

BIBLICAL TRUTH ABOUT GOD THE FATHER, SON, AND HOLY SPIRIT

Lesson 10: God is in Control

Biblical doctrine is the study of what the Bible teaches about God and other important truths. Our previous lessons have been:

1. The One True God
2. God is Three in One
3. God is Eternal Spirit
4. God is the Creator
5. God is the Sovereign Ruler
6. God is Perfect
7. God is All-Knowing (Omniscient)
8. God is All-Powerful (Omnipotent)
9. God is All-Present (Omnipresent)

MAIN TRUTH, CENTRAL SCRIPTURE, AND OUTLINE

God is sovereign—nothing and no one is outside of His control. He orchestrates all of life, from world events to the smallest details of individual lives, for the good of His people and His own glory. In His wise providence, even corrupt human instruments fulfill His eternal plans. The mystery of God's providence surpasses even the mysteries of His miracles and is the source of deepest comfort for all who trust in Him.

(Genesis 50:15-21; Acts 2:23-24)

1. God controls all things (Gen. 50:15-21)

A. God's sovereign control over circumstances

Though circumstances may fluctuate between bad and good, God meticulously controls every detail for His glory and our good (Ps. 115:3; Rom. 8:28). God providentially ordained every event in Joseph's life. The Lord determined that Joseph's father would love him more than he loved his brothers (Gen. 37:3); that his brothers would jealously hate him (37:4); attack him (37:23-24); and sell him into slavery (37:28). God determined that Joseph would be unjustly accused and condemned (39:19-20) and forgotten by the cupbearer (40:23).

B. God's sovereign purposes

God demonstrates His complete sovereignty through providentially using man's purposes to work out His own perfect purposes. His sovereign control is man's only true hope and rest. Through all of Joseph's suffering and disappointment, God never left him (Gen. 39:2, 21, 23)

and ultimately exalted him (41:40-41, 43) so that he would deliver many people from death in time of famine (50:20).

2. God controls salvation (Acts 2:23-24)

A. God's sovereign control over the cross

God's foreknowledge is determinative, and it demonstrates His sovereign control over all aspects of salvation, including the crucifixion of Christ.

B. God's sovereign control in using means

Our omniscient God utilized wicked men to bring about the eternal good of salvation to all who believe in Christ. God used the horrific murder of His own Son to bring eternal life to all His people.

A question naturally arises: how God can remain innocent of purposing evil? The key point of clarification is to recognize that God's motives and man's motives are sharply divergent. As Joseph told his brothers, "You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good" (Gen. 50:20). All that God is and all that He does—His motives, intentions, and actions—are always perfectly pure and good. Because of the Fall, man's motives are the opposite. They are corrupted by sin, and therefore they are culpable for the evil that motivates their intentions and actions, while God remains perfectly righteous, having both purposed and achieved only good.

MEMORY VERSES

Genesis 50:20 *But as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive.*

Isaiah 46:9-10 ⁹ *Remember the former things of old: for I am God, and there is none else; I am God, and there is none like me,* ¹⁰ *Declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times the things that are not yet done, saying, My counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure.*

Acts 2:23 *Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain.*

ADDITIONAL NOTES

The following notes are from *The Holy One: A Handbook of Biblical Truth about God*, a book being written by Pastor Stan with a projected publishing date in the early part of 2024. These notes are from a chapter entitled, "The Providence of God."

If God, after creating the world, had left the management of it in other hands, and had withdrawn to employ himself in other works, our inquiries might well follow him, and we might laudably seek to know our Creator. But God is not far from us. He did not, on making the world, leave it to itself, or commit it into other hands; but it is an object of his constant care, and his hand is concerned in all its movements.

JOHN L. DAGG (1794-1884)

Thou art all my good in times of peace, my only support in days of trouble, my one sufficiency when life shall end. Help me to see how good thy will is in all, and even when it crosses mine teach me to be pleased with it. Grant me to feel thee in fire, and food, and every providence, and to see that thy many gifts and creatures are but thy hands and fingers taking hold of me. Thou bottomless fountain of all good, I give myself to thee out of love, for all I have or own is thine, my goods, family, church, self, to do with as thou wilt, to honor thyself by men, and by all mine. If it be consistent with thy eternal counsels, the purpose of thy grace, and the great ends of thy glory, then bestow upon me the blessings of thy comforts; if not, let me resign myself to thy wiser determinations.

