

Chapter X: Providence

Since God not only created the world but also upholds it, we naturally pass from the doctrine of creation to that of divine providence. This may be defined as that work of God in which He preserves all His creatures, is active in all that happens in the world, and directs all things to their appointed end. It includes three elements, of which the first pertains primarily to the being, the second to the activity, and the third to the purpose of all things.

1. The Elements of Divine Providence

We distinguish three elements:

a. Divine preservation. This is that continuous work of God by which He upholds all things. While the world has a distinct existence and is not a part of God, it nevertheless has the ground of its continued existence in God and not in itself. It endures through a continued exercise of divine power by which all things are maintained in being and action. This doctrine is taught in the following passages: Ps. 136:25; 145:15; Neh. 9:6; Acts 17:28; Col. 1:17; Heb. 1:3.

b. Divine concurrence. This may be defined as that work of God by which He co-operates with all His creatures and causes them to act precisely as they do. It implies that there are real secondary causes in the world, such as the powers of nature and the will of man, and asserts that these do not work independently of God. God works in every act of His creatures, not only in their good but also in their evil acts. He stimulates them to action, accompanies their action at every moment, and makes this action effective. However, we should never think of God and man as equal causes; the former is the primary, and the latter only a secondary cause. Neither should we conceive of them as each doing a part of the work like a team of horses. The same deed is in its entirety both a deed of God and a deed of man. Moreover, we should guard against the idea that this co-operation makes God responsible for man's sinful deeds. This doctrine is based on Scripture, Deut. 8:18; Ps. 104:20, 21, 30; Amos 3:6; Matt. 5:45; 10:29; Acts 14:17; Phil. 2:13.

c. Divine government. This is the continued activity of God whereby He rules all things so that they answer to the purpose of their existence. God is represented as King of the universe both in the Old and in the New Testament. He adapts His rule to the nature of the creatures which He governs; His government of the physical world differs from that of the spiritual world. It is universal, Ps. 103:19; Dan, 4:34, 35, includes the most insignificant things, Matt. 10:29-31, and that which is seemingly accidental, Prov. 16:33, and bears on both the good and the evil deeds of man, Phil. 2:18; Gen. 50:20; Acts 14:16.

2. Misconceptions of Divine Providence

In the doctrine of providence we should guard against two misconceptions:

a. The Deistic conception. This is to the effect that God's concern with the world is of the most general nature. He created the world, established its laws, set it in motion, and then withdrew from it. He wound it up like a clock, and now lets it run off. It is only when something goes wrong that He interferes with its regular operation. God, is only a God afar off.

b. The Pantheistic conception. Pantheism does not recognize the distinction between God and the world. It identifies the two, and therefore leaves no room for providence in the proper sense of the word. There are, strictly speaking, no such things as secondary causes. God is the direct author of all that transpires in the world. Even the acts which we ascribe to man as really acts of God. God is only a God that is near, and not a God afar off.

3. Extraordinary Providences or Miracles

We distinguish between general and special providences, and among the latter the miracles occupy an important place. A miracle is a supernatural work of God, that is a work which is accomplished without the mediation of secondary causes. If God sometimes apparently uses secondary causes in the production of miracles, He employs them in an unusual way, so that the work is after all supernatural. Some regard miracles as impossible, because they involve a violation of the laws of nature. But this is a mistake. The so-called laws of nature merely represent God's usual method of working.

And the fact that God generally works according to a definite order does not mean that He cannot depart from this order, and cannot without violating or disturbing it bring about unusual results. Even man can lift up his hand and throw a ball into the air in spite of the law of gravitation and without in any way disturbing its operation. Surely, this is not impossible for the omnipotent God. The miracles of the Bible are means of revelation. Num. 16:28; Jer. 32:20; John 2:11; 5:36.

To memorize. Passages referring to:

a. Preservation:

Ps. 36:6b. "Jehovah, thou preserves man and beast."

Neh. 9:6. "Thou art Jehovah, even thou alone; thou hast made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth and all things that are thereon, the seas all that is in them, and thou preserves them all."

Col. 1:17. "And He is before all things, and in Him all things consist."

b. Concurrence:

Deut. 8:18a. "But thou shalt remember Jehovah thy God, for it is He that giveth thee power to get wealth."

Amos 3:6. "Shall the trumpet be blown in a city, and the people be not afraid? shall evil befall a city, and Jehovah hath not done it?"

Phil. 2:13. "For it is God who works in you both to will and to work, for His good pleasure."

c. Government:

Ps. 108:19. "Jehovah hath established His throne in the heavens; and His Kingdom rules over all."

Dan. 4:3b. "His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and His dominion is from generation to generation."

1 Tim. 6:15. "Which in its own times He shall show, who is the blessed and only Potentate, the King of kings, and Lord of lords."

d. Miracles and their design:

Ex. 16:11. "Who is like unto Thee, Jehovah, among the gods? Who is like Thee glorious in holiness, fearful in praises, doing wonders?"

Ps. 72:18. "Blessed be Jehovah God, the God of Israel, who alone does wondrous things."

Mark 2:10. "But that ye may know that the Son of man hath power on earth to forgive sins, He saith to the sick of the palsy, I say unto thee, Arise, and take up thy bed, and go thy way into thy house."

John 2:11. "This beginning of miracles did Jesus in Cana of Galilee, and manifested forth His glory; and His disciples believed on Him."

For Further Study:

a. Name some examples of special providences. Cf. Deut. 2:7; 1 Kings 17:6, 16; 2 Kings 4:6; Matt. 14:20.

b. How should belief in divine providence affect our cares? Isa. 41:10; Matt. 6:32; Luke 12:7; Phil. 4:6, 7; 1 Pet. 5:7.

c. Name some of the blessings of providence. Cf. Isa. 25:4; Ps. 121:4; Luke 12:7; Deut. 33:28; Ps. 37:28; 2 Tim. 4:18.

Questions for Review:

1. How is the doctrine of providence related to that of creations?

2. What is divine providence?

3. What is the difference between general and special providence?
4. What are the objects of divine providence?
5. What are the three elements of providence, and how do they differ?
6. How must we conceive of the divine concurrence?
7. How far does the divine government extend?
8. What is a miracle, and what purpose do the scriptural miracles serve?
9. Why do some consider miracles impossible?