

The Providence of God as Seen in the Lives of Elijah and Ahab

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Introduction

Our English word, *providence*, comes from the Latin word, *providentia*, meaning foresight or to foresee. The equivalent Greek word is *pronoia*, but, ironically, it is not used in reference to God in the Scriptures. *Divine Providence* refers to the foresight of God by which He determines the needs of men and supplies the same for the accomplishment of His Divine Will. God's Providence benefits all men generally (Mat. 5:45). However, He exercises a more specific Providence toward His own faithful people (Deu. 4:40; 5:33; Mat. 6:33; 28:20). Just as we are commanded to "...do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith" (Gal. 6:10), so does God behave in seeing the needs of men and working to accomplish His will and our ultimate good.

The Providence of God is generally thought of only in terms of what He does "behind the scenes" through natural law and circumstance. By this understanding of the term we can **believe** that certain events transpire in our lives due to the Providence of God, but there is no concrete or conclusive proof upon which to dogmatically rely. Mordecai's famous question to Esther illustrates this very point: "And **who knoweth whether** thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this" (Est. 4:14, emph. DM)? It appears that Mordecai believed that it was providential that Esther was the Queen of Persia at that time (and thus in a position to prevent the destruction of her people), but there was no way he could absolutely prove it.

However, considering the aforementioned definition of *providence*, we will also do well to include God's miraculous acts in our concept of this important subject. The Bible records hundreds of supernatural acts which were the result of God's foreseeing the needs of an individual, a family, a nation, or even all mankind, and then providing for that need. In many cases a combination of the supernatural and the natural was employed in God's Providence. God apparently spoke to Noah directly (supernatural phenomenon) and ordered him to build the ark (natural phenomenon) to the saving of his house (Gen. 6:13-14). The rain and the fountains that produced the flood were natural, but the duration of the rain (40 days and nights) was supernatural (Gen. 7:11-12). Whereas the natural exercise of Divine Providence must always leave us with a degree of uncertainty about how or whether God was at work in certain

events, when God demonstrated His Providence in supernatural acts, no room was left for doubt.

The concept of the miraculous element of Providence is necessarily limited to the past ages in which God sometimes thus worked among men. This relates both to Old Testament and New Testament records, for miracles are recorded with frequency in both. While it is not in the purview of this chapter to discuss at length the cessation of miracles, suffice it to say that the New Testament teaches:

1. Generally, miraculous supernatural acts recorded in the New Testament were for the purpose of confirming the Truth of Jesus' claim to Deity and the Truth of the message of His messengers (John 20:30-31; Mark 16:19-20; Heb. 2:3-4).
2. When the revelation of the Gospel was completed, the miraculous spiritual gifts would no longer be necessary and would cease (1 Cor. 13:8-10; Eph. 4:11-13).
3. The Holy Spirit was to reveal all the Truth to the apostles (John 16:13), thus the revelation was complete by the time the last apostle (John) died (cir. AD 100).
4. It is evident that many saints in the first century possessed the miraculous gifts, but that these gifts were imparted by and available through the apostles only is likewise evident (Acts 6:6, 8; 8:6, 14-19; 19:6; et al.).
5. Therefore, with the death of John at the close of the first century, the miraculous age came to an end, as seen from a two-fold perspective:
 - (a.) The need for them was past; they were for confirmation of the Word while it was in the process of revelation. With revelation finished, so also was the need for miraculous confirmation, and
 - (b.) the apostles (the medium of transmission of the miraculous gifts) were no longer among men to confer them. Thus, with the passing of those last ones upon whom John (the last apostle) had laid his hands (cir. AD 150), the miraculous element, having served its God-given purpose, ceased. Those who claim miraculous powers for themselves or for others today are themselves misinformed and are the misinformers of others.

While any discussion of the operation of Providence in our time must necessarily be confined to God's working through His natural laws and "behind the scenes," a fruitful area of study is to be found in God's employment of miraculous elements in the exercise of His Providence in ages past. In the lives of Elijah, the prophet, and Ahab, the King of Israel, we will see numerous illustrations of God's Providence working miraculously. Divine Providence ever smiled upon Elijah, God's faithful prophet, while It mostly frowned upon Ahab, a man of consummate evil.

Who Were Elijah and Ahab?

