

The Providence of God: Is It Wishful Thinking?

From the series: Tough Questions: No Easy Answers

Text: Genesis 50:15-21; Romans 8:28-39

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

The title of this sermon, “The Providence of God: Is It Wishful Thinking?” raises a tough question for which there is no easy answer. And that is what I have named the sermon series I begin today. Tough Questions.

By that, I mean questions that matter, that impact my life and society; questions that raise critical issues for ourselves and our world.

These are questions for which there is no easy answer, no answer that can be checked by a scientific experiment or calculated by computer technology. So much hangs on the answer, but the answer will finally involve a commitment of faith because the nature of the question defies a clear and simple answer.

We will open ourselves to some critical questions that most of us wrestle with some time or other, but often leave unspoken in conversation because we are not always ready to admit to the question or to face the possibility that some tried and true formulas of faith may need revising, which is scary.

But a healthy faith, a positive spiritual life can hardly be possessed if there are questions that now and then surface but are pushed down and denied. And so, let’s raise some tough questions these weeks, seeking not easy answers, but honest engagement with the questions and hopefully a place to stand that provides freedom and confidence for our lives.

That we have questions about some of the “answers” that our traditional biblical faith has supplied is not surprising. How could it be otherwise? The whole biblical story arose from 2000 to 4000 years ago. The human experience of God was portrayed in narrative, saga, myth, allegory and parable, which conceived of the physical universe and of God within the framework of an ancient picture which was believed to be the way things were, but not at all in terms of our present understanding of the universe, humankind, society, or historical development as we know it.

The ancients wrestled with fundamental human questions as we do - Where have we come from? Where are we going? Is there some purpose unfolding? Does it all mean something? Those questions are addressed in all the world's religions. And the stories, myths, and teaching of all religions are attempts to find some clue to the meaning of Reality we encounter as humankind. The Bible is the cumulative religious understanding of Israel, culminating in the event of Jesus Christ, and the belief about God, the world, nature and history formed the framework within which the biblical answers to ultimate questions were articulated.

But that framework no longer reflects the reality of the universe or humanity or God's interaction with the world. I don't think I have to belabor that fact; it must be obvious to any reasonable reflection on the ancient worldview.

But then, if our whole understanding of the nature of the universe and humankind has undergone radical re-conception, is it still possible to believe the ancient answers to life's tough questions? For example: *The Providence of God: Is it wishful thinking?* To engage that question, let's look at the model or the paradigm from Scripture within which the providence of God was declared and proclaimed.

But, first, let's see what Providence has been understood to consist in. I had the Questions and Answers of the Heidelberg Catechism printed in your liturgy. These questions come in the second part of the Reformation Catechism out of the 16th century - the discussion of the Apostles' Creed, the opening statement of which declares,

I believe in God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth.

QUESTION 26: What dost thou believe when thou sayest: I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and Earth?

ANSWER: That the eternal Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who of nothing made heaven and earth, with all that in them is, who likewise upholds and governs the same by his eternal counsel and providence, is for the sake of Christ his Son my God and my Father, in whom I so trust as to have no doubt that he will provide me with all things necessary for body and soul; and further, that whatever evil he sends upon me in this vale of tears, he will turn to my good; for he is able to do it, being Almighty God, and willing also, being a faithful Father.

QUESTION 27: What dost thou understand by the Providence of God?

ANSWER: The almighty and everywhere present power of God, whereby, as it were by his hand, he still upholds heaven and earth, with all creatures, and so governs them that herbs and grass, rain and drought, fruitful and barren years, meat and drink, health and sickness, riches and poverty, yea, all things, come not by chance, but by his fatherly hand.

QUESTION 28: What does it profit us to know that God has created, and by his providence still upholds all things?

ANSWER: That we may be patient in adversity, thankful in prosperity, and for what is future have good confidence in our faithful God and Father that no creature shall separate us from his love, since all creatures are so in his hand that without his will they can not so much as move.

In the Catechism's statement, the Providence of God is rooted in the biblical teaching of creation. The God Who creates, likewise upholds and governs. In consequence, "all things come not by chance, but by his fatherly hand."

