

# Providence of God

## Introduction to Providence

God is actively involved in the lives of his children and in this world. We need to remember that our Lord is not a “deistic” God that created this world and now has no interaction or involvement in the affairs of men. God forbid! No, our Heavenly Father is actively involved in the lives of every single one of his children. The broad biblical topic used to describe God’s active and passive involvement in our lives is God’s “providence”. We hope to try to consider together some examples of God’s providence in the scriptures to try to understand better how God works in our lives. Over the years in the church, there has been a great deal of conflict regarding the absolute predestination of all things and some trying to place all events at the feet of God as their cause. Absolute predestination has been rightly and scripturally rejected, but as is usually the case, God’s people typically overcorrect in the other direction. While trying to reject that God causes all events, we have left the scriptural teaching of God’s providence largely neglected. While correctly rejecting that God has predetermined all events, we have incorrectly portrayed that God is not very involved in our daily lives. We hope to strike the scriptural balance in our discussion of God’s providence. God does not cause all events in this world, but God is always actively and passively working all the time for the good and blessing of his children in this world.

We undertake this topic with great humility, reverence, and ultimately amazement of our God’s wisdom and his ways. God’s ways are so much infinitely higher than our ways and his thoughts so much higher than our thoughts (Isaiah 55:8-9); the majority of the time we can’t really understand what God is doing. Our finite, corruptible, simple minds just cannot understand the eternal, infinite, and perfectly omniscient mind of God. Ultimately, we need to remember that God’s judgments are unsearchable, and his ways are past finding out by mortal men (Rom. 11:33). We cannot fully know in our lives to what extent God is actively or passively working behind the scenes that we cannot see in the moment. Therefore, we want to look at some examples from the word of God where the Spirit peeled back the curtain of God’s providence just a little bit to where we can see how God has worked in specific circumstances in the lives of his children in times past. We can look at these instances in scripture of God’s providence and have confidence, hope, and excitement that our God can and will bless and guide us by his providence in our lives in the same manner he has providentially blessed his faithful saints that have come before us.

As with many crucial Bible doctrines, the word “providence” is not used prevalently in scripture, but the truth of God’s providence gushes forth on almost every page of his word. Actually, the word “providence” is only found in the KJV Bible once, and it is Tertullus accusing Paul before Felix and speaking of “Felix’s providence” of the Jewish nation (Acts 24:2), having nothing to do with God’s providence. The same Greek word “pronoia” – meaning “*forethought, provident care or supply*” (Strongs) – is also found in Rom. 13:14, translated as “provision” for the flesh. While this actual word is not very prevalent in scripture, its meaning gives us a very good summary definition of providence – “provident care or supply”. Let us consider some more definitions for a little more context. The root word for providence is obviously “provide”. From Webster’s 1828 Dictionary, “provide” is defined as: “1) to procure beforehand; to get collect or make ready for future use; to prepare. 2) to procure supplies as a means of defense, or to take measures for counteracting or escaping an evil”. Then, also from Webster’s 1828 Dictionary, “providence” is defined as: “1) the act of providing or preparing for future use or application. 2) foresight; timely care; particularly active foresight, or foresight accompanied with the procurement of what is necessary for future use, or with suitable preparation. 3) in theology, the care and superintendence which God exercises over his creatures”.

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We see from these definitions that providence is not simply God's perfect foreknowledge of future events. Notice the definition of "active foresight". Not just having a passive knowledge of events, but God's "active" procurement to collect and make ready and provide all that is necessary for a future need. In many instances that we see in scripture, God is planning and working and guiding for years, and even generations, before to make sure everything has been properly procured for a future a need of God's people.

Notice the components of the root word "provide". First, "pro" which means "before". Then, "video" which means "to see" and speaks of vision. Therefore, provide literally means "to see before". However, God does not just "see before" in omniscient foreknowledge, but he actively is working to provide everything that is necessary to guide, bless, or even save his people in a future need. God sees our need beforehand in his perfect omniscience, and in his unsearchable and past finding out ways, he procures all that is necessary to provide for our future need when it arrives. That's why God's timing is always perfect. We might not understand why something happened at a certain time or in a certain way in our lives, but we never know how or if God might use that in the future in his providence. We just can't know or understand all God is doing all the time. Therefore, we must always come back and trust the bedrock truth that our Heavenly Father always has our best interest at heart and always lovingly corrects and guides us as our Good Heavenly Father. God sees our needs beforehand and as any loving Father would do, he makes sure his children are taken care of for their future need.

We need to make sure we thread this needle properly and with great precision. God does not cause all events that happen in this world, and not everything that happens is somehow being used by God. We need to understand the principle of God's "overruling providence". Bad things happen in this world and are inevitable in a fallen, sinful world – "*in this world you shall have tribulation*" (John 16:33); it is guaranteed that tribulation will come in our lives in this world. There's a sense in which God's providence is always making things better than it "could be" if he fully removed his providential hedge. "*Surely the wrath of man shall praise thee: and the remainder of wrath shalt thou restrain.*" (Psalm 76:10) God does not cause sin and does not cause the wrath of man. Instead, God is always "restraining" the wrath of man. Depraved man is never fully able to be as wicked and sinful as he would be or desires to be without God's "restraining and overruling" providence to protect his people. In other words, wicked men have an innate desire to do even worse and even more wicked things than we already see around us. In spite of the wicked's designs, God is sovereign, and he restrains and overrules their desires and prevents them from carrying out the fulness of all their wicked devices.

However, there are also times when God uses the wrath of man to his praise – "*surely the wrath of man shall praise thee.*" (Ps. 76:10) Notice, this verse is clear and precise; this is still the "wrath of man", not wrath caused by God. Then, at the same time "*the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God*" (James 1:20). Therefore, God does suffer some things for his honor and glory, but not all things without exception are working together for God's glory. God removed his providential hedge and suffered Nebuchadnezzar to ransack Jerusalem for the purpose of judging and chastising his people to bring them to repentance and to honor his word of judgment that was promised due to their rebellion. Nebuchadnezzar only did what God suffered him to do, but he is still called God's servant and was the rod that God used to chastise his people. We need to really remember though – especially in the case of Nebuchadnezzar, Joseph, and other prominent examples – that **just because God acted one way, one time, does not mean that God works that way all the time, even in what might appear to us to be similar circumstances.** We will

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deal with Nebuchadnezzar in much more detail in a later section, so I encourage you to read that as well. Nebuchadnezzar committed sin by his actions, and God held him accountable for those sins. His destruction of Jerusalem showed God's sovereignty, upheld God's word, and was used by God to correct his people. God restrains the full wickedness of man, but there are times when even the wrath of man can be suffered by God to his praise and to his glory.

Even in the worst circumstances of this life, even when there might seem to be no hope, God can providentially bless his children in a mighty way. There are so many examples in scripture where at the worst time with no hope or seemingly no way out, at the exact time of the most severe need was when God's providence was manifested in a mighty way. We have to remember that God is able to do "*exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think.*" (Eph. 3:20) We can't put our God in a box of the small limitations of our mind and think that God can't bless providentially in this situation; we can't presume this is too far beyond God's repair or beyond reconciliation. It certainly might be true that it is too bad and too far gone for man to remedy the situation, but that is usually the instances where God's providence is manifested the strongest for God's glory and honor. God is in the business of giving beauty for ashes (Isaiah 61:3). Ashes are not pretty, not worth anything, and you can't really do anything with them. Ashes are even a remembrance of what was formerly there but has been lost and burnt up. Ashes are a remembrance of blessings lost and gone. In the midst of ashes, our God raises up great beauty out of the ashes of our life. God gives his people a beautiful rainbow in the aftermath of the storm to remind his people of his covenant faithfulness in the midst of the trials of this life (Gen. 9). It is when we think there is no way and no hope that God's providence will most likely show up in a powerful and mighty way that we don't expect to God's honor and glory.

God providentially guides the path of his children in our lives. "*The steps of a good man are ordered by the Lord, and he delighteth in his way.*" (Psalm 37:23) The word "ordered" here means "established". God has not chosen every step of our lives for us, but God does guide, order, and establish our walk of discipleship by his providence. "*5) Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. 6) In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths.*" (Prov. 3:5-6) If we trust God with all our hearts, if we forsake our own understanding, acknowledge and remember who God is and that he always has our best interests in mind, then God has promised to "direct" our paths. If we trust God fully, then He will direct our paths, even if we don't understand in the moment how it will ultimately all work out. "*A man's heart deviseth his way: but the Lord directeth his steps.*" (Prov. 16:9) We devise and scheme what is the best way to go (oftentimes without any input from the Lord) because we are relying and trusting on our own understanding. We say to God in prayer, "I know what's best for me, now give it to me." We've charted our own way based on our own understanding, and now we just want God to rubber stamp our itinerary. Notice it's our heart that is devising and scheming the best path for us. It's man's heart that is "*deceitful above all things and desperately wicked*" (Jer. 17:9). That's why the pathway that our own heart chooses is oftentimes so different than God's will, because our heart is deceptive and wants to satisfy the flesh. In summary our heart says, "No, God you don't really know what's best for me". Therefore, God overrules the devices and schemes of our heart and providentially directs our steps according to his will.

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### **Jehovah Jireh**

In Gen. 22, the Lord calls Abraham to offer his son, Isaac, upon Mount Moriah. Abraham is obedient to this command, willing to offer Isaac with a belief that God will resurrect his son from the dead. Just as Abraham is about to offer his son, the Lord sends an angel to speak to him, showing him a ram caught in a thicket to offer instead of Isaac. In memorial of the Lord's providence on Mount Moriah, Abraham called the name of that place "*Jehovah-Jireh, as it is said to this day, In the mount of the Lord it shall be seen.*" (Gen. 22:14) Jehovah Jireh means "the Lord will provide; or the Lord will see." This name of Jehovah Jireh connects the correct vantage point of God's providence that we have already noted – "to see before" and then to procure everything necessary for a future need when the need ultimately arises. God saw the future need of Abraham, and God provided beforehand exactly what was necessary (a ram) to be in the exact right place at the exact right time to meet the need of his obedient child, walking in faith. Jehovah Jireh is a great model for the active foresight and provision of God that our Heavenly Father undertakes for his children on a daily basis.

First, note that the ram was caught in a nearby thicket the whole time. The ram did not just appear when the angel showed up. No, the ram was there the whole time, but Abraham did not see what God had already provided until the Lord by an angel showed him what God had already provided beforehand. Thus is the case with God's providence in our lives many times too. The providential deliverance may have been there the whole time, but we could not see it because we are evaluating the situation through natural eyes, instead of through the eyes of faith. God called Abraham to offer Isaac in an exact location. Then, prior to Abraham arriving at that exact location, the Lord providentially suffered a ram to be caught in the thicket at that exact location before Abraham even got there. Also, notice the involvement of angels in this providential deliverance. The angel notified Abraham of God's providential care, but maybe even guided that animal to be there at the exact right place at the exact right time. The Lord is always actively guiding his angels to providentially care for his children. Abraham did not know what was going to occur. He just took each step in faith, even though he didn't understand it in the moment. Then, when the appointed time came, an angel showed him the providential deliverance that was there all along. That's how God's providence works, even when we cannot see it and have no knowledge of what God is doing beyond our sight. He works everything providentially together beforehand to where all the provision we need is in the exact right place at the exact right time. Like Abraham, most of the time, we will never know what God is providentially doing in the moment. However, when the Lord reveals what he has provided beforehand, what a blessing to see the Lord's active foresight, provision, and Jehovah Jireh blessings in our lives as well.

### **God's Perfect Omniscience**

When we consider God's providence in our lives, we have to view his actions through the lens of God's perfect omniscience. God's "omniscience" means he has "all knowledge" – "omni" (meaning "all") "science" (from Latin meaning "knowledge"). God has perfect knowledge of all events in this world. God is eternal and not bound by time. For lack of a better way of describing it, God can see all eternity at once. We can only think about and consider one thing at a time in our mind. We can only know what has happened in the past, now in the present, and then make reasonable assumptions about the future. We certainly do not have all knowledge of events beyond our purview. On the other hand, God has all knowledge of all events that have or will occur in the history of this world. Furthermore, he knows them all and can recall and

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understand them all at one time. God does not just have a binary, cold knowledge of events like a computer storing information. Rather, God perfectly “understands” all things, which we cannot relate to or even comprehend. We cannot fully fathom that “all knowledge” because we are bound by time and very limited knowledge of our mortal, finite minds.

God sees all of eternity at one time. Therefore, while we can only look at the events of life based on our immediate surroundings and the timeline of our life, God sees everything that is happening in every person’s life in this world right now all at one time – even the thoughts and intents of every person’s heart. *“12) For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. 13) Neither is there any creature that is not manifest in his sight: but all things are naked and opened unto the eyes of him with whom we have to do.”* (Heb. 4:12-13) The word of God in this context is Jesus Christ. Therefore, Jesus Christ knows intimately every part of our bodies, even the parts that are almost indistinguishable to us, like the joints and marrow. Christ also intimately knows our inner man as well, able to distinguish and divide even between the soul and spirit, which man cannot do. God knows the thoughts and intents of every man’s heart perfectly. No man can hide the thoughts of his heart from God’s perfect omniscience. God sees the actions of every creature in this world and “all things are naked and opened” unto Christ’s eyes.

There is nowhere in this world we can go to escape God’s perfect omniscience. From Psalm 139, we see God’s intimate knowledge of every aspect of our life. God searches and knows his creatures (v.1); God knows our down sitting and uprising, and he understands our thoughts afar off (v.2); God is there compassing our path and our lying down, and he is acquainted with all our ways (v.3); God knows every word in our tongue altogether (v.4). We cannot flee and get away from the presence of God where he cannot see or know us: in heaven, in hell, fleeing to the uttermost parts of the sea, anywhere in this world, even there will God’s hand lead us and God’s right hand hold us (v.7-10). Understand, there is no where we can go from the all-seeing eye and knowledge of God. Also, thankfully, there is no where we can go or nothing we can do where God’s providence cannot bless us in that circumstance because God will never leave us nor forsake us.

Because God sees everything in this world perfectly in an eternal way all at one time, God can declare things as already done that have not yet occurred in the timeline of history in this world. *“Declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times the things that are not yet done, saying, My counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure.”* (Isaiah 46:10) There are many events that could have turned out differently based on the actions of men in this world for Jesus’ lineage to have been under different circumstances. For example, if King Saul had been obedient to God and lived godly, he could have been the kingly lineage of the Messiah (1 Sam. 13:13). He chose to sin, and God rejected him as king and chose to establish David, a man after his own heart as king. Saul was of the tribe of Benjamin; David was of the tribe of Judah. The Messiah could have come through the tribe of Benjamin if Saul was obedient, but God knew perfectly beforehand what would occur and prophesied hundreds of years even before Saul’s life through Jacob that Judah would be the tribe that Shiloh would come from (Gen. 49:8-12). Therefore, God can declare things that have not even occurred yet in history with total clarity and certainty. Read Daniel chapters 7-12 and many of the prophesies that are given in such perfect detail spanning hundreds of years of future events in Judean history that scoffers have tried to say the book had to have been written after

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those events as a history book instead of beforehand as a prophetic book. God can declare events that have not even come to pass as though they already were past due to his perfect omniscience.

God is perfectly omniscient and is actively working in the lives of his children every single day. However, we cannot try to put God in a box, or try to bring God down to our level and think we can fully understand him. God is eternal and perfect in all his ways and thoughts. We are temporal, timely creatures and imperfect in our natures. We cannot pretend to think we can fully understand everything God has done or will do. In particular, we cannot dogmatically affirm to what extent God is actively working or passively suffering events to occur in this world in his providence. We know God is there and working, but we cannot always identify exactly to what extent all the time. “8) *For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord.* 9) *For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.*” (Isaiah 55:8-9) The heavens are so incomprehensibly higher than the earth and likewise God is incomprehensibly larger and higher than us. We cannot fully understand God in this world with our finite minds. God’s judgments and God’s ways truly are “unsearchable” and “past finding out”. “*O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! how unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out!*” (Rom. 11:33) We know from God’s promise that God is actively working by providence in the lives of his children, but ultimately our God is so big and perfect and powerful that the full depth of his judgments, thoughts, and ways are beyond our comprehension in this world.

We are commanded to “*walk by faith, not by sight*” (2 Cor. 5:7). That’s why Jesus declared that an evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign (Matt. 12:39). God expects us to walk by faith, trusting God, but when we ask God for a sign before we are willing to walk after him, then we show that we don’t truly trust God by faith. We are called upon to “*live by faith*” (Rom. 1:17). We don’t live by signs, and we don’t live by “explanations”. We live by faith in God. We oftentimes feel like we have the right to require God to explain everything to us that he is doing all the time. No, God is sovereign; he can do as he pleases and doesn’t have to answer to or explain his actions to lowly man. Furthermore, if God did explain all his will, purposes, and thoughts to us, we couldn’t fathom or understand it anyway because his ways and thoughts are so infinitely higher than ours. Therefore, we don’t require God to perpetually explain himself to us. Remember, **we don’t live by explanations; we live by faith.** God doesn’t have to explain everything to us; we just simply trust God in faith, knowing that our heavenly Father always has the best interest of his children at heart in his actions of providence.

## Rejecting the Error of Absolute Predestination

It is vitally important to understand and distinguish that just because God has perfect knowledge of events that will occur and since he works providentially in our lives, that does not mean that God is causative in every action in this world. God has not unalterably predetermined all events that will occur in this world – that is the unscriptural doctrine of “absolute predestination” or “fatalism”. Man was made in the image of God. God has a will, and man was created in his image with a will. God has not pre-programmed all decisions and actions of man from before the world began, but man is given free will to choose to obey God or choose to sin. While the believer of absolute predestination will deny this truth, if God has absolutely predestinated all events, that means that God chose beforehand for Adam and Eve to sin and even caused not only their sin but caused the temptation of Satan that enticed their sin. If God unalterably predetermined all events

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before the world began, Adam was not actually culpable for breaking God's law to not eat of the forbidden fruit. Then, Adam had no choice in the matter. God pre-programed Adam to do that, and he didn't have a choice to do otherwise. Therefore, God not only caused man to sin, but he caused him to break the commandment that God established. The Bible thoroughly refutes absolute predestination, but just this disjointed contradiction should suffice to reject it. The proponent of absolutism may say that God predestinated all events and that God is not the author of sin, but that is a logical contradiction; if one is true, then the other must be true as well. Someone can say they believe in grace, but you have to perform one work to be saved. Well, regardless of how often you repeat that logical contradiction, that doesn't make it true. If one work is necessary for your eternal salvation, then you are saved by works. Period. If God predestinated all events, that does make God the author of sin. Period, regardless of how often the opposite is illogically stated.

