PROVIDENCE AND PROMISE

HOW GOD RULES HIS UNIVERSE FOR THE GOOD OF HIS PEOPLE

BY BOB DEWAAY

"These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, but are of no value against fleshly indulgence." (**Colossians 2:23**)

There was a time in American history where the term "providence" was commonly used. During the nineteenth century our citizens understood the term, and it was important to them. In 1865 Lincoln used the term "providence" in his second inaugural address, demonstrating not only that the term was important but that he understood the difference between God's moral will and God's providential will:

> The Almighty has His own purposes. "Woe unto the world because of offenses; for it must needs be that offenses come, but woe to that man by whom the offense cometh." If we shall suppose that American slavery is one of those offenses which, in the providence of God, must needs come, but which, having continued through His appointed time, He now wills to remove, and that He gives to both North and South this terrible war as the woe due to those by whom the offense came, shall we discern therein any departure from those divine attributes which the believers in a living God always ascribe to Him?[1]

During the American Civil War, letters to home from soldiers on both sides often referenced providence.[2] In 1872, Charles Hodge devoted an entire chapter in his systematic theology to describe and defend the doctrine of providence. His chapter begins:

> God's works of providence are his most holy, wise, and powerful preserving and governing all his creatures and all their actions. Providence, therefore, includes preservation and government. By preservation is meant that all things out of God owe the continuance of their existence, with all their properties and powers, to the will of God. This is clearly the doctrine of the Scriptures.[3]

Today most Christians do not even have the concept in their minds much less the term on their lips. "Open theism" assaults the doctrine when it denies God's control over His own universe. At the opposite pole stands emergence theory that claims in a pantheistic or panentheistic way that God is "enfolded" in the creation and thus creation is emerging as God continues to create from within it.[4] And overall the general problem of theological ignorance emanates from Biblical illiteracy and prejudice against scholarly study.

People's lack of knowledge of the doctrine of providence (or their failure to believe it) has practical implications. The most profound is that Christians begin to think like pagans, resorting to spiritual warfare teachings to ward off curses or bad fate. They resort to divination to seek to divine information that supposedly will ensure good outcomes to their endeavors. All of this is a result of their not believing that God can care for us unless we obtain new, secret information.

The purpose of this article is to help rectify this situation by describing and defending the doctrine of providence. The doctrine itself is revealed in the Bible for our comfort and for God's glory.

ARE "ALL THINGS" STATEMENTS LITERAL?

This statement in Hebrews describes God's providence: *"And He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature, and upholds all things by the word of His power."* (**Hebrews 1:3a**). This verse is often cited in connection with providence because it follows a statement about Christ as creator. He creates the universe and then sustains it. The context indicates that "all things" (Greek *ta panta* "the all") is literal. The doctrine of the continued upholding of all things assures us that God remains in control of His own universe. It also refutes false ideas like deism (that God, like a clockmaker, merely wound up the universe and allows it to run on its own). Since God in Christ created the world (Hebrews 1:2), it follows that "all things" upheld includes everything created.

Another passage that states this is found here: *"For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities all things have been created through Him and for Him. He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together"* (**Colossians 1:16, 17**). Here we have a context for "all things" (*ta panta* being found in verses 16 and 17) that makes it unmistakable

that Paul means it literally. He is speaking of all of creation, sentient and non-sentient, physical or spiritual. Everything outside of God is created and contingent. Everything in the universe also is held together by Christ. Christ is the sustainer of the universe. One scholar comments on this: "Apart from his *continuous* sustaining activity (note the perfect tense *suneste_ken*) all would disintegrate."[5] Everything created is included; nothing is excluded.

