

DIVINE PROVIDENCE



A CLASSIC WORK
FOR MODERN READERS

STEPHEN CHARNOCK

Edited by Carolyn B. Whiting

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Stephen Charnock taught us to take hold of the God of providence with both hands and cling to him with all our might—trusting that even so God is holding us in his almighty hand. Carolyn Whiting has updated the quaint prose of Charnock’s early modern English to communicate more easily with today’s reader, but the thoughts remain deep, brilliant, and timeless. Formatted in short chapters with study questions, this edition will prove very useful for personal study and small groups.

—**Joel R. Beeke**, President, Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary

Charnock shows how all Scripture contains the theme of God’s providence and how this doctrine works to buck up our faith. More than three hundred years since this book’s writing, in an act of providence that Charnock never would have anticipated, God has led Carolyn Whiting to update this work in an attractive new format.

—**Dale Ralph Davis**, Former Professor of Old Testament, Reformed Theological Seminary, Jackson

The doctrine of providence assures us that God governs and continues to provide for the world and for us. We need this assurance! In this classic book, we find a stimulating discussion that is filled with pastoral insight. Charnock is grounded in Scripture and the wisdom gained from his deep familiarity with God’s ways of providence in his life. Carolyn Whiting has made his work accessible for readers today. Read this book, meditate on its teachings, and be encouraged!

—**Donald K. McKim**, Author, Pastor, Professor

In chaotic and challenging times, what great comfort there is to be found in soul-nourishing reflection on God’s providence. Carolyn Whiting has given us all a gift by bringing this classic text forward for contemporary readers.

—**Stephen Nichols**, President, Reformation Bible College; Chief Academic Officer, Ligonier Ministries

Today the sovereign hand of God is not understood, believed in, or welcomed. I urge people everywhere to get back to the Bible’s most serious teaching: God’s providence. To read this excellent book by the eminent Puritan author Stephen Charnock is to take the first step toward living a life pleasing to our great God and to entering into the happiness of heaven when our brief earthly lives are finished.

—**Maurice Roberts**, Retired Minister, Free Church of Scotland
(Continuing)

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Scripture quotations from the New Testament use the ESV's alternate, footnoted translation of *adelphoi* ("brothers and sisters").

Italics within Scripture quotations indicate emphasis added.

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To Sinclair B. Ferguson,
who taught me to read and love the Puritans

“Isn’t it the most wonderful thing to be a Christian!”

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Foreword

“Providence is mysterious because God’s ways are above our human methods. Dark providences are often a smoldering groundwork laid for some excellent design that God is about to reveal.” Thus wrote the Puritan Stephen Charnock (p. 34), who then unfolded a doctrine of providence that comforts, sustains, and strengthens those who believe it to be true.

My acquaintance with Stephen Charnock began in 1972 when I was a freshman mathematics student at Aberystwyth University in Wales. I had been converted for barely a few weeks when I encountered InterVarsity Fellowship (IVF), a nationwide organization of evangelical students who are committed to a conservative doctrine of Scripture. The IVF group at Aberystwyth met on a Saturday evening in the student union building and was studying “The Communicable and Incommunicable Attributes of God.” I had never read the Bible, but I was now reading a section of Charnock’s massive, scholarly, two-volume *Discourses upon the Existence and Attributes of God!* Though I did not know it then, this work by Charnock was my introduction to robust Reformed theology.

Most of us have a defective, inadequate understanding of the nature of God. As John Calvin famously wrote, “The human heart is a perpetual idol factory.”¹ God made us in his image, but we are constantly making him after our own image. A biblical understanding of providence shatters the idols we create. What I studied all those years ago as a very young Christian reshaped my understanding of the world and, more

1. “Hominis ingenium perpetuum, ut ita loquar, esse idolorum fabricam.” John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1.11.8.

importantly, myself. Fundamentally, my studies in divine providence reshaped my understanding of God himself. It left a profound impact on me that remains to this day.

