

## **Sermon 78: Romans 8:28: God's providence over nature**

### **OUTLINE**

The confessional teaching of providence  
The biblical evidence for providence  
Answering science with providence  
Applications of providence

### **INTRODUCTION**

God being in full control of our lives and His universe is the bedrock of our assurance. However, this truth is being blasted on two different fronts, science and philosophy. Science is challenging this truth with the 'how' question and philosophy is challenging it with the 'why' question. Science claims that it accounts for how the universe is run apart from God's working. Philosophy challenging the truth with the question, if God is control of all things and all things are coming to pass according to His will, does He will evil as well, is He good? As we continue to examine the words of Romans 8:28, we want to defend the Bible against these attacks. We want to clearly articulate that is indeed in control in order that our grounds of assurance are not undermined. We turn then to examine the doctrine of God's providence.

For many Christians the doctrine of providence is a very unimportant, and unnecessary doctrine. Most of life can be explained in terms of Science. Modern man sees all the mechanisms of the body, the weather, the earth, space, etc in terms of scientific explanations. God has over time become 'the God of the gaps'. That means that wherever science can't explain something, that is God's doing, but as soon as science explains it, Christianity is made to look more stupid and irrelevant as science shows that natural and not supernatural causes lie behind how most things work. New atheism is confident that science has explained enough mysteries that God has been squeezed out all of the gaps and can no longer justify His existence. Bacteria explain sicknesses where medieval notions said it was caused by demons, the water cycle explains rain, and on and on we could go showing all the scientific explanations of things that used to be credited as God's doing. God for some has no place but perhaps as a detached creator, and possibly someone needed in the great unknown of death. The Bible gives a radical review to 21<sup>st</sup> century scientism. Christians need to revisit this fundamental doctrine in order to renew their minds of the Godless worldview adopted from naturalism.

### **The confessional teaching of providence**

As we proceed to dissect this doctrine we will first, state the doctrine as it is found in the confession. Then we will look at the perspective the Scriptures teach. The implications of this doctrine are huge, they imply that naturalism is incorrect, and we will make some comments regarding that. But also this doctrine addresses the issue of sin raising the question whether God is the author of sin. We will address that issue as well. Here is a quick summary of paragraph one.

**Who is the governor of all things?** "God the good Creator of all things". **From what resources does He govern?** "in His infinite power and wisdom". Please note the reference to God having all that is needed to oversee His creation in the areas of knowledge and power. It is infinite power and wisdom and not merely knowledge that He uses. Implying there will be no task too hard, no problem unsolvable, and no knowledge lacking.

**What actions make up His role in sustaining His creation?** "...uphold, direct, dispose and govern". This would be the confessions attempt to say that everything that is needed that would make up the ongoing sustaining and existence of anything is covered by God's providential activity. **Over what does He exercise His providence?** "all creatures and things, from the greatest even to the least". This encompasses all animate and inanimate objects, 'creatures' would mean all of humanity, the devil and demons, and all animals, insect, and bacterial life, etc. And 'things' would indicate anything be it atoms, water, wind, earthquakes, etc. **By what principles does God act?** "by His most wise and holy providence". There is no wiser plan than the one God is executing in His providence, and there is no sin in all that God does in sustaining and guiding the existence of all things. **For what purpose does God govern?** "to the end for which they were created, ...to the praise of the glory of His wisdom, power, justice, infinite goodness and mercy" God works all things according to the predetermined purpose He gives things, for the ultimate purpose of glorifying His own name. **What are the determining causes behind God's providence?** "His infallible foreknowledge, and the free and immutable counsel of His own will". The meaning of 'foreknowledge' here is not the Arminian version of it. God does not choose to decree or order His providence based on a possible future He did not cause. The only possible sorts of futures are those that are made possible by God's power, choice, determining, etc. There are no events He has had no part in, no people saved, that were not first appointed, etc. In this instance it refers to God's perfectly thought out plan, that has no room for error in its planning. It makes no mistakes so that He needs a plan B. And His providence is guided not by whether we have earned or deserve His providential actions on our behalf, not because He is somehow obliged to do certain things, but by His free and immutable counsel. His free will informs His unchanging plan, and this is what He carries out in His providential workings. God's decree is the blueprint for history, providence is God's carrying out the construction according to that predestined design. It is infallibly planned, freely planned, and unchangeably planned. Providence is its perfect execution.

