
God's Providence

Because “providence” is not a word found in our English Bibles, we must explain from where the word comes, which will allow us to see if it represents the truth God reveals to us in His Word. Whenever you are using a word that is not in the Bible, you must ultimately be interested in the truth represented by that word rather than defending the word as biblical. This is the same way we approach other words, like, “Bible”, “biblical”, “Trinity”, etc. Though these words are not found in the Bible, they can still represent the truth that is found there.

Providence comes from “provide” which is a word that combines the Latin for “to” or “before” (pro-) and “to see” (videre). Because of this, many assume “provide” should refer to “foresight” or “to foresee”, but linguistically and theologically, it has more to do with “seeing to” something, meaning “to take care” of something. We say, “I’ll see to that.” “Seeing” is used in the active sense of making all necessary arrangements for the accomplishment of one’s purposes. So rather than providence referring to a passive observation of something before it happens, it is actually referring to an active “taking care of” something beforehand. Providence speaks of God’s “seeing to” the universe. This meaning is also found in the Bible’s use of “see” in Genesis 22.

Genesis 22:7-8 - **7** And Isaac said to his father Abraham, “My father!” And he said, “Here I am, my son.” He said, “Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?” **8** Abraham said, “God will *provide* for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.” So they went both of them together.

Genesis 22:13-14 - **13** And Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him was a ram, caught in a thicket by his horns. And Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. **14** So Abraham called the name of that place, “The LORD will *provide*”; as it is said to this day, “On the mount of the LORD it shall be *provided*.”

Each use of the word “provide” in this passage is an English translation of the Hebrew word, “to see”. The ESV footnotes that “The LORD will provide” and “it shall be provided” can also be translated “The LORD will see” and “it shall be seen”. God’s “providing” is His way of actively “seeing to” the needs of Abraham.

For these reasons, providence is best seen as God’s continued care and involvement for creation. In other words, providence explains God’s relationship to creation after He created it. This avoids deism and pantheism by showing that God is intimately involved with every part of a creation that is distinct from Him. This also avoids “chance” and “fatalism” by showing God is the personal and infinitely powerful Creator and Lord. Some attempts at defining “providence” include:

Wayne Grudem: 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.

MacArthur and Mayhue: Divine providence is God’s preserving his creation, operating in every event in the world, and directing the things in the universe to his appointed end for them

Joel Beeke: In providence, the God who decreed all things for his glory in Christ executes his decree in history by his preservation and control of all creatures, and by concurrence with all their actions, so that all his purposes are accomplished.

These definitions of providence are basically covering the same 3 areas of God’s relationship to creation. They deal with God’s preservation of creation, how He works in and with creation, and the goal to which He is moving creation. This will serve as our outline for this study. Let’s look first at God’s preservation of creation.

1. Providence Includes God's Preservation Of Creation

Preservation is God's work to maintain the creation in existence and functioning as He designed it to, even after He created it. We are tempted to see God's work and involvement only in the "big" miracles of history. The Exodus, the Flood, and several other events dominate our thinking when asked about God's involvement in the world, but the reality is that God is always involved with every part of creation. In fact, if it weren't for God's continual preservation of all things, everything besides the Triune God Himself would go out of existence. We must learn to see every part of life as His work. This is what Paul was teaching when he said:

Acts 17:24-25 - **24** The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, **25** nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything.

Creation, even if they are unaware or unwilling to recognize it, constantly experiences God's care.

Ps. 104:10-15, 21 - **10** You make springs gush forth in the valleys; they flow between the hills; **11** they give drink to every beast of the field; the wild donkeys quench their thirst. **12** Beside them the birds of the heavens dwell; they sing among the branches. **13** From your lofty abode you water the mountains; the earth is satisfied with the fruit of your work. **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 **15** and wine to gladden the heart of man, oil to make his face shine and bread to strengthen man's heart ... **21** The young lions roar for their prey, seeking their food from God.

Notice that this care is for all of creation, not just certain parts or certain humans. Jesus emphasized this when He spoke of the birds and flowers.