Stephen Charnock, along with other Puritan preachers of the seventeenth century, was the very essence of a pastoral theologian. Writing much of their material in the 1660s, a period of profound persecution, many Puritan preachers and scholars were barred from churches and university positions. It was a time when providence seemed to be against them. Yet from these difficult years emerged a description of a mighty, powerful, sovereign God.

J. I. Packer notes that “the leading Puritan theologians”—including Charnock—“all achieve a massive, adoring simplicity when speaking of God that argues intense reflective study, deep and prayerful Christian experience, and a sharp sense of responsibility to the church corporately, to their hearers and readers individually, and to the truth itself.” He concludes, “This quality gives Puritan theological writing a flavour . . . that one rarely finds elsewhere. Luther’s dictum that the three things that make the theologian are prayer, thinking in God’s presence, and conflict, outward and inward . . . seems to find verification in the great Puritans; as you read, you feel a power of thought and a spiritual authenticity in their writings that is matched by very few.”²

Charnock bases his study on divine providence on 2 Chronicles 16:9: “The eyes of the LORD run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to give strong support to those whose heart is blameless toward him.” To help you navigate the following pages, it may be helpful to think of this book as a square with four corners. At each corner sits a profound and unchanging truth.³

First, God’s providence is designed to do good for his people. God takes meticulous care to ensure our ultimate blessing. His scrupulous care in the unfolding of providence, despite any appearance to the contrary, is calculated to achieve the redemption of his people. All things work together for their good (Rom. 8:28)—good things *and* evil things.

2. J. I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1990), 333.

3. For a fuller analysis, see Julián E. Gutiérrez, “Who Is This King of Glory? Recovering the Identity of the God of Providence,” in *Divine Action and Providence*, eds. Oliver D. Crisp and Fred Sanders (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2019), 58–73.

Failure to keep in mind God's continuous activity in our lives leads to despair and discouragement, as we see in 2 Chronicles 16.

Second, as Creator, God has both the power and the moral right to order events and circumstances as he pleases. Nothing and no one can hinder his ultimate plan for his people. However difficult the providence may seem to our finite understanding, God knows the end from the beginning. His decree is always effective. In the darkest hour, God is still in perfect control. His ultimate purpose for us cannot be hindered.

Third, Charnock, like the authors of the Westminster Confession, understood providence through the lens of *first* and *second* causes.⁴ What God, the first Cause, wills to occur happens through agents (second causes). God wills and man wills. We see only the human agent and often draw wrong conclusions. But, in the words of William Cowper's hymn, "behind a frowning providence there hides a smiling face."⁵ In the midst of a terrible storm, we may lift our heads and see that his hand is on the tiller.

To ensure a robust view of providence and maintain that God is *not* the author of sin, Charnock introduces a fourth premise: God brings about his will in two ways—he sometimes initiates something directly and sometimes permits events to occur that he has not directly initiated. For example, he allows Satan to do his evil work (as we see in the book of Job), without being complicit in the evil itself. Even if we cannot understand it completely, we are better off for having experienced an evil (and the grace that sustains us) than we would be if the evil had never occurred.

With these theological tools in hand, Charnock explores the intricacies of divine providence in ways that pastorally nourish the soul. These truths of divine providence have helped me through some of the greatest trials of my life, and they promise to do so for you as well. It is time for you to stop reading what I have to say and start reading Charnock for yourself. In doing so, you will be thankful for the wonderful modern edition prepared by a dear friend of mine, Carolyn Whiting.

Prepare to be blessed.

Derek W. H. Thomas

4. See Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 5.2. Charnock was too young to join the Westminster Assembly, which gathered in 1543–45.

5. "God Moves in a Mysterious Way," 1774.

