

The Doctrine and A Paradigm of Providence

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*“...according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will...”
(Ephesians 1:11)*

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“...according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will...” (Ephesians 1:11)

Introduction

When reading the quotes, speeches, and writings of the Puritans or the founding fathers of the United States of America, you find the word **“Providence”**¹ used frequently. In many cases it is used as a synonym for God, rather than using God **“Providence”** is used. These men had such a grounded understanding of God’s governance of His creation that to speak of God was to speak of His providence. For it was by His providence that God orders all the events of our lives and those of all of history.²

When civil war soldiers wrote their wives, their sweethearts, and their mothers on the eve of a battle, their letters commonly spoke of **“Providence.”** As they anticipated the next day’s battle they knew not what the battle would hold for them. It could mean a life changing wound, the death and loss of friends, or perhaps brothers, or other family members, or even their own death. Yet, their letters acknowledged that they knew **“Providence”** would dictate the outcome. God’s governance of the event would determine the outcome. Their lives were in the hands of God’s providence.³

The goal of our study is to explore the Biblical doctrine of providence. We will do this by breaking our study down into four sections: **I. The Definition of Providence, II. A Paradigm of Providence, III. Providence and Prayer,** and **IV. The Application of Providence.** In **Section I** we will put forward a working definition of Providence, and then we will examine and explain its seven parts. In **Section II** we will use the life of Joseph as a paradigm of God directing an individual’s life. We will be looking at both the tragedies and the triumphs, which Joseph experienced as God providentially directed him. Further, we will also seek to answer the questions of how can God sovereignly direct Providence without violating man as a moral agent, and without becoming the author of evil? In **Section III** we will address how do we understand the interaction of prayer and Providence? This section is of great personal relevance for every believer. In **Section IV** we will look at how we need to apply and benefit from the doctrine of providence. Though this might not seem an especially weighty matter, yet the greatest weakness of the Christian life is not understanding the faith as much as not applying what we know or applying it improperly. This final section will offer much for our personal growth and how to share and counsel with the doctrine of providence.

¹ An explanation is necessary for the guidelines used in the capitalization of “Providence” throughout our study. First, the rule used was that whenever Providence stood independently of God it was treated as a synonym for God and was capitalized as in the first paragraph. Second, when it was used in conjunction with God as in “God’s providence” it was not capitalized. Third, when it was used in the plural, “providences,” or as other parts of speech, e.g. as an adverb—“providentially,” it was not capitalized. The underlying principle to such a practice is that in everything we should give glory and honor to God even down to the capitalization of pronouns referring to God and all His specific works e.g. Providence, Bible, etc.

² William J. Federer (ed.), *America’s God and Country Encyclopedia of Quotations* (Coppell, TX: Fame Publishing, Inc., 1996), e.g. Ben Franklin, 248, Thomas Jefferson, *Declaration of Independence*, 322, see index “Providence” for the numerous listings, 844.

³ R. C. Sproul, *The Invisible Hand* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1996), 13.

I. The Definition of Providence

A. A Working Definition

“Providence” is one of those words, which is found few times in the Bible,⁴ but as a doctrine it is found everywhere. As such, we will need a working definition of Providence. *“Providence is God’s sovereign exercise of especially His power, wisdom, and goodness in sustaining and governing His creation and all the acts of His creatures according to His will for His glory.”* We will attempt throughout our study to expound the meaning and related questions of this definition, yet as we begin we will need to understand each of the parts of our definition.

1. “Providence”

First, the idea of the word “providence” is the idea of being watched over by God.⁵ Both the Greek and Latin words reference God’s foresight of things which issues in His provision and care but also His direction and governing control over all things. It is not that God simply sees us, our actions, and the events of history. Such would simply make Him an eyewitness. Rather, as The Westminster Confession states, *“God, the great Creator of all things, doth uphold, direct, and govern all creatures, actions, and things, from the greatest even to the least, by his most wise and holy providence.”*⁶ So, when we pray asking God to “watch over us,” we are not asking Him to be a witness, rather we are asking Him

⁴ “Providence” is a translation of the Greek noun pronoia (pro = “before” + [root] noeo = to think) literally meaning “forethought”. It is translated “providence” in Acts 24:2 and “provision” in Romans 13:14. The verb pronoio from which the noun was formed literally means “to take thought for” or “provide” and is usually translated “provide for” (1 Tim. 5:8; Rom. 12:17; 2 Cor. 8:21), Vine, Unger, and White (editors), “Provide, Providence, Provision,” Vine’s Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words: New Testament Words, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1983), 495, 496; cf., J. Behm, “pronoew, pronoia,” Theological Dictionary of the New Testament (hereafter TDNT), Gerhard Kittel (editor), G. W. Bromiley (translator) (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1967), IV:1009-1017.

In the New Testament these words basically mean “by foresight to make provision,” and they are only used of man’s provision. It is in secular Greek and the Apocrypha (the non-canonical books written between the Old Testament and New Testament) that the words are most used of God’s “taking forethought” of His creation. In secular Greek it was so associated with God that it became a synonym for “God,” so to speak of “Providence” was to speak of God. Yet, it was used to depict “God” as impersonal and cosmic and even synonymous with Nature. It was freely associated with a destiny, fortune, and fate. It was this pagan usage which was probably the impetus for the lack of these words in the New Testament, C.F.D. Moule, “Providence,” The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible (hereafter IDB) (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), III:940.

The Latin term for providence is providentia (pro = before + video = to see) literally meaning “foresight”. It is reflective of the same idea as the Greek words. The Latin word grew beyond its literalness to indicate a foresight, which developed future plans and prosecuted those plans to their realization. Thus in its theological and biblical context it means God’s foresight, which issues in His care and provision.

⁵ Sproul, The Invisible Hand, 15-22.

⁶ “The Westminster Confession of Faith,” in The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (USA), Part I, Book of Confessions (hereafter Book of Confessions) (Louisville, KY: the Office of the General Assembly, 1996), Chapter V, 6.024, p.130. Cf. other definitions: John Owen: “the effectual working of His power, and almighty act of His will, whereby He sustains, governs, and disposes of all things men, and their actions, to the ends which, He has ordained for them unto the praise of the glory of His grace” in Samuel Owen, “The Providence of God,” Reformation and Revival, Vol. 4, No. 2, Spring, 1995 (Carol Stream, IL: Reformation and Revival Ministries, Inc., 1995), 73; J. I. Packer: “Providence is...the unceasing activity of the Creator whereby, in overflowing bounty and goodwill (Ps. 145:9; cf. Mt. 5:45-48), He upholds His creatures in ordered existence (Acts 17:28; Col. 1:17; Heb. 1:3), guides and governs all events, circumstances, and free acts of angels and men (cf. Ps. 107; Job 1:12; 2:6; Gn. 14:5-8), and directs everything to its appointed goal, for His own glory (cf. Eph. 1:9-12),” “Providence,” New Bible Dictionary, (hereafter NBD), J. D. Douglas (ed.) (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1962), 1050, 1051; John Calvin: “...what is called providence describes God, not as idly beholding from heaven the transactions which happen in the world, but as holding the helm of the universe, and regulating all events (222). ...what is governing, but presiding in such a manner, as to rule, by fixed decrees, those over whom you preside...” (223), Institutes of Christian Religion, (hereafter Institutes), 2 vols., John Allen (translator) (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Christian Education, 1936), Vol. I. Bk. I, Chap. XVI, 222, 223; Richard Muller: “...the continuing act of divine power subsequent to the act of creation, by means of which God preserves all things in being, supports their actions, governs them according to his established order, and directs them toward their ordained ends,” Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms (hereafter DLGTT) (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1985), 251.

providentially to care for us (cf. Mt. 5:45; 6:25-33). Thus, the basic idea of “providence” is God’s watchful and attentive administration and care of His creation. Scripture adds to this basic idea.

2. God’s Sovereignty

Second, to this basic idea we add that Providence is “*God’s sovereign exercise.*”⁷ By His “sovereignty” we simply mean that God does not answer to anyone other than Himself. He is able to do entirely what He desires, and no one or power can restrain Him from doing what He chooses to do. He is entirely His own Boss. Arthur Pink aptly summarizes the meaning of God’s sovereignty:

“The sovereignty of God! What do we mean by this expression? We mean the supremacy of God, the kingship of God, the Godhood of God. To say that God is sovereign is to declare that God is God. To say that God is sovereign is to declare that He is the Most High, doing according to His will in the army of heaven, and among the inhabitants of the earth, so that none can stay His hand or say unto Him, ‘What doest Thou?’ (Dan. 4:35). To say that God is sovereign is to declare that He is the Almighty, the Possessor of all power in heaven and earth, so that none can defeat His counsels, thwart His purposes, or resist His will (Ps. 115:3). To say that God is sovereign is to declare that He is ‘the Governor among the nations’ (Ps. 22:28), setting up kingdoms, over throwing empires, and determining the course of dynasties as pleaseth Him best. To say that God is sovereign is to declare that He is the ‘Only Potentate, the King of kings, and Lord of lords’ (1 Tim. 6:15). Such is the God of the Bible.

...When we say that God is sovereign, we affirm **His right to govern the universe**, which He has made for His own glory, just as He pleases. We affirm that **His right is the right of the Potter over the clay**, viz: that He may mold that clay into whatsoever form He chooses, fashioning out of *the same lump* one vessel unto honour and another unto dishonour. We affirm that **He is under no obligation to give an account of His matters to any.**⁸

God’s sovereignty embraces every aspect of our lives from the hair on our heads (Mt. 10:30; Lu. 12:6, 7) to the number of days we live (Ps. 139:16), from the words which come out of our mouths (Prov. 16:1) to the steps we take (Prov. 16:19; 19:21), from the time in history we live to the exact places we live (Acts 17:26), from being sustained through our night’s sleep (Ps. 3:5) to the total sustainment of our lives and being (Acts 17:28).

J. I. Packer offers this summation, “Providence is presented in Scripture as a function of divine sovereignty. God is King over all, doing just what He wills (Ps. 102:19; 135:6; Dan. 4:35; cf. Eph. 1:11). This conviction, robustly held, pervades the whole Bible.”⁹

3. God’s Attributes of Power, Wisdom, and Goodness

Third, Providence is “*God’s sovereign exercise especially of His power, wisdom, and goodness.*” As sovereign He exercises especially three attributes of His nature in Providence. This does not mean that He does not exercise any of His other attributes in Providence, but rather these three are *especially* prominent: His power, His wisdom, and His goodness.

By His **power** we mean God’s omnipotence (all-powerful). In Providence God sustains or preserves His whole creation. He does so totally, so that, if He would retract His power from this sustaining activity His creation would cease to be. By this same sovereign power He governs all His creation and creatures. His power asserts His will over His creation so that what He has planned will be

⁷ Cf. Gen. 45:17; Job 38-41; Ps. 115:3; 135:6; 145:17; 104:24; Is. 28:29; Dan. 4:35; Rom. 11:36; 1 Tim 1:17; 6:15, 16; Heb. 1:3; Rev. 4:11.

⁸ Arthur Pink, *The Sovereignty of God* (London: The Banner of Truth, revised 1961), 20-22.

⁹ Packer, “Providence,” *NBD*, 1051.

accomplished.¹⁰

By His **wisdom** we mean God’s omniscience (all-knowing). He by His knowledge knows all things, those things past, present, and future. There is nothing secret to God. Nothing is hidden from His knowledge, and by His wisdom He chooses the best of all possible options. Thus, He purposes, plans, sustains, and governs all things to serve His plan and His end. Providence does not serve fate, rather it is the assurance that it serves God’s good purpose.¹¹

By His **goodness** we mean God’s attributes of love, compassion, patience, mercy, and grace. In these He is good, and all goodness is measured by His goodness. His goodness is not extrinsic to Himself, but rather it is intrinsic. It is His nature. He cannot be other than good. God’s goodness is absolute; it is good as nothing else can be good. It fits the ideal of what it is suppose to be; God “is in every way all that He as God should be and therefore answers perfectly to the ideal expressed in the word ‘God.’”¹² Thus, He is good in the absolute sense that God is absolute perfection and absolute happiness or joy within Himself. Jesus spoke in this sense when He told the rich young ruler, “No one is good except God alone” (Mk. 10:18).¹³ God’s goodness is then manifest to His creation and creatures in His love, compassion, patience, mercy, and grace. It is critical to emphasize that if God were only all-powerful and all-knowing, then His providence would be an uncertain and fearful reality to His creatures, but it is the fact that He is good which assures us that all things serve His **good** purpose and all those who love Him and are called according to His purpose (Rom. 8:28).¹⁴

4. God’s Activities of Sustaining (Preserving) and Governing

Fourth, Providence is God’s “*sustaining (preserving) and governing.*” Providence begins with the fact that God has sovereignly created and having created He is the sovereign ruler over His creation. It is the exercise of His sovereign power, which enables Him to sustain and govern His creation. This exercise is Providence. Louis Berkhof explains, Providence is “that continued exercise of the divine energy whereby the Creator preserves all His creatures, is operative in all that comes to pass in the world, and directs all things to their appointed end.”¹⁵ There are the three specific activities of Providence. The first is God’s **preservation** or **sustainment** of His creation, which is His continuing enablement and necessary support for the ongoing existence of His creation. The second is His **governing** of His creation to the end that His omniscience has ordained. The third is **concurrence**, which is the mysterious (i.e. beyond our complete understanding and comprehension), dynamic interaction between God’s sovereign exercise of Providence, both in His sustaining and governing works, and the actions of His creation and creatures. The first two activities we will discuss here, but the last will be dealt with in the next part.¹⁶

¹⁰ Cf. Gen. 18:14; Job 9:12; Ps. 115:3; Jer. 32:17; Mt. 19:26; Mk. 14:36; Lu. 1:37; Rom. 1:20; Eph. 1:11, 19; this attribute is reflected in God’s name: ‘El Shaddai’ (God Almighty), e.g. Gen. 17:1; 28:3; Ex. 6:3; Nu. 24:4. 16; Is. 13:6; Joel 1:15; Rev. 19:6.

¹¹ Cf. God is perfect in knowledge: Job 37:16; Jn. 21:17; Rom. 11:33; 16:27; 1 Jn. 3:20; God knows all things both now, before, and their future: Ps. 33: 13-15; 139:1-6, 13-16; Mt. 6:8; 10:29, 30; 1 Sam. 16:7; 1 Chron. 28:9; 29:17; Jer. 17:9, 10; Is. 44:7, 8, 25-28; 46:10, 11; Dan. 2:36-45; Heb. 4:13; God knows all possibilities: Mt. 11:21; Heb. 2:10.

¹² Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1941), 70.

¹³ The Scripture quotations throughout our study will be from the New American Standard Bible (NASB) translation. Any other versions will be noted except those found quoted within a quotation.

¹⁴ Cf. Ex. 34:6, 7; Ps. 36:6, 9; 86:15; 104:21; 145:9, 15, 16; Lam. 3:22; Mt. 5:44, 45; 6:26; 15:32; 20:34; Mk. 10:18; Lu. 7:13; Jn. 1:16; 3:16; 5:42; Rom. 2:4; 9:22; 5:5, 8; 8:35, 39; 1 Tim. 1:2; 2 Tim. 1:1; Titus 1:4; 1 Pet. 3:20; 2 Pet. 3:15; 1 Jn. 4:8, 10, 11, 19; Rev. 1:5.

¹⁵ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 165, 166; cf. Muller, *DLGTT*; 251; Sproul, *The Invisible Hand*, 15–17.

¹⁶ Berkhof notes: “This definition indicates that there are three elements in providence, namely, preservation (*conservatio*, *sustentatio*), concurrence or cooperation (*concursus*, *co-operatio*), and government (*gubernatio*),” (166). There is some diversity in whether to list two activities of Providence (sustaining and governing) or to list three (adding concurrence), (166,

a. God's Sustaining or Preserving

The Biblical evidence for this doctrine is found on every page of Scripture. Psalm 65:9-13 recites God's preservation of His creation,

"You visit the earth and cause it to overflow; You greatly enrich it; the stream of God is full of water; You prepare their grain, for thus You prepare the earth. You water its furrows abundantly, You settle its ridges, You soften it with showers, You bless its growth. You have crowned the year with Your bounty, and Your paths drip with fatness. The pastures of the wilderness drip, and the hills gird themselves with rejoicing. The meadows are clothed with flocks and the valleys are covered with grain; they shout for joy, yes, they sing."¹⁷

The Psalmist found God's sustaining work everywhere: its abundance, its richness, its watering, its fruitfulness, its preparation, etc., etc. In the Apostle Paul's words, "God was causing the growth" (1Cor. 3:6). Or again in his sermon in Athens, "He Himself gives to all people life and breath and all things.... For in Him we live and move and exist..." (Acts 17:25, 27). Accordingly the Psalmist confessed, "...Your lovingkindness and Your truth will continually preserve me" (Ps. 40:11). Thus, Scripture clearly teaches the sustaining or preserving work of God in His providence.

Berkhof sums up this providential work of preservation "as that continuous work of God by which He maintains the things which He created, together with the properties and powers with which He endowed them."¹⁸ It should be noted that God's preserving work manifests His "ordained power" (*potentia ordinata*) which "guarantees the stability and consistency of the orders of nature and grace,"¹⁹ thus God limits the exercise of His power to consistency with His established laws of order for creation and His creatures. He limits Himself to work through second causes, to not violate the natures of His creatures. This means that for man God works in ways that are consistent to man's self-determining action and his real moral agency for these are necessary for moral accountability and moral government.²⁰

So though God preserves man, man must still fulfill his commissioned duty from God. John Calvin explains the relationship between these. He begins by quoting Proverbs 16:9,

"A man's heart deviseth his way; but the Lord directeth his steps;" signifying that the eternal decrees of God form no impediments to our providing for ourselves, and disposing all our concerns in subservience to his will. The reason of this is manifest. For he who has fixed the limits of our life, has also entrusted us with the care of it: has furnished us with means and supplies for its preservation; has also made us provident of dangers; and, that they may not oppress us unawares, has furnished us with cautions and remedies. Now, it is evident what is our duty. If God has committed to us the preservation of our life, we should preserve it; if he offers supplies, we should use them; if he furnishes remedies, we ought not to neglect them. But it will be objected, no danger can hurt, unless it has been ordained that it shall hurt us, and then no

167). There is no questioning the part of concurrence in Providence, but only where it should be treated. It is really only a question of organization. We will discuss it under our fifth part: "*His creation and all the acts of His creatures.*" These three elements: God's sustainment, government, and concurrence, describe the activity and work of God's providence. Berkhof reminds, "while we distinguish three elements in providence we should remember that these three are never separated in the work of God. While preservation has reference to the being, concurrence to the activity, and government to the guidance of all things, this should never be understood in an exclusive sense. In preservation there is also an element of government, in government an element of concursus, and in concursus and an element of preservation," (167), *Systematic Theology*, 166, 167.

¹⁷ cf. Ps. 147:7-9, 12-20; 104:10-30; Mt. 5:45-48; 6:25-34; 10:29,30; Col. 1:17; Heb. 1:3; 1 Sam. 2:3-10.

¹⁸ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 170.

¹⁹ Muller, "*potentia ordinata*", *DLGTT*, 232; cf. Calvin, *Institutes*, Bk. I, Chap XVI, 223.

²⁰ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 171.

remedies can avert it. But what if dangers are therefore not fatal, because God has assigned you remedies to repulse and overcome them? Examine whether your reasoning agrees with the order of the Divine providence. You concluded that it is unnecessary to guard against danger, because, if it be not fatal, we shall escape it without caution; but, on the contrary, the Lord enjoins you to use caution, because he intends it not to be fatal to you. These madmen overlook what is obvious to every observer—that the arts of deliberation and caution in men proceed from the inspiration of God, and that they subserve the designs of his providence in the preservation of their own lives; as, on the contrary, by neglect and slothfulness, they procure to themselves the evils which he has appointed for them. For how does it happen, that a prudent man, consulting his own welfare, averts from himself impending evils, and a fool is ruined by his inconsiderate temerity, unless folly and prudence are in both cases instruments of the Divine dispensation? Therefore it has pleased God to conceal from us all future events, that we may meet them as doubtful contingencies, and not cease to oppose to them the remedies with which we are provided, till they shall have been surmounted, or shall have overcome all our diligence. *Therefore I have before suggested, that the providence of God ought not always to be contemplated abstractedly by itself, but in connection with the means which he employs.*”²¹

We should follow Calvin’s lead. Providence is not to be considered abstractly by us because our knowledge is limited (Dt. 29:29). Only by due consideration of God’s means for us, the instructions, admonishments and warnings of Scripture as well as our own knowledge of cause and effect, are we able to rightly apply the doctrine of Providence. For example, if we say, “it doesn’t matter whether I do this or not because God is going to do what He has planned anyway.” This is to consider Providence abstractly without consideration of the means, which God has given us. When David learned that Saul was coming against him at Keilah, he asked the Lord, “*‘Will the men of Keilah deliver me and my men into the hand of Saul?’ And the Lord said, ‘They will deliver you’*” (1 Sam. 23:12). David does not consider this “abstractly”—“Well then, I’m done for! What is the point of trying to escape?” Rather, he and his men flee Keilah and escape Saul. David heeds the “means” available to him and by these means he understands God’s providence.

Thus, God preserves His creation not abstractly but consistently “with His established laws of order for creation and His creature,” and therefore He works His providence both consistently with and without violation of the natures of His creatures.

b. God’s Governing

The governing activity of Providence is the fact that God exercises His power so that the end He has decreed will indeed be accomplished. God governs all things to His good end. God’s governance is “that continued activity of God whereby He rules all things teleologically (with the end in view) so as to secure the accomplishment of the divine purpose.”²²

This government is the exercise of the Creator and the King of creation (Mt. 11:25; Acts 17:24; I Tim. 1:17; 6:15; Rev. 1:6; 19:6; Dan. 4:25, 26). His government is good and full of mercy (Ps. 100:5; 136; 145:89, 8-21; Mt. 5:45-48; Jn. 3:16). His government is just and righteous (Ps. 89:14; 97.2; 101:1; Zech. 9:9). The exercise of His governance is both by authority, i.e. right, and power, i.e., ability (Rev. 4:11; 5:12; Mt. 28:18; Phil. 2:9-11; I Cor. 15:23-26).

The power He exercises as King is both His “ordained power” and His “absolute power” (potentia

²¹ Calvin, *Institutes*, Bk. I, Chap. XVII, 237, 238, italic added.

²² Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 175.

absoluta). By this latter “God can effect all possibility, constrained only by His own nature”²³ (i.e., by the law of contradiction). His “absolute power” is distinguished from His “ordained power,” in that, His “ordained power” is self-limited and bound by the laws, by which, He has ordered creation. His “absolute power” is the unrestrained measure of His infinite omnipotence (Dan. 4:34-37). It is by His “absolute power” that He exercises “special providence” such as prophecy, theophany or miracles (that which is beyond ordinary means and supersedes creation’s laws of order). These acts of special providence are seen and can be explained only with God as its primary cause. In special providence and especially miracles, it is not that they are a violation of the laws of order, but they are the action of the transcendent power of God, which transcends the regular order.²⁴

The final end to which God governs is His own glory (Eph. 1:9-12). The Westminster Shorter Catechism puts this in a memorable way in Question One. “Q.1. **What is the chief end of man?** A. Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever” (1 Cor. 10:31; Rom. 11:36; Ps. 73:24-26; Jn. 17:22, 24). By extension it is the chief end of all of creation to glorify God for this was the purpose for which God created! God’s glory is the value, weight, and apprehension of who He is. All of creation and the drama of history are to be the stage for this display of the magnificence of God. That which will portray His greatest glory is the salvation of all those who are in Christ and the defeat of all His enemies (I Cor. 15:23-26; Rom 9:22-24; 11:36; Hab. 2:14; Ps. 22:27; Eph. 1:3-6, 9-14) The ending of the Lord’s Prayer is the fitting ending of God’s providential government, “*For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen*” (Mt. 6:13).

5. God’s Concurrence

Fifth, Providence is God’s sustaining and governing of “*His creation and all the acts of His creatures.*” This part of our definition is the most threatening and controversial. It threatens our conception of man’s freedom. We become fearful of being made no more than puppets. Yet, Providence, as we shall see, makes room for the exercise of man’s “free” acts, but it also affirms that God “*works all things after the counsel of His will*” (Eph. 1:11). There are no maverick molecules in the universe, and there are no acts outside of His sovereign government: “*The mind of man plans his way, but the Lord directs his steps*” (Prov. 16:9; cf. Phil. 12, 13). The operation of God’s governance of the “free” acts of man is at its heart a grand mystery, but it is also a mystery revealed in part in Scripture. This flowing together of God’s sovereign governing of all things with the “free” acts of His creatures is called concurrence.

God created and having created He must by necessity preserve His creation, yet, in addition, He must work with His creation in fitting ways, thus honoring the state and nature which He had ordained for His creatures. His concurrence is the “flowing together” of His power with the power He has ordained to His creatures. He does this in such ways that His purpose and plan are impeccably accomplished. Berkhof defines it this way, “the cooperation of the divine power with all subordinate powers, according to the pre-established laws of their operation, causing them to act and to act precisely as they do.”²⁵

The power, which God exercises, is not “equal to” or “a little greater than” that of His creature, rather His power is essential. So Jesus told His disciples, “*apart from Me you can do nothing*” (Jn. 15:5; cf. Phil. 4:13; 1 Cor. 15:10). Jeremiah admits, “*I know, O Lord, that a man’s way is not in himself, nor is it a man who walks to direct his steps*” (10:23). Proverbs states, “*Man’s steps are ordained by the Lord, how then can man understand His way?*” (Prov. 20:24; cf. 16:9). It is for this reason that James warns, “*Come now, you who say, ‘Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, and spend a year*

²³ Muller, “*potentia absoluta*,” DLGTT, 231; cf. “*Providentia*,” 252.

²⁴ Muller, “*Miracula*,” DLGTT, 194, cf. Berkhof, Systematic Theology, 176.

²⁵ Berkhof, Systematic Theology, 171; cf. Sproul, The Invisible Hand, 79–80.

there and engage in business and make a profit.’ Yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow. You are just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away. Instead, you ought to say, ‘If the Lord wills, we will live and also do this and that.’ But as it is, you boast in your arrogance; all such boasting is evil” (Jas. 4:13–16).²⁶

On the one hand, the Biblical understanding of concurrence holds that God’s power is essential and, on the other hand, that the power of His creatures and second causes is real. The actions of the agents are real actions with real effects. The creaturely power is not analogous to the relationship of a glove to a hand where the only power is the hand, and the glove has none. Rather, it is more like the first steps of a toddler which are guided, balanced, and sustained by her parent’s hand. Without the parental hand the nose dive is predictable, but the steps of the toddler are real steps not manufactured by the parent. The actions of Joseph’s brothers were motivated by hatred, jealousy, and greed, but each of their actions were real actions accomplished by their own motivations, yet God both ordained and by His concurrent power turned their real actions to serve His purpose (Gen. 50:20; 45:5). The actions of the Jewish leaders, Pilate, and the Jewish people were their real actions which resulted in the crucifixion of Jesus. Yet, Peter proclaimed, *“this Man, delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to the cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death”* (Acts 2:23). This again is an example of the concurrent work of God’s providence. Abraham told Abimelech that Sarah was his sister, and Abimelech took her to wife. When God judged Abimelech in his dream, we are told, *“Now Abimelech had not come near her, and he said, ‘Lord, will You slay a nation even though blameless?’ Then God responded, ‘Yes, I know that in the integrity of your heart you have done this, and I kept you from sinning against Me; therefore I did not let you touch her”*” (Gen. 20:4, 6). Here we see the concurrent power of God cooperating with the power of His creature.

The concurrence of God is wrapped in His omniscience and omnipotence. We are too short-sighted, too limited in knowledge, and too small-minded to understand God’s concurrence. We can say, “there, we see that God’s concurrence was at work,” but how it worked we are at a loss to say. Thus, we must humbly bow before God Almighty in wonder, awe, and worship, and say with the Apostle Paul:

*“Oh, the depth of the riches both of the
wisdom and knowledge of God!
How unsearchable are His judgements and
His ways past finding out!
For who has known the mind of the Lord?
Or who has become His counselor?
...For of Him and through Him and to
Him are all things to whom be glory
Forever. Amen” (Romans 11:33-36).*

6. God’s Will In His Eternal Decrees

Sixth, Providence is *“according to His will.”* At the center of the doctrine of providence is the good pleasure, the purpose, the will of God. Providence is not a man-centered doctrine as much as we would all naturally want to make it. It is first, entirely and primarily, God-centered. It serves God first. Secondly, it serves His creation and creatures. One purpose and plan guide Providence. It has one target to which it is speeding. It is guided to that target by the will and the purpose of God.

God’s will or His good pleasure is established in **His eternal decrees**. The “Larger Catechism” fittingly summarizes this. *“God’s decrees are the wise, free, and holy acts of the counsel of his will, whereby, from all eternity, he hath, for his own glory, unchangeably foreordained whatsoever comes to*

²⁶Cf. Calvin, *Institutes*, Bk. I, Chap. XVI, 225; cf. Prov. 16:1, 4, 33; 21:1, 30, 31.

*pass in time, especially concerning angels and men.*²⁷

God's decrees teach us that He sits upon His throne as the all-knowing, all-wise, all-powerful Creator and King of His creation. He governs it not by the whims and wishes of His creation but by His own established purpose and plan. This purpose and plan was not made in a rush; it was not a spur-of-the-moment impulse; it was not a last minute reflex. God governs by the execution of a precise plan conceived and wrought before he created, "*before the foundations of the earth*" (Eph. 1:4)²⁸ Having wisely, fittingly, and perfectly purposed and planned He unchangeably ordained or decreed whatsoever comes to pass in time. When God spoke in creation that which He spoke came to be. God said, "*Let there be light, and there was light.*" Such is the nature of God's decrees. When He "*speaks*" them they are done. When He speaks them they inalterably speed toward their fulfillment. So the providence of God accomplishes and fulfills God's eternal decrees.

God's decrees are characterized by a number of features, which both define their character and distinguish them both from other acts of God's will.

a. God's Decrees are one plan.

Though we refer to God's "decrees," this reflects our perception of His plan. God's knowledge is immediate and comprehensive not as ours is linear and progressive. Consequently, when God executes His decrees they are one comprehensive plan decreed before the foundation of the world.²⁹

b. God's Decrees are for His creation.

The decrees pertain only to God's creation and not to Himself. His decrees are God's *free* knowledge (that which pertains to outside of Himself) rather than His *necessary* knowledge (that which pertains internally to Himself). God being omniscient knows all possibilities (an exercise of His necessary knowledge), and from these possibilities God chose (an exercise of His free knowledge) the most fitting or the best to bring into being (cf. Heb. 2:10).³⁰

c. God's Decrees encompass both God's actions on His creation and the actions of His creation.

God's decrees express the immutable plan for both God's actions and the actions of His creation. It is the fact that God has decreed these actions, which makes them absolutely certain. Some, He has decided to effect Himself; others, He has chosen to effect by means of His creation and free creatures, i.e. through secondary causes. God has concurrently ordained His decrees to come to pass through secondary causes, i.e. by the free agency of His rational creatures. In so doing, His creatures are responsible and culpable for their sinful acts. God is not the author of evil or the acts of evil (Jas.1:13; Hab. 1:13; cf. Lev. 19:2; Is. 6:3; 1 Pet. 1:16).³¹ Further, the primary motivation for the "free" acts of men is their fallen nature, so, though God would ordain their sinful acts, His purpose is in His decree is

²⁷ "The Larger Catechism," Book of Confessions, Q. 12, 7.122, p.202; cf. "The Smaller Catechism," Q. 7 and Q. 8, 7.007, 7.008, p. 181; Ps. 2:7; 33:10-11; Prov. 19:21; Is. 14:24-27; Acts 4:27, 28; Rom. 16:25; Eph. 1:4, 11; 2 Tim. 1:9; Titus 1:2. The Biblical vocabulary used in reference to God's decrees is varied: Old Testament Terms—to counsel (*'etsah* from *ya'ats*, Job 38:2; Is. 14:26; 46:11), to sit together in deliberation (*sod* from *yasad*, Jer. 23:18, 22), to have in mind, to purpose (*mezimmah* from *zamam*, Jer. 4:28; 51:12; Prov. 30:32), will or good pleasure (*chaphets*, Is. 53:10), or to please or to be delighted or sovereign will (*ratson*, Ps. 51:19; Is. 49:8); and New Testament Terms—decree (*boule*, Acts 2:23; 4:28; Heb. 6:17), counsel of God (*thelema*, Eph. 1:11), good pleasure (*eudokia*, Mt. 11:26; Lu. 2:14; Eph. 1:5, 9), and predestination, election, chosen (e.g., Eph. 1:4, 5, 11; Rom. 8:29), Berkhof, Systematic Theology, 101, 102.

²⁸ Cf. Mt. 25:34; 13:35; Jn. 17:24; 1 Pet. 1:20; Rev. 13:8; 2 Thess. 2:13.

²⁹ Berkhof, Systematic Theology, 102.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 102.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 103.

different than the evil purpose of the perpetrator of an evil deed. Augustine made this distinction: “What happens contrary to his will occurs, in a wonderful and ineffable way, not apart from his will. For it would not happen if he did not allow it. And yet he does not allow it unwillingly but willingly. But he who is good would not permit evil to be done, unless, being omnipotent, he could bring good out of evil.”³²

d. God’s Decrees are not the acts themselves.

The decree to create is not creation, rather it is the establishing that creation will come to pass. There is a distinction between the decree and its execution. “God’s so ordering the universe that man will pursue a certain course of action, is also quite a different thing from His commanding him to do so. . . .neither do they impose compulsion or obligation on the wills of men.”³³

e. God’s Decrees are distinguished from His permissive will.

God’s permissive will refers to His commandments and laws, which He has set forth for His creation. His rational creatures are called to obey these commandments and laws, but they are often disobeyed. By contrast, His decrees are the eternal, unchangeable (immutable), and efficacious plan of God.³⁴

f. God’s Decrees both benefit and explain.

God’s decrees benefit His people because they provide a certain hope resulting in confidence, security, and an ensuing peace (e.g. Rom 8:28; Jn 14:1-3; Phil. 4:7). God’s decrees are by their very nature secret to God and largely unrevealed. Prophecy is the limited and unique revelation of God’s decrees. Because of this, we can rest assured that predictive prophecy will absolutely be fulfilled. “The first such prophecy was the promise of a deliverer from the seed of the woman (Gen. 3:15), which runs like a golden thread through the entire Scripture.”³⁵ Our understanding of God’s decrees are thus to minister deeply to the hope, peace, and faith of the believers.

g. God’s Decrees are All-Wise, Eternal, Efficacious, Immutable, Absolute, All-Comprehensive, and Permissive of Sin.

God’s *wisdom* establishes both the quality of His decrees and prohibits them from being irrational or arbitrary (Eph. 3:10, 11; Rom. 16:25-27; Ps. 33:11; 104:24; Prov. 3:19; 19:21; Jer. 10:12; 51:15). They are *eternal* because they exist in eternity for they exist in the divine being (Acts 15:18; Eph. 1:4; 2 Tim. 1:9). To be *efficacious* establishes the fact that God’s decrees cannot be thwarted because of their certainty (Ps. 33:11; Prov. 19:21; Is. 46:10). Their *immutability* is established by God’s knowledge, veracity, and power, therefore He *need* not change them and *will* not change them because He is faithful and true, and there is no turning or shadow in Him (Job 23:13, 14; Ps. 33:11; Is. 46:10; Lu. 22:22; Acts 2:23). They are *absolute* because the decrees’ resulting events and eventualities are part and parcel within the decree, i.e. not only the end is decreed but also the means to that end, therefore it is absolute (Acts 2:23; Eph. 2:8; 1 Pet. 1:2). They are *all-comprehensive* because they encompass the physical as well as the spiritual, the moral as well as the practical, good actions as well as sinful actions (Eph. 2:10; Prov. 16:4; Acts 2:23; 4:27, 28), contingent events (Gen. 45:8; 50:20; Prov. 16:33), the nature of man as well as all of his actions, and the days of his life as well as the place he lives (Job 14:5; Ps. 139:4; Acts 17:26). Lastly, they are *permissive of sin* because, though they are infallibly certain, they do not immediately or compulsively act upon the volition of the agent. God determines, but He does not hinder a sinful act. Rather, He controls it, so that, its result will serve His good purpose (Gen. 50:20; Ps. 78: 29;

³² In Heinrich Bullinger, “The Second Helvetic Confession,” *The Book of Confessions*, VIII, 5.041, p. 66.

³³ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 103.

³⁴ F. H. Klooster, “Decrees of God,” *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (hereafter EDT), Walter A. Elwell (editor) (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984), 303.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 303.

106:15; Acts 14:16; 17:30).³⁶

Providence is God's working out of all things after the counsel of His will (Eph. 1:11), and the counsel of His will was established before the foundations of the world in God's eternal decrees (1:4). It is the understanding of this fact which enabled the Apostle Paul to exhort the Philippians: "...*work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure*" (2:12, 13).

7. God's Glory

Seventh, Providence is "*for His glory*." God's one design for creation was to display His glory, His beauty, and His majesty. He created to display His deity, His mercy, His power, His wisdom, and His goodness. When God created He said His creation was "*good*." At its completion He said, it was "*very good*." "*Good*" for what? To display His glory! Creation is not abstractly or independently "*good*," as God is good. Creation has no goodness apart from the purpose for which God created it. Rather, "*good*" is "*good*" because it has value and purpose, thus creation was "*good*" because it was perfect to serve God's purpose for it. Its purpose is to display His glory, and this too is the purpose of God's administration of His providence. He exercises it to display His glory. The Westminster Larger Catechism teaches us: "*God's works of providence are his most holy, wise, and powerful preserving, and governing all his creatures; ordering them, and all their actions, to his own glory*" (Ps. 145:17; 104:24; Is. 28:29; Heb. 1:3; Job 38-41; Mt. 10:29, 30; Gen. 45:7; Ps. 135:6; Rom. 11:36; Is. 63:14).³⁷

God providentially then **governs for His own glory**. This is foundational to understand rightly God's providence. God does **not** govern "*for our happiness*" but **for His glory**. How easily we are shocked and surprised when events do not turn out for our immediate happiness. There is something, which cries out in our disappointment, "*How dare God not order events for my happiness. What does He think He is doing up there? Has He fallen asleep on the job? How can God be good and not order events for my happiness?*" We may be better Biblically educated than this, but the "natural man" in us, the Flesh, screams these thoughts into our consciousness in times of disappointment, hurt, and loss.

