

Providence: Is God in Control?

We live in a world full of pain, sorrow, abuse, and evil. Critics of Christianity often appeal to that fact to disprove the existence of God. They claim that a good God would not do evil, and a powerful God would prevent evil. Since evil happens, God must not be good or powerful. Perhaps he does not even exist.

Others who believe in God try to explain the existence of evil by asserting that God is good but not powerful. For example, Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote a book in 1981 titled *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. In that book, he claims that God is good and is doing his best, but he's not powerful enough to stop evil from happening. Even God himself cannot stop the evil actions of wicked people or the terrible results of natural disasters.

Many who would claim to believe in God attribute evil or chaos to luck, chance, random actions, and fate. In their imagination, God sees these things happening, but he can't do anything about it. He's unable or unwilling to stop evil.

The question I want to consider today is, Is God in control? In the face of such evil and suffering in our world, can we still believe that God is in control of all things? Or would it be better to believe that God is good but not all-powerful? Maybe it would be easier to believe in God if we also believe that God is *not* really in control of all things. When evil or disasters happen, we can say that God has nothing to do with it or that God could not prevent it.

I remember hearing a pastor say that after the 9/11 attacks. That horrendous event was the work of Satan and of evil people, but God had nothing to do with it.

Does the Bible allow us to believe that? Do we believe that anything that happens is outside God's control? Is God unable to intervene in human affairs? Do things happen in this universe without God's participation? Are random chance and luck real forces in the world?

I want to assert very clearly that the Bible teaches God's complete control over all created things, including human beings and their activities. There is nothing outside of the purview of God's control. In answering the question, Is God in control? We respond with a resounding "Yes, he is."

And we answer that way because we believe in God's providence. Today I'd like to consider what the Bible teaches about providence.

- I. Providence defined
 - A. A couple of wrong definitions

1. Some wrongly define providence as God's control of all things insuring that good things happen to me. When good things happen, that's God's providence.

For example, if you find a \$5 bill on the sidewalk, that's God's providence. If you narrowly escape an accident or a disaster, that's God's providence. If you get a promotion at work, that's God's providence.

In other words, God's providence covers only good things. When someone has an accident or a disaster happens, that's not God's providence.

Attributing only good things to God's providence is a misunderstanding of the concept. God's providence covers more than good things.

2. Another faulty definition of providence would be to assert that God intervenes only occasionally in our lives but for the most part is not involved. God mostly leaves us alone and gets involved directly only at certain points in our lives. Most of the time, we are in control of our own lives, we are masters of our own fates.

This view would say that God is like a cosmic lifeguard—he's watching out for us all the time, but he mostly leaves us alone until we need him to jump in and rescue us. When God directly intervenes in our lives, that's providence.

Both of these definitions are faulty. These definitions just do not square with the biblical teaching on the issue.

B. Accurate definitions of God's providence

1. Various texts that teach about God's providence—all of these passages assert God's control over the entire creation.

Isaiah 46:10–11 [God declares] the end from the beginning, And from ancient times things that are not yet done, Saying, 'My counsel shall stand, And I will do all My pleasure,'¹¹ ... Indeed I have spoken it; I will also bring it to pass. I have purposed it; I will also do it.

Psalms 135:6 Whatever the LORD pleases He does, In heaven and in earth, In the seas and in all deep places.

Nehemiah 9:6 You alone are the Lord; You have made heaven, The heaven of heavens, with all their host, The earth and everything on it, The seas and all that is in them, And You preserve them all. The host of heaven worships You.

Dan 4:35 [God] does according to His will in the army of heaven And among the inhabitants of the earth. No one can restrain His hand Or say to Him, “What have You done?”

Matthew 10:29–31 Are not two sparrows sold for a copper coin? And not one of them falls to the ground apart from your Father’s will. ³⁰ But the very hairs of your head are all numbered.

Acts 17:26 He has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their preappointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings,

Ephesians 1:11 In Him also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestined according to the purpose of Him who works all things according to the counsel of His will,

Colossians 1:17 He is before all things, and in Him all things consist.

