

Dr. Gary Meadors, Knowing God's Will,

Session 13, The Role of Providence

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Welcome again to our lectures on Biblical Theology for Knowing God's Will. By the table of contents, we're in part three, Discerning Subjective Challenges. We've talked about conscience.

We were talking about the Holy Spirit when we quit last time. My time was way over. And as you can see, I'm going to finish a little something there, but you don't need the notes, okay? Because today's lecture is actually lecture 13.

Which is the role of Providence, which is GM 13. GM 13, the role of Providence. Those are the notes that you should have available as you listen to the lecture today.

But the role of the Spirit was a little longer. In fact, I need to rush that, I suppose. But my main task is to get you curious enough to do some research on your own because your convictions will have to be developed by you.

You can't just listen to me. I give you pointers and point you in certain directions. You have to do your own work and come to your own conclusions, more or less, depending on your skills and the time you have to think about it.

But when we stopped last time with the role of the Spirit, I didn't actually finish. We said we were talking about Colossians and some other texts that are so easily read in the wrong way because of Paul's religious language. But let me come to this particular slide, which you don't need to have.

Like I say, you'll know what's going on by the way that I explain things. The principles relating to the work of the Spirit and guidance. During the apostolic period, God used revelatory guidance for redemptive-historical purposes.

During the time of the Old Testament, He directly communicated, He worked with the priests, and He worked primarily with the prophets for the rest of the Old Testament. But that was an open revelatory process. Their scriptures were in process, like they were in the New Testament period, through a hundred or so.

But that was revelatory. That was not the kind of guidance we're talking about. In the current church era, God's Word is our only infallible rule.

We don't have other infallible rules. You can claim Spirit presence in all you want, but you're still not infallible because that's a subjective claim. A claim which I think can be misguided.

God's Word is our only infallible rule. Furthermore, God's Word is perfect and sufficient. Sufficient doesn't mean that it addresses everything in ongoing cultures from the time of the Bible, but it means it's sufficient to get to it with your direct implied and creative constructs.

You have a sure word to be able to manage your life. Yet, Christians differ on a number of those things because, by God's decrees, He did not intervene to bring everybody to the same conclusion. He could do that, but He didn't choose to do that.

Why He allowed the massive diversity that we have is known only to God. But that is what we have. It's the state of affairs, and so, therefore, we have to manage that, then think through it and deal with it in our own context.

Consequently, we should not look for extra-biblical revelation. I wish we were told to do that. Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could have a blue phone on our desk, pick it up, and talk directly to God, and He would tell us exactly what to do?

Even when the Bible doesn't speak to it, He still could tell us. But God didn't choose to do that. He didn't make us robots.

He made us in His image to think, feel, choose, and make decisions. He even allows us to make mistakes, so maybe we can improve our state of life by getting to the right decision. So, don't look for extra-biblical revelation.

You're asking for what God's not going to provide. God's will is not lost. It's not hidden.

God's will is found as we adjudicate life's issues through biblical teaching. So, to demand revelatory guidance is contrary to God's mode of operation, in my opinion. Okay, now let's just rehearse this.

We've been talking a lot about conscience. And you remember, in the worldview and values complex within our thinking processes, conscience is always looking at the worldview and values. And if we violate it, conscience causes pain.

The pain of, hey, I shouldn't do that. Or at least the question, am I off track here? And so, consequently, you've got that constantly going on. But now, when we talk about the Spirit, we observe that the Spirit and conscience were both witnesses.

That was their main rope. So, watch what's going to happen in a moment. Internal critical self-awareness is the domain of conscience and the domain of the Spirit.

An internal witness to the worldview and values we recognize and apply. So, at the end of the day, the Spirit also, as conscious, is watching us in relation to our thinking. And there's no way for us to make an absolute claim when we're convicted about something, where that conviction came from.

Did it come from our internal self-reflection and conscience in relation to our worldview and values? Or did it come because the Spirit puts a finger on our worldview and values? His finger. And so, that becomes a question. And so, at the end of the day, what happens is this.

The Holy Spirit and conscience operate in the mind. The Spirit, like conscience, convicts. That's the key term in reference to our worldview and values set.

Our challenge is to distinguish issues by our worldview and values. And to be aware of that internal pressure, we feel. We call it a lot of things.

