

God's Mysterious Providence

Act 17:25-28, Romans 12 & 13

Pastor Zeke B. Pipher

(GA) When I returned home last year from Alaska I had two new things – a beard, and nerve damage in my feet. You remember that, don't you? Some of you cringed more over my beard than you did my nerve damage.

A. That was some of the worst pain I've ever experienced. I remember laying in bed and not being able to put so much as a sheet on my feet for three weeks... a sheet was too heavy and caused tremendous pain.

1. When I tried to put my foot down on the ground, it felt like someone was jabbing a knife into the soft, padded underside of my toes.

B. I'm happy to report that just last week I ran three times without any pain. Now, who's responsible for my health and restoration? Who brought me back to the point where I'm able to jog again?

1. Was it Dr. Buhlke, my doctor that spent hours and hours researching medical journals in order to diagnose my condition properly and put me on the correct medicine?

2. Or was it God?

C. I ask this question because it surfaces an issue that we need to be resolved on – the issue of how God works in the world... and what role we play in that work...

1. We're beginning a new series this morning that will last for five weeks. I've titled the series: **"God & You."**

a. We're heading into a busy, dynamic fall... school starts this week. Isn't that incredible?!

2. I want to help us think about the main roles we'll play this year. At work. In the home. In the community. And in church.

a. My hope for this series is that in five weeks, we'll have a clearer, more accurate picture of how God works. And, what it means for us to be involved with Him.

(SN) Ok... let's go back to my initial question: Who is responsible for my health and restoration? Who brought me to a place where I can jog pain-free again?

A. To answer this, I'd like to have us look at a passage in Matthew's Gospel – turn with me to chapter 14.

1. Jesus just heard about the death of John the Baptist. This is recorded in *14:1-12*. This news comes after Jesus a full, demanding day ministering to others.

a. He gets into a boat with His disciples and sets out to someplace where He can get alone and rest.

2. The people are simply too excited about Jesus and the message to let this happen. They follow Him out to where He was going. Jesus sees them and helps them. *Look at 14:13-14 – Read.*

a. The disciples know that Jesus is exhausted and sad, so they suggest that Jesus get some alone time. Take some personal time. *Read verses 14:14-15.*

b. This isn't an inappropriate request from the disciples, yet Jesus felt compassion for these people and in *verse 16*, He says: "They need not go away; you give them something to eat."

- i. The disciples scramble a bit, trying to figure out how this is going to happen – they protest in *verse 17*: “We have only five loaves here and two fish.”
 - 3. You know this story and how it ends. Jesus takes the five loaves and two fish, blesses them, and all of a sudden the disciples have an unending supply of food to pass out.
 - B. I love this story – I love it for how it shows us how God works in this world and what role His disciples – you and me – play in that work. Three things specifically jump out at me:
 - 1. First of all we see a God who deeply loves people – ALL people that He has created.
 - a. Jesus, it says in *verse 14*, “felt compassion” on these people.
 - i. A lot of times when preachers will talk about God and His providence – His perfect governance of all things – they use terms and words that make Him sound big and impersonal and calculating.
 - a) This statement in *verse 14*, “felt compassion,” doesn’t let us think of God like this. This is an emotional word – the Greek word literally means to feel moved in your heart about something.
 - i) We see this compassionate God when Jesus wept at Mary & Martha’s sadness when Lazarus died.
 - ii) We see this compassionate God in Matthew 14, when the crowds were hungry.
 - iii) And we see this compassionate God at the end of the gospels, when He goes to the cross on our behalf.
 - b. Friends, our God has a heart... and He interacts with this world with compassion.
 - i. When I came home from Alaska with nerve damage in my feet... I felt broken and humbled by pain. As many of you know about chronic pain, it is with you every second of the day. It nags at you... it can put a dark cloud over everything.
 - a) This passage shows me that God knew how I felt, what I was going through. He cared about it. The tiny little nerves in my feet causing me pain were no so small that God didn’t notice... and care.
 - c. I don’t know what you’re going through – probably something, though.
 - i. And our enemy is likely telling you that nobody cares, especially not God. He’s too big to care. He’s got other matters to attend to. He’s working on the crisis in the Middle East... or putting His best energy into the Perseid meteor showers... He doesn’t have time to care about the tiny things you’re going through.
 - a) But that’s not true. God is the one who knows exactly what you’re going through... and even when others might forget about you, He never does.
 - d. Pastor Lee Eclov received a letter from a young lady once. She wrote:
 - i. It was the end. I knew it. I could no longer fight. I sat here emotionless. I was totally alone. First came flu-like symptoms that wouldn't go away. I battled for weeks, then months. Eventually, I was unable to get out of bed and unable to eat anything without severe pain and vomiting. I finally sought medical help—but my faith was failing fast.

