

# DIVINE PROVIDENCE

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We begin the Apostles' Creed by saying, "I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth." Dr. Martin Luther, in his explanation of this article, says, "I believe that God has made me and all creatures; that He has given me my body and soul, eyes, ears, and all my members, my reason and all my senses, and still preserves them..." God's preservation and governance of the universe He created is called Divine Providence. Christians, in accordance with Holy Scripture, believe that God continues to preserve and govern the universe and everything in it. We do not worship a "clockmaker god" who creates the world, gets it going, and then leaves it to work on its own. We do not worship an "absentee landlord god" who sets up autonomous Laws of Nature and then lets things take care of themselves. Christians are not naturalists or materialists, we are supernaturalists who believe that God who made the world is still very much involved in it.

In Colossians 1.16-17, St. Paul, speaking of Christ, says, "16 For by him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers: all things were created by him, and for him: 17 And he is before all things, and by him all things consist." He is saying very clearly that God made all things and every thing; not creation in some general, vague sense, but in the fullest possible sense.

We further learn from St. Peter in 2 Peter 3.5, that "by the word of God the heavens were of old, and the earth standing out of the water and in the water". The universe was created by means of the Word, not some naturalistic, materialistic process.

The author of the Letter to the Hebrews (1.2-3), speaking of the Son of God, tells us, "...whom he hath appointed heir of all things, by whom also he made the worlds; 3 Who being the brightness of his glory, and the express image of his person, and upholding all things by the word of his power..." The triune God who made the universe also upholds or preserves it by the Word of His power. The universe, every creature, and every process is included in God's governance.

In Ephesians 1.22 St. Paul speaks of Christ's governance of all things: "22 And [the Father] hath put all things under his [Christ's] feet, and gave him to be the head over all things to the church."

This headship extends to the minutest of things. In Luke 12.6-7 Jesus tells us: "6 Are not five sparrows sold for two farthings, and not one of them is forgotten before God? 7 But even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not therefore: ye are of more value than many sparrows." Despite the comparative worthlessness of sparrows, God keeps each one of them in mind. He even knows the number of hairs on your head. What we value we count.

Jesus further says concerning Divine Providence (Matthew 6.25ff.), "25 Therefore I say unto you, Take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink; nor yet for your body, what ye shall put on. Is not the life more than meat, and the body than raiment? 26 Behold the fowls of the air: for they sow not,

neither do they reap, nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feedeth them. Are ye not much better than they? 27 Which of you by taking thought can add one cubit unto his stature? 28 And why take ye thought for raiment? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin: 29 And yet I say unto you, That even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. 30 Wherefore, if God so clothe the grass of the field, which to day is, and to morrow is cast into the oven, shall he not much more clothe you, O ye of little faith? 31 Therefore take no thought, saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed? 32 (For after all these things do the Gentiles seek:) for your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things. 33 But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you. 34 Take therefore no thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof." These words concerning Divine Providence serve to encourage believers to trust in the presence and help of the Lord in every place and situation. While God is transcendent, He is not absent or disconnected from the world and creatures He made. It is fitting that God care for the creation He made.

The world knows nothing of this. For the unbeliever the material world and its processes are all that there is. Or if there is room for a god in their thinking it is usually a limited and uninvolved god, a god of the gaps. Thus, the meaning and purpose of life eludes them, and they must search for it endlessly. For the Christian believer, however, the doctrine of Divine Providence points us away from the world's blindness and error. By the Word of God we see that God is near and involved everywhere. Paul told the Athenians (Acts 17.28) "For in Him we live, and move, and have our being." The purpose of existence, the meaning of life is a given, and it is not secular but sacred. We are here in God's world to worship and serve God, not to live for self-fulfillment. We don't have all the answers yet, but the Word of the Lord answers enough questions to sustain faith and comfort hearts until we leave this vale of tears and stand before the Lord in Paradise.

Now, while the reality of Divine Providence includes all creatures and operations, it centers in the Holy Christian Church. To be a member of the Church through faith in Christ is to be the object of the Lord's special care. In Romans 8.28, St. Paul says, "28 And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose." This is a revolutionary statement, the import of which is often missed because it is so familiar. What it says is that every event in the universe must in some way serve for the good of the Church (the called). Every event and creature in some way serves God's purposes for His people. When we get to heaven, we will delight in discovering how all this worked out. For now, we walk by faith, not by sight.

