

The  
PROVIDENCE  
of GOD

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RC Sproul

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LIGONIER MINISTRIES

*Renew your Mind.*

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# Introduction

Christians today live in a fast-paced world. We are surrounded daily by a flurry of events that sometimes seem to be disconnected, purposeless and chaotic. We are inundated with news from around the world informing us of human triumphs and tragedies, elections and assassinations, wars and disasters. Modern man attributes the events that occur all around us to chance, fate, coincidence, or even sheer luck. Modern man refuses to see the controlling hand of God in anything.

Christianity affirms that the universe is not chaotic. Not only was the universe created with a purpose by God, it is providentially controlled by God as He guides it toward the fulfillment of that purpose. God is in control of every aspect of existence, from the most mundane to the most spectacular. He controls kings and nations; He controls the weather, He controls the good in our life, and He controls the bad in our life. God is directing all things toward the fulfillment of His purposes. For the Christian, the providence of God is a great comfort and joy for he can be assured that “all things work together for good to those who love God” (Rom. 8:28).

May this series encourage you to trust in the invisible hand of God as He works all things together for good to you.

Sincerely

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "R.C. Sproul". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned below the word "Sincerely".

RC Sproul

# 1

## What Is Providence?

### MESSAGE INTRODUCTION

The providence of God is the doctrine of God's involvement in the world and in the daily affairs of our lives. While the vast majority of people profess to believe in some kind of God or higher power, few seem to believe that God is actually involved in our daily lives. In this lesson, Dr. Sproul explains how God is the One who is aware of all that occurs in the universe and who cares about all that happens in our lives.

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. To be able to define the concept of providence.
2. To be able to explain the difference between proximate and ultimate causality.
3. To understand why the doctrine of the providence of God should be a comfort to all Christians.

### QUOTATIONS

*There are three things in providence: God's foreknowing, God's determining, and God's directing all things to their periods and events.*

— Thomas Watson

*The most strict and proper notion of Providence . . . is nothing else but the performance of God's gracious purposes and promises to His people. Payment is the performance of promises. Grace makes the promise, and Providence the payment.*

— John Flavel

**LECTURE OUTLINE**

- A. The concept of God's providence has changed through history.
  - 1. Until the nineteenth century there was an acute sense of God's overarching providence in which man assumed that God was all-powerful and directly involved in the daily lives of people.
  - 2. The cultural mentality of today is typified by the question: Is there anybody up there who can and will help me?
    - a. Twentieth-century man is unsure whether an omnipotent Being really exists.
    - b. He questions whether or not such a Being is personal and ultimately in charge of the universe.
    - c. If there is such a Being, modern man wonders if He has the ability to help.
    - d. And, if this God exists and is able, man questions His willingness to help.
- B. The concept of God's providence ultimately comes down to the issue of causality.
  - 1. Twentieth-century man views life as a "closed mechanistic universe."
  - 2. Earlier cultures conceived of the universe as being directed by the "invisible hand" of God, who is ultimately responsible for everything.
  - 3. The focus of our modern culture is on proximate causes rather than the ultimate causal power — God; thus, modern man has no concept of providence.
    - a. The modern focus is on "having a religion — believing in something."
    - b. The focus should be on truth.
- C. The providence of God encompasses the concept of God as "spectator."
  - 1. "Providence" literally means "seeing something beforehand."
  - 2. The God of Judeo-Christianity is the God who sees everything that takes place in the universe (John 8:4 ff.).

3. This concept is both frightening and comforting.
  - a. A God who sees everything is frightening because sinful man desires a hiding place where he can be overlooked by God.
  - b. A God who sees everything is comforting because we are not afraid to be known intimately by a God who cares for us. We know that He is there and that He can and will help us (Matt. 10:29–31; 12:36).

**STUDY QUESTIONS**

1. Until the \_\_\_\_\_ century there was an acute sense of God's overarching providence in which man assumed that God was all-powerful and directly involved in the daily lives of people.
  - a. Twentieth
  - b. Nineteenth
  - c. Eighteenth
  - d. Seventeenth
2. Twentieth-century man is unsure whether \_\_\_\_\_ really exists.
  - a. Evil
  - b. Reality
  - c. An omnipotent Being
  - d. None of the above
3. Twentieth-century man questions whether or not God, if He exists, is \_\_\_\_\_.
  - a. Impersonal
  - b. Personal
  - c. A force
  - d. All of the above

4. The concept of God's providence ultimately comes down to the issue of \_\_\_\_\_.
  - a. Causality
  - b. Necessity
  - c. Sufficiency
  - d. Personality
  
5. Twentieth-century man views life as a(n) \_\_\_\_\_.
  - a. Closed mechanistic universe
  - b. Open naturalistic universe
  - c. Open mystical universe
  - d. Closed supernaturalistic universe
  
6. Earlier cultures conceived of the universe as being directed by the \_\_\_\_\_ of God, who is ultimately responsible for everything.
  - a. Omnipresence
  - b. Invisible hand
  - c. Name
  - d. None of the above
  
