Basic Christian Theology

First Baptist Church Dandridge
Dr. Justin Terrell
justin@fbcdandridge.org

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Theology: The Doctrine of God (4)

1. Divine Providence

   a. **Definition**: God's sovereign power to order and arrange events and people to accomplish his divine purposes.

      - **Quote**: "…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." (Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* 166).

   b. **Sovereignty:** According to the doctrine of God's sovereignty, he has complete power and authority over everything in creation. As Charles Spurgeon once noted, God even controls every speck of dust floating through the air in a sunlit room. Therefore, God controls everything in creation to fulfill his purposes—even controlling human activity and evil. In fact, as Joel Beek summarizes, Scripture mentions God controlling the weather, plants and animals, the nations of mankind, the life and decisions of humans, Satan and demons, and the sins of humans. To be clear, God doesn't cause sin (James 1:13), but he can utilize human sin to accomplish his purposes (Gen. 50:20; Acts 2:23; 4:27-28).

      - **Psalm 148:8** – "*Praise the LORD from the earth, you great sea creatures and all deeps, fire and hail, snow and mist, stormy wind fulfill his word!*"

      - **Jonah 1:17** – "*And the LORD appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah.*"

      - **Daniel 4:17** – "*…to the end that the living may know that the Most High rules the kingdoms of men and gives it to whom he will and sets over it the lowliest of men.*"

      - **1 Samuel 2:6-7** – "*The LORD kills and brings to life; he brings down to Sheol and raises up. The LORD makes poor and makes rich; he brings low and he exalts.*"

      - **Job 1:12** – "*And the LORD said to Satan, 'Behold, all that he has is in your hand. Only against him do not stretch out your hand.' So Satan went out from the presence of the LORD.*"

- Genesis 50:20 – "*As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today*."

- Acts 2:23 – "*This Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men*."

c. Concurrence: Inside the workings of God's providence is divine "concurrence," which is the doctrine that God uses the actions of humans to accomplish his purposes in the world. In other words, God is the first cause, but he uses secondary causes (humans) to fulfill his will. While the dynamics of this doctrine combine God's sovereignty and human agency, God's will is always accomplished.

- Quote: "The nature of God's 'concurrent' or 'confluent' involvement in all that occurs in his world, as—without violating the nature of things, the ongoing processes, or human free agency—he makes his will of events come to pass, is mystery to us" (J.I. Packer, Concise Theology 73-73).

- Joshua 11:6 – "*And the LORD said to Joshua, 'Do not be afraid of them, for tomorrow at this time I will give over all of them, slain, to Israel. You shall hamstring their horses and burn their chariots with fire*."

- Question: If a person needed serious financial help, could God drop a sack of cash into their living room? (Yes). Is that how he operates? (No). Why not? Because he has chosen to be glorified by working through human decisions and actions to accomplish his will.

2. Miracles

a. Definition: According to Wayne Grudem, "*a miracle is a less common kind of God's activity in which he arouses people's awe and wonder and bears witness to himself.*" Milard Erickson declares that miracles are "*supernatural works of God's providence which are not explicable on the basis of the usual patterns of nature*." A more specific definition is offered by Richard Mayhue: A miracle is "*an observable phenomenon delivered powerfully by God directly or through an authorized agent, whose extraordinary character captures the immediate attention of the viewer, points to something beyond the phenomenon, and is a distinctive work whose source can be attributed to no one else but God.*" Therefore, miracles are supernatural works from the hand of God; events or activities that are beyond explanation; they defy the principles of logic, physics, and nature; and they leave us truly amazed.

b. Descriptions: Throughout the Bible, miracles are often described in different ways.

- Signs: An act or event that points a person to something beyond the act or event itself. In the miraculous sense, the act would point people to God. John 2:11, "*This, the first of his*

signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory. And his disciples believed in him."

- Wonders: An act or event that leaves people amazed or astonished, often startling a person or creating reverent fear. Acts 2:43, "*And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles.*"

- Miracles: An act or event that displays great power and might, pointing one to God. Acts 19:11, "*And God was doing extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul.*"

- Mighty Works: A work often performed by Christ that no one else could do. Mark 6:2, "*What is the wisdom given to him? How are such mighty works done by his hands?*"

c. Purposes: Why does God perform miracles?

- To magnify his glory: Everything that God does is aimed to bring glory to himself. When God performs a miracle, his primary goal is to reveal his glory to others.

- To authenticate the gospel: There are times when God will help people believe the gospel by performing a miraculous sign as evidence of the truth.

- To preview the final kingdom of God: Miraculous works were performed to give a preview of what life in the final kingdom will be like (e.g., no blindness, sickness, death, etc.).

- To graciously help people in need: When Jesus performed a miracle, he often did it out of compassion for those who were suffering or had serious needs. Therefore, the miracle was an act of grace and mercy.

3. Angels and Demons

a. Angels: As God maintains and rules over creation (providence), Scripture teaches that he utilizes a group of supernatural beings known as angels. Angels are not divine or eternal creatures, but were created to carry out God's will in the invisible/heavenly realm. We find evidence of angelic work in thirty-three books of the Bible (213 times in the Old Testament and 176 times in the New Testament. While the Bible doesn't give us a precise number of angels, it states that there are "*multitudes*" (Heb. 12:22) and "*myriads*" (Ps. 68:17), and they are "*innumerable*" (Matt. 26:53). However, of the original number of angels, a third of the angelic realm followed Satan and were expelled from heaven (Rev. 12:3-4).

- Nature: Angels are spiritual beings (Heb. 1:14) that have been given incredible power to accomplish God's will in supernatural ways (2 Peter 2:2). In addition, they are morally righteous (1 Tim. 5:21) and display emotions (Luke 15:10).

- Organization: Scripture indicates that Michael is the "*archangel*" (Jude 6), and leads the angelic army (Rev. 12:7-8). He will blast the final trumpet announcing the return of Christ (1 Thess. 4:16). There are also Cherubim and Seraphim.

- Purpose: The primary ministry of angels is to worship and serve God (e.g., praising God, delivering messages, suppressing demons, exercising judgment, etc.). However, God also uses angels to bless and protect believers. Hebrews 1:14, "*Are [angels] not all ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation*."

b. Fallen Angels: Following Satan's rebellion toward God, Scripture reveals that one-third of the angels rebelled with him and were expelled from heaven (Rev. 12:3-4). These rebellious beings are known as "fallen angels" or "demons," and they are led by the ultimate fallen angel, Satan. The Devil and his demonic forces continue to rebel against God in the world.

- Satan: In Scripture, Satan is regarded as a person, not a symbol or myth. He is filled with pride, anger, and a desire to destroy God and his people. Satan slanders, lies, and accuses; tempts people with sin; harasses believers with doubt, fear, and confusion; inspires false teachers, and will one day empower the Antichrist. However, he isn't divine, meaning that he isn't omnipresent, omnipotent, omniscience, etc. In fact, he only operates without the bounds of God's control and permission. In the end, Satan will be thrown into the lake of fire for eternal judgment (Rev. 20:1).

- Demons: In Scripture, demons carry out the work of Satan in opposing God and believers. They do not appear in bodily form, but can possess humans for their purposes (Matt. 17:14-18). Demons oppose the work of holy angels; blind humans to the gospel; inflict pain and illnesses; promote false teaching; and tempt humans with sin. However, these evil spirits will join Satan in eternal judgment.