Elijah, the Tishbite, was God's fiery prophet from Gilead who confronted Ahab, a malevolent monarch, and his even more wicked wife, with their evils. He did so on several occasions, thereby becoming a fugitive from the wrath of them both (1 Kin. 17:1; 18:17-18; 19:1-3; 21:17-23). In the prophetic work of Elijah, aimed at the evils and atrocities of Ahab, God exercised His Providence in preserving the life of this great prophet time after time.

Ahab was the seventh King of the Northern Kingdom of Israel who came to power near the end of the ninth century BC. In his 22 years of infamous reign he had the distinction of doing "evil in the sight of the Lord above all that were before him" (I Kin. 16:30). It was not enough that he walked in the sins of Jeroboam, he multiplied his iniquity by taking Jezebel, the daughter of Ethbaal of the Zidonians, for his queen, and became an avid devotee of Baal himself, to the sore anger of God (vv. 31-33; cf. 21:25-26). The evil deeds of Ahab came to an end as the result of what seems to be an act of God's Providence.

God's Providence in the Life of Elijah

God's Providence at the Brook Cherith (1 Kin. 17:1-7)

When Elijah first confronted Ahab with his sins he promised the king that there would be no more rain until Elijah so decreed. God knew that Ahab would seek to kill Elijah, so He immediately set His Providence in motion. He instructed Elijah to flee eastward and hide by the brook Cherith, from which he would receive water to sustain him. At the same time, God promised to use ravens to supply the prophet with bread and meat. Obviously, the Lord used a combination of supernatural and natural means of providing for His servant in this case. God's instruction to Elijah, telling him where to flee was supernatural. The means of providing food for the prophet (ravens) was miraculous, while the food itself was natural bread and meat. Both the means of provision (a brook) and the water itself were non-miraculous.

God's Providence at Zarephath (1 Kin. 17:8-23)

When the brook Cherith dried up, God continued to shower His Providence upon Elijah by sending him to Zarephath, a city in Zidon. His needs would be met by a widow who had been commanded by God to sustain him. He found the woman near the city gate and asked her to bring him some water and some bread. The woman replied that she was even then gathering sticks to prepare her last portion of meal and oil for herself and her son as their final meal. They were apparently on the verge of starvation because of the drought. Elijah told her that if she

would make a cake for him first and then make one for herself and her son that her supply of meal and oil would not run out until God sent rain again. The woman did as the prophet directed and the supply of meal and oil was not exhausted, though they all ate from it many days.

God also helped His prophet by enabling him to raise the widow's son from death, thus answering her allegation that he had come to bring evil rather than good and causing her to confess him certainly to be God's spokesman. Again, the natural and the supernatural are combined in this Providential sustenance of Elijah. God's instruction that he should go to Zarephath was supernatural and it would appear that His "command" to the widow there to sustain the prophet was also miraculous. Elijah's first meal there did not involve the miraculous, for the widow simply made a cake from ingredients she had in her kitchen. However, every meal she prepared thereafter, as long as Elijah was in her house, was the result of God's miraculous Providence in keeping the meal and oil supplied. God used Elijah to repay the widow's hospitality by bringing her dead son back to life.

God's Providence in the Contest on Carmel (1 Kin. 18:1-40)

In the third year after Elijah told Ahab that it would rain no more until he gave the word, God sent him to the king to announce that it would rain again. However, before making that announcement, the prophet strongly condemned Ahab for his apostasy in worshiping Baal. In order to reveal who the true and living God is, Elijah proposed a contest between himself and the prophets of Baal and Asherah, 950 of them altogether, on Mount Carmel. Ahab consented, and the prophets and a great cloud of people, including the king, assembled. The contest was simple, but graphic and powerful. Both the prophets of Baal and Elijah would slay a sacrificial animal and lay it upon an altar, with the false prophets doing so first. No fire would be placed on the altar of Baal or of Jehovah. The prophets of Baal were to call upon him to consume the sacrifice with fire and Elijah would call upon the Lord with the same request. Whichever answered by fire would be shown to be God.

