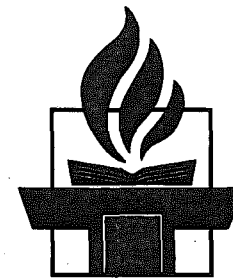


Reformation  
& Revival



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**W**hat God requires of us He Himself works in us, or it is not done.

*Matthew Henry*

**W**e may lay it down as an elemental principle of religion that no large growth in holiness was ever gained by one who did not take time to be often long alone with God.

*Austin Phelps*

**G**od's attributes coincide with His being.

*Herman Bavinck*

**G**od, as a jealous God, is filled with a burning desire for our holiness, for our righteousness, for our goodness.

*Donald Grey Barnhouse*

## *The Providence of God*

Samuel A. Owen

**P**rovidence, from *pro* and *video*, literally means foresight, and then a careful arrangement prepared beforehand for the accomplishment of a predetermined end.<sup>1</sup> Generally, when we speak of God's providence we are speaking of His activity in all that happens in the world, preserving and guiding all things toward the goal which He has for them.

In any complete discussion of this issue, many other truths of Scripture must be brought to bear, most of which relate to the doctrine of God Himself. It begins with His sovereignty (His supremacy, His kingship, His Godhood); that He is the Most High, the Almighty, the "only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords" (1 Tim. 6:15). But the providence of God is not related only to a discussion of His sovereignty. Stephen Charnock, in his classic study of God, does not have a separate section on providence. Rather, he discusses it in each of his sections dealing with God's power, immutability, omnipresence, knowledge, goodness, and wisdom. He says that to deny God's providence is to deny each of these attributes as well, and vice versa. For example, he says, "The goodness of God is condemned by a distrust of His providence. As all trust in Him supposeth Him good, so all distrust of Him supposeth Him evil; either without goodness to exert His power, or without power to display His goodness."<sup>2</sup>

Our discussion of the providence of God here must needs be more limited in scope. We shall therefore attempt to define it succinctly, note its extent (especially as it relates to the people of God) and its mystery, and show its effect in the life of one who truly believes it.

### The Providence of God—A Definition

God's actual providence is "the effectual working of His power, and almighty act of His will, whereby He sustains, governs, and disposes of all things, men and their actions, to the ends which He has ordained for them,"<sup>3</sup> unto the praise of the glory of His grace.

Consider the components of this definition. (1) God's providence is the effectual working of His power and will unto His desired ends. God has a plan for His creation. In His providence He effectually carries out that plan; it is characterized by adequate power to produce the intended effect (Eph. 1:11; Isa. 45:5-7; John 5:17). (2) The scope of providence involves all things, including men and their actions (more on this below). (3) The purpose and goal of God's providence is His own glory (Eph. 1:6, 12, 14; John 12:28; 1 Chron. 29:11; Isa. 42:8; et.al.). He is God, and He does what He pleases in heaven and on earth (Ps. 115:1-3; 135:5ff.). (4) Note the actions involved in providence: sustaining, governing, disposing. The sustaining work of God is His upholding all things (Acts 17:28; Col. 1:17; Heb. 1:3; Ps. 63:8), His preservation of His creation. As Calvin remarked, God "sustains, nourishes, and cares for, everything He has made."<sup>4</sup>

While most people gladly accept the idea of God caring for His creation, the act of God in governing is less well received. However, Scripture is clear in this regard as well: God actually disposes of all things to His appointed ends for His own glory (e.g., Prov. 16:4). This governing is all-inclusive. Hodge states:

God having from eternity absolutely decreed whatsoever comes to pass, and having in the beginning created all things out of nothing by the word of His power, and continuing subsequently constantly present to every atom of His creation, upholding all things in being and in the possession and exercise of all their properties, He also continually controls and directs the actions of all His creatures thus preserved, so that while He never violates the law of their several natures, He yet infallibly causes all actions and events singular and universal to occur according to the eternal and immutable plan embraced in His decree. There is design in providence. God has chosen His great end, the manifestation of His own glory, but in order to that end He has chosen innumerable subordinate ends; these are fixed; and He has appointed all actions and events in their several

relations as means to those ends; and He continually so directs the actions of all creatures that all these general and special ends are brought to pass precisely at the time, by the means, and in the mode and under the conditions, which He from eternity proposed.<sup>5</sup>

In His providence we see the wisdom of God planning, the knowledge of God directing, the will of God commanding, and the power of God executing.

#### The Extent of God's Providence

As stated above, God's providence extends to all things.<sup>6</sup> It extends over the natural world (Ps. 147:8-18; Acts 14:17). It includes the animal creation (Ps. 104:21-29; Matt. 6:26). It extends to the general affairs of men (Prov. 21:1; Isa. 10:12-15; 45:1-7; Dan. 2:21; 4:25). The circumstances of individuals are controlled by God (1 Sam. 2:6; Prov. 16:19; James 4:13-15), as are events that are considered by us as chance occurrences (Ex. 21:13; Prov. 16:33). Indeed, God's providence is concerned not only with the great events of mankind but also with the details of daily life (Matt. 10:29-30). As Zwingli reminds us:

We cannot but admit that not even the least thing takes place unless it is ordered by God. For who has ever been so concerned and curious as to find out how much hair he has on his head? There is no one. God, however, knows the number. Indeed, nothing is too small in us or in any other creature, not to be ordered by the all-knowing and all-powerful providence of God.<sup>7</sup>

Furthermore, God's providence governs men and their actions. It extends to the self-determined acts of men (Ex. 12:26; Prov. 16:1; 19:21; 20:24; Jer. 10:23). Indeed, it is even exercised over the sinful acts of men. This is seen in that (1) the sinful acts of man are in such a sense under the divine control that they occur only by His permission and according to His purpose (Gen. 45:5; Acts 4:27-28; 2:23; 3:18; cf. Isa. 53:10);

(2) God restrains and controls sin (Gen. 50:20); (3) He overrules it for good (Acts 3:13).<sup>8</sup> Note that God neither causes sin, nor approves it; He only permits, directs, restrains, limits, and overrules it. Man is the sole responsible and guilty cause of his own sin.<sup>9</sup> God willingly (according to His determinate counsel) suffers the sinful actions of wicked men to be for the manifestation of His glory, and by them effects His own righteous ends.<sup>10</sup> Thus, Almighty God brings light out of darkness, good out of evil.