Our great God and loving Father is good (Mt. 6:26, 30, 32; 19:17; Jas. 1:17)! Yet, the great end of His providential control of all things is to accomplish all things for His glory. It is this fact which sets God upon His throne and delivers Him from being reduced to a heavenly Santa Claus who knowing "who has been naughty and nice" rewards them accordingly. God is not simply the great gift-giver providentially giving gifts to those who "*deserve*" them and withholding them from those who "*don't deserve*" them. Rather, all His gifts are driven by His good purpose for all of history (Rom.8:28). The end of which is predestined to yield glory to His name.

Karl Barth offers one of the clearest explanations of why God's glory is the end to which God works all things because it was the beginning of all things.

"God's glory is the indwelling joy of His divine being which as such shines out from Him, which overflows in its richness, which in its super-abundance is not satisfied with itself but communicates itself. All God's works must be understood also and decisively from this point of view. All together and without exception they take part in the movement of God's self-glorification and the communication of His joy. They are the coming into being of light outside Him on the basis of the light inside Him, which is Himself. They are expressions of the infinite exultation in the depth of His divine being. It is from this point of view that all His creatures are to be viewed both first and last. God wills them and loves them because, far from having their

³⁶ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 105.

³⁷ "The Larger Catechism," Book of Confessions, Q. 18, 7.128, p. 203; cf. "The Smaller Catechism," Q. 11, 7.011, p. 181.

existence of themselves and their meaning in themselves, they have their being and existence in the movement of the divine self-glorification, in the transition to them of His immanent joyfulness. It is their destiny to offer a true if inadequate response in the temporal sphere to the jubilation with which the Godhead is filled from eternity to eternity.... The reaction of God even against sin, the meaning even of His holiness, even of His judgment, the meaning which is not extinguished but fulfilled even in damnation and hell, is that God is glorious, and that His glory does not allow itself to be diminished, to be disturbed in its gladness and the expression of that gladness, to be checked in the overflowing of its fullness. And this is what is expected from all creation because this is the source from which they come. It is in this light that they are to be seen and heard. This is their secret that will one day come out and be revealed. And it is to this that we are always required and will always find it worth our while to attend and look. It is for this revelation that we should always wait. The creature has no voice of its own. It does not point to its own picture. It echoes and reflects the glory of the Lord. It does this in its heights and its depths, its happiness and its misery.”³⁸

Barth captures the deep sense of God’s glory. It is the profound reason and justification for all things. Only in and in everything God’s glory is the quintessential atomic structure of value for every being and every inanimate creation. The value, the weight, the beauty, the glory of all things is their reflection of the joy and happiness of God in all that He is and does. God is contented, delighted, exuberant, glorious in the most minute and seemingly insignificant of His works because it is indwelt by the value which God has given it by His creating it. There is nothing in creation which lacks this reflected glory of God, so there is nothing which is not weighted, dignified, and worthy of God. Now we can see the offense against God’s glory that even when one of His laws would be broken, that only when a tiny bit of creation would be abused, that even when only one defiant, “No!,” echoes rebellion, then we can begin to grasp the offense against His glory. All creation was a perfect symphony; every note was perfect, and with the first and every sin, which followed there came a shrieking scream of disharmony. God’s glory could not and cannot tolerate such offense; God cannot allow such an attack on Who He is. For He is the value from which everything and everyone receives its value, therefore if God and His work are treated as if of lesser or no value, then nothing else has value. Barth put it so well: “His glory does not allow itself to be diminished, to be disturbed in its gladness and the expression of that gladness, to be checked in the overflowing of its fullness.” The work of judgment, even the terror of God’s wrath, is the pure and justified expression of God’s glory. The only thing worthy of creation was the glory of God. The only thing worthy of the redemption of that creation is the glory of God. The only thing worthy of God’s providential rule is the glory of God. Consequently, Barth helps us see the cruciality of seeing the glory of God as the essential and necessary end to which Providence is taking all of creation. The glory of God is its only worthy end. The glory of God has a very specific manifestation in Providence which we have yet touched upon, so we now turn to it.

B. The Initiation, Centrality, and Culmination of Providence

We, to this point, have emphasized primarily Providence as the work of the Father, but to only make this emphasis would miss the heart and soul of what the New Testament would teach us about Providence. The center of Providence is Jesus Christ. He is its golden thread which runs the full length of Providence. He pulls all the pieces together to make a whole. We find in the Christ the supreme paradigm of Providence, and yet He is much more. In Him we meet the God of Providence who has stepped into His providence. Therein, He comes to reveal Himself, to avail us of Providence’s meaning, and to stand for us as the ideal of one under the reign of Providence. In all the workings of Providence Jesus Christ is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. Not only the beginning and the end,

³⁸ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics A Selection*, G. W. Bromiley (translator and editor) (San Francisco: Harper Torchbooks, Harper & Row, Publishers, 1961), 162, 163.

He is every detail along the way. See how Paul puts it: "*For I do not want you to be unaware, brethren, that our fathers were all under the cloud and all passed through the sea; and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea; and all ate the same spiritual food; and all drank the same spiritual drink, for they were drinking from a spiritual rock which followed them; and the rock was Christ*" (1Cor. 10:1-4). This passage reminds us that everywhere we look in Scripture we find the work of Christ.

1. Jesus Christ – The God of Providence

Again the Apostle Paul wrote, "*...all things have been created through Him [Christ] and for Him. He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together*" (Col. 1:16,17). The Hebrews writer instructs us: "*He [Christ] is the radiance of His [the Father's] glory and the exact representation of His nature, and upholds all things by the word of His power*" (Heb. 1:3). Jesus declared in His Great Commission: "*All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth*" (Mt. 28:18; cf. 1 Cor. 15:23-26; Phil. 2:9-11; Rev. 19:11-16). These verses indicate that Jesus, the eternal Son, is no less the creator, the sustainer, or the governor than the Father. Jesus Christ is the Word of God spoken in the beginning (Jn. 1:1-3). He is the Life and the Light of men (v.4). He is the Lamb of God (v. 36). He is the Wisdom of God (1Cor. 1:30). As ascended King He is the ruler of Providence, and Providence serves Him for He is the goal and end for which Providence is administered. As ascended and reigning King He governs as the God of Providence. He is the eternal joy of the Father (Jn. 15:11; 17:3, 24; 1 Jn. 1:3, 4) which by His very nature cannot do otherwise than stand at the end as the manifest glory of God to which every knee must bow (Col. 3:3, 4; Phil. 2:10, 11).

2. All Providence Serves Jesus Christ

To say the above is to enable us to see that all the workings of Providence serve Jesus Christ. T. H. L. Parker puts it this way:

The creation is the stage on which are enacted God's dealings with mankind. Providence is God's gracious outworking of his purpose in Christ, which issues in his dealings with man. ...from the beginning God has ordered the course of events toward Jesus Christ and his incarnation. From the biblical point of view world history and personal life stories possess significance only in the light of the incarnation. The squalid little story of lust in Judah's dealing with Tamar (Gen. 38) falls into its place in the genealogy of the Messiah (Matt. 1:3). Caesar Augustus was on the throne in Rome for the sake of the unknown baby in its manger.³⁹

We can add to this, why was the story of Ruth included in the canon of Scripture? Was it not because Ruth and Boaz were a link in the chain to the Savior and King's birth? Why the story of Rahab, the harlot? Was it not because she and Salmon also were another link in the same chain (Mt.1:5)? What of all the evil perpetrated upon the people of God? Was it not to complete the sufferings and the afflictions of the Messiah (Col. 1:24)? For what reason do all of God's chastisements fall upon His people? Is it not so we will fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith (Heb. 12:2)? Is it not so we may share in His holiness (v. 10)? Is it not so we will grow up in all aspects unto Him our Head (Eph. 4:13, 15)? In every saving event the Messiah is there as covertly as He was in the wilderness rock pouring forth water to His people. Now He is hidden in His people who are His Body (Col. 1:27; Mt. 25:40, 45), and yet they are hidden in Him and at the end all will be revealed in Him (Col. 3:3, 4). Jesus Christ is so woven into the warp and the woof of Providence that when the underside of the weaving is revealed it will be the image of Jesus Christ. When He is revealed the meaning and reasoning of Providence's course will be give its ultimate and complete explanation (Eph. 1:10).

3. Providence's Work Upon Mankind Outside of Christ

³⁹ T. H. L. Parker, "Providence," *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (hereafter EDT), W. Elwell (ed.) (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, House, 1984), 890, 891.

If this will explain the providential events in the lives of God's people, then what explains all the other events on the rest of mankind?⁴⁰ They are significant only as they relate to the lives of God's people whether they be villains or friends (Rom. 9:20-24; Prov. 16:4).⁴¹ This is a sobering conclusion. Though Providence touches every life, it is **"for Him"** and His people (Col. 1:16; Jn. 1:3; 1 Cor. 8:6; Heb. 2:10). Providence will provide blessings, prosperity, and happiness for both those in Christ and outside of Him, but such blessings will only be temporal for those outside of Christ. Jesus warned that for those who practice righteousness for the eyes of man when the applause dies, *"Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full"* (Mt. 6:5). So it will be for those outside of Christ. Augustine wrote in his *City of God* of the Romans. He noted, they were honorable people, motivated by their love of liberty and desire for domination.

"For these pagan heroes there was not to be the divine grace of everlasting life along with His holy angels in His heavenly City, for the only road to this Society of the Blessed is true piety, that is, that religious service or *latreia* (to use the Greek word) which is offered to the One true God. On the other hand, if God did not grant them at least the temporal glory of a splendid Empire, there would have been no reward for the praiseworthy efforts or virtues by which they strove to attain that glory. When our Lord said: *'Amen I say to you they have received their reward'* (Mt. 6:2, 5), He had in mind those who do what seems to be good in order to be glorified by men.

"After all, the pagans subordinated their private property to the common welfare, that is, to the republic and the public treasury. They resisted the temptation to avarice. They gave their counsel freely in the councils of the state. They indulged in neither public crime nor private passion. They thought they were on the right road when they strove, by all these means, for honors, rule, and glory. Honor has come to them from almost all peoples. The rule of their laws has been imposed on many peoples. And in our day, in literature and in history, glory has been given them by almost everyone. They have no right to complain of the justice of the true and supreme God. *'They have received their reward.'*"⁴²

"...It was, then, not only to reward the Roman heroes with human glory that the Roman Empire spread. It had a purpose for the citizens of the Eternal City during their pilgrimage on earth. Meditating long and seriously on those great examples, they could understand what love of their Heavenly Fatherland should be inspired by everlasting life, since a fatherland on earth has been so much loved by citizens inspired by human glory."⁴³

"...The conclusion from all this is that the power to give a people a kingdom or empire belongs only to the same true God who gives the Kingdom of Heaven with its happiness only to those who believe in Him, while He gives the earthly city to both believers and unbelievers alike, according to His Will which can never be unjust."⁴⁴

The incredible irony of this is that recorded, secular history takes the exact opposite view. All that counts are the Kings, the Princes, their captains, their armies, their commerce, and their power. The rest they treat as backwash, inconsequential eddies, in the river of history.

When we see the golden thread of Providence, which strings all events, actions, and creatures together, we will see that they serve Jesus Christ. Like watching a missile released to its target. It flies over somethings, between others, beneath and even through some. Its speed defies the eye to find the

⁴⁰ Cf. also see comments on this topic below on pages 20ff.

⁴¹ Cf. Calvin's conclusion: "...he [God] takes care to govern all creatures for the benefit and safety of his people, even the devil himself..." *Institutes*, Bk. I, Chap. XVII, 241.

⁴² Augustine, *The City of God* (Garden City, NJ: Image Books, 1958), Bk. V, Chap. 15, p. 112.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, Bk. V, Chap. 16, p. 113.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, Bk. V, Chap. 21, p. 116.

target before it strikes home. There it impales itself deeply and perfectly in that for which it was released. Thus, all events, actions, and creatures, together streak, guided by Providence. At impact, they will be transformed into the perfectly configured pedestal to display Jesus Christ-His work and His glory.

Thus, we are to see all of Providence as that which must come to pass to accomplish this supreme good. All things will find their meaning and their goodness as they serve Jesus Christ. How? This is the mystery of which we are only given bits and pieces, but we are promised that in the day of Christ's glory we with all the faithful will chorus the eternal "*of course.*" On that day of revelation and judgment, "*at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father*" (Phil. 2:10, 11).

C. The Distinction Between Providence, Fate, Chance, and Luck

There are a number of terms which are used with some reference to concept of determinism in life. These are not the same as Providence. Providence is a Biblical idea, while these other terms are clearly not Biblical, therefore Providence must be distinguished from such ideas.

Fate is a concept which is quite different from Providence. Donald Bloesch writes of fate, "In classical thought fate was believed to be superior to the gods, since even they were unable to defy its all-encompassing power."⁴⁵ Augustine notes, "Ordinarily, when people hear the word fate they think of nothing but the position of the stars at the moment of one's birth or conception."⁴⁶ Fate, whether a property of the constellations or of a unnamed force, was considered omnipotent over the gods and the lives of people. It was the final word and determinate of all things, but fate has no purpose to the wielding of its power. It conforms all things to its meaninglessness. "Fate is blind, inscrutable, and inescapable."⁴⁷ It is an impersonal, irrational, cosmic determinism which subjects freedom to its irresistible gravitational pull to no where. It is a maverick power with no goal. It is entirely capricious.

Providence in contrast is the administration of a personal God, Who has created and destined all things to His purpose. Providence liberates man to fulfill the end for which he was created. Providence is a determinism as fate is, but Providence is personal, purposeful, cooperative (working concurrently with man as a moral agent), and hopeful. Fate is again, an impersonal force which determines all things without reason, purpose, or regard. Whereas Providence offers the security of purpose, justice, hope, and peace, fate offers the precariousness of meaninglessness, uncertainty, and injustice. Fatalism was a dominant theme for both the Greeks and the Romans, as well as, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam.

Chance is not the same thing as fate. Chance is a mathematical probability but unpredictable. Chance is the random possibility of something happening, but it has no power to direct or control anything. Chance is powerless and mindless. It at best is only a spreadsheet of statistics. Luck like chance refers to a probability, but it is often a favored probability which is governed by a favorable fate so that one gains something by chance. One is lucky who has a favored probability of success, but what causes chance to lean in its favor? Some unnamed force showers luck with its favor, but for what reason? No other reason is needed other than one is simply arbitrarily given luck.

Again, we must realize that this is not the doctrine of Providence. Providence is the purposeful movement of God in the lives of His creatures to accomplish His goal for them. In Providence there is

⁴⁵ Donald G. Bloesch, "Fate, Fatalism," *EDT*, 407.

⁴⁶ Augustine, *City of God*, Bk. V, Chap. 1, 99.

⁴⁷ Bloesch, "Fate, Fatalism," *EDT*, 407.

no such thing as chance or luck or fate. Things happen because of the will of God. They happen according to a rational plan formulated according to God's purpose. They do not happen capriciously or haphazardly, but rather they are deliberate actions progressing toward a positive, rational goal. Thus, we must consciously learn to think and speak in ways which reflect a providential point of view.⁴⁸ Yet, as we do so, we find out how deeply and unconsciously we have embraced the frames of reference of fatalism, chance, and luck.

W. B. Hunter fittingly concludes,

“Because of God's providential care for his creation, ultimately, there is no such thing as luck. What is more, from God's perspective, there are not really any accidents, surprises or ‘curious turns of history,’ What we call chance doesn't exist. Sound extreme? Yes it does. But these ideas are straightforward consequences of verses like Proverbs 16:33: ‘The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD’ (NASB). From a biblical perspective, your world-history book should be prefaced with 2 Kings 19:25, ‘Have you not heard? Long ago I ordained it. In the days of old I planned it; now I have brought it to pass.’”⁴⁹

In this light we need to distinguish between worldly deterministic ideas and the Biblical idea of Providence.

D. Summary

“Providence is God's sovereign exercise of especially His power, wisdom, and goodness in sustaining and governing His creation and all the acts of His creatures according to His will for His glory.”

Herein, in these seven parts of our definition, is the tapestry of Providence woven by Scripture. The remainder of our study will be given to expounding, explaining, and illustrating this doctrine of providence. We also will attempt to address many of the related questions, which come to our minds when we attempt to think God's thoughts after Him especially in such dark, deep waters as Providence. Yet, the definition ignites the sparks of questions and uncertainties as to the dynamics of Providence. For example, as God exerts control, governance, how does He not make man less than a free moral agent? How can God exert control and not become a participant in evil and ultimately the author of evil? How can God exert control and still be just in His judgment of man's evil? Can we talk of God “*permitting*” evil and at the same time say He has “*decreed*” evil? If Providence is the governance of God's foreordained plan, then can we expect God to hear and answer prayer? Such questions are but a few of those engendered by the definition and description of Providence. Our plan is to attempt to answer these and other questions through a study of one of the classical Biblical examples of Providence at work. From this example we should hope to find a paradigm of how we should understand Providence in our own lives.

⁴⁸ Cf. Calvin, *Institutes*, Bk. I, Chap. XVI, 228, 229; Augustine, *City of God*, Bk. V, Chap. 1, 99-100.

⁴⁹ Hunter, *The God Who Hears*, 49; Packer distinguishes Providence from additional world views: pantheism, deism, dualism, indeterminism, determinism, chance, and fate, “Providence,” *NBD*, 990.

II. A Paradigm of Providence: Joseph

A. Introduction: Secular Versus Sacred History

The term “*secular*” came from the Middle Ages when the Empire was being ravaged and splintered. The vacuum of power was filled regionally by feudal lords. They took as much land as they had power to take. The Roman Catholic Church had vast land holdings throughout Europe, and these lands became ripe plums for these feudal lords to pick. By force of arms they took what was the Church’s and made it theirs. They made these “*sacred*” lands “*secular*.” “**Secular**” described the state of that which was no longer belonging to God.

History has for the most part been made secular. It has been removed from the sphere of God’s providential control. In other words, historians do not explain the events of history as governed and controlled by God. Pick up a history book, and history is explained by economic forces, political developments, sociological evolution, cultural pluralism, environmental changes, and ideological ebb and flow. The sovereign and providential government of God does not explain history. History has been secularized.

The even sadder commentary is upon the Church. Most Christians tend to approach God’s providential governing of all events from their own at least partly secularized perception rather than from a thorough going Biblical approach. Often in most Christians’ minds the events of life and history are understood like a game of catch. We toss the ball back and forth among ourselves. Sometimes we do it successfully, and sometimes we make errors—dropping the ball or making bad throws. Sometimes we just hold on to the ball too long. Then because we ask God in prayer, or He takes pity on us, or becomes angry with us, or for just His own reasons He breaks into our game of catch. Sometimes we throw the ball to Him, at other times He intercepts it, but most of the time God just watches. God broke into the game with Jesus, and He will break in again at the end to finish the game. We think God is in the game when good things happen to us, and He has stepped out of the game when bad things happen. Some how God will make everything right at the end when He takes control of everything.

The grief of this scenario is that we too have secularized history, but we only half secularize it. We speculate that God controls and governs somethings, **just not all things**. We love to quote Romans 8:28—“*we know that God causes all things to work together for good...*” but we secularize it, because we don’t want God “**causing all things**.” *Somethings* yes, maybe even most things, but certainly *not all things*!

B. Joseph’s Life Is Sacred History

Joseph was a man through whom and in whom we see “**God causing all things**.” He was a man who saw God at work in all the events of his life. He could only speak in terms of sacred history—a history where God governs all things according to His will and for His glory.

Joseph’s life is primarily recorded in Genesis 37-50. There are other references to Joseph in Scripture, and one of no small consequence is Acts 7:8-18. There, Stephen mentioned Joseph as he preached just before he was martyred. There are especially two points, which Stephen makes which are critical for our understanding of Providence. Before we turn to Stephen’s insights we will review Genesis 37, the beginning of Joseph’s story.

Joseph’s story begins when he was the seventeen-year-old beloved son of Jacob (Gen. 37:2). He was the eleventh son of twelve and the firstborn son of Jacob’s cherished wife Rachel who died after giving

birth to her second son and Jacob's twelfth, Benjamin (35:17-19). Jacob showered his attention and love on Joseph. This special attention leads to increasing hostile feelings between Joseph and his ten older brothers. They did something, which caused Joseph to give a bad report on them to Jacob (37:2). Then Jacob gave Joseph a multi-colored tunic (v.3), which caused his brothers to hate Joseph and refused to speak with him except in unfriendly ways (v.4). Joseph has two dreams in which his brothers become subservient to him (v.5-11). Joseph's report of the dreams provoked his brothers to greater jealousy (v.11). Joseph was sent to check on his brothers' welfare as they were shepherding far from home. They saw Joseph coming, and they plotted first to kill him (v.18). Reuben, the oldest, intervened attenuating the plan to only throwing him in a pit, where Reuben hoped to later rescue him (v.22). Reuben left and in his absence, the rest of the brothers crossed paths with some Ishmaelite merchants on their way to Egypt (v.25). Judah, moved by his greed, suggested that they sell Joseph into slavery, which met with the rest's approval (v.26-28). Joseph was sold, and they dipped his tunic in animal blood explaining to Jacob, "*We found this please examine it to see whether it is your son's tunic or not*" (v.32). Meanwhile, the Ishmaelites sold Joseph as a slave to Potiphar in Egypt.

1. God was with Joseph.

First, Stephen clearly flags the banner of God's providence over Joseph's life. "*...The patriarchs became jealous of Joseph and sold him into Egypt. **And yet God was with him**, and rescued him from all his afflictions, and granted him favor and wisdom...*" (vv. 9 and 10). Stephen saw in Joseph's life sacred history. "**God was with Him.**" God was at work in Joseph's life. Stephen saw God's hand upon this man. He saw God orchestrating the events of his life.

Stephen's point goes deeper. God was not only with Joseph in his triumphs, but God was with him in his betrayal by his brothers, his enslavement in Egypt, Potiphar's wife's attempted seduction, and Joseph's ensuing imprisonment. In "*all his afflictions*" God was with him. In his abandonment and loneliness God was still with him. In his grief and anger God was with him. When he was ill-treated God was with him. Though he was persecuted for his righteousness and fidelity, and though he suffered long, lonely, stench-filled nights in prison; though he was cold, hungry, sick and hopeless, God was with him. Such dramatic experiences are more than a storyline can depict, yet, God was with him. In his depression, hopelessness, and despondency, God was at work and was with him. In the deepest and darkest days of Joseph's life God was no less with him than when he was given Pharaoh's signet ring. This is the theme and truth of the Bible's teaching concerning Providence—"**God was with him.**" In comfort and calamity God is with us providentially governing history and our personal lives.

2. God was with Joseph to accomplish His good purpose.

Second, Stephen goes to the heart of what it means that God is with us. Often we think God is with us if we are happy, circumstances are going our way, obstacles obstructing our plans have been eliminated, and everybody is on our side. Surely, we think, God is with us. Yet God's presence with His children is not simply characterized by obvious blessing but something of much greater significance—God's purpose in history. Note that God was with Joseph in all of his afflictions as well as all his blessings. The thread is neither blessings or afflictions, but God's purpose.

Lincoln, as the story goes, was facing an impending civil war battle. An advisor urged that they pray that God would be on the side of the Union. Lincoln with great insight responded, "*my concern is not that God is on our side, but that we are on His side!*" This is the point, which Stephen makes here in his sermon. Listen to verse 17. "*But as the time of **the promise** was approaching which **God had assured to Abraham**, the people increased and multiplied in Egypt...*" Here then is the thread running through God's providence and the lives of all God's children—God is with us to accomplish His will. God's

promise to Abraham was being fulfilled through Joseph. God was with Joseph taking him through all these vicissitudes, all these ups and downs, these privations and sufferings, to serve God's faithful fulfillment of His promise to Abraham (see Gen. 15:13 ff.). **God's providence does not govern for our happiness but for our service to God's will, purpose and plan.** God is with us not so He will be on our side, but so we will be on His.

The storyline for Joseph continues in Egypt as his life touched six people. After Joseph's arrival in Egypt he was sold to Potiphar, captain of the Pharaoh's bodyguard (Gen. 39:1). Potiphar realized that God's hand is upon Joseph, so he elevated him to his chief steward (vv.2-4). Potiphar's wife also saw something in Joseph. She "*looked with desire at Joseph*" (v.7). When her seduction failed (vv.11-12), she told her husband that Joseph had attempted to force himself upon her (v.14). Potiphar then had Joseph thrown in prison. There the chief jailer saw that the hand of God was on Joseph, and all that he touched prospered (v.23). The jailer placed all the prisoners in Joseph's charge (v.22). The cupbearer and the baker of the Pharaoh were made prisoners because they had offended the king (40:1). They both on the same night had dreams and Joseph told them, "*Do not interpretations belong to God? Tell it to me please*" (v.8). Joseph interpreted the cupbearer's dream that he would return to the Pharaoh's service, but the baker's dream meant he would be executed. Both interpretations then came to pass, and Joseph asked the cupbearer to remember him and to get him out of the prison (v.14), but cupbearer forgot (v.23). Two years later, the sixth person, the Pharaoh, had two dreams, which no one could interpret, and the cupbearer told Pharaoh about Joseph (41:9-13). Joseph interpreted his dreams to refer to seven years of plenty and then seven of worldwide famine (vv.25-32, cf. v. 57). A special man would be needed to prepare in the years of abundance for the years of famine. Pharaoh recognized Joseph as the man God had prepared for this task (vv.38-39). Pharaoh told Joseph, "*See, I have set you over all the land of Egypt. 'Then Pharaoh took off his signet ring...put it on Joseph's hand.... 'Though I am Pharaoh, yet without your permission not one shall raise his hand or foot in all the land of Egypt'*" (vv. 41, 42, 43). So in a day God had providentially and concurrently raised Joseph from a prisoner to the Prince of Egypt.

a. God was with Joseph in one way

Let's be even more precise in our understanding. God was with Joseph in one way, and He was with Pharaoh in another. Both served His will—one to receive eternal blessing and the other for only temporal service. This is the Apostle Paul's point in Romans 8:28. "*...God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.*"⁵⁰ Paul wrote to remind the Roman Christians that God providentially works all the circumstances and events of their lives and all of the children of God to one great and glorious "**good.**" This "**good**" is our completed salvation in Jesus Christ and thereby the glory which this will bring to God's name. This eternal happiness and blessedness of His people and the resulting glory to Him is the good for which God providentially works, and in this He will demonstrate His transcendent glory to all His creation (see Rom. 8:18-25). God works all things together **for this good, for a certain group of people.**

Paul identifies this group by two descriptive clauses—"*to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.*" The first clause is reflective of Deuteronomy 6:5—"*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.*" In other words, those who **truly** love God. The second clause too is reflective of the OT—"*those who are called according to His purpose.*" With regard to God's choice of Jacob over Esau, Paul said almost the same thing in Romans 9:11. "*...So that God's purpose according to His choice would stand, not because of*

⁵⁰ C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, Vol. I (Edinburgh: T. &

works but because of Him who calls.” When the Apostle uses “*calling*,” it always refers to “*effectual calling*,” i.e. when God irresistibly calls someone to become part of His purpose, to extend mercy to these whom He has called to Himself, these whom God has caused to be “*born again*.”⁵¹ This “*calling*” is synonymous with being “*born again*” or “*regenerated*” by the Holy Spirit (Jn. 3:3, 5; Titus 3:5). Jesus says, these are the ones who hear His voice and come to Him. (Jn. 10:27). This “*calling*” of God distinguishes God’s elect from the nonelect. Salvation, by it, is declared to come not simply to those who decide to embrace Jesus Christ in faith, but it comes only to those who have been effectually called by God. This call is decisive and primary, while the act of decision and faith is reactionary and secondary but real. This effectual calling of God divides all of humanity between the elect and the nonelect. It is for the elect which God works His good purpose. For these, God works all things together for His eternal good according to His merciful purpose (cf. Rom. 9:22, 23). This is God’s purpose for Joseph and all those in Christ.

b. God was with Pharaoh in another way.

As we stated above, God was with Joseph one way, but though God was providentially working through Pharaoh it is important to see that God was with Pharaoh in another way.⁵² (Joseph’s Pharaoh was probably Sesostri III, 1878-1843 BC). Psalm 75:6 states, “*He [God] puts down one and exalts another*” (cf. Dan. 2:21). God does so to serve His eternal plan and to extend temporal mercy and good to the non-elect. Joseph’s Pharaoh was given all the money, all the livestock, and all the property of Egypt because of his goodness to God’s covenant people—the family of Jacob (Gen. 47:14, 17, 20, 23, 25; cf. 12:3). Potiphar’s house temporally prospered because of his goodness to Joseph (Gen. 39:5), as did the jailer (40:21-23). Those blessings are reflective of God’s promise to Abraham in Genesis 12:2, 3,

T. Clark Limited, 1975), 425-431, lists 8 ways the subject and verb, *pavnta sunergei* (ο& qeov”), has been rendered: 1) “God works together in all respects;” 2) “God causes all things to work together;” 3) “(God) works together all things in all respects;” 4) “(God) causes all things to work together;” 5) “all things work together;” 6) “the Spirit works together all things in all respects;” 7) “the Spirit causes all things to work together;” and 8) “the Spirit works together.” Cranfield reasoned that option 5), and he concluded, “We understand the first part of the verse, then, to mean that nothing can really harm—that is, harm in the deepest sense of the word—those who really love God, but that all things which may happen to them, including such grievous things as are mentioned in v. 35, must serve to help them on their way to salvation, confirming their faith and drawing them closer to their Master, Jesus Christ. But the reason why all things thus assist believers is, of course, that God is in control of all things. The faith expressed here is faith not in things but in God. Why then, it may be asked, does Paul make ‘all things’, and not ‘God’, the subject of his sentence? It is, we suggest, because he wants to draw attention to the transcendent power of Him who helps us. His power, His authority, is such that all things, even the actions of those who are disobedient and set themselves against Him, must subserve His will. To say that all things assist believers is thus—in a biblical context—a heightening of the statement that God assists them; for it is to assert not only that He assists them, but also that His help is triumphantly and utterly effective” (428, 429).

⁵¹ The difference between God’s “general calling” (Mt. 20:16; Mk. 16:15) and His “effectual calling” (Rom. 8:29, 30; 9:10-18) is that the first is an invitation, which offers a possibility, and the second is the calling heard and truly received, thus it is actual. The general calling is the open invitation through the open preaching of the Gospel that all who will may come, whether they do or not. In contrast, the effectual calling is effected by the Holy Spirit through regeneration, or being “born again,” which then enables conversion—an actual turning to God in faith, repentance, and baptism—so that they do in fact come. Contemporary Evangelical theology most commonly defines regeneration or being born again as experienced by believing, i.e. it takes the position of decisional regeneration. Whereas what we are describing is a regeneration effected by the sovereign work of the Holy Spirit and **evidenced** by conversion and believing, but it is separate logical event from conversion. It is accomplished by the sovereign work of God, the Holy Spirit, Who causes one to be born again. It is the regeneration of a person dead in their Sin and sins being made alive to God, and thus they become able to see the Kingdom of God, the truth of the Gospel (Jn 3:3, 5, 8; 1 Cor. 2:10-14; Eph. 2:1-10; Titus 3:3-6). Without this work of the Spirit one cannot see the Kingdom and the Gospel is simply foolishness to him, so he is incapable of responding to the general calling and rejects the Gospel though he even hears it preached in the most persuasive way. This in essence is the fundamental difference between Reformed theology and Contemporary Evangelical theology on regeneration and effectual calling. Ultimately it is the issue of whether God is sovereign over salvation and elects those who come into His Kingdom, or whether man elects, by his decision, to be saved, or rejects the Gospel, and elects damnation.

⁵² Note the development of this theme of God’s providence for those outside of Christ above on p. 13.

“...I will bless you. And so you shall be a blessing; and I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse.” God will temporally bless those who bless His people. In contrast, those who curse His people will be both temporally and eternally cursed. God raised them up, Pharaoh, Potiphar, and the jailer, to serve His purpose. In so caring for them God also extended His kindness (Rom. 2:4) and patience (2 Pet. 3:9) to them. This was God’s providential and “general calling” to repentance, to acknowledgement, to give thanks to Him as God, and to seek His favor and mercy (Rom. 1:20 ff.).

Further, God out of his love and mercy cares for all His creation both the righteous and the unrighteous (Mt. 5:45). This care is a temporal care. Even to those who hate God, God extends this mercy and providential care—“*your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous*” (Mt. 5:45). In this God both manifests His own perfection and love and so models such for His children (v.48). Yet, for those who only know God’s temporal blessings and not His effectual calling, His kindness and patience will end with their further rejection of His goodness, and such only becomes further evidence for their just condemnation (Rom. 2:4, 5; Dt. 32:34, 35; Gen. 15:16).

1) The Creator’s Love

We need to see in God’s providential blessing two clear manifestations of God’s fatherly care and preservation of His creation. **First**, God has given life to each of His creatures (Acts 17:28; rev. 4:11), yet even as a newborn has life, unless she is sustained, the life given will end. Such is creation’s need of the Creator’s sustainment and His preservation. Unlike our analogy of the newborn, creation never outgrows its need for the Creator’s preservation (Acts 17:28; Col. 1:17; Heb. 1:3). Thus, the Father’s physical preservation—air, water, food, clothing, shelter, etc.—**is the expression of His love for His creation.**⁵³ This love is not the special, **covenant love** which He has for His elect (e.g. Dt. 7:6ff.; Rom. 9:13; 8:31-39; Eph. 1:3-14; 5:25-27). We need to critically recognize these two expressions of God’s love both to appreciate each and distinguish the two. As Creator He loves and cares for His creation, and He physically provides for it, and through the Father’s providential preservation He is glorified. His creation gives glory to Him by their acceptance of His provision and care. Dietrich Bonhoeffer notes, “This is the way they glorify their Creator...by a daily unquestioning acceptance of his gifts.”⁵⁴

2) Providence’s Witness

Second, this Creator’s love manifested in providential kindness and preservation is part of **God’s general call to all His creatures to repentance** (Rom. 1:20 ff.; 2:4; 2 Pet. 3:9). Such is God’s **positive call** to repentance, while His judgments on his creatures are no less a call to repentance, but these are a **negative call** (e.g. Ps. 78:9-64; Rev. 9:13-21; 16:8-11). This is the witness of Providence. T. H. L. Parker states, “God’s fatherly care was a sign, pointing toward himself. Rom. 1:20 makes it clear that the purpose of this witness of providence was simply to render man inexcusable for not knowing God.”⁵⁵ Providentially “**God is with**” His people for eternal salvation, but “**He is with**” the rest of His creation only for temporal blessing. In this last category His blessing manifests itself especially upon those who bless His children, and yet, in the broader context of the Creator’s love, He pours out the blessings of His preservation upon all His creation. This serves as His witness to every generation to give thanks and repent of their denial of God and His providential care.

C. God’s Invisible Hand

As we return to Joseph’s life, we want to point out two manifest ways God works His providence:

⁵³ Mt. 5:45-48; 6:25-34; Jn. 3:16; 1 Tim. 2:3, 4; 2 Pet. 3:9; Jonah 4:9-11; cf. Ps. 65:9-13; 147:7-9; 12-20; 104:10-30.

⁵⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1959 second edition), 159.

⁵⁵ Parker, “Providence,” EDT, 891.

invisibly and visibly. First, in most situations we **do not see** His providence. It is invisible. Thus, God works His providence by His *“invisible hand.”* Second, at certain points God manifests His providence so that it is seen and perceived (cf. Dt. 29:4). Sometimes it is dramatic and at other times very subtle. In this perception God works His providence by His *“visible hand.”*

There are three primary applications which God’s people should glean from the ways, which God manifests His providence. **One**, the same Providence is at work, whether it is manifestly perceived or not. Beneath the veil of invisibility God is no less working all events to His benevolent purpose and end, than when He is at work in the neon lights of His visible Providence. **Two**, since we know this fact, we should have no less trust in His providential care when we don’t see it, than when we do see it. God’s providence is no less present. **Three**, He gives us experiences of His visible Providence to encourage and help our faith in those experiences of His invisible Providence. From these insights we can encourage and comfort others when they cannot see God’s visible providence. Keep these three applications in mind as we first look at the invisible hand of God’s providence at work in Joseph’s life in Genesis 37, then we will look at God’s visible hand at work in the later events of Joseph’s life.

We should note that God’s providence is often veiled by the ordinary. Such is the case in this first phase of Joseph’s life. We first find that Joseph, *“the little brother,”* had observed his older brothers doing something which they were not supposed to do. *“And Joseph brought back a bad report about them [his brothers] to their father”* (v. 2). What could be more ordinary? Brothers telling on one another? Especially the youngest!

Next, we see God’s providence veiled in the frailty of family bias, prejudice and favoritism. *“Now, Israel loved Joseph more than all his sons, because he was the son of his old age; and he made him a varicolored tunic”* (v. 3). As the events continue to spill forth in the narrative we can see the *“natural”* dysfunctional response of jealousy and hatred from Joseph’s brothers. *“And his brothers saw their father loved him more than all his brothers; and so they hated him and could not speak to him on friendly terms”* (v. 4). In these swirling dysfunctional events God’s invisible hand is at work.

D. Questions About God’s Providence

Perhaps we need to interrupt these developments to address a couple of important issues. First, in this growing hostility and hatred of Joseph’s brothers, we see their hearts first set on murder (v. 18), only relenting to sell their brother into slavery (v. 28), and then to cover up their crime with lies to their father (vv. 31-33). Can we say that God is at work in these events? If we do, are we not making God the author of their sin? Can God be directing their evil actions without being the perpetrator or author of evil? With these questions we are thrown into the deep waters of God’s providence, and these are holy waters (Dt. 29:29; Rom. 11:32-36). Yet, God in His Word has left buoys floating on the surface of these waters to mark our course, and by them we need not lose our way.

