

THE PROVIDENCE OF GOD

THE DEFINITION OF PROVIDENCE

- The word “providence” does not occur in most English versions of the Bible...but the concept is biblical
- Divine providence is the governance of God by which he, with wisdom and love, cares for and directs all things in the universe...it is his act of purposefully providing for, sustaining, and governing the world
- It refers to the loving, sovereign care of God by which he governs all the affairs of our daily lives
- It demonstrates that God takes an active role in the world that he created, particularly in the lives of those who are alone made in his image
- “27 – Q. What do you understand by the providence of God? A. God's providence is his almighty and ever present power, whereby, as with his hand, he still upholds heaven and earth and all creatures, and so governs them that leaf and blade, rain and drought, fruitful and barren years, food and drink, health and sickness, riches and poverty, indeed, all things, come to us not by chance but by his fatherly hand.”¹
- “Article 13 – The Doctrine of God’s Providence. We believe that this good God, after creating all things, did not abandon them to chance or fortune but leads and governs them according to his holy will, in such a way that nothing happens in this world without God’s orderly arrangement.”²
- “Question 18 – What are the works of providence? Answer – 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.”³
- “Chapter 5 – Of Providence. 5.1. God the great Creator of all things doth uphold, direct, dispose, and govern all creatures, actions, and things, from the greatest even to the least, by his most wise and holy providence, according to his infallible foreknowledge, and the free and immutable counsel of his own will, to the praise of the glory of his wisdom, power, justice, goodness, and mercy.”⁴
- “Providence is like a curious piece of tapestry made of a thousand shreds, which, single, appear useless, but put together, they represent a beautiful history to the eye.”⁵
- God’s providence is infinitely greater than even the most complex Rube Goldberg machine (a contraption where someone sets up an incredibly complicated chain reaction in order to accomplish a simple task)
- In such a contraption, every little detail has to work out exactly right or the whole thing falls apart
- God’s providence is infinitely more complex and amazing in that it pervades every minute detail of our lives
- “I believe that every particle of dust that dance in the sunbeam does not move an atom more or less than God wishes – that every particle of spray that dashes against the steamboat has its orbit, as well as the sun in the heavens – that the chaff from the hand of the winnower is steered as the stars in their courses. The creeping of an aphid over the rosebud is as much fixed as the march of the devastating pestilence – the fall...of leaves from a poplar is as fully ordained as the tumbling of an avalanche.”⁶
- “Every tiny, popping bubble in the foam at the top of a newly poured can of Coke. Every floating dust mote which you can only see in the early-morning bedroom beam of light. Every tip of every stalk of grain

¹ Heidelberg Catechism

² The Belgic Confession

³ Westminster Larger Catechism

⁴ Westminster Confession of Faith

⁵ John Flavel

⁶ Charles Spurgeon, “God’s Providence,” sermon on Ezekiel 1:15-19.

stretching across the endless Nebraska plains. All of them, with their slightest movements, specifically governed by God.”⁷

- “There are an infinite number of wheels in the works of providence.”⁸

THE FALSE VIEWS OF PROVIDENCE

Deism

- Deists (such as Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson) view God as a clockmaker who created the world long ago, wound it up, and then let us run on its own
- The universe simply unwinds according to the properties God built into it but without divine involvement
- For deists, God is transcendent but not immanent...he is largely disconnected from his creation in that he doesn't communicate with humanity...does not hear or answer prayer...does not intervene in human affairs
- God is distant, impersonal, unknown, and unknowable
- “A species of deism has reappeared on the contemporary scene in the form of what sociologist Christian Smith calls ‘moralistic, therapeutic deism.’ He identifies this as the theology of America’s youth culture: God is not relevant to life except that he wants us to be good and happy. Otherwise he may be ignored. Deism’s failure: it does not relate the creation to the Creator.”⁹
- But providence is not deism...God is no remote, detached, or uninvolved deity!

