

DAY 1

On Doing Our Part and Leaving the Rest to God

OPENING INVITATION

- Set aside your worries of the day.
- Take some deep breaths. Invite God into your day.
- Ask God to speak to you through this day's wisdom.
- Begin when you are ready!

A FATHER'S WITNESS

I was not sure what was happening. I was sleeping soundly as only a child could. The rain was gently tapping on my windowpane. My father arrived home unexpectedly from military maneuvers. He was shaking me and yelling for my siblings to get up. He was still in his battle dress uniform, and it was muddy. He was crying. I was very confused—my father always had a well-pressed, pristine uniform, and he rarely cried. As I entered the bright living room, I tried to adjust my eyes to the light as

I watched my dad pace the floor. He was distracted, and kept calling my siblings to hurry up. My mom was already up. She was sitting in a chair with a look of disbelief on her face and her arms crossed, as if comforting herself. As my discomfort grew, I wondered, “What’s going on? What’s happening? Is everything all right?”

After all of us crowded into the living room, my father just stared at us. He was so upset. He tried to talk, but his voice kept cracking and his tears kept flowing. He tried to compose himself but it took him some time. I was terrified. I wondered, “What is going on?”

After what seemed like forever for a child, my dad was able to speak, and he told us about the accident. Earlier that evening during a convoy in severe rain, a vehicle lost control, slid off the road, and overturned. In the pandemonium, a young soldier was thrown around the vehicle and banged his head. It would be a mortal wound. My father was the first on the scene. He found the soldier—whom he knew, who had his whole life ahead of him—in great pain.

We had welcomed this young man into our home for many a holiday meal. I remembered him as a very skinny African American man with a little acne. He was shy and would not go for seconds, and so my mom was always filling his plate. It was clear by his demeanor that he thought the world of my father, and he always spoke to him with respect. This particular soldier was only four years older than my brother.

Arriving at the scene of the accident, my father attempted first response procedures but to no avail. He held the young man in his arms as he died. As medical personnel arrived, my father would not let go. The lifeless body had to be slowly pried from his arms, and he was given permission to return home.

As my father told us the story, it was obvious he was deeply troubled by the experience. He explained that he needed to wake us up to know that we were OK. After telling us this story, my father was overcome with emotion and started to cry again. He gathered us up in his strong arms and hugged us. He would not let us go. This was the first time I remember my father being so affectionate.

I had never heard anything like this story before, and the tragedy of this fallen soldier rocked my world. Seeing my father so broken shook everything I knew. How was I supposed to understand tragedy and sorrow? "Is anything safe?" I wondered.

This was my first glimpse into the harsh reality of life. Although I grew up on an army base in Cold War West Germany, my parents fostered a warm and loving environment and kept the tension and uncertainty of the Cold War at bay. My siblings and I, along with our friends on the military base, lived a relatively normal childhood.

It seemed my father was always on training maneuvers, especially after President Ronald Reagan's 1987 visit in which he challenged the Soviet leader, "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall." The military operations never seemed out of the ordinary, and my dad being away was just the way things were. The fathers

of all my friends were also away and, as kids, we were distant from world affairs. We were more worried about preadolescent pimples, what shoes to wear, where to sit on the bus, and how to escape embarrassing moments in class.

On that training operation, however, a soldier died. The only time the innocence of my world was broken was when that soldier died. How could a child understand what that meant? How could any sense be made of it? Over the following days I watched my father prepare a letter to the soldier's family, and this unenviable task tore him up.

I remember asking him with a child's level of compassion, "Dad, what are you going to write? How are you going to explain it?" Surprisingly, my father actually smiled at my questions, as if they reminded him of a secret weapon. He unbuttoned the chest pocket of his uniform and pulled out a small green book, a beat-up old copy of the New Testament. He flipped to a dog-eared page and read to me:

Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going. (Jn 14:1-4)

After reading the biblical passage, my father looked at me and explained, “You see, Jeff, God is taking care of things. We just have to trust him.”