Paragraph 2 talks about how God brings this to pass in terms of first and second causes. It states that the source of all of God's providence flows from God's foreknowledge and decree as its first cause. "Although in relation to the foreknowledge and decree of God, the first cause, all things come to pass immutably and infallibly; so that there is not anything befalls any by chance, or without His providence;" The execution of God's will is such that God's plan comes off perfectly, as He planned it, first time. He needs no repeats, retries, or back up plans. However, God does not act to bring all things to pass in the same way, He also uses second causes, "yet by the same providence He ordereth them to fall out according to the nature of second causes, either necessarily, freely, or contingently". So He may have predetermined a victory in battle, Prov 21:31, 'The horse is made ready for the day of battle, but the victory belongs to the LORD,' but calls for training, careful preparation of weapons and equipment (Prov 21:31), as well as wise counsel Prov 20:18, 'Plans are established by counsel; by wise guidance wage war.' Or He willed the salvation of all Paul's

travelling companions on the boat with him, but the means was the pieces of driftwood from the smashed up boat. God appoints the end as well as the means. He even uses apparently 'chance' happenings like the arrow that killed Ahab (1 Kings 22:28,34), and Ruth meeting Boaz (Ruth 2:3). These were all used by God as secondary causes in the execution of His plan. And so we do not neglect prayer, preaching, medicine, exercise, seatbelts, etc. In fact the confession stresses that God's usual mode of operation is by means.

Paragraph 3 highlights that God is not restricted to the use of means, but can also work in miracles. "God in His ordinary providence maketh use of means, yet is free to work without, above, and against them at His pleasure." These first three chapters concern themselves more with God's providence over things rather than creatures, in paragraphs 4-7 we see God's providence and the mystery of His using sinners without violating their freedom, and without being guilty of sin, nor being the direct author of sin.

### **The biblical evidence for providence**

We will make a quick scan of the Biblical evidence which shows that the confession has correctly summarised the teaching on God's providence.

Col. 1:15-17 (ESV) "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. [16] For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. [17] And he is before all things, and **in him all things hold together.**" Hebrews 1:3 (ESV) "He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and **he upholds the universe by the word of his power.** After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high," Creation is not a machine, that runs on its own only needing a service every now and then. No, the Bible portrays Creation as always upheld, perpetually by Christ. At every level He is holding it together and sustaining its existence, from the level of the sub atomic upwards. Here we see the Trinity at work, The Father, through the Son, by the Spirit. There is also much mystery here as we think that the Son, who was an infant feeding at Mary's breast was also holding the universe together. God upholds the regularity of the seasons, as He says to Noah after the flood, Genesis 8:22 (ESV) "While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease." All things are fed from Him, Psalm 145:16 (ESV) "You open your hand; you satisfy the desire of every living thing." He not only sends rain, but causes the rain to be effective for growth, Psalm 147:8 (ESV) "He covers the heavens with clouds; he prepares rain for the earth; he makes grass grow on the hills." These verses are not a defence for all animal lovers so that they can like God too. These verses highlight God's compassionate providential supply. They are not the ramblings of a pre-scientific poet, but the Spirit revealed perspective of what the true cause behind this kind provision really is. Read the psalms with this thought in mind: David does not distinguish between science and miracle, but everything God does, from the regular things like feeding the animals and sending rain, as well as miraculous deliverances are part of His Kingly rule over Creation. The constant obedience of Creation to God's sustaining command casts our disobedience into stark relief.