Thankfully, the Bible leaves no doubt on its rejection of absolute predestination, and its affirmation that God is not the author of sin. Predestination in scripture (only mentioned directly 4 items in scripture: Rom. 8:29-30; Eph. 1:5,11) only deals with "people" and never "events". God predetermined the final destiny of all of his elect before the world began. God only predestinated "whom" and "us" (his people); he never predestinated "what" (events). We should not diminish God's predestination of a people to eternal salvation in heaven by slandering God's holy name for causing the sinful actions of men. It is true that God is perfectly sovereign, and he can overrule the actions of men when he sees fit to intervene for his people's good and for his glory; just because God can intervene does not mean that God always will choose to do so. Predestination in scripture only relates to God's predestination of his elect people to heaven, not any predetermining of this life's events before the world began.

In James 1:13-14, scripture affirms that God himself cannot be tempted with evil nor does God tempt any man with evil. God cannot behold evil or even look on iniquity (Hab. 1:13), and God will not and cannot do iniquity (Zeph. 3:5). When Israel was offering their children to false gods, God affirms that not only did he not command that, but it never even entered into his mind (Jer. 19:5, Jer. 7:31, Jer. 44:2-5). When charged with these glaring problems, the proponents of absolute predestination will often backtrack to Deut. 29:29 and try to say that we can't understand how but somehow these things are in God's "secret will", we just can't know how. *"The secret things belong unto the Lord our God: but those things which are revealed belong unto us and to our children for ever, that we may do all the words of this law."* (Deut. 29:29) It is true that there are many things that God keeps to himself. However, God's "secret things will" shall never contradict his revealed will in his word. God's "secret will" will never contradict his "revealed will" in the scriptures. Therefore, when God says in Jer. 19:5 that he did not command these sinful abominations to occur, that denies that these actions were somehow in God's "secret will" behind the curtain. Furthermore, notice from Deut. 29:29 that the secret things belong unto "the Lord our God", not to man. When the absoluter says "they know" the secret will of God, and it includes some sinful event that somehow God is using for good, they are speaking of things that don't belong to them and they don't know anything about. It's true we don't know what is in God's "secret will", but the absoluter doesn't know either because those things belong to God and not to any man.

Consider, if all events are predetermined by God, there is no possibility of alternative outcomes. This nullifies every single "if-then" statement in the scriptures. If you do this, then this is the outcome, but if you choose to do the opposite, then this is the alternative outcome of what will happen. If absolutism was

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true, then every “if-then” statement in the Bible is rendered totally irrelevant and null and void. Let us consider just a small sampling of events in scripture that clearly had alternative outcomes, let alone every if-then statement in all the scriptures.

- God intended to destroy all the nation of Israel except Moses, but because of the action of one man, God chose to be merciful to Israel and spare them. Note that if Moses would have just allowed God to do his wrath, he would have started over the nation with Moses a Levite, but instead the lineage of Christ still came through Judah, due to the actions of Moses (Exod. 32:9-14).
- Samuel tells Saul that if he had been obedient to God, he would have established his kingdom upon Israel forever (1 Sam. 13:13), but since he did not obey God’s commandment, his kingdom would be removed from him (1 Sam. 13:14). Again, this could have changed the Messianic lineage to Benjamin from Judah, but God prophesied years beforehand of Judah, knowing the choices that Saul would make, not causing his sinful decisions.
- God tells David that if he stays in the city of Keilah, that Saul would come for him, and then the people will give him up to Saul. However, in response to that information, David leaves the city and escapes what the Lord confirmed would happen if he had stayed in the city, and Saul ends up not even coming to Keilah (1 Sam. 23:9-13).
- God said he would bless Jeroboam in the same manner as David if he was obedient unto him (1 Kg. 11:37-38), but instead Jeroboam was judged of the Lord because of his sins and making the people of Israel to sin (1 Kg. 14:7-16).
- Hezekiah was told he would die imminently from the Lord by the prophet, but because he chose to pray unto God, he did not die but was granted by God 15 more years to live (Isaiah 39:1-10). It is clear that if he had not prayed unto God, then he would have died as the Lord commanded.
- God sent prophets to the Israel and Judah to call them to repent, and he even told them that if they repented then they could avoid the Assyrian and Babylonian captivity. Instead, they rejected the prophets, and therefore were allowed to go into captivity for judgment. God would repent of the evil he intended for Israel if they would repent (Jer. 26:12-13), but they did not so they were sent into Babylonian captivity, as God had promised.
- Ezekiel is told that if he had been sent to other nations then they would have hearkened unto his preaching. Instead, he was sent to Israel, and they did not hearken to his preaching (Ezek. 3:5-7).
- Jesus said if the mighty works he performed in Judea had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented (Matt. 11:21, Luke 10:13). Jesus reemphasizes that if the mighty works he had performed in those cities of Judea had been done in Sodom, it would not have been destroyed (Matt. 11:23).

There is a distinction between God knowing all the works that he will ultimately complete before the world began, and then God unalterably decreeing all events in this world to occur before the world began. “*Known unto God are all his works from the beginning of the world.*” (Acts 15:18) It’s clear from these examples that God knew he would change his course of actions with Moses and Israel and with Hezekiah, etc. God knew how things would ultimately turn out and what he would do in every circumstance, but that does not



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mean that God has predetermined the events of man. God is eternal, and we cannot try to comprehend the actions of an eternal God by our mortal, finite minds. We must arrive at the same conclusion as the scriptures, that predestination in scripture only relates to God predestinating a people to heaven before the world began, not to God unalterably decreeing all events of man before the world began.

### **Do All Things Work Together for Good? Rightly Dividing Romans 8:28**

*“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.” (Rom. 8:28)*

The Holy Spirit gave God’s people some amazing, comforting truths in the eighth chapter of Romans. However, it has become commonplace in Christian culture today for Romans 8:28 to be used in a very broad and general sense to try to comfort God’s people in tragedy, extending far beyond the immediate context of the verse. Oftentimes, well-meaning believers attempt to use Romans 8:28 to try to explain some bad circumstances that occur in life – a tragic, sudden loss of a loved one, a terminal diagnosis, a global pandemic, wars, violence, crime and unrest, or any number of other bad things in this world. They attempt to teach in a very general way that “God is working all things together for your good”. This incorrect portrayal of this text tells the struggling child of God that the Lord has caused this event, but it’s okay because ultimately God is using this – just like how supposedly God uses all things, all events in this life without exception – to work together for your ultimate good. While it is true that God’s motivations and goals in his actions are always the good of his children and God can use challenging circumstances for your good, scripture does not support that all events without exception are working together for our good. Let us rightly divide Romans 8:28 together to understand that not all events without exception are working for our good, but rather all things that GOD DOES are working together in synergy for the good of his children.

### **"Why" Did This Happen?**

When someone is told that “God is working all things together for your good”, the natural tendency for us is to try to find out “why” did God allow this to happen? That causes even well-meaning Christians to start looking behind every single door and around every corner to figure out “why” God did this. When considering all the wickedness in this world, it is an understandable question in response to this false “all things” notion to try to find out “why” and “how” is God working with this sin for my good. Many well-meaning Christians have been caused to question the integrity and character of God because of the misapplication of this all things text. How could a good God not just allow this to happen, but how could a perfect God be using this sin (a drunk driver killing your child, for example) for my good? They correctly question the direct connecting link of one’s sin and God using that sin for their good. We always get into trouble when we try to attribute an official “why” to anything in this world.

There are instances in scripture that the Holy Spirit does give us the “why” God suffered certain events to occur – Job, Joseph, Moses, Esther, Ruth, Jesus, Judas, etc. However, considering all the thousands of events in scripture and probably billions more in life that are not recorded, we can’t take a small sampling of just a few acts of God’s providence that the Lord clarified for us, and then try to perfectly figure out every single event in our life. We can see from the handful of instances in scripture explained versus the billions of other events left unexplained, that for the majority of events in our life we will never understand

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the full “why” they occurred. We can see from those instances in scripture that if God does want us to know “why”, the Lord will give us clarity by the Holy Spirit as to the exact “why” God suffered things to happen as they did in our life. Furthermore, Romans 8:28 says we “know” – it is obvious and clear – that the all things in context work together for our good. Therefore, if we are doubting (if we do not “know”) if the events of our life are for our good, then those events in our life are clearly not the “all things” in context of Romans 8:28.

Our focus when bad things happen should not be trying to find a “why” but simply trusting God in the midst of that trial. We walk by faith, not by sight (2 Cor. 5:7). It is not our responsibility to see and understand why everything occurs. No, it is just our responsibility to walk by faith, trusting God whether we have clarity in a given situation or not. We don’t need to be continually searching to try to figure out all the reasons why God suffered something to occur. We certainly don’t need to be trying to connect instances of sin and trying to figure out how God is working behind the scenes in that sin to ultimately be for our good. Many people begin to question the integrity of God when they try to see how God is using sin for their good. No, God never actively uses sin to work together for your good. There are many instances in scripture and in our lives where God does suffer sin for a purpose, and God will overrule that sin in his providence for your good and for his glory. God never actively uses sin for your good but will only overrule that sin for your good. We will clearly reach wrong conclusions when we always try to find God behind the scenes, in the shadows, working sin for our good. We have to be reminded of God’s impeccability above sin. God cannot be tempted with evil and does not and cannot tempt any man to sin (James 1:13). God cannot even behold or look on iniquity (Hab. 1:13). God will not do iniquity (Zeph. 3:5). God hates wickedness (Ps. 45:7); God’s soul hates the wicked (Ps. 11:5); God is angry with the wicked all the day (Ps. 7:11); there are many works of the flesh that God hates (Prov. 6:16-19). The detestable sins of child sacrifice by Israel were not commanded by God and never came into God’s mind (Jer. 19:5).

We cannot look at God’s vehement hatred and disposition against wickedness, and then reach the conclusion that God is secretly working behind the scenes with those things he publicly hates to bring about our good. God forbid! God, in his providence, can bless and overrule the worst sins of men and bring beauty from ashes in our lives. We see this so many times in scripture with God bringing beauty from ashes. God can, and many times does, overrule sinful actions for his glory and for his people’s good. However, just because God has overruled in his providence for his people’s good from time to time, we cannot then extrapolate that providence to every single action that occurs in this world. We certainly cannot say that God is secretly working behind the scenes with every sin for our good. No, God’s providence will many times bless his children “in spite” of sin, never with God working together with sin.

### **Things that DO NOT Work Together for Your Good**

Just a simple cursory overview of this world shows many things are clearly not working for our good, let alone “working together” for our good. The Greek word that is the basis for “working together” in this text is where we get our English word “synergy”. The “all things” in context are all “working in synergy” for the good of God’s children (the called that love God). However, there are many things in this world that God is clearly not working “in synergy” with. Sin is a rebellion against God’s commands; sin works death (James 1:15), and death is our enemy (1 Cor. 15:26). God is not working with sin and our enemy death for our good. Instead, God destroyed through his Jesus Christ because sin is constantly working for our death,

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not our good. The devil is our adversary who is seeking to devour God's people (1 Pet. 5:8). Satan is not working in synergy with God behind the scenes for our good; the devil is rather working for our destruction to devour us. The future man of sin will "*oppose and exalt himself against all that is called God or is worshipped.*" (2 Thess. 2:4) This future wicked man will work directly in "opposition" towards God, not in cooperative synergy with him. Lust and sin bring forth death (James 1:14-15) and death is our "enemy", certainly not our friend (1 Cor. 15:26).

The natural and carnal mind is "enmity" (an enemy) toward God (Rom. 8:7), and in our original natures, we were enemies of God (Rom. 5:10, Col. 1:21). The flesh "*lusteth against the Spirit...these are contrary the one to the other.*" (Gal. 5:17) Our natural flesh is warring against the Spirit (see Rom. 7:16-23 for the internal warfare conflict in the soul of the child of God) and working contrary to the Spirit to cause us to stumble. That's why the end of the carnal mind is death (Rom. 8:6; death which is our "enemy", 1 Cor. 15:26), and the end of the broad way is destruction (Matt. 7:13). Friendship with the world is "*enmity with God*", and if we are the friend of the world, then we are in turn the enemy of God (James 4:4). There are many other examples we could provide, but finally "*the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God.*" (James 1:20) God is not behind the scenes secretly using the wrath of man for your good to fulfill the righteousness of God. No, the Holy Spirit made sure you understand exactly what that verse says – the wrath of man does not work for the righteousness of God. Therefore, it is evident there are many things in this world that are not working for your good and are definitely not working "in synergy" with God for your good.

### **Rightly Dividing Romans 8:28 In Context**

To rightly divide the proper interpretation of Romans 8:28 in context, we need to consider the entirety of the eighth chapter of Romans together. Romans 8:28 begins with "*And*" that connects it not just to the preceding paragraph section, but also the whole chapter in context. This one verse cannot be taken in isolation of the full context, especially since the verse begins with a conjunction connecting it to the rest of the preceding thought. The original texts of the Bible were not divided into chapter and verse divisions. They are very helpful for our quick reference, but the chapter and verse divisions are not divinely inspired. In Romans, the KJV translators did a good job of presenting a very logical chapter transition from Romans 7 to Romans 8. Romans 7 is dealing with the internal warfare of the flesh versus the Spirit in the conscience of the child of God. This chapter climaxes by asking who shall deliver our wretched man from the body of this death (v.24), and answers that Jesus Christ is our deliverer from the law of sin and death in our members (v.25). For the child of God struggling in the midst of their warfare with the flesh, maybe even sometimes feeling like they are losing that warfare, we need to be reminded that even if we feel condemnation in our conscience, actually "*there is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit.*" (Romans 8:1) In the midst of that warfare, we might feel condemned, but the Holy Spirit gives us many things that God is doing for us in the whole eight chapter of Romans that should give our struggling conscience hope that we are actually not condemned.

The Holy Spirit affirms there is no condemnation for those in Christ (v.1). Then, to prove this point, the Lord gives all the things that God, particularly the Spirit and the Son (v.2-27) and then the whole Godhead in the covenant of redemption (v.29-30), have done and are doing for us to remove any condemnation. In summary of all that God has done for us in Romans 8:1-30, the Spirit then asks, "*What shall we say to these things?*" Our conclusion for all "these things" from v.1-30 that God is doing for us should be "*If God be*

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*for us, who can be against us?"* (v.31) Then, also in summary, God asks *"Who is he that condemneth?"* (v.34) This question of condemnation (in v.34) connects the whole chapter back to the original affirmation of no condemnation (in v.1). Now after everything God has told us that he is doing for us in this chapter, especially the eternal covenant of redemption, we should reach the same conclusion that the Holy Spirit originally affirmed back in verse 1. Who is he the condemneth? No one, because there is no condemnation to those in Christ Jesus.

As we consider the entire eighth chapter of Romans together, it is helpful to look at this chapter in paragraph form. There were no chapters and verses in the original text, but as with any writing, there are logical paragraph progressions throughout the entire book and this chapter. In each of these paragraphs, a primary thought is introduced in the first verse of the section and then connecting words or similar questions at the beginning of the following verses tie the thought together for that whole paragraph. When we look at the connecting words beginning each verse that link verses together in this chapter (for, that, because, so, but, and, therefore, likewise, moreover), I think it's clear there are three distinct connected paragraphs in this chapter.

- Romans 8:1-15 – The law of the Spirit of life giving us power to mortify the flesh.
- Romans 8:16-30 – The ministry and witness of the Spirit in our lives, and the eternal covenant of redemption by all the Godhead.
- Romans 8:31-39 – Questions and answers of conclusions we should reach from what God has done for us in v.1-30.

To prove the affirmation that there is no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus (in v.1), the Lord gives us great detail about many things God has been and is doing for his children in their lives (in v.2-27) leading up to Romans 8:28. Consider all the things that God has been and is doing through the Spirit and the Son for the called who love God:

- The law of the Spirit of life in Christ has made us free from the law of sin and death (v.2).
- God sent his own Son to condemn sin in the flesh (v.3) and through Christ the righteousness of the law is now fulfilled in us (v.4).
- The Spirit gives us a spiritual mind to mortify the flesh and the carnal mind (v.5-9).
- The Spirit gives us spiritual life to not live after the flesh but to mortify the deeds of the flesh (v.10-13).
- The Spirit leads us as the sons of God (v.14).
- The Spirit of adoption liberates us from bondage and fear; the Spirit compels us to cry, Abba Father (v.15).
- The Spirit bears witness with our spirit that we are the children of God (v.16); the Spirit bears witness to us that we are joint heirs with Jesus Christ (v.17); the Spirit bears witness to us that if we suffer with Christ, we shall be glorified with Christ (v.17b); the Spirit bears witness to us that the sufferings of this world are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to come (v.18-23).
- The Spirit groans within ourselves, making us long for and desire the adoption and redemption of our body (v.23). The Spirit blesses us to be saved by hope, looking for Christ's second coming (v.24-25).
- The Spirit helps our infirmities (v.26); the Spirit and Jesus Christ make intercession for us to God with groanings that cannot be uttered, according to the will of God (v.26b-27).

