

3. God's will and providential signposts

His disciples asked him, 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?' (John 9:2)

Popping the question

The church weekend will soon be here and Ben thinks that it will provide an ideal opportunity for him to decide between Alice and Lydia. He has been listening to some advice from other Christians and they have told him that, if his heart is right, God will certainly guide him to the right girl. He has heard many speak of how God indicates his will through providential acts—the circumstances of our lives—and so gives clear signposts that take us along the paths he wants for us.

Friday arrives and, as Ben reaches the venue, he is both surprised and disappointed that Lydia is not there; she is ill and unable to come. But then he thinks, 'That's it! How could God be clearer?' He now looks forward to spending time with Alice over the weekend and, if it goes well, as he is sure it will, he will broach the subject of marriage with her.

But there are so many people on the weekend that he and Alice are split into different groups for seminars; even meals have two sittings, and Ben shares none with Alice. What is God saying now? Ben decides to consult Tom, one of the elders at his church.

Interpreting providences

Tom explains to Ben that many Christians look to interpret the events of their daily lives in this way—they use 'providential signposts'. They see in them messages from God. This is sometimes done on a national scale: a



hurricane or flood might be deemed to be the judgement of God on a sinful nation. But, on the whole, the Bible speaks against making such connections. Job, one of the oldest books of the Bible, is a book about suffering, the nature of true faith and the mystery of providence. An important lesson of the book is that Job's friends (his so-called 'comforters') got it wrong when they tried to tell Job why he was suffering, even though they claimed to have had 'spiritual' revelation. In Job 4:12–16, Eliphaz said,

A word was secretly brought to me,
my ears caught a whisper of it.
Amid disquieting dreams in the night,
when deep sleep falls on men,
fear and trembling seized me
and made all my bones shake.
A spirit glided past my face,
and the hair on my body stood on end.
It stopped,
but I could not tell what it was.
A form stood before my eyes,
and I heard a hushed voice.

But the 'comforters' were criticized by God for their explanations, as we see, for example, in Job 42:7: 'After the LORD had said these things to Job, he said to Eliphaz the Temanite, "I am angry with you and your two friends, because you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has.'" In God's long reply to them, he gave no explanation of Job's suffering; instead, he simply challenged Job and his friends to consider his own sovereignty. For example, Job 38:1–5 says,

Then the LORD answered Job out of the storm. He said:
'Who is this that darkens my counsel
with words without knowledge?
Brace yourself like a man;
I will question you,



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and you shall answer me.
 Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation?
 Tell me, if you understand.
 Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you know!
 Who stretched a measuring line across it?

It is impossible not to see in the tone of God's response that he disapproved of the interpretation of his sovereign acts.

Old Testament providential signposts

But Ben says that he is sure that the Old Testament teaches that some disasters were the judgements of God. What about Sodom and Gomorrah, for example, and that devastating swarm of locusts in Joel 2? The LORD described the latter as 'my great army'. Tom replies that, on such occasions, it was God who gave the commentary. But without such divine interpretation, how are we to judge?

Nonetheless, Ben considers that there were specific providential signposts in the Old Testament. In other words, he says, some things were interpreted as God's specific dealings, and taken as either guidance or judgement. Tom replies that care needs to be taken when looking back into Israel's history. God did guide that nation at different times and in different ways to achieve his purposes. In the desert wanderings, the Israelites had the fire by night and cloud by day to lead them (Exod. 13:21–22). Some battle tactics, it seems, were dictated by God, sometimes through providential signs (e.g. 1 Sam. 14:6–15). Also, there was the strange Urim and Thummin. These appear to have been stones on the breastplate of the high priest, which he wore when he went into the presence of God. By some means, he would use them to ascertain the will of God on any important matter affecting the nation (Exod. 28:30; Lev. 8:8; Num. 27:21; Neh. 7:65). But all this guidance related to the nation as a nation—not to individuals about their individual lives.

A wife for Isaac

But Ben persists and asks Tom to explain the incident in Genesis 24, when Abraham's servant was sent to look for a bride for Isaac. Tom agrees that



this passage appears to confirm conventional guidance teaching for two reasons: firstly, because the guidance was specific for an individual; and secondly, because it involved interpreting a circumstantial providence:

Then he [the servant] prayed, 'O LORD, God of my master Abraham, give me success today, and show kindness to my master Abraham. See, I am standing beside this spring, and the daughters of the townspeople are coming out to draw water. May it be that when I say to a girl, "Please let down your jar that I may have a drink," and she says, "Drink, and I'll water your camels too"—let her be the one you have chosen for your servant Isaac. By this I will know that you have shown kindness to my master.' (Gen. 24:12–14)

But, Tom explains, Isaac had to marry to fulfil God's promise to Abraham of a nation from his seed. Furthermore, God had specifically promised Abraham an angel to guide the servant to ensure that Isaac found the right wife (vv. 7,40). This passage is about God revealing his will to the prophet Abraham and giving guidance to that end via an angel to achieve his specific purposes for his nation Israel.