The prophets of Baal called upon him from morning till evening, even mutilating themselves with knives in their frenzy. Elijah added to their shame by sarcastically suggesting that they might need to cry louder on the chance that Baal might be talking, taking a journey, or even taking a nap! Of course, no answer came from the nonexistent god. Elijah then gathered the people about him, repaired the torn-down altar of the Lord, slew his animal and placed the wood and the sacrifice on it. However, to dramatize the power of God even further, he made a

trench around the altar and had water poured over the sacrifice and the wood three times and had the trench filled with water. Then, in a moment of great drama, he called upon God to make himself known and to show that Elijah was His servant. God then sent such a fierce fire that it consumed not only the wood and the sacrifice, but even the stones of the altar and the water in the trench. In response, the people fell on their faces and proclaimed Jehovah to be God. Elijah, with the help of the people, then took the prophets of Baal to the brook Kishon where Elijah killed them.

As in all of Elijah's prophetic activity, the miraculous element is prominent in this contest, while natural elements are interwoven with it. The gathering of Israel at Carmel, the provision of wood, sacrificial animals, and stones for the altar of God, and the extinction of the false prophets all employed non-miraculous means. However, the climactic event in the Carmel contest was the startling fire that God supernaturally sent upon His altar. This episode demonstrated God's Providence in several ways: 1. The exposure of the falseness of Baal and of the prophets of Baal was a great gift to a deluded nation. 2. The powerful, undeniable manifestation of the true and living God was likewise most beneficial to Israel, causing them to acknowledge Him. 3. The confirmation (before Ahab and all of the people, including the false prophets) of Elijah as a man who belonged to God and who spoke on behalf of God was most timely in those dark days of evil in Israel. 4. The slaying of the false prophets by the prophet of God was a sign of God's utter abhorrence of their false religion and of all of those who practiced it, especially its leaders.

God's Providence in Sending the Rain (1 Kin. 18:41-46)

Elijah told Ahab that he could quit mourning over the destructive drought because it would soon rain again. Upon giving this announcement he then mounted the peak of Carmel and bowed himself in prayer that it might rain (cf. Jam. 5:18). Six times he sent his servant to look out over the Mediterranean for any sign of a rain cloud while Elijah prayed, only to be told there was no cloud in sight. He was sent a seventh time and this time the servant reported a cloud over the sea like a man's hand. Upon receiving this news, the prophet warned the lingering Ahab he had better begin his journey homeward before the impending rain stopped him. The rain, accompanied by wind, soon came in abundance out of a sky black with clouds and the drought of three and one-half years was broken. The Providence of God was still over them. We may observe that in this series of events God manifested his Providence through the natural process of rain, in specific and undeniable answer to the prayers of the devout prophet.

The supernatural element was involved in that God sent the rain just as Elijah said he would and at just the time he said it would arrive. Although we cannot expect such an immediate and direct answer to our prayers as that received by Elijah, there is still a practical lesson for us in the persistence with which he prayed.

God's Providence in Providing Food Under the Juniper Tree (1 Kin. 19:1-8)

Ahab did not wait long to tell Jezebel of the slaughter of her prophets by Elijah. Her response was to send a message to Elijah that she would see to it that he met their same fate. He fled for his life to the wilderness south of Beersheba where he sat down under a juniper tree, begging the Lord to let him die. Instead of allowing this request, while the prophet slept, the Lord sent an angel to him, telling him to arise and eat the cake and drink the water the Lord provided. He did so and slept again. The angel awakened him again, urging him to eat and drink more because of the long and hard journey he was taking to Horeb. In this scene the prophet was weary from travelling, famished for lack of food and drink, isolated from his home and people, and tired of running from the wrath of an evil king and queen. He was tired of the fight with evil. In his utter discouragement, God's Providence came to his aid. By means of the angel, both food and encouragement were once more provided in Elijah's hour of need. Again, miraculous and natural elements were combined in these provisions.

God's Providence in the "Still Small Voice" at Horeb (1 Kin. 19:9-18)

In his flight from Jezebel's threat, Elijah journeyed all the way to Sinai where he took up residence in a cave. When the Lord asked him why he was there, he rehearsed his faithful service to God among a rebellious people who had forsaken the Law, torn down God's altars, and slain God's prophets. He was there because his life was in danger due to his faithfulness, and he believed himself to be the only faithful one left in all Israel. God then produced a mighty wind, an earthquake, and fire, but did not reveal himself to Elijah in any of them. Following those mighty demonstrations of power God then made himself known to Elijah in a "still small voice," by which he asked him again why he was in Horeb. Elijah gave the same reply as before, after which God instructed him to anoint Hazael over Syria, Jehu over Israel, and Elisha to succeed himself. God then told Elijah that there were still 7,000 in Israel who had not gone after Baal.

