

God's Providence #1

Often, especially among Christians of the "Reformed" tradition (some, but not all Lutheran, Presbyterian, Baptist, Dutch Reformed, and others), we hear of God's "Providence", whether as a church doctrine, or simply an observation of some happening in everyday life, as in "Why, that is surely providential". But what is meant by the word? It is not a word that is used often or at all in most Bible translations, and yet when understood, it is seen from Genesis to Revelation, as well as history and current life.

So what do we mean by "Providence"? The most basic meaning is that God is the great provider. It is the activity of God as the omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent Creator, whereby He

1. Directs, sustains, preserves, and provides for all his creation, from galaxies to the tiniest of life on earth
2. Directs all things to the ultimate conclusion of his sovereign will and purpose.

God's providence is completely contrasted with Deism, that says God created all and then just turned it loose to whatever happens, with no guidance, direction or care. On the other hand, it is distinguished from Pantheism, where God is "in" everything, with no distinction between God (or gods) and the universe. It is also not to be confused with "fate", a kind of forced submission of creation into robotic and unwilling obedience. It recognizes that God is in control of all things, bad as well as good, yet preserves him from being in any way the cause of evil, or the author of sin. It allows that men will choose to do what they do, thus preserving their own moral responsibility, yet unknowingly fulfill his greater and ultimate purpose.

This may seem to be contradictory, and indeed one of the greatest challenges is to understand both divine sovereignty and human responsibility. Many people falsely "resolve" the conflict by stressing one and denying the other, but what kind of solution is that? The Bible represents both as true, and our place is to find an understanding that encompasses both, from scripture alone.

It has been said that **God's providence is best seen in the rearview mirror**. That is, when we are actually experiencing things, we do not and cannot see God's ultimate purpose. It is only when we look back, that we can see how God was working in our lives and circumstances. In fact, life is often like an old "Hee-Haw" comedy script, where one man tells a story and the listener says "Oh, that's good", but the first says "No, that's bad" (and vice versa) before going on with the story. So in our lives what we think we need or want as being 'good' would sometimes turn out to our harm, and what we take as disagreeable or even painful circumstances, end up being for the good. That is why we are to rejoice in all things, and to believe that all things work to the good to those who love God and are the called according to his purpose. (1 Thess. 5:18, Rom. 8:28)

Instead of approaching the study of God's sovereignty and providence systematically in great detail, we are going to do it by stories – some from scripture, and some from modern history. In this regard, we are looking mainly at the second part of the definition of Providence, God's directing of all things to accomplish His ultimate purpose. Such things are considered by unbelievers to be merely "coincidences", "fortuitous circumstances", or "luck".

Prov. 16:9 – "A man's heart deviseth his way: but the Lord directeth his steps."

Story #1: Joseph in Egypt, Gen. 37-50

Joseph was the favoured son of Jacob. He had two dreams of being exalted. He related the dreams, which caused resentment among his brothers, and even cautious concern to his father.

His father sent him out to find his shepherd brothers, who threw him into a pit and were going to kill him, but instead of killing him, they sold him as a slave to a passing caravan of Ishmeelites, who took him into Egypt. He was sold to Potiphar as a slave, and after a time of apparent blessing, he was falsely accused by Potiphar's lusting wife, and ended up in prison.

Pharaoh's baker and butler were cast into the same prison. They both had dreams which they told to Joseph, who gave interpretations that were shortly confirmed. The baker was hanged and the butler went back into Pharaoh's service but did not mention Joseph's interpretations. Joseph remained in prison.

Eventually Pharaoh had two disturbing dreams, and the butler was reminded of Joseph, and told Pharaoh about him. After Joseph was retrieved from prison, Pharaoh related the dreams, and Joseph gave the interpretations – 7 years of abundance followed by 7 years of famine. As a result, Pharaoh set Joseph as the second ruler in the land and gave him responsibility for administering the stockpiling of grain in the seven years of plenty, and the distributions and sales during the years of famine. During the famine, Jacob sent his sons to Egypt to buy grain, and they were recognized by Joseph, but they did not recognize him. After a second trip in which Benjamin came also, he revealed himself to his brothers. They then went back to retrieve Jacob and the rest, and they all came to dwell in Egypt with honor and privilege.

Now go through the story at every point and ask “Why?”, or “Is this good or bad?” To an observer at the time, they might say, “It just happened”, or “He was just lucky (or unlucky), I guess”, but from our standpoint we can see clearly that what then seemed to be grievous injustices resulting from jealousy, hatred, lust, and ungratefulness, in the end turned out to be God’s means of keeping the family of Jacob alive during the famine.

Gen. 45:5-8 – “Now therefore be not grieved, nor angry with yourselves, that ye sold me hither: for God did send me before you to preserve life. ... And God sent me before you to preserve you a posterity in the earth, and to save your lives by a great deliverance.”

Gen. 50:15-21 – After Jacob’s death, Joseph reassured his brothers in 19-20 saying “Fear not: for am I in the place of God? But as for you, ye thought evil against me; **but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive.**” They were wrong, and yet God was directing it all for His purpose.

Further, we see that it was not merely to keep them alive through the famine. Another purpose was to get them into Egypt for 400 years as he told Abraham in Gen. 15:13-16. Even though God had given the land to Abraham and his seed for ever, he would lead them into Egypt because “the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet full”. At that point God would bring them out. Why would God want first to bring them into Egypt, and then back again?

1. To preserve them from the vile corruptive influences of the Amorites.
2. To humble Pharaoh’s pride and to give an eternal testimony to all that God is the true and only God.
3. To institute the practice of the Passover, which would be a prefiguring of the suffering sacrifice of Christ and the resulting deliverance of His people “out of the power of this world”.
4. To glorify His power by the splitting of the Red Sea and destruction of His people’s enemies.
5. To show that Israel is His people, unique among the nations.
6. To give the Amorites enough time for their sin to “ripen”, so that God could in perfect justice destroy them through the armies of the Israelites.

Just think, that ALL of these things were brought about as the God-directed consequences of Jacob favoring Joseph over his brothers!

Now for a modern instance of God’s providence:

Story #2: “A Dollar and Seventy-seven Cents” in 70 Years of Miracles by Richard Harvey, pp. 35-38

This story is a good illustration of how we should not rashly judge God’s kindness or faithfulness due to unpleasant circumstances.

Young Richard Harvey and his mother were in Chicago with his brother for a time, while their father was getting established in Pittsburg as a pastor. An ad in the *Tribune* told of a great boat excursion on to Lake Michigan, in 1915. Because money was so short and Richard wanted so desperately to go, the family agreed to put all their extra money in a piggy bank. If on the night before the boat sailed there was enough money for them all, they would go, else none would go. Despite their efforts, when the bank was opened, they were \$1.77 short. Richard was extremely disappointed, but they determined to stick to their agreement. They did get up early and found a bridge where they could watch the excitement of bands playing and celebrations. As they lifted the gang plank and loosed the ship from the dock, some excitement on shore caused a great rush of the passengers to one side of the ship, and as young Richard watched in horror, the ship rolled over. 844 people died, in the largest loss of life in a single shipwreck on the Great Lakes. That shortage of \$1.77 probably saved their whole family.