

A STUDY OF THE PROVIDENCE OF GOD

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INTRODUCTION

The Bible affirms the glorious existence of the great God of the Universe (Genesis 1:1; Hebrews 11:6). Moreover, the God of Scripture is the God of history Who has intervened in the affairs of man, His creature. He is not, however, merely a God of the past; rather, He is the eternal “I AM” (Exodus 3:14), the One “who is and who was and who is to come” (Revelation 1:4). Those who have a reverent regard for Almighty God do not doubt His movement in today’s world. It is, though, vitally important that we understand exactly **how** the Lord works.

SOME BASIC IDEAS CONCERNING GOD’S ACTIVITY IN THE WORLD

There are several basic ideas that men entertain concerning the working of God in His world.

(1) **Some men assert the ideology of deism.** Exactly what is deism? “Deism is the view that regards God as the intelligent Creator of an independent and law-abiding world but denies that he providentially guides it or intervenes in any way with its course of destiny” (Harvey, 1964, p. 66). Since deists generally deny God’s intervention in His creation, it follows that they would refuse to recognize the biblical truths of incarnation, the atonement, the authority of the Scriptures, miracles, the church, prayer, etc. Deism is false, however, because: (a) it makes no sense that God would create the world and then adopt a “hands-off” policy toward it; (b) it attacks the love, mercy, benevolence, etc. of the Creator; and (c) it expressly denies the Scriptures and therefore leaves unexplained the great divine events of history.

(2) **Some men affirm God’s activity in the world, yet interpret almost everything as a miracle.** Pentecostalism (and its kindred spirits) assumes (assume) that virtually every favorable event that transpires (especially in the life of a Christian) is miraculous. If a loved one recovers from a serious illness, God has worked a miracle! This position asserts that God works miracles every day. Those who subscribe to this notion overlook the fact that although Jehovah has used miracles in the past, they always occupied a unique role in His plan. The Lord employed miracles in the creation (Genesis 1; Psalm 33:9), and in the

revelatory process by which His redemptive will was made known (Exodus 4:1-9; Mark 16:20; Hebrews 2:2-4), but supernatural works are not being performed today. This is evinced by the fact that: (a) their purpose (i.e., the production of faith) no longer is needed; faith is supplied by the completed Scriptures (John 20:30-31; Romans 10:17); (b) the methods by which miraculous gifts were bestowed no longer are extant (i.e., Holy Spirit baptism and the impartation of the apostles' hands—Ephesians 4:5; Acts 8:18); and (c) the cessation of the age of miracles clearly was foretold by inspiration (1 Corinthians 13:8-13; Ephesians 4:8-16).*

(3) **The biblical view recognizes that God operates providentially in the world today by means of natural law.** Just as the Lord works to bring about man's salvation through spiritual laws, His ultimate purpose is enhanced in His sovereign use of natural law as well.

PROVIDENCE DEFINED

The term "providence" derives from the Latin, *providentia*, signifying "foresight." The word is used to denote the biblical idea of "the wisdom and power which God continually exercises in the preservation and government of the world, for the ends which he proposed to accomplish" (McClintock, 1968, 8:707). "Providence concerns God's support, care and supervision of all creation, from the moment of the first creation to all the future into eternity" (Tenney, 1975, 4:920). The concept of providence, therefore, is opposed to deism, which asserts God's non-interest in the world; additionally, it is the opposite of "fate" or "chance," which sees world events as uncontrollable and without any element of benevolent purpose.

At this point, the following observation needs to be made. While God exercises a **general** providence over the Universe and its creatures as a whole, there also is a **special** providential care that the Father manifests on behalf of His regenerate children. This fact is established by the doctrine of prayer. Does God hear and respond to (consistent with His will) the petitions of Christians? He most assuredly does (John 15:7; James 5:16; 1 Peter 3:12; 1 John 5:14-15), and those prayers are answered by providential means.

* For a fuller discussion of these particular points, see Jackson (no date), 1[4]:162-170.

PRINCIPLES FOR UNDERSTANDING DIVINE PROVIDENCE

It is very important that a consideration be given to certain principles that are involved in the operation of divine providence. Remember that any concept of providence one chooses to believe must be consistent with the teaching of the Bible in general.