I'll just call it conviction. And it really doesn't make any difference in some ways at the end of the day, whether it's our conscience convicting us or whether it's the Spirit. Both are asking us to do the same thing.

To check out our worldview and values. To do research in relation to the issues that we're thinking about. Not to take the shortcut, which is to our own feelings, which will misguide us every time.

So, you can see how conscience and Spirit are intertwined in this whole process. Distinguishing conscience and Holy Spirit. Because conscience and the Holy Spirit operate in the mind, it is impossible to distinguish the voices we claim to hear.

Now, there's going to be people who are going to say that's not true. Well, you can think that way if you like, but you find that you study the scriptures and look for evidence. But you've got to study the Bible in context.

You can't cherry-pick text from the apostles that were aimed at them, like in the Upper Room Discourse and other places. You can't cherry-pick text from the Old Testament. And many texts actually point you to scripture.

You just don't get it because you haven't read the text as carefully as you should. So, because conscience and the Spirit operate in the mind, it's impossible to distinguish the voices we claim to hear. We are ourselves talking to ourselves.

But in that mysterious aspect, the Spirit of God can convict us as well as our conscience and maybe even more. But the Spirit does not convey content, either new revelatory content or interpretive content. You can have five views laid out on a piece of paper and say and pray, Holy Spirit, tell me which is true.

Well, you've just insulted God because it doesn't work that way. God tells you to do your homework, do your best, make a decision, and then live with it until, for whatever reason, you might be rewarded or you might be called to re-value it. Consequently, we discern the voices we claim to hear on the basis of our adjudicated biblical worldview and value system.

It's always back to the transformed mind. Remember, the role of the Spirit is to convict, not to communicate content. Okay, so that would conclude this Holy Spirit's part, at least for our purposes.

We obviously have a lot more research you may need to do yourself. But now, we're going to go over the issue of providence here, and you will need your notes for this particular session, GM 13, on the role of providence. Wow, if you think of the Holy Spirit or even conscience, conscience is a piece of cake compared to some of these things, and they're all easy compared to the issue of providence.

You can make providence simple by a simplistic statement: God did it. God and relate everything to the Lord. Your mistakes, your failures, you can just ipso facto say, it's all God.

He's teaching me something. I think that's kind of flippant, to be frank. I don't want to blame God for my stupidity and my carelessness, for my lack of thinking.

So, we need to be careful about how we approach this issue of providence. Furthermore, providence is the domain where the problem of evil is treated in literature and ethics, and the role of providence is in that. And that's one of the most challenging domains in theology.

So, I'm just going to brush providence here, trying to get a happy medium between the extremes and have us think about some big pictures. This will be a little bit brief, but I think it's all we can do here. The controversy over the continuum of sovereignty.

Remember, sovereign is a noun, and God is sovereign. That's the kind of God that he is. Sovereignty, the sovereignty of God, puts it more in an adverbial domain, which is how God acts.

The word providence really covers the actions of God, even though we turn sovereign into the adverbial idea and describe them the same way. And that's how I like to keep them separated. We have a sovereign God, and providence is his activity.

Now, there's a continuum of the classical view of sovereignty, or providence, I should say, and the open theism view, which came on the scene and, I'm sure has ancient

roots, but we're at the recent ones. In the high view of the issue of providence, we saw the classical view of Augustine, Calvin, Johnathan Edwards, and a host of others. They assert God knows all, God controls all.

And as I would assert a little bit in there, free will is bound by nature. So freedom is even restricted, but it's restricted by an issue of nature. A low view, which is very prominent today in many circles.

A great boy named John Saunders was the main proponent of what we call open theism. I am not an expert on open theism. I'm not even a novice on open theism.

I'm of the classical view. They view humanity as totally free, and they have statements about God that puzzle me. God does not know all things in advance, but he deals with them with his wisdom as they occur.

That's part of protecting, I guess, human freedom. Well, I'm not going to get into that. You can look it up and deal with it.

So we've got the high view, the low view. I'm going to take the high road, the classical view and God does know, God does control, but we have a lot of challenges. It's easier to answer the challenges from the low-view standpoint.

