

MCBC Sunday School—January 7, 2018
PROVIDENCE: A REASSURING DOCTRINE
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26 How does all mankind continue to be related to God after the Fall?

ANSWER: After the Fall, all mankind continues to be subject to God's **providence** and to owe to Him whatever He is pleased to require.

27 What is God's **providence**?

ANSWER: God's **providence** is *His most holy, wise, and powerful preserving and governing of all His creatures and all their actions, to His own glory.* (Adapted from the *Westminster Shorter and Larger catechisms*, Qs. 11, 18)

28 What is the benefit of our knowing about God's **providence**?

ANSWER: The benefit of our knowing about God's **providence** is that it makes us *patient in adversity and thankful in prosperity*, so that *we may place our firm trust* in our Heavenly Father concerning everything that befalls us. (Adapted from the *Heidelberg Catechism*, Q. 28)

You'll notice on #28 that Pastor has added this note:

For deeply reassuring teaching on this subject, read prayerfully John Flavel's, *The Mystery of Divine Providence*.

Flavel was a 17th century Nonconformist English Puritan pastor.

For those who are not familiar with Flavel's work on providence, let me try to whet your appetite just a little with a brief overview of his book, so you can see how it's put together.

PART 1: The Evidence of Providence

- The Work of Providence for the Saints
- Our Birth and Upbringing
- The Work of Conversion
- Our Employment
- Family Affairs
- Preservation of the Saints from Evil
- The Work of Sanctification

PART 2: Meditation on the Providence of God

- The Duty of Meditation on Providence
- How to Meditate on God's Providence
- The Advantages of Meditating on God's Providence

PART 3: Application of the Doctrine of Providence

- Practical Implications for the Saints

- Practical Problems in Connection with Providence
- The Advantages of Recording Our Experiences of Providence

Another helpful work is John Murray's booklet (30 pp) on Providence especially in the context of suffering, called *Behind a Frowning Providence*.

- The title is an allusion to William Cowper's hymn-line, *Behind a frowning providence He hides a smiling face*.

For a fuller-length treatment of God's providences and purposes especially in the midst of suffering, I suggest *When God Weeps: Why Our Sufferings Matter to the Almighty* by Joni Eareckson Tada and Steve Estes.

- For her part, at least, Joni Eareckson Tada writes substantively and scripturally from very personal, painful experience.

Jerry Bridges' *Trusting God* is another very helpful, practical study on God's Providence.

Not by Chance: Learning to Trust a Sovereign God is a biblical-theological study through the Old and New Testaments of this very topic of providence.

My purpose this morning is not to answer every question we might have about God's providences and the reasons for them. I just gave you 5 titles that will help you with that.

My purpose is to stake down the outlines of the biblical doctrine of God's providence and to furnish enough Scriptural data for a solid foundation on which you can build, through your own reading of Scripture, a structure that allows you to recognize, interpret, and store your own experiences of God's providence in your life.

Understanding providence is crucial because *it is—and always has been ever since the Fall—a primary means through which God directs and interacts not only with His people but with the world at large and creation itself*.

- His usual means of sustaining, or guiding, or providing, or intervening is not through miracles or His direct presence, but through the providential employment of mostly ordinary, secondary means.
- The Bible is full of God's miraculous interventions for direction, or protection, or provision, right?
- But if you stop and think about it, those miraculous interventions are not evenly spread all through the Bible.
- The vast majority of them are clustered around three unique eras in history: (1) Moses and the Exodus, (2) the ministry of Elijah and Elisha, and (3) the ministry of Christ.
- In the longest stretches of history—between and since those eras—miracles are the exception; providence is the rule.

Let's talk for just a moment about the word "providence" itself.

Because the term “providence” appears rarely if ever in the Bible (depending on the translation).

- It appears only once in three translations, and not at all in most.
- KJV and NASB (Acts 24:2), and once in NIV (Job 10:12).
- It does not appear at all in NKJ, ESV, CSB, or NET.

So “providence” is one of those theological words—like Trinity or Incarnation—that is used to identify a concept that permeates Scripture under a variety of guises and expressions.

Dr. Panosian once observed that “providence”

probably has more meaning to us in this generation of “video” than it has had before. Linguistically the root of the word *providence* is two simple words: one is *before*, or *for*, or *in behalf of*; and the other is *to see*. God *pro videos*; that is, God provides because . . . He sees [before] what we need and therefore supplies.

