PROVIDENCE... SEE GM 6 AND GM 13

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**“God’s Providence Summarized in the Westminster Confession”**

**John W. Tweeddale**

God’s ways at times seem baffling. As the Apostle Paul says, they are inscrutable ([Rom. 11:33](https://www.esv.org/Rom.%2011%3A33/)). That’s why as Christians we often encourage each other to trust in God’s providence, to remember His invisible hand, and to rest in the knowledge that He orchestrates all things for our good (8:28). We call on providence when God’s ways are “past finding out” (11:33, KJV). When tragedy strikes. When joy surprises. When sorrow overwhelms. When opportunity knocks. When circumstances push us to the edge. When we have no answers. Somehow. Some way. As Christians, we know the solution lies deep in the providence of God.

The appeal of providence is that it places each moment of our lives—good, bad, and everything in between—in bold relief against God’s plan for all things. We tell ourselves that God is in control. Yet we still struggle to connect the chaos of our lives with the certainty of God’s design. As finite and fallen creatures, we often fail to trust that God will lead, guide, and direct us according to His good and sovereign will. One reason Christians have long spoken about providence is to bolster our faith amid life’s uncertainties.

As I was working on this article, I took a walk around the campus of Reformation Bible College, where I teach, and looped back to my office by way of our coffee shop to purchase an afternoon latte. While I was waiting for my coffee, I asked one of my students about something in his life. Unaware that I was writing an article on providence, he began reflecting on the difficulty of not always knowing God’s ways. He gave me a helpful illustration. When traveling by car, he told me he prefers having the map on his smartphone open so that he knows at all times where he is, where he is going, and how he will get to his destination. But, he confessed, he doesn’t like traveling when he has no map to follow but only a friend or family member to navigate the journey one turn at a time. His point was well made. He knows that he is to trust in God’s providence, but he wishes he could see the map that details the coordinates of his life.

In his classic work The Mystery of Providence, the Puritan John Flavel states, “It is the duty of the saints, especially in times of straits, to reflect upon the performances of Providence for them in all the states and through all the stages in their lives.” Flavel, in other words, urges Christians to meditate on God’s providence at every juncture of life and even to talk about His ways with fellow Christians. But to reflect in any meaningful way on “the performances of Providence,” we need to have a clear understanding of what we mean by the term providence.

There are few better resources for summarizing the Bible’s teaching on key doctrines than the Westminster Confession of Faith. In chapter 5 of the confession, we have one of the most precise definitions of providence in the history of the church. For the remainder of this article, we will examine the first four sections of chapter 5 of the Westminster Confession of Faith, which detail the biblical doctrine of providence.

The opening section of chapter 5 relates providence to the outworking of God’s eternal decree (see WCF 3) in the realm of God’s creation (see WCF 4). It states:

*God the great Creator of all things doth uphold, direct, dispose, and govern all creatures, actions, and things, from the greatest even to the least, by his most wise and holy providence, according to his infallible foreknowledge, and the free and immutable counsel of his own will, to the praise of the glory of his wisdom, power, justice, goodness, and mercy. (WCF 5.1)*

In Truths We Confess, a splendid guide to the Westminster Confession, Dr. R.C. Sproul calls this paragraph an “unequaled summary of Reformed theology.” To begin with, notice that the confession connects providence with God’s work of creation. Since God created all things, He governs all things. God is not aloof or disengaged. He is actively involved in the world that He made, directing everything great and small according to His sovereign plan. Dear reader, God is not unconcerned with the events of your life. He is not surprised or taken off guard by your suffering. The God who made the galaxies knows the hairs on your head, the fears of your heart, the events of your life, and the details of your future (consider [Matt. 6:25–34; 10:26–33](https://www.esv.org/Matt.%206%3A25%E2%80%9334%3B%2010%3A26%E2%80%9333/)).

The God who made the galaxies knows the fears of your heart, the events of your life, and the details of your future.

The Bible is replete with verses that testify to God’s upholding, directing, disposing, and governing His creation. Here are just a handful. [Psalm 135:6](https://www.esv.org/Psalm%20135%3A6/) teaches that God’s providence extends to all parts of creation: “Whatever the LORD pleases, he does, in heaven and on earth, in the seas and all deeps.” [Proverbs 15:3](https://www.esv.org/Proverbs%2015%3A3/) reminds us that the “eyes of the LORD are in every place, keeping watch on the evil and the good.” [Daniel 2:21–22](https://www.esv.org/Daniel%202%3A21%E2%80%9322/) explains that God “changes times and seasons; he removes kings and sets up kings; he gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to those who have understanding; he reveals deep and hidden things; he knows what is in the darkness, and the light dwells with him.” [Acts 17:24–28](https://www.esv.org/Acts%2017%3A24%E2%80%9328/) declares that the “God who made the world and everything in it . . . gives to all mankind life and breath and everything . . . having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place . . . for in him we live and move and have our being.” And [Hebrews 1:3](https://www.esv.org/Hebrews%201%3A3/) states that God the Son, the second person of the Trinity, “upholds the universe by the word of his power.” The manifold witness of Scripture is that God is in control of everything in heaven and on earth. As Thomas Watson observes, “God is not like an artificer that builds a house, and then leaves it, but like a pilot he steers the ship of the whole creation.”

The Westminster Confession links providence not only to creation but also to “the free and immutable counsel of [God’s] own will.” The events of creation and providence represent the unfolding of God’s perfect design for the world. Stated another way, God performs His eternal decrees in the works of creation and providence. But what are the decrees of God? The Westminster Shorter Catechism gives us a succinct answer: “The decrees of God are his eternal purpose, according to the counsel of his will, whereby, for his own glory, he hath foreordained whatsoever comes to pass” (WSC 7). More simply, whatever happens in your life is according to the infinite wisdom of God. As the psalmist states, “O LORD, how manifold are your works! In wisdom have you made them all” ([Ps. 104:24](https://www.esv.org/Ps.%20104%3A24/)).

The doctrine of providence reminds us that while the precise purposes of God may be veiled from our sight, we can still draw comfort from knowing that whatever befalls us comes from God’s good and wise plan for our lives. Certainly, this precious truth lies behind the many exhortations in Proverbs for us to trust in God. We place our faith in the Lord and not in our own understanding, because He will make our paths straight ([Prov. 3:5–6](https://www.esv.org/Prov.%203%3A5%E2%80%936/)). It is the Lord who establishes our steps (16:9). His purposes stand forever (19:21). One of the ways my wife and I reinforce these truths in our family is to challenge each other to trust in God’s wisdom, to be content with what God gives, and to be faithful in what God calls us to do each and every day. We rest in God because we know that nothing is outside the scope of His providence. There are no “maverick molecules,” as Dr. Sproul used to say. All that comes to pass is according to His will and for His glory.