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### **The Eternal Covenant of Redemption**

After listing many things the Spirit and the Son have been and are doing on behalf of God's children, we arrive at Romans 8:28. Notice the intended audience for any good that is being worked together – “those who love God, who are the called according to his purpose.” Therefore, keep in mind that God is working all the things in context together in synergy for the good of his elect people, not for the world at large. After considering the ministry and witness of the Spirit and the sacrifice of the Son in v.2-27, then the Lord gives us the crowning jewel, the pinnacle of what God has worked together for his people's good – the eternal covenant of redemption to save the elect made by all the three persons of the Godhead before the world began. “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.* 29) *For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren.* 30) *Moreover whom he did predestinate, them he also called: and whom he called, them he also justified: and whom he justified, them he also glorified.*” (Rom. 8:28-30) The five aspects of the covenant of redemption – foreknowledge, predestination, calling, justification, and glorification – are the pinnacle of God's eternal plans to bring his people into heaven with him. Let's consider the crowning jewel of what the Lord has worked together in synergy for the eternal and ultimate good of all of God's people.

Before the world began, God “foreknew” a people. Here in Romans 8, this “foreknowledge” is not speaking of God's perfect omniscience of events and history, but it is speaking of God's covenant love of his elect. To “know” in scripture often speaks of an intimate knowledge, especially in the context of a marriage relationship – Adam “knew” Eve and she conceived, and they had a son (Gen. 4:1). Adam did not learn facts about his wife. He knew her in an intimate, full, loving way that was bound by a covenant of marriage. This is how God “foreknew” his people. God knew and chose to love a vast group of people – known as the elect – and validated that love by entering into a marriage covenant with his bride, the church. God did not just simply know facts and names of his people; he knew and loved them intimately in the eternal marriage covenant. We could just as easily say, for whom God did “forelove”, he also did predestinate, and God has foreloved his people from before the world began.

For those that God loved before the world began, the Lord also “predestinated” them to be in heaven with him at the end of time. Predestination in scripture always has to do with people, not events. Notice the object of God's predestination – for “whom” (people) he did predestinate, not “what” (events). The object of God's predestination is always people (see also Eph. 1:5,11), not unalterably predetermining the events of this world. God did unalterably fix the final destination for all the elect to be with him in heaven at the end of time and to be conformed to the image of Jesus Christ. Everyone that God foreloved was predestinated to heaven at the end of time.

Furthermore, God decreed that all of the “whoms” that were foreloved and predestinated would be “called” by the Holy Spirit in their life. This calling by God is also known in scripture as regeneration, quickening, or the new birth. God calls the elect by the voice of the Son of God out of death in trespasses and sins into life in Jesus Christ (John 5:24, Eph. 2:1). This is the same group of people throughout this entire context. Every child of God that the Lord loved before the world began and predestinated will be called and born again, given a new nature of the Spirit in their soul at some point during their life. We are now given a new nature of God's goodness, instead of our sinful natures, when are called by God in the new birth.

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Those that God foreloved, predestinated, and called were all “justified” (declared righteous) by the work of Jesus Christ on the cross. Jesus was made to be sin for us that we might be made the righteousness of God in him (2 Cor. 5:21). All of God’s children (who have no righteousness of their own, just filthy rags before God, Isaiah 64:6) have received the imputed righteousness of Jesus Christ on their eternal account before God. All the foreloved and predestinated elect have been justified in the sight of God by the work of Jesus Christ on the cross. Then, the final act of the covenant of redemption is for the elect to be “glorified”. The people that God foreloved and predestinated before the world began, were called by the Spirit in their life, were justified by Christ on the cross, all of those same elect will finally be conformed into the image of Jesus Christ and brought into heaven to be eternally with the Lord. Our bodies are sinful and vile, and therefore, our bodies must be changed into the image of Jesus Christ to be fit to live in heaven. This change of our bodies will be made in glorification, and so shall we ever be with the Lord.

These five aspects of the covenant of redemption by the three persons of the Godhead are definitely “working together” for the eternal good of God’s people. The Godhead is working in perfect “synergy” to accomplish all of these things for the elect. There is perfect synergy between God the Father foreloving and predestinating, the Spirit calling that exact same definite group, and Jesus Christ justifying and glorifying that exact same definite group of people. All of these provisions of the eternal covenant of redemption – God’s foreknowledge, predestination, calling, justification, and glorification – are all working in synergy for the good of God’s elect that love God because God first loved them.

### **Our Conclusions – What Shall We Say To These Things?**

Let’s answer the Holy Spirit’s question. What is our response to “these things”? Remember, the Lord is giving us “all these things” (in v.2-30) to consider that we should reach the same conclusion as God in our conscience in the midst of our internal warfare with the flesh. That we should boldly say in our soul during our internal warfare that there is no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus (v.1). What is our response to “these things” that God has been and is doing for the called who love God – “*What shall we say to these things?*” (v.31) When we consider all that God has been doing for us in eternity and in time to minister to us on a daily basis and to procure our eternal salvation, our response should then be “*If God be for us, who can be against us?*” (v.31b) This should be our confidence in God’s love and working for us, for our good in eternity, that if God is for us and on our side, how could anyone being against us in this world overcome God who is on our side? We should reach the conclusion by faith that if God freely gave up his own Son for our sins, then why should we ever doubt that he will also “*freely give us all things?*” (v.32) What “all things” will God freely give us? God will not give us sin and death in our life and then be working behind the scenes with that sin to bring about good. No, God forbid. Rather, God gives us “*all things that pertain unto life and godliness.*” (2 Pet. 1:3) The all things that God gives always pertain to “life and godliness”, nothing to do with sin. God gives us “*every good and perfect gift*” sent down from above (James 1:17). God gives us his “*good, acceptable, and perfect will*” (Rom. 12:2). If God gave up the most precious commodity in all the universe – his own beloved Son – to execute the covenant of redemption, why would we ever doubt that God will give us what we stand in need of on a daily basis?

Then, he asks two questions that affirm the original premise of no condemnation back in v.1. Who has the right to bring a charge against the called who love God? Answer: No one, it is God that justifieth (v.33). The next question directly ties back to the internal warfare of internal condemnation or justification by faith.

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Do we walk in liberty by faith in Christ or do we walk in condemnation? God asks, “*Who is he that condemneth?*” (v.34) This question of condemnation (in v.34) connects the whole chapter back to the original affirmation of no condemnation (in v.1). Now after everything God has told us that he is doing for us in this chapter, we should reach the same conclusion that the Holy Spirit originally affirmed back in verse 1. Who is he the condemneth? No one, because there is no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who are the called who love God.

The Holy Spirit continues to strengthen our struggling conscience in the midst of this internal warfare through the rest of the chapter. Because of “all these things” that God has worked together for our good in, culminating in saving us from our sins through the covenant of redemption, we don’t need to be afraid of all the perils, dangers, and fears of this world. Nothing can separate us from the love of God in this world – not tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, or sword (v.35); nothing in life; nothing in death; not angels, principalities, powers, not things present, not things to come, not any other creature can thwart all the things that God has worked together for our good, particularly saving us from our sins according to the covenant of redemption (v.38-39). We are given these truths by the Lord in Romans 8 to reach the same conclusions as God in our daily warfare of faith. In our own conscience, we ought to be “*persuaded*” (v.38) – fully confident, no doubt or fear at all – that there is nothing that can separate us from God’s love that he chose to bestow upon us even before the world began. We don’t live in fear of condemnation, but we live by faith in Christ of his finished work of salvation on our behalf. Actually, because of “*all these things*”, now we can boldly say in our souls by faith that “*we are more than conquerors through him that loved us.*” (v.37)

It is not scriptural that all things without exception work together for our good. However, it is absolutely a true principle that all things that GOD DOES are working together in synergy for the good of his children, the called who love God. As our perfect Heavenly Father, God always has the best interest of his beloved children at heart. When necessary, God sends chastisement for his children in our lives, but even that is evidence of God’s love for us (Heb. 12:6-8). God even sends chastisement for the good and ultimate correction of his children. Sometimes when God suffers a trial of our faith to come in our lives, it is oftentimes to purge away the dross and bring us through the fire as a vessel that is more pure for the Master’s use (1 Pet. 1:7, Prov. 25:4). Therefore, everything that GOD DOES is always working together for the ultimate good of his children. With that said, some of the sentiment of Romans 8:28 we addressed before is true, but this verse in context is not the verse to teach that lesson. In his providence, God is oftentimes working even in challenging times, to bless his children in the midst of the storm, but that does not mean that he causes every storm to come. There are many great verses to teach the overruling providence of God that is working in our lives on a daily basis, but Romans 8:28 is not a providence text to teach that scriptural principle. What God does – not all things without exception – is always for the good of his beloved children, both in time and in eternity.

### **Eternal Providence by Jesus Christ**

Providence speaks of God seeing a need beforehand and providing for the deliverance and care of God’s people to provide for that need. This providence is displayed in God’s involvement in our everyday lives, but ultimately God’s care and provision beforehand is displayed in our eternal salvation. God saw, even before the world began, the ruined condition of man by sin and covenanted within the Godhead to do everything that was necessary to secure eternal salvation for the elect. When we understand God’s

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providence in eternity, that God saw our greatest need of deliverance from eternal wrath and he sent his only Son to die for our sins to save us from that condition, that should give us bold confidence that God will provide for all our needs here in our lives as well.

God saw before the foundation of the world the great need that man would require. God did not cause Adam to sin in the garden, but God in his perfect omniscience knew that Adam would ultimately succumb to Satan's temptation and would sin. God saw the great need of his people beforehand, and he provided for that need. Man could not fix his sin and death problem; man could not remedy his need, so ultimately God had to become a man to provide for our need of deliverance. God looked out before the world began and evaluated if there would be any man who could fulfil their own need or the need of others. "2) *The Lord looked down from heaven upon the children of men, to see if there were any that did understand, and seek God.* 3) *They are all gone aside, they are all together become filthy: there is none that doeth good, no, not one.*" (Psalm 14:2-3, see also Psalm 53:2-3) God evaluated the condition of man and saw his total depravity, his total inability to remedy himself from the fallen condition of sin he would be in after Adam's transgression. God saw our greatest need of eternal salvation beforehand, and even before the world began, God covenanted to provide for that need in saving us from our sins. God saw beforehand his people's final enemy of death (1 Cor. 15:26) and put in motion the plan of salvation to destroy our last enemy of death and save us from eternal ruin.

Before the world began, God covenanted to provide for the needs of those that he loved. We have already considered that from Romans 8:28-32. God "foreloved" a people, but that people were in a ruined condition and was in need of deliverance from sin. God "predestinated" his people to be with him in heaven at the end of time. However, for that final destination to be secure for the elect, there were things that had to occur to remedy our fallen condition. Our soul had to be changed in the new birth or be "called" into new life in Christ. Our offense before God had to be paid in full and Jesus Christ "justified" us on the cross. Our body has to be changed to be fit for heaven and thus we shall ultimately be "glorified" into the image of the Son of God. Foreknowledge, election, and predestination is all about God seeing our need beforehand of a Savior. Then, calling, justification, and glorification is God executing what is necessary to remedy our need to save his people to heaven.

We see a depiction of God's eternal providence displayed in God's command to Abraham to offer Isaac upon Mount Moriah in Genesis 22. After God gave Abraham this command, he makes the journey to that mountain with Isaac and his servants. When they arrive at the mountain, Abraham and Isaac go up the mountain. When Isaac asks Abraham where the lamb for a burnt offering is, Abraham responds "*My son, God will provide himself a lamb for a burnt offering.*" (Gen. 22:8) Abraham had faith in God's "providence", that God would "provide" a lamb to spare Isaac. Then, right when Abraham is about to slay Isaac, an angel stops him, and God providentially provides a ram caught in a thicket to offer in substitute of Isaac. Abraham named that place "Jehovah-Jireh", meaning "The Lord will provide or see". The second portion of that Hebrew name "Jireh" means "to see, look at, inspect, or know". Abraham had confidence the Lord would "provide" a lamb in the stead of Isaac. God saw a need beforehand ("Jireh", to see), and God provided for that need of Isaac by providentially sending a ram at the exact right place at the exact right time to save Isaac. That's what God did for his people to save us from our eternal damnation. God saw the need of man, ruined in sin, justly condemned to an eternity of God's wrath. God saw that need and sent his only begotten Son as the Lamb of God (God literally provided "himself" (Gen. 22:8) in Jesus Christ



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as a Lamb) to take away the sin of his elect people. Abraham named that mountain “Jehovah-Jireh”, but we can call Mount Calvary (maybe even the literal same mountain range as Moriah) as our eternal “Jehovah-Jireh”. God saw the need of his people, with the knife of God’s wrath out-stretched in judgment, and God provided the Lamb on Calvary in our substitutionary stead to save us from our sins.

God’s eternal providence in saving us from our sins should give us confidence for his providential care and provision in our daily lives. If God saw our greatest need in eternal damnation and freely gave the most important thing in this universe, the blood of Jesus Christ, to save us from that condition, why should we ever doubt that God will provide for our comparatively smaller needs here in our daily lives? *“Who delivered us from so great a death, and doth deliver: in whom we trust that he will yet deliver us.”* (2 Cor. 1:10) We see God’s eternal providence in saving us from “so great a death”. We see God’s daily providential blessings to provide for us in our lives today as he currently “doth deliver”. That gives us confidence to have faith to “trust that he will yet deliver us”. Because of God proving his love for us in eternity, we should never doubt that God will provide for all our needs here daily in this life. In Matthew 6:25-34, we see that we should reason by faith that if God provides for the daily needs of the fowls, lilies, and grass, that we should never doubt that God will abundantly provide for his children that he loves. God doesn’t even love the fowls, lilies, and grass, but he loves his people so much he sent his Son to die for our sins. If God provides for ordinary components of his creation in such a gracious way, we know by faith that God will providentially provide for all our needs in our daily lives.

### **God’s Overruling Providence – The Life of Joseph**

The life of Joseph gives us a great picture into God’s providence in action in the lives of his children. Providence means “to see before”; not just seeing before but undertaking actions to provide for a future need. God always knew in his perfect omniscient foreknowledge that there would be a seven-year drought in all the land during Joseph’s life. God was aware just exactly when and how this event would occur at a certain later date. However, God did not just sit idly by with that knowledge and just allow thousands, maybe even millions, of people to die during that seven-year period, including his chosen people, the children of Jacob. Seeing that future need, God put in motion the guidance of Joseph’s life, even through unfortunate circumstances, beginning even 20 years before the famine to have Joseph in the exact right place at the exact right time to provide deliverance for God’s people.

Joseph was sold into Egyptian bondage by his jealous brothers at age 17. Even before that time, God gave Joseph a dream when he was still in Canaan of his brothers and his father bowing down to him before he ever was sold into Egyptian bondage. The fulfillment of that dream did not come to pass until Joseph was 39 (2 years into the 7-year famine, Gen. 45:6). Therefore, God didn’t just see before the need of Israel’s family for deliverance, but he even gave Joseph a dream of what would occur 22 years before it came to fruition. God gave advance warning and notice of what he would do in his providence at a later date, even though Joseph had no idea what the dream actually meant until 22 years later. This shows a glimpse of providence in the mind of our eternal God. Time is nothing to God; one day is just like a thousand years with our eternal God. These 22 years are so long in our life, but that period is almost nothing to our eternal God. God gave advance notice of his providence long before anyone understood what that dream even meant.

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Joseph ended up where he was at the exact right place, at the exact right time in Egypt mainly due to the sins of others. Joseph didn't do anything wrong to get where he was, but he was hurt by the sins of others. His jealous brothers sold him into Egyptian bondage. He was exalted in Potiphar's house where he was a servant, rising to run all of Potiphar's house and affairs. Then, he was falsely accused by Potiphar's wife and cast into prison. He served faithfully in prison and soon he was in charge of the whole prison. He interpreted the butler and baker's dreams, and when the butler was restored, he forgot to mention Joseph to Pharaoh. Joseph was continually injured by the sins of others, even though he did nothing wrong. It was due to the sin of his brothers that Joseph was in Egypt. It was due to the sin of Potiphar's wife that he was in prison. It was due to the forgetfulness of the butler that Joseph was still in prison. From our perspective, we see Joseph as always being taken advantage of, always getting the short end of the stick, but when we see the "rest of the story" we can see God's providence overruling these sinful actions of others in Joseph's life.

Joseph went to Egypt because of his brothers' sin at age 17 and was in bondage or prison till age 30, the beginning of the 7 years of plenty. At the beginning of the famine, Joseph would have been 37. Therefore, for 20 years, God has been providentially guiding the life of Joseph to have him as 2<sup>nd</sup> command in Egypt to save God's people from dying of starvation. Providence is not just God's knowledge of the needs of his people, but his guidance and actions in our lives beforehand to provide for a need in the future. God used the actions of men by his overruling providence to put Joseph in a position to save the lives of millions of people and save the posterity of Israel through which the Messiah would come.

God gave Joseph a great resignation to God's will and providence, and also gave him clarity to know that God used the events of his life to put him in a position to save his family and many others from starvation. When Joseph reveals himself to his brethren, notice these statements he makes, a summary of the last 22 years of his life. *"5) Now therefore be not grieved, nor angry with yourselves, that ye sold me hither: for God did send me before you to preserve life... 7) And God sent me before you to preserve you a posterity in the earth, and to save your lives by a great deliverance. 8) So now it was not you that sent me hither, but God: and he hath made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house, and a ruler throughout all the land of Egypt."* (Gen. 45:5-8) God did not cause the sinful actions of his brothers, Potiphar's wife, or the butler. God did not cause what they did, but God did take the reality of those decisions and used them in such a way to guide Joseph to Egypt with an audience before the Pharaoh at the exact right time, right at the beginning of the 7 years of plenty. All those actions of others brought Joseph to the exact right place at the exact right time to be elevated to 2<sup>nd</sup> in command of Egypt to save his family and millions of others from starvation.

Joseph attributes all the guidance of his pathway to 2<sup>nd</sup> in command of Egypt to save his family as God sending him before them to Egypt. God did not cause or predetermine all those actions to occur, but yet at the same time, God used these actions to "send" Joseph before his family to preserve their life (Gen. 45:5). In Psalm 105:17, we are told again that God "sent" Joseph before them. Joseph even goes as far as to say that it wasn't even his brothers who sent him to Egypt, but it was instead God who sent me hither to Egypt and elevated him to such high authority. *"So now it was not you that sent me hither, but God."* (Gen. 45:8) This is one more example of God's providentially directing the steps of our life, even if there are negative events that take us where we need to go. *"A man's heart deviseth his way: but the Lord directeth his steps."* (Prov. 16:9) We might devise our own way, or even others might devise an evil plan to harm us, but God is still directing the steps of his children, every single step of the way.

