

GOD'S PROVIDENCE

“in Him all things hold together”

Key question

How does God work His will in the world?

Key text

Colossians 1:17

“He is before all things, and in him all things hold together”

Key Definition

Providence

Divine Providence is the active implementation of God's plan for his creation so that His strategic purposes are realized and His Son is ultimately glorified.

Introduction

1. How are we to understand the hand of God in the affairs of nature and history? Is He directly responsible for orchestrating every event with a sense of purpose and meaning for his people or does He just let things happen according to the “laws of nature”?
 - a. A couple takes fertility drugs and has seven children at one time with tax payers financial help to the tune of \$4 million. The couple is Christian claiming that the children are a miracle. In what sense are they right and how are they naive?
 - b. While praying in school three children are killed in a random shooting by another student who is angry. How is God's providence to be understood in this context?
 2. What is a miracle? Is God's work contrary to nature?
 3. Does prayer make a difference?
 4. Can we identify everything that happens as an act of God's providence?
 5. If this world is Satan's domain, in what sense is God governing it?
- A. **God's continuous relationship with his creation should motivate us to appreciate His hand in not only the miraculous but also the mundane of life.**
1. **Sustenance** - maintaining order in creation.

- **Neh.9:6** “Thou art the Lord, thou alone; thou hast made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them; and thou preserves all of them; and the host of heaven worships thee.”
- **Col.1:17** “He is before all things, and in him all things hold together”
- **Heb.1:3** “upholding the universe by his word of power”

2. **Governance** - directing creation to a purpose or end.

- The events of nature – Dan.2:37** — “You, O king, are the king of kings, to whom the God of heaven has given the kingdom, the power, the strength and the glory;” See also Mk.4:39-41; Job 9:5-9; Ps.104:14
- The acts of men - 1 Kings 22:28, 34** — “And Micaiah said, ‘If you (Ahab) indeed return safely, the Lord has not spoken by me’ . . . Now a certain man drew his bow at random, and struck the king of Israel in a joint of the armor.” **Mk.14:30** — “And Jesus said to him, ‘Truly I say to you, that you yourself this very night, before a cock crows twice, shall three times deny Me.’” See also Dan.2:21, 4:24-25, Ps.47:7-8, 66:7
- The casting of lots - Jonah 1:7** — “So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah.” **Acts 1:24, 26** — “And they prayed, and said, ‘Thou, Lord, who knowest the hearts of all men, show which one of these two Thou hast chosen . . .’ And they drew lots for them, and the lot fell to Matthias.” **Prov.16:33** — “The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord.”
- The afflictions of life - Job 5:6** — “For affliction does not come from the dust; neither does trouble sprout from the ground.” **Ex.15:26** “I will put none of the diseases on you which I have put on the Egyptians.” **Acts 13:11**, “the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you will be blind,” **Acts 12:23**, “an angel of the Lord struck him ... and he was eaten by worms and died.” **Deut.32:39** “It is I who put to death and give life. I have wounded, and it is I who heal,” **Isa.30:26** “the Lord binds up the fracture of His people and heals the bruise He has inflicted.” (Cp. Gen. 37:28 & 45:5; I Sam. 9:15,16 and 9:5-10)
- Acts of evil - Gen.50:20** — “As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good. . .” **Isa.45:7** — “The One forming light and creating darkness, causing well-being and creating calamity; I am the Lord who does all these.” **Amos 3:6** — “If a calamity occurs in a city, has not the Lord done it?”
- The care of all creation - Matt.5:45** - “he makes his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.”
- The care of his people - Rom.8:28** — “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.”

B. Romans 8:28-39 teaches us a balanced view of God's providence.

“²⁸ 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. . . . ³³ Who will bring a charge against God's elect? God is the one who justifies; ³⁴ who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us. ³⁵ Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ³⁶ Just as it is written, “*For Thy sake we are being put to death all day long; We were considered as sheep to be slaughtered.*” ³⁷ But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us. ³⁸ For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor

principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

1. We can be assured of God's loving providence. Rom.8:28
2. God's purposes have more to do with His kingdom and righteousness than our kingdom and happiness. Rom.8:33-34
3. This providence does not assure us of our dreams and worldly hopes in that it may even involve our suffering and death. Rom.8:38

C. Three postures toward life are represented by the Wisdom Books of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job.

1. **Proverbs** represents a view of life that is clearly defined by rules.
2. **Ecclesiastes** represents a view where following the rules do not seem to make a difference.
3. **Job** represents a view of life where I will follow God even when following the rules does not bring the results that I expect.

NOTE: After reading Proverbs we may have a view that is too simplistic and does not square with out experience. After reading Ecclesiastes we may be very realistic but also cynical. In reading Job we are challenged to live on the “far side” of confusion and disappointment with a tough faith in God.

D. We participate in God's providence as we pray and obey.

1. The dynamic part of God's will is a mystery that we must accept.
 - a. It involves his absolute control.
 - b. It also involves our participation in relationship with him through prayer and obedience.
2. We are promised that prayer does change things.
 - **Matt.7:7-11** “ask, seek, knock”
 - **Matt.21:22** “all things - ask in prayer - believing”
 - **1 Jn.5:14-15** the only limitations are “faith” and “God's will”
 - **Mk.11:24** “what things soever you desire”
 - **Jn.14:13-14** “Whatever you ask in My name”
 - **Phil.4:6** “let all your requests be made known to God”

E. The Christian faith has impacted the history of humanity in significant ways.

1. Giving **meaning and mission** to humanity.
 - a. The Christian gospel and call includes a missionary emphasis that extends beyond one's own culture.
 - b. The incarnation is a model for missions.
 - c. Life is defined so as to have a purpose that engages the world and heaven.
2. Giving **dignity** to all humanity.
 - a. The Biblical message pictures humanity in the image of God with great dignity.
 - b. Biblical ideas of liberty start with inner liberation of the person and only secondarily as a political and economic act.

