



PROVIDENCE

John Piper

“In what is perhaps his most important book so far, John Piper demonstrates with great cogency and exegetical skill that God’s providence ‘is his purposeful sovereignty in which he will be completely successful in the achievement of his ultimate goal for the universe.’ This book will enlarge your vision of God and thereby strengthen your faith.”

D. A. Carson, Theologian-at-Large, The Gospel Coalition

“John Piper, with his characteristic clarity and focus on the biblical text, shows us the pervasiveness of God’s providence in the Scriptures. Piper lingers over the biblical text, and we see in text after text that God rules over all of reality, from the smallest atom to horrific disasters. As we have come to expect from Piper, he turns our eyes to the infinite greatness and beauty of God, while reminding us that God’s providence constitutes amazing good news for those of us who know Jesus Christ.”

Thomas R. Schreiner, James Buchanan Harrison Professor of New Testament Interpretation, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“There are many books by John Piper that I would recommend to believers because of the depth and freshness of thought in his writings. *Providence* will rank among the highest on the list. The breadth of God’s providence that is covered here is breathtaking. Piper leaves no stone unturned! Read it and see for yourself. This is a landmark work!”

Conrad Mbewe, Pastor, Kabwata Baptist Church, Lusaka, Zambia

“While some see God’s hand only in miracles, and others don’t see his hand at all, providence is the wonderful truth that God is sovereign in and over everything that happens. Combining passion with a curious spirit, John Piper has cherished and proclaimed this truth throughout his ministry. This engaging book is not just about one doctrine, but ranges throughout the alpine vistas of God’s work in our world, our redemption, and our lives today. It is deeply faith invigorating.”

Michael Horton, Professor of Systematic Theology and Apologetics, Westminster Seminary California

“In this remarkable book, John Piper reveals the personal side of sovereignty, helping us glimpse the intricate complexity, winsome beauty, and ultimate purpose of God’s plans in action. Piper is able to write about a multifaceted doctrine in a way that is easy to grasp and so practical!”

Joni Eareckson Tada, Founder and CEO, Joni and Friends International Disability Center

“John Piper’s magisterial book is a robust antidote to the weak view of God’s providence held by many Christians today. His exposition of the subject is thorough in scope and saturated with biblical insight. Piper is a model of the pastor-theologian as he not only describes providence but also shows how our understanding of providence can deepen our lives.”

Tremper Longman III, Distinguished Scholar and Professor Emeritus of Biblical Studies, Westmont College

“With the publication of *The Justification of God* in 1983, John Piper showed that he was a man unflinching in his adherence to the sovereignty of God’s grace. Now, half a generation later, that adherence remains. This massive book affords food for thought in a way that will stretch the minds and hearts of its readers.”

Paul Helm, Former Professor of the History and Philosophy of Religion, King’s College London

“This is a book about the providence of God, written by a man who has spent his life expounding the glory of God. This volume is substantial, as its subject matter demands. Piper moves from the time before creation to the second coming of Christ, showing that the providential acts of God are pervasive through time, circumstances, and people as he explains the staggering power of the self-sufficient God.”

Miguel Núñez, Senior Pastor, International Baptist Church, Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic; Founding President, Wisdom and Integrity Ministries

“By nurturing humility and assisting us to tremble at God’s word, John Piper’s *Providence* helps our eyes to catch the eye of the King in his awesome and terrifying beauty (Isa. 33:17; 66:2). He is not a safe lion, but he is good.”

Jason S. DeRouchie, Research Professor of Old Testament and Biblical Theology, Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary

“John Piper’s careful exposition is coupled with insightful theological reflection and pastoral application. Here is hope when health fails, enemies assail, dreams unravel, relationships crumble, and calamities destroy. Here is strength for enduring difficulty, facing uncertainty, and overcoming anxiety. Here is the sweet experience of our Father’s bountiful goodness in the special care and conduct of his providence.”

J. Stephen Yuille, Vice President of Academics, Heritage College and Seminary; Associate Professor of Biblical Spirituality, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“Piper has the gift of making complex ideas easily understandable. Under the general theme of providence, he deals with some of the most difficult themes of the Christian faith—the relation of God’s sovereignty to man’s decisions, the origin of evil, God’s use of evil people and the devil to accomplish his goals, and election. From a South American standpoint, where so many questions about God’s ways arise from a context of rampant neopentecostalism, health-and-wealth gospel, poverty, and corruption, this book is much needed.”

Augustus Nicodemus Lopes, Assistant Pastor, First Presbyterian Church, Recife, Brazil; Vice President, Supreme Council, Presbyterian Church of Brazil

“In our profusely man-centered age, John Piper’s book heals the mind and soul with gospel truth. This is not just a theological work on God’s providence, but also pastoral guidance full of biblical yet practical wisdom. This book will help the modern generation of Christians enjoy the truth of God’s sovereign power and help those around them to

stand on the solid foundation of the gospel instead of the shaky ground of human pride. Piper lights a radiant flame of God's glory in the lighthouse of God's love where people will find true hope in a raging ocean of errors and fears. His book is very relevant for residents of post-Soviet countries, who need to see the greatness and beauty of the true King and ruler of this world while committing themselves to building his kingdom for the spiritual prosperity of their nations for the glory of Christ!"

