

What Is Divine Providence?

The reason this book is about the providence of God rather than the sovereignty of God is that the term *sovereignty* does not contain the idea of *purposeful* action, but the term *providence* does. Sovereignty focuses on God's right and power to do all that he wills, but in itself, it does not express any design or goal.

Of course, God's sovereignty *is* purposeful. It *does* have design. It *does* pursue a goal. But we know this, not simply because God is sovereign, but because he is wise, and because the Bible portrays him as having purposes in all the does. "My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose" (Isa. 46:10).

The focus of this book is on God's sovereignty considered not simply as powerful but as purposeful. Historically, the term *providence* has been used as shorthand for this more specific focus.

The Building Blocks of Providence

Why was the English word *providence* chosen to capture this biblical teaching? In reference to God, the word does not occur in most English versions of the Bible (e.g., ESV, KJV, HCSB, NRSV).¹ It is

¹ The word *providence* occurs once in reference to human action in Acts 24:2 in the KJV and NASB. And it occurs once in reference to God's action in Job 10:2 in the NIV and TNIV.

difficult to be certain about the history of a word and why it came to carry its present meaning. But here is a suggestion.

The word *providence* is built from the word *provide*, which has two parts: *pro* (Latin “forward,” “on behalf of”) and *vide* (Latin “to see”). So you might think that the word *provide* would mean “to see forward” or “to foresee.” But it doesn’t. It means “to supply what is needed”; “to give sustenance or support.” So in reference to God, the noun *providence* has come to mean “the act of purposefully providing for, or sustaining and governing, the world.”

Why is this? There are two interesting reasons, one based on an English idiom and the other based on a biblical story.

God “Sees to It”

We have an English idiom that goes like this: “I’ll see to it.” Like all idioms, it means more than the words, taken individually, seem to signify. “I’ll see to it” in English means “I’ll take care of it” (which is itself an idiom!). I’ll provide for it. I’ll see (or make sure) that it happens. So it could be that putting the Latin *vide* (“see”) together with the Latin *pro* (“to,” “toward”) produced “see to” and came to mean more than “foresee,” but to mean “see to it” in the sense of “take care of it” or “see that it happens.” That would be what we mean by God’s providence: he sees to it that things happen in a certain way.

Providence on Mount Moriah

Then, even more interestingly, there is the biblical story of Abraham’s offering of his son Isaac. Before they went up Mount Moriah, Isaac said to his father, “Where is the lamb for a burnt offering?” (Gen. 22:7). Abraham answered, “God *will provide* for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son” (22:8). And when God had shown Abraham a ram caught in the thorns, “Abraham called the name of that place ‘The LORD will provide’” (22:14).

What is striking is that whenever the word *provide* occurs in Genesis 22, the Hebrew word is simply “to see.” Very simply, Abraham says to Isaac, “God *will see* for himself the lamb” (יִרְאֶה לְוִי הַשֶּׁהָ 22:8).” Similarly in verse 14: “‘The LORD will provide’ [the Lord will *see* יִהְיֶה יִרְאֶה]; as it is said to this day, ‘On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided’ [it shall be *seen* יִרְאֶה יְהוָה יִבְהֶר].”

The old King James Version preserves this literal rendering of Genesis 22:14, even transliterating the Hebrew of “the Lord sees” as *Jehovah-jireh*: “Abraham called the name of that place Jehovahjireh: as it is said to this day, In the mount of the LORD it shall be seen.” The New King James Version has joined virtually all other contemporary versions by translating *see* as *provide*: “Abraham called the name of the place, The-LORD-Will-Provide; as it is said to this day, ‘In the Mount of the LORD it shall be provided.’”

With regard to the doctrine of God’s *providence*, the question is this: Why does God’s *seeing* in Genesis 22 actually refer to his *providing*—his providence?

The answer I suggest is that in the mind of Moses, and other authors of Scripture, God does not simply *see* as a passive bystander. As God, he is never merely an observer. He is not a passive observer of the world—and not a passive predictor of the future. Wherever God is looking, God is acting. In other words, there is a profound theological reason why God’s *providence* does not merely mean his *seeing*, but rather his *seeing to*. When God sees something, he sees to it. Evidently, as Moses wrote Genesis 22, God’s purposeful engagement with Abraham was so obvious that Moses could simply refer to God’s perfect *seeing* as implying God’s purposeful *doing*. His *seeing* was his *seeing to*. His *perception* implied his *provision*—his *providence*.