Hebrews 1:3 [he upholds] all things by the word of His power,

2. Based on these and many other similar texts, let’s consider several accurate definitions of God’s providence from various writers¹
 - a) Many centuries ago, Augustine said, “Nothing, therefore, happens unless the Omnipotent wills it to happen: he either permits it to happen, or he brings it about himself.”
 - b) Theologian A. H. Strong said,
Christ is the originator and upholder of the universe.... In him it consists, or holds together, from hour to hour. The steady will of Christ constitutes the law of the universe....

¹ Quotes from Jerry Bridges, *Trusting God* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1988), 26.

- c) Well-known theologian J.I. Packer defines providence as, “The unceasing activity of the Creator whereby, in overflowing bounty and goodwill, He upholds His creatures in ordered existence, guides and governs all events, circumstances, and free acts of angels and men, and directs everything to its appointed goal, for His own glory.”
- d) Jerry Bridges: God’s providence is His constant care for and His absolute rule over all His creation for His own glory and the good of His people.
- e) The 1689 London Baptist Confession puts it this way: God the good Creator of all things, in His infinite power and wisdom does **uphold, direct, dispose, and govern** all creatures and things, from the greatest even to the least, by His most wise and holy providence, to the end for the which they were created,
- f) Note that all of these definitions assert that God is in control of all things all the time. His care and involvement are constant; he is currently directing and superintending all things. His providence covers all of creation at all times in all conditions.

3. Other implications of God’s providence; what does providence imply?

- a) Providence implies that even the smallest details are under God’s providential care. Not even the smallest molecule or virus escape God’s care and control. Not even a sparrow falls to the ground outside of God’s knowledge.

One of my professors used to say that there was not one maverick molecule in the whole universe. God governs and superintends all of it.

- b) Providence implies that God has a purpose or an objective for all events—God is controlling all things for his own glory and for the good of his people. God is working in our lives to conform us to the image of his son (Rom 8:29). And God is moving all things toward their pre-ordained goal.

We can be assured that God has a good purpose in whatever he allows or causes. We may not be able to see that good, but we can have faith that there is a good purpose for it.

E.g., Gen 50:20

- c) Likewise, providence implies that God has a plan for us. Every part of our existence, our lives, and even the places of our residence is an aspect of God's providential plan for us.
- d) Providence implies that all things are dependent on God for their existence. Only God is truly independent; all created things exist because God created them and sustains them. Col 1:17—even atoms and molecules hold together because of the power of God.
- e) Here's the hard part: Providence includes both the good and the bad, both beneficial and painful events.

Job 1:21 ... The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; Blessed be the name of the LORD.

Job 2:10 ... Shall we indeed accept good from God, and shall we not accept adversity (צָרָה)? ...

Job 12:9f Who among all these does not know That the hand of the LORD has done this, ...14 If He breaks [a thing] down, it cannot be rebuilt; [If] He imprisons a man, there can be no release. 15 If He withholds the waters, they dry up; [If] He sends them out, they overwhelm the earth. ... The deceived and the deceiver [are] His. ... 19 He leads princes away plundered, And overthrows the mighty. ... 23 He makes nations great, and destroys them; He enlarges nations, and guides them.

Ex 4:11 And the LORD said unto [Moses], Who hath made man s mouth? or who maketh the dumb, or deaf, or the seeing, or the blind? have not I the LORD?

- f) Providence implies that from the greatest to the smallest—from galaxies to quarks—all creation exists because God wills it to be so.

Quote: Every breath we breathe is a gift from God, every bite of food we eat is given to us from His hand, every day we live is determined by Him. He has not left us to our own devices, or the whims of nature, or the [malicious] acts of other people. No! He constantly sustains, provides for and cares for us every moment of every day.² ... Nothing is so small or trivial as to escape the attention of God's sovereign control; nothing is so great as to be beyond His power to control it.³

- g) What does providence *not* mean?
- (1) Providence is not a direct imposition of God's miraculous power.
 - (a) Providence operates through the normal, natural processes of life, not through miraculous actions. Providence operates in the background; we often don't even notice it. God is superintending or governing all things usually through natural processes.