Evgeny Bakhmutsky, Pastor, Russian Bible Church, Moscow, Russia

"John Piper helps us see and savor God's purposeful sovereignty by inductively demonstrating what the whole Bible teaches about its ultimate goal, its nature, and its extent."

Andy Naselli, Associate Professor of Systematic Theology and New Testament, Bethlehem College & Seminary; Elder, Bethlehem Baptist Church, Minneapolis

"Through this magnum opus, John Piper leads hearts to joyful worship by unfolding the often-neglected doctrine of God's providence. This book is both a textbook for serious students of theology as well as devotional reading for the layman. Read this book and worship the God who will achieve all his purposes for his glory and for the best of his elect."

Matthias G. Lohmann, Chairman, Evangelium21; Pastor, Free Evangelical Church Munich-Central, Germany

"In my estimation, this book represents the most mature and the fullest biblical-theological reflections of John Piper. As a pastor and teacher, I'm often asked, 'How can I reconcile what I know about God, man, and creation in the Bible with how I experience them?' Thanks to Piper, I now have a definitive work to help me answer these questions. This book will move readers to delight in God and in his revealed reality as they wonder at God's intended purpose for his creation."

Biao Chen, Chinese Project Coordinator, Third Millennium Ministries

"John Piper's works have always emphasized the glory of God and the joy of his people. Now Piper offers us a masterful treatise on the consoling doctrine of God's providence, moving between biblical theology and systematic theology with precision and a deep knowledge of Scripture without losing focus on the pastoral aspects of such important biblical teaching. May the Lord of glory use this book for the edification and joy of his people!"

Franklin Ferreira, Academic Director, Martin Bucer Seminar, São José dos Campos-SP, Brazil

"John Piper skillfully shows how the truth of providence directly relates to diverse areas of theology. *Providence* mixes his thorough theological and biblical insights with more than forty years of pastoral ministry. It is a real treasure for the global church and will be a valuable resource for the church of God for years to come."

Sherif A. Fahim, Lecturer in Systematic Theology and Biblical Studies, Alexandria School of Theology, Egypt; General Director, El-Soora Ministries

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Think

This Momentary Marriage

What Jesus Demands from the World

When I Don't Desire God

Why I Love the Apostle Paul

PROVIDENCE

John Piper

Providence

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To all the missionaries
who have given their lives,
or will yet give their lives,
to gather God's elect from all the peoples of the world,
in the confidence that the saving purposes
of Providence
in Christ Jesus
cannot fail.

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INTRODUCTION

Four Invitations

God has revealed the goal and nature and extent of his providence. He has not been silent. He has shown us these things in the Bible. This is one of the reasons that the apostle Paul says, “All Scripture is . . . profitable” (2 Tim. 3:16). The profit lies not mainly in the validation of a theological viewpoint but in the revelation of a great God, the exaltation of his invincible grace, and the liberation of his undeserving people. God has revealed his purposeful sovereignty over good and evil in order to humble human pride, intensify human worship, shatter human hopelessness, and put ballast in the battered boat of human faith, steel in the spine of human courage, gladness in the groans of affliction, and love in the heart that sees no way forward.

What we find in the Bible is real and raw. The prizing and proclaiming of God’s pervasive providence was forged in flames of hatred and love, deceit and truth, murder and mercy, carnage and kindness, cursing and blessing, mystery and revelation, and, finally, crucifixion and resurrection. I hope my treatment of God’s providence will have the aroma of this shocking and hope-filled reality.

In this introduction, I would like to offer you four invitations.

Counterintuitive Wonders

First, I invite you into a biblical world of counterintuitive wonders. I will argue that these wonders are not illogical or contradictory, but they are different from our usual ways of seeing the world—so different that our first reaction is often to say, “That can’t be.” But the “can’t” is in our *minds*, not in reality. “How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!” (Rom. 11:33).

For example, in the justice of his judgment, God raises up a cruel shepherd for his people, and then he sends punishment on that shepherd:

Behold, I am raising up in the land a shepherd who does not care for those being destroyed, or seek the young or heal the maimed or nourish the healthy, but devours the flesh of the fat ones, tearing off even their hoofs.

“Woe to my worthless shepherd,
 who deserts the flock!
 May the sword strike his arm
 and his right eye!
 Let his arm be wholly withered,
 his right eye utterly blinded!” (Zech. 11:16–17)

This jars us. For most of us, this is not how we usually think about the ways of God. First, that God *raises up* a brutal shepherd for his people seems to implicate God in sinful brutality. Second, that God judges the shepherd for his worthlessness seems like capriciously condemning what he himself ordained.

There are many such scenes in the Bible, and I will argue that in them all, God is neither sinful nor capricious. If we are prone to be critical rather than be changed, we should put our hands on our mouths and listen. We are sinful and finite. God is infinite and holy.