Matt. 6:25-33 - **25** "Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? **26** 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? **27** And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? **28** And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, **29** yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. **30** But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? **31** Therefore do not be anxious, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' **32** For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. **33** But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.

Everything good that we enjoy is from God, and we are supposed to receive it with thanksgiving and praise.

Acts 14:16-17 - **16** In past generations he allowed all the nations to walk in their own ways. **17** Yet he did not leave himself without witness, for he did good by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness."

James 1:17 - Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.

Romans 2:4 - Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?

Ps. 145:8-10 - **8** The Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. **9** The Lord is good to all, and his mercy is over all that he has made. **10** All your works shall give thanks to you, O Lord, and all your saints shall bless you!

A lack of this perspective may be what is keeping you from the creaturely happiness and holiness for which you were created. John Calvin said:

I call “piety” that reverence joined with love of God which the knowledge of his benefits induces. For until men recognize that they owe everything to God, that they are nourished by his fatherly care, that he is the Author of their every good, that they should seek nothing beyond him—they will never yield him willing service. Nay, unless they establish their complete happiness in him, they will never give themselves truly and sincerely to him. (Institutes 1.2.1)

How often do you reflect on Col. 1:17¹ in your day?

This fact of God’s preservation of creation is also what makes science and technology possible. I know that we talk about “natural laws” as though they were “things” that do something, but in reality, they are simply the observations we have made of how God usually preserves creation. Wayne Grudem said:

God, in preserving all things he has made, also causes them to maintain the properties with which he 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!

Though we have “normal” or “natural” ways of explaining things, we must always understand those things are simply God’s ways of accomplishing these goals. The sunrise can be explained scientifically, but Jesus makes it clear that it is still God’s sun that HE is causing to rise. The same thing applies to rain. Even though we can explain why rain is falling with meteorology, it is still the product of God’s causing it to rain. Things don’t continue to work the same way just because they’ve always worked that way. They work the way they do because of God!

So to understand providence, we must first see that God is preserving all of creation in its existence.

2. Providence Includes God’s Governing Of Creation

Having established the fact that God is constantly preserving all of creation, it will be helpful to look at the purpose for which He does this. God preserves everything because He is accomplishing His purposes in and through creation. This is the aspect of providence that speaks to His “government” of all things to a certain goal. John Frame said:

The English word "govern" comes from the Latin ... "to steer a ship." That dynamic emphasis on directing the motion of something toward a goal remains in the traditional theological use of the term govern, though it is lost in the more common use of the word today, which is usually political. Nature and history, like ships, are moving. They have a direction, a destination, and everything works toward that end.

As we studied last week, God has has an immutable decree from before the foundation of the world, and history is His “accomplishing” of that plan. God’s preservation of creation is being done as He is carrying all of creation to His intended goal.

Eph. 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...

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

So God has a decree, and He is accomplishing or “working out” everything according to that will. This is also seen in Hebrews 1:3.

Heb. 1:1-3 - **1** Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, **2** but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. **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...

The verb translated “upholds” is also used in Scripture of carrying something to a destination.² It is not a picture of someone simply holding something, but it is meant to show you that they are carrying something somewhere. So God is not only personally making sure everything that exists is existing, but He is causing it to exist and doing it in order to accomplish His goal. This is another reason we can know the promise of Romans 8:28 is true. Peter was teaching us this same truth of governance when He talked about things to come.

² Peter 3:5-7 - **5** For [scorners] deliberately overlook this fact, that the heavens existed long ago, and the earth was formed out of water and through water by the word of God, **6** and that by means of these the world that then existed was deluged with water and perished. **7** But by the same word the heavens and earth that now exist are stored up for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly.

Notice that God created and is “keeping” creation “until” a certain day comes. This clearly shows that the Lord is purposeful in all that He does, and He is accomplishing all of His purposes, just like He said He would.

But though these two aspects of providence may be obvious to all believers, things get a little bit more difficult when we start talking about HOW God works in and through creation to accomplish His goals. Because God’s preservation and governing includes all of creation, we must think through how He accomplishes. For that, we turn to the doctrine of concurrence.

