

## THE PROVIDENCE OF GOD

by

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"God's works of providence are His most holy, wise, and powerful preserving and governing all his creatures and all their actions." (Shorter Catechism, answer to Question 11.) The Scriptures very clearly teach that all things outside of God owe not merely their original creation, but the continuance of their existence, with all their properties and powers, to the will of God. He upholds all things by the word of His power (Heb. 1:3). He is before all things, and in Him all things consist (Col. 1:17). "Thou art Jehovah, even thou alone; thou hast made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their hosts, the earth and all things that are therein, the seas and all that is in them, and thou preservest them all" (Neh. 9:6). "In Him we live, and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28). He is "over all, and through all, and in all" (Eph. 4:6).

Throughout the Bible the laws of nature, the course of history, the varying fortunes of individuals, are ever attributed to God's providential control. All things, both in heaven and earth, from the seraphim down to the tiny atom, are ordered by His never-failing providence. So intimate is His relationship with the whole creation that a careless reader might be led toward pantheistic conclusions. Yet individual personalities and second causes are fully recognized--not as independent of God, but as having their proper place in His plan. And alongside of this doctrine of His Immanence the Scripture writers also present the kindred doctrine of His Transcendence, in which God is distinctly set forth as entirely separate from and above the whole creation.

Yet as regards God's providence we are to understand that He is intimately concerned with every detail in the affairs of men and in the course of nature. "To suppose that anything is too great to be comprehended in His control," says Dr. Charles Hodge, "or anything so minute as to escape His notice; or that the infinitude of particulars can distract His attention, is to forget that God is infinite. . . . The sun diffuses its light through all space as easily as upon any point. God is as much present everywhere, and with everything, as though He were only in once place, and had but one object of attention." And again, "He is present in every blade of grass, yet guiding Aucturus in his course, marshaling the stars as a host, calling them by their names; present also in every human soul, giving it understanding, endowing it with gifts, working in it both to will and to do. The human heart is in His hands; and he turns it even as the rivers of water are turned."<sup>1</sup>

It is almost universally admitted that God determines when, where, and under what circumstances each individual of our race shall be born, live, and die, whether it shall be male or female, white or black, wise or foolish. God is no less sovereign in the distribution

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1 Systematic Theology, II. pp. 583, 585.

of His favors. He does what He will with His own. To some He gives riches, to others honor, to others health, to others certain talents for music, oratory, art, finance, statesmanship, etc. Others are poor, unknown, born in dishonor, the victims of disease, and live lives of wretchedness. Some are placed in Christian lands where they receive all the benefits of the Gospel; others live and die in the darkness of heathenism. Some are brought through faith unto salvation; others are left to perish in unbelief. And to a very large extent these external things, which are not the result of individual choice, decide the person's life course and eternal destiny. Both Scripture and everyday experience teach us that God gives to some what He withholds from others. If it be asked why He does this, or why he does not save all, the only available answer is found in the words of the Lord Jesus, "Yea, Father, for so it was well-pleasing in thy sight." Only the Scripture doctrine of the fall and redemption will give us any light on what we see about us.

It is to be remembered that those who receive these gifts, whether spiritual or temporal, receive them through pure grace, while in regard to the others God simply withholds those gifts which He was under no obligation to bestow. Nations, as well as individuals, are thus in the hands of God, who appoints the bounds of their habitation and controls their destiny. He controls them as absolutely as a man controls a rod or a staff. They are in His hands, and He employs them to accomplish His purposes. He breaks them in pieces as a potter's vessel, or He exalts them to greatness, according to His good pleasure. He gives peace and fruitful seasons, property and happiness, or He sends the desolations of war, famine, drought and pestilence. All of these things are of His disposing, and are designed for intelligent ends under His universal providence. God is no mere spectator of the universe He has made but is everywhere present and active, the all-sustaining ground, and all-governing power of all that is.

Although the price of the sparrow is small and its flight seems giddy and at random, yet it does not fall to the ground nor alight anywhere without your Father. "His all-wise providence has before appointed what bough it shall perch upon; what grains it shall pick up; where it shall lodge and where it shall build; on what it shall live and where it shall die."<sup>2</sup>

Every raindrop and every snowflake which falls from the cloud, every insect which moves, every plant which grows, every grain of dust which floats in the air has had certain definite causes and will have certain definite effects. Each is a link in the chain of events, and many of the great events of history have turned on these apparently insignificant things.

