

THE BENEFITS OF PROVIDENCE

A NEW LOOK AT DIVINE SOVEREIGNTY



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*“We do not want merely to see beauty, though,
God knows, even that is bounty enough.
We want something else which can hardly be put
into words—to be united with the beauty we see,
to pass into it, to receive it into ourselves,
to bathe in it, to become part of it.”*

C. S. LEWIS,
THE WEIGHT OF GLORY

PREFACE



For as long as I can remember I have sensed the presence of God. From the time I was a toddler, listening to my mother tell me about God, I recognized that the world is rich with manifestations of the divine. Even as a rebellious teenager, wishing that I could be a law unto myself, I could not shake this feeling. As I have matured, this sense of God's presence has grown more acute, even as it flowered into what I regard as a personal acquaintance with God, along with a full-fledged theology of his attributes and works. Today my sense is no longer merely that God is *here* with me, but that he is everywhere, within and without, sustaining all things, that he guides every event in human history, and that he is coordinating all aspects of the cosmos toward a glorious end. I believe that God's work in the world is thoroughly intimate and redemptive. In short, I confess, with the great Christian minds Augustine, Anselm, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, and Edwards, that God is entirely sovereign and perfectly good, the holy and omnipotent Lord of all. And I confess with the apostle Paul, along with the Stoic poet whom he quotes, that in God "we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28).

For centuries Christians have affirmed the sovereignty of God. But recent generations have seen a falloff of commitment to this doctrine. For a variety of reasons, many Christians have opted to depart from the great tradition affirming meticulous divine governance of the world. Most disturbing is the growing popularity of openness theology, which represents the nadir of the long slide from orthodoxy. This is a perilous move for the church and doubly tragic. We are witnessing the rejection of a doctrine that is both biblically anchored and practically beneficial.

And in its stead, thousands are embracing what may be regarded as heresy, the implications of which are practically devastating. The words of Jeremiah come to mind: “My people have committed two sins: They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water” (Jer. 2:13).

This book aims to contribute to the growing body of literature critical of the latest alternatives to the orthodox Christian doctrine of divine providence. When you get down to it, of course, the issue at hand is not just the maintenance of sound doctrine but also the nature of God. The current dispute over openness theology is essentially a debate about who God is and therefore could not be more urgent, nor the implications more significant.

In the book of Philippians Paul exhorts, “continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose” (2:12-13). Another book of mine (*How to Be Good in a World Gone Bad*, Kregel, 2004) focuses on how we are to “work out” our salvation. At various points throughout the present volume, especially in the final chapter, I affirm and apply the notion that it is God who works in us “to will and to act according to his good purpose.” Just how both can be true—how we can be morally accountable and at the same time the work in us can be divinely orchestrated—is mysterious, but this is nonetheless the plain teaching of Scripture. Perhaps here we must simply affirm with the writer of Deuteronomy, “the secret things belong to the LORD” (29:29).

Yet Christian theologians and philosophers are called to inquire, if at times tentatively, into even the most hallowed domains of human knowledge. We are called not simply to rest in the dogmas of the past—however profound and well-established—but to explore new inroads to orthodoxy, to articulate afresh the verities of the faith, and to reinspire the people of God with the core teachings of our tradition. This is the daunting adventure of Christian scholarship, and this book exemplifies this effort. It is written in full conviction that our forebears were correct in affirming the meticulous providence of God, that this doctrine is both faithful to Scripture and a boon to personal virtue, and that there yet remain many creative avenues of expression of this doctrine to exalt the mind and encourage the heart.

Portions of this book are reworkings or expansions of some previ-

ously published articles. Many sections of Chapters 1 and 2 originally appeared in my essay “Does God Take Risks?,” a chapter in *God Under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents God* (Zondervan, 2002). Parts of Chapter 3 are drawn from my essay “Towards a New Aesthetic Vision for the Christian Liberal Arts College,” *Christian Scholar’s Review* 28:3 (Spring 1999). And some sections of Chapter 4 first appeared in “A Berkeleyan Approach to the Problem of Induction,” *Science and Christian Belief* 10:1 (April 1998), while other portions were drawn from “The Philosophical Theology of Theistic Evolutionism,” *Philosophia Christi*, Series II, 4:1 (Spring 2002). My thanks go to these publishers for permission to reprint those materials here.