Fatalism

- Fatalism teaches that there is a blind, impersonal force over which no one has control – not even God – and that events are swept along by this blind, purposeless power
- It is the belief that “what will be will be,” since all past, present, and future events have already been predetermined by some all-powerful force
- But providence is not fatalism
- “What is fate? Fate is this – *whatever is, must be*. But there is a difference between that and Providence. Providence says, *Whatever God ordains must be*; but the wisdom of God never ordains anything without a purpose. Everything in this world is working for some one great end. Fate does not say that. Fate simply says that the thing must be; Providence says, God move the wheels along, and there they are.”¹⁰

THE EXPLANATION OF PROVIDENCE

God Preserves All Things

- He keeps the universe in existence and upholds all things by his providence
- In his power and might, God upholds and sustains his creation
- He is responsible for maintaining the delicate balance necessary for life on this planet
- He holds it all together, preventing the universe and everything in it from flying apart

⁷ John Piper, *Providence*, 36.

⁸ Jeremiah Burroughs

⁹ Terry Johnson, *The Identity and Attributes of God*, 115.

¹⁰ Spurgeon, “God’s Providence.”

- In fact, if God were to fail for a moment to preserve the universe, it would in that instant completely vanish and we would cease to exist

Psalm 36:6 ~ Your righteousness is like the mountains of God; Your judgments are like a great deep. O LORD, You preserve man and beast.

Acts 17:25, 28 ~ nor is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all people life and breath and all things...28 for in Him we live and move and exist, as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we also are His children.'

Colossians 1:17 ~ He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together.

Hebrews 1:3 ~ And He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature, and upholds all things by the word of His power. When He had made purification of sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high,

- We base our entire lives on the constancy of laws which are kept in place by God
- Everything coheres together because he ensures that the universe runs as an ordered, reliable unit instead of an erratic, unpredictable entity
- The earth remains 93.2 million miles from the sun...the earth consistently rotates on its axis at 22.5 degrees...the moon stays at its distance from the earth...the atmosphere remains the same density
- "He holds all those quarks and leptons of the microcosm together by the mysterious coulomb electrical force he made and maintains, and he likewise sustains the fleeing galaxies of the universe."¹¹
- "The 'laws of nature' are merely human observations, human descriptions of how God orders and regulates his universe. The dependability of those laws is a testimony to God's faithfulness...The natural order and regularity in nature are not inherent in any absolute sense. Rather, they testify to the faithfulness of God. Natural laws describe how God normally works. When he stops, they stop...We owe our continued existence and sustenance to the preserving power of God."¹²

God Governs All Things

- Everything is ultimately under the control of God's providence
- Although God sometimes exercises this control by the use of his power directly (i.e. miracles), he normally works through means
- "Theologians speak of 'divine concurrence': when the creature acts, God acts simultaneously. God's activity accompanies the creature's activity at every point, yet without depriving the creature of its natural freedom. God governs the physical universe according to the laws of nature, the animal world according to instinct, and the rational world according to the properties of the mind...as well as through the influence of the Holy Spirit on the mind, will, and emotions."¹³
- Concurrence says that two or more parties can act in the same event and produce a given outcome without all parties having the same intent
- Thus, even though secondary causes bring about events, it is the hand of God that is the primary cause of all

The Natural World

- God's providence is evident in that his control extends to the smallest details of nature
- God is immediately active in his creation...feeding the animals, dressing the plants, "natural disasters," etc.

Psalm 104:27-28 ~ They all wait for You To give them their food in due season. 28 You give to them, they gather it up; You open Your hand, they are satisfied with good.

¹¹ R. Kent Hughes, *Hebrews*, vol. 1, 28.

¹² Johnson, *Identity and Attributes*, 118.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 119.

Psalm 135:6-7 ~ Whatever the LORD pleases, He does, In heaven and in earth, in the seas and in all deeps. 7 He causes the vapors to ascend from the ends of the earth; Who makes lightnings for the rain, Who brings forth the wind from His treasuries.

Psalm 147:16-17 ~ He gives snow like wool; He scatters the frost like ashes. 17 He casts forth His ice as fragments; Who can stand before His cold?

Proverbs 16:33 ~ The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord

Isaiah 40:26 ~ Lift up your eyes on high And see who has created these stars, The One who leads forth their host by number, He calls them all by name; Because of the greatness of His might and the strength of His power, Not one of them is missing.

Matthew 5:45 ~ so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.

Matthew 10:29 ~ Are not two sparrows sold for a cent? And yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father.