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When Jacob dies, Joseph's brothers then become afraid that Joseph will exact his revenge against them now that their father is dead. His own brothers acknowledge their sin in selling him into Egyptian bondage (they don't try to absolve their blame and say, it's okay because God made us do it). They also ask for Joseph's forgiveness (Gen. 50:17). Joseph is not bitter against his brothers for their past sins towards him because he has been shown by God how the Lord providentially guided him before his family to save their life and millions of others. Joseph tells his brothers, *"But 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) This shows God's overruling providence triumphing over evil in this world. Joseph's brothers "thought" evil against Joseph; they intended to hurt and injure him by selling him into Egyptian bondage. The motive and intent of Joseph's brothers was evil in what they did. However, in contrast, God "meant it" (meaning "to think, plan, esteem, calculate, make a judgment") unto good. God could have stopped Joseph from going to Egypt; he could have struck down dead both those Ishmaelite traders and his brothers right on the spot. However, God did not prevent this from occurring because God "planned, calculated, and intended" to use this event ultimately for good – for Joseph's good, for his family's good, for Egypt's good, and for millions of hungry people's good. Notice the contrasting distinction in the intent behind the actions of Joseph's brothers versus the intent of God's actions. Joseph's brothers intended evil by what they did. God intended good by what he allowed to occur in Joseph's life.

Joseph's life is such a great example of how "mysterious" God's providence can be. We can't fully understand all the intricacies of God's providence. God clearly didn't cause or approve of the sinful actions of Joseph's brothers, but yet at the same time God used those actions to send Joseph before them to preserve the life of millions of people. We can't fully understand some of these actions of God's providence other than just taking scripture at its word. God used their actions to send Joseph before them to preserve their life. God allowed these negative events to transpire in Joseph's life for his good and for God's ultimate glory. However, this is where we have to once again give the reminder that just because God did one thing, one way, one time does not mean God always does things for the same purpose every time. We have an amazing story of God's overruling providence in the life of Joseph, but this one account cannot be used as the basis to support the all inclusive statement that all things without exception work together for your good. We cannot take one situation in scripture as the proof text to support an all-inclusive, without exception rule in the word of God; that is very poor scriptural interpretation and exegesis. God's "intent", God's "motive" behind his actions are always your good, just like with Joseph. We see God's overruling providence to triumph over the sinful actions of men to bring about good and to bless his people in the face of even starvation and death. Truly, God's providence and his judgments are unsearchable and his ways are past finding out!

### God's Providential Hedge – The Life of Job

One of the most important aspects of God's providence for us to understand is God's "hedge of protection" around his people. In Job 1:10, even Satan acknowledged that God had put a hedge (a protective fence) around Job, his house, and all that he had. Later, Job acknowledges that God has "hedged in" his children (Job 3:23). In Matt. 21:33, Jesus gives a parable of the kingdom of God and the Jews rejection of Jesus. There was a vineyard that was planted by the landowner, and he protected that vineyard with a fence "hedged round about" the vineyard to protect it from any unwanted intruders. In Isaiah 5:1-7, we see another

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depiction of a vineyard planted by God, which was his chosen nation of Israel. God “fenced” his vineyard in (Isaiah 5:2) to protect the vines and grapes from varmints and animals that would damage the vineyard. God even put a tower in the middle of this fenced vineyard to be watchful for any intruders that might try to breach the vineyard’s fence. Unfortunately, because of the disobedience and sin of the natural nation of Israel, God said he would “*take away the hedge thereof*” (Isaiah 5:5) and would suffer this vineyard to be eaten up, broken down, and laid waste. This shows how God has fenced in the vineyard of his church and his people today, but also a sobering reminder that God is not obligated to protect us with his hedge and is just to remove that hedge from our lives if we live in rebellion to our Lord.

Satan knew that God had put a “hedge of protection” around the life of Job. “*Hast not thou made an hedge about him, and about his house, and about all that he hath on every side? thou hast blessed the work of his hands, and his substance is increased in the land.*” (Job 1:10) This hedge (fence) protected Job himself, all his house, and all that he had on every side from the possible vicious attacks of the devil. Apparently, Satan had tried to afflict Job in times past, but he was unsuccessful because he could not go any further than the limits of God’s protective hedge around Job and his life. That is such a comforting and reassuring thought for God’s children today. The devil is constantly walking about seeking which of God’s children he can devour and destroy by temptation (1 Pet. 5:8). Satan is seeking how he can destroy us, but he is helpless to go beyond God’s protective hedge in our lives, regardless of how much he wants to attack God’s children. God’s hedge protects us from evil in this world, and we can’t fathom how much wickedness would come immediately in this world if God removed his protective hedge from his people. We see what happened to the nation of Israel from Isaiah 5:1-7 that God when removed his protective hedge from them because of their sin, then they were totally destroyed by Babylon and later destroyed again by Rome. We have a small glimpse into the horrible evil that can come if God removes his protective hedge from any area of our life, as Satan grievously tormented the life of Job. Very bad things happen when God’s hedge is restricted or removed, and that should make us even more thankful for God’s protective hedge that we do have that protects us from this evil.

Satan had tried to afflict Job before, but he couldn’t get to Job; he couldn’t get past God’s protective hedge. “*Hast not thou made an hedge about him, and about his house, and about all that he hath on every side? thou hast blessed the work of his hands, and his substance is increased in the land.*” (Job 1:10) The word “hedge” here is actually a verb instead of a noun, meaning “to shut in, fence about for protection or restraint”. This is not necessarily describing the physical fence (a noun) but God’s action of fencing (a verb; building a fence) around Job and his people for their protection from the evil of this world. Satan knew that God was actively fencing protection around Job’s life that he could not cross over. God – in his own will and purpose and ultimately for his own glory in this instance – removes a portion of his providential hedge and suffers Satan to afflict the life of Job. Satan acknowledges 3 things protected by God’s providential hedge – Job himself, his house, and all that he hath. First, God removed the protective hedge from 2 of those 3 things (from his house and all that he hath), but God left his protective hedge around Job himself – “*Behold, all that he hath is in thy power; only upon himself put not forth thine hand.*” (Job 1:12) Satan cannot go beyond the protective hedge of God, and he was not suffered to touch Job personally, but the devil could now touch all his family and his possessions that was now vulnerable.

The remainder of Job 1 shows us just how much evil God’s restraining providential hedge protects his people from in our lives. As soon as the providential hedge was removed by God from Job’s house and his

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possessions, Satan immediately works to use the Sabeans to kill Job's oxen, asses and servants. Then, the devil uses fire from heaven to destroy Job's sheep and some more servants. Then, the devil recruits the Chaldeans to slay Job's camels and even more servants. Finally, a great wind (probably like a tornado) blew down Job's oldest son's house, and all ten of Job's children were killed in that collapse. After God removed his providential hedge, within one day, Satan destroyed all of Job's 7,000 sheep, 3,000 camels, 500 oxen, 500 asses, all but 4 of his servants, and all of his 10 children. This should be a very sobering example that if it wasn't for God's providential hedge around our lives protecting us from Satan and from the evil of this world, we would be consumed with evil immediately in a moment.

Job responds to this unparalleled sequence of tragic events with amazing faith and resolve by falling down before God in worship and blessing the name of God for what he had been blessed with in spite of his great loss. Even though God removed his providential hedge from a few areas, God is still glorified by Job in the midst of this horrible circumstance. Job did not even sin or charge God foolishly. Satan is very displeased with his failure to entice Job to curse God or even to sin thus far in this tragedy. Therefore, Satan comes before God again in Job 2, and requests to afflict Job's body personally, which he had been previously restricted by God's providential hedge from touching Job personally. Then, God sees fit to remove his providential hedge a little bit more from Job and suffers Satan to touch Job's body with illness. Still God restricts Satan's affliction of Job, that he can touch his body, but he cannot take his life – *“And the Lord said unto Satan, Behold, he is in thine hand; but save his life.”* (Job 2:6) Satan went immediately from the presence of God, and smote Job with sore boils from the sole of his foot to the top of his head. Again, this is such a sobering reminder of what a blessing God's providential hedge of protection is in our life. Immediately, when God removed the hedge from Job's life, Satan went right away and afflicted Job with a severe, painful, debilitating illness. If it wasn't for God's providential hedge protecting us from Satan every day, the devil would afflict us with grievous sickness at a moment's notice if he could. However, praise God that Satan does not have the authority to do as he pleases to the full extent he pleases. Satan can go no farther than God's providential hedge will allow in our life, but if that hedge is ever removed in any way, evil and suffering is sure to follow in our lives.

Job still has not sinned with his lips or charged God foolishly in this entire event up to this point. Then, Satan apparently begins to work on those closest to Job to entice him to sin – his wife and his closest friends. Job's wife turns on him and tells him to just curse God and die. Even with his excruciatingly painful sickness and his wife's rebuke, Job still did not sin with his lips. Then, Job's three close friends show up and spend chapters 3-31 arguing with Job and condemning him for their perception of his supposed unrepentant sin in his life. Job understandably gets a little testy in those exchanges with his supposed friends and makes some rash statements. Another young man, Elihu, rebukes Job in chapters 32-37 and then God personally rebukes Job in chapters 38-41.

When we arrive at the end of Job's story in chapter 42, Job is humbled and repents for his hasty speech during his time of trial. Job prays for his friends, and they are forgiven by God. Then, we see that God blesses Job literally twice as much as he did before he lost everything. That is not just a general statement, but numerically he literally received twice the denominations of possessions he had before – 14,000 sheep, 6,000 camels, 1,000 oxen, and 1,000 asses. He also was given 10 more children, even the same allocation of boys and girls he had before as well – 7 sons and 3 daughters. Not only did Job have more daughters, but his daughters were the most beautiful in all the land.

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Now, the real question we naturally gravitate to in this account of Job is “Why?” Why did God suffer his providential hedge to be removed from Job’s life? Why would God allow these horrible events to happen in the life of a man who was serving God so diligently? In this specific instance, God suffered his hedge to be removed to test and to purify Job’s faith as gold (Job 23:10 – we will consider that in depth in the next section), and to show God’s overruling providence and power over the devil. God used this fiery trial in Job’s life to purify his faith, so that he would be more fit for the service of God after this trial than he was before. Then, ultimately, God suffered this to happen in Job’s life to manifest his glory and power to overrule the wicked devices of Satan by his providence. Even though Job suffered horribly for a short period of time, we see God’s power and grace in the midst of tragedy by blessing him twice as much after this as Job had before. The wicked devices of Satan for a short time could not thwart God’s grace and blessing in Job’s life, to bless him even more in the end than he had before. God’s glory and grace was exalted over the wickedness of Satan in the story of Job.

We see God’s providential hedge around his people but let us look in a broader sense of the restraining and restricting of evil God has in the world at large. In 2 Thess. 2:7, we see God is currently “letting” (restraining) the mystery of iniquity that is already working in this world. However, near the end of time before Christ’s second coming, God will loosen and remove his restraining influence, and we will see the full badness and wickedness of this world on full display. The last days will mirror and even be worse than the days of Noah (see Matt. 24:37-39), and unfortunately we will return to a time when “*God saw the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.*” (Gen. 6:5) Before Jesus’ second coming “*there shall be a time of trouble, such as never was since there was a nation even to that same time.*” (Dan. 12:1) This is a glimpse of what will happen when God briefly removes his good restraining hedge and influence and allows this earth to manifest its natural disposition of abject wickedness and rebellion against everything good and against God. Thankfully, the Lord restrains the remainder of man’s wrath to protect his children (Ps. 76:10).

When we consider the life of Job, this is where we need to emphasize that just because one thing happened one way one time for a specific purpose, does not mean that God always allows similar circumstances for the same purposes. In other words, every time someone loses their business holdings, or if their children die, or if they get sick, that does not always mean that God is always showing his sovereignty over Satan and allowing it for the same purpose as Job. Most of the time bad things happen just as collateral damage from living in a fallen, sinful world. We get sick because we are sinners and not glorified yet. Not every time that happens, is there a request and removing of a providential hedge from their life, etc. We don’t always know (actually we very rarely know) exactly why everything happens in this world, but we do know that one possibility is that God can use the circumstances in our life for his glory and for purification of our faith. Once again, the account of Job should be a sobering reminder that any restriction of God’s providential hedge will result in calamity. Therefore, let us praise and thank our gracious God for his providential hedge of protection around the lives of his children that protects us from evil in this world.

### **God’s Trying of Our Faith**

If God is fully in sovereign control of the events of this life and can prevent and protect us from any evil in this world by his providence, then why does God not always prevent bad things from happening in our

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lives? The short answer is that we cannot always know (honestly we rarely know) exactly why bad things happen in our lives. Just because God worked powerfully in the life of Job to overrule loss, death and sickness does not mean those who encounter similar circumstances that God is working the same way in their situation as he did with Job. Just because one thing happened one way one time for a specific purpose, does not mean that God always allows similar circumstances for the same purposes. We can't get caught up in always trying to figure out "why" something happened, but we need to just focus on God's grace and mercy in the midst of what does come. It is a true principle and very prevalent in scripture that God oftentimes suffers difficult circumstances to try or test our faith to strengthen us for the future. God used the fiery trial in Job's life to try and ultimately to purify his faith, so that his would be more equipped for the service of God after this trial than he was before. The word "trial" indicates that God will "try" (or test) our faith, according to his will. God gave Job understanding by the Holy Spirit that the Lord was suffering this trial to try him and ultimately to bring him forth as more purified gold in the service of God.

We know that God is working in his providence in our lives regardless of if we can see or perceive him in the moment. God has promised to never leave us or forsake us (Heb. 13:5), and even if we don't see him in our trials, we must never doubt that God is right there with us in the fire. *"8) Behold, I go forward, but he is not there; and backward, but I cannot perceive him: 9) On the left hand, where he doth work, but I cannot behold him: he hideth himself on the right hand, that I cannot see him."* (Job 23:8-9) Job knew that God was not only with him in this severe trial, but he knew he was actively working in his life even though Job could not see it. Job looked to the front, back, left, and right but he could not behold the Lord. He knew God was working on the left hand (where "he doth work"), but he could not see how he was at that time ("but I cannot behold him"). Job had confidence God was working on the right hand too, but God was hiding from Job's visibility ("that I cannot see him"). Even though Job couldn't see exactly how God was working in his life, he never doubted he was there and providentially blessing him.

Job was blessed to understand from the Lord that God was purifying his faith in the midst of this fiery trial. *"10) But he knoweth the way that I take: when he hath tried me, I shall come forth as gold."* (Job 23:10) Job also took comfort in knowing that his God "knows" what he is going through; he "knows" the way that I take. What is going on in my life is not new or surprising to my Lord; God intimately knows what I am going through. Job also reached the conclusion by this point in his trial that God was "trying" his faith. God did not cause everything that occurred (we know from Job 1 & 2 that Satan did that, even though God suffered it by removing his protective hedge from Job and his family). Why did God suffer this to occur? From Job's perspective, he believed that God suffered it to "try" his faith to make him more pure in service to God. The end result of God testing and trying Job's faith was to make him more refined, more pure, more holy in service to the Lord. God uses the fire of trial to refine and purge out impurities that may hinder us in service to God. *"Take away the dross from the silver, and there shall come forth a vessel for the finer."* (Prov. 25:4) It takes intense heat to remove impurities from metals. If there are impurities (dross) in our life that are detracting from our devoted service to God, the Lord will allow intense heat of trials to come in our life to purge out and burn away those impurities.

God oftentimes uses the furnace of fiery trials to take away and purge out the dross from our lives so that we can come forth as a vessel for the finer for the Lord. *"That the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honor and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ."* (1 Pet. 1:7) The end result of God suffering these trials of faith is

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so that we may end up as pure gold to God, having the unprofitable dross burned away. Job fully believed that God was trying him to burn away dross and impurities in his life. Job knew assuredly that the end result of that trial would be better than before – *“when he hath tried me, I shall come forth as gold.”* The disciple of Christ should desire to be a vessel *“unto honor, sanctified, and meet for the Master’s use prepared unto every good work.”* (2 Tim. 2:21) While the heat of trial is uncomfortable in the moment, we need to follow Job’s example and look beyond being temporarily uncomfortable and look toward our finished refined gold product in service to God.

Thankfully, the Holy Spirit gave us the end of the story of Job and his fiery trial. He struggled in the midst of his trial and had to be rebuked by Elihu and then by the Lord. However, by the end of the book in the last chapter, Job repented of all his pride and haughtiness he had displayed, Job prayed for his friends, and the Lord gave Job twice as much as he had before. Job was sufficiently tried, and he came forth as gold, more pure and holy in the end after this fiery trial. His example of faith in the midst of his severe trial has strengthened countless children of God throughout the centuries in the word of God.

We see Abraham’s faith being “tried” by the Lord on Mount Moriah. In Gen. 22:1, that God did “tempt” Abraham, which at first blush can be very alarming language. However, in this context, “tempt” simply means “to try, to prove, to put to the test”. That is what God oftentimes does in our lives, allowing challenging circumstances to try our faith. Abraham’s faith went to court in a trial; his faith was put to the test, to prove his faith and his commitment to the promise of God. Abraham passed the test, his faith was proven, being willing to sacrifice his only son, Isaac, before God provided a ram for a substitute. Abraham proved to God that his faith in God’s promise was authentic, and this also served to further purify and strengthen Abraham’s faith further. Abraham’s faith was even “more pure gold” after this testing of his faith than it was before. We see with both Job and Abraham that God in his providence suffers his children to be tested and tried to strengthen and purify their faith. While we cannot always know why certain challenging events occur in this life, we should take those events in stride with the perspective that it is an opportunity for our faith to grow in Jesus Christ.