1. God Works In All Events

Initially, let us establish that **God is in fact at work in all the events of the narrative**. This confirmation comes from Joseph’s own words 13 years later when he discloses himself to his brothers in Egypt. He then explains what he has learned since his enslavement, *“...it was not you who sent me here, but God...”* (45:8). After Jacob’s death in Egypt Joseph explains even further, *“...as for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result...”* (50:20). There is no doubt that God was actively engaged and providentially working. We are told **“God sent”** Joseph to Egypt. Further, God was intending good in the same events in which Joseph’s brother’s were intending evil. Some want to emphasize that God only “permitted” the evil, and, in one sense, this is

correct;⁵⁶ but God **did more** than simply permit. **He sent!** God is not passive in these events but active, ordaining them. He decreed them. God was clearly at work in these events!

2. Two Intentions At Work

Second, God was not the only one at work. Joseph's brothers also had a hand in them. **God was at work in the events**, which brought Joseph to Egypt, and **Joseph's brothers were also at work in these same events** (50:20). How are we to understand this? We are told that there were two intentions in the same events. There was the intention of Joseph's brothers, and there was God's intention.

Joseph's brother's intention came from their hearts (Mt. 15:18-19; Jer. 17:9). These intentions of the human heart are filled with the corruption bred by Adam's sin (Rom. 5:12 ff.; cf. 7:15-24), thus our hearts are filled with all kinds of evil (Gen. 6:5, 11, 12; Rom. 1:18-32). Our hearts are easily deceived justifying our evil as good (Jer. 17:9; Rom. 1:32), so we serve our own lusts and intentions (Jas. 1:13-15). Such were the intentions of Joseph's brothers. Their hearts were already filled with hate, murder, slavery, lies, greed, and violence. God did not put those intentions in their hearts. The intentions have always been there as they exist in all human hearts.

God's intention was good and holy. His very character is this—good and holy (Ps. 86:5; Mk. 10:18; Is. 6:3; Rev. 4:8). God's intention cannot be and is not other than what He is (Jas. 1:13,17), even as, Joseph's brothers' intentions could not be other than their natures (Mt. 7:16-20; Jas. 1:17). Evil is best defined as that which is less than what is absolutely good. God is absolutely good (Mk. 10:18), and it is impossible for Him to be inconsistent with His nature (2 Tim. 2:13; Titus 1:2; Heb. 6:18; Nu. 23:19), or to be less than absolutely good, i.e. evil.⁵⁷

3. God Is Not The Author of Evil

God is also all-powerful, omnipotent. He is the Almighty (Gen. 17:1; Job 11:7; Rev. 4:8; 19:6). Augustine said it well, "But he who is good would not permit evil to be done, unless, being omnipotent, he could bring good out of evil."⁵⁸ Therefore, God exercises His omnipotence, providentially working through the evil of men's hearts to accomplish His good. In this way God may exercise His providence without being the author of evil. First, because God does not perpetrate the evil, rather it is independent of Him rising out of the heart of fallen man. Second, in the exercise of His providence He has only good intentions and cannot work any purpose but that which is consistent with His good nature. Third, because by His almighty power He conforms all evil to serve His good purpose.

4. How Did God Providentially Work On Joseph's Brothers?

God directed Joseph's brothers as His agents for the sending of Joseph to Egypt. In what way were they God's agents? In what way did God work upon them to direct them to sell Joseph? In so working upon them, how were the brothers still "free" agents and culpable of God's judgment when they only did what He willed?

a. God Is The Primary Cause

First, Scripture is replete with the fact that **God is the primary cause for all things**. Louis Berkhof, states, "In every instance the impulse to action and movement proceeds from God. There must be an influence of divine energy before the creature can work. ...God causes everything in nature to work and to move in the direction of a predetermined end. So God also enables and prompts His rational

⁵⁶ Cf. above on pages 10 and 11, below at footnote 61, and on pages 25ff. comments on the same topic as God's decrees are distinguished from His permissive will.

⁵⁷ Sproul, *The Invisible Hand*, 162, 163.

⁵⁸ in Heinrich Bullinger, "The Second Helvetic Confession" (5.001-5.260), *Book of Confessions*, VIII, 5.041, p. 66.

creatures...by energizing them to certain specific acts. He worketh all things in all, 1 Cor. 12:6, and worketh all things, also in this respect, according to the counsel of His will,” (Eph. 1:11).⁵⁹ Scripture attributes to God an actuating in the believer “*both to will and to work for His good pleasure*” (Phil. 2:13; cf. 1 Cor. 15:10; Heb. 13:21). Paul preaching to the Athenians stated, “*in him we live, and move, and have our being*” (Acts 17:28; cf. Rom. 11:36; 1 Cor. 8:6; 11:12; Col. 1:16; Heb. 2:10). Jesus established it beyond doubt telling us, “*apart from Me you can do nothing*” (Jn. 15:5; cf. 1:3, 4; 5:17, 18; Col. 1:17; Heb. 1:2, 3). John Calvin offered an excellent insight into this fact that God is the primary cause of all things:

“There is no power among all the creatures more wonderful or illustrious, than that of the sun. For, besides his illumination of the whole world by his splendour, how astonishing it is that he cherishes and enlivens all animals with his heat; with his rays inspires fecundity [fruitfulness] into the earth; from the seeds, genially warmed in her bosom, produces a green herbage, which, being supported by fresh nourishment, he increases and strengthens till it rises into stalks; feeds them with perpetual exhalations, till they grow into blossoms, and from blossoms to fruit, which he then by his influences brings to maturity; that trees, likewise, and vines, by his genial warmth, first put forth leaves, then blossoms, and from the blossoms produce their fruit! But the Lord, to reserve the praise of all these things entirely to himself, was pleased that the light should exist, and the earth abound in every kind of herbs and fruits, before he created the sun. A pious man, therefore, will not make the sun either a principal or necessary cause of those things which existed before the creation of the sun, but only an instrument which God uses, because it is his pleasure so to do; whereas he would find no more difficulty in acting by himself without that luminary.”⁶⁰

b. Joseph’s Brothers Were A Secondary Cause

This brings us to the question, in what way were Joseph’s brothers God’s agents? They were His agents in a secondary sense. **God sent** Joseph into Egypt (Gen. 45:8), i.e. He was the primary force (cf. Ps. 77:20). Had He not acted Joseph would not have been sent to Egypt. Thus, even more strongly, there is no contingency in God’s acting; there are no “*ifs*.”⁶¹ Yet, He sent Joseph to Egypt by the schemes and actions of Joseph’s brothers. They decided, they acted, yet they were only a secondary and dependent contingent force in the events. We should see two things: one, the mystery of concurrence, and two, the work of primary and secondary causes.

How does God work upon secondary agents? He works upon them according to their natures and their created end. In other words, God does not work upon a man as though he were a horse, dog, or rock. The nature of man issues from man’s heart (Prov. 4:23; Mt. 15:18-19; Jn. 8:34). Thus, there are many ways Scripture describes God’s work upon men. “He blinds the minds of men, strikes them with

⁵⁹ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 173; cf. John Calvin, *Institutes*, Bk. I, Chap. XVI, 223. Berkhof (168) lists the diversity of God’s providential control: “The Bible clearly teaches God’s providential control (1) over the universe at large, Ps. 103:19; Dan. 5:35; Eph. 1:11; (2) over the physical world, Job. 37:5, 10; Ps. 104:14; 135:6; Matt. 5:45; (3) over the brute creation, Ps. 104:21, 28; Matt. 6:26; 10:29; (4) over the affairs of nations, Job 12:23; Ps. 22:28; 66:7; Acts 17:26; (5) over man’s birth and lot in life, 1 Sam. 16:1; Ps. 139:16; Isa. 45:5; Gal. 1:15, 16; (6) over the outward successes and failures of men’s lives, Ps. 75:6, 7; Luke 1:52; (7) over things seemingly accidental or insignificant, Prov. 16:33; Matt. 10:30; (8) in the protection of the righteous, Ps. 4:8; 5:12; 63:8; 121:3; Rom. 8:28; (9) in supplying the wants of God’s people, Gen. 22:8, 14; Deut. 8:3; Phil. 4:19; (10) in giving answers to prayer, 1 Sam. 1:19; Isa. 20:5, 6; 2 Chron. 33:13; Ps. 65:2; Matt. 7: 7; Luke 18:7,8; and (11) in the exposure and punishment of the wicked, Ps. 7:12, 13; 11:6.”

⁶⁰ Calvin, *Institutes*, Bk. 1, Chap. XVI, 219, 220.

⁶¹ Calvin wrote explaining Augustine’s comment, “in what sense God permits,” “...but in what sense **permission** ought to be understood, ...the will of God is the supreme and first cause of all things, because nothing happens but by his command or permission. He [Augustine] certainly does not suppose God to remain an idle spectator, determining to permit anything; there is intervention of actual volition..., which otherwise, could never be considered as a cause,” *Institutes*, Bk. I, Chap. XVI, 229.

giddiness, inebriates them with the spirit of slumber, fills them with infatuation, and hardens their hearts” (Rom. 1:28; 11:8; Ex. 8:15).⁶² Yet, the simplest outline of this mystery is that God works upon men’s hearts by the giving and withholding of His grace (2 Cor. 12:9, 10; 1 Cor. 15:10). The giving of His grace softens, strengthens, protects, equips, and sustains. The withholding of His grace hardens, blinds, isolates, limits, and confuses. Romans 1:18-32 depicts it as a “*giving over*” to the corrupt intentions of man’s heart. Proverbs 21:1 states, “*the King’s heart is like channels of water in the hand of the Lord: He turns it wherever He wishes*” (cf. Prov. 16:1, 4, *9, *33; *20:24).

Arthur Pink points out that in at least four ways God acts upon the true believer or the regenerate to accomplish His will and in at least four different ways upon the unbeliever or the unregenerate. God exerts upon His own elect a **quicken**ing or **regenerat**ing influence or power. **He makes them alive** (Jn. 3:3; 5:34; 2 Pet. 1:4; Col. 1:13; 2 Cor. 5:17; Acts 26:18). **He empowers them** (Eph. 1:18; 3:16; is. 40:29; Acts 1:8; 4:33 1 Cor. 2:4; 1 Pet. 1:3 gal. 5:22; 2 Cor. 8:16). God exerts upon His own elect a **direct**ing influence or power. **He guides them** (Ps. 48:14; Eph. 2:10; Prov. 16:9; Ps. 65:4; Exe. 36:27; Phil. 2:13). God exerts upon His own elect a **preserv**ing influence or power. **He keeps them**. (Ps. 97:10; 37:28; 145:20; 1 Pet. 1:5; 1 Chron. 18:6). Further, God acts in other ways upon the unregenerate or unbeliever. God sometimes exerts upon the unbeliever a **restrai**ning influence by which they are **prevented** from doing what they are naturally inclined to do. **He restrains them** (Gen. 20:6; 37:18; 45:8; Num. 23:8, 20; Ex. 34:24). God sometimes exerts upon the unbeliever a **soften**ing influence disposing them, contrary to their natural inclinations, to do that, which will promote His cause. **He softens them** (Gen. 32:4; 39:3, 4, 21; Acts 7:10; Ex. 2:6; 1K. 18:10; esp. 4:16; 5:2; Dan. 1:9; Prov. 21:1; Ezra 1:1, 2; 7:27). God sometimes exerts upon the unbeliever a **direct**ing influence so that good is made to result from their intended evil. **He directs them** (Gen. 45:7; Is. 10:5-7; Judges 7:22; Ps. 41:9 with Mt. 26:50; 27:4 with Ps. 35:11; is. 50:6; Ex. 12:46; Num. 9:12). God also **hardens** the hearts of unregenerate men and **blinds** their minds. **He hardens them** (Ps. 105:s5; Ex. 4:221; Rom. 9:17; Ex. 14:17, 18; Dt. 2:30; Josh. 11:19, 20; Jn. 12:37-40; 2 Th. 2:11-12).⁶³

c. God Works Both Passively and Actively

Thus, God providentially acts both **passively** and **actively** upon men. By **passively**, it is meant that God permits or allows acts, which are sinful, and not according to His desires. Such acts are authored not by God (Jas. 1:13 ff.; Ps. 5:4-6) but by the corrupted natures in Satan (Jn. 8:44), his hosts (Eph. 6:12), and mankind (Jas. 1:14-15; Mt. 15:19-20). G. I. Williamson explains, “**For God is not the author of all that is, although he has decreed all**. Satan and his host (of men and angels) are the ‘authors’ of sin, although God has created them and decreed even their sin without being himself the author of it.”⁶⁴ Consequently, God does not externally coerce sinful acts but allows the nature of mankind to have its way, thus He allows man to do what is in his heart; what man wants to do. God decrees good purposes through evil acts, and, thereby, He will decree evil but evil only as a means to His good purpose (Prov. 16:4). Again Williamson writes, “Because God is infinite, eternal, and immutable one. He is able to allow us to do as we please (within the limitations of opportunity and ability) and yet render certain that we will do what he has predetermined that we will do.”⁶⁵ He allows this so that even out of evil He might bring forth good (Is. 45:7; Gen. 50:19, 20; Rom. 8:28; Prov. 16:4). Further, He will use evil to bring judgment upon evil (Ps. 7:14-17; 34:21, 22; 37:10-15). He will allow such acts ultimately because they serve His purpose and will in the end glorify His name (Gen. 45:5-8; Acts 2:23; 3:18; 4:27-28; Rom. 9:17).

⁶² Calvin, *Institutes*, Bk. I, Chap. XVIII, 255; cf. p. 241; cf. A. W. Pink, *The Sovereignty of God*, 78-88.

⁶³ Pink, *Sovereignty of God*, 78-88.

⁶⁴ Williamson, *The Westminster Confession of Faith for Study Classes* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1964), 50, bold type added.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 49.

God **actively** works upon men without violating their freedom and without tempting men to sin. Heinrich Bullinger wrote, “when, therefore, it is said in Scripture that God hardens, blinds and delivers up to a reprobate mind, it is to be understood that God does it by a just judgment as a just Judge and Avenger.”⁶⁶ In this sense we find God acting justly as he hardened what was already hard. (Ex. 5:1-18; 7:3; Rom. 9:14-18; 11:25; Jn. 12:37-41). He acts justly to blind those who have refused the truth (Is. 29:9-12; Eph. 4:18; 2 Thess. 2:10, 11; 1 Jn. 2:11). He acts justly to deliver up those who have disregarded Him (1 Sam. 16:14, 16; 2 Chron. 30:7; Ps. 81:12; Prov. 1:24-32; Mt. 23:37-39; Acts 7:42-43; Rom. 1:18-32; Rev. 17:17). Further, God also actively directs and governs the acts of men by placing thoughts in their minds and hearts (Rev. 17:17; Prov. 21:1; 1 Sam. 14:15). He restrains the evil that men might do (Mt. 24:22; Gen. 37:19-27), as well as, their coming and going (Acts 16:6-7; Num. 22:21 ff.).

Job serves as a fitting example of this providential work. God’s grace was upon Job, so he was a perfect man and richly blessed (1:1-5). God had put a gracious “*hedge*” of protection about him (1:10), so that he was protected from the assaults of Satan and his enemies, the Sabeans (1:15) and the Chaldeans (1:17). When God restricted this grace, then Satan was free to attack Job as were the Sabeans and Chaldeans. We should note that God did not put it in Satan’s heart to attack Job. It was already in his heart, as it was in the hearts of the Sabeans and Chaldeans. The latter two had always wanted to steal Job’s riches. They simply had lacked the opportunity because of God’s protection. Their intention was evil, but God’s intention was good—God tested Job. This was God’s good purpose, yet the purpose of Satan was to destroy Job and shame God (1:11). Here we clearly see God as the primary cause of Job’s testing, and we see Satan as God’s secondary cause or agent, as well as the Sabeans and the Chaldeans.

In the same way, we see the grace surrounding Joseph removed, and the hate and jealousy of his brothers thereby freed to attack Joseph. God forestalls Joseph’s murder by the grace given to Reuben (Gen. 37:2, 22). God sends Joseph to Egypt as Judah’s heart is hardened with greed to sell Joseph (37:26). God providentially coincided the time of the Ishmaelites passing by with the lunch break of Joseph’s brothers and the absence of Reuben. God effected enough room in the caravan, the desire for a slave by the merchants, and their destination. God’s drawing together of all these people, needs, and circumstances is called “**concurrency**.” Berkhof defines it as “*the cooperation of the divine power with all subordinate powers, according to the pre-established laws of their operation, causing them to act and to act precisely as they do.*”⁶⁷ It is God’s sovereign melding of all agents and secondary causes to come together in a perfect orchestration to accomplish precisely what God had decreed.

5. Is God Unjust?

Last, let us ask, can God righteously blame Joseph’s brothers for doing God’s will to Joseph? John Calvin offers a clear answer to this.

“Why, therefore, they ask, shall a thief be punished for having pillaged him whom it has pleased the Lord to chastise with poverty? Why shall a homicide be punished for having slain him whose life the Lord had terminated? If all such characters are subservient to the Divine will, why shall they be punished? But I deny that they serve the will of God. For we cannot say, that he who is influenced by a wicked heart, acts in obedience to the commands of God, while he is only gratifying his own malignant passions. That man obeys God, who, being instructed in his will, hastens whither God calls him. Where can we learn his will, but in his word? Therefore in our actions we ought to regard the will of God, which is declared in his word. God only requires of us conformity to his precepts. If we do any thing contrary to them, it is not obedience, but

⁶⁶ Bullinger, “The Second Helvetic Confession,” *Book of Confession*, VIII, 5.041, p. 66.

⁶⁷ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 171.

contumacy and transgression. But it is said, if he would not permit it, we should not do it. This I grant. But do we perform evil actions with the design of pleasing him? He gives us no such command. We precipitate ourselves into them, not considering what is his will, but inflamed with the violence of our passions, so that we deliberately strive to oppose him. In this manner even by criminal actions we subserve his righteous ordination; because, in the infinite greatness of his wisdom, he well knows how to use evil instruments for the accomplishment of good purposes.”⁶⁸

Calvin teaches us that God’s just condemnation of evil acts, which He has decreed is found in the intention of the perpetrator. They are not doing the evil to please God but rather to please themselves. God has declared His will in His law and written His law upon the hearts of mankind so that each is without excuse! Their intention is made clear as God simply “turned them over” to the desires of their hearts. They seek not to please God but themselves. They make themselves their own end rather than God, and for this they are justly condemned.

We find the Lord’s hand invisibly working through the ordinary, through the family dynamics, through the mistakes and the sins, and even through “*chance*” encounters. These became visible to us because of the revelation of Scripture, but they were not visible to those involved until God made them visible. Beneath this invisibility God sends forth and withholds His grace both inclining and disposing each event to His good will and purpose. Yet independently each agent yields completely to the intentions and will of his own heart, so that, from the issues of his own heart he is righteously accountable before God and is both bound and free to his own heart. By God’s concurrence of directing people, events, nature, and the propinquity of time and place, our God reigns governing all to the end of His good pleasure and purpose.

Once again John Calvin fittingly summarized this and affirmed our proper response.

“The mind of a Christian, therefore, when it is certainly persuaded that all things happen by the ordination of God, and that there is nothing fortuitously contingent, will always direct its views to him as the supreme cause of all things, and will also consider inferior causes in their proper order. He will not doubt that the particular providence of God is watchful for his preservation, never permitting any event, which it will not overrule for his advantage and safety. But, since he is concerned in the first place with men, and in the next place with the other creatures, he will assure himself, as to both, that the providence of God reigns over all. With respect to men, whether good or evil, he will acknowledge that their deliberations, wills, endeavours, and powers, are under his control, so that it is at his option to direct them whithersoever he pleases, and to restrain them as often as he pleases (439-440).

“...The necessary consequences of this knowledge are, gratitude in prosperity, patience in adversity, and a wonderful security respecting the future. Every prosperous and pleasing event, therefore, the pious man will ascribe entirely to God, whether his beneficence be received through the ministry of men, or by the assistance of inanimate creatures. For this will be the reflection of his mind: “It is certainly the Lord that has inclined their hearts to favour me, that has united them to me to be the instruments of his benignity towards me.” In an abundance of the fruits of the earth, he will consider, that it is the Lord who regards the heaven, that the heaven may regard the earth, that the earth, also, may regard its own productions: in other things he will not doubt that it is the Divine benediction alone which is the cause of all prosperity; nor will he bear to be ungrateful after so many admonitions.

“...If any adversity befall him, in this case, also, he will immediately lift up his heart to God, whose hand is most capable of impressing us with patience and placid moderation of mind. If Joseph had dwelt on a review of the perfidy of his brethren, he never could have recovered his

⁶⁸ Calvin, *Institutes*, Bk. I, Chap. XVII, 238, 239.

fraternal affection for them. But as he turned his mind to the Lord, he forgot their injuries, and was so inclined to mildness and clemency, as even voluntarily to administer consolation to them, saying, “It was not you that sent me hither, but God did send me before you to save your lives. Ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good (Gen. 45:7, 8) (441-442) ...The conclusion of the whole is this — that, when we suffer injuries from men, forgetting their malice, which would only exasperate our grief and instigate our minds to revenge, we should remember to ascend to God, and learn to account it a certain truth, that whatever our enemies have criminally committed against us, has been permitted and directed by his righteous dispensation” (442-443).⁶⁹

The doctrine of God’s providence is a doctrine of deep reassurance that all is well in heaven, however, confused things may seem to us on earth. It is this doctrine which assures us that we need not **“be anxious for nothing.”** It is this doctrine which frees us to *“seek first His Kingdom and righteousness and all these things”* (food, clothing, and our well-being) will be added to us by our heavenly Father. It is this doctrine which bids us come and enter the “peace of God.” Where there is no panic. Where all things are perfectly on schedule. Where the end was assured from the beginning. Such peace the world cannot give you, but the providence of God can and does.

6. A Summation of God, Evil, and Freedom

Here are some of the primary propositions of God’s relationship with evil in Providence. God will decree evil to accomplish His good purpose. God acts as the primary cause of all events. He causes actions by the exercise of His grace both by exerting it or withdrawing it. God decrees evil only through secondary causes which serve His good purpose. Secondary causes freely act in an evil way according to their natures. Now we will summarize our developments of each of these propositions.

a. The Sustaining Necessity of God’s Grace

To correctly perceive these propositions we must recognize God’s sustaining work of His creation is essential for its existence. Without God’s sustaining grace creation would die. Creation has no force or life apart from God’s creation and sustainment. Thus, this sustaining force is constantly at work. The Apostle Paul stated this, *“in Him we live, move and have our being”* (Acts 17:28). So as God exerts His grace to sustain His creation, He also exerts His grace to govern His creation. There are three guiding principles of the exercise of God’s grace: 1) He cannot act in ways to contradict His nature; 2) He will not act in ways which contradict the natures of His creatures, and 3) He will act in ways which we are most fitting to accomplish His will.

b. The Depravity of Man

The nature of man is evil (Mt. 7:11; Rom. 1:18-32; Gen. 6:5, 11). This does not mean he is as evil as he can be, but the reason he is not is in God’s work not man’s. God limits man’s opportunities for evil, He exerts prophylactic protection (e.g. the Law, civil authority, family authority, religious authority, as well as, special interventions—“hedges” against evil), God has established in man’s soul a conscience, and He cuts short evil’s day in His judgments (e.g. Sodom and Gomorrah). Thus, man is not as evil as he could be, but man is not so evil as to not be able to do “good,” i.e. benefit others. Yet the popular mistake is that because man can benefit others then that ability must make him good. Such does not make man good, but rather in Jesus’ words, *“if you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts...”* (Mt. 7:11). Goodness for man would be to love God with all his heart, soul, and might and to love his neighbor as himself for the glory of God in both motive and action. Such man is incapable of doing without the intervention of God’s grace.

⁶⁹ Calvin, *Institutes*, Bk. I, Chap. XVII, 439-443

Let's amplify this. Man, we are taught, was made in the image of God (Gen. 1:26, 27), but in the Fall of man Adam's sin brought about a corruption upon this image of God in man (Gen. 3:7ff.; Rom. 5:1-12; Col. 3:10). It did not entirely destroy it. Man can still reason, will, and feel; he still has a conscience. He is still a moral being, but all of these faculties are warped. Romans 1 teaches us that man's heart was darkened (v. 23), that man exchanged the truth for a lie (v. 25), that his mind became depraved (v. 28), i.e. since he was unwilling to submit to God and His Law man's sin resulted in his inability to submit to God and His Law (cf. Rom. 8:6-8). Man now reasoned, willed, felt, justified, and moralized without knowing God. Adam was not only shut out of the Garden (Gen. 3:24); he also lost the true knowledge of God and the capability to truly worship Him (Col. 3:10). Such is the corruption on man's soul which affects his total being—his perception of himself, the world around him, where he came from, why he is here, and where he is going (cf. Prov. 1:7; 9:10). So everything in his heart is disoriented and lost. He is dead to God (Eph. 2:1). Yet, God in His graciousness provides grace that man might do good, i.e. benefit one another. God's sustaining grace enables man to do good even though he is evil. God sustains the parenting needs, the spousal needs, the neighborly needs, the patriotic needs, etc., so man needs and wants and can do good. God thus sustains His image in man though it is now corrupted by man's inability to know God. This ability is further tainted with man's focus upon himself, his selfishness. Yet, God's sustaining grace enables man to resist and harness this selfishness to varying degrees. God's working of grace upon the human heart will yield works of righteousness (Rom. 2:14, 15), yet the withdrawal of that grace will cause a man to plunge into the depth of sin because he then has nothing to follow but his own heart (Jer. 17:9; Prov. 14:12). His heart is evil, thus without the grace of God he has not even the capability of true repentance (2 Tim 2:25, 26). We recognize that man does good because of God's sustaining grace.

We live in a day that shouts the “goodness” of man from every corner and flags a healthy self-esteem as a “cure-all” for all societal and individual ills. The Church has bought its portion of this misperception in varying degrees, and she has forsaken the doctrine of the depravity of man. We do not want to look at how evil the soul of man is in its corrupted state, but then we cannot until we can see the holiness of God. Only against such purity can we truly see how depraved man's soul is and only against the back drop of God's Law can we see our true rebel natures (Mk. 10:18; Rom. 8:6-8). Someone once pointed out that you can look at sheep against a green pasture and call them white, but when the same sheep are viewed against a background of pure white snow the sheep are no longer perceived as white. Such is the perspective on the nature of man when we compare man with other men, and then compare him to the holiness of God and His Law.

Further, we have lost the true sense of man's abominable rebellion against God. Rather, we see secular history as the norm and the necessary, and we see man serving God as the insignificant, optional, and unnecessary. Man's utterly rebellious heart is manifested by his rejection of God as his creator, his nonworship of God, his refusal to give thanks to God, and his arrogant and prideful silence neglecting to ask for God's grace. God's name is thoughtlessly used in vain. God's laws are systematically broken, supplanted, and ridiculed. God is made the last thought, given the last consideration, and even the thought of God and His will is completely abandoned. Religion is sold as magic and is used as only a means “to get everything you ever wanted from God.” Spirituality is characterized by seeking a god of your own design and imagination, and life after death is the fulfillment of your fondest imagining. We live in a world where faith in faith is religion, and reality is whatever we believe it to be. Such is the rebellious heart of mankind, which says, “I'm really a pretty good person.” The secular man does not understand that being as good as everyone else is not a commendation, but it is a condemnation.

c. Man Is Free to Act According to His Nature

Evil is that which is less than good, therefore God cannot be evil. God is the definition of good. He cannot be the author of evil because by His very nature He cannot be less than what He is (Jas. 1:13; 2 Tim. 2:13). Satan, his angels, and mankind have authored evil. Jonathan Edwards used the analogy of a planet drawn into orbit around a sun. The sun nourished the planet, and it flourished. The sun then spun off into its own orbit, and the planet was sent spinning of into the universe. Without the sun's nourishment the planet returned to its dead state. Edwards then asks, did the sun cause the planet to die? He answered, No. It died because it had no life of its own. It was the life-giving rays of the sun, which gave it life. When the sun withdrew from the planet all that changed was the gift, which the sun had given. Such is the grace of God given to man. Without the grace of God man returns to his own nature. Thus, evil is not the exercise of God. Grace is the exercise of God, and He is under no obligation to exercise His grace a part from His sovereign will. When He withdraws His grace from man, man returns to the counsel of his evil heart.

d. The Interaction of God's Grace and the Nature of Man

The withdrawing of His grace also has very specific results, and these results are so immediate to the action of God that they can even appear to be attributed to God. For example, "*Now the Spirit of the Lord departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the Lord terrorized him*" (1 Sam. 16:14; cf. 2 Cor. 12:7). In light of other passages it is clearly impossible for God to be tempted or directly participate in evil (e.g. Jas. 1:13; 1 Jn. 1:5), and this is wholly consistent with the nature of God as represented throughout Scripture. We must therefore balance a passage such as 1 Samuel 16:14 with these other passages, which enable us to see that when God's grace is withdrawn (i.e. a hedge which holds back an evil attack, Job 1:10) that the immediate result is an attack of evil. It wanted to execute its evil intent before but was prevented by God's grace, thus once the grace was withdrawn it immediately attacks. We see this in other passages, which should form the correct model for us (cf. 2 Sam. 24:1 with 1 Chron. 21:1). Job 1 and 2 teach us that it is Satan who releases the attacks upon Job, but he was able to do this only after each restriction of God's hedge of protection around Job. First, the hedge is removed around Job's prosperity (v. 12). Second, the hedge is removed from Job's health but not his life (2:6). It is in light of this model, which is the fullest explanation of the workings of God and Satan, that we should understand other less clear passages. We should note that God did not completely remove His grace from Job, and consequently Job stood. We are reminded of Jesus words, "*...no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand*" (Jn. 10:29). Such is the protective grace of God.

The withdrawal of God's grace always has a predictable result. It is not open to chance. The nature of Satan, his angels, and man dictate what will happen when God's grace is removed. Thus, man is not coerced to sin when God's grace is removed, but rather man freely does what is natural to him. Satan does not need to be coerced to do what is in his heart; rather he like man only wants the opportunity to do it. Thus, both Satan and man are free to do what they want. On the other hand, when God showers His grace upon someone whether it be for salvation in Christ or for some temporal blessing God gives him eyes to see, ears to hear, and a heart to know (Dt. 29:4) what would not be seen, heard, or known without God's grace. With God's grace man freely does what is obvious to him. He is not coerced. He freely seizes that which has by God's grace become the desire of his eye, ear, and heart. Man has a freedom of choice governed by his own nature and the grace of God. Thereby, God is always just to hold man culpable or blamable for his actions, and man cannot say to God that He was unjust in judgments (Ps. 51:4; Rom. 9:19-21). God is righteous in calling us to be thankful in all things for they are all by His hand. Truly, in Him we live and move and have our being! As the Psalmist wrote, "*You have enclosed me behind and before...*" (139:5). We therefore are to learn that we have one hope and one hope only. We were made to cry out and depend upon the grace of God, and to attempt to live arrogantly and independently of it will be justly condemned.

e. The Interaction of Primary and Secondary Causes

By these activities God decrees the acts of man without participating in them. God is the primary cause without authoring evil, while man is a secondary cause. In this context we must hear a deeper ring to the word and idea “grace.” *“My grace is sufficient for you...”* (2 Cor. 12:9). *“He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires”* (Rom. 9:18). *“But Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord”* (Gen. 6:8). David cried out because he knew his need, *“Be gracious to me, O God, according to Your lovingkindness...”* (Ps. 51:1). *“For by grace you have been saved...”* (Eph. 2:8). *“For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men...”* (Titus 2:11). *“...According to the power of God, who has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was granted us in Christ Jesus from all eternity...”* (2 Tim. 1:9, 10). *“But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me did not prove vain; but I labored even more than all of them yet not I, but the grace of God with me”* (1 Cor. 15:10).

There are at least two reasons God decrees evil through secondary causes: first, to demonstrate His justice by defeating and judging evil with its own evil, thereby it destroys itself with its own plans (e.g. Rom. 1:18-32; Ps. 34:21; 37:14, 15; 81:11, 12; 94:23; Prov. 26:27; 28:10; Esther 7:10), and second, to demonstrate His power to bring good out of evil (e.g. Gen. 3:14-16; 50:20; Ps 118:22, 23; Hab. 1:12-2:20; Rom. 8:28; 2 Cor. 12:9, 10; Heb. 12:1-11). In these ways we see the consistent theme of Scripture that God created and providentially reigns to demonstrate His glory. The flow of history is toward one end and only one end—the manifestation of God’s glory! History is not man-centered but God-centered. Without this perspective we ask all the wrong questions and construe all events to their wrong conclusions. *“For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea”* (Hab. 2:14).

D. God’s Visible Hand

God’s providence is mostly invisible to the eyes of His creation and creatures. Though invisible not less real, but then there is special Providence in which God makes His providence manifest, and His hand becomes visible.

We see this happen in Joseph’s life. The early events of his endearedness to Jacob and his brothers’ hatred and jealousy of him were the workings of God’s invisible hand. Though later Joseph comes to see God’s providence at work in all these events when he tells his brothers, *“Do not be grieved ...because you sold me, for God sent me before you to preserve life”* (Gen. 45:5). Joseph’s revelation was that **“God had sent”** him to Egypt. That which had been invisible God had made visible and manifest to Joseph. God taught him that it was not His brothers but God’s own providential workings, which brought him to Egypt and which fulfilled God’s promises to Abraham.

1. Deliverance from Anger and Bitterness

A point of application should be noted here. It was this fact, that Joseph saw the hand of God providentially directing his life, which delivered him from bitterness, anger, and revenge toward his brothers. To see God at work is a gift. This gift is to be our buffer from bitterness, anger, and revenge. With this regard we repeat a quote from John Calvin notes this so well.

“The mind of a Christian, therefore, when it is certainly persuaded that all things happen by the ordination of God, and that there is nothing fortuitously contingent, will always direct its views to him as the supreme cause of all things, and will also consider inferior causes in their proper order. He will not doubt that the particular providence of God is watchful for his preservation, never permitting any event, which it will not overrule for his advantage and safety. But, since he is concerned in the first place with men, and in the next place with the other creatures, he will assure himself, as to both, that the providence of God reigns over all. With respect to men,

whether good or evil, he will acknowledge that their deliberations, wills, endeavors, and powers, are under his control, so that it is at his option to direct them whithersoever he pleases, and to restrain them as often as he pleases. The vigilance of the particular providence of God for the safety of the faithful is attested by numerous and very remarkable promises: ‘*Cast thy burden upon the Lord, and he shall sustain thee: he shall never suffer the righteous to be moved.*’ (Psalm lv. 22; 1 Peter v. 7) ‘*He that dwelleth in the secret place of the Most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty.*’ (Psalm xci. 1) ‘*He that toucheth you, toucheth the apple of his eye. We have a strong city: salvation will God appoint for walls and bulwarks.*’ (Zech. ii. 8) ‘*Though a woman forget her sucking child, yet will I not forget thee.*’ (Isaiah xxvi. 1; xlix. 15) Moreover, this is the principal scope of the Biblical histories, to teach us that the Lord so sedulously defends the ways of the saints, that they may not even ‘*dash their foot against a stone.*’ (Psalm xci. 12)

“...If there be no more efficacious remedy for anger and impatience, surely that man has made no small proficiency, who has learned in this case to meditate on the Divine providence, that he may be able at all times to recall his mind to this consideration: ‘It is the will of the Lord, therefore it must be endured; not only because resistance is unlawful and vain, but because he wills nothing but what is both just and expedient.’ **The conclusion of the whole is this - that, when we suffer injuries from men, forgetting their malice, which would only exasperate our grief and instigate our minds to revenge, we should remember to ascend to God, and learn to account it a certain truth, that whatever our enemies have criminally committed against us, has been permitted and directed by his righteous dispensation.**”⁷⁰

2. God Makes Himself Visible

As we follow Joseph to Egypt we find God’s providence becoming visible. First, we are told that “*the Lord was with Joseph*” (Gen. 39:2). Here God is making Himself visible. Though we know in retrospect that God was with Joseph in Canaan from Joseph’s later testimony (45:5,7). Here God tells us that He was present.

We should note that this is no small bit of information. Think about it personally. How many times in moments when your world seemed to be draped in darkness, despair, and hopelessness would you have been recharged and renewed to hear our great God whisper to you, “*I am with you!*” So, we must remember that, when He makes His presence visible to us, it is not just for the comfort of the moment, but so that we will remember that in those times when His presence is invisible to us He is no less present!

Next, we find that it was also revealed to Potiphar that God was present with Joseph. “*Now his master saw that the Lord was with him and how the Lord caused all that he did to prosper in his hand*” (39:3). We see that by this Joseph is elevated to chief steward or comptroller of Potiphar’s house.

Four important insights are here. One, God works to accomplish His good purpose in His children which is their ultimate eternal salvation (Rom. 8:28). Yet, those who are not His children, God in His mercy and grace blesses these too, especially when these bless His children (Gen. 12:3); but their blessing is only a temporal blessing. Here we see God blessing Potiphar. “*...The Lord blessed the Egyptian’s house on account of Joseph...*” (39:5).

Two, though God makes His providential working visible and evident to one person does not mean it is or will become evident to others. For example, when Potiphar looked on Joseph he saw God’s hand, but when Potiphar’s wife looked on Joseph she saw only a handsome young man whom she desired (39:7). What is visible to one is not visible to all. Later, we see that the Jailer and the Pharaoh (41:38,39)

⁷⁰ Calvin, *Institutes*, Bk. I, Chap. XVII, 239, 240, 242, 243; bold added.

both saw that the Lord was with Joseph. Yet, Joseph's brothers did not see it, and neither do we have any evidence that Jacob did. God is the One Who gives eyes to see His providence (cf. Dt. 29:4).

Three, when God's providence is visible to us we need to share this insight with those who do not see. God providentially works through His people in this way. We become His vessels of mercy, comfort, and warning to others (cf. 2 Cor. 1:3; Lu. 22:31-34; Phil. 1:12 ff.).

As the events of Joseph's life run through the latter chapters of Genesis we find event after event of both God's visible and invisible hand at work. Joseph's life is the testimony of God's providence and, even more, it is a paradigm, an example, and a model of the working of God's providence. In this we are taught that God is preserving and governing our lives each step of the way and all through history. Nothing is left to chance. It is all Providence!