7. The focus of our modern culture is on \_\_\_\_\_ rather than the ultimate causal power.
  - a. Instrumental causes
  - b. Effectual causes
  - c. Material causes
  - d. Proximate causes

8. "Providence" literally means \_\_\_\_\_.
  - a. Omnipotence
  - b. Ultimate causal power
  - c. Seeing something beforehand
  - d. None of the above

**BIBLE STUDY**

1. In his lecture, Dr. Sproul said that in this day of unprecedented skepticism toward the very existence of God, people ask the question, Is there a personal Being in charge of the universe? Study Acts 17:24–28 and list Paul's statements about God that indicate that He is indeed in charge of the universe.
2. Modern man asks another question: Is there anybody up there who can help me? How does Psalm 121 answer that question? In answering the question, first note all the specific statements in the Psalm about God's help, then summarize them into a one-sentence statement about God's help for you.
3. Dr. Sproul said that another question about providence is: If God exists, is He able to do anything with this world, and if He is able, is He willing to do anything about the daily circumstances of our lives? Study Psalm 23 and find at least six ways in which God is willing to do something within the daily affairs of our lives.
4. Study Psalm 104 and list several statements indicating that God, not a blind mechanical force, runs the universe. How do you reconcile these statements about the direct action of God in nature with what we know about the physical laws of nature?
5. The following are several Scripture passages that tell us what God sees. Briefly state the main point of each passage.
  - a. 2 Chronicles 16:9
  - b. Job 34:21–22
  - c. Psalm 33:13–15
  - d. Psalm 44:20–21
  - e. Proverbs 5:21
  - f. Jeremiah 23:23–24

6. According to 1 Chronicles 28:9, what else does God “see”?
7. Jesus taught that “the very hairs of your head are all numbered” (Matt. 10:30). What was Jesus intending to communicate with that statement?

#### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. What does R.C. mean when he speaks of a “closed mechanistic universe”? Why is it important that Christians not adopt this view of the world?
2. How does the Christian doctrine of providence affect one’s understanding of the relationship between science and theology?
3. Over the last several centuries man has moved farther away from an understanding of the universe that incorporates God’s providence to an understanding that doubts the very existence of God. What people, events, philosophies, theories, and other ideas helped to bring about this shift?
4. What does it mean to live by a practical atheism? Do you see such a practical atheism in the world today? Do you see hints of it in the church today?

#### **APPLICATION**

1. In what sense is it frightening to realize that God knows all of your thoughts, motives, words, and actions?
2. In what sense is it comforting to know that God knows all things and is in control of all things?
3. In what moments in your life would a proper understanding of God’s providence have been helpful to you?
4. How can the realization of God’s providential care help you to be completely honest before God? Identify two areas in which deeper honesty with God is needed. As you worship Him this week, commit yourself to bringing this before Him.

#### **FOR FURTHER STUDY**

Flavel, John. *The Mystery of Providence*

NOTES

## 2

# God Makes It All Happen

### MESSAGE INTRODUCTION

Contrary to popular opinion, we do not live in a closed, mechanistic universe where everything operates according to fixed natural laws. Rather, as Dr. Sproul explains in this lesson, God is the cause of everything in the universe and everything that takes place in the universe. That is, God not only created but also sustains and governs His creation.

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. To discover and be able to summarize the biblical teaching about the sustaining activity of God.
2. To discover and be able to summarize the biblical teaching about the governing activity of God.
3. To realize our complete dependence upon God, not only for our needs, but also for our very existence.

### QUOTATIONS

*Nothing, therefore, happens unless the Omnipotent wills it to happen: He either permits it to happen, or He brings it about Himself.*

— Augustine

*As God's rule is incomprehensible, so it is invincible. His throne is not moved. He breaks through all resistance, and makes the universe servant to the coming of His kingdom. The rule of God is the gladness of His people.*

— G.C. Berkouwer

**LECTURE OUTLINE**

- A. God not only created the universe, but also sustains it.
  - 1. The classical Christian view of God's role in the creating and sustaining of life differs from that held by modern man.
    - a. The classical Christian view of providence is that God is the primary cause of the creation of the universe and the primary cause of the continued functioning of the universe.
    - b. No "thing" has intrinsic causal power; rather, causal power must be given by an ultimate source.
    - c. Modern man's view ignores God as the primary cause and focuses instead on secondary causes to explain the existence and maintenance of the universe.
  - 2. The concept of divine sustenance asserts that what God creates, He also sustains and preserves.
    - a. God alone is the author of "being."
    - b. Man does not have the power of "being" within himself.
    - c. If anything exists, then something or someone must have the power of "being" within itself or nothing would "be."
    - d. It is in God that "we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28).
- B. God governs His creation.
  - 1. God's providential government is permanent.
    - a. In the human realm, governments come and go, and no governor is permanent.
    - b. God's government can never be overthrown (Ps. 2:6).
    - c. To refuse to submit to the authority of God is immoral (Acts 17:30–31).
  - 2. God's providential government is sovereign.
    - a. God does not need our consent to govern the universe.
    - b. God has the ultimate "divine right of kings" to reign and rule over the universe.