THE VALLEY OF VISION

DEFINITION OF GOD'S PROVIDENCE

The word "providence" comes from the Latin *pro* (before) and *video* (to see), hence the root meaning is "to see beforehand or in advance." This term involves more than simple foreknowledge, and it includes the ideas of provision, protection, preservation, government, and care. Providence is God's management of all things in His created world. God is more than a spectator of human events. Although the word itself is not found in Scripture, providence is clearly taught and illustrated throughout. Providence may be thought of simply as God's unseen hand working behind the scenes in all the details and events of life.

1. Thomas Watson: "Providence is God's ordering all issues and events of things, after the counsel of his will, to his own glory" (*Body of Divinity*, 119).

2. Ezekiel Hopkins: "Providence is an act of God, whereby, according to his eternal and most wise counsel, he preserves and governs all things, and directs them all to their ends, but chiefly to his own glory" (*Works*, 3:371).

3. *The 1646 Westminster Confession of Faith*: "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" (5.1). Following this closely is the highly regarded London Baptist Confession of 1689.

4. *The 1689 London Baptist Confession of Faith*: "God the good Creator of all things, in His infinite power and wisdom does uphold, direct, dispose, and govern all creatures and things, from the greatest even to the least, by His most wise and holy providence, to the end for which they were created, according unto His infallible foreknowledge, and the free and immutable counsel of His own will; to the praise of the glory of His wisdom, power, justice, infinite goodness, and mercy" (5.1).

5. Louis Berkhof: "Providence may be defined as that continued exercise of the divine energy whereby the Creator preserves all His creatures, is operative in all that comes to pass in the world, and directs all things to their appointed end" (*Systematic Theology*, 166).

6. R. C. Sproul: “The universe is not only dependent upon God for its origin, it depends upon God for its continuity of existence. The universe can neither exist nor operate by its own power. God upholds all things by His power. It is in Him that we live, and move, and have our being. The central point of the doctrine of providence is the stress on God’s government of the universe. He rules His creation with absolute sovereignty and authority. He governs everything that comes to pass, from the greatest to the least. Nothing ever happens beyond the scope of His sovereign providential government. He makes the rain to fall and the sun to shine. He raises up kingdoms and brings them down. He numbers the hairs on our head and the days of our life. There are no blind, impersonal forces at work in human history. All is brought to pass by the invisible hand of Providence” (*Essential Truths of the Christian Faith*, 62).

7. Wayne Grudem: “We may define God’s providence as follows: God is continually involved with all created things in such a way that he (1) keeps them existing and maintaining the properties with which he created them; (2) cooperates with created things in every action, directing their distinctive properties to cause them to act as they do; and (3) directs them to fulfill his purposes.” Grudem further discusses providence under three subtopics: preservation; concurrence; and government. (*Systematic Theology*, 315).

8. John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue: “Divine providence is God’s preserving his creation, operating in every event in the world, and directing the things in the universe to his appointed end for them” (*Biblical Doctrine*, 218).

9. Joel Beeke and Paul Smalley: “Providence is closely related to God’s decree and foreknowledge. The word *providence* (Latin *providentia*) derives from a root meaning ‘to see beforehand’ (*providere*), not in the passive sense of mere foresight and observation, but in the active sense of making all necessary arrangements for the accomplishment of one’s purposes. In providence, the God who decreed all things for his glory in Christ executes his decree in history by his preservation and control of all his creatures, and by concurrence with all their actions, so that all his purposes are accomplished” (*Systematic Theology*, 1:1059).

BASIS OF GOD’S PROVIDENCE

God’s providence is rooted in His attributes. Technically, God’s providence is classified as one of His works, such as creation and salvation. The author is treating providence as an attribute of God because it is closely related to many other attributes. The word “Providence” was widely used by our forefathers as a proper reference to God. In short, God’s providence is the outworking of His character. God does what He does because He is who He is. There is a strong connection between God’s providence and these attributes:

1. Sovereignty: God’s full authority and control over all people, things, and events
2. Omnipotence: God’s power and ability to accomplish whatever He desires
3. Omniscience: God’s perfect knowledge and wisdom to fulfill His purposes
4. Omnipresence: God’s presence is in all places. He is both transcendent (above and beyond) and immanent (involved with and near) all creatures.
5. Goodness: God always does what is best. Providence is very closely related to His goodness and is sometimes treated doctrinally as an aspect of His goodness.
6. Righteousness: God always does what is right.