All these demonstrations, conversations, and instructions seem to have had at least the following Providential purposes: (1) To restore the courage and determination of the weary,

discouraged prophet. (2) To anoint the men (through Elijah) who would bring God's vengeance upon the House of Ahab and the disobedient and rebellious nation of Israel. As in God's previous dealings with the prophet, there is a combination of the natural and the supernatural. God produced mighty outpourings of power upon Horeb and then spoke to the prophet in the "still small voice," all of which were miraculous. However, through the anointing of Hazael and Jehu by Elijah, He would pour out His wrath upon apostate Ahab and Israel by means of treason, assassination, and war – all non-miraculous, yet nonetheless the working of God. The work that Elisha would do in Israel would involve further supernatural elements of God's Providence.

God's Providence Concerning Naboth's Vineyard (1 Kin. 21:1-24)

Ahab coveted a vineyard next to his palace in Jezreel, owned by a man named Naboth. When Naboth refused to sell it because it was his inheritance, Ahab pouted like a child and would not even eat. When Jezebel learned the cause of his depression, she promised to deliver the vineyard to him. Through a wicked plot she had Naboth killed and told Ahab he could take possession of the vineyard. As he was on his way to do so, God was at the same time telling Elijah what the king had done. He was to go immediately to confront him with his sin of murder and theft and to announce God's judgment that the dogs would lick up his blood at the very place where they had licked up that of the murdered Naboth. The prophet was also to announce to Ahab the end of his dynasty and the consumption of Jezebel by dogs at the wall of Jezreel. These terrible iniquities were the "last straw" in the eyes of the Source of all justice, truth, and integrity. God's Providence intervened to keep Ahab and Jezebel from concealing their evil deeds of murder and larceny concerning Naboth. The intervention was miraculous in that the Lord spoke to Elijah, informing him of their wickedness, and instructing him what to say concerning them. The message was delivered to Ahab from the mouth of a man, which did not involve the miraculous element.

God's Providence in Consuming Ahaziah's Soldiers by Fire (2 Kin. 1:1-16)

Ahaziah succeeded Ahab, his father, when Ahab was killed in battle. When the new king injured himself in a fall, he sent messengers to Ekron to inquire of the pagan idol, Baalzebub, whether he would live or die. As they were going, the Lord's angel told Elijah to go and meet them and shame Ahaziah for implying that there was no God in Israel by sending to Ekron to inquire of Baal. He also was to answer the king's question about his health – he would not rise up from his bed but would die. When the king's messengers returned with this report,

Ahaziah sent a captain and 50 men to arrest Elijah, but the prophet called upon God to consume them with fire. This was done a second time with the same result. A third contingent of 51 men was sent, the captain of which begged before Elijah for his own life and for the life of his men. An angel told the man of God he could now go to the king in safety, which he did, delivering God's message of impending death to him in person. He died as Elijah had prophesied.

God was no more pleased with Ahaziah's preference of Baal over Himself than he was with that of his father, Ahab. In God's Providence, He saw to it that Ahaziah was both reproved and punished for his wickedness. By miraculous means, God informed Elijah both of Ahaziah's deed and of the Lord's message for the king. Likewise, by miraculous fire from heaven, God demonstrated to 102 soldiers of the king (and thus to the king himself) that He was indeed "alive and well" in Israel and that He had a man through whom He spoke and acted. As before, God used the mouth of His prophet (a non-miraculous medium) to deliver His message to a wicked and idolatrous king.

God's Providence in Taking Elijah to Heaven (2 Kin. 2:1-11)

The Providence of God which had ever been over Elijah throughout his courageous life was present to the very end of his earthly sojourn. The translation of Elijah to Heaven had apparently been revealed by God to both Elijah and his successor, Elisha, as well as to the schools of the prophets. The two prophets traveled from Gilgal to Bethel, from thence to Jericho, and then to the Jordan River. In arriving at each place, they attracted "sons of the prophets" who met them with the message that Elijah would be taken that day. When Elijah and Elisha came to the Jordan, the older prophet folded his mantle and struck the waters, causing them to part, providing a dry passage for the two men. As they passed on eastward from the river, a chariot of fire, drawn by fiery horses swept down and picked up Elijah, and he was born up into heaven by a whirlwind. This remarkable translation of Elijah into heaven without his tasting death (as with Enoch, Gen. 5:24; Heb. 11:5) was a remarkable demonstration of the miraculous element of God's Providence, by which He demonstrated His great delight in this storied prophet.

