

# The Providence of God

## Romans 8:28

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**Steve DeWitt**

Let's say that you are thinking about the possibility of changing careers. You're just starting to consider it. You're not serious. Maybe you mentioned it in prayer once or twice. Then out of the blue, an old friend calls and tells you about a fantastic opportunity in the exact field you were thinking about. When you hang up, do you think this is from God? Is He leading or not?

Or let's say you are searching to buy a house and in your heart you had secretly hoped that it had a big back yard for the kids and a three-car garage. You are a little embarrassed to admit that you actually prayed that God would bring the big yard and garage that morning. After dropping the kids off at school, because of a road closing you go a different way home and drive by a house with a for sale sign in front of it and...a three-car garage and...a big back yard! Is this merely coincidental? Is this God hinting to you what He wants you to do? Would not buying it immediately be disobedience?

I remember my sophomore year in college, I happened to get on the phone with a friend who had an overnight guest from a southern Christian college. I asked to talk to her and was amazed that she happened to know a good friend of mine that went to the school. The next morning was a Sunday, and in a weird circumstance, she happened to eat breakfast when I did. Seeing her, she happened to be pretty beautiful. And she happened to sit by me. That morning at church there only happened to be one seat open in the 2,000 seat auditorium and it happened to be next to this girl. She happened to sing really great which happened to be something I liked. They happened to invite me to take her to the airport and I happened to have the time. We happened to sit close together in the back seat to the airport. I happened to mention that I was thinking she was pretty great and she happened to say the same thing back to me. Was this all a coincidence or was this my soul mate? I will never know because she happened to get on the plane and I happened to not see her again until she was married with two children. Did I miss my soul mate? If not, how do you explain all those weird circumstances? Was God leading or not?

These stories point out the confusion that we experience in making decisions when we spiritualize the circumstances of life. Yet, we believe God is active in our lives and works through circumstances. So how does God expect us to navigate through them?

We have been answering the question of how to know God's will for our lives. Let's do a quick review. We began in Romans 12:2. The first step is a renewed mind saturated with God's Word. God's Word is God's will so as God's Word shapes our thinking, God's will guides our decisions. God's will has two dimensions. His hidden will, which is His ordained will for all that happens in human history, is something we cannot know and should not worry about. The second dimension is God's revealed will, which includes all the moral parameters and biblical principles for life. We must always obey God's revealed will. Where God has not stated His will, we have freedom to make choices. These choices are to be guided by wisdom and last week we went over the nine steps to wisdom. We came to the conclusion to do as Augustine said, "Love God and do as you please." As we love God and pursue wisdom in life, His desires become our desires and the decisions we make conform to what He would want us to do.

## The Providence of God

God's control of circumstances is known as the providence of God. Providence might be one of the most precious and most ignored truths in the entire Bible. Let's define it:

- *God the Creator of all things doth uphold, direct, dispose, and govern all creatures, actions, and things, from the greatest even to the least, by His most wise and holy providence, according to His infallible foreknowledge, and the free and immutable counsel of His own will, to the praise of the glory of His wisdom, power, justice, goodness, and mercy.* (Westminster Confession)
- *The invisible hand of God.* (R.C. Sproul)

The providence of God is His behind the scenes control of all things. Where is this taught in Scripture? All over. Here are two important examples:

- *In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will...* (Ephesians 1:11)
- *And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.* (Romans 8:28, ESV)

The *working out of everything in conformity with his purpose* is the same as *God working all things together for good*. In both cases, Paul is teaching that we do not live in a random universe or operate independent of God. All things depend on God and all things are upheld, directed, and governed by Him and according to His eternal purpose. Acts 17:28 says, *In him we live and move and have our being*.

Some people may think that God is governing only on the macro level; the big issues. *God works on the national or international level, but not on my level; not in my life*. Actually, the Bible goes to great lengths to show that God is as sovereign over a single hair on your head as He is over the ocean tides and world wars (Matthew 10:30). His providence is exhaustive down to the details. Everything is governed and decided by Him. There isn't a circumstance in our lives that He has not ordained, controlled, and is using to conform us to the likeness of Jesus Christ. Amazing. Think of the infinite wisdom and power required to do that.

The question remains of how does God do this when nearly everything in our world has a natural cause? It rains due to the properties of water and heat. My heart pumps by an electrical process in my body. These natural/secondary causes occur at such universal regularity that science discounts the existence of God and the supernatural. How does God do this? By concurrence:

*Concurrence = God (first cause) cooperates with created things (secondary causes) in every action, directing their distinctive principles to cause them to act as they do.* (Wayne Grudem)

The first cause cooperates with a second cause to cause them to act as they do. Let me give you an illustration. I want Tom here to throw this football to John, over there. (He throws the ball.) What is the natural explanation for what just happened? Tom threw to John. Did he do it himself? Yes. Is it what I wanted? Yes. In this case, I was the first cause who cooperated with secondary causes to accomplish what I determined to happen when I wrote this sermon on Thursday.