7. Faithfulness: God is always reliable and trustworthy in His provision.
8. Immutability: God is unchanging in all His ways, words, and works.

SCOPE OF GOD'S PROVIDENCE

When we speak of God's providence we are referring to how God governs and preserves all things. At times God chooses to work through miracles, but His normal working is through providence. In miracles God intervenes in the normal course of things to accomplish His purpose; whereas in providence God works in and through normal, ordinary means. When a miracle occurs people often marvel, "That was the hand of God." In the everyday course of life we should also be aware that God's hand is at work in unseen ways, and His providential working should evoke our wonder and praise. Providence is sometimes referred to as God's "common grace" for all people in general, while His "saving grace" is extended only to His elect.

Louis Berkhof lists eleven areas of God's providential control: 1) over the universe at large, Ps. 103:19; Dan. 5:35; Eph. 1:11; 2) over the physical world, Job 37:5, 10; Ps. 104:14; 135:6; Mt. 5:45; 3) over the brute creation, Ps. 104:21, 28; Mt. 6:26; 10:29; 4) over the affairs of nations, Job 12:23; Ps. 22:28; 66:7; Acts 17:26; 5) over man's birth and lot in life, 1 Sam. 16:1; Ps. 139:16; Isa. 45:5; Gal. 1:15, 16; 6) over the outward successes and failures of men's lives, Ps. 75:6, 7; Lk. 1:52; 7) over things seemingly accidental or insignificant, Prov. 16:33; Mt. 10:30; 8) in the protection of the righteous, Ps. 4:8; 5:12; 63:8; 121:3; Rom. 8:28; 9) in supplying the wants of God's people, Gen. 22:8, 14; Deut. 8:3; Phil. 4:19; 10) in giving answers to prayer, 1 Sam. 1:19; Isa. 20:5, 6; 2 Chron. 33:13; Ps. 65:2; Mt. 7:7; Lk. 18:7, 8; and 11) in the exposure and punishment of the wicked, Ps. 7:12, 13; 11:6 (*Systematic Theology*, 161). John Piper explores the nature and extent of God's providence under these headings: providence over nature; providence over Satan and demons; providence over kings and nations; providence over life and death; providence over sin; providence over conversion; providence over Christian living; and the final achievement of providence in the triumph of missions, the coming of Christ, new bodies, new world, and never-ending gladness in God (*Providence*, 221-689).

Providence covers every possible thing in the universe in the physical world and in the spiritual world, in nature and animals, in people and nations, in birth and life, in our successes and failures, in things apparently accidental or unimportant; in protection and provision for God's people, in answering prayer, in saving sinners and punishing evil. The providence of God is comprehensive and includes all these areas:

1. God's preserving and maintaining all created things

Acts 17:28 *For in him we live, and move, and have our being; as certain also of your own poets have said, For we are also his offspring.*

Romans 11:36 *For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things: to whom be glory for ever. Amen.*

Colossians 1:17 *And he is before all things, and by him all things consist.*

Hebrews 1:3 *Who being the brightness of his glory, and the express image of his person, and upholding all things by the word of his power, when he had by himself purged our sins, sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high;*

2 Peter 3:7 *But the heavens and the earth, which are now, by the same word are kept in store, reserved unto fire against the day of judgment and perdition of ungodly men.*

MacArthur and Mayhue explain this aspect of providence: “God preserves all things according to their own properties as long as he wills them to exist. God preserves what he created; he does not create new atoms, molecules, and energy. God preserves the dynamics of nature in relative stability and predictability, so that science and technology are possible. But God always retains the sovereign right to suspend or end the normal processes of nature” (*Biblical Doctrine*, 220). Grudem defines preservation: “God keeps all created things existing and maintaining the properties with which he created them” (*Systematic Theology*, 316).