E.g., we all arrived here today through the providence of God. We got in our cars and drove to church. This was not a miracle, not a direct intervention of God into the natural world. It was providential.
 - (b) When God intervenes directly, we call it a miracle, not providence. Providence is God's normal way of superintending things through the regular, natural laws of the universe.
 - (2) Providence does not imply that God is the author of evil or sin.
 - (a) God is in control of all things, but he never violates his own moral standards or tempts anyone to evil. He never entices or solicits us to commit sin.

² Jerry Bridges, *Trusting God* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1988), 27.

³ Jerry Bridges, *Trusting God* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1988), 40.

Jas 1:13 *Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God: for God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth he any man:*

- (b) God is able to employ the evil activities of wicked men without himself being the author of evil or coercing anyone to sin.

E.g., Ac 2:23 *[Jesus], being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain:*

Ac 4:27-28 *For of a truth against thy holy child Jesus, whom thou hast anointed, both Herod, and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles, and the people of Israel, were gathered together, For to do whatsoever thy hand and thy counsel determined before to be done.*

God often works through “secondary causes.” Evil people do the wicked things they want to do, yet God uses their evil actions for his own good purposes. Cf. Gen 50:20; Judas.

Trans: Hopefully we now have a better idea of what providence is. Providence is God’s work of upholding, directing, disposing and governing all things—both good and bad—to the purpose for which they were created.

II. Providence denied

Sadly, many people today deny God’s providence.

A. How do people explain the events of life?

1. Some people substitute themselves for God. They claim to be the masters of their own fate, the captains of their own destiny. E.g., famous poem *Invictus*

*Out of the night that covers me, Black as the Pit from pole to pole, I thank whatever gods that be for my unconquerable soul. In the **fell clutch of circumstance**, I have not winced nor cried aloud; Under **the bludgeoning of chance**, my head is bloody, but unbowed. It matters not how **strait the gate**, how charged with **punishments the scroll, I am the master of my fate; I am the captain of my soul.** W. E. Henley, *Invictus* (1888)*

That is a blasphemous, almost satanic poem. According to the author, there is no true God, only “circumstance” and “chance.” It does not matter what God says; he does not care about the threat of God’s judgment.

Also, no one is the master of his own fate or the captain of his soul. That’s a ridiculous and plainly false attitude.

Many people are under this false assumption that they control their own lives. They substitute themselves for God. E.g., Rom 1.

2. Some see themselves as just the opposite; they are victims of circumstance, fate, and chance. E.g., Carly—“I’m the victim of coyumstance.” What happens is the result of dumb luck, chance, fate, or random events. I.e., they have no agency; they are subject to luck and chance with no power to change things.

Rabbi Kushner said, “Can you accept the idea that some things happen for no reason, that there is randomness in the universe?... [some things happen as] a matter of pure luck.”⁴

Kushner says that natural events such as earthquakes, hurricanes, tornadoes and forest fires are acts of nature, not acts of God. He says that nature is “morally blind, without values.” Natural events are purely the subject of chance, fate, dumb luck, and random circumstance.

From a Christian worldview, we are subject to the forces of nature, but the forces of nature are subject to God. He is in control of nature. We may not be able to explain or understand God’s purposes in natural disasters, but we believe that God is in control of them.

⁴ Jerry Bridges, *Trusting God* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1988), 29. Quoting Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, pages 46–48.

We don't believe that we are subject to dumb luck, chance, or fate. We have agency; what we do matters. We can change our conditions and our destiny. We are not merely puppets on strings. We are not the victim of circumstance. Chance and fate have no power to do anything; things cannot happen for no reason.

3. Some people, like Rabbi Kushner, claim that God is good but not sovereign. He's trying his best, but is not able to intervene powerfully in nature. God shares in our frustrations, pain, and lack of ability to change things.

Some assert that God *refuses* to intervene in human affairs. God is cheering for you from the sidelines but refuses to influence the results of the game.

If you believe that God exists but that he is *not* all-powerful, then you are denying what the Bible says. You can't have the biblical God and claim that he is not powerful enough to intervene in the world.

