

THE DOCTRINE OF PROVIDENCE (PART 2)

PRAYER

I. Review: Providence is God's Ongoing Relationship with Creation.

1. Preservation
2. Concurrence
3. Government

Last week, we introduced the doctrine of God's providence. If you remember, we used the Heidelberg Catechism to help us do just that, and we saw that it defined God's providence as "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]"

And, in looking at God's providence, we identified 3 specific attributes about it that helped us see how God works and moves through his creation.

First, we looked at the doctrine of (1) Preservation. "Preservation" is a term used to say that God keeps all created things existing and maintaining the properties which He created them to have. He is, in this way of speaking, 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. He preserves that which he has already created.

Second, we looked at the doctrine of (2) Concurrence. “Concurrence,” you’ll remember, 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. We’ll take a closer look at this today as it relates to some different elements of divine and human interaction, such as the matter of free will and the problem of evil.

Third, and finally, we looked at the doctrine of (3) Government. “Government,” is the idea that 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.

So, God (1) sustains his creation, (2) works in and through his creation, and (3) ultimately directs that creation to his good ends.

These things work together, inseparably, to bring all things to pass that God has ordained from before the beginning of the world.

However, if we understand God’s providence to mean that he is (1) preserving creation; (2) acting in and through it; and (3) governing all things towards a specific ends that he has ordained, then we are left with a few questions that need to be answered.

First, (1) how exactly are we to understand divine sovereignty and human freedom to work hand-in-hand? Second, (2) If God is sovereign, then why are we held responsible for the evil things that we do and why isn’t God responsible? And, Third, (3) How can God be good and powerful and there still be evil in the world?

To answer these questions, let’s look at the Biblical Givens ... or what the Scripture makes clear to us concerning divine sovereignty and human responsibility.

II. 3 Propositions

Scripture teaches 3 propositions simultaneously:

(1) First – God is absolutely sovereign, but his sovereignty never functions in such a way that human responsibility is curtailed, minimized, or mitigated.

(a) General texts – Ps. 115:2-3; 135:6; 139:16; Dan. 4:34-35; Eph. 1:11

God not only assigns time and places to people, but so reigns that even the most mundane natural processes are ascribed to his activity in the world.

Remember verses 14 of Psalm 104, from last week, “You cause the grass to grow for the livestock and plants for man to cultivate, that he may bring forth food from the earth.”

The writer of Ecclesiastes knows of the water cycle but biblical authors prefer to speak of God sending the rain than to say, “It is raining.” God is the one who opens and shuts, who kills and brings, life, who raises up and puts down kings. And, so, we see God’s sovereignty over all of creation.

But not only that, we see God’s sovereignty over even the human will. Look with me at Ezra 6:22,

“And they kept the Feast of Unleavened Bread seven days with joy, for the Lord had made them joyful and had turned the heart of the king of Assyria to them, so that he aided them in the work of the house of God, the God of Israel.”

Here, we read of God turning the heart of the king of Assyria, so that his actions actually helped the Israelites in their work. God’s sovereignty shown over the inclinations of the human will.

Moreover, we see God’s sovereignty over evil in the Scriptures. Psalm 2 is a great example of this:

“The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord and against his anointed, saying, ‘Let us burst their bonds apart and cast away their cords from us.’ He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision” (Psalm 2:2-4).

Or what about Lamentations 3, “Who has spoken and it came to pass, unless the Lord has commanded it? Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that good and *bad* come?”

The Lord is always in sovereign control over all evil that exists, and this is clear throughout all of Scripture. And while we may see examples in Scripture of God ordaining evil in some loose way—Lam 3, for example--we must be careful to see that when God’s sovereignty over evil is spoken of in Scripture, the authors *never* ascribe evil to God. They *do* make it clear that even evil cannot escape God’s sway, however. Sin and rebellion exist but no matter how difficult the questions that are thereby called into being are, the sweep of God’s sovereignty is not curtailed or qualified.

So, God is absolutely sovereign, but his sovereignty never functions in such a way that human responsibility is curtailed, minimized, or mitigated.

- (2) Second – Human beings are morally responsible creatures – they significantly choose, rebel, obey, believe, defy, and make decisions – and they are rightly held accountable for such actions; but this characteristic never functions so as to make God absolutely contingent.

This fact is clear in the command to repent.

Acts 17:30-31 says, “The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, 31 because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.”

Human beings are responsible for their actions before God. And this responsibility, we see in Scripture, arises out of God’s own initiative in election. Think of Deut. 6:6, “And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart.” It is God who ordains this responsibility.