Catch-22 in Writing a Book Like This

Those are my suggestions for how the English word *providence* has come to mean “the act of God’s providing for or sustaining and

governing the world.” Of course, it is of minor importance whether I am right about that. When it comes to words, what matters is not that we know where they came from or how they got their meaning. What matters is that we grasp truly what a writer or speaker intends to communicate with his words.

Then the real task begins: Does what an author intends to communicate with words conform to reality? Is the conception of providence that an author describes true? Or, in the case of this book, since I take the Bible to be the touchstone of truth: Do we grasp truly what the Bible teaches about God’s providence?

So as I turn to clarify more specifically what I mean by God’s providence, it should be clear that I am caught in a kind of catch-22. On the one hand, I should give my evidence from the Bible first, in order to support my understanding of God’s providence. On the other hand, I have to use the term *providence* all along the way as I lay out that evidence, and the term should have a clear meaning for my readers, which can only come from that evidence. I can either give you a clear sense of what I mean by *providence* before I give you the evidence for it, or I can use the word *providence* ambiguously throughout the book and wait for a clear conception until the end.

I don’t like ambiguity. I think it is the source of much confusion and error. So I choose the first option. Here at the beginning, I’m going to give you as clear a conception as I can of what I mean by divine providence, knowing that it is based on evidence not yet provided. Then you may view the rest of the book as biblical support and explanation and application and celebration for this conception of providence.

My aim in this book is not to develop a new meaning of providence that the church has not embraced in its historic statements of faith. Instead, I aim to gather from the Scriptures some very old kindling of truth, pile it up in plain view, and put a match to it. This is not because I want to consume it, but because I want to release its incendiary properties for the intensifying of true worship, the solidifying of wavering

conviction, the strengthening of embattled faith, the toughening of joyful courage, and the advance of God's mission in this world.

Some Good, Old Views of Providence

Let's reach back a few centuries for some definitions of providence that I am very happy with, because I think they express biblical truth.

Heidelberg Catechism (1563)

Question 27. What do you understand by the providence of God?

Answer. The almighty, everywhere-present power of God, whereby, as it were by his hand, He still upholds heaven and earth with all creatures, and so governs them that herbs and grass, rain and drought, fruitful and barren years, meat and drink, health and sickness, riches and poverty, indeed, all things come not by chance, but by his fatherly hand.

As in virtually all confessions, divine providence signifies an "almighty, everywhere-present power of God." This power "upholds" and "governs" all things. But what gives this definition its twist toward providence (and not just sovereignty) is the phrase "by his fatherly hand." This carries massive implications about the design of God's governing of all things. It implies that everything in the universe is governed with a view of the good of God's children! But we must wait to see this more fully.

The Belgic Confession (1561)

Article 13. The Doctrine of God's Providence

We believe that this good God, after creating all things, did not abandon them to chance or fortune but leads and governs them according to his holy will, in such a way that nothing happens in this world without God's orderly arrangement.

Again God “leads and governs” all things so that nothing is left to “chance or fortune.” And again, what focuses the doctrine on providence, not just sovereignty, is that “nothing happens . . . without God’s *orderly arrangement*.” Which, of course, begs for an explanation of the word *orderly*. Order implies design and purpose. Order to what end? That is what we will focus on in part 2 of this book.

Westminster Larger Catechism (1648)

Question 18. What are the works of providence?

Answer. 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.

God’s providence not only “preserves” and upholds the existence of “all his creatures,” but also “[orders] . . . all their actions.” The purpose of all this preserving and ordering is made explicit: “to his glory.” This is purposeful sovereignty, which we call *providence*.

Westminster Confession of Faith (1646)

Chapter 5. Of Providence

5.1. God the great Creator of all things doth uphold, direct, dispose, and govern all creatures, actions, and things, from the greatest even to the least, by his most wise and holy providence, according to his infallible foreknowledge, and the free and immutable counsel of his own will, to the praise of the glory of his wisdom, power, justice, goodness, and mercy.

This is the fullest definition we have seen so far. God upholds, directs, disposes, and governs “all creatures, actions, and things.” This is pervasive sovereignty. Then come all the providential colors: sovereignty governed by wisdom and holiness—and all “to the praise of the glory of his wisdom, power, justice, goodness, and mercy.”