In the next section, the confession introduces a difficult but important distinction between first and second causes. It states:

*Although, in relation to the foreknowledge and decree of God, the first Cause, all things come to pass immutably, and infallibly; yet, by the same providence, he ordereth them to fall out, according to the nature of second causes, either necessarily, freely, or contingently. (WCF 5.2)*

Earlier in the confession, the Westminster divines (as theologians were called in the seventeenth century) made this same point:

*God, from all eternity, did, by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely, and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass: yet so, as thereby neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures; nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established. (WCF 3.1)*

These two statements are among the most tightly worded and theologically weighty portions of the entire confession. We have already seen that God’s providence is the cause of the execution and ongoing operation of His predetermined plan for all things. When we think about God’s governance of creation, we must reject any notion of providence that suggests that God withdraws from the world on the one hand or that He treats humans as robots on the other. We reject both Deism and fatalism, since both distort God’s relationship with the world. In Deism, God does nothing. In fatalism, God does everything. Neither of these positions is acceptable.

By declaring God as the first or primary cause of all that comes to pass and asserting the legitimacy of second causes, the confession affirms a concursus of divine sovereignty and human freedom, meaning that God accomplishes His purposes through the free choices of creatures and other secondary causes. As Joseph tells his brothers, who sold him into slavery, “You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good” ([Gen. 50:20](https://www.esv.org/Gen.%2050%3A20/)). Joseph’s siblings were guilty of conspiring against their brother and lying to their father about his death (read [Gen. 37](https://www.esv.org/Gen.%2037/)), but God worked through these events to accomplish His promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (see [Gen. 50:24](https://www.esv.org/Gen.%2050%3A24/)). Likewise, as the book of Exodus chronicles the actions of Pharaoh against Israel, we learn that Pharaoh hardened his heart and refused to release Israel from slavery in Egypt (e.g., [Ex. 8:32](https://www.esv.org/Ex.%208%3A32/)). But we are also repeatedly told that Pharaoh’s actions were the result of God’s hardening his heart (e.g., 9:12). These biblical texts illustrate a co-working or convergence of divine and human wills.

Geerhardus Vos explains the principle of concursus:

*Every individual has only to look at his life history to discern that there was a higher hand that governed it. At this point faith in God’s co-working is most closely connected with our dependence upon Him. He directs even our free acts, and however far above our comprehension may be the manner in which he does that, in any case it must be a co-working, a concursus. Not matter, not fate, not chance can affect us, if our freedom is to be maintained, but only the co-working of God (*[*Ps. 104:4*](https://www.esv.org/Ps.%20104%3A4/)*;*[*Prov. 16:1; 21:1*](https://www.esv.org/Prov.%2016%3A1%3B%2021%3A1/)*).*

God is the primary and ultimate cause of all things. But this statement, according to the confession’s summary of the Bible, does not negate the laws of nature or the free actions of humans. In the mystery of God’s providence, God uses ordinary and regular means to bring about His sovereign purposes. J. Gresham Machen clarifies the relationship between God as the first cause of all things and second causes such as gravity or our personal decisions. He concisely states: “God makes use of second causes to accomplish what is in accordance with His eternal purpose. Second causes are not independent forces whose cooperation He needs, but they are means that He employs exactly as He will.” Machen then gives an illustration to reinforce this point.

Imagine you discover a bullet hole in a pane of glass. You would naturally conclude that the hole was caused by the passage of a bullet through the glass, which was caused by the firing of a gun, which was caused by the pulling of a trigger, which was caused by a person holding a gun. As Christians, we affirm that God is sovereign over everything. Since He ordains whatsoever comes to pass, He is the first cause of these events. Yet we would not say that God pulled the trigger. Nor would we attribute the breaking of the glass to God. Machen insists that the person who fired the gun is responsible for the damage caused by the bullet. God’s providential rule does not nullify personal liability.

The confession develops the principle of concursus to make the point that God is sovereign and that we are responsible, moral creatures. Since God is the first cause of everything that happens, “all things come to pass immutably and infallibly” according to His predetermined design. God’s eternal plan for the world is unchanging and unfailing. However, He ordered the events of history to transpire “according to the nature of second causes, either necessarily, freely, or contingently” (WCF 5:2).

We reject both deism and fatalism, since both distort God’s relationship with the world.

Observe that the Westminster divines identify three types of secondary causes: necessary, free, and contingent. A necessary cause, from our vantage point, is one that is required for us to go about our days. For example, [Genesis 8:22](https://www.esv.org/Genesis%208%3A22/) states, “While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease.” The normal seasons of the year are necessary for us to enjoy the rhythms of life. As [Jeremiah 31:35](https://www.esv.org/Jeremiah%2031%3A35/) reminds us, the Lord gives the sun “for light by day” and the moon and stars “for light by night.” Certainly, God does not need His creation. But in His wisdom, He has so organized the world that we need the sun, moon, and stars to experience the days and nights that He has prepared for us (see [Ps. 90:12](https://www.esv.org/Ps.%2090%3A12/)).

Next, the confession refers to free agency. Everything God has made works according to its nature. God designed us as creatures to be moral agents who are responsible for all our thoughts, musings, feelings, words, deeds, behavior, and so on. We must answer to God for our actions. The confession states that when God created Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden, they were “under a possibility of transgressing, being left to the liberty of their own will, which was subject to change” (WCF 4.2; see WCF 3.1; 9.1–5). This means, among other things, that when Eve took of the forbidden fruit, she did so of her own accord. Notice the actions described in [Genesis 3:6](https://www.esv.org/Genesis%203%3A6/). The woman saw that the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil was good for food. She delighted in what she beheld. She desired the wisdom that the tree offered. She took. She ate. She gave to her husband with her. And he ate. As a result of their actions, they were cursed (see [Gen. 3](https://www.esv.org/Gen.%203/)). In the words of the ancient Preacher, “God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes” ([Eccl. 7:29](https://www.esv.org/Eccl.%207%3A29/)). In ways we cannot fully fathom, God determines our finite lives while never undermining our voluntary actions (read carefully [Acts 2:22–24](https://www.esv.org/Acts%202%3A22%E2%80%9324/) and note the confluence of God’s definite plan and the lawless conduct of those who crucified Jesus).

