

THE DOCTRINE OF PROVIDENCE (PART 1)

PRAYER

I. INTRODUCTION: REVIEW

The last two weeks, we've considered the doctrine of creation. We saw that the Bible teaches that God created the universe out of nothing, by His word. God is the author of all things, both visible and invisible, both in the heavens and the earth. He created all things good and He created all things for His glory.

This morning we turn our attention from the doctrine of creation to the doctrine of providence. Here's the game plan: this week we're going to consider mainly two things:

1. What the doctrine of providence is, and;
2. Several implications of the doctrine of providence for our lives.

Next week, we're going to consider several common questions that arise from this doctrine. For example: how does God's sovereignty in providence relate to our choices and human responsibility; or, how does God's sovereignty in providence intersect with sin and evil and suffering in the world?

II. What is Providence? God's Ongoing Relationship with Creation

HC #27: "God's providence is His almighty and ever present power,[1] whereby, as with His hand, He still upholds heaven and earth and all creatures,[2] and so governs them that leaf and blade, rain and drought, fruitful and barren years, food and drink, health and sickness, riches and poverty,[3] indeed, all things, come not by chance[4] but by His fatherly hand.[5]"¹

¹ [1] Jer. 23:23, 24; Acts 17:24-28. [2] Heb. 1:3. [3] Jer. 5:24; Acts 14:15-17; John 9:3; Prov. 22:2. [4] Prov. 16:33. [5] Matt. 10:29.

In other words, providence is the belief that God, in His goodness and power, preserves, accompanies, upholds, directs, and governs all creatures, all actions, and all things, from the largest star in the galaxy to the smallest sparrow in a tree. God the Creator and King governs all to the praise of the glory of His wisdom, power, justice, goodness, and mercy.

We see throughout the Bible the teaching that God is the one who gives life, renews, sees, watches over, observes, saves, protects, preserves, leads, teaches, rules, works, upholds, and cares, for all of His creation, and especially for all His people.

[Read Psalm 104]

“Bless the **LORD**, O my soul! O LORD my God, **you** are very great! **You** are clothed with splendor and majesty, covering yourself with light as with a garment, stretching out the heavens like a tent. **He** lays the beams of his chambers on the waters; **he** makes the clouds his chariot; **he** rides on the wings of the wind; **he** makes his messengers winds, his ministers a flaming fire. **He** set the earth on its foundations, so that it should never be moved. **You** covered it with the deep as with a garment; the waters stood above the mountains. At **your** rebuke they fled; at the sound of **your** thunder they took to flight. The mountains rose, the valleys sank down to the place that **you** appointed for them. **You** set a boundary that they may not pass, so that they might not again cover the earth. **You** make springs gush forth in the valleys; they flow between the hills; they give drink to every beast of the field; the wild donkeys quench their thirst. Beside them the birds of the heavens dwell; they sing among the branches. From **your** lofty abode **you** water the mountains; the earth is satisfied with the fruit of **your** work. **You** cause the grass to grow for the livestock and plants for man to cultivate, that he may bring forth food from the earth and wine to gladden the heart of man, oil to make his face shine and bread to strengthen man’s heart. The trees **of the LORD** are watered abundantly, the cedars of Lebanon that **he** planted. In them the birds build their nests; the stork has her home in the fir trees. The high mountains are for the wild goats; the rocks are a refuge for the rock badgers. **He** made the moon to mark the seasons; the sun knows its time for setting. **You** make darkness, and it is night, when all the beasts of the forest creep about. The young lions roar for their prey, seeking their food from **God**. When the sun rises, they steal away and lie down in their dens. Man goes out to his work and to his labor until the evening. O LORD, how manifold are **your** works! In wisdom have **you** made them

all; the earth is full of **your** creatures. Here is the sea, great and wide, which teems with creatures innumerable, living things both small and great. There go the ships, and Leviathan, which **you** formed to play in it. 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 and return to their dust. When **you** send forth your Spirit, they are created, and **you** renew the face of the ground. May the glory of the **LORD** endure forever; may the **LORD** rejoice in his works, **who** looks on the earth and it trembles, **who** touches the mountains and they smoke! I will sing to the **LORD** as long as I live; I will sing praise to my **God** while I have being. May my meditation be pleasing to **him**, for I rejoice in the **LORD**. Let sinners be consumed from the earth, and let the wicked be no more! Bless the **LORD**, O my soul! Praise the **LORD**!” (Psalms 104:1–35 ESV)

Through God’s providence we see God being actively involved in His creation at each moment. God didn’t abandon his creation after He made it; rather, He tends to it and sustains it by His infinite power and sovereignty. **God’s providence causes to continue what has already been called into existence, and He does it by (1) sustaining it; (2) working in and through it; and (3) directing it for his good purposes. These three avenues are called (1) preservation, (2) concurrence, and (3) government. Let us look more closely at each.**

“For from Him...”

