



■ Few things distinguish Christian and secular worldviews with greater clarity than the doctrine of providence. This doctrine insists that everything (yes, *everything*) that happens does so because God wills it to happen, wills it to happen *before* it happens, wills it to happen *in the way* that that it happens.¹ Such a view signals immediately that history is not arbitrary or fortuitous; neither is it “simple determinism,” “*Que Sera, Sera*” or, “whatever will be, will be,” as though our own choices and involvement have no relevance whatsoever, a fatalistic view more reflective of Islam than biblical Christianity.

So central is the doctrine of providence that summary accounts of Christian doctrine, such as the Westminster Shorter Catechism, raise the issue at the very beginning. Thus, question 11 of the Shorter Catechism asks: “What are God’s works of providence?” To which the answer is given: “God’s works of providence are, his most holy, wise, and powerful preserving and governing all his creatures, and all their actions.”

The key word is “all,” signaling the totality of God’s control over the world in which we live. Our Father in heaven takes care of his own children, ensuring that his

▣ Providence

purposes for them will be accomplished despite the forces of sin and evil designed to oppose and frustrate his intentions. In the end, everything occurs according to the will of God.

All this can sound either scary or reassuring depending on our frame of reference. For Christians, at least those who are not preoccupied with philosophical questions, this is a most glorious truth because it is the basis upon which we can be certain that heaven will be ours! It only requires one errant molecule in the universe to question the certainty of the future and unless we can be assured that *everything* is submissive to God's sovereign rule, there is always the possibility that the future may not be as we have believed it to be. Of course, Christians don't always think like this. The idea of God's sovereignty seems to threaten human freedom and contingency. "What about free will?" is a question that frequently lies near the surface, erupting with volcanic force and, if the logic is followed, threatening all possibility of certainty about anything and everything!

The word *providence* consists of a prefix, *pro*, meaning "in front of" or "before," and the Latin root *videre*, "to see." Words, of course, do not always mean what their etymology suggests, and in this case, "to see beforehand," suggesting foreknowledge, is not what is intended by the word *providence*. Providence suggests God's care of the world, both his supervision of all events and circumstances *and* his provision for all of our needs. It is more than God's ability to "see" into the future; it is his *active* and *determined* care to ensure that what he has promised for us actually does come to pass.

Providence and the Bible ■

The alternatives to this robust notion of providence are: God can see the future he desires but is powerless to bring it about (no control), or that he can see all “possible” futures based on the free choices of individuals without determining one solely based on his own volition (another form of no control), or that his control is a general one only and not one where the individual details are determined in any way (limited control). Some will recognize various strands of theological and philosophical ideology in these alternatives, both ancient and modern, but before we examine these it will prove helpful to examine the issue biblically and theologically.

PROVIDENCE AND THE BIBLE

The Bible gives us many examples of God’s providential ordering of the details and circumstances of the lives of individuals. These tangible, visible demonstrations of his providence encourage us that just as he worked in the lives of certain people in the past, so he is able to work in the present. We must draw conclusions from these accounts with considerable care, lest we misconstrue those things which are unique to these individuals and their precise location within the history of redemption. Such accounts are not necessarily meant to imply that we can expect God to work in our lives *in exactly the same way*.² However, seeing the way God worked in the lives of others, sensitive as we must be to what may be unique and what may be considered more general and timeless in their significance, should prompt us to recall Paul’s words regarding Israel in the time of the wilderness wanderings: “these things took place

▣ Providence

as examples for us” (1 Cor. 10:6). We will, therefore, examine three examples from the Bible to help us understand the meaning of God’s providence: the stories of Ruth and her mother-in-law, Naomi, Joseph, and Job.

Naomi and Ruth

The book of Ruth is that tiny jewel that sparkles after the darkness of the book of Judges, a book which ends with the somber words, “everyone did what was right in his own eyes” (Judg. 21:25). It is a refrain picked up from an earlier statement in the book: “In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes” (Judg. 17:6). From such dark surroundings emerges something that, in one sense at least, is wholly unexpected; but only to those unfamiliar with the ways of God!

The book of Ruth is illustrative of the doctrine of providence from two distinct points of view: a macrocosmic level in which we begin to see how the purposes of God announced in the Garden of Eden are fulfilled—that the woman’s “offspring” is set at enmity with the serpent’s “offspring”—the so-called *proto-evangelium* (Gen. 3:15). This is the story of the Old Testament, from Genesis to Malachi. It tells us how the flow of redemptive history from the patriarchs to the prophets is one in which the line of the Messiah is told. This is what enabled Jesus to lead the two disciples on the Emmaus road on a Bible study from “Moses and all the Prophets,” pointing out to them “the things concerning himself” (Luke 24:27). Had the story line of the Old Testament not displayed a unifying theme established by divine providence, this would not have been possible. God has ensured that his promise

Providence and the Bible ■

of salvation to sinners through the atoning work of his own Son be realized, not through haphazard events contingent upon the choices of men and women and the forces of evil over which God has no ultimate control, but by events that are planned and certain. There is a master-plan! God reigns through the stumbling, hobbling service of his people and the rage and malice of his foes to establish his eternal purpose for this world. The story of a small, insignificant family from Bethlehem is one of the building blocks in the coming of Jesus Christ into the world. A son born to Ruth and her husband, Boaz, becomes King David's grandfather!³

The story of Ruth is also illustrative of the doctrine of providence at a microcosmic level. It shows us God's wise provision of a husband for a Moabite widow—which, in Bethlehem in those times was a necessary provision to ensure her release from a life of penury! When, by God's astonishing grace, Ruth professed her faith in her mother-in-law's God, thereby evidencing a work of conversion in her heart, she also vowed to go with Naomi to Bethlehem. There were no guarantees for her there as a Moabite widow, which is partly why Naomi had urged her to return to her own people (Ruth 1:8-9). She did not know that God would provide for her in a way that would be a source of wonderment forever afterwards. In the words of the English poet William Cowper:

God moves in a mysterious way
His wonders to perform;
He plants his footsteps in the sea
And rides upon the storm.⁴

▣ Providence

The problem, of course, with planting footsteps in the sea is that liquids do not retain their shape once the foot is withdrawn! In other words, the ways of God cannot always be discerned by us in any visible, transparent way. It requires from us a degree of trust and faith in the providence of God. In ways that only *afterwards* became clearer, Ruth's gleaning in the barley fields of Bethlehem was part of God's plan all along whereby she and Boaz would meet and eventually marry and have a child called Obed, "the father of Jesse, the father of David" (Ruth 4:17). On a microcosmic scale, Ruth could express wonder in the providence (provision!) of God in her time of need. As the Puritan John Flavel put it: "Sometimes providences, like Hebrew letters, must be read backward."⁵

On a macrocosmic scale, she knew next to nothing of her role in the fulfillment of God's promise in the Garden of Eden. On this level, there were aspects of what God did in her life that only future generations would understand. And give glory to God!

Joseph

The entire life of Joseph is summarized in Genesis 50:20: "As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good." The teenager we met at the beginning of the story is now over a hundred years old. His life has come full circle and he is addressing his duplicitous brothers. Their action, in selling him into slavery, had nothing but evil intent written all over it. Their malevolence can in no way be lessened by the knowledge that things did not turn out as they might have done. Truth is, God overruled their evil actions to accomplish a purpose