

GOD'S CONTINUING WORK: PROVIDENCE

There is probably no point at which the Christian doctrine of God comes more into conflict with contemporary worldviews than in the matter of God's providence.¹²

James Montgomery Boice

The God of Providence rules all things well. How we ought to trust him! Ever remember, our heavenly Father is God all wise, good, and omnipotent. He is too wise to err, too good to do wrong, and too strong to fail.¹³

Don Fortner

Group Work: What are the theological implications of these verses in regard to the doctrines of providence? (Genesis 45:5-7; 1 Samuel 2:7-8; 1 Samuel 6:7-10; 2 Samuel 17:14-15; Job 37:9-13; Psalm 139:1-5; Ezekiel 28:2-10; Acts 3:17-18)

¹²James Montgomery Boice, "God's Providence", *The Highway*, accessed July 3, 2015, http://www.the-highway.com/providence_Boice.html.

¹³Don Fortner, "The Providence of God," *Grace Gems*, accessed July 3, 2015, http://www.gracegems.org/13/providence_of_god.htm.

WHAT IS THE DOCTRINE OF PROVIDENCE?

God's works of providence are his most holy, wise, and powerful preserving and governing all his creatures, and all their actions (Westminster Shorter Catechism Q. 11).

*If Creation was a unique exercise of divine energy causing the world to be, providence is a continued exercise of that same energy whereby the Creator, according to his own will, (a) keeps all creatures in being, (b) involves himself in all events, and (c) directs all things to their appointed end.*¹⁴ (J. I. Packer)

*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.*¹⁵ (Wayne Grudem)

PRESERVATION¹⁶

God keeps all created things existing and he maintains the properties with which he created them.

He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds (active, purposeful control over that which is being carried) *the universe by the word of his power.* (Hebrews 1:3)

And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. (Colossians 1:17)

In him we live and move and have our being (Acts 17:28)

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. (Nehemiah 9:6)

*God, in preserving all things he has made, also causes them to maintain the properties with which he has created them. God preserves water in such a way that it continues to act like water. He causes grass to continue to act like grass, with all its distinctive characteristics. He causes the paper on which this sentence is written to continue to act like paper—so that it does not spontaneously dissolve into water and float away or change into a living thing and begin to grow! Until it is acted upon by some other part of creation and thereby its properties are changed (for instance, until it is burned with fire and it becomes ash), this paper will continue to act like paper so long as God preserves the earth and the creation that he has made.*¹⁷ (Wayne Grudem)

How can a right understanding of the preserving aspect of God's providence strengthen our intimacy with him?

How can a right understanding of the preserving aspect of God's providence strengthen our missional activity?

¹⁴J.I. Packer, *Concise Theology*, 54.

¹⁵Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 315.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 316.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 316-317.

CONCURRENCE¹⁸

God *cooperates* with created things in every action, *directing* their distinctive properties to cause them to act as they do.

*By concurrence we mean that both God and his creatures work together to accomplish God's sovereign purposes in his world.*¹⁹ (David P. Nelson)

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. (Ephesians 1:11)

1. Inanimate Creation

- *You cause the grass to grow for the livestock and plants for man to cultivate.* (Psalm 104:14)
- *Praise the LORD from the earth...fire and hail, snow and mist, stormy wind fulfilling his word!* (Psalm 148:7-8)
- *For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.* (Matthew 5:45)

2. Animals

- *These all look to you, to give them their food in due season. When you give it to them, they gather it up; when you open your hand, they are filled with good things. When you hide your face, they are dismayed; when you take away their breath, they die.* (Psalm 104:27-29)
and return to their dust.
- *Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them.* (Matthew 6:26)
- *Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father.* (Matthew 10:29)

3. Seemingly “Random” or “Chance” events

- *The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD.* (Proverbs 16:33)

4. The Affairs of Nations

- *He makes nations great, and he destroys them; he enlarges nations, and leads them away.* (Job 12:23)
- *For kingship belongs to the LORD, and he rules over the nations.* (Psalm 22:28)
- *And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place.* (Acts 17:26)
- *Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good.* (1 Peter 2:13-14)

5. All Aspects of Our Lives

- *Give us this day our daily bread...* (Matthew 6:11)
- *And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus.* (Philippians 4:19)

¹⁸Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 317-319.

¹⁹David P. Nelson, “The Work of God: Creation and Providence,” 281.

- *Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them. (Psalm 139:16)*
- *Since his days are determined, and the number of his months is with you, and you have appointed his limits that he cannot pass. (Job 14:5)*
- *Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations. (Jeremiah 1:5)*
- *In him we live and move and have our being. (Acts 17:28)*
- *I know, O LORD, that the way of man is not in himself, that it is not in man who walks to direct his steps. (Jeremiah 10:23)*
- *A man's steps are from the LORD; how then can man understand his way? (Proverbs 20:24)*
- *The heart of man plans his way, but the LORD establishes his steps. (Proverbs 16:9)*
- *For not from the east or from the west and not from the wilderness comes lifting up, but it is God who executes judgment, putting down one and lifting up another. (Psalm 75:6-7)*
- *...What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it? (1 Corinthians 4:7)*
- *... for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure. (Philippians 2:13)*

The Presence (Problem) of Evil²⁰

1. God uses all things to fulfill his purposes and even uses evil for his glory and for our good.

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)

And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. (Romans 8:28)

The LORD has made everything for its purpose, even the wicked for the day of trouble. (Proverbs 16:4)

Surely the wrath of man shall praise you. (Psalm 76:10)

And he said, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return. The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD." (Job 1:21)

And the LORD said to Moses, "When you go back to Egypt, see that you do before Pharaoh all the miracles that I have put in your power. But I will harden his heart, so that he will not let the people go." (Exodus 4:21)

For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, "For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth." So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills. (Romans 9:17-18)

2. Nevertheless, God never does evil and is never to be blamed for evil.

Woe to the world for temptations to sin! For it is necessary that temptations come, but woe to the one by whom the temptation comes! (Matthew 18:7)

²⁰Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 327-329.