Another astonishing Word comes to us from the lips of Jesus (Matthew 24.14): "14 And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations; and then shall the end come." Most of the time, this verse is used to assure Christians that the Gospel message will reach to the ends of the earth, and this is so. However, not often noticed is what it further says: When the Gospel has finished its work, the end of the world will come. That is, when the last person to be converted to the Christian faith is converted, human history will end with the

Second Coming of Christ. The world continues to exist solely for the Christian Church. God's plan of salvation in Christ, and the welfare of the Holy Christian Church are ultimately what human history is all about.

The gods of this world are useless, "trot 'em out on holidays" kind of gods. This is not so for the Christian believer. The Triune God is transcendent, but He is not absent or uninvolved. He is present, preserving and governing all things, and this has particular meaning for those who are members of the church which is the special object of His Providential care. So do not be anxious; do not give in to secularized thinking. The Lord your God is with you wherever you go. He is able to deliver you. He is a very present help in trouble.

----- Part 2 -----

*(The following comments are based on the appropriate chapter in Pieper, F., Christian Dogmatics, Vol. 1. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950, pp. 487-489.)*

In [Part 1 of this article] we considered the basics of the comforting doctrine of Divine Providence. In this issue I'd like to explore this doctrine further with you. Modern people are often deluded by modern science into thinking about the world in a mechanistic way. That is, we think that the universe and everything in it runs by a set of inviolable laws of nature without any involvement on God's part. This makes it very difficult, if not impossible, for many to see how God fits into their worldview or into their life. So it isn't surprising that for many people in our culture, God is a kind of extra added option that they value to some degree but don't really know what to do with. But the doctrine of Divine Providence tells us clearly that the universe is not merely a machine running according to independent laws of nature. This is God's world, and He is very much involved in it and in our lives.

Having said that, we turn our attention to second causes. Second Causes are the means through which divine Providence operates. This is brought out by Psalm 127.1 - "Except the Lord build the house, they labour in vain that build it: except the Lord keep the city, the watchman waketh but in vain." The Lord builds the house (first cause) and the builders build the house (second cause). Yet the operation of the builders (second cause) is subordinate to the operation of God. The builders work only that which God works through them, and they work only as long as God works. What the creatures do naturally they do because of God's influence on them. Man walks, sun shines, medicine heals, bread nourishes, etc. 17th century Lutheran theologian Johann Gerhard: "What is more natural to man than that he moves? And still we move in God. (Acts 17.28 - 'For in Him we live, and move, and have our being.') What is more natural for the sun than that it rises day by day? And yet 'God maketh His sun to rise' (Matthew 5.45)." Nothing happens by itself independently of God. What nature does "naturally", it does as the means through which God's providence works, and is therefore subordinate to, and dependent on, the activity of God.

Deuteronomy 8.3 and Matthew 4.4 tell us: "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God." These passages tell us not only that God may nourish and

sustain a man without means, but it also tells us that bread's power to nourish does not exist independently from the Word that created it and gave it power to nourish. If God were to withdraw His Word from the bread it would no longer nourish even if we were stuffed full of it. Man is not healed through medicine alone, but through the Word of God which originally gave the herbs, etc. their healing properties and maintains them day by day. God heals and the medicine (second cause) heals, yet not as two actions, but as one action. The operation of the second cause is the result of an uninterrupted operation of God on the creatures and through the creatures.

Luther (Small Catechism) "I believe that God has made me and all creatures, has given me my body and soul, eyes, ears, and all my members, my reason and all my senses, and still preserves them." We receive our body and soul with all their members from our parents as second causes, and at the same time we know that God is our Creator and Father. When, therefore, nature does what is proper to it, it is because God created it, God gave it its "task" and powers, God preserves it, and God's providence operates through it for our benefit. Nature is dependent upon God's operation. We work, earn money, buy food, cook it and eat it. And yet all of this we receive from the hand of God who operates for our benefit through the second causes. Therefore, it is right to thank and praise Him, and to receive and use everything as from Him.

People speak of the laws of nature as if these were somehow independent and autonomous, as if the universe were a machine. The so-called "Laws of Nature" are not something which differs from God's will and operation, but are God's will and operation itself in its relation to the existence and operation of the creation. That these laws of nature operate consistently is a testimony to the faithfulness and unchangeability of our God. He is not capricious but utterly reliable; a proper object of our faith and worship.

The second cause does not separate the first cause (God) from the effect. The effect is the immediate result both of the first cause and of the second cause. It is improper to say, "This is nature's job, and that is God's job" as if the two were unrelated and separate. Rather it is proper to say that the sun shines, and God makes the sun shine, and so we receive the sunshine from the gracious hand of God.

