

The Providence of God **Providence Baptist Church**

I. Introduction

- A. Corydon Baptist Church, the Heidelberg Catechism, and Providence Baptist Church
- B. Heidelberg Catechism (1563) Q&A #27

Q: What do you understand by the providence of God?

A: Providence is the almighty and ever-present power of God by which God upholds, as with his hand, heaven and earth and all creatures, and so rules them that leaf and blade, rain and drought, fruitful and lean years, food and drink, health and sickness, prosperity and poverty—all things, in fact, come to us not by chance but by his fatherly hand. (Jer. 23:23–24; Acts 17:24–28; Heb. 1:3; Jer. 5:24; Acts 14:15–17; John 9:3; Prov. 22:2; 16:33; Matt. 10:29)

C. The Doctrine of Providence: Some Definitions

1. “The work of God in which He preserves all His creatures, is active in all that happens in the world, and directs all things to their appointed end” (L. Berkhof, *Summary of Christian Doctrine*, 59).
2. “God’s works of providence are his most holy, wise, and powerful preserving and governing all his creatures, and their actions” (Westminster Shorter Catechism, Q. 11).
3. “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. The model is purposeful 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” (J.I. Packer, *Concise Theology*, 54).

II. Biblical Evidence

A. God’s providential control over the universe at large

1. **Psalm 103:19** “The Lord has established his throne in the heavens, and his kingdom rules over all.”
2. **Daniel 4:35** “all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, 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?’”
3. **Ephesians 1:11** “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 . . .”
4. **Hebrews 1:3** “He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power.”

B. God’s providential control over the physical world

1. **Psalm 104:14** You cause the grass to grow for the livestock and plants for man to cultivate, that he may bring forth food from the earth...
2. **Psalm 135:6** Whatever the Lord pleases, he does, in heaven and on earth, in the seas and all deeps.

- C. God's providential control over the animals
 - 1. **Psalm 29:9** The voice of the LORD makes the deer give birth and strips the forests bare, and in his temple all cry, "Glory!"
 - 2. **Psalm 104:21, 28** "The young lions roar for their prey, seeking their food from God When you give it to them, they gather it up; when you open your hand, they are filled with good things."
 - 3. **Matthew 6:26; 10:29** "Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father."
- D. God's providential control over the affairs of nations
 - 1. **Job 12:23** "He makes nations great, and he destroys them; he enlarges nations, and leads them away."
 - 2. **Psalm 22:28** For kingship belongs to the Lord, and he rules over the nations.
 - 3. **Psalm 66:7** [the Lord] "who rules by his might forever, whose eyes keep watch on the nations—let not the rebellious exalt themselves."
 - 4. **Acts 17:26** "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 . . ."
- E. God's providential control over our birth and lot in life
 - 1. **Psalm 139:16** "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."
 - 2. **Galatians 1:15-16** "But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with anyone . . ."
- F. God's providential control over the outward successes and failures of our lives
 - 1. **Psalm 75:6-7** "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."
 - 2. **Luke 1:52** "he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate . . ."
- G. God's providential control over things seemingly accidental or insignificant
 - 1. **Proverbs 16:33** "The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord."
 - 2. **Matthew 10:30** "But even the hairs of your head are all numbered."
- H. God's providential control in the protection of the righteous
 - 1. **Psalm 4:8** "In peace I will both lie down and sleep; for you alone, O Lord, make me dwell in safety."
 - 2. **Psalm 5:12** "For you bless the righteous, O Lord; you cover him with favor as with a shield."
 - 3. **Psalm 63:8** "My soul clings to you; your right hand upholds me."
 - 4. **Romans 8:28** "And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose."
- I. God's providential control in provision for His people
 - 1. **Deuteronomy 8:3** "And he humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that he

- might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.”
2. **Philippians 4:19** “And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus.”
- J. God’s providential control in giving answers to prayer
1. **Psalms 65:2** “O you who hear prayer, to you shall all flesh come.”
 2. **Matthew 7:7-11** “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!”
 3. **Luke 18:7-8** “And will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?”
- K. God’s providential care in the exposure and punishment of the wicked
1. **Psalms 7:12-13** “If a man does not repent, God will whet his sword; he has bent and readied his bow; he has prepared for him his deadly weapons, making his arrows fiery shafts.”
 2. **Psalms 11:6** “Let him rain coals on the wicked; fire and sulfur and a scorching wind shall be the portion of their cup.”

III. Preservation

- A. God “preserves” all things. That is, He *keeps* all created things existing and *maintains* the properties with which He created them.
- B. He keeps all created things existing . . .
1. **Hebrews 1:3** He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he *upholds the universe* by the word of his power.
 2. **Colossians 1:16-17** For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things *hold together*.
- C. He maintains the properties with which He created them . . .
1. Water continues to act like water; grass continues to act like grass; etc.
 2. Given this truth, we see how **God provides a basis for science**: God has made and continues to sustain a universe that acts in predictable ways.

IV. Concurrence

- A. “God cooperates with created things in every action, directing their distinctive properties to cause them to act as they do” (Wayne Grudem, *Bible Doctrine*, 143; see Scripture verses above).
1. “Another aspect of providence is called *concurrence* We are creatures with a will of our own. We make things happen. Yet the causal power we exert is secondary. God’s sovereign providence stands over and above our actions. He works out His will through the actions of human wills, without violating the freedom of those human wills” (R.C. Sproul, *Essential Truths*, 62).