(1) **God never operates providentially in any way that is in conflict with His nature or His revealed will.** First, since God is holy (Isaiah 6:3) and righteous (Psalm 89:14), His acts of providence always will be consistent with these traits. For instance, God never tempts people to do evil (James 1:13-14), and thus one never could conclude that the Lord has influenced men providentially to do that which is wrong. Such passages as Romans 9:17, where Jehovah “raised up” Pharaoh, must be interpreted in this light. Second, providence is implemented in harmony with Heaven’s will as revealed in the Scriptures. This means, to cite just one example, that since God has revealed the conditions for the remission of alien sins (Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38), one never should surmise that providence works in saving him in some other fashion. This is a most crucial point.

(2) **Divine providence does not negate man’s freedom of will.** As an amplification of the foregoing proposition, it must be stressed that providence never will overthrow one’s personal will power. Contrary to the theological determinism of Augustine and Calvin (i.e., the notion that man is so depraved in sin that he has lost his power of choice), the Bible teaches the freedom of the human will (Matthew 23:37; John 5:39-40; Revelation 22:17). By His providence, therefore, God will not **coerce** a person to do either evil or good, but He can use people to accomplish the divine purpose in either capacity. Note these examples:

(a) Because the wicked Assyrian “had it in his heart to destroy,” Jehovah used him as an instrument of wrath upon ancient Israel (cf. Isaiah 10:5-7).

(b) The Chaldeans were a “bitter and hasty nation,” marching across the Earth to possess dwelling places not theirs. They were terrible, dreadful, and violent; yet, God used them to punish His rebellious people. The Lord said of His purpose to bring Babylon against Judah, “I am working a work in your days,

which ye will not believe though it be told you” (cf. Habakkuk 1:5-11). God said, “**I am doing this!**” Yet He used those who were disposed to evil to accomplish the task.

(c) Again, to use the example of Pharaoh, when that base monarch decided to “harden his heart” and rebel against God (Exodus 8:15; 9:34), the Lord determined to use him and so said, “for this cause have I made thee [Pharaoh] to stand, to show thee my power, and that my name may be declared throughout all the earth” (Exodus 9:16). The decisiveness of that contest has echoed across thirty-five centuries of history!

(d) Near the end of Jesus’ ministry, the Jewish rulers gathered to consider the fate of the Lord. On this occasion, Caiaphas, the high priest that year, said to them: “Ye know nothing at all, nor do ye take account that it is expedient for you that one should die for the people, and that the whole nation perish not.” The inspired apostle John commented upon this saying, “Now this he said not of himself; but being high priest that year, he prophesied that Jesus should die for the nation; and not for the nation only, but that he might also gather together into one the children of God that are scattered abroad” (John 11:49-52). Hendriksen has noted that this cannot mean that Caiaphas was **forced** to say what he did.

He said what he wanted to say, and the responsibility for the wicked meaning which his words conveyed remains entirely his own. Yet, in God’s wonderful providence, the choice of words was so directed that these same words were capable of expressing the gist of God’s glorious plan of salvation.... This passage affords a glimpse into the mystery of the wonderful relationship between the divine counsel and providence, on the one hand, and the exercise of human responsibility, on the other (1954, 2:164).

(e) Similarly, as we shall note more precisely presently, the Lord may open doors of opportunity for the voluntary accomplishment of this will, but men must use their volitional faculties and step through (cf. Acts 14:27)!

(3) **The providential must be distinguished from the miraculous.** A miracle is God’s working on a plain that is above that of natural law; providence is His utilization of natural law. In a miracle, the Lord works **directly**; in providence, He operates **indirectly**, employing means to accomplish the end. A writer of the past century has captured the essence of this quite well:

Providence [is] the conduct and direction of the several parts of the universe by a superior intelligent Being. The notion of a providence is founded upon this truth, that the Creator has not so fixed and ascertained the laws of nature, not so connected the chain of second causes, as to leave the world to itself, but that he still preserves the reins in his own hands, and occasionally intervenes, alters, restrains, enforces, suspends, etc., those laws by a particular providence (Watson, 1881, p. 863).

Let us note several instances of God's operation by the miraculous on the one hand, and by providential means on the other.