~ Edward Panosian, *The Providence of God in History*

So God’s providence involves His capacity to see ahead, and therefore to see **to** things ahead of time.

- One divine title that explicitly commemorates this aspect of God’s providence more than any other is Jehovah-Jireh in Genesis 22.
- It’s a rich passage because it foreshadows the ultimate providential provision for us through the sacrifice of His own Son, the Lamb of God, for our sins.

But providence is more than Divine anticipation or even provision.

- Providence is not merely reactive, even to what God foresees ahead of time.
- Providence is not even merely proactive.
- Providence is *determinative*.

The doctrine of God’s providence is rooted in the doctrine of God’s sovereignty.

- I don’t know if you’ve ever noticed that the heart of the word “sovereignty” is the word “reign.”
- As far as I can tell I think that’s just a happy linguistic providence; but it’s a useful one.
- “Providence is presented in Scripture as a function of divine sovereignty. God is King over all, doing just what He wills. This conviction, robustly held, pervades the whole Bible.” ~ J. I. Packer, “Providence,” *New Bible Dictionary*
- “‘God reigns’ is a logical sequence from ‘God is.’” ~ William S. Plumer, *Jehovah-Jireh: A Treatise on Providence*
- And God’s providence is a logical outgrowth of God’s reign.
- But it’s not just a matter of logical deduction, or systematic theology.

The *concept* of providence saturates the Scriptures—in both doctrine and demonstration.

What Does the Bible Say?

Exodus 4:11. Who has made man's mouth? Who makes him mute, or deaf, or seeing, or blind? Is it not I, the LORD? (ESV)

- What is striking about this claim is God's unblinking assertion that He is the Creator not only of the healthy and whole but also of what we call the handicapped!
- God claims *purposeful* providential responsibility even for the kinds of conditions we tend to view as the unfortunate result of defective genetics or the tragic outcome of accidents.
- And the language is very direct—He “makes” them that way.
- Why He does so is not part of this discussion and, for the present, beside the point.
 - One of the books that most helpfully explores some of the answers to that question is the one by Tada and Estes, *When God Weeps*.
- But our first responsibility is to train our minds to think God's thoughts, to adjust our thinking to His revelation of reality.
- And according to God, disabilities are not accidents that occur because God momentarily loses control, or is taken by surprise, or is unkind or unjust.
- The mute, the deaf, the blind, the disabled are *fashioned* that way by the omnipotent hand of an all-wise—and always good—God for His ultimate glory (cf. John 9:1-3).

Deuteronomy 32:39. "I kill, and I make alive; I wound, and I heal: neither is there any that can deliver out of my hand." (KJV)

- It seems clear that Hannah had meditated on this truth and prayed it back to God.

I Samuel 2:6-7. The LORD kills and makes alive; he brings down to the grave and raises up. The LORD makes poor and makes rich; He brings low and lifts up. (NKJV)

- Hannah's meditation on Deuteronomy 32:39 flowers into a very personal application of this truth to her own circumstance—her conception of a child after years of frustrating barrenness.
- She models what we're supposed to do with these kinds of passages and truths.

Neh. 9:6 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. (ESV)

- That's fairly all-inclusive—heaven with all its beings and galactic systems, earth with all its creatures and ecosystems.

Job 2:10. "Are we to receive the good at God's hands but reject the bad?" (CJB)

- Where do we get the idea that we deserve only unmixed good from God's hand?
- Or that God is somehow unrighteous or derelict in his duty to allow—let alone purpose for us—affliction, adversity, misfortune, or catastrophe?
- Though his initial response to his own catastrophes is stellar, even Job came to insinuate—however subtly—that God was not being entirely just or fair with him.
- God responds to those insinuations in chs 38-41, and most directly in the beginning of ch 40.

Psalm 103:19. The LORD has established His throne in the heavens, And His sovereignty rules over all. (NAU)

- This is one of the prooftexts on your catechism cards.
- Borders are nonexistent in His kingdom and nothing is beyond the reach of His scepter.
- What response should such a truth elicit?
- All His subjects—angels, hosts, ministers, creatures, and my own soul—are invited to exult in His universal sovereignty and to “Bless the LORD” (Psalm 103:20-22).