There is one more thing before we come to the end of this topic. God is not bound to the workings of nature. The Bible affirms over and over, from cover to cover, that God is a God of miracles. At times God confers on the secondary causes plainly supernatural power, as, for example, when Jesus turned water into wine (John 2). At other times He restores or augments the natural power which was either lost or debilitated, as, for example, when He enabled 100 year old Abraham and his barren wife Sarah (in her nineties) to conceive Isaac (Gen 17). He also at times impedes the secondary causes which are set by nature to perform their operations so that the effect does not follow, as, for example, when the bite of a viper failed to kill St. Paul (Acts 28.3f.). The universe is not a "closed system". God can, has, and does intervene miraculously, in His way and in His time, for the benefit of His people. Therefore, our faith and our prayers need never be limited in their scope. As the angel Gabriel said to Mary: "For with God nothing shall be impossible" (Luke 1.37).

*(The following is a summary of the chapter on Divine Providence in Pieper, Francis, Christian Dogmatics, Vol. I. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950, pp. 489ff.)*

In [the previous two parts] on divine providence I dealt with God's governance of all things and of the relationship between providence and the second causes or actions of the creatures through which divine providence acts. The operation of God and the operation of the second causes are not two operations but one operation. Nature produces rain and God sends rain. These are not two different operations but one. So we receive the rain from the hand of God who still preserves His creatures.

Now the question arises, since we all live and move and have our being in God (Acts 17:28), what is the relationship between divine providence and sin? Since God agrees or concurs in the actions of moral beings (humans and angels), we need to understand how far God agrees in the performance of evil or sinful actions. As we begin to think about this, there are three overarching principles that we must keep in mind:

God is unalterably opposed to evil actions. The Ten Commandments make this plain. The minute we entertain the idea that God approves of any sinful action we have made a wrong turn.

God often prevents the occurrence of evil actions. For example, in Gen. 20 God prevented Abimelech from taking Abraham's wife Sarah to be his wife when Abraham had told him she was his sister. Interestingly, we don't often see God doing this simply because the evil actions he prevents don't happen!

When God permits evil actions to occur, they must ultimately serve His good purposes. Joseph's brothers sold him into Egypt, but God used this evil event to later rescue Joseph's family from starvation during a time of severe famine. Joseph later told his brothers, "As for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive" (Gen 50:20). St. Paul said, "And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose" (Rom 8:28).

So God agrees or concurs with evil actions in so far as they are acts but not in so far as they are evil. In His providence, God concurred with the actions of Joseph's brothers as actions, but He didn't concur with the evil of their actions. For the Bible says: "The foolish shall not stand in thy sight: thou hatest all workers of iniquity. Thou shalt destroy them that speak leasing [lies]: the LORD will abhor the bloody and deceitful man" (Psa 5:5-6). This doesn't clear up all the difficulties which arise in our minds, but being finite and sinful, we must confine ourselves to the limits imposed by this distinction. Otherwise we end up either denying divine providence as Pelagius did when he claimed that he could perform certain actions without God's concurrence, or we deny that there is any evil in human action and make God responsible for it. Both of these alternatives are contrary to Scripture, and contrary to the universal experience of the human conscience, which holds people responsible for their evil deeds. All people,

including thieves and murderers, "live and move and have our being" in God (Acts 17:28) and therefore, cannot operate without God's concurrence.

Does God Permit people to sin? Yes. The Bible teaches this in numerous places. Psalm 81:12 "So I gave them up unto their own hearts' lust: and they walked in their own counsels." God doesn't want us to sin but He permits it. Acts 14:16 "Who in times past suffered all nations to walk in their own ways." Note the word "suffered". We see this all around us. People live in utter disharmony with the will of God with seeming impunity. What a surprise Judgment Day will be for them as they realize all too late that they haven't gotten away with anything. For now God often suffers or puts up with sin. But we must say more. The Bible also teaches us that God in His righteousness also uses sin to punish sin. Read Romans 1:24-32. There we learn that because of their idolatry and rebellious sinfulness, God gave sinners over to uncleanness...unto vile affections...to a reprobate mind, with the result that they received what they deserved for their evil actions. In 2 Thessalonians 2:11ff., God sends those who refuse to receive the love of the truth a strong delusion so that they believe the lie and are damned. God permits sin, but uses it to punish sin, and ultimately holds us accountable for every idle word we speak. God's sufferance of sin does not imply approval at all.