This way of expressing God's aim in providence will prove to be critical in being faithful to Scripture. Some views of providence focus so fully on God's aim in displaying his mercy that the rest of his glory is obscured. I think the Westminster resistance to that reduction is wise and biblical. The aim of God's providence, so says the confession, is "to the praise" of God's glory—not just one aspect, or one facet, of his glory (such as love or grace or mercy) but *all* of it: "the glory of his wisdom, power, justice, goodness, and mercy."

What Is the Difference between Providence and Fate?

Sometimes these strong statements of God's directing, disposing, and governing of all creatures, actions, and things raise the question of how the biblical view of God's providence differs from fate. The idea of fate has a long history—from Greek mythology to modern physics. What troubles people in general is that fate and providence imply a kind of fixedness to the future that seems to make life meaningless. Here is Charles Spurgeon's (1834–1892) response to this concern.

First, he gives us his astonishing conviction about the minute pervasiveness of divine providence. This is from a sermon on God's providence based on Ezekiel 1:15–19:

I believe that every particle of dust that dances in the sunbeam does not move an atom more or less than God wishes—that every particle of spray that dashes against the steamboat has its orbit, as well as the sun in the heavens—that the chaff from the hand of the winnower is steered as the stars in their courses. The creeping of an aphid over the rosebud is as much fixed as the march of the devastating pestilence—the fall of . . . leaves from a poplar is as fully ordained as the tumbling of an avalanche.²

2 Charles Spurgeon, "God's Providence," sermon on Ezek. 1:15–19, Bible Bulletin Board, accessed April 9, 2020, <http://www.biblebb.com/files/spurgeon/3114.htm>.

That's astonishing. Every tiny, popping bubble in the foam at the top of a newly poured can of Coke. Every floating dust mote which you can see only in the early-morning bedroom beam of light. Every tip of every stalk of grain stretching across the endless Nebraska plains. All of them, with all their slightest movements, specifically governed by God.

So Spurgeon foresees the objection and continues on in the same sermon:

You will say this morning, Our minister is a fatalist. Your minister is no such thing. Some will say, Ah! he believes in fate. He does not believe in fate at all. What is fate? Fate is this—*Whatever is, must be*. But there is a difference between that and Providence. Providence says, *Whatever God ordains must be*; but the wisdom of God never ordains anything without a purpose. Everything in this world is working for some one great end. Fate does not say that. Fate simply says that the thing must be; Providence says, God moves the wheels along, and there they are.

If anything would go wrong, God puts it right; and if there is anything that would move awry, he puts his hand and alters it. It comes to the same thing; but there is a difference as to the object. There is all the difference between fate and Providence that there is between a man with good eyes and a blind man. Fate is a blind thing; it is the avalanche crushing the village down below and destroying thousands. Providence is not an avalanche; it is a rolling river, rippling at the first like a rill down the sides of the mountain, followed by minor streams, till it rolls in the broad ocean of everlasting love, working for the good of the human race. The doctrine of Providence is not: *what is, must be*; but that what is works together for the good of our race, and especially for the good of the chosen people of God. The wheels are full of eyes; not blind wheels.³

3 Spurgeon, "God's Providence."

I hope it will become obvious in what follows, particularly in part 2, that God's ultimate purpose in his pervasive providence is so purposeful, so wise, so holy, so gracious, and so joyful that the last thing anyone would think to call it is *fate*.

For the Ever-Increasing Enjoyment of All Who Love God

I agree with all of the descriptions of God's providence that we have seen above from the historic confessions of faith and from Spurgeon. I think they are coherent with each other and faithful to Scripture. This is what I will mean by the term *providence* in this book. But it might be helpful to quote one more affirmation of faith to clarify my own view.

During my thirty-three years as pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church, the elders carefully crafted a document called *The Bethlehem Baptist Church Elder Affirmation of Faith*. Since I was part of that process, the statement on God's providence in this affirmation captures some emphases that will unfold in this book. Here are the key quotes on providence:

3.1. We believe that God, from all eternity, in order to display the full extent of His glory for the eternal and ever-increasing enjoyment of all who love Him, did, by the most wise and holy counsel of his will, freely and unchangeably ordain and foreknow whatever comes to pass.