Throughout the whole course of events there is progress toward a predetermined end. Dr. Warfield has well written: "It was not accident that brought Rebecca to the well to welcome Abraham's servant (Gen. 24), or that sent Joseph into Egypt (Gen. 45:8; 50:20: 'God meant it for good'), or guided Pharaoh's daughter to the ark among the flags (Ex. 2), or that, later, directed the millstone that crushed Abimelech's head (Judges 9:35), or winged the arrow shot at a venture to smite the king in the joints of the armor (1 Kings

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<sup>2</sup> Toplady, Preface to Zanchius' Predestination, p. 14.

22:34). Every historical event is rather treated as an item in the orderly carrying out of an underlying Divine purpose; and the historian is continually aware of the presence in history of Him who gives even to the lightning a charge to strike the mark (Job. 36:32)."<sup>3</sup>

"In the great railroad stations," said Dr. Clarence E. Macartney, "you can see a metallic pencil come out and write in great characters on the wall the time of the arrival or departure of the trains. The metallic pencil seems to write of itself, but we know that hidden in an office somewhere the mind and hand of a man are operating the pencil. So in our own life, we note our own deliberations and choices and decisions, and yet in the fabric of our destiny there seem to be other strands, strands not of our own weaving. Apparently trivial events play their part in great issues."<sup>4</sup>

Although the Bible repeatedly teaches that this providential control is universal, powerful, wise, and holy, it nowhere attempts to inform us how it is to be reconciled with man's free agency. All we need to know is that God does govern His creatures, that His control over them is such that no violence is done to their natures, and that His control is consistent with His own purity and excellence. God so presents the outside inducements that man acts in accordance with his own nature, yet does just exactly what God plans for him to do. This subject as it relates to man has been more fully treated in the chapter on Free Agency.

Man's sense of moral responsibility and dependence, and his quick appeal to God in times of danger, show how universal and innate is the conviction that God does govern the world. And, in conclusion, would it seem reasonable to acknowledge a providential control in the ordinary affairs of our daily lives and yet to hold that the eternal destiny of millions of souls is left to blind chance, or at best, to the whim of weak, sinful creatures such as men are?

## SCRIPTURE PROOF

That this is the Scripture doctrine of Providence is so plain that it is admitted by many whose philosophical views lead them to reject it for themselves. We shall now present a summary of Scripture proof, showing that all events have a divinely appointed place and purpose, that God's providence is universal, and that He thus secures the complete fulfillment of His plans. God's providential control extends over:

### **[1] Nature or the physical world**

"Jehovah does His will in the whirlwind and in the storm, and the clouds are the dust of his feet" Nahum 1:3.

"Only in the land of Goshen where the children of Israel were, there was no hail," Ex. 9:26.

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<sup>3</sup> Biblical Doctrines, p. 14.

<sup>4</sup> Moderator's sermon on Predestination, preached before the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A., 1924.

"He makes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the just and the unjust," Matt. 5:45.

The famine in Egypt appeared to men to be only the result of natural causes; yet Joseph could say, "The thing is established of God, and God will shortly bring it to pass," Gen. 41:32.

"And I also have withheld the rain from you, when there were yet three months before the harvest; and I caused it to rain upon one city, and caused it not to rain upon another city," Amos 4:7.

"He gave you from heaven rains and fruitful seasons, filling your heart with food and gladness," Acts 14:17.

"Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand, and meted out heaven with a span, and comprehended the dust of the earth in a measure, and weighed the mountains in scales, and the hills in a balance?" Is. 40:12.

## **[2] The animal creation**

"Are not two sparrows sold for a penny and not one of them shall fall to the ground without your Father," Matt. 10:29.

"Behold the birds of the heavens, that they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns; and your heavenly Father feeds them," Matt. 6:26.

"My God has sent His angel and hath shut the lions' mouths, that they have not hurt me," Daniel 6:22.

"The young lions roar after their prey, and seek their meat from God," Ps. 104:21.

"Thus God has taken away the cattle of your father (Laban) and given them to me" (Jacob), Gen. 31:9.

## **[3] Nations**

Nebuchadnezzar's humiliation was "to the intent that the living may know that the Most High rules in the kingdom of men, and gives it to whomsoever He will, and sets up over it the lowest of men," Dan. 4:17.

"Behold, the nations are as a drop in the bucket, and are accounted as the small dust of the balance; behold, He takes up the isles as a very little thing," Is. 40:15.

"Let them say among the nations, Jehovah reigns," 1 Cor. 16:31.

"For God is the King of all the earth," Ps. 47:7.

"He changes the times and the seasons; He removes kings, and sets up kings," Daniel 2:21.