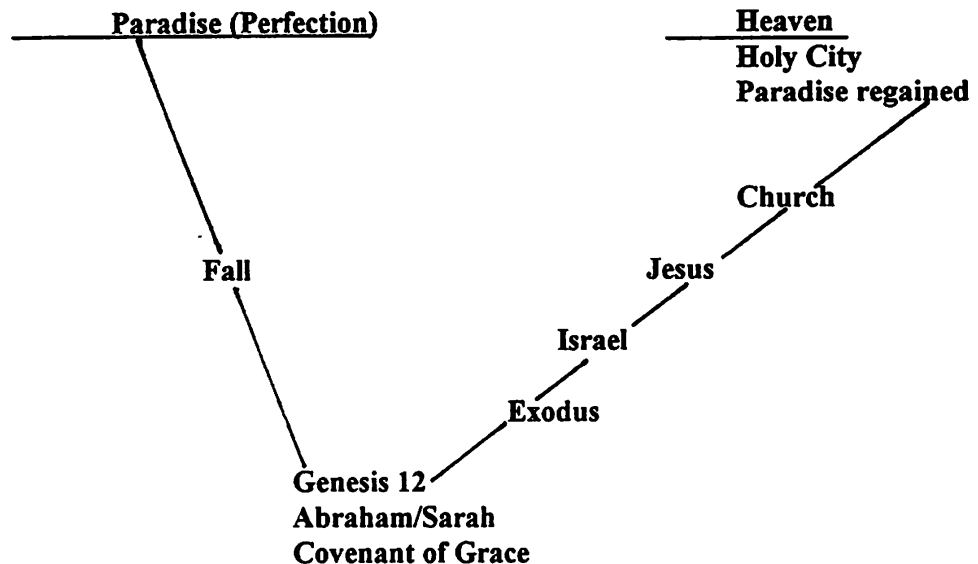
In order to picture this biblical model of God's interaction with the creation, I drew a diagram which still needs some work, but I think will make the point -

THE BIBLICAL MODEL - A THEISTIC SALVATION MODEL

God is predominantly transcendent/omnipotent. God intervenes in nature/history. The biblical story is largely a redemption story centering in God's saving action to redeem the human creature and effect God's Kingdom. Creation is largely a stage area for the drama of salvation.

God: Transcendent (Other)

Word → Creation "In the beginning ..."



This model does not deny God's presence or immanence in Creation; the Spirit is present in Creation and Jesus is God's presence in flesh. However, God's transcendence predominates; God is "above," other than that which God calls

into being by God's Word. And what God creates is perfect, harmonious, "very good." The Genesis story in the succeeding chapters through chapter 11 then recounts human rebellion, disobedience and the consequent corruption of the perfect paradisaical state. The human creatures' disobedience is spoken of in subsequent Christian teaching as the Fall and the human family is marked by that original disobedience, which moral failure is the root cause of all that goes wrong in Creation. The biblical story beginning with Genesis 12, the calling of Abraham and Sarah and the covenant of Grace constituted with them, marks the turn from the Creation theme to the salvation or redemption theme - the long movement toward the End of history with paradise regained - the Holy City, the new Jerusalem and the dwelling of God with humankind.

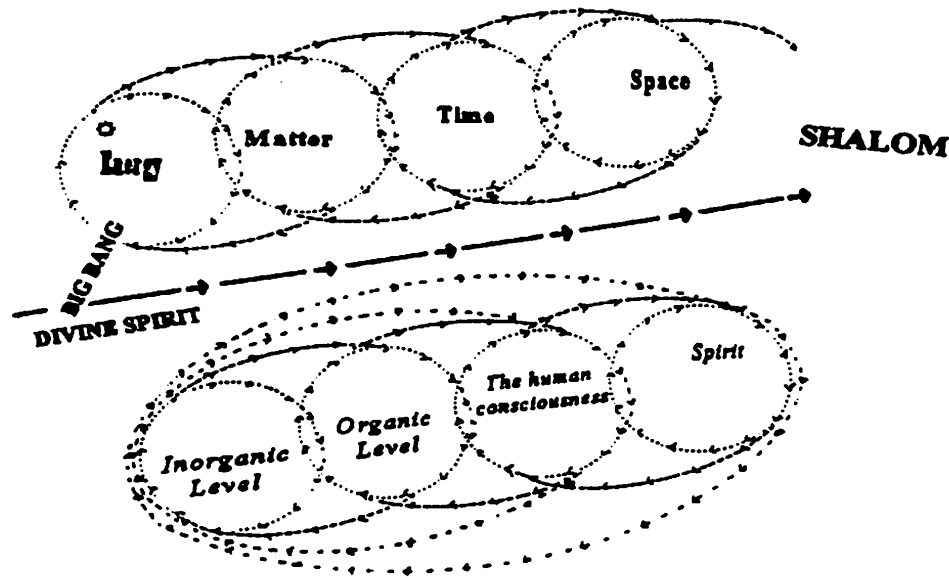
In this scheme, which is the traditional biblical model or paradigm, the focus is the Divine-Human relationship; the stress is on salvation and the physical universe is simply the stage on which the redemptive drama is played out. God is outside but intervenes and really controls what happens, because God is Fatherlike, God can be trusted to turn even evil to good purpose, but all things - good and evil, come from God's "fatherly hand."