Editor's Preface

A number of years ago, I read a quote attributed to Stephen Charnock, a Puritan theologian whom I had never heard of at the time. To me, his words read like a symphony written by a man whose heart overflowed with wisdom and a certainty of the knowledge of God and the holiness of his being that could only come from divine revelation. I wanted to read more. Most Christians have neither heard of nor read Charnock. If this describes you, dear reader, be prepared. You are in for a real blessing.

This modern edition of a seventeenth-century work came out of my attempt to encourage a small group of young professional women to read the Puritans and specifically Stephen Charnock. My primary reason for editing this book was my heart's desire for others to read and understand the doctrine of God's providence as Charnock so masterfully presents it. It is a difficult concept for us to grasp. We live in an age of digital distractions and shrinking attention spans, but our God remains fixed on eternity and his eternal ends, drawing all things together and making them subservient to his glory, the glory of Christ, and the good of the church.

I have never known a time when the family that raised me and the family I raised were not active members of the church, united to a body of believers who held tight to the truths of the gospel. Jesus Christ has always been at the center of my life. But now, after laying down a firmer foundation and gaining a surer grasp of the providential ways of our most holy, righteous God through the writings of Charnock, my eyes have been opened, my passions ignited, and my convictions now fixed on the church with a new understanding that takes my breath away.

I thank God for the life and work of Stephen Charnock.

EDITOR'S PREFACE

In producing this edition of *Divine Providence*, I sought to retain the author's meaning while updating the language and style, sentence by sentence, to make it more accessible for today's reader. The original volume, which was a compilation of a series of Charnock's sermons, had no chapters or subheads and few paragraphs. In addition to adding these features, I have inserted the occasional transition, updated spelling and pronouns for a contemporary audience, replaced archaic vocabulary with modern equivalents, and updated Scripture to the English Standard Version except where noted. The abbreviated seventeenth-century footnotes required a bit of detective work. In many cases, it has proved impossible to find complete bibliographical information. I have also added interpretations and, if necessary, transliterations for words and phrases rendered in Latin, Greek, or Hebrew in Charnock's original work. Dr. Derek Thomas of First Presbyterian Church in Columbia, South Carolina, graciously performed all the translations in addition to writing the foreword for this volume. Debbie Thompson provided the summary statements for each chapter, and Beck Otersen developed the study questions.

Now I add my name to the prayer that was lifted up by the editors of the 1680 first edition of this book. It is my prayer for you.

We pray that a blessing from heaven may be upon this work, and upon you in reading and studying the nature, and beauty, and ends of divine providence, and that the Lord of the harvest would send forth more and more such laborers into the harvest.

Carolyn B. Whiting

Preface to the Original 1680 Edition

You are here presented with a little piece of a great man: great indeed when considering great piety, great parts, great learning, and great wisdom. No one who was well acquainted with him will deny him his right, however evil men may begrudge him his honor. So many have desired to know more about his life, but because he kept so humble and private during his lifetime, we felt it would be an offense to his ashes to make him so public now that he is dead. Therefore, please rest and be satisfied with this brief account of him.

When he was very young, Stephen Charnock went to Cambridge, where in Emmanuel College he was brought up under the instruction of Mr. W. Sancroft, who is at present the archbishop of Canterbury. Gracious workings of the Holy Spirit and evidence of the new birth were apparent in Mr. Charnock while there.¹ After leaving college, he spent some time in a private family and shortly thereafter commenced his ministry in Southwark. In 1649, he moved to New College in Oxford, where he obtained a fellowship and spent several years.

He was known for his gifts, and his reputation was held in highest esteem by the most learned and godly in the university, and because of this he was assigned to public work more frequently. In 1655, the year after he became proctor, he was called to Dublin, Ireland, by Lord Henry Cromwell for public service employment and as minister of St. Werburgh's and lecturer at Christ Church Cathedral. He ministered there for about four or five years, with the approval and admiration of the most wise and judicious Christians, and with the concurrent applause of

1. Mr. Johnson, in his sermon on the occasion of Mr. Charnock's death.

those who were of different religious sentiments. Even those who had no use for his piety would commend his learning and gifts as being beyond exception and above comparison. About the year 1660, being discharged from publicly exercising his ministry, he returned to England and spent the greatest part of fifteen years in and about London without any call to his old work in a settled way. We know more about his preaching from his five years in Ireland than we do in later years. Let them that heard him speak for him, or, if they should be silent, his works will do it.

