

# The Providence of God

By Al Felder

The Greek word for providence only occurs five times in the New Testament. Twice it is in noun form and three times it is in verb form. The noun form means prior knowledge, forethought, provision, and care.<sup>1</sup> The verb form means to perceive in advance, to foresee, to take thought for, or make provision for.<sup>2</sup>

In none of the passages in which the word “providence” occurs does it refer to the providence of God. Instead, it only refers to the care and foresight of men. *“But if any provide not for his own, and especially for those of his own house, he hath denied the faith, and is worse than an infidel.”* (1 Timothy 5:8) In this verse it is used to point out the responsibility of a man to take care of those within his house.

An examination of these facts causes us to realize that the idea of God’s providence is not something gathered from one particular passage in the Bible. Rather, it is a doctrine that appears on nearly every page of Scripture to which the term providence has been appropriately attached. Our understanding of God’s providence comes from a thorough study of His word as a whole, and not from a few passages of scripture.

There are many false views regarding the providence of God. Atheism is the philosophy that professes the belief that God does not exist. The atheistic view of how things came to be is more fantastic than believing that a tornado can go through a lumber yard and leave behind a perfectly constructed house.

Paganism is a belief in many gods. Pagans believe that there is a different god for each part of nature (wind, sea, etc.). It is also believed that these gods rival one another.

Deism is the belief in a God who created the universe, and then abandoned it. This belief assumes that God has no real control or influence over creation. Furthermore, it denies that God has indeed given supernatural revelation.

Calvinism teaches that God controls every detail of our lives, and every movement of the universe. This belief teaches that God dictates every event no matter how small or great, even the resting place of each snowflake that falls. According to this belief there is no such thing as free will.

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<sup>1</sup> Vine, W. E. 1996. *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*. Nashville, TN : Thomas Nelson, Inc., 1996. p. 496.

<sup>2</sup> —. 1996. *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*. Nashville, TN : Thomas Nelson, Inc., 1996. p. 495.

The Biblical doctrine of providence refers to how God relates to the on-going world. Whereas creation deals with the origin of the universe, providence deals with God's involvement from that point forward. What does God have to do with the course of every day events? How does He shape the general or even specific outcomes of life? What does He have to do with anything? Does He even care? Is He involved? All of these questions can be answered with an understanding of God's providence as taught by His word.

Providence is the activity of God as accomplished through natural law. It stands in contrast with the miraculous by which God operates independent of natural law. In providence, God manipulates His own laws for the accomplishment of His ultimate purpose.

There are two types of providence, general and special. General providence includes primarily the realm of nature and refers to the works of God in preserving the universe in its existence, and directing its natural processes according to the predictable patterns we call the laws of nature. It is referred to as general providence because it occurs daily, and affects all people. *"That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust."* (Matthew 5:45) There are certain things necessary for life that God through His providence causes to happen. These things happen not only for His people, but for those in the world as well. These are general provisions that God has made for all life to be sustained.

It is within the area of general providence that God maintains His creation. *"Who being the brightness of his glory, and the express image of his person, and upholding all things by the word of his power, when he had by himself purged our sins, sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high."* (Hebrews 1:3) In the Greek language, the perfect tense form is used meaning that Christ keeps on holding together the forces of the universe. *"In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth."* (Genesis 1:1) The word create in this passage of scripture means to make something that did not previously exist.<sup>3</sup> Since Christ created everything from nothing, He must continue to hold it together or else it would go back to being nothing again.

Consider another New Testament verse on this subject. *"And he is before all things, and by him all things consist."* (Colossians 1:17) The word consist means to stand together.<sup>4</sup> The idea behind both of these passages of scripture is that Christ literally holds all of creation together.

Within the realm of general providence, God maintains the seasons. *"While the earth remaineth, seedtime, and harvest, and cold, and heat, and summer, and winter, and day, and*

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<sup>3</sup> Vine, W. E. 1996. *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*. Nashville, TN : Thomas Nelson, Inc., 1996. p. 51.

<sup>4</sup> —. 1996. *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*. Nashville, TN : Thomas Nelson, Inc., 1996. p. 124.

*night shall not cease.”* (Genesis 8:22) In this verse, God declares after the flood that all of these natural occurring seasons would continue. Through His providence he ensures that these things will continue to happen.

God also provides the basic necessities of life through general providence. *“Behold the fowls of the air: for they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feedeth them. Are you not much better than they?”* (Matthew 6:26) In His sermon on the mount, Jesus declared how God takes care of His creation. The needs of every creature are supplied. Every man, whether good or bad, benefits from this providence.

Unlike general providence, special providence differs from time to time and place to place. In special providence different groups of people are treated in different ways. It is important to point out that special providence is the exception and not the rule, which is why it is special.