But we know that, today, God deals with his church, not the outward, physical nation of Israel. Christ transmitted his specific commands for the church to the apostles—and, says Tom, I do not believe that there are any such apostles today.

A fleece for Gideon

'What about the story of Gideon in Judges 6?' asks Ben. 'Many Christians talk about "putting out a fleece". They are undecided about a course of action—whether to do A or B—so they set up a sort of test as Gideon did.'

Tom says that Gideon did indeed put out a fleece of wool and asked God to confirm by some unusual providences what he was telling him to do. But when we look at that story carefully, we see that Gideon had already been told by God what to do; he had had direct, clear, verbal revelation. The 'test' he decided on was to receive reassurance from God—a test with which God graciously complied. Tom suggests that it is



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difficult not to see Gideon as demonstrating a remarkable lack of faith, if not downright disobedience.

New Testament providential signposts

Ben asks Tom whether there are not similar incidents in the New Testament. Tom replies that Jesus appeared to reject the notion that we can interpret providence:

His disciples asked him, 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?' 'Neither this man nor his parents sinned,' said Jesus, 'but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life.' (John 9:2–3)

Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. Jesus answered, 'Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them—do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish.' (Luke 13:1–5)

Tom asks whether, if on these occasions Jesus did not look to give the reasons for seemingly arbitrary providences, should we? But despite this clear message of Scripture, many do make such deductions and are often swung from one conclusion to another as the circumstances are variously interpreted, or as events simply move on:

When the islanders saw the snake hanging from his [Paul's] hand, they said to each other, 'This man must be a murderer; for though he escaped from the sea, Justice has not allowed him to live.' But Paul shook the snake off into the fire and suffered no ill effects. The people expected him to swell up or suddenly fall dead, but after waiting a long time and seeing nothing unusual happen to him, they changed their minds and said he was a god. (Acts 28:4–6)



Of course, certain sins do bring their own retribution. Too much alcohol, and you might get a hangover; sexual immorality can give rise to sexually transmitted diseases. Notwithstanding this, suffering should not be seen as the specific punishment of God on sin—although all suffering is a consequence of that first sinful disobedience of Adam in the Garden of Eden. The Bible gives no indication that other providences should be seen as carrying a message—in fact, rather the opposite, as we have seen from Christ's specific teaching.

Open doors

Ben asks what Tom thinks about open doors: surely they are signs from God?

'In what way?' asks Tom.

Ben replies that he considers an opportunity for gospel work that occurs as a result of a particular providence to be God's leading that such an opportunity should be taken; the 'open door' is a sign. Tom replies that it is true that most references to an 'open door' in the New Testament do refer to opportunities for gospel work, as in Acts 14:27, for example: 'On arriving there, they gathered the church together and reported all that God had done through them and how he had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles.'

Paul and Barnabas did use this opportunity to preach the gospel. But on another occasion, Paul ignored an open door: 'Now when I went to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ and found that the Lord had opened a door for me, I still had no peace of mind, because I did not find my brother Titus there. So I said good-bye to them and went on to Macedonia' (2 Cor. 2:12–13). So an open door is just that: it is not a message from God; it is an opportunity to serve him that we can take or not, as we choose.

God speaking to us personally in a verse or a passage

Ben asks whether there are not examples of God speaking to Christians by either showing them or bringing to their minds particular verses.

'Of course!' says Tom. 'God presses on our minds and consciences his teaching; that is why we should be storing his Word in our minds (Rom.

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12:1–2). A praying Christian will ask God to bring Scripture to mind in this way, especially at a time of particular need.

But Ben says that that is not what he is thinking of; some Christians are suddenly struck by a verse or passage of the Bible and consider that it therefore contains a message for them, outside the purpose of the original context. He has heard of a young Christian woman thinking of going to Bible college; one day, she picked up her Bible and, as it fell open, she saw the word 'cedar'—the very name of the college that was her favoured choice! She saw it as a sign from God. Tom replies that the Bible was never intended to be used in this way. It is not a book of wizard's spells from which the magic can be summoned. Ben replies that a lot of believers he knows think that the Bible speaks to them in this way.

Tom then asks Ben to consider another Christian, a young man who is being tempted into an immoral relationship with a married woman. His Bible falls open at the verses which speak of David's adultery with Bathsheba. Is that a sign for him to commit the sin? Ben thinks this suggestion is preposterous: no Christian would accept such a justification! When pressed by Tom as to why not, Ben replies that the context of those verses must be seen. It was a gross sin for David that had serious consequences, and he regretted it bitterly. So, Tom asks, if those verses should not be taken out of context, why should we as evangelicals take any other verses out of context and press them into uses to suit our particular purposes?