3.2. We believe that God upholds and governs all things—from galaxies to subatomic particles, from the forces of nature to the movements of nations, and from the public plans of politicians to the secret acts of solitary persons—all in accord with his eternal, all-wise purposes to glorify Himself, yet in such a way that He never sins, nor ever condemns a person unjustly; but that his ordaining and governing all things is compatible with the moral accountability of all persons created in his image.⁴

4 "Elder Affirmation of Faith," Bethlehem Baptist Church (website), October 18, 2015, <https://bethlehem.church/elder-affirmation-of-faith/>.

This claim that God communicates his glory “for the eternal and ever-increasing enjoyment of all who love Him” is, I believe, implicit in the historic creeds, as, for example, when the Westminster Catechism says that the chief end of man is “to glorify God and *enjoy* him forever.”⁵ But I regard this goal of the enjoyment of God, and its relationship to the glorification of God, as so crucial to the purpose of God in providence that I make it explicit and prominent. It will, I hope, become clear in part 2 that this is not just what *I* do. It is what Scripture does.

Before we turn to the task of part 2 and the question of God’s *goal* in providence, it will be helpful to deal with what many see as a stumbling block—namely, the self-exaltation involved in God’s aim to display his own glory. That is what we take up in chapter 2.

5 For the exegetical defense of this idea of ever-increasing joy in the age to come, see the discussion of Eph. 2:7 in chap. 14.

Is Divine Self-Exaltation Good News?

I am tempted to say that modern people find it almost impossible to receive with thankfulness and joy the relentless witness of the Bible that God consistently acts for the sake of his own glory. I have in mind texts such as Isaiah 48:9–11:

For my name's sake I defer my anger;
for the sake of my praise I restrain it for you,
that I may not cut you off.

Behold, I have refined you, but not as silver;
I have tried you in the furnace of affliction.

For my own sake, for my own sake, I do it,
for how should my name be profaned?

My glory I will not give to another.

I wrote that I'm tempted to say *modern* people resist this divine self-exaltation rather than rejoicing in it. But upon further reflection, I realize that this resistance is not unique to modern people. It is human. And it is complex.

Our Resistance to God's Self-Glorification

On the one hand, human beings know all too well the experience of self-exaltation. We know it up close and personal. We have all done it. We all have a built-in reflex to love praise, and we enjoy, at some level, being made much of. On the other hand, it is an almost equally universal trait that we don't like this about people, including ourselves (in our best moments, anyway). We have a love-hate relationship with the desire for our own glory.

Our resistance to the pervasive biblical witness to God's self-glorification is made even more complex by the fact that, in general, we (Americans at least) seem to love cinematic or fictional heroes marked by arrogance and swagger and cocky self-assurance. We give them rousing cheers if they show off their ability to win when vastly outnumbered. We seem to love their smug, egotistical self-exaltation. It's cool. And being cool, self-exaltation (with all its cultural mutations over the decades) endures as a deep aspiration of the human heart as well as an admirable trait in our heroes. It is the feel-good counterpart of being shamed. We hate being seen as foolish. We love being seen as smart and competent. And we want our heroes to be the same, even if they push the envelope of cockiness.

And yet it's not that simple. If these cocky heroes begin to use their clever skills to act unjustly and hurt innocent people—or people we like—our empathetic admiration winces. Before long, the mental shrewdness, physical adroitness, and verbal wit that made them cool makes them evil. They lose their appeal. The self-exalting braggadocio that once pleased now repulses.

The complexity of human resistance to God's self-exaltation is further increased by the fact that Jesus himself said, "If I glorify myself, my glory is nothing" (John 8:54). And the apostle Paul said, "Love . . . seeks not its own" (1 Cor. 13:4–5 NKJV) and, "Let no man seek his own" (1 Cor. 10:24 KJV).

Not Just a Self-Exalting God, but Any God

But feeding our resistance to God's self-exaltation is something deeper. On the surface, we might mount a self-justifying moral case against God's supposed egotism, but in reality there is a much deeper rebellion in us that resists not just a self-exalting God, but any God—any real God who exists and who has authority over the world and us. Paul tells us that this is the mark of the human heart without the transforming death of Christ and work of God's Spirit:

The mind of the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God. (Rom. 8:7–8, my translation)

Paul contrasts those who have the "mind of the flesh" with those who have the mind of the Spirit (8:6). Then he describes those with the mind of the Spirit: "You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you" (8:9). We change from having the *mind of the flesh* to having the *mind of the Spirit* when the Spirit of God comes to dwell in us through faith in Christ (Gal. 3:2). Apart from the Spirit, received through faith, we are naturally insubordinate to God and resistant to his authority.