Psalm 115:3. “Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases. (ESV).

- The assertion could not be any more all-encompassing.
- The psalmist’s repeated refrain in light of this truth all through the rest of the psalm is “Trust in the LORD” (Psalm 115:9-18).

Psalm 135:6. “Yahweh does whatever He pleases in heaven and on earth, in the seas and all the depths.” (HCSB)

- Another of the prooftexts on your catechism cards.
- Here the psalmist goes on to describe how God controls the clouds, the lightning, and the wind for His ends (Psalm 135:7).
- Do you suppose that has any practical relevance for our attitude toward the weather?

Isaiah 45:5-7. “I am the LORD and there is none else. I form light and create darkness, I make well-being and create calamity, I am the LORD, who does all these things. (ESV)

Lamentations 3:37-38. Who is he who speaks and it comes to pass, When the Lord has not commanded it? Is it not from the mouth of the Most High That woe and well-being proceed? (NKJ)

Daniel 4:35. “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?”

- Again, one of the verses on your catechism cards.
- Who made this astonishing assertion of God’s sovereignty and providence? Surely Daniel, right? Or one of his Jewish companions?
- The speaker was a Gentile and the ruler of the dominant empire of the day—King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon.
- If the entire population of the earth—all 7.7 billion, with all their combined technology and military might—were amassed against God, how would He respond? We don’t have to speculate or surmise.
- Psalm 2 tells us God’s reaction to the rulers of the earth marshaled in rebellion against His purposes—He laughs! Whom would you say is in charge?

Amos 3:6. “If a disaster occurs in a city, hasn’t the LORD done it? (HCSB)

- It is one thing to accept this truth in the abstract.

- But put a name on the city and a date on the evil: “Can there be evil in Oklahoma City on April 19, 1995, and the Lord have not done [i.e., sent, permitted] it?”
- Or NY City on Sept. 11, 2001?
- Does that mean that God inspired or initiated the evil act itself?
 - No. Lots of other Scripture clarifies that’s a deeply flawed deduction.
- Since God is all-knowing and all-powerful, couldn’t He have averted it?
 - Of course. He has done that countless numbers of other times.
 - Why didn’t He these times? That’s a legitimate question, but one for another time and place.
 - But not until we bow to God’s repeated revelations of reality in Scripture will we be properly equipped to grapple with questions of why.

Ephesians 1:11 refers to “*the purpose of him who works all things after the counsel of his own will.*”

- This is the New Testament twin of the truth embedded in Psalm 103:19, 115:3, and 135:6.
- “All things” doesn’t leave out much, and “according to the counsel of His own will” is pretty specific.

Revelation 3:7 describes Christ as “*he that openeth, and no man shutteth; and shutteth, and no man openeth.*”

- What kinds of applications does this verse invite in terms of God’s control over our choices and opportunities?

Providence in Summary

According to these verses, God’s providence extends over every kind of experience we could ever face, no matter how big or mundane:

- health and handicaps
- life and death
- wounding and healing
- poverty and wealth
- humiliation and honor
- affliction and blessing
- adversity and prosperity
- weather
- darkness and light
- calamity and peace
- woe and well-being
- closed and opened opportunities
- all the doings of collective nations as well as individual inhabitants of the earth

This is not abstract theology. These providentially governed circumstances reflect practical experiences that affect everyone.

The collective weight of these passages is enormous—and this is only a small sampling.

And these are just some of the *propositional* statements of Scripture that directly *teach* God's providence.

There are dozens of *narrative* statements that in the course of recording historical events *demonstrate* God's providence in action.

All that biblical data helps us hammer out a working definition of providence.

Defining Providence

Charles Hodge, the famous 19th century Princeton theologian, devoted 40 pages of his ST to the subject of providence.

Here's his definition:

[God's] most holy, wise and powerful preserving and governing of all His creatures and all their actions. Providence, therefore, includes **preservation** and **government**. By preservation is meant that all things external to God owe the continuance of their existence, with all their properties and powers, to the will of God. . . . The latter [government] includes the ideas of design and control. It supposes an end to be attained and the disposition and direction of means for its accomplishment.

