

Does God have Free Will?: The Meaning of Providence

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Introduction

Ask most people this question: “What is providence?” and you will get a variety of answers. Some will say “A city in the state of Rhode Island”; or, “A Roman Catholic college, the Friars, that play basketball in the Big East Conference.” Really Reformed types might say a Reformed College in Southern California that has Hillary Gamble on the faculty!

But Presbyterians, and other biblically literate people, should respond to the question, “What is providence?” thusly: “God’s works of providence are, his most holy, wise, and powerful preserving and governing all his creatures and all their actions” (WSC #11). Or, better yet: “God’s works of providence are his most holy, wise, and powerful preserving and governing all his creatures; ordering them, and all their actions, to his own glory” (WLC # 18). And, for those who are familiar with the Three Forms of Unity: “The almighty and everywhere present power of God; whereby, as it were by His hand, He upholds and governs heaven, earth, and all creatures; so that herbs and grass, rain and drought, fruitful and barren years, meat and drink, health and sickness, riches and poverty, yea all things come, not by chance, but by His fatherly hand” (HC # 27). Heidelberg Catechism #28 makes this personal, “What advantage is it to us to know that God has created, and by His providence doth still uphold all things?” Answer: “That we may be patient in adversity, thankful in prosperity; and that in all things, which may hereafter befall us, we may place our firm trust in our faithful God and Father, that nothing shall separate us from His love; since all creatures are so in His hand, that without His will they cannot so much as move.”

We live in a post-Christian, postmodern culture. Most people, including many professing Christians, do not believe in the triune God of the Bible who created, sustains and directs the world. Pagan thought prevails with the ancient dualism of impersonal Fate and Chance in a cosmic dog-fight with man trying to manage the mess without being ground to dust. The concept of a personal triune God does not make sense to this culture, let alone a God that has a free-will. We are far beyond even the mechanical deistic view of a clock-maker god. These so-called Christians hold to “open theism” with its puny god who is limited by man’s will, by time, and by space. Most who proclaim to believe in the God of the Bible really have a “Mr. Potato Head” view of God. They take the attributes that they like, stick them into their concept of God and viola: they have conjured up a truncated god that they can like and are sure they can manage. Thus, most of these people live bouncing between irrational, inane optimism and deep, dark despair.

The aforementioned catechism answers are based on the Westminster Confession of Faith Chapter 5. Let’s consider this chapter entitled, Of Providence. Section I says:

God, the great 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.

We must go to the Bible for the answers to these important questions about Providence and God's free will. Remember Romans 3:1-4: Let God be true and every man a liar. For our subject, let God have free will and every man not! If God does not have free will, then no one has it, including you and me! Free will is usually understood as, "1. Unconstrained choice to do or act. 2. the power of directing our own actions without constraint by necessity or fate."

This is different than the Bible's view of free will. Free will is the ability of a rational being to choose. A rational creature is free to choose only so far as his nature and abilities allow him to choose. This is true for God and man, although, of course, in different ways, as He is the triune Creator and we the finite, sinful creatures. Today we live in a world where people think they are free to be whatever they imagine themselves to be. The issues involved in gender identity come to mind; however, that is another topic for another time. Of course, providence and free will make no sense without the Biblical world and life view set forth in the Bible and the Reformed Creeds in general and in the The Westminster Confession of Faith in particular: see Chapter II, Of God, and of the Holy Trinity, Chapter III, Of God's Eternal Decree, Chapter IV, Of Creation.

When you consider any subject, including providence, you must start with God. Genesis 1:1, "In the beginning God created..." This is where it all starts. "For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever, Amen", Romans 11:36. A theocentric view of life must be taken versus an anthropocentric or creaturely view. Ever since the Fall into sin, men have said, "Did God really say?!" Yes, God who is true has said. And it is Satan who is a liar and murderer. And it is we who have tinkered with the truth. This loss of God centered thinking has tragic effects on life. This is well chronicled in Psalm 19 and Romans 1-3. No amount of common grace knowledge of general revelation can overcome the Fall. Only electing, saving grace through the work of the Holy Spirit applying the special revelation of the Word can. So for us, as fallen, and I trust, redeemed sinners, the question is: How does God define his providence and free will?

When you take an honest look at the text of Scripture, it is clear that God is personally and intimately involved with his creation. The triune God of the Bible, Yahweh, creates out of nothing all things that are (Hebrews 11:3). Consider Genesis 1-10. These early chapters are real, time-and-space history, not myths or merely sacred poetry. Again, that is another article for another time. God is intimately involved with his creation. In his creative acts he speaks: the Word goes out and accomplishes His will as the Spirit carries him and then hovers over the creation.

The Psalms

Psalm 29 makes clear that Jesus, the Word, providentially and powerfully directs the creation.

