

“The Providence of God”

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If your theology doesn't make you humble, go deeper.

Psalm 16:1-11; Acts 17:24-28

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(Listen to the audio version of this sermon at : [http://corinth.buzzsprout.com/.](http://corinth.buzzsprout.com/))

No random happenings

It was 1968. I was 11 years old, and my family had just returned from Pakistan. My oldest brother was 15 ½ and wanted to take steps toward a driver's license, so he and the next oldest brother rode their bicycles to the Division of Motor Vehicles. Somewhat naïve about the racial tensions in our city, they nevertheless traveled down High Street in Portsmouth, figuring that was the safest route. On their way home, a young black man on the sidewalk lashed out at my brother with a rope embedded with nails that wrapped around his neck, damaging his right eye for life and causing him to lose his left eye. My brother has lived with that visual handicap ever since.

There's so much more to that story, as you can imagine. The group of African American boys said in their defense that a car of white kids has passed by earlier and thrown bottles at them. From their standpoint it was retaliation for a random act of violence and perhaps subconsciously for generations of mistreatment by white people. My favorite part of the story is that my parents, my mother in particular, tried very hard to model gospel forgiveness and grace in private and public. The story is relevant to the MLK weekend because it is one small but personal microcosm of the complexities of race relations in America, particularly in the South, and I am grateful for the non-violent legacy of Dr. King in advocating for dignity and opportunity for all people.

I remember what I said to my mother as an 11-year-old when I heard about the incident. “Well, maybe God didn't want Doug to get his driver's license.” It was my 11-year-old articulation of a phrase both Christians and non-Christians say: “Everything happens for a reason.” If God is in charge, there are no random happenings.

What's your theology? Did God pick my brother for a life-altering injury that day? Maybe I was wrong about the driver's license, but the attack helped my brother's career. Sympathy probably landed him his first job on the ground floor of a company that exploded, and Doug has done very well with hard work and business intuition.

Let's broaden that lens. Did God call Martin Luther King, Jr. to change the world? Was his legacy and impact greater because he was assassinated? So, can we give God "credit" for that? To go back further, would you agree with our founding pastor, Jeremiah Ingold, who wrote shortly after the Civil War that the South's loss was due to the providence of God so slavery would be blotted from North Carolina?

Most of the time, the issues are not that large. I've had more than the usual number of messages this week where someone pointed out a "God-wink," which is an answer to prayer or coincidence that it seems only God could have accomplished.

The last two weeks we have been talking about the first paragraph of the Apostles Creed: "I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth." *The Heidelberg Catechism* says that this means God not only "created heaven and earth and everything in them," but "still upholds and rules them by His eternal counsel and divine providence." What is providence? "The almighty and ever present power of God by which He upholds, as with his hand, heaven and earth and all creatures, and so rules them that leaf and blade, rain and drought, fruitful and lean years, food and drink, health and sickness, prosperity and poverty – all things, in fact, come to us not by chance but from his fatherly hand." Everything good and bad is caused by God.

Well, then, are we just robots? What about free will? Don't things sometimes happen because of chance or coincidence? And, by the way, what's the difference between God's providence and fate? Some physicists, without reference to God, believe that everything in the universe has been predetermined since the Big Bang, the ongoing and inevitable reaction of molecules bounding. The present is caused by the past, which is caused by the past before that. Is that the same thing as God's providence, only we just apply Christian language to it? Are we really just living out a predetermined course?

Boundary lines

We could almost literally turn to any single random page in the Bible as a starting point for this topic. Every book and story and teaching in the Bible is in some way about God, humans, and the interaction. Sometimes the focus seems to be on what God is doing and sometimes on what humans are up to. Always it's about the connection.

Psalm 16 is a God-saturated poem written by someone who's in a very good place and gives credit to God for those blessings. The title says "A Miktam of David." Nobody knows exactly what "miktam" means. Scholars debate whether "of David" means it was written by or perhaps for King David, but I'm going with David as author.

This is a beautiful expression of David's faith. He says that everything good in his life is because of God (2). My favorite line is verse 6 "The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; surely I have a delightful inheritance." At this point in his life, David can say, "All is well, and God did it." Because of that, "my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices" (9), and he can even have confidence that after he dies he will have joy in God's presence and "eternal pleasures" (11).

