

THE SCRIPTURE DOCTRINE OF DIVINE PROVIDENCE

by

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We are this afternoon to consider the general doctrine taught in the inspired Scriptures of the providence which God exercises over the world and its inhabitants. It is evident that this doctrine presupposes, and can be understood only in the light of what was ascertained in the previous lecture to be, the facts of the case as to God's nature and his relation to the universe.

We then saw that there have prevailed among philosophers three partial views as to God's relation to the world, each presenting one side of the truth, but each radically erroneous, insofar as it was partial and denied the complementary truths presented by the others: (1) The agnostic, maintaining that God is unknowable; (2) the pantheistic or naturalistic, maintaining that God is ever present and active in every element of every created existence, whether spiritual or material; and (3) the deistical, which maintains the separate, extramundane [not of the physical world or universe] existence of God and his action at will upon all his creatures from without.

The element of truth in all of these alike is embraced and assimilated with the rest in Christian Theism. God is essentially unknowable. We can know only those parts of his nature, of his relations or of his ways, which he has chosen to reveal to us. And at the best the creature can know even that which he is permitted to know only in part. At the same time, God is essentially omnipresent and active at the same time and in unbroken continuity in all his creatures. Our dependent being exists in him, and our dependent energies are ceaselessly recreated from the inexhaustible fountain of his life. All nature and all human history evolve in unbroken continuity through his guiding, cooperating will present in and working through the created dependent things themselves. None the less is God separate from the world, existing alike extensively and intensively infinitely above and beyond it.

All these views are essentially involved in all our practical, everyday religious experience. We all submit our intellects absolutely to Him, as we reverently bow before the inscrutable mystery of His being who, although his essence is light, in his relations to us has "made darkness his secret place, and his pavilion round about him the dark waters and the thick clouds of the skies" (Ps. 18:11). We all instinctively recognize his presence and activity in all his creatures, and in all their changes, and in the innermost and most spontaneous exercises of our own souls. We all look up to him as our Father, speak to him and hear him speak to us in his word and providence. He deals with us as a person exterior to ourselves. He presides over the physical universe and over communities of men as a person exterior and superior to all. He controls all events by his interior confluent energies according to a plan, one and universal, formed before the beginning of the world. He has formed a great moral government over his intelligent creatures as men and angels,

and governs them by commands and motives objectively presented, and by his providences and by his word. He at times, and for purposes evidently subsidiary to his general plan and to his ordinary methods, acts upon the system of second causes from without, working miracles, or signals to his intelligent children, thus arousing their attention, instructing their faith and determining their action. He has revealed the great end of his whole system of works, to which all things in all eras and in all spheres work together, to be the giving of objective expression to the perfections of his own nature, or, as we usually phrase it, the manifestation of his own glory.

In all our religious experience, when we work and when we study and when we pray, God is always at once beyond us and above us and before us and within us--at once the source of all life and movement, the authority binding all consciences, and the sublime object of all personal love and worship.

I. The word PROVIDENCE means, first, to see beforehand, and then to exercise all that care and control which God's infinite prevision of his own ends and his knowledge of his appointed instrumentalities may suggest.

The order of thought in theology is marked by the following commonplaces: *Deus existens*, God existing--his being, attributes and threefold personality; *Deus volens*, God willing or forming his eternal plan; *Deus agens*, God in the successions of time executing the plan he had formed in eternity.

Our term "providence," then, includes generally the entire sum of all God's activities exterior to himself and subsequent to creation through all time. "God executes his decrees" or plan "in his works of creation and providence." Here "providence" evidently includes the entire sum of God's activities of all kinds with reference to his creatures previously brought into existence. It is the general term which includes all varieties or special kinds of the same. It includes the exercise in every mode of his *potestas ordinata*, or energy exercised along the lines of pre-established and uniform law, and his *potestas libera*, or energy put forth independently of all established sequences upon special occasion and as determined by his personal will. This includes his general or natural providence, embracing the universe as one system and operating through the uniformities of natural law, and his special or supernatural providence, acting upon and modifying the action of second causes from without in the form of miracle and of grace.