My thoughts are not your thoughts,
 neither are your ways my ways, declares 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. (Isa. 55:8–9)

I am inviting you into a world of counterintuitive wonders. I hope that you will let the word of God create new categories of thinking rather than trying to force the Scripture into the limits of what you already know. When Paul calls us to be “transformed by the renewal of [our] mind” (Rom. 12:2), part of what he has in mind is the overcoming of our natural resistance to the strangeness of the ways of God. Immediately before calling for transformed minds, he writes:

Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!
 How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!

“For who has known the mind of the Lord,
 or who has been his counselor?”
 “Or who has given a gift to him
 that he might be repaid?”

For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen. (Rom. 11:33–36)

In the end, my invitation into the biblical world of counterintuitive wonders is an invitation to worship. God is vastly greater and stranger and more glorious and more dreadful and more loving than we realize. Immersing ourselves in the ocean of his providence is meant to help us know him, fear him, trust him, and love him as we ought.

Penetrating through Words into Reality

Second, I invite you to penetrate through words into reality. *Providence* is a word not found in the Bible. In that sense, it is like the words *Trinity*, *discipleship*, *evangelism*, *exposition*, *counseling*, *ethics*, *politics*, and *charismatics*. People who love the Bible and believe that it

is God's word want to know what the Bible teaches, not just what it says. They want to know the *reality* being presented, not just the *words* that were written.

The Bible itself makes clear that it is not enough just to say the words of the Bible. The Bible mandates that all churches have teachers. All churches are supposed to have elders (Titus 1:5), and elders are required to be teachers (1 Tim. 3:2). The task of a teacher is not just to *read* the Bible to his hearers, but to *explain* it. And explaining means using other words besides the ones in the text. Throughout the history of the church, heretics have frequently insisted on using only Bible words in defending their heresy. This was certainly the case for the fourth-century Arians, who rejected the deity of Jesus and were happy to use Bible words to do so.¹

R. P. C. Hanson explained the process like this: "Theologians of the Christian Church were slowly driven to a realization that the deepest questions which face Christianity cannot be answered in purely biblical language, because the questions are about the meaning of biblical language itself."²

1 The Arians affirmed biblical sentences while denying biblical meaning. Here is a description of the proceedings: "The Alexandrians . . . confronted the Arians with the traditional Scriptural phrases which appeared to leave no doubt as to the eternal Godhead of the Son. But to their surprise they were met with perfect acquiescence. Only as each test was propounded, it was observed that the suspected party whispered and gesticulated to one another, evidently hinting that each could be safely accepted, since it admitted of evasion. If their assent was asked to the formula 'like to the Father in all things,' it was given with the reservation that man as such is 'the image and glory of God.' The 'power of God' elicited the whispered explanation that the host of Israel was spoken of as *δυναμις κυριου* [power of the Lord], and that even the locust and caterpillar are called the 'power of God.' The 'eternity' of the Son was countered by the text, 'We that live are always (2 Corinthians 4:11)!' The fathers were baffled, and the test of *ομοουσιον* [same being], with which the minority had been ready from the first, was being forced upon the majority by the evasions of the Arians."

See Archibald T. Robertson, "Prolegomena," in *St. Athanasius: Select Works and Letters*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, vol. 4, Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, 2nd Series (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1892), *xix*.

2 R. P. C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988), *xviii–xix*.

The longer I have studied Scripture and tried to preach it and teach it, the more I have seen the need to encourage preachers and laypeople to penetrate through biblical words to biblical reality. How easy it is to think we have experienced communion with God when our minds and hearts have stopped with verbal definitions, grammatical relations, historical illustrations, and a few applications. When we do this, even Bible words themselves can become alternatives to what Paul calls “spiritual . . . understanding” (συνέσει πνευματικῇ, Col. 1:9).

I am going to use the word *providence* to refer to a biblical reality. The reality is not found in any single Bible word. It emerges from the way God has revealed himself through many texts and many stories in the Bible. They are like threads woven together into a beautiful tapestry greater than any one thread. We are using a word that is not in the Bible for the sake of this larger truth of the Bible.

Of course, there are dangers in doing this—just like there are dangers in using only Bible language, which can be twisted to carry false meanings while giving the impression of biblical faithfulness (cf. 2 Pet. 3:16). I will mention one danger, among others.

Since the word *providence* is not used in specific biblical texts, we have no biblical governor on its meaning. We can't say, “The Bible defines providence this way.” We could say that only if the Bible actually used the word *providence*. Whenever you ask what a particular word means, there must be a *meaner* if the meaning is to have validity. So if the *meaner* is not one (or more) of the biblical writers, then when I use the word *providence*, I must assign a meaning. That is what I do in chapter 1. I don't assign an arbitrary meaning; I try to stay close to what others have meant by the word in the history of the church. But I do choose the meaning.