Four, the fruit of this fact is that it enables us to enter into God's peace. The Apostle Paul describes this peace. "...the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 4:7). This verse teaches us about "God's personal peace" as it comes to stand as a guardian over our hearts and minds. God's peace is the peace in which He dwells. Imagine for a moment the Throne room of Heaven. There is no rush, no panic. Everything and everyone is calm, orderly, at peace. Why? Because everything is on schedule, nothing is backlogged. There is no uncertainty as to the outcome of events; everything is certain. There is no anxiety. This is the peace of our sovereign God. He reigns, and all is under control, on schedule, proceeding to its decreed end. God invites us to enter His peace, but to do so we must trust Him. The other option is to yield to your fears, anxieties, and uncertainties (e.g., Mt. 14:22-27), to the appearance of our circumstances. Peace is the fruit of the Bible's doctrine of God's providence, which assures us that, every detail of our lives and history is sovereignly in control and on schedule. A confidence and faith in God's providence is the door into God's perfect peace!

III. Providence and Prayer

There are three major areas of questions and confusion in the study of Providence. First is the question, how can God sovereignly direct Providence without violating man as a moral agent? Second is the question, how can God sovereignly direct Providence without becoming the author of the evil perpetrated by His creatures? Third is the question, how can God sovereignly direct Providence and prayer still be a meaningful activity? As we looked at the paradigm of Providence in the life of Joseph we have attempted to answer the first two of these questions. We now turn to the third question regarding Providence and prayer.

A. A Personal Experience

As we begin I would like to preface this study by sharing a personal experience. It was in light of this experience and other resulting struggles which perhaps explains the length of this section. In my research I sought to find answers which were both personally relevant and which would also be of help to others on the road behind me. For I do not believe that my struggles and questions on this topic reflect only my experience, but I believe they are extremely relevant for the Body of Christ. Further, my findings have resulted in a personal revival of my own prayer life, and so my prayer is that such will be the reader's experience as well!

My mother was diagnosed with cancer some eleven or twelve years ago. She sought medical treatment, and our family prayed for the Lord's healing and deliverance. During this time I had a very confident certitude that God would spare my mother. I simply had no doubt about it. Surgery was necessary, but the anticipated report that all the cancer had been removed was not what we received. Rather, the surgeon told us it had spread beyond the originally infected organs. My faith was surprised, but my certitude of God's deliverance was barely shaken. Chemotherapy was the next step with some initial success, but the final diagnosis was that the cancer was spreading, and it was terminal. I was beset by confusion, but I still believed God would miraculously heal my mother. As we came to the final months of her life it became evident that God was not going to heal her. She declined and degenerated as the final stages of her cancer progressed, until finally the disease ended her life.

I probably have more insight into the process I went through now than then. I was confident of my mother's salvation, and I deeply desired to be of support to my father and my own family, but in the weeks and months to follow I found it more and more difficult to pray. Finally, I began to experience open anger toward God for not delivering my mother, but especially so because I had firmly and confidently believed He would. I had claimed the promises that if I truly believed God would heal my mother, then He would give me what I asked. I struggled for probably a year without any intellectual or emotional resolution. I lost confidence in prayer not so much in God. I eventually worked through my anger, and I began rebuilding my relationship with the Lord. The key for me during that time was my daily times of personal worship and learning to praise God for Who He is, delighting in Him, and in His love for me. It was a spiritual discipline of meditating on Scripture and turning it to praise God. It was renewing! Yet, prayer, as personal petition, was difficult and unresolved for me. I eventually put my questions on hold and pushed on, but there was simply a question mark for me over the relationship of prayer, faith, and the sovereignty of God.

Finally, it was this study, which follows, which began to free me of the confusion and worry that prayer demands perfect faith. It confirmed to me that the therapy of meditation on Scripture and turning it to praise is the very foundation and heart from which prayer is to spring. For prayer is not first getting what you want from God, but first, it is the means of intimate and necessary communion between God and His children. From this communion, the hearts of His children are changed by beholding Him in His

majesty, beauty, and glory. We come to want what He wants, and then He gives us the desires of our hearts, which is now His will. Prayer in this context becomes the means for God to give us what He sovereignly wants to give us. This we receive with thankfulness, but not necessarily or always with understanding, and with utter confidence in God, Who is good, Who is sovereign, and Who is entirely trustworthy.

B. The Problem of Providence and Prayer

Probably any praying Christian has his or her own personal confusions, challenges, and frustrations with prayer, but most tend to center on similar issues and grounds. As we approach the study of Providence and its interaction with prayer there are common problems, which we face. Prayer and Providence pose both a theoretical and practical question. Very simply, if God's providence has established everything according to His will, then why should we pray? In other words, does not Providence preclude prayer and make it unnecessary? The unraveling of the answer to this question yields an extremely practical outcome, but it also requires a review of the Biblical teaching on prayer and for many of us a reconstruction of our theology of prayer.

Robert Dabney more formally states the question for us:

“Since God is omniscient, there is no meaning in our telling Him our wants, for He knows them already, better than we do. Since He is good, He already feels every proper impulse to make us happy and to relieve our pains; and does not need any persuading on our part, to incline Him to mercy. And since He is immutable, and has already determined from eternity, every act of His future agency, by an unchangeable decree, to hope to change God by our importunity, is worse than useless; it is a reproach to Him. Hence there is nothing for the wise man to do, but to receive His allotments with calm submission, and to honour Him by imitating His moral perfection.”⁷¹

He continues and starts us down the road to a right understanding of prayer.

“We reply: to him who had any reverence for the Scripture these assertions of God's wisdom and goodness would be arguments to prove, instead of disproving, the propriety of prayer. For has not this wise and good being commanded prayer? Has He not seen fit to appoint prayer as the instrument for receiving His purposed blessings? Then, to the humble mind, there is the best proof that prayer is reasonable. But farther, we have already remarked that, so far as prayer is intended to produce any change, it is not a change in God, but in us. He does not command it because He needs to be informed of our wants, or to be made willing to help. He commands it because He has seen fit to ordain it as the appointed means for reception of His blessings. And we have seen abundant reasons why it is a suitable means to be thus ordained: a wise means, a right means. It is a necessary and instinctive outgoing of the rightly feeling soul. It is the proper homage for man to render God. It is an influence wholesome for man's soul itself. And now, God having seen these good reasons (doubtless with others) for ordaining prayer as the means of receiving His favour; there is nothing in His wisdom, goodness, or immutability, inconsistent with His regular enforcement of the rule, “ask, and ye shall receive.”⁷²

⁷¹ Systematic Theology, 717; cf. Millard J. Erickson, Christian Theology (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983, 1984, 1985), 405.

⁷² Ibid.; cf. Calvin, Institutes, Vol. II, Bk. III, Chap. XX, 94-95; Thomas Goodwin, “Profiting from Prayer,” What Happens When I Pray?, David Harman (editor) (London: Grace Publications Trust, 1997, from Goodwin's [1600-1680] The Return of Prayers), 95-98. Goodwin wrote with the hope to convince his readers of the value of prayer and the need to persevere in prayer. He began his work with eight reasons why they should pray. His reasons are well worth noting: 1) Because God has commanded us to pray! We could easily stop with this reason we do not need more; 2) “Because prayer is a means of grace for every Christian, and ...we shall despise God's gracious provision for us if we think that prayer will not be any use in bringing about the purpose for which God has ordained it. Every faithful prayer is ordained by God to be a means of obtaining what we desire and pray for” (95); 3) Because God has ordained prayer as a specific means of Christ's intercession

Dabney points out four critical meanings for our Biblical understanding of prayer. First, we are to pray because it is commanded by Scripture (Mt. 6:9; Lu. 18:1; Rom. 12:12; Col. 4:2,12; 1 Thess. 5:17; Eph. 6:18; Phil. 4:6; Jude 20, etc.). Second, we are to pray because God has ordained it as the means of receiving that which He has ordained to give (Mt. 7:7-11; 21:22; Mk. 11:24; Lu. 11:9-13; 18:1-8; Jn. 16:24; Jas. 1:5,6; 1 Jn. 3:22; 5:14,15; etc.). Third, we pray because our souls were so created to find meaning, delight, contentment, and exercise of faith through prayer (Ps. 27:8; 40:16,17; 5:1-3; e.g. 1 Sam. 1:9-13; 2:1 ff.; Phil. 4:6,7; 1 Pet. 5:6,7; 2 Cor. 12:7-10; Jas. 4:2,3; Heb. 11:1,6,39,40; etc.). Fourth, we pray because it is the appropriate means to give homage, to acknowledge our dependence, and to honor God (1 Pet. 5:5-7; Jas. 4:6-10; Jn. 15:7,8; 16:24; Lu. 14:7-11; 18:1-8,9-17; Mt. 6:5-7,11-13; 7:7-11; 2 Sam. 12:16; etc.).

Of Dabney's reasons for why we pray and ought to pray the first is the most obvious, but it is also the most fundamental. We want to take a step back from it as our beginning point. God has commanded us to pray, but Who is this God Who would command such a thing as prayer?

C. The Nature of God and Prayer

The beginning point for understanding the Bible's theology of prayer, and every other doctrine, is to realize that the context of whatever Scripture teaches is what it teaches us about the nature of God. C. W. F. Smith points this out: "Prayer is attempted intercourse with God.... Its means and end always depend upon how the nature of God is conceived."⁷³ In other words, the defining revelation on prayer is the nature of God. Prayer is shaped in Scripture by the nature of God. Prayer comes from the nature of God, and it is not independent to it. Prayer is relevant because of Who God is. If God were not Who He is, then prayer would be irrelevant. Prayer is a biblical approach to God; a privilege given to God's children through Christ. Therefore, prayer will not and cannot violate the nature of God. Prayer conforms to the nature of God and never the other way around. We pray because God delights in our prayers and has commissioned prayer as a means to His favor and communion with Him, but, apart from God's commissioning of prayer, prayer would be irrelevant, meaningless and useless. God is by nature the One Who hears prayers and accords this means to commune with Him. As the nature of God solicits our prayers, so this same nature demands that the prayers offered, answered, and refused conform also to His nature; or they become irrelevant, meaningless and useless. Prayer is not the invention of man, but a means commissioned by God and established by His nature.

The point here is critical. For many make prayer to be something which violates God's nature. In some cases, it is interpreted into formulas, which obligate God to fulfill their prayer requests. In other scenarios, prayer constrained by faith holds God hostage to do what is demanded in faith. These approaches find some Scriptural evidence only because these interpretations do not balance and interpret these verses by the greater context of the nature of God. True Biblical prayer can never be made to be a manipulation of the Bible's sovereign God! Dabney writes:

"We can hardly suppose that God would abdicate his omniscience [all-knowing] in his dealings

for His people; 4) "No prayer is ever useless. Where God has given a heart to speak, he has an ear to hear. To think otherwise is to despise God's gracious provision for us; "...if we are not confident that our prayer is going to be heard, not only is God's provision for us misused, but his name is misused also. ...You thus rob God of one of his most royal titles, for he describes himself as " God that hears prayer"(95); 5) Because watchfulness and thanksgiving are required of us (Col. 4:2; Ps. 5:3) (96); 6) Because without prayer you will lose the experience of proving God faithful and the enhancing of your hope and confidence in Him (Ps. 116:2) (97); 7) Because through prayer you will gain insight into your own heart, ways and prayers and learn to judge them (Ps. 66:18-19; Jas. 4:3; Jn. 16:24); and 8) Because of prayer we commune with our God. "God and we should be of one mind and desire the same things is a cause for great joy"(98).

⁷³ C.W.F. Smith, "Prayer," *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, G.A. Buttrick (ed.) (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), III: 857.

towards the very objects of His redeeming love, and makes their misguided, though pious desires the absolute rule of His conduct towards them. This would be the literal result, were He absolutely pledged to do for shortsighted Christians exactly what they, with pious motives, ask of Him. We may add here, that such an assumption is refuted by God's claim to chastise believers for their profit. They of course pray, and innocently pray for exemption. ...If God were under bond to hear every prayer of faith, He would have to lay down the rod in each case, as soon as it was taken up."⁷⁴

The Biblical revelation of God must define prayer for us, and when we allow Scripture to so interpret itself we find a consistent whole and all its parts adding to this whole!

Petitionary prayer is making our desires known to God, but this very act implies that many things about the nature of God. Dabney points out that prayer reflects God to be omnipresent (present everywhere) and omniscient (all-knowing) or "otherwise our prayers would never reach His ears." He must be all-wise "to know infallibly what is best for us, and how to procure it." Further, He must be infinitely good, "otherwise we should have no sufficient warrant to carry Him our wants, and His benevolence would be overtaxed by such constant and innumerable appeals." Last, He must be omnipotent (all-powerful) or He could not protect from dangers, and provide needs. "For these reasons the offering of prayer is a virtual ascription of divinity to its object."⁷⁵

1. God, Who Delights in Prayer: Matthew 7:7-11

"Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened" (Mt. 7:7, 8). In these verses we are taught that God is One who commands prayer (cf. 1 Tim. 2:8), so we are taught to ask, seek, and knock. To our obedience God will give, reveal, and open. This unconditional invitation and command is not made once but twice. Verses 7 and 8 emphasize that God is One who delights in our prayers. Frederick Bruner comments, "With human beings, importunate asking, seeking, and knocking are considered rude, 'troublesome and disgusting,' but with God, *not* to come asking eagerly is displeasing...the rabbis [taught]: "'A man is annoyed by being worried by the requests of his friends, but with God, all the time a man puts his needs and requests before him, God loves him all the more.'"⁷⁶

a. God's Goodness

"Or what man is there among you who, when his son asks for a loaf, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, he will not give him a snake, will he? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give what is good to those who ask Him!" (Mt. 7:9-11). In verses 9-11 Jesus more explicitly elaborated God's nature. These verses focus on the goodness of God as we entreat Him in prayer, and in His goodness we find His generosity. Jesus poignantly contrasts the natural parenting instinct and generosity with that of our heavenly Father, but He does so with a unique twist. As generous and conscientious as a human parent can be, it is still the fruit of his fleshly nature, which is "evil" (v. 11). "*How much more*" (Jesus' key phrase of contrast, v.

⁷⁴ Robert Dabney, Systematic Theology (Carlisle, Penn.: The Banner of Truth, 1985 from Presbyterian Pub. Co., St. Louis, 1878), 722.

⁷⁵ Dabney, Systematic Theology, 714; cf. W. Bingham Hunter, The God Who Hears (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1986), *omniscience*-32ff., 41f., *omnipresence*-34ff., *omnipotence*-157ff.; William Ames, The Marrow of Theology (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1997, from Third Latin Edition, 1629), 258, 259: "[Prayer] arises first from faith. Rom. 10:14, *How shall they call on him in whom they have not believed?* We mean the faith whereby we believe, **first**, that God knows all things, including the inward affections and motions of our hearts, wherein especially the essence of prayer is found. **Second**, that God is omnipotent and so can do what he wills in fulfilling our desires. **Third**, that he is the author and giver of every good thing; and **fourth** that he approves and accepts our prayer through Christ."

⁷⁶ Frederick Dale Bruner, The Christbook, Matthew 1-12, Vol. 1 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987), 278.

11) will your heavenly Father's generosity be, Whose nature is "good" (v. 11). Bruner explains Jesus' contrast:

"Jesus intends to shock us by these illustrations. He says, 'You who are evil'—an interesting reflection, incidentally, on Jesus' sober estimate of human nature *and* of his own—he does not say 'we who are evil.' (Bengel...calls our verse 'an illustrious testimony to the doctrine of original sin.' Bonnard...contests... 'The *a fortiori* reasoning ["how much more"] does *not* start with the general goodness of man in order to lift itself to the generosity of God; it starts with the wickedness of man...to make comprehensible the incomparable generosity of the heavenly Father.') This human analogy intends to buck up our wavering, unbelieving, reluctant-to-pray spirits and to encourage us to start *asking!* Jesus is trying in every way he can—whether by repeating an open-ended promise six times (as he did in the Ask sentences) or by appealing now to the universal love of parents—to bring us by any means possible to the Father, hands out and mouths open. We are not supposed to have a dumb relation with God in which he is so divine that he shouldn't be bothered by our talk or in which we are so sinful we shouldn't try. *Jesus wants us to ask.*"⁷⁷

Jesus' assurance is that we need not fear, be reluctant, or hesitate. God from His "*good*" nature will only give us "*good things*," and He will do so eagerly if we simply ask, seek, and knock. We already have a list of the "*good things*" which God is eager to give here in the Sermon on the Mount (Mt. 5-7).

"...[The] petitions of the Lord's Prayer—each petition is a very good thing.... The good things of the Blessings [Beatitudes] and obedience to the Commands (Matt 5) are also right askings, as are the right ways of the Devotions and the right seekings of the Goals (Matt 6). The Matthean phrase 'good things' limits prayer, too, in that prayer for the not good is forbidden....⁷⁸ Hence every good thing taught in every paragraph in Scripture is something we can ask for in prayer. The emphasis in the text is on the Father's breathtaking readiness to give his asking children what is good for them. To awaken a simple, uncomplex faith in the Father is the goal of this Sum, as it was the goal of the whole sixth chapter, especially that chapter's Lord's Prayer."⁷⁹

b. God's Sovereignty

Herein is the nature of God, which commissions prayer as the ordained means for receiving the blessings, the good things, which God desires to give His children. Yet, one final attribute of God's nature must be touched upon—His Sovereignty. God's sovereignty is established by an overwhelming number of texts. "*Our God is in the heavens; He does whatever He pleases*" (Ps. 115:3). "*All the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, but He [God] does according to His will in the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of earth; and no one can ward off His hand or say to Him 'What have You done?'*" (Dan. 4:35). "*Job...said, 'I know that You can do all things, and that no purpose of Yours can be thwarted'*" (Job 42:2). "*Remember the former things long past, for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like Me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things which have not been done, saying, 'My purpose will be established, and I will accomplish all My good pleasure'*" (Is. 46:9, 10).⁸⁰ Hunter explains the relationship between prayer and God's sovereignty:

"...Prayer has been ordained by God as a means to accomplish aspects of his will. Given human limitation, God must do many things irrespective of whether or how people pray.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 279.

⁷⁸ Cf. "The Larger Catechism" in *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Part I, Book of Confessions* (Louisville: The Office of the General Assembly, 1996), 7.294, p.234: "Q. 184. **For what things are we to pray?** A. We are to pray for all things tending to the glory of God, the welfare of the church, our own or others' good; but not for anything that is unlawful."

⁷⁹ Bruner, *The Christbook*, Vol. 1, 280.

⁸⁰ Cf. Ps 75:7; 2 Kings 19:25; Prov. 16:1, 9, 33; 19:21; 20:24; Acts 15:18:17:24-31; Rom. 11:33-36; Eph. 1:11; Phil. 2:13; 1 Tim.6:15, 16.

Nevertheless, apparently there are some activities, which God has chosen to accomplish in a way which allows men and women to cooperate through prayer in bringing his will to fruition. God gives his children the impulse and ability to pray in order that he may respond to their petitions and carry out aspects of his will.

“Prayers are the free acts of men and women, and God is not dependent on or limited by them. But he is pleased to bring his purposes into reality by responding to prayer. This view is supported by texts such as the following: ‘In his heart a man plans his course, but the LORD determines his steps’ (Prov. 16:9); ‘It is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose’ (Phil. 2:13).

“...God will do what he has sovereignly chosen to do. This thought is the central point of Ezekiel 36. But in the final two verses the sovereign Lord says he will act *in response to the prayers of his people*: ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Once again I will yield to the plea of the house of Israel and do this for them.... Then they will know I am the LORD’ (vv. 37-38). So as to act sovereignly, God apparently will move his people to pray so he can respond.⁸¹

Hunter is pointing out that God in His sovereignty has first among all the reasons for prayer ordained prayer, as a means for accomplishing His will. In this, He prompts His children to freely pray whether from piety or the personal exigencies of circumstances.

Paul Helms asks,

“Why is it important to bear in mind that God has ordained the activity of praying under certain circumstances? It is important if we are to resist the temptation to separate the action of praying from the matrix of other actions and events in which it is set, and to speculate about ‘the power of prayer’ in isolation. It is easy to ask, ‘if A had not prayed, would God have done what he did?’ But to do so is in effect to pry apart the action of praying from the total matrix of events and actions of which it forms a part.”⁸²

Helm wants us to see that prayer is not independent of God’s sovereignty, but it is a part of the exercise of His sovereignty. Thus, God sovereignly ordains the answers to our prayers, but He also ordains that we pray, so He can answer as He has ordained.

C. S. Lewis summarizes for us once again one of the clear reasons why God ordained prayer. It was not because God needed prayer, but it was for the benefit of His children by their participation in the accomplishment of God’s sovereign purpose in history.

“Infinite wisdom does not need telling what is best, and infinite goodness needs no urging to do it. But neither does God need any of those things that are done by finite agents, whether living or inanimate. He could, if He chose, repair our bodies miraculously without food; or give us food without the aid of farmers, bakers and butchers; or knowledge without the aid of learned men; or convert the heathen without missionaries. Instead, He allows soils and weather and animals and muscles, minds and wills of men to co-operate in the execution of His Will. ‘God,’ said Pascal, ‘instituted prayer in order to lend to His creatures the dignity of causality.’”⁸³

God has ordained prayer for His children’s benefit. Yet, being sovereign the end for which He ordained prayer is not left to whim or chance, but it is secured by His sovereignty over prayer.

2. God’s Will and Prayer: 1 John 5:14, 15

Thus, we find that the doctrine of God’s sovereignty teaches much about prayer. For this reason we find much said about the will of God and prayer. The cardinal verse on prayer is 1 John 5:14, 15: “*This is the confidence which we have before Him, that, if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us.*

⁸¹ Hunter, *The God Who Hears*, 55-57.

⁸² Paul Helm, *The Providence of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 154.

⁸³ In Hunter, *The God Who Hears*, 57.

And if we know that He hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests which we have asked from Him.” The Lord’s Prayer teaches us to pray, *“Your kingdom come. Your will be done, On earth as it is in heaven”* (Mt. 6:10). We find at the heart of Jesus’ Gethsemane prayer is His desire for the Father’s will: *“My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; yet not as I will, but as You will”* (Mt. 26:39). The intercession of the Holy Spirit in the prayers of the children of God is for the will of God: *“...because He intercedes for the saints according to the will of God”* (Rom. 8:27). The Biblical theme of praying according to the will of God reflects the doctrine of God’s sovereignty. Or to put it another way is to say that because God is sovereign it is necessary that His people pray according to His will. This was why Paul’s intercession for the Colossian church was that they might *“be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding”* (Col. 1:9). It is why it is necessary that our minds be renewed, *“so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect”* (Rom. 12:2). The will of God is not so that we might live pleasing God and then pray however we want, but rather that we might pray the same way we are to live—according to the will of God.

Dabney strikes right at the heart of the greatest misconception of prayer. “So far as prayer is intended to produce any change, it is not a change in God, but in us.”⁸⁴ The unregenerate, natural man does not understand the things of God (1 Cor. 2:14; cf. Rom. 8:6-8). At the heart of his inability to understand the things of God is his desire to use God to achieve his own ends (cf. Jas. 4:2, 3). Whereas, those in Christ, the regenerate, are taught by God’s Word (e.g. Mt. 16:24-26; Rom. 12:1, 2) and the Spirit that our lives can no longer be lived for our own ends, but rather we are being transformed into the likeness of Jesus Christ (Rom. 8:29; Eph. 4:13, 23, 24; Col. 3:9, 10; 2 Cor. 3:17, 18). This fundamentally means that our minds must be conformed to His mind, Who *“humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death...”* (Phil. 2:8; cf. Heb. 10:5-10; 1 Pet. 4:1, 2; 1 Cor. 2:10-16; Mk. 10:43-45). Thus, we are to live for the glory of God in all that we do (Rom. 11:36; 14:6-8; 1 Cor. 10:31). This we must realize is fundamental to our understanding of prayer. The pulse of this principle is that right praying is asking all things according to His will (Mt. 6:9-13; 26:39, 42; Rom. 8:26, 27; 1 Jn. 5:14, 15; cf. 2 Cor. 12:7-10). Such praying changes us. Such change is fundamental to a right theology of prayer.

3. The Reasonableness of Prayer Answered According to God’s Will

Beyond the clear Biblical instruction, it simply makes sense that we pray according to God’s will and that our prayers are a clear reflection of God’s sovereignty. First, it is **absurd**. Think for a moment, to whom are we praying? Paul calls Him *“the only wise God”* (Rom. 16: 27). Isaiah prophesies, *“...[God] Declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things which have not been done, saying, ‘My purpose will be established, and I will accomplish all My good pleasure; ...truly I have spoken; truly I will bring it to pass. I have planned it, surely I will do it’”* (46:9-11). Again, the apostle Paul teaches us, *“the foolishness of God is wiser than man’s wisdom”* (1 Cor. 1:25). So is it not absurd that we would want our will rather than His? He has declared the end from the beginning, i.e., He has decreed the end before the beginning was begun. He knows every cause and effect relationship. He knows every plan within a plan. He alone knows every good end. Would it not be absurd and the height of foolishness to not desire His glorious will but rather cast it aside for my shortsighted will or fickle want? The first practical reason then is, that knowing who God is, it would be absurd to ask for anything but His all knowing and wise will.

Second, it is **dangerous** to ask for anything but God’s will. If it were possible for us to change God’s purpose or plan by subverting His will by ours, would we not be terrified of the possible unforeseen outcome? How many times do God’s children in their panic and fear ask for immediate relief without any consideration of consequences upon their future or others. Mark Twain wrote a short story entitled,

⁸⁴ Dabney, *Systematic Theology*, 717.

“The Mysterious Stranger.” An angel befriended three boys. On one occasion they were overcome watching the grief of a village woman because of her daughter’s death. They pleaded with the angel to do something. When it was done, and they realized the consequences of what they had asked, Twain described their recognition: *“We could not speak; we were frozen with horror, for if we had not meddled with her career she would have been spared this awful fate.”* As a secondary effect another man’s loss is even greater, but the angel attempts to comfort them, *“There, don’t be so distressed. You were sincerely trying to do him a kindness, let that comfort you.”* To which they respond, *“Oh, dear, dear, that cannot comfort us. You ought to have told us what we were doing then we wouldn’t have acted so.”* If God were such as this, and prayer the power to make events conform to our wishes, then how dangerous that power would be. Rather, God’s Word teaches us, *“In the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words; and He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to his purpose”* (Rom. 8:26-28). These verses are God’s assurance that neither our panicked, plotted, nor pathetic petitions will change God’s will from the good purpose He has planned.

The last apparent and practical reason that the priority of prayer is praying for God’s will is that to do anything else besides this is not only **absurd** and **dangerous**; it is also **perverted**. The apostle Paul as he wrote the Colossians gave them a list of the things which God’s wrath will judge. He lists “greed” among them, and then he made a parenthetical comment about “greed.” He wrote, *“greed, which amounts to idolatry.”* In other words, when we make our wants the commanding desire of our hearts, God will judge this in His wrath because we have made our wants into an idol. From our wants we have fashioned the god we worship. James makes this very application to praying. He abruptly and shockingly states that such praying only for our pleasures or desires (4:1 ff.) is to pray from wrong motives. He classifies those who pray in this way as *“adulteresses!”* Does he mean we should never pray for what we want? No! Rather James with all of Scripture establishes that the priority of prayer is praying first and foremost not for what we desire but for what God desires. James’ remedial instruction is, *“Submit, therefore to God”* (v. 7). He continues, *“Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded.”* The priority of prayer is to submit to God and His will, to desire what He desires. Without this priority we are as double-minded men wanting to go two ways at once, and as such we have perverted prayer. We pervert it every time we make our desires, wants, and pleasures, our greed, to be what prayer is all about. We make God our servant. We make God a Jinni to whom we give our wishes, and He is to do our bidding. Is not such praying a perversion of prayer? Do we not make ourselves the god and God the servant?

Prayer is first the communication of a servant to God Who is ever present and Who has called us into covenant with Him through our Lord and Great High Priest Jesus Christ. The greatest priority in this communication is that we are always, and never anything other than, His children and servants. This is what Jesus taught us in the Lord’s Prayer: *“Our Father, Who art in heaven, hallow be Thy name, Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done....”* He is God, Who is Holy, Holy, Holy! In prayer we seek to enter into His presence and into privileged communion with Him; and always above all things, prayer seeks His will, His good pleasure, His purpose, His Kingdom. Within this priority, He invites us to pour out our hearts to Him, and thus seeking His will in all things as His servants, we enter the very peace of God. Was not this kind of praying the example which Jesus gave us in Gethsemane: *“My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; yet not as I will, but as You will”* (Mt. 26:39)? Such praying is not a lack of faith, but rather it is full of faith in our sovereign God.

Another question often arises when speaking of God’s Will and the certainty of it: does God change

His mind?

4. Does God Change His Mind?

Exodus 32 is the account of God threatening to destroy Israel because of their idolatry with the golden calf. Moses intercedes for them so that God will not destroy them. Exodus 32:14 records that God relents from His threat, but this text poses the question, does God change His mind? “*So the Lord changed His mind⁸⁵ about the harm which He said He would do to His people.*” This text and others certainly suggest that God does change His mind.⁸⁶ Some take these passages to indicate that God’s will is not immutable or unchanging. Several considerations must be understood if we are to “rightly divide the word of truth.” First, primary passages of Scripture must serve to interpret secondary passages, and the clear must interpret the less clear. For example, narrative passages must be interpreted by explanatory passages. The reason is that in narrative passages like Exodus 32:14 we are told what happened, but not why it happened. We have a case but not the principle behind the case. If a narrative records a “good” lie (e.g. Ex. 1:17-21), but the Law establishes that bearing false witness is wrong (Ex. 20:16) then which text is primary? The Law is the primary text. In the case of God’s immutability (Ex. 3:14; 2 Kings 19:25; 1 Sam. 15:29; Ps. 102:26-28; Mal. 3:6; Rom. 1:23; Heb 1:11, 12; 13:5, 8; Jas. 1:17; 1 Jn. 1:5), Scripture establishes it beyond question and especially in regard to His decrees (Nu. 23:19, 20; Job 23:13, 14; Ps. 33:11; 110:4; Prov. 19:21; Jer. 4:28; Rom. 11:29; 2 Tim. 2:13; Heb. 6:17,18). It is the primary text. God in His being and decrees does not change (Is. 14:27, 46:9-11).

Second, we need to realize that God has intentions or desires, which are not decrees. A decree by its very nature is unalterable, immutable (Gen. 22:16-18; Nu. 23:19; Ps. 110:4; Jer. 4:28; Rom. 11:29; Heb. 6:17, 18; 2 Tim. 2:13). Yet, God expresses His will in ways which do not come to pass, therefore we must conclude that these expressions of His will are not decrees. For example, He has commanded man not to sin, but man has sinned. God “*desires all men to be saved.*” (1 Tim. 2:4; cf. 2 Pet. 3:9), but not all men will be saved. Thus, we must understand that not all intentions, wishes, and desires of God are His decrees. Such is the case in Exodus 32:14. John MacArthur comments, “God had only threatened judgment, not decreed it. A divine intention is not an unchangeable divine decree. ...Intentions retain a conditional element and do not necessarily bind the speaker to a stated course of action (cf. Jer. 15:16; 18:8-10; 26:3, 13, 19; Joel 2:13; Jonah 3:9, 10; 4:2).”⁸⁷

Third, there is in addition to the above understandings the fact of styles of expression or forms of speech which must be considered. We know God is not like us, but how do we express that which we have no vocabulary or experience to express or understand? We do so by analogy to what we do understand. Passages, especially narrative passages, which record a theophany (i.e. God manifesting Himself to humans), must be understood “anthropomorphically” (i.e. attributing to God human attributes like feelings, arms, footprints, anger, breath, etc.). We have no other terms by which to understand the being of God. Louis Berkhof notes, “And if Scripture speaks of His repenting, changing His intention, and altering His relation to sinners when they repent, we should remember that this is only an anthropopathic way of speaking. In reality the change is not in God, but in man and in man’s relations to God.”⁸⁸

⁸⁵ *Nacham* is the Hebrew word used here (cf. Gen. 6:6, 7; Judges 2:18; 1 Sam. 15:11). It means in the *niphal* stem “to repent” which is often accompanied by a change of plan and of action: Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 480.

⁸⁶ Cf. Gen. 6:6-7, 18:22-23, 20:3, 7; 1 Sam. 15:11; Jer. 15:6; 18:7-8, 26:3; Amos 7:2, 3; Joel 2:13; Jonah 3:10; Is. 38:1-6

⁸⁷ *The MacArthur Study Bible* (Nashville: Word Bibles, 1997), study note Exodus 32:14, 142.

⁸⁸ Berkhof *Systematic Theology*, 59; Calvin, *Institutes*, Vol. I, Bk. I, Chap. XVII, 249.

Fourth, we find in some contexts that God clearly exhibits a willingness to change His mind because He is testing. In Genesis 18 God manifests Himself to Abraham and reveals His coming judgement upon Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham appeals to God to spare the city for the sake of the righteous. Abraham then begins to barter over the number of righteous necessary to spare the cities. Earlier in the narrative God speaks an aside, “Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do...? For I have chosen him, in order that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice, in order that the Lord may bring upon Abraham what He has spoken about him” (vv.17, 19). The purpose of God’s disclosure of this coming judgment to Abraham was both to test and measure Abraham as the leader of God’s people and Abraham’s perception of righteousness and justice. Did God change His mind here? No! Would He have changed His mind? No! Why? Because God knew exactly how many righteous there were in Sodom before Abraham asked. God already knew the outcome before the dialogue. The dialogue served as a test and measure of Abraham. The case is the same for Moses in Exodus 32, Hezekiah in Isaiah 38, and Jonah. This is obvious because God forewarns them. So Calvin comments, “that was not to destroy them, but to reform them, that they might not be destroyed. If this be admitted, the nature of the circumstances leads to the conclusion that we must understand a tacit condition implied...”⁸⁹ To put it in our terms, God was testing and measuring.

For these reasons we should not conclude that God changes His mind in the sense of His eternal purposes decreed before the foundations of the earth (Eph. 1:4, 11; 2 Tim. 1:9). God’s will is immutable. He does not change His mind. We can be assured that as we pray for God’s Will we are praying for that which is immutable, unchangeable.

5. Summary

Our cursory look at the nature of God establishes some necessary parameters for and about prayer. We need always to bear in mind that the nature of prayer is the way it is because God is the way He is! Thus, The nature of God teaches us that our prayers are not a burden to God, we cannot wear Him out with our prayers, for hearing and answering our prayers is a delight to Him. Yet, the nature of God teaches us some qualifications about the prayers God delights to hear and answer. First, we learn that God’s goodness is the fountain of His generosity, but it also characterizes the nature of His answers to our prayers. God will only give us good things, i.e. those things which are according to His good purpose for us (Rom. 8:28). God does not give us purposeless or capricious answers to prayer. Goodness is not relative or arbitrary, rather it always the reflection of God’s goodness and not simply what we think or feel would be good. Second, God’s sovereignty not only enables God to answer prayer, but it is His sovereignty which even ordains our prayers which He is pleased to answer. Thus, God has ordained prayer to give us what He wants to give us. Third, as a result of the working of the first two attributes of God’s nature we are not surprised that in text after text dealing with prayer we find that God’s will is central to Biblical prayer. The reason flows naturally from our first two points: God gives good gifts which are good according to His purpose, and God ordains prayers which ask according to His will, so He can answer according to His will. Thus, His will is central to prayer.

D. The Economy of the Trinity in Prayer: The Roles of the Son and the Spirit

So far we have dealt primarily with the role ascribed to the Father in prayer. There is a Biblical protocol for prayer: we pray to the Father through the Son by the Holy Spirit. Theologians refer to this

⁸⁹ Calvin, *Institutes*, Vol. I, Bk. I, Chap. XVII, 250-251; Calvin explains “repent” simply means “a change of action” when used of God. This is in contrast to any change in His counsel or His will. With regard to God’s decrees and will Calvin notes, “he perpetually and regularly prosecutes what he has foreseen, approved, and decreed from eternity” (249, 250). Cf. Hunter, *The God Who Hears*, 52f.

division of roles as the economy of the Trinity.⁹⁰ Though each person of the Trinity shares the same attributes and each is equal in glory, majesty, and power, yet is ascribed a separate primary role in prayer. We see this in other areas as well. For example, the Father is ascribed most regularly as Creator, the Son is ascribed most regularly as Redeemer, and the Spirit is most regularly ascribed the Indwelling Sanctifier (cf. 1 Cor. 8:6; 12:4-7; 2 Cor. 13:14; Eph. 4:3-6; Rev. 4 and 5). This is not to say that each does not participate in the work of creation or redemption or sanctification, but characteristically these are primarily and economically ascribed to the different persons of the Godhead. Such is the case in prayer. We pray to the Father through the Son by the Holy Spirit (e.g. Mt. 6:9; Eph. 3:14; Heb. 4:14-16; Jn. 15:7, 16; Rom. 8:26, 27; Eph. 6:18; Jude 20). So having looked at the work of the Father we now turn to the work of the Son and the Spirit.