So the deepest problem we have in dealing with God's self-exaltation is not that we don't like some kinds of self-exalting authority but that fallen human nature does not like *any* kind of divine authority over our lives. The idea that God is unattractive to us because he acts for his own glory cloaks a deeper resistance: he is unattractive because he is God.

But What If?

But what if God's continual acting for his own glory proved to be less like an insecure, self-enhancing, needy bully and more like the star professional basketball player who drives his Porsche into the neighborhood because he genuinely loves inner-city kids and

wants to give them the unimaginable pleasure of playing with their hero?

What if God's calling attention to his glory turned out to be less like a quack doctor who hangs out a sign that he's the best and more like a real doctor hanging out a sign because he is, in fact, the best, and he alone can do the procedure that will save the community from the spreading disease?

What if God's making known his superiority is less like an anxious college art teacher touting the greatness of his classes to shore up his reputation by attracting more students and more like the best artist in the world going to the poorest college and announcing that he is going to give an absolutely free course so that he can show the lowliest student the secrets of his superior skill?

What if God's public promotion of his power is less like a narcissistic, fame-hungry, military general who seeks victory by sacrificing thousands of soldiers from his safe position behind the lines and more like the truly greatest general who wins both victory and fame by willingly dying at the frontline for the troops he loves?

In other words, what if, in the end, we discovered that the beauty of God turns out to be the kind that comes to climax in being shared? And what if the attitude we thought was mere self-promotion was instead the pursuit of sharing the greatest pleasure possible for all who would have it?

What if things turn out something like Jonathan Edwards believed they would?

Doubtless the happiness of the saints in heaven shall be so great, that the very majesty of God shall be exceedingly shown in the greatness, and magnificence, and fullness of their enjoyments and delights.¹

1 Jonathan Edwards, *The Miscellanies (Entries 833–1152)* ed. Amy Plantinga Pauw (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), 189 (#934).

The Great and Last End of God's Works

I have addressed God's self-exaltation toward the beginning of this book because, when we turn to the question of God's final goal in providence, we find in Scripture that his own glory—the beauty of the full panorama of his perfections—is God's most recurring and all-embracing aim. All the efforts I have made to survey and think through the Scriptures have confirmed that Jonathan Edwards's conclusion in his *Dissertation Concerning the End for Which God Created the World* is correct.² This is one of the most important and influential books I have ever read. Here Edwards piles reason upon reason and Scripture on Scripture to make this point:

Thus we see that the great and last end of God's works which is so variously expressed in Scripture, is indeed but *one*; and this *one* end is most properly and comprehensively called "the glory of God"; by which name it is most commonly called in Scripture.³

In other words, as soon as we focus on the question about God's goal in his works of providence, we must face the fact that the Bible repeatedly and pervasively points us to God's doing these works for his own glory. And if Edwards is right (in both the quotes given above), "for his glory" does not mean to *get* glory which he doesn't already have, but rather to display and vindicate and communicate his glory for the everlasting enjoyment of his people—that is, for all those who, instead of resenting God's self-exaltation, receive him as their supreme treasure.

That is a big *if*—*if* Edwards is right. Part 2 of this book will put that *if* to the test of Scripture. We will focus in part 2 not mainly on

2 For an introduction to the life of Edwards, the implication of his theology for evangelicalism, and the complete text of *The End for which God Created the World*, see John Piper, *God's Passion for His Glory: Living the Vision of Jonathan Edwards* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1998).

3 Jonathan Edwards, *Ethical Writings*, ed. Paul Ramsey and John E. Smith, vol. 8, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 530. Or see John Piper, *God's Passion for His Glory*, 246.

the nature or the extent of divine providence, but on the ultimate goal of all that God does in his providence over the world. It will become increasingly clear why God's aim to communicate his glory is not at odds with his aim to make us fully and eternally happy. We will see from the Scriptures, not just from Jonathan Edwards, why the majesty of God shines in the fullness of the saints' enjoyments of his glory.