The part of the doctrine of providence described by the two passages just discussed is called "preservation." But that is only one aspect of providence—it also includes government. Charles Hodge explains:

> Providence includes not only preservation, but government. The latter includes the ideas of design and control. It supposes an end to be attained, and the disposition and direction of means for its accomplishment. If God governs the universe He has some great end, including an indefinite number of subordinate ends, towards which it is directed, and He must control the sequence of all events, so as to render certain the accomplishment of all his purposes.[6]

As with the preservation component, there also are "all things" statements that concern God's providential government. Here Paul addresses the Athenian philosophers:

> *The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands; nor is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all people life and breath and all things; and He 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 17:24-26**)

Here, after mentioning creation of "all things," Paul speaks of God's determination of the times and boundaries of various nations. This concept will lead us to see why theologians speak of primary and secondary causes. On the scene of history, most national boundaries have been determined by wars and political intrigue. But Paul claims that God determines the boundaries of nations. So we see that God's governance of the world includes matters which, on the scene of history, are determined by human choices, including evil ones. So we have to come to grips with how God can determine a boundary drawn by humans, often through evil acts.

Those who write Christian theology are sometimes accused of being too scholarly or of making to many confusing distinctions. But what Christians need to know is that there are Biblical reasons that necessitate definitions and distinctions. The passage under consideration is a prime example. Theologians have dealt with such passages and concepts in order to affirm all that the Bible says. In the case of God's providence and human actions it is done through the doctrine of concurrence. Concurrence is about the relationship between primary and secondary causes. Here are some definitions: "Secondary causality refers to the force imparted by physical creatures. Primary causality refers to the causal power exerted by God in the course of cosmic events."[7] Concurrence explains the relationship between these two.[8]

Before exploring this theologically, let us consider a passage that shows that concurrence is true:

> *Now do not be grieved or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life. For the famine has been in the land these two years, and there are still five years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvesting. God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant in the earth, and to keep you alive by a great deliverance. Now, therefore, it was not you who sent me here, but God; and He has*

> *made me a father to Pharaoh and lord of all his household and ruler over all the land of Egypt.* (**Genesis 45:5-8**)

Joseph spoke that to his brothers, who had treated him wickedly. God was the primary cause and was working out His saving purposes throughout the Joseph narrative. The brothers were the secondary cause ("you sold me here"). Thus we have concurrence.

The following statement from the Westminster Confession is often cited regarding this:

> God, from all eternity, did, by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely, and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass: yet so, as thereby neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures; nor is the liberty or contingency of *second causes* taken away, but rather established.[9]

At this point it needs to be stated that it is easier to see that the Bible teaches providence and concurrence as part of it than it is for us to fully understand how this can be. But we should remember that the only reason we even know this to be true is because it is stated in the Bible.

Another theologian comments:

> In Ephesians 1:11 Paul says that God "accomplishes all things according to the counsel of his will." The word translated "accomplishes" (*enerego_*) indicates that God "works" or "brings about" *all things* according to his own will. No event in creation falls outside of his providence. Of course this fact is hidden from our eyes unless we read it in Scripture. Like preservation, God's work of concurrence is not clearly evident from observation of the natural world around us.[10]

There again was another "all things" statement which I claim must taken lit-

erally. What we know about providence we learn from the Bible. The more Biblically we think, the more we think like Christians and not like the pagans who have no Bible. It was no accident that Paul preached on providence to the pagan philosophers. He declared to them the true God who previously was unknown to them.

There are such "all things" statements in the Old Testament as well:

Forever, O Lord, Your word is settled in heaven. Your faithfulness continues throughout all generations; You established the earth, and it stands. They stand this day according to Your ordinances, For all things are Your servants. (**Psalm 119:89-91**)

That God universally rules over His own creation for His own intended purposes is clearly taught. Another Psalm also tells us so:

For I know that the Lord is great And that our Lord is above all gods. Whatever the Lord pleases, He does, In heaven and in earth, in the seas and in all deeps. He causes the vapors to ascend from the ends of the earth; Who makes lightnings for the rain, Who brings forth the wind from His treasuries. (**Psalm 135:5-7**)

The doctrine of providence must be embraced and understood if we are to have a Biblical worldview. The neglect of teaching these matters in churches has damaged so many Christians that even many churchgoers have begun to think (and act) like pagans. We must understand what sort of universe we live in, and what God's relationship to it is if we want think like Christians rather than like pagans.