1. The Son's Priestly Intercession--Praying In Jesus' Name

We are taught by Jesus that we are to pray to the Father (Jn. 15:16, 23; 16:23-26) and to Him (Jn. 14:12-14) "*in My name*" (cf. Rom. 1:8; 7:25; 16:27). There is a twofold reason for this. First, the focus in this section of our study is Jesus' mediatorial ministry as our High Priest (Rom. 8:34; Gal. 3:20; 1 Tim. 2:5; Heb. 4:14-16; 8:6; 9:15; 12:24). Particularly as it comes to prayer, it is His mediatorial work in heaven (Rom. 8:34; Heb. 4:14-16), but His heavenly work is founded upon His mediatorial ministry on earth. The second reason, which we will address later, is our union with Christ, our abiding in Him, which reflects a concrete unity of our will with His and our obedience to His words and commandments (Jn. 15:7, 10; 1 Jn. 3:24). It is our conformity to His will and purpose. It is, in other words, to take His yoke upon us (Mt. 11:28). John Stott puts it like this: "It is only when Christ's words abide in us that our prayers will be answered. Then we can ask what we will and it shall be done, because we shall will only what he wills."⁹¹ Before we turn to expound this second reason we will note the High Priestly work of Christ, and it is because of this work that we are able to pray in His name (Jn. 14:12; 16:24).

a. Jesus' Priestly Ministry on Earth

Jesus' priestly ministry on earth was the **perfection of His life**, the unblemished Lamb of God (Heb. 4:15; 7:26-28; 1 Pet. 2:22; 2 Cor. 5:21; cf. Is. 53:9). As such, He became the **sacrifice, once for all**, for the sins of all (Rom. 3:21-26; 5:6, 8, 10; Mk. 10:45; Mt. 20:28; 26:28; 2 Cor. 5:21; Rev. 1:5, 6; 1 Tim. 2:5, 6; Titus 2:14; Heb. 10:10-18; 1 John 2:1, 2). God, the Father, in the Resurrection, attested this (Rom. 1:4; Acts 13:30-39). During His earthly ministry Jesus **interceded** for his disciples (Lu. 22:31, 32, 41, 44; Heb. 5:5-10; Mt. 26:39, 42, 44, 46, 50; Mk. 14:36, 39; Jn. 17:9-26; Is. 53:12) as their Great High Priest (Heb. 5:10). These three works characterize Jesus' Great High Priestly ministry on earth: His sinless life, His once for all sacrifice, and His intercession.

b. Jesus' Priestly Ministry in Heaven

Jesus' priestly work on earth was all preparatory for His ascent to the heavenly Holy of Holies. Hebrews teaches this most clearly. First, His "ascent" actually characterized His priesthood, "*...we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God...*" (4:14; cf. 7:26; 8:1). His Ascension made Him our "ascended" Great High Priest. By virtue of His ascent Jesus became "*a minister in the sanctuary and in the true tabernacle, which the Lord pitched, not man...for Christ did not enter a holy place made with hands, a mere copy of the true one, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us...*" (Heb. 8:2; 9:24; cf. 9:11, 12, 14). It was here that His blood secured eternal redemption and offers the continual cleansing of the consciences of His people forever:

⁹⁰ Cf. Abraham Kuyper, *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, Henri DeVries (translator) (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1900, reprinted 1975), 19, 20: "That in every work effected by Father, Son, and Holy Ghost in common, the power to *bring forth* proceeds from the Father; the power to *arrange* from the Son; the power to *perfect* from the Holy Spirit."

⁹¹ J. R. Stott, *Christ The Liberator* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1971), 57, in Hunter, *The God Who Hears*, 195.

“...Through His own blood, He entered the holy place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption. ...how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?” (Heb. 9:12, 14).

The significance of His ascended ministry for His people is of infinite magnitude. First, Jesus’ substitutionary atonement on earth was an historical event, yet its effectual redemptive work was accomplished in heaven as it was presented before God, the Father, in the true temple or tabernacle of heaven. Jesus took it to the true mercy seat, in the actual Holy of Holies, the very throne of God. It was here that our redemption was bought.

After Jesus presented His sacrifice in the heavenly Holy of Holies, He began His second heavenly priestly work. He continues to minister on our behalf so that the benefits (Heb. 9:11) of His sacrifice are continually applied to our needs (Heb. 9:14; 13:20-21; Rom. 8:34; note the present tense of the verbs). It should be clarified that this does not mean Christ is continually offering or making sacrifice for His people. His sacrifice was an “once for all” (Heb. 7:27; 9:12; 10:10) sacrifice, unrepeatable and completely sufficient. Yet, the abiding benefits are continually applied to His Church. He intercedes continually upon the basis of His sacrifice (1 Jn. 2:1) to pour out grace and mercy in the time of need (Heb. 4:16). Christ’s Great High Priesthood by its very essential nature is perpetual (Heb. 5:6; 6:20; 7:17, 21, *25, 28; Jn. 12:34; Ps. 110:4) and for this reason His Priesthood is permanent (Heb. 7:24) and must abide forever. Robert Dabney asks and answers an evident question.

“If all power is given into Christ’s hands, (Matt. xxviii:18; Eph. i:22; Col. ii:9, 10) why need He intercede at all? Why not do, of Himself, without interceding, all that His people need?” The answer is, that Christ is a royal Priest, (Zech. vi:13) not Aaronic, but Melchisedekan; and His intercession is rather a perpetual holding up of His own righteousness on behalf of His people, by a perpetual pleading, in order that He may, on that ground, have this viceroial power of succouring all their wants. And as a royal Priest, he holds up His righteousness to the Father, as a plea for admitting each one of the elect into that body, His kingdom, to which the Father has authorized Him to dispense His fullness”⁹²

Jesus’ ministry of perpetual intercession has at least four applications:

- (1) the application of His work to the salvation of individuals and His pouring out of the “riches” of this salvation;
- (2) for the special administering of the special mercy and grace needed by His saints;
- (3) for the continual cleansing of the consciences of His saints; and
- (4) for the hearing and answering of the prayers of His saints offered in His name.

c. Jesus’ Priestly Work and Prayer

It is the last application of Christ’s priestly work, which addresses the issue of prayer. It is this application of His redemptive work upon our prayers which makes our prayers holy unto God. The distinction between the Spirit’s intercession (Rom. 8:26, 27), and that of Christ’s is first of all the locations of intercession. The Spirit indwelling (Jn. 14:16-20, 26; 15:26; 16:7, 12-15) the soul of the true believer intercedes there. Christ reigning in heaven intercedes there (Heb. 4:14-16; 8:1, 2; 9:24). Second, the Spirit intercedes because of the weakness of the believer which disables him from praying according to the will of God (Rom. 8:26, 27). So the Spirit filters content and intercedes with “groans” expressing the believer’s prayers in accordance to the will of God.⁹³ Christ, on the other hand, enabled first the

⁹² Dabney, *Systematic Theology*, 549.

⁹³ “The Larger Catechism,” 7.292, p. 234: “**Q. 182. How doth the Spirit help us to pray?** A. We not knowing what to pray for as we ought, the Spirit helpeth our infirmities, by enabling us to understand both for whom, and what, and how prayer is to be made; and by working and quickening in our hearts (although not in all persons, nor at all times in the same measure)

Spirit's indwelling, intercession, and ministry (Jn. 14:16-20; etc.), and second, He applies His work of redemption to our unholy prayers and makes them holy (Rom. 8:34; Heb. 4:14-16; 10:19-22; 13:20, 21; 2 Pet. 2:15). The Westminster Confession's comment though speaking of good works is descriptive of Christ's intercession of our prayers as well:

“Yet notwithstanding, the persons of believers being accepted through Christ, their good works also are accepted in him, not as though they were in this life wholly unblamable and unreprouable in God's sight; but that he, looking upon them in his Son, is pleased to accept and reward that which is sincere, although accompanied with many weaknesses and imperfections.”⁹⁴

The combination of the Spirit's indwelling intercession and Christ's heavenly intercession is really the total picture of Christ's heavenly intercession. The Spirit came, indwells, and works as a direct result of Christ's priestly work (Jn. 16:7). Thus, the Spirit's work is Christ's work (Jn. 14:16-18; Rom. 8:9, 10; Eph. 3:16, 17; 2 Cor. 3:17, 18). Thus, there is a twofold effect. Prayers come to the Father “*according to His will*” by the intercession of the Spirit, and they come made acceptable and holy by the blood or redemptive work of Christ, our Great High Priest. For us to pray in the “name of Jesus” (Jn. 14:13; 15:16; 16:23) recognizes both of these effects.

We should note further that as Jesus' whole earthly ministry was devoted to doing the will of the Father (Heb. 10:7, 9, 10; Jn. 4:34; 5:30; 6:38; 17:4; Phil. 2:8), and the Spirit's ministry is to conform us to the image of Jesus (Rom. 8:29; 2 Cor. 3:17, 18). It would be entirely out of character and entirely abusive of prayer to think simply any kind of prayer is acceptable to God. It is only His will which is called, “*good, perfect and acceptable*” (Rom. 12:2). Therefore, it is prayer that is offered “**in the name of Jesus**” and “**according to the will of God**” which is acceptable.

Both the nature of God and the nature of Christ's High Priestly work create a context by which we can establish these warrants of prayer. We must go even further to say that these also must be understood to be present in all the teachings of Scripture on prayer, and prayer cannot be either Christian or Biblical which does not reflect these foundational facts.

2. The Spirit's Intercession in Prayer: Romans 8:26, 27

The intercession of the Spirit differs from the intercession of the Son both in nature and location. The Son's intercession is in heaven at the throne of God both as king and priest, while the intercession of the Spirit is on earth in the hearts or souls of the children of God, His elect. The Son applies His work and benefits from heaven and the Spirit applies them in the hearts of those who have been born again. Abraham Kuyper wrote,

“...Christ intercedes for us in *heaven*, and the Holy Spirit on *earth*. Christ our Holy Head, being absent from us, intercedes outside of us; the Holy Spirit our Comforter intercedes in our own heart which He has chosen as His temple.

“There is a difference, not only of place, but also in the *nature* of this twofold intercession. The glorified Christ intercedes in heaven for His elect and redeemed, *to obtain for them the fruit of His sacrifice*: ‘If any man sin, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the Righteous’ (I John ii. I). But the object of the Holy Spirit's petitions is the laying bare of all the deep and hidden *needs* of the saints before the eye of the Triune God.

“In Christ there is a union of God and man, since, being in the form of God, He took upon Himself the human nature. Hence His prayer is that of the Son of God, but in union with the

those apprehensions, affections, and graces, which are requisite for the right performance of the duty” (cf. Rom. 8:26; Ps. 80:18; 10:17; Zech. 12:10).

⁹⁴ “The Westminster Confession of Faith” in *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)*, Part I, *Book of Confessions* (Louisville: The Office of the General Assembly, 1996), 6.092, p. 143.

nature of man. He prays as the Head of the new race, as King of His people, as the one that seals the covenant of the New Testament in His blood. In like manner, there is to some extent a union between God and man, when the Holy Spirit prays for the saints. For, by His indwelling in the hearts of the saints, He has established a lasting and most intimate union, and by virtue of that union putting Himself in their place, He prays for them and in their stead.

“...Christ intercedes for the body because He is the Head; even though the prayers of the members were perfect and mature, He would still intercede with the Father in their behalf. But the Holy Spirit prays because the prayers of the saints are *imperfect, immature, and insufficient*. His prayer is *complementary* and necessary, inasmuch as the saint can not yet pray as he ought; hence *decreasing* as the saint learns to pray more and more correctly.”⁹⁵

Kuyper was an incredible man and a true saint of God. He was a great instrument of grace to the Reformed Church of the Netherlands and to the Church at large. He was a pastor, professor, author, editor, and politician. He worked tirelessly to apply the Bible and faith in Christ to every sphere of life. He was the founder of the Free (Reformed) University of Amsterdam in 1880 and served from 1901 to 1905 as the Prime Minister of the Netherlands. His work, The Work of the Holy Spirit, has been a jewel in the treasury of the Church since its writing. With regard to the intercession of the Holy Spirit it will be helpful to let Dr. Kuyper instruct us.

a. The Intercession of the Holy Spirit

The primary focus we want to maintain is upon the work of the Holy Spirit in prayer. Dr. Kuyper begins by helping us understand the critical difference between the prayers of the unconverted and the converted.

“For even sinners pray. This is evident from the heathen world, which, however low its forms of prayer, yet offers up supplications and petitions. It is evident from the ease with which a little child, taught by its mother, learns to pray; and from the many who, estranged from prayer, in sudden calamities bend the knees, and, although they can not pray, still assume the attitude of prayer, willing to give half their kingdom if they only could pray. And lastly, it is evident from the thousands and tens of thousands who, convinced of the impossibility of praying for themselves, cry to others: ‘Pray for us!’

“Prayer in higher, holier sense the sinner can not offer. Everything in him is sinful, even his prayer. In his sin he has reversed the established order of things: not he existing for God, but God existing for him. Confirmed in his selfishness, the God of heaven and earth is to him little more than a Physician in every sickness and a Provider in every need; a wonderful Being, ever ready at his first cry to supply out of His fullness his every necessity.

“This is the egoism that inseparably belongs to every sinner’s prayer. The prayer of the redeemed saint is: ‘Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name, Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. For Thine is the Kingdom and the Power, and the Glory forever. Amen.’ The converted sinner offers first the petitions for His name, His Kingdom, and His will; then he adds the petitions for bread, for forgiveness, for protection from sin. But the unconverted sinner has no conception of a prayer for God’s name, Kingdom, and will. He prays for bread only; for forgiveness also, but only from the motive that bread and luxury and deliverance from trouble may not be denied him.

“Wherefore it is impossible to have too low an estimate of the sinner’s prayer. The depth of our fall is in nothing so apparent as in the sin of this degenerate, bastardized prayer. All such prayer may be designated as a defying and vexing of God and His eternal love. In this sense the prayer of the sinner contains nothing of the work of the Holy Spirit. All this prayer springs from the

⁹⁵ Kuyper, The Work of the Holy Spirit, 637, 638.

egoism of the sinful heart, and has not the least value, rather the opposite.”⁹⁶

We fall into the corruption of self-praying too commonly (Jos. 4:2 ff.). Why? Because of the corruption of our souls which was wrought by the sin of Adam. This corruption is referred to as the “old man” (Col. 3:9; Eph. 4:22), “the carnal” or “the flesh” (Rom. 7:14; 8:1-15) and indwelling sin (Rom. 7:20). Though in Christ, though recipients of new life, yet this war rages in the regenerate, converted man (Rom. 7:21-25; Gal. 5:16-18). The “old” rages against the “new” (Col. 3:9, 10; Eph. 4:22-24). Thus, to help us in this “weakness” (Rom. 6:19; 8:26; cf. Rom. 5:6, 8; 2 Cor. 12:9-10) the Holy Spirit was given (Rom. 5:5; 8:1-16, esp. 13, 26, 27). With all that the Spirit does He specifically helps us in our weak praying, i.e. when we do not know how to pray according to God’s will: “*In the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words; and He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He intercedes for the saints according to the will of God*” (Rom. 8:26,27).

Again Kuyper explains and summarizes this so well for us.

“The intercession of the Holy Spirit is according to the saint’s condition, which is described in the seventh chapter of Romans. Surely, the Lord God might have been pleased to regenerate the sinner in such a way as to deliver him at once and completely from sin, and from all the after-effects of his old nature; but He has ordained it otherwise. Regeneration does not effect such a sudden change. It does indeed change his state before God at once and completely, but it does not place him at once in a condition of perfect holiness. On the contrary, after regeneration it remains, on the one hand, ‘I delight in the law of God after the inward man;’ but also, on the other, ‘I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind.’ Hence the cry: ‘O wretched man that I am, who shall deliver me from the body of this death?’

‘And the intercession of the Holy Spirit fully meets this condition. If in regeneration we became perfectly holy, without any infirmity, with perfect knowledge what we should pray for, there would be no need of this intercession. But, this not being so, the Holy Spirit comes to help our infirmities, in us to pray for us, as though it were our own prayer.

‘This last point must be emphasized. The Holy Spirit prays for men called saints; and it must be maintained that every regenerated person is a saint, his infirmities notwithstanding: a saint, not for what he is in himself, but because of the word of Christ: ‘*Thou art Mine.*’ And these two conditions, (1) of being a saint, and (2) still being unholy in himself, cannot remain unreconciled. Wherefore the Sacred Scripture teaches that, although we lie in the midst of death, yet in Christ we are holy; hence we have a holiness, yet not in us, but outside of us in Christ Jesus. ‘Our Life is hid with Christ in God.’ And the same applies to our prayers. We are saints not only in name, but also in deed. And therefore the prayers that ascend to the mercy-seat from our hearts must be holy prayers. It is the sweet incense of the prayers of the saints. But being unable of ourselves to kindle the incense, the Holy Spirit helps our infirmities, and from our hearts prays to God in our behalf. We are not conscious of it; He prays for and in us with groans that can not be uttered; which does not mean that He makes us utter groans for which we can not account, but that He groans in us with affections and emotions which may comfort us, but which have nothing in common with the sighing of our respiratory organs. This is clear from verse 27, where St. Paul declares, that He that searcheth the hearts, knoweth what is the mind of the Spirit.”⁹⁷

In this explanation Kuyper points out for us the necessary intercession of the Holy Spirit in our prayers. His intercession is necessary because in this practical sense our salvation is not complete. The Spirit is our Advocate, our Helper, our Counselor, so He intercedes completing that which is lacking in

⁹⁶ The Work of the Holy Spirit, 632.

⁹⁷ Kuyper, The Work of The Holy Spirit, 638, 639.

us. He makes our prayers complete, filling up that which our infirmity, our weakness, disables in us. Kuyper continues, moving from the Spirit's intercession on our behalf to His actual work in our prayers.

b. The Prayer of the Holy Spirit and Our Prayers

“Apart from the intercession of the Holy Spirit in our behalf there is also a work of His Person in our own prayers.

“The proportion between these two operations is different according to our different conditions. The child regenerated in the cradle and deceased before conversion was possible, could not pray for himself; the Holy Spirit prayed therefore for and in him with groans that can not be uttered. But if the child had lived and was converted at a later age, it would first have been the prayer of the Holy Spirit alone; and after his conversion his own prayers would have been added. And, even after his conversion, he may become indifferent and fall into a temporary apostasy, so that his own prayer fails altogether; yet the prayer of the Holy Spirit in him never fails.

“Finally, according to the measure of his spiritual growth, his progress in prayer will be either slow or rapid. The Holy Spirit prays in us as long and in as much as we can not pray for ourselves; but at the same time He teaches us to pray, that gradually His prayer may become superfluous. This includes that when temptations threaten us of which we are ignorant, or we are in the midst of assaults and conflicts which we fail to understand, the Holy Spirit immediately renews His prayer, and cries unto God in our behalf.

“But this should not be understood as though the Holy Spirit teaches us to pray, that He may withdraw Himself altogether from our prayers. On the contrary, every prayer of the saint must be in communion with the Holy Spirit. In order to be more earnest in prayer we must sustain a more intimate communion. The more we pray alone and of ourselves, the more our prayer degenerates into a sinful prayer, and ceases to be the prayer of a child of God. Wherefore St. Jude admonishes us to pray in the Spirit.

“There is only this difference: when the Holy Spirit prays for us, He prays independently of us, although in our own heart; but when we have learned to pray, although the Holy Spirit continues to be the real Petitioner, yet He prays with us and through us, and cries unto God from our lips. As a mother first prays for her child without his knowledge, and then teaches him to pray that by and by she may pray with him, so also is the work of the Holy Spirit. He begins with praying for us; then He teaches us to pray; and when we have made some progress in the school of prayer, then He begins to pray with us not only in us but also through us. This is the Spirit of adoption, by whom we cry ‘Abba, Father;’ but in such a way that at the same moment He testifies with our spirits that we are the children of God.”⁹⁸

The Spirit's intercession is both within us and yet apart from us. Though He groans His prayer to the Father on our behalf more articulately than words could express, He truly teaches us to pray through His sanctifying ministry to us. In this life we will always need His intercession because of our inability to pray according to the Father's will, our weakness, yet His ministry to us matures us so that we are growing to a greater ability to pray as we ought.

3. Summary

We have been surveying the economy of the division of roles in the Trinity of the Godhead. The Biblical protocol is to pray to the Father through the Son by the Holy Spirit. We are to learn to pray according to the will of the Father, but we are faced with a handicap, our weakness, the corruption worked upon our souls by the sin of Adam. The Godhead has made provision for our inadequacy. The Son intercedes in heaven applying His work on our behalf, so that our requests are met with mercy and grace in His name, so that our requests are made holy through His work. The Holy Spirit intercedes in our hearts, personalizing and making comforting application of Christ's work, so that we are conformed

⁹⁸ Ibid., 639-640.

to Christ and His true image of the Father. Even more, the Spirit both prays for us and teaches us to pray as we ought according to the will of the Father. From these insights from this brief summary it is hoped that we might better perceive prayer as that which consistently reflects the nature of God. Again, prayer is what it is because God is Who He is. Prayer is not an add-on, but it flows naturally and harmoniously from the nature of God. We will not and cannot understand the nature of prayer and how it operates until we understand the nature of God Who has instituted it to serve Him, His purpose, and to serve us. We now turn to attempt a definition of prayer from this perspective.

E. The Resulting Definition of Prayer

Based upon the above insights we can now introduce an appropriate definition of prayer. The Shorter Westminster Catechism, “**Q. 98. What is prayer?** A. Prayer is an offering up of our desires unto God, for things agreeable to his will, in the name of Christ, with confession of our sins, and thankful acknowledgment of his mercies.”⁹⁹ Hunter is even more succinct: “Prayer is a means God uses to give us what he wants.”¹⁰⁰ Augustine put it this way: “...prayers are useful in obtaining those favours which He foresaw He would bestow on those who should pray for them.”¹⁰¹ The critical point in these definitions, which are consistent with the doctrine of Providence, is as the Shorter Catechism states, “Prayer is an offering up...*for things agreeable to his will...*” This is founded upon 1 John 5: 14, 15. “*This is the confidence which we have before Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us in whatever we ask, we know that the requests which we have asked from Him.*” This should be seen as the defining text for prayer.¹⁰² It clarifies what is implied in other texts (e.g. Jn. 15:7f.) and creates a context for still other texts which have been interpreted as without qualification (e.g. Mk. 11:24 and parallels). Yet the question, which is posed by this definition, is that if God only answers prayer which are according to His will and we know that Providence is the working out of His will in history, then is prayer necessary?

F. Prayer: An Ordained Means To An Ordained End

The challenge we face as we come to the issues of prayer and Providence is primarily prayer’s meaningfulness. If God by His omniscience knows my every need before I ever ask (Mt. 6:8), and He executes all things only and always according to His will (Eph 1:11), then why pray? Is not prayer meaningless? The answer is simple, No! There are several reasons, and, though we have listed these

⁹⁹“The Shorter Catechism” in The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Part I, Book of Confessions (Louisville: The Office of the General Assembly, 1996), 7.098, p. 191.

¹⁰⁰ Hunter, The God Who Hears, 12.

¹⁰¹ St. Augustine, City of God, Bk. V, Chap. 10, p. 110, in Helm, The Providence of God, 158.

¹⁰² There are several reasons why 1 John 5:14 and 15 should be considered the primary text for defining prayer. **First**, John of all the Gospel writers is recognized as the one who wrote with theological reflection. The “Synoptic” Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) are so called because of their similarities, while John is distinct both in material and theological development. The Gospel of John was written probably some thirty plus years after the Synoptics, as was the epistle of 1 John. The significance of this is that the first generation of Christians was passing away. The challenges, conflicts, progress, failures, and successes of the Church had helped to refine and articulate of the Gospel and normative Christian growth. It is from this experience, and of course the direction of the Holy Spirit, that John leaves no question as to the warrant of prayer (i.e. the freedom and restriction placed upon prayer). It is “*if we ask anything according to His will.*” **Second**, John establishes this warrant here so where it is implied or unstated it will be understood! A general rule of interpretation is that the more specific text interprets the less specific text. Here then, John establishes the context for passages, which touch upon the warrant for prayer. He gives the “more specific” text to interpret the less specific texts. Here then, John establishes the context for passages, which touch upon the warrant for prayer. He gives the “more specific” to interpret the “less specific.” **Third**, we find in this verse a specific formula used here in 1 John, the Gospel of John, and in the synoptics with reference to prayer, “*whatever we ask.*” (1 Jn. 3:22; Jn. 11:13; 14:13; 15:16; cf. 14:14; 15:7; 16:23, 24; Mt. 21:22; Mk. 11:24). Where we find these words or their equivalent we should understand that here are words which have an understood warrant for the Church. In other words, these words are not used randomly, but rather they came to be used with a particular context, subject, and meaning. **Fourth**, we will look at several verses so that we might be confident that Scripture has this warrant in mind whether it is stated, implied, or not.

reasons,¹⁰³ here we want to focus primarily on only one—God has ordained prayer as a means to certain ordained ends. In other words, God has ordained prayer to be the way certain ends are achieved. Therefore, God’s children must of necessity pray.

R.C. Sproul states this point not only with reference to prayer but also of every kind of means in God’s plan.

“We remember that God has an eternal plan of redemption, a plan that is formed down to the smallest details. God has a purpose, end, and goal to that plan of redemption. All things are not only working together for our good, but they are also working together for the accomplishment of God’s eternal purpose. His providence not only extends to the ends but also to the means to those ends. A means is a vehicle through which something is accomplished. So, simply stated, God ordains the means to the end as well as the ends themselves. He uses the means as secondary causes under the supervision and government of His primary causality.”¹⁰⁴

Thus, prayer like the moral actions of man has been ordained. Like every moral action every prayer is an ordained means to an ordained end.

John Calvin in his “Defense Of The Secret Providence Of God” pointed out that when God so joins a means to an end it is an inseparable joining.

“We must here also carefully bear in mind that principle which I have before laid down, that when God displays His power through *means (media)* and *secondary causes*, that power of His is never to be *separated* from those means or inferior causes. It is the excess of a drunkard to say, ‘God has decreed all that is to come to pass, and that must come to pass; therefore, to interpose any care or study, or endeavors of ours, is superfluous and vain.’ But since God prescribes to us what we ought to do, and wills that we should be the instruments of the operation of His power, let us ever deem it unlawful in us to sunder those things which He hath joined together. For instance, God ‘in the beginning,’ commanded the earth to bring forth every kind of herb and fruit without any human art or culture. But now He makes use of the hand of man as the instrument of His operation: If any one should boastingly desire to receive bread by merely opening his indolent mouth, because the blessing of God fructifies the earth, he would not only, by such a boast, trample underfoot the Providence of God, but would do away with it altogether. For he would separate and rend asunder those things which God has joined together by an inseparable connection.

“Wherefore, with reference to the time future, since the events of things are, as yet, hidden and unknown, everyone ought to be as intent upon the performance of his duty as if nothing whatever had been decreed concerning the issue in each particular case. Or (to speak more properly) every man ought so to hope for success in all things which he undertakes at the command of God, as to be freely prepared to reconcile every contingency with the sure and certain Providence of God. The Lord, moreover, promises His blessing upon the work of our hands. By this promise each godly man will acknowledge himself with alacrity to his undertaking, and will be persuaded that he is not casting into the air labour in vain; but, resting on the Word of God, he will believe that God by His secret counsel, will direct all his labour to the issue that shall be best. In a word, as the Providence of God, rightly considered, does not bind our hands, but free them for work, so it not only does not hinder prayer, but strengthens and confirms its earnestness.”¹⁰⁵

Calvin illustrates how God inseparably joins means and ends together. Man under the curse of the Fall was to eat by the sweat of his brow. God inseparably joined labor to eating, a means to an end. So in

¹⁰³ See pages 34, 35 and fn. 72 above.

¹⁰⁴ Sproul, *The Invisible Hand*, 201; cf. Hunter, *The God Who Hears*, 55-60.

¹⁰⁵ John Calvin, “Defense of the Secret Providence of God,” *Calvin’s Calvinism*, Henry Cole (translator) (Grandville, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Assoc., 1950), 235, 236.

prayer and God's provision we see the inseparable joining of means and end. Thus, our Lord concluded, "Ask and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you" (Mt. 7:7).

The dynamic of Providence's prompting of prayer should be understood in the same way that God prompts the "free" moral acts of man by the dispensing and withdrawing of His grace. As He pours out His grace upon us, then we pray. Without this grace our hearts become hard, and rather than seeking His face we avoid God. We run from Him. Whose graceless heart will not testify how much more natural it is to run from God than to seek His face and fellowship in prayer. If it were not so, then we would find the world, even more the Church, eagerly diligently, regularly seeking God in prayer, but that is not what we find in the world, the Church, or in our own hearts.¹⁰⁶ So Calvin wrote,

"He, however, who knows and feels that men and their counsels, and the issues of all things, are ruled and overruled by the Providence of God, will confess with trembling, as did the prophet Jeremiah: *'I know, O Lord, that the way of man is not in himself: it is not in man that walketh to direct his steps'* (Jer. x. 23). Bearing in mind also those words of Solomon—*'A man's goings are of the Lord: how can a man, then, understand his own way?'* (Prov. xx. 24)—he will commit himself wholly unto God, and depend entirely upon Him. Where there is such a state of mind, prayers will ever follow, that God will begin and perfect every work which we undertake, while we thus rest on Him in all quietness, and on Him alone. Just in the same degree will he who dreams about the will of fortune give himself up to be driven about in fear by the devil and by the wicked, as by ferocious brute animals—as if they could do anything of themselves! And thus will such an one fret and fume with perpetual anxiety; and, looking at his life as hanging continually by a single thread, as it were, he will live in unending torment. He will scarcely be able to put forth one foot without despairing of his life or well-being. Whereas the faithful, having the all-ruling hand of God ever before them, will never hesitate to cast all their cares and concerns upon Him. And they will all the while rest assured that the devil and all wicked men, whatever tumults they may cause, are not only held of God by their feet in chains, but are compelled to do His pleasure, under which assurance they will pass their lives in security and peace"¹⁰⁷

Once again, we must realize that prayer is the established duty of every Christian (Mt. 7:7; 1 Tim. 2:1, 8; 1 Thess. 5:16-18). We have been called to prayer, and we need not wait for the mood to pray for it is our duty to pray without ceasing (1 Thess. 5:17), to make prayer of first importance (1 Tim. 2:1), to be vigilant and devoted to prayer in all seasons (Col. 4:2; cf. Lu. 18:1), and "*with all prayer and petition pray at all times in the Spirit, and with this in view, be on alert with all perseverance and petition for all the saints...*" (Eph. 6:18). God has commanded such prayer so that He might give us that which He has ordained to give us when we have asked.

In God's providence we recognize that we receive much without asking. Even the wicked are showered with God's goodness without asking (Mt. 5:40). In contrast God is sustaining and governing His creation and creatures so that not a sparrow falls or the number of hairs of our heads change except by His ordination (Mt. 10:29, 30). So we must conclude that we do not receive only because we ask, but we must go on to say that there are some things which we will not receive unless we ask (Mt. 7:7-8; Acts 12:1-17). Further, there is a still further category of gifts which will not be received except when requested through the confident, unquestioning certitude of faith (Mt. 7:7-11; Is. 38; Jas. 4:2, 3; Dt. 9:7-

¹⁰⁶ The basis of the grace given to stir up prayer in His people (2 Cor. 12:8, 9) is prompted by the giving of faith (e.g. Acts 13:48; 2 Cor. 4:13; Heb. 11:6) and the enabling presence of the Spirit (e.g. Rom 8:28; Eph. 6:18). This especially prompted by the necessity of situations. Further see Thomas Goodwin, "Profiting from Prayer," *What Happens When I Pray?*, David Harman (editor) (London: Grace Publications Trust, 1997, from Goodwin's [1600-1680] *The Return of Prayers*), 107-111.

¹⁰⁷ Calvin, "Defense of the Secret Providence of God," 229-230.

29; Jonah 2:1-10; Mk. 9:29; 6:5, 6; Lu. 22:36; 18:38; 22:31, 31). So there are clearly certain things, which God will not provide until we ask for He has ordained the means inseparable joined to the end. Yet in prayer we receive much more than simply what we ask.

Again, Sproul pointed this out.

“In the life of the church we speak of the ‘means of grace.’ One of the chief means of grace is prayer. The means of grace are given to us as instruments for our sanctification. Prayer is a vital vehicle, or tool, that God has given His church so that we may become fully sanctified. By prayer our thoughts are lifted toward Him and our hearts are bent to His perfect will. God is not the beneficiary of our prayers. He is the Benefactor; we are the beneficiaries.

Calvin remarked in the *Institutes*:

‘But some will say, Does he not know without a monitor for both what our difficulties are, and what is meet for our interest, so that it seems in some measure superfluous to solicit him by our prayers, as if he were winking, or even sleeping, until aroused by the sound of our voice? Those who argue thus attend not to the end for which the Lord taught us to pray. It was not so much for his sake as for ours. (III/XX.3)’¹⁰⁸

As we began our study of the relationship between Providence and prayer we want to face the commonly perceived problem of the seeming conflict between a preordained Providence making prayer meaningless. What we have found instead is that prayer is essential to Providence. Rather than conflicting we find a perfect unity and motivation to pray because there has been an inseparable joining which has made prayer essential (Jas. 5:16). John Flavel, a 17th century Puritan observed this harmony when he wrote,

“The respect and relation Providence bears to our prayers is of singular consideration, and a most taking and sweet meditation. Prayer honours Providence, and Providence honours prayer. Great notice is taken of this in Scripture (Gen. 24:45; Dn. 9:20; Acts 12:12). You have had the very petitions you asked of Him. Providences have borne the very signatures of your prayers upon them. O how affectingly sweet are such mercies!”¹⁰⁹

Yet, we want to look still further at God’s reasons for commanding prayer. Yes, it is so that we might receive that which He desires to give, but prayer as a “means of grace” is not only prompted by grace but also is a dispensing fountain of grace to the believer. We find that God ordains prayer for ends other than simply what we are asking. God’s purpose for prayer is much more glorious than simply a transaction of asking and giving, but it is also the spiritual communion of a child seeking the loving face of his Father. This fact is at the heart of crying, “Abba, Father.”

Yet as we would establish this fact it creates another question: what is the operation and interaction of faith in the dynamic of Providence and prayer? We have already pointed out that God’s dispensing of His grace is operative through one’s faith, but it is also operative in antecedents to faith, for example the exigencies created by situations and need. We would begin by saying what has already been said about prayer and Providence. They are each part of the whole; prayer is inextricably woven into Providence as an ordained means to an ordained end. In the same way faith too is woven into the whole. As God ordains prayer He also ordains faith in each of its amounts and degrees without removing or disabling our duty to believe and act on that belief. This perspective flies in the face of many modern teachers and popular expectations which fail to discern rightly the object and teaching about faith, prayer, and

¹⁰⁸ Sproul, *The Invisible Hand*, 201, 202.

¹⁰⁹ John Flavel, *The Mystery of Providence* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1963), 120. Also see Benjamin Palmer, “What Happens When I Pray,” *What Happens When I Pray?*, N. R. Needham (editor) (London: Grace Publications Trust, 1997 from Palmer’s 1894, *The Theology of Prayer*), 46-48.

Providence.

G. Is Faith an Unconditional Warrant for Prayer?

Dabney points out two prevalent errors regarding expectations as to what can be asked and received in prayer, i.e. its warrant: “Some err by defect, forming no definite view of the ground on which their faith is entitled to rest; and consequently, approaching the throne of Grace with no lively hopes whatever. Others err by excess, holding the promises in a sense God did not intend them to bear; and consequently their hopes are fanatical and superstitious. ...The consequence of these erroneous views ultimately is disappointment, and hence, either self-accusation, or skepticism.”¹¹⁰ In other words, there are those who pray and have no assurance of what they will receive. They live in ignorance and confusion about prayer. Their prayers are sometimes no different than the pagan, and they know little or nothing about Biblical and Christian praying. They know neither what pleases God in prayer, nor what He has promised to give or not give in prayer. The second group err because they exceed all warrants for prayer advocating that all things are possible for those who believe! Whatever one truly believes is mandated in prayer by that faith. They believe God has one grand spiritual law for prayer—you can receive anything you ask as long as you truly believe you will receive it. Proponents of this error preach the simple adage that all one need to do is “name it and claim it.” Their gospel promises health, wealth, and prosperity for those who have faith. These err because they exceed the Scriptural warrants for prayer. It is this second group which we want to turn our attention to in this section. First, we want to briefly present their case, and, secondly, we want to examine the texts which are often appealed to justify their position that faith alone is the only warrant upon prayer.

Bruner notes an example of this type of abuse:

“The kind of teaching I am criticizing can be illustrated by a full-page ad in *The Christian Herald* (Sept., 1985), p. 73, entitled ‘How To Write Your Own Ticket With God Series.’ It goes on to say: ‘The Lord Jesus Himself gave this message to Kenneth E. Hagin, saying, “If anybody, anywhere, will take these four steps, or put these four principles into operation, he will always receive whatever he wants from Me or from God the Father.”’ In this series, Rev. Hagin relates his vision and presents the message in much greater detail than in his single cassette message previously available. Four cassettes - \$16.00.” There are more sophisticated versions of this message (e.g., possibility thinking and motivational seminars) The best recent American evangelical antidote to these false gospels that I have read is the Rev. Dr. Donald McCullough’s (Solana Beach Presbyterian Church) *Waking from the American Dream* (1988): “Positive thinking is not the same thing as Christian faith; it falls way short...[it does not] leave room for the concept of sin” (p. 47).”¹¹¹

Another example typical of this approach is Charles Capps, Releasing The Ability of God Through Prayer. In his discussion of 1 John 5:14-15, he emphasizes that the point of these verses is that when God hears you then you can ask anything. Whatever you ask you know (faith) God will give it to you. As to the “*if we ask anything according to his will,*” he dismisses it as not the point of the text.

“Let’s say it this way so you can see it, ‘if you ask according to His will for asking.’ His word is His will. This passage is not dealing with God’s will for you to have or not to have a certain thing. That is not even involved in this verse of scripture. Many have thought it was and it has held them in bondage for years.

“They said, ‘If I pray for something that is not God’s will, then I won’t receive it.’ Therefore they didn’t take time to find the will of God, but prayed saying, “Lord, if it be your will.” There was no faith in that prayer. No need of praying that prayer. You are wasting your time. You do

¹¹⁰ Dabney, *Systematic Theology*, 721.

¹¹¹ Frederick Dale Bruner, The Churchbook, Matthew 13-28, Vol. 2 (Dallas:Word Publishing, 1990), 758, 759.

not know whether God has heard you or not so you cannot release faith in your prayer. That prayer will not produce for you because it does not qualify on the basis of God's rules for asking. Answered prayer is governed by spiritual law (God's Word).

"God's will concerning you having or not having is not involved in verse 14. Now don't misunderstand me. I'm not saying that you should pray for just anything whether it is God's will or not, but you can do that. The Bible says you can. If you know He heard you, you will have whatever you desired, you will have the petitions you requested, right, wrong, good, bad or indifferent.

"It is very dangerous for a person to pray for something assuming that it is God's will. You can believe and receive things that are not God's will by doing this. Israel received a king to rule over them. It wasn't God's will but they requested it."¹¹²

Capps goes on to point out that the determining fact of answered prayer is the faith of the one praying. God will answer that prayer whether it is His will or not. He then points out that this is God's will and the spiritual law of prayer.¹¹³ He goes on to point out that prayer is dangerous because of this law.