Generally speaking the Bible teaches us that all things that happen, happen according to God's purpose, a purpose that is not informed or compelled by anything outside of Himself and His own good purposes. Ephes. 1:11 (ESV) "In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him *who works all things according to the counsel of his will*,". Everything that happens is part of His purpose and plan, otherwise known as His decree. Firstly, the tiniest events in this world are attributed to God's will, Matthew 10:29 (ESV) "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father." Apparently random things like the rolling of a dice are part of His purposes, Proverbs 16:33 (ESV) "The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord." Unexpectedly, even decisions that seem to be free are planned by God (Proverbs 19:21), Proverbs 21:1 (ESV) "The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; he turns it wherever he will." Those things science claims to explain by natural causes, like lightning, are said to be under His control, Job 36:32 (ESV) "He covers his hands with the lightning and commands it to strike the mark." There is no area that His sovereignty does not reign over. There is nothing that comes to pass that He has not ordained. And nothing that He is not upholding, steering, causing, ruling over, etc.

### **Answering science with providence**

In the next message we will deal with what this means regarding God's working and the issue of sin, but now we are focusing on God's relationship to nature, and want to view how He works His providence. Here is a vital perspective needed to remember as we respond to our naturalistic world, that seeks to explain all things without any reference to God. The Bible speaks about 2 specific ways in which God works.<sup>1</sup> In the beginning, God created all things out of nothing, that is creation ex nihilo. He said, 'Let there be...' and it came into being. When we speak of miracles we would associate it with this sort of working. The mistake that Christians and scientists are making is in thinking that when we say that God upholds the universe, that we mean that there is a constant and ongoing unnatural miraculous upholding going on. So that when science discovers the mechanisms of nature, this theory is then proved to be false. The Bible does talk about another way in which God works, "Let the earth bring forth..." (Gen 1:24). Here we see not creation out of nothing, but creation from something else, the use of means. God does not only work in the unnatural miraculous way, and every other thing that happens is the process of a pre-programmed machine. No, God is using means, mechanisms that He puts in place, mechanisms that He upholds and empowers. He sends rain, but also causes the growth in response to the rain. This is as much His working as a miracle. I am trying to chart a course for us between two extremes. One the one hand there is the deistic view where God is the maker of this vast machine, but has no part in its working, it runs on its own. And science has discovered the mechanisms that work it. This view would deny the existence of miracles altogether, being unobservable thereby unprovable, therefore unbelievable. This of course prejudices the definition of truth to being only that which can be verified, resulting in verificationism. And on the other hand there is a hypersupernaturalism that seeks to make every moment miraculous and immediate, denying God's use of means. This view is called 'Occasionalism' Jonathan Edwards was one who believed that every moment was a creation

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<sup>1</sup> Michael S. Horton, *The Christian Faith, a systematic theology for pilgrims on the way*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2011), 345.

ex nihilo affair, and not God working to sustain His creation by means, designing, upholding and guiding its mechanisms, making them effective at every moment. This of course demeans everything to an illusion, implying that the mechanisms of nature are not in fact God's means at all. The deistic view is held by various forms of theology that are unbiblical one worth mentioning is Open Theism. Open Theism believes that both God's knowledge and power are limited. For if God knew who would and wouldn't be saved, that would render something certain, and would limit free will. And God's power is limited because He will not save anyone who does not want to be saved. They deny the Bible's picture of God being involved in every event, enabling and guiding it towards His intended goal.