The most famous "all things" statement in the Bible is found here: "*And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose*" (**Romans 8:28**). This passage raises an important issue. How does God's providence specifically apply to God's own people? The world is full of evildoers who are opposed to God's purposes. Are God's people safe in His hands even in the presence of evil? This passage assures us that we are. The "called" know that God lovingly assures that they shall experience "good," which is defined in the verses that follow as being ultimately glorified and conformed to the image of Christ.

If "all things" are not under God's control, we might be tempted to think that some evil in the universe might unravel God's good plans. Some find a strange "comfort" in thinking that way. I once heard a famous local open theist on the radio railing against Romans 8:28 and mocking Christians who take solace in it. He espouses the warfare worldview and believes that there are battle casualties in the war. Is he right that not only does God fail to be in total control of his own universe but that He does not even know the future?

Let us consult the ending of Romans 8 so that the context will give us the answer:

Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? Just as it is written, "For Your sake we are being put to death all day long; We were considered as sheep to be slaughtered." But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (**Romans 8:35-39**)

Paul intends his readers to take this list as universal, covering everything we might imagine that could derail God's good intentions for us. When he says "nor any other created thing," that covers everything in the universe outside of God Himself. The "all things" statements in Romans 8 are literal. The creator of the universe, who controls all things, assures us that all things work for our good—and more. Even the future is included ("things to come"). God's providence spans both space and time and includes everything therein.

Consider this "all things" statement from the same context: "*He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things?*" (**Romans 8:32**) The people of God are the beneficiaries of His providential oversight of the entire universe! This should humble us and bring us to our knees in grateful worship.

It amazes me how many Christians I have met who do not want to hear about this. They think they find more comfort in the idea that God is not fully in control of the universe. I spoke with one person who said, "But the list does not include ourselves, we can separate ourselves from God's love." He wanted man's "free will" to be self-determining, and therefore, outside of providence as we have defined it. There are two major problems with this: 1) Exegetically it is impossible because humans and their own willpower are created and so are included in the list. 2) It calls into question why some people have more trust in their own willpower than God's saving purposes.

During a public debate with an open theist we fielded questions from the audience. One came up for me from someone who disagreed with me. The questioner asked, "How can you have assurance of salvation if you believe in God's sovereign grace?" My response was, "I fail to understand why someone finds more assurance from their own decision making abilities than from the power of God to keep them." The response of the audience of about 1000 was a stunned hush. Apparently many people had not previously considered the implications of their own way of thinking.

The doctrine of providence truly covers "all things" (*ta panta*) and the Biblical writers expect us to believe it. The doctrine is intended to comfort us even if it is difficult for us to understand

how God at one and the same time can be totally in control of all things in the universe and yet evil exists in the universe. The only answers to this are to be found in the Bible. The theological discussions and terminology that arise from the doctrine of providence arise precisely because the Bible tells us that moral evil exists and all things are God's servants.

PROVIDENCE AND FATE ARE INCOMPATIBLE

Many people are confused about providence, thinking that if it is true, then fatalism is true. Fatalism comes in at least two forms: pagan fatalism that fears mischief from various deities, and materialistic philosophical fatalism that claims that all events are necessary results of previous causes. In Biblical times, pagan fatalism was common. The doctrine of providence, far from being fatalistic, helps us avoid fatalism.

An important consideration in Biblical interpretation is to consider the intended original readers and what the author intended in writing to them. In two important books of the New Testament where "all things" statements about God's providence are found, the readers were people who lived among pagans who believed in fatalism. Those books are Colossians and Ephesians.