God's Providence in the Life of Ahab

God's Providence in Withholding the Rain (1 Kin. 17:1, 7)

The withholding of rain from Israel was a direct consequence of the evils of Ahab (1 Kin. 16:30-33). Undoubtedly, this was not only punitive in purpose, but intended to bring about repentance in the wicked king, if possible; thus, it was "Providential." The sore drought and

famine that resulted from the three and one-half rainless and dewless years was a natural effect. However, the withholding of the moisture was done miraculously by God through His prophet Elijah – the drought was not a mere circumstance of nature that occurs various times in all parts of the world.

God's Providence in Sending Rain Again (1 Kin. 18:1–46)

Having brought extreme drought and famine upon Ahab and Israel because of the king's iniquity, the Lord determined it was time to reverse this condition, perhaps to see if he had learned anything and to give him an opportunity to repent. Leading up to the restoration of rain was the mighty contest at Mount Carmel, demonstrating both to Ahab and to all of the people the falseness of Baal and the existence and power of Jehovah. Immediately after this mighty demonstration, the Lord sent rain in response to the pleas of Elijah. This was perhaps done so that the faithfulness and power of the Lord would still be fresh on the mind of Ahab and so that he could not avoid crediting the Lord with the needed rain. The rain came by natural means (from dark storm clouds), but it was sent specifically by the will of God at that particular time, thus showing Divine intervention.

God's Providence in the Syrian Wars (1 Kin. 20:1–43)

Ben-hadad the Syrian, with a confederacy of 32 other kings, encamped around Samaria and demanded Ahab's unconditional surrender. Ahab refused this demand and God sent an unnamed prophet to tell him that the enemy would be delivered into his hand. With only a small force of 7,000 led by 232 princes, Ahab's forces totally routed the Syrian host. God's purpose in this miraculous, Providential victory was to prove to Ahab that He was indeed the Lord. God's prophet warned Ahab to prepare for Ben-hadad's return the next year to fight Israel in the plain. The Pagan king was under the superstition that Israel worshipped "gods of the hills," and since Samaria was in the hills, this was why Ahab prevailed. He thought that if he fought Israel in the plain, the gods would be on his side. As predicted, Ben-hadad assembled the same sized force as that with which he had besieged Samaria and encamped at Aphek. Ahab's forces encamped nearby and were like "two little flocks of kids" compared to the host of Syria.

God sent His prophet to Ahab a third time, telling him that God would once more give the Syrians into his hand, and for the purpose once more of demonstrating God's power to the apostate king. The Israelites destroyed 100,000 Syrians in the first day of battle, causing the rest

to flee into the city of Aphek where another 27,000 were killed under a wall that collapsed. Ben-hadad and his servants first hid, but the servants convinced him that the only possible way to avoid certain death was to throw themselves on the mercy of Ahab. Ahab called him his "brother," spared his life, accepted several promised concessions from him, and then sent him on his way home with a covenant of peace. Ahab's mercy was misguided and displeasing to God. One of the sons of the prophets was sent to Ahab to tell him that because he had allowed Ben-hadad, whom the Lord wanted Ahab to destroy, to go free, Ahab would have to pay with his own life for doing so. Ahab was killed in the battle he led against Ramoth-gilead some three years later (1 Kin. 22:37).

God's purpose in the several acts of Providence concerning these wars with the Syrians (involving both the miraculous and the non-miraculous) is plainly set forth—to prove to Ahab that Jehovah, not Baal or any other alleged deity, was the Lord, the true God. There was no immediate indication that Ahab learned anything from all of these wonderful deliverances and direct messages from God's prophets.