We should clearly apprehend and firmly hold the obvious truth that what we distinguish as the natural and the supernatural providence of God--*e.g.* his ordinary providence, his gracious operations and his miraculous interventions--are nevertheless inseparable parts of one harmonious system in execution of one plan and the various manifestations of the energy of one God. They run on together at the same time as the work of one agent and the execution of one plan. Ordinary providence is the constant fact which is never intermitted. Grace always presupposes the ordinary providence, which it simply supplements and perfects; and the miracle always presupposes grace, which it subserves and confirms. In the case of an apostolical miracle, as in that of the man lame from his mother's womb healed at the gate of the temple called "Beautiful" by Peter and John, all

three of these diverse modes of the divine activity were in operation at the same time and as necessary parts of one interdependent system: (1) There was the ordinary providence of God sustaining and directing the normal action of the bodies and souls of all the parties engaged and of their physical and moral environment. (2) There was at the same time the gracious operation of the divine Spirit upon the souls of the apostle and of the subject of the miraculous cure, producing their appropriate effects in their sanctified affections. (3) There was at the same time, and in perfect harmony with these, the miraculous power of God exercised at the word of the apostles in the person of the man born lame.

As to the ultimate method of God's action upon or in concurrence with natural causes, either in the forms of ordinary providence, of grace or of miracle, we absolutely know nothing. But it is important to observe that we do know very certainly (1) just as little of the one as of the other. The fact that we cannot understand the *modus operandi* of God in his works of grace or of miracle, can be no objection to the admission of their reality to the man who believes in the reality of God's ordinary providence without being able to explain its method. (2) We know that God's methods of operation, whether natural or supernatural, whether in the forms of ordinary providence, of grace or of miracle, are all carried on simultaneously, are all mutually harmonious, are all the activities of one and the same infinite Agent and in the execution of one all-comprehensive plan.

II. Whatever, however, may be the (to us) utterly unknown ultimate method of the divine operation, either in and through natural causes from within or upon them from without, it is intuitively certain, *a priori*, that they must in every case be consistent with what God has otherwise revealed to us of his own essential nature. It is simply impossible that God can deny himself, or ever in any form act in a manner incongruous with his own perfections.

Hence it follows--1st. That the providence of God in all its modes, whether natural or supernatural, whether ordinary, gracious or miraculous, must be, all and several, the execution of one single indivisible plan. There can be no real incongruities or antagonisms between the natural and the supernatural or between ordinary providence and grace. God, being eternal and infinite in knowledge and wisdom, sees the end from the beginning. There can be with him no surprise nor repentance nor change of plan nor divided counsel. All that he purposes must be one purpose; all that he does, of every various mode of activity, must be the execution of the one purpose, and must therefore constitute one harmonious system.

2d. Hence it follows with equal certainty that the providence of God must be universal. It must comprehend in its grasp equally every agent and every event without the least discontinuity or exception. One event is never in any degree more providential than any other event. There prevails a very unintelligent and really irreligious habit among many true Christians of passing unnoticed the evidence of God's presence in the ordinary course of nature, and of recognizing it on the occasion of some event specially involving their supposed interests, as if it were special and unusual. They will say of some sudden, scarcely-hoped-for deliverance from danger, "Why, I think I may venture to say it was really providential." But would it have been any the less providential if they had been

destroyed and not delivered? Would it have been any the less providential if they had not been in jeopardy at all and had needed no deliverance?

The great Dr. Witherspoon lived at a country seat called Tusculum, on Rocky Hill, two miles north of Princeton. One day a man rushed into his presence crying, "Dr. Witherspoon, help me to thank God for his wonderful providence. My horse ran away, my buggy was dashed to pieces on the rocks, and behold! I am unharmed." The good doctor laughed benevolently at the inconsistent, halfway character of the man's religion. "Why," he answered, "I know a providence a thousand times better than that of yours. I have driven down that rocky road to Princeton hundreds of times and my horse never ran away and my buggy was never dashed to pieces." Undoubtedly, the deliverance was providential, but just as much so also were the uneventful rides of the college president. God is in the atom just as really and effectually as in the planet. He is in the unobserved sighing of the wind in the wilderness as in the earthquake which overthrows a city full of living men, and his infinite wisdom and power are as much concerned in the one event as in the other.

There is a distinction to be observed between God's natural providence, which is universal and ordinary, and his supernatural providence, which is occasional and special. His natural providence is equally in every thing and event, but his grace and his supernatural intervention are in one event and not in another, at one time and not at another. It is proper, therefore, to distinguish his natural providence as general, and his grace or his supernatural providence as special. But it is essential to understand that in the ordinary sense of *providence* relating to the course of events in our natural lives, the common distinction between general and special providence is unintelligent and irreligious.