2. God’s concurrence in all things, events, and people

Concurrence may be defined as “God’s operation with created things, causing them (whether acting directly or ordaining them through secondary causes), through their properties to act” (MacArthur and Mayhue, *Biblical Doctrine*, 220). Grudem defines concurrence in this way: “God cooperates with created things in every action, directing their distinctive properties to cause them to act as they do” (*Systematic Theology*, 317).

Some examples would include rain and snow, grass growing, sun and stars. These have a natural explanation, but they also have a divine explanation. The botanist can explain the factors that cause grass to grow, but Scripture says that God causes it to grow. The meteorologist can explain the science of rain and snow, but Scripture says that God causes it to rain and snow. As Grudem states, “the doctrine of concurrence affirms that God *directs*, and *works through*, the distinctive properties of each created thing, so that these things themselves bring about the results that we see” (*Systematic Theology*, 319). If it rains we should thank God. If crops grow we should thank Him, and so forth. God is continuously at work in these ways:

A. Inanimate creation

Psalms 148:8 *Fire, and hail; snow, and vapor; stormy wind fulfilling his word.*

B. Animate creation

Psalms 104:24-29 ²⁴ *O LORD, how manifold are thy works! in wisdom hast thou made them all: the earth is full of thy riches.* ²⁵ *So is this great and wide sea, wherein are things creeping innumerable, both small and great beasts.* ²⁶ *There go the ships: there is that leviathan, whom thou hast made to play therein.* ²⁷ *These wait all upon thee; that thou mayest give them their meat in due season.* ²⁸ *That thou givest them they gather: thou openest thine hand, they are filled with good.* ²⁹ *Thou hidest thy face, they are troubled: thou takest away their breath, they die, and return to their dust.*

Matthew 6:26 *Behold the fowls of the air: for they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feedeth them. Are ye not much better than they?*

Matthew 10:29 *Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? and one of them shall not fall on the ground without your Father.*

C. Events that seem to be random or chance

Proverbs 16:33 *The lot is cast into the lap; but the whole disposing thereof is of the LORD.*

D. The salvation of God's people

God plans and provides everything for His people's redemption from beginning to completion. Salvation of the soul is not the result of chance, accident, or human will, but is only accomplished by the good providence of God. Paul's monumental text refers to the five golden links in the divine chain of redemption (foreknowledge; predestination; calling; justification; and glorification).

Romans 8:28-30 ²⁸ *And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.* ²⁹ *For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren.* ³⁰ *Moreover whom he did predestinate, them he also called: and whom he called, them he also justified: and whom he justified, them he also glorified.*

Ephesians 1:11 *In whom also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestinated according to the purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will.*

E. The rise and fall of nations and control of government leaders

Job 12:23 *He increaseth the nations, and destroyeth them: he enlargeth the nations, and straiteneth them again.*

Proverbs 21:1 *The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD, as the rivers of water: he turneth it whithersoever he will.*

Daniel 2:20-21 ²⁰ *Daniel answered and said, Blessed be the name of God for ever and ever: for wisdom and might are his:* ²¹ *And he changeth the times and the seasons: he removeth kings, and setteth up kings: he giveth wisdom unto the wise, and knowledge to them that know understanding.*

Acts 17:26 *And hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth, and hath determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation.*

F. All details of our lives

This would include our dates of birth and death, our parents and siblings, our physical features, our mental ability, as well as our place(s) of residence, schooling, and occupation.

Psalms 139:16 *Thine eyes did see my substance, yet being unperfect; and in thy book all my members were written, which in continuance were fashioned, when as yet there was none of them.*

Job 14:5 *Seeing his days are determined, the number of his months are with thee, thou hast appointed his bounds that he cannot pass.*

Proverbs 16:9 *A man's heart deviseth his way: but the LORD directeth his steps.*

Philippians 2:12-13 ¹² *Wherefore, my beloved, as ye have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.* ¹³ *For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure.*

Grudem concludes: “God’s providential work of concurrence extends to all aspects of our lives. Our words, our steps, our movements, our hearts, and our abilities are all from the Lord” (*Systematic Theology*, 321).