God's Providence in Events Relating to Naboth's Vineyard (1 Kin. 21:1–29)

A full account of the lust of Ahab for Naboth's vineyard, his refusal to sell it, Ahab's resultant depression, and Jezebel's "solution" to this problem has already been recited. God sent Elijah to Ahab with a strong message of condemnation for their wicked deed. The prophet also told the king that his posterity would be cut off from reigning in his stead because of his multiplied evils, and he was given certain horrible details concerning his own death and that of Jezebel. This strong message from the prophet finally made an impact upon the heart of Ahab (perhaps the cumulative effect of God's previous acts of Providence also finally had their effect). He genuinely humbled himself and repented, causing God to inform Elijah that he would hold off the evils he had pronounced against Ahab during his lifetime, but would visit them upon the king's son. Unfortunately, Ahab's repentance was not long-lasting and within three years he would be dead because he listened to the hired false prophets rather than to God's prophet (1 Kin. 22:1–37). The message of Elijah to Ahab is definitely seen to have been Providence that served God's purpose of bringing an evil man to his knees. This Providential sequence involved both the miraculous (the message God gave to Elijah) and the non-miraculous (God's message delivered by a man).

God's Providence in the Campaign Against Ramoth-Gilead (1 Kin. 22:1-40)

Ahab determined to take Ramoth-gilead from the Syrians and he persuaded Jehoshaphat, King of Judah, to be his ally. Before mounting the campaign, Jehoshaphat suggested that they consult the Lord about their plan. Ahab assembled the 400 court prophets who, knowing the king had his heart set on this effort, encouraged him to go. Jehoshaphat apparently did not trust these prophets and asked if there was not a prophet of God to consult. Ahab told him there was, and he sent for Micaiah, but warned that he hated this prophet because he always prophesied evil concerning him.

At first this faithful prophet mocked the king by telling him to proceed with his plans just as the false prophets had done. However, Ahab recognized what he was doing and demanded that he tell him the Lord's will. Micaiah then told Ahab that if he went into battle Israel would be without a king, meaning that Ahab would be killed. The prophet also told the king (in what may be a parable) not only that his prophets were liars, but that God had sent a lying spirit in their mouths so that Ahab might be encouraged to go into this battle and be killed. God's true prophet was then sent to prison by the king to be placed on a diet of bread and water until he had returned from battle. The two kings carried out their plan to attack the Syrian city, Ahab disguising himself so as to go unrecognized by Ben-hadad, whom he had earlier spared after defeating him in war. One of the Syrian soldiers drew his bow "at a venture" and the arrow mortally wounded Ahab. He died and was brought back to Samaria and buried, bringing a wicked and inglorious life and reign to an end.

Some remarkable instances of Providence appear in this setting. That Micaiah was informed of the Lord both of what would happen to Ahab and that it was His will that Ahab die are revelations and therefore miraculous. However, here we also see the Providential use God made of the lying prophets to persuade Ahab to do the very thing that would fulfill the will of God concerning Ahab. Also, we can see the natural working of Providence in the unknown Syrian bowman whose arrow struck its mortal blow between the joints of Ahab's armor.

God's Providence in the Many Prophetic Messages to Ahab

God sent five different prophets to Ahab (Elijah, an unnamed prophet, an unnamed "man of God," an unnamed "son of the prophets," and Micaiah) to variously warn him, threaten him, set before him incontestable evidence of His power, and foretell his downfall. God sent Elijah several times and the unnamed prophet twice with God's message. Except for one occasion, Ahab remained unmoved from his course of wickedness. If ever a man lived who had no excuse for continuing in his iniquity, Ahab was that man! In God's Providence, Ahab had

warning piled upon warning, threat added to threat, and demonstration combined with demonstration to stimulate him to lasting repentance and obedience, but he responded hardly at all.

Conclusion

In this study of God's Providence in the lives of Elijah and Ahab, He is seen to be gracious and merciful as he cared for Elijah's needs on several occasions, and in His mercy toward Ahab when he once humbled himself. God is also seen to be wrathful and just in the judgment against sin and rebellion in His dealing with the iniquitous life of Ahab. All the working of God's Providence in the lives of these two men demonstrate that God had their best interests in mind in the way He dealt with them. However, His love and concern for His nation of Israel is also seen in the many attempts to rescue them from idolatry and all its corruptions. Beyond these things, His concern for all mankind is seen in that He demonstrated in these events His incomparable power, His mercy, and His justice for the admonition of all future generations (Rom. 15:4). How wonderful is the Providence of God!

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