

# THE PROVIDENCE OF GOD

PAUL HELM

CONTOURS *of*  
CHRISTIAN  
THEOLOGY

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*Series Editor*

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Sov'reign Ruler of the skies,  
Ever gracious, ever wise;  
All my times are in thy hand,  
All events at thy command.

His decree who form'd the earth  
Fix'd my first and second birth;  
Parents, native place, and time,  
All appointed were by him.

He that form'd me in the womb,  
He shall guide me to the tomb;  
All my times shall ever be  
Order'd by his wise decree.

Times of sickness; times of health;  
Times of penury and wealth;  
Times of trial and of grief;  
Times of triumph and relief;

Times the tempter's power to prove;  
Times to taste the Saviour's love  
All must come, and last, and end,  
As shall please my heavenly Friend.

Plagues and deaths around me fly;  
Till he bids, I cannot die;  
Not a single shaft can hit,  
Till the God of love sees fit.

*John Ryland (1753–1825)*

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attempted to keep faith with Scripture and with the classical Christian theological tradition that is grounded in it. The question is whether this view (or its rival) goes beyond Scripture in saying things that are not warranted by the Bible's teaching. Such a possibility could be admitted if not avoided altogether by practicing negative theology. Negative theology is a necessary element in Christian theology and undoubtedly has its advantages. To say that God is immovable and invisible, while it tells us what God is not, says nothing about what God is. This is both necessary and safe. But a wholly negative theology is ultimately sterile.

Because Scripture is not a library of books in various theology, any systematic presentation of a systematic doctrine invites the charge that it goes beyond the text. The text itself, both the orthodox view of the person of the Trinity and the doctrine of the Trinity, have a different inner logic and add to Scripture. After all, the word 'providence' does not appear in Scripture, nor is the 'unmoved mover' any more than does the word 'Trinity'. This book on the providence of God is written in the belief that nothing is a

Anyone who attempts to limn the contours of a Christian doctrine has a choice. Either he can set differing versions of the doctrine side by side with Olympian detachment, or he can offer a view of his own.

In this book I offer a view of my own, though not one that is peculiar to me. The chief reason for this approach is to try to avoid the blandness and obliqueness that often come from setting one view beside another in a 'neutral' way. For an author to offer a view of his own carries with it the hope of putting readers on their mettle by inviting them to take sides and to think out their own views in dialogue with the one that is proffered on the pages before them.

In what follows, I put forward the 'no-risk' view of divine providence, a view which I believe corresponds both to Scripture and to the historic teaching of the church. I have supported this view with arguments, and have denied the cogency of other arguments sometimes used in its support. Obviously, this procedure will not commend itself to everyone who agrees with the conclusion, much less to those who take the view that God takes risks. I have, of course,

attempted to keep faith with Scripture and with the classical Christian theological tradition that is grounded in it.

The question is whether this view (or its rivals) goes beyond Scripture in saying things that are not warranted by the Bible's teaching. Such a possibility could be minimized, if not avoided altogether, by practising negative theology. Negative theology is a necessary element in Christian theology and undoubtedly has its advantages. To say that God is immortal and invisible, while it tells us what God is not, says nothing about what God *is*. This is both necessary and safe. But a wholly negative theology is ultimately sterile.

Because Scripture is not a library of books in systematic theology, any systematic presentation of a scriptural doctrine invites the charge that it goes beyond the text. In this vein both the orthodox view of the person of Christ, and the doctrine of the Trinity, have at different times been said to add to Scripture. After all, the word 'providence' does not appear in Scripture, not at least in the Authorized Version, any more than does the word 'Trinity'. This book on the providence of God is written in the belief that nothing in it is at odds with Scripture. But since divine providence touches some of the deepest themes – God's sovereignty, human freedom, sin and evil, human tragedy and cosmic disaster – it is likely that any serious treatment will contain controversial elements. Whether this book is controversial in that it goes beyond Scripture in an unacceptable way is for my readers to consider, and I invite them to do so.