The scientist and the naturalist and the atheist look at the secondary causes only. That's all they see. They conclude that what happens is simply the result of the free choices of men or natural causes. The Christian reads the Bible and sees that there is a divine first cause behind every secondary cause guiding and directing and controlling every occurrence to His desired end. Just because there is a natural explanation for something doesn't mean that God didn't cause it. In fact, the normal way that God works is through natural causes to accomplish His purposes. The cooperation is concurrence. The control is providence.

You may have heard of the man who was caught in a flood and climbed on his roof and prayed, "O God, save me!" A man in a canoe came and offered to take him to safety, but the man said, "No thanks, God is going to save me." The water kept rising. Then a man came in a power boat and offered to take him to safety. The man said, "No thanks, God is going to save me." The water kept rising. Finally, a helicopter came and dropped a rope. He shouted, "No thanks, God is going to save me." He eventually drowned and went to heaven where he asked God, "Why didn't you save me?" God said, "I sent a canoe, a boat, and a helicopter; what more do you want?"

This highlights the fact that God cooperates with natural secondary causes to fulfill His eternal purposes. Circumstances are secondary causes. Every circumstance, no matter how ordinary or extraordinary, how explainable or indescribable, comes by the hand of God.

When it comes to knowing God's will, this has led many well intentioned Christians to think that God gives us "hints" about what He wants us to do by extraordinary circumstances. Does God at times do the unbelievable? Yes. Looking back on events, we can at times see His fingerprints on something. However, when it comes to knowing God's will in a decision, what we have seen is that God's will is not something to be found by keeping your eyes open for signs. This leads to a kind of superstition. God's will has been revealed and God expects us to view circumstances or open doors as opportunities that must be evaluated by wisdom—those nine steps we studied last week.

### **"Open Doors" and God's Will**

There are two primary reasons for not assuming God's will from an apparent open door circumstance:

#### **We don't know who "opened the door"**

If we are not careful, our perception of an open door will automatically assume that God opened it for our good. However, is every opportunity good and wise? No. In fact, there are others who might "open doors" in our lives. Satan opens doors of temptation. Our fleshly desires may make an opportunity look desirable. Those are trap doors. Some opportunity will come and our flesh will deceive us into thinking *this must be something from God because it seems so wonderful and God would want me to be happy and something so good would have to come from God...*

By the same token, we shouldn't assume God is closing some door either. This is the problem with the providence of God—His hand is invisible. We don't know, but God doesn't expect us to know; He expects to live according to His revealed will and according to wisdom.

#### **Circumstances don't come with God's interpretation**

We desperately want circumstances to give us direction, but to do so, we have to interpret those circumstances and Scripture gives us no help in reading providence. It is entirely subjective. I have heard of people who view rain on a wedding day as a sign that God may not be too happy with the marriage. But what if the groom is a farmer? His farming family could view this as God's divine blessing on the marriage.

It's easy to look too much into this. Last week when I went to fly to the CEF conference for a few days of ministry, I went to check in and they said, "We are sorry, but we don't have you listed anywhere in our computers." The thought crossed my mind, *Maybe the plane is going to crash and I will be in one of those God saved me stories.* Or I could have wondered if this was a sign that He didn't want me to speak at the conference. I asked how much a round trip ticket to Asheville would cost. They said, on the day of departure, \$1,000. I said, "Ma'am, this is being paid for by a missions organization, is there anything you can do?" She types around a little and writes a number on a piece of paper and slides it to me. \$277. I bought it and made the trip. The people at CEF were quite happy because that was \$80 less than the ticket they had thought they bought for me weeks before.

If I was looking for a sign, I could have gone from thinking God didn't want me to speak to the plane is going to crash and God is saving me to this inconvenience is actually saving the Kingdom of God \$80. Here's the point. I didn't know. God didn't tell me. Circumstances don't come with directions. Therefore, we must not assume we know what God is doing.

## **Scriptural Examples of Misinterpreting Circumstances**

### **Job and his friends**

The Old Testament book of Job describes a man who lost everything—his wealth, his children, his social standing and his health. For nine chapters, his friends come and interpret God's purpose in what has happened. They suppose that God is punishing Job. They question his righteousness. Even his wife encourages him to curse God. Job doesn't. In the end, God gives his perspective and guess how much the friends got right? Nothing. Circumstances don't come with directions.

### **Jesus' disciples and the blind man (John 9:1-3)**

*As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" "Neither this man nor his parents sinned," said Jesus, "but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life.*

The disciples saw the circumstance and assumed they knew God's perspective on it. *Obviously, this man or his parents sinned and the blindness is God's punishment. We know God's purpose in this circumstance.* They couldn't have been more wrong.

### **Paul and open doors (1 Corinthians 16:9; 2 Corinthians 2:12-13; Colossians 4:3)**

The language of God's will as an *open door* comes primarily from the Apostle Paul who used this language. He says in Colossians 4:3, *And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message...* You can look others up, but what is interesting when you study them is that Paul didn't describe open doors as God's leading, but as God simply presenting opportunities. In fact, on at least one occasion, Paul didn't go through a door that he believed God had opened.