I am grateful for my wonderful colleagues at Taylor University, especially those in the Department of Biblical Studies, Christian Education and Philosophy, who have been a steady encouragement to me in all my scholarly endeavors. And I want to thank my colleagues in the broader Christian philosophical and theological communities who have inspired me in so many ways. Lastly, I am thankful to my wife, Amy, who is a constant support and encouragement to me in all that I do. Next to Christ himself, she remains the clearest expression of God’s gracious providence in my life. Our children—Bailey, Samuel, and Magdalene—are likewise standing testaments to providence. I dedicate this book to them in the hope that they, too, will one day see themselves as characters in the divine artwork, saved by grace, and willing servants of our sovereign Lord.

INTRODUCTION: WHY PROVIDENCE MATTERS



A few years ago my university invited a seminary professor to speak to our students. Just prior to his lecture, he and a colleague of mine struck up a conversation that eventually turned to the doctrine of divine sovereignty. Soon they both recognized that they held very different views about the extent of God’s providential governance of the world. “Well,” one of them concluded, “we just worship different Gods.” The other nodded in agreement, saying, “Yes, we sure do.” The conversation ended there.

At the time I found this exchange to be rather curious, perhaps even a bit melodramatic. How could these two intelligent, devout Christian men agree that they worshiped different deities just because of their differing doctrines of providence? My colleague believed God to be completely sovereign over creation, ordaining all things that come to pass. The visiting scholar maintained that God passively allows many things to happen, even limiting his own knowledge about the future. To both men these divergent conceptions of divine providence were sufficient grounds for denying they worshiped the same God. Was their shared assessment correct?

However one answers that question, this anecdote illustrates the fact that the doctrine of providence is a fundamental theological issue. The extent to which God controls the world is of vital importance both to our personal lives and to numerous related Christian doctrines. For

example, one's doctrine of providence directly affects one's view of human freedom. This, in turn, influences the way one conceives of human responsibility. One's views on these issues also shape one's approach to God's relationship to human sin and suffering. And the doctrine of providence affects one's take on various moral attributes of God, including his wisdom, kindness, justice, mercy, and love. These are not trivial theological matters but momentous issues that affect believers at a basic level.

In 1 Timothy 4:16 Paul writes, "watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers." This is just one of many biblical passages that emphasize the importance of sound doctrine, but this exhortation goes further than most in linking sound doctrine with salvation. Indeed, as the wayward theologies of many cults and even terrorist networks tragically demonstrate, bad doctrine can destroy lives and even escort people to hell. While perhaps not as pivotal as the doctrines of the Trinity, the divine incarnation, the resurrection of Christ, or the authority of Scripture, the doctrine of providence is crucial to Christian faith and practice. Misconceptions and misapplications of the concept of divine sovereignty can be personally devastating and can even distort one's perspectives on these more basic theological issues.

The classical Christian view of providence affirms God's exhaustive foreknowledge and complete control over the cosmos. Because God is omniscient, he knows the future as well as the past and the present. And because God is perfectly good and wise, we can be confident that he governs the world perfectly. Regardless of how things might appear at times, we can rest in the assurance that God will achieve all of his purposes for history and our individual lives. The promise that "in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose" (Rom. 8:28) speaks directly to the fact that God is at work in every detail of the believer's life, redeeming even the most painful experiences for the believer's own good and for God's glory. This is the high view of providence.

The last century has seen significant erosion of the high view of providence. Liberal theologians of various stripes have critiqued this orthodox doctrine, and in recent years challenges have been raised even in evangelical circles. The perspective known as openness theology con-

tinues to grow in popularity, in spite of its grossly unbiblical tenets. Its proponents, known as open theists, claim a high view of Scripture and defend their perspective using a wide array of arguments that have persuaded many Christians that God neither knows the whole future nor completely controls the world. In creating and governing the world, open theists tell us, God takes risks. Because of the extent of human freedom, even God cannot always predict what we will do next. Thus it occasionally happens that God's plans are frustrated, his expectations are disappointed, his hopes are dashed, and his judgments are mistaken. Such belief in divine risk, as touted by open theists, constitutes the essence of a low view of providence.

My purpose in this book is to provide a broad defense of the high view of providence, both through critical analysis of the low view of providence and through constructive application of the high view. My critical aim is to demonstrate that the concept of divine risk contradicts the plain teaching of Scripture and that the major arguments against the high view are flawed. My constructive aim is to reveal some significant benefits of the high view of providence, both of a theoretical and practical nature. Thus the overarching thesis of this book is that *there are many good reasons to accept the high view of providence and no good reasons to reject it*.