"Sometimes we pray for things we don't need and are not good for us. I heard of a man in World War II who prayed for God to move him from one concentration camp to another. It was just a few miles away and he prayed and God answered his prayer. He was very happy but it was short lived. In a few weeks the allied forces came into the camp he left and liberated all the prisoners. He stayed two more years in the other camp. He used his faith and his prayer was answered but it prolonged the problem. The Word says if God hears you, you will get what you ask. 1 John 5:14-15 is simply saying that if you get an audience with your Father, you will get your prayer answered."¹¹⁴

Capps goes on to appeal to Mark 1:23, 24 and John 15:7 as two additional witnesses to these conclusions. He points out that these verses have nothing to say about the will of God.¹¹⁵ He acknowledges that "If you pray for things you know are evil, your heart will condemn you and your faith will not work."¹¹⁶ But faith is such a powerful force in prayer that you must choose your words with care and knowledge. "Wrong words in prayer will hold you in bondage. They will loose the ability of the enemy against you. Right words in prayer will release the ability of God."¹¹⁷ Capps repeatedly instructs that one must pray according to God's Word. "A prayer accurately formed and stated from the Word of God will absolutely move heaven, earth and the things under the earth in your behalf."¹¹⁸ He acknowledges that God's Word is God's will. To further determine God's will one should ask what is heaven like (reflective of the Lord's prayer Mt. 6:9-10).

"Let's ask ourselves what it is like in heaven. Is there any poverty there? Is there any disease in heaven? No. There is no poverty there. Neither is there any sickness or disease there. Jesus told His disciples to pray that the will of God be done in earth as it is in heaven. Then He must be saying to pray that there be no disease on this earth and that there be no poverty here. Now if Jesus is teaching His disciples to pray this way, don't you know that is the will of God. His will is that it be on this earth as it is in heaven."¹¹⁹

¹¹² Charles Capps, *Releasing the Ability of God Through Prayer* (Tulsa, OK: Harrison House, 1978), 14, 15.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 16, 27.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 22, 23.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 36.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 40.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 49.

He then states that all the trials of life are not brought by God but Satan. “If you believe that God brings these things on you, you cannot use your faith to get rid of them..”¹²⁰

This is enough to represent the main thrust of Capps and the “Word of Faith Movement.” Faith becomes a force independent of God, but it is the magical key, which will unlock the power of God. For some faith is the power which God uses, and we can avail ourselves of this same power. God in essence perfectly wields the power of faith. The sovereignty of God is given lip service (if that), and faith is made sovereign. If you have faith you can get whatever you desire as long as it is not blatantly evil. This movement is an extreme of the abuse of faith without warrant, but it is the logical progression of the error Dabney earlier described. It entirely departs from orthodoxy and is clearly false teaching.¹²¹ Now we will turn to those texts to which are often appealed as teaching faith as the only warrant of prayer

1. “Keeping His Commandments” and “Pleasing Him:” 1 John 3:22

In 1 John 3:22 we find, “*whatever we ask we receive from Him,*” yet a warrant is placed upon this clause by the remainder of the verse: “*because we keep His commandments and do the things that are pleasing in His sight.*” This clause makes explicit that the reason, “*because,*” for receiving whatever we ask is that we are living under the restraint of His commandments and limited by what is pleasing in His sight. Here John’s terminology is different than in 5:14, but the meaning is the same. God’s will is explicit in His commandments, and what is pleasing to Him. Therefore, these verses (1 Jn. 3:22 and 5:14, 15) picking up the formula “*whatever we ask*” establish its warrant as “*according to His will.*” John Stott commenting on 5:14 and 15 observes:

“In iii.22 the condition of answered prayer is whether our behaviour accords with God’s commandments; here whether our requests accord with His will. Prayer is not a convenient device for imposing our will upon God, or bending His will to ours, but the prescribed way of subordinating our will to His. It is by prayer that we seek God’s will, embrace it and align ourselves with it. Every true prayer is a variation on the theme ‘Thy will be done’. ...In such prayers, and only in such, *He heareth us*, that is, not just that our petitions register and He takes note of them, but He listens favourably to us, He gives ear to our cry (as in Jn. ix.. 31, xi. 41, 42).”¹²²

2. “Abiding in Me,” “My Word,” and “Asking In My Name:” John 15:7, 16

In John 15:7 Jesus states, “*If you abide in Me and my words abide in you ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.*” In verse 16 Jesus again states: “*you did not choose Me but I chose you, and appointed you that you would go and bear fruit, and that your fruit would remain, so that whatever you ask of the Father in My name he may give to you.*” Verse 7 qualifies ‘*ask whatever you wish*’ with “*If you abide in Me and My words abide in you.*” To abide in Jesus’ words means to intimately know them and obey them, while the first expression, “*abide in Me,*” is explained by 1 John 3:24. “*The one who keeps His commandments abides in Him.*” So we find here the warrant placed upon “*ask whatever you wish*” is that you must obey His commandments and intimately know and obey His teachings. One who is doing these things can ask whatever you wish. The clear implication being that one so under the Lordship of Christ will ask that which is according to His will.

Verse 16 qualifies the promise formula by a long developmental succession of results. Jesus choosing and appointing of His disciples was for the result of them going in His name to bear fruit with the result that this fruit would be remaining fruit. These preceding actions and results necessitated the resulting

¹²⁰ Ibid., 50, 53.

¹²¹ Hank Hanegraaff, *Christianity In Crisis* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1993) does an excellent job of critiquing the “Word of Faith” movement.

¹²² John R.W. Stott, *The Epistles of John*, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1964), 185, 186.

privilege and apparent means “*that whatever you ask*” in Jesus name (i.e. the One Who chose you, appointed you, sent you to bear fruit in His name and not simply any fruit but fruit of eternal significance) you will receive. Once again, there is a qualifying warrant placed upon the promise formula, “*whatever you ask.*” C. W. F. Smith writes, “For John it is essential that the Christian abide in Christ ...thus experiencing a living union akin to that of vine and branches (15:1-8), within which it is possible to ask what we will and it will be done (vs. 7). This organic union implies unity of will and purpose, with Christ as the basis for prayer (as the branch asks only what is in the nature of the parent stock to supply). This is otherwise expressed as prayer in Christ’s name (14:13-14; 16:23)....”¹²³

Above, prior to this section,¹²⁴ we mentioned the twofold foundation of prayer offered in Jesus’ name. The first is the High Priestly work of Christ first on earth and now in heaven. It is unfortunate when the words, “in Jesus’ name” are uttered only as a formula, or even worse as though they were “magic words,” and without any grasp of their significance. When used as a formula it is as though these words are spoken independently of the context of Christ’s priestly work, as though they came to us without context. In addition to the Priestly work of Christ, they must also be used with recognition of their discipling context. They are words given to those who follow Jesus, bear crosses for His sake, and deny themselves (Mt. 16:24). W. Bingham Hunter sees in the verses instructing us to pray in Jesus’ name what he calls “the prayer-obedience cycle.”¹²⁵ “When Christ’s word becomes internalized through training facilitated obedience, we begin to think God’s thoughts, which helps us pray according to his will: Obedience helps us will and pray what Christ wills.”¹²⁶ Obedience conforms us to Christ so that we learn to pray as Jesus Himself would pray. Hunter then concludes, “Thus those who pray in Jesus’ name must always ask themselves, what would Christ pray for in this situation? Prayer from the mind of Christ is always according to God’s will, and hence is always heard.... ...this would explain why *in my name* prayers are all unconditional: you will receive *anything* you ask.... ...when we pray in Jesus’ name we receive whatever we ask because our will and God’s will are the same.”¹²⁷

3. “Little Faith” versus “Mustard Seed Faith:” Matthew 17:14-21//Mark 9:14-29

There is a final set of passages which are found in the Synoptics ([1] Mt. 17:14-21// Mk. 9:14-29; [2] Mt. 21:18-22//Mk. 11:20-26; [3] Mt. 7:7-11//Lu. 11:9-13). These particularly suggest at least at first reading a more unconditional warrant for prayer. In Matthew 17:14-21 Jesus had just returned from His Transfiguration (vv. 1-13). He was confronted by the father of a demon-possessed boy, who His disciples could not exorcise. Jesus rebukes his disciples and then casts out the demon. The disciples then privately ask why they had failed. Jesus explained, “*Because of your little faith*” (v. 20). He goes on to add that with only faith the size of a tiny mustard seed one can move mountains, and “*nothing will be impossible to you. But this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting*” (vv. 20b-21). Frederick Bruner is by far the most helpful commentator on this passage and the related Synoptic Gospel passages. On Jesus’ explanation, “*Because of your little faith,*” Bruner comments, “The root of our problem, and we know it is deep down inside, is that we do not really believe.... We are almost as much unbelievers as the world of unbelievers. This is Jesus’ sharpest pain and the deepest source of his complaint. Believers hardly believe.” Then Bruner asks the question, “what distinguishes little faith from mustard-seed faith, or little faith from a little faith?”

A good rule in Gospel interpretation is ‘when at first you don’t succeed, try another Gospel.

¹²³ Smith, “Prayer,” *IDB*, 865.

¹²⁴ See above on page 37.

¹²⁵ Hunter, *The God Who Hears* 195, 196; this cycle is diagrammed in the endnotes for chapter seven, note seven, 214.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 196.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 197, 198. Hunter quotes Samuel Chadwick’s statement of what it means to pray in Jesus’ name: “To pray in the Name of Christ... is to pray as one who is at one with Christ, whose mind is the mind of Christ, whose desires are the desires of Christ, and whose purpose is one with that of Christ” (197). Such would seem to be the same for one who “delights in the Lord.” “Delight yourself in the Lord; And He will give you the desires of your heart” (Ps. 37:4).

...Mark ...heard Jesus say prayer [9:29] where Matthew heard Jesus say faith. Is there any difference? Not much, for prayer is simply faith breathing. Faith is the inside and prayer is the outside of one true relation with God. Thus ‘a little faith like a grain of mustard seed’ is simply faith that says its prayers, faith that breathes. Faith and prayer are also united by the fact that they both look outside themselves for their power – neither trust its own competency; both faith and prayer are openness toward God.

“So how does the church find the helpfulness she needs for the world? By believing God enough to pray. Why were the nine disciple unable to be of help to the father and his possessed son? Because they did not have that little mustard-seed faith that moved them to prayer. ...Prayerlessness is powerlessness.

“...A *little* faith, a *little* prayer, does wonders. (In Luke, for example, when the apostles ask Jesus to increase their faith, Jesus, surprisingly, does not give them a way *to increase* their faith but teaches them, instead, to realize all that *little* mustard-seed faith can do, Luke 17:5-6. Thus, Jesus wants his disciples to learn that they can run marvelously on a low tank. We are *always* inhibited by the low level of our faith; Jesus tells us to rejoice that we have faith at all and to be confident that with even our little and always inadequate faith we can really do a lot, even miracles.)”¹²⁸

Bruner quotes Adolf Schlatter then continues his comment on one final insightful point of emphasis. “‘It is not the strength of their faith that makes God gracious, it is God’s grace that makes their faith strong.’ Jesus wants his disciples to cease groveling in shame or inadequacy because of their almost always-weak faith, and he wants them to believe that they’re even elementary faith and prayer throbs with power. Thus faith in Jesus is a steadier spiritual, psychological and even physical reality than self-confidence and self-esteem, which go up and down with performance.”¹²⁹

4. A Call To Pray and Pray and Pray: Matthew 7:7-11//Luke 11:9-13

These insights teach us a great deal about the relationship of prayer and faith. First is the simple recognition that we all struggle with “little faith.” Second is the difference between “little faith” and “mustard-seed faith.” Mustard-seed faith is faith, which prays, while a “little faith” is no faith. Third, the simple truth which Jesus taught his disciples - “A little faith, a little prayer does wonders.” What an incentive to pray! Last, this tiny parcel of faith expressed in prayer makes us look to God. He is the power source. God, who can do the impossible, can be boldly approached with a tiny faith, which is simply enough to ask. This is in essence the same point Jesus makes in Matthew 7:7-11 – “Ask,” “Seek,” “Knock,” and it will be “received,” “found,” and “opened” to you. Bruner says, it is “as if to say this is law; the way to receive from the Father is asking?”¹³⁰ “Little faith” simply won’t ask.

What of the warrant of such prayer? In these passages, Matthew 17:14-20; 7:7-11, and their parallels, we find no warrant because Jesus’ purpose was not to establish a warrant but to teach and encourage bold prayer even from a tiny mustard-seed faith. Bruner explains,

“This famous Ask passage is noteworthy because of the unconditioned character of its promises. Ask *what*? We are not told exactly. The promises are astonishingly open-ended. Whenever this passage is read with simple faith it will take the breath away.”

He continues,

“This text has its problems, for we all know of asking that to all honest observation did not receive what it asked. People have been hurt here... Why, then, is Jesus’ promise so dangerously absolute? I believe it is because Jesus is convinced that his disciples have an appalling lack of

¹²⁸ Bruner, *The Churchbook*, Vol. 2, 620-621.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 622.

¹³⁰ Bruner, *The Christbook*, Vol. 1, 277.

faith (and so, of prayer, faith's exhalation). ...Schweizer...acknowledges that Jesus' open-ended teaching on prayer can be abused, but Jesus 'is not concerned about the chance of being misunderstood...[by someone who] would transform the gift into an instrument for his own designs. ...He is not concerned that his hearers might misuse [the gift of prayer], only that they have it.'"¹³¹

Man's natural tendency is to attempt to sustain the nature of man as sufficient and adequate, but the Gospel portrays the nature of man as bankrupt, inadequate, and in a constant state of need. On the other hand, the Gospel portrays God as totally sufficient. As such, Jesus sought to teach and establish again and again that the neediness of man should compel him to be an asker, a seeker, and a knocker. The willing, able, gracious, and merciful nature of God compels Him to give, reveal, and open. Prayer is the means of this interchange. Therefore, man must exercise this means. "Asking is what prayer is; this passage [7:7-11] and the Lord's Prayer together carve this gracious fact into the doctrinal conviction of the church. If this passage can succeed in making disciples prayerful, the Sermon on the Mount (which is the will of God) is on its way to fulfillment 'on earth as it is in heaven.' Jesus does not leave his church with a great deal of equipment, but he knows...that if he can leave her with the simple, open-ended gift of prayer, he has already met most of her need."¹³²

5. "A Faith Without Doubt:" Matthew 21:18-22//Mark 11:12-14, 20-26

Matthew 21:18-22 and its parallel of Mark 11:12-14, 20-26 give us the account of Jesus cursing the fig tree because of its fruitlessness (vv. 18-19).¹³³ One commentator appropriately designated Jesus' action as the condemnation of "showy fruitlessness." The suddenness of the curse shocks the disciples, but it is also a subtle emphasis of judgment. Mark's account especially suggests the condemnation of Jerusalem, Israel and the scribes and priests (Mk. 11:18). He does this by interweaving the cleansing of the temple in the middle of the cursing of the fig tree.¹³⁴ Both Matthew and Mark make an explicit application to the disciples' faith in their expressions of preaching and prayer. In verses 21 and 22 Jesus says, "*Truly I say to you, if you have faith and do not doubt you will not only do what was done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, 'Be taken up and cast into the sea,' it will happen. And all things you ask in prayer, believing you will receive.*" Mark's account adds, "*but believes that what he says is going to happen, it will be granted him. Therefore I say to you all things for which you pray and ask, believe that you have received them, and they will be granted you*" (11:23b, 24).

These verses are an astounding statement of the warrant of faith without doubt – "*if you have faith and do not doubt...it will happen*" (Mt. 21:21); and "*believes that what he says is going to happen it will*

¹³¹ Ibid., 277, 278.

¹³² Ibid., 278.

¹³³ There are some differences between Mark's account and Matthew's. These differences have raised two questions: 1) Why had Jesus expected to find figs in light of Mk. 11:13; and 2) did the curse occur immediately (Mt.) or overnight (Mk.)? First, though the fig tree was fully leafed, it was not time for figs (Mk. 11:13). "Jesus must have hoped to find green winter figs which, not having ripened before the tree lost its leaves in the autumn, had stayed on the branches through the winter and were ripening with the leafing of the tree in the spring;" Robert Gundry, *Matthew* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1982), 417. Second, there is only an apparent difference between Matthew's and Mark's accounts when Matthew implies that the curse was immediate, while Mark has the curse one day and the effect noticed the next. ...The withering was [not] completed in a moment.... Mark...indicates that the withering had previously occurred. So there is no contradiction," John Broadus, *Matthew* (Valley Forge: The Judson Press, 1886), 435.

¹³⁴ We find a similar image in each of the following: Lu. 13:6-9; Jer. 8:13; Joel 1:7; Ezek. 17:24; Micah 7:1-6; Hos. 9:10; 16f. The cursing of the fig tree was an act of prophetic symbolism, cf. 2 Chron. 18:10; Jer. 27:2; 28:10ff; cf. D. E. Nineham, *Saint Mark* (Harmondworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, Ltd., 1963), 299; also see Eduard Schweizer, *The Good News According To Mark* (Richmond, Virginia: John Knox Press, 1970), 231, 232, who emphasizes that Mark particularly has interwoven the cursing with the cleansing of the temple (11:14-19). Gundry, *Matthew*, 417, points out that this suddenness of the cursing is to emphasize the "dire threat of judgment."

be granted him” (Mk. 11:23). The first application of both is to what the disciple would say in faith... *“if you say to this mountain”* (Mt.); and *“believes what he says”* (Mk.). The second application is to the prayer of faith – *“all things you ask in prayer believing you will receive”* (Mt. 21:22); and *“all things for which you pray and ask, believe that you have received them and they will be granted you”* (Mk. 11:24). We need to look at three questions which bear on these texts.

First, what is a faith without doubt? Gundry notes that “doubt” should be understood as the same thing as *“little faith”* in Matthew 17:20 (cf. 14:31).¹³⁵ The disciples ask why they failed to cast out a demon, and Jesus replies, *“Because of your little faith.”* He goes on to contrast their *“little faith”* with *“faith the size of a mustard seed”* which is promised to do the same thing in chapter 17 as here in chapter 21. In both texts mustard seed faith can say to this mountain, *“Move from here to there’ and it will move.”*¹³⁶ Thus, we have two simple equations: *“little faith”* which cannot move mountains (17:20) = *faith which doubts*, (21:21) and *“faith the size of a mustard seed”* (17:20) = *“if you have faith and do not doubt”* (21:21). Both of these latter can move mountains, but neither of the first two can.

Yet, there is another clue to what faith without doubt refers. Matthew includes an event which none of the other Gospels have. It is the immediate introduction to Matthew 21:18-22. In verses 14-18 Matthew records Jesus’ healings of the blind and the lame (v. 14). There is a contrast of the responses to these healings in verses 15 and 16. The children who had observed these events shout, *“Hosanna to the Son of David”* (v. 15), and the chief priests and the scribes indignantly rebuke Jesus for the children’s praise (vv. 15, 16). Jesus then rebukes these leaders, *“...have you never read, ‘out of the mouth’ of infants and nursing babies you have praise for yourself?”* Matthew sees here what true faith is. It is embodied in the faith of these children (cf. Mk. 10:13-16; Mt. 19:11-15; Lu. 18:15-17). They witnessed these *“wonderful things He had done”* (v. 15) and simply confessed the obvious. No doubt. No qualification. Yet, these children’s faith was the work of God who had prepared praise for Himself out of mouths of babies (quoting Ps. 8:2; cf. Mt. 11:25). Eduard Schweizer gives this summary: *“...the*

¹³⁵ Gundry, *Matthew*, 418; cf. “doubt” in Mt. 14:31; Jas. 1:6-8; 1 Tim. 2:8. Eduard Schweizer comments on Matthew 14:31, in the incident of Peter walking on the water to Jesus, “the Greek word for ‘doubt’ suggests ‘going in two directions at once’; the term used in 21:21 means literally ‘think asunder,’ think along two lines; the term in James 1:8 means ‘to have two souls,’ as though two souls were struggling within a single breast, the one inclined to go one way, the other another. When faith devotes its attention strictly to the word of Jesus, it may take a realistic view of wind and waves; but must not allow them to distract it. According to Matthew, such faith is promised everything; but when it begins to vacillate between the command of its Lord and some evident personal danger, it falters.

“But we are not dealing simply with ‘faith and courage in the face of a most arduous undertaking,’ as Goethe read this story, but with the kind of faith that rivets its attention solely on the word of Jesus; that kind of faith really only begins at the point where Peter fails; for only then is he bereft of all hope but the sight of his Lord and help from him. This, then, is true faith: not the sublime achievement of an especially religious individual, but ‘single minded’ devotion to the Lord, to his bidding and to his help. It can be enforced by necessity, when there is nothing else left to rely on; in fact it is more likely to be found in such a situation....

“It is more likely that the confession of Jesus as God’s Son appears here because the boat symbolizes the community that confesses Jesus. The contrast between the master and his disciples is even sharper than in 8:23-27, and both sides are emphasized; the power of Jesus and the doubt of the community. Thus the story is a promise for their obedience and a summons constantly to renew their faith, a faith that devotes its attention to the power of the Lord, expressing itself in the prayer (‘Save, Lord.’) The crucial points, then, are Jesus’ call to follow, the promise he accords to faith, and his saving help in the face of failure.

“This is also the way the Gospel will end: the doubting disciples (28:17) are called upon to go out in faith into all the world and are promised the presence of their Lord ‘to the end of the age.’ Peter is not depicted as an outstanding hero by virtue of his faith, but as a representative of the disciples in general (see the discussion of 15:15),” *The Good News According To Matthew* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1975), 322, 323.

¹³⁶ The mountain illustration is a hyperbole (an exaggeration to make a point) (cf. Lu. 17:6; 1 Cor. 13:2; Zech. 4:7) used “in Rabbinic literature to denote a Rabbi who can remove difficulties of interpretation. ...Jesus means that God will, in response to faith, enable the disciple to do ‘the impossible,’” C.E.B. Cranfield, *The Gospel According To St. Mark* (London: Cambridge University press, 1972), 361.

strong faith...is granted to whoever, like a child, ...can rely completely on God in whatever concrete situation he finds himself, and expects everything from him [God].”¹³⁷ Faith without doubt is faith which has become resolutely focused upon the word of Jesus, and it will not be distracted. Whereas, when Jesus bid Peter to come walking on the water to Him, Peter doubted. Note the sequence, he became distracted, he doubted, and he sank (Mt. 14:22-33). Jesus said, “*You of little faith, why did you doubt?*” (14:31). A faith which is without doubt will not be distracted from its object. Schweizer states that faith without doubt “refers simply to the existence of a faith to which everything has been promised just because it expects everything from God and nothing from itself. Of course, a person with this kind of faith always prays that the will of God will be done, not his own. In Mark’s version ‘faith’ is defined as ‘not doubting.’ This is certainly true, especially since the Greek word (and the German) contrasts ‘duplicity’ with the absolute simplicity of faith. Doubt describes man in his indecision and in his wavering between God and every other source of help.”¹³⁸ Faith without doubt describes a man decided upon God as his only hope of help! The wet Peter realized this and cried, “*Lord, save me!*” (Mt. 14:30). Before this he doubted and went under, but when he resurfaced the wind and waves had pushed all doubt aside. He was decided, only Jesus could save him! Such is faith without doubt!

Second, why does Jesus distinguish between faith expressed in speaking (word of faith), and faith expressed in praying (prayer of faith)? Fredrick Bruner offers an insightful distinction:

“The first sentence says, in fact, ‘believe what you say, and, believe that what you say has miraculous effects.’ This Word of Jesus is an appeal to Christian workers to have confidence in their message. Luther often advised his ministerial students to have confidence in their words, where they give the faithful and evangelical exposition of Scripture, for their words are the Word of God.... The Second Helvetic Confession, chap. 1, [has]...a great sentence... ‘**the preaching of the Word of God is the Word of God.**’”¹³⁹

Bruner continues pointing out the relevance of speaking to mountains.

“You will even be able to say to this mountain over here, ‘Go jump in the lake,’ and it will go. It is one of Jesus’ goals to encourage his disciples with the breathtaking power of what they say. Jesus’ words here are pictures: no one goes around talking to mountains. But all disciples go around talking to themselves about mountain-like problems.... The power that levels mountains is preaching that speaks with confidence.”¹⁴⁰

Third, is there a qualification on such prayer, or do we in fact have an unconditional promise given for prayer offered with faith without doubt? Matthew’s record is put most clearly: “*all things you ask in prayer believing you will receive*” (21:22). Again Bruner comes to our aid.

“Thus when Jesus says ‘*and absolutely everything you ask for in prayer—believingly* [literally, “*believing,*” *pisteuontes*]—*you will get,*’ the key word is ‘*believing*[ly].’ For all honest believers this word ‘*believing*(ly)’ immediately removes from consideration every private wish for my temporal welfare. I cannot ask believingly that my life will be without crosses. I can pray believingly that the cross will serve God’s honor and help other people (cf. 2 Cor. 1:3-7). I

¹³⁷Schweizer, *Matthew*, 409; also see footnote 135 above.

¹³⁸Schweizer, *Mark*, 234, 235.

¹³⁹Bruner, *The Churchbook, Matthew 13-28*, Vol. 2, 757, 758. “Jesus’ main gift to his people will be his Word, by which the Father continually speaks to us; this is the first and main gift of Jesus to his church. His other gift is the privilege of our speaking to the Father. By these two means—the Word and prayer—the church makes her sure way through the world. The sacraments, incidentally, are divinely instituted extensions of the Word; they are not competitors with it. The seventeenth chapter of Matthew teaches the Word and prayer doctrines classically. ‘By the [Sum] Jesus intends to teach [his disciples] that second only to the office of preaching, prayer is the chief work of a Christian’ (Lu., *SM*, 228),” Bruner, *The Christbook*, Vol. 1, 278, 279.

¹⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 758.

cannot pray with confidence that, whatever my health, I may please him.

“...Jesus wants us to trust God boldly, confidently, assuredly, knowing that God is propitious to us through the fully satisfying work of Jesus. Knowing that this is how Jesus wants us to pray so confidently—makes our prayers much more than a hoping mumbling and transforms the life of prayer into an adventure.

“...Luther understood this kind of prayer: God ‘desires of us nothing more ardently than that we ask many and great things of him, and he is displeased if we do not confidently ask and entreat’ (Large Catechism).”¹⁴¹

H. Can Anyone Pray About Everything With A “Certain Faith”?

It is commonly taught that if you truly believe without any doubt, then God will answer your prayer. This problem we have already touched upon, but it is both so prevalent and dangerous a problem, which wrongly construes the relationship between faith and prayer, that we will touch upon it once again. Dabney puts this misconception this way: “the only reason any prayer of one in a state of grace and activated in the main by pious motives, is not specifically and infallibly answered, is, that it was not offered in faith, and that whatever such a saint fully believes that he shall receive that which he asks, he will receive it, as surely as inspiration Such prayer...[is dignified by calling it] ‘the prayer of faith.’ We must clarify our writing on this issue, or we will find ourselves greatly disappointed and discouraged with prayer. This perspective and conception of faith has no regard for the warrants of faith and prayer which both logic and Scripture dictate!”¹⁴²

First, following Dabney’s argument, we can see that both logic and our own experience dictate, that to have a certain faith for any given outcome is simply beyond our ability to know with any more than a relative certitude, even in those situations in which we may be very knowledgeable. For example, a husband of 30 years has probably relatively come to a familiar understanding and expectation of his wife. He has learned her preferences, her dislikes, her fears, her joys, etc, but the amazing thing about husbands and wives is that they continue to surprise one another. Their preferences and dislikes change, as do their moods, fears and aspirations. As familiar as a husband of 30 years is with his wife he will make mistakes in predicting her wants and needs. If this is the case for someone who one knows well, how then should we expect to know what God wants and desires in varied circumstances and with varied people. Can we know with certainty that God wants this illness healed but not that one (e.g. 2 Cor. 12:7-9)? Can we know He wants this person to move here and that one over there? Or even can we know who will come to Christ, and who will not (e.g. Rom. 9:6, 10-18; Acts 13:45-48)? We cannot see all possible options let alone know how one option will effect a future chain of events over another. So how do we know the best option for which to pray, or what about the timing of an answer to prayer? What if we pray for the right option a day late or one minute late? Therefore, the realities of our own lives and the experience of living teach us we cannot pray with a certain faith about all the various circumstances of life. The simple fact is we do not have enough knowledge about many issues in our lives to be able to pray according to the will of God with a “certain faith.”

Our study of Providence provides another example. We found many various conditions to be present in the operation of Providence:

- God provides care for His creation and creatures even when they do not ask (e.g. Mt. 5:45; Acts

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 759, 760; “We talk to ourselves about our problems in the form of much thought, worry, and sleeplessness; we might talk about our problem with those close to us, too, but even we Christians are strangely reluctant to talk frankly about our problems with the Father, proving again that our faith needs robustness. Jesus opens the doors of faith as widely here [Mt. 7:7-11] as they will ever be opened again, and he promises us unconditionally a fruitful audience with the Father—for the simple asking,” Bruner, *The Christbook*, Vol. 1, 277.

¹⁴² Dabney, *Systematic Theology*, 721,722.

- 14:16, 17; 17:24-27).
- God also gives care when they do ask (e.g. Pss. 65:1 ff.; 107:1ff.; 107:1ff.; 1 Kings 17:1; 18:41-45; Acts 12:3-17).
 - Some things we do not know how to pray about (e.g. Rom. 8:26; 2 Sam. 24:13, 14; Acts 16:6-8; Mt. 20:22; Phil. 1:22-24).
 - Sometimes we ask wrongly and still receive rightly (e.g. 2 Cor. 12:7-10; Mt. 20:20-23; Mk. 2:3-12; Mt. 26:39).
 - Sometimes God does not answer or He replies, “No” (e.g. 2 Cor. 12:7-10; Dt. 3:23-28; Mal. 2:13, 14, 17; Mt. 16:21-23; 2 Sam. 12:15-19).
 - Sometimes God answers prayers immediately and sometimes long removed from the asking (e.g. Ex.32:18; Acts 12:3-17; Lu. 2:25-38).
 - Sometimes God gives reasons for His answer or delay and sometimes He does not (e.g. 2 Sam. 12:14; 2 Cor. 1:8-11; Jas. 4:1-2; Acts 16:6-10; Rom. 15:20, 23, 24, 28-33; Acts 12:1-3).
 - Sometimes prayer is not answered for a lack of faith but clearly for other reasons (e.g. 2 Cor. 2:7-10; Mt. 26:39; Jas. 4:1-2; 1 Pet. 3:7; Ps. 66:18).

With all of these multitude of variables, how can we presume we know the right answer to any given set of circumstances, so that with a “certain faith” we can pray without a doubt? Logic dictates that this is beyond our ability to know.¹⁴³

What will make sense of all of the variables, which we have observed in our Providence study? I believe there is only one clear Biblical answer: “*This is the confidence which we have before Him that, if we ask anything according to His will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests, which we have asked from Him*” (1 Jn. 5:14, 15). W. Bingham Hunter, accordingly, defines prayer: “Prayer is a means God uses to give us what he wants.”¹⁴⁴ Dabney agrees with this and adds to it: “All our prayers shall be specifically answered in God’s time and way, but with literal and absolute accuracy, if they are believing and pious prayers, and for things according to God’s will. Now there are only two ways to find out what things are such; one is by special revelation, as in the case of faith, of miracles, and petitions for them; the other is by the Bible.”¹⁴⁵ Only from these two sources may we with certainty know what is according to God’s will. Dabney warns, “Faith, without an intelligent warrant, is sheer presumption.”¹⁴⁶ Since special revelation is extraordinary to the normal Christian life we must focus upon the Bible as our primary source for God’s will which is what Scripture teaches us: “...seeing that His divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness.... For by these He has granted to us His precious and magnificent promises...” (2 Pet. 1:3, 4).

I. Two Categories of Prayer Topics—One With a Certain Warrant, One Without

¹⁴³ We should note that there is a spiritual gift of faith: “...if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains...” (1 Cor. 13:2; 12:9). Undoubtedly the Spirit gives certitude with the manifestation of this gift, which is exceptional and extraordinary. That this gift of faith is extraordinary is emphasized by the qualifier “*all*” faith (13:12). The fact is that this gift does not help with the issue of prayer and faith because the gift is not the norm but the exception, which is part of the diversity of the Body. In other words, we all cannot exercise this, therefore it is irrelevant for our personal prayer life.

In addition, the gift of prophecy can also manifest a clear certitude about future events, but this certitude may or may not indicate God’s will about the future event. We see this clearly with regard to Agabus’ prophecy about Paul’s imprisonment (Acts 21:10-14). After the prophecy Paul says he must still go to Jerusalem, but everyone else tells him, don’t go. When Paul refused to relent everyone said, “*The will of the Lord be done!*” (v. 14). In other words, though the prophecy foretold what would happen, they did not know what God’s will would be with regard to it. So even prophetic certainty does not guarantee that one can pray with a “certain faith.”

¹⁴⁴ Hunter, *The God Who Hears*, 12.

¹⁴⁵ Dabney, *Systematic Theology*, 722.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 723.

1. Prayer Topics Without Warrant: Issues Nonessential to Redemption

“...God, both by promise and example, clearly holds out two classes of objects for which Christians pray. One is the class of which an instance has just been cited – objects naturally desirable, and in themselves innocent, which yet are **not essential to redemption**; such as recovery from sickness, recovery of friends, good name, daily bread, deliverance from persecution, conversion of particular sinners, &c., &c. It is right to pray for such things; it is even commanded; and we have ground, in the benevolence, love, and power of God, and tender sympathy of the mediator, to hope for the specific answer. But still **the truest believer will offer those prayers with doubts of receiving the specific answer; for the simple reason that God has nowhere specifically promised to bestow it.** The enlightened believer urges such petitions, perhaps warmly: but still are conditioned on an ‘if it be possible,’ ‘if it be consistent with God’s secret will.’ And he does not know whether he shall receive or not, just because that will is still secret. But such prayers, offered with this general trust in God’s power, benevolence and better wisdom, and offered with this general trust in God’s power, benevolence and better wisdom, and offered in pious motives, are accepted, even though not answered. Cf. 2 Cor. xii:8, with vs. 9; Matt. xxvi:39; with Heb. v:7. God does not give the very thing sought, though innocent in itself; he had never promised it: but He ‘makes all things work together for good to the petitioner.’ This should be enough to satisfy every saint.”¹⁴⁷

Here we find the category for Bruner’s cautions when he wrote,

“In some matters, no honest disciple can pray with undoubting confidence. Such matters include one’s own health. If Jesus had to ask if even his crucifixion was necessary, *“but thy will be done”* (26:39), then no disciple is above the Lord in also asking, in all questions of personal health or well-being, *“but thy will be done.”* The spiritualists tell us that the prayer *“thy will be done”* is unbelieving because God’s perfect will is health and that Jesus has already borne our sicknesses and carried our diseases in his atonement (Isa. 53:4 and Matt. 8:17). But even the spiritualists finally die.

“It seems like tempting God to say that in our case we can know that God’s will is, for example, our successful surgery, whereas in Jesus’ case, unfortunately, God’s will was execution and in Paul’s case a thorn in the flesh (2 Cor. 11:7-9). In other words, simple *faith*—respect for *God*—requires us to be modest when we ask about matters beneficial to ourselves. We simply don’t know what God intends for our welfare, and the cross should open us to surprises.

“On the other hand, we have every right to ask God confidently and, if one may say so, brashly (Luke 11; 18), boldly, and without any doubt at all, for the removal of mountains in the way of his gospel. Here we can pray away! We can pray against all pride and opposition, against all false doctrine, unreality, false ethical teaching, and false ethical living. Mountains we can pray against; the gospel we can pray for. But with ourselves, well, we are supposed to deny ourselves, take up our *crosses*, and follow him.”¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 723, bold added.

¹⁴⁸ Bruner, *The Churchbook*, Vol. 2, 759; Bruner identifies clearly this warrant upon faith which does not doubt except about what it is suppose to doubt about. Then he presses on to make a further distinction and to address the abuse of those who teach that there is no warrant on faith.

“Everyone who has made a difficult prayer request, and who has honestly mustered as much faith as possible and then been disappointed, has read this verse or verses like it and been hurt. And sometimes, like vultures or Job’s counselors, the spiritual are on the scene with their ‘you didn’t have enough faith,’ and the wound festers.

“...In order to be fair to our text, it is best to end its exposition by saying that Jesus’ story and his promises in it want to encourage us to throw ourselves into confident prayer, believing that the results will be prodigious. Confident prayer not only withers fig trees, Jesus promises, it uproots mountains. If disciples can make the always essential evangelical correction of pointing Jesus’ promises away from private welfare and toward public mission, they are on track. (Cf. John 15:7-8).

2. Prayer Topics With a Warrant: Issues Essential to Redemption

Dabney continued with the second class of objects for which we can pray with a certain warrant!

“The other class of objects of prayer is, the **benefits accompanying redemption**; all the gifts which make up, in the elect, growth in grace, perseverance, pardon, sanctification, complete redemption. **For these we pray with full assurance of a specific answer, because God has told us, that it is His purpose specifically to bestow them in answer to all true prayer.** See Ps. lxxxiv:11; Luke xi:13; 1 Thess. iv:3; Luke xii:32; John xv:8. So, we have a warrant to pray in faith, for the grace to do the things which God’s word makes it our duty to do. In all such cases, our expectation of an answer is entitled to be as definite as was that of Apostles, when inspired with the faith of miracles. God may not give it in the shape or channel we expected; He may choose to try our faith by unexpected delays, but the answer is sure, because definitely promised, in His own time and way. Here we may say, Habak. ii:3, “For the vision is yet for an appointed time, but at the end it shall speak, and not lie; though it tarry, wait for it; because it will surely come it will not tarry.”¹⁴⁹

With regard to these warranted topics for prayer Paul Helm draws this analogy:

“...let us imagine the following non-theological case. A promises B that should B at any time want to borrow A’s ladders, then all B needs to do is to ask for them. This certainly looks like a case of a personal relation. A and B, let us suppose, are friends; and A’s promise looks like a personal, friendly, intentional action. What the promise appears to do is to specify a sufficient condition for a request being granted. To obtain the ladders, all that B needs to do is ask, and the ladders will be his.”¹⁵⁰

We might add, without A’s promise to lend the ladder to B, B would not have a warrant to expect the availability of the ladder when he requested it. Since A has promised the ladder, then B can confidently expect it to be delivered when requested.