Glory as the Whole Panorama of God's Excellencies

Let's be clear about Edwards's meaning (and mine). When he says that God's one end, or goal, in providence "is most properly and comprehensively called 'the glory of God,'" he does not mean that the glory of God is one divine attribute among others. For example, he does not mean that the glory of God is vying with the love of God or the grace of God as the end of providence. God's glory does not vie with his love; it includes his love.

Above I used the phrase "the beauty of the full panorama of his perfections" to define the glory of God. In other words, God's glory is not any one of his perfections but the beauty of all of them, and the perfectly harmonious way they relate to each other, and the way they are expressed in creation and history.

This is important to emphasize because some scholars choose to make one perfection of God so prominent in their understanding of his providence that other perfections are, so to speak, deactivated. This is most often done with God's love. For example, someone may believe that the love of God would not allow a particular act of God's providence—say, the fact that "the angel of the Lord went out and struck down 185,000 in the camp of the Assyrians" (Isa. 37:36). They may ask, "If love seeks the good of the beloved, how could God allow, let alone perform, an act that created hundreds of thousands of Assyrian orphans and widows overnight?"

This is why I drew attention in chapter 1 to the wise and biblical way the Westminster Confession expressed the goal of God in his

works of providence. They all exist, it says, “to the praise of the glory of his wisdom, power, justice, goodness, and mercy.” Not just one of these excellencies. All of them. I agree. So when I say that God’s final goal in providence is the fullest display and vindication and communication of his glory for the everlasting enjoyment of his redeemed people, I don’t mean to reduce this goal to any one aspect of his glory. I mean that the greatness and beauty of his glory is all of his excellencies working in perfect harmony.⁴

4 Elsewhere I have tried to show from Scripture that “the glory of God is the infinite beauty and greatness of his manifold perfections.” John Piper, “What Is God’s Glory?,” *Desiring God*, July 6, 2009, <https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/what-is-gods-glory>.

PART 2

THE ULTIMATE GOAL
OF PROVIDENCE

SECTION 1

*The Ultimate Goal of Providence
before Creation and in Creation*

Before Creation

We do not ordinarily use the word *providence* to describe God's action before creation. But since our focus here in part 2 is on God's *purpose* in providence, we will see a fuller, more faithful picture of that purpose if we listen to the biblical witness about how it existed before God made the world. Scripture pulls back the curtain on eternity past and gives us a glimpse of God's act in choosing a people for himself before creation. God's goal is clearly stated:

[God] chose us in [Christ] before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, *to the praise of the glory of his grace*. (Eph. 1:4–6, my translation)

One express purpose of God's choosing a people "before the foundation of the world" is that we would be "holy and blameless before him" (1:4). But how will that holiness express itself? Is there a more ultimate goal? Yes. Our being chosen carries with it a God-given destiny—a *pre-destination*—planned *before* creation. It's found in verses 5 and 6: "He predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, *to the praise of the glory of his grace*."

If you divide this act of *predestination* (1:5–6) into its four parts and relate them to each other in order from the deepest root to the most ultimate fruit, the progression moves like this: (1) the purpose of God’s will gives rise to (2) a plan that through Jesus Christ (3) God’s elect would receive adoption as sons with (4) the ultimate goal that they would praise the glory of God’s grace.

The ultimate goal of God in initiating the entire plan of salvation before creation was that he would be praised for the glory of his grace.

Not Just Glory, but the Praise of Glory

Five decades ago, when I first saw this statement of God’s ultimate purpose in our salvation, what riveted my attention was not only how unmistakably clear the purpose statement is (“to the praise of the glory of his grace”), but also the fact that Paul circles back to these very words two more times in Ephesians 1.

In Ephesians 1:11–12 he says that we have been “predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will, so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be *to the praise of his glory*.” Existence for the praise of God’s glory! And two verses later, he says that the Holy Spirit is “the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it *to the praise of his glory*” (1:14). Inheritance for the praise of God’s glory! Notice: his purpose is that we might *be*, and his purpose is that we might *possess*. *Be in existence* to the praise of his glory. *Possess* the inheritance to the praise of his glory. In other words, God’s goal from before creation was that *what we are* and *what we have* would give rise to praise for his glory.