(a) Before Mary was sexually intimate with Joseph, and so while yet a virgin, she "was found with child of the Holy Spirit" and subsequently gave birth to baby Jesus (Matthew 1:18-25; Luke 1: 30-37). The virgin birth was the fulfillment of Isaiah's "sign" (Isaiah 7:14), and indeed was a miracle (Elkins, 1977, pp. 250ff.). The impregnation of Mary was a supernatural act as a result of God's direct power. By way of contrast, Hannah, of Old Testament fame, whose womb had been "shut up" (1 Samuel 1:6), prayed fervently to Jehovah requesting a son, whom she then promised to give to the Lord all the days of his life. Scripture says that "Jehovah remembered" Hannah and when Elkanah her husband "knew her" [a biblical term for sexual union], she conceived and brought forth a son (1 Samuel 1:19-20). Here, by means of the law of procreation, God intervened and sent a child into the world a child who grew up to become the great prophet, Samuel. And so, two children were sent into the world—the one a prophet by means of providence and the other, God's Son, by means of a miracle!

(b) In the reign of king Hezekiah, Sennacherib, king of Assyria, came against all the fortified cities of Judah and conquered them (Isaiah 36:1). The pagan monarch's army came right to the northwestern edge of Jerusalem where, according to Sennacherib's *Annals*, he imprisoned Hezekiah "like a bird in a cage." The king of Judah sought deliverance from the Lord. Through the prophet Isaiah, Jehovah promised to deal with the heathen invaders. Here is how He did it. In one night's time, "the messenger of Jehovah went forth, and smote in the camp of the Assyrians a hundred and fourscore and five thousand; and when the men arose early in the morning, behold, these were all dead bodies" (Isaiah 37:36). God destroyed the Assyrian host via a devastating miracle. On the other hand, and no less remarkably, of Sennacherib Jehovah said: "Behold I will put a spirit in him, and he shall hear tidings, and shall return unto his own land; and I will cause him to fall by the sword in his own land" (Isaiah 37:7). The king did return

to his homeland where, while he was worshipping in the house of a false god, “his sons smote him with the sword” (37:38). **That’s providence!***

(c) When Jesus and His disciples were caught in a violent storm on the Sea of Galilee, the Lord “rebuked the winds and the sea; and there was a great calm” (Matthew 8:26). Here, deity controlled the weather **miraculously**. In another instance centuries earlier, after Israel had suffered a divinely caused drought for three-and-one-half years, Elijah prayed and Jehovah sent rain. First, there came a little cloud from out over the Mediterranean Sea that appeared to be about the size of a man’s hand; then, “the heavens grew black with clouds and wind, and there was a great rain” (1 Kings 18:44-45; cf. James 5:16-18). That, of course, is the way rain always comes to Palestine, but in this instance God was directing the elements of the weather providentially. And it might be noted in this connection that this was a wonderful demonstration of Jehovah’s great power over Baal, a pagan deity who was worshipped as “the storm god” (Frank, 1975, p. 52). There is, therefore, a difference between miracles and providence.

(4) **In providence, God works behind the scenes.** A miracle, from the very nature of the case, is designed to be demonstrable. It is an open, exceedingly dramatic event. Even the enemies of Christianity could not deny the powerful signs performed by the apostles of Jesus (cf. Acts 4:14-16). Providence, however, is quite different. I sometimes say that providence is a “provable/non-provable” proposition. On the surface, that sounds like a contradiction, but it is not since I am using the terms “provable” and “non-provable” in two different senses. Providence is provable. That is, we know that God works in this fashion, because the Bible so plainly teaches it; it is a fundamental Bible truth affirmed from beginning to end. However, providence is non-provable in the sense that no person can point to particular circumstances of his or her life and confidently assert, “I **know** that this was the providential intervention of God at work!” It very well may have been, but there is no way to document one’s subjective feelings about an event. It is like prayer. We are confident that God answers prayer, for the Bible positively declares it; but subjective assertions regarding prayer prove nothing. Deceived people constantly are claiming that they have petitioned the virgin Mary or some “saint” and have been answered, but their claim is meaningless.

* Compare also the death of king Ahab as an example of providence in action (1 Kings 21:19; 22:30-38).

So, while it is true that God does work in the lives of men, they frequently are unaware of it. We may suspect it, believe it, hope it to be the case, and even act in such a way as to accommodate it; but, in the final analysis, we walk by faith and not by sight (2 Corinthians 5:7). Let us note some examples that may prove helpful.

(a) Joseph and his brethren certainly were instruments in the providential hand of God “to preserve [the] life” of the Hebrew nation, as Genesis 45:4ff. reveals clearly. Yet, it is certain that those brethren were unaware of this fact, and there is no reason to believe that Joseph understood the matter in his earlier years.