That's probably what makes it wrong, in my opinion, because the easy answers are never the right answers, to be frank. The high view on the classical view is what I would suggest. One of the best books I've seen that actually addresses the issues of providence is this one by Spiegel, *Benefits of Providence, and A New Look at Divine Sovereignty* by Crossway.

I'll give you a bibliography in the notes on this, on providence, but that's a place to go. John Piper recently wrote a very large book on providence, but in my opinion, what Piper has done is illustrate providence, not necessarily explain the more difficult areas. He's given us verses, narratives, and paradigms about providence, but other books deal much more with the philosophical and theological challenges of that domain.

Providence is God's irresistible actions. I memorized the verse from Job 42,2 in the American Standard Version many years ago. It's one of my life verses, and that is, Job said, I know that thou canst do all things and that no purpose of thine can be restrained.

You just hear the old language there. I know thou canst do all things and that no purpose of thine can be restrained. Providence is not our domain.

We experience it, we observe it, usually after the fact, whatever it is. There's nothing outside God's control. If a meteor hit the earth and did great damage and destruction, that would still be under God's providence and be negative providence for the inhabitants of the earth, but it didn't take God by surprise.

Maybe God could have intervened, but he chose not to. It's only in the wisdom of God that we can explain certain major negatives, particularly in the physical domain, whether it be a scholar. I've known some scholars who died young in life, right in their prime.

Man, we were just waiting for the second volume, as it were, and they died. And they died accidental deaths, most of the time, sometimes a disease. Why didn't God spare them? I mean, they were making valuable, very valuable contradictions.

Well, God typically does not choose to intervene in life. Life goes, but he doesn't choose to intervene. That's his norm.

We've seen, we all see that all the time. Even John the baptizer died when Jesus was walking on earth a few miles away, and Jesus didn't intervene. John's the greatest man born of woman, according to what Jesus said in the book of Luke, and yet he didn't intervene.

So, we've got to get used to the fact that the things in life that we experience, particularly, we will focus, of course, on the negative of this. Underemployed, underpaid, cancer, all manner of diseases. We have good friends who have MS, and Lou Gehrig's disease has struck a number of major Christian leaders that we know.

And so, consequently, what do you do about that? Well, you have to accept the fact that that is what I've called negative providence. The pain, the physical evil, the tsunamis in the Pacific, the hurricanes where I live in Florida, the snow in the north, um, drunks who run over babies, um, that's a negative providence. And you get into a lot of issues.

We talked about this earlier when I read the Creed to you, which talked about God, including in his decree providence, sovereign decree, and even the secondary causes. And that's a major issue that you'll have to study in philosophy and theology. We are not treating it here, but it is absolutely crucial to this domain.

All right. Deuteronomy 29:29. The secret things belong unto Jehovah our God.

That's the echo of the ASV. But the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law. Everything we've been talking about together there, isn't it? God's sovereignty isn't revealed to us, but his moral will and the words of the law are, and that is our domain of responsibility.

Not only that, to do, not find, do all the things of the law. Job 42, too, as I mentioned, and Isaiah 46, 10, but Deuteronomy 29, 29 is a very important text. Amos 3, 7, surely the Lord Jehovah, that would be the Lord, would do nothing except he reveal his secret unto his servants, the prophets.

Now, nothing would relate to the domain of humanity. There are things that God has not yet revealed to us. He didn't reveal the idea of the ecclesia, the church, until we get into the New Testament.

They were still struggling with some of those things until the revelation came, even though some say that they can see semblances of it, even in the Old Testament. He reveals his secret unto his servants, the prophets in the Old Testament, which Amos has warned, and to the apostles and prophets, particularly the apostles in the New Testament. Ephesians 1:3, 13 to 14.

By the way, one of the things you won't see in modern Bibles is the real sentence. To see the real sentence, you almost need to look at an original language text like the Greek New Testament. The older versions, like the ASV, many times retain the full sentence, which gets very long and sometimes, for modern English, awkward.

But they have respect for that, and they retain it. But anyway, in Ephesians 1:3 to 14, that's 11 verses, one sentence. Verse 5 says, having foreordained unto us, foreordained us unto adoption, making known unto us the mystery of his will, that is that we have become his children, foreordained according to the purpose of him.