In the first chapter I survey the standard perspectives on divine providence. These include three versions of the high view: Augustinianism, Molinism, and simple divine foreknowledge. I critique the latter two views, both of which regard God's foreknowledge as logically prior to his providential decrees. Thus, for the remainder of the book I assume the Augustinian perspective to be the strongest version of the high view of providence. Nonetheless, I invite advocates of Molinism and simple divine foreknowledge to explore the many benefits of the high view of providence, as their views are amenable to much of my constructive project. I also review the low view of providence in the first chapter, examining openness theology as well as its historical precursors: process theology, political liberation theology, and feminist theology.

In Chapter 2 I assess the high and low views of providence in light of Scripture, concluding that the low view is biblically unwarranted and that the high view enjoys significant biblical support. In so doing, I use openness theology as the representative of all versions of the low view

of providence, because it is currently the most popular among these perspectives. Moreover, open theists are the most concerned to argue from Scripture, and many of them even subscribe to biblical inerrancy. I consider the open theists' central arguments for their view and rebut each of these. I examine the philosophical motivations for their perspective, showing why the concept of divine risk is unnecessary. And I identify some historical and cultural factors that account for the rise of this errant theology in the first place.

In Chapter 3 I discuss the orthodox doctrine of divine conservation of the cosmos, noting how it implies an Augustinian view of providence. From here I explore several major implications of this perspective, specifically regarding the laws of nature, the concept of miracle, and the whole domain of aesthetics. With regard to the latter, I develop the idea of the world as an aesthetic phenomenon and God as a cosmic artist. I expand this aesthetic model in light of some contemporary aesthetic theories, specifically proposing that the cosmic art is fundamentally an act of divine expression and communication. This model prepares the way for further critical applications regarding the issue of divine emotion and the problem of evil, which I take up in Chapters 5 and 6 respectively.

In Chapter 4 I apply the high view of providence to the practice of science. I discuss four issues, two of which are methodological and two of which are substantive. The methodological issues are the notorious problem of induction and the debate over methodological naturalism. I show how the high view of providence dissolves the problem of induction and undermines methodological naturalism. This latter implication, I note, diminishes the grounds for embracing an evolutionary perspective on the substantive issue of origins. The other substantive issue I examine is the contemporary debate over the nature of human consciousness. After surveying the major theories of mind, I show that the high view of providence has some surprisingly useful applications to this issue, offering hope for a satisfactory account of consciousness where all the current theories fail.

In Chapter 5 I explore the matter of divine emotion based on the aesthetic model spelled out in the third chapter. After looking at the standard views, divine passibilism and impassibilism, I propose an alternative that incorporates the insights and avoids the major shortcomings of each: divine *omnipathism*. This is the idea that God experiences all emo-

tions eternally and immutably. I develop the concept of omnipathos in a way that parallels some of the other classical attributes of God, specifically omniscience and omnipresence. I also discuss the major theories of emotion and show how each of them can be applied to a conception of God as omnipathic.

In Chapter 6 I discuss the problem of evil, showing how the high view of providence offers many significant resources for dealing with this perennial issue. I review many of the major theodicies and demonstrate why they fail to adequately account for God's permission of evil. The approach favored by the high view of providence is the "greater good" theodicy, which emphasizes God's redemptive use of human suffering and even immorality. I explore several applications of this perspective, as related to character building, solidarity with Christ, and beatific vision. And I present a biblical case for divine sovereignty over moral evil.

Finally, in Chapter 7 I apply the high view of providence to numerous moral and devotional matters. I argue that the high view naturally enhances the nurturing of such moral virtues as humility, faith, courage, and patience. Moreover, I explain how the high view provides the believer with a more universal right of complaint to God about personal trials. And, likewise, I show how the believer has better grounds for the privilege of thanking God for his blessings. I conclude by applying the high view of providence to the spiritual disciplines and the practice of evangelism.

My intent in this book is to present a long-standing theological doctrine in a fresh way that demonstrates its explanatory power, illustrates its conceptual depth and versatility, and proves its practical utility. I hope for the reader that all of these considerations will converge to make a persuasive case (if one wants to call it that) for the high view of providence. There are many wonderful benefits in taking this view, and there is a significant toll to be paid by those who reject it in favor of the low view of providence. I am convinced that the high view is a boon to both academic inquiry and personal faith. If this book goes some distance in demonstrating this, then my efforts will have been worthwhile.