2. Joseph and his brothers: **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.”
- B. The question of evil and free will . . .

V. The Question of Evil

A. The Questions

1. What is the relationship between God and evil in the world?
2. Does God actually cause the evil actions that people do? If so, is God not responsible for sin?

B. Important biblical passages that show God using the evil deeds of willful moral creatures:

1. The story of Joseph: Joseph’s brothers were wrongly jealous of him (Gen. 37:11); hated him (Gen. 37:4,5,8); wanted to kill him (Gen. 37:20); and wronged him by throwing him into a pit and selling him into slavery (Gen. 37:24, 28). And yet Joseph could say in the end: **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.”
2. The story of the exodus from Egypt and God hardening the heart of Pharaoh (cf. Ex. 4:21; 7:3; 9:12; 10:20, 27; 11:10; 14:4, 8). And, yet, Pharaoh hardens his own heart (Ex. 8:15, 32; 9:34).
 - a. [Paul reflecting on Ex. 9:16]: **Romans 9:17** “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.” (cf. **Romans 9:18** “So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills.”)
 - b. God is seen hardening the hearts of the Egyptian people as well: **Exodus 14:17** “And I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians so that they shall go in after them, and I will get glory over Pharaoh and all his host, his chariots, and his horsemen.”
3. The story of Job
 - a. **Job 1:21** 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.”
 - b. **Job 1:22** In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrong.
 - c. Job looks beyond the secondary causes of his calamity (Satan, Sabeans, Chaldeans, windstorm) and with eyes of faith sees things as ultimately from the hand of the Lord. Indeed, Job does not blame God for evil or charge God with anything wrong.
4. The crucifixion of Jesus
 - a. **Acts 2:22-23** “Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know—this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men.”
 - b. **Acts 4:27-28** “for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, *to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place.*”

- C. Essential Affirmations (see Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 434–437)
1. “God uses all things to fulfill his purposes and even uses evil for his glory and for our good” (cf. **Rom. 8:28**; **Gen. 50:20**; **Rom. 9**).
 2. “Nevertheless, God never does evil and is never to be blamed for evil” (**Lk. 22:22** “For the Son of Man goes as it has been determined, but woe to that man by whom he is betrayed!”; **James 1:13-14** “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.”).
 3. “God rightfully blames and judges moral creatures for the evil they do.”
 - a. **Isa. 66:3-4** “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.”
 - b. The blame for evil must always be on the responsible creature.
 4. “Evil is real, not an illusion, and we should never do evil, for it will always harm others and us.”
 5. “In spite of all of the foregoing statements, we have to come to the point where we confess that we do not understand how it is that God can ordain that we carry out evil deeds and yet hold us accountable for them and not be blamed himself.”
 - a. We affirm the principles above because Scripture teaches them. But Scripture does not tell us exactly how God does these things. There is mystery here . . .
 - b. The Baptist Confession (1689); Article 5, Section 4:

The almighty power, unsearchable wisdom, and infinite goodness of God are so thoroughly demonstrated in his providence, that his sovereign plan includes even the first fall and every other sinful action both of angels and humans. God’s providence over sinful actions does not occur by simple permission. Instead, God most wisely and powerfully limits and in other ways arranges and governs sinful actions. Through a complex arrangement of methods, he governs sinful actions to accomplish his perfectly holy purposes. *Yet* he does this in such a way that the sinfulness of their acts arises only from the creatures and not from God. Because God is altogether holy and righteous, he can neither originate nor approve of sin.

VI. Do we have a “free will”?

- A. What do we typically mean by the term “free will”?
 1. Usually absolute freedom—freedom outside God’s providential control.
 2. Of course, an absolute “freedom”—a freedom totally free of God’s control—would be impossible in a world providentially sustained and directed by God himself.
- B. In what sense are we free? How should we understand “free will”?
 1. We make *willing* choices that have *real* effects.
 2. We act in accord with our own desires.
 3. We reject the error of fatalism or determinism.
 4. I’m free. God’s free. God’s more free.

The Baptist Confession (1689)
Article 3; Section 1

From all eternity God decreed everything that occurs, without reference to anything outside himself. He did this by the perfectly wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely and unchangeably. Yet God did this in such a way that he is neither the author of sin nor has fellowship with any in their sin. This decree *does not violate the will of the creature or take away the free working or contingency of second causes*. On the contrary, these are established by God's decree. In this decree God's wisdom is displayed in directing all things, and his power and faithfulness are demonstrated in accomplishing his decree.

God Moves in a Mysterious Way
William Cowper (1774)

God moves in a mysterious way
His wonders to perform;
He plants His footsteps in the sea
And rides upon the storm.

Deep in unfathomable mines
Of never failing skill
He treasures up His bright designs
And works His sovereign will.

Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take;
The clouds ye so much dread
Are big with mercy and shall break
In blessings on your head.

Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,
But trust Him for His grace;
Behind a frowning providence
He hides a smiling face.

His purposes will ripen fast,
Unfolding every hour;
The bud may have a bitter taste,
But sweet will be the flower.

Blind unbelief is sure to err
And scan His work in vain;
God is His own interpreter,
And He will make it plain.