3. The governorship of God is an absolute monarchy.
  - a. God is the president, congress, and supreme court all in one — the ultimate political structure.
  - b. The central motif of the Scriptures is the kingdom of God.
  - c. To Him alone we owe ultimate obedience and allegiance.

**STUDY QUESTIONS**

1. God not only created the universe, but also \_\_\_\_\_ it.
  - a. Sustains
  - b. Is part of
  - c. Continually creates
  - d. None of the above
2. The classical Christian view of providence is that God is the \_\_\_\_\_ of the creation of the universe.
  - a. Proximate cause
  - b. Instrumental cause
  - c. Primary cause
  - d. None of the above
3. No “thing” has intrinsic \_\_\_\_\_; rather, it must be given by an ultimate source.
  - a. Causal power
  - b. Wickedness
  - c. Causality
  - d. None of the above

4. Modern man's view ignores God as the primary cause and focuses instead on \_\_\_\_\_ to explain the existence and maintenance of the universe.
  - a. Sufficient causes
  - b. Secondary causes
  - c. Formal causes
  - d. None of the above
5. God alone is the author of \_\_\_\_\_.
  - a. Scripture
  - b. Sin
  - c. Being
  - d. All of the above
6. To refuse to submit to the authority of God is \_\_\_\_\_.
  - a. Understandable
  - b. Permissible
  - c. Natural
  - d. Immoral
7. God does not need \_\_\_\_\_ to govern the universe.
  - a. Omnipotence
  - b. Our consent
  - c. Wisdom
  - d. None of the above

8. The central motif of the Scriptures is \_\_\_\_\_.
  - a. Salvation
  - b. Predestination
  - c. The Kingdom of God
  - d. The Providence of God

**BIBLE STUDY**

1. What do the following two passages teach us about the relationship between primary and secondary causes?
  - a. Ezra 1:1–4
  - b. Isaiah 45:1–7
2. What do the following Scriptures teach about God’s sustaining activity?
  - a. Colossians 1:17
  - b. Hebrews 1:2–3
  - c. Isaiah 40:26
  - d. Job 12:10
  - e. Psalm 145:15–16
  - f. Psalm 147:8–9
  - g. Isaiah 42:5
  - h. Acts 17:25
3. Read Job 34:14–15. What would happen if God were to cease His sustaining activity even for one second?
4. What is God called in 1 Timothy 6:15?
5. Compare Psalm 2:1–4 and Luke 19:11–14. In what ways does the attitude expressed in these two passages reflect the attitude of society today? According to Psalm 2:4, how does society’s attitude affect God’s sovereignty?

6. According to Proverbs 21:1, what important area of life is ruled by God?
7. How do the following Scriptures illustrate the teaching of Proverbs 21:1?
  - a. Exodus 12:35–36
  - b. Exodus 34:23–24

#### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. R.C. commented that God is often thought of today as a “celestial bellhop.” Have you seen or heard this idea communicated explicitly or implicitly in the secular society or even within the church? How does this idea of God devalue our concept of God and thus, our prayer life?
2. Twice in the lecture R.C. referred to the kingdom of God as being the central motif of the Bible. Why did he say that? How is this motif related to providence? What are the implications of this concept in our daily lives? How does this kingdom relate to the kingdoms of this world? How conscious are you of having a dual citizenship?
3. Is the kingdom of God a present reality reflected in civil and social structures? If so, how? In what sense is the kingdom of God a future reality?
4. We tend to see the hand of God only in miracles. How is the hand of God also present in the everyday events of life — as chronicled in the daily newspaper, for example? Explain your answer.

#### **APPLICATION**

1. In Romans 1:21, Paul indicts mankind for neither glorifying God nor giving thanks to Him. What have you learned from this study that should cause you to glorify God and to give thanks to God?
2. The Bible says “in everything give thanks” (1 Thess. 5:18). How can the truths you have learned in this lesson help you obey this command? Make a point this week to apply these truths by giving thanks at least once a day for something that you would normally take for granted.
3. Identify an area of your life where you chafe under the authority of God. Admit and confess this area of weakness to God. Review Scripture passages that relate to this area of your life.

**FOR FURTHER STUDY**

Farley, Benjamin. *The Providence of God*

NOTES

# 3

## God or Chance?

### MESSAGE INTRODUCTION

We have seen that the doctrine of divine providence is the teaching that God sustains and governs His universe, bringing all things to their appointed end. This doctrine is scarcely accepted among people today. The non-Christian, for the most part, has ruled out both the creating act of God and His providence. For him all events are in the hands of fate or chance. Even many Christians, while accepting the truth of divine creation, deny God's sovereign involvement in the daily affairs of their lives, attributing much of what happens to chance or luck. The Scriptures clearly speak to the issue whether "chance" or God is the ultimate cause of all events in the universe.

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. To be able to explain the concept of chance.
2. To understand and be able to recognize the difference between the concept of chance as the ultimate cause and the concept of God as the ultimate cause.
3. To understand and be able to explain why the concept of chance as a causal agent is ultimately nonsensical and atheistic.

