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## CHAPTER 1

# Of Birds, Flowers, and You

### *Living under Providence*

How unspeakably precious and sweet it is when we can believe that God our Father in heaven is absolutely directing the most minute circumstances of our short sojourn in this wilderness world! That nothing, however trivial, takes place, whether it relates to the body or the soul, but is under His control—in fact, is ordered by Himself!

MARY WINSLOW

ot long ago we were invited to a dinner meeting at an upscale restaurant in downtown Grand Rapids, Michigan.

When we arrived, we gave the *maitre d'* the name of our party. We were promptly escorted to a private room, where our server greeted us warmly. Once we were seated, he handed each of us a leather-bound menu with the name of the restaurant embossed on the cover. Classy.

Then, opening the menus, we were surprised to encounter the latest in touchscreen technology. Very cool.

We placed our orders, then settled into comfortable, uninterrupted conversation. In just the right amount of time, our server returned first with our appetizers and a little later with our salads. But when he returned the next time, he was accompanied by three additional waiters, who carried our entrées. This was the first time we had seen these other three, but they seemed to know exactly who had ordered what. This was especially impressive because the plates they were holding were covered with shiny chrome domes.

Placing our dinners in front of us, the four servers looked to each other for a signal. Then, at precisely the same moment, the silver covers were lifted . . . followed by a chorus of oohs and aahs. The entrées looking up at us after the big reveal were exactly what we had ordered.

Nicely done.



The problem is, when it comes to real life, what's on our plates under those chrome domes is often something we *didn't* order and might not even want. And because the selection on others' plates is clearly visible, we may be tempted to compare ours to theirs.

"That's not fair," we may protest. "This isn't what I wanted. Why didn't I get that dinner rather than this one?"

To make things worse, we may not have had a chance to "order" at all.

What we'd prefer would be to choose what looks good to us, our best-life-now hopes and dreams, and then to have the server return, lift the silver dome, and—voilà!—exactly what we wanted. And occasionally that may be the case. But sometimes it's not. Often it's not. God's divinely apportioned sovereignty is usually a surprise to us mortals.

So why would we trust a God who doesn't give us what we want?

In fact, why would a good, loving God serve up unappetizing portions to us?

You can keep your cancer. I'll take a pony.



This book is about trusting God to write your story. But as we've said, this is really about God's Story. His ways. His watchful care over His creation. His Providence.

*Providence*—it's not a word you hear a lot in everyday conversation. In fact, a search of Google books shows that the use of the word in print has steadily declined since 1800. But it's an incredibly important word and concept.

Noah Webster's 1828 dictionary gives us insight into this bedrock truth that we need to learn to love and lean hard into:

Foresight, timely care; particularly, active foresight . . . accompanied with the procurement of what is necessary for future use. . . . In theology, the care and superintendence which God exercises over his creatures.<sup>1</sup>

Tucked inside this three-syllable word is the shorter word *provide*, which combines the Latin *videre*, meaning “to see” (think “video”) with the prefix *pro*, meaning “before.” *Pro-video*, “to see before”—that's at the heart of God's Providence.

God goes before us. He sees and knows everything before it even happens. And He makes provision for whatever we will need at that time.

Stop and think about that for a moment. Imagine the peace, comfort, and hope that would be ours if we really believed that He knows and sees everything that lies before us, *before* it happens—and that He has already provided whatever we will need when we get there! What freedom from fear, anxiety, and dread that should give us.

This is why I (Nancy) often say, “I love living under Providence!” What an amazing gift this is to us.



If we were able to sit down with Jesus and chat about Providence, He might explain it with a simple word picture, much as He did on a Galilean hillside a long time ago:

Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? . . . Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. (Matt. 6:26–29)

Birds. Wildflowers. Human beings. In His Providence, God sustains, attires, and cares for all of His creation.



Our home in southwest Michigan gives us a front-row seat to an amazing array of wildlife. Having lived here for almost four years at the publication of this book, I (Robert) have become a bird man. There are thousands of birds in our neighborhood, ranging from tiny yellow goldfinches to massive hawks, herons, and bald eagles. I revel in the sight of these amazing creatures just outside my window. And early in the morning, even in the dead of winter, you’ll find me trudging through deep snow to refill the bird feeders, just to be sure our little feathered friends have breakfast.

But what if I didn’t do this? Would the birds go hungry? And who feeds the birds I can’t feed? Who looks out for them when I’m out of town?

The fact is, none of these winged creatures needs me in order to survive.

That's right. Our good, wise, sovereign God cares for and meets the needs of the smallest of His creatures. Every single day. That doesn't mean they never have problems or that they never get hurt. But Jesus assured us that even common, ordinary sparrows cannot fall to the ground and die apart from the "Father's consent" (Matt. 10:29 CSB). Even the birds live under Providence.



