

CHAPTER FIVE: DIVINE PROVIDENCE

Definition of Divine Providence

1. God who, in infinite power and wisdom, has created all things, upholds, directs, controls and governs them, both animate and inanimate, great and small, by a providence supremely wise and holy, and in accordance with His infallible foreknowledge and the free and immutable decisions of His will. He fulfils the purposes for which He created them, so that His wisdom, power and justice, together with His infinite goodness and mercy, might be praised and glorified.

(a) The **Author** of providence: the God of infinite power and wisdom who created all things (Nehemiah 9:6).

(b) The **Definition** of providence: “upholds, directs, controls and governs” (see Daniel 4:35, Hebrews 1:3).

○ Negatively, God preserves His creation, otherwise it would turn into chaos.

○ Positively, God governs His creation, by making sure that His will is done.

Providence ought to be tied with the Decrees of God – what God has decreed in eternity comes to pass in time by His works of providence (Ephesians 1:11).

(c) The **Objects** of providence: “all things ... both animate and inanimate, great and small.”

○ Inanimate objects such as the sun (Joshua 10:12-14), the star over Bethlehem (Matthew 2:2,9,10), storms (Luke 8:22-25), and vegetation (Psalm 104:14).

○ Animate objects such as ravens that fed Elijah (1 Kings 17:4,6), Balaam’s ass (Numbers 22:28), mouths of lions (Daniel 6:22), fish (Jonah 1:17, Luke 5:2-9), the heart of even kings (Proverbs 21:1), and the sinful actions of men (2 Samuel 16:10, Acts 4:27-28).

(d) The **Harmony** of providence with creation: “He fulfils the purposes for which He created them.” God has a plan for everything He created, and by His providence that plan comes to pass. For example, the sun and the moon to give light on the earth (Genesis 1:14-18).

(e) The **Goal** of providence: “His wisdom, power and justice, together with His infinite goodness and mercy, might be praised and glorified.” God’s glory is the goal of all that He does (Romans 11:36). It is by His wisdom that all the events of providence work together to glorify Him. This can only be accomplished because He has the power to do what He wants, yet everyone is treated justly according to what they deserve; those who are saved are monuments of His goodness and mercy.

The Relationship of Providence to the Use of Means

2. *Nothing happens by chance or outside the sphere of God's providence. As God is the First Cause of all events, they happen immutably and infallibly according to His foreknowledge and decree, to which they stand related.*

Yet by His providence God so controls them, that second causes, operating either as fixed laws, or freely, or in dependence upon other causes, play their part in bringing them about.

3. *Ordinarily, in His providence, God makes use of means; yet He is free to work without them, to give them efficacy above what they normally possess, and even to work contrary to them, at His pleasure.*

(a) Paragraph 2, lines 1-3 teach that all events, without exception, are included in God's providence. Whatever God has purposed must come to pass (see Psalm 33:11, Lamentations 2:17). This might appear that we are only like toys that God plays with; rather it shows that the very means God has ordained (including what we do) make a difference and are thus important.

(b) Paragraph 2, lines 4-5 teach that these means themselves are under the providential control of God. Many events which are done by men and seem unrelated yet produce a result predetermined by God. Ruth was a gift of the Lord to Boaz (Proverbs 19:14), yet she met him by 'chance' (Ruth 2:3). Herod, Pontius Pilate, the Gentiles and the Jews all did what they wanted with Jesus yet it brought about the plan God had "predestined to take place" (Acts 4:27-28). This should teach us 3 things:

1. To cease from anxiety and complaining. Everything is under God's control so that to be anxious is to doubt God, and to complain is to accuse God.
2. To reject the idea that what we do makes no difference (use of means). It does make a difference because God has ordained the use of means. For example, although victory in war has been predetermined by God (Proverbs 21:31), I must prepare my equipment and seek wise guidance (20:18).
3. To avoid the presumption that God will do what He has said without the use of means. We cannot expect God to save our loved ones if we do not pray for them. No one can be saved except through repentance and faith.

(c) Paragraph 3 teaches that God is free to work apart from means if He wants to. We can define such works as 'miracles'.

God worked *without* means in the conception of Christ without a father (Luke 1:34-35).

God worked *above* means when Isaac was conceived by such old parents (Romans 4:19-21).

God worked *against* means when the bush was not burned (Exodus 3:2-3), the iron floated (2 Kings 6:6), and the furnace did not burn His servants (Daniel 3:27).

But it is a presumption to expect a miracle when the means are at hand as, for example, when medicine is not used in sickness. To demand a miracle is to tempt God (Matthew 4:5-7).