The Bible clearly reveals that nothing has the power to prevent God from accomplishing his will; God does exactly what he wants to do all the time.

Daniel 4:35 ... *[God] does according to His will in the army of heaven And among the inhabitants of the earth. No one can restrain His hand Or say to Him, "What have You done?"*

Ps 115:3 *But our God is in the heavens: he hath done whatsoever he hath pleased.*

Psalm 135:6 *Whatever the LORD pleases He does, In heaven and in earth, In the seas and in all deep places.*

Eph 1:11 *[God] ... worketh all things after the counsel of his own will:*

Even Satan himself can do only what God allows him to do. E.g., Job—God gave Satan permission to torment Job. God was fully in control of the situation.

Trans: If you deny God's providence, your options are not very comforting or satisfying. Either God does not exist, or he's not powerful, or he's not good, or we are the victims of fate, chance, and impersonal laws. Of course, we deny all of those options. We affirm God's providential control of all things.

III. Providence in practical terms

- A. All conditions of the universe are under God's control. God is the great king, and he is ruling over all things. He is the potter, and we are the clay. He is actively working all things according to the counsel of his own will.
- B. That means that we are *not* the victims of fate, luck, chance, or random events. What happens to us comes from God, either directly or indirectly. God is control of everything that happens to us.

As Job said, the Lord gave and the Lord took away.

1. God's control of all things can be very comforting because we know that God is watching over us and caring for us through the trials of life. Everything that happens to us has a purpose. There is no luck, chance, or fate in a universe under God's control.
2. It can also be rather hard to understand why God would allow us to suffer pain, sorrow, and loss. If he's good, why does he allow evil? If he's powerful, why doesn't he prevent it? These are deep, profound, significant questions.

The best answer is that God has his reasons. God has morally adequate reasons for everything that he does and for everything he allows.

Quote: If we presuppose that God is perfectly and completely good—as Scripture requires that we do—then we are committed to evaluating everything in light of that truth. When the Christian observes evil events or things in the world, he can and should consistently trust in God's inherent goodness by inferring that God has a morally good reason for the evil that exists. God is certainly not overwhelmed or stymied by evil in the universe. He could put an end to it at any time. God has planned evil events for reasons that are morally commendable and good. He does not usually reveal what those reasons are. But Christians should trust that God has a morally sufficient reason for the evil which exists.⁵

3. This, of course, is a matter of faith and trust. We walk by faith, trusting that God is providentially controlling all things for his own glory and for our ultimate good. He has a morally sufficient reason for everything he does or allows.

⁵Bahnsen, *Always Ready*, p. 172.

4. We may not understand how God is working in a situation, but we trust that he is working. Those things that may seem to be only for evil may turn out to be for good (Gen 50:20). Those things that may seem to be luck or chance may turn out to be God's will. E.g., Ruth gleaning in the field of Boaz.
- C. It's not necessary that we are able to reconcile God's goodness and power with the presence of evil. We must admit that there is much about God and his ways that we do not understand.

Isa 55:8-9 For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.

Some things about God we understand, but some things about God we believe without full comprehension (cf. Deut 29:29). We believe in God without fully understanding his work or his ways. That's walking by faith. Some things about God are beyond our comprehension.

- D. The providence of God is not an easy doctrine to believe or appreciate. Especially in hard times, it's almost easier to believe that God is limited, lacking in power, unable to change things. It might be easier to believe that God is doing his best but is unable to prevent evil. Perhaps God is just as frustrated as we are because he can't do anything to solve our problems. Many people believe that.

But of course, we can't believe that and still believe the Bible. We don't have that option if we want to remain faithful to God's revelation.

We must believe that God is upholding, directing, disposing and governing all things to the end for which they were created. That's what the Bible clearly and repeatedly teaches—God governs all things. God is in control of all events in the universe; there are no maverick molecules.

And because that is true, the events of our lives have meaning and purpose in God's eternal plan. God is working all things together for the good of those who love him. God is bringing glory to himself and good to his people through his providence. We believe that by faith. We trust in God's providence.