*Now when I went to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ and found that the Lord had opened a door for me, I still had no peace of mind, because I did not find my brother Titus there. So I said good-bye to them and went on to Macedonia. (2 Corinthians 2:12-13)*

When Paul arrived in Troas, he found a fantastic opportunity for ministry, which he calls, "the Lord opening a door." However, he walks away from this open door because he views finding his assistant Titus and news from the church at Corinth as more vital than the open door in Troas. What can we learn here about how to view "open doors" or opportunities or various options in decision making?

### **"Open Doors" and Decision Making**

**Circumstances are controlled by God, but merely provide the context for decisions. All decisions must be guided by God's revealed will (Scripture) and spiritual expediency (Wisdom).**

Here is where understanding how God works is important. God works through secondary causes to accomplish His purposes. Those secondary causes include situations where an opportunity is clearly the path of wisdom. It may not be a sin to pass on the prudent opportunity, however, if we do, that decision has consequences. God wants us to maximize the opportunities He sovereignly puts in our path.

Here are a few examples. I have a friend who had prayed for a wife for years. He was in his mid-30s and in seminary. He had prayed for her and really had his mind set on what a godly woman was. One day he met this girl who really struck him. The more he got to know her, the more he realized that she matched with God's description of a godly woman and his desires for a wife. After he got engaged, he told me that he felt he would almost be disobedient not to marry her. That was a slight overstatement, but not far from the truth. God wants us to live according to wisdom and sometimes He sovereignly brings circumstances where the path of wisdom is so obvious that we feel we must walk in it.

This is somewhat how I felt about coming to Bethel as the pastor. I had prayed about God using my gifts for preaching and leadership. I had done my training. I had been ordained. I had done my part to be ready. One day in April of 1997, through a phone call, I heard of the opportunity to come here. Did I have to come? No. But as I learned more about the church and learned more about the opportunity for a church like ours in Northwest Indiana, I became mostly convinced that this was what I needed to do. I say mostly, because if we only make decisions where we are totally convinced, we will miss out on some great opportunities. Even the most obvious decisions will have a measure of uncertainty because we don't know the future.

This is how I feel about our building expansion. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to analyze the data and see that we need more space. Are there uncertainties? Yes. But there are always uncertainties. In fact, let's go back to where we started on the providence of God because here is where a God-centeredness in life helps in decision-making. What do you do with the 4% or 10% uncertainty in a decision?

*And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. (Romans 8:28, ESV)*

What did I say was a biblical theology of decision making? *Love God and do as you please.* (Augustine) What does Romans 8:28 say is God's guarantee for all who love God? *All things will work together for good.* The invisible hand, which creates the circumstances that are the context for decisions, is also the invisible hand that works in cooperation with our wills and

decisions toward an ultimate good. Where do I go with the 10% uncertainty in a decision when I am truly loving God and seeking to walk according to wisdom? I rest that uncertainty in a sovereign God and in His power to fulfill His good purposes even in my poor decisions.

We make those, don't we? All of us have made decisions we see now as unwise. However, don't you look back on them and see how God has used those mistakes to create good? When we can't see God's plan for good, we must trust His promises.

As one author wrote, the providence of God is like the guardrails you find on a mountainous road. Why are they there? To keep us on the road and to keep us from destruction. God's providence is like that. He will not allow us off the road. *All things work together for good, for those that love God.* This is not a guarantee for all of humanity. Things will not work together for good if you are not a lover and follower of Christ. It's for those that love God.

### **The Guardrails of Providence**

- Philippians 2:13 - God works in us both *to will and to act according to his good purpose.*
- Philippians 1:6 - *...being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.*
- Joshua 1:9 - *Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go.*

A life according to wisdom requires faith in God's ultimate sovereignty, which is one reason signs and fleeces are so popular. They short-circuit true faith by attempting to coerce a direct word from God. Like Bob needing a word from Dr. Marvin to make a decision. God is glorified in our passionate desire to please Him, our careful consideration of circumstances, our application of wisdom, our resting in the fact that our decisions do not control our destinies, and that ultimately whatever is done is done "if the Lord wills."

There are some people who are chronically indecisive. Some of this is simply personality, but when we are kept from making decisions because of a fear of the future, this is a lack of faith in God's ability to bring about good. One of the earliest memories in my life is of being at a lake where I was in my Dad's arms and he carried me out on a long dock. I was terrified and I remember gripping him as tight as I could. Why? I was afraid he might drop me.

Our God will never drop us. Our God will never leave us. Our God will never allow those that love Him to remain outside of His love and care. This is wonderfully freeing, isn't it? We shouldn't live recklessly, but then again, we shouldn't live fearfully either. The guardrails of the providence of God are in place.

I hope this series has been helpful and freeing. Love God passionately and do as you please knowing that all that you do from that perspective fulfills His will and is protected by His providential care.

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