This was a memorable experience for me, because my father is a quiet disciple. Honestly, I think this was the first time he opened up to me and spontaneously shared his faith. In receiving this unexpected but timely testimony, I was able to see that as I trusted in my father, so he was confident in the Heavenly Father. And so my dad’s answer was an inspiring witness to me of what I would later call trusting in divine providence.

DIVINE PROVIDENCE

Admittedly, we might hear this expression and wonder what *divine providence* means. My father did not know, and he would not have used that term. My use of it came later, from a different father in the spiritual realm. For me at that point, divine providence was a vague notion that God was in charge, and even if bad things happened, we could trust him because everything would be all right.

My father’s reliance on God pointed me to the loving-kindness of the Almighty and showed me a path to discern his genuine care for us and for our world. My father never had the opportunity to read theological or spiritual works, and so as I mentioned, he would not have used terms such as *providence* or expressions such as *passive will* or *sacrament of the present moment*. And I am sure he never heard of the spiritual father

Jean-Pierre de Caussade. My father just knew of God's presence and compassion within and throughout the twists and turns of life. He actively performed the duties of his vocation as husband, father, and soldier, and attentively served God, his country, and his beloved family.

And so my father gave me a life-changing glimpse into divine providence. By unveiling it, he showed me his way in approaching the ambiguities, sufferings, and sorrows of life. He taught me his secret to persevering through the joys, comforts, tragedies, and losses of life.

PEACEFUL BALM AND BALANCED ANSWER

Into any time of uncertainty or distress, the message of divine providence is a contradiction. We are called to both submission and action. Interior peace comes when we focus on the joy of surrendering to divine providence while both living and acting in the present moment. All people of good will are summoned to contemplation and to activity. This counsel of trust and abandonment to God's goodness, which has been firetested and proven in the lives of countless holy ones throughout the ages, is offered to each of us today. In the arena of our own worries and perplexities, we are shown a more excellent way, namely, the love of God and of our neighbor.

This message offers to calm our restlessness by directing our hearts. It reminds us of God's love and care for us, and gives us a liberating wisdom that dispels anxiety and isolationism as it

opens widely a door to us to both interior peace and the selfless performance of our duties in life.

In many respects, the message of God's providence pulls away the veil of our illusions and calls us to reality. It guides us to step back and see the whole panorama of existence. As we look, we see goodness and beauty, but also evil and suffering. "But why the darkness?" we might ask. Our minds could speculate: "If God is all-powerful and all-good, how could there possibly be wickedness and sorrow in our world? With the presence of evil, it would seem that God is either not all-powerful, since he cannot stop it; or he is not all-good, since he could prevent it but chooses not to." With this argument volleying in our minds, we see two extremes.

One response could be atheism. In witnessing rampant hurt and gloom, we could throw up our hands and quit on God, believing that either he does not exist or that he has failed us. This type of anti-theism is motivated by a belief that, since God is absent or negligent, we have to take up the work and build our own kingdom of man. And so we have to either join or fight evil for ourselves. If we are honest, there are times or extreme moments when we have all heard this option whisper to our hearts: "God, where are you? Are you real? Don't you care?"

Another response to our sober inquiry could be quietism. In being scandalized by villainy and depravity, we could spiritually succumb to its influence and accept the false conviction that life is evil, and we could give up on the capacity or possibility of goodness. We could assume maliciousness is the norm. We

could choose to completely remove ourselves from life, isolate ourselves from reality, and deny the power of any activity other than that within our own souls. Again, this drive—to shut out the world, deny life, and put our souls on lockdown—is also a tempting whisper in turbulent or distressing times: “God, why have you left? Why is there so much evil? Am I to be alone in my own soul?”