Luke 12:7 ~ Indeed, the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Do not fear; you are more valuable than many sparrows.

Acts 14:17 ~ and yet He did not leave Himself without witness, in that He did good and gave you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness.

- Even the most seemingly trivial things in the natural world are under God's providential control

Rational Beings

- God's providence extends to control over rational beings such that when the creature acts, God acts simultaneously
- When people accomplish their purposes, he also accomplishes his purposes through them in a way that doesn't violate human freedom or responsibility
- Divine compatibilism states that when people perform free acts (i.e. not constrained or compelled in their actions), they do that which God wants them to do
- His providence is compatible both with human freedom and responsibility
- Compatibilism reconciles the reality that every event is causally determined, ordained, and/or decreed by God and is also compatible with the free agency of man (technically, man is not truly "free" to do what he wishes because he cannot do what is contrary to his nature...and because his nature is depraved, he can only make choices consistent with that sinful inclination)
- Compatibilism deals with the foundational issue of how man can be held accountable for his actions if his actions were always going to occur and could not have been anything other than that which occurred
- In short, both are true...God providentially determine all that occurs AND man is a free, moral agent

Proverbs 21:1 ~ The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; he turns it wherever he will

- The greatest OT display of God's providential control over rational beings is the account of Joseph and his brothers
- Each person in that account operated of their own volition: Jacob's favoritism, the brothers actions, Potiphar's wife's accusations, etc.
- But God was sovereignly orchestrating those events
- "From Genesis 45-50, we are told that (1) Joseph's brothers had sent Joseph to Egypt, (2) God had sent Joseph to Egypt, (3) Joseph's brothers had evil intentions in sending Joseph to Egypt, and (4) God had good intentions in sending Joseph to Egypt. So, the question is, who sent Joseph to Egypt? The bewildering answer is that both

Joseph's brothers and God did. It was one action being carried out by two entities, the brothers and God doing it simultaneously."¹⁴

Genesis 50:20 ~ As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive.

- Another OT example is that of Cyrus ordering the rebuilding of Israel's temple
- Although it was Cyrus who initiated the decree, it was the Lord who was ultimately responsible

Ezra 1:1 ~ Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah, the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he sent a proclamation throughout all his kingdom

- Another example is that of God's use of Assyria to punish his people

Isaiah 10:5-7 ~ Woe to Assyria, the rod of My anger And the staff in whose hands is My indignation, 6 I send it against a godless nation And commission it against the people of My fury To capture booty and to seize plunder, And to trample them down like mud in the streets. 7 Yet it does not so intend, Nor does it plan so in its heart, But rather it is its purpose to destroy And to cut off many nations.

- "God's intent in the Assyrian invasion is to inflict His righteous judgment against sin, and the intent of the Assyrians is to 'destroy and cut off many nations.' Two different purposes, two different entities acting to bring about this purpose, in one, single action. As we read further, God reveals that, although this destruction is determined and decreed by Him (Isaiah 10:23), He will still punish the Assyrians because of the 'arrogant heart of the king of Assyria and the pomp of his haughtiness' (Isaiah 10:12, cf. Isaiah 10:15). Even though God Himself had infallibly determined the judgment of a disobedient people, He holds those who brought the judgment accountable for their own actions."
- Similarly, God orchestrated the events surrounding Christ's birth...but violated no one's free agency

Micah 5:2 ~ But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, Too little to be among the clans of Judah, From you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel. His goings forth are from long ago, From the days of eternity.

Luke 2:1 ~ Now in those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus, that a census be taken of all the inhabited earth.

- The same is true for individuals...ultimately God is controlling the path we take

Proverbs 16:9 ~ The mind of man plans his way, But the LORD directs his steps.

- We make our own plans and carry them out of our own volition...but it is God who is ultimately in control

Sinful Acts

- God's providential government also includes evil actions such that he directs evil, yet is not ultimately responsible for it
- God predetermines wicked events in such a way that he is not directly responsible for the sinful choices of wicked men
- His determination of wicked events is compatible both with human freedom and responsibility
- God providentially accomplishes his purposes through the sinful choices of mankind

2 Samuel 24:1 ~ Now again the anger of the LORD burned against Israel, and it incited David against them to say, "Go, number Israel and Judah."

