

Providence

Is it Providence or Coincidence?

The Providence of God is mysterious. Just when we think we've identified an instance of it—the certainty gets away from us. For example, I had an appointment with a doctor in Knoxville (in August 2014) and the nurse had scheduled my visit at a different office than the one I usually visit. Before the time came for the appointment we decided to take a drive to the new office to locate it—just to be sure I knew where to go when the appointment time came.

We drove to Knoxville and learned that the new doctor's office was nowhere to be found. We called the number twice to get an explanation but got no answer. We even had a nearby hospital call to locate my doctor's office. They got nothing.

The lady at the hospital recommended we try a nearby office building that had been renovated but still stood empty. She gave us directions. We went, although we had little confidence that we would locate the new office.

As we pulled into the parking lot of the vacant office building another car entered the parking lot behind us. I didn't think anything about it until we both stopped.

The other driver got out of his car I recognized him. He was my doctor. He said he had decided on the spur of the moment to check to see if his new offices had been finished. They hadn't.

I said, "This is amazing. We were just looking for your office."

As he got into this car to leave he said, "Isn't God great?"

Coincidence? God's Providence? Or was it too trivial a thing for God to be bothered with?

We can't be sure. Nevertheless, a small event that has a big effect is a clue that God is at work.

Sometimes things happen to us that—at the time—look like the worst that could possibly happen, but then when we look back on it we see that the whole experience was for the good.

Many times God's providence is like that. It is like the story of Joseph.

It does not always look favorable

Joseph's brothers sold him into bondage to Ishmaelites, who then delivered to Potiphar in Egypt where he was a slave. Betrayed by Potiphar's wife and jailed where he interpreted the dreams of Pharaoh's cupbearer and baker. This led to his meeting with the Pharaoh for whom he interpreted the dream about the fat cattle and the lean cattle. All this led to his rise to the 2nd highest rank in Egypt and the ability to save his family from the famine.

Surely Joseph thought it was a terrible thing for him to be sold by his own brothers to Ishmaelites, and then delivered into slavery in Egypt.

Later, he saw a different picture.

Genesis 50:19 But Joseph said to them, "Do not be afraid, for am I in God's place? 20 "As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive. 21 "So therefore, do not be afraid; I will provide for you and your little ones." So he comforted them and spoke kindly to them.

The guiding principle in God's providence is His love. No one is "...in God's place," but God.

He sees all; He knows all; He guides all to accomplish His overall purpose.¹

Creatures may intend to do evil, but no one can defeat God's purpose. God intended to see that Joseph's brothers' evil would—in the end—accomplish good.

Abraham teaches us about providence.

Abraham was the servant of God, a man whose faith in God rose to the level of archetype. He also had a son of his old age whom he loved. But a day came when God decided to test Abraham to learn if Abraham loved his son more than God.

Genesis 22:2 He said, "Take now your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I will tell you." 3 So Abraham rose early in the morning and saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him and Isaac his son; and he split wood for the burnt offering, and arose and went to the place of which God had told him.

This was the classic test of faith. Abraham loved Isaac and he loved God. But did he love Isaac more than God?

Yet, how could Abraham's love and God's love solve this brutal dilemma?

Genesis 22:6 Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son, and he took in his hand the fire and the knife. So the two of them walked on together. 7 Isaac spoke to Abraham his father and said, "My father!" And he said, "Here I am, my son." And he said, "Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?"

¹ Romans 8:28.

In these preparations Isaac began to see that something was missing. Where was the sacrifice? Abraham knew what God had required, but he kept his faith in God's providence.

Genesis 22:8 Abraham said, "God will provide for Himself the lamb for the burnt offering, my son."
So the two of them walked on together.

The word "providence" means literally "to see before," and therefore by implication to do something about the situation. In this case, there was already upon Mount Moriah a suitable sacrifice, "a ram, caught in a thicket by his horns" (v 13).²

Yet, at this point Abraham had no idea that there was a ram in the bushes, but God knew. Faith required that Abraham trust in God's providence, even if it meant that God would raise Isaac from the dead.

Then in the greatest test of faith as recorded in the scriptures Abraham laid Isaac on the altar, on top of the wood, and took the knife in his hand to slay him. It was then that the angel called to him and said, "Do not stretch out your hand against the lad, and do nothing to him, for now I know that you fear God..." vs, 12.

Genesis 22:13 Then Abraham raised his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him a ram caught in the thicket by his horns; and Abraham went and took the ram and offered him up for a burnt offering in the place of his son.