So in this first chapter of Ephesians, we see God *choosing* us for his glory (1:4), *predestining* us for his glory (1:5), *adopting* us for his glory (1:5), *destining* us to *be* for his glory (1:12), and securing our *inheritance* for his glory (1:14). Or, to be more clear and precise, his

goal, expressed three times, is not simply “God’s glory” but “the *praise* of his glory” (1:6, 12, 14).

Calling attention to the goal of *praise* clarifies how we should understand what Jonathan Edwards meant when he said “that the great and last end of God’s works . . . is most properly and comprehensively called ‘the glory of God.’”¹ God’s goal is not simply that the glory of his perfections shine, but that we find God’s glory *praiseworthy*.

No, not just *find* it as praiseworthy, but *feel* it as praiseworthy—feel its value—because otherwise our “praise” would be hypocrisy. God is really pursuing the exaltation of his beauty in the *enjoyment* of his praising people. To the degree that our praise is without feeling, to that degree it falls short of commending the preciousness of what we praise. Half-hearted praise is poor commendation. But God does not intend for the final praise he seeks to be a poor commendation. His glory is of infinite value. It is infinitely beautiful. Therefore, God, in all his glory, will prove to be more satisfying than anything or anyone else.

The Discovery of C. S. Lewis

I linger over the implications of the word *praise* in Ephesians 1:6, 12, and 14 because it really does contain a key part of the solution to the problem raised in chapter 2 of this volume concerning God’s self-exaltation in Scripture. C. S. Lewis, like so many others, stumbled over this reality in Scripture, and it was his own lingering over the nature of praise that provided the breakthrough for him.

At first, he complained that the way the Scriptures command us to praise God seemed to him like “a vain woman who wants compliments.” But instead of turning away in disgust, Lewis looked more

1 Cited in the previous chap., p. XX. Jonathan Edwards, *Ethical Writings*, ed. Paul Ramsey and John E. Smith, vol. 8, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 530.

deeply, as he did with so many things, into the reality of praise. Oh, that we all would penetrate through words to the reality behind them. Here is what Lewis found:

The most obvious fact about praise—whether of God or anything—strangely escaped me. I thought of it in terms of compliment, approval, or the giving of honor. I had never noticed that all enjoyment [note well!] spontaneously overflows into praise. . . . The world rings with praise—lovers praising their mistresses, readers their favorite poet, walkers praising the countryside, players praising their favorite game—praise of weather, wines, dishes, actors, horses, colleges, countries, historical personages, children, flowers, mountains, rare stamps, rare beetles, even sometimes politicians and scholars.

My whole, more general difficulty about the praise of God depended on my absurdly denying to us, as regards the supremely Valuable, what we delight [!] to do, what indeed we can't help doing, about everything else we value.

I think we delight to praise what we enjoy because the praise not merely expresses but completes the enjoyment; it is its appointed consummation. It is not out of compliment that lovers keep on telling one another how beautiful they are; the delight is incomplete till it is expressed.²

God's Goal: The Consummation of Our Joy in God

With this in mind, let's return to Ephesians 1 and the way Paul expressed the goal for God's plan to choose, predestine, and adopt a people. He says three times that the goal is the praise of God's glory (1:6, 12, 14). Now, if Lewis is right (and I think he is), then God's pursuit of our praise for his glory is his pursuit of *the consummation of*

2 C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1958), 93–95.

our enjoyment of that glory. “We delight to praise what we enjoy because the praise not merely expresses but completes the enjoyment; it is its appointed consummation.”³

This means that *God’s* self-exaltation is utterly different from all *human* self-exaltation. When humans exalt themselves, they call attention to something that can never satisfy the people they want to impress: themselves. No mere human, no matter how exalted, can be the all-satisfying treasure of another human. Nor is such satisfaction of others even a typical human motive for self-exaltation. For humans, self-exaltation is typically a way of getting, not giving—using people, not serving them. But it is otherwise with God.

In exalting himself—that is, in upholding and communicating his glory—God aims to *give* enjoyment to all who will have him as their supreme treasure. And since praise is the appointed consummation of such enjoyment, God is not indifferent to our praise. If he aims at our joy in him, he will aim at our praise—joy’s consummation. He will not limit our joy by discouraging our praise.

God’s Self-Exaltation vs. Human Self-Exaltation

So *God’s* self-exaltation is different from *human* self-exaltation in that, by exalting himself, he is not distracting us from what is ultimately satisfying, but displaying it and inviting us into the enjoyment of it. When *we* exalt ourselves, we misdirect the hearts of others. We try to get their attention and praise for ourselves. We are thus not only encouraging idolatry but encouraging misery. We are luring people away from joy. We are saying, in effect, that it is better for them to admire us than to admire God—to enjoy our glory rather than God’s.