Wilbur Tillett in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* states that Providence denotes the "preservation, care and government which God exercises over all things that He has created, in order that they may accomplish the ends for which they were created."

Here is one of the most descriptive definitions I have come across:

Providence is the beneficent outworking of God's sovereignty, whereby all events are directed and disposed to bring about those purposes of glory and good for which the universe was made. These events include the actions of free agents, which while remaining free, personal and responsible are also the intended actions of those agents. Providence thus encompasses both natural and personal events, setting them alike within the purposes of God.

~N. M. deS. Cameron, "Providence," *New Dictionary of Theology*

J. I. Packer condenses the salient features of these and other definitions by stating that providence is

the unceasing activity of the Creator whereby, in overflowing bounty and goodwill, He upholds His creatures in ordered existence, guides and governs all events, circumstances, and free acts of angels and men, and directs everything to its appointed goal, for His own glory.

All these definitions of providence recognize two distinct but overlapping dimensions of this truth: **preservation** and **government**.

So we could divide the definition this way:

PRESERVING PROVIDENCE

God continuously preserves and maintains the existence of every part of His creation, from the smallest to the largest, according to His sovereign pleasure.

GOVERNING PROVIDENCE

God graciously guides and governs all events, including the free acts of men and their external circumstances, and directs all things to their appointed ends for His glory.

Aren't you glad all that is not on your catechism card?

But breaking it down like that can give us a fuller appreciation for the scope and dynamics of God's providence.

Providence, then, obviously stands in direct contrast and opposition to luck, fate, fluke, chance.

- These and Providence are mutually exclusive outlooks on why things happen.

R. C. Sproul (*The Invisible Hand*) rightly deduces,

The doctrine of the providence of God leaves no room for fate, blind or otherwise.

God is not blind; neither is He capricious. For Him there are no accidents. . . . If chance exists, God cannot exist. If one molecule flies wild by chance, then God is not sovereign. If God is not sovereign, then God is not God. God and chance simply cannot coexist.

And they ought not coexist in our minds.

So where do we go from here?

I have a whole chapter exploring multiple passages specifically on the preserving providence of God over creation—the cosmos, the angels, all earth's ecosystems along with their flora and fauna.

In short, *all of creation* continually exists solely because of the ongoing, active, preserving providence of God.

Two key NT passages on God's preserving providence over creation:

- Colossians 1:16-17—"By Him [Christ] all things consist [stand/hold together, cohere]."

That leads to the next passage. *How*, exactly, does Christ hold all things together? By what means does He do this?

- Hebrews 1:3—Christ "Upholds [carries along; sustains] all things by the word of His power [His powerful word]."

I.e., it is not just God generally, or even the Father specifically, but Christ who holds all things together by the power of His command.

But I want to spend the rest of our time on what usually concerns us most closely: *the providence of God over us and all our ways*.

- We tend to see providence only in the extraordinary, the unusual, the surprising, the coincidental, the seemingly “chance” circumstances or events of life.
- We tend to think of providence as God’s stepping in and changing things only when something dramatic happens—either for better (provision of a job, protection in an accident, or a successful pregnancy) or for worse (a job loss, an injury or illness, or a miscarriage).
- But providence is not only God’s stepping into a situation with government and guidance.
- Providence is, first and foremost, God’s faithful maintenance and preservation of all things—or there would be nothing to govern and guide!

Presumably you woke up this morning...or at least most of you did.

- Why? How did that happen?
- Psalm 3:5—“I lay down and slept; I woke again, for the LORD sustained me.” (ESV)
- David writes this “on the run.”
- His life is in danger.
- He did not consider the fact that he woke up in the morning to be an accident or a “natural law.”
- He attributed it to God’s sustaining of his life.

Applying providence is just that everyday practical.

Each morning you wake up is a reminder of the *preserving providence* of God!

How about this one?

“For in him we live, and move, and have our being” (Acts 17:28).

- What initially sounds like eloquent poetic language is actually a stunningly down-to-earth application of the doctrine of providence.
- Literally, Paul is informing his pagan audience in Athens that “in [God] we live, and move ourselves, and exist.”
- According to Paul, life is not a “natural” law; it is a *supernatural* law.
- “Move” means exactly what it sounds like—to possess the faculty of motion, to have the ability to freely move our limbs and transport our bodies.
- Not everyone can do that; and in the providence of God, most of us will not always be able to do that.
- “Have our being” is simply the Greek verb “to be.”
- Without God we would not continue to exist.