How can we reconcile God’s sovereign providence and human responsibility for the choices we make? Grudem offers this helpful insight: “It seems better to affirm that God causes all things that happen, but that he does so in such a way that he somehow upholds our ability to make *willing, responsible choices*, choices that have *real and eternal results*, and for which we are *held accountable*. Exactly how God combines his providential control with our willing and significant choices, Scripture does not explain to us. But rather than deny one aspect or the other (simply because we cannot explain how both can be true), we should accept both in an attempt to be faithful to the teaching of all Scripture” (*Systematic Theology*, 321).

3. God’s governance over all things

Psalms 103:19 *The LORD hath prepared his throne in the heavens; and his kingdom ruleth over all.*

Daniel 4:34-35 ³⁴ *And at the end of the days I Nebuchadnezzar lifted up mine eyes unto heaven, and mine understanding returned unto me, and I blessed the most High, and I praised and honored him that liveth for ever, whose dominion is an everlasting dominion, and his kingdom is from generation to generation:* ³⁵ *And all the inhabitants of the earth are reputed as nothing: and he doeth according to his will in the army of heaven, and among the inhabitants of the earth: and none can stay his hand, or say unto him, What doest thou?*

Grudem says this about the governmental aspect of providence: “God has a purpose in all that he does in the world and he providentially governs or directs all things in order that they accomplish his purposes” (*Systematic Theology*, 331). Thomas Watson illustrates how God uses various means in His providential control: “Suppose you were in a smith’s shop, and should see there several sorts of tools, some crooked, some bowed, others hooked, would you condemn all these things, because they do not look handsome? The smith makes use of them all for doing his work. Thus it is with the providences of God; they seem to us to be very crooked and strange, yet they all carry on God’s work” (*Body of Divinity*, 121).

NOTABLE EXAMPLES OF GOD’S PROVIDENCE

1. The story of Joseph

- A. Joseph’s dreams of greatness
- B. The jealousy of Joseph’s brothers
- C. Joseph’s brothers sell him into slavery
- D. Joseph becomes a servant of Potiphar
- E. Joseph is wrongly accused by Potiphar’s wife and sent to prison
- F. Joseph interprets the dreams of two fellow prisoners, Pharaoh’s butler and baker
- G. Pharaoh’s dreams are interpreted by Joseph
- H. Pharaoh rewards Joseph to a prominent position in Egypt
- I. Joseph is the administrator of food supplies in time of famine
- J. Joseph is reunited with his father and family after many years

- K. Joseph is able to provide for the needs of his father and family

Genesis 45:4-5 *4 And Joseph said unto his brethren, Come near to me, I pray you. And they came near. And he said, I am Joseph your brother, whom ye sold into Egypt. 5 Now therefore be not grieved, nor angry with yourselves, that ye sold me hither: for God did send me before you to preserve life.*

Genesis 50:20 *But as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive.*

2. The redemption of Ruth

- A. The famine that sent Elimelech and Naomi from Bethlehem to Moab
- B. The death of Elimelech and his sons, Mahlon and Chilion
- C. Naomi and Ruth's return to Bethlehem at harvest time
- D. Ruth's gleaning in the field that belonged to Boaz, a relative of Elimelech
- E. Boaz's kindness toward Ruth and his request that she continue gleaning in his field
- F. Naomi's counsel to Ruth about Boaz being a near kinsman to the family
- G. Ruth's romance with Boaz
- H. Boaz's willingness to serve as her kinsman-redeemer
- I. Boaz and Ruth become husband and wife
- J. Ruth gives birth to Obed
- K. Obed becomes the father of Jesse and the grandfather of David

The Book of Ruth begins with famine and ends with fullness; it begins with death and ends with birth; it begins with loss and ends with gain; it begins with disappointment and ends with satisfaction. All of this is due to God's providence in the details of life. God demonstrates how He works behind the scenes to accomplish His gracious purpose in the lives of His people.