### QUOTATIONS

*Now it has been commonly accepted in all ages and almost all mortals hold the same opinion today, that all things come about through chance. What we ought to believe concerning providence is by this depraved opinion most certainly not only beclouded, but almost buried. There is no such thing as fortune or chance.*

— John Calvin

*How full of consolation is the doctrine, that infinite wisdom directs every event, brings order out of confusion, and light out of darkness, and, to those who love God, causes all things, whatever be their present aspect and apparent tendency, to work together for good.*

— J.L. Dagg

#### LECTURE OUTLINE

- A. God reveals His sovereignty over all things in the Old Testament account of the capture and return of the ark of the covenant by the Philistines (1 Sam. 3–6).
  - 1. The ark of the covenant was the most sacred vessel in all of Jewish religious history.
    - a. The ark was the throne of God, containing sacred items from Jewish history.
    - b. The ark was militarily significant because the Jewish armies were always successful when the ark was carried into battle.
  - 2. God tells Eli that judgment will fall on his family and Israel because of the immoral actions of his sons.
    - a. The Philistines kill 30,000 Israelites in battle, including Eli’s two sons, Hophni and Phinehas.
    - b. The ark of the covenant is captured, and Eli dies when he hears the news.
    - c. Phinehas’ wife goes into labor when she hears the news, and she subsequently dies. The child she bears is named Ichabod, meaning “the glory has departed.”
  - 3. God demonstrates His sovereignty to the Philistines.
    - a. The statue of the Philistine deity is disgraced before the ark of the covenant.
    - b. The Philistines are visited by plagues of tumors and rats.
    - c. The Philistines decide to conduct an experiment to determine whether or not the ark should be returned.

4. By allowing that “chance” may be responsible for their trouble, the Philistines reveal their atheism.
  - a. The Westminster Confession of Faith teaches about God’s providence in His decrees.
  - b. Disbelief in God’s sovereign ordination of all things means disbelief in God Himself.
  - c. The declaration of the absolute sovereignty of God is fundamental to all theistic belief.
  - d. If there is “one maverick molecule” in the universe, all God’s promises are uncertain. If God is not sovereign, God is not God.
  - e. God clearly shows that He is the cause of all things; there are no maverick molecules.
- B. The question of God’s sovereignty in all things always hinges on the question of cause or chance.
  1. The word “chance” merely describes a mathematical concept of probability.
  2. “Chance” is not an entity; therefore, chance can “do” nothing.
  3. God is the ultimate cause of everything.

**STUDY QUESTIONS**

1. In what passage of Scripture do we find the account of the capture and return of the ark of the covenant by the Philistines?
  - a. Judges 3–6
  - b. 1 Kings 3–6
  - c. 1 Samuel 3–6
  - d. 2 Samuel 3–6

2. The \_\_\_\_\_ was the throne of God, containing sacred items from Jewish history.
  - a. Cave of Adullam
  - b. Altar
  - c. Tent of Meeting
  - d. Ark of the Covenant
3. Phinehas' wife goes into labor when she hears the news that the ark has been captured and her husband has died, and she subsequently dies as well. The child she bears is named Ichabod, meaning:
  - a. Grief has come
  - b. The glory has departed
  - c. God has seen
  - d. To God be the glory
4. By allowing that "chance" may be responsible for their trouble, the Philistines reveal their \_\_\_\_\_.
  - a. Tolerance
  - b. Immorality
  - c. Atheism
  - d. Deism
5. Disbelief in God's sovereign ordination of all things means disbelief in \_\_\_\_\_.
  - a. God Himself
  - b. Calvinism
  - c. Chance
  - d. All of the above

6. The declaration of the absolute sovereignty of God is fundamental to all \_\_\_\_\_ belief.
  - a. Pantheistic
  - b. Humanistic
  - c. Deistic
  - d. Theistic
  
7. If God is not sovereign, God is not \_\_\_\_\_.
  - a. Omnipresent
  - b. Omniscient
  - c. God
  - d. None of the above
  
8. “Chance” is not an entity; therefore, chance can “do” \_\_\_\_\_.
  - a. Anything
  - b. Nothing
  - c. What God wills it to do
  - d. None of the above

#### **BIBLE STUDY**

1. Read Lamentations 3:1–38. In light of the context outlined in verses 1–36, what do you think was the Holy Spirit’s purpose in inspiring the writer to make the statement in verses 37–38?
2. Study the account of the initial meeting of Ruth and Boaz in Ruth 2:1–13 and list as many so-called “chance” occurrences as you can find that eventually led to their marriage. What is the real reason behind this series of events?
3. Read chapter 6 of Esther (or the entire book if you are unfamiliar with the story). How many of the seemingly ordinary events that led to the turnaround of the Jews’ fortunes would most people attribute to chance today? How does this story shed light on the meaning of the seemingly ordinary events of our lives?