For the Son of Man goes as it has been determined, but woe to that man by whom he is betrayed! (Luke 22:22)

... this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. (Acts 2:23)

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. (James 1:13-14)

3. God rightfully blames and judges moral creatures for the evil they do.

These have chosen their own ways, and their soul delights in their abominations; I also will choose harsh treatment for them and bring their fears upon them, because when I called, no one answered, when I spoke, they did not listen; but they did what was evil in my eyes and chose that in which I did not delight. (Isaiah 66:3-4)

See, this alone I found, that God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes. (Ecclesiastes 7:29)

Of the evils that infect God's world (moral and spiritual perversity, waste of good, and the physical disorders and disruptions of a spoiled cosmos), it can summarily be said: God permits evil (Acts 14:16); he punishes evil with evil (Ps. 81:11-12; Rom. 1:26-32); he brings good out of evil (Gen. 50:20; Acts 2:23; 4:27-28; 13:27; 1 Cor. 2:7-8); he uses evil to test and discipline those he loves (Matt. 4:1-11; Heb. 12:4-14); and one day he will redeem his people from the power and presence of evil altogether (Rev. 21:27; 22:14-15).²¹ (J. I. Packer)

The painful things that come into our lives are not described by God as accidental or as out of his control. This would be no comfort. That God cannot stop a germ or a car or a bullet or a demon is not good news; it is not the news of the Bible. God can. And ten thousand times he does. But when he doesn't, he has his reasons. And in Christ Jesus they are all loving. We are taught this sovereignty so that we will drink it in till it saturates our bones.²² (John Piper)

PRAYER

One of the ways God allows his creation to stay involved with him is through prayer. Prayer, which is personal communication from us to God, not only helps us know 'about' God but also helps us truly 'know' God.²³ (Wayne Grudem)

Why Does God Want Us To Pray?²⁴ (Wayne Grudem)

1. Prayer expresses our trust (faith) in God and is a means whereby our trust in him can increase.
2. Prayer brings us into deeper fellowship with God, and he loves us and delights in our fellowship with him.
3. In prayer God allows us as creatures to be involved in activities that are eternally important.
4. In praying with humble dependence we give glory to God.
5. Prayer often affects or changes the way God acts.

²¹J.I. Packer, *Concise Theology*, 56.

²²John Piper, *A Sweet and Bitter Providence: Sex, Race, and the Sovereignty of God*, (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), 136-137.

²³Wayne Grudem, *Christian Beliefs*, 48.

²⁴Wayne Grudem, *Bible Doctrine*, 158-159.

Do We Have Free Will?

*Reformed theology indeed insists that a real measure of freedom has been assigned to man by the Creator. But that freedom is not absolute and man is not autonomous. Our freedom is always and everywhere limited by God's sovereignty.*²⁵ (R. C. Sproul)

*An absolute "freedom", totally free of God's control is simply not possible in a world providentially sustained and directed by God himself. If that is what someone means by "free will," it is inconsistent with Scripture to say that we have free will. On the other hand, we are free in the greatest sense that any creature could be free—we make willing choices, choices that have real effects. We are aware of no restraints on our will from God when we make decisions, and we act in accord with our own desires. In this sense, it is certainly consistent with Scripture to say that we have "free will." Clearly we must insist that we have the power of willing choice and that our choices have real results in the universe...*²⁶ (Wayne Grudem)

How can a right understanding of the cooperating aspect of God's providence strengthen our intimacy with him?

How can a right understanding of the cooperating aspect of God's providence strengthen our missional activity?

GOVERNMENT²⁷

God has a purpose in all he does in the world and he providentially governs or directs all things in order that they accomplish his purposes.

The LORD has established his throne in the heavens, and his kingdom rules over all. (Psalm 103:9)

... and he does according to his will among the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand or say to him, "What have you done?" (Daniel 4:35)

For from him and through him and to him are all things. (Romans 11:36)

*The model is of purposive personal management with total "hands-on" control: God is completely in charge of his world. His hand may be hidden, but his rule is absolute.*²⁸ (J. I. Packer)

How can a right understanding of the governing aspect of God's providence strengthen our intimacy with him?

How can a right understanding of the governing aspect of God's providence strengthen our missional activity?

²⁵R. C. Sproul, *What is Reformed Theology?: Understanding the Basics*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2005), 27.

²⁶Wayne Grudem, *Bible Doctrine*, 151.

²⁷*Ibid.*, *Systematic Theology*, 331.

²⁸J. I. Packer, *Concise Theology*, 54.

The doctrine of providence teaches Christians that they are never in the grip of blind forces (fortune, chance, luck, fate); all that happens to them is divinely planned, and each event comes as a new summons to trust, obey, and rejoice, knowing that all is for one's spiritual and eternal good.²⁹

J. I. Packer

²⁹ J. I. Packer, *Concise Theology*, 56.