

# PROVIDENCE

By Dennis Cornish

Providence is a very common word used throughout Scripture, a word that is fundamental to our being able to understand God's sovereign will for us within His redemptive plan, but the question is how do we go about unraveling the depth of its meaning so that the significance of its richness permeates every fiber of our being and enables us to glorify Him to the utmost. On the topic of this question John Calvin wrote, "Ignorance of providence is the greatest of all miseries, and the knowledge of it the highest happiness" (Institutes 1.17.11)

As Christians we are naturally drawn to the praise and worship of God; and we thankfully do so, but at the same time we may question our own ability to do it in a way that is fully honoring to Him. Thankfully, we can enhance our proficiency in praise and worship of Him by taking the time to think and meditate upon the divine providence of God's purposes in and for our lives. This can be a broad corporate view which encompasses all of God's elect, but the most effective means for us individually is to focus on the mystery of God's providence in our own lives. We must earnestly review every aspect of our personal lives and the experiences that we have gone through that may have changed the course of our lives or solidified the path that He put us on to begin with. We can start the journey by simply defining the doctrine of divine providence as the Christian understanding of God's continuing action by which all creation is preserved, supported, and governed by God's purposes and plans for human history and for individual human lives, therefore we can be confident that God's providence can be further defined as the active outworking of God's sovereignty in everything no matter how insignificant we might improperly attribute to it. This fact should bring to mind Proverbs 16:33 where we read: *"The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord."* I can remember when I was eight years old that my older brother was scheduled to fly back to the mid-west from California and in God's providence something came up where my mother had to cancel his flight. It turned out that the flight that he was scheduled to be on crashed into another jet liner over the Grand Canyon on June 30, 1956 and everyone on both planes lost their lives. I praise God for my mother's

decision, but I know that whatever the reason that she decided to cancel my brother's trip was ultimately because of God's providence.

Sometimes these examples of Divine provision are known as the invisible hand of God's providence, and I can think of no more dramatic functioning of this concept as that which is found in the book of Ester. Nowhere within the pages of this book do we find the name of God, but the events that unfold within it are unmistakably the providence of God being made manifest in every aspect and detail of what we read in its pages. The Lord was and is directing all things. His invisible hand of providence steers the course of kings and the unfolding of history, and in this we can be confident that He is in charge even when He seems to be disassociated from the events of our lives.

The Westminster Shorter Catechism defines providence in this way: "God's works of providence are, His most holy, wise, and powerful preserving and governing of all His creatures and all their actions" (Q&A II). We must always remember that the Lord's sovereignty is not His passive permission but that it is His active control over all things.

The English word providence is derived from two Latin words: *pro*, which means "before," and *vide*, which means "see." With respect to divine providence, a key aspect of its meaning is that it refers to God's foresight. God has established all that will be, and this means that He knows the future, having declared "*the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things not yet done*" (Isaiah 46:10). He is omniscient and therefore has complete knowledge of all that has happened and all that will happen, with this fact on its own repudiating the heresy of those who claim that He looks to the future for how man will react to His precepts before He chooses them as His elect. These same naysayers also ignore the fact that God exists without beginning or end and is not limited by a past, present, or future, but rather experiences all of time at once. This divine attribute indicates that God is the author and governor of time itself, which began when He created the universe. Therefore, for God, there is no succession of moments; all events are eternally present, allowing God to see and experience all of history, past, present, and future simultaneously.

It is His will alone that determines whatever happens; He is sovereign and has ordained all that comes to pass. Our God is in control and while we cannot fully

comprehend the depths of God's ways, we can still affirm the truth that *"For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be glory forever. Amen* (Romans 11:36)". Dr. John Tweeddale, a professor of theology at Reformation Bible College in Sanford, Florida, states that: "the doctrine of providence reminds us that while the precise purposes of God may be veiled from our sight, we can still draw comfort from knowing that whatever befalls us comes from God's good and wise plan for our lives".

Prayerful introspection, with an essential level of intensity, will effectively bring to the forefront of our minds all that God has done for each of us in our fallen state, those things that we may have sinfully attributed to coincidence or fate. As an integral part of our self-examination, we might just find that we have been guilty at some point in our lives of having fallen into the worldview of attributing God's providence to fixed and scientifically proven causes that are merely a natural outworking within a settled universe and therefore are not subject to divine intervention. "We are living in a day when the secular world takes it for granted that the universe is not subject to something or someone outside of itself. The lack of references to God's control or purpose in science, history, and popular culture reveals a view that the universe is a closed system and that everything that occurs within it can be summarized into impersonal or spontaneous reactions within a godless system and can be seen as a measured and natural occurrence. This has not always been the case; a study of the past reveals that this assumption of a closed system is relatively new for Western civilization. As we read the writings of scientists, historians, composers, philosophers, and other thinkers who lived long ago, we find repeated references to the Hand of divine providence." <sup>1</sup>