He was a person of excellent attributes, strong reason, great judgment, and a curious fancy (which do not often go together). He was industrious, always striving toward higher improvements and general learning, and he spent all his days immersed in methodical study. He was a great redeemer of time, rescuing not only his restless hours in the night but even time spent walking in the streets from those impertinencies and fruitless vanities that often fill up men's minds and steal their hearts away from those better and more noble objects that challenge their thinking on those issues of higher regard. He did this by carefully watching and constantly writing down his thoughts, and in this way he kept track of them, thus furnishing himself with materials for his most elaborate discourses. His chief talent was his gift of preaching in which, most modestly speaking, he had few equals. Therefore, to this for which his Lord and Master had best fitted him, he addicted himself and directed his studies. Further, he chose to neglect the practice of physics, in which he had a considerable measure of knowledge. Even when providence denied him the opportunities to preach, he was still studying, building up his faith, and preparing for the work he might be called to do.

When he began preaching once more, no one who heard him ever insinuated that he had neglected his duty during his years of restriction. Even in his most private time, he was continually at work for the public, and had he been less in his study, he would have been less loved in the pulpit. His library was his workhouse in which he labored hard all week, and though it was not furnished with a great number of works, there was a curious collection of books, and on the Lord's Day it was apparent that he had not been idle.

Though he spent much of his time in private, he never indulged in sloth. He was personable and free, affable, and talkative in company

he understood and liked, but somewhat reserved around those with whom he was not well acquainted. He did not have many acquaintances because he would avoid visitors, knowing well how much ordinary friends were apt to take up his time, which he could ill spare from his beloved studies. He met with only a few who could give him better entertainment with their company than he could give himself alone. And these friends needed to be very good and very learned, by whose conversation he could gain more than by his own thoughts and books.

He was a true son of the Church of England in the sound doctrine laid down in the articles of religion and taught by our most famous ancient divines and reformers. He was a devoted follower of their piety, as well as a strenuous maintainer of the truth they professed. His preaching was mostly practical, yet rational, aligning the presentation of his arguments with his hearers' understanding and affections. Where controversies came his way, he was perceptive in judging and discussing them and then drawing conclusions, and no less skilled in applying them to practice. He was indeed a true laborer, never having a reason to be ashamed and being able by sound doctrine both to exhort and convince the naysayers.

Some have said his preaching was too high for the lower class and those lacking education. It cannot be denied that his gifts were suited to more intelligent Christians, but it must also be said that although he was sometimes deep, he was never abstruse, and he handled the great mysteries of the gospel with clarity and perspicuity so that if in his preaching he was above most, it was only because most were below him.

In his ordinary course of work, he finished several considerable treatises on some of the most important points of religion, and these have been left behind in the same form in which he wrote them to preach from the pulpit. *Divine Providence* is being published first, as a forerunner to several other treatises we will be making public as soon as they can be transcribed (if the Lord wills and spares our lives). We affirm by our work that these are true, as Charnock's own copies are under our review at the request of his friends. If anyone else attempts to publish his works, it can only be by imperfect notes taken while he was preaching from the pulpit. In this case mistakes do often happen, as everyone knows, and we know this by experience in the case of this very author more than once. This is being said to secure the reputation

of the dead and prevent the abuse of the living. These sermons might have been presented to the public with solemn ceremony and many accolades, the author's worth being so well known and his preaching so highly esteemed by the most eminent ministers in this city. But this was judged a needless act, as his own works are best sufficient to praise him.