Third, God’s providence does not discount contingent secondary causes. From the standpoint of human agency, a contingent cause is one that is dependent on something else to occur. Contingent causes often come in the form of “if-then” scenarios. Scripture gives us several examples. In [Exodus 21:13](https://www.esv.org/Exodus%2021%3A13/) and [Deuteronomy 19:5](https://www.esv.org/Deuteronomy%2019%3A5/), if an Israelite is guilty of unintentional killing, then God has appointed a place for that person to flee for refuge. In [1 Kings 22:13–36](https://www.esv.org/1%20Kings%2022%3A13%E2%80%9336/), the prophet Micaiah warns of the death of Ahab to demonstrate his credentials as a spokesman for God. If the king of Israel dies in battle, then he, Micaiah, will be proven to be a true prophet. But, as Micaiah explains, if Ahab returns in peace, then “the LORD has not spoken by me” (v. 28). The credibility of Micaiah as a prophet is contingent on whether Ahab returns from battle dead or alive.

When we discuss the relationship between primary and secondary causes, we are affirming that God ordains and governs all things in such a way that accounts for natural laws and human activity. God’s sovereignty does not destroy but establishes second causes. His eternal purposes are worked out in history on the plane of providence. As the first cause of all things, God wisely and purposefully accomplishes His sovereign decree through the regular cycle of seasons, the rise and fall of empires, the ups and downs of markets, and the daily endeavors of finite, morally responsible, decision-making, sinful people (see, for example, [Isa. 10:5–19](https://www.esv.org/Isa.%2010%3A5%E2%80%9319/), especially vv. 6–7).

As Christians, we know the solution lies deep in the providence of God.

The next two sections in chapter 5 of the Westminster Confession make two important qualifications about God’s providence. The first qualification concerns miracles: “God, in his ordinary providence, maketh use of means, yet is free to work without, above, and against them, at his pleasure” (WCF 5.3). The world that God has made is not closed to His intervention. Normally, God uses secondary means such as the laws of nature to accomplish His divine purposes. However, God is under no obligation to limit His providential rule to these means. He may determine to part the waters of the Red Sea or heal the sick or cast out demons or raise a person from the dead to demonstrate His power to redeem His people. These supernatural activities are not intended to contradict or undermine God’s use of ordinary means but are meant to broaden the scope of God’s providential rule. As Archibald Alexander Hodge argues, “The order of nature and miracles, instead of being in conflict, are the intimately correlated elements of one comprehensive system.” God uses natural law, human actions, and divine miracles to accomplish His eternal and immutable plan for His glory.

The other qualification the confession makes about God’s providence is that His divine sovereignty over all things should in no way be taken as suggesting that He is the author of sin. It states:

*The almighty power, unsearchable wisdom, and infinite goodness of God so far manifest themselves in his providence, that it extendeth itself even to the first fall, and all other sins of angels and men; and that not by a bare permission, but such as hath joined with it a most wise and powerful bounding, and otherwise ordering, and governing of them, in a manifold dispensation, to his own holy ends; yet so, as the sinfulness thereof proceedeth only from the creature, and not from God, who, being most holy and righteous, neither is nor can be the author or approver of sin. (WCF 5.4)*

The central thrust of this section lies in the claim that sinful actions proceed only from angels and humans and not from God. To prove this point, the Scottish theologian David Dickson appeals to the testimony of Moses ([Deut. 32:4](https://www.esv.org/Deut.%2032%3A4/)), David ([Ps. 5:4](https://www.esv.org/Ps.%205%3A4/)), Daniel ([Dan. 9:14](https://www.esv.org/Dan.%209%3A14/)), Habakkuk ([Hab. 1:13](https://www.esv.org/Hab.%201%3A13/)), Paul ([Rom. 3:3–5](https://www.esv.org/Rom.%203%3A3%E2%80%935/)), James ([James 1:13–18](https://www.esv.org/James%201%3A13%E2%80%9318/)), and John ([1 John 1:5; 2:16](https://www.esv.org/1%20John%201%3A5%3B%202%3A16/)). He then makes several arguments based on these and several other biblical texts to show that God is not the author of sin:

* Because God is essentially and infinitely holy and good, He is pure and free from every spot and blemish.
* Because God is absolutely perfect, He cannot fail or be deficient in His work.
* Because God is the Judge of the world, He is the Forbidder, the Hater, and the Revenger of all sin and unrighteousness, as contrary to His holy nature and law.

The Westminster Confession’s chapter on providence takes us behind the scenes of history to impress on us that absolutely nothing is outside the purview of God’s reign. He knows all things. He ordains all things. He directs all things for the good of those who are in Christ and for the glory of His triune name ([Eph. 1:3–14](https://www.esv.org/Eph.%201%3A3%E2%80%9314/)). When we are pressed and flummoxed and hurt and saddened and amazed by God’s mysterious providence, the precision of Westminster helps us sing with William Cowper, *Deep in unfathomable mines of never-failing skillhe treasures up his bright designs, and works his sov’reign will.*

Even more, we stand before our sovereign God and say with the Apostle Paul, “For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen” ([Rom. 11:36](https://www.esv.org/Rom.%2011%3A36/)).

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**“God’s Providence Revealed in Scripture”**

**Robert Rothwell**

Have you ever heard a non-Christian say, “Everything happens for a reason”? I have, and probably more times than I can count. I’m not sure what to think when I hear it. On the one hand, I’m glad when a non-Christian expresses doubts that purposeless things happen. After all, one can quickly move from belief that some things have no purpose, to belief that life has no purpose, to sheer nihilism that bears fruit in suicide or sociopathic behavior. On the other hand, I know that when most non-Christians confess that everything happens for a reason, they do not have the right reason in mind. Usually they are just admitting belief that blind, impersonal fate controls everything. But of course, how can blind, impersonal fate have a reason for everything? Purpose comes only from personal agents who make a plan and follow it. If everything happens for a reason, something—or rather, Someone—must decide the reason for it.

As Christians, we know that everything happens for a reason because the personal triune God has created all things and has a plan for everything that happens. He is sovereign over all such that even a sparrow cannot fall to the ground apart from His will ([Matt. 10:29](https://www.esv.org/Matt.%2010%3A29/)). He works out all things, not just some things, according to the counsel of His will ([Eph. 1:11](https://www.esv.org/Eph.%201%3A11/)). This, essentially, is what theologians mean by providence—God has a plan and a purpose for the world and governs history such that everything from the least to the greatest contributes to the achievement of that plan and purpose. He isn’t merely a passive observer of history; rather, He has designed history to achieve a particular end and He directs history so that it will surely reach that end.

##### No Such Thing as Chance

All Christians have some doctrine of God’s providence because the Bible teaches clearly that God rules over all things. I do not know any professing believer who denies that the Lord is in control over the big things such as presidential elections, hurricanes, or world wars. However, in the biblical doctrine of providence, we’re not limiting God’s control to only the major things of history. We’re talking about even the smallest things, even the roll of the dice. [Proverbs 16:33](https://www.esv.org/Proverbs%2016%3A33/) says, “The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD.” A roll of the dice, which would be the rough modern equivalent of the ancient practice of casting the lot, seems to have a totally random result. But this is not so. The results of the roll are exactly what the Lord ordained.