Let's take the simple example of going to the doctor and receiving treatment. Upon receiving surgery or medication, and you are healed, who healed you? God or the doctor? Science says that because we can observe the medical procedure applied working under the microscope, and we cannot see God anywhere, it was the doctor and his medicine harnessing the mechanisms of nature, not God. The Occasionalist/hypersupernaturalist would say that it was not the medicine at all, but God working the miracle of healing. The truth is it is not a case of either/or, but both/and. It is the either/or unbiblical perspective that has resulted in a 'God of the gaps' scenario. God appointed the means of the doctors education and grasp of His mechanisms, and constantly upholds the effectiveness of those mechanisms. As the psalmist we should view the rain not as the result as the water cycle, but behind the water cycle see God's loving hand. It should be emphasized that every moment the universe is not used by God against you in judgement as it did in the flood, that is, great patience and mercy being exercised. We see in God's pledge to Noah that the seasons will come round every year, God's patience and mercy in upholding the universe even though it is indwelt by sinners. He will ensure the mechanisms are upheld. So that although He may intervene and tweak the seasons in order to fulfil His purposes of judgement, or blessing, or the advancement of the Gospel, etc. We should expect the regularity science observes, it betrays order, design and power. And we should view the universe as upheld, and every moment as so, by God's patient grace.

This raises the issue of miracles. There are those who say that God will not violate the mechanisms He has put in place. And so miracles are the pre-scientific understanding of the authors of Scripture. However, we have established that it is not a case of either/or, but both/and. And that God is free to intervene and perform miracles. We need not list the many many that we have in the Scriptures. But we can address some wrong thinking amongst Christians. There are those who feel that God's care needs to be expounded in miracles, as they do not fully appreciate the grace and concern exercised on our behalf in God's everyday providence. This has led to a reactionary view, where in opposition to science, miracles have become an everyday affair. Resulting in the sincere but misguided perception that God should be active in miracles every day in one's life. This results in the impression that God's voice is a constant monologue in one's soul. Being guided by prophetic vision, voice, impression etc, replaces the use of God's ordinary means for revealing His will, the Bible. A retreat from science and a reactionary stance against science treats it as essentially evil and untrustworthy. This ruins the witness of Christians before the world. Our understanding of providence encourages science. It is unthreatened as science delves into the mechanisms of God's creation. Every discovery is a fresh reminder of the

master design, and the grace of His upholding. Of course science will not observe God working, they can only observe His mechanisms, God is Spirit, and by definition unobservable and untestable. We must remind science of its limits as it has transgressed its boundaries. He had to reveal Himself to us, for we would never find Him. Here the Bible enlightens us to what we could never know for ourselves. The conclusions of science are conclusions based on only half the evidence, we have the rest of the info. That behind the mechanisms of nature is God's design, upholding, guiding, and ruling, as a token of His grace, for the purpose of guiding history to His conclusion the glory of His name and the salvation of the Church.

### **Applications of providence**

As Martin Luther put it we should see God hiding His blinding majesty behind His kindness in providence, that the milkmaid and the baker are the 'masks' of God in answering our prayer for daily provision. As 21<sup>st</sup> century people we will have to think a little harder as the baker is no longer the man we get our bread from, but we go to the shops who have a baker who works for them, but their organisation is a faceless corporation. However, God's providence and kindness is exercised as much in the multi-corporational, market driven, international economy as in the medieval bakery. He is in every tick and tock, upholding and guiding it at every moment. The multifaceted nature of our daily provision does not even challenge His omniscience, nor the apparently, constantly shifting values of the market exercise His power. The simplicity of God's providence does not need to be reviewed in the light of the world of 7 billion people and its multiplying need. Our lives are not lost to His view as He hopelessly tries to juggle the world's economy. No He is aware of our needs, and He is able to provide exactly what we need, when we need it. When we prosper it is by His hand, and we need to praise Him, and not grow callous. And when we are poor, it is not because He is weak and losing the war, He has ordained it as such, and we should be content in whatever situation we find ourselves in. 1 Tim. 6:7-8 (ESV) "for we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world. [8] **But if we have food and clothing, with these we will be content.**" 1 Tim. 6:17 (ESV) "As for the rich in this present age, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, **but on God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy.**" Confidence and contentment are the fruits of proper reflection upon God's providence.