(b) Jehovah used Cyrus, the Persian king, to deliver the kingdom of Judah from Babylonian captivity (2 Chronicles 36:22-23). Of that king, God said: “I will gird thee, **though thou has not known me**” (Isaiah 45:5).

(c) There certainly is no doubt in the mind of the serious Bible student that Esther, the queen-wife of Ahasuerus, was a vessel used of God in saving the lives of those Jews threatened by the wicked Haman. However, at the time Mordecai even surmised, “And **who knoweth** whether thou art not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?” (Esther 4:14).

(d) Onesimus was a slave who had run away from his master, Philemon. Having made his way to Rome, he came into contact with the apostle Paul, who converted him to Christ (Philemon 10). Sometime later, the apostle sent this slave home, urging Philemon to receive him as a beloved brother. In this connection, Paul says: “For perhaps [Greek, *tacha*, “possibly”] he was therefore parted from thee for a season, that thou shouldest have him forever” (Philemon 15). Paul sees the possibility of providence here, but not even he, though inspired, knew for sure. Lenski is right on target: “Paul says ‘perhaps,’ for God’s providential purposes are veiled; even Paul can speak of them only tentatively” (1961, p. 966).

THE SCOPE OF DIVINE PROVIDENCE

From the vastness of the entire Universe, to the very hairs of one’s head, the providential interest of the Lord is manifested. Let us illustrate the scope of His majestic concern.

(1) **The Universe.** In a grand exaltation of Christ, the writer of Hebrews declared that the Savior is “upholding all things [i.e., the entire Universe—WJ] by the word of his power” (Hebrews 1:3). Moreover, “in him all things consist [Greek, *sunistemi* “stand together”]” (Colossians 1:17). “Christ is the controlling and unifying force in nature” (Robertson, 1931, 4:479).

(2) **The forces of nature.** God is in control of the forces of nature. He maintains the continuity of the seasons (Genesis 8:22), and He “covers the heavens with clouds...prepares rain for the earth...makes grass to grow upon the mountains” (Psalms 147:8). He controls the Sun and stars (Job 9:7), “by his breath ice is given” (Job 37:10), “he gives snow like wool; he scatters the hoar-frost like ashes. He casts forth his ice like morsel; who can stand before his cold? He sends out his work, and melts them; he causes his wind to blow, and the waters to flow” (Psalm 147:16-18), and “he left not himself without witness, in that he did good, and gave you from heaven rains and fruitful seasons” (Acts 14:17).

(3) **The animal creatures.** Since the life of every living thing is in the hand of God (Job 12:10), one is not surprised to learn that God maintains and uses His animal creation. Though animals neither sow, nor reap, nor gather barns, God feeds them (Matthew 6:26). He “gives to the beast his food, and to the young ravens which cry” (Palm 147:9); indeed, “the young lions roar after their prey, and seek their food from God” (Paslam 104:21). Not even a bird falls to the earth except by the Father’s will (Matthew 10:29).

God not only exercises a **general** providence over the animal kingdom, but can employ His creatures in a **special** way as well. For example, He provided a “ram caught in the thicket by his horns” for Abraham (Genesis 22:13), and sent quails into the bread brought by ravens (1 Kings 17:6). The Lord sent fiery serpents to bite the Israelites (Numbers 21:6), sent she-bears to punish the lads of Bethel (2 Kings 2:23-24), and used a lion to slay a disobedient young prophet (1 Kings 13:24ff.), yet shut the lions’ mouths to protect Daniel (Daniel 6:22). These cases were not mere poetical references; rather, they were actual historical cases.

(4) **God and the nations.** Since the fall of man, Almighty God has been working a plan designed to effect the redemption of sinful humanity. This “scheme of redemption” operated in view of the first com-

ing of Christ, and will be culminated by the Second Coming of the Lord. To implement His purposes, God has worked providentially among the nations of the world. He is “ruler over the nations” (Psalm 22:28). He rules in the kingdoms of men, setting over them whomever He will (Daniel 4:17), removing kings and setting them up (Daniel 2:21). He can elevate a “Daniel” or a Joseph” providentially to power (Daniel 2:48; Genesis 41:41; 45:9), or drive a Nebuchadnezzar from the throne (Daniel 4:28ff.). Elsewhere I have given more attention to this point (Jackson, 1981, pp. 213-214).