1. *Preservation*: God Upholds and Sustains All Things

(Heb 1:3; Col. 1:17; Neh. 9:6; Job 34:14-15)

“Preservation” is the term used to say that God keeps all created things existing and maintaining the properties which He created them to have. He is *preserving* his creation.

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

So for example, we see God preserving this wooden pulpit to keep the same properties that wood has. It is stiff and hard (knock). I don't expect it to spontaneously dissolve into water. This wooden pulpit continues to keep its properties and form until it is acted upon by another part of creation, such as fire, at which point it becomes ash.

We shouldn't think, however, of God's preservation as a continuous new creation: he doesn't create new atoms and molecules every second for every existing thing. Rather, he preserves what has already been created.

Look with me at some verses that talk about this very thing ...

Col. 1:15 He (Christ) is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. **16** 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. **17** And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

Heb. 1:1 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 (Christ) upholds the universe by the word of his power. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, **4** having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.

App: Both verses here indicate that if Christ were to cease his continuing activity of sustaining all things in the universe, then all except the triune God would instantly cease to exist. This is what Paul says in Acts 17:28 when he says, "In him we live and move and have our being."

Without Christ, nothing would come into existence; that's the doctrine of creation.

Without Christ, nothing would continue to exist; that's the doctrine of preservation.

As part of God's creation, we can be thankful to God for the preservation of our own lives.

Elihu, in his wisdom, says of God in Job 34:14, "If he should take back his spirit to himself, and gather to himself his breath, all flesh would perish together, and man would return to dust."

So, #1 ... God "preserves" or ... Upholds and Sustains All Things.

Any questions? ...

"...and through Him..."

2. Concurrence: God Works In and Through All Things

(Gen. 45:5; Eph. 1:11; Job 37:6-13; Prov. 16:9, 33; Job 14:5; Phil. 2:13)

Concurrence is the aspect of divine providence that describes how God works IN and THROUGH ALL THINGS, particularly the actions of God's creatures. In Concurrence we see divine agency and human agency running together or running alongside each other in specific actions.

"Concurrence" basically means that God cooperates with created things in every action. He directs their distinctive properties to cause them to act as they do. In other words, things that happen are, first and foremost, events that God causes to happen; yet, God works through the distinctive properties of each created thing, so that these things themselves bring about the results that we see.

- **Primary and secondary causes** – This is what we refer to as "primary" and "secondary" causes.
 - The divine cause of each event works as an invisible, behind-the-scenes, directing cause and therefore can be called the "primary cause" that plans and initiates everything that happens.
 - But the created thing brings about actions in ways consistent with the creature's own properties, ways that can often be described by us or by professional scientists who carefully observe the processes. These creaturely factors and properties can therefore be called the "secondary" causes of everything that happens, even though they are the causes that are evident to us by observation.

We see this clearly spoken of in the Scriptures ...

“The heart of man plans his way, but the LORD establishes his steps.”
(Proverbs 16:9 ESV)

Look at Acts 14:15 in your handouts ...

Acts 14:15 “Men, why are you doing these things? We also are men, of like nature with you, and we bring you good news, that you should turn from these vain things to a living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them. 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.”

Notice verse 17: The secondary cause of the growth of the food and the gladness of their hearts were the rains from heaven and the fruitful seasons. The rain caused the food to grow and the fruitful seasons made the heart glad. But behind those secondary causes, there’s a primary cause, namely God. HE did good by giving rains and fruitful seasons.

Look at Acts 17:24. “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. 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, ²⁷ that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, ²⁸ for “‘In him we live and move and have our being’; as even some of your own poets have said, “‘For we are indeed his offspring.’”

Illus: Wait a minute... you might be thinking: “Didn’t my parents decide where and when I was born?” Well yes, they did. But this text says that behind the secondary cause of your parents giving you life and deciding where you’d be born, there was a primary cause, namely God. He gives life and He decides when and where you dwell on this earth. In God you live and move and have your being.

App: This means that we should be thankful for all that God does in and through us. And not only us, but the things around us. If it rains, we should thank God. If crops grow, we should thank God.

Further, we should be able to bask in the immensity of God in thinking through this doctrine. How big is God that not even snow can fall without God having a hand in it. Not even an animal's cry can be had without God's hand being over it. Everything, even inanimate objects, work in cooperation with God. Just look at what Job 37:6-13 says,

For to the snow he says, 'Fall on the earth,'
likewise to the downpour, his mighty downpour.