This simple division of topics for prayer is most helpful when seen against the prayers of Scripture. For example, the apostle Paul prayed for what? We will look at just two examples: his prayer for the Colossians (Col. 1:9-14), and his prayer for the Ephesians (Eph. 3:14-21).

a. Colossians 1:9-14

In Colossians 1:9-14 we find these specific petitions: 1) “*that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding*” (v.9); 2) “*so that you will walk in a manner worthy of the Lord*” (v. 10); 3) “*to please Him in all respects*” (v. 10); 4) “*bearing fruit in every good work*” (v. 10); 5) “*increasing in the knowledge of God*” (v. 10); 6) “*strengthened with all power,*

“But has a shell game been played here? Isn’t there a naturalness, a divine naturalness, about praying for ourselves, for our problems and concerns? Haven’t we perhaps spiritualized Jesus’ personal teaching on prayer quite away when we say that we cannot pray anything confidently for ourselves, and that we can only pray confidently for the Master or against mountains? This objection has substance. Impersonal prayer is a contradiction in terms. We are involved in this. And we matter to God. If we are children of the Father we can – we must – pray for and about ourselves, and, yes, about our experiences, needs, problems, and seemingly little situations. To deny this would be to deny Jesus’ personalism, particularism, and realism. We count.

“But when this has been said, are we really playing games when we suggest that we cannot know exactly what God has in mind for us in particular? Is it lack of faith to say that I cannot be sure that my surgical operation is supposed to succeed? I think it is lack of faith (or of respect for God) to say that I am sure that what I want is what God wants. I do not think it is a confidence game to read the Gospels and to learn there that we are creatures, no less than the human Jesus of Nazareth, so that we must always defer in personal cases to God’s will, a will that we cannot always read from our best hopes” (pp. 758, 759).

¹⁴⁹ Dabney, *Systematic Theology*, 723, 724.

¹⁵⁰ Helm, *The Providence of God*, 155, 156.

according to His glorious insight” (v. 11); 7) “attaining of all steadfastness and patience” (v.11); and 8) “joyously giving thanks to the Father” (v. 11). The remainder of the verses give reasons for thankfulness rather than illustrate petitions. Here we can see a sample of what to pray for with all assurance that we can know that what we ask is according to the will of God. We do not know how, when, or to what decree God will answer, but we can be assured that **these are according to His will for His children’s redemption**, and what He hears He will in fact give (1 Jn. 5:15).

b. Ephesians 3:14-21

In Ephesians 3:14-21 Paul prays again for believers and petitions for the following: 1) “to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man” (v. 16); 2) “that Christ may dwell in your heart through faith” (v. 17) ; 3) “rooted and grounded in love” (v. 17) ; 4) “may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge” (vv. 18, 19); 5) “that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God” (v. 19); and 6) “according to the power that works within us to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen” (vv. 20, 21). Once again, the Apostle prays for those things, which accompany redemption. In so praying he teaches us that there are things for which we have full warrant to pray, and God will hear us and answer these petitions. Once again, we do not know when, how, or to what degree, but we are assured that these requests are according to God’s will, therefore He will hear and answer our requests.

These two prayers emphasize that too often our prayers do not center on the things which have been revealed as God’s will for us, but rather the preponderance of most Christians’ prayers fall within Dabney’s first class of petitions—those things which are “not essential to redemption.” Recognizing this we need to better balance our prayers, but most importantly distinguish clearly between those things which God has warranted and those that He has not. It is not that we should not pray for others or our own health and issues of life, but in praying for them we must clearly recognize that we pray with no certainty as to their outcome. From these examples of prayer it is obvious that the Apostle prayed for those things which accompany redemption. We find the same character in the prayers of Jesus! This kind of prayer is the kind of praying into which we are to grow. It is the kind of praying which is ever seeking to see the work of God in people’s lives, to see them conformed to the image of Jesus, to see sin defeated and the glory of God victorious! One could not more highly commend a beginning place than by praying the prayers of Scripture for learning this kind of praying.¹⁵¹

J. Summary

The Gospels teach us that a “*little faith*” is no faith because it will not ask. Faith, which does not doubt, is faith, which asks and has only one hope in its asking—“*that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him*” (Heb. 11:6). Faith has eliminated or simply knows it has no other options. Our faith is forever in Him not in what He will or will not give to us. Because we trust Him, we ask only that He will give us what is according to His will, we ask for those things for which He has taught us to ask, and we know that is always sufficient for His good purpose for us (cf. 2 Cor. 12:9; Rom. 8:28). Further, there is only one reason a prayer is ever answered by God—His grace and His mercy. There is no merit in faith (cf. Lu. 17:10). In the exercise of God’s providential care there are those providential acts which God requires of us. In the case of prayer it is that we must ask (faith) for His care, though His acts of

¹⁵¹ Here is a list of selected prayers found in Scripture: Nu. 6:22-27; Ex. 5:22-23; 1 Sam. 1:9-18; 2 Sam. 7:18-29; 1 Kings 3:1-15; 2 Kings 19:14-19 (Is. 37:14-20); 20:1-3 (Is. 38:1-3); 1 Chron. 17:16-27; 29: 10-20; 2 Chron. 6:1-42 (1 Kings 8:22-53); 20:5-12; 30:18-20; Neh. 1:4-11; Is. 26:7-19; Jer. 10:23-25; Hab. 3; Mt. 6:9-13; Jn. 17; Acts 4:24-31; Rom. 15:5-6, 13; Eph. 1:15-21; 3:14-21; Phil. 1:9-11; Col. 1:9-12; 1 Thess. 3:11-13; 5:23-24; 2 Thess. 1:11-12; 2:16-17; 3:5, 16. Here also is a list of selected Psalms useful for praying: 3- 6, 15, 18, 19, 22-25, 27, 29, 31-35, 37, 40, 42, 43, 44, 46, 50, 51, 55, 57, 62, 63, 68, 69, 71, 73, 77, 84, 86, 88, 91, 93, 97, 99-101, 103, 104, 107, 110, 111, 113, 115-119, 121, 123, 127, 128, 130, 139, 141, 142, 145. A further resource is Evan B. Howard, *Praying the Scriptures* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999).

care forever come from His grace and mercy, yet He places requirements upon us before He will exercise His providence for our good. He does this so that we might grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ (cf. Heb. 5:7, 8). The warrants (privileges and restrictions) of faith and prayer are given also to this end that we might grow in the knowledge of His will in all things and that we would continually grow in the fruit of humility, thanksgiving, peace, joy, and bold confidence in the Lord. In these relationships we see the consistency and beauty of the doctrine of providence as it embraces faith and prayer.

IV. The Application of Providence

A. Introduction: Providence Versus The World's Way of Thinking

It is in one sense impossible to categorize the way “the world” thinks because it is so varied. But we use the term “world” in its Biblical sense as that system of operation, which both opposes and lives life alienated from the true God of the Bible. So how does the world think? Godless! Such is the character of the depraved mind (Rom. 1:28). Because man would not approve, honor, or worship God, he has been cursed with the inability to approve, honor, or worship God that is what the depraved mind is. Because man would not, now he cannot. So how does the world think? Godlessly! They think secularly. They think in terms of a creation but refuse to acknowledge the Creator.

Providence is a quite sacred way of thinking. It is Biblical thinking. Providence establishes clear references: life started with God's plan, God was life's first and primary cause, God continues to sustain and govern the life of His creation, and God will bring history to a close as He has purposed and planned. All things are from Him, all things continue through Him, and all things are for Him (Rom. 11:36). In other words, Providence thinks in terms of God as the starting point, continuation, and conclusion of all things. God is the frame of reference for Providence. Providence is God-centered, while the way the world thinks is man-centered, but it is especially Godless thinking.

1. Fate, Chance, and Luck

One of the basic expressions of the world's way of thinking is to disembowel creation of God and His control over it. So they do not refer to Providence, but to Fate, Chance, and Luck. These are all godless terms to explain life apart from God, i.e. Godless living.

Fate is a mindless, purposeless, irrational, omnipotent power, which destines all things, but it destines and determines both things and people without purpose or meaning. Fate has no plan but is entirely capricious. Godless people sense some power directing life, but they must of necessity define it from a depraved point of view. So they give credit and acknowledge fate as directing all things. Fate determines all things and actions. It is inescapable. Full-blown fate leaves man entirely helpless before its absolute power of determination. One is free to do whatever one wants to do, but the outcome is determined. It is sealed. There is no reprieve. Fate is mindless and heartless. It is simply a capricious, absolute, determining power.

While fate determines man's destiny without God, chance reflects a universe, which has no single end in view but multiple possibilities. Chance is the mathematical probability of one possibility over others. Chance is entirely unguided, uncertain, and powerless to determine outcomes. Chance is simply what might be or might not be. Chance mixes with the free will of man, i.e. man's self-determination, to result in the fulfillment of a possibility. Man can assert himself with chance. He can have a part in determining his outcome, but chance creates man's uncertainty about any final outcome.

Luck is a favorable probability, but luck suggests there is something directing the outcome favorably. Thus, luck like chance is not a destiny, but luck is a special kind of a chance. It is given an outcome

weighted toward individual success or favor. What produces this favorable outcome? Fate? Luck is a term, which suggests a partial determination.

None of these terms reflect the Biblical concept of Providence. They are the world's attempt to explain the occurrence of events without and apart from God.

So consequently these words should be avoided. Within Providence there is no fate; there is no chance; and there is no luck. There are no accidents, coincidence, or fortunes. There is only the will of God (Prov. 16:33). Thus, as we acknowledge the coming or passing of events fate, chance, and luck are not the vocabulary we should use. Rather, "may Providence smile on you," or "may your providence be happy." The Biblical expressions seem to be "may the Lord's will be done," "to God be the glory," "we praise you Father for your grace and blessing," "the Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away," "Grace and peace be with you," "may the Lord bless your way," "may our Lord bless and keep you," "I will our Lord willing," etc. If we are to apply Providence, then we must avoid Godless language and look for expressions which reflect the reign and exercise of Providence in our observation or expectation of events. As Paul wrote, "*We are destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and we are taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ*" (2 Cor. 10:5).

In addition, because Providence is the working out of God's good purpose for His children we must cultivate an attitude of trust exemplified by thankfulness in everything. We must remind ourselves that thankfulness in everything is only rational if God is working all things out for His good purpose, a purpose that will be good for us. Apart from this fundamental affirmation of Providence, to be thankful for all things would be absurd, but in the frame of reference of Providence it is the only response of faith! So Scripture teaches us, "*In everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus*" (1 Thess. 5:18). "*There must be no filthiness and silly talk or course jesting which are not fitting, but rather giving thanks*" (Eph. 5:4, cf. v. 20; Col. 3:15, 17; 1 Thess. 2:12, 13).

2. Existentialism and Postmodernism

Philosophy reflects the systems of thought by which people attempt to make sense out of life. In different periods of history different systems of thought have each established basic tenets upon which their system rests, and these tenets have tended to be the driving forces for the ideas which have shaped that age. Gene E. Veith, Jr. gives this brief outline of the historical developments in philosophy.¹⁵² The first stage was "Premodern" which included the Greek, Roman, and early Christian periods. This period was governed by the understanding that reality was governed by the supernatural, that which was beyond the senses. The world was under the control of God or the gods.

The second stage began in the 1700's. The Renaissance and then the Enlightenment were driving forces shaping the perceptions of the world. This was the "Modern" period. It was characterized by the rejection of the supernatural. It replaced the supernatural with the concept of a universe, which had resulted from and is sustained by naturalistic machine-like laws. It was called the "Age of Reason." Reason and empirical science drove this age. These were considered as man's only access to truth. Reason became man's new god.

The third stage is the "Postmodern" period. Its roots were in the 19th century philosophy of Romanticism, which rejected logic for feelings. Passion, idealism, simplicity were pressing ideas for the romantics.¹⁵³ Romanticism gave way to Existentialism, which became the heartbeat of Postmodernism. Existentialism is hard to define for it has so many variations. Brian Godawa notes three dominant

¹⁵² Gene Edward Veith, Jr., *Postmodern Times* (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1994).

¹⁵³ Bertrand Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1945) 675-683.

themes of Existentialism: chance over destiny, freedom over determinism, and experience over reason.¹⁵⁴

a. Chance Over Destiny

Existentialism assumes that there is no underlying pre-existing order, meaning or purpose. This assumption gave voice to Nietzsche's cry, "God is dead." Since there is no meaning or purpose to life God is irrelevant. What governs the universe? Chance! The universe is an accident, and there is no point to it. It moves from one chance accident to another chance accident. Chance events inevitably bring evil and suffering. The experiences of unjust, random evil and suffering make life absurd.

b. Freedom Over Determinism

Since there is no pre-existing order to the universe, then a person's existence will only have the meaning which he or she gives it.¹⁵⁵ Chance necessitates that man is free, and his decisions create possibilities, options, and meaning. All social, political, religious systems impede and restrict man's freedom, so they must be discarded so that man will have the greatest expression of autonomous freedom in a chance universe. For only in freedom can man define his meaning. External systems restrict man, so he must look within himself, to his own personal intuition to make the best decisions and find his meaning.

c. Experience Over Reason

Existentialism rejects reason. "The Modern Man thought that through science, logic and careful rational reflection we would discover the underlying order to all things in order to discover the meaning of it all. But we cannot find such order or meaning in a chance universe. Reasoning only leads to despair (*angst*). We cannot *find* meaning through reason, we must *create* meaning through our own choices and experience."¹⁵⁶ From Romanticism the hope of man became discovery by experience. Introspection was of greater value than logic, the heart offered more than the head. So truth was made subjective. We know truth by the way we feel, and the way it makes us feel. We know things are true because we feel them to be so. Since I make my own meaning, if someone else does not feel that which I feel is truth it does not change my truth. I make my own meaning, and they make their own meaning. We are the sum total of all our choices and chance experiences. Man's meaning is always and only found inside himself. Therefore, contradiction is ok. Rational impossibility is accepted because one cannot know truths by reason. "The ramifications of this denial of the law of contradiction leads to the absurdity of a worldview where murder is both evil and good, lies are both true and false, and man knows both true and false, and man knows both everything and nothing at the same time."¹⁵⁷ Thus, right and wrong are ultimately what is right and wrong for me. Sin doesn't exist. Rules and laws are only preferences and opinions. There is only the power of choice and chance. Tolerance and pluralism have become bywords for an Existential view of life. Joel Arrington notes, the Postmodern password is "'whatever' – the ultimate in tolerance."¹⁵⁸ She offers this helpful chart.

¹⁵⁴ Brian Godawa, "Postmodern Movies: The Good, The Bad and The Relative, Part I," *SCP Newsletter* (Spiritual Counterfeits Project), Vol. 23:3, 1999 (Berkeley: SCP, Box 4308), 1, 4, 6-9, 14, 16.

¹⁵⁵ This is the meaning of Jean Paul Sartre's expression: "existence precedes essence."

¹⁵⁶ Godawa, "Postmodern Movies," 6.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁵⁸ Joel Arrington, "Hey Mom, What's A Worldview?" *Focus on The Family*, April, 1198, 14, excerpted from her book, *World Proofing Your Kids* (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books).

Chris

MODERN

POSTMODERN

tian

There is an Author	There is no author, but there are ideals.	There is no author and no ideals.
We live in a grand story, the triumph of God's plan.	We live in a grand story, the triumph of reason, evolution and the progress of the human spirit.	There is no grand story.
We have hope.	We are making progress (false hope).	We have no hope.

This is the way the world is thinking. They do not consciously think this way, but the ideas have been incorporated little by little until they have become woven into the vocabulary and the worldview of people. “As C. S. Lewis pointed out, the most dangerous ideas in a society are not the ones that are being argued, but the ones that are assumed. Ideas debated in the public square are shaped by argument, but ideas that are assumed by the public shape us.”¹⁵⁹

It is to this arena that we bring Providence. The worldview of Providence stands diametrically opposed to Postmodernism. This we must realize as we set about the task of applying Providence. The battle of ideas is subtle. The world would have you believe and live with Postmodernism as your worldview of choice (Rom. 12:2). While as Bible believing Christians we teach and live in the frame of reference of Providence. To offer Christ to the world Providence becomes part of the package. So against the backdrop of Postmodernism Providence clearly distinguishes itself in these ways.

1. Providence teaches us that there is meaning in life, and it is given meaning not by us, but by God in His good purpose and plan. Though there are times in which we cannot understand all the events of life, yet we understand enough and trust God's sovereignty to accomplish and give meaning to all events.
2. The focus of our lives then is to worship and please the great God in whom “*we live and move and have our being.*” Our creation and God's providential rule establish our responsibility to worship and please God as the indisputable duty of every person. The work of redemption further establishes this duty beyond dispute.

¹⁵⁹ Godawa, “Postmodern Movies,” 1. Godawa does an excellent job pointing out how Postmodernism is being presented as the normal worldview in movie after movie. All their characters assume these subtle themes.

3. Thanksgiving must be the expression of faith, which affirms God's providences in our lives. Such affirms the meaning of every event. *"We know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose"* (Rom. 8:28). Such affirms that there is a blessed end to which God is moving all history. Such affirms that in every event God is working to transform us into the likeness of Jesus Christ.

4. Providence teaches us that all things come from the hand of God, therefore we should seek from Him all things. Providence teaches us the necessity of prayer and seeking our heavenly Father's provision from the smallest to the greatest issues in our lives. Further, Providence assures us that God is delighted when we seek Him.

5. Providence directs us not to look within ourselves for there we find a "deceitful heart," rather Providence directs to God's Word that we might know God, His ways, and His duty for us. Thus, Providence calls us to God's Word that we might grow in our knowledge of God and His will. By such we study to please Him.

6. Providence calls us also to think clearly about how we speak and the terms we use. There is no such thing as luck, coincidence, accidents, chance, fortuitousness, fate or fatalism in Providence. Such are alien concepts to Providence, and therefore such should make us search and use other expressions, which represent what we believe about Providence.

B. The Assurances of Providence When We Face Our Fears and Dread

Life is so full of things to fear. Fears come in basically in two kinds: real fears and unreal fears. There are some things we rightfully should fear. They are very real potentialities, but then there are so many things that we fear which are the results of fertile imaginations. These fears are not real. They are like a bad dream which though very vivid is still not real. The uncertainties of life tempt us to fear, to fear that which might be. Such fears can drag us down to the depths of the despair, to the distress of helplessness and hopelessness, and to the very pit of dread. Calvin so articulately describes being attacked by fear and its uncertainties, but he then goes on to point out the distinctive value of the doctrine of providence to the true believer when faced with fears of uncertainties and of helplessness and hopelessness.

"Human life is beset by innumerable evils, and threatened with a thousand deaths. Not to go beyond ourselves, —since our body is the receptacle of a thousand diseases, and even contains and fosters the causes of diseases, a man must unavoidably carry about with him destruction in unnumbered forms, and protract a life which is, as it were, involved in death ...Now, whithersoever you turn, all the objects around you are not only unworthy of your confidence, but almost openly menace you, and seem to threaten immediate death. Embark in a ship; there is but a single step between you and death. Mount a horse; the slipping of one foot endangers your life. Walk through the streets of a city; you are liable to as many dangers as there are tiles on the roofs. If there be a sharp weapon in your hand, or that of your friend, the mischief is manifest. All the ferocious animals you see are armed for your destruction. If you endeavour to shut yourself in a garden surrounded with a good fence, and exhibiting nothing but what is delightful, even there sometimes lurks a serpent. Your house, perpetually liable to fire, menaces you by day with poverty, and by night with falling on your head. Your land, exposed to hail, frost, drought, and various tempests, threatens you with sterility, and with its attendant, famine. I omit poison, treachery, robbery, and open violence, which partly beset us at home, and partly pursue us abroad. Amidst these difficulties, must not man be most miserable, who is half dead while he lives, and is dispirited and alarmed as though he had a sword perpetually applied to his neck? You will say that these things happen seldom, or certainly not always, nor to every man, but never all at once. I grant it; but as we are admonished by the examples of others, that it is

possible for them to happen also to us, and that we have no more claim to exemption from them than others, we must unavoidably dread them as events that we may expect. What can you imagine more calamitous than such a dread?

“...When this light of Divine providence has once shined on a pious man, he is relieved and delivered not only from the extreme anxiety and dread with which he was previously oppressed, but also from all care. ...**This, I say, is his consolation, to apprehend that his heavenly Father restrains all things by his power, governs all things by his will, and regulates all things by his wisdom, in such a manner, that nothing can happen but by his appointment; moreover, that God has taken him under his protection, and committed him to the care of angels, so that he can sustain no injury from water, or fire, or sword, any further than the Divine Governor may be pleased to permit [cf. Ps. 91:3-6; 118:6; 27:4].** ...How is it that their security remains unshaken, while the world appears to be revolving at random, but because they know that the Lord is universally operative, and confide in his operations as beneficial to them? Now, when their safety is attacked, either by the devil or by wicked men, if they were not supported by the recollection and contemplation of providence, they must necessarily and immediately faint. **But when they recollect, that the devil and the whole army of the wicked are in every respect so restrained by the Divine power, that they can neither conceive of any hostility against us, nor, after having conceived it, form a plan for its accomplishment, nor even move a finger towards the execution of such plan, any further than he has permitted, and even commanded them; and that they are not only bound by his chains, but also compelled to do him service,—they have an unbounded triumph according to their own wills.**¹⁶⁰

In the light of our confident faith in Providence, we are reassured that whether we understand the events of our lives, as to how they fit into God’s overall purpose and plan for history, is immaterial. The fact which must be realized is that they have a part in that good, wise, and righteous plan of God. We need to reaffirm the character of this plan that it is good, wise, and righteous, and that God is entirely trustworthy to us. There is another step in this reassurance which is critical. It is the part we play in this plan. For we each have a part to play whether large or small, whether long or short.

The best analogy for our part may be that of a soldier. For we are in a war, and though we are the children of our heavenly Father we are also soldiers of the King (Eph. 6:10-20; Rom. 13:12; 1 Thess. 5:8; 2 Tim.2:3). Our part is to obey, to be faithful, to follow orders. It is the King who determines what part we play great or small, long or short. We are **not** promised problem-free living. We are **not** going to be exempted from the problems and the tragedies of life. For herein will be our battlefields. Whatever Goliath we face, whatever scheming Potiphar’s wife we must escape, whatever lions’ den into which we are cast, whatever cross we must bear we are soldiers of the King. Thus, to whatever battlefield He calls us there we are to stand for Him or die for Him. It is ours simply and faithfully to obey.

We must realize that we are not exempt from heartache, disappointment, disease, broken families, rebellious children, calamities too numerous to count, and death. Yet, **Providence guarantees three supreme facts: One**, God’s good purpose is served in every event in our lives (Rom. 8:28). **Two**, God is compassionately and sustainingly present with us to demonstrate His strength in our weakness (2 Cor.12:9, 10; cf. 9:7-11). We are neither alone nor unsustained in every event of our lives (cf. Ps. 23). **Three**, God will make us more than conquerors; we cannot lose (Rom. 8:37-39; cf. 2 Cor.2:14-16),

¹⁶⁰ Calvin, *Institutes*, Vol. I, Bk. 1, Chap. XVII, 245-247, bold added.

Special Note: The reader will find that a majority of references in this section are made to John Calvin and John. The reason is that they were rich in the application of Providence, whereas most authors neglected this critical part in their studies. It is best to consider any Biblical study of doctrine incomplete without a serious attempt at its practical and daily application. Lest, we become simply hearers of God’s Word and not doers (Jas. 1:22).

whether in life or in death (Rom 14:7, 8).

It is in this light that God calls us to take courage in Him, to be strengthened in His might, and to gird up our minds for that which by Providence we may be called to face. As Joshua was called to take up the mantle of Moses and to lead Israel in the conquest of a land with established and superior forces, he was instructed, *“Be strong and courageous.... The Lord is the one who goes ahead of you; He will be with you. He will not fail you or forsake you. Do not fear or be dismayed”* (Dt. 31:7, 8; cf. Josh. 1:5-9; Heb. 13:5). So Providence assures us of **One: God’s good purpose, Two: His presence and strength, and Three: ultimate victory!**

Yet, anxieties will come. For these God has given us the means of prayer to secure His personal peace.

C. Moving from Our Anxieties to God’s Personal Peace: Philippians 4:4-6

There is a Biblical priority for praying. That priority is that Biblical prayer first centers upon our knowledge of who God is and from such a knowledge of God we are to pray for His will and His glory. If this plank is first laid, and our prayers issue from this foundation, then as the apostle John wrote, *“if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests which we have asked from Him”* (1 Jn. 5:14, 15).

We are tempted to stray from this priority. Much of the popular teaching on prayer focuses on having an absolute faith or special formulas for asking or expectations of signs and wonders. The need is rather to get first things first in prayer. To do so, we must acknowledge that God is God. He is sovereign in all His activities. *“How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who became His counselor? ...For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen”* (Rom. 11:33-36).

Prayer is first the communication of the servant to the God who is ever present and who has called us into covenant with Him through our Lord and Great High Priest Jesus Christ. In prayer we seek to enter into His presence and into privileged communion with Him; and always, above all things, prayer seeks His will, His good pleasure, His purposes, His Kingdom. Within this priority then He invites us to pour out our hearts to Him. And in thus seeking His will in all things as His servants, we enter the very peace of God.

How do we do this? Philippians 4:4-7 teaches us this sweet balance between living under the sovereignty of God’s will and plan and pouring out our needs before Him in meaningful communion with Him. Here are the Apostle Paul’s four instructions:

1. “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice” (v. 4).

Biblical prayer begins with the acknowledgment of who God is. It is not a frantic explosion of our bound up needs. *“Rejoice in the Lord.”* Who is the Lord that I should rejoice? Name Him by all His names: He is *“Father.”* He is *“Abba Father.”* He is *Yahweh* □ the great I Am. He is our Rock. He is our Light and Salvation. He is our Helper, our Refuge, our Fortress, our Deliver, and so we could go on and on and on. How has He manifested Himself as such in the pages of Scripture? How has He manifested Himself as such to you? By recalling these we hallow the name of our heavenly Father. In this hallowedness of God’s name we rejoice. This instruction reminds us of one even more ancient. Nehemiah instructed Israel *“for the joy of the Lord is your strength”* (Neh. 8:10). Such rejoicing in the Lord’s will set our fractured dispositions right side up, turning our melancholy into joy and strength. It moves us from being problem-centered to God-centered.

2. *“Let your **gentle spirit** be known to all man. The Lord is near”* (v.5).

Paul states let your “gentleness” be evident, apparent, well demonstrated. The word used for “gentleness” (*epieikes*) is, in other places, contrasted with being contentious (1 Tim. 3:3). It is associated with being meek (Titus 3:2); it is described as a function of the heavenly wisdom (Jas. 3:17). It is associated with that which is good by virtue of its very character and constitution, as well as, by its beneficial effect. Thus, gentleness is that quality of disposition and character which doesn’t argue with God, rather it is meek, under God’s control, submitted to His rule. It is the character of response to that which is given by God; it is a fruit of the Holy Spirit; it is the Christlike embrace of everything coming from the Father’s hand. Gentleness is patient with all men. Behind everyone, gentleness knows, the sovereign hand of God moves, providentially moving all things to their appointed end. Oh, how can we pray without gentleness? The Psalmist vividly pictures this quality for us.

*“O Lord, my heart is not proud,
Nor my eyes haughty;
Nor do I involve myself in great matters,
Or in things too difficult for me.
Surely I have composed and quieted my soul;
Like a weaned child rests against his mother,
My soul is like a weaned child within me.
O Israel, hope in the Lord
From this time forth and forever”* (131:1-3).

Why this gentleness? Why this meekness and patience of the soul? Because, Paul states, *“The Lord is near.”* The figurative translation of “near” is to be “near at hand.” In other words, we can be gentle because the Lord is at hand; He is near to me! Again, the Psalmist gives us an apt expression of this nearness:

*“O Lord, ...You have enclosed me behind and before,
And laid Your hand upon me.
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me.
It is too high, I cannot attain to it.
...Your hand will lead me,
And your right hand will lay hold of me”*(139:4-6, 10).

In the security of such assurance we are gentled; we are quieted; we become meek before the Lord and display this gentleness to men. It is not a secret but a way of life made manifest to the world. Such “gentleness” is an essential attitude for the pattern of Biblical prayer.

3. *“Be **anxious for nothing**, but in everything be in prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God”* (v. 6).

Finally, we come to the command to bring our needs before God. We need to note several points. First, whatever we have a care for, or that which brings us to a point of worry or concern; these anxious things should be submitted to God in prayer. Peter instructs in a similar fashion: *“casting all your anxiety on Him, because He cares for you”* (1 Pet. 5:7). Second, in this verse we have four different expressions for prayer, each with a nuance of distinction, and in these expressions we find different kinds of prayers described.

a. *“in everything by **prayer**”* (*proseuche*)

This word translated “prayer” is the most common expression for prayer in the New Testament. It references the general experience of communication with God. It is distinguished from others by the fact that they are more specific. The other expressions for prayer describe specific kinds of prayers, but this

word “*prayer*” (*proseuche*) is general enough to take in all the other more specific expressions.

b. “in everything by prayer and *supplication*” (*deesis*)

Supplication is the cry, the appeal to God, which results from a specific need, desire, or want. We first have a need, then prompted by this need we appeal, ask God for its provision. To “*supplicate*” is to ask God for specifics.

c. “in everything by prayer and *supplication with thanksgiving*” (*eucharistia*)

Thanksgiving is a kind of prayer, but it is also a practice and mindset. When we know God will work all things together for good we can then be thankful for all things (cf. Col. 3:15-17). This thanksgiving prayer, practice and mindset, is dependent upon a healthy and confident understanding of God’s providence. Providence is the action of God’s sovereign power guaranteeing that what He has willed will come to pass. By His providence then God sustains, governs, and disposes of all things, men and their actions, to the ends, which He has ordained for them. In God’s providence we are assured that God always works for the good of those who love Him, and therein may we always, not incidentally but always, accompany all our specific supplications with “*thank you*” to God from the assurance of His providential work. Thus, the apostle wrote the Thessalonians, “*Rejoice always; pray without ceasing; in everything give thanks; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus*” (1 Thess. 5:16-18).

d. “in everything by prayer and *supplication with thanksgiving make your requests*” (*aitema*)

The word translated “*requests*” distinguishes itself from other words for asking by the fact that it is used by one who asks of someone who is greater in some measure than the one asking. Thus, a child asking a parent (Mt. 7:7), a vassal asking his king (Acts 12:20), a subject asking a political leader (Lu. 23:23) a beggar asking help of someone of means (Acts 3:2), and of course, a worshipper asking God (Col. 1:19). A “*request*” is a humble asking. It is an asking which sees the distance between the one asking and the one asked, and thereby, the asker is requesting benevolence, grace, and mercy from the one asked. A “*request*” asks God with the attitude that God delights to bless. “*God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble,*” Peter tells us (1 Pet. 5:6) quoting from Proverbs 3:34. “*Requests*” then are the humble askings for God’s gracious provision of what is needed or desired.

Praying is this kind of communication with God. It is the communication of our specific deepest felt and realized needs and desires. These we supplicate, ask, and request with the accompaniment of confident thanksgiving in God’s providence to do us good in all things. Yet, every asking is colored with gentleness and humility, and so we humbly ask His gracious provision.

4. “*And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus*” (v. 7).

Here is the blessing of praying according to our knowledge of God, seeking His will, and standing in the assurance that He hears and will answer us according to His will. As we pray thus we are blessed with God’s own personal peace. What is the peace of God like, God’s own personal peace? Imagine entering the throne-room of heaven. God reigns in absolute control over all agents and events of His creation. He providentially directs them to His final end. What would be the atmosphere and experience of such a state? No panic. No worry. No confusion. All is on schedule. All is proceeding exactly as purposed. No one is wondering why. Rather everyone is nodding “Of Course!” There are no emergency alarms. No “911.” No backup plans. No surprises. You never hear, “I never thought about that.” No “oups.” Everything, from the sparrows in the trees to the hairs on our heads, to the accounting of every teardrop, is proceeding with the precision of an atomic clock. All is well. And here, there is absolute peace. Relax. Everything has been anticipated, and all is well. This experience of utter calm is the blessing of praying “*not my will but Thine!*” This is the peace that will guard the

hearts and minds of those who are in Christ Jesus.

Our panic, confusion, and pain prompt us to cry to God for His help, provision, and healing, but our cries and prayers are guided by the Bible's instruction. The Bible's priority for praying is that we pray first out of the knowledge of who God has revealed Himself to be, and we pray that He will work in each of our requests according to His sovereign will. We pray that in each answered request His glory would be made manifest. From this priority in our praying we then secondarily, pour out our prayers, supplications, thanksgivings, and requests with the utter confidence and faith that He not only hears our requests, but He will answer each one according to His will. In this confidence and faith we enter into God's own personal peace that will stand as a sentinel over our hearts and minds in Jesus. Such is the Biblical pattern and priority for prayer. Now, we want to add to prayer the practice of meditating on Providence.

D. Learning to Meditate on Providence

John Flavel was one of the few Puritan leaders to survive the "Glorious Revolution" which climaxed in 1688 with the crowning of William and Mary and England's deliverance from Roman Catholicism. Flavel's, *The Mystery of Providence*¹⁶¹ was first published in 1678. Flavel spent the first hundred pages expounding Providence as God's work for His saints exhibited in their births and upbringings, their conversions, their employments, their family affairs, their preservation from evil, and finally, in their sanctification. Then he set to prove that the right application of the doctrine of providence was to meditate upon it. Even more, he sought to establish it was the duty of God's people to meditate upon Providence! He pointed out that our Lord commanded such meditation (Mt. 6:25-34), that to not do so is sin (Ps. 28:4,5; Is. 5:12,13; Job 34:26,27), that such meditation issues forth in praise and thanksgiving to God (Ps. 107), that only through such meditation can we spiritually benefit from the works of God (Ps. 74:14; 1 Sam.17:37; Mt.16:9; Num. 14:19), that we slight God not to observe His providences, (Is. 1:3, 26:10; Jer. 5:3; Zeph. 3:2), and that without such meditation one cannot know how to pray in various circumstances (Is. 12:1-2, 26:8; Zeph. 2:1,2; Amos 4:12).

1. The Advantages of Meditating on Providence

Flavel instructed his readers that in this duty to meditate upon Providence there is great advantage! He then listed ten such advantages. **First**, by such meditation "you may maintain sweet and conscious communion with God day to day"¹⁶² (Ps. 92:4-34). By this kind of meditation God manifests Himself to the soul, and in this kind of meditation the soul communes with God. In this communion deep lessons are taught. Correcting and rebuking providences are perceived (Micah 6:9), and hardness of heart is melted away (Ps. 32:4, 5; Lam. 2:17-19) producing a caution against sin (Ezra 9:13, 14; Ps. 85:8). On other occasions, the soul is cheered and comforted reflecting on smiling and reviving providences, which result in praise and thanksgiving flooding the soul (Ps. 18: 1-3; Ex. 15; Rev. 15:3). Such mediations work upon the soul a deep poorness of spirit and humility. In such merciful providences the soul sees God's great condescension to our unworthiness and need (Gen. 18:17; 32:10; 2 Sam. 7:18). Further, they warm the heart to love God greatly (Song of Sol. 2:3-5), and to exercise a great zeal for Him and His Law (Ex. 32:19, 20; Ps. 51; 2 Sam. 12:7-10; Is. 6:8; 2 Chron. 17:5, 6; Ps. 116:12). So Flavel concluded, "And thus you see what sweet communion a soul may have with God... [by meditation on] His providences. O, that you would thus walk with Him! How much of heaven might be found on earth this way!"¹⁶³

Second, not only do we find the advantage of sweet communion with God in such meditation, but we

¹⁶¹ John Flavel, *The Mystery of Providence* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1963).

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 143.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 147.

also find the very delight of the Christian life in such meditation as well. Flavel wrote, “A great part of the pleasure and delight of the Christian life is made out of the observations of Providence”¹⁶⁴ (Ps. 111:2). For example, it is often in the providences of God that we see the manifestations of His attributes, and therein, we delight in them and in Him (Ps. 85:10; Hab. 2:3; Rev. 14:1-3, 8). Herein too, we find answers to prayers spoken before perhaps even forgotten, but in our meditation we find them answered (Hab. 2:3; Ps. 31:22; Eccl. 11:1; Gen. 46:29, 30). Also, in thinking on present circumstances and providences we are able to see God’s finger, hand, and the strength of his arm at work (Ps. 119:71). Thus, fears and sorrow fall away and praise and thanksgiving replace them. Such meditations cannot but impress us of the great esteem and value which God has placed upon us (Ps. 23:6; Job 7:17, 18; 36:7) and deepens the assurance of our salvation and hope in the Lord. We find even afflictions to be surer evidence of our hope rather than destroyers of our souls (Phil. 1:19; 2 Cor. 2:14-16).

Here are Flavel’s remaining eight advantages: **third**, such meditation overpowers and suppresses “the natural atheism in your hearts;” **fourth**, by remembering and recording providences your faith will be strengthened in the future; **fifth**, by recalling former providences you will always have a source for praise and thanksgiving; **sixth**, such meditation will endear Jesus Christ to you more and more everyday; **seventh**, reflection upon providences have “a marvelous efficacy to melt the heart, and make it thaw and submit before the Lord;” **eighth**, meditation “will both beget and secure inward tranquility in your minds, amidst the vicissitudes and revolutions of things in this unstable vain world;” **ninth**, such will “have an excellent usefulness and aptitude to advance and improve holiness in our hearts and lives;” and **tenth**, such will be a sweet and powerful assurance and comfort in your dying hour.¹⁶⁵ Flavel then closed, “...I have spread before you some encouragements to this blessed work. O, that you would be persuaded to take up this lovely and in every way beneficial practice. This I dare presume to say, that whoever finds a careful and a thankful heart to record and treasure the daily experiences of God’s mercy to him shall never lack new mercies to record to his dying day. ‘...Who can utter the mighty acts of Lord? Who can show forth all his praise’” (Ps. 106:2)?¹⁶⁶

2. How to Meditate on Providence

How then does one go about the practice of meditating on God’s providences? Flavel helps us here as well. **First**, set before yourself as full and as thorough a recollection of God’s providences in your life from the first to the last as you are able to do. Consider their timing and their peculiar kindnesses. Providences often can be seen as a great train with one car linked to the next. So pay particular attention to the leading providence “because they usher in a multitude of other mercies, and draw a blessed train of happy consequences after them.”¹⁶⁷ Look also to the means and the instruments of God’s providences for often “great mercies are conveyed to us by very improbable means, and more probable ones laid aside.”¹⁶⁸ Note the design and scope of the providences as well as the aim and goal. Also ask how do these providences relate to our prayers?