You can see what this implies. It implies that the issue before us in this book is *not* the meaning of the word *providence*. The issue is this: *Is the reality that I see in the Bible, and call providence, really there?* There is no point in quibbling over whether *providence* is the best word for

the reality. That is relatively unimportant. The all-important truth is whether there is a reality in the Bible that corresponds to my description of the goal, nature, and extent of God's *purposeful sovereignty*. You will see in chapter 1 why I use the short definition "purposeful sovereignty" for providence. But for now, I am simply flagging the danger that it would be a sad mistake to miss the biblical reality by focusing on the word.

A God-Entranced World

Third, I invite you into a God-entranced world. Jesus said to look at the birds because God feeds them (Matt. 6:26) and to consider the lilies because God clothes them (Matt. 6:28–30). Jesus's aim was not aesthetic. His aim was to free his people from anxiety. He really considered it a valid argument that if our heavenly Father feeds the birds and clothes the lilies, how much more surely will he feed and clothe his children.

This is simply astonishing. The argument is valid only if God really is the one who sees to it that the birds find their worms and the lilies wear their flowers. If birds and lilies are simply acting by natural laws, with no divine hand, then Jesus is just playing with words. But he is *not* playing with words. He really believes that God's hand is at work in the smallest details of natural processes. This is even clearer in Matthew 10:29–31:

Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And *not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father*. But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows.

God does not just feed the birds and clothe the lilies; he decides when every bird (countless millions every year) dies and falls to the ground. His point is the same as in Matthew 6: "He is your Father. You are more precious to him than birds. Therefore, you don't need to be

afraid.” That kind of pervasive providence, combined with that kind of fatherly care, means he can and will take care of you. So seek the kingdom first, with radical abandon, and don’t be anxious (Matt. 6:33).

CHARGED WITH GRANDEUR

This God-entranced view of the world was not peculiar to Jesus. The psalmist sings to the Lord of his specific care for the creatures he has made:

These all look to you,
to give them their food in due season.
When you give it to them, they gather it up;
when you open your hand, they are filled with good things.
When you hide your face, they are dismayed;
when you take away their breath, they die
and return to their dust.
When you send forth your Spirit, they are created,
and you renew the face of the ground. (Ps. 104:27–30)

God’s involvement in nature is hands-on—the kind of closeness that causes the biblical writers to make declarations like, “He makes grass grow on the hills” (Ps. 147:8). “The LORD appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah” (Jonah 1:17). “The LORD God appointed a plant” (Jonah 4:6). “God appointed a worm that attacked the plant” (Jonah 4:7). “He . . . brings forth the wind from his storehouses” (Ps. 135:7). “He it is who makes the clouds rise . . . who makes lightnings for the rain” (Ps. 135:7). “He . . . rebuked the wind and the raging waves” (Luke 8:24). This is not poetry for God-less naturalistic processes. This is God’s hands-on providence.

God does not intend for us to see ourselves, or any part of the world, as cogs in the wheels of an impersonal mechanism. The world is not a machine that God made to run on its own. It is a painting, or a sculpture, or a drama. The Son of God holds it in being by the word

of his power (Col. 1:17; Heb. 1:3). Gerard Manley Hopkins expressed it unforgettably in his sonnet “God’s Grandeur”:

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
 It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
 It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
 Crushed. Why do men then now not reckon his rod?
 Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
 And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
 And wears man’s smudge and shares man’s smell: the soil
 Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

And for all this, nature is never spent;
 There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
 And though the last lights off the black West went
 Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs—
 Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
 World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.³

SEEING THE RISING SUN

I will never cease to be thankful that in my college days, Clyde Kilby was one of my literature professors. He gave a lecture once on the awakening of amazement at the strange glory of ordinary things. He closed the lecture with ten resolutions for what he called “mental health.”⁴ Here are two of them:

I shall open my eyes and ears. Once every day I shall simply stare at a tree, a flower, a cloud, or a person. I shall not then be concerned

3 Gerard Manley Hopkins, “God’s Grandeur,” Poetry Foundation, accessed April 9, 2020, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44395/gods-grandeur>.

4 You can read all of them here: John Piper, “10 Resolutions for Mental Health,” *Desiring God*, December 31, 2007, <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/10-resolutions-for-mental-health>. When Kilby speaks of “mental health,” he is speaking generally, not clinically. He does not have clinically diagnosable mental illnesses in view.

at all to ask what they are but simply be glad that they are. I shall joyfully allow them the mystery of what [C. S.] Lewis calls their “divine, magical, terrifying and ecstatic” existence.

Even if I turn out to be wrong, I shall bet my life on the assumption that this world is not idiotic, neither run by an absentee landlord, but that today, this very day, some stroke is being added to the cosmic canvas that in due course I shall understand with joy as a stroke made by the architect who calls himself Alpha and Omega.