All God's providence is at the same time both general and special, and general because it is special, and special because it is general. It is general because it reaches by continuous action equally every element of the world and every event. It is special for the same reason, because, reaching equally to every particular, it reaches universally to all particulars and to their entire sum. That which controls the every link controls the whole chain. That which controls the movement of every atom controls the whole world. That which controls the thought and volition of every man controls the entire course of human history.

God does not come down from above upon the course of our lives in spots. His whole infinite being dwells everlastingly in each atom and each spirit. He is universally in all things, because he is ever equally in each thing. In every grain of sand, in every drop of water, in every pulse of air, in every flower that blows, in every infant soul, in every human thought and will and act, in the equable flow of natural law, in the great catastrophe of exploding worlds or of nations brought to judgment, in the fall of Adam, in the giving of the law on Sinai, in the redemption of man on Calvary, in the mission of the Holy Ghost, in the resurrection of the dead and in the eternal judgment,--however heterogeneous these agents and events in themselves, however incommensurate their significance to us, and however various is the method of the divine operation in them severally--yet in them all the one Jehovah is equally present with his absolute perfections

and in his supreme potency. Events may be infinitely different in their significance as well as in their importance to us, yet the truly religious mind finds equally in all things, even the least significant and the least important, the presence and supreme control and the benevolent administration of our heavenly Father.

3d. It is equally self-evident and certain that the whole of God's providence in every part of it must be an expression of his essential perfections, of infinite wisdom and power, and of absolute righteousness and benevolence. Nothing can be a surprise to his intelligence, or too complicated for his wisdom, or too difficult for his power, or inconsistent with his perfect righteousness or love.

These essential attributes of the great Ruler are abundantly manifested in all his works. The whole universe, and the entire course of its history as far as known to us, exhibit unquestioned evidence of limitless intelligence and power and of unmistakable righteousness and benevolence. This is witnessed to by the entire volume of human literature--that of philosophers, scientists, and poets, as well as that of the special devotees of religion.

Nevertheless, the course of providence from the point of view of man unilluminated by a supernatural revelation, is full of anomalies to him utterly insoluble. The question is not whether the face of nature and the course of providence give evidence of the intelligence, power, righteousness and goodness of God--this is admitted by all sober men--but the true question is (as put by John Stuart Mill in his posthumously published *Essay on Theism*), *Are the facts of nature and the history of events, as we know them, possibly reconcilable with the belief that the Creator and Controller of the world is at the same time infinite in his wisdom and in his power and in his righteousness and in his goodness?* Mr. Mill is assured that this reconciliation is impossible in view of the awful prevalence of moral and physical evil. He is sure that God must be limited either in his wisdom or his power or his benevolence, and is inclined to think that he is limited in all; and upon the whole, with an imperfect standard and a limited ability, strives to do as well as he can.

The apparent incongruousness of the facts, and hence the difficulty of the problem, we admit. But we have seen God because we have seen Christ, and we have learned to read all the course of providence in the light of the Cross. Since the baptism of Pentecost we have been convicted of sin and of a guilt we are utterly unable to gainsay [deny] or remove. We have been convinced that the finite can never measure the Infinite, and that self-convicted sinners can never judge the integrity of the All-holy. In the light of Calvary we have an impregnable assurance that the Father of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ is unlimited in wisdom and in power, and that he can do no wrong. Bowing our heads in unquestioning submission to his sovereign rights, and with confidence in his absolute perfection, we exclaim in the face of all apparent anomalies, "Oh the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out! For who has known the mind of the Lord, and who has been his counselor? Or who has first given to him, and it shall be recompensed unto him again? For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things: to whom be glory forever. Amen" (Rom. 11:33-36).

III. It is no less certain that, whatever be the ultimate method of God's exercise of his energy in providence, it must necessarily be in a manner perfectly congruous to the nature of his creatures, upon which and through which he works, and with the laws of their action.

It is impossible to believe that the all-perfect Creator of all things will in his subsequent control of their action violate the properties with which he has endowed them or the laws he has imposed upon them. The Scriptures everywhere and constantly take for granted the principles of "natural realism," which correspond to the instinctive judgments and the spoken and written languages of all men. Material and spiritual beings are real entities. They have real, substantial, objective existence. Although they are ever dependent upon their First Cause, they are nevertheless real active agents and causes. God has endowed them each and severally, according to their respective kinds, with their essential properties and power of action, which, as far as we know, never change or fail.