In their acceptance of the world's aberrant view, some people in the church have succumbed to living as practical atheists, failing to recognize the Lord's continual guidance and control over everything that happens. Conversely, when we resolve to look at and trace the events that have shaped our lives in-light-of God's providence, we begin to see the sanctifying tapestry that He has woven within us to make us whole. "We see not only that God saved us but also how He saved us as the Spirit helps us reflect on everything that God has been orchestrating throughout our lives to bring

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<sup>1</sup> Paraphrased from an article in *Tabletalk Magazine* (Sanford, FL, Ligonier Ministries, Inc., August 28, 2013).

about our salvation.”<sup>2</sup> This practice will begin to increase our faith and allow us to give God the prayerful thanks that He deserves from those who He has created to glorify Him. We will begin to recognize that not only has God created us, along with the entire universe, but He remains sovereignly in control of it and thereby sustains every aspect of His creation. Hebrews 1:3a reminds us that: God, through His Son and by His Spirit, *“upholds the universe by the word of His power.”* Nehemiah 9:6 also proclaims: *“You are the Lord, you alone. You have 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 you preserve all of them; and the host of heaven worships you.”*

We are to look not only at the specific events in our lives, but the order and timing of those events as well. There is a time for every season in our lives, some are seasons filled with pain and conflict whereas others are marked by a more obvious spiritual growth, but all are combined and unified with much prayer on our part and in conjunction with the prayers of others. We are to be immersed in Scripture and do our best to recognize the providence of God within our own lives and how His providence is connected to His promises for those who would faithfully follow His commandments. Scripture is His revealed will for our lives and if we submit to Him, it should be no surprise that He remains faithful to fulfill His promises.

We are also to recognize that God, in His sovereignty, may bring us through painful trials to accomplish His purposes, just as He had done so many times to the Israelites. We are to remember Romans 8:28 and how all things work together for the good of those who love Him and are called by His name. This verse is an anchor that secures us in our faith, it is the reassurance we long for as “we know that He is watching over and caring for us each moment. Aside from this blessed promise we have only insecurity and chaos, and nothing is certain.”<sup>3</sup> We are not to be discouraged by our present circumstances but are to faithfully submit to His sovereignty which includes His timing in our blessings. Providence is God’s tool to be used for His purposes in our lives, and it does not always remove our pain and is sometimes referred to as God’s

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<sup>2</sup> *Tabletalk Magazine* (Sanford, FL, Ligonier Ministries, Inc., February 2021).

<sup>3</sup> Paraphrased from *Tabletalk Magazine* (Sanford, FL, Ligonier Ministries, Inc., May 25, 2025).

heavy providence but viewed properly it can nurture our hope and encourage us to walk in our utter dependence upon our Lord and Savior. Job 2:10 reminds us: *“Shall we receive good from God, and shall we not receive evil?”* Our ways are not His ways, nor our timing His timing, but in everything we are to humbly serve Him in faithfulness and to lean not on our own understanding. Our contentment should always be grounded in our union with Christ. Paul tells us in Philippians 2:12-13 that we are to: *“work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.”* This is another advantage of being immersed in Scripture as we see how God is faithful and how His love and grace are seen in everything that He does for us. Our contentment in life should rest upon our knowledge of God’s character and actions, giving us the comfort that He has appointed our life for His purpose and glory. He is our Lord and Master, and we are to trust and submit to His sustaining and providential grace. This alone gives us the strength to overcome the doubts and inner turmoil that Satan continues to assail us with. Satan loves our uncertainties, and we are to put them aside in the abiding confidence that God is superintending all things for our good. We are to maintain the spiritual confidence that comes by living by faith and not by sight and continuing in the knowledge that God will provide.

In our daily interaction with the world, including within the sanctity of our churches, we may not always see or feel evidence of this truth, but going again to Romans 8:28 we can be assured that God’s providence supernaturally includes His fatherly care for His children. There is comfort and security in knowing our good Creator actively governs all things to bring about His perfect plan.

Even though life’s difficulties bring us sadness and pain His divine intervention can sustain our Christian hope and encourage us to walk in complete dependence upon Christ Jesus. Paul reminds us in 2 Corinthians 4:17-18 of the truth that: *“For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.”* We live in the darkness of a fallen world and the Puritan Thomas Watson tells us in his

book, *The Body of Divinity*, that “the providences of God are sometime dark and our eyes are dim, and we can hardly tell what to make of them; but when we cannot unriddle providence, let us believe that it will work together for the good of the elect.” We are to trust in God’s plan for our lives even while we cannot see where He will lead us. Watson also writes about the actions of sinful men stating that: “if men do not act as we would have them, they surely act as God would have them.”

Forgiveness is rarely easy. Wounds that prick the soul are hard to bear, and the Christian will incur many painful and heart-rendering wounds over the course of his life. But forgiveness is the mark of true Christianity and God’s providence reminds us that no matter how great the evil against us is or was, it is unable to undo the sovereign purposes that God has for us. God is in control, not the circumstance in our lives that Satan is attempting to use against us for our determent and his evil intent. Our Christian Walk must never be unequally yoked with bitterness, anger, or resentment.