But of course, for God to get the results of the dice roll He ordained, lots of things have to happen. It has to be thrown with just the right amount of force. Too much and the dice will tumble past the ordained number. Too little and it might not tumble at all. So, God has to regulate the dice thrower’s arm to get the result He wants. What if there is a slight breeze or the dice are being thrown under an air conditioning vent? Well, in either case, the force of the air is going to play a part, however slight, in the outcome of the dice roll. That is something else for the Lord to direct in order to get His chosen outcome. But the movement of the air is related to the temperature of the room, which is related to the movement of the air molecules, which is determined by the atoms in the molecules and ultimately by subatomic particles. They have to move in just the right way to create just the right temperature to create the conditions necessary for the dice to give the number the Lord has chosen. And that is a vast oversimplification—once you get down to the subatomic level, things get really complicated.

All Christians have some doctrine of God’s providence because the Bible teaches clearly that God rules over all things.

All that is to say, as Dr. R.C. Sproul so frequently reminded us, that there is not one “maverick molecule” in all creation operating outside the sovereign control and direction of the Lord. There can’t be, for if the tiniest thing were to go astray, the cascading effects could change everything. Ultimately, as Dr. Sproul also reminded us, there is no such thing as chance.

##### Everyday Providence

Understanding that there is no such thing as chance should dramatically reframe our view of everyday life. Let’s face it—most of us are not very important people in the eyes of the world. We’ll have a lasting influence on maybe a handful of individuals, and we’ll be quickly forgotten after we die. Because of that, it is too easy to think that our actions do not matter or that God is not all that involved. We might think He is involved in the affairs of world leaders, but certainly He doesn’t pay much attention to the rest of us as we change diapers, try to keep our teenagers out of trouble, work long hours to pay the mortgage, chat with neighbors, struggle to make it to church each week, put our feet up in the evenings, play the same game with our toddler for the umpteenth time, cram for the next exam, and so forth.

The truth of God’s providence tells us otherwise. For one thing, providence means not only that He is governing and directing all things but also that He is sustaining all things. [Hebrews 1:3](https://www.esv.org/Hebrews%201%3A3/), for instance, reveals that God, through His Son, “upholds the universe by the word of his power.” God not only created all things but He preserves all things ([Neh. 9:6](https://www.esv.org/Neh.%209%3A6/)). As I have been telling my children recently, if the Lord were to stop sustaining the existence of the world, everything—including us—would immediately vanish into nothingness. At every moment, we are completely dependent on God’s continuing to sustain His creation. The universe does not continue on in its own power.

From the truth of God’s sustaining providence, we may rightly infer that the Lord thinks there is something awfully important about everything in creation, even the things we consider the most mundane. Our Maker is not one to waste His time and energy, as it were, on trivial things. The very fact that He sustains everything, including our ordinary lives and decisions, means there is value to these things. This value, of course, does not come finally from us; rather, the value is found in how God works all things together for our good and His glory, in how He weaves everything together in His sovereign plan ([Isa. 43:6–7](https://www.esv.org/Isa.%2043%3A6%E2%80%937/); [Rom. 8:28](https://www.esv.org/Rom.%208%3A28/)). As [Romans 11:36](https://www.esv.org/Romans%2011%3A36/) expresses it: “For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.”

So, God’s governance and sustenance work themselves out in the comparatively little things of life. Our choice to have chicken and not fish for dinner, our selection of flowers to plant in our front yards, our preference for football over baseball, our decision to take the scenic route and not the more direct highway, our request to have the stylist cut half an inch instead of a whole inch off our hair, our opting for our daughters to take ballet lessons instead of soccer—everything is ultimately governed and directed by the Lord and thus has value in His plan. This truth is not meant to paralyze us. We are not going to cause God’s kingdom to go off the rails if we choose chicken over fish. In fact, a decision such as that one, all things being equal, is indifferent. It is neither inherently sinful nor inherently righteous to eat chicken or fish. Nevertheless, the choice we make in even such an apparently insignificant matter has ramifications for the kingdom that we cannot fathom.

God’s providence operates in extraordinary matters to bring about His plan only if He also controls things in everyday matters.

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To put it another way, God’s providence is very much an everyday reality. The Bible doesn’t reveal the god of Deism, who is mostly unconcerned and uninvolved with his creation. Scripture presents us with the one true God, who is close at hand ([Jer. 23:23–24](https://www.esv.org/Jer.%2023%3A23%E2%80%9324/)) not just in the sense that He is everywhere present with His creation but that He is present in and through the events of creation and the decisions of His creatures. He remains distinct from these things, but make no mistake, His hand is upholding these things and directing them as He works out all things—not only some things—according to the counsel of His will ([Eph. 1](https://www.esv.org/Eph.%201/): 11).

##### Extraordinary Providence

Our apparently insignificant choices are not going to throw God’s plan off course, but what about bigger and more consequential decisions and actions? These aren’t going to ruin the Lord’s plan either because His providence operates not only in everyday things but also in what we might call extraordinary things—those actions that more clearly affect the course of world history and the expansion of God’s kingdom. In fact, we may say that because the Lord’s providence governs the everyday things, it must also govern the extraordinary things.

[Daniel 2:21](https://www.esv.org/Daniel%202%3A21/) says that God “removes kings and sets up kings.” Few things are more directly relevant to the outcome of history than the world’s rulers. The rising and falling of kings constitutes one of the extraordinary things that must happen precisely according to God’s intent in order for His plan for history and for His people to be achieved. We will consider the ascension of King Cyrus the Great to the Persian throne in 538 BC to help illustrate this.

Two hundred years earlier, long before Persia was a major player on the world scene and before Cyrus was even born, before the exile of Judah into Babylon, the prophet Isaiah predicted that Cyrus would rise to power, conquer, and set the Judean exiles free to return to their homeland ([Isa. 45:1–13](https://www.esv.org/Isa.%2045%3A1%E2%80%9313/)). But of course, for this to happen, a vast number of events and decisions had to go in a particular way for Cyrus to become leader of Persia and rule in such a way that the Jews could go home. First, the Jews must be exiled to Babylon. But this can happen only if Babylon conquers the seemingly all-powerful Assyrian Empire, the reigning world power in Isaiah’s day. But Babylon does this only if the Assyrian emperors make a number of poor decisions and the Babylonians become more effective than Assyria on the battlefield. For this to happen, the right strategists have to come to prominence in Babylon and the Assyrian king will have to follow poor counselors or make bad decisions on their own. But you cannot have the right strategists in Babylon without those strategists’ receiving the right education and experience, which requires the birth of these strategists into the right families who can provide that education and experience. Then, these families are formed only by the right marriage decisions, and so forth. On the other side, getting poor counselors into place in Assyria requires a similar chain of events.