3. Providence Includes God’s Concurrence With Creation

Though we have clearly seen THAT God governs His creation, now we will look at HOW He does it. Concurrence is the doctrine that teaches God works in, with, and through creation as He accomplishes His decree. In other words, concurrence is our way of summarizing the fact that in one action, both creation and God can be full and real participants. It keeps us from seeing all of reality as meaningless. This doctrine is how we respond to the charge that God’s “meticulous” providence causes us to be robots and makes us our choices and actions meaningless.

One of the main reasons there is so much confusion surrounding God’s providence is because it is hard for us to see how it literally applies to everything. So the first thing we must prove is that God’s providence is meticulous, not just general. God is meticulously involved in:

- A. Inanimate Creation - Ps. 148:8; Matt. 5:45
- B. Animals - Ps. 104:27-29; Job 38:39-41; Matt. 6:26

² John 2:8 - And he said to them, “Now draw some out and take it to the master of the feast.” So they took it.

Luke 5:18 - And behold, some men were bringing on a bed a man who was paralyzed, and they were seeking to bring him in and lay him before Jesus...

2 Tim. 4:13 - When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, also the books, and above all the parchments.

- C. Random / Chance Events - Pr. 16:33; Ruth 2:3; 1 Sam. 24:10; 1 Ki. 22:17, 20, 34-37; Ex. 21:13; Dt. 19:5
- D. Events Fully Caused By God And Creatures - Jonah 1:15; 2:3; Job 1:21-22
- E. Nations - Job 12:23
- F. All Aspects Of Our Lives - Matt. 6:11; Phil. 4:19; Ps. 139:16; 1 Cor. 4:7

As you can see in these references, God is preserving and governing all things that are and all things that happen. Though much of this is easy to accept, the hard part of this doctrine involves understanding God's relationship to sin and evil. Typically, even for those who affirm God's sovereignty, we so badly want to keep God from being charged with evil actions that we end up misrepresenting what He has revealed His relationship with evil to be. So let's look at some clear passages where God is either taking credit or given credit for evil that was done by people. Some general references include:

1 Sam. 16:14 - Now the Spirit of the Lord departed from Saul, and a harmful spirit from the Lord tormented him.

2 Sam. 24:1; 1 Chron. 21:1 - YHWH and Satan incited David to number the people

Amos 3:6 - Is a trumpet blown in a city, and the people are not afraid? Does disaster come to a city, unless the Lord has done it?

Lam. 3:37-38 - **37** Who has spoken and it came to pass, unless the Lord has commanded it? **38** Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that good and bad come?

Lam. 1:12-15 - **12** "Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by? Look and see if there is any sorrow like my sorrow, which was brought upon me, which the Lord inflicted on the day of his fierce anger. **13** "From on high he sent fire; into my bones he made it descend; he spread a net for my feet; he turned me back; he has left me stunned, faint all the day long. **14** "My transgressions were bound into a yoke; by his hand they were fastened together; they were set upon my neck; he caused my strength to fail; the Lord gave me into the hands of those whom I cannot withstand. **15** "The Lord rejected all my mighty men in my midst; he summoned an assembly against me to crush my young men; the Lord has trodden as in a winepress the virgin daughter of Judah.

Isa. 45:5-7 - **5** I am the Lord, and there is no other, besides me there is no God; I equip you, though you do not know me, **6** that people may know, from the rising of the sun and from the west, that there is none besides me; I am the Lord, and there is no other. **7** I form light and create darkness; I make well-being and create calamity; I am the Lord, who does all these things.

2 Thess. 2:11-12 - **11** Therefore God sends them a strong delusion, so that they may believe what is false, **12** in order that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness.

1 Pet. 2:8 - "A stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense." They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do.

So how do we resolve this? Well, it may not scratch every itch or answer every question, but we basically use the "greater-good" argument, which is a biblical form of the "ends justify the means" argument. We confess, with Scripture, that God causes all things, even evil, but, in causing evil, God never does evil. This means that we are, by faith, affirming that God can decree and cause evil to come to pass and still be praised for only doing righteousness.