Because of Kilby’s eye-opening influence, and because of what I now see in the Bible as an all-embracing, all-pervasive providence, I live more consciously in a God-entranced world. I see reality differently. For example, I used to look at sunrises when I was jogging and think that God has created a beautiful world. Then it became less general and more specific, more personal. I said, “Every morning God paints a different sunrise.” He never gets tired of doing it again and again. But then it struck me. No, he doesn’t do it again and again. He *never stops* doing it. The sun is always rising somewhere in the world. God guides the sun twenty-four hours every day and paints sunrises at every moment, century after century without one second of respite, and never grows weary or less thrilled with the work of his hands. Even when cloud cover keeps man from seeing it, God is painting spectacular sunrises above the clouds.

God does not intend for us to look at the world he has made and feel nothing. When the psalmist says, “The heavens declare the glory of God” (Ps. 19:1), he does not mean this only for the clarification of our theology. He means it for the exultation of our souls. We know this because of what follows:

In [the heavens] he has set a tent for the sun,
 which comes out like a bridegroom leaving his chamber,
 and, like a strong man, runs its course with joy. (Ps. 19:4–5)

What is the point of saying this? When we look at the handiwork of God in creation, we are to be drawn into bridegroom-like joy and into the joy of an Eric Liddell running with head back, elbows pumping, smile bursting in *Chariots of Fire*, basking in the very pleasure of God.

I am inviting you into a God-entranced world. No, we are not naïve about the miseries every sunrise meets. You will, perhaps, be shocked at the implications of God's pervasive providence in the suffering and death of this world. The Lord gives and the Lord takes away (Job 1:21). And the exulting sun dawns on 150,000 new corpses every morning. That's how many people die every day. In a world with this much God-entranced beauty, and this much God-governed horror, the biblical command to "rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep" (Rom. 12:15) means that we will continually be "sorrowful, yet always rejoicing" (2 Cor. 6:10).

To Know God

Fourth, and finally, I am inviting you to know, maybe as you never have known, the God whose involvement in his children's lives and in the world is so pervasive, so all-embracing, and so powerful that nothing can befall them but what he designs for their glorification in him and his glorification in them (2 Thess. 1:12).

The death of the Son of God ransomed a people for God from every tribe and language and nation (Rev. 5:9). The transaction between the Father and the Son in the death of Christ was so powerful that it secured absolutely, for all time and eternity, everything needed to bring the bride of Christ safely and beautifully to everlasting joy.

Romans 8:32 may be the most important verse in the Bible, because it establishes the unshakable connection between the greatest event in the universe and the greatest future imaginable: "He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?"

Indeed. How will he not! All things. All things!

Let no one boast in men. For all things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours, and you are Christ’s, and Christ is God’s. (1 Cor. 3:21–23)

All things ours. Because the Father did not spare the Son. When Christ died, everything—absolutely everything—that his people need to make it through this world in holiness and love was invincibly secured. God the Father predestined it—everything we need—and promised it to us (Ezek. 36:27; Rom. 8:29). God the Son purchased it for us (Titus 2:14). God the Spirit performs it in us (Gal. 3:5; Heb. 13:21). Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ (Rom. 8:35–39).

I would like to help as many as I can to know the God of all-embracing, all-pervasive, invincible providence. His word is spectacularly full of knowledge about God’s ultimate goal. Cover to cover, it rings with the riches of his grace toward his undeserving people. Page after page tells the stunning story of the nature and extent of his providence. Nothing can stop him from succeeding exactly when and how he aims to succeed.

I am God, and there is no other;
 I am God, and there is none like me,
 declaring the end from the beginning
 and from ancient times things not yet done,
 saying, “My counsel shall stand,
 and I will accomplish all my purpose.”
 (Isa. 46:9–10)

Goal, Nature, Extent

The book is divided into three parts. Part 1 defines *providence* and then illuminates a difficulty, namely, the self-exaltation involved in God’s aim to display his own glory. Part 2 focuses on the ultimate goal

of providence. Part 3 focuses on the nature and extent of providence. I have chosen this order (goal before nature and extent) because I think we understand more clearly what a person is doing if we know the end he is pursuing. If I know your goal is to build a house in Minnesota, I will understand what you are doing when you dig a massive hole in the ground. Basements are important in this climate. Otherwise, without knowing your aim, I won't know what the hole in the ground means. The nature and extent of the hole is explained by the goal.

I refer to the *ultimate* goal of providence because God is always doing ten thousand things in every act of providence. (That is an understatement.) Each of those ten thousand things is intended. Which means that God has millions and millions of goals every hour. He accomplishes all of them. We don't know most of them. (That too is an understatement.) So part 2 of this book is not about trying to know all those goals. That is impossible. What I want to know is where everything is going. What is the goal that guides everything?

Then we can grasp more fully the nature and extent of his providence. By the question of *extent*, I mean, How much and how completely does God control things, including human beings? By the question of *nature*, I mean, for example, What *means* does God use to control things? Is the word *control* even the right word? It is not my default word to describe providence. Not because the word is false, but because it tends to carry connotations of mechanical processes and coercive strategies. I will use it. But I hope to continually show why these connotations do not attach to God's providence.

