

## CHAPTER ONE

# THE POWER OF PROVIDENCE

*Exodus 1:1–2:10*

**M**y wife and I once attended a play entitled *All in the Timing*, by David Ives. The play is made up of six short comedic sketches, one of which is called “The Philadelphia.” In this sketch, one character enters the scene complaining about his day. He declares that everything is going wrong for him. When he explains his predicament to a friend, the friend tells him that he is experiencing these problems because he is in a “Philadelphia.” The friend used the phrase “in a Philadelphia” to describe a day in which everything you try to accomplish is thwarted. That phrase stuck with us, and, while we have nothing against the city of Philadelphia (it is a wonderful place!), my wife and I sometimes employ this phrase to describe one of those days in our lives when it seems like nothing is going our way. We just look at each other and say, “I am in a Philadelphia.”

Have you ever been “in a Philadelphia,” experiencing one of those days in which everything goes wrong?” Have you ever wondered where God is on days like that? I know that when I am in a “Philadelphia” I am often tempted to ask, “Where are you, God?” Perhaps you do too.

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As we commence our journey into the life of Moses, we learn that at the time of his birth the Israelites were in a “Philadelphia” of sorts (or perhaps it would be better to say they were in an “Egypt”!). Everything had gone wrong for them. The glorious promises made to Abraham seemed to have fallen to the ground. It must have seemed to them that all hope was lost. But God never forgets his promises, his people, or his plan. In his marvelous providence, we know that “in all things God works for the good of those who love him” (Rom. 8:28)—even when we are in a “Philadelphia.” Israel would eventually realize this, but in the opening chapters of Exodus they must have been doubtful about this reality. Just as we often do during difficult times, Israel was likely questioning the power of God’s providence to work all things together for their good. But it was at the moment when all must have seemed lost to Israel that God sent forth his redeemer and thus revealed the glorious power of his providence.

## FROM PROMISE TO PERIL

For us to understand properly the mindset of the Israelites prior to Moses’ birth, we must first consider who they were before everything went wrong. It is important to remember that when Israel entered Egypt four hundred years earlier, the people were filled with promise and hope regarding the future. There were two reasons why the Israelites had such great hope when they first entered Egypt.

First, the Israelites were God’s chosen people. They were the descendants of Abraham and thus heirs to the covenant promises made to him in Genesis 12, 15, and 17. As children of Abraham, the Israelites were promised that they would be prosperous (Gen. 17:6), that they would produce a lineage of kings (Gen. 17:6), and that they would inherit the entire land of Canaan. In addition, God promised

that his covenant would be “everlasting”; it would extend for generations (Gen. 17:7).

The second reason they were filled with hope upon entering Egypt was the fact that it was God himself who had told them to go there. God visited Jacob in a night vision and told him to take his family to Egypt (Gen. 46:1–4). At that time, the children of Israel were experiencing a great famine and there was food in Egypt. Further, not only was there food, but God had also placed his servant Joseph there and had raised him to a position of power in Pharaoh’s court. Even more than that, God promised to be with his people while they were in Egypt and he promised to prosper them:

“I am God, the God of your father,” he said. “Do not be afraid to go down to Egypt, for I will make you into a great nation there. I will go down to Egypt with you, and I will surely bring you back again. And Joseph’s own hand will close your eyes. (Gen. 46:3–4)

God promised Israel (as Jacob and his descendants would henceforth be known) that he had nothing to fear about going to Egypt. God promised to be with his people, to prosper them, and to bring them back.

When Israel first arrived in Egypt, they witnessed the fulfillment of God’s promises and became a great nation there (Ex. 1:7). At this point, the Israelites had everything going for them. They had survived the famine and had prospered in Egypt just as God had promised. The Egyptians did not like Israel’s prosperity and made efforts to suppress them, but the Israelites continually rose to the top. Everything was going their way, but that was about to change. Israel was about to enter a “Philadelphia,” and it began with these words: “Then a new king, to whom Joseph meant nothing, came to power in Egypt” (Ex. 1:8).

FROM BAD TO WORSE

When the new Pharaoh came to power everything changed; everything began to go wrong for Israel. The once prosperous and powerful Israelites soon found themselves as lowly slaves. The Egyptians came to dread them (Ex. 1:12) and worked the Israelites ruthlessly (Ex. 1:13); they “made their lives bitter with harsh labor” (Ex. 1:14). The Israelites were now in bondage to a foreign nation.