PSALM 29 a Psalm of David

Ascribe to YAHWEH, O heavenly beings,

Ascribe to YAHWEH glory and strength.

Ascribe to YAHWEH the glory due his name;
Worship YAHWEH in the splendor of holiness.

The voice of YAHWEH is over the waters;
the God of glory thunders,
YAHWEH, over many waters.

The voice of YAHWEH is powerful;
The voice of YAHWEH is full of majesty.

The voice of YAHWEH breaks cedars;
YAHWEH breaks the cedars of Lebanon.
He makes Lebanon to skip like a calf;
and Sirion like a young wild ox.

The voice of YAHWEH flashes forth flames of fire;
The voice of YAHWEH shakes the wilderness;
YAHWEH shakes the wilderness of Kadesh.
The voice of YAHWEH makes the deer give birth
and strips the forests bare,
and in his temple all cry, "Glory!"

YAHWEH sits enthroned over the flood;
YAHWEH sits enthroned as king forever.
May YAHWEH give strength to his people!
May YAHWEH bless his people with peace!

This psalm makes clear that God is personally and intimately involved with every day, normal occurrences. Yahweh's voice or word is powerful. Clearly, this is NOT a mechanical view of the world. Rather, it is a personal, covenantal view assured by the Noahic administration of the covenant of grace (Genesis 8:20-9:7). This is providence, not the laws of nature. This is the Father's care, not mother earth's gift!

Psalm 104 is also abundantly clear and is even more pointed in its proclamation of providence.

PSALM 104

Bless YAHWEH, O my soul!

O YAHWEH my God, you are very great!

You are clothed with splendor and majesty,

Covering yourself with light as with a garment,

stretching out the heavens like a tent.

he makes the clouds his chariot;

he rides on the wings of the wind;

he makes his messengers winds,

his ministers a flaming fire.

He sets the earth on its foundations,

so that it should never be moved.

You covered it with the deep as with a garment;

The waters stood above the mountains.

At your rebuke they fled;

at the sound of your thunder they took flight.

The mountains rose, the valleys sank down

to the place that you appointed for them.

You set a boundary that they may not pass,

so that they might not again cover the earth.

You make springs gush forth in the valleys;

they flow between the hills;

they give drink to every beast of the field;

the wild donkeys quench their thirst.

Besides them the birds of the heavens dwell;
They sing among the branches.
From your lofty abode you water the mountains;
the earth is satisfied with the fruit of your work.

You cause the grass to grow for the livestock
and plants for man to cultivate,
that he may bring forth food from the earth
and wine to gladden the heart of man,
oil to make his face shine
and bread to strengthen man's heart.
The trees of YAHWEH are watered abundantly,
The cedars of Lebanon that he planted.
In them the birds build their nests;
the stork has her home in the fir trees.
The high mountains are for the wild goats;
the rocks are a refuge for the rock badgers.

He made the moon to mark the seasons;
the sun knows it's time for setting.
You make darkness, and it is night,
when all the beasts of the forest creep about.
The young lions roar for their prey,
seeking their food from God.
When the sun rises, they steal away
and lie down in their dens.
Man goes out to work
and to his labor until evening.

O lord, how manifold are your works!

In wisdom have you made them all;

the earth is full of your creatures.

Here is the sea, great and wide,

which teems with creatures innumerable,

living things both small and great.

There go the ships,

and Leviathan, which you formed to play in it.

These all look to you,

To give them their food in due season.

When you give it to them, they gather it up;

when you open your hand, they are filled with good things.

When you hide your face, they are dismayed;

when you take away their breath, they die

and return to dust.

When you send forth your Spirit, they are created.

And you renew the face of the ground.

May the glory of YAHWEH endure forever;

may YAHWEH rejoice in his works,

who looks on the earth and it trembles,

who touches the mountains and they smoke!

I will sing to YAHWEH as long as I live;

I will sing praise to my God while I have being.

May my meditation be pleasing to him,

for I rejoice in YAHWEH.

Let sinners be consumed from the earth,
and the wicked be no more!
Bless YAHWEH, O my soul!
Praise YAHWEH!

Verse 30 is especially significant: “When You send forth Your Spirit, they are created, and you renew the face of the ground.” Thus, you must realize that God is personally involved in everything although He is NOT part of the created world. Jehovah made and continues to care for the earth NOT mother nature or Ghia!

Both Testaments witness to this reality. This providential control is comprehensive. Listen to the Holy Spirit who speaks to this issue.

Proverbs 16:1: “The plans of the heart belong to man, but the answer of the tongue is from the LORD.” Thus, even this intimate action of rational man is under God’s control! Examples are prophecy by believers and non-believers. He is sovereign over the words of men.

