

Divine Providence

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Introduction

How does one define providence? No single Hebrew or Greek word expresses the idea of God's providence.

The Greek word *pronoia*, describing God's purposeful foresight, was frequently used by the ancients, but occurs only 2x in the NT, denoting not God's care, but man's (Acts 24:2; Rom. 13:14).

- Thomas defines *πρόνοια* [*pronoia*] as from *prnoeō* [to foresee], meaning “foresight, forethought” [4307].
- BDAG say it refers to “thoughtful planning to meet a need, forethought, foresight, providence; (a) of God especially with reference to divine beneficence; (b) of humans.”

The root verb *prnoeō*, used by Philo, Josephus and others to describe divine foresight, is also used in Scripture – but only of man, although in certain instances, such men were divinely-empowered (Acts 2:25, 31; 21:29; Gal. 3:8).

- Thomas defines *προνοέω* [*prnoeō*], a compound of *pro* [before] and *horaō* [to see, perceive, attend to], meaning “to foresee” [4306].
- BDAG say it means “(1) to see in advance, foresee, with an eye to the future; (2) to see at a time prior to the present, see previously; (3) in the middle voice, to have before one's eyes, see before one.”

Definition

Divine providence is often assumed rather than asserted in Scripture, being implied or inferred in many passages. Whenever God's plan and purpose are pronounced, when deliverance is discussed, when prayer is prescribed, the concept of providence hovers in the background.

Providence is the ongoing activity of a benevolent Creator in upholding His creation in ordered existence. Guiding events and governing circumstances, He constantly works toward His desired goals. Employing Omniscience, Omnipotence, and Omnipresence, God provides and protects, punishes and penalizes, promotes and pursues His eternal purpose. Yet, all the while, He respects the free moral agency of mankind, holding us each accountable for our individual choices.

Distortions

Pantheism absorbs the world into God. Deism cuts it off from Him. Dualism divides control between God and another power. Indeterminism affirms the world is under no control. Determinism imposes a control that destroys man's moral responsibility. Chance denies this controlling power to be rational. Fate denies it to be benevolent.

- Pantheism affirms that everything is God and God is everything. "God is all and all is God." This view both diminishes God, and deifies nature.
- Deism views God as an "absentee landlord" who is too remote to be involved in the day-to-day events of His creation.
- Dualism proposes two gods, one good and one evil. Attempting to avoid imputing evil to the Lord, this philosophy diminishes Jehovah, robbing Him of His uniqueness, and exalts Satan, making him far more powerful than he really is. (Zoroastrianism)
- Indeterminism is the concept that events are not deterministically caused by prior events or outside forces. In other words, there is no guiding force in the universe. (Materialism)
- Determinism is the philosophical view which affirms that every type of event, including human behavior (thoughts, words, deeds, etc.) is causally determined by previous events. In other words, the guiding force in the universe (God) is absolutely sovereign, and everything happens because of Him. (Calvinism)
- Chance is a philosophy, closely akin to indeterminism, which affirms that life is unpredictable, impersonal, and purposeless.
- Fate affirms that events are outside a person's control, predetermined by supernatural powers. In Greek and Roman mythology, the Fates, (i.e., the goddesses Clotho, Lachesis, and Atropos) preside over the birth and life of humans.

Providence in the Natural Realm

God is good, blessing both man and beast (Psa. 104:24-30). He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous (Matt. 5:42-45). He provides for the birds of the air, and clothes the lilies of the field (Matt. 6:25-33). Christ the Creator is before all things and through Him all things hold together (Col. 1:16-18). The Son of God made the world, and upholds all things by the word of His power (Heb. 1:1-4).

Providence in the Spiritual Realm

Messianic prophecies foreshadowed the coming of Christ (Gen. 3:15; 12:1-3; 49:8-10; 2 Sam. 7:8-17). In the fulness of time, God sent forth His Son to fulfill his promise of redemption (Gal. 4:4-5; cf. Mark 1:14-15). God's eternal plan and purpose were accomplished, at least in part, through the agency of sinful men (John 11:47-53; Acts 2:22-36; 3:17-26; 4:23-31). God's ability to work through the malicious intentions of men to accomplish His benevolent purposes is well-illustrated in the example of Joseph (Gen. 37:18-36; 50:15-21).

Providence in the Political Realm

God changes the times and the epochs, removing kings and also establishing kings (Dan. 2:19-23). The Most High rules over the realm of mankind, bestowing it on whom He wishes, setting over it the lowliest of men (Dan. 4:13-17). The Lord made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation (Acts 17:24-28). Jesus Christ, King of kings and Lord of lords, strikes down the nations, ruling them with a rod of iron, treading the wine press of the fierce wrath of God, the Almighty (Rev. 19:11-18).

Providence in the Personal Realm

God provides for our physical needs (Matt. 6:11; Heb. 13:5-6). He provides for our spiritual needs (Matt. 6:12; 1 Pet. 3:10-12). He provides for our spiritual deliverance (Matt. 6:13; 1 Cor. 10:13).

Qualifications

Divine providence is no guarantee against hardship or hunger (Deut. 8:2-3). It is no guarantee against sickness or suffering (2 Cor. 12:7-9). It is no guarantee against persecution or peril (Rom. 8:28-39). Divine providence is a reality; yet, we must exercise caution in our expectations (Rom. 1:8-10; 15:30-33). We must also exercise caution in our assertions (Esth. 4:9-14; Phile. 10-16).

Conclusion

Divine providence does not remove human accountability (Matt. 18:7; Luke 22:21-22), nor does it negate our responsibility (Acts 2:37-41; 3:17-21). Therefore, obey the gospel while there is time and opportunity.