For Cyrus to come to power, he must first exist, so the right couple must come together to produce the child. To get to that point, two families have to agree for Cyrus’ mother and father to get married. Each parent must make it to childbearing age for Cyrus to be conceived, so his mother and father must each be protected from accidents, illnesses, and more that could kill them before Cyrus is born. And for that to happen, Cyrus’ grandparents must make the right decisions in caring for Cyrus’ parents as they grow up, which means that Cyrus’ great-grandparents have to make the right decisions in raising Cyrus’ grandparents, and on and on.

I am simplifying things here, but the point is that God can by no means ordain and control the rise of someone such as Cyrus and the release of the Jews apart from governing innumerable small details such as parental decisions and personal histories. This has to get down into even the genetic level, for Cyrus can come to power only if his immune system keeps him alive long enough for him to take power. If even the tiniest thing goes wrong at any point—say, he inherits a genetic proclivity to a fatal disease—then all is lost.

God not only created all things but He preserves all things.

Decisions made and actions taken have a cascading effect. Trace the history of the actors in an extraordinary event back far enough, and the event and actors become reality only after millions of tiny decisions made by countless different people converge to get the right person into the right circumstances at just the right time to make the choices that bring about the event. For the Messiah to be born of the line of David ([Isa. 11:1–10](https://www.esv.org/Isa.%2011%3A1%E2%80%9310/)), as prophesied, the line of David has to survive until the Messiah’s birth. And the line of David survives only if innumerable decisions by the members of David’s line as well as other factors outside the control of David’s line all contribute somehow, even in a small way, to the preservation of the line. That much is clear from the book of Ruth, where a series of seemingly chance events end in the marriage of Boaz and Ruth, forerunners of David. All this is to say that God’s providence operates in extraordinary matters to bring about His plan only if He also controls things in everyday matters. Everything happens for a reason because God arranges for everything to happen for a reason.

What this should tell us is that the choice between chicken and fish, while in itself not generally a moral decision or immediately consequential, is not ultimately inconsequential after all. It may, for example, play a part in creating an allergy in a future descendant, who then chooses to go not to the seafood restaurant but to the coffee shop, where he meets the local girl who loves the shop’s coffee and eventually marries her, and they give birth to the influential evangelist, judge, or president who shapes world history. And just think, the parents of this leader never would have met if their more remote ancestor had chosen chicken over fish or vice versa.

At the same time, while God’s providence governs all things, He is not a grand puppet master pulling all the strings in such a way that our decisions are not truly ours, that our motivations do not matter, and that we have no real impact on the course of history. The Lord works in and through our decisions, actions, and motivations in such a way that they remain our decisions, actions, and motivations while nevertheless working toward the fulfillment of God’s purposes. Our decisions, actions, and motivations concur with the Lord’s decisions, actions, and motivations in the sense that they work together, according to the nature of each respective actor, human and divine, to make happen what God has ordained. Theologians call this the doctrine of concurrence, and it is best explained by looking at a couple of biblical illustrations.

One of the classic illustrations is the life of Joseph, particularly as Joseph sums up his experience. After having been sold into slavery by his brothers, enduring mistreatment in Egypt, rising to the right hand of Pharaoh, and reconciling with his family, Joseph tells his brothers, “As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today” ([Gen. 50:20](https://www.esv.org/Gen.%2050%3A20/)). When Joseph’s brothers sold him into slavery, they had only a sinful intent to do away with him. That was their motive and that was the reason for their action. The Lord, however, had a different plan. He wanted to get Joseph into Egypt so that Joseph could finally join the court of Pharaoh and save not only the world from famine but particularly the chosen line of Abraham. His means of accomplishing this good intent and achieving the beneficial outcome was to allow Joseph’s brothers to develop an evil intent and to act on their sinful actions so that Joseph could get into Egypt in the first place. God did all this without having an evil intent or doing evil Himself. But the intents and actions of the brothers and the Lord, while fundamentally different, concurred in such a way that Joseph was sent to Egypt.

Dr. Sproul in his teaching on providence would often also look to [Job 1](https://www.esv.org/Job%201/) to illustrate concurrence. In that chapter, Satan seeks to destroy Job, the Lord allows him to go after Job, and the Chaldeans steal Job’s camels. Everything comes together and Job suffers a great loss, but the actors all do different things and are differently motivated. Satan seeks to discredit Job as a faithful servant of the Lord, so he stirs things up against Job. The Lord seeks to vindicate Job as His faithful servant, so He allows Satan to act against Job. The Chaldeans do not know about the dialogue between God and Satan; they just see a wealthy man and desire his goods for themselves, so they steal from Job. All these things operate in different ways, but Job suffers no financial loss unless Satan wants to discredit Job, God allows him to work, and the Chaldeans see and desire Job’s wealth. These three elements concur to bring about Job’s suffering, but God remains holy and just throughout.

Probably the best illustration of concurrence is the crucifixion of our Lord and Savior. As we consider the different players in the event, we see many different motivations and actions. (Although, in the examples that follow, we note that the three persons of the Trinity ultimately share the same motivation and are each involved in the action of the others, in the outworking of salvation we can emphasize particular works associated with each person.) Judas betrayed Jesus because he was motivated by money. The Jewish authorities did not like the acclaim Jesus was receiving and were threatened by His critiques. The Roman authorities just wanted the Jews to stop arguing so that their dispute would not develop into a revolt. Satan wanted to put an end to the ministry of Christ and His attacks against the demonic kingdom. Jesus went willingly to the cross to atone for the sins of His people and to obey His Father. The Father sent Jesus to the cross to fulfill His promises to save His people. The Holy Spirit sustained Jesus on the cross so that effective atonement would be achieved and the Savior glorified ([Isa. 53](https://www.esv.org/Isa.%2053/); [Matt. 26:3–5, 14–16; 27:24–26](https://www.esv.org/Matt.%2026%3A3%E2%80%935%2C%2014%E2%80%9316%3B%2027%3A24%E2%80%9326/); [John 3:16; 11:45–49](https://www.esv.org/John%203%3A16%3B%2011%3A45%E2%80%9349/); [Rom. 8:32](https://www.esv.org/Rom.%208%3A32/); [Heb. 9:14](https://www.esv.org/Heb.%209%3A14/); [Rev. 12:4](https://www.esv.org/Rev.%2012%3A4/)). All the players in the greatest act of redemptive history had to act for the atonement to take place, and while each differed in motivations and actions, everything concurred to bring the plans and purposes of the Lord to fruition. God governed all this without doing wrong or violating the wills of the individual actors. As Peter said to the audience on Pentecost, “This Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men” ([Acts 2:23](https://www.esv.org/Acts%202%3A23/)).