An unbeliever, reading this passage, would say that the process that brought the ram to the thicket where it got caught was entirely natural. And it was a coincidence that Abraham and Isaac happened to arrive there at that time. But Abraham, the man of faith, had been led for three days to this exact spot,

2. Elwell, W. A., & Comfort, P. W. (2001). Tyndale Bible dictionary. Tyndale reference library (1092). Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers.

and he was in desperate need of Divine help—for the dilemma was great.

God does not provide by accident. This is the eternal principle in providence. God provides for our needs. He has seen it from afar and He provides.

The great text on providence in the NT is also set in a context of sacrifice pleasing to God. Paul had reason to commend the Philippians' sacrificial support of his missionary work. To them he stated his unbounded confidence in the providential care of God:

Philippians 4:18 But I have received everything in full and have an abundance; I am amply supplied, having received from Epaphroditus what you have sent, a fragrant aroma, an acceptable sacrifice, well-pleasing to God. 19 And my God will supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus.³

The Philippians gave to Paul, and God supplied the Philippians all their needs. We do not understand this to be a *quid pro quo*—something for something—rather, more like the interworking of the organs of the body. Each organ has its own role, its own function, and together all are a unit. In this way God supplies all our needs—both physical and spiritual—because He has foreseen it.

Moreover, there is a difference between our “needs” and our “wants.”

Jesus told His disciples,

Matthew 6:25 “For this reason I say to you, do not be worried about your life, as to what you will eat or what you will drink; nor for your body, as to what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? 26 “Look at

³ Elwell, W. A., & Comfort, P. W. (2001). *Tyndale Bible dictionary*. Tyndale reference library (1092). Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers.

the birds of the air, that they do not sow, nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not worth much more than they? 27 “And who of you by being worried can add a single hour to his life? 28 “And why are you worried about clothing? Observe how the lilies of the field grow; they do not toil nor do they spin, 29 yet I say to you that not even Solomon in all his glory clothed himself like one of these. 30 “But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the furnace, will He not much more clothe you? You of little faith! 31 “Do not worry then, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear for clothing?’ 32 “For the Gentiles eagerly seek all these things; for your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. 33 “But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. 34 “So do not worry about tomorrow; for tomorrow will care for itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.

- God provides for the basics of life.
- There is no need to worry about acquiring the things that God provides.

But Christ said, “...seek **FIRST** His kingdom and His righteousness.”

We should think of the kingdom of God in this way: the kingdom of God is first and foremost the rule of God.⁴ His

⁴ Edersheim, A. (1896). *Vol. 1: The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* (267). New York: Longmans, Green, and Co. “According to the Rabbinic views of the time, the terms ‘Kingdom,’ ‘Kingdom of heaven,’ and ‘Kingdom of God’ (in the Targum on Micah 4:7 ‘Kingdom of Jehovah’), were equivalent. In fact, the word ‘heaven’ was very often used instead of ‘God,’ so as to avoid unduly familiarising the ear with the Sacred Name. This, probably, accounts for the exclusive use of the expression ‘Kingdom of

righteousness—emphasis on “His”—is that which comes to us on the basis of faith—like the faith of Abraham.

Our tendency is to doubt that God provides, or that His instructions are the wisest to follow. This is what we must overcome, and add to that—we should submit to God’s rule.

Providence should not be confused with the counterfeits.

- **Counterfeit Concepts of Providence**

The nonbelieving world has many erroneous ideas about providence. At the heart of every secular proposal about providence is the denial of the personhood of God. In the worldly religions or the secular philosophies there is always some cold principle or force dominating man or clashing with his life. It may be all-pervasive or local. It may be rational or irrational, consistent or arbitrary.

False providences include these,

Fate Countless numbers of people have thought themselves to be trapped by a sometimes fickle and always foreboding fate. “As fate would have it,” they say.