Now, purpose touches on sovereignty, doesn't it? Of him who works all things after the counsel of his will. Huge statement. Some have said that Ephesians contains more of Paul, even though it's shorter than even the Book of Romans.

So, it's a very important book to study. So, the providence of God is our sovereign God working out things in history. Sometimes good, sometimes bad.

And the problem of evil comes into this. The problem of evil is we have an all-good God who is all-powerful, and yet evil happens. So, the atheist would say either he's not all good, or he's not all-powerful, or it wouldn't be this way.

Well, that's your opinion. That's not God's opinion. The evil in life, God will say, permits in that sense and has allowed in his decree to happen for purposes that we don't know.

I suppose it's like the fellow who was born blind. Why is he blind? Was it his parents' fault or his? And Jesus said it was to glorify God and his healing. And so, we can't

jump on to conclusions too quickly about the negative things of life as well as the positive.

Providence described. The description of God's secret actions is affirmed in the Bible. We've seen texts here and there.

Access to God's secret actions is not our business. You're not to ask God, Lord, what's going to happen to me two weeks from now? We're never, never encouraged or told or anything to do that. We are not.

God isn't sitting up in heaven waiting to tell us things. If you would change your life, if you knew what the future is, then you're not living right now. Remember Paul and the Ephesian elders? They said you're going to go to Jerusalem.

You're going to be taken captive by the Romans. Paul says I don't care because I am determined in my own life that it is God's will for me to go there. So I'm going.

Knowing the future didn't change Paul's mind. So, knowing the future is overrated. You're probably better off not to know it.

The description of God's secret actions is affirmed. Access to God's secret actions is not our business. We are recipients.

Consequently, we may see the results in our lifetime, but we have no real authority to declare the reality of his actions because he didn't tell us. What God hasn't revealed, we don't really know. We could guess, and we could wonder why COVID-19 made such an impact on humanity. Why did the tsunami hit the Pacific Islands and kill so many people? Why did the hurricanes, three of them back to back, come up through Florida? Have we been disobedient, and that was a judgment? I think when people make those kinds of statements, they're overstepping boundaries.

We can't describe the actions in our world, and we can't really claim to know the correlation between the nature that God has created and himself and what he might choose to do. We see both things happening in the Bible, particularly in the Old Testament and the narratives, but we don't have that kind of insight. We're not given that, and we're not told to deal with it.

Consequently, we may see the results but have no real authority to declare the reality of his actions. In one sense, God is behind everything. In another, God uses many means to achieve his ends.

This is God's business. That is his orchestration of life. It is not for us to figure it out.

This is God's business, and it's not for us to figure it out. Joni, I can't remember her last name, who had a diving accident and was paraplegic her whole life. Yet, she turned that into a career as a spokesman for God's grace.

In spite of that tragedy, people have done that on many occasions. Some get recognition and notoriety because of it. Others plow on and live a painful, difficult life as a result of negative providence.

Both negative and positive are in God's world. So, if you are a recipient of more positive providence in life, you should thank God for that fact. God guides every event in human history, and he is coordinating all aspects of the cosmos toward a glorious end.

All right. Implications of Providence. We may assume God is always at work.

Now, that's not always easy to do. If you're lying in a... I had a friend in this situation. He had a car wreck.

He was pinned in his vehicle. He could smell gasoline. His eyeball was lying on his cheek.

They would pop out under a lot of pressure, and he couldn't do anything. He was helpless. The only verse that would come to his mind at that time was, in all things, rejoice.

Well, that's good Christian maturity, but it didn't solve his problems. He came out okay. But the fact is that we have to just assume God is always at work.

He just doesn't intervene in secondary causes, necessarily, to deliver us from pain. He did for his three friends of Daniel. But you jump in a fiery furnace.

You will not see the same results. We cannot declare authoritatively his secret work. We can observe it.

We can wonder. But you cannot make declarations. But we can rest in his arms.

God is our shepherd king. You know, in the Old Testament, the Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. Shepherd, in the Old Testament, Ancient Near Eastern context, was a metaphor for the king.

So, when it says God, the Lord is my shepherd, the Lord is my king and brings on other aspects of his kingship. But God is our shepherd king with all the details of these metaphors. That's a place to rest.

We like to figure things out as human beings. We want to know. We want to know particularly.

