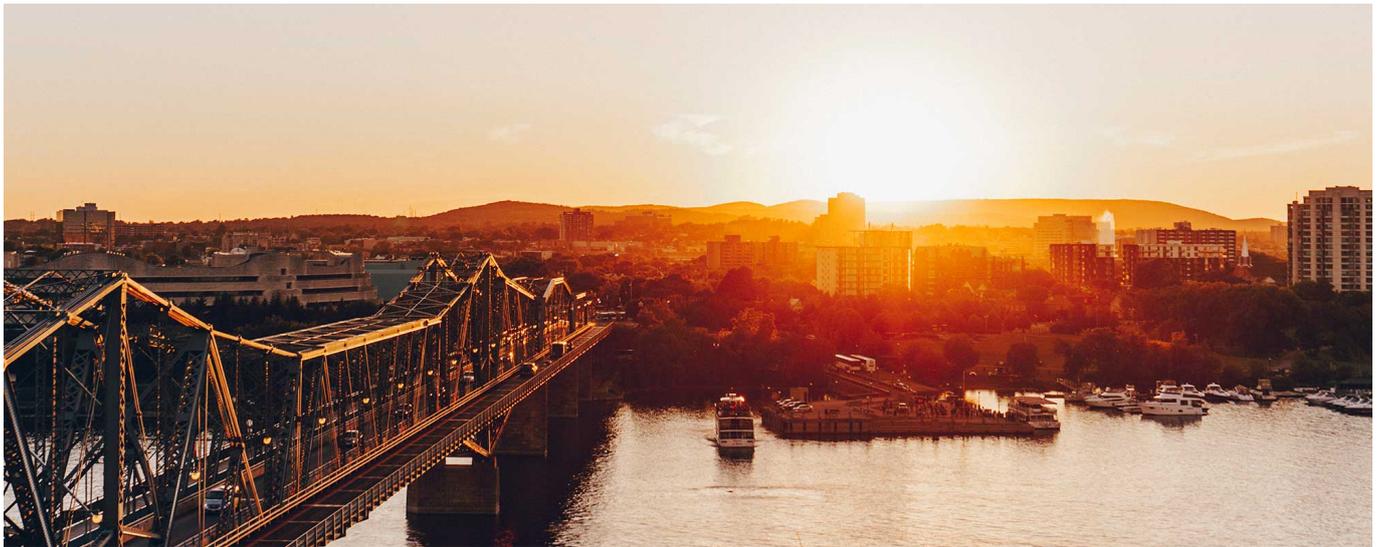


A Crash Course on God's Providence

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There's some confusion about God's providence. To be frank, I don't quite understand it that well myself. That is not to say, however, that the Bible doesn't lay out some parameters in our understanding of providence. However we understand God's providence, we need to make sure it is in harmony with God's Word. Consider the following principles regarding God's providence.

First, God will never providentially operate in a way that is contrary to His nature or His Word.

God is holy (Lev. 19:2) and righteous (Psa. 145:17), and therefore will not providentially operate in a way that is inconsistent with His being. While God may manipulate nature and orchestrate events, He will never tempt people to do evil (Jas. 1:13-14).

Second, God will never providentially operate in a way that violates man's freedom of choice.

Contrary to the teachings of Calvin, Augustine, and Zwingli (all of whom taught that

mankind is unable to *choose* righteousness without being *forced* to do so by God), the Bible teaches that man is free to choose whether to obey or disobey God (cf. Josh. 24:15; Matt. 23:37; John 5:39-40; Rev. 2:5, 16, 21-22; 3:3, 19; 22:17). Therefore, God will not force someone to choose to do right or wrong. God is no respecter of persons (Acts 10:34-35) and will not nebulously ordain that some obey Him while coercing others to disobey Him. He can, however, override the outcome of someone's evil decision and use it for good.

For example, God used the murderous intentions of Joseph's brothers to deliver Israel (Gen. 50:19-20). God used the greedy slave owners who threw Paul and Silas in prison to bring the gospel to that region (1 Thess. 2:1-2). God orchestrated the cowardly, corrupt Pilate, the evil Jewish leaders, and the crooked Judas to bring about the crucifixion of Jesus, resulting in the gift of salvation to the whole world (Acts 5:30-31). God used the martyrdom of Stephen in Acts 7 to cause a widespread dispersion of Christians into the world to further spread the gospel (Acts 8:1).

Third, God's providence must be distinguished from God's miracles.

God's **miracles** (a) are observable and quantifiable, (b) supersede natural law, and (c) teach an underlying truth. God's **providence**, on the other hand, does not fit into any of these categories. Miracles are observable and quantifiable in that they can be seen and distinguished from natural events, such as a resurrection from the dead (John 11:43-44), floating disembodied fingers writing on walls (Dan. 5:5), and a dozen baskets of leftover food (John 6:13). Such examples are all undeniably supernatural events. Miracles supersede natural law in that they cannot be explained by natural phenomena. Additionally, miracles teach an underlying truth in that they are designed to elicit a faith response (e.g. Heb. 2:3-4). For instance, when Jesus healed a paralytic, He explained the reason why was so that we "may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins" (Mark 2:10).

Consider an example of how God's providence is different than God's miracles. First, note that when Mary was still a virgin she "was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit" (Matt. 1:18-25; Luke 1:30-37) - a fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy (Isa 7:14). Mary's conception while still a virgin cannot be explained naturally, thus it was a miracle. On the other hand, Hannah, of the Old Testament, was unable to conceive because her womb had been "closed" (1 Sam. 1:6). Yet she "prayed to the Lord and wept bitterly" (1 Sam. 1:10), promising the Lord that she would dedicate her son to His service if He would bless her with a son. God "remembered her," and her husband "knew Hannah his wife," and she "conceived and bore a son" (1 Sam. 1:19-20). Clearly, Hannah's conception can be explained by natural phenomena, whereas Mary's conception can only be a miracle.

Fourth, God’s providence is not usually easily discernable.

Without the Bible specifically telling us that God is at work in the world, we would not know anything about God’s providence. Even now, we may suspect that God is working providentially in our lives, but we may not be able to prove it. Mordecai was unsure whether God was using Esther to save the lives of the Jews, so he remarked, “Who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?” (Est. 4:14). The apostle Paul, unsure whether God orchestrated his meeting with the runaway slave Onesimus, said in his letter to Onesimus’ master, Philemon, “For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever” (Phile. 15). **If an inspired apostle was reluctant to claim something was an act of providence, we should be just as reluctant today.** We know that God is at work behind the scenes (cf. Rom. 8:28), but we are frequently unaware of how, or even if, He is operating in a given circumstance.

An excerpt from my newest book, *You Are A Theologian: Thinking Right About God* 

This is another volume in the *You Are A Theologian* book series. ***Thinking Right About God*** challenges readers to think more Biblically about God’s attributes, His triune nature, and His sovereignty. Like the first book in this series, it is ideal for a broad range of applications: personal study, small group discussions, and college/young adult/adult Bible class curriculum.

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