- c. The idea of conscience as a guide for moral virtue is cultivated in Christian tradition.
 - d. The concept of person also entered Western thought by way of reflection on the Bible.
3. Missionary efforts brought **literacy** too much of the world.
- a. Literacy was restricted to the elite of Europe, Africa and South America until missionaries came.
 - b. The fact that the Gospels were written for the masses encouraged literacy among the masses.
 - c. The “grand narrative” of the Bible became the inspiration for the political hope of communities and the liberation of individuals.
4. The reformation set the stage for **modern science**.
- a. The reformers believed that God revealed himself through Scripture and in nature.
 - b. The reformers questioned conventional tradition and learning replacing it with individual investigation and free inquiry.
 - c. The Puritans promoted the priesthood of all believers and with it the anti-authoritarian attitude in matters of civil and religious polity.
 - d. Natural Theology developed as an expression of respect for what God had revealed of himself in nature.
 - e. The conflict between science and religion developed as the result of two things.
 - 1. The Enlightenment’s enthronement of reason together with the presuppositions of naturalism or materialism.
 - 2. The political competition (to dominate culture) between professional scientists and professional clerics.
5. Giving **respect to the humble** of the world.
- a. The incarnation led the way for the church to respect the least among us.
 - b. The gospel was for the poor and the sinner.

F. We should be aware of the mistakes that are often made when we talk about God’s providence.

- 1. We can error (being naive or insensitive) in the way we provide commentary on events or experiences.
 - a. We should avoid taking God’s name in vain by ascribing a meaning to events that is unwarranted. “We prayed that the storm would miss our house and it did.” We need to explain then why God would allow it to (in missing our house) destroy our neighbor’s house.
 - b. We should not talk about evil and even demonic events as the work of God even though God allows such events and can use them for good.
- 2. We should avoid limiting God’s work to only the miraculous. His hand is in the mundane also.
- 3. We should not excuse all human longings and strivings as a failure to respect God’s providence. God’s providence includes the dynamic relationship of cause and effect through human actions (prayer and behaviors motivated by longings and desires).
- 4. We should not view “walking in the light” as simply aligning our expectations with whatever comes to pass (because it is God’s sovereign decree).

5. We should not deny the reality of spiritual conflict (warfare) in this life with its victories and defeats contingent upon our beliefs and behaviors.

G. Summary

1. God actively manages his creation to realize His ultimate purposes.

- a. His purpose includes the restoration of our full humanity as image bearers of God's glory as revealed in Jesus Christ.
- b. He determines the boundaries of nations. Acts 17:26
- c. He cares for the detailed needs of His people. Matt.6:25-34
- d. He directs the events of life for our good. Rom.8:28
- e. Four models of God's management.
 1. God is a **puppeteer**. Our actions are completely controlled by a sovereign Lord who decrees whatever comes to pass as a part of a plan that brings Him glory.
 2. God is a **prophet**. When He created the world He foreknew what we would do and constructed His plan respecting our actions.
 3. God is a **restaurant manager**. He sets the menu from which we have limited choices. We can take His advice and be healthy or ignore it and suffer.
 4. God is a **wilderness guide**. He offers us His wisdom as He faces the unknown future together with us.

2. Aligning our lives with God's plan is vital to our personal peace.

- a. We must distinguish between what is "our stuff" and what is not.
- b. Distinguishing what is our stuff includes not only the events but also the timing and path that our lives might take.
- c. We are to claim by faith what is ours and not covet the things that are not for us.

3. Much but not all of God's management is clearly understood.

- a. God's normal way of managing creation we call "the laws of nature." (If we do not dress properly we get chilled. Tall good looking people tend to get better treatment than those that are short and unattractive.) God's special interventions are called "miracles" and are departures from the norm.
- b. The parts of God's management plan that we do not see falls into the large category of "mystery."

Mystery	Special revelation	Acts 13:2
Common sense	Mature insights Discerned principles Moral codes Laws of Nature	2 Cor.12:9 Matt.4:1-11 1 Cor.5:1-2 Matt.6:25-34

Pastoral advice

What should we be learning from God's providence?

1. We should resist the notion that the Biblical God is the god of deism.
2. We should be sensitive to God's hand in all areas of life but also be careful about the commentary that we provide on specific events.
3. Because God is there, all things continue.
4. We should follow Paul's example in that he was both active (running a race) and passive (writing of joy while in prison).

Questions that you should be able to answer.

1. Specific facts you should know.

- a. What are three postures toward life that are depicted in the wisdom literature of the Old Testament?
- b. In what ways is the Bible specific about God's control of the details of life?
- c. In what ways does God include us in His providence?

2. Issues that you should be able to discuss.

- a. What is the role of prayer in God's providence?
- b. What means does God use to uphold his purpose in the earth?
- c. How does Rom.8:28-39 teach a balanced view of God's providence?
- d. How active or passive should we be in our response to life?
- e. What kinds of mistakes do Christians often make when they offer commentary on God's hand in the affairs of life?