I am reminded of a Ligonier Ministry lecture in a Theological Studies class on the providence of God and the mention of the Latin phrase “*Deus pro nobis*” which means “God is for us,” which is one of the oldest phrases in the church and can be seen in the Bible verse Romans 8:31, “*If God is for us, who can be against us?*”. The phrase signifies that, because God is on one’s side, that no earthly power can ultimately prevail against them. It is used to express comfort, reassurance, and a belief that God’s support is absolute

Providence is inexorably linked to the doctrine of concurrence, which is the Lord working in and through His creation and His creatures to bring about what He has planned. God’s righteous intentions are for His glory, although there are those who act concurrently with God’s intent, but when they do so we can see that their motivation is driven by an evil and sinful intent on their part. None-the-less, concurrence affirms that in all that occurs in our lives, it is God’s purpose to fulfill His plan for His creation and for His glory. Those whose motives are evil and act in a cross purpose with God’s intent are morally culpable and will come under His judgement for their sin. We clearly see this in the life of Joseph and the painful experiences that he endured. We have him being sold by his brothers; accused by Potiphar’s wife; imprisoned; forgotten by his fellow prisoner;

and then eventually raised into a position of power that was only second to that of Pharaoh's. Joseph was subject to grief and pain by those who sinned against him, yet God's irresistible providence preserved him for His glory. Joseph himself stated to his brothers: *"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 (Genesis 50:20)."*

Joseph, in speaking these words, does so in the spirit of divine wisdom. In the book of James, we are told: *"Let no one say when he is tempted, 'I am being tempted by God,' for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one. But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death, (verses 13-15)."*

Earlier I mentioned in our examination of God's providence in our lives that we should also look at the timing of these providential events. In this case we find that thirteen years had passed from Joseph being sold into slavery at the age of seventeen to his finding favor with Pharaoh at the age of thirty. Scripture is replete with what seem like unanswered prayers, and we can look at many examples, such as Abraham and Sarah who bore Isaac in old age, or Hannah the mother of Samuel giving birth to him late in life, or even Mary at such a young age becoming the mother of God while at the same time Elisabeth at an advanced age giving birth to John the Baptist, all which came about in God's providential timing. All things are set into motion within His perfect timing, not by our wishes or fervent prayers. We must remain faithful in acknowledging God's will not only for our lives, but the timing of those events as well.

I am compelled to include one more example of concurrence as written by Robert Rothwell in his article entitled 'God's Providence Revealed in Scripture' where he wrote: "Probably the best illustration of concurrence is the crucifixion of our Lord and Savior. As we consider the different players in the event, we see many different motivations and actions. Judas betrayed Jesus because he was motivated by money. The Jewish authorities did not like the acclaim Jesus was receiving and were threatened by His critiques. The Roman authorities just wanted the Jews to stop arguing so that their dispute would not develop into a revolt. Satan wanted to put an end to the ministry of

Christ and His attacks against the demonic kingdom. Jesus went willingly to the cross to atone for the sins of His people and to obey His Father. The Father sent Jesus to the cross to fulfill His promises to save His people. The Holy Spirit sustained Jesus on the cross so that effective atonement would be achieved and the Savior glorified. All the players in the greatest act of redemptive history had to act for the atonement to take place, and while each differed in motivations and actions, everything concurred to bring the plans and purposes of the Lord to fruition.”

With all that in mind, let’s look at the Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms with a mind to individually continue in the study of providence as we see how it is defined by this dictionary. As we look through these brief definitions, we will see that they touch on several categories that, as a subset, further define providence and in doing so, we will develop a more fully orbed understanding of just what God’s providence entails. Even with this cursory glance, we can easily see that God’s sovereign providence is multi-dimensional, but always within His will and for His purpose for all creation, including the subordinate lives that we live as His children.

### Divine Providence

we find that the concept of divine providence comes from combining the Greek word ‘pronoia’ which has the meaning of fore thought, with the Latin word ‘providentia’ which has the meaning of to provide beforehand. Putting these two terms together we find that Divine Providence is God’s maintenance, guidance, and continuing involvement with all creation, including humans, as a means of carrying out His divine purposes in history, (see Acts 4:28; Romans 8:29-30; and Ephesians 1:5, 11).

### Doctrine of Providence

This is the Christian understanding of God’s continuing action by which all creation is preserved, supported, and governed by God’s purposes and plans for human history and for human lives.

### Afflictive Providence

A term used for the sad and difficult events and situations that may be seen as part of God's providence in the lives of believers, and at times it is used to purge them from sin.

### Comfortable Providence

The providence of God perceived as refreshing us and bringing us comfort, a chief benefit of which is communion and thankfulness to God, (see also communion with God).

### Happy Providence

Those providential actions of God that bring joy and happiness; or which are means to keep one from sin, (see Matthew Henry's commentary on 1 Samuel 25:32-39).

### Preventive Providence

A term for the ways in which God may be perceived to block or prevent certain paths, perhaps to keep one from sin or from straying from God.

With this brief look at God's providence we can agree with Ephesians 1:11-12 where we read: *"In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will, so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of his glory."*