### **Providence in Sickness**

We now want to look at God’s providence in-depth in specific areas of our daily lives. Providence speaks of God seeing a future need and providing in advance for that need. One of greatest needs that we encounter in this life is our dependance on God’s providence during physical sickness. We have already considered God’s providence in the midst of Job’s sickness. Even though God suffered Job to endure severe boils all over his body, God still sustained and blessed him in the midst of that physical sickness. If God in his providence had not restricted Satan, it’s very possible that this would have been a terminal disease for Job. Certainly, Job had to endure great pain and suffering in the midst of his sickness, but God’s providence still sustained him and saved his life during his severe illness.

In Isaiah 38, Hezekiah was sick and close to dying. Then, God sends the prophet, Isaiah, to tell King Hezekiah to *“Set thine house in order: for thou shalt die and not live”*. Hezekiah immediately turns his face towards the wall and prays unto God to be merciful unto him in the midst of his sickness. God is gracious and answers the prayer of Hezekiah. God tells the prophet to turn around and go tell the king that *“I have heard thy prayer, I have seen thy tears: behold, I will add unto thy days 15 years.”* (Isaiah 38:5)



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As a sign to confirm God's answer to Hezekiah's prayer, God even made the sun to go backward and the sun dial to go back 10 degrees. God provided for Hezekiah's need when he was facing a terminal illness and on his death bed. (As a side note, this account clearly disproves absolute predestination. God would never have told Hezekiah he was about to die, if an action that Hezekiah would perform was going to change that outcome and him end up living 15 more years.)

God hears the prayers of his children when we are in great need and especially when we are facing severe or even terminal sickness. We will consider prayer and God's providence later more in-depth, but consider Hezekiah's example of how God specially answers prayer in our sickness. We are told in James 5, that we ought to pray for those sick in the church because God might see fit to answer our prayers and providentially heal those who are sick. *"14) Is any sick among you? let him call for the elders of the church; and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord: 15) And the prayer of faith shall save the sick, and the Lord shall raise him up; and if he have committed sins, they shall be forgiven him. 16) Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed. The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much."* (James 5:14-16) If we are sick, we should call for the elders of the church to come and pray over us, even anointing us with oil. If we pray in faith, God might see fit to save and deliver our loved ones from their illness. We don't need to feel like our prayers are useless when we have a loved one who has a bad medical diagnosis, but be encouraged that the effectual, fervent prayer of a righteous man (and woman) avails very much.

That does not mean that every time we pray for a loved one that is sick that God will add 15 years to their life. We need to remember that any healing of a disease in this world is only temporary. There will inevitably be another disease to come in their life, if they stay alive for very long. Ultimately, true healing will not come until we are removed from this world of sin and death, and we are finally in the presence of Jesus in heaven. We pray for our loved ones during sickness, but we don't need to think that God's providence has abandoned us because they are not healed. If we pray for God to "heal the sickness" of our loved ones, God might answer that prayer by "fully healing" them in death to be with him in heaven. That is why we need to pray, "Lord, bless my loved one to be healed from their sickness, but nevertheless, not my will but thine be done." We need to pray with boldness and faith that God can heal any disease, but we also pray deferring to God's will to heal our loved ones.

Think about God's providence in the sickness of many people who were ultimately healed by Jesus and the apostles. Many of these people were sick for many years and had to endure their sickness for years, but God provided for their need at a set time for Jesus or the apostles to heal them of the sickness. The man that was born blind in John 9 had to suffer with being blind since birth. We don't know specifically what age he was, but he was "of age" to speak for himself, so he was probably at least 20 years old or maybe even older. I'm sure it was very difficult for him to wonder why this happened to him, especially since he had probably been told his whole life by the religious elite that his blindness was due to his sins or his parents' sins. Rather, Jesus affirms that he was born blind *"that the works of God should be made manifest."* (John 9:3) Jesus used this man's illness and his subsequent healing to manifest the glory and power of God over life-long illness.

There was a man who was born lame or paralyzed in Acts 3. We don't know how old he was when he was healed, but he begged for years every single day at the temple. I'm sure he doubted why this happened to

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him many times over the years, but God used his healing by the apostles to validate the power of their apostolic ministry. God healed that man at just the right time in his providence. The woman with an issue of blood suffered from that illness for 12 years, but God's providence eventually – at just the right, perfect, appointed time – provided for her healing by Jesus (Matt. 9:20-22). Jesus healed lepers that had been ostracized from their families for years, but at the appointed time, the Son of God healed them from their sickness. Jesus healed countless lame, mute, blind, lepers, possessed with unclean spirits, so many so that scripture didn't have room to give us the full story of each one. If all of Jesus' healings and other miraculous works were detailed in full, even the whole world could not contain the record of them all.

Jesus didn't just heal those who had long-term illness but also those who had acute, short-term sickness too, even unto death. Jesus healed Peter's mother-in-law who was sick with a fever (Mark 1:29-31). Jesus healed the nobleman's son who was at the point of death (John 4:46-54). Jesus raised three people from the dead: the widow of Nain's son (Luke 7:11-18), Jairus' daughter (Matt. 9:18-26), and finally raised Lazarus from the dead (John 11). For these people, their sickness had overtaken their natural life, but the power and providence of God brought them back to life for the glory of God. Jesus Christ knew in his perfect foreknowledge that they would initially die from their illness, but God provided for that need by having the Son of God in the right position at just the right time to resurrect them from the dead.

These examples show us that even when we feel like God is not working in our lives, in our sickness, God's providence has never abandoned us. I'm sure there are many times over the years that these blind, lame, leprous, possessed, and sick people doubted why God suffered these things to occur and remain in their lives. They probably felt that God was not working in their lives because they couldn't see it or understand it in the moment. Then, when God's providence came to full fruition, I'm confident they could look back and praise God for providing for their healing, even if they had to wait a long time for it. God saw their need long before, but God's providence did not come to climax in their healing until God's appointed time. In providence, we usually want God to fix our problems right away to prevent any discomfort, especially in sickness. However, just as with all manner of God's providence, God is always working in our lives even when we cannot see it, and he has provided future deliverance and healing from our sickness, even if that ultimate healing comes in death to be in heaven with our God.

### **Providence from Physical Death**

When people talk about God's providence, many times it is in the context of God providing for their deliverance from danger, maybe even deliverance from a life-threatening situation. We see God's protective hand of providence when we are delivered from a severe car crash or other similar instance where we could have been severely injured but were blessed with safety. We have seen how God protected Job's life from dying in the midst of Satan's affliction. The devil certainly would have taken Job's life if God had not restricted him by his providence. *"19) He shall deliver thee in six troubles: yea, in seven there shall no evil touch thee. 20) In famine he shall redeem thee from death: and in war from the power of the sword."* (Job 5:19-20) We have the same confidence of Job that God will redeem us from death and keep us safe in times of war and peril. We trust in God's providence to deliver us from physical death when we are in dangerous situations in this life.

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We have already considered God's providence in the life of Joseph in depth. God providentially sent Joseph before into Egypt to not just save the life of his natural family but also to save the lives of millions of others in the midst of an upcoming famine. *"And God sent me before you to preserve you a posterity in the earth, and to save your lives by a great deliverance."* (Gen. 45:7) God saw their need would be a great 7-year famine where millions of people, including God's chosen posterity, would die if not for God's providential intervention. God saw that future need and sent Joseph to Egypt 20 years in advance to save his family and millions of lives during the famine. God's providence is sometimes working many years in advance to save our lives during our times of severe need.

God's providence saw the need of Noah in the midst of a generation that was set to be judged by God. The Lord provided for Noah's need to be saved from the global judgment by water by telling him 120 years before hand to build an ark to the saving of his house. This example of God's providence also shows us the intersection between God's providence in deliverances in our life, but also our command to obey God for God's providence to be fully realized. *"By faith Noah, being warned of God of things not seen as yet, moved with fear, prepared an ark to the saving of his house; by the which he condemned the world, and became heir of the righteousness which is by the faith."* (Heb. 11:7) *"And spared not the old world, but saved Noah the eighth person, a preacher of righteousness, bringing in the flood upon the world of the ungodly;"* (2 Pet. 2:5) God provided a providential avenue for Noah and his family to be saved from the flood, but it also took 120 years of Noah's diligent obedience for God's providence to be fully realized. God provided for the salvation of Noah's family from the flood by his providence.

After God powerfully delivered the Israelites out of bondage, the Egyptians caught up to them at the Red Sea in Exodus 14. They became afraid that they would be slain by the Egyptians, even blaming God to have brought them out of Egypt just to die in the wilderness. The Israelites were boxed in at the Red Sea with nowhere to escape and from their perspective there was no way that God could deliver them. God understood this perilous situation of his people and provided providential deliverance in a way that the Israelites would have never imagined. God parted the Red Sea with a strong east wind and his people walked through the sea floor on totally dry ground. God miraculously saved his people from supposed annihilation in a way they would have never imagined. When we pray for God's providence, we never know in what way God might see fit to answer our prayers. Even in situations like this where it might seem inevitable or a guarantee from our perspective that we might lose our natural life, God's providence can even make a way in the sea that we cannot even see.

Rahab and her family were blessed to be saved from destruction in Jericho because God providentially guided the two Israelite spies into her home. Rahab's family was delivered from death by God's providence beforehand to bring the spies to Rahab. *"And that ye will save alive my father, and my mother, and my brethren, and my sisters, and all that they have, and deliver our lives from death."* (Joshua 2:13) It might appear to the untrained eye to be random chance that those spies arrived in Rahab's house to hide out of every other possible house in Jericho. It was not random but God's providence that directed these spies into Rahab's house, arguably the only person in Jericho that truly feared Jehovah God. God's providence is oftentimes manifest the most strongly in what might appear to be random chance. God providentially guided his spies to the home of his devoted daughter in need. I'm sure God's providence directing the spies was unbeknownst to them in the moment, but they could certainly see in hindsight that it was God that

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providentially guided them to Rahab's house. The Lord saw his child, Rahab, in peril and providentially directed his people to her house to ultimately save her life in the destruction of Jericho.

Jesus gets into a ship with his disciples to travel to the other side of the Sea of Galilee. There was a great storm that arose during that journey so that the ship was covered with waves and now full of water. The disciples were afraid of capsizing and drowning in the middle of the sea, so they cried out to Jesus to save them from perishing. *"25) And his disciples came to him, and awoke him, saying, Lord, save us: we perish. 26) And he saith unto them, Why are ye fearful, O ye of little faith? Then he arose and rebuked the winds and the sea; and there was a great calm."* (Matt. 8:25-26) The disciples asked Jesus for deliverance from what they perceived to be a life-threatening situation, and Jesus answered their prayer and delivered them by his providence. We need to follow the disciples' example and cry out to Jesus for deliverance when we feel in great peril and danger. Our God in his providence will never leave us or forsake us and will deliver his people when we cry out to Jesus Christ in faith.

During a later storm on the Sea of Galilee, Jesus was walking on the water and asks Peter to come out and walk unto him on the water. Peter gets distracted, takes his eyes off Jesus, begins to sink, and cries out to Jesus to save him from drowning in the sea. *"30) But when he saw the wind boisterous, he was afraid; and beginning to sink, he cried, saying, Lord, save me. 31) And immediately Jesus stretched forth his hand, and caught him, and said unto him, O thou of little faith, wherefore didst thou doubt? 32) And when they were come into the ship, the wind ceased."* (Matt. 14:30-32) Jesus reaches forth his hand and takes Peter's hand and brings him safely into the boat. Peter cried out to Jesus during a time he felt he was literally about to die, and Jesus providentially saved him from perishing in the sea.

God providentially saves his people from enemies and during war times as well. *"I will call on the LORD, who is worthy to be praised: so shall I be saved from mine enemies."* (2 Sam. 22:4) God saved Israel from the Midianites by the hand of Gideon (Judges 6:14). God saved Israel from the Philistines by the hand of David (2 Sam. 3:18) and also by the hand of Jonathan (1 Sam. 14:6-23). God saved Israel and Hezekiah from King Sennacherib and all the Assyrian army (2 Chron. 32:22). There are many stories we probably know of personally from men who have fought in wars, and they said they should have never made it out alive, but they were delivered by the Lord. That was most likely an answer to prayers of their loved ones back home or their own prayers for God's providence and protection upon them during the war. God's providence blessed his people in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in wars the same way he blessed his people in the Old Testament, saving them from death in the middle of dangerous wartime conflicts.

There are so many instances I'm sure we could all give personally as well where if God's providence was not protecting us, we probably would have died in that situation. Later, we will consider specifically angelic intervention to protect us providentially, especially from danger. God's angels encamp round about them that fear him (Ps. 34:7). If it wasn't for God's angels encamping round about his people, there are many people who would have died in car wrecks, injuries, or any multitude of dangerous events that happen every day in our lives. God's providence protects his people in their time of need, especially if our life is in danger. We especially need to follow the pattern of the apostles and of Peter to cry out to God when our life is in peril. God will hear our prayers and will providentially bless us during our time of need.

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### Providence in Daily Food

We rely upon God's providence in our daily lives. Nothing is more relevant to our faith in God's daily providence than our trust in God to provide for our daily food. There are many people in this world who do not know where their next meal will come from to feed their families. When we are lacking our basic provisions of daily food, what do we do? We need to pray unto our God to "*Give us this day our daily bread*" and trust in God's providence to provide for our needs. Our lack of daily food does not take God by surprise, and God has promised to provide for our daily necessities and our daily food. We need to trust in God to provide for our daily food in his providence, regardless of how much we have in the cupboard or the food pantry in the moment.

We see a beautiful story of God's providence providing for our daily food in Elijah's life. In 1 Kings 17, Elijah announces what will end up as a 3 ½ year drought, and God sends him out to the brook Cherith to hide away from Ahab. God provided for Elijah by sending bread and flesh to him in the morning and the evening by commanding ravens to bring that food to him. God provided for bread and meat for Elijah through ravens, and he had the water of the brook to drink from. Sometimes, we might not be too excited about the means of God's providence. I doubt Elijah was too excited about eating bread and flesh carried by the claws of a raven, but he happily ate it and thanked God for providing for his daily food. God sustained his prophet in a very unlikely way, but Elijah did not miss a single meal at the brook during this period of the drought, until that brook eventually dried up.

However, then the time came when the brook dried up because of no rain in the land. How was the daily food and drink of Elijah going to be sustained now? Well, God sends Elijah to another very unlikely source of his daily food, to a widow who is on her last meal. Elijah arrives in Zarephath and approaches a widow to give him water to drink and food to eat. The widow explains that she is preparing the last meal for her and her son. They are going to eat this last meal, and then they plan to starve to death. In faith, this widow honors the request of the prophet and gives her family's last meal to Elijah. Then, God sustained their daily food for many days: "*15b) And she, and he, and her house, did eat many days. 16) And the barrel of meal wasted not, neither did the cruse of oil fail, according to the word of the Lord, which he spake by Elijah.*" (1 Kings 17:15-16) God miraculously provided for not just Elijah's daily food but for this widow and her son in a miraculous way, allowing for their meal and oil to be miraculously replenished every single day. That is so amazing to think about, how God miraculously sustained the food and drink of his people during a severe drought! God didn't give them more than they needed, but he providentially gave those three people just enough food and drink for one day at a time, every single day. The oil and meal never failed his people during that time, sustained by God's providence.

God providentially provided for the Israelites in the wilderness with manna from heaven as their daily food after being liberated from Egyptian bondage. God gave his people manna from heaven every single day for 40 years to provide for their daily food. The Israelites complained about having just manna, so God also gave them quail meat to eat from heaven too. Even after the Israelites were disobedient to refuse to enter into Canaan in faith, God did not cut off the daily manna from heaven. Instead, God in his longsuffering nature, still gave them daily manna every single day, except the Sabbath. God gave his people just enough manna for each day. Except for the sixth day, when they were commanded to gather twice as much and it would not spoil, they could not build up a stash of manna for the next week or the next month. No, if they

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tried to keep any manna over till the next day (except for on the Sabbath) it would spoil and ruin. This is such a great depiction of how God answers our prayer to “Give us this day our daily bread”. God will not necessarily give us food for multiple days or even a week. God has promised to give us just what we stand in need of every single day, to give us this day our daily bread.

During Jesus’ ministry, Christ took the lunch of a small boy and fed thousands of people with it. Jesus took 5 loaves and 2 fishes and fed 5,000 men (maybe up to 15,000 total of men, women, and children) with 12 baskets full of leftovers (Matt. 14:13-21). Later, Jesus took 7 loaves and a few fishes and fed 4,000 men (maybe up to 12,000 total) with 7 baskets full of leftovers (Matt. 15:29-39). God providentially provided for the daily food of his disciples in a way that no one ever imagined was possible. God can providentially take small loaves and fishes (or meal and oil) and provide for the daily food of his people. Let us never discount God’s ability to provide for our daily food or our daily needs, even if we can’t see where the food will come from.

God commanded his disciples (and us today as well) to include petitions unto God for our daily food into our daily prayers. “9) *After this manner therefore pray ye... 11) Give us this day our daily bread.*” (Matt. 6:9-11) We trust in God’s daily providence to provide for our daily food. Later in Matt. 6:25-34, Jesus gives an extended lesson on trusting God for our daily necessities. We don’t need to worry excessively about our daily food, drink, or raiment. God provides for the daily basic necessities of the fowls and the lilies and the grass. Therefore, we shouldn’t doubt God’s providence to provide those necessities for his beloved children. Instead, as we seek the kingdom of God first and his righteousness, we have confidence that God will answer our daily prayers for our daily bread and “*all these things [food, drink, and raiment] will be added unto you.*” (Matt. 6:33)

God has promised to supply all our need in Jesus Christ. “*But my God shall supply all your need according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus.*” (Phil. 4:19) God has promised “*grace sufficient*” for all our trials (2 Cor. 12:9). Not more, not less, but exactly the grace sufficient we need for every day. Just exactly what grace we need for today, not any lacking or any extra. We also need to be reminded that God knows what we need better than we do. We are prone to confuse our wants with our needs. God gives us just what we need each day so that we still have to live in faith and dependence upon God for our daily needs. God doesn’t always give us extra, but he does give us exactly what we need, at the exact time that we need it. We trust in our God’s providence to provide for our daily needs, giving exactly what we stand in need of every single day of our life.