The Relation of Providence to the Fact of Sin

4. *God's almighty power, unsearchable wisdom, and infinite goodness are so far-reaching and all-pervading, that both the fall of the first man into sin, and all other sinful actions of angels and men, proceed according to His sovereign purposes. It is not that He gives His bare permission, for in a variety of ways He wisely and powerfully limits, orders and governs sinful actions, so that they effect His holy designs. Yet the sinfulness involved in the actions proceeds only from angels and men and not from God, who, being most holy and righteous, neither is nor can be the author or approver of sin.*

5. *God, who is most wise, righteous and gracious, frequently allows His own people to fall for a time into a variety of temptations, and to experience the sinfulness of their own hearts. This He does in order to chastise them for sins which they have committed, or to teach them humility by revealing to them the hidden strength of evil and deceitfulness remaining in their hearts. His purpose is also to cause them to realize their need to depend fully and at all times upon Himself, and to help them guard against sin in the future. In these and other ways His just and holy purposes are worked out, so that all that happens to His elect ones is by His appointment, for His glory, and for their good.*

6. *God, as a righteous judge, deals otherwise with the wicked and ungodly men. He awards them blindness and hardness of heart for their sins. He withholds from them the grace which might have enlightened their minds and exercised their hearts, and in some cases recalls the gifts He had bestowed on them. Also, He sets them in situations which their evil hearts seize upon as opportunities for sin. In other words, He abandons them to their own innate corruptions, to the temptations of the world, and to the power of Satan, with the consequence that they harden themselves by the use of the very means which God employs for softening the hearts of others.*

(a) **Sin in general** (paragraph 4). There is no attempt made to explain the origin of sin. This section simply states the relationship of providence to sin as it is revealed in Scripture.

1. God not only permits, but actually directs and controls sinful acts. If it is said that God 'permits' then he permits only because it is according to His purpose, as it has been predetermined (see Genesis 45:4-5, 2 Samuel 24:1, Acts 2:23, 4:27-28).
2. God is not thereby the author or approver of sin (James 1:13-14). This is obvious, but it must not be used to cancel the truth under no. 1, as both are clearly revealed in Scripture.

(b) **Sin in Christians** (paragraph 5). Four purposes are listed in this section under the general heading of God allowing His people "to experience the sinfulness of their own hearts".

1. "to chastise them for their sins which they have committed" – so with David when he numbered the people, as if victory in battle depended on numbers in the army and not on the Lord (2 Samuel 24:1 & 1 Chronicles 21:1).
2. "to teach them humility by revealing to them the hidden strength of evil and deceitfulness remaining in their hearts" – so with Hezekiah who proudly boasted before the Babylonians of the riches he had (2 Chronicles 32:24-25,31); God also sent Paul "a thorn in the flesh..., a messenger of Satan" to keep him from pride (2 Corinthians 12:7).

3. “to realize their need to depend fully and at all times upon Himself” – so Peter, James and John that they might see the need to watch and pray so they might not enter into temptation (Mark 14:38,72).
4. “to help them guard against sin in the future” – so the experience of the Psalmist when he was envious of the wicked (Psalm 73).

These are all examples of how God works for good in all things towards His people who love Him (Romans 8:28).

(c) **Sin in the ungodly** (paragraph 6). God often hardens men for their previous sins (Romans 9:18, see also John 12:39-40, Acts 28:26-27, Romans 1:24-28, 11:7-10, 1 Peter 2:7-8). He does this, not by any wicked influence, but

- by withholding His grace (Deuteronomy 29:4), which He is free to give or withhold as He wants;
- by letting them continue in their lusts (Romans 1:24,26,28);
- by exposing them, in His providence to such circumstances that they will harden themselves (Deuteronomy 2:30).

All this God does as “a righteous judge”. How foolish sinners are to think that they can change at any time. They reckon without the just punishment of their sins in this life, if God so chooses.

The Relation of Providence to the Care of the Church

7. God’s general providence reaches out to all creatures, but in a very special way it is directed to the care of His church. All things are controlled providentially for the good of the church.

Who, if anyone, enjoys God’s special care? Is it the famous, the great, the political leaders, the Jews? No! It is the church. In what special place does God exercise this special care? Is it Jerusalem where the temple was? Is it Rome at the Vatican? Is it Mecca? No! It is where we, the church, are. It is for the sake of the church that everything in life happens (Ephesians 1:22, see also Romans 8:28, 1 Timothy 4:10). We must be encouraged by this even if we cannot see at present how God is working it out for good.