

## PROVIDENCE AND PRESERVATION

by

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From Carl F. H. Henry, ed., *Basic Christian Doctrines* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1971).

The doctrine called providence pervades the Scriptures of both Testaments. It is not incidental or accidental, but it is rationally integral to the scriptural system of truth and joyfully integral to its way of life. The term comes from the Latin *pro* and *videre*, meaning to look ahead, to foresee, and thus to plan in advance. But as here used, it also means to carry out the plan. And, since the agent of providence is the all-knowing, all-powerful God, literally everything is included. Although for purposes of analysis (following the order of the historical unfolding of God's purpose) we properly distinguish between creation, providence, redemption, and fulfillment, they all are simply stages in one eternal and unchanging purpose, the several historical stages of which are completely harmonious with, and fully support, each other.

In a brief article such as this, such a claim obviously cannot be fully documented. However, anyone who may doubt it should read the Scriptures with this claim in mind, and allow them to make their own impression on his mind. He will find that certain passages, as Psalm 139, express this doctrine sharply and powerfully, but the calm assurance with which the Scriptures as a whole either refer to it or simply assume it should perhaps have an even more convincing effect. A briefer way of achieving the same result might be to read Dr. G.C. Berkouwer's delightful treatise on *The Providence of God*. It is open to anyone to doubt the truth of the doctrine, if the intellectual difficulties which it undoubtedly entails seem overwhelming; but it is not open to any candid mind to doubt that the Scriptures uniformly teach it and take it for granted, or that millions of intelligent believers live joyfully and triumphantly in the conviction of its truth.

### INTEGRAL TO CREATION

This doctrine, as we have said, is integral to, harmonious with, and fulfills the doctrine of creation. Without it, the latter would be, as Calvin says, "jejune." For, as he also says, "unless we proceed to his providence, we have no correct conception of the meaning of the article 'that God is the Creator' " and "no one seriously believes that the world was made by God, who is not persuaded that he takes care of his own works." The Creator may not be thought to have made the world without any definite idea of what he intended to do with it, to discover that, when later his plans were matured, it was not well adapted to his purpose. What we can see, by revelation or by discovery, of his grand design shows clearly that central to it, so far as this world is concerned, is personal association. And so, from the beginning, he made the world so that it

could be a responsive stage for, and a contributing instrument of, personal fellowship, having indeed a share in that fellowship according to its various levels of potentiality. It is, as Keats expressed it, "a vale of soul-making"; and this is true even if the absolute idealists, who made great use of this conception, failed to understand its true significance.

But this involved the precise balancing of two apparently opposite conditions. On the one hand, as deism and naturalism one-sidedly maintain, God gave the world an abiding existence with inherent organization and with stable operations according to law; the world and its several constituent parts exist in some sense in their own right, possess their own character, and operate with their own dynamism. Thus the created world can be understood by acquaintance with its individual parts and discovery of its (and their) laws; and it can normally be assumed, without fear, that it will not change its character and action irresponsibly and unpredictably. But if, as deism and naturalism further maintain, the natural world were a closed system with no possibility of influence by its higher levels on the lower, or by the Creator, then the possibility of personal fellowship within it would have been precariously provided for only within narrow circles, and the Creator would have been shut out. And so, as pantheism maintains, God made the world everywhere, always and in all its parts open to and dependent upon His presence; and, as the French occasionalists also insisted, though equally one-sidedly, he made it completely responsive in all its operations to his will. If the continuous divine energy were even momentarily withdrawn, creation would lapse into nothingness. This is not, as Barth teaches, because it would be overwhelmed by a mysteriously positive and aggressive "chaos," although a power and purpose and a personal kingdom of destruction do exist. But, were the divine providence withheld, the created world would lapse into nothingness even if no such kingdom of evil existed at all. It would be so because it was originally made to be continuously dependent upon the sustaining power of God, and it was so made in the service of his purpose of personal fellowship. The same conception may be stated in positive terms. Although God and the created world are not to be identified, yet the relationship is so intimate that God is everywhere present and active, so that any action of created being, or of *a* created being, is at the same time God's act.

