

Fundamentals, Study 5. Providence (Acts 17:22-34)

by BS Poh

o The doctrine of providence is important because it gives comfort and strength to the children of God.

1. *Providence* is God's work of preserving and controlling everything He has created. This work of God extends over the physical and the spiritual realms, the things that are without life as well as the things that have life, the events that happen as well as the decisions of man. Nothing happens by chance. Otherwise, prayer will be meaningless.¹ (1. Isa 46:10-11; Psalm 135:6; Matt 5:45; 6:30; Acts 14:17)

2. God controls the events in the world in two ways. The first way is known as *general providence*, in which means are used. These means, also known as "second causes", include: (a) the laws of nature (e.g. gravity, light, heat, electricity, etc.); (b) the decisions of men, and (c) the interaction between the decisions of men and the laws of nature (sometimes known as "the law of cause and effect"). This is God's ordinary way of controlling everything.² In the second way, known as *special providence*, God controls the timing and concurrence of events to specially answer the prayers of His people or to fulfil His own will. God may also perform miracles by overruling natural laws, human decisions and circumstances as and when He pleases.³ He caused the Red Sea to open up for the Israelites to cross over. The three friends of Daniel were not burned to death in the fiery furnace. Lazarus was raised up to life after being dead four days. True conversion, leading to a transformed life, is a work of special providence.⁴ (2. Acts 27:31, 44; Prov 16:1; 21:1; 3. Hosea 1:7; Rom 4:19-21; Dan 3:27; 4. Isa 37:21-22; Dan 9:20-23; John 15:7; Acts 10:30-31.)

3. We must guard against two wrong ideas about providence. One idea is known as *deism*, which teaches that God allows all things to run on their own, just like a battery-operated clock that is allowed to run on its own. In other words, God is no longer involved in the affairs of the universe.⁵ The other wrong teaching is known as *pantheism*, which teaches that God is everywhere in the universe in such a way that anything that happens is a direct act of God. Pantheism confounds (i.e. mixes together) the Creator with the things created, and the work of creation with the work of preservation. It denies the reality of all second causes.⁶ (5. Psalm 50:1, 15, 16, 23; 6. Acts 17:24, 29)

4. Even the sinful acts of men are under God's control and permission. However, men are held totally responsible for their sinful actions. The holy God can never be the author or approver of sins.⁷ In fact, God restricts and controls the sins of men so that His wise and merciful purposes are fulfilled.⁸ In particular, He governs all things to the good of His people.⁹ (7. James 1:13; 1 Cor 10:13; 8. 2 Kings 19:28; Psalm 76:10; 9. Gen 50:20; Rom 8:28)

5. Those who belong to God are often left, for a time, to face various temptations and sufferings, in order to punish them for their sins, or to show them the deceitfulness of their hearts. In this way, they will be kept humble and watchful against sins, and learn to trust and obey God. They will then

appreciate more the death of Christ on the cross, which was to secure their salvation and to cleanse them from all sins.¹⁰ Other men are allowed to continue in their sins, so that they harden themselves more and more. Their final condemnation in hell will be because they deserve it.¹¹ (10. 2 Chron 32:25-31; 2 Cor 12:7-9; 11. Exod 8:15, 32; Isa 6:9-10; 1 Pet 2:7-8)

= Let us be thankful to God for His providence, and seek His mercy, through faith in Christ.

Review Questions

1. What is *providence*?
2. Why will prayer be meaningless if things happen by chance?
3. What is *general providence*?
4. Name the *second causes*.
5. What is *special providence*?
6. How does *deism* contradict providence?
7. How does *pantheism* contradict providence?
8. Why does God restrict and control the sins of men?
9. Why does God often leave His people to face temptations and sufferings?
10. Why should we not blame God for the sins and condemnation of other men?

Assignment/Discussion

Why is the doctrine of providence such a comfort and strength to Christians? See Prov. 16:1; 21:1; Isa. 37:21-22; Dan. 9:20-23; John 15:7; Acts 10:30-31.

Memory Passage (Neh 9:6)

You alone are the Lord;
You have made heaven,
The heaven of heavens, with all their host,
The earth and everything on it,
The seas and all that is in them,
And You preserve them all.
The host of heaven worships You.

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