Luck Life is indeed fortuitous at times. Optimists speak of “fortune,” or less solemnly of “luck.” But then, since this is all so impersonal, fortune-tellers arose, and someone dreamed up “lady luck.” [Was the outcome of the Battle of Midway merely the product of luck? The producers of the epic movie, *Midway*, thought so. Was it merely fortuitous that the Japanese Zeros

Heaven’ in the Gospel by St. Matthew.” And further, “A review of many passages on the subject shows that, in the Jewish mind, the expression ‘Kingdom of Heaven’ referred, not so much to any particular period, as in general to *the Rule of God*—as acknowledged, manifested, and eventually perfected. Very often it is the equivalent for personal acknowledgment of God: the taking upon oneself of the ‘yoke’ of ‘the Kingdom,’ or of the commandments—the former preceding and conditioning the latter.”

were drawn to the extreme lower altitudes and so allowed the American dive bombers to approach the Japanese fleet virtually unopposed. These dive bombers destroyed four Japanese aircraft carriers in the attack and virtually turned the tide of the Second World War. An accident of Luck? I don't think so.]

Serendipity This is the term used by the one who takes credit for unintentional discoveries of good things along the way in life. But he refuses to acknowledge that God was there before him and so he does not give thanks.

History Some Marxist propagandists have championed their cause by saying, "History is on our side." They were appealing to a supposed inevitability of future events that would lead to a Communistic world. "History" in such a statement appears to have taken on a divine dimension. Likewise, when American leaders have affirmed a "manifest destiny" for the United States to be the superior power in the Western hemisphere or in the world at large, the same kind of reasoning is employed.

Progress The development of science and technology, education and social evolution, and territorial conquests have made some people believers in progress as something more than what is seen. Until the two world wars, there was the illusion of a relentless momentum pushing upward and onward forever. In some respects, progress is but providence by another name, but not to the degree that people assume for themselves the glory that belongs to God.

Nature Men like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau of 19th-century New England attributed to nature the gifts of providence. But nature is impersonal and abstract. There is no "Mother Nature."

Natural Selection and the Survival of the Fittest Charles Darwin's classic on biological evolution, *The Origin of the Species*, appeared in 1859. It popularized two relatively new theories. For millions of people, the mysterious decisions

behind “natural selection” intrigued the thoughtful more than the notion of God’s providence. And the idea that “the fit survive” necessarily makes providence altogether unnecessary.

These counterfeit views compete with the idea of God’s providence. Of course, they cannot all be true. Nor can they satisfy the inquirer whose personhood calls insistently for a personal providence that reflects a knowledge of his individual needs and uniqueness. Only the Christian doctrine of providence provides that.⁵

God provides for us spiritually.

- **He provides rules to live by.**

People do not know right from wrong as a result of birth. It’s not genetic. Moral instruction is essential to guide people through life, and to enable them to avoid the pitfalls and conflicts that arise because of human lust and greed. This may be seen in a controversy over the Ten Commandments.

There is the story of four men who held up a grocery store in Louisville, Kentucky, and in the process shot and killed two policemen. When the men were brought to trial, their lawyer noticed a copy of the Ten Commandments on the wall near the jury box.

“Judge Hayes,” said the attorney, “that framed reproduction of the Commandments is detrimental to this trial. I request that it be removed lest it adversely influence this jury.” Some people present observed that among the Commandments were these: “Thou shalt not steal”; “Thou shalt not kill.”

The judge said he did not believe the document would prejudice the trial and refused to have the Decalogue removed

⁵ Elwell, W. A., & Comfort, P. W. (2001). Tyndale Bible dictionary. Tyndale reference library (1092). Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers.

from the courtroom. So, the Commandments remained in the display for all to see.⁶

It is odd that in this life there are people who don't know that their adversity comes from violation of the very thing that could prevent their troubles. Had these four robbers but followed the Commandments⁷ they would not have been on trial for murder, and two police officers would have remained alive.

For the Christian there is only one way to escape the trials of life, and that is to steer a straight course through them. James wrote in his letter,

James 1:2 Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, 3 knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. 4 And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

The Christian's faith provides a way through the trials, and temptations. Sometimes the things we consider trials are what God has sent to cause us to change course.

- **Providence in the London fire**

Art Cashin, Director of Floor Operations at UBS, told a story about a massive fire that broke out in the city of London, England on September 2, 1666. It began in a bakery on Pudding Lane, which was on the East End (between London Bridge and the Tower). The fire spread quickly into the shop next door. That shop sold ship's goods, especially tar and turpentine. The building not only caught fire, it exploded, raining flaming tar down on the wooden buildings in the neighborhood.

At first the authorities dismissed it as a local blaze. The wind had other ideas, however. Strong gusts of wind whipped up the fire and soon the flames were spreading across the city. By mid-

⁶ Tan, P. L. (1996). Encyclopedia of 7700 Illustrations: Signs of the Times. Garland, TX: Bible Communications, Inc.