So, number 2 ... human beings are morally responsible creatures, but it is from God that this responsibility arises.

- (3) And Third – Despite everything Scripture says about God’s sovereignty, the Bible insists that God is perfectly good. God is *never* presented as an

accomplice of evil, or as secretly malicious, or as standing behind evil in exactly the same way that he stands behind good. The goodness of God, it is clear, is *non-negotiable* in Scripture.

- **1 John 1:5** - This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that *God is light*, and in him is no darkness at all.
- **Psalm 92:15** - To declare that the LORD is upright; He is my rock, and there is no unrighteousness in Him.
- **Psalm 145:9** - The LORD is good to all; he has compassion on all he has made"

God Himself never sins nor does anything evil or unholy. Again, if there is one thing that the Bible is clear about, it's that God is holy and does not sin. "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!" (Rev. 4:8); See Isa. 6:3). God cannot be tempted by evil and He Himself tempts no one" (James 1:13). "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?" (Gen. 18:25). God is just and holy and eternally without sin.

III. Compatibilism

But, then, how do we put these 3 truths together in some compatible way so that we can answer the 3 questions from before: (1) how are we to understand divine sovereignty and human freedom to work hand-in-hand? (2) If God is sovereign, then why are we held responsible for the evil things that we do and why isn't God responsible? (3) How can God be good and powerful and there still be evil in the world?

The answer to that is found in the definition of the word, "compatibilism."

D.A. Carson explains compatibilism as the idea that "The Bible as a whole, and sometimes in specific texts, presupposes or teaches that both of the following propositions are true:

- (1) God is absolutely sovereign, but his sovereignty never functions in such a way that human responsibility is curtailed, minimized, or mitigated.
- (2) Human beings are morally responsible creatures—they significantly choose, rebel, obey, believe, defy, make decisions, and so forth, and they are rightly

held accountable for such actions; but this characteristic never functions so as to make God absolutely contingent.

The two propositions are taught in Scripture and are mutually compatible.

Although there are numerous passages of Scripture that address this issue, I want to look at three specific passages that really help to show how God can be absolutely sovereign over all things, yet human beings completely responsible for their sinful actions.

First, let's take a look at the story of Joseph ...

IV. God is sovereign over all things (sin, evil, Satan, etc.) and human beings are completely responsible for their sinful actions.

Joseph

Background: Joseph, one of the sons of Israel, is betrayed by his other brothers and sold into slavery. He ends up in Egypt. After serving in the house of Potiphar, he is unjustly accused by Potiphar's wife and is thrown into prison. Ultimately, he's delivered from prison by God and raised up to be the one through whom God rescues Israel and blesses the nations during the famine.

- **Genesis 45:4-8** So Joseph said to his brothers, "Come near to me, please." And they came near. And he said, "I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. 5 And now do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life. 6 For the famine has been in the land these two years, and there are yet five years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. 7 *And God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. 8 So it was not you who sent me here, but God.* He has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt.
- **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.*

So, we see here, that it was the acts of Joseph's brothers that led Joseph to Egypt. It was Joseph himself who went to Egypt. But, according to Joseph's own mouth, it was not Joseph's brothers who sent him to Egypt, but God.

Next, let's take a look at the story of Job.

Job

Background: Job is "blameless and upright" (1:1). God asks Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job?" (1:8). **Read 1:8-22!**

Job 1:8-22 And the LORD said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil?" 9 Then Satan answered the LORD and said, "Does Job fear God for no reason? 10 Have you not put a hedge around him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. 11 But stretch out your hand and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face." 12 And the LORD said to Satan, "Behold, all that he has is in your hand. Only against him do not stretch out your hand." So Satan went out from the presence of the LORD. 13 Now there was a day when his sons and daughters were eating and drinking wine in their oldest brother's house, 14 and there came a messenger to Job and said, "The oxen were plowing and the donkeys feeding beside them, 15 and the Sabeans fell upon them and took them and struck down the servants with the edge of the sword, and I alone have escaped to tell you." 16 While he was yet speaking, there came another and said, "The fire of God fell from heaven and burned up the sheep and the servants and consumed them, and I alone have escaped to tell you." 17 While he was yet speaking, there came another and said, "The Chaldeans formed three groups and made a raid on the camels and took them and struck down the servants with the edge of the sword, and I alone have escaped to tell you." 18 While he was yet speaking, there came another and said, "Your sons and daughters were eating and drinking wine in their oldest brother's house, 19 and behold, a great wind came across the wilderness and struck the four corners of the house, and it fell upon the young people, and they are dead, and I alone have escaped to tell you." 20 Then Job arose and tore his robe and shaved his head and fell on the ground and worshiped. 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." 22 In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrong.