And then there are the flowers.

The first spring after our wedding, I received a call from Nancy.

"We need to hurry, honey," she said.

"What's up?" I queried.

"The trilliums are blooming," she explained. "And they'll only last for a few more days."

Not having any idea who or what trilliums were, I did my best to be a fully engaged husband and act like this was important. So I went along.

I could not have been prepared for the sight of hundreds of thousands of delicate little white flowers carpeting the floor of the wooded acreage just a few miles from our house. Taking Nancy's hand as we walked a narrow, winding path through the loveliness, I drank in the beauty and worshiped the Creator who designed this visual feast—for His own enjoyment and ours.

When Jesus wanted to help people understand and trust God's Providence, He reminded them that God does a more than adequate job of feeding birds and clothing flowers. So what does that mean for you? It means you have a God who cares deeply about you and who will meet your needs. He doesn't just watch the birds eat or take photos of white blossoms. He is personally involved with the feeding and clothing. And what He does for these, He will do for you.



But that's not all there is to God's Providence. The word also speaks to His wise, sovereign rule over every detail of His creation.

Now, this is admittedly a subject that can stir up animated arguments. But there are basically two options.

Either . . .

1. God sovereignly causes and/or permits everything to happen that happens in our lives and in this world.

Or . . .

2. God stands by and watches passively and powerlessly, unwilling or unable to do anything about what happens.

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Where would we be without the certain knowledge that “He’s got the whole world in His hands” and that every detail of our lives and days is ordered by our all-wise, all-knowing, loving God?

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So here at the outset, we’re going to be clear that *we choose door number one*.

Where would we be without the certain knowledge that “He’s got the whole world in His hands” and that every detail of our lives and days is ordered by our all-wise, all-knowing, loving God? Far from being a crushing burden to be borne or diminishing our value, the Providence of God is a great and precious gift. To be helpless victims of chance, tossed about on the storms of life—that would be forever dis-

concerting and tragic. Thank God it is not the case.

As Pastor Charlie Dates tweeted recently after experiencing a turbulent flight:

I'm amazed at how, on a bumpy flight, the pilot's voice is calm and assured when addressing the passengers. What unnerves us doesn't seem to bother them. It's good to have a life captain who's assured of your safe arrival when life is bumpy.<sup>2</sup>



The Old Testament book of Exodus includes many providential moments. One of the most dramatic was when the Israelites were finally released from their Egyptian captors. They were escaping eastward, but there was a problem. They came to a massive body of water, with no way over or around it—and no boats or life jackets. What's more, a ferocious army was bearing down on them, brandishing swords and plenty of hostility.

In the next few hours, God's Providence would be on display in a way that makes bird feeding and flower dressing look like child's play. But His people didn't trust that it would happen. In spite of God's relentless faithfulness up to that point, in spite of watching Yahweh perform one spectacular miracle after another on their behalf, they feared for their lives and fell back into their trademark response: complaining. "So dying in Egypt wasn't good enough for you?" they griped to Moses as they stood there on the banks of the Red Sea. "You just want us to die here in the wilderness?" (see Exod. 14:11–12).

Undaunted, Moses had another plan. He trusted God. Proving that he was the right man for the job, he announced to the restless, fearful mob:

Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the LORD. . . .  
The LORD will fight for you, and you have only to be silent.  
(Exod. 14:13–14)



And show up He did. Not only did He provide a path through the water and drown the pursuing army, He went on to lead the ragtag group of Israelites through the wilderness, providing food, water, protection, and more until they finally reached the land He had promised them.

Shades of watching God feed our birds or staring in awe at the little white wildflowers spread out in the woods.

Our heavenly Father looks at our circumstances, our concerns, and our anxious fears, and says, “Take heart, My child. I’ve got this.”

A close friend of ours has been walking through some horrifically messy and painful circumstances—mostly the fallout of the sins of others. In a recent text exchange, I (Nancy) wrote to her:

When things seem to be falling apart, it’s natural to freak out, hyperventilate, give in to fear, anger, or despair, or try to wrestle the problems down and get them out of your life. But this moment is part of a bigger Story He is writing in and through you. Remember the Red Sea. Stand still. See the salvation of the Lord.



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God’s Providence is often better seen in retrospect.

There’s something about the clarity of looking into a rear-view mirror. Looking back often gives us a more accurate picture of where we’ve been and what it means. That’s not to say that every look back will show us all there is to see—at least not in this life. We have to have eyes to see, and that may take time and

prayer. But if we continue to ponder where we've been and look with the eyes of faith, the view in the rearview mirror will often snap into focus and we'll get a clearer vision of how God has been working in our lives.

The view out the front windshield is a different story. We may think we know where we're headed, only to discover again and again that we had no earthly idea. What actually takes place may not at all be what we had envisioned or anticipated.