Ruth 2:8-12 *Then said Boaz unto Ruth, Hearst thou not, my daughter? Go not to glean in another field, neither go from hence, but abide here fast by my maidens: Let thine eyes be on the field that they do reap, and go thou after them: have I not charged the young men that they shall not touch thee? And when thou art athirst, go unto the vessels, and drink of that which the young men have drawn. Then she fell on her face, and bowed herself to the ground, and said unto him, Why have I found grace in thine eyes, that thou shouldest take knowledge of me, seeing I am a stranger? And Boaz answered and said unto her, It hath fully been showed to me, all that thou hast done unto thy mother in law since the death of thy husband: and how thou hast left thy father and thy mother, and the land of thy nativity, and art come unto a people which thou knewest not heretofore. The LORD recompense thy work, and a full reward be given thee of the LORD God of Israel, under whose wings thou art come to trust.*

3. The drama of Esther

- A. Queen Vashti's refusal to obey Ahasuerus and her subsequent dethronement
- B. The selection of Esther as the new queen
- C. Mordecai's uncovering of the plot to assassinate the king
- D. The choosing of a certain day (by lot) on which to exterminate the Jews
- E. Esther's unauthorized entrance into the king and his willingness to accept her

- F. The king's insomnia and the reading of the record of Mordecai's deed
- G. The unexpected exaltation of Mordecai to Prime Minister
- H. The unexpected humiliation and execution of Haman on his own gallows
- I. The reversal of the king's original decree concerning the Jews

The Book of Esther clearly demonstrates there is no detail too small for God to notice; there is no situation too hard for God to handle; there is no enemy too powerful for God to defeat; and there is no need too great for Him to supply. Beeke and Smalley note that "Esther is the only book of the Bible that never mentions God by name. It contains no accounts of miracles and no prophecies. Its characters are never explicitly said to pray. Why this is the case is mysterious, but the silence is deafening. Furthermore, the book relates how God's people faced extermination by wicked Haman. The book confronts the reader with this question: Where is God? The answer that we find in Esther is that God still works when he is silent" (*Reformed Systematic Theology*, 1:1058).

4. The crucifixion of Christ

God providentially used the evil motives and actions of Judas, the Jewish leaders, the angry mob, and the Roman leaders and soldiers to accomplish His perfect will in the arrest and crucifixion of Christ. Because of divine providence we call the day of His crucifixion "Good Friday" instead of "Bad Friday."

Matthew 26:23-24 ²³ *And he answered and said, He that dippeth his hand with me in the dish, the same shall betray me.* ²⁴ *The Son of man goeth as it is written of him: but woe unto that man by whom the Son of man is betrayed! it had been good for that man if he had not been born.*

Acts 2:22-23 ²² *Ye men of Israel, hear these words; Jesus of Nazareth, a man approved of God among you by miracles and wonders and signs, which God did by him in the midst of you, as ye yourselves also know: ²³ Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain:*

5. The crucifixion and salvation of the dying thief

God's providence brought this condemned man to the right place at the right time so that he was crucified next to Christ and was converted just moments before his final breath.

Luke 23:39-43 ³⁹ *And one of the malefactors which were hanged railed on him, saying, If thou be Christ, save thyself and us.* ⁴⁰ *But the other answering rebuked him, saying, Dost not thou fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation? ⁴¹ And we indeed justly; for we receive the due reward of our deeds: but this man hath done nothing amiss. ⁴² And he said unto Jesus, Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom. ⁴³ And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, To day shalt thou be with me in paradise.*

With insight and skill John MacArthur describes God's gracious providence: "The thief was a career criminal, and Roman law had condemned him to die on a cross. Sovereign grace placed him on the same hill as the Savior, where he watched the Lord of glory die for his sins. Jesus' reply to the thief was as glorious a promise as a dying sinner could receive: *Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise* (Luke 23:43). As far as we know, those were the only

words Jesus ever spoke to the man. There was no verbal pre-evangelism, no four-point message, no appeal of any kind. But as the thief watched the sinless Savior die, faith was kindled in him. His conversion, even though it occurred as he was passing into eternity, was no less genuine than the apostle Paul's. The thief received the same everlasting life, even though his entire earthly life had been wasted in crime and disobedience. The moment his repentance wrought faith, the Savior received him into the kingdom" (*The Gospel according to Jesus*, 156-157).

