random chance?

We know from other parts of the Bible though that back then, when the Children of Israel cast lots, even though it looked completely random, it was actually

the Lord who controlled the outcome. He guided things so that each tribe got the land that was perfect for it. So in the end it was the Lord in charge all along.

The Lord doesn't do exactly that anymore: I can't roll these dice and figure out from it what the Lord wants me to do. But the Lord does do something similar: any time things in the world or in our hearts seem out of control and random, the Lord is actually still in control guiding things.

This is helpful to remember because it can be scary when it seems like no one is in charge. When your parents or adults don't pay attention to things that worry you; or when they are worried themselves and don't know exactly what is going on; or when you are confused by what you are thinking and feeling and have no one to talk to about it; or when bad things happen in the world and it seems like no one can stop it; even though it looks like no one is in control, even though it all looks random and messy, remember that the Lord is guiding everything even everything that looks chaotic. The Lord is always in control.

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A sermon by Rev. Joel Christian Glenn
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I want to start by telling a story about Divine Providence. There was a young boy of around 1 or 2 who had a lazy eye. His parents scheduled a check-up, but there was only one available a few months down the line. They didn't think much of it; after all, it was just a lazy eye, nothing to worry about. It happened that shortly after that, someone cancelled their doctor's appointment and the parents were asked if they wanted to bring their son in. When they did, it turned out he had a rare form of cancer and had a tumour in his eye. Had they waited until their scheduled appointment it would have been too late for the boy. Everything had to work out exactly right for this to happen. Imagine all the circumstances that went into one person simply deciding to cancel their doctor's appointment, and then for it to be filled by this family before it was too late. Divine Providence in action, right?

Here is another story. This story is also about Divine Providence. This morning, my alarm went off, and I got up. I showered, brushed my teeth, and got dressed. I fed my birds and had a cup of coffee and read the Word. I then prepared for this service that we're having right now. And that's it. If you're waiting for the story to get interesting or come to a punchline, sorry, there isn't one. But this is equally a story of Divine Providence as the first. Divine Providence was just as much at work with me this morning as I got ready for the day as it was in the first story I told that was so remarkable.

It's easy to live life thinking that most of it is random and uncontrolled; and then occasionally God steps in and adjusts things, and that's Providence. So if we want to catch Providence in the act we have to look for situations that are incredibly

unlikely but that take place anyway. But Providence is much more intimately involved in the mundane than just that. Listen to this short passage:

Are not two sparrows sold for a copper coin? And not one of them falls to the ground apart from your Father's will. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Do not fear therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows. (Matthew 10:29-31)

The Lord's will is involved even in the death of a tiny, cheap, insignificant bird; and He has painstakingly kept track of each hair on your head. I think it would be fair to say that Providence goes much deeper than just the big obvious things.

The Teachings of the New Church take this a step further: the Lord is involved in every detail of everything that ever happens. He does not just on occasion attend to the details. If the Lord mostly let things run their course, His Providence would be meaningless. This is from the book *Secrets of Heaven*, addressing the idea the Lord governs things in general but leaves the small things up to chance or to other people to figure out:

I have spoken to spirits about the Lord's exercise of government in an overall manner, saying that what is overall can never exist without specific aspects, and that but for these the overall is nothing; for the reason why the expression 'overall' is used is that this is what the specific aspects considered all together are called, just as particular parts taken all together are referred to as the general whole. To speak therefore of Providence acting in an overall manner but not in specific ways amounts to saying nothing at all. (*Secrets of Heaven* §6482)

The fact that Providence is present in even the smallest details of life is amazing, but it also raises questions. Why does evil happen, why are there tragedies and natural disasters? I won't go into these details, beyond to simply say that not everything that happens is what the Lord wants, but for various reasons He allows it.

Another concern that could be raised though, and this is the focus today, is if Providence is everywhere, is there any point in noticing it anywhere? To borrow a phrase, when everyone is super, no one will be; if everyone is special, than no one is

special. Likewise, if providence is everywhere, all the time, then there is no point in pointing out a specific instance of it. Or so it would seem. Just because Providence is everywhere does not mean we always see it. And while there is value in acknowledging that Providence is always at work, there is also value in pointing it out, and appreciating it with gratitude, when we do notice it.