That is the picture, the framework, the model within which God's Providence is affirmed in Scripture and has been taught in the Christian faith tradition. This understanding is held not only by folk in the churches, but finds expression again and again in popular conversation. This idea has permeated the consciousness of Western culture - "God has a purpose in it." Over and over one hears it in the face of tragedy and suffering of every sort. It is not a reasoned conclusion on the basis of evidence; it reflects a deep, deep, uncritical response to life's experiences. It must reflect a deep longing in the human heart that it be so.

That's why I raise the tough question - Is it wishful thinking? Is it something within us that craves such a Providence to be operative because we are aware of the fragile nature of our lives, how vulnerable we are to a hundred or a thousand perils beyond our knowledge and control?

But if such "comfort" is posited on a conception of God and cosmos and human reality that we can no longer really believe, then are we only fooling ourselves? Simply believing something does not make it true.

Well, *how do we understand our reality?* If not the biblical model of Creation in Perfection/Fall/Redemption, then what model might be more reflective of what has been discovered about our universe and our human reality? How might we conceive of God and God's inter-action with the world?

An Alternative Creation Model:

If you eliminated God as Mystery and the immanent Divine Spirit permeating the movement from Big Bang toward Shalom, I think those scientists who deal in cosmological thought, astrophysics, sub-atomic biology and the related fields would agree that this diagram reflects our knowledge of the physical universe and our total reality. All that was present in the Big Bang has been unfolding, developing from that micro-second to the present.

Some scientists sense the presence of a Mystery; some deny any possibility of positing purpose and goal. But, the phenomenon of religion is a human response to some ultimate Creative Source or Force from which all reality derives, some purpose or intention - a movement toward a Goal.

We have reflected on God as Mystery whose creative life-giving "Breath" or spirit permeates all that is, whose nature is given definition by the Word/Spirit in flesh in Jesus from whose life we see the nature of the Mystery as gracious. This is the claim of faith; it is not verifiable as are the echoes of radio waves from the Big Bang of 15 billion years ago. Such a claim is not provable by any means derived from the sciences. But, the question arises:

Is such a claim consistent with a conception of the universe, our experience of God and our experience of being human? It is my contention that it is. Further, I would contend that the old model of Creation/Fall no longer convincingly explains our experience of ourselves, of God, of cosmos.

The Creation model posits by faith the Mystery that is God as the Creative Fount of all that is, claiming that that which sparked the whole cosmic drama of fifteen billion years was endowed with the whole potential that is being actualized; all that is was there “in the beginning.” The operative term for this model is *Emergence*, the continuous unfolding of the potential that was contained in the originating Creative explosion. Over 15 billion years the inorganic moved to the organic and there was life. Organic life emerged into consciousness, self-consciousness, the pre-human, the human. And the human moves toward the level of spirit. And where will spirit lead? Will there be a level of spiritual community beyond anything our human community has yet known in its warring, despoiling, rapacious madness?

Let me be clear; the model might suggest that it is ever upward and onward, but that is not necessarily so. Why?

Because at the level of the human, the creature becomes co-creator, able to respond to the beckoning of the Spirit or to be dragged down by the pull of the lower from which he/she has derived.

This is where the claim of the Providence of God must be re-thought. The old Creation/Fall model posited a God Almighty and all controlling, a transcendent/wholly other Being whose “life” was not really immanent within the cosmic process. That God, spoken of as male, existed apart from the cosmic drama, but rather directly governed, controlled all that transpired. Thus, the Heidelberg Catechism claims, “all things come not by chance, but by his fatherly hand.” The nurturing parental conception of God softens this claim and the positive value of such a faith is that one becomes patient in adversity, thankful in prosperity, with good confidence for the future.

But there are problems here. All things from God’s hand?

The Holocaust? There are serious voices that claim we can never think the same about God after the Holocaust - 6 million of God’s special people?

Or, what of the beautiful child living in close proximity to this church in a life/death struggle with cancer? And the instances that we encounter again and again are beyond number.

Is it a comfort to believe all things come from God’s fatherly hand? And then, too, such a claim is contrary to the emerging, unfolding, developing, evolving reality of which we are a part. There seems to be no tinkering with the amazing universe about which we have learned so much.

Further, such a view of God’s interaction with the world and our lives runs contrary to our own concrete experience. We do determine the course of history and of the cosmos in a very real sense. We can destroy the planet or we can nurture it. We can work for peace or create conflict, violence and death. We can

work for dialogue and mutual understanding among religious traditions or use religion as the fuel to warfare. We may wish it were not in our hands, but it is. So, then, is the answer to our question, “Yes?” Is trust in the Providence of God just wishful thinking?

My answer is not an easy answer. It is not a simple “Yes” or a simple “No.” I do believe one can yet believe in the providence of God within the cosmic drama of which we are a part, but it will undergo a significant revision.