Providence is all-embracing and all-pervasive, but when God turns the human will, there is a mystery to it that causes a person to experience God's turning as his own preference—an authentic, responsible act of the human will. God is sovereign over man's preferences. Man is accountable for his preferences. God's hidden

hand in turning all things and his revealed commands requiring all obedience are in perfect harmony in the mind of God, but not in our visible experience. We are obliged to follow his revealed precepts, not his secret purposes.⁵ We will see that such is the nature of providence.

5 I have adapted here the words of John Owen: “The holiness of our actions consisteth in a conformity unto his precepts, and not unto his purposes.” John Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, vol. 10, ed. William H. Goold (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, n.d.), 48.

PART 1

A DEFINITION AND
A DIFFICULTY

What Is Divine Providence?

The reason this book is about the providence of God rather than the sovereignty of God is that the term *sovereignty* does not contain the idea of *purposeful* action, but the term *providence* does. Sovereignty focuses on God's right and power to do all that he wills, but in itself, it does not express any design or goal.

Of course, God's sovereignty *is* purposeful. It *does* have design. It *does* pursue a goal. But we know this, not simply because God is sovereign, but because he is wise, and because the Bible portrays him as having purposes in all he does. "My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose" (Isa. 46:10).

The focus of this book is on God's sovereignty considered not simply as powerful but as purposeful. Historically, the term *providence* has been used as shorthand for this more specific focus.

The Building Blocks of Providence

Why was the English word *providence* chosen to capture this biblical teaching? In reference to God, the word does not occur in most English versions of the Bible (e.g., ESV, KJV, HCSB, NRSV).¹ It is

¹ The word *providence* occurs once in reference to human action in Acts 24:2 in the KJV and NASB. And it occurs once in reference to God's action in Job 10:12 in the NIV and TNIV.

difficult to be certain about the history of a word and why it came to carry its present meaning. But here is a suggestion.

The word *providence* is built from the word *provide*, which has two parts: *pro* (Latin “forward,” “on behalf of”) and *vide* (Latin “to see”). So you might think that the word *provide* would mean “to see forward” or “to foresee.” But it doesn’t. It means “to supply what is needed”; “to give sustenance or support.” So in reference to God, the noun *providence* has come to mean “the act of purposefully providing for, or sustaining and governing, the world.”

Why is this? There are two interesting reasons, one based on an English idiom and the other based on a biblical story.

God “Sees to It”

We have an English idiom that goes like this: “I’ll see to it.” Like all idioms, it means more than the words, taken individually, seem to signify. “I’ll see to it” in English means “I’ll take care of it” (which is itself an idiom!). I’ll provide for it. I’ll see (or make sure) that it happens. So it could be that putting the Latin *vide* (“see”) together with the Latin *pro* (“to,” “toward”) produced “see to” and came to mean more than “foresee,” but to mean “see to it” in the sense of “take care of it” or “see that it happens.” That would be what we mean by God’s providence: he sees to it that things happen in a certain way.

Providence on Mount Moriah

Then, even more interestingly, there is the biblical story of Abraham’s offering of his son Isaac. Before they went up Mount Moriah, Isaac said to his father, “Where is the lamb for a burnt offering?” (Gen. 22:7). Abraham answered, “God *will provide* for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son” (22:8). And when God had shown Abraham a ram caught in the thorns, “Abraham called the name of that place ‘The LORD will provide’” (22:14).

What is striking is that whenever the word *provide* occurs in Genesis 22, the Hebrew word is simply “to see.” Very simply, Abraham says to Isaac, “God *will see* for himself the lamb” (יְרֵאֶה-לּוֹ הַשֵּׁה 22:8). Similarly in verse 14: “‘The LORD will provide’ [the Lord will *see* יִהְיֶה יְרֵאֶה]; as it is said to this day, ‘On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided’ [it shall be *seen* יִבְהֶר יְהוָה יְרֵאֶה].”

The old King James Version preserves this literal rendering of Genesis 22:14, even transliterating the Hebrew of “the Lord sees” as *Jehovah-jireh*: “Abraham called the name of that place Jehovahjireh: as it is said to this day, In the mount of the LORD it shall be seen.” The New King James Version has joined virtually all other contemporary versions by translating *see* as *provide*: “Abraham called the name of the place, The-LORD-Will-Provide; as it is said to this day, ‘In the Mount of the LORD it shall be provided.’”

With regard to the doctrine of God’s *providence*, the question is this: Why does God’s *seeing* in Genesis 22 actually refer to his *providing*—his providence?

The answer I suggest is that in the mind of Moses, and other authors of Scripture, God does not simply *see* as a passive bystander. As God, he is never merely an observer. He is not a passive observer of the world—and not a passive predictor of the future. Wherever God is looking, God is acting. In other words, there is a profound theological reason why God’s *providence* does not merely mean his *seeing*, but rather his *seeing to*. When God sees something, he sees to it. Evidently, as Moses wrote Genesis 22, God’s purposeful engagement with Abraham was so obvious that Moses could simply refer to God’s perfect *seeing* as implying God’s purposeful *doing*. His *seeing* was his *seeing to*. His *perception* implied his *provision*—his *providence*.