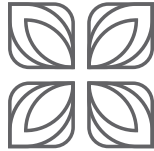
One thing more needs to be added concerning this book. We have introduced Charnock to you here in the very same way he is known by others in every other place so that you have here, dear reader, a specimen of the strain and spirit of this holy man and his familiar and ordinary way of preaching. These sermons, "A Discourse on Divine Providence," are being published first because they were delivered to us first, and in order to obviate the harm both to him and to you that might be done by forgeries. Likewise, by this little taste we hope to gratify the appetites of those who, having been his auditors, are longing and even greedy to feast themselves again upon those excellent truths that were so sweet to them through Charnock's preaching. Perhaps, too, it may quicken the appetites of those who never heard him preach and or have never even heard about him. If you like this small cluster of Charnock's writings, have no fear, there are still more excellent volumes to come.

We pray that a blessing from heaven may be upon this work, and upon you in reading and studying the nature, and beauty, and ends of divine providence, and that the Lord of the harvest would send forth more and more such laborers into the harvest. This is the hearty prayer of yours in the Lord:

Richard Adams
Edward Veal



DIVINE
PROVIDENCE



I

The Eyes of the Lord

*The eyes of the LORD run to and fro
throughout the whole earth, to give strong support
to those whose heart is blameless toward him.*

2 CHRONICLES 16:9

Because of our fallen nature, we are fearful and forget that the Lord's eyes are on us. Fear drives us to ignore the Lord's instructions and to follow our own ways, but we must remember that the Lord's providence and grace are limitless and constant. He gives strong support to his people. He knows what we need, and he will never fail to provide it at exactly the right time and in exactly the right way. Rest in the strength of his divine providence.



In the beginning of 2 Chronicles 16, we find Baasha, king of Israel, building and fortifying Ramah. Situated on the road between Jerusalem and Samaria, Ramah is about twelve miles from Jerusalem, the metropolis of Judah and the seat of its king, Asa. Baasha intends to isolate Asa and to prohibit anyone from crossing the border between the two nations (v. 1).

Baasha is probably afraid that the people of Israel will revolt and flee to Judah because Asa has reformed the practice of religion there. Therefore, Baasha fortifies Ramah to hinder and intercept any who try to pass by

on that account. “For great numbers had deserted to [Asa] from Israel when they saw that the LORD his God was with him” (2 Chron. 15:9).

When Asa realizes what Baasha is doing, he is afraid, and in his fear he sins by seeking help through worldly means rather than by turning to God. He enters into a covenant with Ben-hadad, king of Syria, who is a neighbor and an idolatrous prince, and purchases his assistance for the sacrilegious price of silver and gold from the temple treasury. His plan is for Ben-hadad to invade Israel’s territories and distract Baasha from fortifying Ramah. The large payment easily persuades Ben-hadad to break his covenant with Baasha, and his armies successfully take several cities, including all the store cities of Naphtali (2 Chron. 16:2–4). Baasha is forced to abandon Ramah in order to save his country, and Asa seizes the materials Baasha has left behind and uses them to build two cities, Geba and Mizpah (vv. 5–6).

Next, God sends Hanani the seer to Asa with a message of war: “Because you relied on the king of Syria, and did not rely on the LORD your God, the army of the king of Syria has escaped you. Were not the Ethiopians and the Libyans a huge army with very many chariots and horsemen? Yet because you relied on the LORD, he gave them into your hand. For the eyes of the LORD run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to give strong support to those whose heart is blameless toward him. You have done foolishly in this, for from now on you will have wars” (2 Chron. 16:7–9).

Asa’s sin has been aggravated by his having experienced God’s former kindness to him: the Lord gave him a miraculous victory over a vast army of Ethiopians and Libyans when he relied on him. That Asa should foolishly turn and rely on a human ally instead of God disparages the Lord’s providential kindness. As the seer points out, Asa has every reason to trust in God’s providential care of his creatures, to rest in the particular ends he purposes, and to believe that all his providences are for the good of his people.