Proverbs 16:4: “The Lord has made everything for its purpose, even the wicked for the day of trouble.” Although He is not the author of sin (James 1), He has His sovereign plan in His hand and uses the wicked for His good purposes! Some examples are: Saul in the Old Testament and Judas Iscariot in the New Testament.

Proverbs 16:9 “The heart of man plans his way, but the LORD establishes his steps.” Clearly, man is a rational being who plans his life. However, only God can bring about the desired outcome. He is sovereign over the actions of men. For example: Sampson in the Old Testament, Peter in the New Testament.

Proverbs 16:33: “The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD.” There is no such thing as chance or luck! Even this “random” act is planned/controlled! Therefore, no more “pot luck dinners”; rather “pot providence dinners”! God is sovereign over events. Examples include: Haman in the Old Testament and choosing the apostle to replace Judas in the New Testament.

Proverbs 19:21 “Many are the plans in the mind (heart) of a man, but it is the purpose of the LORD that will stand.” The sovereignty of God is comprehensive and all powerful. Man is limited and exercises his will but does NOT control God nor trump him. Pharaoh and Ahab are examples.

Proverbs 20:24 “A man’s steps are from the LORD, how then can man understand his way?” God’s sovereign will/plan is so comprehensive that to have a true and full understanding of your heart and life is an impossibility! Only God knows everything including you and your ways!!! Jesus and his dealings with Peter stand out.

Proverbs 21:1 “The King’s heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD, he turns it wherever he will.” Politics and politicians, including their decisions, are included in God’s plan and care! The picture is of an irrigation ditch. God is sovereign over desires. Here, some examples are: Cyrus and Herod.

Proverbs 21:30: “No wisdom, no understanding, no counsel can avail against the LORD.” We hear echoes of Psalm 2. The Lord laughs at the machinations of man. Balaam and Barak’s evil is a perfect example. Man is judged by God (Psalms 1 & 2).

Proverbs 21:31: “The horse is made ready for the day of battle, but the victory belongs to the LORD.” This is tied to verse 30. Human planning and effort are real and important BUT not ultimate in determining the outcome. God is ultimate. There are several examples but Hezekiah and Sennacherib stand out.

Proverbs 29:26: “Many seek the face of a ruler, but it is from the LORD that a man gets justice.” Again, human planning and effort are real and important BUT not ultimate in determining the outcome. God is ultimate. Paul’s trials cover this! As we come to a presidential election, let us note this well!

Psalm 33:10-11: “The LORD brings the counsel of the nations to nothing; he frustrates the plans of the people. The counsel of the LORD stands forever, the plans of his heart to all generations.” This is a great summary of the Old Testament’s view. The prophets and the historical books all say “amen” to this view.

The New Testament

The New Testament builds on this view of providence, gives more details and ties it to the work of Christ.

Ephesians 1:11-12: “In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will, so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of his glory.” There is much here for our contemplation. Christ is the fountain of all our blessings. God plans and executes all things in an ordained, orderly manner. This sovereign salvation depends on God bringing it about according to his plans and prophecies in the Old Testament. Thus, we must not worry (Matthew 6:19-34), nor fear (Matthew 10:26-33). His providential care extends to fallen sparrows and the number of hairs on our heads!

Thus, you must not believe in Fate and Fortune. Do not act as if they exist. The rest of Chapter 5 of the Westminster Confession of Faith extends and completes our consideration.

II. “Although, in relation to the foreknowledge and decree of God, the first cause, all things come to pass immutably and infallibly; yet, by the same providence, he ordereth them to fall out according to the nature of second causes, either necessarily, freely, or contingently.” In other words, God structures things so that certain creatures work in different ways. All do not work in the same manner. Note well, the three categories: necessity, freely or rationally, and contingently from his providential hand.

III. “God in his ordinary providence maketh use of means, yet is free to work without, above, and against them, at his pleasure.” In other words, God is orderly and works in predictable ways; therefore man can do scientific investigation. BUT, God has and may do what are called wonders, signs or miracles.

IV. “The almighty power, unsearchable wisdom, and infinite goodness of God, so far manifest themselves in his providence, that it extendeth itself even to the first fall, and all other sins of angels and men, and that not by a bare permission, but such as hath joined with it a most wise and powerful bounding, and otherwise ordering and governing of them, in a manifold dispensation, to his own holy ends; yet so as the sinfulness thereof proceedeth only from the creature, and not from God; who, being most holy and righteous, neither is nor can be the

author or approver of sin.” In other words, God is pure, holy and does not sin in this control of the world. The well-known Rabbi is wrong: we do NOT have to choose between a good god and an all-powerful god. God is both. The open theists are wrong. Even the Fall and even the Cross are in his plan and come from His providential hand!