¹⁴ <https://www.gotquestions.org/compatibilism.html>

1 Chronicles 21:1 ~ Then Satan stood up against Israel and moved David to number Israel.

- It is notable in this event that, although God was in control of David’s sinful choice, David was punished

2 Samuel 24:12-17 ~ “Go and speak to David, ‘Thus the LORD says, “I am offering you three things; choose for yourself one of them, which I will do to you.” ’ ” 13 So Gad came to David and told him, and said to him, “Shall seven years of famine come to you in your land? Or will you flee three months before your foes while they pursue you? Or shall there be three days’ pestilence in your land? Now consider and see what answer I shall return to Him who sent me.” 14 Then David said to Gad, “I am in great distress. Let us now fall into the hand of the LORD for His mercies are great, but do not let me fall into the hand of man.” 15 So the LORD sent a pestilence upon Israel from the morning until the appointed time, and seventy thousand men of the people from Dan to Beersheba died. 16 When the angel stretched out his hand toward Jerusalem to destroy it, the LORD relented from the calamity and said to the angel who destroyed the people, “It is enough! Now relax your hand!” And the angel of the LORD was by the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite. 17 Then David spoke to the LORD when he saw the angel who was striking down the people, and said, “Behold, it is I who have sinned, and it is I who have done wrong; but these sheep, what have they done? Please let Your hand be against me and against my father’s house.”

- This is relationship between the providence of God and the sinful choices of man are most clearly evident in the death of Christ
- It is the ultimate example of God providentially using sinful events to accomplish his purposes

Acts 2:22-24 ~ Men of Israel, listen to these words: Jesus the Nazarene, a man attested to you by God with miracles and wonders and signs which God performed through Him in your midst, just as you yourselves know— 23 this Man, delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death. 24 But God raised Him up again, putting an end to the agony of death, since it was impossible for Him to be held in its power.

Acts 4:27-28 ~ For truly in this city there were gathered together against Your holy servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, 28 to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose predestined to occur.

- The answer to the question "who put Jesus to death?" is both God and the wicked people...two purposes carried out by two entities within a single action
- “The cross is the ultimate example of God’s providential governance of evil actions. The crucifixion of Christ is without a doubt the worst crime the human race has ever committed...[yet they] were doing what God had predetermined...Herod, Pilate, and the rest intended evil, while God intended the salvation of the world.”¹⁵
- Concurrence and compatibilism help explain how God can ordain evil and not be guilty of sin
- He has a holy intent in all he ordains
- Evil is evil, but the Lord never has an evil intent, and he never does evil himself...he works through the evil intents of others to fulfill His good intent

Satan

- Even Satan only does what God allows him to do...he can only do what fits with God’s purposes
- Satan is controlled...he is God’s devil in that he restricts Satan’s activity and allows him to go only so far and no further

Job 1:6-8 ~ Now there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan also came among them. 7 The LORD said to Satan, “From where do you come?” Then Satan answered the LORD and said, “From roaming about on the earth and walking around on it.” 8 The LORD said to Satan, “Have you considered My servant Job? For there is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, fearing God and turning away from evil.”

Luke 22:31 ~ Simon, Simon, behold, Satan has demanded permission to sift you like wheat

¹⁵ Johnson, *Identity and Attributes*, 125-126.

- “Satan, even at his worst, is doing God’s bidding. He is serving God’s purposes. Satan’s motives, of course, are evil. He is in total rebellion. Yet the wisdom and power of God ensure that his rebellion serves only to further God’s cause. God controls all spiritual forces...The devil exists ‘for God’, and therefore he exists to suit God’s purposes.”¹⁶

- This is why Paul can deliver a sinning believer over to Satan

1 Corinthians 5:5 ~ I have decided to deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of his flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.

- “The motives, the intent, are totally contrary, yet the act is the same. Satan aims to destroy a Christian’s soul and so he destroys his flesh; God aims to save a Christian’s soul and so he destroys his flesh through Satan. Satan’s activity is ‘approved’ or ‘allowed’ by the Sovereign Lord.”¹⁷
- Thus, as is clear from all these examples, God is providentially in control of all events in the universe, ordaining them and using them to accomplish his purposes
- Even seemingly “bad” things ultimately happen by the hand of God

Isaiah 45:7 ~ The One forming light and creating darkness, Causing well-being and creating calamity; I am the LORD who does all these.