The classic biblical story of God’s Providence is the Joseph story in Genesis. I cannot here re-tell that story. You can read it in Genesis 37-50. It is a story of human arrogance, meanness, grief and deep pathos. The family of Jacob is human, all too human. The brothers hate Joseph, their father’s favorite who himself is not wise in relating his dreams of superiority. In the end, Joseph becomes a powerful ruler in Egypt. Jacob sends his remaining sons to Egypt to buy grain because of a famine in Canaan. They are recognized by Joseph who puts them through tests and great stress. Finally, he reveals himself to them. They fear for their lives. But Joseph spares them.

Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good... Joseph had a choice. He could have wiped them out in an act of vengeance. Rather, he forgave them, breaking the cycle of violence. In so doing, I believe Joseph was responding to the Spirit that beckons toward shalom rather than yielding to the impulse from below that would have satisfied the desire for vengeance and retaliation. Joseph discerned in the milieu of human conflict a way of peace that led to reconciliation; Joseph acted with grace.

Paul is probably as responsible as anyone for the traditional conception of Providence. The 8th chapter of Romans is a statement of his conviction that all things are directly determined by “God’s fatherly hand” as the catechism claims.

We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. Paul believed God had pre-destined that we be conformed to the image of Jesus. He goes on to make an absolutely marvelous claim that whatever befalls us in no way can separate us from God’s love in Jesus Christ.

Can we translate Paul’s confidence in terms that reflect our understanding of our world, our experience? I think we can, but not as straightforwardly and simply as Paul claimed.

The biblical model of God in direct control of all that happens so that nothing happens but that which “comes from the Fatherly hand” collided with the model of the universe that arose in the modern period - we speak of the Newtonian model - the great machine that grinds on its way according to ironclad laws of cause and effect leaving room only for a Creator at the beginning to get things

started and then from outside the system becoming an observer, perhaps on rare occasion intervening, tinkering with the system. This is a Deist conception - God the Supreme Clockmaker who creates, winds it up and lets it run on its own.

This model left little room for God's intimate involvement in the universe or in our lives. It collided head-on with the idea of Providence as conceived in Scripture and catechism. This understanding of the universe has dominated the last three hundred years and created the tragic gulf between religious faith and scientific understanding of the world. The conflict has been costly to both science and religion and is the cause of large-scale defection from religious faith by the intellectual leadership of the world.

But, there are leading thinkers today in both science and religion who see in the more recent understanding of the universe the manner in which God's continuous immanent creativity is operative in the unfolding drama influencing the course of cosmic development toward a goal according to a gracious purpose.

As my thinking - the I that I am - influences the whole of my being, even to the most elemental physical processes, analogously so a God transcendent - more than the totality of all that is but not apart from any aspect of it - might influence the course of its development in ways that are life enhancing, creative, and increasing in complexity, moving the whole to higher levels of development.

Computers remain a mystery to me, but I do know there is hardware and software. The hardware is mechanical; it functions according to physical law. But, the "machine" is useless without a program that determines how its myriad circuitry operates. The program is determined by a human mind with a purpose in mind. The program is encoded on a disk and inserted in the hardware equipment so that the desired result is achieved.

Might God be the author of the software of the cosmos? And if God as Mystery is revealed to be mirrored in Jesus, then could we not trust in the creative, gracious intention written into the universe's program of development?

Finally, when we speak of God, we speak of mystery and when we think deeply about our own being, we run up against mystery, as well. All analogies break down; we come to the end of rational discourse. Yet, I believe there are resources in our faith tradition and in the amazing unveiling of the wonders of the cosmos that point to a God much larger than the old, biblical stories portrayed, but a God, nonetheless, full of grace with a purpose far grander than we've yet conceived of.

The old conceptions gave confidence for the future and comfort for the present. Comfort is "*com-fortes*" - that is, enabling one to live *with strength*. I do believe that is possible, to an even greater degree, given what we are learning about the nature of our world. But there is this critical difference: in the model I am suggesting, we are called to be co-creators with God. We can thwart the Creator's

purpose or join in its realization. The dice of the universe is loaded, biased toward life and creative movement toward spirit and community, toward Shalom. But, it will not happen unless or until the human species catches the dream and forsakes its warring madness.

The Providence of God - is it wishful thinking? If we see ourselves passively being played upon, waiting for God to unilaterally create heaven on earth, sparing us all harm and suffering -Yes. But, if we understand that providence as God's continuous top-down influence nudging, beckoning, urging toward humane community - No.

When we learn to react to our life situation as did Joseph, with humility and grace, then I believe we will experience the reality of what Paul expressed -

If God is for us, who can be against us? What can separate us from the love of Christ?... nothing in all creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Living thus, open, free, confident, I will see how God works all things together for good and, yielded to that overarching Divine persuasion, I will find my life being conformed to the image of Jesus Christ, whose highest expression of human selfhood was the integrity of offering his life for the Divine Dream that drove him, praying,

Thy will be done.