"Jehovah brings the counsel of the nations to naught; He makes the thoughts of the people to be of none effect," Ps. 33:10.

"And Jehovah gave them rest round about. . . . Jehovah delivered all their enemies into their hands," Joshua 21:44.

"And the children of Israel did that which was evil in the sight of Jehovah; and Jehovah delivered them into the hands of Midian seven years," Judges 6:1.

"Shall evil befall a city, and Jehovah hath not done it?" Amos 3:6.

"For, lo, I raise up the Chaldeans, that bitter and hasty nation, that march through the breadth of the earth, to possess dwelling places that are not theirs," Hab. 1:6.

#### **[4] Individual men**

"The king's heart is in the hand of Jehovah as the watercourses; He turns it whithersoever He will," Prov. 21:1.

"A man's goings are established of Jehovah," Ps. 37:23.

"A man's heart devises his way, but Jehovah directs his steps," Prov. 16:9.

"For we ought to say, if the Lord will, we shall both live, and do this or that," James 4:15.

"Of Him, and through Him, and unto Him are all things," Rom. 11:36.

"Who makes you to differ? And what have you that you did not receive?" 1 Cor. 4:7.

"The angel of Jehovah encamps round about them that fear Him, and delivers them," Ps. 34:7.

"If it be so our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace; and He will deliver us out of thy hand, O King," Daniel 3:17.

"Jehovah is on my side; I shall not fear. What can man do unto me?" Ps. 118:6.

"But now, O Jehovah, you are our Father; we are the clay and you our potter; and we are the work of your hands," Is. 64:8.

"And the hand of our God was upon us, and He delivered us (the returning exiles) from the hand of the enemy and the lier-in-wait by the way," Ezra 8:31.

"And God brought their counsel to naught," Nehemiah 4:15.

"But against any of the children of Israel shall not a dog move his tongue, against man or beast; that ye may know how Jehovah does make a distinction between the Egyptians and Israel," Ex. 11:7.

"And the Lord said unto Paul in the night by a vision, Be not afraid, but speak and hold not your peace; for I am with you, and no man shall set on you to harm you," Acts 18:9.

#### **[5] The free acts of men**

"It is God who works in you both to will and to work, for His good pleasure," Phil. 2:13.

"And Jehovah gave the people favor in the sight of the Egyptians, so that they let them have what they asked," Ex. 12:36.

"And the king (of Persia, Artaxerxes) granted him (Ezra) all his request, according to the hand of Jehovah his God upon him," Ezra 7:6.

"For Jehovah had made them joyful, and had turned the heart of the king of Assyria unto them, to strengthen their hands in the work of the house of God" (rebuilding the temple), Ezra 6:22.

"And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep mine ordinances, and do them," Ezek. 36:27.

#### **[6] The sinful acts of men**

"For of a truth in this city against your holy servant Jesus, whom you did anoint, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, and the Gentiles and the people of Israel, were gathered together, to do whatsoever your hand and your counsel foreordained to come to pass," Acts 4:27,28.

"Jesus answered him (Pilate), You wouldst have no power against me, except it were given you from above," John 19:11.

(David, rebuking Abishai, in regard to Shimei) "Because he curses, and Jehovah has said, Curse David . . . . Let him alone, and let him curse; for Jehovah has bidden him," 2 Sam. 16:10,11.

"Surely the wrath of man shall praise you; and the residue of wrath shalt you gird upon you" (or restrain), Ps. 76:10.

"And I, behold I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians and they shall go in (the Red Sea) after them; and I will get me honor upon Pharaoh, and upon all his host, and upon his chariots, and upon his horsemen," Ex. 14:17.

### **[7] To the fortuitous events or "chance happenings"**

"The lot is cast into the lap; but the whole disposing thereof is of Jehovah," Prov. 16:33.

"So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah," Jonah 1:7.

"And they prayed, and said, You, Lord, who knows the hearts of all men, show of these two the one whom you have chosen . . . And they cast lots for them; and the lot fell on Matthias," Acts 1:24, 26.

"He covers His hands with the lightning, and gives it a charge that it strike the mark," Job 36:32.

"And Micaiah said, If you (Ahab) return at all in peace, Jehovah has not spoken by me . . . And a certain man drew his bow at a venture, and smote the king of Israel between the joints of the armor," 1 Kings 22:28, 34.

"For affliction comes not forth from the dust; neither does trouble spring out of the ground," Job 5:6.

"And Jesus said unto him (Peter), Verily I say unto you, that you, today, even this night, before the cock crow twice shall deny me thrice," Mark 14:30.

This chapter is taken from *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1936).