## **Providence in Marriage**

In scripture, and in our lives as well, we see God’s providence in guiding our marriages. Even on the sixth day of creation, when everything up that point was good, God saw something that wasn’t good. God saw the need of man, that it was not good for man to be alone (Gen. 2:18). Therefore, God created Adam a “helper meet” (a helper suitable for him) to fill that need so that Adam would not be alone. The original marriage was an action of God’s providence, seeing beforehand man’s need for companionship and fellowship, and providing for that need by creating him a wife. In the original marriage, God saw a need beforehand – that it’s not good that man should be alone – and then provided for Adam’s need by way of marriage. Our marriages today are guided by God’s providence in like manner as well. God directs and guides our pathway

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in life to fill our mutual need for companionship in marriage as well. God is always the best “matchmaker”, so we need to rely on God’s perfect timing to providentially guide our marriages. Let us consider God’s providential guidance and perfect timing in the marriages of both Boaz and Ruth and then Isaac and Rebekah.

### Boaz and Ruth

When there was a famine in Bethlehem-Judah, Elimelech took his wife and his two sons and went into Moab. His two sons married Moabite women, and eventually Elimelech and both his sons died. Naomi decides to return back to Bethlehem-Judah, and one of her widowed daughter-in-laws, Ruth, commits to return back with her. God’s providence is certainly different than God predetermining the events of our life beyond our control. Ruth had a choice to stay in Moab or go back with Naomi. God didn’t cause her to go back with Naomi; Ruth herself had a choice to make. Naomi even does her best to dissuade Ruth from coming back with her. Instead, Ruth made a commitment to Naomi that is certainly indicative of the unconditional commitment of a marriage relationship, even though it was delivered from a daughter-in-law to her mother-in-law. *“16) And Ruth said, Intreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God: 17) Where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried: the Lord do so to me, and more also, if ought but death part thee and me.”* (Ruth 1:16-17)

How God’s providence ultimately unfolds in our lives is determined by our decisions, and marriage is a great example of that. God does not predetermine who we will marry or sovereignly impose a marriage on us. No, we have the ability to make the decision for ourselves who to marry. Ruth made a good, godly decision to leave an ungodly land and to commit to return to the land of Jehovah God. The Lord honored her commitment to follow his will and do the right thing, and God blessed her in that by providentially guiding her to a godly husband in Boaz. However, we can also make bad decisions and marry unbelievers contrary to God’s word, and there will be severe challenges in those unequally yoked marriages. God does not sovereignly dictate every single marriage because we can still make poor decisions in marriage that are contrary to the word of God and the will of God. When we are praying for guidance and seeking God’s will for our marriages, I believe that God honors that commitment and will guide you in his providence to the right person at the right time for a help meet specially compatible for you. Ruth made a decision to leave her homeland in Moab to return with Naomi, and God’s providence is strongly manifested as soon as they return back to Judah.

As soon as Ruth arrives back in Judah, she goes out to glean in the fields to provide food for her and Naomi. As she goes into the fields to glean, *“her hap was to light”* on the field of Boaz, who was of the kindred of Elimelech (Ruth 2:3). As Ruth goes out to glean, she “happened” to “randomly” arrive in the field of her future kinsman redeemer, Boaz. We can clearly see that this was not random happenstance; this was God’s providential guiding of Ruth to the exact right field of her kinsman redeemer. What’s so amazing about God’s providence, especially displayed in the life of Ruth, is how God is guiding us, even when we don’t know it. I don’t think Ruth had a special vision or saw a light or angel that guided her right to Boaz’s field. She was just walking, and it very well might have been the very first field she came upon. Ruth didn’t know in the moment that God was providentially directing her steps and actions to the exact right field, but God was working behind the scenes and guiding her mind and her actions according to his providence. We

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oftentimes can't see how God is guiding our actions by his providence in the moment, until everything starts to line up.

Ruth didn't even know the significance of what happened that day until she got home and told Naomi what field she gleaned in, and Naomi immediately blessed God for his providence. Ruth could not recognize the providence of God in the moment, but Naomi from a third-party perspective could understand immediately that this was God's providence guiding her. This shows why we need to have spiritual-minded counselors around us to give us advice who can see God's providence working in our lives, even if we can't see it in the moment. Think about this, of all the possible fields in Judah that she could glean in, what are the chances that Ruth arrived at the exact right field of her kinsman redeemer? Also, what are the chances of her showing up at the exact right time of year to go into Boaz's field to glean "*in the beginning of the barley harvest*" (Ruth 1:22)? What are the chances that a Moabite widow would leave all she knew in her homeland to go into a foreign land with her widowed mother-in-law? None of these unlikely circumstances occurred by random chance but were all guided by the providential hand of God.

Now, consider the other side of this equation in Boaz. Boaz is described as being a mighty man of wealth, and he appeared to be considerably older than Ruth. Boaz had remained a bachelor for many years and was an older, maybe even middle-aged, man by this point. I'm sure Boaz often felt that marriage had passed him by, and there was just no hope for marriage for someone like him, especially at his age. Boaz is just going about his daily responsibilities, going to supervise and inspect his fields on what appears to be a regular day, and then this beautiful young lady "randomly" (providentially) shows up to glean in his field. He treats her specially and tells his works to "accidentally" drop some "handfuls of purpose" for her to pick up. Boaz then began to inquire about Ruth, and the whole city attests that she was a virtuous woman. Ruth requests Boaz to perform the part of the kinsman redeemer, and after the nearest kinsman declines, Boaz redeems both Elimelech's land and redeems Ruth in marriage.

Boaz had to wait many years for his virtuous wife to arrive, but she just showed up at just the right time. I'm sure Boaz had periods of bitterness during his prolonged singleness, like many of us are prone to do. I guarantee you after he married Ruth though, he told everyone he knew that Ruth was "worth the wait". All those years of waiting for God's providence in his marriage had finally come to fruition, and I'm sure he couldn't have been happier. God's providence had been working to bring this marriage to pass at the exact right time for many, many years. We don't have a timeline for these events in Ruth, but the only reason Ruth eventually came back to Judah was because she married a Jewish man in Moab. Ruth could have married anyone, but she chose to marry a Jewish foreigner sojourning in Moab. She could have stayed in Moab when her husband died, but she chose to come to Judah. She went out to glean, just to provide for her daily food, and she just happened to arrive at the field of her near kinsman at the beginning of the barley harvest. By the end of the barley harvest, probably just 40 days later, she was married to her kinsman redeemer in Boaz. For many years back in Judah, Boaz chose not to pursue other woman, waiting for the right person for him to marry. God strongly guided the actions of both Ruth and Boaz by his providence for many years unbeknownst to either one of them. Then, that providence finally came to a climax when Ruth "just happened" to arrive in Boaz's field on an apparently regular day.

That is typically how God's providence works in our life, in the regular, apparently mundane actions of daily life. Just like in the book of Esther, there are no miracles in this account of God's providence for Ruth



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and Boaz. Ruth and Boaz had been guided by God on two separate paths for many, many years, and those two paths finally came together into one at the exact right time in the exact right place. When we go about our regular, apparently mundane actions of daily life, we might feel that God is not working in our lives. However, if you wait 20 years, you never know how you might look back on something and realize how God was providentially guiding the whole time. Why did I not get that job? Why did that person that I really liked not like me in return? Why did this or that happen in the way that it did? God doesn't always give us those answers, but every now and then, when God's providence comes to full fruition, such as in the life of Ruth and Boaz, we can see with 20/20 hindsight how it was God's providence working in our lives all along.

### Isaac and Rebekah

We see from the example of Isaac and Rebekah's marriage that is also incumbent upon us to make godly decisions for God to providentially bless our marriages. We have to put ourselves in a position to succeed and for God to bless us providentially. In Genesis 24, Abraham is now old and well stricken in years, but Isaac (who is 40 years old at this time) is still unmarried. Abraham commissions his most trusted servant to travel back to his homeland among his family and find a wife for Isaac. Abraham had faith and confidence that God would providentially guide his servant to the right woman for Isaac to marry. *"The Lord God of heaven, which took me from my father's house, and from the land of my kindred, and which spake unto me, and that sware unto me, saying, Unto thy seed will I give this land; he shall send his angel before thee, and thou shalt take a wife unto my son from thence."* (Gen. 24:7) Providence is God seeing a need beforehand and procuring everything necessary to meet that need in the future. Abraham had total confidence that God would *"send his angel before thee"*, guide the pathway and decisions of his servant, and for this trip to be successful for the servant to return with a wife for Isaac. God providentially sent his angel before Abraham's servant to guide his pathway to the appropriate wife, Rebekah, for Isaac to wed.

First, this gives us a good example for how we need to follow God's pattern for finding a godly spouse. Abraham specifically forbids his servant from finding a wife for Isaac among the Canaanites that he lived among. Abraham knew the Canaanites worshipped false gods, not Jehovah God, and his son could not marry someone who was not devoted solely to Jehovah God. Therefore, if God is going to providentially bless us to find a spouse, we need to be seeking a husband or wife in the right place. Scripture unequivocally forbids a Christian from marrying an unbeliever. *"Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness?"* (2 Cor. 6:14) When you are deciding how to raise your children, how to spend your money, the priorities of your family, you cannot have a harmonious marriage when a believer wants to honor God in their decision-making, and the unbeliever only wants to indulge this world. Therefore, the general framework that is necessary for finding a godly spouse is looking in the right place and seeking a believer to marry. The best place to seek a believer to marry is in the church, among fellow believers in God.

This servant had been well trained by Abraham and apparently believed in Jehovah God too. When he arrives into the proper land, he immediately prays for God to give him success in finding the right woman. He prays very specifically for the right woman to display love and service by watering not just the servant but also his camels (Gen. 24:12-14). Before the servant was even done speaking, Rebekah shows up and answers his prayer by offering water to both him and his camels. How exciting is this account that God

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answers the fervent prayer of his man before he was even done praying his prayer! We need to follow this servant's example and pray unto God for providential guidance in our decisions, especially in decisions regarding marriage. We need to pray specific prayers, not just general prayers. Furthermore, we need to pray in faith with an expectation that God hears and that God will answer our prayers. Look at the effect when this servant prayed in that bold, confident, faithful way. God answers his prayer before he was even finished praying it. That doesn't mean that God will answer our prayers that suddenly every time, but God is faithful to answer our prayers in his perfect timing when we pray fervently, specifically, and faithfully such as Abraham's servant.

The servant didn't immediately let Rebekah know what was going on because he didn't yet know who she was. *"And the man wondering at her held his peace, to wit whether the Lord had made his journey prosperous or not."* (Gen. 24:21) The servant is standing back amazed at God possibly answering his prayer mid-sentence right before his eyes as this young lady runs around feeding his camels. However, he did not yet know if she was of Abraham's kindred and didn't know if his journey was prosperous yet or not. He then asks Rebekah who her father was, and she tells him her father is Bethuel, which just so happens to be Abraham's nephew. The man's immediate response when he realized that God had providentially and clearly answered his prayer was to *"bow down his head and worship the Lord."* (Gen. 24:26) This needs to be our immediate response as well when God graciously blesses for our prayers to be clearly answered as well, to bow down and worship our gracious and merciful God.

Then, the servant blesses God for providentially guiding him to the right place at the right time. *"And he said, Blessed be the Lord God of my master Abraham, who hath not left destitute my master of his mercy and his truth: I being in the way, the Lord led me to the house of my master's brethren."* (Gen. 24:27) This teaches an overarching principle of following God's will in our lives. Why did the Lord providentially bless so strongly to guide the servant's path? I *"being in the way, the Lord led me."* This servant was in the way of faith, in the way of prayer, in the way seeking God's will in the right place. He was following "the way" of God, and then *"the Lord led me in the right way."* (Gen. 24:48) We have to follow God's word and submit to God's will and God's way, not our own way. When we follow God's way, he will make our journey prosperous and fulfilling. Also, notice where "the way" of God led the servant unto? *"I being in the way, the Lord led me to the house of my master's brethren."* The Lord's way will always lead us to the house of our Master's brethren, primarily leading to the church. Following the way of God will never lead us to the world or to the wicked land of the Canaanites. God's way will always lead us to God, not away from God. God's way will always lead us to our Master's brethren in the house of God.

Now, think about this event from the eyes of Rebekah. Unbeknownst to her, there has been a servant traveling for months to arrive in Abraham's homeland, looking for his family. She is going about her daily chores and arrives at the well to apparently draw water just like any other day. She is a very loving young lady with a servant's heart, so she proactively offers to water this stranger's camels. Then, she later finds out that this man came to look for a wife, and she was answering the servant's prayers right before his eyes, even though she was just trying to help and serve a stranger. What are the chances that after traveling for probably many months, that right after this servant prays to God that the first person that shows up is a female, unmarried relative of Abraham? Then, furthermore that this same lady would do exactly what that servant had just prayed for in watering his camels to confirm his trip's success? That is God's providence clearly in action. God was guiding Rebekah all day long in her daily, mundane activities to arrive at the

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exact right time as the servant at the well. She could have been delayed and not arrived when she planned, but instead she arrived at the exact right time. This again shows us God's providence in action in the regular, mundane actions of life. Rebekah was going about her regular day, diligently doing her chores, fetching water, and now helping a stranger where she could. All that time, God was providentially guiding for her to arrive at the exact right time to interrupt the servant's prayer by answering his prayer with her actions. God's providence is just so amazing to watch in action!

The servant then goes to Rebekah's family and immediately explains the situation. He tells her family how God "*sent his angel before me*" to providentially guide me to your daughter (Gen. 24:40). He requests Rebekah to come back with him immediately to Isaac, and she agrees to return. They return back to Canaan and Isaac and Rebekah fall in love at first sight and are happily married. Isaac was not married until he was 40 years old. He had to wait a long time for God to provide a wife for him, but just like Boaz, I'm sure he said that Rebekah was worth the wait. Then, he had to wait another 20 years before Rebekah gave birth to their twin sons, Jacob and Esau. Isaac really had to learn patience in waiting on God's providential timing, in both his marriage and the birth of his children. God's timing is always perfect, and when we do things God's way, the providential blessing of God is always worth the wait.

We learn some very important principles about God's providence in marriage through the story of Isaac and Rebekah. First, we need to be seeking a godly spouse in the right place, among believers in the house of our Master. We cannot be unequally yoked with unbelievers and seek a spouse among today's version of the ungodly Canaanites of this world. We need to prayerfully seek "God's way", not our way, for the Lord to direct our steps and guide us to the right person at the right time. We need to pray fervently, specifically, and with strong faith that God will answer our prayer in his perfect timing. When God's providence is unfolding before us, we need to act swiftly and confidently, not waiting for more signs once God has clearly manifested his will in our life. When God does answer prayer, we need to immediately praise and worship God for his providential guidance of our actions. If we are "walking in God's way", I believe the Lord will providentially guide our steps as well, leading us to the house of our Master's brethren, and Lord willing to a godly spouse that you seek in your life as well.

## **Providence in National Deliverance**

God's providence is powerfully displayed in his deliverance of the nation of Israel many times in the Old Testament. The Lord knew in his perfect foreknowledge the dangers and perils that would come against the Israelites at various times. Then, the Lord was guiding and moving many years, even generations, in advance to have the exact right people in the exact right place to provide for the needs of his people. Many more examples of miraculous, angelic intervention in the protection of the Israelite nation could be noted as well that we don't have time to examine. Also, we will not consider these, but God's providence in national deliverance could be also examined in the American revolution, WW1, WW2, and other wars. Many unnatural, unique circumstances happened during these wars to where it is evident that the Lord was providentially fighting on behalf of his people.

## **Moses**

The Lord blessed Jacob's family to go into Egypt to preserve their lives during the famine of Joseph's reign. Later on, a new Pharaoh took power who began to afflict the Israelites in severe bondage. Even 400 years

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before the exodus led by Moses, the Lord prophesied to Abraham, not just that his people would go into Egyptian bondage, but also prophesied that they would be led out of bondage with great substance (Gen. 15:13-16). The Lord knew exactly the circumstances that would happen four centuries in the future and prophesied their deliverance from bondage, even in the life of Abraham. The Lord guided the life of Moses by his providence and protection to ultimately fulfil this prophecy. Moses did not fulfil leading the exodus until he was 80 years old, but the providence of God was moving to protect his life as an infant from the genocidal decree of Pharaoh to kill all the newborn males from Israel. The Lord blessed Moses' life to be spared from Pharaoh's command by his mother putting him in an ark on the river. Not only was Moses' life spared, but the Lord providentially moved Pharaoh's daughter to find Moses in the ark and to adopt him into her family. Not only that, but the Lord providentially allowed Moses' mother to be paid by Pharaoh's daughter to wean her own son. The Lord saw the future need of deliverance from bondage 80 years in the future and providentially guided the protection of Moses as an infant because of the great work he would do 80 years later.

Moses then was raised in Pharaoh's house for 40 years but found out his heritage and slew an Egyptian protecting his kindred. Moses then flees to Midian and herds sheep for 40 more years before the Lord appeared to Moses in a burning to bush to call him to return to Egypt to lead Israel's liberation. God saw the need of a deliverer, but Moses was not ready to be the Israelite's leader at 40 years of age. God was preparing Moses for 40 years to deliver his people. The Lord had to mold a prideful, short-tempered, hot-headed man into the meekest man on the earth to be able to lead millions of stubborn, rebellious, and stiff-necked Israelites in the wilderness. God had an intended outcome, but he had to mold Moses for 40 years as a shepherd in the desert into the right leader to lead his people out of bondage. He would have failed 40 years before. Therefore, we see the Lord not only prophesying Moses' providential deliverance 400 years before, but we see the Lord's guiding hand of providence all throughout Moses' life to prepare him for this great work to lead his people out of bondage at age 80. God heard and answered the prayers of affliction from his people in bondage, and God had been providentially preparing their leader for 80 years to lead them out of bondage. The Lord saw this great future need of his children and guided all the circumstances of Moses' life for him to be the right man, with the right maturity, at the right time, in the right place, to stand up to Pharaoh to let God's people go. We see from this example, and many others in scripture, that God's all-seeing eye of providence is usually working many years, even generations, in advance in his people's lives to provide for us in our time of need.