What about God's concurrence or agreement in good acts? In His general governance of the world God works the good acts even of unbelievers. This "civil righteousness" though it doesn't merit salvation, is of great value in this world. It is the foundation of the well-being of the community and the state. This is why it is so dangerous to see our society turning further and further away from God's Word as the basis for right and wrong, good and evil. A godless society will be ruled ultimately by arbitrary laws of relative value, and ultimately collapse. Hence we Christians pray regularly for our society and for those in authority, that civil justice and righteousness may prevail among us and preserve us. This is why we are commanded to honor and respect earthly authorities. See 1 Tim 2:1f., and Rom 13:1ff.

In the kingdom of grace, that is in the Christian believers saved in Christ, God works the spiritually good actions by the special operation of the Holy Ghost in the Word of God. He not only creates in believers the ability to perform the good, but also creates the act itself. "For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure" (Phil 2:13). God also produces the thinking needed for the proper performance of the ministry. "Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think any thing as of ourselves; but our sufficiency is of God" (2 Cor 3:5). And Paul teaches us that it is the Holy Spirit through whom we put to death the deeds of the body (Rom 8:13).

Therefore, we are debtors to God, who not only created us but still preserves us. He does this in such a way that even our sins cannot ultimately frustrate His purposes. And in the Gospel we are assured over and over that His purposes for us are good and gracious in Christ, who suffered at the hands of evil men to bring about so great a salvation that it can save even the vilest of sinners. This was illustrated magnificently for us when Christ prayed for His executioners as He was crucified, "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do."

In [the previous parts of this article] on Divine Providence, we've discussed the relationship of providence to second causes, and to sin. We have maintained that nothing happens apart from God, as it says in Acts 17:28 – "For in him we live, and move, and have our being". This may cause someone to think that divine providence makes us robots. Nothing could be further from the truth. The Bible teaches us over and over that human beings are moral beings, free of coercion, who are responsible for their actions. Consider this:

Acts 17:31 Because he hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead.

This verse tells us that one day God will judge the world in righteousness by Jesus Christ. The resurrection guarantees it. The fact that God will judge us means that he holds us responsible for our actions; it means that we are not robots but people. It also means that we should see to it that we are in a right relationship to Christ so that that day will not be grievous for us but joyful!

Not only does God our creator hold us responsible for our actions, but so does our conscience. We know that we are not robots; we know we are responsible for our deeds; and we know that sin deserves to be punished. Our consciences teach us this. Look at what St. Paul says about the conscience:

Romans 2:15 Which shew the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and their thoughts the mean while accusing or else excusing one another.

The law of God is written in our hearts. Our conscience bears witness to this as it sometimes excuses us and sometimes accuses us. And:

Romans 1:32 Who knowing the judgment of God, that they which commit such things are worthy of death, not only do the same, but have pleasure in them that do them.

Human beings know God's judgment. We know that those who commit sins deserve to be punished. Modern people have to work hard to cauterize their consciences to the point where we silence its witness about sin and its just desserts.

So even though Divine Providence is all encompassing and we live, move, and have our being in God, that does not mean that we are robots who do everything by coercion. We are uncoerced, moral beings, who are responsible for our actions even though God governs all things.

This brings us to the question: Must all things occur as they do occur, or could they happen otherwise? The answer to that question depends on the viewpoint from which we consider the question. Simply stated, from God's viewpoint, all things must occur as they do occur; all things happen of necessity. From the human viewpoint, all things could occur otherwise; all things happen contingently. Let's go to the Scriptures:

Acts 4:27 For of a truth against thy holy child Jesus, whom thou hast anointed, both Herod, and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles, and the people of Israel, were gathered together, 28 For to do whatsoever thy hand and thy counsel determined before to be done.

This passage tells us that the events surrounding the passion and death of Jesus had to happen as they did in accordance with the will and governance of God. This is further illuminated by the words of Jesus to Peter and the disciples during His arrest in the garden of Gethsemane. He told them to put their swords away, reminding them that if He chose, He could call twelve legions of angels to rescue Him. Then He adds:

Matthew 26:54 But how then shall the scriptures be fulfilled, that thus it must be?

He reminded them that all these events were foretold by God in the Old Testament, and that they must now happen as they were foretold. So we see in these passages that from God's viewpoint all things must occur as they do.

Now, at the same time, other passages of Scripture speaking about the same events, indicate that from a human viewpoint, all things could occur differently than they do. For example:

Matthew 26:24 The Son of man goeth as it is written of him: but woe unto that man by whom the Son of man is betrayed! it had been good for that man if he had not been born.