God’s providence means that everything happens for a reason, both the big things and the small things, both good and evil. Ultimately this is for a good reason, for in providence God is working out all things according to the counsel of His perfectly good will ([Eph. 1:11](https://www.esv.org/Eph.%201%3A11/)). Much more could be said and will be said in the succeeding articles, but we have seen the basics of the biblical teaching: God’s providential rule operates in both the everyday things and in the extraordinary things, and it operates in and through what His creatures do. Indeed, He is sovereign over all that happens, giving purpose to everything even if we cannot discern it. Moreover, His all-controlling sovereign providence does not make what we do meaningless. Without it, nothing has meaning.

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**“God’s Providence Applied in Our Lives”**

**Joel R. Beeke**

Nothing is more practical than the doctrine of providence, for it engenders both faith and godly fear. When Christ teaches us how to deal with anxiety, He reminds us that God the Father feeds every little bird and clothes every flower with its lovely colors ([Matt. 6:25–30](https://www.esv.org/Matt.%206%3A25%E2%80%9330/)). How much more, then, should we trust Him to care for His own beloved children? Whether one is willing to admit it or not, everyone constantly lives in the presence of the living God. The more the believer is conscious of God’s providence, the more it can be said of him, as B.B. Warfield wrote, “Everywhere he sees God in His mighty stepping, everywhere he feels the working of His mighty arm, the throbbing of His mighty heart.”

Our God is in control. While we cannot fully plumb the depths of God’s ways, we can still affirm that “of him, and through him, and to him, are all things: to whom be glory for ever” ([Rom. 11:36](https://www.esv.org/Rom.%2011%3A36/), KJV throughout). There are many things for which we do not know the reason, but for everything we know who has ordained them. Obadiah Sedgwick wrote, “No one is so fit to govern the world as He who made it.” His perfect wisdom, holiness, justice, power, love, and goodness will not fail.

Consequently, we can be like the child on board a ship who remained peaceful while wind and waves raged around him. When asked how he kept calm in such a violent storm, he replied, “My father is the captain.” How much more can the church sing: “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore will not we fear, though the earth be removed, and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea” ([Ps. 46:1–2](https://www.esv.org/Ps.%2046%3A1%E2%80%932/)).

God’s providence benefits believers in many ways. Let’s consider five of them.

**First,** the God-centered Christian worldview establishes our trust that our Father reigns over all things through His Son by the Holy Spirit. The Heidelberg Catechism says:

*The eternal Father of our Lord Jesus Christ (who of nothing made heaven and earth, with all that is in them; 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; on whom I rely so entirely, that I have no doubt but He will provide me with all things necessary for soul and body; and further, that He will make whatever evils He sends upon me, in this valley of tears, turn out to my advantage; for He is able to do it, being Almighty God, and willing, being a faithful Father. (Q&A 26)*

The doctrines of providence and adoption link arms to undergird God’s children with a wonderful confidence. The sovereign God is their loving Father in Jesus Christ, so that in all of life they “are pitied, protected, provided for, and chastened by Him as by a Father; yet never cast off,” as the Westminster Confession of Faith says (12.1). John Cotton exclaimed, “Is it a light matter for the God of heaven and earth to be called your Father, since you are but men?” As our Father, God will surely give “provision for a son here [and](https://tabletalkmagazine.com/article/2021/02/gods-providence-applied-in-our-lives/) provision for an heir hereafter,” for “God nurtures us” and “hath given us an inheritance.”

We live in a dangerous world. Disease, disaster, and war sweep many people into eternity every day. Evil men oppress and abuse the godly and the innocent. Unseen to our eyes, Satan and his host go about like roaring lions seeking to devour people and drag them to damnation ([1 Peter 5:8](https://www.esv.org/1%20Peter%205%3A8/)). The deceptions and passions of sin rage in our hearts, so that we are never safe from ourselves. Realism demands that we live wisely and prudently in such a perilous place.

However, Christians need not live fearfully or anxiously but may cling to the promise of [Romans 8:28](https://www.esv.org/Romans%208%3A28/): “We know that all things work together for good to them that love God.” Thomas Watson wrote: “All the various dealings of God with his children do by a special providence turn to their good. ‘All the paths of the LORD are mercy and truth unto such as keep his covenant’ ([Ps. 25:10](https://www.esv.org/Ps.%2025%3A10/)).” He concluded, “The grand reason why all things work for good, is the near and dear interest which God has in His people. The Lord has made a covenant with them. ‘They shall be my people, and I will be their God’ ([Jer. 32:38](https://www.esv.org/Jer.%2032%3A38/)).”

God’s providence comforts His covenant people. Sedgwick said:

*No good man ever lacked anything that was good for him. I may lack a thing which is good, but not which is good for me: “The LORD will give grace and glory: no good thing will he withhold from them that walk uprightly” (*[*Ps. 84:11*](https://www.esv.org/Ps.%2084%3A11/)*).*

God has a special providence over His living church because we are the apple of His eye, His lambs, His children, and His jewels ([Zech. 2:8](https://www.esv.org/Zech.%202%3A8/); [Isa. 40:11; 49:15](https://www.esv.org/Isa.%2040%3A11%3B%2049%3A15/); [Mal. 3:17](https://www.esv.org/Mal.%203%3A17/)). His care for His people is entirely gracious, tender, mysterious, glorious, exact, and often extraordinary. The God-centered Christian worldview establishes our trust that our Father reigns over all things through His Son by the Holy Spirit.

Faith in God’s providence supports the Christian’s service to God. It is his shield against all the attacks of Satan ([Eph. 6:16](https://www.esv.org/Eph.%206%3A16/)). Warfield said, “A firm faith in the universal providence of God is the solution of all earthly troubles.” Rather than being paralyzed with fear or driven about by anxiety, the strong believer stands on the stable ground of divine providence and advances ahead in firm obedience and submission to his Master’s will.

**Second**, people who believe in God’s providence are people of prayer who know and believe that their providing God commands, hears, and answers prayer. They know that “every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning” ([James 1:17](https://www.esv.org/James%201%3A17/)).

John Calvin said:

*It will not suffice simply to hold that there is One whom all ought to honor and adore, unless we are also persuaded that he is the fountain of every good, and that we must seek nothing elsewhere than in him. . . . No drop will be found either of wisdom and light, or of righteousness or power or rectitude, or of genuine truth, which does not flow from him, and of which he is not the cause.*

Prayer is the cry of childlike faith. When we pray, “Our Father which art in heaven . . . Give us this day our daily bread,” as our Lord taught us ([Matt. 6:9, 11](https://www.esv.org/Matt.%206%3A9%2C%2011/)), we acknowledge God “to be the only fountain of all good, and that neither our care nor industry” can get us what we need and desire without His blessing, and therefore, we “withdraw our trust from all creatures and place it alone” in Him (HC 125).