We trace an absolutely unbroken continuity in the action of these second causes through the entire history of the world and of mankind. These elements, thus originally endowed with unchangeable properties, act and react with invariable uniformity under the same conditions; and as the conditions change they act differently, but always in a way uniformly related to the conditions under which they act. As, therefore, the general adjustments or groupings of second causes under which they act are for the most part uniform from age to age, and change only locally and slowly, the uniformity of action which results gives origin to what are called "laws of nature," which continue absolutely uniform as long as the adjustments or groupings of these causes remain unchanged.

It is obvious that we apply this only to the world of matter and to certain spheres of the natural actions of spirits. The spirit of men in certain spheres of action is confessedly endowed with the divine power of originating and directing its own action independently of its external environment. But in the sphere of purely natural causes men never seek to attain their ends by violating the "laws of nature." On the contrary, they seek by science to attain a definite knowledge of those laws under all varieties of condition, and then they so apply this knowledge, by varying the conditions under which the natural causes act, that the very laws of nature themselves, thus directed, work out their purposes for them. Thus steam and electricity in the hands of men obey the "laws of nature" as implicitly as they do when nature is left to itself; only the same causes naturally produce different effects under changed conditions.

Now, men of pure science, habitually confining their attention to the uniformities of nature's action under the uniform conditions existing, regard the habit of religious men in ascribing results to the action of a personal agent having personal aims in view, and special reference to human characters and necessities, as irrational and superstitious. And hence, on the other hand, many unintelligent religious men regard the point of view of men of science as essentially irreligious. But it is obvious that these contrasted views of the course of events in the natural world are not mutually contradictory but

supplementary. They are the two equally true and real sides of the one system of objects. If even men comparatively ignorant and impotent can so wonderfully make the powers and laws of nature subservient to their own purposes without violating them, why cannot God at least do the same? Nay, why, since God's knowledge and power are alike absolutely limitless, should not the whole of nature be as plastic to his will as the air in the organs of a great musician, who articulates it into a fit expression of every thought and passion of his soaring soul.

The reason that this analogy is not immediately conclusive to every mind is, that when man arranges the conditions so as to render the action of nature subservient to his purpose, you can always trace his trail, see the visible marks of his interfering agency; while the course of nature flows on with mathematical precision of physical action, without the least trace of a providential interference *ab extra*. But it is forgotten that while man is always locally outside his work and acts upon all elements from without, and in succession a part at a time, God is simultaneously present and active within every ultimate element. His impulse is therefore through, not outside of, their own spontaneities. His control is neither partial nor successive but simultaneously in the entire universe, thus coordinating all adjustments and all reactions in the execution of one plan and in the current of one issue.

There are two extreme tendencies to which different persons are inclined when regarding the course of events in the world, each of which is evidently false when exclusively indulged, but both of which together, when combined, lead to the true attitude which every Christian should cultivate. [1] The view of the mere naturalist, in which the supernatural is altogether merged in the natural, and, [2] conversely, the view of the pantheist, in which the natural is altogether merged in the supernatural. And these apparently opposite extremes virtually come to the same thing, because they both equally exclude a personal God and human freedom, and maintain a naturalistic fatalism. But both present a side of the one truth. The natural is the fixed and regulated method which the personal heavenly Father has laid down for his own guidance; the supernatural does neither exclude nor supersede the natural, but it is the self-revelation of the heavenly Father, who works through natural law, as the personal Agent who, having ordained law, uses it to accomplish his spiritual purposes. The universe has a personal basis. The laws of nature are the methods self-ordained of a personal Agent. The true scientists are the sons of God, who were not created for the laws of nature, but the laws of nature for them.

After the Charleston earthquake, the Christian preachers endeavored to enforce upon their hearers the scriptural lessons of the event viewed as a divine dispensation. The visiting scientists are represented as having scoffed contemptuously, maintaining that the preachers should have confined themselves to an exposition of the laws of nature and drawn comfort from the proven exceptional character of such experiences. These men of mere science may have been able and useful in their narrow speciality, but they were certainly very absurd philosophers. They were perfectly right in confining their own investigations to the scientific aspects of the phenomena, and the preachers had an equal authority in calling the attention of the Christian people to the aspect which the light of the inspired Scriptures, when thrown upon the providential facts, presented. We say,

advisedly, that the preachers' authority in the premises is limited to the application of the light of the inspired Scriptures to the current facts. They have no right to assume the role of prophets, as too many are at times inclined to do; and no man not the subject of plenary inspiration should dare to explain the ultimate divine purpose in any particular event or its relation to human guilt. The Master himself said, "Suppose ye that those eighteen upon whom the tower in Siloam fell were sinners above all men that dwell in Jerusalem? I tell you, Nay; but except ye repent ye shall all likewise perish" (Luke 13:4,5).