We should have a proper view of science. It can only provide insight into God's mechanisms, but not a view into God's part in them, that is where the Scriptures illuminate us. It can be used to highlight God's wisdom, design, and power. God's providence provides a stable universe where science can pursue observation without all things radically changing every moment. We should resist the naturalists perspective that wants to polarise activity into an issue of either God or nature, instead of allowing for both, which the Scriptures teach. How it all pulls together is hidden in God's mind, but that it does is revealed for us to know.

The doctrine of God's providence denies the perspective of luck, chance, fate, or any other construction of things where God is not the upholding and guiding first cause of all things.

This teaching encourages us in the use of means, without trusting in the means as powers in themselves, or the power lying in us. We employ prayer knowing that prayer does not create realities, make God do our will, nor make prayer the defining power which shapes the future. God's will and power oversee the passing of time, not the power of your prayers. God has chosen to use them, not because He needs us, or our prayers, or permission, but because He is gracious and includes us, and allows sinners, by grace, to partner with Him. Prayer is a privilege to partner with God to bring His will to pass, not a power to shape the future. We employ other means as well such as evangelism, sitting under the preaching of the word for spiritual growth, wearing seatbelts and taking safety precautions, taking our medicines and looking after our health. As Thomas Watson put it, "Providence is a Christian's diary, but not his Bible". Some have reasoned that if God has willed all things, and it is His power that is bringing them to pass then I don't need to do anything. This is to govern your life by God's secret counsel, not His revealed will in the Word. By providence and not by Scripture. Providence teaches you that God is in control, but the Scriptures show you how you are to live. If you leave the Scriptures behind, and rationalise based on what they reveal about God's providence you make absurd mistakes such as not evangelising, not praying, not looking after your health. We live our lives governed by the Scriptures, but take courage and confidence from the fact that God is ultimately in control. God's providence informs our assurance, the Scriptures inform our actions.

Many have argued that if God overrules in all things, that would lead to all sorts of abuses such as antinomianism, prayerlessness, hypercalvinism, etc. A few response to this way of arguing and then we will close. Firstly, it worries me when I hear people argue in this fashion because it reveals to me that they are not happy to accept something as true because the Bible says so, but only if it squares with their logical and rationalistic criteria for truth. They reason that if something could possibly lead to an abuse it cannot be true. This of course is absurd, grace by its very nature is prone to abuse, this is one of the arguments used against Paul in Romans. Love is also prone to abuse, is love not real? We must take our beliefs from Scripture not some false rationalistic criteria for truth. There are many things the Bible teaches that do not square with reason, it is at this very point that we see the importance and the need for God to reveal things to our sinful and finite perspective. It is exactly here where we allow revelation to inform reason. Reason can only take us so far. Second, to deny the doctrine of providence as we have expounded it has very serious consequences. Let me paint a picture of the universe where God does not overrule as we have said. Open theism is an example of a god who does not oversee and will all things. A god who learns from the future who is limited in what he does in time, who does not save anyone, for people save themselves of their own free will. In this universe one cannot pray to ask God to save anyone, to soften anyone's heart, to cause a person in government to act a certain way, for He is limited in that way. In this universe we have a God who does not have a plan for time, but has to react to whatever situations develop. He is magnified not for the power for willing something from the beginning and bringing it to pass, but merely for being a good manager of a bad situation. We would have no confidence that God has a purpose in our suffering, that He could bring good out of it. Our only confidence would be in His good intentions, but we would have no certainty that He could do what He wills. I hope you can see that this is not the God of the Bible. But rather we have a God who has a plan, a perfect, wise, holy, unchanging plan. It has the best goal, the glory of

His name. And He is fully equipped in power and wisdom to bring that plan to pass, exactly as planned with no need for a plan B and no unforeseen contingencies. It is upon this God that we are able to rest, to have assurance, to find His purpose in our suffering, and know that what He has revealed about the future is certain.

Finally we can see that God is in control of even our suffering and orders all things for our good, God is in control our lives are safe and our sufferings have meaning.