Even though the betrayal of Judas was foretold and foreordained, nevertheless, Jesus spoke a word of solemn warning in order to dissuade Judas and keep him from the act of betrayal. Jesus tried to produce contrition in Judas indicating that things could have turned out differently. Jesus words here were not heartless words to an unfortunate robot, but a genuine word of warning to an uncoerced moral being who is responsible for his actions. Or consider:

John 19:11 Jesus answered, Thou couldest have no power at all against me, except it were given thee from above: therefore he that delivered me unto thee hath the greater sin. 12 And from thenceforth Pilate sought to release him: but the Jews cried out, saying, If thou let this man go, thou art not Caesar's friend: whosoever maketh himself a king speaketh against Caesar.

Here again, Jesus tried to dissuade Pilate and the Jewish Sanhedrin from committing murder with a solemn word of warning, again indicating that from the human viewpoint things could have occurred differently.

Scripture, therefore, teaches both the necessity and the contingency. Now these two things involve a tension that cannot be resolved by reason. They must both be held in tension and maintained until the hereafter when all the tensions necessitated by the limitations of human finitude and sin are resolved in the presence of God.

1 Corinthians 13:12 For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.

In summary of what we have said thus far, this quote of a notable theologian serves well: "According to the law of divine providence which rules all things, it is correctly said that all things happen of necessity; from the standpoint of man everything in human affairs is done freely and contingently."

Maintaining both things at the same time is difficult but necessary. The teaching that from God's viewpoint all things happen of necessity guards us against the error of atheism; the idea that things happen apart from God or without God, by chance. The teaching that from a human viewpoint all things could happen otherwise guards against the error of fatalism; the idea that whatever will be, will be, which leads to a disregard of the means God has given to sustain and govern our lives.

In order to understand this more clearly, let's see how these doctrines apply to the question of the end of human life. Is the time of my death determined and fixed, or is it able to be lengthened or shortened? From God's viewpoint the time of our death is fixed:

Job 14:5 Seeing his [man's] days are determined, the number of his months are with thee, thou hast appointed his bounds that he cannot pass.

This Scripture is very clear: our days are determined and God has appointed the bounds of our lives which we cannot pass. Yet at the same time the Scriptures teach us that from a human viewpoint life may be lengthened or shortened. For example:

Psalm 55:23 But thou, O God, shalt bring them down into the pit of destruction: bloody and deceitful men shall not live out half their days; but I will trust in thee.

Here, speaking of bloody and deceitful men, Scripture says that God will destroy them and that they will not live out half their days. That is, because of their sins their lives will be shortened.

Then we have the story of Hezekiah's repentance. Wicked king Hezekiah had received the sentence of death from the Lord's prophet Isaiah. Hezekiah responded by weeping and repenting of his sins, and God graciously added fifteen years to the king's life.

Isaiah 38:1 In those days was Hezekiah sick unto death. And Isaiah the prophet the son of Amoz came unto him, and said unto

him, Thus saith the LORD, Set thine house in order: for thou shalt die, and not live. 2 Then Hezekiah turned his face toward the wall, and prayed unto the LORD, 3 And said, Remember now, O LORD, I beseech thee, how I have walked before thee in truth and with a perfect heart, and have done that which is good in thy sight. And Hezekiah wept sore. 4 Then came the word of the LORD to Isaiah, saying, 5 Go, and say to Hezekiah, Thus saith the LORD, the God of David thy father, I have heard thy prayer, I have seen thy tears: behold, I will add unto thy days fifteen years. 6 And I will deliver thee and this city out of the hand of the king of Assyria: and I will defend this city. 7 And this shall be a sign unto thee from the LORD, that the LORD will do this thing that he hath spoken; 8 Behold, I will bring again the shadow of the degrees, which is gone down in the sun dial of Ahaz, ten degrees backward. So the sun returned ten degrees, by which degrees it was gone down.

So, from a human viewpoint, life can be lengthened or shortened.

In conclusion: The fact that the time of our death is fixed and determined with respect to God's viewpoint enables us to trust and be confident in God's care and protection, knowing that He will bring us to the time appointed. And the fact that life can be shortened or lengthened with respect to the human viewpoint encourages us to make proper use of the means God has given to sustain our lives and prolong our days, such as work, food and drink, a pious life, prayer, flight from danger, etc. Holding faithfully to both of these biblical teachings involves a tension that our reason is tempted to resolve, but we must not give in to this temptation, because this tension moves us to faith in God's powerful governance and at the same time, to faithful use of the means God uses to govern and preserve us.