The Lord teaches us to go to Him with every need, with all our frailty, with all our cares. Knowing that He is our provider, we should seek from Him our food and drink, health, clothing, good relationships in our families, success in our callings, the Spirit’s power in our churches, and peace for our nation. We should cast “all [our] care upon him; for he careth for [us]” ([1 Peter 5:7](https://www.esv.org/1%20Peter%205%3A7/)).

Knowing God’s providence fosters humility, which is vital for prayer. The Holy Scriptures remind us that no matter how hard we work, we cannot get anything unless we receive it from His hand ([Ps. 104:28](https://www.esv.org/Ps.%20104%3A28/); [John 3:27](https://www.esv.org/John%203%3A27/)). Indeed, we cannot move a finger, blink an eye, or think a thought without His enablement. We may have the greatest skills and the most impressive list of experiences and references, but “it is he that giveth thee power to get wealth” ([Deut. 8:18](https://www.esv.org/Deut.%208%3A18/)). Even with strength and skill, we might toil all day and fail to attain our goals. “Except the LORD build the house, they labour in vain that build it: except the LORD keep the city, the watchman waketh but in vain” ([Ps. 127:1](https://www.esv.org/Ps.%20127%3A1/)).

Therefore, we must trust in God alone and seek all good things from Him. Oh, to have a true sense of our constant dependence on Him! So often people go to work day after day, buy groceries, take medicine, pay bills, and enjoy pleasures—but do not give a thought to Him and the fact that all depends on His will. Their hearts are lifted up in pride, they forget the Lord, and they say, “My power and the might of mine hand hath gotten me this wealth” ([Deut. 8:17](https://www.esv.org/Deut.%208%3A17/)). Their prayerlessness is the nail that seals the coffin of their spiritual deadness. But the child of God has the Spirit of adoption crying in his heart, “Abba, Father” ([Gal. 4:6](https://www.esv.org/Gal.%204%3A6/)). He knows by a Spirit-infused instinct that all deliverance from evil and enjoyment of good comes from his Father. And therefore, he prays. And you? Do you pray? Are your prayers a sincere seeking after Him who is the fountain of all good? Do you really believe in the God of providence?

The Heidelberg Catechism highlights three more benefits of knowing God’s providence:

*That we may be patient in adversity; thankful in prosperity; and that in all things, which may hereafter befall us, we place our firm trust in our faithful God and Father, that nothing shall separate us from His love; since all creatures are so in His hand, that without His will they cannot so much as move. (Q&A 28)*

**A third benefit**, therefore, is patience in adversity. We naturally respond to adversity by sinking into self-centered bitterness or falling into despondency. However, even when our circumstances are turbulent or painful, the Christian should cultivate inner quietness by exercising faith in God’s providence. David said, “I opened not my mouth; because thou didst it” ([Ps. 39:9](https://www.esv.org/Ps.%2039%3A9/)). Godly quietness under sorrow comes not from hardening our hearts and shutting down our emotions but from clinging to God in the midst of the storm.

Christian patience in adversity (“longsuffering”) is a supernatural fruit of God’s Spirit ([Gal. 5:22](https://www.esv.org/Gal.%205%3A22/)). Unbelievers may grimly resign themselves to circumstances they cannot change; believers, however, persevere in faith, believing that the greatest evils will be turned to their profit, and will work for their good, in the hands of a loving, faithful God. By God’s grace and in answer to prayer, we can be “strengthened with all might, according to his glorious power, unto all patience and longsuffering” ([Col. 1:11](https://www.esv.org/Col.%201%3A11/)). By the Spirit, Christ’s disciples are willing cross bearers ([Luke 9:23](https://www.esv.org/Luke%209%3A23/)).

Those who believe in providence rest in God’s purposes for their afflictions. They understand and approve of God’s intention to train up His children to mature holiness by their sorrows and trials ([Prov. 3:11–12](https://www.esv.org/Prov.%203%3A11%E2%80%9312/); [Heb. 12:5–11](https://www.esv.org/Heb.%2012%3A5%E2%80%9311/)). They say, “Before I was afflicted I went astray: but now have I kept thy word. . . . It is good for me that I have been afflicted; that I might learn thy statutes” ([Ps. 119:67, 71](https://www.esv.org/Ps.%20119%3A67%2C%2071/)). Though they often cannot see how, they trust that God is glorifying Himself through their struggles, not least by showing that He is worthy of their faith and godly fear even when He does not give them happiness here and now ([Job 1:1, 8–11, 20–21](https://www.esv.org/Job%201%3A1%2C%208%E2%80%9311%2C%2020%E2%80%9321/)). They live in union and communion with Christ and rejoice to suffer with Him, knowing that one day they shall reign with Him in glory ([Rom. 8:17](https://www.esv.org/Rom.%208%3A17/)). They resolve to “run with patience the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith” ([Heb. 12:1–2](https://www.esv.org/Heb.%2012%3A1%E2%80%932/)).

The Christian’s hope in God’s purposes depends on faith that He really does control all things. Johannes VanderKemp said, “If no universal Ruler directed whatsoever comes to pass, how should good men be able to quiet and comfort themselves in all their tribulations? Would not their condition be worse than that of the wicked?”

One of the greatest trials a believer may endure is that of spiritual darkness. Westminster Confession of Faith 18.4 notes, “True believers may have the assurance of their salvation divers ways shaken, diminished, and intermitted,” sometimes “by God’s withdrawing the light of His countenance, and suffering even such as fear Him to walk in darkness and to have no light” (see [Isa. 50:10](https://www.esv.org/Isa.%2050%3A10/)). Anthony Burgess explained that God may temporarily withdraw a believer’s joy and assurance of His love so that His beloved child may taste the bitterness of sin and learn to hate it more, grow in humility, treasure joy and peace and not take them for granted, glorify Him by obedience, and increase in compassion to comfort others.

Whether or not the saint walking in darkness can discern its spiritual benefit, he can rest in knowing that his sovereign God always works for His glory and the good of His elect. William Gurnall said, “The Christian must trust in a withdrawing God.”

Dear believer, imagine for a moment that everything in life always went “your way.” You were never afflicted. You never faced adversity. What would you be like? I know what I would be like: I’d be a spoiled, immature, self-centered, proud sinner who only believed in myself. Though my flesh does not always want to admit it, I know deep within that I’ve needed every affliction that my heavenly Father has ever sent my way to deliver me from myself and to conform me increasingly to His Son. Without adversity, I never would be a sin-hater, a Christ-lover, and a holiness-pursuer. I would not be the Christian that I am. I suspect you are no different from me.