4. What do Isaiah 45:7 and Lamentations 3:38 teach about God's involvement in the "good" and the "bad"?
5. From the following passages of Scripture, list some reasons why God might actually cause some "bad" things to happen to us.
  - a. Amos 4:6–10
  - b. Haggai 1:3–11
  - c. Hebrews 12:5–11
  - d. 1 Peter 1:6–7
6. What assurance do we have in Romans 8:28–29 about both the "good" and the "bad" things that come into our lives? How does verse 29 clarify the meaning of "good" in verse 28?
7. Often we think we would "feel better" if we knew why certain things happen to us, or if we knew what God was doing. What do the following Scriptures teach about our ability to understand the actions of God?
  - a. Isaiah 55:8–9
  - b. Romans 11:33–34

#### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. Is there anything so random in the universe that even God is not sovereign over it? What is your reaction to R.C.'s statement, "If there is one maverick molecule running around loose in the universe, then God is not sovereign"?
2. R.C. said, "The great message of atheism is allowing chance to do anything." The average person would say that atheism's primary message is, "There is no God." How do these two statements relate?
3. What is the legitimate definition and use of the word "chance"? What is the illegitimate definition and use?
4. Why is the statement "nothing causes something" the most antiscientific statement?

**APPLICATION**

1. What kinds of events do you consciously or unconsciously ascribe to chance? How can you begin to correct your thinking on these matters? Challenge yourself to discover how God can use all events to promote growth in Christian character.
2. During the week make a significant effort to continually acknowledge before God in prayer your appreciation for His providential hand in your life.
3. God wants us to come to the place in our Christian maturity where we can say in times of adversity, “God, I don’t understand what you are doing, but I trust you.” What have you learned in this lesson that can help you grow toward that stage of maturity?

**FOR FURTHER STUDY**

Helm, Paul. *The Providence of God*

NOTES

# 4

## Is God Responsible for Human Wickedness?

### MESSAGE INTRODUCTION

If God is in control of every event that occurs in the universe, is He not therefore responsible for all the sins that people commit? This is one important question we encounter when we begin to talk about the sovereign government of God over His creation. To answer this question biblically we must understand the condition of the human heart and the influences under which it operates apart from the grace of God. Just as importantly, though, we need to see that God restrains and controls human wickedness so that His righteous government is maintained.

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. To examine the relationship between the sovereign goodness of God and human evil.
2. To understand and be able to explain who is responsible for human wickedness.
3. To be able to explain why the problem of evil is so important for Christians to understand.

### QUOTATIONS

*The providence of God is the great barrier and hindrance to a world of sin, which otherwise would break forth like an overflowing flood from our corrupt natures.*

— John Flavel

*In the case of both Caiaphas and Judas, . . . divine ultimacy even behind evil actions is presupposed. But divine ultimacy operates in some mysterious way so that human responsibility is in no way mitigated, while the divine Being is in no way tarnished.*

— D.A. Carson

#### LECTURE OUTLINE

- A. The relationship between God’s providence and evil in the world is often misunderstood.
  - 1. Evil men in history have been divine instruments.
    - a. Hitler believed he had a historical mission that Providence had destined for him.
    - b. The bishops of the Russian Orthodox Church believed Stalin was a divine instrument for the leadership of the people of Russia.
    - c. These men, however, are viewed as two of the most diabolical figures in history.
  - 2. The issue whether evil is ordained by the providence of God has been called by Strauss “the Achilles’ heel of Christianity” because it questions Christianity’s credibility.
  - 3. In the face of evil in the world, John Stuart Mill contended that there was an unresolved dilemma between God’s benevolence and His omnipotence.
- B. The crisis of our day focuses on questions of causality.
  - 1. The seventeenth-century philosopher Rene Descartes advanced the principle of “first cause,” which says that nothing can be in the effect that is not in the cause.
  - 2. This principle is used to prove that God is personal since human beings are personal.
  - 3. The principle, however, seems to backfire when we consider the question of evil in the world.
  - 4. A solution to this apparent problem may be found in the phrase “more is less.”

5. Evil is defined in negative terms.
  - a. Human beings are moral creatures able to discern good and evil.
  - b. Evil is defined as a lack of conformity to God's standard of righteousness.
  - c. By its very definition, evil is negative.
- C. The existence of evil in the world should not affect our view of God as omnipotent and perfectly good.
  1. God is eternally, immutably good.
  2. Man is created mutably good.
  3. God is incapable of doing evil.
  4. God has ordained evil.
    - a. God does not force men to do evil.
    - b. He has created man with the capacity for evil.
    - c. God chooses not to stop evil.
  5. When God ordains anything, His purpose in doing so is absolutely good.
  6. It must be good that evil exists or it could not exist because God ordains only what is good.
  7. All things work together for good (Rom. 8:28).