- **Job 1:20-22** Then Job arose and tore his robe and shaved his head and fell on the ground and worshiped. 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.*” 22 In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrong.
- As readers, we know that Satan took Job’s property and the lives of his children
- Job ascribes the giving and the taking away of his property and the lives of his children to the LORD, not to Satan.
- The narrator of the book says that in Job’s ascription of all this to the LORD, that Job did not sin or charge God with wrong!
- Job’s view of God and His providential control over even the worst of tragedies produced humble, heart-broken, worship (1:20)!

Finally, let’s take a look at the life of Jesus.

Jesus

- The crucifixion of Jesus Christ, the sinless Son of God, the righteous One, the one who never sinned, is the most wicked and evil atrocity ever committed. Yet, it happened by *the hand* of God and *the plan* of God.
- **Acts 4:24–28** And when they heard it, they lifted their voices together to God and said, “Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them, who through the mouth of our father David, your servant, said by the Holy Spirit, ““Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers were gathered together, against the Lord and against his Anointed’— 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.*”
- **Acts 2:22–24** 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. God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it.

It was men who sent Jesus to the cross. But it was ultimately God who oversaw it, ordained it, and predestined it.

And, so, we see the idea of compatibilism worked out in Scripture in these 3 stories. God, sovereign over all things (sin, evil, Satan, etc.), yet human beings, completely responsible for their sinful actions.

Though we may not fully understand how it works, we see the doctrine of compatibilism throughout Scripture, pointing us to the truth that while man retains human freedom and moral responsibility, God retains his sovereignty over all, including moral actors.

So, then, what do we do with all of this? Let me give you a few applications:

Application:

1. Look at the cross.

- **Romans 5:6-9** For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. 7 For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die— 8 but *God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.* 9 Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God.

Trust that, while we may not understand how it all works together, and why does this or does that, we can be sure that God is a good and faithful God, because he sent his own Son to die for our eternal lives.

2. Look at the end.

- **Revelation 21:3-4** And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. 4 *He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.*”

Trust that, while we may not understand God’s sovereignty in all of its respects, we do know how it is going to end. We know what all of this is divine action is working toward – and it’s our own salvation!

(NOTE: Much of the two applications below are drawn from John Piper’s *Spectacular Sins*)

3. Eight Things to Do with Evil

Knowing that God is sovereign over evil and is using evil even now for our good, know that you can do 8 things with evil ...

1. *Expect* evil. “Do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you” (1 Pet. 4:12).
2. *Endure* evil. “Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things” (1 Cor. 13:7; cf. Mark 13:13).
3. *Give thanks* for the refining effect of evil that comes against you. “Give thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Eph. 5:20; cf. 1 Thess. 5:18). “We rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance . . .” (Rom. 5:3–5).
4. *Hate* evil. “Let love be genuine. *Abhor* what is evil; hold fast to what is good” (Rom. 12:9).
5. *Pray for escape* from evil. “Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil” (Matt. 6:13).
6. *Expose* evil. “Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them” (Eph. 5:11).

7. *Overcome* evil with good. “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Rom. 12:21).

8. *Resist* evil. “Resist the devil and he will flee from you” (Jas. 4:7).

4. Four Things Never to Do with Evil

And, furthermore, because we know that God is sovereign over evil in the world and is working for our good, we can know what NEVER to do with evil and the temptations that Satan raises in our minds ...

1. *Never despair* that this evil world is out of God’s control. “[He] works all things according to the counsel of his will” (Eph. 1:11).

2. *Never give in* to the sense that because of seemingly random evil, life is absurd and meaningless. “How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! . . . For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory for- ever” (Rom. 11:33, 36).

3. *Never yield* to the thought that God sins or is ever unjust or unrighteous in the way he governs the universe. “The Lord is righteous in all his ways” (Ps. 145:17).

4. *Never doubt* that God is totally *for you* in Christ. If you trust him with your life, you are in Christ. Never doubt that all the evil that befalls you—even if it takes your life—God loves you. “He who did not spare His own Son, but gave Him up for us all, how will He together with Him freely give us all things?” (Romans 8:32). The cross is the eternal pledge of His love for us. In Christ, God is forever for us and not against us.