Catch-22 in Writing a Book Like This

Those are my suggestions for how the English word *providence* has come to mean “the act of God’s providing for or sustaining and

governing the world.” Of course, it is of minor importance whether I am right about that. When it comes to words, what matters is not that we know where they came from or how they got their meaning. What matters is that we grasp truly what a writer or speaker intends to communicate with his words.

Then the real task begins: Does what an author intends to communicate with words conform to reality? Is the conception of providence that an author describes true? Or, in the case of this book, since I take the Bible to be the touchstone of truth: Do we grasp truly what the Bible teaches about God’s providence?

So as I turn to clarify more specifically what I mean by God’s providence, it should be clear that I am caught in a kind of catch-22. On the one hand, I should give my evidence from the Bible first, in order to support my understanding of God’s providence. On the other hand, I have to use the term *providence* all along the way as I lay out that evidence, and the term should have a clear meaning for my readers, which can only come from that evidence. I can either give you a clear sense of what I mean by *providence* before I give you the evidence for it, or I can use the word *providence* ambiguously throughout the book and wait for a clear conception until the end.

I don’t like ambiguity. I think it is the source of much confusion and error. So I choose the first option. Here at the beginning, I’m going to give you as clear a conception as I can of what I mean by divine providence, knowing that it is based on evidence not yet provided. Then you may view the rest of the book as biblical support and explanation and application and celebration for this conception of providence.

My aim in this book is not to develop a new meaning of providence that the church has not embraced in its historic statements of faith. Instead, I aim to gather from the Scriptures some very old kindling of truth, pile it up in plain view, and put a match to it. This is not because I want to consume it, but because I want to release its incendiary properties for the intensifying of true worship, the solidifying of wavering

conviction, the strengthening of embattled faith, the toughening of joyful courage, and the advance of God's mission in this world.

Some Good, Old Views of Providence

Let's reach back a few centuries for some definitions of providence that I am very happy with, because I think they express biblical truth.

Heidelberg Catechism (1563)

Question 27. What do you understand by the providence of God?

Answer. The almighty, everywhere-present power of God, whereby, as it were by his hand, He still upholds heaven and earth with all creatures, and so governs them that herbs and grass, rain and drought, fruitful and barren years, meat and drink, health and sickness, riches and poverty, indeed, all things come not by chance, but by his fatherly hand.

As in virtually all confessions, divine providence signifies an "almighty, everywhere-present power of God." This power "upholds" and "governs" all things. But what gives this definition its twist toward providence (and not just sovereignty) is the phrase "by his fatherly hand." This carries massive implications about the design of God's governing of all things. It implies that everything in the universe is governed with a view of the good of God's children! But we must wait to see this more fully.

The Belgic Confession (1561)

Article 13. The Doctrine of God's Providence

We believe that this good God, after creating all things, did not abandon them to chance or fortune but leads and governs them according to his holy will, in such a way that nothing happens in this world without God's orderly arrangement.

Again God “leads and governs” all things so that nothing is left to “chance or fortune.” And again, what focuses the doctrine on providence, not just sovereignty, is that “nothing happens . . . without God’s *orderly arrangement*.” Which, of course, begs for an explanation of the word *orderly*. Order implies design and purpose. Order to what end? That is what we will focus on in part 2 of this book.

Westminster Larger Catechism (1648)

Question 18. What are the works of providence?

Answer. God’s works of providence are his most holy, wise, and powerful preserving and governing all his creatures; ordering them, and all their actions, to his own glory.

God’s providence not only “preserves” and upholds the existence of “all his creatures,” but also “[orders] . . . all their actions.” The purpose of all this preserving and ordering is made explicit: “to his glory.” This is purposeful sovereignty, which we call *providence*.

Westminster Confession of Faith (1646)

Chapter 5. Of Providence

5.1. God the great Creator of all things doth uphold, direct, dispose, and govern all creatures, actions, and things, from the greatest even to the least, by his most wise and holy providence, according to his infallible foreknowledge, and the free and immutable counsel of his own will, to the praise of the glory of his wisdom, power, justice, goodness, and mercy.

This is the fullest definition we have seen so far. God upholds, directs, disposes, and governs “all creatures, actions, and things.” This is pervasive sovereignty. Then come all the providential colors: sovereignty governed by wisdom and holiness—and all “to the praise of the glory of his wisdom, power, justice, goodness, and mercy.”

This way of expressing God's aim in providence will prove to be critical in being faithful to Scripture. Some views of providence focus so fully on God's aim in displaying his mercy that the rest of his glory is obscured. I think the Westminster resistance to that reduction is wise and biblical. The aim of God's providence, so says the confession, is "to the praise" of God's glory—not just one aspect, or one facet, of his glory (such as love or grace or mercy) but *all* of it: "the glory of his wisdom, power, justice, goodness, and mercy."

What Is the Difference between Providence and Fate?