Both of these options are possibilities and yet neither one is real. Neither satisfies our hearts or fulfills the generous invitation to surrender to divine providence. Each one is an escape, a well-devised hiding place that robs us of the mystery of life and all its richness, grace, and glory. Breaking through these misguided, cowardly, and weak options, we are offered a middle way. We are presented with the option of both *submission* and *action*. Let’s explore this.

We begin by asserting that the world and human life are fundamentally good. Evil happens, and it can be daunting. It is agonizing to our souls. We can react and want to get away. We desperately seek a balm to soothe our souls. Without reflection, we can either be assimilated into atheistic action with overly busy lives or escape by enclosing ourselves in layers of inertia. Faith will have none of these options. It holds our hands to the fire. Faith unmask the immaturity of both options. It demands self-reflection, examination, and integrity.

Faith calls us to ask questions and labor for answers. It proposes a different perspective and points us along a different path. Evil does happen, but it does not have the last word. Creation is

good. The wickedness may run rampant in the Garden, but the Garden is still good and can still bear good fruit. Yes, the world is fallen, humanity is free and sinful, and bad things happen, but divine providence is able to bring all things to a good end for those who love God (see Romans 8:28).

Yes, this is our world after the Fall from grace contained in the biblical story of the Garden of Eden, but wickedness does not have an everlasting force, and it is not the basis of who we are or what our world was created to be. Each of us, and the world in which we live, is good. In spite of evil and suffering, we are blessed and cherished by a loving God, who is among us and bears all things with us.

Yet God does permit evil to happen because he respects our freedom. He also allows the wayward flow and fallenness of creation. But any wickedness that is permitted by his passive will—either of the moral or natural order—only has the power we give it. God ennobles us with the wisdom and glory to vanquish the kingdom of sin and death, to be free, and to dwell in peace. And so to those who draw close to him, God brings about an even greater good from any evil. Depravity is destroyed by bold and daring goodness.

This is the divine action that calls for our submission. It is this action that radically motivates people of good will to work energetically and tirelessly to dismantle darkness, suffer persecution for righteousness, and generously extend themselves in the service of others so that light can dispel gloom and iniquity from every corner of the world. By working for goodness against

the evil that is permitted through God's passive will, we show our belief in divine providence and manifest God's desire for righteousness throughout creation. It is a providence that places every suffering and sorrow within an everlasting and magnanimous horizon. It reveals to us the true identity of creation and humanity, beloved by God.

This is the loving union of God and humanity that is bypassed in the self-absorption of the quietist and denied in the empty activism of the atheist. We are called to something more and something greater. Faith points the way and describes for us the freedom and joy that is found in an unconditional surrender to divine providence.

And so we are helped in our discernment of God's providence. Faith gives us a stronger conviction of the divine presence and action among us. It shows us God's power and healing strength. It displays his abundant goodness to such an extent that we wish to become instruments of that same goodness in our world today.

What will you do with this holy testimony? Will you ignore it and leave divine providence behind, or try to create your own providence by a faulty belief in yourself? Or will you truly surrender? The invitation is offered. The choice is yours.

SPIRITUAL STEPS

Some practical thoughts to help us all live the wisdom of divine providence:

- As you are preparing yourself for the day, ask God to help you see his providence in your life today.
- Pause during an activity or take a brief walk in the middle of the day. Reflect on what has already happened and what is still to come. Ask “What is God’s message for this day?”
- As you prepare for bed, examine your day and note where you noticed God’s presence. Thank him for those moments. If you did not experience God’s presence today, express this in prayer to God and ask for the graces to see him tomorrow.

CLOSING PRAYER

*Good and gracious God,
I turn to you, abandoning myself to your providence.
Please show me the way.
Show me your goodness and manifest your care to me.
Lord, I want to cooperate with you and see you
in all that I do.
I consecrate my every moment
and all my duties to you.
Lord, draw close to me.
Grant me consolation and perseverance.
Bestow your peace upon me.
Help me to always dwell in your providence.
I make this prayer through Jesus Christ,
who is Lord, forever and ever.
Amen.*