### **Esther**

The book of Esther is unique in that the name of God is not directly mentioned in the Hebrew text. Even though the name of God is not directly in the text, we see the providential hand of God powerfully manifested at every step of the way. Also, it's important to note that in Esther there are no miracles recorded. Instead of miracles, the Lord's providence is powerfully working through the regular, apparently mundane, actions of daily life. That is how God's providence typically works – not necessarily by miracles but guiding our daily, mundane actions, even when we do not realize what the Lord is providentially doing. We see God's strong providential intervention for the good of his people in the life of Esther. God knew all along that the wicked Haman would eventually enact a law to try to destroy the Jews. God saw with his perfect foreknowledge that entire existence of the Jews would be in danger at a future date at the hands of Haman. Therefore, many years before that peril would come against the Jews, God was guiding the lives of Esther

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and Mordecai to be in the exact right place at the exact right time to provide for the Jews' deliverance. God was beginning to work in this situation at least 9 years before Haman's edict to put Esther in a position to save her people. Vashti was removed from queen in the 3<sup>rd</sup> year of Ahasuerus, due to the prideful and sinful decisions of the king. Of all the people in the kingdom, a Jewish lady, Esther, was chosen as the new Persian queen in his 9<sup>th</sup> year; then, Haman's decree was in his 12<sup>th</sup> year. We see that God was providentially guiding at least 9 years before for Esther to be providentially chosen as queen to be in the exact right position years later for "such a time as this" to save the Jews from annihilation.

Furthermore, years before Mordecai does the right thing and reports a plot to assassinate the king. A notation of Mordecai's report was made in the book of the king's chronicles, but the king never knew about it, and Mordecai was never rewarded for it. That is an important lesson that we need to do the right thing, even if no one is looking, and even if we never get any praise for it in the moment. We never know how our apparently secret good deeds can come back to providentially bless us in the future. Then, years later (we don't know exactly how long, but let's say 5 years later for an example), the king can't sleep one night and requests the book of the king's chronicles to be read to him. By God's providence, the servants reading the chronicles happen to turn to the exact page that denotes Mordecai's report of the assignation plot. Haman is waiting in the king's foyer to request to hang Mordecai, but instead Mordecai ends up getting paraded all around Shushan by Haman for his saving the king's life years before. A silent good work of Mordecai is brought back up 5 years later (maybe) in the exact right night when the king couldn't sleep to not only save his own life but be a crucial event in the deliverance of the Jewish nation. We never know how our silent, private, unglamorous good deeds will come back to bless us and others in the future, according to the Lord's providence. Thus, we need to be obedient and faithful to do the right thing, even if no one is looking. Even if we receive no applause in the moment, we never know if the Lord might bring that back around to providentially bless us, even years in the future.

Esther's great act of faith is also an important example in the intersection between God's providence and man's obedience in acts of providence. God has not unalterably predetermined all events that will occur in this world. No, the Lord providentially puts his people in the right position to act as agents of his providence, but we must have the courage to be obedient to that calling when the Lord puts us in the right place at the right time. Mordecai told this to Esther as she was preparing to request the king to help the Jews from Haman's decree. *"For if thou altogether holdest thy peace at this time, then shall there enlargement and deliverance arise to the Jews from another place; but thou and thy father's house shall be destroyed: and who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?"* (Esther 4:14) Mordecai saw the providential hand of God moving in this situation to put Esther in the exact right place, in the exact right time, "for such a time as this". What are the chances there would be a Jewish queen with the ear of the king to deliver her people when they are facing destruction? Mordecai knew Esther was in her position as queen for a reason, to be the agent of God's providence to save his people.

However, Mordecai also understood that God was not going to do this great work for Esther. No, she had to be obedient to what God had providentially called her to. God put her in the right providential position, but now she had to show great courage and faith to beseech the king. Notice that Mordecai's faith was not ultimately in Esther; his faith of deliverance was in God. Mordecai fully believed that even if Esther squandered her providential positioning and did not act out of fear, then God would still send enlargement and deliverance for the Jews from "another place". God will bless his people; God will honor his covenant

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and promises; Mordecai knew God will deliver us, he just didn't know how yet, if it's from Esther or another place. The integrity of God's word and covenant was at stake. All the prophecies of the Messiah coming from the tribe of Judah were at stake. The Lord was not going to let his people be wiped off the face of the earth, and he would not let his word and covenant fail. Even if Esther got afraid, didn't act, and squandered her providential position, Mordecai knew that the Lord would deliver his people another way.

Mordecai also gives us the beautiful providential language that applies to our lives as well – who knows whether you are come to the kingdom *“for such a time as this”*? Who knows how we might be placed in a position providentially by God, where we can make a huge impact in others' lives? Who knows what form that might take, but God is in the business of putting his people in the exact right place, at the exact right time, for *“such a time as this”*. Also, we can relate to Mordecai's pondering if this is truly the Lord's hand of providence or not – *“who knoweth”* if you are come for such a time as this? He sure thought it was God's providential hand, but he didn't know for sure yet. We usually cannot see the full unfolding of God's providence until we examine a situation with 20/20 hindsight. Usually, we do not know in the moment. We doubt just like Mordecai, *“who knows”* if this is really what I need to be doing or not? However, in spite of those inevitable doubts creeping in, we trust God in faith and try to be agents of God's providence as he opens doors *“for such a time as this.”*

Here again we see the Lord's guiding hand of providence working many years – at least 9 years – in advance to put Esther in the exact right place, at the exact right time, for such a time as this, to deliver the Jews from destruction. We also see how the Lord providentially brought back up the unglamorous, seemingly unnoticed act of Mordecai doing the right thing at the exact right night, due to the king's insomnia, to save his life, exalt him, and to foil his enemy. We never know how the daily, apparently mundane, actions of life are being used and guided by the Lord in his providence that we cannot see in the moment. However, when we look back in hindsight, we can see the Lord interweaving his providence in every day of our lives. We see that interweaving daily guidance of the Lord in the book of Esther in delivering his people from destruction, and we can see the daily guidance of God's hand of providence in our daily lives as well.

### **Cyrus**

After Judah had endured 70 years of Babylonian captivity, the Lord raised up and providentially guided Cyrus the Great, the king of the Medo-Persian empire, to issue a decree for the Jews to return back to Jerusalem in 538 BC. Displaying God's perfect omniscient foreknowledge, probably at least 150 years before Cyrus issued this decree, the Lord even named Cyrus by name as the man would issue the decree for the return to Jerusalem. *“Thus saith the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have holden, to subdue nations before him; and I will loose the loins of kings, to open before him the two leaved gates; and the gates shall not be shut.”* (Isaiah 45:1) The Lord stirred up Cyrus in his providence to issue a decree for the Jews' return. The *“Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia”* (v.1) to make a proclamation that *“the Lord God of Heaven hath charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem which is Judah.”* (Ezra 1:1-4, see also 2 Chron. 36:22-23) Notice how Cyrus attributed this burden to the Lord God of heaven to build a house. It's really amazing how the Lord tendered the heart of this king who has a lot of shortcomings in history to do this great deed to liberate his people from bondage. Truly, king Cyrus' heart – as well as the hearts of all kings and governmental leaders – is in the hand of the Lord, and he turns it however he sees fit. *“The king's heart is in the hand of the Lord, as the rivers of water: he turneth it whithersoever he*

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*will.*” (Prov. 21:1) The Lord providentially stirred up the heart of Cyrus the Great to deliver his people from bondage and return to Jerusalem to rebuild the house of the Lord.

### **Providence by God’s Chastising Hand**

God is a loving heavenly Father to his children. Sometimes it is necessary for the wise parent to chasten their children when they see a detrimental attitude or problem that the parent knows will cause them problems in the future. The chastening hand of God is evidence of God’s love towards his children – “*as many as I love I rebuke and chasten.*” (Rev. 3:19) If we are not lovingly chastised by the Lord, then we are bastards and not sons (Heb. 12:8). Sometimes the wise parent changes their response based on the situation and what they deem the child needs to learn an appropriate lesson to correct their behavior. The Lord deals with his children in the same way. Sometimes the Lord will suffer very difficult circumstances to come in our lives to chasten his children, to bring us to repentance for our future growth and development.

Parents often suffer and allow things to occur for the benefit of their children, even if the children cannot understand the parent’s decision-making in the moment. A parent might allow a rebellious child to touch a hot stove that they have been repeatedly warned not to touch. The parent did not cause it; the child is the responsible party for their ultimate burned hand. The parent could have prevented them from touching the hot stove, but in the parent’s wisdom they chose to remain passive and suffered the child to do what the child had in their heart to do anyway for the purpose of teaching them a lesson that would ultimately be in the long-term best interest of the child. That’s what God does for us so often as our Heavenly Father. When we make bad decisions, we are the sole culprit that caused the consequences of our sin, not God, but oftentimes the reason why God does not actively intervene and actually stop us from doing something is because we need to learn a lesson that will benefit us in the future. Other times, bad things happen in our lives because we are simply reaping what we’ve sown. We decided to sin, and now we must face the penalty of those sins. Even then God is upholding his word and chastening us for our own good, to teach us necessary lessons to make better godly decisions in the future. Just as any loving parent, their parental decisions are always for the long-term growth, safety, health, and good of their children, whether they choose to actively intervene or passively suffer the actions of the child. Everything that our loving Heavenly Father does for his children will always be with the intent of our ultimate good, growth, and safety. God is always guiding us as his children for our good, but he does not work in synergy with sin to accomplish that good, even if he suffers evil events to come in our lives for our purification and growth.

God has the sovereign authority to actively intervene in any situation he sees fit (see Providence by God’s Active Intervention section). However, sometimes the Lord does not see fit to sovereignly intervene to stop difficult circumstances from occurring. The Lord may passively suffer circumstances to occur to chasten his people to repent or to purify sinful dross from our lives or to manifest his glory. Scripture does teach us that God does suffer some evil or difficult actions to occur ultimately for his glory. God has the power to overrule any situation for his glory and for the benefit of his children. God can intervene providentially and miraculously in any event in human history, but there are certain instances where he chooses not to intervene and remain passive, according to his will and his future intended purpose. However, it is important to note that we have no scriptural authority to say that God is working all events without exception together for our good (as noted in the Do All Things Work Together For Good? section above). Let’s consider a short

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sampling of a few instances that God did suffer difficult circumstances to occur for the good of his people and his ultimate glory. Many more examples are laced all throughout scripture as well.

- God suffered Joseph's brothers to sell him into slavery for the future purpose of God using Joseph to save his family during famine and many others as well. God did not cause his brothers to do commit this sinful act (their own jealousy and wicked hearts did that), but he permitted it to occur for the future purpose of saving Joseph's family and countless others (Gen. 50:20). See "God's Overruling Providence – The Life of Joseph" section above for further treatment of this.
- God suffered Israel to remain in Egyptian bondage for hundreds of years while God could have miraculously released them at any time. Instead, he allowed them to remain in bondage until the appointed time, and they had to endure great affliction during this period of suffering, according to the Lord's will. God ultimately used their release at the appointed time to destroy the pagan gods of Egypt by the ten plagues and to manifest to the entire world his glory and his power over the kingdoms of men.
- God suffered some Jews to be taken into captivity in Babylon during the first exile in 605 BC, such as Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, and it was "*for their good*" (Jer. 24:5-7). These people had to endure exile, but they were blessed to prosper in captivity (which all four of them did, being promoted to positions of leadership multiple times), but primarily they would be spared from the horrendous judgment that was coming upon Jerusalem in 586 BC (the evil figs, Jer. 24:8-10), which was a time of unspeakable suffering so bad the Jews resorted to cannibalism (Deut. 28:52-57). Even though they were taken into Babylonian captivity, they were delivered from much worse suffering than if they had remained in Jerusalem.
- Jesus "suffered" the grief of his loved ones by tarrying for three days to allow Lazarus to die (which was not a good situation for Mary and Martha, even though it was good for Lazarus as he went to heaven). Jesus' reason for doing this was for the glory of God (John 11:4) and that the disciples might believe (John 11:15). Jesus did not cause the death of Lazarus. Adam's sin and Lazarus' own sin caused his death, but Jesus allowed him to pass away for a purpose and for an intent, to manifest his glory and power by ultimately raising Lazarus from the dead after four days.
- Paul prayed thrice for his thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan that buffeted him, to be removed, and God could have removed the thorn at any time. Paul continued to suffer with this thorn in the flesh because God's intended purpose in allowing it to remain was that Paul would stay humble and not be exalted above measure, that he would understand that God's grace was sufficient, and that God's strength would be manifested through Paul's weakness (2 Cor. 12:9-10). God suffered this thorn to continue to cause pain in Paul's life for his humility, purification, and growth as a disciple of Christ.
- God sometimes does not intervene to heal his righteous children and instead allows them to enter into heaven at a young age for the purpose of saving them from the evil that is to come in this world and future evil in their own lives (Isaiah 57:1). God does not prevent every car wreck or illness that takes the lives of people, from our perspective maybe too early in their life. However, the Lord might be delivering them from greater suffering in this world later in their life, and blesses them to go on to heaven early, even though it causes us great pain in their early passing.



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God's chastening hand upon his chosen nation of the Israelites was consistent all throughout the Old Testament because of their repeated sins against the Lord. God suffered various judgments from foreign, pagan oppressors to come upon the nation of Israel and Judah because of their sin to bring them to repentance back to Jehovah God.

- Judges Oppression – Many times during the period of the judges, the Lord suffered various nations to come and oppress Israel because of their sins. The Lord would remove his hedge of protection and suffer various nations to oppress the Israelites. God's people would eventually pray and repent, and then, the Lord would send them a judge to relieve them of their oppression. These foreign nations would have had no ability to oppress Israel if God had not suffered them to chastise the Israelites to bring them to repentance.
- Sennacherib – God sent Sennacherib, the Assyrian king, as “the rod of mine anger and mine indignation” against the northern tribes of Israel to judge them for their sin. “5) *O Assyrian, the rod of mine anger, and the staff in their hand is mine indignation. 6) I will send him against an hypocritical nation, and against the people of my wrath will I give him a charge, to take the spoil, and to take the prey, and to tread them down like the mire of the streets.*” (Isaiah 10:5-6) God suffered Sennacherib to afflict Israel and sent him as a rod to chastise his disobedient people. Even though the Lord suffered Sennacherib to chastise his people, at the same time God judged Sennacherib. Later, 185,000 men of his army were slain by an angel, and Sennacherib was killed by his sons when he returned home from battle (2 Kings 19:35-37). God suffered him to chastise his people, but God still held Sennacherib accountable for his own sin as well.
- Nebuchadnezzar – God removed the providential hedge from Judah and suffered Nebuchadnezzar and Babylon to totally ransack and destroy Jerusalem in 586 BC. God suffered his chosen nation to be in bondage for 70 years in Babylon because they chose to neglect the land's sabbath rest 70 times. God used Nebuchadnezzar as the rod of judgment and the means of Judah reaping what they had sown in sinning by neglecting the land's sabbath rest.
  - Nebuchadnezzar is even called God's “servant” multiple times (Jer. 25:9 & 27:6). God takes credit for giving the land over to Nebuchadnezzar; he did not take the land himself; he never could conquer Jerusalem unless God suffered him to conquer them. “*And now have I given all these lands into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon, my servant; and the beasts of the field have I given him also to serve him.*” (Jer. 27:6) God consumed all nations by Nebuchadnezzar's hand (Jer. 27:8); he did not conquer all these nations or Jerusalem by his own military might. God gave this earthly power over into his hand for a short time. God used Nebuchadnezzar as a rod to judge Jerusalem and other nations. God takes firsthand credit for this judgment. Nebuchadnezzar did not conquer them on his own. “8) *Therefore thus saith the Lord of hosts; Because ye have not heard my words, 9) Behold, I will send and take all the families of the north, saith the Lord, and Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon, my servant, and will bring them against this land, and against the inhabitants thereof, and against all these nations round about, and will utterly destroy them, and make them an astonishment, and an hissing, and perpetual desolations.*” (Jer. 25:8-9) God takes firsthand credit for the judgment he was sending upon Jerusalem. “*Moreover I will take from them the voice of mirth, and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom, and the voice of the bride, the sound of the millstones, and the light of the candle.*” (Jer. 25:10)

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- God used Nebuchadnezzar to judge his people, but the Lord still held him accountable for his sins. God did not put in Nebuchadnezzar's heart to do all the wickedness and destruction that he poured out on Jerusalem. The lust for worldwide power and to conquer and destroy other nations was already in Nebuchadnezzar's sinful heart; God didn't put it there. God did remove his providential hedge and suffered Nebuchadnezzar to do the evil that was already in his heart. However, then after God was done with Nebuchadnezzar as his rod of judgment, he sent judgment then upon Babylon and held them accountable for their sins against Jerusalem. *"And it shall come to pass, when seventy years are accomplished, that I will punish the king of Babylon, and that nation, saith the Lord, for their iniquity, and the land of the Chaldeans, and will make it perpetual desolations."* (Jer. 25:12) God raised up the Medes against Babylon to destroy them and to judge them for all that they did against Jerusalem (Jer. 51). God rendered unto Babylon all the evil they did unto Zion (Jer. 51:24), and the city of Babylon would be desolate without inhabitants (Jer. 51:29). No sins are ever overlooked or approved of by our perfectly holy God. The Lord will carry out appropriate judgment for every sin (even those suffered according to his will) either in Christ on the cross or on the wicked in the lake of fire at his second coming.
- The accounts of Sennacherib and Nebuchadnezzar show a glimpse into the interworking of God's providence, God's sovereignty, and also man's responsibility. God suffered both of these kings to bring affliction and destruction to chastise his people for their sin to bring them to repentance. Then, after the Lord was done with these kings as a chastising rod, he holds them fully accountable for their sin, and brings judgment on them both, holding them individually and their nations accountable for their sins they carried out against the people of God. The Lord never causes or approves of sin. Even if the Lord sees fit to suffer sin in his will and sovereignty, he still holds those parties accountable for their sin by judging them later on or at his second coming.
- It is in examining these instances where we can find the correct interpretation of Ps. 76:10, *"Surely the wrath of man shall praise thee: the remainder of wrath shalt thou restrain."* God suffered Nebuchadnezzar's wrath to ransack Jerusalem for the purpose of judging and chastising his people to bring them to repentance and to honor his word of judgment that was promised due to their rebellion. Nebuchadnezzar only did what God suffered him to do, but he is still called God's servant and was the rod that God allowed to chastise his people. Nebuchadnezzar committed sin by what he did, and God held him and Babylon accountable for that. His destruction of Jerusalem showed God's sovereignty, upheld God's word, and was used by God to chastise his people, ultimately bringing them to repentance and restoration to their homeland. We need to once again remind you that just because God acted one way, one time – particularly with Nebuchadnezzar – does not mean that God works that way all the time, even in what might appear to us to be similar circumstances. God restrains the full wickedness of man, and there are times when even the wrath of man can be suffered by God for his purposes and can be used to his praise and glory (just not every time).