IV. Providence, as made known to us in Scripture, history, and our religious experience, includes two distinct exercises of the divine energy: (1st) preservation, and (2d) government.

1st. *Preservation* is the continuous exercise of the divine omnipotence through successive duration upholding all creatures in being and in power. This does not in the least confound the Creator and Preserver with his works, nor does it invalidate the separate objective existence and the real efficiency of these created elements as second causes. But it simply affirms that they are essentially and continuously dependent existences and causes. All atoms of matter and all created spirits live and move and have all their being and the unfailing spring of all their energies in him only. If he should withdraw his supporting power, the whole dependent universe would lapse into non-being immediately.

2d. *Government* includes God's control of all the activities of all his creatures of every kind, and his direction of them toward the fulfilling of his one eternal plan.

[1.] That God has one universal plan which he executes with undeviating purpose in all his works of creation and of providence is made very certain, *first*, from the fact that he is an infinite Intelligence acting from eternity before all worlds, and absolutely unconditioned by any facts or powers external to himself; *secondly*, from all that the Scriptures teach us as to his sovereignty, eternal foreknowledge, and as to making his own glory the single end of all things. And *thirdly*, the same fact is obviously exhibited in the unexceptional experience of all generations of men, and the revelations of modern science, exhibiting the absolutely unbroken continuity of thought and purpose and of divine superintendence and control in the whole universe, in all its parts and during all its successive ages. Of course this general plan, although one and indivisible, has many subordinate systems successive and contemporaneous, and many varieties of method. To us, of course, these appear very various, and sometimes we make the mistake of regarding them as mutually inconsistent. But while various they are only to be understood when conceived as the many articulated members of one consummate system, reaching through all space and all time and all spheres.

Here we see that whatever is really true and significant in the famous but recent scientific doctrine of evolution had for many ages been anticipated by the Augustinian theology. Whatever may eventually turn out to be the facts with regard to genetic evolutions through successive natural births, all must unite in recognizing the fact that the universe in all its spheres and through all its history is the continuous logical evolution of one purpose, to one end, through the energies of one infallible and inexhaustible Will.

[2.] God effectually governs all his creatures and all their actions by a method to us inscrutable, but certainly consistent with his own perfections and with their properties and laws. This government is revealed in the Scriptures and in our experience to be universal, certainly efficient, holy, benevolent and wise.

a. In matter God governs all things, apparently by the distribution and adjustment of material particles under the great categories of time, place, quantity, and quality. This procedure leaves the properties and laws of matter entirely unmodified, and it makes the omnipresent, omniscient, and omnipotent God Lord of all.

b. The providence of God over his rational creatures involves *three* elements: *First*, his working in the entire sphere of their environment, presenting external motives and influences, molding character and stimulating to action. *Secondly*, his working in their bodies and souls through the natural laws of their organizations, through the entire process of their growth. And *thirdly*, his immanent working within their will, whereby his directive energy becomes confluent with their own spontaneity, and "he turns the hearts of men as the rivers of water are turned," and "works in us to will, and be willing to do, of his own good pleasure."

The redeemed Christian is a child already at home in his Father's house. All these beauties and all this abundant wealth belong to our Father, and are set apart for our use. All things whatsoever that come to pass, however dark and enigmatical, are expressions of our Father's will, and are wisely designed to promote our welfare in the present and to secure it with infallible certainty in the great Hereafter. The word "chance" expresses simply a relation. An event happens by "chance" when the causes which produce it are so complex or so unusual as to be incapable of rational expectation by us. Hence, as far as God is concerned, there is absolutely no such thing as chance. As far as we are concerned, all events which lie beyond the reach of scientific prediction fall into the category of chance. But by faith we embrace the infinitely wise will of God and accept all events as the excellent will of our heavenly Father. Creation and providence are seen to be the preparatory work which culminates in redemption. We read all the means in the light of the glorious end. God is in every experience, making "known unto us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure, which he has purposed in himself, that in the dispensation of the fullness of times he might gather together all things in Christ, both which are in heaven and which are on earth, even in him. In whom also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestinated according to the purpose of Him who works all things after the counsel of his own will: that we who first trusted in Christ should be to the praise of his glory."

"Oh the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out! For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things; to whom be glory forever. Amen."

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