We kind of do this already: if we focus on, for example, a cancer patient who survived in spite of all odds against it, we are saying, “this event was so unlikely, that I’d have to be blind to not see the Lord’s Providence as bringing it about.” But this way of identifying Providence is flawed, as is easily pointed out. What of the many cancer patients who did not so miraculously survive? If we see Providence in the lone survivor of a plane crash, what of the 100s of others who died horribly? And especially what of the people who suffer against all odds? There are stories of people who encounter misfortune after misfortune from childhood to old age. Were they hounded by the unforgiving hand of the Lord’s Providence? There has to be a better way of seeing the Lord’s Providence than just noticing all the things that are incredibly unlikely.

The Teachings of the New Church give a few metrics that can help us notice Providence at work, and it has little to do with focus on what is unusual or unlikely.

It is granted a person to see Divine providence from behind and not from in front, and in a spiritual state and not in the person's natural state. To see Divine providence from behind and not from in front is to see it afterward and not beforehand. And to see it from the perspective of a spiritual state and not from that of a natural state is to see it from the perspective of heaven and not from the perspective of the world. (*Divine Providence* §187)

There are two parts to this: one, we only really see Providence after the fact. In other words, only after things have taken place. We should be wary of in real time seeing things unfold, and thinking, “maybe this is a sign of how I should act!” Providence doesn’t work that way. That’s the simple part. The more complex part is when only

see Providence when we look at the world from the point of view of heaven. What does that mean?

There are a lot of ways we could approach that question, but for now, I want to focus on seeing the good. Heaven is defined by good from the Lord. That's what makes heaven heavenly. And in fact, all good is from the Lord. If something is truly, spiritually, long term, good, than it is from the Lord. Nothing good is just some random occurrence. Again, we have the tendency to think most of it just happens, and then sometimes God goes out of His way to provide it. I know I do this with my thoughts: sometimes a great thought pops into my head, and I think, "wow, there's no way I came up with that on my own! Surely that was inspiration from the Lord!" Which is true, but it ignores the fact that all the good thoughts I've laboured over and produced through hard work and effort are equally from the Lord; "from" meaning intended, produced, and kept alive by, intentionally and consciously. If it's good, God intended it. No good thing happens by accident. The Psalms give beautiful testimony to this reality; here being a mere handful of examples:

Oh, that men would give thanks to Jehovah for His goodness,
And for His wonderful works to the children of men!
For He satisfies the longing soul,
And fills the hungry soul with goodness. (Psalm 107:8-9)

Oh, give thanks to Jehovah, for He is good!
For His mercy is forever. (Psalm 136:1)

Men shall speak of the might of Your awesome acts,
And I will declare Your greatness.
They shall utter the memory of Your great goodness,
And shall sing of Your righteousness.
Jehovah is gracious and full of compassion,
Slow to anger and great in mercy.
Jehovah is good to all,
And His tender mercies are over all His works. (Psalm 145:6-9)

God provides all good things, and He provides them abundantly.

Now let's turn to our cancer patient who beat the odds: that good thing is from the Lord. But it is equally from the Lord when a cancer patient is assessed, given a good prognosis, follows through on treatment, and recovers exactly according to what the doctors predicted. What makes both of these Providential is that we clearly see the good that the Lord provided, whether by obvious means or by apparently miraculous ones. When we see something good, that is when we can acknowledge and appreciate Providence, regardless of how predictable or mundane that good seems. It was all intended and brought about by the Lord.

This still leaves us though with the tragedies: where do those fit in? I think it is important to note that the difference is not in how much Providence is involved; the difference is in our blindness to it. When we see the good that comes out of something, it is obvious that Providence is at work. When there is only evil, it is because we do not see the good. That doesn't mean it is not there. With a cancer patient who has been given only a few weeks to live, the Lord is still with them, guiding their steps, urging them on towards heaven and a better life; but we are at times completely blind to that sort of goodness. It may be we only see it much later, even decades from now when we ourselves enter into heaven.

The upshot of all this is that Divine Providence is involved in every last detail of our lives. We can trust that He leaves nothing to chance. At times, occasionally, we can see this Providence. But if we want to see it more, then we should stop looking for coincidences and improbabilities and signs, and instead look for the good. When you see that good, rejoice in it and appreciate it with gratitude! You are glimpsing the work of Providence! But then also have the humility to realize that the Lord is working everything towards what is good, even when we, with our limited, finite view, are blind to it.