In addition to facing ruthless treatment and slavery, the Israelites faced another, even more horrifying, threat—the slaughter of their sons. Although the Egyptians had made their lives bitter, the Israelites were still multiplying in number, much to the alarm of Pharaoh, who feared that they would become a military rival. So Pharaoh hatched an evil plan to control the population growth:

The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, whose names were Shiphrah and Puah, “When you are helping the Hebrew women during childbirth on the delivery stool, if you see that the baby is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, let her live.” (Ex. 1:15–16)

Pharaoh ordered the Hebrew midwives to kill every Israelite baby boy. The Hebrew midwives, however, courageously obstructed Pharaoh’s plan. They remained faithful to God and refused to implement the plan. This frustrated Pharaoh and led him to employ a more direct strategy for the elimination of Hebrew boys. “Then Pharaoh gave this order to all his people: ‘Every Hebrew boy that is born you must throw into the Nile, but let every girl live’ ” (Ex. 1:22).

As you can see, everything was going wrong for Israel. They had come to Egypt filled with confidence and assurance of God’s promises, but soon found themselves in harsh slavery and under the ruthless oversight

of their Egyptian taskmasters. Even worse than that, a Pharaoh who was unfamiliar with Joseph had mustered his entire nation against them. The Nile was about to become the graveyard of Israel's future. Just pause and consider what Israel's mindset must have been at this moment. The people must have felt like they were in a "Philadelphia." The children of promise were now slaves to a foreign king. They must have been asking questions like, "Where are you, God?" and "Why is this happening to us?"

### WHERE ARE YOU, GOD?

Although few of us have faced the type of persecution that the Israelites faced in Egypt, we do sometimes find ourselves in difficult and challenging circumstances which lead us to ask the questions, "Where are you, God?" and "Why is this happening to me?" As Christians, we all give verbal assent to the truth of Romans 8:28, that God "in all things works for the good of those who love him," but it is much easier to assent to this truth when things are going our way. When hard providences crash upon the shores of our lives in seemingly relentless waves, the truth of Romans 8:28 is easy to question and doubt. I confess that in the midst of my own personal trials I have had my doubts. How about you? In the midst of your own personal trials have you ever wondered, "What good could possibly come out of this?"

While it can be difficult to trust God in challenging circumstances, it is often when things seem most perilous that he works most powerfully. God often sows the seeds of redemption in the seemingly barren soil of despair. God enjoys confounding the conventional wisdom of our world, and he often does this by snatching victory out of the jaws of defeat. We can see an example of this in how God delivered Israel from their predicament in Egypt.

## THE POWER OF GOD'S PROVIDENCE

If there had been a twenty-four-hour news network like CNN in the days before Moses' birth, the headlines that would have been flashing across the screen might have been something like this: "Hebrews Continue in Slavery; No End in Sight," "Hebrew Sons to Be Tossed in the Nile," and "God's Promises: Fact or Fiction?" In other words, things were very bleak for the Hebrews and they knew it. But even at this bleak moment, the hand of God's providence was at work planting the seeds of a plan that would eventually blossom into the redemption of his people and the fulfillment of his promises to them.

God's plan required a leader and mediator through whom God would bring about his deliverance. God's purpose required a human vessel and that vessel was Moses. But Moses was about to enter the world at what seemed like the worst possible time; he was born as a Hebrew son at a time when Hebrew sons were doomed to die in the Nile. The plan of God seemed surely destined to fail, but then God intervened in his providence and extracted a glorious victory. From the river of death, God brought life and deliverance.

The power of God's providence can be witnessed in Moses' early life through the amazing way in which he was preserved in the face of Pharaoh's evil edict. Pharaoh had decreed that every Hebrew son must die, but God decreed that he would send a son of the Hebrews to redeem his people. God won. The kings of earth often shake their fists at heaven and declare themselves to be gods, but their decrees and plans have consistently been relegated to the dust heap of history by the power of God's providence. We see this proven once again in Moses' victorious birth.

But the glory of God's providence in the birth of Moses is not seen primarily in the reality that God won, but in how he orchestrated the events that preserved Moses' life in the face of Pharaoh's decree. God plucked the strings

of history like a masterful musician. He saved Israel by his providential control over the actions of three women.

### THREE WOMEN AND A BABY

The first woman whom God employed in his providential preservation of Moses' life was Moses' mother. God gave Moses a faithful and courageous mother. The most powerful man in Egypt had decreed that all Hebrew sons must die, but when Moses was born his mother subverted Pharaoh's decree, putting herself at personal risk. After his birth, Moses' mother realized there was something special about this child and she hid him from the authorities for three months (Ex. 2:2).

But, eventually, Moses grew too big to be hidden, and so his mother came up with the following plan:

But when she could hide him no longer, she got a papyrus basket for him and coated it with tar and pitch. Then she placed the child in it and put it among the reeds along the bank of the Nile. (Ex. 2:3)

At first glance, this plan did not seem like a very effective one. After all, the most likely outcome of such a plan was that Moses would die from dehydration, malnutrition, or drowning. Moses' mother was seemingly leaving his survival to chance. It may have been the case that Moses' mother was uncertain of his destiny when she placed him in the water, but it also possible that she knew the location where Pharaoh's daughter came to bathe and strategically placed him in the water so that he would be found by her. Either way, the hand of God's providence was at work in preserving the life of Moses. God was watching over the redeemer of his people.