(5) **Special providence for the people of God.** Does the person who is devoted to serving the Creator have any promise of providential advantage in this world? He certainly does! While it is true to say that God sends His rains upon the just and the unjust (Matthew 5:45), it is not to the alien, but to the saint that inspiration promises: “And my God shall supply every need of yours according to his riches” (Philippians 4:19). It must be pointed out, of course, that this most assuredly does not mean that one’s fidelity to the Lord can be measured in terms of material prosperity. The book of Job reveals that even the righteous can suffer deprivation and, by way of contrast, sometimes the tents of robbers do prosper (Job 12:6; cf. Psalm 73). This, however, does not negate the truth that providence operates in a special way for the children of Jehovah. Both history and clear biblical statements establish this. Space will allow us only a few examples.

(a) In the Old Testament era, three times each year male Jews were required to “appear before the Lord in Jerusalem” to celebrate certain feasts. In connection therewith, God promised, “neither shall any man desire thy land, when thou goest up to appear before Jehovah thy God three times in the year” (Exodus 34:23). Thomas Horne observed that “it is a well known fact that the Jews constantly attended these ceremonies without any fear of danger, and that their most vigilant enemies never invaded or injured them during these sacred seasons” (1841, 2:122). Adam Clarke wrote:

What a manifest proof was this of the power and particular providence of God! How easy would it have been for the surrounding nations to have taken possession of the whole Israeliteish land, with all their fenced cities, when there were none left to protect them but women and children! Was not this a standing proof of the Divine origin of their religion, and a **barrier** which no deistical mind could possibly surmount! (n.d., 1:477, emp. in orig.).

(b) No study of providence would be complete without a reference to the Old Testament narratives concerning Joseph and Esther. I will not attempt to discuss those cases here since they are masterfully treated in that volume simply called *Sermons*, by the late, great J.W. McGarvey. This book still is in print, although the lessons were delivered almost a century ago. In a magnificent way, McGarvey demonstrated how the special providence of the Lord was wrought in the lives of Joseph and Esther. These sermons are “must” reading for the serious Bible student.

(c) The law of Moses demanded that every seventh year and every fiftieth year be observed as sabbatical years. In these years, the Israelites were neither to sow nor to reap. How were they to survive in these periods when the land was enjoying its rest (cf. Leviticus 25)? Especially would this seem to be a critical problem when, at the time of Jubilee (the fiftieth year), the land would have to go unattended for both the forty-ninth and fiftieth years! Well, God promised that in such circumstances He would give them a **three-year crop in one year** (Leviticus 25:20-21). Jehovah thus challenged them to trust His providence! Sadly, however, they did not and so had to suffer for it (2 Chronicles 36:21). Oh, how we rob ourselves when we exercise weak faith!

(d) Of the numerous instances of providence found in the inspiring life of the peerless apostle Paul, one will illustrate our point. While on this third missionary trip, Paul, from Corinth in Greece, penned his epistle to the Romans (Acts 20:2; Romans 16:23; Acts 18:7). In Romans 1:9-10 the apostle mentioned that he continually made request (a present tense participle) that he “may come unto you in joy through the will of God” (Romans 15:30-32). God will answer that prayer in His own providential way! Note the following sequence of events:

1. Paul returns to Jerusalem where he is arrested for allegedly defiling the temple (Acts 21:28); in the night, the Lord tells him that he must bear witness at Rome (23:11).
2. To save his life from the Jewish mob, the Roman leaders have Paul taken to Caesarea by night (23:31ff.).
3. Here he is imprisoned for two years (24:27). Finally, exercising his right as a Roman citizen, he appeals to Caesar (25:11).
4. In the early autumn of A.D. 60, he is put on a ship for Rome (27:1).

5. In route, they are shipwrecked and all hope of being saved from the disaster is lost (27:20).
6. In the night, an angel appears to Paul and promises, “thou must stand before Caesar” (27:24).
7. The following spring, safe and sound, Paul and company arrive in Rome (28:16). **Prayers answered! Providence effected!**

(e) We do not have the space for the study of such rich passages as: “God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation make also the way of escape, that ye may be able to endure it” (1 Corinthians 10:13), or “And we know that to them that love God all things work together for good, even to them that are called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28). These and others thrill our hearts with glimpses of the Lord’s wonderful providence.

CONCLUSION

Belief in providence determines many of the basic attitudes of true piety. The knowledge that God watches and works in our lives teaches us to wait on Him in faithfulness, humility, and patience for vindication and deliverance (Psalms 37; 40:13ff.; James 5:7ff.).

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