We earlier considered Colossians 1:16, 17 to prove the doctrine of providence. Now let us consider why Paul taught this to the Colossians in light of the false teachings they were exposed to. They lived in a culture that believed that bad fate was caused by hostile spiritual powers and that certain processes and experiences could ward off bad fate.[11] Paul's purpose was to show them that being in Christ who created and upholds "all things" put them above the reach of the principalities and powers. The cross had disarmed them (Colossians 2:13-15).

R. C. Sproul writes about "the fates" in a pagan worldview:

The fates were part of the mythological system of the ancient world, and they were depicted as arbitrary, capricious, and mischievous sub-deities who wreaked havoc among people. Today fate is sometimes seen as a blind force of nature that causes horrible things or good things to happen to us.[12]

As Christians we know from the Bible that God is transcendent (i.e., not "in" the creation as in pantheism or panentheism) and personal. This must inform our understanding of providence. Sproul continues: "The doctrine of the providence of God leaves no room for fate, blind or otherwise. God is not blind; neither is He capricious."[13] God cares for the well being of His people and has promised that whatever happens to us is part of His purpose for our good and His greater glory. No spirit being or bad fate can derail God's plan.

Secular humanism has its own version of fate that is amazing in its bleakness. With no knowable, personal God who interacts in any way with the universe, they posit the idea of the uniformity of cause and effect in a closed system. This means that everything that happens is nothing more than the effect of a series of previous causes. This includes all things, even our thoughts. Philosophers who believe this have said that if someone had exhaustive knowledge of all past and present causes they could perfectly predict the future. No miracles are possible, and human beings are no more than the result of a long causal chain.

Humanist Paul Kurtz, thinking like that, arrived at this conclusion:

The humanist, on the contrary, asks that we as human beings face up to the human condition as it is. Humanists accept the fact that God is dead; that we have no way of knowing that he exists; or even of knowing that this is a meaningful question. They accept the fact that human existence is probably a random occurrence existing between two oblivions, that death is inevitable, that there is a tragic

aspect to our lives, and that all moral values are our own creations.[14]

As can be easily seen, the Biblical doctrine of providence is the opposite of fatalism. The infinite, personal God who created all things also upholds all things. God does not expect us to blindly grope about in the darkness, but He has spoken once for all in Scripture. We can know his moral will, and we can watch His providential will unfold as history unfolds before us.

This passage in Ephesians was written to another church that consisted of converted pagans living in a pagan society that was fatalistic: "*also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will*" (**Ephesians 1:11**). There are a number of strong terms in this verse about God's comprehensive sovereignty that covers "all things." The context gives the Ephesian Christians the strongest possible assurance of their eternal inheritance that is true because of God's actions alone. Think of all the things Paul says are true about us as Christians: He blessed us with every spiritual blessing, He chose us, He predestined us for adoption as sons, He redeemed us, forgave us, He lavished grace upon us, He made known His will (from verses 3-10). And now in verse 11 we get the doctrine of providence. In fact, Ephesians 1:3-14 is a long list of what God has done for us to insure our eternal salvation. Then in Ephesians 1:15-19 Paul prays that God would enlighten the eyes of their hearts to realize how great their hope and salvation are. But why?

The reason this was so important was to keep them from the same sort of pagan fatalism and resultant fear that afflicted the church at Colossae. The hostile powers were believed to influence people and were commonly feared:

which He brought about in Christ, when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and

dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. And He put all things in subjection under His feet, and gave Him as head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all. (**Ephesians 1:20-23**)

Here we have another "all things" passage. Just like in Colossians, we learn that providence covers not only all that is in existence, but also time, including the future. If they are seated with Christ, then they are not under the power and dominion of hostile powers. They were safe from what they previously feared.