Lamentations 3:37-38 ~ Who is there who speaks and it comes to pass, Unless the Lord has commanded it? 38 Is it not from the mouth of the Most High That both good and ill go forth?

Amos 3:6 ~ If a trumpet is blown in a city will not the people tremble? If a calamity occurs in a city has not the LORD done it?

THE PURPOSE OF PROVIDENCE

- Providence differs from sovereignty in that the term “sovereignty” does not contain the idea of purposeful action
- Sovereignty focuses on God’s right and power to do all that he wills...but it does not specifically express any design or goal
- Providence includes the idea of sovereignty but focuses on the design of God’s governing of all things...it focuses not on God’s sovereignty as powerful but as purposeful
- In providence, God sees to it that things happen in a certain way for a certain purpose
- It implies that everything in the universe is governed with a view toward his glory and the good of God’s children
- God directs all things to their appointed end, namely the consummation of the kingdom of God, the glory of Christ, and the good of his redeemed people

1 Corinthians 15:28 ~ When all things are subjected to Him, then the Son Himself also will be subjected to the One who subjected all things to Him, so that God may be all in all.

Ephesians 1:6, 10, 11, 12, 14 ~ to the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved...10 with a view to an administration suitable to the fullness of the times, that is, the summing up of all things in Christ, things in the heavens and things on the earth. In Him 11 also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will, 12 to the end that we who were the first to hope in Christ would be to the praise of His glory...14 who is given as a pledge of our inheritance, with a view to the redemption of God’s own possession, to the praise of His glory.

¹⁶ Ibid., 126-127.

¹⁷ Ibid., 128.

Philippians 2:9-11 ~ For this reason also, God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, 10 so that at the name of Jesus EVERY KNEE WILL BOW, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, 11 and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Colossians 1:18 ~ He is also head of the body, the church; and He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything.

THE IMPLICATIONS OF PROVIDENCE

We Should See a Purpose in Everything

- There is no such thing as good luck or bad luck...no fortune or misfortune...nothing happens by chance or fate
- Everything has a reason...and everything is significant
- “Like the gears on a clock, every little detail in all of human history, your life and my life included, is a part of something bigger than we could ever imagine. And God is causing all things to work out exactly as they should for our greatest good and His greatest glory. If only we could see as God sees. Can we see that this moment is working exactly as it should in order to accomplish something for God in the next month or year or decade or century? Can we believe that our God is so perfectly wise and capable, that He can direct an infinite number of wheels to accomplish one great goal? In sadness and joy and heartbreak and fulfillment. In all these things, God is lovingly orchestrating His purposes.”¹⁸

We Should Marvel at God’s Many Providences

- We must be constantly amazed at the many ways the Lord has worked in our lives to make us what we are today
- He has superintended every circumstance of our life...he has opened and closed doors...provided and denied opportunities
- Therefore we must observe God’s hand in all things!

We Should Trust the Lord Fully

- “28 – Q. What does it benefit us to know that God has created all things and still upholds them by his providence? A. We can be patient in adversity, thankful in prosperity, and with a view to the future we can have a firm confidence in our faithful God and Father that no creature shall separate us from his love; for all creatures are so completely in his hand that without his will they cannot so much as move.”¹⁹
- Paul makes clear that God carefully micromanages all that occurs in our lives for our highest good, including even our triumphs and tragedies

Romans 8:28-29 ~ And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. 29 For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren;

- “Whether life brings prosperity or poverty, well-being or disaster, health or disease, longevity or death, never am I facing random, meaningless events. I am always, always, always, always dealing with God. He, in turn, is always dealing with me. Whatever my circumstances may be, positive or negative, easy or difficult, I am always dealing with my Almighty Father, and he is always dealing with his beloved child.”²⁰

¹⁸ <https://jacobrcrouch.wordpress.com/2023/03/01/there-are-an-infinite-number-of-wheels-in-gods-providence/>

¹⁹ Heidelberg Catechism

²⁰ Johnson, *Identity and Attributes*, 129.