V. “The most wise, righteous and gracious God, doth oftentimes leave for a season his own children to manifold temptations, and to the corruption of their own hearts, to chastise them for their former sins, or to discover unto them the hidden strength of corruption, and deceitfulness of their hearts, that they may be humbled; and to raise them to a more close and constant dependence for their support upon himself, and to make them more watchful against all future occasions of sin, and for sundry other just and holy ends.” In other words, whatever difficulties that arise for the believer, whether internal or external, God is on the throne, in control and up to something good, even when he is providentially pounding the child of God.

VI. “As for those wicked and ungodly men, whom God as a righteous judge, for former sins, doth blind and harden, from them he not only withholdeth his grace, whereby they might have been enlightened in their understandings, and wrought upon in their hearts; but sometimes also withdraweth the gifts which they had, and exposeth them to such objects as their corruption makes occasion of sin; and withal, gives them over to their own lusts, the temptations of the world, and the power of Satan: whereby it comes to pass, that they harden themselves, even under those means which God useth for the softening of others.” In other words, God’s providence even extends to the spiritual state of unbelievers and the process of their hardening, whether by blessings or curses.

VII. “As the providence of God doth, in general, reach to all creatures; so, after a most special manner, it taketh care of his church, and disposeth all things to the good thereof.” In other words, the LORD has the back of the church! As we noted before, we do not need to worry or fear! (Psalm 2 and Ephesians 1:15-23).

Conclusion

Dear friend, you must realize that God is good and wise. He is good all of the time. He is wise all of the time. Above all, He is holy, holy, holy! He is in control. If you are God’s child and united to Christ, you are worth more than many sparrows, yes all of them together; he will give you bread, fish and eggs NOT stones, snakes and scorpions! Also, He will grant you to suffer with Christ so you will grow in grace. Yes, you will suffer with Christ.

Does God have a free will? Indeed, God has a free will which is bound by his total character. He is free but bound to his holy perfections. His will is free but bound to his pure, holy character. He is not the Mr. Potato Head god of man’s making but the triune one that Isaiah saw, Isaiah 6. He is not the “force” of Star wars. He is not the idolatrous imagination of man drunk on his own sinful, fallible and limited wisdom. He is the living, holy One.

What then does this mean? You and I should bow down and worship him! You and I should praise him. He is wise; you and I ignorant. He is strong; you and I weak. He is just and impartial; you and I self-protecting and prejudiced. He is good; you and I perverse. Above all, he is merciful and loving through Christ; you and I are self-centered and hard-hearted. By grace you have been saved through faith in THIS GOD, Yahweh, Father, Son and Holy Spirit (Ephesians 2:1-10).

Dear friend, providence should lead to praise and worship! Learn this from God’s Word. Learn from the Bible’s teaching. Learn from the lives of Job, Jonah, Nebuchadnezzar, and Paul. Learn it from Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, “Nevertheless, your will be done not mine!”

Learn to trust him and his providential, Fatherly care. After all, the blood of the Lamb and his righteousness makes you worth more than many sparrows. Yes, God has free will only limited by his sinless holiness. He has exercised that will towards you in Christ. You are a renewed image bearer reflecting Jesus. You are safe from the world, your flesh and the Devil. Praise him that he is in charge and not anyone or anything else.

If you are not his, flee to him now. He will never turn the humble away! We will be able to help you be found by him.

Now dear child of the King, relax, enjoy him, put on the whole armor of God. Enjoy him as he providentially gets you to glory. Memorize Scriptures on this truth. Meditate on God's providence. Memorize and meditate on the Catechisms.

WSC Q.11 What are God's works of providence?

A. God's works of providence are, his most holy, wise, and powerful preserving and governing all his creatures, and all their actions.

WLC Q. 18 What are God's works of providence?

A. God's works of providence are his most holy, wise, and powerful preserving and governing all his creatures; ordering them and all their actions, to his own glory.

HC Question 27 What dost thou mean by the providence of God?

The Almighty and everywhere present power of God; whereby, as it were by his hand, he upholds and governs heaven, earth, and all creatures; so that herbs and grass, rain and drought, fruitful and barren years, meat and drink, health and sickness, riches and poverty, yea all things come not by chance, but by his fatherly hand.

HC Question 28 What does it benefit us to know that God has created all things and still upholds them by his providence?

We can be patient in adversity, thankful in prosperity, and with a view to the future we can have a firm confidence in our faithful God and Father that no creature shall separate us from His love; for all creatures are so completely in His hand that without His will they cannot so much as move.

Beloved, in him you live and move and have your being (Acts 17:28).

Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!

For who has known the mind of the Lord,
or who has been his counselor?
Or who has given a gift to him
that he might be repaid?

For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen. (Romans 11:33-36).