Joseph - Gen. 37:11, 4, 5, 8, 20, 24, 28; 45:5-8; 50:20; Ps. 105:17

This story focuses on the sinful action of selling Joseph into slavery. The text makes it clear that the brothers and God were full participants in accomplishing this. We have an example here of one action being fully done by two parties for two different reasons.

Did Joseph's brothers sell him into slavery? Yes. Why? Because they hated him.

Did God sell him into slavery? Yes. Why? Because He loved him and His people.

The reason that we are able to read this story and recognize God's decreeing and accomplishing of sin as a good and wise thing is because we are so far removed from it that we are able to see the wisdom in it. The closer we are to the accomplishment of sinful actions, the harder it is to see God's goodness and wisdom, but, given time and perspective, we will always confess that all of God's decrees are just and good.

Assyria and Israel - Isa. 10:5-7, 8-11, 12, 13-14, 15-19

Again, here is an account where an evil is being done, Israel being destroyed in battle, and God and man are seen as accomplishing. This is not God and man working together in some kind of synergistic way. Rather, it is both of them being full participants in one action, but they are acting for different reasons.

Did the Assyrians want to destroy the Israelites? Yes. Why? Because they were prideful.

Did God want the Assyrians to defeat the Israelites? Yes. Why? Because He loved Israel.

The Cross - Acts 2:23; 4:28; 13:27; Lk. 22:22

This is the best example of God's good intentions in decreeing and accomplishing evil. It has always been and will always be sinful to murder. Not only is murder sinful, but it is the pinnacle of depravity to murder the Son of God Who has come to save us. Still, even in this greatest sin in human history, God was accomplishing His purposes, and sinful men were sinfully accomplishing their purposes.

Did sinful men want Jesus to be murdered? Yes. Why? Because they hated Him.

Did God decree Jesus to be murdered? Yes. Why? Because He loves His people and His glory.

The struggle we often have with seeing God's wisdom in decreeing evil is tied to being "up close" and personal with it. When we encounter some kind of evil that seems to have no justification and no good end in sight, we are tempted to either say God is evil, or we will say this was simply allowed by Him rather than decreed. We so badly want to keep God from ever being charged with evil, which is a noble desire, that we speak as if evil is not part of His decree.

Based on the previous examples we have looked at, by faith, we can know that we will one day praise God for His wisdom in whatever it is that is giving us concern now. In glorification, will be convinced, from the heart, that all of God's ways are wise, just, and pure, and we will gladly confess that He could not have done anything with more wisdom or perfection.

In order to help you see why God is righteous and good in decreeing evil things, listen to these helpful quotes below.

Jonathan Edwards (Concerning the Divine Decrees, Works, 2:527): God does not decree the actions that are sinful, as sin, but decrees them as good. . . . By decreeing an action **as sinful**, I mean decreeing it for the sake of the sinfulness of the action. God decrees that they shall be sinful, for the sake of the good that he causes to arise from the sinfulness thereof; whereas man decrees them for the sake of the evil that is in them.

Riccardi: God ordains sin and evil—He even ordains the eternal punishment of the wicked—to *make known to His elect the riches of His glory*... God is not *less* glorious, but *more* glorious, because He ordains evil. And the more He magnifies His glory, the greater is His

love to us. Surely God cannot be charged with unrighteousness for doing that which amounts to the greatest benefit for us who are His.