God peculiarly exercises His providence toward His people, His church, in their generations, for whom are all things. As Charnock says,

He has a particular regard to His church. This is the signet on His hand, as a bracelet upon His arm; this is His garden which He delights to dress; if He prunes it, it is to purge it; if He digs about His vine, and wounds the branches, it is to make it beautiful with new clusters, and restore it to a fruitful vigor.<sup>11</sup>

God's outward providence towards His own consists in at least three things:<sup>12</sup> first, in causing all things to work together for their good (Matt. 6:31-33; Rom. 8:28); second, in ruling and disposing of kingdoms, nations, and persons, for their benefit (Ps. 105:14-15; Rom. 9:17); third, in avenging them of their adversaries (Zech. 12:2-5; Luke 18:17; Rev. 17:14).

To God's providence is to be assigned all the good we enjoy, and all the afflictions we undergo. Though the ordering of His providence towards us is various, yet every issue and act of it tends to one certain end—our good in His glory.

#### The Mystery of God's Providence

The fact that God does govern all His creation is expressly stated (and everywhere assumed) in Scripture. But this does not leave us without mystery. For example, we do not always (perhaps not even very often) understand how the provi-

dence of God is at work in the tragic sufferings and changing situations of our earthly existence. But faith takes hold of the God who is ordering all towards His appointed ends, the God who stands beside us and goes before us, who promises never to abandon us, even—especially—when all the evidence is to the contrary.<sup>13</sup> Now we see in a mirror dimly, but one day we shall see clearly. Luther's words put this into perspective:

Keep in view three lights: the light of nature, the light of grace, and the light of glory.... By the light of nature, it is inexplicable that it should be just for the good to be afflicted and the bad to prosper; but the light of grace explains it [there is a life after this life; and all that is not punished and repaid here will be punished and repaid there]. By the light of grace, it is inexplicable how God can damn him who by his own strength can do nothing but sin and become guilty. Both the light of nature and the light of grace here insist that the fault lies not in the wretchedness of man, but in the injustice of God.... But the light of glory insists otherwise, and will one day reveal God, to whom alone belongs a judgment whose justice is incomprehensible, as a God whose justice is most righteous and evident—provided that only in the meanwhile we believe it, as we are instructed and encouraged to do....<sup>14</sup>

#### A Proper Response to God's Providence

The doctrine of providence provides a bulwark against the ideas that God is detached from the present workings of the universe or that we are caught up in fatalism. It tells us that the world and our lives are not ruled by chance or fate but by God, whose hand is at the helm.

In the midst of great turmoil God's people were told to "Be still, and know that I am God" (Ps. 46:10), to be still before Him, and under the dispensations of His providence. Jonathan Edwards notes that this implies at least three things:<sup>15</sup> (1) Being still as to words—not speaking against the sovereign administration of Providence, or complaining of them; not

darkening counsel by words without knowledge; (2) Being still as to actions and outward behavior, so as not to oppose God; and (3) Being still as to the inward frame of our hearts, cultivating a calm and quiet submission of soul to the sovereign pleasure of God, whatever it may be.

Psalm 46 gives the ground of this stillness: the divinity of God. God is God—perfect, with infinite power, knowledge, understanding, and holiness. And God is great and beyond comprehension. “If we find fault with his government, we virtually suppose ourselves to be God’s counselors; whereas it becomes us rather, with great humility and adoration, to cry out with Paul in Romans 11:33ff.”<sup>16</sup>

Let us therefore take great comfort in the doctrine of God’s providence. From a knowledge of its truth flow thanksgiving for the favorable outcome of things, patience in adversity, and incredible freedom from worry about the future (as we safely rest in the One whose authority curbs Satan with all his furies, and upon whose nod depends whatever opposes our welfare).<sup>17</sup> Let us fearfully dare to commit ourselves to God, believing and proclaiming the doctrine of His sovereign and good providence. For “with the goodness of God to desire our highest welfare, the wisdom of God to plan it, and the power of God to achieve it, what do we lack?”<sup>18</sup>

#### Endnotes

- 1 A.A. Hodge, *Outlines of Theology* (Banner of Truth, 1972), 258.
- 2 Stephen Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God* (Baker, 1979), 2:319.
- 3 John Owen, *Works* (Banner of Truth, 1965), 1:475.
- 4 Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Westminster, 1960), 1.16.1.
- 5 *Outlines*, 262.
- 6 The following is a concise summary in Hodge, 265-66.
- 7 Quoted in Timothy George, *Theology of the Reformers*

(Broadman, 1988), 123.

- 8 Hodge, 267.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 268.
- 10 Owen, 1:475.
- 11 Charnock, 1:406-407.
- 12 Owen, 1:475.
- 13 George, 312.
- 14 Martin Luther, *Bondage of the Will* (Revell, 1957), 317.
- 15 Jonathan Edwards, *Works* (Banner of Truth, 1974), 2:107.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 2:108.
- 17 Calvin, 1.17.7; 1.16.3.
- 18 A.W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (Harper & Row, 1961), 70.

#### Author

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