## **Providence by God's Active Intervention**

We have considered how the Lord does not always actively intervene in many situations he could prevent and stop all together. However, on the other hand, there are many times where the Lord does see fit to actively intervene to save his people, to stop someone from committing an action, or to judge people for

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disobedience in the moment. Why in some instances (maybe even similar situations from our perspective) does the Lord actively intervene to stop something, but in other instances he remains passive and suffers it to occur? We don't have an answer for that. The Lord is sovereign, and his will is always good, acceptable, and perfect (Rom. 12:2). God has the right to actively intervene or remain passive in any situation, and he is perfectly righteous and holy in either course of action he chooses. The Lord many times – maybe even typically – sends angels to actively intervene in the affairs of men. We will consider angelic interventions in the next section. There are many, many examples in scripture we could give in addition to these where God intervened through personal appearance, through nature, or other means to provide for the needs of his children.

- In preparation for the battle against Jericho, the first city battle in the conquest of Canaan, Joshua sees a man with his sword drawn. When he inquires if he was for Israel or their adversaries, he answers he is come as the captain of the Lord's hosts. Joshua takes his shoes off because this man states this is holy ground (Josh. 5:13-15). I believe since this man made the ground holy, this is a preincarnate appearance of Christ in the Old Testament. An angel would never have proclaimed the ground was holy from their presence or accepted worship. Christ came to personally oversee the angelic host in fighting for Israel in their conquering of Jericho.
- When the three Hebrew men were cast into the fiery furnace, Nebuchadnezzar declared he saw a fourth man in the fire with them, and the fourth had the form like the Son of God. Christ came to personally deliver these three faithful men from the fire who refused to submit to idolatry from the punishment of this wicked king (Dan. 3). Christ honored the commitment of these men to not bow down to a false idol by coming to personally save them from the fire.
- In the midst of a battle with the Amorites, Joshua prays to God for the sun to not go down until they had gotten the victory over their enemies. In response to the faithful prayer of Joshua, the Lord caused the earth to stop spinning and the sun to not go down for a full 24 hours (Josh. 10:11-14). God saw fit to pause the natural laws of the earth's rotation to provide victory for his people over their enemies.
- When Moses and the Israelites were pinned in and the Egyptians were getting ready to attack them, the Lord opened up the Red Sea to provide a dry pathway in the sea to save his people (Exod. 14). God saw fit to actively intervene to provide miraculous deliverance for his people in the midst of danger and wiped out the Egyptians in the process too. God is the sovereign of the sea, and provided deliverance through an impossible route.
- Jonah chose to rebel against the command of God and took a ship in the opposite direction of Nineveh. God prepared a whale to swallow Jonah, then providentially kept Jonah alive in the intestinal track of that whale until Jonah repented and the whale vomited up Jonah on dry land (Jonah 1-2). God does not always prepare a whale to swallow us up when we rebel against God's will, but the Lord will chastise us to where our conscience will feel in the "belly of hell" (Jonah 2:8). After Jonah then goes to Nineveh, they repent, and he gets upset, the Lord then prepared a gourd to shelter Jonah's head. Then, the Lord destroys the gourd too because of Jonah's still rebellious attitude (Jonah 4). The Lord worked through whales and gourds to deal with Jonah.
- When Abraham went into Gerar and lied to Abimelech about Sarah being his sister, God actively appears to Abimelech in a dream to warn him from sinning by telling him that Sarah was Abraham's sister (Gen. 20). God does not always actively appear to us in a dream to warn us of impending sin,

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but he chose to notify Abimelech in this case. Also note that while God warned Abimelech, he still had a choice to heed God's warning or not. Thankfully, Abimelech took the hint and sent Abraham and Sarah away without an egregious sin.

- The Apostle Paul was seeking the Lord's direction in his missionary journey. His first choice was to go to Asia, but they were forbidden of the Holy Ghost to preach there. His second choice was to go to Bithynia, but the Spirit suffered them not to go there. Then, the Lord finally opens a door to go to Macedonia (Acts 16:6-10). Paul's first two indications of the Spirit's leadership were wrong, and the Lord actively prevented him from going those two places. We don't know exactly how the Holy Ghost forbade him and suffered him not to go, but it was clearly evident to Paul the Lord was preventing him from going. The Lord does not always actively intervene to prevent us from making the wrong decisions, but this missionary journey was so important that the Spirit actively prevented Paul from going to the wrong place twice.
- God does not always intervene to strike people dead for their sin, but there have been occasions where he actively intervened to strike men dead in the moment for their sins. Er & Onan were slew by the Lord for their wicked lives (Gen. 38:7,10). Nadab & Abihu were struck dead at their first offense for offering strange fire to the Lord (Lev. 10:1-2). Korah and his sons questioned Moses' authority, and then God opened up the earth and swallowed all of them and their houses too (Num. 16). Herod did not give God the glory when he was praised, and the Lord sent an angel to have him smitten and immediately eaten with worms (Acts 12:23).

Each of these instances of God's active intervention should be clear examples that just because God does intervene or does things one way, one time, does not teach a universal principle for how things always happen. Many people use God's overruling providence in the life of Joseph to support the universal principle that all things without exception work together for our good. That is the same as saying that every time some rebels against God's will, they will be swallowed by a whale; every time someone is about to commit adultery, they are warned in a dream; every time we are about to make a bad decision, the Lord prevents us from doing it; every time men commit a sin, the Lord strikes them dead on the spot. God's judgments are unsearchable, and his ways are past finding out. God's providence is dynamic, and rarely does he work the exact same way in different circumstances. Therefore, we can see that God does sometimes see fit to actively intervene in his creation, but clearly these instances can not be used to teach universal principles – just as Joseph cannot be used to teach an incorrect universal principle that all things work together for good.

### **Providence by Angelic Intervention**

One of the ways – arguably the primary way – that the Lord sends active providential deliverance for his children in their lives is through the Lord's dispatching of angels. God's angels encamp round about God's children who fear him. *"The angel of the Lord encampeth round about them that fear him, and delivereth them."* (Ps. 34:7) The Lord sends his angels to provide deliverance for his children in their time of need. It's so comforting for the child of God to know that God's angels "encamp round about" us. We don't just have one singular guardian angel. God has many angels encamped all around us, protecting his people from every direction. What a blessing to know the Lord hears our prayers (see next section), and dispatches angels to fight on our behalf and to minister to the heirs of salvation.

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- In response to Hezekiah and Judah's prayer in the battle against the Assyrians, God sends an angel who smote 185,000 Assyrians soldiers in one night (2 Kg. 19). God sent a great providential deliverance for his people through his angel based on the fervent prayers of Hezekiah and Judah.
- When Elisha and his servant appear to be surrounded by the enemy's army, the Lord opens the eyes of his servant, and he sees the mountain full of angels, horses, and chariots of fire to where he can know that there are more angels with us than earthly enemies against us (2 Kg. 6:14-17). There was a host of the angelic army ready to fight on behalf of just two of the Lord's people. How many more of the Lord's angels are ready to be dispatched to fight on behalf of the Lord's church?
- The angel who came to Daniel after his prayer had just come from a battle with the prince of Persia for 21 days. Michael the archangel came to relieve him in this spiritual warfare, and then this angel was going to return to that spiritual battle after he completed ministering to Daniel (Dan. 10:12-21). Also, in the last days, God will send Michael to stand up and fight for God's people at the end of time (Dan. 12:1). There is a constant spiritual warfare going on all around us that we cannot see, and God is constantly sending angels to fight and encamp round about those that fear him.
- When Daniel was faithful to remain committed to prayer regardless of the king's decree, the Lord sent an angel to the lions' den to stop the lions' mouths. The Lord sent his angel to providentially protect his faithful servant who remained devoted to God despite persecution (Dan. 6).
- When Peter was cast in prison, the church prayed for him without ceasing. In response to the prayers of the church, God sent his angel to break off Peter's shackles and providentially lead him out the front door of the prison (Acts 12).
- When Abraham sent his servant to find a wife for Isaac, he prayed for God to send his angel before the servant to make his journey prosperous (Gen. 24:7). This servant's and Abraham's prayers were answered in a powerful way (see Isaac and Rebekah section above). The Lord sent his angel to guide the pathway of both the servant and Rebekah to providentially provide a wife for Isaac.
- God sent an angel with a sword drawn to actively withstand and prevent Balaam from going to Moab. Balaam could not see the angel at first, only his ass could see the angel. The angel was sent to stop Balaam, but he blames and smites his ass. Then, the Lord actually opens the mouth of the ass to talk back to Balaam (Num. 22:21-39). It's amazing the ass could see the angel that Balaam could not see. Here we see the Lord sending his angel to actively stand in the way to prevent a man from going to prophecy against God's people. The Lord actually suffers Balaam to go, but only to speak those things that he's commanded by God.

## **Prayer and the Providence of God**

There is much about the providence of God that we have no control over. We submit to God's sovereignty, his love for his children, and his good, acceptable, and perfect will. However, one area we can petition our sovereign God to providentially intervene on behalf of his people is through our diligent commitment to prayer. Even in prayer, we submit to God's will. We acknowledge that the perfectly omniscient God of this universe knows what we need better than we think we do. Therefore, we pray for God to providentially bless his people, and then we submit to God's will, whatever course of action he chooses, whether he chooses to actively intervene or remain passive. Let's examine a small sampling from scripture – many

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more examples could be given as well – that show God may choose to alter his providential course of action in our lives based on the effectual fervent prayers of the saints.

- *“The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much.”* (James 5:16) In James’ discussion on prayer, he has already called on those in affliction to seek peace through prayer (v.13). If any is sick, let him call for the church elders to lay hands on and pray for them (v.14). Our prayers for those who are sick can change God’s providential interactions in that situation, and *“the prayer of faith shall save the sick, and the Lord shall raise him up.”* (v.15) Elijah was a great sinner, a man of like passions like me and you, but he prayed earnestly, and the Lord sent and then later ended a 3 ½ year drought in Israel (v.17-18). Just like Elijah, our prayers can change the course of history. Our effectual, fervent prayers can change God’s providential interactions with us, and can even save the sick, according to his will.
- The church was committed to praying without ceasing for Peter when he was cast into prison (Acts 12:5). Then, in response to the effectual, fervent, perpetual prayers of the church, the Lord sent an angel to loose his shackles and providentially lead Peter right out the front door of the prison. The church did its duty to pray without ceasing for Peter, but thankfully God answers our prayers even when we don’t pray believing and pray in faith the way we should. The church thought Rhoda was a mad woman when she stated Peter was actually released and at the door. The church was astonished that the Lord actually answered their prayer in this powerful display of his providence. It is through the diligent prayers of the church that the Lord saw fit to send his angel to providentially release Peter from prison.
- God got so angry with Israel’s sin when Moses is on Mount Sinai that God decides to wipe out all the Israelites and to start over with Moses. Then, Moses prays and intercedes for God to be merciful to Israel. In response to Moses’ prayer for the people, the Lord changes his course of action and chooses to be merciful (Exod. 32). Moses’ prayer of intercession changed God’s providential course of action to his people and cause the Lord to *“repent of the evil which he thought to do unto his people.”* (Exod. 32:14) God did not repent of sin, but God changed his course of action from one holy, righteous judgment unto another holy, righteous act of mercy based on the intercessory prayer of Moses.
- In the midst of a battle with the Amorites, Joshua prayed to God for the sun to not go down until they had gotten the victory over their enemies. In response to the faithful prayer of Joshua, the Lord caused the earth to stop spinning and the sun to not go down for a full 24 hours (Josh. 10:11-14). Based on the bold prayer of Joshua, God saw fit to pause the natural laws of the earth’s rotation to provide victory for his people over their enemies.
- Hezekiah brings a threat from the Assyrians before the Lord in prayer, and the Lord specifically assures Hezekiah that he “heard” his prayer (2 Kg. 19:20). In answer to Hezekiah and Judah’s fervent prayer before the Lord, the Lord sends his angel to slay 185,000 Assyrian soldiers in one night. Look at the mighty deliverance the Lord sent to Judah by the effectual fervent prayer of Hezekiah and God’s people.
- Hezekiah was told by the prophet from the Lord to set his house in order because he was going to die. Hezekiah immediately turns his face towards the wall and prays unto God to be merciful unto him in the midst of his sickness. God is gracious and answers the prayer of Hezekiah. God tells the prophet to turn around and go tell the king that *“I have heard thy prayer, I have seen thy tears:*

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*behold, I will add unto thy days 15 years.*” (Isaiah 38:5) God saw fit to change his providential course of action and grant unto Hezekiah 15 more years of life because of one effectual, fervent prayer.

- In case we ever doubt the Lord hears our prayers, especially those accompanied with fasting and confession, we have some beautiful pictures of just how attentive the Lord is to the prayers of his people in Daniel 9 & 10. As Daniel is praying unto God, the angel Gabriel comes to him and tells him that he was dispatched by God from heaven to Daniel at the very beginning of his prayer (Dan. 9:23). The Lord took such heed to Daniel’s prayer that he dispatched an angel from heaven before he even finished praying all the words of his prayer. Next, after three weeks of prayer, mourning, confession, and fasting, the Lord sends an angel to Daniel. This angel says that from the very first day you set your heart for prayer and repentance that *“thy words were heard”* (Dan. 10:12). However, this angel was not dispatched to Daniel till three weeks later due to his spiritual battle of the prince of Persia. That is a reminder that even though God hears all our prayers in the moment, that does not mean that the answer to that prayer or deliverance will come right away. However, we never need to doubt that our loving heavenly Father always hears our prayers petitioning his providence in our lives.

Our prayers petitioning God’s providence in our lives are intended to be a sanctifying process that conform us more to the will of God and ultimately conform us more to the image of Jesus Christ. We always pray submitting to God’s will, knowing that our perfectly omniscient, loving heavenly Father knows that is best for us, even if we don’t realize it or disagree in the moment. Prayer is not just an avenue for us to get what we want from God. Prayer is not our means to get man’s will done in heaven, but prayer is the avenue for God’s will to be done on the earth. Therefore, when we pray for deliverance, healing, or other blessings, but the answer we expect is not in accordance with God’s will, what is our response? What is our response when we pray for providential deliverance, but we still have to suffer through the situation? The purpose of prayer is a sanctifying process that our own wills are broken, molded, and more greatly conformed to God’s will through praying for God’s will and then humbly submitting in faith to what’s God’s will actually is. God’s ultimate goal in saving a people was for us to be conformed to the image of his Son (Rom. 8:29). God as the perfect Potter with each prayer, with each trial, with each revolution of the Potter’s wheel through the events of our daily lives is conforming his people more and more into the image of Jesus Christ. Here in our lives, our submission to God’s will and God’s providence in prayer in one of the primary ways that we are more conformed to Christ’s image here in our lives.

### **Providence in our Daily Lives**

God is actively involved in our daily lives in his providence. Remember our original definition and vantage point of providence – “to see and provide beforehand.” God not just sees our need beforehand, but is working behind the scenes many times years, even generations, before the need comes to fruition to ensure everything is procured in the right place at the right time when our time of need arises. God knows our needs on a daily basis, and he is always working, many times years in advance, to ensure he provides for our needs. As we have hopefully meditated on God’s providence in scripture all through this work, and then also meditate on God’s providence in our lives, it is absolutely amazing how the Lord works and guides in his providence. God works in ways we do not expect and cannot even fathom. We never need to put God or his providence in a box or limit his sovereign providential power. Always be reminded that God is able

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to do exceeding abundantly above all we ask or think. *“Now unto him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us.”* (Eph. 3:20) When we see God working over and above even our highest dreams in his providence, this leads us to glorify our great God. *“Unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen.”* (Eph. 3:21)

I hope from our consideration of God’s providence together, we can reach the same conclusion as Paul and the Holy Spirit – God’s judgments are truly unsearchable and his ways past finding out! *“O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! how unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out!”* (Rom. 11:33) The ways in which God moves in the lives of his children are amazing to consider. Most of the time it’s hard for us to understand because God’s ways and thoughts are so much higher than ours, even so much higher than the heaven above the earth (Isaiah 55:8-9). We should never be so prideful to presume we know how the Lord might work in his providence in a given situation. Who can know and understand the mind of God or give him counsel about the proper course of action? *“For who hath known the mind of the Lord? or who hath been his counsellor?”* (Rom. 11:34) Paul reaches the same exclamation of praise in Rom. 11 that he did in Eph. 3. The consideration of God’s dynamic inter-workings of his providence leads us to extol and glorify our great God of providence. *“For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things: to whom be glory for ever. Amen.”* (Rom. 11:36)

God knows everything we need before we even ask (Matt. 6:8). Despite God’s perfect omniscience of our needs, we are commanded to pray to God for his providence to learn submission to his will and conform us more to the image of Jesus Christ. Even men in their fallen sinful state will only give good things to their children, never vain or harmful things. How much more then will our heavenly Father give good gifts to them that ask him? (Matt. 7:7-11) The Lord will never leave us or forsake us (Heb. 13:5). We need to trust the Lord’s providence in our life. God knows our needs long before we ever do, and he will supply all our need according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus, according to his good, acceptable, and perfect will. *“But my God shall supply all your need according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus.”* (Phil. 4:19)