Second, to rightly meditate upon God’s providences one must draw them to God’s Words (Ps. 57:2). God’s Word should interpret for us our providences and confirm the principles of Scripture, which are at work in our lives and in particular personal experiences. God’s Word will instruct us as to how we should respond to every providence (Ps. 94:12; 73:17). We also need to trace out the paths of Providence in the lives of those found in Scripture. There we will see both sin and holiness and the fruit of each. Such meditation will make even a fool wise. Also, draw together the paths of God’s

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 151-177.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 177, 178.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 119.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 120.

graciousness, His chastisement of His children, and how we are to respond to both.

Flavel lists four more instructions for meditating on Providence: **third**, in all providences never neglect to see God as the author and Lord of each (Prov. 3:6), and also as the work of your loving heavenly Father laboring for your good; **fourth**, learn and discipline yourself to respond to every providence with the affections and heart attitudes of which God’s Word instructs you (Eccl. 7:14); **fifth**, if in Providence God’s mercies to you are delayed do not lose heart but learn patient perseverance (Ps. 13:1, 2); and **sixth**, do not pry into the secret providences of God (Dt. 29:29), or to attempt shallow explanations or condemnations when faced with the vast mystery of God’s providentially workings (Ps. 73:3, 13; Job 42:3).¹⁶⁹ Flavel noted that this model of meditation is not understood by very many. “O that we were but acquainted with this heavenly spiritual exercise, how sweet it would make our lives, how light it would make our burdens! Ah, sirs, you live estranged from the pleasure of the Christian life, while you live in the ignorance or neglect of this duty.”¹⁷⁰

One of the most helpful parts of this meditative process is Flavel’s instruction to give special attention to the proper reaction when “sad providences frown upon you.” For even in the face of “sad providences” one must still maintain spiritual joy and abide in the comfort of God! This must be exercised with a cheerfulness of heart, which flows from our faith and hope in God. Flavel posed several questions to help us think and respond in this way.

“Why should we give up our joy in God on account of sad providences without, when at the very worst and lowest ebb the saints have infinitely more cause to rejoice than to be cast down?

...Why should they be sad, as long as their God is with them in all their troubles?

...Why should we be sad as long as no outward dispensation of Providence, however sad, can be interpreted as a mark or sign of God’s hatred or enmity?

...Why should we be cast down under sad providences while we have such great security that even by the hands of these providences God will do us good, and all these things shall turn to our salvation (Rom. 8:28)?

...Why should we give up our joy in God, when the change of our condition is so near (Rev. 7:17)?”¹⁷¹

His answer to these questions is threefold: first, turn your energies to mortifying “your inordinate affections to earthly things.”¹⁷² Second, dwell much upon the fact that the Lord is near (Phil. 4:4, 5) and rejoice in this. And third, focus your mind upon being eternally and heavenly-minded (Col. 3:1-3; Gen:9; 2 Chron. 17:5, 6) and having your heart contented with the portion the Lord has allotted to you (Phil. 4:11, 12). Such things are critical for our proper meditation upon especially the sad, frowning face of Providence. Flavel by these instructions gives us a great running start on learning to meditate upon Providence. As we follow these wise guidelines they will yield a wisdom and maturity of insight into God’s ways. Such will securely anchor you in the time of a storm, as well as, enable you to be a fountain of insight and understanding and a light and line to others as they are being cast about by the wind and waves!

E. Interpreting Providence

1. Preliminary Considerations:

As I have both grown in my understanding of Providence and taught the principles of Providence to

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 128-142.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 117.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 133, 134.

¹⁷² Ibid., 134.

others, there are basics, which must be taken like stakes and driven into the ground to anchor our understanding. This will prevent us from drifting or forgetting these fundamental issues. Losing these basics will make us vulnerable to the wind and waves of confusion.

a. Affirm God's Power, Wisdom, and Goodness

In our definition of Providence we have pointed out that Providence especially exercises three primary attributes of God: His power, His wisdom, and His goodness. This is to emphasize that God constrains all things by His power to achieve that, which in His wisdom He has purposed and planned and in doing so each and every event shows forth the goodness of His benevolence and His justice. So Calvin wrote, Providence is “to show the care of God for the whole human race, and especially his vigilance in the government of the Church, which he favours with more particular attention.”¹⁷³ Thus, we must regardless of the appearances of circumstances affirm in every event that the occurrence of this event that was for our care and that God in His goodness has so ordained this even to accomplish His good purpose for us. In affirmation of this our first response should be, “Thank you” (1 Thess.5:18). During my Seminary days I attended an intramural softball game. There was a foul ball popped-up down the first base line. Both the first baseman and the catcher rushed to catch the ball. They collided in a dead run. At the moment of impact the first baseman's glasses exploded into the air. The catcher was knocked unconscious. We rushed to the downed men, and I will never forget hearing the whispers of the first baseman whose face was already covered with blood from his broken glasses. He chanted, an affirmation of his faith in God's providence, “Thank you, Jesus! Thank you, Jesus!” Another event comes to mind of a young woman who lost her leg in an automobile accident. Her father, a pastor, was not sure what he would say to his daughter as he entered her hospital room for the first time. She was the first to speak, “Dad, God's will for my life has not changed one bit.” These are affirmations that God's good purpose is being served in every event (Rom. 8:28). We must never lose sight of this fundamental fact!

b. Affirm The Deep Mystery of Providence

A second fact of Providence is closely joined to the first. Providence is a great mystery of which we see only a small part. Again Calvin wrote,

“It must also be observed, that, although the paternal favour and beneficence of God, or the severity of his justice, is frequently conspicuous in the whole course of his providence, yet sometimes the causes of events are concealed, so that a suspicion intrudes itself, that the revolutions of human affairs are conducted by the blind impetuosity of fortune; or the flesh solicits us to murmur, as though God amused himself with tossing men about like tennis-balls. It is true, indeed, *if we were ready to learn with quiet and sober minds*, that the final issue sufficiently proves *the counsels of God to be directed by the best of reasons*; that he designs either to teach his people *the exercise of patience*, or to correct their corrupt affections and subdue the licentiousness of their appetites, or to constrain them to the practice of self-denial, or to arouse them from their indolence; and, on the other hand, to abase the proud, to disappoint the cunning of the wicked, and to confound their machinations. Yet, however the causes may be concealed from us, or escape our observation, *we must admit it as a certain truth, that they are hidden with him*; and must therefore exclaim with David, ‘Many, O Lord my God, are thy wonderful works which thou hast done, and thy thoughts which are to us-ward: they cannot be reckoned are more than can be numbered’ [Ps. 40:5].

“...None, therefore, will attain just and profitable views of the providence of God, but he who considers that he has to do with his Maker and the Creator of the world, and submits himself to fear and reverence with all becoming humility.”¹⁷⁴

¹⁷³ Calvin, *Institutes*, Vol. I, Bk. I, Chap. XVII, 232.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 232-234, italic added.

Calvin is teaching us that we must approach the understanding of Providence as approaching the deep mystery of God's secret counsel and such should elicit from us great humility as we approach the providence of God. This point is abundant throughout Scripture.

*"Oh, the depth of the riches both
of the wisdom and knowledge of God!
How unsearchable are His judgments
An unfathomable His ways!" (Rom. 11:33).*

*"For My thoughts are not your thoughts,
Neither are your ways My ways, declares
the Lord..
For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
So are My ways higher than your ways
And My thoughts than your thoughts" (Is. 55:8, 9).*

We will not or can we comprehend all of Providence or even most, but in reality we at best will see only a small portion. With such a limited grasp we must not attempt to judge God's ways for we stand on the shore with a tiny cup in hand looking out over the vastness of His ocean of Providence. We will be best equipped with a confident trust in Him in one hand and humility before His omniscience in the other.

c. Affirm Anxiety Must Be Forsaken And Prayer Pursued

Closely on the tail of the second basic comes the third. Humility and faith should lead us to forsake anxiety and pursue prayerfulness. The words of Jesus must instruct our hearts! *"And who of you by being worried can add a single hour to his life? Do not worry then, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we wear for clothing?' For the Gentiles eagerly seek all these things; for your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. So do not worry about tomorrow; for tomorrow will care for itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own"* (Mt. 6:27, 31-34). Further, the Apostle Paul wrote, *"Be anxious for nothing but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God"* (Phil. 4:6). These are instructions with which we must be constantly reminded, lest we forget to our peril and confusion.

d. Affirm God's Word Must Be Read and Studied.

We must add to these the diligent reading and study of Scripture. God's Word was given so that we might understand the works and the ways of God. The examples of Scripture have been revealed to us so that we might understand God's ways upon earth and with His people. God has made visible His ways in Scripture so that we might also see His ways in our lives and His work in history. Without this knowledge we will be tossed here and there by the uninformed opinions of men. We become the blind leading the blind. Leslie Weatherhead warns us of this:

"My boy was killed ten days ago in one of the raids on Berlin," said a woman, 'but I am trying to bow to the inscrutable will of God.' Here is a mother wringing her hands and weeping in anguish because her baby is dead. Her minister stands by her, longing to comfort her; but though his presence and prayers may offer consolation he knows only too well that when the storm is raging it is too late to talk any about the anchor that should have been put down before the storm began. What I mean is that it is so important that we should try to think clearly before disaster falls upon us. If we do, then in spite of all our grief we have a philosophy of life that steadies us as an anchor steadies a ship. If we do not, the storm is so furious that little can be done until it has abated. If only the minister could have injected into the mind of the woman his own belief about God! But that, alas! is impossible."¹⁷⁵

¹⁷⁵ Leslie D. Weatherhead, *The Will of God*, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1972), 10.

For God's people this need not be the case. Providence will always teach us to look beyond this life. Rather we must confidently embrace God's eternal salvation for us. We must take God's Word and say with it, *"Just as it is written, 'For Your sake we are being put to death all day long; we were considered as sheep to be slaughtered.' But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord"* (Rom. 8:36-39). Scripture will teach us both to rightly understand God's ways and to know the righteous way His people are to respond to His ways.

e. Affirm How Not To Respond

Last, we must constantly remind ourselves of how we ought not to respond to God's Providence.

- Do not murmur and grumble against God because of adversities (Phil. 2:14; cf. Dt. 1:26, 27; Nu. 16:41).
- Do not despair or take too lightly the Lord's chastisement which marks you as His beloved sons (Heb. 12:5).
- Avoid self-pity and bitterness when suffering (Heb. 12:15-17; Jonah 4).
- Do not ascribe to God blame for your own actions or someone else's (Rom 9:19-21; Gen. 50:20).
- Do not rationalize and justify your sinful behavior because of others or Providence (Gen. 4:5-7; Heb. 12:7-11).
- Do not resign to circumstances when options of action are available to you (1Sam. 23:10-13; Acts 16:6-10).
- Do not become passive to your Christian duty because of Providence (Josh. 1:7-9; Phil. 4:4-9; Col. 3:12-4:1; Gal. 6:9; Heb. 5:11-14).
- Do not become arrogant and prideful in matters of knowledge but cautious of your own ignorance and folly (1Cor. 8:1, 2; Gal. 6:1-5).
- Do not sinfully seek your own fleshly will and because you achieve it call it God's will for you (Gen. 50:20; Gal. 5:13; Jas. 1:13-18).

It is so easy to lose one's balance when interpreting and applying Providence we need remember these basic affirmations. The pressures of adversity can so disorient us that we end up running from God rather than to Him. To escape this these five basic affirmations should be memorized and then affirmed by application: 1) God's power, wisdom, and goodness is at work in all events; 2) Providence is a deep mystery to us; we can see only an outline of its vastness; 3) anxiety is to be forsaken and prayer pursued; 4) God's Word must be read, studied, and applied; and 5) we must be clear as to what responses to Providence are sinful and to be refused. These basics will go a long way in helping us think through and survive the adversities we must face!

2. How To Interpret Past Events:

a. Boast in the Lord as the First Cause

When things go according to your hopes, expectations, efforts and prayers, prospering you, and enabling you to achieve success Calvin instructs us, "Let him [not] speak of his own prudence, virtue or good fortune; nor give that praise to man, nor to any creature, which is due to God alone but let him ever feel assured that God was the first cause and author of all his good, through what secondary medium

soever it came.”¹⁷⁶ In his *Institutes* Calvin wrote,

“Every prosperous and pleasing event, therefore, the pious man will ascribe entirely to God, whether his beneficence be received through the ministry of men, or by the assistance of inanimate creatures. For this will be the reflection of his mind: ‘It is certainly the Lord that has inclined their hearts to favour me, that has united them to me to be the instruments of his benignity towards me.’ In an abundance of the fruits of the earth, he will consider, that it is the Lord who regards the heaven, that the heaven may regard the earth, that the earth, also, may regard its own productions: in other things he will not doubt that it is the Divine benediction alone which is the cause of all prosperity: nor will he bear to be ungrateful after so many admonitions.”¹⁷⁷

Such is the instruction of Jeremiah:

“Thus says the Lord, ‘Let not a wise man boast of his wisdom, and let not the mighty man boast of his might, let not a rich man boast of his riches; but let him who boasts boast of this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the Lord who exercises loving-kindness, justice and righteousness on earth; for I delight in these things,’ declares the Lord” (Jer. 9:23, 24).

The Psalmist in like manner sees such past successes as from the hand of the Lord.

“O God, we have heard with our ears, our fathers have told us the work that You did in their days, in the days of old. You with Your own hand drove out the nations; then You planted them; You afflicted the peoples, then You spread them abroad. For by their own sword they did not possess the land, and their own arm did not save them, but Your right arm and the light of Your presence, for You favored them...For I will not trust in my bow, nor will my sword save me. But You have saved us from our adversaries, and You have put to shame those who hate us. In God we have boasted all day long, and we will give thanks to Your name forever” (Ps. 44:1-3, 6-8).

In 1 Corinthians the Apostle Paul twice instructed, *“He who boasts is to boast in the Lord” (1:31; 10:17).*

Thus, when we meet with success and a smiling providence we should seek not to credit ourselves, though we recognize ourselves and others as secondary causes or mediums, but we first and foremost are to give glory and credit to God as the One Whose providence has mercifully and graciously smiled upon us.

b. Gratefully Acknowledge Secondary Causes

With regard to mediums or secondary causes Calvin instructed,

“Yet at the same time a pious man will not overlook inferior causes. Nor, because he accounts those from whom he has received any benefit, the ministers of the Divine goodness, will be therefore pass them by unnoticed, as though they deserved no thanks for their kindness; but will feel, and readily acknowledge, his obligation to them, and study to return it as ability and opportunity may permit. Finally, he will reverence and praise God as the principal Author of benefits received, but will honour men as his ministers; and will understand, what, indeed is the fact, that the will of God has laid him under obligations to those persons by whose means the Lord has been pleased to communicate his benefits.... For he will rank it among the blessings of the Lord, not to be destitute of human aids which he may use for his own safety; he will neither be remiss, therefore, in taking the advice, nor negligent in imploring the help, of those whom he perceives to be capable of affording him assistance; but, considering all the creatures, that can in any respect be serviceable to him, as so many gifts from the Lord, he will use them as the legitimate instruments of the Divine providence. And as he is uncertain respecting the issue of his undertaking, except that he knows that the Lord will in all things provide for his good, he studiously aims as what, according to the best judgment he can form, will be for his advantage.

¹⁷⁶ Calvin, “A Defense of The Secret Province of God,” *Calvin’s Calvinism*, 230-231.

¹⁷⁷ Calvin, *Institutes*, Vol. I, Bk. I, Chap. XVII, 241-242.

Nor, in conducting his deliberations, will he be carried away by his own opinion, but will recommend and resign himself to the wisdom of God, that he may be directed by its guidance to the right end. But he will not place his confidence in external helps to such a degree as, if possessed of them, securely to rely on them, or, if destitute of them, to tremble with despair. For his mind will always be fixed solely on the Divine providence, nor will he suffer himself to be seduced from a steady contemplation of it, by any consideration of present things.”¹⁷⁸

Calvin’s judicious counsel is that anyone who aids our success should receive our acknowledgement, thanks, and honor. They should be perceived as the gifts of God to us for our success. As such we are justly obligated to them for their aid. Further, he instructs that it is appropriate and right to pray and ask for such help, and when such help is given, then it should be wisely received as from the Lord. So with regard to these secondary or mediums of Providence the Christian will thank God for them and give praise to Him for his success, but he will also acknowledge the aid of these mediums whom the Lord has sent to aid him in his success. He must judiciously distinguish that his reliance must always be upon the Lord and not the secondary cause.

Such we again see in the practice of Scripture. The Apostle Paul exhibits such faith as he wrote to the Thessalonians: “*We give thanks to God always for all of you, making mention of you in our prayers constantly bearing in mind your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of our God and Father...*” (1 Thess. 1:2, 3).¹⁷⁹ With regard to himself the Apostle said, “*For this purpose also I labor, striving according to His power, which mightily works within me*” (Col. 1:27, 29).¹⁸⁰ Thus, we find in Scripture the recognition of others and their works, but in doing so thanks are given to God for them. By so doing they are made secondary causes, and God is made the primary cause. We find this kind of recognition repeated again and again through Scripture. With regard to one’s self we find a full recognition of one’s gifts and calling, but in these the grace of God is fully recognized thus honoring God. In addition, we find Scripture warning us that we must guard against thinking too highly of ourselves (Rom. 12:3), rather we should boast always in the Lord (1 Cor. 1:31).

Calvin also warns that if we suffer a loss we are not to blame God but the secondary cause, while we at the same time recognize that all things are by God’s will. If we suffer loss because of our own neglect or foolishness, then we need to be quick to assume responsibility for our own actions.

“If he suffer any loss either through negligence or through imprudence, he will conclude that it happened according to the divine will, but will also impute the blame of it to himself. If any one be removed by disease, whom, while it was his duty to take care of him, he has treated with neglect,—though he cannot be ignorant that that person had reached those limits which it was impossible for him to pass, yet he will not make this a plea to extenuate his guilt; but, because he has not faithfully performed his duty towards him, will consider him as having perished through his criminal negligence. Much less, when fraud and preconceived malice appear in the perpetration either of murder or of theft, will he excuse those enormities under the pretext of the divine providence: in the same crime he will distinctly contemplate the righteousness of God and the iniquity of man, as they respectively discover themselves. But it is principally in regard to things future that he will direct his attention to inferior causes of this kind.”¹⁸¹

In other words, we must assume responsibility for our own past actions and from these we need to learn so that in the future we will not repeat them!

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 243-244; e.g. 2 Sam. 10:12.

¹⁷⁹ Cf. Phil. 2:19-30; 1 Cor. 3:10-4:5, 12:12-26.

¹⁸⁰ Cf. 1 Cor. 4:1-5, 15:9-11; Phil. 4:13; Rom. 12:3, 14:7,8.

¹⁸¹ Calvin, *Institutes*, Vol. I, Bk. 1, Chap. XVII, 243-244.

3. How To View Future Events

a. Some General Guidelines

As we anticipate future events there are guidelines and cautions, which we will do well to take with serious regard. Calvin again instructs us:

“With reference to the time future, the Providence of God is to be contemplated by all godly minds thus: Let the minds of the godly be ever *intently fixed on God’s promises and threatenings*. For as soon as their minds turn aside from these, they are shut up against all instruction in the fear of god, and the progress of faith ceases. But he who *shall always keeps his eye fixed on the omnipotence of God*, as seen in the glass of His Word, and *shall rely on His promises* therein also contained, will mount on the wings of faith above all the countless perils of the world. And then, *bowing, before the threatenings of God* also beheld in His Word, *he will humble himself* under the sight of them as so many rods.”¹⁸²

Here we are instructed to always live humbly before God’s Word. We should not make any provisions for the flesh (Rom. 13:14), rather we should plan to do the will of God (Rom. 12:1, 2). Such admonitions as “*Seek first His Kingdom and righteousness*” (Mt. 6:33) give us general direction and a sense of priority for our future. “*For not one of us lives for himself, and not one dies for himself, for if we live, we live for the Lord, or if we die, we die for the Lord therefore whether we live or die, we are the Lord’s*” (Rom. 14:7, 8). Such Scriptural direction though general is necessary for every believer as he or she looks toward the future. As we pray the Lord’s Prayer (Mt. 6:9-13) this too teaches us to anticipate the future under the direction of seeking His kingdom, His will, His provision, His forgiveness, His keeping from evil and honoring His providential sustainment and government. James offers us this instruction: “*Now listen, you who say, ‘Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money.’ Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say, ‘If it is the Lord’s will, we will live and do this or that.’ As it is, you boast and brag. All such boasting is evil*” (Jas. 4:13-16).

Obviously, we must view future events through the duty of God’s moral laws and the Law of Christ. It must be characterized by a seeking of God’s will for all aspects of our lives and a pursuing of holiness and ministry. Yet, the dominant note must be prayer for the future! For as our Lord prayed for His future and instructed His disciples to do the same we can do no less (Mt. 26:37-46)!

b. Confidence in Providence Yields Freedom

Guided by these directions we must view the future with utter confidence in Providence. Abraham faced the future with such confidence. Remember when his herdsmen and the herdsmen of Lot quarreled over the pasture for their herds. Abraham said to Lot, “*Is not the whole land before you? Please separate from me; if to the left, then I will go to the right if to the right, then I will go to the left*” (Gen. 13:9). Abraham left the choice up to Lot. He had no anxiety as to his future. Whether Lot chose the hills or the lush, well-watered valley, it made no difference to Abraham. His confidence in God’s providence freed him from anxiety. Such confidence and freedom Providence should provide for each of us as we view the future.

When we are so confident of God’s providence we are enabled to not fret and “make” our plans work, but rather we are freed to seek and look for God’s leading. This was a lesson learned and shared by Adolphe Monod.

“A French pastor in the mid-1800s was struck with a debilitating illness. For many months, he

¹⁸² Calvin, “Defense of the Secret Providence of God,” 231, italic added.

lay on his bed awaiting death. During this time, students and friends gathered around him to grasp any morsel of knowledge that would fall from his lips. These morsels were gathered into a book known as *Adolphe Monod's Farewell*. On one occasion, Monod commented on how he regretted relying too much on his own plans during his life. 'There is no peace for a man who finds the mainspring of his actions in his own will. He is always in danger of being mistaken; he is often troubled and in error, because human will and human interests are subject to much error; he has no rest, he is disturbed, he is tormented and inspires a deep compassion in anyone who sees his real desire to glorify God and yet also sees how he accumulates for himself obstacles in his way, by his lack of simplicity; while, on the other hand, when we look at God alone, we can cast all our burden upon Him and He sustains us. What is more, if my projects are of my own devising, they may be impossible to carry out. I might wish to follow a certain profession, but it involves expenses, which are beyond my means. I might want to be a painter, but my sight is not good.... But there is no possibility of missing my vocation if my projects are devised for me in the plan of God. For then, even this impossibility which I find of doing what I originally proposed to do, proves to me that God is not calling me to that; and the very infirmities which disqualify me become so many lights by which God reveals to me my true vocation. If we act in this spirit, our vocation is God's affair, not ours; and the activity, the individual exertion that God always requires of us, consists only in following Him in faithful and complete obedience. Thus we shall find perfect peace: God cannot mislead us.'¹⁸³

4. Four Principles for Interpreting Providence by Outward Appearances

a. Providence Cannot Be Interpreted by Providences

We should begin by noting the two kinds of providences: 1) smiling providences and 2) frowning providences. The first are those experiences, which are characterized by their prosperity, success, and agreeableness to our longings, aspirations, and expectations. We normally acknowledge these events as "happy" or "smiling providences." The second kind of providences we experience are those that bring disappointment, suffering, and adversity, and in these we quite consequently acknowledge as "sad" or "frowning providences."

Often there is a grave error committed at this point by interpreting smiling providences as God's pleasure with us and God's displeasure with us in the frowning providences. John Flavel explains:

"We cannot understand the mind and heart of God by the things He dispenses with His hand. If prosperous providences befall us, we cannot say, this is a sure sign that God loves me, for who have more of those providences than the people of His wrath? 'They have more than heart could wish' (Ps. 73:7). Surely, that must be a weak evidence for heaven, which accompanies so great a part of the world to hell. By these things we may testify our love to God, but from ten thousand such enjoyments we cannot get any solid assurance of His love to us.

"And from adverse afflictive providences we cannot know His hatred. If afflictions, great afflictions, many afflictions, long-continued afflictions, should set a brand or fix a character of God's hatred upon the persons on whom they fall, where then shall find God's people in the world? We must then seek out the proud, vain, sensual wantons of the world, who spend their days in pleasure, and say these are the men whom God loves.

"Outward things are promiscuously dispensed, and *no man's spiritual state is discernible by the view of his temporal*. When God draws the sword, it may 'cut off the righteous as well as the wicked' (Ezekiel 21:3)."¹⁸⁴

To ascribe either God's pleasure or displeasure toward us by the kind of providences we experience is to

¹⁸³ Table Talk (Lake Mary, FL: Ligonier Ministries, April, 1995), Vol. 19, No. 4, 30.

¹⁸⁴ Flavel, *The Mystery of Providence*, 199., italic added

fall into the error of Job's friends. They assured Job that God prospered the righteous and punished the wicked, therefore, based upon this principle, Job had sinned and God's punishment had dramatically fallen upon Job. This is the error of attempting to interpret Providence by only temporal, observable experiences. We should not do this because **providences cannot be interpreted by their outward manifestations** whether they are smiling or frowning.

Once again listen to Flavel.

“To some all providences are overruled and ordered for good, according to that blessed promise (Rom. 8:28); not only things that are good in themselves, as ordinances, graces, duties and mercies, but things that are evil in themselves, as temptations, afflictions, and even their sins and corruptions, shall turn in the issue to their advantage and benefit. For though sin is so intrinsically and formally evil in its own nature, that in itself it is not capable of sanctification, yet out of this worst of evils God can work good to His people. And though He never makes sin the instrument of good, yet His providence may make it the occasion of good to His people, so that spiritual benefits may, by the wise overruling of Providence, be occasioned by it.

“And so for afflictions of all kinds, the greatest and sorest of them, under the influence of Providence bring a great deal of good to the saints, and that not only as the occasions, but as the instruments and means of it. ‘By this therefore shall the iniquity of Jacob be purged’ (Isa. 27:9); that is, by the instrumentality of this sanctified affliction.

“To others nothing is sanctified, either as an instrument or occasion of any spiritual good; but as the worst things are ordered to the benefit of the saints, so the best things wicked men enjoy do them no good. Their prayers are turned into sin (Ps. 109:7), the ordinances are the savour of death (2 Cor. 2:16), the grace of God turned into wantonness (Jude 4), Christ Himself a rock of offence (1 Pet. 2:8), their table a snare (Ps. 69:22), their prosperity their ruin (Prov. 1:32). As persons are, so things work for good or evil. ‘Unto the pure all things are pure; but unto them that are defiled and unbelieving is nothing pure’ (Tit. 1:15).”¹⁸⁵

Consequently, **we cannot interpret Providence by its outward manifestations**, whether they prosper us or bring adversity upon us.¹⁸⁶

b. Providences Cannot Be Interpreted Solely by Their Timing.

There are two potentially different reckonings of timing: 1) our timing, and 2) God's timing. We must immediately recognize that God has no obligation to work on our time schedule. Providence is governed by God's timing. God's timing is always precise, certain, and punctual. I once received a letter with a salutation, which still is etched upon my mind. The letter was signed, “In God's Impeccable Timing.” A contemporary song of praise underlines this truth.

“In His time, In His time
 ...Lord please show me everyday
 ...That you do just what You say in Your time.”¹⁸⁷

There is a twofold possible outcome when God's timing is late by our reckoning. The first is positive. We learn patience and perseverance by our faithful wait. The testimony of Scripture is played out in our lives. The rule we find for God's people is that waiting is the normal not the exception. We must learn contentment and that waiting for God is never idle or unprofitable unless it is spent in murmuring and grumble against Him (e.g. Ps.27:14; 37:7, 34; Is. 40:31; Heb. 11:13-16, 39, 40).

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 198, cf. 192.

¹⁸⁶ Cf. Job 23:8,9.

¹⁸⁷ Diane Ball, composer, copyright 1978, in Maranatha! Music Praise Chorus Book (Laguna Hills, CA; Maranatha! Music, 1986), no. 41.

The second outcome is to despair and to faint.

“So it was with David, after God had made him such a promise, and in due time so faithfully performed it, that never was mercy better secured to any man, for they are called, ‘the sure mercies of David’ (Isa. 55:3), yet Providence delayed the accomplishment of them so long, and permitted such difficulties to intervene, that he despaired to see the accomplishment of them, but even concludes God had forgotten him too, ‘How long wilt thou forget me, O Lord? for ever?’” (Ps. 13:1), and what he speaks here by way of question, he elsewhere turns into a positive conclusion: ‘All men are liars’ (Ps. 116:11), ‘I shall one day perish by the hand of Saul.’ And the causes of these despondencies and sinkings of heart are partly from ourselves and partly from Satan.

“If we duly examine our own hearts about it, we shall find that these sinkings of heart are the immediate effects of unbelief. We do not depend and rely upon the Word with that full trust and confidence that is due to the infallible Word of a faithful and unchangeable God. You may see the ground of this faintness in Scripture: ‘I had fainted unless I had believed’ (Ps. 27:13). Faith is the only cordial that relieves the heart against these faintings and despondencies. Where this is wanting, or is weak, no wonder our hearts sink at this rate, when discouragements are before us.”¹⁸⁸

Rightly, Flavel warns us that faith and confidence in God and His Word is much needed when we face delays according to our schedules. Frustration, disappointment, and self-pity can turn us from our greatest comfort during these times. Rather we must pursue God in prayer and in His Word reminding ourselves that faith comes from hearing (Rom 10:17; Gal. 3:2, 5). We must discover the delight of passing such time in worshipping and in the depth of intimate fellowship with Him.

Yet, though God may graciously bestow upon us smiling providences in our timing we must still be cautious in interpreting these providences as signs of God’s pleasure or if delayed signs of God’s displeasure. **The timing of a providence is no sure sign of God’s favor or disfavor.**

One surely then asks, by what measure may we interpret providences?

c. Providences Are to Be Interpreted by Their Fruit.

Providences are truly smiling providences when they accomplish God’s eternal will in the lives of His people. Smiling providences are tools in the Holy Spirit’s hand to conform us to the likeness of Jesus Christ. When providences work such good they are truly smiling providences. John Flavel wrote,

“...though the providences of God materially considered afford no evidence of God’s love to us, yet *the manner in which they befall us, and the effects and fruits they produce in us, do distinguish them* very manifestly; and by them we may discern whether they are sanctified providences and fruits of the love of God, or not. Yet these effects and fruits of providences by which we discern their nature *do not always appear immediately; but time must be allowed for the soul’s exercise under them.* ‘Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterwards it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby’ (Heb. 12:11).

“The benefit of a providence is discerned as that of a medicine is. For the present it gripes, and makes the stomach sick and loathing, but afterwards we find the benefit of it in our recovery of health and cheerfulness. Now the providences of God are some of them comfortable, and others sad and grievous to nature, and the way to discern the sanctification and blessing of them is by the manner in which they come, and their operations upon our spirits.”¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁸ Flavel, *The Mystery of Providence*, 192.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 199, 200.

The fruit to be looked for in a “sanctified”¹⁹⁰ providence could be negative or positive. **Negative fruit** are the prevention and intervention in the attacks of Satan and the deliverance from evil and sin. **Positive fruit** are the fruit of Holy Spirit (cf. Gal. 5:22) and both the process and incremental growth into the likeness of Christ in virtues and practice (cf. Eph. 4:13; 2 Cor. 3:18; Rom. 8:29).

Examples of negative fruits would be deliverance and prevention from sins (Gen. 39:7-12; 20:3-7), recovery from sin (Lu. 22:31, 32; 2 Cor. 7:6-13), sustained and equipped to resist sin (Heb. 5:11-14), when our hearts are turned against sin and not against God (2 Tim. 2:24-26; Mt. 5:4), when sin is purged leaving a pure heart (Mt. 5:8; 1 Tim. 1:5; 2 Tim. 2:22), when we are greatly humbled and submit to God (Jas. 4:4-10), when turned from running from God to running to Him (Ps. 73:15-28); and when foolishness and wickedness extinguished and the wisdom of God’s Word is implanted (Jas. 1:18; Lu. 24:32; Ps. 94:12).

Examples of positive fruits would be the putting on of Christ (Rom. 13:14), putting on our new self (Eph. 4:24), walking in love (Eph. 5:2), presenting your body as a living sacrifice (Rom. 12:1), putting on the armor of God (Eph. 6:11-20), putting on compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, forbearance, forgiveness, and letting the Word of Christ richly dwell within you (Col. 3:12-17). Flavel adds to this list:

“Those mercies and comforts are undoubtedly sanctified to men which humble their souls kindly before God in the sense of their own vileness and unworthiness of them. ‘And Jacob said, . . . I am not worthy of the least of all thy mercies, and of all the truth which thou hast shown unto thy servant’ (Gen. 32:9, 10).

“Sanctified mercies are commonly turned into cautions against sin (Ezra 9: 13). They are so many bands of restraint upon the soul that has them, to make them shun sin.

“They will engage a man’s heart in love to the God of His mercies (Ps. 18:1, cf. title).

“They never satisfy a man as his portion, nor will the soul accept all the prosperity in the world upon that score. ‘Esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt: for he had respect unto the recompence of the reward’ (Heb. 11:26).

“It is a sure sign that mercies are sanctified when they make the soul more ready and enlarged for God in duty. ‘Therefore the Lord established the kingdom in his hand: and all Judah brought to Jehoshaphat presents, and he had riches and honour in abundance. And his heart was lifted up in the ways of the Lord’ (2 Chron. 17:5,6).

“That which is obtained by prayer and returned to God again in due praise, carries its own testimonials with it, that it came from the love of God, and is a sanctified mercy to the soul.”¹⁹¹

We might add a third category of **disastrous fruit**. This fruit is wicked and godless (Rom. 1:18). It is fruit, which clearly indicates that a providence is not sanctified. It is in reality a temporal curse. For example when temporal prosperity creates pride, arrogance, and self-conceit before God. It is the sin of Nebechadnezzar (Dan. 4:19-33; cf. Ps. 10:3, 4; Dt. 8:7-18). Another example is finding temporal happiness in an immoral, adulterous relationship. Such is not a blessing but is called the curse of God (Prov. 22:14; cf. Eph. 5:5-7). When a providential opportunity comes, it is turned not into an opportunity of glory to God but the pursuit of fleshly lusts (Jas. 3:13-16; 4:1-4) and justifies the judgement of God (Col. 3:5-9; Mt. 13:22). The fruit of such providences are usually indulgence and pride rather than humility and mourning over sin. Rather than greater advances in ministry and for the kingdom, there is a neglect of duty and a rushing headlong into the schemes of the enemy. This disastrous fruit also helps interpret Providence.

¹⁹⁰ Flavel uses “sanctified” to mean a providence which resulted in spiritual and eternal blessing for a child of God; *Ibid.*, 198-199.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 205, 206.

So we can interpret providences as truly smiling providence, whether they provide temporal prosperity or adversity, if they produce the fruit of the Holy Spirit and conform us to the likeness of Christ. Likewise, we can interpret as truly frowning providences when the resulting fruit is eternally disastrous.

d. Providences May Be Provisionally Interpreted by the Manner of Their Coming

This, it must be said, is not as sure as the test of fruitfulness, but this test is helpful and further confirms the eternal goodness of God at work. The manner in which providences come help to interpret them. For example, if we have been in prayer for provision or growth, and we receive provision, or we are enabled to take steps of growth, then we may receive the providence as sanctified by our Lord as long as it does not violate God's Word. When others have prayed for us and we are kept from falling into sin or delivered from it, then we may again receive it as sanctified.

Flavel especially sees the manner helpful in interpreting providences of adversity.

“When our troubles are fitted both for quality and degree to work properly upon our most predominant corruptions, they look like sanctified strokes. The wisdom of God is much seen in the choice of His rods. It is not any kind of trouble that will work upon and purge every sin; but when God chooses for us such afflictions as, like medicine, are suited to the disease the soul labours under, this speaks divine care and love. Thus we may observe that it is usual with God to smite us in those very comforts which stole away too much of the love and delight of our souls from God, and to cross us in those things from which we raised up too great expectations of comfort. These providences show the jealousy of God over us, and His care to prevent far worse evils by these sad but needful strokes are ordinarily fitted by the wisdom of God to the strength and ability of our inherent grace.”¹⁹²

Again the manner is helpful and worthy of consideration but must be confirmed by the sure fruit of Providence.

5. Summary

There are basic affirmations which must always be held in mind as we approach the interpretation of Providence: 1) God's power, wisdom, and goodness in all events; 2) Providence is a deep mystery to us; we can see only an outline of its vastness; 3) anxiety is to be forsaken and prayer pursued; 4) God's Word must be read, studied, and applied; and 5) we must be clear as to what responses to Providence are sinful and to be refused. As we seek to interpret past events always acknowledge God as the first cause and give Him the glory. This is the basic affirmation of Providence! Then we must acknowledge all secondary causes. In doing so we must first acknowledge personal responsibility in failures, and never attributing evil to God, but attributing it to secondary causes. In seeking to interpret future events the first consideration is God's promises and warnings, thus we are to seek God's will in all future events. It is our confidence in God's Word that gives us the freedom to fully trust and act upon God's promises and adhere to His warnings. These must be our guides in seeking to understand any future potentialities. Finally, we shared the four principles for interpreting appearances: 1) Providence cannot be interpreted by providences or only the appearance of things; 2) providences cannot be interpreted only by their timing; 3) providences must be interpreted by their fruit; and 4) providences may provisionally be interpreted by the manner of their coming.

These are wise guidelines for the interpreting Providence. They give us basic guidance, but they should at least early on be submitted to other godly counsel and others' holy insight meaning those who have been making fruitful application of these principles for some time. As we repetitively apply them,

¹⁹² Ibid., 200, 201.

we will not only become more adept but insight will be added to insight, and we will grow in wisdom and understanding. Herein, we will become those who prove that the will of God is pleasing, acceptable, and perfect!