

THE MYSTERY OF PROVIDENCE

John J. Murray

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Introduction

It is a joy and privilege for me to write an introduction to this excellent exposition of the doctrine of God's providence. These soul-stirring chapters were first preached at the conference of a church in Singapore, some twenty years ago. Happily the sermons were transcribed into print and are now here available to a wider audience.

John J Murray was a choice friend and colleague of mine in the Christian ministry. There are vital lessons to be learned from his fine exposition of the doctrine of providence.

We see that God has complete control over all that happens in his universe, even over the very worst of things.

We see that believers in Christ should enjoy full assurance that for them 'all things work together for good.'

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We are blessed to see how in providence God prepares all who have faith in Christ for entry into the glorious eternal world of heaven after death.

John J Murray, who here introduces us to such great lessons, has, since preaching these heavenly doctrines, passed away and is now in that blessed world above where God is eternally loved by all his believing people.

Maurice Roberts
Inverness



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O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! how unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out! ³⁴For who hath known the mind of the Lord? or who hath been his counsellor? ³⁵Or who hath first given to him, and it shall be recompensed unto him again? ³⁶For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things: to whom be glory for ever. Amen.

Romans 11:33-36

We know that people who are of the world think that everything is being governed by chance. The view is prevalent today that there has been a process of evolution by which the world has come into existence, and that process is still developing

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and going on. Everything that is happening in this world is happening by chance and by fortune. That is the prevailing view amongst the majority of people in our societies. So many people are governed by lucky omens and charms, by seeking to know the future through fortune tellers and people like that. That is the attitude the world takes up.

But then we think of the attitude even amongst the people of God. Perhaps they do not all have the view of providence that we find in the Scriptures and that we find in the best times of the history of the Christian church. A great theologian in America in the 19th century, A.A. Hodge said:

There prevails a very unintelligent and really irreligious habit among many Christians for passing unnoticed the evidence of God's presence in the ordinary course of nature, and of recognising it on the occasion of some event especially involving a supposed interest as if it were special and unusual. They will say of some sudden scarcely hoped for deliverance from danger, 'Why, I think I may venture to say it was really providential!' But would it have been any

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less providential if they had been destroyed and not delivered. Would it have been any less providential if they had not been in jeopardy at all and needed no deliverance?¹

That view is held no doubt by many in the professing church throughout the world. Yet it is something that is far removed from the concept of providence that we find in Scripture and that prevailed in the best days of the church.

One of the great blessings of the Protestant Reformation and of the great Puritan era in the British Isles and in other places, was to restore to the church the concept of God. God in his glory, and God in his majesty. Dr James Packer has said, 'Puritanism was at heart a spiritual movement passionately concerned with God and with godliness.'² Some of the Puritans wrote books on providence. There are several Puritans who wrote

¹ Hodge, A. A. (1887) *Popular Lectures on Theological Themes*. Presbyterian Board of Publication, Philadelphia: USA. pp.38-39.

² Packer, J. I. (1990) *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life*. Crossway Books, Wheaton, Illinois: USA. p.28.

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about the thing that we are considering here. One of them was John Flavel. His book has been reprinted as *The Mystery of Providence*. He called it originally *The Divine Conduct*, and he says in the epistle dedicatory to that volume, 'It is the design of this manual to assert the being and efficacy of providence against the atheism of the times, and to display the wisdom and care of providence in all the concerns of that people who are really his.' And if John Flavel felt the need to write that when he was living in the 17th century, how much more we need today to assert the being and efficacy of providence against the atheism of the times.

Now, the word 'providence' is taken from Latin. It is really *video*, 'to see,' and *pro*, 'before.' And it really means *to see beforehand*, or *foresight*, in the sense of taking care of the future, or rather an ordering of things and events after a predetermined and intelligent plan. It presupposes wisdom to devise and power to execute.

The Westminster Shorter Catechism asks the question, 'How does God execute his decrees?' It gives the answer, 'God executes his decrees in the

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works of creation and providence.’ These are the two areas that God is working in. There is a clear distinction between God’s activity in creation and God’s activity in the preservation and government of that creation. He has made all things, he created all things, but now he is preserving everything and he is governing everything.

It is common in evangelical circles for us to think of a threefold activity of God. He has created all things, he is upholding all things in his providence, and then, in a third area, he is working the work of redemption. Now it is really true to say that there are only two activities of God. There is the activity of creation, which is completed, and everything else is encompassed in the activity of providence. You might say, ‘Surely that means that we do not appreciate redemption?’ Well, we do appreciate redemption, but redemption is part of the providential outworking of God’s decree in the world. Providence covers *all* that God is doing in the world. It *includes* redemption amongst the things that we can ascribe to the providence of God. So God has created all things and now in his providence he is sustaining and upholding all

things and accomplishing the purposes that he had from all eternity.

I. The scope and extent of providence

How far does providence extend? Perhaps it would be helpful for us to understand providence in three categories.

a. The individual Christian

We begin first of all with particular providence, the particular work of God embracing every single act of every Christian. The direction and care of our lives, each one of us, if we are Christians, is under the purposeful care of our heavenly Father. There is nothing too small in our lives to escape the attention of our Father. The very hairs of our head are all numbered. That is God's providence in our individual lives.

b. The Christian church

Then the second category is the especial providence of God embracing the whole of the Christian church. What is true of the Christian, what is true of

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you individually, is true of other Christians. It has been true of other Christians in the past, it is true of other Christians in the present and it is true of other Christians in the future. The church was chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world. The church was predestined to be conformed to the image of God's Son. All that befalls the Christian church in the world is under the sovereign care and providence of God. All things that are happening to the Christian church are happening in order that they may all work together for the good of the Christian church.

c. The created cosmos

The third category is the general providence embracing the whole created universe. Not only are individual Christians the objects of God's providence, not only is the Christian church the object of God's attention, but so is the whole of nature. It is under the providence of God. All those forces and people who are indifferent to God and who are antagonistic to God, even defiant of God, they are all being controlled by that God. Not only is it the individuals in the creation that are being