The Eyes of the Lord and God’s Providence

Let’s take a closer look at the key verse of this passage—in particular the phrase “The eyes of the LORD run to and fro throughout the whole earth” (2 Chron. 16:9). What is meant by the “eyes of the LORD”?

In Scripture, the eyes of the Lord signify God's knowledge, as in Job 34:21, where we read, "His eyes are on the ways of a man, and he sees all his steps." Or in Hebrews 4:13, which tells us, "No creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account."¹

But the eyes of the Lord also signify God's providence. For example, on Solomon's completion of the temple, the Lord declares, "I have heard your prayer and your plea, which you have made before me. I have consecrated this house that you have built, by putting my name there forever. *My eyes and my heart will be there* for all time" (1 Kings 9:3). Here we see his grace and goodwill and note that his eyes and heart are joined together. As another example, Psalm 32:8 reads, "I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you with *my eye upon you*." In other words, God will direct in a gracious and favorable way those who seek him. Conversely, to be cut off from the eye of the Lord is to be deprived of his favor: "I had said in my alarm, 'I am cut off from your sight'" (Ps. 31:22).

When directed against evil, God's providence demonstrates his anger and vindictive justice: "Their tongue and their doings are against the LORD, to *provoke the eyes of his glory*" (Isa. 3:8 KJV). Both kindness and anger appear first in the eye: the first in a pleasant way, and the second in redness and displeasure.

A Description of God's Providence

Second Chronicles 16:9 gives us a description of God's providence: "The eyes of the LORD run to and fro throughout the whole earth."

We see from this description that God's providence is immediate and constant, always watching. Note that the passage specifies "the eyes of the LORD." It refers to God's own eyes, not another's. The Lord is not like an earthly prince whose servants see what takes place and then report to him what is happening in the kingdom. God's care is immediate. Though the angels are his servants and administer his providence as the guardians and watchers of the world, God is their captain and is always himself on the watch.

1. Salomo Glassius, *Philologia sacra* (1623), vol. 3, 1, 106.

God's providence is quick—the essence of speed. His eyes do not merely gaze but “run” the round. They are not slumbering eyes nor drowsy eyelids; their motion is quick and nimble.

God's providence is diligent, persistent, and rigorous. The phrase “run to and fro” exemplifies diligence and care, an industrious inspection into all things. His care is repeated and never-ending. He looks this way and that, again and again. His eyes are never confined to one place or fixed on one object but are always rolling from one place to another.

God's providence extends over “the whole earth.” This includes all things in the earth—he rules over all the hairs on your head, the smallest worm as well as the mightiest king, the lowest shrub as well as the tallest cedar, and every cranny, corner, or crack of the earth.

The End of God's Providence Is to Show Himself Strong

What is the end, or purpose, of God's providence according to 2 Chronicles 16:9? “To give strong support to those whose heart is blameless toward him.” The King James Version reads, “To show himself strong in the behalf of them whose heart is perfect toward him.”

God's providence is efficacious because his care engages his strength. God not only sees the dangers that are coming but acts to prevent them. He not only has eyes to see but also has the power to order all things according to his pleasure. He is wise to see and strong to save.

Who are the persons for whom God shows himself strong? Those whose hearts are “blameless” or “perfect” toward him.

Three Doctrines of Divine Providence

In the remainder of this discourse, I will exposit and defend three doctrines of divine providence:

1. There is a providence exercised by God in the world.
2. All God's providences in the world are ordered for the good of his people.
3. Sincerity in God's way gives believers an interest in all God's providences and their goodness.

Study Questions

1. Why was Asa's reliance on the king of Syria an offense against God's providence?
2. Read Deuteronomy 11:12, Psalm 11:4, Proverbs 15:3, and 1 Peter 3:12 for further references to the eyes of the Lord. What do these verses add to your understanding of this concept?
3. Why do you think Charnock makes 2 Chronicles 16:9 the starting point for his study?