In all our afflictions, but especially after we have come out of afflictions ([Heb. 12:11](https://www.esv.org/Heb.%2012%3A11/)), we shall find that the bitterness of our sorrows is far outweighed by the sweetness of God’s good purpose. Our loving Father will not waste one tear of His dear children ([Ps. 56:8](https://www.esv.org/Ps.%2056%3A8/)). Samuel Rutherford said, “When I am in the cellar of affliction, I look for the Lord’s choicest wines.”

**A fourth benefit of providence**, which can be as difficult to exercise as patience in adversity, is thankfulness in prosperity. Although adversity is real, frequent, and sometimes overwhelming, we are also immersed in God’s good creation, which is to be “received with thanksgiving” ([1 Tim. 4:4](https://www.esv.org/1%20Tim.%204%3A4/)). God “giveth us richly all things to enjoy” (6:17). We never lack good gifts, and therefore, never lack reasons to praise the God of providence ([Eph. 5:20](https://www.esv.org/Eph.%205%3A20/)). Wilhelmus à Brakel said, “The proper use of God’s providence will render you an exceptional measure of gratitude and will teach you to end in the Lord as the only Giver of all the good which you may receive for soul and body.”

Gratitude is essential to godliness. Without thanksgiving, we cannot obey God’s will: “In every thing give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you” ([1 Thess. 5:18](https://www.esv.org/1%20Thess.%205%3A18/)). Calvin said,

*I call “piety” that reverence joined with love for God which the knowledge of his benefits induces. For until men recognize that they owe everything to God, that they are nourished by his fatherly care, that he is the Author of their every good, that they should seek nothing beyond him—they will never yield him willing service.*

Both adversity and prosperity have their dangers. “Give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with food convenient for me: lest I be full, and deny thee, and say, Who is the LORD? Or lest I be poor, and steal, and take the name of my God in vain” ([Prov. 30:8–9](https://www.esv.org/Prov.%2030%3A8%E2%80%939/)). Both adversity and prosperity have accompanying duties: “Is any among you afflicted? Let him pray. Is any merry? Let him sing psalms” ([James 5:13](https://www.esv.org/James%205%3A13/)).

Knowing God’s providence fosters humility, which is vital for prayer.

At the heart of thankfulness is the faith to look past God’s good gifts to appreciate the goodness of God Himself. The Christian loves God more than His gifts and, while grateful for daily mercies, counts the Lord as his portion ([Lam. 3:22–24](https://www.esv.org/Lam.%203%3A22%E2%80%9324/)). He sings, “Blessed be the Lord, who daily loadeth us with benefits, even the God of our salvation” ([Ps. 68:19](https://www.esv.org/Ps.%2068%3A19/)).

People rarely appreciate the good things they receive, for they delude themselves into thinking they deserve them. Few have learned the lesson of Jacob: “I am not worthy of the least of all the mercies, and of all the truth faithfulness, which thou hast shewed unto thy servant” ([Gen. 32:10](https://www.esv.org/Gen.%2032%3A10/)). The fact is that we deserve to be tormented in the flames of God’s wrath and to be denied even a drop of water ([Luke 16:24–25](https://www.esv.org/Luke%2016%3A24%E2%80%9325/)).

When I visited my father after his open-heart surgery, I found him crying with thankfulness. When I asked why he was so grateful, he said: “A nurse just came in and moistened my lips with an ice cube, and I couldn’t help but think of the rich man in hell who had not one drop of water to cool his tongue. I deserve his portion.”

Have you ever been truly thankful for an ice cube? May God help you and me to be truly grateful for the smallest kindnesses shown to us by Him and by each other.

**Finally**, providence grants us as Christians an assured trust in God for the unknown future. Therefore, Christians should be eternal optimists. Heidelberg Catechism 28 says that the doctrine of providence encourages us to “place our firm trust in our faithful God and Father.” Literally, the Dutch reads, “have a good expectation.” Child of God, do you have a good expectation for your future? The hand of our Father rules the world, and no one can stop His purposes from being fulfilled ([Dan. 4:35](https://www.esv.org/Dan.%204%3A35/)). “God hath not appointed us to wrath, but to obtain salvation by our Lord Jesus Christ” ([1 Thess. 5:9](https://www.esv.org/1%20Thess.%205%3A9/)). You are in the hand of the Father and the Son, and there is no safer place in the world ([John 10:28–29](https://www.esv.org/John%2010%3A28%E2%80%9329/)).

Since God rules over all things, we can rejoice now that we will one day arrive safely at our everlasting inheritance. Paul says: “If God be for us, who can be against us? He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things?” ([Rom. 8:31–32](https://www.esv.org/Rom.%208%3A31%E2%80%9332/)). Paul glories in the certain outcome of providence:

*I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (vv. 38–39)*

The doctrine of providence also implies that the opposite is true. If God is against you, who can help you? Nothing in all creation can shield you from the wrath of God if you continue in your sins and refuse to receive His Son with a broken-hearted faith. If you are an unrepentant sinner, consider that you are an enemy of the God of providence. You do not trust His fatherly sovereignty but deeply resent Him and prefer to worship gods of your own imagination. You proudly rely on yourself rather than seeking His grace in prayer. You do not have a thankful heart, though every day you breathe God’s air and drink His water. If you do not repent, then He will take all good away from you and use His sovereign power to punish you forever.

By His providence, the Lord is gathering a people to Himself out of this wicked world. The most extraordinary providence of God is His sending His Son to redeem sinners ([Gal. 4:4–5](https://www.esv.org/Gal.%204%3A4%E2%80%935/)). When evil men crucified Jesus Christ, they fulfilled the sovereign purpose of God that His Son die as a ransom for many ([Mark 10:45](https://www.esv.org/Mark%2010%3A45/); [Acts 4:27–28](https://www.esv.org/Acts%204%3A27%E2%80%9328/)). God raised Christ from the dead by His power, and now Christ sits at God’s right hand as the King of kings and Lord of lords ([Pss. 2:6; 110:1](https://www.esv.org/Pss.%202%3A6%3B%20110%3A1/" \t "_blank)).

Today, God is working through the gospel so that everyone who turns from sin, trusts in Christ, and calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved ([Rom. 10:13](https://www.esv.org/Rom.%2010%3A13/)). Could it be that God’s providence arranged for you to come across this article so that you would be converted and follow Christ? If you are not yet saved from your sin, then recognize that you are not reading these words by accident. God is speaking to you. By God’s grace, turn away from what you have formerly relied on and put your hope in the living God. And then rejoice, for God causes all things to work together for the good of those converted by His call, those who love Him ([Rom. 8:28](https://www.esv.org/Rom.%208%3A28/)). In all their afflictions on the way to glory, they can say, “We are more than conquerors” (v. 37).

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