**STUDY QUESTIONS**

1. The relationship between God's providence and \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_ in the world is often misunderstood.
  - a. Evil
  - b. God's goodness
  - c. God's power
  - d. None of the above

2. Who called the issue whether or not evil is ordained by the providence of God “the Achilles’ heel of Christianity” because it questions Christianity’s credibility?
  - a. Descartes
  - b. Russell
  - c. Strauss
  - d. Calvin
  
3. In the face of evil in the world, John Stuart Mill contended that there was an unresolved dilemma between God’s benevolence and His \_\_\_\_\_.
  - a. Omnipresence
  - b. Omniscience
  - c. Omnipotence
  - d. All of the above
  
4. The seventeenth-century philosopher \_\_\_\_\_ advanced the principle of “first cause,” which says that nothing can be in the effect that is not in the cause.
  - a. Descartes
  - b. Kant
  - c. Mill
  - d. Spinoza
  
5. \_\_\_\_\_ is defined as a lack of conformity to God’s standard of righteousness.
  - a. Providence
  - b. Evil
  - c. Mutability
  - d. Good

6. Man was created \_\_\_\_\_ good.
  - a. Partially
  - b. Eternally
  - c. Immutably
  - d. Mutably
  
7. God is \_\_\_\_\_ of doing evil.
  - a. Incapable
  - b. Sometimes capable
  - c. Always capable
  - d. Inclined towards the possibility
  
8. When God ordains anything, His purpose in doing so is \_\_\_\_\_.
  - a. Ambiguous
  - b. Possibly good
  - c. Absolutely good
  - d. Unknown even to Himself

**BIBLE STUDY**

1. If God sovereignly controls all events that happen in His universe, does that then make Him responsible for the sins people commit? How does the Bible answer this question in James 1:13–24?
  
2. Refer to the following passages of Scripture and state how each describes the condition of the natural (unregenerate) human heart:
  - a. Genesis 6:5
  
  - b. Jeremiah 17:9
  
  - c. Romans 3:10–12

3. Read Ephesians 2:1–3. What does it mean to be “dead in trespasses and sins”? What evil influences are we inclined to follow?
4. What do the following passages of Scripture teach about God’s attitude toward human wickedness?
  - a. Genesis 6:6
  - b. Ezekiel 6:9
  - c. Ephesians 4:29–31
5. What do the following Scriptures teach us about God’s rule over all our plans and intentions, whether good or evil?
  - a. Proverbs 16:9
  - b. Proverbs 21:30
  - c. James 4:13–15
6. One instance of God’s both permitting and restraining evil is seen in an incident in the life of Jacob’s family. Read Genesis 34:24–35:5. What evil did God permit? What evil did God restrain? How did He do it?
7. God also uses evil to accomplish His own purposes. Read the following Scripture passages and explain what they teach about this fact in the lives of Joseph and Jesus.
  - a. Genesis 50:20
  - b. Acts 4:27–28

#### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. What are some of the ways in which people sidestep the tension between a good God and the existence of evil?
2. Why did R.C. say, “It must be good that evil exists”?
3. R.C. says in his lecture that God ordains evil, but does this necessarily imply that God is the author of that evil? Why or why not? Who is ultimately responsible for evil?
4. Discuss ways in which you have seen God use a tragedy or evil to bring about good.

**APPLICATION**

1. Ephesians 2:1–3 refers to several evil influences that we are all inclined to follow. Which one is most troublesome to you now? What steps can you take to overcome this influence?
2. Recall a situation in your life in which you can see God’s redeeming activity over sin.
3. What roles do guilt and conscience play in overcoming evil? How can you make your conscience more accountable to the biblical standard?
4. Are any of the doctrines discussed in this lesson still unsettled in your heart and mind? Ask God to help you as you come to terms with His truth.

**FOR FURTHER STUDY**

Hodge, Charles. *Systematic Theology*, Vol. I, pp. 575–616

NOTES

# 5

## What About Human Freedom?

### MESSAGE INTRODUCTION

How does God's sovereignty affect my freedom to choose and to act as I desire? Many people are prepared to grant the fact of God's sovereignty over natural events or impersonal circumstances. We all know that so much that occurs in the daily affairs of life occurs because of the decisions and actions of people. Is God sovereign over those choices? And if He is, doesn't that violate human freedom? By grappling with the issue of God's sovereignty and human freedom, we can begin to answer those questions.

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. To explore and be able to summarize the relation between God's providence and the exercise of human freedom.
2. To be able to define the concept of concurrence.
3. To understand that there is no ultimate contradiction between God's providence and human choices.

### QUOTATIONS

*To be God and sovereign are inseparable.*

— Stephen Charnock

*These two things we derive most clearly from the Scriptures: that the providence of God concurs with all second causes and especially with the human will; yet the contingency and liberty of the will remain unimpaired. But how these two things can consist with each other, no mortal can in this life perfectly understand.*

— Francis Turretin

**LECTURE OUTLINE**

- A. There seems to be a contradiction between God's providence and the exercise of human freedom.
  - 1. Providence is not exercised in such a way as to destroy human freedom or volition.
  - 2. Human choices are a part of God's providence.
- B. This apparent contradiction is more clearly understood in light of the doctrine of concurrence.
  - 1. Concurrence refers to actions of two or more parties that take place simultaneously.
  - 2. The story of Job is an example of the doctrine of concurrence (Job 1).
    - a. God gave Satan permission to attack Job.
    - b. God ordained that the Chaldeans steal Job's cattle, the source of his wealth.
    - c. Three agents were therefore involved: God, Satan, and the Chaldeans.
    - d. The Chaldeans' purpose and Satan's purpose were in agreement.
    - e. Their purposes were in conflict with God's purpose.
  - 3. God's purpose and designs must be considered when we evaluate the moral import of an action.
  - 4. The story of Joseph is another example of the doctrine of concurrence (Gen. 37–50).
    - a. Joseph's brothers sold him to traders because of jealousy.
    - b. The brothers' free, volitional involvement was evil (Genesis 50:20).
    - c. God's involvement was ultimately for good.
    - d. The short-term good was the rescue of Israel from the famine.
    - e. The ultimate good was the opportunity of salvation for Israel and all mankind.