Life is great and God is responsible. You and I all have days when we could have written Psalm 16. I even wrote a [devotional](#) based on this psalm last year for the United Church of Christ daily devotional, "Still Speaking." Sometimes I look around my life and think, "How could I be so incredibly blessed?" I know this isn't all by chance, and I certainly can't take credit for health and safety and financial blessing and a rewarding career and great kids and a healthy, delightful one-year-old grandson.

God is so very good! Because of this confidence, David can pray for God to continue to keep him safe (1). This God has proven himself reliable because all is well.

Not far from anyone

The setting of our second reading could hardly be more different, but the belief about God is remarkably the same. In Acts 17, the Apostle Paul is speaking to a group of people who not only aren't Christians; they're not Jewish either. They do not "believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth." They are instead steeped in first century Greek philosophy.

Don't get the wrong impression, though. They don't always agree with each other, either. Some are Stoics, who believe they are living out what Fate has predetermined. Others are Epicureans, who believe everything happens by chance. For the Stoics, the universe is predetermined, but not by a personal God. For the Epicureans, nothing is predetermined. These are the two primary alternatives to believing in the providence of God. If God isn't governing then the world, then either "Fate" is or it all happens by chance.

Paul wants to preach Christ to this diverse audience in Athens. What they have in common is that they all believe in lots of gods. They're almost post-modern in the sense that whatever god works for you is OK unless your idea of God invalidates mine. They love that Paul has some new things to say until he gets to the resurrection of Jesus, which of course demands response to an absolute truth. They shut him down.

Paul begins brilliantly by connecting to their story. Several hundred years before Paul arrived in the city, a terrible plague had struck Athens. A prophet named Epimenedes came from Greece and suggested that they needed to sacrifice to all of the gods they knew about. They should drive a herd of sheep away from the Areopagus and, wherever one of them lay down, they should build an altar and sacrifice to one of the gods. Just to cover their bases, they should sacrifice one sheep to "an unknown God."

Paul used that story and that altar to inform them that, indeed, they had missed naming a god – and not just “a god,” but “the God who made the world and everything in it.” This God unknown to them “is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands” (24). This God doesn’t need anything from us. In fact, “he himself gives life and breath and everything else” (25).

Paul is saying what the Creed says: “I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth.” Because that’s true, God is self-sufficient. He doesn’t need you.

In this context Paul articulates what we call the doctrine of “the providence of God.” Verse 26: “From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands.” You may think that migration and wars and treaties created national borders, but it was predetermined by God. Why?

Verse 27: “God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him.” Remember that Paul is almost singlehandedly the hinge as the door of God’s redemptive purposes swings wide open to include Gentiles. He doesn’t say so, but I would surmise that Paul is very aware that the rise and fall of Greece, with its program of Hellenization, and the rise of Rome, with its interstate highway system, has made possible the advance of the Gospel. Paul, a Jew, is able to travel easily into urban centers and preach the Gospel in Greek, a language common to virtually everyone because it was forced on them in previous generations. Who could have planned that but God?

Paul adds, “He is not far from any one of us” (27). Then in verse 28 he shows his own familiarity with Athenian culture by quoting Epimenedes, probably an inscription he saw somewhere in the city, “For in him we live and move and have our being,” and a Stoic philosopher, “We are his offspring.” Notice that Paul doesn’t quote the Old Testament to them. He quotes their own literature.

So yes, both David and Paul, giants of the Old and New Testament, join the other writers of Scripture in saying that God is fully in charge of everything that happens.

But it’s also important not to overlook in both texts, as is also true everywhere else in the Bible, that we are not saying the same thing as the secular physicist who believes everything was predetermined at the Big Bang, or the same thing as those who attribute all that happens to Fate or to the invisible gods.

First, we believe there is a personal God – the Father Almighty – who is fully in charge. Second, nowhere does the Bible suggest that the providence of God – or sovereignty or predestination or whatever other label you want to add – makes no allowance for human choice.

In Psalm 16, for example, when David attributes all the good things in his life to God, he also says, “Those who run after other gods will suffer more and more.” There are consequences for not choosing to put your trust in the one true God.