It should be evident from the passages we have studied from Romans, Colossians, and Ephesians that Paul intended that the doctrine of providence that covers "all things" would be understood and believed by the church for our hope and comfort. What is troubling is that so many Christians are either ignorant of the doctrine or outright reject it on the grounds that they think it makes God responsible for evil. Some seem to be more comforted believing that at least part of God's universe is outside of His control than to believe what the Bible teaches on this matter. I have demonstrated by careful exegesis that these "all things" statements in regard to God's creation, sustenance and governance of His own universe are intended to be taken literally by the Holy Spirit-inspired, Biblical authors. Now we need to turn to providence as it relates to evil and to unbelievers.

GOD'S MORAL WILL AND GOD'S PROVIDENTIAL WILL

For many years I have discussed and debated this topic with many Christians espousing a range of doctrinal beliefs. Based on my experiences I make the following educated guess about why some refuse to accept the comfort God offers through the doctrine of providence: they object to the fact that the comfort is offered only to the church. This goes

for Old Testament history as well. If God protected and saved Israel by raising up, hardening, and judging Pharaoh (Romans 9:15-18), then providence is only beneficial to God's people. It is a very bad thing for the rest. It doesn't teach that universally "everything will work out for good." It teaches that God works all things for the good of those called according to His purpose—and that is not everyone. The rest are also serving a providential purpose, but not a beneficial one for themselves. Providence is about everything that happens, so providence contains good and evil. As Job said, we cannot accept the good from the Lord but not adversity (Job 2:10).

If we are to have any hope of understanding the whole counsel of God on this matter, we have to deal with a Biblically necessitated distinction: the one between God's providential will and His moral will.[15] What necessitates this distinction is that God providentially ordains actions that go against His revealed, moral will.

We can see this by returning to the Joseph narrative. In the end, Joseph says this to his brothers: "*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*" (**Genesis 50:20**). In using Joseph to bring about salvation for Jacob and his family, and thereby preserving the Messianic promises to Abraham, many evil acts were committed. Those acts are contrary to God's moral will. But God used those acts to bring about His saving purposes. His brothers mistreated him, as did Potiphar's wife and others. But God used all of that mistreatment to further His saving purposes. God's providential will was furthered by people transgressing God's moral will. This is precisely what is meant by concurrence that we discussed earlier.

This passage also raises the issue of intent. God's intentions were good, but his brother's were evil. R. C. Sproul explains this well:

God's intentions are always good. There is no shadow of turning in Him, no lapses into negligence.

He clearly intended for Joseph to be sold into slavery; His purpose in this was altogether holy. The means He used to accomplish this end were the wicked wills of His creatures. They intended something altogether different from God's intent. They meant evil. They committed evil. They were responsible for that evil.[16]

That God uses human evil to achieve His good purposes does not implicate God in evil. God is not the author of sin. God's providential will includes "all things," as we clearly saw in many passages. As such, providence contains good and evil. God's moral will, which is revealed in the Bible, is only good.

There are other places where this can be seen as a necessary implication of Scripture. For example, Paul wrote: "*Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God*" (**Romans 13:1**). When Paul wrote that, wicked Nero was the Emperor in Rome. Paul saw no contradiction that God established Nero as Emperor. That Nero was in authority was God's providential will. That Nero was wicked can be established by examining his actions in light of God's moral will. God's providential will is revealed as history unfolds. We cannot know it in advance unless certain future events are revealed in Bible prophecy (as some are). But other than what is specifically prophesied to be God's future providential will (such as the fact that Antichrist will arise), we only know God's providential will as history unfolds. But when it does unfold, we can and must make value judgments about what is good and evil about the persons and events themselves. We must affirm that our leaders were established by God, and we must obey the Bible and pray for them. But we also must judge good and evil in light of God's moral will.

I once had a discussion with a man who wanted to write a book from a theological perspective that I disagree with. We got onto this topic and he stubbornly refused to believe anything other

than that God has only one will and that is His moral will. I tried to show him from Scripture that his idea was flawed and did not account for all that the Bible says on the matter. It was to no avail. Needless to say his book came out with confused theology. It is not possible to understand God's revealed purposes without a solid grasp of the doctrine of providence.