Exodus 2:4 tells us about the second woman involved in preserving Moses' life: "His sister stood at a distance to

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see what would happen to him.” As his sister was standing there, she noticed that other people were approaching, among them Pharaoh’s daughter who was coming to the Nile to bathe. Pharaoh’s daughter was to become the third woman God used to preserve Moses’ life.

When Pharaoh’s daughter arrived, she saw Moses and sent her servant to recover him from the water (Ex. 2:5). As soon as Pharaoh’s daughter looked at Moses, she felt “sorry for him,” recognizing that Moses was one of the Hebrew babies (Ex. 2:6). She decided to adopt him. This is when Moses’ sister jumped into the situation and made the following suggestion to Pharaoh’s daughter: “Shall I go and get one of the Hebrew women to nurse the baby for you?” (Ex. 2:7). And whom do you think she fetched to nurse Moses? Of course, she chose Moses’ own biological mother!

## THE CHAIN OF PROVIDENCE

Just consider the chain of extraordinary providences that preserved Moses’ life. His mother hid him for three months. When she could no longer hide him she put him in a basket among the reeds of the Nile on the exact day and time, and at the exact location, that Pharaoh’s daughter was coming to bathe. Moses’ sister just happened to be watching all of this and just happened to think of a great plan to suggest a Hebrew wet nurse. On top of all this, Pharaoh’s daughter, in direct rebellion to her father’s decree, felt pity on Moses and adopted him into the most powerful house in Egypt. Moses was supposed to be dead, but instead he grew up in the house of the leader whom, through God’s power, he would one day bring to ruin.

When we behold the chain of providential events that God used to preserve Moses’ life, we learn a bit about God’s *modus operandi*. *Modus operandi* is simply a fancy Latin way of describing how someone likes to operate, a

pattern of acting. God has a redemptive *modus operandi*. One aspect of God's redemptive *modus operandi* shines forth in his preservation of Moses—irony. Simply stated, God loves irony. Just consider the ironies present in the chain of events that led to Moses' preservation.

First, the Nile was a place where Israel's hope was to be extinguished, for the river was to be the place where its sons would die. But God brought forth from that supposed graveyard the life of his son and servant Moses, whom he would eventually employ in the redemption of his people. Second, consider the fact that it was from Pharaoh's house that the edict went forth to kill the sons of the Hebrews, but through God's providence, it was from Pharaoh's own house, by means of his daughter's compassion, that Moses was saved from that very edict. Finally, consider the irony of the weak defeating the strong. Moses comes into the world as a little defenseless baby and is saved by three women. In contrast, Pharaoh was the most powerful man in the world. Yet, these three women and a baby sowed the seeds of Pharaoh's demise.

Through this amazing and ironic chain of providential events, God preserved the life of Moses and set in motion the wheels of his unfolding plan of redemption. Moses was exactly where he needed to be to serve in his role as mediator. He would be raised with the knowledge of his Hebrew identity (because of his mother's presence), while simultaneously being raised in all of the wisdom and knowledge of Egypt. God had indeed worked all things together for good for his people!

## THE POWER OF PROVIDENCE IN OUR LIVES

While the events of our lives may seem incredibly trivial in comparison to the major events that have unfolded in God's redemptive plan, this divine pattern of God bringing good things out of bad is replicated in the pattern of our

lives. The truth of Romans 8:28 is, in fact, most relevant and true at those very moments when we are most likely to place its truth in doubt. God always “works all things together for the good of those who love him” (Rom. 8:28). Our problem is that we often do not see or understand his gentle hand of providence while we are in the midst of trouble. Yet, even in our most desperate moments, he is there. He is there working all things together for good for us.

While we always need to exercise care when drawing parallels between the operation of God’s providence in our own personal lives and in God’s grand redemptive plan, I think Scripture clearly teaches that the power of God’s providence is at work in our own lives. This individual aspect of God’s providence is affirmed by the simple comforting words of Matthew 10:30, “And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered.” God does pay attention to our lives.

The Westminster Larger Catechism echoes this individual aspect of God’s providence in its answer to the question “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” (emphasis mine). Moses wasn’t the only person who experienced the power of God’s providence; every believer enjoys this privilege.

What this means for us is that when we are in a “Philadelphia” and everything seems to be breaking bad in our lives, we can be comforted by the knowledge that God is aware of our struggles and, more importantly, will use our trials for our good and his glory. But it is important to remember that while we are in our struggles we may not recognize God’s providence at work. Providence is something that is often understood at the human experiential level only in retrospect. We usually require some distance to gain enough perspective to see the power and glory of God’s providence in our lives.