OUR RESPONSE TO GOD'S PROVIDENCE

In his monumental work, *Providence*, John Piper writes: "God has revealed his purposeful sovereignty over good and evil in order to humble human pride, intensify human worship, shatter human hopelessness, and put ballast in the battered boat of human faith, steel in the spine of human courage, gladness in the groans of affliction, and love in the heart that sees no way forward" (*Providence*, 13). Piper suggests ten effects of seeing and savoring God's providence:

- 1) It awakens awe and leads us into the depth of true God-centered, Christ-exalting, Bible-saturated worship.
- 2) It makes us marvel at our own salvation and humbles us because of our sin.
- 3) It causes us to see everything as part of God's design—everything as from Him and through Him and to Him, for His glory.
- 4) It helps protect us from the trivializing effects of culture and from trifling with divine things.
- 5) It helps us be patient and faithful amid the most inexplicable circumstances of life.
- 6) It shows us that the "problem" of God's sovereignty in suffering is more than relieved by the sustaining purpose and power of His sovereignty through suffering.
- 7) It makes us alert and resistant to man-centered substitutes that pose as good news.
- 8) It makes us confident that God has the right and the power to answer prayer that people's hearts and minds would be changed.
- 9) It shows us that evangelism and missions are absolutely essential for people to be converted to Christ, because God makes them the means of His work in creating saving faith.
- 10) It assures us that for all eternity God will be increasingly glorified in us as we are increasingly satisfied in Him (*Providence*, 693-711).

In every circumstance God's people may rest upon the soft pillow of God's providence, knowing that His unseen hand is working in all the details of life for His glory and our ultimate good. We have blessed assurance in the fulfillment of God's purpose in spite of present or future adversity. B. B. Warfield said, "A firm faith in the universal providence of God is the solution of all earthly troubles" (cited in Beeke and Smalley, *Reformed Systematic Theology*, 1:1097). The counsel of James Smith is helpful: "Whatever your circumstances may be, your Father knows them, he has provided for them, he will bring you through them, and get glory to himself by them. Let the peace of God rule in your heart. Stay yourself upon the word of the Lord. Your loving Savior wishes you to be free from anxiety, to wait upon him without distraction, to honor his Father's love, by living in the exercise of calm, patient, waiting faith" (*Believer's Daily Remembrancer*, reading for February 19).

When unexplained tragedy struck Job's family, he was able to say "The LORD gave, and the LORD hath taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD" (Job 1:21). Puritan Joseph Caryl expressed Job's attitude in this way: "Lord, though all this be come upon me, yet I will not depart from thee, or deal falsely in thy covenant. I know thou art still the same Jehovah, true, holy, gracious, faithful, all-sufficient; and therefore behold me prostrate before thee, and resolving still to love thee, still to fear thee, still to trust thee; thou art my God still and my portion forever. Though I had nothing left in the world that I could call mine, yet thou Lord alone art enough, yet thou alone art all" (cited in Beeke and Smalley, *Reformed Systematic Theology*, 1:1081).

Romans 8:31-37 ³¹ *What shall we then say to these things? If God be for us, who can be against us?* ³² *He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things?* ³³ *Who shall lay any thing to the charge of God's elect? It is God that justifieth.* ³⁴ *Who is he that condemneth? It is Christ that died, yea rather, that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession 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 *As it is written, For thy sake we are killed all the day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter.* ³⁷ *Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us.*

R. C. Sproul comments: "One of the oldest sayings of the ancient church summarizes the essence of the relationship between God and His people: *Deus pro nobis*. It means "God for us." That is what the doctrine of providence is all about. It is God's being for His people. Paul is saying that no matter what we have to endure in this world as Christians, nothing has the power to sever the relationship we have to a loving and sovereign providence" (*Everyone's a Theologian*, 78).

Thomas Watson describes the believer's proper response to divine providence:

1. Admire God's providence.
2. Learn quietly to submit to divine providence.
3. Christians should believe that God's providence will work together for their good at last.
4. God's providence should be an antidote against fear, that nothing comes to pass but what is ordained by God's decree, and ordered by his providence.
5. The merciful providence of God should cause thankfulness, especially in the matter of salvation. That Christ should make himself known to us, and touch our hearts with his Spirit, when he passes by others; whence is this but from the miraculous providence of God, which is the effect of his free grace?
(*Body of Divinity*, 124-126)