⁷ The Sabbath law is an obvious exception. Author.

morning the next day much of the city was on fire and much of the populace had taken to boats and barges on the Thames.

The king called for a team of Navy gun experts to blow up blocks of buildings to form a firebreak. The strategy worked and after raging three days, the fire burned itself out. The devastation, however, was huge. Nearly 500 acres of the city was burned to ashes. An estimated 15,000 homes and nearly 100 churches were fully destroyed leaving 100,000 homeless. Amazingly, the human death toll was set at 10.

Under the rubric of, “It’s an ill wind that blows no good” the disaster was, in fact, a blessing in disguise. The year before, nearly 100,000 Londoners had died of the Plague. A new outbreak had been feared but the fire destroyed the rat hovels where the plague-bearing fleas had thrived. After the Great Fire, the Plague virtually disappeared. No one realized it at the time but the fire saved the city.⁸

Sometimes there is a blessing in trials.

Paul said in his letter to the Philippians,

Philippians 1:12 Now I want you to know, brethren, that my circumstances have turned out for the greater progress of the gospel, 13 so that my imprisonment in the cause of Christ has become well known throughout the whole praetorian guard and to everyone else, 14 and that most of the brethren, trusting in the Lord because of my imprisonment, have far more courage to speak the word of God without fear.

- Sometimes good comes from adversity.
- Adversity happens for a reason.

In Acts Chapter 17 we are told that Paul and Silas came to Thessalonica to preach the gospel and they made converts both

⁸ 2014 by King World News®. September 3, 2014.

among the Jews and the God-fearing Gentiles. But we read in the 5th verse that,

Acts 17:5 ... the Jews, becoming jealous and taking along some wicked men from the market place, formed a mob and set the city in an uproar; and attacking the house of Jason, they were seeking to bring them out to the people. 6 When they did not find them, they began dragging Jason and some brethren before the city authorities, shouting, "These men who have upset the world have come here also; 7 and Jason has welcomed them, and they all act contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus."

Adversity seems to follow people who want to embrace the kingdom of God, or to extend its rule.

Acts 17:10 The brethren immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea, and when they arrived, they went into the synagogue of the Jews. 1 Now these were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so. 12 Therefore many of them believed, along with a number of prominent Greek women and men.

Paul and his companions suffered great adversity as they went about preaching the gospel. But great good came out of their preaching.

God's providence leads many to salvation

Peter wrote in his first letter,

1 Peter 4:14 If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you.

And in the same letter he said,

1 Peter 1:6 In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials, 7 so that the proof of

your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ; 8 and though you have not seen Him, you love Him, and though you do not see Him now, but believe in Him, you greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, 9 obtaining as the outcome of your faith the salvation of your souls.

In a book entitled the Search for the Twelve Apostles—which is excerpted below from an online article—we can read of the Apostle Peter’s final days,

“Of the final days of the apostle Peter in Rome, Jowett wrote that Peter was cast into a horrible prison called the Mamertine and for nine months, in absolute darkness, he endured monstrous torture manacled to a post. In spite of all the suffering Peter was subjected to, he converted his jailers, Processus, Martinianus, and forty-seven others. Peter met his death at the hand of the Romans in Nero’s circus, 67 AD.”⁹

Adversity, yes, because it was the price of saving souls.

God’s providence in Christ

God foreordained the coming of Christ, and in His foreordination He included the sufferings of Christ. God determined His suffering to be fitting to perfect Him as the author of man’s salvation. The glorification of man in Christ is God’s providence.

1 Peter 1:10 As to this salvation, the prophets who prophesied of the grace that *would come* to you made careful searches and inquiries, 11 seeking to know what person or time the Spirit of Christ

⁹ Source: The Search For The Twelve Apostles, William McBirnie, PH.D – biblepath.com

within them was indicating as He predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories to follow.

12 It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves, but you, in these things which now have been announced to you through those who preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven—things into which angels long to look.

When the Jewish authorities insisted that the Romans crucify Jesus they meant to do evil. They coveted their control of the beliefs of the people, and they jealously guarded their place and their nation.

But God meant it for good, not only for them but for all men. And so through God's providence in the offering of His Son...

Titus 2:11 For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, 12 instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and Godly in the present age, 13 looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus, 14 who gave Himself for us to redeem us from every lawless deed, and to purify for Himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds.

Make the choice to trust in God's providence.