Don’t miss the significance of the context.

- Paul is preaching to idolatrous Greeks, in basic philosophical terms they can understand, the truth that all men (1) possess life, (2) receive their capability for bodily movement, and (3) have existence *only* from the one true God.
- In fact, he’s quoting one of their own pagan poets to confirm this truth! Talk about providence!

William Newell, *Hebrews Verse by Verse*:

Ghastly wonder of all the ages: man, a creature, whose very name is need, need, need; who must be “kept” from outside himself, like a newborn babe supplied with breath, with food, with air; kept in balance by a power wholly without himself; who must be warmed by a created sun; the temperature of his body kept by a marvellous adjustment; his blood kept circulating; his heart kept beating—yet the constant effort of human “science” and “philosophy” is to get as far away as possible from the consciousness of this creating, providing, maintaining Lord God!

Take a breath.

Go ahead—do what you’ve been doing all morning without *ever once* thinking about it—but this time, draw your next breath **consciously**.

- How long would you have survived without that breath? They say about 3 mins.
- Scripture has *only one, repeated* explanation for your ability to do that just now.

It all started in Genesis 2:7.

Job refers to the Lord, “in whose hand is the soul of every living thing, *and the breath of all mankind.*” (12:10).

Elihu observes that—If God *should gather to Himself His spirit and His breath, all flesh would perish together and man would return to dust (Job 34:14-15, NASB).*

Objection: *Yes, but that’s in the Book of Job, and the Book of Job is poetry. It is the nature of poetry to express things figuratively. You can’t take expressions like that literally.*

Well, what about Daniel’s words to Belshazzar?

“the God who *holds* your breath in His hand and owns all your ways, you have not glorified. (Dan 5:23 NKJ)

Objection: *But everyone knows that prophets often spoke in pictures. Daniel’s words are a kind of prophetic word picture to make a point.*

What about Paul’s words to the Athenians?

“God . . . giveth to all life, and breath, and all things.” **Acts 17:24-25**

Objection: *Come now, Paul is **preaching** there, and we all know how preachers are sometimes! That is just a rhetorical expression.*

The settled prejudice of unbelief can manufacture a retort for anything.

I asked you earlier to consciously draw a breath. I won’t ask you to feel your head, but if you did most of you would notice that it’s covered with hair—more or less.

Have you ever considered counting your hairs?

- Probably not. If you have, you need a new hobby.
- Besides, God already has.

Jesus prepared his disciples to encounter rejection, persecution, and even death by drawing this analogy:

Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows. Mt. 10:29-31, ESV

This is one of those times I'm convinced Jesus used humor to make a point.

- I can't read this passage without seeing a playful, facetious, half-smile on Jesus' lips.
- In fact, if he's not being facetious, then the analogy is more worrying than comforting.
- How many sparrows would you say you're worth?
- How many is "many"? Ten? Fifty?
- Do you suppose you might be worth, I don't know, a hundred sparrows to God? A thousand?
- See what I mean about being a bit facetious? The very comparison is purposefully absurd. (And absurdity is the essence of humor.)
- God didn't suffer and die for sparrows—or even angels; but He did for you.

What impact is all this truth about the Providence of God supposed to have on us? All the books I recommended at the beginning spend a great deal of space exploring the answer to that question in detail.

But Catechism Question 28 sums it up concisely.

- **Patience** in adversity...*because it's all in God's providence*
- **Thankfulness** in prosperity...*because it's all in God's providence*
- So that we may place our **firm trust in our heavenly Father** concerning everything that befalls us...*because we know it's all in God's providence*

Patience. Gratitude. And Confidence.

- Would you not love to live your whole life that way this year, come what may?
- That comes only as we *personalize* this doctrine of providence.

Like Matthew Henry did:

"Firmly believing that my times are in God's hands, I here submit myself and all my affairs for the ensuing year to the wise and gracious disposal of God's divine providence."

Because God's Providence and God's Sovereignty go hand in hand ahead of us. But in their trail go all the other attributes of God as well—His justice, His wisdom, His mercy and kindness, and His loyal love.