In considering our response to God's providence one should acknowledge a distinct difference in the Calvinist and Arminian positions. Grudem has thoroughly addressed these different positions and the reader is encouraged to consult his helpful treatment (*Systematic Theology*, 315-351). This is a sample of Grudem's comments: "Both Calvinists and Arminians believe that our actions have real results and that they are eternally significant. Both agree that we are responsible for our actions and that we make voluntary, willing choices. Both groups will agree that God answers prayer, that proclaiming the gospel results in people being saved, and that

obedience to God results in blessing in life, while disobedience results in lack of God's blessing. But the differences are very significant. Calvinists when true to their doctrine will live with a far more comprehensive trust in God in all circumstances and a far greater freedom from worry about the future, because they are convinced, not just that God will somehow cause his major purposes to work out right in the end, but that *all things* work together for good for those who love God and are called according to his purpose (Rom. 8:28). They will also be thankful to God for *all* the benefits that come to us from whatever quarter, for the one who believes in providence is assured that the ultimate reason for all things that happen is not some chance occurrence in the universe, nor is it the 'free will' of another human being, but it is ultimately the goodness of God himself. They will also have great patience in adversity, knowing that it has not come about because God was unable to prevent it, but because it, too, is part of his wise plan. So the differences are immense." Grudem concludes with these thoughts from Calvin: 'Gratitude of mind for the favorable outcome of things, patience in adversity, and also incredible freedom from worry about the future all necessarily follow upon this knowledge... Ignorance of providence is the ultimate of all miseries; the highest blessedness lies in the knowledge of it'" (*Systematic Theology*, 347).

John Newton wisely writes about the blessings of God's providence: "An acquiescence in the Lord's will, founded in the persuasion of his wisdom, holiness, sovereignty, and goodness—this is one of the greatest privileges and brightest ornaments of our profession. So far as we attain to this, we are secure from disappointment. Our own limited views and short-sighted purposes and desires, may be, and will be, often overruled; but then our main and leading desire, that the will of the Lord may be done, must be accomplished. How highly does it become us, both as creatures and as sinners, to submit to the appointments of our Maker! And how necessary is it to our peace! This great attainment is too often unthought of, and overlooked: we are prone to fix our attention upon the second causes and immediate instruments of events; forgetting that whatever befalls us is according to his purpose, and therefore must be right and seasonable in itself, and shall in the issue be productive of good. From hence arise impatience, resentment, and secret repinings, which are not only sinful, but tormenting: whereas, if all things are in his hand; if the very hairs of our head are numbered; if every event, great and small, is under the direction of his providence and purpose; and if he has a wise, holy, and gracious end in view, to which everything that happens is subordinate and subservient; then we have nothing to do, but with patience and humility to follow as he leads, and cheerfully to expect a happy issue" (*Jewels from John Newton*, reading for January 31).

Newton continues, "So, in his kingdom of grace, he trains his people up by various exercises. He delights in their prosperity, and does not willingly grieve them. But afflictions in their present state are necessary; and his blessing makes them salutary. But this is their great privilege, that their comforts and their crosses are equally from his hand, are equally tokens of his love, and alike directed to work together for their good. He appoints the bounds of their habitations, numbers the hairs of their heads, and is their Guide and Guard, their Sun and Shield, even unto death. Here they meet with many changes, but none that unnoticed by him, none that can separate them from his love; and they all concur in leading them on to a state of unchangeable and endless joy" (*Jewels from John Newton*, reading for July 5).

Providence is a Christian's diary, but not his Bible.

THOMAS WATSON (1620-1686)

The vastness of the sway of Providence cannot be imagined. It ranges from the archangel to the microbe, from the highest heavens to the humblest anthill; nothing is too large for His grasp, nothing is small enough to elude His notice.

W. J. TOWNSEND

When people settled this country, they named a Rhode Island city "Providence." That would not happen in our culture today. The idea of divine providence has all but disappeared from our culture, which is tragic. One way in which the secular mind-set has made inroads into the Christian community is through the worldview that assumes that everything happens according to fixed natural causes, and God, if He is actually there, is above and beyond it all. He is just a spectator in heaven looking down, perhaps cheering us on but exercising no immediate control over what happens on earth. Historically, however, Christians have had an acute sense that this is our Father's world and that the affairs of men and nations, in the final analysis, are in His hands.

R. C. SPROUL (1939-2017)