I am very much that way. I don't want generalities. I want particularity.

And yet, God hasn't always chosen to do that for us. We are to focus on God's revealed will, his word. We are judged on the basis of how we deal with that.

I believe that very deeply. When we stand before Jesus, one of the biggest issues is going to be, how did you treat the message I left you? Did you live by it, or did you ignore it? I think I want to be at the end of that line because I know that's going to be a day that's not going to be really glorious for most of us. Declaring God's sovereign providence is easy.

To say, oh, that's God's will. That's very easy to do. Explaining the negativity and the destruction, the horror of some of those events and their implications requires more than most of us can muster.

But it certainly requires serious reading and research just to touch the hymn of God's providence. So, that's a major Christian worldview piece, is this issue of the providence of God. Some would say, well, the Christians have invented that so that they don't have to be embarrassed by a God who doesn't take care of them.

Well, we have other explanations, don't we? God has his plan. He will fulfill his plan in due time. And we'll see it all on the other side.

That's not pie in the sky. That's reality as it is now. Some classic issues for reflection.

The task of this class is to focus on God's revealed will. We cannot probe the deeper issues of providence and sovereignty here. This is the work of philosophic theology.

Our task has been to focus on his word, to learn better ways to get to his word, not to just say, oh, that's the spiritually expedient thing to do. That is so lame in relation to the seriousness of what it means to make some decisions in life. We got the church as a What is the church's view about war? What is the church's view about gender, particularly transgender? What is the church's view about sexuality? And we've seen the church failing at many levels in some of those areas as well.

So that's the task of some very deep thinking domains. Issues that forever challenge the problem of evil. I've got behind me here, you can't see because of the TV, it's here temporarily to do these lectures.

I have a shelf full of books on providence and the problems of evil. And I'm reading, and I still shake my head. I can understand, I can't comprehend.

That's an important distinction. I get tired of saying, oh, I can't comprehend the Trinity. Well, what do you think you can't do? You can't? No, you can't.

That's silly. Can you understand it? Understanding means taking the assertions by implication, particularly in scripture concerning Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. I don't have to comprehend it, but I can understand it.

I can understand a lot of things that I do not comprehend. There's a big difference between understanding and comprehension. The problem of evil, the challenge of unanswered prayer.

We'll talk a little bit about that. I don't have all the answers by any stretch. Guys, I have more texts that I haven't explained in some of those domains than I have.

So do all of my colleagues. So, I'm in good company. We cannot probe the deeper issues of providence and sovereignty.

That task is forever a challenge to all of us. So, the problem of evil, the challenge of unanswered prayer, the seeming silence of God. Sir Robert Anderson, many centuries ago, wrote a book about the silence of God.

And your prayers seem like they go up and hit the ceiling and bounce right back in your face. But the fact is that God is still on his throne—our puzzlement over life's reality.

We'll never figure it out, so give up. Surrender. Job couldn't figure it out.

He, I can't imagine. Job was a better man than I am, much better. How did he fare? Well, he lost it all.

He lost it all, but he didn't lose his integrity with God. So, providence is a challenge. You'll have to start studying it.

I can't, I have no easy way to give you all the end of it—conclusions for now. The current study affirms the classical view of God's sovereignty and sovereign providence.

Your current teacher uses positive providence and negative providence to describe life without trying to explain causality. That's what really challenges me. The study of sovereign providence will challenge your deepest levels of thinking.

This is a deep subject in terms of being honest, not being what we call theodicying. Theodicying is arguing in a way that protects God. Who am I to protect God? We

have to ask these questions honestly and chase them, and that's the best that we can do.

Resources, I won't go through these. You can see those in the notes, and to your ability to retrieve them, I would highly recommend the Spiegel volume to start with. The frame is always very good, too.

So that's the issue of sovereignty. Finally, a lecture within some smaller time limits, even though we had it on with the Holy Spirit. Okay, our next lecture, which will be somewhat short, too, will be on prayer and God's will.

And we'll talk about that briefly, and I'll give you more to think about and more questions I haven't answered either. So, you have a good day. God bless you.

And wherever you are, if you're hurting, and if you're in serious jeopardy in some far-flung part of the world, we pray that God will be with you and will help you through the hard times that you face. Thank you.