What we see looking ahead is our story—our circumstances seen from our finite, limited perspective.

What appears when we look back is God's Story—what He sees and knows and has in mind, how He is always at work for our good and His glory.



God is writing a Story—the Story of redemption. It is grander and greater than anything we can imagine. Here are some important things we need to remind ourselves often about His Story and how it relates to the story He is writing in and through each of our lives:

1. *Our individual stories are part of a much bigger Story.* At times, we will experience heartache, loss, disappointment, and unfulfilled longings. But He is weaving all of that into a Story that will have us lost in wonder and worship when we get to the end.
2. *Ultimately, this Story is not about us, but about Him.* We are bit players in His Story. We are not the stars. He is!
3. *Perspective makes all the difference.* God sees the beginning and the end and everything in between; we only see this present moment. In storytelling language, His is an

omniscient point of view, whereas ours is limited to what we can perceive from our earthly vantage point. He has a wide-angle lens and sees the whole mural He is painting in all of history. We see only the little speck of time and space we occupy at this moment.

4. *God works in unexpected, unexplainable ways to accomplish His purposes.* We should not expect Him to write our story the way we would write it.
5. *God sovereignly and purposefully ordains and orchestrates the circumstances of our lives.* There is no such thing as happenstance or accident. Nothing catches Him off guard. There is no plot twist in your story or ours of which He is unaware or that He can't overcome.
6. *What we see now is not the whole story.* If we could see what God sees and know what He knows, our hearts would be at peace.
7. *We can trust Him to write the story of those we love.* That doesn't mean we shouldn't help or support them. But we don't want to rescue them from circumstances that may be a chapter of the story He is writing in their lives.
8. *The challenges we face may be a part of God writing someone else's story.* God wants to use our story to be a means of His grace and intervention in the lives of others—even those who may have “wrecked” our story.
9. *Those who trust in Him will never be disappointed.*<sup>3</sup> Not every chapter in this life has a “happy” ending. But every true child of God will live “happily ever after.” We can be sure of that.

10. *You can trust God to write your story . . . and you can be sure that in the end, He will *right* your story!*



The biblical account of Job is a stunning story of God's control over the events of our world and the happenings in our lives.

The book that bears his name opens with a ringing endorsement of Job's character: "blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil" (Job 1:1). Yet, this God-loving, sin-hating man—a devoted family man and generous benefactor—was not insulated from agonizing suffering and loss.

To the contrary, in a test of divine sovereignty that really had nothing directly to do with Job, God gave Satan permission

to afflict this godly man with unimaginable loss and pain. One unanticipated disaster after another hit Job hard from every direction and caused the bottom to fall out. His great wealth—gone in a day. His ten (!) children—all dead in a moment. His body—covered with excruciating sores. His wife (also suffering deep grief)—confused and disoriented. His friends—misguided and unhelpful at best.

At the outset, Job held fast to his confidence that God is worthy to be blessed, not just when He is the dispenser of blessings, but also when those good gifts are removed and replaced with adversity. But as time wore on, that confidence sometimes wavered. Through thirty-five chapters of endless dialogue and

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debating about the problem of pain, Job's inspiring bursts of faith were interspersed with anguished outbursts of questioning and despair. And all the while God was silent. As hard as Job and his well-meaning friends tried to figure all this out, they just didn't know what they didn't know.

Finally, the sovereign God stepped forward and addressed His suffering servant: "You've pummeled me with questions," the Lord said in effect. "Now, I have a few questions for you!"

*I will ask you, and you instruct Me! (Job 38:3 NASB)*

For starters . . .

*Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?  
Tell Me, if you have understanding. (v. 4 NASB)*

Then, for the next four chapters, God held court. In one incontestable point after another, He reminded Job of His track record as the Lord of all creation. He unveiled His greatness, His power, and His providential oversight and care of the universe. Job interrupted only once—to acknowledge that he was way out of his league when it came to understanding or challenging God:

*Behold, I am insignificant; what can I reply to You?  
I lay my hand on my mouth. (40:4 NASB)*

Finally, when he had heard God out, Job responded in resignation, confession, and humble, awe-filled wonder:

*I know that You can do all things,  
And that no purpose of Yours can be thwarted. . . .  
I have declared that which I did not understand,  
Things too wonderful for me, which I did not know. . . .  
I had heard of You by the hearing of the ear;  
But now my eye sees You. . . .  
Therefore I retract,  
And I repent. (42:2–6 NASB)*

In other words, “You win. You are good. You are faithful. I trust You to write my story.”

Chances are, your story is not as dramatic as Job’s, yet your problems and your pain are no less real. You may not be able to see His purposes or plan at this point. But by His grace, you can rest in His Providence, confident that . . .

He is good.

He is faithful.

And you can trust Him to write your story.