- C. God's providence involves the working together of all things for good.
  - 1. God is the Author of every good and perfect gift.
  - 2. Man wants to take credit for the good but transfer blame for the evil.
  - 3. God's sovereign providence is not limited by human freedom.

**STUDY QUESTIONS**

- 1. Providence is not exercised in such a way as to destroy \_\_\_\_\_.
  - a. Man
  - b. Itself
  - c. Concurrence
  - d. Human freedom
- 2. \_\_\_\_\_ are a part of God's providence.
  - a. Human beings
  - b. Human choices
  - c. Evil motives
  - d. None of the above
- 3. \_\_\_\_\_ refers to actions of two or more parties that take place simultaneously.
  - a. Providence
  - b. Concurrence
  - c. Synergism
  - d. Paradox

4. In the story of Job, which two agents involved were in agreement in their purposes?
  - a. Satan and the Chaldeans
  - b. Satan and God
  - c. God and the Chaldeans
  - d. Job and the Chaldeans
5. God's purpose and designs must be considered when we evaluate the \_\_\_\_\_ of an action.
  - a. Definition
  - b. Free nature
  - c. Moral import
  - d. None of the above
6. What Old Testament verse summarizes the doctrine of concurrence?
  - a. Genesis 1:1
  - b. Deuteronomy 14:26
  - c. Genesis 50:20
  - d. Isaiah 53:10
7. What was the short-term good that God brought out of Joseph's enslavement?
  - a. The rescue of Israel from the famine
  - b. Joseph's opportunity to get revenge upon his brothers
  - c. The redemption of the world
  - d. None of the above

8. God's sovereign providence is not limited by \_\_\_\_\_.
  - a. His holiness
  - b. Human freedom
  - c. His sovereign will
  - d. None of the above

**BIBLE STUDY**

1. Read Acts 2:23 and Acts 4:27–28. What part did God play in the crucifixion of Christ? What part did Herod, Pilate, and the Jews play? Did the people involved do what they wanted to do? Did the people involved do what God ordained them to do?
2. Read Job 1. What was God's part in Job's troubles? What was Satan's part? What was the part of the Sabeans and the Chaldeans? Did God ordain Job's troubles? Did God "force" the Chaldeans to steal Job's livestock? Why did God allow Satan to attack Job (cf. Job 42:5)? What was Satan's motive for the attack upon Job? What was the Chaldeans' motive?
3. Why did Joseph's brothers sell him into slavery (Gen. 37:1–28)? According to Genesis 50:15–20, what motive did Joseph attribute to his brothers? What motive did he attribute to God?
4. Read Isaiah 10:1–19. What was God's purpose for using the Assyrian king? What was the Assyrian king's motive? How is the Assyrian king described in verse 15?
5. Read the account of Paul's shipwreck in Acts 27. What did God reveal to Paul about His sovereign providence in verses 21–25? What did the ship's sailors attempt to do in verses 27–30? How did Paul respond in verse 31? How do you reconcile Paul's expression of certainty in verse 22 with his contingent statement in verse 31? What does this teach us about the relationship between God's providence and our responsibility? What does it imply about fatalism?

#### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. Many people believe that man is autonomous when, in fact, he is only free. What is the difference between these two concepts? What are the implications if man is autonomous?
2. Is it legitimate for God to punish people for doing evil if they fulfill His purposes by doing so?
3. Does God's sovereignty over every historical event reduce man to being a puppet on a stage?
4. How can the teaching of Deuteronomy 29:29 help us live with the tension between God's sovereignty and man's responsibility?

#### **APPLICATION**

1. Decide now how you will respond the next time someone mistreats you. How can this lesson help you prepare a godly response?
2. Briefly state in your own words what you have learned from this study about the relationship between the sovereign providence of God and human freedom.
3. Recount the causal chain of events that God used to bring you to saving faith.
4. Where have you been unwilling to accept responsibility for your own thoughts, emotions, personality traits, or habits? Begin to take responsibility for your freedom. Don't be satisfied by simply saying, "That's just the way I am; I can't help it."

#### **FOR FURTHER STUDY**

Berkhof, Louis. *Systematic Theology*, pp. 165–78

## NOTES

# 6

## If God Knows Our Needs, Why Pray?

### MESSAGE INTRODUCTION

There is a linguistic link between the words “providence” and “provide.” Part of God’s providence is His disposition to provide for all of His creation and especially for His people. But the question arises, “If God is omniscient and knows what we need before we ask, why should we pray? In fact, doesn’t it seem a bit arrogant to pray as if we needed to inform God or remind Him of our needs?” We will learn the answers to these questions as we study the relationship between God’s sovereign providence and prayer.

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. To be able to grasp and summarize the relationship between providence and prayer.
2. To begin to understand the nature of prayer.
3. To understand and be able to explain the motive and purpose for prayer.