Next came the tests—some painful, mostly embarrassing. Then came a kidney infection that almost stopped my much-needed surgery. It disappeared miraculously. Eventually, my gall bladder was removed. The surgery was declared a success. I was sent home.

But I noticed that I still couldn't eat without getting ill. Deep within myself I knew I was still sick. My symptoms worsened. So, here I was, back in the hospital.

I sat in the bathroom. It was the middle of the night. No people, no "miracle" medicine, no strength left. I was too tired to fight. I sat there—four walls surrounding me. And a bleak, monotonous "bleep" from my battery-operated IV filled the silence. I couldn't stop the sound of that miserable machine, anymore than I could control my own miserable life. So I sat there—dull, miserable, in pain, with no hope.

It was while I was there that I finally did hear something else. I didn't hear it with my ears—but I did in my spirit. I heard someone crying. And I immediately knew that it was Jesus crying for me. I was shocked—totally surprised. I didn't think he would do that for me.

This experience did not leave me emotionally elated. Nor did I feel a physical touch. Life was the same, except I now knew I really was not in this battle alone. Jesus cared in a way my wildest imagination would never have hoped for or expected.

Slowly I got up and shuffled back to bed, my IV still "bleeping" in my ears. Life was the same but different entirely. I believe that Jesus at that time made intercession to the Father for me. When there was absolutely no one else that would help me, he cried for me. And I did recover. Thank you, Jesus.¹

e. How many of us have our own version of this story? Some moment, or many, when God showed up and made His compassion known?

i. Jesus could have sent this crowd away... that would have been perfectly acceptable action considering what just happened to His cousin and friend.

They would have gone home and found food at home, likely.

a. Feeding them didn't save their lives. It happened because our God feels compassionate towards us. This is one thing we learn about God from this story – He has a heart!

2. We also see in this story that He's a God of incredible power – *miraculous* power. He does work miracles.

a. We've perhaps heard this story too many times... but watch a second grader when he listens to this story.

i. Jesus tells everyone to grab a seat on the grass. He takes a small amount of food... not even enough to feed Jesus and disciples. An amount so small that most people can't even see what Jesus is holding up when He gives a blessing.

a) But then the food keeps coming. The more bread they break off, the more they find in the baskets. The more fish they hand out, the fishier things get. (*In a good way.*)

b. It's easy today to stop believing in a God that works miracles. We don't see them often. Science and the media tell us over and over that they're impossible. It's easy to begin thinking naturalistically about God and how He works in the world.

¹ Eclov, Lee..WHAT SERMON? WHEN PREACHED? WHEN ACCESSED?

