

Video Transcript: The Providence of God

1.

The Bible tell us that God controls and sustains all of creation. This is referred to as the Providence of God. On the face of it, this doctrine seems perfectly logical and reasonable. But it also raises some challenging philosophical issues which need to be addressed.

In this video, I discuss the biblical evidence for the Providence of God, and how we can understand its implications.

2.

The word “providence” means “prudent foresight”.

In theology, it refers to “the foresight and benevolent care of God”, and also “an ordering or intervention by God for this purpose”.

Hence, the doctrine of the Providence of God may be summarised as follows:

God has ordered the creation, and interacts with it, so as to fulfill his good and perfect will.

In effect, it means that God controls everything.

3.

This doctrine is self-evident to those who believe that God is the Creator of the cosmos.

But it is also strongly supported in Scripture.

For example, in Hebrews 1:3 we are told that Christ is “sustaining all things by his powerful word.”

Similarly, Paul said, “in [Christ] all things hold together” (Colossians 1:17).

A number of passages show that God controls the forces of nature (e.g., Job 37:2-12; 38:4-38; Matthew 8:23-27), and provides for the animals and man (e.g., Psalm 104:10-30; Matthew 6:25-30).

4.

The Bible also speaks about God’s control of human affairs, making some nations great and destroying others (e.g., Job 12:23-25; Acts 17:26), and directing the lives of individuals in order to accomplish his will (e.g., Exodus 4:21; 14:4; Jeremiah 1:4-5; 10:23; Proverbs 16:9; Galatians 1:15-16).

In short, all of creation exists and acts in accordance with the will and purpose of God. Thus, Paul said:

[God] gives all men life and breath and everything else ... he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live ... For in him we live and move and have our being (Acts 17:25-28).

5.

While it is comforting to know that God is in control of everything, nevertheless, this doctrine raises some important questions:

1. If God controls everything that happens in the world, then do we really have a freewill?
2. Does God cause evil?
3. Are some people predestined for salvation and others for destruction?

For those who believe that the Bible is the Word of God, and therefore the truth, these questions can only be answered by examining the Bible’s own teachings.

6.

The Bible clearly teaches that man has a freewill and is fully responsible for the choices that he makes. This is evident from the very beginning when Adam and Eve were given the freedom to obey or disobey God's command:

You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die (Genesis 2:17).

The fact that Adam and Eve ate the fruit of the "knowledge of good and evil" means that every one of their descendants also has the ability to discern right from wrong, and good from evil.

Thus, Moses urged the fledgling nation of Israel to "choose life" by obeying the commands of God (Deuteronomy 30:19-20).

7.

But the prophet Isaiah laments, "We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way" (Isaiah 53:6).

Even the simple command of Jesus to "Repent and believe the good news!" (Mark 1:15), requires his listeners to choose to turn from their sins and believe the gospel message.

To the weary, Jesus gives the invitation, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28).

Similarly, the Holy Spirit and Jesus say, "Whoever is thirsty, let him come; and whoever wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life" (Revelation 22:17).

8.

The Bible shows that there are occasions when God directly causes bad things to happen (e.g., Isaiah 45:7; Amos 3:6), and other occasions when he allows bad things to happen (e.g., Job 1:12).

But the Bible also teaches that God is good, righteous and holy (e.g., Isaiah 5:16; Revelation 4:8).

So when he permits evil, we should understand that this is done within the broader context of his righteousness at work in a fallen world.

Evil, in effect, is God's instrument for exercising righteousness in the world and leading sinners to salvation (cf. Luke 13:1-5).

9.

The book of Job explores the difficult question of why God allows bad things to happen to good people. The following points are worth noting:

1. Job was righteous in the eyes of God, and did not deserve his suffering (Job 1:8).
2. It was Satan who conceived of and executed the evil against Job, but God allowed it to happen (Job 1-2).
3. Job's attempts to derive some meaning and reason for his suffering were in vain. God's answer to Job could be summarised as, "Who are you to question me?" (Job 38-41).
4. In the end, God restored to Job, twice over, all that he had lost (Job 42:10).

10.

Several passages in the New Testament confirm that God determined, before the world existed, whom he would save. For example, Paul taught that:

... those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son ... And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified (Romans 8:29-30).

Similarly, Peter said to the believers:

... you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light (1 Peter 2:9).

But even in election, the principle of freewill still applies.

11.

Thus, Paul exhorts the believers to:

... 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 (Philippians 2:12-13).

When we understand election as God's sovereign choice of some people to be saved, then we must also accept that God has chosen others for condemnation. For example, Peter said of those who reject the gospel:

They stumble because they disobey the message – which is also what they were destined for (1 Peter 2:8).

But here, also, the principle of freewill is at work. Thus, Peter also wrote:

[The Lord] is patient with [sinners], not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance (2 Peter 3:9).

12.

It is clear from Scripture that God controls and sustains all of creation.

However the Scriptures also clearly show that:

- While God controls everything that happens, nevertheless, man has a freewill.
- While God does allow, and even cause, bad things to happen, nevertheless, God himself is good.
- While God has predestined some people for salvation and others for destruction, yet God does not want anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.

To those who do not believe in God, these conclusions will appear to be contradictory.

13.

But to those who believe in God, they are enigmatic, yet true, because this is the clear teaching of Scripture.

The apparent contradictions arise because of our limited understanding of God. Thus, Moses taught the people of Israel:

The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may follow all the words of this law (Deuteronomy 29:29).

While the apostle Paul proclaimed:

Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! (Romans 11:33).