### QUOTATIONS

*The nature of the divine goodness is not only to open to those who knock, but also to cause them to knock and ask.*

— Augustine

*Prayer prompted by the Holy Spirit is the footfall of the divine decree.*

— Charles Spurgeon

**LECTURE OUTLINE**

- A. Providence and prayer go hand in hand.
  - 1. It is part of God's disposition to desire to provide for His people.
  - 2. He invites His people to verbalize their needs to Him.
  - 3. God knows what we need before we even ask (Matt. 6:8).
  
- B. Prayer is for our benefit, not God's, because it helps us to deepen our relationship with Him.
  - 1. Prayer should include the element of adoration of God — the intense release of love from the human soul directed toward the appreciation of the majesty of God.
  - 2. Prayer should also include the confession of our sins in order to release us from disabling guilt.
  - 3. Prayer should further include thanksgiving — the acknowledgment of God's grace.
  - 4. Finally, prayer should include supplication — the verbalization of our needs.
  
- C. God uses prayer to bring about His eternal decrees.
  - 1. Prayer changes people and events (James 5:17–18).
  - 2. Christ viewed prayer as critical to the success of His mission on earth (Luke 6:12–13).
  - 3. Prayer should be a matter of passion for the people of God (Luke 18:2–7; 22:44).
  - 4. The providential provision of God is most evident by watching God answer our prayers.
  - 5. Prayer does not change God's mind; rather, prayer is part of His providential plan for the destiny of the world (James 5:16).
  - 6. God calls each of us to work, to plan, and to pray.

**STUDY QUESTIONS**

1. \_\_\_\_\_ go hand in hand.
  - a. Prayer and doubt
  - b. Providence and sin
  - c. Providence and prayer
  - d. None of the above
  
2. Which of the following passages teaches that God knows what we need before we even ask?
  - a. Matthew 6:8
  - b. Matthew 6:5
  - c. Mark 11:25
  - d. All of the above
  
3. Prayer is for \_\_\_\_\_.
  - a. The purpose of changing God's decretive will
  - b. God's benefit
  - c. Our benefit
  - d. All of the above
  
4. Prayer should include the element of \_\_\_\_\_, the intense release of love from the human soul directed toward the appreciation of the majesty of God.
  - a. Confession
  - b. Adoration
  - c. Supplication
  - d. Thanksgiving

5. Prayer should include \_\_\_\_\_ in order to release us from disabling guilt.
  - a. Supplication
  - b. Thanksgiving
  - c. Adoration
  - d. Confession
  
6. Prayer should include \_\_\_\_\_, the acknowledgment of God's grace.
  - a. Thanksgiving
  - b. Supplication
  - c. Confession
  - d. Adoration
  
7. Prayers should include \_\_\_\_\_, the verbalization of our needs.
  - a. Adoration
  - b. Confession
  - c. Thanksgiving
  - d. Supplication
  
8. Prayer changes \_\_\_\_\_.
  - a. God
  - b. Nothing
  - c. People and events
  - d. God's decretive will

#### **BIBLE STUDY**

1. In Matthew's account (Matt. 6:7–8), what does Jesus stress in His introduction to the Lord's Prayer? What does Jesus stress after giving the Lord's Prayer in Luke's parallel account (Luke 11:5–8)?
2. Acts 4:24–30 records the prayer of the disciples when Peter and John were threatened by the Jewish leaders. How did they address God, and what is the significance of their addressing Him in that way? What three things did they tell God in verses 24–28? What was the purpose of telling God these things when He obviously knew them already?
3. Read Jeremiah 32. How does Jeremiah address God in verse 17? What did Jeremiah acknowledge about God? How does the first part of Jeremiah's prayer compare with the disciples' prayer in Acts 4?
4. Read 1 Chronicles 29:10–12. Analyze the passage and write down any expressions of adoration that you find.
5. Read 1 John 1:9. What does the verse promise? What is the condition to the promise?
6. What does Romans 1:21 teach us about the importance of being thankful to God?
7. According to Philippians 4:6–7, what attitudes should characterize our supplication?

#### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. What should be our goal in apportioning the time we spend among the four major elements of prayer?
2. What does James mean when he speaks of "fervent" prayer (James 5:16)?
3. What did R.C. mean when he said that he loses his humanity if he doesn't adore God?
4. What portion of our supplication should be devoted to our personal needs as opposed to the needs of others?

**APPLICATION**

1. R.C. said that one evidence of Christian maturity is a greater emphasis on adoration, confession, and thanksgiving. Which one of these do you need to work on most? What will you do to begin to grow in this area?
2. It is important that we remember to express our gratitude to God. List several ways to achieve a consistent attitude of thanksgiving for prayers He has answered.
3. What is the most important thing you have learned, or been reminded of, in this lesson about the providence of God and prayer? How do you plan to apply this truth in your life?
4. How do you presently incorporate ACTS into your prayer life? If you do not currently practice this, how can you begin?

**FOR FURTHER STUDY**

Kelly, Douglas. *If God Already Knows, Why Pray?*

NOTES