Jonathan Edwards (Concerning the Divine Decrees, Works, 2:528): “It is a proper and excellent thing for infinite glory to shine forth; and for the same reason, it is proper that the shining forth of God’s glory should be complete; that is, that all parts of his glory should shine forth, that every beauty should be proportionably effulgent, that the beholder may have a proper notion of God. It is not proper that one glory should be exceedingly manifested, and another not at all. . . . “Thus it is necessary, that God’s awful majesty, his authority and dreadful greatness, justice, and holiness, should be manifested. But this could not be, unless sin and punishment had been decreed; so that the shining forth of God’s glory would be very imperfect, both because these parts of divine glory would not shine forth as the others do, and also the glory of his goodness, love, and holiness would be faint without them; nay, they could scarcely shine forth at all. If it were not right that God should decree and permit and punish sin, there could be no manifestation of God’s holiness in hatred of sin, or in showing any preference, in his providence, of godliness before it. There would be no manifestation of God’s grace or true goodness, if there was no sin to be pardoned, no misery to be saved from. “How much happiness soever he bestowed, his goodness would not be so much prized and admired. . . . So evil is necessary, **in order to the highest happiness of the creature**, and the completeness of that communication of God, for which he made the world; **because the creature’s happiness consists in the knowledge of God**, and the sense of his love. And **if the knowledge of him be imperfect, the happiness of the creature must be proportionably imperfect.**”

Again, the doctrine of concurrence is our way of explaining the Bible’s teaching that the eternally righteous God of all creation can and does cause all that comes to pass, and He does it in a way that He never sins. This even includes the sinful actions that are done by willing participants that are truly active as well. We are confessing, along with Scripture, that all things that are ultimately from the hand of the Lord, and He is always working for the clearest revelation of His glory and the highest good of His people.

Is God Always In Control?

In an effort to summarize an answer to this question from our first three lessons, we gladly confess that our God is always in control. No matter what happens in creation, we know that all of it comes from His hand and is under His sovereignty. Though we daily see and experience the breaking of His preceptive will, we know that His decretive will is never able to be successfully opposed. This aspect of His will is eternal, and He is working it out in history through providence as He preserves and governs all of His creation.

This confession is not only true in the good things that are accomplished by God, but we also proclaim this truth by faith even in the face of incredible evil. Our God is accomplishing all of His purposes, even when heinous sin is being committed by humans, and He is doing this in righteous ways and for good purposes. Though we struggle to always see this, we know it is true by faith, and we long for the day when we will never have any questions about how wise, good, and just our God is. We trust Him and all of His purposes to secure His greatest glory and our greatest good.

Practical Applications Of God's Providence

To begin with, it would be most helpful for you to memorize the 28th question in the Heidelberg catechism. Our applications will flow out of it.

What does it benefit us to know that God has created all things and still upholds them by his providence?

We can be *patient in adversity*, *thankful in prosperity*, and with a view to the future we can have *a firm confidence* in our faithful God and Father that no creature shall separate us from his love; for all creatures are so completely in his hand that without his will they cannot so much as move.

1. Because of God's providence, you can be "patient in adversity"

Because of the Fall, suffering is inevitable in this life (John 16:33). Those who do not trust the Lord and His good use of sovereignty will never handle life's troubles in a way that is helpful to them or glorifying to God. Providence causes us to remember that our groaning may be real, but our grumbling is never acceptable (Ps. 39:9).

We also don't endure suffering by agreeing there is just nothing we can do about it. Instead, we are sustained in all of life's troubles because we know our loving Father is the One who is causing all things to come to pass. We agree with the Psalmist who said, "It was good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn your decrees." (Ps. 119:71). We can say this because we know from God's Word that He afflicts His children to chasten, train, and mature us so that we will share in His holiness (Prov. 3:11-12; Heb. 12:5-11; Ps. 119:67) and be made more like Christ (Rom. 8:17; 2 Cor. 12:9).

2. Because of God's providence, you can be "thankful in prosperity"

Because we know that God causes all things to come to pass, the foolishness of pride in our accomplishments and possessions is enhanced. We know from God's revelation to us that every good gift comes from above (James 1:17), and we know that everything we have and are is a gift from Him (1 Cor. 4:7). The only acceptable response to this knowledge is praise to Him and thankfulness in our hearts for all of His kindnesses to us (Ps. 145:8-10).

3. Because of God's providence, you can have "a firm confidence in our faithful God and Father"

The security and hope that we have because of God's providence ought to make us the most optimistic people in the world. We know that God rules over all things, and we also know that He is always working for our good. His providence also causes us to be eternally secure in His love. We are loved by our Heavenly Father with a love that can never lessen, fade away, or be threatened (Rom. 8:28, 31-32, 35, 39).