In Acts we find one of clearest and most important examples of the distinction between God's providential will and His moral will: "*this Man, delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death*" (**Acts 2:23**). The rejection and crucifixion of Jesus Christ was an example of the most horrid wickedness in human history. But it was God's "predetermined plan." God willed that wicked men would crucify Messiah. But their wickedness is against God's will. So either there are two wills in God, or the Bible teaches a meaningless contradiction here. Remember the distinction about intention that we saw in Joseph's statement. Peter's entire sermon in Acts 2 could be summed up with a statement like this: "My Jewish brethren, your wicked intentions caused you to crucify your own Messiah, but God intended it for good and proved it by raising Him from the dead." Those who rejected Messiah did moral evil for which Peter called them to repent (Acts 2:38). Some of them did and were recipients of the very salvation that God intended to bring to pass through the death and resurrection of Christ.

It was God's will and purpose that Messiah would suffer and die for sins. His purpose is always holy and good. It says in Isaiah 53:10 that "the Lord was pleased to crush Him." God's providential oversight of history—from the seed promise to Eve to the death of Messiah—was leading history toward the fulfillment of the promise to the patriarch that the seed of Abraham would bless all the families of the earth. All the evil that happened during the years from Eve to Messiah was part of God's providence. That God wills in one sense (providentially) what is

against His moral will in another is a necessary conclusion from the Bible.

PROVIDENCE AND PROMISE

There are times in the Biblical record where there is no evidence of God speaking to anyone. Much mischief is done in God's name because people fail to believe that God can rule, bless them, and bring forward His purposes unless they are getting personal revelations from God. They feel they need ongoing additions to God's revealed will for them to be successful or please God. They do not understand God's providence and its relationship to God's promises.

In Genesis God spoke this promise: "*God said to Abram, 'Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, where they will be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years. But I will also judge the nation whom they will serve, and afterward they will come out with many possessions*" (**Genesis 15:13**). In the course of the following history God also spoke to the other patriarchs. But from the time of Joseph until the time God appeared to Moses when he was 80 years old, there is no record of God speaking to anyone.

Considered in that light, think of the record of the birth of Moses: Moses's mother decided to put him in a basket covered with tar and put it along the reeds of the Nile (Exodus 2:2, 3). She had no specific revelation from God to do that, she simply made her decision. It just so happened that the daughter of Pharaoh went to bathe in the Nile. It just so happened she saw the basket, had it fetched, and saw Moses crying in it. It just so happened that she decided to keep Moses alive despite that he was a Hebrew child. It just so happened that she permitted Moses' sister to find a nurse who chose Moses's own mother. It just so happened that Moses became the son of Pharaoh's daughter. There was no revealed will of God given to any of the people involved—they were making decisions as they saw fit. But behind the scenes God was providentially fulfilling His promise to Abraham. He planned to use Moses to

lead the Hebrews out of Egypt as a great people.

The details are no problem for God. One implication of this is that our thoughts and decisions are part of God's providence. In areas of life not covered by God's moral will we can make any decision we see fit. Once made, the decision is then known to be God's providential will. That is all there is to it. God used a seemingly random collection of decisions from the time of Joseph to the time of the burning bush to keep His promise to Abraham. The implications of this are staggering.

R. C. Sproul supposes that Pharaoh's daughter heard the cry of the baby, and that is what got her attention, referring to it as "the cry heard 'round the world." Whatever the case, future world history hung on Moses being found by Pharaoh's daughter in the Nile. Here is Sproul's one-paragraph summation:

> We could surmise that if the baby had not cried there would have been no Moses. Had there been no Moses there would have been no incident at the burning bush. No burning bush, no Exodus. No Exodus, no giving of the Law at Sinai. Not Law, no prophets. No prophets, no Jesus. No Jesus, no cross. No cross, no redemption. No redemption, no Christianity. No Christianity, no Western civilization as we know it. . . . But there is no "what if?" in God.[17]

The point is clear that God holds "all things" together and does so in order to bring about His purposes. History is the unfolding of God's providential will before our eyes. It may look to be by "chance" but it is not.