It is through special providence that God cares for His children. This fact is established by the Bible’s teachings on prayer. *“For the eyes of the Lord are over the righteous, and His ears are open unto their prayers: but the face of the Lord is against them that do evil.”* (1 Peter 3:12) God hears and answers the prayers of His people. This is not something that He does for mankind in general.

Special providence stays within the boundaries or the possibilities of natural law, but nevertheless brings about a result that might not have happened by natural law alone. This is possible because the laws of nature do not operate in a way that necessitates one and only one result from a particular set of events. An example of this would be God causing a drought to speed up the rebuilding of the temple during the days of Haggai. *“And I called for a drought upon the land, and upon the mountains, and upon the corn, and upon the new wine, and upon the oil, and upon that which the ground bringeth forth, and upon men, and upon cattle, and upon all the labor of the hands.”* (Haggai 1:11) In this instance God worked through natural law to cause a drought at a specific time for a specific purpose. This action caused the Jews to put aside less important things so that they could accomplish the work of the Lord.

There are times, however, when God’s desired goals are not accomplished through special providence.

*“<sup>6</sup>And I also have given you cleanness of teeth in all your cities, and want of bread in all your places: yet have ye not returned unto me, saith the Lord. <sup>7</sup>And also I have withholden the rain from you, when there were yet three months to the harvest: and I caused it to rain upon one city, and caused it not to rain upon another city: one piece was rained upon, and the other piece whereupon it rained not withered. <sup>8</sup>So two or three cities wandered unto one city, to drink water; but they were not satisfied: yet have ye not returned unto me, saith the Lord. <sup>9</sup>I have smitten you with blasting and mildew: when your gardens and your vineyards and your fig trees and your olive trees increased, the palmer worm devoured them: yet have ye not returned unto me, saith the Lord. <sup>10</sup>I have sent among you the pestilence after the manner of Egypt: your young men have I*

*slain with the sword, and have taken away your horses; and I have made the stink of your camps to come up unto your nostrils: yet have ye not returned unto me, saith the Lord. <sup>11</sup>I have overthrown some of you, as God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah, and ye were as a firebrand plucked out of the burning: yet have ye not returned unto me, saith the Lord.”* (Amos 4:6-11)

In this passage, God lists a number of natural events He caused to get the attention of Israel and bring her to repentance. God worked through natural law bringing about specific events for a specific purpose. In this passage, however, we can clearly understand that God does not overrule the will of men through His providence. In other words, God has given man freewill and He continues to allow man to exercise that freewill even if it is contrary to His will. God, through His providence, will cause certain things to happen in order to get our attention; but the choice as to whether or not we will obey Him is ours to make.

There are numerous examples of God’s providence in the lives of men and women throughout the Bible. *“<sup>4</sup>And Joseph said unto his brethren, Come near to me, I pray you. And they came near. And he said I am Joseph your brother, whom ye sold into Egypt. <sup>5</sup>Now therefore be not grieved, nor angry with yourselves, that ye sold me hither: for God did send me before you to preserve life.”* (Genesis 45:4, 5) These verses inform us that God worked through the envious feelings of Joseph’s brothers for the good of all. What they meant for evil, God meant for God. Through these series of events God caused Joseph to be in a position where he could save his family from a horrible famine.

Ester is another great example. *“For if thou altogether holdest thy peace at this time, then shall there enlargement and deliverance arise to the Jews from another place; but thou and they father’s house shall be destroyed: and who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?”* (Esther 4:14) Ester is unlike many of the other books in the Bible. In fact, as you read the book you will find that its purpose is to show God’s providence for His people. Ester was the most unlikely candidate to be the queen of the most powerful man in the world, but she found herself in that very position. Not only was she an unlikely queen, she was queen when her people needed a powerful ally the most. Through her position she was able to stop a plot that would have wiped out the Jews. The unmistakable message of this book is that God, through His providence, placed Ester in that position.

God’s greatest acts of providence were for the purpose of bringing about His plan of redemption. *“Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel, and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain.”* (Acts 2:23) Granted miraculous acts were also involved in this process for specific reasons, however, God also worked through His natural law in order to bring certain things about. God’s plan for the salvation of man is at the center of everything.

The reason for God’s providence has to do with the purpose of creation. When someone makes something, it is usually with a purpose in mind. When God created the universe, He did so for a specific purpose. *“For of him, and through him, and to him, are all*

*things: to whom be glory forever.”* The purpose for which God created was that His glory would be manifested in and among His creation. All of His providence works towards this end.

Our belief in providence determines our attitude. Whether we accept it or reject it, that choice will have an impact on our life. The knowledge that God watches and works in our lives teaches us to wait on Him in faithfulness, humility, and patience. It allows us to understand that no matter what sufferings a solitary moment may possess, all things truly do work together for good for those who love Him. *“And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.”* (Romans 8:28)