This need of chronological distance was present in the account of Moses' preservation as well. While we know the end of the story, Moses' mother did not. For example, when she placed him in a basket she had no idea that God would preserve her son, that he would be raised in Pharaoh's house, and that she would be called upon to be his wet nurse. At the existential moment when she placed her son in the basket, she likely thought she would never see him again. Like so many aspects of the Christian life, we are called to exercise faith in regard to God's providence. This is true even when our story does not end well and things do not turn out "right" in the end. Even when we fail to experience a "happy ending," God is still working for our good and displaying his glory. Admittedly, it requires great faith to trust in God when we suffer difficult providences, but we do not exercise that faith in a void. We have a greater assurance of the truth of Romans 8:28 because we have seen how God, through his providence, orchestrated our deliverance from bondage to sin through the One who is greater than Moses.

### THE ONE GREATER THAN MOSES

While the account of God's preserving and protecting of Moses does provide us with comfort regarding the power of God's providence in our lives, its most important function is to point us forward to the work of Jesus Christ. Like Moses, Jesus was born at a time when Israel was under the foot of a foreign power. In Moses' time it was the Egyptians and in Jesus' time it was the Romans. Again, as with Moses, Jesus was born when a powerful leader, King Herod, issued a decree to slaughter Israelite male children. Of course, like Moses, Jesus was preserved from this decree by the providence of God and the faithful actions of his parents.

But while there are many comparisons that can be drawn between the life of Moses and that of Jesus, there are also great contrasts to be made. One of the most important contrasts is in regard to the scope of redemption provided by the two mediators. Moses matured to become the mediator of the old covenant and the human vessel through whom God delivered his people out of their bondage to the Egyptians. But, in stark contrast, Jesus was the mediator of a new and more glorious covenant; he personally delivered his people and he delivered and saved them from sin, death, and the wrath of God. Jesus' work of redemption was clearly greater than that of Moses. This is why the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews reminds his congregation, and by implication us, how important it is for us to fix our eyes on Jesus and to recognize that he far surpasses the glory of Moses:

Therefore, holy brothers and sisters, who share in the heavenly calling, fix your thoughts on Jesus, whom we acknowledge as our apostle and high priest. He was faithful to the one who appointed him, just as Moses was faithful in all God's house. Jesus has been found worthy of greater honor than Moses, just as the builder of a house has greater honor than the house itself. For every house is built by someone, but God is the builder of everything. "Moses was faithful as a servant in all God's house," bearing witness to what would be spoken by God in the future. But Christ is faithful as the Son over God's house. And we are his house, if indeed we hold firmly to our confidence and the hope in which we glory. (Heb. 3:11-6)

Yes, Moses was a faithful servant in God's house, but Jesus is God's faithful Son. His glory far surpasses Moses' and the glory of the exodus is eclipsed by the glory of God's providence in bringing about our redemption through Jesus.

All of Jesus' glorious redemptive work was part of a plan forged by the Father before the foundation of the world and perfectly orchestrated in time. As Galatians 4:4–5 reminds us, Jesus came into this world according to the exact timing of God's providence: "But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship." Jesus came into the world according to God's providential plan and God once again worked the glories of his redemptive irony in a manner that confounded the world and reaffirmed the reality of Romans 8:28. He did this by securing our victory at the moment of seeming defeat. Just think about Jesus on the cross. There was the self-proclaimed Son of God hanging from a cross and seemingly subject to the Roman Empire and its decrees. To his disciples this seemed like the bleakest moment in human history—the Savior of the World was crucified at the hands of men. Yet, in the greatest irony of all, it was at that very moment of seeming defeat that the greatest victory in history was won by the power of God. Jesus rose from the dead victorious and in doing so proved to the utmost the reality of these words: "And we know in all things God works for the good of those who love him."

#### FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

1. It is very challenging to trust God during difficult times. As we saw in this chapter, Israel faced this challenge during their time of bondage in Egypt. Can you think of a time in your life when you had to trust God during a difficult time? How did you cope? What did you learn from this experience?
2. God commenced his plan of delivering Israel from bondage in Egypt at the very time when all hope seemed lost. Can you think of other times in

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redemptive history when God delivered his people at a time when all seemed lost? How is this pattern manifested in the work of Jesus?

3. Moses almost perished as a child, but was saved through a chain of providentially orchestrated events. Can you look back on your life and see a similar chain of providence in how God delivered you from a trial?
4. Read Galatians 6:4–5. This text speaks about the providential coming of Jesus Christ in history at the exact time appointed by God. In John’s Gospel, Jesus frequently refers to his “hour” (John 2:4; 4:21, 23; 5:25, 28; 7:6, 8, 30; 8:20; 12:23; 12:27). How do the “hour” texts of John’s Gospel relate to Galatians 6:4–5 and what do these texts reveal about God’s role in history and redemption?