Since the closing of the New Testament canon, God has not spoken inerrantly and authoritatively to anyone. That is what we mean by *sola scriptura*. God is no less able to keep His promises and bring forth His purposes during those 2000 years than He was during the 400 years between Joseph and Moses. God is in control of His own universe, and He is using that control

for the benefit of those who are recipients of His promises.

What does this mean to us? There is not a single promise dependent upon us getting a personal revelation so that we make the right decision. Even our sin, which we regret so much, cannot foil God's good purposes as revealed in His promises. Our sin is always being cleansed by the blood of Jesus, and He is keeping His promise to sanctify us. We are safe. If tragedy strikes Christians, as it often does, not a single promise of God is in jeopardy. He promised that He is working all things together for our good. God never breaks His promises.

APPLICATIONS

The passages in the Bible that teach the doctrine of providence are in contexts where comfort is being given to God's people. God is not honored if we refuse to be comforted because the idea of God being in total control of His own universe makes us think that therefore He is not doing enough to stop evil. When we let personal, philosophical issues keep us from believing what God has said we dishonor the God of the Bible. This is true even if we do so thinking that we protect God's honor by making Him look more acceptable in some people's eyes. Dear reader, God is offering you comfort. Take it.

As it says in Hebrews, it is impossible for God to lie. Not a single promise of God given to believers can possibly fail. God has promised that we will never be separated from His love. God has promised that everyone He has adopted into His family will be glorified.

He has promised that He will never leave us or forsake us. We have no reason, therefore, to fear anything on this earth. God's providence means that every created thing is under His control—so His people are safe.

Each of us has unanswered questions about providence. The concept of causal relationships is more complex than any human can comprehend. We can only know what God has revealed. But we do have a choice: we can believe what God has revealed and think accordingly, or we can ignore what God has said and to the degree we do, think like pagans. The doctrine of providence, if understood and properly believed, will give us comfort and keep us from thinking like pagans.

END NOTES

1. http://www.bartleby.com/124/pres32.html

2. R. C. Sproul, The Invisible Hand – Do all Things Really Work for Good? (Dallas: Word, 1996) 13.

3. Hodge, C. (1997). *Systematic theology*. Originally published 1872. (1:575). Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

4. See Bob DeWaay, *The Emergent Church – Undefining Christianity* (Minneapolis: Bob DeWaay, 2009). Chapter 9 describes emergence theory, its sources, and it errors.

5. O'Brien, P. T. (2002). *Vol. 44: Word Biblical Commentary : Colossians-Philemon*. Word Biblical Commentary (47). Dallas: Word, Incorporated.

6. Hodge, *Theology* (1:581).

7. Sproul, *Invisible*, 104, 105.

8. The term "compatibilism" is also used similarly: "It holds that absolute divine sovereignty is compatible with human significance and real human choices." Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994) 316 n 1.

9. As cited by Sproul, *Invisible*, 100.

10. Grudem *Theology*, 317.

11. See CIC Issue 69 *The Colossian Heresy part 1*: http://cicministry.org/commentary/issue69.htm

12. Sproul, *Invisible*, 156.

13. Ibid.

14. Paul Kurtz, "What is Humanism?" in *Moral Problems in Contemporary Society; Essays in Humanistic Ethics* ed. Paul Kurtz (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1969), 4.

15. Other theological terminology has been used to describe this distinction, such as "secret will and revealed will" or "will of decree and will of command." The same issue is addressed whatever the terminology.

16. Sproul, *Invisible*, 94, 95.

17. Ibid. 44.