## BASIC TO REDEMPTION AND FULFILLMENT

Involved in what has already been said is the further fact that the doctrine of providence is basic to and completely harmonious with the doctrines of redemption and fulfillment. They simply represent, in view of the fact of evil, the further outworking of God's original and unchanging purpose of personal fellowship. God had them in mind when he created the world, and does now as he providentially sustains and governs it. The Lamb was slain from before the foundation of the world, and the world was so created and constituted and providentially governed that, in the fullness of the times, he would enter into it by way of incarnation, live and die in it, and rise again. This was no afterthought worked out in a world not already prepared for it. All history, including cosmic history, was from the beginning designed to be summed up in Christ by the power, wisdom, and grace of God, who is continuously immanent in the world as he is ever also transcendent to it.

God's providence embraces not only the whole, but its parts as well--"all his creatures and all their actions." This includes "free" creatures, their "free" actions (even their evil ones), and their sinful state. It is here that many who would disagree with what has already been said begin to hesitate or deny. Among the various reasons given for negative reaction at this point, two seem

to be of basic importance, and another, not so generally recognized or admitted, is probably even more influential. The latter is simply the refusal of the sinful human heart to surrender to God and to rest joyfully in his sovereignty. Those who acknowledge it do not need that it be further discussed here, and to those who refuse to admit it, nothing that we can say would do much good. So we will turn to the other sources of difficulty.

One of them is a certain dualism which assumes or asserts that if God rules in any action, then it is God's act *and not a free man's*, and if man acts freely, then it is man's act *and not God's*. A careful exposure of this unbiblical dualism is sorely needed, for by it much theological discussion (notably at this time discussion of revelation and inspiration) is vitiated. But such an exposure clearly lies beyond the limits of this discussion. Suffice it here to point out that the Scriptures nowhere present or endorse such a dualism. They freely attribute human actions to God, actions which, insofar as they are attributed to man, are judged to be good or evil. One and the same act is an act of self-hardening on Pharaoh's part and an act of hardening by God of Pharaoh's heart. One and the same act is a result of the evil purposes of Joseph's brethren and of the good purpose of God. Also, be it carefully noted, the relations between man and God, in these free human actions, is not simply a voluntary cooperation of two independent actors. It is much more intimate than that. Paul is in Christ and Christ is in Paul. We are to work out our own salvation, for it is God who works in us both the willing and the doing. A scriptural study of the work of the Holy Spirit *as possession* would be specially illuminating at this point. It would make it abundantly clear why the Scriptures are aware of no problem here, because they take for granted and affirm not this subtle dualism but God's providential and gracious rule.

## THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

The other source of difficulty for many is the far profounder problem of evil. There are really two problems of evil. One, which may be called the *practical* problem of evil, asks: since evil there is, what can be done about it? The Gospel is the sufficient answer. The other may be called the *theoretical* problem of evil. In a world created and providentially sustained and governed by a God of infinite wisdom, goodness, and power, how could evil possibly be real? How could such a God be said to sustain and govern evil creatures in their continued being and in all their actions? The writer of the Book of Job, the Psalmist, and other Scripture writers are aware of some aspects of this theoretical problem, but, though some light is here and there thrown upon it, the Scriptures never attempt a theoretical answer to it. When some aspect of it is presented, it is always as a challenge to faith; and from the resulting struggle, faith emerges strengthened and deepened and expressing itself as doxology.

Modern believers find themselves in the same situation. They freely acknowledge that no man knows the answer to this theoretical problem--an acknowledgment that is only confirmed by a study of Barth's ambitious attempt to solve the problem. Their faith is challenged, but it emerges singing, "This is my Father's world." They confess with Lewis F. Stearns, "If we only had the faith to apprehend, in the things seen and temporal, the things unseen and eternal, we should discover in every running brook and every breaking dawn, in every event of history and every experience of life, the presence of Our Savior, working for human redemption." Or, as B.B. Warfield used to express it, "The devil thinks he is free; but he has the bit in his mouth, and God holds the reins."

Naturally, if some other god is substituted for the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, this

can become an unspeakably terrible doctrine. By any who know God in Christ but have rejected him, this doctrine will also be fiercely rejected. If, forgetting the humility that is due in our situation of finiteness and sinfulness, we insist on having all the answers, this doctrine may well seem incredible. But if, knowing whom we have believed, we are ready to follow the light which he has revealed, we will find that this doctrine (which is light indeed in the midst of our darkness) will inevitably issue, together with all the other Christian doctrines with which it is harmoniously associated, in a life of gratitude and joy.

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