And in Acts 17, Paul says the reason God set boundaries for the nations is “so that people would seek him and perhaps reach out for him.” A response is required. After saying that God has ordered everything in creation, Paul adds, “He commands all people everywhere to repent” (30) because “he will judge the world with justice” (31). The doctrine of God’s providence doesn’t overrule human responsibility. In Paul’s mind it leads directly to the need to seek God, to repent and believe.

Why stuff happens

The Heidelberg Catechism says the doctrine of God’s creation and providence should have three effects on the believer. We should be (1) patient in adversity, (2) thankful in the midst of blessing, and (3) trusting in everything. These are the three words to remember in connection with providence: patience, gratitude, and trust.

I want to add a fourth, related to the above: humility. The providence of God should make me humble. If your theology doesn’t make you humble, go deeper.

If what I think and say on this topic or any other makes me arrogant, I’ve missed the point. The doctrine of God’s providence at the end of the day means that he’s God and I’m not. He’s in charge, and I’m not. It never, ever, relieves me of the opportunity and responsibility of making choices. I believe because he’s God and I’m not. I repent because he’s God and I’m not. I try to make God-honoring, wise choices in my daily life because he’s God and I’m not. I work for justice because he’s a God of justice. I witness and persuade, because he’s God and has revealed truth to us.

It’s possible to overthink the providence of God. When you start asking questions like, “Did God predetermine where I parked my car this morning (or what I had for dinner last night or which tie I wore)?” that’s just silly. The catechism doesn’t encourage such reflection. Think big picture. Why? Because there’s nothing about the obsession with minutiae that leads to patience, gratitude, trust, and humility.

So what about what seems to be a the logical disconnect – namely, that when good things happen I give God credit and when bad things happen (to me or someone else) I don’t fault God? I’m comfortable saying God has blessed Linda and me, but I don’t say to someone who’s sick or unemployed, “God did this to you, you know.” I might say that our city is blessed, but I’m not going to Matagalpa, Nicaragua on a mission trip and informing the residents that their poverty is due to God’s curse.

Why? Because giving God credit is the humble response. When we see that answer to prayer or that God-wink that only God could have arranged, saying “God did it” is a beautiful response that honors him.

What then is our response when bad things happen – whether to “good people” or otherwise? Why am I not as quick to say either “God did that” or “God didn’t do that?” as Rabbi Kushner famously said in his book, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. His answer was that God’s doing the best he can, but he can’t change things.

I have this discussion with my Confirmation class each year, because they are the age I was when I said confidently after my brother’s attack, “Maybe God didn’t want him to get his driver’s license.” When I pose the question of why bad things happen their first response is similar to what mine would have been at their age. Maybe they did something bad. God’s going to bring good from it. Maybe if they think about it, they’ll know the reason. I then ask them if that answer will work for parents whose 5-year-old died of leukemia. Does it work as a response to the Holocaust?

My goal in this sermon is not to resolve this complex matter, and not to have you walk out say, “That was so profound. He explained God so well to us.” The need to articulate why, or even theorize, especially with a specific bad thing, is adolescent. The peace comes in saying, “A loving, almighty Father is in charge, and he’s enough for me.”

Here’s what I tell my Confirmands about why bad things happen. I first say how Christians don’t respond. We don’t say, “That’s easy.” That would be pride. We also don’t say there is no God, or that God doesn’t love us, or that God can’t do anything about evil in the world. We don’t say, “I know all the reasons.” We’re OK with mystery.

How then do Christians apply the doctrine of God’s providence to evil in the world? We trust God even when we don’t understand. We’re even more thankful for our blessings. We pray for those who suffer. We show up – we love, we give, we serve. We confess our sins because we realize that we are no more deserving of bad things than they are. Even if we can see a cause and effect, such as when a young man goes to jail because he committed a felony, we say, “There but for the grace of God go I.”

But our best answer to suffering and evil is Jesus. The Christian response is that we have a God who doesn’t keep his distance from our hurting world. He stepped into our world, suffering with us and for us. He was not only taking all the consequences of our sins on himself. He was letting us know that whenever we suffer, we have a God who knows what it’s like to be poor, to be rejected, and ultimately to die unjustly.

That’s why the providence of God in the Bible is no sterile doctrine for intellectual debate. It’s at the heart of who we are and what we believe. Knowing that God is an almighty Father who is in charge of the world is the very reason we live and hope and love. Amen.