Tom tells Ben of the church he attended as a young Christian. They used to pass round a 'promise box' which contained verses of Scripture written on small pieces of paper, rolled up and pushed into a slot in the box. As they picked them out at random, they became God's promises to them for the day. Of course, in a sense, any promise of Scripture that applies to Christians is a promise for all Christians each day. But there is no significance in the providence of picking a particular one out of the box.

Casual providences

Ben then asks Tom, 'What we are to make of day-to-day (what we might call 'casual') providences?'



He relates how, when he first moved into the area he now lives in, he could not decide which church to attend. Just as he was discussing it with a friend, a leaflet advertising a local church was posted through his door. Was this a sign? Was God saying that this was the church he was to go to?

Tom replies that we see examples of casual providences in the Bible. The apostle Paul, when writing to Philemon and asking him to accept Onesimus back as a brother rather than as a slave, speculated that 'Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back for good—no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother' (Philem. 15–16). If the apostle Paul accepted that some events just happen and cannot be given a definitive interpretation, then so should we. But Ben points out that small events can have huge outcomes, so surely God must have a purpose in them, a purpose we can deduce? Tom agrees that casual providences can have disproportionate outcomes, and suggests that they follow through a hypothetical example:

One day, Janet was late for work; she ran for the bus but missed it. Travelling on the later bus, she met a friend she had not seen for some time; he was a young man from a church she used to go to. They got chatting, they arranged to meet, and within two years they were married, and soon three children followed.

Tom asks, 'Could Janet see the hand of God in the fact that she missed that bus? Of course! Did she know that morning that she was supposed to make herself late for work? No; that would be contrary to God's prescribed will. A Christian should be a good time-keeper; indeed, Janet had to apologize to her line manager when she did eventually arrive at work. Nonetheless, being late fulfilled God's decreed will for her life. Could Janet say that God brought her to her husband? Yes, she could. Would it then be right to say that it was God's leading for her to be late for that bus? No! Indeed, that would be dishonouring to God. It was not true; and God would never suggest a sinful act to any believer or unbeliever. From our perspective, it was a casual providence that God worked through to achieve his own purposes.'

'And what about the church leaflet?' asks Ben.

Tom says that the correct response should be, firstly, to see whether the



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Bible has anything to say about choosing a church. If we look there, we will see that we are to attend church (Heb. 10:25), and that we should seek a church that teaches the apostles' doctrine (Acts 2:42). If there is more than one church that meets this requirement, we can ask others for help in deciding (Prov. 15:22), or even ask God directly for wisdom (James 1:5). The leaflet should have been read in the light of this knowledge; it was not a sign.

Tom tells Ben that, as a teenager, he applied to go to university but failed to gain a place; he had to try again the following year, when, rather strangely (as most people who knew the university admission system remarked), he got an unconditional offer. At that university, he was converted and met his future wife. He could see that there were a myriad of small providences that had brought him to this position. Was he, then, supposed to have been reading those 'signposts'? But he was not even a believer! When he did come to faith, did he then have a new responsibility to interpret the signposts? But there is no instruction in the Bible to do this, and no mechanism by which to achieve it. His new responsibility as a Christian was to get to know, and obey, God's prescribed will as revealed in Scripture.

Signs and superstitions

Tom continues: the interpretation of signs as omens is the stuff of pagan cultures and was endemic in medieval Roman Catholic Europe. Today, many primitive cultures are dominated by this approach. In Madagascar, a country Tom has frequently visited, one tribe might, for example, see dogs as an evil omen and consider them *fady*; yet another tribe will see them as a sign of blessing. Often the origin of the *fady* is unknown. It might simply be that, in the distant past, an important elder in the first tribe was bitten by a dog, and a member of the second tribe was in some way helped by one. This sort of thing should play no part in the Christian life; instead, the Christian is free from all superstition. What Paul said in another context surely applies here as well:

But now that you know God—or rather are known by God—how is it that you are turning back to those weak and miserable principles?





Do you wish to be enslaved by them all over again? You are observing special days and months and seasons and years! I fear for you, that somehow I have wasted my efforts on you. (Gal. 4:9–11)

Does God speak in any providence?

Ben asks Tom this question.

'Yes,' replies Tom. 'But not by secret, subliminal messages. Some events will dictate a life change. If we believe in God's decreed will, we must see these as coming from God. For example, if you have set your heart on being a military pilot, but then discover that you have been categorized as colour blind (as apparently at least one in six males are), your career choice is changed for you. But even here we must not try to read a 'message' into the situation. It was not necessarily wrong to have had the desire to be a pilot; it simply was not in God's decreed will. We have to leave the reasons with him.'

But what about Lydia?

This is Ben's last question, the one he has been working up to all along. Tom replies that the absence of Lydia at the church weekend should not be seen as a message from God; it just happened. If he is still keen on her, he should find another time to talk to her, and not be blown off-course by an unexplained, casual providence. God is not sending Ben coded messages.