Paradoxically, then, God is the one being in the universe for whom self-exaltation is a form of love. For he is the only being whose worth and beauty can satisfy the human soul fully and forever. When God

3 Lewis, *Reflection on the Psalms*, 95.

makes his praise the goal of his providence, he is pursuing our full and lasting pleasure. That is love.

This is why God's self-exaltation does not contradict those Scriptures we saw in the previous chapter that treat self-exaltation as sin (John 8:54; 1 Cor. 10:24; 13:5). God never sins (1 John 1:5). Nor did Jesus (Heb. 4:15). Yet people thought Jesus sinned when he exalted himself to forgive sins. "Who is this who speaks blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?" (Luke 5:21). But he was not sinning, because he was more than man. He really could forgive sins against God, for he was God. The point is this: there are things that are sinful for *man* to do that are not sinful for *God* to do. Such as forgive sins—or uphold and communicate his glory for the enjoyment of the world.

The Massive, Omitted Place of Grace

I realize that so far in this chapter I have totally omitted any discussion of the word *grace* as part of God's goal in Ephesians 1:6. Yet the key phrase that expresses the ultimate Goal of God's providence terminates on *grace*. God chooses, predestines, and adopts "to the praise of the glory of *his grace*." My omission is not owing to the unimportance of grace, nor to the fact that Paul omits the word in his repetition of this purpose in verses 12 and 14, where he writes, "to the praise of his glory." My reason for the omission is not that grace is minor in God's goal, but because it is massive. It will be pervasive in the chapters to come.

Let me give just a taste of what I mean by *massive*. The implications of God aiming at the "praise of the glory of his grace" *before* the foundation of the world are staggering. For grace is God's merciful response to *undeserving* people. But sin had not yet entered the world when there was no world! There were no undeserving people. To say that praising *grace* is God's goal seems to imply that there had to be sin and rebellion against God. Seems? No. This passage does more

than *seem* to imply that God is assuming the existence of sin in his creation—a creation that does not yet exist.

The Blood of the Beloved before Creation?

The praising of grace that God aims at before the foundation of the world will be accomplished “through Jesus Christ.” “He predestined us for adoption to himself as sons *through Jesus Christ* . . . to the praise of the glory of his grace” (Eph. 1:5–6). What does that mean? Paul tells us plainly in verse 7: “In [the Beloved—Jesus!] we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace.”

This takes your breath away. Before the foundation of the world, before there were any human beings who had sinned, before any human needed to be *redeemed*, God planned that the goal of creation and providence would be “the praise of the glory of his *grace*,” and that this grace would come to people through “the forgiveness of . . . trespasses,” “through [the] blood” of “the Beloved”—the beloved Son of God (cf. Col. 1:13). In other words, not only was grace for undeserving people planned as the capstone of God’s glory, but God planned for that grace to be expressed through the blood shedding of his beloved Son for trespasses that he never committed.

You can see, perhaps, why I say that my omission of an extended treatment of grace in this chapter is owing not to the fact that grace is minor but to the fact that it is massive. In the coming chapters, we will see repeatedly that God’s purpose is to exalt his glory through the exercise of his grace. His aim is the greatness of his name and the gladness of his *undeserving* people. That is, his aim is the God-exalting, soul-satisfying praise of the glory of *his grace*.⁴

4 Treating the praise of the glory of “grace” as the ultimate end of God’s providence does not imply that the glory of his other attributes, such as wisdom and justice (expressed in wrath against sin), are muted or minimized. Rather, in their proper biblical proportions, they ultimately serve to magnify the glory of God’s grace toward the redeemed.

And the glory of that grace will be seen most beautifully in the suffering of the beloved Son of God for undeserving sinners. Therefore, we will deal much more fully with the centrality of the Son of God in God's pursuit of "the praise of the glory of his grace."⁵ It will become plain concerning Christ that "all things were created through him and *for him*" (Col. 1:16). But we turn now to the purpose of God's providence that comes to expression in the act of creation itself.

5 See especially chap. 12, where I deal with 2 Tim. 1:9 and Rev. 13:8.