- i. And much of the Gospels – most, I think – show us the human nature of Jesus. Leaving aside John’s Gospel, the other three gospel writers seem more intent on showing us a man who is submitted to His Father, filled with Spirit of God, walking in the obedience that the first Adam didn’t attain.
 - a) Much of the gospels show us a man – an exemplar – an example of how WE can live if we’re submitted to God... filled with the Spirit... walking in obedience.
- ii. But every now, Jesus does something that only God can do. He does something supernatural... miraculous. This is one of those times.
 - a) Friends, I don’t think things have changed much. Often we see God work through natural processes, yes. Miracles don’t seem typical. But every now and then our God seems to do one.
- c. I read a story this past week about a man who made it out of the World Trade Center on 9/11. He’s a New York Port Authority police officer who rushed into the North Tower to try and help rescue people.
 - i. His name is Will Jimeno – his story was told in the movie World Trade Center that came out in 2006.
 - a) Jimeno was a part of a five man team that was in the concourse that connected the North and South Towers when the South Tower came down. They all tried to run to the freight elevator... only Jimeno and two other man lived.
 - i) Jimeno was pinned by concrete, with only a tiny air pocket above his head providing oxygen.
 - ii. Then the North Tower collapsed and another man died... so now it was Jimeno and one man, McLoughlin, who also badly hurt and barely conscious. The men were there for hours... Jimeno finally decided to close his eyes and let himself die.
 - a) Then, he says, he became acutely aware of a powerful presence with him. He said: “I saw Jesus coming toward me. I was really thirsty. When I saw Jesus I knew.” There was no face, but Jimeno knew it was Christ. Jimeno said: “I remember asking Jesus, ‘If I get to Heaven, can I have some water?’”
 - i) The vision didn’t stay with him long. Jimeno felt it was telling him, “We’re going to make it out.”
 - a) And Jimeno did – out of the 2,800 people who were buried when these two buildings collapsed... only 20 emerged alive. Jimeno and McLaughlin were two of these twenty.²
 - iii. Friends, because of what I read in the Bible... I believe this. This was a miracle. I researched and read dozens of stories like this last week.
 - a) It is undeniable that we have a God who can and does at times show up and work miracles in this world.
- d. What miracle do you need in your life?
 - i. Perhaps it involves money... or food...
 - ii. Perhaps it involve your marriage... or a child...
 - iii. Perhaps it’s something physical... or spiritual, demonic...

² Story taken from: *The Third Man Factor; Surviving The Impossible* by John Geiger, (Copyright 2009 by John Geiger) pg. 72-73.

b) Friends, we have a God that does work miracles, at times. Don't be afraid to ask Him, by faith, if He might like to glorify Himself in your situation by working a miracle. Perhaps a miracle that springs from His compassion for what you're going through, like happens in Matthew 14.

i) Now, be prepared to receive whatever He does or doesn't do in response to your prayer... but don't be afraid to ask.

3. There is one more thing that jumps out at me from this passage – and this gets at the question: What is our role in God's providence, or work, in the world? Friends, God loves to work through His people.

a. Seriously, think about it – if Jesus can take five loaves of bread and two fish and feed 5K people until they are full, and still have twelve baskets of left-overs... He probably could have produced the food without those initial loaves and fish, right?

i. And let's be honest, Jesus probably didn't need the disciples to run around passing out and picking up food.

a) With a single thought – Jesus could have set a table full of food in front of every single person without anyone's help.

b. But, friends, time and time again in Scripture God shows us that this isn't how He rolls...

i. God could have healed my feet over night – completely taken away the pain with simply a thought... a decision of His will.

a) He raised Lazarus from the dead with the words, "Lazarus, come..." – Something tells me He could have put this humpty dumpty back together again by Himself.

ii. But He didn't. He providentially connected me with Dr. Buhlke. And before that, God providentially provided Dr. Buhlke with his background... his education... and his heart for his patients.

a) And only after all of this work done in community with my doctor, did I recover and get back to a place where I can jog... slowly, but I can jog.

c. So, earlier I asked the question, Who healed me, then... Dr. Buhlke, or God? Well, if you're familiar with Matthew 14, you know that this question poses a false dichotomy. It's not an either or question.

i. Who fed the crowds in Matthew 14? Was it Jesus? Was it the disciples?

a) Yes and yes... because *that* is the way God rolls.

(A) How does God work in the world... and what is your role in that work?

A. God providentially directs and governs all things... but not as a stoic, removed, calculated Deity in the Sky.

1. He moves about His creation with compassion. He feels every injustice... every empty stomach... every broken heart... nothing escapes His concern.

2. And He often works through natural processes to direct life on earth... but sometimes, sometimes He'll work a miracle.

3. And often, that miracle, or whatever the work is that God does, will happen through you... by God's enablement, but through you.

a. And in the next few weeks we'll explore that idea more deeply – the idea of how God wants to do His work... through the role you play in your work, in your family, in your church, and in your society.

i. My prayer for you and me these next four weeks is that we see the calling God has our lives to be about His work in the world.