Sometimes these strong statements of God's directing, disposing, and governing of all creatures, actions, and things raise the question of how the biblical view of God's providence differs from fate. The idea of fate has a long history—from Greek mythology to modern physics. What troubles people in general is that fate and providence imply a kind of fixedness to the future that seems to make life meaningless. Here is Charles Spurgeon's (1834–1892) response to this concern.

First, he gives us his astonishing conviction about the minute pervasiveness of divine providence. This is from a sermon on God's providence based on Ezekiel 1:15–19:

I believe that every particle of dust that dances in the sunbeam does not move an atom more or less than God wishes—that every particle of spray that dashes against the steamboat has its orbit, as well as the sun in the heavens—that the chaff from the hand of the winnower is steered as the stars in their courses. The creeping of an aphid over the rosebud is as much fixed as the march of the devastating pestilence—the fall of . . . leaves from a poplar is as fully ordained as the tumbling of an avalanche.²

2 Charles Spurgeon, "God's Providence," sermon on Ezek. 1:15–19, Bible Bulletin Board, accessed April 9, 2020, <http://www.biblebb.com/files/spurgeon/3114.htm>.

That's astonishing. Every tiny, popping bubble in the foam at the top of a newly poured can of Coke. Every floating dust mote which you can see only in the early-morning bedroom beam of light. Every tip of every stalk of grain stretching across the endless Nebraska plains. All of them, with all their slightest movements, specifically governed by God.

So Spurgeon foresees the objection and continues on in the same sermon:

You will say this morning, Our minister is a fatalist. Your minister is no such thing. Some will say, Ah! he believes in fate. He does not believe in fate at all. What is fate? Fate is this—*Whatever is, must be*. But there is a difference between that and Providence. Providence says, *Whatever God ordains must be*; but the wisdom of God never ordains anything without a purpose. Everything in this world is working for some one great end. Fate does not say that. Fate simply says that the thing must be; Providence says, God moves the wheels along, and there they are.

If anything would go wrong, God puts it right; and if there is anything that would move awry, he puts his hand and alters it. It comes to the same thing; but there is a difference as to the object. There is all the difference between fate and Providence that there is between a man with good eyes and a blind man. Fate is a blind thing; it is the avalanche crushing the village down below and destroying thousands. Providence is not an avalanche; it is a rolling river, rippling at the first like a rill down the sides of the mountain, followed by minor streams, till it rolls in the broad ocean of everlasting love, working for the good of the human race. The doctrine of Providence is not: *what is, must be*; but that what is works together for the good of our race, and especially for the good of the chosen people of God. The wheels are full of eyes; not blind wheels.³

3 Spurgeon, "God's Providence."

I hope it will become obvious in what follows, particularly in part 2, that God's ultimate purpose in his pervasive providence is so purposeful, so wise, so holy, so gracious, and so joyful that the last thing anyone would think to call it is *fate*.

For the Ever-Increasing Enjoyment of All Who Love God

I agree with all of the descriptions of God's providence that we have seen above from the historic confessions of faith and from Spurgeon. I think they are coherent with each other and faithful to Scripture. This is what I will mean by the term *providence* in this book. But it might be helpful to quote one more affirmation of faith to clarify my own view.

During my thirty-three years as pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church, the elders carefully crafted a document called *The Bethlehem Baptist Church Elder Affirmation of Faith*. Since I was part of that process, the statement on God's providence in this affirmation captures some emphases that will unfold in this book. Here are the key quotes on providence:

3.1. We believe that God, from all eternity, in order to display the full extent of His glory for the eternal and ever-increasing enjoyment of all who love Him, did, by the most wise and holy counsel of his will, freely and unchangeably ordain and foreknow whatever comes to pass.

3.2. We believe that God upholds and governs all things—from galaxies to subatomic particles, from the forces of nature to the movements of nations, and from the public plans of politicians to the secret acts of solitary persons—all in accord with his eternal, all-wise purposes to glorify Himself, yet in such a way that He never sins, nor ever condemns a person unjustly; but that his ordaining and governing all things is compatible with the moral accountability of all persons created in his image.⁴

⁴ "Elder Affirmation of Faith," Bethlehem Baptist Church (website), October 18, 2015, <https://bethlehem.church/elder-affirmation-of-faith/>.

This claim that God communicates his glory “for the eternal and ever-increasing enjoyment of all who love Him” is, I believe, implicit in the historic creeds, as, for example, when the Westminster Catechism says that the chief end of man is “to glorify God and *enjoy* him forever.”⁵ But I regard this goal of the enjoyment of God, and its relationship to the glorification of God, as so crucial to the purpose of God in providence that I make it explicit and prominent. It will, I hope, become clear in part 2 that this is not just what *I* do. It is what Scripture does.

Before we turn to the task of part 2 and the question of God’s *goal* in providence, it will be helpful to deal with what many see as a stumbling block—namely, the self-exaltation involved in God’s aim to display his own glory. That is what we take up in chapter 2.

5 For the exegetical defense of this idea of ever-increasing joy in the age to come, see the discussion of Eph. 2:7 in chap. 14.



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