7 He seals up the hand of every man,
that all men whom he made may know it.

8 Then the beasts go into their lairs,
and remain in their dens.

9 From its chamber comes the whirlwind,
and cold from the scattering winds.

10 By the breath of God ice is given,
and the broad waters are frozen fast.

11 He loads the thick cloud with moisture;
the clouds scatter his lightning.

12 They turn around and around by his guidance,
to accomplish all that he commands them
on the face of the habitable world.

13 Whether for correction or for his land
or for love, he causes it to happen.

God is behind everything friends, even the snow, the ice, and all that we see or even do not see. That should give us extreme comfort and also allow us to just sit here amazed at the enormity of the God we serve.

Any questions so far?

“...and to Him are all things. To Him be glory forever. Amen.”

3. Government: God Rules and Directs All Things

(Dan 4:35; Rom. 8:28; Ps. 103:19)

The third aspect of Providence that Scripture teaches is government. God governs the world and directs all things to their appointed purpose. In other words, the world and everything in it is not ruled by chance or by fate but by God, who directs history and creation toward an ultimate goal. Scripture beautifully sums up all of this in repeatedly speaking of God as the Creator-King who governs all things.

“The LORD has established his throne in the heavens, and his kingdom rules over all.” (Ps 103:19)

Dan. 4:34 At the end of the days I, Nebuchadnezzar, lifted my eyes to heaven, and my reason returned to me, and I blessed the Most High, and praised and honored him who lives forever, for his dominion is an everlasting dominion, and his kingdom endures from generation to generation; 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?”

God is the one who is steering the ship of history. There is a destination, and Christ’s purpose to bring the world to that goal will happen. **Paul says in Romans 8:28 that “we know in all things that God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called *according to his purpose*.”**

Eph. 1:7 In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, **8** which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight **9** making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ **10** as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. **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, 12** so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of his glory.

Notice in these verses a few different aspects of God’s divine government.

First, God's governing activity is universal and does not merely extend to his own people. It extends to all matters and all men ... that which is good and that which is not good. Ephesians 1:11 says that he works "all things according to the counsel of his will."

Second, God is good in his government. Romans 8:28 says that God works for the good of those who love him. That good that we see in Romans 8:28 is referring to God's purpose in conforming his children to the image of his son (verse 29).

Third, God is personally concerned about those who are his. Again, Romans 8:28 shows that this governing that God does is particularly concerned with God's own children.

Fourth, God is sovereign in his government. This means that he and he alone determines his own plan and knows the significance of each of his actions. Psalm 103 ... "The LORD has established his throne in the heavens, and his kingdom rules over all." Or, as it's put in Daniel ... "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?"

Application:

And so why does this matter? Why are we studying this? Well, because it means everything. It means everything for our life and faith in Christ. Think about it for a second ...

TRUST: Belief in God's providence means that we can trust God for all things because he has already handled our biggest problem ... sin. Faith in Christ enables us as believers, **in spite of all the riddles that perplex us and tearful trials that come and go, as believers in Christ we cling to the conviction that the God who rules the world is the same loving and compassionate Father who in Christ has forgiven us of all of our sins, who has accepted us and adopted us as His children, and who will receive us with joy into His glorious presence forever.** So in all of our suffering and tears, Christians look forward with joy to the future with faith in our God's fatherly hand of providence. God's providence is precisely a source of humility and hope and trust and consolation and courage.

TRUST: In Him you can trust so completely as to have no doubt that He will provide you with all things necessary for body and soul,[4] and He will also turn to your good whatever adversity He sends you in this life of sorrow.[5] He is able to do so because He is almighty God,[6] and willing to do so because He's a faithful Father.

PATIENCE: God's providence also means that we can be patient in adversity. If we know that God is working, and that he is working for our good, then we can wait knowing that he hasn't forgotten us. So far from forgetting us, he has ordained everything in the universe for us. What a God!

GRATITUDE: Moreover, it means being thankful in whatever circumstance we find ourselves in. Whether it is prosperity or poverty, we know that God has ordained things for the good of those who love him and so we can be thankful that God has seen to it that we are in the circumstance that we are in right now. While we may not understand all of the reasons for the circumstance, we can know that God know and that God is at work in our lives even now to bring us closer to him and more closely conformed to the image of his son. It is why Paul can say to the Thessalonians in 1 Thess. 5:18, "give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus."

HOPE: Finally, with a view to the future, God's providence means that we can have a firm confidence in our faithful God and Father that nothing shall separate us from His love. **Rom. 8:28.** We have a hope that no one else in the world has, because we have been given a promise that no one else has. That God will work all things for the good of those who love him. And that this God who loves us, and works out all things for our good, will never leave us, never forsake us, and never allow us to depart from him. What a hope. What a savior!